COLLECTIVE BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

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Fanship, brandship, and relationship are all a part of what the statement “I like this” really means. Your judgment joins a pool of other judgments, a small relationship economy, one of millions that continually coalesce and dissolve, and reform around cultural products-movies, sneakers, jeans, pop songs. Your identity is your investment in these relationship economies.

—John Seabrook (2000)

Your judgment joins a pool of other judgments . . .

Yes, it does. There is something to brands beyond the individual consumer. A brand relationship is more than the thoughts and feelings of individual consumers about a brand. There are meaningful collective brand relationships. Further, all “individual” relationships pass through collectives. Brand relationships are made through social forces.

When we were first approached about contributing to this volume we were both flattered and ambivalent. We don’t see brand relationships or theorize them as most of these distinguished contributors do. As presently conceived and constituted we are outliers in this sub-area of brand research. To us, brand relationship is an area so thoroughly dominated by psychologists (at least in U.S. business schools) that even the interpretive work (Fournier 1998) in the area is thoroughly individualistic and retro in its 1950s-era projective ethos. There is very little discussion of collective action, thought, memory, or even the role of institutions, society, or collectivity in general. There are just the individual consumers and their minds. Sociology 101 was apparently dropped from the field’s brand curriculum. In U.S. academic marketing circles, brand relationships are all about brand-consumer dyads. It even sometimes requires thinking of brands as animate beings, often with personalities (Aaker 1997). So, if the cornflake brand were a human would he/she be friendly/unfriendly, happy-go-lucky, or sullen? Aside from the already noted too-tight focus on the object-person dyad and complete lack of social constructionist thought is the odd (at least to us) reliance on anachronistic 1950s-era neo-Freudian brand-as-person/pet school of thought (Bartos 1986). While these formulations may be valuable in creative positioning, an easy-to-get managerial metaphor, and no-doubt entertaining, our own experience, theorizing, and data have led us elsewhere.

Thus the word “relationship” in U.S. academic marketing has typically been used in a very narrow manner. The social world is reduced to brand and consumer, and that’s
it. Part of the relationship conceit is that these two parties somehow behave toward one another as if both were alive. They both even have personalities despite the fact that one is usually a thing. To state the obvious: brands typically do not have personalities because they do not have predisposition of behavior. Anthropomorphic packaging and mascots aside (Hine 1995; Ludacer 2008), the average Consumer Packaged Good (CPG) does not emote, think, or behave. Marketing departments, ad agencies, media outlets, and any of the myriad other frequently conflicting institutions involved in the production of a brand may do so, but brands do not. We know of no compelling evidence that humans, without being somehow coaxed or demanded to do so, think of brands as humans or even humanlike. While acknowledging brands as the objects of all sorts of human desire, creativity, fantasy, and play (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), it is humans, human collectives, and institutions that make brands. But this is missing from the brand literature. Where are the discussions of institutions and collectives? Do brand relationships have to be so narrowly conceived?

What we offer instead is an alternative theoretical space for discussing, among other things, brand relationships. It is an attempt to at least change the conversation, even a little. We do this by situating our discussion of brand relationships within an evolving social model of brands that we have been working on for some time. We begin with a definition of brands.

brand (n.) A vessel of popular meaning.

The reader will no doubt note that we use the term popular rather than commercial or some other narrower mercantile construction. A visit to a contemporary thesaurus shows popular as a synonym to commercial. This of course makes sense, in that life inside a consumer culture has erased whatever distinction once (if ever) existed between these terms. The popular is the commercial. Commercial culture is popular culture. Just as the U.S. Supreme Court has acknowledged the difficulty in attempting to separately define political and commercial (popular) speech, we cannot say that California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is not a brand or that Ben & Jerry’s contains no political meaning. Meaning defines brands. This holds true even when that meaning is mundane.

For just a moment, think about how modern brands began. In the late nineteenth century, brands replaced many unmarked commodities. While it is true that there were some branded products prior to this period (such as patent medicines and tobacco), it is during the last two decades of the nineteenth century that the ubiquitous branding we know today began. Between 1875 and 1900, many branded products replaced unbranded commodities (see Figure 9.1). The phenomenal growth first took place in packaged goods. Soap, previously sold by weight from a generally unbranded cake, became Ivory (1882) and Sapolio (circa 1875). Beer, previously drawn from an unnamed keg, became Budweiser (1891) and Pabst (1873). All across the spectrum of goods and services, existing commodities became brands, as did the flood of new things designed for the modern marketplace of 1900.

During the last years of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth centuries,
branding exploded. Advertising and branding pushed marketplace modernity along; they were its engines, its mode. Over the next eight decades, the branding tide rose to cover just about everything. A century later even dirt and water were branded.

THE SOCIAL BRAND

Brands are created by interactions of multiple parties, institutions, publics and social forces. Even the term *co-creation* belies the brand’s true nature and is stuck in a fictive dyad: brand/marketer-consumer. Nothing in the material world, the social world, or brand world is that simple or isolated. Thus, we also reject the au courant term, *co-creation*, not because it goes too far, but because it doesn’t go far enough. There are more social actors than consumer and marketer in this play. Co-creation, as it is typically used, is thus a critically constrained construct.

Brand managers have for decades spoken in terms of qualitative insights and brand *meaning*. The oft-repeated object lesson of The Coca-Cola Company’s confusing attitude assessment of a product with the cultural meaning of a brand is now MBA legend, as it should be (Hays 2004, Pendergrast 1993). Completely consistent with this is the high demand for consultants and brand experts from anthropology, communications, and sociology (Sunderland and Denny 2007).

In the modest hope of improvement we offer a social model of the brand. It is a work in progress. But, it is an honest (if not provocative) attempt to move the brand discourse in a different direction. Brand meaning is plastic and dynamic, continually molded by social forces. We would like to bring some of the sociological imagination (Mills 1959) to the conversation.
Elsewhere, we have offered the first steps toward a social model of brands (O’Guinn and Muñiz 2009). The basic components (see Figure 9.2) are: the marketer; the good, service, or personage; the individual consumer; consumer collectives; and institutions. Essential processes are accommodation, negotiation, mediated cultivation, collective memory, polity, rumor, and disruption. We will use this model as a platform on which to rest our understanding of brand relationships. Our theory of brands is based on the interplay of several social forces, institutions, consumers, and collectives of consumers. This interplay yields meaning. It yields brands.

The marketer is easily conceived. It is the agent who at one time was thought, by some, to own the brand and determine brand meaning. While that was never really true, it is certainly not the case today. Marketers “create” the brand in the sense that they give it initial form, message, packaging, position, and platform. Marketers control a certain amount of monetary capital, means of production, intellectual property, pricing, and distribution authority. The marketer launches the brand and tries to vest it with intended meanings in an attempt to bring about a desired consumer response. But in reality marketers neither own nor control the brand. They do not create the brand; society does. The marketer is a relatively powerful social actor, but by no means the only one.

Even the mighty marketer rarely begins tabula rasa. Marketers are themselves products of social production. Tide is manufactured by Procter & Gamble (P&G). P&G is itself socially formed by various stakeholders, partners, biases, traditions, cultures, social memory, laws, customs, and real and imagined competitors. Interested and vested parties contribute to the birth and launch of brands. The various institutional configurations of P&G’s brand management system (and its impact on the general practice of brand management) are well documented (Low and Fullerton 1994). That these differing hierarchies impact the resulting brand offering is taken as a given. Marketers negotiate with engineers, creators, and holders of intellectual property, market researchers, and competitors within
and beyond the company and project these things into constructing the "imagined" market for the good or service. For those who have had the opportunity to actually be involved in the launch of a brand, you know about all the backstage politics, expectations, games, test market results, institutional memory and history, imagined target market, and on and on (Rothenberg 1994; Stabiner 1993). All of these, and more, are involved in the social production of the brand before it is ever launched.

The good, service, or personage is just that, the physical thing, the material, the actual item offered to the marketplace.

The consumer is a focal social actor in the model. This part of the model is where consumer research has labored and produced knowledge about how individuals process brand information, advertising, and other brand communication, and make judgments and decisions.

**Consumer Collectives**

Sometimes collectives are face-to-face interactions, such as local car clubs or user groups, but more often they are computer-mediated (e.g., online communities), and almost always they are imagined. Other than in face-to-face settings, most community members meet or interact with a fairly small percentage of community members. Most others have to be imagined. The idea of imagined community was notably promoted by sociologist Benedict Anderson (1983) to explain how nation-states (a relatively new phenomenon in human history) came to be. How could hundreds of million people residing in nations covering hundreds or thousands of square miles come to actually think of themselves as Americans, Germans, or Chinese? How can people who never meet one another share such a strong sense of identity, something worth killing and dying for?

In an obviously more trivial sense, how can millions of users of a brand come to think of themselves as loyal Coke drinkers, Blackberry users, or Volvo types? In the imagined brand community is we see admittedly small but meaningful felt affiliations to untold and unseen others. This is not a trivial part of what we call brand equity. As the late Daniel Boorstin, historian and former Librarian of Congress, once noted:

... nearly all the things we consume become thin, but not negligible bonds with thousands of other Americans (Boorstin 1961).

Remember: "thin but not negligible bonds." This is perhaps the hardest notion to get across in thinking about human-brand relationships. These bonds are the thin and typically diaphanous threads that, when combined through the twisting of ubiquitous popular social forces, amount to strong ties to many unseen and unknown others. In modernity most communities are imagined, they are experienced as the soft, comfortable, and sure knowledge of the like-ethos others, whether they involve the other 300 million Americans one does not know directly or the much smaller collective of loyal Pabst Blue Ribbon beer drinkers. We do not know them by name but we know they are there. Brand communities, like most modern communities, depend on the imagined unmet and unremunerated
admires or users of their brand. It is this understood and imagined notion of other brand users being “just like me” that leads to spontaneous parking lot discussions among drivers of the same brand of car.

If (post)modern society is increasingly noted for a surface orientation, a disconnectedness from neighbors and face-to-face community (Putnam 2000), an ephemeral attachment orientation to all things civic, then would it not make sense that known-in-common commercial referents (brands) would become more, not less, important in social collectivity? For most consumers, that is the level at which the social brand and brand community exist. This is what the sum of our research tells us. True, in our earlier work we highlighted instances where brand communities were active, powerful, and large (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). Certainly such communities exist; they have in fact become much more common and widely acknowledged than we first imagined. But we do not want other researchers, managers, or readers to believe that communal brand relationships must always be this strong, or this seemingly fanatical. They do not (see Figure 9.3).

We should not limit brand community discussions to the vanguard, the lead user, or the proudly marginal to engage the larger parent construct: the social brand. For all things there are distributions; the same holds true of brand-person relationships. For most consumers, most of the time, brand relationships are thin (but not negligible), and most collectives or brand communities are imagined and far from fanatical. Unlike people who are weekend Klingons (Kozinets, Stadetime June 2001) the typical brand community member has a life that does not require costumes or pilgrimages to the now franchised Burning Man. The typical brand community member merely has to admire collectively
and quietly; they do not have to leave town with the circus or find it at a “desert near you.” They merely admire and imagine.

The larger point is that in a consumer society brands become non-negligible connections to others. To a relative few, these brand-centered collectives sometimes supplant other social organizing and sanctioning structures. For even fewer, they become truly vital to the consumer and their interface with the social world. Our data reveal this level of brand community commitment as relatively rare, but not completely unimportant, because these highly motivated consumers often figure prominently in social networks. It is, therefore, the entire distribution of brand community affiliation that should be considered. The late CEO of The Coca-Cola Company was not referring to freakish or marginal consumers when he said:

People around the world are today connected to each other by brand-name consumer products as much as by anything else.

—Roberto Goizueta, former CEO, The Coca-Cola Company (Pedergrast, 2000)

The next components in our model are institutions.

Institutions

Institutions include, but are not limited to, media, retailers, equity markets, government, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Institutions also play a role in brand creation. These institutions bring the weight of economics, norms, practice law, and regulation to the ongoing creation of brands. The media, for example, determine what raw materials and modes of meaning creation (e.g., television advertisements, Web pages, branded entertainment, and consumer-generated content) will be available. They determine, as institutions, what demographics can be reached during a certain day-part for a given cost per thousand of eyeballs delivered. They not only define the channels of communication opportunity, but they also define what is not possible, what audiences cannot be delivered for a certain brand for a given price.

Television is bought in the “up-fronts” in a highly institutionalized manner; about $10 billion a year in the United States alone. The parameters of those institutions, their rules, their highly ritualized procedures, their lists of possible and impossible have a significant impact on how a brand comes to have its meaning. The types of programs available are themselves a product of deeply embedded group and cultural processes. For example, the 2007–2008 television season witnessed a pronounced thematic shift, with networks moving way from longtime trusted genres featuring doctors, cops, and lawyers, to shows featuring distinctly spiritual and supernatural themes. Most observers agreed that this shift represented a culturally driven desire for fantasy and escapism. As one network programming director noted, “the real world has become such a horrendous place that people are looking for magic to avoid the tragic” (Brill quoted in Elliott, 2007, p. 5). Has a nation of 200 million or so unaffiliated spiritual seekers become resonant with cultural media production: a genre seeking viewers and generating advertising revenue? These
sorts of processes and effects have as much impact on brand meaning as the actions of account managers and advertising creative directors.

The list of institutions is long. Obviously retailers significantly participate in the creation of brands. The almost byzantine structure of retail space negotiation has an enormous impact on what a brand comes to signify through its display in public space. Governmental agencies significantly restrict what a brand can mean. They may bring formal legal action when a company produces what is deemed as an inappropriate brand or a brand that is by its nature monopolistic. Assumptions and estimates of the likelihood of greater regulation, possible class action lawsuits, and more restrictive public policy serve to frame the positioning or repositioning of many brands. The mere presence of regulations and the institutions charged with creating, modifying, and imposing those makes a significant impact on which meanings are allowed for a brand and which are not. Likewise, NGOs exert force in the social construction of brands. Brands recently sanctioned by the Environmental Defense Fund or the Sierra Club mean something different than those without such blessings.

**Processes**

The primary processes that act to form brands include accommodation, negotiation, and cultivation.

*Accommodation* is a process through which the marketer’s intended meaning is given some degree of acceptance by consumers. Consumers typically accommodate some, but not all, of the marketer’s desired meaning. The term *accommodation* explicitly acknowledges that some of the marketer’s meaning will likely remain.

*Negotiation* refers to a social process in which actors actively “bargain” for something, in this case what the brand means and for whom. We are speaking of the shared meaning, the sphere of negotiated commonality. In textual terms, this would be where reader and writer share meaning. Without it, meaningful communication about brands, or anything else, is impossible. Negotiation for meaning occurs with all brands, but at any given moment in the life of a brand the meaning of that brand might be closer to the preferred meaning of the marketer or that of the consumer. Famous instances of brand “hijacks” or “appropriations” by consumers are plentiful in the brand literature (Wipperfurth 2005). More typically however, common ground is found without such theatrics and drastic action (Walker 2008). Radical asymmetries certainly occur and are inherently interesting, but the norm is far subtler, if less entertaining. Relationships around the mode are predictably more stable but still involve various social collectives. In these staid and stable relationships the various agents are content enough to find the status quo desirable. Certain brands, such as Morton Salt or State Farm Insurance, have had essentially the same marketing, and in most places consumer relationships, for decades. In regard to the latter, in states where changes in insurance laws and regulation are in flux, new strategies (including exit) are sometimes attempted by marketers. Consumers and other parties then negotiate the decades-old brand promise, “Like a good neighbor . . . State Farm is there.”
When a brand emerges from more organic social roots it is often the case that the marketer (if wise) accommodates organic brand meaning, including the rituals that reify it. Consider an example from the Gatorade brand. Gatorade had been an established, nationally distributed brand for nearly twenty years before one of the brand’s most defining elements was created. Moreover, this element was created independently of the marketer. The phenomenon in question, often called "the Gatorade shower" (Rovell 2006), occurs when a team wins an important game and dumps a cooler of Gatorade on their coach’s head. Though its origins are contested by at least two different teams and their fans, Rovell (2006) speculates that it most likely originated during a New York Giants victory over the Washington Redskins in 1985, when nose guard Jim Burt dunked his coach, Bill Parcells, at the end of the game. Though the practice was initially considered disrespectful, it quickly came to be seen as a playful sign of affection in subsequent incidents. Once its nature was understood, the media began to expect it with each Giants victory and scrambled to capture and broadcast it. The practice quickly spread, becoming part of the ritual of the game for all kinds of athletes. Rovell (2006) notes that

... a Gatorade dunking probably happens on a football field in every state, and the reporting of the event gives the brand thousands of free media mentions and impressions every year. It has reached a point where coaches in all sports—including tennis, basketball, soccer and baseball—have received the ice cold shower (p. 78).

Yet this ritual originated and developed without any input from Gatorade. Aside from a one-time $1,000 Brooks Brothers’ gift certificate to Parcells to cover the damage to his wardrobe, Gatorade never encouraged the practice (in fact, doing so might have robbed it of its legitimacy). Here, the original social actors were professional athletes and the journalists who reported on them. They created the practice, disseminated it, and vested it with meaning, meaning that was then widely embraced by amateurs and professionals alike.

Consumer collectives often assert negotiating power. In their early study of brand communities, Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) commented on a way in which this happens, referred to as desired marginality. Here, brand community members actively try to keep the community ethos one of marginality; they prefer that ethos and actively try to maintain it, sometimes working against the marketer’s quest for market share. A brand such as Apple with approximately 6 percent of the U.S. computer market has marginality as part of its core brand meaning. Apple brand communities thrive and celebrate their marginal status (Kahney 2004). Thus, some brand community members actively work against market share growth, or at least the perception of growth. These communities must walk a tricky path between rejecting willing new members and sustaining a large enough market share to keep the brand viable. If the brand gains too much market share or becomes too mainstream then cultural cachet is lost and the brand is no longer as desirable. Here the boundaries of community and brand are upheld by the collective. As Apple moves toward double-digit market share a new, more mainstream brand meaning may have to be negotiated. Clearly, such a new brand meaning will not be the result of unilateral action by the marketer.
Cultivation is another social construction process that affects the social construction of brands. O'Guinn and Shrum (1997) demonstrated that goods and services frequently used in television programming are seen by those who watch more television as systematically more plentiful in the social world. That is, consumption life on television helps to cultivate the belief of a similar world in the minds of those who watch television. This is mass-mediated social construction. Just how much of the social world do we actually directly experience? Surprisingly little. So, the social world outside our direct experience is constructed; built through indirect means. In a nation where the average person watches more than four hours of television a day along with several more hours online, we must know that much of what we think we know about the world is brought to us by commercial media. Do you suppose this colors the picture, helps consumers construct the world outside the one they directly experience, the one they assume and imagine? Brands are an integral part of media world; media world exists because brands exist. It is certainly no coincidence that brands, mass media, and the advertising industry all have parallel histories from the late nineteenth century on.

This is one essential reason that branded entertainment is so incredibly popular at this time. A significant process in the social construction of brands is those brands’ appearance within programming content. They become part of mental representations shared by viewing audiences as representing what other people have and use in their daily lives. Given how much television the average person watches, and the branded plentitude found in contemporary programming content (not to mention the ads between the programs), brand meaning can be significantly influenced by what viewers believe about the social world as presented to them via television, films, and other mediated content. This is highly significant in that what is being delivered to viewers/consumers is a representation of the social world and its brands and consumption plentifully and seamlessly integrated within. As sociologist Michael Schudson (1984) has noted, American advertising is “capitalist realism.” Media and advertising realities are constructed, not randomly or casually, but carefully. In what Thomas Burrell called positive realism an African-American family (see Figure 9.4) is portrayed against a pejorative stereotype: note the emphasis on family, the professional and present father, and the very clearly middle class setting. This ad was created by an agency that specialized in advertising to African Americans. At the center of this social reality construction is a brand, mediated through family, social class, and so on; not driven by U.S. Census Bureau data. Here the sociological and the psychological meaningfully interact.

Polity

Brands and politics were never complete strangers. In the United States, brands have an entanglement with politics that goes to our very founding. The politics of goods and their “branding” were present in the American Revolution (Axtell 1999) and in several, perhaps all, major social movements since. As several historians have noted, this merging of brand and polity has only accelerated, particularly since the end of World War II (Cohen 2000). It hit its stride in the cultural revolution of the 1960s, which was very much
about the "establishment," material existence, and stuff, including brands. It is here, as noted by Frank (1997) and others, that the revolution paradoxically became about what (brands) you bought, not whether or not you bought them. Today, it is easy to point to a slew of brands that have been overtly politicized.

Many so-called revolutionaries now strike blows against the capitalist empire by buying things (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2004). As paradoxical as this seems (is), the brands of revolution have been granted community approval. In the new sociopolitical order, revolutionary politics are enacted not through choices of consuming or not consuming, but in identification, group sanctioning, and community championing of brands that are deemed by the collective to be the best vessels of the group's "alternative" politics. Such social processes can be seen in many brands. American Apparel, Apple, Ben & Jerry's, Carhartt, Diesel, MAC cosmetics, REI, The Body Shop, and Tom's of Maine are some good examples.

Politics is all about felt we-ness and politics must have social identity markers: brands are the postmodern campaign button. Recently, the open discussion of the Republican and Democratic brands has made this so thoroughly ordinary as to almost escape com-
ment. The Obama brand is testament to what the savvy harnessing of consumer-generated content and shared construction can do [Trippi (2004) asserts that this tactic started with Howard Dean’s 2000 campaign]. When the “Change” brand space became clearly more powerful, the McCain brand managers attempted to crowd that sector with their own “Change You Can Trust” positioning. Since Joe McGinnis’s classic book (1968), and Doyle Dayne Bernbach’s “Daisy” ad for Lyndon B. Johnson (Kern 1989), branding and policy have become inseparable in modern politics. Forty-something years later politics have found their way firmly into the dry goods aisle.

Rumors also play an important role in the social construction of the brand. Rumors allow the community to express properties of the brand that might not be true, but reflect what the community wants to be true. Rumors surrounded the reintroduction of Volkswagen’s New Beetle in 1997, as community members looked for reasons to be optimistic that the New Beetle would honor its roots (Muñiz, O’Guinn, and Fine 2005). As a result, rumors about the new model, including the use of the original plans and the re-hiring of retired designers, were rife in the months leading up to the launch of the New Beetle. Long-time community members wanted to believe that the New Beetle would be true to the ethos of the original, despite fearing otherwise. The belief that the New Beetle had become a “chick” car or a “gay car” gave meaning to the brand.

Members of the Apple brand community spent considerable time discussing the introduction of the iPhone as community members looked for evidence that the device would revolutionize the smartphone the same way the iPod revolutionized personal MP3 players. In a reaction, members of the Blackberry brand community spent much time discussing the iPhone introduction along with rumors of the phone Blackberry would introduce to compete with it. We have observed several instances where rumors of an impending line-extension or repositioning have caused sufficient push-back from brand loyalists to get companies to either reconsider or outright abandon their plans. We first saw this in consumer electronics, technology, and automotive categories. Later we saw it spread via the Internet social networking to just about every category. Recently, we saw it in the Mini Cooper community as members discussed the rumors of the new model that eventually became the Clubman.

The brand world is inherently self-reflexive. The social construction of a brand is full of feedback loops and recursive action. Marketers are immersed in feedback from consumers through market research, consumer-generated content, brand community chatter, and so on. They react to one another and perceptions of one another. They “imagine” each other. Consumers perceive the “schemer schema” (Wright 1986) or the persuasive intent and modus operandi of the marketer. Consumers form ideas as to what the marketer is trying to do with a brand. Sometimes they reject that view altogether, other times they embrace it, but they almost always have some reaction. Consumers always leave their mark, their fingerprints, on the brand. Consumers are aware of changes made to their brands and the marketer-preferred meaning, just as they are to the meaning ascribed by social collectives who “appropriate” or “hijack” the brand for their own purposes. In fact, all the institutions and social actors play this role, and respond to others in building the meaning of the brand. This process is not
confined to the brand-consumer dyad, no matter how reassuring such simplicity may seem.

Manjoo (2008) provides some excellent examples of other ways in which self-reflexivity plays out in the Apple and Windows brand communities. He relates the experiences of technology reviewers David Pogue (The New York Times) and Walt Mossberg (The Wall Street Journal). Both strive for balanced, nonbiased reviews, yet both are routinely taken to task by brand fans for what they perceive to be biased reviews. For example, Pogue once wrote a detailed review of the Windows Vista operating system (OS). Manjoo (2008) notes that the review was generally positive toward both Windows (he found several things to like about it) and Apple (he also noted that several of Vista’s innovations had been standard for many years in the Mac OS). Despite such strident attempts at reason and balance, members of both communities saw systematic biases against their OS of choice in the review. “The Mac people saw it as a rave review for Windows Vista” while the Windows folks, focusing on two minor criticisms, “saw it as a vicious slam on Windows” (Pogue, quoted in Manjoo 2008, p. 160). Mossberg suggests such disproportionate reactions reflect “the Doctrine of Insufficient Adulation” (Mossberg, quoted in Manjoo 2008, p. 161). It appears that consumer collectives, comprised of a chorus of similarly voiced devotees, creates an understanding of reality that has little room for criticisms from outsiders. This becomes a significant node in the consumer-brand-consumer relationship.

Today, many things from vehicles (Volkswagen), to computers (Macintosh), to soft drinks have a dedicated consumer base (generally small in number but not in communicative properties) that interacts with other consumers. Through their interactions, members of these consumer communities enact consumption practices, influence product development, interpret the meaning of the brand to (users and nonusers alike), and otherwise fold within what used to be the corporate marketing agenda. These consumers are drawn together by a common interest in, and commitment to, the brand and a social desire to bond with like-minded others. New modes of computer-mediated communication facilitate and flavor communal communication. We have observed this many times. Consider the following, posted to a thread entitled “A great Mini summer day”:

On the ride home yesterday, I was smiled at by a nice looking young lady in a Prius, challenged by a slammed blatty Integra, waved at by two smiling little kids in an SUV, and given a flash-and-wave by a fellow Mini. What other car can give you that? It was a GREAT day . . . (just wanted to share . . . )

Drivers like to share these prototypical or iconographic experiences with one another, often including directions and maps on how others can replicate it. In this way, the community continually creates the perfect brand consumption experience. These ideals are typically influenced by the advertising for the brand, but are communally scripted. Their potential to influence the consumption experience and the meaning of the brand is large.

Disruption is a process in which there is a perceptible break in social continuity. This occurs in times of change in a society’s circumstance, economics, demography, or along some other social dimension. An early modern historical example is Ivory soap. Ivory.
along with two or three other major competitors, were leaders in turning commodities into the modern CPG industry. When Ivory staked out the "purity space" it was leveraging a major social disruption. Urban modernity had brought enormous disruption to American society. It was a period of enormous in-migration, movement to cities, and massive changes in social character and norms of behavior, not to mention personal hygiene and daily practices of living.

The average life expectancy in the United States in 1900 was 49.2 years (Sullivan 1926). Infant mortality was twice what it would be just twenty-five years later (Sullivan 1926). A concerned public pushed Congress to pass the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906. *Purity* was more than a word; it was, at that time, one of the few things the public believed might prevent them or their children from dying young. So, Ivory floats. Its purity was demonstrated by a market logic. No one really had to understand the physical mechanism relating purity to floating, it became a marketplace myth. Social context gave meaning to Ivory's branding, its advertising claim, its marketplace logic, and the meaning of a bar of soap that floated. Ivory *meant* something. It was pure, 99 44/100 pure. Ivory was no longer a commodity; its set of acceptable substitutes shriveled. The same was true of countless other branded goods and services.

The early 1920s Lifebuoy ad shown in Figure 9.5 is a good example. While most soap
brands of the day positioned themselves toward women as beauty bars, Lifebuoy positioned itself as a male brand. Ads for beauty soaps told mothers to prepare their daughters for the "beauty contest of life (Marchand 1985) through beautiful skin. Lifebuoy reminded anxious mothers of the odds against their young sons living a long life: the flu epidemic of 1918 and the incredibly brutal trench warfare of World War I.

Likewise, many other brands leveraged social disruption and took their meaning from them. Virginia Slims came to much of its meaning by the resonance of marketers and all the other interested parties with the second wave of American feminism (see Figure 9.6). The brand’s social construction was part Philip Morris’s and part general cultural resonance. Philip Morris financed some of the more visible second-wave televised moments, such as The Virginia Slims Women’s Tennis Series and the rise of women’s tennis in general. Remember, the Battle of the Sexes between Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King was actually significant in the larger acceptance and mainstreaming of the second wave: “You’ve Come a Long Way Baby.”

Other times, a brand came to its meaning through a largely consumer-oriented response or resonance, which was then appropriated from the consumer collective. Wipperfurth (2005) provides examples, such as Pabst Blue Ribbon being rediscovered and appropriated by bike messengers in the Northeastern United States, thereby making the once blue-collar staple the choice for hipsters first and then mainstream consumers in search of status via coolness (Heath and Potter 2004) second. Consumers may appropriate the brand, reject the marketer’s
assigned meaning, and collectively reinvent the brand to their own liking. Rather than being random, these consumer appropriations, and then marketer reappropriations, are typically part of a changing set of social props reflecting age-cohort, demographic, economic, political, gender role and other shifting social sands. The cool kids in Chicago's northern suburbs have long been known to appropriate their look from census tracts miles and many dollars of income distant from their origin (Harris 2000). Conversely, do you think Tommy Hilfiger (see Figure 9.7) set out to be the official brand of gangsta rap (Gladwell 1997)? Probably not, but for a period, when that was its appropriated meaning, the company accommodated some of the consumers' brand creation.

Famously, Coke (see Figure 9.8) leveraged the identity crisis of the late 1960s and 1970s with this answer to the ubiquitous question: Is anything real?

Of course, social inequities (stratification) clearly matter in these disruptions. Race, gender, and class are rarely affected or put in play in an egalitarian fashion. Even some-
thing as seemingly benign as a car can be caught up in this. Many long-time members of the Volkswagen community resent the company's continued move up-market. The following member comment makes this clear:

VWoA [Volkswagen of America] can kiss my ass. Volkswagen literally means "people's car." Modern Volkswagens are one of the furthest things from the original "people's car" in the world. I'm absolutely disgusted with VWoA and think they deserve whatever's coming their way.

These sentiments frequently emerge in discussions of Volkswagen's advertising. Consider the following message from a discussion of ads for the Passat:

[These ads] stink. Obviously, they reflect VWoA's attempt to take their cars upmarket, and in the process have lost any of the flair and humor which has been a trademark of their ads for years. I personally think it is an extension of how VW has lost its way and is going to end up alienating the very people they need to touch to buy their cars.

Many resent the new drivers being attracted to Volkswagen, as well, labeling them yuppies or white preppy clients. The relevance of such tendencies is obvious. A new buyer may do an Internet search on Volkswagen and immediately be put into contact with a vision of car and driver that is at odds with the vision management intended.
CONCLUSION

We have offered a discussion of collective brand relationships situated in an attempt at a social model of brands. The model calls into question some of the basic assumptions that have guided marketing theory on brands for fifty years. In their place it offers a new definition of brands and the key social entities and processes involved in their social construction. Importantly, it has asserted a place for the average and ordinary consumer, and thereby mitigating the tendency to conflate fanatical status with social action. Early brand community work was sometimes cast as only important to the freakishly loyal. A decade of “real world” reality by practitioners and consumers has shown this to be too limiting. This model uses the notions of the imagined consumer and marketer to broaden the discourse to the larger formulation of the social brand. We believe all brands are socially constructed; not merely attitude summations, but vessels of popular meaning. We believe the social brand to be a place where disciplines such as psychology and sociology might meaningfully interact.

Brand communities are but one example of consumer collectives. Consumer tribes (Cova and Cova 2002), subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and subcultural communities (Kates 2004) are other examples. Brand communities possess three defining characteristics: consciousness of kind, evidence of rituals and traditions, and a sense of obligation to the community and its members. Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) and others (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Cova and Pace 2006; Cova, Pace, and Park 2007; Muñiz and Schau 2005) have extended, refined, and better specified brand community. The use of specialized forms of brand creation through community action and the use of consumer-generated media content have quite naturally extended the brand community work into the “co-creation” realm (Etgar 2008; Muñiz and Schau 2007). Perhaps most importantly, we assert that most brand community affiliation is thin, but not negligible.

The big question of brand relationship, at least in collective settings, is, “Why brands?” Why should a brand be at the center of a social organization? Why would brand relationships be defined by this context? For one, as has been noted many times, many traditional Western social institutions are experiencing significant challenges. Also, humans use metaphors, metanarratives, and other social templates for sense making and communication; two of the things that make humans human. As Putnam (2000) and others have noted, traditional social institutions and collectives are disappearing. Our research is centered on what is replacing or co-mingling with them. It has particular social theory significance if they are being replaced by the very same commercial forces that helped to undermine or supplant the traditional forms and structures. What could be more iconic of a consumer society than a brand? What could be more ironic for social thought?

Now, after two centuries or so, we arrive at this moment when three things are true: (1) brands are a ubiquitous aspect of daily life; (2) brands are at some level meaningful to ordinary contemporary citizens; and (3) community was not so easily done away with—the communal urge of humans and the benefits that accrue to collectives and institutions ensured community’s adaptive longevity. Community endures in many forms in many
places, including the marketplace. Community, of a particular sort, is alive and well in the form of the brand community. Brand communities possess the hallmarks of traditional communities, but have their own unique market logic and expression.

Ultimately, brand communities matter because they look and behave like other forms of community, and community is essential. These are socially embedded and entrenched entities, and thus extremely durable. The increasing embedded-ness of consumer society has changed the world. Like it or not, brands are not just names of marketed things, but increasingly are part of the social fabric and centers of social organization. Our political parties are regularly and unremarkably cast as brands, as are our schools, religious sects, and all manner of ideologies. For this reason, they shape, limit, and inform social discourse and relationships (see Figures 9.8 and 9.9). Our models, our thinking, and our practice need to catch up with this reality.

How should brand relationship research evolve? Clearly, we believe it could benefit by an infusion of sociological conscience. Brand relations are meaningful because they are social. Humans use brands as known-in-common referents, as symbolic markers of collectivity, of social meaning. To the looking-glass self (Cooley 1902) there is no meaning without the social. Basic human relationships (e.g., father-son, mother-daughter) are given meaning and form through social means. So, why would it be different with brands? It isn’t. Let us be clear: While we wholeheartedly acknowledge, admire and approve of the contributions made by social cognition brand theorists such as Keller (1993), who attempt to meaningfully connect basic cognitive process to classic social structures, we
argue that such has been the exception rather than the rule, and that while this work has moved in the direction of the social, it could move further. We hope we have at least changed the conversation in that direction.

We need to see brands as vessels of popular meaning, where negotiation of the meaning is meaningful. Where consumers bring themselves and a social world to them and thus create them. Brands are not just names of things, but an increasingly important part of the social fabric and centers of social organization. Brands work to bring people together, to divide them, to mark meaningful collectives of identity, to meaningfully define human relationships. When we invoke the phrase “consumer-brand relationship” we are calling forth a lot more than a simple attitude-object dyad. We should be offering more than brand-as-person games, or brand personality. Brand relationship research desperately needs sincere and informed sociological thought.

This craving for community is the chief misery of every man individually and all humanity from the beginning of time.

—Dostoevsky

REFERENCES


