

The Brand Stack

Using brand systems to diagnose and address systemic barriers to organizational alignment and brand identity

By

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Abstract

This major research paper (MRP) explores how organizations might better diagnose and address systemic misalignments that prevent them from achieving brand-related outcomes. Its aim is to explore whether a “brand system” can serve a cybernetic role. One that helps management more deliberately pursue the integrative effects associated with brand orientation and the consideration of brand as a central managerial pursuit.

By employing a research through design (RtD) approach, it proposes that the “brand stack” might be an effective scaffold which can be used to better understand the artefacts, processes and structures that promote brand values across organizations. The brand stack conceptualizes the brand as a type of control system for the organization; one which can be deliberately designed to promote system viability.

Research consisted of an extensive literature review to situate the work within the fields of managerial cybernetics and strategic brand management, expert interviews, and a generative, practice-based RtD approach.

The “brand stack” was co-designed with practicing brand strategists, consultants and marketers through an iterative series of design critiques and working sessions. Through this process, a diagnostic canvas and “brand system” model were developed, focused on helping marketers drive consistency between business practices and marketing communications.

Through the research process, the “brand stack” is shown to be a valuable concept for business leaders and marketers who believe that brands are valuable intangible resources. However, there are objections and limitations to the proposed model which have not yet been fully resolved.

The output of this exploration is intended to be the beginning, not the end, as the scope of this project is exploratory and generative. It is focused on initial exploration that led to the development of the “brand stack” concept. Limitations, and the applicability of the “brand stack” as a consulting or diagnostic tool, will be explored through future field studies.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Brand complexity

Brands play an important role in the world of marketing. And, their role within the practice of marketing is outsized in comparison to the narrow definition of “brand” that is provided by the American Marketing Association (AMA), which strives to be “the most relevant force and voice shaping marketing around the world” (About AMA, n.d.).

According to the AMA, a brand is “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from other sellers.” (Definitions of marketing, n.d.). As others have observed, this trademark-oriented conceptualization fails to capture the complexity and multi-dimensionality of brands, which are increasingly understood as metaphorical constructs that have varied degrees of meaning, co-creation and scope (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015).

However, there is no universally accepted definition of “brand”. The semantic confusion surrounding the term is well demonstrated by research approaches that have sought to better understand brands, but which have examined them in different ways. While some studies regard brands as literal, others regard them as metaphorical. Some see them as an entity, while others see them as a process (Stern, 2006).

In addition to the semantic confusion around the term “brand”, the practice of successfully managing a brand is in itself challenging. A 2019 report from the consultancy Gartner notes that managing a global brand is a complex, multidimensional task. It outlines some of the top challenges faced by marketers today, which include “connecting brand with company culture”, and “connecting brand messaging with organizational values”. The study reveals that only 19% of marketing leaders believe their actions, positioning and messaging are fully aligned with the espoused values of their brand (Gartner Brand Strategy and Innovation Survey, 2019).

A more recent attempt at defining brands describes them as “semiotic marketing systems that generate value for direct and indirect participants, society, and the broader environment, through the exchange of co-created meaning” (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015). This definition seems appropriate given the types of challenges described by modern marketers. The co-creation of meaning between a diverse set of stakeholders that may be external or internal to the organization opens the door to multiple interpretations of “brand” and of a particular brand’s values. This may lead to organizational resources

being sub-optimally deployed, value misalignments between stakeholders inside of organizations, and even misalignments between organizations and the external customers and stakeholders they are meant to serve (deChernatony, 2009).

Brand accountability within the organization

This complexity and misalignment is troublesome for marketing leaders. Chief marketing officers (CMOs) have the highest turnover in the C-suite, and a recent survey found that 57% of CMOs have been in their position for three years or less. (Whitler and Morgan, 2017).

The mix of responsibilities assigned to CMOs also varies greatly. In addition to brand strategy and marketing implementation, there are a broad range of responsibilities that can be under the CMOs purview, depending on the organization. E-commerce, distribution, pricing, product development, and public relations are just a handful of the areas of responsibility that were identified in a Harvard Business Review survey of CMOs (Whitler and Morgan, 2017).

This breadth of responsibility is part of why prominent organizations are replacing the CMO position with new ones that are more reflective of the intent and true scope of the mandate. Coca-Cola, Hyatt Hotels, and Johnson & Johnson, are all among the cohort of companies that have abandoned the CMO role in favour of roles such as the Chief Growth Officer or Chief Experience Officer (Schultz, 2019).

This shift reflects not only the need not only to think critically about job design and role definition, but also the intensifying interconnectivity between advertising and non-advertising-based contributors of brand success. Customer experience, employee culture, product, and public reputation can all impact brand success. They are domains within which brand-related meaning is co-created, and examples of how brand outcomes are influenced by a broad set of factors that reach well beyond the traditional scope of the CMO, and the marketing department.

Stacks: Complexity in “hard” systems

Job design, and role definition, are two avenues that companies are using to grapple with the complexity of managing their brands. But what about the ways in which organizations conceptualize and formalize the management of their brands? Can the way an organization thinks about its brand also help to grapple with the increasing complexity faced by the stewards of brand success? What if brands are

not only semiotic systems but systems that integrate and span the enterprise? Like an operating system, or a strategic hub, around which the organization bases its decisions.

The components of “hard” technical systems - those that are software or hardware based - are often described using “stacks”. A “technology stack” is a model outlining all of the technology services used to build and run a single application or service. The social networking site Facebook, for example, uses a combination of coding frameworks and languages including Javascript, HTML, CSS, PHP, and ReactJS. This is Facebook’s “technology stack” (Tech stack definition, n.d.).

Many marketers also design “marketing stacks” by assembling a suite of tools to help them automate or better manage marketing tasks (Cuissot, 2017). The concept and language of “the stack” is already embedded within the business marketing world - It provides a compelling conceptual anchor to ground new integrative thinking.

If this type of thinking can be used to promote alignment and understanding for “hard” technical and software-based systems, how might it be applied to “soft” social systems like the organization? Those responsible for brand outcomes within organizations may benefit from the integrative nature of systems-based approaches. And, the “stack” provides language within which we might ground a more system-based conceptualization of the practice of strategic brand management.

The concept of a “brand stack” builds upon the idea of brands as semiotic systems, and also upon the job design and role definition work already being done within the field of marketing. There are limits to the expansion of CMO responsibilities, the re-casting of that role, and shuffling the organizational chart. Business and marketing leaders generally understand that brands are externally influenced, and that they are about more than just what happens in the marketing department. Unfortunately, the cross-functional or “holistic” management of brands often happens informally, regardless of reporting structure or what fancy new title the CMO may have. A more deliberate and systematic approach is needed to reap the full benefits associated with strong brands.

Research opportunity

Purpose and scope

This project explores how organizations might better diagnose and address systemic misalignments that prevent them from achieving brand-related outcomes.

By exploring the concept of the “brand stack” it aims to prompt conversations about different ways of managing brand outcomes across organizational functions. It asks whether some are more effective than others. And, it hopes to move toward a framework that will encourage business and marketing leaders to take a more brand-oriented and systemic view of their organizations as a whole.

This project is exploratory and generative in nature. It is intended to be the beginning, not the end. The project’s focus is on an initial exploration of brand systems and the “brand stack”. Further refinements, and the practical application of the “brand stack” concept will be explored through future field studies.

Research methodology

Research consisted of an extensive literature review to situate the work within the fields of managerial cybernetics and strategic brand management, followed by a generative and practice-based “research through design” (RtD) approach. Once an initial prototype of the concept was developed, the “brand stack” was co-designed with practicing brand strategists, consultants and marketers through a series of design critiques and iterative working sessions.

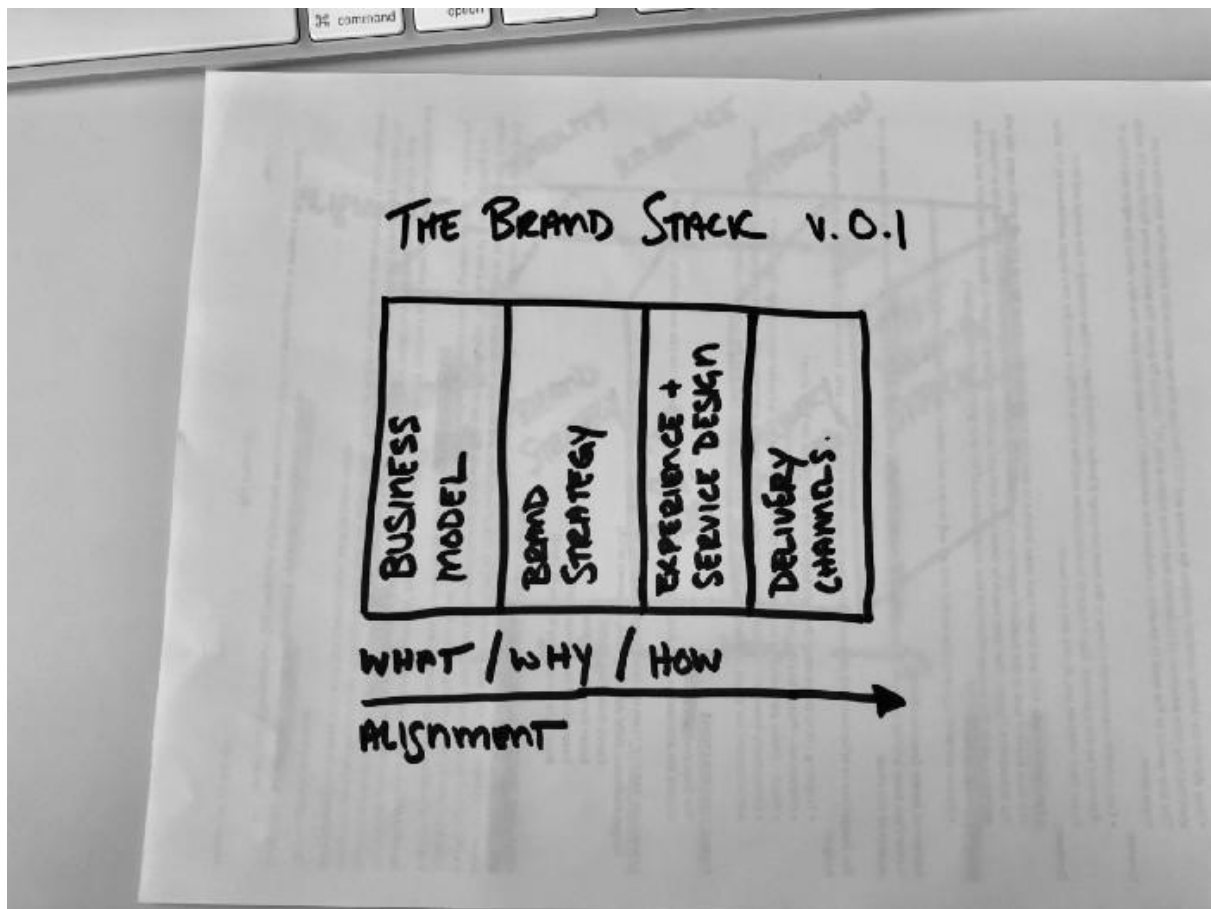


Figure 1. The earliest iteration of the “brand stack”

RtD emphasizes practice-based perspectives, a generative approach, and operates in rich and multiple layers relating to real life contexts (Sevaldson 2010). Practice-based research strategies such as RtD are generally concerned with advancing practice, and the nature of practice. RtD allows researchers to rely on designerly activities as a way of approaching messy situations with unclear or even conflicting agendas (Koskinen et al., 2011). As an approach it offers distinct advantages which make it ideal for exploring the ambiguous, conceptual, and semantically-confused world of brands.

Research questions

The central question this project aims to explore is whether a “brand system” can serve a cybernetic role, helping management to diagnose and address systemic barriers to organizational alignment and brand identity.

Secondary research questions include:

- Can we discover systemic barriers that prevent brands from contributing to desired organizational outcomes for customers, employees and society?
- What artefacts, processes and structures promote brand values within organizations?
- What scaffolds can be used to help organizations diagnose and address systemic barriers to desired benefits & experiences for customers, employees and society?

Background: Brands & systems

Strategic brand management

The literature regarding brands and the practice of strategic brand management is broad and sometimes contradictory. Some call for more attention to be placed on internal perspectives, the values of the corporation, and the individuals working within it (de Chernatony, 1999; Farquhar, 2005; de Chernatony and Cottam, 2009). Others argue for more of an outside-in perspective that focuses on the perceptions of actual and potential customers, acknowledging the role that individual perception has on the formation of brand identity (Burmman et al., 2009; Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015).

These seemingly contradictory perspectives exemplify the complex and multifaceted nature of brands. While it is recognized that brands play a pivotal role in a company's ability to generate value, the levers that determine brand success are difficult to identify. Experts in strategic brand management point toward the importance of "holistic approaches" that aim to align activities across the enterprise, yet much of the literature fails to deliver a specific and repeatable formula for brand success (Burmman et al., 2009; Sarin, 2015).

The observable tension between "inside-out" and "outside-in" perspectives within the field of strategic brand management is an essential consideration for this project, which aims to help brand strategists and marketers more deliberately pursue brand success. We must consider that both the "inside-out" and "outside-in" perspectives have merit, and can be simultaneously true.

Central to answering the questions posed by this project is how to conceptualize a brand system that acknowledges this duality. Brand meanings need to be actively managed along all stakeholder touchpoints, even though there will be some variation of meaning, in response to environmental conditions (Oswald 2012; Sherry 2005). As Conjeco and Wooliscroft have noted, "branding is best

conceived as an ongoing process of meaning negotiation with internal and external stakeholders”. Branding then is a sort of general orchestration - a practice of steering collective meanings toward what is desired, in an attempt to keep these meanings within acceptable parameters (Conjeco and Wooliscroft, 2015).

In conceptualizing the brand stack we must remember that marketing systems are not separate from the environments in which they operate (Conjeco and Wooliscroft, 2015). Environments, and the stakeholders within them, are active system components.

Organizational conflict and brand success

While there are external factors that can not be controlled, those factors can perhaps at least be purposefully influenced, if an organization acts and communicates with congruence and clarity.

However, the challenges of managing a brand across organizational boundaries are as multifaceted and varied as brands themselves. Some common struggles include:

- Misalignments in internal communications that diminish efforts to advance the brand (Farquhar, 2005);
- Politics and internal power struggles that lead to organizational instability (de Chernatony and Cottam, 2007);
- Poorly crafted brand and organizational statements which result in a lack of “brand understanding” within the lower ranks of an organization, or outside of the marketing function (de Chernatony and Cottam, 2007); and
- Incongruence between the actions and values of brands, employees, and the organization at large that create conflict, diminish “brand authenticity” and act as barriers to organizational success (Jones, 2002; Farquhar, 2005; de Chernatony and Cottam, 2007).

Within their argument that brands are semiotic marketing systems, Conjeco and Wooliscroft note that a certain degree of equilibrium is required for a brand system to endure. Their consideration of the brand as a system is intended to “organize branding’s fragmented consustructs”. Their work seeks to delineate between different brand stakeholders, and the different flows of meaning going to and from them. This, they argue, should allow brands to be better understood and to therefore better connect stakeholders inside and outside of the organization (Conjeco and Wooliscroft, 2015).

Central to the questions posed by this project is how we might further explicitly make visible the different flows of meaning between brand stakeholders and functions across the organization. By rendering these value exchanges explicit, we may better understand the artefacts, processes, and structures that are positively or negatively influencing the equilibrium of a brand system. The brand stack then, by looking at brand-related value exchanges, can prompt diagnostic questioning and open conversations about how organizational resources might be realigned to promote congruence and clarity. These conversations can be directed toward positively influencing the homeostasis of a brand system.

Brand orientation & the resource-based view of the firm

There is some evidence within the literature that suggests there are tangible benefits to making brand a central managerial pursuit. Studies of brand orientation have found that when organizations make brands a strategic hub around which they base their decisions, this tends to correlate with integrative effects across the organization, and ultimately superior organizational performance (Gromark and Melin, 2011; Baumgarth et al., 2013).

Unsurprisingly, “brand orientation” suffers from some of the same semantic confusion as the term “brand”. However, the various definitions of brand orientation are at least conceptually similar to one another. Brand orientation can be described as a deliberate approach to brand-building where brand equity is created through interaction between internal and external stakeholders, where brand management is perceived as a core competence, and where brand building is intimately associated with organizational development (Baumgarth et al., 2013; Gyrd-Jones et al., 2013).

The main reasons for the initial introduction of this concept were:

- first, to create a better understanding of how brands are a strategic resource at a time when many still considered them an ‘add-on’ to a product; and
- second, to spread knowledge about how to successfully manage a brand, at a time when brands were primarily handled by marketing departments (Urde, 1994).

The initial argument for brand orientation was that the traditional “market-oriented” method of managing brands was flawed. As a perspective, brand orientation believes that brands need to be given *integrity*, not only in relation to customers’ needs and wants and actions by the competition, but also in relation to internal strategic processes. Brand orientation argues that Instead of a tactical marketing

tool, brands should be an expression of an organization's strategic intent. In summary, brand orientation was introduced as a mindset for building brands into purposeful strategic resources (Urde, 1994; Urde, 1999; Baumgarth et al., 2013; Gromark and Melin, 2013).

As a concept, brand orientation is inspired by the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm. RBV is most commonly used as a managerial framework, to determine the strategic resources a firm can exploit to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. It proposes that firms can have different strategies because they have different resource mixes. As a managerial perspective, it focuses managerial attention on the firm's internal resources rather than external considerations. It aims to identify those assets, capabilities and competencies with the potential to deliver superior competitive advantages. In the RBV, strategists select the strategy or competitive position that best exploits the internal resources and capabilities of the firm, relative to external opportunities. These resources may be tangible or intangible, and they are most strategically advantageous when they are rare, inimitable, and socially embedded in the firm (Hart, 1995).

As a perspective, brand orientation considers brands to be a powerful intangible resource. One which, when managed carefully, can be valuable, unique, and not easily substituted by competitors. The literature regarding brand orientation provides evidence that brands should be a central driver of how an organization perceives, prioritizes, organizes, develops and protects its resource base.

The brand stack then, through its promotion of brand system equilibrium, and concern with the alignment of organizational resources, may also be used as a tool to systematically promote brand orientation. This addresses a known gap in the literature surrounding brand orientation. As Gyrð-Jones et al. note, though there is broad agreement and a degree of consensus around the concept itself, there is a lack of empirical evidence about how organizations try to become brand-oriented, and the problems they encounter in attempting to achieve this (Gyrð-Jones et al., 2013).

Adoption of systems thinking within organizations

One of the challenges that the brand stack and the idea of "brand systems" may face is that systems-oriented thinking is rare inside of most organizations. As Ackoff notes, this can largely be attributed to those who specialize in systems thinking doing a poor job of communicating the value to potential users in the corporate world (Ackoff, 2006).

He also attributes systems thinking's lack of adoption to a general aversion toward failure within many organizations (Ackoff, 2006). Managers have commonly accepted and popular tools available to them which can be used to deal with analysis of complex situations and decision problems. The challenge with these tools is that many deal with the optimization of individual parts of the organization rather than the whole, and that managers also often find them difficult to apply in practice (Jones, 2009; Yurtseven and Buchanan, 2015).

Although you may optimize a component of a system using many popularly accepted approaches, the overall operation of these systems may be adversely affected - since the emergent properties of systems are apparent only when parts interact with one another (Yurtseven and Buchanan, 2015). The benefits of a systems-based approach can be explained to managers within organizations and pique their interest, but there is often hesitation because nobody wants to be blamed if a new approach doesn't yield the desired results (Ackoff, 2006).

And yet, the complex challenges faced by many organizations are ideal candidates for system-oriented thinking: There are actors with differing goals, preferences, and perceptions in all organizations; Many of the problems organizations face can be viewed in different ways; Objectives can be in conflict; and many decisions are made in political contexts, by groups of people rather than individuals (Yurtseven and Buchanan, 2015).

These complex decision processes require heuristic approaches (Pownall, 2012) which allow solutions to be produced within reasonable time frames given that the external operating environments for most organizations change rapidly. Brands, and brand systems with clear and well-defined purposes can provide helpful heuristics upon which business leaders may guide their decision-making. This, combined with the use of organizational language, rather than the language of systems, may make the brand stack an accessible and more easily understood tool for managers within organizations.

Management Cybernetics & the Viable Systems Model

The viable system model (VSM) is often used as a "problem solving" heuristic to work out strategies for change and is also used extensively as a conceptual tool for understanding organizations, redesigning them, and managing change. It offers a method for the study and design of organizations, and a well-established approach for practical problem-solving which can be used to cybernetically connect

fragmented components of organizational systems by examining their relationships and value exchanges (Espejo and Reyes, 2011).

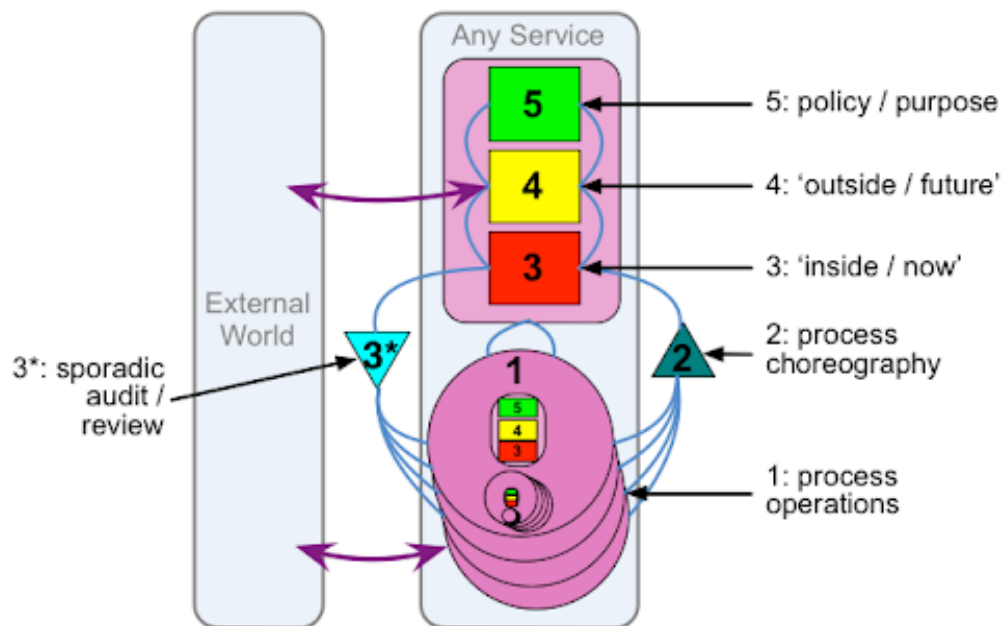


Figure 2. The Viable System model

As a model, VSM sets out to explain how systems are capable of sustained independent existence. Through its multiple levels, it defines an underlying structure for communications in support of viability, and a valuable template for process and organizational design. According to the VSM's cybernetic model of any viable system, "there are five necessary and sufficient subsystems interactively involved in any organism or organization that is capable of maintaining its identity independently of other such organisms within a shared environment" (Beer, 1984).

The five subsystems of the viable system model	
Subsystem	Focus of subsystem
System Five <i>Policy</i>	Policy decisions within the organization as a whole; Balancing demands from different parts of the organization; Steering the organization as a whole.
System Four <i>Outside & future</i>	Looking outwards and monitoring how the organization needs to adapt to remain viable.
System Three	Structures and controls that are put in place to establish the rules,

<i>Inside & now</i>	resources, rights and responsibilities of System One; Provide an interface with systems Four and Five; Represent the big picture view of the processes inside of system One.
System Two <i>Coordination & process choreography</i>	Information channels and bodies that allow the primary activities in System One to communicate between each other and which allow System Three to monitor and coordinate the activities within System One.
System One <i>Process operations</i>	Concerned with performing a function that implements at least part of the key transformation of the organization. These are the value creating functions in the operating model of a business.

Table 1. The five subsystems of the viable system model (Beer, 1984).

The VSM's emphasis on understanding the flows of information across organizational subsystems may be useful for thinking about how brands manifest within functions outside of the marketing department. We can use it to think about the equilibrium of a brand system by ensuring that the necessary subsystems for viability are present.

Designing the organization to support the goals and viability of the brand system is reflective of the deliberate approach to brand-building described by "brand orientation". A viable brand system then, should be correlated with integrative effects and superior organizational performance. This gives the brand stack substance and associates it with a clear goal that may be of interest to managers inside of organizations.

Methods

This project was initially imagined to include multiple workshops where the development of the brand stack could be explored through systemic design. Participants would have worked together to co-create shared understandings of their organizational brand systems using a series of interactive canvases and worksheets. The insights gathered through those workshops were to have then been used to develop and refine the brand stack as a model, and also to explore the landscape of "brand systems" that one might encounter when using the stack as a diagnostic tool.

Unfortunately, the intended research approach was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic which made workshops logistically challenging, and reduced the amount of time that practicing experts had available to participate in projects of personal interest. Teams within organizations were also under pressure as

they looked to adapt their plans and operations, which made taking time for full day workshops an unfeasible request.

While initial exploration through expert interviews was not impacted by the pandemic, workshops were eventually replaced by one-on-one virtual design critiques and co-design sessions, as part of a research-through-design approach.

The brand stack was ultimately developed iteratively in an exploratory and generative manner. This approach worked well but does have limitations, which will be explored.

Expert Interviews

During the early stages of concept exploration, expert interviews were conducted with practicing brand strategists, consultants and marketers. The purpose of these interviews was two-fold:

- first, to find out more about the compositions of their organizations, or of specific client organizations; and
- second, to discuss and feedback on an early iteration of the brand stack.

Interview questions related to the first area of focus sought to understand:

- how individuals inside of their/client organizations conceptualize “brand”;
- how their/client organizations manage brands, in practice;
- the purposes and outcomes associated with their/client brands;
- the tangible and and intangible features that “power” their/client brands; and
- in what ways their/client brand could be seen as a system.

Interview questions related to the second area of focus sought to understand:

- how the brand stack might be commercialized;
- what sorts of objections or roadblocks might be encountered when using the brand stack in real-world situations; and
- whether there is a recognizable need for brand-oriented alignment in the marketplace.

Expert interview participants	
Individual	Area of focus / Industry
Anne Donohoe	Brand strategy & marketing
Jason Last	Advertising
John Xydous	Brand strategy & content marketing
Jon Crowley	Advertising
Kyle Brown	Public relations
Peter Petralia, PhD	Marketing & marketing operations

Table 2. Expert interview participants

Findings from these initial interviews helped to validate the strategic benefit that was imagined to be derived from the use of the brand stack. The high-level concept was almost universally well-received.

However, throughout the interviews a number of practical challenges related to commercialization and implementation were raised. These were helpful in thinking how the brand stack might be packaged in a way that is attractive to marketers. Details about challenges are outlined within the “potential objections and limitations” portion of this paper.

Research through design (RtD)

Exploring the “fuzzy” and semantically-confused world of brands requires a research approach that is as fluid as the subject-matter. And, given the conceptual and practice-oriented intent of this project, methods that allow for co-design with experts, and practical conversations about potential applications of the brand stack helped to ensure it is ameliorative and seen as a tool that solves real-world problems.

As a research approach, RtD emphasizes designer perspectives, a generative approach, and operates in rich and multiple layers relating to real life contexts (Sevaldson 2010). Practice-based research strategies such as RtD are generally concerned with advancing practice, and the nature of practice.

Methodologically, RtD allows researchers to rely on designerly activities as a way of approaching messy situations with unclear or even conflicting agendas (Koskinen et al., 2011).

Krogh et al. distinguish RtD from classical processes of research by noting that RtD embraces “drifting” whereas classical methods consider emergence and change a failure, since measures and grounds of evaluation can be said to be in flux. In designerly research, however, “drifting” is seen as a quality measure - it tells the story of how a designer is capable of continuous learning from findings and adjusting causes of action (Krogh et al., 2015).

Bang describes RtD as “constructive design research” and presents a model in which hypothesizing is seen as an ongoing process that is framed by the overall research motivation, and developed in a continual process centered around experiments. The model describes a constant reframing of the research activity as hypotheses are constructed and explored through abductive reasoning. Although the motivation for research remains consistent, the experiment can inform, or be informed by, every level in the research (Bang et al., 2012).

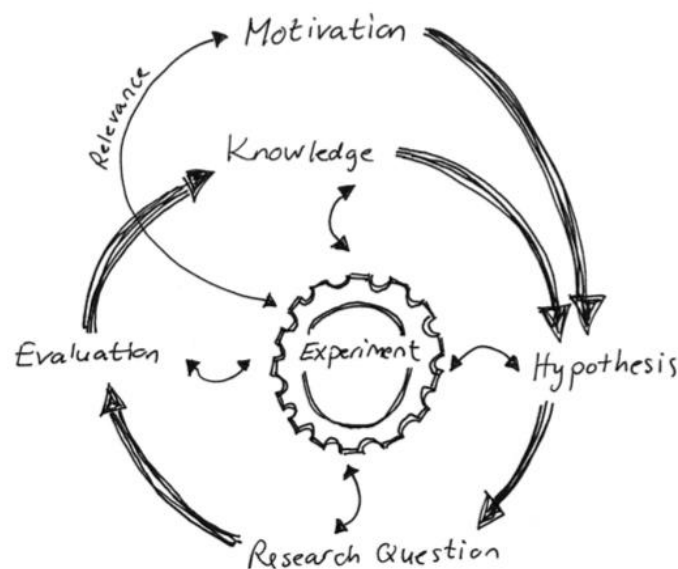


Figure 3. A model for constructive design research (Bang et al., 2012)

The intent of this project remained consistent throughout its journey. However, working sessions and design critiques with practicing brand strategists, consultants and marketers had an influence on the research question. The model offered by Bang et al. does a good job of explaining the process of exploration that was undertaken to explore the brand stack. And, grounding this exploration within the RtD approach allowed for flexibility during an unprecedented period of global disruption.

RtD participants	
Individual	Area of focus / Industry
Alison Fleming	Brand strategy
Anne Donohoe	Brand strategy & marketing
George Panopolous	Marketing & strategic foresight
Jason Last	Advertising
John Ounpuu	Brand strategy & marketing
Jon Crowley	Advertising
Kerry Morrison	Marketing & product; Barsnake
Margarita Marshall	Strategic foresight & product innovation
Peter Petralia, PhD	Marketing & marketing operations
Simon Dannatt	Brand strategy & product innovation

Table 3. RtD participants

The RtD process was helpful in handling potential objections and limitations that had been raised during expert interviews. Additional objections and limitations were also identified through design critique and discussions related to practical application.

A complete summary of the impact that specific artefacts had on the research process is outlined within the “working concept” portion of this paper. Some of the key “before” and “after” artefacts are shown below to demonstrate how the RtD process took place, and its impact on the evolution of the brand stack.

From “VSM-oriented” diagram to “hierarchical brand stack”

Following a review of the literature, the brand stack began to resemble the schema of the VSM. This was helpful, since it grounded the model within the literature, and focused on value exchanges, but research participants found the model overly complicated.

“I don’t know where to look,” noted one research participant.

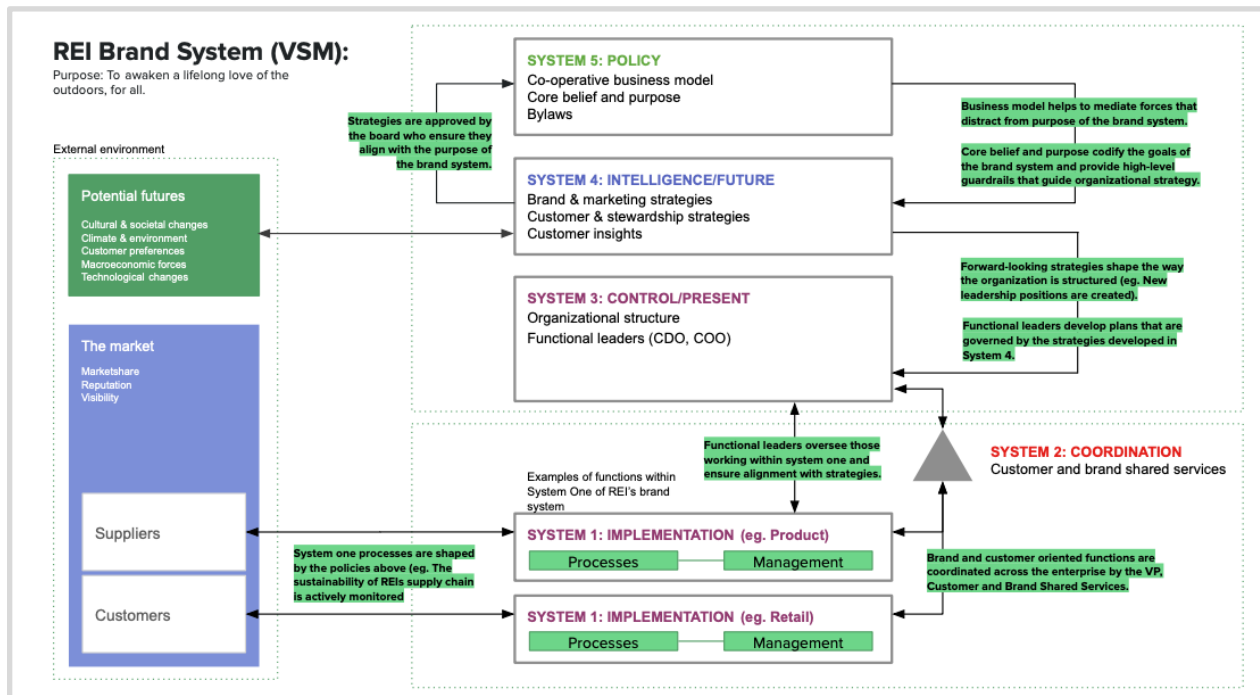


Figure 4. A “VSM-oriented” representation of the brand stack displaying a hypothetical example of value exchanges within the brand system of REI Co-op

Through critique and co-design, a simplified hierarchical model was then developed. This took place through iterative sketching and discussion over Google Meet.

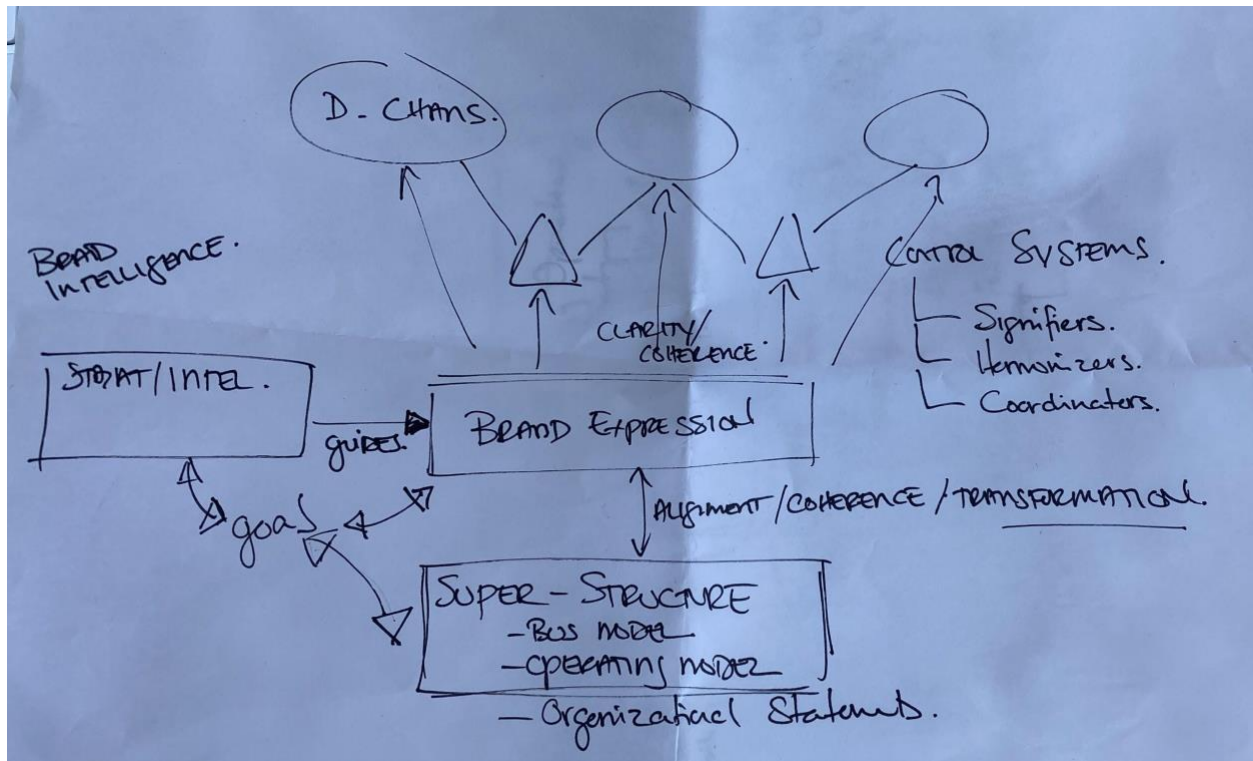


Figure 5. A sketch generated while trying to simplify the “VSM-oriented” version of the brand stack

These sketches were then developed into new visuals using Google slides, formalizing the hierarchical brand stack for future RtD sessions.

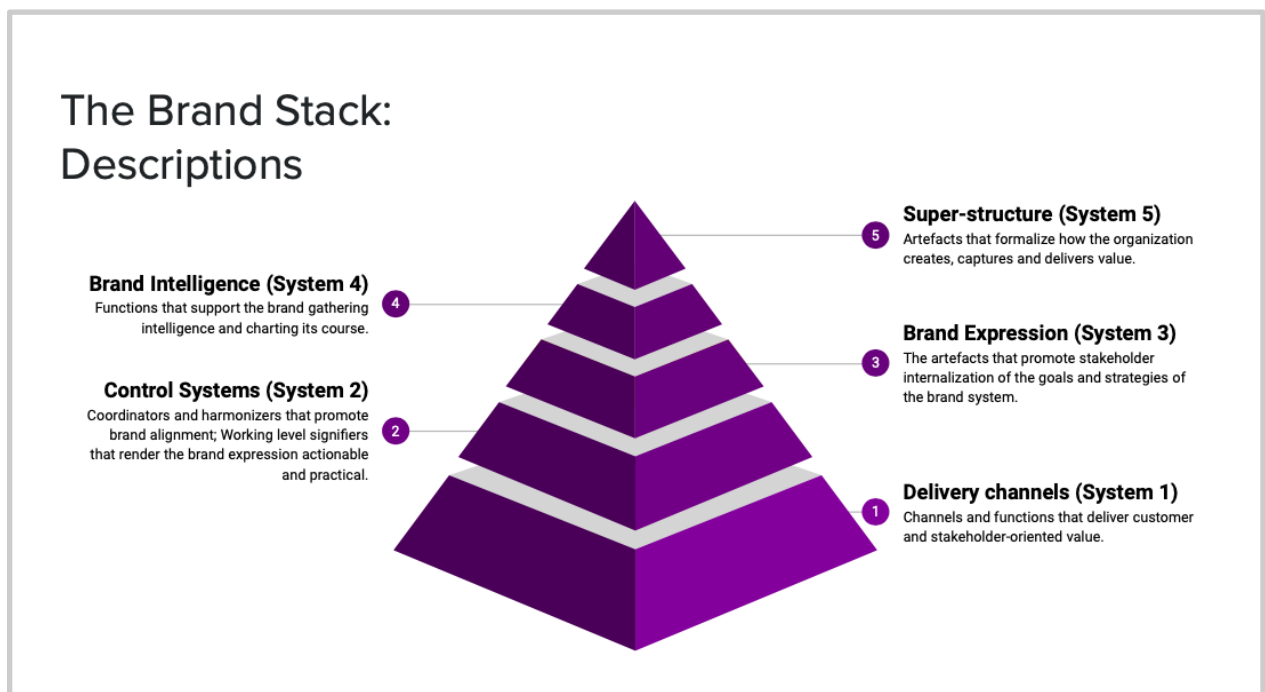


Figure 6. A hierarchical version of the brand stack

Once the hierarchical stack was developed, a diagnostic canvas was also developed to try and re-capture the ability to map value exchanges offered by the previous “VSM-oriented” diagram. One research participant imagined that while the hierarchical stack would be helpful to familiarize marketers with the idea of a “brand system”, it would be the diagnostic canvas that acted as “the money slide”.

From “hierarchical brand stack” to “systemic brand stack”

Moving toward a simplified hierarchical stack was helpful, and made conversations with research participants easier. The addition of a diagnostic canvas also made conversations about practical application more tangible and straight-forward.

Two key areas of conversation drove the next major shift in the composition of the stack.

First, it felt very “top-down” and overly authoritarian. This was seen as problematic based on the professional experiences of research participants working within certain organisations. Certain clients were also cited as examples within discussion. Research participants wanted to see the voice of employees better reflected within the model.

Second, the hierarchical model prompted discussion about the appropriate order of subsystems, which distracted from the conversational focus regarding brands as systems.

Moving toward the next model took multiple conversations and sketches.

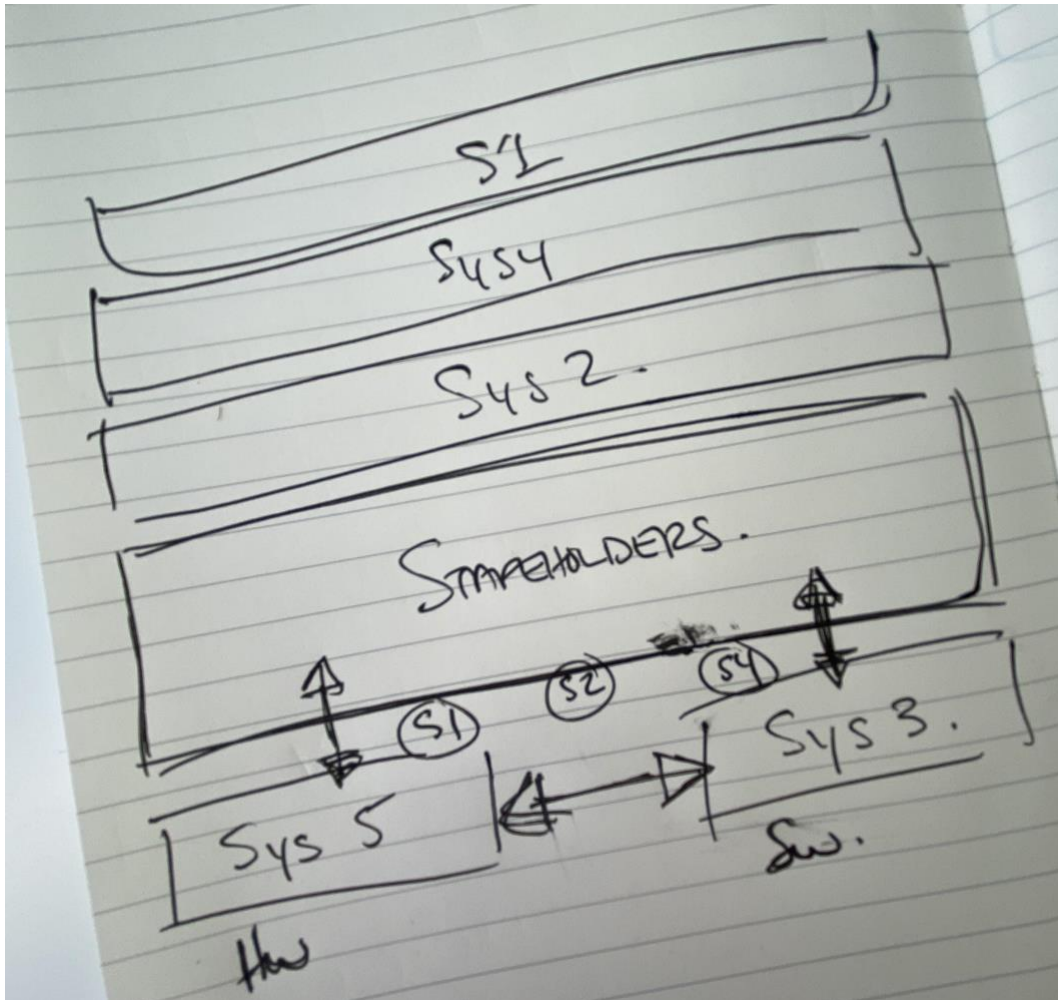


Figure 7. A sketch generated while trying to recognize the role of stakeholders within the "brand system"

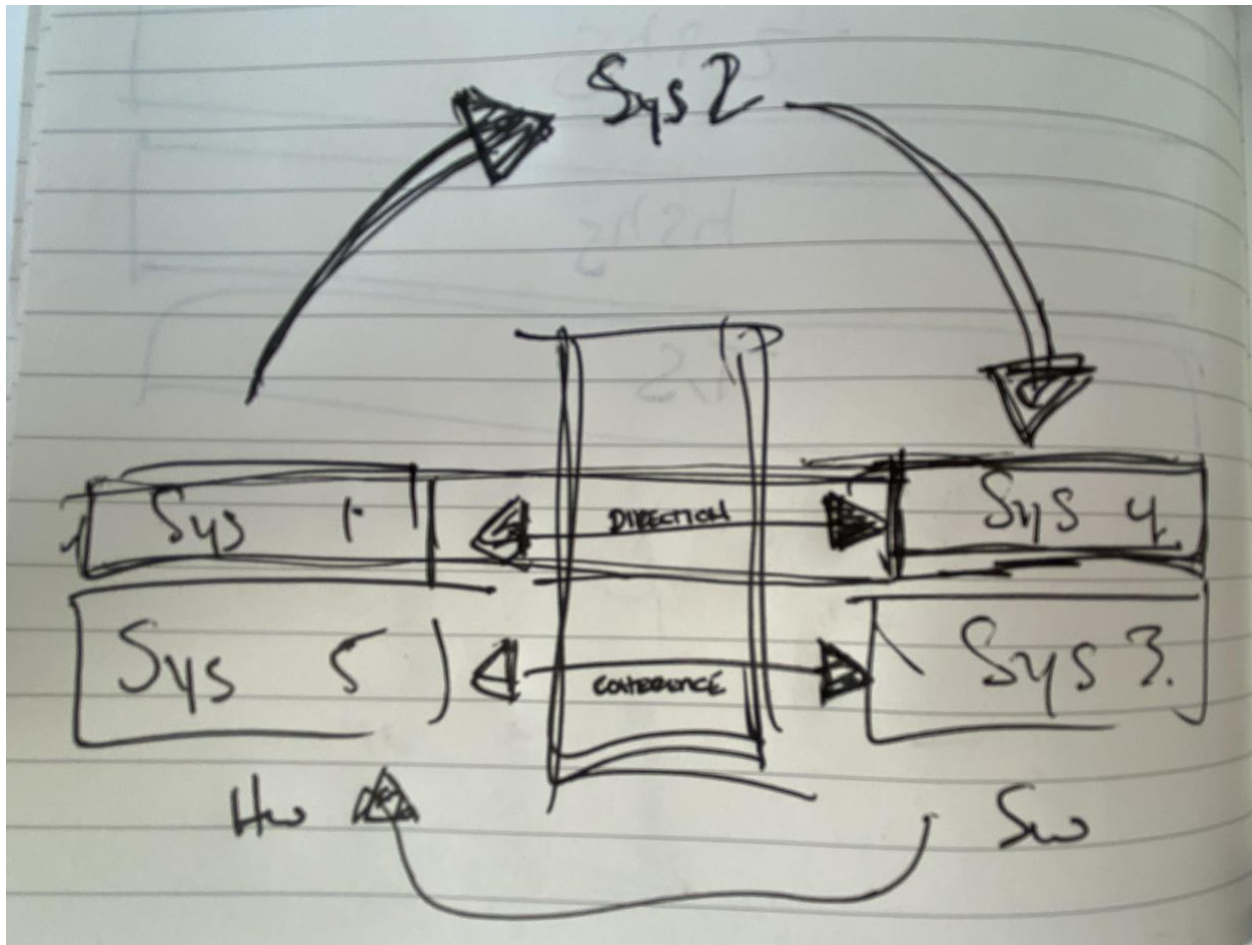


Figure 8. A sketch generated while trying to recognize the interconnectivity between brand stack subsystems

The sketch above ultimately resulted in the version of the brand stack contained in this paper, and detailed in the section that follows. Some objections have been raised about the way that version is visualized, but they are mostly related to the commercialization of the brand stack and its real-world accessibility.

Since remaining objections are not about the *accuracy* of this latest iteration, they have yet to be fully resolved. Further updates are imagined to be made as the brand stack is explored commercially.

Concept development process

The brand stack was developed iteratively through a series of design critiques and working sessions, as part of a generative and practice-based research-through-design approach. Design artefacts were created as inputs to facilitate sessions with practicing brand strategists, consultants and marketers. New

artefacts were then co-created within working sessions, or following working sessions, based on the critique or discussion within the session. The contributions of artefacts to the research process are outlined in the table that follows:

Contribution of artifacts to the research process		
Artefact	Description	Contribution to the research process
Initial Concept Sketch	An initial concept was developed (Image 1) to enable early conversations.	The overall concept was received positively and validated the intent of the research process.
Literature Review	A comprehensive literature review was conducted to explore how to situate the initial concept within the literature.	Brand orientation and the VSM were identified as theories that could be used to support the development of the brand stack.
Generic VSM Diagram	A generic brand system was explored using the schema of the VSM by drawing upon previous professional experiences.	It was determined that an emphasis on value exchanges, instead of subsystem components, was needed.
Value Exchange Map	The generic brand system was explored from the perspective of subsystem value exchanges (Figure 3).	The focus on value exchanges was useful, and prompted a discussion about real-world examples.
REI Co-op VSM Diagram	The hypothetical brand system of REI Co-Op was explored using the schema of the VSM, by drawing upon publicly available documents and marketing assets.	Feedback suggested that this process could be useful for prompting conversations about alignment across the organization. However, the VSM schema was more complex than desired.
Hierarchical brand stack	The five VSM systems were organized in a hierarchical pyramid, with system one on the bottom and system five at the top.	This structure was more easily understood but it was determined that organizational language, rather than the language of systems would make it more accessible to a business audience.
Diagnostic Canvas	A canvas was developed to demonstrate how a strategist might use the brand stack as a diagnostic tool and driver of organizational change.	The canvas was well-received and helped to clarify how the brand stack might be used in practice.
Landscape of brand systems	Multiple real-world examples of brands were explored, based on publicly available documents and marketing assets.	Exploring the types of brands that one might encounter when using the brand stack as a diagnostic tool prompted

	A 2x2 was also produced to illustrate a potential landscape of brand systems.	questions about whether the intent of the stack was to argue for the merits of the “upper-right” quadrant of the 2x2. Or, whether the intent should be to optimize a brand based on the quadrant that it belongs to.
Hierarchical brand stack with marketing language	<p>The hierarchical brand stack was relabeled using language that was more familiar to marketers.</p> <p>This and the diagnostic canvas were then used to drive multiple discussions about the brand stack</p>	<p>New language helped to make the brand stack more accessible to marketers.</p> <p>Discussions were then prompted about the appropriate hierarchy of subsystems, and the importance of recognizing the role of stakeholders in the co-creation of brand meaning.</p>
Systemic brand stack	A new version of the “band stack” was created, placing stakeholders at the centre, removing hierarchy, and removing VSM language altogether (Figure 2).	This final artefact received mixed feedback. Some found it unnecessarily complex. Others found it more representative of how they envisioned brand systems functioning in practice.

Table 4. Contribution of artefacts to the research process

The Brand Stack

Origin

The brand stack was born out of professional frustration, and was little more than a sketch on a napkin in its initial form. As a marketing professional who has worked in advertising agencies, consultancies and public relations firms for over a decade, the author has contributed to, or led, hundreds of projects that were initially framed as communications problems. However, common to many of these projects are more material business problems.

FMCG companies, for example, struggled with this during the early days of social media. Consumers all of a sudden had a voice, and were using that voice to share information with one another about the safety of product ingredients. These conversations often led to reputational issues that had negative impacts on product sales. Brands would often attempt to counter these issues with ads or messaging that sought to explain ingredient safety, but the net effect was, more often than not, a worsening of

public perception. It was generally not until FMCGs began to change the composition of their products themselves that consumer sentiment began to shift, and sales stopped declining (Scott-Thomas, 2013).

Another common challenge is a general overall lack of congruence between how brands outwardly communicate, and their business models. The brand positionings of financial institutions, for example, are rife with contradiction. Scotiabank's tagline for much of the 2000's was "You're richer than you think", however as a financial institution, their business model is built upon encouraging consumers to take on more and more debt so that Scotiabank and its shareholders can make a profit. The tagline may have resulted in a high degree of recall among customers but what about its impact on Scotiabank's reputation (Bank of Nova Scotia: 'You're richer than you think' tagline pays off, 2012)?

The gaps between how organizations act and communicate present significant material risk. The Trust Barometer - an annual study from public relations firm, Edelman - finds that trust is second only to price when it comes to attributes that influence purchase and customer loyalty. The same study offers multiple examples of how incongruences between actions and communication erode trust. For example, Edelman found that 63% of respondents expect brands to follow up statements of racial equality with concrete action, and would otherwise see those brands as exploitative or opportunistic if their words did not match their actions (Trust Barometer Special Report: Brand Trust in 2020, n.d.).

Yet, the actions of so many organizations fail to live up to the promises that are made through brand communications. And, rather than trying to solve material business challenges, many organizations often try to use communications as a band-aid solution instead of addressing problems head-on.

The origin of the brand stack is grounded in these challenges, and a desire to encourage business leaders to think more holistically about their brands: As systems that influence, and are congruent with, the way they conduct business. Not simply taglines, logos, and visual communication systems.

Working Concept

The brand stack is inspired by how cloud architects design "technology stacks" to promote alignment and desired outcomes within 'hard' technical systems, by looking at components such as client & server side programming languages, hardware, and software. The language of stacks is common in the corporate world and has even made its way into the marketing department: Marketers design "marketing stacks" by assembling suites of tools to automate or better manage marketing processes.

Given the general level of awareness and understanding of “stacks”, they provide a good starting point to encourage holistic thinking about brands.

When one marketer asks another marketer, “what does your martech stack look like?” they are asking them what tools and processes their team uses to support the goals of their marketing department. When we instead ask the question, “what does your brand stack look like?” we’re asking how the company has organized itself across functions to support a specific brand’s reason for being. Do organizational activities align with how the brand communicates? Or, are there inconsistencies between what a brand says it believes in, and how it behaves as an organization?

By encouraging marketers to think about brands as stacks, we can prompt analysis or investigation of the many artefacts and organizational processes that contribute to brand success, instead of the focus always being placed on brand expression: The ad-like or visual components of brands. This in turn allows us to identify risks, or to identify opportunities to strengthen the brand system so that it may better pursue its reason for being.

The brand stack contains five systems, which roughly correspond to the subsystems identified in the VSM. New language has been applied to the systems to situate them within the world of marketing. And, the subsystems have been visually re-organized to place emphasis on the focus of the concept: Encouraging coherence between brand expression and the actual practices of an organization.

The stack also acknowledges the importance of external and internal stakeholders in the co-creation and mediation of brand meaning. They are placed at the centre of the stack, acknowledging their vital role.

System components are organized into “software”, and “hardware”, which roughly correspond to things a brand “says” and things a brand “does”.

“Control systems” are placed around the periphery and are connected to all subsystems, acknowledging the importance of processes whose function is related to coordination and integration. These control systems also support the system’s ability to “learn by doing”, continually adapting the “brand system” based on external feedback and system performance.

And, finally, the stack avoids organizing components hierarchically, acknowledging that each subsystem is part of a complex whole.

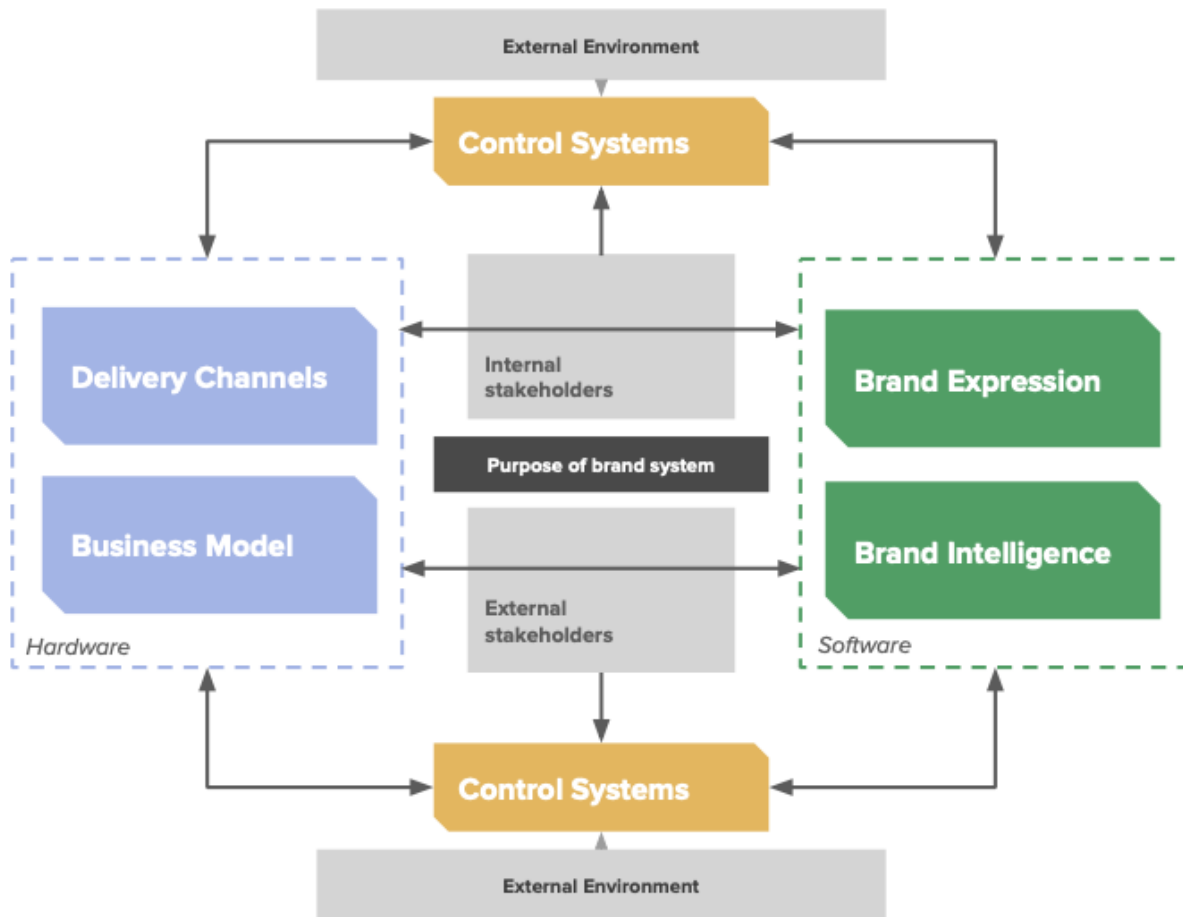


Figure 9. The Brand Stack (August 2020).

Brand Stack Subsystems

The components of the brand stack are derived from those identified in the VSM, but have been presented using language that is more familiar to marketers. By grounding the brand stack in the VSM, we can use it as a framework to help us examine the viability of the “brand system” as a whole.

By placing emphasis on the design of its brand stack and therefore the viability of its brand system, it stands to reason that the organization may expect the benefits associated with brand orientation. If the brand stack is incomplete, and the “brand system” therefore not viable, brand-related outcomes may be hindered and change-oriented conversations can be directed based on where there are barriers to value exchange within a specific organization’s brand stack.

Descriptions of each of the brand stack subsystems and practical examples are contained in the table that follows:

Subsystems of the brand stack			
VSM Subsystem	Brand Stack Subsystem	Description	Examples
System Five: <i>Policy</i>	Business Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artefacts that formalize how the organization creates, captures and delivers value. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business model • Target operating model
System Four: <i>Outside & future</i>	Insights & Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes that support the gathering of intelligence so that the brand can chart its course. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research functions • Brand strategies • Customer strategies • Innovation functions
System Three: <i>Inside & now</i>	Brand Expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artefacts that promote stakeholder internalization of the goals and strategies of the brand system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational statements • Campaigns • Tailored communications
System Two: <i>Coordination & process choreography</i>	Control Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes that coordinate, harmonize, and align resources. • Artefacts that render the brand expression actionable and practical at the working-level. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing operations • Performance measurement • Cross-functional roles
System One: <i>Process operations</i>	Delivery Channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes that deliver customer and stakeholder-oriented value. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer service • Product • Supply chain • Retail • Communications • Etc.

Table 5. Descriptions and examples of brand stack subsystems

Brand system value exchanges

Like the VSM, the practical value of the brand stack is realised when you use it to examine value exchanges between subsystems. By placing artefacts and processes from throughout the organization inside of the “brand system” we can then use it as a tool to promote brand orientation.

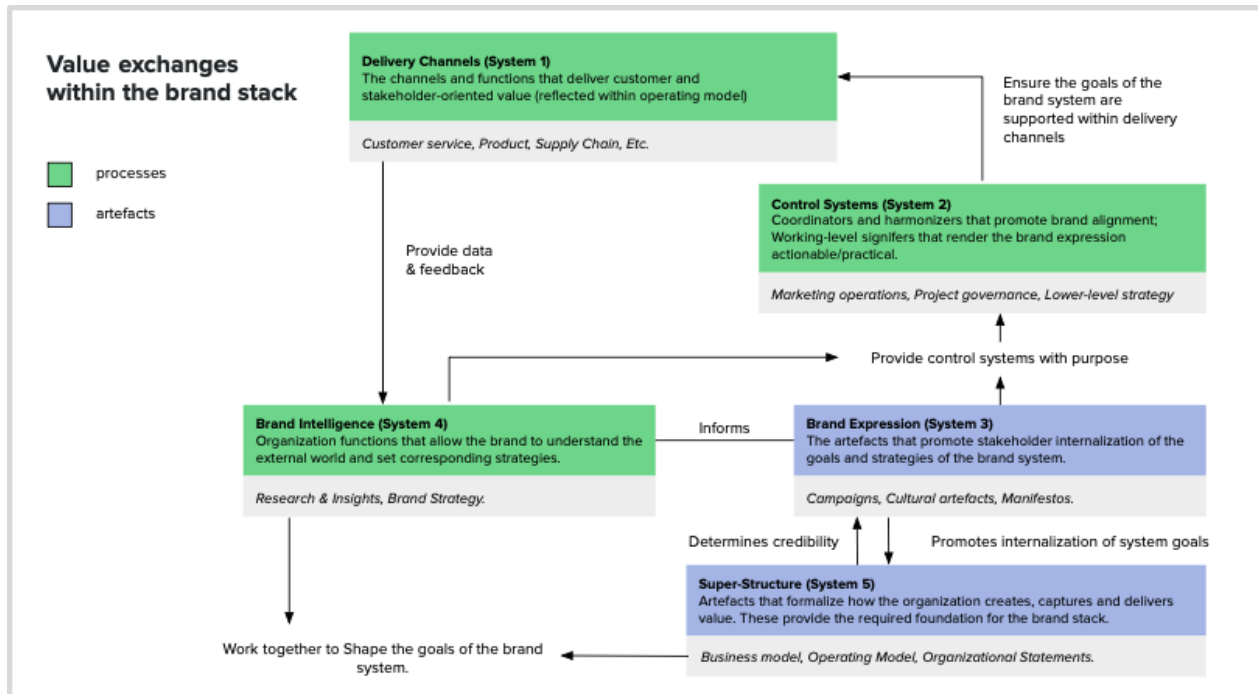


Figure 10. Value exchanges within the brand stack

The process of examining value exchanges using the brand stack is not concerned with whether artefacts and processes belong within the brand system or some other organizational system. Instead, it is concerned only with positive or negative contributions to the brand system.

When using the brand stack to assess the viability of an organization's brand system, the artefacts and processes identified as components of the brand stack may also be components of other systems within the organization. However, it is by examining their contribution to the brand stack that we are able to assess whether or not they are helping or harming the brand, and therefore pursue the benefits associated with brand orientation.

Each of the subsystems and its contribution to brand system viability are described below:

System 5 - Business Model: If a brand is to truly be an expression of an organization's strategic intent, then how that organization creates, captures, and delivers value should be in alignment with its brand expression and the stated purpose of the brand system. Strategic coherence is required. Artefacts in this subsystem can be considered as supportive of brand system viability when they are clear, specific, and in alignment with the purpose of the brand system.

System 4 - Insights & Strategies: The research and strategy processes within this subsystem play an important role in connecting an organization's business model to its brand expression. They act as a bridge between business strategies and artefacts that communicate the purpose of the brand system to internal and external stakeholders. Processes in this subsystem can be considered as supportive of brand system viability when they produce strategies that are actionable, clear, specific, aligned with the goals of system Five, and reflective of the expressions communicated through system Three.

System 3 - Brand Expression: The goals and strategies of the brand system must be made accessible and easily internalized by a variety of stakeholders. They must also be in alignment with the goals of System Five and supportive of the strategies outlined in System Four. The artefacts in this subsystem can be considered as supportive of brand system viability when they effectively promote stakeholder internalization of the goals of the brand system, and are in alignment with systems Four and Five.

System 2 - Control Systems: Brand systems need controls to promote operational alignment and efficiency. Artefacts are also needed to connect brand expressions to working level processes, ensuring that expressions are actionable and can act as drivers of decision-making. These artefacts and processes can be considered as supportive of brand system viability when they effectively align resources, remove barriers, and prevent strategy surrogation.

System 1 - Delivery Channels: The channels within an organization that create stakeholder value should be in alignment with the goals of the brand system, and should be reflective of the brand expression. These can be considered as supportive of brand system viability when they create, capture, and deliver value in a way that supports the overall goals of the brand system.

The Brand stack as a diagnostic tool

The viability criteria above are generalized. And, while they are supported by the literature review conducted as part of this project, they have yet to be stress-tested through field work and practical application inside of real-world organizations. Even though viability criteria have not been established through direct study, the brand stack can be used as a diagnostic tool to qualitatively assess value exchanges between subsystems, and to prompt discussions in an effort to promote brand orientation.

A brand stack canvas was developed to support this assessment, and can be used as either part of the process undertaken to synthesize organizational research, or as the foundation of a facilitated workshop with stakeholders within an organization.

The canvas is loosely based on Bocken et al.'s canvas for mapping sustainable business thinking, which was designed to promote exploration of value creation, value destruction, and value opportunities for business modelling, relative to environmental stakeholders (Bocken et al., 2015).

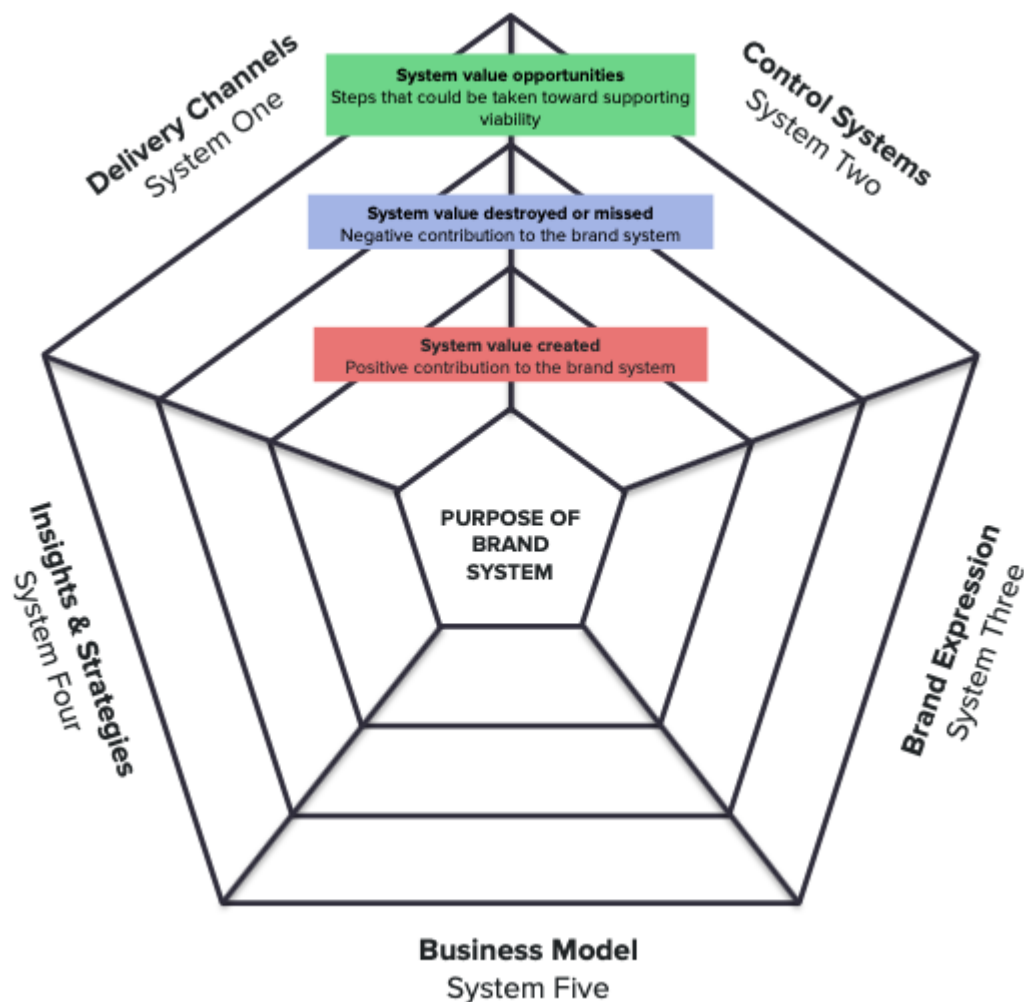


Figure 11. The brand stack canvas

As a diagnostic tool, the brand stack canvas allows supports questioning along three lines:

1. **Value exchanges:** What type of value exchanges flow between actants in the organizations' subsystems (both positive and negative)?
2. **Subsystem functionality:** Which sub-systems perform their core function extremely well? Which have gaps or are blocked from preventing their core function?

3. System contribution: How do the sub-system components contribute to the overall brand system?

When using the canvas, a researcher or facilitator will first input the purpose of the “brand system”. This can be drawn from organizational statements (mission, vision, values) or some form of brand expression (brand purpose, etc.). Care should be taken to ensure the right system purpose is selected, since this informs the steps that follow.

Then, using the three lines of questioning above, each sub-system can be analysed to examine whether it positively or negatively contributes to the organization’s brand stack. Do they create system value? Or, do they destroy or block system value?

Following this analysis, opportunities can be identified in support of improving the viability of an organization’s “brand system”.

Landscape of Brand Systems

Exploring the types of brands that one might encounter when using the brand stack as a diagnostic tool was a helpful part of the concept development process. Through a working session with a fellow strategist, a 2x2 matrix was developed that was felt to be broadly representative of the types of brands we’d encountered within professional practice. Some discussion around specific real-world examples followed, and then the matrix was developed further following the working session.

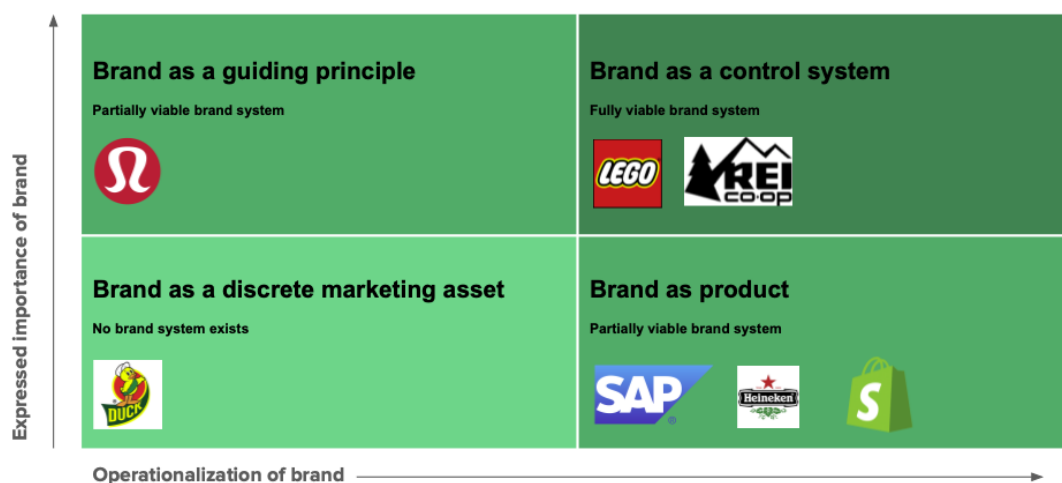


Figure 12. Landscape of brand systems

The brands that have been plotted on the matrix are illustrative only and have been placed based on what could be discerned by examining available documents. Further exploration of this landscape is planned as part of future field work.

The landscape of brand systems was constructed by considering brands along two dimensions: How much they communicate about the importance of their brand, and how much they operationalize their brand through organizational processes. The characteristics of each quadrant are detailed in the paragraphs that follow, although exceptions to these categorizations were imagined throughout the research process.

Brand as a discrete marketing asset: Brands that are viewed as literal entities and limited to marks, taglines and visual design systems. These brands are often nested within parent organizations as part of a “house of brands” structure. Organizations are imagined to be more market-oriented, than brand-oriented.

Brand as product: Brands that are viewed as literal entities but reflective of market-oriented value creation. The meaning associated with these brands is derived more from experiences with products and services than marks, taglines and visual systems. Organizations with brands such as these are imagined to be market-oriented, but rigorous in their use of control systems to drive strategic consistency.

Brand as a guiding principle: Brands that are viewed as integrative metaphoric entities. The meaning associated with these brands is derived from the mental associations of stakeholders. Organizations with brands such as these are imagined to invest greatly in their brand expressions, and view their brands as their most valuable strategic asset. However, their brand systems can lack strategic coherence as a result of operational limitations. For example, they may have brand expressions that are conceptual and not consistently internalized by stakeholders.

Brand as a control system: Brands that are viewed as integrative systems. The meaning associated with these brands is deeply interconnected with the ways in which the organization captures, creates, and delivers value. Organizations with brands such as these are imagined to invest greatly in initiatives and programs that illustrate the purpose of the brand system. Their brand systems are strategically coherent and are built upon actionable, clear, and specific brand expressions.

Commercialization of the brand stack

As a step in the journey toward the version of the brand stack that is included within this paper, the landscape of brand systems prompted a number of helpful questions about the practical application of the brand stack. Many of these questions were related to how it might be commercialized as a consulting tool:

- Does the brand stack make more sense for some organizations than others?
- What is the most compelling problem that the brand stack solves?
- Do all brands need to be viable systems?

These questions have yet to be fully resolved but two distinct paths are imagined:

1. The brand stack is commercialized in a way that promotes the benefits of fully-viable brand systems. As a diagnostic tool, it's main purpose is to help organizations deliberately pursue the benefits associated with brand orientation and to avoid gaps between what they "say" and what they "do".
2. The brand stack is commercialized in a way that allows organizations to identify where they fall within the landscape of brand systems. As a diagnostic tool, it's main purpose is to help organizations optimize themselves against a desired archetype that aligns with their internal resources and organizational strengths.

The former is more reflective of the intent of this research process but is imagined to be of interests to a set of clients and organizations.

The latter has been argued to be more pragmatic by some research participants, who were able to imagine a multitude of business development avenues that would support commercialization of the concept.

Discussion

The intent at the outset of this project was to explore ways of encouraging organizations to close the gap between their communications and their business practices. Not through romantic appeals about

how a brand is about more than what happens in the marketing department - which is the approach offered by pundits and many marketing experts. But instead, by offering a tool that will help organizations achieve this pragmatically, with intent, and by design.

Specific research questions evolved throughout the process, and in response to the changing circumstances introduced by a global pandemic, but were eventually defined.

The central question this project ultimately explored was:

Can a “brand system” serve a cybernetic role, helping management to diagnose and address systemic barriers to organizational alignment and brand identity?

Although we have not exhaustively pursued this question, this research process was designed to be exploratory and generative. The results of this MRP should be thought of as the beginning of an exploration of the brand stack. Not the end.

However, we have seen through the tools developed during the research process, that a systemic lens does offer the ability to examine organizational value exchanges. And, that when that system is oriented around a specific purpose, that we can use analysis of value exchanges to assess the individual contributions of organizational subsystems toward the achievement of that purpose.

The brand stack *can* serve a cybernetic role, particularly for those who already believe in the importance of brands, and see them as valuable organizational resources. Through its conceptualization of the brand as a system, and through its promotion of system viability, the brand stack provides marketers with signposts that can help them make their brand a strategic hub that drives decision-making for the organization. And, it allows marketers to do this deliberately, and by design.

Potential objections and limitations

Strategic overreach: There are certainly those who will not see the value in the brand stack as a promoter of organizational alignment. One objection raised throughout the research process is that there is significant overlap between the brand stack and other methods or tools that exist to promote organizational alignment. For these individuals, the question of why a brand should be the hub around which organizations are designed, and decisions are made, was a major roadblock to acceptance of the brand stack as a concept.

Some might be pursued by empirical evidence demonstrating that this approach leads to superior performance. This could be explored through future study. Others may simply feel that the brand stack is an overreach, and that there are limits to the scope that brands should have within the realm of strategic management.

Unanticipated disruptions or wild card events - such as the COVID-19 pandemic were raised by multiple research participants as examples of scenarios where a “brand system” that is considered viable could be knocked “off balance”. In these cases, participants argued that the brand stack could potentially require the support of other systems to ensure the survival of the “brand system” and of the organization as a whole.

These arguments are valid and have yet to be fully resolved. There are certainly limitations to the brand stack as a strategic management tool. However, it was never intended to be the *only* system that influences an organization's resource base. Through its grounding in the VSM, the brand stack was imagined to be one of multiple viable subsystems within a parent organizational system.

Key to resolving this discussion is the concept of intentional generative capacity, and understanding where this is generated within the firm. When it comes to the brand stack this is meant to be represented by the “purpose of the brand system” component of the model. Some further exploration is needed to fully unpack how different organizational systems work together, given that some essential business functions may not be addressed by the brand stack.

Irrelevance: Some have pointed to examples of organizations that have strong brands but still suffer from alignment or reputational challenges. Nike, for example, is the world’s most valuable apparel brand, with a market capitalization of \$34.8 billion USD (Leung, 2020). Despite efforts to address its labour practices, dating back to the 1990’s, attention continues to be drawn to Nike’s labour practices through its supply chain. The most recent examples are related to forced Uyghur labour in China and have been covered extensively by online publications, news outlets, and talk shows (Bain, 2020).

Those who point to reputational issues such as these related to massively valuable companies argue that the kind of alignment associated with the intent of the brand stack simply doesn't matter. For them, the symbolic power of the brand and its perceived value in the eyes of consumers matters more than any other factor.

While this objection merits further consideration, the Nike example provides a compelling counterpoint. Nike's mission is to "bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world". Their website goes on to note that, "if you have a body, you are an athlete" (Nike, n.d.). Forced labour arguably runs counter to this mission. A human being (or athlete) is unlikely to be "inspired" if their human rights are being violated and they are subject to forced labour. However, there is a lack of "proximity" between the customers who co-create the brand's meaning, Nike's mission, and the claims about labour conditions within its supply chain. If the Tom's brand, who is "in business to improve lives" (TOMS, n.d.) were to be accused of the same misdeeds, the market reaction and reputational impact would be different.

Nike did not become the world's most valuable apparel brand without some degree of deliberate intent and a central focus on the management of their brand. For a market-leading brand such as Nike, you might argue that the relevance of the brand stack is actually exponentially increased.

Appropriateness: Discussion has suggested that the brand stack may be more appropriate for some types of organizations, but not for others. Research participants pointed toward charities and governmental organizations that are inherently mission or purpose-driven. For these organizations, the value of the brand stack was seen as clear and commercialization opportunities were easily identified.

Similarly, single-brand organizations that consider their brand to be their most valuable intangible resource were considered as ideal adopters of the brand stack. Lululemon, for example, lists its ability to maintain the value and reputation of its brand as the biggest risk factor within its annual report and SEC filings (Lululemon Athletica Inc., 2020). Commercialization opportunities with brands like Lululemon, were also easily identified by participants.

Conversely, financial institutions were mentioned by research participants, as examples of organizations that were considered less likely to be interested. Business leaders in these organizations were described as individuals who value brand, but don't consider it to be a primary driver of organizational decision-making.

Field work is needed to explore the use of the brand stack within the organization and to fully understand its ability to practically influence systemic barriers to organizational alignment and brand identity. As with many consulting tools, it may be more appropriate in some instances than others. However, discussions with practicing brand strategists, consultants and marketers have been promising. Feedback about the intent of this project, and its core concept has been universally positive. Discussions

about its practical application have also provided helpful starting points upon which to design future research.

We must also remember that the brand stack is about the promotion of brand-orientation. There are many organizations that have brands but are inherently market-oriented. Integration and system-oriented thinking may still benefit organizations such as financial institutions, but brand may not be the most appropriate lever to promote this thinking.

Ease of commercialization: As mentioned within the expert interviews portion of this paper, a number of practical challenges have been raised by research participants, related to the accessibility of the brand stack to a business audience. The importance of attractively packaging this work to ensure that it is attractive to marketers, has been a central concern throughout.

Central to resolving this feedback is communicating the concept with clarity, simple language and the use of relatable analogies. Finding impactful ways of immediately answering the question “what problem does this solve?” will also be key to practical adoption.

Opportunities for future study

The brand stack is well supported by existing academic literature and offers the potential for a meaningful original contribution to the field of strategic brand management.

Through its attempt to expand upon the common, but narrow, understanding of brands, it aligns with more recent efforts to define what brands are, and why they are important. It attempts to acknowledge the co-creative nature of brands and their role as semiotic systems, while offering marketers a framework for success.

By offering a diagnostic tool and framework to promote brand orientation, the brand stack has the potential to fill a gap within existing research on the subject.

And, through its focus on system viability, the brand stack is aligned with the VSM, which has been used extensively to promote change-oriented conversations within organizations.

Further study of the brand stack will help to more completely explore the potential of “brand systems” as cybernetic tools. Much of this is imagined to be possible through field work within organizations. An

analysis of brand related outcomes may also help to empirically demonstrate the benefits associated with the management philosophy offered by the brand stack.

Specific areas of focus that might be explored through future study include:

- Further refinement of the landscape of brand systems.
- Exploration of barriers to real-world implementation.
- Field tests and refinement of the brand stack and the diagnostic canvas.
- Capturing measurable outcomes associated with real-world implementation.

Parting thoughts

“Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice, and discipline.”

- *Jim Collins, Good to great: Why some companies make the leap... and others don't.*

At the outset of this project a brand marketer was presented with an early description of what was hoped to be achieved through this project. “Why would you study that?” they asked. The marketer in question went on to say that, “everyone knows that brand is about more than what happens in the marketing department.”

The brand that the marketer in question represents is a prominent Canadian brand whose stock market valuation has fallen significantly from its high as a result of the global pandemic, and who will face material business challenges as it looks to adapt in the years ahead. This brand is included on lists of the top Canadian brands, like the Canadian Business “Canadian Top Brand 40”, but receives middle-of-the-pack ratings for reputation, products, and innovation. Moreover, it is being significantly outperformed by its primary competitor on rankings such as these.

The brand in question could really benefit from some conscious choice and discipline when it comes to the management of its brand.

Through this research process the value of a more deliberate approach to brand alignment has become even more apparent. And, the feedback and support from those who have helped to co-design the brand stack has been positive and uplifting.

“Everyone loves stacks!” exclaimed one participant during the late stages of research. This concept has merit, and by wrapping it in the language of “stacks” it has the potential to resonate with decision-makers in the c-suite.

This is only the beginning.

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