MARKETING SEMIOTICS: ANALYSIS OF CONNOTATIONS AND BRAND BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

Consumer behaviour based on the marketing semiotic study can help create high impact brand communications. Effective brand communication will help elevate an existing top brand to a super brand status. Consumer behaviour has long been studied and researchers have been exploring new ways to decipher the thoughts within the black box of decision making that exists in the minds of the consumers. Consumer not only looks at brand communication but analyses it too. Previous exposure to similar brand communication and memory of such brands can affect the future perception of a brand within a consumer’s mind. Today, advertisers use a story telling mode, consumers assimilate and process that information to build contexts/connotations around the brand. This research was aimed at studying the connotations that a consumer associates with a brand and how it impacts his behaviour and the overall brand image. Quantitative data analysis had been used for two personal care brands used in the Indian market. The sample is restricted to Pune city between the age group of 18-24 years, student population. Descriptive statistics as well as repeated measures MANOVA technique had been used in this research to conclude the relationship between brand building and consumer connotations.

KEYWORDS: Connotations, Consumer Behaviour, Brand Communication, Black Box

INTRODUCTION

Brands come into existence with a distinct personality which defines them. Consumers associate with the brands that closely connect with them in one way or the other thus giving rise to brand loyals. However, certain brands fail to connect with the consumers and hence cannot make it big in the market and succumb to the competition. Brand building is a never ending exercise which marketers have to diligently focus on. Neglecting any parameter surrounding a brand could cost the brand a lot in terms of consumer switching and losing market share. Marketing semiotics is the study of the process of meaning making from marketing communications.

The term “semiotics” originates from Greece and is related to the study of signs. The term “Semiotics” was first used by Pierce (1955, p 98) to describe the relation between signs and thought or logic. The word, “Semeion” in Greek means signs and Semiology is the study of signs, symbols and pictures as well as text. Though semiotics has its origin in literature it spreads to other branches of marketing, branding and nonlinguistic fields of communication.

When consumers interpret the communication disseminated by a brand they make meaning out of it. Simultaneously the marketers want to convey certain messages to the customers in a certain specified manner. It is very important that these two processes go hand in hand since the meaning making process by the consumer and
the implied meaning passed on by the marketer have to match. If this process fails then a miscommunication may mar the experience which the marketer wants to render to the consumer. Hence, understanding the connotations that a consumer would build around a specific piece of communication and designing it accordingly would help the brand building exercise.

Connotations and Consumer Behaviour

Marketing semiotics research can be conducted based on analyzing the effect advertisements have on the consumer and how the external factors such as society and culture impact their perceptions and connotations. An analysis of connotations associated with imagery, the form in which it is presented and the channel of communication used to convey the messages will give an insight on how to influence the consumer behaviour in favor of the brand. The French critic, Roland Barthes described a “Myth” as unison of signs and connotations that shape into a particular message, a way of thinking about certain imagery, locations, characters in a predetermined manner based on the text or previous memories of similar communication that the mind uses while analyzing the information. A lot of connotations are also shaped on the basis of culture and nurture or upbringing of an individual. White may not be considered auspicious in some cultures whereas in others it would be a sign of prosperity. Such differences in perceptions are affected by external and internal factors and the environment surrounding the brand communication. Consumers derive connotations or contexts when exposed to marketing communications and this process is mostly internal.

The consumer analyzes the information, carries out a mental assimilation of thoughts and comes out with an output as a response. It is observed that factors such as gender, age intellect, belief systems, and psychological dimensions play an important part in forming contexts to information. The research aims at exploring empirically how two brands are perceived based on the link between connotations as a marketing semiotic element against the seven brand building parameters of Brand Awareness, Brand Feelings, Brand Image, Brand Reliability, Brand Association, Brand Preference/Bonding, Brand Trust. The marketing semiotics data obtained from this research brings about empirical evidence towards the customer perception about the imagery in terms of brand communication by two beauty bar brands of Dove and Lux. The sample size for this research is 600. The sample type being students between the age group of 18-24years existing within the limits of Pune city. This study has a scope of being expanded towards a larger set of population and also a larger area.

METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

- To study whether connotations/context as a semiotic element affects brand building parameters like brand awareness, Brand feelings, Brand image, Brand reliability, Brand association, Brand preference/bonding and Brand trust.

Research Methodology, Sample and Sampling technique

The purpose of this empirical study was to assess if the brand building parameters are affected by the marketing semiotic element of connotation and if there exists a relationship between the independent variables and the dependent one. Data was collected from a target audience of 600 respondents between the age group of 18-24years. This sample was considered so as to get an understanding of how this age group looks at beauty bars and the brand communications used by them. The process of looking good starts developing amongst this age group strongly and their definition of beauty and the brand communication of beauty soaps was analyzed using this study. Dove and Lux were
chosen as the two products on account of the distinct brand communication that both these brands are using. Lux has been using beautiful celebrities as its brand ambassadors for years while on the other hand Dove has made an attempt to change the definition of beauty in a different and innovative way of brand communication.

The seven brand building parameters were the dependent variables and connotations as an element of marketing semiotic was the independent variable. The research was quantitative in order to establish statistical evidence towards the hypothesis. A small questionnaire was administered to check the responses against the seven independent variables towards the connotations generated for the imagery (print adverts) shown for the two beauty soaps of Dove and Lux. A mixed sampling technique involving random sampling and stratified sampling of an equal proportion of male and female respondents was used. The statistical tools that are used for this study include Multivariate and Univariate analysis, Repeated Measures MANOVA including Pillai’s trace, Greenhouse-Geisser, Mauchly’s Test of Sphericity and Bartlett’s test of Sphericity. Descriptive statistics formed the basis of the beginning of the analysis.

RESULTS

Research Question: Whether Brand A (Dove) and Brand B (Lux) are perceived differently in terms of Brand Building Parameters (Brand Awareness, Feelings, Image, Reliability, Association, Preference/Bonding, Trust) against the semiotic variable of connotations/contexts.

Variables and measurements
Independent variable: Brand with two response options (1 = Brand A and 2 = Brand B)

Dependent variable: Respondents perception regarding Brand Awareness, Feelings, Image, Reliability, Association, Preference/Bonding and Trust measured using a five-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Null Hypothesis: Brand A and Brand B are perceived equally in terms of Brand Building Parameters (Brand Awareness, Feelings, Image, Reliability, Association, Preference/Bonding and Trust) against the semiotic variable of Connotations/Contexts

Alternate Hypothesis: Brand A and Brand B are perceived differently in terms of Brand Building Parameters (Brand Awareness, Feelings, Image, Reliability, Association, Preference/Bonding and Trust) against the semiotic variable of Connotations/Contexts. Level of significance: $\alpha = 0.05$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connotations/Contexts</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Awareness</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>.448</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Awareness</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Feelings</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>.753</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Feelings</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>.755</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Image</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>.513</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Image</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>.706</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Reliability</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>.556</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Reliability</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>.776</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Association</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>.889</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Association</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.842</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND A Brand Preference/Bonding</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.141</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRAND B Brand Preference/Bonding</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>.748</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Contd.,

| BRAND A Brand Trust | 4.12 | .780 | 600 |
| BRAND B Brand Trust | 3.87 | 1.034 | 600 |

**Brand Awareness:** Based on the mean values of Brand A and B it can be concluded that the respondents have a better recall for Brand A (Dove) as compared to Brand B (Lux).

**Brand Feelings:** Based on the mean values of Brand A and B it can be concluded that the respondents agree to the fact that Brand A (Dove) arouses more positive feelings within them towards the Brand as compared to Brand B (Lux).

**Brand Image:** Based on the mean values of Brand A and B it can be concluded that respondents feel that the images used for the Brands speak about the Brands and have a global appeal but Brand A (Dove) has a more positive response as compared to Brand B (Lux).

**Brand Reliability:** Based on the mean values of Brand A and B it can be concluded that the respondents feel Brand A (Dove) is better at assuring quality and they feel comfortable looking at the Brand and can rely on it as compared to Brand B.

**Brand Association:** Based on the mean values of Brand A and B it can be concluded that the respondents associate more good, warm and friendly experiences with Brand A (Dove) than Brand B (Lux).

**Brand Preference/Bonding:** Based on the mean values of Brand A and B it can be concluded that the respondents prefer Brand A (Dove) over Brand B (Lux).

**Brand Trust:** Based on the mean values of Brand A and B it can be concluded that the respondents have a better emotional connect and trust towards Brand A than Brand B.

A two group within subject MANOVA was conducted on 7 dependent variables of the Brand Building Parameters (Brand Awareness, Feelings, Image, Reliability, Association, Preference/Bonding and Trust) against the semiotic variable of connotations/contexts.

Table 2: Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Likelihood Ratio</th>
<th>Approx. Chi-Square</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within Subjects</td>
<td>brand</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>3234.479</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tests the null hypothesis that the residual covariance matrix is proportional to an identity matrix.*

The Bartlett’s test of sphericity is statistically significant; p value less than 0.001 indicating sufficient correlation between dependent variables to proceed with analysis.

Table 3: Multivariate Tests*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Hypothesis df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within Subjects</td>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>Pillai's Trace</td>
<td>514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multivariate Tests*</td>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>Error df</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Subjects</td>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>Pillai's Trace</td>
<td>593.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pillai’s trace = 0.514, F (7, 593) = 89.5, p value = 0.000

Since p value (0.000) is less than the level of significance (0.05) the null hypothesis is rejected, hence it is concluded that type of brand does influence aggregate outcome variable brand, brand building parameters (Awareness,
Feelings, Image, Reliability, Association, Preference/Bonding, Trust) Brand A and Brand B are perceived differently in terms of awareness, feelings, and trust).

As Pillai’s trace was significant, univariate ANOVA was conducted on each dependent variable separately to determine the locus of statistically significant multivariate effect. Since the impact brand type is examined on each dependent variable separately we use Bonferroni corrected alpha level to avoid alpha inflation, we therefore divide alpha by number of dependent variables. Hence the new alpha = 0.05/7 = 0.007.

**Table 4: Univariate Tests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>Df (error)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>86.750</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17.521</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sphericity Assumed</td>
<td>86.750</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>17.521</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenhouse-Geisser</td>
<td>111.922</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>127.401</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sphericity Assumed</td>
<td>111.922</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>127.401</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenhouse-Geisser</td>
<td>159.683</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60.301</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sphericity Assumed</td>
<td>159.683</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>60.301</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenhouse-Geisser</td>
<td>81.800</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41.813</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sphericity Assumed</td>
<td>81.800</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>41.813</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenhouse-Geisser</td>
<td>93.338</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>99.763</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sphericity Assumed</td>
<td>93.338</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>99.763</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenhouse-Geisser</td>
<td>82.379</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>75.501</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sphericity Assumed</td>
<td>82.379</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>75.501</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greenhouse-Geisser</td>
<td>17.930</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19.763</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sphericity Assumed</td>
<td>17.930</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>19.763</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>599.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5: Tests of within-Subjects Contrasts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>17.521</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17.521</td>
<td>86.750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>127.401</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>127.401</td>
<td>211.922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>60.301</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60.301</td>
<td>159.683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>41.813</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41.813</td>
<td>81.800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Association</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>99.763</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>99.763</td>
<td>93.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preference</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>75.501</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>75.501</td>
<td>82.379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>19.763</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19.763</td>
<td>17.930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error (brand)</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>120.979</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>.202</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>360.099</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>.601</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>226.199</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>.378</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>306.187</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>.511</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Association</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>640.237</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>1.069</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preference</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>724.999</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>1.210</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>660.237</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>1.102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONCLUSIONS**

A two group within subject MANOVA was conducted on 7 dependent variables of the Brand Building Parameters (Brand Awareness, Feelings, Image, Reliability, Association, Preference/Bonding and Trust) against the semiotic variable of Connotations/contexts for the two brands Dove and Lux. The Bartlett’s test of sphericity is statistically significant; p value less than 0.001 indicating sufficient correlation between dependent variables to proceed with analysis. Pillai’s trace was further used to determine multivariate significance between the two variables.
The Pillai’s trace = 0.514, F (7, 593) = 89.5, p value = 0.000, indicates that p value (0.000) is less than the level of significance (0.05) hence the null hypothesis - Brand A and Brand B are perceived equally in terms of Brand Building Parameters - Brand Awareness, Feelings, Image, Reliability, Association, Preference/Bonding and Trust against the semiotic variable of Connotations/contexts is not accepted. Hence it is concluded that type of brand does influence aggregate outcome variable brand. Since Pillai’s trace was significant, univariate ANOVA was conducted on each dependent variable separately to determine the locus of statistically significant multivariate effect. Since the impact brand type is examined on each dependent variable separately we use Bonferroni corrected alpha level to avoid alpha inflation, we therefore divide alpha by number of dependent variables. Hence the new alpha = 0.05/7 = 0.007

The Greenhouse - Geisser values for all the 7 parameters for brand building along with the representative mean values for both the brands state that in terms of Connotations/contexts as a semiotic variable Dove is superior to Lux on all aspects of Brand building parameters. Also since the p values are significant and less that the new alpha of 0.007 the null hypothesis is not accepted, thus proving that both the brands are perceived differently in terms connotations/contexts and they have a positive impact on the Brands.

Dove has been making very creative and thoughtful attempts at breaking the stereotypes of beauty and redefining it through the marketing communication. Dove has used models from all age groups and have emphasized on the real inner beauty of women. This contrasted with a brand like Lux which has always used beautiful and age defying celebrities to advertise for the beauty bars. After this research it was seen that respondents connect in a much better manner with Dove inspite of the fact that the brand Lux has roped in top celebrities to connect with the respondents. Lux being an old player in the market, earlier it was sought after but when Dove began to change the definition of beauty through the unique advertising contexts that encompass the real inner beauty of women there was a better connect with the respondents. The research shows that Dove is changing the way people perceive beauty and hence ranks higher on brand building parameters due to the connotations that the communication established amongst the audiences.

RECOMMENDATION AND DISCUSSIONS

Communication being “Polysemic”, having several meanings it is imperative to consider the possible connotations that would arise through the communication message before launching it. For example, Dove beauty bar brakes the beauty code by coming up with a campaign of wrinkled and wonderful stating beauty is not restricted by age and this study has also proved that such connotations are found more meaningful by the respondents in a society of changing dynamics with a more free thinking generation sprouting up, communication that breaks the stereotypical codes and gives way to a modern connotation should make a deeper impact. Marketers should design communication that brings out a social significance so that it can act as a communicator of social index.

REFERENCES


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