

Towards Modeling the Retailer as a Brand:

A Social Construction of the Grocery Store from the Customer Standpoint

Abstract

As a highly customer-sensitive business, retailing is one of the most socially active industries. Nevertheless, when addressing retailers as brands, the retailing literature has failed to account for their unique social orientation, exposing a gap in the literature. This paper utilizes the sociological view of brands to socially construct a conceptual retail brand model from the customer standpoint. An ethnographic study of grocery retailing revealed that the store has, metaphorically, a tree-shaped culture, which can organically model the interplay between building the retailer brand as a culture and the phases constituting the social-self concept.

Key words: Retailing, branding, sociology conceptual modeling, social construction, conceptual modeling.

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Introduction

Shopping is a socio-cultural activity in which retailers and customers are socially interdependent^{1,2} - in what Sherry³ (p.13) called a '*retail ecology*'. Despite this inherent social orientation, when addressing retailers as brands, the retailing literature has traditionally focused on a narrow managerial orientation⁴⁻⁷. Consequently, calls to broaden this narrow perspective have been made⁸ which have, in effect, exposed a gap in the literature.

In an attempt to fill this gap, this paper proposes to adopt a social orientation to retail branding. The paper starts with a brief review of existing approaches to branding in order to evaluate the progress made in addressing retailers as brands. A social constructionist approach to research was applied to the case of a major grocery retailer to socially construct the retailer as a brand from the customer standpoint. The findings are presented and discussed in the context of an organically integrated system represented metaphorically as a 'tree', which we believe can be used to model the retailer as a brand from the customer standpoint.

Literature Review

This section will briefly review the evolution in the orientations towards the branding process, and developments in the literature addressing retailers as brands will be assessed.

Then, in light of the social nature of retailing as a business, the sociological orientation to branding the retailer will be proposed.

The classic managerial approach to branding is that of brand equity, which regards the firm as having full control over the branding process. The aim is to maximize profit, and typically geometrical models, most notably pyramids^{6,9} are used to provide a structured representation of the branding process. This stance has been criticized as providing a purely engineered view of brands as lifeless entities^{10,11}. In contrast to the passive role of customers inherent in the brand equity approach, the concept of brand identity infuses life into brands as it engages the customer at the personality level^{12,13}. However, as personality is regarded as only the tip of the iceberg of social life¹⁴, Holt¹¹ has also criticized this approach for being shallow and having a mainly promotional focus.

By recognizing the social impact of marketing on culture¹⁵, the anthropological approach¹⁶ broadens the branding process further to encompass cultural meaning embodiment¹⁷. This view has, however, raised concerns that culture was being commercialized via brands, and is regarded by some as unethical cultural hijacking^{11,18,19}. In the postmodern world²⁰, the recognition of consumers who use (rather than rely on) brands to construct their own identities led to the cultural approach to branding, in which branding is seen as a sociological process of cultural meaning co-construction between consumers and brands^{21,22}.

In spite of the progress made towards a social orientation in branding research, the process of branding in retailing has essentially been limited to either managerial or

promotional perspectives. To some extent this might be expected as traditionally retailers lagged behind manufacturers and service providers in becoming brands on their own right^{4,5}. Over time, however, retailers gained control of their supply-chain operations which allowed them to add value to their private-label product ranges and challenge the functional and economical (strategic) appeal of the well-established national manufacturer brands^{5,23,24}. Whilst the focus on branding in retailing remained on the private-brand (ie the product item), retail branding was reduced to lifeless physical product brands, managed to maximize equity and/or create a strategically attractive personality^{4-7, 25}. However, just as the approach to branding has developed beyond the equity/personality perspectives, calls for a wider view of retailers as brands have emerged⁸.

Since retailing is defined as the business that sells *directly* to final consumer, primarily through their distinctive feature - the store²⁶ - it is argued that shopping is inherently a socio-cultural activity, in which retailers aid customers in their pursuit of social identification¹⁻³. In this social activity, the store is argued to play a pivotal role as the space in which the process of identity co-construction is enacted (experienced)^{1, 27}. Despite the inherently social nature of retailing, retailers as brands have been addressed from the socially shallow brand-personality orientation (esp. amongst lifestyle retailers e.g. GAP) and have been hugely undermined socially via the equity orientation - suffering from accusations of stealing manufactures social identities²⁸ and being perceived as high-risk purchases by customers²⁹. Since the central tenet of meaning co-construction mirrors the social interdependence of customers and retailers, we argue that the cultural/sociological orientation to brands is a viable approach worth adopting in

order to broaden our understanding of the retailer as a brand from its sociological unit - the store. Consequently, in this paper we have sought to conceptually model the customer process of cultural meaning co-construction with the retailer on the shop-floor.

Methodology

According to Hackely³⁰, understanding the interdependence between people and the social world through examining the discursive process of meaning-making from consumption patterns, is an act of social construction of the object of consumption from the customer/agent standpoint. Social construction originated in the field of sociology as an approach to research that both recognizes and unravels the active role agents play in shaping their social world (e.g. consumers in the marketplace)^{30,31}. Therefore, the contribution of social construction to managerial and marketing research is argued to be the production of synthesised accounts of the various ways in which social agents construct their worlds, as they are fashioned from the researcher perspective^{30,32}. Consequently, it is argued that social construction is *not* an attempt by researchers at *grand theorizing* but a reflexive act of social *modeling* that can be tested empirically³¹. Moreover, according to Thorpe³², while methods of conducting social construction vary in managerial research, their main focus is either understanding the *process* of construction first-hand through ethnographic accounts, or the *product* of construction second-hand through studying narrative accounts (e.g. discourse analysis, semiotics, etc.)

As this paper adopts the cultural view of brands to conceptualize from the store context the customer *process* of meaning co-construction with a retailer, market-oriented

ethnographic inquiry³³ has been selected. According to Sherry³⁴, due to wide variations in defining culture, any consumer research project taking a cultural perspective should start by adopting a relevant abstract definition of culture. This allows it to infest its epistemological abstract categories with the web of meaning/s arising from the ethnographic inquiry. This study intends to explore the co-construction of culture in the sociological context of the retail store, therefore, the four abstract organisational culture categories provided by Hofstede et al.³⁵ (p.291) were adopted:

- *Symbols*; these are words, pictures, signs, or objects that carry a particular meaning within a culture;
- *Heroes*; these are alive or dead, real or hypothetical personalities who possess characteristics highly prized in the culture and thus act as or represent a model for behaviour;
- *Rituals*; these are the collective activities that are technically superficial but are socially essential within a culture;
- *Values*; these are the core of culture, the unconscious and seldom discussed feelings that cannot be observed but are felt in behaviour and thus can only be identified by analyzing the visible cues.

To construct the multi-faceted social object under investigation (in this case the store culture), Hackely³⁰ argues that the methods of data collection and analysis must be liberated from traditional methodological rigidity, thus promoting the use of mixed methods. Participant observation, as the prime technique in ethnographic research, was selected for data collection as this method captured the customer's natural behavior and speech³³. To systematically construct the model's conceptual blocks, data analysis was

carried out using the constructionist school of grounded theory ³⁶, whose coding system complements ethnographic data with a highly-structured process of analysis ³⁷.

Finally, according to Morrill and Fine ³⁸, selecting the research setting is vital for the validity of the ethnographic account. That is because the setting becomes the '*empirical mean*' through which the '*natural conceptualization*' (p. 443) of the culture categories will be developed. To depict the customer consumption of the retail store, we have selected the context of grocery retailing, since this represents the most common retail encounter for customers.

Furthermore, since the intention was to study a typical store (and the meanings consumers place on everyday shopping), a traditional supermarket format operated by one of the UK's major grocery retailers was selected. The store was an out-of-town superstore with a sales area of 39,973 sq.ft located in Glasgow, Scotland. The store predominantly carried food, with three fresh food counters (delicatessen, fish and bakery), a full range of produce, provisions and national and private grocery brands plus a full range of health and beauty items. The store also had a kiosk and an in-store restaurant.

One author spent three months in the store, working daily from 10am-7pm and adopting a covert participation style whilst employed mainly in high customer traffic situations (the customer service desk and fresh food counters). To maximise the gain from covert participation, the main data collection techniques adopted were unstructured naturally flowing interactions with customers - the hallmark of the ethnographic inquiry³³. Also, non-participant observation of customer shopping behaviours and interactions with store personnel took place. Finally, to capture the wealth of historically accumulated information about customer encounters, the researcher embarked (overtly) on unstructured naturally flowing discussions with store employees - especially those with

extensive shop-floor experience – in work (eg customer service desk and fresh food counters) and social situations (eg the canteen). During the fieldwork, data were recorded on-site in rich descriptive diary-style notes. This allowed the researcher to effectively conduct constant comparisons amongst the data. Forming (and reforming) the concepts and categories generated from data as they were gathered daily, which is a core characteristic of grounded theory analysis^{36,37}.

Findings

To put the findings in context, it is important to note that this study does not aim to generate a new understanding of customer behavior in (grocery) shopping *per se*, but rather to provide a new understanding of how everyday in-store shopping behavior can be conceptualized or classified into cultural categories, and to identify and explore the relationships amongst these categories. This will enable the modeling of the retailer brand as a process of cultural co-construction between customers and the retailer in a store setting.

Due to the volume of data generated, the findings of ethnographic studies need to be condensed by concentrating on a representative part of the culture under study³. In this paper, the authors opted to concentrate on the values emerging from the rich symbolic and ritualistic meanings of merchandise as store objects. Merchandise (taken holistically rather than focused on private-label products) is an integral part of people's lives, and of a grocery store structure as it overlaps with all aspects of the store operations: service; format; and communication. Consequently, it can act as a window to the store culture as a whole.

Presenting ethnographic accounts is a creative interpretative process as Esterberg³⁹ (p.16) puts it:

“....interpretive writing is akin to fiction in that it is fashioned from the researcher interpretation, or best guess, of what is going on. But it is not wholly fictional because it is rooted in social actors’ actual lives; it is not simply made up”

A tree metaphor is therefore used in presenting the findings. The tree is comprised, as the study reveals, of leaves (symbols) carrying the social meanings of grocery shopping that are socially processed through a network of social interactions (rituals and heroes) at the tree trunk, in the quest to attain the pure ethical meaning of grocery consumption in the tree roots (values). Using ethnographic vignettes; these are accounts for the cultural categories derived through observations of customers merchandise consumption in action, and backed up by verbatim quotes ^{3,33} the following sections present a multidimensional meaning exploration using grounded theory analytical processes and terminology (see appendix) in order to socially construct each part of the tree from a customer standpoint. The retail tree metaphor is outlined in Figure 1 , based upon the meanings generated from the store culture categories (Figure 2). Further explanation of each of these categories follows.

- Insert Figure 1 and Figure 2 here -

Tree Leaves: the merchandise as a symbol

The properties of ‘*customized variety*’ ‘*customized availability*’ and ‘*the bargain*’ capture the customers’ quest for the concept of ‘*freedom of choice*’ which emerges as a central social meaning in the interaction between customers and merchandise in the store.

By analyzing ethnographic vignettes from the grocery store setting, the following sections will explain how open and axial coding leads to the development of the concept from these properties and justifies the emergence of the ‘leaves’ as a selective code.

- ***Customized Variety***

In the grocery store, customers seek to customize the variety of merchandise on offer to suit their individual needs and preferences. A comment from a female shopper illustrates this: “....you used to have little Scottish produce but you have improved on that.....you know when you get the local (produce) it is close and thus more fresh”. By complementing the store’s efforts to source more produce locally, this customer praises the store for raising produce freshness to a level which she thought was more appropriate. In contrast, failure to offer customized variety, may reduce the attractiveness of store in the eyes of customers - another woman complained that the produce range variety was not directly suited to her family needs, so she opted to shop at a competitor’s store: “*the produce range is so poor no large quantities for families. I go to (competitor store) because they have a better range and quantities.*”

Allowing the customization of merchandise variety to meet individual needs provides a potent source of store competitive advantage. It pulls customers to the store: “*You have things that no one else has, exotic things, specific fruits...*”; “*I come here for the fair-trade bananas,... I come here for them otherwise I’d shop at a nearby retailer, I drive here for it*”. As observed frequently on the customer service desk, customers regularly ask for their customized choices to be made available: “*Are you going to have a vegetarian sushi?*”; “*Can I get cans of lemonade instead of two litre-bottles?*”

- ***Customized Availability***

According to the deputy manager of the store, availability is the single most important factor from the customers' viewpoint: *"Availability is the foremost. Price isn't as important; queuing is OK if availability is there"*. Observations confirmed this view - the main customer enquiry directed to employees on the shop floor is: *"Do you have this item (that I need)?"* Availability does not simply mean that the store is well stocked, but rather that the store is stocked with the products that the individual customer wants to buy: *"I couldn't find the size (of butter) I need; you have got the bigger and the smaller but not what I need"*.

If the desired item is out of stock, this creates customer dissatisfaction: *"I can not find any leaf spinach in the freezer. You used to have it, it has been four days or even a week"*; *"... there is no organic chicken, this is the second week"* As these customer comments show, it is the frequency of customized unavailability that increases the risk of customer defection : *"...unsalted butter (brand name) the small and the large pack has been out of stock for four weeks. How does not have any for this length of time? I went to another store and got it"*. Incidents such as this damage store competitiveness, as the produce manager commented: *"...customers' demand very high levels of service and availability...they (customers) say you (retailer name) do not have that, what a shame"*.

When availability cannot be effectively communicated to customers in the store through either customer service (employees), and/or product displays problems arise. For example, the employees administrating the merchandise ordering system were subject to

a grilling by one angry customer: “...for two weeks I have phoned and come over to ask about these two items. I have been told that you ordered them for this week.” Customer service officer response: “they are not yet in”. Customer reaction (in an angry tone), “But I expected to find them...”. By breaking “promises” concerning customized availability the store risks losing customers to competitors: “I come here and everyday (frequency) they (employees) say next week for things I’m looking for... making me have to go elsewhere”.

Availability is also communicated through product display. Traditionally in Britain organic products have been displayed as a separate range. When these products were relocated to be integrated within their respective product categories, this caused confusion over availability and was seen to be inconvenient: “ I can not find organic tea, do you still have it?... it should be all organics in one place... now I have to travel the whole store for just an item ... in one place I can get all organics tea, coffee, whatever.”

- ***The bargain***

As the most popular phrase heard in the grocery store, ‘bargain’, should be taken ‘direct’ (a vivo)³⁶ from the respondents without any further refining, as its meaning to customers envelops the essence of all other promotional tools. In explaining the excitement of obtaining a bargain, one customer enthusiastically said “I look for bargains I never buy something that is of poor quality because it is cheap. In a bargain you get good quality brands at good prices”. This statement conveys a two dimensional meaning: an economic dimension that illustrates the customer’s desire to be *parsimonious*; and a psychological

dimension that evokes the customers' sense of *shrewdness*. Commenting on the desire of customers to be *parsimonious*, and reflecting her experience as a home economist, the independent in-store tasting expert argued that: *"the majority of people are driven by budgets before taste while maintain acceptable quality"*. For customers, the aim is not to buy inferior merchandise just for the sake of low prices but to get a customised (*acceptable*) quality, for a customised (*affordable*) price. As one customer put it: *"people in general look for value for money; I guess no one these days buys nothing for nothing..."*.

This attitude to shopping takes priority over any other form of enticement. A customer who seldom shopped at the store said *"I liked (Case Company)'s ads with (celebrity chef) I really liked it but this won't pull me to the store. I just want to see bargains and good buys"*. Even the presence of a family member on the store staff wouldn't prevent the partner from shopping around for bargains, as a grocery manager commented *"My wife is not loyal to any supermarket, she just pops in where a promotion is..."* The last phrase is an indicator of the willingness of customers to chase bargains, which adds a sense of shrewdness to their underlying parsimonious approach. Another customer indicated that he liked reasonable prices, but was primarily enticed by promotions and special offers: *"(Competitor A) has reasonable prices but (competitor B)'s reductions and offers pull me"*.

Customers have a 'love affair' with promotional offers according to the provisions manager, when touring her department: *"customers LOVE (with a bolder tone) offers, that is why we highlight them"*. This 'love' is illustrated in the feeling of pride and

excitement detected in customers' shy smiles when they speak about attaining a bargain. For example, a customer revealed her excitement in getting a 'bargain' with a quiet smile on her face: *"I got three bags of shopping on offers for five to six pounds.... it is great wonderful bargains..."*. Also, a sense of urgency and fear of missing out strengthens the feeling of shrewdness. One customer commenting on a competitor store said: *"... customers go (there) for promotions... go and grab one"*. The latter part of the phrase' reflects the speed (and implicit shrewdness) needed to capture a bargain. This was seen in the case of an elderly lady who urgently came to the customer service desk, asking for someone to help her to get four bottles of coke off the shelf because they were on offer and she could not lift them. She justified her herself afterwards: *"I did not want to squander the 'bargain' "*.

From these vignettes, the process of open coding generated the properties of "customized variety", "customized availability" (with "frequency" and "communication" in both service and display evident as dimensions) and "the bargain" (with "parsimony" and "shrewdness" as dimensions) arising from the interaction between the customers and the object (merchandise) in the store. In seeking variety, availability, and affordability customers expect to find a wide, accessible, and affordable range of products (*freedom*) tailored to their individual needs/tastes (*choice*). As a result, it can be argued that the concept of '*Freedom of Choice*' emerges as the symbolic meaning carried to customers by the store merchandise. Additionally, the concept's dimensions (frequency and communication) indicate that this attracts customers to shop at the store (if positive) or deters customers (if negative). A sub-category, '*Strategic Charisma*', could be associated with the concept of '*Freedom of Choice*' via axial coding. Through having a sense of

strategic enticement (charisma) and social significance (freedom of choice), the merchandise, as a symbol, can be characterized as being visible, attractive and crucial for store survival in the customer's eyes. In terms of the tree metaphor this mirrors the crucial role played by leaves in helping a tree to breathe and provide an attractive shape and color. Therefore, 'tree leaves' becomes the selective code for the *symbolic* role of merchandise within the culture of a retail store.

Tree Trunk: the rituals and heroes of merchandise

The interactions between customers and merchandise go beyond the symbolic, to include a series of socially collective activities involving engagement with their store heroes. These 'heroes' (employees) in the context of the store culture can be regarded as a sub-category. This engagement is encapsulated in the properties of '*social repercussions of merchandise*', and '*employee sensibility*', that lead to the identification of the concept of '*customer realization of self-image*' at a store. As previously, the following sections will explain how open and axial coding leads to the development of the concept and sub-category and justifies the emergence of the 'trunk' as a selective code.

- ***Social Repercussions of Merchandise***

Customers tend to engage with merchandise in the negotiation of their social goals. Conversations with customers in the store, at both the fish and customer service counters, revealed the repercussions of food shopping on their relationships with themselves, their families, and friends. Buying food as a treat for themselves was a common occurrence: "*I'd like a fish for a dinner, I love it baked*". This phrase indicated that by cooking the fish in a particular way (baked) this customer fulfilled (love) his desires. Another

customer was concerned not to spoil her meal by ensuring that the fish suited her age and lifestyle tastes: “...*no skin no bones ... I’m an old lady*”. In contrast, a young man came to the service desk searching for adventure: asking for a cookbook recommendation, to “*inspire*” him when cooking. Customers were also nostalgic for products that evoked good memories: one customer discussed his “*great time*” in Spain when the swordfish reminded him of “*tasty*” Spanish cuisine.

Customers sought merchandise to show they cared for their loved ones: “*It looks lovely the Swordfish, it’s not my favourite fish but my son’s, so I’ll take a piece please.*” and to show affection: “*my husband is a big man so I’d like to get a big slice, I want to impress him.*” Similarly, parents related to merchandise within the context of entertainment or experiences with their children: “*we have been to Deep Sea World (an aquarium), so they are so excited about it*” and: “*She saw a programme about fish so she is so excited to see it*”

Finally, merchandise plays a pivotal role in customer socialization with friends and the local community. For example, two customers had a complaint: first customer: “*This pack (of soft drink) is outdated, we did not realise till we got home, started drinking and had some bottles.*” The second customer elaborated: “*...we realised they had expired while we were gathering for a drink*”. These customers stressed that the out-of-code product had spoilt their social gathering, rather than mentioning any health concerns. Another case featured a disappointed customer, who had faced an embarrassing social situation because the merchandise failed to live up to its social role: “*I bought it to be a*

gift for someone on Sunday...I followed the instructions but it started to die... So, I couldn't take it to my friend..."

Merchandise-centred socialization does not only occur outside, but also inside, the store as the store becomes a local social hub especially for certain customer groups. An elderly man was waiting at the door for his “*pals*” to arrive – stating in an almost patriotic tone and with a wide smile “*this is our local store, we (his pals) always gather here (in-store café) for a coffee*”. As an integral part of the community, in-store promotional activities also have wider social repercussions. One customer came to the service desk furious about a demonstration sampling a brand of vodka in the store parking lot “*....is this your message ?...promoting drinking and driving!!*).

Along the axis of the property, it can be seen that self-indulgence, as well as affection to family, friends and local community, acts as a guide for customer behaviour towards the merchandise in the store. Thus the ideal self, family, community and friends play the role of the hypothetical (ie may not physically be present in store) personalities who, nonetheless, possess highly valued characteristics, to which customer behaviour in the store responds. These wider social community members can be regarded as heroes to customers in the store culture and therefore be axially coded as ‘social motivators’.

- ***Employee Sensibility***

The social repercussions noted above were captured on the fresh food/customer service counters, and show how customers engage employees in their daily lives, expecting them to understand their social situations and to tailor (or ensure that) the merchandise fulfils

their social goals. In other words, the employee was expected to show sensibility to the customer's desired social repercussions through the store merchandise. This sensibility is seen across two dimensions: "consulting" and "assurance". Customer consultations varied from advice on cooking to food catering. Cooking enquires tended to be more technical: *"How can I cook the Marlin? Pan frying for example"* and *"What is it (ice fish) like? ...and, how do we cook it?"*, whilst catering enquires tended to be more social in nature, as customers asked advice on serving style: *"Is Avocado best in a salad or as a cold appetizer?"*; on customised serving: *"I'd like to buy for the three of us.... How much do I have to take?"*; and even on setting up a romantic situation! : *"I'd like to make a nice meal for my boyfriend. What do you recommend?"* Customers tended to accept employee recommendations, even when subtly made. For example a customer service officer arranged a bunch of flowers on the service desk. Many customers stopped to comment on the color coordination and then went on to buy similar flowers.

As for assurance, customers tend to make an implicit assumption that the company uses its customers for their own commercial interests. However, employees are seen as fellow human spirits who sympathise with customers and protect their interests. The case of a recalled brand of mineral water illustrated this point. In response to the recall advertisement, one customer asked the customer service staff (in a horrified tone) if, despite the advert stating that this was a purely precautionary measure, there really was a health problem: *"I have drunk two already... Is there any danger? I am so worried."* The staff member replied that it was just a standard quality check and the product was not harmful, but despite this reassurance, the customer required (with direct eye contact) further confirmation: *"....that was in the paper...is it true?... no problem if I drink it?!!"*

. Customers also routinely sought safety assurances about merchandise from employees during their daily shopping: “*Is Lemon Sole best for babies? Does it have any bones?*”; “*When I cook the aubergine, can I leave the seeds in it?*”; “*...can this fish stay fresh till tomorrow since it is reduced to clear?*”

In this category, open coding identified the “social repercussions of merchandise”, and “employee sensibility” as the properties capturing the socially essential network (collective activities) through which customers process the merchandise in order to socially construct their persona within their own social communities (themselves, family/partners and friends). Thus, the concept of “*Customer Realization of Self Image (persona)*” can be said to reflect the ritualistic meaning which customers derive from their interactions with store merchandise. Additionally, the employee sensibility dimensions of “consulting” and “assurance” suggest that employees possess highly valued personal characteristics within the store culture, which enable them to facilitate the processes of “*Customer Realization of Self Image*”. Through axial coding we suggest that employees fulfil the role of a real (physically present) hero and can therefore be designated as a sub-category within the rituals category, and coded as a “*catalyst*”. In the case of a tree, the trunk may appear technically as just a support for the branches and leaves but more importantly it acts as the hub of the collective biological activities (including active cells) essential for a thriving tree. Thus, the ‘trunk’, within the tree metaphor, represents the selective code for *rituals* in a store culture.

The Tree Roots: the values of merchandise consumption

Values are the invisible core component of a culture and are defined by its observable parts³⁵. Consequently, the open codes will be the concepts generated at the leaves and trunk. The tree leaves provide the customer with the symbolic meaning of ‘Freedom of Choice’, which allows them to acquire customized merchandise, to use to socially negotiate self-image within their own social community, which is captured in the trunk by the ritualistic meaning of ‘Realization of Self-image’. The customer is looking to acquire selected materialistic objects (merchandise) through which they can negotiate their own self-worth within their social community. This is seeking a form of respect identified as the concept of “*Self Esteem*”⁴⁰. Such abstract ethical values are the spiritual base of the human quest to discover self-meaning in life⁴¹. Consequently, *values* can selectively be coded as the ‘roots’ of the tree.

It can be argued, using axial coding, that the tree metaphor (from roots to trunk to leaves) mirrors the phases comprising a customer’s social self concept⁴². According to Mead⁴², the social self has two phases, ‘I’ and ‘ME’. The latent raw ‘I’, as captured by the Roots’ concept of ‘*Self Esteem*’, takes its meaning through socializing with significant others (*heroes*) to form the ‘ME’, a process which Mead⁴² (p.194) describes: “...*we cannot realize ourselves except in so far as we recognize the other in his relationship to us. It is as he takes the attitude of the other that the individual is able to realize himself as a self*”. This is captured by the Trunk’s concept of ‘*Realization of Self Image*’. Mead⁴² then argues that the social negotiations of ‘ME’, bring the ‘I’ to the fore in the form of a novel\creative image, which Mittal⁴³ identified as a third phase, “MINE”. This is the acquisition of an object to represent the social self (ME) and is thus known as the ‘extended self’⁴⁴, and is captured by the leaves concept of ‘*Freedom of Choice*’. The

concept of '*Social Self*' (I) therefore becomes an axial code forming a sub-category within the values with (Me) and (Mine) as its properties.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The discussion will focus on investigating how the tree metaphor is capable of conceptually modeling the grocery retailer as a social brand through the interplay between the customer's culture (co-constructed meaning system) as developed in a retail store, the literature on consumer behavior in stores, and the various established branding orientations.

The concept of "*Freedom of Choice*" found in the tree 'leaves' is evident in retail consumer behavior literature which investigates the customer's rational consumption of visible store attributes⁴⁵⁻⁴⁷. As 'MINE', the symbolic meaning of '*Strategic Charisma*' is echoed in the traditional literature on store *personality* in which customer perceptions of store attributes form attractive mental images, which, in turn, define the store/retailer's strategic market position^{6,25,46,47}.

To illustrate, *customized variety* and *availability* are well-documented properties in the retail literature. They are regarded as important contributors in devising store experiences that appeal to customers' perceptions of the store. Store attributes are customized to respond to customer desires for variety and availability via convenience, eg the concept of the one-stop- shop^{46,47}, or use of category management that focuses on customizing

buying operations, merchandise displays and store communications to respond to customers' (need-driven) categorizations of merchandise ⁴⁸. Similarly the properties of *customized variety* and *bargaining* are both evident in customers' cognitive responses to the choice-widening tiers in private brand ranges which encompass variety (added value) and price (value-for-money) options ^{23,24}. Additionally in many studies the merchandise variety and prices offered by the retailer are perceived as the prime sources of competitive advantage by customers ^{49,50}. Finally, the appeal of a value-for-money (*bargaining*) proposition is the underlying market proposition of discounters - a thriving segment in many retail markets ^{4,26,51}.

In respect of the existing branding literature, the *communication* of image/personality via store attributes falls into the brand equity approach ^{5,6}. Traditionally this approach relied on devising strategic brand images/personalities to communicate the rational attractiveness of products (stores) to customers, whilst ignoring the role of social culture in giving meaning to the product (store) attributes (ie the ME)⁵². This approach offers no explanation as to how an attribute (a MINE object) can itself be a carrier of meaning. The concept of "*Realization of Self Image*" captures the 'ME' at the 'trunk' and hence explains the process through which an attribute becomes a bearer of social meaning. In other words, it explains *why* customers are attracted to stores offering them a 'freedom of choice'?

The "*Realization of Self Image*" concept depicts the role of rituals in formulating brand '*mythology*', which is the customer's use of meanings - generated from their experiences in the marketplace - to construct their social identities with (significant) others ^{21,53,54}. To

illustrate, the property of *social repercussions* of merchandise encapsulates the process through which a customer's group affiliations with significant others/social motivators (such as family, friends, etc.) forms their personal consumption goals and, in turn, shapes the psychological meanings customers make of the store attributes^{55,56}. The property of *employee sensibility* captures the vital role that employees play on the shop-floor, acting as catalysts in the process of converting the merchandise to fit customers' psychological meanings. This is achieved through a shared understanding with customers, via 'consulting' and 'assuring', of the role that (significant) others play in influencing customers' behavior. Such crucial interactions and engagement makes the contribution of employees to the retailer brand equivalent to that of "brand champion", rather than the traditional view of "brand ambassador" - who is a mere representative of the company⁵⁷. Employee sensibility has been acknowledged as a significant element in cultivating brand equity from social relationships within services in general⁵⁸ and retailing in particular⁵⁹⁻⁶¹. As a result, employees fully deserve their "heroic" status in a store culture.

This process of customer social identity construction on the retail shop-floor, as depicted at the *trunk*, relates to the cultural approach to branding (Holt, 2004). This approach argues that the *formulation* of co-constructed identity is dramatically '*animated*' (p.90) through in-store retail experiences^{1, 27, 61}.

Finally, as the ethical base of the tree, the 'roots' (I) are the invisible/spiritual human values⁴¹ on which the social meanings generated in the trunk (ME) and carried by the leaves (MINE) are *founded*, mirroring the anthropological view of brands. The anthropological approach addresses the latent role of human spirituality as the foundation

of cultural meanings arising from consuming brands ^{15, 54}. The foundation of meaning in retail branding contexts has been identified as the role of the corporate branding process which disseminates corporate identity amongst various stakeholders ⁶². Thus, it can be argued that the tree metaphor as an organically integrated system can - from the customer standpoint - conceptually model the meaning laden store culture; the phases constituting the customer's social self-concept; and the corresponding orientations to branding. This can be conceptualized as an integrated organic whole, which has a *foundation stage* at the root, a *formulation stage* at the trunk and a *communication stage* at the leaves (see Table 1).

- Insert Table 1 Here -

In conclusion, the tree model suggests that customer meanings generated from daily encounters with retail stores are *founded* on their ethical/spiritual values, *formulated* through collective socialization via rituals and heroes, and finally *communicated* strategically through the store attributes. These stages within the model can provide retailers with guidance as to deploy the various branding orientations within their stores to fuse their brand meanings (encapsulated in their corporate identities) along the pathway of customer development of social identity. This fusion of meanings will help retailers build more socially conscious brands with their customers, and brands which are stronger and more sustainable than those built solely on the view that customers are rational beings ^{21,}

⁵⁴.

In a socially-conscious branding effort, retailers should pay principle regard to the central role of store experience⁶⁴. Like the tree trunk bonding the leaves and roots to *form* an

organic/interdependent relationship between them, store experience is the process through which the retailer can bond the strategic promises made to customers' rational self (Mine) at the communication stage and the corporate values concerning customers' ethical/spiritual self(I) at the foundation stage to *form* a trustworthy relationship through which customers and the brand can interdependently co-construct their identities (self-meaning) in the society; that is the social self (Me).

Besides, as an integral part of the process of identity co-construction, it is paramount that retailers recognize the subsequent change of their agent -the employee- role from *technical* to *social*. As a social agent, the employee is expected to aid customers to transfer the technical value offered on the shelf into social value gained in life. Thus, the selection and training process of employees has to adapt to this new role through, perhaps, an increasing emphasis on fusing the employees' social profiles (i.e. *their lifestyles*, such as trekkers, environmentalists, athletes and/or their *life experiences*, such as single moms, students, mothers-to-be, retirees, etc.) with their technical training, so as to reflect the social cognitive mindset of their customers. These shared experiences and understandings provide the social imputes to build a community around which the retailer can form a compelling brand to shop at and work for⁶⁴.

Finally, the tree, as a metaphorical model, extents a long standing tradition in branding research, which uses metaphors as conceptual maps to enlighten our understanding of the complex process of branding^{9,10,63}. The tree model provides a matrix (see table 1) that conceptually aligns and explains the movements amongst the intricate social and strategic

dimensions of retail branding. Therefore, the tree model can form a conceptual base for an integrated multi-dimensional map for retail branding that helps managers navigate the complex (multi-faceted) nature of the process. However, as a conceptual model built using interpretive qualitative research, there is an inherent concern over reliability³. Consequently, future research should empirically test the proposed model within and beyond grocery retailing.

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