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Co-creating Stakeholder and Brand Identities:

Introduction to the Special Section

Sylvia von Wallpach, Ben Voyer, Minas Kastanakis, Hans Mühlbacher

Abstract

This article introduces the special section on reciprocal co-creation of stakeholder and brand identities. Branding research and practice traditionally focus on the managerial creation and implementation of brand identity. Based on recent paradigmatic shifts from managerial to co-creative branding and from consumer to multi-stakeholder approaches in marketing, this special section develops a dynamic, process-oriented perspective on brand identity. Brand identity continuously emerges as a dynamic outcome of social processes of stakeholder interaction. Reciprocally, brand identity plays a potentially important role in ongoing interactive identity development processes of stakeholders. The special section contributes to deepening the understanding of this reciprocal co-creation of stakeholder and brand identities, through a series of conceptual and empirical articles. The Introduction reviews four articles as well as related commentaries and discusses their contributions towards establishing a new dynamic paradigm of co-created and reciprocal brand and stakeholder identities.

1. Introduction

For a very long time research on brands and branding based on seminal works in academic literature (Aaker, 1996; Gardner & Levy, 1955; Keller, 1993) has treated brands as rather static results of intentional managerial actions. Today, an increasing number of

publications advocate a stakeholder- and process-oriented perspective on brands (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). Brands are no longer the product of managerial efforts only (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013). Empowered by new social media, a continuous multiplicity of stakeholders (Hillebrand, Driessen, & Koll, 2015) engage in networked interactions and co-create brands. Recent paradigmatic shifts in branding thought from managerial to co-creative and from consumer to multi-stakeholder approaches account for these tendencies (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2013; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Still, branding theory and practice have not fully embraced a dynamic way of thinking and operating, which is deemed a necessity for developing and maintaining successful brands in today's dynamic environment.

This special issue aims to advance dynamic branding thought by furthering a dynamic, process-oriented perspective on brand identity—a concept that is core to both branding theory and practice. Traditional management-oriented literature defines brand identity as “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create and maintain” (Aaker, 1996, p. 68) or as “a long lasting and stable reference” (Kapferer, 2008, p. 37). According to this literature, brand identity is a creation of managerial decision-making and implementation (Kapferer, 2008). Insights from social theories (Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959, 1967; Hall, 1996) allow suggesting that brand identity is “dynamic, reciprocal, and iterative in nature” (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 45; see also Gioia, 1998; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010): A co-created phenomenon that emerges from continuous dialectic processes of interaction in social contexts (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Branding research provides numerous examples for these iterative identity construction processes involving multiple stakeholders who reflect upon, appraise, negotiate, and contest the brand. Literature illustrates that individuals actively contribute to construct identities

of brands affecting their personal lives. By disseminating brand knowledge, expectations, evaluations, experiences and ways of usage, consumers contribute to a brand's identity (Mumby and Clair, 1997). In a similar manner, other stakeholders, such as employees, investors, suppliers, intermediaries or media, contribute in a conscious or unconscious manner to the development of brand identity (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, & McDonald, 2005; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Consumers, employees and retailers become manifestations of a brand's meaning; media can be advocates or adversaries pointing out specific traits of brand identity.

Stakeholders involved in processes of brand identity co-creation simultaneously engage in the construction of their own identities (Scott & Lane, 2000). Brands have an impact on consumers by contributing to and reflecting their intended personalities and identities (Belk, 1988; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). Brand identities help retailers, suppliers and investors build their own identities. The identities of employees depend to some extent on the identities of the brands they help creating (Chouinard, 2006). Stakeholder identity emerges from ongoing interaction with other members of the same stakeholder group but also with different stakeholders. Stakeholder identities emerge through the specific use of brands in given contexts and depend on the meanings these brands have to other stakeholders.

This special section aims at furthering an understanding of the reciprocal dynamic co-creation processes of stakeholder and brand identities. The following four articles and associated commentaries expand the limits of extant theoretical conceptualizations by focusing not only on brand identity co-creation processes of stakeholders or on individual or group identity construction processes that involve the use of brands. The special section contributes new theoretical and empirical insights into the iterative processes of stakeholder interaction involved in the co-creation of brand identity as well as the simultaneously occurring processes of

stakeholder identity co-creation. Invited commentaries further deepen or problematize the authors' approaches and empirical findings.

2. Contents of the special section

The special section contains four articles and four related commentaries. The section starts with a conceptual perspective on reciprocal brand and stakeholder identity co-creation processes in diverse cultural environments. The conceptual article deepens and extends our theoretical knowledge on reciprocal identity co-creation, while extending it to a cross-cultural context. The section then turns to a series of empirical studies, looking at various empirical evidence of reciprocal identity co-creation and considering a large diversity of stakeholders ranging from employees and managers to consumers and community members. The empirical articles focus on specific issues of, and forward different perspectives on, multi-stakeholder identity co-creation processes. For each of the theoretical and empirical articles the editors invited leading scholars in the field to provide commentaries to the article, suggesting theoretical improvements and future research. The following description of the articles draws from the authors' abstracts to give an accurate account of the intended contribution.

Voyer, Kastanakis and Rhode (2016-this issue) extend brand identity co-creation theory by showing how culture, both in terms of its collective and individual manifestations, can affect the process, nature and outcome of reciprocal identity co-creation. Their conceptual framework offers a series of propositions to deepen our understanding of the reciprocal identity co-creation mechanisms. The core finding is that reciprocal identity co-creation is likely to be affected by cultural differences, and results in different types of co-created identities, both on the brand and stakeholder side.

Csaba's (2016-this issue) commentary on this article raises awareness for the relevance of other cultural dimensions—besides individualism and collectivism—and alternative approaches to cross-cultural research for exploring cultural variations in stakeholders' co-construction of brand identity and their own identities. Csaba suggests replacing the value-centered approach to culture by an understanding of culture as something “dynamic and unsettled, more than cognitive, disjunctive, and not necessarily bounded to geography”. In his view culture includes other important aspects such as habits, rituals, practices, heroes, language and symbols. “Abstract variables fail to capture the rich cultural content of social factors and, as such, are uninformed by and uninformative about concrete social life” and the subtleties of local culture. Considering multiple aspects of cultural difference, interactions between these aspects, and the continuous influence of various cultures on each other can provide additional, relevant insights into reciprocal identity co-construction processes between brands and stakeholders.

Having as a context the Yes Scotland political campaign and using ethnographic data collected primarily from a local group of volunteers in Yes Edinburgh North & Leith (YENL), part of Yes Scotland, the national referendum campaign supporting Scottish independence, Black and Veloutsou (2016-this issue) explore the reciprocal identity co-creation of a brand, individual consumers and the brand community formed by these consumers. The authors analyze the reciprocal relationships of the players in dyads, brand and individual consumers, brand and brand community, and individual consumers and brand community, over time. The findings suggest that specific symbols and processes affecting the other entities beyond the dyads facilitate the co-creation of identities. The involvement and engagement of the working consumers influences the degree of identity trait exchanges between the three entities. Consumer groups highly involved in the development of an actual offer do not only benefit the brand through their creativity, but they

contribute in the development, authentication and modification of the brand identity through their actions that express their individual personality and experiences. Brand managers have to monitor and influence actions that potentially move the identity of the brand in unanticipated directions.

Brodie (2016 - this issues) highlights the specific role of the political marketing agent, which, in the case of the “Yes Scotland” campaign triggered multiple dynamic opportunities to create dialogues between all stakeholders, thus enhancing reciprocal value co-creation. According to Brodie, two processes are involved: *brand identification*, and *Branding as Shared and Common Meanings*, each contributing to the reciprocal identity and value co-creation process. In the first one, the political marketing agent acts as the initiator of the physical identity, and in the second one, it acts as a facilitator of interactions, which eventually result in a co-creation process. Altogether, Brodie concludes by discussing how the learning objectives and marketing activities differ among the two processes.

Based on data from a participatory ethnographic study in Denmark, Kornum and Jones (2016-this issue) underline that a wide variety of stakeholders in an ecosystem enact and co-create brand identity. The intended brand identity deliberately formed by brand management surfaces as values and artifacts articulate. Stakeholders use these artifacts and interpret the proposed values in their own manner, thereby forming their own identities but enacting the brand identity at the same time. The research compares individual and collective articulations of a Nike-related brand community with articulations of the intended brand identity. Findings show a nested system of identities emerging from the interplay between inside-out brand management and outside-in brand community and individual actions. Identity differences and resulting tensions in the nested system are important drivers for synergy. Consumers use and create brand

artifacts in a widespread and visible manner on the community level. Coping with the resulting tensions is more urgent on the collective as compared to the individual level of the community. The community copes with the incurred tension by letting the commercial brand artifacts become verbal and tacit communicative elements of the collective “space” of community life.

In his commentary of the article Kozinets (2016-this issue) welcomes the multifaceted and reciprocal view of brands and stakeholders enacting their identity embedded in cultural contexts. Kozinets suggests attempting to understand the complex phenomenon with every method that we can, analyzing branding in a non-reductive manner. He compares studying nested brand networks in context to studying the world on the back of a tiger who sits on the back of an elephant balanced on a turtle’s back, who is balanced on another turtle’s back, and another’s, with turtles all the way down, endless. One identity of a brand leads to another and another and again another. Future brand research cannot neglect that nested identity ecosystem.

Von Wallpach, Hemetsberger and Espersen (2016-this issue) further develop a process perspective on brand identity by illuminating the reciprocal performative co-construction of stakeholder and brand identity in the context of the LEGO brand. Based on detailed considerations of individual and social identity theory, a critique of research on brand identity, and a review of current performative approaches to branding, this study applies a performativity theory perspective. This perspective implies an agentic view of identity co-construction and perceives identity as something that one “does” or “performs” rather than something that one “has”. The empirical study finds that brand performances—encompassing playing and liking, basement building and showcasing, creating and innovating, community building and facilitating, storytelling, missionizing, and marketplace developing—exhibit generic ludic, creative, economic, and socializing qualities and co-construct involved identities. The findings

highlight the strong interrelatedness of company and stakeholders as agents of brand performance and the important role of managers as active performers, facilitators, and guardians of brand identity co-construction.

Michel (2016-this issue) endorses this view of brands as complex social relations that develop among a multitude of enacted stakeholder identities and discusses in what ways this research may lead to a novel paradigm of brand building – one that highlights the dynamic and fluid character of brand identity. Michel takes this opportunity to underline how important it is to better understand the various ways in which (internal and external) stakeholders can contribute to brand-identity construction. In addition, she points to current misunderstandings within the branding literature while suggesting how this research is positioned to contribute in resolving such confusions. Overall, the paper by von Wallpach, Hemetsberger and Espersen (2016-this issue) opens a new avenue of fascinating research questions that can lead to a better understanding of stakeholders' role in the construction of polysemous brands identities.

3. Perspectives and further research

Recent research criticizes conventional branding literature for using identity only as a metaphor and for treating identity as static and driven by the decisions of brand management; while paying limited attention to the dynamic contexts surrounding brands (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; da Silveira et al., 2013). In stark contrast, the contributions in this special section fully acknowledge the dynamic and socially constructed nature of brand identity. The articles and related commentaries presented in this special section show brand identity to be multifaceted and continuously emerging from the interactions of a continuous multiplicity of brand stakeholders (Hillebrand et al., 2015) embedded in diverse cultural environments.

Kornum and Jones (2016-this issue) demonstrate the nested nature of brand and stakeholder identities and the continuous (re-)emerging of various identities through the interplay of a multiplicity of stakeholders; Black and Veloutsou (2016-this issue) show how the actions of individuals, groups and brand management influence each other in such a nested identity ecosystem; von Wallpach et al. (2016-this issue) illustrate how the identity performances of a multiplicity of stakeholders co-construct brand and stakeholder identities; while Voyer et al. (2016-this issue) underline the importance of the cultural context to reciprocal identity co-creation processes. The central message of all of these contributions is that branding research can use social and individual identity research approaches to their fullest extent instead of using the term identity as a simple metaphor.

The managerial consequences of this turn in brand identity research become evident. Managers no longer are in the driver's seat. Brand management is an important stakeholder in ongoing processes of brand-related interactions, often taking the initiative and setting various stimuli to influence stakeholders' interactions. However, the contributions to this special section highlight that reciprocal identity co-creation processes additionally depend on a multiplicity of stakeholders. These stakeholders create their own expressions of brand identity, (mis)use parts of brand meaning for their own purposes, and actively negotiate brand meaning. Brand management must continuously monitor important stakeholders' (inter)actions and adapt their managerial initiatives accordingly. Brand identity management is not a simple strategic top-down process any longer - neither immune to cultural influences. Altogether, findings from this special section suggest that managers have much to learn from understanding and nurturing the reciprocal aspects of brand-identity co-creation.

By providing first insights into the reciprocal processes of stakeholder and brand identity co-creation, this special section opens the floor for further research. Future research should adopt different and multiple methodological approaches to gain an even deeper understanding of the complex processes of reciprocal identity co-creation in dynamic cultural contexts. Challenges for researchers range from measurement and methodological issues in reciprocal identity co-creation research, to understanding the evolution of reciprocal identity co-creation processes over time.

~~Ben & Minas: Please finalize this section with your ideas...~~

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