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Co-creating stakeholder and brand identities: A cross-cultural consumer perspective☆

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ABSTRACT

Co-creation of value and identity is an important topic in consumer research, lying at the heart of several important marketing concepts and offering a better understanding of a wide range of phenomena, such as consumer identity, satisfaction, or brand loyalty. The literature on co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities, however, draws from (and reflects) a focus on cultures with dominant independent selves. Managers are increasingly confronting globalized marketing environments and therefore must understand how cultural differences shape identity development and co-construction, from a brand, consumer, and multiple stakeholder standpoint. Drawing from a critical review of the literature, this study offers a novel conceptual framework, together with a set of propositions, which discusses how cultural differences might affect such reciprocal co-creation processes. The processes and outcomes involved in reciprocal identity co-creation are likely to differ as a function of cultural environments promoting different types of individual-level differences in self-perception. The study concludes by offering a research agenda to deepen understanding of cross-cultural reciprocal identity co-creation.

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1. Introduction

Time Magazine named "You" personality of the year in 2006; today, the role of individual consumers or brand stakeholders (e.g., employees, suppliers, consumer associations) in generating brand-related content (e.g., social media posts) is central to contemporary consumption. Web 2.0 enables brands and companies to involve consumers and other stakeholders, from brand communities to employees, in the creation of identity-related brand content, such as running a campaign to cast a new model as the face of an iconic product (e.g., Kinder bars by Ferrero) or choosing a customer's own name to appear on a bottle of soft drink (e.g., Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign). In addition, various stakeholders play a growing role in incarnating and shaping a brand's ethos. For instance, the Nike brand is shaped by its consumers, brand communities, or the celebrities being endorsed, which all positively contribute to its brand ethos. But another core Nike stakeholder, its suppliers, have controversially been in the spotlight over the years for the work conditions in the shoe factories, overall negatively contributing to the brand ethos.

As such, scholars are challenging traditional conceptualizations of marketing as a narrow and organization- or customer-centric activity (Deshpandé, 1999; Hult, Mena, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2011) and increasingly acknowledging that focusing on the firm/consumer does not adequately capture reality and that marketing should be understood from a societal standpoint (Hunt, 2007; Kornum & Mühlbacher, 2013). That is, marketing involves multiple direct and indirect contributors to the traditional consumer–firm dyadic. The roots of this idea trace back to the work of Bagozzi (1975), who conceptualizes marketing as sets of dyadic exchanges of tangible and intangible entities among stakeholders, organizations, and other social units at different levels. Stakeholder theory (Clarkson, 1995; Jones, 1995) provides further evidence for such interactions, by suggesting that companies have relationships with multiple stakeholders with different objectives, expectations, rights, and responsibilities, who in turn can each influence the firm's performance. Vargo and Lusch (2004) offer, with their service-dominant logic framework, a management-centered perspective on consumption that includes the role of consumers as stakeholders of the consumption experience. This framework represents the idea of a co-construction process in which actions of various stakeholders mutually influence one another. Finally, Hillebrand, Driessen, and Koll (2015) suggest that the interrelatedness of stakeholders is a central aspect of marketing.

Following this shift of attention, several studies explore the co-creation of identity on the brand and stakeholder side (e.g., Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). While this flourishing research attempts to capture a more realistic and comprehensive account of consumers' and other stakeholders' role in contemporary consumption, research treats two important aspects of the literature less than optimally. First, the literature on identity co-

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creation traditionally adopts a one-sided perspective when assessing the role of various stakeholders in the development and co-creation of brand identities, rather than a reciprocal one (Da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013). Second, research dedicated to identity co-creation mainly adopts a focus on the individual aspects of identity or independent self-construal. Nevertheless, understanding the full nature of the reciprocal co-creation of brand and stakeholder identities and gaining a comprehensive global perspective require consideration of cross-cultural differences.

This article addresses the first oversight by considering in more depth the interdependent or iterative reciprocal brand–stakeholder identity co-creation perspective, conceptualized as a two-way process in which brands contribute to the co-creation of identity of various stakeholders, who in turn shape the identity of the brand. Brands are at the heart of the consumption experience, and research conceptualizes them in both tangible (e.g., marks of ownerships, images, and symbols) and intangible (e.g., means of constructing identities, a way to gain positive experiences) ways (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Brand stakeholders can take many forms, from consumer associations and brand communities, to suppliers and employees, to the media and other actors such as governments or non-governmental organizations (Hult et al., 2011; for a review on stakeholders, see Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Reciprocal identity co-creation encompasses various synchronous and asynchronous mechanisms through which brands and stakeholders contribute to the identity creation processes of the other, while using inputs from these to construct their own identity. Reciprocal identity co-creation is thus a process applied to both individuals (e.g., consumers, employees) and collective stakeholders (e.g., brand communities, company collaborators, network externalities, corporate brand identity). This article investigates the identity concept from both an individual level (i.e., what gives consumers or employees a sense of being unique in their own rights; White & Dahl, 2007) and a collective level (i.e., perceptions, feelings, and thoughts members of a corporation or community experience; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). The following example helps further illustrate the idea of reciprocal identity co-creation: when discussing Apple products online, consumers share their thoughts, pride, and passion about Apple's "sophisticated" and "trendy" products, something that first reflects on the brand and then reverses, giving consumers and the Apple brand community a sense of pride and feelings of sophistication and trendiness themselves (a basic two-way identity co-creation process). Consequently, the service from Apple's employees, another set of stakeholders, further reinforces this process; "Genius" frontline staff incarnate this sophistication and trendiness, further building the brand's, consumers', and their own identity along the same trendy and sophistication lines. Other stakeholders, such as suppliers, wholesalers, universities, or charities, also take pride in working with Apple, integrating the brand's quest for perfection and sophistication into their corporate or even personal identities, while working to reinforce the brand's ethos.

This article addresses the previously identified shortcomings by means of a critical analysis of the established cross-cultural literature, considering both macro-level (e.g., national or regional differences) and micro-level (e.g., institutional differences, local practices) aspects of cultures and resulting in a novel conceptual model. To gain a deeper understanding of how brand and stakeholder identities mutually influence each other and how this process varies across cultures, the study draws on established theories from the fields of branding, social psychology, sociology, and consumer psychology. The findings suggest that the identity co-creation process is likely to differ depending on both its reciprocal aspect and the individual-level aspects of culture, such as independent and interdependent self-construals. These findings can be the starting point for more rigorously comparative research on the topic. This study sheds light on similarities and differences in the co-production process across cultures and thus should aid managers in charge of social media and collective actors (e.g., online brand communities).

This article begins by discussing the literature on brand and identity construction and then theorizes how cross-cultural differences are implicated in various mechanisms of reciprocal identity co-creation across varying cultural contexts. A-first-of-its-kind conceptual framework, together with a series of propositions uncovering cross-cultural differences in reciprocal identity co-creation, focuses on both the prototypical brand–consumer relationship and other stakeholders to advance new theoretical suggestions that can be applied to various brand–stakeholder relationships. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and theoretical and managerial implications of the research.

2. Brand and stakeholder identities in individualist cultures

Brand identity co-creation is in opposition to traditional marketing perspectives, which argue that managers primarily develop brand identities (Kapferer, 2004). A consistent body of work, however, suggests that consumers actively contribute to the co-creation of brand identities (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), as do other stakeholders (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Conversely, research also explores the role of brands in consumer identity co-creation, suggesting that consumers use brands and products to construct different identities and adopt different roles (Belk, 2013; Berthon et al., 2009; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). This section discusses the notions of brand and stakeholder identities and related concepts, showing that their conceptualization follows a distinctive individualist perspective.

2.1. Brand identity: a multifaceted literature

The literature often paints a multifaceted picture of brand identity. Marketers note the importance of viewing branding, image, communications, and reputation as being integrated and mutually influencing in the conception of identity (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that factors such as identity and culture are all symbolic and value-based organizational constructs directly contributing to the consumption experience (Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007). Furthermore, Esch, Langner, Schmitt, and Geus (2006) gather several concepts, including brand awareness, brand image, brand personality, and brand identity, under the umbrella term "brand knowledge." Other concepts, such as brand meaning, introduce the idea that social interactions, in the form of discussions and negotiations between consumers, can shape the meaning of a particular brand (Eckhardt & Bengtsson, 2015). Similarly, the concept of brand relationship, though developed to understand consumers' bond with favorite brands (Fournier, 1998), is useful to understand how consumers' interactions with other types of stakeholders can contribute to the construction of an image. Finally, Huang, Mitchell, and Rosenaum-Elliott (2012) suggest some degrees of overlap between consumers' and brands' identities.

The notion of brand identity or personality derives from advertising literature in the 1970s and marketing literature in the 1990s, with Aaker (1996) defining brand identity as a set of unique associations that reflect what the brand entails. Stakeholders, whether internal or external, can influence an organization's activities, which in turn can shape their organizational identity (Maignan, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2005). Aaker's (1996) work, by helping clarify brand personality and identity, is anchored in an individualist perspective and mainly reflects ego-centered constructs, rather than relational dimensions of brand identity. For example, most dimensions of Aaker's brand identity constructs refer to traits, which are mainly brand centered (rather than involving other stakeholders or other externalities along a firm's value chain that would lean toward a relational orientation), thus reflecting a dominant individualist perspective. Kapferer (2004) offers a different take on brand identity with the brand identity prism, which adopts a management focus and captures more of the cultural and relational aspects of identity. Brand image, though related to brand identity (Nandan, 2005), reflects individuals' perceptions and construction of a brand representation. Kapferer's model offers an indirect perspective of the reciprocal aspects of brand identity by introducing the notion of self-

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