What is a brand? A Perspective on Brand Meaning

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Abstract

Brand is a complex phenomenon. Though brands have been widely discussed and debated in academic world; a common understanding on brand could not be made among the brand experts. "Each expert comes up with his or her own definition of brand or nuances of definition" (Kapferer, 2004), which increases the complexity in brand interpretation as well as its management. This article aims to provide an overview of the existing academic literature defining the brand by analyzing and synthesizing more than three dozen definition of brand. The review of the existing literature was done to reduce the time and efforts of present and future researchers in this area by providing a quick snapshot of the existing definitions; pointing unanswered questions and various perspectives that constitutes brand meaning. At the end views and critical analysis have been presented reflecting authors understanding of the brands.

Keywords: Brand, identity, relationship value, signal, image.

1. Introduction

Brands are omnipresent; they penetrate almost every aspect of our life: economic, social, cultural, sporting, even religion .Due to its tendency to pervade everywhere they have come under growing criticism .In   post modern societies where individuals wants to give name to their consumption, brands can and should be analyzed through various perspectives: macroeconomics; microeconomics, sociology, anthropology, history, semiotics, philosophy and so on (Kapferer, 2004).

Though the concept of brand and branding has been debated recently as a major topic of study in marketing discipline (Moore, Karl and Reid, Susan, 2008) but   they are almost as old as civilization. Old civilization of Mesopotamia and Greek used marks and names to identify or indicate their offerings - predominantly of wines, ointments, pots or metals (Sarkar and Singh, 2005). The word brand is derived from Old Norse word brandr, which means "to burn" (an identifying mark burned on livestock with a heated iron) as brands were and still are the means by which owners of livestock mark their animals to identify them. Due to lack of a common understanding on brand complexity increases in brand interpretation as well as its management. Therefore, it becomes very necessary to understand the very nature of brand for creating, developing and protecting brands and business in general.

Brands are a direct consequence of the strategy of market segmentation and product differentiation. Branding means more than just giving name and signaling to the outside world that such a product or service has been stamped with the mark and imprint of an organization. Branding consists in transforming the product category; it requires a corporate long term involvement, a high level of resources and skills (Kapferer, 2004).

According to Moore et.al.(2008) a good portion of the research on brand is devoted to building better understanding in the area of brand choice(or preference),brand switching, brand loyalty and brand extensions. Interestingly, very few of the studies have taken the approach of asking the question: What is a brand? The issue becomes more complicated when we try to operationalize the brand: Measurement of brand strength. What indicators (factors) should we use to evaluate the brand value (equity) (Kapferer,

2004)?

In the current paper authors have looked at more than three dozen definition of brand by various experts. The definitions have been searched by using the E-Journals subscribed by the authors institutions and Google scholar using the key word brand, definition of brand and brand meaning. It would be very difficult to do the justice with all the individual definitions if analyzed separately. Hence, we have adopted a frame work by de Chernatony and Riley (1998) for categorizing the different definitions under 12 themes. We will start with a classification of themes; followed by a detailed discussion on these themes. Further we will look in to the possibilities of clubbing these twelve themes in to two broad perspectives i.e. a synthesis of twelve themes of brand definitions. Finally we will end by putting authors concluding remarks.

2. Thematic Classification

In order to do the systematic analysis of these definitions we have used a framework suggested by de Chernatony and Riley (1998), they classified definitions of brand in to 12 themes, namely; brand as a logo, brand as a legal instrument, brand as a company, brand as a shorthand, brand as a risk reducer, brand as a Identity system, brand as a image in consumer's mind, brand as value system, brand as a personality, brand as relationship, brand as adding value and brand as an evolving entity. Now we will discuss each theme in the framework with respect to definitions given by various experts.

2.1 Brand as a logo

American Marketing Association defines (1960) brand as "A name, term, design, symbol, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from competitors." In other words brands are a means to differentiate from the competitors (or future competitors).

The definition of brand as logo has Product and manufacturer orientation (e.g. Crainer, 1995, Arnold 1992).Consumers are not the passive recipient of brand marketing activity, and thus branding is not something done to consumers, but rather something they do things with (Meadows , 1983).Further, Brand is not limited to a   name, term, design, symbol, or a combination of them, it can be any other feature(Bennett, 1988;dibb et al. 1997). Others experts have add variants on the theme of the brand visual features as differentiating devices (e.g. Koch, 1994).Basically it Signals to the customer the source of product, and protects both the customer and the producers from competitors (Kotler et al, 1996). However, many researchers (e.g. Aaker, 1991; Kotler et al, 1996) strictly adhere to AMA's old definition. AMA (2007) redefined brand as "A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the seller's good or services as distinct from those of other sellers'". The legal term for brand is trade mark. A brand may identify one item, family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for a firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name. Despite this few issues still remains unclear with the definition brand as a logo. Can brand exist without customer? If the answer is No. then this definition doesn't capture the complete essence of brand. As new definition has still taken manufacturer perspective. The current definition takes logo and legal both perspectives simultaneously which questions our frame work.

2.2 Brand as a legal instrument

Brand is a legal statement of ownership (Crainer, 1985), also a mark to designate the ownership (Broadbent and cooper, 1987). Oxford dictionary (2009) has defined brand as "a particular sort or class of goods, as indicated by the trade mark on them". Now the question arises, what is the extent and basis of legal protection? How valuable are they? Evidently, Legislation offers protection up to some extent (Isaac, 2000)

however, look-alike own labels (Kapferer, 1995) are evidence of the limited scope of the legislation (c.f. de Chernatony and Riley (1998). The value of Trade mark depends upon the ability to protect them from infringement (Simonson and Itamar, 1994). This definition also takes manufacturer's perspective hence doesn't capture the complete essence. If a brand is not relevant to customers, legal protection doesn't make much sense at the same time legal protection may not help if the brand is not differentiated enough. It raises question about our framework as the definitions overlap (e.g. AMA, 2007; logo and legal).

2.3 Brand as a company

Corporate identity is vital as favorable corporate identity gives competitive advantage to organizations (van Reil and Balmer, 1997). By "borrowing" the equity accrued by the corporate name, product lines becomes extension of corporate identity, as Tata exemplifies with the product portfolio of Tata motors all the products carry the name Tata with it e.g. Tata nano. This issue has been emphasized by Simonin and Ruth (1998) in their article "Is a company known by the company it keeps?" Scholars have also argued "a company is known by its brands"(Varadaranjan et al., 2006). However not all companies are similar in their brand architecture and follow the branded house strategy , this definition seems more   suitable to branded house , However in case of house of brand or other brand architecture its relevance is questionable. It also takes manufacturers perspective, so this classification doesn't explain all the aspects of brand as envisaged by others.

2.4 Brand as shorthand

Brands are a short and simple way of expressing or referring to something (offering).According to Brown (1992) "a brand name is nothing more or less than sum of all the mental connections people have around it". Brand names provide memory shortcuts (Jacoby et al., 1977; Keller, 2003). Consumers under time constraint are more likely to buy brands with names they recognize (Chevan, 1992).Since an individual has limited memory capability, to overcome this people bundle small bits of information in to large chunk in their memory and use brand as means to recall these information chunks (Miller, 1956). However, brands are more than mental association; strong brands also have intense emotional association(Kapferer, 2004).but Do consumers always take decision by using brand as short cut? What are other constraints apart from time? Consumer behavior theory by Howard and Seth (1969) helps to understand these questions partially. However further research is needed to understand it more deeply. As the customers paying capacity and willingness along with social influence plays a vital role in determining their attitude towards brand. Social influence also involves the influence by both online and offline influence, which further increases the complexity of the concept. It's clear from the above discussion that this definition takes only customer's perspective.

2.5 Brand as a risk reducer

Consumers perceive risk when they buy a product or services (Bauer, 1960).An understanding of dimensions of perceived risk enables marketers to present their brands to instill consumer confidence (Assael, 1995).This theme is related to the concept of brand as a contract between the organization and consumers (Staveley, 1987; Kapferer, 1992). Again in order to understand this we have to know the dimensions of risk?   According to Kapferer (2004) perceived risk could be economic (linked to price); functional (linked to performance); psychological (linked to our self-concept); social (linked to our social image) and experiential. Thus it's imperative to understand what are the determinants of perceived risk (risk appetite, consumption situation or availability of options etc.)? In this context a few questions arise: are risk dimensions different for other stake holders (e.g. vendors)? How different they are with respect to various stakeholders? It would be very interesting to understand the impact of various risk dimensions under different situations for various stake holders? Also how much risk is reduced for manufacturer by investing in the creation and management of a brand? And therefore, answerer to the above may bring in more clarity to the above aspects narrated by the authors. It's apparent from the above discussion that this definition also

fails to explain the concept of brand for all stakeholders.

2.6 Brand as an Identity system

Kapferer (1992) has emphasized brand as an identity structure with six integrated facets of culture, personality, self-projection, physique, reflection, and relationship. Where physical facet represents product features, symbols & attributes; personality represents character & attitude; relationship represents beliefs & association; culture represents a set of values; reflection represents customer's view of the brand and self-Image represents internal mirror of customer as user of brand. Whilst some of these elements overlap with other definitions (e.g. personality and image), Kapferer's contribution is to stress the importance of the brand as more than the sum of parts. Others (Balmer, 1995; Aaker, 1996) and have also addressed the role of brand identity as a means to develop brand positioning. Developing an identity not only differentiate and protect against competitors, but also enables firm to gain economic advantage (Fomburn and Shanly, 1990). Strong brand identity adds in reinforcement of the meaning behind a brand for consumer; communicates the essence of brand to other stakeholders and encourages a more strategic approach (Diefenbach, 1992). Gardner and Levy's (1955) describes brand as "A brand name is more than the label employed to differentiate among the manufacturers of a product; It is a complex symbol that represents a variety of ideas and attributes. It tells the consumers many thing, not only by the way it sounds (and the literal meaning if it has one) but, more important, via the body of associations it has built up and acquired as a public object over a period of time." The net result is the public image, the character or the personality that may be more important for the overall status (and sales) of the brand than many technical fact about the product. Gardner and Levy (1955) defines image as the ideas, feelings, and attitudes that consumers have about brand. We see that among others only Gardner and Levy (1955) has balanced approach e.g. balancing the tradeoff between image and identity. Looking in to the above discussion one can conclude that   the weakness of brand as an identity system is the emphasis on desired positioning while less focus on perceived image. However, quantification of the role of image and identity is an issue need to be addressed. Also the tradeoff between them. This again brings us to the limitation of defining brand as an identity along with the issue of overlapping between the various definitions (e.g. Identity and image).

2.7 Brand as an image in consumer's mind

People don't react to reality but perceived reality (Boulding, 1956). Though Boulding (1956) doesn't explores reality in-depth his focus is on differing interpretations of the same stimulus. Further, Martineau (1959) has described brand as image in consumer's mind of functional and psychological attributes. Few other perspectives on meaning of brand defines brand image as everything people associate with a brand (Newman, 1957). Another way to define it that "brand is a consumers idea of a product "(Pitcher, 1985).Several authors adhere to the concept of brands as association in consumers' minds (e.g., Joyce, 1963: Arnold, 1992: Keller, 1993).However, Keeble (1991) puts it with more brevity as: "a brand becomes a brand as soon as it comes in contact with consumer". Now the question arises, what is the minimum level of customer contact to make sense of a brand? Also, what is the minimum level of ideas, feelings, and attitudes required to quantify them as image? What are the boundaries for brand? These questions provoke us to see the limitations of defining brand as an image in the consumer's mind. Moreover, the issue of overlapping of various perspectives as discussed above remains unresolved.

2.8 Brand as value system

Values are a subject of notable interest, as shown by reference to "core brand values" in the academic literature (e.g. Cook, 1995; Meenaghan, 1995) and the trade (e.g. Thrift, 1997; Beckett, 1996; Southgate, 1996).Consumers' decisions are influenced by personal and cultural values (Franzen and Moriarty,2008).Clark (1987) remarks   consumers find value in the brand, in its heritage, in their personal experience with it and   how it reflects what the individual stands for. Sheth et al. (1991) define brands as value systems. According to them brand choice decisions is influenced by five consumption values.

a) Functional values, the utility level of the product (or service) compared to its alternatives;

b) Social value, can be described as the willingness to please others, and social acceptance;

c) Emotional values are expressed as choices made based upon feelings and aesthetics;

d) Epistemic values can be used to describe the early adopters in the sense that it relates to novelty or knowledge-searching behavior (a person switching the regular cell phone to try new smart phone).

e) Conditional value refers to a set of circumstances depending on the situation (e.g., Christmas, a wedding, etc.). Socio-economical and physical aspects are included in this value. Under this perspective, individual brands are representation of unique clusters of values.

The above discussion suggests that the value system includes mainly five consumption values. There may be other important components of value system. Moreover value system should also talk from the perspective of other stake holders (i.e. vendors, employee etc.). We see that from this definition consumer's aspect is captured only. This definition also overlap with other definition for example, value system is an integral part of the personality as discussed in the subsequent section.

2.9 Brand as a personality

Differentiation based on functional capabilities are easy to emulate (Lambin, 1993), another way to differentiate is through focusing on psychological values, using creative communication and packaging. Considerable amount of research has defined brand as symbolic personality that user value beyond functional utility (Alt and Griggs, 1988; Blackston, 1992; Arnold, 1992; Goodyear, 1993). While selecting among competing brands, consumers assess the fit between the personalities (perceived) of the brands and the personality they wish to project (Zinkhan et al.,1996).Personality and values are inter-related (gutman,1982), with personality being a sub-set of value constellations. Brand personality is primarily the result of the firm's communication, whilst image is the way consumers perceive the brands personality (Plummer, 1985). Aaker (1996) describes brand personality as metaphor which "can help brand strategist by enriching their understanding of people's perceptions of and attitude toward the brand, contributing to a differentiating brand identity, getting the communication effort and creating brand equity". According to the American Marketing Association (AMA): "Brand personality is the psychological nature of a particular brand as intended by its sellers, though persons in the marketplace may see the brand otherwise (called brand image). These two perspectives compare to the personalities of individual humans: what we intend or desire, and what others see or believe." Brand identity frameworks (Kapferer, 1992, 2004) always quoted brand personality as a dimension or a facet of brand identity - namely those traits of human personality that can be attributed to the brand. Aaker (1997), in the process of building a scale for measurement purposes, defined brand personality not as a part of identity system but as the whole: "the set of human characteristics associated to a brand". Psychologists have worked over years to exclude intellectual abilities, gender, and social class from their personality definitions and scales (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003).However J. Aaker scale (1996) scale includes these traits in their measurement. We can see here different interpretations of the same term. Since there is difference in conceptualization of the concept of the personality it leads to the debate of operationalization issues like validity of brand personality scale developed by Aaker (1997) as pointed out by Kapferer and Azoulay (2003).

2.10 Brand as relationship

Personality is a prerequisite for a relationship between consumers and brands (Duboff, 1986; Woodward, 1991).A brand relationship is a logical extension of brand personality (Blackston, 1992) and if a brand can

be personified consumers would not just perceive them, but would also have relationship with them (Kapferer, 1992; Blackston, 1993). Brand is the expression of relationship between consumer and product. A successful brand can be characterized as having strong relationship between customer and the company (mckenna, 1991). According to de Chernatony and Macdonal, (1992), intangibles components have 80% impact on consumer relationship but only 20% of the cost. This indicates the importance of brand as relationship.

The above discussion raises several questions like issue relating to the level of association which can be termed as relationship. Since most of the Definitions of brand as image, personality and relationship talks about all the three components, hence defining brand as a relationship alone doesn't make much sense. This apparently indicates the limitations of brand definition as relationship.

2.11 Brand as adding value

Brand has also been conceptualized as a bundle of tangible and intangible features which increase the attractiveness of a product or service beyond its functional value (Farquhar, 1989; Park and Srinivasan, 1994).Levitt (1962); de Chernatony and McDonald (1992); Wolfe (1993) and Doyle (1994) defines brand as added value. Added value can be defined as nonfunctional benefits over and beyond products functional characteristics (Jones, 1986; King, 1973). Benefits can be functional, economic, social, psychological (New Man, 1957).King (1984) observed, products are made in factories and through the adding value process, consumers buy brands. The difference between a brand and a commodity can be summed up in the phrase "added values"(de Chernatony and McDonald, 1992).Wood(2000) argues that the brands are not the added value but added value agents. An analysis of the above points out this as the values added and perceived may vary with respect to individuals even within a specific segment. As a result more complexity arises in the operationalization of the concept. This definition also takes the customers' perspective.

2.11 Brand as an evolving entity

According to Good year (1996) brand evolves from "unbranded commodities", to references where name is used for identification, akin to AMA definition. Brands then develop in to a "personality", offering emotional appeals besides product benefits. At each stage, the emphasis of the brand gradually shifts from firms to consumers. At the fourth stage, the consumer "owns "the brand, which acquires "icon" connotation. A further progression is "brand as a company", focusing on a distinct set of corporate "brand values" that permeate organizations.

Strength of this definition is that it tries to answer the question how a product becomes a brand. Also includes Importance of external forces along with extended organization value chain. However, few issues remains unaddressed like, the possible indicators of change in state of a brand, stages may be mutually exclusive or not and under different contexts also the extent of overlap between the stages. Moreover, this conceptualization lacks Empirical validation.

3.0 Summary of Thematic classification framework along with authors [4]

Since we have analyzed all the themes separately a summary of these have been presented in table 1.Thematic classification is based on the framework of de Chernatony and Dall'olmo Riley(1998). Thematic classification along with representative authors has been provided in order to have a bird eye view of the work on each theme. Authors list should be treated as illustrative rather than exhaustive. These twelve themes can be also categorized in two broad categories, based on the dominant perspective (either

Consumer perspective or firm perspective) in their description as discussed above. However few themes capture both the perspectives. A synthesis of the above has been alternated below.

4.0 A synthesis of twelve themes of brand definitions

The twelve themes discussed so far, namely brand as a logo, brand as a legal instrument, brand as a company, brand as a shorthand, brand as a risk reducer, brand as a Identity system, brand as a image in consumer's mind, brand as value system, brand as a personality, brand as relationship, brand as adding value and brand as an evolving entity can be further categorized in two broad category, based on the dominant perspective (either Consumer perspective or firm perspective) in their description as discussed above. This will help the reader to appreciate the twelve themes in a more coherent manner.

As mentioned in the table 2 under firm's perspective captures the themes namely brand as a logo, brand as a legal instrument; brand as a company; brand as a identity system; brand as a image in consumer's mind; brand as value system; brand as a personality; brand as relationship; brand as adding value and brand as an evolving entity. And customers' perspective captures the themes brand as a shorthand; brand as a risk reducer; brand as an image in consumer's mind; brand as a personality; brand as relationship and brand as an evolving entity. We can clearly see that there are few themes which captures both of the above perspectives for example brand as a evolving entity. However, one should think about the brand not only from these two important stakeholders but from the other stakeholder's perspective as well. Moreover there may be overlap in the role of stakeholder for example a customer may also be shareholder or a vendor may also be customer, these examples indicate the limitation of our classification of the themes. However, above typology is just an attempt to reduce the complexity and make the things more comprehensive.

5. A concluding remark

Though brand existed since the beginning of formal trade; increase in brand focus started around mid 1980's. This could be attributed to spurt in merger and acquisition and very high valuation of brand (intangible asset) of the acquired brand by the acquiring companies. Though at first sight brand as a concept may seems simple but in reality it's very complex. From our discussion it is evident that there are overlaps among the themes (definitions like image, identity, value and personality). Also no single explanation is able to make complete sense of brand. However value, personality and image themes apparently seem more accepted among experts as shown in the summary of thematic classification table. Moreover, same terminologies have different interpretations among the expert as discussed in their respective themes for example the concept of personality and identity.

Seemingly Brand can't be defined in few lines. However an attempt has been made to put our understanding based on exiting review of definition which intends to capture the essence of the brand. Brands are conditional, intangible and legal assets for firm. They act like signal of perceived value to all the stakeholders. The perceived value (benefits) may range from functional to psychological associations. This signal is influenced by the interaction among the firm the various stakeholders (also between stakeholders) through the various point of contact and interactions. Hence in spite of understanding the brand as separate themes, we should look at it holistically as a value indicator for various stakeholders. The meaning of the value is subjective and personal; it is shaped by the interaction of company and stakeholders over a period of time and driven by the vision of the organization. The challenge for the organization lies in minimizing the gap between the brand identity and perception. The concept of brand is also dynamic and changes along with the change in social (cultural), economic, political, technological, legal system and across the geography. The brand is not always managed by the firm or customer alone it evolves over a period of time in a given context with the interaction of various stakeholders with the firm (offerings).Brand is not an end in itself it is the means to achieve certain objectives of various interest group and should always be

complimenting a value offering.

Note: A list of brand definitions by various experts can be obtained from the corresponding author; it could not be included in current paper due to space constraint.

Acknowledgement

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Table 1. Thematic classification along with representative authors

S.No.	Classification Themes	Authors
1	Brand as a logo	AMA,1960,2005,2007;Watkins, 1986; Aaker, 1991; Dibb et al, 1994; Kotler et al, 1996;McWilliam, 1993
2	Brand as a legal instrument	Crainer, 1995;Broadbent and cooper, 1987;kapferer, 1995;Lea and Murphy, 1996;McWilliam, 1993
3	Brand as a company	Bernard L. and Ruth, 1998;Varadaranjan et al., 2006
4	Brand as a shorthand	Jacoby et al., 1977;Chevan, 1992;to Brown ,1992
5	Brand as a risk reducer	Bauer, 1960;Assael, 1995;Staveley, 1987; Kaferer, 1995
6	Brand as a Identity system	Kapferer,1992;Balmer,1995;Aaker,1996;Olins,1989; Smythe et al, 1992; Bona, 1994; Bruke, 1994; Haggin,1994;Prinz,1994;Wilson,1994;Fomburn and Shanly, 199;Diefenbach, 1992;Gardner and Levy,1995
7	Brand as a image in consumer's mind	Boulding,1956;Martineau,1959;Newman,1957;Pitcher, 1985;Joyce, 1963: Arnold, 1992: Keller, 1993;Keeble,1991;Gardner and Levy,1995; Park et al., 1986
8	Brand as value system	Thrift, 1997;Beckett, 1996; Southgate, 1996;Cook, 1995; Meenaghan, 1995; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988; Engel et al., 1993;Clark ,1987;Sheth et al.,1991
9	Brand as a personality	Alt and Griggs, 1988; Blackston, 1992; Arnold, 1992; Goodyear, 1993; Zinkhan et al.,1996;Gutman,1982;Aaker ,1996;J. Aaker,1997
10	Brand as relationship	Duboff, 1986; Woodward,1991;Kapferer, 1992; Blackston,1993; Arnold,1992; McKenna, 1991
11	Brand as adding value	Jones, 1986; King, 1973;Hirschman, 1980;Durand,Hirschman and Holbrook,1982;Jones,1986
12	Brand as an evolving entity	Goodyear,1996

Table 2. Synthesis of Thematic twelve themes of brand definitions

Classification	Firm's perspective	Consumer's Perspective
Themes	Brand as a logo; Brand as a legal instrument; Brand as a company; Brand as a Identity system; Brand as a image in consumer's mind; Brand as value system; Brand as a personality; Brand as relationship; Brand as adding value; Brand as an evolving entity	Brand as a shorthand; Brand as a risk reducer; Brand as a image in consumer's mind; Brand as a personality; Brand as relationship; Brand as an evolving entity

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