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# Can Brands Make Us Happy? A Research Framework for the Study of Brands and Their Effects on Happiness

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## ABSTRACT

Brands permeate consumer culture. Yet, despite their ubiquitous presence, one of the societally most relevant and fundamental questions of brand existence remains among the most difficult to capture: Can brands make us happy? Academics have identified emotional and cognitive influences of brands on loyalty and studied the broader well-being effects of income and consumption. This paper adds to this discourse by analyzing the roads and barriers of researching correlations between brands and happiness. We first evaluate methods to reliably assess general influences on happiness. Then, we differentiate three levels of the consumer-brand experience and discuss if and how their respective correlations with happiness can meaningfully be measured. As a result, we offer a roadmap for brand-related happiness research that directs and inspires further inquiry.

## INTRODUCTION

When Apple's first cellular phone, the "iphone," hit the U.S. Market in June 2007, the most devoted fans went to such lengths as to spend several nights in front of the Apple stores to get a hand on the device. Once acquired, they petted the product, showed it around, cheered the brand, and thus rejuvenated the brand-based market system. Has the owners' happiness been driven by the device itself? Was it the brand? Or was it the entire system of brands that molded the iphone in to being such a powerful identity resource?

Brands have been important since about 1885. Since these early days, brands have become means not only for making better-informed purchasing decisions, but also for advancing individual identity projects (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998); as symbols of taste, wealth, and belonging (Levy 1959), as objects of desire (Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2003, Ahuvia 2005), as motives for social community building (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002), and as relationship partners (Fournier 1998). Whereas these functions have been perceived as implicitly positive for consumer well-being, brands have also long been criticized (Fisk 1967). Over the last decade, a rising number of authors have investigated the darker side of corporate branding, the brand's potential backlash (Handelman 1999; Holt 2002; Klein 1999; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Lasn 2000). The key point of these studies is that the "branding of cultures" by corporations advances a superficial culture of over-consumption, resulting ultimately in the destruction of human and environmental resources, a reduced quality of human relationships and diminished overall well-being (Csikszentmihalyi 1999).

The above findings evoke the fundamental question of whether brands can make us happy. Existing research has illuminated various influences of consumption on happiness, such as car possession, smoking, or leisure activity levels, and scrutinized demographic influences such as income, employment, or race on happiness, but remains silent on the level(s) at which brands might influence consumers' and society's psychological well-being. This paper offers an important next step towards closing this gap in knowledge by reflecting on the roads and barriers of brand-related happiness research. We first discuss the concept of happiness, its various influences, and its most reliable measures. Then, we de-

scribe three distinct levels of brand experience from which consumers might derive happiness; brand clues, brand systems, and the overall system of brands. Lastly, we combine the suitable happiness measures with these three realms of experience to present a research framework for future brand-related happiness research.

## THE LEVELS OF BRAND EXPERIENCE

A brand is a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998, 419). This and various other more cultural and multi-faceted concepts of brands underlie an extensive body of literature that has illuminated the individual-psychological (Aaker, Fournier and Brasel 2004; Tybout and Carpenter 2001), communal-sociological (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Hellmann 2003; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002), and economic-managerial (Aaker 1995) merits of branding. However, for our purpose, we need a definition of the brand that differentiates the tangible, observable elements of a brand (e.g. a specific thing) from the meanings of them (e.g. its community associations) and again from the meanings of the entirety of brands in society (i.e. attitude towards brands in general). We next describe these three levels of brand experience as brand clues, brand systems and the system of brands.

### Brand Clues

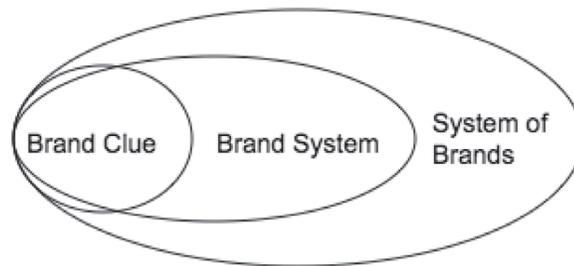
A "brand clue" is a set of distinctions that consumers experience with their physical senses-sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. As manifestations of brands, brand clues include logos, products, price tags, stores, sounds, smells and other clues through which consumers identify the derivation, quality, or function of a particular good or service. For an observer, that is an owner or non-owner, a brand clue in itself is experiential and meaningless. However, brand clues are also links to the brand system.

### Brand Systems

Brand systems are systems of communication that organize the meanings of brand clues for an observer (Giesler 2003). Such meanings may include the particular identity connotations of a brand (e.g. the innovative spirit of Apple products), the connotations of group belonging (e.g. the community of Harley Davidson owners), and the (largely imagined) social responses that consumers derive from interpreting brand meanings (e.g. responses to wearing fashion brands).

Brand systems are characterized by three markers (Luedicke 2005). First, brand systems are established through social communication about brand clues. They proliferate with every reference made to the brand, but are as oblivious as human minds. Second, distinctive clues with high social relevance influence the brand systems' communicative "noise." That social noise is independent of whether consumers accept, alter, or oppose the suggested meanings of the brand clues. Third, being intelligent in their social reproduction, brand systems negotiate and perpetuate specific programs and structures that guide, constrain, and inspire communication. Programs and structures allow consumers, marketers and other observers to communicate in accordance with—or against—the

**FIGURE 1**  
Three ontological levels of brand experience



predominant meanings of a brand system and use these meanings for their marketing or identity goals.

### The System of Brands

The system of brands is a theoretical concept for studying the entire presence and role of brands for an observer. Brands and their social utilization by organizations and consumers are understood as a functional subsystem of consumer societies, and operate with particular programs and codes. In distinction to the brand system, which embraces communications around a specific brand, the system of brands refers to the general logic of brands that enables consumers to recognize brands as parts of a larger system. The shared knowledge about the system allows consumers to employ brands both as a means for social distinction as well as for better making purchasing decisions.

In concert, these three notions allow us to meaningfully define the notion of brands, and to correlate brand experiences with consumer happiness (see Figure 1). Observers (e.g. consumers, marketers, journalists) perceive brand clues independent of brand knowledge (e.g. a Ferrari is a loud red car). When they learn about the brand's social attributes and how they are perceived in a particular cultural context (e.g. a Ferrari is a high status vehicle, or a "pimp ride"), they experience the brand system. Observers that, for instance, have their first experiences with consumer cultures will get an understanding of the system of brands in this particular context. They will learn that particular brands have an effect on social responses or that some social realms demand the usage of brands whereas others rather despise it. Differentiating these three levels of brand experience enables us to distinguish suitable measures for their assessment.

### WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

Ancient Greek philosophy understood happiness as the absence of pain (e.g. Epicure), and was focused largely on the body or the result of intelligent reflection (e.g. Cicero). The hedonist philosophy of Aristippus of Cyrene, however, theorized that happiness was the sum of material pleasures, and the meaning of life was the maximization of delight (Layard 2005, Fromm [1976] 2007). This hedonistic concept of happiness was particularly influential for the Italian metropolitan elite of the Renaissance, and the British and French bourgeoisie of the 18th and 19th centuries. Hedonism continues to be expressed in contemporary consumer culture with the creed of "having more" is "being more" (see Fromm 2007 for a critique). Whether happiness is—or should be—the ultimate goal in life remains an unresolved philosophical question. However, it is evident that American consumers accept the "pursuit of happiness"

since the Declaration of Independence in 1776 as a salient life goal and consumption as a central means for leveraging it.

The definition of happiness is largely author dependant. In the literature, a person's "happiness" is determined in at least four different ways. Psychologists tend to use the construct of "subjective well-being" (Diener et al. 1999). This term reflects the idea of happiness as a non-physical state that cannot be objectively measured (as opposed to body temperature or blood pressure). In this view, subjective well-being is "the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her own life-as-a-whole favorably" (Veenhoven 2001, p. 4). Economists, in contrast, understand well-being as a function of a person's income and the utility derived from consumption (Sunanyi-Unger 1981). Another stream of literature theorizes happiness as one of many human affects. For these researchers, happiness levels can be derived from the observation- and averaging-of a person's affects over a period of time. Lastly, researchers in the field of neurobiology perceive happiness as an activation state within a particular region of the brain.

### What Influences Happiness?

Generic influences on happiness (using measures of satisfaction) were found to include income, personal characteristics, socially-developed characteristics, how respondents spend their time, attitudes and beliefs towards self/others/life, relationships, and the wider economic, social and political environment (Dolan, Peasgood and White 2008, p. 97). Such research has found, for instance, significant differences in the evaluation of subjective well-being depending on people being employed versus unemployed and single versus living with a partner (ibid.). People with high self-esteem, a sense of personal control, optimism, and extraversion were found to be generally happier (Myers and Diener 1995). Research has also tested for happiness correlations with gender, age, education, and ethnicity, but results vary among the various studies (Andrews and Withey 1976; Diener 1984). It seems that money can buy happiness, but only temporarily (Myers and Diener 1995).

The question underpinning all these analyses is whether happiness can be influenced. Some authors argue that about 50% of one's satisfaction is predefined in the human genetic program and that life circumstances only marginally affect human happiness (Lykken and Tellegen 1996). Others believe that a change in behavior, such as an eventual grateful gesture to a friend, can change overall happiness levels (Wallis et al 2005, Seligman 2002). Self-evaluation has been variously used in studies correlating consumption with happiness (see Table 1)(Diener and Suh 1999, Frey and Stutzer 2002, Layard 2005). It has been reported, for

TABLE 1

Correlates of Consumption Measures and Happiness (Source: The World Database of Happiness)

Consumption Measure	Correlation with Happiness
Car Ownership	$r=+.17$
Active involvement in sports	$r=+.19$
Possession of micro-wave and dish-washer	$r=+.15$
Leisure activity level	$r=+.14$
Smoking	$r=-.10$

instance, that among 3,500 Dutch consumers above 18 years of age car ownership correlates moderately positive with happiness ( $r=+.17$ ,  $p<.05$  in 1997 and  $r=+.12$ ,  $p<.05$  in 1993).

Whereas these above studies provide some evidence of consumption influences on happiness, they tell little about brands and remain vague on both the various levels of brand experiences and on the direction of causality. Consequentially, the ultimate question of whether-and how-brands influence consumer happiness has yet to be answered.

### HOW IS HAPPINESS MEASURED?

Approaches to measuring happiness are many fold. As stated above, scholars understand happiness in at least four different ways. However, the economists' reductionism approach of objective well-being does not add to our quest as this stream abstracts from subjective and individual evaluations. In the sections that follow, we describe the key approaches of subjective well-being, hedonic affect, and physiological activation in more detail.

#### Measuring Happiness as Subjective Well-Being

A broad variety of scales have been used to quantify peoples' quality or satisfaction with life. Among the former, the "Satisfaction with Life Scale" of Pavot and Diener (1993) ranks as the most reputed. It evaluates overall happiness with five questions rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Other examples of multi-item scales include the "Oxford Happiness Inventory" (Argyle et al. 1989) with 29 items and the "Depression-Happiness Scale" (McGreal and Joseph 1993) with 40 items.

For some authors, single-item scales are, on average, as valid as multi-item scales (Burisch 1984). Such scales typically use a question such as "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the life you lead?" (European Commission 2008), or "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days? Would you say that you are...?" Answers on a 7 point Likert type scale range from "completely unhappy" to "completely happy" (Andrews and Whitney 1976). For these single-item scales it was found to make no empirical difference in results if the word "satisfied" or "happy" was used (Hirata 2006). This makes the single-item scale applicable for large-scale surveys.

The subjective well-being approach and its underlying beliefs have two important implications for our study. First, happiness is

not understood as a peak of life evaluation, but being happy means that a person judges his or her life favorably rather than unfavorably at a particular point in time. Typically, such measures are repeated over months and years to measure changes in correlations and to abstract from punctual emotions. Second, happiness is understood as a subjective appreciation of one's life without any objective standard. Hence, if consumers judge themselves to be happy, then, as far as the researcher is concerned, they are happy. Difficulties with studying satisfaction with life arise from whether it is a stable personal trait or an evaluation that depends on life circumstances (Veenhoven 1994), and whether happiness is perceived as absolute or relative (Veenhoven 1991). As it currently stands, most researchers in the satisfaction of life paradigm agree that happiness depends on both personal traits and life circumstances. It is further found to depend on both the respondents' social environments and as absolute in the sense that happiness cannot occur unless basic human needs—such as security, health, and food—are satisfied.

#### Measuring Happiness as Hedonic Affect

Happiness correlates not only with the subjective evaluation of the degree to which personal expectations have been met (see Bentham 1789, Veenhoven 1984, Myers and Diener 1995), but also with the relative presence of positive and negative affects. These include the pleasantness of emotions (e.g. love), sensory feelings (e.g. taste), and mood (a mixture of affects). The World Database of Happiness lists more than 200 different scales for measuring hedonic affects. Affect scales explicitly ask for affective states, in contrast to subjective well-being scales that avoid words referring to feelings or moods, but ask for achievements, wants, and goals. Furthermore, researchers applying affective measures are not restricted to self-reports, but can also draw on external observations such as those of family members or the researchers themselves (Noelle-Neumann 1977).

Affective experiences can be evaluated simultaneously good and bad, and should therefore be described as bivalent rather than bipolar (Kahneman 1999). The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) measure of affect rates among the most frequently used affect scales (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen 1988). Participants are asked to rate ten positive affects (interested, excited, strong, enthusiastic, proud, alert, inspired, determined, attentive, and active) and ten negative affects (distressed, upset, guilty, scared, hostile, irritable, ashamed, nervous, jittery, and afraid) according to

their emotional strength at various points in time. Answers range from 1="very slightly or not at all," to 5="extremely" (ibid.). As affects change in situ, they must be measured repetitively to inform about a participant's overall happiness. The "Experience Sampling Method" (ESM, Csikszentmihalyi, Lason and Prescott 1977) acknowledges this dynamic by asking respondents several times per day to report the situation they are engaged in at that moment and to evaluate the presence or absence of various feelings. Although this method reveals valuable insights on the intensity of current feelings in a specific situation, it remains difficult to be implemented for larger scale surveys. Therefore, Kahneman et al (2004) developed the "Day Reconstruction Method" (DRM) that combines elements of time diaries and experience sampling. Respondents are asked to reconstruct the previous day by dividing it into various episodes and to indicate the time dedicated to that episode. In a second step, respondents are asked to report the intensity of feelings along nine affect dimensions on a scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 6 (very much). The assessed net affect of an experience is defined as the average of the 3 positive affect dimensions (happy, warm, enjoying myself) less the average of the 6 negative affect dimensions (frustrated, depressed, hassled, angry, worried, criticized) (Kahneman and Krueger 2006). These dimensions are nevertheless not fixed and the list can vary depending on the research goals.

The measure of happiness via affect is not without its disputes. Kahneman and colleagues, for instance, argue that remembering effects disturb the correct assessment of happiness. Therefore, their approach inquires into the lived experiences of people in situ. They found, for instance, that the five most positive activities for Texas housewives are (in descending order) sex, socializing, relaxing, praying or meditating, and eating, rather than taking care of children (Wallis et al 2005). Seligman (2002) and others argue against this position because they find memories and stories telling more about authentic happiness than the actual experiences. Seligman concludes that engagement and meaning are more influential to happiness than the pursuit of pleasure.

### Measuring Happiness via Physiological Responses

Since neurobiologists have found reliable correlations between self-reported happiness and the activation of particular brain regions, happiness is considered to some extent measurable objectively. Methods for deriving results are electrophysiological (EEG, EKG) and imaging (e.g. fMRI, PET) response techniques. Subjects respond to various stimuli, such as haptic experiences or social stimuli (e.g. family pictures or a movie), with changes in their skin conductivity, heart rate, or activation of brain areas. These findings largely abstract from cultural influences on happiness evaluations and from individual interpretation of emotions. However, researchers must define the levels of activation that translate reliably into self-reported happiness. Hence, as they entail the opposite strength and weaknesses of the self-report techniques, these measures are useful as complementary methods. Realistically, however, most researchers will be unable to cover the financial expenses of an fMRI study with a representative sample of consumers.

## ROADS AND BARRIERS FOR MEASURING BRAND-RELATED HAPPINESS

Consumption inspires human senses as much as it evokes their thoughts (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). With their refined qualities, brands are likely to do so in specific ways at the above three experiential levels. Consumer researchers have inquired at various occasions into the short and long term hedonic responses of consumers to brand or product stimuli (cf. Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Ruth 2001; Sundie et al 2006). Some studies have also

considered how the evaluation of these affects or responses may be mediated by the cognitive appraisal of emotions (Edell and Burke 1987), personality (Matzler, Bidmon and Grabner-Kräuter 2006), and experience and background knowledge (Ruth 2001; Washburn, Till and Priluck 2004). Most of these studies, however, focus too narrowly on selected emotions (e.g. Di Monaco et al 2004) or character traits (e.g. Matzler, Bidmon and Grabner-Kräuter 2006) and ignore well-being outcomes. They also use the brand notion rarely distinct from the products or companies they represent, so that the particular effect of brand clues and systems remains unappreciated. In their attentive study of the influence of brand trust and affect on market performance, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001, p. 87) come closest to an explicit study of brand-related happiness. They measure correlations of brand affect and loyalty by asking three direct questions: "I feel good when I use this brand", "This brand makes me happy", and "This brand gives me pleasure." While these authors provide insightful information, we find such unconcealed, intrusive questions not only likely to provoke biased answers, but also unsuitable for capturing consumer experiences with brands comprehensively (see Kahneman and Krueger above). Hence, we next evaluate potential methods for understanding the role of brands for happiness based on the above distinct levels of brand experience and the most reliable measures. Figure 2 provides an illustrative overview of the various options and limitations that we discuss next.

### Brand Clues and Happiness

A brand clue was defined as a visual, audible, haptic, olfactory, or gustational experience that can be evaluated via physiological response tests and affect measures. The experiencing of brand clues, such as driving a Porsche, will have little (if any) direct influence on cognitive appraisals of well-being, but probably a mediated one. Brand clues can be evaluated by participants that have no previous experience with, or knowledge of the social meaning of the branded good or service. Hence, discrimination of hedonic or physiological responses can be attributed to experiences with goods of different sensual qualities. Researchers may consider various sorts of high and low end branded products for comparison.

From the above methodical and conceptual findings we derive three suitable ways for measuring potential brand clue effects on happiness. First, we suggest conducting laboratory or field experiments at which consumers are confronted with high and low quality, status, price, etc. brand clues. Subjects' physiological responses can be measured via electrophysiological (EEG, EKG) and imaging (e.g. fMRI, PET) techniques and related to subjective well-being measures.

Second, the day reconstruction method appears useful for evaluating emotional responses to brand clues over a period of several days, weeks, or even months. These brand-specific in situ self-evaluations can be flanked with external observations of these consumers' emotional responses to brand clues over this period of time. For such external data, the researcher or the friends and family observe and note facial expressions, posture, voice, and other physical behaviors.

Websites and mobile computer applications allow for more timely evaluations of brand-related affects than previously. The "hedonimeter.net" art project of Christine Wong Yap foreshadows such an empirical approach where respondents record and comment their emotions throughout their day (see e.g. <http://www.hedonimeter.net/results/index.php?op=view&id=2> [03/18/2008]). Results can be averaged and deviations can be calculated to reveal the respondent's amplitude and frequency of positive and negative brand-related feelings. An ascription of "happy" or "unhappy" requires the setting of threshold values.

**FIGURE 2**  
A research roadmap for brand-related happiness research

Happiness Measure Brand Experience Level	Physiological Responses	Emotional Responses / Affects	Subjective Well-being Evaluations
<b>Brand Clues</b> Sensory consumption experiences	Electrophysiological (EEG, EKG) and imaging (e.g. fMRI, PET) comparative experiments with brand clues	Brand-specific in situ self-evaluations (via DRM, ESM) and external evaluations of emotional responses to brand clues	Correlates of self and external SWB evaluations with physiological and emotional responses; potential new measure to correlate brand clue and system influences with satisfaction.
<b>Brand Systems</b> Ideological and social consumption experiences	Electrophysiological (EEG, EKG) and imaging (e.g. fMRI, PET) comparative experiments with social brand perceptions	Brand-specific in situ self-evaluations (via DRM, ESM) and external evaluations of emotional responses to social brand perception	
<b>System of Brands</b> Societal systemic brand experiences	-	-	

Third, for understanding influences of brand clues on satisfaction, we suggest (if applicable) calculating correlates of self and external measures of well-being with the physiological and emotional responses noted above. In addition, we suggest to develop a new scale that allows for measuring indirect brand clue influences on happiness, such as the number of high and low end brands owned, the amount of pleasure derived from consuming the brand in public, the number and type of responses to brand consumption, or the enjoyment with acquiring new products. Such a scale development process would require a qualitative study to evoke relevant brand clue effects. It seems though unlikely that a single temporally limited affect may influence significantly and permanently a consumer’s overall subjective well-being. Causality between a favorable appreciation of a brand clue and a high level of subjective well-being may also be difficult to define.

**Brand Systems and Happiness**

Brand systems capture the social meanings of a brand that evolve through communication about brand clues (Giesler 2003, Luedicke 2005). Understanding the meaning of these communications within a particular culture requires cognitive processing of brand-related messages, such as corporate advertisements, the brand tales of friends, or the symbolic references that brand clues (e.g. shape, material, or style) make in a popular culture. Ownership of a branded good that is perceived as signaling high status-such as a Rolex watch-might influence owners’ self-evaluations of their well-being because wearing a brand clue with high status recognition-rather than a socially less relevant product-might be perceived as an indicator for success and social achievement. In consumer cultural research, the symbolic value of brands has often been studied but seldom refined for a subsequent study of happiness. Among others, Fournier (1998) and Ahuvia (2005), for instance, report on consumers experiencing brand-related emotions from love to hate and Pichler and Hemetsberger (2007) argue that consumers develop extreme devotional relationships with brands. However, these authors remain ambiguous on specific happiness influences. Further examples of emotional responses to brand systems resides in the consumer resistance literature (e.g. Kozinets and Handelman 2004). This body of literature offers accounts of

strong responses to brands and organizations that, again, unfold their cultural and marketing relevance both on the level of affect and of cognitive evaluation.

Two ways of measuring brand systems’ influences on happiness appear viable on the above methodical and theoretical grounds. As a first approach, we suggest inquiring into the affects that brand-related communications provoke (cf. Ruth 2001 for partial findings). This exercise largely overlaps with evaluating the role of brand clues for happiness. However, while using the same empirical approaches-e.g. ESM or DRM-the researcher focuses on in situ reports of social relationships that a brand inspires and on reports of symbolic use and consumer responses. The measure can be flanked by subjective well-being evaluations for consistency tests.

Alternatively or additionally, researchers may seek to reveal potential correlations between a person’s general brand appreciation, brand ownership, and subjective well-being by means of multi-item scales. This approach operates on the level of a specific brand system (probably around a high profile brand) symbolizing the achievement of life goals. For instance, the possession of a Porsche may serve as mediator for the life goal “successful career.” To understand this relationship, the researcher measures in a first set of items the respondents’ general sensitivity towards brand meanings that is expressed, for instance, in brand knowledge, brand experience levels, brand name recall for product categories and the across-respondents overlap of brand associations. These questions need to be developed and tested carefully and should be less intrusive and obvious than existing ones. The second set of questions captures the effective use and meanings of brands that matter to respondents in particular social ways. The scale would allow for self-evaluations of brands that evoke high to low social responses and for indicating the type of responses that these brands evoke, such as surprise, rejection, or respectful recognition from others. Further it is of interest, what kind of relationships the respondents form with those meaningful brands, including positive and negative, short-lived and traditional relationships (see Fournier 1998). These data would provide an idea of the respondents’ usage frequency and direction of brand meanings and allow for revealing potential correlations among the various appreciations of brand systems and happiness.

We hypothesize that the influence of brands systems on subjective well-being is existent but limited whereas the physiological and attitude measures may evoke more vivid responses. However, most likely, it will be difficult to separate the brand clue from the brand system level responses.

### The System of Brands and Happiness

On the system of brands level, we expect brands to influence individuals in their entirety as a social mechanism that not only facilitates purchase choices and (partially) quality evaluations, but also provides a cultural structure for symbolic uses of goods and services. Consumer culture theorists have used notions such as the "world of consumer products" (Fournier 1998) and "the web of brands" (Klein 1999) for describing brands on this systemic level. The major critique against brands also operates on this level of experience. The guiding question on this ontological level is, if the overall existence and influence of brands on consumers' lives has an impact on happiness evaluations, and if so, in which direction(s)? A broad range of answers is possible. Respondents might feel that the symbolic communication that brands reinforce changes their social life to the worse (argued e.g. by Klein 1999), because they have to actively consider what their products are telling others about themselves to avoid trouble. Yet, they might also and even simultaneously be positive towards the system of brands as it allows them to facilitate other aspects of social life, including even symbolic rebellion (Holt 2002). As an example, not having an Apple ipod has almost become a social stigma in some European schools. Parents that pay for their children not to be plagued at school experience this system in a particularly direct way.

Similar abstract constructs have been tested elsewhere for their influence on happiness. Frey, Leuchinger and Stutzer (2004) have, for instance, measured the influence of terrorism on overall happiness using the number of attacks and the number of people killed to define the periods with more or less terrorist activity. Later, they compared these data to longitudinal national happiness surveys. We might consider data such as national advertising expenses, density of billboards in downtown, or the number of brands in a country as comparable indicators, but they abstract from actual perceptions. We suggest conducting an explorative study for developing an appropriate measure of individual brand perceptions. Such a measure of the respondents' appreciation of the system of brand must allow for multi-faceted responses. Respondents must be able to appreciate and disapprove of aspects of the system at the same time, rather than rating the system in its entire social effect. Again, these responses would later be correlated with the same respondents' ranking on a subjective well-being scale. Such correlations are likely to occur for some groups of consumers (e.g. less affluent parents) and less for others (e.g. young urban professionals), depending on life circumstances, social comparison groups and particularly on income levels.

### Combining Measures

Depending on scale length and complexity, it appears useful to combine the evaluations of brand clues, brand systems, and the system of brands for testing the measures for further correlations. It seems logical to combine the system of brands evaluation with the affect reports evaluated using the day reconstruction method.

### CONCLUSIONS

This study offers an important step towards answering the question of whether brands can make us happy. We have argued that happiness (or frustration) may result from consumers' experiences with sensory brand clues, social brand systems and the overall system of brands in a particular society. We have shown that three

distinct paths can lead to a reliable evaluation of happiness: physiological responses, emotional responses (affect measures), and subjective well-being evaluations. On these conceptual and methodical grounds, we have developed a research framework; a guide to the most viable directions and approaches for further research into brand-related happiness. The limitations of this study coincide with its purpose; to invite fellow researchers to work on measures for hedonic responses to brand clues, on scales for the cognitive appreciation of brand systems, on evaluations of the system of brands, or on refining the directional guide with further options.

This ongoing research contributes to consumer behavior research, marketing theory, and public policy in three important ways. First, we seek to provide empirical evidence of consumers' multifaceted evaluations of brands and how they relate to each other in everyday consumption contexts. Second, we expect to learn more about the sources of happiness in brands for deriving marketing implications. And lastly, we hope to respond to social activists' critiques of the system of brands with reliable empirical data. This lack of empirical research has led to an abundance of populist critiques and affronts against corporations and brands, and cries out for independent scientific scrutiny.

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# Shopping for Civic Values: Exploring the Emergence of Civic Consumer Culture in Contemporary Western Society

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we critique how consumerism is considered an antithesis of citizenship, how acting as a consumer and acting in a civic manner are often viewed as detached parts of our lives. We seek to do this by exploring the blurring of consumerism and citizenship, which is culminating in an emerging area of politicised consumption based on citizenly rights, obligations and social inclusion together with competition and autonomous choice. We illustrate this emergence with specific reference to 'green' citizen-consumers to demonstrate the changing face of civic society in the west, where shopping can act as a vector for civic values and hence facilitates the emergence of civic consumer culture in contemporary western society.

## INTRODUCTION—A CRISIS IN CIVIC SOCIETY?

With consumerism dominating the ideology and behaviour of western society, the halcyon days of civic engagement, where individuals act as 'good citizens', are purported to be in decline. This concern exists because of the negative consequences associated with consumerism, in particular the charge of self-indulgence with little consideration for others. This has been compounded by the increasingly visible connections between consumerism and climate change, which is resulting in some profound implications for human, social and environmental capital. All western governments are undoubtedly concerned about the degradation of our society and planet, and have been for some time. In this paper, we are advocating that some of the underlying causes that threaten our planet can be linked to a breakdown in western civic society, and that, what might initially seem paradoxical, we believe combining civic and consumerist values may hold the key to reinvigorating the health of our planet and our society.

Concern about the breakdown in the traditions of civic society is echoed in academic work on social capital and active citizenship. For example David Putnam (2000), in *'Bowling Alone'*, portrays the unparalleled collapse, since the 1960s, of social capital in America. The research of Hoskins et al (2006) indicates a mixed pattern of active citizenship in Europe. While David Halpern (2004) concurs that the strength of social capital in some western societies is cause for disquiet, he is much more concerned with the transformation of social capital per se. Halpern argues that what is more important is recognition that traditional types of social capital are in decline globally and are being replaced with more issue-specific and less time-demanding forms, with the most explicit manifestation residing within a universal increase in individualistic social capital. We argue that this mirrors many of the influences of consumerism in individuals' life-worlds and underlines the challenges associated with consumerism and climate change.

The British government is so concerned by this 'shift' in society, they have implemented educational policy to ensure citizenship now features highly on the educational curriculum in British schools, and are currently considering citizenship ceremonies for British school children to convey what it means to be a citizen of Britain—a sense of shared belonging, higher social cohesion, and for children to understand their rights and responsibilities as British citizens (BBC News24 2008). This concern is also

reflected in wider educational networks, for example the CiCe thematic framework (see [cice.londonmet.ac.uk](http://cice.londonmet.ac.uk)).

Are we then facing a crisis in western society while we wait for an enlightened new generation to brandish the torch of citizenship as adults? Of course this depends on what is meant by citizenship and civicness. Professor Bernard Crick, who was asked to advise the British Government on introducing classes in citizenship into schools, makes a distinction between being a good citizen—obeying laws—and being an active citizen—getting involved in prescribed types of activity that are deemed of civic worth (for example voluntary work). However, this offers a somewhat narrow view of what it means to be a modern citizen living in the west, particularly if we accept that being civic and having a sense of community are perceived experiences, (Couldry et al 2007). Hence, it becomes necessary to look beyond the obvious places to better understand the state of 'civicness' in contemporary western society. At the same time it is also necessary to understand consumerism and its implications for civic society. In this paper we seek to do this by exploring the blurring of what has been viewed by traditionalists as two contrasting concepts, namely that of consumerism and citizenship, which is culminating in an emerging area of politicised consumption based on citizenly rights, obligations and social inclusion, together with competition and autonomous choice. We illustrate this emergence with specific reference to 'green' citizen-consumers to demonstrate the changing face of civic society in the west, where shopping can act as a vector for civic values. We begin our exploration by considering the underlying premises of civic culture, citizenship and consumerism.

## THE UNDERLYING PREMISES OF CIVIC SOCIETY, CULTURE AND CITIZENSHIP

The attributes of a civic society and culture are considered essential for a healthy public sphere and thus for legitimate democracy to survive and flourish. Civic society is generally considered to be the terrain in our lives between those spaces occupied by the economy and the State. It is within this terrain that citizens reside. Taking its cue from Habermasian theories of the public sphere, civic society has to be situated in accessible spaces where the flow of information and ideas are largely unfettered so that a communicative interaction between citizens is encouraged. Thus, "*norms of equality and symmetry*" prevail (Dahlgren 2006, 277), allowing all an opportunity to participate. Discussion of a civic nature, about issues that affect society generally, is considered vital for democracy to survive. Without such activity the hollow institutions of democracy may remain but without moral authority (Dahlgren 2006). These somewhat abstract notions have to be rooted in the everyday, the personal and the subjective lives of individuals and it is from this assumption that the idea of civic culture becomes crucial.

Dahlgren (2000, 2003) argues that civic culture requires social agents to act as citizens because it is through and by such acts that road markers are set out shaping future patterns of civic thought and behaviour. Traditionally this civic space has been located between that occupied by state and private life spheres, where consumption would have been placed firmly within the private sphere. He

**TABLE ONE**  
Dahlgren's Civic Culture model

Values	Must include positive disposition towards democracy as the best way of organising political life.
Identity	People must see themselves as a political entity, as a citizen among the many identities they hold.
Affinity	Minimal sense of commonality must exist based on recognition of mutual needs.
Knowledge	A degree of understanding about democracy and the literacy skills to participate.
Experience	There must be some recurring practices that concretise democracy from an abstract to an actual occasion/event for people.
Discussion	Forms of civic interaction and discussion must take place in accessible locations.

Source: synopsis of the ideas of Dahlgren (2003), *Reconfiguring Civic Culture in the New Media Milieu*.

outlines six variables making up civic culture-table one. At any given point the specific mix of these variables shapes the civic environment that might then be characterised and positioned on a continuum of empowering–disempowering for those living within such a culture.

Within this civic environment, citizens are afforded a trio of rights: personal freedom, participation in political processes and a sharing of the benefits from societal wealth (Marshall 1964). Marshall's notion of citizenship places it beyond individual self-determination despite being centred on entitlement, because the benefits of citizenship result largely through the collective development of a civil society (Turner 2001). Citizens are concerned with solving public problems (Boyte and Skelton 1998), through possessing a sense of belonging to a wider community (Abala-Bertrand 1996). Citizenship is thus about rights balanced with responsibilities, where agency is manifest through voice, where decision-making involves giving due consideration to justice, equality and the widest possible consequences, a space that ultimately affords superiority to broad societal wishes. Crick (2000) makes it clear that citizenship involves more than passive adherence to law *and* it also entails a willingness to take part in the public domain, which in itself, presupposes a belief in some sense of the 'common good'. Thus citizenship offers a notion of freedom that includes duty, which, in effect, imposes a certain direction and purpose on that freedom. In this way being a citizen involves the checking of some individual rights because the collective rights supersede them. Citizenship is then, to varying degrees, about equity, participation, delayed gratification and some form of representation.

The liberal model of citizenship-premised on individual rights (Isin and Turner 2002)-is well entrenched in many Western societies. Accordingly liberty is promoted through allowing individuals to pursue their own interests, and, because a certain form of rational choice is assumed, the actions of one such individual is thus considered unlikely to limit the liberty of others. This form of citizenship is the political equivalent of a *lassiez-faire* market. Alternative theories of citizenship challenge the dominance of this liberal perspective, arguing that communitarianism affords a much greater role for community cohesion, (Etzioni 1993), where the emphasis is on our socio-cultural obligations to one another. This is the political equivalent of social economy models that call for vigorous State intervention. In his polemic, Dahlgren (2006, 269) argues that a republican model of citizenship acknowledges elements of both liberal and communitarian thinking, it is "*citizenship as a mode of social agency within the context of pluralistic interests*". This articulation of citizenship thus offers a vision of society that creates space for us to move between individual and collective

states of liberty. All three views of citizenship offer a view on the appropriate relationship between individual agency and community or social cohesion, between liberty and responsibility, between a freedom to and a freedom from. Parallels are evident in market spaces where the equivalent key relationship might be between consumer sovereignty and producer power. Nonetheless it is evident, from this brief account, how notions of the citizen and civic culture appear distant from a more consumerist-orientated culture.

### THE CORE NOTIONS OF CONSUMERISM AND CONSUMERS

Consumerism is typically associated with hedonism, narcissism, nihilism, decadence, instant gratification and social control (Cohen 2003; Desmond 2003; Durning 1991; Ewen 1976; Firat and Dholakia 1998; O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002; Thompson 1996; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). It is therefore not surprising that, as Kass and Kass (2000) observe, the more people grow to love their freedom and to view it as a distinct element of their lifestyle, the more they will view themselves as having no obligation but to self-indulge. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002) argue that it is this sovereignty and liberty of choice that is complicit in the negative reputation of consumerism. Consumerism is thus often perceived as a negative influence on the morals of society—encouraging 'false values', materialism, unrestrained choice and indulgence and the isolation of individuals from their traditional communities as they seek 'never-to-be fulfilled' promises from their consumption choices. This, in turn, feeds consumers anxiety and self-doubt, undermining their sense of subjective wellbeing, and so reducing their levels of happiness with their lives (Chaplin and John 2007; Borgmann 2000; Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 2000).

It is thus interesting to note that for an increasing number of people, the influence of consumption on their lives is growing, and with it, an increase in individualism. Consequently, around the world, mass consumer society has emerged as the major source of economic and social influence (Bauman 1998; Borgmann 2000; Desmond 2003; Schor 1998). As a result, a modernist perspective has emerged from this evolution (civilising) of society that emphasises the modern, self-disciplined, individual self (Elias 1994), where consumers, in accordance with the pursuit of scientific enlightenment and Cartesian control, are perceived as rational, self-maximising economic individuals in control of their emotions. This, at least initially, seems to strengthen a belief in the *distinction* between notions of civic and consumer culture.

However this modernist account of consumerism and its consequences for consumers fails to appreciate more contemporary

understanding of consumers and their expanded consumption choices and meanings they ascribed to them. That is, the varied traditions, dialogue and practices that constitute their ‘cultures of consumption’ (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; Bevir and Trentmann 2007; Holt 2002; McCracken 1986; Mick and Buhl 1992), as advocated by scholars exploring consumer culture theoretics. Within this more culturally-focused perspective, consumerism is regarded as a process of shared, social learning, laden with emotion, symbolic meaning and identity, and consumers less as culture bearers and more as culture-producers (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; Dermody and Scullion 2001; Maffesoli 1996; McCracken 1986, 1990; Mick and Buhl 1992). Consequently the marketplace, where the balance of power has, in some ways, shifted in favour of consumers, provides consumers with an assorted repertoire of mythic and symbolic resources enabling them to create their individual and collective identities—through their (expanded) consumption choices (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Baudrillard 1993; Belk 1988; Belk et al 2003; Elliott 1997, 1999; Holt 2002; Mick and Buhl 1992; Schau and Gilly 2003; Taylor and Saarinen 1994). What then emerges about contemporary consumers and their consumption is that they are interpretative agents who, in creating meaning from their consumption, play, individually and collectively, within a spectrum ranging from acceptance to (pseudo)rejection of the dominant identity and lifestyle images conveyed by advertising and mass media (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Murray 2002; Thompson 2004). From this account, we see how consumerism has become a powerful influence on both individual and collective behaviour. Consequently can the empowering dimension of consumerism also be used to nurture additional civic threads within modern British society? We will now move our discussion on to consider the idea of the citizen-consumer.

### EVALUATING THE IDEA OF THE CITIZEN-CONSUMER

Critics of consumerism typically perceive citizenship and consumerism to reside at opposite ends of the spectrum, a contrast between outward-looking, public interest versus private, inward-looking self-interest, where citizens are ‘worthy’ and consumers are ‘unworthy’. Certainly the traditional version of civic culture and citizenship has been seen in stark contrast with what being a consumer entails; with, as we have previously discussed, the two positions residing within different cultural values and norms (Lasch 1978). Sharply contrasting world visions have been developed; one based on involvement in society as citizens of a nation, the other with involvement in a corporate world as consumer units (Elliott 1982). Sennett (cited in Bull 2000) argues that our immersion in consumerism leads to apathy about others, for him, being a consumer is instead of being a citizen. A dichotomy is thus exposed between a fundamental principle of the market, namely segmentation, which places emphasis on difference and a first order principle of citizenship—the idea of a common good (Cohen 2003). Consumerism is rooted in self-interest, whilst citizenship takes its inspiration from a regard for others. Citizenship is rooted in trust of others, consumerism in self-reliance (Sennett 1998). The dominance of a consumer culture has thus been articulated as a withdrawing from citizenship, with this void being filled by a small, anti-political group of activists, devoid of claims for legitimacy beyond their own pet projects and pet hates (Bauman 2001). Lash’s (2002) notion of the ‘loss of the common’, related to common good, common experience and common troubles, has negative consequences for civic culture. He argues that this has resulted in an offloading of once public functions into private spaces (Lash 2003). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, 26) talk of how individualisation has

become culturally embedded, thus public space is now characterised by “*conflictual coexistence*”. Couldry (2006) maintain that our predominant orientation is away from anything considered public, many of us choose to place ‘the other’, the more distant, and the things we are less sure of in a public space. All of these are signs that we use ‘public’ to denote remoteness from our own responsibility and agency. Couldry’s study concludes that any vague sense of a ‘public connectedness’ that their respondents felt did not generate civic deliberation or action. Accordingly they talk of a disarticulation between awareness of public issues and the place such issues are afforded in individuals’ life-worlds. One discourse sees the rise of consumerism at the expense of citizenship contributing to a decline of the public over the private sphere (Marquand 2004). Consumer culture is thus distinctly different from the articulation of civic culture expressed by Dahlgren (2003) in table one. For example, with respect to values, there is more individuality and materialistic values, whilst for identity, choice becomes the arbiter of truth—table two.

Overall, then, for many, the impact of contemporary consumer society on traditional citizenship and civic culture has been regarded as negative because this distinct consumer culture has become so dominant.

Historically, however, these divergent positions are untrue (Cohen 2003). As Cohen observes, citizens and consumers have at times been in conflict and sometimes in harmony as the political and economic landscape changes. For example during 1890-1920, activist citizen consumers used their power in the marketplace, through boycotts and buycotts, to achieve progressive political reform in American society (Cohen 2003). The consumer boom then dominated the British and American political landscape, and in particular, according to Hilton (2001) and Bauman (2008), undermined the majestic collective ideals of citizenship by crushing the critical faculties of individuals as citizens in favour of individuals as shoppers. While this might have been true for rational, self-maximising, economic consumers, as our preceding discussion of contemporary consumers indicates, while consumers are embedded in capitalism, they are not passive, complacent nor non-evaluative in their consumption choices, which they weave into their complex, fluid identity projects—for their individual and collective purposes. Consequently they are “*not the unwitting dupe of legend, who responds rat like to environmental stimuli of Skinnerian caprice. Nor...transfixed, rabbit-like, in the headlights of multinational capital*” (Foxall et al 1998, 244). For some consumers, then, particularly those who are better educated, with high levels of political interest (Scammel 2003), and who have a particular personal values orientation, they are using their analytical talents and their economic power to achieve political reform in twenty-first century consumerist society. Widespread and often localised boycotts are illustrative of this. As a result what emerges is the distinction between materialistic and more citizenly-orientated types of consumers, as motivated by their personal values system rather than a broad distinction between citizens and consumers. Mapping this orientation to the values research of Schwartz (1992), materialistic consumers will reside within the domain of self-enhancement, based on the values of power, achievement and hedonism, while citizen-consumers reside within the domain of self-transcendence based on the values of benevolence and universalism. We see, for example, the growth in concern for the welfare of animals in the supermarkets and a growing interest being taken in the production processes of our favourite brands (Klein 2001). Therefore polarised classifications that see the concepts of citizenship and consumerism as only and always in opposition are under increased scrutiny (Bevir and Trentmann 2008; Chambers and