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Brand Texts and Meaning in Post-Digital Consumer Culture[1]

Abstract: This paper discusses the mechanisms of post-digital consumer cultural meaning-making using advertising as its point of departure. The assumption is that the post-digital is neither an era nor an epoch but a characterisation that reflects a consumer cultural world of digitised content that operates as a default for many consumers, while the analogue world hovers ghost-like, re-asserting itself where digital technologies cannot serve, where and when they cannot be accessed, or when they fail. In this post-digital world, the locus of consumer cultural meaning-making has shifted, from long-form advertising campaigns, to fragmented and polysemous intertexts that circulate kinetically via social media. In other words, the locus of consumer cultural meaning-making has shifted from the primary texts of brand marketing, to secondary or paratexts. Drawing on Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality, the paper discusses how this post-digital meaning-making mechanism plays out, for brands, and beyond, within a post-digital consumer culture.

Keywords: media; paratexts; advertising; intertextuality; convergence; meaning.

Introduction: consumer cultural meaning and brand texts

The first author's university, Royal Holloway, University of London, has a quirky history. The building that forms the centrepiece of our campus was once a 'sanatorium' for women, the building being the result of the extravagant philanthropy of one Thomas Holloway, a Victorian entrepreneur. Holloway made his fortune selling branded medicines that, chemically, may have been mere placebos comprised of chalk dust and cooking oil, but he advertised them across the globe with a flair for branding that was ahead of his time. He inscribed his brands with compelling

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meanings through the judicious use of a range of advertising techniques, including carefully drawn packaging art, evocative brand imagery, brand placement in novels and stage plays, roadside billboards and print and classified advertising in periodical magazines and newspapers. Holloway knew how to fill the empty spaces of his brands with cleverly implied yet vividly evocative tales of patriotic war heroism or dubious but compelling claims of their health and strength-giving properties. He was the P. T. Barnum of cold cures, and it made him what, in the mid-1800s, was a fortune.

Strangely, there are no university business school courses that examine Holloway's extraordinarily successful branding and advertising techniques, just as there are none that examine Barnum's genius for publicity, but both understood two things about people and communication. First, they understood that branding is a mnemonic device foremost, and they knew that colourful repetition and iteration served the brand well. Secondly, they knew that blurring the distinction between marketing, news, and entertainment was a very effective sales technique. Holloway paid London writers to insert references to his brands into stage plays and novels, while Barnum was well known for feeding journalists the stories their editors needed to sell newspapers. Both of these Victorian entrepreneurs were able to invest their brands with meaning for consumers through their morally dubious but undeniably effective use of brand texts of various types. They understood intuitively that the meaning of a brand was inherently ambiguous and could be enriched and elaborated through all manner of textual devices, from labelling, brand naming and pictorial representation on packaging, use of distinctive fonts and colour, news coverage, classified and 'advertorial' texts, print and billboard advertising, and brand placement in stage plays and early photography and film.

With few exceptions,[2] University Business School research has been reluctant to acknowledge that Holloway and Barnum knew something about marketing. The idea that the brand is a set of utilitarian and symbolic consumer benefits that are controlled by the manufacturer remains persistent in business research. Some efforts have, though, been made to understand brands as symbols from an anthropological perspective.[3] This has led to the insight that brands are not merely bundles of utilitarian consumer benefits, but also platforms for consumer fantasies, fun[4] and symbolic identity projects.[5] In addition to the anthropological tradition of brand consumer research, a literary tradition has evolved emanating from the contribution of Barbara

[2] For example, Stephen Brown and Chris Hackley, "The Greatest Showman on Earth: Is Simon Cowell P. T. Barnum Reborn?" *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 4, 2 (2012), 290–308.

[3] See, for instance, Sydney J. Levy, "Symbols for Sale," *Harvard Business Review* (July–August 1959): 117–24 and Grant McCracken, "Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods," *Journal of Consumer Research* 13, 1 (1986): 71–84.

[4] Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Morris B. Holbrook, eds., *Postmodern Consumer Research: The Study of Consumption as Text* (London: Sage, 1992).

[5] Richard Elliott and Kritsadarat Wattanasasuwan, "Consumption and the Symbolic Project of the Self", in *E – European Advances in Consumer Research* Volume 3, ed. Basil G. Englis and Anna Olofsson (Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research), 17–20.

Stern[6]. Stern introduced the notion of advertisements as social texts into the consumer research literature in the 1980s, building on Iser's[7] reader response theory.[8] Following Iser, brands can be understood as social texts, the meaning of which is read and interpreted by consumers, and hence brand meaning is not constituted hegemonically by brand management, but is negotiated somewhere in the space between the brand text, and the consumer/reader.

Many in the consumer research field have also been influenced by the Formalist critical literary 'close' reading technique. This has invested considerable authority in what are conceived as primary marketing texts, especially advertisements[9] and elements of advertisements, such as music jingles,[10] as sources of brand meaning. The point around which such meaning-making processes turn, the source, is conceived to be the primary marketing text, that is, the advertisement as a finished work. Scott advocates an approach that follows that of David Mick and Klaus Buhl[11] and takes account of John Deighton et al.[12] in acknowledging both the attributes of the text and the psychology of the reader. However, the literary tradition in consumer research has assumed that the primary text, the advertisement, is the key source of brand meaning, whilst ignoring the role of secondary or paratexts, until recently.[13]

Media convergence[14] highlights the increased importance of secondary brand texts, that is, short-form marketing campaigns consisting substantially of social media posts, mentions in posts, and chat around posts. Chris and Rungpaka Amy Hackley[15] adapt Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality[16] to try to show that the role of secondary or paratexts has always been important in the cultural constitution of brand meaning but is heightened in convergent culture. Genette's work builds on Julia

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[6] Barbara B. Stern, "Literary Criticism and Consumer Research: Overview and Illustrative Analyses," *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, 3 (1989): 322–34. Also see Stephen Brown, *Brands and Branding* (London: Sage, 2016).

[7] Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History* 3, 2 (1972): 279–99.

[8] Linda M. Scott, "Understanding Jingles and Needledrop: A Rhetorical Approach to Music in Advertising," *Journal of Consumer Research* 17, 2 (1990): 223–36.

[9] Judith Williamson, *The Semiotics of Advertising* (London: Sage, 1978); Stephanie O'Donohoe, "Advertising Uses and Gratifications," *European Journal of Marketing* 28, 8/9 (1994): 52–75.

[10] Scott, "Understanding Jingles and Needledrop,"

[11] David Mick and Klaus Buhl, "A Meaning-based Model of Advertising," *Journal of Consumer Research* 19, 3 (1992): 317–38.

[12] John Deighton and Stephen J. Hoch, "Managing What Consumers Learn from Experience," *Journal of Marketing* 53, 2 (1989): 1–20.

[13] Chris Hackley and Rungpaka Amy Hackley, "Advertising at the Threshold: Paratextual Promotion in the Era of Media Convergence," *Marketing Theory* 19, 2 (2018): 195–215.

[14] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

[15] Hackley & Hackley, "Avertising at the Threshold."

[16] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Kristeva's notion of intertextuality[17] to suggest that the paratext, the text that is about the text, acts as a threshold through which the primary text (in this analysis, the notional primary text of the brand) is entered. Genette focused his work on literary paratexts such as the footnotes, preface, the title, foreword, cover blurb, and chapter headings of a novel, arguing that these ostensibly secondary elements in fact cause the primary text to come into existence. His work on literary paratexts has been extended by media and culture theorists to encompass broadcast and digital texts.[18]

So, taking the literary analogy forward, back in the day, brand marketing texts could be conceived as taking a long-form structure, in the sense that a small number of creative inputs would feature in major campaigns that entailed a great deal of repetition over the course of six months or more, often led by primetime, bought, TV spots. Some of these TV ads would become legendary, much-discussed by consumers and commentators. They have featured ever since in compilation TV shows of the greatest, funniest or most popular TV ads, and uploaded versions still rack up millions of views on YouTube. They would become the topic of popular comedians' jokes, references to them would appear in the scripts of popular TV shows, and kids would repeat the funniest ads to seem cool in the playground.[19] Some of the classic ads from the 1980s and 1990s are credited with changing consumer culture, and changing entire markets. BBH's Levi 501s ad, 'Laundrette', is one example.[20] It would air to peak-time UK TV audiences of up to 30 million in the 1980s. Other UK TV examples from the 1970s and 1980s include the Cadbury Smash Martians: The Gold Blend Couple, Renault's Papa and Nicole ads, and the Guinness White Horses. Thus, we could say that viewing the brand texts (especially advertisements) as primary texts made sense in the 1960s and 1970s when major TV-led long-form marketing campaigns supported by print and billboard versions of the TV ads seemed to hold a considerable authority in the interpretation of the meaning of a brand.

Times have changed. Real-time TV audiences have collapsed by 60% in most Western countries against competition from the Internet and ubiquitous smartphone ownership. Many consumers under 35 watch little real-time TV and access all their media channels via their smartphone or tablet screen.[21] Creative marketing media content has multiplied in variety, type, and quantity. It is no longer the case that a long-running TV advertising campaign with a few iterations could attain legendary status and run for years. The cultural authority of long-form marketing has collapsed[22]

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[17] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

[18] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

[19] Mark Ritson and Richard Elliott, "The Social Uses of Advertising: An Ethnographic Study of Adolescent Advertising Audiences," *Journal of Consumer Research* 26, 3 (1999): 260–77.

[20] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT4DR_ae_4o.

[21] Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson, *The Promotional Screen Industries* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010).

[22] Douglas Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding," *Journal of Consumer Research* 29, 1 (2002): 70–90.

and the relatively static structures of consumer culture have given way to 'liquid' and 'fluid' assemblages[23] of consumer cultural meaning. The meaning of a brand can change at any minute with a Tweet or a piece of publicity that goes viral in a matter of days. Brand meaning is inherently unstable and subject to the whims of new paratexts, such as negative user-generated content (UGC) that parodies a campaign, as happened with a recent Kylie Jenner Pepsi campaign.[24]

However, even such twists in brand meaning are themselves highly provisional and subject to rapid re-evaluation in the light of new paratexts. Nike, for example, have proved expert at playing with the fire of social media with politically and culturally provocative creative work, and negative reactions to some recent campaigns were rapidly followed by positive trade press coverage of rising sales.[25] The implication was that Nike had correctly calculated that the negative social media coverage would be counterbalanced with the positive sales impact of increased media coverage. The British oil producer BP was rumoured to have benefited greatly in petrol sales after one of the world's worst oil spills, the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, simply because the brand was in every global news bulletin every day for many months, raising its presence and profile for car drivers many more of whom (purportedly) turned off the highway to refuel their car when they saw a garage with the BP logo.

The point of such examples for this paper is not that the constitution of brand meaning can take unexpected and unpredictable turns subject to media coverage and/or consumer co-optation of the brand meaning,[26] but that brand meaning seems to be produced in fleeting moments of clarity, not through the traditional primary texts and 'official' channels of marketing, but through secondary texts that both destabilise the notion of brand meaning and exploit that very instability.

The wider context for this change in the cultural constitution of brand meaning is a shift in the post-digital marketing landscape. Marketing and advertising content is being re-balanced conventional, 'long-form' TV-driven campaigns toward hybrid forms of promotional content that are created for digital circulation.[27] The logic of consumer cultural meaning-making also shifts, since consumers draw meanings from fleeting experiences of media content that are fragmented, discontinuous and

[23] Fleura Bardhi and Giana Eckhardt, "Liquid Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 44, 3 (2017): 582–97.

[24] See https://www.wired.com/2017/04/pepsi-ad-internet-response/, acc. July 25, 2019.

[25] See https://time.com/5390884/nike-sales-go-up-kaepernick-ad/, acc. July 25, 2019.

[26] Craig J. Thomspon and Gokcen Coskuner-Balli, "Countervailing Market Responses to Corporate Co-optation and the Ideological Recruitment of Consumption Communities," *Journal of Consumer Research* 34 (2007): 135–52.

[27] Chris Hackley, "Advertising, Marketing and PR: Deepening Mutuality amidst a Convergent Media Landscape," in *The Advertising Handbook (Media Practice)*, ed. Jonathan Hardy, Iain MacRury, and Helen Powell (London: Routledge, 2018).

polysemic. These pieces of media content[28] circulate 'kinetically'[29] across multiple social media platforms and are intersected by analogue media such as where, for example, sponsorship in real-time spectator sporting events is parsed into fragments of shared content, e.g. goal scoring video clips of televised football matches that feature visible sponsored hoardings around the ground and the sponsor's branding on the team shirts. This kind of promotional content might include sponsored or shared tweets, Facebook posts or other platform content, UGC or comment around brands and consumption, brand-produced or brand-sponsored video content, brand blog pieces, 'native' advertising (i.e. sponsored journalistic pieces), viral content deriving from sponsored events or publicity, interstitials and other branding around TV channels and/or social media platforms, and many other hybrid forms of promotional content. In one session on a smartphone, browsing news and information, social media and entertainment, a consumer would be likely to encounter dozens or scores of such pieces but many of these would be seen for a mere fragment of a second as the consumer scrolls through newsfeeds. Other pieces of sponsored content might be browsed momentarily or with little attention, for example when consumers wait for an ad to roll while they wait to view some video content.

Understood as social texts, these hybrid promotional forms cannot be said to operate as primary texts, since they do not carry the cultural authority of a primary text such as a book, a poem, or a movie. Rather, they operate as secondary or paratexts[30] since they are narratively incomplete vignettes or intertexts and any one of them can potentially inflect or change the meaning of another.[31] For example, if a cartoon character is used to signify a brand and it becomes widely recognised and associated with that brand, then images of the character will evoke the brand as a silent intertext even when they are seen with no contextual information in other communications, or on any content that may be sponsored by that brand. This occurs a lot with football sponsorship where the sponsor's logo or brand name is printed on the shirts, therefore appearing in all the clips of match action that are uploaded, liked, posted and shared on social media. When the web of intertexts that flow kinetically on brand paratexts through social media align at one point, the brand meaning is momentarily constituted, before the web changes configuration to allow new meanings to potentially subvert the old ones.

An older example of the semiotic distillation of brands into a logo or other symbol can be seen in the long-running UK campaign for low-tar cigarette brand Silk Cut in the 1980s, which is sometimes described as a the most successful cigarette advertising campaign of all time. TV advertising for cigarettes had been banned in the UK and the industry was preparing for a further ban on naming cigarette brands in

[28] Lazar Džamić and Justin Kirby, *The Definitive Guide to Strategic Content Marketing: Perspectives, Issues, Challenges and Solutions* (London: Kogan Page, 2018).

[29] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 41.

[30] Genette, *Paratexts.*

[31] Melissa Aronczyk, "Portal or Police? The Limits of Promotional Paratexts," *Critical Studies in Media Communications* 34, 2 (2017): 111–19.

print ads. In preparation for the impeding ban, a creative called Paul Arden working for the Saatchi and Saatchi agency had the idea of producing a poster of a piece of silk that had been cut.[32] The image of silk sheets cut in different ways, with different sharp implements, became a long-running iconic campaign that needed no product information since consumers understood, enjoyed, and completed the polysemic puzzle. The brand became synonymous with the symbol of a cut silk sheet. The advertising imagery served not as an advertising text but as a paratext, cryptically evoking the brand through visual metaphor, and filling the brand with knowing humour as the advertisers outwitted the regulator, investing cigarette smoking with a mischievous and transgressive appeal.

All such forms of branded content and advertising refer implicitly or explicitly to a notional primary text – the brand, which is empty of meaning or at best ambiguous[33] until meaning is inscribed into it through its paratexts. Consumer culture under media convergence is profoundly participatory[34] because of the access that a high proportion of consumers have to mobile screen with internet access.[35] There is a continuous conversation of likes, shares, UGC, memes, satirical and parodic content, posts, and so forth, often in response to or as a counterpoint to commercially produced content. This is a digital landscape into which brand presence can be strategically seeded with a view to generating different trajectories of brand intertexts streaming through social media, carried on brand paratexts. Current conventional wisdom in marketing often emphasises 'storytelling', but how many brands produce genuine stories? Stories observe certain literary conventions, but (digital) brand paratexts do not have a story arc, they do not have narrative continuity. Like conventional mass media advertisements, they demand a high order of contextual cultural understanding from the reader to mediate their polysemy, but unlike conventional ads, they are not really looked at and read for thirty seconds: they are, more often, scrolled through or encountered in the peripheral consciousness as intertexts that blur into other intertexts across countless units of media content, such as texts, posts, video clips and so forth.

So, we hope that this over-long introduction has set out the main storyline and key concepts of this paper. The following section will outline some basic principles of paratextual theory before placing this in the context of marketing and consumer research studies that investigate brand meaning as a cultural construct. Following that, the discussion attempts to bring the various themes together around the idea of the post-digital consumer cultural environment.

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[32] See https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/best-ads-50-years-silk-cut-showed-paul-ardens-genius/1496678, acc. July 12, 2019.

[33] Brown, *Brands and Branding.*

[34] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture.*

[35] Grainge & Johnson, *The Promotional Screen Industries.*

Literature background

Paratexts in paper and digital media

Genette's theory of transtextuality extends the intertextual theory of Kristeva. Genette's principal work focused on paper-based works, novels, poems, and plays. He conceives of the paratext as a secondary text that acts as a threshold through which the meaning of the primary text is interpreted. For example, the ways in which a reader interprets the meanings of an academic research paper are cued and framed partly by the use of the title, abstract, and also footnotes, references, and other intra-paratextual devices.[36] Paratexts that are contained within the work, such as the aforementioned title, footnotes, abstract, and also preface, cover blurb, chapter headings, illustrations, endnotes, and font, are called peritexts. Paratexts that are produced outside the primary text, such as reviews and critiques, published interviews with the author, anthologies, serialisations, parodies and abridgements, are called epitexts since they are produced outside the work. Peritext, plus epitext, equals paratext. Genette's work feeds into reader response theories as it acknowledges that the meaning of a social text extends beyond the 'work' itself.[37] For example, many people not only interpret a literary work in the light of its prior paratexts, such as the book blurb, title, and preface, but might also form opinions of books they have never read through reviews, published interviews with the author, or the opinions of friends, or they may change their opinion of works they have previously read if they read a subsequent review or critique that casts a new light of meaning on the work. Paratexts encountered before a work is read, then, can frame the way a work is entered and interpreted. Paratexts encountered during or after the work is read can inflect or change the interpretation.

Genette's insight seems counterintuitive to those who insist that the novel, the poem, or the libretto have an inherent textual authority that is prior to any inflections of meaning that may be the result of a reader encountering the work's paratexts. This viewpoint would hold that primary texts should rightly be subject to an exegesis that is intended to arrive at the correct interpretation of the meaning that lies within the work. In this effort, paratexts would serve only to generate insight into that true meaning, as the handwritten margin notes on an author's original draft might be said to serve as clues to the definitive reading of the work. In contrast, paratextual theory holds that the very meaning of the work is produced through and by its paratexts. Indeed, Genette argues that a text cannot exist without its paratexts. Paratexts can exist without texts, such as ancient Greek philosophical works that have been lost but which have been published in reconstructed form, gleaned from references in surviving works and from recovered fragments. According to Genette, then, paratexts do not merely inflect the meaning of primary texts, rather, they act as thresholds through which primary texts are entered by the reader.

[36] Stephen Brown and Hope J. Schau, "Writing Consumer Research: The World according to Belk," *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 6, 6 (2007): 349–68.

[37] See also Iser, "The Reading Process" and Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000).

Paratexts and digital media

Paratextual theory has rarely been applied in marketing and consumer research journals, except by Chris and Rungpaka Amy Hackley,[38] but Gennette's ideas on paratexts are well established in academic cultural, media and film studies. Gray, for example, writes of the paratexts that surround movies and TV shows, such as trailers, video content and TV channel interstitials. Gray acknowledges that media paratexts play a major part in non-media brands, when he refers to the "utility of attaching… brand identity to other established texts, whether individuals, events or shows".[39] Paratextual promotional texts for non-media brands (that is, brands that are not movies or TV shows) include, for example, celebrity endorsements of, or other forms of linkage with, car, alcohol, food and beverage, or other categories of brand, sponsored events that are designed to generate news coverage, packaging that carries brand visual identities or other imagery that is also seen in TV advertisements or video content. Such promotional techniques are by no means unique to the digital, or indeed the post-digital, era. The quintessential epitext of the publishing industry, the interview with the author as a feature article in a newspaper or magazine, was invented as a promotional device by Parisian publishers in the 1700s. What is different about the digital era is that such paratexts circulate with far greater intensity, velocity, and reach than they ever could before digital communications. Media paratexts are now seen in the advertising industry not as 'below the line' appendages to or extensions of TV-driven campaigns but as key branding practices that are designed to be strategically integrated across media channels and platforms.[40]

Brand-meaning research and digital communication

The wider applicability of Genette's work on literary paratexts to digital media is, then, well-established in media and cultural studies. In contrast, in marketing and consumer research in university business faculties, the idea that literary and anthropological theory can contribute to the understanding of brands is still contested in a field whose substantial proportions are modelled on natural science. Such contributions have been present in mainstream marketing academic journals for some time, for example with Sidney Levy's work on symbolism in marketing[41] and later work that followed that positioned marketing management as a task of managing not consumer

[38] Hackley & Hackley, "Advertising at the Threshold."

[39] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 29.

[40] Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

[41] Levy, "Symbols for Sale".

benefits, but cultural meanings.[42] Following Stern's interventions,[43] literary theory has made major contributions to academic consumer research,[44] for example subjecting advertisements to close interpretive readings to analyse not only their linguistic aspects but also their musical and visual rhetoric.[45]

Such studies often carry an arguable contradiction in that they conceive of an advertisement as a finished 'work', the meaning of which is interpreted by the reader rather than fixed in the text,[46] but they also value the 'close' reading technique of classical literary criticism. For Barthes, the cultural meanings of advertising and other cultural texts extend beyond the work itself and are open to polysemic re-interpretation. Consumer uses (and parodies or critiques) of advertisements for their own purposes of identity positioning in personal discussion[47] and social media engagement may change the interpretations placed on these ads by others.[48] This effect is accentuated and amplified through social media because of the decline in the cultural authority[49] of marketers (and of mainstream media in general) and the rise in User Generated Content (UGC) on social media. The various posts, likes, parodies, chats and critiques of an advertisement or other brand communication that circulate on social media become intertextual webs of influence, the kinetic dynamism of which potentially changes brand meanings moment by moment. Under media convergence, consumer participation in the cultural constitution of brand meaning is ubiquitous,[50]

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[42] McCracken, "Culture and Consumption", Mick & Buhl, "A Meaning-based Model of Advertising"; John W. Schouten and James J. Alexander, "Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers," *Journal of Consumer Research* 22, 1 (1995): 43–61; Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble?"; Elif Izberk-Bilgin, "Infidel Brands: Unveiling Alternative Meanings of Global Brands at the Nexus of Globalization, Consumer Culture, and Islamism," *Journal of Consumer Research* 39, 4 (2012): 663–87.

[43] Stern, "Literary Criticism and Consumer Research" and Barbara B. Stern, "Feminist Literary Criticism and Consumer Research: Overview and Illustrative Analysis," *Journal of Consumer Research* 19, 4 (1993): 556–66.

[44] Stephen Brown, "Marketing and Literature: The Anxiety of Academic Influence," *Journal of Marketing* 63, 1 (1999): 1–15.

[45] Norah Campbell, "Signs and Semiotics of Advertising," in *The Routledge Companion to Visual Organisation*, ed. Jonathan E. Schoeder, Samantha Warren, and Emma Bell (London: Routledge, 2013), 258–79; Linda M. Scott, "The Bridge from Text to Mind: Adapting Reader-response Theory for Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research* 21, 3 (1994): 461–90; Edward F. McQuarrie and David Glen Mick, "Visual Rhetoric in Advertising: Text-interpretive, Experimental, and Reader-response Analyses," *Journal of Consumer Research* 26, 1 (1999), 37–54; Stephen Brown, Lorna Stevens, and Pauline Maclaran, "I can't Believe It's Not Bakhtin! Literary Theory, Postmodern Advertising, and the Gender Agenda," *Journal of Advertising* 28, 1 (1999): 11–24; Barbara B. Stern and Jonathan E. Schroeder, "Interpretive Methodology from Art and Literary Criticism: A Humanistic Approach to Advertising Imagery," *European Journal of Marketing* 28, 8–9 (1994): 114–32; Barbara J. Phillips and Edward F. McQuarrie, "Beyond Visual Metaphor: A New Typology of Visual Rhetoric in Advertising," *Marketing Theory* 4, 1/2 (2004): 113–36.

[46] For example, see Scott, "Understanding Jingles and Needledrop"; Stern, "Feminist Literary Criticism and Consumer Research"; and Mick & Buhl, "A Meaning-based Model of Advertising."

[47] Ritson & Elliott, "The Social Uses of Advertising."

[48] O'Donohoe, "Advertising Uses and Gratifications."

[49] Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble?"

[50] Grainge & Johnson, "The Promotional Screen Industries", Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: How Technology Makes Consumer into Collaborators* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

and competes with the promotional paratexts that are produced professionally by the brand and its agents.

Marketing, then, can be understood from a socio-cultural perspective as a struggle over the meaning of a brand[51] that plays out between brand management and its agents, and other market and cultural forces such as consumer-generated social media content. Through advertising and other brand communications, brand management deploy elements of myth, symbolism and ideology in their attempt to frame or control brand meaning.[52] The solicitations of brand management may be read hegemonically, or resisted, or sometimes subverted and co-opted into alternative schemes of cultural meaning.[53] Amidst this struggle, consumers' engagement with brands via digital technology can be less materially based, more fleeting, and more access-oriented than in the pre-digital era.[54] Brands are resources for iterative identity projects[55] and, under media convergence, consumer opportunities for tapping into and adapting the symbolic meaning systems of brands to their own ends for projective identification are plentiful.

Paratexts and the ambiguity of brands

In mainstream, managerial brand management literature, the brand is conceived as a container of meanings that are inscribed into it hegemonically by the brand owner (the brand 'values', the brand 'identity')[56] and conveyed hegemonically into the minds of consumers through advertising and other forms of brand communication (what Holt and Cameron call the 'mindshare model' of brand management). The consumers' role is passive, as receivers of these communications. The brand meaning is inserted into the cognitive apparatus of the consumers by means of a hypodermic model of brand management. The challenge for brand management is to cram the brand identity and positive psychological associations into the cognitive apparatus

[51] McCracken, "Culture and Consumption"; Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble?"; Julian Cayla and Giana Eckhardt, "Asian Brands and the Shaping of an Imagined Transnational Community," *Journal of Consumer Research* 35, 2 (2008): 216–30; Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron, *Cultural Branding: Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[52] Levy, "Symbols for Sale"; Eric Arnould and Craig J. Thompson, "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research," *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, 4 (2005): 868–82; Stephen Brown, Pierre McDonagh, and Clifford J. Schultz, "Titanic: Consuming the Myths and Meanings of an Ambiguous Brand," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, 4 (2013): 595–614; Adam Arvidsson and Alessandro Caliandro, "Brand Public," *Journal of Consumer Research* 5, 1 (2016): 727–48.

[53] Schouten & Alexander, "Subcultures of Consumption."

[54] Bardhi & Eckhardt, "Liquid Consumption."

[55] Marius K. Luedicke, Craig J. Thompson, and Markus Geisler, "Consumer Identity Work as Moral Protagonism: How Myth and Ideology Animate a Brand-mediated Moral Conflict," *Journal of Consumer Research* 36, 3 (2010): 1016–32; Elliott & Wattanasasuwan, "Consumption and the Symbolic Project of the Self"; Gretchen Larsen and Maurice Patterson, "Consumer Identity Projects," in *The SAGE Handbook of Consumer Culture*, ed. Olga Kravets, Pauline Maclaran, Steven Miles, and Alladi Venkatesh (London: Sage, 2018); Alan Warde, "After Taste: Culture, Consumption and Theories of Practice," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 14, 3 (2014): 279–303.

[56] For instance, Kevin Lane Keller, *Strategic Brand Management* (Essex: Pearson, 2011).

of the consumer in such a way that supports efficient long-term recall. The brand, as such, is considered to be an ontological entity that has an existence in the plans of brand management and the collective mind of the consumer. Consumer culture is regarded as a channel through which the brand identity must be conveyed. Brand management is treated as the 'science'[57] of assembling the optimum combination of brand elements and successfully conveying these into the consumers' memory and understanding.

Literary and anthropological analyses that have appeared in the academic marketing literature since the 1980s have brought in an alternative perspective that positions brands as cultural, as opposed to cognitive, constructions.[58] Under the cultural model, the brand is an ambiguous space, the meanings of which are mediated by and through consumer culture. Brands subsist at arm's length from managerial control, having a life of their own[59] that evolves within complexes of consumer cultural myth and symbolism.[60] As such, the interventions of brand management may be re-interpreted, resisted, or co-opted to unintended purposes.[61] Cultural theorisations of consumption embrace the erosion of the cultural authority of marketing[62] and seek to react to and to exploit ideological disruptions in consumer culture.[63] Brand management is the art of the management of socio-cultural meaning[64] rather than a science of mind control. Astute brand management entails a careful appraisal of the historical, cultural, and symbolic aspects of a brand's presence in consumer culture along with ideological interventions that mobilise myths and ostensibly resolve cultural contradictions, an approach Holt and Cameron label cultural branding.

Paratextual branding approaches to brand meaning continue in the socio-cultural traditions but within a distinct literary strain of research.[65] The brand is regarded as a notional primary text, the meanings of which are cued by brand paratexts such as advertisements or other communication content[66] in an endless process of iteration. The brand meaning is inherently unstable and continually produced and re-produced through its paratexts. Brand paratexts can include brand blogs, brand-produced or sponsored video content and sponsored journalism (known as 'native advertising'), brand presence in non-branded content or events, sponsored social media coverage such as brand Facebook pages, advergames containing brands as scene props or other

[57] Keller, *Strategic Brand Management*.

[58] For instance, see Brown, McDonagh, and Schultz, "Titanic"; Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble?"; Cayla & Eckhardt, "Asian Brands and the Shaping of an Imagined Transnational Community."

[59] Brown, *Brands and Branding*.

[60] Levy, "Symbols for Sale"; Arnould & Thompson, "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)"; Brown, McDonagh, and Schultz, "Titanic"; Arvidsson & Caliandro, "Brand Public".

[61] Schouten & Alexander, "Subcultures of Consumption"; Izberk-Bilgin, "Infidel Brand".

[62] Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble?"

[63] Holt & Cameron, *Cultural Branding*.

[64] McCracken, "Culture and Consumption."

[65] Scott, "The Bridge from Text to Mind."

[66] Hackley & Hackley, "Avertising at the Threshold."

forms of content, brand websites, sponsored celebrities appearing in news coverage, events or other entities, and paid-for brand appearances in news or entertainment. Brand paratexts could also include physical manifestations of the brand such as its design and logo, toys or other entities connected to the brand, packaging in retail settings, branded vehicle livery and other organisational signifiers visible in urban settings.

Most of these examples might be broadly conceived as brand peritexts (adapting Genette's typology) in the sense that they are produced by the brand and ostensibly fall within a planned brand strategy. Paratexts that are external to the brand, called epitexts, could be produced by other parties not necessarily controlled by the brand, and these might include ostensibly independent media coverage of individuals or entities associated with the brand (perhaps elicited by PR firms working for the brand), non-paid and serendipitous brand appearances in news and entertainment, social media posts or other forms of UGC about the brand by consumer communities, and consumer sub-cultural adaptations of the brand such as in car modification clubs, biker gangs or other sub-cultural lifestyle communities. All these examples amount to paratexts that have an intertextual link to the brand. In some cases the intertext will be silent, as in, say, a piece of media content that is generally known to have been organised by a brand but which contains no visual branding or other indications of sponsorship. Non-branded content in this sense has become a major feature of marketing, such as where alcohol or cigarette brands organise and fund a pop-up social event that carries no overt branding but at which promotions people employed by the brand will sell, promote, or give away samples of the brand to attendees. Another example of a silent intertext might be a celebrity who is known to have a contract with a brand as endorser or associate but who does not need to display or mention the brand in every public appearance, because the relationship between the celebrity and the brand is well known and functions as a silent intertext each time the celebrity appears in paratextual media content in an appearance on a TV chat show or in a magazine feature.

A different kind of example of paratextual branding occurs where the brand creates a storyworld around a brand character who then becomes a silent intertext for the brand in many extended paratexts, such as toys, websites, books and TV advertisements. One example of this from the UK can be seen in a CGI meerkat character that was created to promote a brand of price comparison website.[67] The character proved so successful that he (Uri Orlov) and his extended family now have a separate existence as sought-after children's toys, movie and TV actors, and authors who write their own biographies and appear in their own TV soap opera as well as in Hollywood movies. The character is said to have not only made a relatively unknown website brand the market leader in that sector but boosted the entire market. The meerkat characters now operate as free-standing signifiers yet also silent intertexts for the brand.[68] This success could be dismissed as simply another storytelling-driven brand

[67] See https://www.comparethemarket.com/meerkat/history/.

[68] Hackley & Hackley, "Avertising at the Threshold."

strategy[69] leveraged by anthropomorphic brand characters.[70] However, the notion of the paratext opens up another perspective.

The scope and resonance of the creative work around the meerkats is captured by conceptualising the various manifestations as paratexts, partial, indeterminate, and incomplete narrative vignettes in themselves that initially achieve a narrative coherence only through their intertextual link with the primary text of the brand, but which subsequently become detached from the primary text as when, for example, consumers, especially children, engage with and consume the products and stories of the characters without understanding anything about the brand. The brand paratext thereby destabilises the primary/secondary text relation,[71] yet, through its role as a threshold[72] through which primary texts are understood, extends the meanings of the brand into a vast space of ambiguity and polysemy. This polysemy is not only a quality of brand advertising[73] but extends by inference to the brand itself as a strategically useful resource for brand management. Iterative new narratives can be inscribed through the strategic use of new paratexts into the ambiguous[74] space of the brand, extending its cultural resonance and increasing its reach into new potential market segments.

In 2016 a German grocery chain transformed its brand presence and market position through a carefully crafted epitext by the name of Kevin. The characters Kevin and Katie Carrot were introduced in 2016 in a TV ad for Aldi narrated by Hollywood star Jim Broadbent.[75] The ad played on parodic versions of Hollywood movies, acted out by the vegetable characters, deepening the engagement of adult viewers. The various paratextual (or epitextual) manifestiations of these characters now include videos, story vignettes within TV and social media ads, soft toys (now selling for £1000 on Ebay), and children's story books that tell the tales of the orange anthropomorphs and their growing family. The consumer response to these promotions has itself generated much admiring trade press and media comment[76] as the brand evolved from a minor player into the UK's fastest growing grocery brand.[77] The various pieces of promotional content featuring the brand anthropomorphs contain no promotional or sales communication as such, and many of them contain no visible branding: the paratexts are vehicles for silent intertexts that extend the meaning (and audience reach and market presence) of the brand. The cast of vegetables in these paratextual vignettes

[69] Brown, *Brands and Branding*.

[70] Stephen Brown and Sharon Ponsonby-McCabe, ed., *Brand Mascots and Other Marketing Animals* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

[71] Aronczyk, "Portal or Police?"

[72] Genette, *Paratexts*.

[73] Stefano Puntoni, Jonathan Schroeder, and Mark Ritson, "Meaning Matters," *Journal of Advertising* 39, 2 (2010): 51–64.

[74] Brown, McDonagh, and Schultz, "Titanic".

[75] See https://www.marketingweek.com/2016/12/20/aldi-best-performing-christmas-ad-tesco-boots-fail/.

[76] See http://www.mirror.co.uk/money/aldi-kevin-katy-carrot-toys-11702280.

[77] See https://www.marketingweek.com/2017/12/12/inflation-hits-four-year-high-as-brits-flock-to-aldi/.

engage many consumers, especially children, as a primary text, since they appeal to those who may never be inclined to shop in the store.

Brand paratexts and the cultural constitution of post-digital meaning

We suggest, then, that Genette's theory of transtextuality, and specifically his ideas on literary paratextuality, can be usefully extended to media texts to illuminate the process of the cultural constitution of brand meaning in the post-digital era. However, other than suggesting that the meaning of brands is constituted in the dyad between (notional) brand text, paratexts, and reader/consumer, little is known about the reading strategies deployed. Both literary and socio-cultural traditions of brand research reject the hegemonic implication of the managerial 'mindshare model'[78] in favour of a reader-response model that locates the social meaning of the brand text in a space that lies beyond the work itself, somewhere between the text and the reader.[79]

Clearly, social texts are capable of evoking affective responses, but it is difficult to imagine that the process of narrative transportation that can occur with a novel, poem or film, or even an advertisement[80] will be the same when the text encountered is a secondary or paratext. The paratext, typically, would entail a visual or silent brand intertext within a short item of social media content, a tweet, video, or post. There is no story arc as such, no narrative continuity or coherence, and little plot or character development, In other words, paratextual branding does not entail the telling of a story in the conventional sense, hence the invocation of ideas of storytelling response such as poetics or narrative transportation has only partial applicability. What is more, the media paratext is inherently polysemic, the completion of meaning is not guided or cued with the same deliberation as it might be in a conventional story: the reader has license to complete the meaning with a wide range of possible inflections. Social texts acquire inflections of meaning within a context of other social texts and brand paratexts are encountered within a constantly shifting constellation of intertextual relations.[81] The meaning of a paratext is constituted through both context, form and content.

This new, post-digital environment for consumer cultural meaning requires new ways of understanding the constitution of meaning through social texts. In marketing and consumer research, extant theory rests on a pre-digital notion of media, most of the key works were published in the 1980s and 90s and consisted largely of close readings of broadcast or print advertisements[82] or analyses of the extensions of

[78] Holt & Cameron, *Cultural Branding.*

[79] Iser, "The Reading Process" and Scott, "The Bridge from Text to Mind."

[80] Tom van Laer, Ko de Ruyter, Luca M. Visconti, and Martin Wetzels, "The Extended Transportation-imagery Model: A Meta-analysis of the Antecedents and Consequences of Consumers' Narrative Transportation," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, 5 (2014): 797–817.

[81] Hackley & Hackley, "Avertising at the Threshold."

[82] For instance, Barbara B. Stern, "Deconstructive Strategy and Consumer Research: Constructs and Illustrative Exemplar," *Journal of Consumer Research* 23, 2 (1996): 136–47.

meaning of such advertisements through consumer discourse.[83] Today, a post-digital media environment requires such analyses, but the nuance of analysis must change to reflect the participatory,[84] collaborative,[85] attention-driven[86] and experience-oriented[87] character of contemporary digital communication. What is more, the context of brand communication has changed so that it is now seamlessly integrated with news, media, and entertainment[88] and designed not merely to inform or entertain but also to activate the consumer into engagement.[89] Through such activation and participation consumers become quasi-producers and, effectively, co-producers or reinforcers and activists of brand meaning within given socio-demographic and ideological groupings and interest groups.[90]

The nature of brand management is changed in the post-digital environment. It is no longer an environment in which a hegemonic, hypodermic model obtains in which relatively passive consumers have brand values and associations inserted into their cognitive apparatus through culturally authoritative marketing interventions.[91] Media channels and consumer culture are constitutive of brand meaning and brand management's task is that of cultural activist, disrupter, facilitator, and ideologist. A stronger understanding of reader response is necessary in this environment, not only through metrics and network analysis, but also through a qualitative understanding of the reading process. Neither semantically neutral metrics nor close reading of brand paratexts in themselves can generate the holistic insights into the constitution of consumer cultural meaning. As celebrated media theorist Marshall McLuhan noted, scholars need to try to understand mediated experience as a "total field" and not be distracted by new media channels and platforms and new forms and styles of media content. Social understanding is a holistic endeavour that embraces the cognitive and the socio-cultural.

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[83] O'Donohoe, "Advertising Uses and Gratifications" and Ritson & Elliott, "The Social Uses of Advertising."

[84] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture.*

[85] Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus.*

[86] Tomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).

[87] Bardhi & Eckhardt, "Liquid Consumption"; Joseph B. Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011); Jeremy Rifkin, *Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism Where All of Life Is a Paid-for Experience* (New York: J. P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000).

[88] Michael J. Wolf, *The Entertainment Economy: How Mega-media Forces are Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Times Books, 1999) and Shay Sayre, *Entertainment Marketing and Communication: Selling Branded Performance, People, and Places* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2007).

[89] Lisa Peñalosa and Alex Thompson, "Constructing the Visual Consumer," in *The Routledge Companion to Visual Organization*, ed. Emma Bell, Samantha Warren, and Jonathan Schroeder (New York: Routledge, 2014), 79–95.

[90] Arvidsson & Caliandro, "Brand Public."

[91] Richard Rosenbaum-Elliott, Larry Percy, and Simon Pervan, *Strategic Brand Management* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

For example, post-digital advertising media planning has been transformed by the cultural phenomenon of celebrification.[92] Increased access to social media has facilitated the acceleration of production of celebrities who both drive, and are driven by, the imperatives of the marketing industry.[93] Instagram, YouTube, and other social media platforms have enabled the rise of self-created celebrities who enjoy an audience reach of multiple millions and take fees for featuring brands in their content. Even minor social media celebrities have such depth of influence that they feature as micro-influencers in the media planning of major advertisers. In these cases, the presence of brands in posts and other content under the celebrity's brand intersects and inflects the meaning of each brand featured. The emotional force of the para-social relationship between fan and social media celebrity gives a powerful resonance to the brand that is featured being used, spoken about or otherwise featured in the content, juxtaposed with the celebrity, as a feature of their lifestyle. Fundamentally, this is not a new marketing play by any means – brands have exploited association with movie stars since the silent movie era in Hollywood, as product placement and its many variations has become a widely understood promotional technique across all forms of entertainment content. However, there are new inflections to the technique in social media – for example, the content is not 'branded' content as such, the brand presence is a mere intertext within other content and its meaning in that moment of visibility rests on its location in a web of other intertexts appertaining to the celebrity, the platform, the brand itself, and the lifestyle scenes, content, script, and scenes portrayed in the content.

Brand meaning under convergence, then, is culturally constituted through paratexts within webs of intertextual relation in which the cultural authority of the primary text is constantly re-framed or subverted by emerging paratexts. Hierarchies of primary and secondary texts, and associated distinctions between authenticity and inauthenticity, and real and fake[94] are blurred as the kinetic[95] process of the circulation of brand paratexts continues. Brand meaning is distributed across webs of intertextual relation that form part of the culturally constituted experience of the consumer. Analysis of paratextual branding, then, whether for managerial ends or toward a cultural analysis, needs to take not only a distant reading of the relational contextual characteristics of brand paratexts, taking account of the "spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic and functional characteristics" of the paratext,[96] and a consideration of the content alongside the forms, but also the reading strategies deployed by consumers to make sense of these webs of paratexts and their intertextual relations.

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[92] Chris Rojek, *Fame Attack: The Inflation of Celebrity and its Consequences* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

[93] Chris Hackley and Rungpaka Amy Hackley, "Marketing and the Cultural Production of Celebrity in the Era of Media Convergence," *Journal of Marketing Management* 31, 5/6 (2015): 461–77.

[94] Markus Appel and Barbara Maleckar, "The Influence of Paratext on Narrative Persuasion: Fact, Fiction, or Fake?" *Human Communication Research* 38, 4 (2012): 459–84.

[95] Gray, *Show Sold Separately.*

[96] Genette, *Paratexts,* 4; also Hackley & Hackley, "Avertising at the Threshold."

Concluding comment: paratexts and the scope of post digital consumer culture

We suggest, then, that post digital consumer culture can no longer be conceived as if it were constituted through a series of fixed points of origin of brand meaning.[97] Post-digital consumer cultural meaning is constituted through a flow of individually fragmented, discontinuous and narratively incoherent brand paratexts.[98] This has implications beyond brand marketing. The notion of consumer culture has broadened to envelop almost every area of life. The manipulation of opinion and sentiment has become inherent to the business models of social media. The art and science of micro-influencing[99] through carefully crafted and targeted paratextual content exploits the collapse of the cultural authority that was once invested in primary texts and is driven by new forms of ideological content. In the post-digital media landscape, the Big Idea, the brand as it were, is a mere umbrella for a variety of arbitrarily connected ideas and content that mobilise affect amongst sensitised groups to drive particular ideologies. Brands are inherently ideological entities[100] and the logic of brands extends easily across social media to political ideas, which themselves become part of the realm of consumer culture. The governing ideology that unites such content may be obscure or hidden to most of the consumers who react to it. The vagueness, ambiguity, and incoherence of the ideology plays in its favour, since it is without meaning until media paratexts inscribe it with meanings that may be subtly different for different audiences. Paratextual theory allows us to conceptualise the brand, or other notional primary text, as an ideological entity inscribed with meanings by its secondary texts. In a post digital media environment in which commercial brands and political ideologies gather supporters in similar ways, the concluding plea is for a reinforcement of age-old scholarly values of critique and reason, but applied through new conceptual frameworks to account for the new forms of ideological communication.

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[97] Andrew Wernick, *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression* (London: Sage, 1991); Helen Powell, ed., *Promotional Culture in an Era of Convergence* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2013); Aeron Davis, *Promotional Cultures: The Rise and Spread of Advertising, Public Relations, Marketing and Branding* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

[98] Hackley & Hackley, "Avertising at the Threshold."

[99] Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War against Reality* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2019).

[100] Daragh O'Reilly, "Branding Ideology," *Marketing Theory* 6, 2 (2006): 263–71.

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