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Retooling the Corporate Brand: A Foucauldian perspective on normalisation and differentiation

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Abstract

In this article we draw upon the social theory of Michel Foucault to explore the neglected tension between normalization and differentiation in corporate branding. The mainstream response within the corporate marketing literature to addressing this tension is exemplified by Deephouse who argues for the identification of a 'strategic balance point'³⁵ which would lead managers to strive for the singular identity that represents the ideal compromise between differentiation and conformity. In contrast we contend that corporate brands exist in multiple discourse contexts, that the tension between normalization and differentiation must be managed within each of these contexts, and that the brand positioning may therefore vary between and within discourse contexts. We also argue that corporate marketers consider the use of strategic ambiguity in managing the tension between normalization and differentiation because it facilitates the creation of flexible interpretations and therefore allows multiple branding strategies to evolve and flourish.

Keywords

Corporate brand, differentiation, normalization

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Retooling the Corporate Brand: A Foucauldian

Perspective on Normalisation and Differentiation

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Abstract

In this article we draw upon the social theory of Michel Foucault to explore the neglected tension between normalization and differentiation in corporate branding. The mainstream response within the corporate marketing literature to addressing this tension is exemplified by Deephouse who argues for the identification of a ‘strategic balance point’³⁵ which would lead managers to strive for the singular identity that represents the ideal compromise between differentiation and conformity. In contrast we contend that corporate brands exist in multiple discourse contexts, that the tension between normalization and differentiation must be managed within each of these contexts, and that the brand positioning may therefore vary between and within discourse contexts. We also argue that corporate marketers consider the use of strategic ambiguity in managing the tension between normalization and differentiation because it facilitates the creation of flexible interpretations and therefore allows multiple branding strategies to evolve and flourish.

Introduction

Foucault challenged us all to ‘think differently’ about the world. In this article we similarly challenge corporate marketing academics and practitioners to think differently about the world of corporate branding. From a Foucauldian perspective, corporate branding can be understood as a discourse practice concerned with the production of meanings, the strategies of power deployed within relationships, and the propagation of knowledge and truth.¹ Taking these three dimensions of discourse as our starting point, we highlight the neglected tension between normalisation and differentiation in the corporate marketing literature on corporate brand strategy. In particular, we draw upon Deephouse’s² work on strategic balance as a starting point for a Foucauldian-oriented critique of the interplay between normalization and differentiation of corporate brands. We contend that this interplay functions as a highly productive force within corporate brand strategy.

A Foucauldian discourse perspective on corporate brands

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a French philosopher and historian whose work emphasized the importance of challenge and critique. According to Foucault³, a critique is not simply a matter of saying things are not right but “a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices we accept rest”.⁴ One of his primary research interests was in the systems of thought that guide and produce how we think about and understand our

world.⁵ He focused on critiquing the processes and practices through which we give meaning to events, objects, people and phenomena and on the relationship between institutions and individuals, including the way in which power operated within various institutional arrangements.

Foucault took a discourse perspective by which he meant that he saw the world as being constituted, experienced and understood through language. Foucault explained that discourses were ‘governed by analysable rules’⁶, which governed the formation and possible transformation of all objects, concepts, and subjects. These rules constituted ‘systems of thought’ that determined what could be said by whom, the positions from which subjects could speak, the viewpoints that they might present, and the interests, stakes and institutional domains that might be represented. Accordingly, the primary task of discourse analysis was to focus on the formation and transformation of discourse or on how ideas are ‘put into discourse’.⁷ In this paper we are concerned with the ways in which the ideas embodied by corporate brands are put into various discourse contexts by corporate marketers. We therefore begin with a brief overview of relevant corporate brand literature, which is a subset of corporate marketing literature more generally.

Drawing on Balmer^{8,9}, Balmer and Greyser¹⁰ defined corporate brands as the ‘explicit covenant’ that can exist between organisations and their stakeholders. Some organisations may choose not to have a corporate brand¹¹ and, instead, deploy only product or service-related brands, in which case no such covenant exists. These organisations have a corporate identity¹² but no conscious distillation of this identity into a corporate brand. The literature identifies a variety of roles for strong corporate brands including: the ability to attract and retain good employees; economies of scale for the

introduction of associated brands; a focus on long-term strategy; and the addition of value to the balance sheet of the corporate entity by the brand itself.^{9,10,11,13,14,15,16}

According to de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo¹⁷ brands should be understood as value-based systems of meaning rather than as objects constructed by brand specialists. Thus, corporate brands exist in what Foucault and others might term the discursive space of meaning rather than the physical space of objects.^{18,19} The meanings or ‘images’ of brands within this discursive space are outcomes of the relationships between brands and their various stakeholders.^{20,21} This view of corporate brands as relational is aligned with that of the International Centre for Corporate and Organizational Marketing Studies, which states on its website that:

A key attribute of both corporate and organizational marketing are [sic] their common concern with multiple exchange relationships with multiple stakeholder groups and networks, both internally and externally. [Quoted from weblink: <http://www.corporate-id/what-is-corporate-marketing/> (5 June 2007)]

In order to understand the ‘multiple exchange relationships’ that involve corporate brands, one must, then, consider all the ways in which brand stakeholders interact both with a particular brand and with other members of the ‘brand web’ of relationships within which it is enmeshed.²² The meaning of Pepsi is, for example, tied up with the meaning of Coca-Cola and of the various celebrities who appear in its advertisements. Thus, with Coca-Cola firmly established as the preferred soft drink of the baby boomers, Pepsi astutely positioned itself as the drink of the ‘new generation’. This positioning only made sense within a discourse which included both brands. From a discourse perspective, then, we may see that the creation and transformation of the meanings associated with

corporate brands cannot be enacted in isolation. Rather these processes are inextricably linked with the meaning-creation processes of related brands. Brands jostle with one another within discursive space to create meaning-laden connections with consumers. However, in establishing what they mean brands also establish what they do not mean. These negatively-defined spaces may then be claimed by competitor brands. The Coca-Cola strategy of declaring that the product was 'it' may then be understood as way of claiming the maximum discursive space without ceding any desirable discursive territory to competitors.

One of the key characteristics of discursive space is that it is made up of multiple, discourses that may overlap and compete with one another.^{6,22} Stakeholders experience brands within the context of these multiple discourses. Thus, in order to understand the meanings that are attached to a brand one must examine the discourse context or contexts that are associated with the brand. These contexts include the power relations between discourse participants, in this case other brands. Some of the discourse contexts of a corporate brand will have been created by the organisation through promotional or advertising campaigns. However, stakeholders may also experience the brand within discourse contexts that are not of the organisation's choosing and which are potentially damaging to the brand.²³ For example, the Bali tourism brand's representation of itself as an oasis of peace and serenity was shattered by media reports following what became known as the 'Bali bombing'. Potential consumers experienced the Bali brand within the context of the media discourse on the 'war on terrorism' and the Bali tourism industry suffered a severe downturn as a result. Corporate brands, like all brands, are therefore vulnerable to the attribution of meanings that are beyond the control of their creators and

may be damaging. They are not mere artefacts of corporate marketing practice but are, instead, caught up in the systems of thought of the discourses within which they have become objects.

The tension between normalisation and differentiation within corporate marketing

Normalisation was a central theme within Foucault's work, much of which focused on the creation of institutions to accommodate those who were deemed abnormal and who therefore should be excluded from society. The insane, the criminal, the sexually deviant and the unhealthy, along with the asylums, prisons, legal systems and sanatoriums created to identify and isolate them from normal citizens, were all the subjects of major works by Foucault.^{24,1,25,26} He did not single these systems out because of their prominence within society but because of what he saw as their centrality to the relations of power underpinning society. He stated that:

To put it very simply, psychiatric internment, the mental normalisation of individuals, and penal institutions have no doubt a fairly limited importance if one is only looking for their economic significance. On the other hand, they are undoubtedly essential to the general functioning of the wheels of power.²⁷

Thus, Foucault saw normalisation as a process that not only served to mark out the majority of 'us' from the minority of 'them' but which existed to support the power relations of society.

Through his work on normalisation, Foucault²⁵ came to the view that power and knowledge were mutually constitutive. He challenged the accepted view that knowledge was power, a view which saw knowledge as a scarce resource that conferred power on

those who possessed it. In contrast, Foucault argued that ‘The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power’.²⁸ Knowledge was, then, both a creator of power and a creation of power.

Similarly, power was both a creator of knowledge and a creation of knowledge. The two concepts were inseparable and for this reason Foucault coined the conjoint concept of ‘power/knowledge’. Foucault^{6,24} also drew attention to the diffusion of power/knowledge throughout society, which was the focus of his work on the history of hospitals, prisons and asylums.

Definitions of normality were, according to Foucault, an outcome of particular power/knowledge configurations. To be defined outside of the boundaries of normality was to risk exclusion, punishment, even death. It is interesting then, to reflect on the challenge that Foucault’s view of normalisations poses for corporate brand work. Balmer⁸ contended that differentiation was one of the three virtues of successful corporate brands. Keller²⁹ stated that differentiation was the second principle guiding the creation of brand knowledge: ‘In general it is desirable to distinguish brands at the same level as much as possible’. Advertising agency Young and Rubicam’s model of brand equity included four measures; differentiation, relevance, esteem and knowledge.³⁰ According to Aaker³¹, the model started with differentiation because:

A new brand with ambitions to become strong must start by developing a real point of differentiation. Conversely, a loss in differentiation is usually the first sign that a strong brand is fading. Differentiation leads.

Aaker argued that differentiation was particularly important at the corporate brand level because a distinctive corporate brand enables consumers to select between products offerings that are otherwise similar or the same.

The emphasis that Balmer, Keller, Aaker and others have placed on brand differentiation appears on the surface to challenge the Foucauldian concept of normalisation and the importance of ‘fitting in’ rather than ‘standing out’ as different. We argue, however, that the interplay between normalisation and differentiation is at the heart of the creation of corporate brand value. Moreover, organisations that fail to pay attention to the inherent tension between the two concepts in their corporate brand strategy are unlikely to have strong brands. We will now outline the way in which we see this tension operating in practice.

Norms are not natural or given concepts: they are products of particular power/knowledge configurations and exist within particular discourse contexts. What is accepted as normal and is ‘taken-for-granted’ by society is very much a human construct. Through the operations of the relations of power/knowledge, certain ideas, opinions and judgements come to be accepted as ‘truths’:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.... Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.³²

When organisations set out to create a corporate brand and establish it as a legitimate actor within various discourse contexts, they are drawing upon particular power/knowledge configurations in order to establish new truths. Normalisation is at the heart of this process. Only corporate brands that operate within discourse norms will be accepted as ‘truth’.

We should, however, be cautious about viewing the existence of regimes of truth that produce notions of the normal and the abnormal as an argument for conservatism in corporate marketing. Just as there are multiple discourse contexts, there are multiple sets of power/knowledge relations and multiple truths accepted and circulating within them. Transgression of the rules of normalcy is only fatal within a totalising discourse such as that documented by Foucault with the prison system of nineteenth century France. There is, perhaps, not quite so much at stake in corporate brand strategy although transgressions may in some cases be fatal to particular brands.

How then, does the requirement for normalisation mesh with the requirement for differentiation in corporate branding? In order to illustrate the interrelationship between normalisation and differentiation, we shall turn to the whimsical example to be found in the Monty Python Film, *The Life of Brian*.³³ The hero of the film, a man called Brian who is mistaken for the messiah, becomes tired of being continually followed by large crowds of worshippers. In exasperation he tells them all to stop behaving like sheep. ‘You are all different,’ he shouts. ‘Yes, we are all different’ the crowd dutifully chants back. One lone follower breaks with the crowd, calling out ‘I’m not...’ whereupon the crowd looks to turn its fury on this dissenter. At one level, this piece of biblical satire appears to simply reinforce the Foucauldian notion of normalisation, the submission of the individual to

collective norms and the perils of breaking with these norms. However, on further examination we can see that, while the members of the crowd might not be acting independently of one another or of their supposed messiah, they were none-the-less differentiated from broader society by virtue of their adherence to a particular set of truths associated with the discourse of Brian. Thus, the success of the brand of Brian was rooted in the fact that it was both 'normal' (messiahs were shown to be an accepted part of daily life within the film) and differentiated from other competing messiah brands. Messiahs were accepted as the source of religious truths and thus, in Foucauldian terms, had the power to determine what counted as knowledge within this discourse context. At the same time, a messiah's message once accepted as knowledge became a source of power in that it could be used to determine the correct answer to questions, such as 'what counts as sin?' and 'how should sins be punished?'. Thus, knowledge produces or reproduces a particular set of power relations and a particular set of power relations produces or reproduces particular kinds of knowledge. In this example, the brand of Brian could not have flourished within a society whose power/knowledge relations were hostile to messiahs but nor could it have flourished if it was not sufficiently distinctive from other messiah brands. Brand differentiation is, therefore, rooted within particular power/knowledge configurations that may set limits on differentiation but do not proscribe it.

The tension between normalisation and differentiation may be seen to operate across all brand categories but is particularly relevant for corporate brands because of their origins within corporate brand identity. While product brands can be ephemeral (e.g. Coke's 'Coke is it' or Nike's 'Just do it') there is a close relationship between the

corporate brand and the organisational entity it represents. Balmer⁹ argued that a corporate brand should be directly derived from an organisation's identity and constituted the major vehicle for communicating that identity to organisational stakeholders. The tight link between what an organization is and the brand associations of its corporate brand means that there is far less room for advertising hype than there is with product and service brands. Organizations are also more subject to power/knowledge relations and to the negative consequences of transgressions against the forces of normalisation than are the products and services they produce. Thus, managing the tension between normalization (which enables organizations to exist) and differentiation (which enables organisations to successfully compete with rivals) is both particularly important and particularly difficult at the level of the corporate brand.

A similar need to manage the tension between normalization and differentiation was noted within the strategy literature by Deephouse² who stated that:

Past research observed that firms face pressure to be different and to be the same.

By differentiating, firms reduce competition. By conforming, firms demonstrate their legitimacy. Both reduced competition and legitimacy improve performance.³⁴

In response to this tension, Deephouse offered an integrative theory of strategic balance for the creation of corporate strategy. He advocated that firms seek to find a compromise position that balanced the tension between differentiation and normalization. This compromise entailed achieving a sufficient level of differentiation to ensure reduced competition while at same time safeguarding the legitimacy gained from similarity or normalization. The goal for organizations, then, was to identify the most advantageous 'strategic balance point'³⁵ to occupy between the two poles of differentiation and

conformity. Drawing on Foucault, however, we contend that strategic balance is only one way of managing this tension. We now outline an alternative model.

Strategic balance and strategic ambiguity

Deephouse's² theory of strategic balance was underpinned by a belief that only one strategy was possible and therefore a compromise was required in order to attain this singular strategy or 'strategic balance point'.³⁶ In contrast we argue that within corporate brand strategy, and indeed within brand strategy more generally, multiplicity is possible and may be desirable.^{37,38} In doing so we draw upon Eisenberg's³⁹ theory of strategic ambiguity (see figure one). Eisenberg used the term 'strategic ambiguity' to describe instances in which ambiguous language was intentionally deployed to accomplish multiple organizational goals with multiple audiences.³⁹ Strategic ambiguity may be used to promote 'unified diversity' that allows multiple meanings to be associated with abstractions (such as corporate brands) without limiting specific interpretations.^{40,41,42} Unified diversity means diversity without conflict. The purpose of strategic ambiguity in discourse is thus to enable divergent interpretations to coexist without these interpretations leading to conflict. In contrast, Deephouse offered the compromise of strategic balance as the means of achieving this goal of avoiding conflict.

<Figure one about here>

Within the model, contained in figure one, two strategic responses to resolving the tension between normalization and differentiation within corporate brand identity are portrayed. The top half of the diagram shows that the outcome of a strategic balance approach is the production of a singular identity. The lower half of the diagram shows

that a strategic ambiguity approach may lead to the production of multiple brand identities. We now provide an illustrative example of strategic ambiguity in corporate brand identity strategy in practice.

The example we have chosen is the corporate brand practices of Australian universities. There is a very pervasive normalizing discourse in which all reputable universities seek to establish their legitimacy, which we call the historical discourse context. This discourse is rooted in scholarly tradition based on such values as academic freedom, peer review and research excellence. Power within this historical discourse is exercised collectively by universities as they scrutinize one another for transgressions and also self-police their own activities. The only legitimate differentiation within this discourse context is based on degrees of excellence. There are, however, other competing discourse contexts within which universities must also position their brand identities. Australian universities must demonstrate their relevance to the communities from which they draw students and which, through taxation, provide much of their funding. They must also provide education to students who are able but not necessarily of the highest intellectual calibre. The values within this socio-political discourse of relevance and access are therefore quite different to those of the historical discourse. Power within this discourse context is exercised by agencies of government which exercise surveillance over universities through various 'quality assurance' mechanisms intended to drive compliance with government priorities. Ironically, perhaps, normalization may in this context mean differentiation from other universities as the Australian Government seeks to introduce diversity and specialization. A further discourse context, which we call the market discourse, has also emerged as an important one for Australian universities.¹⁸

Universities are increasingly competing with one another for students and must therefore establish a corporate brand identity that appeals to students. The values that appeal to students overlap to some extent with those contained in the historical and socio-political discourse contexts but there are additional elements such as the quality of student life centred on non-academic attributes like social and sporting amenities. Within the market discourse context, students exercise power through their enrolment decisions which drives universities to seek differentiation from their competitors but alignment with the norms of student expectations. Universities must therefore manage the tension between differentiation and normalization when establishing a brand identity in each of these discourse contexts and must do so in ways that does not then bring any of these brand identities into conflict with the others.

The normalization process of conforming to certain rules and expectations can co-exist with the process of differentiating university brands when interpretive possibilities and flexibility are facilitated in multiple discourses.⁴³ The challenge, then, is to maintain a corporate brand strategy that safeguards interpretive openness rather than interpretive control and closure. Provided the corporate brands maintain strategic ambiguity in relation to multiple and potentially conflicting identities, universities are able to manage the competing demands and expectations of stakeholders within multiple discourse contexts while at the same time establishing distinctive corporate brand positions.

Conclusion

In this article we have adopted the Foucauldian approach of critique to explore the neglected tension between normalization and differentiation in corporate brand strategy.

The concept of power/knowledge and the way in which it produces normalizing truths that are accepted within society in various discourse contexts has been central to this critique. We have shown that the tension between normalization and differentiation which arises from particular power/knowledge configurations underpins corporate brand strategy. Successful corporate brand strategies must position the organisation within the boundaries of what is accepted as normal and therefore sanctioned, while at the same time differentiating the organization from its competitors. The mainstream response within the literature to this issue is exemplified by Deephouse² who argues for the identification of a ‘strategic balance point’³⁵ which would lead managers to strive for the singular identity that best represents the ideal compromise between differentiation and conformity. One problem that we have identified with this approach is that it assumes a singular discourse context for the brand. The theory also draws on the concept of ‘conformity’, meaning ‘being the same’, rather than normalization which implies compliance with norms, which may or may not allow scope for significant variation.

Drawing upon Foucault^{1,3,5,6,22} we have argued that brands exist in multiple discourse contexts, that the tension between normalization and differentiation must be managed within each of these contexts, and that the brand positioning may therefore vary between and within discourse contexts. This set of arguments may be seen as building on the existing dominant view within the corporate marketing literature that corporate marketing is rooted in ‘multiple exchange relationships’¹⁰. We have also suggested that corporate marketers who manage corporate brands consider the use of strategic ambiguity in managing the tension between normalization and differentiation because it facilitates

the creation of flexible interpretations and therefore allows multiple branding strategies to evolve and flourish.

The approach to corporate brand strategy that we are recommending here would, then, involve the following considerations:

1. What are the discourse contexts within which the corporate brand operates?
2. What is the power/knowledge configuration in operation within each of these contexts, including what are the norms, who defines the norms, who is able to challenge and/or change the norms, and under what conditions?
3. Given the brand's existing identity and the norms in play within each discourse context, what is the most advantageous strategy or strategies for the corporate brand in each context?
4. In what ways is brand strategy in each discourse context constrained or enabled by brand strategies in other discourse contexts?
5. What discourse strategies (e.g. strategic ambiguity) can be deployed to enable the management of brand strategy across multiple discourse contexts?

This list of considerations for the formulation of corporate brand strategy also provides guidance for future research.

Our purpose in writing this article has been to demonstrate the contribution that a Foucauldian approach can make to corporate marketing by exploring the tension between normalization and differentiation in corporate brand practice. Foucault wrote that:

I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area... I write for users, not readers.²⁴

In this brief article we have been able to draw out of the Foucauldian tool-box only a few of the many tools that have practical applications for the work of corporate marketing. Rich possibilities remain within the toolbox for corporate marketing scholars prepared to dig deeper.

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