

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.

Reference

Beer S. (1985) Diagnosing the system for organizations. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester.

Allenna Leonard is an independent consultant, based in Toronto, who worked with Stafford Beer applying his Viable System Model and delivering his Team Syntegrity Process. Her interests include accountability relationships with applications in environmental and sustainability practices. She is a past president of the American Society for Cybernetics and the International Society for Systems Science and is currently serving as president of Metaphorum and chair of the Ecologos Environmental Organization, which advances applications of Beer's work. She has also been active as an adjunct professor and delivered workshops on cybernetics and systems in organizations.

Funding: No funding was received.

Competing interests: The author declares that she has no competing interests.

RECEIVED: 7 FEBRUARY 2025

REVISED: 3 MARCH 2025

ACCEPTED: 3 MARCH 2025

Using the VSM to Improve Exploratory Brand Management

Alfonso Reyes

Universidad de Ibagué, Colombia
areyes/at/unibague.edu.co

> 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."

tions are communication processes that produce this same network. It is in this sense that scholars of brand sociology in Germany (§33ff), such as Oliver Errichiello (2021), suggest that we see brands as autopoietic systems. To be more precise, a brand could be seen as a set of meanings, values and norms that guides customers' behaviour, which is (re)produced via recurrent communication processes.

« 8 » Now, with this in mind, let us see how the Viable System Model (VSM) could provide useful insights for exploratory brand management. In its original formulation, Beer (1979, 1981) established five (sub)systems that any viable system should exhibit. According to Beer, a viable system is one that maintains an independent (autonomous) existence despite unpredictable changes in its environment. For many years the VSM was used from the perspective of first-order cybernetics.

« 9 » It was the work by Raúl Espejo that re-interpreted the VSM from the point of view of second-order cybernetics (Espejo & Harnden 1989). In this re-formulation, the five (sub)systems are called: Implementation, Coordination, Cohesion (and monitoring), Intelligence and Policy. This implies not just a change of the names but the development of a new methodological approach to use the model not as a blueprint of the organization's structure but as a conversational token to co-design, with stakeholders, a desirable structure for the organization (Espejo & Reyes 2011).

« 10 » This constructivist approach to understand the VSM allows us to distinguish six main types of constituent relationships that any viable organization deploys: The first one, called achievement, refers to the direct experience of stakeholders with the goods and services offered by the organization; the second (cohesion) refers to the necessary balance between the autonomy of primary activities constituting the organization and the cohesion they have to maintain; the third (policy-making) are relationships needed to co-define the desirable future of the organization; the fourth (stretching) deal with the changing demands of customers vis-à-vis the goods and services produced by the organization; the fifth (ownership) refers to the cultural appropriation of cus-

tomers of these goods and services; and the last ones (citizenship) are needed to establish the relationships to the higher system to which the organization belongs (Espejo & Reyes 2011: 235).

« 11 » According to the target article, second-order brand management is focused on stakeholders other than customers and brand identity changes dynamically. Therefore, relationships of achievement, stretching and ownership are directly related to the connected learning cycle shown by Honjo in Figure 3.

« 12 » Understanding how to manage (and improve) these relationships with the VSM could help in improving marketing research and communication marketing as proposed by Honjo.

References

- Beer S. (1979) *The heart of enterprise*. Wiley, Chichester.
- Beer S. (1981) *Brain of the firm*. Wiley, Chichester.
- Beer S. (1985) *Diagnosing the system for organisations*. Wiley, Chichester.
- Deichsel A. (1987) *Von Tönnies her gedacht: Soziologische Skizzen [Thinking with Tönnies: Sociological sketches]*. Fechner Verlag, Hamburg.
- Errichiello O. (2021) Gestalt as a determinant of brand management: A sociological perspective on branding in German-speaking discourse. *Gestalt Theory* 43(2): 231–246. <https://doi.org/10.2478/gth-2021-0019>
- Espejo R. & Harnden R. (eds.) (1989) *The Viable System Model: Interpretations and applications of Stafford Beer's VSM*. Wiley, Chichester.
- Espejo R. & Reyes A. (2011) *Organizational systems: Management complexity with the viable system model*. Springer Verlag, New York.
- Foerster H. von (1979) Cybernetics of cybernetics. In: Krippendorff K. (ed.) *Communication and control in society*. Gordon and Breach, New York: 5–8. [► https://cepa.info/1707](https://cepa.info/1707)
- Hellmann K.-U. (2019) Marke als Kommunikation und Metaprodukt: Sozialwissenschaftliche Grundlagen der Markenführung [Brand as communication and meta-product: Sociological fundamentals of brand management]. In: Esch F.-R. (ed.) *Handbuch Marken-*
- führung [Manual of brand management]*. Springer Gabler, Wiesbaden: 95–120.
- Luhmann N. (1984) *Soziale Systeme*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main. English translation: Luhmann N. (1995) *Social systems*. Stanford University Press, Stanford CA.
- Maturana H. R. & Varela F. J. (1973) *De máquinas y seres vivos: Una teoría de la organización biológica [Of machines and living beings: A theory of biological organization]*. Editorial Universitaria, Santiago.
- Maturana H. R. & Varela F. J. (1987) *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Shambala, Boston.
- Varela F. J. (1979) *Principles of biological autonomy*. Elsevier, New York.

Alfonso Reyes is a physicist and a systems engineer from Los Andes University in Colombia. He has an MSc in Computer Science, a PhD in Management Cybernetics and postdoctoral studies in Organizational Learning.

His recent research focused on the relationship between higher education and local development. He is co-author of four books about self-organization from the point of view of second-order cybernetics. He was the chancellor of Universidad de Ibagué in Colombia (2009–2016; 2020–2024) and Dean of the Engineering School at Los Andes University (2016–2020). Now he is retired but still active in research and consultancy.

Funding: The author did not receive any funding while writing the manuscript.

Competing interests: The author declares that he has no competing interests.

RECEIVED: 23 JANUARY 2025

REVISED: 24 FEBRUARY 2025

ACCEPTED: 1 MARCH 2025