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Consumers and Mixed-Brands: On the Polysemy of Brand Meaning

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On the Polysemy of Brand Meaning

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Consumers and Brands

In contemporary consumer cultures, where consumers avidly desire goods that are valued for non-utilitarian reasons such as status, envy provocation, and novelty (Belk, 1988b), it is common among researchers to designate brands as important carriers of symbolic meanings. Through their omnipresence in the marketplace, brands create symbolic universes that can be described as brandscapes, a material and symbolic environment that consumers build with marketplace products (Sherry, 1998:112). Thus, interactions in the marketplace are by and large based on images (Schroeder, 2000) which consumers use to make sense of everyday life and to produce self-identity. It is fair to assert that brands are such an inevitable mechanism in every consumer culture that it is impossible for consumers to avoid them. One cannot avoid buying and consuming branded goods since almost anything offered in the marketplace carries a brand name. As consumers, we can of course actively resist brands through micro-emanicpatory practices (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), and some consumers are indeed doing so. The NoLogo, anti-branding movement (see www.nologo.org) described by Klein (1999), is an example of such resistance where brands are boycotted because of the questionable social and ethical values the companies behind the brands stand for. But even such anti-brand actions involve visual consumption of brand meanings (cf. Schroeder, 2000) and could therefore be considered as just another type of brand consumption.

It is thus a fact that brands are "out there" in the market, provided by companies who want to build strong and durable relationships with consumers. Towards the goal of building strong brands that attract loyal consumers, it has become increasingly common in the American

market to combine two or more brands in one product. This kind of co-operative brand strategy is often referred to as co-branding or brand alliances (Simonin & Ruth, 1998) and has been used by various companies that want to leverage the value of their brands. By seeking to improve consumer goods with well-known brands that are tried and tested, co-branding can be considered as a retro-marketing strategy where brand strategists mix, match, and play with pieces of the past (cf. Brown, 2001:12). Current examples of co-branded products are particularly present in the U.S. food industry, where many brand owners have joined forces to provide consumer goods featuring a mix of brands. Examples of co-branding include Betty Crocker® brownie mix, which boasts of containing Hershey's® syrup, Breyers® ice cream mixed with Reese's® peanut butter, and Post® cranberry almond crunch made with Ocean Spray® cranberries. When companies use an additional brand to endorse a product, it seems like they are trying to evoke a more precise intended meaning for the branded good by providing some additional meanings for a specific ingredient. For instance, by pairing Post® raisin bran with Sun-Maid® raisins, Post® wants to communicate that they are not just using any raisins but indeed the best and most well-known brand of raisins.

Co-branding and brand alliances are terms that marketing managers use when referring to co-operative brand strategies. Since this dissertation focuses on consumers and the ways in which they relate to brands, I will use a terminology that is grounded in consumers' experiences rather than conceptualizations that have been constructed from a managerial point of view. I therefore introduce the term *mixed-brands* to refer to products that appear with a combination of brands. The mixing of brands is a juxtaposition of symbolic meanings and illustrates how brands can enact different roles in various product contexts at the same time. From a consumer perspective, two brands that appear together on the package of a product can be considered as mixed in that the logotypes of the two brands are designed to fit together. Oftentimes, one of the two brands that constitute a mixed-brand is an endorser for an ingredient which is physically added to the mixed-brand product and visually displayed by the addition of its brand logotype. An example of such a brand mixing is provided in figure 1.1, which illustrates a Betty Crocker brownie mix with Hershey's syrup. Betty Crocker is the brand with the major responsibility for the product

while Hershey's is the endorser for an ingredient that is added to the product, supposedly to evoke some additional meaning of chocolate. The pouch with Hershey's syrup is supplied in the package, and it is the consumer who ultimately will accomplish the mixing of the two brands by stirring the products together.

Figure 1.1: Betty Crocker with Hershey's

The question that I address in this dissertation concerns how consumers develop and negotiate meanings for mixed-brands. But before we can

understand the way in which meanings are negotiated for multiple brands that endorse a product, we have to understand how consumers develop meanings for brands that appear as single endorsers for products. In recent years, a number of research studies have focused on consumers and the way in which they relate to brands. Some of the more extensive studies involve Fournier's (1998) conceptualization of consumer brand relationships and Chang's (1998) research on brand meaning negotiation. This line of research has advanced our understanding for how brands become meaningful to consumers in their everyday life. However, existing research on consumers and brands often starts with the assumption that brands are important to consumers. For instance, Chang (1998) claims that due to the fragmentation of society, brands take on new values in consumers' lives and become more important since consumers actively define and integrate brands into their lifestyles. Such *a priori* assumptions that designate brands as important cultural signifiers pervade much of existing research on consumers and brands. But such assumptions may lead to making researchers less sensitive to the possibility that brands may not be as important to consumers as Chang and others would have us believe. When encountering consumers in their everyday lives, it has been common in prior research to explicitly announce the research study as a "brand study." Consumers who participate in such studies know that the researcher wants to find out issues related to brands. In this way, consumers may direct their responses according to their view of the researcher as someone who is primarily interested in information about brands. Prior research has, for instance, requested consumers to collect images that represent their feelings about a predetermined brand (Fournier & Yao, 1997), or to tell stories about brands in their personal inventory (Fournier, 1998:347). This brand-oriented research approach implies that the consumption of brand images and the negotiation of brand meanings are central aspects of everyday consumption. But a research study that explicitly focuses on the role of brands in consumers' lives might generate results that to some extent may be caused by the researcher's interest in the topic. Consumers have learned the rules of marketing and the way in which one is supposed to enact in marketing cultures. When participating in research studies that explicitly focus on the role of brands, consumers might provide answers they believe are accurate according to the marketing discourse. Thus, consumers' increasing literacy in how branding works creates a

reflexivity which challenges current approaches for studying consumers and their brands.

As consumer researchers, we cannot merely assume that brands are important to consumers just because the marketing discourse suggests that this is the case. The fact that brands often constitute an essential component of many companies' marketing strategies does not necessarily mean that brands are important to consumers. And although financial markets boost stock prices of companies that own well-known brands, this does not provide much insight into whether or not brands are a central aspect in consumers' everyday lives. What brands mean to consumers, what roles brands play in everyday consumption are questions that deserve closer analysis. We cannot advance our knowledge of consumers by imposing on them the beliefs held by marketing managers. Instead, in order to understand what brands mean to consumers, we have to apply an out-of focus research approach that does not beforehand designate brands as the focal interest of the study (Askegaard, Christensen, & Østergaard, 2000). I posit that by not explicitly focusing on brands when studying consumers, we can gain an alternative understanding for the role brands play in peoples' everyday lives. We have to start with a less predetermined assumption and explore how and in what ways brands *may* be important to consumers in their consumption and production of culture. In this dissertation, I will therefore address, in addition to the issue of mixed-brands, how consumers relate to brands in general. The intention is to provide an understanding for the role of brands in everyday life in order to challenge and further develop current conceptualizations of consumers and their use of brands. This interesting question will be addressed by examining how consumers make sense of their food consumption. The significance and the meaning of brands will be elicited from stories that consumers provide when they describe their grocery shopping and consumption of food products.

With new knowledge about how consumers develop and negotiate meanings for brands in general, it becomes possible to examine the way in which consumers develop and negotiate meanings for *mixed-brands*. The emergence of products endorsed with a mix of brands has generated a "brand-new" language (Friedman, 1991) that requires a more sophisticated consumer. The new brand language makes

consumption symbolically more sophisticated; the manager of the branded good suggests that consumers should pay attention and interpret the meaning of not only one brand but also the meaning of a second brand that endorses a specific ingredient or component of the mixed-brand. In this way, a product that is endorsed by a mix of brands requires more knowledge from the consumer in order for the product to be consumed the way the brand owner suggests. However, this increasing sophistication can facilitate consumption since products that are endorsed with a mix of brands offer a richer symbolic universe. So it appears that mixed-brands might generate both more and less complexity to the consumption experience.

Throughout this dissertation, I will argue that the meanings of brands are not solely determined by brand strategists but also co-produced by consumers. It follows that a brand's intended meaning, proposed by the brand manager, can be interpreted and negotiated in various ways by the consumer. Similar to advertising, a brand therefore takes on polysemic qualities that can convey various different meanings (Elliott & Ritson, 1997). Thus a mixed-brand, like any other branded good, has polysemic qualities but can potentially convey more diverse multiple meanings because of the dual set of brands. The two individual brands generate each in its own right multiple interpretations in addition to interpretations that the *combination* of the two brands in itself might evoke. Brand strategists who use a mix of brands to endorse a product are therefore not necessarily making the meaning of the good more precise. Consumers interpret marketer-developed meanings and incorporate them into their lives. By so doing, consumers personalize brand meaning by meshing marketer derived meaning with their understanding of self-identity. Furthermore, brand meanings also emerge in social environments where the meanings of brands can be negotiated between members of the social group. What a brand means to a consumer can therefore be understood as a blending of various meanings that are developed and negotiated in several contexts (Ligas & Cotte, 1999).

The main purpose of this work is to address how and in what ways consumers develop and negotiate meanings for mixed-brands. Do consumers develop and negotiate meanings for mixed-brands and use this meaning to make sense of their consumption? Or is the logic

behind this strategy of combining brands perhaps too sublime or too fuzzy for consumers to attend to? Prior research informs us that consumers evaluate mixed-brands more favorably because of the dual set of brands that are used as endorsers. In this manner, mixed-brands work in the way managers want them to: consumers' evaluations are enhanced, and the likelihood that consumers will buy products that have mixed-brands may be increased. However, prior research on mixed-brands and consumers is exclusively conducted in research settings that are different from the consumer's everyday life context. Furthermore, fictitious mixed-brands are used as stimuli in order to measure how consumers' evaluations change when an extra brand is used to endorse a product. But everyday consumption is not like a research setting where consumers are asked to express their evaluation of an unknown mixed-brand that is featured in a hypothetical advertisement. What if consumers do not recognize the mixing of brands at all in their everyday consumption? Results from prior research can then at best provide an understanding for how consumers potentially would relate to a mixed-brand if they paid enough attention and interpreted the intended meanings suggested by brand strategists.

By studying how consumers relate to mixed-brands, we can gain a better understanding for the ways in which consumers develop and negotiate meanings for objects whose proposed meanings originate from different contexts. Imagine a person who has developed some kind of relationship (Fournier, 1998) to Betty Crocker cake mixes and Hershey's chocolate bars. Let us assume that the person credits the meanings of "trustworthy, reliable household partner" to Betty Crocker and the meanings of "warm, childhood experiences" to Hershey's. The interesting question then becomes how these meanings of trustworthiness and childhood experience are developed as a result of mixing the two brands in one product. So far, we have a very limited understanding for how consumers negotiate meanings that originate from several sources. Do the different meanings just add up, resulting in the sum of the individual meanings or does the combination of meanings dilute some of the meanings ascribed to the individual brands? Central to these questions is the way in which meanings are transferred both between the brands and to the mixed-brand. A mixed-brand provides a symbolic link between two brands, and it is reasonable to assume that meanings may be transferred from one brand to the

other and vice versa. But it is unclear how meanings are transferred between the brands that constitute a mixed-brand.

In addition to merely negotiating and transferring existing meanings, a mixed-brand could also evoke new symbolic meanings not attributed to *any* of the individual brands as they appear outside of the combined context. Consider a white flag and a red flag that are combined in some way. The mixed-flag can be interpreted in various ways depending on how the two individual flags are combined. A mixed-flag that features half of the white flag in the upper part and half of the red flag in the lower part results in a Polish flag whereas a reversal of these positions result in an Indonesian flag. Other types of compositions, where the two flags are not combined equally, create other flags. For instance, by cutting out a cross in the white flag and combining it with the red flag, you create a Swiss flag whereas inverting the colors creates a flag that symbolizes the Red Cross. Thus, the juxtaposition of symbols is a symbol in itself, which can generate additional symbolic meanings than the two symbols can each do on their own.

Since the combination of several brands in one product is increasing as a brand strategy among American food companies, there is undoubtedly a managerial interest in understanding how consumers relate to this brand strategy. But even though companies are the legal owners of brands, they are not the only group in society interested in the way consumers relate to brands. Brands are also owned, or rather possessed, by consumers in the sense that they co-produce the meanings of brands. From a cultural point of view, it becomes important to understand what roles brands have for consumers in their everyday lives. In short, consumer research is not a means to an end that should produce results relevant to marketing managers, but is an end in itself. What knowledge can we gain from researching consumers and *mixed-*brands? I posit that the phenomenon of mixed-brands is an interesting case to study because it demonstrates how the symbolic universe that is supplied by brand strategists becomes increasingly sophisticated. By using brand mixes as an empirical case, it becomes possible to understand *how* important brands in general are in everyday consumption. If brands in general are as important in everyday consumption as current research indicates, we can expect that mixes of brands will be important symbols that can help to refine articulation of

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self-identity. Researching mixed-brands provides not only a better understanding for the way in which consumers relate to this particular brand strategy, but also for the various roles brands may have for consumers. For instance, the very function of a brand name – to signal the origin of a product – appears to be less palpable as brands appear in various contexts with different endorsement roles. By focusing on mixed-brands and the various endorsement roles this strategy may represent, we can get a better understanding for the ways in which consumers interpret the notion of a brand.

I have chosen to focus on mixed-brands in order to provide an understanding for the ways in which meanings from several sources are developed and negotiated. Compared to other ways of symbolically linking several brands, a mixed-brand strategy is somewhat unique since the two individual brands are endorsers for products that are physically mixed. When consumers experience a mixed-brand, they generally cannot separate the experience of consuming the two branded products that are mixed. In other words, the mixed-brand constitutes a unit from which experiences of consuming the product is generated. Even if consumers cannot remove the ingredient from the consumer good, they can probably still recognize the taste or the shape of the ingredient. The point here is that the recognized taste of the ingredient constitutes an inseparable part of the total experience of the mixed-brand. Other ways of combining brands through marketing, such as joint sales promotion or cause-related marketing, do not involve physical integration of the products, so the consumption experience can be separated in a way that a mixed-brand does not allow. Product bundling, an offer of two branded goods in combination, is related to the practice of mixing brands in that it suggests that the combination of the two branded goods creates a nice outcome. In a product bundle, however, consumers can easily separate the two branded goods since they are not physically integrated, allowing consumers to use the products separately. The characteristics of mixed-brands and the way in which this marketing strategy relates to other co-operative branding strategies will be elaborated on more extensively in the following chapter.

Throughout this dissertation it will be illustrated that the meanings consumers ascribe to brands do indeed originate from a variety of sources that is beyond brand strategists' control and management.

While brand meanings can be derived from a vast number of sources that are relevant to an individual consumer, many of the cultural meanings that consumers impute to brands may originate from advertising, which can be understood as the mechanism brand strategists rely on to bring brands into the world. While the primary focus in this study will be on the interaction between consumers and *brands*, there will be an implicit connection to current and past advertising for the brands' whose meanings are explored. So in one way, this study can be assimilated with research that addresses advertising as a cultural artifact (e.g. Ritson & Elliott, 1999). While this line of research focuses on advertising discourses *per se*, it also deals implicitly with the brands that are represented through advertising. However, by focusing on consumers and brands, this study offers a slightly different perspective compared to research that traces the cultural meaning of advertising. The concept of a brand can be understood as something that goes beyond its advertising discourse in that the idea of a brand becomes embodied through its endorsed product(s) or service(s). Advertising can indeed be integral in building the notion of a brand, but it is likely to be only one of several elements that give a brand its meanings. Many brands are indeed not advertised at all, so it would be misleading to argue that brands cannot exist without supporting advertising. For many brands, however, advertising is perhaps one of the most important components that develops the notion of a brand in the marketplace. Although this study takes a consumer perspective on brands, it is related to other research traditions in marketing and management. With an increased focus by academic researchers as well as marketing practitioners on the importance of companies' building strong brands in the marketplace, the emerging branding discourse has become an important concept for understanding the management of companies. Thus, corporate branding has become a significant discourse which focuses on a company's internal issues, such as corporate identity (see e.g. Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Research on corporate branding generally emphasizes a company's internal perspective on the way branding practices are organized, but it largely ignores the brand's dynamic role in the marketplace. In contrast, this study examines a perspective external to the company – that of consumers' interactions with brands in the marketplace. Hence, this study will predominantly examine brands as a

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phenomenon that consumers interact with in their everyday consumption.

Organization of Dissertation

The remainder of this dissertation is organized into two main parts. Part One represents the conceptual orientation of this study's research and is discussed in four separate chapters. Chapter 2 traces the history of branding and its relation to mixed-brands. It also offers an account of prior research on consumers and mixed-brands as well as a discussion of the limitations of existing research. Chapter 3 outlines interpretive research with an emphasis on the symbolic dimension of consumption. The intention of this chapter is to bridge the discussion of traditional brand research presented in Chapter 2 with the presentation of interpretive brand research in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 presents existing perspectives that address brand meaning from various theoretical perspectives. Chapter 5 focuses on the polysemy of mixed-brands and outlines a conceptualization for meaning development and negotiation for mixed-brands.

Part Two of the dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapter 6 offers an account of the fieldwork that was conducted in American households. Chapter 7 presents an analysis of the informants' relationships to brands in general. In Chapter 8 follows a critical reflection on the emerging relationship discourse in consumer research. Chapter 9 presents an analysis of the ways in which consumers relate to and negotiate meanings for mixed-brands. The findings are finally discussed and related to existing research in Chapter 10.

Chapter 2

The Evolution of Brands and Mixed-Brands

> Archaeologist Gucci Toyota Rolex, a recent graduate of Ralph Lauren University (Once Karl Marx University) in Budapest, sits in his IBM sensatorium seeking clues that will help him understand the obscure origins of the major world holidays. He believes that some of these holidays, including Coke Day, Elvis Day, Saint Johnny Walker Day, the Day of the Levi's, Sony Feel-Man Day, and the Feast of the Seven-Eleven, may have originated almost a millennium ago in the 20th or 21st century. But the evidence is far from clear. In fact, the period since the likely origin of these holidays is now known as the Pax McDonald's, due to the extended period of World peace that was ushered in after McDonald's first entered what were then known as China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe (Belk, 1996:23-24).

Brands are indeed an interesting phenomenon, attracting attention from consumers around the world. Many of the enduring, well-known brands that have originated from the affluent Western world have diffused around the globe to the most remote consumer cultures (Belk, 1988b, 1999; Ger & Belk, 1996). Belk's (1996) droll and ironic prophesy about archeology in the year of 2995 raises the question of what roles brands have for consumers today and what roles brands have had for consumers in the past. In this chapter, I will examine how researchers from various disciplines conceive how consumers and manufacturers have used brands in the past. This discussion provides an important understanding for the way in which we can discern the current status of brands in consumer cultures. I will then present how brand owners have used various marketing strategies to become more successful in the marketplace. This examination ultimately leads to

issues of combining brands and how consumers relate to mixed-brands in their everyday consumption.

Brands in a Historical Perspective

There is evidence throughout history that indicates the use of branded goods among manufacturers. The term *brand* originates from the practice of using hot irons to burn marks on livestock and other goods to attest to their quality and to designate ownership (Aaker, 1991). Evidence from the Middle Ages indicates that craftsmen stamped their brand on the products they created to distinguish them from those of other craftsmen (de Chernatony & McDonald, 1992). More recent indications of brand use among manufacturers include the pottery king, Josiah Wedgwood, and Wilton carpets, both of which were products available in the eighteenth century (Breen, 1993). At that time, Wedgwood and Wilton were not registered trademarks because trademark laws had not yet been instituted in Great Britain. But both Wedgwood and Wilton can be considered as brand names since consumers used the names of the products to distinguish Wedgwood pottery from other pottery and Wilton carpets from other carpets. Besides Wedgwood and Wilton, there were only a few luxury goods that carried the manufacturers' names at the time. As Koehn (2001:33) writes, "brand marketing was virtually unheard of in the mid-eighteenth century," so most manufacturers were likely unknown to their consumers. But the few brand names that did exist signified to consumers who was responsible for the product and where it came from. This indication of origin remains today as one of the functions of brand names. However, the origin of brands is a more complex issue in a global economy where a product can be designed in one country, manufactured in several different countries, and marketed as a global product (Askegaard & Ger, 1998; Papadopoulos, 1993).

The industrial revolution and its emerging mass production generated an increasing number of commodities that became more readily available to the masses in Europe and America during the eighteenth century. It was not only an increasing number of different products that became available, but also an increasing number of *similar* products with different styles, such as grades of quality and colors

(Breen, 1993:252). In this manner, consumption became more sophisticated since it demanded that consumers express more specifically what they wanted. Durable goods sometimes carried the name of the manufacturer, but a single manufacturer could offer a variety of styles of goods. Many of the eighteenth century brand names were only occasionally advertised in newspapers and were therefore not so distinct from each other. When advertising was used, it was in the form of small ads that were printed in a separate section of newspapers, much like classified advertising today (Strasser, 1989).

In the late nineteenth century, companies began to introduce brands to America and Western Europe in a more systematic manner. This is often referred to as the creation of national brands (Low & Fullerton, 1994; Olsen, 1995). Many of the well-known brands of today, such as Heinz and Kellogg's, were established at this time. Before national brands were introduced, food products were commonly sold in bulk, without packaging or a brand name. But some merchants had packaged food products in "pasteboard caddies" that displayed the grocer's name (Schlereth, 1989:354). This kind of consumer packaging undertaken by local merchants can be considered as the first generation of store brands. By the end of the nineteenth-century, the folding box was invented, and it soon became common practice among food producers to package their products in folding boxes that displayed the manufacturers' brand name. Among the first companies to use this kind of packaging was Quaker Oats, a pioneer that also started to distribute their packaged product nationally in the American market (Hine, 1995). Another company associated with this new type of packaging was the National Biscuit Company that, by 1898, started to promote Uneeda Biscuits in an airtight and moisture-proof package (Schlereth, 1989). Packaged consumer goods had both its advantages and disadvantages for consumers. When manufacturers packaged goods in consumer packages, there were fewer possibilities for the merchant to manipulate the content, but it was also more difficult for consumers to taste the food product and examine the quality prior to purchase (Strasser, 1989). The use of consistent packages gave consumers a sense of security because they learned gradually that packaged goods were predictable and performed in the same manner time after time. Hence, the introduction of packaged goods had a considerable impact on the relationship between the consumer and the merchant (Twitchell,

1999). Before national brands were introduced, it was the merchant who played a significant role in providing consumers with information about the product. The merchant offered goods that were purchased in bulk; therefore it was difficult for consumers to assess the quality of the product because the source from which the merchant purchased these goods could differ from one time to another. Branded goods, packaged consistently made it easier for consumers to choose a product without having to rely solely on the merchant.

When by the end of the nineteenth century companies began to introduce national brands, they also promoted them through advertisements. Advertisements were now often to be found in full pages in newspapers rather than the previously published, small ads in a special section of the newspaper (Strasser, 1989). The contents of the advertisements also shifted; the goal became influencing the buyer by creating new habits. The new branded goods did not speak to the consumers so much through the merchant anymore as they spoke through advertising, which made it possible for manufacturers to sell their goods without direct, personal selling. The combination of a brand name, a consistent package, and advertising was an important development that empowered consumers in their relationship with the local merchant. The diminishing importance of personal contact with the local merchant made the establishment of department stores possible. Department stores were an important innovation for the development of the new consumer culture in the late nineteenth century. In department stores, goods were commonly displayed directly to consumers, and it was a place where consumers went not just to buy necessities, but also for the pleasure of shopping. Bronner (1989:26) characterizes the department store as "the great palace of the new consumer culture where an abundance of goods was proudly displayed and sold, and where shopping became an emotional experience."

This short historical exposé of the use of branding illustrates that this practice has existed for a long time. Pioneers such as Josiah Wedgwood realized that his business could benefit greatly from having a recognizable name that could create consumer preferences for his products. We know less about the way consumers used brands in the early years of the American and European consumer cultures. It appears though that the introduction of national brands was a major

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development that greatly reduced the need for merchants. The new consumer goods that were packaged consistently and promoted with advertising were important in speeding the pace of developing consumer cultures. As consumer cultures gradually emerged, consumption became not just a matter of satisfying immediate needs but also a matter of interpersonal communication (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997). A characteristic trait of a consumer culture is the defining and orientation of social practices, cultural values, and identities to consumption rather than to other dimensions such as work or citizenship. In consumer cultures, we have the freedom to be a consumer and to make choices of what to consume. But this freedom could also be considered as compulsory since it is through the consumption of commodities that social relations and self-identity are sustained and reproduced (Slater, 1997). Thus the reflexive project of the self requires day-to-day consumption decisions about how one wants to live life (Giddens, 1991). In these day-to-day decisions, brands become important symbols that provide structure and stability to the freedom of making choices (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990).

What is a Brand?

Almost any book dealing with brands devotes a section to discussing what a brand is and what it is not. Even though issues of brands and brand management have been examined quite extensively in recent years, there is an insufficient understanding of what a brand means to consumers. Oftentimes, brands are defined from a managerial point of view and construed either in the ways managers define their brands (e.g. Melin, 1997; Uggla, 2000; Urde, 1997) or in the ways leading brand consultants do (de Chernatony & Riley, 1997). In an attempt to develop a theory of the brand, de Chernatony & Riley (1998) identified a broad range of brand definitions. These definitions were organized in 12 themes and describe a brand as a legal instrument, a logo, a company, a shorthand, a risk reducer, an identity system, an image in consumers' minds, a value system, a personality, a relationship, adding value, and an evolving entity. As de Chernatony & Riley (1998) point out, these themes are not mutually exclusive but should be understood as the most important *propositions* that define the brand in the literature.

The traditional definition of a brand, the one commonly used in the brand management literature, was proposed by the American Marketing Association in 1960 and identifies a brand as a

> …distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors (Aaker, 1991:7).

This definition points out the role of the brand as a differentiator, where the intention is to create an object that stands out in front of its competitors. Thus, the definition focuses on the brand strategists' activities while ignoring that it is indeed consumers who are the target for the brand building activities. Keller (1998) offers a similar definition which focuses on the brands' ability to differentiate one product from another.

> A brand is a product, then, but one that adds other dimensions to differentiate it in some way from other products designed to satisfy the same need (Keller, 1998:4).

These ways of defining brands may make sense from a managerial perspective because the goal of brand strategists is to build brands that are identifiable and perceived to be different from competing brands. But the intention of the brand, or rather the *role* of the brand for a consumer, needs to be construed in a different way. While the brand owner's *intention* is to create *difference* through the brand, it is the consumer's purpose to consume the brand for what it may bring in terms of meaning to consumption as Heilbrunn posits:

> A brand may be viewed not solely as a sign added to products to differentiate them from competing goods, but as a semiotic engine whose function is to constantly produce meaning and values (Heilbrunn, 1999:222).

Brands and the products they endorse may satisfy consumer needs, but brands may also be consumed for the meanings they bring to a consumer's life. Hence, consumption can be understood as production (Askegaard & Firat, 1997) since value in brand consumption is created through sign-value. From a consumer perspective, the notion of differentiation is not a goal for the consumer but could be a means

toward an end. By focusing on what makes the term 'brand' meaningful to consumers, it becomes possible to derive which elements construct the notion of a brand. When consumers recognize brands they know and use, there are a number of elements besides the *brand name* that may generate their experience of the brand. Visual elements such as logotype and package design may be as important to the consumer's experience as the name itself. The meanings that are associated with a brand are often closely associated with the products that are endorsed. This relationship between the brand and its endorsed products illustrates that the product and the brand can constitute a unity in the consumption experience. Even though both Kapferer (1997) and Melin (1997) posit that the product should be considered as a dimension of the brand, it seems to be equally reasonable that consumers can also consider the brand as a dimension of the product. For instance, consumers can look for a specific kind of product that is available on the market under different brands. The brand could then be considered as a dimension of the product and construed as a product attribute. In other cases, the brand can be of higher importance to the consumer so that the product is considered as a dimension of the brand. The distinction between a brand and a product can also boil down to meaning the same thing, which happens when consumers use a brand name to signify a product (see Urde, 1997). What consumers put into the word "brand" can thus be a variety of things from physical entities, such as products, to more abstract elements, such as meanings. A brand can therefore be understood as a multidimensional construct that represents a variety of elements which consumers consider to represent the brands.

While brands are often honored for benefiting consumers by providing choice and increasing competition in the marketplace (e.g. Ambler, 1997), it is less often brought to light that brands can also be a hindrance to consumption. A cornerstone in any branding effort is the idea of differentiation, which is achieved by creating a unique position for the brand in the minds of the consumers (Ries & Trout, 1986). If such a position is accomplished, it creates symbolic differences which can generate barriers to consumption. While about two-thirds of consumers agree that there are no discernible differences between rival brands (Twitchell, 1999), it is apparent that people are nevertheless involved in seeking the brands that will deliver the most desirable

experience (Firat, 1995). To some consumers, the abundance of brands in the marketplace may be understood as the ultimate freedom of consumer cultures. To some consumers, however, who are financially unable to partake in brand consumption, it can easily create for them notions of failure and insufficiency.

The Extended Brand

> Like cloning, which it resembles in vocabulary and technique, brand extension is asexual reproduction. It is also magical. Once you have a brand personality established you simply take a bit of its DNA spirit and insert it into a different but analogous product (Twitchell, 1999:179).

By their presence in multiple products, brands can take on many roles in various different contexts. Whether or not that is the case depends on the individual consumer's experiences with the products endorsed by the extended brand. To use an existing brand name when introducing a new product is often referred to as a brand extension (Aaker & Keller, 1990). The term *brand extension* is furthermore distinguished by *line extension* which refers to extension of a brand within a product category. Absolut Kurant, Albani Classic, and Diet Coke are examples of extended brands, where the extension is a result of a slight modification of the original product. Extending brands to new products has been used frequently among brand owners who want to capitalize on the value of their brands. By introducing new products along with well-known brands, the success of new product introductions can be increased (Aaker, 1991). Brand owners use various name strategies when extending their brands. Sometimes the extension is a pure extension, where an existing brand name is used to endorse a new product. In this way many consumers associate the brand *Björn Borg* not primarily with the famous tennis player, but with products such as clothing, toiletries, shoes, bags, and eyeglasses. Also retailers' own brands, such as KF's brand *Änglamark* or Harmon's brand *Best Yet* can be considered as extended brands since they endorse a variety of products sold in the store. Besides such "pure" extensions of brands, it is also common to introduce a sub-brand that co-endorses the new product with the extended brand (Melin, 1997; Urde, 1997). In this way, the new product carries both the extended brand, which can be

associated with many other products, and the sub-brand, which primarily refers to the extended product. A brand therefore has the potential for being experienced by consumers as playing different roles in various consumption contexts.

Besides extending brands in various ways, brand owners have also used various other strategies that involve co-operations with other brands in order to endorse a specific product or idea. In the next section, I will examine these different kinds of co-operations, which here are referred to as *affinity partnering strategies*.

Affinity Partnering Strategies

The term '*affinity partnering strategies*' refers to co-operations between two or more marketable items that in one way or another connect several brands (Swaminathan & Reddy, 2000). A brand is here broadly defined and includes brands associated with a specific product, a company name, an organization, or a celebrity endorser. Affinity partnering strategies are related to the concept of marketing alliances since such strategies often include more than one company. Adler (1966) introduced symbiotic marketing as a term referring to co-operations between companies other than those linked by a traditional marketing intermediary relationship. He defines symbiotic marketing as "an alliance of resources or programs between two or more independent organizations designed to increase the market potential of each" (Adler, 1966:60). Varadarajan & Rajaratnam (1986) have refined the term and limited symbiotic marketing to include partners who have maintained a separate identity. Anderson & Narus (1990) have referred to working partnerships as a mutual recognition between the partners that the success of one firm is partly dependent on the success of another firm. Bucklin & Sengupta (1993) have referred to co-marketing alliances as a form of working partnerships between companies at the same level in the value chain. These types of partnerships involve marketing alliances that consumers are not generally aware of. Long-term partnerships can be initiated between companies without making them explicitly known to the consumers. On the other hand, in affinity partnering strategies, the co-operations are explicitly communicated to the consumers for the purpose of gaining a better market position.

A number of different terms have been used in the literature that examines partnerships involving consumers. Swaminathan & Reddy (2000) define *affinity partnering strategies* as strategic alliances where the primary motive is gaining access to the brand name capital or reputation of another company. The definition of affinity partnering strategies has much in common with the definitions of *affinity marketing* (Macchiette & Abhijit, 1992) and *brand alliances* (Cooke & Ryan, 2000; Rao & Ruekert, 1994). Macchiette & Abhijit (1992) introduced the term 'affinity marketing' and defined it as the use of group affiliation in order to generate strong and credible promotion programs. In their examination of co-operations between brands, Rao & Ruekert (1994) introduced brand alliances as a term for addressing partnerships between brands when physical integration of branded components is involved (e.g., IBM and Intel) as well as when one brand is promoted together with another brand (e.g. Bacardi and Coke). Rao & Ruekert regard any cooperation between brands that is visible to consumers as a brand alliance, whether it is through joint promotion or physical integration. Although the overall terms used in existing research differ, it appears that the way the terms are defined is quite similar. *Affinity partnering strategies* is thus a term that addresses various different co-operations between two or more marketable units. I will next examine these different strategies as they have been discussed in prior research.

The different terms used in prior research involve affinity programs and promotions, cause-related marketing (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988), co-branding (Grossman, 1997; Hillyer & Tikoo, 1995), composite brand extension (Park, Jun, & Shocker, 1996), compositioning (Ruttenberg, Kavizky, & Oren, 1995), ingredient branding (Norris, 1992, 1993), cooperative advertising (Houk, 1995; Young & Greyser, 1983), advertising alliances (Samu, Krishnan, & Smith, 1999), joint sales promotions (Varadarajan & Rajaratnam, 1986), and product bundling (e.g. Harris, 1997; Simonin & Ruth, 1995). I will briefly examine the characteristics of each strategy.

Cause-related marketing refers to a company's contribution to a designated cause that links consumers' involvement in revenue-producing transactions with a firm (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Cause-related marketing makes it possible for a company to obtain a

connection to organizations with noble purposes. For instance, a cause-related marketing program might involve a non-profit organization that gives credibility to the "noble" purpose of the marketing program. For instance, for a couple of years, *IKEA* has run a campaign where they encourage their customers to donate money for the reconstruction of rain forests. When a customer donates money for one tree, *IKEA* promises to contribute to reforestation by donating money for two additional trees. The objective of a cause-related marketing program is to enhance brand image by donating money for charitable purposes (Till & Nowak, 2000). By linking consumer's purchasing of products from the company with spending on worthy causes, companies try to involve consumers in the charitable purpose.

Affinity programs and promotions refer to special offerings targeted at a specific affinity group. Swaminathan & Reddy (2000) refer to the Elvis MasterCard targeted at Elvis Presley fans as an example of an affinity program. Other examples include customized insurance policies for members of a labor union or special offers targeted to students with a student identification card.

Cooperative advertising, advertising alliances, and joint sales promotions refer to advertising or sales promotions where two or more companies pool resources to develop a promotional campaign featuring the participating brands (Samu et al., 1999; Young & Greyser, 1983). An example of cooperative advertising is Renault automobiles and Perrier, where Perrier is used symbolically to give certain meanings to Renault's Twingo edition. Kellogg's and American Airlines, who offer bonus points

Bacardi rum mixes with everything. Except driving.

on American Airlines frequent flyer program to those buying Kellogg's products, is an example of a joint sales promotion.

Co-branding, and composite brand extension are used interchangeably when referring to the promotion of two or more brand names that are integrated in a joint product or service (Norris, 1992, 1993; Park et al., 1996). Examples of co-branding include credit cards like MasterCard, Visa, and Diners Club that are co-branded with various companies, for example, Barnes and Noble bookshops offering Starbucks coffee and other products exclusive to Starbucks and Barnes and Noble. Co-branding is also common in the airline industry where companies around the globe have joined forces to create global alliances. For instance, the Star-Alliance, which is the leading global airline alliance, currently consists of 15 airlines that co-operate in order to offer a worldwide network of travel destinations. The Star Alliance collaboration is frequently marketed to the airlines' frequent travelers as well as in TV commercials.

Co-branding has also been used extensively in the food industry in the American market. Examples include Post Raisin Bran with Sun Maid raisins, Breyers ice cream with Reese's peanut butter, Betty Crocker cake mixes with ingredients from Hershey's chocolate, Chiquita, and Sunkist. The common denominator for the ingredients used by Post, Breyers, and Betty Crocker is the possibility of consuming the ingredients separately. In this way, Sun Maid raisins, Reese's peanut butter, and Hershey's chocolate are all available as separate products that can be consumed outside the context of the mixed-brand. As I indicated in Chapter 1, I will use the term *mixed-brand* instead of the managerial term 'co-branding' so that consumers can more readily relate to the phenomenon under discussion.

Ingredient branding (sometimes referred to as ingredient co-branding) can be referred to as a special case of co-branding. Ingredient branding refers to branded components that generally cannot be bought or consumed separately without assistance from other products. Branded components like Intel microprocessors and Gore-Tex both appear together with other branded goods but cannot be consumed solely as components.

Product bundling refers to the selling of one branded product in combination with another branded product. An example of this strategy includes Bacardi and Coke, which have been packaged together and sold as a party pack. Oscar Meyer's Lunchables is another example of product bundling where a variety of branded goods such as Wonder Bread, Kraft cheese, and M&Ms are packaged together as a lunch box.

Celebrities like film stars are often used as spokespersons and endorsers for brands. This use of celebrity endorsers in advertisements has not been referred to as a co-operative brand strategy before. However, the celebrity endorser is just as much a brand as the brand he/she endorses; it is therefore reasonable to believe that there exists a mutual interest between the brand owner and the spokesperson. The image of the spokesperson could potentially be changed as a result of the connection to the brand just as the image of the brand could be changed as a result of the image of the spokesperson (McCracken, 1989).

The common denominator for affinity partnering strategies is the connection between two marketable units and the explicit communication of the partnership to consumers. The categorization of affinity partnering strategies presented here is a review of contemporary conceptualizations in prior research. I want to point out that the differences between various affinity partnering strategies may not be equally obvious to consumers. The examination of affinity partnering strategies serves here as an illustration of what consumers *might* experience when they consume branded goods. I will now discuss in more detail the phenomenon of mixed-brands and review prior consumer research that addresses the way in which consumers relate to mixed-brands.

Mixed-Brands

As already mentioned, mixed-brands have become commonly used by food companies in the American market. Food products appear to be a suitable product category when physically combining two branded goods. As consumers make less food from scratch and instead rely on

convenience foods, there is a growing market for more processed food. Processed food frequently contains various kinds of ingredients that can be suitable to include as a branded ingredient. Table 2.1 presents a sample of various mixed food brands that currently are available in the American market. The distinction between the main brand and the ingredient brand that is made in the table reflects the way the brands' logotypes are visually portrayed. However, this distinction is not necessarily one that consumers automatically would make. What is understood to be the ingredient brand versus the main brand can of course be reversed depending on consumers' experiences with the two individual brands that constitute the mixed-brand.

Table 2.1: Sample of current mixed food brands in the American market.

Product	Main brand	Ingredient brand
Cake mix	Betty Crocker	Baker's coconut flake
	Betty Crocker	Mott's diced apple filling
	Betty Crocker	Chiquita bananas
	Betty Crocker	Hershey's syrup
	Betty Crocker	Reese's peanut butter
	Betty Crocker	Sunkist lemon
Fruit snack	Brach's	Chiquita bananas
	Brach's	Kellogg's fruit loops
Ice-cream	Breyers	Reese's peanut butter cups
	Breyers	Oreo cookies
	Breyers	Hershey's chocolate
	Breyers	Girl scout cookies
Ice-cream	Dreyer's	Twix
	Dreyer's	Milky Way
	Dreyer's	Snickers
	Dreyer's	3 Musketeers
Snack	General Mills Golden Graham Treats	Reese's peanut butter
	General Mills Golden Graham Treats	Hershey's milk chocolate
Cheese cake	Jell-O	Philadelphia cream cheese
Snack	Kellogg's Pop Tarts	Smucker's fruit
Snack	Nabisco Kool Stuff	Oreo cookies
Cereal	Post Cranberry Almond Crunch	Ocean Spray cranberries
Cereal	Post Raisin Bran	Sun Maid raisin
Cereal	Reese's Puffs	Hershey's cocoa
Peanut butter	Skippy	Nestlés crunch

Consumer Evaluations of Mixed-Brands

Prior research has examined various issues concerning consumers' evaluations of mixed-brands and the possible effect such a branding strategy might have on the two constituent brands. Park, Jun, & Shocker (1996) investigated the role of complementary product attributes when creating partnerships between brands. Attribute profiles refer here to the brand's perceived characteristics in terms of salience and performance of various attributes associated with the brand. Park et al. conducted an experiment with 235 graduate business students who were assigned to evaluate consumers' reactions to different types of branding strategies. Evaluations were examined with a seven-point scale that measured attitude performance and salience constructs represented by eight items (low calorie, low fat, good value, convenience, good taste, package, richness, luxury). The students were randomly divided into eight subgroups to evaluate a specific brand strategy. Groups 1 and 2 were used as control groups where subjects were assigned to evaluate "Slim-Fast diet food" and "Godiva chocolates" respectively. Subjects belonging to group 3 were assigned to evaluate "Slim-Fast cake mix," which is a hypothetical brand extension of the Slim-Fast brand. Group 4 was assigned to evaluate "Godiva cake mix," which similar to Slim-Fast cake mix is a hypothetical brand extension. Subjects belonging to groups 5 and 6 were assigned to evaluate "Slim-Fast cake mix by Godiva." Group 5 was then also assigned to respond to the attribute construct of "Slim-Fast diet food" after exposure to the mixed-brand product whereas group 6 was assigned to respond to the attribute construct of "Godiva chocolates" after exposure to the mixed-brand product. Subjects belonging to groups 7 and 8 were exposed to "Godiva cake mix by Slim-Fast." Group 7 was then assigned to respond to the attribute construct of "Slim-Fast diet food" after exposure to the mixed-brand product whereas group 8 was assigned to respond to the attitude construct of "Godiva chocolates" after exposure to the mixed-brand product. The findings from this experiment indicate that a mixed-brand that is created from two brands that are highly complementary in terms of attribute profiles can in some cases generate a more positive attribute profile concerning the mixed-brand. Slim-Fast cake mix by Godiva is an example where the attribute profile was more favorably evaluated compared to a Slim-Fast cake mix. However, Park et al. found that the attitude profile for Godiva cake mix by Slim-Fast was not more favorably evaluated compared to Godiva cake mix. This

finding points out that a ceiling effect can restrict attributes from a second brand name from being ascribed to a mixed-brand. The level of attribute complementarity points to the importance of fit between the two brands that constitute the mixed-brand. Through a series of experiments, Hadjicharalambous (2001) found that a perceived fit between the product which the mixed-brand endorses improved the evaluation of the mixed-brand.

In a study examining evaluation of low versus high quality host brands with branded ingredients added, McCarthy & Norris (1999) found results that were consistent with Park et al.'s (1996) study. Evaluations of mixed-brands were measured in two different experiments using undergraduate business students as respondents. Evaluations were measured with nine-point scales addressing quality perceptions, product evaluations, and purchase likelihood. The respondents were presented with a specific hypothetical mixed-brand. Two versions of mixed-brand peanut butter were created by using Jif and Peter Pan peanut butter as host brands and Planter's peanuts as the ingredient brand. Two versions of mixed-brand salsa were also created by using Chi-Chi's and Pace salsa as host brands and Del Monte's tomatoes as the ingredient brand. Findings from this study indicate that consumers evaluate a low quality host brand more favorably when a high quality branded ingredient is added; on the other hand, a high quality host brand is only slightly more favorably valued when featuring a branded ingredient. Further empirical support for the positive effects of mixed-brands is provided by Musante (2000) whose study of hypothetical brand mix evaluations indicates that mixed-brands can cause image and favorability enhancement. Similar findings are also reported by Voss & Tansuhaj (1999).

Simonin & Ruth (1998) examined how spillover of attitudes affects consumers' evaluations of two brands after exposure to a mixed-brand product featuring the two brands. Three hundred and fifty staff members and students at a major university participated in an experiment that included 16 versions of hypothetical mixed-brand products. The 16 different mixed-brand products were generated by combining car brands (Ford, Toyota, Volkswagen, Hyundai) with microprocessor brands (Motorola, Fujitsu, Siemens, Samsung). Each respondent was randomly assigned to evaluate one of the 16 mixed-

brand products that were presented in the form of print advertisement. Evaluations of the mixed-brand products were measured by using seven-point bipolar semantic differential scales. Measures included attitudes toward each brand and the mixed-brand product, brand and product fit, and brand familiarity. The findings from this experiment demonstrate that attitudes are transferred between brands that are combined in a mixed-brand. Evaluation of brands that participate in a mixed-brand is thus affected by being combined with another brand. The so-called spillover effects did not apply to all brands equally but were moderated by the familiarity of the brand, where the unfamiliar brand of the mixed-brand received a greater spillover effect.

Further evidence is provided by Washburn, Till, & Priluck (2000) who found that consumers' trial of a product with mixed-brands enhances subsequent evaluations, especially for lower quality host brands. Washburn et al. conducted an experiment involving 139 students who were assigned to evaluate four different hypothetical mixed-brands created from two real brand names rated high on a brand equity scale (HE) and two fictitious brand names rated low on a brand equity scale (LE). The sample of hypothetical mixed-brand products included Ruffles/Maulls (HE/HE), Ruffles/Rory's (HE/LE), Frisky/Maulls (LE/HE), and Frisky/Rory's (LE/LE). Respondents were randomly assigned to evaluate one of the four mixed-brands that were presented in a package prototype. Respondents were also requested to test the product prior to evaluation. The same product (flavored potato chips) was used in all four groups to enable measures of the perceived brand equity constructs. Evaluations were measured with a seven-point brand equity scale involving 26 items. Results from this study illustrate that a mixed-brand can receive a higher rating on the brand equity scale after a positive product trial. The results indicate that low equity brands can gain more from being paired together with a high equity brand than a high equity brand can gain from being paired with a low equity brand. Finally, positive product trial was also observed to result in a higher brand equity rating for a mixed-brand that was created with two low equity brands. In addition, a taste test study conducted by Levin, Davis, & Levin (1996) indicates that a well-known ingredient brand improves evaluations of both unknown and well-known host brands.

Vaidyanathan & Aggarwal (2000) investigated how consumers evaluate store brands that feature branded ingredients. Two hundred and fifty-three subjects, among them 175 students, participated in an experiment that examined evaluations of Heartland Raisin Bran (hypothetical store brand) with Sun-Maid raisins. Evaluations were measured with various seven-point scales addressing product attitude, quality perceptions, value perceptions, and value consciousness. Findings from this experiment indicate that consumers can evaluate a store brand more positively when it has a branded ingredient displayed on the package. Their findings also reveal that a branded ingredient is not evaluated less favorably as a result of a partnership with a lower quality store brand.

Prior research on mixed-brands has also identified the role that an additional brand might have in order to signal product quality. Rao, Qu, & Ruekert (1999) investigated the ability of a mixed-brand to convey signals of unobservable quality. Two experiments were conducted involving 180 respondents who were exposed to various statements about a mixed-brand television created with the hypothetical brands Calypso and Advantage. Findings from these experiments demonstrate that consumers' perceptions of quality can be enhanced when a second brand name is provided for a product that has unobservable attributes, i.e. a product which consumers have no prior experience with.

Finally, Desai, & Keller (2002) have investigated what impact using a self-developed branded ingredient opposed to an ingredient brand that is already well known has on subsequent evaluations of extensions of the host brand. In a laboratory study, 262 students were assigned to evaluate three different brand expansions and subsequent extensions. Findings from this study indicate that when a line extension is accompanied with a well-known ingredient brand, the acceptance of the extension among consumers is increased. But instead of using a well-known branded ingredient, a line extension can be accompanied with a new self-developed branded ingredient. Findings from the study indicate that such a strategy may not have the same immediate acceptance among consumers, but may on the other hand improve subsequent category extensions of the host brand.

The review of existing research informs us that when consumers evaluate mixed-brands as part of an experiment, they regularly tend to evaluate them more favorably when they are compared to a product that only features one of the brands. The problem with existing research is that we do not know if consumers in their everyday life identify the dual brands that constitute the mixed-brand.

Critique of Prior Research

While prior research gives some insights into how consumers relate to mixed-brand products given that they observe the multiple brands, there are several shortcomings with the studies reviewed. All existing research on mixed-brands considers the consumer as a passive receiver of marketing stimuli. Research is often based on cognitive models that do not provide an understanding of the individual consumer's context in which brand meaning is created. This traditional approach only provides a limited aspect of the way in which consumers relate to brands. Interpretive consumer researchers have raised serious concerns about this approach when studying consumers. But even though this critique started more than twenty yeas ago, it is apparent that the traditional approach still dominates research on mixed-brands. Rook's (1985) general call for qualitative interpretive consumer research has not yet been responded to by researchers addressing consumer research on mixed-brands. His critique that was raised 17 years ago against consumer research in general is still an accurate critique that can be raised today against prior research on mixed-brands:

> The majority of consumer and marketing research in print today relies upon self-report techniques wherein the researcher has little interaction, if any, with the respondents. Fixed-format survey designed for statistical computer-analytic processing dominates the field, with few exceptions. Such prophylactic approaches barely scratch the surface of consumers' real lives and jeopardize the relevance of much consumer research. To study consumers' ritual behaviors challenges the research community to try more holistic, qualitative approaches. By its very nature much ritual behavior invites field observation. To extract the meanings embedded in ritualized behavior may require intensive and open-ended interviewing (Rook, 1985:262).

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Rook's critique points out several issues that can also be applied to prior research on mixed-brand products. The first critique concerns the lack of interaction with consumers. Prior studies on consumer evaluations of mixed-brands have all used experimental designs in which a group of people (most often, college students) is exposed to an advertisement or a written statement describing a hypothetical mixed-brand. Respondents are then supposed to answer a questionnaire that is claimed to measure the evaluation of the mixed-brand as well as the evaluation of the individual brands that constitute the mixed-brand product. Apparently, this research approach does not allow for any interaction with the consumers' everyday lives. The examination of consumers' experience of mixed-brands is reduced to an experimental setting that does not take account of "the real world" (Wells, 1993), where brand meanings are developed. So instead of studying how consumers use mixed-brand products in "the real world," respondents in prior studies are invited into a research setting in order to evaluate a hypothetical mixed-brand which is either portrayed through a print advertisement or explained by a description. An example of a mixed-brand description that has been used in prior research is provided in table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Example of product description used as stimuli in experimental mixed-
brand research

Product Concept Description

Pacific Electronics Company is a manufacturer of various electronic and photographic equipment in Singapore. The firm is developing a new 35mm camera which is meant to appeal mainly to consumers in the U.S.A. The camera has automatic film advance and rewind, automatic focusing, automatic telescoping lens, built-in flash that automatically adjusts to the available light. The camera is of a comparable size and weight to the typical 35mm camera. The camera will be priced competitively with existing cameras of this type.

The firm intends to offer the camera in the U.S. through major retailers like Sears, Shopko, and Wal-Mart, as well as through camera shops like Kit's Camera. For the first four months the firm intends to advertise this new product on radio and in magazines. These advertisements will also state that a free roll of 24 exposure (Kodak/Fuji/No ally) film will be provided free with every camera. (The Kodak/Fuji name and logo will appear in all advertisements and on the product's package.) The camera will be sold under the brand name Pacific Camera 100Q.

Pacific Electronics Company is interested in your response to this product concept. On the following pages you will find questions regarding your impressions about this product. Please answer based on your honest impressions about this product.

Source: Voss and Tansuhaj 1999.

To evaluate a product is basically a task that involves expressing brand meanings. However, meanings are somewhat problematic to measure with an experimental research design because a fixed format, such as a survey, cannot address the complexity of meanings which consumers possibly ascribe for mixed-brands. To measure meaning in a research setting appears also to be problematic because the context is different from the everyday context in which brands normally are consumed. Meaning, as Brown (1995) reminds us, is unstable and dependent on the context in which the meaning is expressed. Kover (1995) has raised serious concern about experimental approaches when it comes to advertising research. It appears that the critique is just as valid for research on products with mixed-brands.

> The research environment is quite different… It isolates the advertising as something special, something that stands out in the flow of time, and the results are bound to differ from those of normal viewing… Participants know they must do something as part of the experiment. Therefore, they not only pay unrealistic attention to the stimulus, but they give unrealistic importance to the responses asked for in the research instrument. The measurement instrument itself becomes part of the stimulus (Kover, 1995:605).

Kover's critique about the research setting used in advertising research could also be raised against prior research on mixed-brand products. Kover reminds us that it is likely that consumers will pay much more attention to the stimuli in a research setting than they would have done in everyday consumption. The instrument becomes part of the stimuli and the evaluation process is likely to become self-referential (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001).

Furthermore, existing research uses fictitious mixed-brands as stimuli, which makes the respondents' task of indicating an evaluation of product with mixed-brands even more removed from everyday consumption. Imagine yourself evaluating a product you have never seen before. Would that evaluation change as a result of consuming the product? It would not be unreasonable to assert that the taste of a food product would have something to do with the evaluation of the combined brands. Prior research on mixed-brands does not, with the exception of Washburn et al. (2000), consider the actual consumption of the product as an important factor influencing the evaluation of a product with mixed-brands. Even though much of existing research examines food products, only Washburn et al. let the respondents taste the actual product. Although trial is important, it is necessary to keep in mind that meanings for brands often are negotiated over time, involving several interactions between the consumer and the brand (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981); a single product trial may therefore be a poor indicator of future evaluations. Furthermore, prior research tends to consider the meaning of the brand as something different from the meaning of the product. Prior research measures how brand images change when brands are combined in a product but neglects to acknowledge that the product itself has important symbolic meanings that are used by consumers to create meanings for mixed-brands.

Another issue that we should not neglect is the notion of consumers' market reflexivity. Consumers may be aware that according to the marketing discourse they should respond in a certain way, but their actual behavior may be different from responses given in standardized surveys. It is therefore possible that evaluations made by consumers in prior research have little or no correspondence with actual consumption. If consumer research generates results that are removed from everyday consumption, we have to ask ourselves who will benefit from the results since they neither advance our knowledge of consumer behavior nor provide marketing managers with any guidelines for how to manage mixed-brands.

Given the critique that has been raised here against prior research, it is obvious that the way in which consumers relate to products with mixed-brands needs to be studied as it is experienced in the everyday life of the consumer. Instead of asking how brands influence consumers, we have to ask what consumers do with brands (Lannon & Cooper, 1983) and acknowledge that consumers actively produce meanings through their consumption. While previous research on mixed-brands has examined if a branded good is evaluated differently through display of a second brand name, it has failed to address the experiential aspects of consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) and the complex process of meaning negotiation for branded goods. The basic and fundamental question of how and in what ways consumers develop and negotiate meanings for mixed-brands to make sense of their everyday consumption therefore remains unexplored.

Chapter 3

Interpretive Consumer Research

Consumer research has undergone a major transformation during the last twenty years. In the beginning of the 1980's, most consumer researchers subscribed to logical empiricism as a philosophy of science. Following this paradigm, they were generally concerned with studying mental constructs with regard to buyer behavior rather than experiential aspects of actual consumption (Rook, 1985). In the book, *The Consumer Behavior Odyssey,* Belk (1991) tracks the history and development of research into buyer behavior and describes the characteristics of mainstream consumer research in the following manner:

> The field of consumer research was dominated substantively at that time [In the mid-eighties, AB] by a view of consumers as information processors. The primary conceptual focus was brand choice decisions made by individuals. If information processing takes place, it seemed reasonable that it would occur as consumers chose brands in the marketplace. As such, consumer research was for the most part focused on buyer behavior, and not on consumption behavior at all (Belk, 1991:2).

To avoid the limitations of the information processing perspective, a number of researchers called for consumer research that would address consumer behavior, not just buyer behavior (Belk, 1984; Holbrook, 1987a, b). As Belk (1984:164) points out, consumption is an activity which consumers spend much of their time engaging in, whereas buyer behavior is a limited aspect of consumption. Thus, it was apparent to some consumer researchers that something important was missing in consumer research. A new agenda for consumer research was initiated in the early 1980's that differed both methodologically and substantively from the old mainstream consumer research (Belk, 1995).

This new agenda is often referred to as the interpretive turn in consumer research (Sherry, 1991). Methodologically, the new interpretive consumer research is commonly based on a critical relativist perspective that contrary to logical empiricism "accepts competing research programs for what they are—different ways of exploring and analyzing natural phenomena, each with its own advantages and liabilities" (Anderson, 1986:157). Unlike logical empiricism, critical relativism acknowledges that there exist alternative methods for attaining multiple scientific objectives. Generally, interpretive consumer researchers would reject that a one world exists and would rather argue that reality is constructed and mentally perceived by individuals (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). In critical relativism, knowledge is understood to be created in social situations. It follows that the researcher can never distance the self from the phenomenon under study in the way it is typically done in traditional consumer research (Hirschman, 1986). The emergence of an alternative approach in consumer research created an intense paradigmatic debate in the second half of the eighties; proponents of the traditional approaches attacked critical relativism for being unscientific (Calder & Tybout, 1987) as well as leading to epistemological anarchy (Hunt, 1989). Even though the interpretive perspective has achieved a greater acceptance, it is still far from being the dominant approach to consumer research.

Interpretive consumer research generally uses qualitative methods such as interviews and observations in naturalistic settings. Sometimes this research uses quantitative methods as well, but the approaches that use quantitative methods differ from those commonly employed by traditional consumer researchers. One fundamental critique against traditional consumer research concerns the way experimental and quantitative approaches are used. Belk (1991) describes the methodological approaches used by mainstream consumer research in the following manner:

> Methodologically the field looked to experimental design as its ideal, sometimes supplemented by survey data. The prescribed procedure was to develop a hypothesis (most often based on a psychological theory), run an experiment, and employ analysis of variance and other multivariate procedures for testing the hypothesis statistically (Belk, 1991:3).

An experimental research design removes the consumer from the everyday life in which consumption occurs. Furthermore, the use of quantitative multivariate procedures does not provide a proper understanding for the consumer's individual context in which his or her meaning of consumption is created. Interpretive consumer researchers oftentimes seek to understand consumption as it occurs in everyday life through naturalistic and qualitative approaches.

As indicated by Belk (1995), interpretive consumer research also differs substantively compared to traditional consumer research. While it has been common among consumer researchers to use a cognitive approach for studying buyer behavior, interpretive consumer research addresses issues related to the whole process of consumption. Proponents of the interpretive turn in consumer research generally assert that there is more to consumer behavior than the traditional consumer research addresses. Consumption is a broader concept that goes beyond buyer behavior and addresses the symbolic meanings of consumption. The symbolic meanings of consumer goods had already been addressed by Levy in 1959. However, it was not until the beginning of the 1980's that various researchers showed more extensive interest in the symbolic dimensions of consumer behavior. In the next section, I will first review Levy's examination of the symbolic dimensions of goods and then review some other important contributions that re-introduced and developed the symbolic aspects of consumption.

Symbolic Aspects of Consumption

In the often referred to article, "Symbols for Sale," Levy (1959) examines the symbolic dimensions of goods. Levy criticizes contemporary marketing research for considering the consumer as an economic man when there indeed are other aspects that appear to be more prominent when buying and consuming goods. Levy suggests that consumers are not as functionally oriented as has been suggested by prior research; they pay more attention to the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of consumption. This line of reasoning results in an emphasis on meaning where Levy (1959:118) contends that "people buy things not for what they can do, but also for what they mean." Levy's point should not be interpreted to mean goods do not have

functional values. Goods still perform functionally, but it is the symbolic dimensions and thus the meaning of goods that make it possible for consumers to make choices with less conflict. He argues that the increased variety of goods provided with packages, brands, and advertising plays an important role in consumption. These aspects create preferences in consumers for one brand over another that is based less on the function of the product and more on its symbolic meaning. Levy (1959:119) contends therefore that "the things people buy are seen to have personal and social meanings in addition to their functions." By emphasizing that consumer goods have meanings in addition to their functional values, Levy reminds us that the meanings consumers assign to goods are much more complicated than prior research had shown. The value of goods should therefore not solely be understood by the good's ability to provide a specific function but should also be understood by its ability to make and maintain social relationships (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979).

Levy (1981) published another article in *Journal of Marketing* in 1981. This article represents a major step forward for the interpretive turn and is considered as seminal because it was the first publication in *Journal of Marketing* ever to supply qualitative data (Østergaard, 1997). In this article, Levy continues to focus on the symbolic meanings of consumption. He illustrates the importance of not interpreting what consumers say or do at face value. Instead, he proposes that consumers tell stories of their consumption as a way of symbolizing their lives. He illustrates this argument by providing an example of various interpretations that can be made from the same behavior:

> The approach suggested here is to avoid accepting the responses as if they are scientific observations to be tabulated as measures. Rather, the assumption is that the products are used symbolically, and that the telling about their uses is a way of symbolizing the life and nature of the family; thus it requires a theory of interpretation that determines how the data are to be related and understood. Sanche de Gramont illustrates the point:
>
> I Like to imagine these Three Wise Men of the Occident bent in contemplation over the South American Indian myth about a boy who steals a pet pig from his father and roasted it in the forest.
> Freud would conclude that the boy is symbolically killing his father because he desires his mother. Marx would say that the youthful

member of the proletariat is seizing control of the methods of production in the class struggle against the landed gentry. Lévi-Strauss would find that, in cooking the pig, the primitive Indian boy had achieved the passage from nature to culture and shown that his thought processes are not different from Einstein's.

A conventional marketing approach would probably accept the boy's explanation at face value and conclude that he was hungry, that the pig was convenient, cheap, and tasted good (Levy, 1981:49-50).

Levy emphasizes here the symbolic dimension of consumer behavior and the need for theories that can provide accurate interpretations. The conclusion to draw from Levy's proposition is that the interpretation that is made depends on the theory that the interpreter uses. Levy criticizes marketing and consumer research for using theories that do not allow the researcher to make interpretations that address the symbolic aspects of consumption.

In 1982, Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) address the experiential aspects of consumption as a critique against the view of consumers as information processors. They believe that the information processing paradigm fails to address important aspects that are related to consumption:

Consumption has begun to be seen as involving a steady flow of fantasies, feeling, and fun encompassed by what we call the "experiential view." This experiential perspective is phenomenological in spirit and regards consumption as a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and esthetic criteria (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982:132).

In this first major critique of the view of consumers as information processors, Holbrook & Hirschman argue that consumer research needs to address the experiential aspects of consumption and explore its symbolic meanings.

In another article published the same year, Hirschman and Holbrook elaborate more extensively on the symbolic aspects of consumption. They highlight the previous work by Levy (1959; 1964) and point out that there is much to gain "from inquires into the esthetic, intangible and subjective aspects of consumption" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982:92). These aspects of consumption are what Hirschman &

Holbrook refer to as hedonic consumption, "those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one's experience with products (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982:92).

In their conceptualization of hedonic consumption, Hirschman & Holbrook (1982) state a couple of important propositions that break fundamentally with mainstream consumer research. Their first proposition suggests that emotional desires have more to do with utilitarian motives than with economic decisions. This critique of regarding consumers as a rational economic man had already been raised by Levy (1959), but did not have any profound impact on consumer research until the beginning of the 1980's. The second proposition they assert is that "consumers imbue a product with a subjective meaning that supplements the concrete attribute it possesses" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982:94). This statement is very similar to Levy's (1959) suggestion that consumer goods have personal and social meanings in addition to their functions. Acknowledging that consumer goods have meanings beyond their functions highlights that the consumer is an active co-creator of product meaning and that meanings for a specific object may differ between consumers. A third important proposition offered by Hirschman & Holbrook (1982) regards consumers' imaginative construction of reality. They argue that "hedonic consumption acts are based not on what consumers know to be real but rather on what they desire reality to be" (ibid. p. 94). The reality as the consumer knows it to be does not necessarily correspond to the reality the researcher has set out to understand. One conclusion to draw from this proposition is that it is of crucial importance to understand the consumer's individual context and not impose the researcher's reality on the consumer.

Following Levy's work on symbolism, Solomon (1983) introduced symbolic interactionism to consumer research. Symbolic interactionism originates from American social psychologists and sociologists and has commonly been referred to as the "Chicago tradition" (Solomon, 1983). A basic premise in symbolic interactionism is that "people interpret the actions of others rather than simply reacting to them" (ibid. p. 320). The way in which a consumer interprets an object is thus dependent upon the symbolic environment in which the consumer and the object are situated. Solomon suggests that consumer research has to

42

address how consumers use products socially in order to understand the symbolic meanings:

> The dominant information-processing model […] tends to deter researchers from consideration of what consumers do with products once they have bought them. Consumption does not occur in a vacuum: products are integral threads in the fabric of social life (Solomon, 1983:319).

Solomon addresses here the importance of examining what consumers do with products throughout consumption rather than limiting his focus to the moment when the product is purchased. He also asserts that the context in which consumption occurs is an important consideration in understanding the product's symbolic meanings. Symbolic interactionism considers all consumer behavior as located in a symbolic environment where consumers are the interpreters of the world.

Another important aspect regarding the symbolic dimension of products was addressed by Belk (1988a) in the classical article "Possessions and the Extended Self." Here he introduces the idea that our possessions constitute an important aspect of our sense of self. Belk asserts that understanding the relationships between possessions and the sense of self provides a better understanding for what possessions mean to consumers. In his analysis, Belk illustrates that the way consumers relate to products is much more complicated than traditional research has shown. Products are not just material objects, important at the moment of purchase, but are things that are important for our definition of self. He asserts that we may impose our identity on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us (Belk, 1988a:141). So to understand what possessions mean to people, it is important to recognize that we oftentimes regard our possessions as a part of our extended self (Belk, 1988a).

So far, the literature review has illustrated that the symbolic dimensions of consumption have been addressed conceptually by a number of interpretive consumer researchers. These researchers provided compelling illustrations that were increasingly accepted; there was more to consumer behavior than contemporary consumer research had shown. However, relatively little empirical research has been conducted.

The few but growing number of interpretive consumer researchers were kept busy arguing the conceptual critique and had not yet illustrated that what they argued for could generate many new insights into consumer behavior.

To demonstrate that what interpretive researchers had argued for conceptually could also be manifested in empirical research, Russell Belk took the initiative in the *Consumer Behavior Odyssey.* In the summer of 1986, a number of researchers from marketing departments and various other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology made a research journey from Los Angeles to Boston (Belk, 1991). During this journey, an extensive amount of qualitative empirical data was collected. This data resulted eventually in a number of publications addressing important aspects of consumption that had previously been neglected by mainstream consumer research.

One of the seminal contributions from the Odyssey is Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry's (1989) study on the sacred and profane meaning in consumer behavior. In this article, Belk et al. illustrate that consumers attach sacred meanings to many objects of their consumption:

> For many contemporary consumers, there are also elements of life with no connection to formal religion that are nonetheless revered, feared, and treated with the utmost respect. Examples include flags, sports, stars, national parks, art, automobiles, museums, and collections. Whether we call the reverence for these things religious, contemporary consumers treat them as set apart, extraordinary, or sacred, just as elements of nature are sacred in naturistic religions and certain icons are sacred to followers of contemporary, organized religions. Although the specific focal objects differ, the same deeply moving, self-transcending feelings may attend each, and the same revulsion may occur when these objects are not treated with respect. Religion is one, but not the only, context in which the concept of the sacred is operant (Belk et al., 1989:2).

Belk et al. illustrate that consumers often attribute sacred meanings to consumer goods and other objects. This observation reminds us that consumption involves symbolic dimensions which have importance for the way we understand what things mean to people. Traditional consumer research generally discusses consumers' attachments to goods

in terms of high and low involvement. This construct, however, is rather basal and does not address the very rich symbolic meanings consumers ascribe to objects. In their conclusion, Belk et al. also point out that consumers are active creators of meanings rather than passive receivers of marketing stimuli:

> Often quite apart from marketer efforts and considerations of brand, consumers themselves sacralize consumption objects and thereby create transcendent meaning in their lives (Belk et al., 1989:32).

While the studies reviewed so far address the symbolic meaning of consumer goods and consumption, there is less focus on how these symbolic meanings are acquired by consumers. In the following section, I will address this issue from a meaning transfer perspective.

Culture and Meaning

Before this chapter can be closed, a brief examination of meaning and culture needs to be addressed. To understand how things such as brands become meaningful to consumers, it is important to acknowledge that consumers' statements of meaning should be understood as self-interpretations where general cultural viewpoints are adapted to fit into the consumer's life (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). The meanings that a consumer assigns to things are therefore the result of an interplay between personalized meanings and meanings diffused by cultural tradition. Meanings are therefore thought to be contextualized and situated in relation to culturally shared knowledge (Thompson et al., 1994). In his analysis of meaning movement, McCracken (1986) identifies three main locations of meaning: the culturally constituted world, consumer goods, and the individual consumer (see figure 3.1). His conceptualization is summarized in the following manner:

> Usually, cultural meaning is drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to a consumer good. Then the meaning is drawn from the object and transferred to an individual consumer (McCracken, 1986:71).

```
                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │      Culturally Constituted World     │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────┘
                            │                    │
                    Advertising/Fashion       Fashion
                        System                 System
                            ↓                    ↓
                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │            Consumer Goods             │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────┘
                       │          │          │          │
                  Possession  Exchange   Grooming   Divestment
                    Ritual     Ritual     Ritual      Ritual
                       ↓          ↓          ↓          ↓
                    ┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │           Individual Consumer         │
                    └─────────────────────────────────────┘


          KEY:        ☐        Location of Meaning

                      ⟶        Instrument of Meaning Transfer
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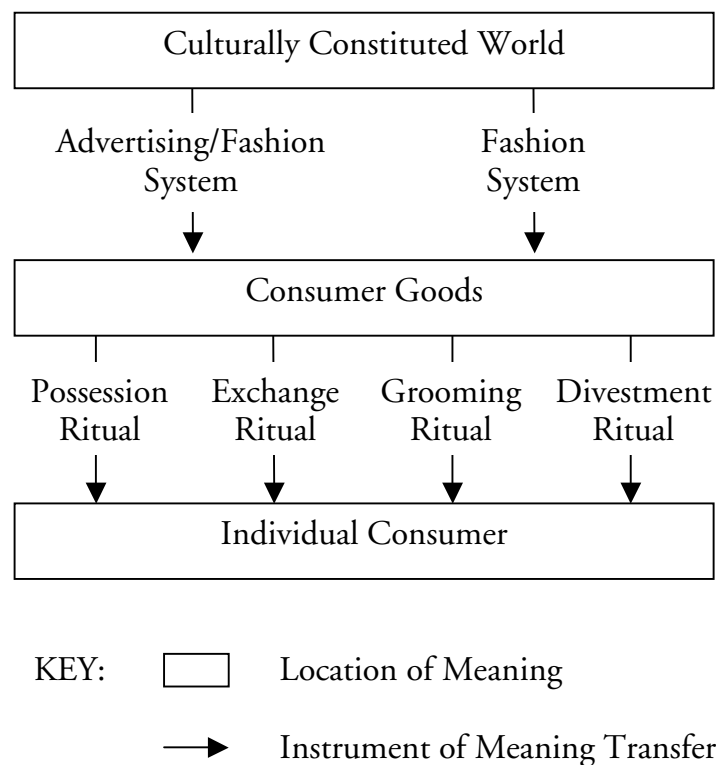
Figure 3.1: Movement of Meaning. Source: McCracken, 1988

All cultural meaning that ultimately resides in the consumer can thus be derived from the culturally constituted world. The model indicates the mobility of meaning and implies that cultural meanings are in constant transit. In McCracken's view, culture is the "lens" through which consumers view phenomena as well as a "blueprint" of human activity. The lens determines how the world is seen and the blueprint determines how the world will be fashioned by human effort (McCracken, 1986:72).

Thus McCracken claims that the meaning of consumer goods is derived from the culturally constituted world. Advertising and the fashion system are the two instruments for transferring meanings from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods. An advertisement works as an instrument for meaning transfer through advertising's creative directors who situate the consumer good together with a representation of the culturally constituted world. If the viewer conjoins the consumer good with the representation of the culture, then the transfer of meaning has occurred. The fashion system works in a similar

way in that new styles of goods are associated with established cultural categories and principles. However, the fashion system also invents new cultural meanings through opinion leaders or through changes of cultural meaning by marginal groups of the society. The agents creating and changing cultural meanings are thus numerous and dynamic.

When the transfer of meaning from the culturally constituted world to the consumer good is accomplished, the next transfer of meaning occurs -- that from the consumer good to the individual consumer. This transfer is accomplished through a number of personal rituals. Meaning is transferred to the consumer through possession rituals in which the consumer personalizes an object. An object becomes a possession when the consumer can claim that they not only physically own an object but also control its meaning. By using possession rituals, consumers move cultural meaning from the good into their lives. Exchange rituals work as instruments for meaning transfer in that a gift-giver chooses a good that represents properties that the giver wants to transfer to the receiver. When the cultural meaning has a perishable nature, the consumer needs to maintain it continuously. The consumer is then likely to conduct some kind of grooming ritual, such as investing time and energy in taking care of the good so that its cultural meaning is maintained. Finally, consumers use divestment rituals for goods that have been owned or used by somebody else or when a good is disposed of. The divestment ritual erases the cultural meaning associated with a previous owner or empties the good of cultural meaning before it is disposed.

Although McCracken's model of meaning transfer has been widely acknowledged, it has also been critiqued for assuming that meanings are primarily handed down to consumers by cultural intermediaries (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Rather than being characterized as a top-down process, where meanings are imposed on consumers, Thompson & Haytko (1997) illustrate that meanings are constructed across social contexts where consumers can use conventional meanings to adopt a critical stance. Furthermore, they suggest that cultural meanings are not simply accepted or rejected but rather reworked by consumers. The meaning transfer process should therefore be characterized as a diffuse, transformative, and consumer-centered undertaking (ibid p. 38).

From Symbolic Meanings to Brand Meaning

The literature review presented in this chapter illustrates that interpretive consumer research has grown into an established and respected field that now co-exists with traditional mainstream consumer research. In the early years of the interpretive turn, many researchers called for research that addressed issues related to consumption and not just brand choice decision-making. This was a much-needed call that has resulted in a greatly improved understanding of consumer behavior. However, it appears that interpretive consumer researchers were too focused on not studying consumers and brands. By not addressing brand-related issues, interpretive consumer research has, to a large extent, neglected the fact that people also *consume* brands. How consumers relate to brands in their everyday lives is an issue that relatively few interpretive consumer researchers have addressed. In the next chapter, I will review prior interpretive research on consumers and brands.

Chapter 4

Theoretical Perspectives on Brand Meanings

> Logos, by the force of ubiquity, have become the closest thing we have to an international language, recognized and understood in many more places than English (Klein, 1999:XX).

> Those who cannot decipher each other's languages decipher the images of each other's consumption and can place (position) each other on social maps that cross cultural boundaries (Firat, 1995:114).

In the previous chapter I examined literature that deals with the symbolic dimensions of consumption and consumer goods. While the previous chapter focused on symbolic dimensions of consumption in general, it did not explicitly address the brand as the unit for analysis. In this chapter, I will introduce brands into the discussion and review research that focuses on the symbolic dimensions of brand consumption. The literature review is organized into four sections. In the first section, I will examine the role brands have as cultural signifiers. This discussion is followed by a review of three perspectives, each offering insights into the way brands become meaningful to consumers through consumption.

Brands as Cultural Signifiers

Within interpretive consumer research, it is well accepted that branded goods have meanings that go beyond their functional values. In this sense, a brand is a container of cultural meanings (McCracken, 1993) which consumers use to make sense of their consumption and to

produce self-identity. The idea that brands carry symbolic meanings was first introduced by Gardner & Levy (1955). In this article, published forty-seven years ago, Gardner & Levy propose that in addition to functional values or common expectations of a product and a brand, there exist additional dimensions that can be of greater importance when consumers chose between different branded goods. Gardner & Levy remind us that

> A *brand name* is more than the label employed to differentiate among the manufacturers of a product. It is a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas and attributes. It tells the consumers many things, not only by the way it sounds (and its literal meaning if it has one) but, more important, via the body of associations it has built up and acquired as a public object over a period of time. A well-chosen brand name may have a rhythmic quality (like Jell-O for desserts) or an apt air (like Bell for telephones). It will also convey meanings which advertising, merchandising, promotion, publicity, and even sheer length of existence have created (Gardner & Levy, 1955:55).

Gardner & Levy here characterize the brand as a symbol that carries meanings in terms of ideas and attitudes that can be considered as the brand's personality. While they do not develop the concept of brand personality in much detail, they do point out, for instance, that different newspapers have characteristics that can be assimilated with personalities which become manifested by the way in which their news is selected, reported, and edited. Gardner & Levy point out that consumer goods do not only have meanings that are associated with their functions but also carry symbolic meanings. They illustrate that products and brands are symbols that carry interwoven characters that are complexly evaluated by consumers. That products carry symbolic meanings in addition to their functional meanings has implications for the way in which we consider consumers as evaluators of products. By opening the discussion about the symbolic dimension of products and brands, Gardner & Levy contend that there are many aspects that have been overlooked in existing research.

An important point with regard to Gardner & Levy's article is the understanding of branded goods as public objects. It is not only the brand owner's intended meaning that is important to consumers but also the meanings that people in general have assigned to the brand over time. In addition to the sender's message, which indeed is of

importance to the meanings that are attributed to a brand, Gardner & Levy point out the importance consumers have as active interpreters of brand meanings. Gardner & Levy (1955) did not present any empirical data that supported their discussion of the symbolic dimension of consumer goods. For many years it appears that their call for research on the symbolic dimension of consumption did not have any impact on research that was undertaken on consumers and *brands*. It is not until recently that consumer researchers have provided empirical evidence that supports the notion of brands as cultural signifiers. In the first half of the 1990's, a number of researchers contributed important empirical findings that highlight the cultural meanings carried by brands. It is perhaps not surprising that three anthropologists are involved in providing these insights.

In his analysis of brands from an anthropological perspective, McCracken (1993) postulates that brands are valuable because they add meanings to consumer goods. McCracken applies the formerly discussed meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986) and examines how cultural meanings are transferred from the culturally constituted world to the consumer good and then finally to the consumer. McCracken (1993) highlights that the model of meaning transfer (McCracken, 1986) does not include any discussion about the role of brands, and he posits that it is therefore necessary to also include the brand when analyzing the cultural meaning of consumer goods. Oftentimes as McCracken (1993) asserts, it can be expected that cultural meanings located in a consumer good are located in the brand rather than the product. To illustrate his line of reasoning, McCracken presents findings from an exploratory study on beer consumption among college students. He found that consumers commonly referred to maleness when they talked about beer consumption. Maleness was not located in a specific brand but rather located in the product. In this manner, McCracken illustrates that any brand of beer must master the meaning of maleness in order to make a connection to the consumers. McCracken also illustrates how different informants "graduate" to new brands of beers as their sense of maleness changes when they leave college and enter a new phase of life. Maleness as a cultural meaning located in beer can thus be articulated differently for different brands of beer. This way of choosing beer brands that correspond to an ideal self illustrates how brands are used to redefine social selves (Levy, 1964)

and to communicate how one wants to be perceived by others (Levy, 1982).

McCracken's analysis illustrates that cultural meanings located in a product can be transferred and thus also become located in a brand which endorses the specific product. Cultural meanings are in constant transfer from the culturally constituted world to the consumer good, i.e. the product and the brand, and then finally transferred to the consumer. The product and the brand co-exist at the same level in the meaning transfer model as an intermediary carrier of cultural meanings. McCracken proposes, consistent with his meaning transfer model, that the meaning of a product and a brand is transferred from the culturally constituted world and to the consumer good through advertising and the fashion system (McCracken, 1986, 1993). While these modes of transfer certainly are important, McCracken does not propose any other institutions through which cultural meanings are transferred. He contends that the advertising system and the fashion system are *two of the means* by which meaning is invested in the object code (McCracken, 1986:77). But an important source of meaning for a brand is the language itself which provides a brand with meaning through the literal meaning of the brand or through the letters and numbers that create the brand name. The brand "Apollo," for instance, does not only carry the meanings communicated by the brand owner. To some consumers, the brand name could evoke associations with Greek mythology or with space missions. In this way, cultural meanings can reside in a brand name in addition to meanings that have been transferred through the advertising system. I am not suggesting that the advertising system is unimportant for the transfer of cultural meanings. The point is that McCracken's model of meaning transfer is too limited to account for the way in which meanings are transferred from the culturally constituted world and to the consumer good.

Even brands that do not have literal meanings can carry cultural meanings that are not necessarily transferred through advertising. Costa & Pavia explored the embedded meaning in alpha-numeric brand names (Costa & Pavia, 1993) and in alphabetic characters (Pavia & Costa, 1994). A number or a letter is just not a number or a letter with a face value but has embedded cultural meaning. For instance, in many Western societies, the number three (3) is often considered as a sacred

number whereas the number thirteen (13) oftentimes connotes bad luck (Costa & Pavia, 1992). Costa & Pavia found that alpha-numeric brand names carry excess meanings for consumers where consumers considered single digits and numbers with feminine shapes like 88 or 36 as feminine. They discovered also that hypothetical brand names that included numbers were commonly associated with mathematics and technology (Costa & Pavia, 1993). In addition, Pavia & Costa (1994) found that consumers perceive excess meaning in the letters of the alphabet. The letter X, Z, W, and K were frequently identified as masculine whereas G, S, O, Q, and A were considered as feminine. Their findings illustrate how beliefs of gender and technology can be embedded in brand names. The interesting point here is that consumers can develop well-structured and complex beliefs about numbers and letters that do not necessarily have anything to do with the intended meaning of the brand as communicated by the brand owner. The excess meanings carried in alphabetic and alpha-numeric brand names illustrate that the way in which consumers interpret a brand is a complex process that involves cultural notions, for example, the notion of gender.

The cultural meanings located in brands are frequently the result of several generations of consumers who have consumed the brands. Thus, brand meanings result from continuous processes carried out over time (Gardner & Levy, 1955). In an exploration of brand loyalty and consumption patterns across generations, Olsen (1995) discovered that consumers often use brands to connect with their past. In this way, "younger generations communicate in a 'dialogue with history' through the memories of the sensual experience provided by heritage brands" (ibid. p. 248). The past becomes present through consumption or possession of specific brands that are associated with a person or with an event that appeared in the consumer's past. Olsen found that consumers frequently use the same brands as their parents once used. It is therefore not unusual that many consumers have longer relationships with brands than with places and people they have known. Olsen's (1995) study illustrates the social function brands might have in creating bonds to family members (see also Moore, Wilkie, & Lutz, 2002). Consumers may also use brands in order to identify themselves with a specific subculture (Ritson, 1999; Slater, 2000) or with a brand community (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz &

O'Guinn, 2001), which is a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. The social dimension of brand consumption illustrates that the meanings consumers ascribe to brands are not totally arbitrary, but are often developed in a social setting. So even though Klein (1999) asserts that logos are the closest thing we have to an international language, it is necessary to remember that the meanings consumers assign to them differ depending on the cultural context. The global presence of brands does not automatically create homogenous brand meanings that are shared among people belonging to different cultures. Rather, the cultural meaning of a brand tends to be localized and adapted to fit to the local contexts. The meanings consumers attribute to Coca-Cola in Trinidad are not the same as the brand's meaning for U.S. consumers even though the brand has been marketed with standardized campaigns (Miller, 1998a). Likewise, the meaning of McDonalds in Beijing is a localized meaning that is very different from the meanings consumers in other cultural settings ascribe to the brand (Yan, 1997). So even if the symbols are the same, it is apparent that the way in which those symbols are interpreted differs.

Prior research on the cultural meaning of brands illustrates that brands convey complex, contextualized meanings that consumers use to construct their self-identity and to make sense of their consumption. Having this in mind, we will now turn to a discussion of how brands become meaningful to consumers through consumption.

Brand as a Narrative

By considering the relationship between a consumer and a brand as part of a semiotic system, Heilbrunn (1998) developed a framework that addresses brand meaning from a narrative perspective. Heilbrunn construes a brand relationship as a story or a text which reflects a series of events arranged in a time sequence. The interaction between a consumer and a brand can be described with a narrative program which develops through several stages and points out how value is invested in brands so that they become desirable (Heilbrunn, 1996). By applying this narrative program to a consumer brand relationship, Heilbrunn (1998) identifies four functions: the acquisition of competency, the

contract, the performance, and the sanction. The first stage in the narrative program requires the brand to secure competency by proving its ability to perform according to stated promises. In this way, the brand acts as a narrative program, promoted through a system of material and discursive differences (Heilbrunn, 1999) in order to become a desirable hero for the consumer. The second stage involves a contract that refers to transfers of values. The values for the consumer are derived from a comparison between what the consumer gives in terms of time, money, and effort and what the consumer receives from the brand. The next stage concerns the brand's performance, which is generated through the consumer's consumption experience with the brand. The final stage in the narrative sequence involves the sanction where the consumer compares what he/she got with what was expected. This stage determines future behavior related to the branded good: a positive evaluation can result in further purchase of the brand and a negative evaluation can result in the generation of negative attitudes.

Heilbrunn (1996) proposes a reformulation of the brand from a semiotic perspective by using Greimas' actantial model to illustrate how value is created and transformed. The actantial model (figure 4.1) illustrates the relations between various actants. The starting point in a brand relationship is the disjunctive state between the object (brand) and the subject (consumer). The subject encounters both helpers that assist and opponents that hinder the subject's obtaining the object. The object is finally transmitted by a sender to a receiver. The narrative process ends with acquisition of the object which reflects a state of conjunction between the object and the subject.
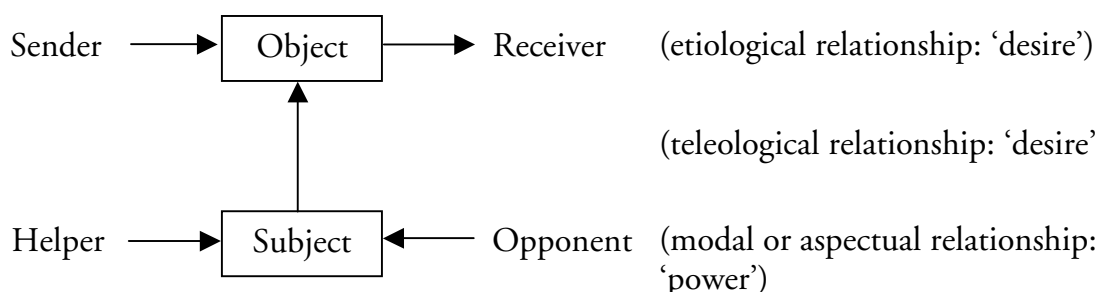
Figure 4.1: The actantial model. Source: Heilbrunn 1996

The narrative approach proposed by Heilbrunn (1996; 1998) points out that brands do not have an intrinsic value. Instead, the value of a brand is considered to be created by various interdependent actants such as brands, consumers, and influence agents:

> A narrative can be understood as the story by which an object's value is created, transformed and appropriated by the various actants. Thus, the important consequence is that the value of an object, conceived in a narrative perspective as its desirability, is co-constructed and negotiated by the various actants (Heilbrunn, 1996:127-128).

The narrative approach to brand meaning illustrates that each actor can play several actantial roles and each actant can be represented by various actors. This leads to the suggestion to replace the concept of market-actor with the concept of market-actants. The multiple market-actants co-exist in a system which prescribes that the actants are interdependent. The meaning of a brand should then be apprehended in a relational perspective where the value of a brand is socially constructed by various actants. The meaning of a brand is therefore not considered as fixed and once and for all given, but resides rather in the differences between the various elements of the system (Heilbrunn, 1998).

Brands in a Relational Perspective

One perspective that increasingly has reached acceptance in consumer research is the notion that consumers engage in relationships with brands (Blackston, 1993; Fournier, 1998; Kates, 2000). A relationship is generally referred to as a mutual exchange between two people and is by and large constituted by what it *means* to relate to another person. A relationship could therefore be considered as a metaphor for *invested meaning*.

Fournier (1998) introduced interpersonal relationship theory to the domain of consumers and brands.1 She proposed a relationship-

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1 Although Blackston (1993) used the relationship idea prior to Fournier when referring to the interactions between consumers and brands, he does not conceptually use theories from the interpersonal domain from which the

inspired framework as a novel approach for understanding consumers' everyday life interactions with brands. Relationship theory originates from the interpersonal domain, and Fournier uses constructs from this discipline to build a conceptualization of consumer brand relationships. Her basic argument for considering a brand as a vital relationship partner is based on the idea of "accepting the behavioral significance of marketing actions" (ibid, p. 345). She uses theories of animism to legitimize the brand as a relationship partner and contends that brands possess qualities similar to that of human beings. Furthermore, she argues that consumers have no problem in giving brands personalities or thinking about brands as if they were human characters. The use of spokespersons and celebrity endorsers in advertisements and anthropomorphized brands such as Betty Crocker contributes to the humanization or personalization of brands. However, Fournier suggests that brands do not even need to execute the abovementioned strategies to become a vital relationship partner. Instead, it is the everyday management of the brand as conducted by the brand manager that develops a set of behaviors from which the brand's human traits are created.

By using the brand relationship framework, Fournier (1998) explores whether, how, and why consumers have ongoing relationships with brands they know and use. She regards consumers and brands as "partners" in a dyadic "relationship" where consumers engage in relationships with brands because of their meanings.

> The consumers in this study are not just buying brands because they like them or because they work well. They are involved in relationships with a collectivity of brands so as to benefit from the meanings they add into their lives (Fournier, 1998:361).

We can see here that what is at stake in a brand relationship is the meaning consumers obtain from having the relationship. By using concepts from interpersonal theory, Fournier develops a conceptual framework that identifies the components that constitute brand relationships. The conceptual framework (see figure 4.2) can be used for analyzing overall brand relationship quality, depth, and strength

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relationship term originates. His conceptualization will therefore not be examined in further detail here.
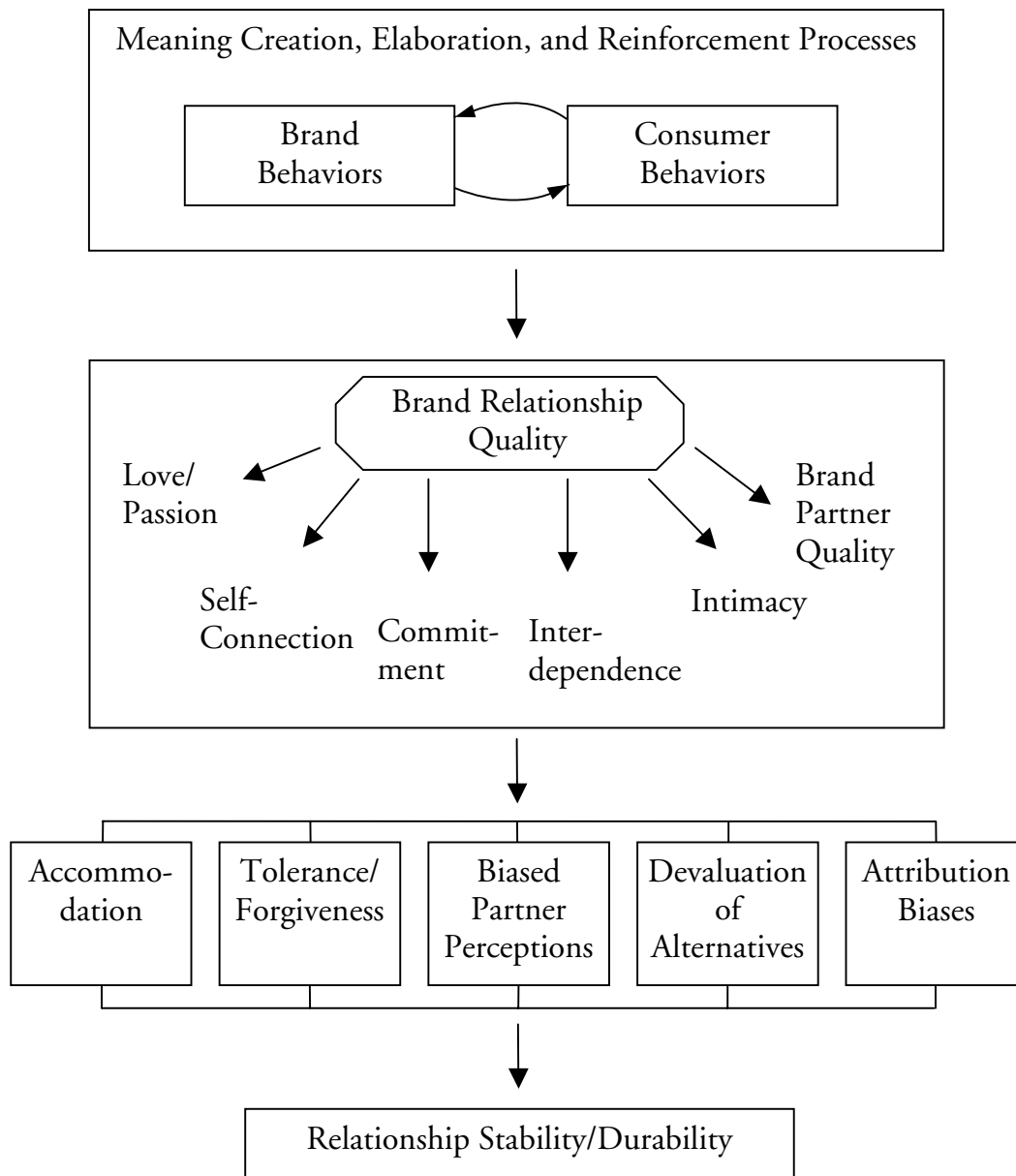
Figure 4.2: Model of brand relationship quality and its effects on relationship
stability. Source: Fournier, 1998.

(Fournier, 1998). The point of departure is the relationship between
the consumer and the brand, which gives meanings to the six facets of
brand relationship quality. Brand relationship quality can be enhanced
or diluted, depending on how the relationship contract evolves as a
result of meaningful actions taken by the consumer and the managers
of the brand. The six facets of brand relationship quality involve
affective and socioemotive attachments (love/passion and self-

connection), behavioral ties (interdependence and commitment), and supportive cognitive beliefs (intimacy and brand partner quality). A strong brand relationship is characterized by a rich affective grounding that is similar to concepts of *love* and *passion* in the interpersonal domain. *Self-connection* refers to the way the brand helps the consumer to express significant aspects of self, including identity concerns, tasks, or themes. When it comes to behavioral ties, *interdependence* in the relationship is created through frequent interactions and consumption rituals that strengthen the connection between the consumer and the brand. *Commitment* to the brand determines brand relationship quality since it develops stability by including the self in the relationship and by excluding alternative brands. A strong brand relationship is further driven by deep levels of *intimacy* emanating from an elaborate knowledge structure and rich layers of meanings of the brand. Finally, *brand partner quality* reflects the consumer's overall evaluation of the brand that is based on 1) a positive orientation of the brand, 2) judgments of the brand's dependability, reliability, and predictability, 3) judgment of the brand's adherence to the relationship, 4) trust or faith in the brand's ability to deliver, and 5) comfort with the brand's accountability for its actions. Fournier's conceptual framework highlights that the notion of brand loyalty is a much richer and more complex concept than existing research has illustrated. The brand relationship framework illustrates that consumers can initiate various kinds of relationships with brands which can be described and analyzed with constructs from theories on interpersonal relationships.

While Fournier's framework primarily focuses on the individual consumer and his/her relationships to brands, there are also important social dimensions involved that determine the strength and durability of a brand relationship. McAlexander & Schouten (1998) illustrate in their study of brandfests, which is a corporate-sponsored event provided for the benefit of current customers, that such social events can have considerable effect on consumer-brand relationships. Another social dimension with regard to brand relationship is offered by Kates (2000), who in a study of gay men's brand relationships illustrates the communal and shared motivations of brand behavior. Kates identified a political dimension of brand relationship which gay consumers address through relationships that can be construed as community membership, political alliance, and political enmity.

Brands in Symbolic Interaction

Another way of characterizing the meaning consumers impute to brands is offered by symbolic interactionism. As reviewed in Chapter Three, symbolic interactionism considers consumers as active interpreters of marketing phenomena rather than passive receivers of stimuli. The meanings consumers attribute to objects result from the moments of interaction between the consumer and the symbol that represents the object. In a study on brand meaning negotiation in households, Chang (1998) draws on theories from symbolic interactionism and develops a framework of brand meaning formation. She asserts that the meanings consumers ascribe for brands are negotiated co-creations between the marketer and the consumer. This negotiated meaning is what Chang refers to as *brand essence,* created in a process through symbolic interactions where the nature of meaning is dynamic and constantly under negotiation. Chang argues that symbolic interactions, that is where meaning is negotiated, can take place at three levels: societal, household, and individual. By using symbolic interactionism as an analytical framework, Chang posits that meaning is neither located in the consumer good nor in the consumer, as McCracken (1986) suggests, but comes from social interactions.

Chang (1998) analyzes brand meaning negotiation from the level of the household since she points out that that meanings credited to brands are largely negotiated in the context of the household. Any brand that is consumed in the household is situated in this context and becomes a symbol that co-exists with other symbols in the household. Her approach can be summarized in the following way:

> Brand meaning is developed within and inseparable from its lived context. Advancing symbolic interactionist theories (e.g., Mead 1934), I posit that the meanings for a brand develop as the brand literally lives among other household symbols: its members, brands, objects and general ambiance. The meanings, taken together, form the brand essence – the core meanings for which the brand is valued. Meanings are socially constructed and not inherent in the object, nor the result of a purely cognitive or isolated perception on the part of the individual. Objects are never meaningful in isolation, and symbol learning is not instinctive but cultural, contextual, and builds upon the dynamics of past knowledge (Chang, 1998:16).

Chang's framework emphasizes the interplay between different symbols consumers interact with at various levels. Meanings that are produced at the societal level are the result of the consumer's interaction with marketers and advertising. Meanings at the household level originate from interactions with other members in the household as well as other symbols constituting the home. Finally, on the individual level, meanings are considered to be created from interaction with the consumer's interpretation of self.

Chang's work builds on Fournier's idea that brands are active partners in a relationship dyad. But in addition to the notion of brand relationships, the construct of brand essence implies that consumers do not just accept and reject brands for what they mean but are active co-creators of brand meaning. Fournier's research (1994; 1998) examines the relationship between consumers and brands and how consumers engage in relationships that support their life themes. Chang (1998), on the other hand, contends that consumers are active and creative producers of meaning; they engage in re-negotiation of brand meanings so that the meanings of the brand support consumers' lives (see also Ritson, 1999). Chang suggests that consumers use various strategies such as counterbranding, rebranding, unbranding, and superbranding to personalize the meaning of brands.

In addition to Chang's framework, Ligas & Cotte (1999) have developed a similar framework based on theories of symbolic interactionism. Chang's notion of brand essence and Ligas & Cotte's conceptualization of brand meaning negotiation draws on the same theoretical background, primarily on works by Robert Blumer and George Herbert Mead. While Chang's work includes an extensive analysis of empirical data that illustrates how brand meaning is negotiated by consumers, Ligas & Cotte's work is mainly a theoretical conceptualization with a few illustrative examples. I will here review some of the points suggested by Ligas & Cotte that provide some further insights into the process of meaning negotiation from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

Similar to Chang's idea that brand meaning is a result of symbolic interactions, Ligas & Cotte consider the meaning of a brand as developed from interchanges among the marketing environment (cf. Chang's societal level), the individual environment (cf. Chang's individual level), and the social environment (cf. Chang's household level). Each of these environments provides a uniform way for consumers to interact with branded goods (Ligas & Cotte, 1999:610). These three environments and their non-linear interrelations are presented in figure 4.3. Ligas & Cotte argue that a particular meaning can be established in each of these three environments that may or may not have impact on meanings established in other environments. Even though they contend that the model of meaning negotiation is neither a "top down" nor a "linear" one, they do indeed point out that meaning for a brand originates from the marketing environment.
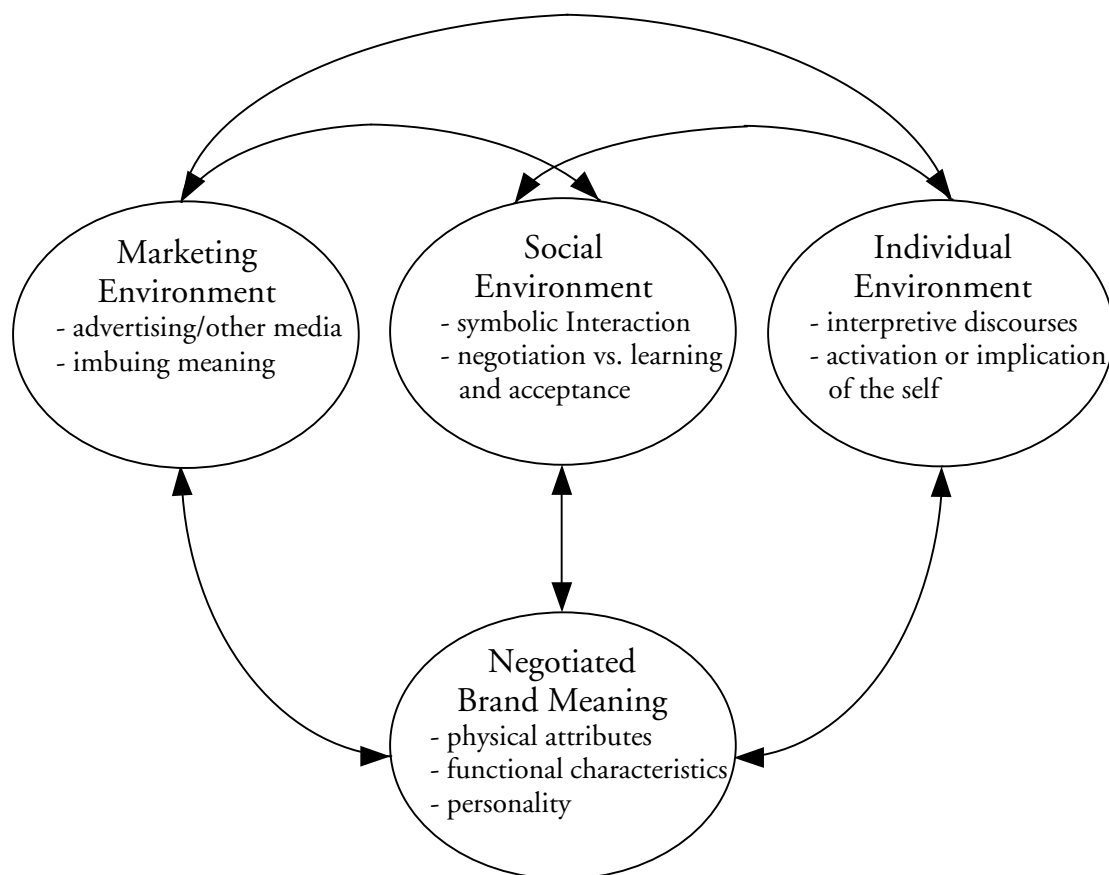
Figure 4.3: A Framework for the Brand Negotiation Process. Source: Ligas & Cotte, 1999

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The marketing environment provides the consumer with knowledge about product benefits and intended meanings for specific brands. The intended meanings of brands are generally created as the brand is communicated to consumers through advertising. Meanings are then also developed in the personal environment, where consumers look for meanings that are created in the marketing environment *and* the social environment. Ligas & Cotte point out two meaning creation processes in the personal environment. The first process involves an interpretation of the meaning derived from the marketing environment. This intended meaning is developed as the consumer seeks to create an individualized brand meaning. In the second process, the consumer enters a situation, such as an appraisal of a brand, with an understanding that the meaning of the brand is influenced by their personal interpretation. These two processes together develop the meaning of a brand in the individual environment. The next level of meaning development takes place in the social environment where the meaning from the individual environment is *negotiated* through symbolic interactionism. While Chang regards brand meaning as being negotiated in all of the three environments, Ligas & Cotte consider meanings as *developed* or *created* in the marketing environment and the individual environment and as a *negotiated* meaning only in the social environment. Ligas & Cotte propose that brand meaning in the social environment has to be negotiated in order to facilitate communication and interaction.

> In the case of using objects (branded products), the individual (consumer) must not only account for what is currently known about the object (form the marketing environment) and what one personally believes the object signifies (from the individual environment), but one must also be aware of the way in which the social group interprets the meaning of the object (Ligas & Cotte, 1999:612).

Ligas & Cotte contend that consumers must either learn to accept the meaning of a brand implied by a social group, or negotiate the brand meanings with others in the group, or search for another social group where the meaning of the brand supports the consumer's self. While the social environment has an important role in negotiating brand meanings, I believe that Ligas & Cotte overemphasize its importance. Since they contend that the consumer *must* accept or negotiate brand

meaning in a social group in order to communicate effectively, it appears that they consider brands as a very central aspect of consumption. While the social environment definitely can have an impact on the meanings a consumer assigns to a brand, it is of course possible that the social group never uncovers possible discrepancies with regard to the symbolic meanings of brands (Elliot, 1994).

From Single Brand to Mixed-Brand

The literature review presented in this chapter offers various perspectives that illuminate how we can understand the way in which consumers relate to and create meanings for brands. The review represents the major contributions that explicitly have addressed development of brand meaning from an interpretive perspective. While prior research examines meaning creation for individual brands, it does not examine the dual sources from which meanings are derived for mixed-brands. In the next chapter, I will develop a framework that addresses the way in which meanings are developed and negotiated for mixed-brands.

Chapter 5

The Polysemy of Mixed-Brands

All brands, including mixed-brands, are containers of cultural meanings that are produced through consumption (cf. McCracken, 1986). Indeed, the marketers' everyday brand building activities are an important source from which meanings for brands are developed. However, the cultural meanings a brand has achieved in the marketplace are the result of consumers' interpretations, with marketer-imbued meanings being only one resource that consumers use in their brand meaning negotiation process (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). Nevertheless, literature on brand management generally conceptualizes the meaning a brand has acquired in the marketplace as a *brand image* that results from a projection of the brand's identity (Kapferer, 1997). In this way, brand identity precedes image and is considered to represent the brand's timeless essence that expresses the soul of the brand (Aaker, 1996). Brand identity is thus understood as a concept that identifies the essence of a true, single meaning of a brand that ideally should be expressed through a single thought (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). But instead of reducing brand meaning to a single word or thought, I will argue in this chapter that brands, like all signs, are polysemic and are therefore open to multiple interpretations. The concept of polysemy builds on the idea that different audiences can generate a variety of different meanings for a sign, depending on various interpretive conventions and cultural backgrounds (Jensen, 1995). Thus, any given signifier can be linked to various signifieds by different people (Gottdiener, 1995). These multiple interpretations result from a discrepancy between the intended code and the code actualized by the interpreter (Elliott & Ritson, 1997).

With regard to mixed-brands, we are dealing with one sign that explicitly refers to two other polysemic signs. In this way, we could think of the mixed-brand as a dual polysemic sign. Potentially, the mixed-brand can generate a more complex set of cultural meanings compared to the number of meanings each brand can generate on its own. But on the other hand, one could argue that the dual polysemy that is at stake in the mixed-brand product reduces the number of possible interpretations since the two brands like an anchor (Barthes, 1977), denominate each other. The two brands work like an anchor so that certain meanings are made more possible or become more fixed. In this way, the two brands generate a sub-categorization of meanings (Bateson, 1979), which makes certain interpretations more feasible.

Dynamic Experiences of Mixed-Brand Products

To understand how mixed-brands might evoke meanings and either increase or decrease polysemy, we need to conceptualize the ways in which consumers recognize and experience combinations of brands. In prior research on mixed-brands, it is generally assumed that consumers indeed observe the two brands that constitute a mixed-brand. However, we cannot simply assume that consumers automatically use cultural meanings from both brands to negotiate their meanings for the mixed-brand. Most certainly, we can expect that consumers sometimes only recognize one of the brands or possibly none of the brands that constitute the mixed-brand. This phenomenon can be illustrated with the well-known figure/ground metaphor (Rubin, 1915). This metaphor has been used by Thompson, Locander, & Pollio (1989) to illustrate the dynamic process of consumer experience where in some contexts, certain aspects stand out and take the figural position while other parts recede into the ground position. The metaphor also implies that figure and ground are interdependent since they both are co-constituting.

The preferred reading of the figure/ground illustration identifies both the vase and the two faces. In a similar way, the preferred reading of a mixed-brand, from a brand manager's point of view, identifies both brands that co-constitute the mixed-brand. Let us imagine that an illustration of the figure/ground phenomenon is the graphical design of a Betty Crocker lemon dessert bar box with Sunkist lemon, where the
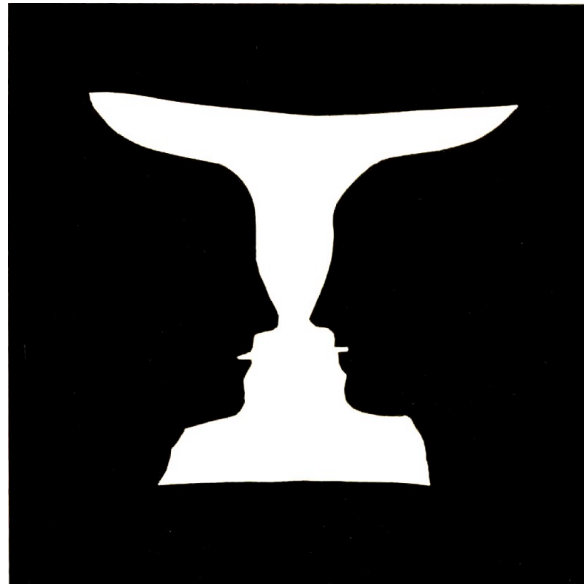
Figure 5.1: Illustration of figure/ground phenomena. Source: Rubin, 1915.

vase represents Sunkist and the two faces represent Betty Crocker. Neither Betty Crocker nor Sunkist causes the other to appear, but they are rather co-constituting the mixed-brand. If consumers can change perspective and see both the vase and the two faces, then the preferred reading of the mixed-brand is achieved. This reading of the mixed-brand is illustrated by image 1 in figure 5.2, which is the graphical design of the mixed-brand as it is presented in the marketplace. However, consumers who only detect either the vase or the two faces do not perceive the interdependence between the figure and the ground. Therefore, they are not explicitly aware of the combination of brands. These two readings are illustrated by images 2 and 3 in figure 5.2. The unobserved brand that constitutes the ground may not be identified explicitly but creates a background against which the figural brand is interpreted. So when one of the two co-constituting brands recedes into the ground and remains unidentified, the consumer's lived experience is then no longer an experience of a product with mixed-brands. In addition to these readings, there is a possibility that consumers do not experience any of the two brands that co-constitute the mixed-brand. Then both of the two brands recede to the ground position while other symbols related to the good take a figural position. Such a reading is exemplified by image 4 in figure 5.2.

1

2

3

4

Figure 5.2: Dynamic Experiences of Mixed-Brand Products.

As Thompson et al. point out, the figure/ground metaphor highlights the dynamic process that characterizes consumer experience. What is figural at one point can constitute the ground in another context. To some consumers, Betty Crocker can be an important brand that constitutes a figural experience as endorser for a variety of food products. But the figural qualification that Betty Crocker may take in certain situations does not necessarily have to be transferred to the context of a mixed-brand. When combined with another brand, the brand may recede into the ground position and the partner brand may take a figural position. It is important to point out that the notion of a mixed-brand does not entirely consist of a display of two brand names; it is also built up by the overall design of the package, product, and advertising as well as the words describing the product. These elements related to the two brand names may be equally or even more important to consumers when they negotiate meanings for mixed-brands. It is therefore possible that the design of the package can contribute as much as the particular brand names to the experience of a mixed-brand. In figure 5.3, I have removed the two logotypes in various ways, but in addition, I could also have changed other elements that build up the notion of the mixed-brand. For instance, the lemon, which is a signifier for Sunkist, perhaps would not have been displayed on the package the way it is if Betty Crocker had been the single endorser for the product.

This figure/ground exercise illustrates the importance of not taking mixed-brand recognition for granted. The dynamic nature of consumer experience implies that symbols, such as brands, are not always interpreted or experienced according to the sender's intention. We should therefore be very careful when examining how consumers develop meanings for mixed-brands because we can be far from certain that consumers indeed recognize the two brands that co-constitute the mixed-brand. But if both of the brand names are recognized, there is a potential for meaning transfer to occur between the brands.

Mixed-Brands and Transfer of Cultural Meanings

The characteristic trait of a mixed-brand is the display of two brands and their associated symbols that prior to co-constituting the mixed-brand were each primarily associated with a product or a line of

products. This co-display of two brands could be *assimilated* by a celebrity endorser who acts as a spokesperson for a brand. Through display of the two brands' logotypes on the package and through advertisements that pictures the brands together, the two brands lend some of their credibility to each other, much in the same way as a celebrity endorser does. A brand of chocolate that is added to a brownie mix endorses the brand of the mix by communicating that they approve of being mixed with this brand. Likewise, the brand of the brownie endorses the brand of chocolate by signaling that the chocolate is of good quality and therefore is a suitable ingredient in the brownie. Thus, a mix of brands has much in common with a celebrity endorser and companies who work together to co-endorse each other. In fact, celebrities build their own names as brand names (Schroeder, 1997), and we could therefore think of celebrity endorsement as a form of brand mixing in accordance with Klein (1999):

> Many artists, media personalities, film directors and sports stars have been racing to meet the corporations halfway in the branding game […] and they are just as captivated by the prospect of developing and leveraging their own branding potential as the product-based manufacturers. So what was once a process of selling culture to a sponsor for a price has been supplanted by the logic of "co-branding" – a fluid partnership between celebrity people and celebrity brands (Klein, 1999:30).

So regardless of whether the endorser is a branded good or a flesh and blood celebrity, there are likely to be some common characteristics for the endorsement process. McCracken (1989) has applied the meaning transfer model to explain how the endorsement process transfers meaning from culture to endorser and from endorser to brand. I will adapt this endorsement model to illustrate the way in which meanings can be transferred from the culturally constituted world to brands, from brands to mixed-brands, and from mixed-brands to consumers (see figure 5.3).

The process of meaning transfer starts with the individual brands "A" and "B" that constitute the mixed-brand. The cultural meanings that are located in the two brands that constitute the mixed-brand, brand A **and** brand B, result from the various roles the brands play in the marketplace (stage 1a and 1b). For instance, the chocolate brand

70

Culture

Culture

Endorsement

Consumption

Key: ——▶ = path of meaning movement

▢ = stage of meaning movement
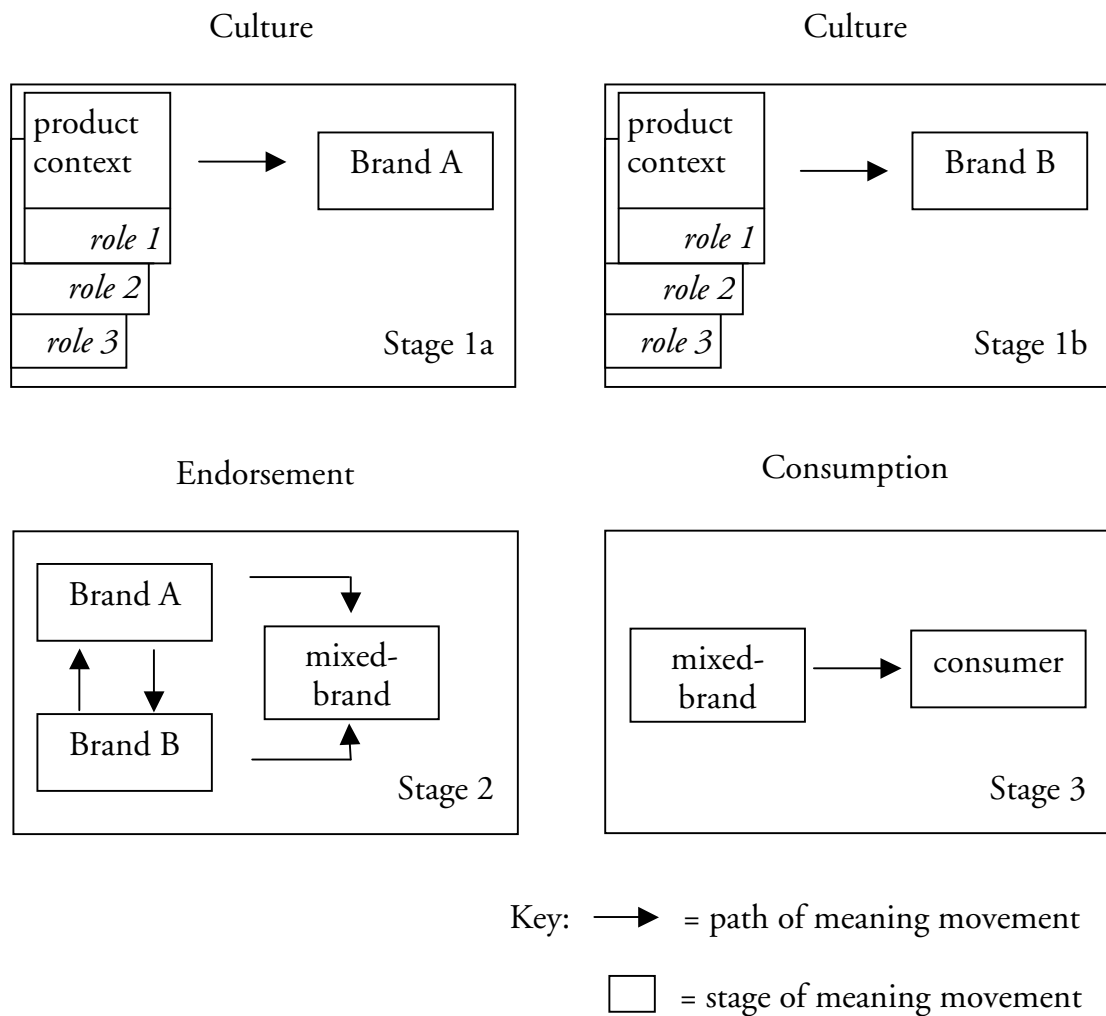
Figure 5.3: Mixed-brands and the endorsement process. Adapted from McCracken, 1989.

"Hershey's" acquires its cultural meanings from various products such as Hershey bites, Hershey kisses, Hershey syrup, and Hershey milk. These different products provide meaning to the Hershey brand by the various roles that are performed in its contexts. As the consumer experiences the combination of the two brands as a mixed-brand for the first time, the endorsement process is likely to occur (stage 2). As indicated in the figure, the two brands co-endorse each other, and there is a possibility that meanings are transferred between the two brands. In McCracken's (1989) original model of meaning movement and the endorsement process, it is only indicated that meanings are transferred from celebrity to product. However, since a celebrity also chooses certain brands because of the meanings that can be transferred to the

person, there is likely a two-way transfer of meaning. If the design of the combination of brands is done successfully and consumers believe that the two brands go well together, the transfer of meaning to the mixed-brand is accomplished. McCracken (1989) describes the process of meaning transfer from the celebrity to the consumer good in the following way:

> The consumer suddenly "sees" the similarity between the celebrity and the product, and is prepared to accept that the meanings of the celebrity (by dint of long and fond acquaintance) are in the product (McCracken, 1989:316).

When the meanings of the two brands are accepted as being located in the mixed-brand, the final stage of meaning transfer, from the mixed-brand to the individual consumer, may occur. This process is accomplished through various rituals that enable the consumer not just to have knowledge about the cultural meaning but also to possess the meaning.

Since the meaning of the mixed-brand is located in the consumer, there is a possibility for a second process of meaning transfer. The two brands that first were considered to co-endorse each other are then not necessarily interpreted as endorsers, but could be understood as an integrated part of the product, where the two brands co-constitute the totality. As the mixed-brand is portrayed in advertising, meaning is then transferred from the culturally constituted world directly to the mixed-brand. In this conceptualization, the two brands, A and B, have been given equal status in the endorsement process. However, depending on how the design of the mixed-brand is presented to consumers, there is a possibility that one of the brands will take on a greater endorsement role than the other. Relying on differences in prior experiences among consumers, we can expect that the very same combination of brands can be interpreted in different ways because different groups of people employ various reading strategies (Scott, 1994) which reflect their cultural background and conventions (Jensen, 1995).

The Mixed-Brand as a Relationship Partner

The endorsement process indicates that there is a possibility for transfer of meanings between the brands and to the mixed-brand. But which meanings of the two brands are transferred and which meanings remain attached to the individual brand? One way to address this issue is from a relational point of view. If we use Fournier's (1998) framework of brand relationships, it becomes apparent that there are potentially several brand relationships at stake when it comes to mixed-brands. The question then becomes how potentially different kinds of brand relationships are negotiated together when the brands a consumer may have relationships with reside in the same consumer good. Take for example the different kinds of relationships a consumer may have with particular brands. A consumer may define his or her relationship with one brand as a secret affair. Another brand may represent to the same consumer a sense of kinship. If these two brands become mixed, clearly an inconsistency will arise that the consumer may have to address. Maybe there will be a new relationship developed for the mixed-brand while the relationship to the two constituent brands may be rearticulated. In terms of human relationships, the mixed-brand product is similar to a marriage between two persons. Consider Mr. A who has a personal relationship with both Mr. B and Mrs. C. Currently Mr. B and Mrs. C. do not have a personal relationship with each other because they do not know each other. But in the mind of Mr. A., his two relationships with Mr. B and Mrs. C are related because they both constitute a part of Mr. A's social life. One day, Mr. A invites Mr. B and Mrs. C to a party at his house. It turns out that Mr. B and Mrs. C take a liking to each other and, after some period of time, they decide to get married. Mr. A. will continue to have two individual relationships with Mr. B. and Mrs. C respectively, even after they get married. But these relationships are also likely to be renegotiated since Mr. A now knows that Mr. B and Mrs. C now have their own personal relationship. The two individual relationships that Mr. A has with Mr. B. and Mrs. C could also generate the notion of a relationship to the couple Mr. and Mrs. BC. Thus, the marriage results in three relationships that are interrelated to each other.

The ways in which consumers may renegotiate relationships for two brands because of their mixing are several. On the most basic level of

analysis, we might use balance theory (Heider, 1958) to illustrate the possible changes of meaning. By applying balance theory to the negotiation process of brand relationships for mixed-brands, we can expect that consumers would change their attitudes towards one of the brands if some kind of imbalance arises (Heider, 1958). The theory basically offers three different outcomes when an imbalance appears. A consumer may change the attitude towards either of the brands in order to achieve balance or the consumer may try to ignore the source of the imbalance. A slightly more sophisticated answer can be provided by applying congruity theory to the process of meaning negotiation. The issue of congruity occurs when a message links two or more objects (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955), in the way that mixed-brands do, by pointing out the connection between two brands. Congruity theory predicts that a less favorable object will become more favorably evaluated when linked to a positively evaluated object. The positively evaluated object will become less favorably evaluated because of its connection with a less favorable object. But the attitude towards the objects does not necessarily have to be affected equally. Congruity theory predicts that the attitude toward an object with a more extreme evaluation (very positive versus very negative) will change less when compared to an object with a more moderate evaluation. This line of reasoning predicts that evaluation of a highly favorable brand that co-operates with a moderately favored brand will change less than the moderately evaluated brand will.

But if we return to the rich and sophisticated vocabulary in which consumer brand relationships can be described, it becomes apparent that balance theory and congruity theory cannot address the complexity of brand meanings and the potential changes that may result because of the brand mix. Balance theory and congruity theory are rudimentary models that add or subtract meanings on an aggregate level. However, the complexity of brand meaning negotiation is likely to involve meaning structures that cannot be added together, as Bateson (1972) reminds us:

> D: I wanted to find out if I could think two thoughts at the same time. So I thought "It's summer" and I thought "It's winter." And then I tried to think the two thoughts together.
> F: Yes?
> D: But I found I wasn't having two thoughts. I was only having one

thought about having two thoughts.

F: Sure, that's just it. You can't mix thoughts, you can only combine them. And in the end, that means you can't count them. Because counting is really only adding things together. And you mostly can't do that (Bateson, 1972:25-26). (D=Daughter, F=Father)

Negotiated Mixed-Brand Meaning

So instead of characterizing the process of meaning development for mixed-brands as a matter of adding or subtracting meanings, it is more suitable to think of the process as a negotiation that develops from an interchange among the marketing environment, the individual environment, and the social environment (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). The assumption here is that the meanings consumers attribute to a brand are *negotiated meanings* that have been developed in the marketing environment by the marketer, personalized and altered by the individual according to aspects of self, and negotiated in social settings between consumers. The meaning negotiation framework developed by Ligas & Cotte (1999) provides a helpful point of departure from which a framework for mixed-brand meaning negotiation can be developed. The negotiated meanings of the two brands (A and B) that constitute the mixed-brand (AB) are the starting point from which meanings for the mixed-brand are derived. Thus, there are two sets of negotiated meanings that through a synthesis become located in the mixed-brand. These sets of negotiated meanings are of course not fixed but constantly rearticulated with regard to the three meaning environments. In addition to the negotiated meanings that are derived from the two source brands, it is possible that the idea of mixing brands generates additional meanings that are developed in the marketing environment and the personal environment and negotiated in the social environment. The outcomes of these processes are negotiated meanings for the mixed-brand (AB). But this negotiated meaning for AB may also have an impact on the negotiated meanings for the two source brands (A **and** B). Therefore, the process of meaning negotiation will start all over again and continue *ad infinitum*. The process of meaning negotiation for mixed-brands is outlined in figure 5.4. We will now look closer at the ways in which meanings are negotiated for mixed-brands in the three environments.
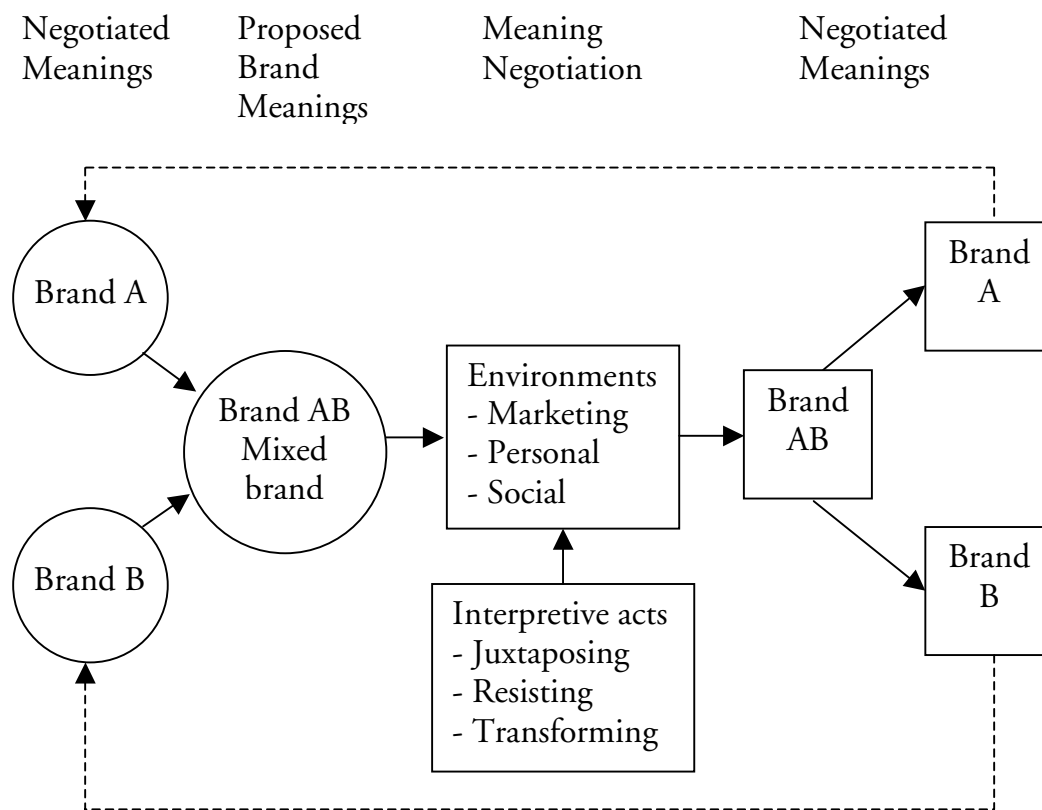
Figure 5.4: Framework for mixed-brand meaning negotiation.

Consumers interpret meanings in the marketing environment that the marketer develops through the everyday management of the mixed-brand. Through these activities, consumers become familiar with the mixed-brand and the benefits of its endorsed products. In addition to information about the product, consumers are likely to get a sense of the values the company wants to express with the brand. Because of the shared characteristics between the mixed-brand and the two individual brands, it is likely that the meanings that are developed for the mixed-brand in the marketing environment resemble the meanings that are developed for the two individual brands in their marketing environments. In addition, the combination of the two brands is likely to generate a development of meaning on its own. Thus the marketer's intended meaning for a mixed-brand consists of the intended meanings for the two individual brands and the notion of the mix of the two brands. Through the mixing of the two brands, the marketing environment provides a meaning regarding the practice of mixing brands. Marketer statements such as "made with…" or "now with…"

indicate the physical mixing of the brands and may generate interpretations where consumers make sense of the fact that the brands are combined.

Beyond the marketing environment, consumers will then also develop a personalized meaning in their individual environments, where meanings from both the marketing environment and the social environment are used to create meanings that correspond to personal goals. When constructing a personalized meaning, consumers are creative readers of the marketer-developed meanings and invent something that is different from what is intended by the marketer as de Certeau aptly describes:

> The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position. He invents something different form what they "intended." He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings. (de Certeau, 1984:169)

The meanings that are developed in the individual environment are produced as the mixed-brand is consumed and becomes part of the consumer's extended self (Belk, 1988a). Thus the roles the brand performs for the consumer create meanings that are synthesized with the marketer's meanings and the meanings negotiated in the social environment. It is reasonable to question then how consumers personalize the meanings of a mixed-brand that explicitly refer to two other brands that the consumer has already created a personalized meaning for. A set of interpretive acts (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) may be performed by the consumer, where the marketers' meanings are juxtaposed, transformed, and resisted. From a marketer perspective, a brand mix may be considered as adequate given the brands' proposed meanings, but when taking account for the personal environment and the social environment, the feasibility of a particular brand mix may be more difficult to assess. According to the consumption practices involving the two individual brands and the personalized meanings that have developed as a result, it is possible that consumers resist the meanings the mix of brands may generate. For instance, if the two brands represent distant consumption activities that evoke dissimilar meanings for a particular individual, it is possible that the meanings the

consumer develops for the mixed-brand will be inconsistent with the meanings that are ascribed to the two individual brands. Therefore meaning must be renegotiated.

Besides the personal environment, individuals also negotiate brand meaning in social settings where they must take account of the meanings that a social group has agreed upon. The meanings an individual assigns to a brand may be totally arbitrary, and in some cases may have little to do with marketer-imbued meanings. But although consumers are free to develop their own meanings for brands, which indeed is the basic premise for the notion of polysemy, it is likely that the social environment limits the number of feasible interpretations. Through social interaction between individuals, brand meaning is negotiated to achieve agreement on the appropriate meaning. Such agreement on meaning is important because it facilitates communication between individuals (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). So to the extent that social groups consume mixed-brands for communication, there is potential for meaning negotiation in the social environment.

The Happy Marriage between Betty Crocker and Hershey's

In the following discussion, I will present a detailed analysis of the Betty Crocker brownie mix with Hershey's and decipher the various meanings which the combination of the two brands might generate. First I will "skim off" the denotative meanings which first come to mind when looking at the package that features the brand mix (see figure 1.1). Thereafter, I will detect the connotative meanings, that is the more subtle meanings that result from a second level of interpretation. The meanings that emerge from this second level of interpretation are likely to be highly individualized since each person interprets the world from his or her own point of view. The connotative meanings that might be the result of this interpretation are therefore most likely to reflect an individual's life themes and life projects (Mick & Buhl, 1992). In the spirit of reader- response theory, I consider my interpretation as part of a cooperative system where I fill in what the author of the text leaves out (Scott, 1994; Stern, 1989). My reading reflects my interpretive framework: one can generate other

equally valid readings of the Betty Crocker brownie with Hershey's syrup. Therefore, the reading should be understood as an illustration of possible meanings that the mix of brands may generate. As the reading is the result of an extensive analysis of the cultural meanings of the brands, it should not be understood as a typical reading which consumers might make in their everyday lives. Instead, by pointing at the abundance of possible interpretations, the aim of the analysis is to account for some of the possible connotative meanings that a mixed-brand may generate among consumers.

The package of brownie mix displays the two brand names and several linguistic signs that through their literal meaning give meaning to the product. The brand names and the other signs referring to product attributes such as dark, supreme, and family size contribute to the meaning of the product both individually and through their relationship to each other. I will here designate the logotypes of the two brand names to be in a figural position and consider the other linguistic signs as the background on which the meaning of the brands is interpreted. The reason for this is the positioning of the logotypes, which are placed in front of the other elements of the package and appear most prominent. The first and immediate meaning that comes to mind when exposed to the Betty Crocker logotype is that of convenient food products which, through the addition of just a few items, quickly transform into something delicious such as a cake, a bread, or a casserole. This meaning of the brand did not just happen all of a sudden, but is the result of the brand's longevity in serving the American market. The Hershey logotype tends to evoke a more restricted set of associations in terms of products since the brand primarily endorses a variety of chocolate products. These meanings of the two brand names are relatively general and do not necessarily have to be unique only for Betty Crocker and Hershey's. Such meanings can also be attributes of many other brands who promote similar products.

To make sense of the specific product that is supplied in the package, it is necessary to complement the meaning of the two brand logotypes with meanings conveyed by the other linguistic signs displayed on the package. In this sense, the elements that initially receded into the ground position move into a figural position. Through their literal meanings, the words *"dark chocolate"* and *"supreme brownie mix with*

syrup pouch" map the specific product, both in relation to Betty Crocker as a maker of a range of food products and Hershey's as a maker of chocolate products. Of all the possible products that are endorsed by Betty Crocker, we are informed that we are dealing with a brownie mix, supplied with a syrup pouch from Hershey's. Through the text "*25 % more servings than Pillsbury thick 'n fudgy 8x8 size,*" we are provided with a reference to an imagined competitor. This information points out the position of the brand in a broader marketing context, where other brands compete for consumers' attention. The text "*13x9, family size*" further positions the brownie not just as a value-for-money product, but also as a product that can be shared with companions because there will be enough for everybody. In addition to the linguistic signs, the image of the transparent pouch with Hershey's special dark syrup and the image of the ready baked cake provide a reference to the liquid chocolate that will ultimately result in a brownie.

This reading of the Betty Crocker brand and the Hershey brand, as well as the reading of the other linguistic signs and images, are the most basic interpretations that a large number of American consumers would agree upon. Indeed, as the two brands are consumed, it is not likely that such an elaborate examination of meaning would be triggered off. Nevertheless, these cultural meanings are an essential part of the brands and constitute the ground for the experience of the products. At this denotative level of interpretation, there are no immediate meaning conflicts in mixing the two brands. To promote a brownie, it seems to make sense to combine a brand that has a good record in providing convenient, semi-manufactured food products with a brand that is almost synonymous for chocolate. But the combination of the two brands generates symbolic meanings that result from the fact that the brands reside in the same product. To identify these symbolic meanings, we have to detect the connotative meanings that these two brands and their endorsed products can evoke and then juxtapose these meanings.

Beyond the meaning of ready-made food products, Betty Crocker can trigger a variety of more subtle meanings. To understand the different meanings consumers associate with Betty Crocker, it is important to consider the marketing discourse that has produced the brand over several decades. Betty Crocker is not just a name referring to various

food products but is also the name of a woman whose face has become a well-known symbol to the American people. Betty Crocker is thus a trade character, a fictional, animated being created for the promotion of a line of products (Phillips, 1996). She is in line with Aunt Jemima, the Green Giant, and the Marlboro cowboy who are other well-known trade characters in the American market. In a Swedish context, Kalle is perhaps the most famous trade character that is used as the endorser for Kalles Kaviar. Betty Crocker was created in the beginning of the 1920s to be used as a signature for the Home Service Department at Washburn-Crosby[2]. In the years following, Betty Crocker soon became a well-known signature to consumers through a radio program called "Betty Crocker Cooking School of the Air," and later through television shows and the Betty Crocker cookbook. The company pronounced Betty Crocker as the "First Lady of Food" in 1945 after a survey had shown that only the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, was better known to the American people. Betty Crocker's face was first painted in 1936, and she has had several face-lifts since, as illustrated in figure 5.5. The current version of her face was introduced to the market in 1996 (see figure 5.6). When Betty Crocker was created, she was used as a fictitious person who spoke on behalf of General Mill's. Gradually, however, Betty Crocker has become a brand on her own, and the name "Betty Crocker" is now used as the primary endorser for a vast number of General Mill's products.

A wide variety of marketing activities has been employed to produce the meaning of Betty Crocker. Radio programs, TV-shows, advertising, promotions, and of course consumers and their use of Betty Crocker's range of products are important sources from which the meanings of the brand are derived. Over the years, the face of Betty Crocker has been promoted as a symbol for the ultimate caring mother who takes responsibility for her family members by serving them good food.[3] Betty Crocker is portrayed as a facilitator who saves time by offering convenient, semi-manufactured food products and, at the same time,

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[2] Washburn Crosby was one of several companies who in 1928 merged to create General Mills.

[3] The marketing discourse of Betty Crocker is here analyzed from the way in which it has been communicated to the market. General Mill's was contacted in order to include a sender perspective on the brand building activities, but declined to participate.
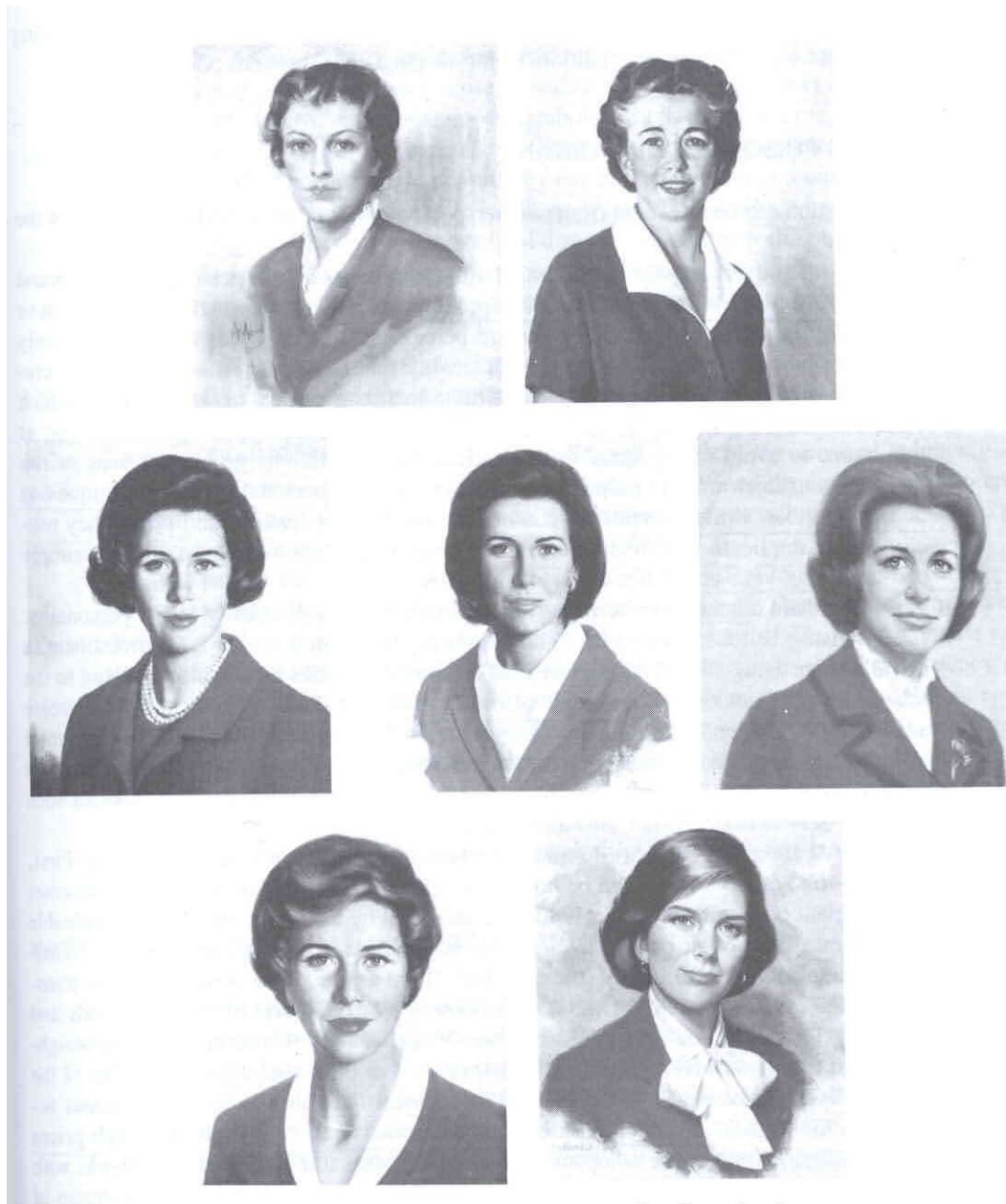
Figure 5.5: Betty Crocker's original face from 1936 and the subsequent face-lifts.
Source: Aaker, Batra, & Myers (1992).

she is also an expert housewife who gives advice to consumers by answering their letters. In short, Betty Crocker is portrayed as a mythical mother figure you can trust by using her recipes, which are regularly published in the Betty Crocker cookbook. The first edition of this cookbook was published in 1950 and became an immediate bestseller (Horner, 2000). While the 1950 version of the cookbook can
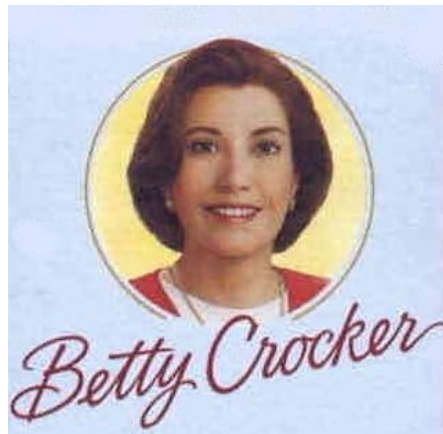
Figure 5.6: Current version of Betty Crocker's face.

be understood as a celebration of uniquely American foods and practices, as Horner (2000) points out, it is interesting to observe that the majority of the ethnic recipes had a Swedish or Norwegian origin, reflecting the community with Scandinavian roots that lived in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where the company had – and still has – its headquarters.

Given the way Betty Crocker has been marketed, there is clearly a connection between the brand and the idea of taking care of a family. To consumers who buy into this Betty Crocker marketing discourse, the brand is a symbol for security and therefore becomes appropriate to rely on to produce the notion of a safe and healthy family. The brand is portrayed as the most competent assistant in American kitchens, and its values are likely to attract a large share of the huge American middle-class. But it is necessary to remember that the brand is likely to have almost opposite meanings for consumers who reject the marketing discourse. To consumers who consider Betty Crocker a middle class phenomenon, the brand is likely to be understood as equivalent with bad food and a symbol for not caring enough about one's family by making food from scratch.

Closely associated with the Betty Crocker brand is the notion of baking. Baking, a domestic activity which people seem to engage in more because of pleasure than necessity, produces associations with a caring person who wants to be appreciated. The important symbolic

meanings that are associated with baking are accentuated by the way cake mixes are designed. Even though it is possible to produce a cake mix that only requires the addition of water, it is common practice to instruct consumers to add one or two eggs in order to boost the notion of "from scratch" baking. That it happens to be eggs that are asked for is perhaps not a coincidence when considering that eggs may represent the mystery of growth and fertility (Dichter, 1964). The meaning of serving a cake bought in a supermarket and the meaning of serving a cake baked at home, even if it comes out of a cake mix, is very different because the latter includes the activity of baking. Traditionally, baking has been characterized as a female activity where the baking of cake has been considered a fertile moment in which mothers symbolically give birth to a child when they bring the finished cake out of the oven (Dichter, 1964). The notion of sharing a cake baked at home is therefore likely to be a different experience from sharing a standardized cake that does not carry any symbolic meanings from the domestic activity of baking. In a way, the symbolic meaning of sharing a cake baked at home has similarities with the celebration of the Holy Communion. A further association with cake consumption involves memories from childhood and festive occasions such as a birthday celebration where the sharing of a cake is an important ritual. A final association worth mentioning here refers to weddings and the ritual of sharing the wedding cake that symbolically embodies the unity of the newly married couple (Charsley, 1997).

What the Hershey's brand is most well-known for is candy, primarily the Hershey Bar that was introduced in the American market in 1905. Since then, the brand has been extended to other types of candy, such as Hershey bites and Hershey kisses, as well as other products such as cocoa and chocolate syrup. Like Betty Crocker, the Hershey brand may evoke a rich set of associations beyond chocolate products. Many Americans associate the brand with Pennsylvania, the state where Milton Hershey who aptly has been characterized as "the Henry Ford of Chocolate Makers" (Coe & Coe, 1996:253) founded the company. Well-known is also Chocolate World, a visitor center in Hershey, Pennsylvania, that demonstrates the art of chocolate making. Similar to Betty Crocker, Hershey's is an old American brand that has existed as long as anyone can remember and symbolizes, through its longevity of serving the market, the essence of American mass consumption. So the

Hershey brand is an American institution that accentuates American freedom, which in this context is equated with consumer choice and capitalist development (Dholakia & Dholakia, 1985). Perhaps the strongest memories people have to Hershey's are associated with childhood, and parents use chocolate as a reward or control mechanism with their children. In order to fully understand the connotative meanings the Hershey brand can trigger though, it is necessary to understand the cultural meanings of chocolate.

Chocolate, characterized as an extraordinary food not likely to be a staple part of ordinary diets (Belk & Costa, 1998), is a naughty luxury which for several hundreds of years has been consumed for its aphrodisiac effects (Coe & Coe, 1996). In Anglo-Saxon countries, women consume on average twice as much chocolate as men do and are also far more often the recipients of chocolate gifts. Chocolate is therefore likely to be an object of desire that women consider as being indulgent, decadent, and sometimes sinful (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 1997). Hence, there is a strong connection between chocolate and femaleness and this in turn evokes associations to bodily pleasures and male seduction. Chocolate is one of those types of food to which people can become addicted, and many consumers have mixed feelings toward it because of its negative effects such as obesity and tooth decay. Given that the Hershey brand is so closely related to chocolate, it is possible that some of the cultural meanings of chocolate also are integral to the Hershey brand.

So far, I have examined the meaning of the two brands and the products they are associated with in isolation, without taking into consideration that the signs, which constitute the mixed-brand, are indeed interrelated because of the visual connection proposed by the marketer. By considering a brand as a text that is read by consumers, it becomes apparent that the notion of intertextuality can help us understand how meanings for mixed-brands are developed.

> When we read a text, consciously or unconsciously we place it in wider frames or reference of language and knowledge, cross-fertilizing a particular reading with other discourses drawn form our own socially, culturally and historically situated experiences (O'Donohoe, 1997:235).

As O'Donohoe reminds us, a text of any kind is always interpreted in a context that situates the text in relation to other texts. Thus, a consumer who interprets a brand does so by framing its position in a culture and assigns an appropriate meaning. And because signs are part of a system, we should look for the meaning of a sign not in the sign itself but rather in its contrast with other signs (Leach, 1976). It follows then that a brand, as a sign in a system, always has a relative position to other brands where the meaning is defined in contrast to other brands. This relational characteristic of meaning is the idea behind the concept of positioning (Ries & Trout, 1986), as Brown (1995) illustrates:

> The Derridean notion that meaning derives from differences internal to the sign system, that meanings are inherently unstable and, indeed, that signs contain 'traces' of the other signs in a chain of signs, is virtually a blueprint of positioning theory. Products, after all, derive their meanings in terms of their similarities and differences from other competitive products. Meanings are continually changing as a result of promotional activity, modifications and so on. The entire system is interdependent, in that alterations to one product affect the meanings of every other element in the product field, and because consumers inevitably evaluate a product against its perceived competitors and bring their own idiosyncratic interpretations to bear, it follows that each product carries imperceptible 'traces' of the others and that meanings are ultimately unknowable or indeterminate (Brown, 1995:168).

As Leach (1976) and Brown (1995) point out, it is the differences between signs that generate meanings for the signs. Because of this intertextuality of texts, where signs are juxtaposed from their relative position in the system, it is apparent that brands do not need formal connections such as a mixed-brand in order to bear traces of each other. A mixed-brand, however, that formally is linked to two independent brands, generates a notion of a marketer-explicit intertextuality, where the meanings of both the mixed-brand and the two individual brands are even more interdependent.

One way to understand how meanings are developed and negotiated for a mixed-brand is to assimilate it with a piece of music, where the meaning is to be found in the mutual relation between tunes:

> The audience of an orchestra are interested in what all the instrumentalists and the conductor do in combination. The meaning

of the music is not to be found in the 'tunes' uttered by individual instruments but in the combination of such tunes, in their mutual relations, and in the way particular patterns of sound are transformed into different but related shapes (Leach, 1976:45).

Like the characteristics of a choir, whose voices create harmony rather than redundancy (Price & Arnould, 1998), it is the full score that constitutes the total experience of a musical composition. One can of course focus on listening to a single part played by one instrument, but the experience of that sound is always framed within the full score. By thinking of the mixed-brand as a piece of music, we can see how the two brand names and other symbols associated with the product come together and generate both the meaning of the totality and the meaning of each entity. Like a piece of music, the Betty Crocker supreme brownie with Hershey's chocolate is a masterpiece, composed by brand managers and orchestrated to generate a leitmotif from the brands. The masterpiece is perhaps, but not necessarily, conducted by a brand manager and always performed by consumers. The leitmotif that is generated from the two brands will be accompanied by other parts of the score to create richness, but it is the character of the leitmotif that ideally gives a lasting impression. To use another music metaphor, one can think of a band that consists of several members, where the notion of the band is generated by the members' contribution to the musical experience. For instance, the idea of The Beatles is inseparable from Paul McCartney, John Lennon, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr. If we follow Leach (1976) and his idea of meaning as a relational concept, we should analyze the meaning of a mixed-brand through its contrast to the brands that constitute it. The issue here is to detect the symbolic meanings that might be generated as a result of juxtaposing the two original source brands (A) and (B) with the mixed-brand (AB). Such sign-sign relations can be analyzed with a syntactic analysis that focuses on how signs are combined to create meaning (Mick, 1986).

A mixed-brand stands in relation to and resembles the source brands because of an explicit cross-fertilization of brand meaning. But the meaning of the mixed-brand is also different from the source brands since Betty Crocker with Hershey's is *neither* the same as Betty Crocker *nor* the same as Hershey's. It is this difference that generates the meaning of the mixed-brand. The mixed-brand is connected to the source brands, but is a symbol in itself with its own interdependent

relations to other signs. Like Saussure's chessboard metaphor, changing the meaning of one brand will change the meaning of all other brands that are part of the mixed-brand system.

So how is Betty Crocker with Hershey's different from Betty Crocker and Hershey's respectively? First there is the notion of companionship which Betty Crocker and Hershey's are engaged in. Their relationship is not secret, but on the other hand, it is not announced elsewhere outside the context of the brownie. In this sense, Betty Crocker is the happy homemaker who is seduced by the virile Mr. Hershey. The mix of Betty Crocker and Hershey's can be considered as a typical example that accentuates a "power-masculinity-virility" motive, the most commonly mentioned motive in Dichter's (1964) interpretation of consumer motivations (Durgee, 1991). The Hershey brand controls and manipulates Betty Crocker by giving sugar and chocolate and thereby demonstrates its power. This fusion of the two brands into a joint product evokes associations of an intimate relationship that ultimately leads to sexual reproduction, where Hershey's, through its special dark syrup, fertilizers Betty Crocker. In this way, Hershey's is a sign that adds critical attributes and makes it possible to define the product as a member of a specific category (Grayson, 1998), in this case, the category of brownies. The special, dark liquid, which is dripping out of the pouch, symbolizes the potency and power of Hershey's and could be understood as a symbolic semen that fecundates Betty Crocker to make the birth of their joint product possible. Just as a father is the genetic co-producer of his child, Hershey controls the brownie by filling every bit of it with "Hersheyness." While Hershey's is indeed first giving something away to Betty Crocker, Betty Crocker takes care of the gift and assures a normal birth of which Hershey's can be proud. In a way, Betty Crocker becomes a symbol for security, another common motive in Dichter's interpretations (Durgee, 1991). Like a mother, Betty Crocker uses her biological ability to metamorphose a pouch of flour and some liquid chocolate into a flawless brownie that Hershey can be proud of. The joint creation of such a delicious brownie provides the physical evidence of the happy marriage between Betty Crocker and Hershey.

So What?

This chapter has offered an alternative interpretation of the symbolic meanings that a mixed-brand might generate. I would like to emphasize *alternative interpretation* because connotative meanings, which I have presented plenty of here, are generally not acknowledged in previous research on mixed-brands. Those who are critical of my interpretation would probably argue that what I have presented in this chapter is nothing more than far-fetched drivel that has nothing to do with the consumption of mixed-brands. But I argue that we cannot neglect that connotative meanings can be triggered when mixed-brands are consumed. It may very well be that there exist other connotative meanings than the ones I have suggested here. The point I would like to make, however, is that it is important that we consider connotative meanings in order to understand meaning development for mixed-brands. The interpretation I have presented reflects my interpretive framework, which is informed by a vast number of resources. Consumers, who in their everyday lives interpret and consume the Betty Crocker with Hershey's brownie mix, have their own interpretive frameworks from which they develop and negotiate meaning for the mixed-brand. We should therefore expect these interpretations to differ from mine. But regardless of how one interprets the marriage between Betty Crocker and Hershey's, I have introduced here a way in which we can think about meaning development for combinations of brands. With this in mind, we will now enter the households of U.S. consumers.

Chapter 6

Fieldwork in U.S. Households

This chapter offers a report of my field studies of U.S. consumers. The research involves interviews and observations of seven consumers and was conducted in Salt Lake City during a six-month period from September 2000 to February 2001. The empirical material in this dissertation focuses exclusively on how consumers relate to food products that display mixed-brands. This choice of product category is not just one of convenience but is deliberate. Food is not like any other commodity, as Sahlins (1972:215) reminds us when he points to the role food has as life-giving, urgent, and ordinarily symbolic of hearth and home. So food as an object of consumption has some characteristic qualities that other types of commodities do not. As we consume food, we ingest it into our bodies, thus making it a physical part of ourselves. We experience it through our senses and internally as the food passes through our bodies. So compared to other types of products that have combined brands, such as a computer with a branded microprocessor or an outdoor jacket made with a branded waterproof and breathable material, I argue that there is the potential for consumers to experience a far more intense connection with a branded ingredient in a food product.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that I have studied U.S. consumers and not Swedish consumers since I am a Swede and enrolled in a Ph.D. program at a Swedish university. My reason for studying U.S. consumers is that most of the mixed-brands that are marketed in the world are available only in the U.S. Although an increasing number of mixed-brand products are becoming available in the Swedish market, there are too few to generate rich and interesting empirical material. Since my goal is to provide an understanding for how consumers

attribute meanings to mixed-brands through their *consumption*, it becomes a reasonable choice to focus on U.S. consumers.

Methodological Assumptions

As Guba & Lincoln (1994) point out, questions about methods are secondary to questions about paradigm. The research paradigm determines both the ontological and epistemological assumptions that the researcher will make. Therefore, before the design of the empirical study can be properly discussed, it is necessary to highlight the ontological and epistemological assumptions that permeate this work. Given the critique I have raised in prior chapters against the traditional approaches to consumer research, it should not come as a surprise to the reader that I identify my work with contemporary interpretive consumer research. Interpretive consumer researchers generally subscribe to a critical relativist perspective (Anderson, 1986) that considers the world as socially constructed with the existence of multiple social realities. I do no subscribe to the idea that there is a single, objective, knowable reality "out there" to be discovered. What can be known about the world is rather very much dependent upon the researcher who interacts with the phenomena under study and literally co-creates findings as the research project proceeds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The approach for data collection is inspired by existential-phenomenology as discussed by Thompson et al. (1989). As a methodology, existential-phenomenology views the world as contextualized; human experience is studied as it is "lived" in the everyday context. The contextualist perspective allows for a holistic understanding with the goal being to attain a first-person description of the experience. The existential-phenomenological perspective is appropriate for this kind of study since I want to find out how consumers assign meanings to goods through everyday consumption. As has been discussed in earlier chapters, meaning structures and the way in which they are created and negotiated is a complex process that requires an extensive examination of each and every consumer under study. Of crucial importance is for the researcher to understand the larger context in which consumers assign meanings to goods. For

example, to a large extent, the meaning of a food brand is created in the context of the household where consumers interact with other branded food products and family members. To understand what a particular brand means to a consumer requires that the researcher also understands how these contextualized meanings relate to the individual's life themes and life projects (Mick & Buhl, 1992).

Given that my intention is to understand the way consumers determine meanings for consumer goods through their everyday experiences, it follows that in-depth interviewing is a suitable method for collecting such data. This methodology can be conducted in various ways such as ethnographic interviewing and phenomenological interviewing (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). In addition, the long interview (McCracken, 1988b) can be considered as a further development of in-depth interviews. The specific kind of interview that I have used is somewhat difficult to label since it is inspired by both the phenomenological interview and the long interview. I will clarify this point as I present the way in which I conducted the interviews.

The empirical data that will be presented in this dissertation will be used for several different purposes. First, data on the role of brands in the informants' lives will be presented in order to generate an idea of how and to what extent brands become part of everyday experiences. This analysis provides a means to contextualize the way in which we understand how meanings for mixed-brands are negotiated. In chapter 5, I have theorized how the development and negotiation of meanings for mixed-brands can occur. Thus, a further purpose of the data is to illustrate the usefulness of the theoretical framework for understanding mixed-brand meaning.

Mapping the Mixed-brand Landscape

The field study of consumers and their consumption of mixed-brand products actually started a year before I conducted my first informant interview. In September 1999, I arrived in the U.S. for the second time in my life. I had only been to the U.S. once prior to that and only for a brief period. My lengthy stay in the U.S. that started in September 1999 was part of an international exchange program, first at the

University of Massachusetts at Amherst for four months, then at the University of Utah for almost a year.

In order to be able to understand the context in which mixed-brands occur, it was necessary for me to become acculturated to patterns of consumption in the U.S. In order to accomplish this, I did what most U.S. consumers do to a great extent: I consumed. As a foreigner, many of the U.S. food brands were unknown to me, so my first goal was to attain a better knowledge of various food brands, their extensions, and also their combinations with other brands. Initially I did not recognize too many mixed-brands because I simply did not know the mixed-brand language. Since I was unfamiliar with many brand names, I did not find it salient that brands were combined. The fact that I did not recognize many of the mixed-brand products, even though I was searching for them, made me sensitive to the possibility that U.S. consumers in general might not be too aware of the phenomenon either.

As I became more familiar with U.S. food brands, I gradually started to notice more mixed-brand products. Almost every time I went grocery shopping, I spent some extra time browsing the store for potential brand mixes. I also got very valuable help from one of the professors at the University of Utah who spent several hours with me in a grocery store, browsing for mixed-brands. We systematically examined every product category available in the store and were able to find many mixed-brand products that had previously been invisible to me. This examination helped me to map the landscape of mixed-brand food products and prepare me for encounters with U.S. consumers.

Recruitment of Informants

Even though there are many mixed-brand food products available in the U.S. market, I could not be completely sure that every consumer would buy this particular line of products. I decided therefore to recruit consumers that I had identified as having bought a product with a mixed-brand. To accomplish this, I observed consumers in two different grocery stores. I took the role of a complete participant (Jorgensen, 1989) in the store and pretended to do my grocery

shopping just like all the other shoppers were doing. When I discovered consumers with a mixed-brand product in their shopping carts, I presented myself and asked if they would like to participate in a research project about food habits. As I have emphasized in earlier chapters, I did not want to impose my research interest in brands on the consumers (Thompson et al., 1994), so I chose to discuss my research as if it would address issues of food habits in general. To make consumers more inclined to participate in the research study, I offered $100 as compensation for their time and effort. Consumers who agreed to participate received a letter that briefly described the study they were going to participate in. The recruited informants were later contacted by phone for scheduling of a first in-home interview. Despite my offer of money for participating in the study, there were some consumers who declined to participate. But since I did not present the whole picture of what the research study was about, I have no reason to assume that they declined because of an unwillingness to participate in research that addresses issues related to brands.

An important issue related to the recruitment of informants was whether I should recruit consumers to attain a homogenous or heterogeneous group. One important goal of this research is to create a better understanding for the *various* ways in which consumers use brands in their consumption. While previous interpretive research on consumers and brands have sampled somewhat homogenous groups of informants such as women (Fournier, 1998; Olsen, 1999), "upper-class, non price shoppers" (Chang, 1998), and students (McCracken, 1993; Olsen, 1995), I decided to recruit consumers in order to get a heterogeneous group of informants. By so doing, I allowed for a more diverse set of behaviors to be observed. The heterogeneous group of informants also provides data that represents a wider group of U.S. consumers than prior research has done. It should be stated here that the intention of this research is not to generalize the findings to a specific group of people like lower-class men or upper-class housewives. Rather, the intention is to generate results that can provide a rigorous understanding for the *different ways* in which consumers relate to brands and mixed-brands through their consumption.

To attain a heterogeneous group of informants, I recruited consumers in two different grocery stores. The characteristics of the stores are not

very different since both offer about the same assortment of grocery products. What makes the stores different is the type of people who shop in the stores. One of the stores is located in a middle-class neighborhood with a mix of people living in either houses, condominiums, or rented apartments. The other grocery store is located in an upper middle-class neighborhood of the town and is dominated by people living in owned houses. This grocery store is also commonly known for being slightly more expensive as well as the place where more affluent people commonly buy their grocery products. By recruiting informants at these two grocery stores, I was able to attain a fairly heterogeneous group of informants in terms of genders, ages, incomes, education, and religions. An overview of the informants' profiles is presented in the table below.

One issue that needs to be discussed in further detail is religious affiliation. Perhaps what Utah is most often associated with is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or the LDS church as it is often referred to. In Salt Lake City, approximately half of the population is affiliated with this church. The cultural context in Utah is very much permeated by the LDS church, so living in this state is a specialized experience that is different from other U.S. states with more diverse religious populations. Members of the LDS church, often referred to as Mormons, are profoundly influenced by the values prescribed by their church. The LDS church strongly emphasizes certain values, more so than many other religions represented in the U.S. An important value emphasized by the LDS church and its members is the importance of keeping strong family bonds and begetting many children. Mormon families are therefore famous for having large families; it is not uncommon to find couples with five to eight children. As a result of having many children, Mormons tend to cook their own food and eat at home to a great extent, since feeding a big family in a restaurant is beyond the budget of many households. Utah is furthermore known for being the state in the U.S. with the highest *per capita* consumption of Jell-O, a product that is relatively inexpensive and therefore indispensable in households where there are many mouths to feed. There are also certain rules prescribed by the LDS church that Mormons are supposed to follow. For instance, it is

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Table 6.1: Overview of Informants' Profiles.

Name	Mixed-brands found in the household or mentioned by the informant	Age	Education	Marital status	Children	Occupation	Religion
Linda	Betty Crocker -Hershey's	59	High school	Never married	0	Administrative assistant, retired	Mormon
Sabrina	Betty Crocker -Hershey's Dreyer's - Twix Dreyer's - Snicker's Dreyer's - Girl Scout Cookies	36	Master's	Married	3	Guidance counselor, Housewife	Methodist
Carrie	Betty Crocker - Hershey's Betty Crocker – Sunkist	88	High school	Widow	8	Housewife, retired	Catholic
Todd*	Reese's Puff - Hershey's Oscar Meyer Lunchables Breyers – Oreo	51	PhD	Second marriage	2	Professor	Jewish
Fanny*	Same as for Todd	44	Master's	Second marriage	2	Social worker	Formerly Mormon
Stephen	Lay's - KC Masterpiece Post - Ocean Spray	52	Bachelor's	Second marriage	8	Computer support	Mormon
Cassandra	Brach's - Chiquita Dreyer's - Twix Dreyer's - Snickers Betty Crocker - Hershey's	26	Bachelor's	Married	1	Part-time work from home, on maternity leave	Mormon

* Todd and Fanny are living together with two of Fanny's children and one of Todd's children.

forbidden for them to consume anything to which one can get addicted. Coffee, tea, liquor, wine, beer, and tobacco are therefore strictly prohibited. Coke, Pepsi, and other brands of cola, which contain the addictive ingredient caffeine, also used to be forbidden but have recently been accepted by more liberal Mormons. The LDS church also prescribes each household to store at least a year's supply of food in case of an emergency such as an earthquake. Therefore, Mormons owning their own houses have a storage room in the basement where they keep their food supply. But others who live in

apartments without access to storage rooms have a harder time finding space for storing their one-year supplies of food. In homes without storage space, it is not uncommon to find food products in wardrobes or under beds.

This short presentation of the LDS church serves as a background to improve our understanding of the Mormon informants. Among the informants, there are three Mormons and four non-Mormons. The non-Mormons' religious affiliations will also provide a background for interpreting their behavior. The reason for providing this presentation of the LDS Church is that non-Mormons also live in this particular culture. It is therefore helpful to have an understanding for the particular culture through which the informants see the world and reflect on their behaviors with regard to food and food brands. During the interviews, the non-Mormon informants reflected on the fact that they were included in the research study, and they sometimes pointed out how they thought their behavior differed from the Mormons' behavior.

In-Home Interviews

The informants were interviewed four to six times in their homes over a period of several months. Each interview typically lasted for about one hour, but I also spent up to two hours with some informants who were more talkative. Two of the informants, Todd and Fanny, were interviewed together since they were recruited while shopping together for their family. Todd had the main responsibility for grocery shopping while Fanny had the main responsibility for cooking. It was therefore suitable to interview them together as they provided insights from slightly different perspectives. The other informants were shopping alone and also had the major responsibility for cooking in the household. These informants were therefore interviewed alone, without participation from other family members.

Informants were interviewed in their homes because this is the context in which most food brands bought in grocery stores are consumed directly or used as ingredients in cooking. The interviews typically took place in the kitchen; it was assumed that this environment would

provide a naturalistic setting since it is the most common area in the home were food is prepared and consumed. The first objective with the interviews was to find out the role that food brands have in the informants' lives. Therefore, I wanted the informants to provide discourses of their food consumption without my explicitly asking for the role that brands might have in their lives. I therefore instructed informants to tell me about their food habits in the household such as what they eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Within this topic, the informant was then free to set the direction of the interview. The first and second interview with each informant can be characterized as phenomenological since the guidance from the researcher was limited.

To find out how the stories of food habits related to various grocery products, I also instructed informants to open up their pantries and refrigerators and tell me about their food storage. Through this procedure, I could get an understanding for how important the brands were to them when it came to identifying and describing the actual products. I also asked the informants how they would instruct me if they would send me to the grocery store to do their food shopping. Through this question, I could elicit how precisely in terms of brand, type of product, size, etc. the informants described the food products they generally consumed.

As I revisited the consumers, I gradually started to bring more structure to the interviews. In this way, the interviews gradually shifted from being phenomenological to becoming more structured, like a long interview (McCracken, 1988b). As the interviews became more structured, I started to ask more questions related to brands and mixed-brands. However, the informants were not told that the research study was dealing with brands until the very final interview. Through this gradual introduction of brand-oriented questions, I could find out how much direction the informants needed in order to start producing stories of brands. Some informants did not need any guidance at all since they had already provided very rich stories of their food brands during their first interview, where brands were a focal aspect of their consumption. Some other informants, who were much less oriented toward brands, needed much more direction in order to produce stories of the brands they had in their households.

In addition to in-home interviews, I also observed each of the informants on one occasion as they were doing their grocery shopping (cf. Otnes, McGrath, & Lowrey, 1995). This observation of shopping behavior provided an understanding for what roles brand names played as the informant was exposed to a variety of different brands in the context of the grocery store.

All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some interviews were also recorded with a video camera to allow for visual data to be included in the interpretation process. The verbatim transcripts were interpreted with an emic approach where the informants' own terms and categorizations constitute the basis for the interpretation of the data. The interpretive process follows a part-to-whole approach where each interview is interpreted on its own (Thompson, 1997). The next step is to relate interpretations from the various interviews to create a holistic interpretation. This holistic interpretation is then related back to each individual interview. In this way, transcripts were read and interpreted, re-read and re-interpreted as further insights were attained through the readings.

Limitations of the Sample

As with almost any study, there are limitations with regard to the sample of informants. The empirical study is limited to one community in the U.S. and carried out in a state that many would argue has a particular culture because of the prominence of the LDS church. So it cannot be argued that the particularities of this study will apply to all U.S. consumers. The focus on food brands provides another limitation regarding the empirical data. I have argued though that food may be an interesting product group to focus on because of the bodily experience that results from ingestion. Meaning negotiation for non-food products that have mixed-brands may therefore be different from the findings in this study. Much of the empirical data that will be presented in the following chapters focuses on products such as cakes and chocolate, so there is also a particular focus within the specific category of food. The reason why cakes and chocolate will play such a prominent role is partly due to the informants who provided me with consumption experiences of these products. Since ready-made cake mixes that are mixed with

chocolate, such as Betty Crocker with Hershey's, were commonly found in the households, it became logical to dig deeper into the symbolic meanings of these products. The interest in this particular line of products has indeed brought some structure to the interviews and made informants talk more about these products than others. However, it was not a deliberate choice prior to the interviews that so much of the data would end up focusing on cakes. If the data had been collected in a different state, where perhaps other types of products with mixed-brands would have been more prominent, my focus would have turned to these products instead. By focusing much of the attention on a specific category of food products during both the data collection as well as the interpretation of the data, it was possible to get a more comprehensive understanding for the symbolic meanings which are involved in this particular mix of brands.

Chapter 7

Empirical Analysis of Consumer Brand Relationships

This chapter offers an analysis of how the seven informants expressed their relationships with food brands. Since my aim is to offer a means for understanding their overall behavior with regard to brands, I will concentrate here on brand relationships in general. Issues relating to mixed-brand meaning development will be reserved for a subsequent chapter. In this chapter, I will apply Fournier's (1998) brand relationship quality model as the analytical framework for interpreting the strength and durability of the informants' brand relationships.

Fournier's framework is presented in Chapter 4; I will therefore only present a brief review of its main constructs. The stability and durability of brand relationship quality depend on the level of the six facets that characterize consumers' behavior to the brand. A strong brand relationship is ideally characterized by love and passion, a connection between the brand and self, a high degree of interdependence, a high level of commitment, intimacy in the relationship, and an overall positive evaluation of brand partner quality. The seven informants in this study vary in the degree of strength they have created in their brand relationships; I will organize my presentation by starting with those informants who have developed several strong and durable relationships, followed by informants with fewer and weaker brand relationships.

Strong and Durable Brand Relationships

Linda: My Cherished Food Brands

The strongest brand relationships were found in Linda, a fifty-nine year old woman living alone in a rented, one-bedroom row house in a middle-class neighborhood. She retired from her job as an administrative assistant two years ago when the company she worked for offered her early retirement. Linda is very sensitive to different brands of food that she consumes, a fact that became evident almost immediately at our first interview when she showed me the groceries in her pantry. Even though I did not ask any explicit questions about brands, she chose to talk about brands, indicating that they were important to the sense making of her food consumption. However, she was not sure whether brands were important for me or not, so she asked me about my own interest in brands. I told her that it was not my interest that was significant to the study one way or another. Rather, if brands mattered to her, she could talk about them, which she then chose to do quite extensively as the following passage illustrates:

> Linda: And everybody uses Morton Salt. Right? (laughter).
> Anders: Everybody, is that…
> Linda: Everybody. I don't know. I just always assume that's what everybody uses. And I like Wyler's, ah, these are for broth, for making chicken flavor and beef flavor. And then somethings I always use-- Hunts tomato paste and tomato sauce. Napkins, always Kleenex brand. I don't know if you are looking for brand names.
> Anders: No, no. Well that's, that's interesting you say you always buy…
> Linda: I, certain things I always use. I always look for a specific brand. I like to make clam chowder, so I usually try to have a little supply of clams. I used to like Morton's minced clams which were the best, and they just disappeared. I don't know why. So I have to use, Snow seems to be the only thing they have. And I like Van de Kamp's pork and beans just because I like the flavor and the taste. (Interview #1)

When Linda describes the food products she stores in her pantry, she cannot refrain from mentioning the names of the brands. Many of the food brands Linda consumes take a figural position in her experience; it

appears that she considers a brand and its endorsed product as a coherent unit that goes together. Her willingness to talk about brands might be considered as an outlet for the affect and strong feelings that characterize the brand relationships she has developed. Fournier suggests that such feelings are similar to feelings of *love* and *passion* in the interpersonal domain.

Linda has developed specific ideas about which brands she likes and does not like, and she typically visits several grocery stores since she cannot find all of her favorite brands in one place. Her preferences for different brands are often driven by an explicit knowledge about a preferred taste, where even highly standardized products such as milk are not "just milk" to Linda. The following quotation indicates Linda's general attitude toward the brands she buys:

> Anders: So if the store has like a promotion for something and it's not your favorite brand, you wouldn't go for it, or?
>
> Linda: I don't usually do that, no. If it's something brand new, I'll try new things. But no, if it's not what I normally buy, I don't care how cheap they make it. I still don't buy it, because I know what I like. I know a lot of people do that. I don't use coupons or read the papers to see what's special. I just, I just know which things I like. And that's what I just pick up. Regardless of the cost or, I am not a comparison shopper. I just know what I like. I get that, that's what I use. (Interview #2)

Her *commitment* to the preferred brands is very strong, and she is willing to support the brands she likes even if the store cuts prices on other brands. Her normal behavior, purchasing the brands she likes, creates a frequency in her interaction with the brands through daily or weekly routines and rituals. According to Fournier, such behavior creates *interdependence* in the relationship. During the years, Linda has sustained many food brand relationships and thus has created deep knowledge about the performance of the brands, such as the quality of the food or the specific tastes she likes. Linda's favorite brands perform over time in the way she expects them to do; therefore they serve as reliable partners and provide stability in her everyday life and a sense of being in control (cf. Thompson et al., 1990). The rich layers of meanings Linda has created for her favorite brands reflects deeper levels of *intimacy* and thus more durable relationships. There are also

elements of a connection between Linda's *self identity* and the brands with which she has developed relationships. She uses brands to create her own identity by emphasizing her unique sense of taste and by distancing herself from other people who have not developed the same kind of strong relationships with food brands that she has:

> Linda: Most people I know they'll say: I could get this brand; it tastes just like that brand, but you're only paying for the brand names, so I use this. It's almost like it. But that's okay **for them** but (laughter), but not for me. No, if I like a specific taste, then I stick with that. […] But going shopping with friends, and they just pick up what's the cheapest and buy, and most of them do that. But I guess I'm too old to change my ways. 'Cause I went with my brother once, and he had a large family, and so he just bought what you get the most, the most for your money. That's, that's how he picked his food. 'Cause when you get right down to it, they all don't taste that, you know different brands really don't taste that much different. But there are still a certain taste that you like better in one than another. […] Every now and then I'll get a different brand of milk just to try it, and it tastes different than what I am used to, so I always go back to the one I like the taste of (laughter). […] Most of my friends and people I've gone with always pick out what's least expensive and that's what they buy, because they think there's not really any difference between the brands. But maybe I have a sensitive sense of taste. I don't know, but I can tell the difference. (Interview #2)

As the passage illustrates, Linda challenges her favorite brands by trying other brands occasionally. But the stability of existing brand relationships prevents her from initiating anything more than "just a fling" with other brands. She returns to the brands she likes because they deliver what she expects from them, thereby keeping her part of the relationship contract. Through her occasional flings with other brands, such as trying a new brand of milk, Linda convinces herself that she indeed has initiated relationships with the right brands. By challenging existing brand relationships, she is in fact strengthening them as she returns back to them after her brief courtships with other brands.

So why has Linda created such strong ties to food brands? In order to understand her brand relationships, it is necessary to analyze her background as a single Mormon woman living on her own for her entire adult life. Linda was born in Pennsylvania and lived there until she moved to Utah 29 years ago. She has never married, so she has been living on her own throughout adulthood. To live on your own as a Mormon is a bit unusual and is not preferred by the church since a Mormon's ultimate goal is to get married and raise a family with many children. Since Linda has been living on her own for many years, it might be interpreted as if she has compensated for the lack of her own family with other friends, among them her cherished food brands. She is aware that she would probably not have been able to afford to buy the brands she prefers if she had raised a family; since she is living on her own, she is able to consume more luxuriously, buying the good brands to compensate for the lack of having her own family

When it comes to relationships with specific brands, Linda makes generally positive evaluations of the *brand partner quality* as her following statement about Betty Crocker illustrates:

> Linda: Betty Crocker's been around for so many years. You know I've got a Betty Crocker cookbook, which I love. Betty Crocker is one of those reliable things; you know they're good, you can count on them, and it's a kind of, feel comfortable and safe buying their things. You know, it's lasted so many years, so you almost know it **has** to be good. Otherwise it would have disappeared from the market. (Interview #3)

Linda's feelings about Betty Crocker are generally positive, and she feels confident that the brand will deliver what she expects from the relationship. She counts on Betty Crocker; Betty Crocker can therefore count on Linda as a loyal consumer as long as the brand sticks to the relationship contract. Through its record of serving several generations of housewives, Linda feels confident that a relationship with Betty Crocker cannot be wrong. She can trust the brand as a reliable household partner, just as many other mothers do in the U.S.

Linda has developed many strong relationships with food brands during her life. However, during the interviews, she expressed many times that

the brands she uses were the same as her mother once used (see Olsen, 1995). It appears that many of the relationships Linda has with brands were introduced to her as a child when her mother taught her how to take care of a household. The lineage factor generates another connection to Linda's self-identity by bridging her current life back to her childhood and to her mother. The following three passages illustrate the nostalgic meanings some of her favorite brands evoke:

> Linda: Some of these things I use just because when I was a child that's what we used, so I continue, you know, through my life to use things like Ralston cereal. Some of these cake mixes are Jiffy. Even this baking powder, it's what my mother used. So I still use it. (Interview #3)

> Linda: I always use Reynolds' aluminum wrap. These things that I've used, it's just a habit because I've used those same things all my life. Probably my mother used them. I don't know (laughter). Probably the only reason. (Interview #2)

> Linda: You just continue to use, you know, even women cooked like their parent, their mother cooked for whatever reasons they do strange things. But you do it because that's the way mom did it (laughter). And I guess you know you like your mother's foods, so you figure if you buy the same brands, that it's gonna be good food too. (Interview # 2)

The strong and durable relationships that Linda has established provide her with important meanings to her food consumption. As has been indicated, most of the strong brand relationships she maintains are based on a belief of superior product performance. But the meanings of her cherished food brands do not end there. During the years, she has incorporated many of the brands into her life, invested meaning into the brands, treating them as sacred objects (cf. Belk et al., 1989). To Linda, food brands are not just labels that can be used to distinguish one product from another but are important symbols that she uses to create her self-identity and to enrich the experience of food consumption.

Relationships of Convenience

Some of the informants have developed less durable and stable brand relationships. Such relationships appear to have been initiated for convenience as well as the stability that the brands' predictability provides in the informants' lives. Brands provide stability in everyday life by generating a sense of being in control in a marketplace characterized by free choice (Thompson et al., 1990). Informants who have developed moderately strong brand relationships are generally not explicitly focused on brands when they construct discourses of their consumption; they can generally talk about cooking and describe their grocery products without using brand names. However, when it comes down to which brands they consume in the household, they tend to have clear opinions of brands they prefer or avoid. Nevertheless, their opinions are not as strong or as sophisticated as Linda's.

Sabrina: My Predictable Food Brands

Sabrina, who has developed moderately strong brand relationships, is 36 years old and lives with her husband and two children. They own a three-bedroom house in an upper middle-class neighborhood. Sabrina uses some brand names when she talks about cooking and grocery shopping, but she does not talk about them in the same affectionate way as Linda does. When Sabrina uses brand names to describe the family's food habits, she does so either because the brand has become a generic term for her, or it is a way of being precise in her description. The following passage illustrates this as Sabrina describes the family's breakfast habits:

> Sabrina: My little boy and my little girl, eat cereal. Do you want the kind of cereal they eat? Okay, they have Crispix. They eat Crispix every day. [My son] eats it dry and [my daughter] eats it with milk and then they both drink milk for breakfast. And then they either have buttered toast or a Kellogg's cinnamon Pop Tart, um, depending on what they want that day, but they usually have cereal and either toast or a Pop Tart. Um. And on the weekends, if they want, they can have waffles. They just eat those Eggo waffles. I don't make them or anything, waffles and Pop Tarts, but I don't let them have waffles and Pop tarts on school days because it's too much sugar. Um, or

sometimes during school days they can have waffles and toast or waffles and cereal, but not both sugary things. And then, um, usually I'll eat, um, either a Pop Tart and some juice or I'll have, um. What else do I have? Sometimes I may have waffle, but I don't eat cereal. And my husband doesn't eat at home. He eats, sometimes he'll grab something at work. Um, and occasionally, maybe once a week or once every two weeks, we'll get bagels, and I, the kids like bagels and cream cheese. (Interview #1)

Her mentioning of Crispix is an example where a brand name is used to precisely describe what kind of cereal her children eat for breakfast. In subsequent interviews, she also mentioned Cheerios (another brand of cereal), which the children also eat occasionally. It is interesting that she describes different cereal products by their brand names and not by the characteristics of the product. In a similar way, she uses a brand name instead of a product term when referring to Kellogg's Pop Tarts. Kellogg's is mentioned because it serves as a clarification that the family indeed eats Kellogg's Pop Tarts and not other brands of Pop Tarts which the family does not like. To Sabrina, Pop Tarts has become a generic term (even though it is a brand owned by Kellogg's) that she frequently used as if it was a product term. In this way, she is commodifying the brand in contrast to the brand owner whose intention is to brand the commodity. Although Sabrina sometimes mentions brand names when describing the family's food habits, it is apparent that she does not need to talk about food brands when having a general conversation about food that is consumed in the household. But when the description of family habits needs more clarification, she tends to describe various products by their brand names rather than with specific product terms.

However, there is a clear difference between Sabrina and Linda in the way they talk about brands. While Linda's mentioning of brands has an affective dimension, there is less of that in Sabrina's brand relationships; *love* and *passion* would be absent or at least less prominent. In this respect, brands are not like a family member or a very good friend to Sabrina so she does not need to talk about them when she describes her food habits. For Sabrina, brands are part of food products, but they do not stand out as a figural experience. Compared to Linda, Sabrina needs more guidance in terms of explicit probes in order for her to talk

specifically about certain brands. Even though Sabrina does not feel passionate about her preferred brands, other ways of connecting to brands make her brand relationships temporarily stable. When Sabrina has developed a preference for a brand, she tends to be fairly *committed* to that particular brand, as long as the initial premise on which the relationship was built is maintained:

> Sabrina: Hmm, well if I find something I like, I'm gonna keep buying it just because I know it works, you know. But I'm willing to try other things, and if they don't work, then I'm not gonna get them, you know. But if I find something that we like, I just keep getting it unless it's ridiculously expensive, you know. So brands, I think are important... to a point, you know. There are some brands, I can't think of them off my head, but I know there, somethings I've bought that I haven't liked that I wouldn't, that are not off-brands, that are brand name, but I haven't liked them, and I won't buy them, you know. I know if I see them. You know, we tried, I can't remember what it was, it was some sort of stuffing potatoes, and no one liked it (laughter). So we won't buy it again. So all of it's just what works and what my kids and my husband likes. (Interview #1)

Sabrina has a list in her mind of which brands she prefers and which products are desirable, even though they carry an "off brand." In this respect, many less durable relationships are created and are based primarily on the product's price The "off brands" are less expensive, so Sabrina tends to stay with them unless she or someone else in the family has a specific preference for a name brand. Sabrina's relationships with "off brands" are generally less stable than the relationships she has developed with name brands:

> Sabrina: Off brands are usually cheaper. Sometimes they're good and sometimes they're not. So I try some, and if they don't work, I don't buy them anymore. I buy what I used to buy (laughter). For example the green beans. I usually buy the Del Monte, but I've tried the off brand like the Western Family, which is Dan's brand or whatever. I don't particularly care for those. Macaroni and Cheese, we've tried off brand, and I don't, the kids don't like that for Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. Um, the cheese crackers, they're just two brand names, and my son likes one better

than the others, so it's not even an off brand. But like butter. I use off brand butter 'cause to me butter is butter. For cheese, if they have off brand, I get off brand…cheese. To me a brand is something that you can find anywhere, and an off brand you find in certain regions. Like back East, the off brand was called Rich Food and out here it seems to be Western Family or Albertson's brand or… (Interview #3)

While Sabrina has developed a few stronger relationships with name brands like Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, Walter's grapefruit juice, and Kellogg's Pop Tarts, she has not initiated the same kind of close relationships with "off brands" which she mostly just collectively labels as off brand without a further specification of which off brand she buys.

Her preference for "off brands" is by and large based on the lower price rather than taste, and her commitment to relationships with "off brands" will terminate if the price difference is eliminated. During the interviews, Sabrina emphasized that she liked to save some money by buying "off brands" instead of name brands. In this way, she construes her role as a "stay-at-home mom" who spends the household's money, and her purchases represent her way of saving money (Miller, 1998b). Sabrina meant that her husband spends much more money on groceries when he is going to the grocery store. Her "unproductive" work as a "stay-at-home mom" is therefore transformed to productive work in that the money that her husband earns is spent in a responsible way. Therefore, she buys off brands when she cannot taste the difference between such a brand and a name brand. In this way, she maintained several times that "butter is just butter" and "cheese is just cheese." Sabrina's experience from living in the eastern U.S. has made it possible for her to make a clear distinction between name brands and "off brands." She is able to find the recognizable name brands wherever she has moved in the country, but the "off brands" tend to be more regional or limited to a specific grocery chain. To Sabrina, "off brands" means less expensive and less reliable brands that are not as good as the name brands. The distinction she makes between "off brands" and name brands is interesting because it is a way for her to categorize her food products where she mentally maps products into those two distinct groups.

Even though Sabrina does not feel passionate about most name brands, they still provide a sense of stability in her life. As she has moved several times in the U.S., she has experienced that not all brands are available everywhere. Her efforts to get the brands with the flavors she likes indicate that brands are important to the point that it helps her to maintain family habits and create her self-identity as a caring mother who gives her family the good name brands (cf. Thompson, 1996):

> Sabrina: Cinnamon [Pop Tart] and there's another kind. It's called like white chocolate that we can get in Virginia and Ohio, when we lived in Ohio. We couldn't get them out here, so my in-laws would bring them, bring us boxes when they would come out. And now they started to carry them at Target, down on Fort Union Boulevard, but they don't have them up at Dan's or Albertsons or anywhere. You probably find that too, being from Sweden, there is some food you can't get; it's very annoying (laughter). […] These are the peas, Leseuer peas that they, you couldn't get, but now you can get them out here. Some of the stuff has been in here for a long time. These are grits. That's grits, just so you know. Tuna, sometimes I eat tuna fish. Green chilies because I cook with those sometimes, spaghetti sauce, um, this is salad dressing that you can't buy out here that my in-laws bring out to me when they come. (Interview #1)

There are a number of brands Sabrina has kept relationships with for a long time. Similar to Linda, she is committed to these brands and is unwilling to buy alternative brands unless she is in desperate need for something.

> Anders: If Dan's wouldn't have, for example, Pop Tarts, the Kellogg's Pop Tarts Cinnamon flavor, what would you do?
>
> Sabrina: I probably wait 'til I go to the store again and try somewhere else. 'Cause usually I, you know, I go to a bunch of different places if I'm out and I need something. 'Cause I know my kids won't eat the off brands, and I don't really like the off brand so I wouldn't buy them. You know, but if it was something desperate, like I needed it for a recipe and all they had was light sour cream, yeah I would buy that, you know. Or if it was paper towels and I had to have paper towels, we would

use the off brand, but I wouldn't buy a whole bunch of them. I would just buy enough to get me through 'til I could get what I wanted. […] 'Cause they [Bounty] work better; they don't tear apart. I know that's true (laughter). Yeah, they're just, they just work best, and we use a lot of paper towels with a two year old, so they just work better. (Interview #2)

When Sabrina talks about different brands, she appears to do so as if she considers them as a dimension of the product. Sometimes the brand name constitutes a figural experience and is used to distinguish one product from another. But on the same level of distinction, she also appears to use characteristics related to a product to distinguish one product from another. In this way, "light sour cream" is a dimension of a product just as Kellogg's is a dimension of Pop Tarts. Thus, Sabrina uses brands and other labels as identification marks in order to identify one product from another. Compared to Linda, food brands do not appear to have the same prominent meaning for Sabrina with regard to construction of her self-identity. There are indeed occasions when Sabrina chooses name brands to satisfy her children's preferences, thereby satisfying the good mother role, but the number of food brands involved in this identity issue is relatively limited compared to Linda.

The brand relationship quality model suggests that strong and durable brand relationships have high levels of intimacy that emanate from an elaborate knowledge structure and rich layers of meanings of the brand. The relatively few longstanding brand relationships that Sabrina maintains would qualify for being *intimate*. These brands have become trustworthy partners and bring stability and predictability to Sabrina's life. The stronger brand relationships can also be characterized as *interdependent* because Sabrina supports them through frequent interactions, such as her morning ritualistic consumption of Kellogg's Cinnamon Pop Tarts. Like Linda, Sabrina maintains some relationships with brands that were introduced to her during her childhood:

Anders: What about Colgate? Why, why do you always buy Colgate?

Sabrina: I think we like the flavor better of the other toothpaste and the texture of it. That's why, and I grew up on Colgate so, I mean, my parents had these Colgates so, that's why. (Interview #2)

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Although she expresses a rational explanation for her choice of toothpaste that is based on taste, it appears that the relationship is maintained primarily because of the brands' ability to symbolically link her current life with her childhood. Through this symbolic link, the brand addresses nostalgic notions of her past self.

Carrie: Multiple "Good" Brands

Carrie is 88 years old and has been a housewife for her entire life. As a professional housewife, she has raised eight children and unlike any of the other informants, she has lengthy experience of taking care of a large family. Even though some of the other informants care for their children in their homes, none of them has devoted an entire life to housekeeping and bringing up children in the way Carrie has. She has been living on her own after her husband died fifteen years ago and is currently living on his pension of approximately $600 a month; her eight children and twenty-six grandchildren supplement her income. She still lives in the three-bedroom house that she and her husband bought when they moved to Utah forty-six years ago. Carrie has less money to spend on groceries today than formerly and that has forced her to abandon some brand relationships in favor of less expensive store brands.

Generally, Carrie does not talk about brands when producing discourses of her food consumption. When I asked how she would instruct me if she would send me to the grocery store, she spoke of different products, such as sorts of meat and vegetables rather than of brands. When asking her explicitly about a specific product (flour), she gave the following answer: "I usually have a brand. A whole wheat, when I'm baking I use whole wheat flour." It is interesting that she on the one hand says that she would choose a brand, but on the other hand refers to the type of flour rather than a specific brand. In general, Carrie is not mentioning any preferences for specific brands, and she oftentimes relies on several brands that she thinks are equally good. While she does not mention many brand names when talking about grocery products, she would not just buy any brand in the grocery store. Despite her limited household budget, she rewards herself by

purchasing certain brands, which indicates that there is *commitment* to some of her food brand relationships:

> Anders: When you go to the grocery store, there are certain things that you just buy the cheapest?
>
> Carrie: No, no. I don't. I…know what I want. I, I, I don't, I don't skimp on certain brands that I like. And if I like that brand over the store's brand or their own brand, you know, the main, then I buy the other, I will buy the good brand. I have very, on orange juice I'm very particular which one I buy. Some of them just don't taste right. Some of them have a lot of pulp in them, and that I don't like too much of it. And I like my brands, and I watch for the sales on them. And last week they had a sale so, that's when I buy it. (Interview #2)

Later in a subsequent interview, Carrie talked again about orange juice and her loyalty to the ones she likes:

> Carrie: I know which ones I like, and I, and that's, I have a couple. Now, like I like this Western Family orange juice because it is, does have calcium added to it. But a lot of them don't. I wouldn't buy an orange juice that didn't have extra calcium. (Interview #3)

Carrie buys the "good brands" that she has developed a preference for based on taste or certain ingredients such as calcium added to orange juice. Her clear opinion of different tastes of orange juice illustrates that she has gained a sophisticated knowledge for orange juice *per se*, but not for the specific brands which she considers as "good" orange juice. Two brands of orange juice have similar meaning to Carrie so long as they have a good taste, a well-balanced content of pulp, and added calcium. However, the meanings associated with orange juice are connected to several brands; it is therefore more suitable to talk about intimacy in her relationship to orange juice, which is then connected to several brands. Her multiple relationships to juice brands make the notion of *interdependence* to an individual brand less prominent since she always has a second relationship to exploit. Thus, there is interdependence in Carrie's relationship to juice as a product but not to a specific brand.

Orange juice is not only an important element in Carrie's diet, but is also incorporated into her ritualistic morning behavior. Carrie

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maintains a daily morning ritual that starts with a visit to her neighbor. At six a clock every morning, she walks over to her neighbor, and they share a cup of Yuban coffee. After one hour, she returns home to drink a glass of orange juice before she starts her 45-minute exercise program. In this way, orange juice becomes an important dimension of her morning ritual that provides structure and stability to her life. Her consumption of orange juice that has added calcium furthermore fits into her self-image as a person who eats a healthy diet and has overall good health. But again, it is the relationship with the "good" orange juice that is important and not the brand *per se*.

Carrie's choice of orange juice illustrates how marketing has created a consumer culture that is based on an ideology of consumer choice (Dholakia & Dholakia, 1985). The presence of multiple brands in multiple versions in almost every product category generates the notion of a culture in which choice becomes "natural" and one is obliged to practice it. In her discussion of orange juice, Carrie is an illustrative example of this practice of choice. While she clearly believes that she is making a choice of orange juice that fits her taste, it is important to remember that such micro choices are determined to large extent by macro choices over which the individual consumer has little influence. The variety of brands available may indeed generate the notion of a marketplace full of choices, but the supply of brand alternatives is often limited to a few suppliers. The marketing discourse also tends to limit macro choices in that consumption of certain products, such as orange juice for breakfast, becomes a cultural necessity: one must consume it.

In some cases, Carrie has developed a clear preference for a specific brand. However, in order to generate stories of specific brands, it was necessary to ask her explicit questions about which brands she uses. For instance, we talked at length about baking, and Carrie expressed how much her children and grand children enjoy her cakes without mentioning any brand names at all. When she showed me her pantry, she had a number of Duncan Hines cake mixes stored. When I later asked her if she would have a specific brand preference for cake mixes, she answered:

> Terry: Well, yeah, you know I know, pretty much which brands are good. Duncan Hines is the best cake mix. If you can get, if you can get the Duncan Hines. I like Duncan

Hines. It's a little, maybe a little bit more, maybe a nickel
or a dime more a box or something, but it's not enough
to, I don't buy that many. (Interview #3)

When it comes to cake mixes, Carrie maintains a strong relationship to one specific brand. Even though she is aware of Betty Crocker as an alternative brand, she prefers Duncan Hines and stays loyal to this brand. However, she is not so committed to the relationship that she would wait to buy the brand if it were unavailable in the grocery store. When Carrie showed me her pantry, she talked about a box of Betty Crocker cake mix, which she had bought because they had been out of the Duncan Hines cake mix at the grocery store. Again, even if there is a preferred brand, Carrie always seems to have an alternative plan, making her less dependent on a specific brand relationship. As her household budget has diminished, she has started to buy more store brands that are a little less expensive than national brands. Even though she has terminated some brand relationships, which she had kept for a very long time, it is not in terms of lost friends that she is referring to those abandoned brands. She has found out that the less expensive store brands perform equally as well as the more expensive national brands, but with a lower cost, and therefore she feels confident with those brands.

Todd and Fanny: Food Relationships

Todd, who is 51 years old, and Fanny, who is 44 years old, have been living together for a year and a half and have thus only recently started to share experiences of food consumption. They now live in Todd's three-bedroom house in an upper middle-class neighborhood. Todd and Fanny are similar to Sabrina in that they do not talk about brands when producing discourses of cooking and grocery shopping. On the surface, it seems that brands do not matter at all to Todd and Fanny, because they seem to be very flexible when it comes to choices of food. When I asked them how they would instruct me if they would send me to the grocery store, Todd answered that he would give me a shopping list that specifies what they want. When specifying what they wanted me to buy, they did not mention any brand names at all but indicated various grocery products by product terms. This product-focused rather than brand-focused way of describing food illustrates that brands may not be the most prominent thing that Todd and Fanny use to make

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sense of their food consumption. When asking them explicitly if there would be certain brands they wanted me to buy, they responded in the following way:

> Todd: Actually rarely, um, there is, basically, the only thing that jumps out of me is Marie Callender for corn bread, but uh, I really don't watch for brand names, do you?
>
> Fanny: I watch, probably more. I know certain, certain brand names that are cheaper, and I will watch that, uh, but you don't seem to watch that. It's interesting 'cause you like a, a certain amount for the grocery bill to be, and I'll be the one that says, this is a little cheaper, and you'll say, oh I don't, I don't want that kind.
>
> Todd: Oh well, when you're talking about a penny or two, or something like that, I just, eh…
>
> Fanny: See? And I think it does. Yeah, so there'll be, I think Best Western. I don't know if you are familiar with that now that you've been here a while, but that's a cheaper brand, an alternative to…
>
> Todd: Than the national brands.
>
> Fanny: I'll watch for that because I think it's just as good, as the others so, um. Some of the gourmet things, but I can't think of anything that comes to mind that I might pick, and that are more expensive but are better. But I can't think of anything right off the bat that, that I would very often. So. (Interview #1)

It is interesting that Todd could only recall one brand that he would be particular with when it comes to grocery products. His lack of preference for specific brands illustrates that he has not initiated the same kind of strong relationships with food brands as, for instance, Linda has. While Todd argues that he would not be particular with specific brands, he does tend to buy the same brands from time to time. However, he cannot recall his brands by name but rather by the package design. Todd is not involved in the actual cooking, but he frequently buys the grocery products together with Fanny. Before Fanny moved into Todd's house, Todd was cooking for himself and his sons for about five years, so he had some time when he could have developed relationships to food brands. Despite this, however, it appears that brands rarely take a figural position in Todd's food experience, and he therefore has a hard time remembering the names of the food brands they consume.

While Todd generally is not too concerned about food brands, Fanny appears to be focused on saving money and, similar to Sabrina, has a *commitment* to less expensive brands (compare with Sabrina's "off brands") that she thinks work just as well as the more expensive national brands. But beyond this commitment to certain brands because they are less expensive, it is hard to see that Fanny would cherish the brands she prefers with feelings such as *love* or *passion* or feel that she has *intimate* relationships with the brands. To talk about *commitment* to a brand because it is less expensive is inappropriate since the bond to the brand disappears as soon as the price becomes unacceptably high. While this is somewhat true for all brands, the difference may be that "real brands" have greater price elasticity than "off brands" do.

Initially Todd showed very little interest in preferences for specific brands. Nevertheless, he uses food brands to define his own self-identity where he avoids certain brands that do not fit his ideal self. So while he articulated few preferences for specific brands, he has a sophisticated strategy of avoiding certain types of brands. This behavior is interesting, and it illustrates, consistent with Wilk's findings (1997), that decisions *not* to consume can be just as important when forming personal and social identity. His avoidance of Western brands illustrates how he uses negative brand relationships to make sense of his consumption:

> Todd: I won't look to the Western brands entry or basically any other. The other thing is, because we know the companies stack, have certain arrangements for the supermarkets to stack, or whatever. I'm basic at eye level okay, and Duncan Hines is usually at eye-level. I'm okay with that. Okay. I'm not going down there for somebody who's made a poor arrangement with the supermarkets. (Interview #2)

Todd identifies himself with his neighbors living in the same upper middle-class area who also do their grocery shopping at Dan's, a higher-end, more expensive grocery store. His choice of a more upscale grocery store, as well as his "eye-level" strategy, illustrate that brands and grocery shopping play a role for Todd in his construction of his self identity. "Western brands," as he calls the Western Family brand, does not fit into his perception of his self-identity. It is not the function or

the taste of the products that are the problem,[4] but rather his idea that the brand is cheap and unsophisticated and, as such, targeted at consumers with lower cultural capital (Holt, 1998):

> Todd: Uh, you know it's stuff lower on the shelf, all right? And I just, uh, I guess it's associated with, well if you can't afford the other stuff, you buy that. And it's usually these less packaged kind of things, they're less attractive to me in terms of, well they don't glare me as much, and maybe there's a connotation with it, that I, I rarely buy, I would rarely buy that. (Interview #2)

Fanny's concern for buying less expensive brands illustrates that she is both more and less concerned about brands than Todd. She appears to be more concerned about brands with a lower price but is less concerned about issues of identity. She could very well do her grocery shopping at a lower-class grocery store such as Smith's or at Costco, a warehouse store that sells products in bulk at low prices. Instead of being concerned about specific brands, Fanny seems to be more interested in the ingredients of food products. She does not use brand names as a heuristic for what is okay to eat on different occasions; rather, she structures her choice of different food based on product attributes such as low fat versus "real stuff," flavored versus non-flavored, and salted versus non-salted, etc.

> Fanny: If I were cooking a gourmet meal for some guests, I would pay attention much more. But I don't, I would expect to spend more money. So if the, you know, if the list were that, then I would make sure you were getting **real** butter and the best cheeses, and the, you know.
> Anders: Real butter, but it, does it matter which butter or just that it's real butter?
> Fanny: That it would be, no I wouldn't pick a brand. I might say unsalted, something like that, but I wouldn't pick a brand. (Interview #1)

As the passage illustrates, Fanny does not mention any brand names, even when she replies to explicit questions about whether she would prefer a brand. Her concern for types of products rather than types of

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[4] Todd is even reluctant to buy Western Family dog food even though Fanny wants him to because it is less expensive compared to other brands.

brands illustrates that issues other than brands are important in her food consumption. Todd uses a *better brand* heuristic to build his identity, but it is constructed on a macro level where he is not explicitly aware of the individual brands that build up his construction of the better brand concept.

Throughout the interviews with Todd and Fanny, I could only elicit a few strong relationships to individual brands where they were explicitly aware of the names of the brands. One of those stronger brand relationships concerns Cadbury chocolate, which Todd and Fanny experienced during a holiday trip to Ireland. They found this chocolate very tasty in comparison with U.S. brands of chocolate such as Hershey's. After returning home, they have continued to buy Cadbury and thereby maintain the memories from their vacation in Ireland. In this sense, Cadbury chocolate has become a very powerful brand, symbolizing their relationship and experience (see Belk & Costa, 1998):

> Todd: So, but why is the chocolate the only thing that is salient to us?
>
> Fanny: 'Cause that's our favorite. That's the most important thing to us.
>
> Todd: But you know, I wonder if it is because it, chocolate has become a very emotional, erotic bonding thing for us. (Interview #3)

Beside the strong ties to Cadbury, brands do not generally take a figural experience for Todd and Fanny, but constitute the ground on which other experiences of their consumption are built (Thompson et al., 1989). With regard to the brand relationship quality model, Todd and Fanny's food brand relationships cannot adequately be characterized by love and passion. They are indeed loyal to certain brands, but this loyalty is based on habits rather than a deliberate commitment. Since food brands often have a limited role in their sense making of their consumption, it is therefore difficult to see that the relationships reflect deeper levels of intimacy.

Weak Brand Relationships

Some of the informants showed little interest in brands when constructing discourses of their food consumption. Informants who

have not created strong relationships with food brands tend primarily to be focused on getting food for less money.

Cassandra: Food for Less Money

Cassandra is 26 years old, living with her husband and their two-year-old son in a two-bedroom apartment in a middle-class neighborhood. Their household budget is very limited since Cassandra stays home with their son while her husband only has a part time job in addition to his university studies. The limited household budget makes the family qualified for the government sponsored food program WIC (women, infants, and children). This program supplies Cassandra with coupons every month, for which she can buy various food products. By no means does the program cover all of the food the family needs, but it is a much-needed contribution to their food supply. It is hard for Cassandra to balance this limited household budget, so she tries to buy the least expensive products she can find in the grocery store. She tends to buy most of the grocery stores' own brands, that is Albertson's, Smith's, or Best Yet at Harmons Supermarket. Cassandra believes that often the store brands are just as good as the name brands, and she buys the store brands because of the savings she can accomplish. When I asked her how she would instruct me if she would send me to the grocery store, she did not mention any brand names but rather focused on issues of price:

> Cassandra: How would you decide which one to buy? Most of the time I buy the cheapest. Um, there is something that, if it's, like his raisins, if I buy the cheapest, they're harder, so a lot of times I'll look for things on sale too, um, but most of the time it is the cheapest. (Interview #1)

Cassandra's support to store brands emanates from her childhood when her parents always stayed away from the expensive name brands and bought generic food products. Even though she is a great supporter of store brands, it would be inappropriate to characterize her relationships with store brands with words such as *love*, *intimacy*, or *commitment*. She has not created rich meanings for store brands but buys them rather because they are relatively inexpensive and perform just as well as the more expensive name brands do. Although she sometimes buys a specific brand, such as her mentioning of the raisins indicates, it is

noteworthy that she does not mention the name of the brand. When asking her which brand of raisins she buys, she could not tell but said that she would know in the store when looking at the package.

From the time when Cassandra started to live with her husband, she has tended to buy more name brands because of her husband's preference for certain more expensive brands. She disagrees with her husband about the additional value of name brands; but it is important for her to make him happy, so she tries to buy the brands he prefers when they are on sale. For instance, she buys A1 steak sauce for her husband and a less expensive store brand for herself, since she thinks the taste of the store brand is just as good as A1. While the store brand tastes different, she does not think it tastes significantly worse than A1, and she will not spend the extra money to buy the original for herself. She does indeed avoid certain store brands with which she has had some bad experiences, but evaluates each product individually. She once had a poor experience with Smith's dishwashing liquid and therefore claimed that she would never buy *Smith's* dishwashing liquid again. Despite this incident with the dishwashing liquid, however, she did not change her general opinion about the Smith's store brands as being a brand that provides value for money. So she continues to buy other products endorsed by the Smith's brand, while avoiding the dish washing liquid.

Even though Cassandra does not buy many name brands, they do have a significant role in the sense making of her food consumption. She uses name brands to compare the quality of store brands and to assess how much money she saves on buying store brands. During one of the interviews, Cassandra illustrated how store brands are designed to look like a specific national brand. Even though a store brand could be named quite differently, Cassandra frequently pointed out the *original* name brand that corresponded to the store brand she uses. Her referring to the authentic version of the brand illustrates how she transfers meanings associated with name brands to the store brands she buys. Sometimes when the price difference is not too great, Cassandra prefers to buy the more upscale name brands, which she believes are a "step up" in relation to the less expensive store brands:

> Cassandra: A lot of times I look for, even like if they're having a sale
> on a higher brand, uh, I'll see how much that one is, and

if it's not too much more, I'll probably buy it. (Interview #1)

By purchasing the more expensive name brands, Cassandra can identify herself with consumers who have a less restricted household budget and feels that she can fulfill the good mother role properly. There is a class issue involved where Cassandra and her husband are trying to achieve a higher social status in society. Cassandra's husband grew up in a very poor family, and it is important for him to consume more expensive brands that he associates with a good life, far removed from the poverty he experienced as a child. It is not equally important for Cassandra to use brands as a social marker, but she appears to be influenced by her husband in his search for brands associated with the good American life.

Stephen: All Brands are Equally Good

Stephen is 52 years old, living with his wife in a two-bedroom apartment in a middle-class neighborhood. He separated from his previous wife a couple of yeas ago and is now living under limited economic conditions since he is paying a child care allowance to his previous wife. Stephen claims he has never been very interested in brands when it comes to food products. Although he had more money to spend on groceries in his previous marriage, his disinterest for brands appears to have remained the same. What is important for Stephen is to make the best deals for his money; therefore, he looks for ongoing sales in the ads for different grocery stores before he conducts his weekly grocery shopping. Lately, however, one of the stores he visits frequently has offered to match all sales that both their competitors offer. This has made life easier for Stephen since he does not have to go to other stores in order to get items on sale. Instead, Stephen watches for sales in the weekly ads from these stores and then goes to his local grocer to buy the items at sale price.

Stephen's concern for not paying more than necessary emanates from his understanding that branded food products are not that different from each other. He once worked in a potato processing plant where he experienced that different brands may indeed originate from the exact same producer and therefore have the same quality:

Stephen: You know, we had probably twenty or thirty different bags that we would use. Some were Eagle brands, some were Yukon brand, and you know, if Albertson's wanted a bag, batch of potatoes we would take their bags off the shelf, and we would bag them with Albertson's brand. The next batch might be for Safeway, the batch might be for Smith. You know they are all the same potatoes. We brought them out of the same warehouse, and yet they're packaged differently. And, I have actually purchased cans where they used to use paper labels, and some of the paper was torn, so I pulled it off and there it was like a Del Monte brand, as I recall, on the outside, but the actual can was imprinted with Hunts. I'm thinking, that's interesting. And so on. I know that different, you know, a company may be owned by Del Monte, but I don't think that every single store brand, there isn't a plant that only cans food for Best Yet. I think someone owns a corn processing plant, and they process corn and package it for, you know, Green Giant or S&W, or, you know, any brand that they might have marketed with so… That's why I say I think the store brands are pretty comparable because they could be canned at the same factory. It may not be, I may be totally up in the line with that. That has been my understanding because of that experience, by having, actually having some cans that were multiple labels. (Interview #4)

Stephen's experience from the potato processing plant, as well as his double-labeling incident with a can, has made him almost indifferent to most food brands he buys; he believes that they are more or less the same. In most cases, a label is just a label, and a specific label does not have a rich meaning that is very different from another label since what is behind the label is more or less the same thing. His current wife, however, has a very clear opinion about certain brands that she wants Stephen to buy; for example, she prefers Coke instead of Pepsi, Smucker's jelly, Post or Kellogg's raisin bran rather than a store brand, and Hunt's tomato ketchup because her mother once worked in a Hunt's tomato factory. To make his wife happy and reduce the risk of potential conflicts, Stephen tries to buy the preferred brands when they are on sale; if they are not, he sometimes tries to delude his wife into believing that he bought the brands she prefers. He mentioned, for instance, how he bought a store brand for cereal and poured the product into an empty Cheerios box. In this manner, Stephen "re-

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brands" (cf. Chang, 1998) the less expensive store brands into the more upscale brands that his wife prefers. To say that brands do not matter at all for Stephen is not true because brands matter to his wife. In this manner, it is appropriate to characterize his food brand relationships as "third party," maintained primarily because of another person's preference.

Summary

The analysis of the informants' food brand relationships illustrates the different roles brands can have in the sense making of food consumption. While Linda produced discourses of her food consumption that in many ways is reminiscent of Fournier's informants, it has been illustrated that food brands are not necessarily so important that they take on figural experiences. Linda did not need any guidance at all to talk about the brands she consumes, as if they were among her best friends. But other informants needed much more explicit questions in order for them to talk about brands at all when discussing their food consumption. And although it was observed that many of the informants tend to buy the same brands from one time to another, this behavior does not necessarily reflect a deliberate commitment to the brands. The next chapter provides a further examination of the appropriateness of the brand relationship construct.

Chapter 8

Towards a Qualification of Brand Relationships

In research on consumers and brands, considerable efforts have been made to demonstrate the anthropomorphous characteristics such as personality (Aaker, 1997; Batra, Lehmann, & Singh, 1993; Durgee, 1988) and charisma (Smothers, 1993) that consumers credit to brands. A similar way of anthropomorphizing brands is found in the brand management literature, where issues of identity have been given considerable attention in recent years (Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; de Chernatony, 1999; Kapferer, 1997). This personification of brands has now reached a new phase with the introduction of a discourse based on relationships (Apéria, 2001; Blackston, 1993; Fournier, 1998; Palmer, 1996). In her seminal article, Fournier (1998) introduced relationship theory to consumer research and demonstrated its usefulness for understanding the roles brands have in the life of the consumer. The article has already been characterized as a modern classic (Østergaard, 2002), and subsequent research on consumers and brands that builds on the relationship idea is emerging (Ji, 2002; Kates, 2000; Olsen, 1999). While brand relationship is a promising new way of thinking about consumer brand behavior (e.g. Fournier & Yao, 1997), there has been a lack of reflection regarding its feasibility to accurately represent the way consumers interact with brands. By arguing that the concept of brand relationship is a readily understandable analogue (Blackston, 1993), it appears that relationship thinking in the context of consumers and brands sometimes is taken for granted without thoroughly discussing its applicability. With regards to Fournier's (1998) brand relationship framework, however, there is an extensive discussion that seeks to qualify brands as a relationship partner. But although consumers may attribute anthropomorphous

characteristics to brands, this does not necessarily imply that socio-psychological theories of interpersonal relationships are adequate to represent consumers' relation to their brands. The objective of this chapter is to critically analyze relational thinking in the context of consumers and brands and deliver a supplementary understanding of consumer brand relationships. The analysis is based on a conceptual examination complemented by illustrations of consumers' interpretations of relationship constructs. These empirical illustrations are not used to show the invalidity of current conceptualizations but are included to show that there may be a discursive problem with the current terminology.

Legitimizing the Brand as Relationship Partner

A cornerstone in Fournier's argument that seeks to legitimize the brand as a relationship partner is the conceptual acceptance of the behavioral significance of marketing actions. Through the marketer's everyday marketing mix decisions, the consumer perceives the brand as a behavioral entity. The central premise on which the framework of consumer brand relationships is founded is the assumption that consumers translate a brand's behavior into trait language from which the brand's personality is construed. By accepting this translation of brand behavior to trait language, Fournier argues that the brand passes the personification qualification and can therefore become an active partner in a relationship dyad. However, Fournier's acceptance of the behavioral significance of marketing activities needs a closer examination; the personification of brands does not necessarily imply that the brand can become an active partner with the consumer. A brand is an inanimate object and cannot think or feel; thus it is likely to respond to consumers in a highly standardized manner. With reference to Levy (1985) among others, Fournier argues that consumers have no problem with thinking about brands as if they were human characters. The words *as if* are very important here because they assume a hypothetical condition that will never occur in reality. The construction of a brand as a person is just a metaphor for having consumers think about brands in terms of human characteristics. But to think of brands in terms of personalities is something different from having relationships with them. Fournier acknowledges that the analogy to

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interpersonal relationships lacks parallelism with the issue of reciprocity but dismisses the significance this matter has for the possibility of understanding a brand as a relationship partner. However, according to Giddens (1991:93), a "pure relationship cannot exist without substantial elements of reciprocity." So the notion of reciprocity is of fundamental importance in order to make the relationship discourse trustworthy (Fournier, Dobscha, & Mick, 1998). In Giddens' terms, a pure relationship is not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life but is sought after because of the benefits the relationship can bring to the partners involved (Giddens, 1991:89-90). This definition of pure human relationships appears to be consistent with Fournier's characterization of brand relationships which "are qualified not along symbolic versus functional product category lines […] but by the perceived ego significance of the chosen brands" (Fournier, 1998:366). Thus, according to Fournier, consumers seek and maintain those relationships that add meanings to their lives. Thus it is reasonable to argue that brand relationships, by the very way she characterizes them, should be interpreted as *pure* relationships. Even though consumer brand relationships may have limited elements of reciprocity, it is still possible to characterize the bonds between consumers and their brands as relationships, even if these relationships lack the important element of parallelism with interpersonal relationships. Still the question remains: Do consumers themselves think that their relationships with their brands are reminiscent of their interpersonal relationships? By considering the following two statements, it is apparent that the relational discourse as an extension of brand anthropomorphization is not always accepted as readily by consumers as it has sometimes been by consumer researchers. For example, let's look at some informants' reactions to the issue:

> Linda: I wouldn't, I don't know if I call it a relationship. You know, like I said, this is something I have a hard time with. Inanimate objects really can't do much for you, but they are there, they are dependable, they taste good, they are recognizable, easily recognizable.

> Todd: I can't even imagine using the word relationship because it has an emotive function and a, or a sense of mutuality or reciprocity, uh, even loyalty or affinity, consumer uses, uh. But I mean, this is a very interesting conversation, but

conceptually I'm completely out of it. It doesn't make any
sense.

These two statements illustrate that the term 'relationship' is primarily understood as a term that belongs to the interpersonal context and is therefore not a suitable concept that should be applied for inanimate objects such as brands. Even though the two informants express a reluctance to accept the relational discourse, this does not mean that conceptually, consumers cannot have brand relationships. Yet the fact that there are consumers who discursively reject relationship thinking with regard to brands is interesting enough and should be taken into consideration. Although Fournier (1998) spent considerable effort trying to legitimize brands as a relationship partner, it appears that absence of reciprocity is potentially a basis for rejecting the relationship construct. I will argue that the relationships consumers have with brands are different in several ways from relationships that they initiate with other people. People are human beings that think and interact with each other while brands only can "behave" on behalf of the manager. For instance, a brand cannot respond in an individual manner to a request from a consumer and therefore lacks an important attribute that characterizes human relationships. It is of course possible that consumers can e-mail or call the brand's customer service and receive personalized responses, but that is an activity where consumers are likely to understand that they are interacting with humans instead of with the idea of the brand *per se*. Since in some instances a brand relationship can be understood as different from a human relationship, it is worthwhile to examine what possible consequences this difference may have for concepts of brand relationship quality.

Brand Relationship Quality

Fournier's (1998) conceptualization of brand relationship quality is an explicit analogue to concepts of relationship quality in the interpersonal field and implies that the relationships consumers have with brands have similar qualities as human relationships. Although one can choose to refer to the bonds between consumers and brands as relationships, I contend that the anthropomorphization metaphor in some instances appears to be unfortunate with regard to some of the brand relationship quality constructs. Just as commercial friendships are different kinds of

relationships compared to relationships to close friends (Price & Arnould, 1999), there is potentially the same kind of difference between human relationships and consumers' brand relationships. The vocabulary that is used to describe brand relationship quality is therefore not necessarily compatible with the vocabulary that is used to describe human relationship quality. I do not suggest that the brand relationship quality constructs should be replaced with other constructs. The issue here is to *supplement* the vocabulary so that the constructs also account for consumers who discursively do not consider their brands as active relationship partners.

According to Fournier (1998), strong brand relationships have affective grounding which is similar to *love* and *passion* in the interpersonal domain. At first, these concepts pretend to be easily transferable to the brand relationship domain since a common sense understanding prescribes that love and passion are not confined only to people. However, as Ahuvia (1993) suggests, interpersonal love and love for objects such as brands are in most cases at best considered by people as *similar* rather than *identical*. The reason for this, according to Ahuvia, is the difference in culturally constructed meanings that people attach to human beings and objects. A second reason why there are likely to be at least two sorts of love is the unilateral nature of object love, which is less complex and responsive than interpersonal love. So it is likely that love for brands is at best understood as something that is similar to love for a person. However, Ahuvia also points out that love is possibly understood as a concept that *only* can exist between people. An example of the ambiguousness of love with regard to brands is illustrated by the following passage:

> Fanny: Okay, uh, well Häagen-Dazs ice cream, uh, they would be different from how I feel about my husband because I wouldn't trust it (laughter) as much or I couldn't have, I would feel like, I don't really, well I would feel like it's only suited for certain occasions, uh. I wouldn't, you know, have it to access, and I certainly wouldn't feel that about my husband. Uh, do I love Häagen-Dazs ice cream? Uh, I don't, I guess I don't love it like I do with something else.

As Fanny's statement indicates, there is a possibility that loving a brand can be understood as something different from loving, for instance, a husband. Even though consumers may not love or show feelings of passion for brands in the way they do for human beings, it does not imply that the prerequisite of a strong brand relationship is absent. So in order to make the brand relationship quality constructs applicable to a wider group of consumers who understand love as a concept that only can exist between human beings, it might be feasible to also include a term such as fondness, representing feelings that can be described with the act of liking:

> Linda: Not love (laughter). Not love. Like I said, I don't think of inanimate objects being an object of my love. Like it very much, yes, uh… You know I'm not good at comparing things with people (laughter). But I like it very much, and I know I have said I love it, but you know, candy is candy, chocolate (laughter) is wonderful.

To say that one loves objects, activities, and ideas is relatively widespread in the American society and is distinct from the way the word 'love' is used in many other cultures where the concept has a more restricted applicability. This phenomenon buttresses the idea that redefining love as a feeling that is similar to but different from interpersonal love can be productive to research. In so doing, brand relationship quality constructs can represent relationships to brands in other cultural settings, where the concept of love has a more restricted usage.

With regard to *commitment,* another facet of brand relationship quality, it appears that the lack of reciprocity makes the construct somewhat problematic. As Giddens (1992:137) points out, commitment is generated as an individual gives of herself to another. Unlike human relationships, brand relationships are primarily unilateral and make shared commitment more difficult. A person who commits to another person does so because the other partner in the relationship is committed to the same goal. The problem with commitment in the context of brand relationships is that consumers do not necessarily feel that a brand can be committed to a relationship with the individual consumer. But despite unwillingness to accept commitment in the context of brands, there may still be a strong bond to the brand, so

absence of commitment does not necessarily mean that the brand relationship is weak:

> Fanny: Yeah I don't feel commitment or loyalty to Häagen-Dazs ice cream. Uh, and I wouldn't think that Häagen-Dazs ice cream would to me, uh. You know, I can, I could take it or leave it, uh, so there is that. I don't feel like that's a brand I should buy, as opposed to another. There is not, you know, it's not going out of business or it's not a small business or, you know, those sort of, have a loyalty that way. And I, same thing, I don't think it has a loyalty or commitment towards me as a consumer. It doesn't need me, so.

The unwillingness to accept commitment as a concept related to brands may have something do with the absence of a relationship to a human being who represents the brand. The personal encounter in a commercial friendship (Price & Arnould, 1999) generates the notion of a relationship in which commitment is given a different kind of meaning than in the context of brand relationships. So even though consumers may ascribe personality-like characteristics for a brand, this does not in itself necessarily imply that commitment is accepted as a term that relates to inanimate objects such as brands:

> Stephen: You know, if were having to go to farmer Jones, and buy eggs and butter, and I knew Mrs. Jones and knew their kids, you know, that's, that's different because I know those people behind. With the corporate structure that we have in the food industry, you separate them, you know, you have really no commitment to the people who are behind the products you are buying.

As the statement illustrates, commitment may be a concept that is exclusively considered to belong to the interpersonal domain and is therefore considered as inapplicable in the context of brands. While one indeed can argue that the farmer Jones who Stephen refers to can be considered as a brand too, it is apparent that his interpretation of the encounter with the farmer differs from his interaction with mass-produced brands. Although mass-produced brands use celebrity endorsers to personify their brands, there is possibly a greater distance between the consumer and the brand than is the case for local brands like "Farmer Jones." According to the brand relationship framework,

commitment is an adequate concept when referring to behavior that seeks to support the longevity of a brand *relationship*. But when consumers show a skepticism towards the idea of having relationships with brands, concepts such as commitment are likely to be dismissed because of the limited elements of reciprocity.

Another facet of the brand relationship quality construct is *interdependence.* While this concept has an important meaning in a human relationship, its applicability is less obvious in the context of brands. While frequent brand interactions can make consumers dependent on their brands, it is difficult to see why consumers would think that their brands would be dependent upon them as an individual consumer. On a macro level, a brand is of course dependent on consumers because without their fondness, the brand's *raison d'être* is jeopardized. So consumers are indeed likely to understand that companies try to offer brands that satisfy the market. And while consumers may realize the potential power the market has, there is a possibility that their personal role in keeping the brand dependent is considered to be of marginal importance. So if a mass produced brand loses one relationship with a consumer, there is likely an understanding among consumers that the brand has millions of other relationships to explore.

> Stephen: To my wife or to a family member, to me that's totally different relationship because of the feelings. I mean, and the Kraft food has no feeling. It doesn't care if I go, you know, if I buy it this week or if I buy Best Foods. It doesn't really care.

Although many companies seek to anthropomorphize their brands, consumers may still consider them as relatively anonymous. Therefore it might be difficult for individual consumers to see that it would make much of a difference to the company if they bought the brand or not. The concept of interdependence appears to have a more suitable applicability for relationships with brands that represent local businesses, such as the community brand relationships reported by Kates (2000). Such relationships explicitly involve the people behind the brand and may provide a significantly different meaning for the notion of interdependence. To use the term 'interdependence' for brand relationships, where the brand is not understood to be dependent

on the individual *per se,* seems to be problematic because the sense of mutuality is not present. Hence, in addition to interdependence, it is worthwhile to consider if the term 'dependence' should also be included as a supplementary concept for interdependence.

When consumers reject the suggested brand relationship discourse, it is also likely that the concept of *intimacy* is rejected. Fournier (1998) contends that intimacy in a brand relationship is generated by elaborate knowledge structures of the brand with rich layers of meanings. But similar to concepts of love, it is possible that some consumers are unwilling to equate intimacy in the brand relationship domain with intimacy in the interpersonal domain. Intimacy in an interpersonal relationship concerns the most personal matters, and it is the exclusive right of sharing the personal information with the other part of the relationship that creates intimacy. A consumer cannot share his/her life story with a brand since the brand is an inanimate object. While I agree with Fournier that consumers can develop rich layers of brand meanings, it is difficult to see how this in itself can create an intimate relationship with the brand. To make intimacy a viable concept, it might be appropriate to consider that relationships with objects are never two-way (person-thing) but always three-way (person-thing-person), as Belk (1988a) suggests. By including the social dimension of brand consumption, concepts such as intimacy obtain a new meaning. Brands can become the messenger that generates intimacy in a human relationship, thereby strengthening the consumers' relationship to the brand.

While it is possible that consumers may reject or at least find the relational discourse unsuitable for their brand relationships, it is apparent that some of the brand relationship quality constructs are less capable of representing the way consumers relate to their brands. Fournier (1998) illustrated the usefulness of relationship thinking by relating three women's brand stories to the concept of relationship quality. But examining the constructs empirically, it appears that there are some consumers who may have difficulties in accepting the conceptualization. The fact that there are consumers who discursively reject concepts related to relationship theory points to the need for discussing its significance in the context of consumer research.

With this chapter, I have tried to uncover some of the critical issues in relationship thinking in the context of consumers and brands. While Fournier's (1998) work is a valuable contribution that has enriched our understanding of consumers and brands beyond cognitive utilitarian models of decision-making, there is a need for further research that can qualify the relational discourse in the context of consumer research. This chapter examines the possibility that there may be consumers who reject relational concepts and suggests that the parallelism between these concepts and human relationship constructs may be problematic. Before the relationship discourse becomes a taken-for-granted concept in consumer research, we need to further critically examine its feasibility in terms of representing consumers.

Chapter 9

The Meanings of Mixed-Brands

Having examined the informants' behavior to food brands in general, we will now turn to an analysis of their process of meaning development and negotiation for mixed-brands. This chapter is organized in three main parts; each offers insights to the way in which mixed-brands become meaningful to consumers. The analysis starts with an examination of the ways the informants recognize mixed-brands as they talk about food products that are consumed in their households. This level of interpretation is the most basic one from which further meaning development and negotiation for brands can be analyzed. In the second section follows an analysis of the informants' explanations of mixed-brands. On this level of interpretation, we can see how the meaning of the practice of combining brands generates meaning for mixed-brands. In the final section follows an analysis of how meanings are developed and negotiated for brands that are mixed and how this may change the meanings informants ascribe to the constituent brands.

Recognizing the Mix

In order to adequately analyze the meaning development for mixed-brands, it is of profound importance to have an understanding of the ways in which consumers recognize the mixing of brands. In Chapter 2 I argued that it is ill advised to conduct research on consumers' evaluations of mixed-brands without having an idea of whether or not the mixing of brands is an issue that consumers pay attention to in their everyday consumption. To this end, I will introduce perception theory to illustrate how the various senses provide the consumer with information that creates recognition of mixed-brands.

Through the five senses – vision, smell, sound, touch, and taste – we receive "raw data" from the external environment that is interpreted and used to develop and negotiate brand meanings (Solomon, Bamossy, & Askegaard, 2002). Thus, the ways consumers recognize brands is dependent upon the way the information from the five senses co-contributes to an experience. Brands and their endorsed products are consumed visually (see Schroeder, 2002), where the design of elements such as advertising, package, logotype, and attributes of the products provide the consumer with marketer-created meanings. In addition to visual information, a brand can also be represented by smells that can emanate from the endorsed product or from smells that are generated during the act of consuming the brand (Ellen & Bone, 1998). Any brand name also has a sound character that is generated as the letters and words related to the brand name are pronounced (Costa & Pavia, 1992; Klink, 2000). The auditory sensation of the brand is also generated as the brand is consumed, where the endorsed product can generate a unique sound, such as the Harley-Davidson sound (see Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The product a brand endorses may also have a physical form, which through the sense of touch can generate experiences that becomes associated with the brand. Finally, a brand can provide a sense of taste that can be intrinsic to the endorsed product or a taste that is generated through the act of consumption.

When consumers experience brands and their endorsed products, there is likely a set of senses involved that generates the notion of a brand. The way in which the senses provide information about a brand and make recognition of a brand possible can be illustrated with Charles S. Peirce's work on semiotics. In his writings, Peirce described the signifying process as a dynamic relation between a sign, its object, and an interpretant (Peirce, 1897-1910/1985). A sign, according to Peirce, can be anything that stands for something that is its object. The link between the sign and the object is called an interpretant and is the interpreter's mental image created or caused by the sign (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001). The relationship between sign, object, and interpretant is illustrated in figure 9.1

As discussed in Chapter 2, the term 'brand' can be considered as a multidimensional construct that can stand for a variety of things. Thus, when the word 'brand' (sign) is used in the literature, it can represent a
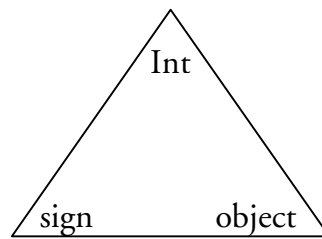
Figure 9.1: Peirce triadic model of the signifying process.

variety of things (object), such as a name, a company, a logo, a personality, a product, or an idea. The term brand is in this way a sign because it "causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses," as Heilbrunn points out (1997). When consumers refer to brands they know or use and, for instance, state, "I'll usually buy Betty Crocker," it is the name of the brand (sign) that is used as a representative sign that refers to a specific version of a product (object). To consumers then, the concept of a "brand" comprises the things commonly considered to represent the sign. For the purpose of illustrating how mixed-brands become recognized, I will here designate the brand's endorsed product to object. The signifying process that generates brand recognition can be understood as the mental image that is created as consumers link the brand name (sign) with the product (object). The mental image, that is the interpretant, can be understood as a recognition that "this is a product from brand x."

The signifying process for mixed-brands can be divided into two levels where the first level starts out with two signifying processes that link the two individual brand names and their endorsed products (see figure 9.2). The mental images of these two signifying processes merge to a new sign which is the mixed-brand, comprising the two names of the individual brands and their endorsed products. The signifying process that occurs on the second level creates a mental image that links the sign (the mixed-brand) with its object (the endorsed product) and can be understood as the recognition of the mixed-brand product. This way of describing mixed-brand recognition represents the managerially ideal situation where the two brand names and their endorsed products are identified. However, it is possible that consumers designate other

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Brand A and B
are mixed

Second
level

Int

sign   object

Brand AB   Product
            endorsed by
            Brand AB

First level

Int

sign   object

Brand A   Product
            endorsed by
            brand A

Int

sign   object

Brand B   Product
            endorsed by
            brand B
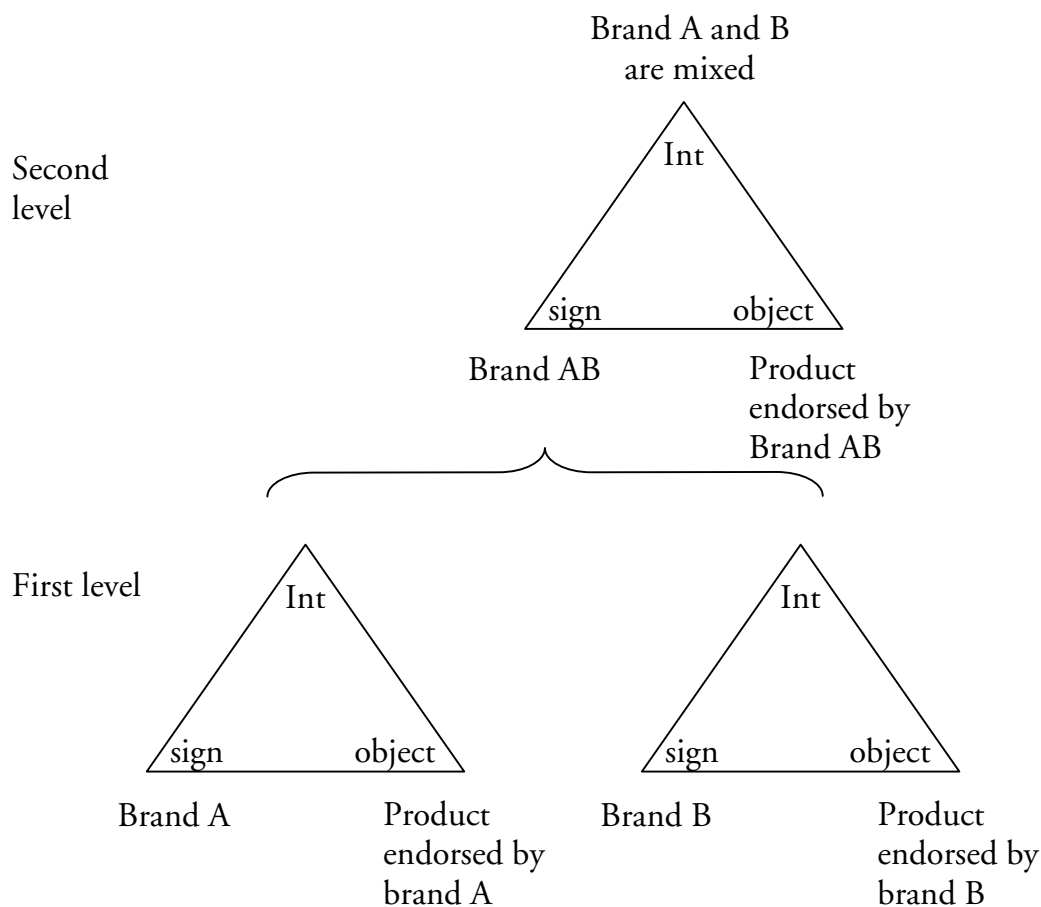
Figure 9.2: Semiotic illustration of mixed-brand recognition.

elements of a product than the brand name as the sign. For instance, instead of recognizing one of the brand names, a consumer can use the design of the package to identify and make sense of the product. Given that the concept of the brand is defined broadly and thus includes elements such as the design of the package, one could indeed argue that a consumer who recognizes the design of the package and one of the mixed-brand's constituent brand names in fact recognizes elements of the mixed-brand. However, in order to recognize that the two brands are mixed, it is necessary that the consumer identify the two constituent brand *names*. If one of the constituent brand names remains unrecognized, there will be a lack of recognition of the mixing of brands.

With regard to the informants' recognitions of mixed-brands, there are "managerially perfect" recognitions of mixed-brands: the two

constituent brand names and their endorsed products are identified, and, ideally, the informant also mentions some positive statements about the fact that the two brands are mixed. When making such statements, informants generally use a combination of information from several senses. However, there are informants who show a lack of interest in food brands in general and are often not visually recognizing the mixing of brands even when they in fact are exposed to packages that portray brand mixes. Typically, only one brand name is identified or other symbols than the brand name are used for identification and sense making of the product. In these cases, it appears that the visual design of the logotypes representing the mix does not create enough attention to take on a figural position and thereby become part of the consumers' experience (cf. Thompson et al., 1989).

When both brand names that constitute the mixed-brand are identified, one of the brands is typically identified as an endorser for a product that adds certain key characteristics. The following passage, where Cassandra is discussing the mixing of Dreyer's and Twix, illustrates how both the product's main brand name and its ingredient brand name are identified:

> Cassandra: Just like, I think if Dreyer's could have come out with their own ice cream that had the same ingredients as Twix, but because they put Twix on the label, people bought it if they liked Twix too. I think it benefits them.
> Anders: So what does it mean to you that they have Twix on the, like it says Twix on the package…
> Cassandra: Well if they just said it's ice cream and they named it a different kind of name, like they had Super Bowl ice cream or something like that, you had to go and read what was in the ice cream. People I think sometimes don't want to go and look and, okay what's in this ice cream, what's in this ice cream. But you see Twix, and you automatically know what's in there, and if you like Twix you're gonna buy it. Rather than if it had a name and then said this has caramel, whatever else it has, you know cookie crunch or whatever in it. People are gonna buy something that says Twix before they buy something that says caramel and cookie crunch. (Interview #3)

The mixed-brand Dreyer's with Twix (sign) is here linked to ice cream (object) and generates recognition of the brand mix. Cassandra

interprets Twix as an ingredient that adds the notion of a taste to the ice cream whereas Dreyer's is interpreted as the main endorser who is responsible for the product. But the Dreyer's brand does not provide any sense of taste for the ice cream; in a way, the brand is almost interpreted as a generic one, synonymous with ice cream. While realizing that Dreyer's could produce an ice cream with the same taste as if it contained Twix, Cassandra acknowledges that the mixing of brands is a matter of labeling products in order to make them appealing to consumers. Although Cassandra talks about people in general and their behavior, it is likely that her generalizations originate from her own experiences, since she has indeed tried Dreyer's ice cream with mixed-brands herself. Cassandra's saying, "you see Twix and you automatically know what's in there," indicates that she is absolutely clear that the Twix brand is a sign that stands for a specific product. In this way, a branded ingredient whose taste she recognizes has a more explicit and powerful message when compared to a generic product or a brand without a distinct recognized taste such as Dreyer's. It is interesting that she mentions Super Bowl ice cream because this is a mixing of brands as well. To Sabrina, however, Super Bowl – just like her understanding of Dreyer's – does not have a specific taste and can therefore not add any adequate meanings of taste to the product in the way that Twix can.

Another example where the signifying process takes the "managerial path" is illustrated by Linda who gave the following comment on a brownie mix while showing me her pantry:

> Linda: I only use Betty Crocker brownie mix because I like theirs the best. Because they have this extra syrup and they are really moist.
> Anders: Oh the syrup, aha, is that…
> Linda: It's Hershey's syrup. You just add that, mix it in before you bake it, and it seems to make them really moist. (Interview #1)

Linda's statement illustrates how the two brand names and their endorsed products are visually identified and thus part of two signifying processes. Betty Crocker (sign) stands for a brownie (object) whereas Hershey's (sign) stands for syrup (object). The interpretants of these two signifying processes generates a new sign, the mixed-brand. This

new sign, Betty Crocker with Hershey's, stands for a brownie with extra syrup included, and the mental image Linda creates in her mind is that of a moist brownie. Similar to Cassandra, Linda interprets Hershey's syrup as an additional item that is added to the brownie mix whereas Betty Crocker is understood as the main endorser for the product. In her mind, Linda has compared this brownie mix with other prepared mixes on the market and has decided that she thinks Betty Crocker is better because she interprets the syrup as something extra which the other mixes do not supply. Linda's recognition of the brand mix is primarily based on visual information, where the design of the package portrays the combination of the two brand names. In addition, though, since the Hershey syrup is supplied through a separate pouch, recognition of the brand mix can also be generated through additional senses, such as taste and touch, as the brownie is prepared.

The two examples of mixed-brand recognition illustrated by Cassandra and Linda represent the "managerially ideal" interpretation. They do both use the combination of brand names to make sense of the products, and the fact that the brands are mixed means something to their consumption experience. But it is far from always that a mixed-brand is identified as clearly as is illustrated by Cassandra and Linda. Frequently, at least one brand name remains visually unidentified when informants talk about products with mixed-brands. As I illustrated with the figure/ground metaphor in Chapter 5, it is possible that one of the brand names that co-constitute the mixed-brand will recede into the background and leave the figural experience to other elements than the brand name. Thus, it is no longer the brand name that constitutes the sign in the triadic model. This lack of brand recognition is illustrated by the following passage, where Sabrina describes her family's baking habits:

> Sabrina: We do brownies but they come out of the box, and it's the, um, I'm trying to think, it's the Supreme Brownies, but I can't think of the brand name to tell you, but I buy the same kind of brownie mix. Um, it's got the little syrup pack that you pour in (laughter). It's either Duncan Hines or Betty Crocker. It's one of those two, but I do buy the same kind of brownie mix. (Interview #1)

To Sabrina, the words "Supreme Brownies" appear to be more important than the brand names, at least when it comes to recognizing the specific product. She knows the name of two major brands of brownies, Duncan Hines and Betty Crocker, but she is uncertain about which one she is using. To Sabrina, "Supreme Brownies" is the sign that stands for her favorite brownie and generates an interpretant that links the words "Supreme Brownies" with the idea of a brownie. This interpretant becomes a sign in a second signifying process, where its object, "a little syrup package," generates a new interpretant. It appears that there are two subsequent rather than parallel signifying processes that generate her recognition of "Supreme Brownies with a little syrup package." At this point, however, this sign does not include either of the two brand names that endorse the brownie mix. Even though she is not identifying the specific brand of the syrup, it is apparent that the syrup pack means something to her experience of the brownie. Through its physical separation from the rest of the brownie mix, the syrup pack is a sign that stands for the practice of adding syrup to the brownie. Although not identified by a brand name, the syrup pack generates an experience that is significant to the overall experience of the product. Later in the interview, Sabrina added that she could recognize the specific brownie mix she always buys by the design of the package:

> Sabrina: Yeah, I know what it looks like. I can show it to you on the shelf. I don't know the brand name though. It's in a red box, and it's, supreme is the, um, they have different flavors, you know, different like rocky road. But it's supreme, and it's in a red box. (Interview #1)

As this passage illustrates, the word "Supreme" and "a red box" are the signs that together with the notion of a brownie (object) create the recognition. Although Sabrina is aware of two brand names that endorse brownies, they recede into the background, leaving the figural experience to be taken by other signs. Apparently, it is not the brand names that are the most salient symbols that create her experience of the brownie.

Another type of "managerially imperfect" mixed-brand recognition occurs when the ingredient brand is used to make sense of the product while the product's main endorser remains in the background. Carrie,

who is talking about the prepared baking mixes she uses, illustrates this manner of recognition:

Carrie: Oh, it makes, it's a cookie bar. It's called Sunkist Lemon Bars. It's just a lemon… it has a nice soft lemon filling over a cookie dough. That's their favorite.

Anders: Is that something you usually buy, or?

Carrie: Yup. It comes in the stores of the…These prepared, these Pillsbury's or Betty Crocker's, see, and they make a lot of cake mixes and all that kind of stuff. (Interview #1)

Carrie is here referring to a cookie bar that is endorsed by Betty Crocker and Sunkist. But similar to Sabrina, she appears to be somewhat uncertain as to whether it is Pillsbury or Betty Crocker who is the producer of the prepared mix. The sign that stands for the cookie bar is "Sunkist Lemon Bars," and the mental image that she creates from this signifying process becomes a sign in a subsequent signifying process, where the link to Pillsbury and Betty Crocker generates an image of the product (see figure 9.3). Carrie makes an interesting distinction between what a product is called and from whom it
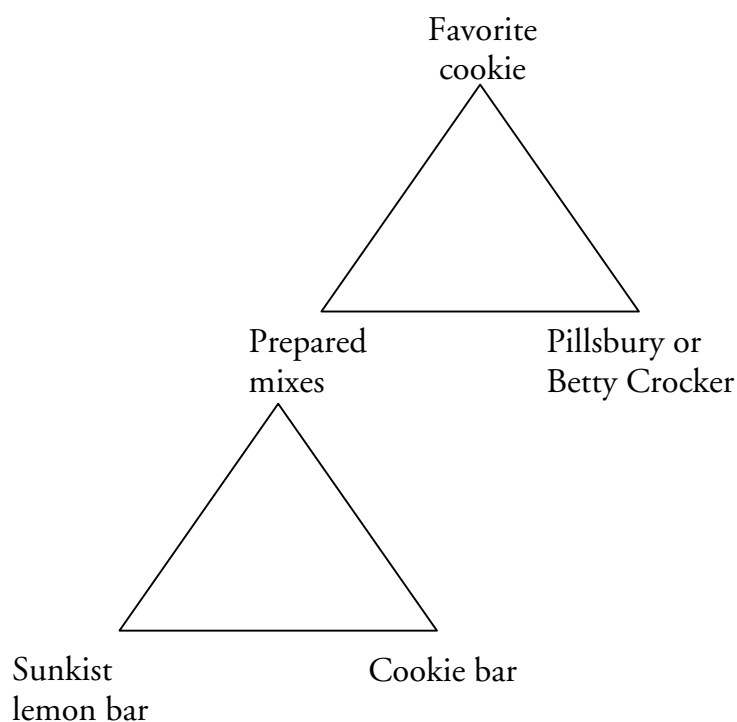
Figure 9.3: Illustration of subsequent signifying processes for mixed-brands.

originates. For Carrie, "it's called" includes the words she uses to identify and to make sense of the product, in this case the brand of the ingredient. Thus, the Sunkist brand name is the sign that stands for the lemon bar. But what Carrie calls the product is not the same thing as her understanding of the product's origin. Instead, she identifies two of the major brands for prepared cake mixes as potential endorsers. However, these two possible endorsers are not necessarily signs in the original sense, since she appears to interpret these brands as something more basic or intrinsic to the product and, as such, they correspond to Peirce's notion of the object. The gist of the matter here is that Carrie does not recognize the visual portraying of the two brand names as a *mix* of brands. Rather, Sunkist is used as an identification mark whereas Pillsbury or Betty Crocker is understood as the maker of the product. Thus in order to recognize the mixing of brands, it is required that the two brand names are interpreted as makers of two distinct products.

In the types of recognitions discussed above, the two mixed brand names were identified but not necessarily interpreted as mixed. But there are other types of recognitions, where only one brand name is identified. When this is the case, the brand name that remains unidentified is generally not unknown to the informant. It is only in the combination with another brand that the unidentified brand does not convey adequate meanings to constitute a figural experience. In this way, Carrie is not aware that the Betty Crocker devils food cake-mix she uses contains Hershey's chocolate, and Todd and Fanny do not know that Reese's Puffs are made with Hershey's chocolate. However, Hershey's is a well-known brand in both these households, and therefore has the potential of taking on a figural experience.

The informants' recognitions of food brands are sometimes not very prominent, and there appear to be other issues than the product's mix of brands that are important to the consumption experience. Comments like, "I haven't paid any attention" and "I wasn't thinking that way" are common when informants are explicitly probed on the mixing of brands. Several of the informants were more or less unaware of the mixing of brands, and it was therefore necessary to introduce them to the logic of combining brands. After having explained to Sabrina how food brands are mixed, she gave the following comment:

> Sabrina: I like that particular brownie mix; it just so happens that it has Hershey's syrup in it. Does that make sense? So. And now that I thought about it a lot over the last two months, you know then, I realize that yes, they are together, but I don't know that I ever thought about it that much before just because we'd always like that particular type.
>
> Anders: Because I know, I think like the first time you told me that it was the supreme…
>
> Sabrina: Maybe that's what it is! I don't know (laughter). I can tell you the box is red. So. And they are called supreme. There's different flavors. Supreme is just no nuts, no caramel, nothing, just brownies. So. And like I said, I don't clutter my brain with names. I just know what, what it looks like. You know? (Interview #4)

Sabrina is generally not too concerned about brand names when it comes to products and focuses instead on other elements related to the brand. She has found out what she and her family like, but it is not necessarily the brand name that she bears in mind in order to get the right products from the grocery store. Most often she identifies the product by the color of the package and therefore pays less attention to the brand name *per se*. Another example illustrating that mixes of brands are not as prominent as assumed in prior research is given by Todd, who after being introduced to the logic of mixed-brands, reflects upon his lack of recognition:

> Todd: We're just, we are not noticing what we should be noticing according to the corporate advertisers. Now I have a question for you. Are the other people noticing this stuff? (Interview #3)

It is interesting to see how Todd is questioning whether or not the other informants I was interviewing observed the mixing of brands. He realizes that he is not paying attention to mixes of brands but is far from convinced that people in general would observe such a thing. Since he considers himself as an average person in terms of behavior, he has a hard time believing that mixes of brands would be a salient issue to consumers in general.

The analysis illustrates that recognizing mixes of brands is a much more complicated matter than acknowledged in prior research, where the *a*

priori assumption suggests that the mix of brands is observed in the "managerial way" (see Chapter 2). As the informants' statements illustrate, it is far from obvious that combinations of brands are recognized as a mix of brands. In several cases, informants did not recognize one of the brands that constitute the mixed-brand. Therefore it becomes problematic to take for granted that consumers recognize a mix of brands as Park et al. assume in their study (1996), where a cake mix used as stimuli is described as "Slim-Fast cake mix by Godiva" and "Godiva cake mix by Slim-Fast." Such an assumption does not account for the ways in which mixed-brands apparently can be recognized in everyday life.

Explaining Brand Mixes

We will now turn to an analysis of the ways in which the informants describe what they think the mixing of brands is all about. Compared to recognitions where informants identify the two brands as possible co-endorsers for a product, explanations of brand mixes represent a higher level of interpretation resulting from reflections of what it means to mix brands in one product. What we seek here is the mental image consumers create by linking the mixed-brand (sign) with the marketing practice of mixing brands (object). To make the point clear, it is not the meaning of mixed-brands *per se* that will be examined here but rather what this particular brand strategy means to consumers. Even though it is possible to conceptually separate what brand mixes as a branding strategy means to consumers from the meanings consumers attribute for a mixed-brand, it is important to remember that these two sets of meanings are closely interrelated. However, for the purpose of illustrating how consumers receive marketing strategies such as brand mixes, the meanings of mixing brands will be analyzed in isolation. The mixed-brand can be considered to be part of a system with relations to its constituent brands and the companies behind these brands, a sort of brand architecture (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). This system of endorsers generates a notion of several connections between the brands that consumers can focus on when explaining brand mixes (see figure 9.4). First and foremost, there are two focal connections between the two constituent brands (Brand A and Brand B) and the mixed-brand (Brand AB), which can be used to explain the brands' roles in the
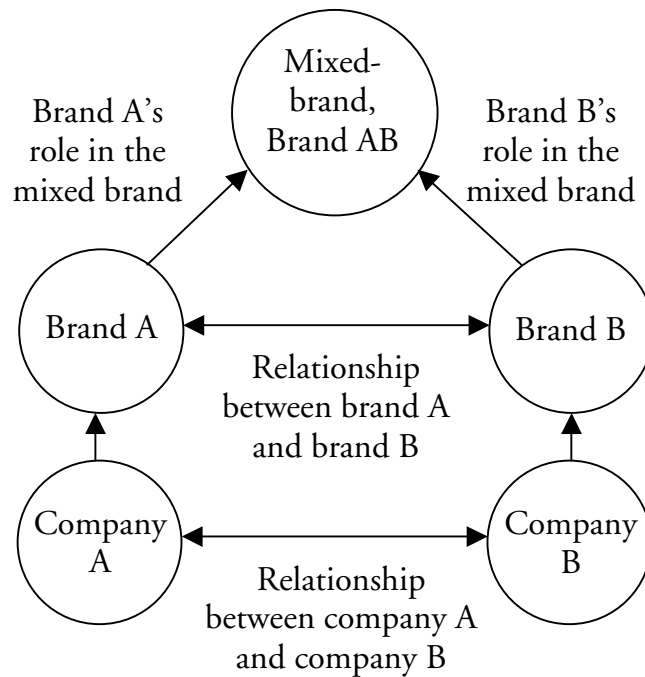
Figure 9.4: Explaining mixed-brands. Relationships between mixed-brand, brands, and companies.

mixed-brand. These two connections generate the notion of a relationship or some sort of exchange between the two brands. In addition, a brand can also be more or less explicitly associated with a corporate endorser that links a product brand with a corporate brand. These connections between the brand and its owner can then generate the notion of a relationship between the two companies. The relationships between brands and the companies behind the brands that are outlined in figure 9.4 illustrate a structure that consumers may detect when experiencing mixed-brands. However, it is of course possible that the notion of a brand and the company behind the brand is understood as the same thing, especially if the brand name is identical with the name of the company.

The ways we can expect that marketing strategies such as brand mixes are explained by consumers have most certainly something to do with consumers' understanding of their role as members in consumer cultures, where marketing is a major force that influences everyday life. Since people in the affluent world no longer make most products themselves, they are primarily acquiring goods offered on the market. In this way, consumer cultures become mediated by market relations,

where commodities such as goods, services, and experiences are offered on the market solely to be bought by consumers (Slater, 1997). In this context, marketing plays a dominant role in mediating the relations between the consumer and the producer; branding can be pictured as a sort of masquerade where the "real" conditions behind the brand can be hidden (cf. Klein, 1999). Contemporary societies are frequently described as over-communicated and saturated with marketing images, where the rapid flow of signs makes everyday life aestheticized

In aestheticized societies, where commercial manipulation stresses the importance of images, the distinction between reality and image becomes effaced. In such a simulational world, branding plays an important role in providing a symbolic universe that consumers use to build their life-projects. Of course, branding is in fact real, but the reality behind the logic of branding may very well be something different from what it appears to be. As the merger and acquisition boom continues, there are in fact fewer companies that manage the brands that are offered on the market. In this way, the abundance of brands provides consumers with selection but leaves little room for real choice (Klein, 1999). With large portfolios of brand names, it is possible for companies to create mixes of brands that appear to consumers to be co-operations between companies and their brands when in fact, both brands may be owned by the same company as illustrated in figure 9.5. Such "false" mixes of brands may be interpreted as a co-operation between two companies and may therefore not be different from a mix of brands that belong to two independent companies. But depending on the degree of consumers' reflexivity with regard to marketing, we can expect that some consumers may question the authenticity of such intra-organizational brand mixes.

The development and negotiation of meanings for mixed-brands are likely to be influenced by the way the relations between brands and the companies behind the brands that constitute the mixed-brand are interpreted. Among the informants, there are explanations suggesting that the mixing of brands is a matter of sourcing primary products. When this is the case, one of the brands is understood as endorser for a product that is bought by the other brand (or the company behind this brand) in order to be used as an ingredient in the product which the

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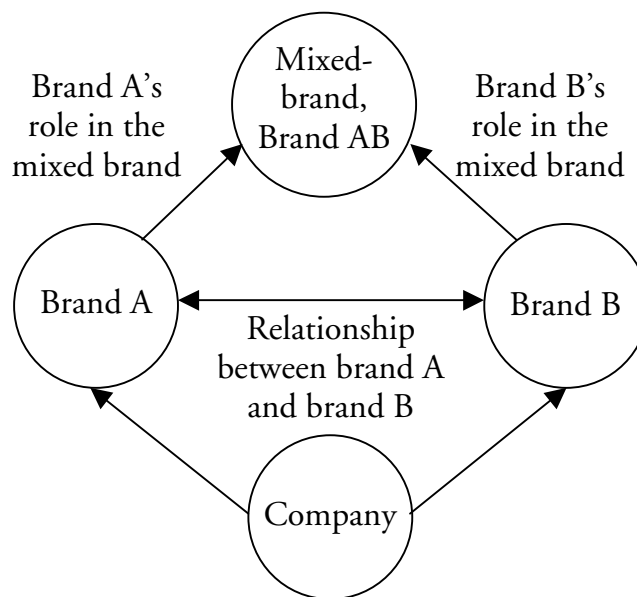
Figure 9.5: Explaining mixed-brands. Brand mixes created by *one* company.

consumer is buying. The brand that buys the other brand is then understood as the "real" endorser for the product that is offered on the market. Sabrina's explanation of Dreyer's with Twix and Snickers respectively, illustrates this way of understanding mixed-brands:

Anders: So do you know, is there a relationship between Dreyer's and like Twix and Snickers or…

Sabrina: I don't think so. Like a business relationship?

Anders: Yeah. What do you think?

Sabrina: I don't think so. No I don't think so. I think they, maybe they just pay them, and they use their products or something. I don't know that (laughter). (Interview #3)

Sabrina understands the relationship between Dreyer's with Twix and Snicker's in the same way as she understands the relationship between products she uses in her own cooking. Like Dreyer's, Sabrina buys products and uses them as ingredients in dishes much in the same way as Dreyer's buys various ingredients, among them Twix and Snicker's, to make ice cream. Cassandra shares a similar understanding with Sabrina as she explains issues of ownership with regard to the brands that endorse a cake mix:

Cassandra: I think General Mills owns Betty Crocker, I would think. But I don't know. I doubt they own Hershey's. I don't think they own Hershey's. They probably just buy their product. (Interview #3)

Cassandra interprets General Mills as a company owning brands whereas she associates Betty Crocker much more closely with certain food products. Apparently, she considers Hershey's to be independent from General Mills and interprets the display of the Hershey logotype as evidence that their company is supplying General Mills with an ingredient for their cake mix. This explanation reflects that she does not understand the relationship between General Mills and Hershey's as a collaborative one where the companies co-operate intensively to create the product. Rather, it is General Mills who is perceived as the company with the major responsibility for bringing the mix of Betty Crocker with Hershey's on the market. Another example where mixed-brands are explained as the sourcing of primary products is illustrated by Stephen, who offers a detailed description of how he thinks Lays potato chips is made with KC Masterpiece barbecue sauce:

Anders: This flavor, the barbecue flavor. You mentioned KC Masterpiece?

Stephen: Yes… Um, they put the flavoring on when they make the chips. I mean you've got the same kind of potatoes coming through, and it's just a matter of putting different flavors on them and just a, running through the plant. And I don't know whether they use like a liquid mix because it's all, it's rather uniformly spread, so I would imagine it would have to somehow be, you know, as they're going along the conveyor belt, you've got something that puts it on as they go through. And it's on both sides. So they must turn them over at some point in the process. Or it may be just a dip. I'm, I'm not sure how that. I have never been to a plant that made potato chips to see how they do it.

Anders: But what do you think about, that they actually have KC Masterpiece on the chips? The barbecue sauce they have is KC Masterpiece. What do you think about that?

Stephen: So they have act, they probably purchased that from whoever makes the barbecue sauce, using that in the flavoring. I mean you'd have to, I guess, in order to advertise, to use that name. We use, well I bought, uh, Bulls Eye. I have never bought the regular barbecue sauce.

> We just used the store brand. I did buy Heinz, I think. The last time that was the one that I got. Strayed from the Hunts variety. (Interview #4)

Stephen's explanation of the Lays and KC Masterpiece mix focuses on the production process, where he points out the relationships between the companies that are involved in making the potato chips. Although he has never been to a plant that produces potato chips, he relates to the work experience he gained in a potato processing plant and provides an explanation of how he thinks the process of flavoring chips is accomplished. It is interesting that he does not immediately associate KC Masterpiece as the producer of the barbecue sauce. This distinction between the KC Masterpiece brand on the one hand and "whoever makes the barbecue sauce" on the other hand indicates that he assumes that the production of the sauce and the branding of the sauce are two distinct processes that very well could be undertaken by different companies. His way of focusing on the production process illustrates that the display of two brand names evokes meanings for him of a relationship between a producer and its suppliers.

In addition to explanations that focus on the issue of sourcing primary products, there are informants who explain mixing of brands as a marketing strategy, where the perceived ultimate intention for the company is to make more money. The following passage from Todd, where he refers to Reese's Puffs cereal from General Mills with Hershey's, illustrates his understanding of brand mixes as a way of increasing the awareness of the brands:

> Todd: Clearly they're going for name recognition in order to sell their cereal. (Interview #2)

Todd interprets the relationship between the two brands as a way for the brands to help each other in the marketplace. This relationship may indeed involve a supply of ingredients from one brand to the other, but that is of secondary importance to the explanation. The "real" purpose of such an image-based relationship is to enhance the recognition of the brands in the marketplace. A similar explanation is offered by Carrie, who refers to the display of an extra brand on a cake mix as advertising:

> Carrie: I think, I think, I think it's advertising.
> Anders: Does it make any difference to you that…

Carrie: I don't think so. I, I've never noticed, but I never noticed it really. I hadn't paid any attention. I've just look for the, of course this is reduced fat, and cocoa doesn't have as much fat in it as chocolate. So I don't. Doesn't this say it is made with Hershey's cocoa? (Interview #2)

While acknowledging that the display of an extra brand is advertising, Carrie is unwilling to accept that it influences her decision to choose a certain brand. Apparently, there are other issues than the brand of an ingredient that Carrie is looking for when selecting which chocolate cake mix to buy. She appears to be more interested in the fat content of the product and looks for the type of ingredient the mix is made of (chocolate versus cocoa) than the brand of the ingredient.

Yet another way of explaining brand mixes is that it creates a means for improving a product, thereby increasing the participating companies' revenues. When consumers perceive the relationship between the two brands as a means for the companies to support one another, this understanding is based primarily on the belief that such a relationship creates a "real" improvement in the product. Cassandra's reflections on Dreyer's and its mixes illustrate this way of thinking:

Anders: So what do you think about Dreyer's when you know that they are kind of working together or mixing with another?

Cassandra: How do I feel about Dreyer's because they are doing that? I think it's good. I think they're trying to improve their product, and if mixing with a candy bar is gonna do that, I think that's great. They should do it. Cause I'm sure it benefits both companies. Yeah, I think it's good. (Interview #3)

It is interesting that she takes the companies' perspective rather than a consumer perspective when judging whether she thinks the cooperation is a good idea or not. If the mixing of brands benefits the companies, she considers the strategy to be feasible. One could of course argue that she also thinks that an improved product benefits her as a consumer. But the fact that she evaluates the mix from the companies' point of view illustrates the influence the marketing discourse has on her sense making of brand strategies. Cassandra has a bachelor's degree from a business college, and it is possible that her education influences the way

she understands marketing and branding. There is an obvious risk that research on consumers and brands tends to be self-generated when knowledge of marketing practices becomes widespread in society. A consumer who has learned some basic marketing, like Cassandra, is apt to produce a discourse that reflects the way marketing and branding is explained in textbooks.

A final example where brand mixes are understood as a way of improving the product is illustrated with Sabrina:

> Sabrina: I'm sure it has to do something with how much money they can make, by putting them together (laughter), I would think.
>
> Anders: What do you think *their* purpose is? I mean, making more money…
>
> Sabrina: To make a good product, and in turn make more money. That's what I think their purpose is, yeah. But they obviously have to put enough thought into it that it's gonna be something that sells, cause if they put something bad out there, nobody gonna buy it. So. (Interview #4)

Sabrina thinks that a mix of brand potentially can improve the product and make a company more profitable. But the condition for this is dependent on how the mix is received by consumers in general. Thus, brand mixes are understood as a marketing strategy, where the purpose is to satisfy consumers. Sabrina's use of "they" illustrates that she thinks of mixed-brands, the constituent brands and the companies behind these brands, as a coherent unit. While she thinks that the relationship between the brands is a matter of sourcing primary products, she does not reflect much further on the relationships between the brands and the companies behind the brands.

Besides Sabrina's and Cassandra's understanding of mixed-brands as a way to improve the product, Linda considered the combination of the two brands as something unique that would have been impossible to create with only one of the mixed brands. In the following passage, she reflects upon the mix of Betty Crocker and Hershey's:

> Linda: I think it's great (laughter). It makes me buy it (laughter). Because, Hershey's, you know, they don't make cake mix;

they don't have cake mixes. They don't make those kinds of things. So putting a Hershey's syrup in that only adds to the flavor. (Interview #1)

Linda's statement indicates that she associates a brand with the competence to make a specific product. Since she thinks of Hershey's primarily as a maker of chocolate, she considers this brand to be unable to make cake mixes. Therefore, the mix of Hershey's and Betty Crocker is an appropriate and desirable combination.

The various explanations offered so far represent an understanding among the informants that does not question the authenticity of brand mixes. The relationships that are perceived to exist between the brands and the companies behind the brands, as discussed above, can be labeled *supplier relationship*, *image relationship,* and *improvement relationship*. These relationships do not have to be mutually exclusive; consumers can use them in combination when explaining the phenomenon of brand mixes. But they understand these relationships as "real" in the sense that there is a mutual interest between the brands and their companies.

Among some of the informants, though, there is skepticism towards the authenticity of brand mixes. They realize that mixes of brands intend to make consumers believe that it is a matter of co-operation between brands and the values these brands stand for. But instead of buying into this marketing game, they suspect that the real conditions regarding the co-operation are kept secret from the consumers. Todd and Fanny, who talk about Dreyer's ice cream with Oreo cookies, point to this issue:

Anders:	Did you mention before, ice cream with Oreo cookie?
Todd:	I did mention that.
Fanny:	You did?
Anders:	Is that a mixing?
Todd:	You can buy, uh ice, cream with…
Fanny:	Oh yeah…
Todd:	Oreo cookies in it.
Fanny:	Yeah, and they will say Oreo.
Anders:	But will they say anything more than Oreo's? says it Dreyer's or?
Fanny:	Uh-huh, yeah it will…

Todd:	Yes, so they'll be the brand and then they'll be the flavor label pieces, say Oreo cookies, or cookies and creams, but it's Oreos.
Anders:	So Oreo suddenly appears in ice cream?
Todd:	It wasn't suddenly. It wasn't a conspiracy involved here Anders! It was a marketing decision.
Fanny:	A very smart marketing decision.
Anders:	So what do you think about that, like you said a marketing decision to…
Fanny:	A smart one. What do I think about that?
Todd:	What, what do you mean by what do we think about that? We don't have much control over some of these issues.
Fanny:	No, I haven't thought about it.
Todd:	If a couple of focus groups, they decide this works and suddenly they spring it upon us, and we of course must devour it.
Fanny:	Well, when they both reap the benefits, I suppose.
Todd:	Well I think the Oreo people are the same as the ice cream people. Am I wrong on that Anders? Are you allowed to answer any questions that we might post to you on tape? Okay, but there are conglomerates here, and they gotta own, one's owned by the other. (Interview #2)

As "flavor label pieces," Oreo is not understood primarily as a brand but as a label that represents the characteristic flavor of the product. In this way, Oreo is not assigned the same endorsement power as the product's brand, i.e. Dreyer's. When Todd starts to analytically reflect on the combination of ice cream with Oreo cookies, he critically dismisses the marketer-preferred reading. While realizing how consumers ideally should understand the mix of brands, he rejects this way of understanding and suggests instead that the same company probably owns both brands. To Todd, mixing brands becomes then a branding game that is used to manipulate consumers to believe in something that in fact is just made up by a company. This dismissing of brand mixes as something genuine illustrates that the stories companies tell about their brands and their connections to other brands in the marketplace are not necessarily interpreted as the companies intend.

Similar to Todd, Stephen is also aware of the fact that there are companies who operate on the market with several brand names. When taking this knowledge into consideration, Stephen provides a critical

questioning of brand mixes, where he assumes that maybe the very same company owns both brands that are mixed. Therefore, consumers' explanations of brand mixes are not necessarily consistent with the story that the company wants to tell with the mix.

> Stephen: Now I guess the question might be is, does the same company that owns the Lays potato franchise or brand name, do they also own the KC Masterpiece barbecue franchise, which I would assume there has got to be pretty close tie to? Like Kraft foods or any other of the big companies? I guess Kraft is owned by Philip Morris. Do they slip a little nicotine in (laughter)? Yeah, there is a lot of interesting partnerships, um. It's amazing what companies are getting into. And I know that, you know some, even the General Motors, I understand it's branched out into other fields of entertainment and stuff as a base for their corporate stakeholders, to justify the stockholders' investment in the company. And it would be interesting to see, you know what, who actually owns all the companies that make the food that we eat. In the, I think in the collegial environment, you would probably get into that more than you do as a consumer, perhaps as to who actually owns it. And I, I don't, maybe it's on every brand that you buy. But I don't know that I've ever seen on Kraft foods "owned by Philip Morris tobacco company." I probably would say, well it's time for me to stop buying anything that is made by Kraft if that's the case. Because I, my basic belief is that tobacco is totally wrong. (Interview #4)

Stephen's reflections on the ownership issue are interesting because the very function of a brand name, to signal ownership and origin, is dismissed by the way he articulates his understanding of brand ownership. There is an obvious risk that a brand loses part of its function when it becomes associated with a big company whose values do not correspond to that of the brand. In Stephen's mind, there is a clear inconsistency between the values he associates with Philip Morris and the meanings he ascribes for Kraft food products. Due to his Mormon affiliation, Stephen opposes Philip Morris as a company because of their tobacco business. Even though Philip Morris is not explicitly mixed with Kraft, as Stephen suggests, this association has at least a rhetorical impact on his attitude toward Kraft foods.

The informants' interpretations of brand mixes that underlie this examination of explanations can be divided into three categories. These categories are outlined in figure 9.6 as subsequent signifying processes. On the first and most basic level of interpretation, the mixing of brands is explained as a way for one brand to use another company's brand and its endorsed product as an ingredient product. I call this level *co-operation*. It reflects an understanding that the mix of brands is not necessarily targeted at consumers but may only be an issue between the companies involved in the production of the mixed-brand. This interpretation is then the starting point in a subsequent signifying process which I call *marketing*, the second category. Interpretations on this level go beyond the issue of a pure supply of ingredients and focus on the way companies and brands co-operate to make better products, thereby satisfying consumers. Finally, on the third level, which I call *branding*, mixes of brands are interpreted with a critical lens: consumers question the story of mixed-brands. The level of interpretation a consumer reaches depends on the individual's knowledge and understanding of the relation between themselves and the marketer. Those who have a limited understanding of marketing's role in society may perhaps only be able to make an interpretation on the co-operation level. With a more elaborate knowledge of what marketing and branding is all about, interpretations on the second and third levels may be possible. The explanations that have been presented here are not naturally observable but are of course generated because of the explicit questions regarding mixed-brands that were asked during the interviews. My questions undoubtedly made informants reflect on what the mixing of brands means and caused them to form interpretations that they would not necessarily make in everyday life. Therefore, given the relative lack of recognition of mixed-brands among the informants, it is likely that the combination of brands, if recognized at all, only generates basic interpretations like "this brand uses another brand as an ingredient." The subsequent signifying processes that are laid out in figure 9.6 should be understood as an excerpt of processes that have been made possible by an infinite chain of preceding signifying processes. Thus, the first level of interpretation, the starting point in this analysis, is preceded by a number of signifying processes that have generated the sign "Brand A and Brand B." Likewise, the branding level outlined in figure 9.6 is not the terminal stage but can be followed by subsequent signifying processes.

Branding game

Branding

```
        Int
   sign     object
```

The mix can better satisfy
consumers and make the
company more profitable

The idea of
marketing

Marketing

```
       Int
  sign     object
```

Supply of primary
products

The idea of
making a better
product

Co-operation

```
       Int
  sign     object
```

Brand AB

The idea of the to-
getherness of brand
A and brand B

```
    Int                      Int
sign   object           sign    object
```

Brand A   The idea of   Brand B   The idea of
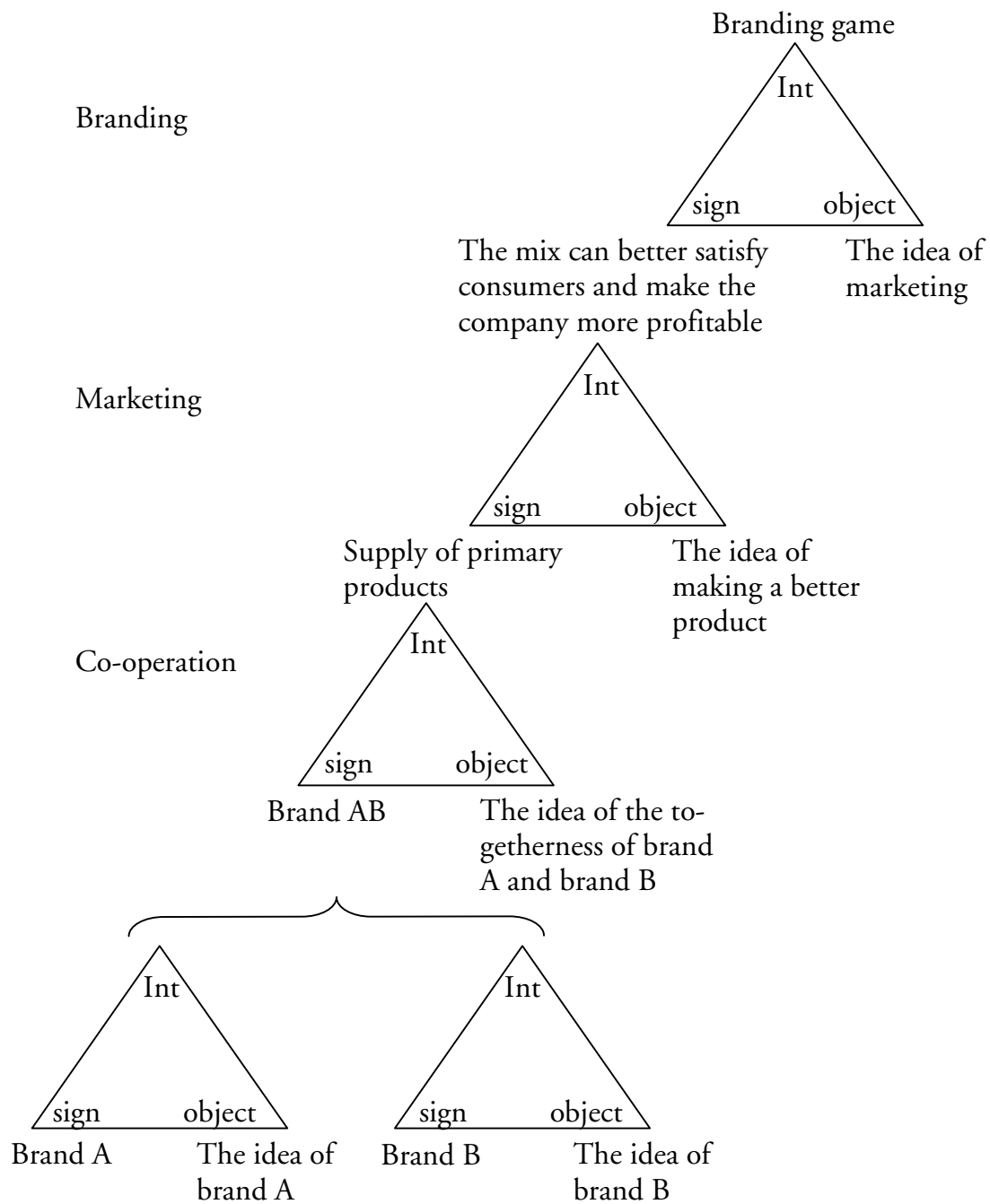   brand A   brand B

Figure 9.6: Semiotic analysis of the informant's explanation of brand mixing.

Developing and Negotiating Meaning

The analysis that follows in this section will illustrate how the meanings for the mixed-brand's constituent brands develop as a result of the mix of brands. As the brands that constitute a mixed-brand become associated with each other, there is a possibility that consumers do not experience the product as one unit but as two distinct units, each with its own separate meaning. For instance, marketer-suggested meanings for a mix of Betty Crocker and Hershey's co-exists with marketer meanings for these two individual brands. Likewise, it is possible that consumers develop meanings in the individual environment and negotiate them in the social environment, with regard to both the mixed-brand and its constituent brands.

When consumers make sense of mixed food brands, it is likely that product attributes, such as the taste of the two products, are an important aspect; these attributes create the foundation on which consumers develop and negotiate meanings. It is quite rational for a consumer to think that food companies who mix brands seek to find partners that can contribute to creating a product with a good taste. However, in order to uncover mixed-brand meaning negotiation that goes beyond issues of taste, the symbolic dimension of brand meaning needs to be examined. One way to detect symbolic meanings is to use projective techniques that help consumers to express themselves more fully and subtly (Levy, 1985). Therefore, when informants were talking about brand mixes, they were asked to think of mixed-brands as a married couple, where the personalities of the two brands might influence each other as a result of the marriage. By personifying brands in this way, the idea was to give the consumer a way of understanding how the personalities of the brands are developed and negotiated because of their connection to each other. The person/marriage metaphor was thought to be useful since research has demonstrated that consumers easily can assign personality traits for brands (see e.g. Aaker, 1997). But before analyzing these personified meanings and the way they change consumer understanding of the mixed-brand, we will first take a closer look at issues of taste.

The Taste of Mixed-Brands

In the first place, taste might be considered as something obvious and straightforward that is easy to examine and agree upon. Indeed, there are individual differences between consumers regarding their taste preferences: what one consumer deems to be delicious can be perceived as unappetizing to another. But even though an individual might find certain food products unappetizing, he or she will have an idea of what kinds of food in general are consumed in a certain cultural context (Harris, 1974). Hence, there tends to be general agreement about what kinds of foods are thought to be appropriate to eat as well as appropriate ways of combining different foods in order to match tastes, smells, and textures. In traditional Swedish food culture, for instance, one would not think of serving rice and potatoes at the same meal. Particular main courses are generally partnered with rice while others are served with potatoes. Thus, potatoes and rice are seldom considered as substitutable. In Indian food culture, on the other hand, potatoes and rice do not have the same role in the orchestration of a meal and can therefore be served together. This way of organizing products into consumption systems is known as product syntax, a semiotic term derived from linguistic analysis (Kehret-Ward, 1987; Kragh & Djursaa, 2001). With regard to mixed-brands, product syntax is an important concept that illuminates how consumers negotiate issues of taste. The point that needs to be made clear here is that there is no obvious way of determining appropriate product syntaxes even though consumers sometimes may believe so. As Gronow (1997, p. 134) posits, there is no "natural" scale or order in tastes and smells. Indeed, tastes and smells can be observed regarding their resemblances and differences and from that we can make up our minds if they represent pleasant or unpleasant tastes. However, the tastes we find pleasant are not inherent but determined by culture, where the individual's preferences are formed by traditional norms and fashion. Gronow (1997, p. 129) points to the role fashion has in setting standards of good taste and guiding eaters in the perplexing task of selecting proper meals and socially accepted foods and drinks (see also McCracken, 1988a). Among the various stakeholders in the fashion system, marketers and their brand-building activities are likely to significantly influence issues of taste with regard to food. In an American context, for instance, the Hershey brand is an icon standing for the best of American mass consumption and evokes associations of rich and tasty chocolate. These cultural meanings of the

brand are co-produced by consumers, but are highly influenced by the marketing discourse that has produced the brand over several decades. Likewise, in the context of mixed-brands, the marketing discourse is likely to play an important role in creating preferences for combinations of tastes. Brands that have been on the market for a long time and considered as trustworthy because of their longevity are likely to be taken seriously by consumers when marketed as mixes of brands. The taste of a product that is endorsed by a mixed-brand does not necessarily have to be improved in a "real" sense because of the mix. But consumers may nevertheless perceive improvement in the product because the authoritarian marketing discourse implicitly suggests it is.

When consumers focus on issues of taste, they develop a meaning for the mixed-brand that synthesizes the taste experience of the two individual brands. The following passage illustrates how Linda interprets the presence of Hershey syrup as enhancement of taste:

> Linda: I saw Betty Crocker brownie mix, oh that has Hershey's syrup in. I'm gonna buy that and try it. But other than that, thinking that it would enhance the taste, I haven't thought more about it. (Interview #3)

Both Betty Crocker and Hershey's belong to Linda's set of favorite brands, and she has a large associative network, especially for Hershey's, which primarily can be derived to the Pennsylvanian heritage she has in common with the brand. She considers both Betty Crocker and Hershey's as reliable brands that help her out in her cooking, so there is indeed a symbolic match between the two brands in terms of the roles they perform in her consumption system. However, as is obvious from her statement, she understands the mix of brands primarily as a way to obtain a better taste of the brownie. Even though I encouraged her to think of Betty Crocker and Hershey's in terms of personalities, she was reluctant to do so, and she said that it was hard to think of inanimate objects in that way. So when explaining how she understands the mix of Betty Crocker and Hershey's, she restricts the explanation to a matter of taste and quality of the product:

> Linda: I like this Betty Crocker with, it just seems more moist to me. It's just (laughter), I don't know how to describe it, you know. It's a feel you get with that hot chocolate, with

hot chocolate. It's just good. I love that, that combination
with the syrup in. It's the moisture I like. (Interview #3)

The fact that Linda associates moisture with Hershey's syrup is
interesting because it does not primarily relate to the taste of chocolate.
When Hershey's appears as an independent endorser for chocolate bars,
Linda associates the brand primarily with rich chocolate rather than
with moisture. But when the brand endorses chocolate syrup as a
component in a brownie mix with Betty Crocker, it is the meaning of
moisture that becomes salient to Linda as the following passage
illustrates:

> Linda: Well they put that liquid pack in there. They say it makes
> it more moist, and in baked, you know, excuse me, those
> kind of baked goods, moisture always improves the taste.
> (Interview #4)

Linda believes that the reason why she associates Hershey syrup with
moisture is the claim "they," that is the manufacturer of the brownie,
make about the liquid syrup. But when she visually examines the
package, she is unable to find any statements about moisture and
concludes that it was maybe just in her imagination that she had
associated the liquid syrup with moisture. Anyway, in Linda's opinion,
moisture is a very important characteristic of a cake or a brownie; it
improves the overall taste experience. This preference can be considered
as a convention shaped by the fashion system. Linda's idea of a moist
brownie is therefore not a preference she has figured out entirely herself
but is predominantly generated by a marketing discourse. In the past,
the notion of moisture has often been emphasized by various makers of
prepared mixes and can therefore be considered as a marketing
discourse that becomes important to all brands of prepared mixes.
Indeed, makers of prepared brownies may have figured out that people
prefer moist brownies to dry brownies and therefore used the claim of
moistness as a way to position their brands on the market. So the
notion of moistness may not have been unimportant to housewives, but
it becomes so much more important when used by marketers in the
everyday execution of their cake brands. It is of course also possible that
the brand managers of Betty Crocker brownie mix with Hershey syrup
have proposed the association between the liquid syrup and moisture
explicitly. By doing so, the notion of moisture becomes materialized by

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the inclusion of the Hershey brand in the mix. Linda's associations to moisture point to the importance the marketing environment has in developing meanings for mixed-brands. The Hershey syrup that is provided in the mix with Betty Crocker is indeed a *chocolate* syrup, and it would be reasonable to assume that this brand would evoke associations to chocolate, especially because of the strong position the brand has as endorser for chocolate products. But apparently, it is possible for brand managers to propose an alternative marketing meaning for a brand when it is mixed with another brand. Linda uses this marketer-developed meaning and incorporates it to her own personal environment where the idea of moistness fits well with her self-image of a caring mother who serves delicious food. With regard to the social environment, Linda negotiates meanings for food brands only occasionally since she lives alone. However, from time to time, she invites friends and her extended family to her home, and when serving them brownies, she can feel confident that her cherished Betty Crocker with Hershey's is the right choice.

> Linda: Aaah, Betty Crocker with Hershey's (laughter). It's the best one. I get more compliments off this brownie mix than anything else that I've ever used (laughter).
>
> Anders: So what do they tell you?
>
> Linda: Oh these are so good; they are so moist. Oh wow, you know, especially if I serve them warm, and everybody really likes them. (Interview #3)

So indeed she receives support from the social environment for the meanings she ascribes to Betty Crocker with Hershey's brownie mix. In addition to the social environment, though, Linda looks for meanings that the brands generate through their record of serving the market. In a way, this is a sort of social meaning of the brand as well, although not negotiated between consumers through symbolic interaction:

> Linda: And as, just like Betty Crocker you know, Hershey's has been around forever, always good. It's reliable. People continue to like it, so they must be doing something right. That's what I would feel. Because if the public, if you know people don't, consumers don't like it, they're sure not gonna buy it. And it stays and stays so it's good (laughter). That's the way, you know, I just always figure that way. If it's on the market, and it's been there for so

many years, it has to be good. There's something that we like about it because we keep buying it, so obviously we are satisfied with their quality. (Interview #3)

By looking at the record the brand has in the marketplace, Linda receives support for the meanings she attributes to the brands. Brands that have been on the market for a long time cannot be inferior according to Linda, and she can therefore feel comfortable that choosing such brands will be socially acceptable. This perceived mythical function of the market generates a heroic notion of brands (see Heilbrunn, 1998). With regard to the meanings of Betty Crocker and Hershey's, it is difficult to find any possible changes in the meanings Linda assigns to the brands because of their mixing in the brownie. For instance, Hershey's chocolate does not become "more moist" when endorsing chocolate bars. Because of the symbolic match between Betty Crocker and Hershey's, it is possible that her understanding of the two brands as reliable household partners is enhanced. But whether or not this is the case is very difficult to elaborate on further since Linda was reluctant to talk about brands in less product-specific terms.

When the sense making of mixed-brands is focused on the different tastes that come together, it appears that the meanings of the two constituent brands mostly remain the same. Since it is a mix of tastes that only is present in the mixed-brand, it appears to be quite logical for a consumer to argue that the tastes of the two individual brands remain the same. Another example illustrating a focus on taste is provided by Sabrina, who discusses the taste complementarity of the products that come together in the mix:

Sabrina: I don't know. I guess they try to find things that complement each other, you know, that work well together. Like you wouldn't put Hershey's syrup with hot sauce or ketchup, you know, so they try to find two things that work well together. Like when you get married, you try to find somebody who you work well with or complement.

Anders: Do you think they influence each other?

Sabrina: Not really. I mean I don't know what you mean 'influence'. I don't know that. I mean they're not people, they are non-living things, so I don't know how they can

really influence each other. Maybe you do. I don't know.
Maybe I'm missing something. (Interview #4)

The taste complementarity Sabrina refers to can be understood as a product syntax or taste syntax which makes it possible to judge good mixes from bad mixes. While it may seem obvious at first what an appropriate taste combination is, as Sabrina's statement reflects, we have to keep in mind that there are no natural laws that determine tastes. It is interesting how she focuses on the way the tastes go together, where the characteristics of the products become the most important criteria when judging whether a mix of brand is appropriate or not. Her example of a mix of Hershey's syrup and a hot sauce or ketchup is significant since it illustrates that she understands mixed-brands as matches of tastes. If she would have been focusing on brands and their symbolic meanings that go beyond meanings related to product attributes, one could have expected her to mention that, for instance, a mix between Hershey's and Heinz is inappropriate because of the meanings these brands are associated with. Similar to Linda, Sabrina is reluctant to think of brands in terms of personalities, and since she considers brands as "non-living things," it is impossible that the brands could change their personalities in the way a married couple could. To Sabrina, the meanings of a food brand are primarily determined by the taste of the product where she buys the brands her family likes. Two brands that are mixed are therefore evaluated with respect to the degree they complement each other in terms of taste rather than in terms of personality. Thus, the taste syntax becomes more important than the brand syntax.

A final example of taste issues will be provided by Stephen, who primarily relates to brand mixes in terms of the characteristics of the products. When he reflects upon how brands and their personalities might change as a result of being mixed, he delivers an explanation that concerns the compatibility of the products:

> Stephen: I'm not sure that they would change the product, but I
> can see where they, for instance, if the cranberries don't
> go along with the particular way that you build the flakes.
> You know, if there, one in sweet and one is sour, you
> know I don't think you gonna want to put them together.
> So yes, you may say okay, we'll do some sweetening of the
> cranberries to modify it so that it's a pleasing

combination, the same as you would in a marriage relationship. So. (Interview #6)

To Stephen, the notion of a brand is almost synonymous with the product, and it is therefore logical to think of brand mixes as mixes of products. The product syntax becomes an important issue when judging the appropriateness of the mix. It is interesting that Stephen reproduces a managerial discourse when discussing changes of the products. His saying "you gonna want to put them together" and "we'll do some sweetening" illustrates that he explains modifications of the products as if he were part of making the decision. When asking Stephen to think of brands as if they have personalities, he equals personality with the characteristics of the product that the brand endorses:

> Stephen: Oh the Sun-Maid person is very warm. He's absorbing all the sun that he can. He's out there to get a tan, likes laying by the pool so he gets really wrinkled skin and re… but retains all of their personality and flavor. (Interview #6)

To Stephen, the Sun-Maid person evokes associations primarily to raisins and the way they become what they are. The personality of the Sun-Maid brand is therefore exclusively related to raisins and could be regarded as a product personality rather than a brand personality since it is reasonable to assume that Stephen would ascribe this personality to any brand of raisins. Of particular interest is his reference to the Sun-Maid person as a *male* person. When Stephen described the Sun-Maid person, he did not have a package of Sun-Maid raisins close at hand. If he had, it is likely that he would have referred to the Sun-Maid person as a *female*, in line with the girl who has been an intrinsic part of the Sun-Maid logotype for decades. Stephen's inability to reproduce the Sun-Maid person as she is presented in the marketing environment illustrates that marketer-created personalities are not necessarily the most central aspects that provide meanings for a brand. The Sun-Maid brand is explicitly anthropomorphized by the marketer, and one could therefore have expected Stephen to refer to this "raisin girl" when describing the personality of the brand. Therefore, the marketing context appears to be relatively absent with regard to the meanings he bestows on the Sun-Maid brand.

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When Stephen describes personalities for a brand that endorses a variety of products, he becomes less focused on product attributes and presents more abstract meanings, as the following passage illustrates:

> Stephen: I think the Post person is very outgoing, looking for new ways of doing things, more ways of pleasing people. Making breakfast an exciting experience so that they can compete with that jerk down the store who makes those hard bread things they call bagels. Why would anyone want to eat one of those you know? So I think this, the Post person is got to be someone who's willing to change and try new things and experiment, you know, expand their horizons. To say, okay not everybody likes Post, whatever their original brand was (laughter) of cereal. Grape nuts, you know, we need to modify the flavor a little bit so that it appeals to more people. Make it more absorbent so that the ones who don't like a crunchy cereal will still like the cereal when it is all soggy, you know. And vice versa. You want it to stay crunchy long enough to please the crunchy person who doesn't like soggy cereal. So, I think they're very, the Post person has got to be very flexible and very understanding of people's needs and wants and be willing to modify their product to meet those needs. (Interview #6)

Stephen thinks of Post as a family group where the various products the brand endorses generate the personality. His saying "everybody likes Post whatever their original brand was" is interesting because it illustrates that he thinks of the different Post cereals, such as Raisin Bran or Cranberry Almond Crunch, as brands. When he refers to those product brands, he focuses again more closely on the product attributes and the way they are modified in order to please consumers. These statements illustrate how Stephen reproduces a Kotlerian understanding of marketing management, which is understood as satisfying consumers with products that match their needs most closely.

When considering the meaning for the combination of two brands, Stephen thinks that the brands maintain their individuality even though they are mixed together. This finding appears to be consistent with both Linda's and Sabrina's understanding of brand mixes:

Stephen: Oh perhaps there is some complement of that person's original individuality. But I think that they maintain their individuality even as they are married, much as couples maintain their individuality. There may be some blending, you know maybe that Sun-Maid person becomes sweeter because of the relationship with the Post company. But I think overall they've got to maintain individuality to, I don't know, to maintain their viability. […] I can still see an individual bag of Sun-Maid raisins, so in that respect I'll say they maintain their individuality, or they may be also having a relationship with the fruit cake people, where their products are used. But as far as the, and maybe it's like a family, you know one member is individual, one member has combined and lost their identity and now have become just another scoop in the Post cereal world. But I think that if you munch them up, you know if you crush the raisins 'til where you couldn't identify them in the cereal, I think that they are still individual because if you wanted, you could pick out those raisins, you know if you'd like to eat them separately. So, there's some, there's a complement I think more than an absorption of that personality. You know you enhance the taste with the raisin, you enhance the taste of the cereal, the grain flake if you will. You enhance the sugar sweetening that's on it because you get the sweetness, but you also get a natural sweetness from the raisin. (Interview #6)

Since Stephen still can identify the products that are mixed, he thinks the brands maintain their individual personalities. There might be a change in the way the individual products taste because the combination of products generates a different holistic taste experience. The grain might taste different because it is mixed with raisins just as the raisins might taste different because they are mixed with grain. So in this way, the two products influence each other in terms of taste. But Stephen believes that the two brands maintain viability because he can still consume Sun-Maid raisins independently from Post.

The data presented in this section has illustrated that development of meanings for mixed-brands are often centered on aspects relating to the products' taste and physical characteristics. It is somewhat surprising that the informants focus to such an extent on product personalities rather than the more abstract concept of brand personalities, especially

when considering that they were explicitly encouraged to anthropomorphize brands through the person/marriage metaphor. When the development and negotiation of meanings for a mixed-brand is focused on product attributes, it appears that there is a minimum of meaning transfer *between* the brands. Meanings are primarily transferred from the two brands to the mixed-brand.

Juxtaposing and Transferring Symbolic Meanings

When consuming mixed-brands, there is indeed a potential for less product-specific meanings to be developed and negotiated. We will now turn to an analysis of such meanings and map how the symbolic match between two brands can emerge. With two brands combined, there is a possibility that meanings a consumer attributes to one of the brands will be transferred to the other brand and vice versa. In this way, the meaning of "brand A" may become more similar to the meaning of "brand B," just as the meaning of "brand B" may become more similar to "brand A." Thus, this transfer of meanings might result in modified and renegotiated meanings that are ascribed to the two brands. The following passage, where Todd and Fanny discuss the changes that mixed-brands might generate, illustrates how meanings can be transferred between the brands:

> Todd: So the question then becomes is, does one impact the other? Uh, and I guess impact in terms of the consumer's perception. (silence). Is that your question? I would assume at least for me, it would have to if one of the, the coalition partners, let's use that expression, has some positive memories that are able rub off on the other, which is either neutral or negative. But nothing is, if Cadbury was linked with Cocoa-Puffs, which was produced by General Mills, uh, I believe that would soften my attitude toward General Mills and give it a more, a rosier aura, than otherwise.
>
> Anders: So you say that they do change.
>
> Todd: Yeah, I would think, I think they would for me. Okay, so Duncan Hines was linked with other, and we've talked about this to some degree. Uh, especially if the other image is, is neutral, it certainly has to be an added effect.
>
> Fanny: Yeah, same thing I would think. That they complement each other and that they, yeah if I saw something, a brand that I normally wouldn't buy, that they've added

something to it that I really like, I would think, oh well, it must not be so bad, yeah. (Interview #4)

We can see here that meanings are not necessarily transferred in a two-way fashion, where transfer of certain meanings from one brand triggers off a transfer of meaning from the other brand. On his own initiative, Todd made up a hypothetical brand mix of Cadbury chocolate and Cocoa-Puffs cereal from General Mills. It is significant that he chooses Cadbury as a "coalition partner" because it is a brand to which he has a very rich associative network. General Mills, on the other hand, is a brand that Todd knows very well, but the associative network is nowhere near as large as it is for Cadbury. By hypothetically mixing these two brands, Todd suggests that his attitude towards General Mills will be changed in a positive way because of the link to Cadbury. However, Todd's reflections do not indicate that any meanings would be transferred back to Cadbury as a result of being mixed with Cocoa-Puffs. It appears that the meanings he ascribes for General Mills are not salient enough (either in a positive or a negative manner) to make a transfer to the Cadbury brand possible. Consistent with Todd's statements, Fanny interposes that she also believes that a brand that she is indifferent to gets a more positive image if it is mixed with a brand that she has a positive attitude toward. These two examples indicate that a brand a consumer views favorably appears to be less susceptible for meaning transfers from other brands.

In addition to the transfer of positive meanings, there are of course also negative meanings that can be transferred between brands that are mixed. Below is an illustration of this matter, where Todd explains how he would transfer meanings from Hershey's to its potential partner brands:

> Todd: But then when we have a situation where Hershey's is added to a, a neutral thing for us, and then we have this negative connotation about Hershey's, then where do you go with that? That brings them both down in a sense. (Interview #4)

We can now see that there is a pattern in the way Todd develops meanings for brands that constitute a mixed-brand. When the meanings Todd ascribes for a brand are salient, either in a positive or in

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a negative way, there is a meaning transfer taking place. This finding is partly consistent with prior research that indicates a highly favorable brand may positively influence the attitudes that are ascribed to a less favorable partner brand (McCarthy & Norris, 1999; Washburn et al., 2000). However, prior research does not suggest that a less favorable ingredient brand can weaken its partner brand. In order to get a better understanding for the negative meanings Todd would transfer if the mix of brand would be a real one, we need to look closer at the meanings he credits to Hershey's. From the various statements Todd made about the Hershey brand, I would argue that the meanings he associates with the brand are somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he can talk at length about the brand in a nostalgic way when he relates it to memories from his childhood in New York City. But on the other hand, he also disparaged the brand as the following passage illustrates:

> Todd: Hershey's is the most waxy of chocolate. Clearly it's chocolate, okay? If there's nothing else, I'll go with that. But my sense of Hershey's is a brand that is the last of the best picks. In other words, you pick something far better than that before you pick that. So my sense of a person who does that is somebody who doesn't know from chocolate, or doesn't have the money to buy something better. (Interview #4)

We can see here that Todd defines himself away from the Hershey brand, which in his eyes is a brand for people with low cultural capital who do not know how wonderful chocolate can be. Since these meanings appear to be very notable to Todd, it is therefore reasonable that a brand that mixes with Hershey's will also be associated with some of the same meanings. But as we will see in a moment, this is not necessarily the case.

As discussed in Chapter 7, Todd and Fanny talked several times about Cadbury chocolate and the important erotic bonding role the brand has in their relationship. The following passage illustrates their understanding of the Cadbury personality and gives an idea of the meanings they bestow on the brand:

> Fanny: Full of class, full of…
> Todd: Wonderful taste…
> Fanny: (laughter).

Todd:	A sensuousness about the person…
Fanny:	Right.
Todd:	A gourmet if you will.
Fanny:	Uh, lots of culture (laughter).
Todd:	And then I, I don't think, I don't think it's necessarily the idea that it's a British company or was a British company at one time or is foreign. It's just that it, it, it has a sense of being richer and creamier.
Fanny:	Yeah.
Todd:	And more savory, yeah. Also look at the way it's packaged, okay. You have a real thick thing in the Cadbury, and the Hershey's are packed much thinner.
Fanny:	Yeah, thinner. (Interview #4)

As the quote vividly illustrates, Todd and Fanny have a very romanticized image of Cadbury, and they identify themselves as stereotypical consumers of the brand. During one of the interviews, Todd visually examined the Cadbury package closely and discovered that the Hershey Corporation produces Cadbury chocolate under license on the American market. This relationship between Hershey's and Cadbury can be considered as an unintentional mix of brands that would not necessarily be known to consumers. Nevertheless, since this relationship links the two brands together, one could imagine that Todd would transfer the negative meanings from Hershey's to Cadbury. However, in the following passage, we can see how Todd negotiates with himself to maintain the desirable meanings for Cadbury:

Todd:	If we read carefully, it doesn't say it's made, well it says manufactured by Hershey's, but it's under license from Cadbury, which suggests to me that Hershey's had to go out of its way to produce a better candy bar under the license.
Fanny:	Well they had to use Cadbury's recipe, right?
Todd:	Something like that. But it does taste differently, doesn't it?

Since Cadbury allows the poor quality Hershey to use their recipe, it would not have been far-fetched to believe that Todd would transfer certain negative meanings to the Cadbury brand. But Todd is doing quite the contrary and extols Cadbury as a maker of good chocolate whose recipe other chocolate manufacturers yearn for. Todd is almost

denying the relationship between Cadbury and Hershey and seeks an explanation that can justify the desirable meanings he assigns for the Cadbury brand. In a way, he resists the marketer's meaning and interprets the relationship so that it fits with the meanings he has developed in his personal environment for the Cadbury brand.

Another example where meanings appear to be transferred in a unidirectional way is provided by Fanny, who modifies the meaning of Betty Crocker because of the brand's relationship to Hershey's:

> Fanny: For me it's so funny cause I think of Hershey as a corporate, sort of a corporation where Betty Crocker has appeared to me as more of a home, you know, spun kind of a deal so…it wouldn't deter me from buying Betty Crocker, but it loses some of that warm, fuzzy kind of feeling.
> Todd: Hmmm… Is it the logo?
> Fanny: No. It's the merging of the two. Although there's part of me says smart lady (laughter), you know, which is kind of interesting.
> Todd: You know what I'm saying. Is it the logo for Hershey's which doesn't have a face?
> Fanny: No, I guess it's what I know about Hershey. It's just more, more what I know about Hershey being. I mean being in the amusement park business. Hershey has an amusement park. I mean I just know it's more of a, I know it as a corporate, corporation, so for Betty Crocker I don't have that knowledge. (Interview #3)

The mix of the two brands causes Fanny to modify the meaning of Betty Crocker by transferring certain meanings from the Hershey brand. This example illustrates how important the individual environment is when consumers develop meanings for brands. Fanny interprets the Hershey brand by relating it to her own personal experience of their being involved in the amusement park business. Since she knows that Hershey's runs an amusement park, she thinks of this brand as a business brand much in the same way as she understands the company she runs together with her extended family. These meanings in themselves are not a problem, but they appear to be inconsistent with the meanings she associates with Betty Crocker. The meanings that concern "Hershey as a corporation" are not compatible with the meanings she holds for Betty Crocker, making her state that

Betty Crocker "loses some of that warm fuzzy kind of feeling." It is interesting that it is Betty Crocker who loses some of the positive meanings while the meaning of Hershey's appears to remain the same. Fanny could have transferred the positive meanings she attributes to Betty Crocker to the Hershey brand and made the meanings of this brand warmer and fuzzier. But the fact that she is not doing this illustrates that it may be difficult to compensate a negative meaning with a positive meaning. Developing and negotiating meanings for mixed-brands is not like mixing colors where one can compensate for an incorrectly broken shade of color by adding more of the missing one. So instead of blending the meanings together, it appears that meaning development for mixed-brands is a matter of juxtaposing symbolic meanings, where certain meanings become important and are therefore transferred to the partner brand.

A final example where meanings are transferred in a unidirectional way is illustrated by Cassandra, who believes that Betty Crocker's use of Hershey's chocolate changes the meaning she credits to Betty Crocker:

> Cassandra: Betty Crocker would probably be experienced and just like that grandma figure, you know, just kind of down home and nice and comfortable, comforting kind of, whereas Hershey's probably more like I talked about the younger figure, more, what do I call them? People who like dress in style and just really are happening. So I guess in a way Betty Crocker kind of, it's appealing to a younger audience, maybe.
>
> Anders: You said Betty Crocker…
>
> Cassandra: You remember she, she was the cake mix, so in a way, she was appealing to a younger audience using Heinz, or Hershey's, sorry, excuse me. That she had that Hershey in there. So it wasn't just the basic cake; it was more of a…younger…audience, maybe… do you know what I'm trying to say? (Interview #5)

Hershey's presence in the cake mix has a considerable impact on the meanings Cassandra ascribes for Betty Crocker, where that brand, through its use of Hershey's, expresses youthfulness. As such, Betty Crocker is no longer just a "basic cake" but becomes an active and outgoing person. But why doesn't Cassandra transfer any meanings

from Betty Crocker to Hershey's? As the following passage illustrates, Hershey's is not getting older because of the mix with Betty Crocker:

Cassandra: I don't think Hershey's is changing because they are with Betty Crocker, but I can see Betty Crocker changing because they're with Hershey's. I don't know why but, like because she's taking on kind of a younger image, you know this is a more, it's definitely not going sophisticated. It's kind of going the more wide usage of younger people, I would think. But Hershey's, just because they're with Betty Crocker isn't making them, an older, you know, I don't think it makes them appeal to older people. I don't know. Maybe it does, maybe it does because people who would respect Betty Crocker would see that she's using it, so maybe they would use it too.

Anders: I don't know if you remember why you, you said that Hershey's was more a younger person.

Cassandra: I would think just because they have so many wild flavors and different candies and... You just don't think of. I mean I'm sure older people eat chocolate, but when you think of chocolate, you just think of candy and a younger generation, I guess. Especially the weird flavors. Like there's so many different flavors and different candies, and I just think it makes me think younger. I don't know. (Interview #5)

Since there is no "logical" way for the transfer of symbolic meanings, we can only conclude that sometimes certain meanings are transferred from one brand to another in a way that is impossible to account for beforehand. Just as Cassandra transfers certain meanings of youthfulness to Betty Crocker, we could have expected that the meanings of an old, weak housewife could have been transferred to the Hershey brand. But when Cassandra juxtaposes the two brands and the meanings she attributes to them, it is a set of notable meanings she ascribes for Hershey's that is transferred to Betty Crocker. The reason why she is doing this can have something to do with Cassandra's understanding of age, where youthfulness is understood as something positive and desirable that can revitalize an old and (re)tired brand. Since she thinks that the mix of Betty Crocker and Hershey's is appropriate, it becomes logical for her to transfer the positive meanings to Betty Crocker. On the other hand, if she had thought that the mix of brands was unsuitable, perhaps the meanings of the older housewife

would have been transferred to Hershey's and made the meanings for this brand less favorable. Regardless of how the meanings would have been developed, it points to the importance of taking account of meaning development in the individual environment, where the marketer-developed meanings can be juxtaposed, reinterpreted, and resisted.

Summary

This chapter has offered an empirical examination of meaning development for mixed-brands. The ways in which mixed-brands become meaningful to consumers can be thought of as a process, where interpretations on various levels of abstraction generate meanings for the mixed-brand as well as its constituent brands. The elements of the meaning-development processes are illustrated in figure 9.7. The meaning development for mixed-brands starts with a visual recognition that two brands are used as co-endorsers for a product. This recognition of the combination of brands is a prerequisite for further meaning development for the mixed-brand, but as the examination has illustrated, the marketing practice of combining brands is not always an issue that consumers pay attention to in their everyday consumption. So it is indeed legitimate to ask why research efforts should be directed towards consumers' experiences of mixed-brands when this marketing strategy, at least when it comes to food products, may have a very limited role in consumption. In the next chapter, I will elaborate further on this issue. If consumers recognize the display of the two brands, there is a potential for further meaning development. As consumers make sense of the brand mix, various ways of explaining the combination of brands provides meaning for the mixed-brand. In the theoretical conceptualization, I argued that the meanings of the two source brands merge and become located in the mixed-brand. However, findings from this study indicate that consumers separate the meanings of the mixed-brand's source brands; they consider them as two individual brands despite the fact that they are mixed. So whether or not there is a notion of a mixed-brand at all can be questioned given the empirical evidence. The final section of this chapter examined changes of meaning for the two source brands that the mixed-brand might cause. As informants heavily focused on issues of taste, there were
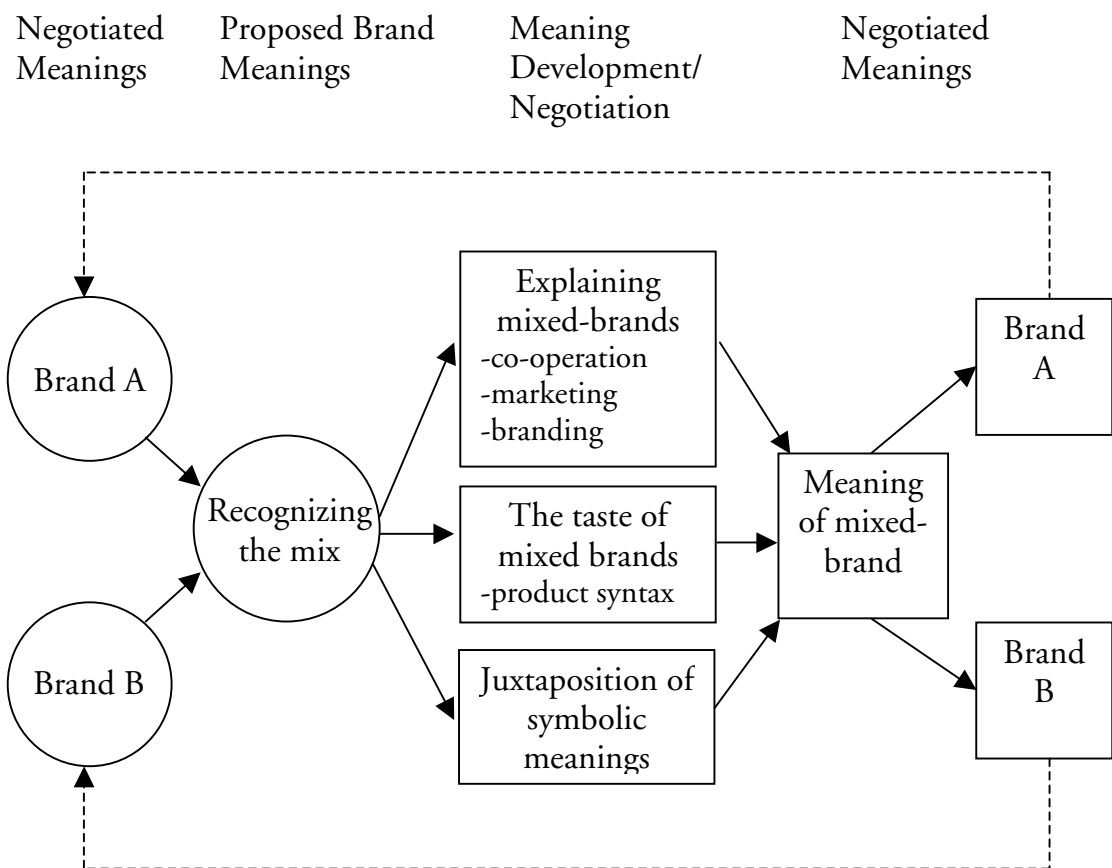
Figure 9.7: Empirical model of mixed-brand meaning negotiation.

limited instances of meaning transfers between brands. Only when more abstract meanings beyond taste were taken account of, was it possible to detect meaning transfers between brands. Throughout the chapter, the Hershey brand has appeared in several contexts, paired with various partner brands. The variety of meanings the informants have expressed for this brand highlight the central role the personal environment has for brand meaning development. Of course, the marketing discourse does have a considerable impact on the meanings consumers assign to the brand. But the extent to which consumers creatively develop highly personalized meanings points out the broader significance brands may have in providing meaning to consumption.

Chapter 10

Summary and Conclusions

The aim of this dissertation has been to illuminate how consumers create meanings for mixed-brands through their everyday consumption. As I indicated in Chapter 1, research on consumers and their interpretations of mixed-brands is indeed of interest for brand managers seeking to build strong and enduring brands that attract loyal consumers. By offering a research approach that accounts for consumers' lived experience of mixed-brands, this study complements prior research with a much-needed "real-life" empirical examination. These empirical findings give some support to prior research on this issue, but they also uncover some limitations of that research. In particular, the study contributes to our understanding of the symbolic dimension of brand meanings. But even more important than the phenomenon of consumers' interpretation of mixed-brands, this dissertation discloses a number of broader issues with regard to the role of brands in the everyday life of the consumer. Perhaps one of the most important arguments that emerge from this study is that brands are not always as important to consumers as the existing literature would seem to suggest.

What About Contributions to Existing Mixed-Brand Research?

Prior research on brand mixes is here collectively labeled as "consumer evaluations of co-branded products." The labeling of this line of research with a common term reflects the relative homogeneity of research approaches and common beliefs about scientific knowledge in consumer research. The term also reflects that this line of research is

heavily derived from Aaker & Keller's (1990) often cited article, "Consumer evaluations of brand extensions." With regard to research on consumer evaluations of co-branded products, the current study does by and large provide empirical support to prior findings, but extends the understanding when it comes to the brand meaning negotiation process. As a result, this study challenges the approaches for data collection that have been used in prior research. In short, findings from existing research suggest that the attribute profiles and perceived quality of a mixed-brand are often more positively evaluated than the two constituent brands when they appear as individual endorsers. The findings reported in this study do not refute that attitude profiles may be enhanced because of a mixed-brand, but at the same time they indicate that the effects reported in prior research might be exaggerated. Prior research also indicates that meanings are transferred between brands that are mixed and that the level of meaning transfer is moderated by brand familiarity. While transfers of meaning between brands were observed, it seems to be a unidirectional transfer of meaning that is not necessarily moderated by brand familiarity. When focusing on the symbolic meanings of the mixed-brand's constituent brands and the way they are developed in the personal environment according to life themes and life goals, it becomes apparent that the transfer of meanings between brands is a more complex process than acknowledged in prior research. The framework developed in this study for mixed-brand meaning negotiation depicts important information for marketers: the meanings consumers ascribe to mixed-brands and the potential transfers that may occur between the combined brands are not exclusively determined according to marketers' intentions. The meanings that are developed in the marketing environment actually co-exist in tandem with meanings developed both in the personal environment as well as in the social environment. The meaning negotiation framework further emphasizes the importance of understanding brand meaning as a continuous process that emerges through everyday consumption. Examining consumer evaluations of mixed-brands and the potential meaning transfers through a single exposure to an advertisement, as has been commonly done in prior research, appears to generate a rather limited understanding for the way in which mixed-brands become meaningful to consumers. When examining the meanings for mixes of brands that actually are *consumed* and domesticated into the symbolic context of the household (cf.

Chang, 2001), the personalized brand meanings which relate to aspects of self become important for meaning development. Brand meanings evolve over time and reflect the consumption practices that the brands are involved in. Therefore, it would seem that the conditions for meaning transfer between mixed-brands are heavily determined by the associative network a consumer has developed for each of the two mixed brands. (cf. Henderson, Iacobucci, & Calder, 1998). So in addition to brand familiarity as a possible factor influencing meaning transfer between mixed-brands, this study suggests that the associative networks consumers develop for brands should be taken into consideration. While a consumer may be highly familiar with two distinct brands, it is possible that the two associative networks that have been developed for each differ with regard to size and complexity. Because a large associative network represents richer and more complex brand meanings, it is likely that there is a greater possibility for meaning transfers.

This study fundamentally challenges one important aspect of existing research findings. By ignoring the study of *consumption,* prior research offers no insights into the meaning development process for mixed-brands as it occurs in everyday life. As the results of this study vividly illustrate, it is far from obvious that mixed-brands become salient symbols that consumers pay attention to in their consumption. Although this study cannot provide evidence that this is a common characteristic among U.S. consumers in general, it does pose some questions about prior research on mixed-brands. The results reported in this study indicate that combinations of brands may have a limited role in consumption. Combinations of food brands tend primarily to evoke meaning development and meaning transfers when consumers are explicitly asked to consider the mixing of the brands. However, in the context of everyday consumption, there are no researchers asking consumers to assess attribute profiles and perceived quality of brand mixes. One can therefore assume that the potential implications such a branding strategy might have are greatly exaggerated in prior research. Although existing research on consumers and their evaluations of co-branded products appears to have the ambition of producing findings that can be useful to brand managers, it is difficult to see the applicability of the research since a fundamental aspect of meaning development is left unexplored. Research that tends to ignore real life

experience, such as existing research on mixed-brands, could therefore be considered as basic research that has no immediate applicability. Like a chemist who mixes substances in hopes of making a serendipitous discovery, brand researchers mix brands and assess how the meanings change as consumers become involved in the process. But since actual consumption of the brands and the meanings that are developed through such consumption are ignored (Belk, 1984; Holbrook, 1987a, b), the potential meaning changes that are observed in experimental research settings should be considered as results from basic research; they do not necessarily have any immediate implications with regard to consumption. Of course, such research efforts on mixed-brands can be legitimate because they may generate knowledge about how consumers behave in a research setting.. However, findings from this research should not be presented as phenomena that occur in everyday life. Besides the empirical evidence that points to the limited role mixed-brands have in consumption, this study offers insights into how brand mixes as a marketing strategy are explained by consumers. While prior research implicitly assumes that mixed-brands are understood in the way brand strategists seek to portray them, evidence from this study indicates that consumers might well see through the marketers' branding game and critically question the authenticity of mixed-brands. Such questioning among consumers is likely to impact the way they develop and negotiate meanings for brands and can therefore jeopardize the effectiveness of the brand strategy (cf. Holt, 2002).

This study has emphasized the importance of understanding symbolic meanings that are generated as brands are consumed and incorporated into the life of the consumer. It has developed a framework for addressing consumers' meaning negotiation processes for mixed-brands, and, through a close reading of a mixed-brand, it was illustrated that a combination of two brands can trigger a variety of connotative meanings. While consumers indeed impute symbolic meanings for brands, it is astounding how difficult it was for some informants to express these meanings when it comes to mixed-brands. Even though a projective technique was used to facilitate the informants' expression of less product-specific meanings such as taste, several were reluctant to express brand meanings through the proposed metaphor. This reluctance may be interpreted in at least two different ways. It is

possible that food products represent a category where brands have a more restricted role in consumption. Food brands can indeed function as identification marks that facilitate the consumer's locating the same brand from time to time. But besides this function of identification, food brands may not always be as important for identity construction as has been assumed. As a result, it is possible that the significance of symbolic meanings is not as prominent for food brands as it might be for brands in other product categories. Given that this study exclusively focuses on food products and their brand mixes, it is important to remember that the findings may not be valid for brand mixes in other product categories. Another possible explanation for the informants' reluctance to express brand meanings in less product-specific terms concerns the method that was used. While it was expected that a projective technique would be suitable to facilitate expression of symbolic meanings, results from this study illustrate that the use of the marriage metaphor had mixed success. There were indeed some informants who accepted the metaphor and could express the meanings they attribute to brands in terms of personality, but there were also informants who refused to anthropomorphize inanimate objects. It is possible that other projective techniques, for instance, collages (see e.g. Belk et al., 1997), could have provided a better understanding for the symbolic meanings that are developed from brand mixes.

What About the Role of Mixed-Brands as a Brand Strategy?

Since this study points out the limited role mixed food brands have for consumers in their consumption, it is legitimate to ask what *possible* role this brand mixing strategy might have. Even though brand mixes might be totally irrelevant in the context of consumption, the strategy may still have importance in the construction of corporate identity and may also generate stability and strength in relationships with other companies in the value chain.

The practice of mixing brands can be considered as a form of auto-communication, where the strategy becomes a self-referential activity that manifests a corporation's understanding of self and culture (Christensen, 1993). Auto-communication refers to the importance

external marketing communication can have for the organization itself, where focus is shifted from the market to the organization. The sender of the communication also becomes the primary receiver of the communication, where the message creates and maintains organizational culture (Christensen & Cheney, 2000). Because branding has become such a dominant business strategy through which a company's success is understood, more sophisticated versions of branding, for instance, brand mixing, contribute to the notion of a successful and dynamic company that understands the logic of the market. The practice of mixing food brands has almost become an industry standard in the U.S.; therefore it becomes important for organizations to use this strategy to communicate internally that the company is in the forefront of the brand building battle. In this way, brand-mixes become a symbol that is used to remind the organization about the values and catchwords that unite them (Christensen & Cheney, 2000). Such a brand orientation (Urde, 1999) may be important in order to build successful brands in the minds of the brand strategists, but it appears to have a limited role with regard to consumers.

Besides being an important strategy for internal organizational identity construction, brand mixes might be used to maintain and strengthen relationships with suppliers and retailers. By offering a supplier a visual display of the ingredient's brand, it is possible to achieve a better relationship with the company who supplies the ingredient (Norris, 1992). Likewise, the supplier of an ingredient or a component can also achieve a better competitive position by offering its customers an ingredient brand (Norris, 1993). In the past, collaboration between companies has generally been initiated because of the potential benefits that could be achieved by combining competencies within the companies, such as technological know-how. Successful brand building can also be considered as an internal core competence, and brand partnerships could therefore be regarded as yet another form of a strategic alliance. However, because the foundation for a brand partnership is created in the marketplace, in terms of consumers' meaning creation for the brands, rather than in a production or product development process, a brand partnership is a slightly different form of strategic alliance. As branding practices are becoming the dominant form for understanding company success, there is indeed a

great potential for brand partnerships. Brand mixes can also facilitate access to retailers in the same way as brand extensions can (cf. Collins-Dodd & Louviere, 1999), and may be a successful strategy for facilitating foreign market entries (Voss & Tansuhaj, 1999). In this way, brands might be an important mechanism that enables new kinds of relationships between companies. Even though mixed-brands can be useful in creating strong business-to-business relationships, they may still have a limited role in creating consumer-brand relationships (see Webster, 2000). However, the extent to which a business-to-business relationship is strengthened because of a brand mix depends on the anticipated effect the strategy will have on consumers' demand for the brand. While there currently appears to be an understanding among both academic researchers and brand managers that co-branding has a positive effect on consumers, it is likely that the strategy will continue to strengthen business-to-business relationships. One could argue that exposure to a brand always has the potential to increase consumers' awareness of the brand. So even though it appears that consumer recognition of mixed food brands is limited, it is possible that long-term use of the strategy may have a role in creating brand awareness.

Implications for the Brand Management Literature

Through its focus on consumers and their brand meaning development, this study provides support to the contention that consumers are active and creative co-producers in the marketplace (cf. Wikström, 1996). Rather than being passive receivers of marketing stimuli, consumers in this study were observed to actively personalize brand meanings in their everyday consumption (cf. Fournier, 1998). This finding is consistent with Chang's (1998) research and lends empirical support to the brand meaning negotiation framework developed by Ligas & Cotte (1999). The active role consumers have in the process of meaning development has several implications for current conceptualizations of popular brand management concepts including brand equity and brand identity.

In the brand management literature, the meaning of a brand is generally considered to be created by the marketer, where brand identity expresses what the brand stands for (Aaker, 1996). The

meaning consumers ascribe to a brand is referred to as a brand image and is understood as a projection of the brand's identity (Kapferer, 1997). The characterization of brand identity as the brand's DNA configuration (Upshaw, 1995) or as the soul of the brand (Aaker, 1996) reflects an understanding that the meaning of the brand is to be found within the brand itself. Thus, it is the brand strategist who is supposed to define brand identity in order to avoid falling into an image trap, where the market becomes the primary interpreter of the brand (Aaker, 1996). Likewise, Kapferer (1997) argues that brand strategists should focus on the brand's identity and not let the public dictate brand language. While it is important that the brand strategist has a vision for the brand, it appears to be dangerous to focus too much on identity. There is potentially a reversal of the image trap, where the management of the brand becomes a self-absorbed and self-seductive identity game (Christensen & Cheney, 2000). Brand identity may be an important concept that helps organizations to develop an understanding for their own values, but as Christensen and Cheney (ibid, p. 267) point out, "organizations should not *assume* either that their identities 'are' what they tell them to be or that people *necessarily care.*" To avoid falling into an identity trap where brand identity fails to stay in tune with the market, it is necessary to reconceptualize current notions of brand identity and acknowledge that consumers also have an important role in the construction of a brand's identity.

Like brand identity, current notions of brand equity (e.g. Aaker, 1991) need to be redefined so that the consumers' active role in brand building is taken into consideration. Even more consumer-focused brand equity conceptualizations, such as Keller's (1993) customer brand equity concept, fail to acknowledge the role consumption has for brand meaning development. Although Keller in his later work (2000; 2001) focuses on the meaning brands have for the consumer, he still characterizes meaning as something which the brand strategists give to the brand by creating brand image. Hence, image is considered solely as the result of the brand strategists' activities. Although it is sometimes acknowledged that the brand building activities can generate relationships with consumers (e.g. Aaker, 1996), it is also generally considered as a result of the brand strategist's actions, where the consumers' active role in defining the relationship is ignored (cf. Fournier, 1998).

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Finally, results from this study indicate that in some instances the notion of brand personality may be somewhat exaggerated. Brand personality, that is a set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997), has emerged as an important concept that brand strategists should seek to develop through their brand building activities (Batra et al., 1993). However, as the findings illustrate, the personality traits consumers attribute to brands are not necessarily consistent with the brand strategist's intended traits. Since several of the informants were unwilling to express brand meanings in an anthropomorphized way, it may be necessary to rethink current notions of brand personality. Although brand strategists use personality traits in advertising to imbue their brands with anthropomorphized qualities, it does not automatically imply that consumers buy into this personality game.

What About Brand Managers?

This research may also have implications for managers who are in charge of their brands. The findings in this study point out some of the limitations of brand management. Even though the term 'brand *management*' might sound like the company has total control of the brand, it is important to remember that not everything about the brand can be managed. In the marketplace, consumers take brands into their lives and create their own individualized meanings for them. Managers may seek to control brand meaning as much as possible, but there will always be limits on how much that meaning can actually be managed. The consumer might very well act in an unmanageable way (Gabriel & Lang, 1995) and make management of the brand in the marketplace a daunting task. The results from this study, showing that consumers sometimes do not recognize brand mixes at all, pose some questions with regard to the impact of branding. Almost everything offered in the marketplace is branded today, and it is generally assumed that consumers care and pay attention. Consider, for instance, how this understanding is reflected in the way brand consultants Tom Blackett and Bob Boad write about partnership between brands:

> Whether or not companies planning joint ventures take their brands into consideration, one thing is sure: their use in tandem will almost

certainly affect the way customers perceive them (Blackett & Boad, 1999:xvii)

However, as has been illustrated in this study, it is not certain that mixes of brands will have any affect on how consumers perceive the brands. So while brand managers might very well use brand mixes in order to create interesting partnerships with other companies, they should not necessarily expect too much response from the consumers.

Brands in the Everyday Life of the Consumer

This research contributes to the emerging understanding for the role brands have in the everyday life of the consumer. Prior interpretive brand research (e.g. Chang, 1998; Fournier, 1998) has advanced this understanding far beyond traditional approaches that have tended to reduce consumers to narrowly cognitive utilitarian decision-makers. Compared to prior interpretive brand research on the other hand, the research contained in this study offers an additional understanding through its out-of-focus data collection approach. By not making brands center-stage during the empirical data collection (Askegaard et al., 2000), it was possible to come closer to the consumers' own voices and detect the role brands have in everyday consumption. Although research projects always generate results that are influenced by the researcher's interaction with consumers, I argue that the approach used in this study offers a fair attempt to represent consumers' everyday use of brands. Fournier's (1998) explicit approach for data collection, where informants were encouraged to tell the story behind any brand in the inventory, evidently generates stories that legitimize brands as central symbols that make consumption meaningful. In addition to this explicit data collection approach, where informants were asked for brand stories, Fournier (1998) purposively selected three *women,* since according to prior research it could be expected that because of their gender, they would engage themselves in stronger relationships with brands. As Fournier's research sought to conceptually legitimize interpersonal relationship constructs, there is nothing suspicious about such an approach at a foundational research phase. But it is important to remember that the central role some brands appeared to have for Fournier's informants does not necessarily encompass all consumers. Compared to prior research that has focused on consumers who to

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some degree are expected to share some characteristics (such as upper class non-price shoppers (Chang, 1998), gay men (Kates, 2000), women at mid-life (Olsen, 1999), or children (Ji, 2002),) this research offers a fairly heterogeneous account of consumers. Informants were not purposively selected for their ability to reproduce stories that reflect the central role brands have in their consumption. Rather, informants were purposively selected in order to maximize discovery of heterogeneous patterns (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Steve, 1993:82), where brands may be one of many aspects which make consumption meaningful. It is also possible to criticize my selection of informants because the sample is far too small to adequately represent U.S. consumers in general. The purpose though is not to generalize the findings to all of U.S. consumers but to provide a more balanced understanding of the possible roles brands may have in the lives of consumers. While this research has included consumers whose behavior possibly implies that brands may have a more restricted role in consumption, such as dedicated price shoppers or consumers with very limited household budgets, we have to remember that the empirical data collection was carried out in the U.S. Further research on consumers and brands in other cultural settings is therefore necessary. Although many brands from the U.S. have conquered markets in less affluent areas of the world in the last decade, it does not imply that the roles these brands have in these consumption contexts are the same as in the U.S. (see Ger & Belk, 1996). By conducting the empirical research in a U.S. setting, however, this study can more easily be compared to other interpretive research on consumers and brands that has been carried out in the U.S. If the empirical data had been collected outside the U.S., it would have been more difficult to demonstrate the possible limitations with prior research since empirical differences could have been explained by cultural differences.

This study provides support to Fournier's research on consumers and their brand relationships. Rich stories with regard to food brands were indeed elicited, and it was illustrated that the brand relationship framework could be applied in order to understand brand relationship quality. In addition to rich brand stories though, several of the informants produced discourses of their food consumption, which illustrate that brands sometimes play a very limited role. In both Fournier's (1998) and Chang's (1998) research, one gets the impression

that brands take a very prominent role in consumption, where consumers deliberately choose certain brands and incorporate them into their lives. But when not explicitly asking consumers for stories of their favorite brands, there are many other elements besides brands that emerge as important symbols that provide meaning to consumption. Through its focus on mixed-brands, this study can be considered as a prolongation of prior interpretive brand research. If brands had been equally as important to consumers as indicated in prior studies, one would have expected far richer stories of consumers' experiences with mixed-brands. The limited role mixes of food brands appears to have for consumers calls for a rethinking of the role of brands in the life of the consumer.

When doing phenomenological interviews with consumers, it is advised that the researcher avoid asking the question *why*, since it may force informants to come up with rational explanations that they think justifies their behavior (Thompson et al., 1989). During the data collection for this study, this advice was followed; informants were instructed to talk about their food consumption in general. However, even though the question "why" was avoided, it appears that consumers nevertheless tend to produce rationalizations for their behavior. It appears that consumers believe that in addition to talking about their behavior (such as their food habits), they also feel a need for justifying their behavior with an explanation. That consumers make these kinds of rationalizations is somewhat problematic because it may appear as if their behavior is very deliberate and has "logical" explanations. It may *appear* as if consumers have relationships with brands when they do not.

Why Relationships and Consumer Research?

The question of whether or not rich stories of consumers' experiences with brands necessarily should be interpreted as if consumers have relationships with brands needs further discussion. Results from this study do not invalidate the relational idea between consumers and brands, but they do raise a number of questions regarding how these relationships are currently conceptualized. Relationship marketing was introduced as an alternative to the exchange paradigm and sought

initially to explain inter-organizational behavior and service situations (O'Malley & Tynan, 2000). In the last few years, however, relationship marketing has been extended to also include mass consumer markets (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995), and with Fournier's (1998) conceptualization, relationship thinking has reached its logical conclusion. While relationships between companies can often be described as mutual, where both buyers and sellers are active and where interaction and relationships are important, it has been questioned whether there exist relationships between businesses and consumers at all (O'Malley & Tynan, 2000). While questioning whether relationships can exist in the consumer market, we have to keep in mind that relationship constructs have not emerged at random but are the result of a cultural development (Østergaard, 2002). As such, relationship marketing exists primarily as a discourse (Fitchett & McDonagh, 2000), and it is through this discourse we understand interactions between actors in the marketing system. So there is nothing "real" in relationships beyond the metaphor that seeks to create an understanding for interactions in the marketplace. But as O'Malley & Tynan (2000:807) suggest, "it may be that the metaphor of interpersonal relationships has been so successful that the academy has forgotten that it is a metaphor which is being used." Thus, researchers sometimes consider relationships as if they were real and use social exchange theory in a way that tends to over-emphasize the role of trust, commitment, communication, and mutuality (O'Malley & Tynan, 2000). So the question is whether relationship thinking accurately represents consumers and their behavior in the marketing system. Fitchett & McDonagh (2000) have critiqued relationship marketing for not being able to rebalance the inequalities and underrepresentation of consumers in market exchanges. They contend that current conceptualizations reduce consumers to prisoners under the hegemony of organizations. In this way, relationship marketing becomes more rhetorical than real because the kind of relationships consumers have with companies and their brands are likely to be imposed on them rather than initiated by mutual interest.

> As a consumer I am unable to demand that my bank or airline service provider negotiate the terms of our relationship to serve my own interests, whereas the organization can impose such terms without any recall to the consumer. [...] The market relations between organizations and consumers form a very unusual type of

relationship, and one that we as individuals would be unwilling to consider in any other relational context. The bias in such relations is such that one could legitimately argue that there is no mutual relationship, only imposed relations (Fitchett & McDonagh, 2000:217-218).

It is common practice for companies to assert that they have relationships with their customers, but it is less known whether consumers really want them or believe that they have relationships with companies and brands whose products and services they consume. There is generally a lack of reciprocity in the relationships between companies and consumers, and one can question whether the term 'relationship' is the best term to use when describing the interactions that take place between consumers, companies, and brands. One can of course redefine the term 'relationship' so that it does take account of the current conditions reflecting its lack of reciprocity. But then we must question what we have achieved by redefining the relationship construct so that its meaning becomes significantly distant from its theoretical roots.

One of the benefits of relational discourse in the context of consumers and brands is the emphasis on the consumers' active role in keeping the relationship going. In Fournier's (1998) conceptualization, the consumer and the brand (and implicitly also the manager who administers the brand) are both considered to influence how the relationship evolves over time. In this way, there is not a top-down hierarchy in which consumers are reduced to passive receivers of marketing stimuli. Instead, consumers are considered as active co-producers of brand meanings (Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Ritson, 1999). But the question is whether the relationships consumers have with brands can credibly be characterized as *equal* relationships. Although consumers are free to choose which relationships to nourish and maintain, there is always a managerially preferred way of interacting with brands, which limits the consumers' freedom. Consumers' unauthorized ways of using brands, as reported by Ritson (1999), can be subject to brand management intervention, where the consumer ultimately runs the risk of getting sued (Klein, 1999:177). So while it is the case that brands are always managed by their legal owners, it appears that relationships consumers have with their brands are likely to be equal only within a narrowly defined context. It might therefore be

that relationship discourse creates a false belief in consumer freedom when, in fact, the relationship is largely managed by the marketers (cf. Fitchett & McDonagh, 2000).

Relationship discourse should be understood in the light of a broader movement where companies seek to personify themselves. Through concepts such as corporate identity and brand identity, marketing research has given companies a human dimension by pointing at the similarities these concepts have with human identity. Although it might be appealing to humanize companies in this way, concepts of corporate identity has been criticized for its questionable parallels to human identity (Balmer, 2001). It is without doubt that the relational discourse fits well with managerial goals, where maintaining long-term relationships with existing customers is considered more profitable than short-term exchanges. Whether the relationship discourse is equally valuable in serving the interests of consumers needs further analysis. It is now a readily accepted fact that consumers think of brands in terms of personalities, and it appears that the relationship thinking has been received positively by consumer researchers as well. However, we have to be aware that the acceptance among consumers to think of brands in terms of personalities did not emerge randomly. It is the result of a marketing discourse that saturates the market with ideas built on relationship principles. Perhaps consumers do not think they have relationships with their brands, but if we as researchers supported by the marketing discourse, continue to argue it is so, consumers are sooner or later likely to accept the relationship discourse.

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