

Guest editorial: Interpretive approaches to branding

What are interpretive approaches in marketing?

Interpretive approaches in marketing are dedicated to examining the symbolic, sociocultural, historical, ideological and experiential dimensions of consumption, situating such inquiries within a broad constellation of theoretical traditions spanning the social sciences, arts and humanities (Cova and Elliott, 2008). Ontologically, interpretivism assumes that reality is “socially constructed, multiple, holistic [and] contextual” (Tadajewski, 2006, p. 438). For interpretive scholars, social reality is intersubjectively constituted; epistemologically, therefore, knowledge is apprehended not from an external, objective vantage point, but through the lived experiences of research coparticipants (Tadajewski, 2006, p. 430). Researchers working within interpretive paradigms draw on phenomenological and social-constructivist traditions, privileging the experiential and cultural narratives that shape marketplace behaviors.

Within this paradigm, inquiry unfolds through immersion in social contexts, employing emergent research designs in which analytical categories arise from the interactional fabric of everyday life rather than being imposed *a priori*. A central strength of interpretive methodologies lies precisely in their capacity to illuminate the quotidian contexts within which consumer behavior is enacted, enabling marketing scholars and practitioners to access the sociocultural dynamics that animate marketplace activity (Hackley, 2024). Consequently – although not exclusively – interpretive researchers rely on qualitative methods to access and interpret individuals’ lived experiences (Cova and Elliott, 2008).

Although participant observation is often regarded as the canonical method in cultural approaches to consumption, it is not indispensable in interpretive research on branding, as demonstrated by the methodological choices represented in the eight contributions to this special issue. Rather than conducting site-bound ethnographies of physically colocated groups or communities, several authors turned to netnography. Gambetti *et al.* (2026) employed a multisited netnography to examine brand activism and the moral reasoning consumers deploy when evaluating controversial brands, while Rynarzewska *et al.* (2026) conducted an immersive netnography to investigate how social media content creators shape public opinion during a high-profile dispute between two celebrities. Textual analysis, as originally established by Barbara Stern, was used by Kauz and Gollnhofer (2026) to uncover how brands implicitly reference

competitors in indirect comparative advertising. Similarly, Leggett and Davies (2026) carried out an abductive thematic analysis of imagery produced by a hyper-human, brand-dedicated virtual ambassador, demonstrating its ability to generate native social media content and distinct forms of virtual brand expression.

In addition, more mainstream qualitative approaches feature in this collection:

- semi-structured interviews (Jiang and Veg-Sala, 2026) to investigate how secondhand luxury affords meaningful access to high-end products without diminishing brand prestige;
- in-depth interviews (Longo and Regany, 2026) to explore how organizations undergoing sustainability-oriented transformation construct and internalize social and environmental commitments; and
- a mixed design combining focus groups and interviews (Cenizo, 2026) to analyze how cultural elements – such as music – reshape a brand’s meaning in consumers’ minds.

Finally, Fuschillo *et al.* (2026) combined a longitudinal case-study approach with brand genealogy to investigate the role of place in the mythmaking processes of local brands.

Interpretive research in marketing constitutes a primary means of generating “Thick Data” (Moisander *et al.*, 2020). Whereas “Big Data” draws upon large-scale datasets, Thick Data emerges from smaller samples yet yields dense contextual understanding, emotional texture and cultural nuance that cannot be captured through quantitative approaches alone. Interpretive marketing inquiry excels at cultivating such depth, allowing researchers to examine the sociocultural categories – gender, nationality, age, musical preferences, hobbies – that consumers mobilize to construct identities and differentiate themselves from others. Moreover, Thick Data offers fine-grained insight into the interpersonal dynamics unfolding within consumption communities, including consumer tribes and brand communities (Moisander *et al.*, 2020). Rather than striving for a single, monolithic truth, interpretive research on branding embraces interpretive plurality, while recognizing the value of critically evaluating alternative frameworks for making sense of reality (Coffin and Hill, 2022).

Brands in consumer culture

Whether cast as the villains of contemporary capitalism (Klein, 1999), as potent symbolic resources that firms may harness for strategic advantage (Holt, 2004), or as ambiguous yet remarkably effective mythological entities (Brown *et al.*, 2013), brands undeniably occupy a central position in modern life. Once dismissed as the “backward little brothers of the cultural world” (McCracken, 2011, p. 142), brands are now widely recognized as cultural forms in their own right. We inhabit brand societies in which brands function as “a powerful life-shaping force” (Kornberger, 2010, p. xii). Unsurprisingly, they attract the attention of scholars across disciplinary boundaries, including sociologists (Arvidsson, 2006), anthropologists (Nakassis, 2013) and even philosophers (Kornberger, 2010). What unites these approaches is the understanding of brands as cultural and material artifacts cocreated and sustained by a diverse array of actors – not simply by firms.

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From an interpretive perspective, brands lead a social life that exceeds and frequently escapes managerial intent (Cova, 2017). Companies may attempt to mobilize the symbolic power of their brands (Holt, 2004), yet it is ultimately the brand – rather than the trademark-owning firm – that elicits consumers' affection. Consumers may even nurture a deep attachment to a brand while holding skepticism or mistrust toward the corporation behind it. For many managers, acknowledging that a brand's primary *locus* of existence lies in society rather than strictly in the marketplace remains counterintuitive. Yet such recognition is indispensable for understanding the cultural and societal configurations in which brands operate today (Diamond *et al.*, 2009). Beyond managerial strategies, brands are embedded within cultural patterns and social structures that both constrain and enable their trajectories – not merely in terms of growth, but crucially in terms of their long-term sustainability in highly competitive, rapidly shifting environments.

Brands traverse multiple social spheres, and their meanings are shaped within networks and communities that appropriate and reinterpret them in distinctive ways. Within each group, particular forms of rationality, legitimacy and authenticity emerge through interactions among actors and through the narratives they collectively construct and contest. Managers must remain attuned to this social malleability. Yet many still imagine brand image as a singular, coherent representation derived from straightforward semiotic transmission. In reality, brands consist of complex, multilayered articulations between social structures (e.g. groups, networks) and cultural patterns (e.g. shared codes), articulations that are further intensified and multiplied by the platformization of everyday life (Arsel *et al.*, 2025).

In recent years, brands have evolved into sociocultural and techno-mediated assemblages that shift in real time. Such complexity resists reduction into standard metrics or stable causal models; it demands interpretive, qualitative inquiry capable of tracing meanings, practices, narratives and relationships *in situ*. In contemporary digital ecosystems, brands are not fixed entities but cultural processes subject to continual reconfiguration. Algorithmic curation, diasporic networks, activist movements and anti-consumption practices rewrite – day by day – what a brand is and what it signifies. In this context, conventional quantitative tools risk capturing merely statistical shadows of underlying phenomena, variations devoid of interpretive substance. Understanding how brand meanings emerge, circulate and transform, and why they do so in often ambivalent and situated ways, requires interpretive methodologies: ethnography, netnography, discourse and visual analysis, narrative reconstruction and close examination of technological mediations and cultural environments. This Special Issue places precisely this imperative – following the social life of brands up close – at the center of its intellectual and methodological agenda.

Branding vs brand management

Brand management is a broad term used to describe the marketing strategies through which companies maintain, enhance and communicate the wider value and reputation of a brand and its products over time. An effective brand

management strategy strengthens and deepens relationships with audiences. Yet branding is not a one-way process; it is fundamentally relational, involving a reciprocal exchange between consumers and brands. Consumers often integrate brands into their self-concepts and social identities, using them to articulate values, aspirations and affiliations. Interpretive research examines how individuals construct their identities in relation to brands, while simultaneously showing how individuals actively shape the brand itself (Nakassis, 2013).

As evidenced in the contributions by Gambetti *et al.* (2026) and Cenizo (2026), branding strategies move across multiple layers, platforms and social groups before becoming fully embedded in popular culture – even when this process involves navigating controversies and conflicts. Jiang and Veg-Sala (2026) show how the secondhand luxury market, although external to the original point of sale, continues to shape perceptions of brand value. Not paradoxically, brand value can also be influenced by quasi-comparative advertising – that is, campaigns that implicitly reference competitors (Kauz and Gollnhofer, 2026). Such practices underscore how branding draws upon communicative forms that mimic everyday social interaction. Fuschillo *et al.* (2026) demonstrate the importance of the relationship between branding and local resources in processes of collective mythmaking. Meanwhile, Leggett and Davies (2026) and Rynarzewska *et al.* (2026) highlight the idiosyncratic properties of digital environments, where new institutional arrangements, partnerships and actor categories (e.g. social media content creators) acquire authority and influence within branding strategies. Longo and Regany (2026) further draw attention to the role of employees as internal activists who operate as cultural agents within the organization.

Brands, however, extend far beyond the corporate sphere. The term applies equally to consumer products, sports teams, hospitals, musical groups, religious institutions and even pilgrimages – consider, for instance, the Camino de Santiago. In contemporary society, nearly everything is branded, including catastrophes and disasters (Brown, 2016). Hurricanes and storms receive personal names – Ciaran, Harvey, Irma, Carmen, Gabriel – assigned by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), which explains that naming facilitates rapid identification in warning messages, as names are easier to remember than numerical or technical labels historically used. Our society names these phenomena to communicate about them more effectively. It is branding.

Branding, therefore, is an activity undertaken by a wide diversity of actors – not only firms. Any individual or institution may initiate a form of branding for a phenomenon, person, or artifact without engaging in formal brand management. Understanding this pervasive cultural condition is one of the central motivations underpinning the development of this Special Issue.

Papers in this special issue

Gambetti *et al.* (2026) illustrate how social media operate as contested moral arenas in which brands and consumers negotiate legitimacy, opposition and strategic repositioning. Focusing on the deliberate creation of a new brand entity

intended to distance itself from a morally compromised corporate parent, the study examines how such decoupling efforts seek to reshape public perception and deflect regulatory scrutiny.

Employing a multisited netnography, the authors analyze Mission Winnow – a brand initiative launched by Philip Morris and positioned as a hub for transformative dialogue and innovation. The netnography encompasses posts and interactions on the platform's official channels as well as spontaneous consumer conversations and user-generated content circulating across social media. This design allows for a contextualized interpretation of how brand narratives are constructed, contested, and reframed across heterogeneous digital environments.

Social media, the authors show, host a fluid interplay of moral controversy, acceptance and resistance. When acceptance narratives gain salience, consumers legitimize the decoupled brand entity by deploying moral rationalization strategies and symbolic distancing from the parent firm. Conversely, when resistance narratives dominate, consumers actively reconnect the new brand to the corporate parent's unethical behaviors, thereby undermining its decoupling strategy.

Jiang and Veg-Sala (2026) explore how Millennial and Gen Z consumers interpret secondhand luxury, offering a nuanced account of how luxury value is constructed across both firsthand and secondhand contexts. Moving beyond the assumption that luxury value derives exclusively from newness or exclusivity, the study examines how secondhand luxury can afford meaningful access to high-end products without diminishing perceived brand prestige.

Adopting an interpretive approach, the authors conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with young luxury consumers experienced in purchasing both firsthand and secondhand items. This qualitative design enables fine-grained exploration of the value dimensions that these consumers mobilize and extends existing frameworks of perceived luxury value by introducing components specific to the secondhand domain.

Millennials and Gen Z regard secondhand luxury as a legitimate and attractive alternative, particularly because it offers ethical and relational value propositions – dimensions often absent from traditional luxury consumption. Clear divergences emerge in the perceived value of firsthand versus secondhand luxury, indicating that brands must design differentiated strategies for these segments. Moreover, the study demonstrates that integrating secondhand offerings into luxury portfolios can reinforce, rather than weaken, overall brand value.

Kauz and Gollnhofner (2026) investigate a specific form of indirect comparative advertising in which advertisers signal the competitor being referenced without naming it explicitly. By analyzing how implicit referencing operates, the study extends existing theories of comparative advertising and introduces a conceptual refinement to current frameworks.

Responding to calls for comparative advertising research beyond US settings, the authors employ interpretive textual analysis, following Barbara Stern's established approach. Their analysis focuses on two Swiss cases of implicit

referencing, enabling close examination of how meaning is constructed through linguistic and visual devices.

Implicit references are crafted through two primary mechanisms: verbal cues – such as slogans, taglines and characteristic expressions – and visual cues, including colors, labels and shapes that evoke a particular brand in consumers' minds. The study also identifies recurring construction patterns: implicitly referencing advertisements create a favorable platform for comparison, mobilize redundant cues to reinforce associations, and guide consumers toward a preferred interpretation of the competitive contrast. Practically, the article offers guidance to practitioners seeking to design effective implicit comparisons, emphasizing that indirect comparative advertising performs best when it reliably triggers precise brand associations.

Fuschillo *et al.* (2026) examine the relationships among local brands, regional brands and iconic products, and how these dynamics contribute to broader processes of collective mythmaking. Focusing on the cultural mechanisms through which local producers elevate their brands relative to a regional brand and its emblematic product, the study advances debates on cultural branding and offers clarification on how brands attain iconic status at local, national and global levels.

To provide a cultural understanding of place and its role in the emergence of iconic brands, the authors adopt a dialectical approach centered on the interrelation between the pasta-producing locality of Gragnano and the brand Garofalo. This methodological perspective enables a detailed exploration of how place-based heritage, symbolic resources and socio-historical narratives shape the ascent of brands toward iconicity.

Places and their cultural heritage operate as potent reservoirs of meaning for enhancing the status of local brands, which in turn reinforce the iconic stature of their regional counterparts, generating a mutually constitutive relationship. This dynamic is especially pronounced when the product itself carries deep cultural significance, enabling resonance across geographic and cultural contexts.

Cenizo (2026) examines how popular music functions as a cultural mediator capable of reshaping brand meaning beyond the direct influence of firms. Challenging the traditional view that brand meaning emerges primarily from firm–consumer interactions, the study demonstrates that other cultural agents – such as widely circulated musical productions – significantly broaden the field of forces involved in constructing and transforming brand perception.

Brand meaning is neither static nor fully controllable by firms. Music influences it dynamically through the interplay of brand positioning, symbolic resonance and narrative integration. Authentic incorporation of a brand into song lyrics can generate strong emotional connections, whereas superficial mentions fail to cultivate meaningful engagement. The study also notes the plurality of interpretations shaped by consumers' personal experiences and shows how repeated musical exposure reinforces brand associations. Finally, it challenges the assumption that any form of visibility – even negative – necessarily benefits a brand, highlighting the reputational risks inherent in culturally charged contexts.

Leggett and Davies (2026) analyze Ella, a hyper-human virtual influencer, employed as a dedicated brand ambassador for Disney Japan. The study investigates the storytelling strategies employed by virtual ambassadors and examines how these strategies extend and enrich the brand's existing personification.

Using an abductive thematic analysis of 212 image-based posts spanning the full duration of Ella's online activity, the authors provide a detailed account of how visual storytelling is constructed and how different representational modes contribute to brand meaning in digital environments.

The findings show that hyper-human virtual ambassadors can generate native social media content that operates effectively across both physical and virtual settings. These environments shape audience connections in distinctive ways: everyday-life storytelling fosters relatability and emotional proximity, whereas fantasy- and surrealism-based storytelling activates imagination and expands the brand's expressive possibilities. Both modes incorporate brand iconography seamlessly, reinforcing the coherence and recognizability of the endorsed brand.

Practically, the study highlights the potential of virtual ambassadors to support brand storytelling by introducing new narratives and reactivating existing ones, including those capable of eliciting collective nostalgia. The creative flexibility inherent in virtual entities allows brands to develop content that fluidly traverses reality and virtuality, broadening opportunities for culturally resonant and strategically differentiated storytelling.

Rynarzewska *et al.* (2026) examine the role of social media content creators (SMCCs) in shaping public perceptions during the highly mediatized Johnny Depp v Amber Heard trial. While celebrity brands have traditionally relied on mainstream media for reputation repair, the study highlights how social media has become a strategic arena in which SMCCs exert substantial – and often underexamined – influence on attitude formation and change.

Using an interpretive process-data approach grounded in netnography, the authors analyze how SMCCs covered the case and how their narratives circulated within online communities. This method enables close observation of meaning-making processes, audience reactions and the dynamics through which opinions crystallize in digital environments.

SMCCs aligned with Depp's team significantly shaped online discourse, bolstering his brand image and amplifying his popularity. Their commentary increased audiences' trust in SMCCs relative to traditional media, particularly when discrepancies between the two became evident. The study underscores the importance of perceived authenticity and credibility in successful image-repair efforts.

The article demonstrates why brand managers must actively engage SMCCs in reputation management strategies, and it highlights broader societal implications by showing how the trial influenced public debates on domestic violence and the MeToo movement.

Longo and Regany (2026) investigate how brands can meaningfully position themselves as forces for good by examining how social and environmental commitments are constructed internally within organizations undergoing

sustainability-oriented transformation. Adopting an internal branding perspective, the study focuses on the understudied role of employees in CSR-driven brand repositioning and in shaping the emergence of responsible brands.

The authors conduct in-depth interviews with employees working in organizations implementing CSR transformations alongside ongoing CSR-led brand repositioning. This qualitative design captures internal dynamics, collective sensemaking processes and the everyday practices through which employees engage with and enact sustainability commitments.

Internal activist communities play a pivotal role in forging social and environmental commitments. The authors identify four types of such communities, each contributing through three key practices – raising awareness, galvanizing action and federating efforts – that translate CSR commitments into tangible and intangible brand elements supporting the repositioning process.

The study offers several contributions: it conceptualizes internal activism in the context of CSR brand repositioning; extends the literature from individual to collective activism; highlights employees' central role in internal brand-building; and demonstrates how internal activist communities function as “cultural agents for change.” Managerially, it shows that these communities provide essential resources and expertise for developing credible and responsible brands.

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