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Individual and collective identity construction in a Niké related brand community

Kornum, Niels Gyrd-Jones, Richard Al Zagir, Nadia Brandis, Kristine A.

Purpose and background

Brand communities celebrate and co-create the brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz and Schau, 2005) and they are interesting, because they form a center from which a multitude of brand meaning expressions emerge (e.g., Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003; Moradin, Bagozzi and Bergami, 2013). Moreover, involvement in brand community activities leads to a positive relation with the brand (McAlexander et al., 2002; Carlson, 2008) and Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) find that brand communities are internally heterogeneous, but cannot directly identify the motives behind. Strangely, there is no research from the individual's perspective that explores the ways in which company brand identity is expressed from a "bottom-up" perspective, i.e. from individual identifications nested within collective identifications; both identifications potentially related to the brand identity.

Brand identity is traditionally conceptualized from an inside-out perspective with brand managers as communicative cores that transmit brand identity to internal and external stakeholders (e.g., Burman, 2008; Aaker 2002, Kapferer 2008). Recent research suggests that (brand) identity creation is a set of social processes where relevant stakeholders enact their own identity and in this process might co-create the brand simultaneously (e.g. de Silveira, et al., 2013; Hemetsberger and Mühlbacher, 2008; von Wallpach, 2009). Hemetsberger and Mühlbacher (2009, pp. 4-5) suggest two "facets of brand identity: *intended identity*, which is developed by a deliberate, strategic process ... and *enacted identity*, which is emerging through enactment and social discourse". In this study we identify nested levels of member's individual and collective identities (da Silveira, Lages and Simões, 2013, p. 33) as they are expressed and emerge through encounters between enacted and intended brand identities and between individual and collective identities (Ibid.).

The purpose of this study is to explore the complex levels of identity construction within a brand community and between the collective identity and the intended brand identity. As something new our research in detail demonstrates how the individual identities and the collective identity of a community in a nested system co-create the intended brand in enhancing and complementary ways. It identifies consequences for brand managers seeking to interact with communities in order to strengthen the brand.

Methodology

The study focuses on a Niké related running (brand) community called NBRO. The name is formed as an abbreviation of the urban area in Copenhagen: Nørrebro; the area from where the community's running activities spring. The empirical foundation of the study is based on a 6 months full participation study where researchers evolved as community members (e.g., Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) interacting with the members and join in on their natural behavior and socialization processes (Agafonoff, 2006). In all, 13 in-depth interviews, a focus group session with

four founders of NBRO and a netnography (Kozinets, 2001; 2010) were triangulated to reduce rival explanations (Kvale, 1996) and validate emergent themes (O'Donoghue and Punch, 2003). The four researchers played the devil's advocate in the data analysis process to reduce the risk of biased interpretations (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Kvale, 1996).

We abductively analysed (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009) these themes in relation to the literature and an emergent conceptual framework was identified inspired by an understanding of subcultural identities as nested within the dominant organizational culture identity (Martin and Siehl, 1983). In context of this study we distinguish between identities that reveal similar / enhancing traits and orthogonal traits where community members would, for instance, although perceived as different, both accept the intended brand and their separate collective community identity (Ibid.).

Findings

We see two critical levels of interplay between identities. Firstly, between the collective identity of the community and the intended brand identity, and secondly, between individual identities and the collective identity of the community. *Match between collective identity construction and the intended brand identity*

The observed collective identity corresponds to a relatively high degree with the Nike's intended brand identity. "Passionate runners" and having Nike as an essential brand in the community ("Nike is essential") is in accordance with what Niké intends the brand to symbolize. The combination of design and high profile athletes, the Greek name for (victory), the "swoosh" (Larson, 2011) and the "Just do it" brand symbol (Grow, 2008) show traits that are similar to NBRO's. Both community founders and regulars in interviews confirm these similarities and NBRO's own produced t-shirts include as much Niké symbolic reference as Niké's trademark allow for, and in the beginning even beyond that.

Articulations, such as "NBRO [members] are cool and anarchistic" split into: "anarchistic" which is founded in reckless behavior and not being overly structured and "we're NOT a running club". The community sees itself as the "naughty little brother" of serious running clubs. Being "cool" originates from prioritizing a self-developed fashionable hipster-like look where Niké outfit is embedded as an important component. Whilst these constructions are different from Niké's explicitly expressed brand identity, they accept it; thus they are orthogonal to the Nike brand identity. Niké is always strongly symbolically but tacitly present in the community via the Niké gear, i.e. shoes and clothes members are wearing, but never communicated top-down as a must have. When directly referred to, it is in the form of individual identity construction projects, where Niké is represented in an outspoken manner, by talking about the gear you have bought yourself or others have bought in runs or presenting them on Facebook or Instagram.

Match between individual and collective identity construction

The collective identity construction in the NBRO community is originally developed by the founders and now maintained and protected by the "founders" and "insiders" representing the top of community hierarchy. The "regulars" and "newcomers" in their encounter with the collective identity construction strongly identify with it. Community dynamics appear funnelled in that direction in the sense that their

individual identity construction seems to be in coherence with the collective construction. Individual identity constructions inside and outside the community involve elements that are both similar and orthogonal in relation to the collective identity construction. Inside the community it is the strong identification with the community “insiders”, including founders that drive similarities. But personal identity projects located outside the community context, for instance friend groups or urban lifestyle priorities, demonstrate orthogonal support to the coherence of the community.

In *summary*, the entire identity system consists of individual identity constructions that are nested into the collective. In their encounter they exhibit different degrees of overlap (similar or orthogonal). The proximity of individual identity construction to the core of the collective identity construction is decided by the pattern of individual degrees of overlap, and the number of members that share that overlap. All this combines into representations of the strength of the collective identity, and ultimately denoting its coherence with the company intended brand identity.

Identity encounters and their outcome based on the degree of match

The outcome of this nested system is that while the insiders / founders and regulars receive privileges from Niké, for instance, discounts and free running numbers, all NBRO members report buying more Nike running shoes and clothes. Brand related behaviors are built into the hierarchy dynamics between individual and collective identity constructions.

Discussion and theoretical / practical implications

These findings can be interpreted in the context of organization identity theory, where the self-concept or self-definition (core) of a person is nested within the simultaneously perceived organizational identity attributes (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 2010). The community individual identity constructions are both found to be “self-referential” (similar to one’s self) and “self-defining” (via emulation changing one’s self “to become more similar”) (Asforth et al. 2008, p. 329) when community members adapt by supporting the collective community identity, most surprisingly in this research in the change of self to be more positive towards buying more Niké outfit.

While the identity constructions found in the nested system of this study match the similarity construct found in the identity literature, i.e. similarity between the organizational identity and one’s self, an orthogonal (Martin and Siehl, 1983) match between the two is not found in the identity literature. The reason is that it is focused on the opposition between positive and negative identification (Bhattacharya and Elsbach and 2002; Kreiner, et al., 2009; Asforth et al. 2008). As hypothesis for further research, what could be called orthogonal identification can be understood as an identification split between individual self-identification and social identification, and both identifications are positive, but the subject or object for identification is different.

The knowledge about nested systems of individual, collective and intended brand identities is essential when companies reflect and strategize on how to relate to brand communities. This study supports earlier studies that propose that interventions by the brand should seek *to be in accordance* with the collective identities of the community (Fournier and Lee, 2009; Kornum 2009). If Niké would *directly intervene to change* the collective identities in NBRO that are different from the intended brand, i.e.

reckless and anarchistic behavior and image, it would destroy exactly the anarchistic image that is so important in the collective narrative, because it, in their self-understanding, differentiates them from being “just” another brand community of enthusiastic fans.

Originality and limitations

Brand community literature has already indicated that communities co-create the brand in ways that are different from the intended brand identity construction (e.g., Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). However, there has been no research on the processes of brand co-creation viewed from the perspective of a nested system of individual, collective and intended brand identity constructions.

By identifying constructs that are compatible with a more dynamic understanding of identity construction, this research paves the way for a deeper understanding of how the boundary dynamics between the intended brand identities and collective / individual identities are changing between temporary stabilizations (Hernes, 2010) of enhancing, orthogonal or antagonistic configurations. While research in this study demonstrates how intended brand, collective and individual identities relate across boundaries, it does not explicate the (historical) dynamic processes (Schultz and Hernes, 2013) that can illustrate how sense- breaking and sense-giving processes unfold in congruent or incongruent identity boundary dynamics (Ashforth et al., 2008; Kreiner, et al., 2009).

Keywords

Brand co-creation, intended brand identity, enacted brand identities, nested system of identities.

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