

Integrating branding theory under the novel concepts of Brand Genetics, Brand Genotype and Brand Phenotype.

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Abstract

Brands cast meanings seeking consumer engagement. To remain meaningful, brands interact with environments, process inputs, and adapt, resembling a living organism. Branding strategies are ubiquitously centred around the construct of brand identity.

This study approaches branding from an organismic metaphor perspective, introducing the notions of Brand Genetics, Brand Genotype and Brand Phenotype. In addition, we amplify brand conceptualization beyond identity, including brands' inheritance and antecedents as key influencers of intracellular metabolism, the attributes and essence of a brand. Finally, we envision the integration of branding theories under the Genotype-Phenotype framework, favouring cross-pollination, leveraging future research, and integrating brand stakeholders.

Our work revisits fundamentals of branding, fostering consistency among strategy, concept, and execution, allowing brand essence, brand elements and business goals to converge and interdependently evolve.

Keywords: Branding Strategies, Branding Typologies, Brand Identity.

Track: Product and Brand Management

1. Introduction

Metaphors encourage us to stretch our imagination, to refresh our insights, to build on the strengths of different perspectives, to integrate the analytical with the non-stochastic (Morgan, 1997). The dualist and multidimensional nature of branding makes theory and decision-making range from consistent to transient, from subjective to objective, from aspirational to functional (Aaker, 1997). We believe that expansion of theory will benefit from the organismic metaphor that we propose in this paper, as it contemplates structured, yet integrative and fluid analyses, reflections, and interpretations within and around the various phases and activities of the branding initiative.

Within the vast branding literature there are many different views, definitions, and scopes for the meaning of brand (Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006). Keller (1996) assertively defines a brand as a name, symbol, term, sign, and design; Hart & Murphy (1989), from a utilitarian perspective, as the element that differentiates a product of one producer from that of another. These definitions juxtapose scholars such as Kapferer (1992), who takes a psychosocial path and defines a brand as a living memory, a genetic program, a framework of meaning and direction; or Franzen & Moriarty (2009) who explain brands as the study of how products take on meaning from an established identity. These approaches that may seem atonal, can be explained by the evolution of the role of brands for firms and consumers. Initially considered means of assuring quality, functionality, and utilitarian differentiation (Levitt, 1980, Rise & Trout, 1986), brands have evolved and humanized, with branding strategies centring on Gestalt (Hart & Murphy, 1998), a person-centred set of human characteristics and traits (Wertheimer, 1938) in which people and things, mind and matter, are linked (Errichiello, 2021). Modern branding theorization places identity at the centre of the brand construct, in order to assemble and maintain a set of values that will distinguish and create meaning for a given set of consumers and customers (Aaker, 1996, Kapferer, 2004).

Connections are however more complex and multidimensional than the fulfilment of a functional necessity or catering to a utilitarian expectation. Considering brands as an extended product to which a name and a symbol are added (Hanby, 1999, Doyle, 1994) is an oversimplification (Doyle, 2001), that fails to address the complexity and sophistication of contemporary society and the role of brands for consumers (Hart & Murphy, 1998).

Consumption has become more elaborate, even purposeful, with brands turning into bastions that project cultural meaning (Davies and Elliot, 2006) of concepts materialized through brand elements such as names, logos, positioning and visual identity. Consumers who

identify with, follow, consume, and are loyal to a brand, share consciousness, rituals, traditions and even morality (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Regardless of adopting a conceptual (Kapferer, 2012, Franzen & Moriarty, 2009), or a utilitarian (Keller, 1993) approach, branding theories converge by acknowledging brands as living, dynamic and transformational entities; humanlike and rooted in metaphors, (Kapferer, 2012, Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, Torelli, 2018, Avis et al, 2012, Aaker 1997, Aaker, 1991, Kotler, 2004).

While we parse apart various approaches to branding, it is important to keep in mind that brands are still fundamentally developed and nurtured in support of a business strategy (Aaker, 2014), geared towards gains in productivity (Keller, 1996, Hart & Murphy, 1989), and increases in shareholder value (Doyle, 2001) by focusing on the creation of relations capable of leading consumers to engage in transactions (Lüdicke, 2006). Brands are therefore not only a cultural expression and a holistic concept, but a key marketing tool (Kotler, 2004).

2. Similarities and intersections between brands and organisms

Organisms are the key ontological unit of biology (Etxeberria, 2004, Korzeniewski, 2004), living individuals consisting of multiple biological systems, with different functions integrated autonomously, continually being influenced by their interactions with the environment (Dufner, 2013). Maturana & Varela (1980), define organisms as autopoietic machines, meaning that they are organized as a network of processes, entirely specified by themselves, with the objective of production or transformation through metabolization.

Franzen & Moriarty (2009) define a brand as being a dynamic system, whereby, similarly to an organism, various components interact and self-correct to stabilize the functioning of a system as a whole. In constant and multidimensional interactions within their environment, brands integrate and process inputs from a variety of internal and external stakeholders and networks. Balmer (2006) reinforces that once established, despite having been conceived within a given corporate environment, brands can have life and meaning of their own, becoming a separate, divisible, autopoietic, yet adaptable, organism. Internal and external inputs are processed with the objective of creating a harmonious output that reinforces, contemplates, and pursues organizational goals, turning brands into a fundamental element for businesses to survive and thrive (Hanby, 1999).

3. Brand genetics, brand genotype and brand phenotype, the model explained

Genes contain the information that will determine the structural and physiological properties of an organism (Griffiths et al., 2000). Branding traces commonalities, resemblance, and individual traits, outlining meaning and direction (de Chernatony, 2001, Balmer, 2001, Hanby, 1999). Brands will then be the compilation and projection of such characteristics (Kapferer, 2012), associated or applied to a product, service, or corporation. The Brand Genetics perspective is based on Brand Genotype and Brand Phenotype as structures to organize and facilitate the creation and management of the brand's essence, in alignment with execution and deployment of brand elements and marketing initiatives.

Genotype explains the genetic constitution of an organism. It is the result of hereditary information but also contemplates alleles, or variant forms of a gene. The brand genotype represents the intercellular metabolization of the brand's essence. In other words, it starts with the understanding of legacy, inheritance, and antecedents, then evolving to decisions and theorization on identity. This postulates a broader vision of the process of conceptualization. Under the traditional scope of branding strategies, identity is the monolithic core of all reflections, interpretations, and decisions that define a brand concept, (Aaker, 1996, Aaker & Joachimstaler, 2000, de Chernatony, 2001, Schroeder, & Salzer-Morling, 2005, Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Even established and renowned models such as the Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2012), Brand Equity Model (Aaker, 1996), Brand Concept Typologies (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009), the Corporate Identity Mix (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986) and the Brand Compass (Bridson & Evans, 2015), despite being structured, influential, and widely adopted, focus heavily on identity to define traits and characteristics of a brand.

Furthermore, theory shows that associations with geographical origin, persons, ideologies, or other exogenous elements, are not reflected nor contemplated in the conceptual development phase of branding strategies, but rather applied or incorporated to brand elements, (Aaker, 1991, Franzen & Moriarty, 2009, Kapferer, 2012, Keller 1993, Kotler, 2004, Torelli, 2018, Schroeder & Salzer-Morling, 2005).

We identify here more than a minor piece left out. Reliance on associations can enable brands to incorporate and leverage existing identities, values, and attributes ranging from people to locations, from ideologies to personalities, from emotions to value systems (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Such associations when meaningful and pertinent, can potentially accelerate awareness and engagement with consumers, thereby improving effectiveness of marketing investments. However, it also exposes brands to exogenous and uncontrollable negative factors,

including animosity from ethnocentrism, (Papadopoulos, 2011, Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009, Rojas-Mendez, 2013, Stokburger and Sauer, 2011, Usunier, 2006) or the effects of shifts in social and cultural paradigms taking place in a given society or social group. Moreover, growing numbers of corporate and product brands have undergone changes to their brand elements to avoid backlash from consumers and other stakeholders due to the controversial origins of associations that originally shaped the meaning of their brands.

Brands that are self-determined, non-reliant nor leveraged on existing references or associations, but rather grounded on meaningful and independent concepts, despite requiring more efforts and investments to become recognized and engage with consumers, (Perrey & Spillecke, 2013), potentially allow firms and marketers to mitigate the above-mentioned conflicts. Brands like Apple, Coca Cola and Zara, (Aaker, 2010, Cant, Machado and Seaborne, 2014), are just a few examples of powerful brands based on conceptual constructs that are unique and meaningful, as well as impersonal, stateless, and independent, (Schneiders, 2011; Lopez, and Fan, 2009). Hence, our model proposes under the structure of Brand Genotype, that a deep reflection on the brand's genetic program - genome - (Kapferer, 1992) should occur in the early stages of the conceptualization of a brand's essence, taking into consideration inheritance and antecedents as instrumental influencers.

Phenotype consists of the observable characteristics of an organism and is determined by the Genotype, (Griffiths et al, 2020). Brand Phenotype, subsequently, represents the inter-organism ecology, grouping all visible brand-element-related initiatives and outputs. These are - but not limited to - logos, names, visual identity, brand architecture, go-to-market associations, and advertising, which are key to creating cues to memories and delivering the conceptualized meaning to consumers (Brioschi, 2006). Brand elements are the delivery platform of the Brand Genotype and should be the clear representation the brand's inner associations. (Kapferer, 2012). More than related through structure or organizational functions, our vision is that Brand Genotype and Brand Phenotype need to be part of an integrated, and interrelated organism. Variants, adaptations, reactions to environmental change, revision of organizational goals, adjustments of identity, need to be reflected precisely and in real-time by brand elements, to ensure that meaning is consistent, and consumer engagement is perpetuated.

Sequential, and permeable to exogenous influence, this structure allows the convergence and integration of different streams and models of existing branding theory. Furthermore, it enhances visibility and transparency of the branding strategy within the firm, facilitating congruence of the visions and actions of brand stakeholders. Eventual needs to adjust to environmental change will be easier to identify and act on as the model, despite being

overarching and integrative also individualizes and modularizes tasks and activities of the whole branding process throughout the firm. The figures below offer a visual representation of the model and how it incorporates existing branding theory:

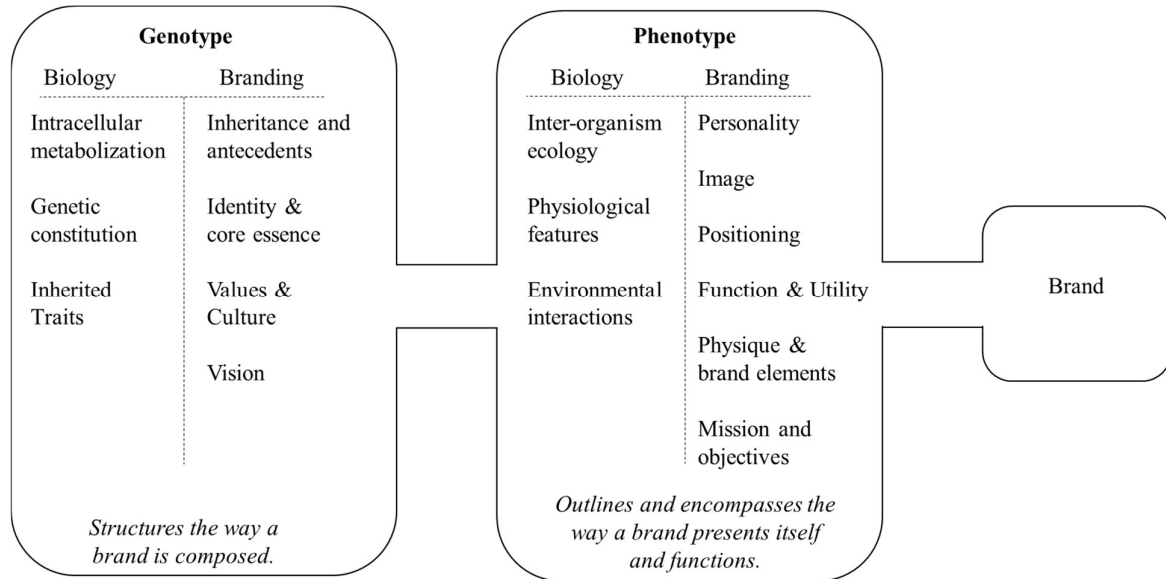


Figure 1. Genotype consists of the attributes, traits and inherited characteristics that will be expressed throughout the elements that compose the Phenotype.

	Perspectives and definitions	Brand Genetics correspondence		Perspectives and definitions	Brand Genetics correspondence
Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer)	Culture	Genotype	Brand Typologies (Franzen and Moriarty)	Core Concept	Genotype
	Physique	Phenotype		Identity	Genotype
	Relationship	Phenotype		Meaning	Genotype
	Self-Image	Phenotype		Segmentation, Positioning	Phenotype
	Reflection	Phenotype		Physique	Phenotype
Brand Equity Model (Keller)	Identity	Genotype	Relationships	Phenotype	
	Meaning	Genotype	Identity	Genotype	
	Relationships	Phenotype	Personality, Archetype	Phenotype	
Corporate Identity Mix (Birkigt and Stadler)	Response	Phenotype	Brand Compass (Bridson and Evans)	Brand image	Phenotype
	Ambition	Genotype		Profiling	Phenotype
	Identity	Genotype			
	Image	Phenotype			

Figure 2. While scholars develop unique, yet dissociated models focused on identity and execution of branding strategies, the genetics approach accommodates, integrates and mutually enriches existing theory.

4. Implications and conclusion

In a fluid and globalized world where consumers can easily emancipate themselves from a product or brand at the turn of a head, or at the flick of the wrist, (Holt, 2002, Ozanne and Murray, 1995, Lüdicke, 2006), it becomes decisive for companies to construct brands that are meaningful and sustain the ability to remain like this over time. The organism metaphor incorporates this dynamism. Brand Genetics and the Genotype-Phenotype dyad integrate existing branding theory, expand the basic concept of brand essence beyond identity (Ianenko, Stepanov and Mironova, 2020), and promote symbiosis between brand concepts and elements.

By comprehensively accommodating and creating correspondence among the various branding theories, the model facilitates articulation of future streams of research. For practitioners, the model facilitates integration of decision-making and roles of the various brand stakeholders favouring consistency of the branding strategy throughout the organization and with the environment. The topic, however, is rich and extensive, and the model is expandable. This short paper is the starting point based on which we are open to discuss and expand the model.

Finally, this study does not attempt to confront nor challenge well-established and consolidated understandings about branding, but rather seeks to present a perspective that, structured and outlined by the metaphor of brand as organism, aggregates definitions and concepts from different streams of branding theory. Due to its permeability with the environment as well as comprehensive and inclusive design around concepts and elements, we believe that the brand genetics framework will be incorporated and grow, facilitating consistency and convergence of future theoretical development.

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