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Co-creating stakeholder and brand identities: Introduction to the special section

Sylvia von Wallpach^a, Benjamin Voyer^{b,c}, Minas Kastanakis^b, Hans Mühlbacher^{d,*}^a Copenhagen Business School, Department of Marketing, Solbjerg Plads 3C, 3rd floor, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark^b ESCP Europe, 527 Finchley Road, Hampstead, London NW3 7BG, UK^c London School of Economics and Political Science, UK^d International University of Monaco, INSEEC Research Center, Monaco

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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.

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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) treat 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 et al., 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 section 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, 2012, p. 37). According to this literature, brand identity is a creation of managerial decision-making and implementation (Kapferer, 2012). 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, 2002, 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 & 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

* Corresponding author at: International University of Monaco, 2, avenue Albert II, MC-98000, Monaco.

E-mail addresses: svw.marktg@cbs.dk (S. von Wallpach), bvoyers@escpeurope.eu (B. Voyer), mkastanakis@escpeurope.eu (M. Kastanakis), hmuehlbacher@inseec.com (H. Mühlbacher).

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, 2002). 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 section) 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 section) 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 section) 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 section) 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 section) 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 section) 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

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