# An online discursive inquiry into the social dynamics of multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation

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## ABSTRACT

Brand research increasingly recognizes the active role of multiple stakeholders in co-creating brand meaning and the importance of new social media supporting stakeholders in their co-creation efforts. However, empirical insights into the social process of online multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation are so far missing. This study contributes to existing research by illuminating the social dynamics that characterize multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation in a virtual environment. The authors undertake an online discursive inquiry focusing on stakeholders' textual interactions regarding the UK Gate Gourmet brand crisis. The empirical study aggregates online stakeholder texts to illustrate (a) relationships between salient stakeholders and (b) discursive strategies and resources stakeholders apply to co-create brand meaning. The article concludes that brand meaning results from simultaneous interactions between interdependent stakeholders in a network (termed multi-log). Successfully managing brands requires management's active engagement in this multi-log.

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## 1. Introduction

Brand research increasingly acknowledges the fact that traditional managerially oriented and customer-focused concepts of branding do not capture brand reality in its entirety. Brands are neither unilaterally created by management nor solely relevant for customers. The importance of stakeholder-oriented brand management considering the active role of multiple stakeholders in co-creating brands and their meanings increases (cf. Gummesson, 2006). Especially corporate branding literature stresses the importance of brands for multiple stakeholders (e.g., Balmer & Gray, 2003). However, evidence for active stakeholder brand co-creation so far mainly exists for consumers (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993). Only recently, brand research moves towards a multi-stakeholder co-creation perspective, perceiving brands as social processes resulting from interactions in stakeholder networks (e.g., Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009).

New social media particularly support these co-creation processes by providing stakeholders that never met offline with unprecedented opportunities for joint brand-related interaction (cf. Hatch & Schultz, 2010). These stakeholders might have different expectations regarding a brand (Jones, 2005) and different resources to uphold their brand-related interests (cf. Renn, 1992). Online platforms enable stakeholders to exchange brand opinions and experiences with each other in (un-)

filtered forums (Asmussen, Harridge-March, Occhiocupo, & Farquhar, 2010). Brand meanings that online texts express add to the meaning management intends for its brand, and to the meanings multiple stakeholders associate with a brand (Asmussen et al., 2010). Specific social dynamics might characterize this social process of online multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation that cannot be observed offline. Branding literature does so far not provide (a) a theoretical conceptualization of brands as online social processes or (b) empirical insights into the social dynamics characterizing online multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation (cf. Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz et al., 2009).

The present article contributes to brand research by shedding light on the textual representation of the social dynamics underlying online multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation. The paper conceptualizes brands as online social processes from a linguistic, hermeneutic perspective (Hatch & Rubin, 2006). This perspective views brands as social processes represented by constant online textual interactions in a stakeholder network and brand meanings as dynamic online textual expressions of what stakeholders have in mind about a brand (cf. Hatch & Rubin, 2006).

The empirical study relies on a case study that allows understanding the phenomenon of interest in-depth (cf. Woodside, 2010). The authors undertake an online discursive inquiry focusing on stakeholders' textual interactions regarding the UK Gate Gourmet brand crisis, which mainly revolves around labor right issues. The empirical investigation illuminates (a) the network of relationships between salient stakeholders and (b) the discursive strategies and resources stakeholders apply to co-create brand meaning. The study identifies three main discursive strategies (offense, defense, and neutrality) and a variety of discursive

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resources stakeholders use to co-create brand meaning. Changes in discursive resource allocation strategies over time lead to shifts in stakeholder salience and add to the stakeholder network's dynamic nature.

The multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation dynamics this paper illustrates strongly depend on the unprecedented opportunities virtual spaces provide. New social media allow like-minded brand stakeholders to join forces and merge resources to achieve their goals—generating strong interdependencies between stakeholders. The simultaneous interaction among multiple stakeholders (termed multi-log) changes brand management's role: management can no longer control brand meaning but is only one of many actors in the brand meaning co-creation process and needs to actively engage in a multi-log with salient stakeholders.

## 2. Theoretical development

### 2.1. Emergence of the stakeholder brand co-creation era

Branding literature and practice traditionally apply a managerial perspective, assuming that management creates and unilaterally communicates the brand's meaning to customers who are passive receivers and ideally react as management intends (cf. Keller, 2003). Recent research acknowledges the limitation arising from both the predominantly managerial orientation as well as the narrow customer focus of branding literature. A call for stakeholder-oriented brand management considering the active role of multiple stakeholders arises (cf. Gummesson, 2006).

Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) first highlights the importance of managing relationships with multiple stakeholders, that is, "any groups or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p.16). Corporate branding literature introduces a similar thought to branding research by stressing the importance of multiple stakeholders for corporate brands (e.g., Balmer & Gray, 2003; Chun & Davies, 2006). For instance, employees represent an important stakeholder group since they are brand ambassadors who spread intended corporate brand meaning to customers (e.g., Schultz & de Chernatony, 2002). More recently, corporate branding research introduces a more systematic approach acknowledging the existence of complex systems of multiple interrelated stakeholders (e.g., Gregory, 2007; Roper & Davies, 2007). However, the majority of this literature still applies a managerial perspective, while knowledge on how multiple stakeholders engage in an ongoing dynamic brand discourse and socially negotiate corporate brand meaning is scarce.

Insights into the active role stakeholders play in co-creating brand meaning so far mainly exist for consumers. Related research introduces the idea of the postmodern and critical consumer and demonstrates the importance of consumption activities for brand meaning co-creation (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998). Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) argue that brands belong to and are created in concert with communities. Consumers actively create lively brandscapes (e.g., Thompson & Arsel, 2004) and brand cultures (e.g., Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) in which they interact and negotiate brand meaning. Similarly, literature on service-dominant logic emphasizes the creation of (brand) value in-use through interaction and dialog in a dual relationship between consumers and the company (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Latest research on virtual customer integration illustrates how consumers—empowered by new social media—co-create brand meaning by contributing to new product development (e.g., Fueller, Jawecki, & Muehlbacher, 2007), marketing these products (Fueller & von Hippel, 2008), and even creating their own brands (Fueller, Luedicke, & Jawecki, 2008).

Only recently, brand research applies a broader stakeholder perspective and acknowledges that stakeholders are no longer simply targets of one-directional brand communication but active

participants in brand discourse and co-creators of brand meaning (Merz et al., 2009; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). The few studies leading in this direction perceive brands as social processes and brand meaning as continuously and dynamically co-created through social interaction within dynamic stakeholder networks (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz et al., 2009; Muehlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Payne et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2011). Contrary to early conceptualizations of co-creation as a dyadic, direct firm/customer exchange relationship (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2004), newer contributions describe co-creation as an activity that takes place between "economic and social actors within networks interacting and exchanging across and through networks" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p. 5). Exchange in these multi-stakeholder networks is increasingly indirect "masking the nature of exchange" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p.3).

New social media particularly support such multi-stakeholder interactions by providing stakeholders with information they could not access before (Asmussen et al., 2010; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Potts et al., 2008) and empowering them to become "engaged, culturally adept social actors who present to corporations a range of conflicting societal and economic interests" (Handelman, 2006, p.107; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010). Hence, it is increasingly the online domain where substantial multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation occurs.

While proclaiming the so-called "stakeholder-focus brand era" (Merz et al., 2009, p. 329), branding literature so far only forwards the abstract notion of brands as social processes involving multiple stakeholders but (a) does not provide a theoretical conceptualization that allows empirically studying brands as online social processes and (b) does not provide empirical insights into the process of online multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation (cf. Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz et al., 2009).

### 2.2. Multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation via online discourse

This paper adopts a linguistic, hermeneutic perspective to the study of brands as online social processes (cf. Hatch & Rubin, 2006). The basic assumption underlying this perspective is that language use is a social practice that constructs certain aspects of social reality (cf. Cherrier, 2009). Following the linguistic tradition in hermeneutics, brands acquire meaning through a constantly evolving interaction and interpretation process involving multiple stakeholders (cf. Hatch & Rubin, 2006). Accordingly, brands as online social processes are in this article represented by constant textual interactions within stakeholder networks—also referred to as discourse. Brand meanings are hence dynamic textual expressions of what stakeholders have in mind about a brand that constantly result from this discourse. The online texts stakeholders produce are "sites of emergence of social meanings" (Kress, 1995, p.122) as well as "sites of struggle where different groups compete to shape social objects (e.g., brands) in ways that serve their own interests" (Mumby & Clair, 1997, p. 182 (text in parentheses added)). By disseminating their knowledge, expectations, evaluations, and ways of (non-)usage, stakeholders co-create their own brand meanings (cf. Mumby and Clair, 1997). In line with recent views on co-creation (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2008), this article perceives online brand meaning co-creation as a discursive social process in which salient stakeholders may directly or indirectly, purposefully or coincidentally interact via written text to shape certain aspects of a brand's social reality (cf. Muehlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008).

Stakeholder theory argues that managers determine those stakeholders as salient that possess one or more of three relationship attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). However, by focusing solely on these criteria, management may overlook other relevant brand meaning co-creators. In a linguistic, hermeneutic brand perspective, the group of salient stakeholders comprises any individual or group inside or outside the organization that shows an interest in a brand and actively participates in brand-related