

Naturally Occurring Brands: A Preliminary Test of Validity

Christine Wright-Isak
Florida Gulf Coast University
Fort Myers, Florida 33965
cwright@fgcu.edu

Mushfiq Swaleheen
Florida Gulf Coast University
Fort Myers, Florida 33965
mswaleheen@fgcu.edu

Abstract

Advancing current marketing theory that brands are symbols produced as a result of combined cultural and marketing processes, naturally occurring brands (NOBs) have been posited in previous research to be symbolic phenomena that influence consumers but are not created or managed by commercial entities. Their existence opens marketing theory and practice to recognizing a new source of competition for commercial brands. In this paper, the validity of the NOB concept is tested using community NOBs – small town, suburbia and city – as the examples.

Introduction

The Intersection of Branding and Community

Branding as a marketing tool. The commercial value of marketing brands is that consumers form relationships with the brands they favor, leading to brand repurchase and loyalty– so long as the brand fulfills the expectations signified by the brand symbol (Fournier, 1998). Brand symbols convey clusters of associations made between the branded product and consumer lives. Moreover, consumers' preferences for brands are based on more than features and functional benefits; they include valued social and emotional associations that powerfully influence consumer perceptions and preferences (Calkins 2005, Sherry 2005).

Consumer interpretations of what brands mean are shaped by a cultural context of symbols. The meanings of symbols are comprised of historically accumulated associations of human experiences, objects, and constantly evolving socially constructed meanings. Only a portion of these associations are able to be re-created or modified by the marketing actions of commercial brand managers (Sherry 2005). Others emerge as part of social-interactions among consumers (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig 2002) that are unlikely to influence consumer decision-making in the ways marketers expect. Nevertheless many marketing scholars and practitioners focus on business-managed brands as if they were the only sources of influence on consumer decisions (Aaker 1996). The possibility of other classes of symbols that influence consumer choices often go unnoticed.

Community as a human institution. The word community is used by many scholars attempting to describe collectivities of human beings. Most commonly, community is construed as the social institution that mediates between family and society. Its meanings range from the most literal, a physical enclave in which a cluster of families or a tribe resides (Kornblum 1974, Suttles 1968), to places where human beings attempt to perfect everyday existence (Hayden 1976, Zablocki 1979). In-between these characterizations is the idea of community as a collectivity of human beings bonded by their agreed upon way of living in proximity to one another (Gans 1967, Hunter 1969, Suttles 1968). In these studies individuals are the unit of analysis and the spectrum of attachment to community ranges from residency to membership.

Contemporary scholarship on “place marketing” (Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1996) examines geographic locations with residential, commercial or historical value that affects local economies. Place “character” and how it is perpetuated has more recently been investigated by sociologists (Molotch, Freudenberg, & Paulsen, 2000) where this aspect of communities influences prospective visitors or future residents to choose them as destinations. They offer places like Washington, DC or Jacksonville, Florida as examples. These studies take the physical location as the unit of analysis and the spectrum of research reflects combinations of economic, sociological, anthropological and historical variables that differentiate places. In-between the conceptual levels of community as an institution and Jacksonville as a location lies another category of community commonly used by consumers.

Consumer use of archetypical communities as signposts to choice. The terms small town, suburbia and city are well known to most Americans. Many have lived in more than one type of place and are familiar with all three, aided by ubiquitous descriptions in art, music, literature, cinema and other media. Each label describes a distinct form of community with a unique set of perceived social, psychological and utilitarian meanings about what life is like there. Each of these types were interpreted as offering different interactions among neighbors and these different expectations were observed to be an important factor in buying a home as consumers compared particular communities in a region (Wright-Isak 1985).

Thus consumers were observed to anticipate the likely satisfaction of living in one or another community based on categorizing them as small town, suburbia, or city, which prompts the question of whether these ubiquitous terms for community are used the same way as commercially maintained brands are used by consumers to identify preferred alternatives. If so, they may be a class of cultural symbols that influence consumer choices, despite not being directly created or maintained by any business brand competitor.

The theoretical importance of discovering the existence new class of symbols and meanings competing for the allegiances of consumers is that they may influence consumption choices in hitherto unknown ways. Today marketing managers’ expectations are based on brand equity building – planning and executing brand strategies with known competitor brands in mind (Calkins 2005, Keller 2000). A new class of

symbols shaped by social processes free of deliberate brand investment is unpredictable in its likely impact on consumer brand perceptions. Understanding how such naturally occurring brands emerge and evolve in consumers' social constructions of reality would increase certainty in marketers' efforts to anticipate what consumers will think or do.

Theory Synthesis

Branding

Research on branding. Brand scholarship is a broad spectrum of research ranging from tangible product or service features strategically marketed under a brand symbol (Calkins 2005, Tybout & Sternthal 2005, Kotler, Haider, & Rein 1996) to the cultural influences of brand symbols and meanings on consumer perceptions (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander et. al. 2002, Sherry 2005). Marketers have evolved in their thinking about how brands work, from focusing on rational-calculative brand positioning in terms of tangible utilitarian benefits (Tybout & Sternthal 2005, Keller 1998), to intangible but no less salient emotional or experiential benefits (Fournier 1998, Sherry 2005).

Marketing scholarship on the connection between consumer and brand acknowledges that it is culturally based, complex in terms of literal and imagined "places" and is ongoing over time. Scholarship has evolved from studies limited to intentional efforts of marketers to use branding as a tactic, to acknowledging consumer autonomy in deriving meaning from a broader social environment of symbols and meanings that influence preference and purchase.

At their most basic, brands are symbols. Symbols are objects in which humans have invested meaning – objects that in themselves would not have independent meaning. Their value lies in the significance for those who know how to interpret them, know what their socio-cultural references signify (Sapir 1930). Brand marketers depend on this social underpinning of investing and sharing meaning of symbols for the effective communication of their brands.

The brand-consumer connection. Scholarship regarding the provider perspective on the brand – consumer connection has expanded from a focus on how to manage perceptions of product features or communications enhancing a brand's advantages (Tybout & Sternthal 2005) to acknowledgement that consumers can and do independently modify brand reputation and imagery, sometimes in contrast to provider intentions (Sherry 2005). Several scholars describe the nature of attachment between a consumer and his or her brand as a relationship in which the brand's commercial purveyor manages all its interactions with its constituents via messaging and post-purchase product service (Fournier 1998, Veloutsou 2007). McAlexander et. al. (2002) identify three dimensions to this connection: geography, social context and temporality.

Sherry (2005) styles this as an interactive relationship, a "dance," performed against the backdrop of other cultural symbols and meanings. For him the symbols presented in advertisements designed to convey the brand's meaning, constitute a drama performed

against a backdrop that, by association, will enhance the positive meaning of a brand to its target audience. This cultural backdrop may contain a variety of influences on consumer perceptions. Their potential for competing with intended brand messages is often overlooked as since they are not purposefully and strategically maintained with the overt goal of influencing consumers. Unseen, they aren't measured when a specific ad's likely performance in its market is being tested.

Marketers may create brand imagery via integrated marketing communications and other promotional activities (Calkins 2005), but consumers actively participate in the evolution of the brand's total meaning by evaluating it against the emotional, moral and social meanings they associate with it. Scholars have observed that consumers add to, modify or even contradict the intentions of marketers in buying and using their brands (Rook 1985, Sherry 2005).

Consumers today proactively use brands as "signposts" with which to navigate a world of commercial and cultural alternatives (Sherry 2005). Consistent and widely understood meanings associated with a brand (e.g. Apple, Nike) can transform a given brand from commercial asset into cultural icon (Holt 2003). A brand like Harley Davidson or Nike stands for certain sets of values to most consumers regardless of whether or not they are motorcycle owners or athletes – and can influence future buyers of the brand.

In all these studies brands are assumed to be purposefully marketed and brand meaning is assumed to be intentionally created and managed using strategic planning processes in order to influence consumers' perceptions and choices. While some work from the manager's perspective and others identify ways in which consumers depart from managerial intentions, all focus on intentionally managed brand symbols. We argue that there may also be unmanaged symbols that nevertheless influence consumer perceptions and choices. The field of competitive branding should be expanded beyond deliberate marketing efforts to recognize that all cultural symbols have the potential to affect consumer perceptions and evaluations of commercially available brands.

Community

A Diverse Concept. As a concept, what community has in common across the fields of sociology and marketing is that it is the form of organization that satisfies the longing for belonging felt by most individuals (Duneir 1989, Suttles 1968, Zablocki 1981). The many social science conceptualizations of community range from sociological studies of actual human enclaves (Duneir 1989, Kornblum 1974, Suttles 1968, Gans 1967, Vidich & Bensman 1968) to metaphorical brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) or tribes (Veloutsou & Moutinho 2009). In recognition that waking time spent in one space regularly can give rise to community, recent scholars have even identified "communities of practice," emerging among professionals (Wenger & Snyder 2000). The tendency for humans to bond and belong is at the heart of each conceptualization of community.

Social Structures and Processes. Studies of residential community can be sorted into three main types: small town, suburb and city neighborhood. Some studies display how collective social processes manage belonging via residential communities' norms in city

neighborhoods (Duneir 1989, Suttles 1968). Some posit the demise of small town community, expecting its eclipse by national urban cultural norms and attitudes (Vidich & Bensman 1968). Others examine how conformist community norms originated and evolved in suburbia during the 1950's and 1960's (Wood 1958, Gans 1967) and others update this research with a more positive view, observing persistent heterogeneity of community types after America had become a suburban nation in the 1980's (Baldassare 1986).

Community Archetype and Character. Recently the persistence of the distinctive traditions that make up the character of places has been found to result from conjoined factors including geography, economics, and social interactivity (Molotch, Freudenberg, & Paulsen 2000). This last characteristic is included in the temporality dimension of community posited by McAlexander et. al. (2002), as well as by scholars of episodic community (Belk & Wallendorf 1988). As manifested by all these scholarly approaches, community in a wide variety of forms is ubiquitous and relevant to consumers' daily existence. This paper focuses on whether consumers share distinct and commonly understood meanings for three archetypes of residential community: small town, suburbia, and city. If so, we suggest that they operate as nonmarketed "brands" that indicate specific residential alternatives to satisfying the desire for community.

Brand-Community Convergence in Marketing Theory

In marketing research. Investigations into the symbolic influence of brands on consumers and the concept of community as a social institution that satisfies their need for belonging have been combined in marketing research. Consumers seeking intermittent community experiences have been observed at swap meets (Belk, Sherry Jr., & Wallendorf 1988). Emerging community (episodic belonging) has been discovered among attendees in flea markets (Sherry Jr., 1990), and community subcultures forming among a brand's aficionados have been found among motorcycle owners and the Harley brand (Schouten & McAlexander 2005). In addition, community-by-visitation or momentary belonging has been created for combined spiritual and commercial purposes in places like Heritage Village (O'Guinn & Belk 1989).

In consumer behaviors. Consumers actively combine brand and community when they imagine they belong to a human enclave of like-minded others who share their affiliation with a commercial brand on the basis of what it stands for. Whether actually meeting or just imagining like-minded others, some consumers experience belonging to a community by purchasing a brand repeatedly, prompting scholars to characterize these phenomena as "brand communities" (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig 2002) or even "brand tribes" (Cova & Cova 2001, Veloutsou & Moutinho 2009). Examples include the Harley Davidson, Zima soft drink, and Jeep brands.

Naturally Occurring Brands (NOBs). Wright-Isak takes the intersection of brand and community a theoretical step farther, suggesting the possibility that consumers can also use non-commercial cultural symbols in this way, a phenomenon she calls "naturally occurring brands" or NOB's (Wright-Isak 2012). Extending the idea that consumers use

brands as cultural signposts (Sherry 2005), she asserts that commercially managed brands are not the only cultural signposts they use. She suggests that they also use NOBs that emerge from “natural” cultural processes as signposts of meaning to guide their consumption decisions.

There are three criteria for an NOB. First is that what it signifies, its cultural referents, value associations, brand labels or logos and associated imagery, must constitute a constellation of consistent meanings to diverse population groups over time. Second is that the NOB influences consumer preferences and choices. Third is that its meaning is not intentionally created or managed (Wright-Isak 2012).

The phenomenon that prompted recognition of possible existence of NOBs was that home buyers interpreted specific sets of visual cues to indicate what it would be like to live in several different types of community. In an ethnography of small town life, newcomers used the terms “small town,” “city,” or “suburbia,” to anticipate their likely satisfaction of living in one place vs. another. Some preferred one type over another, but all described the three types in the same way and labelled local communities the same way as being one of these types (Wright-Isak 1985). This paper quantifies these earlier observations to test whether the meanings associated with each type in 1985 continue today.

Generations of Brand Meanings

Brand perceptual equity. Although what a brand means may have differential appeal to old vs. young, male vs. female, one generation or another, *all understand what it stands for in the same way* (Calkins 2005). Coca Cola, Nike or Harley maintain consistent brand meanings regardless of whether or not a consumer drinks soft drinks, wears athletic shoes or rides motorcycles. Such common understandings constitute a brand’s perceptual core equity. The core set of associated images and meanings of any successful brand are consistent across diverse consumer groups (Holt 2003). Marketers invest considerable resources in managing these perceptual equities to maintain their positive value (O’Guinn, Allen & Seminek 2011).

The first theoretical issue for accepting the conceptual marketing utility of NOBs is whether or not they (like commercially managed brands) have sets of widely understood associations. From the fact that a brand’s set of visual cues and meanings are the same to different consumer groups, it can be inferred that it is a cultural signpost capable of influencing preference or aversion. The second theoretical issue for an NOB is whether or not its meaning has remained the same over the long run. That can be investigated by learning whether or not it carries the same set of associations among multiple adult generations of consumers in a given culture.

Testing NOBs with consumer target segments. Grouping consumers as target segments occupies much of a marketer’s strategic time and effort (Keller 2000, Tybout & Sternthal 2005). Managers identify a brand’s meaning to each of several target segments so that marketing efforts can be focused on those most likely to desire the brand (Kotler & Armstrong 2011, O’Guinn, Allen & Seminek 2011, Tybout & Sternthal 2005).

Consumers are segmented based on a variety of attributes including similar product and brand use patterns, psychographic, social or generational characteristics.

Generations and cohorts of consumers. Generations are defined as population segments who are born in a given time period. Examples are the Baby Boomer generation born between 1946 and 1964 and Generation X born between 1965 and 1976 (Schewe & Noble 2000). The most recent is Gen-Y or the Millennials born between 1977 and 1986 (Noble, Haytko, & Phillips 2009). The term cohort is an alternative concept whereby a generation is distinguished by the cultural events (wars, economic booms or depressions, or profound technological shifts like the internet) occurring during its life cycle (Schewe & Noble 2000).

In this paper “generation” is used to include both terms. Marketing practitioners tend to use “generations” to refer to both, and recent scholarly questions about the validity of cohorts as distinct from generations of consumer attitudes or values have been raised, also favoring the term “generation” (Noble & Schewe 2003).

Generations and cultural contexts of brand meanings. Cultural events of their youth and coming of age years provide the specific context of symbols and their social meanings in which each generation interprets brands (Noble & Schewe 2003). This makes generational consumer target segments good subjects with whom to validate the existence of NOB’s.

Multiple generations as consumer segments. Three generations of consumers have come of age since the 1985 research uncovered the three community NOBs. The Boomer generation grew up in the socially stable 1950’s and came of age in the turbulent 1960’s, and the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements (Kotler & Armstrong 2011, O’Guinn, Allen, & Semenik 2011). Gen-X were children in these socially turbulent times and now are a more cautious, less iconoclastic, more family focused generation (O’Guinn, Allen, & Semenik 2011). Gen-Y (Millennials) have spent their entire lives in a technologically advanced global environment (Crampton & Hodge 2009). They focus on finding the right balance between standing out and blending in (O’Guinn, Allen, & Semenik 2011, Noble, Haytko, & Phillips 2009). Testing the validity of NOBs with these generations can support or disconfirm the idea that NOB consistent meanings persist over time. From these sources, Chart 1 below illustrates cultural overlapping of “generations” and “cohorts.”

Chart 1 – Cultural Influences on Generations and Cohorts of Americans

Generation or Cohort	Birth Years (Generation)	Coming of Age Years (Cohort)	Key Childhood & Coming of Age Events & Conditions	Key Generational & Cohort Attitudes
Depression Generation/Cohort	1912-1921	1930-39	Great Depression; life in small towns or big cities	Risk Averse; Save rather than spend
“Greatest Generation” WWII Cohort	1922-1927	1940-45	World War II; Sacrifice vs. common enemy; small town is image of “American Dream” family	“We’re in this together” Patriotism; Defer gratification; Risk

			life	averse
Post WWII Cohort “Silent Generation”	1928-1945	1946-63	Nuclear Family, Suburbia, McCarthyism; The Cold War	Patriotism, fear of brainwashing; Value social conformity
Baby Boomer Generation I “Older Brother/Sister” Cohort	1946-1954	1963-72	\$\$ Prosperity; Vietnam War; Civil Rights movement; JFK assassination; sexual revolution; rise of Suburbia	Challenge Authority; Don’t trust anyone over 30; Rewrite social norms; Risk-comfortable
Baby Boomer Generation II “Younger Brother” Cohort	1955-1965	1973-83	Women’s Lib; Watergate; Oil Embargo 1973; TV imagery of life in the 3 archetypes of community	Less optimistic re \$\$ than Boomer I; Follow rather than lead social change
Generation X X Cohort	1966-1976	1984-94	Reagan era society; fall of communism; Children of divorce; latch-key kids; tech adept community persists	Delay marriage; Accept cultural diversity, new gender roles; Focus on quality of life over ambition
Generation Y Millennial Cohort	1977-1987	1995-05	Use social media; Middle East Wars; worst economy since 1929	Balance blending in & standing out; Uncertain future; socially tolerant

Research Design

Purpose

Testing NOB concept validity. This study tests the validity of the naturally occurring brand (NOB) concept among several generations of American consumers, by examining whether or not the three community NOBs hold the same core meanings today as were originally observed in the 1980’s. If these examples are described similarly by Baby Boomers, Gen-Xers and Millennials, it will verify their existence as commonly interpreted symbols. This would support the first of the three NOB criteria by demonstrating that the meanings of each tested examples are the same to each new generation. However, if each generation labels and interprets their meanings differently, the validity of the NOB concept is challenged.

Theoretical expectations. The most successful brands are widely understood throughout the culture – to customers, consumers and others, regardless of their immediate need or desire for the product or service the brand labels (Holt 2003). These successes result from years of consistent marketing efforts to establish the core meanings associated with each brand symbol. NOBs are expected to display different understandings by each generation due to the absence of such intentional marketing efforts. If the meanings of the three brands of community are consistent across generations, the idea of a naturally occurring brand (NOB) is supported.

The perceptions of each generation today reflect its accumulated cultural experiences. Gen-Xers and Millennials, being generations away from the Baby Boomers of the 1985

study, can be expected to have different perceptions. Perhaps the Baby Boomers in the first study revised their understandings of the three community types based on subsequent life experiences, or these NOBs have changed so that they no longer resemble the 1985 descriptions. Either situation could render the examples and perhaps the concept of naturally occurring brands invalid. This will be evident if the three generations do not characterize the community NOBs as expected.

In 1985, each type of community was described with positive as well as negative characteristics, not surprisingly since widespread artistic portrayals of each one have vilified or celebrated it, depending on the authors or filmmakers or artists points of view. Contemporary exploratory research seems to reconfirm several general perceptions of each (Wright-Isak 2012), finding that:

- The Small Town is seen as Main Street occupied with stores and homes where social life is close-knit, quiet, but often boring and narrow minded, expecting inhabitants to conform to local norms.
- Suburbia is signaled by cul de sac arrangements of houses, and understood to be good for raising kids but also seen as imposing conformity on neighbors and status preoccupied or achievement oriented.
- The City is visualized as crowded collections of separate individuals occupying row homes or high rises and characterized as a sophisticated place where people are trendy but also as a place that is noisy and potentially dangerous.

Methods

Research Design. The research described in this paper tests whether or not each of the three generations understands each of the community NOBs in the same way as the others do, and whether these perceptions match what theory expects regarding each. A survey was designed using 15 descriptors for each community NOB, developed from the set of images and meanings discovered in the 1985 and 2012 studies. A 16th descriptor “perfect place for someone like me” completed the set in order to get some idea of affinities that might indicate preference for one or another. Three consumer generations, Boomers, Gen-Xers, and Millennials were surveyed for their perceptions of each NOB using nonverbal test stimuli and verbal meaning measures.

Sampling Process. Two classes of students (Millennials) pursuing undergraduate studies at a local university took the survey and then were trained to conduct subsequent surveys with other generations. As part of a class project they were instructed to survey only non-students over the age of 25. The result is a convenience sample of the three generations. A total of 138 usable surveys were completed. The study was fielded in 2009-10 during spring break. Since many students returned to their family’s home towns outside the state during their break, the resulting sample is geographically diverse, although not random.

Survey Instrument. In each questionnaire each of the three NOBs was represented by one black & white, unlabeled, photograph. The small town image featured a main street with a mix of shops and homes. The Suburbia image used was the iconic Bill Owens

photograph of the cul de sac street ringed with split level homes, and the city image was a street lined with brownstone homes in upper Manhattan.

Procedures. Each image was presented on its own page beneath which was listed the complete set of sixteen descriptor statements. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they agree that each statement describes the community depicted, using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = disagree completely and 5 = agree completely. Following the ratings exercise, the three pictures were presented together on one page and respondents indicated which verbal label matched each image: small town, suburbia or city. Three versions of the questionnaire were fielded, each with a different (randomly scrambled) sequence of community image pages and two versions of descriptor sequence for each page was also fielded to control for order effects.

The 15 descriptor ratings are the basis for testing whether or not the NOBs have the same meanings across generations. The list of community rating items included five (5) descriptors expected to be associated (high agreement) with each type of community. These are detailed in the analysis plan that follows. The 16th descriptor, “The perfect place for someone like me,” was included to measure affinity for one type over another as a preliminary indicator of ability of the NOBs to influence consumer choices.

Hypothesis Formulation

Reasoning. If small town, suburbia and city images are labeled correctly and each image is associated with the same set of meanings by all three generations, then the concept of NOB has demonstrated validity. This general expectation is operationalized in four hypotheses:

- Ho 1 – Verbal descriptors of each community type are specific to one NOB and not to another (measured by ratings on the descriptors for each image across the total sample).
- Ho 2 – Consumers can identify community NOB’s by their visual features alone (measured by correct picture labeling).
- Ho 3 – Each of the three generations (subsamples) view each of the NOB types as having the same meanings as the other two generations do (based on comparing the descriptor ratings of each generation with the other two.)
- Ho 4 – All three generations rate each community equally high (or low) on lifestyle “suitability” (measured by comparing generational ratings for each image on descriptor 16).

Analysis Process. The descriptors were sorted into three blocks of 5. Each block was comprised of the positive and negative measures that are expected to be rated high that it describes its expected NOB, and not the other two NOB’s. The average rating for each descriptor was computed for the total sample. The average rating for each block of 5 was computed and then T-tested for its level of difference from the average ratings of the other two blocks. T-tests were conducted with n=136-138 observations.

Chart 2 Theoretical content of the ratings blocks

Measures expected to score high agreement they describe the Suburbia NOB (Block 1)

- This is the place to find soccer moms
- Like the place where I grew up
- Your status here is based on how much money you have
- A place people move to for raising their children
- Everyone is expected to conform here

Measures expected to score high agreement they describe the Small Town NOB (Block 2)

- People here tend to hold traditional values
- People here tend to be narrow minded
- Everyone is expected to conform here
- A place where people volunteer to help their neighbors
- Safe and quiet but totally boring

Measures expected to score high agreement they describe the City NOB (Block 3)

- This is where the latest trends are started
- A place to live before I settle down
- Noisy and often dangerous
- A place where I can be free to discover myself
- People here tend to “live and let live”

Hypothesis Testing. There are two general hypotheses being tested. For each NOB paired tests of significance were conducted to test whether the average of response scores to the correct block of descriptors was significantly higher than the averages obtained for the two other blocks. Table 1 below shows the numerical results of this testing for the total sample and Table 3 shows similar testing and results within each generation. (Table 2 shows that most consumers correctly label each picture for its community NOB). In general, within each NOB, or type of community (think of each picture, its label and its set of descriptors) we pose the following hypotheses:

- General Null Ho = there will be no difference between average ratings of a block that matches an NOB and each of its non-matching blocks.
- General Alternative Ho = there will be a statistically significantly higher rating given a NOB block matching its picture compared to each of its non-matching blocks. For example: For the cul de sac neighborhood picture the average rating of Block 1 (NOB Suburbia) will be significantly higher than either Block 2 (NOB Small Town) or Block 3 (NOB City).

Results of Hypothesis Tests

Hypothesis 1

Observations. In Table 1 we see that when the unlabeled image of Suburbia was rated by the whole sample, the average of scores for the five descriptors associated with Suburb (Block 1) was 16.5 compared 15.75 for five descriptors associated with a Small Town (Block 2) and 12.93 for five descriptors associated with City (Block 3). Table 2 shows that a majority of the respondents associate the expected set of descriptor statements with each image.

Analysis. Scores for the block expected to be associated with each NOB was statistically significantly higher than the blocks not expected to be associated with it. All three images are associated with the same imagery observed in the earlier studies to characterize them. The null hypotheses – that there would not be significant differences in the consumer interpretations of all three images – were rejected, and the concept criterion is supported.

Table 1: Total Sample Testing of Community NOB Block Descriptor Ratings

Community	Average	Standard t -test ¹ : H_a : Average score > 12.5	Type score deviation confidence interval (p – value)
<u>Community image shown: Suburbia</u>			
Suburbia	16.65	0.346	15.969 – 16.734 0.00
Small town	15.75	0.286	15.186 – 16.318
City	12.93	0.297	12.341 – 13.514
<u>Community image shown: Small town</u>			
Suburbia	13.49	0.323	12.854 – 14.132
Small town	17.37	0.334	16.715 – 18.035 0.00
City	10.37	0.286	9.803 – 10.936
<u>Community image shown: City</u>			
Suburbia	11.38	0.252	10.885 – 11.883
Small town	12.12	0.267	11.592 – 12.656
City	15.95	0.380	15.204 – 16.707 0.00

Note: 1. The null hypothesis is ‘average score = 12.5’ in all cases

Hypothesis 2

Based on examining the sample as a whole for correct identification of the stimulus images with the NOB labels “small town,” “city,” and “suburb,” a high majority is observed to correctly label each image. Table 2 below illustrates this.

Table 2: NOB Identification of Images

Community Type	Small Town	Suburbia	City
% Labeled Correctly	84	85	93

Hypothesis 3

Observations. The ratings for each community type were computed within generational subsamples in the same way they were computed for the total sample. Comparisons were made for the three blocks of descriptors and each generation tested for significant differences in perceptions of each NOB. Table 3 below demonstrates these comparisons.

Analysis. Descriptor Block 1 is recognized by each generation as describing the NOB Suburbia, Block 2 as describing the NOB Small Town and Block 3 describes the NOB. Paired t-tests show that the scores of the expected block (in bold type) are statistically significantly higher than the other two scores for each NOB in the perceptions of each generation. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and the concept criterion is supported.

Table 3: Intra-Generation Testing of Community NOB Block Descriptor Ratings

	Descriptor Block 1 ^a	Descriptor Block 2 ^a	Descriptor Block 3 ^a
NOB: SUBURBIA			
Boomers	16.86	15.88	12.77
Generation X	17.08	16.61	12.85
Millennial	15.93	14.83	12.37
NOB: SMALL TOWN			
Boomers	14.16	17.43	10.95
Generation X	14.15	18.58	10.77
Millennial	12.56	16.21	10.12
NOB: CITY			
Boomers	11.29	12.23	16.07
Generation X	12.23	11.66	15.69
Millennial	10.77	12.23	14.81

Notes:

- Block of five descriptors of community archetype where 1=Suburbia, 2=Small Town and 3=City.
- Bolded ratings are statistically significantly higher than non-bolded ratings in the same row at the 95% confidence interval.

Hypothesis 4

Observations. Whether or not there are generationally distinct preferences for or aversion to the NOBs as alternative options for where to live was measured using an affinity measure, Descriptor 16, “A perfect place for someone like me.” This descriptor was not included in the previous block analyses. Affinity for one NOB over another can be interpreted as an attitudinal step toward preference. Thus differences in rating a given NOB as “Perfect for someone like me” can indicate that there is potential for these NOBs to influence consumer preference and choice. Table 4 illustrates differences in the generations’ affinities for one NOB over another.

Table 4: NOB affinity ratings by generation

Location	Boomers	Generation-Xers	Millennials
Suburbia	3.36	3.08	3.16
Small town	2.43	2.08	2.00
City	2.25	2.77	2.44

Analysis. In general all three generations show greatest affinity with suburbia, which is an unsurprising finding given the prevalence of suburbia as a residential community style and cultural icon in the second half of the 20th Century (Gans 1967). The comparison of positive to negative affinity ratings shows Boomers view small towns as closer to their ideal place than do either Gen-Xers or Millennials. The latter two generations appear to have more affinity to Cities than do Boomers. Whether such differences are significant are not tested; the variation is displayed to suggest that research designed specifically to investigate how these NOBs influence consumer choice is indicated.

Outcomes

General Conclusions

Concept upheld in general. Consumers see the tested NOBs generally as theory predicts, supporting the idea that there are naturally occurring brands that exist alongside commercially positioned brands in consumers' cultural frames of reference. Since the agreement ratings for each block of verbal descriptors were statistically significantly higher for each predicted community NOB than the non-predicted blocks, Hypothesis 1 is upheld. With each image labeled by most respondents as the NOB expected by theory, Hypothesis 2 is also upheld. We can say that there is consumer consensus on what NOB name to use for each cluster of images and associated attributes.

Concept upheld in each generation. The tested NOBs were also characterized as theory expects by each of the three generations tested. Thus, we conclude that "suburbia," "small town" and city" operate as NOBs having consistent imagery and meaning across time (multiple generations), upholding Hypothesis 3. This extends the supporting evidence that the community archetypes operate as naturally occurring brands, whose cultural meanings (brand perceptual equities) have remained consistent over time.

Variation in affinity. Finally, the observed variation in generational agreement that one or another NOB is "an ideal place for someone like me" is a preliminary indicator that these NOBs may have the symbolic power to influence consumer behavior, eliciting either interest or aversion. This preliminary support for the second defining characteristic of NOBs, that they influence consumer decisions, requires future research specifically designed to test it.

Scholarly and Practical Implications

For Place Marketers: Community Design and Marketing Communications. The most obvious implication of these findings affects the situation of residential real estate

developers. Depending on the resemblance the designs and layouts of their communities to one or another of the NOBs, they may be inadvertently communicating ideas about the way neighbors' lives will take place within them, with consequent positive or negative effects on prospects' choices. As the attribute ratings show, each type (small town, suburbia, and city) comes with both positive and negative associations. And each is signified to consumers by the spatial arrangement of buildings and streets – as correct identification of the pictures with labels showed.

Knowing how such forms of community are perceived can enable the designers and marketers of these communities to market their own residential designs more strategically – by defining target prospects more precisely in terms of attitude and lifestyle values that prefer each type, and using this knowledge to position their offerings to the appropriate target. They can further enhance receptivity to their offerings by improving marketing communications to emphasize the positive over negative attributes of a given new residential development to those target segments whose attitudes are likely to be receptive.

For Advertisers and IMC Specialists: Specific New Relevant Variables. Similarly, these findings have relevance for those who use various forms of community as backdrops in visual marketing communications, especially when portraying brands via print and TV or movie theatre advertising. Strategic questions to be asked include whether or not the creative concept in advertising a given brand plans to show it in contrast or similarity to such backdrops. For example, a small town backdrop might enhance brand perceptions of “family” for brands like Disney or Jello. A city backdrop might reinforce perceptions of sophistication for brands like Jaguar or Grey Goose. This study's findings alert advertising researchers to the need for measuring such communications elements explicitly when they test variations on an ad idea. In addition to these particular implications, there are less obvious but no less important theoretical and practical considerations.

For Consumer Behavior and Branding Scholars: A new analytical level of symbols and meanings. The NOB concept advanced in this paper has passed a preliminary test of validity that prompts several insights. First, it indicates that an intermediate level of signs and symbols in brand constellations of meaning exists between general cognitive categories of symbols and commercially created and maintained brands, opening branding theory to a whole new class of stimuli competing for consumer attention that has yet to be adequately understood. NOBs offer a new approach toward specifying variables in the oft-referenced “cultural context” to be measured in future research.

Second, awareness of a new layer of influences on consumer perceptions generates fresh theoretical questions regarding the realities of marketplace brand competition. For practitioners, the most immediate effect of this new middle level is the need to redefine what commercial brand competitive sets include. This discovery also calls attention to the interaction of main message and inadvertent additional messages contained in a given marketing communication. It calls attention to the importance of explicitly investigating the content of whole constellations of images and symbols in which commercially created

and managed brands are embedded, because, unrecognized, their influences on consumers perceptions are unpredictable.

Consumer autonomy in using brand as cultural signposts. This research reinforces findings by previous scholars that consumers have considerable initiative and autonomy in determining brand symbolism and meaning. NOBs persist without the intentional assistance of brand marketing efforts. Even when they don't present purchasable alternatives, as symbols of human values and attitudes they help shape the standards by which consumers develop preferences among commercially available brands. Acknowledging their presence as sources of meaning against which consumers evaluate commercially created and managed brands forces a paradigm expansion that will be challenging, especially for practitioners. Marketing communications must now take into account a new class of relevant variables if they are to assess any commercial brand's market perceptions or its integrated brand communications adequately.

Study limitations and suggestions for future research. Before the proposed NOB concept can be accepted with confidence, more comprehensive research is needed, (1) to verify these community NOBs operate as suggested and (2) to identify other types of NOBs. Similar findings among a broader and randomly selected sample of consumers regarding the community NOBs would strengthen the findings of this research. In addition, this study only tests and finds support for the validity of the first of the three defining characteristics of the NOB concept, the capability of a perceptual equity to persist without intentional management. Further research is needed to validate the second criterion of NOBs - whether or not they influence actual consumer choices. Finally, identification and testing of other examples of NOBs is needed to be sure that this is not simply a singular curious case.

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Biographies



Christine Wright-Isak earned her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Chicago going directly to industry where she became a national branding specialist. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the Lutgert College of Business at Florida Gulf Coast University. Her research interests include Brand Equity Management, New Product Branding and Military Branding.

[Dr. Swaleheen prefers to send no picture]

Dr. Mushfiq Swaleheen teaches economics at Florida Gulf Coast University and has multidisciplinary research interests. His empirical research on corruption is published in *Economics Letters*, *Public Choice*, *Kyklos* and other journals.