**New Perspectives and Future Research Issues on Brand Meaning Management**

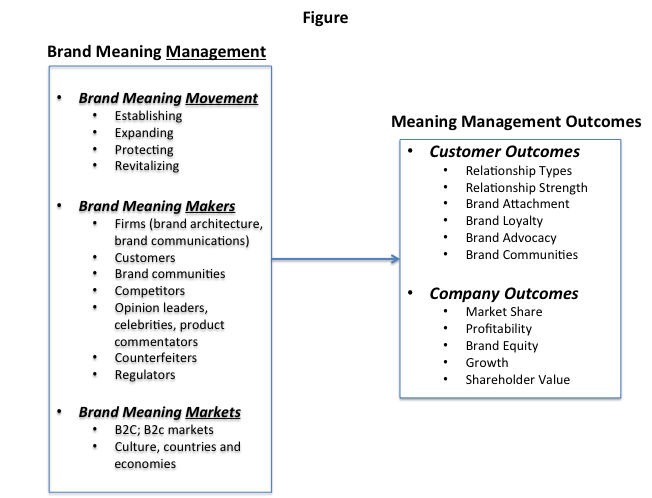
**Deborah J. MacInnis and C. Whan Park**

**University of Southern California**

Establishing, expanding, protecting, leveraging and revitalizing brand meaning is critically important yet exceedingly complex. On the one hand, successful brand meaning management is foundational to both brand differentiation and to establishing strong and enduring brand-customer relationships. Strong brand relationships are grounded in strong brand attachment, brand love, brand identification and high quality brand relationships. Such grounding can drive important outcomes to firms, like brand loyalty, brand advocacy, and consumers’ motivations to join forces with others in establishing brand communities. In turn, these outcomes can enhance market share, brand profitability, brand equity, brand growth and shareholder value (see Figure).

On the other hand, *managing* this meaning over time is complex, dynamic and multi-determined. Moving from the point of establishing brand meaning to expanding its meaning, protecting it, and revitalizing it when necessary is influenced by meaning makers from within as well as outside the firm. Within the firm, a given brand’s meaning may emanate from marketing communications, yet this fundamental meaning is often grounded in and sometimes constrained by the context of the set of brands that comprise the company’s brand architecture. Moreover, influences on brand meaning management reside not just within the firm but also with other meaning makers such as consumers, competitors, celebrities and regulators. Some meaning makers are favorably disposed to the brand (brand champions); others are not (brand detractors). Moreover meaning makers from both inside and outside the firm can use social media to impact thousands at once. Brands with strong brand meanings are also subject to counterfeit brands that can either highjack/threaten or even bolster brand meaning. So too must firms be vigilant in protecting and/or recovering from brand transgressions that might threaten the meaning they have carefully cultivated with consumers. Managing these complex and interacting forces so as to prevent dilution or distortion of brand meaning is thus critical.

The papers in this special issue highlight, yet add new insights to this complex domain. Following the Figure, the papers fall into three broad categories. A group of papers lend insight into *the myriad entities that are involved in the meaning making process itsel*f, such as marketers (Johnson, Thomson and Jeffrey) celebrities (Escalas and Bettman), brand users (Rindfleisch and O’Hearn) and the broader culture in which consumers live (Torelli and Stoner). A second set emphasizes the critical *impact that brand meaning has on consumers and brands themselves*—outcomes that include brand identification and attachment (Sen, Johnson, Bhattacharya and Wang), the management of close relationships and social status (Ahuvia), and brand evangelism (Collins, Glaebe, Mizerski and Murphy). The final set address *when and how brand transgressions can threaten these outcomes, and what brands must do to recover from lost or tainted meanings. I*n so doing, the authors identify relevant moderators that include the nature of the brand relationships (i.e., whether it is based on communal or exchange based relationship norms; Aggarwal and Agarwal), the nature of the brand violation as related to the basis for consumers’ brand attachment (e.g., violations of brand expressiveness, expertise, exclusivity, or values consistency; Sayin and Gurhan-Canli), and individual differences of consumers (e.g., sensitivities to violations of honor values; May, Monga and Kalaignanam).

****

What follows is a brief review of each chapter and their respective findings and contributions. We conclude by addressing important and unanswered questions that pertain to brand meaning management, and for which additional research is needed.

**Brand Meaning Makers**

Consistent with this emphasis on understanding the sources of brand meaning, the papers in this volume provide novel insights into the role that marketers, celebrities, consumers, and the culture in which they operate affect brand meaning.

***Marketer Derived Brand Narratives and Brand Meaning.*** In developing brand meaning, marketers often use brand narratives, which tell a story about the brand. Such narratives are powerful since they can “elevate the brand beyond the realm of a basic commodity”. **Johnson, Thompson and Jeffrey** suggest that good narratives follow three rules: (1) they correspond with or are logically consistent with the world and our knowledge of how it works, (2) they are interesting and may contain elements of a brand paradox, and (3) the story flow and format correspond with what consumers can recognize as a fictional story. As long as narratives correspond with these factors, consumers are generally uncritical in their acceptance of brand stories. Often the marketer constructs these brand narratives and the narratives they construct derive from whimsy or fantasy. Consider for example, Dos Equis’ “most interesting man in the world”. Dos Equis’ fictional character is depicted as a suave, worldly Latin who shows proclivities toward all things sophisticated. His cultured background disinclines him from drinking beer exclusively, but when he does choose to drink beer, he prefers Dos Equis. Most consumers know that the actor playing “the most interesting man in the world” is merely an actor. But they playfully go along with the narrative built around the brand.

But what changes this state of affairs? When do consumers perceive brand narratives as inauthentic? Johnson et al propose that inauthentic narratives may damage the brand by reducing brand-self connections and identification with the brand. A qualitative study and two experiments (one using real brands), showed that *two factors can serve as narrative disruptors that reduce the perceived authenticity of the narrative. One concerns the extent to which the brand is seen as copying the narrative of another brand. The second is) the extent to which the brand narrative contracts what consumers know to be true about the brand* (i.e.,. the brand narrative focuses on service excellence, when consumers know that the service is far from excellent). Even one of these disruptors can significantly affect the perceived authenticity of the narrative, thus thwarting marketers’ attempts at meaning making through narrative. The authors point to some interesting research issues on brand narratives and their resonance, including the extent to which consumers are sensitive to narratives for one brand that conflict with the narrative of other brands in the firm’s brand portfolio. In this way, the authors touch on the important issue of brand meaning management in the context of a brand’s architecture.

***Celebrities and Brand Meaning***. As brand meaning makers, marketers have long relied on the power of celebrities as meaning makers in their own right. Indeed, **Escalas and Bettman** report that in the US some 20% of traditional media ads feature celebrities. As “modern day heroes and heroines” they are powerful drivers of consumers’ attention, fascination, and identification. But the use of celebrities can be economically costly to the firm, and potentially damaging in the event of a moral breach in the celebrity endorser’s conduct. Understanding when and why celebrity endorsers are effective is therefore important to marketers.

Whereas past research has focused on celebrity attractiveness or credibility given fit with the product category, Escalas and Bettman argue that celebrities are carriers of meaning. As carriers of meaning, they can serve as vessels of meaning that help consumers construct their own identities. Thus, the power of celebrities resides less in their ability to be an active relationship partner than in their role as meaning enablers that help consumers meet their own needs. In this way, an important outcome of celebrity endorsements may be less their persuasive power (which has been the focus of past research), than on their ability to build positive brand-self connections.

Based on this perspective, the authors posit that *brands should be most able to build positive brand-self connections when (a) the celebrity matches their aspirations, (b) when the image of the celebrity matches the image of the brand, and (c) when consumers perceive the brand as symbolic*—that is, it’s use signals something to others about the user. These predictions were borne out in a study that assessed the extent to which respondents felt a connection between the brand and the self. A second study extended these findings, by suggesting that the impact of celebrity endorses is also impacted by the extent to which consumers self-enhancement goals are salient. By manipulating self-esteem, the authors found that *when consumers’ self-esteem was threatened, they were mostly likely to form brand-self connections linked to the person they aspired to be like (vs. did not aspire to be like).* When self-esteem was not threatened, there were no differences in the brand-self connections consumers formed to aspirational or non-aspirational celebrities.

Interestingly, whereas many marketing consulting companies focus on celebrities that are liked (vs. not liked) and the extent to which they are persuasive, the research by Escalas and Bettman suggest that an entirely different set of criteria for the selection of celebrity endorsers (their aspirational status, their match with the brand image), the products for which they might play the most powerful role (symbolic products), and the conditions under which their impact may be greatest (when self-esteem is threatened). Moreover, they suggest that marketers should give greater consideration to brand self connections (vs. persuasion) as the criterion against which the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers is judged.

***Consumers as Brand Meaning Makers.***  While the prevailing wisdom dictates that identifying, communicating, and controlling brand meanings advantage marketers, consumers are also active meaning makers in the creation, use and disposition of brands. Clearly, consumers add brand meaning of their own, in part through the autobiographical memories they have of brands and by their expressive use of brands to signal their identity (see Escalas and Bettman). Whereas consumer derived brand meanings can sometimes conflict with the brand meaning intended by marketers, **Rindfleisch and O’Hern,** however, suggest that involving consumers as makers of the brand and creators of personalized brand meanings can also advantage marketers. Following a review of brands as private and communal assets (vs. assets tightly protected by the marketer), the authors identify a novel mechanism by which consumers can create personalized brand meanings called “brand remixing”. With brand remixing, consumers start with the brand offered by the marketer, but personalize it. Through this process, a set of meanings that are idiosyncratic to each customer is developed.

Brand remixing has its roots in entertainment (with remixed songs, videos and video games), the production of which is aided by digital editing technologies. Yet, the authors provide an interesting context for studying brand remixing—specifically, Nokia’s use of 3D software, which allows users to design their own Lumina 820 series smart phone case and to manufacture it using a 3D printer. In this research, the authors study 92 smartphone case designs submitted by 63 users and displayed on the Thingiverse.com website. The context allows the authors to study both what choices user-designers made in the case design (e.g., use of the brand name, font options) and which designs most resonated with viewers/ consumers of these designs.

Of note is that nearly 40% of designs featured some type of pro-Nokia branded message. Thus*, many consumers were willing to adopt a marketer branded message, even when left to their own devices*. Importantly, *views and download data showed that these user-designed cases augmented views and downloads of the basic design template by a factor of six.* The initiative garnered positive support from both the business press and consumers. It also led to a contest that allowed users to submit product prototypes, judged by a 5-member panel. In this way, *users became product unpaid members of the product design team*. The winning cases featured *novel benefits (i.e., storage spaces for a key, cash or credit cards) that should strongly resonate with users*. In general, this work complements Escalas and Bettman. Whereas Escalas and Bettman suggest that marketer derived brand meanings can help consumers to form an identity, Rindfleisch and O’Hearn suggest that users derived brand meaning can help marketers develop an identity for the brand. Their research also indicates that *marketers can create opportunities for users to develop involvement in the brand and so create avenues for brand attachment.* The potential for brand remixing raises a number of interesting questions, which the authors address in their conclusion section.

***Culture and Brand Meaning.*** Of course, although marketers might craft brand narratives for consumers, the meaning of brands is also reflected by the culture in which the brand operates. Since many brands operate across cultures, it is important to see how cultural meaning associated with a brand can be identified, leveraged and protected. **Torelli and Stoner** address these issues by reviewing a considerable body of research on cultural issues related to branding. They note that an important destination point for brands is the achievement of iconic brand status. Such status is realized when the brand is widely regarded as “the most compelling representative symbol of the beliefs, values, and lifestyles of a culture”. Not many brands reach this destination status, but some like Coke, Harley Davidson and Elvis Presley are widely regarded as brands that have achieved this iconic status. Use of such brands can symbolize allegiance to and belonging to one’s culture, resulting in positive cultural equity. Complicating matters though is that specific consumers might well belong to two or more cultures by virtue of their cultural heritage and/or place of origin on the one hand, and their place of personal development on the other. Notably, while some individuals have these bi-cultural identities, situational cues can prime the accessibility of one culture or another, impacting how a brand’s cultural meaning is viewed.

*One important contribution of this paper is the authors’ explication of four factors that serve as building blocks to the brand’s cultural equity*. Brands can gain cultural meaning by virtue of their association with various countries or regions of the world—associations that might be viewed as highly positive (e.g., French wine, Swiss chocolate) or negative (paint from China). Brand meaning also emanates from the extent to which the brand is itself seen as global. Global brands can convey associations with modernity, cosmopolitanism, and prestige. Third is the alliance between important values of the culture (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism) and the image of the brand as hedonistic vs. functional. A final building block is “cultural authority”, which is realized when brands become known and accepted for telling stories that resonate with the culture’s desires, hopes, struggles and fears. The authors posit that the more strongly brands can work in concert with these four building blocks, the stronger their cultural equity will become.

*A second important contribution of this paper is the development of a conceptual model in Figure 4 that identifies the considerations marketers face in managing cultural equity*. The process involves a cultural audit so as to uncover the culture’s current understanding of the brand. The audit can form the basis for the selection of target markets and a brand positioning strategy in the culture. Culture-specific marketing mix activities play a powerful role in communicating the brand’s cultural equity. Deep understanding of the brand’s cultural equity also provides the basis for determining what new products the firms should develop and/or what markets it should enter or build so as to leverage and protect cultural equity.

**Meaning Management Outcomes**

As Figure 1 shows, brand meanings are critical to marketers and consumers in light of their potentially powerful effect on these entities. Brand meaning and consumers’ identification with the brand can affect the strength of consumers’ brand relationship, the type of relationship they have with the brand, brand attachment, and outcomes that might stem from attachment, including brand loyalty, brand advocacy and investment in brand communities. Several papers in this volume highlight the powerful outcomes that can emanate from resonant brand meanings.

***Brand Identification and Attachment.*** Increasingly, researchers are incorporating concepts like identification and brand attachment as important drivers of meaningful brand relationships. Yet, **Sen, Johnson, Bhattacharya and Wang** note that these concepts derived from different literature bases that addressed different questions. Moreover, they differ in definition. Identification is defined as the degree of congruity between the brand identity and that of the consumer. Attachment (as defined by Thomson et al 2005) refers to the strength of the emotional bond connecting the brand with the consumer.

Beyond definitional differences, the constructs are proposed differ in their antecedents. *Brand attachment is hypothesized to relate more strongly to one’s personal history with the brand and it’s impact on felt security. In contrast, identification is hypothesized to relate more strongly to impression management and the fulfillment of social identity needs. As a result, positive meaningful brand relationships might be impacted by each construct, independently.* Moreover, the authors predict that *the two constructs will differentially impact distinct relationship outcomes, such that identification will more strongly predict public endorsement of the brand whereas attachment will more strongly predict brand loyalty.*

In a carefully executed and empirically precise study, the authors asked students to report on indicators of attachment and identification and their hypothesized antecedents and consequences. Their results generally confirmed expectations. Attachment and identification emerged as distinct constructs, and differed in their antecedents, with attachment being uniquely predicted by brand history and impression management being uniquely predicted by impression management. Interestingly, felt security predicted both constructs. The authors posit that *whereas felt security might predict attachment by providing personal security and reducing personal anxieties, felt security might predict identification by providing social security, and reducing social anxieties*. In terms of consequences, although both attachment and identification predicted both public endorsement of the product and loyalty, attachment more strongly predicted loyalty, whereas identification more strongly predicted public brand endorsement.

***Brands and Social Relationships.*** According to **Ahuvia,** mammals are uniquely hardwired, by virtue of their well-developed neo-cortex, to experience empathy and manage social complexity. In today’s modern society, our advanced brain functioning drives us to use brands and products (including possessions) as aids to social complexity management. Brands do so by their ability to facilitate, reinforce, symbolize or, in some cases substitute for close relationships with others. They also do so by their ability to manage consumers’ social status; that is to place consumers in a position where others will regard them in high regard.

Using brands to facilitate and reinforce close relationships is important for life management. Specifically, close relationships, with their implicit norm of reciprocity, suggest that giving at one point in time to a relationship partner will involve reciprocation in a time of need. Managing close relationship is also critical because only some of the myriad individuals with whom we have a relationship are intimates on whom we can rely. Managing relationship closeness is facilitated by involvement in brand communities and gift giving. Both practices involve ritualistic behaviors and symbolic aspects that can alter (strengthen, change, weaken) the closeness of one’s relationships with others.

by emphasizing their role, and indeed essentiality, in managing close relationships and signaling status to others. Common to these twin functions is a social perspective, where emphasis is placed less on the product itself than on its instrumentality in addressing higher-level goals.

***Brand Evangelism***. Continuing on the theme of attachment, identification brand promotion, and brand love, **Collins, Glaebe, Mizerski and Murphy** examine *how brand meaning is conveyed to others in the marketplace through the firm’s most ardent devotees—brand evangelists*. The importance of brand evangelists as meaning makers and diffusers cannot be discounted in light of the credibility and influence that they can have on other consumers. Remarkably, given the importance of brand evangelists to firms, the field has yet to develop a strong conceptualization of evangelists and a method by which they can be identified.

Collins et al argue that brand evangelists don't’ differ from non-evangelists in terms of their sociability, experiential focus or knowledge seeking tendencies as others have posited. Instead, what drives evangelists to compulsively spread positive WOM is the brand’s ability to provide them with a transcendent experience. These consumers have had something akin to a spiritual experience, such that the brand seems right or perfect in its relationship with the customer, a feeling that is captured by the term “quintessence”.

*Quintessence, and three other factors (the spread of positive WOM about the brand, the perception by the consumer that they are part of a brand collective or community, and the perception that they are genuinely and authentically motivated to champion the brand) are posited as four formative indicators of brand evangelism*. With formative indicators, the construct is indicated by the combination of all component factors. In a sample of 3,995 customers of an online video entertainment rental service, 2.8% indicated agreement with all four indicators and hence were identified as evangelists. A stratified sample of non-evangelists was identified and evangelists and non-evangelists were compared on several measures that should be related with brand evangelism. Evidence that evangelists differ from non-evangelists on these variables was taken to illustrate the scale’s validity.

As expected, compared to non—evangelists, *evangelists (a) were more satisfied with the brand, (b) have more positive perceptions of the product’s value, (c) have stronger intentions to use the brand in the future, (d) were less likely to consider using competitors’ products, and (e) were more strongly connected to other members of the brand community and (f) were more likely to read corporate communications and (g) were more likely to share brand knowledge*. Importantly, whereas past research suggests that evangelists and non-evangelists differ in their use of social media, their social orientation, their tendencies for experiential consumption, and their knowledge orientation, the data did not find differences between evangelists and non-evangelists on these factors.

**Meaning Management and Brand Transgressions**

Increasingly, researchers have extolled the benefits of establishing deep, meaningful and attachment based relationships with consumers. One such benefit seems to be that when the brand does something wrong, consumers who have developed a strong relationship with the brand are motivated to discount negative information, so as to maintain cognitive consistency. Doing so, allows attached consumers to continue their brand relationship and as such maintain the status quo. Interestingly though, some recent research, including several papers in this volume, suggest that under some circumstances attachment can have a dark side. Specifically, in some cases negative information about the brand can lead consumers to question their relationship with the brand and demotivate their willingness to continue their brand relationship.

***Exchange vs. Communal Brand Relationships*. Aggarwal and Agarwal** develop insight into this phenomenon in their conceptual paper related to transgressions and the relationship norms that underlie the brand relationship. Based on work by the first author and work by Clark and colleagues in psychology, the authors note that two types of norms can govern brand relationships—communal and exchange.

Often consumers have what is regarded as an exchange relationship with the brand. In such relationships consumers expect relationship equivalence; such the brand will reciprocate the consumers’ relationship inputs with inputs that are at least as great as that which the consumer has given. In exchange relationships emphasis is on tit for tat exchanges. Aggarwal and Agarwal posit that *in exchange relationships the magnitude of consumers’ responses to a brand transgression will be proportional to the severity or magnitude of the transgression. As the magnitude of the transgression increases, the greater the negative impact the transgression will have on the consumer-brand relationship.*

However, sometimes, particularly in attachment based brand relationships, brand relationships operate more on the basis of communal than exchange norms. When relationships are communal in focus, individuals place less emphasis on tit for tat equivalence than on evidence that the relationship partner is sensitive to and attentive to their needs. Consumers in such brand relationships will forgive brands for minor transgressions. In part, this forgiveness is based on motivated reasoning. Given their attachment to the brand, consumers have much to lose by concluding that its actions have been problematic. But as transgressions become more serious and reveal insensitivity to their needs consumers will react extremely negatively.

*Thus, and in contrast to exchange-based relationships, transgressions in communal relationships are characterized as a step function (vs. a linear relationship) in their impact on consumers.*

The authors review evidence consistent with this logic and discuss implications for manager. One implication is that managers who make a severe mistake may be blindsided by the extremely negative response from their most loyal customers. A second implication is that one’s most loyal attached customers may be most vulnerable to violated communal relationship norms. Hence managers must be vigilant to transgressions that signal lack of attentiveness or concern for the consumer as a relationship partner.

***Violating the Basis for Brand Attachment.* Sayin and Gurhan-Canli** also tackle the issue of potential vulnerability of attachment based relationships, here from a different vantage point than Aggarwal and Agarwal. In this conceptual paper, these authors propose that consumers are often attached to brands because the brand’s meaning resonates with who they are, who they want to be, and what they need to do in satisfying everyday life issues. Thus, factors such as the expressiveness of the brand in signaling something about the consumer, its exclusivity, its expert status, or its consistency with the consumer’s values can often motivate brand attachment*. If consumers are attached to the brand for any of these reasons though, they are predicted to react negatively (and more negatively than unattached consumers) to brands that violate this basis for attachment (i.e., the brands shows itself to express something different, becomes less or non-exclusive, reveals lack of expertise, and shows that it is not acting in responsibly and in a socially desirable way but actually acts irresponsibly.*

Going further, the authors posit that the degree to which these types of brand transgressions hurt brands is also a function of four different consumer needs. Each need is tied with the basis for brand attachment. *For example, violations of the expressive nature of the brand are predicted to be greater for attached consumers with high (vs. low needs for self-enhancement. Violations of the exclusivity of the brand will be greater for attached consumers with high (vs. low) needs for uniqueness. Violations of brand expertise will be greater for attached consumers who are high in need for risk avoidance. Finally, violations of the empathic nature of the brand as acting responsibly will be greatest for attached consumers with a higher need for justice.*

***Violations of Honor Values.* May, Monga and Kalaignanam** also study brand transgressions, asking when a brand failure (a situation where the brand disappoints its customers) will (or will not) enhance consumers’ desires for revenge against the brand. Consumers who seek revenge against the brand are not only disinclined to not help the brand, they do everything they can to actively hurt it, and through whatever means are deemed most hurtful (boycotts, negative WOM, stealing from the company, damaging property). May, Monga and Kalaignanam suggest that an important moderator between brand failures and desires for revenge concern the consumers’ adherence to “honor values”. Individuals with high honor values believe that their self-worth is impacted not only by what they do and what others think of them. Violating one’s honor values (e.g., by being a liar, a cheat, or an otherwise unethical person) makes a high honor individual lose self-esteem. High honor individuals also believe that their own honor can be taken away by others. As such, high honor individuals are vigilant in adherence to honor values. High honor individuals are also extremely sensitive to how others are treated. Being unfair or insulting to an individual is unfair and insulting to the self. Thus, high honor individuals take active offense when others are treated poorly. In light of these characteristics*, the authors propose that high honor individuals will have a greater desire for revenge against a company for a brand failure than will low honor individuals. Four studies confirm this prediction.*

*One potentially significant outcome of this research for marketers is that they are very vulnerable to having high honor individuals exact revenge against them and their brand*. However the authors propose that firms can actively engage in several processes that will reduce high honor individuals’ desires for revenge. Specifically, the authors predict that *the negative effect on vengeance for high honor individuals is tempered by the degree to which such customers are allowed to suggest a punishment for the person who caused the brand failure*. The reason why is that being asked to suggest a punishment satiates consumers’ revenge-seeking desires. *Apologies are also posited to be effective mechanisms for tempering the vengeance inclinations from brand failure of high honor consumers. They are also predicted to be more effective than monetary compensation because they alone communicate concern and empathy to the customer who experienced the brand failure. These* predictions were borne out in three empirical studies, including a large-scale household panel study involving over 6000 households.

**Unanswered Questions**

As notable as the contributions of this special issue are, equally of note are the gaps in our current understanding of brands and brand meaning- particularly those noted in the Figure that represented by the papers in this volume.

First, the bulk of work on brand meaning and meaning management h as focused on a B2C market, leaving the B2B world largely unexplored. A host of questions might be raised about brand meaning and meaning management in the B2B area. ……

Second, brand meaning is critical not just to the brand in question, but to other brands that comprise the firm’s brand portfolio. Very little research to date has examined brand meaning in the context of brand architecture design…….

Third, the field would benefit from insight into the role of brand relationships and attachment in not just brand meaning establishment, but brand expansion, protection and revitalization. In the area of brand meaning expansion, our work has focused extensively on brand extensions, however other ways of brand meaning expansion (through co-branding, brand alliances, sub-branding, ingredient branding, and mergers and acquisitions has received limited attention. Interesting questions include…..

Finally, little is known at present about the *evolutionary nature of* *brand relationships; in other words, how do brand relationships begin, change and dissolve.* What precipitates a change in consumers’ brand relationship from non-relationship to relationship status? Do different brand relationships have different relationship trajectories? What drives the depth of brand attachment? How do consumers and marketers keep relationships fresh? What factors precipitate marketer and consumer relationship dissolution? How do consumers negotiate (and re-negotiate) brand relationships as relationships evolve? And how to marketers keep brand relationships fresh as consumers themselves evolve across their life course?