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Working consumers: Co-creation of brand identity, consumer identity and brand community identity

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ABSTRACT

The creation of identity, in terms of both consumer identity and brand identity, is a core topic in marketing theory. Based on participant ethnography of Yes Edinburgh North & Leith, part of Yes Scotland, the national referendum campaign supporting Scottish independence, this paper explores identity co-creation among three entities: the brand, the individual consumer, and the brand community. The findings suggest that the interactions among these entities co-create their identity, primarily through the actions of highly motivated working consumers. This paper identifies the main dialectic relationships and shows how the effects move beyond the dyads to affect the other entities, including the symbols used in the process of co-creation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for brands, individual consumers, and brand communities.

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1. Introduction

Brand management was a process that managers initiated and performed (Aaker, 1996; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Kapferer, 2008) whilst other stakeholders observed. Research nowadays suggests that brands are dynamic social processes and that branding is a cultural phenomenon driven by the incongruities and synergies among managers, employees, consumers, and other stakeholders (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). These agents increasingly co-create brands through their actions, using images and language that shape brand meanings and values, which in turn shape brand identity and reputation (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Indeed, groups of consumers interacting with brands they are passionate about are transforming business and communication practices (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). Brand followers are becoming such a powerful signaling source that recent research suggests that consumers co-create brand identities (da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013). Furthermore, brand admirers may act as “working consumers” who actively contribute to the development and management of the brand, its identity, and brand-related activities (Cova & Dallı, 2009), while their own individual identity can also be affected.

Typically, theorists examine the identity co-creative processes in one direction, such as the brand's effect on the identity of individual consumers (Belk, 1988); the brand's effect on the identity of consumer

brand-related groups (Veloutsou, 2009); the individual's or brand-related group's effect on the meaning of the brand (Cova & Pace, 2006). Research knows less about the processes, issues, and tensions of stakeholder identity and brand identity co-creation characterized by a reciprocal effect between dyads acting as sets of agents providing symbolic meanings to create identity. Understanding how meaning moves between these dyads and the effect of the actors on each other helps explain the evolution of each identity and, from a managerial perspective, may provide additional insight into who owns a brand and the process by which brand value develops.

This research addresses this gap by examining the reciprocal relationships among brand identity, brand community identity, and individual identity creation and readjustment over time. The study suggests that these identities are co-created through the involvement of working consumers with the brand, which acts as a focal point of engagement. More specifically, the study examines the development processes of these three identities when multiple stakeholders employ a wide range of symbols, provided by the employed brand managers and other sources, in attempts to deliver the brand's core promise. The study also contributes to reputation research by offering a more comprehensive explanation of the signaling process (i.e., uncontrolled by the brand's original developer/owner and arising from working consumers and their groups).

The Yes Scotland brand created and managed between 2011 and 2014, as part of the campaign for Scottish independence that took place in Scotland on September 18, 2014, provides the focal brand and context for this study. Yes Scotland was the legally designated

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campaigning organization for supporters of Scottish independence and provided the umbrella group under which individuals and political parties could work toward this goal. The campaign actively created and managed the Yes Scotland brand as part of its key strategy to organize “the biggest grassroots campaign the country has ever seen” (Canavan, 2013) and therefore relied on an extensive network of active potential voters who volunteered to develop and implement the campaign and promote the brand.

The size and length of the campaign was unprecedented in U.K. political history and therefore has implication for political branding. Consistent with political marketing literature, political parties, organizations, and ideas are political brands (French & Smith, 2010; Smith & French, 2009), and the brand image and reputation of the political entity play important roles in political campaigns (Falkowski & Cwalina, 2012; Peng & Hackley, 2009; Pich & Armannsdottir, 2015). Voters represent consumers because they consume the ideas promised by the political brands (Falkowski & Cwalina, 2012) and make judgments about them not only from controlled and uncontrolled signals but also from the characteristics of campaign supporters and the behavior of campaign workers (Enos & Hersh, 2015). Political campaigns commonly recruit large numbers of volunteers or activists from the populace (Enos & Hersh, 2015; Tam Cho & Gimpel, 2010), who act as working consumers and proactively build the brand, partly from marketing resources (e.g., designing and delivering leaflets for local candidates) and the in-kind donation their time and effort provide.

This paper begins by defining the concepts of brand identity, brand reputation, brand meaning, and individual and brand community identity. Next, the paper discusses how brand, personal, and brand community identities are formed and poses the research question. The methodology used to collect the data is then outlined to provide a more detailed examination of the Yes Scotland brand. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results.

1.1. Brand, individual consumer, and brand community identity

Research often uses the terms “brand identity” and “brand reputation” interchangeably, and though no consensus exists on the definition (de Chernatony, 1999; Walker, 2010), in general branding researchers agree that they differ (Walker, 2010). Brand identity is the core character of the brand (Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006) and defines the brand. Brand identity is an internal perspective, typically created before presenting the brand to external audiences, and is managed by the brand management team (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). This study defines brand identity as the set of unique brand associations that producers aspire to create or maintain and the symbols they use to identify the brand to people (Aaker, 1996). Little agreement exists on the dimensions of brand identity (Coleman, de Chernatony, & Christodoulides, 2011), though most models include the symbolic, visual, and physical representation (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008; Simões, Dibb, & Fisk, 2005); the offer characteristics (Kapferer, 2008); and the brand personality (Aaker, 1996; Coleman et al., 2011).

Brand reputation derives from the perspective of external stakeholders (Basdeo, Smith, Grimm, Rindova, & Derfus, 2006) or wider audiences (Walsh & Beatty, 2007) and is an aggregate set of public judgments whose valence may change over time (Siano, Vollero, & Palazzo, 2011). Reputation also incorporates assessments of the brand’s positioning and salient characteristics (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009). Controlled and uncontrolled signaling build brand reputation over time (Walker, 2010), suggesting that signaling helps external audiences understand and assess the internally constructed brand identity. Brand meaning reflects internal and external stakeholders’ mind-set about a brand (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), and therefore the term incorporates brand identity and reputation.

In postmodern terms, individual identity refers to the set of beliefs and evaluations people hold about who and what they are (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity); their capabilities (e.g., mental, physical),

values, histories, roles (e.g., mother, campaigner), and social relationships; and what they possess (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). A key identity source is national identity, which strongly affects consumption and group affiliation (Heere & James, 2007). Social identity consists of an individual’s beliefs about his or her place in groups and the social relationships he or she forms and maintains (Sirgy, 1982). Conceptualized as a narrative that provides spatial and temporal understanding of who people are, where they came from, and what they might be (Thompson, 1997), individual and social identity are inextricably linked through the interpretation of the cultural symbols used to construct meanings (Dittmar, 1992). Consistent with the group identity, or the degree to which people feel connected with a group’s character or purpose (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), brand community identity is the shared social identity at the group level internalized by individual members who depersonalize their individual identity (Lantz & Loeb, 1998; Ren et al., 2012).

1.2. Consumer empowerment and co-creation of brands

Consumers are active, empowered players in the development of brands (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). They are given, or increasingly now take, the power and authority to make decisions about branded offers (Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006) to the extent that they often co-produce products and services with other consumers and companies (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009). Consumers’ ability to influence other consumers’ evaluations of branded offers, through groups of like-minded individuals (Cova & Pace, 2006; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001) or general word of mouth (Hutter, Hautz, Denhardt, & Fuller, 2013; Yeh & Choi, 2011), also empowers them. The Internet provides opportunities for individuals to communicate with brands and with each other about brands, increasing consumer empowerment (Christodoulides, 2009; Quinton, 2013).

When brands develop community spirit, and consumers meet and interact around the brands, consumer empowerment increases, and brand followers may believe that they own the brands, rather than the companies that produce them (Cova & White, 2010). The power of brand admirers is such that some even question whether the brand still belongs to the company (Cova & White, 2010; Veloutsou, 2009), thus hijacking the brand as their own (Cova & Pace, 2006). This empowerment can cause problems because consumer groups are capable of opposing official brands and/or creating competitive offers with little or no input from the companies (Cova & Pace, 2006). These actions are difficult to control (Muñiz & Schau, 2007), and companies may view them as unwelcome and even dangerous (Cova & White, 2010).

One aspect over which consumers have some control is brand meaning (identity and reputation), and in some cases, the supplier cannot manage or direct this shift of control (Cova & Pace, 2006). Prior research suggests that brand managers should manage brand identity by recognizing other internal employees who contribute to the interface between the brand’s internal and external environment as brand “ambassadors” (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Research, however, also acknowledges that many stakeholders contribute to how audiences perceive brand reputation (Ruzzier & de Chernatony, 2013; Walsh & Beatty, 2007). Empowered consumers play a role in reputation building, especially in contexts in which consumer interaction is greater (Siano et al., 2011). In these cases, a brand’s value is beyond the tangible and intangible offer components and contains experiences co-created with consumers (Payne et al., 2009).

Consumers can contribute to brand meaning (identity and reputation) creation in two ways. First, they can express their opinions and signal information about the brands, including their assessments of and experiences with the brands (Siano et al., 2011). Here, consumers are an uncontrolled source of information that shapes the reputation of the brand. Second, they can become more involved in the development of the brand by producing signals that wider audiences perceive as originating from the brand or by helping develop new products

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