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Performing identities: Processes of brand and stakeholder identity co-construction

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ABSTRACT

This article provides in-depth insights into the dynamic, performative co-construction of stakeholder and brand identity in the context of the LEGO brand. Based on detailed considerations of individual and social identity theory, a critique of research on brand identity, and a review of current performative approaches to branding, this study applies a performativity theory perspective. Brand performances—encompassing playing and liking, basement building and showcasing, creating and innovating, community building and facilitating, storytelling, missionizing, and marketplace developing—exhibit generic ludic, creative, economic, and socializing qualities and co-construct involved identities. The findings contribute to a dynamic view of brand identity, highlighting brand identity's performative construction alongside constructions of stakeholder identities and the strong interrelatedness of company and stakeholders as agents of brand performance.

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1. Introduction

This study analyzes the co-constructive development of two theoretically distinct types of identities and investigates how brand identity is built alongside constructions of stakeholder identity. In line with recent calls to include a stakeholder perspective in branding research (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2015; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Scott & Lane, 2000; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), this article addresses a multitude of stakeholder identities involved in constructing brand identity. Brand stakeholders, according to that literature, are active participants in brand interaction and co-creators of brand meaning (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz et al., 2009; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). While recent branding literature increasingly agrees on a dynamic and co-constructive perspective, stakeholder-oriented literature strongly advocates the heterogeneous character of co-construction of brands among a multitude of actors. Hillebrand, Driessen, and Koll (2015) introduce the notion of continuous multiplicities of stakeholder relations that are deeply intertwined and, in their interrelatedness, develop a characteristic and distinct dynamic, in which the properties of the whole emerge from the interactions between the parts (DeLanda, 2006), which is different from simple dyadic relationships.

This process perspective on brands also affects traditional conceptualizations of brand identity. Accordingly, brand identity can no longer be reduced to a stable essence (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 1986) but continuously

develops through multiple actors' social interactions in varying social contexts (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Contrary to the common assumptions that identities must be strategically aligned and brand identity solid and stable (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008; Urde, 2013), Csaba and Bengtsson (2006), da Silveira, Lages, and Simões (2013), and Lucarelli and Hallin (2014) describe brand identity as meanings that are dynamic, fluid, enacted, truly processual, and multiple. Rather than viewing brands as ostensive, consisting of a bundle of components, this article adopts the perspective of brands as complex social relations that develop among a multitude of enacted identities (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2014; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2012). Consequently, the article assumes that a multitude of actors perpetually develop, negotiate, and enact brand identity and stakeholder identity in situ. In an attempt to pursue identity, stakeholders use, talk about, and construct brand identity while enacting their own identities. Conversely, other stakeholders—more or less intentionally—construct their own identities, weaving their realities into brand identity construction.

These arguments for a continuous multiplicity view are accumulating; yet empirical insights into the multi-layered, dynamic process of brand identity co-construction among a multitude of stakeholders are still under-developed. Drawing on recent literature on brand identity on the one hand and extant literature on individual and social identity on the other hand, this article introduces an agentic view of identity co-construction, based on a performativity perspective (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2010). This perspective suggests that identity is not something that one “has” but rather something that one “does” or “performs” (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Accordingly, brand identity is not constructed in isolation, let alone by management, but rather by multiple, dynamic performative co-constructions (Butler, 2010) of brand identity and

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stakeholder identity that transcend conventional organizational boundaries (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). This article aims to further develop a process perspective on brand identity by illuminating the performative co-construction of stakeholder and brand identity in networks of actively involved stakeholders, including brand management. Applying an interpretative case study approach (Woodside, 2010) involving narrative interviewing with 29 highly involved stakeholders of the LEGO brand as well as a netnographic study of naturally occurring LEGO brand performances, this study provides in-depth insights into seven performances that exhibit generic ludic, creative, economic, and socializing qualities and dynamically co-construct a multiplicity of identities. The findings highlight the important role of managers as active performers, facilitators, and guardians of brand identity co-construction.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Dynamics of stakeholder and brand identity

The recent rise of stakeholder- and process-oriented perspectives leads to a radical shift in branding thought (see Merz et al., 2009), necessitating a re-conceptualization of the concept of brand identity. Critical voices raise concern about the missing theoretical foundation of conventional conceptualizations of brand identity, as well-established definitions of brand identity as “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create and maintain” (Aaker, 1996, p. 68) or the idea that a brand should act as “a long lasting and stable reference” (Kapferer, 2008, p. 37) show limited consideration of the origins of the identity concept (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Some literature criticizes these conventional concepts for using identity only as a metaphor and for not paying adequate attention to the dynamic context in which brands are embedded (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; da Silveira et al., 2013).

In line with social theories, which perceive identity as created through continuous interaction in social contexts (e.g., Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959, 1967; Hall, 1996), Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) question the core assumptions of conventional brand identity concepts by arguing that in a dynamic multi-stakeholder environment, (1) brand strategists can no longer define brand identity in isolation; (2) brand identity is not enduring and stable, but dynamic, fluid, and adaptive over time; (3) brand identity does not represent the essence or the true substance of a brand, but refers to a multiplicity of meanings that multiple stakeholders reflexively constitute, negotiate, and eventually contest; and (4) a distinction between an internal and external locus of identity construction becomes obsolete as stakeholders' brand-related activities transcend company borders.

Insights from identity research in sociology, psychology, and organizational theory highlight the social and contextual aspects of identity formation and provide the basis for further developing the idea of brand identity arising from a continuous dialectic process of social interaction among multiple brand stakeholders (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Organizational theorists conceptualize organizational identity construction as “dynamic, reciprocal, and iterative in nature” (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 45; see also Gioia, 1998; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Identity construction processes develop through iterative interactions among managers, organizational members, and other stakeholders, who reflect on, appraise, negotiate, and contest these meanings (Scott & Lane, 2000).

While engaging in organizational identity construction, all involved stakeholders “are simultaneously engaged in the construction of their individual identities” (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 44). Individual identity reflects stakeholders' needs for self-definition and “is formed and maintained through actual or imagined interpersonal agreement about what the self is like” (Schlenker, 1986, p. 23). Individual identity construction is contextual and relies on social exchange with salient others in which stakeholders perform behaviors to convey impressions that serve their self-interests (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Drawing on “beliefs about their

self-concepts, values, and goals” as well as on “initial assessments of audience (e.g., their expectations, goals, and beliefs) and situational characteristics (e.g., social rules and roles)” (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 46), individuals attempt to construct identity in interactions with relevant others, which becomes situated if validated by others and generalized if accepted by the same audience over time (Schlenker, 1985).

Integrating these insights, da Silveira et al. (2013, p. 28) conceptualize “brand identity as dynamic, constructed over time through mutually influencing inputs from managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers).” They conclude that brand identity should be flexible and fluid, though scant evidence indicates how brand identity is continuously adapted among social constituents and management. Recent contributions, for example, in the area of brand transformation (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2014) provide a promising avenue for a better understanding of the adaptive co-construction of brand identity among stakeholders—a fruitful perspective of the dynamics of identity co-construction that this article adopts and outlines subsequently.

2.2. The performative construction of stakeholder and brand identity

Aiming to enhance an understanding of the multi-layered, dynamic process of brand identity co-construction among a multitude of stakeholders, this article draws from the important works of Butler (1990, 2010), Callon (1998), Austin (1975), and Lash (2015) in the area of performativity theory, as well as on recent empirical findings on brand performativity. Performativity theory is concerned with performative constitutions of reality in the broadest sense, or constructing and performing identity. As such, performative thinkers strive to counter logics of apparently stable phenomena, or the presumption that social objects have a metaphysical substance that precedes their expression (Butler, 2010). Performativity describes a set of processes that bring about a certain ontological reality—processes that bring things into being and lead to certain kinds of binding consequences (Butler, 2010). Thus, a series of performative practices constitute and re-constitute social objects/brands as existing and autonomous reality.

In line with performativity literature, this article suggests that “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). A performance is not an essential, inherent feature of an object, but a relationship among performers, actions, and audience. “Performance isn't ‘in’ anything but ‘between’” (Schechner, 2006, p. 30) and implies the process of enactment through and in discursive formations (Bode, 2010). Performativity means to constitute reality through language and practices that exert an intentional (illocutionary) force and—under specific environmental circumstances—a related, intentional, or unintentional effect (perlocutionary act) that has some kind of binding consequences (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2010). Identities are contextually variable and open to continuous re-definitions (De Fina, 2011); “projecting an identity is regarded as acting and speaking in certain ways in concrete social encounters or communicative situations” (De Fina, 2011, p. 266). This view assumes that identity construction is rather a process of identification and a kind of social and discursive work (Zimmermann & Wieder, 1970).

Building on these theoretical groundings, Nakassis's (2012, p. 626) discussion of brand citationality and performativity offers an interesting perspective on brands that derives from Derrida's (1988) and Butler's (1993) discussion of citationality as reflecting “the property of iterability, the reproducibility of a form, and the norm that governs its intelligibility and producibility, over distinct discursive time-spaces.” Citations weave together the many voices and identities that take part in brand discursive events over time into one complex entity called brand. Nakassis further defines brands parsimoniously as a relationship between some set of brand instances, or tokens, and their material qualities and a brand identity, or type, and its immaterial qualities. “From this point of view, a brand is an ongoing articulation between brand tokens, a brand type, and a brand ontology” (Nakassis, 2012, p. 628). Consumer engagement with a brand is a form of citation of brand identity for the purpose of performing

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