The Times (and Brands) are a Changin’: A Response to Gaski’s Commentary

Francisco Conejo¹ and Ben Wooliscroft²

Abstract
Gaski’s commentary of Conejo and Wooliscroft’s “radical” (2015) “Brands Defined as Semiotic Marketing Systems” is rebutted. We reaffirm the need to update the AMA’s stagnant 80-year-old brand definition while addressing six issues: 1) That we don’t repudiate the AMA definition; 2) that we don’t present just another brand definition; 3) that definitions do change; 4) that products and brands are distinct concepts; 5) that the commentary does not properly address the Semiotic Brand System; and 6) that the commentary distracts from the real, more important question at hand, of whether the AMA brand definition is still viable.

Keywords
AMA, brand, definition, semiotic, system, marketing, history

Introduction
Brands are central to marketing. They are main ideological foci driving research and practice (Levy and Luedicke 2013). Despite their importance, the American Marketing Association (AMA) brand definition has stagnated, unchanged for 80 years. It fails to reflect how much the marketing environment has developed and is thus out of date with current marketing thought and practice. This is troubling. Improper definitions steer users down incorrect paths and hinder marketing education, research, and practice (Gabbott and Jevons 2009; Patterson 1999).

Our article in this issue, “Brands Defined as Semiotic Marketing Systems,” addresses this situation. The present commentary rebuts John Gaski’s (2015) observations on our article, which he calls radical among others epithets, published in this issue. Gaski’s commentary stays true to his impassioned aversion to definitional change (Gaski 2013a); his Friedmanite views of marketing (Gaski 2013b); and his managerial notions of branding. We welcome the opportunity he has provided to strengthen our positions in regards to updating definitions. Six misunderstandings are clarified, with further focus on a few select ones.

1. Not Repudiating the AMA Brand Definition

Gaski claims (p. 2) that our article “...hinges on rejection of the traditional AMA brand definition.” The AMA brand definition is simplistic, but we do not repudiate it. Still suitable for basic brands, those closely related to their products, the definition should not be altogether discarded. We instead advocate for extending the AMA brand definition, beyond the lowest common denominator currently offered, to one able to explain the richness and sophistication of today’s most powerful brands.

Gaski also accuses us (p. 3) of “...launching such unbridled criticism of the long-standing official AMA definition of brand.” “Unbridled” is a gross exaggeration. Per standard practice we present our positions, develop arguments, substantiate with literature, and draw conclusions. We do this constructively. Just because something has consolidated as a marketing convention does not mean it is above scrutiny. The ability to openly question and discuss issues is what characterizes science in free-thinking societies.

2. Not Another Brand Definition

Gaski asks (p. 1) “So, do Conejo and Wooliscroft deliver the Rosetta stone of branding, or poll the linguistic and lexicographic landscape further?...in fact, (they) add to the confusion and move marketing thought in the wrong direction with yet another “brand” definition...”

As to offering “yet another brand definition,” we explicitly avoid precisely that. Brands have become quite varied with respect to one another. Instead of a one-size-fit-all definition like the AMA’s, we offer a broader, more flexible brand concept. As a mid-range theory, our conceptualization integrates specific brand notions into the more-inclusive marketing

¹University of Colorado, Denver, CO, USA
²University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

Corresponding Author:
Francisco Conejo, University of Colorado at Denver, Business School, 1475 Lawrence St., Denver, CO 80202, USA.
Email: francisco.conejo@ucdenver.edu
theories (Brodie and De Chernatony 2009). The proposed framework not only describes what brands might be. It also suggests how they might operate and be better managed.

As to “moving marketing in the wrong direction,” the American Marketing Association (2014a) defines *brand* as a “Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.” This simplistic (non-legal) trademark notion is quite limited. Reflecting the conventional Managerial paradigm, the AMA definition neglects how much some brands have gained in terms of meaning, opposed to the literal trademarks of yore; how some brands are no longer product features, but independent strategic assets; how organizations increasingly control brand meaning, now co-created by multiple stakeholders; and how traditional firm-consumer interactions are extending in scope, now encompassing other participants (Conejo and Wooliscroft 2014).

Given their increased sophistication and diversity, beyond mere differentiating symbols, we reconceive brands (p. 1) as “complex multidimensional constructs with varying degrees of meaning, independence, co-creation and scope” (Conejo and Wooliscroft 2015). The proposed conceptualization better reflects current reality, for example, how social media have changed consumer-brand interactions. Helping update education, research and practice, our re-definition is a step in the right direction.

To support the proposed conceptualization our article categorizes the AMA definition as a *Managerial Brand Conceptualization*. This designation, and its limitations with respect to current branding are discussed from a historical perspective.

Gaski claims (p. 3) “Of course, the categorical rejection of that ‘Managerial Brand Conceptualization’ is untenable on its face as long as marketing is a managerial function.” The Managerial Brand Conceptualization is addressed throughout our article, especially pages 2-3. Without unnecessary detail, the term *managerial* does not refer to an organizational function but to the Managerial School of Marketing, something completely different (Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988).

3. Definitions Change

Our definitional stagnation claim is historically supported: The ‘current’ AMA *brand* definition is virtually identical to its 1948 one, based on the 1935 definition of the National Association of Marketing Teachers (AMA 1948), an AMA precursor (Witkowski 2010).

Gaski posits (p. 3) that we “lament the octogenarian stature of the AMA brand definition.” We do not object to its age per se. We rather question the definition not being updated given the marketing environment’s dramatic changes. Since 1935 the U.S. went from depression, through war and boom, to global dominance and integration; society benefited from civil rights, feminism and environmentalism; and technology became ever present through personal computing, the Internet and now mobile telecommunications. Given these changes, and how marketing thought and practice developed correspondingly, we find it regrettable that the AMA *brand* definition has fallen behind.

Gaski argues that the AMA *brand* definition needs no change. He first lists (p. 3) some nouns: “Look at any random page in your dictionary and you will probably find that most definitions there have been essentially unchanged for far longer than 80 years... Do we need to alter the definition of table, chair, wall, floor, window, or door?” Abstract concepts like brands do not compare to simple physical objects. The latter’s definitions stem from their basic characteristics and therefore remain largely unchanged. For example, a “chair” is normally understood as a “*separate seat for one person, typically with a back and four legs*” (OED 2014). Altering its features might make it a stool or bench, but no longer a chair.

Gaski then mentions (pp. 3-4) some intangibles: “...must we also feel compelled to change the definitions of motherhood, brotherhood, power, conflict, peace, and freedom?” Building on his motherhood example, no reasonable marketer would deny that the notion of family has changed over the past decades. Kotler and Armstrong’s (2014) *Principles of Marketing* acknowledges this: Conventional families, comprising biological parents and children, represent only 20% of households. Today, non-traditional families dominate and include single parent, remarried with children, LGBT with or without children, and DINKS (dual income no kids), among others. As society develops, so must its definitions.

Gaski also offers (p. 4) some supposedly unchanged marketing terms: “In context, try package, feature, product, price, and style... Do any of these terms really need new definition?” Building on his product example, early textbooks, such as Clark’s (1922) *Principles of Marketing*, understood products as mostly agricultural or manufactured goods. This coincides with marketing’s Commodity School, which in the early 1900s classified physical goods (Sheth, Gardner, and Garrett 1988). Current product definitions are quite different, having transcended physicality. For example, the AMA itself (2014d) now defines product as “A bundle of attributes (features, functions, benefits, and uses)... a mix of tangible and intangible forms... a product may be an idea, a physical entity (a good), or a service, or any combination...” This illustrates how marketing definitions do change over time, becoming progressively more sophisticated and abstract.

Perhaps the best argument for updating the AMA brand definition is that its marketing definition already has gone through several incarnations (Zinkhan and Williams 2007). Though with respect to this, Gaski’s commentary is completely silent.

Gaski complains (p. 3) that our proposed brand definition “...appears to fail the exclusivity test objectively by incorporating non-brand constructs such as other system elements (distributors, competitors, society, etc.).” However, Hunt’s (1991) exclusivity criterion is not violated. Other system participants were included to broaden the definition and address the creation and reception of meaning (value). If this test were applied to AMA definitions, which, for example, equate brand manager to product manager (AMA 2014b) and thus imply brands equal products, an exclusivity/differentiation problem does emerge.

Rather than definitional, Gaski’s objection to the inclusion of other system participants appears ideological. In a previous article...
(Gaski 2013b), he conceives marketing as essentially a private sector profit-driven activity; the micro-macro tension, including externalities, as "none of marketing’s business" (p.12); and does not object to exploiting corporate social responsibility merely "as a business tactic to enhance profits..." (p. 13).

The AMA revised its marketing definition precisely because of such a narrow managerial perspective. The 2004 definition conceived of marketing as a mere tool, neglected other important participants, and ignored the discipline’s social impact (Gundlach and Wilkie 2009; Keefe 2008). To solve these limitations, in 2007 the AMA redefined marketing as "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (AMA 2014c). The AMA has thus already moved beyond simplistic managerial notions, towards broader, more inclusive definitions.

Gaski calls our proposed definition "radical" (p. 1) and "extreme" (p. 3). Though it merely conceives brands as "semiotic marketing systems that generate value for direct and indirect participants, society, and the broader environment, through the exchange of co-created meaning" (Conejo and Wooliscroft 2014, p. 1). By no means radical, our definition purposely mirrors the AMA definition of marketing to give the field something familiar on which to build.

4. Products and Brands are Distinct Concepts

Gaski states (p. 3) that our proposed definition

"...incorporates brand itself (pp. 6, 7, 11). But if brand is the whole system, then the so-called brand component must be defined differently...in which case the CW SBS is fiction or illusion...The CW definition further demonstrates the problem of circularity when the definiendum, ‘brand,’ sometimes turns up as a component of the definiens (pp. 6-8)."

Yet, we define brands as marketing systems, not brand systems. This eliminates any circularity. Granted, we do occasionally mention the brand system. But this is done for the sake of fluidity with no major conceptual consequences. For example, the system’s depiction necessarily includes brand as otherwise its relation with system flows and components could not be described.

Gaski adds (p. 3) "Symbolically, x ≠ x + 1, or x ≠ x + y unless y = 0. We simply cannot use the word “brand” to designate both x and the larger construct x + y. This self-contradiction is a logical dilemma..." Again, there is no contradiction to resolve. Indeed, if the above equations are applied to AMA definitions, which equate brand manager to product manager (AMA 2014d), then brand ends up equating product. It is flawed to conceive brands as products and brand management as the management of products. Products and brands are distinct constructs requiring conceptual differentiation (Kapferer 2012).

Gaski claims (p.2) that ‘‘Brand user’’ certainly does not mean user of a name, term, design, or symbol...the word ‘brand’ actually refers to branded product item(s)...not the brand itself (name or mark, that is)...”

Consumers seek, create and transform meaning (Sherry 2005). With acceptable quality now often a given, products are not only consumed for what they intrinsically are or do (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2002). They are also sought for what they mean with their implicit sub-textual meanings often providing the greatest appeal (Levy 1959). These rich meanings are rarely intrinsic to products. They are actually acquired from an external and more important source of value: the brand, often the main object of consumption, not the product (Kapferer 2012).

Brands have transcended products. As brands gained in complexity beyond literal trademarks, they encompassed more than the products to which they originally referred (Moore and Reid 2008). In today’s post-industrial society brands are often larger, more important, and more valuable than their products (Arvidsson 2005; Lury 2004). Brand names and symbols thus no longer denote just products. They now also refer to brand concepts themselves, regardless of their products (Bastos and Levy 2012). Brand management should therefore be seen as distinct from product management (Kapferer 2012).

Gaski insists (pp. 1-2) that “a brand manager is not the manager of a “name, term, design, or symbol”...the word “brand” actually refers to branded product item(s)...not the brand itself...” These sentiments echo AMA criteria, their brand manager definition referring readers to product manager (AMA 2014d). Brand management did originally bestow product responsibility upon single managers (Low and Fullerton 1994). Although early brands typically encompassed single products (Kapferer 2012). Even when products were offered in different variants, such as Remington rifles in the 19th century, brands still reflected core product features (Henning and Witkowska 2013).

By the mid-1970s the relationship between products and brands started to change. Stagnant post-Oil Crisis markets led brand managers to seek growth in new categories. Brand management shifted away from single-product lines, towards ones encompassing a variety of products under single brand names (Morein 1975). Line diversity meant that distinctive product features often conflicted. Instead of emphasizing specific product features, as done until then, brands gravitated towards generally applicable umbrella concepts. Less literal and more connotative, brands became semiotically complex (Kapferer 2012).

Line diversity also had structural consequences. Product and brand management used to be synonymous, but now a separation of roles was sometimes necessary. Product managers remained in charge of their respective lines, but a new managerial level was introduced above them, the brand manager, which transcended products and focused on brands themselves. Unlike product managers, who focused on sales, brand managers concentrated on brand meanings and perceptions (Morein 1975). They also conceived brands as important assets, distinct from organizational products. Given its broad, long-term strategic nature, the new role became typically assigned to seasoned senior managers (Uncles, Cocks, and Macrae 1995). Over time this new notion consolidated and
is how brand management is generally understood today (de Chernatony, McDonald, and Wallace 2011; Kapferer 2012; Keller 2013).

Product and brand management undoubtedly overlap. Depending on the brand both functions might encompass the same position, goals and activities. But they might also be clearly differentiated. Given today’s brand diversity, more flexible brand conceptualizations are needed that go beyond the AMA’s simplistic one-size-fit-all trademark notion, and which acknowledge brands’ operation along continuums of meaning, independence, co-creation and scope. As branding becomes an all-encompassing semiotic endeavor, it increasingly interrelates with the marketing environment. Brands may therefore be conceived as interactive flows of meaning, that is, semiotic marketing systems.

5. Semiotic Brand System Not Properly Addressed

Our article’s other main contribution, beyond spurring AMA brand redefinition, is reconceiving brands as semiotic marketing systems. Through the branding, semiotics and General Systems Theory literatures, the nature, structure and operation of the Semiotic Brand System are extensively explained. Our Figure 2 (p. 7) illustrates the flows of co-created meanings between brands, their different stakeholders, and their impact on the marketing environment.

Gaski discounts the proposed system claiming (p. 2) that “...brand surely can be construed as an element of a system-nothing is new under the sun.” The literature indeed describes brands as systems. Though this refers to systems at their most basic, not in a proper sense, limited to the signifier-signified interrelationship. In contrast, our proposed model goes beyond mere signification systems. It applies General Systems Theory, something quite different.

Gaski’s commentary, titled “On “Brand” – Whether a Semiotic Marketing System or Not”, claims a “response to the central content of the authors framework” (p. 1). Our proposed system is called “creative” (p. 1); “a gratuitous and superfluous gimmick” (p. 2); with “latent internal weaknesses” (p. 2). However, the commentary fails to properly address the proposed system. The section covering this, “On CW’s Semiotic Marketing System in Particular” (p. 2), dodges the issue through a series of ambiguous statements like “it may or may not prove to be productive to envision a generalized brand system, semiotic or otherwise” (p. 2); or “there remains a question of whether brand definition is amenable to a General Systems Theory approach” (p. 2), among others. Despite this vagueness the section then categorically states, “even if all of brand-related management and its environment can be reconciled with General Systems Theory and located within it, this does not mean that brand itself is such a system, as CW represent” (p. 2). The reader is then returned to the definitional issue “...even if reasonable, legitimate, productive, and brilliant for CW to have created such a framework, that does not therefore imply that the original meaning of the word “brand” must now be disallowed” (p. 2).

Given the Semiotic Brand System’s novelty, we hoped that its merits (and naturally its weaknesses) would have been properly addressed.

6. Distracting from the Real Issue

Gaski states (p. 3) “...the audience has received two alternative visions as grist for comparative assessment: (1) the CW SBS-based definition and (2) the age-old AMA version...Marketing scholars will arbitrate the contest...” We do criticize the AMA definition, though by no means is our article about our definition vs. theirs. Our article clearly indicates (p. 10) that it merely provides “An initial brand definition for the AMA on which to further build...” This position follows our firm belief in proper definitional process: open academic discussion, eventual consensus, and final formulation by the proper authorities. It is a pity that by focusing so doggedly on our ideas, Gaski’s commentary lost sight of the real, more important issue at hand: whether the AMA brand definition is still viable.

Conclusion

The old guard’s reluctance to change is understandable. But given the significant environmental developments of the last 80 years, and professional brand management having already surpassed mere trademarks, we find it important that the AMA revise its current definition of brand (and brand management). This change is long overdue. The simplistic and outdated AMA notions decrease American marketing’s credibility.

Redefining brand will undoubtedly be a challenge. Though just like with its updated marketing definition, a new, more current and inclusive brand definition is an opportunity for the AMA to show leadership and progressiveness. At the very least, the AMA might temporarily indicate that their current definition refers to brands at their most basic, that other brands might be more complex, and that a new definition is underway.

“One of the signs of the health of a discipline is its willingness to reexamine its focus, techniques and goals as the surrounding society changes...” (Kotler 1972, p. 46). Brand management is no exception. Its notions and practices need to be continuously updated to reflect the socio-managerial thinking of the times (Kapferer 2012). No form of brand management has, nor should ever be permanent (Low and Fullerton 1994). We again invite marketers to discuss how brands should be officially re-defined, a long neglected issue.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Journal of Macromarketing Editor-in-Chief Terrence Witkowski and Associate Editor Mark Peterson for allowing us to extend our positions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References


Author Biographies

Francisco Conejo is a Marketing Instructor and Researcher at the University of Colorado at Denver. He has an Advertising BS from the International University of the Americas, Costa Rica; an MBA and MS in International Business from the University of Colorado at Denver; and a PhD in Marketing from the University of Otago, New Zealand. Before entering academia he worked extensively with consumer products across a variety of sectors.

Ben Wooliscroft is an Associate Professor at the University of Otago, New Zealand, where he gained his Marketing doctorate. He is on the editorial review boards of the Journal of Macromarketing, the Journal of Historical Research in Marketing, and the European Business Review. His research interests focus on sustainability, brands, ethical consumption and a variety of macromarketing issues.