

MAKING SENSE OF BRANDING

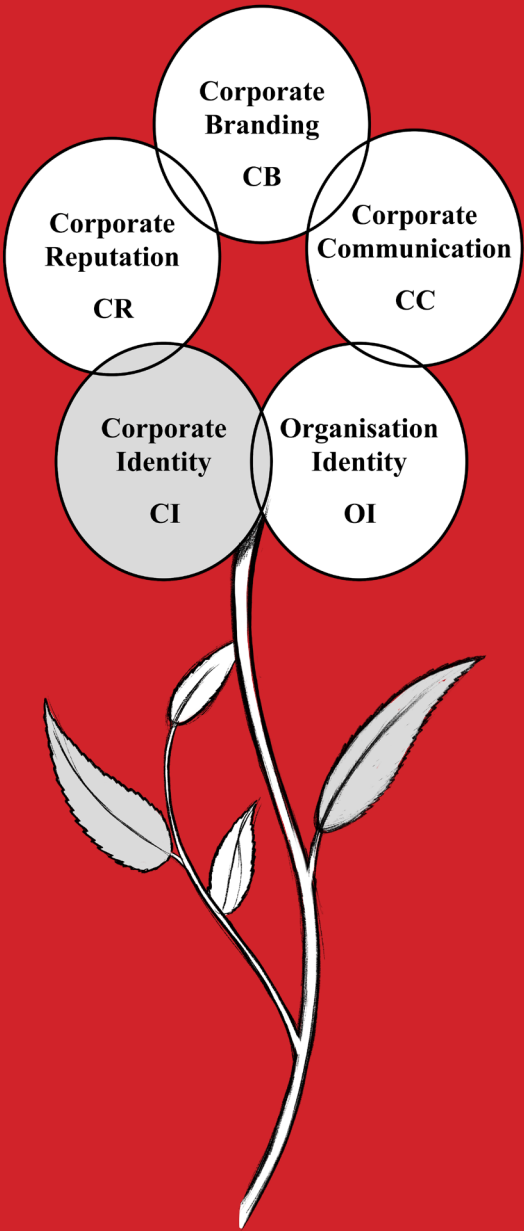
Undergraduate Thesis
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MAKING SENSE OF BRANDING

*Investigating the ambiguous nature of contemporary
branding thought*

Undergraduate Thesis
London College of Communication
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ABSTRACT

Branding is a broad and interdisciplinary concept. Across industries and disciplines, it is understood from different angles. This makes it difficult to grasp the underlying ideas behind the diversity of views on branding, and to make sense of how they relate to one another. This essay assimilates a plethora of concepts into a coherent narrative, aiming to diffuse some of the confusion surrounding branding. We find that contemporary literature understands branding in holistic terms, going beyond the use of trademarks and advertising, and placing the concept at the heart of an organisation's identity. We establish that contemporary branding suffers from confusing terminology that inhibits a productive dialogue between scholars and practitioners. Further, we conclude that the holistic conception of branding makes it difficult to discern between what is branding and what is running a business. Lastly, this essay ends on a speculative note, questioning whether the instrumentalisation of identity, enabled by contemporary branding practices, poses an obstacle to the perceived authenticity of brands.

DESIGN RATIONALE

A defining characteristic of my thesis is that it is through and through theoretical. It discusses the concept of branding in abstract terms, without analysing case studies. This mode of writing closely resembles the literature I have drawn from, comprised largely of articles from marketing, management and business journals.

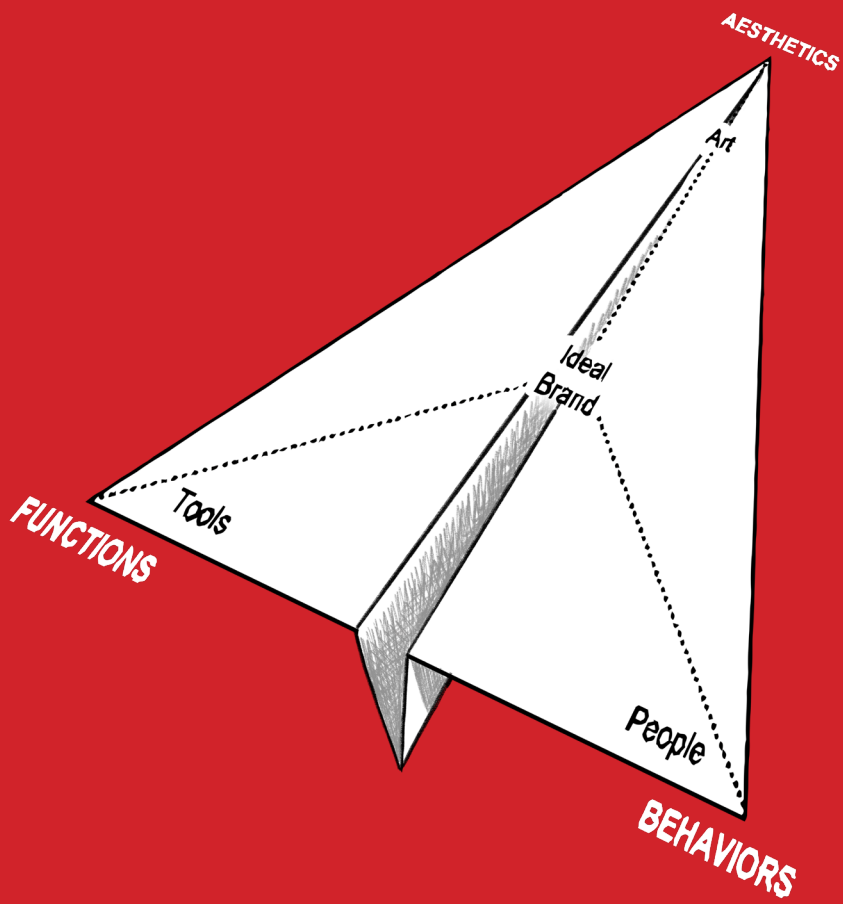
When abstract and intangible matters are being discussed, it is natural to resort to the use of conceptual frameworks. Quintessentially, conceptual frameworks are simplified, schematic mental representations of complex phenomena. They help put ideas in relation to one another and provide structure to thought. I put forward a conceptual framework in this essay, differentiating between a *naive*, *intuitive* and *holistic* understanding of branding. Similarly, the literature I have drawn from is populated with conceptual frameworks of the like.

A benefit of conceptual frameworks is that they are easily visualised using diagrams such as flow charts, tree diagrams, pyramid graphs and so forth. This seems to be particularly popular among marketing and management scholars, who

make up a significant portion of my bibliography. To be very specific: I do not mean the visualisation of data, I mean the representation of intangible ideas.

My designed thesis comments on the usefulness of such frameworks. I have taken diagrams visualising conceptual frameworks from the papers in my bibliography, and appropriated them to produce illustrations that render the content of the diagrams of secondary importance. A pyramid graph visualising the concept of branding becomes... a paper plane. By ridiculing these diagrams, I aim to remind the reader of the purpose of conceptual frameworks: To guide our thinking, not to dictate it. Conceptual frameworks are invaluable tools to organise intangible ideas, but they aren't factual models of reality. This reminder would have served me well when my research confronted me with different contradicting conceptual frameworks. And similarly, I hope to encourage the reader to critically examine my own writing, and the framework I use to make sense of branding.

Said illustrations are inserted throughout this book. An otherwise plain, simple and accessible handbook is decorated with a collage of diagrams from my bibliography. Overall, this aims to achieve an overly serious, technical and diagrammatic look with a twist of irony.



INTRODUCTION

What does *branding* mean? Although this might appear to be a simple question, I want to argue that the study of branding is charged with a sense of ambiguity, due to its broad and interdisciplinary nature. There is an abundance of competing definitions, articulating the nature of a *brand* and the practice of *branding*. Across professions, from graphic designers to managers, branding is understood in different terms. The diversity of angles to studying branding has given rise to challenges: The language used in branding is ambiguous, who is in charge of branding is unclear, and how it is to be practised is debatable.

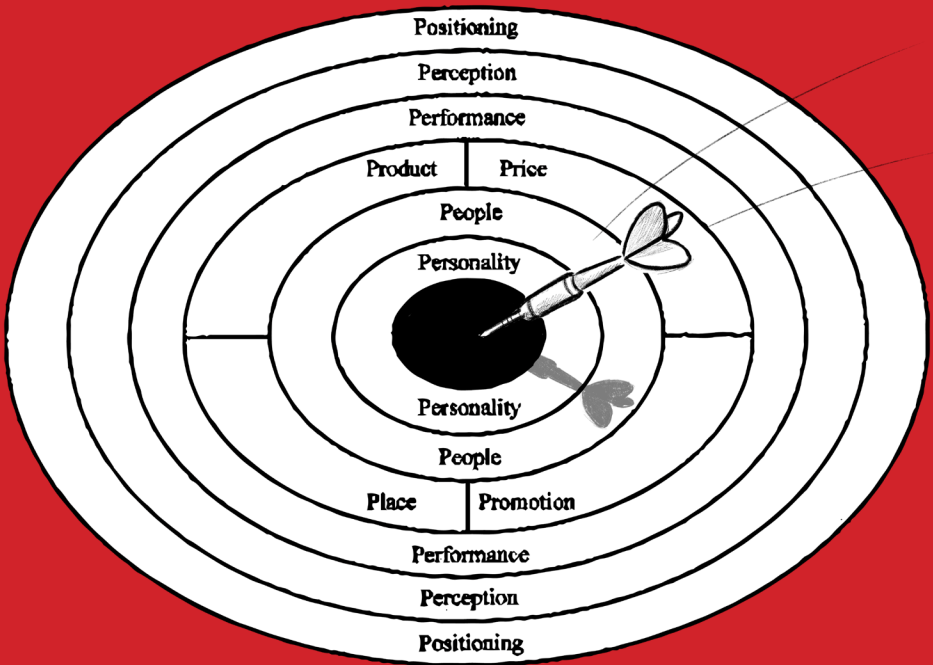
Within the literature, some voices address the confusion surrounding branding (Balmer, 2001; Balmer and Van Riel, 1997). This thesis aims to contribute to this ongoing conversation. In the hopes of diffusing some of the ambiguity surrounding branding, it identifies key ideas that reappear throughout the literature.

It further aims to juxtapose and organise these ideas in a meaningful way. In simple terms: I make efforts to make sense of the ambiguous nature of branding, and analyse the root

of the confusion I have experienced.

I define three levels of understanding branding. Namely, *the naive*, *the intuitive*, and *the holistic*. The first three chapters explore these levels of understanding in their successive order. The three levels of understanding branding serve as a device to organise the perspectives from the literature I draw upon. Each level of understanding builds upon the last, and introduces new ideas that add complexity to the discussion. Building on the context set in the first three chapters, the fourth chapter then explores the reasons why branding is ambiguous. It further identifies potential solutions for how these can be resolved.

Together, the first four chapters aim to construct a conceptual framework of branding representative of contemporary thought. The last chapter profoundly challenges this framework of branding. It questions whether contemporary branding thought enables businesses to produce brands that meet the rising demand for authenticity.



IT'S ABOUT TRADEMARKS!

The naive understanding of branding

To begin, it is helpful to trace the literal meaning of the word branding. It originated to describe the process of placing a mark with a hot iron, be that on livestock or as a punitive measure to stigmatise prisoners. Later, the meaning was expanded to include marks placed on goods (Harper, 2020). Historically, a brand has served the purpose of signalling ownership, denoting source of origin, and communicating a promise of quality, amongst other things.

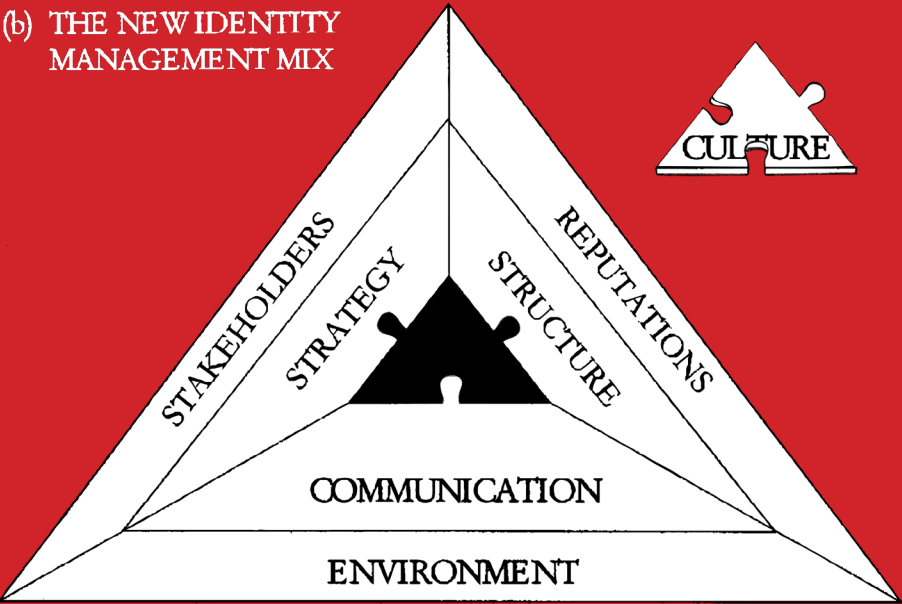
To pinpoint the start of the modern branding phenomenon, we can turn to Bastos and Levy. They describe a shift from the anonymous sale of retail goods, with no indication of their source of origin, to the practice of increasingly labelling, packaging and promoting products in the late 19th century (Bastos and Levy, 2012). This development can be interpreted as a response to the rise of a mass-market following the industrial revolution. With it came a platform for mass-distribution and promotion of products, as well as a move away from the self-sufficiency of the individual, effectively setting the conditions and creating a need for the newly found practice of branding (Lury, cited in Slade-Brooking,

2016).

This is perhaps the simplest way to understand the nature of branding. A commercial practice of applying a label (a name, a trademark) to a product, and thereby communicating its source of origin, implicitly prescribing it non-generic status. In the eyes of a consumer, knowing who made a product becomes a point of differentiation and a source of added value (Bastos and Levy, 2012), it acts as a promise of quality and fosters familiarity and trust.

Arguably, the formal branding process undertaken by some small and medium-sized businesses (from here onwards: SMEs) today does not meaningfully go beyond this level of understanding. From anecdotal experience, it is my impression that many SMEs do not think of branding as much more than commissioning a logo and choosing a name. Of course, the extent to which this is true varies from business to business. However, the observed characteristics of business-to-business SMEs, as described by Irene Inskip, support the notion that there is a relative neglect of branding by these businesses. She notes that there is 'an almost absolute silence about corporate branding in or for small to medium-sized B2B companies' (Inskip, 2004, p. 359).

(b) THE NEW IDENTITY
MANAGEMENT MIX



IT'S ABOUT PERCEPTION!

The intuitive understanding of branding

We have established that the naive way to understand the concept of branding is to attach a name and a trademark to a product, denoting what it is and who made it. Branding is rendered an arbitrary means of differentiation. Branding is also portrayed as an *ad hoc* process: A label can be placed on a product after it has been made. There is no need to consider branding before making a product.

However, given a moment of consideration, it is obvious that choosing a name and a trademark for a product are processes far from arbitrary, and further, we understand that there are more moving parts to branding than just a trademark and a name. For one, different means of promotion are to be considered. As we climb up the ladder of understanding, we will weave these added complexities into a more sophisticated view on branding.

Walter Landor, founder of Landor Associates, famously said: “products are created in the factory, brands are created in the mind”. This neat summary goes a long way in advancing our understanding of branding by shifting our attention to the role of the consumer. The brand, in Landor’s mind,

is defined by the perception the consumer has of a particular product. Bastos and Levy add to this perspective. They explain that “Branding starts as a sign, a way of denoting that an object is what it is and then becomes a form of naming something (e.g. a steer, a slave, a prisoner, a detergent). But immediately, denotation is not enough and connotations arise” (Bastos and Levy, 2012, p. 349). This line of thinking suggests that brands are defined by the associations and connotations they build up. Further advancing this view are Hatch and Rubin, who observe that brands have a ‘dual status as expressions of management strategy and symbols in popular culture’ (Hatch and Rubin, 2006, p. 42). This duality, again reaffirms the notion that brands are shaped by cultural forces a business can’t control. These perspectives invite us to appreciate that brands are created in the eyes of their audience. Branding, by extension, becomes the practice of manipulating the perception of a product.

If branding is quintessentially the practice of shaping perceptions, how can we guide the direction in which perceptions are to be shaped?

As mentioned before, the first virtue of branding is to achieve meaningful differentiation in a competitive marketplace. This aim is unanimously accepted and echoed throughout the literature. Alina Wheeler, in her book *Designing Brand Identity*, says: “As products and services become indistinguishable, as competition creates infinite choices, as companies merge into faceless monoliths, differentiation is imperative” (Wheeler, 2006, p. 4). The role of the brand becomes to guide consumers in navigating an abundance of options. As Nicholas Ind states: “The primary function of brands is to reduce our anxiety in making choices” (Ind, cited in Slade-Brooking, 2016, p. 14). Bastos and Levy (2012), add a historical dimension to the conversation. They suggest that intensified competition, and the resulting “proliferation

of brands” (Bastos and Levy, 2012, p. 355), during the ‘Consumer Revolution’ in the 1960s has gone hand in hand with advances in branding thought, in particular, the conception of the *brand image* notion by Gardner and Levy described in their 1955 article ‘The Product and the Brand’. They do not postulate that there is a causal relationship between an increase in competition and sophistication of branding thought, but it’s worth considering whether there is some merit to this hypothesis.

The Product and The Brand puts forward three invaluable ideas for this discussion. For one, it calls for “greater awareness of the psychological nature of ‘products’ - whether brands, media, companies, institutional figures, services, industries, or ideas” (Gardner and Levy, 1955). The authors explore the subjective nature of brands in great depth and conclude that the elements contributing to a consumers’ liking of a particular product are complex, subtle and intangible. As an example, in the case of a brand name, they state that “It tells the consumers many things, not only by the way it sounds (and its literal meaning if it has one) but, more important, via the body of associations it has built up and acquired as a public object over a period of time” (Gardner and Levy, 1955). They conclude that businesses should move away from promoting their products merely on the grounds of objective qualities, and take into account the complex symbol that is their brand image. This, once again, reaffirms the aforementioned idea that branding is about manipulating the perception of a product.

Secondly, they postulate that businesses should aim to differentiate their products on the basis of their brands’ chosen ‘personality’ (Gardner and Levy, 1955). In a purely hypothetical example, this could mean that a detergent brand should not seek to compete merely on claims of superiority over other detergents, but rather associate itself with a particular

group of people - even if that association appears arbitrary in the context of the product.

Thirdly, the authors suggest that individual advertising campaigns are not to be thought of in isolation. They state that “a reputable brand persists as a stable image through time. The ideas people have about it are not completely malleable, not idly swayed by one communication and then another” (Gardner and Levy, 1955). This view advocates for elements of the marketing mix to be thought of as long-term investments in the brand image (Gardner and Levy, 1955). If differentiation was the first virtue of branding, this can be thought of as the second: Achieving coherence and consistency.

To summarise our discussion of branding so far: A brand should strive to create a lasting and coherent image in the eyes of its customers, that differentiates it from the competition in a meaningful manner. From a macro perspective, brands then achieve market segmentation by embodying a diverse array of ‘personalities’ that appeal to distinct groups of consumers. If we accept this as the rationale guiding the process of shaping the brand image, we might ask: What tools do brands have at their disposal to achieve these aims?

For one, a company can make efforts to have a consistent visual appearance, that reflects its positioning in the marketplace and creates a sense of coherence. In fact, in today’s world, we have been conditioned to expect brands to make such efforts. On all fronts, from a brands’ advertisements to its website, packaging, product design, brochures and even little promotional pens it might give away; Fonts, colours, layouts, imagery and illustrations will be used systematically, obeying rigorous sets of rules. A brand will own, control, protect and reinforce its established *look and feel* in all interactions it has with its stakeholders. Wheeler enriches this perspective by stating that “Brand Identity is the visual

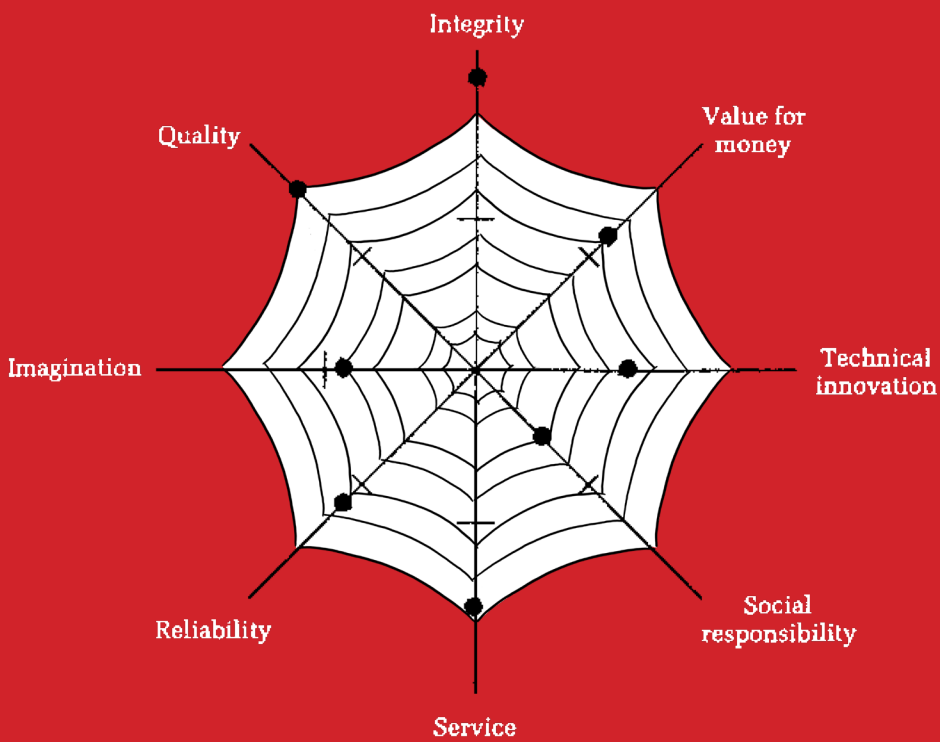
and verbal expression of a brand” (Wheeler, 2006, p. 6). Her mention of the *verbal* expression of a brand is of significance. Although it might appear less obvious, a brand’s use of language should be thought through, and consistent. Together, both *look and feel* and *tone of voice* contribute to what is often called brand identity.

As omnipresent as the brand identity orthodoxy might appear today, historical sources suggest that businesses only recognised its importance around the time of the ‘Consumer Revolution’. The design historian Philip Meggs writes: “[...] the visual identification systems that began during the 1950s went beyond trademarks or symbols. The national and multinational scope of many corporations made it difficult for them to maintain a cohesive image, but by unifying all communications from a given organisation into a consistent design system, such an image could be projected, and the design system enlisted to help accomplish specific corporate goals” (Phillip Meggs, quoted in Shaughnessy, 2014, p. 27). Adrian Shaughnessy, editor of the book *Manuals 1*, goes on to explain that it was around this time that brands first started using *brand manuals*, which served as rulebooks governing a brand’s visual expression (Shaughnessy, 2014).

The brand identity notion goes a long way in enabling businesses to project a coherent, differentiating image of themselves. It allows businesses to streamline communications across all touchpoints they have with consumers. These include, notably, advertising, which can be prescribed particular relevance to branding. In fact, *The Product and The Brand* seems to suggest that, at the time of the ‘Consumer Revolution’, advertising was regarded as a primary device to shape the image of a brand. The article emphasizes the role of advertising agencies in the practice of branding, and makes no mention of other means a business could employ to manipulate its brand (Gardner and Levy, 1955). This assumption

is consistent with the view given by Wally Olins in his book *On Brand*. He writes: “Consumer good manufacturers - the FMCG [fast-moving-consumer-good companies] people and their advertising agencies - defined the branding idea” (Olins, 2003, p. 58). Up until the 1960s, branding thought had been driven by FMCG’s and expressed through advertising.

Concluding our intuitive understanding of branding, we have established that a brand is defined by the perception its audience has of it. Recognising that the connotations and associations a brand evokes can be a powerful tool for differentiation, businesses seek to identify and manipulate the image they project. Businesses further understand that their brand image should strive to be consistent and coherent. To achieve this aim they create formal rules for communications, verbal and visual. And lastly, they recognise that marketing and advertising serve not only to boost sales in the short-term, but also as continuous investments in the brands’ lasting image.



IT'S ABOUT IDENTITY!

The holistic understanding of branding

Hitherto we have introduced some of the key concepts central to the practice of branding, namely differentiation, perception and cohesiveness. The context in which we have situated our discussion, however, was deliberately simplified. We have entertained the scenario of an unspecified business, manipulating its outward-facing image, to sell an unspecified product to an unspecified audience. As we fill in the blanks, and consider different types of businesses, products/services, and audiences, we will add nuance to our discussion. With each example, we will introduce new ideas, advance our understanding of branding and expand the conceptual territory the term inhabits.

Olins, for one, makes an important distinction between the nature of product branding and service branding. He criticizes that, at the time of his writing (2004), service brands largely mimicked the efforts of product brands. He suggests this is because the practice of branding has its roots in the consumer goods domain, and most of the knowledge on branding has been derived from this realm (Olins, 2003). This observation resonates with the views of other resear-

chers. Balmer and Gray, exploring the concept of corporate brands, state: “Although corporate brands are sometimes seen to be analogous to product brands, there are fundamental differences: this is an issue that has concerned writers for over a decade” (Balmer and Gray, 2003, p. 977). Leek and Christodoulides, discussing business-to-business branding, add to this: “The existing body of research knowledge on brand management has been predominantly derived from business to consumer markets, particularly fast moving consumer goods” (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011, p. 830).

Olins argues that branding a service the same way one would a product is problematic. A detergent can be regarded as constant, its quality, packaging and contents don’t change from purchase to purchase, and the task of branding it can be achieved by means of messaging. Advertising a detergent can change how a consumer perceives it. A package delivery service, on the other hand, is variable. Every delivery will be different. There can be a huge discrepancy between how the service is advertised, and how it is perceived, for example, if a package never arrives or delivery staff are rude (Olins, 2004). In light of this, Olins makes an important point: “In order to get an effective service brand, people have to be taught to live the brand they work with. For the customer, the person who represents the brand *is* the brand. If he or she doesn’t perform properly, the relationship between the brand and the customer may collapse” (Olins, 2003, p. 75). Olins’ argument is that staff is an important component in how service businesses are perceived, and thus internal initiatives to train said staff become part of the branding agenda. The salient contribution Olins makes to our understanding of branding is that it needs not be outward-facing only, it can go beyond packaging and advertising. Instead, the concept extends to within a corporation, involving the management of people.

Another factor is to be considered is that a business’ offe-

ring, service or product, is seldom singular. Typically, businesses offer a range of distinct services or products, sometimes a combination of the two. How these services and products are perceived individually, as well as in relation to one another, becomes a matter of strategic importance. The challenge of managing a business' portfolio of products/services has given rise to the notion of *brand architecture*. *Brand architecture* is the strategic organization of several individual brands to advance a corporation's goals. Aaker and Joachimsthaler explore different approaches to brand architecture in what they call the *brand relationship spectrum*. One approach is the *branded house* strategy, whereas a business markets its full range of products/services under the same *master brand*. Alternatively, there is the *house of brands* strategy, wherein individual products/services are portrayed as distinct entities, with little relation to each other. An example of the former is Virgin, a *branded house*. As diverse as its offering may be, all services/products are perceived to be strongly associated with the Virgin *master brand*. Alternatively, Procter & Gamble utilizes the *house of brands*, marketing a large number of consumer goods as separate brands, including *Head & Shoulders*, *Old Spice* and *Febreze* to name just a few (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000).

It is worth noting that businesses rarely fall neatly into the *house of brands* or *branded house* category, in reality, businesses tend to be on the spectrum in between the two extremes. However, for the sake of argument, we will limit ourselves to these two strategies.

To understand the significance of the *brand architecture* notion, we will consider the quintessential trade-off that exists between a *house of brands* and a *branded house*. A *house of brands* enables businesses to differentiate their products to a high extent, allowing "firms to clearly position brands on functional benefits and to dominate niche

segments” (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 11). At the same time, the creation of new brands is a costly endeavour, as each brand needs to be marketed separately. On the other hand, as Aaker and Joachimsthaler state: “a branded house usually maximizes synergy, as participation in one product market creates associations and visibility that can help in another”. Ultimately, they conclude that a *branded house* “enhances clarity, synergy, and leverage and thus should be the default brand architecture option. Any other strategy requires compelling reasons” (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 15).

The insight gained by considering the *brand architecture* notion is that branding plays an important role in informing a firm’s organisational structure. Olins illustrates this point by giving the example of the multinational luxury goods conglomerate LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy). LVMH is an example of a *house of brands*, operating a large number of luxury brands in various industries, going to great lengths to ensure that their individual brands are perceived as distinct. And while Olins states, that “in the back office, in financial management, information technology, human resource management, distribution and so on, group resources operate” (Olins, 2003, p. 104), achieving a *house of brands* is more than a matter of how a business presents its offering outwardly. Advertising alone is not sufficient to achieve a house of brands. Each brand needs to have its’ own staff, stores and distribution systems (Olins, 2003). Consequently, branding becomes central to a firm’s internal organisational structure.

So far, we have assumed that branding, through both external (visual identity, advertising) and internal (the management of people, the structure of an organisation) means, is directed at the audience a business is selling to. As the concept of *employer branding* suggests, branding can also serve to attract talent and strengthen organisational culture inste-

ad. Backhaus and Tikoo describe that *employer branding*, analogous to *product and corporate branding*, serves to differentiate a firm, but as an *employer*. It is conducted through external marketing to potential applicants, as well as internal marketing to a company's own workforce. They explain that *employer branding* efforts should be consistent in their messaging with *product and corporate branding* efforts, as to not create conflicting views of the company's values. Furthermore, the image of a firm as an employer, as it is marketed to potential applicants, should be in line with the reality of its organisational culture. Internal marketing measures help in this pursuit by strengthening the commitment of employees to the firm's values (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

In the context of our discussion, *employer branding* reveals that a diverse group of audiences are to be considered in the practice of branding, both within and outside of an organisation.

Here is where the holistic understanding differs largely from the intuitive understanding. The intuitive understanding of branding is simple, contained within the marketing department and advertising agencies. The holistic view brings in the whole organization as branding agents. Managing people plays a role in branding. Structuring an organisation is a matter of branding. Even the recruitment of talent, as well as the strengthening of organisational culture, are branding concerns.

I would argue that these examples have not added an exhaustive number of moving parts, they have changed the nature of the concept. What these examples imply is that, from management to staff, everyone is given a stake in branding. Furthermore, as we are forced to realise that the key ideas we identified (manipulating perceptions, achieving coherence and differentiation) are relevant throughout an organisation, we need not stop at the above examples.

Extrapolating from this basis, we can declare store layouts as central to the branding of supermarket chains, as they undoubtedly contribute to how a supermarket is perceived, and further as they could be utilised to differentiate one store from another. The same line of thinking could be applied to User Experience design in internet-based companies, or the recipes used by a restaurant. I'd argue that any difference between these examples, and the packaging of detergent, which is widely understood to be a part of its branding, is arbitrary.

Contemporary literature recognises the brand as a holistic concept. It is summarised well by the *Strathclyde Statement*, formulated by the *International Corporate Identity Group* (ICIG), which can be found in the appendix. The main achievement of the *Strathclyde Statement* is that it frames the brand as the identity of an organisation. By doing so, it doesn't negate the key ideas we identified before (differentiation, cohesiveness, perception), it instead integrates them in a richer understanding of branding.

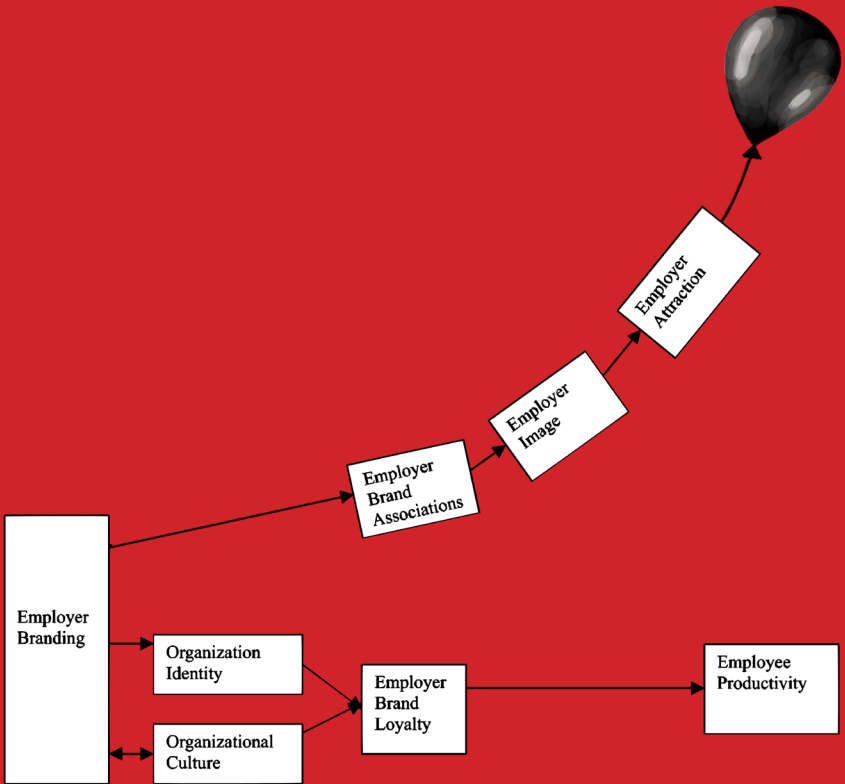
The theme of *differentiation* resurfaces, as the authors of the *Strathclyde Statement* assert that corporate identity lends a firm a "sense of individuality that can help to differentiate the organisation within its competitive environment" (International Corporate Identity Group, 2020).

It is also stated that "corporate identity can be a powerful means of integrating the many disciplines and activities essential to an organisation's success" (International Corporate Identity Group, 2020). This frames corporate identity as a centralised device, coordinating the various moving parts of a firm's inner workings. As such, corporate identity builds *cohesiveness*. Further, the *Strathclyde Statement* points out that corporate identity "can also provide the visual cohesion necessary to ensure that all corporate communications are coherent with each other and result in an image consistent with the organisation's defining ethos and character" (Inter-

national Corporate Identity Group, 2020). This explicitly incorporates the *brand identity* notion put forward in our intuitive understanding of branding.

And finally, the authors note that “Corporate identity differs from traditional brand marketing since it is concerned with all of an organisation’s stakeholders and the multi-faceted way in which an organisation communicates” (International Corporate Identity Group, 2020). In our intuitive understanding of branding, we had asserted that the perception external audiences have of a firm is central to branding. The *Strathclyde Statements* elevates this idea to the level of our *holistic understanding* of branding by recognising that all stakeholders need to be considered.

By framing branding as a matter of a firm’s identity, the authors place the concept at the very heart of an organisation. They state that “corporate identity is a strategic issue” (International Corporate Identity Group, 2020) and that it endows an organisation with a “sense of purpose and direction” (International Corporate Identity Group, 2020). Branding goes from being about an organisation’s *perceived* identity to its *actual identity*. This shift might be a response to the realisation that to change how a firm is perceived, with whatever aim, one has to change its reality. The examples we entertained have demonstrated that its staff, management and structure all contribute to this. This begs the question. If branding is concerned with an organisation’s *actual* identity, is there a difference between branding and running a business?



IT'S AMBIGUOUS!

Challenges of contemporary branding

In the last three chapters, we have made efforts to articulate the concept of branding, by assimilating perspectives of scholars and practitioners alike. By gradually introducing key ideas that reappear throughout the literature, we hoped to construct an understanding of branding representative of contemporary thought. It was framed as a holistic concept, describing the identity of an organisation. This chapter gets to the core of why the holistic understanding of branding renders the concept ambiguous, and aims to resolve some of the confusion.

Balmer states that branding suffers from “a failure to make a distinction between the elements comprising a business identity and the elements to be considered in managing a business identity” (Balmer, 2001, p. 259). I’d like to underline the significance of this insight.

In our *intuitive understanding* of branding, we had clearly defined the moving parts involved in the practice of branding as advertising and visual identification systems. In our *holistic understanding*, we observed that this model was limited, one had to consider the structure of an organisation, the ma-

nagement of people and organisational culture as all of these elements contribute to the brand. I suggested that this line of thinking creates a slippery slope, from it one could infer that all aspects of a business contribute to the brand.

While it is reasonable to understand the brand as holistic, comprised of the sum of an organisation's many behaviours and properties, it is unreasonable to suggest that all of these are to be considered and aligned in the management of the brand. The challenge that arises is that one must draw a line between what elements constitute a brand and what elements are to be managed. If the elements to be managed are defined too narrowly, one runs the risk of creating a significant disconnect between the desired brand perception and reality. If the elements to be managed are defined too broadly, the lines between what is branding and what is just running a business, become blurry.

The first case, in which the management of a brand is defined in narrow terms, is a recognised concern among scholars and practitioners. Olins' contribution to our *holistic understanding* of branding attests to this. He recognised that service brands all too often mimic product brands, as they are branded solely through the means of external marketing, which creates a dissonance between the image sold and reality.

However, this is not a problem specific to service companies only. It hints at what is a larger problem in the world of business: the adoption of what I would call the *communications paradigm* of branding. Not coincidentally this is reminiscent of the *intuitive understanding of branding* I presented in the second section of this text. Many businesses and practitioners understand the brand in holistic terms, but operate on the level of the *intuitive understanding*.

Balmer puts it well: "The practitioner literature is replete with examples of where identity is initially defined in terms

of the fundamental attributes of an organisation but often undergoes a dramatic volte-face with identity solutions being explained only in graphic-design terms” (Balmer, 2001, p. 251). Although it hurts me to say, as someone who identifies as a designer, I find that Balmer is right. There is an undue focus on graphic design (and other forms of external communication) in the realm of branding.

This is not to say that the communications paradigm in branding does not add substantial value to the field, the point is merely that other elements, that perhaps should be considered in the practice of branding, frequently go unmentioned. When branding is understood in holistic terms, but the practice defined too narrowly, I'd argue that dissonance between image and reality becomes inevitable.

It would seem like the solution would be to *both* understand branding holistically *and* subsequently tackle the task of brand management holistically. This is easier said than done, as suggested by Schultz and Chernatony in their text *The Challenges of Corporate Branding*. In line with our understanding, they assert that “Enlightened corporations approach branding as a pan-company activity that cuts across both functional areas and business units” (Schultz and Chernatony, 2002, p. 105). They go on to suggest that this holistic pursuit of branding raises challenges. For one, they ask: “With such a diverse group of stakeholders influencing the nature of a firm’s corporate brand, is it realistic to expect managers to be able to *control* the corporate brand?” (Schultz and Chernatony, 2002, p. 111). I think this is a valid concern. By framing the brand as a holistic concept, comprised of a plurality of interrelated and intricate moving parts, directed at a network of stakeholders (both internal and external) - the proposition of managing this complexity is rightfully called into question.

Another challenge the authors mention is the ability to “overcome turf and internal rivalry in managing the corpo-

rate brand” (Schultz and Chernatony, 2002, p. 111). They establish that, as a holistic concept, the responsibility for the brand is dispersed among the whole company. Consequently, “no internal department can claim to control or own the brand as their internal turf. Instead they will have to engage in company-wide, cross-functional relations, where different functions each contribute to the building of the brand” (Schultz and Chernatony, 2002, p. 111). The roles of different disciplines have to be articulated clearly, so that effective collaboration can be achieved.

Apart from blurring the lines between branding and running a business, Balmer observes that contemporary branding suffers from confusing terminology. He states that “there is a lack of consensus as to the precise meaning of many of the concepts articulated above, and the relationships between them” (Balmer, 2001). The concepts he is referring to are: *corporate identity*, *organisational identity*, *visual identity*, *corporate brand*, *corporate communications/total corporate communications*, *corporate image*, *corporate personality*, and *corporate reputation*.

This observation strongly resonates with my view, in fact, I’d like to add *brand image*, *brand identity*, *brand design* and *brand strategy* to the list. Balmer points out that the “muddled” use of terminology is a recognised concern among scholars. He references Abratt, who reaffirms this view, by stating that “despite the voluminous literature the concepts remain unclear and ambiguous as no universally accepted definitions have emerged” (Abratt, 1989, p. 66).

Balmer suggests that the terminology is a reason for why the field of branding has branched into distinct schools of thought, with little dialogue between one another. I’d like to argue that it’s the other way around. The study of branding has branched into distinct schools of thought because it is broad and ambiguous. The “muddled” use of terminology is a

symptom of the ambiguous nature of branding, not a cause of it.

My argument goes as follows: As a consequence of being holistic and all-encompassing, the concept of branding is generous. It's open to perspectives across disciplines. Fetscherin and Usunier (2012) attest to this idea. Their bibliometric analysis of branding literature reveals that a diverse group of disciplines contribute to the body of research on branding, most notably: business, management, architecture, arts and communications. Balmer, too, recognises the interdisciplinary nature of branding thought. Furthermore, he observes that “despite the wealth of disciplines, the degree of cross-fertilisation of ideas and insights from these literatures is comparatively slight. It would appear that business identity issues have, to a large degree, matured along narrow, vertical and disciplinary paradigms” (Balmer, 2001, p. 265). As a result of the interdisciplinary nature of branding, the literature has yielded a matrix of terminology that reflects the variety of angles to understanding the concept of branding. As such, the “muddled” use of terminology is a symptom, not a cause of the ambiguity surrounding branding.

The ambiguous terminology indicates the existence of an entangled web of interrelated concepts. This poses a challenge for practitioners and scholars alike. If there is no agreement on the language used, and on the meanings of the concepts, a productive dialogue becomes difficult. The productive response to this reality appears to be to push for clarity. This can be achieved by surgically separating the terms and focussing on where they diverge conceptually. Further, one can define the hierarchical relations between the individual concepts, and once again achieve a contained schematic understanding of branding.

Balmer, for one, has made such efforts repeatedly in his corpus. He discerns the aforementioned terms by differentia-

ting how they relate to the general field of *business identity*, or what I have referred to as branding.

Broadly put, Balmer distinguishes between concepts that are *observational* in nature and concepts that describe *objectives*.

To give two contrasting examples:

According to him, *corporate identity* is “The mix of elements which gives organisations their distinctiveness: the foundation of business identity studies” (Balmer, 2001, p. 254).

In relation to the *corporate brand*, he describes that “The Acquisition of a favourable corporate brand is an espoused objective of business identity management. A corporate brand proposition should be derived from the organisation’s identity” (Balmer, 2001, p. 253). To summarise: The *corporate identity* of an organisation is an observable phenomenon.

Every organisation has an identity, whether it actively brands itself or not. The *corporate brand*, in contrast, is acquired. It is defined by management efforts, and should be derived from the existing *corporate identity*.

Perhaps the biggest achievement of Balmer’s definitions is demonstrated by comparing them to the following definitions of *corporate identity* quoted by Abratt (1989, p. 66):

„. . . *identity in its most basic sense; that is the fundamental style, quality, character and personality of an organisation, those forces which define, motivate and embody it*“

„*The corporate identity is the ,personality‘ and ,soul‘ of the corporation*“

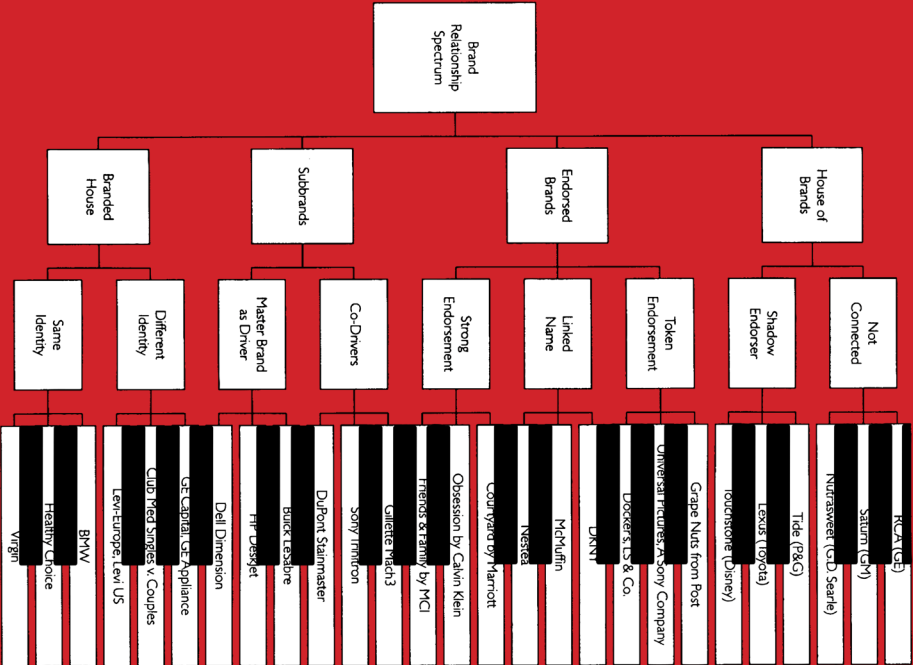
These definitions certainly carry weight and are not to be dismissed easily. However, the language used offers little indication as to how branding should be practised. Describing corporate identity as the ‘soul’ of the corporation raises more questions than it answers. Balmer, on the contrary,

when clarifying the convoluted terminology, makes the terms tangible. He discriminates clearly between what is to be observed, and what is to be acquired. Balmer's approach advocates for more precise and rigorous use of language, and consequently enables a more productive dialogue between scholars and practitioners. Clarity in language then, presents a good starting point to navigating the holistic nature of the branding phenomenon.

In this chapter, we have established that accepting the brand as a holistic concept urges for a clear line to be drawn between what elements comprise a brand and what elements are to be managed. If the focus of management is too narrow, as exemplified by the communications paradigm, a discrepancy between the image projected and the reality perceived follows. On the other hand, if the focus of management is too broad, the feasibility of managing the resulting complexity is called into question. The more elements are integrated into the branding process, the greater the need grows to assign clear roles and enable effective collaboration between actors within a corporation.

I would suggest that in drawing the line between what elements comprise the brand and what elements are to be managed, a sound and sensible rationale is to be employed, preferably on a case-to-case basis, that weighs in the above concerns.

Furthermore, we have postulated that the interdisciplinary nature of branding has generated a plethora of interrelated concepts, which has inadvertently led to ambiguous use of language. By focussing on where individual concepts converge, and pushing for clear, tangible and precise language, this issue can be resolved.



IT'S ABOUT AUTHENTICITY!

Speculating on the future of branding

In chapters 1-4, I have hoped to construct a conceptual framework for understanding the practice of branding. Chapters 1-3, going from the *naive* to the *holistic* understanding of branding have, somewhat coincidentally, provided a rough sketch of the historical evolution of the concept. However, it must be stated that it has not been the aim to comprehensively trace the history of branding. Rather, the goal has been to identify the key ideas that have reappeared throughout the literature (differentiation, perception, cohesiveness, identity) and to integrate them into a conceptual model of branding. Chapter 4 has investigated challenges that have arisen from the holistic understanding of branding. For one, to disentangle the web of interrelated concepts in the branding arena, we must push for precise and tangible language. Also, we must distinguish between what elements comprise a brand and what elements are to be managed.

Assuming that this conceptual framework is accepted as relevant to contemporary branding practices, one question remains that we will seek to explore in this chapter. How future-proof is this understanding of branding?

A growing body of research observes a rising demand for authenticity in branding (Morhart *et al*, 2015; Fritz *et al*, 2017; Schallehn *et al*, 2014; Bruhn *et al*, 2012).

As Morhart *et al* remark, “In order to engage in meaningful branding efforts, it is imperative for marketers to understand the nature of authenticity of their branded products and services, as well as its drivers and consequences” (Morhart *et al*, 2015). Although the validity of their statement needs not be challenged, we might note that this responsibility doesn’t fall solely in the hands of marketers.

To understand this increased need for authenticity, we can consider two competing explanations. Morhart and colleagues describe that “consumers are confronted with increasing commercialization, an overflow of the fake, and an omnipresence of meaningless market offers” (Boyle, 2004; cited in Morhart *et al*, 2015, p. 200). Bruhn and colleagues, in contrast, interpret the need for authenticity as a response to a rising feeling of societal uncertainty, facilitated by political instability, the global financial crisis and climate change (Bruhn *et al*, 2012). From these explanations we can infer that the cause for this development is likely multifaceted: Some fault might reside in the brands themselves, some of it might be attributable to external factors.

We might ask: Does our understanding of branding present a good conceptual foundation which can produce *authentic* brands? This begs the question - what do we understand by authenticity in the first place?

The literature suggests that authenticity comes with a range of conceptual associations and is not easily defined. In the context of our discussion, we will consider two views that I judge to be of particular prominence in the body of research I have examined.

The first portrays authenticity as a matter of a brand’s sincerity. Truthful, honest and genuine interactions with its

stakeholders define a brand's authenticity.

Morhart and colleagues put it well: "We conceptualize credibility as the brand's transparency and honesty toward the consumer, as well as its willingness and ability to fulfil its claims" (Morhart *et al*, 2015, p. 202). Based on this view, if there was a discrepancy between the claims a brand makes and reality, it would be considered inauthentic.

Our understanding of branding places great emphasis on the need to achieve consistency between the image projected and reality. As such, it sets us up well for creating brands that are truthful, and by this view, authentic.

Another perspective on authenticity frames it as a question of integrity. In the context of people, authenticity could be understood as "[...] the degree to which a person is true to his or her own identity in the face of corrupting external pressures" (Schallehn *et al*, 2014, p. 193). Applied to brands, this could be translated as: "To be authentic, brands must be without an instrumental economic agenda, and be disseminated by people who are intrinsically motivated by deeply held values" (Holt, 2002; cited in Morhart *et al*, 2015, p. 203). Authenticity becomes a matter of a brand being true to core values. If a brand's behaviours and properties reflect the presence of a strongly held sense of self, it is authentic.

I'd argue that the extent to which our understanding of branding enables us to produce authentic brands (according to this view of authenticity), is debatable.

We have argued that a brand's behaviours, appearance, offerings and structure should be derived from its core identity, and that already goes some way towards fulfilling this definition of authenticity. On the other hand, we have implicitly suggested that this identity can be instrumentalized. A brand can make efforts to shape its identity, and the natural assumption is that this would serve an economic agenda. To rephrase: If a brand's behaviours, appearance, offerings and

structure are all derived from its core identity, but this identity was constructed to serve economic gain, is it still authentic? To frame it in colloquial terms:

If I as a consumer/employee perceive a brand to possess the power of changing its identity in order to appeal to me, will this make me suspicious? Will it dilute the meaning, the inherent weight the term identity carries?

Admittedly, this is an open-ended question. The answers are contingent on one's worldview, beliefs and sentiment. I do not mean to enforce my view as the correct one. That being said, it will underlie the rest of this discussion, as I speculate on the future of branding.

I believe that the instrumentalisation of identity, enabled by branding practices, poses an inherent obstacle to brand authenticity. How can this concern be resolved?

The logical response is not to instrumentalise identity, which by extension means, to seize all branding efforts. This proposal is not to be mistaken with the notion of *debranding*, which describes a marketing strategy where a product is strategically positioned to appear generic (Parasuraman, 1983). Instead, it is suggested that a business refrains from strategically managing its brand. This doesn't seem like a plausible option, as central as branding has become to business today. But what's more important, it's hardly beneficial. After all, it would imply undoing all of the advances in thought the discipline of branding has provided.

Undoubtedly, these are of great value. The recognition that "brands are created in the mind", that they are shaped by the connotations and associations they evoke, should continue to guide our thinking. The realisation that all of an organisation's moving parts contribute to the perception it evokes, should not be ignored. And further, the value in striving for coherence and consistency throughout an organisation, should remain unquestioned.

I'd like to suggest another approach to resolving the obstacle to authenticity posed by the instrumentalisation of identity, that doesn't suggest the resolution of branding. Instead, it is based on *rethinking* branding.

My idea is that the brand is to be thought of as an *epiphenomenon*. An epiphenomenon is "a secondary phenomenon that results from and accompanies another" (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2020). As such, the sum of an organisation's offering, structure, communications and staff behaviour give rise to the brand as a secondary phenomenon. A by-product, so to say. This is not a radical reappraisal of our holistic understanding of branding, it builds on it. The subtle difference is that as an *epiphenomenon*, as a by-product, we don't need to manage the brand. We don't need to control a corporation's identity. We need to nurture its ingredients.

We can declare the identity of a corporation, and it's brand, as outside of our control and employ a bottom-up approach to brand management. By loosening branding's grip on identity, we are free to reshift our priorities. We are liberated from the obligation to police what's *on-brand* and what's *off-brand*, because we don't control the brand *per se*.

Instead, brand management can assume a more passive, mediating role. Informed by the body of research on branding that has been accumulated by scholars and practitioners, it can seek to investigate how the various stakeholders of an organisation (internal and external) perceive its identity. However, this insight should not be used to take executive action, imposing an articulated identity on a corporation that aims to align and shape these perceptions. Instead, the information on how an organisation is perceived should be distributed among stakeholders.

Managers should be informed of how customers perceive an organisation. Consumers should be informed of how managers perceive an organisation, e.g. through the means of

creative advertising. Potential applicants should be informed of how staff perceives their organisation, and staff should be informed of how potential applicants perceive their organisation. Managers should be informed of how staff perceives their organisation, and vice versa.

If brand management took an unbiased approach to exchange perceptions between stakeholders, this would enhance transparency. Arguably, natural incentives exist for misaligned perceptions to converge. If the image a consumer has of an organisation is substantially different from the image the organisation projects of itself through advertising, then the resulting dissonance invites the consumer to update their perception. In the same way, if there is a significant gap between how managers and consumers perceive an organisation, managers are likely incentivised to change their behaviour.

The key idea is to render brand management a device to increase transparency and accountability between stakeholders in an unbiased way. This allows an organisation to build a cohesive identity organically and authentically.

Of course, we are deep into the realm of speculation at this point. It is understood that this is not a comprehensive, developed model of branding. The aim is to invite discourse on the question of whether a softer, more indirect approach to branding is a viable method of meeting the rising demand for brand authenticity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this thesis, we employed a conceptual framework differentiating between three levels of understanding branding. The three levels served as a structural device to organise the plethora of views within the literature in a meaningful manner. We went from its origins, the mere use of trademarks, to appreciating the holistic and multidisciplinary nature of contemporary branding.

In the fourth chapter, we found that that the holistic conception of branding has given rise to challenges. As a designer, interested in the field of branding, this chapter gets to the core of why I find branding to be ambiguous. For one, we found that the holistic nature of branding has led to confusing terminology, which reflects the plethora of views on branding across disciplines and industries. From this, we inferred that we must push for precise and tangible language. Further, we found that one must differentiate between the holistic nature of brands, and the elements that should be considered in the practice of branding. To put it colloquially, this could be restated as: If everything contributes to the brand, how do we draw the line between what is branding

and what is just running a business?

In the last chapter, we speculated on the future of branding. Building on the discussion of the first four chapters, we asserted that the instrumentalisation of identity poses an inherent obstacle to authenticity in branding. Further research is needed to evaluate the validity of this claim. If it was found that consumers perceive brands as inauthentic merely because they instrumentalise their identity, then contemporary branding thought is urged to evolve. A softer, more indirect approach to branding, as was suggested in the last chapter, might be a reasonable response.

Our discussion was through and through theoretical. While this was an appropriate mode for the purposes of this thesis, future work can strengthen the conceptual foundation we laid out by grounding it in real-world examples. As was mentioned earlier, the three levels of understanding branding roughly trace the history of branding. In future work, the model could, therefore, prove useful in the study of the historical evolution of branding.

In this essay, I have sought to answer the questions that, as a designer interested in branding, had left me feeling overwhelmed. It was my intention to better grasp the scope of the concept and to understand my role in the process. My hope is that this discussion helps aspiring practitioners, like me, to make sense of branding.

APPENDIX

The Strathclyde Statement

„Every organisation has an identity.

It articulates the corporate ethos, aims and values and presents a sense of individuality that can help to differentiate the organisation within its competitive environment. When well managed, corporate identity can be a powerful means of integrating the many disciplines and activities essential to an organisation's success. It can also provide the visual cohesion necessary to ensure that all corporate communications are coherent with each other and result in an image consistent with the organisation's defining ethos and character.

By effectively managing its corporate identity an organisation can build understanding and commitment among its diverse stakeholders. This can be manifested in an ability to attract and retain customers and employees, achieve strategic alliances, gain the support of financial markets and generate a sense of direction and purpose.

Corporate identity is a strategic issue. Corporate identity differs from traditional brand marketing since it is concerned with all of an organisation's stakeholders and the multi-faceted way in which an organisation communicates.“

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