

# THE ROLE OF BRANDS IN A CONSUMER CULTURE: CAN STRONG BRANDS SERVE AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

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## ABSTRACT

Strong brands engender strong relationships with consumers and provide the platform for the development of relationships among the brand's adherents. Could the brands associated with products take the place of a relationship with God? The literature seems to support an affirmative response. The evidence suggests that by belonging to brand communities, consumers may be able to fulfill several of their needs and desires, including the need for a unique identity, for community, and for being a part of something larger than themselves. This paper argues that the development of strong brands within a consumer culture has the potential to serve as a substitute for relationships, including as a substitute for a relationship with God. In response, several questions are raised for Christian marketing educators and researchers.

## INTRODUCTION

The use of branding in a religious context has received attention in both marketing (e.g., Einstein, 2008; Swimberghe, Sharma & Flurry, 2009) and the church growth movement (e.g., Cooke, 2008; Stielstra & Hutchins 2009). The focus of much of this research is on the branding of congregations and denominations as components of marketing strategy. Some, however, have questioned the appropriateness of using branding to further the Kingdom and using marketing strategy as a means to evangelize (e.g., Conlon, 2007; Guinness, 1993). Although this is an important area of concern, it is not the only issue involving branding that may be of concern to Christians. What about the branding of consumer products? Specifically, does the development of strong brands raise particular concerns for Christian marketers and educators?

The (in)compatibility of Christianity and consumer culture has been discussed at length (e.g., Jung, 2010; Makant, 2010; Zanstra, 2010). The roles of individual marketing elements, however, have not received the same degree of attention. This paper will argue that the development of strong brands within a consumer culture raises important concerns. Specifically, the idea that strong

brands have the potential to serve as a substitute for relationships within a consumer culture is examined, giving special attention to individuals using brand relationships as a substitute for a relationship with God. In addition to serving as a possible direct substitute for non-Christians, brand relationships may also be relied upon by Christians as a substitute for a deeper relationship with God. First, the role of the consumer culture in the lives of individuals will be briefly reviewed. Second, the role of branding in consumer culture will be briefly explored. Third, the relationship between branding and religion will be examined. Finally, conclusions will be drawn for Christian marketing educators and researchers.

## CONSUMER CULTURE

The pervasiveness of consumer culture in many societies has been widely recognized (e.g., Burns, 2006). The effects of consumer culture on the lives of individuals in these societies are far-reaching, affecting their lives in many ways (Miller, 2009). Arguably, the most profound way that consumer culture affects individuals involves the role that products play in the development and maintenance of individuals' identities (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). A brief exploration of this issue is warranted.

A key characteristic of a consumer culture is the meaning and importance placed on products in the lives of individuals. To understand consumer culture better, an examination of a society characterized by a different paradigm, such as one characterized by a dominant premodern influence, would be helpful as a contrast. Within premodern societies, products are viewed primarily as a means to satisfy utilitarian functional needs. Premodern societies are characterized by traditionalism (Koppl, 1996), where the vast majority of individuals' time is spent providing for basic needs with little time or resources left to pursue other options. Consequently, a materialistic lifestyle is impossible for most within premodern societies. The lack of financial means, however, is not the only reason for a lack of extensive purchasing activity by individuals in premodern societies (Cobbett, 1958; McKendrick, 1982). Indeed, when financial resources in excess of that required for subsistence is received, they are ordinarily saved or exchanged for additional free time (Perkin, 1969)—there is generally little motivation to use the excess financial resources to purchase additional products.

Instead of focusing on products, the life focus of individuals in premodern societies is on relationships with others (family and community) and with God (religion) (Miller, 2009; Paterson, 2006). These relationships are fundamental and tend to remain stable over one's life, acting as relatively permanent, unchanging foundations upon which one's self is based (Wachtel, 1989). Selfhood is formed and is maintained informally through daily interactions made possible through relationships (Hartley, 1999). As a result, identity problems are relatively unknown in most premodern societies (Baumeister, 1986). In this context then, identities

are easily recognizable, objectively and subjectively. Everybody knows who everybody else is and whom he is himself. A knight is a knight and a peasant is a peasant. There is, therefore, no problem of identity. The question, "Who am I?" is unlikely to rise in consciousness, since the socially predefined answer is consistently confirmed in all significant social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 184).

As opposed to what was observed in premodern societies, in consumer cultures, relationships are no longer paramount—relationships with others and with God no longer form the foundation of most individuals' lives nor of their selves (Cova, 1996; Kee, 1999). The breakup of

the nuclear family, the loss of community, and the waning of religious authority have changed the meaning of personhood in consumer cultures (Burns, 2006). In the place of relationships, life becomes based on the material. The material world, however, is impersonal and impermanent, providing few solid foundations upon which a self can be developed and maintained.

Within this environment, a substitute for relationships must be sought. Although impermanent, many argue that products have taken the place of relationships as the foundation of one's self (e.g., Ahuvia, 2005; Gould, 2010). Individuals are thought to use products as a way to establish their identity and provide a means to differentiate their selves from others (Fullerton, 1998). As a result, products gain a much more prominent role in the lives of individuals (Burns, 2006)—the focus of life becomes the acquisition of goods (Needleman 1991). Consumption becomes much more than the mere acquisition of products to address utilitarian functional needs, therefore. Instead, in a consumer culture, consumption becomes the primary means to define who we are (Holt, 2002; Miller, 2009; Pooler, 2003).

In and of themselves, products seemingly provide little to become the basis for constructing one's self. The acquisition and possession of products arguably becomes key to the development of the self in consumer culture, however, as the products themselves become vessels that contain image (Miller, 2009). Indeed, within a consumer culture, the primary role of products is no longer to serve merely as utilitarian functional tools, but as carriers of image (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006). The images associated with products become the basis for one's self—images are acquired and integrated into one's self through the acquisition and possession of products carrying images associated with one's desired self (either to support one's perceived established self, provide support to a perceived underdeveloped or undercommunicated self, or to support a new or different self). Indeed, arguably most products in a consumer culture are acquired with the objective of assimilating the meaning associated with them into one's self (Batey, 2008). Consequently, products become the tools available to individuals to construct their desired selves.

All consumption becomes conceivable as the desire for, as well as the desire of, the self....We then seek, in consuming such objects (products), to incorporate an idealized self, to make the self

more real, and to end the inner despair of not having a self (Ferguson, 1992b, p. 27-28).

Consumption becomes the defining feature of consumer culture (Holt, 2002).

Within this environment, providing consumers with building blocks to build their selves and to construct desired realities becomes a primary focus of marketing activities (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Keating, 2005). When examining the marketplace, what is of primary importance, therefore, are the images associated with the products, not the products themselves (Neuner, Raab, & Reisch, 2005).

A product that symbolizes a human value that they endorse may result in a more positive attitude toward that product, and a greater likelihood of purchasing it, whereas a product that symbolizes a value that they reject results in an unfavorable attitude and a lower probability of purchase (Allen, Gupta, & Monnier, 2008, p. 296).

The goal of marketers, then, is to associate images with their products—images which appeal to the products' target markets. "The image is the substance. Through a planned interplay of signs, the image becomes the essence a customer seeks in a product or service. . . . Technology exists merely to create images" (Cova, 1996, pp. 496-497). Indeed, "in a quite real sense, every commodity becomes identical, the necessary but inconsequential carrier of ultimate value" (Ferguson 1992a, p. 174).

Given that the primary role of products is to convey image, the utilitarian properties of most products become relatively meaningless (Miller, 2009). This is not to say that individuals do not place any importance on the functional attributes of products, but associated with every product is its symbolic qualities which ultimately drive most purchase choices (Batey, 2008). In other words, the functional qualities of products may appeal to customers, but, within a consumer culture where most purchases are discretionary (despite our attempts to convince ourselves of the contrary), the image associated with a product often becomes the product's primary attribute (Dittmar, 1992). Consequently, "People today pay for meaning more than they pray for it" (Atkin, 2004, p. 95).

It would be desirable to say that finding identity in the marketplace only applies to non-Christians, but the research seems to indicate that many Christians act very similar to non-Christians in this regard (Platt, 2010). A study by Veer and Shankar (2011) examining attendees at Anglican churches and the general public observed that individuals who are more religious are less likely to pos-

sess intentions to purchase a very expensive watch when its self-construction qualities are promoted as opposed to when its physical qualities are promoted. Veer and Shankar (2011) believe the reason for the findings is intention suppression—although the purchases of more religious and less religious individuals do not differ and are ultimately made for the same reasons, when advertisements appear not to focus overtly on identity construction but on physical features, religious individuals are thought to be better able to justify the purchase. In other words, they are able to have their purchase intentions more closely correspond to what would be "expected" from a "Christian" while simultaneously making purchasing decisions similar to those of nonbelievers. Essoo and Dibb (2004), however, note that the "casually" religious value trendiness, brands, and prestigious products more than devout individuals. Stillman, Fincham, Vohs, Lambert, and Phillips (2012) report similar findings.

Products vary in their ability to carry image—all products are not the same. As would be expected, products which are very visible such as luxury products (Wilcox, Kim, & Sankar 2009), counterfeit luxury products (Wilcox et al., 2009), music and hairstyles (Berger & Heath, 2007), apparel (Parker, 200), and motorcycles (Felix, 2012) have been shown to be particularly able to serve as carriers of image as have products associated with movements, such as green and sustainability-related products (Bartels & Hoogendam, 2011). Although products that are not as visible generally do not carry image as effectively as products which are highly visible, they can often still carry image nevertheless (Parker, 2009). Indeed, even products such as brands of canned food and brands of gasoline can carry image for some consumers.

### **Loss of Permanency**

The loss of permanency in consumer culture has additional effects on the lives of individuals that should be examined. With one's self being based on relationships with others and with God in premodern societies, one has a feeling of being part of something bigger than oneself. With the self being based primarily on possessions within a consumer culture, however, the feeling of being part of something bigger diminishes (Walker, 2008). The loss of relationships with others and the loss of a sense of being a part of something bigger within a consumer culture are well-documented (e.g., Putnam, 2001). (It should be noted that within Christian communities, relationships and a sense of being a part of something bigger than oneself still plays, or at least, should still play an important role. Evidence to this effect is observed in

that the attractiveness of interpersonal relationships in Christian communities and a corresponding sense of being something bigger is widely acknowledged by secular authors (e.g., Ault, 2004; Welch, 2010).

Some argue that humans are social beings and are driven to maintain social ties, hence the loss of relationships in a consumer culture drives individuals to develop alternatives (Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011). Consequently, if social ties are severed in one area, substitutes to those ties will rise in another (Walker, 2008), or as Atkin states, “Community has not gone away. It cannot because it’s too fundamental to the human condition” (2004, p. 62). Wuthnow (1998) suggests that although formal, long-term relationships may have faded, looser ad hoc relationships are forming in their place. These alternative relationships often form around items of importance, such as brands (Muñiz & O’Gwinn, 2001), relationships that are very similar in kind to human relationships (Lastovick & Sirianni 2011). Examples of existing brand communities include Yamaha motorcycles (Felix, 2012), Beamish beer (O’Sullivan, Richardson, & Collins, 2011), Harley Davidson (Fournier & Lee 2009), Apple Computers (Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006), and Zarra apparel stores (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011).

In conclusion, although many of the problems and shortcomings of a consumer culture have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Burns, 2006), the changing role of brands and its effects on the lives of individuals have not been fully recognized. In consumer culture, brands can act as a primary tool through which image is associated with a product. The influence of brands, however, has arguably grown into something much larger than just the conveyance of meaning, but may now be a vehicle through which social ties, or at least a substitute thereof, can be reestablished. A brief review of the rise of branding is appropriate.

## **BRANDING**

Given that brands are inherently symbolic carriers of meaning, brands can be a primary means by which image is associated with products. Batey states, “Self-definition in a personal and social context is linked in part to the meanings inherent in the consumer goods we choose, the implication of this and its importance for brands must be recognized” (2008, p. 101).

Branding is nothing new—branding is as old as civilization (Moore & Reid, 2008). The purpose of the earliest brands was to identify the producer or sender of the branded products, primarily as a means to guarantee

the quality of the product (Franzen & Moriarty 2009; Moor, 2007). This reality can be seen in the origins of the term “brand”—brand comes from the old Norse word “brandr” which means “to burn,” as in the branding of livestock (Blackett, 2003). The importance of brands, however, significantly increased during the mid to late nineteenth century (Lury, 2004). With the industrial revolution came increased production and the need to obtain widespread distribution, and brands provided a mechanism for advertising and creating demand (Atkin, 2004; Hilton, 2003). In this context, branding becomes a primary means used to build loyalty to a particular product or supplier (Blackett, 2003).

The twentieth century saw a change in the role of brands in the marketplace. Increasing competition, the increasing role played by advertising, and the availability of growing numbers of similar products produced a need to increasingly differentiate one’s products from those of competitors (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). As suggested by Hotchkiss and Franken, “The remarkable increase in the use of national advertising during the past half century is perhaps sufficient evidence of its value...The goodwill of certain well-advertised names and brands is valued in the millions of dollars” (1923, p. 1). Hotchkiss and Franken further state, “It should be remembered, however, that a few years ago consumers did not know men’s clothing or flour or fruit or coffee by manufacturers’ brands. The habit of brand discrimination was established by advertising in these cases” (1923, p. 34). Branding provided a means by which a product could become something more than just a physical product. By applying a brand to a product, a mechanism becomes available whereby a product can be differentiated from the offerings of competitors based on the qualities associated with the brand (Hilton, 2003).

As the twentieth century continued, the role of brands continued to evolve. With the growth of consumer culture coupled with post-World War II affluence, marketers began to see an increased role for brands in the marketplace (Twitchell, 2005). Consequently, a “real explosion” occurred in the use of brands (Blackett, 2003). Specifically, in addition to providing a way to differentiate one’s offerings from competitors, brands became increasingly linked to symbolic images or meanings, providing an additional means for differentiation (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Indeed, consumers were observed to be willing to pay more for the perceived added value from the linked meanings, and marketers were more than willing to provide them with the linked meaning.

By the 1990s, the initial role of brands as indicators of origin or guarantors of quality had been largely supplanted (Lury, 2004). Instead, the primary role of brands had become the communication of meaning or image (Moor, 2007; Schembri, Merrilees, & Kristiansen, 2010). This shift in the role of brands is not surprising since it is consistent with what would be expected in a consumer culture. As discussed earlier, in a consumer culture, brands play a primary role in the images connected to a product, and it is through the images associated with brands that individuals define themselves and their place in the world (Batey, 2008; Spratt, Czeller, & Spangenberg, 2009). As Sherry states in *Kellogg on Branding*, a brand is “a principal repository of meaning in consumer culture...it is both a storehouse and powerhouse of meaning” (2005, p. 40). Fournier states, “Consumers do not choose brands, they choose lives” (1998, p. 367) and Holt states, “Consumers flock to brands that embody the ideals they admire” (2004, p. 4)—ideals that reflect how one views one’s self or would like to be viewed. Given that brands possess little utilitarian value but are inherently open vessels, they become excellent for the conveyance of image to consumers. “By ‘romancing’ its consumers through the generation of an appealing and accessible narrative in which those consumers are invited to participate, brands can provide both the structure and the raw material for meaningful discourse” (Batey, 2008, p. 33).

The role of brands in a consumer culture, therefore, is much more than merely a communicator of information about a product. “Brands are encoded in memory on a cognitive (thinking, analytical) and emotional (somatic) basis. These two elements of brand encoding are inextricably linked and it is emotional coding rather than reasoned argument that determines whether or not people take notice of the stimuli related to the brand” (Gordon, 2002, p. 285). The emotional part of a brand plays an essential role in a product’s ability to act as a building block of an individual’s self. This quality of a brand, called a brand’s personality or its brand image, was discussed by Asker, who stated:

Researchers have focused on how the personality of a brand enables a consumer to express his or her own self (Belk, 1988), an ideal self (Malhotra, 1981), or specific dimensions of the self (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993) through the use of a brand. Practitioners view it as a key way to differentiate a brand in a product category

(Halliday, 1996), as a central driver of consumer preference and usage (Biel, 1993), and as a common denominator that can be used to market a brand across cultures (Plummer, 1985) (Aaker, 1997, p. 347).

Consequently, Batey defines brand image as “a description of the associations, beliefs and feelings consumers have about the brand” (2008, p. xxvi) and a brand as “the consumer perception and interpretation of a cluster of associated attributes, benefits and values” (2008, p. 6). The meaning of a brand to consumers, therefore, is based on the “semantic and symbolic features of a brand, the sum of the fundamental and conscious elements that compose the consumer’s mental representation of the brand” (Batey, 2008, p. 111). Brand meanings are created subconsciously, but directly affect behavior (Batey, 2008). Consequently, the entire focus of brands has changed—originally brands legitimized the producer by communicating the product’s origin and authenticity. Today, brands legitimize consumers by acting as markers of identity (Atkin, 2004). Brands articulate who we are and what our values are (Clifton and Maughan 2000). (It should be noted that the definition of brand as established by the American Marketing Association is “a name term, symbol, or design or a combination of these, which is intended to identify goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors.” In relation to today’s marketplace, however, Atkin (2004) views this definition to be about a century out of date).

Brands began to signify the qualities desired by an individual and become viewed by individuals as a means to acquire that quality (McCracken, 1986). Indeed, consumers have demonstrated that they possess few problems with assigning personal qualities to inanimate brands (Fournier, 1998). Moore and Reid (2008) believe that this ability of brands has its basis in the growth of media since media permits a greater richness and complexity of brand messaging and storytelling. Twitchell (2005) elaborates on the role of storytelling, calling it the “core of culture,” an assessment shared by Sherry (2005). Brands facilitate this process by representing different stories (Twitchell, 2005).

Given that brands are not concrete entities, but are instead merely conveyers of meaning, the meanings attached to brands are the result of a “co-production” between producers/marketers and consumers (Zentes, Morschett, & Schramm-Klein, 2008). Sherry (2005)

calls this the “brand essence”—the meaning which arises from a consumers’ engagement with a brand. Hence, the images associated with brands may vary between individuals or groups of individuals (Sherry, 2005). Travis states, “When a brand is first being introduced, there is a short period of time when marketing can influence its positioning. But after that, consumers decide what it means, and once they’ve decided, they don’t like to change it” (2000, p. 18). Hence, the meaning associated with brands is not static, but is dynamic, where the meaning associated with brands and the value that consumers receive from brands is determined in part by the consumers themselves (Christodoulides & Jevons, 2011; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009).

By the latter 1990s, the role of brands began to evolve further. Brands began to take yet a larger role—brands began to be looked to as a metaphor for interpersonal relationships (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Within this perspective, brands and consumers are viewed as partners in relationships which have many similarities to the relationships between two individuals (Gobé, 2009; Holt, 2004). Possibly more importantly, the relationships involving brands goes much further than merely the relationship between a brand/company and a consumer. Relationships can also be built between individuals who possess a relationship with the same brand (Woietschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008)—relationships which may aid in the development/maintenance of one’s self (Fournier 1998). Walker (2008) discusses the idea that shared consumer relationships with a strong brand can result in something like a community among the consumers. Indeed, consumers’ relationships with brands may act as a substitute for community relationships in providing the glue to support society (Sherry, 2005; Twitchell, 2005).

Muñiz and O’Guinn suggest that the communities formed around brands are, in fact, real communities and define a “brand community” as a “specialized non-geographically bound community that is based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (2001, p. 412). Originating in practitioner-oriented literature (e.g., Keller, 2001), brand communities are widely accepted in the academic community (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Hermann, 2005; Andrew, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). Keller (2001) argues that the development of a brand community is the highest level of connectedness a brand can have with its customers, leading

to a highly loyal and involved customer base. Although consumers may participate in brand communities for product-related reasons (e.g., need for quality reassurance, need to express involvement with a product, or the product may require joint consumption such as board games and sports contests (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008)), most join brand communities for the sake of community building (McAlexander et al., 2002). Muñiz and Schau (2005) observe that brand communities often can exhibit many religious characteristics and Sherry (2005) suggests that such “religious” connections are key to establishing a strong brand community.

Brand communities have been facilitated by the Internet. The Internet has made it possible for consumers to develop spontaneous, non-geographically bound brand communities quickly (McWilliam, 2000). The growth of social networking and the use of social media has further facilitated the development of virtual brand communities (Cova & White 2010; Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010). Virtual brand communities appear to offer many of the same benefits as physical brand communities (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011).

Do brands affect all consumer demographics equally? Most studies that have examined the relationships between brands and demographics have found little effect, but they have typically examined attitudes toward the brands, not the importance of the brands (e.g., Liu & Wang, 2008; Munn, 1960). The importance of branding appears to be stronger to some demographic groups than others. The importance of brands to teenagers and young adults, for instance, has been long recognized (Bird & Tapp, 2008; Cassidy & van Schijndel, 2011). During this age span, individuals tend to be particularly sensitive to issues relating to self and identity (Cassidy & van Schijndel, 2011). Throughout life, however, self remains a significant concern to individuals. This also applies to specific demographic groups who seem to be less interested in self concerns and the role of branding. The purchasing patterns of the U.S. lower middle class known for its price consciousness is an example. The group’s acceptance of private brands and rejection of debt-based spending does not necessarily reflect an example of a rejecting of possession-based self construction or display, but instead likely represents the construction/display of a different thrift-based identity (Burns, 2008).

## THE ROLE OF STRONG BRANDS IN A CONSUMER CULTURE

“If a brand’s foundations are composed of people’s intangible mental associations about it, it follows that the stronger and more resilient the consumer’s mental associations about the brand are, the stronger, potentially, is the intricate relationship between the brand and its consumers. Brands flourish or perish on the strength of that relationship” (Batey, 2008, p. 7). Strong brands are seen as a significant power in the marketplace and in the minds of consumers. Indeed, it is the strong brands which have the ability to serve as the basis for the brand communities mentioned above.

Strong, or iconic, brands are brands with which consumers are deeply involved. Cultural icons act as symbols in individuals’ lives, providing them with a means to understand and relate with the world. “Icons come to represent a particular type of story—an identity myth—that consumers use to address identity desires and anxieties” (Holt, 2004, p. 2). Brands which are able to convey an identity myth around which significant numbers of individuals gather are called iconic, or strong brands. Strong brands engender strong relationships with consumers and provide the platform for the development of relationships among the brand’s adherents. Devotion to strong brands becomes the unifying factor around which similarly minded individuals can build community (Eisenberg, 2009; Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008) and provides the basis for a high degree of brand loyalty—leaving the brand not only would sever the relationships one has with the brand and its identity-building qualities, but also the relationships one has with other followers of the brand (Holt, 2004). Indeed, much of the value of strong brands is contained in the relationships one has with other brand followers (Holt, 2004).

Faced with the devotion that consumers can have toward strong brands, Dumoulin raises an intriguing question, “Could brands take over the role that religions and philosophical movements used to own?” (2003, p. 35). Dumoulin (2003) observes that several “religious” realities (e.g., faith, spiritual journeys) can be seen in the positioning of brands in the marketplace, as has Lindstrom (2008c) (e.g., devotion). Similarly, in their analysis of the “cult of MacIntosh,” Belk and Tumbat (2005) observed numerous quasi-religious aspects, including stories of creation, a Messiah, evangelism, satan, and resurrection. Twitchell (2005) and Sherry (2005) also observe that consumers’ relationships with strong brands are similar to their relationships with religion. Dumoulin (2003)

suggests that brands may be occupying a position which has been forfeited by organized religions.

Brands and religions are currently undergoing opposite journeys. Religions started by focusing on the inner emotional and spiritual structure of their followers. They now feel the need to widen the subject of their interaction with their followers to secure and demonstrate their relevance to contemporary values and aspirations. Brands, on the other hand, started by addressing very functional and objective/external needs. Their future relies on their ability to go deeper into the emotional/spiritual needs of their customers (Dumoulin, 2003, p. 35).

Sherry (2005) comes to the same conclusion. Sherry suggests that brand communities are able to provide direction in life to those who are not connected to organized religion. “Consumers employ brands to achieve the experience both of transcendence and immanence, to infuse their lives with a lived experience of the sacred” (2005, p. 45). Similarly, Atkin states, “Brands are the new religion” (2004, p. xi). Atkin (2004) then compares brand communities to the development of cults. Atkin says,

A cult is a group or movement exhibiting a great devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing. It is normally innovative in its ideology, exhibits an acute sense of belonging to a well-defined community, enjoys exclusive devotion (that is not shared with another group), and often enjoys voluntary advocacy on the part of its members (2004, p. xxii).

Whereas, he defines a cult brand (a strong brand capable of attracting a community of consumers) as:

A brand for which a group of customers exhibit a great devotion or dedication. It is normally innovative in its ideology, can be identified by having a well-defined community that exhibits an acute sense of belonging, enjoys exclusive devotion (that is not shared with another brand in the same category), and often enjoys voluntary advocacy on the part of its members (2004, p. xxii).

The similarity in the definitions is obvious.

Contrary to common thought, cults members are not emotionally, mentally, or intellectually flawed or deficient. Instead, most cult members come from conven-

tional and respected homes and tend not be individuals who would be expected to be most susceptible to persuasion (Barker, 1984). Cult membership seems to fill two individual needs, namely, a need for community and a need for a unique identity (“belonging allows the individual to become more himself” (Atkin, 2004, p. 4)). The seemingly contradictory ability of groups comprised of very similar individuals to provide feelings of personal uniqueness is not new. Snyder and Fromkin (1980), for instance, explore this reality in the context of the hippie movement of the 1960s (a phenomenon which they called the P. T. Barnum effect). Atkin states,

We all have an awareness of our uniqueness and difference. We might feel uncomfortable or dissatisfied in an environment where it is not recognized or encouraged. Being welcomed into a group where that difference is validated and encouraged by people who are also different, but like ourselves, is a relief and even exciting. . . . The same paradox can be found at the heart of cult brands (2004, p. 8).

Relationships built around strong brands are similar in kind and in substance to the relationships inherent in cults. Relationships that build among consumers around a brand provide consumers with the essence of relationships within an environment where family and community relationships are often virtually obsolete. Such relationships permit consumers an opportunity to be associated with others who are perceived as holding similar interests and similar objectives.

There are two required characteristics of a successful community—shared experiences among members and a sense of responsibility and mutual dependence (Atkin, 2004). Communities developed around strong brands, therefore, must provide participants with the ability to share experiences and stories and develop strong bonds (Eisenberg, 2009). “Because things are so crazy out there, people like to find out if they see the world in the same way as other people. People will believe in anything—from a chocolate bar to a political view—if it makes them feel that they belong to something bigger than themselves” (a loyal Snapple drinker as quoted by Atkin, 2004, p. 95). Furthermore, members of a brand community need to feel an obligation to other members. The mutual dependence which exists where members feel a sense of responsibility to other members is an outcome of the sense of belonging to the group and provides

the ultimate cohesiveness of the community developed around a strong brand (Atkin, 2004).

To exist as a successful cult brand, requirements inherent to cult and religious systems must be incorporated, such as a belief system and ideologies.

Today’s most successful brands don’t just provide marks of distinction (identity) for products. Cult brands are beliefs. They have morals—embody values. Cult brands stand up for things. They work hard; fight for what is right. Cult brands supply our modern metaphysics, imbuing the world with significance. We wear their meaning when we wear Benetton. We eat their meaning when we spoon Ben & Jerry’s into our mouths. We get inside a company’s worldview and fly their meaning when we step onto a Virgin plane, we shop for meaning when we check out at Whole Foods. . . . Brands function as complete meaning systems. They are venues for the consumer (and employee) to publicly enact a distinctive set of beliefs and values (Atkin, 2004, p. 97).

The importance of developing brand communities is seen in the levels of success experienced by brands with strong brand communities. “It’s the brands that are recognizing the power of human interaction that are becoming the heroes of business” (Atkin, 2004, p. 37). Brands with strong brand communities are well-differentiated in the minds of consumers and possess a passionately dedicated target market—a group of people who more than willingly serve as unpaid missionaries or evangelists propagating the strengths and benefits of the brand using the best of viral techniques (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

### **Physical Evidence**

If it is true that brand communities have the ability to serve as a “substitute” for religion, there should be further evidence of this effect than just observed behavior. Such work was begun by Beauregard and Paquette (2006) who examined the neural underpinnings of religious/spiritual/mystical experiences by examining MRIs to assess brain activity. Their observations suggest that such experiences result in neural activity in numerous areas of the brain, and that the response markedly differs from that observed from experiences with other humans. Lindstrom (2008a) extended the analysis by examining the relative brain activity of individuals when exposed to strong brands (brands which engender strong emotional engagement from consumers, such as Guin-

ness, Ferrari, Harley-Davidson, and Apple), weak brands (brands which engender limited emotional engagement, such as Microsoft or BP), sports icons and paraphernalia, and Christian religious imagery. When the MRIs were analyzed, the results from exposure to strong brands and religious imagery were observed to be virtually identical, and were substantially different from the MRI results from exposure to weak brands or sports icons and paraphernalia.

These results are not surprising. From interviews with 14 religious leaders, Lindstrom (2008b) identified nine components of a powerful religion; a clear vision, a sense of belonging, an enemy, sensory appeal, storytelling, grandeur, evangelism, symbols, and rituals. He then discussed how each of the components is also a component of a strong brand.

Strong brands, therefore, appear to hold a unique place in the marketplace. The success of strong brands has led marketing educators to include discussions of strong brands and of how marketers can build and maintain strong brands in their classes. Given the seeming ability of strong brands to act as a substitute or replacement for a relationship with God, however, how should Christian marketing educators address this subject?

## DISCUSSION

Although further research is obviously required, the results and observations discussed above have an important application to marketing. The development of a brand community appears to hold great promise for the successful development and furtherance of a brand (Arora, 2009). Through the development of strong brand communities, marketers can help raise products to iconic levels by clearly differentiating the products from competitors. The meaning associated with the product can be crystalized in the eyes of consumers, giving the product a clear and well-defined image and place in the marketplace. Such clarity can result in the development of product loyalty among customers which is strong and unwavering. Furthermore, the brand communities themselves provide consumers with the additional benefits associated with being a part of a community.

The evidence suggests that by belonging to brand communities, consumers may be able to fulfill several of their needs and desires, including the need for a unique identity, for community, and for being a part of something larger than themselves. The inherent problem in brand communities is clear to see when considering the evidence from a Biblical perspective where the univer-

sal church is intended by God to provide for those same human needs. John 15 describes the concept using the example of Jesus being the vine and we the branches, abiding in Him and bearing fruit as part of that community. We identify with the vine, become part of the community and bear fruit providing for the needs of others. I Corinthians 12:12-27 describes us as part of the Body of Christ, each unique in our identity yet part of the bigger whole and designed to work together in community. Indeed, as image bearers of the Triune God (Genesis 1:26) we have each been created with the capacity and innate desire for fellowship with others. As the Godhead has perfect fellowship with each other, we search for the same kind of self defining relationships. At what point in time does the brand community begin to replace the spiritual community that God designed for us to participate in and be defined by? Moreover, at what point does brand community interfere with non-Christians coming to see how their desires are for a relationship with God?

Although the ability to meet more of a consumer's needs and desires is usually looked upon as being a good strategy for a marketer, the nature of the consumer's needs and desires appear to play a role in this designation. As has been discussed earlier, the personal needs and desires of many individuals which are satisfied by belonging to a brand community associated with a strong brand may closely resemble those fulfilled through belonging to and participating in some form of organized religious activity or organization. If this is true, this conclusion raises several questions to be considered by Christian educators.

### Questions for Christian Marketing Educators

Is there a business rationale for educating students on how to build and support strong brands? The evidence from the business world seems to indicate that the answer is a strong "yes." Strong brands fulfill important roles in the marketplace. As reviewed above, the building and maintenance of strong brands provides businesses with a way to differentiate their offerings from the offerings of competitors, build a very loyal customer base, and develop customers who may be more than willing to enthusiastically engage in marketing activities for the company at no cost. Building strong brands, therefore, would appear to be a logical endeavor for marketing practitioners, and hence, should seemingly be an important component in marketing education (Arora, 2009).

But, are strong brands viewed as a replacement or substitute to God? The research seems to indicate that strong brands may possess this ability as strong brands

are viewed by consumers in a vein similar to religion—a secular religion well suited for the consumer culture. The development of brand communities appears to be able to provide benefits similar to those available from relationships with others and with God.

Given that brand communities appear to be able to serve as a substitute to a relationship with God, is a primary activity of marketers actually idol-making? The Bible clearly indicates that any substitute for a relationship with God is an idol. As humans, we are predisposed to worship and indeed need to worship something. “The human soul will find an object of worship, either on the shelf, on the altar, in the mirror, or in heaven. We are born idolaters” (Mohler, 2009, p. 47). Is the building of strong brands, then, equivalent to the building of idols for customers to build relationships with and ultimately worship? The existing research indicates the answer to this question may be “yes,” suggesting that marketers may inherently actually be idol-builders and that the discipline of marketing may be engaged in developing new and improved methods by which idols can be constructed—not just any idols, but idols which are most “worthy” for the devotion and admiration by “consumers.” Hostetler (2006) suggests that, like the children of Israel (Exodus 32:1-87), the U.S. (and similar societies) possesses the same alchemy necessary for the creation of idols; impatience, unbelief, pragmatism, ingratitude, compromise and corruption. He goes on to list many of the idols consumer culture has created and worships including materialism encouraged by marketing.

Is the development of idols wrong? Idols are addressed frequently in the Bible. Given that idols are in direct violation of the first two commandments (“You shall have no other gods before me,” and “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20: 3-6, New International Version), idols are always addressed in a negative fashion. Indeed, idols are not just simply frowned upon—they are totally antithetical to building a strong relationship with God. Throughout the Bible, Israel and all humanity are repeatedly called to avoid idols and/or to turn from idol worship. Because idols are created by human hands, they are incapable of reflecting the true

nature of God, creating a situation of incorrect worship giving testimony to the wrong god (Mohler, 2009, p.48). God’s response to that kind of worship is punishment for generations (Exodus 20:4). This is indeed serious business.

If the development of strong brands can be equated to the development of idols and if the development of strong brands is a primary goal of marketing, what is the appropriate role of Christian marketing educators? Clearly, Christian marketing educators cannot take part in activities which can be construed as involving the development of idols or encouraging the practice of idolatry. “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21, NIV). “And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Matthew 18:5-6, NIV). On the other hand, the building of strong brands is an essential component of marketing strategy. The building of strong brands is a tactic arguably pursued by Christian-based and Christian-owned companies as well as secular firms given its influence on the success which the brand will enjoy in the marketplace. For-profit companies are not alone as the church itself has succumbed to the temptations of branding by making themselves more consumer friendly in response to the sharp decline in membership and attendance at mainline denominations (Colson & Vaughn, 1992). Where are our students to find the direction they need to navigate these dangerous waters?

One thought might be found in the arena of consumer product knowledge. Consumers each experience products at different levels of understanding (Levitt, 1980). At the most basic level consumers “know” about the product generically or for the actual benefit that product fulfills in their life. An automobile provides transportation from place to place. That same product can be “known” by its tangible description of a specific year, make and model of automobile. At this level, products are differentiated based on tangible characteristics that are unique from other brands of automobiles. The final level of product understanding relates to what other augmented benefits might arise from the purchase of the brand in question. Here is where prestige, image, and all of what turn strong brands into icons reside. So then, are marketing educators to teach students only to utilize the concepts from the first two levels to market our brands? On first glance that is an easy solution but do not those

rather unemotional tangible characteristics of each brand coordinate to create the image and aura of each strong brand? Would that leave only the generic product to be discussed in marketing courses where no brands are differentiated from others at all?

What then is the role of a Christian marketing professor? Is simply warning students of the dangers held in scripture about the creation of idols enough? Or, should we act as Hezekiah and forcibly remove the Asherah poles and destroy the bronze snake that Moses had made to heal the Israelites from their distress (Exodus 18:4)? This is an important area for discussion. On one hand, Christian business students need to possess the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed and make an impact in the businesses in which they will ultimately be employed (whether Christian or secular) and the individuals that they will be employed with. On the other hand, Christian marketing educators cannot advocate the development of idols.

### Questions for Marketing Researchers

It appears that much further discussion and research is needed to examine these issues. Since these issues lie at the very heart of what marketing is, further discussion and research would appear to be of the utmost importance.

First, research needs to explore the differing effects which strong brands may have on Christians and non-Christians. It does not appear that Christian consumers are exempt from the effects of strong brands as can be easily seen by observing the belongings of Christians, such as the extensive displays of strong brands during many typical Sunday morning services. Research appears to indicate that Christians may possess lower purchase intentions when strong brands are promoted primarily as image carriers, but that the purchase intentions do not differ from non-Christians when product features are stressed. This seems to support the intention suppression hypothesis of Veer and Shankar (2011) who believe that Christians may desire to have purchase intentions that closely correspond to their “Christian” part of their identity while simultaneously allowing them to make purchases consistent with the other components of their identity. Is this true? Several believe the self has become multivocal for many in consumer culture—where individuals possess a number of different selves to be expressed in various settings (Burns, 2006). Could this be a reason why the behavior of many self-professing Christians has not been observed to vary much from that of unbelievers when they are not in church or with

Christians? Do some Christians possess a hypocritical approach to possessions? In other words, do Christians and non-Christians take different perspectives on strong brands or are any differences that may be seen merely window dressing?

Second, what effect does salvation have on attitudes and behaviors toward strong brands? Does salvation bring a lasting reassessment? Does salvation bring a reassessment of the nature of one’s relationships with more attention being shifted to relationships with God and with other Christians and less of a focus on possessions and strong brands?

Third, does the extent of a nonbeliever’s relationships with strong brands affect his receptivity to the Gospel? Do individuals with strong relationships with strong brands perceive a lesser need for a relationship with God?

Fourth, are a Christian’s church experiences related to the nature of the relationships with strong brands? Are Christians who possess strong relationships with their fellow church members and/or other Christians less likely to focus on strong brands? Are strong brands viewed as replacements for the relationships one does not have with fellow Christians? Can relationships with strong brands replace the community found in church, but not affect one’s faith? Can strong brands be idols for some but not for others?

Finally, neuroscience suggests that sports are very different experiences than religious experiences and strong brands (Lindstrom, 2008a). This is surprising. Sports are known for generating a religious fervor and for providing a basis for relationships with various teams and for developing relationships with other individuals. Why do MRIs indicate that individuals view sports differently? Does this difference have anything to say about marketing strong brands?

### CONCLUSION

It appears that the issue of strong brands and resulting brand communities comprise an issue which warrants attention from marketing instructors and from marketing researchers. Branding is an activity integral to marketing. Given the nature of the apparent role of branding vis-à-vis relationships, particularly those involving God, it appears that attention to this issue is imperative.

Finally, although marketing is an area that possesses a number of issues germane for discussion from a Christian context, few articles have been published in the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* that explicitly address marketing and the interplay of customers,

including consumers, and businesses. Hopefully, this paper will begin to generate interest in exploring these important areas.

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