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The brand core and its management over time

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the brand core and its management over time. The aim is to develop a framework for managing the core of a brand for continuity and change.

Design/methodology/approach – A longitudinal case study of the Volvo brand's core and its management serves as the empirical basis for a qualitative analysis of the "brand core" using rhetorical perspectives.

Findings – The management of the brand core for both continuity and change is an unsolved paradox in strategic brand management literature and practice. Existing conceptualisations offer little or no guidance regarding managing a brand's core over time. The Volvo brand has evolved by adding and shifting mindsets, which has kept its core surprisingly stable.

Research limitations/implications – The new framework mitigates a paradox and, by defining the brand core as a point of reference, allows for brand management to address both continuity and change and consider a range of stakeholders while doing so. The integration of rhetoric into the framework makes it applicable to product, service and corporate brands, or indeed anything that can be considered a "brand". The brand core is defined as "an entity of core values and a promise".

Practical implications – By shifting perspectives on a brand's core over time, change and development are stimulated while preserving its inner values and promise.

Originality/value – The brand core framework integrating rhetoric theory was supported by a longitudinal case study to resolve a strategic brand management paradox.

Keywords Brand identification, Market orientation, Brand orientation, Brand meaning, Brand core, Brand essence, Brand rhetoric

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the brand core and its management over time. In principle, all established brands have an inner core, even though it may vary in terms of content, depth and clarity. Essentially, the core of a brand is what it can be reduced to without losing its fundamental meaning or its utility as a point of reference in long-term management. The aim of this study is – through employment of a strategic brand management perspective – to develop a framework that enables continuous management, preserving the brand core while stimulating progress and development by dynamically managing change. The framework is therefore intended to mitigate the paradox of managing for both continuity and change over time (Collins and Porras, 1998; De Wit and Meyer, 2010; Prahalad and Hamel, 1989).

The research is based on a 10-year longitudinal study of Volvo's management of its brand covering the period from 1927 to 2015. By observing and taking part in the discussions regarding the Volvo brand's core values – safety, quality and environmental care – I became aware of their importance to the organisation and its management. Particularly intriguing

was the continuity with which the brand seemed to have been managed. Volvo's three core values have remained unchanged for decades, as has the positioning of the brand in relation to safety. A Volvo manager responded to my question of whether "safety" is to be classified as a functional, emotional or self-expressive benefit as follows: "We view our core values from different viewpoints and we do not limit them to be this or that, rather all at the same time. They all say Volvo for life" (interview, December 2005). This statement surprised me and raised fundamental theoretical questions about "the brand core and its management".

Volvo is a unique case with which to investigate the inner elements of a brand and how it is managed over time. First, the organisation has long-standing core values. Second, Volvo is a well-known brand with a recognised international brand position. The company's safety position is in fact an oft-cited illustration in the strategic brand management literature (Kapferer, 2012; Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2006). Third, Volvo's transition from a product brand to a corporate brand provided a rare opportunity to study the implications for its brand core.

The notion of the brand core is equally relevant for new brands such as Airbnb, Spotify and Uber, as for established

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ones like British Airways, Nestlé and Harley-Davidson. For the distinct category of “heritage brands” (The Nobel Prize, Louis Vuitton, SC Johnson and successful constitutional monarchies), safeguarding the brand’s core while embracing change in society and markets is essential (Balmer *et al.*, 2006). Arguably, the notion of the brand core is important for all types of brands – product, service and corporate (organisational) brands.

Three key questions related to the brand core sum up the formidable challenges facing strategic management and theory:

- Q1. How to define what the core of the brand is, and what it is not?
- Q2. How to use the brand core as a point of reference in all branding efforts?
- Q3. How to stay true to the brand’s core while still adapting to change?

In principle, without a defined core, strategic brand management will lack a general course to follow (de Chernatony, 2009). The reality is that most brand managers struggle to understand what their brands essentially represent (Balmer and Greyser, 2002). The problem is not usually the lack of potentially significant key elements, but rather the issue of which of those elements are most central (Lencioni, 2002). Defining and implementing elements that are *not* core, or those that deviate from the core when formulating a brand strategy, can potentially derail a brand-building process and endanger brand assets (Kapferer, 2012). Not knowing what constitutes the brand core engenders risk – that change might result in the brand losing its identity and market position. Even with a carefully defined core, the challenge remains of how to ensure its evolution and adaptation to change over time (Gryd-Jones *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b).

The “brand essence” concept is the most commonly encountered in the literature and among marketing practitioners relating to the brand core notion. This concept was primarily developed for product brands by Ted Bates advertising agency in the 1970s and is often applied in the management of fast-moving consumer goods brands. Other related terms are “brand concept” (Park *et al.* 1986); “brand mantra” (Keller, 1999); “brand vision” (de Chernatony, 2006); the “promise” (Knapp, 2008); “covenant” (Balmer, 2010); and the brand’s “core ideology” (Collins and Porras, 1998). For decades, exactly what constitutes the core of a brand and how it can be defined and managed have intrigued academics from a range of disciplines (Grant, 2010; Gardner and Levy, 1955; Peirce, 1934). Traditionally, however, the focus of strategic brand management research has been on product branding, with corporate branding receiving less attention (Balmer, 2010). Furthermore, the management of brand image – rather than brand identity – has been in focus. Customer benefits are considered key in defining a brand’s core, rather than brand values (Park *et al.*, 1986). Theory lacks an agreed-upon brand core framework applicable to different types of brands for continuous and dynamic management.

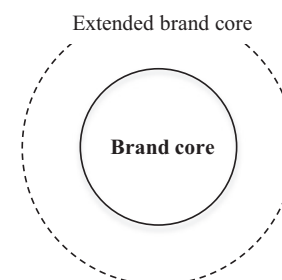
The rhetorical theory of communication serves as a theoretical foundation for the conceptual framework of this paper. In rhetoric, “essence” comprises the attribute or set of attributes that fundamentally define an entity (Crowley and Hawhee, 2004). I selected this theoretical approach for the exploration to mitigate the inherent tension between managing for continuity and managing change. More specifically, this paper focuses on the analytical capacity of the rhetorical theory (not on rhetoric as related to “eloquence” or “persuasion”) to explore the nature of the brand core and its management over time. The rhetoric perspectives (logos, ethos and pathos) are integrated in the brand core framework introduced in this paper, without having a single type of brand, target group or particular approach in mind. Rhetoric is a “science of sciences”, which makes it part of many existing theories, frameworks and concepts (McCloskey, 1998, 2000; Iglesias and Bonet, 2012; Sigrell, 2008). However, to my knowledge, this is the first application of rhetoric theory in the specific exploration of the brand core.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. I start by reviewing the literature, with its definitions and approaches to the concept of the brand core within the fields of marketing, advertising, brand management and general management. This reveals a gap in the literature regarding managing for both continuity and change. Second, criteria for a new framework are listed based on the identified theoretical gap. Third, rhetoric is presented as a theoretical foundation, focusing on its three perspectives: logos, ethos and pathos. Then, the brand core framework is introduced. Fourth, the methodology section explains the analysis of the Volvo case using the new framework, and its integration with two established product brand and corporate brand frameworks. Having discussed and analysed the case, the paper concludes with implications for theory and practice, its limitations and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

A common theme in the reviewed literature is the notion of a “brand core” and “an extended brand core” (Figure 1). Definitions and frameworks related to the notion of the brand core follow a similar logic, in which a fuller image or identity encompasses a number of brand elements and associations, which are distilled into a “brand core”.

Figure 1 The core of a brand



2.1 The brand core: related concepts and applications

I begin by reviewing extant concepts and frameworks and their key management applications as related to the notion of a brand's core. Brand essence is, as noted, the most prominent and widely used concept in brand management literature and practice (Table I). The applications range from a general management scope (as in the Core Ideology model of Collins and Porras, 1998) to specific usages, for example those of formulating a brand's value propositions (Knapp, 2008) or identifying and promoting a brand's "big idea" in advertising over the long term (Ogilvy, 1983). The concepts and frameworks differ in that they are being developed primarily either for product brands or corporate brands. In some cases, the brand image is in focus, while in others, the brand identity is taken as the point of departure.

To sum up the inner meaning of a brand, to communicate its value proposition and to clarify its position, the concepts of "brand essence", "brand vision" and "brand promise/covenant" are used throughout the strategic brand management literature (de Chernatony, 2009). Although the terminology may differ, the basic role and function of what are

here termed "brand statements" is to encapsulate a brand's meaning (Table II).

In advertising and communication management, terms such as "promise", "tagline", "pledge", "payoff", "claim" and "slogan" are often used interchangeably. Examples of brand statements are De Beers' "Diamonds are forever" and American Express's "Don't leave home without it". A brand statement can range from specific product features (Andrex: "Soft, Strong and Long") to created image associations ("Welcome to Marlboro country") and an organisation's spirit (Adidas: "All in"). Brand statements are more or less strongly associated with a brand's core. Examples of deeply held (and legally and/or constitutionally bound) brand statements are, "For the benefit of mankind", used by the Nobel Prize organisation, based on Alfred Nobel's will from 1901 (Urde and Greyser, 2014, 2015), and "Dieu et mon droit" (British Monarchs' motto since 1066).

2.2 The "extended brand core"

Continuing with the literature review, "customer needs and benefits" and "brand values" are presented as key dimensions

Table I Definitions of concepts related to "the core of a brand"

| Authors | Concepts and definitions | Models and applications |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Ted Bates Worldwide (1980) | <i>Brand essence</i> : "... what the brand is all about; what qualities it possesses to motivate the consumer to buy the brand instead of another competitive brand" (Ted Bates Advertising, internal document) | The "Brand Wheel" model is primarily used for <i>advertising and communication management of product brands</i> . Based on customer insights with benefits defined as functional, emotional or self-expressive |
| Ogilvy (1983) | <i>Big idea</i> : "Unless your advertising contains a big idea, it will pass like a ship in the night" (p. 16) | Ogilvy's principles; recognising and developing <i>long-term brand advertising campaigns</i> |
| Park et al. (1986) | <i>Brand concept</i> : "A firm selected brand meaning deriving from basic consumer needs—functional, symbolic and experiential" | The "brand concept-image" model is used in <i>planned management and positioning of product brand image over time</i> |
| Aaker (1996) | <i>Brand core identity</i> : "The core identity represents the timeless essence of the brand [...] central to both the meaning and success of the brand [...] contains associations that are most likely to remain constant" (p. 85) | The "brand identity" applies to <i>product and corporate brand management</i> . The brand identity is related to the value proposition with functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits |
| Keller (1999) | <i>Brand mantra</i> : "Brand mantras are short three to five word phrases that capture the irrefutable essence or spirit of the brand positioning" (p. 45) | "Brand mantras" are intended to build <i>brand commitment</i> to make the (corporate) brand personally meaningful and relevant for internal stakeholders |
| Knapp (2008) | <i>Brand promise</i> : "The essence (heart, soul, and spirit) of the functional and emotional benefits that customers and influencers receive when experiencing a brand's products and services" (p. 18) | The purpose of a brand promise is to create and communicate a long-term <i>value proposition</i> with the customer's perspective. Applicable for both product and corporate brands |
| Kapferer (2012) | <i>Brand kernel</i> : "Traits judged to be necessary to the brand definition" (p. 255) | The "brand identity prism" applies primarily to product brand (identity) management, where it is used to achieve <i>coherence and consistency</i> |
| Balmer (2010) | <i>Covenant</i> : "[...] what is promised (from the corporate side) and what is expected (from the customer and stakeholder side)" (p. 189) | The "AC4ID framework" applies to corporate brand identity management. The covenant is a <i>contract between the organisation and its customers and non-customer stakeholders</i> |
| De Chernatony (2006) | <i>Brand vision</i> : "Brand vision: an envisioned future, the purpose of the brand and the values that will underpin the brand" (p. 75) | The "brand vision process" provides strategic brand management with a <i>point of reference</i> . Applicable to product and corporate brands |
| Collins and Porras (1998) | <i>Core ideology</i> : "Ultimately, the only thing a company should not change over time" (p. 82) | The "core ideology model" relates to the mission of the corporation and the core values of the organisation from a <i>general management perspective</i> |
| Urde (2013) | <i>Corporate brand core</i> : "An entity of core values supporting and leading up to a promise" (p. 758) | The "corporate brand identity matrix" is used to <i>define and align</i> a corporate brand's identity |

Table II Three types of brand statements

| Brand statements | Definition |
|------------------|---|
| Brand essence | The central inner core of a brand encapsulated by a short phrase that is often expressed as a metaphor |
| Brand vision | A projection of the brand into the future by a description of what the brand (and organisation behind it) wants to accomplish. The brand vision is often intended as a source of inspiration and challenge for the organisation |
| Brand promise | A declaration specifying what a brand will/will not do or stand for |

of the “extended brand core”. Brand core definitions are logically distillations of broader brand conceptualisations. The way a brand’s core is defined herein – what is considered to be at core and what is peripheral – reflects an author’s understanding of a brand; however, the notion of the extended brand core could, in principle, include all brand dimensions that are not considered to be core. Notable extensive brand conceptualisations are *customer-based brand equity* (Keller *et al.*, 2012), *brand identity systems* (Aaker, 1996) and the *corporate brand identity and reputation matrix* (CBIRM; Urde and Greyser, 2014). These, and other (corporate) brand frameworks, provide a necessary context. Reviewing the literature, “customer needs and benefits” and “brand values” are dimensions directly associated with the definition of a brand’s core.

2.2.1 Customer needs and benefits as part of the “extended brand core”.

In a seminal article on the brand concept, Park *et al.* (1986) presented a framework for the planned management of a product brand’s image over time. In substance, the brand concept is management’s response to the needs and wants of the consumer. In the reviewed literature, this is one of the rare contributions that attempts to bridge continuous and dynamic brand management over time. Park *et al.* (1986) emphasised the importance of introducing, elaborating and fortifying the brand’s image and positioning over time by responding to consumer needs (Fennell, 1978; Levy, 1959; Solomon, 1983, on consumer behaviour; and Nicosia and Mayer, 1976, on sociology of consumption). Aaker (1996) refers to customer benefits – derived from customer needs – as shown in Table III.

Park *et al.*’s (1986) “brand concept” serves as an aid to brand communication and positioning to support the

Table III Three types of customer needs and benefits

| Customer needs and benefits | Definition |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Functional | A (need) benefit based on a product attribute that provides functional utility to the customer |
| Emotional | A (need) benefit providing a positive feeling experienced by a customer through the purchase or use of a brand |
| Self-expressive | A (need) benefit providing a way for a person to communicate his or her self-image |

Sources: Aaker (1996); Park *et al.* (1986)

management of the image over time. Thus, the principal role of brand management is to adjust image and positioning continuously to current market conditions following a market-oriented approach (Levitt, 1960, 1981; Narver and Slater, 1990; Shapiro, 1988; Jaworski and Kohli, 1993). The limitations of this influential framework are that it does not consider brand identity and that it has a product brand focus.

2.2.2 Brand values as part of the extended brand core.

A brand can be described as a “cluster of values” (de Chernatony, 2009, p. 104). A value-based understanding of a brand implies that there are values closer to its core, and other values that are peripheral. The meanings of brands are influenced by the organisation’s attempts to “manage meanings and values” in a cultural context (McCracken, 1993) in an “ongoing interaction” with customers and non-customer stakeholders (Urde, 1999, p. 117). Table IV provides an overview of values related to a brand from three different viewpoints.

First, there are “values related to the organisation”, which are characterised as deep underlying internal values (Harmon, 1996; Aaker and Joachimstahler, 2000; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Ind, 2007). These values answer, in principle, the questions of who we are, how we work and what it is that makes us who we are as an organisation (Hatch and Schultz, 2001). These cultural values may also be described quite simply as the organisation’s “rules of life” (Gad, 2001; Baumgarth, 2010; Hatch and Schultz, 2008). Consequently, these are the values that are internally regarded as important within an organisation. However, the same may not apply for the outside world (Alvesson and Berg, 1992).

Second, there are “values that summarise the brand”, described as an “organization’s essential and enduring tenets – a small set of general guiding principles” by Collins and Porras (1998, p. 73). In the literature, these types of values are referred to as kernel values (Kapferer, 2012), core values (Urde, 2009) and brand mantras (Keller *et al.*, 2012). Examples of brand mantras are Nike’s “Authentic Athletic Performance”; Disney’s “Fun Family Entertainment”; and BMW’s “The ultimate driving machine” (Keller *et al.*, 2012, pp. 121–122). The role of this category of values is to guide both internal and external

Table IV Three viewpoints on brand values

| Brand values | Definition |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Values related to the organisation | Arrangement of an organisation’s more or less expressed common values, supporting ideas, positions, habits and norms, which converge to give a corporate culture its character |
| Values that summarise the brand | Values that sum up the meaning of a brand. Core values are mindsets rooted within an organisation and essential perceptions held by customers and non-customer stakeholders, and define the identity of a brand |
| Values as perceived by customers | Customer values are expressions of core values, used to appeal more directly to a target group |

Source: Urde (2003, 2009)

brand-building efforts. They can be considered “the melody of the brand”, which follows through all of the product and service design, and communications, supporting behaviour from the organisation (Urde, 2009, p. 622). When viewed together, organisational values, brand core values and perceived customer values form the value foundation of a corporate brand (Urde, 2009, p. 622). Core values are classified as “true”, “aspirational”, “potential” or “hollow”; such classification depends on the extent to which they are rooted internally in the organisation, and to what extent they are “seen and appreciated” by customer and non-customer stakeholders (Urde, 2009; Lencioni, 2002).

Third, and finally, there are “values as perceived by the customer”, discussed in the literature as “added values”, “extended values” and “customer values”. These types of values are, as the terminology implies, additions to and extensions of a proposition to customer and non-customer stakeholders. Knox and Maklan (1998) used the term “customer value” to express what the customer is prepared to exchange for a brand. They thereby form the basis for the brand’s value proposition (in advertising terminology, this is also known as the unique selling proposition, or USP) and its positioning (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2011).

2.3 Defining and managing the brand core over time

Based on the review of the current literature, I conclude that there are frameworks developed primarily for the management of product brands and for corporate brands. However, there is, as far as I know, no single framework for the definition and management of a brand’s core that is applicable to all types of brands. Furthermore, the existing frameworks represent primarily market-oriented, outside-in approaches, with a focus on image, or brand-oriented, inside-out approaches, with a focus on identity (Urde *et al.*, 2011). The inherent tension in theory and practice remains between managing for continuity according to the brand’s identity (i.e. what it stands for, from an internal organisational perspective) and according to a brand image and reputation (i.e. how it is perceived, from the perspectives of customers and non-customer stakeholders). Figure 2 identifies approaches to the management of product and corporate brands, as well as a gap in both theory and practice.

3. Towards a new “brand core” framework

Three criteria are central to a usable brand core framework, and are necessarily responsive to the identified theoretical gap, paradox and associated managerial challenges. From an academic and managerial point of view, the framework must:

- be applicable to different types of brands (*universal criteria*);
- provide a point of reference – the brand core itself (*continuity criteria*); and
- enable adaptations and change over time (*dynamic criteria*).

Following the treatment of rhetoric as an avenue to a new brand core framework, Section 5 introduces a new framework that addresses all three of these key criteria.

4. Rhetoric as theoretical foundation

I advocate the use of rhetoric for its broad applicability and its potential to facilitate the exploration of the brand core concept and its management. The nature of rhetoric is here discussed in relation to the three above-mentioned criteria – “universal”, “continuity” and “dynamic”. Rhetoric concepts relevant to the purpose of this paper are placed into a strategic brand management context (Flory and Iglesias, 2010, and McCloskey, 1998, on rhetoric and management studies).

4.1 Universality in rhetoric

The universality of rhetoric is expressed in Aristotle’s definition: “the faculty of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given situation” (Kennedy, 2007, p. 36). In this paper, rhetoric is viewed as an interactive process and not as “one-way communication”. The definition used in this paper is proposed by Corbett and Connors (1999, p. 1), and includes “persuasion” nuanced with an overt reference to rhetoric, which is “the art or the discipline that deals with the use of discourse, either spoken or written, to inform or persuade or motivate an audience”.

Rhetoric informs our way of speaking, thinking and communicating with an audience in an interaction (Burke, 1969). It helps a speaker (the equivalent of a brand of any type) make an audience understand the speaker’s message, trust the source and desire a certain outcome (Greyser, 2009, on building and sustaining brand reputation). From this

Figure 2 Approaches in managing a brand’s core

| | <i>Product brand management</i> | <i>Corporate brand management</i> |
|--|---|---|
| <i>Market orientation: Outside-in approaches with a focus on brand image</i> | ‘Customer needs and benefits are key in defining and managing the product brand’s core’ (Park <i>et al.</i> , 1986) | ‘Customer needs and benefits are key in defining and managing the corporate brand’s core’ (Keller <i>et al.</i> , 2012) |
| <i>Brand orientation: Inside-out approaches with a focus on brand identity</i> | ‘Organisational and core values are key in defining and managing the product brand’s core’ (Kapferer, 2012) | ‘Organisational and core values are key in defining and managing the corporate brand’s core’ (Urde, 2013) |

Gap in strategic brand management theory and practice

perspective, communication has a purpose and rhetoric guides the process of defining the idea, choosing the arguments and expressing them in a way that helps reach “the desired end” (e.g. brand leadership). A brand can be said to be “a means to an end” by which a brand management strategy can reach its specified goals (e.g. a desired brand position).

4.2 Continuity in rhetoric

The purpose of a rhetorical discourse is to make an audience see a goal and want to reach it. The aim of communication is to convey “what the speaker ultimately wants to share – make common – with the audience” (Sigrell, 2008, p. 41) and thereby reach the “the desired end”. The choice of arguments is guided by and largely depends on the speaker’s purpose; as Aristotle put it *On Rhetoric*, “[. . .] choices are based on the end” (Kennedy, 2007 p. 38). A clear intent is a crucial part of any “thorough” communication (McCloskey, 1998, 2000) and guides the “deliberate” speaker. In the context of strategic brand management, the deliberate speaker is a brand owner, and the desired end is the strategic intent (Pralhalad and Hamel, 1989) of making appeals and promises to customers and non-customer stakeholders. That intent is essential for continuity and is a prerequisite when treating brands as resources and potential strategic competitive advantages (Barney, 1996; Grant, 2010; Hooley and Saunders, 1993).

4.3 Dynamism in rhetoric

The rhetoric communication triangle (Corbett and Connors, 1999, p. 2) describes the linkages from speaker to audience via subject matter and message. Within that context, the purpose of rhetoric is to apply effective means of communication and arguments to convey an idea to others. In brand management, the “speaker” is the corporate or product brand; the “audience” is the target audience of customers and non-customer stakeholders; and the “subject matter” is the branded product, service or solution.

4.4 Universal rhetorical perspectives for continuity and dynamics

Rhetoric’s three “modes” of communication deployed in a discourse are:

- 1 those relating to the issue itself (logos);
- 2 those deriving from the speaker’s character and reputation (ethos); and
- 3 those appealing to the audience’s emotions (pathos).

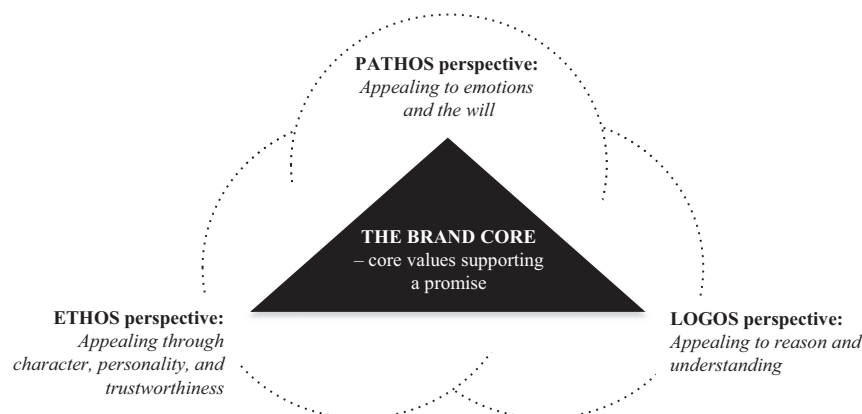
An identical topic (the core of a brand) can be seen from different perspectives in much the same way as an object – for example a statue – in a dark room looks different when light is cast upon it from different angles. From the logos viewpoint, the speaker selects arguments that appeal to the mind and increase understanding. With regard to ethos, the speaker opts for arguments that reflect and convey the character of the speaker, with the aim of building the audience’s trust. In terms of pathos, the speaker chooses arguments that will stir emotions in the audience.

To conclude, rhetoric offers a systematic exploration of different ways to formulate an appeal vital for both continuity and change in strategic brand management, as in any other context. The shifting of perspectives represents an alternative approach that does not call for categorisations; for example, categorising customer benefits as functional, emotional or self-expressive. Rhetoric therefore has the potential to break “the tyranny of either or” (Collins and Porras, 1998 p. 43). Any type of classification of needs, benefits or values may limit the adaptability of long-term brand management to development and change. Notably, the rhetoric exploration of the brand’s core occurs as a totality and from different perspectives. This distinguishing feature implies that a single aspect (such as “safety”) can influence and augment the brand meaning in more than one way over time.

5. The new brand core framework

The brand core framework consists of core values and promises that combine to form a single entity that appeals to an audience by being understood, interpreted and communicated from different perspectives over time. Thus, values and promises are the key elements of the proposed framework surrounded by the three rhetorical perspectives (Figure 3). It is possible to explore the brand core with an outside-in approach, an inside-out approach or a combination of the two. The core values influence the meaning of the promise, and vice versa. The promise and the values are

Figure 3 The brand core framework



intended to fuse into the core of the brand. The logos–ethos–pathos appeals are perspectives on the brand core as an entity and totality.

In the application of the brand core framework, an organisation and its management need to have a clear intent associated with their brand (cf. rhetoric’s “deliberate speaker” concept). Furthermore, specific goals associated with the brand (cf. rhetoric’s “desired end” concept) also need to be set. Finally, the exploration of the brand core is to be viewed as a totality from the three essential perspectives of appeal (cf. rhetoric’s “modes of appeal”). As noted, rhetorical theory prescribes that logos, ethos and pathos must all be present in effective communication, although not necessarily in equal proportions, in a fixed sequence or with the same degree of emphasis. This script is not a limitation; on the contrary, it is an essential strength of the method that enables flexibility.

For strategic brand management, the framework is intended to be an aid to exploration of the core of the brand (universal criteria) and for its consistent management (continuity criteria) and communication over time (dynamic criteria).

6. Methodology

Brands acquire their meanings in the minds and hearts of people; in this sense, brands are “social constructions” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In addition, a brand is a “sign” that is intended to stand for something, in some respect or capacity – and it addresses somebody; that is, it creates in the mind of a person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more fully developed sign (Peirce, 1934; Levy, 1959; Guiraud, 1971). As this study entails the exploration of the brand core and its management over time, key challenges included how to implement a research design of a social phenomenon (a brand) and its evolution. More specifically, I wanted to describe, understand and analyse aspects of a phenomenon and related mindsets and perspectives within an organisation and its management. Furthermore, my aim was to develop a new framework responding to the paradox of “management for both continuity and managing change”, which has been identified as a gap in the current strategic brand management literature (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Hatch and Schultz, 2009; Gryd-Jones *et al.*, 2013b). A set of theoretical and managerial criteria was defined to guide the development of the framework.

As noted in the Introduction, the interest for long-term management of a brand’s core was sparked by a series of early participant observations and interviews at Volvo (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Rhetoric was identified as a relevant theoretical foundation based on its universal, continuous and dynamic nature, which thereby met the “new framework criteria”. More specifically, rhetoric’s appeals were integrated into the framework later used in the analysis. This approach differs from the ones applied in the current brand management literature: It focuses on the notion of shifting perspectives and thereby avoids categorisations and classifications, which may limit management flexibility over time.

A longitudinal, qualitative, single-case-study method was chosen for four principal reasons. First, the case study method is suitable for investigations of contemporary phenomena when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1993; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). Second, the longitudinal structure presented the opportunity to study processes and evolutions over time (Pettigrew, 1990; Bryman and Bell, 2011). In the Volvo case, the date range is 1927–2015, which represented an opportunity for process studies relevant to the investigation’s purpose. Third, the Volvo case served as empirical foundation and supported the theory development. Finally, fourth, the Volvo case provided an opportunity to illustrate and clarify the application of the proposed conceptual managerial framework in practice (Barnes *et al.*, 1987). The arguments for the relevance and uniqueness of the case are presented in the Introduction.

Long, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Volvo management from 2005 to 2015; some of these senior managers were interviewed more than once. In total, 28 interviews were conducted, including four with former CEOs. The real-time data collection enhanced the retrospective interviewing and archival analysis (Pettigrew, 1990). During the period in which the fieldwork was conducted, regular contact was maintained with Volvo Cars divisions and with the Volvo Group (which produces other, larger vehicles, such as trucks and buses). The two divisions became separate corporations in 1999, but retained common ownership of the Volvo trademark and a strong shared interest in the brand. Table V provides a summary of data sources and descriptions.

In the case analysis, different research methods were used – interviews, participant observation and content studies of documents and archival material (Gummesson, 2005). By the use of more than one method, as well as multiple data sources, it was possible to triangulate (cross-check and delineate) findings (Denzin, 1989). For example, the finding that a shift in perspective on the Volvo brand occurred in 1976 was supported by retrospective interviews with the CEO at the time, as well as content analysis of documents (Volvo brand platform statements and internal memos), advertisements, and industry press articles from the relevant period. The coding of the transcribed interviews and the content analysis (applying the rhetoric perspectives) helped to validate this particular finding. This critical event in 1976 was related to Volvo’s references to the organisation behind the brand in terms of “we at Volvo”, which heralded a “corporate persona” and a shift towards corporate branding.

Following the case description, the new brand core framework was integrated with two existing product and corporate brand identity frameworks. These were selected on the basis of sharing a similar logic and having identifiable “extended core” elements. My intention was to analyse the new framework’s applicability in different brand contexts. In this type of case study, it is possible to generalise through the process of “theoretical abstraction” (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Theory-building from the case-based research followed an

Table V Data source summaries and descriptions

| Data source | Description |
|---|--|
| Interviews | In total, 28 formal interviews with Volvo management (four with former CEOs), Volvo brand management, Volvo brand communication and advertising, Volvo PR and sponsorships, Volvo after sales management and Volvo's lead advertising agencies |
| Participant observations | Participation at the Volvo Corporation's brand council and board meetings, internal meetings related to brand management and sponsorship events such as the Volvo Ocean Race |
| Volvo policy documents | <i>Volvo Brand Management Policy, The Volvo Core Value Policy and Volvo Trademark Policy</i> |
| Volvo cultural documents | <i>The Volvo Way and Our Tomorrow: Company Philosophy</i> |
| Volvo brand strategy documents and brand platforms | <i>The Soul of the Brand and The Volvo Brand Pyramid</i> |
| Volvo Cars' brand advertising | Printed ads, TV commercials and PR material, including archival material, published books (<i>Forty Years of Selling Volvo, 1955-1989; Volvo—The Passion</i>) and Volvo websites |
| Volvo market research and consumer insight analysis | Volvo customer insight reports, Volvo core values evaluation and rankings, Volvo market data and benchmarking reports |
| Historical overviews of Volvo Cars | <i>Volvo for Safety: A History of Volvo Cars Corporation (1927-2009); Volvo Cars Engines (1927-2007); Volvo Cars Racing (1927-2010)</i> |

iterative process of moving back and forth between the constructs and the data. The paper's conceptual contributions may be viewed primarily as “delineating and integrating new perceptions” (MacInnis, 2011, p. 138).

7. The Volvo case

The purpose of this case study is to describe – and later to analyse – the evolution of the Volvo brand and its core from 1927 to 2015. The quotes collected from the interviews and other data sources provide insights into the mindsets of the organisation. The case description is organised into three stages, with particular attention given in each stage to the core values, promises, advertising themes, value propositions and positioning (Table V).

7.1 Product branding (1927–1975)

In 1927, Volvo's founders crafted the following mission statement: “An automobile is made by and for people. The basic principles for all manufacturing are and must remain: quality and safety” (Volvo Corporation, 1998, p. 7). That set the direction for the development of the company and its brand. The first international brand promise articulated for Volvo cars – “A product of superb Swedish engineering” – reflects the importance the company placed on quality, durability and reliability (Volvo Corporation, 1993, p. 10). By the 1960s, the company had built its international advertising campaigns on such themes as “overbuilt to take it”, “100,000-mile reputation” and “stronger than dirt” (Volvo Corporation, 1993, p. 16). An advertisement that focussed on the last of those claims reads: “Buy a car and you're thrown headlong into a battle against rain and snow and mud and slush and slime and grime. Buy a Volvo and you get a car that is prepared for the battle” (Volvo Corporation, 1993, p. 26). The international positioning of Volvo was summed up in the claim that it was “a sensible and affordable quality European car” (Volvo Corporation, 2008, p. 37).

7.2 Transition to corporate branding (1976–1999)

During this second phase, the brand reinforced Volvo's safety position and also adopted “care for the environment” as an additional core value. At a trade show in Washington, DC, in 1976, Volvo exhibited a safety-stressing concept car that attracted considerable media attention. According to the company's international advertising manager at the time, this occasion was “a breakthrough for Volvo's positioning” and created “a new category” related to the concept of safety (interview, November 2006). To bring about this change, descriptions of the safety aspects of the car's design and the results of crash tests became distinctive recurring elements of communications campaigns. The company explained that the arguments in favour of safety differed markedly in both form and content from traditional car advertisements. An example of an advertising headline from the period was, “When did you last hear a car salesman speak about safety?”, which both acknowledged and countered the low interest in safety within the automotive industry at that time. The corresponding brand promises were: “Drive Safely. Volvo”; “A car for people who think”; and “A car to believe in” (Volvo Corporation, 1993, pp. 62–67). The advertising manager explained that the company had wanted to “elevate safety as an important aspect in the choice of a car, in order to achieve a change in attitudes”. The introduction of the seatbelt as a standard Volvo feature in the USA was not a customer-driven move, but something that the company implemented on the basis of its own convictions. In an interview in April 2005, Volvo's CEO from 2000 to 2005 recalled that “safety was controversial, and seatbelts were ridiculed when first introduced. An organisation must fight for its values”.

In 1972, Volvo adopted the core value of “environmental care”. During a media interview that year, Volvo's CEO (from 1971 to 1983) pointed at a car's exhaust pipe and commented, “We are aware that our products have a negative impact on the environment and we are going to do something about it”. Recollecting the tug-of-war between

environmentalists and industrialists during that decade, he added:

At the time, many industrialists viewed the environmental movement as a disturbance, demonstrating and occupying factories. I invited them – to their surprise – to come to Volvo to inspect our facilities (interview, December 2010).

He concluded:

We established our core values not only in Sweden, but internationally. We managed to connect safety and environmental care. This built the reputation of Volvo as a company with a sense of social responsibility.

7.3 Corporate branding and country of origin (2000–present)

At the third stage of the brand's evolution, Volvo based its positioning and value propositions on the core value of safety. The company's emotional appeals became more prominent during these two decades, and it introduced the first international brand promise in 2000: "Volvo. For life".

Meanwhile, core values had become even further ingrained in the corporate culture. The CEO of Volvo Corporation between 1997 and 2011 asserted, "The core values are part of the culture and soul of the company" (interview, March 2011). Clear confirmation of this was found in an internal brand policy document (Volvo Corporation, 1998, p. 2), which read:

The Volvo core values express what the organisation believes in and, ultimately, help the corporation to endure. They drive the development of new product offerings and the way Volvo serves its customers and the community. By following this path, a bond between Volvo and its customers and partners is established.

Volvo's senior vice-president for public affairs explained that quality, in the traditional sense, "is no longer viewed as differentiating but as a qualifier" (interview, February 2010). The core values had already been given a broader meaning and appeal in the same internal brand policy document (Volvo Corporation, 1998, p. 17), which said, "Quality, traditionally product quality, nowadays also encompasses all the virtues and functions of Volvo products and services which create end-user pride and delight".

In the 1970s, the core value of care for the environment had been primarily concerned with the safety of operators for example, in limiting the use of asbestos in components or harmful chemicals in paint. While this has remained an internal value, it has since been reinterpreted and given broader meaning and appeal. The vice-chairman of Volvo Cars asserted that "safety in combination with environmental care is a natural evolution" (interview, March 2008). The present definition of this core value demonstrates a holistic view, as exemplified in an internal policy statement (Volvo Corporation, 1998, p. 18):

Environmental care in all our operations – from design through production, distribution, service and recycling – is an integral part of the commitment towards customers, employees and the community. By instituting the environment as a recognised core value, Volvo clearly demonstrates its environmental pledge for the future.

The safety value has been strongly supported by the company's track record of "firsts" in relevant product developments. In Volvo's own words:

Safety is and will remain the most distinguishing core value of Volvo. Safety is historically an integral part of Volvo products, processes and services. Today, the differentiating basis of the safety concept has evolved to further

encompass personal, family, business and environmental values (Volvo Corporation, 1998, pp. 17, 22–23).

Safety has become Volvo Cars' most distinctive value and the basis of its most important emotional appeal. According to the senior vice-president for public affairs, "Safety is Volvo's leading edge. Other car manufacturers would probably first view safety from a [narrower] rational perspective" (interview, February 2010).

In an interview in February 2011, a former CEO of Volvo Cars stressed that "passion for the product" and "the concept of Scandinavian design" are important themes for the future brand development, and could extend the brand beyond the ambition to be perceived as a "premium luxury" mark. Identifying "safety and the human-centric approach" as pillars of the brand, he envisioned new product design and marketing communication as emphasising the "emotional side of the brand", thereby giving Volvo the "chance to own a position for ourselves and to stand out internationally as a Scandinavian brand".

The three stages in the evolution of the Volvo brand are summarised in Table VI.

8. Analysis

The case description reveals an evolution of the Volvo brand and, more specifically, its brand core over time. The interpretation, understanding and communication of the Volvo brand have changed, but the brand core has remained stable, especially considering the time span. The new framework is analysed here in regard to its universal applicability to both a product brand and a corporate brand, and whether it can serve as a point of reference to ensure continuity and allow dynamic management and interaction over time.

Based on the Volvo case study, the new brand core framework is analysed in three phases. First, the Volvo brand's evolution is examined, applying the new framework. Second, Volvo is analysed in retrospect as a product brand using the Kapferer brand identity prism (1991, 2012), extended with the brand core framework. Third, Volvo is analysed as a corporate brand using the CBIRM (Urde, 2013; Urde and Greyser, 2014), extended with the brand core framework.

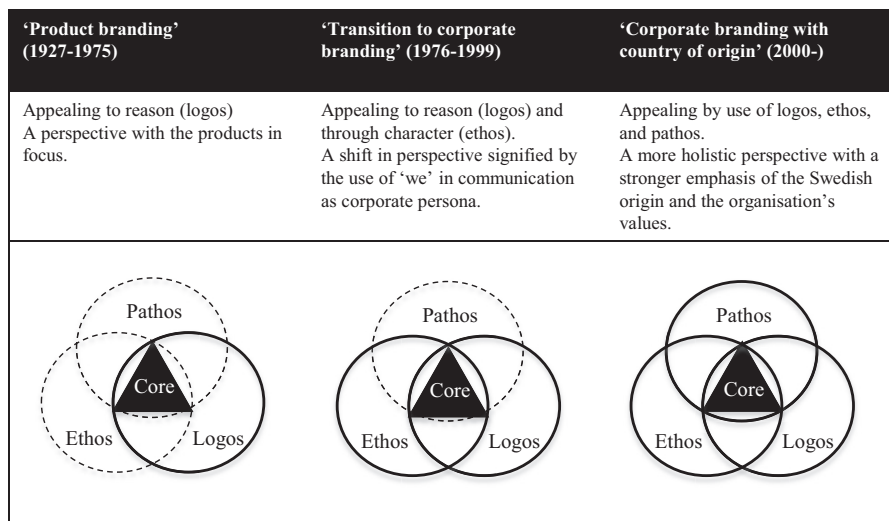
8.1 The rhetorical evolution of the Volvo brand and its core

In the "product branding" stage (1927–1975) of the Volvo brand's evolution, marketing communications primarily appealed to reason, with value propositions typically being supported by test data and detailed product specifications. The interviews and other data sources in this study indicate that management and the organisation viewed the brand and interpreted its meaning mainly from a logos (rational) perspective. A "product branding" mindset was prominent, with the product serving as the "persona". At that time, the first innovative, safety-related product features – such as the safety belt in 1959 – were promoted primarily by reference to technical data, not to the emotional arguments that were later deployed. This rational appeal reflected the character and personality of a Volvo and shaped the image of the company and its brand. The communications strategy clearly reflected the logos element of rhetoric. This is illustrated in Figure 4 by

Table VI The evolution of the Volvo brand

| | "Product branding" (1935-1975) | "Transition to corporate branding" (1976-1999) | "Corporate branding with country of origin" (2000-present) |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Core values | Quality (Safety as a latent internal organisational core value) | Quality and safety (Environmental care adopted as a third core value in 1972; initially an internal value) | Safety, environmental care and quality (The three core values are established, with safety as the most distinctive) |
| Promises | "A product of superb Swedish engineering" | "A car for people who think"; "A car to believe in"; "Drive safely. Volvo" | "For Life. Volvo" |
| Typical advertising themes | "Overbuilt to take it"; "Stronger than dirt"; "100,000 mile reputation" | "When did you hear a salesman talk about safety?" "When it comes to safety, nobody demands more of Volvo than Volvo" | "Volvo introduces daytime running lights. (People once laughed at seat belts too.)" "Volvo. Built by Sweden" |
| Value propositions | Durability, quality and value for money | Safety and quality | Safety and "Scandinavian design" |
| Positioning | "A sensible, affordable Swedish quality car" | "A safe car from a socially and environmentally concerned Swedish company" | "A safe car with Scandinavian design by an inclusive and humanistic company" |

Figure 4 Shifting perspectives on the Volvo brand core



a solid-line circle representing the logos perspective of the Volvo brand core. The ethos and pathos perspectives are depicted with dotted-line circles, indicating that they were part of the Volvo mindset and communications but were *not* emphasised.

During the "transition to corporate branding" stage (1976–1999), the company behind the product became an integral element of the brand rhetoric, as reflected, for example, in the frequent use of the first-person pronoun in advertising copy: "We at Volvo". This signalled a shift in communications strategy and in Volvo's view of its brand. Thus, the corporation's ethos – mission and vision, culture and competences – was being treated as a vital part of the brand. This observation supports the rhetoric-based idea that additional perspectives provide additional opportunities to devise "appeals" (e.g. value propositions).

An unexpected finding in the Volvo case is how the emphasis on ethos rhetoric at this stage seems to have played an important part in the gradual conversion of Volvo from a product brand into a corporate brand. This ethos perspective was emphasised from the mid-1980s forward via external communications (e.g. by Volvo's CEO in the media, in debates with environmentalists and in brand advertising), referring to "our" purpose and values. In rhetorical theory, this type of speaker is described as a "corporate persona". In the Volvo case, the internal perception and mindset of the brand and the external communications appear to have changed. Different advertising taglines (promises) were used, reflecting the search for the company's new desired position related to "safety" in the marketplace, while the core values remained the same. Notably, the case study supports the proposition

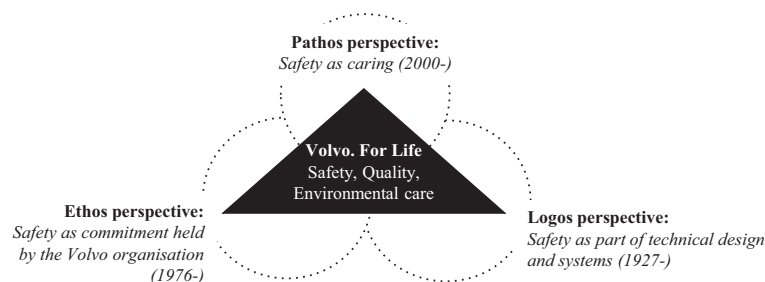
that the brand core was applicable both for Volvo as a product brand and as a corporate brand.

In Figure 4, the two solid-line circles enveloping the brand core illustrate the stronger combined logos and ethos perspectives. The pathos perspective was in the background of the overall communication, represented here by a dotted-line circle. The brand core serves as a point of reference for continuity, while the ethos perspective enhances the brand's value propositions to customers and non-customer stakeholders.

At the "corporate branding with country of origin" stage of the brand's evolution (2000–present), all three appeals – logos, ethos and pathos – are present and more balanced rhetorically, both in management's and the organisation's views of the brand as expressed in marketing communications (Figure 4). The "Volvo. For life" promise is supported by the three established core values, forming an entity: the brand core. Such advertising taglines reflect the brand promise's relationship with safety. As the conceptual framework presented here implies, the addition of a rhetorical perspective does not mean that the other perspectives have become less relevant; on the contrary, the process of argumentation becomes more complete. A case in point is the evolution of safety from a "rational sales pitch" in advertising (logos) to a vital part of the company's ethos and a core value – as a result of this transition, safety became a vital part of the positioning of the brand and the organisation behind it. This indicates that the evolution of the brand core and its meaning is reflected in the mindsets of management and the organisation. Volvo's commitment to safety became part of the brand promotion, supported by continuous development of safety-related features, upon which the brand's track record was built. In later Volvo communications, safety has been communicated by pathos, in the form of appeals to the emotions. It is expressed, for example, in the prominence given to Scandinavian design, the corporate culture and country of origin. A case in point is the advertising theme "Made by Sweden", introduced in 2015 with the Swedish footballer Zlatan Ibrahimović.

To conclude the first phase of the analysis, the Volvo brand and its core have evolved over time. Figure 4 schematically depicts how the emphasis of the three rhetoric perspectives has shifted and become increasingly integrated and balanced. Landmarks in corporate history that stand out during this evolution include the adoption of environmental care as a core value in 1972 and the introduction of the internationally communicated brand promise "Volvo. For life" in 2000.

Figure 5 Perspectives on the Volvo core value "safety"



Through communication, the internal interpretation of the Volvo brand has influenced its image and reputation in the external marketplace.

The core value "safety" has become the organisation's most recognised and distinguishing value. Notably, the positioning process of Volvo in relation to safety has advanced continuously over an extremely long period. Figure 5 illustrates the evolution characterised by shifting perspectives of this specific Volvo core value, using the logic of the brand core framework.

8.2 Volvo: a product brand

In this second phase of the analysis, the brand core framework is retrospectively applied to Volvo as a product brand from the mid-1960s. The Volvo brand is reconstructed based on the case description of the initial stage (1927–1975); see Figure 6.

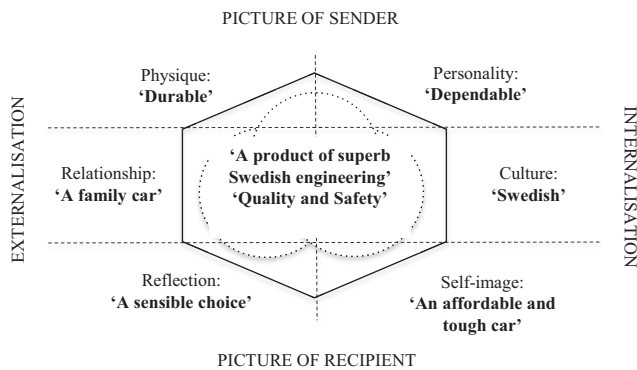
Archival material, such as brand platforms, strategy documents, sales manuals and advertising, support the brand prism reconstruction. The six facets of the brand identity prism model (Kapferer, 1991, 2012) are defined with the Volvo brand's values and statements from the relevant period that, together, are intended to capture its identity. In addition, the Volvo brand core is superimposed on the hexagonal framework. It is defined as "A product of superb Swedish engineering" (promise) supported by the core values "quality" and "safety". In the 1960s, the core value – safety – was, as noted, not explicitly part of the external communication. However, it was a latent internal core value traceable to the corporation's long-standing mission statement from 1927.

8.3 Volvo: a corporate brand

In the final analytical phase, the brand core framework is applied to Volvo as a corporate brand (2000 to the present). The completion of the Volvo corporate brand identity using the CBIRM framework (Figure 7) is supported by its brand platform ("the soul of the brand"), Volvo advertisements, Volvo websites and quotes from interviews with Volvo managers and advertising agency representatives to triangulate and substantiate Volvo Cars' CBIRM.

The CBIRM is described as a reinforcing framework of elements and linkages, with a core consisting of a set of values that leads to a promise. It is intended to serve as a tool for an organisation's management of its brand identity and reputation, including communications (Urde, 2013; Urde and Greysier, 2014).

Figure 6 The 1960s Volvo Cars brand identity prism and its core



Source: Kapferer (2012)

The integration of the two frameworks is facilitated by the notion that the core makes up the “centre square” in the CBIRM framework. Furthermore, “the arrows radiating from the centre symbolise the logic that all elements of the matrix are interrelated and form a structured entity”, and the content of one element in the CBIRM is intended to “echo” that of the others (Urde, 2013; Urde and Greyser, 2014).

9. Discussion and conclusions

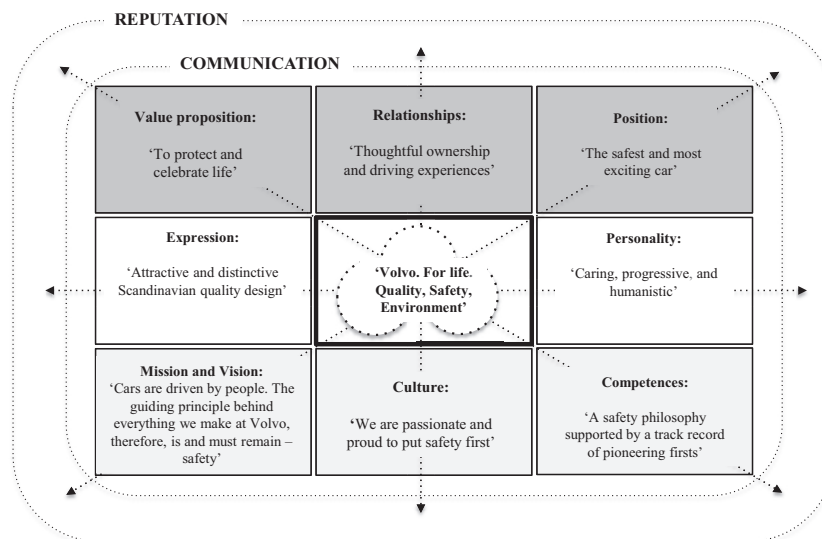
This study has explored the brand core and its management over time. The study’s findings are here discussed and related to the extant literature. First, the brand core concept is compared with Ted Bates’ brand essence – the most widely used concept in both literature and practice. The term brand essence is given various meanings by scholars and practitioners, but the focus here is on its original construct and application (Greyser, 2009; Aaker,

1996; Kapferer, 2012; de Chernatony, 2006). Second, the brand core framework’s perspectives are related to organisational mindsets. Finally, the paradox of simultaneously managing a brand’s core for both continuity and change is discussed.

The brand core concept differs from that of Ted Bates’ brand essence in four significant ways:

- 1 The brand core consists of core values and a promise constituting a single entity, and is not limited to the brand essence’s single short (metaphorical) sentence. With the inclusion of core values, the proposed concept responds to the reality and need of corporate brand management (Knox and Bickerton, 2003; Balmer, 2010; Gryd-Jones et al., 2013a,2013b), while the brand essence concept was intended primarily for fast-moving consumer product brands. Furthermore, the case analysis indicates that the integration of the brand core framework provides a temporal dimension to the CBIRM (Urde and Greyser, 2014) and the brand identity prism (Kapferer, 2012). In addition, by superimposing the brand core on the two frameworks, its interconnection with key identity, communication and reputation elements becomes evident (Figures 6 and 7).
- 2 With its rhetoric perspectives, the brand core framework provides a structured method of analysing a brand from different perspectives over time, in different situations and for different purposes. It is intended to be a managerial framework not limited to advertising, as is the case for the original Ted Bates’ brand essence concept. Modern brand management encompasses processes engaging and involving the organisation behind the brand in a continuous interaction with customers and non-customer stakeholders (de Chernatony and Cottam, 2009; Gryd-Jones et al., 2013a; Veloutsou and Panigirakis, 2001).
- 3 Contrary to the brand essence model, the proposed framework does not call for classifications of brand elements

Figure 7 Volvo Cars’ corporate brand identity and reputation matrix, or CBIRM



Source: Urde and Greyser (2014)

(Park *et al.*, 1986). The brand essence model builds on the definition of a benefit or value as functional, emotional or self-expressive. The brand core framework sidesteps this fixation in favour of multiple and shifting perspectives of the core over time, as specifically illustrated by Volvo's safety core value (Figure 5).

- 4 The brand core framework allows for an inside-out, outside-in or a hybrid of these two approaches in defining and managing a brand long-term (Gryd-Jones *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b; Urde *et al.*, 2011; Gromark and Melin, 2010). In the case of the brand essence model, this model is primarily based on consumer insight studies, leading to a process of distillation into an essence.

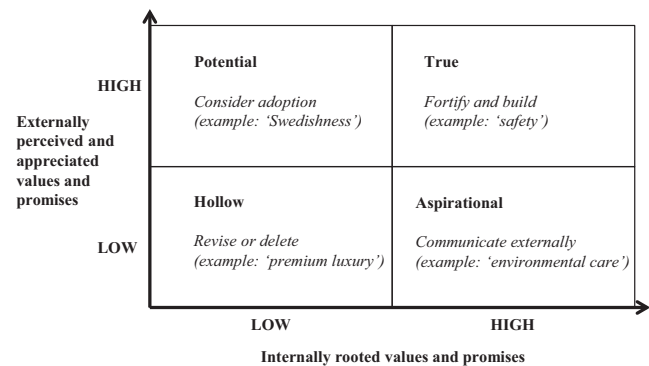
Another primary conclusion drawn by the study is that the shifting of perspectives on the brand core is the shifting of a frame of mind. An organisation's brand mindsets are, essentially, perspectives on the fundamental meaning of its brand. In managing and communicating a brand over time, the proposition is the shifting perspectives as the most sustainable approach over time to explore, define and reach internal agreement regarding the inner meanings of the brand. This is an interactive process that is influenced by external considerations to, for example, safeguard the perceived relevance and differentiation of the brand (Beverland, 2006, on authenticity). A finding from the Volvo case emphasises the brand core's role in refining the organisation's convictions, beliefs and ambitions in relation to its brand(s). A brand mindset can be viewed as a temporal position and perspectives of an organisation (and its management) relative to its brand(s) in a given market context.

The longitudinal case study shows how the Volvo organisation's mindsets have indeed changed and evolved over time. However, this evolution has not been without internal friction and tensions within the organisation and its external stakeholders (Gryd-Jones *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b). For example, the introduction of Volvo's first sport utility vehicle was initially rejected by parts of the organisation, on the grounds that the new car concept contradicted the core values of safety and environmental friendliness, and called for design alterations. Another example of tension was the market's resistance to the introduction of seatbelts. As referred to earlier, Volvo's CEO commented: "An organisation [Volvo] must fight for its values". I see this stance as an indication of a brand-oriented mindset, with the identity of the brand core serving as a guiding light.

The "continuity and change paradox" of long-term brand management is mitigated by providing a method for shifting perspectives of the brand core and thereby adapting to change while preserving the core. The Volvo case study indicates a logos-ethos-pathos sequence in the brand's evolution, but other sequences can also be foreseen. For example, Body Shop is discussed as being a "born ethos" corporate brand with an "authentic core" (Merrilees, 2015).

Situations may arise when change of the brand core needs to take place. A brand's core, or parts of it, can be considered "hollow", "true", "aspirational" or "potential" (Figure 8) – depending on the strength of internal roots, and on the extent of external perceptions and appreciation by customers and non-customer stakeholders (Urde, 2009; Anker *et al.*, 2012; Lencioni, 2002). It can also be affected by competitive

Figure 8 The brand core grid



changes or changes in the broader social environment. A brand's core becomes "hollow" when it is not rooted internally, and when customers and non-customer stakeholders do not perceive and appreciate its meaning.

For example, in the aftermath of the Deep Water Horizon catastrophe, BP decided to radically change its corporate brand's core values (Balmer *et al.*, 2011). In the case of Volvo Cars, the ambition to become known as a "premium luxury" brand was considered – internally and externally – to be "hollow" and was replaced by the notion of "Scandinavian design". Conversely, "true" brand elements are identified as having a strong internal rooting combined with an equally strong external appreciation. In the case of Volvo, the core value safety is "true" in this sense. Following this logic, aspirational brand core elements have internal commitment but are not perceived and appreciated externally to the same extent; in the case of Volvo, environmental care may be seen as "aspirational". A brand's core can attract the interest of and be re-interpreted by customers and non-customer stakeholders, providing different perspectives from those of the organisation and its management. For example, customers and potential customers appreciate Volvo's Swedish origin, making "Swedish-ness" into a "potential" perspective influencing the brand core.

9.1 Theoretical implications

This paper has made three theoretical contributions to the strategic brand management literature:

- 1 The study contributes by conceptualising the brand core and its management over time. This addresses a gap in the literature, and the study suggests a stronger focus on the brand core in long-term brand management. The strategic importance of a defined brand core lies in its capacity to provide focus, guidance and alignment in the brand management process. Furthermore, contrary to extant frameworks, the brand core framework is applicable to product, service and corporate brands – or indeed anything that can be considered a "brand".
- 2 The study contributes by integrating rhetoric as theoretical foundation in the exploration of the brand core and its management. It builds upon and relates to work by several notable scholars (McCloskey, 1998, 2000; Sigrell, 2008; Iglesias and Bonet, 2012). Contrary to extant branding research, the brand's core is viewed from different perspectives, providing a structured method.

The study's integration of analytical rhetoric with strategic brand management theory contributes by emphasising rhetoric's universal nature and its ability to provide a focus and to adapt to the audience. Instead of categorising or classifying brand elements, the brand core framework is based on applying different perspectives and mindsets in the long-term brand management process.

- 3 The study contributes by mitigating the paradox of management for continuity and managing change. When the brand core serves as a point of reference, this enables preservation of a brand's core while adapting to change. Defining the brand core provides the brand with a certain integrity, which in turn opens it up for deliberate interaction with customers and non-customer stakeholders regarding its meaning and development (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002; Gryd-Jones *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b; and Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013, on co-creation).

9.2 Managerial implications

Five strategic brand management implications can be taken from the findings of this study. All of these are “role-relevant” (Jaworski, 2011, p. 211).

First, management needs to define the brand's core. The logic is to reduce and distil the brand without losing its fundamental meaning and its utility as a point of reference in long-term management. In selecting a brand's core values, it is important to avoid primarily “outbound” customer values and primarily “inbound” organisational values. Instead, values should be selected that are core to the brand and will have meaning for the organisation, its customers and non-customer stakeholders alike. The same logic applies in the selection of a brand promise. The task is to fuse a brand promise and core values together into a single entity that sums up the brand's inner meaning.

Second, management needs to align the brand's identity, communication and positioning with its core, taking the brand's reputation, position and track record into account. By systematically reviewing matches and mismatches between the brand core and how it is expressed and perceived internally and externally, a stronger and more coherent brand is achieved. Notably, as product and corporate brands differ, so too will the elements to align vary; however, the brand core concept can in principle be given a pivotal position in any construct. The task is to fine-tune the brand's melody and harmony.

Third, management should promote organisational mindsets that support preservation of the brand's core, while simultaneously influencing and stimulating progress. Following this logic, an organisation and its management should always first explore the possibility of shifting perspective of the brand core before changing or abandoning any of its essential elements. By adjusting, for example, communication, value propositions and positioning, management can stay on course without losing focus on the brand's core. The task is to strive for a brand core that will be – internally and externally – regarded as “true”, while promoting “aspirational” and considering “potential” elements. In addition, management must not ignore the

urgent need to revise or delete any “hollow” brand core elements.

Fourth, management must balance the brand's meaning over time. The task is to make it appealing from the standpoint of reason and understanding (logos), to instil trust through its character and personality (ethos) – and to appeal to emotions and the will (pathos). Adding, emphasising and shifting perspectives of a brand's core can ensure its authenticity, relevance and differentiation over time. The important rhetoric rule is to include all perspectives unfailingly, while acknowledging that the balance among these perspectives may, and most likely should, differ over time.

Finally, management must measure the essential brand core elements over time. By tracking the internal foundation and commitment of the brand – combined with external appreciation and perceptions of the brand promise and the core values – management can continuously evaluate the strength and performance of the brand core. Such a managerial tool serves as an early warning system and an essential guide in strategic brand management.

10. Limitations and further research

This study examined a single brand in one industry. Therefore, a broader spectrum of case studies of product and corporate brands in different market contexts would provide valuable additional theoretical and managerial insights.

Moreover, the case study has reviewed the evolution of one established brand over time. Further research could explore how “new” brands are launched, with particular focus on the pace and sequence of steps in the process of shifting and merging of rhetoric perspectives and mindsets.

The application of analytical rhetoric has, in my view, not been given the attention it deserves within the research field of strategic brand management. It seems to have been “lost in translation” for unknown reasons. I hope that this paper opens up opportunities to expand integration of rhetoric with the study of brands and how to manage them over time.

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