

What the Heck is a Brand?
An Attempt of Integration and its Consequences for Research and Management

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What the heck is a Brand?

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Summary

Contemporary marketing literature overwhelmingly describes brands from either a managerial or a consumer-centric perspective. The level of analysis is either individual or social. In most cases brands are conceived as tangible or intangible objects. Another stream of research conceives brands as mental representations or socially shared meanings. Each perspective has provided rich insights but bears the danger of being restrictive. Attempting to integrate extant knowledge the paper first presents a brief review and discussion of how the brand phenomenon has been approached in the literature. Secondly, it proposes an integrative perspective, which conceptualizes a brand as encompassing *brand manifestations*, *brand meaning*, and a *brand interest group* that co-produces brand manifestations and co-constructs brand meaning in an ongoing public discourse. Finally, the implications of such an approach for future research and brand management are discussed.

Keywords: brand concept, brand interest group, brand meaning, brand manifestations, brand discourse

Introduction

In a business environment where global competition and rapid transfer of technology in most industries have made differentiation by product features increasingly difficult, brands and branding have attracted rising interest from marketing managers and academics. Although there seems to be general agreement that the successful creation and management of strong brands is essential for company success, there are considerable differences in assumptions about (1) what a brand consists of, (2) how a brand develops, and (3) who participates in that process.

The marketing management stream in the literature by and large considers brands as being material objects comprising intangible components, ranging from a mark or logo, marked product or a bundle of features (e.g. Kotler, 1991; Park and Srinivasan, 1994; Aaker; 1995), to the entire corporation (e.g. Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 2004; de Chernatony and Harris, 2000; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; 2003; Leitch and Richardson, 2003). Such brands can be created and closely managed by their creators. Customers, within this view, take a receptive role. Only recently, Vargo and Lusch (2004) have introduced a radically different view: the co-producing customer.

Consumer research, on the other hand, has focused on branding phenomena on the side of customers. An extensive body of literature refers to individual consumers' cognitive concepts that develop in response to marketing activities (Aaker, 1997; Aaker et al. 2004; Keller, 1998; 2003; Troiano, 1996; Tybout and Carpenter, 2001). Other authors emphasize the social character of brands as symbols used by consumers for the purpose of social interaction (Solomon, 1983; Belk, 1988; Elliott, 1994; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Ahuvia, 2005). Accordingly, ideas of how brand meaning develops vary considerably. Some authors consider meaning to be delivered by the marketer (e.g. McAlexander et al., 2002), and as individually perceived (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1999; Holt, 2002; Schultz and de Chernatony, 2002). For others, brand meaning is socially co-constructed among consumers (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Kates, 2004), or in interaction with other stakeholders (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Jones, 2005; Luedicke, 2006a).

Each conceptualization puts a certain perspective into the focus of interest, thus leaving a patchwork of theoretical approaches towards brands and brand research that results in calls for integration to provide more powerful theoretical insights (Keller, 2003). The aim of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework that builds on the extant knowledge provided by

the various streams of research and offers an integrative view that captures the complex interplay among physical manifestations of a brand, brand meaning, people and organizations interested in the brand.

First, the paper presents a brief review and discussion of how brands have been studied in contemporary marketing literature. Then, it proposes an integrative perspective, which conceptualizes a brand as encompassing a brand interest group whose members co-construct brand meaning in an ongoing public discourse as well as co-produce brand manifestations and potentially become brand manifestations themselves. Finally, the implications of such an approach for future research and brand management are discussed.

Review of brand research

A review of the extant literature on brands and branding reveals considerable differences in the determination of the research object, the perspective applied by the researchers, and the level of analysis.

- Objects of brand research

Looking at how brand research has developed and proliferated over time, distinct views of what constitutes a brand and therefore, what should be the object of research become apparent (see also: de Chernatony, 1997; 2006; Stern, 2006). The most recognized and still widely used definition of brands refers back to Kotler (1991). He considers brands to be a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of these, which is intended to identify the goods and services of a seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate them from those of the competitors. Hence, one of the main functions of a brand is to protect the owner of the trademark from imitation. Closely related to this definition of a brand is its conceptualization as a bundle of tangible and intangible features (Park and Srinivasan, 1994), which increase the attractiveness of a product or service beyond its functional value (Farquhar, 1989). Both views reflect a utilitarian focus on branded objects.

The brand identity perspective, as proposed by authors such as Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) or Kapferer (2004), has widened this horizon. By adding characteristics of the organization, they have succeeded in changing the long-standing object-oriented branding paradigm. Corporate behavior, the behavior of sales personnel and central organizational values have become part of a renewed brand concept on a corporate level (e.g.

de Chernatony, 2006; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; 2003). Even so, recent publications, which focus on brand communities, consumption experiences or emotional branding, conceive brands as “text and symbols, including the product and its logo” (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001, 423). Consumers socialize around such brands (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002), which are material (Sherry, Kozinets and Borghini, 2007) “inanimate objects” (Elliott and Percy, 2007, 65) offered by a marketer.

A second stream of literature has conceptualized brands as mental representations, for instance as individual cognitions (Richards et al., 1998; Keller, 1998; Aaker, 1997; Troiano, 1996). By looking at brand knowledge, that is brand awareness, the perceived attributes of, and the benefits derived from a branded product or service, the image, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and experiences, research interest is firmly focused on an individual, cognitive perspective of how a brand is represented in consumers’ minds (Keller, 2003).

As opposed to purely cognitive perspectives, consumer culture theorists are mainly concerned with social and experiential aspects of brands and branding. Research focuses on emotional relationships among members of sub-cultures (Elliott and Davis, 2005), constituencies of brand communities (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001) and “neo-tribes” (Cova and Cova, 2002), community and tribal boundaries (Kozinets, 2002), the social context (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002), and consumption experiences around brands (Carù and Cova, 2007). However, as Luedicke (2006a) notes, authors remain inconsistent about the distinction of the tangible (names, signs, symbols, designs, product, service, person, place) and the social aspects (meaning, value, relationships, community, resistance) of a brand. Albeit the mounting knowledge and growing evidence that materiality and immateriality, cognitive representations, emotional relationships, and social brand experiences are strongly related, attempts to integrate these theoretical perspectives are virtually non-existent. In recent years, brand research has broadened, but it has also become more fragmented. The specialization in particular fields has increased the depth of knowledge, but at the same time has narrowed the perspectives. There is a need for a look at the bigger picture.

- Research perspective

A great part of brand-related literature takes a managerial, sender oriented perspective. From this perspective, customers are stimulated by marketers to produce a certain response.

As Keller states “.. marketing activity creates or affects multiple dimensions of brand knowledge and these multiple dimensions of brand knowledge, in turn, influence consumer response to marketing activity” (Keller, 2003, 597). The managerial perspective ascribes the active brand creation and development activity to the firm, and a passive, receptive role to the consumer.

An extension to this view was provided by Fournier (1998). By engaging in relationships with brands, consumers are considered taking a more active role in the creation of brand meaning. Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) added a further step by focusing on the triangular relationship between consumers, other consumers and a branded object. McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) widened the perspective by studying customers’ relationships with a branded product, related marketing agents, institutions as well as other customers. Even so they still consider brand meaning as being developed first by marketers. In their view, consumers socialize around brands, which are defined as brand objects.

Interpretive consumer research has been looking at the more active role of the consumer in the creation of brand objects and brand meaning. Authors such as Wallendorf and Arnould (1991), Arnould and Price (1993), Belk and Costa (1998) or Peñaloza (2001) have demonstrated the importance of consumption activities in the development of brand meaning. Later, postmodern and consumer culture scholars have argued that ‘brands belong to and are created in concert with groups or communities’ (Brown et al., 2003). Consumers are actively creating lively “brandsapes” (Kozinets et al., 2004; Thompson, 2004) and brand cultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muñiz and Schau, 2005). Becoming involved in such interactions, consumers continuously employ, alter or reject brand meaning (Kates, 2004). In their seminal article, Vargo and Lusch (2004) finally turned the marketing-dominant logic upside down by putting the customer into the role of the co-producer of the final service offer. They argue that marketing processes are completed only if and when consumers mobilize their own resources to avail themselves of the services that marketers propose, and extract value-in-use from these offerings. That is, consumers co-produce brand objects (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003). Kozinets et al. (2004) have introduced the notion of “interagency” that refers to the interaction of marketers and consumers: Embedded consumers produce producers’ products at the same time and as much as producers consume consumers’ consumption. On the same line, Cova and Rémy (2007) suggest considering customers being *prosumers* who take it upon themselves to weave realities. Füller, Luedicke and Jaweck

(forthcoming) have pushed these thoughts even further in describing processes of brand creation by consumers in total independence from marketers.

The literature on brand cultures provides useful insights into the complex processes underlying the cultural co-construction of brand meaning and branded objects. Yet, despite this groundbreaking turn towards an emancipatory view of the consumer (Kozinets, 2002), the dominant perspective of this stream of literature still remains customer-centric (Hetzel, 2007; Sherry et al., 2007). Other relevant and important (social) actors in the (co-)creation of brands are either neglected or treated from a customers' perspective. Following Gummesson's critical account of the currently dominant research perspective in marketing (Gummesson, 2006) and his plea for a radical network perspective in marketing including all relevant relationships and interactions, brand research needs a broader perspective.

This broader perspective may build on the growing number of publications on corporate brands and branding which have taken a stakeholder-oriented perspective on brand creation and development. Following authors such as de Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2001) or Schultz and de Chernatony (2002), staff and service personnel are particularly relevant stakeholders due to their significant role in contributing to a brand's meaning by "living the brand" (Ind, 2001). In contrast to these publications focusing on a specific stakeholder group, such as employees or capital owners, more recent publications have expanded their field of investigation to a complex system of multiple interrelated stakeholders with potentially conflicting interests, who engage in an ongoing dynamic and incremental process of discourse (Hatch and Shultz, 2003; Handelman, 2006; Roper and Davies, 2007). The meaning of corporate brands is considered being "socially negotiated" (Gregory, 2007).

In summary, there is evidence that a multitude of individuals, groups and organizations, internal or external to business firms co-produce brand related objects and co-construct brand meaning in varying intensities of activity, participation and emotional quality. They actively and selectively gather around those brand-related objects and brand meanings. Impulses may stem from either side: marketers interested in brand creation and development as well as consumers, distributors, journalists, members of other organizations and institutions interested in the brand. Therefore, drawing on recent arguments of authors such as Gummesson (2006) or Arnould, Price and Malshe (2006), we strongly promote an interactive, network-oriented perspective on brands and branding.

- Level of Analysis

A great part of the literature on brands and branding is theoretically based on cognitive or social psychology (Keller, 2003). Thus, it employs an individual level of analysis which has provided a very large body of knowledge on individual brand-related phenomena. In recent years, sociological (e.g. Arnould and Thompson 2005; Hellmann 2003; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Thompson 2004), anthropological and (n)ethnographic (Kozinets, 2002) approaches have become more prominent in brand research. They have largely contributed to an improved understanding of social processes among consumers interested in branded products or services.

However, human behavior is neither exclusively driven by individual level factors nor is it only social. Thus, Luedicke (2006a) sees consumers as individual and social observers, who use brand systems to make suitable choices, to identify with, contribute to, or lean against. In his systems theory (Luhmann, 1995) driven approach Luedicke distinguishes the brand, which comprises its tangible aspects, from the brand system, reflecting the social aspects of a brand. However, if brands are conceptually restricted to their tangible aspects, and set apart from the social aspects of the brand system, some well documented phenomena cannot be explained. Research has shown that what usually are considered stable, tangible aspects of a brand are malleable brand components (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). What is considered a tangible manifestation of a brand is continuously negotiated and (re-)defined by those who are interested in the brand and, at the same time, depends on, and determines brand meaning. Other research has shown that places and events may be considered highly experiential brands (Hetzl, 2007). Furthermore, consumers as co-producers are doing something with a brand, and alter its tangible form while consuming/co-producing it. It is not that consumers and other people interested in a brand are just communicating *about* a brand. They are communicating *with* and *through* brands, becoming *part of* the brand in that they initiate brand experiences and alter brand meaning. In a similar vein, those interested in a brand are acting upon brands as individuals but also as members of groups. They take part in brand cultures and create mental representations about these experiences at the same time. Therefore, what is missing is an effective attempt to merge individual and social level research in one integrative theoretical framework.

An integrative perspective

Brand research so far has either focused on (1) tangible and intangible objects, such as products or services, persons, places, organizations, their names, symbols, signs or designs, on (2) cognitive concepts, such as brand awareness, attitudes, images or meaning, or on (3) individual as well as social brand-related experiences and practices (see Table 1). This restriction on either research object has produced plenty of fruitful insights. As argued above, however, individual and shared mental representations as well as individual and social experiences largely determine what are considered brand objects. The mental representations in turn, depend on the objects and the experiences they represent. Individual as well as social experiences, in turn, depend on the objects and mental representations related to them. Therefore, we assume a triangular reciprocal interaction. Dimensions of the research object, which have been treated separately in brand research, so far, are actually closely interrelated. Together they form the phenomenon to be studied. Thus, to further progress in our knowledge of the brand phenomenon we need a more complex definition of the research object that encompasses all three dimensions.

Table 1: Overview of Brand Research Approaches

Research object	Perspective	Level of analysis
Tangible and intangible objects	Managerial, sender-oriented	Individual
Cognitive concepts	Customer-centric	Social
Experiences/practices	Stakeholder-oriented	Culture
	Interactive	

Concerning the research perspective, brand research, so far, either takes a (1) managerial, sender-oriented, or a (2) customer-centric perspective, both conceiving the customer as a rather passive receiver. Postmodern scholars have questioned the split between producers and consumers (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Recent research has demonstrated the active role of consumers in the co-production of tangible and intangible objects/features as well as in the co-construction of mental representations and individual and social experiences/practices. Research on corporate brands has added other constituencies, but only recently replaced the focus on particular stakeholders and a managerial perspective by a more

complex view of interacting marketers, customers and other interested stakeholders who co-create brand meaning. Following Gummesson (2006) and Arnould et al. (2006), a network-oriented perspective may allow integrating all individuals, groups, organizations and institutions interested in a brand according them an active role. In contrast to the concepts of brand subculture (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001) or tribe (Cova and Cova, 2002) such networks may be highly heterogeneous. Their members may have different interests and varying activity levels with regard to a brand.

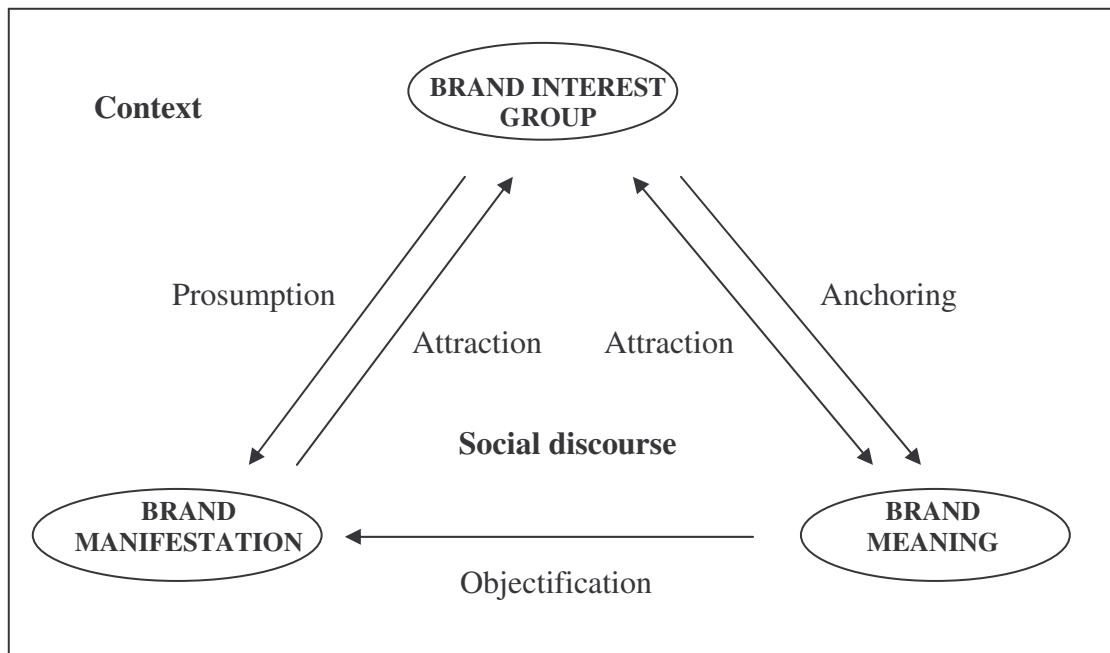
Finally, brand research has been conducted either on an individual, social, or a cultural level of analysis and has produced a huge amount of specialized knowledge about individual or social cognitions concerning brand objects as well as sub-cultures, communities, or tribes forming around brands. However, the individual cognitive view that has been dominating for a rather long time leaves out the emotional and cultural relevance of brands. On the other hand, recent consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) has ignored individual views. Ever since McCracken's seminal article (McCracken, 1986) there have been very few attempts to integrate individual, social and cultural levels of analysis. Acknowledging the theoretical as well as the empirical problems related to "merging" levels of analysis, nevertheless it seems fruitful to integrate the various levels of analysis in order to make substantial progress in future brand research.

In conclusion, there is a need for an integrative conceptualization of brands. Such integration should encompass various social actors, who continuously co-produce/co-construct brand objects, meaning, and practices on individual and social levels. It should further differentiate various manifestations of brands, being tangible and intangible objects, organizations, activities, people, places, or brand experiences (see also Arnould et al. 2006). Such an integrative conceptualization may define a brand as being (1) a *system* of interrelated brand meanings, brand manifestations, and individuals as well as organizations interested in a brand, and (2) the *processes* underlying the dynamic development of those meanings, manifestations, interested individuals and organizations. That is, brands can be conceived as comprising three closely interrelated concepts: brand manifestations, brand meaning, and a brand interest group (see Figure 1).

People and organizations interested in the manifestations, in the meaning of a brand, or in other people and organizations interested in the brand, form the brand interest group. In a continuous process of social discourse, members of the brand interest group co-construct

brand meaning. Brand meaning becomes subject to experience through the manifestations of the brand, which are produced, constructed and used by the members of the brand interest group in an individual manner, as well as in social and cultural contexts. In the following we will describe the three concepts in more detail.

Figure 1: An integrative concept of brands



- Brand interest group

Literature suggests that interrelated stakeholders (Freeman, 1984) or societal constituents (Handelman, 2006) interested in a brand enter a brand-related discourse. They take part in brand creation and brand development when they purposefully or coincidentally get together on physical and/or virtual platforms to share their experiences or express their beliefs and convictions regarding a certain company, product, service, place, or person. Brand interested enter and leave the discourse at different times and in different roles, such as media agents, consumers, entrepreneurs, staff and service personnel, retailers, distributors, suppliers or competitors. The discourse may take many different forms: direct and indirect, verbal and nonverbal. We call the social entity of individuals, organizations and institutions participating in such a brand-related discourse a brand interest group. Although members of the brand interest group are in constant flux (Cova and Cova, 2000) and may never meet, they contribute to the development of the brand by disseminating their knowledge, communicating

their expectations, evaluations, and ways of usage or non-usage (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004) during an ongoing interaction process from which brand meaning continually emerges (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

Brand interest group members may take different roles depending on both, the perceived relevance of, and the emotional relationship with manifestations of the brand, the brand meaning, or other members of the interest group; their social roles may range from real brand fanatics through participants to observers (Koll et al., 2007), and from devotees and protagonist to brand antagonist (Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007). Perceived relevance of, and emotional relationships with brands determine how intensively individuals participate in the ongoing social discourse. Individuals and organizations for which the brand is of high relevance and who have developed strong individual or social emotional relationships may form an inner circle. For example, brand communities, sub-cultures of consumption, or brand tribes have developed as networks of social interrelationships among individuals who are highly interested in a brand object and have developed emotional bonds among their members (Cova and Cova, 2002; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Wipperfurth, 2005). Members construe themselves as 'belonging' to a brand because this membership is functional for the development and maintenance of their social identity (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Strong emotional bonds find their expression in the individual production of brand manifestations, such as building shrines (Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007), and in the social co-production of manifestations such as product innovations (Füller, Jawecki and Mühlbacher, 2007), or events (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002). Shared rituals and traditions are central social processes, reproducing the shared meaning of the brand, as well as the history and culture of the brand interest group.

Members of the inner circle act and communicate differently as compared to members of the periphery. They shape the manifestations and meaning of a brand in a substantial manner. In many cases, such highly involved members of a brand interest group become innovative and take an active role in the creation of brand manifestations and brand meaning (Wikström, 1996; Hemetsberger, 2002; Cova and Cova, 2002; Wipperfurth, 2005). By their mere presence core members can become manifestations of the brand. They co-create and control the performance of appropriate codes (Elliott and Davies, 2005) as well as the processes how novices can become well respected members of the inner circle (Reinhardt and Hemetsberger, 2007).

The core of the brand interest group is embedded in a much bigger, peripheral group of individuals and organizations, which have a certain personal and/or professional interest in the brand. Less involved consumers, employees, retail sales personnel, celebrities, journalists, consumer advocates and even members of interest groups of competing brands participate in the ongoing creation of brand meaning and brand manifestations to a certain extent. The adversarial contributions of brand antagonists to brand-related discourse, for instance, may reinforce brand meanings and the social cohesion of the core members of a brand interest group (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Luedicke, 2006b), or may have harmful consequences for brand meaning (Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Thompson et al., 2006).

- Brand meaning

Depending on the level of analysis the term “brand meaning” has been used with various connotations in branding literature. For an integrative attempt to explain the development of brand meaning, the social representations paradigm, first proposed by Moscovici (1984), presents an adequate theoretical basis. It combines individual and social level analyses with a process perspective. Based on this paradigm, brand meaning can be defined as a dynamic collective system of knowledge and evaluations continually emerging from social discourse among the members of a brand interest group. Like in the process of the development of a social representation, the meaning of a brand-related stimulus is first individually determined, that is the stimulus is categorized depending on individual sensory experiences and introspective states, such as cognitive operations, beliefs, and emotions (see also Barsalou, 1999). If a stimulus is socially relevant, interested individuals communicate about it (Holt and Thompson, 2004; Thompson, 2004; Arnould, 2005), share their brand related experiences and thoughts (Carù and Cova, 2007). Despite the sometimes controversial discourse (Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002), individual meanings are shaped into socially shared meaning. Up to a certain extent social consensus is achieved concerning the proper classification, evaluation, and adequate practices (Maturana and Varela, 1980; Parales Quenza 2005). Individual interpretation systems become socially constituted (Kates, 2004); what is relevant to the members of the brand interest group is socially anchored.

In this sense, brand meaning is consensual but not uniform. As Barsalou (1989; 1999) has pointed out, individual cognitive structures comprise context-dependent as well as context-independent knowledge and affects. Building on the work of Abric (1993), the

members of a brand interest group can be considered as co-constructing context-independent elements of brand meaning, which are logically interrelated. In addition, brand meaning contains many, more time-specific and context-related cognitions, affects and practices, which are distributed across members. Each member of the brand interest group holds part of the collective brand meaning. The context-independent elements of brand meaning provide a common ground for the interpretation and evaluation of brand manifestations, and other members of the brand interest group. Context-dependent elements serve the purpose of situation-specific interpretations without raising conflict when contradictory elements appear. Therefore, many sub-versions of the same meaning system do exist simultaneously, not only across individuals but also for every single individual.

The context-independent elements of meaning for Gucci, for example, might include Italian chic and design. Yet, varying additional meanings may become relevant in different social situations. Carrying a Gucci bag can take on a status character at a social event. A Gucci bag can also signal being a trendy person when meeting friends, or might reinforce the person's status of belonging to a higher level in the workplace. However, the bag may also simply serve as a 'container' for carrying groceries, signaling understatement or even brand resistance.

Following this conceptualization, brand meaning is not a stable system of cognitions and related affects, but is in constant flux as prevailing beliefs and evaluations are not only challenged and reinvigorated in discourse (Moscovici, 1984) but also depend on the situational context (Barsalou, 1999). Hence, this concept of brand meaning stands in contrast to the idea of brand image or brand knowledge, which is commonly viewed as comprising rather stable, descriptive attributes or informational dimensions that characterize a brand (Keller, 2003).

- Brand manifestations

Brand meaning might manifest itself in various ways. Brand manifestations are tangible and intangible objectifications of the meaning of a brand. Wolff Olin's model (1995), for instance, suggests that a brand's central idea is manifested through various media, i.e. product, environment, staff behavior and communication. Hence, brand manifestations allow individuals and groups to sensually experience the meaning of a brand. Brand manifestations are not determined from the very inception of a brand, nor are they to be exclusively thought

of as branded objects. They may comprise a number of elements, which can be objects as well as people, organizations, activities, events or patterns of behavior. The 'Red Bull' brand, for example, can be experienced not only by tasting and smelling the drink, holding the can or seeing the logo, but also by listening to an interview with the founder of the Red Bull company, watching a Formula 1 race with the Red Bull Racing Team participating, or by taking part in the 'Red Bull Flugtag' (a fun promotion event for brand and flight enthusiasts). Hence, the brand manifests itself in a variety of ways, depending on different situations. Brand meaning is often reflected in a specific person or a group of people who may be members of the brand interest group (Sherry, Kozinets and Borghini, 2007). This 'personification' of a brand contributes to its ontological reality. In the case of luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior or Coco Channel, often it is the owner or the founder of the company who is perceived as *the brand*. Even celebrities, employees, typical consumers or groups of consumers and their specific patterns of behavior may be conceived of as being part of a brand.

What is to be considered a manifestation of a brand is continuously co-constructed by those who are interested in the brand. At the same time this co-construction depends on and determines the meaning of the brand (Dant, 1999). Brand manifestations continually stimulate social interaction and thereby the reproduction of brand meaning. It is not only the company, which plays an active part in this process by providing substantive as well as communicative staging (Arnould, 2007), but also other members of the interest group. With special merchandise presentations, the organization of brand-related events, the store layout, or the specific behavior of their staff, retailers, for example, contribute substantially to the development of brand manifestations. Consumer groups engage in brand-related activities, which are adopted by others and might become constituent elements of a brand. Some consumers even engage in product or service innovation (Hemetsberger, 2002; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) to the extent that the market appropriates their ideas (Füller et al., forthcoming; Franke and Shah, 2003; Shawhney and Prandelli, 2000).

Discussion

This paper makes an attempt to integrate the various streams of brand research into one theoretical framework. Findings from psychology and sociology research are combined to simultaneously explain individual as well as social brand-related phenomena. Viewed from

this perspective, brands are created and develop through social interaction among all those who are interested in their meaning, their manifestations and others participating in the brand-related interaction. By acknowledging the various roles of diverse stakeholders in co-constructing brand meaning and co-producing brand manifestations, the development of brands is portrayed as a complex, contextual, and interactive process within a social system of interrelated, yet diverse actors who, themselves, may become part of the brand.

The contributions of this work are manifold. The presented theoretical approach is different from recent socio-cultural brand concepts (Holt, 2004). It is a social approach in that it concentrates on the social representations, which individuals share about a brand, and the processes leading to these representations. However, it also includes the way in which meaning is being represented in people's minds. Moreover, most socio-cultural approaches towards brands tend to de-emphasize the more profane, material component of brands in favor of a 'social meaning' approach towards brands. The presented framework seeks to re-integrate the tangible representations of brands however, in a radically different way. Brands are neither exclusively conceived as branded products, services, places or organizations nor as mental representations. Brands might manifest themselves in material and immaterial ways. Some sports fashion brands, as in the snowboarding market for instance, derive their core characteristics and meaning from the people who wear them, the specific events they become related to, as well as from the practices their wearers have developed to clearly differentiate themselves from users of other snowboard brands.

Understanding the co-construction of brand meaning, the co-production processes of brand manifestations, and how to integrate the brand interest group into brand management are questions that provide a fertile ground for future theorizing and research. As, for instance, with regard to brand extensions, researchers typically focus on the fit among the original branded product and a new product or service. A good fit is argued to increase the likelihood of a successful new product launch. This basic contention may also be transferred to the presented brand conception. However, because a brand, from an integrative point of view, consists of the brand interest group, brand meaning and brand manifestations, all of these aspects need to be considered simultaneously. Accordingly, the fit dimensions which usually focus on brand knowledge need to be expanded to all other brand aspects. The associations concerning a new product or service may fit the originally branded product but attract a different group of users, who are in conflict with the current ones. This may have adverse

effects on the success of brand extensions. Besides drawing attention to additional fit dimensions, our conception suggests that brand extension research needs to expand its effort to identify context-dependent and context-independent elements of the brand. The fit assumption may only hold true for the context-independent elements of brand meaning, for manifestations considered being central to the brand, and for highly active members of the brand interest group who largely determine the brand's essence. Because of their situational specificity, context-independent elements may be diverse or even contradictory without having any negative influence on the success of a brand extension. Successful brand extensions therefore, require a deep and elaborate understanding of a brand's context-independent meaning, core manifestations, central interest group members, and their mutual influences.

Moreover, innovation does not only take place within organizations marketing products or services. Drawing on Vargo and Lusch (2004) we contend that members of a brand interest group may take a prominent role in the construction of a brand, not only in terms of brand meaning, but also in terms of brand manifestations and the people and organizations belonging to the brand interest group. Hence, deepening our knowledge about why and how highly active members of the brand interest group take part in substantive and communicative staging processes will become a major issue in future marketing research.

This paper also contributes to an extended and more complex view of how brands are created and developed not only by brand proponents, but also by the opponents of a brand. Recent literature on contested consumption (Luedicke, 2006b) gives insights into contributions of anti-brand communication on brand positioning and development. Actually, oppositional brand communication could even sharpen the meaning of a brand. As many stakeholders are taking part in the construction of brand meaning and the production of brand manifestations, brand discourse is a complex process of social interaction that may be invigorated by contradictory contributions. The meaning of brands often unfolds through the interplay of consumers, resistant consumers, retailers and companies, as for instance in the case of Benetton. Its highly controversial advertising campaigns have brought forward committed advocates as well as antagonists, thus sharpening the brand's meaning. Disregarding these effects, researchers and practitioners alike have faced brand resistance and antagonistic brand discourse without knowing how to handle them. Hence, in order to get a

hold of brand meaning, it seems necessary to investigate the direct and indirect, online and offline interaction processes of all relevant members of what we termed brand interest group.

Furthermore, members of this brand interest group may form various relationships with a brand. Up until now, brand relationships in the literature have been viewed primarily as a dyadic relationship between the consumer and the branded object. However, those brand relationships are forming in the private, as well as in the public domain (Richins, 1994), which leads to different implications with regard to brand relationship building and private and symbolic consumption. Whereas private relationships may form independently from other members of the brand interest group, public relationships are used for entertaining social relationships and may derive much of their meaning from being a member of the brand interest group. Moreover, with regard to brand manifestations, members of the interest group might build up relationships with different manifestations of a brand. They might even produce their own brand manifestations, for instance in the form of fetishes and shrines. Robby Williams fans, for example, in absence of the person, build their own shrines consisting of color prints, flowers, CD's, concert tickets, and other devotional objects for the purpose of adoration. Other manifestations of such brands might be rituals, which help strengthen the relationship between members of a brand interest group and the brand meaning. Relationships may as well be formed with people and activities, which constitute manifestations of a brand. However, in order to be able to uncover the consequences of such behavior on brand meaning, all three components of a brand must be taken into consideration. It is the dynamics between these elements that shape brands in a permanent process of co-construction and co-production.

Managerial Implications

A number of managerial implications follow from our theoretical discussion. The basic tenets of our integrated view are in line with the postmodern view that brands are not controlled by managers but rather evolve in social discourse among people and organizations interested in the brand. Brand managers are confronted with the fact that they are not the 'owners' of the brand who can actively manipulate brand images in the minds of passive consumers (Salzer-Mörling and Strannegard, 2004). At least, the core members of a brand interest group actively participate in the creation of brand manifestations and the ongoing development of brand meaning. Who becomes a member of the brand interest group is largely

up to the interested individuals' control. However, this is not to say that brand managers cannot play an important part in the creation of brands. As they belong to the core of a brand interest group they have a prominent role in stimulating and altering brand-related social processes. They can actively contribute to the brand through products and services, communication activities, events, people and platforms on which the interactions of brand interest group members may take place.

Viewed from this perspective, brand 'management' offers even richer opportunities for developing brands. Targeting brand enthusiasts and brand followers is not restricted to potential consumers or buyers. The Ferrari brand, for instance, vividly demonstrates that the most enthusiastic members of the core interest group are not owners or buyers of a Ferrari car, nor the retailers or media, but rather fans who contribute to the Ferrari brand meaning through their passion for the Formula One racing team. Ferrari fans have become part of the brand by publicly displaying their allegiance through rituals, showing up in 'red masses', expressing their passion for Ferrari through totemic merchandise items. Without these fans, Ferrari would not be Ferrari. By managing brandscapes and platforms for social interaction, the Ducati brand managers, as another example, support an intensive discourse concerning brand meaning, which is rich in experiential and emotional facets, and the development of brand manifestations by the most active members of the brand interest group (Shawney, Verona and Prandelli, 2005).

The integrative brand conception presented here allows managers to think about a brand in a different manner, even with regard to its tangible and intangible manifestations. Referring to the example of BMW, the marketer seeks to manifest the brand with the blue and white logo, with the BMW Brand Academy and the BMW Brand Behavior Initiative as tools for internal brand building, by the Formula One racing team and various activities such as the annual biker meeting. It might just as well manifest itself in people or retail outlets. Moreover, platforms may be provided as meeting places for members of the brand interest group, like for instance seminars, adventure trips or online chat forums.

It is the integrated view of brands that should help to develop brands differently and more carefully. Once we accept that brands emerge in social discourse, for marketing it becomes indispensable to identify all relevant members of the brand interest group, their interrelationships and changing structure, to take their active role into account, forge

meaningful affective bonds among them and provide platforms and stimuli for positive brand discourse and activities in order to enable the co-creation of successful brands of the future.

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