

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

or simply selling more toys, as when equivalent products in pastel colors are purchased when a daughter is born into a family that has an earlier-born son.

« 4 » A focus on the recipient of brand identity and activism would no doubt find that differentiated products and services are more salient to some than to others. Sometimes, a trivial-machine-to-trivial-machine relationship (\$47) is appropriate if the product matters only for its functionality or its convenience. One customer may be quite satisfied to select ordinary products, such as laundry detergents, on the basis of what is carried in the nearest store. On the other hand, someone, often a young person, finds it very important to have a certain style of a certain brand when there are many functional equivalents in items such as athletic shoes. More attention to the first one might be mere noise while to the second a trend to follow on a daily basis. Athletic shoes are indeed a good example of differences in customer or user needs. At one extreme, functionality, as usually considered, is irrelevant, such as when a particular brand of shoe associated with a celebrity sportsperson is purchased as a collector's item and never worn. At the other, a brand may be known for its fit, such as better for narrow or wide feet and then functionality is the paramount consideration.

« 5 » Brand identity and brand activism, broadly applied, are competing for attention in an increasingly crowded environment of polarizing media messages. Individuals have limited bandwidth and are bombarded with ads for products and services they may never use. Bandwidth can be an issue even with a product such as shampoo that nearly everyone uses. More than fifty brands were on the shelves of a moderately large pharmacy, with many having several variations. Would any ordinary consumer be able to recognize more than a handful of them? And, would it matter? **Q1**

« 6 » If fields are flooded with advertising and marketing, people may not even see important messages they would find useful, such as a service that is locally available that meets their needs or public health warnings. This also may make it more difficult for emerging perspectives that may not be as articulate or polished to be heard.

« 7 » There can be a problem when the coherence between brand identity and brand

activism is not conserved. The standard assumption in commercial transactions is that reputations should be fostered and sales increased. However, that assumption is based on the premise that there are no other agendas being pursued. A loss in reputation or sales of one entity might be justified if the gain to another part of the business was high enough.

« 8 » To take a recent example, the owner of the *Washington Post* newspaper, who also has government contracts with his other businesses, has been willing to lose brand-identity reputation and subscribers to gain advantage with his other commercial holdings.²

« 9 » In democratic societies, it has not been common practice with mass-market consumer products for the brand activism of businesses or organizations to be associated with one political party or another. It

2 | "Jeff Bezos defends decision to end Washington Post endorsements," *The Guardian*, 28 October 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/oct/28/jeff-bezos-washington-post-endorsements>, and "Trump meets with leaders from Bezos-owned Blue Origin," by Filip Timotija, *The Hill*, 25 October 2024. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/4954591-trump-meets-blue-origin-leaders-bezos>

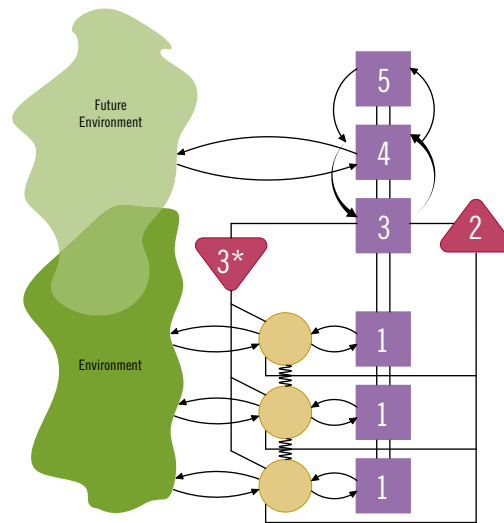


Figure 1 • Diagram of Beer's Viable System Model showing System One (1), Two (2), Three (3), Three Star (3*), Four (4), and Five (5) in relation to one another as well as present and future environments.

has been unusual to make politics part of brand identity or to make decisions that favor or reflect the ideology of the party in power, although that is often a feature of authoritarian regimes. Doing so narrows the potential market for its goods and services unless it is able to drive out its competition. It may be that young people who are active on social-media platforms are becoming more inclined to consider a brand's social or political positions, however.

« 10 » It would also be useful to consider what limits on brand identity are appropriate. It may be that the assumptions and activities associated with commerce are counter-productive elsewhere. For example, universities who seek to be *run like a business* may eliminate course offerings or departments that are outside their *core* identity. While it may be useful for companies to adjust their offerings in this way, universities are not as agile and may suffer a decline in adaptability and innovation. In a potentially more serious matter, if individual students are encouraged to think of themselves as brands as soon as they start secondary school, it may constrain their agency to explore and follow different interests as they mature. It also may discourage them from thinking of their lives in broader terms than those of a participant

in the economy, buying products and selling their services.

« 11 » Beer's Viable System Model (VSM) is a model of a system in its environment that acts to remain viable whether it is an amoeba or a company (Beer 1985). In both cases, the entity must earn something from the environment either by a transactional relationship or by participating in an ecology. Brands, brand identity and brand activism typically reside in System Four, which looks outside at the future. It is based on the identity, ethics and values of its System Five coupled with operational feasibility in System Three. All support the interchange between the System One units producing something the environment permits or values and receiving feedback that allows them to course-correct. These relationships are further supported by a function in System Two that smooths interactions among System One units and a specific, sporadic assessment carried out by System Three Star (Figure 1). As such the VSM is not simply an autopoietic system (§30ff) but also a system producing something valued by the environment that enables it to *produce* itself.

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Using the VSM to Improve Exploratory Brand Management

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> Abstract • I show how to connect the methodological development of the Viable System Model with exploratory brand management from the point of view of second-order cybernetics.

« 1 » The target article by Seiichiro Honjo shows the difference between traditional brand management and exploratory brand management. The latter is focused on stakeholders rather than customers, entails dynamic changes in brand identity and promotes the rise of brand activism. To understand these characteristics, the author proposes a theoretical framework based on the distinction between first-order and second-order cybernetics (Foerster 1979). He concludes that conventional brand management relates to first-order cybernetics while exploratory brand management relates to second-order cybernetics.

« 2 » He also argues, from the perspective of sociological brand management (Deichsel 1987; Hellmann 2019; Errichiello 2021), that further research could be done to revise current tools and methods used in research marketing and marketing communications to improve exploratory brand management by learning from Stafford Beer's Viable System Model (VSM) (Beer 1979, 1981).

« 3 » In my commentary, I show how further exploration could be done in the direction mentioned by the author by making some conceptual precisions and pointing to those organizational relationships that may provide important insights for brand management from the point of view of the VSM.

« 4 » First, let me make some conceptual clarifications. In §33, it is proposed that brands could be regarded as autopoietic systems. To check this proposition, we need to review the definition of the concept given by the Chilean cyberneticians Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in the 1970s (Maturana & Varela 1973). In their book

The Tree of Knowledge (Maturana & Varela 1987) they established three necessary and sufficient conditions for a system to be considered autopoietic:

- a The components of the system should interact through relations of production.
- b These relations produce the system's components.
- c Some of these relations produce the boundary of the system.

« 5 » Therefore, every autopoietic system is an autonomous, self-producing and organizationally closed system, which implies that it is a structure-determined system. This means that its future behavior is determined by its internal structure and not by external perturbations. In other words, perturbations may trigger behavior but not determine it. Therefore, seeing a system as autopoietic implies that its components must be adequately identified and the quality of their relations clearly specified. For instance, if we say that the main organizational components of a company are the people who work there, clearly it cannot be modelled as an autopoietic system because the company does not *produce* its workers, instead it produces goods and services. As an alternative, Varela (1979: 15ff) proposed the term "allopoietic" system to refer to this kind of autonomous and organizationally closed but not autopoietic systems.

« 6 » Moreover, Maturana used to claim that autopoietic systems pertain to the biological realm, the cell being the most emblematic. However, even in this domain, higher-order biological systems did not meet the three constitutive conditions. Of course, autopoiesis has been used as a metaphor (and not as an explanatory concept) in different domains, including Beer's classification of some structural recurrent problems in organizations (Beer 1985).¹

« 7 » Niklas Luhmann (1984) developed his theory of society based on the idea of autopoiesis. To be able to do this, he claimed that the main components of society were not people but communications. A society, thus, could be seen as composed by a network of communications whose rela-

1 | Beer referred to this kind of structural problems as "pathological autopoiesis."