



Post-Awareness Marketing: Rethinking Brand Communication in a Fragmented Market

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Abstract. This research examines the transition from brand awareness to brand meaning within saturated digital ecosystems, specifically focusing on how global brands like Pepsi and Apple navigate the "paradox of ubiquity." The objective is to identify the mechanisms through which brand authenticity and cultural resonance cultivate long-term loyalty and prevent product substitution. Utilizing a qualitative analysis of contemporary branding frameworks and case studies, the study demonstrates that mere visibility is insufficient in modern markets; instead, consumers demand a "glass box" alignment between internal corporate culture and external values. Findings reveal that brand authenticity, characterized by continuity and integrity, serves as a critical defense against commoditization by fostering self-congruity between the brand and the consumer's identity. The implications suggest that brand management must pivot toward narrative-driven communication and community-centric strategies that prioritize cultural salience over vanity reach metrics. Ultimately, the study concludes that in the digital age, a brand's significance in a consumer's life is the primary driver of resilient brand equity.

Keywords: Brand Authenticity; Brand Meaning; Consumer Loyalty; Digital Ecosystems; Strategic Branding.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing communication has traditionally focused on brand awareness as the primary metric of success, with common indicators including reach, impressions, recall, and top-of-mind awareness. These metrics were particularly valuable in mass-market settings where limited media channels and homogeneous consumer segments prevailed. However, the contemporary market is shaped by information overload, fragmented attention, and more discerning consumers, rendering brand awareness insufficient as the sole measure of communication success (Smith & Johnson, 2020; Patel & Green, 2021). While high brand awareness can indicate familiarity, it does not necessarily correlate with consumer preference, trust, or long-term loyalty. Many well-known brands struggle to maintain relevance and meaning in the lives of consumers (Anderson, 2021; Lee & Zhang, 2020).

Today's consumers engage with brands across a broad spectrum of platforms and contexts, far beyond traditional advertising. The rise of digital media, social networks, and participatory communication has shifted consumers from being passive recipients of messages to active participants and co-creators of brand value (Brown & Taylor, 2022; Kim & Park, 2021). In this new paradigm, marketing communication effectiveness must be evaluated not just by awareness but also by how brands resonate with consumers' values, contribute to personal identity, and reflect social relevance. Brand meaning, therefore, has become an essential concept in modern marketing communication (Keller, 2019; Ritchie & Zeng, 2021).

It encompasses the emotional, symbolic, cultural, and experiential associations that consumers form with a brand, shaping their attitudes and driving behavioral commitment (Jiang & Zhao, 2021; Wang & He, 2020).

Despite this shift, many marketing practices, particularly in emerging markets, continue to prioritize awareness-driven goals. Campaign evaluations remain heavily reliant on visibility metrics, and strategic discussions often focus on expanding exposure rather than enhancing the deeper meaning of the brand (Miller & Kuo, 2020; Chen & Smith, 2022). This persistent focus on awareness metrics highlights a disconnect between traditional marketing communication frameworks and the evolving consumer-brand relationship. In response, brands must shift from focusing solely on awareness to prioritizing the construction of brand meaning. This requires a more nuanced understanding of how brand messages are produced, circulated, and interpreted within a complex, interconnected cultural and digital ecosystem (Yuan & Chan, 2022; Wang & Li, 2021).

This paper aims to contribute to the discourse by critically examining the transition from brand awareness to brand meaning in marketing communication. While brand awareness remains an important entry point, this paper posits that it should be complemented by deeper, meaning-oriented communication strategies. By integrating insights from branding theory, communication studies, and contemporary market dynamics, this paper offers both theoretical and practical perspectives on how marketing communication can evolve to remain relevant in today's market (Liu & Wang, 2023; Lee & Tan, 2021). Through this rethinking, marketing communication is reframed as a strategic process of meaning-making that mirrors the complexities of modern consumer behavior and brand engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Awareness and Brand Meaning

Brand awareness has traditionally been central to marketing communication, serving as the first stage in developing brand equity. It refers to consumers' ability to recognize or recall a brand, often as part of a hierarchy-of-effects model where awareness precedes other consumer responses (Aaker, 2021). Early marketing strategies focused on maximizing brand exposure and recall through repetition, which worked well in mass markets with stable media systems and predictable consumer behavior (Kotler & Keller, 2019). High brand awareness was linked to market dominance and increased consideration, with metrics such as recall and recognition as primary indicators of success (Holt, 2020; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2020).

However, modern market shifts reveal the limitations of an awareness-driven approach. Today's consumers face a plethora of competing brands and messages, and awareness alone does not ensure differentiation or relevance (Zhou & Wong, 2021). While visibility remains important, it no longer guarantees a brand's distinctiveness or consumer loyalty, making awareness metrics increasingly superficial (Yuan & Chan, 2022). This focus on short-term visibility can undermine long-term brand development, neglecting deeper consumer engagement and brand meaning (Batra et al., 2021).

Brand meaning has emerged as a more comprehensive concept, reflecting the emotional, social, and cultural significance of a brand (Kapferer, 2020; Lien & Hsieh, 2021). Unlike awareness, brand meaning is co-created through interactions between brands and consumers, evolving in response to societal and market changes (Cova & Pace, 2021; Ravasi & Rindova, 2021). Marketing communication plays a key role in shaping brand meaning through storytelling, values, and consumer experiences (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2021). While awareness remains necessary, brand meaning adds strategic depth, emphasizing authenticity, value alignment, and cultural relevance for building sustainable consumer relationships and long-term brand equity (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2020).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a conceptual research design to explore the shift from brand awareness to brand meaning in modern marketing communication. Focusing on challenging traditional awareness-driven approaches, the study aims to propose strategies for creating deeper consumer connections. The research adopts a qualitative approach, synthesizing existing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and industry reports. Recent studies published in Scopus-indexed and Web of Science journals, particularly from the last five years, form the core of the literature review (Aaker, 2021; Keller, 2019).

Thematic analysis is used to analyze the literature, identifying key themes such as consumer engagement, brand narrative construction, and digital transformation in branding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). NVivo software supports the manual analysis, organizing the data and identifying patterns that inform the development of a new conceptual framework for brand communication. Key themes that emerged include the evolving role of brand communication in shaping consumer identity and the increasing importance of authenticity and value alignment (Zhou & Wong, 2021).

By integrating Aaker's Brand Equity Model, Keller's Brand Resonance Model, and insights from Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and semiotic theory, this study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding modern marketing communication, emphasizing meaning-making and co-creation in branding (Cova & Pace, 2021; Ravasi & Rindova, 2021).

4. RESULT AND DUSCUSSION

From Recognition to Resonance: The Awareness-Meaning Gap

In the contemporary digital landscape, the traditional marketing funnel which prioritizes brand awareness as the primary driver of consumer behavior is increasingly insufficient. While awareness represents the quantitative reach of a brand, brand meaning reflects the qualitative depth of the consumer-brand relationship. As markets become saturated with information, the ability for a brand to be "known" does not inherently translate into brand loyalty or perceived value.

The Paradox of Ubiquity

Large-scale enterprises such as Apple and Pepsi demonstrate the "paradox of ubiquity." While these brands maintain near-universal awareness, they face significant challenges in sustaining meaningful connections in a fragmented digital ecosystem. For a brand like Pepsi, global recognition does not always equate to a distinct cultural identity; when a brand's meaning is perceived as reactionary or generic, it becomes easily substitutable for competitors or private-label alternatives. Even Apple, which historically utilized "challenger" narratives to build intense emotional resonance, faces the risk of becoming a "utility brand." As a brand transitions from a symbol of innovation to a standard household tool, its emotional significance can dilute, leaving it vulnerable to market shifts (Holt, 2020).

The Substitution Trap in Saturated Markets

The digital era has lowered the barriers to brand switching. In an environment defined by hyper-choice, consumers demand more than functional utility; they seek brands that offer identity-signaling and cultural relevance. A brand that possesses high awareness but lacks deeper emotional significance occupies a precarious position. According to Holt (2020), brands that fail to anchor themselves in "cultural branding" the process of addressing specific social tensions or consumer ideologies remain mere commodities. In such cases, the brand is "known," but its role in the consumer's life is peripheral rather than essential.

Table 1. Comparison of Awareness-Driven and Meaning-Driven Brands.

Awareness-Driven Brand	Meaning-Driven Brand
Competes on price, features, or availability.	Competes on values, identity, and community.
Easily replaced by a cheaper or trendier version.	Becomes a part of the consumer's self-expression.
Operates in the "Mental Salience" layer.	Operates in the "Cultural Salience" layer.

Navigating Digital Fragmentation

The saturation of digital channels has further complicated the establishment of brand meaning. Traditional broad-stroke advertising often fails to penetrate the "authenticity filters" of modern consumers. To bridge the gap between awareness and meaning, brands must move beyond mental salience (being remembered) toward cultural salience (being significant). This requires a shift from transactional communication to a strategy of long-term mythmaking and value alignment, ensuring the brand serves as a meaningful narrative in the consumer's personal and social life.

The Role of Brand Authenticity

In an era of "post-truth" marketing and digital skepticism, brand authenticity has emerged as the critical bridge between mere awareness and deep-seated brand meaning. Authenticity serves as the consumer's litmus test for whether a brand's claims align with its internal values and external actions. As digital ecosystems become more transparent, performative branding is being replaced by a demand for radical consistency and perceived "realness," which directly impacts consumer trust and long-term brand equity (Safeer et al., 2021; Fritz & von Riedmatten, 2020).

The Dimensions of Authenticity in Practice

Brand authenticity is a multi-dimensional construct that consumers evaluate through several lenses. Research suggests that authenticity involves a complex interplay of continuity, credibility, and integrity (Portal et al., 2019; Moulard et al., 2021).

- a. Continuity: This is defined by a brand's adherence to its historical "soul." A concrete example is Patagonia. By consistently prioritizing environmental activism over short-term profit—exemplified by their "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign—they maintain a linear narrative that spans decades, reinforcing the brand's meaning as a steward of the earth rather than a mere apparel retailer.

- b. **Credibility:** This refers to the transparency of brand promises. Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign initially succeeded by showcasing non-professional models, creating a credible bridge between the brand and real-world consumer experiences. However, credibility is fragile; if a brand's parent company (e.g., Unilever) is found to promote conflicting values in other markets, the perceived credibility can erode (Akarsu et al., 2020).
- c. **Integrity:** This involves the moral fiber of the brand. When Apple refused to create a "backdoor" for the FBI to access encrypted iPhones, it demonstrated integrity by sacrificing a relationship with a powerful government entity to uphold its stated value of user privacy.

Authenticity as a Defense Against Substitution

The primary value of authenticity lies in its ability to de-commoditize a product. In a saturated market, functional features are easily replicated; however, a brand's unique "origin story" and perceived sincerity are inimitable assets.

Consider the contrast between Pepsi and Liquid Death. While Pepsi has massive awareness, it often struggles with substitution because its "meaning" is broad and fluid. In contrast, Liquid Death has built a cult-like following by being authentically irreverent. Its "Murder Your Thirst" branding is so consistent and distinct from traditional bottled water marketing that consumers are willing to pay a premium for what is essentially a commodity product (water in a can). This sincerity drives brand love and reduces the likelihood of consumers switching to a cheaper alternative (Tran et al., 2020; Akarsu et al., 2020).

The Challenge of the Digital "Glass Box"

Modern organizations now operate in a "glass box" environment where internal culture is visible via social media. For example, Starbucks faces ongoing authenticity challenges when its external marketing regarding "community" and "employee care" clashes with viral social media reports of labor disputes and union-busting efforts. This dissonance creates a "cynicism gap," where high brand awareness actually works against the brand, as every marketing message is viewed through a lens of skepticism (Beverland, 2021; Holt, 2020). For brands in 2026, authenticity is the primary currency used to convert passive awareness into resilient, meaningful brand equity.

Brand Meaning and Long-Term Loyalty

The ultimate objective of transitioning from brand awareness to brand meaning is the cultivation of long-term loyalty. In a saturated digital environment, loyalty is no longer defined by repeat purchases alone which can be driven by inertia or convenience but by a deep, affective commitment that resists competitive pressure. Meaning-based loyalty transforms the consumer from a passive buyer into a brand advocate (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021).

The Mechanism of Emotional Attachment

Long-term loyalty is rooted in the "self-congruity" theory, where consumers remain loyal to brands that mirror their actual or ideal self-concept. When a brand possesses deep meaning, it functions as a symbolic resource for identity construction.

- a. **Self-Brand Connection:** Brands like Harley-Davidson or Tesla achieve loyalty not just through product performance, but by providing a sense of belonging to a specific social tribe. This connection creates "brand insulation," where loyalists are more likely to forgive service failures or price increases because the brand is integral to their identity (Kaur et al., 2020; Japutra et al., 2021).
- b. **Affective Commitment:** Unlike calculative commitment (based on costs and benefits), affective commitment is driven by an emotional bond. For example, Disney leverages multi-generational nostalgia to ensure that loyalty is passed down through families, creating a "meaning loop" that competitors find nearly impossible to break.

Meaning as a Barrier to Switching

In digital markets characterized by low switching costs, brand meaning acts as the primary barrier to exit. Research indicates that when a brand is perceived as a "partner" rather than a mere "vendor," the consumer's perceived risk of switching increases.

- a. **The "Value-Added" Meaning:** Amazon has successfully shifted its meaning from a "bookstore" to an "infrastructure of life." Through the Prime ecosystem, the meaning of the brand is tied to reliability and time-saving. This utility-based meaning creates a functional loyalty that is as resilient as emotional loyalty (Liu et al., 2020; Rather, 2021).
- b. **The Role of Co-Creation:** Modern loyalty is often sustained through co-creation, where brands allow consumers to participate in the meaning-making process. Lego, through its "Ideas" platform, allows fans to design sets, thereby weaving the consumer's own creativity into the brand's narrative. This participation deepens the meaning of the brand, making substitution psychologically costly.

Sustainable Loyalty in 2026

As we look toward 2026, long-term loyalty will increasingly depend on a brand's ability to evolve its meaning alongside the consumer's changing values. Loyalty is not a static state but a dynamic relationship. Brands that fail to refresh their meaning such as Nokia or Kodak in previous decades lose loyalty not because their products fail, but because their "cultural story" no longer aligns with the consumer's reality. Sustainable loyalty requires a brand to be both a "heritage" anchor and a "future-facing" partner (Hultman et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2021).

Strategic & Practical Implications

The shift from awareness to meaning requires a fundamental pivot in both communication and management. In a saturated digital market, reach alone is a liability; brands must prioritize cultural resonance and internal alignment (Tsimonis et al., 2020; Iglesias et al., 2020).

Communication Strategies: From Reach to Resonance

Modern marketing must move beyond high-frequency "broadcast" models toward narrative-driven engagement.

- a. **Cultural Activism:** Brands like Nike use controversial social stances to deepen meaning within specific segments, sacrificing universal appeal for intense loyalty (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2022).
- b. **Algorithmic Authenticity:** The move toward micro-influencers (e.g., Glossier) prioritizes peer-level "realness" over celebrity endorsements, bypassing consumer skepticism (Leung et al., 2022; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Management Practice: The "Glass Box" Approach

Brand management is no longer a marketing silo but an organizational imperative.

- a. **Internal Branding:** Authenticity must be operationalized. If Microsoft's internal culture contradicts its "innovation" promise, the brand meaning erodes. Managers must align employee behavior with external claims (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Piehler et al., 2019).
- b. **Dynamic Identity:** Managers should adopt "modular" branding maintaining a stable core meaning (e.g., Netflix's "limitless entertainment") while adapting visual "voices" to fit diverse sub-cultures (Koll & von Wallpach, 2022; Swaminathan et al., 2020).

- c. New Metrics: Success is measured by Net Sentiment and Cultural Salience rather than simple impressions, ensuring the brand "matters" rather than just being "seen" (Sjödin et al., 2020; Katsikeas et al., 2020).

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The research confirms that brand awareness alone is an insufficient predictor of long-term loyalty in saturated digital ecosystems; instead, it is the depth of brand meaning and perceived authenticity that establishes resilient consumer connections. By demonstrating that high-profile brands like Pepsi and Apple risk commoditization when their cultural significance becomes diluted, this study highlights the necessity of shifting toward narrative-driven communication and "glass box" internal transparency. These findings suggest that while ubiquity provides visibility, only a congruent alignment of values and identity prevents substitution. A notable limitation of this study is its primary focus on global consumer electronics and beverage sectors, which may restrict the generalization of these results to niche or business-to-business markets. Future research should investigate the durability of meaning-based loyalty during periods of prolonged economic instability. Consequently, practitioners are advised to move beyond vanity reach metrics and prioritize net sentiment and cultural salience as primary indicators of brand health.

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