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Reconceptualizing brand identity in a dynamic environment[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Brand identity definitions predominately take a unilateral and aspirational perspective—what managers want the brand to be—while emphasizing the need for stability over time. The increasingly dynamic environment and the rising role of consumers as co-contributors to brand construction and development demand rethinking this perspective. This paper seeks to advance the established conceptualization of brand identity by revising the definition and proposing brand identity as dynamic, constructed over time through mutually influencing inputs from managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers). Drawing on a seminal definition from the field of sociology, underpinning the socially constructed nature of identity, the authors propose an innovative managerial framework that challenges established approaches of brand identity, within the new market context.

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1. Introduction

Researchers and practitioners recognize the role of brand identity as an essential tool to effectively differentiate and manage brands (Aaker, 1996; Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 1999; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2008). When considering brand options, "there are too many choices available today for customers to make the effort to work out what makes a particular brand specific" (Kapferer, 2008, p. 178). This growing competitiveness makes differentiation, and therefore brand identity, increasingly important.

Branding literature has tended to define brand identity as an internal construct that emanates unilaterally from the organization—what managers want the brand to be—and that requires stability over time (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008). Accordingly, brand managers should develop and maintain a clear and consistent identity, so that brands can serve as stable references for consumers (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008). Several management-oriented business publications have endorsed this approach, recommending a fixed brand identity. A widely-held belief is that a stable brand identity can help firms navigate and adapt to market changes (Collins & Porras, 1994). In practice, and consistent with this principle, companies seek to stabilize the identity of their brands over time. For example, Nestlé currently re-examines its brands' identities every four years.

However, the environment is increasingly dynamic and many markets are experiencing unexpected mutations and hard-to-predict transformations. Furthermore, the marketing domain is evolving to a new dominant logic, in which exchange processes and relationships among market actors are increasingly central (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Proactive consumer involvement (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000) requires co-opting consumer participation in the value-creation process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), whereby consumers become active contributors (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009; Prahalad, 2004). Such challenges call for a new insight into the conceptualization of brand identity.

This paper seeks to advance the notion of brand identity by re-conceptualizing brand identity as dynamic and emanating from multiple actors (e.g., brand managers, consumers). Three insights provide support for this rationale: (1) Although definitions do not clearly articulate the dynamic understanding of brand identity, this idea is present in branding literature through brand identity frameworks (e.g., Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 1999; Kapferer, 1986); (2) Parallel domains of research conceptualize identity as dynamic, engaging several social constituents (e.g., work in sociology and social psychology—Goffman, 1959; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; in organizational identity—Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2004; Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; in corporate identity—Handelman, 2006); (3) Emerging research streams in marketing, such as the new service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Brown et al., 2003; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Holt, 2004; Schau &

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Gilly, 2003) provide further support for the importance of co-creation and consumer experiences (Payne et al., 2009; Prahalad, 2004; Kelly & Lawlor, 2010).

Drawing on multiple areas of research, this paper attempts to clarify what brand identity is and introduces a perspective for studying brand identity that acknowledges the increasingly dynamic market environment and the rising role of the consumer as a co-creator of brands. The authors suggest that brand identity management ought to be a dynamic process and, consequently, that managers need to reshape brand identity over time according to environmental changes and inputs from other social constituents (e.g., consumers).

2. Literature review

2.1. Background on brand identity

According to Csaba and Bengtsson (2006, p. 118) “in the vast branding literature, there are many views of brand identity”. In fact, several authors compare existing views in an attempt to elaborate an overall understanding of brand identity. Such task appears to be complex since brand identity definitions and brand identity frameworks do not always convey the same meaning. This lack of consensus may result from the evolution of idiosyncrasies in the brand identity domain (Holt, 2002).

2.1.1. Brand identity definitions

Traditionally, branding literature portrays brand identity as the uniqueness and essential idea of the brand (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2008). Two features emerge from this view: aspirational and enduring.

“Aspirational”. Scholars in brand management currently define brand identity as an internal and aspirational construct that emanates unilaterally from the brand management. Aaker, for example, adopts a strategist perspective of the concept by portraying brand identity as (1) “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain” (Aaker, 1996, p. 68), and as (2) a tool that “represents what the organization can and will do over time” (Aaker & Joachminsthaler, 2000, p. 13). de Chernatony (2010, p. 55) challenges this view by arguing that “one of the weaknesses of this perspective is that managers focus on internal aspect of branding” and that “thought also needs to be given to the way customers perceive the brand”.

“Enduring”. Recent research examines the connection between market environment dynamics and brand identity durability (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). If the market environment is especially dynamic, should the brand identity be enduring, so that brands can serve as “anchors of meaning” (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006, p. 130) for the consumers, or should the brand identity be flexible and adaptive? The sense given to “enduring” is essential to address this question. Despite the frequent use of the term enduring in the literature, few authors explicitly define the notion. In fact, the term assumes different meanings in different contexts.

In the branding literature, Kapferer (2008, p. 37) suggests that the brand is the memory of the product and should act as “a long lasting and stable reference”. Within this context, enduring means long lasting and relevant. The brand must maintain its identity, and in so doing, respects its “contract” (Kapferer, 2008, p. 38) with itself, with its mission, and with its consumers. Some authors (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008) suggest that, in addition to its uniqueness, an enduring brand identity must be resistant to change. While acknowledging brand identity change in exceptional circumstances (e.g., when the current brand identity is obsolete, tired, or appeals to a limited market), they suggest that, although challenging, strong brands should maintain their identity constant for long periods of time, and recommend resisting the temptation to change brand identity in order, for example, to address new market trends and/or to boost sales and profits.

Practitioner oriented literature proposes that enduring stands for “constant yet flexible” (Interbrand, 2007) and attempts to establish which parts of the brand values should remain constant and which should be flexible. According to Collins and Porras (1994, p. XV), enduring means “preserving core values and purpose, while changing cultural and operating practices, specific goals and strategies”. Interbrand (2007) proposes a 70/30 principle for global branding—70% of the brand must remain absolutely consistent and 30% can be flexible—ensuring that while the core meaning of the brand remains unchanged, the brand can evolve.

The above discussion suggests that two perspectives on enduring brand identity co-exist: (1) static, fixed and unchanged as time goes by, independent of environmental context, and (2) dynamic, where core values maintain consistency over time, with continuous (partial) adjustments to environmental changes. This study takes the view that “enduring brand identity” should have a dynamic meaning. Such a perspective entails flexibility for brand evolution to market and environmental changes, while keeping the static idea of establishing long lasting references and maintaining stable anchors for consumers' identities.

2.1.2. Brand identity frameworks

In the last decades, leading scholars in brand marketing have developed frameworks to conceptualize brand identity (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 1999; Kapferer, 1986; Upshaw, 1995). Academic literature cites these frameworks (e.g., Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003) and industry widely uses them. Brand identity frameworks appear to include consumers' inputs, aside from the (expected) management's aspirational dimensions, confirming the incorporation of market feedback in the development of brand identity (see Table 1). For example, Kapferer's framework (1986) simultaneously incorporates managers' (physical, relationship, personality, culture, and consumer reflection) and consumers' inputs (self-image). Aaker's brand identity system (1996) provides a value proposition that includes self-expressive benefits—the expression of the consumers' self-identity. A dynamic understanding of brand identity is therefore present in branding literature through these frameworks, albeit not in the definitions.

Practitioners have also developed brand identity frameworks as illustrations of their experience in brand management. Companies, advertising agencies, and consulting firms have created their own frameworks, for example Unilever's proprietary “Brand Key Tool”, Nestlé's brand identity scheme, and “Interbrand Newell and Sorrell's Brand Blueprint” (Blackett & Boad, 1999). Although some of these frameworks do not distinguish brand identity from brand positioning, they combine the strategist vision—what the managers want the brand to be—and the receiver's vision—what the brand is, according to the consumers (see Table 2).

The concern for what brand identity really is, whether the internal vision of the brand managers, as depicted in current definitions, the external perceptions of the consumers, or a combination of both perspectives, as expressed in current frameworks, reflects the blurred distinction between brand identity, brand image, and brand positioning. Similar to earlier conceptualizations of corporate identity and organizational identity (Simões, Dibb, & Fisk, 2005), the notions of brand identity, brand image, and brand positioning frequently overlap, in the literature and in practice. Table 3 summarizes the connections in the branding literature between brand identity and related concepts such as brand image and brand positioning.

This paper takes the view that brand image focuses on targets' overall perception of the brand (Kapferer, 2008) while brand positioning means emphasizing the distinctive characteristics that make the brand different from its competitors (Keller, 2003).

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