Towards A Sociological Model Of Brands

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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 *co-creation* 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 themselves to such an obviously reductionist treatment. Thus, we reject the *au currant* co-creation term, not because it goes too far, but because it doesn't go far enough. Co-creation 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; Thomson and Coskuner-Balli 2007) to meaningfully theorize brands. The *sine qua non* of critical theory: to critique 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 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 *ipso facto* necessitate a critical stance or a critical sociology. Such weighty and colorful baggage can be, and typically is, an impediment to material understanding.

The theory of brands proposed here is based on essential sociology that pre-dates the critical turn by decades. It draws on the idea of community, itself a construct in active use for at least one hundred and fifty years. 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 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 summed attitudes. 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-WW-II psychology were promises of early attitude theorists that now seem outlandish (Schramm and 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 Fishbien (1963) type attitude models (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Alas, quasi-behavior brand attitude measures proved only modestly capable of predicting other quasi-behavior brand measures. Roughly fifty years of published research gave us an average of less than ten percent shared variance ($r \cong .3$).

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 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 and 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 and O'Guinn 1995; 2001; O'Guinn and Muniz 2000). Like a handful of others (Fischer, Bristor and Gainer 1996; Maffesoli 1996; Schouten and 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 <u>only</u> 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 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.

[Insert figure 1 about here]

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 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 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 and Jerry's* contains no political meaning.

THE SOCIAL MODEL

The basic **components** of our model (see *Figure 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.*

[Insert figure 2 about here]

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 true, it is certainly not thought of that way today. Marketers “create” the brand in the sense that they give it initial form, message, packaging, position and platform. The marketer launches the brand and tries to vests 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 society.

Even the mighty marketer rarely if ever begins *tabula rasa*. Marketers are themselves products of social production. *Tide* is manufactured by Procter and Gamble. Procter and 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 for the good or service, etc. For those who have had the opportunity to actually be involved in the launch of a band 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 million 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, Cited in Pedergrast, 2000, page 22.

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, p. 37*)*. Thin, but not negligible bonds: this is a enormously important idea to get across. It is this idea that takes the brand community notion away from those that wish to think of it as only applicable to the marginal consumer: the interesting, but odd. 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.

Consider Tupperware (see *Figure 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 and also developed and reinforced bonds among consumers in similar life circumstances.

[Insert figure 3 about here]

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, 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 and Dholakia 2006; Cova and Pace 2006; Cova, Pace and Park 2007; Muniz and Schau 2005) have extended, refined and better specified brand community. These researchers have noted specific dynamics, such as desired marginality and member legitimacy, within the brand community and the use of specialized forms of brand creation, such as community activism and consumer generated media content (Etgar 2008; Muniz and Schau 2007). While published extant academic research has documented fifty or so brand communities, we have individually been contacted by or otherwise been made aware of a couple hundred other marketer's efforts to build and/or manage brand community (see *Figure 4*). These extend from major software brands to traditional CPG brands.

[Insert figure 4 about here]

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 and even law to the on-going 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 eye-balls 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 5*). Television is bought in the "up-fronts" in a highly institutionalized manner...about $10 billion a year in the U.S. 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, page 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 researcher. Again, this is where the sociological approach, rich in a tradition of both production and consumption can contribute.

[Insert figure 5 about here]

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 *brandscapes* (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 brand or a brand that is by its nature monopolistic. 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 re-positioning of many brands.

The very re-positioned *Camel* cigarette brand of the 1990s is a prime example: from "old outdoor guy" brand to hip and young *Joe Camel* (see *Figure 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 shown below demonstrate a repositioning that had enormous institutional antecedents and consequences. 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 lead to the social construction of the new Camel.

[Insert figure 6 about here]

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, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) exert a force in

the social construction of brands. Brands recently sanctioned by Environmental Defense Fund (Federal Express) or the Sierra Club mean something different than those without this blessing.

Processes: The processes which act to form brands include:

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 and Meyer 1989).

Negotiation refers to a social process in which actors actively "bargain" for something, in this case what the brand means and who it belongs to. 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 (Wipperfurth 2005; Holt 2004). 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 built on those associations and used them to market 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 1960’s for fear of being the unofficial black detergent or soap (Chambers 2007; Fox 1985). 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 co-branding world of social causes, we once heard a Fortune 500 company assert that it could not/would not co-brand 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.

Consider the Sharpie brand of magic markers. 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 contested nature of brands), these collectives have largely resisted management 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 marginality* 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 six percent 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 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. 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 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 constructed through what viewers believe about the social world as delivered to them via television, 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 absent purchased ad time. During the February 2005 broadcast of Superbowl XXXIX, the Gatorade logo was displayed for a total of six minutes and fifty-eight seconds (Rovell 2006). Given the worldwide 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 WWII (Cohen 2000). It hit its stride in the cultural revolution of the 1960s, revolution which 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*. 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 Loken and Roedder-John in this volume; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). Try driving into Satan Cruz, California in a Hummer and asking where the *WalMart* is.

[Insert figure 7 about here]

Some "revolutionaries" now strike blows against the capitalist empire by buying things (Frank 1997, Heath and Potter 2004). As paradoxical as this seems (is), these brands of revolution have been granted community approval. In the new socio-political 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 and 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-sweat shop brand. It is strongly supported by an on-line 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 "anti-brand brand," *BlackSpot*, by *AdBusters*, an ostensibly anti-advertising and anti-consumer 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 V.W. Beetle in 1997 as community members looked for reasons to be optimistic that the new Beetle would honor its roots (Muniz, 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 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 re-positioning 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 feedback in the direction of 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, on-line brand community chatter, etc. They react to one another

and perceptions of one another. The “imagine” each other. Consumers perceive the “schemer schema” (Wright 1986) or the persuasive intent of the brand and beyond. They form some 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 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, non-biased 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, page 160). Mossberg suggests such disproportionate reactions reflect “the Doctrine of Insufficient Adulation” (Mossberg, quoted in Manjoo 2008, page 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 enormous in-migration, movement to cities, 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 US 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 a 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.

Likewise many other brands leveraged social disruption and took their meaning from them (also see Torelli and Keh, in 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 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.

[Insert figure 8 about here]

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 brand managers and then the brand is officially re-positioned. Brand managers may react to culturally resonant consumer appropriations of brands and then call them their own. Rather than purely random, these consumer appropriations and marketer re-appropriations work because they can function 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 different one, to the study and theorizing of brands. We fully admit that our model is bare bones and a first attempt. One has to start somewhere. 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 multi-method 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 an historical consciousness informs brand research going forward. We also firmly believe that ethnographic work is critical.

Absent 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 essential. We encourage 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 construction of brands.

Conclusion

In the late nineteenth 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 ubiquitous 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.

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 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.

[Insert figure 9 about here]

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 attitudes floating in preference factor space. They may be that,

Coke $\sum a_i b_i$

Where: a_i =sweet b_i = fizzy etc.

but they are a whole lot more (see *Figure 10*).

[Insert figure 10 about here]

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 re-think our views of brands and the 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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FIGURE 1 – BRAND COMMINITY IN-STORE DISPLAY

This Swatch in-store display invokes brand community.

FIGURE 2 – A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION MODEL OF BRANDS

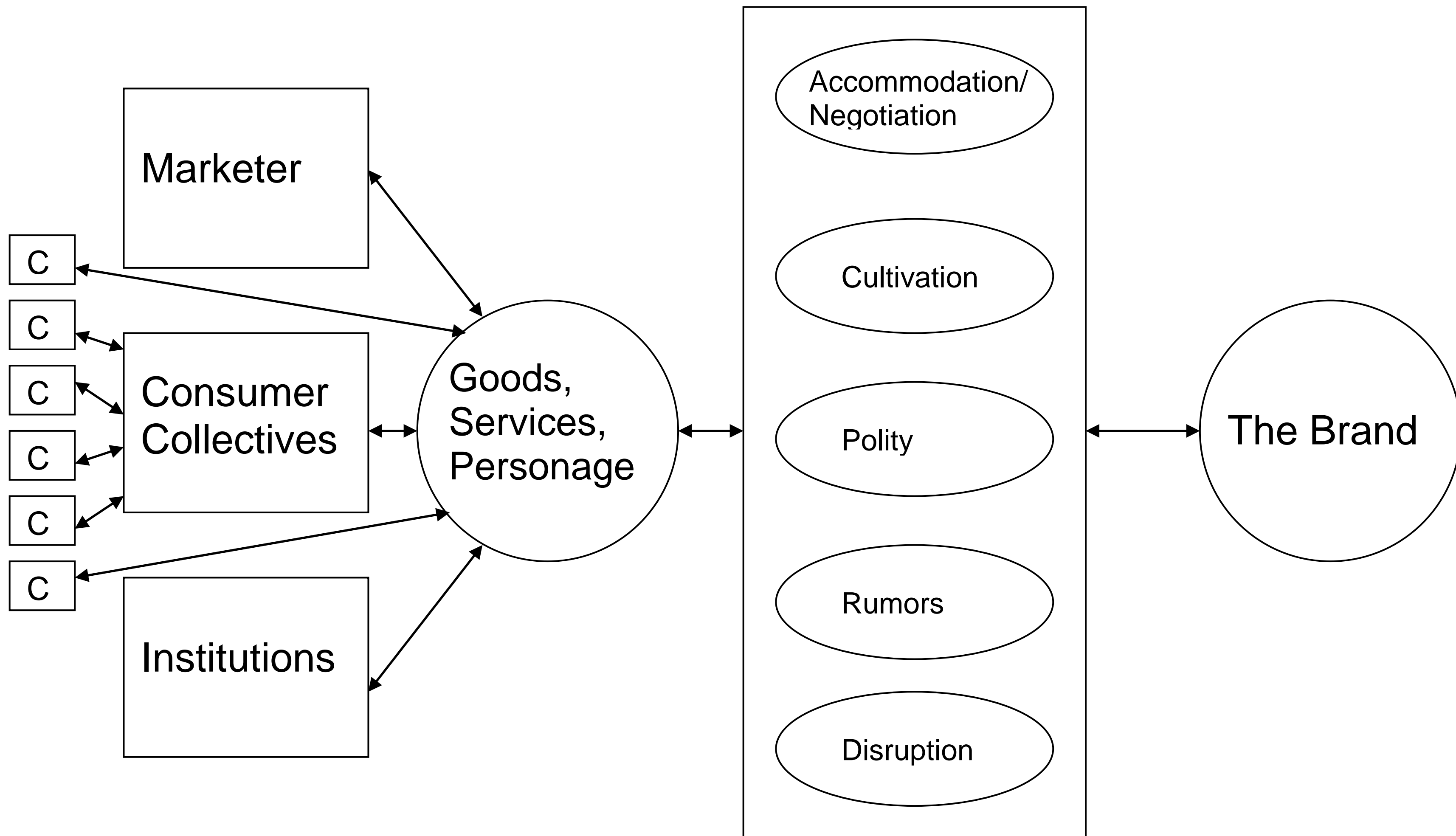


FIGURE 3 – EARLY BRAND COMUNITY

Tupperware Co-Founder Brownie Wise was the force behind one of the first popular brand communities.

FIGURE 4 - CAR MARKETER SEEKS TO BUILD COMMUNITY

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."

The Scion brand has been developed in large part via community-building efforts

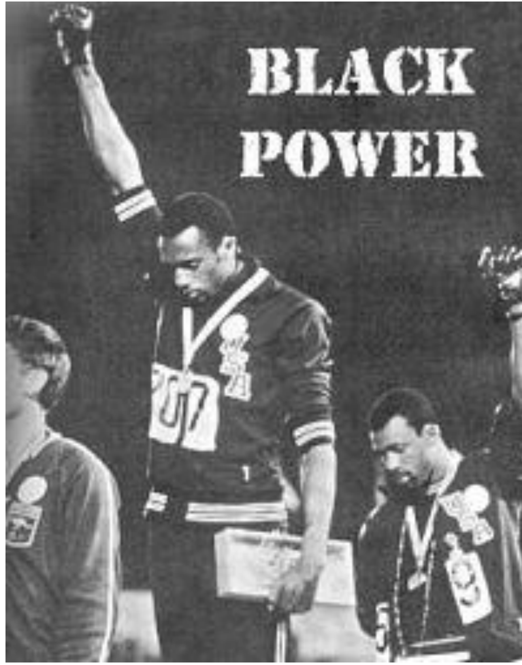
FIGURE 5 – Media Trade Advertisement

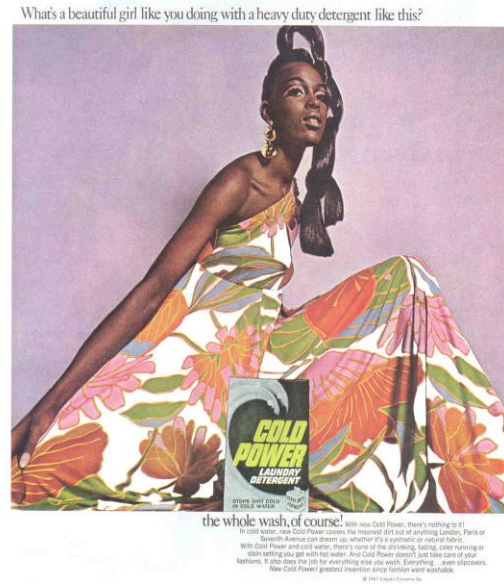
Here the producers of the South Park appeal in the trade pres to media buyers with the promise that they show can effectively deliver a valuable demographic.

FIGURE 6 – Two Camel Advertisements

Repositioning with significant institutional involvement

FIGURE 7 – POLITICIZATION OF BRANDS



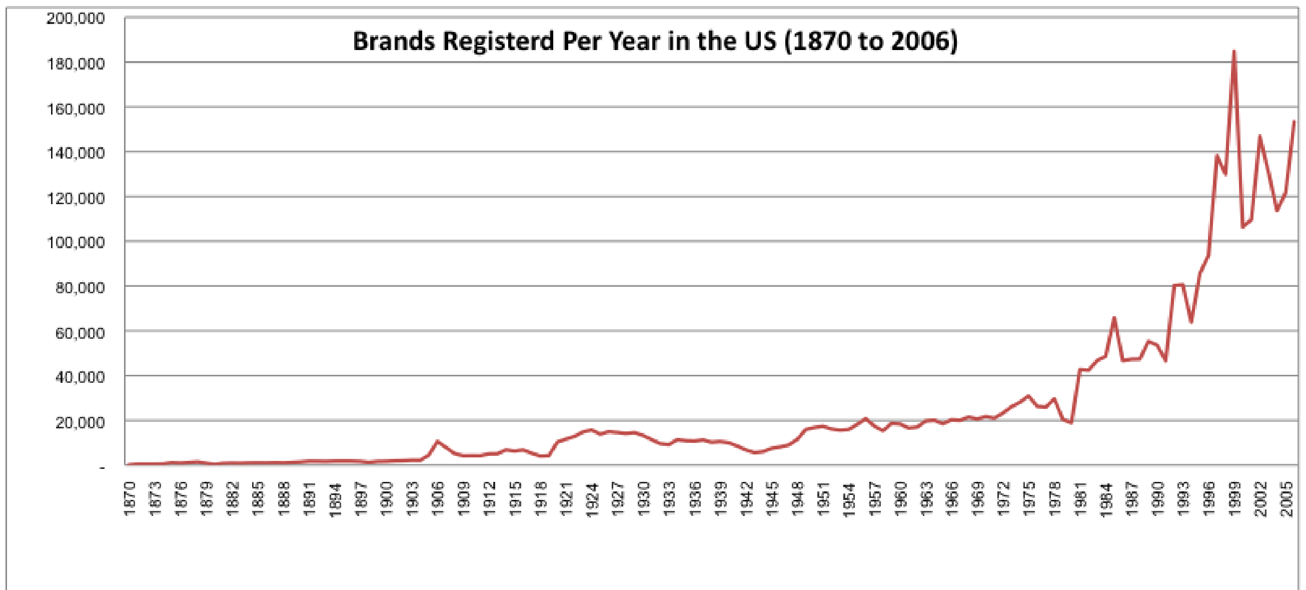


The Black Power *statement appropriated as* Cold Power.

FIGURE 8 - POLITICIZATION OF BRANDS

Virginia Slims *came to much of its meaning by its resonance with the Second Wave of American feminism*

FIGURE 9 –NUMBER OF BRANDS REGISTERED



Brand registrations increased dramatically in the last part of the twentieth century.

FIGURE 10 – COKE AD

Coke insinuates itself into social gatherings