

## **The Problems of Brand Definition**

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### **Abstract**

Whilst the word brand is used widely in marketing, it is a word which has multiple meanings, and can not be clearly defined. This lack of any clear definition presents significant problem in brand theory, creating confusions and significant problems in the way in which research is formulated and undertaken. The paper examines the use of term in the study of brand equity and brand personality, and highlights how lack of clear definition might cause disagreement and confusion in research.

Keywords: Brand Equity, Brand Personality, Brand Definition

## **The Problems of Brand Definition**

### **Introduction**

Alexander emphasised the importance of clear definition in marketing, and his call for clarity has been mirrored by other theorists (e.g. Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992). Among the concerns expressed by theorists have been the potential for misleading and imprecise language (Schutte 1969), and the possibility for the same constructs to be subject to varying definitions (Jacoby 1978; Kollat et al. 1970). Within these critiques it is possible to discern a concern that the lack of definitions within marketing are causing confusion and holding back the advancement of theory and research.

Whilst the problem of defining brand has been discussed (e.g. de Chernatony 2009; Stern 2006; Wood 2000), there has not as yet been a consideration of the problem in relation to outcomes in research. However, it is evident that the lack of clarity of brand definition does indeed cause confusions; in particular this can be seen in the examples of measures of brand personality and brand equity.

### **Origins of Brand and the Problem of Definition**

Brands have arguably existed for thousands of years (Moore and Reid 2008), but the modern idea of brands commences in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction of trade marks and attractive packaging (Fullerton 1988; McCrum 2000), which were developed as ‘a guarantee of authenticity’ (Feldwick 1991, p21). The origins of branding were reflected in the American Marketing Association (AMA) 1960 definition of the brand, which focused on tangible brand attributes as points of differentiation:

“A name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competitors” (Cited in Wood 2000 p664).

The problem with this early definition was that, whilst being relatively straightforward, it failed to account for the introduction of consideration of intangible brand attributes into brand theory (e.g. Gardner and Levy 1955). A more recent AMA definition (1995) adds ‘any other feature’ to the attributes that might differentiate, reflecting the developments in brand theory. The open-endedness of this definition reflects increasingly varied perspectives and definitions of brand, leading Stern (2006, p216) to discuss “semantic confusion” and the “instability and idiosyncratic usage” of the word brand. Likewise, de Chernatony (1989) discusses problems with the interpretation of the term brand, Wood (2000, p664) proposes that there are “diverse approaches to brand definition”, and Kapferer (2004, p9) suggests that that each “expert comes up with his or her own definition, or nuance to the definition.”

One interesting approach to brand definition is illustrated by de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998), who consider brands as constituted by their components. However, even this approach presents the problem of what components might be included. For example de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley do not include brand equity amongst the components, and the evolution of brand theory continues to add to potential brand components (e.g. brands as cultural artefacts, Schroeder 2009). In addition to questions of which components might be included, a further problem arises in how the components might be defined and delineated. As just one example, the definition of brand image is the subject of debate (Stern et al. 2001),

including how it might be delineated from other brand components (Patterson 1999). As a result, whilst definition by the constituent parts appears to be a solution to brand definition, the approach simply raises a new set of problems.

### **Brand Equity**

Brand equity provides a case study of how the variable and nuanced brand definitions are enacted in research. For example, Yoo and Donthu (2001) review a long list of 'definitions and forms' of brand equity that includes examples such as attitudinal dispositions, added value, brand awareness and brand assets. In such a list it is possible to perceive that it reflects different implicit understandings of brand, for example a consumer centric view against a firm centric view, all of which reflect in different brand equity measures.

An illustration of the problem can be found in Wood's (2000) discussion of brand definition in relation to brand equity. As part of the review, Wood identifies a divide between consumer and firm oriented brand definitions before later presenting an 'integrated' definition of brand as "a mechanism for achieving competitive advantage for firms, through differentiation" (p677). In doing so, Wood appears to be adopting a firm oriented definition, and this is perhaps a reflection of the fact that her main interest is definition of brand in relation to brand equity.

Feldwick (2002), appears to have grasped the underlying problem. Having detailed a scholarly brand definition, he identifies three perspectives on brand equity in theory and research; the total value of a brand as a separable asset, the strength of consumer attachment to the brand, and a description of the association and beliefs about a brand held by consumers (p37). He quite reasonably identifies that these are three different concepts, and later proposes that 'we might find the whole area [brand equity research] easier to understand if people stopped using those words [brand equity] altogether' (p57).

The interesting point in Feldwick's argument is that it is possible to discern that, in his rejection of brand equity as a singular concept, he is actually identifying the problem of brand definition. Of particular note is that he earlier described a brand as "simply a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer" (p4) and that consumers have "hijacked brands for their own purposes" (p21). In describing brands in this way, it appears that he is implying that the brand asset resides with the consumer rather than the firm. The implication of this perspective is that it is not clear how a brand might be a separable asset, as the asset is 'held' by the consumer. Such a perspective on brand quite reasonably points towards a perspective in which the utility of the term 'brand equity' might be questioned.

Likewise, the consideration of brand definition by Ind (2004) presents similar challenges for the concept of brand equity. Ind proposes that a brand is a unique mental construct in the mind of the stakeholders, in which they form their own understanding of the brand based upon their own individual perspective, experiences and culture in relation to their individual position (relative to the brand). For the antecedents of this perspective, Ind's sees the brand as being the sum of the activity of all aspects of an organisation, and also of competitors. With the brand individually constructed and presumably 'held' in the mind of each stakeholder, the definition of brand becomes a moving target, for example determined by the culture of the individual (see Goodyear 1996 for a similar point of view). If Ind's perspective on brand is accepted, then valuation of the brand as a separable asset becomes very questionable, as it is

not clear how such an individually held and constructed brand might be meaningfully measured.

The problem of a brand as a separable asset is made even more explicit by Stagliano and O'Malley (2002). They question whether it would be possible to sell a brand, such as McDonald's, without selling the entire company, including the transfer of people and processes. In their view the brand and the organisation that enacts the brand become inseparable. Their perspective is supported by Deighton's (2002) review of the sale of the Snapple brand to Quaker, which saw a brand purchased for \$1.7 billion sold a few years later for just \$300 million. Deighton identifies the cause for the loss of value as arising from the Quaker enactment of the brand, which saw the abandonment of the quirky and risky approach taken by the original brand owners. In essence, the enactment of the brand by the original owners was the brand, and the brand could not therefore be transferred as a stand alone separable asset; the brand could not be sold without the Snapple management, process and ethos.

Returning to Yoo and Donthu's list of 'definitions and forms', it is apparent that their list is a proxy argument about what a brand might be. Even when examining a limited number of perspectives on brand definition in relation to brand equity, it seems that there are incompatible views of what brand equity might be, and whether brand equity might even be a valid concept. From a managerial perspective, it appears to be necessary to define a brand as something that might have a separable value in order to justify investment in branding. However, such a perspective bumps into the problem that, according to some definitions of brand, such a separation becomes impossible. The fundamental problem is the question of what exactly a brand might be. Can a brand be an asset that can be managed, owned and isolated within a firm, is it the enactment of the entire firm, or is it 'owned' as a construct in the mind of all stakeholders?

Whilst these questions are presented as broad brush characterisations, they nevertheless express the underlying assumptions that shape brand equity research, and even whether brand equity might be a valid concept. Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that Feldwick rejected the term 'brand equity', as the term can not encompass the differing underlying definitions of a brand.

### **Brand Personality**

The concept of brand personality offers a different perspective on the problems of brand definition, and highlights the lack of concept boundaries (see Morse et al. 1996 for a discussion of the importance of concept boundaries). The majority of recent brand personality research and theory is rooted in Aaker's (1997) seminal paper, which saw the development of a brand personality five factor model (BPFM) that mirrored human personality research methods (e.g. see McCrae and Costa 2003). The purpose of the model was to create a *generalised* scale for the measurement of brand personality applicable to the measurement of all brands. To this end, Aaker used a wide range of brand categories to achieve a balance between symbolic and utilitarian brands.

Since the BPFM was published, the concept of 'personality' research has been extended into many new research areas including store/retail personality (e.g. Lévesque and d'Astous 2003), corporate personality (e.g. Rekom et al. 2006), destination personality, (e.g. Ekinici and Hosany 2006; 2006), country personality (e.g. Pitt et al. 2007), charity personality (e.g.

Sargeant et al. 2008), product personality (e.g. Govers and Mugge 2004) and even formula one racing team personality (Donahay and Rosenberger 2007). Within these many 'personality' conceptualisations is the problem of what might be encompassed in the definition of brand.

For example, Aaker did not include destinations or charities in the development of the BPFM, but other theorists include these as brands (e.g. Laidler-Kylander et al. 2007; Morgan et al. 2002; Ritchie et al. 1999; Van Ham 2001). By contrast, Aaker did include brands which are encompassed in other 'personality' conceptualisations; the corporate brands of Mercedes and McDonald's (corporate personality), Kmart (store/retail/corporate personality), and Cheerios (product personality). It might be argued that, within the inclusions and exclusions of categories, Aaker is implicitly identifying her understanding of the boundaries of brand, and that these differ from other 'personality' researchers. As such, researchers of other variants of 'personality' have sought to justify why their concepts are different from brand personality.

Keller and Richey (2006) propose that corporate brand personality is distinct from a product brand personality, suggesting that it "can encompass a much wider range of associations" (p75). The problems that arise in such distinctions are illustrated by an example provided to justify their differentiation. They use the example of P&G and their Pringles product brand, suggesting that the two brands are separate entities. However, they were presumably unaware that in Asian markets, P&G pursues an endorser strategy (Berens et al. 2005), in which P&G offers a 'parental seal of approval' to their brands (Temporal 1999, p112). In this situation, it is difficult to see how the associations between the parent and the product brand might be separated, suggesting that any delineation of brand and corporate brand personality becomes dependent upon considerations such as the brand portfolio strategy (Aaker 2004).

In another case, Rekom *et al's* (2006) research seeks to identify the corporate personality of McDonald's, arguably a monolithic brand (Berens et al. 2005). Their methodology involved measuring consumer perceptions of McDonald's, a method with the same underlying purpose as the BPFM. The obvious problem presented by this research is that McDonald's might be considered to be a brand and was also utilised as a 'brand' in the formulation of the BPFM, indicating that Aaker viewed McDonald's as a brand. As such, the only reasonable explanation for the development of 'corporate personality' scale for the research must be that Rekom *et al* have an underlying disagreement with Aaker about what a brand might be.

In a similar argument to corporate personality, Govers and Schoormans (2005) try to delineate 'product variant' personality from brand personality, suggesting they are different conceptualisations. However, returning to the McDonald's example, it would be difficult to argue that a 'Big Mac' served in McDonald's packaging in a McDonald's restaurant might see any meaningful separation between product variant and brand personality, or even between product and corporate personality. The 'Big Mac' and 'McDonald's' are effectively fused together. The example of McDonald's illustrates the difficulty in the idea that a product variant might be seen as separate from the brand, and it is not clear where any delineation might start and end between a McDonald's product, brand and corporate personality.

The degree of the underlying problem is highlighted even more clearly in the study of store/retail personality. Lévesque and d'Astous (2003) consider the relationship between store personality and brand personality and suggest that, whilst there are similarities, there are also differences between the two concepts. As such, whilst utilising the BPFM as a

foundation they developed scales specifically adapted to measurement of store personality. By contrast, Zentes *et al* (2008), used the original BPFM to measure store personality, arguing that development of a specific scale for retail would suggest that the same consideration might be needed for other brand categories, such as cars. Implicit in this disagreement on how to measure store 'personality' is the issue of the contentious nature of the relationship between brands and retail, in which some theorists seek to delineate the two concepts (e.g. see Dennis *et al.* 2002).

In all of these examples it is apparent that there are different understandings of the boundaries of brand to those implied by Aaker, and this difference in understanding of what a brand might be has determined research agendas. It could be argued that each of the personality measures is simply looking at a narrow aspect of brand, were it not for the inclusion of corporate brands, product variant brands, and store brands in the BPFM development. Furthermore, despite the extension of the marketing concept to encompass non-commercial organisations (Kotler and Levy 1969), there are still question marks over whether organisations such as charities are equivalent or related directly to commercial brands. If they are indeed brands, it is not clear why Aaker's generalised BPFM need be adapted or new measures introduced.

### Conclusion

In the study of brand equity and brand personality, there are considerable confusions in what is actually being measured in research. The nature of the underlying problem is illustrated in the famous fable in which wise blind men are asked to describe an elephant by touch (Gabriel 2004). As they are unaware that they are touching an elephant, they describe the trunk and tail as snakes. In other words it is necessary to agree on what is being measured before the attributes can be identified and measured. In this brief review it is apparent that the definition of brand is problematic, and Schultz and Schultz (2004) summarise the problem of brand definition as follows:

It's like Humpty Dumpty: "It means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less." It's this lack of agreement that causes much of the confusion, lost motion, wasted efforts, and misplaced investments in brands and branding today. (p10)

Within the many measures of brand equity and 'personality' it is possible to discern that the various measures are actually a proxy for an argument over brand definition. It is apparent that considerable efforts are being expended in justification of ever more brand measures, when the underlying justification is not the validity of the individual measures, but the definition of brand itself. In an ideal situation, the definition of brand would be clarified, including setting of boundaries around the concept but, as long as theorists continue to define brand from their own theoretical perspective (see Brodie and de Chernatony 2009), there will be no easy resolution to these problems.

It appears that the concerns expressed by Alexander (1937) are still applicable today. Whilst it might be argued that the variance in brand definition reflects the development of knowledge about brands, the resulting confusions suggest that the word 'brand' needs a thorough review. In other words, like the elephant and blind wise men, theorists might be advised to determine what is actually being measured before commencing measurement. At the very least it may be useful for researchers to declare their own brand definition, such that the underlying causes of disagreements become explicit.

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