Branding an Industry?

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Branding an Industry?

Conceptual development and relevance

“The food industry is under full scale assault. The crisis is global.”

(Rotten, Netflix documentary series)

“Drones mean innovation, new services for citizens, new business models and a huge potential for economic growth. We need the EU to be in the driving seat...”

(Violeta Bulc, European Commissioner for transport)

An established industry is struggling to defend its image in the aftermath of a “full scale assault”. An up-and-coming industry strives to promote its “huge potential” and legitimize its existence. These are but two recent examples that illustrate that the pressures and opportunities related to developing and maintaining a positive (brand) image exist not only at the level of individual corporate brands, but also at the more aggregate level of industry. Other examples, include recurrent image crises that have negatively impacted companies operating in industries, such as the automotive industry, the tobacco industry, the oil industry, the accounting and finance industry, etc. (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014; Nader, 1965, Palazzo and Richter, 2005; Rogers et al., 2005). Conversely, as shown by research in contexts, such as microfinance, fair trade, and community-supported agriculture, market actors sometimes benefit from the positive image of the industry they operate in, or find ways to constructively respond to industry image crises (Bajde et al., forthcoming; Boersma, 2009; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli. 2007).
While such issues and opportunities are far from new, we suggest that their intensified presence and the strategic reactions to them deserve additional attention. Multiple factors have contributed to the increased relevance of what we propose to term ‘industry branding’. Increased sensitivity towards the risks and harms of industrial production and mass commerce, enhanced opportunities for sharing stories of industry failure and controversy, growing interest in promoting national and regional industries in the global marketplace, and strengthened aspirations to strategically develop industries of the future, to name but a few (Beck, 1992; Geiger et al., 2014; Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2007; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014).

However, although branding activities play an important role in legitimizing and promoting industries, sectors, clusters, and other industry agglomerations, marketing theory has been slow to address this matter. This essay makes a case for explicating industry branding as a set of processes through which representations, identifications, and affective entanglements with a particular industry are purposefully established. We reflect on the socio-cultural, economic and political developments that have intensified the need for strategic practices of industry branding, on the actors involved in industry branding, their aims, and the consequences of their attempts to shape the image of a particular industry in the eyes of varied audiences.

We draw upon nascent literature on industry legitimation and cultural branding of markets and industries developed in consumer culture theory (Holt, 2004; Giesler, 2012; Humphreys, 2010a and 2010b; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014) and organization studies (Rao, 2000 and 2004). We apply and extend this work by unpacking the concept of industry branding and illustrating it with practical examples. We use extant literature and practical examples to highlight the role of industry branding
in modern-day economies to outline the manifold dimensions and challenges of industry branding, and to generate suggestions for future research.

**Industry branding as another brand of branding**

As the customary argument goes, the terms ‘brand’ and ‘branding’ have been steadily expanded to cover not only products, services, and corporations (i.e., product brands and corporate brands), but also individual persons, governmental and non-governmental institutions, political parties, events, locations, and even nations (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Dinnie, 2015; Kerr, 2006; Konecnik, 2004). Such conceptual stretching has further complicated the already elusive definitions of brand and branding. Do we really need another brand of branding?

We provide two core arguments in support of an affirmative answer to this question. First, we point to several changes in the social, political, and business environment that have contributed to the growing importance of industry branding. Second, we argue that conceiving and explicating industry branding can help scholars and practitioners take proper stock of the unique nature and challenges of branding an industry. Before outlining these two lines of argumentation, we address several definitional considerations so as to clarify our own position of what is meant by industry branding.

**Definitional considerations**

A plethora of definitions of brand and branding exist in the literature. Historically, definitions of brand(ing) have revolved around identification. Accordingly, a brand has been commonly defined as an identification marker (a name, a symbol, or other means of identification) that allows
marketers to differentiate a product or an organization from competitors (Dinnie, 2015). Put differently, a brand “is a name with the power to influence” (Kapferer, 2012, 8). Although industries and sectors also have names that serve to differentiate them from other sectors and industries, they are rarely labelled with trademarked names or logos. Yet, even from a narrow logoistic perspective on brands (deChernatony, 2009), brand names and logos designating business sectors and clusters are being increasingly used as a tool for industry development communication.

For instance, Lundequist and Power (2002, 691) describe Medicon Valley as exemplary case of industry development through “top-down cluster-branding”. Since its inception, the Medicon Valley brand has exerted considerable influence on the development of the “life-sciences industry”, by making both the valley and the emergent industry attractive to bio-tech and pharmaceutical companies, highly sought-after professionals, and investors (Lundequist and Power, 2002). Medicon Valley thus serves as an illustrative example of industry branding intertwined with location branding (Kerr, 2006). Whereas in the case of the Medicon Valley, industry branding revolves around regional identifications (the Greater Copenhagen area), the architecture of buildings and spaces inhabited by prominent industry players (Schroeder, 2003) can also serve as a powerful marker of an industry.

Furthermore, industry-wide brand symbols have been commonly developed by professional and trade associations (e.g., California Milk Processor Board’s “Real California milk”), by international and national certification bodies (Fairtrade Labelling Organizations’ “Fairtrade international”), as well as by development organizations and tourism boards (e.g., “Medicon Valley”, “I Love NY”). Such brands do not signify a single product or a single corporation. They are developed and used as industry-level identification markers and communication devices.
Of course, there is much more to branding than names and logos (deChernatony 2009).

Furthermore, the process through which brands are constituted cannot be reduced to the purposeful branding efforts of corporations, what Schroeder (2017) calls the corporate perspective of branding. For instance, Kotler and Gertner (2002, 250) point out that a country brand exists even if “a country does not consciously manage its name as a brand”. They go on to argue that even in absence of strategic nation branding, people still form beliefs and impressions about particular countries. The (brand) image they have of a particular country or nation subsequently shapes their choices of where to travel, where to work, where to buy goods from, etc. (Konecnik 2004). This argument advances a definitional logic according to which brands reside in the minds of consumers as cognitive construals and affective responses (Dinnie, 2015; Heding et al., 2009). Schroeder (2017) describes this logic as the “consumer perspective” of brands. He adds that while corporations own the trade mark and engage in strategic branding efforts, they never truly own the images consumers have of the brand or fully control the processes through which brand images are formed and through which brands come to play a role in consumers’ lives.

Consumers perceive and relate to brands in various ways, using or refusing brands as relational resources and ideological referents (Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2004). This happens not only on the level of individual company products or corporate brands, but also on the more aggregate levels (Dinnie 2007). For instance, people might harbour various ideas regarding the capacity of a specific industry to be of benefit to them and to society (Humphreys, 2010a and 2010b; Giesler, 2012). They might dream of working in a particular industry, or harbour fears and suspicions towards chosen industries. Entrepreneurs, investors, and employees might be proud or ashamed to be associated
with a particular industry, and might thus use the industry brand as a resource to connect with, or to distance themselves from others.

However, people do not construe and deploy brands in vacuum. Corporate and consumer perspectives on branding should be complemented with a cultural perspective, according to which a brand is not only a bundle of consumer associations or a legal/corporate asset, but also a cultural and sociological object shaping and taking shape in particular socio-cultural environments (Schroeder, 2009, 2017). From this standpoint, a brand’s existence is tied to its vitality as a “cultural category” (McCracken, 1986); a nodal point in which economic, social, and political concerns and aspirations intersect (Holt 2004). Put differently, when a particular categorization of economic activities or entities becomes normalized as a shared cultural category and invested with distinct cultural meanings, brands emerge.

The cultural emergence and evolution of industry brands can thus be seen as a process that cannot be reduced to the institutional efforts of the industry associations, governmental institutions, and industry leaders seeking to develop and manage the industry brand (Holt 2004; Holt and Cameron 2010; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014). Instead, the process through which brands are constituted also implicates a variety of other stakeholders: citizens, consumers, cultural intermediaries (e.g., the media, celebrities), institutional activist, etc. (Rao, 2004; Giesler and Fischer, 2017). Together these actors shape the ways in which brands are represented in (popular) culture (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014). Rather than residing in consumers’ minds, the (industry) brand thus exists in the communicative patterns and codes instituted in particular socio-cultural milieus (Schroeder, 2009, 2017).
Based on this short overview, we distinguish between the broader processes of (industry) brand constitution through which economic entities or activities become constituted as culturally-shared categories invested with distinct cultural meanings (i.e., as brands), and the narrower term (industry) branding which we define as a set of purposeful efforts aimed at establishing certain identifications, representations, and affective entanglements with a chosen (industry) brand in a particular cultural environment.¹ For instance, popular culture products, such as TV series, movies, and newspaper texts, can significantly impact the ways in which consumers relate to products, services and industries (Hirschman, Scott and Wells, 1998; Sherry 1995, Humphreys 2010b), thus contributing to the processes through which industry brands are constituted, but not representing an effort of industry branding (as defined in this paper), unless their authors or disseminators strategically use them to advance particular industry representations. Put differently, the manner in which industry brands become constituted as socio-cultural referents and a valuable assets to stakeholders and society, can entail strategic efforts of industry branding or they can occur through other processes that are not driven by strategic motivations to support or oppose an industry.

**Not new, but increasingly relevant**

Industry branding has, as illustrated by the examples presented above, been around for a long time. Industry brands have long served as cultural nodes suffused with symbolic meanings, aspirations, fears, and concerns. This has been particularly salient in cases of controversial industries linked to high systemic risks and negative social and environmental externalities (Rao, 2004; Humphreys, 2010a and 2010b; Giesler, 2012; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014). In these contexts, industry brands have been found to develop through ongoing, collective negotiations of meanings attached to contested products and services (e.g., Botox injections, gambling, oil) and to controversial
practices of production, marketing, distribution, consumption, and disposition, etc. (e.g., oil spills, irresponsible marketing of Botox, gambling addiction).

Further, it has been argued that the controversies surrounding modern markets become accentuated as developments in science and technology, globalization, and urbanization give rise to new forms of risk and concerns (Beck, 1992; Geiger et al., 2014; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014). The swelling matters of concern have encouraged a growing host of actors to question the organization of markets and industries, and to engage in attempts to “conceive and establish new rules for the game” (Callon, Méadel and Rabeharisoa, 2002, 194). Put differently, an expanding array of actors have actively debated and attempted to reorganize economic activity on the level of industry rather than on the more micro level of single products or corporations. The growing list of actors who are reinventing markets and industries includes governments, professional and trade associations, corporations, universities, NGOs, municipalities, consumer groups, etc. (Geiger et al., 2014; Krabbe 2017; Kjeldgaard et al., 2017, Padgett and Mulvey, 2007).

These actors pursue diverse, if often interrelated, aims. Industry branding can be motivated by social and political aims related to protecting the rights and interests of vulnerable groups or society at large. For instance, activist groups, NGOs, and governments engage in negative branding of socially and environmentally problematic industries as well as in positive branding of industries that promise to provide solutions to pressing social problems and opportunities for development. As indicated by the opening quotation, government officials often promote new industries as engines of economic growth and fountains of new services for citizens. Concerns for benefits to society can overlap with economic motives to remove barriers to industry expansion, to bolster the industry’s capacity to attract investors, consumers, employees, etc., or to strengthen the positioning of
individual corporate brands by aligning them with industry trends, such as novel uses of technology (Padgett and Mulvey, 2007; Krabbe, 2017).

Industry branding can also take root outside of corporate or governmental settings. For example, Rao (2000) shows how automobile clubs run by motor car enthusiasts played a vital role in paving the way for the emergent car industry. These clubs significantly reshaped the public image of cars at the start of the 20th century by organizing reliability contests that legitimized the automobile as a reliable means of transportation and paved the way for the development of the car industry. In addition to rebranding cars and the car industry in the eyes of the public and potential car buyers, the clubs also played a pivotal role in convincing the state to authorize the use of cars.

In addition to being strategically constituted by a multitude of brand constituents, industry branding also addresses highly diverse audiences. Industry branding seeks to transform the image of an industry in the eyes (and pockets) of investors, prospective employees (employer branding), the general public, political representatives, public institutions and regulators, and, of course, the consumers. Although systematic studies of the relationship between industry image and company performance are yet to be conducted, extant studies do show that industry image significantly impacts the corporate image of companies operating in the industry and their ability to attract employees (Burmann et al., 2008; Wallace, 2014). It is also clear that a negative image of a category of products or services can have a chilling effect on the capacities of companies to attract consumers. For instance, the development of an industry can rest on its ability to dispel negative doppelganger images of products and services that frighten, repulse, or disquiet consumers or the public (Giesler, 2012; Humphreys, 2010a and 2010b; Krabbe, 2017; Popp, 2016). A brief overview of existing studies of industry image and branding, referenced in this paper is provided in Table 1.
Finally, the social and economic motivations for purposeful branding of industries are reinforced by intensifying competition between regional or national industry sectors, as well as between industries that are increasingly forced to compete for the same pool of resources (e.g., private and public-sector industries). Globalization has given rise to global industry (brands), while at the same time accentuating the relevance of local industry (Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2007). Strategic efforts to brand an industry often derive from the need to strengthen the standing of regional or national industry brands in an increasingly global marketplace (Dinnie, 2015). Regional and national industry bodies have become increasingly active in branding local industries both domestically and internationally. For instance, national industry networks, such as the Danish Fashion Institute, actively promote national industries through global events, such as the Copenhagen Fashion summit (Melchior et al. 2011), and through initiatives aimed at strengthening the normative legitimacy of the industry, such as the Danish fashion ethical charter (www.danishfashioninstitute.dk).

Unpacking industry branding

A simplified outline of industry branding covers at least two inter-related dimensions: 1) branding the industry-wide category of products and services, and 2) branding the set of organizations comprising the industry. To continue with the above example, the image of the Danish fashion industry is, in simple terms, comprised of the generalized image of Danish fashion products and the generalized image of Danish fashion designers and producers. Examples of extant research looking into the constitution of industry-wide images of products and services include Hirschman et al.’s
(1998) analysis of discourses and meanings of coffee, or more recently, Giesler’s (2012) analysis of the evolving brand image of Botox.

Further, an industry brand subsumes manifold product and company-related processes such as: 1) research and innovation, 2) sourcing and production, 3) marketing and distribution, and 4) consumption and disposition. Put differently, the image of the Danish fashion industry derives from generalized, culturally-constituted perceptions of how Danish fashion designers/producers and fashion products ‘perform’ (ethically, technically, financially, etc.) across a broad range of development, sourcing, production, marketing, distribution, consumption, and disposition activities. Ensuring a strong industry brand is thus predicated on establishing the legitimacy and appeal of industry products and organizations across the full range of industry practices and processes. Namely, a strong industry brand assures and entices its constituents and audiences by consistently upholding the moral, social, technical, and economic qualities of its products and organizations.

Extant studies emphasize the importance of establishing the legitimacy of an industry through creating awareness, validating the industry’s appropriateness, and building trust (Rao, 2000; Humphreys, 2010a and 2010b; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014; Popp, 2016). In addition, successful industry branding establishes not only legitimacy in the sense of the industry being proper or acceptable (i.e., being congruent with current norms and beliefs), but also as being desirable and inspirational. For example, the popularity of the niche industry of community-supported agriculture emanates not only from its capacity to address the social and environmental ills of corporate agriculture, but just as importantly stems from its capacity to enchant consumers with inspiring imaginations of positive social change, and meaningful personal connections to nature and local community (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007).
This double helix of legitimation and imagineering (i.e., envisioning a better future for society and individuals) is particularly relevant in cases of emergent industries where legitimation and removal of barriers to industry development are just as important as mobilizing interest, passion, and aspiration. Take the example the emergent drone industry. On the one hand, the (future) image of this industry is tied to its ability to address public concerns over safety and privacy, to successfully navigate the current regulatory barriers, and curtail irresponsible drone use (Boucher, 2015). On the other hand, the speed of industry development is also tied to the intensity of the interest and excitement among potential drone entrepreneurs, investors, government officials, corporate customers and consumers, future employees, etc. This excitement can be linked to various aspirations and desires; aspirations to establish a region or a country as a drone-industry leader, the desire to revolutionize industries such as photography, transport, construction, or agriculture, the pleasure of flying drones for fun or sport, etc. Kindling and sustaining these aspirations and desires, by for example interpellating techoptian ideologies of technology-enhanced future or by mitigating the pressures posed by dystopian technology ideologies (Kozinets 2007), represents an essential component of industry branding.

Finally, whereas the branding of emergent industries will likely be future oriented (i.e., establishing the future potential of an industry), industry branding can also relate to the past. For example, established industries might appeal to their heritage and tradition in order to strengthen the authenticity or nostalgic value of its products and to reinforce the commitment and loyalty of brand stakeholders. In this sense, the industry brand can draw its power from the retold past as well as from the foretold future.
Figure 1 summarizes the discussed dimensions and processes of industry branding. Whereas it is not the primary purpose of this paper to offer managerial advice on how to approach industry branding, this tentative overview can serve as a crude map for managers interested in identifying the challenges and opportunities of industry branding. For example, industry stakeholders should consider the role of generalized, industry-wide representations and meanings of products and services associated with a certain industry (e.g., of drones and drone-related services), as well as the representations and meanings associated with the institutions that comprise the industry (e.g., of drone producers and drone operators) and the activities of these institutions (e.g., drone production, drone operator training). These two dimensions will likely affect each other, and require coordinated efforts to legitimize the industry and inspire its constituents to support it. As indicated below, further research is needed to better understand the impact of industry image on market development and company performance, the impact of industry branding activities of individual market actors on industry image, as well as the relationship between corporate branding and industry branding.

Conclusions and future research opportunities

The mere fact that an industry exists as a shared cultural category to which various meaning are attached does not in itself provide sufficient grounds to argue for the existence of an industry brand. The argument becomes meaningful with the convergence of specific social-economic and institutional developments. Among these developments, it is the intensified controversies surrounding particular industries and the purposeful efforts to raise concerns or to dispel them on
the one hand, and the heightened aspirations and purposeful efforts to shape the development of industries via management of imaginations and images of industry (i.e., industry imagineering) on the other, that justify and motivate the introduction of the industry brand concept. As a result, the processes of purposeful industry branding are likely to take shape in controversial industries and in the contexts of emergent, aspirational industries. It is these contexts that new forms of industry coalition and collective industry branding efforts most commonly occur – a topic ripe for further investigation.

Whereas exploration of industry branding in the context of controversial industries is well underway (Humphreys 2010a and 2010b; Giesler 2012; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014), less attention has been paid to industry branding in the context of prosocial industries and emergent industries. The controversial nature of the contexts studies has lead researchers to view industry branding as a process of legitimization. Yet, as the discussion above indicates, there is more to branding than legitimization. Future research can examine the processes of industry imagineering through which industry brands generate interest, excitement, desire, and aspiration among their constituents and audiences.

This paper seeks to explicate and conceptualize industry branding in order to open research avenues that would lead toward systematic study of industry brand development. In addition to investigating aspects of industry branding that have not been covered by literature on industry legitimation (Rao, 2000 and 2004; Humphreys, 2010a) and nascent studies of cultural branding (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014), future studies can address the following issues: How do industry brands emerge and under what conditions do purposeful efforts to brand an industry occur?; What roles do different brand constituents, cultural intermediaries, and brand audiences play in constituting an
industry brand?; What shapes the agentic capacities of these actors and the distribution of power among them?

This last question points to a number of political and ethical concerns and challenges. Namely, given the diverse and often conflicting interests of brand constituents, as well as the lack of clear ownership rights to the industry brand, how do different actors lay claim to an industry brand and how do their actions affect other industry constituents? What is the role of the public and its representatives in industry branding and how does such branding impact the public? What kind of institutional structures and dynamics frame the increasingly strategic efforts to develop and control industry brands? Likewise, there is much need to continue building on research that has looked into the role of popular culture and (news) media in the constitution of industry brands (Sherry 1995; Humphreys, 2010a and 2010b). Creators and disseminators of popular culture can significantly impact the constitution of industry brands, regardless of whether it is performed as a deliberate effort of industry branding or not.

Further addressing the economic and managerial implications of industry branding, future research can investigate the impact of industry image on market development and company performance more closely. For example, studies that would measure of the impact of industry image on the performance of companies remain scarce, and tend to focus on implications in relation to employee recruitment (Burmann et al., 2008; Wallace, 2014). Further research could shed light on many other implications, such as how industry brand dynamics impact the market performance and market value of individual companies, how company-specific events and activities affect the industry brand, and vice versa. A diverse range of qualitative and quantitative methods can be used to obtain
a better understanding of the relationships between market development/performance, corporate branding and industry brand(ing).

Finally, there is considerable opportunity and need to explore the socio-cultural, political, technological, environmental, and economic ‘geographies’ of industry branding. Namely, how do macro processes such as globalization and subsequent competition between global, national, and regional industry constellations impact industry branding? What is the role of the nation state and transnational political institutions in industry branding? What role does national industry branding play in national branding (and vice versa), and how does industry branding impact the balance of power between local and global industry players, governments, or even nations? What is the role of technological shifts and environmental problems in industry brand development? These are just some of the potential questions suggested by nascent literature on industry branding (Melchior et al., 2011; Krabbe, 2017), and waiting to be addressed by future research on industry branding.

1 While building upon several insights from the literature on cultural branding, we refrain from its tendency to use branding as a catch-all term that encompasses all activities involved in shaping cultural representations of the brand. Instead, we reserve the term branding for activities that are purposefully oriented towards brand management, be it performed by managers or any other actor.

2 We sketch out possible future research trajectories in the Appendix.

References


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