

**Crossing Bridges: Assembling Culture into Brands
and Brands into Consumers' Global Local Cultural Lives**

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Abstract

Fournier and Alvarez (2019—this issue) and Batra (2019—this issue), respectively, offer interpretive and psychological perspectives on how brands acquire cultural meanings. In this commentary, we discuss the opportunities for leveraging these two perspectives, and use an assemblage theory lens to uncover the dynamics of how cultural models articulated through cultural myths, metaphors, ideologies, and cultural objects circulate through the brand assemblage and through the consumer assemblage. We offer a bridge-crossing approach to research opportunities bringing both a socio-historical-cultural approach and psychological approach to understand how cultural meanings are assembled into brands and how consumers assemble brands into their lives.

Keywords: Brands, Cultural meanings, Brand assemblage, Consumer assemblage, Assemblage theory

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Over 20 years ago, Fournier admonished us to remember that “people don’t choose brands, they choose lives” (1998, pp. 366–367), and Holt (2002) warned of the unintended and unwanted ways that brand meanings creep into our lives and make trouble. These provocative articles were very instrumental in our multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary, and multi-method journey to understand the complexity of whether and how brand meanings are assembled into consumers’ global and local cultural lives (c.f., Coulter, Price, & Feick, 2003; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008a, 2008b; Price, 2015; Vredeveld & Coulter, 2019). Additionally, we have benefitted greatly from the scholarship of Fournier and Batra and their colleagues (c.f., Fournier & Alveraz, 2012; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Batra et al., 2000; Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012).

This research dialogue presents two articles on how brands acquire cultural meanings (Fournier & Alvarez, 2019—this issue; Batra, 2019—this issue). Both Fournier and Alvarez and Batra comment on how cultural meanings are assembled into brands, often by brand managers, but also other cultural intermediaries, including consumers, and how consumers use brands as resources in their lives, attaching new and different meanings to brands. Fournier and Alvarez analyze the value of interpretive research for informing how actors associate brands with cultural models and “use cultural models to make sense of brand experiences in their daily lives,” and importantly, link the interpretive lens to consumer psychology. By contrast, Batra addresses three issues about the role of cultural intermediaries in the meaning transfer process (McCracken,

1986) ~ how meanings adhere to brands, how meanings are transferred to brands, and how consumers contribute to the meaning transfer process ~ primarily focused on experimental work.

In this commentary, we draw upon the articles by Fournier and Alvarez and Batra, as well as our work and the work of others, to discuss the cultural meaning of brands. We next foreground our bridge-crossing perspective, bringing to the dialogue both a consumer culture theory lens and a psychological lens (with their related methodologies). We follow with a brief discussion of assemblage theory as an organizing theoretical lens, and then overview how cultural models are assembled into brands (the key focus of Batra), and how brands are assembled into our global and local cultural lives (emphasized by Fournier and Alvarez). For each of these two brand-culture dynamics, we highlight research opportunities. Our goal is to further conversation around brands as important carriers and creators of cultural meanings and vital resources in consumers' lives.

Bridging Consumer Culture Theory and Psychological Approaches to Cultural Meanings of Brands

Researchers in consumer behavior have explored the cultural meanings of brands for decades. McCracken (1986) suggested that brand meanings are created through the transfer of meanings primarily organized by the firm. Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) reiterated that a consumer's image of a brand is formed primarily by marketing activities. With time, brand meanings are now more discursively produced across a wider, more diverse range of human and non-human actors, and 'consumers' have more power and are now key creators of brand meanings (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 320). Moreover, the ostensible human authors may be

disconnected from the meaning transfer process through technologies, media, and other interacting human and non-human actors (Moor, 2012). As such, questions arise, “who is assembling the meaning of brands, and how do we tap into those meanings?”

We’ve engaged with several projects on cultural meanings of brands seeking to cross bridges between consumer culture theory and psychology to understand how cultural meanings are assembled into brands, and how brands are assembled into our global and local cultural lives. We embarked on a three-year research program in post-socialist Central Europe involving qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate how consumers new to a market economy would engage with brands (Coulter, Price, & Feick, 2003). With improved understanding of the socio-historical-cultural milieu, we took a more psychological perspective developing a scale to assess the meanings of branded products ~ generally ~ not with a specific brand (e.g., Nike), and exploring differences between individuals new to a consumer culture versus those who were not (Strizhakova et al., 2008b). We went on to develop a scale to measure consumer belief in branded products as a passport to global citizenship (Strizhakova et al., 2008a) and examine its effects on quality and identity signaling and the importance of branded products and purchase of global brands (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2011), and to explore brand meanings as drivers of local relative to global brand purchases (Strizhakova & Coulter, 2015). Crossing country, philosophical, and methodological bridges yielded insights about the cultural meanings of brands that we would not have realized by staying on either side of the bridge.

Assemblage Theory for Thinking about Cultural Meanings of Brands

Assemblage theory conceives of the world as constituted from “more or less temporary amalgamations of heterogeneous material and semiotic [actors], amongst which capacities and actions emerge not as properties of individual [actors], but through the relationships established between them” (Canniford & Bajde, 2015, p. 1; DeLanda, 2006). In consumer research, assemblage theory has been used to understand brands, consumer culture and markets, practices, families, new technologies, and daily life (c.f., Canniford & Badje, 2015; Epp, Schau, & Price, 2014; Hoffman & Novak, 2017; Lury, 2009; Parmentier & Fischer, 2014; Price, 2015; Preece, Kerrigan, & O’Reilly, 2018; Price & Epp, 2015). An assemblage framework prompts consideration of semiotic meanings and material components at macro and micro levels of analysis that make up the complex systems that constitute brands and consumer culture (Canniford & Bajde, 2015; Lury, 2009; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). As such, assemblage theory encourages attention to the broad meanings that circulate in cultures and through institutions, but also with the minutiae of consumers’ and brands’ daily practices.

Assembling Cultural Meanings in Brands

The Brand Assemblage

It has become more apparent that a brand is never fully stabilized, but rather is a moving assemblage that is dynamic, discursively constituted, contested, and negotiated (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2000). Lury (2004, 2009) describes a brand as a “happening object,” emergent from a specific, socio-historically defined space (Fournier & Alvarez, this issue; Slater, 2014). Although marketing and brand managers seek control over the brand assemblage attempting to optimally position it, no actor (firm, consumer, institution, or other) “can entirely own or control its brand”

(Slater, 2014, p. 104). As such, this research dialogue, surrounding the complex interplay of culture and brands, is both timely and vitally important. “Brand meaning emerges out of increasingly dispersed networks of users, producers and other agents” (Cayla & Arnould, 2008, p. 97; Parmentier & Fischer, 2014; Thompson, MacInnis & Arnould, 2018).

We define a brand assemblage as the heterogeneous (human and non-human) actors with shifting capabilities that collectively define a brand. A brand territory, within which a brand assemblage resides, includes shifting relations among numerous actors (e.g., retailers, consumers, packaging, communication elements, media placements, communities) that create new meanings, as well as new material forms. Actors circulate into and out of the fragile and porous territory of the brand assemblage, each actor with relational power dependent on other actors. Expressive, material, and imaginative relations among actors gives the brand assemblage agency and force (Epp et al., 2014). For example, Nike’s selection of politically polarizing Colin Kaepernick as spokesperson for the thirtieth anniversary of its iconic “Just Do It” campaign created a circulation of human and non-human actors with forceful expressive, material, and imaginative relations that altered both the brand territory and cultural conversations (Avery & Pauwels, 2019).

Batra provides a broad review of how firms employ cues and stimuli (e.g., visual, sensory, and human cues) to create brand meaning and brand personality providing theoretical reasoning and experimental evidence. Further, both Batra and Fournier and Alvarez reference cultural models as key elements of a brand assemblage. Fournier and Alvarez discuss myths, ideologies, metaphors, and cultural objects as manifestations of cultural models, and importantly these cultural models *can* become key actors in a brand assemblage and give the brand relational capability to “resonate” with people’s lives. Relatedly, Fournier and Avery (2011, p. 206) argue,

“Resonant brands live in the slipstreams of culture; they will always ebb and flow,” and these resonant brands create their own social rituals, cultural artifacts, and cultural conversations that bring a brand “squarely into consumers’ lives” (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 205). Moreover, they provocatively avow, “brand differentiation is supplanted by cultural resonance as the overarching criteria for strong brands.”

Brands as Cultural Assemblages

Brands themselves can be cultural assemblages, “a symbolic repertoire,” “woven into the fabric of global consumer culture” (Cayla & Arnould, 2008, p. 101, p. 105). Moreover, within at least some socio-cultural assemblages, brands may be preeminent over product categories (Eckhardt, Dholakia, & Varman, 2013; Kornberger, 2010; Lury, 2004). Brands have received extensive attention as symbolic devices for consumers around the globe, and recent work by Gürhan-Canli, Sarial-Abi, & Hayran (2018) articulates the importance of brand-related characteristics (perceptions of brand localness, globalness, and foreignness) as cultural assemblages. Much of our own work has described the power of global brands as resources for consumers envisioning participation in a global community. Pursuit of global citizenship is integrally coupled with use of global brands; and the transformation of individual identity through brands (Price et al., 2017; Strizhakova et al., 2008a). Branding as a cultural model proliferates shifting, continually changing mini-masses, lifestyles, tribes, groupings of various kinds that are “demanding, open and incomplete” (Lury, 2009). The skills of destabilizing and re-stabilizing consumer territories is a defining characteristic of contemporary brand development. For example, semiotic and material components (e.g., logo, spokesperson) can be

rearranged to create a doppelganger brand or an alternate brand meaning (e.g., Absolute cirrhosis), destabilizing brand territories.

Assemblage theory emphasizes that the brand's materiality and meanings are co-constituted through ongoing, ever-changing collective and distributed practices (Lury, 2009; Onyas & Ryan, 2015). Thus, it is also useful for thinking about how brands are integrated as vital actors in consumers' lives, giving shape to collective and individual identity, everyday practices and rituals, and family and social relationships (Berger & Heath, 2008; Epp et al., 2014; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Whether beloved (Batra et al., 2012) or uninvited (Fournier & Avery, 2011), brands "infuse culture with meaning" (Schroeder, 2009, p. 124). As an institution, branding structures and produces economic activity, creating its own cultural model and logic (Lury, 2009). In short, "the preferred and prominent conceptual container of the new millennium that remixes, flavors and widely disseminates the ideas of marketing and consumer desire is that of the 'brand'" (Eckhardt et al., 2013, p. 7).

Within the brand landscape, consider how the Oreo cookie brand moves into new cultural spaces (e.g., from the U.S. to China, Brazil), altering its product aesthetics (e.g., shape, taste) to address local preferences, and differentially attaching itself to broad cultural models unique to cultural practices across countries that can give the brand coherence (e.g., supplanting the shared bedtime story-time ritual with an Oreo cookie technology-mediated long-distance family practice) (Epp et al., 2014). Relatedly, Preece et al. (2018) draw on assemblage theory to examine a delicate balancing act between continuity and change helps to account for the longevity of the James Bond franchise brand within evolving socio-cultural contexts, exploring the brand as a micro-assemblage (the actors in a film); a meso-level assemblage (how the brand is stewarded by a family across various expressive/semiotic and material arrangements); and a

macro-level assemblage (how shifting sociocultural elements are “enrolled and unenrolled” mapping to cultural change). This work which documents that brands are nested assemblages that sustain through continuity and change is responsive to Batra’s call for an integrative framework that examines how the micro-assemblage of an ad connects with the macro-level assemblage of shifting sociocultural elements.

In interpretive work, Vredeveld and Coulter (2019) uncover how some sojourners to the U.S. (international students) use brands to construct the cultural experience of “life in America.” Rather than having a pre-constructed bucket list, these sojourners observe the circulating meanings and iconic imagery in the U.S. and purchase brands to create their unique American cultural experience. Informants decode the indexical usage meanings of brands in order to perform American College Life, everyday American consumption, and uniquely American rituals. Brands are used not to extend the self or establish a self-brand relationship, but rather to actively create sojourner’s observed and decoded cultural experience of American life. This research is consistent with Fournier and Alvarez who note that people create individual idiosyncratic cultural models from “the shared models available and their own experiences.”

Research Opportunities

Viewing the brand as a dynamic assemblage, whose territory is constantly challenged by actor movements that destabilize the brand invites new research from both socio-historical-cultural and psychological perspectives. Consistent with Slater (2014), we suggest the need for interpretive work to understand why particular actors have an interest in stabilizing or destabilizing the brand territory, and how actors within assemblages may reconstitute brand territories. Research might more closely examine how social media is bound up with the socio-

cultural context for brands and potential destabilizing effects on brand meanings (Rokka & Canniford, 2016), or focus on consumers' power "to reward or punish firms for their branding initiatives in real time" (Thompson et al., 2018, p. 320).

As Batra advocates, marketing and consumer practices are layered with emotion, touch, sound, smell, taste, and sight cues that imbue brands with cultural meanings. Myriad opportunities exist to build upon past experimental work to explore the individual and interactive effects of cues on consumers' cultural meanings of brands. Research could investigate how firms use color in their brand messaging to evoke the feeling of a fresh start or how a sound conveys a consumer journey. Further, interpretive methods might explore how these factors play into consumers' daily lives that involve consumption of branded products imbued with deep cultural myths and metaphors (Coulter & Zaltman, 1994; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

An assemblage perspective foregrounds that even a small change to the brand actors or their relationships can have a catalytic or exponential impact, because how the brand holds together depends on the complex interplay of coalescing actors (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Price & Epp, 2015). Opportunities exist to quantitatively calibrate the interplay between firm decisions and consumer reactions to understand how and what practices, rituals, and cultural artifacts can stabilize, gather, and bind actors, protecting the territory of the brand (Epp et al., 2014; Price & Epp, 2015). As noted with the James Bond movie franchise brand, understanding brands as cultural assemblages requires an exploration of balancing continuity and change in the assembled brand within the broader socio-cultural context (Preece et al., 2018).

Batra draws upon McCracken's meaning transfer model; but Moor (2012) challenges this guiding lens given that the governance of brand meaning is widely dispersed among heterogeneous actors (Cayla & Arnould, 2008; Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Thompson et al.,

2018). Moor (2012) points to avenues for research that distinguish different forms of mediating activity and different material and non-human participants in mediation. Research could examine the salience of new actors (e.g., “market influencers” on Instagram or twitter) as mediators for the creation of brand meanings (Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Amazon’s Alexa Show (on her 10” screen) shares headlines, reviews, and shopping options unprompted, selecting, and then mediating what we know about “what’s trending” (Hoffman & Novak, 2017). Examining mediating activities and actors, while acknowledging the fuzzy and dynamic territories of brand, consumer, and broader socio-cultural forces offers numerous research challenges.

Finally, opportunities to explore brands as powerful actors for assembling culture abound. More attention could be given to brands as a central device for assembling an “authentic” cultural experience. As suggested by Fournier and Alvarez, we see merit in theory and research that investigates the “intricate relationship” between product category assemblages and brand assemblages. Experimental research might examine the boundaries of brands as an institutional cultural model, examining them as actors in nation branding, social movement branding, and personal branding (Arvidsson, 2005).

Assembling Brands into Consumers’ Cultural Lives

The Consumer Assemblage

The consumer’s assembled life is made up of shifting relations among actors nested within a shifting socio-cultural context that reflects the consumer’s habitus or cultural milieu (Bourdieu, 2013). This milieu is comprised of people we are connected to, the infrastructures, technologies and media that surround us, and the landscapes through which we move (Price,

2015), and as Fournier and Alvarez describe, the area of influence that establishes our tastes, ways of seeing, and the identities and relationships that bind us. Consumer assemblages are constructed around key consumer projects, including: personal and collective identity projects; family and social relationships, rituals and everyday practices that co-produce and reproduce culture, and brand assemblages.

The complex, idiosyncratic, and dynamic quality of consumers' assembled lives cannot be overstated. Price (2015) describes how consumers experience their assembled lives as tangles of obligations, including work, family, soccer practice, church, house, friends, and personal identity. The interplay of these assemblages is complex and not always harmonious. Practices and rituals, bundled with their material forms and expressive and cultural meanings, bind consumers to their lives. Cultural myths, metaphors, ideologies, and cultural objects circulate through these assemblages, exerting binding force, but they are also used creatively and ambiguously (Slater, 2014; Epp & Price, 2018). Consumers may believe that family dinner is a vital everyday family practice that produces and reproduces family relationships and collective identity. Nevertheless, families are resourceful in stretching relations and boundaries to provide alternative forms, such as watching movies and eating popcorn and Papa John's pizza on speed dial (Epp & Price, 2018). When is it okay to outsource emotional, cognitive, and physical labor to brands, and when not? (Epp & Velagaleti, 2014). Brands insert themselves into consumers' lives and also are inserted into consumers' lives in surprising and myriad ways (Price, 2015).

Brands as Actors in Consumers' Assembled Lives

Brands are powerful actors on consumers' assembled local and global cultural lives. They can be the glue of collective and individual identity, family and social relationships, and

everyday practices and rituals. Alternatively, they can disrupt and transform consumers' assembled lives. A particularly profound illustration of brands as actors in consumers' assembled lives is the way that brand augmented reality and the IoT disrupt our assembled lives, brand meanings, and brand relationships (Hoffman & Novak, 2017); we invite Alexa (Amazon) as a brand into our home, but then "her" actions reach beyond our control, usurping other roles, and influencing us in unanticipated ways.

Fournier and Alvarez observe, consumers "are the ultimate meaning creators" connecting available cultural models "to make sense of their own experiences." Within this cognitive view of culture, consumers actively decode, create, and re-communicate the meaning of brands. Batra references numerous experimental works in this meaning-making space, particularly as consumers interpret pictures and images in advertisements. Brands are also embodied by consumers as actors (Shore, 1998); brands (not products) are signposts for our assembled lives, "we need Tide." These embodied versions of brands are embedded in our way of living; "Choosey mothers choose Jif" binds the brand to cultural themes of how life *should* be enacted (Coupland, 2005). Increasingly however, consumers bring their own unique meanings, sometimes intentionally at odds with intended brand meanings. Fournier and Alvarez report on consumers who create doppelganger images, and Warren and Mohr (2018) discuss graduates of an elite private university drinking "blue-collar" Pabst Blue Ribbon, spoofing low cultural taste through ironic consumption.

Brands sometimes figure prominently as stand-alone assemblages in consumers' lives. Research on brand communities illustrates how consumers orient significant portions of their material, expressive, and imaginative lived lives around brands—deriving social, identity, material, and practice benefits from participation (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau, Muniz, &

Arnould, 2009). Yet, brand community activists are rather the exception to the rule. Most consumers do not belong to a brand community; rather, they use brands as resources to enact their everyday lives that revolve around other important things—who they are, their family, work, children, home, values, and ambitions.

Research Opportunities

Viewing consumers' complex assembled lives as including brands as relational actors, has the power to shift our understanding of actor agency embodied in everyday practices. An assemblage perspective does not privilege the agency of the consumer, the brand, or the many other forces at work, rather acknowledging that all exert relational power depending on their material, expressive, and imaginative capacities. Hence, research is needed that embraces a flat ontology, recognizing that neither consumers nor brands are in control.

Interpretive research might focus on broad questions, including: When and how do consumers recruit brands as powerful relational partners (or tools) in their imagined cultural lives? When and how do brands grab hold of cultural models that allow consumers to envision these projected myths as their lives? And, when do brands with their cultural tropes and temptations sneak in, exerting relational power, even when not invited? How do brands disrupt and transform consumer assemblages? At a more granular level, research could systematically explore how consumers are using, managing, and controlling specific brands or bundles of brands. As an example, diary data could be used to track how teenagers are intentionally depositing their iPhones with their parents after school or un-enrolling from Instagram for the day or week as forced self-control. We need to understand more about how consumers use brands and brands use consumers.

Consumers form a wide swath of relationships with brands; Fournier and her collaborators offer provocative, groundbreaking work on these relationships (c.f., Avery, Fournier, & Wittenbraker, 2014). As we consider how consumers assemble their lives, we might consider not just what this brand does for me, but what this brand does for my crazy, fraught, and complex set of relationships and obligations. Research might track not only on consumer loyalty or commitment to specific brands (e.g., Starbucks, Papa John's), but how a specific brand helps us to manage our relationships with people, things, and activities. This collective perspective foregrounds brands as relational mediators (Price, 2015), asking: how do brands help consumers juggle priorities, seek forgiveness from transgressions, invite possibilities, and gain awareness?

Both Batra and Fournier and Alvarez acknowledge brands are resources for identity-making and navigating the practice of life. Brands are ambiguous and malleable enough to participate in our lives in manifold ways (Slater, 2014). Vredeveld and Coulter (2019) provide insights into how and why the *same* brand (e.g., Walmart; Adidas) is recruited to mean different things by different international students, and by the same students across different countries. Interesting opportunities exist to more fully understand how consumers can concurrently adore and disavow a brand (e.g., Apple), and how those brand meanings are embedded in consumer assemblages. Additional research might bring a quantitative lens to investigate whether specific brands are particularly elastic and adroitly used to convey multiple meanings in the service of consumers' assembled lives. The ambiguity and malleability of brands to move across a consumers' many interests and practices could be empirically investigated to examine relational brand power (Slater 2014).

Concluding Thoughts

Our commentary uses assemblage theory to highlight ever changing, relational ebbs and flows of human and non-human actors that bind or de-stabilize cultural meanings of brands, and how brands are malleable, ambiguous, and powerful actors in consumers' lives. We envision and look forward to bridge-crossing research opportunities that leverage socio-historical-cultural and psychological perspectives to further illuminate how cultural meanings are assembled into brands; how brands function as an institutionalized cultural assemblage; how consumers use brands in the cultural meanings and enactments of their assembled lives; and different forms of cultural mediation and human and non-human actors engaged in mediating activity.

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