

## **Leveraging brand communities with deep-layered meanings**

### **Abstract**

Brands are a key factor for the management of companies and have a leading role in the modern societies. Consumers develop different relationships with brands, some of them quite interesting from a marketing point of view. The engagement in brand communities is symptomatic of how consumers can involve themselves with their preferred brands. Brand communities are non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. Understanding the underlying characteristics that make some brands more prone to be chosen for a community is at the core of our study. Our purpose is also to contribute to the on-going debate on this topic. Our research is exploratory and we use a semiotic approach focused on how meanings influence the creation of brand communities.

Our findings suggest that it is primarily the brand and the depth of meanings that it allows to create around it that is central to the consumers' decisions to join or develop a brand community. This perspective accounts for why brands of completely different categories of products are chosen to the development of communities. Brand managers should create rich narratives around their brands to enable that consumers assume brands in their lives in meaningful ways. Addressing the consumers' interests, desires and aspirations is essential to create a significance that is deep rooted in consumers' lives. The brand's ability to reach deep layers of significance is critical for the foundation of brand communities.

### **1. Introduction**

The act of buying is a way of structuring and giving meaning both to the world and to the relationships established between people. In a consumer culture (Slater, 1997) products and their sign values take a leading role in the creation of meanings for individuals (Solomon, 1983; Fournier, 1998). In the post-modern world, consumers may regard brands with increasingly deeper levels of meaningfulness. The engagement in brand communities (BC) is symptomatic of how consumers can involve themselves with their preferred brands. Although there is a solid background of research in the field of brand communities (e.g. Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; McAlexander and Koenig, 2007) there's also a lot of potential to further develop this topic. Brand communities offer a fresh and effective approach to building brands in the present-day, unresponsive marketing environment (Algesheimer, 2005)

Brand communities may be based on a wide array of products, including cars, motorcycles, computers, television series, personal digital assistants and even soft drinks (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Belk and Tumbat 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Algesheimer et al., 2005). These different examples show how the development of communities is not limited to any particular type of product category. From this perspective we will address the following research question: what are the brand characteristics that facilitate the creation of brand communities?

The existing literature essentially deals with the characteristics of consumers in BCs that are already established. We consider that the previous approaches overlooked the study of the brand characteristics that are critical for the consumers' decision to join or start a BC. This was the gap that we identified and that we address with the present research.

This research paper aims at contributing to the discussion on the topic of brand communities. Our intention is to extend the BC literature by exploring a semiotic view about what is central for the consumers' decision to participate in a BC.

The originality of our approach results from focusing the research on the brand characteristics that make it more or less prone to be chosen as central to a community. Also, the use of semiotics contributes to the uniqueness of our work since that to the extent of our knowledge little has been explored on the topic of brand communities with the resources of the science of signs.

## **2. Approach**

Our study is exploratory (Yin, 2009) and in this first stage conceptual. Nonetheless we regard this first study as the beginning of a process that will include, in the future, the collection of empirical data to enrich and further develop the research.

If we accept that brands exist as representations in the markets (Franzen and Bouwman, 2001), involved in signs (Floch, 2001) and with power to create associations and meanings (Keller, 1998; McCracken, 1990, 2005; Holbrook and Hirschmann, 1993) then the semiotic theory seems to fit perfectly as an approach to develop research about brands. Although there are many different approaches to branding with the use of semiotics there is still a great potential to further develop the understanding of the brand phenomenon with the semiotic resources (Mick et al, 2004).

In the next section we will bring up a brief approach to the brand community and semiotic literatures. Then we will present our discussion about the role of meaning in the development of brand communities and we will end the article with the conclusions and ideas for future research.

## **3. Related literature**

### ***Brand communities***

A brand community can be described as a community with no geographic boundaries, built upon a structured set of social relations shared by brands' followers. Brands communities' main characteristics are the awareness of the existence of a shared possession, as well as of traditions, rituals and a sense of moral and social responsibility. Brand communities are part of a brand's social construction and play a vital role in the brand's final legacy (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Brand communities are social entities that reflect the inclusion of brands in the consumer's daily routine, serving not only as a connection between the consumer and a brand but also between consumers (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Brand communities are spaces where brand loyalty is intense, manifested and nurtured by the emotional connections the brand was able to establish with these customers.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) mention three essential elements of a brand community. First, it is necessary a consciousness of kind, which is the intrinsic connection that members feel towards each other; it's a collective feeling of shared difference. The consciousness of kind is a shared recognition, a way of thinking about certain things that goes beyond shared

attitudes or perceived similarities. Members feel a relevant connection with the brand but above all they feel a strong bond with the other community members. The consciousness of kind transcends geographic boundaries. The sense of belonging represents an intrinsic connection that members feel towards one another. This sense is one of the main reasons why brand communities can be so powerful when influencing someone's behavior (Vianello, 2011).

The second element that defines BCs is the common traditions and rituals that perpetuate the community and its history, culture and awareness of belonging. Traditions and rituals represent essential social processes where the community's signification is reproduced and transmitted within and outside the community. These rituals and traditions are generally focused on the use of experiences shared with the brand, acting as a way of maintaining the brand community's culture. Traditions and rituals represent essential social processes where the community's signification is reproduced and transmitted within and outside the community, allowing its perpetuation while sharing its story, culture and awareness. Whenever activities implying rituals or traditions are performed, members' sense of awareness and legitimacy towards their community increases (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

The third element of BCs is the sense of moral responsibility, a feeling of recognition of the right or obligation towards not only the community as a whole, but also towards its individual members. A sense of moral responsibility may be described as a self-awareness of the rights and obligations members have regarding not only the community but also other members. This leads to collective actions whenever the community feels threatened (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). This feeling of moral responsibility is the trigger to collective actions, also contributing to the group cohesion.

Brand communities play key roles on behalf of the brand, since they promote the dissemination of information and experiences, perpetuating the history and culture of brands. A brand community can create a strong relationship of allegiance and compromise between individuals with a certain brand (Keller 1998). BCs are one of the options that individuals have to gather in groups in order to create and promote social relationships, thus maximizing their social capital (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). These brand communities are promising, based on the assumption that the relationships established with consumers who share the same opinion are more effective and credible in inducing a connection between customers and a certain brand, leading them to a higher level of commitment and loyalty (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).

### ***Semiotics***

Researchers of semiotics study signs and their effects, the processes of signification, how meanings are created and how reality is represented (Chandler, 2007). The roots of semiotics can be identified in the pre-Socratic era, where Hippocrates identified bodily symptoms as signs conveyors of messages about physical and mental states (Danesi, 1998). Nevertheless, it was only in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that modern semiotics had its origins based on the writings of the American philosopher Charles Peirce and of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (Beasley *et al*, 2000).

For Saussure, a sign, linguistic or otherwise can be regarded as a dyadic relation between a signifier (form, expression) and a signified (concept, content). So, sign *is* the *relation* between the signifier and signified. For Saussure there's an arbitrary nature of the sign.

Signifier and signified are not linked by any defined relationship but this connection is rather arbitrary.

Peirce, on other hand, developed a semiotic conception where a third element – the object – is a referent. His General Theory of signs can be explained in the following fashion: “*sign* is a thing which serves to convey knowledge of some other thing, which it is said to *stand for or represent*. This thing is called the *object* of the sign, the idea in the mind that the sign excites, which is a mental sign of the same object, is called an *interpretant* of the sign.” (Peirce, 1893-1913: 13). Peirce defended the idea that human beings have no direct experience, but merely an indirect knowledge of reality. The relationship between the three semiotic elements presented translates the process of representation through which human beings construct their knowledge and understanding of the world.

Human being interpret things as signs mostly in an unconscious way (Chandler, 2007). This perspective is shared by researchers like Danesi (2006) that considers that the processes of mental construction are most of the times unconscious and Franzen and Bouwman (2001) who argue that a large part of the representations are beyond consciousness.

We will borrow perspectives from both a Saussurean and Peircean theories. Mick *et al* (2004) state that the integration of multiple semiotic paradigms is promising and that the repeated separation of the Peircean and Saussurean traditions could be detrimental to the realization of the benefits of using the semiotic theory in marketing. Semiotics has been used, in marketing research, mainly in the fields of advertising, brand image research and the theory of symbolic consumption (Nöth, 1988).

#### **4. Discussion**

The starting assumption of our discussion is that brands are semiotic entities. This view implies regarding brands as systems of signs that have the ability to create meanings in the consumers’ perceptual spaces. Brands continuously generate representations, issuing signs that float free in the markets. These signs are endowed with the ability to act as stimulus that can influence consumers at any moment in time. Signs of brands can be apprehended unconsciously and the subsequent processing of their effects can be also made beyond consciousness. Brands are dynamic entities that generate meanings through the actions of their signs.

It is important to clarify the concepts of brand knowledge and brand meaning. The action of semiotic signs creates an effect in the mind of consumers. This effect of signs can be regarded as a perceptual response that integrates information in one’s mind, contributing to the knowledge about the referents of those signs. Keller (2003) defines consumer brand knowledge as all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information stored in consumer memory. Knowledge about brands is traditionally regarded in marketing literature in terms of brand awareness and brand image. Brand image is defined as consumer perceptions of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in memory (Keller, 1998). The significance of brands, on other hand, results from the consumer-ascribed value to the knowledge set (Berthon *et al.*, 2009). We use brand meaning in this sense.

The complex nature of meaning can be explored with a semiotic approach. Meanings result from personal interpretations that are conditioned by the pre-existing ideas, values, opinions and all the idiosyncrasies that compose the self. Also, the interpretation of signs is conditioned by the specific social, cultural and historical contexts. That’s why different

consumers develop different associations to a brand, even if using the very same signs. Meanings thus arise from an individual processing of signs that is infused with the personal characteristics of each consumer. Nevertheless, brands accomplish the development of shared meanings because consumers don't live in isolation but rather in societies that share resources, namely social and cultural ones.

Barthes (1984) used the example of language to show that systems of signs present not only a literal sense but also deeper senses, like symbolic and figurative ones. There are different layers of meaning. Besides a first-order structure that relates to the denotative meanings there are also second order systems that head mythical levels, as Barthes (1984) calls them.

We propose transposing this semiotic view to the analysis of brands. The idea of layers of meaning is quite valuable to the development of our approach. From a semiotic view of brands we propose that the meanings that they are able to create can be regarded as layered. Since each consumer will develop its own interpretation of signs, the significance of each brand he or she knows can be different and reach deep layers.

Meanings that consumers develop about brands can assume different degrees. There are certainly some brands that represent more meanings and to which one assigns more importance. And there are surely other brands that signify less to a consumer. Apple, Lexus and Gap for example, can be highly significant brands for a given consumer and of little interest to others. Also, consumers can assign to these brands different levels of meanings. Brands offer consumers ways of developing symbolic meanings, associations, emotions, self-affirmation and identification (Aaker, 1996). The ascribed value that each consumer assigns to brands is made through a personal process that intertwines the brand signs' effects with the personal idiosyncrasies.

The depth of brand meaning is not, to the extent of our knowledge, explored in the literature. Keller (2001), for example, speaks of establishing breadth and depth of brand awareness. But the idea of deep layers of significance goes beyond the concept of brand awareness. What we propose is a view about how meanings of brands can reach layers that are deeply rooted in consumers' mind.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) studied a Saab community in the USA where members were quick to point out that the brand also produces airplanes and jet fighters. This fact seems to be important to some consumers and offers a way to deepen the significance of the brand. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) also suggest that brands with a rich and long history seem to be more easily chosen for developing communities. The characteristics of products (e.g. design, quality, ability to efficiently perform specific functions), of the company (e.g. social and ecological responsibility, ability to manufacture) and of the brand itself (like its history, its graphic design or its values) can be critical to the development of consumers' meanings. So it seems that are not the products that make their brands more prone to be chosen for a brand community. Brand communities are not exclusive of given categories of products but are rather determined by the brands themselves.

Our central argument is that brands that have the ability to create different and deep layers of meaning around them are more easily chosen to be at the core of brand communities. This perspective accounts for why brands of completely different categories of products are central to the development of brand communities. It is primarily the brand and the depth of meanings that it allows to create around it that is central to the consumers' decisions to join

or develop a BC. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) have suggested: "These communities may form around any brand, but are probably most likely to form around brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition." We also believe that brands with rich associations, with unique characteristics like a long heritage and with a strong distinctiveness in face of competitors, for example, offer consumers more possibilities to develop deep layers of meaning around them.

As explained, meanings result in a first stage from personal interpretation processes. Nevertheless shared meanings will be accomplished in different groups of consumers. Brands that offer consumers the possibility of developing deep-layered meanings will certainly be more prone to have communities around them. If a brand is highly significant to a consumer and if he encounters other consumers to whom the brand assumes also deep meanings then we might have the necessary shared interest to develop a community.

Brands can assume deep layers of significance for consumers' lives, in ways that sometimes are very particular, but nonetheless not necessarily unique to a single consumer. Complex layers of significance that are intertwined with personal emotions, aspirations, desires and even pleasure and passion, can be developed by a given consumer towards one brand. At the same time other consumers can also develop these deep layers of meaning. The symbolism of Nike and the aspirational nature that the brand offers to consumers, alongside narratives that frame its communication in appealing ways, are all elements that can be used by consumers. Consumers can develop deep layers of significance about Nike by intertwining their personal characteristics with the ones offered by the brand. These meanings can be beyond the consumers' consciousness. Also, these meanings can lead to oppositional brand loyalty to other brands.

Our view is aligned with Algesheimer et al. (2005) perspective that the consumer's relationship with the brand precedes to his or her relationship with the brand community. The authors (2005) used the construct of "brand relationship quality", defined as the degree to which the consumer views the brand as a satisfactory partner in an ongoing relationship, to encompass the overall consumer relationship with a brand. Algesheimer et al. (2005) "found that the consumer's relationship with the car brand was an influential antecedent to his or her identification with the brand community." Before joining a BC, consumers must have already some kind of special interest in the brand. A deep significance is, in our view, the critical aspect.

## **5. Conclusions**

We propose that the consumers' development of deep-layered meanings about brands is essential for brands communities. Brands that offer consumers the possibility of developing deep significance are more easily chosen to be at the core of a brand community. Presenting brands in narratives, full of possible associations, symbolism and appeal is essential. Brands must be able to offer consumers the possibility of entering their lives and becoming meaningful in deep layers of significance. A brand offer is not only composed by tangible elements, like products, but also by intangible ones like associations. The richer the narratives around a brand, the higher will be the possibility that consumers assume brands in their lives in meaningful ways. Addressing the consumers' interests, desires and aspirations is essential to create a significance that is deep rooted in the consumers' lives. The brand's ability to reach deep layers of significance is what we propose as critical for the foundation of brand communities.

## **6. Limitations and future research**

This paper is being developed in a conceptual frame and this is its main limitation. We deem as relevant the study of the dynamics of meaning when consumers are already involved in a BC. What is the role of deep layers of meaning to the development of the brand communities? The semiotic view of representations as continuous growth can be relevant to understand how the participation in a BC can lead to even deeper levels of personal significance of a brand. The continuous interplay between personal meanings and shared meanings of a BC is a critical aspect, in our view, about how these communities evolve throughout the time. Another critical aspect that should be investigated is the role of authenticity in the communication of brands. Is the brand authenticity critical for the success of a BC? And to what extent do consumers value authenticity and are able to evaluate it? These are some of the questions that we believe being valuable addressing in future research.

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