

Instantiation

Reframing brand communication

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This paper discusses how brands, and their values, become established in the mind of the consumer. The AIDA model of brand communication is now widely rejected within the marketing community. It is accepted that the consumer does not 'process' brand experience at a rational and conscious level, and a new consensus has emerged that focuses on the need to find deeper, and more 'psychological', reasons for brand motivation. The brand is now construed as also sending emotional, and therefore more complex, messages to the consumer, and we have recognised, as a result, that the business of brand experience is more subtle than the rationality of AIDA once suggested. The fundamental structures of the AIDA model remain, however, firmly in place, albeit with new terminology. This paper, in contrast, argues that the entire framework of brand communication needs to be revised. We need a new model to understand how consumers experience brands.

Introduction: AIDA (Act One)

How do brands communicate with consumers? This is a question that runs to the very heart of the marketing process and it has attracted much attention in recent years. In order to understand some of the issues involved we need, however, to identify where our models of brand communication have come from and, in particular, how strongly they are linked to our underlying theories of perception. This should be our starting-point in understanding the process of so-called 'brand communication'.

The conceptual landscape in which we believe consumers perceive brands feels so intuitively self-evident that it hardly seems to demand interrogation. We imagine that consumers experience brands in much the

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same way as they experience everything else in the world around them. They perceive, for example, a physical object such as a table, and light waves from this object are transmitted to, and form perceptions in, their minds. They ‘process’ these perceptions and then act accordingly by, for instance, walking around the table or placing their coffee on it.

There is, in this model, a basic assumption that any act of perception consists of three parts: the object (or event) itself; the waves of light that pass from the object (or event) towards the eye; and the formation of a ‘perception’ on our retina. When thinking about brand communication, we take this common-sense view of perception and apply it, almost wilfully, to our account of how consumers perceive brands. A brand creates a TV advertising execution, or a piece of packaging, that replaces the table in our basic model. Consumers encounter this marketing activity and it creates perceptions in their minds. These perceptions ‘carry’, we assume, rational or emotional ‘messages’, which the consumer then processes at a conscious, or subconscious, level. This framework interprets brand communication as a transmission from a sender (the brand) to a receiver (the consumer) and it is enshrined, in its most exegetical form, in the Shannon Weaver model (Shannon & Weaver 1949).

This model of perception seems so very clear to us; the laws of optics, no less, support it. It is, however, a culturally determined way of construing perception and one that has been dominant only in the past 400 years. This is not to say, of course, that it is a model that is factually inaccurate. It is just that it tells only half the story.

The schema of perception that has just been described is, in fact, Cartesian in origin. Descartes initiated this view of perception in the early 17th century (Descartes 1641) by dividing reality into two parts: ‘extended’ matter (the objective physical world) and ‘thinking’ matter (our subjective inner world). In this configuration, perception is necessarily framed as the process through which waves of light pass from the physical world to the mental world – from objects to our subjectivity.

Our conventional model of brand communication follows this interpretation of perception to the letter. It forms the underlying platform upon which the AIDA model of brand communication has been created. In its most unreconstructed form (the DAGMAR model: Colley 1961) this model asserts that the brand sends *rational* messages to the consumer, which he or she then interprets and acts upon (Figure 1). This is now widely rejected as a way of understanding how brands influence consumer behaviour (Earls 2002; Grant 2002; Heath & Feldwick 2007). But what have we replaced it with?

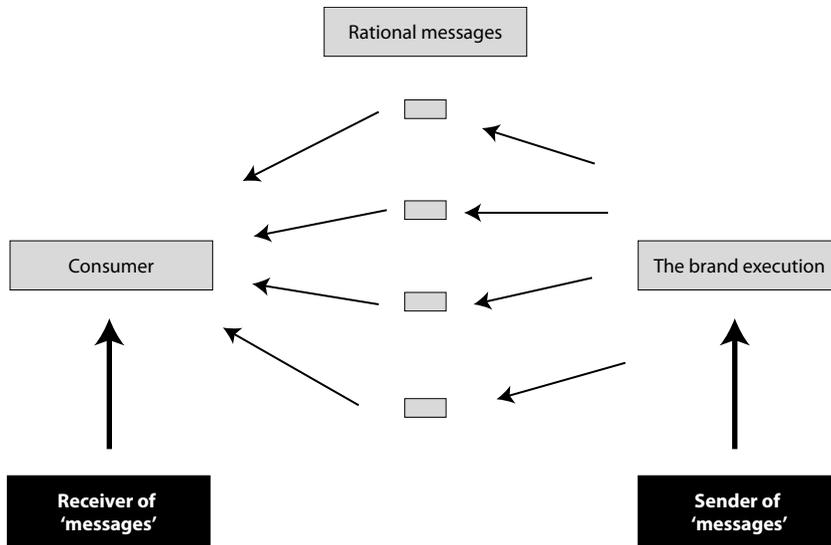


Figure 1 The conventional model of brand communication

AIDA (Act Two)

There is much self-congratulation in the marketing community that we have become more sophisticated in our approach to brand communication. This has been evident in a number of ways. At one level, marketers have accepted that brand communication is more complicated than we originally thought. It is now recognised that emotional values conveyed in advertising are as important, if not more important, than the rational messages that accompany them (Heath *et al.* 2006).

We have also understood that the consumer is more than a simple information-processing unit and that we need to understand the effects of brand communication at more profound levels. We want to comprehend the lives of consumers, the contexts in which they use and experience brands, and their deeper predispositions and attitudes. We need to get 'under the surface', 'probe deeper' and gain 'insight' into what they 'really' think. This re-evaluation of the consumer's context has led, in recent years, to the growth of commercial market research, and qualitative research, in particular.

Commentators such as Heath (2001) have also shown us that consumers process the meanings of advertising at levels that are deeper than we previously thought; he argues that the very process of brand experience works implicitly and in a manner that is both passive and non-conscious.

This complicates the once simplistic picture of brand communication still further.

These refinements to our communication model have encouraged us to make significant progress in recent years, but if we step back from our headlong pursuit of ever deeper and more psychological analyses (and the seemingly inevitable recourse to neuroscience), we can see that these recent interpretations of consumer experience are still working within the basic remit of the AIDA model. We have introduced ‘emotional’ messages alongside the ‘rational’ ones, and we have decided to dig more deeply at the psychological pole of the Cartesian model, but we are still assuming that the basic structures of the AIDA model suit our purposes. For example, Penn talks in terms that are overtly revisionist, but still very much within the messaging framework:

If Coca-Cola makes an advertisement, which transmits the same emotional messages that consumers have received countless times before, it may bypass the conscious mind completely – simply because there is no need to process it and retain it in working memory.

(Penn 2006, p. 518)

Such ways of thinking about brand communication suggest that very little has actually changed. We are still immersed in the language of ‘messaging’ and ‘processing’ even if the process itself is now more psychological and more sophisticated. We have simply added emotional messages to the model outlined in Figure 1.

In this paper it will be argued that we need to go further; the underlying assumptions of the AIDA model need re-evaluation. We need to question the very basis of our Cartesianly derived transmission model of communication. In doing so, we will need to step back from the model itself. When we do this we can see how much marketing hubris it contains. It is a model that is entirely focused on what the *brand is doing to the consumer*; it is, after all, a framework of *communication* and, as such, it is constructed around how the brand owner sees the advertising. But, as Lannon and Cooper pointed out some years ago (1983), this is certainly not how the consumer relates to it. We need to explore how consumers experience marketing activity and how they interact with it.

Intentionality – and increasing consumer sophistication

Interestingly, it is not just the marketing community that has become more sophisticated in recent decades; consumers are now more ‘knowing’ as

well. They are familiar with the marketing process, they are aware of its terminology and they often play the marketing game – by taking part in the creative process themselves (Earls 2007) or by subverting brand and cultural codes or the advertising itself (Chevalier & Mazzalovo 2004; Gabriel & Lang 2006).

But their sophistication resides in something more than just a familiarity with the marketing process. It resides in their disposition towards it. In a past age, when consumers saw rational messages in TV executions and processed them rationally, advertising was relatively transparent. In our more media-literate age, consumers now expect the brand to be more devious. They believe the brand has an agenda and is trying to manipulate them in some way. In other words, consumers are looking for, and expecting to find, *intentionality* in any brand communication that they encounter. They instinctively look ‘behind’ what they actually see and try to unravel the deeper motivations of the brand itself. This makes the marketing process very much more complicated for brand owners. Words such as ‘premium’ start to mean ‘standard’ in the eyes of the consumer; ‘no added sugar’ starts to mean ‘contains aspartame’; and ‘scientifically proven’ tends to mean anything but. Consumers are no longer taking words and ‘messages’ at face value; they look for hidden meanings and for the intentionality of the brand owner. The same happens in current and political affairs. Events are increasingly no longer things that simply ‘happen’ – there is always a reason for a particular announcement or government initiative. There are ‘good days to bury bad news’. Paradoxically, it seems, consumers are now involved, in a reciprocal manner, in their own version of the interrogative process that brands have unleashed on the consumer in the form of market research.

This shift in the consumer mindset is transformational. It does not represent a simple increase in consumer sophistication, nor does it merely suggest that marketing campaigns need to be a little more subtle in their approach. It entails a completely different model of brand experience. So what does this model look like?

Intentionality – restructuring the brand–consumer interface

The tendency of the consumer to look ‘behind’ brand activity, and to seek out the intentionality of advertising, does nothing less than overturn our familiar model of brand experience. It does this because it drives a theoretical coach and horses between our previously overlapping models of perception and communication. It demands that communication is

construed in seemingly new and radical terms. And the changes that it involves have far-reaching consequences throughout the marketing process.

In the conventional framework there was an assumption that the brand was just the originator of the advertising, etc. (i.e. literally the ‘sender’ of the message). It is this position that is transformed by the underlying expectation of brand intentionality. A brand that is construed as intentional, and with an agenda, is quite different from a brand that is seen as a purveyor of messages.

This shift results in a new model of communication. This is illustrated in Figure 2. What effectively happens is that the key features of the old model are repositioned. The brand owner is no longer viewed as the sender of a message (rational or emotional). The brand owner is now construed as an ‘author’, or as a creative force ‘behind’ the brand manifestations that the consumer perceives. The brand owner is reframed as the locus and source of an intentionality that was hitherto absent. This, in turn, has a radical effect on the brand itself. It becomes the central feature of the new model – replacing the role of the message – when, previously, the brand was practically synonymous with the brand owner. The consumer awareness of intentionality has thus had the effect of prising the idea of the brand away from the idea of the brand owner. The effect is revolutionary. The brand now achieves new status; it has metamorphosed into *the very thing that is experienced* rather than something that merely sends a message. The brand has become an entity that is created by the brand owner and it is something, *in its own right*, that needs to be decoded and understood. It is now the visible manifestation of the intentionality that is assumed by the consumer to exist ‘behind’ their experiences of the marketing process. The brand, as Klein explains, has come of age:

The old paradigm had it that all marketing was selling a product. In the new model, however, the product always takes a back seat to the real product, the brand, and the selling of the brand acquired an extra component that can only be described as spiritual. Advertising is about hawking a product. Branding, in its truest and most advanced incarnations, is about corporate transcendence.

(Klein 2000, p. 21)



Figure 2 The new model of brand experience

Klein is correct in identifying the transformation that has taken place in the marketing world, but her analysis of its causes is wrong. It is not because of the increasing sophistication and global reach of brands that they have become so much more dominant in consumer culture. They have reached this position because of the shift in the consumer relationship with brands that has been identified above. It is this that has placed the brand centre stage; it is a consumer-inspired revolution.

In this new framework, marketing activity itself also becomes reframed. In our conventional model, the activities of advertising, packaging design and PR, etc. were interpreted as the mechanisms, vehicles or routes, through which messages were conveyed to the consumer. In this new framework the brand is experienced directly. The marketing activities around it are, therefore, repositioned as *the very forms in which the brand is experienced*; the vehicles themselves begin to possess communicative power.

A new model of brand experience: the brand as narrative

The changes that have been discussed so far are of considerable significance. This, however, is only the beginning. For now we can re-interpret the process of ‘brand communication’ itself. If the consumer has repositioned the brand owner as an author, with creative intentionality, then the brand needs to be reframed as a piece of narrative. And it follows that the consumer is no longer a mere ‘receiver’ of a message. We have established a model that (finally) places the consumer in a pivotal role – as a *reader* of brand activity. Brand communication, far from being something that brands do, is now reframed as interpretative action on the part of the consumer. Brand communication becomes an act of ‘reading’ the brand (Fiske & Hartley 1978).

In order to explore the consequences of these changes and how they might impact on our theories of brand experience, we should look at the process of reading in more detail. Let us take an archetypal text – say Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (2004/1847). Here we have a prime example of a text or narrative. But when we sit in an armchair and read the novel there are actually *two* different types of experience that are taking place.

The first of these is at a purely *physical* level. We have before us a book, which has pages and the shapes of words printed on those pages. We perceive the book (and the words in it) as physical objects in exactly the same way as we perceive the table in our earlier analysis of perception.

But there is also a second process that is taking place. As we read *Wuthering Heights* something else is happening. We are experiencing the

thoughts and ideas of Emily Brontë, and we are learning about the characters of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. The heath comes to signify certain things to us and the plot, as it unravels, comes to hold a deeper meaning. Ideas thus form inside our minds in a way that creates emotional responses, empathies and maybe even strong psychological reactions. But these effects are *not* being created by the waves of light passing from the page to our eyes or by the shape of the letters on the page – they are being created *by the process of reading*. This experience is emotionally involving, and represents the main activity as we sit in the chair, but it is happening on a level that completely circumvents any ‘message’-based model. The meaning of the novel simply *unfolds* in our heads as we read.

It is one of the contentions of this paper that consumers, in our media-literate age, experience brands in the way that they read *Wuthering Heights* rather than in the way that they perceive tables. They read brand activities; they do not simply perceive them.

The key insight in the analogy above, however, is that thinking of the brand as a narrative separates the ‘meaning’ bit from the ‘physical’ bit (i.e. what we actually experience of the brand in terms of physical packaging or advertising). These physical manifestations of the brand are relegated in importance and are repositioned as *how* a brand narrative is encountered. The images on our TV screens, or the colours of a pack design, become equivalents of the words on a page of *Wuthering Heights*. We certainly perceive them, but they are no more than the *facilitators* of the reading process.

Consumers in this new model are, of course, still ‘taking things out’ of a brand narrative. They do this in the same way that *Wuthering Heights* can affect them as they read it. If we insist, we can still call what they take out of an advertising execution a ‘message’. But what we must realise is that the process is not a message-driven one. It is consumer-driven and this means that what is taken out is determined by the consumer as a reader. The marketing process is not a matter of simply putting messages into advertising and hoping that the same messages will ‘come out’ in the mind of the consumer (after they have been ‘transmitted’ across three-dimensional space). Instead, the marketing task is one of creating a text or narrative for a brand that is interpreted by the consumer in a particular way. As Radford makes explicit, meaning is created by the process of reading: ‘You do not receive meaning from the text. You create meaning as you engage with the text’ (2005, p. 173).

Brand narratives are thus engaging, emotionally enriching, pieces of creativity and they form very powerful influences on the views of consumers. But, emphatically, they do not have this effect by sending messages to consumers. They do this by the way in which they manifest themselves to the consumer in the form of a text.

Narrative models: structuralism and semiotics

None of this, of course is new. It an analysis of how meaning is derived from a text and, as such, it parallels the theories of structuralism and its sister discipline semiotics.

Saussure (1959/1916), the founder of structuralism, made the same distinction that we have identified between a word, or the sound of that word, and the meaning that it conveys to the reader or listener. The meaning is not ‘carried’ by the word – it is no more than a collection of letters on a page or a sound that is uttered. The meaning is determined by how the reader or listener interprets it within the broader context of the rules of language. Words, therefore, do not ‘stand’ for anything – they are not referents – their meaning is created by how they relate to other words in an underlying linguistic structure. Interestingly, Saussure extends this analysis of language to a more systematic level. Language is divided into two parts: language as it is spoken or manifested in everyday communication (*parole*), and the underlying structure of rules and conventions (*langue*) that lie ‘behind’ it. We have, in this distinction, a parallel with the way in which consumers experience brands – in terms of their actual experiences and the intentionalities that they assume exist behind them.

Semiotics, already well established within the market research world (Lawes 2002; Valentine 2002), takes the theories of structuralism and applies them to far greater swathes of reality; its remit is broader than just language. It sees the same theory of meaning as having relevance to any aspect of human culture because all such creations can be interpreted as text. Everyday physical objects can be construed, therefore, as signifiers and their cultural meanings (signifieds) are determined by the way in which they are interpreted within a culture’s system of meaning.

Semiotics thus takes the radical step of insisting that meaning can be conveyed by *forms of being* – by objects or artefacts – and not solely by language or structures that look like ‘messages’. The businessman who wants to look professional does not carry around with him written messages that say he is ‘trustworthy’ or ‘good at his job’. He prefers to wear a suit and drive the right kind of car. In doing so he adopts a meaning

system that is focused on *being*, or *appearing to be*, a good businessman rather than simply *saying* that he is one. He uses semiotics rather than an overt ‘messaging’ model.

Despite this shift to a way of thinking that is based on ‘being’, rather than the sending of messages, modern semiotics is, however, still working within the broad remit of the Cartesian model of reality. Signs, despite their polysemic characteristics, are still discussed in terms of a ‘transmission’ model of meaning. Signifiers are still construed as ‘out there’, while their corresponding signifieds are thought to exist only in the mind of the perceiver. Modern semiotics is, therefore, still largely operating according to the underlying tenets of the traditional communication model. It makes the important step of identifying the critical role of the consumer in the process of interpreting text, but it still sees text as being ‘transmitted’ in the first place. If we are going to establish a more radical framework for understanding brand experience, we need a model that steps beyond even this analysis of communication. We require a structure that overturns the very ‘transmission’ model itself.

A new narrative model: instantiation

The instantiation model that is discussed in this section remains a framework that analyses how brands and their values become embedded in the minds of consumers, but, critically, it is not a ‘communication’ model. It takes a very different approach to the business of brand experience, preferring to construe the way in which we perceive brands as *a process of actualisation*. Our experience of a brand is thus interpreted not as a series of acts of perception but rather as an ongoing procedure of actualisation that takes place in our minds.

Interestingly, as an aside, it is a framework that draws its roots from a way of thinking about reality that pre-dates the Cartesian model. It is derived from an Aristotelian view of the world based on essence (Lear 1988), which dominated western thought for nearly two millennia. This may seem a curious source of inspiration when trying to understand such modern entities as commercial brands, but, as we shall see, this model is already established (and indeed flourishing) within current marketing theory – albeit in terms that disguise its pre-modern parallels.

The instantiation model is a model about how we experience the world, but it assumes that the world is laid out before us in the form of text. It makes exactly the same distinction that we have already encountered in this paper. It divides reality into:

- *matter* – which has no characteristics of its own; matter is simply a vehicle in which brand essence is actualised
- *essences* – which are the key constituents of reality and which, in their various combinations, determine the characteristics of reality as we experience it.

Within this framework, essences are instantiated – literally ‘instanced’ in the world. They are perceived only in so far as they are actualised in matter. They exist, as it were, ‘behind’ the reality that we perceive, and the ways in which they combine determine the nature of that reality. The power that determines how essences are combined is, in the pre-modern model, a creative force otherwise known as God. He is the Author of Creation and he certainly has an agenda, albeit a relatively impenetrable one. In our parallel marketing framework, of course, we have no need for divine intervention – but we have brands that are created by more pluralistic, if still intentional, authors in the forms of advertising agency creative departments, brand owners and even consumers themselves. As we have seen, brands, in our model, are a text and the consumer seeks to understand the intentional forces that have created them. The convergence between the two models occurs because in the pre-modern framework the world was construed in exactly the same way. Reality itself was seen as a text and there was an author – a point highlighted by Foucault in his description of pre-modern reality as the ‘Prose of the World’ (Foucault 1970). The way in which consumers now see brands – as constructions created by authors with intentionality – makes the pre-modern model a new and useful framework to explore how consumers experience brands.

So how does the instantiation model work? Essences in this framework are understood as universals – ‘nesses’ of which we experience instances in reality around us. The act of experiencing them moves them from a position of being *in potentia* (behind reality) to one of actualisation. In marketing terms this would mean that the essence ‘Coca-Cola-ness’ is instantiated in Coca-Cola advertising, packaging or sponsorship, etc. Interestingly, its essence is also instantiated in other experiences that consumers have of the brand (i.e. who they see drinking Coca-Cola, where they find it and everything else they experience about the brand in the media). Instantiation, therefore, does not limit itself to a very narrow scope of what the brand owner might *want* to convey about its offer; it includes all of the ways in which a particular brand is experienced. And this entails the fact that it includes both the positive and negative aspects of how a brand is experienced. By moving beyond the messaging model we

have escaped from the tendency to only include experience that looks like ‘communication’.

As the consumer encounters the instantiations of a brand they absorb them, at a conscious or subconscious level, in a way that creates an impression of what the universal ‘Coca-Cola-ness’ is like. This becomes their understanding of the brand itself; it is a construction made by the consumer – not the brand owner. A description of the Aristotelian account of experience will illustrate this way of thinking (for a full discussion see Rorty 1980):

Starting from individual perceptions of things, the perceiver gradually, by way of memory, builds up an experience which is ‘universal in the soul, the one corresponding to the many’ ... This process gives us universals (such as ‘man’) which in turn lead to higher universals, such as ‘animal’ ... the world simply impresses us in such a way that we come to internalize ever wider and more inclusive concepts. We are by nature equipped to take on form (essence) in this way; if we are diligent and unimpaired, our natural faculties will see to it that we do so.

(Hankinson 1998, p. 168)

Brand values are thus created by the consumer through a process that is more akin to that of reading *Wuthering Heights* than the conventional messaging model underpinning AIDA. They are created by a ‘reading’ or ‘absorption’ of the brand rather than by a transmission-based procedure of processing messages.

Critically, this model of brand experience places the brand centre stage, as in Figure 2. The process of instantiation creates the brand essence in the mind of the consumer and, thinking within this new model, we start to use new idioms and new language. We are now viewing the brand as something that *becomes*, or *exists*, in the mind of the consumer – not just something that is ‘perceived’. This is, therefore, a thoroughly phenomenalist account of the branding process, although a full discussion of this aspect of the model will not be covered in this paper.

The instantiation model in current marketing practice

From this very brief description of instantiation, it seems a bold claim to argue that this model of brand experience should be adopted in marketing circles. It is an even more radical claim, however, to argue that this process of adoption is already taking place. The modernity of marketing, and the terminology that we employ, hide us from the truth of this claim, but, in this last section, we will explore the ways in which this is already under way.

It is of some significance that the concept of brand essence has emerged alongside the increasing awareness of brand intentionality on the part of the consumer. The concept of essence speaks a language of something ‘behind’ the experiences of brands that they encounter. The marketing community has understood the concept of brand essence only imperfectly in recent years, but the fact that the concept has emerged at all should be noted. There are, however, other examples of pre-modern terminology that are becoming more common in the marketing lexicon. These have emerged as we have sought ways to describe the ways in which essences (not just perceptions) become embedded in the mind of the consumer. Increasingly, brand owners talk about the ‘manifestations’ of their brands; they want to understand how consumers interpret those manifestations (or incarnations) and to evaluate whether they actualise their brand essence in the most effective way. For example, Robertson discusses experiential marketing in terms that are almost purely Aristotelian in nature. He uses the terminology of ‘embodiment’, rather than instantiation, but he is thinking about essence and its actualisation in the same way as we have discussed:

Experiential executions ultimately succeed or fail on the ability of the staff or brand ambassadors to embody the brand essence, not only by the way they are presented, but in the way they behave and interact with consumers.

(Robertson 2006)

As market researchers, we too, have our own pre-modern idioms. We often recommend to our clients, for example, that they *invoke* more of the ‘fruit’ values, ‘youth’ values or ‘British’ values in the packaging or the advertising of their brands. We, too, adopt the very language of instantiation even as we cling to the assumptions of the messaging model.

But the parallels run deeper than just the terminology we use. One of the most striking developments in recent years has been the way in which commentators place importance on the brand ‘being’ rather than just ‘messaging’. We have seen the rise of experiential marketing discussed above (Grant 1999), the emphasis placed on brand authenticity (Lewis & Bridger 2001; Boyle 2003), and the need for companies to ‘live’ the values of their brand (Edwards & Day 2005). At the same time writers such as Rijkenberg (2001) argue the case for ‘total communications’, which involve all the ways in which a brand can be experienced by the consumer (i.e. not just the overt ‘messages’ that it sends). Gordon also speaks in precisely these terms – all that is lacking in her analysis is the concept of instantiation itself:

We learn about a brand through the multiple experiences we have with it in different ways and conditions over time. Each exposure or experience is integrated with those memories that are already embedded – to create a totality of meaning.

(Gordon 2006, p. 20)

The reader will be struck by the parallels that exist between this extract and the description of Aristotle's account of experience encountered above. Both ways of thinking see perception as something more than a series of individual visual acts. Perception is effectively broadened, as a concept, to include the building up in the mind of what Heath calls 'pathways' via a process of 'consolidation' (Heath 2001, p. 48) and which Gordon elsewhere describes in neuronal terms (see also Franzen & Bouwman 2001):

Cells that fire together are wired together. Brand associations are strengthened over time through repetition (and weaken over time if not repeated). This does not need conscious attention. It can happen below the radar.

(Gordon 2002, p. 115)

These references to the non-conscious aspects of experience highlight yet another parallel between the instantiation model and more recent thinking on brand advertising. One of the key aspects of the instantiation model is that it represents experience as being a *passive* process; it goes on all the time and at levels that involve both the conscious and subconscious parts of the mind. This is an inevitable consequence of the fact that it is a model of 'being' rather than of 'messaging' and, crucially, it demands an account of subliminal perceptions. As early as 1714, the German philosopher Leibniz was criticising the Cartesian model of perception on the grounds that it ignored subconscious perceptions: 'It is in this that the Cartesians made a great mistake, for they disregarded perceptions that are not perceived' (Leibniz: 1714, p. 644). Such a pre-modern backlash to the rise of modernity went unheeded at the time, but has significant resonance in the Low Involvement Processing Model of advertising proposed by Heath:

Implicit learning is automatic. It is not under our control. We cannot choose to switch it on or off because it is on all the time ... We cannot switch off our implicit learning. It carries on collecting brand learning, whether we like it or not.

(Heath 2001, p. 65)

Lastly, however, let us return to the very concept of 'communication' itself. Here is yet more evidence of the implicit adoption of the

instantiation model. In its more contemporary forms, advertising seeks to build brand–viewer relationships that are more conspiratorial, more adult to adult, and that involve the consumer in a more integrated relationship with the brand. And this, in itself, simply reflects the rise and rise, on a broader scale, of relationship marketing in recent years. Marketers want to share perspectives, and conspire with the consumer, in the search for ever-closer relationships.

If we step back from the concept of communication for one moment, and look at the etymology of the word, we discover that it comes from the same stem as terms such as communion, common, communal and commune. The very concept of communication is rooted in the values of sharing. This is how the concept was used in the pre-modern world before Descartes ruptured it so abruptly with his division between ‘thinking’ and ‘extended’ matter. As Radford explains, this resulted, within 50 years, in a redefinition of what communication involves. In the hands of John Locke it shifted from a concept focused on ‘sharing’ to one that emphasised ‘transmission’:

Communication is firmly linked to terms such as ‘sharing’, ‘participation’ and ‘association’ rather than ‘transmission’. It draws a direct line from its roots of ‘commonness’, ‘communion’ and ‘community’ in ways that the OED now lists as archaic ... As Locke uses the term, ‘communication’ becomes a conduit for the exciting of ideas in the mind of a hearer that correspond to the ideas in the mind of the speaker. The sense of conveying an idea replaces the older sense of sharing an idea. The respective roles of the initiator of movement (a speaker) and the destination (a hearer) become integral parts of the definition. This nuance is a subtle but an extremely important shift.

(Radford 2005, pp. 15–17)

For all of its modernity, therefore, much of modern advertising practice is reinventing the pre-modern interpretation of communication. We prefer, of course, to talk in terms of brand–viewer conspiracies, and applaud our postmodern irony, but, in fact, we are simply reverting to the underlying framework of an instantiation model that is pre-modern in origin.

Mention of Locke brings us full circle. Lannon and Cooper, in their paper referenced earlier (Lannon & Cooper 1983), identify that one of the key misconceptions of the conventional model of advertising is that it assumes the consumer is a ‘*tabula rasa*’ upon which the brand can metaphorically ‘write’ its messages. We have to look no further than Locke (1981/1690) for the first exposition of this view of the human mind, which still haunts the marketing profession.

Conclusion

There is a widespread acceptance that our conventional models of brand communication are no longer fit for purpose. The collapse of our traditional structures has coincided with the rise of the concept of brand essence and the increasing conviction, on the part of consumers, that intentionality exists behind their experiences of brands. At the same time our marketing language, and our strategic ambitions, are increasingly shifting to models that involve ‘sharing’, ‘embodiment’, ‘manifestation’ and ‘being’. All that we lack is coherent schema within which we can restructure the brand–consumer relationship.

The instantiation model does precisely this. It creates a vision of brand experience that construes it as the ongoing (and often passive) absorption of essences as ‘instances’ of universals. This overturns the conventional model that sees brand experience as the receiving and processing of messages (either rational or emotional). It is a consumer-centred model because it focuses attention on how the consumer interprets what he or she experiences and how they categorise it, either consciously or subconsciously. It also emphasises the totality of brand experience and not just the bit that marketers like to call ‘communication’. As such, of course, it shares much with a semiological account of brands. It goes further, however, in suggesting that brands are more than just signs; we should construe them as actualised essence in the mind of the consumer.

To this extent, the instantiation model begins to open up a much broader debate about the exact nature of what a brand is. Because it construes brand experience as a ‘becoming’ in the mind, it radically transforms brands into *forms of being in themselves*. Such a step draws us to a potential analysis of the brand as a form of phenomenological reality that exists only in the mind and that is based on the structure of essence.

The consequences of this analysis are also far-reaching for market research in both its quantitative and qualitative forms. Much of market research culture, and particularly quantitative culture, is based on the assumption that brands are sending messages to consumers and that it is the role of the market researcher to ascertain whether they have been ‘received’ and ‘decoded’ properly. If we are to abandon this messaging model we move into a new world where we are required to reframe much of the market research project itself. We need to think about brands as actualisations *in the mind* of the consumer rather than as senders of messages from *outside of that mind*; we need to start asking questions such as ‘How is this brand being?’ rather than ‘What is it saying?’ And we need

to begin thinking about the brand as a *mental structure* rather than as a name that simply has associations linked to it.

These shifts are fundamental for both forms of market research, but particularly so for qualitative research. This is because the latter has much potential to explore and evaluate the workings of brand essence. It is hoped that the implications of these shifts can be explored in subsequent papers.

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