

Second-order Branding as Orchestration of Media Ecology

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> Abstract • Commenting on Seiichiro Honjo's target article, I suggest an alternative orientation from McLuhan's media ecology theory that might expand upon the proposed framework. Media ecology is appropriate to the contemporary notion of brand as a carrier of multiple communications relevant to action and decision-making by customers or stakeholders, as noted by Honjo.

« 1 » The target article by Seiichiro Honjo presents an argument and approach for reimagining strategic brand management as a cybernetic function. Corporate, or strategic brand management is suggested by the descriptions, even though the brand management process (designing and communicating a company's brand and its values) can be generally applied to all entities that formalize an identity. This identity is typically signified by a visual logo and attributes associated with the company's offers. As a professional designer and a professor, I have field consulting experience in designing, evaluating, and advising on branding and marketing strategy for large companies, so the contribution of an invited commentary is a welcome opportunity to expand on this inquiry.

« 2 » A key distinction is made between first- and second-order brand management, and these are also coupled with so-called conventional and exploratory branding. In §55, this differentiation defines the second-order behaviors of managing a company's "brand," its image and identity, as a circular, observer-based process, wherein the second-order observations are external to the brand owners. First-order brand management is considered conventional, as a simplified model wherein the brand is closely managed internally, and observers are not interacting with or changing the brand. The theoretical impact of this distinction appears to be

the ability to further distinguish that brand definition and communication can provide a transformative function, enabling more complex relationships among stakeholders and not just customers of the brand's products and services. However, the research question RQ1 in §80 appears to be circular, in that conventional and exploratory are labels for the association of first- and second-order criteria. As I was unable to locate papers on exploratory branding, and found only papers on exploratory methods in studies on branding, this definition and label might be further delineated.

« 3 » The target article introduces "conventional" brand management very early in the discussion, but it is defined (§1) more in contrast to the exploratory position, as there is no clear distinction made of the modern evolution of strategic branding, that is quite advanced, but not exploratory. The articulation of new "exploratory" brand management is presented here as the emergence of a second-order cybernetic function, but it is also not defined independently of its second-order relationship (§§2, 27ff). No cases or attributions of companies with a second-order process are made. Honjo describes the ambiguity of even established brand management in §3, with clear references in marketing. A definition of conventional brand management should account for advances in the theory of brand as asset and corporate value creation, such as Jean-Noël Kapferer's, which defines brand management as concerned with "gaining power, by making the brand more known, bought, and engaging" (Kapferer 2012: 10). If this type of definition were used to distinguish the conventional branding aim of creating corporate value and improving reputation in the marketplace, the exploratory distinction might be seen more clearly by readers new to marketing theory and practice.

« 4 » The concepts of first-order and *regulatory* control are indeed relevant to most conventional brand management. However, we might also recognize that there are complex second-order functions involved in managing, or aligning, a brand to the company business model, its identity creation and intended markets. Perhaps it could be seen as strategic branding vs. exploratory branding, where the stakeholder observers have different goals in each case.

In *strategic* branding, the brand asset provides a significant multiplier effect for profitability and market strength, such as the so-called master brand strategy (Aaker 2006).

« 5 » The social or transformative functions of the exploratory brand might be considered of significant value to social enterprises (Kickul & Lyons 2020) and social-purpose organizations (De Silva et al. 2021). These types of organizations have developed unique business models that could also be considered exploratory or second-order, in that such business models are consciously designed to produce social impact. There currently appears to be fairly limited literature on the branding aspects of these new business models.

« 6 » A reference to advertising as part of conventional brand marketing is discussed briefly in §11, but is not developed much further in the target article. Because researchers developing new theories for advertising would also be relevant in this argument, the consideration of how an exploratory branding process would use advertising might shed light on how these brands would appear in media form. As conventional advertising was based on mass media and mass audiences, the traditional brand strategy was based on achieving salience and memorability in a crowded mass market. However, as new generations of consumers as digital natives have left television and mass media behind, brands have been forced to move into social-media and web marketing. The move to virtual media ecosystems has consistently diminished the exposure to brand imagery and messaging. Studies show the impact of social-media advertising has a much more limited reach than advertising in mass markets. As reported by Xingchen Niu, et al. (2021: 1) a significant proportion of Americans (82%) ignore social-media advertising. Since advertising can be viewed as the ecosystem in which brands become salient to consumers (and other stakeholders), a media-ecology analysis of the changing advertising ecosystem might be considered in the further development of the exploratory brand concept.

Furthering the Inquiry

« 7 » The question I am interested here is: What cybernetic processes co-evolve in the media ecology in which exploratory

brand management is engaged with stakeholders?

« 8 » An assumption is suggested in §56 that (conventional) “brand identity is fixed.” The idea is that fixed identity holds only for first-order brand management, as the observation was made that first-order feedback is from internal controls. Also for conventional advertising contexts, brand promotion is distinct from selling, but such promotion, inclined toward selling and marketing, is also typical in strategic brand management. Brand managers will not have license within a firm to deviate from brand identities, and all brand constructs (wordmarks, typefaces, palettes, taglines) are not pliable subjects but are rather highly controlled strategic assets. Ranulph Glanville’s concept of “enabling control” (Glanville 2007: 1181) also applies with respect to second-order branding, as external feedback suggests that an expanding range of brand engagement options could emerge within a media ecology. The media-ecology perspective suggests that there is less co-creation than there is ecological (social) pressure and dynamics that facilitate brand identity, salience against a social background, and its expression of preferred meaning.

« 9 » Klaus Krippendorff was likely the first to define the cybernetics of influence (i.e., branding) in advertising, with in-depth discussions of linear control and participation, contrasting enablement and causality in complex communication ecologies. He adopts ecology as a frame for understanding organizational interaction, and follows the dynamics of species differentiation in ecosystems, wherein they can both compete and cooperate in an environment. Krippendorff appropriated ecology as a model for how “organizations can interact with each other recursively without requiring central control or a global understanding” (Krippendorff 1988: 66). Even in conventional advertising contexts within pre-Internet mass media, he describes “information flows” (and messages, goods, services, money) as influential for enabling circularities, if not causalities, as communication patterns among participants in an ecology. Krippendorff (ibid: 49) even describes the role of communications research studying itself as a second-order context, an “autology.”

« 10 » Marshall McLuhan’s media-ecology perspective (McLuhan & McLuhan 1988), as opposed to advertising, places brand identity as a medium in which other content, the messages, are carried. In media ecology we are interested in the effects that a changing media process creates in an ecosystem. In a media ecology, the brand image becomes a context, and functions as a ground, not figure, in a changing dynamic as the medium evolves. The brand becomes a *formal cause* in that a form is made that foregrounds content (as efficient cause) as discussed by Eric McLuhan (Zhang & McLuhan 2016).

« 11 » The method used for tracing dynamic changes of a medium in an ecology was defined by McLuhan as the Tetrad of Media Effects (McLuhan & McLuhan 1988). It consists of four positions of relative presence, corresponding to Aristotle’s four causes, yet traces the effects of a medium as it becomes enhanced (from ground to figure) or reverses (figure back to ground), or retrieves new meaning from old (ground), or obsolesces back into ground. A simple thought experiment for relatively recent branding debacles can reveal these dynamics. The recent controversy over the change to Bud Light packaging and image, employing a transgender influencer, significantly eroded the sales and reputation of the normally mainstream Budweiser and Bud Light brands (Lim & Ciszek 2024). This is an example of an enhancement effect going to the extreme, and reversing, as predicted by the Tetrad method. The periodicity of such dynamics is variable, depending on the ecology, which is to also say, the audience, stakeholders and their perception. Just this year, i.e., 2025, there has been an attempt to restore the original brand position with an ironic and salient masculinity, for the Super Bowl advertising schedule. This is an example of a retrieval of the brand, as the Tetrad would suggest, it resurfaces *as an art form* (McLuhan & McLuhan 2017) and therefore irony is appropriate. While we are taking Bud Light as a case for the model of exploratory brand co-creation, the salient case perfectly ascribes the relevance to media ecology. It also suggests that co-creation may be problematic and lead to uncontrolled brand traversals that could defeat the very business model the brand is designed to reinforce.

« 12 » In conclusion, this exploration into the relationship of cybernetic theory to brand design and management has merit as a theoretical proposal for further development in management cybernetics. We do not yet understand enough about the shift in medium that would likely occur when and if brands were offered to their ecologies of use for co-creation. Would there be counter-effects from motivated antagonists, for example in the currently contested Tesla brand? The interest in drawing political attention to a contested brand would likely outweigh an unmotivated majority, especially in contemporary social-media ecologies, and the external effects would tarnish the image, and that might be the second-order intent of such actors. Therefore there are clearly implications for design cybernetics, or systemic design to develop new communicative forms and memetic experiments, wherein the exploratory design of existing brands in corporate or public management could be trialed in case studies or online A-B experiments. This takes me to a question for further exploration of this approach, namely: How might second-order brand strategies be managed, or coordinated over time, to flourish in a changing marketing ecosystem? Q1

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Harnessing Variety Engineering for Management of Non-Trivial Systems

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> Abstract • I explore the potential of second-order cybernetics to promote resilient processes and a capacity to adapt in systems of diverse kinds. For demonstration, I use two abstract systems: brand management and water governance. By connecting parallels between these systems, this commentary also aims to inspire transdisciplinary dialogues and practical innovations that not only reinforce the applicability of second-order approaches in these domains but also suggest that this approach can be adopted in other social and organizational systems, treating variety engineering as a management strategy.

Stakeholder consultation and co-creation for de-trivialization and viability

« 1 » Seiichiro Honjo's target article offers a valuable contribution by deepening our understanding of the relationship between second-order cybernetics and exploratory brand management. Honjo explores how stakeholder co-creation and systemic perspectives reshape traditional views of brand identity, presenting thought-provoking arguments for treating companies as non-trivial machines (§§76–78). Honjo aligns brand management with the principles of systemic design, emphasizing mutual value generation and brand activism, where brand identity emerges from continuous and recursive interactions (§§14, 72, 74). In this context, companies actively engage with social and environmental issues relevant to their audiences.

« 2 » This perspective shares similarities with the structures I have encountered in my work related to water governance, where River Basin Organizations (RBOs) act as mediators among multiple stakeholders, such as farmers, environmentalists, and policymakers. Companies and RBOs operate in complex ecosystems shaped by political,

economic, social, and environmental forces. To ensure their viability/sustainability, they cannot be managed as a trivial system; they must reflect environmental complexities and engage with social and cultural dynamics, aligning with contemporary challenges. It should be noted that the working definition conceives of governance as the system of rules, practices, and processes by which an organization is directed and controlled.¹ The concept of management is conceived as the design, control, and development of organizations (Ulrich 2001). The two terms are used by and large synonymously. It is also worth noting that viability and sustainability are nearly synonymous (Espinosa 2023). Viability refers to the ability to continue existing or developing as a living system (Beer 1985). Sustainability, on the other hand, as per the Cambridge Dictionary,² is defined as the quality of causing little or no harm to the environment, thereby enabling continued existence over the long term. Organizing for sustainability, therefore, implies organizing for viability (Schwaninger 2018: 1226).

« 3 » In his theoretical argument, Honjo emphasizes that non-trivial machines and second-order cybernetic models demonstrate that the observer and the system are not independent entities, but are intrinsically connected (§45). In this sense, companies and RBOs need a management model that not only reflects the systems in controls but is also capable of co-evolving in response to dynamic challenges. As Roger Conant and Ross Ashby (1970: 89) state, "Every good regulator of a system must be a model of that system."

« 4 » The ability of companies and RBOs to cope with environmental disturbances and preserve their identity/purpose is inherently tied to their capacity to learn and anticipate problems. In non-trivial machines, regulation through feedback alone is insufficient. According to Markus Schwaninger (2009: 26), the creation of a desirable future is largely based on what we

1 | "Corporate governance: Definition, principles, models, and examples," by James Chen, Investopedia 12 September 2024. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/corporategovernance.asp>

2 | <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sustainability>