

## Is Water Still For Thirst Quenching? How Advertising Influences the Cultural Meaning Transformation of Consumer Goods

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### Abstract

The meanings of goods in contemporary capitalist societies are the interplay of marketing processes over these goods. This paper is aimed at analyzing and discussing the influencing mechanisms associated with the advertising role, as well as the social consequences of this influence. We aim to understand how advertising influences the cultural meaning transformation of consumer goods. We studied the French bottled water market because it is one of the world's most developed in terms of advertising investments and water brand image construction. After collecting 357 advertising spots between 2006 and 2007 and filtering it, the final corpus of 63 advertisements was examined using discourse analysis methodology. We explored how these ads created meaning through the relationship between text, discourse and context. We identified nine different major categories of water meaning. Our conclusions show that advertising works as a potential meaning transfer tool by bringing together the culturally constituted world - like people's concerns with environmental conservation, slimming as a synonym of beauty and sport practice as a way of health improvement - and bottled water brands. Water has become a cultural product like any other, overcoming the idea of "taste for necessity" related with its original body hydration meaning.

### 1. Introduction

Bottled water is one of the fastest growing businesses in the world, showing average growth rates of about 9% a year between 2001 and 2005. It is the leader of all soft drinks industry (EUROMONITOR, 2007). Seven countries of the 10 biggest per capita consumers are located in western Europe and France is the fourth of them - the second in Europe (XERFI, 2006). Bottled water consumption in France has reached a skyrocket growth from the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century until today. In 1946, per capita consumption was just 6 litres per person (MARTY, 2005), but it reached impressive 171 litres per person in 2005 (INSEE, 2006). How to explain this enormous increase in bottled water consumption in France?

Consider that 99% of French population is served by good quality tap water, which is trusted by 84% of them (TNS-SOFRES, 2006); that tap water costs about 0.03 Euros per litre, against 0.38 Euros per litre of mineral water sold in supermarkets and an average of 3.11 Euros per litre when sold on cafés and restaurants (EUROSTAF, 2004). It is not possible to explain this enormous growth in water consumption attributing it only to tap water mistrust (which is small); nor to the average price of bottled water, that can reach values 1,000 times higher or more. Thus, we face the ambiguous situation that in France most of the population trust and receive good quality tap water in their houses and, at the same time, the country is the fourth biggest bottled water per capita consumer.

Are we talking about the same good when we refer to tap and to bottled water consumption? Can we say that both are serving the same human need (that is, thirst quenching or body hydration)? Considering the worldwide massive marketing actions by the bottled water industry, can we still adopt the United Nations definition and consider that water is a human need (UN, 2008)? Or would it be more correct to consider it as a new consumer desire, as similar as any other good which receives high marketing investments to its image development?

The meaning of a good in contemporary capitalist society most of the time is the interplay of marketing processes actions over this good, which create, manage, negotiate and maintain that meaning (THARP & SCOTT, 1990). We can find in the literature some analysis of this marketing process role in creating cultural meaning to material goods (DOMZAL & KERNAN, 1992; HENNION, MEADEL, & BOWKER, 1989; HIRSCHMAN, SCOTT, & WELLS, 1998; MCCRACKEN, 1986), MOSTLY ASSOCIATED TO BRANDS (HOLT, 2002; HOLT, MICK, & RATNESHWAR, 2005). But we have not found empirical research that tried to analyze how this process happens when referring to goods which in their inner meaning are much associated with a human need. Nor we have found research efforts that have specifically studied the advertising role on this meaning transformation process when referring to water - one exception about the study of bottled water meaning is Wilk (2006), but he restricted his analysis to a theoretical focus, and not to a field based research. Moreover, we found no agreement in the literature about the mechanisms through which advertising works as a cultural meaning transformation instrument, even being a relative consensus that advertising do exert a role in this process (see MCCRAKEN, 1986). This paper is aimed at analyzing and discussing the influencing mechanisms associated with this advertising role, as well as the social consequences of this influence.

In sum, in this paper we analyze, theoretically and empirically, how advertising discourses of bottled water companies have transformed water cultural meaning in France. More specifically, our *research problem is to understand how advertising influences the cultural meaning transformation of consumer goods*. Even recognizing that other marketing processes - like branding, packing, distribution or pricing strategies - do collaborate to this cultural meaning process change, we do not include them into our analysis because of space constraints, and mostly because advertising is a major factor in cultural meaning development when compared to other marketing processes (MCCRACKEN, 1986).

Our choice to study the French bottled water market is due to its large development not only in terms of per capita consumption growth, but mostly due to the prominence of companies' marketing efforts to create and differentiate their water brand images. This was done mostly through robust advertising investments. The bottled water sector is the first one in advertising investments among all soft drinks industry in France: 95 million Euros invested in 1998, 118 in 2000, 144 in 2001, 126 in 2002, 132 in 2003, 92 in 2004, and 85 million Euros in 2005 (EUROSTAF, 2004, p. 33; LSA, 2006, p. 62)

In the next section we briefly review the theory about cultural meaning development and change, and the advertising role in this process. Next we describe methodological procedures adopted to collect, select and analyze our empirical data. Then we present a summary of our main results, including data collection and major categories of meaning we found after analyzing the corpus of bottled water advertising data. In the discussion section, we analyze the advertising role in the cultural transformation of water meaning and its social consequences, as well as what our research adds to the theory. We conclude with comments about future research suggestions about the study of marketing actions influence on the cultural meaning of consumer goods, as well as limitations of our research.

## 2. Theory

There is no agreement in the literature about how goods acquire and change their meanings, but some studies might be highlighted due to their influence on the development of this subject's theory.

It might be argued that the most accepted paradigm regarding this subject is the one originated by McCracken (1986). He theorized that the original location of the cultural

meaning that ultimately resides in the consumer goods is the culturally constituted world. Culture constitutes the “lens” through which the individual views phenomena, determining how it will be apprehended and assimilated. Culture also is the “blueprint” of human activity, because it determines the co-ordinates of social action and productive activity, specifying behaviours and objects that issue from both (p. 71-72). McCracken sustained that cultural meaning is located in three places: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer. He explained the movement of cultural meaning as a flow in a two-step process: first the meaning flows from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods. The two instruments of this first step are advertising and fashion systems. The second step is the transfer of meaning from the consumer goods to individual consumers. This is done through four instruments: exchange rituals (when someone chooses, purchases, and presents goods to others), possession rituals (when one spends time cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off, and photographing his/her goods), grooming rituals (special pains necessary to insure that the special, perishable properties resident on the good are captured and made resident in the individual), and divestment rituals (the erase of meanings associated with previous owners, and the disposal of a consumer good).

Tharp and Scott (1990) showed that the market system is a cultural institution that actively places objects into communicative contexts and gives them visibility, therefore creating and changing their cultural meaning. They also theorized the meaning development process as a flow, in which human experience is a negotiation of culturally constructed symbols. They specified the relationship between any actor, individual or institutional, and its culture as a dialectical process, relating marketing institutions with culture. The meaning of a product was theorized as an amalgam of the perception and use intended by the marketing institution and the preexisting expectations of the culture that become its environment. Then, the meaning would become more and more complex as the marketers’ actions interacted with those of other institutions and subcultures to form, maintain, and alter the meaning of the good. Therefore, the meaning of any object is continually in flux due to constant changes in external situational factors (age, marital status, income), individual internal factors (psychic development, mood, health), and cultural factors (economic or technical development, influences from current events, other cultures and natural forces) (ibid, p.49).

Hirschman, Scott, and Wells (1998) proposed a model which conceptualized the meaning creation, negotiation, and alteration process as a synchronic and diachronic relationship process. This relationship occurred among *texts*, *practices* and *history*, which can be labeled as intertextuality. In their theorization, *texts* might be considered as any direct reference to a product (like advertising) or texts that included products as symbols. *Practices* (or body of practices) include everything that has grown up around the consumption of a particular object in the culture from which the text comes from. *History* includes historical habits, events, and imagery that resulted on contemporary product discourse. They concluded that products as material entities do not have meaning. Only when they are transformed into *signifiers* of a culturally recognized practice or category can they be said to mean something.

Things mean what they mean not because of some inherent quality of a string of letters or any other symbol, but rather due the agreement by social actors and the people that certain linguistic forms mean certain things (PRACEJUS, OLSEN & O’GUINN, 2006, p. 83). This agreement between producers and receivers upon linguistic and rhetorical meanings happens overtime and establish the meanings to consumer goods (DEIGHTON, 1985; MCQUARRIE & MICK, 1992; MICK, 1986; PHILLIPS & MCQUARRIE, 2002; SCOTT, 1994a; 1994b). Meaning resides in the ideas and values that determine how cultural phenomena are organized, evaluated, and constructed (McCRACKEN, 1986).

Going beyond this array of investigations, Thompson and Tian (2008) had developed a genealogical framework of the representational strategies and ideological rationales that

mythmakers use to shape popular memories in relation to their competitive goals and to efface counter-memories that contradict their mythologized representations. The conceptual model derived from their research highlights competitive, historical, and ideological influences on commercial mythmaking and their transformative effects on popular memory which have not been addressed by prior theorizations of the meaning transfer process.

The consumer behaviour research, in one of its various streams, has studied advertising as rhetoric, as text, and as social product. Rhetoric is persuasive communication that tries to convince consumers to do (normally to buy) something. This is why it depends on the use of various conventions or socially agreed rules of language (PRACEJUS, OLSEN & O'GUINN, 2006). Domzal and Kernan (1992) stated that advertising create meanings which are built through *signifiers* (sensory representations) and *signifieds* (what the signifier stands for or implies). These two together teach new meanings to customers or confirm/reinforce those they already know. They argue that to regard advertising as a cultural text is also to recognize that it conveys meaning by using a variety of styles, like drama, rhetoric, metaphor, and so on. Stern (1988) also sustain that a firm's advertising might be studied with the support of literary analysis of figurative language. For her, a firm's persona (identity), its benefits to the consumer and the values it appeals to are inherent in the words, tone and images the ad's speaker selects to create a cohesive offering out of the multitudinous and chaotic details we call "reality".

Meaning first reside in this reality, i.e., in the culturally constituted world. In order to become resident in consumer goods, advertising works as an instrument of meaning transfer when it brings together the consumer good and the culturally constituted world within the frame of one particular advertising. McCracken (1986) sustains that this symbolic equivalence is searched by the advertising agency, which succeeds when the viewer/reader attributes to the consumer good certain properties he or she knows that exist in the culturally constituted world. When it happens, the meaning transfer process is complete.

### 3. Method

In this section we discuss the chosen criteria adopted to select and analyze data; and to present the results of our fieldwork. We begin with data collection details followed by the data analysis procedures.

#### 3.1 Data collection

Most of the advertising on the French bottled water market began in the second part of 19<sup>th</sup> century (AUBY, 1994) and we did not set up filters to data collection based on time. Since our goal was to comprehensively understand the advertising role on the transformation of the water cultural meaning, we included in the corpus of data any bottled water advertising exhibited in France. This included newspapers, magazines, billboards or other media like TV, radio, movies and Internet. International water brands sold on the French market but with no media exposition in the country were not included on the corpus of data.

We collected data between 2006 and 2007 from three main sources: public libraries, advertising museums, and Internet. As our main focus on the research was the historical change in water meaning, actual advertising exhibited on the streets (subway, bus stops, billboards, cafés, bars, etc.) was included on the corpus only as a complementary source of data in specific cases. For example, to strengthen the understanding of any actual campaign available on Internet. We did not collect data from live TV, but we did use TV ads spots found in our three main sources to compose our corpus of data. This is due to four main

reasons. First, our goal was to analyze historical change in water meaning. Thus, advertising presented on TV during data collection would be important, but not essential to understand this historical shift, since its effects on water meaning change has not yet been felt (if compared with older advertising). Second, the amount of advertising presented would necessarily bring too many difficulties to perform a broad search because of the large number of open and cable TV channels available. Third, the three main sources we chose proved later to be a reliable source of relevant advertising because they were naturally submitted to an “importance filter”. That is, the available material was composed either by pioneers’ water advertising spots or by the most important ones in terms of the importance of water meaning creation. We did this informal check through a field research with customers (results not included on this paper because of space constraints). Finally, the most important commercials being exhibited on TV during the fieldwork were also available on the major brands’ Internet websites. In each of our three main sources of data we tried to carry out the deepest and broadest possible search of advertising spots considering time frame and kinds of media used (TV, movies, newspapers, magazines, radio, Internet, etc.). Whenever possible we recorded all advertising available to analyze them later.

To compose our corpus of data, we followed three steps (BAUER & AARTS, 2000; PHILLIPS & HARDY, 2002): 1) preliminary data selection (to search for redundancy and integrity of data); 2) analysis of selected data to identify the broadest possible variety of different water meanings represented on advertising; and 3) new selection of data until we found no new water meanings, comparing with those already identified on step two. To carry on this cyclical selection we considered three criteria: first, the *relevance*. To be included in the corpus of data the advertising should a) bring any kind of new meaning or association to water beyond organic hydration; b) have been broadcasted through the most effective mass communication channels (i.e., TV, radio, magazines, and Internet). The second criterion was the *synchronism*. As the corpus of data is a historical intersection, the majority of the collected materials have a cycle of stability and change that contributes more to the construction of a certain social reality in one moment than in another. The third criterion, *saturation*, was used to verify the inexistence of new variability of meanings to the bottle water brands. In other words, we were not concerned with population representation, but with maximization of types or varieties of symbolic constructions to bottled water. Therefore, we decided to stop collecting new data when new meanings were no more found. We also used press articles and the brands’ Internet web sites to assist in the saturation analysis.

We initially collected 357 advertising spots shown in diverse media (TV, radio, newspaper, magazine, movies, billboards, etc.) exhibited in France from 1880 to 2007. From 1880 to approximately 1920, most of the data corresponded to printed advertising on magazines and newspapers. After that, movies and TV spots slowly began to overcome printed ones and later became the majority type of ad spots. After applying the criteria previously described, our final corpus of data was composed by 63 advertising spots, as shown in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1 – Composition of the corpus of data**

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Owner Group</b>	<b>Total number of selected advertising spots</b>	<b>Number of selected advertising spots in the final corpus of data</b>
Volvic	Danone	20	3
Evian	Danone	73	5
Contrex	Nestlé	20	4
Vittel	Nestlé	56	4
Perrier	Nestlé	80	15
Cristaline	Castel	0	0
Badoit	Danone	36	5
Hépar	Nestlé	5	3
Salvetat	Danone	2	2
Saint-Yorre	Castel	9	7
Quézac	Nestlé	1	1
San Pellegrino	Nestlé	3	1
Saint-Amand	Saint-Amand	0	0
Taillefine	Danone	2	1
Vichy-Célenstins	Castel	16	5
Valvert	Nestlé	3	1
Courmayeur	Castel	0	0
Thonon	Castel	4	1
Arvie	Danone	10	3
Wattwiller	Wattwiller	1	1
Aquarel	Nestlé	0	0
Eau de Perrier	Nestlé	0	0
Vernière	Castel	0	0
Talians	Danone	0	0
Other private brands	-	16	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>357</b>	<b>63</b>

In terms of brand representation, from 34 different water brands comprised on the initial corpus (some of them do not exist anymore), 24 responded for about 64% of the total volume and 75% of the total amount of revenues of the French bottled water market in 2005 (EUROMONITOR, 2006). Twenty-two of the 24 brands selected on the final corpus of data are owned by the three major players of that market - Nestlé, Danone and Neptune (Castel Group); 18 of them were represented on the corpus with at least one advertising spot. We did not include ads from brands with less than 0,1% of market share nor repeated spots from the same advertising campaign of the same brand.

### *3.2 Data analysis*

Texts in a broad sense are social spaces in which two fundamental processes occur: world cognition/representation and social interaction. They can be not only written texts, but also spoken words, drawings, symbols, artifacts, movies, music, etc. (PHILLIPS & HARDY, 2002). We adopted this broad definition and considered as texts all forms of marketing processes – among them, in this paper, exclusively advertising spots.

Texts do not have meaning individually; they structure one discourse and acquire meaning only in their connection with other texts, through their production, distribution and

reception process. Discourse analysis explores how these texts acquire meaning through the relationship between *text*, *discourse* and *context*, and how this meaning contributes to social reality constitution – what was named “Order of Discourse” as conceived by Foucault (1969; 1971). It is the meaning that creates social effects, not the text itself (FAIRCLOUGH, 1995, 2003).

We chose discourse analysis as our theoretical and empirical frame of reference to proceed the analysis of the corpus of data. In the data analysis procedures we kept the coherence with previous theory which states that meaning creation, negotiation, and alteration process is a result of the interplay among texts, practices and history - i.e., intertextuality (HIRSCHMAN, SCOTT & WELLS, 1998). Thus, we used a discourse analytical procedure which comprised three levels of analysis, each other being confronted: *text*, *discourse* and *social analysis* (i.e., the social consequences of the analyzed order of discourse) (FAIRCLOUGH, 1995, 2003).

Following Fairclough’s (2003) analysis framework recommendation, first we transcribed each advertising spot in text format. Second, we selected the unity of analysis of each text – i.e., how the water (or the brand) was represented. Third, using Atlas.ti software we codified these representations. Fourth, we aggregated these representations by similarity of water representations. Last, we nominated these groups of representations into categories of meanings. This concluded the text analysis. Taking the categories of meanings together we reconstituted the *order of discourse* associated with bottled water in France. Our last step in the analysis procedures was to confront the *text* and *order of discourse* results in order to conclude how the new bottled water meanings were created and how they have influenced the consumption and the image of water in contemporary France (i.e., the *social analysis*). This will be the basis of our final discussion regarding the advertising (and the marketing) role on the cultural meaning transformation process of consumer goods.

#### 4. Results

The fieldwork showed that our basic unit of analysis should be brand image, given that the major bottled water companies followed a similar path in terms of advertising strategy: to create strong image positioning for their brands, mostly through advertising. Therefore, the transformation of water cultural meaning derived from this branding strategy, because these were the water representations presented to the French population through mass media advertising.

The *texts* analysis resulted in nine different major categories of water meaning due to brand positioning. These nine categories were a result of the 63 text transcriptions. Each of the texts was analyzed to check for different water representations - i.e, ideas or concepts associated either with water consumption or with the brand represented itself. Each of these representations was codified. At the end of the 63 texts analysis, we grouped the codes by meaning similarity, what resulted on the nine categories. Some of them overlap because several brands have changed their image positioning throughout their history (for example, Evian, Perrier and Vittel) and kept slight and sometimes major attributes from the previous brand images. Other water representations of the brands Cristaline, Salvetat, Valvert and Wattwiller were not considered as strong as the ones presented bellow and were not included in this summary of findings.

Two categories - “Origin/source” and “Medicine or medicament” - were the pioneers until the 1950s. The former was attached to water spas image, and the latter mainly to the distribution channel where the largest part of the mineral water bottles were sold – drugstores. Thus, it was natural that until mid 20<sup>th</sup> century advertising texts presented almost exclusively

these two categories of meanings. At the end of the 1950s, there was a significant change in the laws regarding bottled water commercialization that substantially influenced the market. Among other important measures, mineral water began to be sold in markets and other groceries distribution outlets (CHAMBRIARD, 1998). This legislation shift was considered a revolution, since only after that new players that today are market leaders began to compete in the bottled water market - Nestlé and Danone respectively in the 1960's and 1970's and Neptune (Castel Group) in the 1990's .

After the entrance of these major players, the new meanings created by their advertising spots were heavily focused on brand image development and fragmentation. Clearly, these companies tried to establish new cultural meanings to water, but always mediated by their best-selling or most well-known brands. Hereafter we briefly describe each major meaning category. For the sake of clarity we illustrate each of them with one advertising spot that exemplify our interpretation.

*Category "Origin/source"* – in this category we found association with a hydrographic basin, a city/region, a natural formation or with a specific mineral water source. This water representation tried to transfer positive original place/region properties to the bottled water brand. For example, the purity associated with Alps' ice melted water (brand Evian); the strength and purity of the Central Massif Volcanoes (Volvic) (see Figure 1) or the power of geysers (Arvie); the medicinal and leisure images associated with old water spas like Contrexéville (Contrex); the ancient tradition of old Galo-Romans and Celtic inhabitants (Quézac); the country patriotism (Perrier).

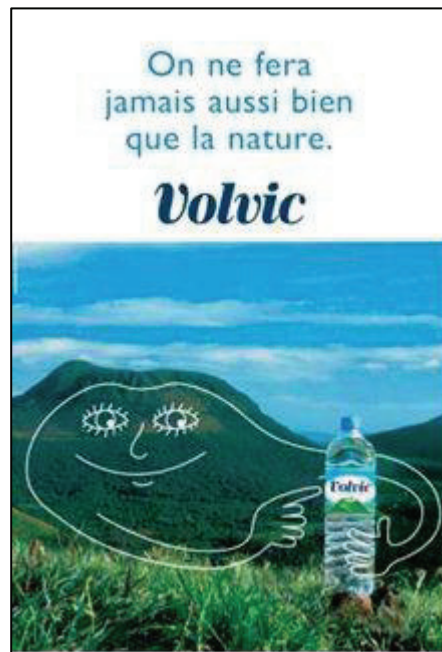


Figure 1 – Volvic's advertising "We will never make it as good as the nature"

*Category "Medicine or medicament"* - Until 1950s, most bottled water brands associated their image with the medicine or medicament idea. It has continued to be used by some brands to constitute images of diuretic properties (Vittel), liver protection and insomnia avoidance (Hépar) (see Figure 2), and overall health strengthen (Vichy-Célestins).





Figure 2 – Hépar’ advertising “Because you can be insomniac for a lack of magnesium”

Category “Gastronomy and digestion improvement” – we have identified associations of some brands with formal eating moments - lunch, dinner and parties (Badoit); with the positive effects of water consumption in these moments (St-Yorre) (see Figure 3); and with the importance of having the brand offered in restaurants (Perrier).



Figure 3 – St-Yorre’s TV advertising “St-Yorre, for digestion, it helps”

Category “Motherhood/Fatherhood” – the brands that explored this relationship tried to establish a relationship among mothers and fathers taking care of their children’s health through the offering of good quality bottled water. We found many references of some brands which claimed to be adequate to pregnant women, like Evian – see Figure 4.



Figure 4 – Evian’s advertising “Is never too early to give Evian water to one baby”

Category “Slimming treatment and beauty improvement” – one of the strongest associations recently constructed by some brands, like Contrex (see Figure 5), Courmayer and Taillefine, the idea of beauty improvement was claimed to be a result of slimming properties “caused” by water consumption. We also found skin care associations as a result of water consumption (Vichy-Célestins).



Figure 5 – Contrex’s TV advertising “Contrex, my slimming partner”

Category “Energizer and sexual arousal drink” – advertising spots in this category represented water as a sexual arousal drink (mostly brands Perrier and Vittel), a source of strength and energy (Evian, Arvie, and Perrier). Many times the strength resulting from water consumption was associated with sexual performance improvement.



Figure 6 – Vittel’s TV advertising “Vitelize yourself”

*Category “Art and creativity”* – some brands created ad campaigns which associated their brand image with famous and innovative painters like Salvador Dali (see Figure 7) and Andy Warhol; music stars like Edith Piaf, John Lennon (Perrier) and David Bowie (Vittel). Usually these associations were not focused on short-time selling campaigns but in abstract brand image associations. Most of these art associations began in the late 1950s, when corporate art was being popularized and legitimized by prominent American and European artists’ creations (PRACEJUS, OLSEN & O’GUINN, 2006).



Figure 7 – Salvador Dali’s advertising created specially to Perrier

*Category “Sports drink”* – we identified brands associations with improvement of sportive performance as a result of water consumption. Sometimes this relationship was strengthened through the participation of one sport celebrity who worked as an endorser – for example, Zidane soccer player (Volvic – see Figure 8) and John McEnroe tennis player (Perrier). These sport stars were not chosen randomly, but usually as a result of a sponsoring strategy of each brand.



Figure 8 – Zidane on Volvic’s TV advertising: “Volvic it’s a luck”

Category “Luxury and sophistication” – the last strong association we found in our analysis was the relationship between the consumption of water by wealthier (St-Yorre) and/or young and sophisticated people (San Pellegrino – see Figure 9). The most luxurious (and normally expensive) brands often used this advertising strategy.



Figure 9 – San Pellegrino’s TV advertising “Young and beautiful people drinking San Pellegrino”

Analyzing the advertising discourse of all brands as a role allowed us to identify a common strategy that constitute the hegemonic *order of discourse* in the French bottled water market – to distance bottled water from the idea of the human need of body hydration/thirst quenching. We discuss this *order of discourse* development as a result of the bottled water meaning transformation and its social consequences in the next section.

## 5. Discussion

Products as material entities do not have meaning unless they are transformed into signifiers of culturally recognized practices or categories (HIRSCHMAN, SCOTT, AND

WELLS, 1998). This dynamic process of product meaning creation, negotiation and transformation has been theorized in different ways in the literature. McCracken (1986) explained how the movement of meaning flows from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods through advertising and fashion systems; and from these consumer goods to individual consumers through possession, exchange, grooming and divestment rituals. Hirschman et al. (1998) sustained that product meaning is an outcome of discourses that result from the interplay among texts, practices and history. Texts about products (such as ads) or texts that include products as symbols (such as TV shows) derive from the body of practices that grow up around the consumption of a particular object from which the text comes from. Tharp and Scott (1990) defended that marketing function is the site for negotiating cultural meaning for products, since meaning of a product is the amalgam of the perception and use intended by the marketing institution and preexisting expectations of the culture that has become its environment. Domzal and Kernan (1992) stated that meanings constitute the “cultural definitions” of products – the nexus of consumption objects and culturally esteemed behaviors. These meanings are built through advertising that serves to teach new meanings to customers or to confirm/reinforce those that they already know. This advertising communication and teaching process is done using *signs* (elements of an ad), which have two components: *signifiers* (sensory representations) and *signifieds* (what the signifier stands for or implies). This last stream of argument is based on semiotic theory.

Our fieldwork showed that bottled water advertising discourses have transformed water cultural meaning in France using two different strategies. First, most advertising discourses focused on brand image development and not on the water meaning as a simple commodity. Second, the flow of this meaning transformation was based on historical cultural categories mostly related to water spas (like purity, leisure associated with nature and medical cure) and from these original meanings to a miscellaneous of different ones, not always derivate from the first ones. These present-day meanings comprised water brand images as diverse as medicament, digestion improvement, motherhood, slimming treatment and beauty enhancer, energizer and sexual arousal drink, art, luxury and sophistication, etc. Cultural principles – “organizing ideas by which the culture segmentation of the world in discrete parcels is performed” (MCCRACKEN, 1986, p. 73) – were also identified, like the “delicacy” of mothers who give Evian water during pregnancy, the “strength” and men’s sexual energy charged after drinking Perrier and Vittel.

Thus, we have identified that advertising worked as a meaning transfer tool by bringing together a consumer good and representations of the culturally constituted world within the frame of collected advertising. This transfer process was carried out through the joint effect of *text* (ads texts themselves – images, sound and printed words), *discourse* (the new meanings assigned to each of the brands) and *context* (the continuous effort to distance bottled water from the idea of a human need). This last meaning nowadays is more connected to tap water. Moreover, bottled water image today is not only just another commodity, although we recognize there are bottled water brands that still position themselves on the market in a simple way like this. Contemporary meaning of bottled water (i.e., *order of discourse*) changed as a result of many factors. We tried to describe in this paper how advertising collaborated to this process, since it worked to bring together the properties of the culturally constituted world into the unknown properties of the consumer good, accomplishing the meaning transfer process.

Overall, bottled water in contemporary France goes far beyond the simple idea of thirst quenching and for some brands (mostly the luxurious and most expensive ones) has reached a meaning level comparable with many other cultural products – like alcoholic drinks or even perfumes (products that normally carry important symbolic properties). Indeed, it would be naïve to attribute the observed consumption growth from 6 litres per person in the

1940s to 171 litres per person in 2005 solely to a decrease of trust in the tap water. Our advertising analysis presents a contemporary social transformation that bottled water has suffered. It has become a cultural product like any other, overcoming the idea of “taste for necessity” (BOURDIEU, 1984, p. 374).

## 6. Conclusion

Cultural branding through advertising discourse transformed water in France in a consumer good far beyond the idea of a simple commodity, as it still is for a significant part of the world population. French market leaders applied advertising to charge their brands images with many natural or artificial properties (also utilitarian and hedonic ones) that barely remind us that we are still dealing just with water.

We have identified that cultural meaning has shifted from the culturally constituted world to the consumer goods (bottled water), which originally had no meaning but its body hydration function. Of course, this was not a natural process. The cultural meaning of a consumer good is a result, among other things, of advertising strategies created by specialized agencies hired by big companies. In the French market this has happened, since the entrance of the two major players – Nestlé and Danone groups – on the French market of bottled water “coincides” with the exponential growth in its consumption. Thus, bottled water meaning transformation was also a way of legitimizing consumption growth and allowed the charge of prices much higher than tap water. Moreover, advertising constructed this transformation bringing together culturally constituted images - like environmental conservation, slimming as a synonym of beauty and sport practice as a way of health improvement – and bottled water brands. This process did not happen in the vacuum. Consumers were the final actors in this process and any meaning change would be impossible without their participation, being it a conscious process or not.

This research has limitations which deserve attention and that might be considered as suggestions for future research efforts. First, we have not analyzed the importance of other marketing process in this water meaning cultural change – for example, packing, sports and events sponsoring, distribution strategies, public relations, etc. Second, we did not discuss the viewer/reader/consumer participation as the final chain of the cultural meaning transfer process. Therefore, it is worthwhile to extend the investigation to understand how people think and act as the final actors of this process.

Our choice of studying only the French and not the Brazilian or other bottled water market demands some explanation. The Brazilian bottle water market is still in its childhood, if compared with the French market - probably the world’s most developed in terms of water brand image construction. But we will not be surprised if soon we face a similar process in Brazil, as a result of international corporations’ efforts on replicating their marketing strategies globally. Moreover, the choice of water as a subject research seemed appropriate to us due to our research problem. Water has had historically no other meaning but something aimed at body hydration, and twentieth century marketing actions of multinational corporations have strongly changed this.

As Wilk (2006) stated, long ago magicians and priests could transform and manipulate the powers of natural substances; today corporations contend for the same powers. We indeed identified that advertising discourse has helped to transform bottled water in a form of cultural consumption, driven by everything from status competition to a belief in magical curing, sexual arousal or beauty treatment. And, incredibly, it can still be used for thirst quenching too.

## 7. References

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