The multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management ☆

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the internet, including developments such as Web 2.0, has led to new relationship realities between organizations and their stakeholders. One manifestation of these complex new realities has been the emergence of an internet-based democratization of brand management. Research about this phenomenon has so far mainly focused on investigating just one or more individual themes and thereby disregarded the inherent multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management as a holistic, socio-technological phenomenon. The aim of this paper is to address this limitation through an investigation of the various socio-technological democratization developments of the phenomenon. To achieve this aim, a balanced and stakeholder-oriented perspective on brand management has been adopted to conduct an integrative literature review. The review reveals three key developments, which together form the essential parts of the phenomenon: (I) the democratization of internet technology, (II) the democratization of information, and (III) the democratization of social capital. The insights gained help to clarify the basic structures of the multi-layered phenomenon. The findings contribute also to the substantiation of a call for a new brand management paradigm: one that takes not only company-initiated but also stakeholder-initiated brand management activities into account.

1. Introduction

The evolution of the internet, including developments such as Web 2.0, has led to new relationship realities between organizations and their stakeholders. One manifestation of these complex new realities has been the emergence of an internet-based democratization of brand management. Research about this recent phenomenon has to date mainly focused on investigating just one or more individual themes, for example, internet-based user innovation, collective intelligence, electronic word-of-mouth or online communities (see Arnhold, 2010; Burmann & Arnhold, 2008). Minimal attention has been paid to the inherent multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management as a holistic, socio-technological phenomenon. The present paper aims to address this limitation by investigating the multi-layered nature of this phenomenon through an exploration of its various socio-technological democratization developments.

When investigating the complex democratization processes researchers are confronted with the issue of conflicting conceptualizations. Tuten (2008), for example, defines brand democratization as "the

invitation to consumers to participate in creating and then experiencing a brand's meaning" (p. 176). Not only is this definition limited to organization–consumer relationships, and thereby neglecting relationships with other potentially relevant brand stakeholders, but it also implies that an organization has control over who it can *invite* to participate in the creation of a brand's meaning, which is not always the case. Plunkett (2011) conceptualizes the term brand democratization in a similar narrow, company-control-centric way by defining it as a "practice of allowing" (p. ii) product fans and interested consumers to participate in brand-related activities. This, again, appears to exclude the possibility that some consumers (and other stakeholders) might participate in brand-related activities, without necessarily being invited by the *allowing* organization. In contrast to these two conceptualizations, Neisser (2006) emphasizes that consumers cannot be controlled, for instance, in their new roles as online critics or reviewers. He defines brand democratization as a development that puts consumers increasingly in control: through the internet, consumers are increasingly enabled to take charge and transform their relationships with brands "from ordinary buyer to reviewer, inventor, designer, ad creator, champion or critic" (p. 40). Nonetheless, Neisser's approach also seems too narrow by focusing just on consumers. All three authors disregard the importance of brand stakeholders other than consumers in their conceptualizations.

While these authors focus their considerations on the concept of *brand* democratization, others suggest more explicitly that not only brands but also branding, in the sense of brand *management*, is being democratized (Christodoulides, 2008, 2009; Fournier & Avery,

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2011; Hensel, 2008; Kemming & Humborg, 2010; Quelch & Jocz, 2007). Kemming and Humborg (2010), for example, conceptualize the democratization of branding as the "Technology-driven empowerment of consumers, such as the production of brand meaning by (micro) blogging, interaction in social networks or producing and disseminating brand advocacy" (p. 193). For Quelch and Jocz (2007), at least some of these internet-based processes have the potential to reduce or even circumvent the role of professional brand managers. Hensel (2008) acknowledges this as a "new era of brand management" by defining the key challenge for organizations now as finding a way to keep the balance between "guiding a brand and being guided as a brand" (p. 62).

Burmann and Arnhold (2008) offer their *user generated branding* approach as a response to this democratization challenge. Based on their research, they developed a managerial framework which conceptualizes user generated branding as "the strategic and operative management of brand related user generated content (UGC) to achieve [an organization's] brand goals" (p. 66). This approach allows the conceptual integration of stakeholders (i.e. users), instead of just consumers, and it also enables the conceptual integration of organization-initiated or organization-sponsored, brand-related UGC within a brand managerial context. But, due to its company-control-centric perspective, it falls short of enabling a conceptual integration of non-organization-initiated or non-sponsored, brand-related UGC (beyond the realm of integrative social media monitoring; see Burmann & Arnhold, 2008). This appears to be a crucial conceptual limitation for the present democratization context, considering that what consumers and other stakeholders hear or read online about brands, in terms of genuine, non-sponsored UGC, is potentially far more important to them than any sponsored or otherwise organization-initiated, brand-related content (Christodoulides, 2008). To overcome this limitation a conceptualization of brand management seems to be needed that breaks free from an industrial age, company-control-centric paradigm (Christodoulides, 2008, 2009) and moves towards a more balanced (de Chernatony, 2001; Gummesson, 2002) and also more stakeholder-integrating (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2010) management perspective.

Such an outlook on brand management will be further discussed and conceptualized in the next section together with the need to adopt a socio-technological perspective on the internet-based democratization phenomenon as the point of departure for the present context. The aim of adopting this approach is to minimize the above mentioned issue of conflicting conceptualizations. The resultant definition is then used as a foundation for the investigation of the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management. The findings of this investigation are presented and discussed in the main section of the paper. Following the consideration of these results, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings' wider implications but also limitations as well as potential future research directions. The paper's contribution is twofold. Firstly, it helps to clarify the basic structures of the multi-layered, socio-technological phenomenon consisting essentially of (I) the democratization of internet technology, (II) the democratization of information, and (III) the democratization of social capital. Secondly, it contributes to the substantiation of a call for a new brand management paradigm: one that takes not only company-initiated but also stakeholder-initiated brand management activities into account.

2. Conceptualizing brand management and its internet-based democratization

Brand management has been conceptualized from a variety of perspectives — most of them with an internal, external or balanced strategic orientation (Heding, Knudtzen, & Bjerre, 2009; Louro & Cunha, 2001). Since the purpose of this paper is to explore a relational phenomenon between organizations and their stakeholders, a balanced and stakeholder-integrating perspective has been chosen

as the most appropriate brand management orientation. From such an angle, *brands* can be construed not only as company-controlled but also as socially constructed entities (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), socio-cultural phenomena (Berthon, Pitt, Chakrabarti, Berthon, & Simon, 2011), and/or complex social phenomena consisting of interrelated brand meanings, brand manifestations and internal as well as external brand stakeholders (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006). Subsequently, the *management* of brands cannot be understood as consisting solely of organization-initiated or organization-sponsored processes. Rather, it needs to be understood as also entailing stakeholder-initiated activities that are not controlled by the organization.

Based on this societal perspective, brand management can be conceived as brand meaning management (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; McCracken, 2005), but compared to traditional views on meaning management, brand managers are not perceived as being able to manage brand meaning directly in their stakeholders' minds. They can only control – to a certain extent at least – the production of and access provision to certain brand manifestations, for instance, the manufacturing and distribution of products. The experience of these brand manifestations might then influence the stakeholders' creation, adjustment, or reinforcement of the brand meanings in their minds. Nonetheless, each person ultimately develops his or her own personal brand understanding based on various individual as well as socio-cultural factors. This rationale has led to the concept of brand meaning co-creation between an organization and its brand managers on one hand and its brand stakeholders on the other (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008). Essential to the present argument though is the acknowledgement that, in the internet age, the power within this co-creation relationship has in many cases increasingly shifted away from organizations and brand managers towards their brand stakeholders. This is due to an unprecedented shift of resources availability regarding the creation of and access provision to brand manifestations.

In the pre-internet age, although word-of-mouth existed amongst consumers, organizations were generally considered the ones who set the brand meaning co-creation agenda (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2009). Organizations constituted the main authors in the brand meaning co-creation process since they were seen as the providers of the major tangible and intangible brand manifestations, such as products and promotions. The consumers' role within the co-creation process was at this time usually limited to experiencing – and creating meaning out of – what the authors had to provide.

However, empowered by the internet, consumers and other stakeholders have now become potentially more active (co-)authors, agenda setters and access providers when it comes to brand manifestations. They are therefore able to contribute to the co-creation of brand meaning at a previously unreachable level since the internet, and related technologies, provides them with an unprecedented availability of resources to access, produce and/or distribute brand manifestations themselves; thus supporting the contention that consumers – and other stakeholders – have "moved out of the audience and onto the stage" (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, p. 80). Beyond traditional word-of-mouth, they now have access to a broad variety of UGC platforms such as blogs and microblogs, social networking sites, wikis, and product review or video sharing sites. All these platforms potentially allow their users not only to enrich their own experience of a brand but also, for example, to express an opinion about it and therefore create a manifestation of the brand that can be experienced by others.

In this context, brand management can thus not only be conceptualized as brand meaning management but, more precisely, as brand manifestation management. This conceptualization entails (a) the creation of tangible as well as intangible brand manifestations; and (b) the control of access provision to these manifestations. The advantage of using such a conceptualization is that it allows researchers to move beyond traditional approaches towards an understanding of brand management

as consisting of complex organizational as well as non-organizational processes that can potentially (i) not only involve consumers and employees but also other brand stakeholders; (ii) not only be co-creative and constructive but also co-destructive (Plé & Cáceres, 2010); (iii) be highly dynamic and fragmented; (iv) be directional as well as non-directional; (v) be dialogue-oriented as well as multilogue-oriented (Berthon, Holbrook, Hulbert, & Pitt, 2007); and (vi) include or exclude an organization and its brand managers from a multilogue amongst stakeholders about the organization's brand.

It also enables researchers to regard brand manifestations as brand touch points, brand experience points or brand meaning co-creation resources — no matter whether these have been created by an organization's internal or external brand stakeholders (see Burmann, 2010). Consequently, this brand management approach facilitates the full conceptual integration of non-organization-initiated or non-sponsored, brand-related UGC in a brand managerial context. Finally therefore, this conceptualization allows brand management researchers to shift the traditional comprehension that an organization is at the center of its brand's management to a viewpoint where it might instead be perceived as potentially just being one part of a complex brand management stakeholder network (Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Esmann Andersen & Nielsen, 2009; Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002).

This perspective also relates to the growing evidence in the literature that the traditional boundaries between an organization and its internal stakeholders on the one hand and its external stakeholders on the other, have become increasingly blurred (e.g. Gregory, 2007; Handelman, 2006; Pitt, Watson, Berthon, Wynn, & Zinkhan, 2006; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). For instance consumers, who are traditionally defined as external stakeholders, might as active members of an (online) brand community become endogenous to the firm and its brand management, for example, on a communications or new product development level (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). But, this does not necessarily mean that every internet-empowered brand stakeholder of a company now has to be considered as a (part-time) brand manager of that particular organization. Instead, organizations need to realize and internalize conceptually that brand management has quintessentially been *democratized*. The emergence and then evolution of the internet as a "democratizing change agent" (Kramer, 2008, p. 7) has led to a technology-based democratization of brand management in regards to the management of brand manifestations.

However, an exploration of these multi-layered democratization processes from a purely technological angle appears to be insufficient since the technological (infra-)structure of the internet cannot be separated from its use by social human actors and their permanent creation of meaningful information and communication through the internet (Fuchs, 2005). To be able to untangle the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management, the internet therefore needs to be interpreted as a *socially embedded technology* (Berners-Lee et al., 2006), since both society and technology are actively and continuously shaping each other (Halford, Pope, & Carr, 2010). This approach takes into consideration that various internet technologies under investigation have only become powerful change agents through people's adoption and integration of these technologies in their everyday social lives (Anderson, 2007; Kelly, 2009). Consequently, this means that the technological as well as the societal developments need to be taken *holistically* into account — as two sides of the same coin. Thus a holistic, socio-technological perspective on the internet-based democratization phenomenon has been adopted as the point of departure for the present investigation.

The concept of democratization is in this context construed as a process of transition from a less to a more democratic form of power sharing (Grugel, 2002; Potter, Goldblatt, Kiloh, & Lewis, 1997; Tilly, 2007). The internet-based democratization of brand management can subsequently be conceptualized as a phenomenon that occurs when the ability to use the internet leads to a more democratic form of power sharing between an organization and its

brand stakeholders regarding the creation of and access provision to brand manifestations — compared to previous circumstances. The principle of *power sharing* implies hereby that power is a relational concept. To have more power as one part of a relationship means less power for the other(s); the power of an organization's stakeholders can therefore, to a certain extent at least, be related to the organization's power (Box, 1982).

This concept of relational power has been identified by Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, and Schrader (2006) as consisting of various facets in the context of brand and marketing management. Building on French and Raven's (1959) framework of social power bases, Rezabakhsh et al. (2006) compared consumers' potential powers in the pre-internet age with those of the present times. They found that consumer power has increased on brand management-related bases such as reward and coercive power, expert power and legitimate power. These are exemplified in the following. Firstly, consumers' *reward and coercive power* has increased through their growing ability to voice their opinions about organizations and their brands on a potentially large scale, for example through blogs. Secondly, organizations' *expert power* has decreased through reductions in consumers' lack of information and increased market transparency, for instance through access to online product reviews. Thirdly, consumers' *legitimate power* to influence prices and products has been strengthened, for example through group-buying sites or websites that offer new levels of product personalization and specification.

However, the multi-layered nature of these various socio-technological power sharing and shifting processes has not yet been investigated in a brand managerial context. This paper therefore aims to contribute to the development of a deeper understanding regarding the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management. To achieve this aim, a broad integrative literature review has been conducted to explore the phenomenon's various socio-technological democratization developments. An integrative review was chosen as an appropriate research method since it is particularly suitable for the development of complex, holistic conceptualizations (Creswell, 2007; Torraco, 2005).

3. Findings and discussion

The integrative literature review of the internet-based democratization of brand management identified three key developments that together form the essential parts of the phenomenon: (I) the democratization of internet technology, (II) the democratization of information, and (III) the democratization of social capital. Fig. 1 visualizes these findings.

It also shows that on the most basic level the phenomenon consists of two different forms of democratization: democratization through technology and democratization of technology itself (Carroll & Hackett, 2006). The internet-based democratization of information and of social capital fall into the former category while the democratization of internet technology falls into the latter. Apart from presenting these key democratization developments, Fig. 1 shows the key developments' respective key facets or sub-themes, based on the findings of the integrative review. For example, social self-representation, social connectivity and social mobilization are the key facets of the internet-based democratization of social capital. The arrows in Fig. 1 indicate the main influences between the two different forms of democratization that have been elicited from the literature. Despite the socio-technological conceptualization that societal and technological developments influence each other, the one-way arrows reflect the finding that the democratization of internet technology is a necessary enabler for the internet-based democratization of brand management but that its presence alone is not sufficient evidence for the occurrence of the phenomenon. Only the presence of either of the two other key developments or any of their key facets provides sufficient evidence for the occurrence of the internet-based
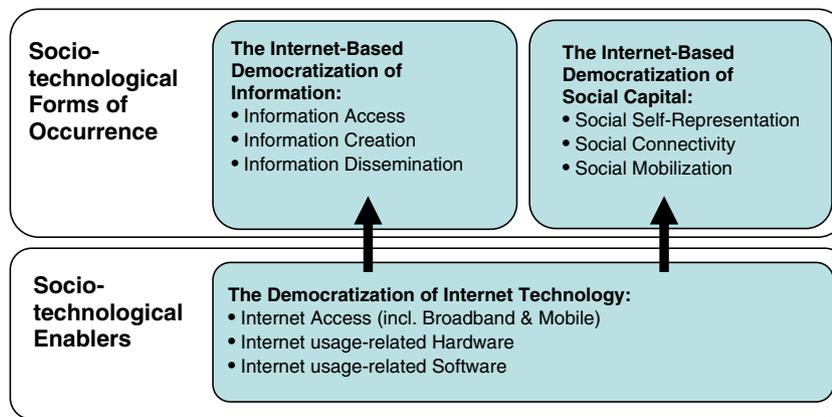
Fig. 1. The three socio-technological key developments of the internet-based democratization of brand management.

democratization of brand management in a particular situation. All these key developments and findings are further explained and discussed one-by-one in the following sections.

3.1. The democratization of internet technology

As previously described, in the pre-internet age, many stakeholders, particularly consumers, had very little power in their everyday dealings with organizations (Berthon & Hulbert, 2003; Pitt, Berthon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). However, with the advent of new technologies the power imbalance between organizations and their stakeholders has in many cases shifted considerably. The internet, in particular, has been a huge contributory factor to this shift — along with internet usage-related technologies such as more affordable PCs, easy-to-use software, digital TV, still and video cameras, broadband and mobile telecommunications (Argenti, 2006; Brown, 2009; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006). For example, in the pre-internet age generally only commercial organizations had the technological and financial means to produce and broadcast audio-visual material such as video clips, whereas today most people in the industrialized world have access to the necessary equipment listed above. Therefore, based on the conceptualization of democratization as a process of transition from a less to a more democratic form of power sharing, the developments that led to the wide-spread availability of hardware and software for internet access and the infrastructure for internet connectivity, can – at least on a technological level – be interpreted as a democratization process (Fig. 1).

Nonetheless, an important emerging theme in the literature is that democratization describes a process in which inequalities of power are reduced but by no means eliminated. Therefore, in many instances a technology-based social divide can still be observed. And this applies not only to less developed regions and continents but also to leading countries in the industrialized world. For example, in European countries like Sweden or the UK there is, at least to a certain extent, evidence of a digital divide and therefore social exclusion (Ferlander & Timms, 2007). Although more and more users are technically enabled to access the internet and other communication infrastructures they might not necessarily have the right digital media literacy skills required to engage with the new possibilities of the internet democratization (Cammaerts, 2008; Livingstone, 2008). Knowing how to use the available software and hardware resources might be equally – if not even more – important than just the technical access to it.

The democratization of access to internet technology is an essential enabler for the *internet-based* democratization of brand management (Fig. 1). But its presence alone is not sufficient as an indicator of the occurrence of the *socio*-technological phenomenon under investigation.

Only when people possess the necessary skills to use the available technology, can it be applied to increase a brand stakeholder's power.

3.2. The internet-based democratization of information

From a perspective of user empowerment, access to the internet presents *digitally literate* consumers and other stakeholders of organizations with new opportunities: (i) to overcome information asymmetries that characterize traditional markets (Christodoulides, 2009; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Weber, 2007), (ii) to take on a more active role in creating information about organizations and their brands (Anderson, 2006; Gillin, 2007; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006), and (iii) to disseminate this information to a wide audience with much greater ease (Anderson, 2006; Gillin, 2007; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Information-related abilities have therefore been identified as one of the key forms of occurrence of the internet-based democratization of brand management (Fig. 1).

3.2.1. The internet-based democratization of information access

The internet has empowered consumers and other stakeholders by giving them unparalleled access to a massive body of information, for example information about products, organizations, markets and entire industries (Harrison, Waite, & Hunter, 2006; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Smith & Zook, 2011). Furthermore, the internet offers an unprecedented mix of immediacy, searchability and interactivity compared with other information sources, such as traditional advertising (Harrison et al., 2006; Li & Bernoff, 2008). The majority of the information available on the internet itself, for example via search engines such as Google, is virtually free of charge to any user, making the search costs considerably lower when compared with many previously existing databases and archives (Keen, 2007; Verona & Prandelli, 2002).

The available information on the internet might represent an insurmountable information overload for some users, while for others it can minimize relative market power between organizations and consumers or other stakeholders when it comes to information asymmetry. The locus of power is not necessarily completely shifting but inequalities appear to be decreased through means such as search engines or price comparison websites. Nonetheless, similar to the technical literacy skills issue mentioned above, some authors point out that *where* and *how* to find the right information on the internet can equally be a struggle for users without the right internet literacy skills (e.g. Brants & Frissen, 2003).

When it comes to the brand meaning co-creation process, internet literate users are able to enrich their own experience of a brand through accessing previously unavailable brand manifestations via the internet, for example through searching for information about a brand from a distant geographical area. This access to additional brand manifestations can be interpreted as one form of occurrence

of the internet-based democratization of brand management phenomenon since it can have a positive impact on, for instance, a consumer's legitimate power in relation to a particular organization (Fig. 1).

In contrast to these *user-initiated* activities on the internet, which most organizations hardly have an influence on, many companies use the concept of providing access to information online to their advantage, in terms of brand manifestation management, through their own *organization-initiated* activities. A case in point is a company offering customers access to additional information about the latest products on its website. The advantage here is that the organization can, of course, control the content of the information provided, in contrast to, for example, an independently-run product review website. If a company owns an internet property, for instance an online community website, it might also be able to allow only selected users to access it and the information it provides. One example of this practice would be a customer relationship management activity where the organizing firm invites only certain users or customers to take part with exclusive access to content which can potentially strengthen the invited customers' loyalty (Bhalla, 2011).

It can be concluded that there are certain limitations to the internet-based democratization of information access that need to be taken into account. Nonetheless, in any case, the democratization of information access is just one of various information-related empowerment processes. On another level, internet literate users are able to enrich their brand experience by not only accessing additional information on the web but also actively participating in the *creation of information* about brands on the internet.

3.2.2. The internet-based democratization of information creation

A belief in the freedom of information was a strong motivating factor in the development of the internet from the outset (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2000; Hemetsberger, 2006a). However, generating content on the web was, for the overwhelming majority of users, too much of a challenge due to their lack of technical skills. As Smith (2008, p. 19) points out, "For the first 15 years of the internet's existence, creating content… [was] the preserve of geeks who knew code or could navigate unprepossessing bulletin boards. Today, anyone can do it". Brand manifestations that may nowadays be created on the web, without needing to know software code, can range from simply posting a comment on somebody else's blog to creating your own blog or microblog with brand-related comments; from writing an online review about a product to producing and uploading a spoof ad for this brand on YouTube; from creating a profile on a social networking site for a brand to creating an entry on Wikipedia about the particular product, service or organization. The ability to create such brand manifestations can increase, for instance, the reward or coercive power of an organization's brand stakeholders. As stated earlier, people are no longer necessarily just passive recipients or targets of an organization's marketing and communications activities, but can potentially, more than ever before, become active producers and publishers or broadcasters in their brand meaning co-creation relationships with organizations (Argenti, 2006; Gregory, 2007; McConnell & Huba, 2007). The internet-based democratization of information creation can therefore be construed as another form of occurrence of the internet-based democratization of brand management phenomenon (Fig. 1).

The main exception to these user-initiated information creation activities is *organization-initiated* ones. When a company runs, for example, a creative competition for its customers on the internet, it potentially has a certain level of control over what is produced and published online (e.g. through moderation or selection processes; see Arnhold, 2010). The literature provides evidence that some organizations are even able to exploit content generated by – at first sight – *empowered and independent* internet users for their own commercial purposes (e.g. Cova & Dalli, 2009). Examples of these kinds of beneficiaries are commercial UGC platforms, such as the

social networking site Facebook, or blog hosting sites such as blogger.com (Cammaerts, 2008; Coté & Pybus, 2007). In this context it is questionable to what extent the contributors to these commercially-run UGC platforms can be seen as genuinely independent and free of commercial dependencies. Internet users who generate content on these commercial websites, i.e. sites that earn money through placing advertising or sponsorship around UGC, are to a certain extent exploited by these organizations. The rationale for this conclusion is that these organizations do not have to create the content for their advertising platforms themselves and can thus minimize their own labor costs (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Dumenco, 2010; Kim & Hamilton, 2006; Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008).

This example of hypercapitalism (Graham, 2000) illustrates that while most organizations are increasingly losing power and control through the emergence of user-generated content on the internet, some corporations are able to gain power, and benefit tremendously from internet-based information creation. This situation also applies to the next key facet of the internet-based democratization of information phenomenon, which is focused on the dissemination of information on the internet.

3.2.3. The internet-based democratization of information dissemination

Organizations have never been fully in control of the information that is communicated about them and their products in the public domain due to the activity of stakeholders such as the media and competitors (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Grigoryants & Schnetzer, 2008; Roehm & Tybout, 2006). Also, individual stakeholders, such as consumers, have always been able to share opinions on a product or organization through word-of-mouth, for example, by talking to family, friends and colleagues. However, when it comes to the dissemination of information to an audience wider than that, the opportunities in the pre-internet age were limited. In contrast to that, nowadays virtually anyone with adequate digital literacy skills and access to the internet can use it as a personal communication and publishing or broadcasting platform to reach an audience far beyond family, friends and colleagues. The ability to disseminate brand manifestations via the internet increases, for instance, the reward power of an organization's brand stakeholders and therefore leads to a more democratic form of power sharing between this organization and its internet literate brand stakeholders. It can therefore be concluded that the internet-based democratization of information dissemination represents yet another form of occurrence of the internet-based democratization of brand management phenomenon (Fig. 1).

A critical issue in this context is the crisis of credibility on the internet. Due, for instance, to a lack of control and accountability on the web, in many cases anybody can become a self-proclaimed expert and influence those who are not able to distinguish between quality and nonsense (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Keen, 2007). This democratization of expertise can lead to error and opportunism (Guernsey, 2000). Wikipedia can be used as an example where people have contributed material that is incorrect, biased and potentially defamatory, for instance, in the case of politicians such as George W. Bush (The Economist, 2006). In terms of doubts about the credibility of internet content, the literature provides evidence that all kinds of content can be faked on the internet (e.g. Cammaerts, 2008; Deuze, 2008). Lim (2009) and Rezabakhsh et al. (2006) also point out that search engine results can be manipulated through various search engine marketing methods.

Despite these limitations, the findings of the literature review indicate that each of the three facets of the democratization of information phenomenon provides opportunities for an organization's internet literate brand stakeholders to access and/or create brand manifestations to increase their reward, coercive, expert and/or legitimate power. Each of those three empowerment processes represents – enabled by the democratization of internet technology – a potential form of

occurrence of the internet-based democratization of brand management phenomenon (Fig. 1).

However, this conclusion is not unanimous but contested by some critics. Boyd (in Johnson, 2009), for instance, questions the internet-based democratization of information even if users are provided with the necessary internet literacy skills, since for her the whole game has changed:

"we've made [content] creation and distribution more available to anyone, but at the same time we've made those things irrelevant. Now the commodity isn't distribution, it's attention — and guess what? Who gets attention is still sitting on a power law curve… we're not actually democratising the whole system — we're just shifting the way in which we discriminate".

This critique ties in with Locker's notion that an internet-based technology such as Twitter is "good for democracy, but it's not democratic" (in Henley, 2009). In the context of blogs, for instance, Cammaerts (2008) suggests that elites in society (e.g. well-known actors, politicians, or business leaders) generally have it easier when disseminating their ideas because, just by being elites, their blogs automatically get more attention than those of ordinary bloggers. It is therefore important to keep in mind that democratization does not mean democracy in terms of equal distribution of power — or attention. Social divides might thus still be observed in many cases despite an overall transition from a less to a more democratic form of power sharing when it comes to access, creation and dissemination of information on the internet.

Overall, however, examining the evolution of the internet from the previously discussed holistic, socio-technological perspective (Fuchs, 2005), it appears to be important to recognize that it has not only been a technology- and information-driven but also particularly a *socially-driven* phenomenon. People have been adopting and using the internet as part of their social lives (Anderson, 2007) and many of these internet technologies "rely for their power on social interactions" (Kelly, 2009, p. 122). This part of the internet-based democratization phenomenon will be further explored next.

3.3. The internet-based democratization of social capital

Although the internet was initially seen mainly as an information access and publishing mechanism, some involved in its technical development from an early stage state that the internet was also always *social* (e.g. Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2000). For example, the first online newsgroups and discussion forums were started by developers and programmers right from the very beginning of the World Wide Web evolution (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2000). Even before that, in the 1980s, virtual communities, such as The WELL, were created as electronic dial-up bulletin board systems (Rheingold, 1991; Turner, 2005). Nonetheless, on the scale of a global mass phenomenon, the internet as a socially-oriented platform began to emerge in the late 1990s with applications such as Classmates.com, Sixdegrees.com and FriendsReunited.co.uk (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Jeffery, Fenn, Johnson, Smith, & Coumbe, 2009). Since then, particularly over the last few years, the social side of the internet has become very prominent due to the rise of further so-called social internet (e.g. Boyd & Ellison, 2008), social web (e.g. Brown, 2009), social media (e.g. Safko & Brake, 2009), social software (e.g. Tepper, 2003), social computing (e.g. Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007) or Web 2.0 (e.g. O'Reilly, 2005) applications such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr, to name but a few. From this socially-oriented perspective, the internet provides new opportunities for technically literate consumers and other stakeholders of organizations

(i) to *represent and express themselves* as individuals or groups of stakeholders in front of an organization and other audiences in a diverse number of ways. For instance, through the creation of their own websites, blogs, microblogs, discussion forums or profiles on social networking sites (Cova & Pace, 2006; Hemetsberger, 2005; Kozinets, 2001; Proctor & Kitchen, 2002; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Simmons, 2008; Webb & Burgoyne, 2009),

(ii) to *connect with others* beyond their geographical proximity. For example, to form a worldwide brand or anti-brand community (Cova & Pace, 2006; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006, 2010; Kucuk, 2008; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), and

(iii) to *interact with* or *mobilize others*. For example, to jointly develop new products online (Füller et al., 2007; Hemetsberger, 2005, 2006b; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009; Piller, Schubert, Koch, & Möslein, 2005).

In these examples, internet users may benefit not only from the actual information or knowledge that is exchanged or created in the process, but particularly from social, communal and relationship-oriented aspects such as sharing, collaborating and bonding with others (Belk, 2010). In this context, even individual stakeholders, such as consumers, are able to make themselves heard through the internet to an unprecedented extent not only as individuals or groups that create and disseminate information but also as individual or social entities who actively want to *express themselves to* and *connect and interact with others*. It may thus be concluded that digitally literate consumers and other stakeholders are not only more empowered on a technological or information-related basis through the new opportunities that the internet offers but also on a social level – at least potentially – in their dealings with organizations. Consequently, as indicated in Fig. 1, it may thus be inferred that the democratization of internet technology has not only enabled a democratization of information but also a democratization of social capital.

Based on a review of the social capital literature, the term has initially been defined here as a beneficial social asset – to individuals and/or groups – that comprises (i) social connections and (ii) the resources that may be mobilized through these connections (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Apart from these two main forms of social capital, additionally *social self-representation* is introduced as a third form, specifically for the present internet-related context. Social capital in the form of social self-representation opportunities is seen as relevant in the present online context since it can be interpreted as a prerequisite for the other two forms. The various opportunities for expressing yourself *to the world* via the internet (see Fig. 2, point 1) may have a considerable impact on the development of a person's or group's online relationships and networks (point 2) and subsequently the resources that might be accessed through these connections (point 3).

3.3.1. The internet-based democratization of social self-representation

In the literature about postmodern consumption it has been postulated that many people are seeking both individualistic as well as communal experiences in life (Belk, 2010; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Simmons, 2008). The internet appears to be able to provide both these kinds of experiences to its users. It can function as "virtual glue" (Simmons, 2008, p. 305) that people can use to bond together in an increasingly fragmented world. It can, at the same time, also be approached as a platform for individualistic experiences rather than any bonding benefits (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007). When it comes to communal experiences, postmodern consumers show new forms of sociality based not only upon direct face-to-face or synchronous internet-mediated interaction with others, but also through a more indirect form of an internet-based *self-exhibition* in front of others (Cova & Pace, 2006; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Klein Pearo, 2004; Hemetsberger, 2005; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Simmons, 2008). Blogs, for instance, can not only be interpreted as a means of internet-mediated dissemination of knowledge, but also as a platform for social self-representation. In this sense, the internet may represent "the ultimate democratisation of self-expression" (Watson, 2009). Microblogs, such as Twitter, have become particularly prominent in

this respect. Another case is virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), in which users can create their own profile and avatar totally from scratch and therefore a completely *new me* (Krishnamurthy & Dou, 2008).

In the specific democratization context, it has to be taken into account that new internet-based self-representation opportunities have also led to new possibilities for an organization's brand stakeholders to create brand manifestations. These manifestations may contribute to the creation of brand meanings of, for example, a corporate brand that potentially stand in sharp symbolic contrast to the brand meaning that the corporation itself intends to convey through its own corporate brand meaning co-creation activities (see e.g. Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006, and their concept of the Doppelgänger brand image). A case in point is a group of Virgin Atlantic flight attendants who criticized the airline and its passengers on the social networking site Facebook (Conway, 2008). The Facebook site provided the flight attendants with a new platform to create a brand manifestation by expressing themselves and their opinions about the airline and its passengers. This previously unavailable platform of internet-based social self-representation can be interpreted as a means that has increased their ability to use coercive power towards their employer. The internet-based democratization of self-representation can in this context therefore be construed as yet another form of occurrence of the internet-based democratization of brand management phenomenon (Fig. 1).

However, there is also another angle that needs to be taken into account in the present context. For example, when institutions actively try to manipulate or fake user self-representations on the internet. One early case in point was Reckitt Benckiser with their cleaning product brand Cillit Bang and their PR agency Cohn & Wolfe who set up not only a fake blog but also a fake blogger named Barry Scott who left marketing messages in blogs and posts on other websites (Coates, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

3.3.2. The internet-based democratization of social connectivity

Although the internet has been linked with decreases as well as increases in traditional social capital (e.g. Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2008; Wellman, Quan Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001; Williams, 2006), in terms of social connectivity, a strong rationale has emerged in the literature showing that the internet is in principle able to broaden users' opportunities to build and maintain networks with others (e.g. Donath & Boyd, 2004). This rationale is often based on a concept developed originally by Granovetter (1973) who differentiates between weak ties and strong ties. Based on his concept,

the internet may not necessarily offer users per se the opportunity to increase the number of strong ties (i.e. emotionally close, long-term relationships), but it may well allow a person to increase the weak ties (i.e. emotionally distant, casual relationships). For example, social networking sites or blogs are particularly suited to maintaining weak ties easily (e.g. Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ferlander & Timms, 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2008). From this weak ties perspective, the internet appears to provide at least bridging social capital, which means it allows individuals or groups to make connections with other individuals or groups, potentially from completely different backgrounds or geographical areas (Putnam, 2000). These kinds of social connections might, for most members of a particular network, only have the characteristics of tentative relationships but what they might lack in depth they can make up in breadth (Williams, 2006).

Looking at the power imbalance between organizations and their brand stakeholders from a perspective of weak ties and bridging social capital, the internet allows consumers and other stakeholders, potentially, to connect more easily with people who have a specific joint interest, purpose or background (Preece, 2000). This may be considered as beneficial for internet users in terms of their stakeholder power, for instance, when it comes to seeking advice from existing or former customers of an organization, for example, in the context of specific banking services (Berger & Messerschmidt, 2009). Connecting with others allows an organization's brand stakeholders, in such a context, to decrease the organization's expert power. Thus, the internet-based democratization of social connectivity can be confirmed as a form of occurrence of the internet-based democratization of brand management phenomenon (Fig. 1).

In the pre-internet age, it was mainly organizations that had the resources to connect with thousands of people worldwide via, for example, advertising, PR or direct marketing activities. Nowadays, virtually any internet literate user can potentially connect with a large number of other users. This weak ties-based democratization of social connectivity can potentially cause a considerable erosion of control over brand meaning co-creation processes for organizations. However, these points about weak tie relationships only encapsulate one side of the discussion in the social capital literature. Apart from bridging social capital, which is mainly linked to weak tie relationships and a primary focus on connectivity, there is another form of social capital called bonding social capital, which is mainly linked to the mobilization of resources through strong tie relationships (Putnam, 2000).

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1. An Individual's or Group's Internet-Based Self-Representation Opportunities:
- Own websites, blogs, discussion forums, profiles on social networking sites, etc.
- Contributions to other individuals', groups' or organizations' websites, blogs, discussion forums, social networking profiles, etc.
- Further user-generated content (UGC), for example, videos on YouTube or photographs on Flickr
- Emails, instant messaging, chat rooms, etc.

2. An Individual's or Group's Internet-Based Connections with:
- Other individuals
- Other groups
- Other organizations

3. The Potential and Actual Resources that an Individual or Group Are Able to Mobilize Through Their Internet-Based Connections:
- Financial resources
- Emotional resources
- Labor resources
- Informational resources, etc.

Fig. 2. Key forms of internet-based social capital.

3.3.3. The internet-based democratization of social mobilization

The internet provides its users with bridging social capital by enabling them to create and maintain weak tie relationships. A drawback of this internet-based bridging social capital is that these kinds of social connections and networks are usually considered as rather superficial and casual. They are considered unlikely to provide members of a network with valuable social resources such as strong emotional or substantive support when needed (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Valenzuela et al., 2008; Williams, 2006). Bonding social capital, in contrast to bridging social capital, occurs when individuals or groups provide close emotional or substantive support for one another (Putnam, 2000).

Some literature provides evidence that the internet is also able to generate bonding social capital for at least some of its users (e.g. Ferlander & Timms, 2007). In this context, the concept of social mobilization becomes relevant (e.g. Hara & Estrada, 2005). While social connectivity is mainly about access to other individuals and groups, social mobilization is about the resources that then may be available to a member of a network through its other members. The extent of these resources, which can be mobilized through a network, depends on the intensity, trust and reciprocity of the relationships within the network (Granovetter, 1973). This suggests that while bridging social capital depends more on the breadth and quantity of relationships, bonding social capital depends primarily on the depth and quality.

Although it might at first glance seem unlikely that internet users bond with friends of friends or even strangers on the internet on a similarly intense and reciprocal level as they might with close family or friends it should not be underestimated that individuals or groups of joint specific interest, purpose or background may provide each other with a substantial amount of emotional, informational, financial and/or human (e.g. working hours) resources that would usually only be expected in a strong tie relationship.

An example of internet-based social mobilization, where individuals and groups have benefited from substantial reciprocal services in terms of dedicated time and labor or human resources (i.e. voluntary and therefore unpaid working hours), is Lugnet.com, the international LEGO users group network of so-called AFOLs, adult fans of LEGO. This global online community of LEGO enthusiasts is user-driven, created by fans for fans. Here, on different forums, hundreds of LEGO enthusiasts can actively discuss all kinds of topics related to LEGO products in great length and depth over weeks, months and even years. They can share their ideas as well as their passion for the products and brand. They showcase their own LEGO creations or co-develop and co-design complex new LEGO worlds based on virtual or real LEGO bricks constructions. Lugnet.com enables its users not only to mobilize other enthusiasts to co-create new LEGO-related brand manifestations but also to provide access for others to these manifestations on a broader scale. The internet enables individuals and groups in this context to mobilize others which can increase, for example, their legitimate power towards the LEGO organization (see also Hatch & Schulz, 2010). Based on this example the internet-based democratization of social mobilization can thus be identified as another form of occurrence of the internet-based democratization of brand management phenomenon (Fig. 1).

The findings of the literature review indicate overall, in terms of (i) social self-representation, (ii) social connectivity, and (iii) social mobilization, that each of these three facets of the democratization of social capital phenomenon provides opportunities for an organization's internet literate brand stakeholders to access and/or create brand manifestations to increase their reward, coercive, expert and/or legitimate power. Based on the evidence and examples presented within this review, it can therefore be inferred that the democratization of social capital, in conjunction with the democratization of internet technology, should be considered as being another essential part of the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management (see Fig. 1).

4. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to develop a deeper understanding of the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management as a holistic, socio-technological phenomenon. The insights gained from the integrated review have clarified the phenomenon's basic structure on three different levels. Firstly, on the most basic level, the literature review shows that the explored phenomenon consists principally of two different kinds of democratization: democratization of technology and democratization through technology. On a second level, the study reveals that the democratization of internet technology has led to two different kinds of democratization through technology: a democratization of information and a democratization of social capital. On a third level, the review provides evidence that each of these democratization developments consists of various internet-based democratization facets. Of particular relevance appear to be the six facets which can be associated with the democratization of information or the democratization of social capital. Each of these six internet-based facets enables a more democratic form of power sharing between an organization and its digitally literate brand stakeholders in the context of the creation of brand manifestations and/or the access provision to them, compared to previous circumstances.

Based on a balanced, stakeholder-integrating and brand manifestation-oriented conceptualization of brand management, these findings have considerable managerial consequences. Most notably, brand management *has* been democratized through the internet as a radical change agent. The power within brand meaning co-creation relationships between organizations on the one hand and their internet-empowered stakeholders on the other, has in many cases increasingly shifted towards the organizations' brand stakeholders. This is due to an unprecedented shift of resource availability on the internet regarding the creation of and access provision to brand manifestations. Internet-based brand meaning co-creation activities can now be stakeholder-initiated as well as organization-initiated at any stage of the process. Empowered by the internet, technically literate brand stakeholders of an organization have – more than ever before – a choice of moving between different levels of activity and involvement regarding brand meaning co-creation. They can (1) in the traditional, rather passive sense, co-create meaning out of the brand manifestations which they experience that are provided to them by the brand's focal organization and/or other stakeholders; (2) become more active through co-creating not only brand meaning but also brand manifestations in collaboration with the brand's focal organization and/or other brand stakeholders; or (3) create brand manifestations on a previously unparalleled magnitude by themselves outside the control of anybody else, including the brand's focal organization. Looking at the wider implications for the brand management discipline, these findings correspond with an emerging call in recent literature (e.g. Fisher & Smith, 2011) for the development of a new brand management paradigm. Our research substantiates the notion that this new approach needs to integrate not only organization-initiated but also stakeholder-initiated brand management activities.

In terms of future research directions, the in-depth exploration of power structures within open source communities, such as the Linux operating system project (Hemetsberger, 2006a, 2006b; Kozinets et al., 2008; O'Reilly, 2005; Pitt et al., 2006), appears to have great potential. The difference between Linux and other examples discussed in this paper is that from a democratization perspective we move into the territory of so-called open source brands (Pitt et al., 2006) or community brands (Füller et al., 2008) where power and control over core brand manifestations, such as the development of new products, is radically more decentralized and heterarchical compared to conventional product or corporate brands (Pitt et al., 2006; Schroll, Hemetsberger, & Füller, 2011). We expect this area of research to provide valuable insights into the development of a new brand

management paradigm that will be applicable not only to open source and community brands but also conventional product and corporate ones.

In terms of the limitations of our research, it needs to be acknowledged that the priority has been to clarify the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management as a holistic, socio-technological phenomenon. We subsequently suggest that it is useful to consider the basic structure of this phenomenon in terms of the three key developments and their respective key facets as presented in this paper (Fig. 1). Nonetheless, although we have separated these key developments and facets analytically, and although we have portrayed various influences of key developments as unilateral in the ideal-typical conceptualization of this complex topic, we recognize that many aspects of this phenomenon are in fact interrelated and multilateral.

Despite the limitations, overall the paper provides some direction for future research through its contribution towards the clarification of the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratization of brand management phenomenon. Moving forward towards the development of a new, more balanced and stakeholder-integrating paradigm appears to be essential, since the lack of an adequate framework has implications not only for brand management but marketing as a whole.

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