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The Organic View of the Brand: A Brand Value Co-creation Model

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Introduction

Brand management has evolved from its original focus on product differentiation (for example, Aaker, 1996) to new perspectives that include service brands (for example, Berry, 2000) and corporate brands (for example, Balmer, 1995). This represents the emergence of a new approach that understands brands as social processes that involve multiple stakeholders. This also creates the need to better understand how brand value is co-created together with other stakeholders (Brodie *et al*, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Frow and Payne, 2011). In this respect, there is an opportunity to build an integrated brand value co-creation model (BVCC) (Merz *et al*, 2009) that can be used in different business settings (Wallström *et al*, 2008; Payne *et al*, 2009; Pillai, 2012).

This article presents an organic view of the brand (OVB); a BVCC model. The OVB argues that brands are organic entities because they are built together with various stakeholders and many parts of this process are beyond the control of the organisation. From the OVB, brand value is conversationally co-created by multiple stakeholders in a fluid space subject to constant negotiation. This calls into question many of the traditional assumptions of brand management and demands a new managerial style. The OVB challenges the traditional ideas of the value proposition and the brand covenant and instead suggests that while managers need to provide direction for the brand, they must also be willing to accept that brand

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meaning is constantly negotiated with many other stakeholders (Round and Roper, 2012; Ind *et al*. 2013). Thus, managers will need to accept a loss of control and be willing to share if they want to build a relevant brand image. The implication is that managers will need to develop a new leadership style that is more humble, open and participatory.

This research is qualitative and exploratory in nature (Creswell, 2007), due to the lack of empirical research in this area (Pillai, 2012). The fieldwork consists of 20 in-depth interviews with marketing directors of companies in the fields of fast moving consumer goods (FMCG), business-to-business (B2B), and services – as well as directors of brand consultancies, and a workshop with eight of the previous interviewees.

Brands as social processes that involve multiple stakeholders

From the product branding perspective, a brand is a name as well as a set of perceptions based on functional and emotional values and benefits (de Chernatony *et al*, 2006) that help to differentiate a product (for example, Aaker, 1996). As such, brands work to guarantee product quality (Dawar and Parker, 1994) and simplify consumer purchase decisions (Jacoby *et al*, 1977). Traditional product branding practices dedicate most resources to building the brand's outward image (Morrison and Crane, 2007) through diverse communication initiatives.

However, the growing importance of the service sector in developed economies, as well as the emergence of the concept of service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), are challenging the traditional view of brands. According to this line of thinking, customer interaction with company employees (for example, Berry, 2000) and the value-in-use (for example, Grönroos, 2011) largely determine the overall experience, and consequently, brand value. When an experience is positive, consumers are more likely to establish long-term relationships with the brand (Brakus *et al*, 2009). This new current of thought attaches greater importance to the broad integrative role of the service brand as an interface between consumers and employees, as well as between the company and numerous other stakeholders (Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony, 2000; Davis *et al*, 2000; McDonald *et al*, 2001; Brodie *et al*, 2006, 2009).

Parallel to the service brand literature, the corporate branding literature has also been gaining attention since the mid-1990s (for example, Balmer, 1995; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2002; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Golant, 2012; Balmer, 2012a,b). In fact, several authors in academia and the professional world (for example, Wallström *et al*,

2008) have stressed that there is a clear move from product and service brands towards corporate brands. In the same way, Merz *et al* (2009) argue that brand literature has evolved from focusing on output (the product) to the conceptualisation of brands as social processes in which multiple stakeholders are involved in the co-creation of brand value.

The primary difference between product and corporate brands is that, while the fundamental objective of product brands is to achieve customer satisfaction, corporate brands incorporate a broader view and scope (Gylling and Lindberg-Repo, 2006; Roper and Davies, 2007). Corporate brands take into account the needs of multiple stakeholders (Balmer, 1995; de Chernatony, 2002; Hatch and Schultz, 2002) while aiming to improve the overall brand experience (de Chernatony, 2002). Accordingly, the corporate brand has a fundamental role in the creation of sustainable relationships between an organisation and its multiple stakeholders (Schwaiger and Sarsted, 2011). Balmer and Gray (2003, p. 982) claim that 'the core of a corporate brand is an explicit covenant between an organisation and its key stakeholder groups'. This is an essential bilateral contract between the organisation (s) behind a brand and clients and other stakeholders (Otubanjo *et al*, 2010; Balmer, 2012b). Corporate brand stakeholders include clients, employees, investors, suppliers and citizens (Morsing and Kristensen, 2001; Schultz, et al, 2005; Davies *et al*, 2010). The brand covenant or brand promise is defined by the senior managers and is expressed as a value proposition of the corporate brand (Balmer, 2012b).

Several authors have tried to build conceptual corporate brand models. Balmer and Soenen (1999) developed the ACID test that differentiates between four types of identity and provides structure for better planning and benchmarking of corporate identity strategies. The four identity types are the actual identity, the communicated identity, the ideal identity and the desired identity. The model allows managers to identify and minimise gaps among all these types of identities. This model was later on refined and three more identity types were added to complete the AC4ID test (Balmer, 2012b). This later version allows for better calibration of the brand identities with the covenanted corporate brand identity. Another interesting model is that of Knox and Bickerton (2003). They identify six conventions that serve as guiding practices to diagnose the management, and nurturing of, the corporate brand. Finally, Hatch and Schultz (2003) proposed a model that claims that to get the most of a corporate branding strategy three essential elements should be aligned: vision, culture and image. Their model allows managers to analyse and diagnose the existing gaps among these three elements.

One of the main threats to a corporate brand is a gap between stakeholder perceptions of a corporate brand and the brand promise made by the corporation (Roper and Davies, 2007; Anisimova, 2010). A gap may cause consumers and stakeholders to reject or be ambivalent to the brand promise (Balmer, 2012a, b). If consumers and stakeholders can reject a brand promise, then this implies a clear transfer of power from the organisation to consumers and stakeholders (Cova *et al*, 2011). Consequently, while corporations retain simple legal ownership of their brands, various stakeholders share a major part of the emotional ownership of corporate brands (Balmer, 2012a, b).

Managers must accept that they are losing control of their brands and that controlling every aspect of a brand is impossible in this new environment. According to Haarhoff and Kleyn (2012, p. 112), 'They can guide, influence and inspire consumers to co-create brand meaning, but unilateral identification and building of all aspects of brand positioning [...] is no longer possible'. From this perspective, building a brand is an interactive process in a conversational environment (Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011) where brand value is co-created by multiple stakeholders (Merz *et al,* 2009). In this conversational space consumers use their experiences to construct meaning and value together (Baker *et al,* 2005). Instead of imposing a vision, the role of a brand manager should be to negotiate and communicate with the various stakeholders (Golant, 2012) so as to understand the meanings they attach to the brand – and then reinterpret, adapt and reinforce the brand's value proposition accordingly (Iglesias and Bonet, 2012).

While managers have a crucial role, personnel – and especially front-line employees – are at the heart of service and corporate brands (Brodie, 2009; Balmer, 2010). The behaviour of employees can make or break a brand (Roper and Davies, 2007). Their levels of commitment and empowerment will largely determine the success of a brand (Aaker, 2004). When employees understand and share the brand vision then their actions can be easily aligned with brand. Of course, this means that managers must persuade employees of the need to be aligned with the values of the brand so that employees reflect this belief in their interactions with clients and other stakeholders (de Chernatony, 2002; Golant, 2012). This is the main challenge facing brands – transferring brand values to the daily behaviour of employees (Wallström *et al,* 2008).

The similarities between the literature on corporate and service brands (Balmer and Gray, 2003) have led some authors to use the terms interchangeably (de Chernatony *et al,* 2006). Both corporate and service brands have multiple interfaces that involve diverse stakeholders (for example, Balmer and Gray, 2003; Brodie *et al*, 2009) and emphasise internal policies and the key role of the employee (for example, Harris and De Chernatony, 2001; McDonald *et al*, 2001). Other common elements include the emphasis on co-creation involving different stakeholders (for example, Brodie *et al*, 2009; Cova and Dalli, 2010), and mechanisms to create outstanding experiences (for example, Berry, 2000; de Chernatony, 2002) that enable the development of long-term trusting relationships (for example, Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony, 2000; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). Empirical research by Rahman *et al* (2009) shows that brand management practices for goods and services may not be as different as previously thought. Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony (2000) also suggest that product, services and corporate brands fulfil the same basic functions. Thus, it seems that there is a growing convergence in the branding literature, that is consistent with the stakeholder-focus brand era presented by Merz *et al*, 2009 and that is characterised by viewing brands as social processes in which multiple stakeholders are involved in the co-creation of brand value.

This points towards the need to better understand brand value co-creation processes by multiple stakeholders (Brodie *et al*, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Frow and Payne, 2011) and develop an integrated brand value co-creation framework that can be relevant in various business settings (Merz *et al*, 2009; Payne *et al*, 2009).

Brand value co-creation

Van Durme *et al* (2003) were among the first researchers to face some of the above challenges. In their model, they integrate the 'three promises' framework, also known as the value triangle with the idea of triadic brand relationships.

Subsequent research, although acknowledging that brands allow the making, enabling and facilitating of promises, differs from Van Durme *et al* (2003) in two respects. Firstly, employees are not only involved in keeping promises, but also play a key role in making promises (for example, salespeople, receptionists, and so on) (for example, Ind and Bjerke, 2007). Secondly, there are stakeholders other than consumers and employees involved in co-creating value (for example, Davies *et al,* 2010).

Brodie *et al* (2006) developed a conceptual model known as the service brand-relationship-value (SBRV) triangle that expands the works of Berry (2000), Grönroos (2006), Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), and Van Durme *et al* (2003). The model also seeks to overcome the limitations of the works of Berry (2000) and Van Durme *et al* (2003) by incorporating 'network relationship experiences, rather than just consumer experiences' (Brodie *et al,* 2006, p. 371). The SBRV triangle underlines the central role of the service brand and the importance of experiences between the brand and its multiple stakeholders to co-create value.

The SBRV model is an enlarged view of the brand (not only service brands) that was developed in response to the theoretical paradigm shift instigated by Vargo and Lusch (2004). The SBRV triangle, like the model of Van Durme *et al* (2003), stresses the importance of employees in brand experience co-creation processes, but unlike the Van Durme model, the SBRV triangle acknowledges the existence of many other stakeholders – along the same lines as Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and Grönroos (2006). However, one significant shortcoming of the model is that it only considers employee-stakeholder interactions as a possible source of creation of meaning and experience, and so neglects the role that other brand interfaces play (Batey, 2008). These other interfaces include the brand's symbols (McDonald *et al,* 2001) and physical manifestations (Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony, 2000), such as decoration, in the case of a hotel or a store brand (Schmitt, 2003).

Brodie *et al* (2006) also place the brand at the centre of their model – yet according to a vast literature, brands only exist in the minds of consumers, which suggest their centrality (for example, Keller, 1993). Lastly, it seems inconsistent that 'the company' appears twice in their model (at one of the vertices of the SBRV triangle; and at the same time, at the centre of the model as an entity that can be similar to a brand). Therefore, although the SBRV triangle solves some of the shortcomings of previous models, such as the Van Durme *et al* model (2003), it still suffers some incoherencies and certain limitations as it does not take into account all sources of meaning and value creation.

Payne *et al* (2009) integrate co-creation and branding to diagnose and develop customer relationship experiences. The main components of their model are: the value creation processes (involving customers); the supplier's value creating process (which refers to the mechanisms related to the design and co-creation of a brand relationship experience); the encounters and interactions that co-create experiences; and lastly, other additional sources of brand knowledge. This model is interesting because it integrates the processes of value co-creation, experiences, interactions and relationships, in a context (business-to-consumer goods) other than that of the service brand. The model also overcomes one of the principal limitations of the SBRV triangle of Brodie *et al* (2006), by incorporating other additional sources of brand knowledge (Keller, 2003) and brand meaning (Batey, 2008), as well as employees, customers and other stakeholders. Although their model provides interesting insights, Payne *et al* (2009) recognise the limitation of their business-to-consumer focus and encourage future research to investigate different business settings.

Merz *et al* (2009) discuss a stakeholder framework that illustrates the last stage of their evolving brand logic. Under this framework, which is in line with the proposals of other authors such as Ind and Bjerke (2007) and Ballantyne and Aitken (2007), brand value is the result of dynamic social interactions among multiple stakeholders.

The framework of Merz *et al* (2009) recognises that the creation of value largely depends on interactions between the firm and customers, and that these interactions depend in turn on the interactions established among the various employees of the company. Furthermore, brand value is also built on the interactions between an individual customer and other stakeholders in this process, such as in brand communities.

While recognising the usefulness of the Merz *et al* (2009) proposal, many other authors (for example, Keller, 1993) argue that brand value is subjective and unique to each individual. The second criticism of the model is that, in contrast to other proposals such as that of Payne *et al* (2009), it does not explicitly include sources of value creation within the company other than employees. Finally, the brand appears as a simple interface between the firm, customers and other stakeholders. According to the argument supporting the model, if any brand is built from multiple social interactions that contribute to the generation of value, then it seems that all these agents should be part of the brand.

Research objectives

The emerging branding perspective focuses on brands as social processes and claims that brand value is co-created by multiple stakeholders. Although several authors have attempted to conceptualise the process of brand value co-creation (Van Durme *et al*, 2003; Brodie et al, 2006; Merz *et al*, 2009), the field of study is still developing and fragmented. According to Cornelissen *et al* (2012), these models should take into account that brands are built through continuous interpretations and negotiations with multiple stakeholders. Similarly, Vallaster and Lindgreen (2011) claim that very few researchers have explored and described the relationships between the main actors involved in building the brand. From this perspective, the question remains unanswered as to whether brands are mostly built internally, externally or in cooperation (Roper and Davies, 2007; Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011).

There is a fundamental need to study and better understand how brand value is co-created with other stakeholders (Brodie *et al*, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Frow and Payne, 2011; Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011). Empirical research is also needed in this field as most existing research is purely conceptual (Wallström *et al*, 2008; Pillai, 2012). In addition, no study has yet compared brand building processes and strategies in different industries (Pillai, 2012). This research deficit is especially evident in B2B (Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011). Payne *et al* (2009) also recognise that it would be worthwhile studying the brand value co-creation process in different environments – ranging from FMCG, to services and B2B – to discover if relevant similarities exist.

The objective of the present research is to build an integrative BVCC model from empirical fieldwork in different business settings.

Method

Owing to the lack of relevant empirical research, this study applies a qualitative and exploratory approach to develop a new BVCC model (Creswell, 2007). To overcome the limitations of previous studies that focused on one area of economic activity (for example, Payne *et al*, 2009), this study includes in the sample a variety of marketing managers for leading international brands from various sectors (FMCG, B2B and services), as well as directors of globally recognised brand consultancies. The data collection comprises 20 in-depth interviews, with five respondents from each of the four profiles – at which point the saturation criterion was reached (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). The diverse profiles of the respondents enable the use of constant comparisons that form the main pillar for the construction of a robust conceptual model (Creswell, 2007). The in-depth interview guide tried to cover the view of the interviewees on the evolving role of brands, the degree of control that managers have on brands, they key actors on the brand value co-creation process, and the differences in the processes of creating brands in differing environments (see Table 9.1). Finally, to review the model

Table 9.1 In-depth interview guide (subjects covered)

• Evolution in the role of brands
• Key actors, elements and processes to be taken into account when building brands
• Key actors, elements and processes for brand sustainability
• Impact of new technologies on brand building
• Intellectual property–brand control
• Co-creation of brand value
• Role of employees in co-creating brand value
• Role of customers in co-creating brand value
• Role of senior managers in co-creating brand value
• Other roles in co-creating brand value
• Differences in the processes of creating brands in differing environments (FMCG, Services, B2B)

emerging from the fieldwork, eight of the above respondents (two from each profile) participated in a workshop, in line with the proposal by Payne *et al* (2009).

Data were analysed and interpreted using NVivo 10.0 software. The 20 interviews were transcribed – and then analysed and interpreted line by line using a coding process to identify concepts and properties (see Figure 9.1). These concepts were then grouped using constant comparisons into higher order concepts – such as categories and subcategories (see Figure 9.2). Finally, these categories were integrated to build a conceptual model that was then reviewed against the literature and opinions of the experts who participated in the workshop (see Figure 9.4).

Data analysis and interpretation

From the analysis and interpretation of the in-depth interviews and workshop, a BVCC model emerges – the OVB. According to the OVB, brand value is conversationally co-created by many different stakeholders and brands are organic entities that can often develop outside of the strategic aims set by brand managers. The following sections further discuss the theoretical framework that has emerged from the fieldwork.

Conversational space: where organisations and individual consumers meet

The co-creation of brand value primarily occurs in the conversational space between the organisation and individual consumer (Figure 9.3).

Marketing Manager, Services 2
In the online connected world we live in, (“*connected world*”) that very quickly all of that investment, all of that work, all of that association that you might have done over 30, 50, 100, 300 years around some values can be changed (“brand associations change”) very, very quickly (“quick change”). I’m not just talking about reputational damage (“*reputational damage*”), I’m just talking about people starting to use your brand name, your product (“people using brand assets”) in a particular way that you had not anticipated and, in fact, didn’t want it to go in but you just can’t stop it (“brand hijack”). The word spreads so quickly (“word of mouth”) that actually before you realise it your entire proposition is starting to be shifted in the marketplace (“brand proposition shift”). Can you control it? (“potential lose of control”)

Figure 9.1 Illustration of concepts-codes
Note: Conceptual names are in italic. *In vivo* codes are in brackets.

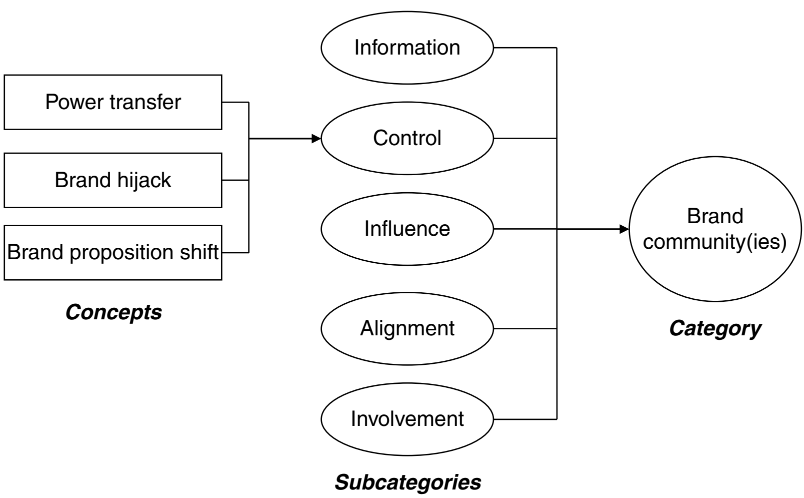

Figure 9.2 Illustration of emerging subcategories and categories

In this space, the consumer and organisation interact through brand interfaces and frontline employees.

> Brands do not create value unilaterally. Brand value is created when consumers see that their experience at the various contact points are positive. (Consultant 1)

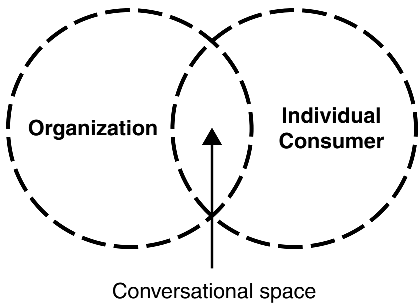

Figure 9.3 The conversational space

> We are very aware that the value of a brand depends on how consumers interact with it and their evaluation of these interactions. We have to develop the best possible experience using the tangible elements that we can offer – such as the decoration of the common areas, the rooms, the food, and above all, through the efforts of frontline staff such as receptionists and waiters. The definitive moment when a valuable brand is produced – or not – is when the client interacts with the elements of the brand and evaluates the experience. (Services 5)

Therefore, the creation of brand value depends on the interactions established between consumers and the organisation that manages the brand – through frontline employees and brand interfaces. The role of the organisation is to understand the needs and desires of consumers in order to facilitate a satisfactory brand experience.

It must also be emphasised that each consumer has a unique perception of a given brand. The meanings that a consumer derives from a brand are subjective and the result of individual experiences and perceptions. As a result, the model that emerges from the fieldwork starts in the conversational space between the organisation and each individual consumer.

> Each consumer has a specific image of a brand and this may sometimes be completely contrary to the image held by other consumers. The perceptions of a brand and its value depend on individual experiences. (FMCG2)

In the OVB (Figure 9.4) we adopt a bird's eye view that focuses on the connected space where an individual consumer and the organisation come together. In this space brand interactions take place (both

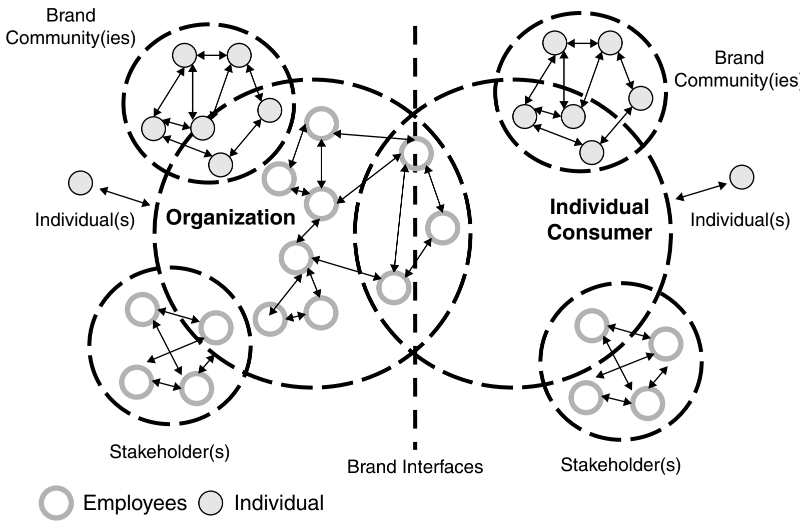

Figure 9.4 The organic view of the brand

planned and unplanned), which can be absorbed back into the organisation and shared with others if there is a willingness to learn. Equally, the consumer can also take those brand interactions and share the experiences with other stakeholders, such as brand partners and consumers, and even participate in naturally occurring communities beyond the purview of the organisation. Thus the model emphasises two important issues. First, the brand space where the meaning and value of the brand is determined is fluid and subject to constant negotiation. Second, while brand owners still have influence over the meaning of the brand they are no longer able to control brand experiences to the same extent as in the past.

Brand interfaces

The construction of a leading brand requires consistent management across a number of interfaces. Brand interfaces include all the many non-human interfaces through which consumers interact with a brand and which are essential for potentially building brand value – including the product, packaging, visual identity and points of sale.

> I believe that it is the product that largely makes the brand. (FMCG 4)
>
> The functionality must be very clear. If you do not have the best laptop in the world then you will not have a brand like Apple. Again,

> if you don't have a fantastic design then you will not have an Apple. Some of the brand promise is undeniably tangible. (Consultant 2)

The final perception of consumers will largely depend on those brand interfaces that make the brand promise tangible. This point is evident with FMCG, but it is also important for service and B2B brands.

> On the basis of the brand, we build a language that is applied to everything – the design of new offices, the visual identity, photographic style, artwork and communications. We unfold this language at all our points of contact. (Services 3)

Unlike other models, the OVB that arises from the fieldwork suggests that all the brand interfaces can make and keep promises. Products, packaging and store design communicate and make promises. In addition, each of these interfaces should be able to fulfil promises made and so contribute positively to brand value co-creation. Brand interfaces have been the traditional levers of brand building because brand managers can more easily control them.

> If my product cannot fulfil the promises we communicate, then we cannot stay long in the market. For this reason, one of our obsessions is the control of every manufacturing process to ensure compliance with brand standards. (FMCG 2)

Employees

Despite the importance of brand interfaces in building a brand, employees remain essential. The multiple interactions and contacts that occur between frontline employees and clients largely determine the brand value co-creation and this is especially evident in services and B2B.

> You need to understand that internal employees are probably the most important stakeholders. […] We are an experiential brand, with multiple touchpoints, and that means that our employees are the brand. (Services 4)

Within FMCG, marketing managers also highlight the key role of employees, even if there are fewer direct employee-customer interactions, because they are responsible for listening to consumers and then developing and implementing strategies that project the values of the brand at every brand interface. Thus, employees facilitate brand value co-creation.

> A company such as ours cannot compete successfully without a team that lives and breathes the brand values and fights for these values for every product we introduce. (FMCG 3)

This is an important point, as many FMCG companies underestimate the key role of their employees in the brand building process and this leads to a high turnover among brand managers within companies and damages brand value.

> Job rotation is an important factor that many people forget about. It is impossible to significantly advance a brand – even if you are marketing genius – if you stay in the job for less than two years. (FMCG 1)

Creating a team of employees who show high levels of commitment to the brand is one of the greatest challenges for any manager who wants to develop a strong competitive position over the long term.

> This is like a theatre in which the actors are the employees and the customers are the audience. We raise the curtains each morning in 8000 shops worldwide. How can we ensure that the same play is performed and that the actors perform their roles and participate with real feeling? (Services 3)
>
> I believe that the role of employees is fundamental in our markets to communicate the love. An employee who is not connected with the company or the brand is unlikely to fight for the brand. Having employees who feel involved with the brand makes a real difference to the bottom line. (FMCG 4)

To achieve this level of employee engagement it is essential to have the right people and know how to listen to them, build their trust, and enable them to develop and grow within the company. Consequently, from the organisational perspective it is essential to align recruiting, training and compensation policies with the brand identity. When a brand has an internal culture of support and development and institutionalises these management mechanisms, it is then much easier to communicate the brand values to the customer with naturalness and consistency.

> If the employees do not firmly believe in the values that the company projects, then there will be schizophrenia between what the company says and what the company does internally. The image of

> the company will sooner or later be damaged. Therefore, employees must be completely involved and committed to the values the brand transmits. (Consultant 2)

Finally, note that for employees to competently perform their roles they need to have an excellent understanding of all the brand interfaces.

> It freaks me out when I see a five-person team managing a top detergent brand when not one of them has ever loaded a washing machine. (Consultant 1)

External stakeholders

In the current competitive environment, the role of stakeholders in building a brand is increasingly important. In this model, external stakeholders include all those external agents who have a decisive influence on brand value co-creation, as for instance suppliers, distributors, business partners, shareholders and journalists.

> It is unimaginable that a modern brand could be built without developing close relationships with many external stakeholders. We need reliable suppliers that enable us to optimise production processes. We must also work very closely with distributors to achieve the desired penetration. It is also vital that we develop trusting relationships with market research agencies and media agencies to help us understand what consumers want, how to make the brand promise, and then communicate and keep that promise. (FMCG 3)

Some of these stakeholders play a key role in the processes of facilitating value creation as they take on part of the role traditionally performed by the organisation owning the brand.

> If a sub-contracted business partner responsible for maintaining our machines fails to meet the expectations of our end client then the client complains directly to us – and our brand value is affected. (B2B 3)

In this way, the interactions produced in the conversational spaces between these external stakeholders and the organisation and the brand consumers decisively affect the process of co-creating brand value.

There is another type of external stakeholder whose impact on brand value is less direct, but who still has great influence on consumer perceptions of a brand – the media. Finally, the perceptions of an individual consumer may also be affected by the possible inputs that he or she may receive from other individuals, such as friends or family. Moreover, the level of credibility that consumers attach to these positive and negative recommendations is considerable.

Brand communities

New information technologies have given consumers much more access to information about the brands they use and consumers can now share their opinions with people that they have never met. This emerging reality is greatly affecting the process of brand value creation and is calling into question the ways in which brands should interact with consumers.

> Outside there is a million times more knowledge than inside – and in this highly connected world you must relate with these sources of information or you are missing part of the script and will remain a follower. This is the result of various factors: firstly, the consumer is better informed and more involved; secondly, consumers want to hear opinions; and thirdly, technology makes the first two points possible. (B2B 4)

Conversations that a consumer has with other individuals in a community affect the perception of a brand, and so alter subsequent interactions with brand interfaces and employees.

> We have to offer outstanding experiences to our customers because many of them will share their experiences with others on social networks. And their opinions will have a major influence on the buying decisions of these consumers and determine *how* they approach us – or *if* they approach us. (Services 4)

Managers must accept an inevitable loss of control over the brand-building process and in this new environment, they must be able to identify the key external stakeholders and invite them to participate in this process.

> Brands must work in a more ambiguous environment and they will partially lose control of the message as stakeholders increasingly use social networks. (B2B1)
>
> Our view is to say to companies, people are talking about you in naturally occurring communities so you can't just say you are not

> interested. Instead why not leverage these communities and invite a few of them into a closed garden where we can create a community and talk to people and ask them to help to build the brand. (Consultant 4)

At the same time, it is also essential to have a clear strategy of influencing these areas of discussion – without attempting to impose the company view – by providing information that may be relevant for various stakeholders.

> We are creating a proactive approach to explain what we are doing so that others can tell our story. The point is that you lose credibility when you talk about yourself – others must tell your story for you. (Services 3)

Final considerations

The fieldwork shows that there is unanimous agreement that brands cannot be only understood from the point of view of consumers or the company – there needs to be a stakeholder approach to brand management.

> Today it is very complex to create a valuable brand. Brand value is created jointly by employees of the brand, the products and services it offers, the work of its partners, customer feedback, and so on. This requires a consistency of brand experience and recognition that, in a sense, the final result does not only depend on the work of the brand managers and employees, but that many agents are involved in the brand building process. (Services 2)

The interviewees also argue that consumer-brand interactions and the overall brand experience are key in building brand value and developing long-term trusting relationships between the brand and its consumers.

> It's about the day by day ... that is where the interaction and experiences can be created. That's probably the major shift now if you look at branding then and now. (Services 4)
>
> A brand is above all a sum of experiences and a relationship with the consumers and many other stakeholders. (FMCG 4)

Recognising the call of Payne *et al* (2009) and Pillai (2012), this study also explores whether there are significant differences in the processes of co-creation of brand value in different environments (FMCG, B2B, services).

> In all fields, fast moving consumer goods companies, service companies, or industrial corporations, a brand is a promise made to various stakeholders. These promises must be kept if you want to build a trusting relationship. (FMCG 1)
>
> I believe there are no significant differences, because what you are trying to do is firstly build a series of homogeneities or coherences of expression ... and secondly, build a series of coherences of experience. (Consultant 3)

The interpretation of the data reveals that there are no significant differences between brands in different business settings, regarding brand value co-creation. Moreover, there also seems to be an agreement on the critical importance of having a multi-stakeholder approach to brand management, keeping brand promises, emphasising the importance of interactions and managing the brand experience, and maintaining trusting relationships with stakeholders. So, even if the most natural area of application of the OVB is the corporate brand, due to its very intrinsic multi-stakeholder nature, it also applies to service and product brands.

Another important point of contact is that all interviewees, including FMCG marketing managers, defend the key role of employees. Traditionally, the role of employees has been particularly valued in the areas of B2B and services. However, interpretation of the in-depth interviews seems to suggest that a lack of commitment from employees will lead to a loss of brand value – the main difference in FMCG is that the impact is seen to be less immediate.

> For a service brand it is very important to take care of employees, especially those in direct contact with the client, so that they understand the brand promises and deliver the promise. However, it can be seen that a lack of commitment by employees also damages the bottom line in the world of fast moving consumer goods. Therefore, if your employees are not engaged with the brand, the only difference is the time it takes for the consequences to appear. (Consultant 5)

According to the interviewees, the basic processes of brand value co-creation are essentially the same for any economic environment

(FMCG, services and B2B). Consequently, the organic view can explain these processes in all of these environments. However, the interviews also reveal that there are certain operational tools that may be specific to a particular type of branding.

> I think they are pretty much the same … they all have to keep the brand promises to stakeholders … however, it is true that some tools might be different … for instance we use service blueprints, which are not so common for product brands… (Services 4)

Discussion

The traditional BVCC models place at their heart either the consumer (Van Durme *et al*, 2003) or the organisation (Brodie *et al*, 2006). In contrast, the organic view argues that brand value is built in the conversational space where the organisation and the consumer meet. This perspective coincides with the claims made by Vallaster and Lindgreen (2011) and Golant (2012) that brands are built by interactive processes in conversational environments. This approach also aligns with Grönroos (2011) and Grönroos and Voima (2013) who state that brand value co-creation only takes place in direct interactions between the firm and customers.

Proposals by Payne *et al* (2009) and Merz *et al* (2009) place greater emphasis on a dual consumer and organisational perspective and highlight the key role of interactions between them in the process of co-creating brand value. However, both models are somewhat inorganic in the sense that they suggest a major organisational capacity to design, organise and implement brand experience. The traditional corporate brand management models (for example, Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Knox and Bickerton, 2003; Balmer, 2012b) are also inorganic, as they present frameworks that allow managers to analyse gaps in the corporate branding strategy while presupposing managers have the capacity and ability to address them. The OVB questions the traditional idea of a value proposition defined exclusively from the organisational perspective. In the same way, the OVB questions the idea of the brand covenant because the covenant implies that the organisation is able to make proposals about what a brand means, what a brand does and how it operates (Otubanjo *et al* 2010). In other words, a brand covenant suggests that an organisation has a high degree of control over what a brand means and how its promise is implemented – despite the fact that Balmer (2012a, b) recognises that consumers may accept or reject a brand covenant. Thus, even if managers have an ideal and desired brand identity and a clear covenanted and communicated identity, due to the organic nature of the brand, stakeholders can divert the identity in a different direction. Moreover, as consumers and many other stakeholders co-create the brand, they have the capacity to influence the actual identity and to force managers to reconsider their ideal brand identity. So, even if there is fit between what is promised and what is delivered stakeholders can persuade managers to change or adapt their view.

The OVB suggests that what is actually needed is a sense of direction that is constantly negotiated and adapted together with many other stakeholders. This view is in agreement with Jones (2012, p. 78) who claims that 'brands need instead to think about purpose'. Jowitt and Lury (2012) have also stated that rather than rigid positioning, brands need a long-term consistent core that is combined with various short-term and flexible propositions. In accordance with the OVB, brands in an environment of constant conversation with multiple stakeholders must become more flexible. This means that instead of proposing rigid brand and value covenants, brands must have a well-defined proposition that provides a sense of direction but also facilitates the flexibility needed for constant reinterpretations of meaning and experience.

The OVB thus recognises the key role that various stakeholders play in the process of defining a brand's sense of direction. The OVB argues that brands are organic entities because they are built together with various stakeholders – and many parts of this process are beyond the control of the organisation. This perspective is recognised in the literature (Cova and Dalli, 2010; Cova *et al,* 2011; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and especially in the case of naturally occurring brand communities.

The managerial approach to branding has long stressed the importance of control, but as brands become increasingly fluid due to the active involvement of consumers, the approach is becoming less viable (Kornberger, 2010). As Merz *et al* (2009) note, 'the logic of brand and branding is also evolving and has shifted from the conceptualization of brand as a firm-provided property of goods to brand as a collaborative, value co-creation activity of firms and all of their stakeholders'. This perspective suggests that brands evolve in an organic way as they adapt to new realities that are determined through continuous interactions with consumers and others. This builds on the idea of organisations as organic, whereby change occurs constantly through an 'evolving symbiotic relationship' between an organisation and its stakeholders (Ind, 2009, p. 10). This does not deny the potential of organisations to influence the brands they own, but it does indicate a shift in power and the emergence of greater fluidity and heterogeneity.

If that is the case, a company can only seek to influence some of the many actors involved in the process of co-creating a brand. From the OVB, brand interfaces are the levers of value creation most easily handled by brand managers. Ensuring that employees align with the vision of the brand by using simple control mechanisms is impossible. Possibly the most difficult task managers face is to bring alive the brand values in the everyday behaviour of employees (Wallström *et al*, 2008). When employees are engaged they can come to realise their crucial role in building brand value. Finally, brand managers do not have any real control over many of the multiple external stakeholders who are involved in this process and this is especially evident in the case of naturally occurring brand communities.

Therefore, the OVB calls into question many of the classic assumptions of management and challenges traditional power structures, as well as traditional leadership styles. From this perspective, instead of reinforcing control mechanisms, the brand must be capable of implementing mechanisms, processes and platforms that enable consumers and other stakeholders to provide their views, suggestions and ideas. As stated by Golant, (2012, p. 125), 'this re-inforcement lies more in moderating, rather than seeking to impose and dictate, the conversational contexts in the organization'. This approach therefore presents significant challenges regarding self-disclosure for organisations. In any event, it must be clear that this approach does not excuse managers from their ultimate responsibility for defining the proposition and sense of direction of the corporate brand. Moreover, the ease of interconnection between the various stakeholders requires brands to emphasise consistent management of the brand experience and to manage relationships with stakeholders as a strategic imperative.

The OVB requires that managers develop a leadership style that is humbler, empathic, participatory and transparent. Moreover, persuasion and the ability to influence should replace an obsession with control. This is similar to the concept of 'Open Leadership' proposed by Li (2010) that emphasises the need to stimulate conversation and encourage participation. Moreover, techniques of influence must be found. However, this influence should always be accompanied by an alignment with the interests of stakeholders (Christodoulides, 2008), thereby ensuring the activities of brand managers are seen as useful and relevant rather than intrusive. In this respect, a stream of research that has been called 'persuasive brand management' (Iglesias and Bonet, 2012) claims that key activities for brand managers include the interpretation of meanings for strategic decision making and the persuasion of a wide range of stakeholders (internal and external) to align brand value co-creation.

Conclusions

From the academic point of view this research is relevant because it attempts to answer the calls for studies of the processes of brand value co-creation in multiple stakeholder networks (Brodie *et al*, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Frow and Payne, 2011). It also responds to the recommendations made by Merz *et al* (2009) for fieldwork on an integrated brand value co-creation framework.

This study also provides empirical evidence regarding the processes of brand value co-creation. According to Pillai (2012), more empirical research is needed in this field as most existing research is conceptual. Because the sample includes marketing directors from companies in FMCG, services and B2B (as well as consultancy directors), it has been possible to develop a model that is useful for all of these business environments – as called for by Pillai, (2012), Payne *et al* (2009) and Wallström *et al* (2008).

There are four relevant points for managers and consultants to absorb from this research. Firstly, the traditional paradigm of brand management is based on control; yet the OVB shows that brands are organic entities that emerge and develop in a space where multiple interactions occur and multiple conversations among different stakeholders take place. As Roper and Round observe (2012, p. 948) in their critique of brand equity as a corporate-led process, '... it appears problematic to reconcile a position that regards ownership of a brand as exclusively that of a corporation with one where the corporation is not exclusively responsible for the creation of the brand equity'. Therefore managers need to recognise that although they have responsibility for shaping a brand's identity, the process will evolve with the participation of many other stakeholders. Our fieldwork shows that managers increasingly recognise this loss of control and the greater influence of consumers and other stakeholders. This does create a risk for organisations in that the world outside defines the brand to a greater degree, sometimes in opposition to the desire of managers (Hatch and Schultz, 2010, p. 603), yet it also affords the opportunity of closer consumer involvement in the development of products and services, if managers are willing to be transparent and more receptive to the ideas of others.

Secondly, in recognising the loss of control and the heightened influence of stakeholder, the OVB offers a new alternative understanding of what a brand is, This perspective is especially relevant for corporate brands, because of the multi-stakeholder nature and the links with corporate marketing philosophy. However, it also applies to service and product brands, because according to the OVB, all types of brands are built through organic social processes. The implication of this view is that managers can no longer only define from the organisational perspective a value proposition or a brand covenant. Instead, the OVB suggests that what is needed is a purpose and a sense of direction that is constantly negotiated and adapted together with multiple stakeholders.

Thirdly, managers need to be willing to share if they want their brands perceived as authentic in a connected, participative and transparent environment. Rather than asking what information managers dare share with people outside the organisation, they must ask if there are good reasons for holding information back. The more individuals know, the more they can contribute to the brand-building process so that the brand is relevant to them and aligned with their expectations.

Finally, this approach to brand building requires senior managers to develop new management techniques and leadership styles. Managers must learn to be more humble in order to recognise and value opinions expressed by various other stakeholders in the brand-building process. As Hatch and Schultz also observe in their interview with the CEO of LEGO, consumer involvement opens up the organisation and enables outsiders to define brand credibility, such that, '... to the old inside-out thinking you can just say – totally forget it' (Hatch and Schultz, 2008, p. 162). Consequently managers must develop the ability to listen actively and adapt their points of view and brand strategies in order to align these with inputs from other stakeholders. Moreover, they also need to be willing to trust others and empower their staff. When brands are built through multiple conversations, then managers have to listen and help to provide the most relevant and consistent experience across all touchpoints.

Limitations and further research

The construction of the OVB has been the result of research based on in-depth interviews with managers. However, while this approach enables very useful insights to be gained it does suffer the limitation of not including the opinion of consumers. A line of future research will consist of in-depth interviews with consumers in order to complement the vision of managers – and so obtain a dual view of the process of brand value co-creation. Furthermore, the main limitation of this study is that the conclusions are not generalisable. Owing to the qualitative nature of the research, the OVB focuses on trying to better understand the processes and agents involved in brand value co-creation, but without proposing testable hypotheses. Another interesting research opportunity would be to deepen our understanding of the influence of each of the model's components when building a brand in a specific business setting (FMCG, services and B2B). Finally, various lines of research can be opened regarding the loss of control by managers; the activities that may affect various stakeholders; as well as the leadership style that managers must develop to effectively manage a brand in this new environment.

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