

Open Peer Commentaries

on Seiichiro Honjo's "Brand Management as Cybernetic Practices"

Expanding Brand Management With Cybernetic Insights

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> Abstract • Framing brand management in the context of cybernetics helps to clarify how it has evolved over recent decades and where it is going. There would be value in its being extended to give a fuller picture of what we are doing when we are managing brands. Further analysis of the multiple interacting purposes across the system would also assist in this endeavor. Specific application to modern, hyper-personalized digital marketing would also be revealing.

«1» *Statement of positionality:* I spent the formative years of my professional life in brand management of pharmaceuticals in Australia. In Australia, marketing pharmaceuticals to consumers is prohibited by law, and so the resulting brand and marketing environment is by necessity complex and convoluted, involving pharma companies, regulators, patient associations, medical trade and scientific publications, health professionals, allied health professionals and marketing firms (and more). Our small integrated marketing communications agency navigated this system of networked relationships and influence informing performance of a brand on a daily basis. This context informs my approach to authoring this commentary – that is, my comments on brand management (as opposed to cybernetics) draw on my Australian industry experi-

ence rather than an academic orientation to brand management.

«2» The target article by Seiichiro Honjo can be read as a comparison between the developmental trajectory of brand management over recent decades with the trajectory of cybernetics, and an analysis of the insights that cybernetics can bring to brand management. The act of drawing this comparison emphasizes the view that second-order cybernetics is an evolution of first-order cybernetics. However, Honjo avoids buying into the dichotomy between them, by suggesting that, in the context of brand management, the first-order cybernetic model is a "particular case of the second-order cybernetic model" (§50). This act of bringing together the two types of model suggests that different models are useful in different situations, countering the notion that one superseded the other.

«3» In the spirit of Heinz von Foerster's exhortation (mentioned in §56) that we should "act always so as to increase the number of choices" (Foerster 2003: 227), this openness is helpful in adding to our toolkit of ways to understand our life-world. If we are able to think of first- and second-order cybernetic models as on a spectrum, rather than as a binary, then we dramatically increase the number of choices available to us.

«4» In constructivist analysis, we are driven to ask, *What are we doing when we do x?* So, we might ask, *What are we doing when we seek to reduce complexity?* Honjo postulates that we can "expect more practical implications from simplifying a model than from making it more complex" (§§48f). Extending this, I would argue that we are seeking to align the problem at hand with our cognitive (computational) capacity. Often, when faced with complexity, this is neces-

sary. However, caution is needed when extrapolating back out to the broader system – what we learnt in the simplified model is not necessarily explanatory at every other level. As Honjo writes, it may not be descriptive of why emergence occurs (§49)

«5» The process of being open to complexity (zoom out), then isolating components to examine their particular behaviour (zoom in), then building back out to the bigger picture (zoom out again) is one that is echoed through cybernetics, systems thinking, design thinking and many other disciplinary approaches. Readers of Honjo's article, and practitioners of cybernetics in diverse contexts such as management, including brand management, should welcome the opportunity to use this framing to critically self-reflect on when simplification becomes over-simplification.

«6» In the spirit of this reflection, I argue that the positioning of the article on the dynamic between brand identity and brand image – while commonplace in management literature – is an over-simplification in the context of cybernetics and constructivist analysis. Figure 3 in Honjo's article gives the impression that it is a closed system, even though it expands the number of loops compared to the conventional brand-management model. Going further and expanding the constructs might help in understanding relationships and complexity in modern brand management.

«7» For example, brand image is not only influenced by marketing communications – it is also influenced by direct experience of the product. Therefore, there is also a potential circular causality between reading about the product and experiencing the product that also interacts with brand identity and brand image. In working with brands,

I have observed that there is often a disconnect between these that cannot be remedied through marketing communications. This has been dubbed the “experience gap” in industry parlance (see, for example, the 2020 report “Closing the experience gap” from the firm Clear Strategy).¹ A way to address this within the framing offered in Honjo’s article is to expand the iterative capacity from the brand identity (as described in the section entitled Brand management and second-order cybernetics, §57f), to iteration of the product itself.

« 8 » Another example of expanding the constructs might be to consider more than one brand identity associated with the one product or service. This is not to say multiple brands, but the multiple identities that one brand can embody. I would argue that when we expand our system to include stakeholders and not just customers, the multiple identities become more and more apparent. If we include employees, we are now contending with an internal brand identity (that may be at odds with the external brand identity). If we include modern forms of hyper-personalized digital marketing, brand identities become highly fluid because exposure to them is limited to a select consumer base that has minimal interaction with other consumer bases (for a description of this type of marketing see Chandra et al. 2022). For example, it is possible for global online-only companies to use the anonymity provided by highly individualized targeted marketing, plus the ability to scale out of any experience gap issues (i.e., move on to new consumer markets) when the gap is perceived and begins to have an effect on brand image. Thus, the agility of the brand identity is not always used in a positive manner to respond to a stable and long-term customer and stakeholder base (Lavi 2023).

« 9 » Similarly, the rise of brand activism is not a straightforward matter. Further exploration of the *why* of brand activism will lead to more clarity on what we are doing when we are engaging in brand activism. Honjo hints at this in highlighting research that has proposed the purpose of brand activism is at least partly about employee

motivation and engagement (§20) – so, for example, brand activism is related in some way to employee activism.

« 10 » Honjo highlights that extending CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and ESG (Environment, Social, Governance) compliance to brand activism is becoming more common, and that this can lead to increased sales (§§24f). This raises the perennial question as to whether activities like ESG and brand activism are ends in themselves, or are another tool for the traditional bottom line. It might be said that it is a win-win situation, however, to invoke Stafford Beer, “the purpose of the system is what it does” (Beer 2002: 217). So, if the system does not produce the outcomes sought by the brand activism, can that be said to be its purpose? Beer writes, “it is always possible to analyze a situation from the point of view of its regulatory phenomena” (Beer 2002: 217). In this way, we can assess whether the purpose of brand activism is to solve complex social issues by whether it achieves this in any cases. How can brand activism be examined from the perspective of the outcomes it achieves, rather than its stated purpose? ¶11

« 11 » Honjo proposes that the “selling” mode constitutes “[d]eceptive persuasion” and that brand management, either conventional or exploratory, is a move away from this (§56). Reinforcing this is the assertion that in brand activism, deception is always revealed when actions do not match words (§25f). However, this is perhaps another over-simplification. The suggestion above of exploring this in the context of digital marketing (hyper-personalized, targeted) is also relevant here – the learning loop between algorithm (leveraged through advertising placement by brands) and consumer is ripe for exploitation through deceptive persuasion, without being anathema to exploratory brand management.

« 12 » We might hypothesize that there is a connection between the rise of brand activism and the popularity and increased use of social media, the attention economy and positive feedback loops between outrage and engagement. Again, this would be an area of interesting cybernetic study – for example, what has been the effect of the rise of social media influencers as a key marketing tool for brand management? Social me-

dia users assess the value of a brand based on how it will contribute to their own personal brand on the platform. As a related aside, the influence of the experience gap in this situation is reduced, because the brand is almost exclusively valued for its contribution to personal brand (which is a marketable commodity), and not for whether the experience of it matches the promise. As consumers become brands themselves, the rules of deceptive persuasion are made all the more complicated.

« 13 » In §50, Honjo writes, “Here, we can understand the differences between a first-order cybernetic model and a second-order cybernetic model as the differences in the learning and behavior of the observer.” We could go further and say that brand management concerns changes in the learning and behavior of companies (executives, brand managers, employees) and stakeholders (customers, potential customers and influencers). That is to say, the evolution of brand management that Honjo proposes can be further extended with additional circular causality.

« 14 » However, there is a question of whether this additional circular causality leads to more desirable outcomes. Honjo seems to suggest that this is the case, proposing that a model comprising more circular causal loops and/or the particular inclusion of customer construction of brand image (de-trivializing the customer) somehow leads to more desirable outcomes, in particular that it “corresponds to acknowledging the customer’s dignity” (§77).

« 15 » Hyper-personalization in marketing can be seen as a de-trivialization of the customer. In this case the goal is not to understand, but to use that knowledge to subliminally persuade. Thus, there is a logical fallacy in the assumption that de-trivializing customers leads always to acknowledging their dignity. The two processes (de-trivializing the customer, and acknowledging the customer’s dignity) may in some circumstances go hand in hand. However, it could not be said that the one causes the other. In the case of hyper-personalized marketing, the goal is to build detailed customer profiles through online tracking, allowing marketers to micro-target them to get them to purchase products, potentially at moments of weakness. Building detailed profiles aims for

1 | Report downloaded from <https://clearstrategy.com/thinking/the-experience-gap/> on 2 February 2025.

the de-trivialization of potential customers.. However it is also a form of deceptive persuasion, which is the opposite of acknowledging a customer's dignity. This situation is apparent in the well-known case reported in Forbes of Target knowing a teenage girl was pregnant before her father did (Lavi 2023: 230).

«16» I would argue that the way through this situation (that in some cases de-trivializing the customer goes hand in hand with acknowledging their dignity, and sometimes does not) is to return to purpose or intent. In the target article, there is quite a bit of discussion about purpose, however it is based on the assumption that purpose is different from a profit or growth motive (which is often enshrined in the legal structure of the organization). Purpose is assumed to mean a social responsibility (§21). This definition could be limiting for the cybernetic analysis of brand management, because it means that we are less likely to assess, at the same time, the influence of all motives (purposes) of a company in determining how it will act.

«17» Any analysis of purpose should look at stated or explicit purpose(s), as well as tacit purpose(s). We can suppose that a gap between stated purpose and underlying purpose is experienced as hypocrisy by stakeholders. Changes in political winds can reveal hypocrisy when the line-that-must-be-toed moves. It is worth considering whether the recent changes in behavior of global tech company CEOs in a new political context in the USA is an example of this.

«18» Relating to Q1 above, an area for further research might be whether it is possible in all cases for a company to hold a profit motive as well as a commitment to solving the wicked problems to which the author of the target article refers. A possible philosophical question to guide this might be whether, when a product or service is deemed to unequivocally hinder the solving of the wicked problem, the company that produces it can be wound down (or pivoted). This is relevant, for example, to energy transition. How could the broader systemic effects of brand management and marketing, including considerations of their contribution to wicked problems, be integrated into the approach described in the target article? Q2

«19» In conclusion, further analysis of the multiple interacting purposes across the system would assist in the endeavor to analyze the evolution of brand management over time. Specific application to modern, hyper-personalized digital marketing would also be revealing.

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A Citizen Perspective on Recent Manifestations of Branding

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> Abstract • I raise concerns about the prevalence of brand identity and activism in society and whether it can be beneficial to extend it to so many aspects of our lives as citizens and consumers. It makes us consider the appropriate fields where brand identity and activism are or are not appropriate.

«1» While the author of the target article, Seiichiro Honjo, has accomplished a comprehensive exploration of brand management and brand identity in general, it would be interesting to see an approach that looked more broadly from other contexts, such as the customer or the citizen perspective. Clearly, elaborating a theory and a relationship to design is a needed contribution, although an argument could be made that it is more relevant in some situations than others.

«2» For example, marketing applies to a wide variety of products and services from companies, non-governmental organizations and governments. The brand identity and activism is not only communicated by companies associating their brand with ecological responsibility or sponsoring charitable events but, in the United States and Canada, at least, by issue groups and politicians seeking to define their opponents through negative advertising as much or more than to propose their own priorities. The latter may or may not be ethical and acting to increase choice.

«3» It is also the case that, even with products and services, directed marketing aimed at meeting emotional and self-expressive aims necessarily includes some and excludes others. Sometimes this is overt – such as the dress code or its lack at restaurants – and sometimes subtle, such as the type of person shown enjoying the product in advertising. Gender-specific products – such as some children's toys, may be meeting a need but may also be reinforcing stereotypes