Implications of Habermas's "theory of communicative action" for corporate brand management

Joachim Kernstock

*Institute of Marketing and Retailing, University of St Gallen,
St Gallen, Switzerland, and*

Tim Oliver Brexendorf

Center for Customer Insight, University of St Gallen, St Gallen, Switzerland

Abstract

Purpose – The authors propose applying Habermas's "theory of communicative action" (TCA) to discuss the benefits of incorporating the concept of interaction in the field of corporate brand management. The purpose of this paper is to gain suggestions for interactions derived from Jürgen Habermas's social theory.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper refers to Habermas's TCA in terms of its implication for stakeholder interactions within corporate brand management. Based on review of the sociological literature of Habermas's TCA, this approach offers a more detailed picture of corporate brand management. Bodies of literature are selected, examined and the TCA has been connected to corporate brand management to provide a research background and a managerially useful insight of human interactions.

Findings – The social theory of the German social-philosopher Jürgen Habermas provides certain starting points for classifying interactions. The paper introduces Habermas's proposed forms of human action. Furthermore, it relates to the cognitive, moral-expressive and aesthetic-expressive knowledge interest areas, Habermas's validity claims of communicative actions as well as context and world relations.

Research limitations/implications – The study of Habermas's TCA considers one stream in sociological theory. Other theories may provide further insights for corporate brand management.

Practical implications – The paper shows managerially useful implications for managing stakeholder interactions within corporate brand management. Management can use the developed patterns of thought as a starting point for managing interactions with stakeholders.

Originality/value – The paper introduces Habermas's TCA within the field of corporate brand management. Moreover, it facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of implications for managing interactions within the field of corporate brand management.

Keywords Brand management, Corporate brands, Stakeholder analysis, Strategic marketing, Social theories

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

With the "revealing of the corporation" and the rise of corporate marketing the concept of corporate brand management shifts from the more intrapersonal based view of brand management towards a more interpersonal approach for understanding the brand and its role for interaction. This change of focus has both theoretical and practical implications on brand management. It requires a deeper understanding of personal interaction where a corporate brand develops its meaning and its performance

by influencing the entire corporate sphere: customers, employees, owners and the public.

This paper focuses on the discussion of a theoretical background to deliver a better understanding of the role of a corporate brand within interpersonal action. The contribution of this paper is to broaden and enrich the theory of corporate brand management, drawing on perspectives from Habermas's "theory of communicative action" (TCA). The paper makes a contribution to corporate brand management by giving a structured managerial framework for managing the brand through interactions with the stakeholders of the brand relating to Habermas's levels of action. Through this application of sociological theory, we are attempting to strengthen current concepts of corporate brand management.

As a starting point, we introduce the concept of corporate brand management and stakeholder management to refer to the need of a theory reflecting the interactions between the stakeholders of the corporate brand. Further on we explain Habermas's (1984, 1987) TCA and focus on its relevance for corporate brand management. This will be followed by an analysis of corporate brand management in light of Habermas's social theory. An outline of the main elements of Habermas's theory will consequently relate sociological theory to corporate brand management. This will explain the impact of his theory on stakeholder interactions with the corporate brand. Subsequently, we shall review the basic constructs of the TCA, and then apply them within the context of corporate brand management. Overall, we intend to establish implications for corporate brand management based on an in-depth analysis of Habermas's TCA. Furthermore, first practical implications are given based on this theoretical view on corporate marketing and corporate brand management.

The concept of corporate brand management within corporate marketing
Webster (1992) declares that marketing ought to broaden its scope from a focus on products to include an emphasis on people and organisations. He stressed the importance of marketing on a corporate-level. Corporate-level marketing is distinguished from traditional marketing concepts by a multidisciplinary scope and having multiple exchange relationships with different stakeholder groups (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Corporate-level marketing involves different concepts such as corporate identity, corporate reputation, corporate communications and corporate brand management (Balmer, 2001, 2009; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Karaosmanoglu and Melewar, 2006). Each of these concepts have their own intellectual roots and practice-based adherents (Knox and Bickerton, 2003; Balmer, 2006, 2009; Mukherjee and He, 2008).

Although the concept of corporate brand management is subsumed under the corporate-level marketing paradigm, it could be distinct from related concepts of corporate identity, corporate reputation, corporate communication and corporate reputation. Corporate brand management can be defined as the process of creating and maintaining a favourable reputation of the company and its constituent elements by sending signals to stakeholders using the corporate brand which is based on the identity of the firm (Maathuis, 1999, p. 5). Bickerton (2000) suggests that the concept of corporate brand management unites the concept of brand management with the concept of corporate identity. Thus, an increasing linkage between corporate identity (corporate-level) and brand management (SBU-level) leads to an integrated approach. Whilst brand management originates from a marketing perspective with the aim of

attracting customers, many corporations divide branding activities into the categories of product, service and corporate, in order to address a wider range of stakeholders (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Knox and Bickerton, 2003; Brown *et al.*, 2006). The integration of the two perspectives combines the "inside out" organisational focus with the "outside in" marketing focus (Knox and Bickerton, 2003). An integrated conceptualisation incorporates the internal building and the development of values as well as the external expression through the brand (Kiriakidou and Millward, 2000). The basic concern of an integrated corporate brand management is to align brand activities with a more coherent strategic framework. As such, the corporate brand becomes an expression of the corporate strategic intent (Urde, 1999, 2009; Knox and Bickerton, 2003).

The concept of the corporate brand management embodies the communication of values and identity in a strategic and coherent way, internal and external, through corporate as well as marketing communication (Balmer, 2001; Knox and Bickerton, 2003; Mukherjee and Balmer, 2008). As such, the stakeholder perception of a corporate brand is formed by communication and interaction with the corporation (Keller, 2000; Davies and Chun, 2002; Schultz *et al.*, 2005; Brexendorf and Kernstock, 2007). The corporate brand embodies the entire firm and emerges from the various personal attitudes and connotations surrounding it (Keller and Aaker, 1998). Within corporate marketing, the boundaries between internal and external stakeholders are ambiguous. Organisation members who are also employees have multiple roles, and are both "insider" and "outsider" to the corporation (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Moreover, managing the moment of truth between employees and other stakeholder groups is of relevance, so that multiple interfaces have to be managed.

The concept of stakeholder management within strategic management
Connectivity to corporate-level marketing comes along with the discussion of stakeholder management within strategic management. Whereas strategic management and stakeholder management take in a top down-perspective on corporate activities, corporate-level marketing culminates from the bottom-up perspective related to different marketing, brand and communication concepts.

In strategic management, Freeman (1984) proposed that systematic attention to stakeholder interest is critical for the success of the corporation. His definition of a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" emphasises the managerial focus on interaction between the corporation and its stakeholders.

The stakeholder notion is deceptively simple: Donaldson and Preston (1995) introduced a taxonomy of a stakeholder theory in which they classify stakeholder types as normative, instrumental and descriptive/empirical. Of these, they propose that the normative type, which concerns how managers should deal with corporate stakeholders, is the most critical category.

Need for a theoretical foundation
Certain authors have identified the need for a theoretical background for corporate brand management (Mukherjee and Balmer, 2008). As such, there is a requirement for a broader view, integrating wider theoretical foundations (Balmer, 1998, 2009; Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Sociological theory can facilitate mature corporate brand

management through its contribution of new perspectives to the practice (Hulberg, 2006). In the field of consumer research, the contemporary social theories and philosophies of Foucault, Giddens, Goffman, Habermas, Parsons and Bourdieu are widely used to ground observation, understanding and theoretical framing of complex social phenomena (Cherrier and Murray, 2004).

In addition to the growing importance of a theoretical foundation, an approach for structuring and shaping stakeholder interactions is necessary. In the past, there has been no theoretical concept of how to manage interactions within corporate brand management. Individual theoretical disciplines have been restricted by a narrow paradigm within the field. Organisational studies focus on the interaction between corporation, supervisor and employee. Strategic management spotlights on the stakeholder as a whole; marketing studies on the customer and sales and service management on the interaction between employee and customer. From this we can see that an interdisciplinary approach has been absent so far. The introduction of one is a timely intervention in the field.

At this point, the theory of stakeholder management and corporate marketing are well elaborated regarding classification and structure. Nevertheless, the theory lacks depth when it comes to the interaction between stakeholders and corporation. The application of Habermas's TCA can, however, offers deeper theoretical insights, particularly with regard to the interaction between the corporate brand and the stakeholders.

Contribution of Habermas' TCA to corporate brand management

Habermas's TCA gives insights into identity-based building and communication of the corporate brand. Since its publication in 1981, Habermas's TCA has been widely acclaimed for its contribution to philosophy and social theory. Habermas (2000) bases his theory of society on the foundations of communicative rationality. Prior interdisciplinary studies have drawn on Habermas's TCA in elucidating marketing techniques (van Toledo, 1986); ideal speech in communication (Jacobson and Storey, 2004) and business management (Herda and Messerschmitt, 1991). The main contribution of Habermas's TCA, however, is its capacity for facilitating an understanding of social infrastructures by analysing the rationality of human interaction.

From a communications perspective, a central concern of Habermas is for the reconstruction of universal conditions of understanding within the human communication process (Burkhart, 2007). Habermas's (1984, 1987) TCA understands communication as a multi-dimensional process in which each participant needs to accept particular premises in order to achieve mutual understanding with other subjects.

Against this background, the TCA offers key rationalisations for the integration of sociological, organisational and marketing thought reflecting interactions within corporate brand management. In the last decade, brand research neglected the interaction between the internal and external domains of a brand. In current research, the interaction between internal and external environment of the brand gains more attention (Gotsi and Wilson, 2001; Schultz et al., 2005). The understanding of the corporate brand's role within these processes of interaction becomes relevant for analysing and understanding:

- customer-employee interaction; and
- customer-customer interaction.

Both types of interaction are relevant for creating and managing the corporate brand. There are two effects to take into account here. First, the influence of the corporate

brand on the interaction process (either "customer-employee" or "customer-customer" interaction). Second, the interaction process between the corporate brand and the customer, the employee or any other stakeholder individually.

These two processes can be broadly understood by exploring the three levels of discourse which constitute the main body of Habermas's TCA. It is within this discourse that the analysis and understanding of interaction takes place. This discourse can be considered as being relevant for both human interaction and the interaction with the corporate brand (Table I).

The TCA provides explorative potential for corporate-level marketing issues, understanding brand-influenced interaction, society and brand community-building and contribution to external and internal brand-building processes.

Corporate brands between lifeworld and system

At the core of Habermas's theory are two concepts: lifeworld (Lebenswelt) and system (Habermas, 1984). The first is based on Husserl's lifeworld theory (Husserl, 1913; McIntosh, 1997, p. 104). Historically, the term "lifeworld" has signified the pattern of societal action. Effectivity and efficiency are required to control complexities within society. From an institutional perspective, this results in the emergence of sub-systems, such as economy and administration. These sub-systems are coordinated through money (economy) and power (administration) (van Toledo, 1986). "Lifeworld" is related to symbolic reproduction, whereas "system" is directed towards material reproduction. Language belongs to the lifeworld, whereas reproduction of material goods is located in the system domain (McIntosh, 1997). Both sub-systems stand in an exactly defined mutual relationship. The coordination of action in the lifeworld is based on mutual consensus between individuals.

Corporate brands are related to both lifeworld and system. Brands contribute to people in social communities and systems (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995).

The lifeworld consists of three structural components: culture, social institutions and personal identities. As such, lifeworld and communicative action interfere with each other. Corporate brands address the social interaction of human beings and groups of human beings (think stakeholders). Corporate brands can be seen as artefacts with personality (Aaker, 1997) and multiple identities (Balmer and Greyser, 2002). They are interacting with human actors and groups of human actors (i.e. stakeholders). Understanding this

Theoretical background	Psychological view	Sociological view
Focus of interest	Intrapersonal	Interpersonal
Viewpoint	Individual view	System, network, society view
Subject(s) of interest	Person itself	Social groups, organisations, society
Research objective	Cognition, behaviour	Interaction
Fundamental corporate brand related paradigm	Rational and emotional orientation	Cognitive-instrumental Norm-conformative Aesthetic-hedonistic discourses
Relationship	Customer-brand relationship	Person (s)/group-brand relationship

Table I.
Theoretical viewpoints of corporate brand management

process of interaction broadens the understanding of corporate brand development processes and management issues which have to be taken into account.

In analysing the corporate brand processes of interaction, the three levels of discourse become the critical body element. Habermas distinguishes between the:

(1) cognitive-instrumental;

(2) norm-conformative; and

(3) aesthetic-hedonistic discourses in communication.

In a communicative action, these three domains are always equally at stake. A corporate brand which will be successfully integrated in social interaction should address all three levels of discourse. Here, we place the emphasis on a paradigm shift in the approach to the theory of brand management in general. We try to refocus the well-adapted, psychologically driven approach to distinguish between rational and emotional attitudes of a brand. This leads to a three-level sociological approach, addressing the brand's capabilities within the levels of cognitive-instrumental, norm-conformative and aesthetic-hedonistic discourses.

Both perspectives, the psychological and the sociological approach, should be taken into account when analysing research issues pertaining to the corporate brand and also adapting it to managerial implications (Table I).

Habermas's TCA

For the TCA, Habermas bases his argument on the assumption of action of each partner and takes in a microperspective of actions. Habermas assumes that every action of a subject is intended. Max Weber introduced the "meaning" in the concept of action theory and distinguished actions from human behaviour: "Human behavior – be it external or internal, activity, omission or acquiescence – will be called "action" if and insofar as the actor attaches a subjective meaning to it" (Habermas, 1984, p. 279). The coordination of action is enabled through a solid network of interaction (Habermas, 1984, p. 571).

Habermas's (1984, 1987) TCA represents a paradigm shift from a Cartesian subject/object dualism to an intersubjective model of interaction between humans (Kubecki, 1994, pp. 464-5). This shift of paradigm to an intersubjective model results in a distinction between two forms of action: instrumental action and communicative action. All human actions however consist of both communicative and instrumental action (Habermas, 1984, 1987; Table II).

Habermas's theory of coordinated action

Habermas (1984, p. 285) differentiates between the action situation and the orientation of action. The orientation of action is broken down into oriented towards success and

Action situation	Oriented to success	Action orientation Oriented to reaching understanding
Nonsocial	Instrumental action	–
Social	Strategic action	Communicative action

Source: Habermas (1984, p. 285)

oriented towards reaching understanding (Habermas, 1984, p. 285). Reaching understanding and persuasion are two mechanisms for coordinating action. Reaching understanding is inherent in speech. Reaching understanding and speech are not related to each other as means to end, but reciprocally interpret one another (Habermas, 1984, p. 287). In his action, the actor:

> […] is primarily oriented to attaining the end […] that he selects means that seem to him appropriate in the given situation, and that he calculates other foreseeable consequences of action as secondary conditions of success (Habermas, 1984, p. 285).

Instrumental action

Habermas (1984, p. 285) talks about instrumental action as a nonsocial action oriented towards success or control. Instrumental action is therefore presupposed by communicative action. Instrumental acts can only be implemented by means of a common understanding of language and language-based norms ("*Verstehen*"). The domination of instrumental action over communicative action is termed strategic action. In strategic action the values of success and control eclipse or dominate the values of understanding. Strategic actions can be regarded as substitutions for communicative actions.

Communicative action

Habermas (1984, pp. 285-6) understands communicative action "whenever the action of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding". Participants need to reach consensus before control- or success-oriented decisions can be implemented. There are two types of exchange relationships that can exist between persons or social entities: economic and social (Blau, 1964).

Economic exchange is contractual in nature, whereas social exchange is based on trust, mutual understanding and a sense of common purpose. Habermas (1984, p. 86) defines communicative action as "the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations". Habermas (2000, p. 12) pronounces that communicative action is a "symbolically mediated interaction". Communication from this point of view is a multi-dimensional process in which each participant needs to accept certain demands in order to achieve mutual understanding among the participants. In the TCA, the other agents are "co-subjects" who communicate about common interpretation. Also corporate brands can be considered as "co-subjects". As such, communicative action is understanding- and other-oriented; its output is determined by the better argument (Toulmin, 1958). We draw on Habermas's TCA to argue for the need of communication partners to develop shared understanding in their interaction. Against this background, open and honest persuasion is not undesirable (Jacobson and Storey, 2004).

Social action

A social action can be built only on a consensus-oriented communicative action. Habermas (1984, p. 287) views language as human means of understanding. In this context, Habermas emphasises the importance of speech in order to reach mutual understanding. Through speech, individuals can realise a common definition of reality (situation of action). The consensus between persons is not sufficiently explained as the result of their communicative actions.

Furthermore, it is dependent on the availability of structural resources which build, together with communicative action, the symbolic substance of the lifeworld. The lifeworld consists of three structural components: culture, social institutions and personal identities. As such, lifeworld and communicative action are dependent on each other. Social actions are distinguished according to two action orientations, through interest positions and normative agreement (Habermas, 1984).

Validity claims of communicative action

Communicative action is applied to a background and three validity claims. These claims are inherent in all communicative action. The three validity claims are truth, conduct or rightness and sincerity or authenticity. In addition, there is a background validity claim of comprehensibility, which is necessary before the three validity claims can be applied.

The following questions should be answered to focus communication in a target-oriented approach:

- Is the speech act understandable? (comprehensibility)

- Is the content objective? (truth)

- Are the speakers' intentions socially acceptable? (conduct or rightness)

- Do speakers express what they truly believe? (sincerity or authenticity)

Each of the validity claims correspond to one of three knowledge interests or epistomological approaches. Furthermore, each validity claim is associated with a context or world in which communicative action occurs. The subjective world is considered as authenticity, the intersubjective world as conduct and the objective world as truth.

Communicative types of action within corporate brand management

Communicative types of action are conversation, normatively regulated action and dramaturgical action. All these types are oriented towards reaching understanding through the interaction (Habermas, 1984). The objective of applying the three types of action to corporate brand management is to gain a deeper understanding of the role of the corporate brand in stakeholder communication. Each type of action elaborates the level of interaction a corporate brand can deploy in stakeholder communication.

Corporate brands and conversation

Conversation is a cognitive-instrumental relation. Social actions are a purposive-rationale type (Habermas, 1984). The basic attitude is objectivating. Conversation may be predominantly interpersonal communication with a specific purpose. In marketing, sales and service, encounters have the purpose of selling products or serving the customer. Conversation in standardised service or sales encounters is purpose- and goal-oriented (Gutek *et al.*, 2000).

Stakeholders of the corporate brand may have different points of contact with the brand. Corporations need to project consistent images to their internal and external stakeholders, because the image external stakeholder groups have of the corporation is influenced both by the images that employees project and by external interpersonal communication, product and media communication (Gotsi and Wilson, 2001).

Employees of the corporation play an important role in living and communicating the corporate brand (Brexendorf and Kernstock, 2007). If employees may dissociate themselves from corporate communication campaigns, conversation leads to cognitive dissonance and to distorted communication about the brand (van Rekom, 1997).

Corporate brands and normatively regulated action

Besides, cognitive-oriented conversation, norms and rules shape the process of communication. Actors judge norm-confirmative behaviour of themselves and others according to the existing norms (Habermas, 1984). The normatively regulated action is a two-world model: this is based on the fact that the actor can distinguish between the factual and objective from the normative elements of an action which are conditions and means from values (Habermas, 1984). Thompson and Fine (1999, p. 292) pronounce that "social interaction is the engine that drives the creation of collective meaning". The meaning of corporate brands is built into their social and cultural contexts (Brown *et al.*, 2003; de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007). Corporate brands are related to the social world by affecting their social context.

Normatively regulated action to the corporate brand could be induced by the corporation or on the initiative of stakeholders. Brand-centered, recurring and marketer-facilitated events like a brandfest (McAlexander and Schouten, 1998) or durable brand worlds like the "BMW Welt" in Munich are separated from brand communities which are built through brand fans, personal and corporate blogging and internet sites like www.youtube.com. Here, consumers can expose their relationship to brands. The impact of brandfests are greatest for customers who have less experience with the brand and a low brand commitment, whereas brand communities relate to loyal and committed customers who often have extensive knowledge of and experience with the brand (Schouten *et al.*, 2007).

A lot of communities exist because of a certain brand and their members share and build a strong bond around the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Brand communities fuse consumptive and social practices where the corporate or product brand reigns supreme (de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007). Brand communities can be related to the product brand as well as the corporate brand. The MINI brand community has strong connections to the MINI brand, whereas the relation to the "BMW Group" corporate brand does not exist or is just accepted. On the other hand, there are brand communities related to a corporate brand which includes a positive relationship to the product brand, e.g. Volkswagen. In this case, the product (e.g. Volkswagen Golf) and corporate brand (Volkswagen) bolster each other. In addition, Harley-Davidson Motorcyles's Harley Owners Groups and Apple MacIntosh user groups have a strong relation to the corporate brand as well as the product brands.

Brand communities are norm-confirmative. The members of brand communities share common brand-related beliefs and values, use unique jargons, rituals and modes of symbolic expression based on the brand values (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Solomon, 2004). Moreover, they develop and exhibit their own unique set of norms and behaviour within the brand community, which could transcend the brand core and values. The brand values are the parenthesis of taking part in the community and/or further development within the community.

In the case of brand communities, the bond between the customer and the brand, as well as between all community members, is strengthened (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

The interactions within the brand community provide not only utilitarian support in giving brand-related information and support to the members of the brand communities, but also social support through the interactive experiences between community members in the brand environment (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). The brand becomes a part of the stakeholder of the brand, and the norms and values of the brand are taken into account.

Corporations would be well advised to sustain the relationships to the brand communities and their members in order to secure the bond with their brand ambassadors. Furthermore, the selecting, initiating and controlling of interactions within the brand community are of great importance. Brand communities can also influence their members in negative ways. Normative pressure and the obligation to follow the values of the brand, as well as the norms of the brand community, can lead to reactance of the brand community members (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005).

Corporate brands and dramaturgical action

Dramaturgical action is the third form of communicative action. In dramaturgical action, the actor, presenting a view of himself, has to behave according to his own subjective world (Habermas, 1984). As Habermas (1984, p. 93) pronounces "the actor is oriented to his own subjective world in the presence of his public". Desires and feelings have a paradigmatic status in this type of action.

Especially, successful corporate brands refer to the terms of dramaturgical action. Corporate brands are means of expressing something symbolically. Consumers have a perception of themselves and they relate their brand choice on the basis of using a particular brand. They interpret brands as symbols and attribute their own meaning to it. The symbolic meaning of a brand is defined by the group of people using the brand and varies according to the exposure to the different social environment. People perceive brands in their very personal ways, attach own meanings to them and build relationships to them (Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) posits that the connection and strength of a customer-brand relationship is based on factors like passion, interdependence, commitment, intimacy, compatibility and self-connection to the brand. Customers build a self-connection to different brands, build a specific brand meaning to them and use this to develop their own self-identity (de Chernatony and McDonald, 2003; Kay, 2006). To leverage the ideal self-concept, people choose brands which they believe maintain or support the desired self-image. They use brand logos for their self-expression and self-representation. By using the brand, they are communicating themselves and hope to receive a positive response from their peer groups (Schenk and Holman, 1980). As such, there is an interaction between the symbolism of the corporate brand being used and the individual self-concept. So the corporate brand itself becomes a direct part of the dramaturgical action of an external stakeholder/customer or internal stakeholder/employee.

Contribution

The goal of this paper was to broaden and to contribute new perspectives of corporate brand management derived from Habermas's TCA. By indicating a sociological theory, we try to strengthen current thinking on corporate brand management. Stakeholders of the corporate brand value the relationship with their internal brand possession (dramaturgical action), the brand environment like brandfests and brand

communities (normative-regulated action), and the marketing agents like the salesperson in marketer-related encounters (conversation). Thus, the individual stakeholder of the corporate brand is embedded in different types of action, where some types may be dominant.

The normatively regulated action supports the bond between the brand and customer through interpersonal relationships that are based on norm-confirmative actions. Brand communities are an example of normative-regulated actions within corporate brand management. These interactions are related to the social world and are established through interpersonal relations.

The dramaturgical action is based on desires, feelings and shared experiences. For corporate brand management, a successful way to create a long-lasting, sustainable base for interaction with the stakeholders might draw on dramaturgical action. From a management point of view, normative-regulated action and dramaturgical action interfere and have to be considered as co-aligned concepts.

When the actions on the levels of dramaturgical action, norm-regulated action and conversation with the corporate stakeholders are not rooted in consistent corporate values, a loss of credibility will ensue (Scholes and Clutterbuck, 1998). The action between the corporation, its representatives and the stakeholders form the perception and corporate image (Clutterbuck, 2005). The basis of social exchange between the stakeholders and the corporation are often very different, but could be related to instrumental or communicative action.

The TCA provides an approach that allows the corporation to relate the interaction with stakeholders to different levels of action. Behaviour coordination primarily involves agreement about the nature of the physical, social or subjective worlds.

Whereas relationships with investors are mainly based on strategic action, the relationship between customers and the corporate brand addresses all levels of Habermas actions. Corporations are able to analyse their interactions with the different stakeholders on the basis of Habermas's theory of communication and could identify gaps in the levels their activities relate to now and in the future.

Managerial implications

By creating contexts for interaction with stakeholders, marketers can cultivate relationships to different stakeholders to strengthen the brand. While conversation in encounters and marketer-facilitated events like brandfests may offer the easiest context for interaction, the stakeholder-initiated communities like brand communities, personal blogging and viral marketing on: www.youtube.com and dramaturgical action are probably more difficult to manage. Managers need to consider that customers as well as other stakeholders have different forms of action within the context and perception of their corporate brands. Social interactions gain relevance for the success of corporate brands.

The meaning stakeholders associate with brands could vary in different social contexts (Kay, 2006). To develop and build consistency over different stakeholders can be rather complex. This is based on the fact that brands are interpreted and redefined in different social and cultural contexts as well as in terms of different stakeholders, associating different meaning with the brand. Managers have to monitor the response of their stakeholders according to their branding activities.

The so far mainly on the rational/emotional-dichotomy based brand management can be leveraged and supplemented by the sociological aspects of Habermas's theory:

brand responsibles should create opportunities for discussion and conversation with stakeholders. It leverages the involvement and reflects interest in the audience. The strict difference between outsiders and insiders of the organisation will be overcome by a discourse-oriented brand management.

On the level of normatively regulated action brand responsibles should orchestrate value sharing activities to echo the expectance of and the commitment to the target community. The normative discourse level broadens the value perspective of the brand to external stakeholders.

By understanding and using the mechanisms of self-award and peer feedback brand responsibles incorporate the concept of dramaturgical action into brand management. This leads to idiosyncratic evolvement of understanding the brand within the target groups and stakeholders.

Research implications

The successful way to communicate with stakeholders still needs further research. A first outline on the research agenda focuses on the following items. First, the variety of stakeholders and different successful concepts of corporate brand management are likely to require different ways of communicating, both in terms of the message itself and the way the message is communicated to the stakeholders (Berens, 2004, p. 6). Second, the exploration of the TCA gives food for thought on how corporations should communicate. This is a research item by itself. Habermas's TCA challenges the rational/emotional-dichotomy and bridges internal and external relations to corporate identity. His theory has various implications for brand management and extents the view of building strong brands through groups, communities and society. Third, Habermas's TCA contributes to the development of corporate brand management by introducing the concept of interaction on all three levels of discourse. Brand positioning and communication can be further leveraged and made more target-oriented by understanding and incorporating Habermas's levels of discourse. And finally, a brand performance scheme based on the analysis of interaction encourages further development of stakeholder understanding within corporate brand management.

References

Aaker, J.L. (1997), "Dimensions of brand personality", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 347-57.

Algesheimer, R., Dholakia, U.M. and Herrmann, A. (2005), "The social influence of brand community: evidence from European car clubs", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 69, pp. 19-34.

Balmer, J.M.T. (1998), "Corporate identity and the advent of corporate marketing", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 14, pp. 963-96.

Balmer, J.M.T. (2001), "Corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate marketing – seeing through the fog", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 35 Nos 3/4, pp. 248-91.

Balmer, J.M.T. (2006), "Comprehending corporate marketing and the corporate marketing mix", Working Paper No. 06/08, Bradford University School of Management, Bradford.

Balmer, J.M.T. (2009), "Corporate marketing: apocalypse, advent and epiphany", *Management Decision*, Vol. 47 No. 4, pp. 544-72.

Balmer, J.M.T. and Gray, E.R. (2003), "Corporate brands: what are they? What of them?", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 37 Nos 7/8, pp. 256-61.

Balmer, J.M.T. and Greyser, S.A. (2002), "Managing multiple identities of the corporation", *California Management Review*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 72-86.

Balmer, J.M.T. and Greyser, S.A. (2006), "Corporate marketing, integrating corporate identity, corporate branding, corporate communications, corporate image and corporate reputation", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 40 Nos 7/8, pp. 730-41.

Berens, G.A.J.M. (2004), *Corporate Branding: The Development of Corporate Associations and their Influence on Stakeholder Reactions*, Rotterdam Erasmus Research Institute of Management, Rotterdam.

Bickerton, D. (2000), "Corporate reputation versus corporate branding: the realist debate", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 42-8.

Blau, P.M. (1964), *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, Wiley, New York, NY.

Brexendorf, T.O. and Kernstock, J. (2007), "Corporate behaviour vs brand behaviour: towards an integrated view?", *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 32-40.

Brown, S., Kozinets, R. and Sherry, J. (2003), "Teaching old brands new tricks: retro branding and the revival of brand meaning", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 67, pp. 19-33.

Brown, T., Dacin, P., Pratt, M.G. and Whetten, D.A. (2006), "Identity, intended image, constructed image, and reputation: an interdisciplinary framework and suggested terminology", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 99-106.

Burkhart, R. (2007), "On Jürgen Habermas and public relations", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 33, pp. 249-54.

Cherrier, H. and Murray, J.B. (2004), "The sociology of consumption – the hidden facet of marketing", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 20 Nos 5/6, pp. 509-26.

Clutterbuck, D. (2005), "Communication and the psychological contract", *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 9 No. 4, pp. 359-64.

Davies, G. and Chun, R. (2002), "Gaps between the internal and the external perceptions of the corporate brand", *Corporate Reputation Review*, Vol. 5 Nos 2/3, pp. 144-58.

de Burgh-Woodman, H. and Brace-Govan, J. (2007), "We do not live to buy – why subcultures are different from brand communities and the meaning for marketing discourse", *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 27 Nos 5/6, pp. 193-207.

de Chernatony, L. and McDonald, M. (2003), *Creating Powerful Brands in Consumer, Service and Industrial Markets*, 3rd ed., Elsevier, Oxford.

Donaldson, T. and Preston, L.E. (1995), "The stakeholder theory of the corporation: concepts, evidence and implications", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 20, pp. 65-91.

Elliott, R. and Wattanasuwan, K. (1998), "Brands as symbolic resources for the construction of identity", *International Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 131-44.

Fournier, S. (1998), "Consumers and their brands: developing relationship theory in consumer research", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 24, pp. 343-73.

Freeman, R.E. (1984), *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Pitman, Boston, MA.

Gotsi, M. and Wilson, A. (2001), "Corporate reputation management: 'living the brand'", *Management Decision*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 99-104.

Gutek, B.A., Cherry, B., Bhappu, A.D., Schneider, S. and Woolf, L. (2000), "Features of service relationships and encounters", *Work and Occupation*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 319-51.

Habermas, J. (1984), *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Habermas, J. (1987), *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Habermas, J. (2000), *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Hatch, M.J. and Schultz, M. (1997), "Relations between organizational culture, identity and image", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31 No. 5, pp. 356-65.

Herda, E. and Messerschmitt, D.S. (1991), "From words to action", *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 23-7.

Hulberg, J. (2006), "Integrating corporate branding and sociological paradigms: a literature study", *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 14 Nos 1/2, pp. 60-73.

Husserl, E. (1913), *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Macmillan, New York, NY.

Jacobson, T.L. and Storey, J.D. (2004), "Development communication and participation: applying Habermas to a case study of population programs in Nepal", *Communication Theory*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 99-121.

Karaosmanoglu, E. and Melewar, T.C. (2006), "Corporate communications, identity and image", *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 14 Nos 1/2, pp. 196-206.

Kay, M.J. (2006), "Strong brands and corporate brands", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 40 Nos 7/8, pp. 743-60.

Keller, K.L. (2000), "Building and managing corporate brand equity", in Schultz, M., Hatch, M.J. and Larsen, M.H. (Eds), *The Expressive Organisation: Linking Identity, Reputation and the Corporate Brand*, Oxford Press, Oxford.

Keller, K.L. and Aaker, D.A. (1998), "Corporate-level marketing: the impact of credibility on a company's brand extensions", *Corporate Reputation Review*, Vol. 1, pp. 356-78.

Kiriakidou, O. and Millward, L. (2000), "Corporate identity: external reality or internal fit?", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 49-58.

Knox, S.D. and Bickerton, D. (2003), "The six conventions of corporate branding", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 37 Nos 7/8, pp. 998-1016.

McAlexander, J.H. and Schouten, J.W. (1998), "Brandfests: servicescapes for the cultivation of brand equity", in Sherry, J.F. Jr (Ed.), *Servicescapes: The Concept of Place in Contemporary Marketing*, American Marketing Association, Chicago, IL, pp. 377-401.

McIntosh, D. (1997), "Language, self, and lifeworld in Habermas's theory of communicative action", in Boudon, R., Cherkaoui, M. and Alexander, J. (Eds), *The Classical Tradition in Sociology. The European Tradition*, Sage, London, pp. 102-30.

Maathuis, O.J.M. (1999), *Corporate Branding: The Value of the Corporate Brand to Customers and Managers*, University of Rotterdam, Rotterdam.

Mukherjee, A. and Balmer, J.M.T. (2008), "New frontiers and perspectives in corporate brand management", *International Studies of Management & Organization*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 3-19.

Mukherjee, A. and He, H. (2008), "Company identity and marketing: an integrative framework", *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 111-25.

Muniz, A.M. Jr and O'Guinn, T.C. (2001), "Brand community", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 27, pp. 412-32.

Schenk, C.T. and Holman, R.H. (1980), "A sociological approach to brand choice: the concept of situational self image", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 610-4.

Scholes, E. and Clutterbuck, D. (1998), "Communicating with stakeholders: an integrated approach", *Long Range Planning*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 227-38.

Schouten, J.W. and McAlexander, J. (1995), "Subcultures of consumption: an ethnography of the new bikers", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 22, pp. 43-61.

Schouten, J.W., McAlexander, J. and Koenig, H.F. (2007), "Transcendent customer experience and brand community", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 35, pp. 357-68.

Schultz, M., Antorini, Y.M. and Csaba, F.F. (2005), "Corporate branding – an evolving concept", in Schultz, M., Antorini, Y.M. and Csaba, F.F. (Eds), *Corporate Branding: Purpose, People, Process*, Copenhagen Business School, Copenhagen, pp. 9-22.

Solomon, M.R. (2004), *Consumer Behavior: Buying, Behaving and Being*, Pearson Prentice-Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Thompson, L. and Fine, G.A. (1999), "Socially shared cognition, affect and behaviour: a review and integration", *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 278-302.

Toulmin, S.E. (1958), *The Uses of Argument*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Urde, M. (1999), "Brand orientation: a mindset for building brands into strategic resources", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 5, pp. 117-33.

Urde, M. (2009), "Uncovering the corporate brand's core values", *Management Decision*, Vol. 47 No. 4, pp. 616-38.

van Rekom, J. (1997), "Deriving an operational measure of corporate identity", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31 Nos 5/6, pp. 410-20.

van Toledo, K. (1986), "Ethical notions about the general application of marketing-techniques, derived from Jürgen Habermas' theory of human action", *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, Vol. 3, pp. 95-103.

Webster, F.E. (1992), "The changing role of marketing in the corporation", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 56, pp. 1-17.

Further reading

He, H.-W. and Balmer, J.M.T. (2007), "Identity studies: multiple perspectives and implications for corporate-level marketing", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 41 Nos 7/8, pp. 765-85.

About the authors

Joachim Kernstock received his Master's degree and PhD in Business Administration from the Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich, Germany. He heads the Competence Center for Brand Management in St Gallen, Switzerland. Joachim Kernstock is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: joachim.kernstock@unisg.ch

Tim Oliver Brexendorf received his Master's degree at Carl von Ossietzky University, Oldenburg, Germany. He has several years' experience in marketing positions in retail companies. After that, he worked as Research Assistant at the Institute for Marketing and Retailing at the University of St Gallen and as a project manager in a marketing consulting spin-off of the university. Currently, he is a research fellow at the University of St Gallen, Switzerland. His research interests lie in corporate identity, brand management, service marketing and personal selling.