

# Brands Defined as Semiotic Marketing Systems

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## Abstract

Brands are one of marketing's main foci. But while the American Marketing Association's official *marketing* definition continues to evolve, its *brand* definition has remained stagnant for nearly 80 years. This article argues that the AMA's simplistic trademark conceptualization of brands is increasingly out of touch with marketing theory and practice. Integrating the consumer culture, marketing semiotics, and General Systems Theory literatures, we re-conceptualize brands as semiotic marketing systems. This follows marketing systems being core to macromarketing. It also obeys marketing systems needing to contemplate their meaning infrastructures given today's progressively symbolic markets. The antecedents, operation and benefits of this new systems approach to brands are discussed. Brands are re-defined as *complex multidimensional constructs with varying degrees of meaning, independence, co-creation and scope. Brands are semiotic marketing systems that generate value for direct and indirect participants, society, and the broader environment, through the exchange of co-created meaning.*

## Keywords

American Marketing Association, brand definition, semiotic system, macromarketing

## Introduction

Marketing systems are central to macromarketing. They reconcile micro commercial activity with important macro socio-environmental issues (Layton 2007). Technology, globalization, and accelerated change have made marketing systems progressively complex. Marketing is now best thought of as an array of multi-layered, interlocking, and specialized sub-systems (Layton 2009).

This article addresses one such sub-system: that pertaining to brands. Brands are important sources of value (Murphy 1993) and one of marketing's main ideological foci (Bernhardt 2009; Levy and Luedicke 2013). Furthermore, marketing systems operate through intangible flows (Fisk 1967). Of these, information (meaning) is essential (Arndt 1986; Layton 2007) for it matches supply and demand, enables exchange, and enhances participants' potency of assortment (Alderson 1965/2006). Brands work within increasingly symbolic markets (Sherry 2005). Marketing systems must pay attention to their meaning infrastructures. Failure to do so may cause systems to work improperly, even fail (Kadirov and Varey 2011). Hence, there is a need to explore brands as semiotic marketing systems.

We begin by briefly discussing the American Marketing Association (AMA) brand definition, perhaps better described as a Managerial Brand Conceptualization (MBC), which places the present brand system development and re-definition efforts within a historical context. A series of limitations pertaining to the AMA brand definition then illustrate how much branding has evolved beyond managerial models. The limitations also

provide the operational assumptions on which the proposed system is based. General implications and the need for a new brand notion are then discussed. The Semiotic Brand System is subsequently presented and its structure and operation are both explained. Model antecedents and benefits are then discussed to further support this new systems approach to brands. Our closing thoughts include a new brand definition for the AMA on which to further build. The authors hope that this exploratory effort contributes to the branding and marketing systems literatures by furthering the discussion of what brands have become, a vital albeit long neglected issue.

## The AMA Brand Definition

Marketing attained maturity as a discipline in the 1930s (Witkowski 2010). The field has since developed according to the socio-scientific circumstances of the times, in the process generating different schools of marketing thought (Shaw and Jones 2005; Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988). The AMA's official marketing definition has also evolved. Over the years it has gone through several iterations (Zinkhan and Williams

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2007). The most recent one, put forward in 2007, followed an extensive review of the previous 2004 definition (AMA 2013). The 2004 definition was deemed too narrow in domain and perspective. It conceived marketing as an essentially managerial tool, to be used for the firms' benefit, focused excessively on the firm to the neglect of other important marketing participants, and failed to acknowledge the discipline's impact on society (Gundlach and Wilkie 2009; Keefe 2008).

Branding's importance within marketing has grown over the years (Aaker 1996; Kapferer 2004). A main source of value, branding currently occupies a central role within the field (Murphy 1993). Branding is thus one of marketing's ideological foci (Bernhardt 2009; Levy and Luedicke 2013) and a prevalent worldview driving research and practice (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). Unlike its evolving definition of marketing, updated repeatedly over the years, the official AMA definition of brand has remained stagnant. The AMA's current brand definition is virtually identical to the one put forward in its 1948 Definitions Committee Report, which was, in turn, based on the 1935 Definitions Report of the National Association of Marketing Teachers, a group that became part of the AMA in 1937 (AMA 1948; Witkowski 2010). Not only is the AMA's current brand definition almost 80 years old, its simplistic (non-legal) trademark conceptualization dates back several millennia, increasingly out of touch with marketing thought and practice.

### *The Managerial Brand Conceptualization*

The AMA brand definition may be broadly described as a Managerial Brand Conceptualization (MBC). The managerial school of marketing emerged in the 1940s as a spinoff from economics. It digressed from abstract theory and sought to provide managers with simple, easily applicable concepts (Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988, p. 96+). The MBC is grounded in Scientific Management and emphasizes production and distribution. Branding is but secondary, an afterthought in which trademarks are added to finished products to differentiate them from competitors (Styles and Ambler 1995). Emblematic of the MBC, though almost a century belated, is the current AMA *brand* definition. It still describes brands as trademarks, as "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (AMA 2014a). That the AMA conceives brands as trademarks is supported by, first, the AMA itself admitting that a trademark is a legal term "meaning the same as brand" (AMA 2014b) and, second, by the AMA brand definition being virtually identical to the International Trademark Association's definition of trademark, conceived as "Any word, name, symbol, or device, or any combination thereof, used to identify the goods of one party and distinguish them from the goods of other parties" (International Trademark Association (INTA) 2014a).

Managerial marketing is inward-oriented. It focuses on improving firm's operational effectiveness (Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988). Though by the 1950s a "marketing revolution" supposedly occurred (Keith 1960), the field's outward shift towards consumer satisfaction spurred social-psychological

interest. Brands began to be acknowledged as important, albeit complex consumer symbols (Levy and Luedicke 2013). Early papers in this regard include classics like Gardner and Levy's (1955) "The Product and the Brand" and Levy's (1959) "Symbols for Sale." However, the AMA still retained its firm-centric trademark conceptualization.

The AMA's failed transition towards a consumer-centric brand notion might be variously explained. On the one hand, the still-influential German School of Economics discounted theoretical models and focused instead on reality, emphasizing history, empiricism, and positivism (Jones and Monieson 1990). A shift towards a theoretical brand notion, conceiving brands as abstract symbols instead of literal ones, would have been unthinkable. On the other hand, marketing was striving to be recognized as a science. Since its early days the field had been constantly criticized (Witkowski 2010). Accused of being unethical and irrelevant (Farmer 1967), marketing's scientific acknowledgement would garner it legitimacy. These aspirations reinforced German positivism. Brands were further conceived as inert and lifeless, akin to objects in the physical sciences (Hanby 1999; Wood 2000). In addition, and despite the hype, managerial marketing was still the dominant paradigm in the 1960s (Shaw and Jones 2005). Though most companies eagerly professed consumer orientations, in practice it was the exception rather than the rule (Kotler 1972). Managerial marketing focused on supply-side perspectives and was fundamentally practical, albeit theory-deficient (Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988). The emerging social-psychological tendencies in marketing thought and research were thus unlikely to receive credence. Brands continued to be seen as managerial instruments, to be used in the attainment of organizational goals (Wood 2000). A shift towards a consumer-centric brand notion, at the expense of managerial control, would have also been unthinkable. Finally, there is simple custom. Branding derived from "trademark advertising" and so marketers unsurprisingly deferred to a conceptualization with which they had been long familiar.

So despite the important advances in marketing theory, the AMA stuck to its trademark brand conceptualization. Yet marketing often suffers from amnesia. The field frequently disregards its construct's historical development (Wooliscroft 2008). Branding's post-war rise to prominence cannot be denied (Bastos and Levy 2012), but it did not originate with the AMA's 1948 definition. Branding dates back at least an entire century prior, to the mid-1800s, when firms were already systematically developing powerful brands through advertised appeals (Henning and Witkowski 2013; Petty 2012).

Petty (2011, 2012, 2013) provides superb accounts of branding's early development. Suffice it to say that by the early 1900s, branding's "First Golden Age" (Low and Fullerton 1994), trademarks had attained sophisticated conceptualizations. In the U.S. and elsewhere trademarks were already widely recognized as more than descriptive trade names (Domizlaff 1939/1992). Trademarks were acknowledged as having broader, richer and more abstract consumer associations, which when advertised, created significant value beyond the product itself.

The notion of brand equity, with brand valuations already worth millions of dollars, date to this early era (Petty 2013). These realizations spurred agencies towards “trademark advertising” (branding). A stream of articles, pamphlets and books supported the practice (Petty 2011). By the early 1900s branding ceased to be a secondary process. It was instead seen as the way of the future. Marketers thus sought to legally protect their extended brand meanings beyond the mere manufacturer name and symbol of trademarks (Petty 2013). Pioneering efforts in this regard include Schechter’s (1927) classic Harvard Law Review article in which he presents the notion of trademark dilution, adopted from prior German jurisprudence. He also shows how conceiving trademarks as mere source identifiers was already an archaic and obsolete notion. With this in mind, and in the context of marketing’s new consumer-orientation, by the 1960s the AMA brand definition should have certainly been updated. Indeed, the 1948 AMA brand definition was already conceptually outdated by at least a couple decades.

Periodization helps summarize marketing’s development though historical eras may oversimplify contexts, ignore processes, and be biased by a false sense of progress (Gerhard 1956). For example, Keith’s (1960) “marketing revolution” extols how the field supposedly evolved through three eras: “Production” (1870s+), “Sales” (1930s+), and “Consumer-oriented” (1950s+). This generalization, based on a four-page depiction of a single company, is commonly accepted as marketing fact (Hollander et al. 2005), though as Fullerton (1988) and Jones and Richardson (2007) proved, no such “revolution” existed. Keith’s eras are but unsubstantiated myths. Marketing developed earlier than conventionally thought. Sales and consumer orientations paralleled, even preceded, the supposed production one.

The widespread acceptance of Keith’s myth shows how marketing is typically considered a modern phenomenon and particularly a post-1950 American innovation. Nothing worthwhile having possibly occurred before the Industrial Revolution (Hollander et al. 2005). Recent accounts suggest that brands are not modern, Western, nor even capitalist innovations. Instead of resulting from the Industrial Revolution, as conventionally thought, brands are said to have emerged with Mesopotamia’s Urban Revolution. This took place some 6,000 years earlier, a product of settlement growth, labor specialization, mass production, and extended economies (Wengrow 2008). Other early cases of branding include 3,000 B.C. Egypt (Wengrow 2008), 2,000 B.C. India (Wolpert 2004), and 2,000 B.C. China (Eckhardt and Bengtsson 2010).

Moore and Reid (2008) dismiss these as early proto-brands because of their functional nature, be it administrative or commercial. Yet just like today’s iconic brands that feed off culturally-important ideas, symbols and myths (Holt 2004), some of these early brands seem to have been deeply relevant for consumers (Wengrow 2008). Holt (2008) further objects to recognizing these early brands as such because of the absence of consumer societies. However, he ignores the affluence and sophistication of pre-modern civilizations. Some developed

thriving consumer cultures with products and brands actively sought to develop status and identity (Eckhardt and Bengtsson 2010; Hamilton and Lai 1989). For example, Roman consumers enjoyed abundant and diverse product assortments, some sold in lavish multi-story shopping complexes (Dixon 1995). Procurement sometimes involved trans-continental supply chains (Hull 2008) and innovative packaging techniques (Twede 2002). Entertainment was also well organized, consumed in much the same way and for the same purposes as today (Minowa and Witkowski 2012).

Economic tradition assumes that pre-modern civilizations are fundamentally different from modern ones, that capitalist stakeholders and behaviors are unique and were not extant prior to the late Middle Ages (Polanyi 1944). But history cannot only highlight differences. It must also recognize the continuity of ideas and practices (Gerhard 1956). As historical research increasingly shows, the fundamental issues facing business, hence marketing, were not that different in pre-modern societies. While perhaps not documented or formally taught, like today, marketing does seem to have been intuitively practiced back then, perhaps even quite intricately. With this in mind, and unlike conventional managerial models, we do not believe in distinct eras into which brands can be neatly classified. In the past, as today, brand sophistication likely varied. A more flexible evolutionary approach is thus required. It should consider brand development as an ongoing process with different degrees of advancement. This underscores the need for broader, more flexible brand conceptualizations than the ones currently used, able to capture developmental progression along different brand dimensions.

### *Limitations of the AMA Brand Definition*

Like Keith’s marketing revolution myth, the AMA brand definition has endured within the field. Its trademark conceptualization benefited from institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). It has been consolidated as a marketing convention and widely perpetuated in education, research, and practice (Davies and Chun 2003; Holt 2002; Kotler and Armstrong 2014, p. 233). Straightforward and simple, seemingly correct and sufficient, the AMA brand definition remains largely unquestioned. Yet despite widespread acceptance, it fails to recognize how much brands have evolved over the last 80 years. It thus falls short on a series of accounts.

The AMA definition first neglects how much brands might have gained in terms of meaning. The trademarks of yore were mostly literal and denotative (Oswald 2012). Conceiving today’s brands as mere identifying names, symbols or features, as the AMA does, is rather simplistic. Brands have evolved into potentially rich connotative symbols (Danesi 2004; Oswald 2012), sophisticated networks of information, associations and feelings (Berthon, Holbrook, and Hulbert 2003), and complex bundles of multidimensional meaning (Gardner and Levy 1955; McCracken 1993). Brands’ implicit sub-textual meanings, not their explicit literal ones, now often provide the greatest value (Danesi 2004; Dichter 1964; Hoshino 1987; Oswald 2012).

Behind today's potentially rich brand meanings is consumption's growing symbolic nature (King 1971; Levy 1959). Consumers progressively seek, create, and transform meaning (Sherry 2005). Societies are thus evolving from a thing to a thought orientation (Dichter 1964). Lash (2002) and Moor (2007) refer to this as "informationalization." With acceptable quality in today's markets often a given, products are not only consumed for what they intrinsically are or do (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002), they are also sought for what they mean (Levy 1959; Moor 2008). Consumers use products to symbolize different facets of their lives. Via possessions, particularly branded ones, consumers build, maintain and extend their individual and social selves (Belk 1988; Douglas and Isherwood 1996). This symbolic shift is not new. Veblen (1899/1912, p. 87) already hinted a departure from classical consumption, the focus of conspicuousness no longer products or activities themselves, but more often the symbols (brands) associated to them.

No doubt some of today's brands are still very basic in terms of meaning. Yet others may be quite rich and complex. It therefore becomes necessary to acknowledge a continuum of meaning through which the variability of today's brands may be better described.

A second limitation of the AMA definition is that it conceives brands as features. Brands are identified with finished products and the definition implies that brands are part of products, products being more important than their brands (Kotler and Armstrong 2014, p. 233; Styles and Ambler 1995). But brands are not just added value (Oswald 2012) and the managerial augmented product concept is losing relevance (Holt 2004). For decades brands have become less subordinated to products (King 1971; Lury 2004). As brands gained in meaning and complexity, they started to encompass more than the products to which they originally referred (De Chernatony and Riley 1997; Moore and Reid 2008). In some cases brands separated from their products altogether (Berthon, Holbrook, and Hulbert 2003; Lury 2004). In today's post-industrial society brands are often larger, more important, and more valuable than their products (Arvidsson 2005; King 1971). Some brands have become autonomous entities in their own right (Foster 2008; Manning 2010): meta-semiotic objects (Arvidsson 2006; Lury 2004), self-referential symbols, and self-valuable signifiers (Beebe 2004). As a result, and contrary to what the AMA definition states, brand names and symbols no longer refer to just products. They increasingly refer to the brand itself, regardless of its products (Bastos and Levy 2012). In today's symbolic society the consumption of symbols often supersedes that of materiality. The signifier has become the signified and the medium is now the message (McLuhan and Fiore 1967).

The above is indicated by how some manufacturers have refocused their core business: Per Levitt's (1960) seminal "Marketing Myopia" article, sustained growth depends, among other things, on firms correctly defining their core business. But manufacturers are now ironically ceasing to manufacture their own products. They increasingly outsource production, refocusing their core business on the much more strategically-important and

higher value-added activity of brand building (Klein 1999). Power is shifting towards those creating brands, away from those making products (Anholt 2005). Products are now often the manifestation of brands, not vice versa (King 1971). Sometimes brands replace products altogether (Klein 1999). Brands may even acquire a life of their own beyond product and company. If products are discontinued, or companies go out of business, brands still live on as part of popular culture (Berthon et al. 2007; Henning and Witkowski 2013).

Brand independence is also a matter of degree. Some of today's brands are still closely linked, even subordinated, to their products. Others have become quite independent. Thus, a continuum of independence exists, which more accurately describes today's brand diversity.

A third limitation of the AMA definition is that it ignores potential co-creation (Vargo and Lusch 2004). This is the degree to which consumers and other stakeholders participate in creating brand meanings (Arvidsson 2005; Sherry 2005). The conventional trademark conceptualization denies co-creation. It simplistically assumes that since organizations create brands, they therefore largely control brand meanings (Berthon et al. 2007). But consumers' role within marketing is changing, evolving from passive recipients (operand resource) to active co-creators of value (operant resource) (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Brands are thus outgrowing the managerial control paradigm (Schroeder 2009). Brands are becoming shared constructs (Wallace, Buil, and De Chernatony 2012). They are increasingly "porous" (Cova and Paraque 2012) "open-source objects" (Haarhoff and Kleyn 2012), co-created by the firm, consumers and other stakeholders (Arvidsson 2006; Sherry 2005). Each adds input, co-determining what brands ultimately mean (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Ind 2004). And today, in the context of social media, this open and participatory nature is what so greatly enhances the meaning and value of brands (Foster 2008).

Again, some of today's brands might still be largely created and controlled by their organizations. Others might be largely taken over, even high jacked, by consumers and other stakeholders, e.g. through brand communities (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). It therefore becomes necessary to also acknowledge this continuum of co-creation through which the variability of today's brands might be better described.

A final limitation is that the AMA definition ignores brands' potentially extended scope. This refers to the number and diversity of entities involved in co-creating brand meanings. Trademarks encompassed firms, and sometimes consumers and distributors (Moore and Reid 2008; Wolpert 2004). However the scope of today's brands is growing and now includes additional stakeholders including suppliers, employees, investors, government, consumer groups, competitors, and even the media, all may be involved in creating brand meanings (Brodie 2009; Grant 2006; Ind 2004). Individually and jointly, stakeholders draw from their backgrounds and contexts to process and re-distribute brand meanings (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007). One might therefore consider stakeholders more like



**Figure 1.** Brands' multidimensional continuums.

participating interlocutors (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Oswald 2012); a networked community (Brodie 2009) engaged in a multilogue, creating and exchanging brand meanings (Cova and Paranque 2012; Sherry 2005).

Brand scope is again a matter of degree. Some of today's brands may still be closely linked to the firm. Others might encompass a wide variety of external participants. It thus also becomes necessary to acknowledge this continuum of scope. One along which the diversity of today's brands may be more accurately described.

In sum, the AMA defines brands strictly as identifying product names, symbols or features. This trademark conceptualization is rather simplistic and its single, one-size-fit-all signifier typification limits research and practice. Not only may today's brands be considerably more sophisticated than 80 years ago, when the AMA first released its "current" brand definition. Today's brands may also be more variable with respect to each other. Marketing would thus benefit from a broader, more flexible brand conceptualization, one that allows better understanding of the complex and diverse nature of brands and the tailoring of branding efforts to particular circumstances. Brands are thus better conceived as broad multidimensional constructs with varying degrees of meaning, independence, co-creation, and scope, as illustrated in Figure 1.

### *Implications of the New Branding Environment*

The above definitional limitations highlight key changes within the branding environment. The field has become substantially more complex over the last half century. Granted, brands still use meanings to steer consumer behaviors (Kotler 1987; Sherry 2005), but contrary to what the AMA definition suggests,

branding is no longer about merely attaching names and symbols to identify products (Keller 2013, p. 2). It has become a progressively sophisticated semiotic endeavor now encompassing contextual nuances and interpretive shades (McCracken 1993; Oswald 2012) heavily moderated by the environment. At the micro level, brand meaning is moderated by organizational, competitive and consumer actions. At the macro level brand meaning is moderated by economic, social, and ecological factors (Oswald 2012).

As with interpersonal relationships, brands do not always behave according to expectations. Brands may commit transgressions related to quality, service, or ethics (Huber, Vogel, and Meyer 2009). And in this era of global social networks, transgressions are immediately shared and commented upon. This almost instantaneously erodes brand meaning, image and equity (Kotler 2011). Brand meanings have therefore also become more fluid. Some might remain dominant, widely accepted and impervious to change, while others can become recessive and less appealing or emergent and ever more relevant (Oswald 2012).

Based on the above, branding needs to evolve beyond the conventional managerial focus on products (Low and Fullerton 1994). It should instead emphasize communications, in turn based on overarching semiotic objectives. Brand meanings therefore need to be actively managed along all consumer touch points (Oswald 2012; Sherry 2005). Today everything constitutes brand media (Moor 2007). Organizations also need more flexible branding structures to accommodate the progressively subjective and dynamic nature of brands. Branding should thus shift away from the excessively rigid notion of control, as this managerial assumption is eroding (Huber, Vogel, and Meyer 2009). Branding should instead move towards the notion of coherence, a general, more flexible branding theme that allows some meaning variation in response to volatile environmental conditions (Haarhoff and Kleyn 2012).

This being the case, branding is better conceived as an ongoing process of meaning negotiation with internal and external stakeholders. Branding is an orchestration of sorts in which organizations provide general guidelines as to what brands should mean, steer collective meanings towards what is desired, and attempt to keep these meanings within acceptable parameters. If branding research and practice are to be more effective, the dynamic interrelationship of brand meanings with stakeholders and their environments needs to be considered. A broader, more flexible brand conceptualization is thus necessary.

### *An Alternative Brand Conceptualization*

Branding has been researched for decades (Brodie 2009). Yet the brand construct itself remains poorly understood (De Chernatony 2009). A plethora of definitions abound in the literature (Schultz and Schultz 2004). Conceptual, technical, and popular brand interpretations are variously offered (Gabbott and Jevons 2009) though the majority are highly contextualized, idiosyncratic and questionable (Stern 2006). Some are also opportunistic and put forward not in response to refined knowledge, but as

research fads (Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992). The above is complicated by an almost metaphysical view of the construct. Almost everything is now considered a brand (Manning 2010). The situation is further compounded by constantly evolving definitions (Dobni and Zinkhan 1990) described as endless spirals of ambiguity (Mick 2007).

Given brands' complexity, single, specific definitions fall short (Gabbott and Jevons 2009). Broader, more inclusive brand conceptualizations are instead needed (Schroeder 2009), particularly ones that acknowledge cultural brand meanings, an area widely ignored by managerial marketing (Oswald 2012; Sherry 2005). Highly abstract theories are also limited since they rarely link to lower-order generalizations to be actionable (Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992). Mid-range theories are thus required. These integrate specific brand definitions into the more-inclusive theories of marketing (Brodie and De Chernatony 2009).

Given the above, and instead of attempting yet another specific brand definition, a general framework is offered. Not only does it describe what brands might be, but also it explains how brands might operate. Building on 1) brands being potentially complex multidimensional constructs operating along continuums of meaning, independence, co-creation and scope; 2) marketing semiotics, which conceives brands as cultural signification systems; and 3) General Systems Theory which allows an integrative approach, the authors suggest that brands be better conceptualized as semiotic marketing systems.

### The Semiotic Brand System

Layton (2007, 2009) provides excellent overviews of marketing systems. For the present purposes, a marketing system is defined as a

“network of individuals, groups and/or entities; embedded in a social matrix; linked directly or indirectly through sequential or shared participation in voluntary exchange of value; which jointly creates, assembles, transforms, and makes available; assortments of products, services, experiences, and ideas; provided in response to customer demand” (Layton 2009, p. 354).

Marketing systems are multidimensional (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt 2006) and operate through different flows: finance, ownership, possession, risk and information (Fisk 1967). Of these, information (meaning) is essential for value creation (Arndt 1986; Layton 2007). Flowing through market infrastructure, information matches supply and demand, enables exchange, and enhances participants' potency of assortment (Alderson 1965/2006). Yet markets are becoming increasingly symbolic (Sherry 2005). If an improved understanding of marketing systems is to be achieved, more attention needs to be paid to systems' meaning infrastructures (Kadirov and Varey 2011).

Based on the above, brand meaning infrastructure will be presently explored. Other flows are indeed related to the brand system, but for model simplicity they are temporarily

disregarded, assumed to be part of the broader marketing system. A simplified Semiotic Brand System (SBS) is presented below in Figure 2.

As shown above, the SBS central component is the brand. The latter is both a repository and vehicle of collective brand meanings. The brand is surrounded in the first instance by its immediate stakeholders: firms, distributors, customers, potential customers, and competitors, among others. Through their respective actions, for example firm/competitor marketing communications, customer brand usage, or potential customer comments, immediate stakeholders co-create brand meanings. This directly contributes towards the diverse meanings that the brand might acquire. (See No. 1, thin gray arrows pointing from customers and others towards the brand.)

This being the case, a mere name, logo or other differentiating symbol does not by default guarantee the existence of a brand. While these might be crafted into a brand identity, they are still just a theoretical notion within the organization. Only after brand signifiers have been released to external stakeholders, and processed by these, do signifiers and the brand as a whole acquire shared meanings in the form of *brand images*. Intended brand meanings can be validated, adjusted or rejected by stakeholders. At this point, the brand has become an open cultural construct with potentially sophisticated association networks. This is in contrast to the mere collection of *firm-defined product signifiers* that the AMA suggests suffice to have a brand.

Immediate stakeholders then extract value from co-created brand meanings. For example, customers use perceived brand associations to construct their individual or social selves, while firms capitalize on the brand's popularity to generate sales and equity. (See No. 2, thin black arrows pointing away from the brand.)

Marketing systems are not separate from the environments in which they operate. Environments are active system components. Their impact must be acknowledged (Shapiro 1964). This follows markets being interdependent, even symbiotic, with other areas of human endeavor (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt 2006). Meaning flows between the brand and its direct stakeholders are thus moderated first by the micro environment, the immediate, particular context in which stakeholders process brand meanings. The micro environment is a product of actions and communications between direct stakeholders, such as the dialogue between the firm and its competitors, or the interactions between customers and potential customers. (See No. 3, dashed light gray arrows.)

Further away from the brand, though also important, is the macro environment. It encompasses broad areas like the economy, society, culture, and the physical environment. Exogenous elements like these also influence marketing systems (Layton 2009). They moderate, albeit indirectly, meaning flows to and from the brand. They create a wider context in which brand meanings are interpreted. High gas prices (economy), for example, impact consumer perceptions of elegant, albeit fuel-inefficient car brands. (See No. 4, thick gray arrows pointing into the system.)



**Figure 2.** The semiotic brand system.

Macro-environmental factors cannot be considered in isolation. They are part of the greater socio-environmental system. What happens in one of these broad areas likely affects the others, particularly in today's globally-interconnected world. Building on the previous case, high gas prices (economy) may derive from the perception of Middle Eastern instability (society). (See No. 5, dashed medium gray arrows.)

At the micro level, brand meaning flows create value for immediate stakeholders and also at the macro level, say, for the physical environment by stimulating more sustainable consumption patterns. However, brand meaning flows may also create negative value, so called externalities, such as by stimulating frivolous consumption patterns. (See No. 6, medium black arrows going away from the brand toward e.g. society.) Hence, brands have a macromarketing nature and need to be conceived as marketing systems.

It should be noted that the above micro and macro-environmental distinctions, and their influence on brand meaning flows, are compatible with other environmental typologies from the marketing systems literature, such as Alderson's (1965) proximate, aspiration and ultimate environments, and more recently, Layton's (2007) task and institutional environments.

### *Semiotic Brand System Operation*

The sequence presented above is somewhat simplified. The SBS does not follow a lineal process of input, throughput, and output. The model is also not limited to individual flows, complete after single iterations. The SBS instead operates on multiple continuous cycles feeding off themselves. This is described as "circulation," a characteristic of information systems, in which meaning is not only consumed, but simultaneously re-elaborated and created (Lash 2002). The SBS thus follows exchange systems' dual flows of information (Alderson 1965/2006). Participants act as double agents. They simultaneously consume and produce meaning (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007). Being dynamic, circular systems, markets are collections of ongoing processes, not static components, whose actions cause a series of reactions (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt 2006).

Within Semiotics signs are not single units of meaning. They can be signifiers for other signs, in a theoretically infinite dynamic of meaning creation (Eco 1979). However, despite feeding off itself, the SBS cannot operate indefinitely. Entropy is a system's natural tendency towards disorganization and collapse caused by energy loss and operational displacement/wear

of system components. These reduce system efficiency, strength, and ability to endure (Katz and Kahn 1966). With the SBS, entropy is induced when brand meanings reach a critical point of irrelevance. The latter is caused by reduced organizational interest, hence resources, and also follows ebb in interest by other system stakeholders, primarily consumers, who start viewing brand meanings as un-worthwhile to pursue.

This obeys the dialectical relationship between the firm and its stakeholders. A certain degree of equilibrium is required for the brand system to endure. Today's markets feed off the simultaneous production of similarity and difference. Consumers wanting to belong endorse official brand meanings, but those preferring to stand out create their own (Bastos and Levy 2012; Holt 2004). Unorthodox brand meanings pique consumer interest and are commercially most effective. But as firms adopt alternative meanings to legitimize and enhance their brands, consumers grow jaded, making co-opted meanings less effective (Holt 2002). Firms not taking over brand meanings so completely to the point of alienating consumers can therefore avoid system entropy. Firms should only adopt enough consumer culture to keep the brand interesting and relevant. By giving consumers co-creation space, encouraging them to develop new brand meanings, firms can perpetuate this symbiotic cycle and extend their brand system's operation. Branding should therefore also be seen as maintaining acceptable levels of mass interest and engagement through the management of meanings.

### *Semiotic Brand System Antecedents*

The SBS builds on a series of antecedents. Marketing has long applied semiotics (Kotler 1987), but in a limited manner focused either on the communication process, the mechanics of meaning transmission (Manning 2010), or on message characteristics, material, conventional and contextual structures (Oswald 2012). As for brands, the literature often describes them as signification systems, though this not from a proper General Systems Theory perspective, as presently done. It instead refers to systems at their most basic, limited to the interrelationship of signifier (e.g. Golden Arches) and signified concept (McDonalds). From a semiotic perspective, the process through which brand meaning is generated, not structured or transmitted, had not yet been explicitly addressed (Oswald 2012).

The SBS starts to resolve this. It addresses brand meaning creation through the perspectives of General Systems Theory and Structural Semiotics. The latter school of thought is based on modern linguistics. It investigates symbols' meaning in pursuit of an underlying reality. This contrasts with the Post-Structuralist bent, which denies meaning certainty claiming endless semiosis (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002). Per Structuralism, meaning derives from a system of interrelated elements (De Saussure 2000). The behavior of each affects the system as a whole and vice versa (Levi-Strauss 1967). Furthermore, meaning, like language, is organized into hierarchical systems of progressively smaller and larger units (Oswald 2012). Meaning is thus acknowledged as part of the

greater cultural system. With their fundamental units being a multitude of signs, semiotic systems are better described as cultural systems (Eco 1979).

The structural semiotic approach is compatible with marketing systems. These consist of productive networks of interrelated elements and processes (Layton 2007). Marketing systems also have hierarchical levels of scope (Dixon and Wilkinson 1989; Hunt 1981). These delimit system boundaries, that is, participating entities, roles and relationships, and resultant inputs and outputs (Layton 2007). System boundaries are somewhat dynamic (Von Bertalanffy 1969). In addition to tangible structures/flows, marketing systems also have symbolic ones that convey meaning. Arguably, marketing systems are fundamentally sign systems. Despite their physicality, all their structures and flows are essentially symbolic. Creating, manufacturing, moving, communicating, offering, consuming, and even disposing of products are all activities that ultimately convey meaning (Kadirov and Varey 2011).

Structuralism is particularly compatible with branding. Brands are semiotic objects. They fundamentally consist of meaning. But brands are also cultural constructs. They reflect and shape culture, influencing how social groups think and act (Klein 1999; Schroeder 2009). Brand's culturally-laden messages are constantly being re-worked and re-distributed by network participants (Levy and Luedicke 2013; Oswald 2012). Brands are thus social sign systems that introduce meaning into marketing networks. These meanings integrate network members, driving the value adding co-creation process (Brodie, Glynn, and Little 2006). Meanings also hold networks together in pursuit of consistent goals in lieu of rising system fragmentation (Kadirov and Varey 2011).

The marketing literature also mentions brands' systemic nature, such as Aaker's (1996) brand system or Kapferer's (2004) organismic brand perspective. These instances again refer to systems in quite basic terms and by no means do they reflect General Systems Theory in a proper sense. Brands' transition towards this perspective is barely starting.

The SBS also begins to resolve this. It applies a General Systems Theory perspective to better understand brands. The SBS is based on systems' concepts and structural principles being applicable across areas even to non-material fields such as branding, where system elements are intangible, abstract concepts represented by symbols (Ackoff 1971; Bunge 1979; Von Bertalanffy 1969). Brands satisfy the fundamental characteristics of open systems (Wooliscroft and Lawson 2003). They have 1) input, importing environmental resources; 2) throughput, systematically transforming input; 3) output, exporting back into the environment; 4) event cycles, outputs furnishing inputs for repeat sequences; 5) negative entropy, import surpluses compensating system's tendency towards disorganization and collapse; 6) feedback, information on internal operation and environmental changes to correct course; 7) dynamic homeostasis, countering internal and external disruptions to maintain operation; 8) differentiation, evolution towards more specialized and elaborate functions; and 9) equifinality, ability to achieve similar states following different

paths (Wooliscroft and Lawson 2003). Parallels thus exist between the SBS and open biological systems in that components interact with their environment, adapt, learn, and evolve into more specialized and efficient forms (Von Bertalanffy 1950).

Finally, the SBS builds on marketing's but especially macromarketing's interest in marketing systems (Hunt 1977, 1981). Since marketing's emergence both practitioners and academics have recognized that concepts are interdependent, which is evidenced throughout the different schools of marketing thought. Several core concepts originate in a broader systems context (Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988). Marketing systems have been addressed by a series of key authors, Alderson in particular whose functionalist perspective is largely based on this approach. It horizontally and vertically integrates the transvections of the provisioning system into an operational whole (Alderson 1965). Other authors include Slater (1956) who provides early insights into marketing systems; Cox, Goodman, and Fichandler (1965) who discuss product flows through the economy; Fisk (1967) and Dowling (1983) who study marketing from a General Systems Theory perspective; Dixon and Wilkinson (1989) who suggest that marketing follow the largely systems-based functionalist paradigm; Wilkie and Moore (1999) who place marketing within the aggregate social system; Meade and Nason (1991) and Layton (2007) who suggest placing marketing systems at the core of marketing; Layton (2009) who sees marketing systems as a key component to economic growth and quality of life; and Kadirov and Varey (2011) who discuss meaning within marketing systems, an area just starting to be explored within macromarketing.

In regards to the latter, meaning may be understood as the interpretive outcome through which marketing systems members differentiate their actions (Kadirov and Varey 2011). Marketing actions have important socio-environmental consequences (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt 2006) that make meaning of interest to macromarketing. The quest to understand things and events, to process their meaning, is a human universal (Brown 1991). Human motivation and behavior are largely driven by this pursuit (Frankl 1968). Meaning is thus an increasingly central concept within the social sciences (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002). If a better understanding of marketing systems is to be achieved, particularly of their impact upon the broader socio-environmental systems, issues surrounding meaning in brands must be addressed.

### ***Benefits of a Systems Approach to Brands***

A systems approach to brands offers advantages. Conceptually, the SBS is better aligned with current consumption paradigms. The Managerial Brand Conceptualization (MBC) follows mid-20th Century cultural engineering where brands are but instruments to shape consumer behavior according to organizational objectives (Mitchell 2012). The SBS instead considers brands from a cultural perspective. Despite their commercial nature, brands are also legitimate sources of original and relevant content that aid stakeholders in achieving their goals (Golant 2012;

Holt 2002; Mitchell 2012). The SBS' broad catalyst perspective marks a fundamental departure from managerial branding that views the cultural antecedents of market heterogeneity as transactional obstacles to be dealt with (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt 2006). This outdated worldview is no longer sustainable given the impact that social media is having on brands. The SBS' more current outlook thus helps update branding research and practice, better poising them for the future.

Terminologically, the SBS should help organize branding's fragmented constructs. Over the years branding thought developed its own concepts and borrowed others from related disciplines. This caused a proliferation of branding terms. Extensive terminology may increase explanatory power, but patchworks of isolated concepts are only marginally useful (Patterson 1999). The uniqueness and interrelationships of branding constructs must be ascertained, such as the still unresolved widespread confusion between brand image and brand personality. Branding constructs need to be integrated into a single conceptual system so terminological order can be brought to the field. The SBS delineates the different brand stakeholders, and the different flows of meaning going to and from them. By addressing term's meaning from each of these perspectives, and reconciling them, the SBS should help clarify redundancies, incoherencies, and gaps, further helping branding research and practice. Results of this terminological clarification may then be extended to other areas, such as education and public policy. This would further integrate marketing with the broader social-environmental systems.

Empirically, the SBS should allow brands to be better understood. Marketing constructs are progressively complex and interconnected. Yet their research continues to be done in isolation, mostly limited to immediate antecedents or consequences (Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992). This approach is only marginally useful. Studying concepts and relationships outside broader contexts leads to poor understanding and less than optimal application. Research is instead best approached from a systems perspective (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt 2006; Wooliscroft and Lawson 2003). The SBS should help in this regard. By conceiving brands as cultural systems it provides a framework connecting stakeholders inside and outside the organization. Its different aggregation levels allow for a variety of research applications – from individual consumers and firms, through markets (Fletcher and Brown 2005), to the global level (Fisk 1967) – achieving a better understanding of brands. The SBS is not limited to synchronic meanings, those at any given moment. Despite brand meanings evolving (Oswald 2012), dynamic systems can still be described (Ackoff 1971). The SBS may thus help study brands' diachronic meaning, longitudinally over time. This should further improve brand understanding.

Finally, from a macromarketing perspective, the SBS offers structures through which the nature, operation, but above all the potential consequences of brands may be better addressed. The effectiveness of marketing systems is indicated by their net contribution (Layton 2007). Marketing undoubtedly enhances

quality of life (Wilkie and Moore 1999). Brands in particular stimulate quality, consistency and accountability (Petty 2011). However, the resulting trade-offs must also be minded, especially marketing's impact on the broader socio-ecological environment (Peterson 2013). These side effects have been long neglected by mainstream marketing (Bartels 1983; Dixon 1984; Nason 1989; Reidenbach and Oliva 1983).

Successive consumer movements have challenged marketing since the late 1800s (Kotler 1972; Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988, p. 127+). Opposition also targeted brands, long condemned on a series of grounds by authors, consumer groups and economists (Petty 2011). Current production and consumption paradigms, based largely on brands, exhaust natural resources and pollute the environment. They also negatively affect individuals, societies and cultures (Klein 1999). A systems approach to brands should help address these issues. Merging into different flows and progressively larger marketing systems, the SBS should help identify and understand the impacts of brands on the greater socio-ecological environment. Though the above is not limited to the present. The SBS anticipates future marketing environments where sustainability is increasingly acknowledged; where organizations progressively acquire socio-environmental purposes, beyond mere profit (Jowitt and Lury 2012); and where consumers place added importance on the responsible actions of brands (Kotler 2011). As branding shifts from the conventional product focus on quality or features, and incorporates important socio-environmental criteria, the SBS is well poised to preempt future notions of brand reputation.

## Conclusion

Intellectual links to the past help understand marketing's present. They also better place scholars for the future (Witkowski 2010). Marketing certainly owes a lot to its managerial heritage and many of its practical concepts are still used today (Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988). Yet circumstances evolve. Globalization, technology and accelerated change have made marketing progressively complex (Schroeder 2009). Managerial branding is struggling to keep up in this revolutionary new environment (Cova and Paranque 2012; Jones 2012). Managerial models are becoming too simple, narrow and static (Wilkie and Moore 2003). Only partially applicable to current realities (Brodie 2009; Brodie and De Chernatony 2009; Jowitt and Lury 2012; Schroeder 2009), they are starting to hinder marketing's development as a science (Mick 2007). Limited and outdated, managerial branding is being left behind (Mitchell 2012) and this will only worsen as branding's prominence and sophistication continues to grow (Levy and Luedicke 2013).

The AMA was launched in 1937 to support the emerging field of marketing (Witkowski 2010). Today, the organization has consolidated itself as a leader within the marketing community. It provides authoritative guidelines as to the meaning, nature and scope of constructs and its definitions carrying substantial weight (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt 2006). The 2007 revised marketing definition re-positioned the

AMA as a thought leader within the field. The definition still recognizes the important managerial perspective, but its broad nature also acknowledges marketing's aggregate domain, alternative perspectives, and social responsibility. This followed the narrow 2004 definition that conceived marketing as essentially a managerial tool, to be used for the firms' benefit. Focused excessively on the firm and neglecting other important marketing participants, it failed to acknowledge the discipline's impact on society (Gundlach and Wilkie 2009; Keefe 2008).

The AMA flaunts itself as "the most credible marketing resource where our members can stay relevant with knowledge . . . The AMA is constantly innovating and evolving, helping to shape the field as well as keep abreast of the changing global marketplace to help our members excel" (AMA 2014c). Yet when it comes to brands, one of marketing's most important notions (Levy and Luedicke 2013), the AMA still clings to an anachronistic 80-year-old definition. The organization presents brands at their most basic and unsophisticated (De Chernatony 2009; Keller 2013, p. 2). Its trademark conceptualization is increasingly out of touch with marketing theory and practice. By no means is the AMA the thought leader it purports to be.

Ironically, even the International Trademark Association is more progressive than the AMA in its brand conceptualization. Instead of defining brands as mere trademarks, as the AMA does, the INTA at least defines them as trademarks that have "acquired significance over and above its functional use by a company to distinguish its goods or services from those of other traders" (Davis and Maniatis 2010, p. 120). And more recently, as "the commercial 'persona' of a particular product or service, established by marketing and advertising" (International Trademark Association (INTA) 2014b). So contrary to their intentions, the AMA's simplistic brand notion may actually be doing a disservice. Those who adopt it, not knowing better, are ultimately left at a disadvantage in regards to better-informed peers. Improper definitions steer users down incorrect paths (Gabbott and Jevons 2009). They hinder marketing education, research and practice, basically the field's development as a science (Churchill 1979; Patterson 1999).

The AMA set out to appraise its marketing definition every five years (Keefe 2008). Commendably, its 2007 definition was recently reviewed and re-approved (AMA 2013). Yet much more pressing is that the AMA formally update its stagnant brand definition. Applied fields like marketing understandably strive to retain simple conceptual frameworks. Overly simplistic ones cannot serve the discipline indefinitely (Lawson and Wooliscroft 2004). It sometimes is necessary to move beyond the conventional doctrine (Jones and Richardson 2007). When fields develop, terminology needs to evolve. As Ackoff (1971, p. 671) explains, "Like surgical instruments, definitions become dull with use and require frequent sharpening and, eventually, replacement."

The AMA would be thus well advised to put forward a broader, more up to date brand definition that goes beyond mere identifying names, symbols, or features to one that acknowledges how much the branding environment has

evolved and ideally that places brands within the broader marketing systems perspective. An initial brand definition for the AMA on which to further build might be the following:

Brands are re-defined as complex multidimensional constructs with varying degrees of meaning, independence, co-creation and scope. Brands are semiotic marketing systems that generate value for direct and indirect participants, society, and the broader environment, through the exchange of co-created meaning.

Formally addressing what brands have become is an important, albeit long neglected issue. The authors invite discussion.

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