A multi-stakeholder IMC framework for networked brand identity

Article Title Page

A multi-stakeholder IMC framework for networked brand identity

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose − Past integrated marketing communications (IMC) frameworks establish brand contacts as important sources of information and feedback. This paper discusses how the presence of multiple brand stakeholders and the proliferation of digital media increase the amount of brand information generated exponentially. When a firm fails to harness this information, it risks misalignment between brand identity and brand image, which, in turn, tarnishes brand equity.

Design/methodology/approach − Past IMC frameworks are reviewed and extended to identify the specific brand contact points between multiple stakeholders that hold significant potential to dynamically reconfigure brand identity. Theoretical propositions regarding the IMC function's role in managing these contact points to generate brand equity are offered.

Findings − The brand contacts described and their successful integration into a firm's brand-equity strategy extend current IMC-based brand-equity models and suggest fruitful, novel avenues for creating brand equity. Further, these brand contacts offer practical examples of how the scope of marketing communications can be redefined.

Originality/value − This paper contributes to the body of research on the elevation of IMC to a strategic-level function. In addition to the synergistic communication of the brand offering, IMC needs to play a pivotal role in coordinating the contacts between the brand and stakeholders, and in extrapolating relevant brand insights from these contacts.

Keywords: Integrated marketing communications, brand identity, brand image, brand equity, stakeholder theory, contact points.

Article Classification: Conceptual paper

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1. Introduction

If you are from the UK, there is a more than 75 per cent chance that you own an Apple

product. Chances are also that you would have bought that product through Apple's website,

or you would at least have used the website to gather information about the product and

brand. You would have (subconsciously or not) taken in Apple's clean and minimalistic

website and the simple and innovative design of the products. Together, your impressions

will have formed a specific image of the Apple brand in your mind, and this image may have

a key reason you bought the product in the first place.

The ability to convey a consistent brand identity to prospective and existing customers

represents a critical success factor in competitive, information-rich marketplaces (Fill, 2000;

Gould *et al.*, 1999). Brand identity – the set of brand associations a firm intends to establish

in consumers' minds (Aaker, 2002) – is conveyed through contact points between a firm and

its customers, for instance through the company website. From a consumer's perspective,

each contact point influences the perceived brand image – the brand associations formed in

consumers' minds (Keller, 1993). Alignment between brand identity and brand image forms

the bedrock of brand equity (Anisimova, 2010; De Chernatony, 1999; Roper and Davies,

2007), referring to a brand's worth in terms of strength and financial value (Burmann *et al.*,

2009).

Yet, the rapid evolution of digital media and the ensuing large volume of information

produced have drastically changed the nature and frequency of contact points (Kitchen and

Uzunoğlu, 2014). A brand's image is now not only shaped by *direct* interactions between

consumer and firm (Schultz *et al.*, 1993), but also by the *indirect* interactions between

consumers and multiple stakeholders connected to the firm (Merz *et al.*, 2009). The resulting

network of stakeholders that is actively involved in the creation and communication of a

brand (Payne *et al.*, 2009) has transformed brands into dynamic entities (Da Silveira *et al.*,

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2013), rendering unilateral definitions of brand identity obsolete (Asmussen *et al.*, 2013; Haarhoff and Kleyn, 2012).

Returning to the opening example of buying an Apple product, let's consider an Apple Watch, your web-search may not only have brought up the brand website, but you could have also learned that Apple has collaborated with Nike to install the Nike+ running app on every device. Knowing Nike as a high-performance sports brand will, to some extent, influence your perception of the Apple brand. During your search, you may also have found consumer reviews of the Apple Watch. In contrast to your initial assessment, some consumers question the product's technical abilities, portraying the Apple Watch as nothing but an expensive status symbol.

Instead of buying the device online, you may now feel that you should try and assess the Apple Watch first-hand. You visit Selfridges, a major UK department store, and find a purpose-built Apple Shop set up within Selfridges, staffed by Apple salespeople. Since Selfridges has built an upscale reputation in the UK, you assume that products sold in their stores provide a certain level of quality. The fact that the Apple Shop is adjacent to brand displays of Dior and Chanel further enforces your impression of Apple's high-end positioning. As you are approached by a friendly and expert salesperson, you receive competent answers to your questions, and the salesperson's enthusiasm may influence your decision to buy the watch there and then.

Throughout the purchase decision-making process, you have encountered the brand at multiple contact points and have interacted with a number of its stakeholders. In the process, your perception of the Apple brand could have moved from one of technical efficiency and performance, which may have been impacted by negative consumer reviews, to one of exclusiveness and prestige, to a combination of the two, and will continue to evolve based on your own experience with the product.

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Brand managers are thus called upon to make sense of the critical contact points occurring in the marketplace and to deploy marketing strategies and capabilities accordingly (O'Cass and Weerawardena, 2009). Integrated marketing communications (IMC), in particular, is viewed as the key marketing capability to convert branded assets and communications into positive brand-equity outcomes (Luxton *et al.*, 2015; Ratnatunga and Ewing, 2005). And, although scholars have long been sceptical about the effectiveness of IMC for driving improvements in firm performance (Cornelissen and Lock, 2000), more recent findings provide empirical evidence suggesting that IMC indeed contributes considerably to both brand and financial results (Luxton *et al.*, 2015).

Despite IMC being a fundamental component of a firm's brand-equity strategy, existing IMC-based brand-equity frameworks are faced with two main issues. First, they assume a unilateral, linear definition and communication of brand identity to build brand equity (Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005); however, the need for information gathering and sense-making has long been acknowledged for the successful implementation of IMC (Schultz and Kitchen, 2001). Second, extant frameworks tend to exclude stakeholders outside the traditional firm-consumer dyad, although, suppliers, retailers, employees, and even competitors shape the image of a brand through their contact points with consumers. To date, however, IMC frameworks provide little guidance regarding *how* a firm can coordinate and integrate the contact points between the brand and its various stakeholders to inform a strategy for aligning brand identity and brand image and ultimately, generating brand equity.

Against this background, this paper presents an extended and modernised IMC-brand equity framework, which explains how the IMC function can effectively manage multiple stakeholder contact points to elevate brand equity. Grounded in the four-stage model of IMC implementation (Schultz and Kitchen, 2001) and the IMC-based brand-equity model (Madhavaram *et al.* 2005), the proposed framework focuses on the role of IMC in managing

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and leveraging brand contacts between multiple stakeholders in pursuit of informing the

firm's brand-equity strategy. Alongside this framework, this paper offers testable

propositions regarding the ways in which multiple stakeholder contact points can be managed

by the IMC function to boost brand equity.

2. IMC: From buzzword to bedrock of brand-equity strategy

2.1 Elevation of IMC from a tactical to a strategic level

Early conceptualisations of IMC focused on buzzwords such as 'one sight – one sound', or

'one voice' (Beard, 1997; Duncan and Everett, 1993; Nowak and Phelps, 1994), highlighting

the need to communicate consistent messages across different channels to meet customer

needs and build long-lasting relationships (Schultz *et al.*, 1993). More recently, IMC has been

defined as "an audience-driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders,

contents, channels, and results of brand communication programs" (Kliatchko, 2008, p. 140).

IMC has thus moved from a tactical tool for coordination of marketing communications to a

strategic process for converting communication and brand assets into positive brand-equity

outcomes (Luxton *et al.*, 2015; Ratnatunga and Ewing, 2005; Schultz, 2004).

This evolution, however, does not unfold automatically over time but follows a staged

process largely dependent on available resources and existing barriers to implementation.

Common barriers include organisational structure (e.g., silos) and culture (e.g., headquarter-

branch clashes), lack of internal coordination, staffing and budgeting constraints, and

managerial misunderstandings about the role of IMC (for a review, see Ots and Nyilasy,

2015). While the evolution of IMC to strategic business integration is commonly assumed in

academic research (see Kliatchko, 2008, 2009), successful application in practice necessitates

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managerial commitment, understanding, and access to complementary resources to overcome the above barriers to implementation.

Assuming that internal stakeholders are collaborating to achieve a harmonic implementation of IMC, Schultz and Kitchen (2001) propose a four-stage model capturing this process. The first implementation stage concerns the tactical coordination of marketing communications ("marcoms") managed by the firm, requiring interpersonal and cross-functional communication. The second stage concerns the redefinition of the scope of marcoms, placing consumers at the core of the firm's business to devise effective communications based on consumers' wants and needs (Kitchen, 2005; Schultz and Schultz, 2003; Schultz, 1993a). In this stage, information about consumers is gathered and analysed, actionable insights are extracted, and new marcoms are developed accordingly. The third stage concerns the application of information technology to maintain fluid and flexible informational networks with the purpose of creating a global customer database available from each hub of the firm. Actionable insights can then be accessed more efficiently, leveraging the global capacity of major firms. The fourth stage concerns the financial and strategic integration of IMC, such that information, insights, and the correspondingly informed marcoms are monitored from a return-on-investment (ROI) perspective.

2.2 IMC as a determinant of brand equity

The coordination of media and multiple contact points are core attributes of IMC (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004; Low, 2000), necessary to convey a consistent brand identity and to achieve positive brand equity (Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005). Although the branding literature entails several perspectives, this paper considers brand identity to be the internally driven, aspirational set of brand associations created, developed, and maintained by a firm to position a brand (Aaker, 2002). Conversely, brand image refers to the interpretation of brand identity resulting in a

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specific set of brand associations held by consumers and other stakeholders (Keller, 1993).

Due to imperfections in the communication process, however, a perfect alignment between

brand identity and brand image is rarely achievable. Such misalignment is detrimental

because it can negatively influence consumer recall and buying behaviour towards a brand

(McGrath, 2005; Schultz, 1993b; Stammerjohan *et al.*, 2005) and may result in a loss of

brand equity (Burmann *et al.*, 2009; De Chernatony, 1999; Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005).

The brand-equity framework developed by Madhavaram *et al.* (2005) highlights the

importance of IMC in ensuring the communication of a consistent brand identity. The authors

present IMC as a fundamental component of a brand-equity strategy, defined as the "set of

processes that include acquiring, developing, nurturing, and leveraging an effectiveness-

enhancing, high-equity brand or portfolio of brands" (Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005, p. 69).

According to the framework, the firm's internally driven brand identity informs the activities

carried out by brand stewards, who are responsible for communicating the brand identity to

the public (e.g., PR divisions or contracted advertising agencies). Brand stewards ensure that

interactions between brand and consumer lead to favourable and durable brand associations,

which, ultimately, increase brand equity (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004; Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005).

Brand equity then informs brand identity in a feedback loop, further influenced by macro-

and near-environmental factors such as evolving consumers' preferences and competitors'

strategies (Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005).

An apparent limitation of this IMC-based brand-equity framework lies in the

conceptualisation of brand managers as active promoters of brand identity and consumers as

passive receivers. While most IMC frameworks recognise that firm-consumer communication

should be a bidirectional exchange of information (Schultz *et al.*, 1993; Smith *et al.*, 2006),

existing IMC-based brand-equity models do not acknowledge this dialogic dimension or the

role of stakeholders outside the traditional firm-consumer dyad. Overall, IMC-based brand-

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equity models to date lack an explicit accounting for two emerging issues that add

considerable complexity to the communication of brand identity: (1) the evolution of digital

media and technologies, and (2) the multiplication of contact points now occurring between

the brand and its stakeholders.

3. Digital media and multiple stakeholders increase the risk of misalignment between brand identity and brand image

Misalignment between brand identity and brand image is largely due to the limitations

inherent in the brand identity communication process, as this paper argues, these limitations

are exacerbated by two additional factors. First, the exponential increase of brand contact

points enabled by digital technology increases the frequency of interactions and

consequently, the amount of information generated through these contacts. Second, a

complex network of brand-relevant stakeholders further expands the number of possible

interactions where brand-relevant information is generated. Because these forces threaten to

widen the gap between brand identity and brand image, they have ensuing negative

consequences for brand equity (Anisimova, 2010; De Chernatony, 1999; Roper and Davies,

2007).

3.1 The surge of digital media platforms

The broad impact of digital technology on the amount of information produced is a well-

understood phenomenon. Modern times have witnessed a reversal from information scarcity

to information abundance (Floridi, 2014), to the extent that scholars refer to this as the

information-power based age (Labrecque *et al.*, 2013). Consumers increasingly use digital

media not just to research products and services, but also to engage with the companies they

purchase from, as well as other consumers and stakeholders (Garretson, 2008). Online

platforms are used to create, modify, share, and discuss consumers' experiences with

products, services, and the companies providing those (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

From an IMC perspective, the need for coordination of multiple contact points has

sharply increased in recent years due to the evolution of information technology in the

domains of marketing and marcoms (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004). Historically, companies were able

to control brand-relevant information through strategic press announcements and skilled

public relations managers. Today, firms are increasingly relegated to mere observers. Modern

companies often have neither the knowledge nor the capacity to monitor and influence all

public comments posted by their customers (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Many

organisations have thus come to realise that they can no longer hide behind polished facades,

as their activities are, in fact, transparent (Schultz *et al.*, 2000).

The threat from rising media coverage that forces companies to operate in the public eye

(Schultz *et al.*, 2000) is becoming even more salient with the growth of social media and the

apparent democratisation of corporate communication. Informational power has been

redistributed from those in marketing and public relations to the individuals and communities

that create, share, and consume social-media content. Communication about brands now

happens, with or without permission of the firms in question, rather than it being initiated by

the firm (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). Independent brand communities (Muñiz and Schau, 2007)

and consumer-generated advertising (Thompson and Malaviya, 2013) are but a few of the

activities outside the control of the firm that consumers use to interact with brands. And,

more often than not, contact points with a brand involve stakeholders other than the firm in

question.

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3.2 Multi-stakeholder brand theory

As the evolution of digital technology has prompted an interest in marketers, so the

multiplication of contact points between brand constituents has redefined modern brands as

being the product of interactions between multiple stakeholders (Vallaster and von Wallpach,

2013). Existing brand co-creation literature, in particular, points to brands as dynamic entities

co-created through interactions between multiple stakeholders, both internal (i.e., employees)

and external (i.e., consumers) (Payne *et al.*, 2009; Da Silveira *et al.*, 2013). If managed

correctly, these dynamic social interactions among multiple stakeholders have been shown to

increase the value of a brand (Merz *et al.*, 2009).

The shift towards a stakeholder-oriented approach to marketing has its roots in

stakeholder theory, which promotes the explicit recognition and management of the roles,

relationships, and interests of a firm's various stakeholders (Freeman, 1994). Stakeholder

theory defines the primary purpose of the firm as serving and coordinating the interests of

relevant constituents (Freeman, 1994) to ensure that each stakeholder strives to deliver high

value inputs to the firm (Freeman *et al.*, 2004). Stakeholder theory thus recognises the

importance of innovative practices that engage stakeholders in order to achieve value creation

and shared risk, ultimately increasing "the size of the pie for everyone" (Freeman *et al.*, 2004,

p. 366). While the co-creation literature cautions that such practices increase the risk of losing

control (e.g., the multiplication of brand contact points increases the risk of deficiencies in

the brand identity communication process), limiting stakeholder engagement can constrain

information gathering and relationship building and decrease the value the firm can extract

from its stakeholders (Hatch and Schultz, 2010).

4. The value of stakeholder-specific brand contacts for IMC

Despite a recognition that multiple stakeholders contribute to the creation of modern brands and that marketing communications are necessary in conveying the redefined brand identity to relevant stakeholders (Gregory, 2007), stakeholder theory is not sufficiently instructive as to how firms should integrate stakeholder dialogue into their processes (Driessen *et al.*, 2013). Prior studies on IMC do not take into account the multiplicity of brand-relevant stakeholders, often limiting their analyses to stakeholder monads or dyads (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). This paper builds on the notion that the synergistic coordination of multiple media activities increases brand equity (Naik and Raman, 2003) and extends this notion to the synergistic coordination of multiple stakeholder contact points. The proposed framework is based on the key premise that the coordination of multi-stakeholder contacts increases brand equity through fostering alignment between brand image and identity. Theoretically, the proposed framework is grounded in Schultz and Kitchen's (2001) four-stage model and Madhavaram and colleagues' (2005) IMC-based brand-equity model, and extends both frameworks by (1) mapping the complex network of multi-stakeholder interactions that threaten to widen the chasm between brand identity and image, and (2) incorporating the recursive, ongoing information cycle stemming from multi-stakeholder interactions.

The four-stage model of IMC (Schultz and Kitchen, 2001) clearly identifies the importance of consumer-based data collection and sense-making (stage 2) in informing IMC strategies. The framework advanced in this paper seeks to extend this stage by mapping those specific brand contact points between stakeholders that are likely to generate relevant brand information (Figure 1). At the outset, the brand-identity strategy informs the IMC strategy, namely the coordination of marcoms and the monitoring of contact points between brand stakeholders. Through multiple stakeholder brand contact points, consumers perceive a

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degree of alignment between brand identity and brand image, leading to brand equity. These

contact points generate brand information, and by monitoring when and how these brand

contacts occur, IMC can transfer the relevant brand information to the firm's research

function to interpret and extract meaningful brand insights. Through fostering collaboration

between the firm's research and branding functions, IMC enacts a gathering and sense-

making process around brand information generated across multiple contact points that

guides the realignment of brand image and brand identity. In line with Madhavaram et al.

(2005), there is an additional feedback loop that links the brand-equity strategy back to the

definition of brand identity. This feedback loop is influenced by macro-environmental factors

outside the control of the company. These are evolving customer trends, political factors,

economical factors, and technological factors beyond the influence of the company.

Intuitive as it may seem, an integrative and recursive information cycle is rarely

implemented in practice due to the barriers cited in Section 2.1. A detailed account of the

hindering effects of organisational barriers to implementation is not the primary focus of this

paper. The current framework concentrates, instead, on the role of appropriate resources and

capabilities in the effective implementation of the IMC brand-equity strategy. Strategic

management research discusses a host of capabilities that are known to influence a firm's

capacity to utilise information. In particular, absorptive capacity – "the ability of a firm to

recognise the value of new, external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial

ends" (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990, p. 128) – has emerged as being a critical capability.

Building absorptive capacity requires adequate resources to leverage the firm's knowledge.

The firm's absorptive capacity is thus argued to be necessary for the synergistic coordination

of multiple brand contacts. Given the wealth of information generated through multiple brand

contact points, it stands to reason that the IMC function's capability to utilise this information

to produce positive brand-equity outcomes would be strengthened when the firm has higher

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levels of absorptive capacity to support this activity. The above discussion results in the

following propositions:

P1. The synergistic coordination of multi-stakeholders brand contact points enacted

by IMC facilitates the alignment of brand identity and brand image to improve brand

equity.

P2. The synergistic coordination enacted by IMC depends on the presence of (a) an

internal feedback cycle between the firm's research and branding functions, and (b)

sufficient absorptive capacity to make sense of the information collected and to

convert information into actionable insights for brand managers.

Figure 1 here

The following sub-sections map specific stakeholder contact points recognised to

generate brand-relevant information (Figure 2). When coordinated effectively by IMC, these

encounters hold the potential to increase brand equity due to the brand-relevant insights they

can generate (Table 1). Based on this central premise, testable propositions are developed for

each relevant stakeholder group. The framework first draws on Clarkson (1995) to narrow the

scope of the analysis to primary stakeholders (shareholders, employees, suppliers, retailers,

customers, and public policy makers), namely those that need to interact with the company on

a continual basis to guarantee its long-term competitive advantage. The paper then adopts a

consumer-centric perspective, focusing on consumers and those stakeholders that frequently

interact with consumers: employees, brand partners (i.e., suppliers and competitors, both in

terms of value aggregation and positioning), and retailers.

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Figure 2 here

Table 1 here

4.1 Consumers

The idea that consumers are central to IMC is widespread in the marketing communications

literature. Similarly, the participation of consumers in a firm's value co-creation process,

across several stages of production and consumption, constitutes one of the foundational

pillars of modern marketing (Payne *et al.*, 2009; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The value of

consumer co-creative practices to the brand-equity strategy stems from delivering products

and services that better satisfy consumers' needs, due to their active participation in the

design and experience processes. Co-creation not only offers tangible benefits in terms of

superior, user-centred design, but also improved brand perceptions as consumers react

positively to communication that discloses a product or service has been co-created (Schreier,

2006). For instance, Burberry's emphasis on co-creation has grown to the extent that much of

its marketing strategy is based on conversations between employees and customers.

Consumers not only contribute to sales and service interactions, but also participate remotely

in fashion shows, order items directly from the runway, and suggest new designs for the

iconic Burberry trench coat. The development of the Burberry brand itself has been opened to

consumers; specifically, elements of marketing communication content are co-developed

with the brand's community through software called Buddy Media (Gouillart, 2012).

While firms oversee design-based co-creation activities from initiation through to

termination, consumers also interact with brands through less tightly controlled

communication-based practices. Relevant examples of such practices cited in recent studies

include impression management within independent brand communities and consumer-generated advertising. Impression management refers to the active projection of favourable brand impressions outside the community through brand evangelisation and justification of brand devotion (Schau *et al.*, 2009). Brand evangelisation goes beyond simple social media-based brand advocacy and reveals how the fiercest supporters perceive the brand. Consumer-generated advertising (CGA), on the other hand, refers to communications that resemble professionally developed commercials, but are, in fact, developed by consumers (Thompson and Malaviya, 2013; Ertimur and Gilly, 2012). International brands such as T-Mobile, Arsenal F.C., Pepsi, and many others employ CGA for promotional purposes, running advertising competitions with the winning entries aired during popular global events. Coca-Cola, for example, aired CGA communications during the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

Greater consumer independence in communication-based practices represents both an opportunity and a risk for firms. While these practices can generate valuable brand insights through impression management and CGA, they can also backfire. For example, the Apple-Newton community was outraged over Apple's decision to discontinue their Newton tablet, and expressed this outrage through negative publicity against Apple (Muñiz and Schau, 2007). Consumers can also sabotage brands through spontaneous, anti-brand CGA (Ertimur and Gilly, 2012), or through participating in firm-sponsored CGA contests with brand-harming entries. Chevrolet's launch of the Tahoe SUV through a firm-sponsored CGA contest became famous for submissions that were mocking the vehicle for its negative environmental impact (Sandoval, 2006). Such occurrences represent a re-appropriation of brand meaning from the consumer side, motivated by vast misalignment between brand identity and brand image, with potentially catastrophic effects on brand equity.

The current framework contends that firms must actively monitor and guide consumer brand contacts to be in line with the firm's intended brand identity in order to minimise any

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misalignment with brand image. While coordination is relatively straightforward for firm-initiated co-production practices, the interaction of numerous and diverse consumer groups (e.g., brand communities) with the brand, without the firm's direct involvement, complicates communication and coordination processes immeasurably. In such situations, brand-relevant information is generated and substantiated in alternative communications. Firms thus require significant resources to be allocated to make sense of the overwhelming amount of information produced by consumers (Hoyer *et al.*, 2010). The proposition below summarises the discussion.

> **P3.** Consumer-brand contacts are effective in aligning brand identity and brand image (i.e., increasing brand equity), depending on IMC being actively involved in (a) the coordination of such contacts, and (b) the internal dissemination of the information these contacts generate.

4.2 Employees

As internal stakeholders, employees act as brand ambassadors who can leverage emotional values attached to the brand (De Chernatony and Harris, 2000). Specifically, employees can either reinforce or undermine brand values depending on whether the expressed values are consistent or inconsistent with their personal values (Harris and De Chernatony, 2001). Identification theory suggests employees who identify with the brand take pride in their group membership and engage in behaviours that enhance the external image of the brand (Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Turner and Oakes, 1986). The alignment between an organisation's vision and its employees' values thus represents the core of the communication of a consistent brand identity (Hatch and Schultz, 2003).

Employee identification can be enhanced through internal branding activities (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009). Such activities educate employees about the brand's values in order to strengthen their intellectual and emotional engagement with the brand (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001) and to ensure congruence between internal and external brand messages, resulting in a shared understanding of the brand and internal commitment among employees (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). Internal branding further achieves acceptance of the brand by enhancing an employee's brand knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). Through internal branding, employees transform the brand promise into a reality that reflects the brand's values and influences customers' expectations, particularly among front-line employees, but increasingly also through interactions with, for example, brand managers. While 'living the brand' is commonplace in socially engaged organisations such as UNICEF or Greenpeace, there is an increasing realisation that internal branding also benefits the external brand image. The Danish pharmaceuticals company Novo Nordisk, for example, internally promotes its values as 'The Novo Nordisk Way of Life' and encourages their implementation to create a strong employee bond with the brand and an outward expression of the brand's values (Novo Nordisk, 2015).

However, communicating and training employees with respect to organisational values does not guarantee adoption (Ind, 2003). Managers must lead by example and deliver a corporate culture that attracts employees who identify with the organisational cause. Patagonia, for instance, is making a profit by living its brand promise – to use business to inspire and implement solutions to environmental crises – at all levels of the organisation, which inspires trust, admiration, and aspiration amongst its consumers to live by the same values (Chouinard, 2006). In addition, permitting employees to incorporate brand values into their daily tasks requires empowerment and a loosening of management control to foster creativity around the use of the brand (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). Bang & Olufsen, for

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instance, has collectively redefined its brand values through a series of employee workshops

(Ravasi and Schultz, 2005), and Kraft is using an app called Foodii to gather employee

insights before collecting external input (Bulik, 2014).

The same ideas are echoed in IMC research: Duncan and Moriarty (1998) state that firms

need to develop strong internal communication before achieving external integration of

marketing communications. Because brand internalisation enables employees to consistently

deliver the brand promise to customers and other external stakeholders (Punjaisri and Wilson,

2007), the integration of brand identity into all facets of the organisation – recruitment,

training, appraisal, and rewards – becomes paramount (Ind, 2003). This paper thus suggests

that IMC should coordinate internal, brand-relevant activities, such as the selection and

training of frontline employees with regard to brand communication. Ultimately, each brand

contact between employees and customers is influenced by the attitudes and behaviours of

the individual employee and their delivery of the brand message (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009). The

following proposition summarises this discussion.

P4. Internal branding, including the active involvement of IMC, is effective in

aligning brand identity and brand image (i.e., increasing brand equity), depending on

(a) a shared understanding of the brand identity between a firm and its employees, and

(b) a coherent communication of brand identity to consumers during contacts.

4.3 Partners

The current framework defines partners to be any entity – suppliers, collaborators, and, in

some cases, competitors – in the immediate environment of the focal firm. In addition, brand

partners can include persons (e.g., Jamie Oliver who endorses Tefal products which adds

recognition and personality to the brand's identity), places (e.g., Aldi's sponsorship of Great

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Britain for the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic games is part of a wider strategy aimed at establishing the retail brand as a beacon of good quality, healthy British food), and institutions (e.g., in the UK, Starbucks uses its involvement with the Fair Trade Foundation to convey legitimacy and social responsibility) (Briggs, 2015).

The primary purpose of brand partnerships is to leverage partners' desirable brand associations to strengthen and improve the existing associations of the focal brand, thereby boosting brand equity (Keller, 2003). Brand partnership literature broadly distinguishes between ingredient branding and co-branding. Ingredient branding typically leverages certain brand attributes through the incorporation of a partner brand (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2010). For instance, a number of major European automotive manufacturers – Alfa Romeo, Aston Martin, Audi, and Mercedes – equip certain models with brakes by Brembo, the Ferrari F1 supplier, to solidify their positions as manufacturers of high-performance vehicles for car enthusiasts. Co-branding arrangements, which are more reciprocal in nature, calibrate core values associated with both brands aiming to reinforce each brand's current positioning or reach out to new customer groups (Blackett and Boad, 1999). Gyrd-Jones and Kornum (2013), in particular, discuss the importance of complementary cultures and values when selecting partners to suit the focal brand's vision. For example, the recent launch of the co-branded Balmain x H&M collection aims to augment H&M's positioning by targeting customers with one-of-a-kind, luxury pieces, while enabling a larger, more diverse group of customers to purchase and experience Balmain fashion (Kell, 2015).

Despite its many benefits, the joining of multiple brand identities bears risks of discrepancy and incompatibility between the values of the involved brands (Leitch and Richardson, 2003). Specific risks include dilution and loss of control over the brand's image, confused positioning and the loss of focus on target groups, and reduced leverage and potential in the future (Blackett and Boad, 1999). Consider, for instance, celebrity endorsers

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tarnishing their brand equity through publicised scandals, leading to the risk of new negative associations being transferred to the endorsed brand (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Simonin and Ruth, 1998). For example, Nike withdrew its sponsorship of professional cyclist, Lance Armstrong after his involvement in doping scandals, which resulted in him being stripped of his seven Tour de France titles. Co-branding may also lead to a loss of control over brand identity to another involved party (Kapferer, 2012), which can be diminished through active dialogue between partner organisations (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Merz *et al.*, 2009).

We propose that brand co-creation with partners occurs through the various brand partnership activities discussed above, namely ingredient branding and co-branding. As described, both of these activities are known to be effective in shaping the focal brand's image, as the brand partnership allows for the transfer of new brand associations to the focal brand, as well as for the strengthening and augmenting of existing brand associations (Keller, 2005). However, the ultimate effectiveness of these brand partnership activities reasonably depends their implementation.

The argument herein is that IMC should play a crucial role in initiating and monitoring partner-branded communication, as well as in mitigating the aforementioned risks associated with brand partner contacts. Specifically, the involvement of IMC should not only encompass the execution of partner-branded communications, but also the vetting of prospective brand partners on the basis of a thorough assessment of their brand associations to ensure that partners with associations advantageous to the focal brand are selected. More broadly, IMC involvement should extend to the monitoring of the cultural values of brand partners, to ensure fit with the focal brand at both brand and corporate levels. Overseeing the integration of partner-branded communications would be a logical extension of the IMC function's current role, which involves the development and coordination of strategic, brand-driven marketing communications (Schultz, 2004). Moreover, IMC represents the core

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capability for the conversion of branded assets and communications into favourable brand-

equity outcomes (Ratnatunga and Ewing, 2005). The above discussion is summarised in the

following proposition.

P5. Brand partnerships are effective in aligning brand identity and brand image (i.e.,

increasing brand equity), depending on IMC being actively involved in (a) the

selection of brand partners that share similar brand values or provide complementary

brand values, and (b) the monitoring and coordinating of partner-brand contacts.

4.4 Retailers

Retailers differ from a firm's brand partners because they participate directly in exchanges

with consumers. Two contact points between retailer and focal brand, in particular, enable the

focal brand to leverage the retailer's brand associations, thereby influencing the perceptions

held by consumers and other stakeholders. These contacts are the choice of retail outlet and

joint promotions, such as cooperative advertising and in-store displays. Associative learning

theory explains these processes by considering human memory as "a network consisting of

various nodes connected by associative links" (Till and Shimp, 1998, p. 68). For brands, this

network entails a set of brand associations (i.e., nodes) that stakeholders hold in their memory

(Keller, 1993), which become connected through exposure to the pairing of two stimuli (e.g.,

retailer brand and focal brand, (Stuart *et al.*, 1987)).

In the current context, when a focal brand initiates a relationship with a retailer, the

nodes representing the identities of the focal brand and the retail brand become linked. The

retailer's brand associations become secondary associations to the focal brand, modifying its

brand image (Keller, 2005). Beyond attaining shelf space within a retailer, an associative link

will also form when the focal brand uses a concession business format. Known also as a

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shop-in-shop, this format involves a focal brand leasing a designated space within a host

retailer to sell its products. For example, as outlined in the opening vignette, in Europe, Apple

is using the shop-in-shop approach to sell the Apple Watch in UK's upscale Selfridges

department stores (Barrie, 2015). The Apple Watch shop is placed beside Rolex, Dior, and

Chanel, enhancing the prestige of the Apple brand and together serving to reinforce the

prestige of the department store. Shop-in-shops allow brands to create a greater presence than

when only occupying allocated shelf space (KDM P.O.P. Solutions Group, 2015).

Given its potential to shape a focal brand's associations, the above contact point between

a retailer and a brand affect the alignment between brand identity and brand image. The

cosmetics retailer Sephora, for instance, shapes the images of certain cosmetic brands by

stocking them on their shelves, as well as through marketing communications, such as in-

store displays, product demonstrations, and sampling. These activities serve to connect

cosmetic brands with the Sephora name, lending a host of secondary associations (e.g.,

French country-of-origin, wide and varied assortment, desirable atmosphere, and

accessibility).

This paper further argues that retailer brand contacts positively impact brand equity only

when they bring the focal brand's image into alignment with its brand identity. Three

conditions are necessary to enact this alignment. First, the retail brand must possess a positive

brand image (Keller, 1993). When a focal brand leverages only strong, favourable, and

unique associations, retailers' contact points can bolster brand image.

Second, a retailer's associations should be compatible with those of the focal brand. The

brand extension literature reports that positive associations are more easily transferred when

the parent brand fits with the extension brand (Boush and Loken, 1991). Similarly, to boost

brand equity, retailer associations should be similar to the focal brand's desired identity.

Industry examples show the unfavourable outcomes of a mismatch in a focal brand's identity

and a retailer's brand image. Calvin Klein's brand image, for instance, was tarnished with the

sale of CK jeans and underwear to discount retailers and off-price warehouses. The brand

associations of the discount retailers (e.g., affordable, accessible) were incompatible with

Calvin Klein's brand identity (e.g., luxury, exclusivity). The result was a misalignment

between Calvin Klein's intended brand identity and the brand image consumers perceived

(Ritson, 2008).

Third, pairing of the focal brand with the retailer brand should be repeated and

consistent. For example, a brand should commit to distribution through its chosen retailer, as

well as ongoing and integrated joint promotions with the retailer, the second proposed

retailer-brand contact point. Repeated exposure to two entities (e.g., the retail brand and the

focal brand together) strengthens the associative link (Martindale, 1991). A stronger

association will better leverage desirable secondary brand associations, which flow onto a

focal brand's image, in turn, bringing it into alignment with brand identity.

Given that joint promotions and other retailer-based communications are traditional IMC

responsibilities, this function's involvement in the identification, selection, and ongoing

management of retail partners is pivotal in addressing the aforementioned criteria, and

ultimately, aligning brand image and brand identity for the creation of brand equity. The

arguments above lead to the following proposition.

> **P6.** Retailer-brand contacts are effective in aligning brand identity and brand image
>
> (i.e., increasing brand equity), depending on IMC being actively involved in (a) the
>
> selection of retailers with positive and favourable brand images, compatible with the
>
> focal brand's identity, and (b) the management of retailer-brand contacts such that
>
> they are repeated and consistent.

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5. Conclusion

Firms that recognise the evolution of consumer-brand contact points and implement updated IMC-based strategic processes to build brand equity stand to gain significant competitive advantage. This paper identifies two substantial changes to modern consumer-brand contacts. First, the entire network of a firm's stakeholders is now actively involved in the creation and communication of a brand's identity (Payne *et al.*, 2009), as well as being strongly influential in shaping the brand's image amongst consumers (Merz *et al.*, 2009). Second, new digital media and technologies further alter the traditional process of communication of a brand's identity, with a large amount of brand communication now occurring with stakeholders external to the firm (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). These changes affect the extent to which brand identity and brand image may be aligned and they have immediate implications for a firm's brand-equity strategy. While the brand-equity strategy is deeply intertwined with IMC, extant brand-equity frameworks (e.g., Burmann *et al.*, 2009; Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005) provide limited strategic guidance for navigating modern contact points.

Drawing together IMC, brand equity, and multi-stakeholder branding literatures, this paper offers two key contributions to theory. First, the paper contributes to IMC and brand equity literature by systematising the management of multi-stakeholder brand contacts as a viable strategy for fostering brand equity. While the co-creation literature has acknowledged the activity of multi-stakeholder brand co-creation (Schau *et al.*, 2009), it has not been systematised to reveal the full extent of entities and encounters that can be tapped by the IMC function to craft a brand-equity strategy. Following Burmann *et al.*'s (2009) contention that brand equity is created when brand identity and brand image are aligned, this paper proposes IMC as the marketing capability responsible for such alignment. By identifying relevant stakeholder groups and mapping concrete brand contacts, the current framework illuminates

those stakeholders and contact points that have the greatest potential to generate valuable

brand-relevant information. Beyond focussing the attention and ensuing efforts of IMC

towards particular stakeholders and contact points, the framework herein provides testable

propositions about the management of stakeholder-specific contact points. In so doing, this

research adds to the mounting evidence that IMC is a strategic, rather than tactical, function

within the firm (Kitchen and Burgmann, 2010).

Second, the proposed framework contributes to stakeholder theory and its application to

marketing, which has been criticised for failing to provide sufficient instruction for genuinely

including stakeholders in a firm's processes (Driessen *et al.*, 2013). This paper not only

identifies brand contact points as a practical strategy for inviting stakeholders into decision-

making and value-creation, but also pinpoints specific examples of brand contacts with each

stakeholder group and prescribes conditions for their successful management. In summary,

this paper presents a holistic framework for understanding and enacting multi-stakeholder

brand management through (1) considering the formation of brand identity and brand image

as an interactive and iterative process involving multiple players, and (2) positioning IMC as

the underlying coordinating function.

5.1 Managerial implications

A key aim of this paper is to provide guidance regarding how the IMC function can navigate

contact points in a rapidly changing marketplace to drive brand equity. The research isolates

the specific contact points at which stakeholders contribute to the definition and

communication of a brand's dynamic identity to consumers. The contact points analysed in

this research show that firms can, and do, increasingly utilise a multitude of channels to

communicate with their various stakeholders and that consumers build brand perceptions

based on contact points not only with the firm, but with its various stakeholders. Beyond

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merely recognising these critical contact points, the paper provides managerial guidelines for

IMC to manage these contact points such that brand identity and brand image can be brought

into alignment.

Due to the elevated and pivotal role of IMC in implementing a firm's brand-equity

strategy, the present research also suggests an assessment, and possible expansion, of those

brand management functions capable of navigating the increasingly complex nature of

today's branding environment. Furthermore, the deployment of IMC specialists across all

activities that potentially affect consumers' perceptions of the brand is recommended. This

paper identifies a host of activities (i.e., contact points) that define consumers' brand

perceptions, not always instigated and controlled by the IMC function, which would benefit

from the expertise of IMC specialists: (1) development, monitoring, and adjustment of

consumer-initiated communications; (2) screening and training of frontline employees; and

(3) selection and monitoring of brand partners and retailers. The interaction between IMC

specialists and those more functionally linked to the activity (e.g., human resources

specialists for frontline employee activities) is essential to ensuring these activities are

orchestrated in a way that contributes to aligning brand identity and brand image, and

therefore, brand equity.

While the increased interaction between the firm and its stakeholders brings many

advantages, this paper highlights certain caveats stemming from open dialogue and

engagement with brand constituents. Disadvantages, such as the potential loss of control over

the brand's identity, indicate the need for marketing thought and experience to be shared

across other organisational functions. The increasing sophistication of brand management

requires not only the engagement of a growing network of stakeholders, but also an

increasing number of the organisation's internal functions, with the organisation ultimately

becoming "an amalgam of all these interests" (Hatch and Schultz, 2010, p. 603). Such an

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outcome not only has vast implications for the governance of the brand, but also becomes an

integral part of the governance of the organisation itself.

5.2 Future research

The proposed theoretical framework calls for future empirical validation through both

quantitative and qualitative studies. From a quantitative perspective, survey research using

multilevel structural equation modelling offers a promising method to test the nested and

hierarchical nature of the proposed framework (e.g., internal-external stakeholders of the

firm, managers-employees-customers within the firm). Testing the stakeholder-specific

propositions herein can provide an empirical basis on which to build more complex models.

For example, the inclusion of the moderating effects implied in the current theoretical

framework (e.g., the level of collaboration between the brand strategy, market research, and

IMC functions of a firm; the level of absorptive capacity to support IMC processes) could

further extend the value of the model.

Qualitative methods, including case studies, interviews, and observations, would allow

researchers to witness and record the series of exchanges that make up contact points across a

network of stakeholders. Knowledge of the iterative process of negotiating and aligning

brand identity and brand image can usefully supplement the quantitative measurement of

outcomes (e.g., brand equity). Similarly, close observation of consumers' interactions with a

firm and their ensuing brand perceptions, and how these differ from interactions with other

stakeholders, would provide detail for comparisons of the relative potential of the firm and

various stakeholders to add to, or detract from, brand equity. Qualitative data collected inside

the firm could also provide rich contextual information for more thoroughly understanding

the moderating effects (e.g., cross-functional collaborations, absorptive capacity) proposed

for quantitative testing above.

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However, the rhizomatic and nodal nature of the proposed framework (Deluze, 1987) may require less orthodox methods of investigation. Link analysis, a subset of social network analysis, can be used to evaluate the connections between different nodes. Quantitative approaches in network analysis can be used to capture the interactional component of a network (i.e., the links between nodes). Conversely, qualitative methods can offer a more nuanced perspective on the network's structural components (i.e., the nodes, cf. Coviello, 2006). Overall, a mixed-methods approach to network analysis could yield greater insights on the interactional and structural qualities of the proposed framework.

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Table 1

Examples of contact points affecting the alignment between brand identity and brand image

Stakeholder	Contact points	Selected references
Consumers	• **Communication of co-produced designs:** Collaboration between firm and consumers in the design of a product or service (e.g., user involvement in design, new product development activities) and ensuing communication of the collaborative effort.	Chien and Chen (2010); Schreier (2006); Schreier *et al.* (2012)
	• **Community-based impression management:** Active projection of a favourable brand impression outside the community through brand evangelisation and justification of brand devotion.	Muñiz and Schau (2007); Schau *et al.* (2009)
	• **Consumer-generated advertising (CGA):** Creation of advertisements and communication material, either spontaneously (i.e., unsolicited CGA) or invited by the firm through competitions or other promotional activities (i.e., solicited).	Ertimur and Gilly (2012); Thompson and Malaviya (2013)
Employees	• **Employees as brand ambassadors:** Employee endorsement of the brand values exerts powerful influence on customers' perceptions of the brand, as employees are situated on the periphery of the organisation, in direct contact with customers.	Harris and de Chernatony (2001)
	• **Person-organisation fit (POF):** Employees that share an organisation's values are more likely to contribute to the organisation in constructive ways (i.e., live the brand).	Ind (2003)
	• **Internal branding:** Communicate and educate employees about the brand values to enhance their intellectual and emotional engagement with the brand, resulting in a shared understanding of the brand and internal commitment among employees.	Burmann and Zeplin (2005); De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2001); Punjaisri and Wilson (2007)

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Partners *(Suppliers & other companies)*	• **Co-branding and brand alliances:** Encompass a variety of marketing activities that involve the use of two (or more) brands for the purpose of evoking favourable associations of both brands. • **Ingredient co-branding and ingredient branding:** Describe the use of ingredient or component brands (or the creation of such) for a focal product to project the ingredient's associations onto the focal brand.	Blackett and Boad (1999) Hillyer and Tikoo (1995); Kotler and Pfoertsch (2010)
Retailers	• **Distribution**: Refers to two formats in which a focal brand is placed in a retailer, allocated shelf space or a concession business (i.e., shop-in-shop), leading the retailer's brand associations to become secondary associations to the focal brand. • **Joint promotion**: Encompasses any marketing communication pairing a focal brand with a retail brand (e.g., cooperative advertising or an in-store display), which connects the two brands in order for a retailer's brand associations to transfer to a focal brand.	Keller (2005) Broniarczyk and Alba (1994); Simonin and Ruth (1998)

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Figure 1

Multi-stakeholder Brand-equity Strategy

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Figure 2

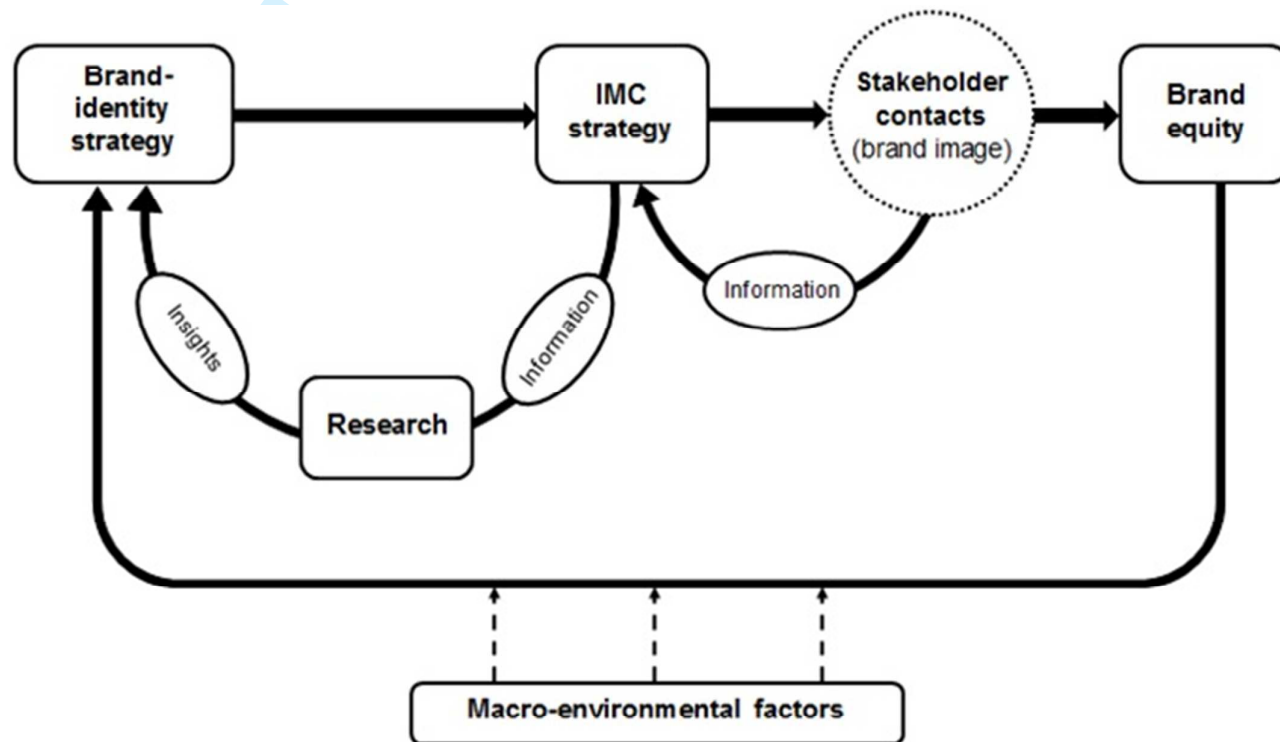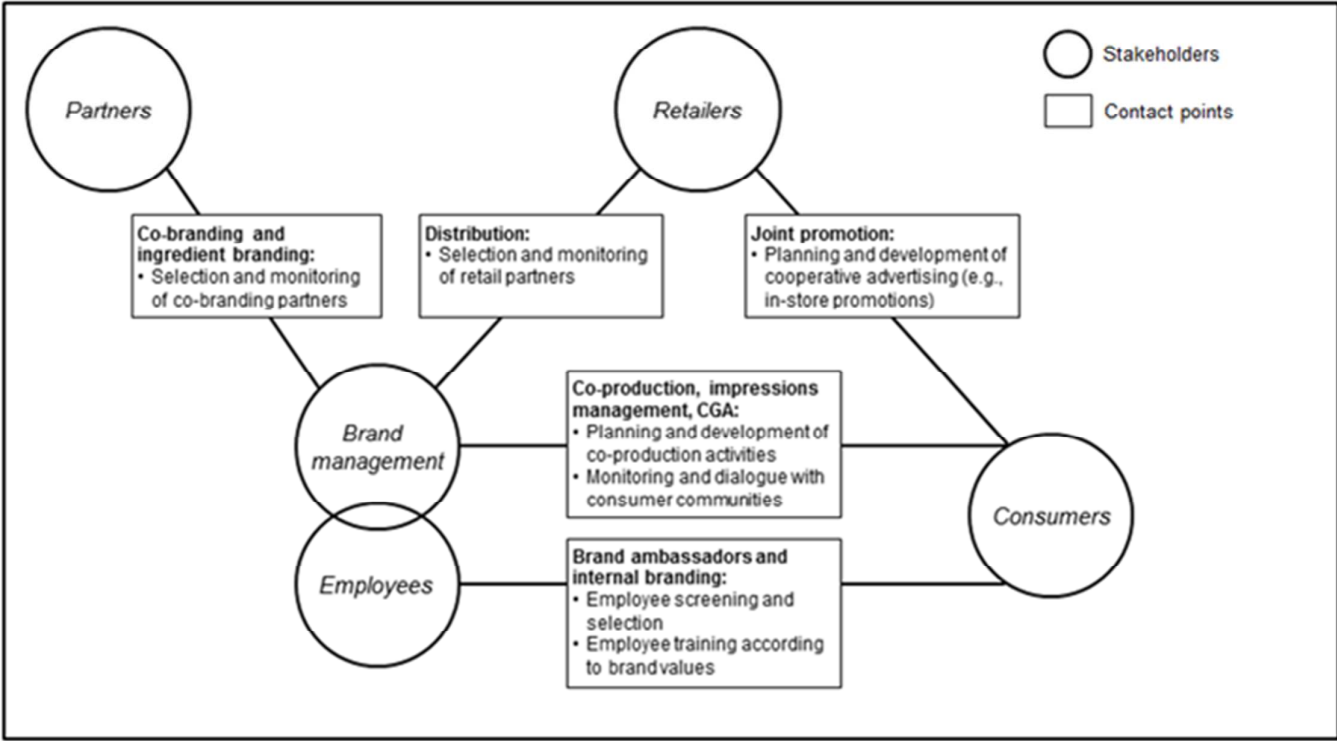**Map of Brand-relevant Stakeholder Contacts Reviewed**

Table 1

Examples of contact points affecting the alignment between brand identity and brand image

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Figure 1

Multi-stakeholder Brand-equity Strategy

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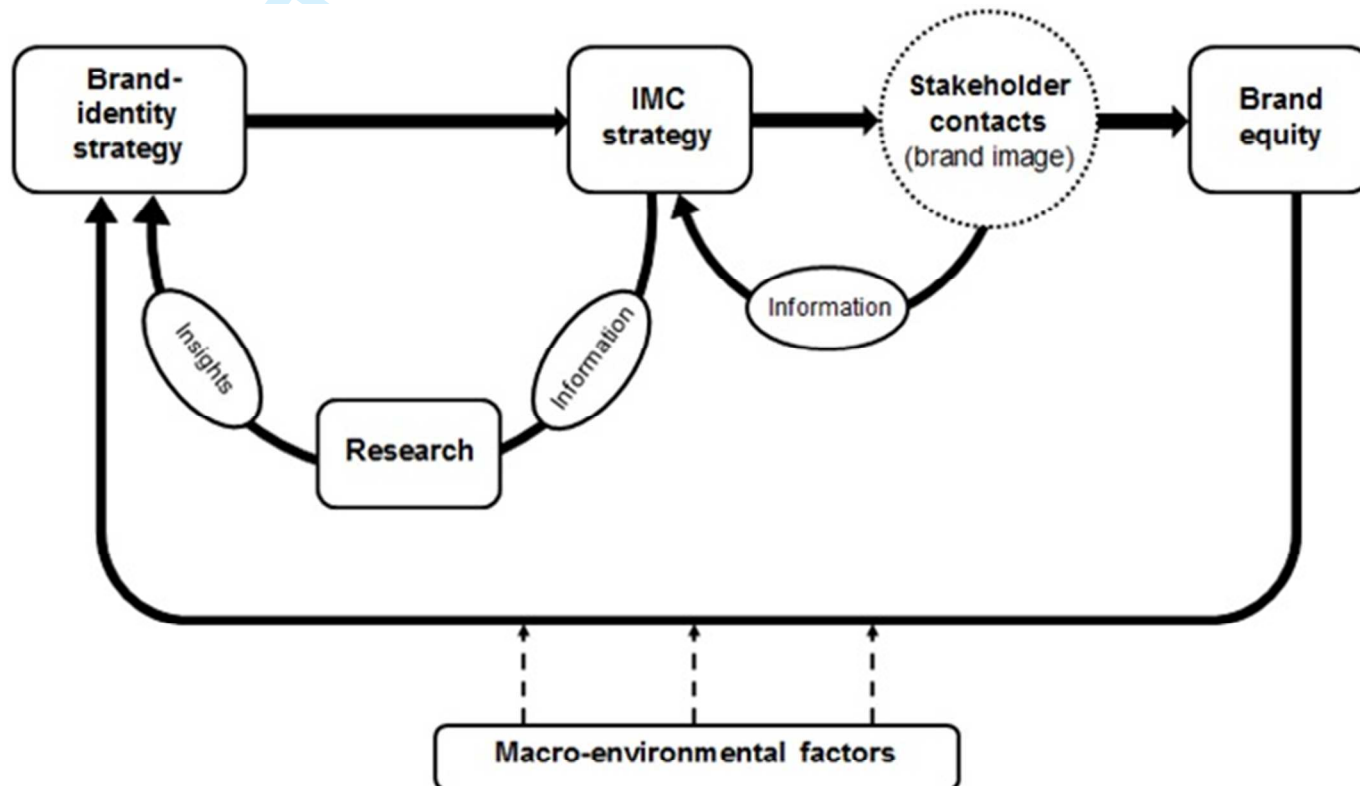25
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Figure 2

Map of Brand-relevant Stakeholder Contacts Reviewed