


## The Language of Brand Relationships: Symbolic, Social, and Political Dimensions

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### ABSTRACT

Since brands are analogous to humans, and various human traits and characters are attached as brand characters, brands are no longer seen solely as objects but also as subjects that influence and guide how people behave and think. This perspective forms brand relationships as human relationships involving interacting, communicating, and expressing. This article uses a cultural studies approach to elaborate on how people express their relationships with brands in various languages. Symbolic language mediates the consumer-brand relationships by sign-values, forming a distinctive personal meaning. Social language directs brand relationships as consumers' social strategies in shaping class, tastes, and social identity through social, symbolic, and cultural capital—the resources and knowledge individuals can use to enhance their social status and cultural identity. Political language makes consumer-brand relationships an arena for channeling ideological desires, interests, and political voices. This elaboration opens the door to a broader discussion about brand relationships and communication from a critical branding perspective.

**Keywords:** Symbolic Exchange-values, Social Capital, Ideological Brand, Symbolic Power, Political Love.

## INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2010, a queue snaked through Senayan City, South Jakarta, Indonesia. The famous shoe sandal brand Crocs offered a special discount that made its fans queue long. As reported by Detik.com, the fanatical customers were willing to queue for hours to get their favorite brand of sandals at a lower price than usual. *"I ended up buying three pairs of shoes. It's a shame to buy one because the queue is long,"* Anita (26) told Taufiqqurahman (2010) from Detik.com while showing her new shoes. Dian claimed to have known the brand since a year earlier from her close relatives. This Bintaro resident had to queue for 3.5 hours to buy her favorite shoes.

Andriani (37), a Depok, West Java resident, was no different. She deliberately came with four of her siblings to buy a brand of sandals that had long been her daily shoes. Although she admitted that she was tired of being in a very long queue, she was satisfied to spend IDR 1.9 million for six pairs of shoes. *"I'm tired too. It's a good thing I didn't bring my children with me. We spent IDR 1.9 million for 6 pairs of shoes,"* Andriani told Taufiqqurahman (2010) from Detik.com.

Meanwhile, Tin (55), as reported by Detik.com, sat exhausted. Beside her were two plastic bags filled with shoes and sandals for her nephews and grandchildren while her two friends were still immersed in the hustle and bustle of choosing their favorite models. *"The model is actually o'on [nerdy and silly], but what else, everyone in my house wears Crocs. Besides, other people have them, why don't I,"* said the resident of Lebak Bulus, South Jakarta, who has only been wearing Crocs for the past year. Ayu, a Bendungan Hilir, Jakarta resident, said this discount promo was something she had been waiting for. She admitted that it did not make sense that only rubber shoes and sandals

could be that expensive. Therefore, utilizing the opportunity of a big discount promo, plus the "grudge" of queuing for hours, Ayu also bought six pairs at once.

Public Relations Crocs Indonesia, Elprisdad, told Taufiqqurahman (2010) from Detik.com that he was surprised by the enthusiasm of those who flocked to buy. "*This means that the loyalty of our buyers is very high, proven by their willingness to queue all day to buy our products,*" she explained. Elprisdad said Crocs deliberately provided consumers 80 thousand pairs of shoes and sandals. The discount offered by Crocs is up to 70 per cent.

Detik.com monitored that around a thousand visitors were seen queuing from the 4th floor to the 8th floor of Senayan City Mall, South Jakarta, as seen in **Figure 1**. Most of the queues were women. The organizers deliberately made a dividing line to keep the queue orderly and provided seats for exhausted buyers.



**Figure 1.** The Five-story Queue of Crocs Brand Consumers in Senayan City Mall (Taufiqqurahman, 2010)

The same thing happened at the opening of Swedish fashion brand H&M at Kota Kasablanka Mall, South Jakarta, on September 6, 2014, and at Hartono Mall Yogyakarta on October 8, 2016. H&M gave a special promo on the opening day, so hundreds of prospective buyers seemed to snake, even a day before the store officially opened. Since last night, many consumers have been waiting for H&M to open. Because the queue had not been opened indoors, at approximately 10 pm, H&M finally opened a queue outside the mall. As reported by Aura.co.id, customer loyalty leader Kota Kasablanka, Wulandari, admitted that the number of prospective buyers that night was increasing, and the queue snaked so that it was moved right in front of H&M on the GF floor (Adystiani, 2014). Until the store opened at 10:00 am, the number of prospective buyers in the queue was estimated at 520 people.

In addition to the public's enthusiasm for the two fashion brands, it cannot be ignored the devastating queues of the latest iPhone 3G gadget series at Pacific Place Jakarta on March 21, 2009, which reached 3000 people out of 39 thousand consumers who had registered online (KompasTekno, 2009) and Blackberry Bellagio at Pacific Place on November 25, 2011. As shown in **Figure 2** captured from Fahrizal's YouTube channel (2011), the queue of thousands of Blackberry fans at Pacific Place experienced chaos despite being guarded by 200 police personnel (Purwanti & Margianto, 2011), making the Ministry of Communication and Information hold RIM Indonesia accountable as the company that launched the Blackberry product brand. Foreign media also reported this event and were amazed by the fanaticism of Blackberry consumers in Indonesia (Kristo, 2011).



**Figure 2.** Customer Queue Chaos During the Launch of the Latest Blackberry in Jakarta (Fahrizal, 2011)

These phenomena confirm assumptions of consumer infatuation with brands. They are willing to queue for hours, even waiting since last night to get their favourite branded products. Initially, people bought shoes or sandals solely because of their function as footwear, not because the colour was good, or the shape was 'cute.' However, today's consumption system has changed everything by reconstructing and manipulating perceptions through various marketing communication activities, leading to massive and brutal consumption activities. The price issue becomes relative and not crucial because, through a sophisticated perception machine, producers can control and discipline consumers' judgment about whether a product is expensive. *"I'm following the trend too, even though I don't think the price is worth it,"* revealed Hukom (35) to Detik.com, who bought four pairs of shoes at once in the Crocs queue (Taufiqurrahman, 2010).

Baudrillard (1996) mentions that to become an object of consumption, an object must become a symbol. The symbol can be an image, perception, or meaning in the consumer's head. Against Marx's idea of commodity values, Baudrillard explains that when an object becomes a commodity, it produces both use-values and economic exchange-values, sign-values, and even symbolic exchange-values. It is because the object not only offers functional benefits according to (or engineered as the) consumer needs<sup>1</sup>, or becomes a medium of exchange in the production-consumption system but also automatically creates symbolic meanings when it enters the realm of consumption. These symbolic meanings provide 'emotional benefits' for consumers so that, like an endless desire machine, consumers continue to produce these symbolic meanings to fulfil their thirst for illusive pleasure (Zizek, 1997). That is why, for Baudrillard, consumption relations play an essential role in the order of (postmodern) society and criticize and shift the dominance of the production system or relations as discussed by Marx.

In today's hypercommodified era, Baudrillard's concept of sign-values manifests in multiple forms that infiltrate almost all aspects of people's lives, from personal and sociocultural to spiritual life. Especially with the development of media and communication technology, sign-values find a cohesive estuary that sticks and floods everywhere. It is no wonder that symbolic commodities that cohesion with image technology and media discourse emerge and spread to the social and cultural spheres, even personal ones. An unremarkable object is dragged into the media space and communication technology with uncontrollable commoditized desires, fusing (and producing) symbolic meanings to turn the object into exclusive bourgeois capital with economic value that is no longer ordinary. It is how sign-values become empowered when it is (in)swept away into the hyper-commoditized sea of media and communication technology desires.

Then, how do brands exist in the constellation of this era of hyper commodification and capitalization? Borrowing and overturning Barthes' logic in the sign system, Baudrillard's studies on sign-values also struggle with the sign system in advertising texts, where he sees advertising as a discourse on an object and at the same time the discourse is an object (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 164). This logic is because advertisements are products of discourse about products (objects), in which there are narratives, rhetoric, and persuasion related to the

<sup>1</sup> In Baudrillard (1981, p. 136), Marx explains that *"production not only produces goods; it produces people to consume them, and the corresponding needs."* Baudrillard interprets this statement as the logic of production that seeks to manipulate needs. Under the rule of the ideological regime of need, the commodity system is interpreted as need itself, which refers to the structure of the individual. Through symbolic exchange, commodities seek to autonomize individuals regarding social becoming, rationalizing their desires and relationships with other individuals and objects (products) in the name of needs, benefits, satisfaction, and use-values.

advertised products. Advertisements, therefore, textually provide themselves as supplying information about a product and promoting the sale of that product. However, on the other hand, what is narrated, what is rhetoric, and what is displayed as a form of persuasion also becomes an object for the consumer audience. Advertising discourse is sometimes separated from the actual object, or in Baudrillard's words, "*it is pure connotation.*" So, discourse replaces the position and role of the object, becoming an object for connotative signifiers created by itself through narrative (visual and verbal) and rhetorical messages.

Despite being in the same habitat, the study of advertisements and brands or branding significantly differs. If, in the context of Baudrillard's advertising studies, sign-values appear (and are raised) through visual and narrative signifiers present in the media and then try to determine the perceptual meaning (signifier) of consumer audiences (to lead to consumption actions), then in the context of brand studies, sign-values appear in the perceptual and emotional space of consumer audiences (society) through various strategies or technologies and apparatuses, not only advertisements. So advertising is one of many. Other strategies include marketing events, brand ambassadors, branded entertainment, and publicity. With the development of media and communication technology, brand communication channels, tools, and strategies have become increasingly sophisticated and unlimited. Consequently, the meaning becomes unique and nonlinear, even though it refers to the same signifier. Consumer audiences can have different meanings even though they refer to the same brand or the same meaning even though the brand is different.

Baudrillard's study of sign-values reaches a significant intersection with brand studies when Baudrillard turns his reflective radar on the sociocultural phenomenon of consumer society. Instead of struggling with the textual symbolic meaning of advertisements, Baudrillard focuses more on the meaning and use of sign-values constructed and bred by (society of) consumers as distinctive signifiers. Baudrillard (1998) argues that consumption behaviors that seem to be directed and oriented toward objects and pleasure have another purpose, which is metaphorical, which is out of the power circle of the regime of needs and production goals by crossing the wave of differential signs that have social codes of value. So, consumption is not just an individual function that needs to be examined through the corpus of objects but has spread to become a social function, a symbolic exchange function, a communication function, and value distribution through the corpus of signs. Thus, the power of object use with the ideology of needs has been replaced by the power of sign-values with social functions (differentiation and distinction) that place consumers as active subjects.

However, although Baudrillard affirms the power of sign-values in consumer society and negates the use-values and (economic) exchange-values of objects so that the existence of objects (products) becomes lost in the signifier, Baudrillard does not explain that the hysteria of the era of hyper commodification and capitalization today has inspired (or forced?) the formation of a new institution that defies sign-values and gives birth to millions of congregants in an empire of obedient and endless desire. That institution is the brand. Thus, branding is a strategy and process of institutionalizing sign-values, and brands are the result. Although Baudrillard tries to include the concept of 'brand'<sup>2</sup> in the entity of advertising calling the brand's role similar to advertising as an emotional connotation in addition to representing the product (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 191), but the brand is a more sophisticated sign-values technology than advertising because by its institutional nature, it is more systemic [organizational, strategic, and becoming a system of consumer-producer interfaces (Lury, 2004)], endemic (epidemic and pervasive among consumers), capitalistic (having the nature and potential of capital, whether economic, symbolic, cultural or social in a circular and accumulative manner), opportunistic (following, shaping and profiting from lifestyle changes) and also fetishistic (mesmerizing, captivating and enchanting consumers). That is why, for Baudrillard, 'brand' is the central concept or subject (in the discourse) of advertising that contributes to the **future** of the 'language' of consumption (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 191).

The brand is the 'object' of the subject (Lury, 2004) and the 'subject' of the object (Klein, 2001; Wijaya, 2015) because the brand is neither a real object (product) nor a real subject (consumer) but can act as an object (reference) as well as a subject (fabrication), which is (lived) by the sign-values power that has alienated the actual subject and object and then approves the presence of the brand in the space of the actual subject and object as an institutional system. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the brand can absorb the power of sign-values and breed in

<sup>2</sup> It is written in quotes by Baudrillard because Baudrillard does not yet have a convincing concept of the brand, as seen from the limited Baudrillard literature that intersects with the brand. Of the limited ones, one of them is in the book *The System of Objects* on page 191, which quotes Pierre Martineau's (1957) statement in *Motivation in Advertising* (p. 50) that: "in a highly competitive system, [in fact] some products can manage themselves with sophisticated technical superiority [strategies] for **long-term benefit**. Those products are invested with a touch of individualization, brought to life with a wealth of associations and imagination, and must have many levels of meaning to achieve the title of top seller. Thus, it is expected that the product can provide emotional closeness [with consumers] through *brand loyalty*."

its womb without showing its form. The magical and charismatic role of sign-values only emanates through (and is confined within) the figure of the brand. The brand speaks on behalf of the sign-values without necessarily displaying the sign-values. It is where the role of the brand as an institution (that represents) sign-values is so existent. Brands become 'home' when wild meanings and desires need shade. The reason is that sign-values kidnap and kill all longing for object reality. The magnet that absorbs when the sign-values circulation expands unstopably and misleads all desires and meanings, but, at the same time, it is the 'factory' where the machine is constantly operating to stimulate the production of meanings and desires for utopian consumer pleasure. With all this power of symbolic enchantment, brands cannot be taken lightly in consumption relations.

Baudrillard (1998) mentions that consumption relations can be analyzed from two aspects, namely as a process of significance and communication, which is based on codes or rules where consumption practices enter and take their meaning, and as a process of classification and social differentiation, where objects/signs are ordained not only as significant differences in a code but as corresponding values (rules) in a hierarchy. In the first aspect, brands play a role in stimulating communicative, symbolic meanings in the consumption process, where consumers refer to the codes of pleasure they desire. In this context, there is a 'personalization' of relations with objects (read: brands) to replace relations between people (Baudrillard, 1996). In the second aspect, brands play a role in the social construction of consumption, forming particular distinctions and classes. Consumption also becomes an arena for power struggles that intersect relational structures (Bourdieu, 1984). If consumption is the entrance to the existence of brands, then in the arena of sociocultural battles, agents welcome brands as one of the 'weapons' or capital that can be used to 'win' power in the social arena. This symbolic form of brand modality can nourish the agent's struggle even to the fatal (ideological) stage.

Thus, consumption is at once a moral (an ideological value system) and a communication system, which in the process becomes an exclusive pleasure (Baudrillard, 1998), and brands play a crucial role in reinforcing this pleasure (Kornberger, 2010). Since pleasure is always desirable and represented in commodities (Böhm & Aanka, 2010), brands are commodity objects that can be blinding (Scott & Batra, 2003), where brands are present as persuasive images in consumers' heads. No wonder, even though they are tired of queuing to get a branded product, consumers are willing to get their favorite brand, and after that, consumers feel 'lonely' again because the real connection that is established is a false connection (Kotlowitz, 2000).

The relationship between consumers and brands can be seen as unique. On the one hand, consumers express their obsession with brands 'blindly' as a form of positive relations. However, on the other hand, few consumers are reluctant to express their hostile relations. It results from internalization and ideologization of brand values in consumers' lives. Brands become doxical, a belief in values accepted as natural and natural (*taken for granted*). According to Bourdieu (1977), doxies can give birth to symbolic power and have the potential to cause symbolic violence, where the controlled party (ideologically) tends to be weak and tries to reduce its resistance if it is harmed. Like a person falling in love, love makes him accept whatever happens to him and considers it all a kind of 'destiny' as a logical consequence of that love. Even that love can be expressed and proclaimed to the public expressively, proudly, and 'madly.' Such is the ideological consumer who is politically controlled by brand doctrine, as Allen Paltrow (who branded his head as seen in [Figure 3](#)), one of Apple's brand fans, experienced in his confession in [Theguardian.com](#) below:

*Growing up, I was a huge Apple fanboy (OK, I still am). The opening of the first New York Apple store in SoHo was the coolest thing that happened to me between the ages of six and 12. For a while, I would spend almost every weekend there. Every year for Halloween, I dress up as a Mac computer and make a habit of shaving the Apple logo into my head to celebrate each OS launch (Paltrow, 2011).*



**Figure 3.** Tattooing Brand Logos on the Head is a Form of Consumer Ideological Expression (Paltrow, 2011)

In some cases, brand doctrine and ideology make brand devotees hysterical when the brand offers new values but silent when the brand disappoints them. As Seto's (2015) research shows, it is not uncommon for consumers to provide logical justifications for brand shortcomings as something that should be understood. Instead, they tend to choose to introspect about their own mistakes. Consumers seem to lose their critical power, succumb to the power of brand charm, and let their autonomy be held hostage to political 'love.'

### THE DIMENSIONALITY OF BRAND RELATIONSHIPS LANGUAGE

Thus, the relationship between consumers and brands intertwines in various dimensions. First is the symbolic dimension. In this context, brands are sign-values institutions that stimulate the production and consumption of symbolic meanings among consumers, *desirably* creating various symbolic pleasures. These meanings and pleasures can differ for each consumer because they are personalized. Baudrillard (1996) calls this the 'personalization' of consumers' relationship with objects. Not surprisingly, we often find the meaning of brands as a symbol of a particular lifestyle, a symbol of success, a symbol of masculinity, a symbol of social concern, a symbol of friendliness, a symbol of confidence, a symbol of prestige, and other symbolic meanings that consumers use to get intangible emotional benefits. Brands become objects of individual comfort and pleasure that consumers continuously reproduce through various acrobatics of meaning they construct.

However, these meanings can only 'exist optimally' if socially constructed. Therefore, this production of meaning expands into the social realm so that the relationship between consumers and brands moves into the second dimension, namely the sociocultural dimension. Here, brands play a role in shaping consumers' social relations and become capital for consumers in the arena of social struggle, both in the realm of the brand-consumer community itself and the realm of the wider community. The layers of this social arena can differ for each consumer, depending on the variability of their social life. For example, a consumer, in addition to being a member of the brand community he loves, also works as an employee in a business environment that visually significantly enhances his image of charm, is also active in a recitation group or social gathering, is part of an environmentalist, and so on. In each of these domains, the tension and function of brand modality in social struggle can be different. In the brand community, the quality of brand ownership may be more important than quantity. At the same time, in the professional realm, visualization may be more significant than just a matter of quality-quantity of ownership; similarly, it can be seen in social gatherings and other realms. Brands can be both a marker and a sign of economic ability, intellect, or a medium for judging specific tastes that lead to social stratification. By this stratification, power relations are formed among consumers.

The next dimension in the relationship between consumers and brands is political. In this context, the meaning of the brand in the perceptual and emotional space of consumers fatally develops until it reaches the ideological stage. Consumers become obedient to meaning, 'slaves' of discourse, and fanatical congregations of brands. The forms of obedience, 'slavery,' and fanaticism are different for each consumer because the ideological

meaning of the brand can be interpreted differently. There are those who, instead of criticizing, consumers agree with everything related to the brand so that there is internalization, rationalization, and naturalization of the role of consumers as helpless parties. Some convey complaints and criticisms but are referred to as feedback. This kind of euphemistic expression and communication is common in ideological (symbolic) violence as an excess of the birth of symbolic power. For example, consumers become radical defenders of the brand, as is the case with fans of football club brands, or become master collectors of all things related to the brand, as is the case with consumers of celebrity personal brands, or become militant missionaries in spreading the 'teachings' of the brand and inviting other consumers to become part of the brand's community of believers as is the case with consumers of gadget brands.

The relationship between consumers and brands is formed in mind (Shimp & Madden, 1988) as a form of consumer awareness of the brand, knowledge, image, direct experience (consumption), to the experience of the heart that binds in the form of loyalty and social spirituality (Wijaya, 2013). Martineau (as cited in Baudrillard, 1996) calls the relationship formed since the interaction of consumer personality and products in the purchase process, which is part of what Baudrillard (1996) calls the process of 'personalization' of consumer and object relations. In the context of brands as dynamic 'objects' (Lury, 2004), Baudrillard's assumption of the personalization of relationships can manifest love and passion, self-connection, commitment, intimacy, interdependence, and the quality of consumer-brand partnerships (Fournier, 1998). Thus, the relationship between consumers and brands is not linear and static but dynamic, with tensions that can change and intertwine in various dimensions and forms (Hinde, 1995).

In the following sections, this article discusses further the language of brand relationships in various dimensions: symbolic, social, and political.

### **The Language of Brand Relationships in the Symbolic Dimension**

Baudrillard (1996) describes the meanings invested in the objects of everyday life and how a structural system enables these objects to be organized into a postmodern society. Drawing on the work of Barthes and Saussure, Baudrillard argues that modes of signification, such as fashion, sports, and media, produce systems of meaning articulated with their own rules, codes, and logic. In the era of capitalist development, economic concentration, new production techniques, and the development of new technologies, capacity was accelerated for mass production, and capitalist firms focused on increasing attention to managing consumption and creating a need for new prestige goods, resulting in what Baudrillard calls the regime of sign-values. In Baudrillard's view, advertising, packaging, display, fashion, 'emancipatory' sexuality, mass media and culture, and the proliferation of commodities have multiplied the number of signs and spectacles, thus increasing sign-values. Under these conditions, according to Baudrillard, commodities are no longer only characterized by use-values and economic exchange-values as in Marx's theory of commodities, but sign-values in the form of expressions and signs of style, prestige, luxury, power, and others become an increasingly important part of commodities and consumption.

Then, at what level is the construction of sign-values meaning located? Undeniably, as mentioned earlier, the influence of Saussure and Barthes on Baudrillard's idea of sign-values is considerable. Baudrillard takes Saussure's analogy of *langue* and *parole* and analogizes production to the system of signification in structuralism. Like the actual object in the sign system, the product is compelling in determining production. Here, the ideology of need becomes the commander, which is married to the object of the product to create the object's use-values. That is why, like denotative meaning (Barthes) and *langue* (Saussure), use-values are fixed, static, and literal, confined to the 'textual' power of the ideology of production through the technology of necessity. Thus, the meanings associated with use-values are constructed at the production level.

Use-values mutate into economic exchange-values when the product object is paraded into consumption. Here, the object becomes a commodity exchanged through the price ideology. Price determines how much economic exchange value an object has. Thus, the meaning of price is constructed by the object holder, either the producer (in the scheme of product selling value) or the consumer (in the scheme of product resale value). In this context, with the strength and power of its economic capital, the producer remains the party with the most potent exchange-value controlling and disciplining authority.

It is different when the reality of objects gets lost in consumption and then reconstructed by consumers to give birth to sign-values meanings. Following the logic of the connotative signaling system (Barthes) and *parole* language (Saussure), the meaning of objects becomes unfixed and tends to be dynamic, articulate, contextual, and even aggressive-destructive. The existence of the object as a signifier reference is killed and replaced by the power of the signifier so that the meanings that are born are 'imaginary' because they do not go through 'normal' labor where usually the signifier refers to a real object. With the disappearance of the existence of the real object as a reference in the meaning system, the existential and literal meaning of the product also disappears, swallowed by signifiers that refer to new signifiers created by consumers. The role of the producer as the authority of use-values

and economic exchange-values is replaced by the consumer as the authority of sign-values. That is why, with the power of the sign-values regime, Baudrillard calls the consumption system more important and influential than the production system. However, Baudrillard does not deny that the alienation of subjects (workers) and objects in production relations also occurs in consumption relations, where subjects (consumers) become alienated from natural objects by signs' radical role in the sign-values regime's power.

However, the power of the sign-values regime is then counteracted by the capitalist intrusion that transforms the sign-values of objects into symbolic exchange-values. Sign-values are capitalized to have a 'price' and can become a medium of exchange for status, class, and identity. This capitalist infatuation is mainly driven by the widespread power of sign-values in consumer social relations, so it has the potential to become a new field of work in producing new symbolic product objects. Thus, it is now the turn of sign-values to be kidnapped and reconstructed through production desires to give birth to symbolic exchange-values of product objects.

Because of the forced marriage of two species, the symbolic exchange-values object becomes a new 'race' of meaning different from other races of meaning, if not to be said as a 'superior race' because of its 'ingenuity.' Imagine that, as an exchange-values, the 'price' is no longer fully controlled by the producer (capitalist) but is left to be determined by the consumer. However, the one who enjoys the profit is the producer (capitalist). That is why Baudrillard (1981) calls the regime of symbolic exchange-values the regime of the political economy of signs. Objects are produced into symbolic commodities, where the exchange-values price of objects is not determined solely based on economic calculations but somewhat symbolic calculations that refer to meaning in social relations.

Therefore, following the logic of use-values production, capitalists try to facilitate and industrialize sign-values to pursue more significant profits. For example, consumers or the people of an area have a habit of *hanging out* together while drinking coffee because in that togetherness and *hanging out for a long time*, they find the meaning of social comfort and warmth; in that togetherness, they find psychic freedom after *chatting* stories revealing everything that is pent up or simply releasing the shackles of the burden of life in a relaxed grip. Capitalists then provide coffee shops with comfortable places, free to chat for hours. Here, it is no longer the price of the coffee or the physical place that determines it but the price of comfort and freedom. So, whatever rupiah is spent differs from the 'price' of comfort and freedom obtained. Not only that, but to multiply profits and piles of capital, capitalists build a discourse (for example, through *branding*) about the comfort of *hanging out* in a coffee shop so that there is an exchange of production and consumption roles of exchange-values meanings between producers and consumers which have implications for the culture and lifestyle of (community) consumers. It can be seen how the political-economic machine works silently through *soft-power* symbolic power.

In this constellation of object values, the brand is dynamically at the centre of the power struggle between producers and consumers. It can be drawn into all realms of value, which Grassl (1991) calls the realist realm in the *product space* - i.e., the realm of production, and the idealist realm in the *perceptual space* of consumers - i.e., the realm of consumption. Looking at recent developments, brands find their existence more in the perceptual space of consumers in the realm of consumption as sign-values and symbolic exchange-values. From the literature search, the trend of brand research and branding is moving into the perceptual space of consumers, especially since the outbreak of the phenomenon of brand anthropomorphism and brand animism (Aaker & Fournier, 1995) or metaphorical humanlike brands. However, it cannot be denied that researchers from the perspectives of management and marketing psychology have a political economy spirit of signs that are sometimes connoted as capitalist stooge academics because they support the perspectives and desires of capitalism.

Meanwhile, Baudrillard (1998) explains consumption relations in two aspects, namely 1) consumption as a process of significance and communication, which is based on codes or rules where consumption practices enter and take their meaning, and 2) consumption as a process of classification and social differentiation, where objects/signs are ordained not only as significant differences in a code but as corresponding values (rules) in a hierarchy.

As a process of significance and communication, consumption changes the constellation of meaning towards objects by exchanging the signifier and signified positions. Consumers relate to objects (products) and are no longer driven by fulfilling essential (functional) needs for objects or products alone but by the meanings formed in the relational experience. Here, there is a 'personalization' of the consumer's relationship with the object to replace the relationship between people (Baudrillard, 1996). This relationship also means that the function and meaning of the object or product are intertwined in the consumer's personal discourse space, creating dynamics of resistance, negotiation, rationalization, and even manipulation to seize the power of consumption desire.

Not surprisingly, sometimes consumers do not only buy or use a product because of its physical or functional benefits to fulfill consumers' biological or physiological needs (for example, buying toothpaste to clean teeth and mouth) but also because of the symbolic benefits that are personally used to fulfill emotional needs (such as self-



confidence) and even then extend to social benefits, such as helping in relationships, giving a positive image among their community, and becoming a kind of 'stepping stone' to achieve a specific position in their social life. At this stage, consumption relations begin to move into the territory of the second aspect in Baudrillard's view, namely, as a process of social classification and differentiation.

### **The Language of Brand Relationships in the Social Dimension**

In the second aspect of consumption relations, where Baudrillard calls consumption a process of social classification and differentiation, the relationship between consumers and brands also enters the social dimension. In the social dimension, the codes produced in the consumption process connect consumers and brands as objects that live in product and perceptual space and connect consumers with other consumers or society in the context of consumers' social lives. Consumption becomes a code of social distinction. Bourdieu (1984) explains that distinction refers to the efforts of individuals in a social arena to develop specific cultural codes that distinguish them from other individuals or groups. However, not just different distinction aims at structuring social class through the judgment of taste or cultural flavor.

Thus, specific tastes are considered more refined than others. To make taste judgments, groups and individuals must have economic, social, cultural, or symbolic capital. With this capital, a person or group can quickly form tastes and distinctions that make them 'superior' to others. In a sense, the capital is used as a 'weapon' in the social arena (relations) fight.

Then, how does the relationship between consumers and brands play a role in the context of this social relationship? Brands, by consumers (and assisted by brand managers through communication strategies and brand discourse), are capitalized as symbolic capital [which has a high symbolic exchange value (Baudrillard, 1981)]. Bourdieu (1977) explains that symbolic capital is something that individuals have based on the meanings of honor, recognition, and prestige, which are maintained as a value in society. Bourdieu argues that symbolic capital gains value across class and status, where a person does not have to try to get it but can also adjust the object (which has the potential to create symbolic capital) to a perceived or considered real value. Symbolic capital will increase mainly due to a demand for fulfilling social obligations and the potential for prestige (Bourdieu, 1977).

Thus, brands can be a symbolic capital for consumers to gain power in their social relations. This symbolic power can be seen, for example, in a particular brand community; a consumer will show the prestige of owning a specific type of brand that is the highest level (and, of course, the most expensive) to show he is different, more capable (economically), more tasteful (whose standards have been formed by the brand discourse), making his caste seem higher than others. For example, certain brands are made in limited quantities, unique and exclusive in the larger social arena,<sup>3</sup> so that whoever owns it belongs to a unique and exclusive group. Therefore, to show his status, class, and power in society, a consumer tries to own it. Consumers utilize the symbolic exchange value of brands for the benefit and purpose of gaining power in the social arena (relationship).

According to Bourdieu, consumers or agents/actors also try to increase the value of their capital to gain more power or at least maintain its continuity. This effort means that capital is dynamic, circular, and accumulative. Symbolic capital can be converted and developed into social, cultural, or intellectual capital, even economic, and vice versa. Thus, the symbolic capital of a brand can also be converted and developed by agents or consumers into social capital, for example, when ownership of (and their relationship with) the brand causes their social network to expand. At the very least, the social network within the (brand-loving) community.

With this social capital, agents or consumers can build businesses related to their knowledge and closeness to the brand, for example, by becoming distributors of brand products, creating new added value to the brand by publishing innovative ideas that open up entrepreneurial opportunities (such as the case of the outbreak of the Oreo martabak business initiated by consumers, or the case of Vespa modifications, and so on) to form economic capital for these consumers. Because of their closeness and intimacy with the brand, consumers have the potential to have specialized knowledge and expertise that many people may not possess, at least reflected in their creativity and innovations in developing brand-added value. From here, consumers also have cultural or intellectual capital related to their relationship with the brand.

It can be seen how the capital owned by consumers related to brands is very dynamic, circular, and accumulative in forming social relations. Thus, the habitus and social arenas that are formed are dynamic. A consumer or agent can have more than one or many arenas, with habitus and social praxis in each arena.

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<sup>3</sup> Featherstone (2007, p. 86) mentions that [*branded*] goods made in limited and exclusive quantities become prestigious because they are treated as rare goods. With this scarcity, the desire to own is positively correlated with the product's economic and symbolic exchange value, which continues to be created and recreated to maintain the circulation and accumulation of capital.

Consumers, as agents involved in social structuration through the formation of an objective arena, are also involved in enculturation through brand-related capital with the inclusion of *know-how* into a subjective habitus. Habitus helps realize the structures of the arena, while the arena mediates habitus and praxis (Bourdieu, 1977). This objective-subjective dialectic makes the process of structuration and enculturation run synergistically and interdependently. Arena and habitus are two sides of a coin that are inseparable in social praxis.

The brand's cultural role as symbolic capital manifests in a distinctive signifier that shapes social classes through specific cultural tastes and lifestyles. The brand's function as symbolic capital works when the brand becomes a social marker, which is then culturally encrypted (Wijaya, 2024). Brand enculturation in this society can occur 'naturally' or *by design*. 'Naturally' when the brand marker becomes a symbol of a particular lifestyle initiated by a community of people without involving 'intervention' or 'taught' by the producer. Creativity and consumer competence are essential here (Wijaya, 2024), as is the Oreo martabak phenomenon. So far, Oreo has offered its use-values as a biscuit product with various variants and its sign-values as a brand that can create family warmth through enjoying Oreo with family members. Out of tradition or the Oreo brand as it is known, some consumers create new ways to enjoy Oreo through Oreo martabak products, which have become popular with the public and are now mushrooming in several major cities in Indonesia. Here, the Oreo brand is not only a marker of Oreo biscuit products but also a marker of a new culinary lifestyle. This marking is outside the control and discipline of the producer or brand owner through advertisements and discourse on the branding of Oreo. From this new lifestyle, a new social arena is formed with a praxis that forms new habitus related to the brand. Thus, new battles in social structuration are inevitable. In interpreting and judging new tastes, brands again become symbolic capital and a distinguishing marker for subjects or agents in the arena to 'win' class (symbolic) power. In this context, brand modality again functions in the relational structure of consumers.

Brand enculturation can also occur *by design* through media discourse designed and paid for by producers or brand owners. Through a massive and systematic process of subjectivation and internalization in *branding*, the brand develops into a symbol of a new lifestyle that hegemonizes the lives of the consumer society. In this context, brands become symbolic capital for agents or subjects (consumers) in the social arena to 'win' social class power and economic capital for capitalist agents to 'win' social class power, as in Marx's logic of production relations. This position means that although the consumer society is not a laborer, consumers act as laborers (Arvidsson, 2005) when consumers 'work hard' to increase the economic capital of capitalist agents through consumption practices. So, the more consumptive a person is, the more 'productive' they are. The more *branded maniac*, the more laboring. Arvidsson reveals that the modus operandi of producers through *branding*, which involves extracting *consumer insights* to increase brand value for consumers as an alibi, is a form of 'labor exploitation' as in production relations. That is why enculturation *by design* and brand ideologization have political significance and implications for the relationship between consumers and brands.

### **The Language of Brand Relationships in the Political Dimension**

Baudrillard (1981) explains that the effect of value structuration in the realm of economy and signification is to change the process and existence of ideology radically. Ideology is no longer solely understood as just a relation between infra and superstructure because ideology in this paradigm is unable to explain the "ideological" function of culture and signs, where there is a separation of culture (signs) from economic demarcation and ideology so that the ideology of the dominant class or group always appears in the discourse waves of various themes, content and values (patriotism, morality, happiness, and others) which then through allegorical power infiltrate the folds of consciousness integratively. Ideology becomes a *form* that crosses the realm of sign production and material production (Baudrillard, 1981).

Baudrillard's view assumes that the logic of commodity and political economy is at the heart of the sign (where signs can function as exchange-values in communication discourse and use-values in the form of rational decoding and differentiated social practices). The sign structure is at the heart of the commodity (because the commodity can annex the effect of signification in a flash in the form of appearing as a total medium or a communication system that organizes all social changes). Thus, we can see that the Marxist dichotomous concepts (subject-object need, infrastructure-superstructure, and exploitation-alienation) are no longer relevant because, in today's world of consumption, commodities are produced as signs, as sign-values and (cultural) signs are produced as commodities (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 147). Ideology manifests itself in the combination of signs and commodities, dominating almost all social production and reproduction processes.

So, how does this ideology of sign-values work in the praxis of consumer social relations? As explained earlier, sign-values can be a symbolic capital for consumer actors in the social arena to 'win' social class battles. As symbolic capital, sign-values are an engine for social distinction and classification. Through ownership and control of sign-values, actors/agents can achieve or reinforce their distinction position in the social class hierarchy to form symbolic power. Bourdieu (1977) states that symbolic power can potentially create symbolic violence. It is

because when the owner of symbolic capital (who has high sign-values) uses his power, he will face actors or agents who have weaker power, making the agent try to change his actions.

The excesses of symbolic power give birth to doxa. Bourdieu (1977) calls doxa beliefs and values that are deeply rooted, learned, and considered universal, self-evident 'laws,' representing the actions and thoughts of an agent in a particular arena. Doksa can be born from the accumulation of symbolic capital owned by the ruling actor, which means that it can also be an accumulation of sign-values that reach the fatalist (ideological) stage in the social praxis of consumption so that consumers or agents or social actors who have less symbolic capital (sign-values recognition) will become 'obedient' to the owner of the more considerable capital through beliefs and the doksis habitus. The same is true in the relationship between consumers and brands. Brands, in a certain level of relational power, have the potential to become doksa for consumers. What is considered truth, prestigious values, and symbols of certain lifestyles carried by (and commodified through) brand discourse and then affirmed and believed by consumers can be said to be doksa.

Two layers of ideological territory can become the domain of brand doctrine, namely, consumers' personal and sociocultural territories. Brand doxa that lives in the personal territory of consumers is the result of fatalistic consumer *decoding* (meaning) of brand values so that the meaning becomes ideological and doxical. Take, for example, a consumer who interprets Crocs as the most comfortable and trendy sandal brand. This meaning becomes the consumer's discourse and influences the formation of consumer habitus in the locus or arena of reliability and naturalness, so that over time, he believes that there are no sandals that are more comfortable and trendier than Crocs, anything related to the comfort and trendiness of sandals must be Crocs, if it is not comfortable and trendy it must not be Crocs. This 'irrefutable' belief makes consumers accept and favor whatever Crocs offers without resistance. Consumers lose their critical power and wither away in the ideological bed of Crocs' doctrine.

In the sociocultural area of consumers, brand doctrine works through the discourse of brand values that are massively internalized by a community of people to form brand *loyalty* (in certain brand community groups) or become *hegemonic brand belief* or *hegemonic regime of truth* (in the broader community of people), where a truth regarding specific brand values dominates a community of people at a time. We know how Odol became the generic brand of toothpaste for Indonesians. Even though the product no longer exists, Indonesian consumers often refer to 'odol' as a substitute for 'toothpaste' even though what they mean is certainly not the actual Odol product brand. We do not know why we call Odol for all toothpaste; we know it. Odol has become the ideological brand/doxa of toothpaste, and the public loses its critical power to question it as if Odol=toothpaste is 'from the *beginning*' or an unquestionable 'destiny.' Thus, the relationship between consumers and brands in the political-ideological dimension places consumers as ideological subjects singular in the personal sphere and plural in the sociocultural sphere. Although, of course, the two areas cannot be broken down dichotomously, as they can intersect with each other, intertwining under the influence of the brand's doxical ideological power.

## CONCLUSION

Some consumers show their infatuation with a brand due to marketing propaganda coupled with loneliness and the emptiness of meaning in their lives. The interplay between strategic marketing communication and the quest for life's meaning in the name of consumers' needs is instrumental in shaping consumer-brand relationships and their unique language. Consumer-brand relationships, a complex interplay of human psychology and marketing strategies, communicate in a rich tapestry of symbolic, social, and political languages. Understanding these languages is critical to comprehending the dynamics of consumer-brand relationships. The language of brand relationships in the symbolic dimension manifests in sign-values converted into symbolic exchange-values. The language of brand relationships in the social dimension manifests in social capital, symbolic capital, and cultural capital, which 'speak' for contestation and social relations. The language of brand relationships in the political dimension is not a passive entity. It is a dynamic force shaped by the ideology and beliefs that guide consumer choices. These choices can move, direct, or even intercept the course of brand relationships, reflecting consumers' power in this dynamic.

From the above explanation, it can be assumed that the relationship between consumers and brands moves into the symbolic dimension when brands are interpreted as sign-values. Here, consumers' emotional and perceptual codes play a more significant role in constructing a meaningful reality related to their relationship experience with the brand. Although sign-values have a social dimension when referring to differentiative codes in forming social distinctions (for example as a tributary of the identity machine), in this context, the meaning and interpretation of the experience of consumer relations and brands are more 'playing' in the space of personal

consumer signification. Baudrillard (1996) calls this the 'personalization' of consumer relations with objects (read: brands). Referring to Martineau's thesis (1957 in Baudrillard, 1996), the process of purchasing a product is an interaction between the subject's personality and the 'personality' of the product itself, which then forms a subject-object or consumer-product personal relationship which in a symbolic context can be referred to as consumer-brand personal relationships. Therefore, codes that express individuality and communicate the intimacy of consumers and brands become significant markers indicating the relationship between consumers and brands.

However, when values accentuate differentiative codes in forming social distinctions to become capital for consumers in forming their social relations structure, the relationship between consumers and brands moves into the social dimension. Here, the personal relationship between consumers and brands expands, spreading to other perspectives with the reality of social relations because it involves consumer subjects or other social actors. The intimacy of consumers and brands becomes 'meaningful and double-acting'. The construction of meaning is no longer only personal but also social because the closeness of consumers and brands has implications for the extent to which consumers are 'accepted' and 'seen' socially, which affects the role and social status of consumers.

This form of brand symbolic modality contributes to shaping the structure of consumer social relations. In this context, brands, metaphorically like loyal and valuable friends, prove and show their loyalty to consumers by helping them not to 'socially stutter' and even be brave and confident in facing battles in the social arena. However, it can also be perceived that consumers utilize their relationship with the brand to smooth their 'social path.' When social relations develop, the social network formed can become social capital. Social capital can be converted into economic capital when consumers see an opportunity to bring economic benefits from their social network. Meanwhile, knowledge, creativity, and special skills due to the closeness and intimacy of consumers with brands also have the potential to become cultural or intellectual capital. Thus, the capital consumers own is related to their relationship with the brand and is dynamic, convertible, circulative, and accumulative.

The relationship between consumers and brands enters a political dimension when brands as sign-values and as capital in social relations are ideologically interpreted. Here, consumers' trust and dependence on brands becomes fatal. Consumers rationalize and internalize everything related to the brand (even militantly) to become fanatics. All their actions and habits become doxical; their lifestyle is *branded* (*'mreki'*), adopting all brand values and even adding them voluntarily. Socially, consumers help spread their ideology to other consumers so that more and more followers 'understand the *brand*' as they adhere to it. No wonder there are now many brand communities that are sometimes militant, such as fans of football clubs or automotive brands.

When brand ideology is widespread and culturized, everyone, not just community members, becomes brand 'obedient' by hypnotizing hegemonic brand truths and beliefs. It is what happens with *generic brands*. Thus, in this context, there is 'no free lunch' for brands. The 'help' of the brand's symbolic modality in the social dimension turns out to be self-interested because, in time, the brand profits economically and politically from the dependence and militancy of consumers towards the brand. All the symbolic drama of sign-values and social drama of brand modalities is just a 'walk in the park' to the brand's genuine interest in controlling consumers.

Of course, the dimensions that color the relationship between consumers and brands are not mutually exclusive but intersect, interdependent, and dynamically articulate, creating an adrenaline of meaning that is not single and linear in every pulse of the consumer-brand relationship. That is why the relationship between consumers and brands is more complex than a mechanical-physiological consumption relationship. Various dimensional layers are intertwined between the construction of meaning in the experiential reality of the relationship.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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