

Branding. Does its approach and applicability follow a one-dimensional trend? Critical analysis from a systematic review of the last 10 years.

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Abstract: *Branding has become one of the most relevant marketing concepts because of the importance and benefits of strategically developing a brand. However, it is commonly categorized in the business environment, which limits its applicability. In view of this, this research work seeks to analyze the various approaches and practical applications of branding in the last 10 years.*

137 scientific articles were consulted using various scientific databases, and 54 were finally extracted, 49 of which were of the highest academic level. To be included, an article had to have relevant, current, reliable information related to the topic in question.

The growing importance of branding in the business sector has caused many scholars to choose to extrapolate branding principles to different areas, but the full implications of branding are not yet known. Both its relationship with an ancestral concept such as anthropomorphization, and its relationship with state-of-the-art technologies such as virtual reality or the Internet of things, or the incredible capacity of being able to mitigate an individual's physical pain through the creation of emotional bonds, have not yet been widely studied by the scientific marketing community.

Keywords: *Branding, personal branding, place branding, employer branding, anthropomorphization.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, there are a large number of brands that constantly interact with their consumers and prospects, seeking to communicate the intrinsic and intangible benefits of their products. This is because they want to create a link between the brand and the individual that enables the organisation's business objectives to be met.

Of course, explained in such a way, the above seems to be a simple task. However, building and developing a brand is often a highly sophisticated and tedious process, which must be executed after a thorough analysis of the company's capabilities and the characteristics of the market.

Managing a brand correctly will definitely provide a wide range of benefits for those who dare to undertake such a titanic effort. It is therefore not surprising that branding is a recurring topic in the scientific field of marketing (Ertekin, Sorescu & Houston, 2018). However, it is not only of interest to marketing academics, but also to entrepreneurs because of the financial benefits it can generate (Sharma, 2017), while at the same time allowing the brand of a given entity to stand out and distinguish itself (Ghodeswar, 2008), which often leads to higher sales volume or revenue.

It is true that branding allows the development of such a valuable asset as an organisation's brand

(Keller & Lehmann, 2006). However, its application is not only limited to a business environment, the ease with which this technique can be extrapolated to different contexts is fascinating, which is why this research raises the following question: What approaches and practical applications of branding are known in the last 10 years? Learning about the different applications and implications of branding will broaden the range of possibilities in which this concept can be developed.

The growing importance of branding has placed it in a privileged position in the scientific field. However, there are several applications and approaches to branding that are not receiving sufficient attention from academics, despite the fact that developing these aspects could give branding the ability to develop in a variety of scenarios with relative ease.

It is clear that the extrapolation of branding to different areas will mean that an expert in brand management is no longer limited to the business sector, but can also explore lesser known areas of this technique or strategy, which suit his or her interests or which present a new challenge to be faced. For example, political, social, cultural, personal, to name but a few examples.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this research aims to analyse the various approaches and practical applications of branding in the last 10 years. Knowing these relevant aspects of branding will facilitate the expansion of the existing literature on the topic in question and provide important insights that will facilitate the development of new theories of branding.

Initially, the methodology of this work will be explained, then the research will be developed through three key points, which are: branding: state of the art as a starting point, where approaches and practical applications of the subject in its initial field in the last 10 years will be explained. Subsequently, the second key point, the applicability of branding, will be developed, in which the applications of this technique in other fields, which have become more relevant in the last 10 years, will be mentioned and analysed. The third key point will be entitled, branding: from anthropomorphisation to "analgesic" work, in which an analysis will be made of the possible practical applications of branding of a particular nature, referring to the most prestigious scientific journals in the world of marketing. Finally, the review will close with conclusions and recommendations, as well as bibliographical references, showing respect for the authors, their research and their ideas.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper is a systematic literature review, where a systematic review is understood as research that identifies, synthesises and evaluates quantitative and qualitative evidence on a given topic in order to generate a concise answer to the research question (Mallett, Hagen-Zanker, Slater & Duvendack, 2012). Munn, Stern, Aromataris, Lockwood & Jordan (2018) add that systematic reviews are the ideal method for conducting a comprehensive analysis of the scientific literature on a given concept. As a systematic review is qualitative in nature, no statistical procedure will be performed.

The articles cited in this document were obtained from scientific databases such as: Google Scholar, Elsevier, EBSCO, ProQuest, Scielo, Dialnet and ScienceDirect. The key words or keywords that allowed the collection of information were the following: "Branding" "Effects of Branding" "Impact of branding" "Scope of Branding" "Industrial Branding" "B2B Branding" "B2C Branding" "Personal Branding" "Place Branding" "Nation Branding" "Employer Branding" "Branding Models" "Branding framework" "Digital Branding" "Branding limitations" "Brand through branding" and "Brand".

In order to carry out this systematic review, 137 scientific articles were consulted, from which 54 were finally extracted. For an article to be included in this review it had to meet the following criteria; be an original article in an indexed and/or refereed journal, have been written within the last 10 years and describe knowledge and applications of branding in relevant or established contexts in current academia. On the other hand, scientific articles from non-indexed or refereed journals were excluded, as well as articles with clearly biased opinions, redundant information,

that do not address the topic to be addressed in a precise manner or that are not found in the requested time period, with the exception of old indexed articles whose presence facilitates explaining a context or perception of the past.

This review seeks to present high-impact knowledge and ideas. Therefore, articles were chosen from the most prestigious journals in the world in their respective fields, according to the Scimago Journal and Country Rank portal. Ninety percent (49) of the articles presented in this research belong to the best quartile of the Scimago website (Q1), 6% (3) to the second best quartile (Q2) and 4% (2) of the articles used in this work have been refereed according to the EBSCO database.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Branding: state of the art as a starting point

The general concept of branding is strongly linked to its application in a business environment, specifically in the retail sector, where the product has direct contact with the end consumer, creating an interaction between the consumer and the brand. If this contact is usually positive, it is very likely to create a bond between the two, which will make it easier for the consumer to purchase that product repeatedly. (Warren, Batra, Correia & Bagozzi, 2019).

Certainly, sales strategies in the retail sector are notoriously affected by branding (Frank, Torrico, Enkawa & Schvaneveldt, 2014). Authors such as Philiastides & Ratcliff (2013) reinforce this idea by mentioning that branding has become a determining factor in consumers' purchasing choices, Yotova (2017) explains that this is because marketers are able to endow generic products with distinctive characteristics through a brand, which gives them an added value that is difficult to imitate. Therefore, it can be said that branding allows building a brand with attractive qualities, which become functional and intangible benefits that manage to influence the purchase of a product (Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer & Nyffenegger, 2011).

As can be seen, branding appears to be a technique oriented purely to the management of a brand in companies dedicated to retailing, but this is not the case, but there is a reason for this. Previously, it was said that branding had a limited influence in the business-to-business market (Saunders & Watt, 1979), and that it was not overtly important in business-to-business marketing of products and services (Robinson, Faris & Wind, 1967 as cited in Viardot, 2017). Years later, its importance was proven through empirical studies, which also demonstrated its influence on decision making in strong companies with highly skilled professionals (Lynch & De Chernatony, 2007). The truth is that today, after more than 40 years of research, business-to-business branding has reached a level of maturity that allows it to have a field of study all to itself (Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2016).

In business-to-business branding, the priority is to build a brand that inspires trust and minimises risks through a good reputation (Mohan, Brown, Sichtmann & Schoefer, 2018). In other words, a supplier company must provide security in a comprehensive manner through its brand, in such a way that an applicant considers its product or service to be the most suitable for its functional characteristics and the seriousness of the organisation.

At first glance, business-to-business branding may seem similar to its counterpart focused on the end consumer, since it not only appeals to a functional benefit, such as the quality of its products, but also chooses to provide abstract benefits such as trust and responsibility (Gomes, Fernandes & Brandão, 2016), which are indispensable characteristics when selecting a supplier. However, after analysing the situation, there are notable differences that have a direct impact on the execution of branding. Osterle, Kuhn & Henseler (2018) detail this situation by mentioning that in the business-to-business market the demand is usually more selective and complex, they look for suppliers that comply with technical characteristics in line with their quality standards, also the decision making is different, as it involves a working group, which must discuss and analyse the available options until reaching the most logical decision possible. It should be emphasised that, although the number of buyers in the business-to-business market is much smaller, the transactions are much larger than in the retail sector.

To summarise, the concept of branding involves an individual or collective entity that, in a figurative sense, seeks to wrap an invisible layer of positive characteristics around its products or services, so that they possess an advantage that consumers often cannot see, but can perceive.

As can be deduced, the brand is expressed figuratively as an invisible layer, although it also encompasses visual elements. Concretely, we can say that a brand is a medium that brings identification and personality to products, as well as serving as a guide for consumers when choosing what to buy. (Kavak, Kazanci, Tugba and Tuncel, 2015). From a psychological point of view, it can be affirmed that a brand has a notorious influence on the evaluation of a product, as it causes the item to be endowed with characteristics or traits similar to those of any human being (Yorkston, Nunes and Matta, 2010). From a financial point of view, we can say that a brand is an intangible asset that is put on the market to compete for a financial value (Krishnan, Sullivan, Groza and Aurand, 2013), being the marketers in charge of making this value grow, since it is of utmost importance for the economic interests of companies (Fischer, Volckner and Sattler, 2010). It remains to be debated which is more important, whether the performance of the brand in its tangible and rational characteristics or in its capacity to awaken positive feelings in its buyers, whether they are end consumers or other companies, probably requires a complex analysis due to the enormous number of variables that can have an impact. The truth is that, nowadays, both aspects are important and complement each other, whether in a business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) market.

Applicability of branding - is the business sector its exclusive field?

Contributing to a company's success through branding is remarkable and shows how indispensable the application of marketing can be, but is that all there is to it? Is branding only limited to supporting companies? Of course not. Branding can be applied in different sectors, and even if it involves the assistance of other subjects, the objective is always the same, to build an attractive brand for a certain target group.

Place branding is defined by one of its fathers as the process of endowing a place with a brand that expresses its own identity in a positive way (Anholt, 2010 as cited in Pedeliento, & Kavaratzis, 2019). This aspect of branding perfectly exemplifies what is expressed in the previous paragraph, as it is supported by disciplines such as sociology, public administration, architecture, civil engineering and geography (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011 as cited in Ma, Schraven, Bruijne, Jong, & Lu, 2019) and aims to increase the attractiveness of a certain area for attracting investors, tourists, professionals, among others. (Klijn, Eshuis, & Braun, 2012). It should be noted that an area can be a city, a district, a region or even an entire country (Lecompte, Trelohan, Gentric, Aquilina, 2017), and that due to the large number of people involved in place branding activities, the process of implementing it is often very complex and difficult due to the different interests of the stakeholders involved (Insch & Stuart, 2015).

Another aspect of branding to take into account is personal branding, Rangarajan, Gelb & Vandaveer (2017) recall Peters (1997), who is credited with the birth of the concept of personal branding, who explains that a person should not perceive themselves as a set of skills available to an employer, but should see themselves as a brand, made up of their own qualities. Personal branding can be said to work with an individual's actions, beliefs or experiences, these can be: the principles a person stands for, the quality of the work they do or the messages they convey (Kalia, Patel, Moriarity and Canon, 2017).

Although it was initially believed that personal branding was purely linked to celebrities, politicians and entertainment industries (Chen, 2013 as cited in Blaer, Frost & Laing, 2020), thanks to the development of the internet and the emergence of social platforms any individual has the facility to be able to apply personal branding. Van Dijck (2013) mentions that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn offer a wide range of tools to improve personal branding in the networks, so the development of this will depend notoriously on how the tools are used when presenting the positive characteristics of the user (Brems, Temmerman, Graham & Broersma,

2016).

In simple terms, personal branding is a planned process where individuals strive to promote the best of themselves (Khedher, 2014 as cited in Kucharska & Mikolajczak, 2018). The originator of the extended self theory, Belk (2013) expresses that individuals are increasingly concerned with their online presentation, so the 'self' they display is increasingly 'managed' by them.

It is clear that personal branding can be used unscrupulously. Even so, its honest and responsible application helps to promote personal qualities that would otherwise be hidden. Ethics and diligence will mark a turning point in the execution of this concept.

While personal branding focuses on the development of the personal brand, which in many cases makes the person who applies it more attractive to the public or potential employers, there is a type of branding that focuses on developing the latter's brand. Employer branding is a concept that involves the reputation of a company and its value proposition as an employer (Barrow & Mosley, 2011 as cited in Dabirian, Kietzman & Diba, 2017), its importance lies in the quality of being able to attract, retain and develop the human talent of your organisation through strategies (Biswas & Suar, 2014).

It should be noted that although most conceptual research on employer branding focuses on current and potential employees, most empirical research focuses on recruitment (Theurer, Tumasjan, Welpé & Lievens, 2016). Tkalac & Sinčić (2018) citing Moroko & Uncles (2009) mention that the main focus of employer branding should revolve around different stakeholders.

In contrast, Carlini, Grace, France & Lo Iacono (2019) citing Greening & Turban (2000) consider that focusing efforts on internal engagement is an excellent idea, as potential employees will prefer to apply to a company that has happy workers with a strong sense of belonging.

Looking at the different positions in the theoretical and practical field of employer branding, it is clear that employer branding still requires more attention from the research community. In the coming decades, approaches and applications of employer branding will probably be clarified through new literature related to the topic, which will possibly lead to a majority consensus among academics.

After all that has been said, the versatility of branding is unquestionable. However, there are still applications or effects of branding that may be going unnoticed by many branding enthusiasts.

Branding: from anthropomorphisation to "analgesic" work, an enigmatic journey

Anthropomorphisation is often used by marketers as a way to enhance the authenticity of a brand, a process of attributing emotions, intentions, beliefs, characteristics and a human mind to an entity (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007 as cited in Puzakova & Kwak, 2017). Although the idea that a brand can be wrapped in human characteristics is no longer questioned in the scientific field (Bennet & Hill, 2012), how it is used is. Portal, Abratt & Bendixen (2018) citing Brown (2010) comment that the concept of anthropomorphisation is not fully understood or exploited in marketing.

It is often thought that anthropomorphisation only contemplates positive aspects and cannot have negative repercussions on the brand that applies it, however, this is not the case (Puzakova, Kwak & Rocereto, 2013). The attribution of a human conscience to a brand endows it with responsibilities that it cannot evade under any circumstances. Although at first glance it may seem hard to believe, anthropomorphised brands are judged more severely than their non-human-conscious peers and transgressions are harder to forgive, especially if there is a denial of the problem by the anthropomorphised brand (Puzakova et al., 2013).

The concept of anthropomorphisation provides valuable insights that are not foreign to branding today. Although it is true that this concept has been applied in a primitive way since at least the Upper Paleolithic, there is currently not enough research that allows us to comprehensively understand how it works and its implications for marketing, which opens up a new path of knowledge for this discipline.

Like anthropomorphisation, language is a very important aspect of branding today, as it can be used to compose creative, complex or eye-catching messages that enable constant positive

interaction with the consumer. Unfortunately, Carnevale, Luna & Lerman (2017) state that although a great deal of consumer research recognises the importance of language in branding and its impact on how consumers react to a brand, there is no scientific research that explicitly incorporates language into branding theories. In view of this situation, Carnevale et al. (2017) propose a new field of study, brand linguistics, an interdisciplinary study based on the models and findings of psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and semiotics applied to the consumer-brand relationship.

It is interesting to see how the research of the aforementioned authors will create a new field of study that will broaden and possibly help to modify theory concerning the application of branding. It should be noted that linguistics not only provides branding with the literature of language, but also with one of its most important branches, phonetics.

Recent studies have shown that the phonetics of a brand name can influence consumer behaviour. (Pogacar, Plant, Rosulek & Kouril, 2014). It is therefore understandable that companies spend time and money exploring new ways to create appealing names for their brands. Experimental research by Argo, Popa & Smith (2010) concludes that brands whose names contain a phonetic structure composed of repetitive sounds (Coca-Cola, Kit Kat, Tutti Frutti, Bits & Bites, Hubba Bubba, to name a few) will influence consumers' choices and evaluations. This will be the case as long as the repetition is not excessive and the linguistic sounds of the brand name are not difficult to pronounce. Meanwhile, the study by Pogacar et al. (2014) showed that the most popular brands have a different sound pattern to the less favoured brands, and based on the results of their research, it is recommended that experts should use stop consonants (sound produced by the stopping and subsequent release of air) and open vowels such as "a" and "e".

The linguistic and phonetic studies presented have been carried out by English-speaking researchers, that is to say, they were executed taking into account only the English language. It is advisable for Spanish-speaking researchers to carry out scientific studies of the same nature and complexity, as this will improve the application of linguistics and phonetics in Hispanic branding. While branding is not deeply studied in the linguistic domain, in the digital domain it is, in fact, in the digital domain branding has a privileged place, academics have dedicated time and effort to develop the branding literature on topics related to social networks, digital advertising, digital analytics or mobile applications. However, there are topics of great interest that still do not receive sufficient attention from researchers.

One of these topics is virtual reality, which can be defined as the use of interactive simulations created from computer software and hardware, allowing the presentation of digital environments similar to those found in the real world (Weiss, 2006 as cited in Laver et al., 2017), its application allows the creation of virtual spaces capable of replacing real sensory perceptions with digital ones (Freeman et al., 2017).

The results of the research conducted by Pizzi, Vanucci & Aiello (2019) show that individuals are able to transfer their virtual perceptions to a brand consciously or unconsciously, and that people are more immersed in virtual reality shops than in physical ones. Based on this, we can say that this technology becomes relevant when it comes to retail branding, a branch of branding strongly linked to visual merchandising, a concept that seeks to improve the attractiveness of a shop and the perceived image of the brand from the consumers' point of view, contemplating factors such as scent, lighting, colour schemes, product placement and the overall design of the place (Law, Wong & Yip, 2012).

Another technological concept that has not yet received sufficient attention is the internet of things. De Cremer, Nguyen & Simkin (2017) state that the internet of things or internet-of-things (IoT) is a network of interconnected devices, systems and services within the existing infrastructure of the internet. In other words, the internet of things is a term that refers to the connection of everyday objects to the internet.

In the study conducted by Wu, Chen & Dou (2016) it is clearly stated that interaction with smart objects can enhance the bonding, attachment and brand competitiveness of the smart product used,

especially when the communication and language of the item is friendly. Knowing this, it is surprising that there are very few marketing studies that explore the internet of things (Nguyen & Simkim, 2017), but the aforementioned research clearly shows how the internet of things can help branding.

It is a fact that technological advances such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, geolocation and data intelligence will provide new tools for branding. However, in order to be as effective as possible when using these technologies, to rule out their use in certain circumstances or to promote their use among marketers, it is necessary to carry out extremely detailed research, including experiments capable of presenting in a scientific way the advantages and possible disadvantages that these technologies may contain when linked to branding.

Leaving aside the technological aspect, Reimann, Nuñez & Castaño (2017) have conducted research that scientifically supports that a close relationship between a brand and a consumer can mitigate the physical pain of the individual thanks to the feelings and the social connection that exists in the brand-consumer relationship. This was proven through 7 experiments, where different test groups were exposed to different tests related to pain, such as: exposure to frozen water, memories of serious accidents or scenarios where they could be hurt, while they thought about their favourite brand, wrote an essay about it or wrote the name of their lovemark.

It is truly amazing to fully understand how the relationship between a brand and a consumer can perform the job of an "analgesic", developing theory related to the authors' research will definitely change paradigms. It is necessary to point out that anthropomorphised brands mitigate pain much more than reified brands, thus contributing to the knowledge of brand anthropomorphisation.

Definitely, branding is very broad, encompassing many disciplines in order to reach its most perfect state, in a way it can be considered something magical. Is it hard to believe? The idea of travelling to a strange place and sleeping in a stranger's room sounds crazy, doesn't it? Who would feel comfortable doing something like that and pay for it? Who would host a stranger in their home? The Airbnb brand would defy common sense.

Airbnb is a digital platform dedicated to private and tourist accommodation where individuals (hosts) offer their properties or rooms to guests from different countries. The premise of inviting a stranger into your home can be considered crazy, but Airbnb transforms that premise through branding and effective communication. This brand comprehensively conveys to its hosts that they are not only sharing a room of their property with a stranger; they are sharing their life, their culture, their beliefs and their experiences with someone who is not as different as they think; on the other hand, it tries to awaken the adventurous spirit of the guests (tourists), inciting them to move away from the classic, the hotel room. Imagine a world where people belong anywhere, that's the message Airbnb wants to convey as a brand.

An inspiring brand identity, an innovative and successful business model. The above paragraph re-emphasises how beneficial it can be to develop a strong brand. At this point, having a developed brand may seem indispensable and a must for any organisation, and it is certainly very important as it brings many benefits, but paradoxically there is a successful company whose philosophy is to have no brand at all.

Mujirushi Ryohin (Muji) is a "brand" whose idea is to create functional, high quality and fairly priced products without any logo or brand. Muji was born in Japan as an antithesis to the consumerism of the 1980s, and despite fervently rejecting the idea of branding or advertising, it has more than 800 shops in more than 25 countries around the world, selling household and consumer goods. Muji's success can be attributed to the quality of its products, the strategic placement of its shops and its highly original philosophy, which unwittingly works on a "brand", the premise of which is to sell quality products that do not carry a high price tag because they carry a famous logo or brand name.

4. CONCLUSION

In short, branding is strongly linked to the business world, as this is the area in which it has developed the most over time. Although it was initially focused on mass consumer markets and its relevance in the industrial sphere was relatively minimised by the academics of the time, the time and dedication of some experts has managed to give a place to the industrial aspect in today's branding.

The growing importance of branding in the business sector has caused many scholars to extrapolate branding principles to different areas. Whether for the purpose of promoting the positive characteristics of an individual, developing and promoting the attractiveness of an area or highlighting the good working practices of a given entity.

Despite the fact that branding has been extrapolated to different fields, the full implications of branding are still not fully understood. Whether its relationship with an ancestral concept such as anthropomorphisation, or its relationship with cutting-edge technologies such as virtual reality or the internet of things, or the incredible capacity to mitigate the physical pain of an individual through the creation of emotional bonds, have not yet been widely studied by the scientific marketing community.

After all of the above, it is recommended that quantitative research with multivariate statistics be carried out, focusing on the applications or possible applications of branding. In this way, key factors or implicit and explicit consequences of the application of branding in different aspects can be revealed and fully explained. It is very likely that as a result, new ways of using branding will be established or established branding paradigms will be broken. The truth is that much remains to be known about this concept, which appears to be multidimensional.

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