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FRAMING THE TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS OF A BRAND

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on existing research dealing with time in brand and brand management, this paper aims at providing a comprehensive and coherent framework of some time-related concepts, with a special emphasis on what happens when a brand reaches the senescence stage.

In addition, it strives to consider what happens when a brand becomes long-lived enough, looking at the brand's customer base. While undoubtedly time affects customers' age and generations, the demand side of the brand-customer relationship is actually under-researched.

Finally, a research agenda is developed, in order to improve what is currently known about such an important but neglected topic as the effects that the passing of time has both on the brand and on the consumers it addresses to.

Keywords: Brand longevity, brand survival, brand life-cycle, brand senescence, brand decline, brand death, target age, target generation, time-framed brand.

INTRODUCTION

Time represents a relevant dimension that affects marketing management, from product life-cycle, to logistics management, from improving and providing an effective customer service to time to market for succeeding and gaining a competitive advantage. This dimension can also be considered when focusing on brand strategy.

Whatever facet of a brand one considers, the passing of time exerts an influence. To name just a few, brand identity is not identical forever, brand personality modifies from time to time, brand equity changes over time. The elements of the brand identity change: think of the visual identity first; as far as the brand is seen having a human-like personality, it can naturally modify itself; brand equity rankings issued by various organizations show different results year after year.

In the academic literature, several time-related concepts linked to bands can already be found: brand senescence (Ewing, 2009), brand revitalization and brand death (Thomas and Kohli, 2009), brand survival (Wilcox et al., 2008), brand heritage (Urde, 2007) and so on. One way or another, all of them

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essentially focus on a particular stage of the life-cycle and look just at the supply side of the brand-audience relationship, i.e. the company's perspective.

Although the dimension of time is for sure an extremely important matter in everyday business, however two topics are still lacking of analysis from an academic perspective. The first one is the development of a comprehensive framework of the concepts related to time in brand and brand management. The second under-researched topic has to do with the effects the passing of time has on the audience the brand speaks to.

This paper has two main aims: the first is providing scholars with a comprehensive framework of the time-related concepts in brand and brand management; the second is suggesting a research agenda to start taking into account the temporal dimension of the audience of the brand, particularly related to the age and generations of the audience in relation to the age of the brand and its longevity.

The contribution of the article will be twofold: first, having a clearer list of the time-related concepts and of the mutual relationships existing among them; second, having some thoughtful directions for future research in the field of brand longevity that can take in due account the effects of the passing of time on the brand's customer base..

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: first a literature background about brand and its relationships with time and time-related concepts will be illustrated. After this, a comprehensive framework putting together brand's time-related concepts will be introduced. Finally, a discussion about the main directions for a research agenda about the topic will be suggested.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND ON TIME-RELATED BRAND CONCEPTS

As pointed out before, time represents a crucial element that might affect the management of several marketing dimensions. First of all, the management of brand in time is a crucial part of a long distance brand strategy. Previous literature has considered time applied to brand and brand strategy in several manners. Companies can decide to focus on different strategies to survive across the years. For instance, brand managers must maintain consistency to create strong, specific and easy to recognise images associated with their brands (Delgado-Ballester et al. 2012; Keller et al. 2001; Park et al. 1986); yet, at the same time, they must opt for maintaining brand relevance, which may require to be updated (Aaker, 2012; Holt and Cameron, 2010; Kapferer, 2014). Creating higher acquisition and retention rates leads to increased willingness to pay higher margins by customers (Stahl et al., 2012).

Brand relevance across time is a key issue in order to retain customers considered by previous research after 2005. However, depending on authors, context, and time when their studies were undertaken, the factors indicated as crucial for maintenance of brand relevance change. For instance, Bennett & Rundel-Thiele (2005) introduced the *Brand Loyalty Life Cycle Model.* When analysing brand

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equity components, they observed that generally, over the years, customers' attachment to brands decreases. The authors suggest that brand loyalty declines for two main reasons: firstly, the quality levels of branded products have risen to a standard where they no longer clearly differentiate the competing brands within the category, secondly: the perception of brands has a different meaning for new consumers than for long-time heavy users. Based on this study, brand relevance is an important longevity factor.

Another time related theme that previous literature considers is brand survival and its predictors. When studying brand survival in the wine industry, Wilcox *et al*. (2008) listed from Aaker *Brand Equity Model* (Aaker, 1991) two components: brand awareness and perceived quality. Their results suggest that brand awareness can be a good predictor of brand ability to survive in time. Referring to the brand equity framework, Thomas & Kohli (2009) claim that most brands with high levels of awareness or positive brand image are candidates for revival. They emphasise that branding is an exercise in patience. Most brands take a long time to build, and a long time to die. This process is a challenge in a corporate system, which usually rewards managers based on short-term performance. In their opinion, the brand revitalization process can be kick-started by addressing the causes of the decline; understanding why it may have failed to maintain its relevance; adjusting this, if necessary; and re-educating the market about new identity.

Referring to the holistic approach of brand management, another stream of research related to time is related to brand evolution. A close attention should be paid to the research by Merrilees (2005) who stresses the importance of brand evolution as a necessary component of a successful marketing strategy. Merrilees has also introduced the idea of three key constructs as a framework for analysing rebranding decisions: brand vision, brand orientation, and brand strategy implementation. Based on that, we can conclude that brand managers should continuously reassess brand vision relevance and company's brand orientation level and the ability to successfully implement its strategy in relation to the market. The opinion that brands need to be revised and reassessed is discussed by Tjiptono *et al.* (2006), who even state that brand is a specific asset which can be 'temporarily dead' and then reintroduced to the market. Tjiptono lays out four brand-specific characteristics: brand origin and brand ownership, brand architecture, brand scope, and brand size which are responsible for brand longevity defined as a continued presence of a brand in the relevant market. The bottom line is that a brand strategy should be continuously reassessed.

Focused on the last step of a brand life cycle, Ewing *et al.* (2009) point out that brands should be immortal and only managerial incompetence results in brand death. They refer to Groucutt (2006, p. 106) who argues that brand life expectancy can be increased by innovation and repositioning. Ewing *et al.* (2009) have introduced a model of *Brand Senescence*, where the key point is to help managers to

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recognise the moment when a brand starts to become irrelevant and needs to be innovated to survive. The model is composed of the following factors: constitutive utility (wellbeing and reflexive effects) and symbolic utility (symbol boredom and status relevance/irrelevance). The essence of this model is that successful brand attracts aspirational interest from non-owners who hold that successful brand in high esteem. As more non-owners achieve their goal and become associated with the brand they aspire to, the value for previous owners decreases. In the long run, the brand ultimately declines and runs out of aspirational consumers. Thus, the *Brand Senescence* model suggests that the key factor for a brand to be immortal is the ability to inspire people and be aspirational.

Another interesting research aspect of brand longevity related to Brand Life Cycle is explored by Butterfield (2007). This article draws the attention to the fact that brands and products have the same lifecycle. The key actions which help to renew brand's lifetime are adaptation and rejuvenation driven by innovation and re-positioning of the brand. Likewise, Bivainiene (2010) discussed the theoretical concept of the Brand Life Cycle Model. She highlighted that brand identity, and consequently brand image, is a key factor related to the brand life cycle, because it influences brand association by customers. Her model proposition is based on three principles: brand identity related to personal values and emotions gives the benefit of self-expression which reflects customer's image, brand identity as a root of customer-brand relationship, and brand identity as a reflection of brand coherence which reacts to changes adequately. In the context of brand life, the brand image is analysed as a result of consumers' opinions and actions. Not only, the brand image is the result of the relationship it has with the consumer, and the way she/he perceives and recognizes herself/himself with brand's values, cognitive characteristics and emotions (Kaufmann et al., 2012).Referring to brand consistency across time as a part of the literature review, it is worth having a closer look at studies of Rindell (2013). Rindell investigated the influence of inputs from consumers' past experiences of a company on their current image-construction processes. She found out that consumer images generated by relevant past experiences are a direct and influential input into real-time corporate image formation. Based on their qualitative researches she also introduced two concepts: "image heritage" and "image-in-use" - respectively, distinguishing consumers' past-based images from those they construct in real time. Image heritage is moderated by three principal variables: timespan of awareness, content of earlier experiences, and key temporal focus. Referring to "image heritage" Rindell & Iglesias (2014) conducted an online qualitative survey with regard to brand image construction processes over time. Their results suggest that time and context dimensions of brand experiences are strongly related to further brand images. In essence, past images from past experiences influence how present experiences are interpreted into current images and future expectations. In connection with our study it means that managers should, in systematic way, identify these specific memorable moments (time

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and context) which are most crucial for the consumers' brand image construction processes and transfer these findings onto brand management processes. This will allow them to follow the customer's lifetime and make brands always relevant. The idea of the influence of "image heritage" on strategy brand management was continued by Rindell *et al.* (2015). The findings of their researches suggest that key challenge for making brand always relevant across time is to find the right balance between company's and customer's and other stakeholders' brand image heritage.

According to the importance of the concept of "Brand heritage", Urde *et al*. (2007) and later on Balmer and Burghausen (2015) pointed out that brand heritage is a denotation of longevity. As Urde claimed, longevity does not necessarily result in a brand heritage, it can, however, be its key element. This can be especially true for family-owned brands. Moreover, even timelessness can be considered as an important brand attribute: "The problem is that the quality of timelessness takes years to develop, even decades. You cannot just decree it. A brand has to pay its dues - it has to come to stand for something in the eyes of the world" (Wetlaufer, 2001, p. 122). Therefore, brand heritage as source of longevity is important for companies with a long tradition, where company heritage and brand heritage are very closely related.

Beverland *et al.* (2015) examined existing theories on brand consistency and relevance and concluded that although these theories present some guidelines to help brand managers resolve the competing imperatives of brand consistency and relevance, following them would assure sustainable performance of a brand rather than brand development. In consequence, they introduced their own concept of *Brand Ambidexterity,* where brands managers need to find the appropriate balance between consistency and relevance based on the idea of service-dominant logic (Merz et al., 2009) and through the methodology of design thinking (Brown, 2009; Dorst, 2011) which can stimulate brand innovation. In their opinion, the combination of these two approaches is the best way to succeed in search for the right balance across years. Service Dominant Logic is about customer centricity as a fundamental company's mindset (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). Design Thinking Methodology focuses on how things (e.g. products and brands) ought to be to achieve novelty and workable solutions (Cross, 2011; Kimbell, 2011). Beverland *et al.* (2015) suggested that brand managers become more like designers when adopting a design thinking approach to brand management and that *Brand Ambidexterity* concept helps brand managers possess a capability of building two things: consistency and relevance of brands.

Urde (2016) introduced the Brand Core concept and how it has been evolving over time. This paper defined a set of core brand values supporting a brand promise defined as a sum of inner meanings of a brand, to communicate its value proposition and to clarify its position (de Chernantony, 2009). The Brand Core is based on three management perspectives: PATHOS - appealing to emotions and the

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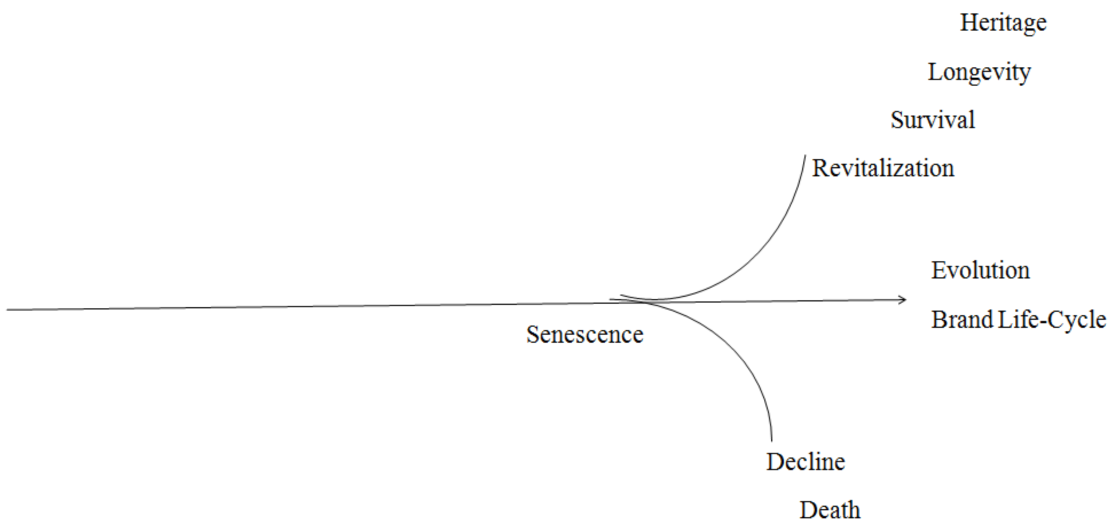
will of customers, ETHOS – appealing to brand personality, and LOGOS – appealing to reason and understanding of customers. These three perspectives give a fundamental meaning to the brand promise, and vice versa, as a point of reference in long-term management. The presented framework is intended to be an aid for the strategic brand management, to explore the core of the brand (universal criteria) and for its consistent management (continuity criteria) and communication over time (dynamic criteria). Urde (2016) suggests that management must measure the essential brand core elements over time. By tracking the internal foundation and commitment of the brand – combined with external appreciation and perceptions of the brand promise and the core values – management can continuously evaluate the strength and performance of the brand core. Such a managerial tool serves as an early warning system and an essential guide in strategic brand management.

A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK OF TIME-RELATED BRAND CONCEPTS.

Past research has undoubtedly examined many time-related concepts in brand and brand management. Quite often, however, each concept is considered in relative isolation from the other ones, so that the knowledge available is somehow disconnected. In the following figure, we try to put such concepts together in order to create a single coherent framework.

Fig. 1 – Time-related brand concepts



According to a general life-cycle model, sooner or later at a certain stage brand senescence will occur. Depending on which brand strategy marketers implement different scenarios will happen. In the worst case, brand decline will follow and, unless marketers are able to put the brand back on a revitalization track, it will likely results in brand death. On the other side, after senescence brand can be revitalized and consequently it will survive, thus resulting in brand longevity. It is very likely that

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such brand will be able to benefit from a certain amount of heritage, since some time will be obviously elapsed.

TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA ON BRAND AND TIME-RELATED CONCEPTS

The extant literature on time-related concepts applied to branding research raises some questions. With few exceptions, published research in this domain focuses primarily on a specific period of time (often the decline phase) or focuses on just one dimension or element regarding branding strategy (brand meaning, brand design, brand core etc.). In addition, no research summarizes existing works on overall time-related concepts of brand. The academic debate remains open about which brand strategies are better to follow in order to guarantee brand survival and longevity.

In light of the quoted works, being relevant and always up to date seems for a brand to be a better strategy than only to be consistent. On the other side, brand heritage, as an outcome of longevity, may be a strong element lending weight and making a brand stand out in the market. Managers responsible for brands with a background abundant with traditions should, as much as others, follow Brand Life Cycle in order to maintain Brand Core Relevance. Strategies for finding and implementing the appropriate balance between consistency and relevance vary, and depend on several aspects, namely: the market, industry and product category as well as the already discussed brand heritage.

For the above reasons, some of still open and unanswered questions that future research can address may be the following:

- what are the main drivers for brand longevity maintenance? Some empirical research is needed for providing best practices of brand survival and longevity (Tjiptono et al., 2006; Wilcox et al., 2008);
- is it better to be a timeless brand that relies on tradition and heritage (Urde et al., 2007) or being a “up to date” brand that continuously rejuvinates itself and to survive (Thomas and Kohli, 2009)?

Beyond the above questions, further aspects are still missing.

Actually, no one can hardly deny that reaching a certain extent in longevity is for any brand both difficult and fruitful. Consequently, a good number of papers deal with the issue of getting old enough, since longevity is reckoned as a positive result to obtain. Longevity means heritage and heritage is in turn a good driver of brand equity (Rindell et al., 2015).

But, to the best of our knowledge, no research has ever considered the effects of brand longevity on the brand’s customer base and its implications on brand management. In other words, the demand side of the relationship with the brand has been totally neglected.

When time goes by, in fact, it is highly presumable that customers of different ages will be part of the same customer base. In addition,the more the brand is long-lived the more various the ages will be.

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Therefore brand managers will be confronted with the necessity of managing a brand that speaks to a differently aged audience.

So, it seems quite interesting to investigate what happens in the brand's customer base when the brand's life spans over a certain number of years.

To analyze the issue of the temporal heterogeneity of the customer base, we need to introduce three concepts:

Calendar time: the year or, for the sake of simplicity, the decade we are referring to: 1970, 1980, 1990, etc.;

Target age of consumers: the typical age of customers the brand is addressing; let's say teenagers, people in their twenties, thirties and so on;

Generation: target age linked to calendar time. Customers belonging to a target age born in a given decade. For example, starting with 1950 as calendar time, teenagers who were born in 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000; people in their twenties who were born in 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990; people in their thirties who were born in 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980; people in their forties who were born in 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980 and so on.

Based on these premises, some open research questions are:

- as a brand reaches a certain longevity, are managers aware of the different clusters of consumers based on their age and/or generation?
- how is it possible to distinguish among customers, according to their generation?
- do all the long-lived brands have the same composition in terms of age and generation of the customer base?
- in case a brand's customer base is made of different ages and/or generations, do these different groups of customers share the same brand image or not?
- in case of multiple generations in the customer base, how can marketers manage the coexistence of such generations, in terms for instance of brand identity?
- is it possible to predict brand survival in the future observing the time-related dimensions of the brand's customer base?

Based on these questions, further research is needed in order to better explore this phenomenon. In addition, beyond conceptual research, additional empirical research about this topic is called for. Qualitative studies could better delve into the subject, for instance better defining the antecedents and consequences of brand longevity across time. Later on, quantitative studies could validate the results from the qualitative studies, testing hypotheses about the existence of some relationships among brand longevity and customer's base age and generation.

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