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Branding in the Digital Age: A ‘2020’ Vision for Brand Management

1. Introduction and overview of papers

The proliferation of digital media, together with increasingly mobile internet connectivity, has arguably been the most significant influence on brands and brand management in the first two decades of this millennium. A simple, age-old definition of a brand is that it is a distinguishable symbol or word, which represents a product or organisation; but, today’s most recognisable brands include people (e.g. Lady Gaga), places (e.g. Paris), services (e.g. Deliveroo), events (e.g. the Olympics), and even ideas or memes (i.e. cultural variants of genes) (e.g. #MeToo). Branding cuts across industries and sectors too and is not restricted to the commercial domain – the growth of non-profit and public sector brands being a case in point. Irrespective of the type of brand however, brand management today is complex and highly competitive, which requires a broad range of skills and perspectives. Hence, this is an important and exciting time to reflect on recent developments, as well as look ahead to the future of branding in the face of pervasive digitalisation.

In this context, the 13th Global Brand Conference convened in Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom, with the participation of more than 70 delegates from 17 countries. Over two-and-half days, 59 peer-reviewed academic papers were presented in parallel sessions. In addition, keynote speakers from industry added to a very lively multifaceted debate around ways and means to help brands compete in the digital age. This special section in *Internet Research* presents a selection of five of the best papers from the conference, following several further rounds of peer-review. In addressing important brand-related challenges, these papers represent a broad spectrum of methodological approaches and underscore the multifaceted nature of modern brand management.

The first paper by Carola Strandberg and Maria Ek Styvén examines place branding in the digital age, linking social media-based promotion of place brands to the self-concept, particularly from the perspective of residents. They highlight how perceived fit between an individual’s self-image and the image of a place (from its residents and its portrayal in media) influences residents’ and non-residents’ voluntary activities as promoters of the place brand online. In the context of more organic approaches to developing place brands, it is particularly important to consider the role and contribution of residents, especially via various social media platforms.

In the second paper, Anette Rantanen, Joni Salminen, Filip Ginter, and Bernard J. Jansen take a machine learning approach to classifying the dimensions of corporate reputation using nearly 20,000 online comments. Given that there is a vast amount of available data on brands that is generated online by users (i.e. user generated content), it is important for brand managers to derive insights from these sources of largely unsolicited feedback. Attempting to ascertain the (online) reputation of a brand at a given point in time by manually examining and classifying all this data (or even a large proportion of it) is a futile exercise. Thus, Rantanen et al.'s multidimensional automatic classification framework, based on convolutional neural networks, automates this process to support brand management in the context of data-rich environments.

Fathima Zahara Saleem and Oriol Iglesias use face-to-face interviews and online observations in the third paper to understand how users engage with content on social media. From an affect-based understanding of social media engagement, they illustrate how high or low arousal states of users can respectively lead to producing or avoiding types of user generated content. Moreover, they find that users are basically inclined to activities on social media that extend the intensity and duration of their desired mood-state. Therefore, brand managers should take a psychologically nuanced and dynamic view in relation to user engagement with brands online.

In our fourth paper, Richard Rutter, John Nadeau, Ulf Aagerup, and Fiona Lettice deal with one of the world's best-known event brands, the Olympics in their interesting paper, which looks into the relationship between the brands that sponsor a mega event and the event's brand itself. Using lexical analysis of website text, they map the prominent brand personality dimensions of the sponsor-brands against those of the Olympics brand. They show that brands can complement and supplement, as well as simply reemphasise, their brand personalities (and therefore, their positioning) by associating themselves with a mega event-brand such as the Olympics.

The fifth and final paper by Hongfei Liu, Chanaka Jayawardhena, Victoria-Sophie Osburg, and Mujahid Mohiuddin Babu focuses on the relevance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) in an often-overlooked setting: the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. Adopting an online scenario-based experimental design, they test the effects of the valence of consumption experience and eWoM. They find that individual online ratings (i.e. a single user's rating attached to his/her review) are relatively more important for post-purchase evaluation than aggregate ratings (i.e. overall rating based on past reviews). Further, they highlight that customers conform with the majority (*vis-à-vis* past reviews) when providing reviews after purchase.

2. The way forward

As these papers point out, an important development in academic research on branding and marketing in recent times has been the widening spectrum of research methods, as well as topics – ranging from qualitative and experiential to highly technical and (big)data-based approaches. In many ways, this development reflects that modern-day branding is a multidisciplinary scientific artform. Successful branding needs more than marketers; it needs ethnographers, designers, and data-scientists alike to overcome challenges and firmly grasp the opportunities that the digital age brings.

What guidance can we provide to them for successful branding in the digital age? Combining the findings from the five papers included in this special section and insights from the conference discussions, we present brands with a clearer (20/20) vision for successful branding from the year 2020 onwards. We do so by identifying four crucial foci for branding that are intrinsically associated with a brand's identity: transparency, responsibility, connectivity, and creativity. We elaborate on these foci in the ensuing sections, though not in any particular order, as we consider them of equal importance.

2.1 Transparency

“Digitalisation has driven transparency to be towards 100%. As a result, in branding, the inside equals outside, without a time-lag. So, the brand architecture needs to be transparent to express the parent behind brands much more, driving unification programmes across the sectors that a brand operates in. Brand architecture here refers to how corporate brands and product brands are used by organisations – it can all be under one brand, like most bank brands, or have products under specific brand names without reference to the parent brand (e.g. RB, formerly Reckitt Benckiser), or have product brands with reference to parent brand (e.g. Unilever).”

– Marc Cloosterman, CEO at VIM Group and Co-author of Future-
Proof Your Brand.

In the digital age there is more demand for brands to clearly communicate their values, origins, associations, and interests. Whilst this invariably means that some customers will not agree or resonate with the brand, the ones that do will be more loyal. The transparency that comes from being clear about what a brand stands for, is the foundation for trust to develop between a brand

and its customer base. The paper by Rutter et al. emphasised the significance of congruent relationships between the brand personalities of the sponsor brands and the event brand. Such relationships between brands and sponsors, or as Marc Cloosterman points out, between product brands and their parent corporate brands have become more prominent today, as transparency increases between brands and stakeholders.

2.2 Responsibility

“Through digitalisation, branding and brands have become more personalised than ever. They influence and create a second identity to customer lifestyle. Thus, the relevance of responsibility becomes crucial for customers’ buying decisions in terms of identification and trust with the associated product or service.”

– Sisi Zheng, Head of China Tech Project at Deutsche Bahn AG.

“A brand that has a clear approach to responsibility as part of their strategy, empowers internal stakeholders to do the right thing and drives loyalty. Conversely, an inauthentic sustainability initiative or bolted-on piece of ethical tokenism is easily spotted for what they really are.”

– Emma Stapleton, Head of Europe at Prince Lionheart.

The importance of brands doing good for society and the environment, as well as ensuring their commercial interests, is more acutely felt by organisations today than ever before. In addition to traditional financial valuations, brands are now evaluated and ranked based on their ethical and responsibility credentials by organisations such as the Ethisphere Institute and B Corps. Becoming a responsible brand requires taking a more stakeholder-oriented perspective, as opposed to simply being customer-oriented; for example, the inclusion of residents’ views and voices in place branding, which Strandberg and Styvén’s paper touches upon. Responsibility is intertwined with a brand’s identity, and with increasing transparency, becomes the foundation for stakeholder relationships and trust.

2.3 Connectivity

“As feedback from customers is now real-time in social media, companies need to ensure that all individual parts build strength. Consistency across channels is important. One weak touchpoint, and customers lose confidence. The way you deliver a service is your brand.”

– Simon Sundberg, Senior Director and Head of Demand Generation (OSS/BSS) at Ericsson.

The paper by Liu et al. echoes Simon Sundberg’s comment; even at post-purchase stages, user generated content cannot be ignored. The nature of conversions surrounding today’s brands is difficult to shape or direct by brand owners, not least because myriad online platforms can proffer a diverse range of fast-changing stakeholder expressions and opinions. Consumers’ and other stakeholders’ perceptions of a brand can be swayed sooner than brand managers can react to a situation, such is the influence of user generated content. Another way to look at this is that brands need to be consistently connected – that is to say, they will always have to be present and active in their engagement with users, customers, potential customers and other stakeholders via online and offline media channels, but also be consistent in the way the brand is delivered across these channels (e.g. in communications, services, and support). In addition, being present without active engagement is fruitless; and as Saleem and Iglesias’ paper points out, user engagement is nuanced, and brands need to take an active role in in the conversations with users.

2.4 Creativity

“Our obsession with tracking channels means we've forgotten the art of storytelling and creating an emotional connection between consumers and our brands. The impact of a great creative on campaign success is many times the impact of channel optimisation. So, we should pay equal attention to digital technology's ability to create ground-breaking new creative solutions, not just its ability to track every impression and click.”

– Pete Coates, Head of iProspect (Leeds), Dentsu Aegis Network.

The flipside of vast, fast, and varied content creation by individuals (as well as organisations) is that brands today have to operate in data-laden, digital environments, which requires them to be skilled at handling ‘big data’ - characterised by high volume of data, in high variety of forms, the nature of which changes with high velocity, and usually low in accuracy (low veracity) in that it is not custom made data for specific purposes. The paper by Rantanen et al. highlights this very well. As a result of such developments, from being a largely creative artform, brand management seems to have turned into a technological enterprise with highly technical processes – nevertheless, it behoves us not to ignore the role of creativity in branding. It is important to note that these technological advancements in tracking and automating the

process of turning data into insight are not replacements, but supplements, of the underlying creative processes that help brands stand out in a highly competitive atmosphere and build strong relationships with users or customers. A good story, told well, can engage users in precisely the kind of emotional (affect-based) way that Saleem and Iglesias describe in their paper.

3. Acknowledgements and concluding remarks

The Guest Editors would like to thank the editorial team of Internet Research led by Editor-in-Chief, Professor Christy Cheung, for their support and providing us with such an excellent outlet for research focusing on branding in the digital age. We thank the authors for their empirical contributions, and of course, the many anonymous reviewers who devoted their valuable time and expertise for improving the papers.

As brand management continues to evolve, doubtless there will be further insights into how brands can compete better in physical stores and online. We hope our observations and the empirical insights of the papers included in this special section will serve as a springboard for these. Newer challenges will emerge, and so will better opportunities, and the Global Brand Conference will convene every year, bringing together experts from across the world to advance the field.