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Brand management: Unveiling the delusion of control

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream brand management literature views brands as products or organisations carrying brand names and brand managers as being in control of brand-related actions and outcomes. By contrast, recent empirical research shows the substantial influence of stakeholders on brands. Together with brand management, stakeholders shape brands by participating in brand-related interaction. European brand research accordingly treats brands as ongoing and complex processes in constant flux. Nevertheless, literature suffers from a significant lack of theoretical underpinnings for understanding brands as complex processes; in this respect, building on European philosophy is a fruitful avenue. This paper introduces the metaphor of the rhizome and draws on European process philosophy to further develop an integrative processual understanding of brands. Brand management claiming control over brands as processes turns out to be a delusion.

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1. Introduction

Since ancient times, brands have existed as artefacts signed by their producers. True to this tradition, many marketers refer to brands as trade or proprietary names or as products or companies carrying a brand name (Stern, 2006). For managers and researchers following this rather US-dominated tradition (Kotler, 1991; Park & Srinivasan, 1994), branding is a range of company-driven practices, such as brand-related communicative acts. These practices are manifestations of a widespread control-centric managerial mindset. Control-centric mindsets appear to be deeply engrained in brand management literature and practice (Christodoulides, 2009; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012), manifested in the very term ‘management’ itself. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2017) ‘to manage’ means “to control (a person or animal); to exert one’s authority or rule over”. In this sense, to manage a brand means to deliver the ‘right picture’ of the company or product. From this notion, however, little room is left for creative and more or less spontaneous interaction between the company and its various stakeholders.

More recent brand literature advocates a less powerful and self-confident position of management. Statements such as managers “need to accept a loss of control” (Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013, p.

671) and even “must relinquish control” (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 194) have raised calls for further research in the field. However, European philosophers such as Derrida (2000, p. 7) clearly argue that accepting ‘loss of control’ implies that the ‘acceptor’ is the one who “receives or makes it welcome, or [the one] who approves, who accepts what the other says and does”. Perceived in this way, managers are the ‘masters of the game’. Other stakeholders who engage in brand-related interaction are ‘intruders’, more or less invited to branding (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). A dominant part of current brand management literature puts brand managers in charge of selecting who they will welcome into their brandscape (Asmussen, Harridge-March, Occhiocupo, & Farquhar, 2013). For example, as Quinton (2013, p. 925) states, “Brand managers (...) should also include individuals who are not customers (yet) but who have interacted with the brand as part of their target market”. Invited stakeholders are welcome only as long as they act in the ‘proper’ way, practicing that which the host wants them to do (Derrida, 2000). Consequently, “an essential part of the role of a brand manager is to persuade” (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012, p. 257). The authors of such statements imply that brand managers are basically in control of brand-related processes.

Over the years, brand research has put effort into providing an understanding of how a brand is created, how it evolves, and where it resides. For many researchers, brands represent cognitions and appraisals that occupy a space in the memory of individuals (Keller, 1993). For others, brands instead reside in relationships (Fournier, 1998) or social systems (Diamond et al., 2009). Such approaches

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have produced important contributions to brand management. However, an understanding of where brands reside implies that brands are entities that 'belong' somewhere (Derrida, 2000). Perceived in this way, brands are 'beings'; they are not 'becoming' (Derrida, 2000). A potentially crucial perspective is entirely missed. Merz, He, and Vargo (2009) advocate conceptualizing brands as complex, dynamic, and processual phenomena. Researchers and managers following this route need to consider the continuous and dynamically constructed socio-cognitive (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008) becoming of brands across context, time, and space. Brands are processes in constant flux (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015) that appear as cognitive or cultural entities only when observed at a certain point in time. Processes in constant flux escape the control of managers.

More recently, paradigmatic shifts from managerially controlled to co-creative branding (Pitt, Watson, Berthon, Wynn, & Zinkhan, 2006) and from consumer to multi-stakeholder approaches (Kornum & Mühlbacher, 2013; Mühlbacher, Leih, & Dahringer, 2006) have contributed to research addressing the complexities of brands in their dynamic, continuous, spatial, and temporal becoming. A European perspective of brands as complex social processes has also emerged (Asmussen et al., 2013; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008). Empirical research of this school of thought shows brands continuously emerging as dynamic outcomes of stakeholder interactions (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, & Espersen, 2017; von Wallpach, Voyer, Kastanakis, & Mühlbacher, 2017). A consistent perspective of brands as interaction processes is missing though. The reason for this lack of a pure process perspective may be the paucity of theoretical underpinnings. With the exception of Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2013), who suggest (European-rooted) social representation theory as a basis for further research, scholars have made little attempt to develop an integrative theoretical understanding of brands as processes. With the intention to fill this gap and to develop the perspective further, this paper adopts the metaphor of a rhizome (Chia, 1999; Deleuze & Guattari, 1999) and follows European process philosophy to illustrate the processual, fluid, and continuous nature of brands.

Section 2 introduces brands as rhizomic, processual phenomena, and section 3 provides a description of interaction processes constituting rhizomic brands. Section 4 discusses the consequences from a European brand management perspective. Section 5 concludes by summarizing the key contributions of this paper followed by reflections on what a brand as process orientation means to the brand management field.

2. Brands as rhizomic, processual phenomena

A rhizome (from the ancient Greek word 'rhizōma') is a subterranean stem different from a root (for an illustration of a rhizome, see Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, frontispiece). The rhizome can take many forms, "from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999, p. 6). This complex, dynamic phenomenon develops according to three process philosophy-oriented principles: (1) heterogeneity, (2) continuous multiplicity, and (3) change (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999). Embracing these three key principles, the rhizome can serve as an illustrative metaphor for understanding brands as processual phenomena.

A rhizome contains *heterogeneous* elements that are gathered together in some form of assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999). An assemblage is a group of interrelated, heterogeneous elements (e.g., individuals, objects, concepts) existing in time and space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, 1999; Lury, 2009). Conceived as processes, brands resemble dynamic rhizomic assemblages. Rhizomic brands

are thus constituted by heterogeneous and interrelated individuals, objects, and concepts in time and space (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Lury, 2009; Onyas & Ryan, 2015; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger et al., 2017). Brand-interested heterogeneous individuals (commonly referred to as stakeholders) get together through social interaction in various forms, such as interest groups, communities, organisations, and institutions (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), constituting complex stakeholder networks (Merz et al., 2009).

The heterogeneous elements of rhizomes, and accordingly rhizomic brands, can be understood only in relation to the multiple other elements and dynamic assemblages of these elements that constitute the brand process (Kozinets, 2017). The *multiplicity* of rhizomes is continuous (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999; Styhre, 2002); each element of a rhizome can be subtracted to investigate the 'one' element (e.g., 'one' individual). An understanding of a single element can only be achieved though when considering that this 'one' is inherently linked to the multiple shoot system of the rhizome (i.e., multiple interrelated individuals) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999). In the context of marketing and branding (Hillebrand, Driessen, & Koll, 2015; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger et al., 2017), continuous multiplicity exists, for example, when all elements of a brand stakeholder network are interrelated in an ongoing state of reciprocation and influence among one another. Changes to or additions or omission of any one element have an impact on all the other elements.

Ultimately, like rhizomes, rhizomic brands manifest as "a stabilised moment in a process of continual becoming" (Chia, 1999, p. 218). Rhizomic brands are thus in continuous *change*. As Chia (1999) explained, continuous change occurring in a rhizome does not manifest in actual mobility, but rather in movement. Today, a rhizome is not the same as it was yesterday, and tomorrow it will not be the same as it is today. Still, the rhizome exists. In a similar manner, rhizomic brands continuously evolve (Diamond et al., 2009). Multiple dynamic brand assemblages are not the same from one moment to the next. Even if brands manifest to observers in a certain stabilised, momentary way (e.g., through temporary manifestations, such as brand-related products or texts), they are in continuous flux.

3. Interaction processes constituting rhizomic brands

In the heterogeneous, multiple, continuously interrelated and changing becoming of rhizomic brands, interaction emerges as a key constituting driver. As previously proposed, brands resemble rhizomes, as they are manifested in dynamic assemblages of interacting individuals, objects, and concepts in space and time (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Onyas & Ryan, 2015). In European branding literature, these dynamics resemble propositions regarding the notion of ongoing processes of interaction among multiple, networked brand-interested stakeholders (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013; von Wallpach, Voyer et al., 2017).

Social interaction theory of the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel (1910) offers a comprehensive understanding of how human beings relate to each other through interaction. According to Simmel (1908/2009), social interaction represents a process of reciprocation and influence between individuals and assemblages. Individuals enter social interaction motivated by *content* (Simmel, 1908/2009), defined as everything that exists in individuals, such as emotions, impulses, cognition, biological functions, and reflective and introspective states unique to the individual (Simmel, 1895; see also; Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008). Content finds expression in social relations and therefore motivates individuals to enter social interaction (Simmel & Wolff,

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