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Brand management: Unveiling the delusion of control

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ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Brands as rhizomic, processual phenomena

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

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

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

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

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

3. Interaction processes constituting rhizomic brands

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

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

1950). Like elements of a rhizome, individuals grow together into continuous multiplicities of assemblages in interaction.

The process of social interaction has two core components: *sociation* and *sociability* (Simmel, 1910). *Sociation* is a form of purposeful social interaction, manifesting itself as a means to an end (e.g., to influence others) (Simmel & Wolff, 1950). For example, a company might make the first move to create a brand by creating temporary manifestations of what the company wants the brand to represent (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2013). The initiators launch a social media campaign to persuade (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006) and emotionally engage consumer advocates (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013) who, in turn, try to evangelise their 'friends' (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). These interactions awake antagonists who take communicative and physical action of resistance (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010). *Sociability* is the pure form of social interaction, an 'actus purus' with no ulterior end (Simmel & Wolff, 1950; Simmel, 1910). For example, the members of a brand community might create brand-related content in a playful manner, might start a design competition for fun (Füller, Jawecki, & Mühlbacher, 2007), or might simply chat with one another independent of any company control (O'Sullivan, 2009) or structure. Sociability represents a free, spontaneous form of social interaction, in which "this freedom to form relations and [the] adequacy of their expression are relieved of any concrete determinants in regards to [structures of] content" (Simmel & Wolff, 1950, p. 54) (e.g., well-established and dominant cognitive structures). In sociability, interaction depends heavily on reciprocity, rather than influence among all interrelated, multiple, and heterogeneous elements of the rhizomic brand.

When individuals enter reciprocal relations, *forms* emerge (Simmel, 1908/2009). That is, forms emerge in the social fabric (Styhre, 2002), in interactive assemblages, and bring forth a level of a relatively abstract, collectively shared understanding that enables individuals to reciprocally interact with and influence each other. Forms flourish in brand-related interactions and through temporary brand manifestations, such as brand-related practices (i.e., linked and implicit ways of understanding, saying, and doing things in relation to brands that are situation-dependent, fluid, and integrative; Reckwitz, 2002), or socio-material artefacts, such as branded objects, visuals, or texts (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2013; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger et al., 2017).

Content and *form* exist together in a complex process (Simmel, 1908/2009) of interaction that keeps the form alive. Metaphorically speaking, the rhizome cannot exist without its content. The biological content of the rhizome motivates the interrelatedness of the shoot structure, which in turn ensures the plant's survival. The interrelatedness of the rhizomic shoots allows the rhizome to grow stronger as it expands into multiple new shoots that comprise new heterogeneous content and are objectified through newly formed shoots. These newly formed shoots, in turn, reciprocate with and influence the already-existing shoots. Similarly, rhizomic brands exist in interrelated assemblages and flourish in an interactive interplay between content and form. Brand-interested heterogeneous individuals and assemblages interact and co-exist as continuous multiplicities, in a process of constant change.

4. A European perspective on brand management: from tree to rhizome

Understanding brands from a complex rhizomic perspective inevitably leads to the question whether brands can be managed at all, and if so, what role management can play in the context of rhizomic brands. Managing brands from a rhizomic perspective does not imply a linear, static, or control-centric approach. The well-established and predominantly shared control-centric

mindset of brand management, manifested through practices attempting to direct stakeholders on the 'right' ways of interpreting intended brand-related manifestations, needs to be disrupted (Chia, 1999, 2010; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2011; Shotter, 2010) when brands are understood as rhizomic processual phenomena. Adopting new 'measures' or 'sets of guidelines' would not embrace this perspective. Rhizomic brands require a total *re-orientation* of management practice altogether and, more important, a shift in the underlying managerial mindset from a mastery-control approach to a 'letting-go', reflexive approach (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2011). In the context of this paper, a mindset is understood as a cognitive framework (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008; Rydén, Ringberg, & Wilke, 2015) that is established in an interplay between content and form (Simmel, 1908/2009). Mindsets are anchored in content (i.e., the mind) and are dynamically linked to and collectively manifested as forms (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008).

This new way to approach brands represents a dynamic and social brand reality or *form*, characterised by sociability (Simmel, 1895). Managing rhizomic brands requires providing spheres of sociability that encourage, support, and embrace new possibilities for creative interpreting, imagining, thinking, and improvising (Barrett, 1998; Chia & King, 1998; Crossan, 1998; Styhre, 2002; Weick, 1998). The relational-responsiveness perspective of Shotter (2010, p. 76) proposes that in social interaction, individuals act in an interrelated, "spontaneously responsive sphere of activity". Relational-responsiveness acknowledges social interaction as a multi-voiced phenomenon, in which individuals do not reproduce brand reality, but rather constitute this brand reality (Shotter, 2008). Brand reality is *heterogeneous* by nature at the individual level and, at the same time, is manifested in assemblages, creating collective spheres of shared understanding, which are constitutive of multiple and interrelated brand forms. One main obstacle to adopting this new mindset is the traditional focus of brand management on *sociation* while neglecting the dynamics of *sociability* and the processual interrelatedness between *sociation* and *sociability*.

The traditional view of brand management is well illustrated as a tree-like system of social interaction, which assumes some multiplicity (e.g., multiple stakeholder groups) (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009; Gregory, 2007) but tends to neglect the *continuous* interrelatedness of these multiple elements (Hillebrand et al., 2015). In the tree metaphor, the main source of influence is the trunk (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999). As a thick, powerful, overarching structure, the trunk is the most important part of the tree; without the trunk, the tree cannot survive. The trunk stands for isolated *sociation*: it exists for a purpose, it has a clear means to an end, and it acts as the main source of influence in the tree-like system. In line with this view, a brand cannot exist without goal-oriented input from brand management. In a rhizomic understanding of brands, there is no isolated *sociation* (Simmel, 1908/2009). *Sociation* and *sociability* manifest in a constitutive, continuous, and interrelated way. The dynamics of *sociation* and *sociability* are not simplistic. The interrelated unities of stems and shoots in rhizomic brands rely heavily on *sociability* to keep their form alive (Simmel & Wolff, 1950).

Socially interacting in spheres of *sociability* requires a different orientation than that used by conventional brand management. Thinking in terms of *sociability* requires that brand managers shift from what Shotter and Tsoukas (2011) call "about-ness thinking" to "with-ness thinking". In his philosophy of language, Bakhtin (1984, quoted in Shotter, 2010, p. 91) defines about-ness thinking as being "finalised and deaf to the other's response, it does not expect it and it does not acknowledge in it any decisive force (...) [S]peakers are concerned in expressing the 'right' picture". With-ness thinking is "when we come into a living, spontaneously responsive contact

with another's living being, with their utterances, their bodily expressions, their 'works' (...) [E]vents occurring out in the world come to be *in touch with each other* – in which *both do the touching whilst also being touched*" (Shotter, 2010, p. 91 italics added). There is no 'master of the house' to 'guest' assumptions. In with-ness thinking, managers not *only* recognise others' responses and interpretations as constituting reality; by understanding that they cannot control what others think but have the ability to exercise levels of influence (Berniker, 1998), managers also work *in action*, by *reciprocating* with these constitutive interpretations, providing other stakeholders with tools to think differently, encouraging creativity, and guiding others to also think outside their common and well-established mindsets (Crossan, 1998).

Borrowed from the music context (Prieto, 2005), the term 'orchestrating' seems suitable for describing the practice of with-ness thinking. Orchestrators try to synchronise themselves with the multiple voices of the orchestra, collaborating and guiding these many different voices into a form of harmony; the orchestrator touches but, at the same time, is being touched (Shotter, 2010). To orchestrate is to embrace the notion that management is not determining and ruling over reality. Instead, a brand manager orchestrates brand reality in continuous interaction with all other stakeholders participating in the brand. Brand managers should also *not* be perceived as the *only* orchestrators of rhizomic brands. Other stakeholders, such as retailers, independent bloggers, and journalists, may take an active role. The locus of harmonisation can be multiple. Orchestrating a rhizomic brand is the ability to articulate brand strategies *that reflect* the constant complex, interactive dynamics of content and form and reconsider well-established assumptions. The orchestrating manager embraces brands in their complex, processual, socio-cognitive becoming. With-ness thinking is not thinking without any structure. Free jazz musicians, for example, "have a sense of structure, and are still able to play within a structure that the audience can recognise, and that's what makes it music instead of just noise" (Barrett & Peplowski, 1998, p. 560). Management in terms of with-ness thinking or orchestration is about understanding that structure can be *stabilised*, *de-stabilised*, and *re-stabilised* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999; Prieto, 2005) on the same stage. Brand management needs to master the art of guiding, stabilising, de-stabilising, and re-stabilising structures with *creative and spontaneous freedom*, in spheres of sociability.

5. Conclusion

Embracing brands as processes of continuous becoming is a perspective widely unknown to brand research and management. Control-centric mindsets of managers and researchers do not allow accepting a perspective of brands as complex processes. The delusion of being able to control all brand-related interactions has attracted attention in the literature. Thus, unveiling the control delusion is central to developing a more realistic approach to brand management and research.

This paper uses the metaphor of brands as rhizomes to contribute to an understanding of brands as ongoing processes of social interaction among continuously interrelated heterogeneous stakeholders contributing to ever-changing, multi-faceted brand reality. Conceptualizing brands as rhizomic processes requires a substantial re-orientation of brand research from cross-sectional outcome orientation to longitudinal process orientation. With-ness thinking must replace about-ness thinking. Brands perceived as rhizomic processes also require a re-conceptualisation of core constructs in brand literature, such as brand identity, meaning, value, or knowledge. From a process perspective, these constructs can no longer be considered being under the close control of

company management. The role of brand managers is reduced to active participants in planned and spontaneous interactions of heterogeneous stakeholders who co-construct permanently changing brand reality.

Brand managers cannot take brand reality for granted. As complex social phenomena, brands are in continuous becoming. European philosophers and sociologists have a long and rich tradition of process thinking that informs brands in becoming. Researchers should guide brand managers in their understanding of brands as complex processes and support them in finding their role as orchestrators in the continuous becoming of brands.

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