REVIEW ARTICLE

Trending topics plus future challenges and opportunities in brand management

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Abstract
An analysis and review by the Journal editors of publications over recent years to identify trending topic areas, plus an overview of some challenges and opportunities facing brand management today.

Keywords Market disruption · Branding research · Marketing technology · Social responsibility · Sustainability · Social media · Brand equity · Corporate branding · Developing countries · Digital branding · Internal marketing · Integrated brand communication

Introduction

Previous editor insights (e.g. Melewar 2008; Brexendorf et al. 2014; Kernstock and Powell 2018) have noted the exciting shifts which have been occurring in the brand management field over the last 2 decades. For example, in the Scopus database, the number of papers on these topics has increased significantly over the past 5 years, whilst the growing numbers of articles related to brand management has mirrored the transformations in business, social and technological environments.

Technological changes have further reduced barriers for new journals and other platforms to enter the 'publishing game', and a massive multiplication of scholarly journals has been noted (Davis 2014), whilst within academia the enduring pressures to publish and be evaluated through publication achievements is ever present (Styhre et al. 2014). Often this means crafting the Journal article around 'safe'

guidelines for rigour of the research but with a lack of substantial contribution to the field of brand management (Brexendorf et al. 2014).

Studies on branding in the rising economies, such as India and China, have also been an increasing feature in reported research during the past 5 years. Other countries beyond those in Europe, USA and Australia with a relatively high number of papers published on branding in recent years include Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, South Africa, Iran and Brazil to name a few.

Following a recent expansion of the Journal editorial team, we have taken the opportunity to conduct a fresh analysis of the publications in the Journal of Brand Management (JBM) between 2015 and first half of 2019 in order to identify trending concepts and topic areas for readers. We also discuss some of the challenges and opportunities currently facing brand management plus present a number of salient questions.

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Recent publication analysis

From our keywords co-occurrence analysis (He 1999; Van Eck and Waltman 2010, 2014), we note 'brand equity' remains a much discussed concept which is also interrelated to other salient concepts such as 'luxury branding', 'brand performance' and 'brand orientation'. The latter is strongly related to a relatively specialty topic of *corporate heritage* which also co-occurs with keywords such as 'brand crisis', 'place branding' and 'image'.

A second topic of emerging interest is clustered around 'social media' and digital branding alongside keywords such as 'engagement', 'online community' and 'brand meaning'. A high number of citations in these topics within JBM during the past five years imply the development of new knowledge on brand management in the digital environment, where until recently research was relatively scarce (Brexendorf et al. 2014). It also shows that JBM has a firm role in this area of new knowledge development. However, the question remains in what ways are articles able to develop useful frameworks that would provide managerial guidance within the digital landscape—a concern raised by the previous editorial team (Brexendorf et al. 2014).

A third topic of continued interest is 'corporate branding' together with internal aspects of branding, featuring keywords such as 'employees', 'brand commitment', 'brand identification', 'brand citizenship behaviour', 'internal branding' and 'behavioural branding'. Indeed, 'the increased traction of internal brand management and the role of the employee has been emphasised by several researches and documented as one of the strong research fields within brand management' (Kernstock and Powell 2018, p. 490), as evidenced by a recent Special Issue within JBM (Piehler et al. 2018). As also noted by Balmer et al. (2017), discussions about corporate brand 'co-creation' and various stakeholders add a further dimension for consideration.

The most disconnected part of the network in our co-occurrence analysis for the Journal in recent years is centred around keywords such as 'authenticity', 'nostalgia', 'brand extension' and 'innovation'. Two keywords that appear at this end of the analysis are also 'co-branding' and 'celebrity'. The distance and size of these nodes indicate that not as many recent JBM publications have tackled these topics. And finally, the last bundle of keywords appear as the most dispersed in our analysis but relate to another set of quite important concepts in their own right, such as 'brand loyalty', 'brand personality, 'brand identity' and 'brand experience'.

However, we note publications on *social responsibility* and *sustainability* whilst growing within the Journal remain rather dispersed, though two Special Issues relating to these areas have recently been published within JBM (e.g. Roper et al. 2018; Golob and Podnar 2019). What also appears interesting is that keywords related to *social responsibility* and *sustainability* are 'corporate image' and 'corporate reputation'. This implies that research on responsible and sustainable brands is (still) rather strongly focused on functional aspects and the 'business case' for brand social responsibility and sustainability.

Our analysis also highlights that in a way brand management has become an umbrella term, connecting research themes at different levels.

At the first level, the research is dedicated to the *concepts* of brand management, such as brand equity, brand personality and brand experience. At the second level, the research is dedicated to the specific *avenues* for brands, for example, sustainability, luxury, heritage, digital. And finally, at the third level, research on branding is related to different *entities* that can be branded and to which most branding concepts and some avenues can be applied to a certain extent (e.g. products, services, organisations, places, ideas, persons …). In fact, in relation to entities, the processes of establishing distinct fields of research are already visible such as for example corporate branding, employer branding and place branding. With this, new knowledge is also generated by scholars coming from different fields, for example, human resource management, tourism, sports, architecture.

Having concluded our analysis of recent publications, the remainder of this review sets out our combined perspectives on some (but not all) of the opportunities and challenges facing branding within disruptive markets. We also outline a number of salient questions.

Challenges and opportunities for brand management

Theoretical advancement

Brands and branding are in the centre of marketing ideology and practice (Conejo and Wooliscroft 2015). As the concept of the brand grew in importance and morphed from being primarily a symbol or logo into a network of social discourses, the brand concept has diffused globally and branding-focused ideology has become broadly adopted (Levy and Luedicke 2013). This has led to prominent growth of brand management, where notions and practices are in continuous adaptation to reflect contemporary social, theoretical and managerial thinking (Brodie and de Chernatony 2009; Levy and Luedicke 2013; Conejo and Wooliscroft 2015).

In recent decades, a paradigm shift has also occurred within brand management ideology where brand owners have become interested in the need to enhance their brands both in socio-psychological and aesthetic ways (Levy and Luedicke 2013). In short, a change from relationships based on brand function and purchase satisfaction towards the post-purchase relationships anchored in experiential delight, aspirational values and communities is now firmly in place (Kapferer 2012). As Kapferer (2012) further notes, this is even more pronounced with developments via information technology, which demands of brands in virtual and interactional environments to develop and provide not only content but emotions and depth.

Branding research as part of a marketing and management ideology is often considered to be of an applied nature

(Hughes et al. 2018), which according to Hughes et al. (2011), fits into the mode 2 approach to knowledge production, where social context is dictating the knowledge production and the relationship between researchers and different users of knowledge is important. Hence, connecting with practitioners and other relevant stakeholders can be a basis for theory development (Hughes et al. 2018), as well as for attracting a wider audience (Brexendorf et al. 2014). As argued by Brodie and de Chernatony (2009), a productive way forward for branding and brand management would be to develop middle range theories that reflect the interface between theory and practice. This implies the importance of two contextual arguments: the ever-changing context for branding in practice and covering different areas or sectors within branding research (Hughes et al. 2018).

In terms of theorising, addressing both challenges might mean thinking about new brand definitions, as well as the relevance of the existing and established concepts and approaches plus their adaptations, transformations and integrations. It might also mean complementing the managerial approach to include cultural, social and relational perspectives towards branding (e.g. Brodie and de Chernatony 2009). For us as journal editors, this brings about aspirations to detect and publish innovative ideas that might not only challenge existing assumptions but also offer new insights for brand management.

In terms of creating synergies on a theory development level, what justification is there for representing branding as an art rather than a science? Maybe it depends on who we ask! Determining the artistic scope of brands, such as shapes, colours and patterns of logos, typefaces, and packaging are often heavily influenced by designers who have attended Art Schools, whereas Business Schools are associated with conceptualising branding theories and formulating strategies. Somewhat strangely, the two sources do not always meet (See Schroeder 2005), requiring brand leadership to encourage a shared vision that may require the integration of tacit and explicit knowledge. In the digital age, the addition of technical prowess can add an additional layer of potential conflict to skills that are based on traditional craftsmanship.

How can we encourage the fusion and transfer of knowledge between fine artists, designers and the wider business community? Concomitantly, we argue that new theories are sought that combine visual, cultural and strategic identity in an integral way either at the product or corporate brand level.

Social relevance and impact

In many countries, brands have firmly diffused into all levels of our everyday lives as a glimpse through the news channels, magazines and social media shows (Levy and Luedicke 2013). Just as any social science discipline or field, brand management should also pay attention to its wider or social influence beyond perhaps the narrower solutions and suggestions for brand managers. By addressing issues that matter to different stakeholders and people in general and which have the potential to change their daily lives, brand management research would be able to position itself more at the forefront of contemporary pressing problems faced by our global society. Furthermore, with the political, social and technological changes that alter the context in which brands live and operate, this pushes branding research to reconsider questions such as those related to concerns for the climate, sustainability, ethicality and trust.

What roles can brands play in sharing 'deep' values of people and how; how can they be part of solving climate change or sustainability problems via behaviour change; how can they address manipulations that are happening and will continue to happen with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), which is gaining unprecedented levels of access to our human lives; how can brands in some industries regain stakeholder trust (LaBarre 2017a).

How does corporate branding differ between commercial ventures and not-for-profit organisations such as social enterprises in terms of values, expectations and corporate social responsibility? How can firms juggle between the conflicting demands of maintaining shareholder satisfaction whilst promoting explicit social objectives? Firms might decide to reinvest some profits to social causes such as the local community, towards environmentalism or in educational programmes that aim to improve consumer well-being. How will corporations assert more control over consumer dialogues in social media, whilst simultaneously ensuring their brands are aligned to the values traced from their mission statements? Will new forms of 'brand trust' emerge as disruption creates uncertainty in markets? And will the discussion on "purpose" substitute content and economical goals for companies and brands?

Digital technology and media

As for several other management fields, the relevance of digital technology and digital media is manifested at the levels of digital artefacts, digital platforms and digital infrastructure (Nambisan 2017). Digital artefacts are digital components, applications or content, part of a product or service (e.g. smart watch, connected toothbrush, AI device) that offer specific value for the users. Digital platforms are common sets of services that host different offerings and artefacts (e.g. iOS or Android platforms), and digital infrastructure are tools and systems that offer possibilities for communication and collaboration (e.g. social media, online communities, cloud storage and 3D printing; Nambisan 2017). All three are forcing branding to focus on experiential perspectives towards brand management together with

the need to individualise and co-create. The questions that might be relevant in this regard are how will brand communicate with the AI; on what levels will brands be engaged in co-creation and individualisation and what will be the consequences for brands and users (e.g. personal brands within brands, brands as memes without formal management); and how will the focus on experience alter brands and users (LaBarre 2017b).

What is the role of changing technology in the way consumers experience the touchpoints connected to the brand, especially how brand experiences are changing? How will advances in augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR) and apps, plus greater integration in our homes via the Internet of Things (IOT), as well as within our cars and other transport enable consumers to use a greater complexity of our senses to experience, evaluate and enjoy branding? How will brands of tomorrow serve multi-functions, enabling us to multi-task better, as how our time is spent will take on greater importance in our lives? How will gamification affect brand loyalty as consumers strive to meet an insatiation for entertainment?

Can new theories of entertainment brands be conceptualised that combine multifunction and user-friendliness with flexibility whilst economising on space? Can new forms of entertainment brands be designed that will meet the needs of a greater leisure class as most Western economies face a greater ratio of retirees compared to working people and what might be the role of technology?

What about the potential dark side of technology on branding, for example some firms have applied digital technologies to cut traditional access points to the bone. How will firms ensure they maintain brand integrity via customer care and service to their clients when tempted by shedding labour through radical changes in automation? How is segmentation and/or targeting via specific channels and techniques being used or changing via digital technology, and what is their level of effectiveness and what is their impact (whether positive or negative) for society?

How are technological advances creating threats from counterfeiting? What opportunities exist to counteract such threats?

Marketing intelligence

How will brand managers cope with handling new forms of Marketing Technology (Mar Tech), machine learning and big data as increasingly sophisticated segmentation and targeting tools become available? What is the changing behaviour of digital users across different ages and/or within different global communities? How can we best measure and evaluate ROI or return on objectives for brands as a result of various types of digital marketing activities? What is the relevance of 'digital engagement' for a brand?

For example, what refined behavioural segmentation variables will emerge through the analysis of advanced tracking procedures of consumer behaviour, voice and storylines using brand communities and offline marketing initiatives?

How can we gain brand engagement via digital channels and techniques including the use of Paid, Earned, Shared and Owned media? How can new theories be developed from an analysis of how brands are engaging with customers through stories captured through blogs, podcasts and other social media which can then be leveraged by brand managers? What is the relevance of 'digital creativity' for brand engagement?

What are the implications for brand reputation management and governance via digital channels for corporate, service and product brands, as well as within differing contexts such as B2B, B2C or C2C?

Measures of disruption

If we are to build new theories and concepts under disruption, how will these levels of disruption be identified and measured? If we assume that disruptive economies lead to difficulties in sustaining brand consistent values and positioning over time, will the importance of marketing strategies change under different levels, and how? For example, how will the marketing communications mix alter to cater for disruption? Will it encourage brand managers to opt for easier ways of measuring in the short-term, such as allocating more direct marketing, more direct mail and selective forms of sales promotion and less traditional media advertising in their promotional budgets?

Type of planning and risk-taking under disruptive markets

With shorter life cycles envisaged, will planning become less formalised, built on contingency plans, and more entrepreneurial and flexible? If more entrepreneurial, will brand management decide to take more risks built on hunch and intuition than business planning? On the other hand, will brand managers become more risk averse and decide to implement more brand-stretching than developing radically new products? Are there ratios of safety (akin to accepted risk profiles) between numbers of new products and numbers of brand extensions which can be used as different benchmarks for different market sectors according to their level of disruption?

Changes in HR/internal marketing practices

How will successful firms faced with future disruption maintain their leadership through internal planning and control?

Will the additional uncertainty associated with disruptive markets alter the relative importance of the branding function, leading to re-organisation of branding as a more strategic activity by companies, with more senior management involvement and greater strategic leadership? Will emotional intelligence, considered a distinguishing feature of successful leaders (Goleman 1998), become more important in the recruitment of future brand managers, and how will it be measured and monitored?

How will leaders maintain their in-house staff motivation to sustain brand optimism to a variety of stakeholders under future disruption? How will motivation of staff working on brands be sustained if employees designing new products see their pet projects failing or experiencing volatility?

Challenges for integrated brand communications

As branding becomes more disruptive, how will brand managers respond, as traditionally their marketing communication agencies have often been the custodian of their brand intelligence?

Will volatility lead to more cautious management, leading to a concentration of strongly established and positioned core brands, or will management aspire to invest in new markets and products that can potentially overshadow their established brands?

In examining marketing practice, what new ad formats are used *in combination* with project brand communication objectives such as identity/recall/preferences/intentions to buy/positive WOM? Can new theories be derived for different market sectors?

Developing relationships

A glance at the UK (for example) over the last few years points to a massive shake-out of high-street retailers that have fallen into administration or rationalised their store base. Why have retailers, as corporate brands, not responded proactively to the opportunities and threats of the digital age? What brand leadership strategies should be prioritised in order to secure strategic partnerships with distributors and manufacturers for improving their negotiating strength in supply chain management and for fostering loyalty with core customer profiles?

If disruption calls for constant innovation for survival, how do business partners, such as franchisors, balance the tensions between maintaining motivation of their ambitious franchisees with the need to maintain sufficient compliance and protect their brand franchise? Previous franchise research has shown integrity-based trust (based on the fairness of how decisions are made) can hold more impact than competency-based trust (based on the outcomes of those decisions) for maintaining compliance (Davies et al. 2011).

However, disruption might call for greater compromises in standardisation in the future, requiring more discretion for franchisees. It is likely that tensions in balancing the control of the brand franchise against a level of business autonomy will escalate as disruption advances across different cultures, contexts and market sectors. Tensions might also grow in future co-branding relations—in which perceptions of inequity can heighten under uncertainty.

Interdisciplinary themes

How can a knowledge of different disciplines be applied to improve our understanding of how branding might evolve in the future? How can disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and psychology, together with geography and history inform us about our future branding orientations?

Branding in developing countries

How do our traditional theories of branding fit against the societal norms and expectations in developing countries? How does the role of brands take on different degrees of importance in developing economies? Do brands here take on different functions or symbolic meaning and how do these vary across cultures? What are the implications for local versus global branding strategies?

How are luxury brands sourced from the developed world treated in developing nations? How can luxury brands balance exclusivity with their need to appeal to global expansion (Kernstock et al. 2017)?

Conclusion

Brand management must respond to the challenges of disruption markets requiring changing business models by engaging in research that is timely, of practical relevance, and which reflects social and, real-world problems.

Following our discussion what advice can we offer at this point to our community of researchers? What kind of papers would be most sought after in JBM? We concur with the arguments offered by Bartunek et al. (2006) that whilst needing to be of high-quality in terms of scholarship, the research should also be interesting. What does interesting mean for JBM? Here are a few pointers for articles:

- Be able to combine practically relevant, 'real world' problems with insightful and theoretically based research and analyses.
- Should be well framed, clear and engaging, able to build interest for readers from the start.
- Should offer fresh, compelling and important findings.

- Findings should have some direct application value for the practitioners. However, as this is not always possible, there are other ways in which findings can be useful to practice, such as be able to teach something new, better explain certain concepts, phenomena, provide additional or different aspects to understand or accomplish something or present new ways of looking at a certain issue (e.g. Bartunek and Rynes 2010).
- Should be timely and try to open or address larger questions that would stimulate further research and go beyond just filling one small gap in the scholarly literature.
- Consider neglected areas or aspects of branding.
- Consider relatively new, emerging or evolving areas within branding.
- Take an interdisciplinary or 'bridgebuilding' approach, either via the harnessing of differing academic disciplines or via the melding of differing practitioner expertise.
- Are conceptually rigorous.
- Theory-driven empirical papers.
- Offer illuminating case studies.
- May pay attention to the (social) influence of brand management beyond perhaps the narrower solutions and suggestions for brand managers.
- And never miss out our fellow brand managers working on application of our academic input.

As editors, we aim to ensure the journal remains interesting and indispensable reading, underpinned with a level of quality for those wishing to embrace the forefront of brand management research and practice. With these challenging goals in mind, we look forward to receiving future paper submissions and hope you continue to enjoy reading the editions that follow.

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