

# The Process of Negotiating Brand Meaning: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores brand meaning creation and negotiation within a framework consisting of three environments, each existing within the "culturally constituted system". In the marketing environment, positioning tactics make the brand recognizable and memorable. The individual environment links the brand to life situations and roles taken on by the "self". In the social environment, where brand meaning often facilitates communication through symbolism, a negotiation process must take place. We take a symbolic interactionist perspective to explore this negotiation process and the subsequent development of brand meaning. We present an application of this meaning negotiation process, and the implications of considering brand meaning as a socially negotiated result.

How is the meaning of a brand name negotiated? Is symbolic meaning instilled in a product by the marketer, in a process that links the product to a symbolic lifestyle? Do consumers choose meaning-laden brands that correspond to their own self concept? Or perhaps consumers create the symbolic meaning of the brands that they use through interaction with others. The premise of this paper is that all three of these scenarios are possible, and likely, as consumers navigate their way through the branded marketplace. The marketer controls the amount and type of information about the brand as it first enters the market; however, once in the marketplace, both the individual consumer and the social system can alter the information and change brand meaning.

Recent work in consumer research has examined how meaning is accepted and altered by consumers. Broadly generalizing, there are two ways in which brand meaning is seen as internalized by consumers. One perspective is that marketers create symbolic meaning for a product or brand and inject it into a "culturally constituted world" (McCracken 1986). This perspective assumes that products acquire a stable meaning, and that consumers accept this meaning "provided" for them, and choose products and brands that suit their self-identity (e.g., Aaker 1997; Fournier 1998; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Walker and Olson 1994), or their personality and values (for a review see Holt 1997). Another perspective is that consumers use creative ways to combine and adapt meanings to fit their own lives; the meanings of products, brands, and advertisements are not perceived similarly by all consumers, but are interpreted in accordance with an individual's life. Individual preferences are a mix of interpretations, discourses, or frameworks used by consumers to link together the brand, the social situation, and the individual (Holt 1997; Mick and Buhl 1992; Scott 1994; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

Our holistic perspective assumes that marketers attempt to instill meaning into products and brands, and that consumers creatively interpret and construct individual meanings based on their life tasks and life goals. However, our framework also considers that consumers do not always act independently when attempting to interpret marketer-induced brand meaning in the cultural system; social forces are also influential (Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen

1996; Ward and Reingen 1990), especially in the process of brand meaning negotiation. Within the marketing environment we examine the establishment and transfer of firm-induced meaning. Within the individual environment we examine how aspects of the self are implicated in brand meaning. Finally, in the social environment we examine the *process* by which consumers negotiate and create brand meaning. A key contribution of this research is our explication of this process using symbolic interactionist theory. For, it is within the social environment that the consumer most often attempts to both signal and explain his/her intended meaning to others.

The paper is organized as follows: we first discuss the concept of brand meaning, since negotiating this meaning is at the core of our argument. Next we present a framework for analyzing the negotiation of brand meaning based on the marketing, individual, and social environments. Our discussion focuses on the process occurring in the social environment, and explains brand meaning negotiation using symbolic interactionism. We conclude with implications of our theory for one specific domain, brand personality research, and a general discussion of the theory's impact.

## BRAND MEANING

A brand does not simply signal a product's utilitarian attributes; it can also have a particular meaning, which makes the product personally meaningful and intrinsically relevant for the consumer. Within the marketplace, the consumer is inundated with both visual and verbal communication campaigns that appeal to this notion of the brand as a meaningful entity. In this way, marketing plays a major role in the creation of brand meaning, because advertisements and promotions tend to inject certain beliefs about the brand into the marketplace. However, a brand's meaning is more than just a marketer-induced tactic; it must also be capable of provoking personally relevant components within the individual.

The way in which the marketer constructs a brand and presents it to a specific consuming segment will be less effective if various perspectives exist for what the brand stands for or means. Likewise, the individual consumer who purchases a product because of the implied meaning behind its brand name will have difficulty communicating this meaning to others if acceptance of the meaning is not consistently recognized. Brand meaning thus offers a mode of communication, an agreed upon way of recognizing the product. Individuals tend to perceive others based on characteristics and qualities that the others exhibit in social situations (Kenny 1994); the same argument can also be made for branded products and their use in particular situations (Aaker 1997; Keller 1993). In general, in order for a brand's meaning to be useful in a social context, agreement about its meaning is necessary on three components: its physical make up, its functional characteristics and its characterization- i.e., personality (Plummer 1984).

The first component of brand meaning on which agreement must be achieved is the brand's physical attributes, which are identifiable and easily verified. A product's unique shape and distinctive packaging offer ways of recognizing alternatives. If various consumers are able to easily recognize one product over another, based simply on the design of the product or on its packaging, then the product's physical attributes are consistent. The second component, the brand's functional characteristics, are also easily identifiable. If consumers repeatedly use the product to

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perform the same task, then agreement on this characteristic exists.

It is not as easy for consumers to agree on the brand's third component, its characterization (personality). The brand becomes something (or someone) personal for the consumer, and its specific attributes play a key role in one's life. Characterization has a dual purpose; not only does it assist in drawing the individual consumer closer to the product, but it can also appeal to a larger audience by creating a shared awareness of its meaning.

In order to successfully sustain a specific brand meaning, it is important for consumers who use the brand to reach some level of agreement about its meaning. *Brand meaning develops from the interchange among three environments: the marketing, individual, and social, as each environment contributes to a uniform way for consumers to identify and interact with a branded product.* Brand meaning enriches the communication process between individuals. Branded products stick in the consumer's mind, thus assisting in the decision-making process by eliciting favorable (or unfavorable) information about a particular product. Not only does the consumer evaluate the functional aspects of the product, but with a developed brand meaning, he or she can also focus on more personally relevant aspects of the product. More importantly, agreement about a brand's meaning can lead one to express more about oneself to others in society and, at the same time, interact on a different level (i.e., more intimate/personal, as opposed to functional) with the product (Aaker 1996). The next section introduces a framework that identifies the three environments in which a product's brand meaning develops. Transference of meaning occurs both within each environment and across environments; thus maintaining some level of consistency becomes extremely important.

### FRAMEWORK FOR THE BRAND MEANING NEGOTIATION PROCESS

Figure 1 identifies three environments in which the development and transfer of brand meaning occurs for a particular product; the marketing, the individual, and the social environments. Within each one, a particular meaning may develop, depending on the agenda(s) of the individual(s) who participate(s) in the environment. Neither a "top down" nor a "linear" effect is present; meaning developed within one environment may or may not impact the meaning existing in another environment. Meaning in one environment might exert more influence on the other environments, again depending on the nature of the individuals within that particular environment. In order for meaning negotiation to take place, it is important to see where brand meaning first comes from and how it can impact each consumer individually. In the next section, the focus shifts to each of these environments.

#### THE MARKETING ENVIRONMENT

Within the marketing environment, brand meaning develops most often from the actual brand development work conducted during the marketing of the product. The typical fanfare associated with introducing a product into the marketplace often involves informing the potential consumer of the benefits that he or she will experience with product use. Through the use of highly innovative communication campaigns and the visibility of public media, the potential consumer not only gains knowledge about product benefits, but also about intended meanings associated with a particular brand. The advertising system enables marketers to frame a product in a way that is appealing to certain segments of society, who can view the advertising and identify with unique or personalized symbols (Shepard 1997) or can imagine the way in which the brand can be used in social situations (Scott 1994). The same can also be said of using media in general, because certain products make their

way into writings, productions and performances, thus increasing the scope of the brand's meaning and impact.

Brand equity concerns itself with issues that make a particular brand recognizable and favorable over other alternatives; it constitutes a "set of assets linked to a brand's name and symbol that adds to the value" of the firm's offering (Aaker 1996). Building this equity is extremely important because, as more consumers positively evaluate and repeatedly purchase the brand, a tolerance to switching develops (Crispell and Brandenburg 1993). Marketers attempt to create a strong and consistent brand meaning (via advertising and other media) in order to become the market leader, or to ensure long term profit (Arnold 1992).

In short, brand equity creates cues to memory (Nedungadi 1990), and the brands provide a summary of information for consumers; they are used as a form of "mental shorthand" (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Arnold 1992; Johnson and Russo 1984). Because the marketing environment is saturated with so many dominant brands, the deterioration of brand loyalty (Liesse 1991) and brand management's problem with "cookie-cutter" products (McGinn 1997) are serious issues. The impetus is on the marketing environment to maintain the meaning it imbues into the brand; this is done by the marketer through complementary marketing programs supporting the brand's meaning (Arnold 1992; de Chernatony and McDonald 1992). We now focus our discussion on how individuals receive and interpret the meaning transmitted by the marketing environment.

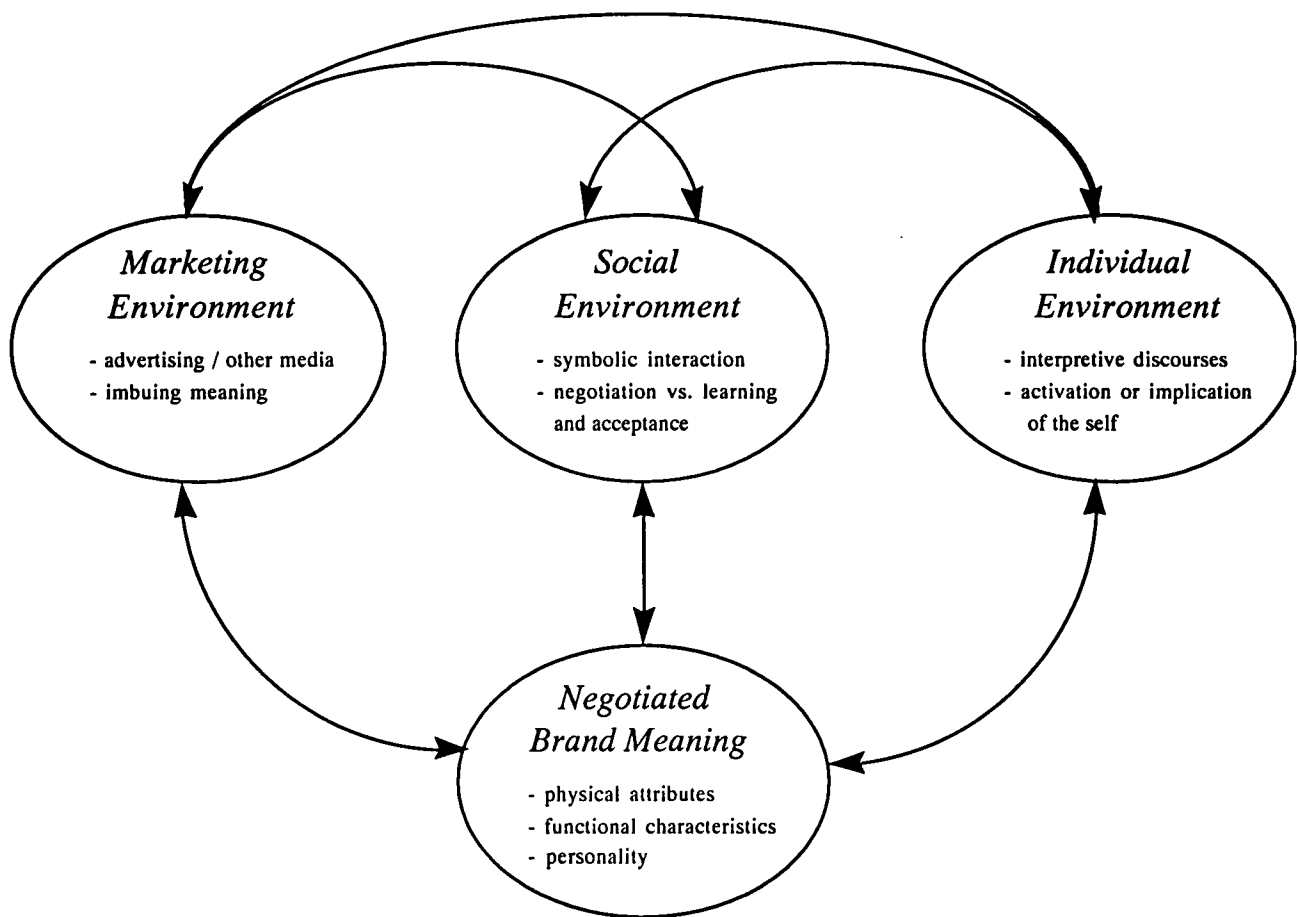
#### THE INDIVIDUAL ENVIRONMENT

Brand meaning can also be developed in the individual consumer's environment. The way in which a consumer wishes to be perceived by others, or how one wishes to present him or herself can lead to the use of a specific product (Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Walker and Olson 1994). We believe that consumers look to the meanings created in both the marketing and social environments to assist with this individual meaning construction. However, consumers are creative, and in the individual environment we foresee two major meaning creation processes.

In the first, consumers interpret the marketer derived meanings of the brand (transmitted through various aspects of the cultural system) and actively adopt or change these meanings through a kind of discourse between the "accepted" meaning and their personal life situation (Holt 1997; Scott 1994; Thompson and Haytko 1997). The essence of this process is that in the individual environment, the meaning of the brand to a person emerges from a "...dialogue between their personal goals, life history, context-specific interests, and the multitude of countervailing cultural meanings..." (Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 16). Individuals make use of the information in the marketing environment and combine this information with their own goals and history to make sense of the brand, to create an individualized meaning of the brand. An underlying assumption in our approach is that individuals have a coherent life story, and so the meanings they create for brands will exist in the context of this holistic life story (Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson 1996; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994).

In the second meaning creation process, consumers enter a given situation with an understanding of the brand meaning influenced by the self, and by individual goals (Cantor et al. 1987; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Little 1989; Markus and Ruvolo 1989). Our formulation of the self follows that of Hermans, who describes a self able "...to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time" (Hermans 1996, p. 33). We assume that the self is itself multifaceted (Cantor and Kihlstrom 1987; Walker and Olson 1994), and that people have

**FIGURE 1**  
A Framework for the Brand Negotiation Process



multiple selves and multiple identities (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993; Markus and Ruvolo 1989). In a given situation, for example an appraisal of a brand, the appraisal will be dependent on whether the self is implicated (Menon and Johar 1997), and on which self is "activated" (Walker and Olson 1994) at the time of meaning construal. This in turn, is influenced by what is important to a person at the time that they begin to construct the brand's meaning, for example, their life themes and life projects (Cantor et al. 1987; Huffman, Ratneshwar and Mick 1997; Little 1989; Markus and Ruvolo 1989).

Both of these processes help to create the brand's meaning in the individual environment. This individual meaning is "brought into" the negotiation of meaning in the social environment through symbolic interactionism. If an individual joining a social group comes to the group with a pre-existing, discrepant sense of the brand's meaning, that meaning must be renegotiated through interaction with the group. In this sense, the individual environment creates a brand meaning that becomes an input to the overall negotiation of meaning process.

Our approach to the individual environment stresses the role of self in negotiating brand meaning. However, we must point out that we believe that both the marketing environment and the social environment become aspects of the self. Studying the role of self in

brand meaning recognizes that the boundary between the group and the self is blurred, in many ways the group is behaving "within the individual" (Hermans 1996). We now turn our attention to this social environment and the negotiation process.

#### THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Brand meaning within the social environment is not only developed and transferred, but it is also negotiated and altered. Each consumer brings an individual meaning to the social situation. Additionally, the marketing environment actively attempts to pass specific brand meaning knowledge onto the consumer, which can lead to numerous interpretations of such meaning. The opportunity exists for many interpretations; however, in most cases, the brand's meaning is able to gain a unified ground in the marketplace. What happens within the social environment that makes this unification and acceptance of a dominant brand meaning possible? Clearly, negotiation must take place in order to reach an agreed upon meaning that facilitates communication and interaction. This negotiation process and its implications for effective communication in the social environment can be explained by taking a symbolic interactionist perspective.

Social interaction exists when two or more individuals communicate with each other in some meaningful way. Each individual has a number of "tools" at one's disposal that assist in the transfer of meaning to others. Most of these tools (e.g., language, gestures, objects) gain their meaning from the teachings and socialization process that one experiences as one comes to be identified with a particular group (i.e., the family, the peer group, the work group, etc.). As one gains acceptance into a particular group, meaningful communication develops with others, thus allowing one's sense of "self" to become identified within that particular group (Mead 1977). The individual gains familiarity with the various objects that are used and is able to see how they impact group communication with their symbolic meanings. In order to interact effectively, one must either 1) learn and accept the implied meanings of the objects, or 2) successfully negotiate one's own meanings of the object to others. One also has the option of seeking out another social setting, where object meaning supports one's beliefs.

Since the individual is able to express more about oneself through various devices, much effort goes into choosing the appropriate device, and expressing an intended meaning in the clearest fashion. *In the case of using objects (branded products), the individual (consumer) must not only account for what is currently known about the object (from the marketing environment) and what one personally believes the object signifies (from the individual environment), but one must also be aware of the way in which the social group interprets the meaning of the object.* The meaning added to the product has the most impact in social interaction and communication when it is identified in use and is accepted by others. Meaning is constantly projected into the world, and the way in which it is deciphered can depend both on how it is projected (i.e., the individual's intentions) and in what context it is projected (Mead 1977). Within the social environment, the meaning that an object conveys can either be accepted or rejected by others; often, the object's meaning must be negotiated among members of society so that it can be unambiguously represented. In order to better understand how this acceptance occurs for branded products, it is important to first explain how such products assist in the communication process.

### **Social Communication**

"Goods themselves remain the communicators, and it is through them that the discourse flows," (Leiss, Klein, and Jhalley 1986). The prevalence of meaning-laden goods has never been more apparent than in today's marketplace. For example, the name Cadillac is synonymous with large, American automobiles, associated mainly with middle-aged or older consumers. General Motors recently introduced the sporty Catera. Its advertised tagline is "The Caddy that Zigs;" clearly, a message that attempts to establish a youthful and sporty meaning for the brand name. In this example, both the physical properties of the object and its imputed meaning function together to say something about the consumer. The next step is to identify how this meaning is ascribed to the object. A symbolic interactionist perspective offers insight into this, and it explains how this meaning becomes consistent within the social environment.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interaction is a complex interplay between social action, the reflexive nature of the self and the negotiations of one's character in daily society (Blumer 1969; Farganis 1993). One's personal meaning for an object is not, by itself, adequate for the use of that object in social interaction. The meaning of an object is not always clear-cut, especially when used in social situations; therefore, the marketing environment meaning may not always accu-

rately reflect an intended meaning either. The social group plays a role in determining how one will act and what kind of meaning one will place on those acts, events and objects that are incorporated into daily life. Social life is a process (as opposed to a structure); it is constantly forming and changing, based on complex interactions between individuals and the need to create meaning and communication (Blumer 1969).

"Objects have no fixed status except as their meaning is sustained through indications and definitions that people make of the objects" (Blumer 1969, p. 12). Symbolic interaction stresses that object meaning arises from the negotiation between members of a social group. Thus, a Rolex watch may signify either an accurate timepiece or a symbol of financial success, depending on the group. The individual does not understand the implied group meaning until after the interaction. Blumer (1969) sees the link between object meaning and the "self" from a number of perspectives. First, when the individual learns of the group's meaning, one can use, alter or deny the meaning. Some meanings may be similar while others may differ; it is up to the individual to determine if the group's meaning is appropriate. This leads to the second perspective; one's object meaning is singular until some social action is performed with the object. Only when action occurs can others begin to infer something about the individual and the object in use. Third, one can only gauge understanding of one's object meaning when it becomes part of an interaction process. Until that time, the only meanings that one is aware of are one's own personal beliefs or those intended beliefs passed down through the cultural system. Finally, one's action (or inaction) with the object is based on its implied or symbolic meaning. The individual must behave in a way commensurate with the elicited meaning to effectively communicate with others in the group.

As more individuals come in contact with others who possess like objects, support is gained for the implied (symbolic) meaning of possessing such objects. This is evident in today's society, where various types of objects serve as representations of cultural phenomenon (McCracken 1986): "the traditional versus contemporary home," "the blue collar car vacation versus the white collar vacation abroad," "Generation X driving Volkswagon Jettas versus the Baby Boomers driving BMWs," etc. Individuals in a social situation not only have their market-driven beliefs about a product, but also their personal intentions about how to use the product. While interacting, they attempt to negotiate their meanings for the object in a way that will assist with the communication process. Negotiation of meaning leads to similar views of an object, and this enables the individual to evaluate the usefulness of the object in identifying something about him or herself.

### **The Social Construction of Reality through Marketing**

The construction of reality occurs from within the social environment, with individuals' actions at a particular time, in a particular place. The notion of the symbolic universe or environment is important for making sense of the deeper meanings that an individual uses for communication (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Solomon 1983). Just as an individual acts with another during a particular situation, one is also interacting with the environment. In the case of the consumer, what one purchases not only aids in personal life, but it also sends a message to the particular social group with whom one identifies. One reaches a stage of "maturity" after effectively interacting with others in various situations, while understanding the various environmentally impacted meanings used in the communication process. During this period of maturing, one learns about, and ultimately helps to create, the negotiated meanings assigned to certain objects. Various contexts become appropriate for transmittal of meaning to others via an object. For

example, Chevy trucks are "like a rock" and their performance substantiates this belief. Hence, an individual who is hardworking and who drives a Chevy truck will more than likely be perceived as being dependable and always there... "like a rock".

In the case of branded products, their meanings within the marketplace arise not only from their physical and functional aspects, but also from the more symbolic characteristics (i.e., characterization). The product not only performs a specific act, but it also helps in identifying the consumer in a particular role (Solomon 1983). Therefore, from the marketer's perspective, it is extremely important to understand that the intended meaning, constructed in the marketing environment, can be altered to suit both individual and social purposes. Furthermore, meaning at the individual level only constitutes another layer. What the individual thinks about the brand's meaning holds little value if it cannot be effectively communicated in the social environment.

### Summary

We have outlined a framework for conceiving how the marketing environment, the social group environment, and the individual environment work together (or sometimes at odds with one another) to negotiate brand meanings. We will now explore the implications of this framework for a particular marketing domain: brand personality research.

## AN APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE BRAND MEANING NEGOTIATION PROCESS

One increasingly important factor in conveying brand meaning is the development of a brand personality. It may be reasonable to characterize a product with human qualities or by giving it volitional behaviors (Olson and Allen 1994). This approach is often seen in advertising campaigns that use celebrity endorsers for the product. Nike's campaign for the Zoom Air line used celebrities noted for their speed (e.g., Michael Johnson, 1994 Olympic Gold Medallist), who lamented about their extraordinary abilities to the point of placing the blame on the product. Another popular way of creating a personality for the brand is to bring it to life with animation (Olson and Allen 1994). Successful examples of this are M&M's characters, Red and Yellow. The consumer is entertained while being engaged with the product on a more personal level.

A strong brand personality may lead to the development of a relationship between the product and the consumer (Fournier 1998, 1994). The brand is a social agent, as opposed to merely an object (e.g., the use of Snoopy as an insurance salesman, thus depicting trust, loyalty and comfort offered by Metropolitan Life Insurance). A brand's personality can be unique; the personality dimensions might include aspects that the consumer does and does not possess (Aaker 1997). The brand behaves as an "active, contributing member" of the partnership (Fournier 1998). Fournier's in-depth analyses of "Vicki," "Jean," and "Karen" reveal that brands affect aspects of each one's identity (e.g., Vicki's belief of a brand's significance for social identification, such as with the various scented shampoos and perfumes needed in order to achieve her "desired image of wholesomeness"). The brands play specific roles in the daily lives of the individuals who consume them.

Injecting the symbolic interactionist perspective into the study of brand personality offers additional insight into how these relationships develop. Not only is the personality negotiated in the social environment so that the product can be effectively communicated with others, but negotiation also takes place in the individual environment, between the consumer and the branded personality (i.e., how does the consumer envision a unique relationship with the product). The unique personality dimensions of a brand

tailor its intended meaning beyond the aggregate level, to a more unique individual perspective (Aaker 1997).

### Summary

This paper outlines a framework of brand meaning creation in three settings: the marketing, individual, and social environments. It continues in the emerging stream of literature concerning how consumers make sense of and create meanings for products, brands, and consumption patterns (Fournier 1998; Holt 1997). Our theory contributes to the view of an active, constructive consumer who interprets and negotiates marketer-created meaning in the context of their life situation (Holt 1997; Scott 1994; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

More interestingly, our approach offers a synthesis of work undertaken from disparate theoretical and methodological viewpoints. Holt's poststructuralism calls for more emphasis on the study of collective consumption patterns, focusing on meaning creation (Holt 1997). The sociocognitive work done by Ward and Reingen and their colleagues examines a collective, group level of influence, but with a focus on both decisions and processes. For example, they have studied how group polarization may influence decision outcomes (Chandrashekar et al. 1996). Our work suggests a synthesis. In meaning creation, the symbolic interactionist perspective suggests that group polarization *cannot happen*, because meaning must be agreed upon. Group members negotiate brand meaning so that communication and interaction can occur. Brand meaning negotiation is a fundamentally different situation than brand choice, thus marketers and consumer researchers should study the meaning creation process in more depth.

Many intriguing consumer issues can be addressed by viewing meaning creation within our framework. For example, understanding how symbolic meaning is negotiated in a group and adopted by the individual sheds light on how group meaning transfers to, and potentially alters the concept of the self. Studying this process in dysfunctional groups (e.g., gangs) could also illuminate how "dark-side" behavior results from the identification with a created brand meaning. The process of negotiation and the resultant meaning of a brand enable the consumer to not only express something about one's self, but to also fit in, and communicate with, a particular group. More broadly, the symbolic interactionist perspective potentially offers a synthesis of existing theoretical perspectives on the construction of meaning, by incorporating an active, interpreting consumer operating within a dynamic social group.

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