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Barbara Loken, Rohini Ahluwalia and Michael J. Houston
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Toward a Sociological Model of Brands

Thomas C. O'Guinn
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Albert M. Muniz, Jr.
DePaul University, Chicago

This chapter offers a basic social model of brands. It is a model with meaning creation at its center. Meaning defines brands, and people make meaning. People make meaning through social means: they make meaning through their interaction, through the institutions they have created and maintained, through accommodation and negotiation with marketers, through rumors, through politics, and often in reaction to a disruption in the social sphere. Brands are meaning. This is true even when that meaning is mundane. Meaning is the most powerful source of sustainable competitive differentiation.

Unlike the vast majority of the brand literature our model is not constrained by a singular focus on the marketer–consumer dyad. This single dyadic relationship, while certainly important, is also quite limiting. This dyadic thinking about brands is too sparse, too simple. Brands are created by interactions of multiple parties, institutions, publics, and social forces. Even the term cocreation belies the brand's true nature and is still mired in this fictive dyad. Nothing in the material world, the social world, or brand world is that simple, that isolated. Nothing in these worlds lends itself to such an obviously reductionist treatment. Thus, we reject the au courant cocreation term, not because it goes too far, but because it doesn't go far enough. Cocreation is in the messy reality of social life a critically constrained construct. While multiple social forces always had a hand in brand creation, current trends amplify their importance. For example, many feel that we have just witnessed the prelude to the consumers-as-creators phenomenon (Anderson, 2006; Shirky, 2008). Consumer-generated brand content and consumer (re)designed brands are common topics in the contemporary trade press and commonly observed in the lives of ordinary consumers. A sea change in mediated communications has clearly enabled multiple parties to play significant roles in the construction of the contemporary brand.
We also reject the necessity of a critical stance (cf. Holt, 2004; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007) to meaningfully theorize brands. The sine qua non of critical theory, critiquing market capitalism, while fashionable in the comfortable confines of trust-fund-baby parlor repartee (McCloskey, 2006), is neither necessary nor sufficient to understand basic social construction. Brands are social constructions under any political banner, within any political ideology. They can be easily theorized without the assumed requisite and entirely predictable critique. Part of the social construction of brands does, of course, rely upon economic relationships, their inequities, and other related social stratification. Again, this reality does not in and of itself necessitate a critical stance or a critical sociology. Such heavy, cumbersome, but often fashionable baggage can be, and typically is, an impediment to material understanding.

The theory of brands proposed here is based on essential sociology that predates the critical turn by decades. It draws on the idea of community, itself a construct in active use for well over a century. It requires no projection of personality, human–analog relationship, or summing of attitudes. Rather than corralled dyads, our theory of brands is based on the interplay of several essential social forces, institutions, consumers, and aggregations of consumers. This interplay yields social meaning; it yields brands.

### Beyond Attitudes

Despite our sincere desire for comity, it is necessary to situate our formulation vis-à-vis the one that has dominated the (marketing) field for so very long: brands as a weighted sum of attributes/beliefs. While an over-reliance on attitude theory and measurement is the proximal problem, the underlying discipline of social psychology (as practiced in consumer research) is rarely very social, at least where brands are concerned. This is a significant problem. To be sure, social psychologists attempt (more or less and occasionally) to account for the influence of others on individual consumers’ thoughts and judgments. But this is hardly the same as studying consumer behavior formed and enacted within and by collectives, collectives themselves shaped by social forces, institutions, and other collectives. Brands are socially constructed, socially maintained, and socially altered. So, how can a paradigm that is barely social itself do justice to something so thoroughly social?

Brand attitude work emerged just after WWII. Foundational to post–World War II psychology were promises of early attitude theorists that now seem outlandish (Schramm & Roberts, 1974). For example, psychologists
Cooper and Jahoda (1947) describe social psychology’s giddy plan to rid the world of racial bigotry once and for all, really. Regrettably, this did not work out so well. In these halcyon days of psychological essentialism and exuberance, attitude theorists also planned to make short work of human-brand relationships (Martineau, 1957). Just as with racism, this proved a peskier problem than the nascent consumer psychologists imagined. Undaunted, these pioneers soon turned to multiattribute and other attitude models (Fishbein, 1963; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). This proved moderately capable of predicting other quasi-behavioral brand measures but still left many unsatisfied.

These days, and really for quite some time, brand managers have talked 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 an MBA legend, as it should be (Hays, 2004; Pendergrast, 2000). Consistent with this is the high demand for consultants and brand experts from anthropology, communications, and sociology (Sunderland & Denny, 2007). On-site brand ethnographies are now more the norm than the exception in many industries. Clearly, there is a need for a meaning-centered social model of brands.

Community as Example

Several years ago, we became interested in applying the notion of community to consumption (Muniz & O’Guinn, 1995, 2001; O’Guinn & Muniz, 2000). Like a handful of others (Fischer, Bristor, & Gainer, 1996; Maffesoli, 1996; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), we believed we were observing a form of community playing out in the marketplace. We were.

We did not, however, begin our brand community research as an ending point. Instead, we intended to use the community construct only as a concrete first example of where core sociological constructs could be applied to marketing and consumer behavior. It was our first example. We never dreamed it would take on the larger life it has. While we remain flattered by the attention, widespread “real world” use (see Figure 7.1), acceptance, and extensions of our brand community idea, we were merely offering an example. Now we wish to contribute to a wider vision and a greater project: a social theory of brands. Our idea of brand community is subsumed within this larger model.

First, what is a brand? A brand is a vessel of popular meanings. The reader will no doubt note that we use the term popular rather than commercial or
It's more than a watch... it's a community!
www.swatchtheclub.com

(See color insert.) This Swatch in-store display invokes brand community.

some other narrower mercantile construction. A visit to a contemporary thesaurus shows "popular" as a synonym for "commercial." This of course makes sense in that life inside a consumer culture has erased whatever distinction that once (if ever) existed between these terms. The popular is the commercial; popular culture is commercial culture, consumer culture. Just as the U.S. Supreme Court has acknowledged the struggle to keep political and (popular) commercial speech distinct, we cannot say that California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger is not a brand or that Ben & Jerry's contains no political meaning.
The Social Model

The basic components of our model (see Figure 7.2) are the marketer, the object, the individual consumer, consumer collectives, and institutions. The essential processes are accommodation, negotiation, mediated-cultivation, collective memory, polity, rumor, and disruption.

We will walk though the model from left to right. The marketer is easily conceived. It is the agent who at one time was thought to own the brand, determine its meaning. While that was never really true, it is certainly not today. Marketers “create” the brand in the sense that they attempt to insert an initial form, message, packaging, position, and platform. The marketer launches the brand and tries to vest it with intended meanings in an attempt to bring about a desired consumer response. Although it probably need not be said again, we will: marketers neither own nor control the brand. They do not create the brand: society does. The marketer is but one part of this social universe.

Even the mighty marketer rarely if ever begins tabula rasa. Marketers are themselves products of social production. Tide is manufactured by Procter & Gamble. Procter & Gamble is itself socially formed by various stakeholders, partners, biases, traditions, cultures, social memory, laws, customs, and real and imagined competitors. Interested and vested others contribute to the birth and launch of brands. Marketers negotiate with engineers, creators, and holders of intellectual property, market researchers, competitors within and beyond the company, an “imagined” market

FIGURE 7.2
A social construction model of brands.
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for the good or service, etc. For those who have had the opportunity to actually be involved in the launch of a brand you know quite well about all the backstage politics, expectations games, test market results, institutional memory and history, imagined target market, segment and profile, and on and on (Rothenberg, 1994; Stabiner, 1993). All of these processes, and more, are involved in the social production of the brand before it is ever launched. For an excellent discussion of how this played out in the development, introduction, and marketing of the Gatorade brand, see Rovell (2006).

The object is just that, the physical thing, the material, the actual good or service, the entity offered to a public.

The consumer is the individual actor in the model. This part of the model is where the vast majority of extant brand knowledge resides. It is where consumer research has labored and produced valuable knowledge about how individuals will “process” brand information, advertising and other brand communication, and make judgments and decisions. It is where psychologists have made their legitimate contributions.

Consumer collectives are groups of consumers. These may be face-to-face (such as local car clubs, bowling leagues, user groups). They may be computer mediated (such as on-line communities). They may, many times, exist as imagined (Anderson, 1983) collectives, collectives with a sense of “we-ness” or belonging not requiring any specific action or prescribed behavior, merely a feeling of collective, being a part of a group of like-minded and feeling others. This idea of imagined community was first used by sociologists (Anderson, 1983) to understand how nation states (a relatively new phenomenon in human history) came to be. How can hundreds of millions of people residing in nations covering hundreds or thousands of miles come to actually think of themselves as Americans, Germans, or French? How can people who never meet one another share such a strong sense of identity, something worth dying for? In a clearly more trivial sense, how can millions of users of a brand come to think of themselves as loyal Coke drinkers, Apple computer users, or Volvo types?

People around the world are today connected to each other by brand-name consumer products as much as by anything else.—Roberto Goizueta, late C.E.O, The Coca-Cola Company (Pendergrast, 2000).

The idea of imagined community is useful here: in brands we sometimes see how admittedly small, but still meaningful, felt affiliations can yield imagined communities of their own, brand communities. Like the late Daniel Boorstin once said, “Nearly all the things we consume become thin, but not negligible bonds with thousands of other Americans.” (Boorstin, 1961). Thin, but not negligible bonds: this is an enormously important idea to get across. It is this idea that takes the brand community notion away from those who wish to think of it as only applicable to the marginal consumer:
the interesting, but odd consumer. Here, Boorstin is not speaking of the marginal, but the ordinary, the mundane. So, too, are we when we speak of brand community members in this way. While "lead users" and the truly fanatical are important in their own right (Von Hippel, 1986), most members of brand communities are largely silent members who feel the small tug of these thin but not insignificant ties that bind consumers to their brands. In the mid-range are brands such as Tupperware (see Figure 7.3). Tupperware products were sold via Tupperware parties. A host would invite friends and neighbors to a party to learn about Tupperware products. These parties sold Tupperware but also developed and reinforced bonds among consumers in similar life circumstances.

Brand communities are but one example of consumer aggregations. Consumer tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002), subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and subcultural communities (Kates, 2004) are other examples. Brand communities, just like other forms of community, possess three defining characteristics: consciousness of kind, evidence of rituals and traditions, and a sense of obligation to the community and its members. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) and others (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006;
Cova & Pace, 2006; Cova, Pace, & Park, 2007; Muniz & Schau, 2005) have extended, refined, and better-specified brand community. These researchers have noted specific dynamics, such as desired marginality and member legitimacy, and the use of specialized forms of brand creation, such as community activism and consumer-generated media content (Etgar, 2008; Muniz & Schau, 2007). While extant academic research has documented 50 or so brand communities, we have individually been contacted by, or otherwise been made aware of, a couple hundred other marketers' efforts to build and/or manage brand community (see Figure 7.4). These extend from major software brands to traditional CPG brands.

Institutions including, but not limited to, media, retailers, equity markets, government, and NGOs also play a role in brand creation. These institutions bring the weight of economics, norms, practice, sanctions, regulations, even law 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.

Institutions not only define the channels of communication opportunity, but also what is not possible, what audiences cannot be delivered for a certain brand for a given price (see Figure 7.5). 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 what a brand comes to mean. The types of programs available are themselves a product of deeply embedded group

Scion Seeks Community in New Campaign

by Aaron Baar, Monday, Jul 28, 2008 5:00 AM ET

After five years of selling itself as a car that can reflect one's individuality, Scion is looking to celebrate its community of individual owners via a new marketing campaign that showcases how owners come together via their customized vehicles.

"Five years ago, when we started, we were all about personalization," Dawn Ahmed, corporate manager for Scion, tells Marketing Daily. "One of the things that surprised us was how quickly people took ownership of our brand and the passion they have for it."

FIGURE 7.4
The Scion brand has been developed in large part via community-building efforts.
FIGURE 7.5
(See color insert.) Here, the producers of *South Park* appeal in the trade press to media buyers with the promise that their show can effectively deliver a valuable demographic.

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). If you need further examples we suggest you pick up *Brandweek, Ad Age*, or even a newspaper. We have all but forgotten the production side of consumer research. Again, this is where the sociological approach, rich in a tradition of both production and consumption, can contribute.

The list of institutions goes on and on. Obviously retailers with their own rules, traditions, histories, trade organizations, lawyers, and lobbyists significantly participate in the creation of brands. The near-byzantine structure of retail space negotiation has an enormous impact on what a brand comes to signify through its display in public space or the denial of same. Some retailers such as Nike and Ikea actually create *brandscape* (Sherry, 2005) in which consumers may actively participate with the brand in an almost museum or amusement park type 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 meaning. Assumptions and estimates of the likelihood of greater regulation, possible class action law suits, and more
restrictive public policy serve to frame the positioning or repositioning
of many brands.

The very repositioned Camel cigarette brand of the 1990s is a prime
example—from “old outdoor guy” brand to hip and young “Joe Camel”
(see Figure 7.6). The “true” goal of the brand’s parent, RJR, generated a
great deal of speculation. The ad campaign was implicated in bringing
about an avalanche of brand advertising regulation ... far beyond tobacco.
Some believe it helped freeze cigarette market share, after a big gain by
Camel against its number one competitor Marlboro. The ads demonstrate
a repositioning that had enormous institutional antecedents and conse-
quencies. The presumed action of a major competitor, consumers, collectives of consumers, populations deemed “at risk,” numerous state, local,
federal, and international governments, NGOs and others all led to the
social construction of the new Camel.

The mere presence of regulations and the institutions charged with
creating, modifying, and imposing those regulations make a significant
impact on what meanings are allowed for a brand and which are not.
Likewise, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) exert a force in the
social construction of brands. Brands sanctioned by the Environmental
Defense Fund (Federal Express) or the Sierra Club (Clorox) mean some-
thing different than those without this blessing.

Processes that act to form brands include the following activities.
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 (Anderson & Meyer, 1989).

Negotiation refers to a social process in which actors actively "bargain" for something—in this case what the brand means and to whom it belongs. This happens 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 the consumer. Famous instances of brand "hijacks" or "appropriations" by consumers are plentiful in the brand literature (Holt, 2004; Wipperfurth, 2005). However, any one of the other social actors may negotiate as well. Consumer actions took Doc Martins from geriatric gardening shoe to alt footwear. Did marketers then react and (re)negotiate the meaning with consumers? Sure. In a similar fashion, urban consumers enabled Tommy Hilfiger's metamorphosis from preppy country club attire to hip-hop wear (Gladwell, 1997). Tommy Hilfiger then appeared to softly leverage those associations in marketing to the mainstream. That is accommodation and negotiation at work.

The condom category provides another example. During the early days of the AIDS epidemic, the Reagan administration brought to bear considerable regulatory pressure as to just when, where, where not, and how condoms could be advertised. Here, the government played a role in meaning negotiation by delimiting potential ad space. Certainly these actions made the product taboo at some level. On the other side of the equation, actions by manufacturers further constrained potential ad space and contributed to meaning. Supposedly, some condom brands had a policy not to buy ads in any gay periodicals for fear of becoming the "gay condom." Here, manufacturers were aware of the meaning of particular publications would foster via their association with a brand. Consumers, marketers, and institutions negotiated the social space and meaning of the category, and certain brands.

This trajectory was similar to that of CPG manufacturers who did not use blacks in their ads until the mid-1960s for fear of being the unofficial black detergent or soap (Chambers, 2007; Fox, 1984). Similarly, Coca-Cola and Pepsi have very different brand mythologies where race is concerned in the southern United States (Pendergrast, 2000; Smithsonian Oral History Archives). Even in the cobranding world of social causes, we once heard a Fortune 500 company assert that it could not/would not cobrand with the struggle against breast cancer "because everyone knows that American Express owns that space." The struggle for brand ownership has become even more contested in the contemporary world with consumer-generated content and computer-mediated environments. Who owns the brand is more than a rhetorical question.
COOL CUSTOMERS

More often than not, as O'Guinn and Muniz underscore with their Social Construction Model of Brands, a line from a marketing plan to a brand's meaning in the real world is curved rather than straight. A marketer's intentions may even seem unrecognizable when compared with a product's reputation as it is created through the seven sociological processes the authors identify. In one famous example, the Tommy Hilfiger brand has traveled the road from upper-crust sportswear to favored hip-hop gear through the processes of negotiation and accommodation.

Preppy Hilfiger's move into the upper echelons of the lucrative urban market in the late 1990s was so surprising that even venerable, straight-laced news outlets like The New York Times and PBS took notice. Writing in The New Yorker (March 17, 1997), Malcolm Gladwell cited Hilfiger as he addressed what he called the "cool-hunt"—companies' quest to reach favored status in youth markets. Gladwell pointed out how Hilfiger had successfully taken hold of its unintentionally budding urban market. That popularity, spurred, among other things, by the unsolicited endorsements of rap superstars like Snoop Doggy Dogg, was then turned into a broader selling point for its brand.

Unlike consumer hijacking, wherein a brand's meaning is appropriated by its consumers, the process of negotiation allows for consumers to adopt a brand and for marketers to accommodate and build on those new brand meanings. Hilfiger might have found its name plastered across the stars of MTV unwittingly, but the company quickly spotted the market potential of that development. In a smart move for this iconic brand, Hilfiger sought further celebrity endorsements and reached out to both its new urban adopters and to their core audience of suburban consumers. Still wearing Hilfiger, these seemingly square customers now hoped, instead of country-club cred, to catch some of the rappers' cool.

R.D.M. & L.W.P.

Consider the Sharpie brand of felt tip pens. A series of Sharpie brand communities have formed online, completely independent of managerial action. Members of these collectives assert their ownership by creating elaborate videos of Sharpies in use. Some of these videos resemble advertisements, building on official campaign taglines such as "Write Out Loud." Others offer testimony of their creators' creative prowess by
documenting the creation of Sharpie works of art, such as portraits and
giant collages. Further asserting their ownership (and illustrating the con-
tested nature of brands), these collectives have largely resisted manage-
ment entre and involvement.

Brand communities often assert negotiating power. Because they are a
social structure they can exert the force of many. In their study of brand
communities, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) commented on the desired mar-
ginality often sought for communal brands. Here, brand community
members actively try to keep the community ethos one of marginality.
A brand like Apple, with an approximate 7% share of the U.S. computer
market, has marginality as part of its core brand meaning. It thrives on
being the underdog (Kahney, 2004). Thus, some brand community mem-
bers actively work against market share growth, or at least the perception
of growth. These communities must walk a tricky path between reject-
ing 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. By enforcing community standards of legitimacy,
or who is and who is not a proper owner/user, they ensure marginality. It
is also true that if a brand manager violates the essential meaning of the
brand, as held by the brand community, the blogosphere can light up in
protest within hours.

Cultivation is another process of social construction. 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 cultivate a similar world in the minds of those who
watch television. This is one reason that branded entertainment is so pop-
ular 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 represent-
ing 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 constructed through
what viewers believe about the social world as delivered to them via tele-
vision, films, and other mediated content.

Consider Gatorade. The brand is nearly omnipresent on professional
sport sidelines. Owing to this saturation, Gatorade is frequently displayed
during NFL game broadcasts, even when it is absent in purchased ad time.
During the February 2005 broadcast of Superbowl XXXIX, the Gatorade
logo was displayed for a total of 6:58 min (Rovell, 2006). Given the world-
wide viewership of the event, Nielsen's Sports Sponsorship Scorecard
estimated that the brand had received more than 590 million impressions (Rovell, 2006).

**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" was hardly absent in the American Revolution (Axtell, 1999). 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, revolution that was very much about the "establishment," material existence, and stuff, including brands. It is here, as Frank (1997) and others have noted, that the revolution paradoxically became about what (brands) you bought, not whether or not you bought. In other words, the nature of making a political statement via consumption choices shifted from not consuming (boycotting) to carefully discriminating among brands and the meaning they evinced. Consider Figure 7.7. In 1968 (a summer of significant racial tension), the then familiar "black power" statement appears oddly appropriated as "cold power." Given that African Americans had only within that decade begun to regularly appear in "mainstream" (white) mass market advertising the headline looks very much like a political appropriation. Today, it is easy to point to a slew of brands that have been overtly politicized (see Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Loken & Roedder John, Chapter 11, this volume). Try driving into Santa Cruz, California, in a Hummer and asking where the Wal-Mart is. Some "revolutionaries" now strike blows against the capitalist empire by buying things (Frank, 1997; Heath & Potter, 2004). As paradoxical as this seems (is), these 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 such brands as American Apparel, Apple, Ben & Jerry's, Carhart, Diesel, MAC, REI, The Body Shop, and Tom's of Maine.
Recently, more actively marketer-politicized brands have emerged on the scene. Two examples of this are SweatX clothes and BlackSpot sneakers. SweatX is an anti-sweatshop brand. It is strongly supported by an online brand community. In fact, without the associated collective, it would have far less market meaning and potency. However, the most controversial polit-brand is the so-called "antibrand brand," BlackSpot, by AdBusters, an ostensibly antiadvertising and anticonsumer culture magazine. AdBusters is marketing the BlackSpot to its members (themselves a form of brand community) to challenge a particularly chaotically politicized brand, Nike.

We're selling real, authentic empowerment. If you wear the BlackSpot sneaker, you're helping to demolish a big, bad corporation [Nike] that has done dirty deeds in the Third World. —Adbuster Publisher Kalle Lasn

By targeting Nike, BlackSpot further complicates the politics of Nike, polarizing both supporter and detractor communities. Very clearly, brands, politics, and national ideology intersect. Politics help give meaning to the contemporary brand.

Rumors play an important role in the social construction of the brand as 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 the new VW Beetle in 1997 as community members looked for reasons to be optimistic that the New Beetle would honor its roots (Muniz, O’Guinn, & Fine, 2005). As a result, rumors about the new model, including the use of the original plans and the rehiring 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 additional meaning to the brand. In a similar way, 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. 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 have seen this in both the consumer electronics and automotive categories.

The brand world is inherently self-reflexive and rumors usually reach the marketer. That is, 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
blogs, online brand community chatter, etc. 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 of the brand and beyond. They 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 always have some reaction. They always leave their mark, their fingerprints, on the brand. Consumers are very 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 in our model play this role and respond to others in building the meaning of the brand.

Manjoo (2008) provides some excellent examples of how this plays out in the Apple and Windows' brand communities. He relates the experiences of technology reviewers David Pogue (New York Times) and Walt Mossberg (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. 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.

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—a period of massive in-migration, movement to cities, and widespread 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 25 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, “ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths percent pure.” Ivory was no longer a commodity; its set of acceptable substitutes shriveled. The same was true of countless other branded goods and services.

Likewise, many other brands leveraged social disruption and took meaning from them (also see Torelli & Keh, Chapter 6, this volume). Virginia Slims came to much of its meaning by the marketers and all the other interested parties’ resonance with the second wave of American feminism (see Figure 7.8). The brand’s social construction was part Philip Morris’s and part cultural resonance. Similarly, Gatorade’s “Be Like Mike” campaign (centered on NBA icon Michael Jordan) is widely regarded as one of the most successful uses of a sports celebrity endorser (Rovell, 2006). Here, the brand’s social construction was part Gatorade (a brand with an already powerful history), part Michael Jordan (the world’s greatest athlete was making more in endorsements than he was as a basketball player), and part of the cultural resonance of the two.

Other times, a brand came to its meaning through a largely consumer-oriented response or resonance, which in turn, was then appropriated from the consumer collective. Holt (2004) provides other examples, such as Mountain Dew going from a Hillbilly NASCAR Belt brand to the official brand of Gen-X skateboard dudes. What consumers create is then often called “insight” by

FIGURE 7.8
(See color insert.) Virginia Slims came to much of its meaning by its resonance with the second wave of American feminism.
brand managers and then the brand is officially repositioned. Brand man­
gagers may react to culturally resonant consumer appropriations of brands
and then call them their own. Rather than purely random, these consumer
appropriations and marketer reappropriations work because they can func­
tion as channel markers in the shifting social currents.

Suggestions on Method

In the model just outlined above we call for a new approach, or at least a
different one, to the study and theorizing of brands. We fully admit that
our model is bare bones and a first attempt. We believe we have put the
essentials in place.

In terms of method we make a few suggestions. First, we believe brands
could and should be studied in a near-endless number of ways. We are big
believers in multimethod approaches. We make a plea for history because
we honestly don't know how you ever understand a brand apart from its
history. We hope that those trained and experienced in historical method
will apply themselves to the study of brands. At a minimum, we hope that
a historical consciousness informs brand research going forward. We also
firmly believe that ethnographic work is critical. Absent social meaning,
we don't think there is a brand. We also believe that social network and
community research on and off the Internet remains vital. We believe that
textual, rhetorical, and visual-based work on brands is vital. We encour­
age those who work in reader response, textual analysis, and semiotics to
work in the branding area. Finally, we encourage demographers and other
quantitative sociologists to bring their tools to bear on the social construc­
tion of brands.

Conclusion

In the late 19th century, brands replaced many unmarked commodities.
While it is true that there were some branded products prior to this period,
it is during the last two decades of the nineteenth century that the ubiqui­
tous branding we know today began. Between 1875 and 1900, thousands
of branded products replaced unbranded commodities. The phenomenal
growth first took place in package goods. Soap, previously sold by weight
from a generally unbranded cake, becomes Ivory (1882) and Sapolio (circa
1875). Beer, previously drawn from an unnamed keg, becomes 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.
FIGURE 7.9
Brand registrations increased dramatically in the last part of the 20th century.

To most scholars, it is absolutely axiomatic that there is no such thing as just a thing. To sociologists, anthropologists, and many more, all material objects carry with them meaning—even the ones grossly mislabeled as "utilitarian." This point has been made too many times by too many celebrated scholars (Goody, 1993; Sahlins, 1972; Schudson, 1984) to belabor it here, although it does apparently need saying in contemporary consumer behavior. The entire human record consists of no place where materiality, social construction, and meaning are strangers. Goods have always had social meaning. The same holds true for branded goods. How could they not?

During the last years of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century, branding exploded (see Figure 7.9). Advertising and branding pushed marketplace modernity along; they were its engines, its mode. Over the next eight or so decades, the branding tide rose to cover just about everything.

By the end of the twentieth century, religious sects publically discussed branding (Jones, 2003), as did universities, cities, and national parks (Twitchell, 2004). Even dirt and water are now branded. Brands came to be important in the lives of citizens. Citizens became consumers.

It is time to see brands as more than summed attributes floating in preference factor space. They may be that,

\[ \text{Coke attitude} = \sum a_i b_i \]

where:

\[ a_1 = \text{sweet} \quad a_2 = \text{fizzy} \quad \text{etc.} \]

but they are a whole lot more (see Figure 7.10).

We need to see them as vessels of meaning. Brands have co-mingled with or substantially emulated the form and function of traditional social institutions. In this chapter we argue that we must significantly rethink
our views of brands and the singular obsession with the individual consumer and his or her thoughts. Contemporary society floats on a true sea-change in mediated human communication that makes it easier for consumers to exchange information and organize. Brands are social creations, and this reality has never been more important. Brands are not just names of things, but increasingly an important part of the social fabric and centers of social organization. Our models, our thinking, and our practice need to catch up with this reality.

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It’s more than a watch... it’s a community

www.swatchtheclub.com

FIGURE 7.1
This Swatch in-store display invokes brand community.
FIGURE 7.3
Tupperware cofounder Brownie Wise was the force behind one of the first popular brand communities.

FIGURE 7.5
Here, the producers of South Park appeal in the trade press to media buyers with the promise that their show can effectively deliver a valuable demographic.
Repositioning with significant institutional involvement.

Virginia Slims came to much of its meaning by its resonance with the second wave of American feminism.
FIGURE 7.10
Coke insinuates itself into social gatherings.