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Shadow brands : exploring phenomenon of meaningless brands

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Shadow brands – exploring phenomenon of meaningless brands¹

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Summary. Marketing practitioners believe in high significance of their brands and high utility of their products. They perpetuate a viewpoint of brands serving as mental shortcuts, which facilitate purchase decisions, and they consider brands to be highly important throughout the whole consumption process. Interestingly, there exist some premises which suggest that the role of brands in consumers' lives is overestimated. The objective of the present study was therefore to gain insight into this phenomenon and examine the real importance of brands in consumers' everydayness. A researcher metaphor of a shadow brand was introduced and diverse qualitative methods were applied. The initial findings suggest that almost all consumed brands remain overshadowed; high involvement brands can be equally meaningless as low involvement ones; neither purchase frequency, perceived quality, nor trust, increase probability of moving a brand out of shadow.

Introduction

There are two fundamentally different stages of brand-consumer coexistence: (1) before a purchase (a decision-making process) and (2) afterwards (trial

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and usage). While a brand may become an important choice factor (i.e. it may outweigh competitive products), its significance is not always maintained on subsequent consumption stages (even high equity brands eventually wear out, as their newness wanes). However, there are relatively many brands that consumers do not perceive as significant, either before, during or after consumption. Unsurprisingly, this group includes mostly replaceable and inexpensive products of everyday use (e.g. groceries), but interestingly it also comprises high involvement brands (i.e. their acquisition involves high risk or effort on consumer's part). To explore this phenomenon effectively, a set of qualitative methods was applied, and a researcher metaphor of a shadow was introduced in order to approach the results theoretically. A shadow brand is the one that consumers are aware of and use it, but they are unable to recall its exact name, detailed information about it, neither they can attribute any special meanings to it. The following sections present initial findings on shadow brands and suggest further research directions.

Theoretical background – significance of brands

Jez Frampton, a global CEO of Interbrand, suggests that consumers need brands to control the environment they live in, i.e. to arrange and optimize their lives along with own desires and aspirations (*Best global...*, 2015). Accordingly, brands become the prism through which consumers perceive themselves and everything around them. In other words, brands play crucial roles in psychological, social and cultural terms, which is reflected by the Interbrand rating: each rated brand is valued between 4 and 171 billion USD (*Best global...*, 2015).

Apart from high financial value, the world's most powerful brands have potential to build extensive non-financial equity. As for Apple, Microsoft, Samsung, Toyota, or McDonald's, consumers can easily retrieve information about them, identify their advantages and recall benefits they offer in everyday life. Even though these brands are non-human objects, consumers tend to anthropomorphize them (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998), love them (Batra, Ahuvia, Bagozzi, 2012; Albert, Merunka, 2013), build communities around them (Muniz, O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, Koenig, 2002), regard them as extended-self (Sirgy, 1982; Belk, 1988; Belk, 2013) etc. It should be noted, however, that such special bonding is not as common as marketing practitioners would expect.

In most shopping situations (at the first stage of brand-consumer coexistence) brands do not play highly significant roles. According to the research held by TNS (*Zakupy...*, 2015), a representation of Polish consumers declared „brand” to be a third-rate factor in their in-store choices (after „price” and „quality”). Similar results were obtained with regard to the cosmetics market (Adamkiewicz, Ulatowska-Szostak, Marcinkowski, 2011), and even lower indicators were calculated for food products (Angowski, Lipowski, 2014) and luxuries (*Rynek dóbr...*,

2014). Despite uncertain representativeness and comparability of all these findings, one can assume that an average consumer does not consciously perceive brands as highly important in their everyday decisions.

The second stage of brand-consumer coexistence (i.e. trial and usage) seem to be vested with meaning and significance. Consumption is regarded as a way to create and transfer the meaning between subjects and objects (McCracken, 1986). There exist different tools to embed (substantiate) meanings into consumers' lives through consumption. For example, based on classic works of Sartre (1943), there are 3 possible ways of cultivating possessions with meaning and increasing their importance: (1) to control (appropriate) an object for personal use (e.g. by mastering or conquering it, or by giving possessions to others as a gift); (2) to create a possession (e.g. design and make it); (3) to extend one's knowledge of an object. Canadian anthropologist, McCracken (1986), offered similar, albeit more practical, view. He indicated rituals as most common instruments for establishing meaning: „Ritual is a kind of social action devoted to the manipulation of cultural meaning for purposes of collective and individual communication and categorization. Ritual is the opportunity to affirm, evoke, assign, or revise the conventional symbols and meanings of the cultural order” (McCracken, 1986, p. 78). He views rituals as effective tools for producing meaning and increasing significance of possessions in consumers' lives. Accordingly, grooming rituals modify one's possession in a way it improves its performance and thus better reflects the owner (e.g. tuning one's car, re-fashioning one's clothes); possession rituals personalize one's possessions and display one's qualities (e.g. housewarming parties to personalize new home; buying exotic trip to demonstrate one's eccentric character; driving expensive car to show off publicly); exchange rituals establish an occasion of interpersonal influence, where a gift-giver imposes certain meaning on a receiver (e.g. when a man offers his partner lingerie or expensive dress or when a granddaughter receives a 100-year-old ring from her grandmother as a family legacy).

The importance of products (and their brands) may, however, fluctuate and not every act of consumption carries substantial load of meaning. As suggested by the American researcher, Coupland (2005), most brands stay invisible to their consumers, and their significance in everyday life is marginal. This is predominantly true for fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), as their purchase processes are mundane, routinized, and they may be easily replaced with no harmful consequences. Accordingly, as FMCG brands do not develop strong emotional ties with users, they are absorbed by everydayness, i.e. camouflaged among other objects. They just become an integral part of the background (e.g. they fill up a physical space of drawers, cabinets and dressers), thus they stay invisible for household inhabitants.

The above discussion led to the offering of two research propositions:

P1: most of brands consumed are meaningless (overshadowed), regardless of purchase involvement on consumer's part, nor complexity and durability of the product.

P2: rituals may become an instrument to temporarily embed a meaning to a brand (i.e. to move a brand out of shadow).

Based on these propositions, several detailed questions were formulated:

1. What is a shadow brand and how it can be parameterized?
2. Whether (and why) high involvement brands and complex, durable products can be shadowed?
3. What keeps a brand in shadow and what determines its movement outwards?
4. What is the role of consumption situation and its perceived importance?
5. Whether rituals are an effective instrument for extracting brand out of shadow and what other techniques there exist?

Due to the word limit imposed on this text, the following sections present only partial research results.

Research method

Given an intangible nature of the phenomenon under study, qualitative methods must have been used and the data were collected longitudinally. 14 individuals were recruited to the project, as they represented 3 contrasted household types, i.e. (1) young independent students living away from their families ($n = 5$); (2) young professionals, aged between 24–35 y.o., without children ($n = 5$); (3) adults with children ($n = 4$). Such sample design allowed for comparisons across households due to the variances in their socio-economic statuses.

At the first stage of exploration the objective was to investigate shadow brands in depth and determine their characteristics. The idea was to find out whether (and to what extent) high involvement and durable brands can become overshadowed and how it correlates with different types of consumption occasions. The data were collected for several weeks by means of go-along interviews, participant observations and in-depth interviews. Throughout interviewing process diverse techniques were used, including projection and retrospection. As walked interviews provide access to richer and insightful information (Evans, Jones, 2011), they were carried out on a variety of consumption occasions e.g. regular grocery shopping, stock-up trip before a formal vs informal party, day-to-day cleanup, practicing one's favorite sport, holiday preparations etc.

The second stage of research was dedicated to identify viable methods for extracting brands from shadow. An attempt was made to verify their effectiveness and evaluate their applicability to different market conditions. In order to accomplish such variety of goals, 3 focus group interviews (FGI) were held. A diverse set of techniques was used, including sorting and projection (e.g. role playing tasks, third-person questions, association tests, sentence completions).

Results

Shadow brands – identifying a new phenomenon by a researcher metaphor

The use of a researcher metaphor, as a tool to support investigation process, has been increasingly appreciated in recent marketing (Fillis, Rentschler, 2008; Zaltman, Zaltman, 2010). A metaphor allows to understand one phenomenon by means of another and to approximate something abstract into something easier to comprehend (Richardson, St. Pierre, 1994; Morgan, 1980). It also stimulates creativity and cognition, as it combines seemingly incompatible areas of knowledge. Avis, Aitken, Ferguson (2012), however, warn, that such metaphor reflects only researchers' perspective. In other words, it facilitates *their* (the researchers) observation, but it does not have to be exactly the way how respondents perceive the world.

A metaphor of shadow serves in this study to describe brands which are used by consumers, but they stay in the background of everydayness and remain ambiguous, vague and meaningless. Users of a shadow brand are not capable of recalling its special features, benefits, neither they can distinguish it from competition. Sometimes, they do not even remember its name, nor logo. Individuals investigated in the present study (responsible for household supplies), when asked about a brand of soap and toothpaste they use, kept answering: „don't remember”, „I have no idea”, „I'm sure it's white and blue...”. Eventually they would mention few brand names, which actually proved wrong after examining their bathroom cabinets. Surprisingly, similar responses were collected with regard to high involvement products (i.e. their purchase and consumption requires higher – financial or non-financial – effort) e.g. computers or expensive perfumes. When asked about the brand of his partner's computer, one interviewee admitted reluctantly: „I don't remember exactly... maybe Asus? Or Acer? I should know this... she's always leaving it in a very strange place and I keep on stumbling on it”. Another respondent confessed that he always purchased the same brand of (expensive) perfumes, but he could have not recalled its exact name at the moment of interview. He was able to retrieve a blurred memory of packaging, its location at home and the general context of its use, nevertheless the brand remained hidden in the shadow of something else (e.g. daily household activities, personal problems, work etc.).

Based on the collected data, several determinants of shadow brands were identified. They all come down to the following two:

1. Individually perceived significance of the situation, in which a brand is consumed (e.g. psychological, social or cultural importance of consumption).
2. Individually perceived number of problems that a brand solves.

The less utility it provides and the less important consumption occasion, the greater the probability for a brand to stay in a shadow. For example, a shampoo

brand will be in a shadow for consumers, who treat it as a tool to wash their hair (1 problem) and their expectations are low (insignificant situation). However, there exists a group of people who are very conscious about their looks and their coiffure is an important element of their self-concept: it influences their mood, confidence, and is expected to express their personality. In this case, a simple shampoo solves a considerable number of problems and thus its brand is less likely to become overshadowed. One respondent revealed that every morning she fought with her frizzy curls and once she managed to discipline them, she felt prettier, better, and more confident. Accordingly, there is only one shampoo brand that helps her in this battle and she treats it as a most valuable and precious companion. Similar stories were found in relation to more complex durables, e.g. mobile phones. At a FGI, a group of iPhone owners effortlessly listed a vast number of problems that this brand addresses (e.g. „it beautifully documents the beautiful moments of my life”, „it is my alternative memory”, „it works even after it falls out of my pocket, when I sprint through the corridors”), while for other users a phone was (just) to maintain contact with the world. Evidently, the later brands were less visible and less meaningful to their consumers than iPhone.²

The study findings suggest that a brand may become overshadowed, regardless of its product category, product durability, complexity, nor purchase involvement. Some brands may also remain in shadow, even if they are bought frequently and regularly. One interviewee responded to a question about the name of her washing liquid as follows: „I can't remember it now, but I've been using it for years and I will not turn to another brand. I always get the same... it's... I don't know”. Similar responses were gained for soap, toiletries or batteries (a regularly purchased good by families with little children). Additionally, neither perceived quality of a product, nor consumer trust to its manufacturer, seem to be crucial determinants of brand meaningfulness and visibility. The following interview situation illustrates powerfully all above findings: prior to a major stock-up trip we were analyzing a shopping list and a respondent declared „I have to buy dishwasher salt. In this case I'm sure – I always buy Finish. I only trust this brand.”; however, while in a store, she reached out for Ludwik (a competitor brand).

The same brand may retain various levels of invisibility for different consumers (see Fig. 1). Most brands stay in shadow (which is depicted by the base of the pyramid), as their consumption is not socially, culturally, nor psychologically important and they do not provide solutions to numerous problems. These can be either brands of complex, high involvement, durables, or simple, high-rotating and low risk product categories. As the significance of consumption increases and the number of issues addressed by a brand grows, one can observe its

² It was very interesting to observe how differently iPhone users addressed their phones: Apple enthusiasts used to say „I took a picture by *my iPhone*” and Samsung owners – „I took a picture by *a phone*”.

movement out of shadow (upwards the pyramid – see Fig. 1). Not many brands succeed in avoiding shadow permanently (based on this study – up to two per individual). Non-shadow brands are consciously purchased (often become a primary reason for shopping); they are very meaningful to their users, who hold rich associations with them and thus can easily describe their attributes, benefits, advantages and roles. Brands from top of the pyramid have potential to bond with their users and are often incorporated into consumers' self-concepts, e.g. they become partners who know all our secrets (iPhone), mates who witness our small victories over apathy (Nike) or failures to keep fit (Kinder Bueno).

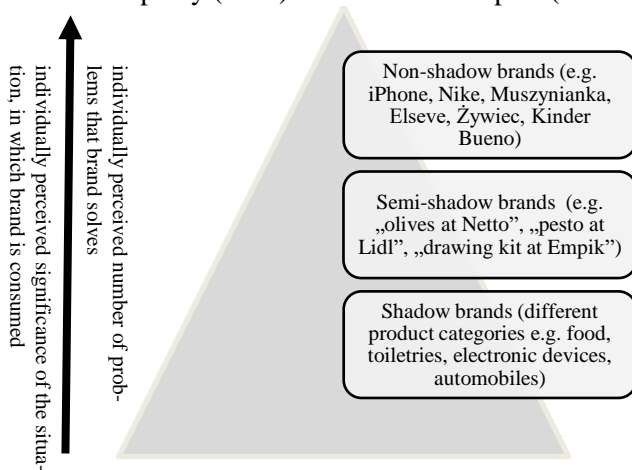


Figure 1. Shadow brands

Source: own elaboration.

There exists a relatively wide category of liminal (semi-shadow) brands, which are more meaningful than those placed at the bottom of the pyramid. Consumers are unable to recall their exact names and thus tend to identify them by means of their location or a retailer e.g.: „olives at Netto”, „pesto at Lidl”, „drawing kit at Empik”, „shampoo at Rossmann”. Surprisingly, it was the way respondents classified global producers' brands (not only retailers' private labels). A „shampoo at Rossmann”, for instance, turned out to be a professional line of products branded by Schwarzkopf.

How to de-shadow a brand

Brand meaningfulness can vary over time and there are many possibilities to encourage its shift up the pyramid (depicted in Fig. 1). The idea behind every technique is to increase the number of problems a brand solves and to boost individually perceived importance of its usage. It can be accomplished by a total re-

positioning of a product and its consumption pattern, for instance, by transforming simple water into a fit drink, a yogurt into a medicament for immunity, or by converting magnesium from basic mineral ingredient into a cure for (allegedly) serious disease (e.g. restless leg syndrome).

Another technique refers to McCracken's idea of meaning transfer instruments. It involves placement of a brand in relation to threshold moments in consumers' lives and resulting rituals. A term of „threshold” is used here to describe a transition of an individual from one state to another, which can be conditioned by culture (e.g. marriage), economy (e.g. first expat contract, first purchase of a car or apartment), or any individual and social reasons (e.g. changing a diet, starting to recycle, quitting cigarettes). Such transition is usually accompanied by more or less formalized rituals, which serve as a practical tool to approach and familiarize new situation. One of the interviewees confessed how a decision to go on a diet changed her shopping behavior and daily routine. As she had to motivate herself to keep a fitness regime, she developed an informal ritual and a brand of bottled water helped her with that. A ritual comprised a sequence of activities, which were linked to purchase and consumption of this brand and were held prior to each workout session (e.g. „I always shake it well before I open the bottle. It is more sparkling then. And I feel like James Bond, you know? <Shaken, not stirred>! I feel a little stronger then”). Another respondent admitted that her first trip abroad (to Thailand and the Philippines) redesigned her eating habits and taught to use completely new products. This experience prompted few brands into a semi-shadow for her („The best milk rice is at Netto, and lemon grass – at <Piotr i Paweł>”).

Lack of ritual appears to significantly decrease the chances for permanently moving a brand out of shadow. For example, one participant revealed that few years ago, while she had been choosing a car, it made her assign certain values to different automobile brands (some brands became visible to her); however, after the purchase they all lost their meanings and clarity (returned to shadow), and the brand she finally selected is not associated with anything more meaningful than mundane trip to work (low significance of usage and no ritualization).

Conclusion

A shadow metaphor offers a new perspective for evaluation of brands and their importance in consumers' lives. It allows to identify various factors, limits and circumstances, in which brands become significant and meaningful for their users. It also encourages to reinvestigate a classic paradigm, according to which only high involvement brands have power to emotionally bond with consumers and drive advanced relationships. Based on initial findings, computers and cars can be equally meaningless and invisible as washing powders or toiletries.

The present study was not deprived of certain limitations, so one should not attempt to extrapolate the findings without any caution. A researcher metaphor allowed to identify basic methods for extracting brands out of shadow, it may have not, however, exploited all possibilities for operationalizing this concept. This study, therefore, needs to be followed by extensive confirmatory research, which should address a larger set of questions and variables.

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Marki cienia – eksploracja zjawiska marek pozbawionych znaczenia

Słowa kluczowe: znaczenie marki, waga marki, marka cienia, metafora badawcza

Streszczenie: Praktycy marketingu wierzą, że ich marki są ważne, a produkty użyteczne. Propagują pogląd o markach jako specyficznych skrótach myślowych ułatwiających decyzje konsumenckie oraz podkreślają ogromną wagę marek w całym procesie konsumpcji. Istnieją jednak przesłanki, aby sądzić, że rola marek w życiu ich użytkowników jest zbyt przeceniana. Dlatego celem przedstawionych badań była eksploracja zjawiska malejącego znaczenia marek w codzienności konsumentów. Przeprowadzono szerokie badania jakościowe, a do opisu rezultatów wykorzystano metaforę cienia. Wstępne wyniki sugerują, że większość konsumowanych marek pozostaje w cieniu; marki wysokiego zaangażowania mogą być równie bez znaczenia, jak marki niskiego zaangażowania; ani częstotliwość zakupu, postrzegana jakość, ani zaufanie, nie zwiększają znacząco szans marki na wyjście z cienia.

Tłumaczenie Małgorzata Karpińska-Krakowiak

Cytowanie

- Karpińska-Krakowiak, M. (2016). Shadow brands – exploring phenomenon of meaningless brands. *Marketing i Zarządzanie*, 3 (44), 317–326.