Complex brand phenomena, such as brand identity, brand community, and consumer emancipation, have recently been on the rise and of interest for consumer researchers. Yet despite their significance for consistent interpretations, the exact relationships between these perspectives remain largely neglected. This paper advances the “brand system” notion of Giesler and Venkatesh (2005) to approach this gap in knowledge from a sociological perspective. A qualitative content analysis on five prominent CCT studies on brands is conducted, that informs about the diversity of the explored brand phenomena. Set in this context, the questions about how brand systems emerge, evolve, and dissolve are answered. Implications of the brand systems concept for future consumer research are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The growing complexity of the social interactions that brands inspire among individuals, communities, and societies requires an adequate complexity in the corresponding consumer culture theories (CCT). Brand-related social phenomena, such as emerging brand identities, brand communities, or acts of consumer emancipation, have recently been on the rise and of interest for consumer researchers. Yet despite their significance for consistent interpretations, the exact relationships between these perspectives remain insufficiently understood.

This paper advances the “brand systems” notion of Giesler and Venkatesh (2005) to approach this particular gap of knowledge from a sociological perspective. A brand, according to these authors, is a set of economic, social, political, and aesthetic distinctions. Products, prices, channels, logos, and etc. are considered elements of the brand. The brand systems notion, instead, embraces the social communications that evolve around a brand. From a brand systems perspective, the dynamic relationships between brands, brand communities, and society are prime sociological concerns. To best reveal the brand systems notion, I first abstract relevant aspects of brand theory and social systems theory. Then, I conduct a qualitative content analysis on five salient CCT studies on brand phenomena. The goal of this analysis is to portray the complexity, diversity, and communalities of the authors’ observations. Using this empirical context, I subsequently elaborate on how the brand systems notion allows for a more consistent understanding of these ostensibly diverse or even paradoxical observations.

The study reveals the following key insights: First, brand systems are established through social communication about brands. Brand systems proliferate with every reference made to the brand, but as human memory is ephemeral, they begin to dissolve in the moment consumers cease to communicate about them. Second, without conspicuous distinctions brands are invisible for the different observers (e.g. marketers, consumers, mass media, researchers) and brand systems have no reason to emerge. Generally, it is irrelevant for the brand systems’ “volume” whether the distinctions that brands make are accepted, altered, or opposed. As long as they inspire these observers to communicate about them, brand systems exist.

Third, as brand systems depend on continuous renewal, they are constantly at risk. Being intelligent in their reproduction, the systems negotiate and perpetuate specific programs and structures that guide, constrain, and inspire communications. Programs and structures allow consumers, marketers and other observers to communicate in accordance with or against the predominant disposition of a brand system. Fourth, brand systems can only be successful with respect to its observers, as only observers can perceive brand-specific communication and contribute to it. Marketers, as corporate observers, profit from strong, positive brand systems as they spread the brand’s distinctions at low costs and enthuse consumers. Yet a brand system’s program can turn against the goals of the marketer if the brand’s distinctions become predominantly rejected. Consumers, as individual and social observers, use brand systems to make suitable choices, to identify with, contribute to, or lean against. Finally, mass media and scientific observers reflect on the brand systems’ distinctions, programs, and structures and thus inform their audiences about the branded world they live in. This study is one example.

In sum, the proposed brand systems framework not only confirms most of the brand-related findings in consumer culture literature but also sets them into a larger and more comprehensible sociological context. In doing so, it helps consumer researchers not only to better understand the complex social dynamics of particular brand identities, brand communities, and brand protest movements, but also the fundamental communalities of their emergence, proliferation, interrelation, and dissolution.

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