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# WHEN BRAND MEETS METAPHOR: BRAND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS IN THE MARKETING DISCOURSE

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*Abstract: The use of metaphors in specialized discourses has long been regarded with skepticism by linguists and researchers. However, the more recent studies have highlighted not only the systematic recourse to metaphors to deliver specialized contents, but also their central role in enhancing the understanding of rather "opaque" fields of knowledge by analogy with conceptual domains within our reach.*

*The marketing discourse for teaching and research purposes makes extensive use of metaphors in order to account for highly abstract economic concepts such as "brand", "consumer", "enterprise", "market", etc. In this context, the purpose of our paper is to identify the main metaphorical patterns which are used to gain insight into the multidimensional concept of "brand", as it is depicted by Philip Kotler and his co-authors in their works "Principles of Marketing" (15th edition) and "Marketing Management" (14th edition).*

*Drawing on the cognitive semantic approach to metaphor, we provide an overview of the various brand conceptualizations by means of analogies with frames of reference such as the domain of human beings, that of buildings and that of assets.*

*Keywords: metaphor, cognitive semantics, brand, academic marketing discourse, Principles of marketing, Marketing Management*

## An overview of the marketing concept

In today's dynamic world of economics and business, the term *marketing* has become a synonym for *necessity*. The nature of marketing is such that it allows alternative definitions to co-exist, each of them illustrating a specific approach to the marketing concept by various practitioners and/or theorists.

As Jim Blythe acknowledges, "There are several marketing definitions in current use, and each suffers from some weaknesses: a universally-agreed definition of what marketing is has not yet been achieved." (Blythe, 2013: 5)

Broadly speaking, two basic approaches are used customarily in accounting for the marketing concept: the functionalist view and the managerial perspective. Thus, according to the American Marketing Association, marketing can be defined in functional terms as "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large."[1]. The Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) provides a consumer-oriented approach to marketing, defining it as "the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably."[2] In the same line of thinking, Philip Kotler,

[1] The definition of marketing, approved July 2013 by the American Marketing Association Board of Directors. https://www.ama.org/AboutAMA/Pages/Definition-of-Marketing.aspx

[2] The official academic definition from CIM
http://www.cim.co.uk/more/getin2marketing/what-is-marketing/

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the leading representative of the managerial school of marketing, states that "Simply put, marketing is managing profitable customer relationships. The aim of marketing is to create value for customers in order to capture value from customers in return." (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014: 24)

Michael Baker combines and reconciles both approaches, claiming that "Marketing is both a managerial orientation – some would claim a business philosophy – and a business function." (Baker, 2008: 4)

Some marketing theorists and researchers (Baker 1976, Shaw 1995, Jones and Shaw 2002, etc.) argue that marketing has been practiced since Antiquity and the Middle Ages, while its formal recognition as a distinct field of activity and expertise can only be traced back to the 1900s. Furthermore, it took several more decades for marketing to become an established academic discipline. As Baker acknowledges, "the enigma of marketing is that it is one of man's oldest activities and yet it is regarded as the most recent of business disciplines." (Baker, 1976, p ix)

Despite the debates and controversies surrounding its origins and its definition, marketing is undoubtedly regarded as an essential component of modern economic mechanisms and patterns. In an era when the competition between economic actors is fueled by socio-economic trends and shifts (the emergence of the free-market economy, the globalization of markets, the advances in technological innovation, the changes in consumers' needs and buying behaviors, product differentiation, the environmental and societal concerns, etc.), marketing-specific concepts such as *marketing mix, target market, consumer buying behavior, customer satisfaction, branding, brand equity, promotion and advertising, market research, customer relationship management,* etc. have become commonplace in the field of both marketing theory and practice.

**What's in a brand?**

With the consumer placed at the beginning rather than the end of the production-consumption chain, the challenge goes beyond simply satisfying individual needs. Marketing professionals strive to anticipate consumer needs and expectations and to predict future consumer behaviors. In order to win the consumers' hearts and loyalty, marketers conduct market research and surveys and have recourse to carefully thought strategies ranging from short term incentives (such as price promotions, coupons, money refunds, etc.) to branding, mass media advertising and promotion techniques.

Indeed, marketing professionals agree on the dynamic, ever-evolving and multi-dimensional nature of the concept of *brand,* as well as on the essential contribution of brands and branding to achieving competitive advantage, while marketing surveys measure the power exerted by brands upon consumers. In a global market where products are similar in terms of physical characteristics, uses, quality and even price, it is brands that act as the propeller of consumer attitudes and buying behavior.

But what lies behind the concept of *brand*? In the marketing jargon, *brand* refers to a "name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers."[3]

In their endeavor to reduce the abstractness of the concept and render it more transparent to aspiring marketing professionals, marketing theorists have employed various

[3] Source: http://www.marketing-dictionary.org/Brand

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teaching techniques and strategies, out of which the recourse to metaphor proves to be one of the most effective.

To us, as a linguist and researcher, providing an appropriate frame of reference to develop an explanatory account of the concept of *brand* is all the more challenging as the concept incorporates a sum of abstract features that increase its "opaqueness".

In accordance with our belief that brands are much exploited but little explored, our paper aims at making a non-exhaustive incursion into the specific metaphors that are used in reference to *brand* in the academic marketing discourse.

**Why conceptual metaphor?**

In our approach to provide some insight into the metaphorical conceptualizations of *brand*, we employed the cognitive theoretical framework for the study of metaphor, as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) and their followers (Gibbs 1994, Grady 1997, Kövecses 1986, 2000, 2010, Turner and Fauconnier 1995, 2002, etc.).

To the difference of the traditional approach that envisages metaphor as a rhetorical linguistic device used essentially for aesthetic purposes, the cognitive semantic perspective focusses on rethinking metaphor as a predominantly conceptual phenomenon rooted in our conceptual system. Thus, according to the cognitive theory (also known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory), metaphor goes beyond the language boundary to become a matter of thought.

Cognitive theorists establish a distinction between *conceptual metaphor* and *linguistic metaphors* or *metaphorical expressions*. Thus, "A conceptual metaphor consists of two conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another" (Kövecses, 2010: 4). Linguistic metaphors are surface-level linguistic structures that derive from and illustrate conceptual metaphors.

The mechanisms of conceptual metaphors as explained by Lakoff and Johnson lie in the systematic projections of pertinent features (characteristics, properties, language, imagery, inferential structure, etc.) between one source conceptual domain[4] – more concrete and familiar in that it is either experientially-based or clearly structured and a target-domain, typically abstract in that it cannot be accessed through senses or bodily experience, nor does it possess a clearly structured organization.

For instance, an abstract concept such as *time* is commonly understood and referred to in terms of spatial movement ("the days ahead") or as a concrete entity that can be handled and offered as a gift ("giving my time"). Other classic examples of conceptual metaphors are "LOVE IS A JOURNEY" (We're at a *crossroads*, We'll just have *to go our separate ways*), "AN ARGUMENT IS WAR" (Your claims are *indefensible*, His criticisms were *right on target*), "THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS" (Is that the *foundation* for your theory?, Your theory needs more *support*), "IDEAS ARE FOOD" (There are too many facts here for me to *digest* them all, That's *food* for thought).

However, as Lakoff and Johnson argue, the metaphorical projections are only partial, in that "In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept, a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor" (1980: 462). For example, the conceptual metaphor "ARGUMENT IS WAR" brings to the fore

[4] By *conceptual domain* we understand any coherent organization of human experience (see also Kövceses, 2010, p.4)

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the conflicting, verbally aggressive nature of arguments, while the cooperative aspect of an argumentative discussion becomes ignored.

A more recent development of Conceptual Metaphor Theory is Turner and Fauconnier's "blending theory" (1995, 2002) which questions the unidirectionality[5] implied by the Lakoffian two-domain model and postulates the existence of two (or more) "input spaces"[6] that present both shared and unique characteristics whose combination results in a so-called "blended space". Turner and Fauconnier maintain that the interpretation of metaphor requires the activation of minimum four mental spaces: two input spaces, a source and a target, and two middle spaces, a generic space representing conceptual structure that is shared by both inputs and a blended space or blend where material from the inputs combines and interacts.

Thus, to the difference of the classical conceptual metaphor theory, which posits the unidirectional projection from the source to the target domain, blending theory highlights the mutually enriching nature of metaphor and builds on the ability to combine elements from familiar conceptualizations into new and meaningful structures.

**Metaphor and specialized discourses**

Regardless of the slight differences in the theoretical positions of the representatives of the cognitive approach to metaphor, our strong belief is that the cognitive framework has the great merit of allowing metaphor to broaden its scope significantly, so as to include conceptual domains such as medicine, informatics, economics, politics, psychology, sociology, etc.

The use of metaphor in specialized discourses has long been a debatable topic among linguists and researchers, as well as among non-linguists. Despite the controversies, the more recent studies have confirmed the systematic recourse to metaphor in order to convey specialized contents.

Metaphor – more precisely conceptual metaphor – is a heuristic tool that enhances knowledge in that it provides the means for explaining and describing essentially abstract specialized concepts, theories and ideas by establishing analogies with more concrete, simple or familiar ones.

To take an example, the conceptual metaphor "SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS ARE PLANTS" is used to facilitate the understanding of the rather "opaque" concept of "social organizations" (such as companies) by drawing similarities with well-established facts about the vegetal world (the components, the life-cycle of plants, etc.). The mapping between the source domain of *plants* and the target domain of *social organizations* nurtures metaphorical expressions such as "He works for the local *branch* of the bank", "The organization was *rooted* in the old church", "His business *blossomed* when the railways put his establishment within reach of the big city", "There is now a *flourishing* black market in software there"[7].

**When brand meets metaphor**

[5] The principle of unidirectionality states that the metaphorical process typically goes from the more concrete to the more abstract, and not the other way around.
[6] a partial and temporary representational structure which speakers construct when thinking or talking about a perceived, imagined, past, present, or future situation (Fauconnier 1994 [1985])
[7] Kövecses's examples (2010, p.10)

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Although an extensive body of literature[8] has been devoted to the study of the *brand* concept, little attention has been paid to its metaphorical dimensions.

The scarcity of the studies on this subject has fueled our desire to make an overview of the main metaphors that underpin the concept of *brand* as they occur in the marketing discourse for teaching purposes. We ought to mention from the beginning that our paper is not meant as an exhaustive study of *brand* metaphors, but rather as a preamble to their further exploration.

To achieve our purpose, we closely examined two milestones in the academic marketing discourse – *Principles of Marketing* (15th edition) by Philip Kotler and Gary Armstrong and *Marketing Management* (14th edition) by Philip Kotler and Kevin Lane Keller.

Consistent with the idea that conceptual metaphors are derived from the patterns detected in linguistic metaphors, we based our study on the identification of the recurrent metaphorical structures that are used in reference to *brand*, supporting our results with numerous examples drawn from the two works cited above.

Thus, the analysis of our corpus has enabled us to classify *brand* metaphors into three main categories, depending on the source conceptual domains employed as frames of reference to highlight specific aspects related to brands – that we envisage generically as the target domain.

The main conceptual metaphors we identified are as follows: A BRAND IS A HUMAN BEING, A BRAND IS A BUILDING, A BRAND IS AN ASSET.

**A BRAND IS A HUMAN BEING**

Specialized literature and marketing surveys have provided evidence that brands are perceived by consumers as animate (quasi-)humanlike entities. According to marketing research and surveys, consumers' perceptions and expectations about brands go beyond the sphere of the functional characteristics and advantages of the branded products or services to take into account the brands' non-functional characteristics, which are often referred to by means of linguistic structures pertaining to the domain of human attributes.

The anthropomorphic brand perspective is underpinned by the conceptual metaphor A BRAND IS A HUMAN BEING.

The conceptual mapping between the source domain of *human beings* and the target domain of *brands* lays at the core of numerous examples of linguistic metaphors that occur in our corpus, such as [brand] "look", "styling", "stature", "strength", "energy", "personality":

(1) General Motors's turnaround of its fading Cadillac brand was fueled by new designs that redefined its *look* and *styling*, such as the CTS sedan, XLR roadster, and ESV sport utility vehicle (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 260)

(2) These brands have become *irresistible*, combining high brand *strength* with high brand *stature*. (idem, p. 247)

(3) *Strong* new brands show higher levels of differentiation and *energy* than relevance, whereas both esteem and knowledge are lower still. (idem, p. 245)

(4) Although studies have found a positive correlation between promotional spending and brand *strength*, this relationship often turns out to be effect and cause, not cause and effect. *Stronger* brands with higher sales can afford the biggest ad budgets. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014: 442)

[8] See, for instance the contributions of Aaker D. 1991, 1996, Aaker &Fournier 1995, Keller 2003, 2009, Fournier 1998, 2009, Keller&Richey 2003, Viot 2006, Kitchen 2008, Schroeder 2014, etc.

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Perhaps the most commonly used anthropomorphic metaphor related to *brands* is that of *brand personality*:

(5) The brand *personality* delivers a picture of the more human qualities of the brand. (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 107)

(6) Properly used, humor can capture attention, make people feel good, and give a brand *personality*. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014: 437)

The metaphor of *brand personality* serves as the basis for a variety of linguistic metaphors that take the form of descriptors (mainly adjectives) that illustrate various human-specific personality traits:

(7) Cath Kidston is one of the brands that is *confident* in its design style and *fun* in its character. […] Cath Kidston allows its brand *personality* (*fun* and *brightness*) to shine through its brand identity (colors and typography), hence becoming a brand consumers can fall in love with. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014: 331)

(8) Most well-known brands are strongly associated with one particular trait: the Ford F150 with "*ruggedness*", Apple with "*excitement*", the *Washington Post* with "*competence*," Method with "*sincerity*," and Gucci with "*class*" and "*sophistication*." (idem, p. 169)

(9) With a brand *personality* defined as *flirty*, for the insider, and an escape, W offers guests unique experiences around the warmth of cool. (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 263)

(10) A brand *personality* may have several attributes: Levi's suggests a personality that is also *youthful*, *rebellious*, *authentic*, and American. (idem, p. 157)

The essence of the *brand personality* metaphor is expressed by David Aaker in his 2015 article entitled "Brand Personalities Are Like Snowflakes": "People express their own or idealized selves in part by the brands that they buy and use, especially when the brands are socially visible and have a personality. Such a brand is a badge that tells others what you value and how you live, and, more importantly, reaffirms to yourself what is important in your life."

Thus, a "socially visible" brand is likely to generate a complex of thoughts, attitudes and beliefs, emotional responses and reactions with respect to the brand, that may range from esteem and respect to trust, loyalty and even different forms of affection or addiction:

(11) *Esteem* measures perceptions of quality and loyalty, or how well the brand is regarded and *respected*. (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 245)

(12) Finally, due to corporate scandals, product crises, and executive misbehavior, *trust* in brands has plummeted. (idem, p. 247)

(13) Brand *loyalty* provides predictability and security of demand for the firm, and it creates barriers to entry that make it difficult for other firms to enter the market. […] Market researchers had measured the taste but failed to measure the *emotional attachment* consumers had to Coca-Cola. (idem, p. 242)

In the long run, loyalty may evolve into brand bonding and may nurture even closer consumer-brand relationships, as expressed by the linguistic metaphors bellow:

(14) *Bonding*. *Rational* and *emotional attachments* to the brand to the exclusion of most other brands.

"Bonded" consumers at the top of the pyramid build stronger *relationships* with and spend more on the brand than those at lower levels. (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 246)

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(15) Thus, positive brand equity derives from consumer *feelings* about and *connection* with a brand. Consumers sometimes *bond* very closely with specific brands. As perhaps the ultimate expression of brand *devotion* a surprising number of people […] have their favorite brand tattooed on their bodies. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014: 267)

The metaphors of *family brand* and *parent brand* represent yet another linguistic evidence that consumers' perception of brands in terms of human beings is rooted in metaphor:

(16) The existing brand that *gives birth* to a brand extension or sub-brand is the *parent* brand. If the *parent* brand is already associated with multiple products through brand extensions, it can also be called a master brand or *family* brand. (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 261)

(17) Line extensions can renew interest and liking for the brand and benefit the *parent* brand by expanding market coverage. (idem: 264)

Like any living organism, the brand progresses through several growth stages, as reflected in linguistic metaphors such as "growth", "mature [brand]," "young/old [brand]", etc.:

(18) Discovering a consumer insight and understanding its marketing implications can often lead to a successful product launch or spur the *growth* of a brand. (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 97)

(19) A company might try to expand the market for its *mature* brand by working with the two factors that make up sales volume. (idem, p. 314)

(20) The *younger* Breakaway Brands are mainly trendy digital upstarts that are now *maturing* and becoming essential to consumers' modern lives. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014: 269)

(21) Turning a potential negative of being an *old* brand into a positive of being experienced, Old Spice has made a remarkable transformation in recent years from "your father's aftershave" to a contemporary men's fragrance brand. (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 503)

**A BRAND IS A BUILDING**

Surprisingly, our corpus shows the co-occurrence of the anthropomorphic metaphor with the building metaphor, which derives from the mapping between the concrete source domain of *buildings* and the abstract target domain of *brands*.

Although they seem incompatible, the two metaphors actually serve to illustrate two different approaches to the brand by the marketing professionals.

The *brand as a human being* metaphor focusses on the symbolic benefits associated with using a certain brand. Marketing research (Aaker, 1996; Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003) provides evidence that a person's self-image is often closely related to the particular image or "personality" of the brand they use. The studies have revealed that when choosing and using a brand, consumers tend to identify themselves and to be associated by their peers with the brand itself. Hence consumers are likely to be attracted to brands that reflect their (ideal) self-image and match their own personality profile. In the light of this view, the *brand as a human being* metaphor is evocative of the consumer-brand relationship.

Within the logic of the *building* metaphor, the focus is on the effort undertaken by marketing professionals to create meaningful and distinctive brand personalities in the minds

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of consumers - directly through advertising campaigns and indirectly through promotions such as cause championing or event sponsorship[9].

Thus, the building metaphor is linked with the planning from bottom to top and the sequentially of the building process, with the idea of a solid structure, as well as with that of long-term commitment and cooperation. The "brand is a building" conceptual mapping accounts for linguistic metaphorical structures of the type "[brand] architecture", "[brand] building", "support [a brand]", and even "[brand's] pillar pattern":

(22) Brand *architecture* for luxury brands must be managed very carefully. (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 335)

(23) Marketers […] can review product portfolios and brand *architecture* to confirm that brands and sub-brands are clearly differentiated, targeted, and *supported* based on their prospects. (idem, p. 320)

(24) All strong brands - whether it's Facebook or Reese's - are *built* around an ideal of improving consumers' lives in some relevant way. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014: 269)

(25) The brand resonance model also views brand *building* as an ascending series of steps, from bottom to top (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 245)

(26) An important part of *reinforcing* brands is providing consistent marketing *support*. (idem, p. 258)

(27) The relationships among these dimensions (A/N energized differentiation, relevance, esteem, knowledge) - a brand's "*pillar pattern*"- reveal much about a brand's current and future status. (idem, p. 245)

**A BRAND IS AN ASSET**

Finally, a third major metaphorical conceptualization of *brands* as revealed by our study is the conceptual metaphor A BRAND IS AN ASSET.

Linguistic metaphors such as "asset" "value [of a brand]", "invest [in a brand]" stem from the "brand is an asset" metaphor:

(28) Brands are powerful *assets* that must be carefully developed and managed. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2014: 267)

(29) These intellectual property rights ensure that the firm can safely *invest* in the brand and reap the benefits of a *valuable asset*. (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 242)

(30) For branding strategies to be successful and brand *value* to be created, consumers must be convinced there are meaningful differences among brands in the product or service category. (idem, p. 243)

The "brand is an asset" metaphor is highly suggestive of the benefits associated with brands and branding and contributes to reinforcing the idea that to companies, brands represent highly valuable pieces of legal property that have the ability to influence consumer behavior and to generate sustained future revenues.

## Concluding remarks

Our exploration of the major metaphorical conceptualizations related to *brand* in the academic marketing discourse has enabled us to propose a classification of brand metaphors based on the source domains that are mapped onto the abstract target domain of *brand.*

Thus, our study has revealed three major conceptual metaphors that guide perception and reasoning about brands, as follows: "A BRAND IS A HUMAN BEING", "A BRAND IS A

[9] Read more: http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/brand-building.html

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BUILDING" and "A BRAND IS AN ASSET". We have also identified a number of less frequent brand metaphors (such as the metaphor of the *umbrella* brand, that of the *flanker* or that of the *flagship* brand) which we will examine in subsequent research. Hence, we strongly believe that the results of our study provide some useful starting points for further research on *brand* metaphors.

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