Metaphor in the marketplace

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Abstract. This inquiry uses an anthropological construal of metaphor to argue for the multi-vocal presence of symbolic meanings in the marketplace. Metaphoric imagery is described as it emanates from marketers, popular culture media and consumers with respect to the product area of hair care. We identify two primary deep metaphors for hair: (1) a living organism requiring nourishment and hydration; and (2) a malleable structure that may be subjected to design and utilized as apparel, accessory, or protection. This theoretical approach is compared to two others currently ‘in play’ in marketing: the Brands-as-Icons model of Holt (2004) and the Meaning Management Model of McCracken (2005). Key Words • anthropology • hair • male/female • metaphor • nature/culture • symbolism

Introduction

Over the past two decades, researchers have described in various ways the power of metaphor to structure marketplace behavior. For example, Stern (1988) suggested that advertisements drew upon the same rhetorical patterns as medieval allegories, presenting products and the problems they are intended to solve as struggles between good and evil. Even earlier, Levy (1959, 1981) argued that consumers construct metaphorical narratives about product usage and brand meaning. These initial interpretive efforts have been expanded by other researchers into large-scale projects directed toward examining the metaphorical meanings underlying marketplace phenomena such as trade shows (Peñaloza, 2000), retail outlets (Sherry, 1987), and brand-loyal communities (Kozinets, 1997; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 1996, 2001). Recently metaphor theory has been extended to explorations of how consumers conceptualize advertising (Coulter et al., 2001) and multisensory and emotive responses to aesthetic experiences (Joy and Sherry, 2003). In particular, the visual aspects of advertising

Thus far in marketing, these applications of metaphor theory have drawn upon two different traditions concerning what metaphor represents and how it may be used within culture. The first approach, exemplified by the work of Stern (1988, 1995), is grounded in literary theory and linguistics, and examines the play-of-words/semantics used to construct metaphoric equivalents in written and spoken texts. The second type of metaphor theory springs from symbolic anthropology (Levi-Strauss, 1963, 1969) and is grounded in cultural images, especially visual and musical, used to transfer meaning between the human and natural worlds.

The literary theory of metaphor is given below (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999: 119).1

1. Metaphor is a matter of words, not thought. Metaphor occurs when a word is applied not to what it normally designates, but to something else.

2. Metaphorical language is not part of ordinary conventional language. Instead, it is novel and typically arises in poetry, rhetorical attempts at persuasion, and scientific discovery.

Metaphors express similarities. That is, there are pre-existing similarities between what words normally designate and what they designate when they are used metaphorically.

In this view, metaphor is essentially a ‘language game’, functioning on a linguistic rather than experiential level.

Friedrich (1991) describes the linguistic applications of this type of metaphor (1991: 49):

Metaphor is an aesthetically specific subtype of the powerful and creative processes of analogy . . . . Metaphor exemplifies all three types of Peircean sign. First, it characteristically involves a vivid and concrete image (‘The world is my oyster,’ ‘The man is a toad’); Second, metaphor strongly entails the actor-reactant, the interaction between ‘reality and fancy’. Third, metaphor forces the interpretant to (re)evaluate the relation between the sign and the things it refers or alludes to.

Mick’s (1986) introductory writing on semiotics provides a comprehensive discussion of this form of metaphor and presents several marketing and consumer behaviour examples. It is this form and tradition of metaphoric usage that underlies much of the structural and deconstructionist analysis of advertising and other marketing communications that appear in the academic marketing and consumer behaviour literatures (see e.g. Stern, 1988, 1995). Primary emphasis is placed upon linguistic phrasing either with or without accompanying visual images. An example would be a Dannon yogurt print ad which shows the sweet fruit at the bottom of the yogurt cup and carries the headline ‘Berried Treasure’, making a play upon ‘berry’ and ‘bury’, as well as equating the sweet fruit filling with treasure. These metaphoric uses reside at the level of cognitive operations, and do not require completing emotional or experiential knowledge to function.

In contrast to the semantic/linguistic construction of metaphor discussed above, symbolic anthropology proposes that metaphoric transfer most commonly references sensori-motor and natural world experiences which the individual uses to comprehend novel events and abstract concepts (Fernandes, 1991: 3).
Anthropologists have long been interested in metaphor and alert to its presence in their materials. Our understanding is grounded in one or another of six basic metaphors or world hypotheses: animism, participation, formism, mechanism, contextualism, organicism. This argument suggests the notion or ‘root metaphor’ as basic not only to philosophy, but to culture itself. (p. 5)

And anthropologists typically apply metaphor in ways different from linguists. Turner (1991: 125), for example, describes this below:

The problem for anthropological analysis is clearly to develop a theoretical understanding of the nature of metaphor consistent with the importance of its role in cultural forms that avoids the reductionist and idealist tendencies of much symbolic and metaphor theory. . . . It should also provide an empirically grounded basis for considering the general question of the extent to which a theory of metaphor can be pressed into service as a general theoretical framework for the analysis of cultural structures of meaning.

This is clearly incompatible with the conventional view of metaphor as a ‘figurative’ relation between two received semantic entities and their meanings. . . . Instead, the metaphor becomes seen as constituting a new, integral construct, a meta-domain as it were, with a new meaning uniquely defined in relation to the context constituted by the interaction between its source and target members.

In our view, the potency of the anthropological construal of metaphor resides in its abstraction of phenomena experienced in the natural or social world to form cognitive concepts. Because it is grounded in human experience, it can tap emotions and senses, as well as linguistic knowledge. One of the most insightful and powerful examples of metaphor within anthropology is Mary Douglas’ discussion of how ‘dirt’ equates with ‘disorder’ (Douglas, 1966):

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment . . . . (1966: 2)

Granted that disorder spoils pattern; [but] it also provides the materials of pattern. . . . This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; [but] also that it has potentiality. It symbolizes both danger and power . . . . (1966: 94)

Here are examples from the social world which Douglas gives as indicating dirt/disorder (1966: 36):

Kitchen utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs, out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.

This, then, is the essence of metaphor within anthropology – abstract categories necessarily arise from grounded experience.

Why do humans construct metaphors and why should marketing theorists care?

Mithen, a cognitive anthropologist (1999, The Prehistory of the Mind), argues that the use of metaphor grew out of humans’ gaining of symbolic thought, approximately 60,000 to 30,000 years ago. At this point in our evolution, he argues, we
gained the ability to ‘map across’ behavioural domains, taking patterns learned in one and transferring them to other, novel domains. This new-found cognitive ability gave rise to both anthropomorphism and totemism in human cultures:

Anthropomorphic thinking is something that pervades our everyday lives. We indulge in anthropomorphic thinking in our relations with pets by attributing to them [human] feelings, purposes and intentions. . . . Anthropomorphism is the seamless integration between our social and natural history intelligences. The very first pieces of Paleolithic art indicate that it stretches back to 40,000 years ago.

Totemism is the other side of the human/animal coin. Rather than attributing animals with human characteristics, it involves embedding human individuals and groups within the natural world, epitomized by tracing descent from a non-human species. The study of totemism – and attempts to define it – formed the core of social anthropology as it developed during the 19th century. (Mithen, 1999: 165)

Mithen, and others, propose that such metaphoric abilities grew out of humans’ newly acquired abilities to think across domains of experience:

Recall the ideas of Annette Karmiloff-Smith regarding how the human mind ‘re-represents knowledge’, so that ‘knowledge thereby becomes applicable beyond the special-purpose goals for which it is normally used and representational links across different domains can be forged’, which is so similar to the notion of ‘mapping across knowledge systems’ as proposed by Susan Carey and Elizabeth Spelke. . . . Their ideas share a common theme: that in both development and evolution the human mind undergoes (or has undergone) a transformation from being constituted by a series of relatively independent cognitive domains to one in which ideas, ways of thinking and knowledge flow freely between such domains. (Mithen, 1999: 154)

In their most recent work, Philosophy in the Flesh (1999), Lakoff and Johnson carry forward this line of reasoning and further propose that metaphoric reasoning is an inherent by-product of sensori-motor development, beginning in early childhood.

Correlations in our everyday experience inevitably lead us to acquire primary metaphors, which link our subjective experiences and judgments to our sensorimotor experience. These primary metaphors supply the logic, the imagery, and the qualitative feel of sensorimotor experience to abstract concepts.

Our most fundamental concepts – time, events, causation, the mind, the self, and morality – are multiply metaphorical. So much of the ontology and inferential structure of these concepts is metaphorical that, if one somehow managed to eliminate metaphorical thought, the remaining skeletal concepts would be so impoverished that none of us could do any substantial everyday reasoning. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999: 128)

Within marketing, the work of Zaltman and his colleagues (Coulter et al., 2001; Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman and Coulter, 1995) has pioneered the investigation of embodied metaphor. Building upon this research, Joy and Sherry (2003) describe the sensory-motor and emotional content of metaphoric experience in an aesthetic (i.e. an art museum) setting. In the present inquiry, we extend the anthropological view of metaphor as culturally-grounded and stemming from social and sensori-motor experiences to a specific product category known to be rich in socially and personally embodied meanings: hair care.
Metaphor as a potential strategic tool

Thus far in the marketing literature, metaphors have been used descriptively as classificatory or explanatory devices (Coulter et al., 2001; Fournier, 1998; Fournier and Mick, 1999; Hirschman, 2003; Joy and Sherry, 2003; Levy, 1981; Stern, 1995; Zaltman, 1997). We propose that anthropological metaphor also may be understood and applied at a strategic level, as well. If metaphors are cultural and embodied ways of structuring reality and ‘making meaning’, then comparing the metaphors which different participants in the marketplace use to make meaning within a given area of consumption could reveal overlaps, gaps, and opportunities that may be of theoretical value to marketing theorists.

Figure 1 shows three sources from which metaphors relevant to understanding a particular product category may originate. Marketers introduce metaphors to the marketplace by means of advertisements, packaging, and other communication forms. For example, a shampoo package may claim that a given brand provides hair with ‘new life and vitality’, suggesting that hair is a living entity. An advertisement for a hair styling gel may state that ‘now your head can be a fashion statement’, suggesting that hair is an item of apparel or clothing. Depictions in the mass media may represent human hair as animal fur or as part of a costume, suggesting that it is bestial or a disguise. Consumers may describe their hair as ‘a big mess’ or ‘uncontrollable’, suggesting that it represents chaos or disorder.

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![Diagram](image.png)

**Figure 1**

**The origins of marketplace metaphors**
We propose that all three of these sources may provide strategically valuable insights for understanding a product category. By examining the metaphors employed by their competitors and the mass media, marketers may acquire ideas for repositioning existing brands or introducing new ones to fill important metaphoric niches. By learning what metaphors consumers use to describe a particular consumption area, marketers may obtain useful information for allaying consumer anxiety concerning a product category (e.g. the high-tech products studied by Fournier and Mick, 1999) and identify those metaphors most useful for creating advertising themes. Further, consumer and marketing theorists may be better equipped to trace metaphoric meaning across multiple venues of consumption, gaining greater understanding of theory generalizability.

Product category/consumption area

The product category of hair care brands and the corresponding consumption area of hair care practices were chosen as a useful context for exploring the strategic value of anthropological metaphor in the marketplace. First introduced as a subject of marketing inquiry in Rook’s (1985) article on rituals, consumers’ hair care practices have proven to be a rich source of metaphorical insight, especially in terms of self-identity and self-transformation (see e.g. McAlexander and Schouten, 1989; McCracken, 1995; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995).

Hair care practices have been a topic of multi-disciplinary social science inquiry for over four decades, generating a robust set of theoretical stances and empirical data which we incorporate in our discussion (e.g. Broyde, 1991; Butler et al., 1998; Cash, 1990; Clayson and Maughan, 1986; Cooper, 1971; Franzoi et al., 1990; Larsen and White, 1974; Lawson, 1971; Terry and Krantz, 1993; Zipkin, 1999).

Marketers’ contributions to metaphoric imagery: packaging and advertising

Marketers contribute to the stock of marketplace metaphors through both packaging and advertising. Product packaging may contain lengthy verbal prose which uses metaphor to characterize the product and its benefits (e.g. ‘Makes hair soft as silk’). The package also may have visual images which communicate metaphoric meaning; for example, drawings of trees or flowers may suggest that the product ‘comes from nature’.

The shape of the bottle may also have metaphoric content; for instance the tear-shaped bottle for Johnson’s Baby Shampoo ties-in to its ‘no-tears formula’ product benefit. Even the colour and scent of the shampoo, styling gel or other hair care product may be metaphoric. For example, a creamy white liquid might be viewed as milk; a light blue, flower-scented liquid might be seen as spring water; a glitter-filled hair gel might represent an ornament, etc.
That product advertisements contain metaphorical references is well documented in the literature (see e.g. Scott 1994a, 1994b; Sherry, 1987; Stern, 1988, 1995). However, these metaphorical allusions have not yet been concurrently compared to those presented on packages, so it will be informative to see to what extent these two sources of marketer-constructed metaphor coincide.

Research texts

Materials for the marketer-originating portion of the project were gathered from retail stores and consumer magazines. First, trips were made to mass merchandise stores such as Wal-Mart, Target, K-Mart and CVS. Packaged items in the hair care section were purchased across a range of brands and uses, for example, brands: Clairol, L’Oreal, Bed Head, etc.; uses: hair colouring, shampoos, conditioners, styling gels, etc.

To gather samples of print advertising for hair care products, issues of the 2002/2003 volumes of Seventeen, Teen People, W, Esquire, YM, Glamour, Mademoiselle, People, Cosmopolitan, In-Style, Men’s Health, GQ, Black Hair and Ebony were purchased, and all hair care advertising was collected.

The iterative method (e.g. Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995) was used to identify metaphors contained in both advertising and packaging. An a priori social science frame guided the identification process, whereby metaphoric imagery already discerned by researchers in the fields of social psychology, sociology and anthropology as being relevant to hair care practices served to guide our analysis of the packaging and advertising materials. These social science-identified hair care metaphors are discussed below and summarized in Table 1.

Social psychological metaphors for hair

Social psychology proposes that one’s hair is an attribute about which social judgments are formed. Results obtained when this metaphor is applied in Western cultures indicate that men and women with gray or thinning hair are deemed less attractive; that long hair and facial hair on men represents nonconformity, creativity and sexuality, and that specific hair colors communicate particular social meanings, such as femininity or elitism (Butler et al., 1998; Cash, 1990; Clayson and Maughan, 1986; Cooper, 1971; Franzoi et al., 1990; Larsen and White, 1974; Lawson, 1971; McCracken, 1995; Terry and Krantz, 1993) (see Table 1). Although not so stated in the social psychology literature, these meanings appear rooted in both culture and biological phenomena – for example, in Western cultures gray hair is associated with aging, and ultimately death.
Table 1

**Social science metaphors for hair**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Psychology</th>
<th>Sociology</th>
<th>Anthropology (cross-cultural samples used):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant metaphor: hair as personal attribute about which social judgments are formed. (All studies conducted on United States samples and, therefore, subject to cultural constraints on generalizability.)</td>
<td>Dominant metaphor: hair as economic, gender, sexual signifier.</td>
<td>Head hair represents one’s sexual potency; thus shorn hair represents celibacy/castration; short or tied/braided hair represents controlled sexuality; long, unfettered hair represents unrestrained sexuality; and graying or thinning hair represents diminished sexual potency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Bald men and men with thin or gray hair are older, less attractive, less successful. 2. Long haired men are more independent, non-conforming, immoral, youthful. 3. Bearded men are more educated, intelligent, reckless, and younger. 4. Red headed men are sad, unpleasant, weak, slow and shallow. 5. Red-headed females are professional, complex and powerful. 6. Blonde women are beautiful, pleasant, smooth, weak, gentle and soft. 7. Blonde men are handsome, pleasant, strong, powerful, rich, successful, active and aggressive. 8. Brunette women are more professionally competent than red or blonde-haired women.</td>
<td>1. Upper-class women wear short, controlled hair styles, working-class women wear curly, voluminous hair styles. The former represents sexual restraint; the latter represents the more overt expression of sexuality. (United States) 2. Lesbian women wear close-cropped hair to represent their deviation from heterosexual female appearance norms. (United States) 3. Uncovered head hair on women represents sexuality (among Mediterranean and Semitic peoples)</td>
<td>1. Head hair represents conformance to societal norms, such that shaved hair represents strict discipline (e.g., Marines), short/controlled hair represents professionalism and adherence to conservative social norms; while long, unrestrained hair represents flouting/disregard of social conventions (e.g., Hell's Angels, hippies). 2. Excessive body/facial hair and/or unkempt head hair represents physical strength, beastliness, spiritual power, chaos/wildness, and masculinity (e.g., Samson, Native Americans, hermits, witches). 3. Special oils and waters are necessary to maintain hair cleanliness and health; whereas dirty or matted hair symbolizes an unclean self.</td>
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Sociological metaphors for hair

The sociological literature proposes that hair length and hair style are read as social class markers. As one moves up the social class hierarchy, hair length and style become more restrained for both men and women (Mazur, 1993). The deep metaphor (Joy and Sherry, 2003; Zaltman, 1997) suggests that hair ‘wildness’ (e.g. Douglas, 1966) must be reduced as the individual becomes increasingly ‘civilized’, as would be expected by the accumulation of incremental social capital and material affluence (e.g. Cooper, 1971; Hallpike, 1969).

Anthropological metaphors for hair

Anthropologists have viewed human hair as a metaphor for sexual potency and life force (Hershman, 1974; Leach, 1958). Hair volume, length, and depth of colour are identified as representing personal fertility and strength. In general, Western cultures identify short or bound hair on both men and women as synonymous with self-control, while long, unrestrained hair signifies disregard of social conventions (Hershman, 1974). ‘Excessive’ levels of body hair suggest both beastliness and heightened spiritual powers; while hair that is unclean/disordered may signify a mind and body that are also unclean/disordered (Douglas, 1966; Hershman, 1974; Synnot, 1987).

Hair as plant/organism

The dominant metaphor invoked by marketers on the hair care bottles and packages we studied was hair-as-plant/organism. Hair was most often depicted as a living entity which grew, was subject to environmental threats such as heat, sunlight and physical exertion, and required care and nurturance. For example, prose on bottles and packages declared that hair needed to be ‘quenched’, ‘hydrated’, and ‘moisturized’. Packaging texts implied that well-watered hair would become ‘lush’, ‘thick’, and ‘supple’, just as does properly hydrated foliage. Obviously, metaphoric imagery such as plants and water are drawn from the natural environment and consumers’ experiences with gardening, observing the growth of trees and grasses, caring for house plants, and so forth (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999).

There were additional marketer-generated metaphoric constructions which extended the hair-as-plant analogy. For example, several commercial products presented themselves as providing vitamins, nutrition, proteins, and therapies that would nourish, fortify, and restore hair health. Varied verbal allusions implied life-giving or life-protecting qualities for the product; for example, that the product could replenish, revive, rejuvenate, enliven, invigorate, and provide resilience to hair. Hair that was not well-watered and nourished was predicted to suffer the same fate as a neglected plant; it became dry, brittle, stiff, rough, grey, flat, dull, dead, stressed, frayed, colorless, damaged, limp, dull, and parched.

Flowing from the work of Joy and Sherry (2003) on aesthetic experiences, the hair-as-plant metaphor was communicated not only linguistically, but visually...
and olfactorially as well. Most of the hair-care products were scented like herbs and flowers; some were tinted green (like sap) or white (like milk). Many bottles and packages displayed visual images of flowers, gardens, fruit, and health-linked botanicals, such as ginseng and aloe.

**Hair as object**

The hair-as-plant metaphor was co-existent with an oppositional metaphor in our sample; this less common rhetorical image cast hair-as-object, most commonly as an item of apparel or an accessory used to enhance or alter one’s appearance. For example, some hair gels and styling products promised to enable consumers to shape, glue, hold and twist their hair into desired configurations. Some hair-colouring products featured frankly non-natural ‘fashion’ tints, such as magenta, bright orange, sky blue, cherry cola, and hot pink. The deep metaphor emergent in such communications is that hair is a malleable entity in the natural environment. It may be acted upon (by its owner or owner’s agent) in an engineering or architectural sense.

Analogously, some conditioners and shampoos suggested that hair was an object by offering to ‘repair’ or ‘restructure’ damaged hair. Often these products claimed to have been developed using scientific expertise resulting in ‘patented formulas’. They contained polymers and resins and were the result of ‘laboratory research’ and ‘advanced technology’. The latent metaphoric image here is one of science being used to perfect or alter the natural environment.

**Print advertising**

The print advertising for hair care products carried these same two base metaphors: hair-as-plant and hair-as-object. For example, several ads stressed the therapeutic, healing, and restorative powers of the featured product; an advertisement for Paul Mitchell Tea Tree hair moisturizer featured a full-page photograph of a man’s head being splashed by water, alluding to the life-giving qualities of the product and suggesting the potential for rebirth.

Advertising also promised to protect hair against environmental damage and to prevent negative outcomes such as dryness, breakage, and shedding. Several botanical sources for rejuvenating and renewing hair health were suggested; among these were coconut milk, aloe gel, herbs, carrot oil, and other organic/natural remedies. These were presented as providing stimulation and nutrition for hair. One advertisement even stated that the product was a ‘comfort food for hair’, implying that stressed hair could be soothed by ingesting certain substances, much as consumers do in their own diets (see also Joy and Sherry, 2003, for a discussion of consumers ingesting art).

Science was also called upon as a source of potency in hair care product advertising. Certain products were presented as originating from novel technologies, laboratory research and patented formulas, and were said to be capable of rebuilding or restructuring hair. As with the information on bottles and packages, this
type of emphasis invokes the hair-as-object metaphor; hair is presented as a physical entity that can be strengthened through science and technology.

Two additional metaphors found in the print ads related directly to metaphors identified in the social science literature. A 'Just for Men' hair colour ad depicted a partially clad man and woman reclining and kissing. The headline reads: ‘The Date: Saturday night ended with Sunday breakfast. Was it Just for Men?’ constructing the proposition that use of the product would enhance one’s sexual attractiveness. Yet this wording falls short of suggesting that the hair color product is directly tied to sexual potency – a theme we will encounter in later analysis.

Print media hair metaphors

From the same set of popular culture magazines used to collect advertisements for hair care products, we gathered representations of hair images in non-hair care advertising, cartoons, and editorial content. These were chosen to demonstrate alternative metaphors, which either supplemented or contrasted with those found in the advertising and packaging images produced by hair care marketers.

Alternative metaphors for men’s head and body hair presented it as desirable either controlled or uncontrolled (e.g. Douglas, 1966). One Dior sweater advertisement featured a clean shaven, blonde man with carefully combed short hair. His sweater was a sedate blue colour and his hands were folded in repose. The overall image is one of calmness and control. Here, short head hair coupled with the absence of facial hair signals conformity to prevailing social norms; i.e. his ‘bestiality/disorder’ has been reduced and contained.

In contrast, other print ads found meaning in using men’s head and body hair to flout traditional norms of conformity and self-control. In an Yves Saint Laurent ad, for instance, the male model’s long, dark curled hair and unshaven face corresponded with his exposed chest and underarm hair to suggest sexuality, virility, and potency.3

Non-conforming hair styles for women were also evident. In a Fiorucci Perfume ad, a young woman in a 1950s style bustier, bright pink lipstick and pink, cotton-candy bouffant hairstyle smells the advertised perfume. Her hair is used as a costume element to help construct a parody of 1950s buxom femininity (see Scott, 1994a).

An editorial fashion layout from W magazine challenged both experiential and cultural hair norms by placing short head hair and visible facial hair on a female figure. The gender ambiguity of the figure was further emphasized by the use of a metal chain vest, metal choke collar, a single earring, and a fox-fur collar draped across the model’s neck. This image is disturbing, because it challenges cultural metaphors about gender generally: for example, that men are rough textured and allied with mechanical and metallic objects, whereas women are smooth, soft, and wear delicate jewellery. Through such challenging images, unconscious cultural construes are foregrounded and laid bare. Because deep metaphors reside at an implicit level (Zaltman, 1997), just below cultural consciousness, making them explicit and subject to contradiction can create feelings of disturbance (see,
for example, Joy and Sherry’s [2003] discussion of emotionally challenging artworks).

In contrast, an advertisement which ‘works with’ deep gender hair norms is a Dolce and Gabbana perfume ad, which shows a shaven-headed, slightly bearded man in underwear embracing a woman with long, voluminous dark hair who is clad in black lingerie. The dark hair on the man’s arms and legs contrasts with the woman’s smooth-shaven arms and legs. In this instance, hair follows the traditional gender rules, i.e., men should have short head hair, but abundant body hair; women should have abundant head hair, but minimal body hair.

Two additional forms of metaphoric representation were identified in print media. First was the use of hair-as-ethnic-marker, specifically of African ancestry and culture. In a Perry Ellis apparel ad, Malcolm-Jamal Warner, a successful African-American film director, is shown with shoulder-length dreadlocks and facial hair. Warner’s use of a non-conforming, Afro-centric hair style marks him as a rebel; one who will not follow traditional standards of appearance (Hallpike, 1969). An even more pronounced use of hair as an ethnic signifier was an ad for Puma athletic shoes. This model’s appearance is a more extreme divergence from cultural norms than Warner’s. His dreadlocks are past waist-length, and his beard is full and untrimmed. The model wears a two-piece, cotton print Jamaican garment and is standing in an open manner, arms stretched upward. The hair here acts as both ethnic identifier and apparel, working with the figure’s clothing to create a consistent representation of Jamaican ethnicity.

Finally, we consider two depictions which employ the hair-as-beastly metaphor. Most animals are covered by fur and this is a key physical marker separating humans from other animals. Our relative hairlessness announces both our more highly evolved status and concurrently our greater physical vulnerability vis-a-vis other species. In a print ad for Fope jewelry, a very delicate young woman wears a Persian cat as a head covering. The tameness and decorative ‘style’ of the cat correspond to her very refined and vulnerable appearance: neither cat nor woman are beastly. In contrast to this is a hair-as-beastly depiction from ‘W’ magazine which shows a female model clothed in animal skins; her own hair is covered with an elaborate, unkempt, fur head-piece – only her hairless, female face marks her as human.

From the foregoing we can learn that the construction of hair as metaphor is given much wider expression in print media, generally, than it is in the advertising and packaging imagery put forward by hair care marketers. Popular culture expressions of hair meaning appear to more often challenge conventional understandings, to cross or circumvent gender boundaries, to demarcate ethnic identity, and to blur the line between humans and animals than those contributed by hair product marketers.

Consumers and hair care metaphors

A third source of marketplace metaphors is consumers. Consumers may construct product-related discourse from a variety of sources, including advertising, the
metaphors of mass media, subcultural and cohort experiences, and personal and familial experiences (Kozinets, 1997; Scott, 1994b; Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Of course, for marketers it is vitally important to be knowledgeable of consumer-based metaphors circulating in the marketplace, as these may reinforce, supplement or contradict those being promulgated by marketers. Consumer-based metaphors relevant to a particular product category which are not presently being used in marketing promotions may be usefully mined and incorporated into future persuasive efforts (Fournier 1998; Fournier and Mick, 1999).

We conducted in-residence interviews with 40 male and female consumers ranging in age from 12–68. A list of the age, ethnicity, and gender of those interviewed is given in Table 2, together with their pseudonyms.

Following standard phenomenological interview procedures (see e.g. Thompson and Haytko, 1997), participants were asked to describe their current hair care practices, ‘best’ and ‘worst’ experiences regarding their hair, past and recent events that they believed influenced their hair care practices, and what they found unattractive/attractive in their own and others’ grooming practices. Interview transcripts (from the tape recorded interviews) were interpreted both individually as gestalts and as a series, and a set of metaphorical figures was identified. These are summarized in Table 3, and discussed below.

Hair as apparel/cover Consumers most often described using their hair as a form of apparel, protection, or even as a disguise. When head hair was ‘missing’, due to a bad permanent or too short haircut, they typically felt vulnerable. Holly, aged 54, stated: ‘Once in a while my hair has been [cut] a little too short, and I feel naked for about a week’. Monisha, age 18, expressed the same metaphor: ‘It definitely was a big deal when I got [my longer hair] cut off. I felt naked back there. It just looks odd when you look at yourself in the mirror and there is no hair back there . . . I just saw my neck.’

Men also viewed their head hair as a cover/apparel. Rob, age 23, commented about both his head hair and recently regrowing his goatee:

Do you like yourself better with it [the goatee]?
I do. . . . Occasionally I have the urge to shave it, and for a couple of days I have nothing, and then I do miss it . . . You feel naked. Hair in general, its biological purpose is to protect you, and psychologically it does too. I mean when you shave your head you feel different, like a young child; like you started over. A lot of times in my life, I've shaved my head, and I felt like I had a new start.

There are several experientially-grounded strands of meaning in the above comments. Nakedness connotes multiple kinds of exposure. In a modesty sense, exposing one’s skin to public view can constitute an undesirable invasion of personal space, a violation of privacy. Being too exposed to public view can also create feelings of shame and embarrassment: ‘I didn’t want people to see that part of me’. In a second sense, nakedness implies exposure to danger and physical vulnerability. The person’s usual barrier between self-and-other or self-and-world have been removed; one feels defenceless, overly-exposed to others’ verbal or visual attacks, e.g. a hostile gaze or comment.
**Table 2**

**Hair care interview respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Stated ethnicity, gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>White, male</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>White, male</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurie</td>
<td>White, female</td>
<td>23</td>
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Rob, above, invokes these metaphoric meanings, which are generally emotionally charged in a negative way; but then he puts forward another, positive aspect of nakedness: new borns arrive in the world naked, they are innocent, guiltless, fresh. Rob’s naked facial and head skin is a fresh start which affords him the opportunity to start over again and again. On a deep subconscious and physiological level, Rob’s shearing himself of head and facial hair returns him to a pre-pubescent status; unwanted accretions of worldly deeds, perhaps unhappy or unwanted, can be removed and the original 'clean slate' refurbished to be written on anew.

The hair-as-apparel metaphor also helped interviewees characterize the hair of others, especially in a negative fashion. Fran (48) for example described the hair styles used by her mother and other women in the 1960s as 'helmet-hair':

I remember my mother and her friends . . . sleeping in toilet paper . . . They would wrap it in toilet paper at night, so no hair would get out of place. It’s kind of the same concept as if you used tissue paper to fold your clothing to keep it from wrinkling. My kids . . . were so intrigued. They used to want to touch her head, because it was this helmet-like thing on her head. And she always told them not to touch it . . . If you look back at that generation, my mother and mother-in-law . . . they would go to the beauty parlor once a week and get their hair washed and set and that’s it; they don’t wash their hair again for a week.

This description contrasts sharply with hair care marketers’ current communications stressing the living, growing aspects of hair. ‘Helmet hair’ lies at the opposite metaphoric extreme; it is inert, lifeless, and unchanging. Perhaps most profoundly, ‘helmet hair’ epitomizes the social and personal construction of hair

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Table 3

Consumer-based hair metaphors

1. Hair as apparel/object/cover (not part of one’s body)
   - Disguise and camouflage
   - Barrier, protection, armor
   - Clothing (casual vs. formal)

2. Hair as Id
   - Positively-valenced: sexuality, potency
   - Negatively-valenced: debris, dirt, oily, coarse, frizzy, dandruff, chaotic, wild, uncontrolled

3. Hair as life-force
   - Strong color, voluminous quantity = life force, vitality
   - Hair (life) must be protected from chemicals, heat, sunlight, physical stress
   - Hair care products are medicines, tonics, elixirs, potions
   - Loss of hair volume and/or color = movement toward aging, death, loss of vitality, life force
   - Loss of hair = castration, maiming, mutilation, disfigurement

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as an artificial appendage – an accessory worn on the head, much like a hat. Of interest here, however, is the current co-existing metaphor among younger consumers of hair as a form of fashion. Hair styling products such as gels, fixatives, and mousses are promoted by marketers and used by young consumers to create hair ‘structures’ that, perhaps ironically, are the metaphoric equivalent of their grandmothers’ ‘helmet hair’. In both generations, products are used to manipulate and hold hair into desired patterns and then wear it in social settings.

Hair as id

In the sense we are employing it here, the term ‘id’ refers to those aspects of one’s existence that are uncontrolled, chaotic, pleasure-seeking, pain-avoiding, and unrestrained (Cooper, 1971; Leach, 1958). Such elements may be positively or negatively valenced; for example, dirt and disease are uncontrolled and chaotic aspects of life that usually are viewed negatively (Douglas, 1966), whereas sexuality, creativity, and gustatory pleasure may be either positively or negatively valenced, as in consuming delicious food versus gluttonous overeating (Hershman, 1974).

For many of our informants, hair was an id-like force attached to their heads (or other body areas); a force which could be desirably potent or could transform itself into a crazed beast that refused to be tamed or obedient. Joyce, a 39-year-old attorney, described styling her curly hair as a:

life-long struggle for control . . . I always wanted my sister’s beautiful, straight blonde hair. . . . It’s controllable. It’s nice knowing when you wake up what you’re going to look like. Mine is kind of like on a blow by blow basis. I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t know what my hair is going to look like . . .

Joyce also linked thick, curly hair to sexuality, which she felt was inappropriate at her law firm’s office:

Interviewer: So you think it’s more professional to have your hair straight?
Joyce: Yeah . . . I’ve gotten teased before when it’s out of control . . . It’s too sexy when it’s curly, and you try to be serious in a meeting and what comes across is this big fluffy hair. I’ll have comments made. When my hair is straight, it’s just more professional . . . I can put it up or tie it back. I can contain it.

The necessity of ‘containing’ hair’s disordered impulses was deemed more crucial during formal occasions, such as weddings, religious services, when dining out, and so forth. Hair, in these circumstances, needed to be clean, under control (preferably ‘back’ or ‘up’), and conservatively styled. Further, both males and females reported trimming, shaving, or waxing body hair in order to control it. Facial, underarm and leg hair on women was viewed as ‘dirty’ and ‘disgusting’ by most respondents (male and female). Older male respondents reported having to remove nose and ear hair. Such perceptions follow from Douglas’ proposal that ‘dirt’ is essentially things out of place. Hair in places it is deemed inappropriate becomes ‘dirt’.
Hair as life force

And yet unruly, wild hair also could have a positive aspect; Karen, 25, likes her curly hair because ‘it looks full. And I think it is feminine for women to have hair like that. I think hair is part of people’s sexual self. It’s part of what draws you to someone’. Karen also noted that ‘creative people’ would be expected to have non-conforming hair: ‘If I were going to an art center, I would expect [to see] people with spiky, crazy hair. I would be surprised if there weren’t [any]. Hair is a way to express yourself.’ Both of the metaphors Karen applies to hair are consistent with the anthropology literature that non-conforming people wear non-conforming hair as a signal of their deviant status (Hallpike, 1969; Hershman, 1974).

Because hair is anthropomorphized, consumers reported that they take care to treat it with nourishing and protective substances (consistent with the hair-as-plant metaphor used by marketers). Vic, Italian-American and in his 50s, reported that:

Sometimes I towel dry [my hair] and other times I actually use a hair dryer . . . I sometimes use a mousse. . . . Some of the products I kind of remember . . . are Pantene and Finesse. Recently, I used Thermasilk and that seems to give my hair more body . . .

Monisha, African American, reported that: ‘my friend uses a shampoo that actually was made for horses and she thinks its going to make her hair grow [long] and shiny’. John (29) believed that hair conditioner had therapeutic benefits: ‘I try to keep [the conditioner] in a little longer than the shampoo, because there is supposed to be some kind of healing action going on . . .’.

Yet some consumers were anxious about putting commercial ointments on their head, fearing they might harm the hair. Daniel (20) reported:

I rarely wash my hair and I never use a conditioner. It’s not good for your hair, because it strips it of its natural oils. Also, I see little point to washing it and then putting all kinds of junk in it, like gel.

Similarly Joe (30) believed that using ‘dyes, hairspray and other chemicals’ would cause hair to ‘fall out by the time you’re 40 or 50’. In this construal, hair was viewed as an entity that was best left in its natural (organic) state. Tampering with it, especially with man-made, artificial products, would damage or poison it.

Comparing theories of marketplace meaning

The foregoing discussion has examined the anthropological metaphors found in three sources of marketplace meaning – the marketer, the mass media, and the consumer. I have argued that metaphorical images arising from sensori-motor, natural world and social world phenomena are the most basic and powerful sources of personal and cultural-level meaning.

By focusing attention on a specific product category and corresponding set of consumption practices (i.e., hair care products and behaviors), I have identified the deep metaphors which structure cultural understanding of this aspect of
human behavior, particular as it occurs in contemporary American society. It is my position that such experiential/anthropological/organic forms of metaphoric meaning are the most potent explanatory apparatuses for marketplace meanings.

There are, however, two competitive models currently ‘in play’ as vehicles for understanding and strategically acting upon marketplace meanings. The first is McCracken’s (2005) updating of his 1988 Meaning Transfer Model. In the more recent (2005) presentation, McCracken emphasizes the role of the marketing manager in ‘managing meaning. . . . Well-constructed, well-managed meanings add value, create consumers, sell products, advance careers, generate profits, and raise stock prices (2005: 175)’. McCracken lists the meaning sources for a product/service as being: ‘class and status, gender, lifestyle, decade, occupation, time and place, value, fads, fashions and trends, and age’. Yet these meaning sources are cast at too general a level to provide guidance to marketing theorists and further, they are hardly novel. All have been cited as sources of brand meaning since the 1970s.

McCracken also views the mass media and consumers as additional sources of marketplace meaning, and with this I would certainly concur. But as with his earlier treatise (1988), the analysis is built at a very general, categorical level, e.g. ‘movies, television, trends, magazines, subcultures’ (2005: 178), involving inconsistent types of abstraction and few marketplace exemplars. Further, he makes one statement with which I would certainly disagree: ‘Advertising is the pre-eminent meaning maker’ (2005: 188). This is simply not an accurate assertion. It would be much more appropriate to state: ‘Successful advertising is a pre-eminent meaning USER’. To work, advertising must be grounded in shared metaphoric understandings, which are deemed culturally appropriate for a particular consumption context. Without appropriate grounding, advertising – and other marketer-generated communications – will be either wrongly-endowed or under-endowed with meaning.

A much more detailed and market-relevant analysis is provided by Holt (2004) in *How Brands Become Icons*. At the outset of his discussion, Holt (2004: 1) lists various types of contemporary American icons, ranging from human celebrities, e.g. John Wayne, Oprah Winfrey; to fictional characters, e.g. Superman, Archie Bunker; to companies, e.g. Disney, Microsoft; to universities, e.g. Harvard. He views iconicity as embodied in ‘the person or the thing . . . widely regarded as the most compelling symbol of a set of ideas or values that a society deems important’ (2004: 1). Holt identifies what he terms ‘culture industries’, such as motion pictures, music, television programming, advertising, as the primary cultivators of these icons and then argues that given icons ‘come to represent a particular kind of story – an identity myth’ (2004: 2). He then links this notion to particular brands, e.g. Mountain Dew, Coca Cola, Budweiser, Nike, which he proposes act as ‘vessels of self-expression, the brands are imbued with Stories that consumers find valuable in constructing their identities’ (2004: 3). And he proposes that:

customers buy the product to experience these stories. The product is simply a conduit through which customers can experience the stories that brand tells. . . . When consumers sip a Coke, Corona or Snapple, they are imbibing identity myths anchored in these drinks. (2004: 36)
In my view, Holt (2004) assigns much too powerful a cultural role to specific brands and to branding in general. In the overall course of consumption and in the life course of a given consumer, brands qua brands play a much less dramatic role than Holt attributes to them. In the reasoning used in the present article (and elsewhere, see Hirschman, 2000) what Holt proposes to be embodied in brands is actually anchored much more deeply in cultural metaphor (and also in archetype, in the case of Holt’s use of the term ‘icon’). These are the authentic carriers of human meaning – brands are mere hitchhikers who have temporarily jumped on board for the ride. It is by attaching themselves to the much more powerful force of metaphor that brands make themselves appear desirable to consumers.

Holt seems at one point in his presentation to acknowledge this, but then quickly re-asserts the hegemony of the brand in the marketplace:

> Iconic brands rarely develop their myths from wholly original cloth . . . [They] seldom compete head-on with other cultural products [e.g., motion pictures] . . . But brands have an advantage over these more ephemeral figures in that they provide a material connection to the myth . . . (2004: 60)

Here again I (and likely Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung, were they still around) must disagree. Metaphor, because it is continually renewed within and across human societies, is essentially immortal. It is brands that are ephemeral. Many, many brands (and persons, and companies, and other social institutions) will attempt to attach themselves to particular meanings – some more successfully than others. But each brand inevitably and ultimately fades; it is the metaphor that lives on.

**Notes**

1. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) do not subscribe to the literary theory of metaphor, but do provide a highly cognizant summary of its precepts.
2. This approach both overlaps with and extends beyond McCracken’s (1988) discussion of ‘Meaning Manufacture and Movement in the World of Goods’. He proposes (1988: 71) that:

> Meaning is constantly flowing to and from its several locations in the social world, aided by the collective and individual efforts of designers, producers, advertisers and individual consumers. There is a traditional trajectory to the movement of this meaning. Usually it is drawn from a culturally constituted would and transferred to the consumer good. It is then drawn from the object and transferred to the individual consumer.

   Our approach views metaphoric meaning as arising from consumers, as well as from advertisers and marketers, which are the sources upon which McCracken places his focus. Further, while his proposals are cast at an abstract level, ours are grounded in the actual practices within a product category.

3. It should also be noted that these images corresponded to American cultural beliefs about hair *colour* as well: in the United States blonde hair on men is seen as more dignified, whereas dark hair is viewed as more primitive/earthy.

4. This is an instance of totemism, in which the desirable long, thick mane and tail of the horse are transferred symbolically to the human head (see Hirschman, 2002).
References


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