Co-creating corporate brand identity with online brand communities: A managerial perspective

Abstract

Contemporary branding literature views brand identity as socially constructed through complex interactions between multiple stakeholders. Despite extant work on how brand communities and individuals contribute towards brand identity formation, our understanding of management-led processes constituting part of the wider process of a socially constructed brand identity is still under-developed. Drawing on in-depth interviews with senior executives of a luxury automotive company and a netnography of its online brand community, we develop a process model of corporate brand identity co-creation, comprising three management-led processes: 'nurturing brand passion', 'bridging' corporate brand identity meanings and 'partnering', and associated activities through which management contribute to the wider process of corporate brand identity formation with community members and other stakeholders. By highlighting the interlinked and recursive nature of these processes and activities in the resulting model, the study offers a deeper understanding of the ways in which management are involved in co-creating corporate brand identity.

Keywords: Corporate branding; brand identity; co-creation; online brand communities

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1. Introduction

Complex market environments and in particular the emergence of powerful brand communities have challenged the assumption of brand identity as a static managerial creation (Aaker 1996). Instead, the contemporary stakeholder-oriented perspective on brand management argues extensively for the brand identity as dynamic and socially constructed through complex networked interactions between the firm, the brand and a multitude of stakeholders (Merz et al. 2009; da Silveira et al. 2013; von Wallpach et al. 2017). These interactions unfold as a co-creation process of brand identity construction whereby brand managers and other stakeholders, individually and collectively "use, talk about, and construct brand identity while enacting their own identities" (von Wallpach et al. 2017, p. 443). During this process, multiple meanings are simultaneously ascribed by stakeholders to the intended brand identity, which resonate not only with them but potentially with a multitude of stakeholders. Yet, despite these contributions, recent process-oriented branding literature provides little insight into the role of brand managers in the co-creation of corporate brand identity as a dynamic social process.

Traditionally, brand identity is defined in terms of concrete and tangible attributes (Kapferer 2012), and as "a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create and maintain" (Aaker 1996, p. 68). Contrary to the classical managerial-inspired approach that sees identity as static and enduring, and aligned with the process-based perspective of brand identity formation, we define brand identity as *a continually evolving constellation of meanings, constructed through a dialectical process among a multitude of*

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stakeholders in relation to their individual and collective identities. The concept of co-creation, which is viewed as the process by which firms and consumers collaborate and participate in value creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004), thus becomes critical to our theorisation of the brand identity as "meanings" (Csaba and Bengtsson 2006; da Silveira et al. 2013; Lucarelli and Hallin 2014; von Wallpach 2017). However, the relevance of the co-creation process in brand building remains under-theorised (Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2016; Csaba and Bengttson 2006). So far, only a few studies within the stakeholder- and process-oriented branding literatures have offered empirical insights into the reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities (von Wallpach et al. 2017; Black and Veloutsou 2017; Kornum et al. 2017; Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013). Nevertheless, more is known about how consumers and brand communities engage in co-creating brand identity compared to brand managers. Consequently, the nature and implications of how managers interact with other stakeholders in this dynamic social process of nested meanings of brand identity remains unclear. Therefore, this study aims to explore how brand managers contribute to the process of corporate brand identity co-creation with members of brand communities.

The study is based on a single case study (Yin 2009) of Aston Martin, an iconic luxury automotive manufacturer with a strong corporate brand. Five in-depth interviews with senior marketing managers and netnographic data collected from the firm-hosted online brand community over a period of six months, resulting in 215 posts and 35,000 aggregated comments including replies, form the basis for our analysis. The key contribution of this paper is the development of a process model, which demonstrates the dialectical relationship between managers and the brand community, by systemising processes and inherent activities managers engage in to contribute to the wider process of corporate brand identity formation. The paper proceeds by reviewing extant branding literature from a process perspective.

Thereafter, we explain the research methodology and present the findings. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the findings, highlight the theoretical and managerial implications and make suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review and Conceptualisation

2.1 Corporate Brand identity

The concept of brand identity has conventionally been defined in the branding literature as a stable entity, which is internal to the firm and the source of influence on consumers' perceptions and interpretations of the brand meaning (Aaker 1996; Kapferer 2012). According to this perspective, the corporate brand identity lives in the minds of individuals and groups: "corporate brand identity is a perceptual/cognitive identity type" (Balmer 2010, p. 186) and refers to "perceived attributes and associations that are linked to a corporate name and, secondary, to an institutional marque" (ibid). In this version of brand identity, a well-defined brand identity is critical for the long-term building, differentiation and management of the corporate brand (Aaker 2004). Recently, however, the managerially-oriented assumption of brand identity as a static managerial creation that is unilaterally developed, maintained and strategically managed through conventional brand alignment frameworks (e.g. Aaker 1996; Urde 1999; Hatch and Schultz 2001; Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Balmer 2012; Kapferer 2012) has been challenged on the grounds that it does not reflect brand management practice in today's increasingly complex market environments where brand identity is no longer stable (da Silveira et al. 2013).

It was not until the 2000s that the stakeholder-oriented perspective on brand management emerged, which considers brands as dynamic and social processes and recognises that they are socially constructed through complex networked interactions between

the firm, the brand and a multitude of stakeholders (Merz et al. 2009; Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013). Thus, brand identity is viewed as dynamic and originates from multi-stakeholders (da Silveira et al. 2013). Since stakeholders are defined as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman 1984, p. 46), this means that internal and external stakeholders (e.g. employees, individual consumers, brand communities etc.) have a role to play in appropriating and co-creating brand identity. Indeed, Kornum et al. (2017) note the existence of synergies and tensions between the intended brand identity, collective identity of the brand community, and individual consumer identities as articulated by brand community members. This process of ongoing social negotiations among stakeholders results in "a nested system of identities" (Kornum et al. 2017, p. 432), where different identities interact in complementary or contradictory ways.

Von Wallpach et al. (2017) posit that the construction of the brand identity and the construction of stakeholder identities are reciprocally intertwined through the many performances of stakeholders including brand managers. This suggests that brands "are social entities experienced, shaped, and changed in communities" (Brown et al. 2003, p.31). Although the process-oriented branding perspective has recently advanced our understanding of brand identity co-creation, only a few empirical studies shed light on the reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities (e.g. von Wallpach et al. 2017; Black and Veloutsou 2017; Kornum et al. 2017). However, they have focused on the co-creation of brand identity among individual consumers and brand communities with the result that much less is known about how brand managers take part in this process.

From the perspective of performative theory, von Wallpach et al. (2017) view brand identity as a social object that is constantly ascribed multiple meanings. Drawing on Tierney et al. (2016, p. 914), we define brand meaning as "an idiosyncratic and evolving emotional and cognitive understanding attributed to a brand as a result of a socially negotiated process". Thus the meaning attached to the corporate brand identity is the embodiment of phenomenological interpretation in a broader cultural context (Edvardsson et al. 2011). Given the powerful role of brand communities in brand identity co-creation (Kornum et al. 2017; von Wallpach et al. 2017), we regard them as an appropriate context for examining company-led processes intended to take part in the wider process of co-creating brand identity with other stakeholders.

2.2 Brand communities as a context for co-creation

Brand communities are social collectives marked by a shared culture where the brand identity is collectively enacted, negotiated and co-created through members' consumption meanings, rituals and practices (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Kozinets 2001). Community members are admirers of the brand (i.e. they include owners and non-owners of the market offering), who are willing to express their perceptions of and stake in the brand to others (Merz et al. 2009) and adhere to three key markers of a brand community (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001): (1) consciousness of kind, (2) evidence of the rituals and traditions, and (3) a sense of obligation to the community and its members. Sharing brand-related information and experiences contributes to the community's cultural capital of the brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). McAlexander et al.'s (2002) work on brandfests identified four crucial types of brand community relationships emerging through interactive experiences at these events: either between the customer and the brand, between the customer and the firm, between the customer and the brand in use or among other customers. In this sense, managers should have

an understanding of the sociocultural influences of the brand community on brand identity meaning (Leigh et al. 2006) and influence the co-creative activities of the brand community.

Co-creation is often discussed in the context of an online brand community where members can play an active role, both as providers and beneficiaries, resulting in value for individuals, brand communities, and for companies (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder 2011). Firms are motivated to participate in online brand communities by the many benefits they can reap: apart from enhancing the brand's core value or stimulating creativity (Ind et al. 2013) and product innovation (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum 2013), they can co-create brand identity with community members (Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013; Gyrd-Jones and Kornum 2013). In contrast, individuals are motivated to participate in brand communities when they can express their self-identity (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder 2011), have opportunities for fulfilment, learning and sharing (Ind el al. 2013) and can exchange brand experiences (Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013).

Stakeholders' discourse and interactions in online brand communities are usually generated and narrated through text (Kozinets 2002). According to Edvardsson et al. (2011), meaning is determined within the confines of language and social interactions, as well as within the roles and social positions of customers and marketers in a social context. In this regard, stakeholders engage in complementary or contradictory discursive strategies to communicate and negotiate their versions of the brand identity meaning depending on the resources and influence they have within the stakeholder network (Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013). As a result, brand managers need to be aware of sources of brand meanings (Iglesias and Bonet 2012), especially consumer-generated content and stories that may or may not promote the intended meaning (Singh and Sonnenburg 2012; Gensler et al. 2013). Iglesias

and Bonet (2012) suggest that brand managers should utilise narratives and storytelling as persuasive rhetorical devices to co-create a favourable brand meaning.

2.3 Dynamics between brand managers and other stakeholders in the co-creation of corporate brand identity

The stakeholder-focus brand era (Merz et al. 2009) implies that the brand is the sum of all relationships and encounters with multiple stakeholders. Therefore it is fundamentally important that firms take the legitimate interest of stakeholders into account (Freeman 1984) and build strong brand relationships with a multitude of stakeholders (Merz et al. 2009). Stakeholders become powerful when they combine their resources and skills and create social spaces to interact with one another and with a firm, and to represent themselves, participate in collaborative marketing programmes or challenge the firm's communication (Cova and Dalli 2009; Cova et al. 2015). These understandings suggest that firms can attract such stakeholders, particularly consumers and offer them resources and a collaborative and creative milieu to communicate, debate, critique, innovate and utilise their skills and knowledge for their own interests as well as that of a firm.

Congruent with the stakeholder and process perspectives on brands (Merz et al. 2009), Iglesias et al. (2013) introduce an organic view of the brand and argue that a brand identity is built with multiple stakeholders and many aspects of this co-creation process lie outside the boundaries of the firm, notably in a 'conversational space'. This is where the firm and consumers interact through 'brand interfaces' such as products, visual identity and service encounters. Adopting a hermeneutics discursive perspective, Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) emphasise the active role of stakeholders in co-creating brand meanings in online social spaces replete with brand-related text, where ''stakeholders continuously negotiate and

re-define brand meanings through their discursive activities'' (p. 1507). However, Gyrd-Jones and Kornum (2013) offer an alternative understanding of brand management from a value complementarity stakeholder perspective. The authors studied the management of brand co-creation processes in relation to multiple stakeholder ecosystems based on the cultural viewpoint of each stakeholder. They found that successful co-creation outcomes depend on the firm's ability to maintain cultural synergies between the brand and multiple stakeholders using core brand values as a mutual reference point. The implication of the stakeholder approach is that brand management is strongly performed through managers' actions and interactions with multiple social constituents such as consumers (da Silveira et al. 2013). Yet, literature focusing on the role of the firm in co-creating brand identity with other stakeholders is still limited.

In spite of the relevance of considering brands as dynamic and social processes arising from brand-based interactions between the firm and its stakeholder networks (Merz et al. 2009), the stakeholder and process perspectives on branding have remained significantly under-theorised (Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2016; Csaba and Bengttson 2006). This paper contributes to the branding literature by unravelling the management-led processes constituting part of the wider process of co-creating brand identities with brand communities and other stakeholders. The study aims to answer the following research question: how do brand managers contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity with online brand communities?

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

The empirical work is based on a single case study (Yin 2009) drawing on interviews with the senior management team and a netnographic study of the brand's online community. Combining both perspectives allowed us to develop a deep understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Dyer and Wilkins 1991), i.e. co-creating corporate brand identity as viewed from a firm's perspective. Purposeful sampling was applied (Patton 1990) to select a suitable case study. We selected Aston Martin (AM) as a case study, as it is (1) a well-known brand, (2) has ambitious plans for the future, which stimulate discussions about brand identity, and (3) has a large and active brand community. This provides a suitable setting for studying how brand managers co-create corporate identity with existing or aspirational owners of their cars.

The Aston Martin online brand community meets the requirements set out by Kozinets (2015): it is relevant, has a regular flow of communication and frequent postings, is highly interactive among heterogeneous community members and has the potential to yield detailed or descriptively rich data. Studying brand communities of corporate automotive brands (like Ford, Jeep or Saab) has shown social influence on identity construction at the individual level (Algesheimer et al. 2005; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), thus allowing us to capture the nested nature of corporate, community and individual identity construction.

Aston Martin, was founded in 1913 and made its international motor racing debut at the 1922 French Grand Prix. Since then, the company has developed a strong corporate brand of British heritage which is synonymous with luxury and elegance. With annual sales around 4,000 cars, the firm has sold a total of 80,000 cars so far and represents the only independent luxury car brand in the automotive industry. As a luxury brand, the key challenges facing this

car maker are targeting younger luxury consumers and in particular broadening the brand's appeal to female drivers, raising the brand's awareness in the United States and Asia, driving technological innovation through new designs and partnerships, and repositioning itself as a lifestyle brand. The firm's "Second Century Plan", which charts the firm's future growth between 2015 - 2020, is underpinned by a three-pillar core product portfolio strategy (notably, the introduction of the firm's first crossover vehicle (DBX) by 2019, the reintroduction of a dormant sub-brand (Lagonda) into the large luxury sedan market and the production of special series vehicles). Meanwhile, the firm has translated its brand values into the provision of curated "Art of Living" experiences (i.e. travel, haute cuisine, sport, fashion and culture) in order to reposition the brand. All of these developments put the Aston Martin corporate brand identity under close scrutiny from both the firm's management and its external stakeholders. Of particular interest to the present study is how members of the firm-hosted online brand community respond to these changes and how the management of Aston Martin interacts with the online community and other stakeholders in co-creating corporate brand identity.

Established in 2009, the Aston Martin online Facebook community has now a fan base of more than 6.9 million followers. Considering the number of Aston Martin cars ever sold, the vast majority of followers are fans of the brand rather than customers, which is not surprising given the high level of brand community member participation for automotive brands (Avery 2012; Algesheimer et al. 2005).

3.2 Data collection and analysis

In order to understand the managerial perspective of co-creating corporate brand identity we used a combination of interviews with management and an ethnographic analysis. Five in-depth interviews were conducted with senior managers who were responsible for the

strategic branding decisions and repositioning of Aston Martin and could provide deeper insights into the firm's branding activities on social media (Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer; General Manager – Global Marketing; General Manager – Client Services; Global Digital Marketing and Content Manager; Global Digital Marketing Executive). These interviews, which were conducted between April and June 2016 and lasted 60 minutes on average, explored managers' perceptions of the current and desired corporate brand identity, core values of the brand and activities that the firm engages in to contribute and facilitate the co-creation process. Secondary data such as company reports, press releases and presentations by senior managers (Chief Marketing Officer, Design Chief Officer and CEO) provided a means of collecting background data about the company and a method of triangulation (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Meanwhile, the perspective of members of the online brand community was captured through netnographic historical data from the firm-hosted online community between March and August 2016, which resulted in a dataset consisting of 215 posts and 35,000 aggregated comments including replies.

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed, then inductively and manually analysed by the first author using open coding as a way to organise and index the data prior to theoretical analysis. As a result, descriptive codes were initially generated in the first-order analysis, then reduced to open codes through constant comparison. Once the analysis moved from description to abstraction using axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998) in the second-order analysis, six themes representing key managerial activities emerged at a higher level of abstraction (Corley and Gioia 2004). After focusing on theoretical links between these themes to draw a theoretical narrative at the selective coding stage, the themes were clustered into three aggregate dimensions (Gioia and Thomas 1996; Corley and Gioia 2004) (see data structure shown in Figure 1). The authors discussed the emergent themes and reached a

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consensus on differences to ensure that theoretical conclusions are accurate and representative of the data (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

Netnographic analysis was undertaken at two levels. First, posts were inductively categorised to identify key concepts which indicated the existence of distinct managerial co-creation activities (e.g. the theme of negotiating brand identity). Next, we manually pattern matched categories arising from managers' key narratives (views, actions and reactions) in the interview data to categories arising from the brand community members' actions and reactions identified from the online data. In this interpretive reading, the analysis involved iteration from part to whole, both within and across the interviews, and within and across netnographic data (Thompson 1997). This iterative process allowed us to explore the synergies and conflicts between multiple interpretations of the corporate brand identity and its meanings and enabled a holistic understanding of the corporate brand identity co-creation process. Finally, following Payne et al. (2009) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), the first author conducted an 83 minute member check interview with the Global Digital Marketing Executive in December 2017 to confirm and refine the authors' understanding of the emerging themes and aggregate dimensions along with the proposed process model.

4. Results

In line with the literature reviewed earlier, we view brand identity co-creation as an ongoing process involving managers and other stakeholders. Given this processual perspective, our focus is on the revised role of brand managers and how they engage and collaborate with online communities in brand identity co-creation processes. Our analysis

identified six such activities: creating a brand family, staging imaginary experiences, negotiating corporate brand identity, legitimising, engaging in collaborative marketing, and knowledge sharing. Further axial coding identified that these activities support three types of co-creation processes through which managers collaborate with online communities: 'Nurturing brand passion', 'Bridging' and 'Partnering'.

4.1 Nurturing brand passion

One of the three processes centres on nurturing the passion towards the Aston Martin brand across all stakeholders, which comprises the activities: creating a brand family and staging imaginary experiences.

4.1.1 Creating a brand family

We define 'creating a brand family' as: nurturing a lifetime of love and passion for the brand and creating an environment for social interactions amongst brand enthusiasts where the brand identity is shared and negotiated. As an iconic luxury car brand, the online brand community consists of predominantly fans of the brand and customers (see methodology section). The firm views the fans as valuable members of the AM family (#5- Marketing Chief Officer), be it as potential future customers or as part of the large brand community that helps elevate the brand to its iconic status.

> *So, I think there's a rather nice sort of lifetime factor to Aston Martin that people will fall in love with the brand at a very earlier age. And they may not be able to buy a car for 20 years or 30 years, but it's really important that we nurture those people.* (#5- Marketing Chief Officer)

Creating a brand family is a future-oriented activity that unfolds over time:

You're talking to aspirants, you know, these are the customers of the future… people that don't own the products but share a passion for Aston Martin. (#4 - General Manager Client Services)

Nurturing brand passion is especially important as the firm targets new markets where there is little, if any, brand awareness. By using the term 'family', Aston Martin emphasises the close bond the brand has with the brand community as well as appreciating the love, trust and loyalty the brand community has towards the brand, as exemplified by the following quotes of members of the online brand community:

Proud to be part of the amazing Aston Martin family' (Dan);
Aston Martin is the best car brand of all time and always deserves all the support and love!' (Bob)

To foster the perception of being part of this family, managers share offline events with the online community allowing them to be present in major events. This includes providing information about ways to explore the cars in great detail, as well as allowing them to be 'present' at key events by streaming live events on Facebook (#5- Marketing Chief Officer). For example, Aston Martin's launch of its DB11 during the Geneva Motor Show 2016 was streamed live, generating half a million views (Aston Martin 2016). AM also introduced a microsite featuring a configurator which enabled visitors to spec, try and customise a virtual car. This initiative drove traffic to the official website, generated buzz around DB11 and offered passionate members an immersive brand experience.

The perception of being part of this family is also strengthened through offline social events for fans and customers, which include an annual event where members of *Pistonheads* (an online news and reviews website devoted to cars) are invited to the company's headquarters in Gaydon to view some AM classic cars (#5- Chief Marketing Officer and Vice President).

4.1.2 Staging imaginary experiences

The process of nurturing brand passion begins by staging imaginary experiences through, for instance, posting video stories, or launching a microsite which allows fans to design their dream car (see earlier). These instruments allow customers to access the brand, fantasise and thus construct their meanings of the brand identity. Storytelling in particular is seen as a more powerful means to convey emotional and cognitive brand experiences and perpetuate the brand's history and brand identity (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), as opposed to merely posting generic content as illustrated in the following quote:

> *Storytelling is more important, because if we wanted to create content and we wanted to create content that got lots of clicks, we would do car videos, you know, we would do silly stuff.... For me, powerful content is content that is storytelling.* (#5- Chief Marketing Officer & Vice President)

Aston Martin emphasises three types of stories. These stories centre on: the legacy of the brand and its myth; behind-the-scenes stories; and stories urging the adoption of the brand's lifestyle (see "Art of Living" portfolio mentioned earlier). Stories about the brand legacy give fans an insight into Aston Martin's 104-year journey. Frequently, iconic cars from the very first Aston Martin 'Coal Scuttle' through to DB5 and One-77, as well as the people who have helped shape the brand, are depicted in both narrative and visual forms,

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documenting the brand's distinctiveness and heritage. Fans get the chance to see the face of the company and experience the work that takes place in and around making a car. They get to know how certain elements of the cars are developed, and get a glimpse of the stories told by employees who take pride and pleasure in making these cars. Online content includes car production videos and pictures taken in the factory in Gaydon, as well as designers' sketches. These behind-the-scenes stories go beyond showing features and specs of the cars to portray transparency and feed the fans' interest in interacting with this exclusive brand and help to create the atmosphere for memorable brand experiences.

The mythical depiction of the brand as an archetypal superhero via its association with the James Bond character (Cooper et al. 2010) provides the corporate brand identity with cultural meanings. To elaborate, Aston Martin created ten DB10 cars specifically for the latest Bond film *Spectre*. The company posted a video clip on YouTube and Facebook which shows how the car was created and includes a dramatic drive by the stunt driver (Aston Martin 2015a).

The company uses the James Bond character as a context-specific reference point in formulating an interpretation of the hero brand, which comes bundled with identity meanings that have found substantial cultural resonance with the brand community:

> *Love Aston Martin. "The combination of Luxury, Performance and Beauty is what always attracted me since seeing the Silver DB5 in Goldfinger.* (Erik)

Finally, through stories around the art of living, managers aim to reinforce particular meanings of the corporate brand identity such as elegance and individuality to consumers through the avenues of experiential lifestyle and culture, inviting fans and customers to explore events and experiences including travel, haute cuisine, sport, fashion and culture.

4.2. Bridging

The second process of corporate brand identity co-creation is 'bridging', which relates to negotiating and balancing various corporate brand identity meanings, rooted in stakeholders' phenomenological interpretations (Edvardsson et al. 2011). Bridging is facilitated via negotiating brand identity, plus legitimising the brand identity.

4.2.1 Negotiating corporate brand identity

Online communities offer platforms for negotiations, interpretation and meaning making (Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013). Negotiating corporate brand identity is a critical mediating activity that involves the continuous exchange with the brand community in an effort to support and maintain the brand identity and provide a rationale for introducing new identity meanings that may be in conflict with the previously established meanings. Therefore, this activity can be regarded as a base for confirmation/refutation or further development of new identity meanings across stakeholders and represents an essential part of the continuous 'bridging' process managers have to engage in and facilitate. As we will demonstrate in this section, negotiating brand identity influences strategic decision making within the firm, as well as tactical marketing activities. Aston Martin is investing £700 million in new technologies and new products (a complete renewal of all sports cars and the addition of new models) (Car Magazine 2016) aimed at targeting new markets and customer segments. The company recognises the marketplace challenge to its identity:

> *I think the challenge comes in evolving the brand image…And it's a good image - people value that image. I think the challenge comes in how we move away from that, such that people see us from as more than just a sports car brand to actually become a luxury brand.* (#1-Global Digital Marketing Executive).

In its effort to curate "Art of Living" experiences, Aston Martin collaborated with a Brooklyn graffiti street artist in order to turn an Aston Martin Vanquish into a canvas (Aston Martin 2015b), something the firm claimed to be an important marker of the brand identity. However, this effort aimed at presenting the car as a beautiful piece of modern art encountered resistance and prompted a discursive debate about the brand identity. The brand community was largely critical and challenged the company to hold to identity meanings established previously:

> *The essence of the Aston Martin is in its style its design its gorgeous sound everything's like an italian supercar but it's made by the british paid in pounds made in Britannia under the reign of a monarch...isn't it.* (Ken)
>
> *Even Americans wouldn't hurt a car like this give us a break.* (Di)
>
> *No! Why did you do that? Aston Martin should be an icon of timeless elegance instead of flashy claptrap.* (Arkadiusz)

In essence, these statements show that 'tattooing' the Vanquish resonated poorly with the dominant brand identity meanings held by the AM brand community. The community viewed the outcome of tattooing the Vanquish as undermining the brand identity. Meanings such as 'American', 'flashy' and 'ugly', emerged to demonstrate a lack of synergy with the brand's core values and the perceived brand identity. The prevalent view within the brand community was that Aston Martin had strayed from its origin as an elegant, iconic British brand. In a statement on Facebook, AM justified embellishing the car on the grounds that:

> *We've not decided to wrap the car, we've decided to do this as an art car - as a piece of work, as a piece of modern, cultural art.*

In the midst of claims and counterclaims, managers reassessed what they conceived as an artistic character of the brand identity and decided to discontinue the promotion:

…, we thought there was no point, nobody likes it. And we probably won't do that with the brand again. (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive)

As illustrated above, corporate brand identity is recursively negotiated amongst brand community members and with managers. The firm welcomes this feedback and constantly assesses its branding strategy, what it stands for, and how it is being perceived externally. The metaphor of *'the proverbial canary in the coal mine'* captures the importance of the brand community as a signalling source. Fans are thought of as an avenue for checking on brand health:

I think it's a health-check … it's a way of us gathering information or getting a sense of what we're doing is right. Uhm you could argue that the fan community on Facebook for example, uhm, is the proverbial canary in the coal mine; you know, they are the early warning. So if they start to get angry at us, … we need to listen to that. (#5- Chief Marketing Officer and Vice President)

As this shows, managers are not the sole creators of the corporate brand identity. Brand identity meanings evolve in the course of contestations between managers and the brand community. Their role is to carefully balance the various identity meanings.

4.2.2 Legitimising

Legitimacy is defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms,

values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman 1995, p. 574). Thus, a key component of legitimacy is the relationship between the company and its stakeholders. The objective of the firm is to co-ordinate and garner moral and cultural acceptance of what the corporate brand stands for. To achieve this, the perceived brand identity across a range of stakeholders needs to fit their cultural schemas. Managers are aware of the strategic implications of legitimacy and engage with fans and the wider public to shape their interpretation of corporate brand identity accordingly:

> *You have to engage with the public at large with your brand otherwise your public at large will not give you permission for your customers to buy your car in the streets, because they are not engaging and understanding the brand in the way they should.*
> (#2- Marketing Director)
> *… they're essential. The fans make the customers feel good. You know, when you're driving an Aston Martin and somebody gives you a thumbs-up, it's a great feeling.*
> (#5- Chief Marketing Officer and Vice President)

Through communication, managers aim to document the role of the corporate brand in the lives of consumers and "institutionalise" certain meanings in their personal and social identities and repeatedly co-construct the corporate brand identity reinforcing Aston Martin's cultural-cognitive legitimacy (i.e. congruence between the firm's activities and existing cognitive and cultural norms and beliefs (Scott 2014)):

> *When you are a client of Aston Martin you are buying into a world that says a lot about how you are educated and how you view the world. You're not buying a car that's gonna be the loudest shoutiest car, at the same time you still have a statement when you get out of an Aston Martin, people are interested in who you are and what*

that car says about you as well…They just have a lot of respect and credibility for

you…. So it says a lot about the power of the brand. (#2- Marketing Director)

In the offline sphere, the brand engages in various social activities in an effort to stress its moral obligation to society but also to draw explicit parallels with more legitimate brands and institutions. For instance, the firm produced eight V12 Vantage S Spitfire 80 limited edition models to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Britain's most iconic warplane Spitfire World War 2 fighter (Auto Express 2016). These activities are often discussed by the brand community.

4.3 Partnering

The third core process contributing to corporate brand identity co-creation involves 'partnering' which refers to closely working with the brand community on a range of marketing activities. It is facilitated by two core activities: 'engaging in collaborative marketing' and 'knowledge sharing'.

4.3.1 Engaging in collaborative marketing

The firm views members of the brand community as peers, or part-time marketers (Gummesson 1991). Their role is to give feedback on concept cars, produce user-generated content, offer brand advocacy, and input into new product development. All these activities contribute towards Aston Martin's brand identity. "*The organic community out there and their word of mouth is actually critical to … getting the message that we have out there…[and] they got a possibility, the potential for them to actually shape other people's perceptions of the brand.* (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive). "*Their job is to help us spread the*

message of Aston Martin, beyond what we can actually do ourselves." (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive)

The firm occasionally collaborates with fans and owners of Aston Martin cars to produce marketing material in the form of driving videos choreographed as stories that express their cultural identities and narrate the corporate brand identity (#5- Chief Marketing Officer and Vice President).

> *… so you know we might engage with a group of owners that are doing a rally. You know they are doing a drive around Scotland in Aston Martins and we will co-create some content there about their experiences.* (#5- Chief Marketing Officer and Vice President)

A key element in engaging in collaborative marketing is to actively encourage and accept critical feedback both externally and internally, particularly during the design process of a new car. For example, when unveiling the DBX concept, Aston Martin CEO Andy Palmer invited feedback which was then communicated to the creative team until a favourable design was created:

> *I am very much looking forward to seeing how this concept is received not only here today, but also by our legion of existing loyal customers and by those potential customers around the world* (Aston Martin 2015c).
>
> *The brand community gives you its overall view of what the car is [identity], what they think of the car [brand identity meaning]and that helps us define whether it's going to be a success or not* (#1- Global Digital Marketing Executive).

Inviting customers to contribute to new product development has been widely recognised and acknowledged (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum 2013) leading participants to imbue the corporate brand with various identity meanings.

4.3.2 Knowledge sharing

Members of the brand community usually discuss technical aspects of the brand which represent a vital component of the brand identity such as the engine. For the brand managers this means that facts and reliable information about the brand need to be regularly disseminated:

> *We have to make sure we meet the challenge of providing all the information they need* (#2- Marketing Director).

Managers also need to share brand-related information with the community in order to correct misinformation posted by members, mainly caused by the complexity of automotive technology. Responses by Aston Martin clarifying the issue are necessary to ensure that such posts do not lead to damaging the corporate brand identity.

The managers also share the education role with other members of the brand community who answer questions and intervene to correct members who have posted incorrect information associated with the brand.

> *Because of the size and the passion of our own community, they kind of do some of that role for us. So we will sometimes get 'Oh, they've answered it for us'. Someone else has come in and gone 'Oh no, that's wrong: its x, y and you can see the information – here is the URL'. So we are quite fortunate in that respect.* (#3-Global Digital Manager)

The continuous process of enabling and leveraging the brand community to engage in collaborative marketing and knowledge sharing activities allows brand enthusiasts to play an active role within the brand community and offers them opportunities for fulfilment (Ind et al. 2013) as a valuable member of the Aston Martin family. This helps reinforce the corporate brand identity meanings, thereby contributing to a shared corporate brand identity.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper contributes to brand research by addressing the fundamental question that stems from the social dynamics underpinning the co-creation of the corporate brand identity: How do brand managers contribute to the co-creation of corporate brand identity with online brand communities? Based on a case study of Aston Martin (AM), drawing on the joint perspective of AM managers and the brand's online community, we introduce a model of corporate brand identity co-creation (see Figure 2). Our proposed model visualises the wider context under which management participates in brand identity formation and details three key processes through which managers can contribute to this socially negotiated process of nested corporate brand identity co-creation with the brand community and other stakeholders. The processes are nurturing brand passion, bridging, and partnering and constitute continuously ongoing and inter-related processes, as indicated by the bidirectional arrows. For instance, nurturing brand passion will facilitate bridging and partnering processes but equally the partnering process has the potential to further stimulate nurturing brand passion and bridging processes. By systemising the processes and inherent activities managers engage in to contribute to the process of corporate brand identity co-creation, this model shows the dialectical nature of the relationships between managers, community members and other

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stakeholders. The interactions between these social constituents, depicted through arrows of varying thickness, lead to the nested nature of brand identity co-creation.

The model builds on the premise that corporate brand identity co-creation follows an interactive and discursive socio-cultural process with various stakeholders (i.e. the brand community and general public) (Merz et al. 2009), acknowledging that fans and customers continuously reflect, negotiate, validate or object to discrepancies with their perception of corporate brand identity. Such a perspective rejects the idea of brand identity constituting a set of associations articulated and communicated by brand strategists (Aaker 1996), that are stable and enduring (Kapferer 2012). Instead, we corroborate the view that brand identity is processual and co-created through actions and interactions of a multitude of stakeholders and thus dynamic and fluid (Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006).

----------------------- Please enter Figure 2 about here ----------------------------------

The three dialectic processes, nurturing brand passion, bridging and partnering, constitute currently under-theorised co-creation activities. Each process serves a specific function. The process of *nurturing brand passion* is typified by the desire to raise the desirability and aspirations of brand ownership and nurture a strong bond and identification with the brand across stakeholders (e.g. customers, fans and potential customers), thereby satisfying their identity needs and contributing to the corporate brand identity construction. Crucial to this process is the creation of a brand family, through which managers create a context for social interactions to take place (Berthon et al. 2009). The meaningfulness of the brand family is built around the brand as a focal point of interaction where managers actively contribute to brand identity co-creation via sharing, staging and narrating imaginary brand experiences. Identities are constructed and narrated through storytelling (Woodside et al.

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2008), in which managers assume the role of partial brand authors (Allen et al. 2008). They communicate and assert meanings that they perceive constitute the corporate brand identity but are still pliable to assume relevancy to members of the brand community from which they may draw and claim as their own (Holt 2002). The story-driven approach also helps forge enduring and deep consumer-brand bonds (Thompson et al. 2006; Iglesias and Bonet 2012). In the context of Aston Martin, stories rich in sensational imaginary, with occasional reference to the superhero archetype James Bond (Cooper et al. 2010), make the brand accessible and act as powerful rhetorical interactions that help fans, customers and other stakeholders make sense of the corporate brand identity and inspire identification with the brand leading to a shared understanding of its identity.

The co-creation of corporate brand identity is further reinforced through the *bridging* process, which we view as negotiating and balancing various internal and external brand identity meanings with the objective to maintain cultural synergy. The plasticity of the brand identity (Michel 2017) and the phenomenological interpretations of its meaning (Edvardsson et al. 2011) allow for the emergence of similar or loosely competing brand identity meanings. This requires managers to embrace tensions that are likely to emerge across the nested system of identities (intended brand identity, individual and collective identities) (Kornum et al. 2017). The objective of such a process is to resolve the incongruity of brand identity meanings and minimise tensions, hence cultivating a meaning of corporate brand identity that is acceptable and relevant across various stakeholders. Core activities of the bridging process are not only to respond but to stimulate a dialogue with customers and fans that facilitates negotiating brand identity. By looking beyond the immediate dyad of the firm and the customer/fan group, managers employ the brand community to assess whether brand initiatives are viewed as legitimate by the brand community and allow for adjustments, if necessary.

The iconic brand image of a highly aspirational brand constitutes the brand's legitimacy at the collective level which reaches beyond the online community (Hakala et al. 2017). Such an image of collective legitimacy acts as a major source of value for customers (Deephouse and Suchman 2008). By encouraging customer-generated content, these value experiences (e.g. positive reactions by the general public) get reported back to the brand community and reinforce the collective legitimacy of the brand (Hakala et al. 2017). Brand managers can contribute to this cycle of reinforcing legitimacy by engaging in branding activities directed at the general public (e.g. James Bond hero story, contributing to social causes) as well as facilitating customer-generated content. This way, brand managers can stimulate and bridge brand identity formation across various stakeholders.

In the *partnering* process, firms and consumers "merge into one integrated process of coordinated actions, where both parties are active, learn together and from each other," (Gronroos 2011, p. 290). Partnering is demonstrated in our findings as AM community members are actively invited to share brand-related knowledge and experiences, produce user-generated content, as well as collaborate in marketing activities, which may include contributing to new product development, jointly producing marketing content, and providing critical feedback. As mentioned earlier for legitimising, taking a broader view of partnering looking beyond the immediate dyad of the firm and the customer/fans group enables a broader view of partnering to be taken, which considers how the brand community functions as a partner and in effect takes the role of a part-time marketer (Gummesson 1991), thus contributing to corporate brand identity construction. Emphasising this broader view of partnering is in line with the understanding that brand identity is co-created and determined collectively through the agency of various actors in the ecosystem (Merz et al. 2009).

6. Managerial contributions

Previous work has already urged managers to fundamentally adopt a new way of thinking by embracing the stakeholder marketing approach and developing necessary co-creation capabilities (Hillebrand et al. 2015). By viewing brand identity formation as a dynamic and ongoing process involving various stakeholders and resulting in a multiple of meanings, the role of managers is that of a co-author of brand identity meanings (Allen et al. 2008). This involves contributing to and stimulating the dialectic interactions between multiple stakeholders in order to facilitate congruence of brand identity meaning and legitimacy of the brand. With this in mind, managers can draw on the proposed model of corporate brand identity co-creation as a guide for designing collaborative marketing programmes with brand communities, enabling interaction and marshalling joint resources. For brand managers, it is important to provide an environment of trust (Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2016) to enable dialogue, exchange resources (e.g. stories, staging imaginary experiences) with brand community members such that they feel part of a larger family, as well as instil the aspirational nature of owning such a brand. It is vital that firm-owned platforms are available as they allow for interactional co-creation to occur (Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2018). In the context of iconic brands, the nested nature of brand identities also requires brand managers to carefully consider the marketing programme directed to audiences outside the immediate brand community. The corporate brand identity meanings ascribed by these audiences help legitimise the brand and brand ownership. In sum, these exchanges are the basis on which corporate brand identity is negotiated and how the meaning of corporate brand identity can be accentuated for brand community members and other individual stakeholders.

The dialogical and collective nature of corporate brand identity co-creation, as proposed in our model, would require a participatory leadership style that enables the organisation to share and work effectively together with customers and other stakeholders (Ind et al. 2013), by consulting them in marketing decision making and involving them in all brand-related planning and activities (Iglesias and Bonet 2012). We would argue that this needs to be underpinned by a corporate culture whose values and basic assumptions (Schein 1985) are aligned with viewing customers as partners, or as is the case here, as members of the family.

In terms of limitations, the proposed model of corporate brand identity co-creation has been derived from a single social media platform (i.e. company hosted Facebook brand community) and focuses on a single iconic brand. Nevertheless we propose that the underlying activities and processes are generic enough to be replicated in the context of iconic brands and brands with large communities and extensive user-generated content (Muñiz and Schau 2007) but encourage researchers to confirm its generalisability, especially across diverse platforms. Of interest is also its relevance and applicability to brands with smaller and/or less active brand communities.

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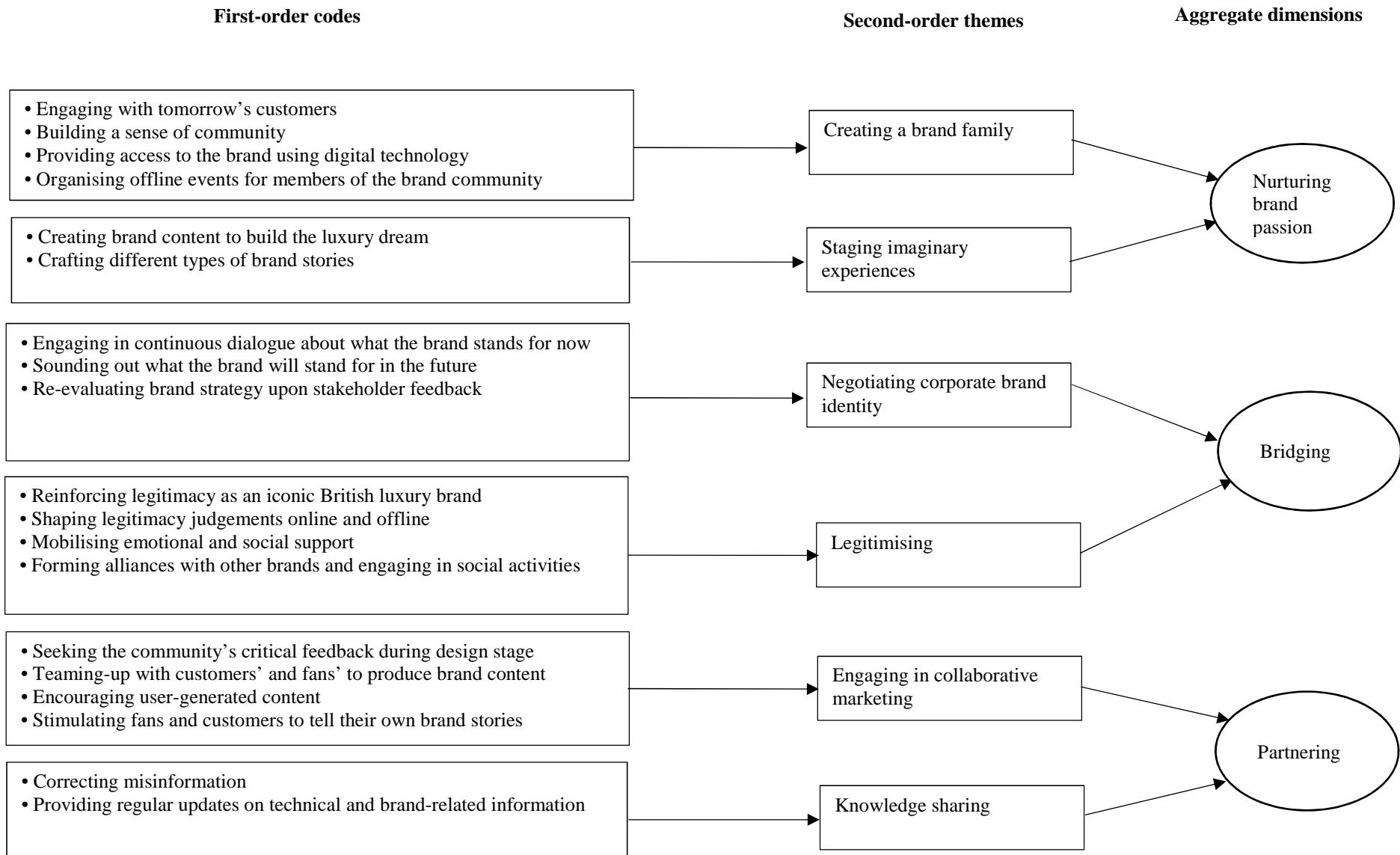Yin, R.K. (2009). Case Study Research: Design and Methods (4e). Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks, California.

First-order codes   **Second-order themes**   **Aggregate dimensions**

- Engaging with tomorrow's customers
- Building a sense of community
- Providing access to the brand using digital technology
- Organising offline events for members of the brand community

Creating a brand family

Nurturing brand passion

- Creating brand content to build the luxury dream
- Crafting different types of brand stories

Staging imaginary experiences

- Engaging in continuous dialogue about what the brand stands for now
- Sounding out what the brand will stand for in the future
- Re-evaluating brand strategy upon stakeholder feedback

Negotiating corporate brand identity

Bridging

- Reinforcing legitimacy as an iconic British luxury brand
- Shaping legitimacy judgements online and offline
- Mobilising emotional and social support
- Forming alliances with other brands and engaging in social activities

Legitimising

- Seeking the community's critical feedback during design stage
- Teaming-up with customers' and fans' to produce brand content
- Encouraging user-generated content
- Stimulating fans and customers to tell their own brand stories

Engaging in collaborative marketing

Partnering

- Correcting misinformation
- Providing regular updates on technical and brand-related information

Knowledge sharing

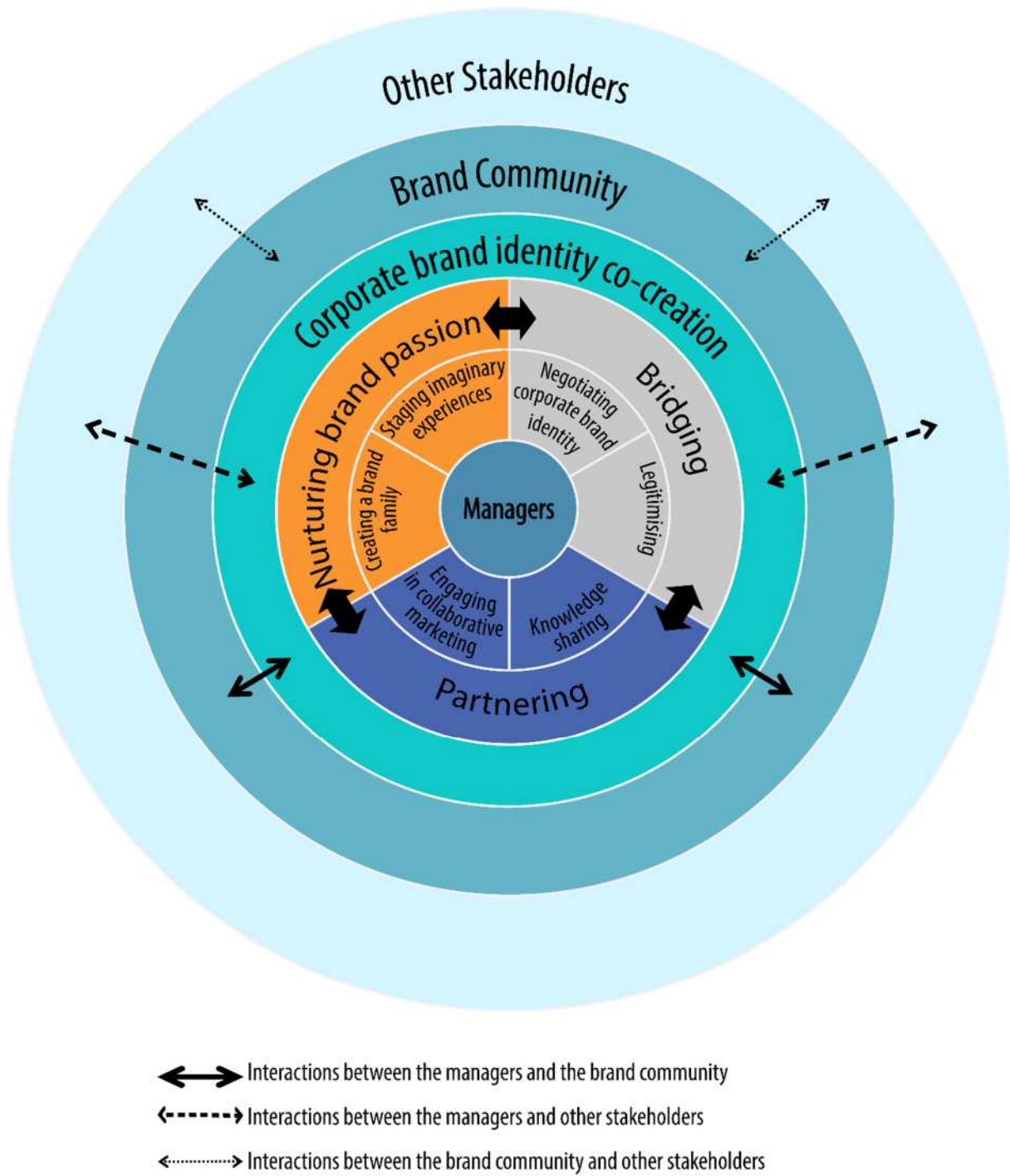**Figure 1. Data structure overview**

Figure 2. The dialectical process model of corporate brand identity co-creation