

Coffee and Tea: Socio-cultural Meaning, Context and Branding

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Abstract

Brands are perceptual entities which inhabit the mental world of consumers. Essential to branding success is appropriation of consumer-relevant meaning. Accordingly, brands are embedded with symbolism. This way brands become instruments of psycho-social negotiations. Brands plug into the socio-cultural meaning reservoir for this purpose. This requires understanding how a product or service fits culturally in a social system. This study attempts to explore the psycho-social role that tea and coffee play in consumers' lives. How tea and coffee are embedded in consumer psyche and their linkages with other consumption aspects were explored using critical incident and storytelling method. Though these beverages share a lot axiomatic similarity in terms of their preparation method and usage, they differ radically in their hidden symbolism. The study found that tea and coffee have different imprints. Coffee is celebratory and tea is ordinary. Coffee consumption is uncommon and its uncommonness imbues it with a unique mystique associated with a wealthy, refined and intellectually evolved class. Coffee is not a potion for sustenance. Tea is linked to ordinariness and is ritualistic in home consumption. Tea is instrumental in bringing family together in close proximity and provides platform for sharing and caring. A certain mystique is associated with coffee. Coffee is predominantly an outside drink; it derives its utility from social, aesthetic and emotional role. Brands which violate embedded psycho-social meaning are unlikely to resonate with consumer. Accordingly, tea and coffee branding efforts cannot afford to ignore the differing hidden reality with these two beverages.

Keywords

Semiotics, socio-cultural space, product instrumentality, meaning appropriation, imprinted meaning, perceptual space, consumption ritual, brand symbolism

Needs and wants open spaces which marketers inhabit through the world of brands. Years back, Maslow (1970) differentiated between physiological and psychological needs or lower or higher-order needs. Higher-order needs are culturally created. A market entity therefore can hold multiple meanings. The functionality is just one part of multiple-layered structure of signification. Brands are not the same as goods. Brands transform a physical entity into something perceptual and achieve value transformation by the process of contextualisation. Goods' ability to carry and convey cultural meanings makes them significant in consumption system of a society (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Sahlins, 1976). A good is inherently a functional entity and its primary worth resides in its performance. But the innate functionality is necessary, yet not sufficient, for brand creation. A physical entity must be extended with investment of a culturally consistent meaning. Branding requires placing a physical entity into socio-culturally constructed world of symbols, signifiers and contexts.

Background: Brands and Meaning

There is a great difference between the way products are placed in retail outlets and in the mental, perceptual world

of consumer. Consumption is both a psychological and a social phenomenon. It is about both acquisition and transfer of meaning in a culturally constructed world of consumer. Building a brand involves much more than product development. Brands must negotiate meaning in the psycho-social space of consumer. Brands, in their process of meaning cultivation, must break away from pure functionality and go on to embrace higher-order meaning. For instance, goods are used by consumers as class markers. Post-modern marketing has taken consumption to a situation that goods' functionality has gone into the background and at the foreground are considerations such as who they speak to, what they say about and how they make consumers feel. It is through brands that consumer achieves a definition (Szmigin, 2003).

One group can be culturally set apart from the other on the basis of what it consumes. For instance, in Britain, the nobility tried to distance itself from the bourgeoisie by developing a system of manners when possession of goods ceased to be an effective class signifier (Elias, 1994). Bourdieu (1984) distinguished between economic and cultural capital. The first one is connected to conspicuous lifestyle and the latter is about a more refined way of living.

Brands derive their utility from their instrumentality in meaning negotiation in the world of signs and signifiers. This way a brand remains submerged beneath the visible or physical signifier, and it is this hidden part that creates value for consumers (Verma, 2010). Brands increasingly seek to transcend the utility barrier, acquiring a meaning sourced from culturally created needs. For instance, the brands for fairness creams derive their significance from 'hidden meaning'. Fairness is important for its psycho-social consequences, including a sense of feeling confident, attractive, admired and envied (Verma, 2011).

Brands gain relevance by becoming part of the material culture of a society. This involves a process by which meaning is given to objects that includes brands. Meaning is drawn from shared culture and retransmitted through themes and images to consumers. Meaning is drawn from a given cultural system and incorporated into brands with the help of signs (Hirsch, 1987). The cultural differences across markets call for creation of different meanings. The cultural codes of products like cars or cigarettes may not be the same in two markets. For instance, Marlboro's rugged individuality, coded in its 'Marlboro Man', is likely to create meaning only in those markets where people already know what it means. Understanding the meaning of signs in a culture is essential in communicating with people (State, 1991).

A brand can be viewed as a bundle of values (Cook, 1995). Personal and cultural values influence consumers' buying decisions (Franzen & Moriarty, 2008). A brand's success critically depends upon how consistently it is placed in a complex amalgam of the sign system. Consumers respond to a brand for its values, heritage, the 'experience' it gives them and how it reflects what a person stands for (Clark, 1987). Brands are repository of meanings and they are important for consumers for living their lives (Fournier, 1998). It is a real challenge to understand and uncover the multiple sources and dynamic nature of brand meaning (Allen, Fournier & Miller, 2008). Culture is the fundamental original source and location of meaning. The cultural categories act as fundamental coordinates of meaning for brands (McCracken, 1986). The co-creation perspective proposes that culturally shared meaning is adapted by individuals according to their unique circumstances. The reader response theory in literature suggests that meaning derived from a text depends upon circumstances of a reader who intends to make a sense out of it (Mick & Buhl, 1992). The shared meaning is created through cultural traditions and marketing system and yet, at the same time, individuals construct their own personal meaning. Thus, consumption and possessions have two types of meanings: the 'public' meaning, which is shared; and another meaning, which is 'private' (Richins, 1994). It

is for this reason that a brand's meaning differs from person to person. Meaning variations can be significant across different social capital groups (Holt, 1998; Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

The interplay of public or shared and private meaning in consumption opens up an interesting field of inquiry. The interpretation of products could vary and individuals could create localised meanings. This sheds light on a post-modern reality that products are arbitrarily linked to their original functions and open to diversions (Cova, 1996). Consumer insights into meaning of a commodity, both at shared and individual levels, are essential to brand building. Tea and coffee are two major hot beverages consumed in India. Unlike tea, coffee has not been a common beverage. Tea is something like everybody's drink, which can be had anytime. This is not true for coffee. Both the commodities are similar in many ostensible ways but within these apparent similarities, differences are also palpable. These differences range from method of preparation to use, occasion to consumption and frequency of use. The visible differences between these two beverages must be rooted in some hidden socio-cultural code of these commodities. Brands that arrive in a social system not basing their strategy on a nuanced understanding of socio-cultural space end up becoming meaningless, notwithstanding their functional usefulness. This calls for discovering the socio-cultural reality linked with coffee and tea which will throw insights for brand building in these commodity spaces.

The Study: Brands and Socio-cultural Context

Tea and coffee are common to Indian culture but does this imply that they are similar in their contextualisation and meaning to consumer? Beneath the apparent construction of an appellation as a beverage, there is a possibility that these hold very different connotations and enjoy different realities beyond the grasp of observation. Consumers as human beings are meaning-making machines (Desmond, 2003). Nothing hangs without a meaning, including people, products, brands, buildings and spaces. A meaning-vacuum state is detested. The markets in this conception are spaces where meanings are traded. Marketers potentialise meaning by planning and directing efforts that set up meanings for their brands and then guide target customers towards them. On the other hand, consumers actualise meanings. Consumers undertake efforts to activate or generate meanings which may go out of sync with what a marketer intended to potentialise (Mick & Buhl, 1992).

The stimulant to undertake this study originated from the literature on signs and signification. Meaning as a theme traditionally belonged to the area of semiotics which

shared very little overlap with marketing (Barthes, 1967; Peirce, 1931–58; Saussure, 1986[1961]). With the passage of time, the stream of semiotics flowed towards consumer research and various researchers began to explore role and significance of signifier and signified in the marketing context (Belk, 2002; Hirschman, 1988; Holbrook & Grayson, 1986; Levitt, 1997, Levy, 1959). Brand building, to a great extent, is about meaning appropriation and signification. Brands find favour when they do or mean what customers want them to. This process involves transformation of what a material thing essentially represents to making it represent something ‘nonmaterial’ (Williamson, 1978). The conveyance of brand meaning necessitates use of signifiers and for this purpose, the communicator ‘raids stable cultural stores of meaning’. Branding from semiotic perspective is about the creation of a sign which stands for something meaningful (Dansei, 2005) for its prospects.

Branding involves placing a brand as a strategically crafted bundle of meaning in consumer-relevant context. This contextualisation is essential, without which brand has a risk of hanging in the air without appropriate interpretational reference point. At the heart of successful branding is meaning appropriation. A generic product or service in any category is perceived in a particular way depending upon cultural conditioning. The meaning so produced tends to be multilayered and multidimensional. This, however, may not be desirable in a particular branding context for it may restrict brand’s potential or suck it in a commodity spiral. Consider a category like wristwatch or handbag and how Omega and Louis Vuitton brands have created meaning radically at departure from explicitly defined product conceptualisation. A view of Omega as a time-keeping device and Louis Vuitton as a carry bag completely misses what is at the heart of their success.

Brands subsume meaning at different levels (Batey, 2008). Objective common meaning rests at the core or the bottom level which is made of sensory impressions like size, shape and sound. The layer above is culturally created by subjective meaning stemming from thoughts and images shared by members of a particular culture. And notch above are the more subculture-specific thoughts and images associated with an object. The final top level of meaning is idiosyncratic to an individual and is formed as a result of personal subjective experiences. A three-level conceptualisation of brand representation is proposed by Timmerman (2001) which moves from concrete to abstract. At the bottom level, a brand is at its most concrete level and its signs are apprehendable by senses, but at higher level, the meaning assumes abstraction. In Franzen and Bouwman’s (2001) scheme, four levels of brand meaning are proposed: brand’s recognisable signs like name and packaging; product aspects like attributes and

consequences; symbolic association related to user image; and feelings and organisational associations, including country of origin and competencies.

Brands are perceptual entities and they exist in the perceptual realm of their prospects. Their creation requires articulation of brand idea which manifests in various signs and symbols. These symbols are used to convey a brand’s core idea which is extracted through interpretational process. Branding is an engagement with and in symbols which results in a perceptual construction housed in target customers’ mind. Three-stage meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1986) suggests that marketing gatekeepers select meanings that reside in cultural categories and cultural principles which they transfer to their products through advertising. And consumers appropriate these meaning in their lives through various rituals. Brands are built on surrounding ideas, values, images and symbolism. Advertising is used to create brand mythology which encapsulates what the brand stands for in terms of product and personal benefits (Randazzo, 1993). Although various symbols, including packaging and promotions, play a role in establishing brand position, advertising is the dominant instrument. Advertising is important in brand building because it can access consumer’s mind where brands are created.

Communication is achieved by use of symbols which work through encoding and decoding process (Schramm, 1954). Encoding is the process of selecting the symbols so that they are decoded and meaning is extracted as intended. Brands use advertising to effect meaning transfer and an agglomeration of symbols are pressed into action. Typically, advertising uses the following dimensions to convey the brand idea: place, time, people, user, artifact, shape, music, occasion, colours, emotions, activity, language and verbal message. All of these elements, which are portrayed in a brand’s communication, are soaked in meanings created by a culture. For instance, the skin colour is not an objective signifier of the pigmentation level, rather it signifies culturally constructed meaning, including ‘admired’, ‘confident’, ‘attractive’ and ‘godly’ (Verma, 2011). Brand building requires selection and deployment of symbols drawn from a culture to produce the desired brand image. Two brands in a product category often use different amalgamation of symbols to create different positions.

The Objectives

The apparent differences between coffee and tea as two popular beverages set them apart in the following ways: tea vending density is much more than coffee; tea is the preferred beverage over coffee in the north; tea enjoys higher frequency of consumption than coffee; tea is ritualistically

drunk in the mornings and evenings; although coffee is sometimes served as welcome drink for guests, tea is generally offered; coffee vendors or joints are more upscale than tea vendors in general; coffee enjoys higher price than tea; widespread consumption of tea makes it everybody's drink compared to coffee which has restricted patronage; and coffee enjoys a close link with a mug, whereas tea is connected with a cup. Are these differences symptomatic manifestations of fundamental variation in meaning structures? Or do these beverages enjoy similarity of meaning structure but are differentiated on the outer surface? This study is driven by the curiosity to uncover the psychosocial reality of coffee and tea. This is essential for both meaning development and communication. The following objectives guided this study:

- To explore the imprinting process by which meaning gets fixated in consumer memory.
- To find the deeper meaning or connotations associated with tea and coffee.
- To discover the socio-psychological significance of these beverages.
- Are there any beverage-specific people or place or use situation-specific associations?

Method and Procedure

The intention of this study was to probe into a phenomenon the contours of which were undefined. The intent was to explore how tea and coffee are embedded in consumer psyche and their linkages with other consumption aspects. Accordingly, a qualitative research design was used involving a number of samples. The respondents were given a briefing about the anchor questions but the purpose of research was not disclosed. This was done to avoid bias which generally creeps in when respondents perceive themselves to be 'subjects' of a study. Use of phenomenology in qualitative research involves use of creating descriptions of personal experiences as basis of getting to knowledge. The phenomenal investigations are guided by objectives of understanding the world of things at an individual level (Conklin, 2007). For each of the investigation issues, the respondents were first briefed and then were asked to note down their thoughts on a piece of paper in a free-flowing manner. The respondents were asked to provide their observations on the following four heads of inquiry:

- The early recallable encounter with the beverage (respondents were asked to close their eyes for some time and recall the incident (s) and only do the recording).

- Situations associated with the beverage (consumption situations or use occasions).
- Persons associated with the beverage (social engagement or dyadic interactions).
- Places associated with consumption of the beverage (spatial distribution of consumption).

It is challenging to gather knowledge about phenomena about which not much is known. When the research is guided by consideration of increasing knowledge about something or to describe a real-world phenomenon, critical incident technique is an appropriate research technique (Bitner et al., 1990). The first head of inquiry used critical incident technique in which respondents are made to recollect incidents which are collected for the research and are later content analysed to draw inferences (Flanagan, 1954). This method is widely used in social sciences. It is a qualitative procedure which allows the study of significant occurrences (Chell, 1998). The respondents in this study were asked to recall and narrate story of early life incidents as to how tea or coffee came in their lives. The early life experiences play important role in the formation of memory structure by which products engrain, a neural network or fragment of memory. It is through this process of imprinting that products are transformed in meaning constellation.

Storytelling is one of the accepted procedures in which respondents share their experience about an experienced incident belonging to the investigated area (Gremler, 2004). Once the stories are collected, as was done in this study, the information contained therein is content analysed to create classification (Grove and Fisk, 1997; Stauss, 1993). The sample for the study consisted of participants in postgraduate management programme. The sampling was guided by considerations of convenience and judgement. This method was found to be appropriate because this was an initial exploratory probe meant to scratch meaning surface linked with the two beverages.

In all, 200 respondents were contacted in smaller groups, equally representing the two categories of beverage. Once the respondents were assembled in a room, they were briefed about the study without an explicit statement of objectives. They were provided with blank papers to write down their responses. For each of the issues under consideration, they were sequentially briefed and were given ample time to respond. This enabled them to pause, think and write and pre-empted answering in a hurry. After the collection of stories, these were content analysed. Content analysis is a widely used tool in the fields like social psychology, communication and advertising (Pollay, 1985) and image analysis (Zimmer and Golden, 1988). The qualitative responses so collected were analysed using

analytic induction process consisting of repeated reading and sorting of stories and achieving a logical classification-based content similarity. One of the limitations a study of this nature often suffers from is representativeness of the sample. The sample in this study was skewed in favour of north Indian participants, accordingly its findings may not permit easy generalisation.

Findings and Discussion

Understanding how a particular good or service is held in consumer consciousness is a necessary starting step in plotting the brand strategy. Goods do not exist in a vacuum. The process of enculturation envelops them with layers of meaning and thereby casts them in a material and non-material role. One good may not be held similarly in its meaning and instrumentality in different cultures. For instance, age stands for respect in some cultures and being outdated in others. Car as a product signifies both freedom and means of mobility. A great deal of meaning negotiation happens at the symbolic level. It is here that brand symbolism and imagery assumes significance (Elliott, 1997). There is great risk in treading into territory of signs, symbols and symbolism without proper understanding of their language and grammar. What do coffee and tea mean?

The Embedded Meaning

By way of enculturation, simple objects evolve into complex meaning constellations. It orients people to behave in a culturally constructed right way. Consumption and manner of consumption is culturally determined because people are implicitly oriented to assume that it is the 'right thing to do'. The ways of living are subtly passed on from one member to the other and in this regard, family becomes the fundamental unit of influence. The beliefs, emotions, feelings and values are attached to goods and services by way of early life experiences by the imprinting process. Imprinting in branding context is the process by which a brand creates its indelible impression by creating an image in the prospect's mind.

Imprinting in animal biology refers to the first encounter between a newborn animal and its natural mother. In just a few seconds, the mother's identity gets permanently fixed in the newborn's mind (Ries & Trout, 1986). Goods become more than bundle of functional utilities and their meaning is extended to encompass consumption situations with involve actors, time, feelings, occasions, relationships, situations and rituals. A malt beverage like Bournvita enjoys multidimensional and multilayered meaning, including dimensions such as mother-child relationship, motherly love and care, morning breakfast, energy and

childhood. Peanut butter, for some in the United States of America (USA), is associated with love and nurturance, and Champagne in France represents celebration (Rapaille, 2006). Discovering the initial imprints is important because it serves as a reference point for all future interpretations (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

Tea: Nourishment and Togetherness

Understanding or product meaning is essential to developing marketing strategy, especially when firms cross borders. One company's strategy to pull Japanese customers from tea to coffee failed because of its inability to understand their meaning. The two beverages radically differed in their positioning in Japanese culture; while tea enjoyed strong emotional connections, coffee had just a superficial imprint (Rapaille, 2006). Through enculturation process, the things get their imprinting during the early childhood. Tea and coffee differ in their imprinted meaning. Tea consumption is linked with the time of the day. Savouring tea marks the beginning and the end of the day at home. Tea is ritualistically prepared in the morning and the evening. Symbolically, tea brings the family together in close proximity where adults share ideas, joys and sorrows. It is a kind of gum which binds family members at a given time of the day. But despite the commonness, frequency and widespread consumption, children are not allowed to be a part of the tea-drinking ritual.

Tea is a restricted drink for children and its rejection is built on perceived negative effects that it might have on children's health or physical well-being. Tea suffers from cultural biasing that originates from its oppositional position in comparison to milk. Milk stands for nourishment, whiteness, strength, growth, motherly love and care. Tea, on the other hand, is perceived to be unhealthy, brown and un-mother like. Tea is associated with skin darkening and poor mental and physical health. Consequently, these imprints linger in memory, thereby making tea a drink with reservation. Unlike many cultures where tea is consumed black, tea in India is served white. Milk or whitener is added as a compensatory ingredient to neutralise perceived harmful effects. Often, tea is used as alibi to consume milk for better health rather than savour the flavor. For instance, a popular brand of tea depicts how three different brews can be made by diluting the tea with varying quantities of milk.

Tea is not a drink for children but milk is. Then, does tea create a pull to transcend from the age of naivety to adulthood? India is a big tea market running into billions of rupees. How come a product soaked in cultural bias becomes a common drink? Certainly, the pull stems from the signalling value. Saying yes to a cup of tea in a way signifies breaking free from the umbilical cord. A cup of

tea in India is parallel to a beer bottle in some cultures. This signifies coming of teen age and entitlement. The lack of inherent taste orientation for tea is compensated by cultivation of meaning relevant to perpetuate consumption. The images beamed by different brands depict tea drinking and drinkers in a particular light with significant functional, social, sensory and emotional benefits. Consider brand names like Taj Mahal and Society Tea. Taj Mahal is an exquisite creation associated with the Mughal Empire symptomatic of royalty and class. The brand 'Society' is representative of a class. Brands like 'Taaza' and 'Tata Tea' are built on a functional and sensory proposition that includes freshness, energy and breaking out of slumber or waking up.

The rich ayurvedic tradition of India also contributes favourably to tea by imprinting it as a medicinal brew. The process similarity used in brewing a domestic ayurvedic formulation at home creates tea's perception as an effective remedy for curing common colds. Accordingly, though forbidden for kids, tea is given to them as a medicine. A number of players leverage this conditioning in their brand-building process. A brand positioned on health and herbal proposition finds favours with a niche market. The desire to make healthy brew renders tea preparation in India a very different exercise. Unlike China and Japan where tea preparation and consumption are governed by high regimentation with culturally laid do's and don'ts, in India, tea is not governed by such rules. The inner craving to brew something inherently unhealthy prompts people to add healthy ingredients in the process of tea preparation. The practices include use of ginger, cardamom and cinnamon. A big brand like Brooke Bond has been engaged in repositioning tea on the health platform. To achieve the same, the brand has now created a range of teas which includes Brooke Bond 'Sehatmand' with vitamin power and Brook Bond Red Label Natural Care with herbal ingredients like tulsi, *ashwagandha*, *mulethi*, ginger and cardamom which are useful in improving immunity.

Coffee: Exclusion and Social Interaction

Unlike tea, coffee in India shares a different imprint. Tea is ritualistically linked with morning and evenings. In most households, it is customary to start and close the day (evening) with a cup of tea. But coffee does not enjoy such time connections. Tea is routinely prepared but coffee is not. It enjoys the position of a special drink prepared on guest visits or special occasions. Coffee is celebratory and tea is ordinary. Its consumption is probably prompted by its signalling value which may stem from high price implying exclusion of masses; unique taste which only connoisseurs appreciate; and complex preparation process that signifies

dexterity in culinary skills (beaten, or filtered or brewed). A certain mystique is associated with coffee. Coffee consumption is uncommon and it is this uncommonness which imbues this beverage with a unique mystique associated with a wealthy, refined and intellectually evolved class. Coffee is a break away from the ordinary and its consumption is tied to special occasions and people in the hierarchy of relationships. Tea is functional but coffee is symbolic. Both significantly differ in their core meaning and connotations. Nescafe once ran a campaign which was built on the idea to promote coffee as a morning beverage ('start your day with Nescafe') to expand its consumption and to get the position enjoyed by tea in this category.

Besides the social hierarchical connotations, coffee drinking extends to the realm of social engagements and indulgence. The aroma, taste and feel of coffee accords its consumers an opportunity to indulge in a unique sensory experience. A new culture of coffee houses is emerging in India in a way similar to bars. But both differ in term of their instrument of stimulation. One uses alcohol and the other use caffeine. Coffee houses differ in their spatial, sensory and social meaning. Some of the coffee houses sell coffee as an alibi to engage in either intellectually evolved serious conversations (business meetings) or promotion of friendship, gossiping to spend time and social bonding (one of the coffee chains makes a proposition that 'a lot can happen over coffee', while the other offers pure sensory indulgence in the aromatic world of coffee).

Coffee is imprinted as a social drink which provides opportunities to come together around the table, engage in conversations, forge friendly bonds and create memorable experiences. Coffee bars have emerged as places of social interactions which accord opportunity to a small world (Milgram, 1967), which are separated in a small degree from one another (Watts & Strogatz, 1998). What lures people to spend a part of their available time in coffee houses with a motivation to forge relationships? Urbanisation and mobility has been cutting people away from community roots. People in urban centres are becoming atomised with a psyche of deprived sense of belonging. As modern existence creates a social vacuum, coffee shops come into the scene to provide a sense of community (Putnam, 2000). Starbucks is promoted as the 'third place' besides home and office. When the home gets devoid of people, coffee houses thrive on creating a false sense of home where you can sit, relax, talk and order things to satisfy your basic physiological needs. Coffee houses are new networking sites where like-minded people converge with the prospect of forging relationships with varying degree of commitment and duration. This is one reason why there is ubiquitous presence of roadside tea vendors but coffee is vended through coffee houses which are

carefully constructed spaces as shrines of coffee-making excellence, facilitators of social engagement and indulgent journey into delectable sensory experience.

The social and sensory overtone that coffee enjoys is new. Coffee has evolved from being a drink of the evolved and thinkers. The earlier coffee houses with minimalist décor and furniture were once functional places for the thinkers, writers, philosophers and the anti-establishment. In the Arab world, coffee was the 'milk of thinkers and chess players'. Coffee contains caffeine, a substance found to be associated with cognitive stimulation and enhanced problem-solving ability. A typical coffee drinker wore spectacles, grew beard, had a sling bag on the shoulder and wore cotton fabrics. The old type of coffee houses are fast vanishing and coffee has emerged in its new avatar as something hip and happening. The coffee houses till the beginning of the twenty-first century were intellectual places where thinkers converged to critique the order of the day, often giving rise to alternate discourse bordering on radical thinking on politics and culture. Coffee bars are now places of sensual gratification and relaxation. Earlier, ideological transformation could happen over a cup of coffee which could potentially alter the collective consciousness and threaten the political establishments. Coffee, in this contextualisation, has broken away from being a potion of the thinker to the liquid of the indulgent.

Coffee, like in its earlier contextualisation, continues to be a façade for an entirely different signified. Coffee houses are three-dimensional spaces that permit people to negotiate on the fourth dimension in the environment which both provides an escape from the outside as well as offers platform for social engagement. The coffee house discourse typically resembles coffee table books which invite readers into a superficial journey of visual odyssey and provides companionship to the companionless. The new coffee lounges do not intent to accomplish transformation of the intellect, rather the 'couches in the lounges' are designed for purposeful separation of both identities and ideas which falsely gives impression of a group. This is in line with the individualistic orientation of modern societies. People converge as individuals and leave in the same way, except that some time is spent in environment of sensory pleasure. The push in the realm of pleasure and indulgence has transformed coffee from a simple brew into a mind-boggling array of concoctions. Visually, a serving porcelain cup or mug has given way to a new array of serving mugs and glasses designed to hook its drinker as a seductress not for a marriage but for a short fling. Coffee's substantive meaning as liquor of the intellect has given way to an entirely new consumption culture designed to negotiate time in unfolding world of physical comfort and sense stimulation.

Coffee is not a potion for sustenance. The aroma, flavour and taste make coffee a drink for pleasure though sensory olfactory and gustatory sense. Many people begin by an initial dislike for coffee because of taste departure from tea and go on to appreciating it as a cultural sign and sensual stimulation. Coffee consumption as a reward and taste or addictiveness works simultaneously. Coffee contains caffeine which works to change mood conditions positively by blocking adenosine receptors. The caffeine in coffee works through dopamine responsible for operating pleasure system in the brain. So, if something creates a good feeling, its repeat likelihood increases. This makes dopamine and serotonin connected with addictions (Plessis, 2011). Dopamine is strongly connected with the feelings of reward (Robbins & Everitt, 1996). The release of dopamine creates a feel-good state and coffee's instrumentality is imprinted in the subconscious. The feeling-good memory produced by dopamine release becomes a reward for coffee consumption. Coffee is one of the ways people create feel-good situations for themselves. Coffee house is a carefully made-up amalgam of everything—sound, sight, smell and social contact—that can be assembled to make people feel good. Reward seeking is intrinsic to motivation and coffee promises a feel-good factor. One of the chocolate brands in India was promoted on the plank that 'you don't buy a Bourneville but you earn it', positioning it as reward for effort. A cup of coffee signifies a break from the norm or departure from the everyday mundane existence which deprives people of small pleasures. These pleasures play important reinvigorating and revitalising role in our lives.

Context of Consumption

Products or commodities develop contexts relevant to their consumption. Consumers look at the marketing offerings from their prism of consumption. A product's inability to either create or fit in a given consumption context can rob it off its essence as a problem solver. It is likely to hang in the perceptually constructed world of consumer as a meaningless symbol pushing it into the realm of nothingness. Brands achieve success when they successfully develop context by occupying a distinct position on the dimensions defining consumption. Consider how car brands like Ferrari and Lexus enjoy different consumption contexts on dimensions such as typical buyer profile, purpose of use, place of use, the time of use, occasion of use and the manner of use. This way products and services both create culture and become a part thereof. In order to gain an understanding into the consumption context, respondents were probed for consumption context and people constituting those situations. This is essential for deciphering how tea and coffee fit in the life of the consumer.

Consumption Situation

In our analysis, tea is overwhelmingly linked with in-house consumption with participating actors being the family members. It is positioned as a morning and evening beverage characterised by ritualistic consumption. The beginning and the closure of the day is tied to tea preparation ritual. Rituals appear to be simple repetitive behaviours, but these are connected within physical, temporal, social and cultural environments (Evans, Jamal & Foxall, 2006). Unlike many shared rituals like community feast or weddings, tea is ritualistically drunk in private setting. The public rituals signal collective identity, instilling and celebrating group cohesiveness (Werner, Haggard, Altman & Oxley, 1988). In China, tea-drinking ritual is guided by many considerations, including expression of respect and family gathering. The morning and evening tea-drinking ritual positions tea with twin layers meaning. Before the start of the day or any significant activity, tea is valued for its caffeine-fired good hormonal effects. Tea symbolically prepares one both mentally and physically to take on the day's challenges. Tea drinking at the end of the day is celebratory or rewarding after a fruitful day. Tea is compensatory for the energy depleted during the course of the day. At the social level, tea drinking acts as an alibi for bonding with family members. Tea is usually prepared in one go and served simultaneously to all members in one go. This ritual transforms individual identities into a collective entity. This way tea is linked with debates and discussion by which differences are reconciled. It accords consensus-building opportunity at the family level (see Table A2 in the Appendix).

The second important aspect is related to outcomes or the utility produced by the beverage. Tea is valued for its functionality. This orientation stems from its perceived beneficial effects during minor illnesses like cold and headache and keeping consumer warm during winter. Further, tea is valued for keeping consumer awake in late hours of night. Tea's role as stimulant of senses is leveraged by the consumer at the time of reading. The functional value of a thing stems from its ability to perform certain functions which allow consumers to gain control over the environment and solve an externally imposed problem (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Furby, 1978; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Tea assumes social orientation when the participants become guests or friends.

Tea is also drunk as an accompaniment to lunch and snacks. Tea, in this context, assumes instrumentality as facilitator of social exchange, according opportunities for forging and reinforcing relationships. Tea served in a social engagement can express regard and affection to others. Another important aspect related to tea is its role as aid to

making time good during the state of boredom. People feel bored in the absence of appropriate stimulation. Tea can promote feel-good perception by raising the stimulation level. Tea is also linked with the situation of relaxation like television viewing. Tea works like icing on the cake capable of creating an experiential transformation. Tea consumption is culturally tied to situations such as getting entertained or idling around.

Mapping of coffee on the positional dimensions of actors, time, place, occasion and outcomes produces a different reality. First of all, coffee predominantly is an outside drink and its consumption location is café. Coffee pulls people into café houses with a motivation to bond and develop relationships. The phrase 'let's have coffee' implies 'let's get together'. An invitation for a coffee is not an invitation for nourishment or making someone better physiologically. Rather, coffee is an alibi for opening a conversation and starting a business or intimate relationship. Coffee is higher on both price and preparation complexity which moves it away from ordinariness. This adds a dimension of specialness to coffee as a beverage. An invitation for coffee may be purely an exercise in an experiential event to indulge in pleasure play through sensory engagement. Coffee derives its utility in this perspective from aesthetically appealing spaces, lighting, aroma and sound designed to arouse emotions (MacInnis & Jaworski, 1988; Park, 1995; Prentice, 1987). The outcomes during these instances are in the realm of arousal of emotions such as happiness, joy and excitement. Situations that are marked with emotional arousal become memorable. This way coffee generates a repertoire of memorable moments which provides happiness when recalled. This is one of the ways in which brands are created. Brands create 'dopaminic memories' by building an inseparable link with the pleasant things or moments in peoples' lives (Plessis, 2011).

Coffee is not consumed in the confines of home with familiar people. The conspicuous consumption of coffee in the presence of others accords its drinker an opportunity for both identity construction and expression. A cup of coffee, with all its accompanying heritage and symbolism, can be a powerful signifier of taste, refinement and status. A cup of coffee is much more than a concoction of water, milk and other ingredients. It is an expressional device. It can lend voice to the inaudible and tangibilise the intangible. Culture assumes greater role as vehicle of communication of class and distinction when economic capital ceases in its role as class marker (Bourdieu, 1990). A reply to the question, 'what type of coffee for you', at the coffee table can reveal both demographics and psychographics of a person. The answer can be identity defining. The style, sophistication, class and taste are all masked beneath the coffee preference. Consumption, in this sense, performs

identity expression function by which individuality and self-concept are revealed to others (Belk, 1988). Just like the manner in which brands gain imagery and symbolic connotations from their users, a coffee also draws its symbolism for its drinkers and reflects a certain level of intellectual awareness, sophistication and refinement. The halo so developed transforms a simple brew into a distinctive cultural marker. In British culture, coffee enjoyed connotations as a drink reserved for people with a certain level of intellect and wealth. The way a BMW or Rolls Royce make announces the position of its owner and anchors the owners in neatly defined categories of power and wealth, coffee type can also reveal the type of person.

Another strong situation connection enjoyed by coffee is built upon its physiological effects. As discussed earlier, the caffeine is a sense-stimulating substance. Caffeine works by chemical alteration of brain functioning by which neuron firing is increased. It is for this reason that coffee enjoys a connection with situations that involve application of mind. Coffee is used to promote alertness of sense or to keep awake during times such as preparation for examination or studies. So, when the energy levels deplete, caffeine comes in handy to reverse the situation and tends to promote more goal focus. Coffee usage, in this context, is at the functional level. Similar utility is sought when consumer seeks body-warming function during cold and winter season. Here, in these situations, the product is valued for delivery at the physiological level. This interaction between the two, often, classically conditions people to associate coffee with studying or cold winter season.

Apart from meeting the real energy requirements by calorific contents though milk and sugar, coffee assumes the role of a trophy or reward for an effort. The representation of cheering faces holding a mug of coffee with raised hands is very close to the image of a champion holding the trophy in the sporting arena. To many consumers, coffee is not an ordinary beverage to be had in ordinary situations. Rather it assumes the role of a trophy to mark accomplishment of everyday challenges. In this sense, this is a celebratory drink that marks special moments in the ordinariness of existence. Coffee is a prize to which one entitles himself or herself as reward for an effort expanded on an activity that comprises daily routine. For instance, a professor rewards himself with a pleasurable coffee experience after delivering a lecture and a surgeon does the same after an operation.

People and Place Association

Consumption is value-extraction process which involves a direct interface between the consumer and the consumed. But a lot remains in hiding behind an apparently simplistic

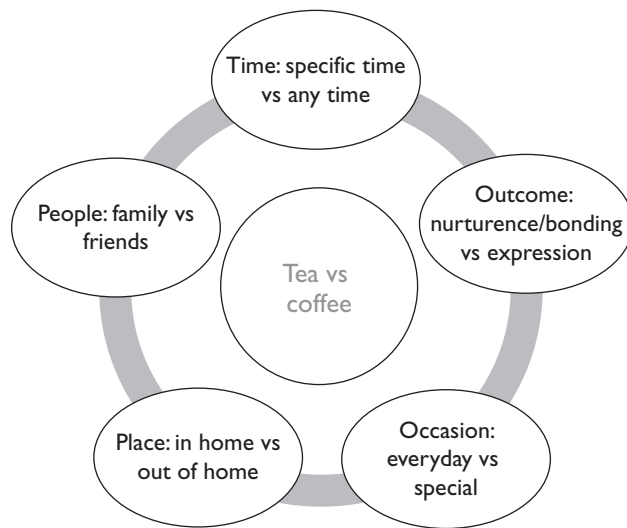
act of consumption. Consumption is a multifaceted and multilayered phenomenon. Brands are created by deliberate amalgamation of a number of factors. However, the brand-building quest must begin with understanding how a commodity or product is embedded in a cultural structure. Economists focus narrowly on commodity ignoring the consumer in their analysis. It is mostly understood that value is created in factories but meaning is created and shared by consumers at their own end at the place of consumption (Dixon, 1997). Food is a biological necessity and linchpin of human social life. Consumption is not only intended to provide bodily sustenance but is an instrument by which cultural meanings are made and communicated (Guthman, 2002). The process of drawing biological sustenance calls for an engagement at the content level. The commodities push themselves into the realm of signification by plugging into things like objects, people and places sublimated with meanings. The place and people associations were explored in this study to get a richer perspective about commodities in question (see Table A3 and A4 in the Appendix).

In order to get a deeper understanding of the tea and coffee consumption phenomena, two specific probes were made with regard to people and place. The analyses of the responses threw interesting insights into the culture of coffee and tea. Tea was overwhelmingly seen as a home drink with family members as participating actors. This is not to state the tea is not drunk with friends. Friends come as the second-most dominant group linked to tea consumption. Coffee, on the other hand, stands somewhat opposite to tea with regard to people and place of consumption. It is an outside drink to be shared with friends more than inside home with family. The newly opened coffee bars enjoy a very strong connection with coffee consumption. Its association with coffee bars is almost twice that of home.

Code of Tea and Coffee: Beverages in Opposition

A commodity without contextualisation holds very little value. Contextualisation is an essential step in articulation and rearticulation of value trigger. Goods acquire their value through their role in the lives of consumers. Two big impositions on consumers come in the form of material and non-material aspects of life. A good by virtue of its production is bestowed with certain functionality but beyond that, often, it is extended to acquire connotative meanings. All consumption is cultural, therefore very few goods can escape meaning. Accordingly, brands are strategically positioned in consumer's mind using a multidimensional space. This essentially involves articulating how a

Figure 1. Context, Meaning and Instrumentality of Tea and Coffee



Source: Developed by the Author.

brand intends to develop a value-generating perception. Brand communication has to tread on multiple cultural dimensions like time, people, occasion, place and satisfaction to get anchored in the consumer's perceptual space.

Tea and coffee appear to belong to two different sets of opposite cultural categories with their own unique meaning and contexts (Figure 1). Their relevance stems from different instrumentalities. Tea's consumption with near and dear ones in the closed comfort of home bestows the beverage its importance in nurturance and bonding role. It becomes an alibi for family members to come together at a designated time of the day and interact, share and transform into a collective entity. Tea is prepared by mother and 'given' as an evolved substitute for 'milk' (grown-ups don't drink milk). Most families enjoy a particular kind of brew which is passed on from one generation to the other. It is surrender of individuality for communality. The shared drink from one pot is akin to coming back of branches to one trunk. Tea in this way is an unpretentious drink. It is not a tool to negotiate a social turf with aliens or semi-friends in an atmosphere of formality. That is reason why, in most families, tea time is more or less fixed in the morning and the evenings.

Coffee, on the other hand, belongs to a different category. By virtue of being an 'outside' drink, it cannot escape from its social role. Unlike home, the world outside is filled with strangers, aggression and insecurities. The social instrumentality of coffee is visible as it belongs to the synthetic and artificially constructed space of coffee bars. These places, unlike home, are not of unlimited access and are priced. Consumer, here, is a passive taker or

'subject' of the purposefully organised and orchestrated amalgam of sight, sound, smell and space. Coffee, in this context, assumes a role as facilitator of business with strangers or creator and nurturer of relationship not born out of blood but bond. The out of home and strangers combination transforms a cup of coffee into a social device. A cup of coffee can signal who you are, what strata of society you belong to, what your tastes are, how you should be treated, should one aspire to be like you or belong to you. Coffee, in this sense, becomes a language and its utility lies in wordless communication.

Concluding Remarks and Managerial Implications

Product performance serves as an essential starting point in brand building but it is not sufficient. Social and emotional value is integral to adding value to brands. This pushes branding into the socio-cultural realm. The culture enables its member to decode and understand meaning of things and respond in an appropriate manner. Culture orients its members by imparting beliefs and values to think and behave in specific ways. The meaning associated with an automobile extends much beyond its automotive properties to envelop socio-cultural dimensions like feminine or masculine; mass or class; old or new; business or leisure; city or all terrain; and power or powerless. Brands fail to make sense when their meaning does not resonate with consumers because of cultural violations. It is imperative to discover how a product or service is embedded in a cultural system.

This study aimed at exploring the meaning embedded in tea and coffee. It is interesting to find that despite their apparent similarity, these beverages have different cultural symbolism as well as different consumption codes. Tea and coffee differ in their imprinted meaning in dimensions such as consumption frequency, preparation method, use occasion, consumption situation, consumption location, associated benefits and symbolism. Tea and coffee belong to two different sets of opposite cultural categories with their own unique meanings and contexts. Their relevance stems from different instrumentalities. Tea is ritualistically prepared in the mornings and the evenings. Symbolically, tea brings the family together in close proximity where adults share ideas, joys and sorrows. It is a kind of gum which binds family members at a given time of the day. But despite the commonness, frequency and widespread consumption, children are not allowed to be a part of the tea-drinking ritual. Tea consumption is linked with the time of the day. There is apparent lack of universally accepted best recipe of tea making and tea preference is individualistically defined.

Exploring coffee revealed a contrasting imprint in many ways. Coffee is celebratory and tea is ordinary. Coffee consumption is probably prompted by its signalling value which may stem from high price implying exclusion of masses; unique taste which only connoisseurs appreciate; and complex preparation process which signifies dexterity in culinary skills (beaten, or filtered or brewed). A certain mystique is associated with coffee. Coffee consumption is uncommon and it is this uncommonness which imbues this beverage with a unique mystique associated with a wealthy, refined and intellectually evolved class. Tea is overwhelmingly a home drink with family members as participating actors. This is not to state that tea is not had with friends. Friends come as the second-most dominant group linked to tea consumption. Coffee, on the other hand, stands somewhat opposite to tea with regard to people and place of consumption. It is an outside drink to be shared with friends more than inside the home with family.

Branding is a value addition process. It is by this value addition that brands forge a connection with the consumer that extends beyond product functionality to include psycho-social aspects (Jones, 1986; Newman, 1957). This is done by plugging into the cultural reservoir for appropriating a relevant meaning. The objects, colours, activities, people, time and situations usually shown in brand communication are assembled to create an intended image. The embedded meanings found in this study hold important marketing implications. A certain mystique is associated with coffee. Coffee consumption is uncommon and it is this uncommonness which imbues this beverage with a unique mystique associated with a wealthy, refined and intellectually evolved class. Coffee's connotation as a

special and social beverage reveals positioning opportunities along these dimensions. Café Coffee Day's core proposition, condensed in its tagline, 'A lot can happen over coffee', is in sync with our findings. The coffee bar brands like Barista, Costa, Gloria Jean and Starbucks owe their fortunes to coffee's social and celebratory cultural code. A cup of coffee in these bars is an alibi to a much hidden social angle. This has implications for atmospherics and layout management for the coffee bars. The interiors and layout must bear in mind the needs that coffee consumers seek to satisfy. Coffee's connections with connoisseurs hold opportunities for creating top-of-the-line super-premium exclusive brands.

On the other hand, tea's connection with homely warmth and family relationships suggests that tea brands can develop connections by focusing on family togetherness. Symbolically, tea brings the family together in close proximity. Tea brands can build their positioning leveraging upon tea's instrumentality in engendering family bonding and joy. The brands should refrain from making a normative statement about any best recipe, flavour or process because the phenomenon of the best tea is inter-generational. Tea advertising is likely to resonate more if it focuses on tea-drinking moments featuring togetherness in warmth of home. Tea is also marred by negative connotation and perception as being unhealthy. This has restrictive effect on its consumption and frequency as many young people grow into reluctant tea drinkers. Brands in this category can gain collectively if this perception is reversed. Although this study revealed interesting contrast between two of the most common beverages, its limited sample size skewed in favour of participants from the north restricts easy generalisation.

Appendix

Table A1. Imprinted Meaning of Tea and Coffee

Imprint Instrument: Tea	Predominant Imprinted Meaning	Imprint Instrument: Coffee	Predominant Imprinted Meaning
Parents/grand parent, family (93) Friends (7)	Daily morning and evening routine/family togetherness (42) Skin darkening effect (21) Unhealthy/harmful, not good for kids/poor mental health/ poisonous/bad kids drink (21) Tea as drink for grown-ups, for mature (8) Household cold cure/herbal medicine (7) Others (1)	Parent-child- immediate family (65) Friends/out of home (25) Guest/visitors (10)	Indulgence/friends/enjoyment/fun/good time/change (23) Special guest drink/social drink/special occasion/ statement (23) Unhealthy/addictive (12) Adult drink (9) Coffee as reward (9) Unique aroma and taste (8) Before bed/keeps awake (5) Bitter taste/dislike (4) Minor illness/cold (3) As substitute for malt beverage (2) Others (2)

Source: Developed by the Author.

Note: Figures in brackets are in %.

Table A2. Consumption Situation: Tea and Coffee

Tea Situation	Frequency (%)	Coffee Situation	Frequency (%)
Breakfast accompaniment	17	Outing with friends/time pass/café	20
Evening beverage	16	Study/serious work	20
Cure for common illnesses	12	Guests/visitors at home	12
Rainy days/monsoon/winter	9	Winter/rainy days	10
Guests	9	After strenuous activity/relaxation	8
Reading/study	9	Marriages/gatherings	7
Along with refreshment/lunch	8	Refreshment/breaks/with colleagues	6
Friends at café	6	With lunch/dinner	8
To wake up at night	5	Cure for common illnesses	4
Time pass	5	Time pass	4
Others	4	Others	1

Source: Developed by the Author.

Table A3. People Association with Tea and Coffee

Tea		Coffee	
People Associated	%	People Associated	%
Family (father, mother, siblings)	56	Friends/colleagues/associates	62
Friends	27	Family (father, mother, siblings)	31
Relatives	9	Relatives	4
Solitude	4	Solitude	3
Colleagues	4		

Source: Developed by the Author.

Table A4. Place Association with Tea and Coffee

Tea		Coffee	
Place Associated	%	Place Associated	%
Home (terrace, living room)	63	Coffee bar	51
Cafeteria	35	Home	29
Roadside vendor	15	Office	10
Hill station, journey, train	16	Hill stations, journey, train	6
Others (relatives, coffee house, hostel)	10	Relatives	4

Source: Developed by the Author.

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