

**Towards a Branding Synthesis: A limit Attitude  
OR  
Branding: 'A limit Attitude'**

Authors: Ayman El-Amir\* and Steve Burt\*\*

(\*) Ayman El-Amir (Corresponding Author)  
Assistant Professor, Business Administration Program  
Trent University, Peterborough K9J 7B8, Ontario,  
Canada  
Email: [aymanelamir@trentu.ca](mailto:aymanelamir@trentu.ca)  
Tel: +1(705)7481011-ext.7106  
Fax: +1(705)748-1409

(\*\*) Steve Burt  
Professor of Retail Marketing  
Institute for Retail Studies, Stirling Management School  
University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, Scotland, UK  
Email: [s.l.burt@stir.ac.uk](mailto:s.l.burt@stir.ac.uk)  
Tel: + 44(0)1786 467399

**OR**

**Towards a Synthesis in branding: A Critical Account of the Process of Branding**

## **Abstract**

Echoing the shift in orientation from transactional to relationship marketing (Gronroos 2006), the debate over the process of branding has moved from a managerially closed to a socially open orientation (Pitt, Watson, Berthon, Wynn and Zinkhan 2006) creating a multidisciplinary intellectual puzzle. In light of the 'limit attitude' approach in critical marketing (Tadajewski and Brownlie 2008), this paper attempts to make sense of this puzzle through a critical examination of the evolution in branding thought. The paper concludes by developing a synthesis, through a constructed tree metaphor, which conceptualizes the multidisciplinary process of branding within a single organic (holistic and integrated) framework.

## **Key words:**

Branding, Critical marketing, Conceptual frameworks, Constructed metaphors

## **Introduction**

The discipline of marketing is undergoing a paradigm shift, moving from a managerial to a social orientation under the umbrella of transactional and relationship marketing (Gronroos, 1997; 2006). In the transactional paradigm, the value of marketing activities is embedded in the economic exchange of products-for-money; whereas the relationship paradigm argues that the true value of marketing activities arises from fulfilling promises within a web of social relationships (Gronroos, 2006; Caloniuss 2006). With the parent discipline in transition, there has also been a revision to the way we consider branding. In the academic literature, the approach to branding has shifted from an interpretation based upon a controlled "*closed*" managerial process, to one involving a more fluid, interdisciplinary, and socially "*open*" process (Pitt et al, 2006, 119). Making-sense of branding as an open process presents a challenging intellectual puzzle (Keller, 2003; Pitt et al, 2006; Brodie and de Chernatony, 2009). Efforts to assemble the pieces of this puzzle have been virtually absent from the literature with the notable exception of Keller (2003). However, his synthesis, which is limited to the bi-disciplinarily approaches of management and cognitive psychology, excludes other significant contributions to

branding thought which have been drawn from the disciplines of social-psychology, sociology and anthropology.

To develop a broader, and more open, synthesis of the process of branding, this paper adopts the “limit attitude” approach of critical marketing (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008, 11), which advocates a continuous re-thinking of existing knowledge to create a more macro/inclusive view that enhances theory by expanding its existing limits (Burton, 2002; 2005; Brownlie, 2006; Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008). Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to critically examine the contributions to branding literature from a variety of disciplinary perspectives in order to systematically link these various approaches (ie the pieces of the puzzle) in an organic (holistic and integrated) framework, To start, a critical examination of the multi-disciplinary approaches to branding will be conducted to unravel the underling assumptions and limitations of each approach. Then, the paper assimilates these different approaches within the frame of an organic/living system, which is encapsulated in a tree metaphor. The paper then concludes with a synthesis of the process of branding.

### **Branding Literature: A Critical Examination**

This section aims to systematically unravel the underling assumptions and limitations of the existing academic approaches to branding. . The review starts with what is recognized as the “classic” approach to branding, the managerial view of brand equity. Criticism of the economic ideology underpinning this approach gave rise in turn to a social-psychological and an anthropological approach to branding. Finally, the contemporary

challenge posed approach by the sociological approach leaves our conceptualization of branding as a disjointed entity, in need of an organic (holistic and integrated) framework through which a synthesis of these various approaches can be articulated and developed.

Classic marketing theory has been shaped by a philosophy of domination and winning, enacted through a rational approach to management inspired primarily by the scientific approach to economic theory (Rindfleish, 1996; Gronroos, 1997; Tadajewski, 2006). Consequently, from this perspective, the primary goal of marketing management is to strategically compete to win and to dominate markets in order to maximize profits (Davidson, 1997; Gronroos, 1997; Kotler, 1999). Historically, the rhetoric of marketing education enforced via text books, and marketing practice legitimized this strategic approach as the sole ideology for marketing management (Hackley, 2003; Brown, 2006).

In the desire to dominate markets, brands play a key role. They are managed by firms with the aim of maximizing their equity (profit), through a process that differentiates one brand from another in order to command a larger market share (Kotler, 1999; de Chernatony, 2002; Keller, 2008). The use of brands in this way gave rise to the equity approach to brand management. With the ultimate goal of maximizing profit, the equity of a brand is defined in accounting terms as:

*“A set of brand assets (and liabilities) linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to (or subtract) from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers” (Aaker, 1996, 7)*

Such a strictly transactional based view of the value of a brand sets the tone for an approach that sees branding as a rationally structured process of economic exchange of a brand for a customer’s money. This approach envisages the brand producer (the firm) as

the prime active participant in the exchange, whilst the consumer takes a secondary or passive role, as the provider of feedback – the buyer. ( Consequently, managerial models of brand equity depict branding as a firm-led structured process in which customers provide systematically measurable feedback – ie they buy or do not buy the brand (de Chernatony, 2002: Dyson et al, 1996; Keller, 2008). This is reflected in the popular use of geometrical figures, such as circles, diamonds, and especially triangles or pyramids, when modelling the branding process (see Gordon, 1999 for a comprehensive review),

As suggested in Dyson et al (1996) and Keller (2008), the popularity of the triangle/pyramid shape in depictions of branding models stems from a step-by-step structure based upon a controlled systematic plan for, and consequently feedback on, the process of brand building. This starts with a wide base of brand awareness upon which the functional needs of customers are met through affordable, accessible and high quality products. Then, based on strong functional attributes, the emotional needs of customers are met by associating the product with a desirable and unique image through marketing communication activities. The fulfilment of both the functional and emotional needs of customers will ultimately differentiate the product from the competition and create a ‘bond’ with customers that, in turn, initiates repeat buying (loyalty) and hence brand equity is achieved. De Chernatony (2002) suggested that to maintain brand equity over time the unique bundle of functional and emotional attractions of the brand should be developed not only to create value for customers, but also to offer *added* values that cater for the continuously refined functional and emotional needs of customers in order to maximise satisfaction and hence equity.

To continuously add value, the managerial approach extended its reach into cognitive psychology in an attempt to inform the process of branding. Keller (2003) argues that cognitive psychology has the capacity to precisely map the functional and emotional components which form brand perceptions in the customer's mind. This enables brand managers to monitor any functional and emotional changes in the customers' perceptions of the brand and consequently launch/amend strategic plans in response, with the aim of again maximizing brand equity. De Chernatony and Riley (1998) conceptually model this process over time using a continuously rotating double vortex: one vortex captures the complex components of brand building inside the firm, whilst the other vortex captures the components of customer perceptions of the brand -- this firm built complex components-- as a simplified two-dimensional (rational-emotional) mental construct (position). This view of brands as a simplified cognitive construct or a "position" in the customer's mind, led Stern (2006) to conclude that a rational approach to branding interprets the term "brand" literally - as a name/sign which is strategically valuable as a way to differentiate a product or service in the marketplace for profit (equity).

Owing to this purely rational view of branding, the equity approach is often regarded as an incomplete view of the process (Blackston, 1995; Grassl, 1999). Grassl (1999) argues that the reliance of the equity approach on a solely rational economic ideology misses the "*ontological reality*" of brands: their "*social ecology*" (Grassl, 1999, 314). Thus, the main critique of the equity approach is based upon its fundamentally scientific style of brand management (Holt, 2002). To illustrate, it is argued that the highly-structured

managerial approach of brand equity manipulates the brand's artifacts to create an "objective brand" for mass consumption, which, as a result, overlooks the "subjective brand; what the brand thinks of a customer" (Blackston, 1995, 8). The equity approach assumes that the brand is a lifeless, fully controlled, object that lacks the ability to create a dialogue, and hence develop personal relationships, with its customers (Blackston, 1995; Hanby, 1999). Although the equity approach recognises emotions in the brand building process, its primarily engineered brand associations – guided by cognitive psychology mapping - tend to produce fabricated brand images and personalities (Holt 2002). Adhikari (2008) noted that consumer behavior studies in a strategic marketing context were essentially built upon understanding emotions, not from a wide social perspective, but from a narrow perspective that focused on their effects upon the customer's economic and rational behavior.

Building on this critique, a counter movement based on a social approach to branding emerged, widening the interpretations of the term "brand" from the literal to the metaphoric (Stern, 2006), and consequently marking a move from a "dead" to an "alive" orientation in the process of branding (Hanby, 1999, 7). The social approach to branding adopted ideas from behavioral sciences, namely social-psychology, anthropology and, lately, sociology, to inform the study of the branding process.

The social-psychology approach to branding is concerned with developing brand *identity*- rather than brand equity- which stems from the interactions between the brand and the customer at the personality level (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 1997; Stern, 2006). To Aaker



(1996) a brand, like a person, should have an identity that provides it with direction, purpose and meaning - its 'strategic intent' - embodied in a lively and ambitious personality. Such a persona provides customers with a reason to develop a relationship (a friendship) with the brand. Aaker (1997) identified five common personality dimensions upon which relationships between brands and customers are built: sincerity; excitement; competence; sophistication and ruggedness.

Through emphasizing the brand's ability to communicate its persona to customers, the social-psychology approach models the process of branding around speech making. Aaker's (1996) 'Core-Extended' model for building brand identity is a strategic communication model that focuses on instilling the identity of the brand (*the core*) in the customer's mind through integrated and consistent communications across all customer contact phases (*extensions*): the product itself; its personality; its symbols; and the internal and external strategies of the corporation. Due to the growing recognition of the role of the service orientation to branding, Brodie (2009) added the employees as a further customer contact phase, as employees are central in facilitating and delivering the promises made by the brand. Whilst the 'Core-Extended' model emphasized the sender's role in the speech, Kapferer (1997) proposed a two-way model that captured the roles of both the brand (sender) and the customer (receiver) in the personality dialogue. Through his identity prism, he visualised the picture of the *sender*, as the brand's physic and personality traits; the *medium*, as the culture and its social relationships through which the brand personality is linked to customers; and the *receiver*, as the brand's personality reflection on customers who adopt it to express their own persona.

Through both the Aaker (1996) and Kapferer (1997) models, the social-psychology approach views branding as the establishment of congruence between the personalities of customers and brands. This is achieved by the means of culturally coded messages transmitted via the strategic management of marketing communications. However, following their respective investigations into customer-brand relationships, Fournier (1998) and Veloutsou (2009) concluded that personality-based relationships with brands do not in themselves form the identities that customers aspire to, rather they are used as a means through which customers negotiate their identities within their own complex web of social relationships. By reducing the role of culture and social relationships to that of the medium through which to communicate the identity embodied in a personality, the social-psychology approach was deemed to just scratch the surface of the dynamic process of social identity construction (Reed, 2002). The social-psychology approach is therefore, regarded by some as having a rather simplified view of brands as social entities- . (Holt, 2002).

In contrast, the anthropological approach to branding views culture as the prime source of brand identity, rather than just a medium through which identity is communicated. Anthropologically, therefore, the value of a brand stems from its ability to contain -- within its identity- a bundle of meanings deeply rooted in culture (McCracken, 1988; Tharp and Scott, 1990; McCracken, 1993). According to McCracken (1993), the anthropological approach views branding as a process in which consumers seek to construct their own identities out of the pool of meanings embedded in their own culture.

He argues that brand communications (especially advertising) play the social role of transferring generic meanings from the culture to the brand. The brand then becomes independently able to evoke and convey these meanings, making the brand itself a powerful cultural symbol (McCracken, 1993; Aaker et al, 2001; Wattanasuwan 2005). In other words, the brand becomes the medium through which culture is communicated. The process then becomes: *culture – brand – customer*, which is the reverse of the social-psychology approach that advocates *brand – culture -- customer*.

The culture-driven symbolic power of the anthropological approach transforms the brand from a market-driven (equity approach) to a market-driving force: a leader which creates rather than responds to demand (Kotler, 1999; Elliott and Percy, 2007). However, as this approach mixes marketing tactics (eg communications) with generic culture to craft a market-driving brand identity, it is seen by others to represent the blatant commercialization of culture (or even the human self) for corporate gain, and has consequently been criticized as a form of cultural hijacking (Klein, 2000; Holt, 2002; Arvidsson, 2005; Hearn, 2008). It is argued that by encapsulating culture in a brand, the anthropological approach creates the illusion that customers can own cultural values through brands (Holt, 2002; Wattanasuwan, 2005).

This, to Brown and Maclaran (1996), is an apocalyptic view of marketing as a discipline. From the postmodern perspective of marketing management (Firat et al, 1995), they warn that the potential to manage social experience and hence values through interactive marketing communications, creates the illusion that utopia can be attained and owned.

Therefore the future can always be the past, which they suggest signals the end of marketing practice on humanitarian grounds: since attaining utopia negates the core of the human concept - that can be pursued but not owned or attained.

One can observe obvious differences and subtle similarities between the anthropological approach, the social-psychological approach, and the managerial (equity) approach to branding.. In essence, the managerial approach and the contrasting social approaches all exhibit different tactics to serve the same concealed intent, that is to exercise the firms' *authority* over the branding process. The managerial approach sees branding as a rational economic process in which the firm exerts its authority through engineering ways to provide more effective and efficient responses to customer needs than its competitors. The social-psychological approach counters this managerial authority through the attention paid to the social side of brands. This moved brand management towards a more 'lively' and 'friendly' concept. Nonetheless, the reduction of social relationships and culture to channels of communication, through which to match brand and customer personalities, reveals an inherent focus on the promotional. This again simply exerts the firm's authority on the process, albeit this time by shallow social means, namely friendly relationships

In an attempt to deepen the shallow social orientation of the social-psychology approach, the anthropological approach changed the focus of the branding process from firm-led to culture-led, instilling human values as the essence of branding. However, its blatant mixing of cultural values in the commercial pot of brands provided a deeper yet still

elusive social orientation to branding through which authority is furtively exerted over the process through cultural hijacking. In short, the managerial as well as the social-psychological and anthropological approaches to branding share the same strategic intent of exerting a firm's *authority* over the branding process, yet they differ in the means by which they seek to do so. Consequently, one may conclude that, like the managerial approach of brand equity, the branding perspectives of social-psychology and anthropology are ultimately used as social approaches to deliver *authority*.

The inherent dominance of an authoritarian ideology in marketing thought meant that the discipline failed to recognize collaboration with (rather than control of) its customers as being the key for trustworthy business relationships (Reidenbach and Robin, 1991; Rindfleisch, 1996; Gronroos, 1997; Tadajewski, 2006). This underlying ideology also impacted upon our understanding of the process of branding. Holt (2002) argued that authoritarian-based approaches to branding were troublesome as they overlooked the *active* role of the customer in the process. The active role played by individuals in shaping the meaning of their own lives is the process of culture construction and production, a central theme in the field of sociology, were it is depicted in several theoretical approaches: such as sociological imagination (Mills, 1959); the social construction of reality (Burger and Lukermann, 1966); and, most recently, social capital accumulation via acts of classification (Bourdieu, 1989).

Holt (1998) observed that the consumption of brands in the contemporary marketplace is rooted in the concept of social capital. This is the historical collaborative construction of

a powerful symbolic meaning (cultural phenomenon) in an object/entity (brand), by the interactions of the social actors (consumers and brands) in their social space (markets, popular culture and mass media) (Bourdieu, 1989; Holt, 1998; 2004). The collaborative process of producing a cultural phenomenon instigated the sociological or cultural view of brands (Holt, 2004). According to Holt (2004), the sociological approach is built around creating the social identity of a brand through myth making. Myths are an integral and indispensable part of human nature, and help to construct self-meaning (identity) through the relentless pursuit of perfection (Coupe, 1997; Somerville, 2006). Thus, shared myth-making is the means through which brands and customers become socially active and bond to co-construct their identities, with the outcomes that brands can develop an iconic (cultural phenomenon) status (Holt, 2004).

The idea of constructing identity by using brands is believed to be the central theme of brand consumption in the postmodern era (Cova, 1997; Holt, 2002; Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Cova et al, 2007). In postmodern consumption, consumers are freed from the traditional authoritarian market logic (Kozinets, 2002) through the pursuit of identity construction in sociological structures like communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002) or cults (Atkin, 2004), thus turning consumption into an act of '*societing*' or social gathering (Badot et al, 2007, 94). A brand's iconic power is therefore manifest in its ability to aid customers in their sociological trajectory of identity construction (Cova, 1997; Holt, 2004; Badot et al, 2007). Consequently, in the cultural approach to brand building (*brand—customer—culture*), the customer becomes the *agent/medium* who adopts a culturally-active brand meaning (a creative vision of

generic cultural value/s) in his/her pursuit of social identity, and actively *collaborates/communes* with the brand and like-minded customers to pursue and develop that meaning within society, ultimately turning the brand into a cultural phenomenon (Holt, 2004; Sherry, 2005).

In pursuit of social identification, the customer's collaboration with the brand takes two main forms. First, in their everyday lives, customers consume a collection of brands that coherently construct their identity in a creative social narrative (lifestyle) which again bonds them with like-minded customers or partners in cults or tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002; Atkin, 2004; Sherry, 2005; Small, 2006; Elliott and Percy, 2007). Second, customers also construct their identity, and hence lifestyle, around the consumption of a particular brand meanings, such as the Harley-Davidson's rebel or Apple's creativity, which bonds them with like-minded customers or partners in sub-cultures or communities of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Elliott and Percy, 2007). Cova et al (2007) add other more "novel" forms of identity construction with brands around which customers commune in consumption tribes: such as an entrepreneurial form, where customers develop the commercial offering of the brand beyond its owners' technical domain; a critical form, where customers imbued brands with new meanings that go beyond those conveyed by the owners, and a pirate form, where customers hijack (or abuse) the brand and produce counter meanings to those originally intended. Although identity construction can take various forms, the common goal of the customers' collaborative activism with brands is a passion for social bonding with others (Cova, 1997; Cova et al, 2007), which Maffesoli

(2007, 30) refers to as “*organic solidarity*”.

With *solidarity* at the core of the sociological approach to branding, this approach clearly contradicts the *authority* based core underpinning the managerial (equity), social-psychological, and anthropological approaches. Hence, whilst the various existing approaches to branding, attempt to address a single process, they are split between two contradicting ideologies. In spite of the potential power of the brand-customer collaboration ideology, doubts are raised over whether solidarity can prevail over authority in the marketplace, as the firms’ pursuit of power (authority) through brands is thought to be inexorable (Shankar et al, 2006; Cova et al., 2007). To make sense of this conundrum we shall now attempt to combine these contracting ideologies, as seen in current branding approaches, within a single holistic and integrated framework.

### **Towards a Branding Synthesis: an Organic Framework**

The evolution of branding thought has so far revealed that the prevailing approaches to branding are conceptually polarized between *authority* and *solidarity*, suggesting the need for an assimilated conceptualization or synthesis of the process of branding. To develop such a synthesis, we will resort to the intellectual puzzle-solving power of the metaphor encapsulated in its process of construction through the systematic transfer of domains (Morgan, 1980; Rindfleisch, 1996; Corenlissen, 2003; 2006). The use of a metaphor to develop an understanding of brands and branding is a well established tradition, as branding is argued to be inherently metaphoric (Gordon, 1999; Hanby, 1999;



Davies and Chen, 2003; Stern, 2006; Brown, 2008). Accordingly, we propose an organically integrated framework, encapsulated in the living entity of a *tree*, as a synthesis to conceptualize the process of branding. To construct the tree-metaphor framework, we will now enact the matching, blending and creating meaning stages of metaphor construction as outlined by Cornelissen (2006).

(Insert Figure 1)

As a living entity, a tree matches (captures) our desire for a synthesis capable of embracing the polarized cores of the existing approaches to branding. The open (holistic) and fluid (integrated) relationships amongst the different, yet complementary, functions of the constituent parts of the tree – the leaves, trunk, and roots -integrate the total structure into an organic living whole. To demonstrate the potential of the tree metaphor, the blending stage will relate the central tenets of each branding approach to the biological functions of the tree's parts: starting with the leaves and ending with the roots. Finally, the creating meaning stage will then show how the harmony arising from the roles performed by each part of the tree is capable of framing the existing underlying authority and solidarity ideologies of branding in a holistic and integrated process.

As discussed earlier, the managerial brand equity approach is based upon engineering an attractive brand image to attain competitive advantage through an effective and efficient response to customer needs. Similarly, the *leaves* of a tree are designed to make efficient and effective use of sunlight (customers) through photosynthesis to provide the tree with energy (competitive advantage) and thus life (equity). In addition to this strategic role, the leaves also give the tree an attractive image through color, and texture, which when

combined (integrated communication) form a distinctive shape that gives the tree an imposing character (personality). The ornamental role of the leaves thus mirrors the promotional emphasis within the social-psychological approach.

Although it may appear at first look to be just a support mechanism for the leaves, the *trunk* is fundamental to the life of the tree. The trunk is the intrinsic hub of the vascular system of the tree (its web of relationships), through which active cells (agents) continuously mediate the vital transformation of the nutrition absorbed by the roots, into energy via the leaves. The trunk thus collectively bonds together all parts of the tree in an organic/living system. During this process, the age and history of the tree is accumulated within the trunk's inner layers. In a similar vein, the sociological\cultural approach to branding provides a web of social relationships through which social agents (customers) mediate (via myth making) the vital transformation of the brand's vision (cultural values) into a shared symbolic meaning. This in turn collectively bonds them together in a social system (community or cult) and produces, in the process, the brands historically-accumulated social capital. Finally, the anthropological approach to branding is based on the brand's ability to contain, in its identity, the raw values embedded in a culture. This is matched in the metaphor by the ability of the *roots* to take in raw nutrition (values) from the *soil* (culture).

In the blending stage of metaphor construction we can relate the structural parts of the tree to the central tenets underpinning the multi-disciplinary approaches to branding. In the tree metaphor, *authority* is represented by both the roots and the leaves, whose roles

are strategically and technically critical to the tree's life - being the sources of nutrition and energy respectively. The trunk's active mediation role, as the space in which the tree's biological (socialization) process of transferring nutrition to energy takes place, mirrors the brand-customer cultural activism found at the core of the sociological approach to branding. Focussing on role of the trunk with respect to the whole tree, one can argue that it does not play a strategic role per se, but its collaborative role with the strategic (authoritarian) parts, the leaves and roots, ensures that its active social role (*ie solidarity*) is strategically essential. Accordingly, it could be suggested that, like the trunk, sociological solidarity has the potential to perform a reconciliation role amongst the multi-disciplinary approaches to branding, by providing the socio-strategic 'nuts and bolts' that bind together their loose ends, and blends them into an inter-disciplinary holistic and integrated framework.

To further illustrate the social mediation role of the tree trunk,, we will conduct a cross-boundary examination of *solidarity-based* and *authority-based* social approaches to branding, grouped into two phases: a *socio-anthropological* phase and a *socio-psychological* phase through which sustainable brand equity can be developed.

The *socio-anthropological phase* provides an overlap between the sociological and the anthropological approaches to branding. This phase merges the brand embodiment of cultural values, the core of the anthropological approach, with the brand activism found at the core of the sociological approach, and acts as an agent engaged with the customer to develop a shared creative vision of these values in society. This collaborative

customer-brand cultural activism provides a response to the ethical criticism of the anthropological approach. It allows the brand to actively work with customers (via myth-making) to aid them in their relentless pursuit of social identification. This, according to Arvidsson (2008, 328), provides the brand with '*ethical capital*', which makes the pursuit of economic goals at the service of the customers' pursuit of social goals. Moreover, since the pursuit of socio-cultural values has become '*the spiritual*' in increasingly secular societies (Somerville, 2006, 8), the brand's socio-anthropological meaning becomes an embodiment of the customers' spiritual goals (Sherry, 2005).

As for the *socio-psychological phase*, this blends the sociological and the social-psychological approaches to branding. In this phase, the brand invites active agents (customers) to share (co-construct) a social vision in a process of '*inter-agency*', by using interactive communications and dramatic experiences of brand meanings in retail settings (Kozinets et al, 2004, 659; Arnould, 2005) and/or advertising (Kates and Goh, 2003; Elliott and Percy, 2007). As an interactive process, the '*inter-agency*' element animates the process of brand meaning co-construction by fusing the brands cultural activism with its promotional personality traits (Kates and Goh, 2003; Arnould, 2005; Hollenbeck, Peters and Zinkhan, 2008). This, for customers, adds a passionate socialization to brand promotions and as such deepens the socially shallow social-psychological approach to branding. However, it should be recognised that from a Marxist standpoint such a fusion of materialism (promotional activities) with social activism (passionate socialization) is seen as a form of materialistic exploitation of the customers' involvement in brand meaning construction (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody,

2008).

The materialistic view of brand meaning co-construction can only be offset by recognizing the value of the social core of the sociological approach (ie *organic solidarity*), in linking the promotional core of the psychological approach via the socio-psychological phase, with the cultural core of the anthropological approach via the socio-anthropological phase. Ibn Khaldun (2005, 99), a fourteenth-century Arab historian, aptly captured the value of the social nature of organic/blood-like solidarity amongst people. He warned that if solidarity was to:

*“...become a matter of scientific (materialistic) knowledge, it can no longer move the imagination (transcendence) and is denied the affection (passion) caused by group feeling. It has become useless”.*

Having in its core both group passion, the goal of the brand’s socio-psychological phase, and spiritual transcendence, the goal of the brand’s socio-anthropological phase, solidarity could be seen as providing a transcendental and non-materialistic path for social bonding. This has parallels with Belk’s (1996, 102) view of experiential marketing as “*giving hope*”. Along with Xie, Bagozzi and Troye (2008) and Arnould (2005), Belk argues that hyper-real market and brand experiences capture the customers’ path of hope (ie passionate transcendence) through their collective social relationships, to construct a distinctive identity out of their respective cultural values. This view of brands as facilitators of meaningful social relationships is widely regarded as the principle value of contemporary consumption and marketing (Cova, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Cova and Cova, 2002; Shankar, Whittaker and Fitchett, 2006; Badot, Bucci and Cova, 2007; Veloutsou, 2009). This makes solidarity - like the trunk in the tree metaphor

- the “beating heart” of the branding process, whose intrinsic social nature ceaselessly transforms the promotional and the cultural authoritarian ideologies of branding into a meaningful and legitimate socio-cultural organic whole. Through this a brand can develop and grow a strategically sustainable equity free from the criticisms levelled at the purely economic approach. In essence, developing brand equity from a solid socio-cultural meaning reverses the strategic view of brand building: from a product/service offering *associated with a meaning* (image) to a *meaning imbued and experienced* through a product/service offering.

In conclusion, embodied in the connotations of the word ‘organic’ is our “*metaphoric vision*” (Stern 2006, 219) of the branding process. This approach, within which a complex set of different yet interdependent cultural, social, and strategic systems function in a coherent and complementary manner, is the essence of *being alive*. Consequently through the metaphoric use of the tree as a living system, we have conceptualised the branding process as an organic whole (Figure 2) that has an anthropological *foundation* (roots) anchored in a humanitarian value system (soil), which is continuously *transformed* sociologically through socio-anthropological and socio-psychological phases (trunk) and *communicated* through social-psychological concepts as an iconic symbol, which management should aim to strategically *sustain* in order to attain enduring equity (leaves).

(Insert Figure 2)

Thus, the tree forms a multi-level integrated framework for the process of branding that both aligns and explains the movements amongst its intricate levels of meaning –

cultural, social and strategic – and subsequently provides an inter-disciplinary understanding of branding as a self-reflective organic process (table 1).

(Insert table 1)

Our proposed tree metaphor has therefore fulfilled our initial goal of providing a synthesis of the multi-disciplinary approaches to branding in a single holistic and integrated conceptual framework. This framework provides a tentative solution to the intellectually-open puzzle of branding, and as such awaits further critique to extend it beyond its current disciplinary boundaries.

## References

- Aaker, David (1996), *Building Strong Brands*, New York: The Free Press.
- Aaker, Jennifer, L. (1997) "Dimensions of Brand Personality," *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 347-357.
- Aaker, Jennifer, L., Benet-Martinez, Veronica and Garolera, Jordi (2001) "Consumption Symbols as Carriers of Culture: A Study of Japanese and Spanish Brand Personality Constructs," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(3): 492-508.
- Adhikari, Atanu (2008) "Consumer Schools of Thought in Management Research: A Theoretical Perspective," *The Icfaiian Journal of Management Research*, Vol.7, No.2, pp. 67-75
- Arnould, Eric (2005) "Animating the Big Middle," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol.81, No.2, pp.89-96.
- Arvidsson, Adam (2005) "Brands: a Critical Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 5, No.2, pp. 235-258
- Arvidsson, Adam (2008) "The Ethical Economy of Customer Coproduction," *Journal of Macromarketing*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 326-338
- Atkin, Douglas (2004) *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers*. New York: Portfolio- The Penguin Group.
- Badot, Olivier, Bucci, Ampelio and Cova, Bernard (2007), "Beyond Marketing Panaceas: In Praise of Societing". In: Saren, M., Maclaran P., Goulding, C. and Elliott, R., Shankar, A., and Catterall, M., ed., *Critical Marketing: Defining the Field*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, pp. 85-96.
- Belk, Russell (1996) "On Aura, Illusion, Escape and Hope in Apocalyptic Consumption: The Apotheosis of Las Vegas", In: Brown, S., Bell, J. and Carson, D., ed., *Marketing Apocalypse: Eschatology, Escapology, and the Illusion of the End*, London: Routledge, pp.87-107.
- Blackston, Max (1995) "The Qualitative Dimension of Brand Equity," *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vol. 35, No.4, pp.6-14
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1989) "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 7, No.1, pp. 14-25
- Brodie, Roderick J. (1999), "From Goods to Service Branding: An Integrative



Perspective,” *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 9, No.1, pp.107-111.

Brodie, Roderick, J. and de Chernatony, Leslie (2009), “Towards New Conceptualizations of Branding: Theories of the Middle Range,” *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 9, No.1, pp.95-100.

Brown, Stephen (2006) *The Marketing Code*. London: Marshall Cavendish Business.

Brown, Stephen (2008), “Are Marketing’s Metaphors Good for It?” *Marketing Review*, Vol. 8, No.3, pp. 209-221

Brown, Stephen and Maclaran, Pauline (1996) “The Future is Past: Marketing, Apocalypse, and the Retreat from Utopia”. In: Brown, S., Bell, J. and Carson, D., ed., *Marketing Apocalypse: Eschatology, Escapology, and the Illusion of the End*, London: Routledge, pp.260-277.

Brownlie, Douglas (2006) “Emancipation, Epiphany and Resistance: On the Underimagined and Overdetermined in Critical Marketing,” *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 22, pp.505-528.

Burger, Peter L. and Luckmann, Thomas (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, First Anchor Books.

Burton, Dawn (2002), “Towards a Critical Multicultural Marketing Theory,” *Marketing Theory*, Vol.2, No.2, pp.207-236.

Burton, Dawn (2005) “Marketing Theory Matters,” *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 16, No.1, pp.5-18

Calonius, Henrik (2006) “Contemporary Research in Marketing: A Market Behaviour Framework,” *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 6, No.4, pp 419-428

Coupe, Laurence (1997) *Myth*, London: Routledge

Cornelissen, Jesop, P. (2006) “Metaphor and the Dynamics of Knowledge in Organisation Theory: a Case Study of the Organizational Identity Metaphor,” *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol.43, No.4, pp.683-709.

Cova, Bernard (1997) “Community and Consumption: Towards a Definition of the “Linking Value” of Products or Services,” *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31, No.3/4, pp. 297-316.

Cova, Bernard and Cova, Veronique (2002), “Tribal Marketing: The Tribalisation of Society and its Impact on the Conduct of Marketing,” *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 36, No.5/6, pp.595-620

Cova, Bernard, Kozinets, Robert, V. and Shankar, Avi (2007), "Tribal, Inc.: The new World of Tribalism," In: Cova, B., Kozinets, R. V. and Shankar, A., ed., *Consumer Tribes*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, pp.3-26

Davidson, Hugh (1997) *Even More Offensive Marketing*, London: Penguin Business.

Davies, Gary and Chun, Rose (2003) "The Use of Metaphor in the Exploration of the Brand Concept," *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol.19, pp. 45-71

de Chernatony, Leslie (2002) *From Brand Vision to Brand Evaluation*, Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann

de Chernatony, Leslie and Riley, Francesca, D. (1998), "Modeling the Components of the Brand," *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol.32 No.11/12, pp.1074-1090.

Dyson, Paul, Farr, Andy and Hollis, Nigel, S. (1996) 'Understanding, Measuring, and Using Brand Equity,' *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vol. (November/ December), pp. 9-21

Elliott, Richard and Percy, Lary (2007) *Strategic Brand Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Firat, A. Faut, Dholakia, Nikhilesh and Venkatesh, Alladi (1995), "Marketing in the Postmodern World," *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 29, No.1, pp. 40-56

Firat, A. Faut and Dholakia, Nikhilesh (2006) "Theoretical and Philosophical Implications of Postmodern Debates: Some Challenges to Modern Marketing," *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 6, No.2, pp.123-162

Fournier, Susan (1998) "Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 24 (March), pp. 343-373

Gordon, Wendy (1999) *Goodthinking: A Guide to Qualitative Research*, Henley-on-Tames: Admap publications

Grassl, Wolfgang (1999), "The Reality of Brands: Towards an Ontology of Marketing," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 58(April), pp. 313-360

Gronroos, Christian (1997), "From Marketing Mix to Relationship Marketing-Towards a Paradigm Shift in Marketing," *Management Decision*, Vol.35, No.3, pp.322-340.

Gronroos, Christian (2006) "On Defining Marketing: Finding a New Roadmap for Marketing," *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 6, No.4, pp.395-417

- Hackley, Chris (2003), "We Are All Consumers Now...' Rhetorical Strategy and Ideological Control in Marketing Management Texts," *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 40, No.5, pp.1325-1352.
- Hanby, Terry (1999), "Brands – Dead or Alive," *Journal of the Market Research Society*, Vol. 41, No.1, pp.7-15.
- Hearn, Alison (2008), "Meat, Mask, Burden: Probing the Contours of the Branded Self," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 8, No.2, pp. 197-217.
- Hollenbeck, Candice, R., Peters, Cara, and Zinkhan, George, M. (2008), "Retail Spectacles and Brand Meaning: Insights from a Brand Museum Case Study," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol.84, No.3, pp.344-353
- Holt, Douglas, B. (2002) "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 29 (June), pp.70-90
- Holt, Douglas, B. (2004) *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Ibn Khaldun, Abdul-Rahaman (2005), *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, New York: Princeton University Press.
- Kapferer, Jean-Noel (1997) *Strategic Brand Management*. London: Kogan Page.
- Kates, Steven, M. and Goh, Charlene (2003), "Brand Morphing," *Journal of Advertising*, Vol.32, No.1, pp.59-68.
- Keller, Kevin L. (2003) "Brand Synthesis: The Multidimensionality of Brand Knowledge," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol.29 (March), pp.595-600.
- Keller, Kevin L. (2008) *Strategic Brand Management*, New Jersey: Pearson McGrawHill.
- Klein, Naomi (2000) *No Logo*, Toronto:Vintage Canada.
- Kotler, Philip (1999) *Kotler on Marketing: How to Create, Win and Dominate Markets*. New York: The Free Press
- Kozinets, Robert, V. (2002) "Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man," *Journal of Consumer Research* Vol. 29 (June), pp.20-38
- Kozinets, R.V., Sherry, J., Storm, D., Duhachek, A., Nuttavuthisit, K. and Deberry-Spence, B. (2004), "Ludic Agency and Retail Spectacle," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 31(December), pp.658-672

Maffesoli, Michel (2007), "Tribal Aesthetic," In: Cova, B., Kozinets, R. V. and Shankar, A., ed., *Consumer Tribes*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, pp.27-48

McCracken, Grant (1988), *Culture and Consumption*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

McCracken, Grant (1993) "The Value of the Brand: An Anthropological Perspective", In: Aaker, D. and Biel, A., ed., *Brand Equity and Advertising*, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.125-139

Mills, Wright C. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Morgan, Garth (1980) "Paradigms, Metaphors, and Puzzle-Solving in Organisation Theory," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol.25, No.4, pp. 605-620.

Muniz Jr, Albert and O'Guinn, Thomas (2001) 'Brand Community', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(March):412-432.

Pitt, Leyland, Watson, Richard, Berthon, Pierre, Wynn, Donald and Zinkhan, George (2006), "The Penguin's Window: Corporate Brands from an Open-Source Perspective," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 34, No.2, pp.115-127.

Reed, Americus II (2002), "Social Identity as a Useful Perspective for Self-Concept-Based Consumer Research," *Psychology & Marketing*, Vol. 19, No.3, pp.235-266

Reidenbach, R. Eric and Robin, Donald, P. (1991), "Epistemological Structures in Marketing: Paradigms, Metaphors, and Marketing Ethics," *Business Ethics Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No.2, pp.185-200.

Rindfleisch, Aric (1996) "Marketing As Warfare: Reassessing a Dominant Metaphor," *Business Horizons*, Vol. 39, No.5, pp.3-10.

Shankar, Avi, Cherrier, Helene, and Canniford, Robin (2006), "Consumer Empowerment: a Foucauldian Interpretation," *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 40, No.9/10, pp. 1013-1030

Shankar, Avi, Whittaker, Julie and Fitchett, James A. (2006), "Heaven Knows I'm miserable now," *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 6, No.4, pp. 485-505

Sherry, John, F. (2005) "Brand Meaning". In: Tybout, A. and Calkins, T., ed., *Kellogg on Branding*, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, pp. 65-194

Shouten, John, W. and McAlexander, James, H. (1995) "Sub-Cultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers," *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol.22(June), pp. 43-61

Small, Robert, G. (2006) "The Book of Ours: Consumption as Narrative," *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, Vol. 9, No.4, pp.317-325

Somerville, Margaret (2006) *The Ethical Imagination: Journeys of the Human Spirit*, Toronto: House of Anansi Press

Stern, Barbara (2006) "What Does Brand Mean? Historical-Analysis Method and Construct Definition", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol.34, No.2, pp. 216-223

Tharp, Marye and Scott, Linda (1990) "The Role of Marketing Processes in Creating Cultural Meaning," *Journal of Macromarketing*, Vol. 10, No.2, pp. 47-60

Tadajewski, Mark (2006), "The Ordering of Marketing Theory: the Influence of McCarthyism and the Cold-War," *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 6, No.2, pp.163-199.

Tadajewski, Mark and Brownlie, Douglas (2008), "Critical Marketing: A Limit Attitude". In: Tadajewski, M. and Brownlie, D., ed., *Critical Marketing: Issues in Contemporary Marketing*, London: John Wiley & Sons, pp.1-28.

Veloutsou, Cleopatra (2009), "Brands as Relationship Facilitators in Consumer Markets," *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 9, No.1, pp.127-130

Wattanasuwan, Kritsadarat (2005), "The Self and Symbolic Consumption," *The Journal of American Academy of Business*, Vol. 6 (March), pp.179-184

Xie, Chunyan, Bagozzi, Richard, P. and Troye, Sigurd, V. (2008) "Trying to Prosume: Toward a Theory of Consumers as Co-creators of Value," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 36, pp.109-122.

Zwick, Detlev, Bonsu, Samuel, K. and Darmody, Aron (2008), "Putting Consumers to Work: Co-Creation and New Marketing Govern-mentality," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 8, No.2, pp. 163-196.

Figure 1: Stages of Metaphor Construction

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Matching</u></b></p> <p>when the researcher outlines general similarities between two different domains</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Blending</u></b></p> <p>when the researcher analytically develops the similarities between the nature of the two domains that have not been recognized before.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Creating Meaning</u></b></p> <p>when the researcher discusses the contribution of the new perspective that the newly developed metaphor can bring to the domain in which the metaphor is drafted</p>

Figure 2: the tree metaphor as a synthesis for the process of branding

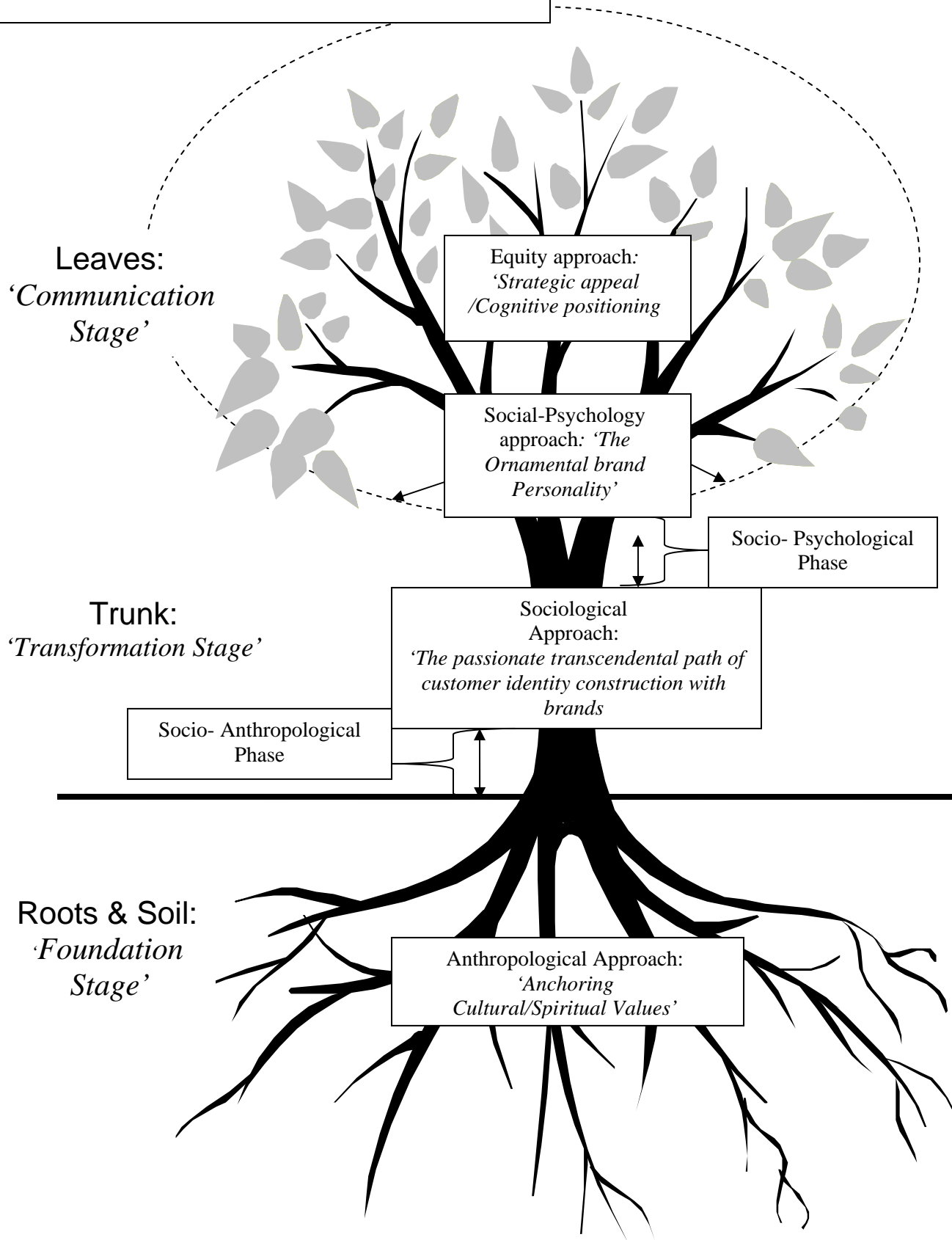


Table 1: The Tree as an organic framework for the branding process

Tree Metaphor	Branding Approaches	Central Tenant/s of each Branding Approach	Underlying Branding ideology	An Organic Framework for the Branding Process
Leaves	Managerial (equity) Approach  Social-Psychological Approach	Strategic Appeal /Positioning  Brand Personality  <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">Socio-Psychological Phase</div>	<i>(Strategic)</i> Authority	Communication Stage
Trunk <i>(the beating heart)</i>	Sociological Approach	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">Socio-Psychological Phase</div> <p style="text-align: center;">“The transcendental path of customer identity construction with brands”</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">Socio-Anthropological Phase</div>	<i>(Social)</i> Solidarity	Transformation Stage
Roots & Soil	Anthropological Approach	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">Socio-Anthropological Phase</div> <p style="text-align: center;">Anchoring/Embedded Cultural/Spiritual Values</p>	<i>(Cultural)</i> Authority	Foundation Stage