

BUILDING UP BRAND MEANING FOR CONSUMERS THROUGH SOCIAL, INDIVIDUAL, MENTAL, AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS

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Abstract

Purpose – to reveal peculiarities of brand meaning creation for consumers through social, individual, mental, and spiritual dimensions.

Design/methodology/approach – the brand meaning dimensions for consumers are analyzed, systematic and logical analysis of scientific literature is performed.

Finding – the analysis and synthesis of the scientific literature allowed to identify the main features and practices of brand meaning building.

Research limitations/implications – the scope of the present paper is limited because it is only a primary attempt to develop an understanding of brand meaning creation for consumers through social, individual, mental, and spiritual dimensions. Also, empirical investigations are needed in order to prove the literature review findings.

Practical implications – the results of this study can be useful for public relations managers, marketing and communication strategists, communications and marketing scientists in making decisions that would help to create brand meaning for consumers.

Originality/Value – based on the results of the analysis of scientific literature sources, the author of the article identified the main dimensions of building the brand meaning and their features and practice.

Keywords: brand, relationship, self-expression, spirituality, lifestyle.

Research type: a literature review.

Introduction

Relevance of the topic. Brands are inherently ideological entities and the logic of brands extends easily across social media to political ideas, which themselves become part of the realm of consumer culture (Hackley & Hackley, 2020). In the contemporary context, brands have become an extremely important part of consumers' lives, they are becoming intermediaries between consumers and real life. Brands create new meanings for consumers, they replace physical experience, construct views and knowledge, and shape the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions that lead to decisions and actions.

Today for brands it is not enough to offer products. Consumers want more. They are searching for more meaning, understanding, and fulfillment. In contemporary society, consumers take for granted that their physical needs will be met. What they crave are opportunities to nourish their emotional needs and fuel self-actualization. They also want to buy emotional equity. They want to buy a laugh, to feel good, to feel safe, cared for, looked after, and nourished. They want to feel important, proactive, special, included, beautiful,

caring, altruistic, powerful, empowered and loved (Sutherland, 2017). Modern brands have become purpose-oriented and multidimensional, with more perceived dimensions than merely the functional, such as social and individual, both mental and spiritual (Gad, 2016). As an example, by buying beauty products, consumers know they are buying the extra benefits of protecting our planet; defending human rights; supporting community trade; activating self-esteem; and saying no to animal testing (Sutherland, 2017).

All larger world brands have an exceptional emotional impact on their consumers. They inspire them, they move them, and give their lives a new meaning (Bačevac et al, 2019). Brands are trying to inspire consumers. When consumers are inspired, for example, by branded videos, they appreciate more meaning in life. This appreciation sparks their sense of gratitude, directed toward the inspiring content and its source, so they likely generate more favorable attitudes toward both the video and the brand (Chang, 2020).

While there have been scores of papers on the actions that brands can take once they acquire market-relevant meanings (e.g., through brand extensions), there are fewer on how brands can create meaning for consumers in the first place. If brands do not address consumer needs, brands may face significant financial losses and lose consumer trust, and market value, which may even lead to a brand reputation crisis, or brand bankruptcy. Therefore, it is very important for brands to respond to consumer needs, and create meaning for consumers, using different approaches and dimensions.

The problem analyzed in this article can be defined by the following questions: How do brands make meaning for consumers? What types of dimensions to choose for the brand meaning creation? Based on this information, it will be possible to continue research in the field of public relations management to reveal the brand meaning creating for the consumers, it can help brands to gain a competitive advantage in the markets and create greater added value.

Consumer-Brand relationship

People develop and maintain emotionally charged relationships with brands. These feelings include affection, passion, and connection (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2018). The brand creates a relationship with consumers by telling its story in a certain way (Bačevac et al, 2019). Building strong brand connections with customers is a solid basis for cultivating customers' positive attitudes (Frasquet et al., 2017).

When brands empower, gratify, and inspire customers, customers want to establish a long-term relationship with the brand. When a brand provides these three benefits, customers come to trust, love, and respect the brand; in short, they admire it (Palusuk et al, 2019). Interpersonal relationship theories were being used by Hon and Grunig (1999), and they thereby recognized six relationship parameters, which are extensively accepted. These are known as "trust", "satisfaction", "commitment", "control mutuality", "exchange relationship", and "communal relationship" (Men and Tsai, 2014).

This implies that when "customers" involve themselves with the activities of word-of-mouth, trendiness, personalization, interactions, and informativeness in social media platforms like Facebook, the consumers gradually develop trust towards the brands, experience more satisfaction with the brands, and feel more committed towards that particular brand. Further, when examining the dimensions of the relationship, the trust element was found to have a high impact on the relationship-building, followed by satisfaction and commitment (Sharma et al, 2021).

Humans have a fundamental desire to create a social network and interact with others. As a way to relieve unsatisfied psychological deficits in everyday human relationships,

individuals experience constant and routine substitute socialization with specific brands and stars through participation in mass media or fan communities. Today, people experience fan-star or fan-brand relationships similar to real human relationships with various brands and celebrities through mass media, such as television and the Internet (Albert, Ambroise, & Valette-Florence, 2017).

Brands fulfill a social role as symbolic nodes that evoke in individuals, freely and subjectively, the most accepted values. Through rhetoric, brands generate awareness, evoke the meaning of life, and grant meaning to what we do or buy. However, brands cannot answer major vital questions in a deep and constant way (Soldevilla et al, 2019).

The establishment of strong relationships with the customers of the business and making it sustainable depends on the brand's competitive power (Coelho et al., 2019). Forming relationships with consumers is useful for brands because brands form communities. All brand communities aspire to serve both (1) members and (2) at least one organizational (brand) goal. An authentic brand community includes all these elements:

- Members who share a mutual concern for one another's welfare
- Members who share a connected identity founded in shared core value(s) and purpose
- Members who participate in shared experiences reflecting the shared value(s) and purpose (Jones & Vogl, 2020).

There are a few examples of brand communities (Table No. 1):

Table 1. Examples of brand communities

Activist community	The United Religions Initiative (URI) connects individuals promoting interfaith cooperation and ending religiously motivated violence.
Celebrity fan community	World-famous performer Lady Gaga created the Little Monsters fan community to connect and support her global fans.
Collaborator community	Google gathers invited thought leaders together in "Labs" to collaborate on an envisioned future and influence Google investments and spending
Customer community	Online streaming platform Twitch created the Community Meetups program to connect their users in cities around the world.
Employee community	Home builder True Homes invests in many events and activities to connect all its employees in satisfying ways.
Enthusiasts community	HOG chapters connect brand enthusiasts who own Harleys or are invited guests of Harley owners.
Professional community	The New York State Association of Independent Schools connects education professionals to support one another across their region.
Sports community	The California Dragon Boat Association connects boat paddlers.

Source: Jones & Vogl, 2020.

Relationship management techniques help marketers to gain more customers, maximize their profitability, and ultimately make their customers loyal (Sayil et al., 2016). If an enduring, two-way, profitable connection is established between the customer and the brand, we will see the enhancement of brand equity (Mahmoudabadi et al, 2019).

Brand as self-expression of consumer

Self-brand connection is "the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concepts, with consumers using brands to express who they are or who they aspire

to be, including expressions “this brand reflects who I am” and “I (can) use this brand to communicate who I am to other people” (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Through consumption choices, consumers are their desired selves, present their lifestyles and tastes, and differentiate themselves from others (Duan & Dholakia, 2017).

Consumer-brand relationships include consumer self-expansion through the inclusion of the brand in her/his self. Greater self-expansion when the brand offers a special versus a mundane reward through its loyalty program. This suggests that, if a brand can deliver novel and arousing rewards, the customers will tend to perceive the brand as one that enhances their abilities, knowledge, and experiences. Receiving a novel and arousing reward from a brand may be a way for consumers to rapidly self-expand (Gorlier & Michel, 2020).

One of the implications of the way we create meaning through brands is to recognize that one of the things that heighten our desire for them is when they allow us to participate actively; to help create the narrative. At a basic level, this might involve using our hands to construct an IKEA wardrobe or a LEGO Star Wars fighter. At a more elevated level it might involve being part of a live process to help design the interior of the A380 plane for middle-Eastern airline Etihad, or giving up your spare time to help construct and develop Mozilla’s web browser, Firefox, or working with an online community to create brand extensions for Activia yogurt. People who participate like the idea that a brand listens to their suggestions and opinions, takes an interest in them, and acts upon their ideas (Ind & Iglesias, 2016).

Brands sell consumers products that encourage individuality and creativity. Brands like Lay’s contest became wildly successful by encouraging consumer submissions for new flavors. Oreo did the same thing. These brands allow consumers to have fun by coming up with combinations that range from fabulous to odd (Mininni, 2018). Suggesting that there are infinite possibilities fuels consumers’ imaginations and leads them to envision how they would adapt these brands in their own lives (Mininni, 2018). Buying and using a brand therefore affirms the sense of who we are. And the more important the purchase to a sense of self, the more meaningful it becomes (Ind & Iglesias, 2016).

Brands sell ideas that spur consumers’ imaginations. For example, MAC Cosmetics launched #MACnificent Me, a year-long user-generated content campaign encouraging consumers to “celebrate your style, heart and soul” by submitting their own mantras about the essence of beauty, 70,000 consumers responded to this (Mininni, 2018).

Brands have an important role to play in helping consumers expand their horizons and perspectives. It can contribute to consumer happiness and well-being. Moreover, it is a way of strengthening brand identification and of creating a more meaningful and self-connected relationship. This may be done, for example, through courses and transfer of know-how, through conferences, evenings, and outings, by providing access to an expanded social network, or through big special events that embody the brand’s values (Gorlier & Michel, 2020).

Brand as a spiritual expression

Religiosity and spirituality are fundamental to humans and we are witnessing an institutional and hierarchical decrease in religions, which are moving away from the center of society. Thus, we eagerly embrace spiritualities, which either purge traditional institutions or form part of them as new guides or sources of meaning. Brands take advantage of this need, detecting these trends through market studies and incorporating them into their strategies. It is therefore not surprising that we encounter in advertising Oriental philosophical ideas or references to a diffuse spirituality without a center and in continuous movement (Soldevilla et al, 2019). People want to believe and have hope and think there is a better future. And when

religion doesn't offer it to them, they turn to spirituality. For example, clothing manufacturers understand the need and profit from it (Moore, 2019).

The concept of spirituality has itself broadened from concerning metaphysical and higher consciousness to include various aspects of mind and body well-being. Hence, the phrase "mind-body spirituality" is almost omnipresent and now concerns matters of physical and mental health (Huss, 2014). It now encompasses a very long list of products and services, such as yoga and meditation sessions, martial arts, spiritual and self-help discourses, spiritual counselling and mysticism, vegetarian and organic diets for spiritual cleansing, traditional massage techniques as spiritual healing and spiritual tourism (Sardana et al, 2018).

Brands like SoulCycle and CrossFit have replaced the role of traditional religious institutions, particularly among younger people who feel isolated in their digital lives. The study by the research firm YouGov found that one in five millennials believes they have "no friends." A report published by the American Psychological Association showed that depression in 18-to- 21-year-olds has climbed more than 46% between 2009 and 2017 (Brooker, 2019).

Religious alienation can be good for business. SoulCycle has thrived by focusing on transforming customers' bodies and minds, and encouraging them to express their brand allegiance through clothing, playlists, and more. The result is "a cultlike loyalty, which illustrates both the depth of participant commitment and the hope for these organizations to fulfill brand promises, like 'find your soul' (Brooker, 2019).

This does not mean that they do not fulfill an equivalent function, but they do create a sense of self-improvement, a love of life and other secular values of transcendence different from those expressed by religious or spiritual forms. In short, there is a clear attempt by brands to follow the same scheme of adhesion, claims, symbology, articulation of relationships, aspirations, evocations, and the future offered by religions (Soldevilla et al, 2019).

Brand as an expression of preferences and values

Brands also have morality, which is core to brand loyalty, involves fairness, honesty, integrity, and social responsibility (Castro-González et al., 2019; Hwang et al., 2019; Xie & Bagozzi, 2019). A company's high ethical standards encourage customers to believe that the company is committed to corporate social responsibility, which promotes greater customer satisfaction and trust, and strengthens customer brand loyalty (Park et al., 2017).

Corporate social responsibility can be disaggregated into five dimensions, from stakeholders' perspective: employee relations, product quality, community relations, environmental issues, and diversity issues (Clarkson, 1995; Inoue & Lee, 2011). Corporate social responsibility typically spans a wide array of potential activities, including philanthropic community support, environmental initiatives, diversity promotion, employee support, changes to products and supply chains, and corporate governance issues (Nickerson et al, 2022).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that consumers care about brands being accountable for their actions. For instance, hoping to better understand what types of corporate social responsibility activities consumers would prefer, Coca-Cola tested a battery of potential initiatives using a series of consumer focus groups. These initiatives range from social to environmental, and from the purely philanthropic (women's economic empowerment) to the seemingly apologetic (helping address obesity). In the end, the initiative that most clearly addressed and preempted the brand's own potential negative social and environmental

impact (reduced water consumption) elicited the most favorable consumer response (Coca-Cola, 2019).

Corporate attention to the environment has a positive impact on a firm's brand value; environmental corporate social responsibility initiatives can lead to competitive advantages for firms by enhancing their image and their brand reputation. Corporate community involvement, strong employee relations, and attention to diversity issues also boost reputations, generate higher operating performance, and increase brand value (Kim et al, 2021). Consumers who are concerned about the green environment are attracted to brands that promote a sustainable environment. Green consumers believe that green brand affects their attitudes as it satisfies their green needs and socially contributes in society (Wu et al., 2018).

Conclusions

Brands are building up meaning for customers through social, individual, spiritual, and mental dimensions. In the dimension of social relationships, brands develop and maintain emotionally charged relationships with consumers, which lead to consumer satisfaction and commitment to the brand. Brands fill the fundamental desire of consumers to create a social network and interact with others, consumer-brand relationship is similar to real human relationships. Forming relationships with consumers is useful for brands because brands form communities. All brand communities serve members and brand goals. Brands form different types of communities: activist, celebrity fan, collaborator, customer, employee, enthusiasts, professional, and sports communities. This helps brands to enhance the brand equity.

In the individual dimension, brands make meaning for consumers by letting them incorporate brands into their self-concepts. Consumers use brands to express who they are or who they aspire to be, to present their lifestyles and tastes, and differentiate themselves from others. Brands let consumers self-expand through the inclusion of the brand in her/his self. Brands create meaning for consumers allowing them to participate actively; to help create brand narrative, to help design, construct and develop. Brands sell consumers products that encourage individuality and creativity, ideas that spur consumers' imaginations.

In the spiritual dimension, brands replaced the role of traditional religious institutions. There is a clear attempt by brands to follow the same scheme of adhesion, claims, symbology, articulation of relationships, aspirations, evocations, and the future offered by religions. Brands create meaning for consumers by caring for consumers' physical and mental health. Spirituality now encompasses yoga and meditation sessions, martial arts, spiritual and self-help discourses, spiritual counseling and mysticism, vegetarian and organic diets for spiritual cleansing, traditional massage techniques as spiritual healing, and spiritual tourism. This does not mean that they do not fulfill an equivalent function, but they do create a sense of self-improvement, a love of life, and other secular values of transcendence.

In the mental dimension, brands make meaning for consumers by letting them express their preferences and values. By choosing brands consumers express their preferences and ethical standards. Brands care about morality, which involves fairness, honesty, integrity, and social responsibility. A company's high ethical standards encourage customers to believe that the company is committed to corporate social responsibility. Brands try to be accountable, socially responsible and care for the sustainable environment, communities, and diversity. This lets consumers believe that the brand affects their attitudes as it satisfies their needs and socially contributes to society.

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