



## Reconceptualizing brand identity in a dynamic environment<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Brand identity definitions predominately take a unilateral and aspirational perspective—what managers want the brand to be—while emphasizing the need for stability over time. The increasingly dynamic environment and the rising role of consumers as co-contributors to brand construction and development demand rethinking this perspective. This paper seeks to advance the established conceptualization of brand identity by revising the definition and proposing brand identity as dynamic, constructed over time through mutually influencing inputs from managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers). Drawing on a seminal definition from the field of sociology, underpinning the socially constructed nature of identity, the authors propose an innovative managerial framework that challenges established approaches of brand identity, within the new market context.

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### 1. Introduction

Researchers and practitioners recognize the role of brand identity as an essential tool to effectively differentiate and manage brands (Aaker, 1996; Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 1999; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2008). When considering brand options, “there are too many choices available today for customers to make the effort to work out what makes a particular brand specific” (Kapferer, 2008, p. 178). This growing competitiveness makes differentiation, and therefore brand identity, increasingly important.

Branding literature has tended to define brand identity as an internal construct that emanates unilaterally from the organization—what managers want the brand to be—and that requires stability over time (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008). Accordingly, brand managers should develop and maintain a clear and consistent identity, so that brands can serve as stable references for consumers (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008). Several management-oriented business publications have endorsed this approach, recommending a fixed brand identity. A widely-held belief is that a stable brand identity can help firms navigate and adapt to market changes (Collins & Porras, 1994). In practice, and consistent with this principle, companies seek to

stabilize the identity of their brands over time. For example, Nestlé currently re-examines its brands' identities every four years.

However, the environment is increasingly dynamic and many markets are experiencing unexpected mutations and hard-to-predict transformations. Furthermore, the marketing domain is evolving to a new dominant logic, in which exchange processes and relationships among market actors are increasingly central (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Proactive consumer involvement (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000) requires co-opting consumer participation in the value-creation process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), whereby consumers become active contributors (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009; Prahalad, 2004). Such challenges call for a new insight into the conceptualization of brand identity.

This paper seeks to advance the notion of brand identity by re-conceptualizing brand identity as dynamic and emanating from multiple actors (e.g., brand managers, consumers). Three insights provide support for this rationale: (1) Although definitions do not clearly articulate the dynamic understanding of brand identity, this idea is present in branding literature through brand identity frameworks (e.g., Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 1999; Kapferer, 1986); (2) Parallel domains of research conceptualize identity as dynamic, engaging several social constituents (e.g., work in sociology and social psychology—Goffman, 1959; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; in organizational identity—Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2004; Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; in corporate identity—Handelman, 2006); (3) Emerging research streams in marketing, such as the new service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Brown et al., 2003; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Holt, 2004; Schau &

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Gilly, 2003) provide further support for the importance of co-creation and consumer experiences (Payne et al., 2009; Prahalad, 2004; Kelly & Lawlor, 2010).

Drawing on multiple areas of research, this paper attempts to clarify what brand identity is and introduces a perspective for studying brand identity that acknowledges the increasingly dynamic market environment and the rising role of the consumer as a co-creator of brands. The authors suggest that brand identity management ought to be a dynamic process and, consequently, that managers need to reshape brand identity over time according to environmental changes and inputs from other social constituents (e.g., consumers).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Background on brand identity

According to Csaba and Bengtsson (2006, p. 118) “in the vast branding literature, there are many views of brand identity”. In fact, several authors compare existing views in an attempt to elaborate an overall understanding of brand identity. Such task appears to be complex since brand identity definitions and brand identity frameworks do not always convey the same meaning. This lack of consensus may result from the evolution of idiosyncrasies in the brand identity domain (Holt, 2002).

#### 2.1.1. Brand identity definitions

Traditionally, branding literature portrays brand identity as the uniqueness and essential idea of the brand (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2008). Two features emerge from this view: aspirational and enduring.

“Aspirational”. Scholars in brand management currently define brand identity as an internal and aspirational construct that emanates unilaterally from the brand management. Aaker, for example, adopts a strategist perspective of the concept by portraying brand identity as (1) “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain” (Aaker, 1996, p. 68), and as (2) a tool that “represents what the organization can and will do over time” (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000, p. 13). de Chernatony (2010, p. 55) challenges this view by arguing that “one of the weaknesses of this perspective is that managers focus on internal aspect of branding” and that “thought also needs to be given to the way customers perceive the brand”.

“Enduring”. Recent research examines the connection between market environment dynamics and brand identity durability (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). If the market environment is especially dynamic, should the brand identity be enduring, so that brands can serve as “anchors of meaning” (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006, p. 130) for the consumers, or should the brand identity be flexible and adaptive? The sense given to “enduring” is essential to address this question. Despite the frequent use of the term enduring in the literature, few authors explicitly define the notion. In fact, the term assumes different meanings in different contexts.

In the branding literature, Kapferer (2008, p. 37) suggests that the brand is the memory of the product and should act as “a long lasting and stable reference”. Within this context, enduring means long lasting and relevant. The brand must maintain its identity, and in so doing, respects its “contract” (Kapferer, 2008, p. 38) with itself, with its mission, and with its consumers. Some authors (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008) suggest that, in addition to its uniqueness, an enduring brand identity must be resistant to change. While acknowledging brand identity change in exceptional circumstances (e.g., when the current brand identity is obsolete, tired, or appeals to a limited market), they suggest that, although challenging, strong brands should maintain their identity constant for long periods of time, and recommend resisting the temptation to change brand

identity in order, for example, to address new market trends and/or to boost sales and profits.

Practitioner oriented literature proposes that enduring stands for “constant yet flexible” (Interbrand, 2007) and attempts to establish which parts of the brand values should remain constant and which should be flexible. According to Collins and Porras (1994, p. XV), enduring means “preserving core values and purpose, while changing cultural and operating practices, specific goals and strategies”. Interbrand (2007) proposes a 70/30 principle for global branding—70% of the brand must remain absolutely consistent and 30% can be flexible—ensuring that while the core meaning of the brand remains unchanged, the brand can evolve.

The above discussion suggests that two perspectives on enduring brand identity co-exist: (1) static, fixed and unchanged as time goes by, independent of environmental context, and (2) dynamic, where core values maintain consistency over time, with continuous (partial) adjustments to environmental changes. This study takes the view that “enduring brand identity” should have a dynamic meaning. Such a perspective entails flexibility for brand evolution to market and environmental changes, while keeping the static idea of establishing long lasting references and maintaining stable anchors for consumers' identities.

#### 2.1.2. Brand identity frameworks

In the last decades, leading scholars in brand marketing have developed frameworks to conceptualize brand identity (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 1999; Kapferer, 1986; Upshaw, 1995). Academic literature cites these frameworks (e.g., Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003) and industry widely uses them. Brand identity frameworks appear to include consumers' inputs, aside from the (expected) management's aspirational dimensions, confirming the incorporation of market feedback in the development of brand identity (see Table 1). For example, Kapferer's framework (1986) simultaneously incorporates managers' (physical, relationship, personality, culture, and consumer reflection) and consumers' inputs (self-image). Aaker's brand identity system (1996) provides a value proposition that includes self-expressive benefits—the expression of the consumers' self-identity. A dynamic understanding of brand identity is therefore present in branding literature through these frameworks, albeit not in the definitions.

Practitioners have also developed brand identity frameworks as illustrations of their experience in brand management. Companies, advertising agencies, and consulting firms have created their own frameworks, for example Unilever's proprietary “Brand Key Tool”, Nestlé's brand identity scheme, and “Interbrand Newell and Sorrell's Brand Blueprint” (Blackett & Boad, 1999). Although some of these frameworks do not distinguish brand identity from brand positioning, they combine the strategist vision—what the managers want the brand to be—and the receiver's vision—what the brand is, according to the consumers (see Table 2).

The concern for what brand identity really is, whether the internal vision of the brand managers, as depicted in current definitions, the external perceptions of the consumers, or a combination of both perspectives, as expressed in current frameworks, reflects the blurred distinction between brand identity, brand image, and brand positioning. Similar to earlier conceptualizations of corporate identity and organizational identity (Simões, Dibb, & Fisk, 2005), the notions of brand identity, brand image, and brand positioning frequently overlap, in the literature and in practice. Table 3 summarizes the connections in the branding literature between brand identity and related concepts such as brand image and brand positioning.

This paper takes the view that brand image focuses on targets' overall perception of the brand (Kapferer, 2008) while brand positioning means emphasizing the distinctive characteristics that make the brand different from its competitors (Keller, 2003).

**Table 1**  
Dimensions of academic brand identity frameworks.

Dimensions	Kapferer (1986)	Aaker (1996)	Upshaw (1995)	de Chernatony (1999)
<b>Managers' inputs (Aspirational dimensions)</b>				
Vision				x
Physical	x	x (e.g., brand as product, visual imagery, functional benefits)	x (i.e., brand elements)	
Relationship	x	x (i.e., brand–customer relationships)	x (i.e., how the brand relates to current and future consumers)	x
Personality	x	x	x	x
Culture	x	x (e.g., brand heritage)		x
Organization		x		
Positioning				x
Reflection	x			
<b>Consumers' inputs</b>				
Self-image	x	x (e.g., self-expressive benefits)		x (e.g., internal self-images of the brand's stakeholders)
"Consumers positioning" (Upshaw, 1995, p. 23)			x (i.e., how consumers position the brand, based on their own perceptions of the brand)	

## 2.2. Contribution from parent disciplines to the conceptualization of brand identity

### 2.2.1. Internal and external influences

Gioia, Price, Hamilton, and Thomas's (2010) study of organizational identity formation confirms that internal as well as external influences affect the development of an identity. Identity originates among insiders (i.e., the organization's members, if an organization; the brand managers, if a brand) and both insiders and outsiders (i.e., all of those who participate in its creation, maintenance, and change—Hatch & Schultz, 2004) contribute to identity development.

### 2.2.2. Dynamic

Scholars from various areas of research (e.g., sociology, social psychology, organizational studies, corporate branding) understand identity as a dynamic concept. The sociologist Goffman (1959, 1967) describes identity as formed through social interactions, and therefore dynamic. In the field of social psychology, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) portrays self-identity as a dynamic concept that varies according to context and to the role of the self. Subsequent related studies on identity support this perspective (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Sirgy, 1982). Similarly, while early definitions of organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and corporate identity (Balmer, 1995; Cornelissen & Harris, 1999) do not specifically refer to identity as dynamic, more recent research does (Gioia et al., 2000; Handelman, 2006; Hatch & Schultz, 2004). Handelman (2006,

p. 110) attributes this passage from static to dynamic identity to the fact that social actors are no longer "passive adopters of identities presented to them from corporations"; instead, by engaging in brands boycotts, activism, and other forms of consumer resistance, consumers and other societal constituents arise as "active co-producers of corporate identities". In the field of organizational identity, Hatch and Schultz (2004, p. 378) propose a simple and transversal definition: "Identity is a relational construct formed in interaction with others". Gioia et al. (2000, p. 64) argue that "the apparent durability of identity is somewhat illusory" because of the ongoing interrelationships between identity and image. Accordingly, the above-cited authors (2000, p. 64) re-conceptualize organizational identity as an "unstable notion, frequently up for redefinition and revision by organizational members", in response to environmental demands and feedback from outsiders. However, Gioia et al. (2000, p. 74) assert that stability and change can co-exist through "adaptive instability". Adaptive instability means that organizations can undergo change(s) while maintaining the enduring nature of their identity. Table 4 summarizes different definitions of identity in the identity-related literature and the corresponding status of the concept (static or dynamic).

### 2.2.3. Identity attributes

In the field of organizational identity, Albert and Whetten (1985) analytically differentiate identity from related concepts (e.g., role), specifying the notion in terms of distinguishing (i.e., unique and distinguished), central (i.e., what is essential?) and enduring (i.e.,

**Table 2**  
Dimensions of (some) practitioner brand identity frameworks.  
Sources: \* provided by the company, 2009; \*\* Blackett & Boad, 1999.

Dimensions	Unilever's Brand Key tool*	Nestlé's Brand identity scheme*	Interbrand Newell and Sorrell brand blueprint**
<b>Managers' inputs (Aspirational dimensions)</b>			
Brand benefits/functional elements	x	x	x
Brand personality and values	x	x	x
Reason to believe	x		
Discriminator	x		x (core proposition)
Brand essence	x	x	x
Products		x	
Mission			x
<b>Consumers' inputs</b>			
Competitive environment	x ("as seen by the consumers")		
Attitudes and values of current consumers/inner associations	x	x	x ("how the brand makes me feel, what the brand says about me")
Insight	x (current consumers' needs)		

**Table 3**  
Brand identity and related branding concepts.

Related branding concepts	Connections with brand identity
Brand personality Brand image	Component of brand identity frameworks (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2008). Brand identity framework incorporates part of brand image (i.e., self-image) (Kapferer, 1986); Brand image is both the result and the interpretation of brand identity (Kapferer, 2008); Separation of the concepts of brand identity and brand image, but brand image incorporates brand personality attributes (Keller, 1993), which are part of brand identity frameworks (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2008).
Brand reputation	Brand identity “gives rise” to brand reputation while the latter provides information to develop brand identity (de Chernatony, 2010, p. 56). Therefore, brand reputation is both the result and source of brand identity.
Brand positioning	Derives from brand identity (Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 2008); Component of the brand identity framework (de Chernatony, 2010); Separation of the concepts of brand identity and brand positioning (Keller, 2008), but Keller’s (Keller & Lehmann, 2006) definition of brand positioning presents some similarities with other scholars’ (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008) aspirational definition of brand identity.

elements that have withstood the test of time) attributes. Additionally, organizational identity involves “three levels of identities” (Whetten, 2006, p. 225), from most to least central and enduring, leading to the assumption that some identity dimensions may be more enduring than others.

Overall, the literature appears to converge to the understanding that identity is a dynamic concept that originates among insiders, and develops through mutually influencing inputs from insiders and outsiders, entailing distinguishing, central, and enduring attributes, where enduring takes a dynamic meaning.

### 2.3. Toward a new perspective on brand identity: insights from sociology, consumer research, and the context of co-creation

#### 2.3.1. Sociology: Goffman’s contribution to identity’s conceptualization

Goffman (1959, 1967) provides a seminal perspective on what identity is, highlighting the social and contextual aspects of identity formation. One can sum up his thought about identity in four main notions: (1) identity is a performance; (2) identity is socially constructed; (3) identity is a dynamic process; (4) self identity seeks to balance the expressions the individual gives and the expressions the individual gives off.

(1) Goffman’s starting assumption is that all actions are social performances (1959, p. 15), where performance entails “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants”. The unit of analysis is the social encounter, which Goffman (1967, p. 15) defines as “all the interaction which occurs throughout any one occasion when a given set of individuals are in one another’s continuous presence”. Encounters involve the individual “either in face to face or mediated contact with other participants” (1967, p. 5), and each encounter is an occasion for social performance. Goffman’s (1959, 1967) work suggests that people control and manage the impressions identity performances leave on others, and that “how effectively the self performs for others affects the others’ regard for it” (Hatch & Schultz, 2004, p. 12). Whether as an individual or a team, the performer tries to present to the audience a given definition of his/her identity.

(2) Identity is socially constructed as the individual develops his identity as a function of interaction with others. Goffman (1959) believes that the individual presents an idealized view of himself and tries to incorporate officially accredited values of the society and/or attempts to hide aspects of himself he does not wish others to see, but with the feeling that he is projecting his true self. The process of establishing identity draws upon the imagery of a mask, which Park (1959, p. 249) initially introduced, within the broader metaphor of a theatrical performance: “Everyone is playing a role, and it is in these roles that we know each other. It is in these roles that we know ourselves”. According to this perspective, people’s identity is like a mask: the conception individuals have of themselves, the self they would like to be, and the self they wish others to perceive. Following

Park’s line of thought (1959, p. 250), “in the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality”. Gradually, the individual is carrying out the role he has chosen for himself, and this role, ultimately, becomes his identity.

(3) Identity is a dynamic process. An important concept in Goffman’s work is the notion of face, “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (1967, p. 5). The line is the acts by which he expresses his view of a social encounter and, through this, his evaluation of the participants, especially of himself. As a characteristic of the social code of any social circle, the maintenance of face over time is crucial (Goffman, 1967). Once one adopts a face, one must live with it. One must sustain a particular expressive order, so that everything will be consistent with the face. From this perspective, face’s maintenance constitutes a fundamental social constraint; social rules tend to encourage the person to try to maintain, at each encounter, both his own face and the face of the other participants. When one’s face is under threat, participants in the encounter find themselves in a state of social ritual disequilibrium. Goffman (1967, p. 15) employs the word “face-work” to define the adjustments a person takes to do whatever is consistent with his face, in order to avoid threats to face, and/or re-establish the ritual equilibrium. Two major adjustments are “the avoidance process” (Goffman, 1967, p. 15) and “the corrective process” (Goffman, 1967, p. 19). Members of every social group enduringly engage in a process to maintain the social rituals and the social order of their group. Identity is dynamic in the sense that it permanently needs to evolve to preserve both individual and audience’s faces. In other words, identity is dynamic because it needs to maintain the consistency of both faces.

(4) Self-identity seeks to balance the expressions the individual gives and the expressions the individual gives off. Goffman (1959, p. 2) distinguishes two modes of communication: “expressions given” (i.e., intentional, conscious form of expression) and “expressions given off” (unintentional or intentional). Symmetry occurs whenever there is congruence between both expressions. Individuals try to present themselves in a favorable light. The perspective of the audience is to use expressions that the individual gives off to confirm the legitimacy of expressions the individual gives. When incongruence occurs, and because participants perceive expressions given off as being more credible than expressions given (Goffman, 1959, 1967), they discredit expressions given, which in turn may discredit the performer.

Goffman’s (1959, 1967) thinking has implications for the reconceptualization of brand identity, suggesting four assumptions. First, although brand management is the entity that may initiate brand identity, one should view identity as developing over time through mutually influencing inputs from several social constituents, including managers and consumers. Second, in order to be enduring, brand identity should be dynamic to sustain both the brand and the consumers’ faces. Retaining the term face from Goffman’s (1967) work, and transposing the associated definition to the context of this

**Table 4**  
Prevailing definitions of identity.

Discipline	Concept	Definitions	Dominant status	Selective sources
Branding	Brand identity	The brand's tangible and intangible characteristics	Static	Kapferer, 1986 Aaker, 1996
		A unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create and maintain	Static	
Social psychology/social identity theory	Self identity	The distinctive and central idea of a brand	Static	de Chernatony, 1999 Brown et al., 2003
		A milieu where marketing management and consumer commitment coexist	Dynamic	
Sociology/social theory	Identity	Involves multiple identities that emerge in different contexts and in different social roles	Dynamic	Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979
		Socially constructed	Dynamic	
Organizational studies	Organizational identity	What is central, enduring, and distinctive about an organization	Static	Goffman, 1959, 1967 Albert & Whetten, 1985 Gioia et al., 2000
		A dynamic construct that involves interactions and interrelationships between organizations' insiders and outsiders	Dynamic	
Corporate branding	Corporate identity	A dynamic process that unfolds over time and a source of stability for those who depend upon it	Dynamic	Hatch & Schultz, 2004
		Collective-level phenomenon	Dynamic	
		What the organization is	Static	
		How a company chooses to identify itself to its stakeholders	Static	Brown et al., 2006 Balmer, 1995; Cornelissen & Harris, 1999 Zinkhan, Ganesh, Jaju, & Hayes, 2001
		Societal-constituent perspective: the social space in which companies and social actors coexist	Dynamic	Handelman, 2006

study, face means positive value, combined with a dual idea of significance and impact on others. Third, the role that brand managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers) wish the brand to play in the markets may gradually become the brand identity itself. As a result, what social constituents want the brand to be and what the brand is, ultimately, tend to intermingle. Fourth, transposing to brand management the argument of the desirable balance between expressions given and expressions given off, this balance narrows the gap between brand identity and brand image.

### 2.3.2. Consumer research literature

**2.3.2.1. Impact of brands on consumers' identities.** Possessions are parts or extensions of the individual (Sartre, 1943), and therefore contribute to the construction of the self-concept, and to the definition, expression, and reinforcement of the self-identity (Belk, 1988). Researchers in consumer research extend this finding to brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005; Fournier, 1998). Brands act through the activities of the managers who administer them. In accepting the behavioral significance of marketing actions, one accepts the legitimacy of the brand as a contributing relationship partner (Fournier, 1998). Brands help consumers create and define their self-identities (McCracken, 1989). For example, Schau and Gilly (2003) show how consumers use brands to create cyber self-representations. Fournier (1998) argues that brands contribute to the exploration and resolution of identity issues. This statement also applies to collective conceptualizations of the self (Belk, 1988). Consumer research on reference groups demonstrates congruency between group membership and brand use (Bearden & Etzel, 1982), and when consumers use brand associations to construct the self and to communicate the self-concept to others, they form a connection with the brand, appropriating the meaning and the identity of brands as they construct their self-identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Additionally, consumer culture theory research advances knowledge on how consumers actively rework and transform brands' symbolic meanings to "manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871). This body of research involves Belk's (1988) and McCracken's (1989) perspectives, which address the co-productive ways in which consumers, working with marketer-generated materials, forge their individual and collective identities.

**2.3.2.2. Impact of consumers' identities on brands.** Fournier (1998) provides a framework for better understanding the relationships consumers form with the brands they know and use. The author presents brands and consumers as reciprocating relationship partners. One of the conditions that qualify relationships in the interpersonal domain (Hinde, 1995) is the fact that relationships are process phenomena, where the partners must collectively affect, define, and redefine the relationship. Aaker (1997) argues that consumers transfer to the brand the personality traits of the people that they and others associate with the brand. In the literature on consumer behavior, references to the impact of consumers' identities on brands relate to the reciprocal role of the brand in the consumer-brand relationship. At the group-level analysis, symbolic properties of reference groups influence brand meaning (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

An additional contribution to the impact of consumers' identities on brands derives from consumer culture theory research, mentioned earlier, in which consumers become both brand identity seekers and brand identity makers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2004; Schau & Gilly, 2003). For example, Holt (2004) demonstrates how legendary brands such as Budweiser and Mountain Dew relate their brand identities to consumers' identities and anxieties at particular historical moments (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumer culture theory views consumers as brand culture and brand meaning producers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Brown et al., 2003; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Consumers forge cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests (Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 2002). Those cultural worlds then impact brands' identities.

### 2.3.3. The context of co-creation

Literature suggests an increasing focus on consumer co-creation (Cova, Ford, & Salle, 2009). Consumer culture theory literature and, in general, consumer research literature converge toward the service-dominant logic, which endorses customer value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In the brand management domain, Payne et al. (2009) examine the co-creation of value and provide a process-based conceptual model of co-creation for managing brand relationship experiences. In the realm of retro brands, Brown et al. (2003, p. 31) demonstrate that brands belong to, and "are created in concert with consumers' communities". Within this perspective, consumers are also co-creators of brand identity.

This discussion leads to the following conceptualization of brand identity: brand identity is a dynamic concept that originates among brand managers, and that further develops through mutually influencing inputs from managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers); this development involves distinguishing, central, and enduring attributes, where enduring takes a dynamic meaning—core values maintain consistency over time while other dimensions vary, when needed, to adjust to the environmental context.

**3. Theoretical framework on brand identity**

Leveraging on the literature and the authors' understanding, this section proposes a brand identity framework (Fig. 1). The framework focuses on established brands as opposed to new brands because the construction of brand identity for new brands follows different patterns (Kapferer, 2008).

*3.1. Framework dimensions*

The framework portrays brand identity management (1) as a dynamic process to which brand managers and consumers (primarily although not exclusively) contribute. The brand performs through the brand managers' marketing and communication strategies, and actions (Fournier, 1998). The consumers perform through building their individual and collective identities (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005; Fournier, 1998).

Encounters (2) are face-to-face or mediated contacts (Goffman, 1959) between the brand and the consumer, occurring on direct or indirect occasions. Transposing Payne et al.'s (2009) encounters depiction to the process of brand identity, the encounters can occur either at the initiative of the brand management (e.g., advertising), or at the initiative of the consumer (e.g., via a blog), or at the initiative of both (e.g., trade shows, consumer's involvement in product design).

Brand face (3) conveys the positive expression of the brand management as a performer in the brand–consumer interaction, where positive expresses the notion of “good showing” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5), to point out that the individual tries to present to the audience a favorable definition of his face. The brand management develops identity as a function of interaction with the targets. Following Goffman's insights (1959), one should separate the intentional form of brand expression from its unintentional part (i.e., the ungovernable aspects of brand expression). The intentional part of the brand face, which consists of exhibiting the impressions of the brand that management wishes the target to perceive, in association with the brand management performance, matches Keller's (2008, p. 38) definition of brand positioning: “the act of designing the brand's offer and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target customer's mind”. Brand positioning sets the strategic direction of marketing activities and programs—“what the brand should and should not do with its marketing” implementation (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 740). Paralleling Whetten's (2006) findings, identity attributes—distinguishing, central, and enduring—should function as managerial referents for brand strategists when they are acting on behalf of the brand. If they fail to legitimize those attributes, managers may find themselves out-of-face and brand identity may become “uncharacteristic” (Whetten, 2006, p. 223).

Consumers' face (4) presents the positive expression of consumers and potential consumers, as performers in the consumer–brand interaction. An example of an attempt of face maintenance by consumers is the petition by Porsche owners against the launch of the sport-utility vehicle (SUV) Porsche Cayenne, in 2002 (Fear & Knoop, 2006). Some Porsche owners felt their face was under threat, as they considered the SUV concept to be inconsistent with the authentic Porsche brand identity (cf. Jones, 2001). Thus, consumers (1) affect, define, and impact the relationship with the brand and (2) forge cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests (Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 2002). These cultural worlds impact both consumer identities and brand

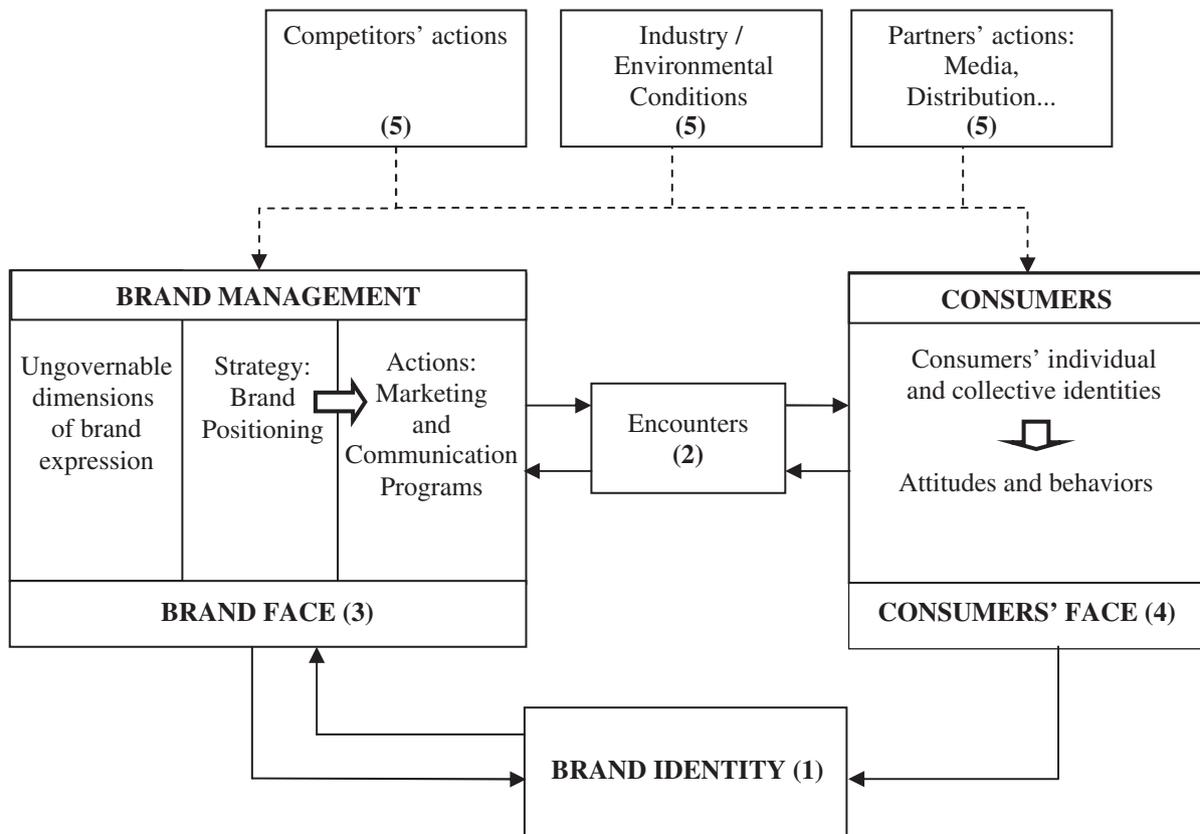


Fig. 1. Brand identity framework.

identities (Aaker, 1997; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2004; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Accordingly, one may argue that consumers' face incorporates the consumers' individual and collective identities, activated through the relationship with the brand. As a consequence, consumers' attitudes and behaviors, arising as actions to build and express consumers' identities, in response to the brand activity (Keller, 2003; Van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2001), are also part of the consumers' face.

Brand identity needs to be dynamic to maintain the face of both brand and consumers. Brand managers should therefore continuously adjust brand identity in order to preserve consistency of both the brand face and the consumers' face. Leveraging on Goffman's exploration of available adjustments to maintain faces, brand managers may develop an avoidance process, keeping the brand away from encounters where face threats may occur, and/or apply a corrective process if brand face becomes damaged, seeking to re-establish the equilibrium.

Additional dimensions (5) assume a position in the brand identity framework as inputs to brand identity. Drawing on Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, and Zeithaml (1993), Keller and Lehmann (2006) suggest that competition, industry, environmental conditions, and partners' actions (e.g., media, distribution) help to shape the notion of the brand. For example, several studies address the theoretical understanding of partners' roles in brand management and the influence that those partners, and specifically media, exert upon consumer identity projects and identity-patterns of social interaction (e.g., Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Kennedy, 2008).

### 3.2. Propositions

At the heart of this paper is the notion of brand identity as a dynamic concept. Underlying the term dynamic are two complementary ideas: relational and adaptive, while preserving consistency over time. Core values maintain consistency, as other dimensions vary, when needed, to adjust to context. Recent earlier work highlights that brand identity is a dynamic process, originating among managers (Gioia et al., 2010), and developing over time through mutually influencing inputs from several social constituents (e.g., managers, consumers). The role that social constituents establish for the brand may gradually become the brand identity itself. Ultimately, what social constituents want the brand to be and what the brand is are two notions that tend to intermingle (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Additionally, identity involves distinguishing, central, and enduring attributes (Whetten, 2006). In order to be enduring, brand identity should be dynamic, to sustain over time both the brand and the consumers' faces (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Thus, a dynamic platform for enduring brand identity hints at flexibility to let the brand evolve and respond to market changes, while maintaining consistency. That is, brand identity may maintain long lasting references to guide consumers among the markets (Kapferer, 2008) and still be dynamic. Consequently, some brand identity dimensions may be more enduring than others (Whetten, 2006). The following proposition summarizes this discussion.

**P1.** *Brand identity is dynamic yet maintains consistency over time; in particular,*

*P1a: Brand identity is a dynamic process that originates among brand managers, and that further develops through mutually influencing inputs from managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers); P1b: Brand identity develops through distinguishing, central, and enduring attributes, yet some attributes are more enduring than others; P1c: Enduring brand identity means that core values maintain consistency while other dimensions vary, when needed, to adjust to the environmental context; P1d: What social constituents want the brand to be and what the brand is tend to intermingle.*

Regarding the role of brand managers in the process of brand identity management, one can assume that (1) managers perform

through interactions with other social constituents (e.g., consumers), influencing other participants (Goffman, 1959, 1967); (2) while performing, they seek to present to others an idealized view of the brand, incorporating positive values (what they think consumers will positively perceive) and/or attempting to disguise unwanted/negative aspects of the brand (Goffman, 1959, 1967). By acting in such a way, managers seek to control and manage the impressions that identity performance leaves on other social constituents, mainly consumers (Goffman, 1959, 1967; Hatch & Schultz, 2004); (3) managers seek to balance expressions given and expressions given off, to narrow the gap between brand identity and brand image; (4) once brand managers have taken on a brand face, they must do whatever is necessary to maintain its expression (Goffman, 1967); they also do whatever they can to maintain consumers' face in each encounter.

Assuming that one of the main brand identity functions is to maintain both brand and consumers' faces, managers ought to manage brand identity in a way that preserves both faces through (pro)active adjustments. For example, managers may incorporate in the brand identity a new dimension that seems appealing to disappointed customers (i.e., restores consumers' face), while remaining consistent with the brand's current strategy (i.e., maintains brand face). Combining this idea with Whetten's (2006) conceptualization of identity, one can expect that (5) distinguishing, central, and enduring identity attributes will function as managerial references for brand managers, to maintain the brand and the consumers' faces. The arguments provided above lead to the following proposition.

**P2.** *Managers continuously seek to balance brand and consumers' faces; in particular,*

*P2a: Brand managers develop identity through interactions with other social constituents (e.g., consumers); P2b: Distinguishing, central, and enduring identity attributes are managerial references for brand managers to maintain both the brand and the consumers' faces; P2c: While developing brand identity, brand managers seek to control and manage the impressions identity performance leaves on social constituents.*

Consumers define, affect, and impact the brand relationship. Encounters function as processes where consumers interact with brands and co-create experiences (Payne et al., 2009). Consequently, the consumer response to the brand activity generates attitudes and behaviors through the mediation of self, individual, and collective identities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005; Fournier, 1998; Kleine et al., 1993; McCracken, 1989). Literature portrays consumer response to the brand activity as dynamic (Keller, 2003; Van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2001). In fact, consumers are increasingly active participants in the brand identity construction process (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2004; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Additionally, literature presents multiple examples of consumers' attitudes and behaviors that impact brand identity: acquisition and consumption (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), personal experience (e.g., feedback from product use and satisfaction), experience of others through communities (Keller & Lehmann, 2006), boycotts and consumer resistance activities (Handelman, 2006), active making of brand meanings and reconfiguration of brand culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Brown et al., 2003; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Consumers' personality traits transfer to the brands they use (Aaker, 1997), and the symbolic properties of reference groups also transfer to brand identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). This research posits that consumers' identities, or at least part of them, transfer to the identities of the brands they use. The previous discussion results in the subsequent proposition.

**P3.** *Consumers play an active role in the process of brand identity construction; in particular,*

*P3a: Consumers' attitudes and behaviors impact brand identity; P3b:*

*Consumers develop part of their identity as an interaction with brands; P3c: Consumers' identities transfer to the identity of the brands they use.*

This conceptual research posits that brand managers and consumers are core (though not unique) actors and inputs in the process of brand identity construction. Drawing on previous studies (Boulding et al., 1993; Keller & Lehmann, 2006), the authors suggest that contextual forces such as competition, industry and environmental conditions, and partners' actions (e.g., media and distribution) influence brand management and consumers. Consequently, those forces contribute to shaping the brand identity. The following proposition captures this idea.

**P4. Contextual forces influence the brand identity construction; in particular:**

*P4a: Competition, industry and environmental conditions, and partners' actions are inputs to brand identity construction; P4b: Competition, industry and environmental conditions, and partners' actions influence brand managers and consumers.*

### 3.3. Final notes

Drawing on multiple streams of research, this paper seeks to clarify and rekindle the notion of brand identity and its management in an increasingly complex market context. By relying on a broad spectrum of literature (e.g., sociology, strategy), the study supports that brand identity is a dynamic process developing over time through mutually influencing inputs from brand managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers). The dynamic aspect of brand identity entails being flexible to contextual changes while preserving a stable sense of self. Such a perspective leads to the needed consistency in identity management and presentations.

With this view of brand identity, the study sheds light on a recurring topic in the branding literature: the connection between market environment dynamics and brand identity stability and durability. Indeed, if the environment is unstable and unpredictable, should the brand identity remain fixed over time, to sustain long lasting references for the consumers, or, on the contrary, should the brand identity be flexible and adaptive? The tentative answer to this question lies in the meaning of the enduring identity attribute. To be enduring, the brand identity ought to be dynamic and flexible so that brand and consumers' faces are supported within the changing environment.

From a managerial perspective, this paper proposes a brand identity framework entailing the following dimensions: brand identity, brand face, consumers' face, encounters and contextual factors (e.g., competitors). The framework specifies how these dimensions relate to each other and may assist brand managers in developing brand identity as a function of integration with consumers, thereby optimizing their marketing and communication strategies in an increasingly dynamic environment.

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