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A Semiotic Note on Branding

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This paper investigates how the pragmatic semiotics of C. S. Peirce can be used as a way of analyzing brands as signs, containing emotional elements that can establish brand communities and branding as the process of establishing brand communities. During the branding process the values, which we call the supra symbolic layer of the brand and the specific artifact merge into a statement or a sign. We discuss the fragility of such brand communities, how we are able to participate in brand communities through our use of the particular brand, and how we are quickly able to leave such communities when we change brands.

Introduction

The construction of identities for commercial products and services, known as *brands*, is a fundamental characteristic of contemporary marketing, advertising, and merchandising enterprises in consumerist societies. The study of brands is of obvious interest to semiotics given the fact that a brand is really a product laden with symbolism, a sign system that has virtually nothing to do with the usability of the product and, yet, has become so integrated with its marketing and promotion that it eventually becomes an inseparable semiotic (thus habitual) feature of the product. The diffusion and maintenance of the semiotic identity into the social mindset transforms the product and its "supra-symbolic layer" of meanings into a singular sign. In a semiotic framework, therefore, branding can be construed to constitute the process of establishing a *common meaning agreement* for the product through a complex interplay between a brand-maker and an interpreter or user group. This process can be called "grafting" since it involves imprinting symbolism onto a product in such a way that the two become indistinguishable and thus part of habitual perception.

Although some work has been carried out within semiotics proper, as the recent review article of the field by Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel, and Brannen (2004) has documented, there seems to be very little work done on defining brands from a Peircean perspective. Indeed, Mick et al. (2004, p. 61) state that an important frontier in the future semiotic study of brands is "spelling out and using in more detail the abundant resources of Peirce's paradigm." This paper is one attempt to do exactly that. In the following, we will define the brand as a semiotic entity; our primarily theoretical frame is the semiotics of C. S. Peirce. Based on some semiotic considerations, we discuss the brand as a sign or sign system capable of creating communities, we discuss the fundamental sign as a sense of ours within the

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community; a sense, which is to be considered as the emotional core of the community. However, first we will take a closer look at the brand in a semiotic perspective.

Defining Brands Semiotically

Turning a product into a brand transforms it into a sign-something that stands for something other than itself-that taps into social meaning systems that govern lifestyle, values, beliefs, and the like (e.g., Wolf, 1989; Umiker-Sebeok, 1987; Berger, 2000; Beasley & Danesi, 2002). A brand is thus a sign in the semiotic sense of that word and branding is a sign process.

Branding involves people at cognitive and discourse levels, both as individuals and as social communities or, more specifically, target market groups or segments. It is a process by which a product becomes imbued with a particular set of meaning values that are, in part, built into it by the brand maker and, in larger part, assigned to it as a consequence of the uses and experiences of its consumers, even if these may and often do differ from the brand maker's intentions (Thellefsen, Sørensen, & Andersen, 2005; Thellefsen, et al., 2006). Brands, therefore, are signs resulting from a discourse system which is implanted in a largely unconscious "negotiation" of meanings between brand makers, who can be called the *utterers*, and consumers, who can thus be called *interpreters*. This interplay can be called an *inner branding process*, a process that crystallizes during actual brand use:
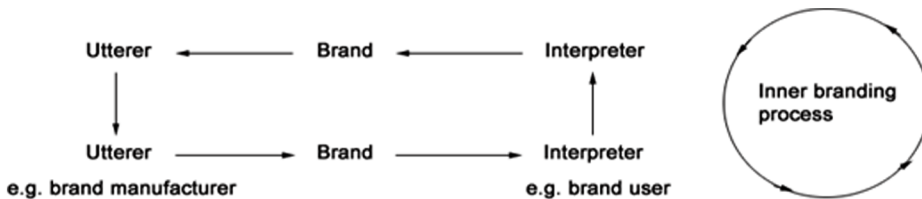
Figure 1. The branding process.

This process constitutes an ongoing negotiation process between the intended use of the brand maker (the utterer) and the actual use of the brand users (the interpreters). Once a product is introduced into a market segment (the potential brand users), whose potentiality as users has been identified by the manufacturer or service provider, it has, in effected, been uttered and thus communicated. The responses from the consumer group form the meaning of the brand. The underlying code can be articulated in the form of a series of questions: Is there a market for the product and do the consumers adapt to the product? Do they use the product as intended? Or, do they use it in another way that perhaps calls for modifications to the product? Do they interpret and accept the product as a brand?

The consumer group is defined as a group of people using (advocating) a particular brand, whether or not they know each other as individuals and as members of this group. It is their common attraction to a particular brand that makes them a user group. The user group is, thus, a dynamic social system, to which people belong and from which they can easily move away. For this reason, identifying who the particular consumer group (or market segment) is constitutes a difficult problem.

It is through meaning negotiations in actual brand use (the discourse frame) that leads unconsciously to a consumer group's tacit acceptance of the link between the brand as product and its added meaning values. Acceptance crystallizes when the consumer group can *identify* the brands and *recognize* its values to group values, thus creating a memory system, or memorate for the brand within the "center" of a consumer group (namely, its main or central tendency towards brand acceptance). We will refer to this center as a fundamental sign:
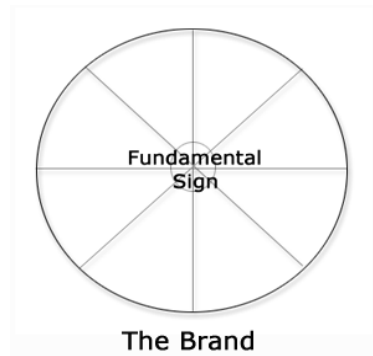

Figure 2. The fundamental sign[5] as the center of the brand.

The fundamental sign is the semiotic center of a consumer group; it is the "signifying glue" that maintains the values added to the product and, thus, the overall social (group-based) meaning of the brand. It is what renders a sense of community possible for a user group, even if in a virtual or totally abstract fashion. In the figure we have drawn and placed the fundamental sign as a hub in a wheel to stress the importance of the fundamental sign in branding.

The acceptance of a brand rests, in this model, on the existence of a common discourse (as mentioned) between brand maker and brand users, which may be interrupted if the brand maker in some way breaks the code inherent in this discourse, that is, if the brand does not live up to the values with which it has been grafted. Acceptance also correlates with the ability of the brand to attract other consumer groups. As indicated above, this can be called the inner branding process of the user group (figure 1). It is this process that strengthens brand image and the sense of community in consumer groups. If the brand's level of acceptance becomes threatened

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5. The concept of the fundamental sign was put forward in 2002 by Torkild Thellefsen and further developed in 2004 and 2005.

by competitors or if the brand maker does not promote the values of the brand effectively, brand users (who are really brand advocates) may gather around the brand in order to protect it. The reason for this is that users form deep ties to the values built into the brand-values that they are obviously inclined to protect.

A case-in-point of the latter is offered by a whole series of ads and commercials based on the theme "I'd rather fight than switch" (as one particular commercial for a cigarette brand once put it). The Coca-Cola brand, for example, refers not only to the actual soft drink, but also to the company itself, the social meanings that drinking Coke entails, and so on and so forth.

To get a sense of why product can evoke such a strong sense of community it is useful to turn to the ideas of Charles Peirce.[6] As a realist, Peirce believed that it is the idea that chooses its advocates, not the other way around. In "A detailed Classification of the Sciences" (1902) he put it in the following way: "[ideas] have a power of finding or creating their vehicles, and having found them, of conferring upon them the ability to transform the face of the earth" (CP 1.217).[7] In other words, ideas make communities and, thus, advocates. Peirce defined community members brought together through an idea as a *natural class*: "Every class has its definition, which is an idea; but it is not every class where the existence, that is, the occurrence in the universe of its members is due to the active causality of the defining idea of the class" (CP 1.214). Consequently, for Peirce, "[ideas] have life, generative life" (CP 1.219). And because of the generative life of ideas:

> Symbols grow. They come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from icons, or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of icons and symbols. We think only in signs. These mental signs are of mixed nature; the symbol-parts of them are called concepts. If a man makes a new symbol, it is by thoughts involving concepts. So it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. Omne symbolum de symbolo. A symbol, once in being, spreads among the peoples. In use and in experience, its meaning grows. (CP 2.203)

This whole line of reasoning may come across as being somewhat extreme. Nevertheless, the notion of ideas having generative life has considerable merit in the case of consumer groups, since such groups have undoubtedly been generated by the fundamental sign (brand). But this is not unique to the commercial domain. Music styles, movie genres, scientific movements, religious concepts, among other things, are similarly able to create a sense of community and, thus, to produce advocates, who will defend the idea or ideas on which their belief system is founded. Brand makers are no different. Their ultimate goal is to produces brand advocates who will protect brands from counteractive forces within society and who will try to convert others to their semiotic system of belief.

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6. As Peirce claimed, potentiality as well as generality cannot be reduced to actuality, since all three modes co-exist in tandem.

7. In Line with Peirce scholarship, we use the abbreviation CP in reference to his Collected Works (see reference section) followed by volume number and, lastly page number (after the period).

Like any symbol, the brand is a central feature of shared memory. This is why consumers reacted negatively when certain brands attempted to change their logo or product design; Coca-Cola and Campbell's Soup are two recent cases-in-point (both of which wanted to introduce new designs for their products that met with considerable opposition). Clearly, it is in the form of shared memories that the brand, as a fundamental sign, constitutes a community-solidifying idea in the Peircean sense. Building ideas or values into a product is, thus, the ultimate objective of branding. This is a social process. Creating a system of meanings that are relevant to specific kinds of individuals is the central technique in branding. This is achieved, first and foremost, by giving it a *brand name*. The product, like a person, can then be easily differentiated from other products. The legal term for brand name is *trademark*. It is little wonder that trademarks are so fiercely protected by corporations and manufacturers. So powerful are they as identifiers that some have gained widespread currency becoming general terms for the product type in common discourse. Examples include *aspirin, scotch tape, cellophane*, and *escalator.* Most brand names appear on the product, on its container, and in advertisements for the product.

The fact that a brand is so much more than a mere product is evidenced by the emergence of people who oppose certain brands for specific ideological reasons. Opponents of brands such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Shell are attacking the kinds of values that these brands communicate (by and large). However, in some ways such opposition only leads to enhancing shared memories and integrating them more into overall social cognition.

So, what does a Peircean view of branding suggest? In our view:

1. It suggests that there is something inherent in the brand, beyond its product status, that has the power to garner attention to itself.
2. It suggests that the brand is able to evoke a sense of community (or a community spirit) among brand users based on their shared memory with the brand.
3. It suggests that branding is a very complex semiotic process involving both emotional and rational though processes.
4. It suggests that brands can create a shared intersubjective memory system based on its sign value.

Brand Attraction

The discussion above begs for a singular question: What is it about brands that allows them to attract and maintain advocates? In order for someone to be attracted to a sign, there must be in that person some qualities similar to the qualities in the sign. If a brand communicates certain lifestyle values, these values must be those already present in an individual, both cognitively and emotionally. In other words, there must be an *iconic continuum* established between brands and their consumers. Iconicity, as is well known, is Peirce's term for emphasizing the fact that signs that resemble or assign some significant social meaning to something, such as a product, is a primary

cognitive in the human species. Iconicity is an effective strategy in branding, because it renders products highly memorable. Products that awaken positive memories are those that people accept as fundamental signs for the simple reason that pleasant memories are those that people wish to experience again. If signs do not evoke such memories, emotionally, there will be a breakdown of the iconic link between the sign and the sign-user. Brand attraction is grounded on such mnemonic iconicity. Clearly, therefore, it is not on a rational level that brand attraction occurs, but on an exclusively emotional-mnemonic one. As Savan eloquently pointed out, for Peirce an emotional response is a legisign, a sign that has the capacity to replicate ideas and, thus, memories:

> But emotions do enter into the systematic explanation of behaviour. Further, emotions can be justified, shown to be inappropriate, disproportionately, strong or weak, and so on. It is clear, I think, that an emotion is a legisign. Like any legisign it exists through its instances or replicas. Each such replica is an iconic sinsign. (Savan, 1981, p. 323)

Incidentally, Peirce defined legisigns as follows:

> As it is in itself, a sign is either of the nature of an appearance, when I call it a *qualisign*; or secondly, it is an individual object or event, when I call it a *sinsign* (the syllable sin being the first sillable [*sic*] of *sem*el, *sim*ul, *sin*gular, etc); or thirdly, it is of the nature of a general type, when I call it a *legisign*. (Peirce, 1977, p. 22)

As legisigns, emotions evoke intrinsic feeling states (qualisigns) instantiated through sinsigns (actual single states). If a brand is indeed capable of eliciting certain emotions in the *exposed mind* (the mind influenced by a brand), it is because it constitutes a true legisign – a sign that people living in a particular situation can easily identify. It thus has a general iconic character since the replica of any legisign is an iconic sinsign. This means that attraction occurs when a brand is capable of evoking similar emotions in interpreters-emotions that elicit an experienced past.[8] The general nature of the emotion suggests that it is capable of arousing similar emotions in different people who are attracted to the brand. It is this semiotic aspect of branding that makes the entire process an effective means for establishing a sense of community.

Even in relaying straightforward information, such as identifying the manufacturer (Bell, Kraft, etc.), indicating the geographical location of the company (Southern Bell, American Bell, etc.), describing what the product can do (Easy On, Quick Flow, etc.), and so on, brands nevertheless create a sense of community. The name Bell, for instance, evokes meanings of tradition and reliance that familiarity with the name kindles. In effect, every brand, as a legisign, links users to an unconscious

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8. On an individual level this also means that whenever a memory is formed, in addition to the symbolic and iconic content or features associated with whatever is memorized, the emotions that are present at the time is also stored. Thus, when this experienced past is recalled, the emotions associated with it is also recalled. This is the case whether we are immediately aware of those emotions or not.

system of shared values and memorates. It is this system that is used and reused for various advertising purposes. Indeed, the more such values a brand evokes, the more powerful it is psychologically and, as a consequence, the more possibilities it offers to the advertiser for creating truly effective ads and commercials. A legisign classifies something, keeps it distinct from other things, and, above all else, allows it to have meaning over and above itself.

The Sense of Community

Although Peirce never directly used the expression "sense of community," implicit in his writings, it can be deduced implicitly from the following excerpt:

> whether the genus homo has any existence except as individuals, is the question whether there is anything of any more dignity, worth, and importance than individual happiness, individual aspirations, and individual life. Whether men really have anything in common, so that the community is to be considered as an end in itself (CP 8.38).

Peirce's goes on to note, moreover, that "Esprit de corps, national sentiment, sympathy, are no mere metaphors. None of us can fully realize what the minds of corporations are, anymore than one of my brain cells can know what the whole brain is thinking" (CP 6.271). Peirce concludes that human beings are "mere cells of the social organism" (CP 1.673). Peirce's notion of "community conscience" (CP 1.56) is, thus, construable as our notion of sense of community. Similarly, Liszka (1996, p. 91) notes that Peirce's notion is "simply the sense of the community of experience shared commonly between utterer and interpreter, sense understood in its broadest terms – the effect of a sign as would enable a person to say whether or not the sign was applicable to anything concerning which that person had sufficient acquaintance." Liszka equates the sense of community with Peirce's notion of commens, which Peirce defined as follows (note: the interpretant in Peircean theory is, essentially, the set of meanings that can be extracted from a sign in social and historical contexts by utterers and interpreters):

> There is the *Intentional* Interpretant, which is a determination of the mind of the utterer; the *Effectual* Interpretant, which is a determination of the mind of the interpreter; and the *Communicational* Interpretant, or say the *Cominterpretant*, which is a determination of that mind into which the mind of utterer and interpreter have to be fused in order that any communication should take place. *This mind may be called the commens.* It consists of all that is, and must be, well understood between utterer and interpreter at the outset, in order that the sign in question should fulfil its function. (Peirce, 1977, pp. 196-197)

According to Peirce, social communication depends on the presence of commens in utterer-interpreter interactions. Bearing in mind that *utterer* and *interpreter* are abstract concepts that can be organizations, companies, groups of people, and so forth. It is obvious that there has to be something shared between utterers and interpreters in order for them to be fused together in a commens. Arguably, Peirce coined the term

commens, or *commind* (as it is sometimes spelled), as a contraction of *communication* and *mens* (= commens) or *communication* and *mind* (= commind) in order to stress that communication can only take place when the minds involved in communication situation are fused through a sense of community which is, in effect, a shared interpretant.

Liszka goes on to identify three Peircean conditions for the constitution of a community. The first condition is that the members must be capable of a specific form of sign-interpretation to some degree; that is, they must be able to utter and interpret certain kinds of signs. The second condition is that there must be some sort of connection or relation, of a communicative sort, between the sign users. The third condition is that there must be some sense of community among the members, which is akin to a feeling that can be labeled simply "ours":

> The first condition allows the possibility of the second, since signs enable us to transform objects or events into meanings, which in turn allow the possibility of something, being shared and shared in a communicative fashion. The second condition allows for the possibility of the third, since identifying shared meanings as "ours" assumes that there is, first of all, something to be shared. (Liszka 1996, p. 83)

The sense of community is established the moment a group of people capable of sign-interpretive activity is united around a common governing idea that leads to ongoing speech acts that establish discourse on the values elicited by the group's fundamental sign. Consequently, the sense of community is a sense of "ours," which implies that there is something to be shared, for example: an interest, an aesthetic taste, a set of beliefs, and so forth. At the same time, the sense of community itself is built up through communication, which is grounded on a sense of the "ours," as Liszka would have it. The sense of community is, semiotically, the center of any community. It is created by a fundamental sign attracting advocates. In sum, the notion of sense of community seems to have at least two basic meanings:

1. A feeling of "ours" within a particular community, which is the fundamental sign that creates the community and keeps it together.
2. A general feeling or sense that it is possible to enter and leave communities at will. In order to be able to use symbols, humans must possess a sense of community, due to the fact that symbols are tools for intersubjective communication. Symbols are irrelevant unless they have community value.

The notion of sense of community is, ultimately, a straightforward framework for understanding how a brand, as a fundamental sign, can generate meanings that are based on culture-wide symbolism that interconnects products with daily life. Until the 1970s, logos on clothes, for instance, were concealed discretely inside a collar or on a pocket. Today, they can be seen conspicuously on all kinds of products, indicating that society has become logo conscious. Ralph Lauren's polo horseman, Lacoste's alligator, and Nike's swoosh symbol, to mention but three, are now shown

prominently on clothing items, evoking images of heraldry and, thus, nobility. They constitute symbols of cool that legions of people are seemingly eager to put on view in order to convey an aura of high class blue-blooded fashionableness. This is a particular sense of community that such brand users share, making them loyal in the same way that nobles were once loyal to their own particular social groups.

Given their psychological power, it is little wonder to find that the same techniques of the brands (e.g., logos) are used as well by non-commercial enterprises and organizations. One of the most widely known ones is the peace sign, often worn on chains and necklaces. Derived from an ancient runic symbol of despair and grief, it became the logo for philosopher Bertrand Russell's (1872-1970) "Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament" in the 1950s. The logo's first widespread exposure came when it surfaced in the 1962 sci-fi film *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, leading to its adoption by the counterculture youth of the era. Users of that symbol, which is a fundamental sign, are linked semiotically, in terms of the sense of community that it engenders.

Branding and Shared Memory

Although it is largely an emotional construct, a brand is not devoid of an internal "logic." That logic is, as the origin of the word suggests, based on word (or brand) meaning. As we have argued in this paper, linking brands to social memory is largely an unconscious process. But this does not mean that brand allegiance comes about simply through passive exposure to a particular brand via advertising. As discussed in this paper, branding is a socio-cognitive semiotic process, which entails a rational discourse based on a sense of community. But in order for this process to become habitual it must involve perception that a product and its inbuilt allusions to existing social symbols (legisigns) are one and the same. The ultimate success of the brand is its ability to tap into these allusions and, thus, awaken emotions in interpreters that potentially can create a common sense (a commens) that enables them to enter into a brand community or, more accurately, to create for themselves a branded consciousness. Again, we use such a term in accordance to Peirce's particular take on it, as can be seem for instance, in the following passage:

> Consciousness is...a bottomless lake in which ideas are suspended at different depths. Indeed, these ideas themselves constitute the very medium of consciousness itself. Percepts alone are uncovered by the medium. We must imagine that there is a continual fall of rain upon the lake; which images the constant inflow of percepts in experience. All ideas other than percepts are more or less deep, and we may conceive that there is a force of gravitation, so that the deeper idea are, the more work will be required to bring them to the surface (CP: 7.553).

Peirce went on to emphasize that: "those [ideas] which are deeper are discernible only by a greater effort, and controlled by only by much greater effort" (CP: 3.547; see also Haley, 1988). We will not discuss the aptness of Peirce's metaphor for consciousness here. Suffice it to say that it can be used as a vehicle for understanding how ideas are

generated. If we think of the lake as the shared memory system discussed in this paper, it is obvious that the deeper the ideas generated by branding are, and the more difficult it is to bring them to the surface, the less capable is the process of creating a shared system of memory. If branding is indeed based on the formation of a community having access to the latter system, ideas communicated by the brand should never sink into oblivion (to extend Peirce's metaphor); they must always be near the surface. This is generally ensured by the brand advocates' defence of the brand. Being a symbol, the brand is not in the same danger of sinking into oblivion as are the ads and commercials that promote it, which are sensitive to change within the larger social context (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). The brand is remembered through use and experience of its use.[9]

This would explain why branding has now extended into the domain of cultural spectacles. Both aim to create shared memories or memorates. Brands do not only refer to products, but entire corporations (IBM, Ford, etc.) and even specific characters that represent, in some way, a corporation. Take, for example, the Disney Corporation cartoon character Mickey Mouse. In 1929, Disney allowed Mickey Mouse to be reproduced on school slates, effectively transforming the character into a social icon – a social memorate. A year later Mickey Mouse dolls went into production and throughout the 1930s the Mickey Mouse brand name and image were licensed with huge success. In 1955 *The Mickey Mouse Club* premiered on US network television, further entrenching the brand and image—and by association all Disney products—into the cultural mainstream.

Analogous "branding events" have repeated themselves throughout modern society. The idea is to get the brand to become intertwined with cultural spectacles (movies, TV programs, etc.) and thus indistinguishable as a sign from other culturally-meaningful signs and sign systems. Because of the Disney Corporation, toys, children TV programming, childhood films, videos, DVDs, theme parks, and the like have become part of the modern perception of childhood as a Fantasyland world. This is why children now experience their childhood through such products.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have attempted to provide a semiotic outline for understanding the power of branding in contemporary society. The basic idea is that brands create communication or discourse systems involving utterers (brand makers) and interpreters (brand users) in a system of meaning negotiations that ultimately create a sense of community or brand ownership by the users themselves. This whole discourse system is created by the simple semiotic act of grafting symbolism onto a product, making the two indistinguishable. Consequently, the brand becomes a

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9. The widespread notion of the ad working as a reminder of certain important brand features reflects this dynamics. Thus, being able to remind of something implies the existence of a more stable level of knowledge stored in memory – in this case the brand level. Consequently the ad works for the brand as it cues relevant aspects of memory and experience.

fundamental sign, the meaning center of a community of users that become its advocates. This whole process has been called an inner branding process here because it does not leave external traces that can be retrieved and studied (like clues in a crime scene). Rather, it leaves cognitive traces that can be construed as legisigns – signs that have social value. Because it is an inner process it allows brand users to be advocates for a brand. The brand becomes almost detached from the brand maker and develops a "life of its own," as can be seen by consumers who reacted negatively to changes in the brand (e.g., the Coca-Cola bottle design of a few years back). The brand thus attracts advocates by communicating values similar to values already present within brand users. If these match, then the brand generates a sense of community in individuals-a sense of abstract linkage with other users of that brand. It is the similarity of the values between brand and brand users that creates and maintains the sense of community. Without this sense of community, there would be nothing to share.

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