

Branding in a hyperconnected world

January 29 2020, by Matt Weingarden

Researchers from the University of Pittsburgh, Texas A&M, UNC-Chapel Hill, University of Wisconsin, and Columbia University published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines the changing role and management of brands in a hyperconnected world.

The study forthcoming in the March issue of the *Journal of Marketing* is titled "Branding in a Hyperconnected World: Refocusing Theories and Rethinking Boundaries" is authored by Vanitha Swaminathan, Alina Sorescu, Jan-Benedict Steenkamp, Thomas O'Guinn, and Bernd Schmitt.

Nike's valuation increased by approximately \$30 billion between the launch of the Colin Kaepernick ad and the end of 2019 in large part due to the viral publicity generated by this action and the way consumers responded to it. This story captured the attention of marketers everywhere and reshaped Nike's brand associations. It also seems to defy one of the traditional principles of branding where brands were encouraged to remain "above the fray" and not be involved in controversial issues that may potentially turn away certain customer segments.

A new article in the *Journal of Marketing* begins with the premise that a hyperconnected environment is changing the role and management of brands such that new theories and models are needed to account for these changes. This article sets the stage for new branding research in a hyperconnected world in which the boundaries of branding have been blurred and broadened. To encourage future research, a research agenda on branding from the perspectives of consumers, firms, and society is

presented.

Considering both the broadening and blurring of brand boundaries, the research team poses three questions: (1) What are the roles and functions of brands? (2) How is brand value (co)created? and (3) How should brands be managed?

The article re-examines traditional roles of brands (e.g., brands as signals of quality or as mental cues) and notes how those roles are changing in a hyperconnected environment. It also describes how hyperconnectivity contributes to several new roles in which brands are containers of socially constructed meaning, architects of value in networks, catalysts of communities, arbiters of controversy, and stewards of data privacy among others. Many of these new roles can be the focus of research from multiple disciplinary perspectives and a variety of research questions that can draw from different theoretical perspectives are highlighted. As brand boundaries are blurring, the article discusses the shift towards cocreated brand meanings and experiences, enacted via [digital platforms](#) which facilitate such cocreation.

Given the complex nature of brands today and in the future, the article encourages researchers to engage in future boundary-breaking research. One implication of hyperconnectivity for branding research is that brands will need to be conceptualized more broadly within each of the theoretical perspectives in the extant [brand](#) literature. The consumer and the firm perspectives should focus more on consumers and firms as part of networks rather than on their roles as individual buyers or managers of brands. The society [perspective](#) should go beyond the role of brands as cultural symbols and examine them as agents of social change. Moreover, brands are becoming more than symbols attached to products that are owned by individual firms; brands can also be ideas, persons, and places.

There is also an opportunity to examine topics that cut across these theoretical perspectives. Brands need to fulfill a broader mission and purpose. For example, the firm perspective will need to embrace societal questions as organizations or corporate brands will be asked to address broader issues including social responsibility, sustainability, and human-resource practices that go beyond profit maximization. The consumer perspective will also have to be more rooted in the society perspective as consumers form networks that are becoming distinct and occasionally vociferous entities that can shape both managerial practice and societal trends. The impact of networks on brands, like that of communities, requires additional sociological, psychological, and cultural insight. Such work would benefit from increased collaboration among branding researchers of different backgrounds, including teams of marketing strategists, economists, modelers, psychologists, sociologists, and consumer culture researchers.

More information: Vanitha Swaminathan et al, Branding in a Hyperconnected World: Refocusing Theories and Rethinking Boundaries, *Journal of Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242919899905](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919899905)

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