

The Simplicity Mantra:

A Paradigm Shift in Consumer Response to Branding

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Abstract: The word ‘simplicity’ has taken a relatively solid position in the vocabulary of consumers since the advent of such products as the iPod and the Method packaging series, which present a ‘simpler’ design, way of operation, or use. The popularity of such publications as Real Simple that advocate a ‘simpler’ lifestyle through these products would seem to suggest a growing consumer response to the myriad of products on the market today that actually complicate life. Upon introspection the term ‘simplicity’ has in itself become the mantra of a new age of product and packaging design. It is this growing usage of the term ‘simplicity’ which signifies a transition in the changing attitudes of consumers toward both the intangible attributes (identity, voice, mission, promise, and value-proposition) and the tangible attributes (form, color, material, texture, details and brand mark) of a product or package.

This paper offers an analytical look at how consumers define the term ‘simplicity’ and proposes a framework for understanding the complex relationships between brand perceptions and their reflection in the design of products and their packaging. The authors suggest that the current consumer definition of the term ‘simplicity’ signifies a paradigm shift in the specific consumer attitudes and responses to the current branding efforts of companies and the particular aspects of their products. This paper will use two separate theory-based brand and product attribute research studies (one product design and one package design) in demonstrating this paradigm shift.

Keywords: *Branding, Brand DNA, Brand Attributes, Product Attributes, Brand Perception, Memes*

1. Introduction

As modern lifestyles have continued to grow more and more complex with increasing responsibilities and decisions, a new priority has taken root among consumers. The daily stresses and burdens of life have impacted the way many people respond to all types of consumable goods—from products to packaging. A visible shift has occurred in branding and product design from what could be described as a mentality of “bigger and better” to a new perspective rooted in the notion of simplicity. In many respects, simplicity is shaping the new generation of design for both consumers and brand managers alike; yet, a firm understanding of this new priority is lacking

from contemporary branding and design literature. This paper attempts to develop a clearer portrait of the new simplicity paradigm by examining two separate qualitative research studies on product and packaging design.

It is the belief of the authors that the growing usage of the term ‘simplicity’ signifies a transition in the changing attitudes of consumers toward both the intangible attributes (identity, voice, mission, promise, and value-proposition) and the tangible attributes (form, color, material, texture, details and brand mark) of a product or package. By offering an analytical look at how consumers define the term ‘simplicity’ and proposing a framework for understanding the complex web of brand perceptions, we hope to offer new insights into the design of future products and their packaging.

2. Background

2.1 Brand Definition

In an effort to improve the clarity of this research, definitions of some key terms used are outlined below. This list is not exhaustive; rather, it is intended as a general overview of critical terminology some readers may not be familiar with. Brand identity is “a set of brand associations that...imply a promise to customers from the organization’s members” [1]. This is often described as the way a brand wants to be viewed by its customers. Value propositions are “the functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits” embodied by the brand [1]. Brand value propositions are related to issues of function, performance, and aspiration, to name a few. Brand image is the perceptual concept of a brand that is held by the consumer [1]. In other words, the brand image is the way a brand is perceived by its customers. Brand image is a widely used term in the branding discipline. Where brand identity is the set of associations a brand is attempting to communicate, brand image is the consumer perception of that communication.

2.2 Brand Attributes (Tangible & Intangible) and Simplicity

In the context of this paper, brand is defined as the sum total of consumer experiences including both the intangible attributes of a brand (voice, mission, promise and proposition) and the tangible attributes (form, color, material and texture) that make up that experience. In essence, brand for this study is seen as a system of beliefs the truth-value of which is obtained through consumer experiences. This definition of brand best addresses the complexities of the consumer mind in that it takes into account all the touch points of a brand both tangible and intangible. The case studies in this paper hope to shed light on the term ‘simplicity’ with the objective to begin to define the term in the context of brand specific consumers. It is our intent to provide evidence of a growing trend in consumer attitudes within the ever-changing landscape of brand loyalties. This paper poses the notion that ‘simplicity’ is the new mantra of consumer truth-value regarding their brand beliefs.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the simplicity mantra consists of a double helix spiral that flows from consumer to product and vice versa (see Figure 1). To and from the product flow its intangible attributes (voice, mission, promise, and value-proposition) and tangible attributes (form, color, material, texture, details, and brand mark). To and from the consumer flow the tangible experiences of the product (form, color, material, texture, details, and brand mark) and the intangible meanings that are generated in the experience (consumer interpretation of the

voice, mission, promise, and value-proposition). In the center of this spiral helix lies the concept of ‘simplicity’ which functions as a representational model for the tangibles and intangibles in the product/consumer interaction circuit. The double helix and the flow from product to consumer can be seen as a variation on the teleological feedback loop between consumers and artifacts [13,14].

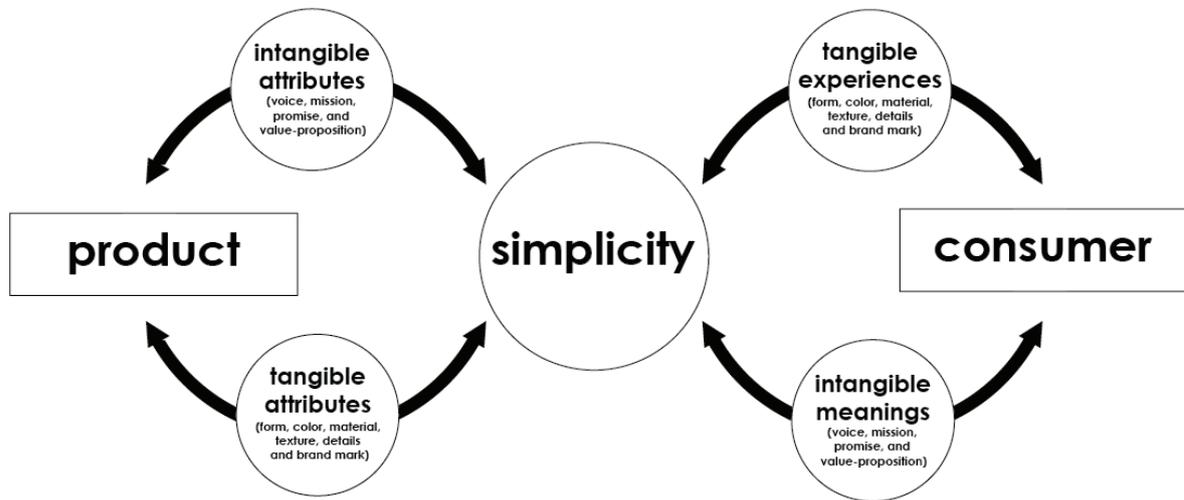


Figure 1 The Simplicity Mantra Conceptual Framework

3. Product Design Case Study

3.1 Project Background

The product design study was based on the idea that the consumer experience of a product is the key to the consumer experience of its brand [2,6,12]. The general premise of this study contends that companies will gain brand equity by developing brand loyalty through the practice of product design and the use of product design methods.

Few studies have investigated the effect product design on branding and brand loyalty and little empirical data exists on the subject. Product design methods in brand building have not been documented much due to the fact that, in marketing studies, product design has traditionally been regarded merely as a means of increasing perceived quality. As the strained global economy continues to place pressure on brands, more research will be needed to understand how the practice of product design can be fully integrated in the development of a brand through the development of the physical attributes, character, and personality of a product. Does the physical experience of a product have a substantial influence on consumer attitudes and choice?

This research investigates the correlation between product design and brand loyalty through the study of Apple brand loyalists and their attitudes towards the intangible and tangible attributes of its brand and its products. This was done through a survey of branding theory and an ethnographic study of product attribute expectations of brand loyal Apple users. The metaphor of brand DNA [6] was used as a basis for the study. The methodology of this research included a pilot study, a survey of literature, various qualitative data collection methods, and an iterative data analysis phase. Of the methods used were semi-structured interviews [11], open-ended questionnaires [11], and Concept Naming [13,14].

3.2 Attitudes Towards Brand Attributes

What meanings do brand loyalists ascribe to the product attributes of form, color, material, and texture? In order to answer this question, over 330 different words and or short phrases were generated from the 25 semi-structured interviews, the 13 open-ended questionnaires, and the 13 Concept Naming exercises. The 330 words and or short phrases were then organized within the physical product attribute categories of form, color, material, and texture. The form category contained 170 separate words and or short phrases that brand loyalists used to describe the form of an Apple™ product. The word ‘simple’ or ‘simplicity’ was the single most commonly used word in describing the form of an Apple™ product. Approximately 61% of the total respondents for the 25 semi-structured interviews and the 13 open-ended questionnaires felt that the form of an Apple™ product had or represented the meaning of simplicity. When asked to describe his feelings about the most important physical attribute of Apple™ products, one respondent stated that it was the simplicity of its shape or form: “It’s the simplicity of it. It’s shape; the way things are laid out, color. Its just seems to me to be a very modern package. It doesn’t confuse me. Like the iPod is so simple, simple to look at simple to use it.” [Interview # 3.0.1]

Simplicity in terms of form was highly regarded by Apple™ brand loyalists for both its aesthetic and functional ascribed meanings. The word ‘simplicity’ takes on the meaning of an all-encompassing term that ties product form with usage in a single package: “The top surface of this machine is in particular a simple flat surface with the logo on it. The logo is flush, it’s not raised or lowered, it’s simple. And the sides, the same way, they’re simple. The hinge mechanism from what I understand is a little more complicated than the newer ones but just overall it’s just a nice simple package.” [Interview # 12.0.2] The notable characteristics of a form conscious Apple™ brand loyalist are based on the fact that they prefer products that have simple and rounded forms. The term ‘simple,’ often referred to as the product’s overall simplicity in form, was characterized with the feelings of ease of use or user friendliness: Probably to stick with simple designs because that seems to work well for them. The way things are so simple on the Mac that it makes them seem so much easier to use. [Interview # 17.0]

3.3 Simplicity Paradigm

The reoccurring theme of ‘simplicity’ in the study with regards to the physical attributes of the product and the brand suggest that brand loyalists understand simplicity to be a mixture of both physical product attributes and brand beliefs. The word simple or some variation of it was used to describe the form, color, and details of Apple™ products as well as the Apple™ logo mark and the brand. The data from the semi-structured interviews and the open-ended questionnaires suggest that form, color and detail attributes of Apple™ products influence brand loyalists’ perceptions of Apple™ brand simplicity in the meanings conveyed to them through the products. In short, forms, colors, and details that are perceived as ‘simple’ contribute to the overall brand image of the Apple™ as being ‘simple’ to use.

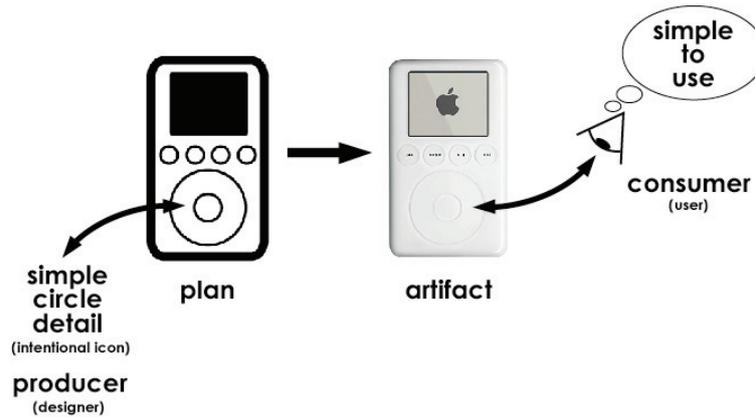


Figure 2 The Simplicity Meme Transfer from Producer (Designer) to Consumer (User) Through the Interaction of a Designed Artifact

Patterns in the data suggest that the meme [3] of ‘simplicity’ is transferred through the physical elements of form, color, details, and the logo mark to brand loyalists through their interaction with the products they use (see Figure 2). The meme of ‘simplicity’ is imbued into the artifact through the design process and the implementation of the plan into artifact.

Apple™ brand loyalists, in their world of meanings, make associations between what they experience with Apple™ products and what they believe to be true about the brand. As businesses, manufacturers, and industries further use product design in the development of brands, more research will be needed to support or refute this claim. The potential for product attribute design to be used as a tool to benefit consumers, businesses, manufacturers, and industries could be greatly increased if such research is conducted.

4. Package Design Case Study

4.1 Project Background

The package design study was developed around the belief that brands and products have become an extension of consumer identity [5,7,15]. Accordingly, this study examined the ways in which consumers’ perceptions of sustainable products are influenced by product packaging, brand identity and self-image. The research gathered qualitative information on physical aspects of existing package designs and compared it with qualitative data on consumer self-expression and brand identity in an attempt to create a greater understanding of the link between packaging, brand and the consumer [9].

The methodology of this research included a pilot study, literature review, qualitative data collection and iterative data analysis. The literature review was designed to address the critical subcategories in each of the primary areas of influence—consumer behavior, consumer self-expression, packaging design, branding and sustainability. The data collection process was triangulated by the use of three qualitative research methods, each with different participant sample sizes—participant photography journal (19), Do-It-Yourself (DIY) package design (11) and questionnaire (55).

The questionnaire aimed to correlate qualitative feedback about the packaging of three different cleaners with brand perceptions and identities. The three brands that were studied were Method™, Green Works™ and Seventh Generation™. There was a separate survey for each brand; however, the questions asked on each survey were the same. Each survey asked questions about specific aspects of the brand's package design for an all-purpose cleaner. Images of each package were provided to the respondents for reference when completing the survey. Other questions on the survey aimed to gather data regarding consumption practices, brand perceptions, and participant self-expression. This method was the most traditional of the three used in the study, and it helped to provide a baseline of data with which the other methods' data could be cross-referenced.

4.2 Tangible Package Attributes

In regards to a visual language to communicate identity (such as the use of specific colors, images, shapes, or materials), the questionnaire data showed that 77% of consumers claimed they were able to recognize brand values strictly from the product's visual language. Of this group, 65% noted that they were able to identify the brand's commitment to environmental practices from the package. 66% of Method users claimed to recognize the brand mission from the package; these participants cited the overall "clean and simple package design" as the visual cue. Those respondents that weren't able to recognize a brand mission pointed toward the "lack of objective information" as the main reason.

At the most basic level, customers respond to packages based on their reaction to the physical components [4]. In the case of this research, color was reported as the overall most appealing aspect of package design. Color scored high with Method users, but "simplicity" ranked as the most appealing visual factor. Participants also mentioned font and shape on a repeated basis. Smell and material, however, both scored very poorly, suggesting that those factors are not noticed as explicitly as color, font, and shape.

4.3 Brand Identity Profiles

As previously mentioned, brands exist in the memory of the consumer and are under joint control of the company and the consumers. Regardless of the messages companies try and send to consumers, the identity of the brand is ultimately controlled by the interpretation of the consumer base. Consequently, brand identity profiles were developed for each of the brands studied in this research directly from the feedback and perceptions of each brand community. For each profile, the descriptions are made up of the words and feelings that were repeatedly cited by the participants. These profiles are merely a snapshot of the overall brand identity, and represent the specific consumer perceptions from a given moment in time.

Method has the most robust identity of all three brands. This is not terribly surprising given the amount of attention paid to the brand from its in-house management team. As shown below, the youthful attributes of "fun" and "modern," as well as the aesthetic attributes like "sleek," "design" and "trendy" are very important to the brand identity. Similarly, "innovation" and "simplicity" are closely tied to the brand. The fact that "simplicity" came out as core attribute of the brand identity testifies to the increasingly important role of simplicity in branding.

4.4 Intangible Package Attributes

In general, eco-conscious consumers share many of the same concerns and perspectives about product packages. According to data collected during the interviews following the DIY exercises, almost all consumers have a strong desire to see through the product package. They want the material to be clear and they don't want anything hidden from view. This interest in being able to see into a package is consistent with future packaging predictions put forth by Meyers and Gerstman [8]. According to participants, a clear package communicates honesty or transparency of company practices. Consumers describe clear packages as “nothing to hide,” “it is what it says it is,” and “simple,” which they equate with good business practices and safe products. Similarly, most participants desire that the cleaning liquid itself be clear, as well. A clear liquid suggests that it is free of dyes and additives, and reinforces in the mind of the consumer that the product is what it claims to be—eco-friendly.

4.5 Simplicity Paradigm

“Simple,” “honest” and “natural” were key buzzwords in the packaging research. Participants used these words over and over to describe their expectations of an eco-conscious cleaner package. Some of these words, such as “natural,” are rather straightforward; “natural” in the context of this research refers to things of, or having to do with, nature—plants, animals, landscapes, etc. “Simple” and “honest,” on the other hand, are more ambiguous and open to interpretation.

When participants talked about “simplicity,” they were often referring to things in their lives that are not simple, such as trying to decide which products are best for their family or finding the time to do the proper research on the cleaners they use. Simplicity is, therefore, an appealing concept because it represents the idea of making daily tasks easier. According to participants, a simple product package facilitates the transfer of product information from package to user. A simple package also stands out on the store shelf because it is so different from the other offerings. Consumers view traditional product packages as “busy,” “overwhelming” and “confusing.” Consequently, the idea of a simple package is appealing because it represents something far removed from the status quo. This also reflects the view of eco-conscious products as an “other” in the realm of cleaning options.

The importance of simplicity can also be attributed to the aesthetic tastes of minimalist consumers who like the look of a “bare bones” package. A single color, sans serif font and ample white space reinforce an aesthetic style that has long been associated with esoteric designer tastes. This style, rooted in the Bauhaus tradition of “less is more,” appeals to consumers who actively try and create their identity from the products they purchase. One participant in the DIY exercise even mentioned her desire to purchase a stylish product that she could “accidentally leave out on the counter” to catch the attention of her peers [Interview 11]. The idea of simplicity is evidently important on a number of different levels. Much like other aspects of product identity, the simplicity of a product sends a message about the brand as well as the consumer. Though many consumers are reluctant to acknowledge their use of brands and packages in the creation of their identity, this quote attests to the underlying reality that there is a strong relationship between packaging and identity.

According to leading packaging consultants, Meyers and Gerstman, consumers of the future will expect their packages to reflect the true nature of the product. Thus, an eco-friendly product will require a package that is not only eco-friendly, but that also communicates perceived brand values such as “natural,” “safe” and “family friendly ingredients.” Meyers and Gerstman also suggest that the changing nature of distribution (“big box” retailers that offer little customer service) will require that packages educate as well as communicate with consumers. This concern was documented in the research by consumers who noted that they often have difficulty understanding the ingredients on a package and deciphering whether the product is what it claims to be. Thus, a package that is “simple” and “honest” assuages fears about greenwashing and making the “right” choice.

The word “simple” sums up the expectations of eco-conscious consumers in this research. It also describes the identity aspirations of the consumers. This dual application to both brand and consumer speaks to the nature of the symbiotic relationship between the two. Despite consumers’ hesitation to admit that they use products and brands to construct their identities, this research clearly shows a connection between brand and consumer identities through packages. “Simple,” “honest” and “natural” reflect an opportunity for companies to educate consumers about their products and company goals, as well as about socially responsible consumption practices. Similarly, these words lend insight into the types of information consumers are looking to find in product packages. They want to know that a product does what it claims, but without feeling like they are being marketed to. The traditional notion of advertising—and branding, for that matter—is not appealing to eco-conscious consumers; brands that fail to keep up with the changing expectations of their customer base will soon find themselves left out of the loop.

5. Towards a Simplicity Paradigm

5.1 Product Design Implications

Simplicity in product design has become a model of modern material culture as evidenced by the products of Apple™ and the influence they have had on a wide variety of other products not only within but outside of the computer and electronics realm as well. The process of designing products no longer exists solely in the black box of product design but is now a segment in the transdisciplinary processes of brand development. Product designing must be augmented with a general understanding of its value and benefit contribution to the end product and the consumer with regards to consumer loyalty, trust and the equity of the brand. Any brand has the potential to attain greater levels of brand loyalty through a well-managed blend of product design and brand experience attributes. The strength of the relationship between product attributes and brand loyalty exist within a continuum of weak and powerful brands within the marketplace.

5.2 Package Design Implications

The importance of simplicity in the success of future branding initiatives has come to the forefront recently. In a 2009 article on brand identity in *Dwell* magazine, design critic Alice Rawsthorn predicts that the role of package design in the future will be to help “[interpret] developments in science and technology in a visual language [consumers] can understand” [10]. This idea that designers have a responsibility to help simplify and communicate complex and often confusing information systems has become the driving force behind many branded packages, particularly eco-conscious ones. The ability to distill the chaos of conflicting brand assertions

and promises into a simple visual language accessible to all will likely be the trademark of successful branded communications in the future.

6. Conclusion

The term 'simplicity' as the focus of this paper was expanded upon through the studies presented. It was our intention to show that 'simplicity' is more than just a buzzword or transient trend but a core value of the consumer mindset in the evolving landscape of branded products. It is our contention that the frequency and depth at which the term 'simplicity' was observed in each independent and separate study suggests a fundamental paradigm shift in the consumer attitudes and responses to current brands and their offerings. Both studies in this paper also conclude that the tangible and intangible attributes of branded products fuel the tangible product experiences of consumers and influence their interpretations of the intangible attributes of the brands.

The ways in which intangible attributes of brand identities are communicated in branded communications is also a core interest of this research and a crucial component in the future of branding. Little is currently known about the complex relationship between product and package attributes and brand identities. These research studies attempt to begin to fill this gap, but there is also an opportunity to plug into existing theories regarding brands and consumers. For instance, the concept of a teleological feedback loop between brands and consumers [13,14] may be able to be expanded to include packaging as an intermediate stop along the circuit. We believe a more developed understanding of this underlying relationship between intangible attributes and tangible design solutions will give way to more informed branding initiatives in the future.

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