

To explore brand meaning and the functional aspects of Dorset food brands from a consumer perspective.

Abstract

This paper introduces the author's doctoral thesis which is to explore brand meaning and the functional aspects of Dorset food brands from a consumer perspective. Hirschman's (1998) hierarchical framework unpacks the different layers of brand meaning and the direct sensory or functional layer is the start of the stimulus meaning. The subsequent psychological, social and cultural meanings have been given much scholarly attention so this thesis focuses on the more neglected first layer.

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 tend to be the greatest consumers in this area and forms the sample population (Mintel, 2011). Qualitative approaches such as participant observation supported by in-depth interviews will be adopted but also a more quasi-ethnographic approach, (Elliott and Elliott, 2002) which allows for greater access to consumers' lived experiences, will also be considered.

This paper seeks to make an original contribution by giving insight into a more neglected area which explores the functional aspects of brand meaning.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore brand meaning and the functional aspects of Dorset food brands from a consumer perspective. The functionality of brand meaning is an area that appears neglected - product uses, shapes, colours, sensory impressions - the tangible elements - all appear to be taken as a given. These are perceived as the most desirable but the cultural, social and psychological meanings are the most useful when explaining brand preference (Donius, 1994 as cited in Franzen and Bouwman, 2001). The contribution of meaning from the functional or tangible characteristics of brands therefore warrants further attention and exploration. Given the author's interest and previous work with local food consumption the area of application for exploring the functional elements of meaning will be in relation to Dorset food brands.

Theoretical Background

Over the last couple of decades, brand academics and practitioners have tended to concentrate on the more symbolic and emotional aspects of brand meaning and they have largely taken the functional aspects for granted. This might be illustrated by a comment by a marketing journalist who says:

“Marketers have fallen prey to the layman's view of ‘branding’ as the ‘frothy bit’ all gloss and image.” (Edwards, 2013 p 24).

This thesis seeks to explore the less glamorous, but highly important, functional elements to fully understand their contribution to brand meaning, in the context of Dorset food brands.

Firstly the roots of the meaning of meaning reveal they can be philosophical, anthropological, sociological or psychological in nature (Gould and Kolb, 1964). Similarly the brand meaning literature reflects these themes and develops further dimensions such as storytelling (Brown et al., 2003), symbolism (Levy, 1959) and the self-concept (Dittmar, 1992; Escalas and Bettman, 2005). There is a dichotomy that emerges with these former dimensions being alluded to as intangible and the functional elements being perceived as tangible (Hirschman, 1980). To help explain this, Hirschman (1998) produced layers of brand meaning which suggests a hierarchical approach as shown in figure one.

- 1 Direct sensory or iconic impression (shape, colour and sound – may not vary amongst consumers).
- 2 The idiosyncratic meaning (i.e. associations because of personal experiences with an object - unique to each consumer) or the psychological meaning.
3. The sub- cultural associations (connected to an idea or an object by members of a given subculture or society).
4. The cultural associations (connected to an idea or an object by members of a given culture).

Figure one: Layers of meaning Hirschman (1998).

In brief, this outlines that the first layer is at the start or the centre of the stimulus meaning. Tangibility arises directly from the product, is accessed directly through the senses and is

palpable (Hirschman, 1980; Sherry, 2005). The presence of the following layers suggest a sequential step by step approach to unpacking brand meaning which is supported by Donius (1994) as cited in Franzen and Bouwman (2001) who also created a hierarchy of brand meaning. He suggests that whilst functional and economic meanings were the most desirable, when it came to explaining brand preference, the cultural, social and psychological meanings were most useful. As a result the economic and functional associations can be set as boundary conditions, but the cultural, social and psychological meanings create key brand differentiators. Batey (2008) refers to “higher order values” (p xx) such as pride in being a good mother or self- esteem which again suggests that some meanings have more salience or importance.

Much attention has been given to layers two, three and four so this thesis focuses on the more neglected first layer. There is some practitioner support (Edwards, 2013; Mitchell 1999) who argue that the functional elements offer greater substance. This functional or sensory layer may include the product or physique of the brand (Kapferer, 2012), its performance (Harness cited by Ogilvy, 1983) and how palpable or tangible the brand becomes to the consumer as perceived through their senses (Sherry, 2005).

Brand meaning resides in the minds of consumers (Batey, 2008) so this research will be explored from their perspective. The author’s curiosity into exploring the functional elements of brands and how they contribute to brand meaning seeks to build on her earlier collaborative work for the Eat Dorset food fair and an MA dissertation which explored functional, emotional and symbolic elements of brands.

Research Aim

To explore brand meaning and the functional aspects of Dorset food brands from a consumer perspective.

Research Objectives

To explore the functional aspects of Dorset local brands.

To explore how tangible the brand becomes to the consumer as perceived through their senses.

To understand how functionality associates with the intangible elements of brand meaning which include storytelling, symbolism and the self-concept.

To explore if the functional aspects may have meaning to consumers in their own right.

Outline of Proposed Methodology

This is exploratory research which looks to gain further insight into the functionality aspects of brand meaning. The research paradigm is interpretivist, which supports the epistemological viewpoint that individuals construct their own social reality. This approach will uncover subjective meanings held by consumers and how they make connections with brands and aligns with the ontological viewpoint that meaning is developed at an individual level and then socially within a community.

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 area and they would therefore form an appropriate population to sample (Mintel, 2011). The use of households would also enable the influences of the individual family members to be explored and understood. Blake et al. (2010) suggests that 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 household. Local food is perceived positively by the majority of consumers with the exception of young, urban lower social respondents (Defra, 2008).

Therefore this thesis will adopt an inductive approach gathering empirical data through qualitative means. The qualitative approach will allow rich detailed data in its Dorset food context to be gathered at household level. Qualitative approaches such as participant observation supported by in-depth interviews but also exploring a more quasi-ethnographic approach, (Elliott and Elliott, 2002) which allows for greater access to consumers' lived experiences with Dorset food brands, will be considered. This may include combining observations with more informal interviews and casual conversations which may allow for further immersion in the experience of the consumer. Further exploration of these approaches with some piloting will allow how to determine the most appropriate method or combination of methods. This will also help to ensure that any these methods are robust and also identify any additional or as yet unidentified issues which need to be incorporated into the study.

The study aims to ensure trustworthiness through the careful documentation of research process which will help to ensure the validity of conclusions made (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). There will be, where possible, a detailed description of data collection process, a pilot interview conducted, member checking to take place that ensures interviewee and interviewer understand each other and therefore correct data interpretations and engagement with open coding.

Ethical Issues

This research will involve direct active participation gaining opinion through discussion. As such it will uphold good ethical practice, ensure participants understand their capacity to consent and protect their confidentiality. They should feel free to withdraw at any stage. Where appropriate, this research recognises any cultural diversity issues albeit this is taking place within the geographic boundary of Dorset. Data will be collected in a sensitive and appropriate manner and the work will be compliant with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.

Conclusion

This thesis aims to add insight into a more neglected area which explores the functional aspects of brand meaning. More recently academics in particular (Brown et al., 2003; Dittmar, 1992; Escalas and Bettman, 2005)have become more enthused about more intangible connections albeit there is increased recognition from some practitioners (Edwards, 2013; Mitchell 1999) that this is not a field to neglect. Given the author's interest and previous work with local food consumption the area of application for exploring the functional elements of meaning will be in relation to Dorset food brands.

This study will produce an in depth meaning of a case study of the meaning of Dorset food brands. Whilst it will offer insight as to how consumers obtain meaning from these brands,

further understanding of the functionality of brands and its importance will add to how brands may be perceived.

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