

## **Abstract**

This paper introduces the author's doctoral thesis which explores the tangibility of brand meaning of local food brands. The conceptual framework is derived from Hirschman's layers of meaning (1980a, 1998) and the tangible (direct sensory and functional) and the intangible (idiosyncratic, subcultural and cultural) labels provide key units of analysis. The latter has received much scholarly attention exemplified by Brown *et al.*, (2003) and Escalas and Bettman, (2005), so this focuses on the more neglected tangible layer, to understand its contribution to brand meaning.

Brand meaning resides in the minds of consumers (Batey 2008) so this research will be explored from their perspective. It adopts an interpretivist approach to uncover subjective meanings held by consumers and their connections with brands. Family households with older children aged 10-15 form the sample population (Mintel 2011). Qualitative approaches such as participant observation supported by in-depth interviews are adopted.

This makes an original contribution by giving insights into a more neglected area which explores the tangibility of brand meaning. The research context is local food as there has been a significant groundswell of interest in this category over the last few years around local sourcing, food miles, health and ethical concerns (Grobel 2013).

200 words

## **Introduction**

This paper introduces the author's doctoral thesis which explores the tangibility of brand meaning of local food brands from a consumer perspective. The conceptual framework is derived from Hirschman's layers of meaning (1980a, 1998) and the tangible (direct sensory and functional) and the intangible (idiosyncratic, subcultural and cultural) labels provide key

units of analysis. The tangibility of brand meaning is an area that has been neglected – it includes the functionality of the product, its uses and the direct sensory impressions. The paper will firstly define then discuss key terms then support the conceptual framework. This will be linked to the research aims and objectives. Local food brands will then be justified as an excellent area of application for this study followed by the methodological approach. This is a working paper as the author has just commenced data collection.

## **Theoretical Background**

Firstly the roots of the meaning of meaning reveal they can be philosophical, anthropological, sociological or psychological in nature (Gould and Kolb, 1964). In brief, associated cultural meanings and attachments contribute to meaning (Linton 1936) with sociology making a relational and symbolic contribution (Lindesmith and Strauss 1949). Personal past experiences and perceptions are important (Szalay and Deese 1978, cited by Hirschman 1980a). Gestures have a role to play (Mead 1934) and it is the interpretation of gestures and other stimuli through the senses that create meaning. Meaning emerges as a result of how these associations connect with one another (Lindesmith and Strauss 1949) and this may affect a consumer's subsequent behaviour (Mead 1934). These interpretations of meaning are echoed in Hirschman's (1998) layers of brand meaning showing a hierarchical approach as shown in appendix one.

The conceptual framework (appendix two) develops and builds on Hirschman's original layers of meaning showing parallels with the tangible and intangible – terms originally used together for the first time in her 1980(a) article. This dichotomy has been reflected in many definitions of a brand. Jevons (2007) analyses a multitude of brand definitions and sums up with:

“A brand is a tangible or intangible concept that uniquely identifies an offering, providing symbolic communication of functionality and differentiation, and in so doing sustainably influences the value offered” (p. 6).

Hirschman (1980a) defines that: “Tangibility means that an attribute is accessible through the senses, it is palpable” (p. 9). In contrast intangible attributes are defined as:

“Intangible attributes exist only within the mind of the individual and are mentally rather than physically associated with the product” (p.9).

The tangible aspects of brand meaning include the direct sensory and the functional. This study explores how palpable or tangible the brand becomes to the consumer as perceived through their senses (Sherry, 2005). The role of the five senses has gained more recent attention particularly with an emotional connection (Schmitt, 2003; Hultén *et al.* 2008; Krishna, 2010) but here the direct sensory connections are of specific interest, together with how they link to the functional. Functionality is included within the tangible attributes as Hirschman later recognises the utility or functional dimension (Hirschman and LaBarbera, 1990) of which Gabay *et al.* further reinforce the importance in 2009. Hirschman made an important early contribution to move from a product focused or quantitative research approach to understanding consumers and she was instrumental in a movement that generated a wealth of literature around the intangible. Within the brand meaning literature this has received much scholarly attention developing further themes within the cultural, subcultural

and idiosyncratic layers such as storytelling (Brown *et al.*, 2003), symbolism (Levy, 1959) and the self-concept (Dittmar, 1992; Escalas and Bettman, 2005) respectively. However this study focuses on the more neglected first layer, the direct sensory and functional, but adopts Hirschman's interpretivist approach. As brand meaning resides in the minds of consumers (Batey, 2008) this research will be explored from their perspective.

## **Research Context**

The research context is local foods. Hirschman (1980b) notes that:

“the domains of food and clothing are perhaps the most tangible, because we respond to them in a highly tactile and palpable manner”. (p.30)

This suggests food resonates with consumers and has meaning in order to create such a response. Food has both functional and symbolic attributes and associations exemplified by the Duchy brand evoking not only a selection of mouth-watering food offerings but is steeped in heritage and symbols linking through to the Duchy estate renowned for its organic credentials. Grobel (2013) identifies an increasing consumer preoccupation with local sourcing, food miles and a focus on health together with ethical concerns. Local foods in particular have engendered a groundswell of interest and increasing demand over recent years (Defra, 2008, IGD, 2010). “Local” is defined as within a 30 mile radius (FARMA, 2012) albeit this may be more of a general perception than a defined distance (Defra, 2008). This study focuses on local food brands around the vicinity of west Dorset as the county offers a diversity of local brands. The south west of England has over half of all local food production with good access. There is a strong sense that local food is highly developed (Mintel, 2011).

## **Research aim**

*To explore the brand meaning of local food brands from a consumer perspective.*

This includes both the tangible and intangible attributes and associations that create brand meaning as they are present within the stated objectives (particularly objectives two and four) which are:

- 1. To explore the sensorial attributes of local food brands.*
- 2. To gain insight as to how the tangible attributes connect with the intangible associations.*
- 3. To understand the contribution of functionality to brand meaning.*
- 4. To gain an in-depth understanding of how tangible attributes contribute towards any hierarchy of meaning.*

The focus is on the tangible attributes but in the context of the intangible. The conceptual framework identifies the sensorial attributes as outlined in objective one. Fitting with the second objective it identifies both the tangible attributes and the intangible associations and the research aims to gain insight into their connectivity. The third objective deals with functionality placed within the tangible attributes. Finally the conceptual framework outlines that the direct sensory, the idiosyncratic, the subcultural and the cultural layers that are

presented in a hierarchical approach demonstrating Hirschman's focus on layers two, three and four. Therefore this is the basis of the fourth objective which seeks to understand how the first layer, the direct sensory or functional attributes, contribute to meaning.

### **Research Methods and Data Collection**

As there is a need for a holistic, in-depth understanding of consumers' attitudes towards local food brands, this study gathers empirical data through qualitative means in its local food Dorset context. Data is captured through consumer-focused, ethnographic methods including a minimum of five accompanied shopping trips, five kitchen visits and around 20 in-depth interviews (Elliott and Elliott, 2002,). Participant observation enables the opportunity to experience what meanings are interpreted by the participants. The data will present the following as identified from the research objectives:

1. The sensorial attributes of local food brands.
2. How the tangible attributes connect with the intangible associations.
3. The contribution of functionality to brand meaning.
4. How the tangible attributes contribute towards any hierarchy of meaning.

### **Sampling**

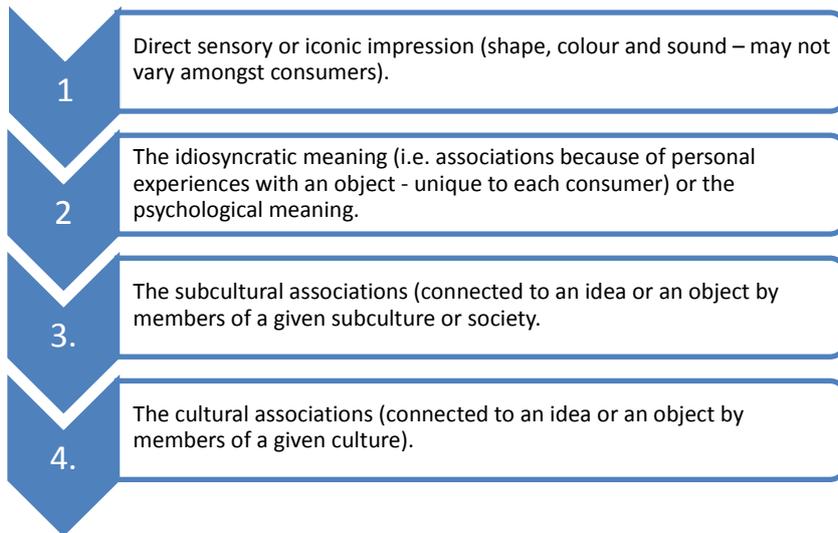
Whilst consumers of local food vary there is support that family households with older children aged 10-15 tend to be the greatest consumers in this local area and they form an appropriate population to sample (Mintel, 2011). Blake *et al.* (2010) refers to so-called "middle class" Britons who like to cook food with raw ingredients and have the requisite shopping skills are more engaged with local food than lower income households.

Farm shops such as Felicity's or Washingpool in west Dorset are the starting point for recruitment of local food consumers. Purposive sampling has recruited regular shoppers to the shops assisted by the retailers. Snowball sampling follows. **As this is a working paper, data is still in the process of being gathered.**

### **Originality/value**

This study adds to the growing body of brand meaning literature by exploring the tangible attributes of local food brands together with their interplay with the intangible associations from a consumer perspective. This is the major contribution of the paper. This is one of very few interpretivist studies on tangible attributes using ethnographic methods in a highly topical category.

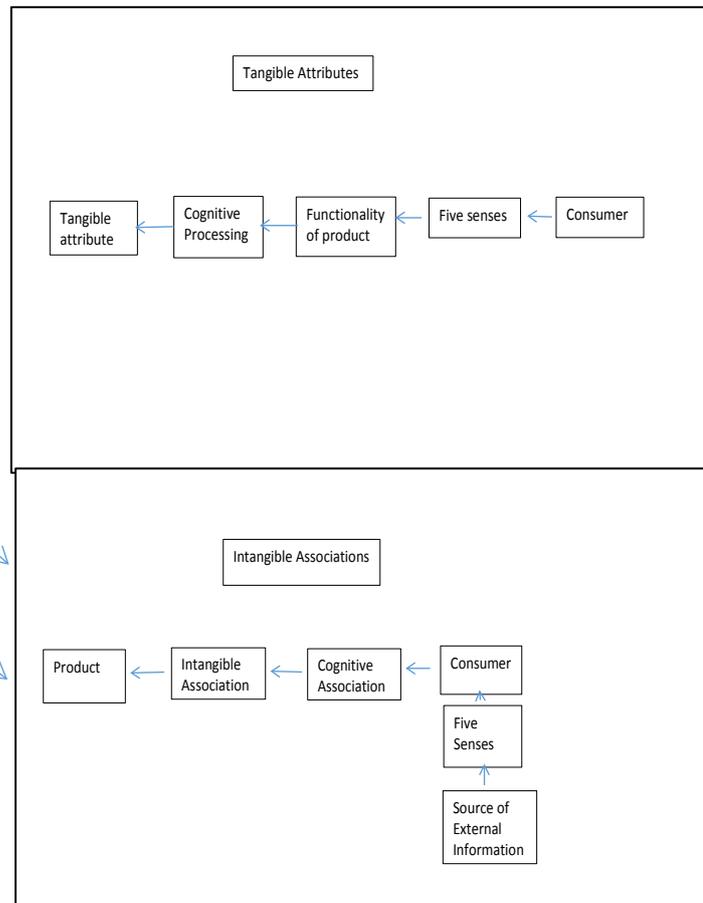
Appendix One: Hirschman's Layers of Meaning 1998



Layers of meaning. Hirschman (1998).

## Appendix Two: Conceptual Framework

- 1 **Direct sensory** or iconic impression →
- 2 The **idiosyncratic** meaning
- 3. The **subcultural** associations
- 4. The **cultural** associations



**Layers of brand meaning: Hirschman 1998**

**Tangible Attributes and Intangible Associations** adapted from Hirschman 1980

Conceptual Framework as adapted from Hirschman 1980 and 1998

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