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How Do Brand Managers Conceptualise Brands?

An Investigation In The Age Of The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Brand Management

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The thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of Doctor of Philosophy

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March 2016

Abstract

Brand management has been undergoing radical changes in a world of internet-empowered individuals, groups and organisations. These changes have led to an internet-based democratisation of brand management. Subsequently, the co-creation of brands has been increasingly emphasised in brand management practice as well as theory, especially the co-creation between an organisation's internal and external brand stakeholders. However, no brand conceptualisation has yet been developed which fully addresses these technological and managerial changes. The purpose of this research is therefore to investigate empirically this research gap – how the term brand is conceptualised by brand managers in the current age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

Interviews with 20 UK-based brand managers across a range of industries and types of organisation have been conducted, following a social constructivist grounded theory methodology. The key finding of four core components and four core processes which brand managers use as integral parts of their brand conceptualisations led to two contributions: (1) a new conceptual framework and (2) a new brand definition both of which fully integrate the phenomenon of brand co-creation between an organisation's internal and external brand stakeholders. Together they can be used as a foundation for the development of a new co-creative brand management paradigm which integrates the brand management-related activities initiated not only by internal but also by external brand stakeholders.

Two more contributions could be made. Firstly, the identification of the different key developments which led to the internet-based democratisation of brand management can help brand managers to better understand the challenges they are facing in current brand management practice, particularly, due to the evolution of social media. Secondly, the identification of the key brand conceptualisation approaches in the literature makes a contribution by providing evidence that stakeholder-oriented brand conceptualisations are more diverse than identified in current literature.

Overall, these contributions all help to move brand definition discourse forward.

Acknowledgements

The work on this thesis has taken me on a very long journey. It enabled me to meet a great number of helpful and inspiring people. Some of them, at least, I would like to acknowledge here.

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my current supervisors Dr Nicoletta Occhiocupo, Dr Sarah Quinton and Prof Yuksel Ekinci for all their great support, patience and insightful feedback. Equally, I would like to thank Prof Jillian Farquhar and Dr Sally Harridge-March for their supervision during the early stages of my PhD journey. Also, Prof Lyndon Simkin has provided some very helpful guidance during the middle stages of this journey. During the whole period of my time at Oxford Brookes, Dr David Bowen, Head of Doctoral Programmes, has been a wonderful mentor and sounding board.

Secondly, I would like to thank the 20 marketing professionals who participated in my research. Many of them did not only give up their precious time for the interview but also provided me later on with additional information and insights. Without their input this work would not have been possible.

I have also been privileged to benefit from the support of great friends, acquaintances and colleagues such as Dr Maureen Lee, Dr Ivan Mitchell, Dr Sylwia Ciuk, Dr Pimpika Thongram, Dr Linda Neal, Sandra Preciado, Priscilla Pereira, Georgina Whyatt, Paul Gaffney, Tracy Panther, Dr Steve Chen, Dr Niall Caldwell, Dr Ian Combe, Dr Tom Farrell, Liz Barker and Prof Hans Mühlbacher. Also the team of librarians at the Business School library and the Interlibrary Loans Service have been amazing in the way they managed to get hold of the most obscure sources from all across the world for me.

Last but not least, rather most importantly, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional love and support. Most of all, Ruth and Dieter Asmussen, I feel very blessed to have you and very privileged to have been able to go on this journey.

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List Of Abbreviations

AMA   = American Marketing Association

CBBE   = Customer-Based Brand Equity

CCT   = Consumer Culture Theory

CGTM   = Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology

FMCG   = Fast Moving Consumer Goods

GT   = Grounded Theory

GTM   = Grounded Theory Methodology

GTm   = Grounded Theory Method

ORQ   = Overall Research Question

NPD   = New Product Development

RO   = Research Objective

SDL   = Service-Dominant Logic

UGC   = User-Generated Content

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Of The Research

Brand management has been undergoing radical changes in a world of internet-empowered individuals, groups and organisations. Marketing consultants at leading companies such as McKinsey, Wolff Olins or GfK describe what has happened in brand management over recent years as fundamental changes (Edelman, 2010), big tectonic shifts (Jones, 2012), or a paradigm shift (Neudecker et al., 2015) respectively. Some academic researchers interpret this situation along the same lines, as a sea change (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2010), or a threat to the foundations of brand management (Cova & Paranque, 2012). Other academics, such as Fournier and Avery (2011, p. 54), point out that these changes can be "scary" for brand managers:

> Brands today claim hundreds of thousands of Facebook friends, Twitter followers, online community members, and YouTube fans; but it is a lonely, scary time to be a brand manager.

Rossi's (2015, p. 2) research reveals, however, that internet-empowered stakeholders can create not only negative feelings of "fear" but also positive feelings of "fascination" amongst brand managers. One of the key challenges of current brand management practice appears to be its continuously increasing complexity through the rise of various internet-related technologies (Cova & Paranque, 2012; Wiedmann, 2014). Wiedmann (2014) emphasises that this also means an increasing complexity for the concept of brand itself, which needs to be not only acknowledged but also conceptualised and managed in everyday brand management practice.

Instead of a management function which is solely controlled by a brand's focal organisation and marketing department (Low & Fullerton, 1994), new concepts of brand management have emerged such as open branding (Do, 2009; Mooney & Rollins, 2008); open-source branding (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kendall, 2015; Pitt et al., 2006); or user-generated branding (Arnhold, 2010; Burmann, 2010; Dennhardt, 2014). These new conceptual developments aim to address the increasing complexity of brand management through a stronger focus on the co-creation of brands in brand management (Boyle, 2007; Ind & Coates, 2013; Merz et al., 2009; Payne et al., 2009).

This increasing emphasis on co-creation especially between organisations and their external stakeholders has mainly been triggered by the emergence and dynamic evolution of the internet and most recently the social media sphere (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Ind et al., 2012).

The influence of (a) digital technology in general, (b) the internet in general, and (c) specifically internet-based social media, on brand management is key for the context of this research project and will be discussed in further detail in the literature review of chapter 3. However, for the purpose of clarity right from the beginning, it needs to be emphasised that this research project focuses particularly on the influence of internet-based applications, devices and channels on brand management practice and subsequently brand managers' conceptualisations of what brands are. While many developments related to this can be associated with the rise of internet-based social media and the phenomena of Web 2.0 and beyond (Andersen, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; O'Reilly, 2005), it should not be underestimated that some developments from the pre-social media Web 1.0 era (such as traditional websites and email) can nowadays still have a considerable impact on marketers and social life in general (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2000; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Markos et al., 2012). Therefore, despite the dominance of social media-related phenomena in the current literature, it is important to note that the present research looks not only at social media but also other internet-related phenomena.

The greater accessibility and ease of use of internet-related technologies in general (e.g. Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007) and internet-based social media in particular (e.g. Labrecque et al., 2013; Quinton, 2013) has empowered consumers and other brand stakeholders, who are 'literate' when it comes to these technologies, in various aspects of their relationship with a brand's focal organisation (which in most cases is the legal trademark owner of the brand). Neisser (2006), for example, states that consumers have gained more power and control to influence the brand management process: through the internet, consumers are increasingly enabled to take charge and transform their relationships with brands "from ordinary buyer to reviewer, inventor, designer, ad creator, champion or critic" (p. 40). Brand-related user generated content (UGC), for instance, can be interpreted as directly competing with content produced by the brand's legal owner (Checchinato et al., 2015). Both can

affect organisational stakeholders' brand perceptions (Mitchell, 2012; Smith et al., 2012).

Through this shifting of brand-related power away from organisations and towards their external stakeholders, such as consumers, the internet as one of the key elements of the digital (r)evolution, has become a potentially powerful "democratizing change agent" (Kramer, 2008, p. 7). This democratisation is mainly based on the emergence, evolution and adoption of various digital technologies. In this study the focus will be specifically on so-called internet technology-related democratisation phenomena in computer mediated environments (Yadav & Pavlou, 2014). Examples of these phenomena are the internet's potential for radical transparency and unprecedented scrutiny of organisations (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Ind, 2003; Meyer & Kirby, 2010); powerful new forms of mass collaboration outside organisations' control (Ind et al., 2013; Shirky, 2008; Surowiecki, 2004; Tapscott and Williams, 2006); and the internet's ability for individuals and groups as well as organisations to access, create and disseminate information on an unprecedented scale (McConnell & Huba, 2007; Neisser, 2006; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006).

While some authors question whether the internet can have a democratising effect on the relationship between organisations and their brand stakeholders (e.g. Cova & Dalli, 2009; Cova et al., 2011; Zwick et al., 2008), a review of the literature has identified that the internet has at least the potential to reduce the given inequalities in the market place for internet literate users (Asmussen et al., 2010 & 2013a; Kucuk, 2012, Weiger et al., 2012). Nevertheless, it is important to differentiate between the terms democracy and democratisation. Democracy in its traditional sense is about equal distribution of power (Columbia Encyclopaedia, 2008), which can be interpreted as a rather utopian concept (Derrida in Bennington, 1997). In contrast to this utopian or "perfectionistic" (Satori, 1968, p. 112) aim, democratisation is a considerably more realistic concept.

The concept of democratisation, in general, can be construed as a process of transition from a less to a more democratic form of power sharing (Grugel, 2002; Potter et al., 1997; Tilly, 2007). Thus, it is quintessentially 'just' about the reduction of inequality, not necessarily its eradication. When applying the concept of democratisation to the

impact of internet-related technology on brand management, it comprises an internet-based democratisation of technology, information and social capital; this has led, for internet literate users, to an overall democratisation of brand management (Asmussen et al., 2010 & 2013a). The mainly *internet-based* democratisation of brand management can be conceptualised as a phenomenon that occurs when the ability to use the internet leads to a more democratic (i.e. less unequal) form of power sharing between an organisation and its brand stakeholders (Asmussen et al., 2010 & 2013a; Weiger et al., 2012). This generic idea of the internet-based democratisation of brand management has been emerging from marketing industry (e.g. Hensel, 2008; Hittner, 2008; Kemming & Humborg, 2010; Neisser, 2006; Neudecker et al., 2015) as well as academia (e.g. Cova & Pace, 2008; Dennhardt, 2014; Füller et al., 2008; Quelch & Jocz, 2007; Schroll et al., 2011; Schultz et al., 2005a).

Quelch and Jocz (2007), for instance, argue that internet-based technological advancements allow external stakeholders to at least reduce, or in some cases completely circumvent, the role of an organisation's professional brand managers. A case in point is the emergence of internet-based facilities such as social networking sites, content-sharing sites, blogs and micro-blogs which enable not only consumer-to-consumer but also stakeholder-to-stakeholder marketing communications on an unprecedented scale (Kitchen & Schultz, 2009).

These changes to marketing communications are a key result of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. Now virtually any internet literate brand stakeholder can potentially have a considerable impact on an organisation's brand management. This democratisation phenomenon has recently been investigated in further depth by a number of academic researchers (e.g. Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Dunne, 2010; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Gensler et al., 2013; Hillebrand et al., 2015). As a consequence, a call for the development of a new brand management paradigm has emerged in the literature (Christodoulides, 2008 & 2009; Fisher & Smith, 2011; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Holt, 2016; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Iglesias et al., 2013; Wiedmann, 2014).

The first fundamental step towards the development of such a new paradigm is the development of an adequate definition of the term brand since this is essential for how

brand management is conceptualised as a management discipline (Berthon et al., 2011; Fournier, 2015; Heding et al., 2009; Keller, 2013; Melewar et al., 2012). However, a key challenge in brand discourse for some time has been that there is no widely accepted definition for the term brand (Avis, 2009; Dall'Olmo Riley, 2016; de Chernatony, 2009; Gabbott & Jevons, 2009; Schroeder, 2015; Stern, 2006). Without a clear understanding and agreement of how brands should be conceptualised in current brand management practice, it will be very challenging, if not impossible, to develop a rigorous new brand management paradigm (Wymer, 2013). This thesis thus aims to make a contribution by investigating this research gap – how the term brand is conceptualised and applied by brand managers in the current age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. Based on this investigation a new managerial definition of the term brand will then be proposed.

The aim is thereby to address also the call in the literature for more integrated brand conceptualisations (Berthon et al., 2011; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Diamond et al., 2009; Fournier, 2015; Iglesias et al., 2013; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006; Schroeder, 2015; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017).

1.2 Aim And Objectives Of The Research

In many different industries brands have been identified as an organisation's most valuable asset (Aaker, 1991 & 1996; Keller, 2013). These valuable assets can not only be worth up to several billion pounds (e.g. Interbrand, 2015) but also be considered as crucial competitive means of differentiation within a market (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Doyle, 2001; Kapferer, 2012). The need for a clear understanding of how brands can most adequately be conceptualised appears therefore to be of high relevance to marketing practice as well as academia.

Regarding the need for clarification and direction, one key issue when it comes to the conceptualisation of brands appears to be their complexity (Wiedmann, 2014). Various researchers have come to the conclusion that brands can best be described as complex phenomena due to, for example, their multi-faceted nature (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a), their multiple dimensions (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a), or their multiple interacting systems and subsystems (Diamond et al., 2009; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). However, identifying and defining these

multiple facets, dimensions or systems and subsystems of a brand, as a complex phenomenon, has so far been one of the key challenges in brand research. Particularly in the current age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management this challenge appears to have become even more complicated. The reason for this is an increasing expectation that conceptualisations of the term brand now need to be able to integrate (1) a variety of brand stakeholders (e.g. Merz et al., 2009; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2010), and (2) a variety of brand co-creation processes between these stakeholders (e.g. Allen et al., 2008; Berthon et al., 2007; Gregory, 2007).

Despite these developments and their essential importance for brand management practice as well as academia only very little research has investigated this particular topic to date (Diamond et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013). Hardly anything is known about the potential impact which the socio-technological evolution of everyday life has had on professional brand managers' brand conceptualisations (Wiedmann, 2014). Since (a) improving the understanding and clarity of brand conceptualisations is a crucial factor for the progress of brand discourse in general (Schutte, 1969), and (b) brand managers are considered a key part of this discourse (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Low & Fullerton, 1994), the present research investigates empirically how brand managers conceptualise brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. One of the main goals is therefore to identify the key components and processes which brand managers implicitly or explicitly use as integral parts of their brand conceptualisations. This identification should then enable the development of a new managerial brand conceptualisation framework which can make a relevant contribution to brand management theory as well as practice.

Such a new conceptual framework which (1) is able to integrate all emerging key components as well as key processes and (2) shows how these are interrelated with each other in brand managerial practice, can be considered an important contribution for two main reasons. Firstly, contemporary brand management cannot be adequately understood without a consideration of the different roles which brands can play in current managerial practices (de Chernatony, 2002; Heding et al., 2009; Goodyear, 1996; Schultz et al., 2005b). Secondly, the absence of a widely accepted definition of the term brand and other related key concepts is seriously hindering the future development of research in this area (Berthon et al, 2011; Gabbott & Jevons, 2009;

Jevons & Gabbott, 2008), as well as the future development of brand management practice (Healey, 2008; Iglesias et al., 2013; Kendall, 2015). Consequently the following research aim and research objectives have been developed.

The aim of this study is to answer the following overall research question (ORQ):

> *How do brand managers conceptualise brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management?*

The following research objectives (ROs) have been developed to operationalise the ORQ:

> *RO1:* *To produce a critical literature review of key debates, theories and empirical studies within brand conceptualisation discourse.*
>
> *RO2:* *To develop an in-depth understanding of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon and its relevance for brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice.*
>
> *RO3:* *To establish the key components and processes which brand managers use as integral parts of their brand conceptualisations in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.*
>
> *RO4:* *To develop a new conceptual framework which integrates all core components and core processes and demonstrates their interrelationships.*

1.3 Contribution Of The Research

This study provides five key contributions to existing knowledge in marketing. The first contribution is the elucidation of the core components and processes which brand managers use as integral parts of their brand conceptualisations in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. This empirical investigation

provides evidence that a holistic brand conceptualisation approach is most suitable for brand management-related research. A narrow approach is not able to capture and reflect the diversity and complexity of brand conceptualisations, which brand managers apply in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

The second key contribution is a new conceptual framework in chapter 6 which shows how the key building blocks and processes of brand managers' brand conceptualisations are interrelated. This framework extends existing research on brands and improves the critical issue of concept clarity in brand theory development as well as brand management practice. While the individual key building blocks of the framework have been identified in previous research (Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Berthon et al., 2011; Iglesias et al., 2013; Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006), this is the first investigation which identifies the key processes and interrelationships between the four key elements. This new conceptual framework can therefore be used as the rigorous foundation for the development of an adequate brand management approach, in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, which for the first time fully integrates the phenomenon of brand co-creation with internal as well as external stakeholders.

The linking and combining of the empirical research findings with the results of the literature review has enabled the development of both a conceptual framework and a definition of the term brand that are better suited for the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. This new brand definition is the first from a managerial social constructivist perspective. It represents the third key contribution.

The literature review in chapters 2 and 3 provides the fourth and fifth key research contribution. Chapter 2 offers an overview of five different brand conceptualisation perspectives which were elicited from existing brand discourse. This structured overview is different to previous reviews of the literature by authors such as Heding et al. (2009), Louro and Cunha (2001) or Merz et al. (2009) in that it integrates these different taxonomies of brand and brand management perspectives into one overall taxonomy. The new taxonomy also shows, for example, that the most recent brand conceptualisation approach, the stakeholder-focused perspective, exists in the literature in more variations than the work by Heding et al. (2009 & 2016), Louro and

Cunha (2001) or Merz et al. (2009) suggests. This study has identified (a) an inside-out, (b) an outside-in, and (c) a balanced perspective within the stakeholder-oriented approaches in the literature.

Finally, the literature review in Chapter 3 makes a key contribution to research by clarifying the basic structure of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon through a new framework. This new framework consists of three interdependent democratisation developments and helps to better understand the complexity of some of the challenges which brand managers are facing today in contemporary brand management. For instance, empowered by the internet, technically literate brand stakeholders of an organisation have – more than ever before – a choice of moving between different levels of activity and involvement regarding brand co-creation. They can (1) in the traditional, rather passive sense, co-create meaning out of the brand manifestations which they experience that are provided to them by the brand's focal organisation and/or other brand stakeholders; (2) become more active through co-creating not only brand meaning but also brand manifestations in collaboration with the brand's focal organisation and/or other brand stakeholders; or (3) create brand manifestations on a previously unparalleled magnitude by themselves outside the control of anybody else, including the brand's focal organisation. Looking at the wider implications for the brand management discipline, these findings substantiate the notion that an adequate managerial approach needs to integrate not only organisation-initiated but also stakeholder-initiated brand management activities.

1.4 Outline Of The Thesis

The introduction chapter is followed by the literature review which is divided into two chapters. In chapter 2, key debates, theories and empirical studies within the brand conceptualisation literature are critically reviewed (Research Objective 1). Relevant ideas and concepts are synthesised to establish the research gap and subsequently the need for an empirical investigation of the conceptualisation of brands from a managerial perspective.

Chapter 3 critically reviews the literature on the developments of the internet-based democratisation of brand management – the democratisation of technology,

information and social capital. Following the review, the relevance of this phenomenon for brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice is elicited (Research Objective 2) to inform the development of an adequate research approach in the methodology chapter.

Chapter 4 introduces the philosophical and methodological considerations relevant to the study. The main purpose of this chapter is to develop a research design that enables addressing the overall research question. The research aim and research objectives are revisited and explained following an initial introduction in chapter 1. The presented research design includes the sequence of main activities as well as the sampling approach for the given empirical research context. The method of data analysis is defined and justified and ethical issues discussed. Overall, it is demonstrated, through the introduction of a new Three Pillar Research Framework, how the present research approach builds on ideas drawn from the literature review as well as the researcher's paradigmatic grounding. Incorporating the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher is paramount to the present research project since the researcher is interpreted as the research instrument (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Chapter 5 provides the findings of the study. Having generated, collected and analysed the data based on the developed research design, the research findings relevant to addressing the research question are presented. As a first result, the key building blocks and processes of brand managers' brand conceptualisations are identified (Research Objective 3). This chapter also offers insights regarding the coding processes as well as the more general data analysis.

Chapter 6 discusses the research findings in relation to existing brand conceptualisation discourse. Emerging contradictions between this research and previous studies will be dealt with. The findings are interpreted and synthesised to establish the key themes and issues. Then, a conceptual framework is developed which demonstrates how the different key components and processes work together (Research Objective 4) from a managerial social constructivist perspective. Furthermore, a new brand definition will be introduced based on this perspective.

Finally, the conclusion chapter revisits the research objectives in order to discuss to what extent each has been achieved. The overall research question will be addressed. The wider implications of the research results are discussed and the contributions of the study are highlighted. A reflection on the process of the research as well as my development as a researcher will also be provided in this context. Recommendations for brand management practice as well as theory will be discussed. The potential for the (conceptual) generalisability of the findings as well as their limitations are addressed and ideas for future research are outlined.

CHAPTER 2:
THE BRAND CONCEPTUALISATION PERSPECTIVES IN BRAND DISCOURSE

2.1 Introduction

The aim of the literature review is to establish the relevance of an empirical investigation into brand managers' conceptualisations of brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. The review is divided into two chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on a critical review of key theories, debates and empirical studies regarding the various brand conceptualisation perspectives within brand discourse. It develops a comprehensive taxonomy of five different brand conceptualisation perspectives. Furthermore, it identifies that previous taxonomies did not pay justice to the variation in the literature in regard to the most recent of the five approaches: the stakeholder-oriented brand conceptualisation approach. Chapter 3 subsequently interrogates the literature about the key developments of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon to elicit the potential key consequences for brand management practice, particularly, brand conceptualisation practice.

2.2 The Brand Concept From Its Early Origins To The Beginning Of Modern Age

The term brand is one of the most ancient words in English but has its roots in the old Germanic languages (Berthon et al., 2011; Stern, 2006). From these origins, the Old Norse *brandr*, meaning to burn, made its way into Anglo-Saxon (Blackett, 2004). Today, this literal meaning is still used when people talk about branding an animal but also, figuratively, for example, when talking about something that makes a lasting impression in a person's mind (Healey, 2008). Early practices of indicating the origin of a product through visual signs can be traced back more than 4000 years to three distinct geographic areas: the Indus Valley, c.2250BC, located in modern-day India (Moore & Reid, 2008), China, c.2700BC (Eckhardt & Bengtsson, 2010), and Egypt c.2700BC (Bastos & Levy, 2012). Some authors even speculate that the earliest

examples of these trade-related signs can be traced back to c.7000BC (Eckhardt & Bengtsson, 2010; Lury, 2001).

However, nowadays the word brand is not just used to describe a visual sign, trademark or name. A whole *new language* has developed around this key term which permeates marketing thinking not only in business schools, advertising agencies and management consultancies but also, more generally, in all kinds of commercial enterprises as well as not-for-profit organisations (Drawbaugh, 2001; Stern, 2006). In parallel to this development, the variety of definitions of the term has proliferated and the ways in which brands are conceptualised have become increasingly diverse and complex (Berthon et al., 2011; Merz et al., 2009).

This proliferation has led to various negative comments within brand discourse. For some authors the term brand has become "overdefined" (Stern, 2006, p. 216), while others feel that it is one of the most over-used (Miller & Muir, 2004) or misused (Brown, 2006; McGhie, 2012) words in business discourse. In light of this, Kapferer (2004 & 2012) and Schultz and Schultz (2004) emphasise that almost every so-called brand expert comes up with his or her own definition of the term. Dolak (2002) illustrates one of the subsequent main issues with this situation when it comes to the term brand in a managerial context: "If you ask ten marketing people or brand managers to define the word 'brand' you will likely get ten different answers" (p. 1).

From an academic researcher's perspective, different definitions of the same term – in this case the term brand – mean that it could be problematic to compare and accumulate empirical as well as theoretical findings related to this term (Brown et al., 2006; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Jacoby, 1978; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973; Kollat et al., 1970; Schutte, 1969; Stern, 2006; Suddaby, 2010; Teas & Palan, 1997). Schutte (1969) recognised this ongoing issue more than four and a half decades ago when pointing out that the progress of brand research will be hindered because previously conducted investigations cannot be compared to new findings due to "terminological and definitional discrepancies" (p. 7). More recently, Wymer (2013) emphasises that the lack of concept clarity in brand research can also have a negative impact on the exchange of knowledge between different communities within brand discourse: "The poor foundation laid in prior [brand-related] research not

only affects the quality of current and future research, it affects the research community's ability to discover and disseminate knowledge to the practitioner community" (p. 1). Clearer concepts allow better dialogue between academics and/or practitioners in brand discourse and subsequently are likely to reduce semantic dissonances (Mollen & Wilson, 2010). A semantic dissonance occurs when discrepancies in meaning exist, for example, between a formal definition used by an academic and a rather informal conceptualisation used by a practitioner (Cherney, 2009).

One of the main challenges with the concept of brands is that it covers a multitude of issues and interpretations in marketing (Berthon et al., 2011; Jensen & Beckmann, 2009). As a consequence, the way in which the term brand is defined, usually depends on the particular perspective of the observer (Gabbott & Jevons, 2009; Richards et al., 1998). A general theory of the brand therefore still remains elusive (Dall'Olmo Riley, 2009; de Chernatony, 2009 & 2010; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Heding et al., 2009).

Despite the brand research literature varying in its acknowledgement of the complexity of the brand phenomenon, one common emerging insight appears to be the realisation that the phenomenon's multi-faceted nature represents a major stumbling block for the progress of brand discourse. Some research, for instance, highlights that this multi-faceted nature is one of the reasons for the absence of a widely accepted definition of the term brand, which has subsequently been hindering the progress of empirical brand research as well as theoretical concept developments (Avis, 2009; Gabbott & Jevons, 2009). Helping to improve the terminological clarity of the brand phenomenon through an analysis which aims to untangle the complexity of its multi-faceted nature should therefore be of highest priority to brand discourse. The present research project contributes to this endeavour. As a first step, the main brand conceptualisation perspectives elicited from the key theories, debates and empirical studies of brand discourse are reviewed and synthesised in the following sections.

2.3 The Goods-Focused Brand Perspective

The concept of creating and using individual brand names for consumer goods on a national and then on a multi-national level emerged in the 18th century (Henning & Witkowski, 2013; Petty, 2012) and began to flourish in the US and Europe in the 19th century on the back of the industrial revolution (Low & Fullerton, 1994; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2005; Room, 1998). Following these developments, the first stream of brand conceptualisations in the marketing literature emerged in the early 20th century (e.g. Brown, 1925; Butler, 1917; Copeland, 1923; Goodall, 1914) and could be characterised as conceptualisations from an individual goods-oriented brand perspective (Merz et al., 2009; see also Bastos & Levy, 2012; Petty, 2013; Stern, 2006). From this viewpoint, the main purpose of brands is to provide a good with a distinctive name, logo, packaging and/or other elements of visual identity that make it clearly recognisable for consumers. Brown (1925), for instance, indicates when explaining the potential difference between trademarks and brands that from his perspective brands have a mainly denotative function: "The trade-mark implies an exclusive property right. The brand, on the other hand, may be merely a label describing a particular variety and grade of goods" (p. 422). Along the same lines, Copeland (1923) states that "a brand is a means of identifying the product of an individual manufacturer or the merchandise purveyed by an individual wholesaler or retailer" (p. 286) and "when a brand has any significance at all, it serves primarily as a cause for recognition" (p. 287).

The definition of the term brand, as proposed by the American Marketing Association in 1948, can be interpreted as a direct progression of the earlier examples of the goods-focused conceptualisation approach (p. 205):

> A brand is a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them which identifies the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and distinguishes them from those of competitors."

In a comment directly related to this definition the American Marketing Association explains in more detail that "A brand may include a brand name, a trade mark, or both. The term brand is sufficiently comprehensive to include practically all means of identification" (1948, p. 205). The American Marketing Association's definition can therefore be interpreted as a progression compared to Brown's (1925) and Copeland's

(1923) earlier conceptualisations in that it (a) incorporates not only the brand's name but also potentially its trademark as part of the brand; (b) incorporates explicitly not only goods but also services; (c) clarifies the need for brand identification as a means for differentiation from the competition; and (d) provides a variety of options through which a brand can be used as a visual identifier for the purpose of differentiation (name, term, sign, symbol, etc.).

Nevertheless, this definition also has various limitations. Firstly, it is rather simplistic by focusing merely on the *organisation's input* through the creation of a combination of name, term, sign, symbol, design and other brand elements for the purpose of a primarily visual differentiation (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a). It does not make any reference to the potentially strategic role, which a brand can play beyond visual differentiation, or any managerial strategy behind the creation of these means of identification (e.g. Kapferer, 2012).
For instance, an organisation's management might develop a particular positioning approach (Ries & Trout, 1986; Riezebos & Van Der Grinten, 2012) or vision, mission and values framework (Davidson, 2005; de Chernatony, 2010; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a) as the strategic foundation of the brand and its subsequent visual objectifications. From the goods-centric conceptualisation perspective of the American Marketing Association, it appears that a brand is limited to just a supporting role as an identifier for a good or service and related marketing communications activities (Louro & Cunha, 2001).

Secondly, apart from the word "symbol" which might be used beyond a denotative context (Bastos & Levy, 2012), no explicit reference is made in the American Marketing Association's definition to brands being able to create or co-create connotations in, for example, the consumers' minds (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Tybout & Carpenter, 2010). From this internal resources-focused vantage point, consumers appear to be interpreted as rather passive recipients of brand managers' marketing activities (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Heding et al., 2009; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Meadows, 1983). In service-dominant logic (SDL) terms, this approach can subsequently be understood as

construing consumers as passive, operand resources (Merz et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004)[1].

Thirdly, another limitation of the internal resources-centric definition is that it not only omits the relevance of consumers and their potential to create connotations related to a brand beyond denotation and visual differentiation but also that it ignores the relevance of other external stakeholders (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Diamond et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2010) when it comes to the conceptualisation of brands.[2]

Despite the indication in some areas of the literature that the goods-centric brand conceptualisation perspective, as represented by the American Marketing Association's (1948) definition, is out of date (e.g. Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Keller, 2013), this approach still proves to be popular. First of all, the influential American Marketing Association itself is using after more than 60 years a definition of the term brand which reflects to a large extent still the original version from 1948: A brand is a "Name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (American Marketing Association, 2015a). This latest version of the goods-centric conceptualisation approach is also the recommended definition by the Marketing Accountability Standards Board (2015).

Furthermore, the goods-centric approach also proves to be popular in the current marketing textbook literature (e.g. Marshall & Johnston, 2010; McDaniel et al., 2012). Interestingly, it is also used in Philip Kotler's seminal Marketing Management textbook which he publishes together with Kevin Lane Keller (Kotler & Keller, 2009) despite the fact that Keller is critical of this definition approach when it comes to the managerial relevance of brands (see e.g. Keller, 2013; or section 2.4). Finally, in terms of empirical research with marketing practitioners, Iglesias et al.'s (2013)

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[1] From a goods-dominant logic (GDL) customers are construed as so-called operand resources, i.e. resources on which an operation or act is performed to produce a benefit, for example, a benefit for the service-producing firm (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Operand resources can be contrasted with operant resources, which are capable of generating a benefit by acting directly on other resources – operand and/or operant – to create value (see Constantin & Lusch, 1994; Merz et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

[2] This latter limitation will be further discussed in section 2.7.

investigation shows that visual identifiers are still relevant today for brand managers' brand conceptualisations. Nevertheless, their research also emphasises that visual identifiers should be seen as only one of many different brand interfaces through which an organisation interacts with its consumers.

In spite of the limitations of the goods-centric approach, de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998a) provide further evidence that the *brand as identifier* conceptualisation is still used in contemporary brand management. Thus the goods-centric perspective should still be considered as relevant in current brand discourse. Through its various mainly visual elements (e.g. name, logo, design) a brand can help at its most basic level to differentiate a good or service as a *marker* (Keller & Lehmann, 2006) from its competitors, as previously pointed out. Additionally, a brand as identifier is also relevant in marketing practice as a legal sign or instrument (e.g. mark of ownership or trademark) since it can help, for instance, the criminal prosecution of product counterfeiters (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; see also American Marketing Association, 2015b; Petty, 2013). Thus, as a trademark, the brand can visually be identified as a "tangible item of intellectual property" (Mercer, 2010, p. 18; see also Schwarzkopf, 2010). However, Balmer (2012a & 2012b) emphasises that while an organisation aims to retain *legal ownership* of certain elements of a brand, such as its trademark, an *emotional ownership* of the brand might have to be shared with a potentially broad range of customers and other stakeholders.

One area in the context of the goods-oriented brand conceptualisation perspective which has largely been ignored by the literature, particularly the literature on brand management, is the negative side of brands as visual identifiers. Bastos and Levy (2012), for instance, point out that the visual branding of an object "is usually done by using some kind of mark placed either directly on the object or indirectly on a label […] that is affixed to the object" (p. 349). This kind of visual marking has a history of not only identifying positive attributes or signs of excellence or distinction but also stigmatising something or someone as inferior, for example, in the context of slavery; imprisonment; or cultural, ethnic, racial and religious discrimination (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Stern, 2006). The brander is therefore usually interpreted as dominant or more powerful than the branded (Bastos & Levy, 2012). This negative application of marks

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as visual identifiers can to some extent be seen as a contributor to the reasons why some people feel uncomfortable with using the term brand.

Critics of the goods-oriented view also make the point that the technological shift, for example, in terms of internet-based interactivity has been ignored. Brand marketing messages or, more generally, information can now flow in all directions: 'top-down' from the company to the brand's stakeholders as well as 'bottom-up' and 'peer-to-peer':

> In the twenty-first century, consumers acquired *voice* as well as choice. Whether it is search (driven by information input by the user), social networking sites such as Facebook, user-generated content via sites like YouTube, or online forums and peer reviews, the dominant flow of information is reversing: from 'top-down' (organisation to consumer) to 'bottom-up' (individuals to each other and to organisations). Individuals are becoming as prolific information creators and managers as organisations (Mitchell, 2012, p. 87; emphasis in original).

Therefore, the case for considering consumers as entirely passive receivers of the brand manager's marketing messages appears to lose ground. Nevertheless, the control- and internal resources-focused, goods- or product-oriented conceptualisation approach overall constitutes a dominant perspective amongst brand managers (Davis, 1995; Louro & Cunha, 2001). Kapferer (1992), for example, stated: "At present, the tendency is to manage products that happen to have a name. [Brand] Management is still living in the age of the product" (p. 3). While Kapferer's statement is over 20 years old, even current brand management textbook literature still promotes, at least to some extent, a goods-centric approach. For example, Johansson & Carlson (2015):

> A brand is a name attached to a product or service. The name and its logo are typically registered and legally protected as trademarks. Thus, in practice brands are trademarks that identify the product maker or service provider   (p. 3).

Overall, the review of the literature so far has shown that the concept of the goods-focused brand perspective emerged particularly during the rise of the industrial revolution (Henning & Witkowski, 2013; Low & Fullerton, 1994; Petty, 2012 & 2013). The goods-oriented brand conceptualisation helped organisations to create an awareness of their products and also market them beyond their traditional mainly local

and regional reach towards a national or even international expansion (O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2005; Room, 1998). The consistent use of a distinctive name or logo, for instance, provided an organisation with the opportunity to make a product potentially widely recognisable and distinguishable for consumers when transportation via trains and ships enabled a wider distribution of many products. The development of the goods-focused brand perspective represented therefore at the time a considerable marketing opportunity for a broad variety of companies to expand the originally rather limited geographical markets of their products. Another strength of the goods orientation is its simplicity with its focus mainly on the visual differentiation of goods (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a). This simplicity makes it still an attractive proposition in contemporary brand discourse as the literature review has indicated.

However, for current marketing practice the goods-oriented approach has some crucial limitations. For example, in many markets, visual distinctiveness is still important but usually not sufficient by itself, as the following sections will show. Other limitations revolve around the goods orientation's rather narrow focus on organisational input only, which considers consumers merely as passive recipients of an organisation's brand management activities. Furthermore, due to its focus on internal resources, this perspective widely ignores the relevance of external brand stakeholders and brand co-creation with them. The image-centric brand perspective which will be introduced next, addresses one of the short-comings of the goods-oriented approach by extending the primary focus on 'just' visual denotations to symbolic connotations.

2.4 The Image-Focused Brand Perspective

Historically, crucial for the further evolution of the conceptualisation of brands within brand discourse were some macro-economic developments primarily in the US and Europe after the Second World War. In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s many consumer markets did not only recover to pre-war levels, but also experienced an unprecedented rise in competition which led to a proliferation of branded products (Bastos & Levy, 2012). At this stage, brands were mainly conceptualised as "manufacturer-branded products" (Low & Fullerton, 1994, p. 173).

Nevertheless, due to the proliferation of these manufacturer-branded products in many different goods categories, consumers had to choose increasingly between products which looked very similar in terms of their visual appearance. A differentiation based purely on visual, denotative brand identifiers therefore proved to be increasingly ineffective. In this context, some brand researchers therefore shifted their attention more actively towards the strategic communication of product benefits with the aim of creating brand connotations or brand image as a more adequate means of differentiation (see particularly Gardner & Levy, 1955). This shift led to the emergence of the next major conceptualisation approach: the image-focused brand perspective.

The emergence of the image-focused brand perspective can be construed as an evolutionary step forward in brand discourse since it moves beyond the goods-centric approach which conceptualises brands merely as denotative or visual identifiers and legal instruments. From an image-centric point of view, brands are more complex than that; they are about all kinds of associations, emotions and knowledge in people's minds in relation to a particular product (see e.g. Bastos & Levy, 2012; Lourno & Cunho, 2001). Since denotative and visual differentiation alone became under the aforementioned more competitive market conditions less sufficient, the concept of actively creating an image emerged as the new conditio sine qua non of brand management (Merz et al., 2009). The associations created can be functional as well as non-functional. In either case, from the vantage point of this second major brand conceptualisation perspective, these associations, together with further brand knowledge and emotions developed in relation to a product, constitute the product's image in consumers' minds, which is the central feature of the brand.

Conveying the functional benefits of a product which satisfy consumers' utilitarian needs became in this context crucial for brand management (Merz et al., 2009). Organisations therefore aimed to create a brand image which stands, for example, for a guaranteed high quality and homogeneity (Jones, 1986; Willmott, 2010). This is advantageous, because building an image of trustworthiness, for instance, in regard to the high quality of a product, can help psychologically as a *risk reducer* for consumers when they make their purchasing decisions (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a).

The creation of functional benefit associations can therefore be interpreted as a first direct evolutionary move forward from denotative identifiers towards connotative identifiers in response to the more competitive environment which requires differentiation beyond brand name and visual identity. However, in many product categories, particularly FMCG, consumers were soon confronted with a dilemma where competing products made very similar claims in terms of their functional benefits. As a case in point Gardner and Levy (1955, p. 34) compared, for instance, claims made in the US detergent market by different competing brands:

- "No detergent under the sun gets clothes whiter, brighter."
- "Washes more kinds of clothes whiter and brighter."
- "Beats the sun for getting clothes whiter and brighter."
- "Washes clothes whiter without a bleach."

Subsequently, for brand management thinking to progress further and find new ways of differentiation, brand image needed to evolve beyond the realm of functional benefits. Potentially, all "ideas, feelings, and attitudes that consumers have about brands are crucial to them in picking and sticking to [the] ones that seem most appropriate" (Gardner & Levy, 1955, p. 35). Thus the authors concluded that the symbolic nature of brands is an important part of the overall phenomenon.

This phenomenon may include the product's brand image and its congruence with the consumer's current or aspired self-image, social position, group membership or group role (Martineau, 1958; Park et al., 1986). Gardner and Levy (1955, p. 35) even suggest that the symbolic values of a product may be "more important for the over-all status (and sales) of the brand than many technical facts about the product". Or, as Levy (1959) puts it in a later publication: "people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean" (p. 118). More recently, Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015a, p. 290) concluded: "In today's symbolic society the consumption of symbols often supersedes that of materiality". As a consequence of these insights, and in contrast to the goods-centric brand approach, it can be inferred that from an image-focused brand conceptualisation perspective brands can provide added value which is not necessarily embedded in the physical product (Merz et al., 2009).

In terms of empirical research with marketing practitioners, de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley's (1998a) findings support the relevance of the image-centric approach. They found that, for instance, *image* as the way in which an object is perceived by consumers, is central to marketing practitioners' brand conceptualisations. Other empirical research with marketing managers and consultants (Iglesias et al., 2013) and managers in start-up companies (Juntunen, 2012) also builds a case for the relevance of brand image as part of practitioners' brand conceptualisations. Juntunen's (2012) research emphasises the relevance of a brand's image in the customers' minds, while Iglesias et al.'s (2013) findings support the idea that each consumer develops a unique image of a given brand over time and that the meanings derived from this image are individual and subjective. This latter finding is of particular relevance since most of the early literature assumes that images are not individual and subjective but can to a large extent generally be moulded in the consumers' minds by a knowledgeable brand manager. These differences when it comes to the image-centric conceptualisation of brands and its underlying assumptions are reflected in a meta-analysis conducted by Dobni and Zinkhan (1990).

Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) reviewed 28 studies related to brand image and found that there has been little consensus in terms of the degree to which brand image is subjective and co-created. Several authors agree that brand image is created in people's minds (e.g. Newman, 1957; Park et al., 1986). In most cases, consumers are still perceived as relatively passive recipients of the brand manager's marketing messages. For example, Park et al. (1986) developed a brand management framework which they claim is, amongst other things, for "controlling a brand image over time" (p. 135). More recently, Robin Wight, the president of the Engine Group, a marketing communications agency network, has suggested that one of the core competences of the marketing communications industry is "building a brand into consumers['] brains" (2009, p. 20). These examples show that authors who adopt an image-focused brand conceptualisation approach might still assume – similar to the goods-centric perspective – that companies are able to manipulate consumers and create the images of their brands among their target audience, more or less, as they wish. In other words, from an SDL perspective, customers are still construed here as passive operand resources who buy brands because they have formed brand associations driven by the brand manager's marketing messages (Merz et al., 2009).

The image-focused conceptualisation perspective therefore seems to entail a paradoxical tension. On the one hand, the brand is seen as a cognitive construct in the consumers' minds which means that the brand resides in the consumers' minds (Heding et al., 2009). The consumer is subsequently assumed to be the 'owner' of the brand (Heding et al., 2009; Louro & Cunha, 2001), which fulfils various consumer-centric roles, such as for example, being a shorthand device or risk reducer during the purchasing process. Furthermore, from this consumer, output-oriented vantage point the focus is on the consumer's perception of the brand (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a).

On the other hand, the image-centric brand conceptualisation approach continues to operate under the assumption that "the marketer is still able to *control* brand value creation" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 83, emphasis added) "by moulding the brand associations held in the consumers' minds" (p. 85) through the marketing communications mix. As part of the earlier discussed goods-focused brand conceptualisation approach, the consumer could here, as part of the image-focused brand conceptualisation approach, be conceptualised as 'cognitive man' (Heding et al., 2009). Along the same lines as the goods-centric perspective, the consumer as cognitive man "is still treated as a generic entity that the skilled communicator is able to 'programme' into intended action" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 86).

Kevin Lane Keller's work, which is mainly based on cognitive-psychological theory (e.g. Keller, 1993 & 2003) can, to a large extent, be construed as being related to or even based on the image-centric brand conceptualisation approach. In his earlier work Keller (1993) uses Kotler's (1991) goods-focused brand definition which is very much based on the earlier quoted American Marketing Association's (1948) definition. However, in his later work Keller points out an important limitation of the goods-centric definitions such as the ones provided by the American Marketing Association (1948) or Kotler (1991) when it comes to marketing practice:

> […] many practicing managers refer to a brand as more than that [the AMA's definition] – as something that has actually created a certain amount of awareness, reputation, prominence, and so on in the market place (Keller, 2013, p. 30).

Consequently, he differentiates between the American Marketing Association's definition of 'brand' with a lower case 'b' and the industry's concept of a 'Brand' with an upper case 'B' (Keller, 2013; see also Dall'Olmo Riley, 2009 & 2016). Keller (2013) emphasises that the "difference is important for us because disagreements about branding principles or guidelines often revolve around what we mean by the term" (p. 30). However, while Keller (2013) points out the importance between different brand conceptualisations, he does not provide any concrete definition for the 'Brand' term nor does he provide any evidence that there is any agreement about the 'Brand' term in the industry. His *assumption* stands, therefore, in contrast to earlier research conducted by de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998a) which showed that marketing practitioners use a broad variety of conceptualisations when talking about brands.

Another challenge within the image-focused brand conceptualisation approach is that some equate the term brand with (brand) image while others define brand image as a sub-set/component of the brand as a whole (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Keller's (1998) approach appears to belong to the latter group. He conceptualises brand image as "consumer perceptions of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumers' memory" (1998, p. 49). In 2013 he still uses almost an identical definition. Brand image "is consumers' perceptions about a brand, as reflected by the brand associations held in consumers' memory" (Keller, 2013, p. 72). Brand image is one of the key components of Keller's concept of brand knowledge and therefore a central element of his customer-based brand equity (CBBE) framework. This framework is considered to be one of the most influential ones in brand management scholarship (Holt, 2005) and has contributed considerably to the establishment of a brand image-focused conceptualisation approach (Heding et al., 2009).

However, it could be interpreted as a limitation of this cognition-oriented approach that it neglects emotional and cultural factors, similarly to the goods-centric perspective, as well as "chaotic, unpredictable and 'autonomous' aspects" when it comes to explaining human behaviour related to brand image (Heding et al., 2009, p. 86). Keller (2003), for example, has acknowledged that while his work is mainly building on cognitive psychology, there are other relevant approaches in his view in relation to conceptualisations of brands and brand management. In his view,

approaches which use a more anthropological or ethnographic perspective can also contribute to the progress of brand discourse. Nevertheless, he also categorises these approaches under the bracket of developing a better understanding of consumers' brand knowledge, which is a central point of his overall CBBE framework.

From a managerial perspective, a strong brand can in the CBBE context be conceptualised as having created "strong, unique and favourable associations in the minds of its consumers" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 85). However, in general, the pervasive idea within the brand image-focused perspective, that consumers' brand associations can be deliberately manipulated by an experienced brand manager, can be interpreted as a weakness of this approach since it implies that consumers *can* be influenced and therefore potentially persuaded to buy something they do not want or need (Ariely, 2008; Mitchell, 2012). Mitchell (2012) argues that this ability to persuade consumers when it comes to the creation of their brand images and subsequently their brand purchasing decision making through marketing activities has led to a persuasion paradigm in brand management thinking. In turn, this has, at least for some people, undermined trust and good will towards the concepts of brand and brand management since from their vantage point both concepts intrinsically entail a manipulative intention. Brand managers' marketing activities can therefore have unintentional counter-productive effects by creating mistrust (Ariely, 2008; see also Klein, 2000; Packard, 1957).

As the literature review shows, the emergence of the image-focused brand perspective took place mainly due to post Second World War macro-economic developments (Heding et al., 2009; Merz et al., 2009). The proliferation of branded goods led to a situation where a primarily denotative differentiation of products was often no longer sufficient in an increasingly competitive environment (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Low & Fullerton, 1994). Consequently, brand management shifted towards the idea of creating brand images. The greatest advantage of this second brand conceptualisation perspective over the first one was at the time the revelation that brands could have powerful symbolic value for its consumers (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Gardner & Levy, 1955).

The literature review shows that this powerful symbolic value of a brand could be related to associations, attitudes, emotions, knowledge, and/or self-image in people's minds. While the image-oriented brand conceptualisation approach is still very popular in contemporary brand management practice, some key drawbacks nowadays are that this perspective is often (1) focusing on consumers only rather than stakeholders; and (2) interpreting these consumers as rather passive market participants who can be easily manipulated by a skilled brand manager.

Despite the criticism related to both the goods-centric and image-centric brand conceptualisation approaches, it needs to be acknowledged that some of the key elements of these two perspectives, such as the marketing mix concept, are still widely used in brand management practice today. In addition, some literature (Heding et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2012) also indicates that the initial focus on conceptualising brands primarily as denotative (goods-focused perspective) or connotative identifiers (image-focused perspective) has at a later stage further evolved. The economic man and the cognitive man-inspired approaches can therefore be interpreted as prerequisites or precursors for the development of more co-creation-oriented variants of the goods- and image-centric brand perspectives (Heding et al., 2009; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Merz et al., 2009). These more recent variants interpret consumers as being more powerful – in some cases even dominating the relationship with legal brand owners – and will be further analysed in the following sections.

2.5 The Identity-Focused Brand Perspective

The identity-focused perspective can be interpreted as emerging out of the goods-centric approach (Louro & Cunha, 2001). It is also mainly concerned with internal organisational resources but, in contrast to the goods-centric perspective, the identity-focused approach sees brands as key strategic tools (e.g. Kapferer, 2012). From this vantage point, brands can be defined as "focal platforms for articulating and implementing an organisation's strategic intent" (Louro & Cunha, 2001, p. 860). The brand identity provides "direction, purpose and meaning" (Aaker, 1996, p. 68) for the creation of the brand by the focal organisation.

The organisation's input is subsequently the primary means of brand creation (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Heding et al., 2009; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Merz et al., 2009). Brand management is considered to be about (1) developing a consistent brand identity and positioning, and (2) implementing them both coherently (Aaker, 1996; Riezebos & van der Grinten, 2012). The main strategic creators are usually assumed to be the focal organisation's senior brand management team – potentially supported by some external brand management consultants. This brand identity is often described as a "system" which can entail a variety of brand manager-determined elements (Aaker, 1996, p. 79). Related to this, de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley's (1998a) empirical research with marketing practitioners identified that their participants adopted an identity-focused perspective when talking about 'brand as identity system' or 'brand as company'.

Aaker's (1991 & 1996) original brand identity system thinking has since been further developed in the literature and can also entail, for example, a brand essence (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000), or a vision, mission and values framework (Davidson, 2005; de Chernatony 2010). In parallel to Aaker's work, Kapferer (1992) developed the idea of a brand identity platform or charter which may include brand standpoint, vision, mission, values, target audiences, core benefits of the brand, and anchoring of the products or services. Kapferer's work is broader and more integrated than Aaker's and will subsequently feature more prominently in the analysis of relational and stakeholder-oriented brand conceptualisation perspectives.

Nevertheless, as a common denominator among different brand identity-focused approaches, strong brands are considered as something that should be built on an organisation's inside-out capabilities that are difficult to imitate or replicate. Thereby the brand can be construed as a major source of competitive advantage and subsequently represents a considerable financial asset for the focal organisation behind the brand (Aaker, 1996; Day, 1994; Kapferer, 2012; Louro & Cunha, 2001). Overall, brand identity development and its consistent implementation across all brand interfaces is seen as the essential means of brand creation (Iglesias et al., 2013).

Historically, this perspective has emerged particularly on the back of different major trends in marketing such as corporate brand management (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Balmer,

2001b) and total brand management (e.g. Tilley, 1999; Simoes & Dibb, 2001). The strength of the identity-oriented brand perspective, which has made it an attractive approach to brand managers especially since the 1990s, is the insight that brands can be crucial strategic and financial assets when managed adequately (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012). However, the identity-focused perspective omits the role of consumers and other stakeholders as crucial actors of brand co-creation (e.g. Sherry, 2005). Consequently, in terms of limitations, due to a strong internal orientation, firms adopting an identity-focused brand perspective as part of their brand management strategy might underestimate the relevance of adapting to external changes in the market place (Kapferer, 2012). This specific limitation will be addressed further in sections 2.6 and 2.7. The next major brand conceptualisation perspective, introduced in section 2.6, also deals with some other short-comings of the goods-centric, image-centric, and identity-centric approaches. The main focus of the brand conceptualisations in the next section is on relationships. This approach is therefore less input- or output-oriented but instead more focused on the *processes* which are part of the brand phenomenon. Another important aspect of this approach is that consumers are interpreted as operant brand resources.

As a preliminary summary of the literature reviewed so far, Table 2-1 highlights the similarities and differences between the goods-focused, image-focused, and identity-focused brand conceptualisation perspectives.

Table 2-1: Summary Of The First Three Brand Conceptualisation Perspectives

	Goods-focused	**Image-focused**	**Identity-focused**
Definition	A brand is a denotative, visual, and legal marker for the purpose of a product's identification or differentiation	A brand is all kinds of knowledge, associations and emotions in consumers' minds related to a product	A brand is a focal platform for articulating and implementing an organisation's strategy (Louro & Cunha, 2001)
Core Capabilities (Day, 1994; Louro & Cunha, 2001)	Inside-Out	Inside-Out	Inside-Out
Strategic Orientation (Hoskisson et al., 1999; Louro & Cunha, 2001)	Internal	Internal	Internal
Conceptual Focus	Input	Output	Input
Dominant Relationship Focus	Dyadic	Dyadic	Dyadic
Dominant Communication Type	Monologue	Monologue	Monologue
Stakeholder Focus (Merz et al., 2009)	Customers as operand resources	Customers as operand resources	Customers as operand resources
Level of Organisational Control over Brand Perception	High	High	High
Importance of Co-Creation	Low	Low	Low
De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley's (1998a) Brand Themes	Logo; Legal Instrument	Image; Shorthand Device; Risk Reducer; Adding Value; Value System	Identity System; Company
Louro & Cunha's (2001) Brand Management Paradigms	Product	Adaptive	Projective
Heding et al.'s (2009) Brand Management Approaches	Economic	Consumer-Based	Identity
Merz et al.'s (2009) Branding Focus	Goods	Value	--

Source: The researcher.

From these first three perspectives, the brand is still construed as something that the focal organisation behind the brand can control to a high degree through providing high product quality and consistent marketing communications. The possibility that marketing messages are not interpreted by the consumer in the intended way is rather ignored. Furthermore, all these three perspectives adopt an internal-resources-focused strategic orientation (see Table 2-1) with static and controllable outcomes rather than dynamic processes. The goods-oriented perspective is mainly concerned with the focal

organisation's resources or input which leads to the creation of the product. The identity-oriented perspective is mainly concerned with the focal organisation's input on two levels. Firstly, the creation of a platform for articulating the organisation's or product's key strategy (e.g. via a brand identity system, a brand identity platform or a positioning) and secondly, the strategy's implementation via the organisation-controlled marketing mix output (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 1992; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Mitchell, 2012). The image-oriented perspective is mainly concerned with the organisation-controlled output, which entails the consumers' perception of the brand messages controlled by the brand manager as the main contribution to the brand creation in their minds.

2.6 The Relationship-Focused Brand Perspective

The above reviewed approaches have not fully integrated the consumers' real or potential relevance as co-creators of brands (Louro & Cunha, 2001; Merz et al., 2009). The goods- and identity-centric approaches clearly focus on the input of the organisation's internal resources and see consumers as operand resources that can be moulded by the brand manager. The image-oriented perspective assumes and incorporates that the brand exists in the consumers' minds but a large proportion of the literature using this approach still interprets consumers as rather passive recipients whose brand perception can be manipulated by the brand's manager through the marketing mix.

The three relationship-oriented perspectives, which will be presented next, differ from the previous approaches. The relationship-oriented perspectives address some of the shortcomings of the previous ones, in that they all acknowledge consumers as relevant contributors and active co-creators of the brand (Louro & Cunha, 2001; Merz et al., 2009; see Table 2-2). Thus, the focus has shifted more towards the co-creation of the brand and the processes between the focal organisation and its customers (Merz et al., 2009; Riezebos et al., 2003). The brand is therefore interpreted as something that continuously evolves in the interaction between organisation and consumers rather than a static input or output perspective (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Louro & Cunha, 2001). De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998a) summarise this approach as follows (p. 428, emphasis added):

> The brand exists mainly by virtue of a *continuous process* whereby the values
> and expectations imbued in the brand object (product or service) are set and
> enacted by the firms' staff and interpreted and *redefined* by the consumers […]

In a more general sense, Fournier (1998) describes the relational, process-oriented character of consumer-firm-brand relationships as evolving and changing over a series of interactions and in response to changes in the contextual environment (see also Rindell & Iglesias, 2014). Brand management is consequently concerned mainly with the management of this relationship – as far as that is possible – between the legal owner and consumer of the brand (Riezebos et al., 2003). In the relational context brands can therefore perform various roles for consumers as well as for organisations (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Keller, 1998; Louro & Cunha, 2001; see Table 2-2). This will be discussed in the following sections.

2.6.1 The Inside-Out Relational Brand Perspective

The inside-out relational perspective acknowledges consumers as operant co-creators of the brand in terms of brand meaning. From this perspective brands cannot simply be created within the organisation and then presented to the consumer in a way in which the messages are both perceived and interpreted exactly as intended by the brand manager (Heding et al., 2009). Rather, a brand is co-created by the organisation's employees and its consumers (Gilly & Wolfinbarger, 1998; King, 1991). Therefore, external as well as internal processes are considered. Nevertheless, in terms of brand managerial core capabilities, this perspective still adopts primarily an inside-out focus which means that it still aims to control all communication which fundamentally enables many of the consumers' brand experiences.

To be able to achieve this, from an inside-out relational perspective, a brand can subsequently be conceptualised as a *promise* that needs to be consistently kept or delivered to the customer through all the interactions which the focal organisation has with its customers (Perrey & Spillecke, 2013). The brand promise in this context does not necessarily have to be linked to the functional product or service benefits but could be entirely related to the emotional, symbolic, social or lifestyle benefits/values associated with the brand (Riezebos et al., 2003). Following this inside-out relational perspective, consumers form their perception of a company, product or brand based on

the total experience which they have with all kinds of interfaces of this particular firm (Heding et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013). They experience whether or not the organisation delivers consistently on its brand promise. Employees are therefore at the centre of brand creation through all their interactions with consumers to deliver the brand promise (de Chernatony, 1999; King 1991). As Merz et al. (2009) point out, employees "shape and represent the brand promises made to external customers" (p. 336) as well as to other internal customers.

The inside-out relational brand conceptualisation perspective focuses, in terms of brand management, on key sequential internal brand strategy development and implementation *processes* relevant to the ongoing delivery of coherent brand experiences that keep the brand promise alive (Louro & Cunha, 2001). The inside-out relational perspective can therefore be interpreted as a more dynamic and process-driven variant of the earlier identity-focused approach (Heding et al., 2009). Another aspect to be considered, is that the inside-out relational approach can potentially involve the company as a whole which stresses particularly the central relevance of employees as key interfaces of the brand (Heding et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013). Similarly to the identity-focused approach this entails, in terms of managerial processes, the need to align employee behaviour with the organisation's brand vision, mission and values (Davidson, 2005; de Chernatony, 2010; Hatch & Schultz, 1997 & 2001; Heding et al., 2009). In this context, the literature on service brands and corporate brands has made considerable contributions.

The goods, image and identity approaches presented above are mainly based on goods-oriented product brand and product brand management thinking. This is in line with the majority of research about brands that has been conducted until recently (Brodie et al., 2009; de Chernatony, 2010). Nonetheless, *service brand* and *service brand management* thinking has gained momentum over the last three decades – in marketing academia as well as in practice (de Chernatony et al., 2011; Horan et al., 2011). The characteristics of service brands which have been highlighted in the literature are particularly: a) intangibility; b) inseparability of production and consumption; c) heterogeneity (non-standardisation); and d) perishability (see further Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999; Brady et al., 2005; de Chernatony et al., 2011; de

Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Gummesson, 1991; Palmer, 2001; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000; Zeithaml et al., 1985).

Despite a growing body of literature questioning the fundamental differences between physical goods and services (e.g. Vargo & Lusch, 2004), the service versus goods-oriented brands debate in the literature highlights some important challenges for more service-focused brands that are relevant for managers as well as academics to understand in the context of brand conceptualisations. First of all, while the first three conceptualisation approaches were mainly based on goods and product-oriented thinking, this approach has a wider brand perspective. As Berry (2000) states, while in packaged goods, the *product* is often the primary brand, when it comes to services, the *company and its employees* are usually the primary brand.

This more holistic or organisation-wide brand thinking approach is reflected in the notion of the "total service brand experience" (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001, p. 645). Service brand management needs to take, as far as possible, the total brand experience into account and therefore the organisation as a whole becomes more important compared to goods-oriented product brand management thinking. This highlights not only that staff are paramount, but also that co-creation can be paramount. Consumers can become crucial co-creators of the service brand experience in a bad as well as a good way. For example, an annoying passenger sitting next to a person on a plane might completely spoil this person's otherwise nice overall service experience with an airline.

In terms of limitations, a critical point of the service versus goods discussion is, for some authors at least, that most goods-oriented product and service brands might not be fundamentally different – they just have service components to differing degrees (e.g. de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001). This point will be further investigated in section 2.7 which reviews the literature on stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisation perspectives.

A lack of stakeholder-orientation beyond employees and consumers could be interpreted as another limitation of at least some of the service brand literature. For example, a service brand manager who wants to take the above mentioned *total service*

brand experience into account, might need to adopt a stakeholder perspective instead of just focusing on customers and employees because "successful service brands" appear to "depend heavily on achieving consistency in all stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of the brand" (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003, p. 1108). More recent service brand-oriented literature has increasingly incorporated a wider range of stakeholders within its brand conceptualisations (e.g. Brodie, 2009; Mattera et al., 2014). Finally, the service brand versus product brand debate presented in the reviewed literature can therefore be interpreted as an important interim stage towards a full stakeholder integration (Balmer, 2013; Balmer & Gray, 2003) which will be covered in more detail in section 2.7.

2.6.2 The Outside-In Relational Brand Perspective

The outside-in relational brand perspective can conceptually be construed in opposition to the previous approach, with consumers being here the main constructors of the brand in terms of brand meaning rather than the focal organisation behind the brand (Louro & Cunha, 2001). From this perspective it is acknowledged that the interpretation and potential redefinition of brand related stimuli received from the focal organisation by the consumer is a complex mental process and can be construed as a co-creation process of brand associations and other kinds of brand knowledge (Merz et al., 2009; Rindell & Iglesias, 2014).

Brand management under the outside-in relational perspective focuses on the processes of continuous analysis of consumers' brand perceptions and subsequent adaptation of marketing activities (Aaker, 1996; Louro & Cunha, 2001). From this perspective brands fulfil consumer-centred roles (Allen et al., 2008; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Heding et al., 2009; Louro & Cunha, 2001) as identified within the image-focused approach. The difference here is therefore not so much in how brands are defined but rather in how they are created. While from both vantage points the brand exists in the consumers' minds, the image-centric approach assumes that organisations still have a high level of control in regard to manipulating this brand (image). In contrast to this, the outside-in relational perspective assumes that the consumers are the "central constructors of brand meaning" (Louro & Cunha, 2001, p. 863). This does not necessarily mean that organisations have no ability to impact the

consumers' creation of brand meaning but their power to manipulate the outcome of the brand's creation is assumed to be considerably lower than for the image-focused (or any other previously considered) perspective.

Furthermore, while the image-centric perspective is focused on the organisational output which creates the brand, the outside-in relational perspective is more concerned with the outcome in the consumers' minds. More precisely, the outcome, i.e. the brand, is not assumed to be something static or stable but something that is – at least potentially – in a constant flow. Consequently, the focus of this perspective is more concerned with the *processes* of the brand creation rather than the input or output central to the goods-, image-, or identity-focused brand conceptualisation perspectives. From the image-centric perspective brands can be interpreted as the consumers' image, a short hand device, risk reducer, adding value or a value system (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a) which is conceptualised as rather static and created in the consumers' minds by the focal organisation behind the brand. In contrast to this, from the outside-in relational perspective, the brand is seen as more of a permanently evolving entity (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a) which means that a brand can here also be interpreted as, for example, an image but this is subject to potentially ongoing adjustments in the consumers' minds, based on their experiences and cognitive processes.

The consumers' input and impact on the ongoing process of the co-creation of the brand is seen as dominant compared to the focal organisation's input or impact. Nevertheless, since the co-creation of the brand is construed as a process, the ingredients of this process are relevant and it is still assumed that an organisation can have some influence over the consumers' brand creation through the provision of the goods/services and marketing communications which the consumers experience (Kucuk, 2012). The level of co-creation can therefore be assumed to be on a medium level (see Table 2-2).

Consumer feedback is the key measurement for an organisation which operates under the relational outside-in perspective (Louro & Cunha, 2001). In order to achieve a high level of customer satisfaction and develop a superior understanding of what consumers want, in comparison to an organisation's competition, Day (1994)

recommends that organisations should develop market sensing capabilities. These capabilities are defined as the "ability of the firm to learn about customers, competitors and channel members in order to continuously sense and act on events and trends in present and prospective markets" (Day, 1994, p. 43). This market capabilities-oriented approach has since further developed within the brand management discipline and is one of the essential foundations for consumer and market research (Beverland et al., 2010; Bhalla, 2011; Morgan et al., 2009).

Since consumers are seen as central creators of the brand, within an outside-in relational brand management approach, a lot of attention is paid to how consumers perceive brands and what 'role(s)' they allocate to brands in their daily lives (de Chernatony, 2002; Heding et al., 2009; Merz et al., 2009). In this context, brands can, for example, "serve as purposeful repositories of meaning" for consumers (Fournier, 1998, p. 365). These repositories of meaning can be used in different contexts, for instance, for the creation of concepts of self and an individual's identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Fournier, 1998) but also, as with the image-focused brand conceptualisation, as short hand devices, risk reducers, value systems, etc. (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a).

Furthermore, people often imbue brands with human personality traits (Aaker, 1997). Aaker (1997) defines the concept of brand personality in this context as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 347). While in some areas of the literature on this topic brand personality traits are assumed to be "enduring, distinct and stable" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 119), in others, brand personality traits are more dynamically construed as being "activated in a continuous reciprocal, dialogue-based exchange between brand and consumer" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 118).

Aaker et al.'s (2004) research indicates that it is advantageous to interpret brand personality as a dynamic phenomenon instead of a static construct. The human-like personality of a brand is created and then evolves dynamically through the interactions between the consumer and the organisation's or product's interfaces (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Iglesias et al., 2013). Important for the outside-in relational perspective is that personality traits can be (a) endowed in the brand by the organisation, but equally (b) created in the process of perception of brand-related

stimuli by the consumers (Heding et al., 2009). As previously indicated, within the research of relational brand conceptualisation perspectives it is assumed that what the brand manager wants consumers to feel and what consumers perceive in terms of a brand's personality traits is not necessarily the same (Berthon et al., 2009; Heding et al., 2009). Consumers can use a brand's personality for their own "inward construction and outward expression of self" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 120). Or, as Belk (1988, p. 160) puts it:

> It seems an inescapable fact of modern life that we learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions […]. Our accumulation of possessions provides a sense of past and tells us who we are, where we have come from, and perhaps where we are going.

Through possessions, particularly branded ones, consumers build, maintain and extend their individual and social selves (Belk, 1988; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979). Consumers can also use brands to symbolise different facets of their lives (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a). However, the construction of a consumer's identity through the use of brands is not necessarily limited to brand attributes but could also entail brand narratives "linked to key events in life structured as stories" to build their personal stories, and position "themselves in relation to culture, society and other people" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 124).

> Love[d] objects serve as indexical mementos of key events or relationships in the life narrative, […] and tend to be tightly embedded in a rich symbolic network of associations (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 179).

The consumer-led processes around the creation of a brand's personality can subsequently be interpreted as a "central aspect of consumers' symbolic consumption and construction of self" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 117).

Research in the 1980s already provided evidence that customers show a greater preference for a brand the greater the congruity between the human characteristics that describe the customer and those that describe the brand (Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982). Brand management is in this context subsequently concerned with "how and why people choose brands with certain personalities and how imbuing brands with personality can thus be a powerful tool to create and enhance brand equity" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 117). In this sense, brand personality could be used from a managerial vantage point as an emotional or symbolic identifier and differentiator for a brand

within a product category. Brand managers should aim to create a brand personality through "the wide array of brand activities, ensuring that the brand personality statement is expressed in all the behavior and communication of the brand" (Heding et al., 2009, p. 139). An intended brand personality could therefore be used and expressed by brand managers and their organisations in a similar way to, for example, a brand vision, mission and values framework or a brand identity charter as discussed within the identity-focused approach.

Overall, a strength of the brand personality approach is that it can help brand managers to develop stronger relationships between brand and consumer and subsequently drive loyalty and brand equity (Fournier, 1998; Louro & Cunha, 2001). Its relevance has not only been confirmed in the academic literature (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Tuškej et al., 2013) but also in brand management practice (e.g. Plummer, 2009). Overall, however, the central limitation of the outside-in relational perspective is its strong focus on consumers and their perception as the main determinants of what the brand should be, while ignoring to a considerable extent the critical role of an organisation's internal characteristics and resources for its brand performance (Louro & Cunha, 2001).

2.6.3 The Balanced Relational Brand Perspective

From the balanced relational perspective, brands are conceptualised as jointly constructed by firms and consumers. The organisation and the consumer are seen as equal relationship partners (Heding et al., 2009). These relationships can be formed through direct contact (e.g. usage of a product or service) as well as more indirect interaction (e.g. perception of mass media marketing communications). From the balanced perspective, the relationship is assumed to (a) involve reciprocal exchange between interdependent and active relationship partners; (b) evolve and change over time; and hence (c) constitute a process-oriented phenomenon (Fournier, 1998; Heding et al., 2009).

In terms of strategic orientation, brand management is concerned with combining outside-in competencies, such as market sensing, with inside-out capabilities, such as internal resources management (Louro & Cunha, 2001). This balanced approach does

not only interpret consumers and firms as relatively equal relationship partners but also aims to equally combine the strengths of the internal and external strategic orientation (Hoskisson et al., 1999) and the core capabilities of an inside-out and outside-in managerial approach (Day, 1994). Thus there is an overlap between the balanced approach and the inside-out and outside-in perspectives.

The brand manager needs the ability to adapt the brand management strategy continuously based on the meaning negotiation which requires an in-depth understanding of consumers' life worlds (Heding et al., 2009). Brand management also needs to 'let go' of the brand to a certain extent since it exists in an environment that cannot be 100 per cent controlled by the brand manager:

> the marketer has to let go of total control of the brand and incorporate the meaning created by consumers in the management of the brand. Furthermore, the management is considered a very dynamic process where the meaning is constantly negotiated under the influence of the many factors influencing both human and brand relationships. (Heding et al., 2009, p. 175)

From the vantage point of the balanced relational approach the meanings created by consumers are not necessarily the ones intended by the brand manager. This vantage point requires a different brand management approach to the goods-, image- or identity-centred perspectives. The brand manager needs to understand the consumer's lived experience, identity projects and life world. Riezebos and colleagues (2003) note in this context that it seems to be easier for a corporate brand to develop a strong relationship with a customer than for an individual FMCG brand, which provides another reason for the rise of corporate brands which will be further discussed in the next section. Nevertheless, Fournier (1998) and Cova and Pace (2006) have provided evidence that FMCG brands, too, can develop strong relationships with consumers.

As a summary of the relational approaches, Table 2-2 highlights the similarities and differences between the inside-out, outside-in, and balanced relational brand conceptualisation perspectives.

Table 2-2: Summary Of The Three Relationship-Focused Perspectives

	Inside-Out Relational Focus	**Outside-In Relational Focus**	**Balanced Relational Focus**
Definition	A brand consists of a continuous process whereby the values and expectations imbued in the brand object are set and enacted by the firm's staff and interpreted and redefined by the consumers (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a)		
Core Capabilities (Day, 1994; Louro & Cunha, 2001)	Inside-Out	Outside-In	Balanced
Strategic Orientation (Hoskisson et al., 1999; Louro & Cunha, 2001)	Internal	External	Both
Conceptual Focus	Process	Process	Process
Dominant Relationship Focus	Dyadic (Heding et al., 2009)	Dyadic (Heding et al., 2009)	Dyadic (Heding et al., 2009)
Dominant Communication Type	Dialogue	Dialogue	Dialogue
Stakeholder Focus (Merz et al., 2009)	Customers and employees as operant resources	Customers and employees as operant resources	Customers and employees as operant resources
Level of Organisational Control over Brand Perception	Medium	Low	Medium/Low
Importance of Co-Creation	Medium	Medium	Medium
De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley's (1998a) Brand Themes	Relationship; Evolving Entity; Identity System; Company	Relationship; Evolving Entity; Personality; Image; Shorthand Device; Risk Reducer; Adding Value; Value System	Relationship; Evolving Entity; Personality; Image; Shorthand Device; Risk Reducer; Adding Value; Value System; Identity System; Company
Louro & Cunha's (2001) Brand Management Paradigms	Projective; Relational	Adaptive; Relational	Relational
Heding et al.'s (2009) Brand Management Approaches	Identity	Personality	Relational
Merz et al.'s (2009) Branding Focus	Firm-Brand Relationships	Customer-Firm Relationships; Customer-Brand Relationships	Firm-Brand Relationships; Customer-Firm Relationships; Customer-Brand Relationships

Source: The researcher.

In a wider historical context, the three relationship-focused conceptualisation perspectives represent an important evolutionary step within brand discourse. In contrast to the first three approaches reviewed, they have to a larger extent integrated the consumers' real or at least potential relevance as co-creators of brands and thus as operant resources (see Table 2-2). Furthermore, the relational perspectives embrace a more dynamic and continuous process-orientation rather than static input or output

perspectives. The inside-out relational approach is therefore particularly suitable in service brand management (Berry, 2000; de Chernatony et al., 2011; de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001) while the outside-in concept resonates especially with market-oriented brand management (Louro & Cunha, 2001) and the literature around brand personality (Aaker, 1997) and symbolic brand consumption (Ahuvia, 2005; Heding et al., 2009).

However, a limitation is that the relational approaches still focus on consumers and employees and therefore often neglect other potentially relevant stakeholders. Based on this drawback the relational approaches could therefore be seen as an interim stage towards full stakeholder integration (Balmer, 2013; Balmer & Gray, 2003). This limitation will be addressed next.

2.7 The Stakeholder-Focused Brand Perspective

The stakeholder-oriented approaches focus more – as the name implies – on society as a whole rather than 'just' employees and consumers in comparison to the previously discussed brand conceptualisation perspectives. Instead of one-to-one dialogue only between organisation and consumer, the stakeholder-oriented perspective also includes brand-related processes between individual consumers, consumer collectives, and any other brand stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009). Thus, brands can be conceptualised as dynamically constructed through social interactions between the firm and its customers, but also consumers amongst each other and all other brand stakeholders (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; Brown et al., 2003). The relational approach is here further broadened from dialogue to multilogue (Berthon et al., 2007). In other words, brands are conceptualised as complex relational phenomena which can be influenced by all kinds of stakeholders (Gregory, 2007; Iglesias et al., 2013; Jones, 2005).

2.7.1 The Inside-Out Stakeholder Brand Perspective

The inside-out stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisation perspective can be construed as a further development of the identity-focused and relational inside-out approaches in that it (1) incorporates brand stakeholders beyond employees and consumers as operant resources (Merz et al., 2009), and (2) incorporates co-creation

beyond brand meaning (Antorini & Andersen, 2005; Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Schultz, 2005). While the identity-focused and relational brand perspectives already adopted a more holistic viewpoint than the goods and image-oriented approaches in terms of integrating potentially the organisation as a whole instead of just the product, they still focused mainly on consumers as external audiences. The perspective presented in this section goes further than that and integrates potentially all kinds of external brand stakeholders (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Merz et al., 2009).

Furthermore, while it is acknowledged that consumers and other external stakeholders cannot be controlled by the focal organisation behind the brand, the possibility for a certain level of influence exerted by the brand manager is still assumed for this normative inside-out brand perspective (Melewar et al., 2012). This influence is exerted through the various management processes used to develop and implement, for example, a brand identity (e.g. de Chernatony, 1999; Wheeler, 2013); a corporate identity (e.g. Hatch & Schultz, 1997 & 2001; He, 2012); a corporate brand covenant (e.g. Balmer, 2012a; Balmer & Gray, 2003); or corporate brand positioning (e.g. Knox & Bickerton, 2003; Louro & Cunha, 2001). Related to this, the broader or more holistic approach of the stakeholder-oriented brand conceptualisation perspectives has also led to a stronger focus on corporate brands and corporate brand management (e.g. Balmer, 2001a & 2001b; Balmer & Gray, 2003; da Silveira et al., 2013; Iglesias et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2005a).

Despite various similarities, Balmer and Gray (2003, p. 976) argue that "corporate brands are fundamentally different from product brands in terms of disciplinary scope and management". In terms of key differences, the authors stress, for example, that while most product-oriented brand management thinking is primarily focused on consumers, corporate brand management incorporates a broad variety of stakeholders, such as employees, intermediaries, or governments, to name but a few. Consequently, due to their broader scope, corporate brands are crucial to an organisation's long-term strategy – which means that they are a vital concern for *senior* management. In contrast to this, product brand management falls mainly within the remit of *middle* management (Balmer & Gray, 2003).

However, Schultz et al. (2005b) found in their study that not all companies adopting a corporate brand management approach did it in the holistic way described above. Instead, they found that corporate brand management has been adopted by many organisations as a rather tactical, visual and campaign-driven approach, close to an adaptation of the management perspectives related to the previously discussed goods- and image-focused brand conceptualisation approaches. Schultz and her colleagues subsequently differentiate between what they call the first and second wave of corporate brand management (Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Schultz et al., 2005a & 2005b).

The first wave of corporate brand management can be characterised by a rather tactical marketing and campaign approach. In contrast to this, the second wave of corporate brand management can be described as a process of "creating, nurturing, and sustaining a mutually rewarding relationship between a company, its employees, and its external stakeholders" (Schultz 2005, p. 48). Through the expansion from consumers to all kinds of external stakeholders, this approach can be interpreted as a progression from the previously discussed relational perspectives. This kind of corporate brand management orientation could, in Schultz and colleagues' view, become "one of the few central and cross-disciplinary concepts that can establish cohesion between the organization's strategy, organization and marketing" (Schultz et al., 2005b, p. 16). Antorini and Schultz (2005) mention the co-creation not only of brand meaning but also of brand manifestations as communication goals for the second wave of corporate brand management. However, they do not explain what they mean by the co-creation of brand manifestations and whether these are co-created within the organisation or in collaboration with external stakeholders.

Nevertheless, in another publication by one of the authors (Antorini & Andersen, 2005), LDraw, a software for LEGO enthusiasts, is given as an example that has been created by users, with no influence from the LEGO corporation, which would in the traditional sense be the producer of such a product. Consumers, and other stakeholders, "are increasingly able to conceive, design, plan and implement complex projects themselves, bypassing traditional institutions and channels" (Antorini & Andersen, 2005, p. 84).

Paradoxically, on the one hand Antorini and Schultz (2005) claim that "the corporate brand is created *across* the organization" (p. 220; emphasis in original) while on the other hand Schultz (2005) explains that the corporate brand consists of four elements including stakeholder images which clearly are not created within the organisation from the inside-out stakeholder-oriented perspective. The four elements of a corporate brand from the second wave perspective are as follows (Schultz, 2005, p. 49, emphasis in original; see also Hatch & Schultz, 2001):

- **Strategic vision** – the central idea behind the company that embodies and expresses *top management's* aspiration for what the company will achieve in the future
- **Organizational culture** – the internal values, beliefs, and basic assumptions that embody the heritage of the company and how these are manifested in the ways *employees* feel about the company they work for
- **Stakeholder images** – views of the organization developed by its *external stakeholders*; the outside world's overall impression of the company including views of customers, shareholders, the media, the general public, and so on
- **Corporate brand identity** – occurs at the juncture between vision, culture, and image and *defines how 'we' perceive ourselves as an organization. Identity* underpins the corporate brand – partly by the feedback from stakeholders and partly by the organisation's self insight. Claims about identity are often stated as core values, beliefs or central ideas

These four elements of the *second wave* corporate brand are visualised in Figure 2-1.

Figure 2-1: The Four Key Elements Of The Second Wave Corporate Brand

Strategic
Vision

Corporate
Brand
Identity

Organizational
Culture

Stakeholder
Images
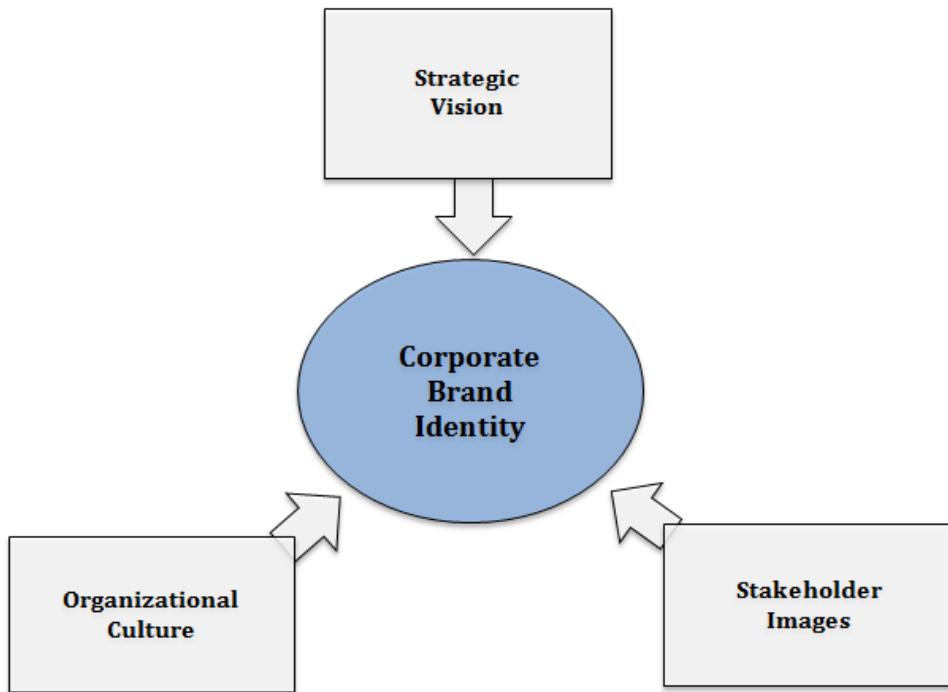
Source: based on Schultz (2005, p. 50).

Antorini and Schultz (2005, p. 228; emphasis in original) stress that "The corporate brand does *not* live in brand books and identity guidelines, it lives *through* people!" Furthermore, the authors believe that while under the first wave of corporate brand management the corporate brand was defined entirely by the focal organisation, under the second wave, defining a corporate brand becomes a dynamic process which also entails the perception of external stakeholders – as mentioned above (Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Schultz, 2005). This reflects very well the inside-out stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisation perspective.

While the perceptions of external stakeholders are taken into account for the creation of the brand (via stakeholder images, see Figure 2-1), at the core of the brand stands the corporate brand identity, which is still primarily defined by the senior management team of the organisation via the stated "core values, beliefs or central ideas" (Schultz, 2005, p. 49). This conclusion is supported by the idea that a firm's top management is able to manage 'the brand' by "generating, maintaining and developing the strategic framework for the corporate brand" (Antorini & Schultz, 2005, p. 225). By *strategic framework* the authors mean "that top management fleshes out the organization's reason for being by seeking to align strategic vision, organizational culture and

stakeholder images founded in the organization's identity" (Antorini & Schultz, 2005, p. 225-226; see also Figure 2-1; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Schultz, 2005).

Nevertheless, the authors still see the creation of a brand as a social process which includes the social interaction between internal and external stakeholders. For instance, the employees' interpretations of the top management created corporate brand vision and the interaction between employees and external stakeholders provide a platform where these interpretations and subsequent ideas about the brand "are tested, modified, converted to narratives about the corporate brand, and hence come to life, i.e. become enacted by internal and external stakeholders" (Antorini & Schultz, 2005, p. 226).

The basis for the authors' conflict when it comes to conceptualising corporate brands appears to be their attempt to combine what Melewar et al. (2012) call normative and social constructivist views on brands. The normative view is the one in which the corporate brand can be managed via, for example, a strategic framework as presented in Figure 2-1, while the social constructivist perspective interprets the corporate brand as a social phenomenon that comes to live in the interaction between internal and external stakeholders in a potentially – at least partially – uncontrollable way as a complex and dynamic social process. Overall, this work acknowledges that external stakeholders have become increasingly relevant and powerful (Antorini & Andersen, 2005). Consumers, for instance, now have unprecedented access to new forms of production, information and communication technology (Antorini & Andersen, 2005; Antorini & Schultz, 2005).

A closer integration is therefore proposed by the authors between the organisation and its internal and external stakeholders. In this context the authors recommend to *democratise* the management of corporate brands. However, the details of this demand are not made clear. While the corporate brand is defined by the authors as *a complex and dynamic social process*, the authors nonetheless limit their focus mainly to internal resources, i.e. to the relationship between top management and employees which is typical for the inside-out stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisation perspective. This becomes particularly clear when external stakeholders are not integrated into the sense-making and sense-giving processes as shown in Figure 2-2.

Figure 2-2: The Branding Process As Sense-Making And Sense-Giving

Image removed from electronic version

Source: Antorini & Schultz (2005, p. 226).

Figure 2-2 illustrates second wave corporate brand management as "a social process that bounces back and forth within the organization as sense-making and sense-giving processes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) between the top management and employees" (Antorini & Schultz, 2005, p. 226). The authors further emphasise that the "process is tied together by the connections between the organization's functions and illustrates the importance of leading the brand through middle management" (p. 226). External stakeholders appear therefore to be excluded from the sense making and giving processes as part of the corporate brand creation process. Furthermore, despite taking the generally increasing empowerment of external stakeholders into account, the authors strongly convey the impression that external stakeholders *can* still be managed.

As an example Antorini and Andersen (2005) provide the idea of creating a (online and/or offline) community as a space for stakeholder integration. To a certain extent it might be possible to control such a brand community space created by the organisation (see e.g. Cova & Pace, 2006). However, the authors do not address conceptually – from a managerial perspective – brand manifestations that are initiated by external stakeholders in (online/offline) areas or spaces that potentially are not controlled by the corporation, maybe even completely without their awareness. In this context it appears that listening to stakeholders, as suggested by Antorini & Schultz (2005) and Schultz (2005), might not always be sufficient. Integrated corporate brand management needs to not only listen to stakeholders but also find ways of engagement and adequate internal and external response (Bhalla, 2011).

Recent approaches of brand co-creation from an inside-out stakeholder-focused perspective (e.g. Ind et al., 2012; Roser et al., 2009), for instance, assume that co-creation is initiated by the legal owners of the brand and not by external brand stakeholders. This can be construed as a limitation of the inside-out approach. For instance, Meyers (2003) points out that "brand managers are losing not only their

ability to control what is said about their brands and where, but even their ability to control and define who is a stakeholder" (p. 31). More and more organisations are confronted with networks of stakeholders "that are characterized by complex exchange" rather than controllable dyadic exchanges (Hillebrand et al., 2015, p. 416). Recent technological developments have enabled external brand stakeholders "to perform for themselves and others many of the marketing tasks and functions (the well-known '4 Ps') that were previously the prerogative of organizations" (Berthon et al., 2008, p. 6). This change will be addressed in further detail in the next section.

2.7.2 The Outside-In Stakeholder Brand Perspective

This stakeholder perspective can be interpreted as a progression of the outside-in relational perspective. In contrast to the relational perspective, this approach goes beyond one-to-one B2C, B2B and C2B dialogue by looking at dialogue between a business with multiple consumers and other stakeholders, i.e. multilogue (Berthon et al., 2007): multiple stakeholders communicating with the organisation simultaneously or multiple stakeholders interacting with each other with or without the involvement of the focal organisation behind the brand. All internal and external stakeholders are construed as operant resources in the process of brand co-creation (Merz et al., 2009). In contrast to the inside-out stakeholder-oriented brand conceptualisation perspective, the focus here is on the external stakeholders.

A brand is conceptualised as a continuous social process (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). The importance of brand co-creation and the input of external stakeholders is higher for the outside-in stakeholder approach than for any other previously reviewed perspective. A particular emphasis is placed on brand communities within this perspective. A brand community is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand" (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 187). Traditional communities generally have three common denominators (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001): (1) consciousness of kind, (2) shared rituals and traditions, and (3) sense of moral responsibility. In this community-oriented context therefore brand community members' shared identity, interests, and values might have an impact on the brands which their community revolves around.

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Brand meaning is created and negotiated through the social interactions amongst members of a brand community with the brand being the focal point of interaction among these members (Heding et al., 2009; McAlexander et al., 2002). Muñiz and O'Guinn (2005) stress not only the brand meaning creating and negotiating power of members within a brand community but also that brand meaning is created and negotiated between brand communities and the legal owner of the brand as well as other market institutions. Brown et al. (2003, p. 31) conclude along similar lines that brands

> are social entities experienced, shaped, and changed in communities. Therefore, although brand meaning might be ascribed and communicated to consumers by marketers, consumers in turn uncover and activate their own brand meanings, which are communicated back to the marketers and the associated brand community.

Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 427) acknowledge the opportunities and risks which the power of brand communities offers to brand managers:

> a brand with a powerful sense of community would generally have greater value to a marketer than a brand with a weak sense of community. However, it should also be recognized that a strong brand community can be a threat to a marketer should a community collectively reject marketing efforts or product change, and then use communal communications channels to disseminate this rejection.

Stakeholders outside a focal organisation can influence and define a brand nowadays to a larger degree than ever before – sometimes in opposition to what the organisation aims to portray (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). This indicates that the role of the brand manager can potentially be rather challenging. On the one hand, the various benefits which members of a brand community experience through their engagement with other members might add considerably to the members' brand loyalty and subsequently increase or stabilise product or service brand equity and/or sales (Heding et al., 2009). On the other hand, consumers might imbue the brand with associations different from the ones strategically developed and implemented by the focal organisation. In extreme cases consumers might even 'hijack' a brand (Wipperfürth, 2005) as happened, for example, to the Burberry brand in the UK in the early 2000s (Mason & Wigley, 2013). Brand management under the outside-in stakeholder-focused approach can be interpreted as more challenging or risky since

brands can be interpreted here as having a "collective nature" (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015, p. 4). A one-to-one conversation via email with a customer might turn into a multilogue with potentially millions of customers when published on social media by this customer (Heding et al., 2009). From the marketer's vantage point, individual consumers as well as whole brand communities might appear as difficult to manage due to the technology-enabled shift in brand meaning creation and negotiation power (Heding et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013).

Thus the role of a brand manager under the outside-in stakeholder-focused perspective incorporates more awareness that marketers are not in control anymore compared to the previously discussed perspectives. Consumers talk to each other maybe without any involvement of the focal organisation behind the brand. Brand value is subsequently co-created or destroyed in the dialogue between consumers and marketers but also among consumers without the involvement of the focal organisation (Cova & Paranque, 2012). Marketers might then have the choice of either turning into rather passive observers or proactive facilitators. Brand managers can create, for example, brand fests offline or build brand communities online that facilitate member interaction (McAlexander et al., 2002).

The communication within the brand community might thereby rest entirely on member interaction, or be to a large extent facilitated by the brand manager (Heding et al., 2009). If community members are left largely to their own devices they might even take over the role of brand managers as happened, for instance, with the Apple Newton community (Muñiz & Schau, 2005). Furthermore, when it comes to brand specific communities, for example in the context of NPD, Ind et al., (2013) advise that the organisation "should see community participants as an integral part of the brand" (p. 6).

Cova and Pace (2008) developed the concept of 'consumer-made' as an example of the consequences of the ongoing internet-based power shifting democratisation processes. Based on this concept, consumers can become crucial contributors or even the main creators of brands since marketing and brand management practices are no longer an exclusive tool for organisations and their marketing departments. Digitally literate consumers are able nowadays to use a broad range of newly acquired powers in

a brand management context. They are able to "create services, goods and experiences and they participate in the design of many of them, update them and reconfigure them" (Cova & Pace, 2008, p. 313). Schroll et al. (2011) use the Apache open-source software brand, as an example, where "Every single member [of the Apache software user community] becomes a marketer of the Apache brand" through the way in which each member engages "in communicating about the brand and [the Apache user] community identity" (p. 2). Based on an analysis of another case, the Outdoorseiten.Net online community, a group of hiking and outdoor enthusiasts who are all members of this online community, Füller and colleagues (2008) have developed the concept of 'community brands' which are brands that are not initially created by a focal organisation but rather the members of a community or interest group. With no marketers, in the traditional sense, being present, the community itself therefore becomes the marketer or brand manager (Füller et al., 2008; Füller & von Hippel, 2008; Hillebrand et al., 2015).

Pitt et al. (2006) who have investigated the emergence of community brands in-depth, in the context of the IT and software industry, call this phenomenon open source brands. Interestingly, similar to the contrasting inside-out stakeholder-oriented conceptualisation perspective, Pitt et al. (2006) focus their investigation also particularly on corporate brands. As represented, for instance, by the goods or identity-focused brand conceptualisation approaches, traditionally, many marketing practitioners as well as academics have used a *centralised* and *hierarchical* perspective on the management of brands. From this "closed" perspective, a brand is owned and controlled by an organisation; the locus of power is situated inside the firm and consumers are seen as relatively passive: "The producer constructs the brand in all its aspects, which customers consume" (Pitt et al., 2006, p. 118). Applying an open source approach to brand management provides a radically different lens to this hierarchical perspective: power and control are *decentralised* and *heterarchical* (Pitt et al., 2006). From this heterarchical perspective the boundaries between brand producers and brand consumers blur increasingly (Hillebrand et al., 2015). Open source brands are "messy" (Pitt et al., 2006, p. 123), it can become difficult to separate producers and consumers, production process, product and brand. Pitt et al. (2006) explain the open source (OS) approach as follows:

OS offerings typically describe products, services, and ideas for which the intellectual input of the inventors and producers is nonproprietary in nature. The term originated in computer programming, in which a program's source code is open to view and modification, and there is no charge to download and use the program. The term *open source* has gained common currency for describing movements that have similar philosophical underpinnings to OS software. For example, Wikipedia is a project in which thousands of people share their creative work to build a free online encyclopedia (p. 116-117; emphasis in original).

In the case of OS, offerings are produced by members of a particular community both for their use and for the use of others. OS offerings are continually worked on, reviewed, and improved by producers and users, who are often the same individuals but more often not (p. 121).

Based on Pitt et al.'s (2006) analysis, overall, a shift from closed to open brands has been observable in the digital age. For corporate brand managers and their organisations this means an increasing loss of control over their organisational brand (Pitt et al., 2006). The authors suggest that corporate brands "cease to be exclusively 'owned' by organisations and become the property of a wider community" (Pitt et al., p. 119). Organisations might retain the legal rights for some elements of the brand (e.g. trademarks, patents, logos) but not for others (e.g. videos about the organisation on YouTube or user-generated online brand communities) or brand meanings. Consequently Pitt et al. (2006) predict that the clear division between a firm and its external stakeholders will disappear.

Community-created brands (Füller et al., 2008; Füller & von Hippel, 2008; Miller & Merrilees, 2013) or open source brands (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Pitt et al., 2006) might currently still be rather the exception in the market place. However, even in the context of company-initiated mainstream brands, Quelch and Jocz (2007) concur with the idea of a democratisation of brand management since internet-based technological advancements allow external stakeholders to reduce at least, or in some cases completely circumvent, the role of an organisation's professional brand managers. A case in point is the emergence of digital facilities such as social networking sites, video-sharing sites, blogs and micro-blogs, amongst other developments, which enable not only consumer-to-consumer but, more generally, stakeholder-to-stakeholder *marketing communications* on an unprecedented magnitude (Kitchen & Schultz, 2009).

Despite the outside-in stakeholder-oriented approach providing new insights in terms of the conceptualisation of the brand as a dynamic social process, a large amount of the related literature limits its scope through a focus on brand communities as defined by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001): brand community is defined as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structure set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). As a limitation, it has emerged that people who dislike a brand can also form these kinds of communities, for example, the anti-Hummer community, anti-Starbucks, anti-Coca-Cola, etc. (e.g. Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010; Kerr et al., 2012; Luedicke, 2006). Furthermore, even individual external stakeholders can nowadays exert a tremendous amount of power on brands, for example, as Dave Carroll and his United Breaks Guitars video has shown (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2010; Gensler et al., 2013). The scope therefore potentially needs to be extended to all kinds of internal and external stakeholders and not only pro-brand communities.

2.7.3 The Balanced Stakeholder Brand Perspective

The balanced stakeholder-focused brand perspective tries to integrate the previous two inside-out and outside-in stakeholder approaches. A key concern to achieve this is the adaptation of a holistic approach (e.g. Berthon et al., 2011; Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2010; Sherry, 2005). Diamond et al. (2009) define a brand in this context as something that is "a continually evolving, emergent phenomenon, best studied in its *totality*" (Diamond et al., 2009, p. 130, emphasis added) comprising multiple creators, stakeholders and meanings, multiple narratives, forms, places and other representations, as well as the dynamic interaction between these component parts. From this holistic perspective, brands can be construed as phenomena which are co-created through social interactions among the whole stakeholder ecosystem of an organisation (Esmann Andersen & Nielsen, 2009; Iansiti & Levien, 2004; Iglesias et al., 2013; Merz et al., 2009; Post et al., 2002). Brand management can then be conceptualised as

> a *holistic* combination of marketers' intentions, consumers' interpretations, and numerous sociocultural networks' associations, a co-creation and

co-production of stakeholders from start to finish (Sherry, 2005, p. 41, emphasis added).

While some see brand stakeholders as an integral part of the brand (e.g. Diamond et al., 2009; Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006), others do not. Merz et al. (2009), for instance, see consumers, from an SDL perspective, as operant resources, resource integrators and endogenous to the brand value co-creation process. However, they distinguish between the brand as operant resource and the stakeholders as operant resources who create the brand through their social interactions. Merz et al. (2009, p. 339) claim that all stakeholders form network relationships "with brands" and interact socially with other stakeholders. This could be interpreted as an extension of the dyadic customer-brand relationship, as explained in section 2.6, towards a stakeholder-brand relationship. But this does not imply that stakeholders *are* part of the brand from their SDL vantage point. The brand "appears as a simple interface between the firm, customers and other stakeholders" (Iglesias et al., 2013, p. 675).

From a consumer culture theory (CCT) perspective, a brand is also conceptualised as distinct from its stakeholders or co-creators, being defined as a principal vessel or repository of meaning for its stakeholders (e.g. O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2009 & 2010; Sherry, 2005). Sherry (2005) goes even as far as conceptualising brand management altogether as a meaning management process which can involve all kinds of internal and external stakeholders (p. 40):

> Marketers, consumers, public policy makers, and consumerists are engaged in a perpetual game of discovering, creating, translating, transforming, and reconfiguring meaning.

Others take the position that brand stakeholders could be integrated into the brand construct *as part of the brand* in the sense that they are an inherent part of the social process or socio-cultural phenomenon called brand (Diamond et al., 2009; Holt, 2004; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008) but this needs to be further investigated. For example, for Iglesias et al. (2013), all stakeholders who (co-)create brand value should be considered as part of the brand. However, they do not specify (1) whether or not stakeholders who potentially (co-)destroy brand value (e.g. anti-brand communities) should be considered as part of the brand too; and (2) whether

stakeholders should only be considered as operant resources while actively creating value or also while not actively creating value as operand resources.

Furthermore, while for some researchers, such as representatives of CCT, brand creation revolves mainly around brand meaning (e.g. Holt, 2004; Sherry, 2005), Holt (2004, p. 3) also acknowledges that "Names, logos and designs" are "material markers of the brand". Ind and Bjerke (2007a & 2007b) with their participatory market orientation also go beyond the co-creation of brand meaning within their conceptualisation. They conceptualise employees, customers and other stakeholders not only as co-creators of brand meaning but also as collective developers of brand manifestations such as products – similarly to the discussion in section 2.7.2 but going beyond community brands or open source brands. Following that, Mühlbacher and colleagues (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006) provide a systematic integrative approach to conceptualising brands in a holistic and balanced stakeholder-focused way. For them, a brand could be conceptualised as being:

> (1) a *system* of interrelated brand meanings, brand manifestations, and individuals as well as organizations interested in a brand, and (2) the *processes* underlying the dynamic development of those meanings, manifestations, interested individuals and organizations. That is, brands can be conceived as comprising three closely interrelated concepts: brand manifestations, brand meaning, and a brand interest group (Mülbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008, p. 9, emphasis in original).

All kinds of stakeholders with an interest in the manifestations of a brand, in its meanings or in other people and organisations interested in the brand, form the *brand interest group*. For Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008), the members of the brand interest group co-construct brand meaning as well as brand manifestations in a continuous process of social discourse. Brand meaning becomes subject to experiencing the manifestations of the brand, which are created and used by the members of the brand interest group. In the following the three closely interrelated concepts of (a) brand interest group, (b) brand meaning and (c) brand manifestation will be further explained.

For Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008), the members of a *brand interest group* can be individuals, groups of people, organisations and/or other kinds of institutions.

For example, consumers, employees, journalists, retailers, suppliers, unions, NGOs, governments or competitors. Although the constellation of a brand interest group may be in constant flux (Cova & Cova, 2002) and some members may physically/geographically never meet, they co-create brand meanings as well as brand manifestations in a continuous process of social discourse. This discourse may take many different forms: direct and indirect, purposeful and coincidental, verbal and nonverbal. Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008) also point out that brand interest group members may take different roles depending on both, the perceived relevance of, and the emotional relationship with meanings and manifestations of the brand or other members of the interest group; the social roles of members may therefore vary from, for instance, real brand fanatics to just observers of a brand-related event or from devotees and protagonists to brand antagonists.

Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008) define the term *brand meaning* based on a process-oriented social representation approach developed by Moscovici (1984). Following this approach, brand meaning can be defined as a dynamic collective system of knowledge and evaluations continually emerging from social discourse among the members of a brand interest group. The meaning of a brand-related stimulus is first individually determined, i.e. the stimulus is categorised depending on individual sensory experiences and introspective states, such as cognitive operations, beliefs and emotions (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008). However, these introspective states can, to a certain extent at least, be influenced or even predetermined by the internalised rituals, beliefs and traditions of a brand interest group.

In the context of an individual's sensory experiences and introspective states, when perceiving a stimulus, Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008) also point out that (based on Barsalou, 1989 & 1999) an individual's cognitive structures comprise context-dependent as well as context-independent knowledge, feelings and beliefs. Therefore, while context-independent elements of brand meaning might provide a common ground for the interpretation and evaluation of brand manifestations among a group of brand interest group members, context-dependent elements always provide room for situation-specific – and thus potentially diverse – interpretations. Consequently, the two authors conclude that many sub-versions of the same brand

meaning system might exist simultaneously – not only between individuals but also for every single individual.

Brand manifestations can be tangible as well as intangible "objectifications of the meaning of a brand" (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008, p. 13). They allow people to sensually experience the brand. Brand manifestations may comprise a number of elements, which can be objects as well as activities, people, whole organisations or events. To clarify these points Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008) use the Red Bull brand as an example (p. 14):

> The 'Red Bull' brand, for example, can be experienced not only by tasting and smelling the drink, holding the can or seeing the logo, but also by listening to an interview with the founder of the Red Bull company, watching a Formula 1 race with the Red Bull Racing Team participating, or by taking part in the 'Red Bull Flugtag' (a fun promotion event for brand and flight enthusiasts).

Hence, the brand can manifest itself in a variety of ways, depending on different situations. What is to be considered a manifestation of the brand is continuously co-constructed by those who have an interest in the brand. At the same time this co-construction of manifestations determines the meanings of the brand. It is not only the company which, in the traditional sense, is interpreted as the legal owner of the brand, that plays an active part in this process, but also other members of the interest group. For instance, retailers, with special merchandise presentations, the organisation of sampling activities or other brand-related events, the store layout, or the specific behaviour of their sales staff, may contribute substantially to the development of a brand's manifestations (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008). Brand manifestations created by other brand stakeholders, for example on the internet, will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

While Mühlbacher and colleagues' (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006) work has provided a number of valuable insights related to the key elements of a brand as a complex social phenomenon, the underlying processes between these interconnected core elements remain to be clarified. This limitation also applies to the research conducted by Berthon et al. (2011). The latter authors come to the conclusion that brands exist on three different levels (objective, subjective and inter-subjective). This includes brand manifestations such as "design,

shape, color, and smell and sound" (Berthon et al., 2011, p. 184) on an objective level, as well as brand meanings such as "thoughts, emotions, and perceptions" (p. 185) related to the brand on a subjective level. However, the processes and interchanges between the different levels of the brand remain unclear.

Iglesias et al.'s (2013) empirical research with brand managers and consultants has investigated processes of brand co-creation involving various stakeholders. Their findings show that brand value is co-created through interactions between stakeholders and the focal organisation behind the brand via employees and brand interfaces (Iglesias et al., 2013, p. 678):

> Brand interfaces include all the many non-human interfaces through which consumers interact with a brand and which are essential for potentially building brand value – including the product, packaging, visual identity and point of sale […]. The final perception of consumers will largely depend on those brand interfaces that make the brand promise tangible.

While Iglesias et al. (2013) also acknowledge the influence of other stakeholders on the creation of brand value, the processes that occur purely between external stakeholders without the involvement of the focal firm appear not to be incorporated. To start filling this gap, the next chapter will further investigate brand manifestations or – in Iglesias et al.'s (2013) terminology – brand interfaces which are created by external stakeholders rather than the focal organisation behind the brand in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

As a summary for the stakeholder-focused approaches, Table 2-3 highlights the similarities and differences between the inside-out, outside-in, and balanced stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisation perspectives.

Table 2-3: Summary Of The Three Stakeholder-Focused Perspectives

	Inside-Out Stakeholder Focus	Outside-In Stakeholder Focus	Balanced Stakeholder Focus
Definition	A brand is a continuous social process (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001)		
Core Capabilities (Day, 1994; Louro & Cunha, 2001)	Inside-Out	Outside-In	Balanced
Strategic Orientation (Hoskisson et al., 1999; Louro & Cunha, 2001)	Internal	External	Both
Conceptual Focus	Process	Process	Process
Dominant Relationship Focus	Multiple (Jones, 2005)	Multiple (Jones, 2005)	Multiple (Jones, 2005)
Dominant Communication Type	Multilogue	Multilogue	Multilogue
Stakeholder Focus (Merz et al., 2009)	All stakeholders as operant resources	All stakeholders as operant resources	All stakeholders as operant resources
Level of Organisational Control over Brand Perception	Medium	Low	Medium/Low
Importance of Co-Creation	Medium	High	High
De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley's (1998a) Brand Themes	Evolving Entity; Identity System; Company	Evolving Entity	Evolving Entity
Louro & Cunha's (2001) Brand Management Paradigms	Projective	--	--
Heding et al.'s (2009) Brand Management Approaches	Identity	Community	Identity; Cultural
Merz et al.'s (2009) Branding Focus	Stakeholders	Stakeholders	Stakeholders

Source: The researcher.

The analysis of the three stakeholder-oriented brand conceptualisation perspectives (Table 2-3) supports Hatch and Schultz's (2010, p. 591) argument that "the work on describing how brands are co-created with their stakeholders has barely begun." More empirical research is required (Pillai, 2012), particularly, to address "the need for broader, more flexible brand conceptualizations than the ones currently used" (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a, p. 289). Stakeholder-oriented theory therefore appears especially relevant due to its "lens to understand the collective nature of brands" (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015, p. 1210).

From a historical perspective, this collective nature is the key point which the stakeholder-oriented approaches contribute to brand conceptualisation discourse. Brands are conceptualised as complex and relational phenomena which can be co-created by any kinds of stakeholders. The inside-out stakeholder perspective suits particularly the (corporate) brand managers who acknowledge the relevance of all kinds of external stakeholders as co-creators but want to concentrate on what the organisation can control (Balmer, 2001a & 2001b; Ind et al., 2012; Melewar et al., 2012). The outside-in perspective suits the (corporate) brand managers who want to focus especially on external stakeholders and on the crucial relevance of online brand communities, eWOM and user-generated branded content in the digital age. This perspective acknowledges that external brand stakeholders, such as online brand community members, become an integral part of the brand (Ind et al., 2013). However, most appropriate appears to be a combination of these two stakeholder-oriented perspectives in the shape of the balanced approach. Only the balanced perspective allows brands to be conceptualised in their totality (Diamond et al. 2009).

2.8 Conclusion

As a result of this first part of the literature review it can be concluded that brands are indeed conceptualised in very different ways within brand discourse. Five main perspectives have been identified. However, some of these perspectives also have further distinct sub-categories. It therefore appears understandable that there is no widely accepted brand definition within brand discourse. The review of the literature further reveals that the emergence and evolution of digital technology, particularly internet-related innovations, has had a considerable impact on brand management as well as brand conceptualisations, especially from the most recently emerged, stakeholder-focused conceptualisation perspective.

In terms of brand management, Table 2-4 shows that the conceptual focus has been shifting from a rather static input (perspectives 1 and 3) or output (perspective 2) approach towards a more dynamic, process orientation (perspectives 4 and 5). The dominant relationship focus has shifted from dyadic (perspectives 1 to 4) to multiple (perspective 5).

Table 2-4: The Five Key Brand Conceptualisation Perspectives

	Goods-focused	Image-focused	Identity-focused	Relationship-focused	Stakeholder-focused
Sub-categories	--	--	--	a) inside-out b) Outside-in c) Balanced	a) Inside-out b) Outside-in c) Balanced
Definition	A brand is a denotative, visual, and legal marker for the purpose of a product's identification or differentiation	A brand is all kinds of knowledge, associations and emotions in consumers' minds related to a product	A brand is a focal platform for articulating and implementing an organisation's strategy (Louro & Cunha, 2001)	A brand consists of a continuous process whereby the values and expectations imbued in the brand object are set and enacted by the firm's staff and interpreted and redefined by the consumers (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a)	A brand is a continuous social process (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001)
Core Capabilities (Day, 1994; Louro & Cunha, 2001)	Inside-Out	Inside-Out	Inside-Out	a) Inside-Out b) Outside-In c) Balanced	a) Inside-Out b) Outside-In c) Balanced
Strategic Orientation (Hoskisson et al., 1999; Louro & Cunha, 2001)	Internal	Internal	Internal	a) Internal b) External c) Both	a) Internal b) External c) Both
Conceptual Focus	Input	Output	Input	Process	Process
Dominant Relationship Focus	Dyadic	Dyadic	Dyadic	Dyadic (Heding et al., 2009)	Multiple (Jones, 2005)
Dominant Communication Type	Monologue	Monologue	Monologue	Dialogue	Multilogue
Stakeholder Focus (Merz et al., 2009)	Customers as operand resources	Customers as operand resources	Customers as operand resources	Customers and employees as operant resources	All stakeholders as operant resources
Level of Organisational Control over Brand Perception	High	High	High	a) Medium b) Low c) Medium/Low	a) Medium b) Low c) Medium/Low
Importance of Co-Creation	Low	Low	Low	Medium	a) Medium b) High c) High
De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley's (1998a) Brand Themes	Logo; Legal Instrument	Image; Shorthand Device; Risk Reducer; Adding Value; Value System	Identity System; Company	Relationship (a, b, c); Evolving Entity (a, b, c); Personality (b, c); Image (b, c); Shorthand Device (b, c); Risk Reducer (b, c); Adding Value (b, c); Value System (b, c); Identity System (a, c); Company (a, c)	Evolving Entity (a, b, c); Identity System (a); Company (a)
Louro & Cunha's (2001) Brand Management Paradigms	Product	Adaptive	Projective	Projective (a); Relational (a, b, c); Adaptive (b)	Projective (a)
Heding et al.'s (2009) Brand Management Approaches	Economic	Consumer-Based	Identity	a) Identity b) Personality c) Relational	a) Identity b) Community c) Cultural; Identity
Merz et al.'s (2009) Branding Focus	Goods	Value	--	Relationships: a) Firm-Brand; b) Customer-Firm; Customer-Brand c) Firm-Brand; Customer-Brand; Customer-Firm	Stakeholders

Source: The researcher.

Alongside this development, the dominant communications type has evolved from monologue (perspectives 1 to 3) via dialogue (perspective 4) to multilogue (perspective 5). Based on this evaluation, the table subsequently also indicates that external stakeholders have obtained a more prominent status within brand conceptualisation from operand customers (perspectives 1 to 3) to operant customers (perspective 4) to operant stakeholders (perspective 5). The level of organisational control over brand perceptions is assumed to have decreased from high (perspectives 1 to 3) to medium (perspectives 4a and 5a), medium/low (perspectives 4c and 5c) or even low (perspectives 4b and 5b). Consequently, the importance of brand co-creation has increased from low (perspectives 1 to 3) to medium (perspectives 4 and 5a) and high (perspectives 5b and 5c).

Overall, there is a rising emphasis perceptible, in recent literature, on the co-creation of brands due to the various internet-based power shifting processes. External stakeholders are interpreted as being more powerful and influential in their relationships with organisations. It appears subsequently, that in the power shifting age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, identifying and defining the multiple facets of a brand, as a complex phenomenon – or, in other words, a brand in its totality (Diamond et al., 2009) – has become even more challenging than previously. The rationale for this conclusion is based on the evidence in recent literature indicating an increasing expectation that conceptualisations of the term brand now need to be able to integrate (1) a variety of brand stakeholders (e.g. Iglesias et al., 2013; Merz et al., 2009), and (2) a variety of brand co-creation processes between them (e.g. Allen et al., 2008; Berthon et al., 2007; Gregory, 2007).

While the internet-based democratisation phenomenon appears to impact on brand management in general as well as recent brand conceptualisations in the literature, the democratisation phenomenon itself has not been explored in depth or clearly defined sufficiently yet in the literature. Therefore, the existing literature related to this phenomenon so far will be reviewed next to develop a better understanding of it and its complexity. This review will provide a more adequate grounding for the investigation of the conceptualisations of brands from a managerial perspective in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. More specifically,

the review and subsequently the further clarification of this complex phenomenon is intended to help with

a) the development of a better understanding of how internal and external brand stakeholders' real or potential relevance as brand co-creators can be conceptualised (Gregory, 2007; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Hillebrand et al., 2015; Iglesias et al., 2013; Merz et al., 2009; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015)

b) the development of a better understanding of internet-based brand co-creation beyond brand meaning (Antorini & Andersen, 2005; Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Berthon et al., 2011; Schultz, 2005; Mühlbacher et al., 2006; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008)

c) the investigation of the extent to which the boundaries between brand producers and consumers increasingly blur or even disappear from a heterarchical perspective of open-source brand management (Hillebrand et al., 2015; Pitt et al., 2006)

d) the adaptation of a holistic research approach (Berthon et al., 2011; Diamond et al., 2009)

CHAPTER 3:

THE INTERNET-BASED DEMOCRATISATION OF BRAND MANAGEMENT AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR BRAND CONCEPTUALISATIONS

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the main characteristics of the internet-based democratisation of brand management will be investigated through a literature review. A particular focus of this review will be on the consequences which this phenomenon has or can have potentially on brand conceptualisation practice. First the emergence of the phenomenon will be discussed and key terms defined. Then the phenomenon's multiple layers will be dissected and individually investigated in further depth. This analysis is, to a large extent, based on the work which I conducted during the early stages of my PhD and published with my supervisors at the time (Asmussen et al., 2010 & 2013a).

3.2 The Emergence Of A Recent Internet-Based Phenomenon

Brand managers have been identified by some authors as the people who traditionally have been in charge of managing brand meaning (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Fournier et al., 2008; Holt, 2016; Kapferer, 2004 & 2012; McCracken, 2005; Mitchell, 2001). However, from a more sociological perspective this narrow link between brand management and brand meaning has been questioned as discussed in the previous chapter. Particularly from a *socially-constructed* viewpoint it is suggested that, one key component needs to be added to the overall brand construct and the narrow brand manager-brand meaning relationship. This missing key component is the concept of brand manifestations which has been further explained above. Brands can then be interpreted as consisting of three closely interrelated conceptual components: brand meanings, brand manifestations and brand interest groups (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008). Looked at through this conceptual lens,

brand managers then cannot simply *manage* brand meaning. Rather, the brand manager can – to a certain extent at least – control the production of and access to some brand manifestations, for instance, the manufacturing and distribution of products or the creation and broadcasting of advertising commercials. The experience of these manifestations might then influence the creation, adjustment, or reinforcement of the brand meanings in the stakeholders' minds. Nonetheless, each person ultimately develops his or her personal brand understanding based on various individual as well as socio-cultural factors (Iglesias et al., 2013). This rationale has led to the concept of brand meaning co-creation between an organisation and its brand managers on one hand and its brand stakeholders on the other (Allen et al., 2008).

If brand management is (re-)defined in this way as (a) the production of tangible and intangible brand manifestations and (b) the provision of access to them, which both contribute to the brand meaning co-creation process, then professional brand managers are facing potentially radical changes to the nature of their role. This is due to an unprecedented shift of resources availability in the production and provision of access to brand manifestations, which subsequently leads to an unprecedented shift in the co-creation of brand meanings. These shifts have started to emerge during the current internet age (Gruen et al., 2005; Harrison et al., 2006; Mooney & Rollins, 2008; Muñiz & Schau, 2007; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2015; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004; Shao et al., 2015).

In the pre-internet age, although word-of-mouth existed, for instance, amongst consumers, organisations were generally considered the ones who set the brand meaning co-creation agenda (Berthon et al., 2009). Organisations constituted the main authors in the brand meaning co-creation process since they were seen as the providers of the major tangible as well as intangible brand manifestations, such as products and promotions. The consumers' role within the co-creation process was at this time usually limited to that of a rather passive audience, experiencing – and creating meaning out of – what the authors had to provide (Allen et al., 2008).

However, empowered by the internet and other related digital technologies, consumers and other stakeholders have become potentially more active (co)-authors,

agenda setters and access providers when it comes to brand manifestations. This might have an impact not only on their own personal brand experience but also that of others. They are now able to contribute to the (co-)creation of brand meaning at a previously usually unreachable level since the internet provides them with an unprecedented availability of resources to access, produce and/or distribute brand manifestations themselves. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy put it, consumers have "moved out of the audience and onto the stage" (2000, p. 80). Beyond traditional word-of-mouth, they – and other stakeholders – have access nowadays, for instance, to user-generated content (UGC) platforms such as blogs and micro-blogs, social networking sites, wikis, product review sites or photo and video-sharing sites (Berthon et al., 2008; Gamble & Gilmore, 2013; McConnell & Huba, 2007; Parent et al., 2011; Schau et al., 2009; Shao et al., 2015).

All these platforms potentially allow users not only to enrich their own experience of a brand but also, for example, to express an opinion about it and therefore create a brand manifestation that can be perceived by others. An example of this phenomenon is provided by Johan Jervoe, corporate vice president of global marketing at McDonald's, when talking about the video-sharing website YouTube: "YouTube is forcing marketers to hand over *control* of how their brands are seen by consumers" (in Jones, 2008, p. 4, emphasis added). Another case in point is given by Ann Glover, chief marketing officer of ING Insurance in the US: "Customers today have more control and influence with the brand than ever. We need to make sure it's give and take – a two-sided conversation, with both parties having responsibilities in the interaction" (in IBM, 2011, p. 2).

Organisations may still be able to control some aspects of the brand meaning co-creation process (Boyle, 2007), such as the manufacturing of their goods, the production of their commercials or the design of their websites. However, when it comes to *user-initiated* brand-related activities on the internet, an erosion of control is observable (Shao et al., 2015). Such a shift in internet-based marketing power, away from organisations towards their consumers and other stakeholders, can be described as a democratisation process (Quelch & Jocz, 2007; Weiger et al., 2012). More concretely, it has been indicated by scholars (e.g. Schultz et al., 2005a) as well as practitioners (e.g. Neisser, 2006) that this process can be portrayed as an

internet-based democratisation of brand management. But, despite this phenomenon having become a widely debated topic, it remains an ambiguous concept. The main ambiguity revolves around the question of what internet-based democratisation in the context of brand management means. Helping to answer this question is one of the main aims of the present chapter. It addresses the above described ambiguity of the complex overall democratisation phenomenon by critically reviewing and conceptualising its various key developments and facets as well as investigating their respective individual democratisation potential. However, before this can be done, first some key terminology and concepts in the context of democratisation need to be further clarified.

3.3 The Concept Of Democratisation: From Its Political Roots To Its Present Role In Brand Management-Related Contexts

The term democracy (Greek = rule by the people) is commonly understood as originating in ancient Greece to designate a government where power is shared and resides in the people, as distinct from governments controlled by a single class, select group, or autocrat (Columbia Encyclopaedia, 2008; Grugel, 2002). Although the scope and meaning of the term democracy has since been changed and expanded the *core idea* of power sharing has persisted (Dahl, 1998; Dunn, 2005; Tilly, 2007). However, what this core idea concretely means is far from clear (see Held, 2006; Sørensen, 1998). For example, who exactly are *the people* who are supposed to share power? And how are they supposed to *rule* or share this power? Depending on the respective historical, cultural and/or economic context, one might receive very different answers to these questions in the literature (Arblaster, 1994). When dealing with these core questions as part of a literature review, democracy – as a political concept – appears therefore to be contested. Attempting to define it becomes then a political act in itself (Saward, 1994).

This political *value-ladenness* needs to be taken into account when translating the concept from its political discourse into a more brand management-related context. Several translations for business or corporation-oriented situations can be found in

the literature. For instance, approaches such as workplace democracy (e.g. Foley & Polanyi, 2006), industrial democracy (e.g. Müller-Jentsch, 2008), organisational democracy (e.g. Johnson, 2006), and stakeholder democracy (e.g O'Dwyer, 2005) have been developed. Most of the literature about these concepts, however, focuses just on the power sharing relationship between organisations and their employees. For the present brand-related context this appears to be a limitation. If brands are conceived as complex social phenomena, as explained above, the network of relationships between a company and its external as well as internal stakeholders is essential. It would thus be questionable to talk of democracy or democratisation in an organisational or brand-related context when only one interest group – here employees – is taken into account (Gummesson, 2002; Matten & Crane, 2005).

Based on this rationale, the *stakeholder democracy concept* has the most (natural) potential to be expanded adequately since the stakeholder approach as a strategic management concept includes external as well as internal constituents from the outset (Freeman, 1984). Furthermore, from a macro-political management perspective, this approach is also most appropriate in the sense that it is able to accommodate critical external stakeholders potentially opposed to the goals of an organisation (Hillebrand et al., 2015; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015). For example, this approach allows the inclusion of the anti-branding movements – as external stakeholders – which are in the present context one of the main critics of current brand management practice.

While some authors generally question whether the internet can have a democratising effect on the relationship between organisations and their brand stakeholders (see e.g. Cova & Dalli, 2009; Cova et al., 2011; Zwick et al., 2008) – which will be further discussed in the following sections – in this context it is important to differentiate, first of all, between the terms democracy and democratisation. Democracy in its traditional sense is about equal distribution of power (Columbia Encyclopaedia, 2008), which is seen by some as a utopian concept (e.g. Derrida in Bennington, 1997). In contrast to this utopian or "perfectionistic" (Satori, 1968, p. 112) aim, democratisation is a considerably more 'realistic' concept. The concept of democratisation, in principle, can be construed as a process of transition from a less to a more democratic form of power sharing (Grugel, 2002; Potter et al., 1997; Tilly,

2007). Thus, it is quintessentially 'just' about the reduction of inequality, not necessarily its eradication.

If the concept of democratisation is in this context therefore construed as a process of transition 'just' from a less to a more democratic form of power sharing, the internet-based democratisation of brand management can subsequently be conceptualised as a phenomenon that occurs when the ability to use the internet leads to a more democratic (i.e. less unequal) form of power sharing between an organisation and its brand stakeholders. The less unequal power sharing is thereby concerned with the creation of and access provision to brand manifestations – compared to previous circumstances. The principle of power sharing implies for this context that power is a relational concept. To have more power as one part of a relationship means less power for the other(s); the power of an organisation's stakeholders can therefore, to a certain extent at least, be related to the organisation's power (Box, 1982).

This concept of relational power has been identified as consisting of various facets in the context of brand and marketing management (Labrecque et al., 2013; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Building on French and Raven's (1959) framework of social power bases, Rezabakhsh et al. (2006) compared consumers' potential powers in the pre-internet age with those of the internet age. They found that consumer power has increased on brand management-related bases such as reward and coercive power, expert power and legitimate power. These are exemplified in the following. Firstly, consumers' reward and coercive power has increased through their growing ability to voice their opinions about organisations and their brands on a potentially large scale, for example through blogs, micro-blogs or social networking sites.

Secondly, organisations' expert power has decreased through reductions in consumers' lack of information and increased market transparency, for instance through access to online product review sites. Thirdly, consumers' legitimate power to influence prices and products has been strengthened, for example through group-buying sites or websites that offer new levels of product personalisation and specification. The multi-layered nature of these various power sharing and shifting

processes needs therefore to be investigated in further detail (Asmussen et al., 2010 & 2013a).

The following review therefore aims to contribute to the development of a deeper understanding regarding the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon. However, an exploration of these multi-layered democratisation processes from a purely technological angle appears to be insufficient since the technological (infra-) structure of the internet cannot be separated from its use by social human actors and their permanent creation of meaningful information and communication through the internet (Fuchs, 2005). To be able to untangle the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, the internet therefore needs to be interpreted as a socially embedded technology (Berners-Lee et al., 2006), since both society and technology are actively and continuously shaping each other (Halford et al., 2010). This approach takes into consideration that various internet technologies under investigation have only become powerful change agents through people's adoption and integration of these technologies in their everyday social lives (Anderson, 2007; Kelly, 2009).

Consequently, this means that the societal as well as the technological developments need to be taken holistically into account – as two sides of the same coin. This specification is important since most academic research so far has mainly focused on investigating just one or more individual themes of this complex democratisation phenomenon in a brand management-related context. For example, internet-based user innovation and collective intelligence, electronic word-of-mouth or online communities (for an overview of these topics see Arnhold, 2010). Minimal attention has been paid to the multi-faceted nature of this democratisation phenomenon as a whole. Thus, to be able to address the inherent complexity of this multi-faceted phenomenon, the internet will be construed as a holistic "socio-technological" system (Fuchs, 2005, p. 57). Adopting this socio-technological perspective for the conceptual structuring of the literature provides a clear point of departure for exploring, reviewing and synthesising the literature related to the phenomenon of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

3.4 The Multiple Layers Of The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Brand Management And Their Relevance For Brand Conceptualisations

The review identified three socio-technological key developments that together form essential parts of the phenomenon under investigation: (I) the democratisation of internet technology; and in conjunction with this – (II) the democratisation of information; and (III) the democratisation of social capital. These findings are visualised in Figure 3-1.

Figure 3-1: The Three Socio-Technological Key Developments Of The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Brand Management

Image removed from electronic version

Source: Asmussen et al., 2013a, p. 1476.

Figure 3-1 conveys one of the key insights gained from the analysis of the literature. The review reveals the presence of two different forms of democratisation: democratisation through technology and democratisation of technology itself (Carroll & Hackett, 2006). The internet-based democratisation of information and of social capital fall into the former category while the democratisation of internet technology falls into the latter. Furthermore, apart from presenting the three key democratisation developments, Figure 3-1 shows the key developments' respective key facets or sub-themes, based on the findings of the literature review. For example, social self-representation, social connectivity and social mobilisation are the key facets of the internet-based democratisation of social capital. Additionally, the arrows in Figure 3-1 indicate the main influences between the two different forms of democratisation that have been elicited from the literature. The arrows reflect the finding that the democratisation of internet technology is a necessary enabler for the internet-based democratisation of brand management but that its presence alone is not sufficient evidence for the occurrence of the overall phenomenon. Only the presence of either of the two other key developments or any of their key facets provides sufficient evidence for the occurrence of the internet-based democratisation

of brand management in a particular situation. All these key developments and findings are further discussed and critically reviewed one-by-one in the following.

3.4.1 The Democratisation Of Internet Technology

In the pre-internet age, many stakeholders, particularly consumers, had very little power in their everyday dealings with organisations (Berthon & Hulbert, 2003; Hillebrand et al., 2015; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). However, with the advent of new technologies the power imbalance between organisations and their stakeholders has shifted considerably, as mentioned earlier. The internet, in particular, has been a huge contributory factor, along with other digital, internet usage-related technologies such as more affordable PCs (including laptops and tablets), easy-to-use and easy-to-access software, digital TV, still and video cameras, broadband and mobile telecommunications (Argenti, 2006; Brown, 2009; Dennhardt, 2014; Pires et al., 2006).

For example, in the pre-internet age generally only commercial organisations had the technological means to produce and broadcast audio-visual material such as video clips, whereas today most people in the industrialised world have access to the necessary equipment listed above (Berthon et al., 2008; McConnell & Huba, 2007)[3]. Therefore, based on the conceptualisation of democratisation as a process of transition from a less democratic to a more democratic form of power sharing, the development that led to people's widespread ability to access and use the internet can – at least on a technological level – be interpreted as a democratisation process (Christodoulides, 2009; Dennhardt, 2014; Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Nonetheless, an important insight from the literature is that democratisation describes a process in which inequalities of power are reduced but by no means eliminated. Thus, in many instances a technology-based social divide can still be observed. This applies not only to less developed regions and continents but also to leading

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[3] In line with the ongoing convergence of different digital technologies that are related to the evolution of the internet and its usage, in the following all of the above listed technologies in terms of access, hardware and software are interpreted as part of the overall term internet-related technologies.

countries in the industrialised world. For example, in European countries such as Sweden or the UK there is, to a certain extent, evidence of a digital divide and therefore social exclusion (Ferlander & Timms, 2007). Although more and more users are *technically* enabled to use digital devices and access the internet and other communication infrastructures, they might not necessarily have the right media literacy skills needed to engage with the new possibilities of the internet democratisation (Cammaerts, 2008; Livingstone, 2008). Knowing how to use the available software (including apps used via mobile internet) and hardware resources might be equally – if not even more – important than just the technical access to it (Brandtzæg et al., 2011; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014).

When it comes to the democratisation of technology, the issue of technical literacy should thus not be underestimated. Regarding the internet, not necessarily everybody wants to engage with it (or is able to). In any case, the acquisition of at least some minimal internet literacy skills should be encouraged and supported amongst all members of society, since the internet can be a powerful resource that provides a broad variety of opportunities for its users (Leadbeater, 2014). Some of these opportunities are explained further in the following sections. For the context of the present section, an important conclusion is that the democratisation of access to internet technology is an essential enabler for the *internet-based* democratisation of brand management. Its presence alone, however, is not sufficient as an indicator of the occurrence of the *socio*-technological overall phenomenon under investigation. Only when people possess the necessary skills to use the available technology, can it be applied to increase a brand stakeholder's ability to influence other stakeholders in terms of the creation of and access to brand manifestations.

In regard to the potential consequences for brand conceptualisation practice, it appears to be relevant that, even on a technical level, the democratisation is interpreted as a *socio*-technological phenomenon. Technology is only an enabler that needs to be used by people and integrated in their lives. In the case of the internet, it has been integrated by consumers in their lives as well as businesses in their daily operations (Schmitt & Cohen, 2013). At least in the industrialised world, most people use the internet or internet-related technologies consciously or unconsciously on a daily basis. Equally important for the present context, internet-related marketing is

for many marketers a cornerstone of their brand management processes. It is an enabler for communication and collaboration without geographical boundaries with all kinds of internal and external stakeholders and therefore provides the opportunity for new brand co-creation processes that did not exist in the pre-internet age. These new developments might have an impact on brand managers' brand conceptualisations and need to be further investigated in the empirical research.

3.4.2 The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Information

From a perspective of user empowerment, access to the internet, if available, presents *adequately literate* consumers and other stakeholders of organisations with new opportunities: (i) to overcome information asymmetries that characterise traditional markets (Harrison et al., 2006; Labrecque et al., 2013; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Weber, 2007), (ii) to take on a more active role in creating information about organisations and their brands (Anderson, 2006; Gillin, 2007; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Rowles, 2014), and (iii) to disseminate this information to a wide audience with much greater ease (Anderson, 2006; Gillin, 2007; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Vernuccio, 2014). The internet-based democratisation mentioned above is consequently not restricted to purely a technological level, but also includes information-related abilities.

3.4.2.1 The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Information Access

In the context of making information more accessible to more people, it "seems to be very easy to make a link between democracy and the internet" (Costa, 1998, p. 318). The internet has empowered consumers and other stakeholders by giving them unparalleled access to a massive body of information, for example information about products, organisations, markets and entire industries (Burmann, 2010; Harrison et al., 2006; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Furthermore, the internet offers an unprecedented mix of immediacy, searchability and interactivity compared with other information sources, such as traditional advertising (Harrison et al., 2006; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Schmidt & Cohen, 2013). The majority of the information available on the internet itself, for example via search engines such as Google, is virtually free of charge to any user, making the search costs considerably lower when compared with many previously existing databases and archives (Keen, 2007; Verona & Prandelli, 2002). Based on this

power shift, in favour of consumers and other stakeholders, the current information age has been declared as "the age of *information democracy*" (Sawhney & Kotler, 2001, p. 386; emphasis in original) or "The Age of Transparency" (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 198).

However, it can be argued that this transparency comes at a price. While consumers might benefit from an increased transparency when it comes to information, for instance, about organisations and their products, at the same time many consumers are increasingly losing control over their own data and digital footprint on the internet (Markos et al., 2012). This latter development enables a variety of organisations to increase their information power. Consequently, as discussed above, a situation of *democracy*, in terms of equal distribution of power for every stakeholder, seems rather a utopian aspiration. For example, the available information on the internet might represent an insurmountable information overload for some users, while for others it can minimise relative market power between organisations and consumers or other stakeholders when it comes to information asymmetry.

Therefore, it is more adequate to investigate the democratisation potential rather than the democracy potential in the present information access related context. The locus of power is, in this context, not necessarily completely shifting but inequalities appear to be decreased, at least on some levels, through means such as search engines or price comparison websites. Nonetheless, similar to the technical literacy skills issue mentioned above, some authors point out that *where* and *how* to find the right information on the internet can equally be a struggle for users without the right literacy skills (e.g. Brants & Frissen, 2003).

When it comes to the brand meaning co-creation process, internet literate users are potentially able to enrich their own experience of a brand through accessing information about it on the internet. This can be interpreted as one form of occurrence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon (see Figure 3-1). For instance, brand stakeholders nowadays are in many cases able to access brand-related information on the internet (including but not limited to social media) that in the pre-internet age would not usually have been available to them. A case in point for this could be a product review published in a different country. Access to

such information, therefore has the potential to increase the level of brand stakeholder power regarding brand-related information access.

Most of the information which consumers and other external stakeholders access on the internet, based on their *own initiative*, cannot be controlled by individual brand managers. However, some companies might still try to exploit the internet-based democratisation of information access to their advantage through *organisation-initiated* activities. There are, for instance, organisations which try to influence the information publicly available on the internet about their brand, their competitors or other related topics (Klara, 2011; Labrecque et al., 2013; Luker, 2011).

The availability of information on the internet, of course, also provides opportunities for organisations to gather and use this for their commercial benefit. In a very immediate or intimate sense, users of Facebook can experience how the organisation behind the social networking site processes and links the data it gathers from its users for various marketing-driven purposes. A recent example has been provided by Leadbeater (2014, p. 3):

> It is a sign of the times that, when a friend of mine recently celebrated his 40th birthday, he was not surprised that Facebook delivered its own birthday greetings, along with those of his many friends. He was especially pleased with the presents his wife had bought for him: each one hit the spot. That was because, unbeknown to him and in the two weeks prior to his birthday, his wife had been treated to a string of advertisements on her Facebook page, each carefully chosen to appeal to the wife of a jolly, Welsh, bearded, rugby loving, cider making public professional.
>
> Was this a helpful service to a time-pressed working mother of two who needed ideas for her husband's birthday, or a worrying sign of the kind of knowledge that services like Facebook have about us and which could be used in far from benign ways, without our knowing?

This case illustrates some of the advantages and disadvantages for the users that result from organisations accessing data available to them on the internet. It can be helpful as well as scary for consumers. A research project by Facebook in collaboration with Cornell University and University of California (San Francisco), which analysed the news feed of over 600,000 randomly selected Facebook users, showed that the information which users of the social network access can have a considerable impact

on them (Kramer et al., 2014; see also Segelken & Shackford, 2014). The research provides empirical evidence that users who receive more negative content on their Facebook news feed (the selection of mainly friends' posts that appear on a Facebook user's homepage) are more likely to subsequently produce negative content themselves in their status updates and other posts. The publication of this 'emotional contagion via social networks' research caused outrage amongst some users (Jeffries, 2014; Jones, 2014). This outrage is due not only because Facebook had manipulated the choice of news feeds which the randomly selected users received (for a week) and therefore Facebook had played, to a certain extent, with people's emotions; but also, more generally, because it shows how powerful the effect of social networking sites on users can be. However, Jones (2014) criticised this outrage as naïve since Facebook adjusts and refines the content of users' news feeds all the time to make them spend more time on the site.

It can therefore be concluded that there are limitations and downsides to the internet-based democratisation of information access that need to be taken into account. Nonetheless, in any case, the democratisation of information access is just one of various potential information-related empowerment processes. On another level, internet literate users are able to enrich their brand experience by not only accessing additional information on the web but also actively participating in the *creation of information* about brands on the internet which will be reviewed next.

In regard to the impact of these developments on brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice, it can be concluded that consumers have far more potential sources of information available to them when it comes to getting information about brands. Consequently, brand managers need to take far more of these information sources and channels into account when it comes to managing their brand and how it is perceived, especially since many of these sources and channels are predominantly outside brand managers' control. For example, platforms such as Facebook appear to potentially have the power to influence people's moods and opinions considerably. The organisations behind popular social media sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, can therefore be interpreted as powerful external stakeholders for most brand managers. It therefore needs to be explored in the empirical research whether this leads to brand managers conceptualising brands in a more co-creative and stakeholder-oriented way.

3.4.2.2 The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Information Creation

A belief in the freedom of information was a strong motivating factor in the development of the internet from the outset (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2000; Hemetsberger, 2006a). However, *generating* content on the internet was, for the overwhelming majority of users, too much of a challenge due to their lack of technical skills. As Smith (2008, p. 19) points out, "For the first 15 years of the internet's existence, creating content … [was] the preserve of geeks who knew code or could navigate unprepossessing bulletin boards. Today, anyone can do it". The internet has, in an unprecedented way, become a tool that potentially enables virtually any digitally literate stakeholder with access to it, to use a broad choice of platforms to create content about any organisation and its brands. This content can range from simply posting a comment on somebody else's blog to creating your own blog or micro-blog; from writing an online review about a product to producing and uploading a spoof video ad for this product on YouTube; from creating a profile on a social networking site for a brand to creating an entry on Wikipedia about this particular product, service or organisation.

People are no longer necessarily just passive *recipients* or *targets* of an organisation's marketing and communications activities, but can potentially, more than ever before, become active producers and publishers or broadcasters in this process (Argenti, 2006; Gregory, 2007; Haarhoff & Kleyn, 2012; McConnell & Huba, 2007). They can even become producers of brand-related information on a mass media reach level (Asmussen et al., 2013b, 2014 & 2015; Bernoff & Schadler, 2010; Vernuccio, 2014) such as Dave Carroll and his United Breaks Guitars video, which criticises in a humorous way United Airlines' customer service (see e.g. Deighton & Kornfeld, 2010; Dunne, 2010; Gensler et al., 2013). Based on the ongoing frustrating experience with United Airlines' customer service representatives after his checked-in guitar was damaged on a flight operated by the airline, he wrote and recorded a song called 'United Breaks Guitars' and produced and uploaded a video clip on YouTube in July 2009.

This video, which features the United Breaks Guitars song, was viewed more than 3 million times within the first week (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2010) and reportedly brought down United Airlines' share value temporarily by US $180 million (Ayres, 2009). Later on, following the success of his campaign, he created another two video clips, which together with the first one have by March 2016 reached more than 18.4 million combined views on YouTube[4]. He has also published a book under the title 'United Breaks Guitars: The Power of One Voice in the Age of Social Media' (Carroll, 2012) in which he describes in detail his struggle with the airline's customer service since the incident of the broken guitar happened. Furthermore, Carroll has launched the website Gripevine.com as a platform "where consumers and companies can come together to work out their differences and arrive at successful resolutions to common consumer complaints" (Gripevine, 2016).

In the terminology of service dominant logic (Merz et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) such a shift means that consumers and other stakeholders can no longer be seen just as operan*d* but operan*t* resources in the context of brand management. This insight applies not only to the co-creation of their own brand experience but to that of others as well. This point will be further discussed in the next section.

In conclusion, the internet-based democratisation of information creation can be construed as another example of the occurrence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon (see Figure 3-1). For instance, the internet enables technically literate stakeholders to create brand manifestations – such as Dave Carroll's video – that were likely to be out of reach technically for most stakeholders in the pre-internet age. The internet-based democratisation of information creation can thus increase, for example, the reward or coercive power of an organisation's brand stakeholders in the context of creating new kinds of brand manifestations independently of the organisation. This leads at least potentially to a more democratic form of power sharing between the organisation and its brand stakeholders.

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[4] Video 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo
Video 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-UoERHaSQg
Video 3: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P45E0uGVyeg

The main exception to these generally user-initiated information creation activities are *organisation-initiated* ones. When a company runs, for example, a creative competition for its customers on the internet, it potentially has a certain level of control over what is produced and published online (e.g. through moderation or selection processes, see further Arnhold, 2010). However, regarding *user-initiated* activities about brands on the internet, overall, a considerable democratisation potential can be observed (Rowles, 2014).

Despite these democratisation processes being seen as beneficial to many internet users, the literature provides evidence that some organisations are also able to benefit considerably from these developments. These organisations manage to exploit commercially for their own business purposes the content generated by the apparently empowered and liberated internet users. Examples of these kinds of benefactors are social networking sites such as Facebook, or (micro-) blog hosting sites such as Blogger.com or Twitter (Coté & Pybus, 2007; Cova et al., 2011; Fournier & Avery, 2011) – as exemplified in the previous section.

In regard to the impact which the internet-based democratisation of information creation can have on brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice, it can be concluded that the organisations which run the most important social media platforms as well as the content providers for these platforms (i.e. users) can create, co-create and/or manipulate branded content on these platforms to an unprecedented scale.

3.4.2.3 The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Information Dissemination

Based on the literature reviewed so far, it can be inferred that organisations have never been fully in control of the information that is communicated about them and their products in the public domain due to the activity of stakeholders such as the media and competitors (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; Grigoryants & Schnetzer, 2008; Roehm & Tybout, 2006). Also, individual stakeholders, such as consumers, have always been able to share opinions on a product or organisation through word-of-mouth, for example, by talking to family, friends and colleagues. However,

when it comes to the dissemination of information to an audience wider than that, there was normally one crucial catch in the pre-internet age, which is succinctly encapsulated in the following quote: "Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one"[5]. Nowadays, virtually anyone with access to the internet can use it as a personal communication and publishing or broadcasting platform to reach an audience far beyond family, friends and colleagues.

It appears that, through the opportunities of internet-based information dissemination, any digitally literate stakeholder can be turned into a potential publisher or broadcaster of brand-related content (Asmussen et al., 2013b, 2013c & 2014; McConnell & Huba, 2007). From a professional brand manager's perspective, two of the main challenges of this internet-based democratisation of information dissemination phenomenon appear to be *reach* and *speed*. In terms of reach, electronic word-of-mouth has, at least theoretically, become "a *boundless dialogue* with thousands, hundreds of thousands or a potentially 'unlimited' number of net-users" (Stauss, 2000, p. 242; emphasis in original). Or as Drew Neisser (2006), a marketing consultant, describes it: "all client houses are suddenly made of glass and the consumers can wield some pretty big stones" (p. 40). At least equally challenging might be the aspect of speed since (micro-) bloggers, for example, "can virally spread negative brand perceptions online as quickly as brand managers can say 'brand equity'" (Simmons, 2008, p. 306). To conclude, the internet-based democratisation of information dissemination can be interpreted as yet another form of occurrence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon (Fournier & Avery, 2011; see also Fig. 3-1).

In terms of the consequences for brand managers' brand conceptualisations, it can be inferred that the internet-based democratisation of information dissemination might have a considerable impact. Since every digitally literate stakeholder can nowadays potentially become an internet-based publisher or broadcaster of brand-related information, some practitioners already proclaim that stakeholders are becoming the new brand managers (e.g. Hittner, 2009). Dennhardt's (2014) research on users of the virtual world Second Life and their user-generated brands, as well as the work on

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[5] This quote has been accredited in equal measure to either A.J. Liebling (see, for example, Moretzsohn, 2006) or H.L. Mencken (see, for example, New York Times, 2007).

open-source brands (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Pitt et al., 2006) and community brands (Füller et al., 2008) support this view. These emerging changes or challenges regarding who is and what constitutes a brand manager might have an effect not only on professional brand managers' work and self-definition but also on their brand conceptualisation (Rowles, 2014; Valos et al., 2015).

A controversial aspect of the internet-based democratisation of information dissemination, which cannot be ignored, is the rise of the amateur (e.g. citizen journalist) and the crisis of credibility. For instance, the traditional distinction between the amateur and the professional producer of media content is increasingly blurring (Cammaerts, 2008; Keen, 2007). Some commentators, like Graham (2005), believe that, at least in some cases, this enables amateurs to "surpass professionals, when they have the right kind of system to channel their efforts". The internet has become a new source of consumer and other stakeholder influence and so have amateurs (Gillin, 2007). But, some argue that this rise of the amateur presents a danger.

Due, for example, to a lack of control and accountability on the internet, in at least some cases anybody can become a self-proclaimed expert and influence those who are not able to distinguish between quality and nonsense (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Keen, 2007). This democratisation of expertise can lead to error and opportunism (Guernsey, 2000). Wikipedia can be used as a case in point where people have deliberately contributed material that is incorrect, biased and potentially defamatory, for instance, in the case of George W. Bush (The Economist, 2006). This has led to restrictions on who can contribute to the online encyclopedia and therefore reduced its democratisation effect.

Despite these and other limitations (see further Asmussen et al. 2013b, 2013c & 2014; Cammerts, 2008; Deuze, 2008; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Lim, 2009), the findings of the literature review indicate that each of the three facets of the democratisation of information phenomenon provides opportunities for an organisation's internet literate brand stakeholders to access, create and disseminate brand manifestations which subsequently increases their reward, coercive, expert and/or legitimate power. Each of those three empowerment processes represents – enabled by the democratisation

of internet technology – a potential form of occurrence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon (Fig. 3-1). As discussed above, this might have considerable consequences for brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice which needs to be further investigated through empirical research.

Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that the overall conclusions regarding the internet-based democratisation of information are not unanimous but contested by some critics. boyd (in Johnson, 2009), for instance, questions the internet-based democratisation of information even if users are provided with the necessary internet literacy skills, since for her the whole game has changed:

> […] we've made [content] creation and distribution more available to anyone, but at the same time we've made those things irrelevant. Now the commodity isn't distribution, it's attention – and guess what? Who gets attention is still sitting on a power law curve ... we're not actually democratising the whole system – we're just shifting the way in which we discriminate.

This critique ties in with Locker's notion that an internet-based technology such as Twitter is "good for democracy, but it's not democratic" (in Henley, 2009). In the context of blogs, for instance, Cammaerts (2008) suggests that elites in society (e.g. well-known actors, athletes, politicians, or business leaders) generally have it easier when disseminating their ideas because, just by being elites, their blogs automatically get more attention than those of ordinary bloggers. It is therefore important to keep in mind that democratisation does not mean democracy in terms of equal distribution of power – or attention. Social divides might thus still be observed in many cases despite an overall transition from a less to a more democratic form of power sharing when it comes to access, creation and dissemination of information on the internet.

3.4.3 The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Social Capital

Although the internet was initially seen mainly as an information access and publishing mechanism, some of those involved in its technical development from an early stage state that the internet was also always *social* (e.g. Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2000). For example, the first online newsgroups and discussion fora were started by developers and programmers right from the very beginning of the World Wide Web

evolution (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2000). Even before that, in the 1980s, virtual communities, such as The WELL, were created as electronic dial-up bulletin board systems (Rheingold, 1991; Turner, 2005). Nonetheless, on the scale of a global mass phenomenon, the internet as a socially-oriented platform began to emerge in the late 1990s with applications such as Classmates.com, Sixdegrees.com and FriendsReunited.co.uk (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Donath & boyd, 2004; Jeffery et al., 2009). Since the beginning of the new millennium, the social side of the internet has become prominent due to the rise of various so-called social internet (boyd & Ellison, 2008), social web (Brown, 2009), social media (Safko & Brake, 2009), social software (Tepper, 2003), social computing (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007) or web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; O'Reilly, 2005) applications such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, to name but a few. From this socially-oriented perspective, the internet provides new opportunities for adequately literate consumers and other stakeholders of organisations:

(i)   to *represent and express themselves* as individuals or groups of stakeholders in front of an organisation and other audiences in a diverse number of ways. For instance, through the creation of their own websites, blogs, micro-blogs, discussion fora or profiles on social networking sites (Cova & Pace, 2006; Hemetsberger, 2005; Kozinets, 2001; Proctor & Kitchen, 2002; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Simmons, 2008; Webb & Burgoyne, 2009; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013),

(ii)   to *connect with others* beyond their geographical proximity. For example, to form a worldwide brand or anti-brand community (Cova & Pace, 2006; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006 & 2010; Kucuk, 2008 & 2012; Meister, 2012; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Sloan et al., 2015), and

(iii)   to *interact with* or *mobilise others*. For example, to jointly develop new products online (Bhalla, 2011; Füller et al., 2007; Hemetsberger, 2005 & 2006b; Kozinets et al., 2008; Martini et al., 2014; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009; Piller et al., 2005).

In these examples, internet users may benefit not only from the actual information or knowledge that might be exchanged or created in the process, but particularly from social, communal and relationship-oriented aspects such as sharing, collaborating

and bonding with others (Belk, 2010; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013). In this context, even individual stakeholders, such as consumers, are enabled to make themselves heard through the internet to an unprecedented extent not only as individuals or groups that create and disseminate information but also as individual or social entities who actively want to *express themselves to* and/or *connect and interact with others*. It may thus be concluded that adequately literate consumers and other stakeholders are not only more empowered on a technological or information-related basis through the new opportunities that the internet offers but also on a social level, at least potentially, in their dealings with organisations. Consequently it can be inferred that the democratisation of internet technology has led not only to a democratisation of information but also to a democratisation of *social capital* (Dennhardt, 2014).

Social capital has become a prominent concept in the social science disciplines (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Ferlander &Timms, 2007; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 1993) since it captures in a contemporary way the basic insight that being connected to other individuals or groups can have beneficial consequences for the individuals as well as for the group (Portes, 1998). In a simplified way, it may be assumed that "Whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships" (Portes, 1998, p. 7). Human capital can be defined as the social resources derived from individual development (e.g. skills, knowledge, experience) while social capital can be defined as the social resources derived from social interactions (Gamarnikow, 2003). Nevertheless, both concepts are contested and the relationship between the two concepts depends on how one defines each of the two terms (for a more in-depth discussion of the relationship of these two terms see Gamarnikow, 2003).

Regarding the concept of social capital, since its early usage in the 1960s and 1970s, the term has been applied to elucidate a wide range of social phenomena and many authors have since tried to define what it is (for an overview and discussion of various definitions see Adler & Kwon, 2002; or Robison et al., 2002). Social capital today still means "many things to many people" (Narayan & Pritchett, 1999, p. 871). It remains "a contentious and slippery term" (Williams, 2006) with no commonly agreed upon definition. The particular definition adopted by a researcher will usually depend on the discipline and perspective of the investigation (Claridge, 2007;

Robison et al., 2002). Some definitions might focus on just one dimension of the social capital construct while others might combine various dimensions of it.

Based on Robison et al. (2002), one dimension could be defined as *what social capital is* (a variety of structures) and another dimension *what social capital can be used for* (the facilitation of certain actions and interactions of individual members of a group or the group as a whole, where the group is defined by some aspect of social structure). In this context, for instance, some authors (e.g. Baker, 1990; Belliveau et al., 1996) limit the scope of their conceptualisation of social capital to only the structure of relational networks, while others (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986; Nahapiet & Goshal, 1998; Putnam, 1995) also include the resources that can be accessed through the members of such networks. The latter approach has been adopted in the following and complemented with a third dimension.

Based on a review of the social capital literature, the term social capital has initially been defined here as a beneficial social asset – to individuals and/or groups – that comprises (i) social connections and (ii) the resources that may be mobilised through these connections (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1988 & 1990; Nahapiet & Goshal, 1998). However, apart from these two main forms of social capital, additionally *social self-representation* is introduced as a third form, specifically for the present internet-related research context. This additional form of social capital has emerged in a discourse outside the traditional social capital literature: postmodern consumption and the usage of the internet. Social capital in the form of social self-representation opportunities may be seen as relevant in the present online context since it can be interpreted as a prerequisite for the other two forms.

The reason for this is that the various opportunities of expressing yourself *to the world* via the internet (see Figure 3-2, point 1) may have a considerable impact on the development of a person's or group's online relationships and networks (point 2) and subsequently the resources that might be accessed through these connections (point 3).

Figure 3-2: Key Forms Of Internet-Based Social Capital

Image removed from electronic version

Source: Asmussen et al., 2013a, p. 1479.

Deconstructing and understanding the concept of social capital and its different dimensions appears to be crucial for the development of an in-depth comprehension of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon. It therefore will be further explored next.

3.4.3.1 The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Social Self-Representation

In the literature about postmodern consumption it has been postulated that society is no longer unified by a common culture or institutional core (such as economy, religion, the state, kinship) but resembles a rather complex labyrinth of cross-cutting discourses (Cova, 1997; Dawes & Brown, 2000; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Simmons, 2008). Within this complex consumer society many people are seeking both individualistic as well as communal experiences (Belk, 2010; Cova & Pace, 2006; Simmons, 2008). What has been demonstrated in the literature so far is that the internet can provide both these kinds of experiences to its users. It can function as "virtual glue" (Simmons, 2008, p. 305) that people can use to bond together in an increasingly fragmented world. It can, at the same time, also be approached as a platform for individualistic experiences or individualistic expressions rather than any bonding benefits (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007).

However, although postmodern consumers enjoy being individualistic and reinventing themselves through their consumption (e.g. Goulding, 2003), research has revealed that they do not necessarily want to do this in isolation (Cova, 1997; Johnson & Ambrose, 2006; Mathwick et al., 2008). Rather, consumers show new forms of sociality based not only upon direct face-to-face or synchronous internet-mediated interaction with others, but also through a more indirect form of an internet-based *self-exhibition* in front of others (Bazarova & Choi, 2014; Cova & Pace, 2006; Dholakia et al., 2004; Hemetsberger, 2005; Litvin et al., 2008; Simmons, 2008). Blogs and micro-blogs, for instance, can be interpreted not only as means of

internet-mediated dissemination of knowledge, but also as a new means of social self-representation. In this sense, the internet may represent "the ultimate democratization of self-expression" (Watson, 2009).

In the specific democratisation context, it has to be taken into account that new internet-based self-representation opportunities have also led to new possibilities for an organisation's brand stakeholders to create brand manifestations. These manifestations may contribute to the creation of brand meanings of, for example, a corporate brand that potentially stand in sharp symbolic contrast to the brand meaning that the corporation itself intends to convey through its own corporate brand meaning co-creation activities (e.g. Thompson et al., 2006, and their concept of the Doppelgänger brand image).

Another important aspect seems to be that, to a large extent, the usage of the internet as a platform for social self-representation is voluntary for the users of the internet (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Apart from certain social pressures (e.g. peer pressure) – for instance, to have a profile on a certain social networking site such as Facebook or LinkedIn because *everybody else got one* – users can to a large extent reconstruct online their social fabric on their own terms, with links of *their* making and choice (Johnson & Ambrose, 2006). Furthermore, an internet user can decide to what extent s/he wants to get *involved* online (Dahl, 2014; Kozinets, 1999; Mittilä & Mäntymäki, 2005), for example, with the creation of brand-related content on an online community's website. It is possible, for instance, just to lurk and read product reviews and the discussions of an online community or actively participate and contribute.

From a professional brand manager's perspective, this *voluntary* aspect implies that stakeholders have, to a certain extent, not only a choice of *if* and *how*, but also *where* to self-exhibit themselves online. Some organisations might hope that their customers and other stakeholders become an active part of the online brand community platform(s) that they have created and which they moderate and control while their customers and other stakeholders may prefer joining more independent community sites (Cova & Pace, 2006; Popp & Woratschek, 2009; Sloan et al., 2015). This situation represents another example of the internet world where organisations

have to accept to an increasing extent that they are not in control of what is said about them and their brands, where it is said and to whom it is said.

It can be concluded that no matter whether used in a positive or negative context, a rewarding or coercive situation, internet-based social self-representation should be regarded as a relevant form of social capital, since the various opportunities for expressing oneself online may have a considerable influence on the development of one's online (and potentially also offline) relationships and networks. The development of these online relationships and networks in the context of the internet-based democratisation of brand management will be explored in the next sections. In terms of the contribution to the internet-based democratisation of brand management, the review has demonstrated that the social self-representation facet can be construed as another form of the occurrence of the overall internet-based democratisation phenomenon (see Figure 3-1).

In regard to the influence of the internet-based democratisation of social self-representation on brand managers, it can be concluded that in many cases marketers have increasingly lost power over their brands. Or, as Fournier and Avery (2011, p. 193) put it:

> Brands today claim hundreds of thousands of Facebook friends, Twitter followers, online community members, and YouTube fans; yet, it is a lonely, scary time to be a brand manager. Despite marketers' desire to leverage Web 2.0 technologies to their advantage, a stark truth presents itself: […] The technology that was supposed to empower marketers has empowered consumers instead.

External as well as internal stakeholders of a brand are nowadays able, equipped with the right skills, to create powerful internet-based self-representations that may include brand-related manifestations which can either reinforce or oppose the focal organisation's intended brand meanings (Bruce & Solomon, 2013; Deighton & Kornfeld, 2010; Gensler et al., 2013). This shift in power, when it comes to the creation and co-creation of brand manifestations and subsequently brand meanings, may be relevant for brand managers' brand conceptualisations regarding the co-creation of brands and/or the involvement of internal as well as external stakeholders in the relevant processes. This lack of clarity when it comes to brand conceptualisations needs to be further investigated through empirical research.

3.4.3.2 The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Social Connectivity

Although the internet has been linked with decreases as well as increases in social capital (e.g. Ellison et al., 2007, Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2008; Wellman et al., 2001; Wilcox & Stephen, 2013; Williams, 2006), in terms of social connectivity, a strong rationale has emerged in the literature showing that the internet is in principle able to broaden users' opportunities to build and maintain networks with others (e.g. Donath & boyd, 2004; Schmidt & Cohen, 2013). This rationale is often based on a concept developed originally by Granovetter (1973) who differentiates between weak ties and strong ties. Based on his concept, the internet may not necessarily offer users *per se* the opportunity to increase the number of strong ties (i.e. emotionally close, long-term relationships), but it may well allow a person to increase weak ties (i.e. emotionally distant, casual relationships).

For example, social networking sites, blogs or micro-blogs are suited to maintaining these ties cheaply and easily (e.g. Donath & boyd, 2004; Ferlander & Timms, 2007; Labrecque et al., 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2008). From this *weak ties* perspective (Granovetter, 1973), the internet appears to provide at least *bridging* social capital, which means it allows individuals or groups to make connections with other individuals or groups, potentially from completely different backgrounds (Putnam, 2000). These kinds of social connections might, for most members of a particular network, only have the characteristics of tentative relationships but what they might lack in depth they can make up in breadth (Williams, 2006).

Looking at the power imbalance between organisations and their stakeholders from a perspective of weak ties and bridging social capital, the internet allows consumers and other stakeholders, potentially, to connect more easily with people who have a specific joint interest, purpose or background (Preece, 2000). This may be considered as beneficial for internet users when it comes to seeking advice from existing or former customers of an organisation, for instance, in the context of specific banking services (Berger & Messerschmidt, 2009). It may be concluded that, on the level of weak ties, the internet provides reach and facilitates the search for other individuals, groups or networks sharing specific interests (Ferlander & Timms, 2007; Zinkhan,

2005). This could simply make it easier for people to join or form a group with an economic purpose by creating, for example, collective bargaining power (e.g. Hughes & Beukes, 2012; Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007; Pitt et al., 2002). However, it could mean that individual internet users now have easy access to an unprecedented number of people, for instance, through simply joining existing or forming new social networks and online communities (Hanna et al., 2011). In this sense, the internet enables its users to connect easily with others beyond geographical proximity, for example, to form a worldwide brand or anti-brand community (Cova & Pace, 2006; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006 & 2010; Kucuk, 2008 & 2012; Meister, 2012; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Sloan et al., 2015). In the pre-internet age, it was generally just organisations that had the critical reach and resources to connect with thousands of people worldwide via, for example, advertising, PR or direct marketing activities. Nowadays, in the age of the internet-based democratisation of social connectivity, virtually any internet-empowered stakeholder can potentially connect with a large number of other stakeholders. Connecting with others allows an organisation's brand stakeholders to decrease the organisation's expert power. Thus, the internet-based democratisation of social connectivity can be confirmed as another form of occurrence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon (Fig. 3-1).

The internet-based democratisation of social connectivity might also have a potential effect on brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice. In the pre-internet age, it was mainly organisations that had the resources to connect with thousands of people worldwide, via traditional marketing communications, to manage and influence, to a certain extent, brand meaning (co-)creation based on the disseminated brand manifestations. Nowadays, virtually any internet literate user can potentially connect with a large number of people. Consumers, for instance, can nowadays easily connect with like-minded people, particularly, through already existing networks such as brand communities. Brand communities can become very powerful, in a positive as well as negative sense for brand managers. They can endorse organisations' intended marketing communications, but they can also resist these marketing activities, criticise or undermine them. This might subsequently have a considerable impact on the outcome of an organisation's brand management activities. Empirical research needs to further explore whether brand managers

consequently integrate external stakeholders, such as brand communities, within their brand conceptualisations since there is a lack of empirical evidence (Iglesias et al., 2013).

The above discussed, mainly weak ties-based democratisation of social connectivity can potentially cause a considerable erosion of control over brand meaning co-creation processes for organisations. However, these points about mainly weak tie-focused relationships only encapsulate one side of the discussion in the social capital literature. Apart from bridging social capital, which is mainly linked to weak tie relationships and a primary focus on connectivity, there is another form of social capital called bonding social capital, which is mainly linked to the mobilisation of resources through strong tie relationships (Putnam, 2000).

3.4.3.3 The Internet-Based Democratisation Of Social Mobilisation

It has been shown above that the internet provides its users with *bridging social capital* by enabling them to create and maintain weak tie relationships. Some authors claim, though, that these kinds of social connections and networks are unlikely to provide members of a network with valuable social resources such as strong emotional or substantive support when needed (e.g. Donath & boyd, 2004; Valenzuela et al., 2008; Williams, 2006). Bonding social capital, in contrast to bridging social capital, occurs when individuals or groups provide such close emotional or substantive support for one another (Putnam, 2000). Other authors, provide evidence that the internet is, however, also able to generate *bonding social capital* for at least some of its users (e.g. Ellison et al., 2011; Ferlander & Timms, 2007). In this context, the concept of social mobilisation becomes relevant (e.g. Hara & Estrada, 2005; Lee, 2015).

While social connectivity is mainly about *access* to other individuals and groups, social mobilisation is about the *resources* that then may be available to a member of a network through its other members. The extent of these resources, which can be mobilised through a network, depends on the intensity, trust and reciprocity of the relationships within the network (Granovetter, 1973). Therefore, it may be concluded

that while bridging social capital depends more on the breadth and quantity of relationships, bonding social capital depends primarily on the depth and quality.

Although it might at first glance seem unlikely that internet users bond with *friends of friends* or even strangers on the internet on a similarly intense and reciprocal level as they might with close family or friends it should not be underestimated that individuals or groups of joint specific interest, purpose or background may provide each other with a substantial amount of emotional, informational, financial and/or human (e.g. working hours) resources that would usually only be expected in a strong tie relationship.

An example of internet-based social mobilisation, where individuals and groups have benefited from substantial reciprocal services in terms of dedicated time and labour or human resources (i.e. voluntary and therefore unpaid working hours), is Lugnet.com, the international LEGO users group network of so-called AFOLs, adult fans of LEGO (see further Hatch & Schultz, 2010). Lugnet.com enables its users not only to mobilise other enthusiasts to co-create new LEGO-related brand manifestations but also to provide access for others to these manifestations on a broader scale. The internet enables individuals and groups in this context to mobilise others which can increase, for example, their legitimate power towards the LEGO organisation (Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

This and other examples (e.g. Jeffares, 2014; Safko & Brake, 2009; Surowiecki, 2004) give a first impression that social mass mobilisation is no longer the exclusive privilege of powerful organisations. In certain cases, individual stakeholders are also able to do this through the empowerment of the internet. It can thus be concluded that the internet-based democratisation of social mobilisation can be interpreted as another occurrence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon (see Figure 3-1).

In terms of brand management practice, this represents yet another challenge due to the decrease in power for organisations in relation to their brand stakeholders. However, social media can also be used to an organisation's benefit by mobilising its brand stakeholders. For example, brand community platforms can be a helpful option

to mobilise an organisation's stakeholders, such as consumers (e.g. Ind et al., 2012 & 2013). Nevertheless, users who get involved with brand communities, which actively include the organisation behind the brand, expect this focal organisation to listen and respond to them (Bhalla, 2011; Ind et al., 2013). As Ind et al. (2013, p. 6) put it:

> They [the community members] expect organizations to listen and respond as the community evolves. They want their ideas and contributions to be taken seriously and they want to know what happens after the community ends or a project is completed. This in turn requires a participatory leadership style that enables the organization to share and work effectively together with consumers. […] This perspective means that managers should see community participants as an integral part of the brand […]

However, whether brand managers have adopted such an integrated view when it comes to their brand conceptualisation practice remains to be empirically explored.

Overall, the findings of the literature review indicate that each of the three facets of the democratisation of social capital phenomenon provides opportunities for an organisation's internet literate brand stakeholders to access and/or create brand manifestations to increase their reward, coercive, expert and/or legitimate power. Based on the evidence and examples presented within this review, it can therefore be inferred that the democratisation of social capital should be considered as being another essential part of the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratisation of brand management (see Fig. 3-1).

3.5 Conclusion

The main aim of this chapter was to address the ambiguity revolving around the question of (a) what internet-based democratisation in the context of brand management means and (b) what the potential consequences of this emerging phenomenon are for brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice. While the literature review provided a variety of insights to address the first question it showed that in order to be able to address the second question adequately, further research is needed.

The review reveals that the internet-based democratisation of brand management as an overall phenomenon basically consists of three different democratisation phenomena. These three key developments are: (I) the democratisation of internet technology; (II) the democratisation of information; and (III) the democratisation of social capital. The review also demonstrates that the three key developments represent two different forms of democratisation: democratisation through technology and democratisation of technology itself. The internet-based democratisation of information and of social capital fall into the former category, while the democratisation of internet technology falls into the latter. One of the key insights elicited by the review is the finding that the democratisation of internet technology is an essential enabler of the overall phenomenon under investigation.

But the presence of the technological democratisation alone is not sufficient as an indicator of the occurrence of the overall socio-technological phenomenon. Only the presence of either of the two other key developments or any of their key facets provides sufficient evidence for its occurrence (see Figure 3-1). The rationale for this conclusion is that access to technology alone is not enough. Only when people possess the necessary skills to use the available technology, can it be applied to increase a brand stakeholder's power. Based on that, the results of the review show that there are altogether six different potential forms of occurrence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon. Three that are categorised as key facets of the internet-based democratisation of information and three that are categorised as key facets of the internet-based democratisation of social capital. Each of those six internet-based key facets has the potential to enable a more democratic form of power sharing between an organisation and its brand stakeholders in the context of the creation of brand manifestations and/or the access provision to them.

These findings have considerable managerial consequences. Most notably, brand management has been democratised through the internet as a radical change agent. The power within brand meaning co-creation relationships between organisations on the one hand and their internet-empowered stakeholders on the other, has in many cases increasingly shifted towards the organisations' brand stakeholders. This is due to an unprecedented shift of resource availability on the internet regarding the

creation of and access provision to brand manifestations. Internet-based brand meaning co-creation activities can now be stakeholder-initiated as well as organisation-initiated at any stage of the process. Empowered by the internet, technically literate brand stakeholders of an organisation have – more than ever before – a choice of moving between different levels of activity and involvement regarding brand meaning co-creation. They can (1) in the traditional, rather passive sense, co-create meaning out of the brand manifestations which they experience that are provided to them by the brand's focal organisation and/or other stakeholders; (2) become more active through co-creating not only brand meaning but also brand manifestations in collaboration with the brand's focal organisation and/or other brand stakeholders; or (3) create brand manifestations on a previously unparalleled magnitude by themselves outside the control of anybody else, including the brand's focal organisation.

The insight that the internet-based democratisation activities in the brand meaning co-creation process can be user-initiated as well as organisation-initiated on all levels has hardly been discussed in the literature so far (Neudecker et al., 2015; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2015). The reason for this might be related to the "conflictual dialectic" (Cammaerts 2008, p. 363) that, whilst the observed democratisation phenomenon appears to empower and liberate people when it comes to user-initiated activities on the internet related to organisations' brands, it also seems to potentially enable organisations to exploit, control and/or deceive people through organisation-initiated activities on the internet. This paradoxical situation appears to have considerable scope as a point of departure for future research.

However, in terms of future research potential, even more urgent appears to be the need to address the ambiguity in regard to how brand managers conceptualise brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. The importance of the brand conceptualisation topic emerged from the literature review in chapter 2. Furthermore, the literature review in chapter 3 revealed that a consequence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management is a lack of clarity in regard to how brands should be conceptualised in brand management practice. Therefore the following overall research question (ORQ) has been

developed to address this research gap: How do brand managers conceptualise brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management? An adequate research design to answer this ORQ will be developed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4:
METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the methodological and paradigmatic considerations will be presented which led to the translation and operationalisation of the overall research aim into an adequate empirical research design. The previous two chapters provided a literature review about key debates in regard to (a) the conceptualisations of brands and (b) the phenomenon of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. While the former delivered insights regarding current discourse of brand conceptualisations, the latter presented an overview of the democratisation phenomenon's various facets from a socio-technological angle. This latter review also brought to light that brand managers' conceptualisations of brands have hardly been investigated in the context of this democratisation phenomenon. The present research thus aims to explore in depth the conceptualisation of brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management from the perspective(s) of brand managers.

Due to the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the research topic (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Diamond et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013) and the lack of sufficient empirical research (Pillai, 2012), the development of a qualitative research design appeared to be a more adequate choice compared to a quantitative design as a first step to addressing the overall research question (Creswell, 2007). Aiming to develop a qualitative rather than a quantitative research design provides the opportunity (a) to investigate a complex and rather unexplored topic; (b) to examine meaning expressed through words rather than numbers; (c) to collect non-standardised rather than standardised/numeric data; and (d) to conduct an analysis concerned with the use of conceptualisations rather than statistics. These factors all appear to be advantageous for addressing the overall research question (Bryman, 2004; Patton, 2002).

However, a more in-depth review of the qualitative research methodology literature revealed that *further relevant topics* needed to be addressed first before a sufficiently rigorous attempt could be made to develop the most adequate qualitative research

design.[6] These topics revolve particularly around two questions: (1) 'how can quality be achieved in qualitative research?' (Bansal & Corley, 2011; Gioia et al., 2013; Tracy, 2010) and (2) 'what is the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher as the research instrument?' (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, these key questions needed to be addressed prior to the research design being developed in further detail.

4.2 Achieving Quality In Qualitative Research

While concepts such as validity and reliability are common measurements of quality in quantitative research (e.g. Ali & Yusof, 2012; Golafshani, 2003), their application in qualitative research can be deceptive and counterproductive (Bryman, 2004; Gioia et al., 2013; Tracy, 2012). To take this into account, a specific framework has been chosen for this research which has been endorsed by editors of the Academy of Management Journal (Bansal & Corley, 2011). The framework, consisting of eight criteria for excellence in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010), has been used as a guideline and will be explained briefly in Table 4-1.

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[6] The term rigour is used here to indicate sufficient thoroughness, care and awareness of relevant philosophical underpinnings when conducting qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b; Tracy, 2010). 'Rigour' will be conceptualised in further detail in the following section.

Table 4-1: A Framework For Quality In Qualitative Research

The Eight Quality Criteria (Tracy, 2010)	How Each Criterion Relates To The Present Research
1. Worthy Topic The topic of the research needs to be relevant, significant, timely and interesting.	The worthiness of the topic has been confirmed through the literature review (e.g. Gaski, 2010; Jones & Bonevac, 2013; Keller, 2013; Kendall, 2015; Rowles, 2014).
2. Rich Rigour The study needs to use sufficient data and time in the field, an appropriate sample, and adequate data collection and analysis processes for the specific context of the research project.	The following sections of this chapter explain in detail how a high level of rigour has been implemented.
3. Sincerity The research project needs to consider *self-reflexivity* about subjective values, biases and inclinations of the researcher, which is particularly important when the researcher becomes the research instrument.	Since the term reflexivity is rather ambiguous (e.g. Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Duberley, 2003; Zolo, 1990), it is defined here as an approach in which the researcher tries to achieve an awareness of, and openness about, the factors that potentially have an influence on his research-related activities and the knowledge created. A reflection is provided in section 4.3.
4. Credibility The research provides an adequate degree of multivocality and concrete details as well as conceptual frameworks which link explicit as well as implicit (tacit) knowledge, and uses evidence that is "showing rather than telling" (Tracy, 2010, p 840).	This has been taken into account when (a) the most adequate overall research methodology was chosen; (b) the sample of participants was put together; and (c) the findings are presented in chapter 5.
5. Resonance The presentation of the research results should influence, affect or move particular readers through its aesthetic and evocative representation and transferable findings.	A sincere effort has been made throughout the findings and discussion chapters to present the key findings and insights gained from the analysis of the data in an aesthetic and expressive way, for example, through the use of diagrams and other forms of visualisation. The transferability of the findings will be elaborated on particularly in the discussion and conclusions chapters.
6. Significant contribution The research provides a significant contribution on a conceptual/ theoretical level as well as methodologically and practically.	This research makes overall five key contributions which are presented throughout this thesis and these will be evaluated in the conclusions chapter.
7. Ethical The researcher considers procedural ethics as well as situational, relational, and culturally specific ethics.	The researcher was confronted with a procedural ethical issue in that one high profile participant was concerned about the protection of his anonymity. This concern has been taken fully into account through the format in which information about individual participants is presented in the different chapters.
8. Meaningful coherence The study achieves what it purports to be about, through an *internal logic* which uses methods and procedures that fit the overall objective, and meaningfully interconnects the literature with the findings and interpretations of each key result.	A specific framework (see Figure 4-1) has been developed and implemented for the purpose of this research to achieve a high degree of meaningful coherence.

Source: The researcher.

Each of these eight criteria will be revisited in the conclusions chapter to reflect on the extent to which each has been achieved. Furthermore, throughout the methodology chapter various of the eight criteria will be addressed to show exactly how the aim of adhering to these high quality standards in qualitative research has fundamentally shaped the development of the research design. First of all, the last of the eight criteria, *meaningful coherence*, will be addressed through the development of a framework that explains and justifies the internal logic of the present research context. The Three Pillars of Research Design Framework presented in Figure 4-1 has been developed to demonstrate the internal logic between (a) the literature reviews, (b) the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher, and (c) the concrete development of the research design as a foundation for the data generation, collection and analysis.

Figure 4-1: The Three Pillars Of Research Design Framework
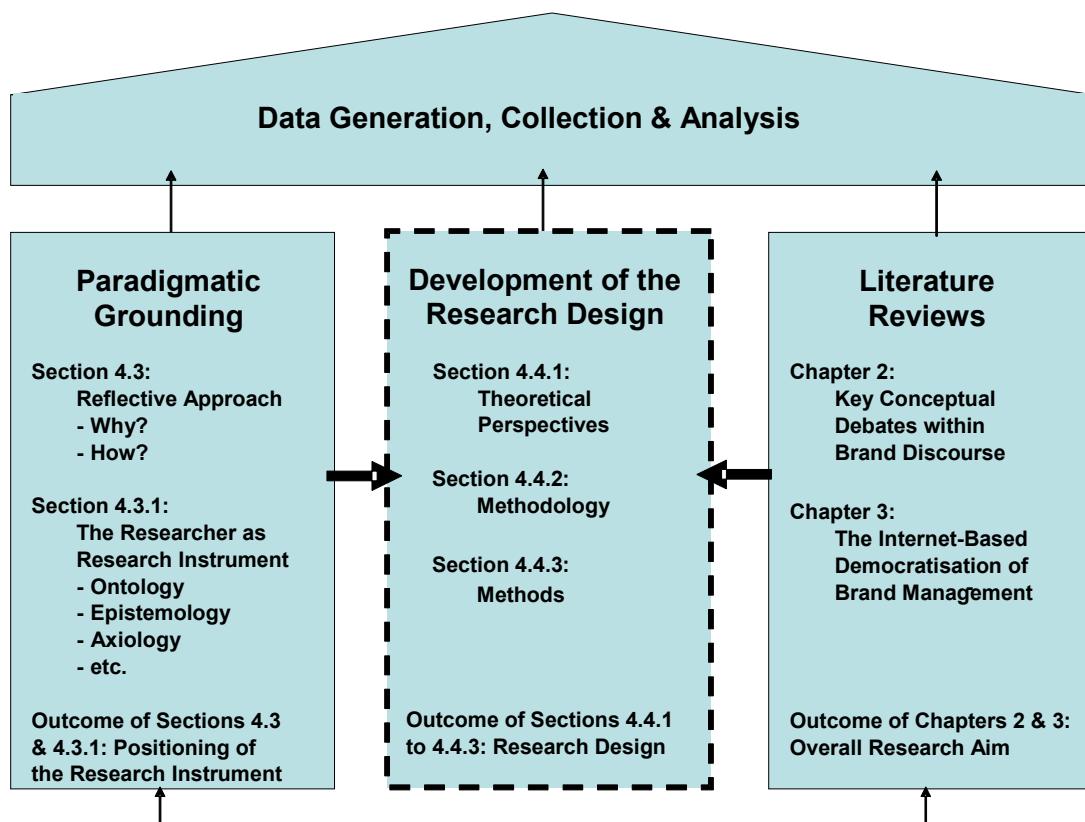
Source: The researcher.

The development of the internal logic of the Three Pillars of Research Design Framework for this research was influenced by, amongst others, a concept created by

Crotty (1998) consisting of four building blocks: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. In contrast to other methodological frameworks, Crotty's concept provides a clear rationale why epistemological considerations (which are here extended to paradigmatic grounding) should be separated from considerations regarding the theoretical perspective(s) of the research. This differentiation appears to be advantageous since it allows discussion and reflection on the 'researcher as the research instrument' on one level (paradigmatic grounding, see the left pillar, Figure 4-1), yet without restricting the researcher already regarding the most appropriate theoretical approach(es) for the research design (theoretical perspectives, see the middle pillar). In practice, this means that the researcher can present a reflection which positions him as a constructivist within the research paradigm discourse. On a *separate* second level (theoretical perspectives) it can then be discussed to what extent symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and other theoretical approaches are relevant to the present research.

Crotty's idea has therefore been integrated within the 'Three Pillars of Research Design Framework'. The first pillar is called 'Paradigmatic Grounding' (relating to his first building block). The second pillar, which is the core one of the three, is formed by Crotty's second, third and fourth building blocks and represents the 'Development of the Research Design'. These two 'methodological' foundations of the framework are complemented by the subject-specific literature reviews as the third pillar (see the right pillar in Figure 4-1). In terms of the visualised *meaningful coherence* and internal logic of the present research project in Figure 4-1, arrows indicate potentially concurrent influences.

Figure 4-1 therefore clarifies that both outer pillars influence the development of the inner pillar. In other words, the work on the literature review chapters (including their outcome in terms of overall research aim) and the work on clarifying the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher (including its outcome in terms of the positioning of the researcher as the research instrument) both have had a considerable influence on the development of the research design on all levels (theoretical perspectives, methodological considerations and methods). It is thus not only the immediately relevant aspects of the research design, represented in the central pillar, but also the outer two pillars that potentially have an influence on the

data generation, collection and analysis. The first and second pillars of the framework will be addressed in detail in the following beginning with the first pillar on the left.

4.3 The Paradigmatic Grounding Of A Self-Reflective Researcher

This section discusses two of the paradigmatic key aspects of the present research project. First, it provides a rationale which supports the application of a reflective approach. Secondly, it presents a framework which helps the researcher to apply such a reflective approach. This framework enables a more systematic discussion of various philosophical assumptions that have influenced the methodological choices and other considerations of the researcher as the research instrument. Through this modus operandi the aspect of *sincerity* should be ensured in terms of the quality of the research (Tracy, 2010). Following Tracy's (2010) framework, qualitative research should emphasise self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases and inclinations of the researcher. In support of this, Miles and Huberman state that it is "good medicine" for researchers to make their preferences clear (1994, p. 4):

> To know how a researcher construes the shape of the social world and aims to give us a credible account of it is to know our conversational partner. If a critical realist, a critical theorist, and a social phenomenologist are competing for our attention, we need to know where each is coming from. Each will have diverse views of what is real, what can be known, and how these social facts can be faithfully rendered.

There are limitations to reflexivity such as, for instance, circularity (e.g. Johnson & Duberley, 2000 & 2003). Nevertheless, the literature increasingly suggests that research methods are not neutral devices, or techniques, which can simply be taken 'off the shelf' to undertake a particular task for which they seem to be most suited (e.g. Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Clark, 2006). Such an 'off the shelf' or "'bag of tools'" (Johnson & Clark, 2006, p. xxv) perspective implies that the nature of the research aim(s), question(s) and objective(s) dictates exclusively the most appropriate research method. Whilst at first sight this 'bag of tools' approach has much to offer, it tends to deflect attention from one key issue: that different research methods bring with them a great deal of "philosophical

baggage" (Johnson & Clark, 2006, p. xxv) which can easily go unnoticed when they are classified as merely constituting different techniques of data collection. Or as Dennett puts it (1995, p. 21):

> Scientists sometimes deceive themselves into thinking that philosophical ideas are only, at best, decorations or parasitic commentaries on the hard, objective triumphs of science, and that they themselves are immune to the confusions that philosophers devote their lives to dissolving. But there is no such thing as philosophy-free science; there is only science whose philosophical baggage is taken on board without examination.

To be able to provide a self-reflection on my philosophical 'baggage', a framework has been developed which will be presented next (Table 4-2). While some might question whether such an effort to establish the researcher's paradigmatic grounding is necessary, leading practitioners in the marketing industry, such as Earl (2015), are acknowledging the importance of a researcher's underlying philosophy and worldview. He states that it can influence, for instance, the questions that are asked in the first place:

> The questions we ask reveal far more than you'd think: not just the answers we hope to uncover, but more fundamentally the ideas we have about the world and how things are. (Earl, 2015, p. 19)

4.3.1 The Development And Application Of A Framework For Paradigmatic Reflection

In a social science context, the term 'paradigm' usually describes a broad theoretical or philosophical framework, worldview, or basic belief system (Blaikie, 2007; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As Guba (1990) puts it: a paradigm is "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (p. 17). However, one of the key characteristics of paradigms which makes analysing or reflection on them sometimes rather complicated is that they deal with "first principles, or ultimates" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 99). In other words, paradigms are beliefs and human constructions that cannot be disproven in any foundational sense (Guba, 1990) or established in terms of their "ultimate truthfulness" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 99). Paradigms, as sets of basic assumptions, can therefore never be known to be right or wrong for that is all they are – assumptions; and any philosophical assumptions are always contentious, contestable and debatable, yet unavoidable (Johnson & Clark, 2006).

Consequently, there are no secure foundations upon which researchers can begin reflecting on their knowledge of knowledge (Johnson & Duberley, 2000 & 2003). Rather, there are competing paradigmatic concepts about knowledge, which lead researchers to engage with their work in particular ways (Johnson & Duberley, 2000). Thus, to be able to (1) reflect on the philosophical assumptions which are potentially relevant to the research and (2) position the subsequent engagement with the particular research topic within wider discourse, a framework for paradigmatic reflection was created (Table 4-2).

Table 4-2: A Framework For The Paradigmatic Grounding Of The Researcher

Paradigmatic area	Key question(s)
1. Ontology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Creswell, 2007; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994, Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Saunders et al., 2007)	What is the nature of reality?
2. Epistemology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Creswell, 2007; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994, Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Saunders et al., 2007)	A) What constitutes acceptable knowledge? B) What is the relationship between researcher and that being researched?
3. Axiology (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Saunders et al., 2007)	What is the role of values?
4. Methodology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Creswell, 2007; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994, Guba & Lincoln, 2005)	How should researchers go about finding out knowledge?
5. Rhetorics (Creswell, 2007)	What is the language of research?
6. Human nature (Burell & Morgan, 1979)	What model of human nature is reflected in the research?

Source: The researcher.

Table 4-2 summarises the findings of a review of the research methodology literature. This review elicited not only a total of six different paradigmatic areas but also one or two key questions related to each area which facilitated a thorough self-reflection. These key questions were used one by one to provide an in-depth reflection on the relevance of the six identified paradigmatic areas for the present research (see Appendix 1). This framework provided me with a foundation to discuss and justify my choices in terms of my overall research design in a more robust way in the following. More 'robust' in this context means that I would like to be able to discuss

and justify my choices in a more balanced way – not only based on the overall research aim and the nature of the phenomenon under study but also in a structured way, taking relevant philosophical commitments into consideration. I believe that the paradigmatic reflection and positioning presented in this section (including Appendix 1) has enabled me, to a large extent, to justify my choices in a more balanced, sincere and transparent way – which from a constructivist research angle means that my work is more credible (see Tracy, 2010). In terms of what needed to come next based on Tracy's (2010) framework for excellence in qualitative research, the paradigmatic grounding developed in this section now needed to be applied in a credible and rigorous discussion on the other three key aspects of the research design (Theoretical Perspectives, Methodological Considerations, and Methods represented by the middle pillar in Figure 4-1).

4.4 Development Of The Core Research Design

The review in the previous section has indicated that the paradigmatic assumptions of the researcher are to the core research design what footings are to a building – they form the foundations of the whole edifice (Grix, 2004). Due to the relevance of these foundations, Furlong and Marsh (2010) recommend that researchers should adopt a position within wider philosophical discourse with which they can identify and reflect on regarding their coherent (or not so coherent) use of it while acknowledging – at the same time – that paradigmatic assumptions can always be contested.

An important point which reflects my position in regard to mixed-paradigm, multi-paradigm and non-paradigm approaches, has been made by some authors using the 'skin' metaphor (Furlong & Marsh, 2010; Grix, 2004). This metaphor implies that researchers might not be able to chop and change between ontologies and epistemologies on a day to day basis because their paradigmatic grounding might be better viewed as a skin, not a sweater that can be changed on an everyday basis (Furlong & Marsh, 2010; Grix, 2004). Having identified my 'researcher skin' as *constructivist* so far, within the paradigmatic assumptions spectrum (see Table 4-3), this positioning needed to be further specified for the development of the core research design.

Table 4-3: Key Philosophical Questions And Answers Based On The Researcher's Paradigmatic Positioning[7]

		Objectivist, Positivist	Critical Realist	Neo-Empiricist	Critical Relativist	Constructivist
Ontology (see further Guba & Lincoln, 1994)	Is there a single reality 'out there'?	yes	yes	no	no	no
Epistemology I (see further Schutz, 1967)	Can human behaviour in the social world be adequately understood only through 'natural sciences-based' research methods?	yes	yes/no	no	no	no
Epistemology II (see further Guba & Lincoln, 1994)	Is the researcher 'objectively detached' from what is being researched?	yes	yes/no	yes	no	no
Axiology (see further Burrell & Morgan, 1979)	Is 'radical societal change' the ultimate goal of your research?	no	yes	no	yes	no

Source: The researcher.

This specification is then contextualised (a) with an analysis of the most suitable theoretical perspectives for the present research amongst different interpretivist traditions, before (b) a more concrete discussion about the most appropriate methodological considerations and methods is conducted.

The process of reflecting on the researcher's paradigmatic assumptions in the previous section has helped to elucidate my philosophical position within wider discourse. The process clarified that my position does not fit in with objectivist, positivist, critical realist, neo-empiricist or critical relativist research traditions (see Table 4-3). Nonetheless, within the constructivist research arena – which is part of interpretivism – there are still many different schools of thought, which could be

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[7] Additional sources used to create this table: Crotty, 1998; Johnson & Clark, 2006; Johnson & Duberley, 2000 & 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994.

considered in terms of potentially relevant theoretical perspectives (Crotty, 1998; Patton, 2002). First of all, the position within the arena of constructivism should be briefly clarified before various theoretical perspectives are further discussed.

There are no widely accepted definitions when it comes to the terms constructivism and constructionism. Furthermore, there is no widespread agreement as to whether they mean the same or different things (Patton, 2002) and some authors prefer to use the former while others prefer the latter term. In addition, in some literature the terms are used interchangeably. Crotty (1998) and Schwandt (2000) describe constructionism as focusing primarily on the collective generation and transmission of meaning while constructivism focuses mainly on the meaning making activity of the individual's mind. Based on the researcher's ontological stance and the overall research aim, the conceptualisations of brand managers are the focus of the project exploring the specific meaning making in their *individual* minds.

Therefore, based on Crotty's (1998) and Schwandt's (2000) descriptions, the research can primarily be classified as constructivism-oriented. Nonetheless, the individual's meaning making is done in a *social* context and thus also includes a constructionistic element, which takes an inter-subjective and collective generation and transmission of meaning into account. This also includes an acknowledgement of how fundamentally liberating but, at the same time, also limiting society's cultures and subcultures can be for the meaning making of individual social actors (Crotty, 1998). The present research will therefore be described in the following as a *social* constructivist approach to bring the constructionistic element together with the more individual-oriented constructivist focus.

In summary, a social constructivist perspective assumes that reality can be subjective, socially constructed and multiple at the same time (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Based on the literature review in chapter 2, this addresses the phenomenon that a brand manager's mental brand conceptualisation might be multi-faceted, used in a situation specific way (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a & 1998b) and consisting of elements of personally developed, subjective brand definitions or models as well as adopted, inter-subjectively constructed brand comprehensions. Social constructivism focuses primarily on the in-depth understanding of individuals'

meaning making rather than the understanding and transforming of society as a whole. As with assumptions regarding values, social constructivists completely dismiss the possibility of a neutral observational language because it masks how language creates social reality, or at least different versions of social reality (Johnson & Clark, 2006). In accordance with the literature review in chapters 2 and 3, a social constructivist perspective interprets brands as social phenomena that come to life in the interaction between internal and external stakeholders in a potentially – at least partially – uncontrollable way as a complex and dynamic social process (Melewar et al., 2012). Overall, this viewpoint also acknowledges that external stakeholders have become increasingly relevant and powerful (Antorini & Andersen, 2005). This fits in with the situation that brand managers find themselves in, as elicited from the literature review, in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

Having clarified the researcher's overall position as social constructivist so far, now different interpretivist traditions will be briefly discussed in terms of their influence as relevant *theoretical perspectives* (see Figure 4-1, middle pillar) for the overall social constructivist research endeavour.

4.4.1 Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical perspective or perspectives of a research design can be described as the link between paradigmatic grounding on the one hand and methodological considerations on the other (Figure 4-1). This provides a context for the methodological process and – through its close connection to the paradigmatic grounding – a basis for the methodology's internal logic and key criteria (Crotty, 1998). This is in line with Tracy's (2010) requirement of *meaningful coherence* regarding quality in qualitative research (Table 4-1). From a research process-oriented angle, in the following discussion about the most relevant theoretical research perspectives, the results of the paradigmatic grounding analysis in section 4.3 will now be 'brought together' with the findings of the literature reviews in chapters 2 and 3. This is also visualised in Figure 4-1. Having briefly clarified the concept of social constructivism above, next the concept of

interpretivism will be briefly clarified as a foundation for the discussion of its various intellectual traditions relevant to the present context.

The term interpretivism is defined differently by different authors. It is sometimes used as a synonym for all qualitative inquiry but this blurs distinctions between considerably different interpretivist schools of thought (Schwandt, 2007). One commonality though between the different interpretivist research communities is their general differentiation between human (social) action and movements of physical objects because for interpretivists human activity is inherently meaningful (Schutz, 1967; Schwandt, 2000). Thus, to understand a particular social action, interpretivist researchers aim to grasp the meanings which constitute that action (Schwandt, 2000). Furthermore, interpretivism also emphasises processes and meanings which occur naturally in people's life worlds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b).

This commonality amongst interpretivists resonates with the present epistemological stance explained above that social constructivists should focus on the processes and the subjective meaning(s) of social action from the perspective(s) of the participants, i.e. the social actors involved in a certain context. It also fits in with the overall research aim of exploring how brands are conceptualised in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management from the perspective(s) of the people who are potentially most affected by this democratisation in their immediate working life world – the professional brand managers themselves. Based on this point of departure and a literature review of the research methodology literature, the most relevant interpretivist schools of thought for the present research context have been identified as follows:

- Max Weber's Concept of Verstehen (Blaikie, 2007; Bryman, 2004; Crotty, 1998)
- Phenomenology (Blaikie, 2007; Bryman, 2004; Crotty, 1998)
- Hermeneutics (Blaikie, 2007; Bryman, 2004; Crotty, 1998)
- Symbolic Interactionism (Bryman, 2004; Crotty, 1998)

An introduction and evaluation of these four interpretivist schools of thought can be found in Appendix 2. The evaluation and discussion of these interpretivist perspectives showed that the most appropriate way to develop the concrete research

design should be based not purely on one of the four discussed interpretivist approaches but rather a combination of them (Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998). Through a combined approach the resulting integrated perspective can be specified as follows.

Based on the insights generated from the discussion in Appendix 2, the present research needed to focus on investigating not only the key elements but also the processes which brand managers incorporate when conceptualising brands in the current age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. To develop an in-depth understanding of these key elements and processes the researcher should investigate particularly the brand managers' meaning making in their everyday work life environment. In terms of *how* this can be achieved the following methodological considerations need to be taken into account:

- Brand managers' meanings are potentially in constant flux
- A qualitative research design needs to be chosen which can cope with the brand managers' potentially very varied and multiple meanings
- The theoretical thought constructs developed by the researcher should be based on the thought objects constructed by the brand managers
- However, the research design also needs to enable the researcher to look for hidden, indirect and taken-for-granted meanings
- It appears to be beneficial to include participation, conversation and/or direct dialogue with brand managers as part of the data generation method
- Actively entering the brand managers' life worlds seems to be recommendable to understand how they comprehend brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management and what they take into account regarding their conceptualisations
- 'Bracketing out' preconceptions is not a desirable option; rather, it needs to be acknowledged that all understanding is situated and value-laden and that I need to go into the fieldwork with an open mind, not an empty one

4.4.2 Methodology

Methodology is the next step within the middle column of the Three Pillars of Research Design Framework (see Figure 4-1). Having clarified the overall research

aim (right pillar); the positioning of the research instrument (left pillar); and the relevant theoretical perspectives (top level of the middle pillar), next the methodology needed to be developed based on these previous considerations. The term methodology should in the context of the Three Pillars Framework be defined as research strategy. The research strategy is underpinned by the theoretical perspectives, paradigmatic positioning and overall research aim discussed earlier and it links these to the choice and use of methods (Crotty, 1998). It provides a set of guidelines for how the research should be undertaken and clarifies the implication of these guidelines for the choice and application of methods (Saunders et al., 2009). It therefore leads to and clarifies the application of the research tools through which understanding is created. Furthermore, methodology as strategy does not only provide guidelines and conventions of how to conduct the research but also a language and format of how to communicate the subsequent findings (Daly, 2003).

In terms of research strategy it has been elicited from the theoretical considerations so far, that instead of a quantitative methodology, which uses hypothetical-deductive approaches that 'uncover' relationships among variables and test general propositions, a qualitative research methodology is required, which allows a focus on context, complexity and multiple meanings (Gephart, 2004). Qualitative research offers the opportunity to create "holistic depictions of realities that cannot be reduced to a few variables" (Gephart, 2004, p. 453). Quantitative research, in contrast to this, "emphasizes measurement and analysis of causal relations among variables" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). For the present context a study of a phenomenon is needed in the complex environments in which it naturally occurs (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and in which particular social experiences are given meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

An investigation of "meanings in use" (Gephart, 2004, p. 453) by the brand managers will also help to understand how the managers conceptualise brands in their life world and their lived, brand-related social interactions. However, one of the challenges of qualitative research is that it is "particularly difficult to pin down" due to its "flexibility and emergent character" (Van Maanen, 1998, p. xi). Qualitative research is therefore – at least to a certain extent – "often designed at the same time it is being done" (Gephart, 2004, p. 455).

Based on (a) this insight, (b) the overall research question and (c) the identified theoretical perspectives relevant for the grounding of the researcher as the research instrument, three methodological research traditions have been considered due to their compatibility with social constructivism: grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), ethnography (Creswell, 1998 & 2007) and case study research (Farquhar, 2012; Yin, 2003). Comparing these three traditions, it appeared that grounded theory was the most appropriate methodology for the given context. A grounded theory approach is most useful when adequate theories are not available to explain a phenomenon under investigation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990 & 1998). As Creswell (2007) states, "theories may be present, but they are incomplete because they do not address potentially valuable variables of interest to the researcher" (p. 66). This latter point is the case for the present context. As shown in chapters 2 and 3, the conceptualisation of brands has been investigated previously but hardly from the perspective(s) of professional brand managers themselves in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Iglesias et al., 2013).

In terms of research focus, grounded theory is best equipped to allow the development of theory grounded in empirical data. Furthermore, in line with the identified combined theoretical perspective, a grounded theory approach enabled the researcher most appropriately to understand the brand managers' conceptualisations of brands in their life worlds and to develop his thought constructs subsequently based on the thought objects constructed by the participating brand managers.

Grounded theory methodology represents a research strategy which, while adaptable and flexible, is systematic and co-ordinated in its approach (Charmaz, 2006; Robson, 2002). Nonetheless, a closer look at the development of grounded theory methodology shows a tension between the evolving and inductive approach of qualitative research generally on the one hand and the systematic process of grounded theory methodology, particularly as promoted by Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990 &1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008 & 2015) on the other (see further Charmaz 2006 & 2014; Robson 2002 & 2011). This tension will be discussed later but, first of all, grounded theory methodology needs to be clarified further for the present context.

The term grounded theory has ambiguous and even contested meanings (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). One reason for the confusion surrounding it is that in some cases it refers to the outcome of a research process where the theory is grounded in the data, i.e. a grounded *theory*; while in other cases it describes a methodology or method applied in this research process (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a; Charmaz, 2003). To differentiate these concepts in the following, the term (a) grounded theory methodology (GTM) will refer to the research strategy and its conventions/rules/ principles which, based on the combined theoretical perspective, inform the design of the research study; (b) grounded theory method (GTm) will refer to the practical procedures used for the GTM-based data generation and analysis; and (c) grounded theory (GT) will refer to the result of the application of GTM and GTm (see further Birks & Mills, 2011 & 2015; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a).

Several decades after the publication of the seminal book The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the GTM landscape can be described as complex (Goulding, 2002; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). This complexity of what might be called a family of methodologies and methods can be difficult to grasp (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). Although the diversity within this family appears to be considerable, some broad common denominators still seem to be recognisable across a broad range of *family members*. These common denominators appear to be **constant comparative analysis, memo writing, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation** as well as some form of **theoretical coding** (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goulding, 2009; Kearney, 2007; Suddaby, 2006).

Another common denominator between various GTMs is the claim to be systematic. Glaser, for example, describes grounded theory as "based on the *systematic* generating of theory from data, that itself is *systematically* obtained" (Glaser, 1978, p. 2, emphasis added). Goulding defines grounded theory as a methodology "used to generate theory through the *systematic* and simultaneous process of data collection and analysis" (Goulding, 2002, p. 170, emphasis added). Charmaz also uses the term *systematic*, however, she states that GTMs "consist of *systematic*, yet *flexible* guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2, emphasis added). While the degree to which GTM should be implemented flexibly or

systematically and prescriptively does not appear to be a major issue at first sight, it was one of the main reasons why Glaser and Strauss later developed different GTM approaches (Goulding, 2002; Stern, 1994).

Apart from the Glaserian school (e.g. Glaser, 1978, 1990 & 1992) and the Straussian school (e.g. Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990 & 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; 2015), the constructivist school (e.g. Charmaz, 1995, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2014) has established itself as a second generation GTM school of thought (Birks & Mills, 2011 & 2015; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a; Morse, 2009).

A closer inspection of these three different schools, in terms of their approach to being systematic, reveals that one of the main differences appears in the area of data analysis. Glaser (1978 & 1992) is adamant that researchers should let data emerge without preconceived concepts or even asking extensive questions of research participants (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b). Due to his mantra *don't force it but let the data emerge* and consequently his criticism of the Straussian approach, Glaser has not provided any standardised recipes or systematic frameworks to analyse data for generating grounded theory beyond the provision of his "Six C's: Causes, Context, Contingencies, Consequences, Covariances and Conditions" (1978, p. 74). Strauss and Corbin (e.g. 1990 & 1998), in contrast, offer more prescriptive guidance on how to generate grounded theory from data, for example, through the application of their conditional matrix. However, critics of the Straussian approach point out that (a) the conditional matrix cannot be mechanically applied independently of the conditions of the research context and (b) techniques such as axial coding rely far too much on preconceived prescriptions (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a).

Although Strauss and Corbin offer a more systematic framework to analyse data for the development of grounded theory, it seemed that neither their approach nor Glaser's were appropriate for the present context. The reason for this is that, firstly, many members of the Glaserian and Straussian schools assume that theory can be discovered as emerging from the data separate from the researcher (Charmaz, 2006). From a social constructivist perspective, researchers are not neutral, their own standpoints, historical locations, and relative privileges shape what they *can* ask and see in the first place (Birks & Mills, 2011 & 2015; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b;

Gergen, 2015; Patton, 2002). Unlike the positivistic/objectivistic ontological and epistemological perspectives of the two traditional GTM approaches the constructivist school takes this adequately into account. The constructivist school assumes that neither data nor theories are discovered, rather, researchers become part of the world which they study and the data they collect (Charmaz, 2006). Any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretive portrayal* of the studied world, not an exact picture of it (Charmaz, 2000 & 2006). Or, in other words, the product of GTM is more like a painting than a photograph (Charmaz, 1995). Based on Charmaz's (2006) and Suddaby's (2006) work on GTM as well as Gallagher's (1992) and Schwandt's (2007) contributions regarding the hermeneutic circle of philosophical hermeneutics; and supported by Crotty (1998), Glaser and Strauss (1967), Goulding (2009), and Kearney (2007), the following methodological framework was used for the present research project (Figure 4-2).

Figure 4-2: A Three Phase Social Constructivist GTM Framework

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Source: Charmaz, 2006; Gallagher, 1992; Schwandt, 2007; Suddaby, 2006.

When it comes to the level of prescription within the constructivist school of GTM, Charmaz is critical of formulaic recipes (e.g. Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). For her, GTMs constitute a craft that researchers practise. Consequently, practitioners may vary in their emphasis on and application of one or another aspect but taken together should share the key commonalities (Charmaz, 2006). As mentioned above, for her, GTMs consist of systematic yet flexible guidelines. Charmaz advises researchers who want to use GTM that "[at] each phase of the research journey, *your* readings of your work guide your next step" (Charmaz, 2006, p. xi, emphasis in original). For Charmaz (2006, p. xi) a "combination of involvement and interpretation" leads the researcher to the next step. In this spirit the Three Phase Social Constructivist GTM Framework, as depicted in Figure 4-2, was developed for the present context and will be explained in detail in the following.

4.4.2.1 GTM Phase I: Preparation

Despite experienced researchers, such as Suddaby (2006), claiming that GTM is an inherently 'messy' methodology, this is not an excuse for ignoring paradigmatic inconsistencies in the GTM realm. Consequently, during the GTM Phase I process, the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher as the research instrument was clarified. Furthermore, as Figure 4-1 indicates, apart from the identification of the paradigmatic grounding, the literature review for the present research project has also been a key influencing factor for the development of the research design. This led to the first tension when consulting the GTM literature.

Since Glaser and Strauss's (1967) publication of The Discovery of Grounded Theory, concerns have emerged in regard to how a researcher should deal with the existing literature in his or her area of research when doing GTM (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a; Charmaz, 2006). A common misconception is that GTM requires researchers to enter the field without any knowledge of prior research (Suddaby, 2006). At the more extreme end of this misconception, the researcher is expected not only to start the fieldwork with a blank mind (i.e. no knowledge of the existing literature) but also with a blank agenda (i.e. without a defined research question); at the less extreme end, researchers are at least expected to defer reading existing theory/literature until data is generated and analysed (Suddaby, 2006). Several authors indicate that the suggestion of deferring the exploration of relevant literature often comes from senior researchers, who have already developed a comprehensive understanding through their own research and study of the literature over a number of years (e.g. Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). Stern (2007, p. 123) points out that this is unlikely to be possible for many researchers nowadays "because of the rigidity of professors, ethical reviewers, and funding agencies, all of whom demand a thorough literature review prior to starting data gathering" (see also Charmaz, 2006).

This has been applicable in the present case, since the PhD research proposal and the PhD registration documents required the provision of a literature review. Lempert (2007) makes another point. She highlights that a literature review can help researchers to understand a conversation and to participate in it more adequately. Only if a researcher knows the current parameters and topics of a conversation can he/she judge what is new and what is not (Lempert, 2007). For Suddaby (2006) "the

idea that reasonable research can be conducted without a clear research question and absent theory simply defies logic" (p. 634). Thus, (a) the earlier tentative versions of the literature reviews, on which chapters 2 and 3 were built, and (b) the subsequent development of the overall research question, can therefore be interpreted as preparation or sensitising (Charmaz, 2006) for the Phase II empirical fieldwork (see Figure 4-2).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) accept that researchers usually bring considerable knowledge of literature with them when they engage in fieldwork. In later publications (e.g. Corbin & Strauss, 2008) they have even stated that a familiarisation with the literature is advantageous before embarking on the generation of data. What should be avoided is that the researcher becomes too immersed in the literature and thus becomes 'theoretically contaminated' (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Goulding, 2009). Charmaz (2006) clarifies that Strauss and Glaser's (1967) originally intended purpose for delaying the literature review was to avoid the investigators importing preconceived theoretical ideas and imposing them on their work. Goulding therefore recommends that "the researcher should read in related areas from the start and allow the data to direct the literature to inform the emerging theory and vice versa" (2009, p. 390). This is similar to what has happened in my case. The literature review was important to, first of all, identify the gap in the literature and develop my overall research aim and question. Since the voice of the brand managers has hardly been investigated beyond individual case studies in the context of the internet-based democratisation of brand management I then read the literature in related areas, which has helped me to sensitise myself for the fieldwork.

4.4.2.2 GTM Phase II: Developing A Theoretical Understanding Grounded In Primary Data

Based on the combined theoretical perspectives of philosophical hermeneutics, Weber's verstehen and the phenomenological construct of meaning making, GTM Phase II (see Figure 4-2), was focused on the development of an in-depth understanding of brand managers' conceptualisations of brands in the context of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. Through the processes conducted during Phase II, the development of an in-depth understanding of the topic

was expected. More precisely, through the repeated sampling of participants ($b_{i, ii, iii, ...}$, see Figure 4-2), primary data generation and collection, coding and analysis processes ($c_{i, ii, iii, ...}$), in combination with continuous memo writing ($d_{i, ii, iii, ...}$), the acquired in-depth understanding was transformed into theoretical findings (Figure 4-2, Phase II). The letters 'i, ii, iii, …' in Figure 4-2 should thereby indicate that the processes represented by the letters 'a', 'b', 'c' and 'd' are repeated on a continuous basis (i = first time; ii = second time; iii = third time; etc). These continuous 'research loops' are in line with Charmaz's GTM approach of learning "how people make sense of their situations and act on them" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 11). As we – as researchers – "learn how our research participants make sense of their experiences, we begin to make analytic sense of their meanings and actions" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 11).

When conducting GTM-based research it is important to differentiate between GTM and phenomenological methodological approaches. While there is a certain overlap with and sympathy for phenomenological research in GTM (Suddaby, 2006), there are also clear differences on a methodological level. In phenomenological research, data is often presented in raw or relatively raw form to: (a) emphasise the *subjectivity* of the actor's life world experiences; (b) provide *thick*, i.e. rich and detailed, *descriptions* of the social actors' lived experiences; (c) allow the reader of the researcher's account a *holistic interpretation* of the social actors' understanding of their experiences and life worlds; and (d) demonstrate *authenticity* (Suddaby, 2006).

In GTM, by contrast, the research may start with a phenomenological interest or question regarding social actors' subjective understandings of a situation but the primary focus is not on the actors' individual stories themselves (Suddaby, 2006). In GTM, the individuals' stories are a means to elicit information and thereby develop a deeper understanding of a certain situation and/or phenomenon (Suddaby, 2006). The data needs to be lifted to a higher, i.e. more abstract or conceptual, level (Goulding, 2009).

These points were very useful since they helped to clarify my own methodological approach for the present context. As shown earlier (in section 4.4.1 and Appendix 2), my combined theoretical perspective contains phenomenological elements. I have

been interested in the subjectivity of the social actors' life world experiences (point a), I want to allow the reader of the thesis to be able to get as close to the data as possible to enable them to make their own (holistic) interpretations of my participants' experiences (point b) and I want to provide the participants of the research with a voice and demonstrate a certain kind of authenticity by showing some 'genuine statements' (point c) (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Robson, 2002 & 2011; Tracy, 2010). In line with Tracy's (2010) requirement of *credibility* to ensure quality in qualitative research, the research needs to provide an adequate degree of multivocality and concrete details which link explicit as well as implicit (tacit) knowledge, and uses evidence that is "showing rather than telling" (p. 840).

Nevertheless the primary goal is to understand, in a more 'generalisable' sense of middle-range theory (Bourgeois, 1979; Brody & de Chernatony, 2009; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Merton 1949 & 1968), the different key building blocks and processes which brand managers use when conceptualising brands. The aim is to develop theory grounded in data based on the participants' individual perspectives. The data therefore needs to be 'lifted'. I thus provide in the following chapters a mixture of individual participants' accounts to exemplify certain points but also conceptualisations of the different perspectives and experiences to move beyond thick descriptions (see also Goulding, 2003). While this does not mean generalisability in a measurable sense, the aim of this research has been to produce middle range theory (Charmaz, 2000). Merton (1949 & 1968) explains that middle-range theories are not all-encompassing grand theories but theories that are applicable to specific areas only. In the current context, that is brand conceptualisation of brand managers rather than brand conceptualisations in general. This resonates with existing brand research literature which claims that middle-range theory is required to integrate different specific conceptualisations into a more inclusive theoretical context (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Brodie & de Chernatony, 2009).

Another key requirement for GTM is its combination of induction and deduction. Strauss and Corbin (1998), for example, note that GTM requires "an interplay between induction and deduction (as in all science)" (p. 137). The iterative nature of the grounded theory research process can be interpreted as evidence of the presence

of an element of deduction. The coding process in GTM-based research usually begins immediately after the first sets of data have been generated (Charmaz, 2006). The coding process itself needs, to a varying extent of course, some theoretical reflection which might then potentially influence the generation and collection of subsequent data sets (Birks & Mills, 2011 & 2015). The movement backwards and forwards between data collection on the one hand, and coding, analysing and theorising on the other, is an iterative process that contains elements of induction as well as deduction (Bryman & Bell, 2007; see also Figure 4-2). So the boundaries between the two different approaches are not that clear in GTM. This is one of the reasons why GTM is interpreted by some as a 'messy' methodology (Suddaby, 2006).

However, despite deduction being relevant for GTM as a research strategy, GTM should not be used to test reality but rather to gain insights from the data of how social actors interpret or deal with their reality (Suddaby, 2006). GT researchers do not test hypotheses (in the Popperian sense of falsification) but:

> they do 'test' their tentative ideas and conceptual structures against ongoing observations. A key component of the constant comparative method is such critical evaluation of emerging constructs against ongoing observations (Suddaby, 2006, p. 636).

In contrast to the perception of some researchers that GTM is 'messy', others interpret it as 'systematic'. As presented earlier, one of the key aspects of GTM stressed by several authors is its systematic approach of collecting and analysing data. This might even have contributed to the perception that GTM is a relatively mechanistic methodology. Another contributory factor to this perception might be the overemphasis on coding and coding techniques (Suddaby, 2006). However, following the different coding techniques does not necessarily lead to grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2011 & 2015; Charmaz, 2006). Following the GTM 'rules' mechanically or rigidly potentially lacks the creative spark that qualitative interpretive research thrives on (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Saldaña, 2009; Suddaby, 2006). Therefore, just following the GTM-oriented recipe by the letter, like a cookbook approach, will not necessarily produce any theoretical concept.

While in quantitative research the inquirer is supposed to be 'neutral', in qualitative research the investigator is considered an active element of the research process and the act of research entails a creative component (Suddaby, 2006). Consequently it can also be concluded that software packages such as NVivo can help with the organisation of the data but not with the interpretation as part of the creative research process (Suddaby, 2006). This is important for the concept of the researcher being the research instrument.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) were both aware of the tension and problem that the success of a GTM-based research project depended to a certain degree on the capabilities of the researcher as a (creative) research instrument. This tension can ultimately be seen as one of the main reasons, if not the main reason, for the 'split' between the two. Glaser (1978) continued to favour creativity and openness in GTM while Strauss (together with Corbin 1990 & 1998; see also Corbin & Strauss, 2008 & 2015) developed more formal and prescriptive routines for analysing data (Locke, 1996 & 2001; Suddaby, 2006). However, Strauss and Corbin were both aware of the dangers of an overly rigid use of their approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 19):

> If the researcher simply follows the grounded theory procedures/canons without imagination or insight into what the data are reflecting […] then the published findings fail […]. Because there is an interplay between researcher and data, no method, certainly not grounded theory, can ensure that the interplay will be creative. Creativity depends on the researcher's analytical ability, theoretical sensitivity, and sensibility to the subtleties of the action/interaction […].

Goulding (2009) supports the point made by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Suddaby (2006) by emphasising that there is a misconception amongst some researchers who think that GTM is easy and if the steps described in the literature are followed to the letter, a (grounded) theory will emerge. In contrast to this misconception, GTM-based processes, as interpretive processes, appear to depend rather crucially "upon the sensitivity of a researcher to tacit elements of the data or meanings and connotations that may not be apparent from a mere superficial reading of denotative content" (Suddaby, 2006, p. 639). Some GTM researchers have linked this to a necessary intense immersion in the data, by some even described as a kind of drowning in the data (Langley, 1999). This immersion has also been linked to an extensive exposure to the field under investigation (Suddaby, 2006). As previously

explained, as a qualitative methodology, GTM – via its constant comparative method – requires an intimate and enduring relationship between the researcher and the field under investigation (Suddaby, 2006). This is also in line with Tracy's (2010) requirement of rich rigour regarding the assurance of quality in qualitative research.

Two other previously discussed points become relevant in this context: (a) the researcher's reflection on his positioning and potential biases as the research instrument; and (b) the quality of the contact between the researcher and the researched (Suddaby, 2006). Glaser (1999) adds to this that the GTM researcher also needs important characteristics such as (1) an ability to tolerate confusion temporarily and (2) "an ability to conceptualise data"(p. 838).

4.4.2.3 GTM Phase III: Reporting

At this stage the conceptual memos (see Figure 4-2) are sorted and integrated to report in a coherent way the developed theoretical findings grounded in data. In this context it was helpful to the researcher to accept that despite GTM-oriented research being conducted in an iterative way, where data is generated and analysed more or less simultaneously (Figure 4-2), it is normally reported in a sequential way (Suddaby 2006, p. 637):

> This gap occurs because the norms of presentation in management (and other academic) journals have positivist origins and impose discrete and sequential categories of data collection and analysis on authors trying to present grounded theory research. […] The norm that has evolved is to present grounded theory in the traditional discrete categories and in the same sequence as quantitative research: theory, data collection, data analysis, results.

I have followed the advice given by Suddaby (2006) and present my research results in a traditional, sequential way but provide examples of the applied coding techniques and of the iterative evolution of the conceptual contributions to avoid the impression of methodological slurring. Some of these examples are presented in the next section.

The results of GTM-oriented research are usually presented in a sequential manner emulating the reporting style/approach of quantitative research, despite the GTM

research being conducted mainly in an evolutionary and iterative way, because it is assumed that most readers of academic publications are mainly interested in the results and not necessarily in the evolutionary process of the different iterations which eventually lead to the researchers' final results. Nevertheless, as an interpretivist and social constructivist researcher who aims to conduct high quality qualitative research, I felt that I have the responsibility to provide rigorous, sincere and credible representations of my research results (see Tracy, 2010; and Table 4-1). Consequently, it was intended in the following, at least to a certain extent, to (1) give the research participants 'a voice'; (2) provide adequate evidence that the developed thought concepts and frameworks are developed based on the elicited thought constructs of the participants; and (3) provide the reader of the research with sufficient information to be able to comprehend the coding processes and the evolution of the conceptual categories (see Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Suddaby, 2006). In the findings chapter I have therefore used selected verbatim reports of the interviews and provided in-depth analysis of some individual cases.

However, GTM-oriented research's primary focus is not on the analysis of the individual accounts themselves (Suddaby, 2006). Rather, it has to move beyond thick descriptions; the individual's narratives need to be coded, analysed and used to develop a deeper comprehension of the particular phenomenon – in this case the conceptualisations of brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. From a GTM-based perspective, the individual narratives therefore needed to be coded and analysed to lift the generated and collected data to a higher, more conceptual level eliciting the similarities as well as the differences between individuals to allow for a more systematic and comprehensive understanding of the potentially multiple facets of the phenomenon under investigation (Birks & Mills, 2011; Goulding, 2009).

With this purpose in mind, some selected individual accounts/narratives are presented and analysed in-depth in the following to provide the reader with examples of the applied coding techniques and the iterative evolution of the conceptual categories. This also enables me, from a phenomenological point of view, to present more clearly how the advanced theoretical concepts/categories have been founded/created based on the brand managers' initial thought objects/concepts. From

a philosophical hermeneutics perspective, this illustrates as well how my understanding has evolved regarding the brand managers' thinking about the phenomenon under investigation and shows how my comprehension has moved beyond the initial understanding. Nevertheless, despite the analysis and in-depth discussion of individual cases and key findings, the aim of this research is clearly to move beyond individual managers and provide conceptual findings and insights on a broader level based on the principles of GTM-based constant comparative analysis and theoretical saturation (Figure 4-2). This is important, since the ultimate aim of GTM is to develop *theory* firmly grounded in primary data. Overall, the selection of the individual participants has followed GTM's theoretical sampling criteria (Charmaz, 2006) which will be discussed below.

Another important point in this context for me to keep in mind was that GTM was designed right from the beginning as a *practical* research strategy to help researchers understand complex social processes and phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Suddaby, 2006). Equally, right from the start it was also supposed to help the participants and their 'communities' to better understand a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I therefore also took into consideration that the research reporting needs to provide some theoretical contributions relevant for brand management practice.

4.4.3 Methods

Having discussed the conventions, rules and principles of grounded theory *methodology* (GTM) as a research strategy, now the implications of these points will be clarified for the practical procedures of grounded theory *method* (GTm) when it comes to sample choice, data generation and collection, data analysis and results presentation. Based on the discussion above and a literature review on GTm, the following five essential points have been applied:

1. Theoretical Sampling
2. Constant Comparative Analysis
3. Theoretical Coding
4. Memo writing
5. Theoretical Saturation

4.4.3.1 Theoretical Sampling

As mentioned above, the process of ongoing simultaneous data generation and collection and analysis is an essential part of GTM-oriented research strategies. To achieve this on a method-level, the inquiry needed to start with an initial purposive sample and the data collected during this initial phase was then coded before more data was generated (Birks & Mills, 2011). The tentative findings of this first analysis phase then influenced the next choice of sample. The data generated with this second sample was then analysed and the findings again were used to guide the next choice of sample. This process is called theoretical sampling and was used by the researcher to focus and feed the constant comparative data analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011; see also Figure 4-2). The goal of theoretical sampling on a method-level is to seek relevant data to develop emerging conceptual ideas up to theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2006). Through theoretical sampling the researcher tried to elaborate and refine the different categories constituting the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006). This process aims to develop the different properties of the emerging category/ies until no new properties occur (Charmaz, 2006).

As will become clear later, first a sample of three brand managers was chosen for a first orientation in the field. During the second stage, a further ten were chosen; and finally seven more participants were recruited during the final stage of the data generation process (see Table 4-5). This iterative sampling, data generation and analysis method differentiates GTM-based research designs from other types of research (Birks & Mills, 2011). Important in this context was taking into account that the researcher had to make strategic decisions about which emerging findings to pursue and, particularly in terms of sampling, who would provide the most relevant data to elaborate and refine the emerging findings (Birks & Mills, 2011). These considerations will be explained in further detail below.

As Figure 4-2 indicates, theoretical sampling is used until theoretical saturation is achieved. For the concrete context of this research project this meant that no rigid sampling frame had to be developed beforehand. To be able to address the overall research question, an initial purposive sample of three brand managers was chosen

(Charmaz, 2006). As an initial common denominator, all three brand managers were recruited from organisations with corporate brand-oriented brand architectures. While some researchers claim that "every company has a corporate brand" (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012, p. 1049), for the purpose of a clearer sampling strategy in a specifically stakeholder-oriented context, it has been taken into account that some stakeholders, e.g. consumers, might not necessarily be aware of an organisation (i.e. the corporate brand name) behind a product or service if it is not linked to the corporate brand's name in (at least some of) its communications to these stakeholders.

To minimise the risk of this kind of scenario where a product or service brand is not linked to the organisation which provides them, the participant recruitment process for the selection of the sample was adapted accordingly. For the present context brand managers were only invited to participate if their organisation had generally been including its corporate brand name, at least on a visual level, in its product or service marketing communications to different stakeholders for at least the last 12 months before the interview with the particular manager was conducted. In other words, to classify as a corporate brand for the present sampling context, in terms of different brand architecture and brand marketing communications approaches, an organisation needed to communicate about its products/services to internal stakeholders (employees) as well as external stakeholders (upstream, e.g. suppliers, as well as downstream, e.g. customers) under the same 'brand' name as the organisation – either as a masterbrand, a monolithic "branded house" (Aaker, 2004, p. 48) or at least on a weak, medium or strong endorsement level (van Riel and van Bruggen, 2002; see Table 4-4 below for an example of different endorsement levels).

Table 4-4: Continuum Of Corporate Brand Endorsement Types Using The ING Group As An Example

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Source: van Riel and van Bruggen, 2002, p. 243.

For further details regarding the chosen sample of corporate brand managers please see Table 4-5.

Table 4-5: Details About The Sample Of Brand Managers

Manager	Gender	Age Bracket	Organisation Size (in UK)	Primary Business Focus	Job Title
Andrew	Male	40-49	Large	B2C	Director of Brand Strategy
Bob	Male	50-59	Large	B2C	Group Marketing Director
Charlotte	Female	30-39	Small	B2B	CEO
Daniela	Female	30-39	Large	B2C	Marketing Director
Edward	Male	40-49	Large	B2C	Marketing and Communications Director
Felicia	Female	30-39	Medium	B2B	Project Manager
Gina	Female	20-29	Large	B2C	Brand Manager
Hendrik	Male	40-49	Medium	B2B	Marketing and Sales Director
Ian	Male	40-49	Small	B2B	CEO
Jeffrey	Male	30-39	Small	B2B	Managing Director
Kirk	Male	40-49	Small	B2C	CEO
Leonard	Male	40-49	Large	B2C	Marketing Director
Maurice	Male	50-59	Large	B2B	Marketing Director
Nina	Female	50-59	Small	B2B	Senior Account Director
Oscar	Male	20-29	Small	B2C	Marketing Director
Pauline	Female	30-39	Medium	B2B	Senior Account Director
Quentin	Male	30-39	Small	B2B	Associate Director
Richard	Male	40-49	Large	B2C	Marketing Director
Steve	Male	40-49	Medium	B2B	Senior Editor
Tim	Male	30-39	Medium	B2B	Director of Innovation

Source: The researcher

As indicated in Table 4-1, part of Tracy's (2010) framework for quality assurance in qualitative research is about the researcher considering ethical issues in relation to the conducted investigation. In the present case, the researcher was confronted with a procedural issue in that one high profile participant, among the 20 brand managers, was concerned about the protection of his anonymity. This concern has been taken fully into account through the format in which information about individual participants is presented in the different chapters, particularly, in Table 4-5.

In an effort to protect the identity of the participants and their employers the following precautions have been taken (a) each participant has been given a codename; (b) the participant's exact age is not revealed; and (c) the exact size of the

participant's organisation in terms of full-time employees in the UK is not revealed, since the sample includes some high profile organisations and individuals within the British marketing industry. Furthermore each organisation (i.e. respective employer) has been given a codename related to the codename of the interviewee (first letter), for example Andrew's organisation is called 'Organisation A', Bob's employer 'Organisation B', and so forth. If an organisation has 'corporate brand name endorsed' sub-brands these are subsequently codenamed as well, for example in Bob's case Brand B1, Brand B2, etc. Also, when Bob talks about organisations and/or brands his organisation collaborates with these partners are codenamed as Organisation or Brand BA, BB, BC, etc.

In terms of the theoretical sampling process, based on the results of the first three interviews, further brand managers from organisations with corporate brand-oriented brand architectures were then recruited. This allowed the researcher to choose interviewees from a broad range of industries: consulting (1), education (3), entertainment (1), fashion (1), financial services (3), food (1), high tech (1), IT hardware and software (2), marketing services (3), media (1), pharmaceuticals (1), telecommunications (1) and transport (1). It also enabled the recruitment of participants from a variety of organisational sizes (small, medium and large organisations); and B2C- as well as B2B-focused institutions (see Table 4-5). Furthermore, I managed to recruit a diverse range of managers in terms of criteria such as age and gender with the aim to have a high level of variation amongst the participants.

The 'gender' column indicates that I have recruited considerably more male (n = 14) than female managers (n = 6), which reflects the situation in the UK that women are under-represented in most industries when it comes to positions held in middle and senior management (Gómez Ansón, 2012; see also Barsh, 2014). In the next column of Table 4-5 the participants have been categorised according to their age at the time of the interview. This column shows that it has been challenging to recruit managers under the age of 30 and over the age of 59 – I have only been able to recruit two managers under the age of 30 and none over the age of 59. Taking the limitations and the general difficulties into account when it comes to getting access to managers to participate in academic research (Amabile et al., 2001; Rynes et al., 2001 & 2007)

the data in Table 4-5 indicates that nevertheless a diverse range of corporate brand managers has been recruited in regard to the theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation strategy.

This is also reflected in terms of the next variable, 'organisation size'. This column illustrates that the participants have been recruited from organisations of various sizes. Size has been measured in terms of permanent full-time employees at the time of the interview. 'Small' indicates that an organisation has fewer than 50 permanent full-time employees in the UK. 'Medium' specifies that an organisation has between 50 and 499 permanent UK-based employees. 'Large' then indicates that an organisation employs 500 people or more permanently and full-time in the UK at the time of the interview with the respective brand manager (European Commission, 2003).

The 'Primary Business Focus' column shows whether the organisation has primarily a Business-to-Business (B2B; n = 11) or Business-to-Consumer (B2C; n = 9) market orientation. Finally, the last column in Table 4-5 shows that I recruited not only marketing managers with different levels of seniority from a broad range of sectors in the UK but also one MD and three CEOs. This is in line with my recruitment strategy since the literature states that these 'very senior' managers with overall responsibility for the organisation can be interpreted as the ultimate corporate brand managers (e.g. Balmer, 2001a & 2001b; Bendisch et al., 2013). In general, for the purpose of my participant recruitment strategy I defined corporate brand managers as members of an organisation's management team who (a) are employed by a 'corporate brand' organisation in terms of the employer's brand architecture and brand marketing communications approach – as explained above; and (b) have partial or overall leadership responsibility for the marketing of that organisation.

The length of the interviews varied between 35 minutes and 2 hours. However, most interviews lasted around an hour. In addition to their time for the interview, several participants provided me generously with further material (presentations, reports, books, articles, etc). All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the researcher and audiorecorded. Most of the interviews (n = 12) were conducted at the interviewees' respective UK-based offices. Five interviews were conducted at the

participants' homes and three were conducted at Oxford Brookes University. Via email and telephone, I was also able to discuss points further with the participants if further clarification was needed.

Face-to-face interviews were chosen in this context as the data collection method since it provided the researcher the best opportunity to 'get close' to the interviewees (Blumer, 1969; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) as per the most relevant theoretical perspectives discussed earlier. These perspectives suggested that it is important to get close to the participants and their life world in the conducted research. While Skype, telephone or online interviews would also have been feasible alternatives to investigate the participants' conceptualisations of brands, the method of direct face-to-face interviews was preferred since it provided the best foundation to create a situation of trust between the researcher and the researched (Cassell, 2015).

4.4.3.2 Constant Comparative Analysis

The constant comparative method is a means of analysis which, on an ongoing basis, generates codes, categories and theoretical concepts through comparing data with data, data with code, code with code, code with category, category with category, category with concept, and concept with concept (Charmaz, 2006). To be able to implement this complex comparative analysis process on an ongoing basis, the literature usually suggests that the researcher engages in data interpretation at the same time, more or less, as the data generation and collection is conducted (e.g. Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Goulding, 2009). While the GTm instructions in the methodology literature were generally helpful to handle the considerable complexity of constant comparative analysis, one additional challenge emerged during the early stages of the data analysis. This additional challenge was not anticipated from the literature review on constant comparative analysis. The additional challenge which occurred right from the early stages was that, apart from creating new codes, categories and concepts, the analytical process also seemed to require the *re-evaluation* of previously collected data.

This led, in the light of new emerging insights, to repeatedly re-analysing and re-coding data that had been collected earlier. Subsequently, an important

methodological conclusion from this research is that key findings can be generated not only during the data analysis at, virtually, the same time as it is collected but also considerably later when the data is re-analysed and re-coded in the light of new findings and insights emerging during later conducted interviews.

More generally, the data analysis needed to focus as much on similarities as on differences since both needed to be explained through the emerging codes, categories and concepts (Goulding, 2009) which will be explained in the next section. This kind of analysis process meant that – as explained earlier – GTm goes beyond thick descriptions to develop in-depth conceptual and theoretical understanding (Goulding, 2009). For example, the richness of Andrew's conceptualisations of 'brands are about multiple relationships' (see Appendix 3) would, from a purely phenomenological perspective, deserve a thick description and analysis in its own right. However, in the GTm context of the constant comparison analysis, the focus is not on phenomenological thick descriptions. Instead, Andrew's elaborations were deconstructed through coding and used as a springboard to investigate the relevance of internal and external stakeholders further – across the experiences of different brand managers. Andrew's elaborations on the 'brands are about multiple relationships' theme have thereby also led to one of the early key categories in the constant comparison process of the first three interviews (see Appendix 4). Further examples of the constant comparison process will be presented and explained in the next sections and in the subsequent findings chapter.

Despite the almost permanent 'work-in-progress' nature of the constant comparison process regarding the emerging insights and findings, the evolution of the present research can be roughly divided into three stages (Charmaz, 2006):

- Stage I: Initial sensitising to the field and data generation/collection; initial and focused coding[8]; development of first tentative categories and concepts (Interviews 1 to 3)

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[8] Initial and focused coding etc. will be explained in the next section.

- Stage II: Continuing initial and focused coding; further development of tentative categories and concepts; clarifying the relationships between different categories and conceptual findings (Interviews 4 to 13)
- Stage III: Focus on refining selected categories and concepts; adopting certain categories as theoretical key components and processes (Interviews 14 to 20)

For Stage I, part of the literature reviewed in chapters 2 and 3 was used as part of the sensitising process for the initial fieldwork. The results of this sensitising process indicated that the brand managers' conceptualisations of brands seem to be intrinsically linked to the context in which they are used. This insight was taken into account for the preparations of the initial fieldwork. After the preparatory work described above was completed, the first three interviews were used to sensitise myself in the field, to generate and collect data (Birks & Mills, 2011) and to develop some initial codes, ideas, and categories. To be able to do that and develop a preliminary understanding of the brand managers' conceptualisations, interview guidelines, i.e. interview questions, were developed.

It is important to mention that following traditional GTm practice (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967), no pilot interviews were conducted. The rationale for this is that (a) first interviews would only be considered as a sensitising exercise and (b) the interview questions would be continuously evolving and changing in relation to the emerging findings. The guidelines for the first interview (see Figure 4-3) contained initial questions as an aide memoire to cover three different relevant conceptual topic areas which emerged from the initial sensitising process based on the literature review: brands/corporate brands, brand management and the democratisation of the internet in the context of brand management.

In the context of this data generation and collection process, the guidelines were helpful as an aid to support the interviewing process. The guidelines' primary purpose is to give some direction in terms of the different topics that should be covered during the interview and also, more specifically, to provide some initial questions based on the literature review-based sensitising. For instance, the interview guidelines for the first interview were structured as follows (see also Figure 4-3):

Figure 4-3: Guidelines For The First Interview

Interview Guidelines
    - Confidentiality
    - Focus: YOUR opinion, thoughts, experiences count
    - Open interview
 	
1. JOB ROLE: First of all, can you please briefly describe for me what your current job role as a brand manager is about?
 	
2. CHALLENGES: What do you see as the biggest challenges currently in your role as brand manager?
 	
3. OPPORTUNITIES/ POTENTIAL: What do you see as the biggest opportunities in your area?
   What is new, where do you see potential?
 	
----- 	
4. BRAND MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA: How relevant is social media in the context of brand management for you?
 	
5. SOCIAL MEDIA AND UGC: What are the most important channels that consumers/ customers and other stakeholders have used to voice their opinion about your brand/ organisation? (Examples?)
 	
6. SOCIAL MEDIA'S/UGC's IMPACT: To what extent has social media/UGC had an influence/impact on your work?
   Impact on your organisation's brand? (Example?)
 	
7. ADJUSTMENT: How do you/your organisation as a whole adjust to the social media/ UGC phenomenon? (Example?)
 	
8. CURRENT SOLUTIONS: (If necessary) what current solutions are available to you to adjust to the social media/UGC phenomenon?
 	
----- 	
9. TALKING DIRECTLY ABOUT BRANDS: Do you see your brand as a corporate brand? Does it matter?
 	
10. How do you explain "What is a brand?" to your colleagues and other stakeholders of your organisation?
 	
11. How would you then describe "the role of brand management"?

Source: The researcher.

- Questions 1 to 3: Starter questions to get the dialogue between me and the participant going and 'getting a first idea' of the brand manager's everyday work life (in which he/she is conceptualising brands, particularly his/her organisation's brand). These questions are complemented by/adjusted through additional ad-hoc questions based on the participant's answers and his or her specific narrative, for instance, when he or she is using concrete examples.

- Questions 4 to 8: These questions focus on how the brand manager deals with different aspects of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. They allow me to develop a better understanding of how the manager understands and conceptualises brands in the context of this phenomenon. Again, these questions are complemented by/adjusted through additional ad-hoc questions related to the answers and narrative of the participant.

- Questions 9 to 11: These more directly brand-focused questions are left until the end since it was anticipated that some brand managers might find these points rather challenging (which proved right).

These questions have then been adapted to the respective interview situation and flow as indicated above (Charmaz, 2006). The guideline questions have continuously evolved depending on the insights gained and the progress throughout the fieldwork research. For example, Appendix 5 shows the guidelines for the interview with Participant 8 (Hendrik) which entails a number of changes that have been made due to emerging insights compared to the initial interview with Participant 1 (Andrew). Compared to the first guidelines, the original Question 1 has been split in two so that the interviewee can first focus on explaining his/her organisation/employer in his/her own words before then describing his/her job role. This gave me a better understanding, right from the start of the interview, of how the organisation is conceptualised by the brand manager. As will become clear later in the Findings chapter, some brand managers (as defined for the present research project) do not necessarily define themselves as brand managers. This became particularly apparent through the interview with Participant 3 (Charlotte). Consequently, I asked

participants to describe their job role without me calling them 'brand manager' anymore as I have done previously.

The original Questions 2 and 3 have been simplified into one question. This is now Question 3 in the guidelines for the interview with Participant 8. The original questions were useful but since the original Question 1 was split in two, it was helpful to simplify this part of the interview. The reason for this is that the introduction/starter questions (Questions 1 to 3) needed to be kept to a minimum so that I could move on to the first main theme of 'brands' as soon as possible. The first main theme in the interview with Participant 8 (Questions 4 to 6, Appendix 5) emerged from Questions 9 and 10 of the original interview guidelines. The reason for these changes will be explained in more detail in the Findings chapter. In short, it appeared to be beneficial to make the participants reflect first on brands other than their own organisation's brand. It helped also to give the participant the freedom to choose the brand(s) they wanted to talk about first. In the interview guidelines for Participant 8 and subsequent participants, I ask him/her to give me an example of a strong brand (Question 4) and a weak brand (Question 5). Only after the participant has reflected on one or more strong/weak brands do I finally ask him/her about his/her organisation as a brand (Question 6, Appendix 5).

The second main part of the interview with Participant 8 (Questions 7 to 10, Appendix 5) is focused on the topic of brand management. These four questions have evolved from the Stage I interviews (Questions 4 and 11 from the original guidelines, Figure 4-3). For example, as will become clear in the Findings chapter later, the theme of 'control' emerged as a key topic during the Stage I interviews. Therefore, it has become more of a focus in subsequent interviews, particularly through Questions 7 and 10 (Appendix 5).

The third and final main part of the interview is mainly dedicated to user-generated content and social media. Questions 12 to 15 (Appendix 5) have evolved from earlier interviews (see Questions 4 to 8, Figure 4-3). One change here is a more specific focus on stakeholder expectations (Questions 14.2; Appendix 5). Stakeholders have emerged as one of the key themes in the early stage of the research as will be discussed in the Findings chapter. To remind me of asking some basic information

about the interviewee, Questions 16 and 17 have also been added to the interview guidelines (Appendix 5).

4.4.3.3 Theoretical Coding

Theoretical coding is a method of theoretical abstraction (Birks & Mills, 2011). However, this needs to be clarified in further detail. One of the confusing things when attempting to understand coding in GTM is the different terminology used by different authors (see for an overview Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 90). Since I use a social *constructivist* GTM perspective (CGTM) I will in the following primarily focus on Charmaz's (2006) coding approach. As a basic concept, coding means categorising segments of data with a short name that summarises and accounts for the piece of data (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, coding is the pivotal link between generating data and developing theoretical ideas to explain the data (Charmaz, 2006). Through the coding the researcher defines what is happening in the data and starts to grapple with what it means (Charmaz, 2006). Below are two of the different forms of coding recommended by Charmaz (2006):

- **Initial Coding:** This type of coding is relevant because it shapes the first analytical frame from which the researcher builds the early stage analysis. It should stick closely to what is going on in the data by, for instance, using in vivo codes, i.e. words or groups of words which are used by the participants themselves. Initial coding should be kept open-ended, however, as stated earlier it should be acknowledged that researchers hold prior ideas. Charmaz recommends: remain open; stay close to the data; keep the codes simple; preserve actions; compare data with data; move quickly through the data. This type of coding works very well in line with the combined theoretical perspective of the researcher. From a phenomenological point of view, for instance, the conceptual ideas developed by the researcher should be built on the conceptual ideas of the participants. Using techniques such as in vivo coding helped to follow such an approach (see e.g. Figure 4-4).

- **Focused Coding:** This second type of coding means using the most relevant and frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes/categories make the most analytic sense to categorise, describe, summarise and conceptualise the data.

An example of initial and focused coding is shown in Figure 4-4.

Figure 4-4: A Coding Example – Internal Brand Stakeholders
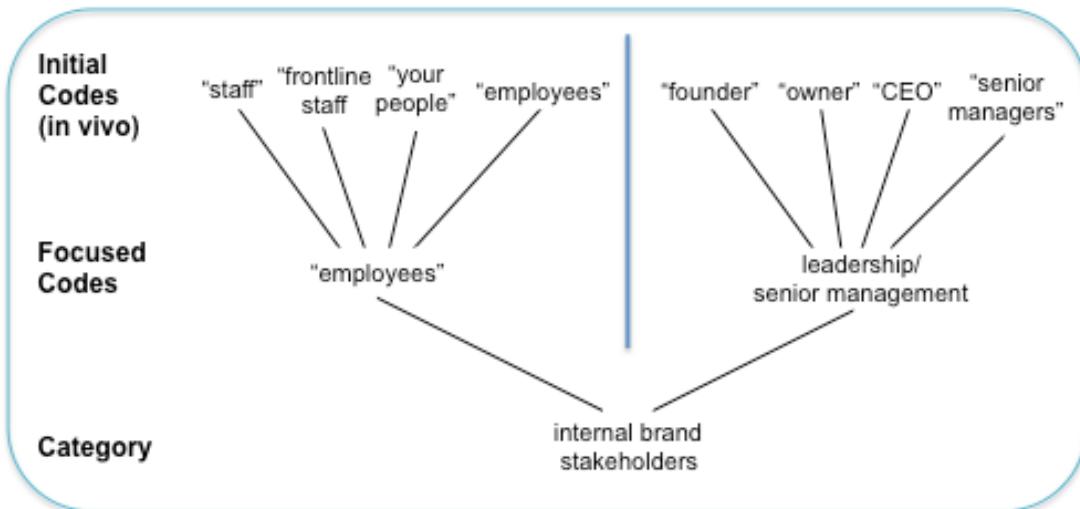
Source: The researcher

The initial codes in Figure 4-4 of people who were conceptualised by brand managers as part of a brand are in vivo codes therefore they are in double inverted commas ("…"). One of the initial codes became one of the two focused codes ("employees"). Combining the two focused codes led later to the category internal brand stakeholders. Further examples will be provided in the Findings chapter.

In the context of theoretical coding and constant comparative analysis it is important to note that the GTm literature is rather vague on the details of data analysis beyond the process of coding. This appears to be a challenge not only for GTm but qualitative research in general (Lather, 1991; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). However, for the specific present GTm context this meant that the creative conceptual and analytical skills of the researcher emerged as a much more crucial ingredient for the whole data analysis (Charmaz, 2006 & 2014; Glaser, 1978 & 1992) as originally anticipated – because following the different coding techniques alone does not necessarily lead to theoretical concepts grounded in the data (Birks & Mills, 2011 & 2015; Charmaz, 2006). A lot of thinking and 'chewing over' the data, codes, categories, interrelationships and overall implications is necessary but generally hardly addressed in the GTm literature. The presentation of coding techniques and

practicalities can therefore only reflect and represent the conducted analysis to a limited extent. Crucial in this context was therefore the memo writing through which a lot of the conceptual thinking and 'chewing over' was captured. This will be explained and exemplified later in section 4.4.3.4 and chapter 5.

Furthermore, it is important to note, in terms of the practicalities of the analysis process, that the data was processed, analysed and coded manually on hard copies of the interview transcripts as well as computer-based with the help of the NVivo and Excel software. As explained earlier, these software packages can only help with the *organisation* of the data but not with the conceptual interpretation as part of the creative analytical research process in GTm (Suddaby, 2006). The following practical explanations regarding the coding and analysis of the Stage I, II and III interviews should therefore not be interpreted in isolation but rather in combination with section 4.4.3.4 about memo writing since this latter technique is fundamental to the overall analysis and coding process.

The Stage I interviews (interviews 1 to 3) were initially coded with the help of the NVivo software. This coding process involved initial and focused coding as well as the development of first tentative categories and concepts. Overall, this analysis produced more than 500 codes. Through an intense immersion in the data and codes (Suddaby, 2006) four key themes were developed during Stage I (see Appendix 4). For an example of an early focused code that emerged from the analysis of the over 500 NVivo codes see Figure 4-5. The focused code here is called 'brands can be controlled by the brand manager'.

Figure 4-5: A Coding Example – 'Brands Can Be Controlled By The Brand Manager' As A Focused Code And A Number Of Related Initial Codes

Managing the personality of the brand

Providing guidance on how to use 'the brand'   Defining how to use the brand

Developing rules & brand governance policies   Vision + higher purpose

Adjusting the brand   Defining the brand   Creating an image

Positioning the brand   Keeping the brand relevant   Keeping the brand strong

Integrating different marketing activities   Aligning action with values   Defining business objectives

Coordinating marketing activities   **Brands can be controlled by the brand manager**   Defining target audiences & (niche) markets

Using social media   Monitoring what's going on

PR   Reacting to what's going on online   Engaging with or listening to customers

Brand induction training   Responsibility for the quality of the customer's experience   Market research

Staff training   Managing trust

Managing people   Quality control   Managing expectations   Testing products and services

Managing different cultures   Consistency   Managing experiences   NPD

Developing a common language (internally)   Standards   Controlling experiences   Selling

Working with intermediaries

Source: The researcher

Further examples for Stage I will be provided in the Findings chapter. For Stage II and Stage III of the interviews the coding was mainly conducted in two ways: (a) manually on hardcopies of the interview transcripts and (b) computer-based through the creation of large tables with the help of the Excel software. The tables contain interview quotes, codes and further information. In terms of organising and coding the data electronically, switching from NVivo to Excel caused some additional work since all relevant parts of the transcripts needed to be copied and pasted individually (into different tables). Since some elements of the transcripts were coded multiple times, some words, sentences and paragraphs were coded various times and copied into the relevant tables. However, this additional work was deemed necessary due to technical issues since the NVivo software proved to be too unreliable at times when parts of the analysis and coding were lost and had to be repeated.

For the Stage II and III analysis, a number of tables have been created with initially developed and identified codes as well as tentative categories and concepts. The focus was here more on clarifying in-depth the relationships between the different categories and conceptual findings in line with Charmaz's (2006) recommendation to compare and contrast data with data. Some of the tables would, for instance, contain examples of quotes from interviewees that address a certain stakeholder and/or brand construct focus. Following GTm, the comparative analysis was continued and the 20 interviews were re-analysed until theoretical saturation was achieved. Theoretical saturation will be further explained in section 4.4.3.5. Further examples and findings of the constant comparative analysis will be explained and discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

4.4.3.4 Memo Writing

Memo writing is a crucial intermediate step between data generation and the final reporting since it prompts the researcher to analyse the data and codes with the aim of developing conceptual and theoretical insights and investigating the relationships (e.g. similarities and differences) between the different findings (Charmaz, 2006; see Figure 4-2). Memo writing is therefore a key aspect of the analysis process. Clarke (2005) has described memos as "intellectual capital in the bank" (p. 85), but in a more prosaic way they can be explained as written records of a researcher's thinking during the process of undertaking a GTM-based study (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Memos can be very different in terms of length (from a few lines to several pages), intensity, coherence, theoretical content and usefulness in regard to the finished report of the research study (Birks & Mills, 2011). Important in this context is that memos should in general be treated as partial, preliminary and provisional (Charmaz, 2006). It is also important to capture new insights, ideas, categories and theoretical concepts at the first possible occasion even if they are still 'imperfect' since they might otherwise get lost. Once they are captured, this helps to find out more about them and their relevance. For example, where the conjectures as well as the weaknesses of emerging concepts are, which could then be focused on in the next data generation phase (Charmaz, 2006). In my case, I have written hundreds of memos. Most of them were preliminary and provisional to quickly capture new

emerging insights and ideas. But many of them were also about bringing together complex thought constructs that had developed over time. These latter memos are called analytical memos (Charmaz, 2006). Some examples are provided in chapters 6 and 7.

4.4.3.5 Theoretical Saturation

Theoretical saturation is what researchers should aim for according to the first generation GTm canons (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is supposed to be achieved once there are no more focused codes emerging in later rounds of data generation and analysis which spark new theoretical insights regarding the identified concept (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006 & 2014). At this stage the identified concept is fully developed to a degree where any of its categories are clearly defined and integrated (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006 & 2014). In other words, theoretical saturation is achieved when no new properties of the identified theoretical concept or its categories emerge.

Dey (2007) compares a saturated concept with a sponge that has absorbed as much water as it possibly can. However, in an earlier publication Dey (1999) challenged the saturation metaphor in principle and proposes "theoretical sufficiency" (p. 257) instead, since he perceives GTM-based research as producing categories through partial, not exhaustive, coding. No matter which term is used, in the end, theoretical saturation or sufficiency expresses a judgement made by the researcher "that there is no need to collect further data" (Wiener, 2007, p. 306). For the present context of the brand managers' conceptualisations of brands, theoretical saturation was reached with the 15th interview. This judgement was supported by the following five interviews (Participants 16 to 20) which did not provide any new focused codes for the brand conceptualisation framework which will be presented in chapters 5 and 6. Subsequently, the decision was made that there is no need to collect any further data in regard to the elements and processes which brand managers use when conceptualising brands.

4.5 Ethical Considerations And Limitations

In this section ethical challenges and methodological limitations will be considered.

4.5.1 Ethical Considerations

For the present research project, procedural ethics as well as situational, relational and culturally specific ethics were considered (Tracy, 2010). Procedural ethics include ethical actions based on institutional requirements. In the present case, the researcher followed the requirements of the Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee. To receive the committee's approval a number of points were considered such as:

a) A risk assessment was conducted for the researcher as well as for the participants and documented on the Oxford Brookes University ethics approval application form. Potential adverse/unexpected outcomes were considered. The researcher recognised that – although unlikely – there exists a potential psychological risk to participants. For example, the description and/or discussion of examples of internet-based word-of-mouth campaigns against the participant's organisation/brand, initiated by consumers or other stakeholders may involve unpleasant memories which have caused distress to the individual. The researcher remained mindful of this possibility at all times, and participants were not pressurised to reveal details of any particular events or experiences which would result in the individual feeling uncomfortable or distressed in any way. Participants were also reminded that their participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time.

b) Potential participants were initially contacted via email and/or telephone and then sent a Participant Information Sheet for further information and consideration. This allowed the potential participants to get a clearer understanding of, for instance, (1) what involvement in the project is required, (2) that the involvement is voluntary, and (3) that participants are free to withdraw their consent at any time. Furthermore, participants were

advised regarding arrangements to protect confidentiality of the data and the email address they could contact if they had any concerns about the conduct of the research project.

c) In terms of debriefing, support and feedback, participants were able to choose whether or not they wanted to receive a summary of the findings once the research is completed. Furthermore, participants were actively encouraged to contact the researcher in case they have any questions or concerns arising from their participation in this research.

Additionally, during the early stages of the fieldwork, the researcher was confronted with an ethical issue that was procedural as well as situational (Ellis, 2007; Tracy, 2010). After his interview, one high profile participant was concerned about the protection of his anonymity. This concern was subsequently taken fully into account through the format in which information about individual participants is presented in the different chapters (see, for instance, Table 4-5 and related explanations; Tracy, 2010; Sales & Folkman, 2000). As another means of protection of the participants' anonymity it was also decided not to attach any transcripts of the expert interviews to the thesis. This is in line with procedural ethical guidelines (Tracy, 2010) and the consent form which all participants signed in advance of their interview (see Appendix 6). Due to the anticipation that the sample would be relatively small and due to the relational and culturally specific ethical circumstances (Tracy, 2010) that some of the invited participants might know each other, they were asked on the consent form to agree *only* to the use of anonymised quotes in publications, such as the thesis, *not* the use of the full transcript of the interview (see Appendix 6). This was approved by the Oxford Brookes University Ethics Committee.

Finally, the findings chapter will present an example where a particular interview question was adjusted due to situational ethical concerns. The direct question 'What is a brand?' or 'How would you define the term brand?' appeared to trigger some level of discomfort for the first interviewees (particularly Bob). A more indirect questioning style was therefore adopted for the subsequent interviews.

4.5.2 Limitations

The decision to conduct GTM-based research had fundamental consequences for the whole research project. This was especially apparent when it comes to topics such as quality assurance. Unlike the established criteria of quality in quantitative research, such as generalisability, validity and reliability (Bryman, 2004; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014), there are no such established criteria in GTM. To address this issue adequately, Tracy's (2010) framework of eight 'big tent' quality criteria was adopted. However, the aim of living up to these criteria proved to be a complex and challenging endeavour. One consequence which emerged from this work was the insight that the researcher has quintessentially become the research instrument. This can be interpreted as a limitation due to the researcher's *subjectivity*. Charmaz, for example, advises researchers who conduct GTM that "[at] each phase of the research journey, *your* readings of your work guide your next step" (Charmaz, 2006, p. xi, emphasis in original). In this spirit the Three Phase Social Constructivist GTM Framework, as depicted in Figure 4-2, was developed for the present context. Patton (2002, p. 433) points out that "Because each qualitative study is unique, the analytical approach used will be unique".

When it comes to data analysis, the *subjective reading* of the researcher means that – at least to some extent – all understanding of the data is situated and value-laden and the developed narrative tells 'only' one story (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997). Another researcher might choose to follow another narrative during the analysis process. The research analysis and findings should therefore be understood as offering a cohesive but interpretive portrayal rather than an exact and complete picture of the brand managers' brand conceptualisations (Charmaz, 2000 & 2006).

In a similar vein, the subjectivity of the researcher could also be seen as a limitation in the context of the theoretical coding process. The researcher might only 'see' what he knows, as illustrated earlier by the hermeneutic circle. The more he learns over time in the field, the more he is able to see and recognise. Consequently, the decision to re-analyse the data repeatedly in light of new emerging insights and codes appeared to be not only worthwhile but absolutely crucial for the completion of this research project. Nevertheless, the dependence "upon the sensitivity of the researcher

to tacit elements of the data or meanings and connotations" (Suddaby, 2006, p. 639) when it comes to the theoretical coding process could be interpreted as a limitation of GTM.

The subjectivity of the applied theoretical sampling approach could also be seen as a limitation of the research design. Following GTM, no rigid sampling framework was developed beforehand apart from the condition that all participants needed to work for a corporate brand marketing-led organisation. Important in this context was that the researcher had to make strategic decisions about which emerging findings to pursue. In terms of sampling, decisions had to be made about who would provide the most relevant data to elaborate and refine the emerging findings (Birks & Mills, 2011). Taking the limitations and the general difficulties into account when it comes to getting access to managers to participate in academic research (Amabile et al., 2001; Rynes et al., 2001 & 2007), it can be concluded that a genuinely diverse range of corporate brand managers could be recruited in terms of gender, age, industry and company size. However, the primary focus, in terms of the recruitment of the experts, was not on these criteria but the corporate brand orientation of the respective employer's brand management strategy. Other priorities might have led to another research focus and subsequently potentially other research findings.

Last but not least, despite the explanatory power of the applied GTM and the theoretical sample of managers across different industries and types of organisation, it can be seen as a limitation that the research has been conducted exclusively with UK-based corporate brand managers. Further research, for instance, with brand managers from non-corporate brand-oriented organisations might provide additional or other findings (e.g. FMCG or not-for-profit brands). Equally, stakeholders other than managers, might have the potential for other relevant contributions. Or, a more international approach might have produced different insights.

However, despite these limitations, the overall reflexivity and internal logic provided by the Three Pillars Research Design (Creswell, 2007; Tracy, 2010) and the strategic flexibility of the GTM approach (Gephart, 2004; Van Maanen, 1998) provided a useful intellectual scaffolding (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) for the research scenario at hand. For instance, the Three Phase Social Constructivist GTM Framework

enabled the development and implementation of a clear research design despite a relatively complex combined theoretical perspective. This meant that from a phenomenologically-oriented theoretical vantage point the participants were given a *voice* underpinned through direct verbatim quotations. Equally, however, as a core aim of GTM, insights from individual participants were compared, contrasted, and ultimately synthesised to lift the findings to a higher conceptual level and develop more abstract and theoretical frameworks which will be presented in the following chapters.

4.6 Conclusion

Due to (a) a lack of relevant empirical research, (b) the complexity of the research topic, and (c) the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher, the decision was made by the investigator that it is most adequate to develop a qualitative research design. This decision had fundamental consequences for the whole research project. For instance, since qualitative research still endures criticism from a 'scientific angle' in terms of quality criteria such as generalisability, validity and reliability (Bryman, 2004; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014), an alternative overall framework for quality in qualitative research was implemented (Tracy, 2010; see Table 4-1). However, the aim of living up to a framework such as Tracy's (2010) became a considerably complex endeavour.

For example, with the aim of achieving *meaningful coherence* (Tracy, 2010) throughout the research process, the Three Pillars of Research Design Framework (Figure 4-1) was created. This was very helpful as a kind of intellectual scaffolding (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) to enable the establishment of an adequate internal logic for the research project. One of the strengths of the Three Pillars Framework was that it allowed the researcher to provide adequate self-reflection. In this context the framework for the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher (Table 4-2) and the key philosophical questions and answers based on the researcher's paradigmatic grounding (Table 4-3) were used to provide an in-depth and more systematic reflection.

Based on this, four interpretivist schools of thought were identified as the most relevant theoretical perspectives following the logic of the Three Pillars Framework (Figure 4-1): (a) Max Weber's concept of verstehen, (b) phenomenology, (c) hermeneutics and (d) symbolic interactionism. As a key insight it emerged from the evaluation of these four approaches that the most appropriate way to develop the concrete research design was not purely based on one of the four perspectives but rather a combination of them. Concrete consequences for the adoption of such a combined perspective were developed. For example, the present research needed to focus on investigating not only the key elements but also the processes which brand managers incorporate when conceptualising brands in the current age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. To develop an in-depth understanding of these key elements and processes the researcher should investigate particularly the brand managers' meaning making in their everyday work life environment. As a further consequence, a second generation, social constructivist GTM approach was selected as the most adequate research methodology.

Following the work of Charmaz (2006), Gallagher (1992), Schwandt (2007) and Suddaby (2006), the Three Phase Social Constructivist GTM Framework was developed (Figure 4-2) and applied to explain and discuss the key elements of this GTM approach on a method level: theoretical sampling, constant comparative analysis, theoretical coding, memo writing and theoretical saturation. In this context, key aspects such as the sample and the coding were discussed using concrete examples. Further examples will be discussed in chapter 5.

There is a comparatively high degree of agreement in the literature when it comes to topics such as theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation or memo writing. However, when it comes to theoretical coding, as part of the constant comparative analysis, the literature entails a comparatively low degree of agreement in terms of how exactly it is done. Furthermore, when it comes to advice on data analysis in GTM beyond coding, the literature is often rather vague and points out that the creativity and conceptual thinking skills of the researcher are key (e.g. Charmaz, 2006 & 2014; Glaser, 1978 & 1992). This vagueness of the literature was not particularly helpful. However, it seems that this is not something that only applies to GTM.

More than two decades ago, Lather (1991) already concluded that data analysis is "the 'black hole' of qualitative research" (p. 149) in general. St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) suggest that this is still the case today. They point out that because explaining data analysis in qualitative research is so difficult, most authors have narrowed it down to coding data (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). Suggestions such as conceptualising qualitative data analysis as thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014) are only helpful to a limited degree. The reason being that in GTM the researcher should analyse the data with an open mind which should *not* already be occupied with predetermined theoretical ideas.

The importance of the researcher as the research instrument and his creative and conceptual thinking skills therefore became particularly clear. This led, amongst other points, to explaining the paradigmatic grounding and the combined theoretical perspective of the researcher in such depth in the present chapter. While this required a considerable amount of time and energy, the insights which emerged from this work were helpful in developing and grounding, for instance, the Three Phase Social Constructivist GTM Framework (Figure 4-2). The hermeneutic aspects of this concept have only emerged through this theoretical work and were not made explicit in the existing GTM literature. Furthermore, in regard to the investigation of the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher it was reassuring to see that a team of brand researchers developed a similar approach to Table 4-2 (consisting of ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology) for their meta-theoretical analysis on brand worlds (Berthon et al., 2011).

CHAPTER 5:
FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings related to the core elements and processes which brand managers integrate into their conceptualisations of brands. To address specifically the complexity of the overall phenomenon under investigation, I started to explore some of the underlying key challenges, themes and tensions that emerge when brand managers talk about brands and related topics. Three of these early findings are explored in section 5.2. These findings enabled me to develop a more concrete understanding of the terminology used in the combined 'cognitive space' in which the participants are 'moving' when it comes to the conceptualisation of brands.

Following section 5.2, which is mainly based on the analysis during Stage I of the research, are sections 5.3 and 5.4. These two latter sections present comprehensively the two key conceptualisation levels which emerged across the different stages of the research in relation to the core elements and processes which brand managers integrate into their conceptualisations of brands. Nevertheless, since the findings from the first three interviews (Stage I) were particularly important in this context, these will be presented and discussed next as the crucial springboard for the rest of the investigation.

5.2 Three Initial Insights From The Fieldwork

The first three interviews (Andrew, Bob and Charlotte) have been paramount for this research endeavour not only because they served as an important sensitising phase but also because they elicited three initial key findings which provided some crucial direction for the subsequent investigation. The following presentation and discussion of these three early findings provides not only a deeper insight into how the data was initially analysed in terms of coding techniques and constant comparative analysis but also an explanation why these points represent an important springboard for the subsequent interviews.

5.2.1 The Controllability Of Brands

Over the course of the interview, Andrew applies different perspectives of controllability when it comes to his conceptualisations of brands. On the one hand, from Andrew's point of view, brands are something that can be "defined", "changed", "used" and "positioned" by his organisation. It is possible "to integrate our brand into … services" with partners and make the brand "fit in". As an organisation, you can manage "how the brand is being positioned". Furthermore, as a brand manager, you "need to form and shape the brand around what the business wants to do". Brands can be utilised as "a tool to deliver a strategy". In a later interview, Gina, for instance, makes a similar point. As the "manager" or "owner" of the brand "you can shape it [the brand] depending on what strategy you want it to be" (Gina).

On the other hand, however, when asked for a definition of the term brand, Andrew uses some further explanations that are less aligned to the idea of brands being controllable:

> A brand is what people say about you [as an organisation] …. And that is really what it is. It's what people think about you when you are not around. It's not what you tell them through advertising but it's all the feelings they get from the interactions they have with you, through advertising, through what is being said about you, through … [their] friends and colleagues, through the shop [Organisation A's high street retail shops], through the phone [call centre-based customer services], through everything … Organisation A does with the brand.

Based on the above quote and explanations, Andrew still conveys here the assumption that brands can – to some extent – be controlled by an organisation. This kind of control could be exerted, for instance, through developing a consistently positive brand experience across all of an organisation's touch points a stakeholder could potentially come across or interact with (e.g. advertising, retail shops, call centres). However, Andrew also acknowledges that not all brand touch points are organisational ones and can therefore not be controlled to the same extent, for example, a customer's friends or colleagues talking about their experience with the organisation/brand. At another point during the interview Andrew also stresses the importance of how the brand is perceived and that this perception can only be controlled to a very limited extent by the focal organisation or manager behind the

brand: "at the end of the day, what it is all about is perceptions, meaning a brand has," but "these perceptions, they evolve all the time and are being influenced by things that I [as a brand manager] don't have a handle on."

As a senior brand manager, Andrew tries to convey the message that he and his organisation are to a large extent in control of their brand. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that there are some aspects of the brand which he and his organisation are not necessarily able to control such as brand perceptions and brand meanings. Initially, it appears that those aspects of the brand which the organisation can control to a large extent, could be subsumed under the focused code "resources" or "manifestations", i.e. resources which the brand manager is able to control and therefore to manage. When those brand resources are perceived or 'touched' by brand stakeholders, these experiences can potentially be transformed into brand *meanings* or feelings in the stakeholders' minds. Despite being in control of the organisation's brand resources to a large extent, Andrew admits that he has "no handle" on the way in which these brand resources are perceived and the way in which these perceptions/experiences are transformed into meanings and feelings.

The tension with regard to the conceptualisation of brands here could thus be further specified from initially 'some aspects of brands are controllable while others are rather uncontrollable' to 'brand resources/manifestations appear to be rather controllable by the organisation while brand meanings seem to be rather uncontrollable'. Nevertheless, after this initial analysis, a more in-depth deconstruction of the interview with Andrew indicates that the actual situation is more complicated than this initial 'brand resources/manifestations versus brand meanings' duality suggests. There seem to be some brand resources (e.g. the 'I hate Organisation A'-websites created by external stakeholders) that are not controllable by the organisation while there are some brand meanings that Andrew feels rather confident of having a handle on. One example of the latter is the brand perceptions of internal stakeholders, i.e. employees: "Being responsible for the brand is … about forming those perceptions of the brand internally" (Andrew). Based on this more comprehensive understanding of Andrew's thinking the following initial visual analytical memo was developed (see Figure 5-1). All bullet points in Figure 5-1 are

initial or focused codes based on the analysis of Andrew's (M01) interview. In vivo codes are identified through double inverted commas.

Figure 5-1: Initial Analytical Memo – Deconstructing The Controllability Of Brands Based On The Interview With Brand Manager Andrew (M01)
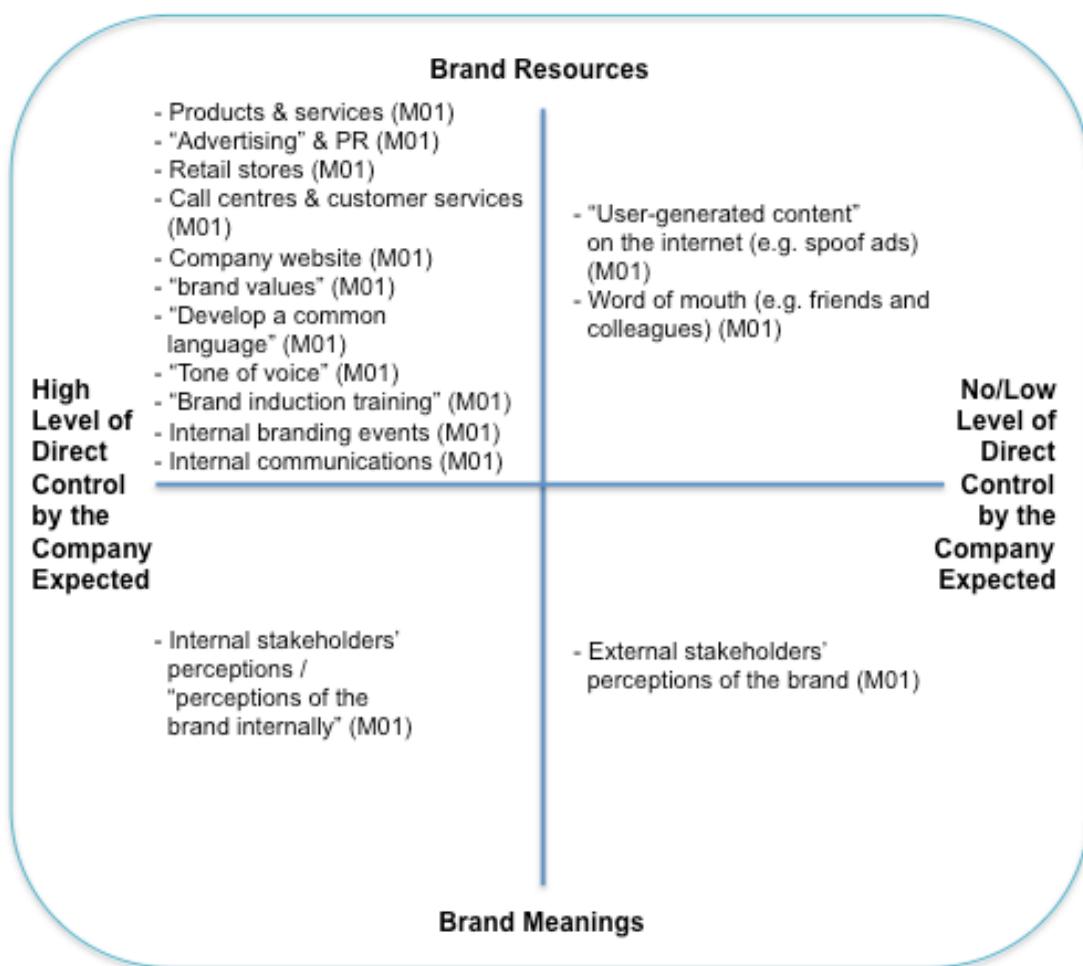
Source: The researcher.

This early insight about Andrew's brand conceptualisation 'space', based on the tension of the controllability of brands, was very helpful as a springboard to investigating and developing further the comprehension of the key elements of brand managers' brand conceptualisations. Furthermore, the theme of the 'controllability of brands' also led to some other relevant findings over the course of the subsequent interviews. However, before continuing this stream of the investigation in section 5.3, first another two important insights, which have influenced the subsequent research, will be discussed.

5.2.2 Brands As Living Entities

While the interview with Andrew provided a particularly clear insight about the tension regarding the controllability of brands, it also provided a foundation for the elucidation of another key category: brands as living entities. Nevertheless, this theme only became clearer through the constant comparison of the emerging data across a number of interviews.

The research findings show that from a brand manager's perspective, brands can have traits of a dynamic, living entity. For instance, a brand can have not only a "personality" (Gina; Pauline); but also *behave* in a certain way (Leonard); it can "listen", or have a "voice" (Hendrik). A brand can also be "agile" (Maurice); "academic" (Nina; Steve); "intellectual", "knowledgeable", "thoughtful" or "in your face" (Nina); "Free thinking", "independent", a "Jack of all trades" (Oscar); "Friendly and welcoming" (Edward); "arrogant" and "opinionated" (Ian); or it can "empathise" and "become accessible" (Hendrik). Some of the comments from the interviewees imply that a brand can be conceptualised as something that has not only the characteristics of a living being but also its own dynamics, evolving nature or even a life of its own. For example: "a brand is like a person" and "a brand has a life" (Gina). Or, managers can try "to make the brand live internally" within the organisation (Andrew); or employees can "live the brand" (Leonard). Also, a brand can build relationships with people (Gina; Hendrik); or brands are about multiple relationships (Andrew; Richard). Some of these findings are presented in Figure 5-2. The letter 'M' in Figure 5-2 stands for 'manager' (e.g. M02 = Bob) to attribute the initial and focused code to one or more participants.

Figure 5-2: Advanced Analytical Memo of the 'Brands As Living Entities' Theme
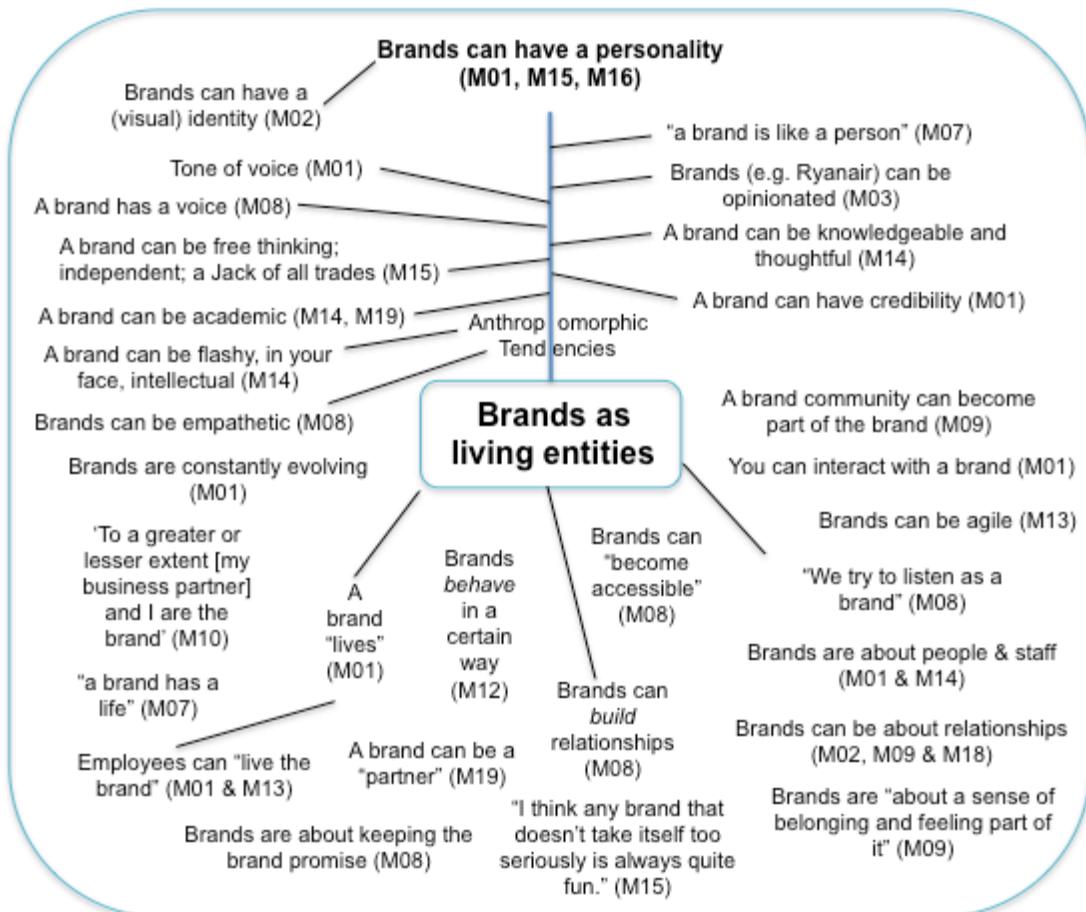
Source: The researcher.

These more implicit or explicit conceptualisations of a brand as a living entity have emerged as another key theme based on the interviews with the managers. But, compared to the previous insight about the controllability of brands, some elements of this second category seemed to possess intrinsically a higher level of complexity. The reason for this is that they are the result of processes involving an interplay of different elements. Subsequently, while the tension of the controllability of brands has provided a springboard to investigate further the various key *elements* which brand managers use when conceptualising brands, the category of brands as living entities led towards another insight. It indicated that the interplay of the various key elements needs to be investigated further too, but on a more holistic and *process*-oriented level. Nevertheless, before the two different emerging conceptualisation levels are further explored, the brand managers' challenge with brand terminology will be further investigated.

5.2.3 The Struggle With Brand Terminology

Another early insight gained initially from the first three interviews was that all three senior brand managers, who are responsible for their organisation's corporate brand, did not use the term corporate brand when talking about their organisation's brand. Furthermore, none of them used more specific terms such as product brand, service brand or corporate brand unprompted. Bob only differentiated between "brand" and "sub-brand" and Charlotte differentiated between "brand" and "label" as a different way to differentiate between her corporate brand ("brand"), which carries her name, and the different product lines (under the name of different labels), which she designs. When prompted with the question whether his company, Organisation B, is a corporate brand, Bob struggled. He found it difficult to differentiate conceptually between his organisation's product or service brands and the corporate brand as shown in Table 5-1. Bob sees differences in the concepts of product brand and corporate brand, as the analysis in Table 5-1 demonstrates. However, he was unable to clearly articulate these differences when trying to answer my question. Or, in his own words: "I'm not giving you a complete answer here" (Bob).

This evidence provided a first indication that the complexity of the brand phenomenon and its terminology can be a challenge even for the most experienced brand managers, such as Bob. Bob is the group marketing director of a very large organisation – with a marketing department of a few hundred people – which he had joined a number of years before the interview took place, following a very successful career mainly in top advertising agencies and the FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) industry.

When I asked Bob to define the term brand, instead of answering the question, first of all, he criticised the misuse of the term in general:

> **Interviewer:** In such a complex organisation you must often ... probably explain to other stakeholders what a brand is and 'Organisation B' or 'the [mentions one of Organisation B's services]' as a brand, how would you explain the term brand to a colleague who is not working in marketing?
>
> **Bob:** Well, that is an interesting question. Because, as you know, the word brand is probably the second most abused term in marketing after 'marketing'. People talk about a brand and brand building – quite often they just mean a logo (laughs) sometimes they don't even mean a logo ... they mean a strap line or slogan.

When I tried to trigger an answer to the 'What is a brand?'-question through suggesting that he could maybe use his own organisation as an example of a corporate brand (Interviewer: "Maybe Organisation B as a corporate brand?") he found it challenging to provide a coherent answer. This situation is further detailed and analysed in Table 5-1 which revolves around the theme 'Struggling with Product versus Corporate Brand Thinking'.

Table 5-1: Bob's Struggle With 'Product Versus Corporate Brand Thinking'

Excerpt of interview with Bob	Initial Codes (relevant to this specific theme; other codes have been excluded)	Initial Analytical Comments
Interviewer: Maybe Organisation B as a corporate brand?		
Bob: Yes, I mean ... [with a] definition of brand, first of all, of course, there are FMCG brands …	**Applies product-oriented brand thinking**	Despite Bob's earlier elaborations during the interview that his organisation is a service-oriented "multi-stakeholder organisation", he refers at least initially back to traditional product (FMCG) brands in his definition attempt. In contrast to his concrete and precise answers to previous topics Bob stays here, at least for the first few sentences, on a rather abstract level.
… where a brand is a combination of practical functions but then also emotional relationships.	Brand as practical function; (but then) moves beyond product-oriented brand thinking; Brand as relationship; Brand as combination of different elements	The point "emotional relationships" can potentially be interpreted as an expansion of the initial traditional product brand paradigm. However, the following sentence appears to move back to product brand thinking with a customer/ consumer focus.
You could say that any entity that is consumed or purchased, that people have an opinion about, is a brand.	Coming back to **product brand thinking** (with <u>external focus</u>) **Issues with brand definition**	While the "practical functions" and – to a certain extent – "emotional relationships" are something that can be managed/ controlled by the organisation (this point will be further explained below), this part of the definition here has a much more external focus and is therefore likely to be less controllable by an organisation. The definition of a brand as something that is "consumed or purchased" and that people need to "have an opinion about" is very product-oriented (including 'service' products) and seems to entail some issues. For example, some people might not consume or purchase anything related to the Ferrari corporation but might have an opinion about Ferrari. The question now is whether Ferrari can be defined for these people as a brand – they have an opinion about it but do not directly purchase or consume any of the organisation's products or services.
I think that's a bit weak, …	**Criticises product brand thinking** (with <u>external focus</u>)	Bob criticises the above given definition that relies quite heavily on traditional product brand thinking (with an external focus) and has its weaknesses, as indicated above. But then he reaffirms his 'traditionalist'

…because I think with a brand normally ... those things are shaped. They are formed and given structure by the management team.	Now **reaffirms his product-oriented brand thinking** (this time with an internal focus)	perspective with a focus on an internal perspective. Bob is now close to Andrew's thinking in terms of 'brands can be shaped and managed by the brand management team/ the organisation' like a resource.
So, … is Organisation B a brand? I don't think fully. I think it is certainly something that people have opinions about …	Applies one of the criteria of his **product brand thinking** (with external focus again) on his own organisation	Bob declares that his organisation is not "fully" a brand despite his impression that people have an opinion about it.
… but in a sense we are 'corporate'.	Clash between **product-oriented brand thinking** versus **corporate brand thinking**	Bob feels that his organisation/ organisational brand is not "fully" a brand since it cannot be consumed/ purchased by end-consumers/ customers like the organisation's sub-brands [concrete products/services] from his point of view. This is quite surprising since all online touch points of his organisation's products and services are only accessible through the Organisation B website which is (a) used/ 'consumed' and/or (b) products/services are 'purchased' several million times per year. Bob appears to see his organisation's 'corporate' brand rather as an umbrella which is not necessarily relevant for the end-users of the organisation's services and therefore not "fully" a brand. This appears to be in contrast to his previous explanations in the interview of his stakeholder-oriented organisation. However, it fits in with his FMCG brand definition about practical functions and emotional relationships. His organisation's 'corporate' brand does not have these two elements from his personal, consumer-oriented/ external perspective. The following sentences/examples support this rationale.
... And the [mentions one of Organisation B's sub-brands] is probably one of our strongest brands as it has a very clear identity, people know what it is for; the emotional values are quite well defined.	Applies criterion of **his product-oriented brand thinking** to one of the organisation's sub-brands	For Bob the 'real' or 'full' brands of the organisation appear to be its sub-brands, such as the example he uses here, which has clear "emotional values", but also a "clear identity" and public image. In other words, here we have Bob's brand criteria fulfilled: emotional relationship and practical functions of the product/service are clear to people (i.e. customers/ consumers).
I think there are also sub-brands like the [mentions another of Organisation B's sub-brands] ... it has a sense of clear visual identity, has some	Applies criterion of his **product-oriented brand thinking** to another sub-brand and introduces a new	In addition to the relevant product-oriented brand criteria above, Bob now adds "clear target audiences". He uses traditional product brand vocabulary ("target audiences") instead of rather corporate brand related

emotional references, clear target audiences …	criterion ('clear target audiences')	terminology ("stakeholders") which he had used at earlier stages of the interview. It is interesting that Bob now mentions visual identity. This did not feature in his definition above but could, rather, be linked to his own criticism of a shallow 'visually-oriented' use of the term brand.
So, I'm not giving you a complete answer here, …	Acknowledges his **struggle with brand definition**	Bob acknowledges that he struggles to give a coherent answer to the 'What is a brand?'-question, particularly in terms of his organisation as a corporate brand.
… but I don't think we have what I call classical brands …	Potentially contradicts his previous brand definition	Bob appears to struggle with the brand definition here because it seems like he is contradicting himself now. He has explained his traditional, product-oriented brand thinking above, based on FMCG brands, which fits the organisation's sub-brands to a large extent but he now claims that the organisation does not have what he calls "classical brands". However, this statement could also just be a reaffirmation that the so-called 'corporate' part of his organisation is not a full (classical) brand from his point of view. Potentially this last part of the excerpt could also be interpreted as a justification for his struggle, that he is simply not able to provide a "complete answer" since there is none from his point of view.

Source: The researcher.

Andrew also struggled with the question whether his organisation, Organisation A, is a corporate brand – but for a different reason – since his international organisation was taken over by another international firm several years before the interview. This takeover, however, was followed by a rather unusual global corporate rebranding model and implementation process (which cannot be further explained in detail without endangering the anonymity of the organisation). Due to the nature of this specific rebranding process Andrew found it difficult to say whether or not Organisation A is a corporate brand. The reason for this being that while the takeover and subsequent corporate rebranding process had taken place several years earlier there is still in some countries a discrepancy between the organisation's developed and implemented corporate brand strategy and architecture on the one hand and the public's and employees' perception on the other.

Furthermore, Charlotte appeared to be a bit uncomfortable with some of the business terminology I used at the beginning of the interview with her. For example, when I explained to her that as the CEO of her organisation (which carries her name) she is also the organisation's ultimate *corporate brand* manager, as stated in the academic literature (e.g. Balmer, 2001a), she dismissed both of these 'job titles' since she sees herself instead primarily as a designer: "I didn't even want to put CEO on my business card" (laughs) "I am a fashion designer and own the Organisation C brand" (Charlotte).

Based on the insight that all three managers appeared to feel comfortable and familiar with the term brand but were – for different reasons – less comfortable with the term corporate brand, I adapted my interview approach accordingly by just using the term brand in my questioning in subsequent interviews (Stage II and III) unless the interviewees themselves started using different terminology. Furthermore, Bob's reaction of appearing to feel uncomfortable when being put on the spot by the question 'How would you define the term brand?', despite his many years of experience on agency as well as client-side, was interpreted as a situational ethical issue (Tracy, 2010). Subsequently, to avoid this kind of discomfort for any other participating brand managers, the interviewing approach was adjusted towards a more indirect questioning technique (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This more indirect approach still allowed an in-depth analysis eliciting the key elements and processes used by the particular brand manager when conceptualising brands. Adjusting the interview and questioning style during the course of a GTM investigation is adequate and legitimate since usually no pilot interviews are conducted beforehand.

Following on from this, the first three interviews therefore provided another important insight in that there are discrepancies in the way brand terminology is used in academia and theory versus industry practice. While in the academic corporate brand management literature there are clear differentiations between product and service brands on the one hand and corporate brands on the other, in corporate brand management practice it seems that there are also differences but these might not necessarily be that clearly articulated through the terminology used. Also, sometimes managers simply do not feel comfortable with the terminology used by academic researchers – as in Charlotte's case. Since the overall research objective is to explore

the different key brand conceptualisation elements and processes used in brand management practice, regardless of whether it is on a product, service or corporate level, I decided not to explore further the conceptual differences between product, service and corporate brands in brand management practice. Subsequently, I did not use or prompt the managers with terms such as product, service or corporate brand. Instead, the potential of (a) the first two key categories about the 'controllability of brands' and 'brands as living entities' and (b) the insight that 'brands are about multiple relationships' (see also the table in Appendix 3) were further investigated.

5.3 CONCEPTUALISATION LEVEL I: The Core *Elements* Which Brand Managers Integrate Into Their Conceptualisations Of Brands

The earlier analysis elicited the tension of the controllability of brands. Subsequently, through the constant comparison with later interviews, this led to the identification of the first two categories of brand conceptualisations in brand management practice: brand meanings and brand manifestations.

5.3.1 Brand Meanings

The brand meanings which exist in people's minds have emerged as a main category of brand managers' brand conceptualisations. Felicia provides a case in point. She mentions that it is part of her organisation's culture "to look after the image" which stakeholders of the brand create in their minds about Organisation F (Felicia). Andrew, as an example given earlier, stresses the importance of a brand as a meaning in people's minds and how it is perceived: "at the end of the day, what it is all about is perceptions, meaning a brand has", but these perceptions, "I [as a brand manager] don't have a handle on." The interview with Bob supports the idea that a key component of the brand is brand meaning in people's minds. Bob suggests that a brand is something "people have an opinion about" and with a strong brand "people *know* what it is for". For Hendrik, it is important "how people perceive the brand …", while Jeffrey, for example, emphasises from his point of view, the intangible and rather individual and uncontrollable character of a brand in a person's mind:

> … brand is one of those really interesting things where we talk about … [it] as if it's a real thing. When the reality is that it only truly exists for the person you are communicating to.

Based on further analysis, the brand meanings category also includes "what our frontline [staff] thinks we [as an organisation] are" and "what customers think we [as an organisation] are" (Richard), or what "people on the outside know about [the organisation]" (Jeffrey). The brand meanings category can also entail brand values (Gina; Steve); a "vision" or "mission statement" in people's – particularly employees' – minds (Steve). Furthermore, any feelings towards a brand such as "loyalty" (Gina; Ian) and "goodwill" (Ian); "trust" (Bob; Felicia; Maurice; Quentin); or "a purpose or belief that drives you [as a member of the organisation]" (Jeffrey) are other elements that can be subsumed under the brand meanings category. The rich diversity of brand meaning elements which was found in this research, underlines why the brand meanings category has become the first identified major contributor to the complexity which some brand managers face when conceptualising brands.

5.3.2 Brand Manifestations

The second main category started emerging already in the first interview. Nevertheless it only established itself as one of the key elements of brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice during the constant comparison process with subsequently collected data. This second category can be summed up as "each and every touch point" (Andrew) of a brand "which can be experienced" (Leonard) by people. These 'touch points' of the brand can be concrete visual or physical elements such as an organisation's "logo" (Hendrik); the "product" (Hendrik & Maurice) and "its fantastic design" (Hendrik); the "showroom" (Maurice); or other retail spaces (Hendrik); and, particularly for employees, a written "positioning statement" (Maurice); a brand book (Hendrik; Maurice); "brand guidelines" (Gina); an "editorial style guide" (Felicia); or "identity guidelines … [on] how we wish to express ourselves" (Maurice).

However, on the other hand, these touch points or experience points of the brand can also be either intangible or entail a combination of tangible as well as intangible elements, for example, all kinds of "marketing communications" (Maurice) such as

the organisation's advertising (Felicia); blogs (Charlotte; Gina; Hendrik; Nina); Twitter account (Bob, Hendrik; Ian, Kirk; Nina); or social media in general (Bob; Gina; Ian; Quentin); the organisation's website (Felicia; Hendrik; Nina); "events" and "publications" (Felicia); "customer service" (Hendrik); the staff's behaviour in general (Hendrik; Maurice; Nina; Steve); particularly the leadership's behaviour as brand ambassadors (Maurice); and the internal culture as a whole (Felicia; Nina). No matter whether tangible, intangible or a combination of both, these brand resources/touchlines can be summarised, so far, as all being elements of a brand which people can experience through any kind of "interaction with the organisation" (Maurice). Based on this idea, brands are seen – in this context – primarily as a tool which can to a large extent be "owned" (Charlotte); "shaped" (Bob; Gina); positioned (Leonard; Tim), or repositioned and refreshed (Hendrik) through the various organisation-created brand resources/ touch points mentioned above.

This *every touch point of the organisation* concept could be interpreted as the second main category contributing to the complexity which brand managers face when conceptualising brands. However, further analysis of the data shows that the brand resources concept needs to be extended beyond the touch points which the focal organisation can control. This is necessary to reflect the whole variety of tangible and intangible brand manifestations present in brand managers' combined cognitive brand conceptualisation space. Andrew, for instance, considers that "A brand is what people say about you [as an organisation]", in other words, brand-related word-of-mouth (WOM).

These 'people' talking about a brand can be anybody, for example, an organisation's employees but also somebody's friends and colleagues, i.e. people who are not necessarily paid or controlled by the focal organisation. Particularly relevant in terms of expanding the concept of brand resource appears to be brand-related *electronic* WOM, or brand-related user generated content – in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. Some of the participants mention in this context, for instance, blogging (Bob; Charlotte; Gina) and micro-blogging, e.g. via Twitter (Bob; Ian; Nina), and video-sharing websites such as YouTube; or more generally content on "social media" (Ian) or "someone else's website and they're

talking about us and using our imagery [without the focal organisation being able to control this]" (Ian).

The constant comparison process helped with shaping the first two main categories. These both appear to be key components of brand managers' combined cognitive brand conceptualisation space. However, it also emerged from the constant comparison process that the initial term brand resources as used in the analytical memo based on the interview with Andrew (Figure 5-1) should be replaced with the term brand manifestation to better differentiate it from the brand meanings category. The term brand manifestations for the second main category appears to be more appropriate since brand meanings, in the sense of the sum total of what people have in their mind about a brand, could also be interpreted as a resource of the brand. Furthermore, it is relevant that brand meaning and brand manifestation elements are not only used separately by brand managers but also in combination when conceptualising brands. An example of this is provided by Maurice:

> if our people [staff] do things like that [behaviour which reflects the organisation's stated brand values] then our customers will see the expression of that in their behaviour and so [align] internal and external brand.

Felicia provides a similar case in point: "in order to have a good [brand] image it's the quality of the work" by the involved stakeholders that counts. Kirk, in comparison, is less convinced that customers' brand perceptions can be directed to that extent but also links organisation-initiated brand manifestations to subsequent reactions that are motivated by the experience of these manifestations. When talking about his organisation's brand he states: "I can control what I put out there [i.e. brand manifestations such as products and marketing communications] but I can't control how people react to it" (Kirk).

In all three examples, the key brand components appear to be linked through at least two processes, first the creation of tangible and/or intangible brand manifestations and then the perception and meaning creation based on the experience of these manifestations. From this angle therefore, the brand can be conceptualised as co-created (Edward; Felicia; Jeffrey) by a number of actors through the processual combination of intangible and/or tangible brand manifestations and the brand perceptions and meanings that are subsequently generated. Before these more

process-oriented findings are further analysed, first of all, two other main categories, which emerged from the interviews, had to be further investigated.

5.3.3 Brand Stakeholders

The earlier described analysis in section 5.2.1 elicited the tension of the controllability of brands from a brand manager's perspective. The analysis of this theme provided evidence that stakeholders of the brand might be another key element of the brand from a social constructivist perspective. Subsequently some further analysis of the interview was necessary with a focus on the brand manager's perspective(s) on stakeholders and the various relationships they have with the focal organisation/brand. Over the course of the interview, Andrew used different perspectives when talking about his organisation's brand. Illustrative examples of this are provided in Appendix 3. Based on the analysis in Appendix 3 it became clear that external as well as internal stakeholders of an organisation have the potential to be considered as vital when it comes to the exploration of brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice. Through the constant comparative analysis not only with the other initial interviews (with Bob and Charlotte) but also across the subsequent investigation, external brand stakeholders and internal brand stakeholders emerged as two further main categories of brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice. These findings will be presented and explained in further detail in the following.

5.3.3.1 External Brand Stakeholders

To be able to grasp the complexity of stakeholders which the interviewed brand managers have to deal with in the context of conceptualising brands, an integrative approach appears to be most suitable – as explained in the methodology chapter. The findings of the research show that a diverse range of external stakeholders – beyond consumers, customers or clients – is part of the brand managers' combined cognitive brand conceptualisation space in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. This includes suppliers (Charlotte; Maurice); wholesalers (Charlotte); retailers and sales promoters (Gina); pressure groups, special interest groups, governments and local communities (Bob); members of parliament (Charlotte; Edward); unions (Felicia); influential bloggers (Bob; Gina; Ian),

Facebook groups and online communities (Gina) or the "Twitters and Facebooks" (Quentin); more generally the media (Bob; Charlotte; Felicia; Quentin); industry experts (Gina; Hendrik); trade bodies (Hendrik; Ian); celebrity endorsers (Charlotte, Gina; Kirk); competitors (Daniela); marketing communications agencies (Bob; Charlotte; Felicia); and management consultants (Felicia; Hendrik; Quentin), to name but a few. In this context, Bob proclaims: "we are a multi-stakeholder organisation". In a similar vein, Ian, whose firm regularly organises events for the industry in which it operates, provides an example which illustrates that the speakers and attendees of these events, as external stakeholders, become an important part of his organisation's brand:

> …often it's true that we will have an event where most of the people in the audience could just as easily be on stage talking. So they themselves are part of our brand because they represent credibility and kudos. When they look around they think "I'm in the right place", that is very much part of the brand. For us, and certainly for me, it's a big reflection on us …

Another manager, Charlotte, provides a case in point of how important, for example, the media and the endorsement of a particular TV show presenter, as an external stakeholder, can be for the brand:

> We had our website crashed immediately after the TV programme and we had, I think, that month the strongest month in sales on the website. We gained about 30 new stores that season because lots of store owners watch it [the TV programme]. So everybody who didn't care about us before all of a sudden took notice. Everybody said "I saw you on [the TV programme …]", I've been sending them stuff for the last 10 years and they've always ignored me. Now that [mentions the presenter of the TV programme] has said "we are great", now immediately everybody is coming [to us] …

Following these findings, external stakeholders have been identified as another main category within brand managers' combined cognitive brand conceptualisation space.

5.3.3.2 Internal Brand Stakeholders

Based on the findings of the present investigation, internal stakeholders also appear potentially to be of crucial importance when it comes to brand managers' conceptualisations of brands. For example, "a brand is always delivered by its people [employees]" (Richard). Or: "For the brand … the people who work for you are your biggest and best asset" (Nina). Asked about who is responsible for the firm's brand

within her organisation, Daniela answered: "I think we [employees] all are and this is what we are trying to communicate to everyone in [Organisation D]." Several of the interviewed brand managers emphasised that an organisation's staff are a key part of its brand through the staff's behaviour, activities and service (Bob; Hendrik; Leonard; Maurice).

These activities entail, for example, the creation and/or co-creation of brand manifestations, as previously stated, since the employees have an impact on a number of experiences, which other internal as well as external stakeholders can have during "every interaction with the organisation" (Maurice). The staff entail those on the "frontline" (Steve) as well as the leadership team in general (Hendrik; Richard); or more specifically the founder (Nina; Steve); owner (Jeffrey; Maurice); or CEO (Hendrik; Nina; Richard) of the organisation. Jeffrey mentions, in this context for instance, that he, as one of the owners and senior managers of his company, represents the organisation's brand – particularly to the firm's B2B clients: "to a greater or lesser extent [mentions his business partner and co-owner] and I *are* the brand".

Another related key finding has evolved – the idea that internal and external stakeholders can be an intrinsic part of the brand, not only as brand meaning but also particularly as *brand manifestation* creators or co-creators. These insights are summarised as follows:

1. Internally A: The organisation's leadership team has been highlighted especially in terms of representing and potentially personifying the brand or, leading by example, as the ultimate brand ambassadors for internal as well as external stakeholders.

2. Internally B: More generally, all employees can be viewed as part of the focal organisation's brand manifestation creation activities. Subsequently every employee has a certain responsibility for the provision of brand manifestations – not only the marketing department – since any employee's actions might have an impact on other brand stakeholders' experiences of the organisation.

3. Externally: Apart from consumers, customers or clients, also the media, influential bloggers, online as well as offline communities, pressure groups, politicians, celebrity endorsers, competitors and potentially any other external stakeholder can be interpreted as part of an organisation's brand. They can be interpreted as creators and/or co-creators not only of brand meanings but also of brand manifestations through activities that can be initiated by the focal organisation behind the brand but equally by the external stakeholders themselves.

4. Generally: To some extent, stakeholders of a brand can even be interpreted as brand manifestations themselves whenever they represent this brand by association, for example, an employee's behaviour at work (or even outside work) can be perceived as a manifestation of the employer's brand.

The intrinsic interconnections between brand manifestations and meanings on the one hand and internal and external brand stakeholders on the other contribute to the complexity which brand managers potentially face when conceptualising brands. Or, as one of the managers describes it, "There are many levels to this …" (Edward). These insights were crucial not only for the further analysis of the data but also the subsequent discussion in chapter 6.

While applying the above described four main categories appears to be helpful to develop a clearer and more in-depth understanding of the key elements which brand managers use when conceptualising brands, a certain level of ambiguity can nevertheless remain even with simple concepts such as a brand's logo. For example, a brand's logo visualised in a newspaper ad can be interpreted as a brand manifestation while the visual representation of the same logo in a stakeholder's mind can be interpreted as a brand meaning (image). The analysis of brand conceptualisations with these four categories has therefore always to be context specific and sensitive. This applies equally to more complex or abstract brand conceptualisation elements such as brand personality. For instance, the intended brand personality of an organisation stated in a brand book used for staff induction training can be seen as brand manifestation while an employee's idea of the

organisation's brand personality created in her mind after reading the brand book can be identified as brand meaning.

As shown above, each of the brand meaning and brand manifestation conceptualisation categories can already be defined as complex in themselves due to the broad variety of elements each can potentially entail in a particular context. However, to a certain extent, it appears that a higher level of complexity can be detected with some conceptualisations. The previous two explanations of brand personality as a conceptualisation element are primarily outcome-oriented, with a focus on one category – either on brand manifestation or brand meaning. However, depending on the context, brand personality could also be interpreted – from a more process-oriented angle – as something that entails elements of two, three or all four key conceptualisation categories. For instance, an organisation's brand personality might be conveyed through brand manifestations created by internal as well as external stakeholders. Based on the experience and cognition of these manifestations by a stakeholder this might then be turned into meaning in the stakeholder's mind regarding the organisation's brand personality. The brand meaning in turn can motivate the stakeholder to create a new manifestation which again might influence how other stakeholders, who experience this particular manifestation, perceive the organisation's brand and its personality.

Having identified that the interconnections between the four categories appear to be potentially highly relevant for brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice, next an analysis of these more process-oriented interconnections will be presented.

5.4 CONCEPTUALISATION LEVEL II: The Core *Processes* Which Brand Managers Integrate Into Their Conceptualisations Of Brands

Following the identification of the four interrelated elements of brand managers' conceptualisations of brands on a basic/elementary level (Conceptualisation Level I), it became clear during this analysis process that on a more complex level (Conceptualisation Level II) these interrelations can also play a key role when it

comes to brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice. In this section, consequently, the focus will be on analysing the interrelations between these four elements.

First of all, excerpts from the interview with Andrew will be used to showcase some of the initial findings before the results of the more in-depth investigation of the different interrelations, especially during the rest of Stage I and also Stage II, will be presented in sections 5.4.1 to 5.4.4.

The underlying insight which emerged from the findings of the 'controllability of brands' and 'brands as living entities' themes was that brands can not only be conceptualised as *outcomes* (such as many brand meanings or brand manifestations) but also as *processes* or a combination of both. A process can be defined as a sequence or series of related actions (Merriam-Webster, 2015). The analysis of the brand managers' brand conceptualisations provides different core sequences when it comes to the conceptualisation of brands. These can potentially involve elements of all of the previously identified four key categories. This insight can already be found in an earlier quote from the first interview with Andrew (see p. 154). This brand conceptualisation example incorporates not only elements from all four key categories but also processes.

For Andrew, in that instance, a brand is what people *say* about you as an organisation. The word 'say' could be construed here as a more static result or outcome but could also be interpreted as a more dynamic process, e.g. a longer speech or a conversation about an organisation – or even as a process that is ongoing and evolving over a long period of time. Andrew continues by stating that a brand is also about all the feelings they, the people, get from the interactions they have with the focal company. Similarly to what people say about a brand, while the feelings towards a brand can be interpreted as potentially rather static and stable, interactions with an organisation can here also be construed as processes. Therefore they could be seen as rather dynamic, which can then lead to potentially changing the feelings somebody holds for a brand.

The quote by Andrew was very insightful for the further investigations of the interrelations between the four conceptualisation elements since it indicates that as part of his brand conceptualisation thinking there appear to be (at least) two key processes. The first key process can be interpreted as the expressing to the outside world of what a person thinks or feels about an organisation. In other words, an external stakeholder creates a brand manifestation by turning her/his brand meaning (what s/he knows/feels about the organisation) into a manifestation which can be experienced by others. The second key process can be construed as the development of feelings based on the manifestations a person experiences through the interactions with an organisation. Here the process appears to be the other way round – based on experiences with the organisation, these brand manifestations are turned into brand meanings in the person's mind.

Following on from the earlier discussed, theoretical interpretivist perspectives, the first process could be described as an interpersonally-oriented sense making process while the latter one could be described as an intrapersonally-oriented sense making process. The latter sense making is thus interpreted as an internally-focused process (the cognitive creation of brand meaning 'inside' a person's mind) while the interpersonally-oriented sense making can be construed as an externally-focused process (the creation of brand manifestations which can be experienced 'externally' by other people). In contrast to the earlier quote, in which Andrew focused on the intrapersonally and interpersonally-oriented sense making of 'people', which in that particular context could be interpreted rather narrowly as *consumers*, in another context he points out that this thinking also applies to internal stakeholders, such as employees:

> We don't look at internal [i.e. employees'] perceptions, we form them (laughs). That is a bit of a joke. … [But this] is certainly the job we are trying to do …. Being responsible for the brand is actually not so much a job that is to do with the outside …we need to understand the outside … but it is much more a job about getting people to understand on the inside [of the organisation] what best to do with the brand and how best to do it ... so it is about forming those perceptions of the brand internally.

In this example, from the brand manager's perspective, the *perception and cognition* of internal stakeholders, in other words, intrapersonally-oriented processes conducted by employees, can be influenced by the organisation (through its interpersonally-

oriented processes). The brand manager sees his job as being about "getting people to understand on the inside" (Andrew) what the brand is about. Another case in point is, for instance, provided by Gina in a later interview. She says

> … as a brand manager … you try to guide people [within the organisation] towards 'This is what the brand is or is not about' (Gina).

At the same time, brand managers such as Andrew or Gina also acknowledge that employees need this understanding or these internalised meanings of the brand since they *interact* with all kinds of internal and external stakeholders. Therefore the employees of an organisation are key in the process of making sense of the organisation's brand on an interpersonally-oriented level for other internal and external stakeholders. In another context, Andrew makes it even more explicitly clear that brand manifestation processes need to be consistent no matter if you deal with stakeholders inside the organisation or outside:

> And it's with brands ... what you are on the outside you are on the inside. That's the reality. Don't try to be something else to customers than to your employees. And the same is true with your shareholders and all the other stakeholders.

These findings led to two preliminary insights:

a) Key processes: Intrapersonally-oriented sense making could for the present context be defined as an inwards-focused process since its primary concern appears to be on transforming one (or more) brand manifestation(s) into brand meaning. Interpersonally-oriented sense making, on the other hand, could be construed as an outwards-focused process since its primary concern appears to be on transforming brand meaning into one or more brand manifestations that can be experienced by others.

b) Key stakeholders: Intrapersonal and interpersonal sense making processes as part of brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice seem to involve internal and/or external stakeholders.

Through the analytical process of constant comparison, these early key insights have been further developed. Examples of this are presented in the following. First, internal stakeholders are investigated in-depth.

5.4.1 Intrapersonally-Oriented Processes By Internal Brand Stakeholders

The intrapersonally-oriented sense making processes by internal brand stakeholders have been identified as a core process category in which an internal stakeholder transforms a brand manifestation which he or she has experienced into brand meaning. In other words, the brand manager and/ or other internal stakeholders give brand meaning to the experience of an internally and/ or externally created brand manifestation. For example, Nina talking about various internally created brand manifestations which she has experienced ("a very nice logo"; the development of industry-leading principles; "we've written books"; the team and corporate culture; "the look of what we produce and of our company"), she concludes about her organisation:

> it is not a flashy, in-your-face brand; it's a thoughtful, knowledgeable, based on academic research etc., etc., foundation and it's more of a gentle brand, not an aggressive brand, in your face. That's how I would see us. (Nina)

In this example, Nina, as the brand manager and an internal stakeholder of the company, explains what brand meanings she has developed resulting from the brand manifestations which she has experienced over time, created by other internal stakeholders.

Another case in point for turning internally created manifestations into brand meaning is provided by Tim. When asked about how he tried to understand what his organisation's brand is about when he was hired, Tim talks about his intrapersonal sense making of the CEO's motto (or "strapline"). Tim explains what the motto means to him and gives an example of how the organisation has implemented it together with a broad variety of other stakeholders, i.e. they have co-created brand manifestations.

An example of a brand manager turning an *externally* created brand manifestation into brand meaning is given by Hendrik. He talks about a brand manifestation (the analysts' opinion – expressed within the industry media – on his organisation's business strategy) and then how he interpreted this externally created manifestation and gave meaning to it:

> Hendrik: The analysts agreed …. One of the key things they said was "Don't change your brand."
> Interviewer: Why did they say this?
> Hendrik: We changed our brand three years ago [name, logo plus tagline], the company was called ….

Another example of a brand manager as internal stakeholder turning externally created brand manifestations into meaning is presented in the following. Ian makes sense for himself of externally created brand manifestations, i.e. other organisations using Ian's organisation's imagery and/or content on their websites:

> … a lot of our content and indeed our brand isn't … on our website at all. It's on someone else's website and they're talking about us and using our imagery. We don't seek to try and control that, it would take too much time and there are sites all around the world where legally you haven't got a hope of doing that and some of them do use it [the content Ian's organisation produces] in a bad way and re-publish stuff on a poor quality website and try to sell and put advertising against it. On the whole we don't worry because if you looked at it you can tell that it was poor quality: it doesn't tend to rank in [online] searches because no one links to them because they are bad. So we don't tend to try and police any of that. (Ian)

5.4.2 Interpersonally-Oriented Processes By Internal Brand Stakeholders

Interpersonally-oriented sense making processes of internal brand stakeholders have been identified as a second core process category in which the brand manager and/or other internal stakeholders transform brand meaning into one or more brand manifestation(s), i.e. something that can be experienced by other internal and/or external stakeholders. In the following, examples will be presented given by Nina, Maurice, Steve, Leonard and Bob of interpersonally-oriented sense making processes by internal brand stakeholders.

Nina explains during her interview how her organisation has turned the idea of being an "intellectual brand" into brand manifestations, for example by writing and publishing books under the name of the company, which could then be experienced by internal as well as external stakeholders:

> ... we always see ourselves as a brand but I think what has happened in the past is that we've seen ourselves as an intellectual brand. We've established [industry-leading] principles, we've written books – we are very much a think tank, and more of the academic type, that was our approach. (Nina)

Maurice, on the other hand, explains how his organisation's internal marketing team has turned their idea of the intended brand essence into manifestations that can be experienced by internal and external stakeholders:

> We express it [the brand's essence] in the form of words, we express it in a positioning statement, we express it in the form of a value proposition [points towards posters hanging in the room in which the interview takes place, which promote the corporate brand's essence], …, we express it in the form of attributes, …. We have that expressed out, we have it published and expressed, we have a brand book which is openly available to all of our people [employees] and our suppliers. (Maurice)

Or Steve explains that the induction training for new staff in his company is a manifestation of the brand specifically for internal stakeholders: "[Organisation S] are very good at communicating their brand identity internally. The whole induction process is geared up to share the vision." Steve also gives an example where an interpersonally-oriented sense making process was not as successful as the leadership team had hoped. Consequently they decided to revisit the mission statement and implement it in more tangible ways. He talks about the insight that some members of the team had not internalised the brand's mission statement. Therefore the leadership/marketing team decided to roll it out in more concrete ways:

> So we are revisiting our mission statement; we found out that some people didn't know about it at all levels of the organisation and we realised we are now going to have to roll that out in more concrete ways. (Steve)

Leonard says that his organisation's brand is fundamentally different to its American competitors due to a different culture manifested through different behaviour. He explains that an intrinsic part of his organisational brand and culture is that "we don't have to report to Wall Street every 90 days …". The difference in culture, as part of the brand, is manifested within his organisation through the lack of "knee jerk

behaviour as with the American competitors" and expressed through being "genuinely more focused on long-term relationships" and able to "play the long-term game" (Leonard).

Bob talks about how his organisation transforms their core brand value of trust into brand manifestations which can be experienced by external brand stakeholders. An example of how this key brand value of the organisation affects their business practice, in terms of the brand manifestations they produce, is their email and direct marketing practice:

> … we have to be quite careful what we push at people, particularly in a direct marketing capacity, because we see ourselves as a trust brand and so, for example, we do little or no marketing messaging in our email work. We do what we call 'service messaging'. We have strict rules about how many emails we send to people, how frequently and what would be in them, because we have a very good performance in our direct marketing area, very good click through and open rates – way higher than average. And we think that's to do with trust, the quality of the information and the importance and relevance of the information. But also, we are conscious that this trust, relationship and relevance can be broken by doing something irrelevant, like trying to sell 'beach balls' for the weekend (he laughs) which would be easy, selling to our database, ... so we have to manage that. Sometimes people don't understand why we control that so tightly. But then, when we want to say something important to people, like there is [mentions various events he considers as important for the organisation's customers] maybe, then the brand has to be taken very seriously in those areas. (Bob)

5.4.3 Intrapersonally-Oriented Processes By External Brand Stakeholders

In the following, various brand managers provide examples of how external stakeholders can make sense intrapersonally of the experience of one or more brand manifestations created by internal and/or external stakeholders.

Maurice, for instance, says about external brand stakeholders in general: "people see in brands what they see. They believe what they believe, *they believe in their experience* and that is the end of it" (Maurice). He also concludes: "… if our people [employees] drive results, our customers will see us as a results-driven organisation" (Maurice). Or, talking about the situation before all businesses within his organisation were rebranded under the name of the corporate 'master brand',

Maurice explains that external stakeholders would not link the brand meanings they had developed through their experience with one company to another in the organisation's 'stable'. Subsequently, the external stakeholders would not transform the brand manifestation they had experienced into the intended brand meaning:

> So the strength of [mentions the core business which his organisation is historically known for] is also the weakness …. Part of the weakness is that we have historically acquired and left to stand alone the businesses we have acquired so the equity [i.e. positive brand meaning] is not transferred over and that was certainly the case with the [mentions a high profile company which operates in a market different to their core business and was acquired by Maurice's organisation] equity. [Mentions the acquired business]'s biggest customer base was the [mentions the acquired organisation's core target group]. [Mentions this core target group] would never ever think that [mentions the name of the acquired company] would have any connection with [mentions the name of Maurice's organisation which is now the name of the corporate master brand]. And so it's an increased effort, we rebranded two and a half years ago to pull the entities together into one piece and we're not fully there yet .... (Maurice)

Another example is provided by Jeffrey when talking about how he wants clients and other external stakeholders in the industry to see his organisation based on the brand manifestations his team delivers:

> I want people to think of us as [mentions his intended brand positioning for the organisation] and that's aligned with a service level which I know is true. People on the outside know we'll get it done. Once they've passed it over to us they can relax. It's what's made this year the best in five years, even though the economic variables have been quite difficult, it's because the service element is our differentiator. (Jeffrey)

The brand positioning that differentiates Jeffrey's organisation from the competition, from his point of view, is about the specific expertise which he and the rest of his senior team have gathered over the years. However, he acknowledges that the more junior members of his team will not necessarily be able to live up to this brand positioning due to their lack of expertise. The clients as external stakeholders will therefore not necessarily give the intended meaning which Jeffrey aims for, to the brand manifestations which junior members of his organisation produce.

> I think the value of [mentions the intended brand positioning] to the clients is directly correlated to who they're talking to internally [i.e. within Organisation J] and their level of experience and knowledge. So if they're talking to the junior colleagues they might not be getting that and therefore

they might not be where I want the [Organisation J] brand to be. But if they're talking to me they should be, if they're not I'm failing. (Jeffrey)

Steve also gives an example of how he wants the industry, in which his organisation operates, and his target audiences to perceive Organisation S in a particular way, based on the brand manifestations which the team of Organisation S has created:

> And we feel that being more aligned internally and also being more aligned and stronger with our relationships with [mentions the core industry they target] will enable us to be much better [mentions the kind of service providers which they are] that [mentions their core target industry] really values and sees a value in when getting their job done … (Steve)

An interesting variation of this third core process category occurs when brand managers talk about themselves as external brand stakeholders (e.g. as a customer, admirer or client) of other organisations (e.g. Jeffrey about Aprilia and Alfa Romeo, Kirk about McDonald's and Foxtons, Leonard about John Lewis, Maurice about BMW and GE, and Nina about Nicole Farhi and Prada). When the brand managers talked about other organisations' brands they, as external stakeholders, make sense intrapersonally of the other organisation's brand manifestations created by their internal and external stakeholders. For example, Kirk talks about Foxtons, a large London estate agency and their branding. He gives examples of the brand manifestations which they have created and provides the brand meaning he has developed based on the experience of Foxtons' "branding" activities. Then he concludes that this company is "very appealing to the public and the new way of doing things" (Kirk):

> Foxtons chucked a load of money at it [their branding] from when they first came out: they took the idea, for example, of the Mini – it was a new car at the time, it was very popular, it had loads of good press about it as a car in itself. So they took the brand of the Mini [as their company car for most estate agents working for them all over London], which was an iconic brand in itself, associated themselves with it but then associated it by developing some very very funky logos [for Foxtons] on them, which were visual – they were seen everywhere. They didn't just get one or two [Minis with the Foxtons corporate colours and logo] they got hundreds of the things, so, no matter where you were you always saw them running around town and stuff like that. And they did a big big push on that front and obviously then they also did a big push in terms of the revamping of all their offices – very funky, modern, used a bit of the cafe culture in terms of their offices so all their offices have cool chairs and armchairs and are bright and so forth but they also have bars with drinks served and so forth so again very appealing to the public and the new way of doing things. (Kirk)

Maurice and Nina also mention in the interviews instances of themselves as external stakeholders of a brand, giving brand meaning to the brand's manifestations which they have personally experienced. Maurice is a great fan of BMW:

> BMW, every time I go into the showroom I feel like their most valuable customer, I'm not their most valuable customer, I have a fairly ordinary BMW and I've got another one now and every experience, every interaction with BMW has been absolutely superlative. (Maurice)

Nina explains why she is a loyal customer of the fashion designer Nicole Farhi based on her experiences of the brand's manifestations:

> I like the fabrics. Hers is the easy-to-wear type for a woman. My look has to be smart casual where I work and that is perfect. She just epitomises the smart casual look. It just suits me professionally. (Nina)

5.4.4 Interpersonally-Oriented Processes By External Brand Stakeholders

Several brand managers (e.g. Bob, Charlotte, Gina, Hendrik, Ian, Kirk, Maurice) emphasised that WOM is an intrinsic part of the brand. It appears to be relevant no matter whether it is created in its traditional form (e.g. Charlotte, Hendrik, Kirk, Maurice) or in an electronic format (e.g. Bob, Charlotte, Gina, Hendrik, Ian, Kirk, Maurice). For instance, Hendrik talks about a traditional B2B WOM scenario where his existing customers (marketing consultancies and agencies) are likely to turn their positive brand meaning which exists in their minds (what they think of his organisation and/or its products) into a brand manifestation that can be experienced by potential new customers:

> I do a lot of work with consultancies and agencies.... If they have a positive view towards [Organisation H] there is a good chance that that will spread out. (Hendrik)

In terms of eWOM as part of the brand, it could be created, for instance, through websites (Felicia, Gina, Hendrik, Nina, Quentin); social media (Bob, Gina, Ian); such as Facebook (Quentin); blogs (Charlotte, Gina, Hendrik, Nina); or micro-blogs, such as Twitter (Bob, Hendrik, Ian, Kirk, Nina, Quentin), YouTube (Charlotte); online user groups (Maurice); online brand communities (Gina); or online ratings and reviews (Ian). In terms of eWOM, Charlotte provides a B2C example in which a

customer turned her brand meaning into a manifestation that has subsequently been experienced by hundreds of other potential customers:

> For example, someone on a [mentions a particular kind of blog] wrote that they bought a [Organisation C] dress, all of a sudden hundreds of people from that site came to us. (Charlotte)

An even bigger effect had the WOM of a celebrity and key influencer in her industry, a TV show presenter, who endorsed Charlotte's brand on television as expressed in the following excerpt cited previously:

> We had our website crashed immediately after the TV programme and we had, I think, that month the strongest month in sales on the website. We gained about 30 new stores that season because lots of store owners watch it [the TV programme]. So everybody who didn't care about us before all of a sudden took notice. Everybody said "I saw you on [the TV programme …]", I've been sending them stuff for the last 10 years and they've always ignored me. Now that [mentions the presenter of the TV programme] has said "we are great", now immediately everybody is coming [to us] …

5.5 Conclusion

Overall, on a process-oriented level (Conceptualisation Level II), it can be concluded that it is very useful for developing a more in-depth understanding of brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice to use the following two dimensions: (a) intrapersonally-oriented sense making versus interpersonally-oriented sense making; and (b) internal stakeholders versus external stakeholders. The combination of these two criteria led to four core process categories – on the basis of the constant comparison process – which are central to brand managers' conceptualisations of brands from a process-oriented angle. These are represented in Table 5-2.

Table 5-2: Core Processes Which Brand Managers Integrate Into Their Conceptualisations Of Brands

		BRAND CONCEPTUALISATION FOCUS	
		Intrapersonally-oriented sense making (transforming experienced brand manifestation into brand meaning)	Interpersonally-oriented sense making (transforming brand meaning into a brand manifestation/ something that can be experienced)
S T A K E H O L D E R O R I E N T A T I O N	INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS	**Process 1**: the brand manager and/ or other INTERNAL stakeholders give brand meaning to the experience of internally and/ or externally created brand manifestation(s)	**Process 2**: the brand manager and/ or other INTERNAL stakeholders turn brand meaning into a brand manifestation that can be experienced by (other) internal and/ or external stakeholders
	EXTERNAL STAKEHODLERS	**Process 3**: EXTERNAL stakeholders give brand meaning to the experience of internally and/ or externally created brand manifestation(s)	**Process 4**: EXTERNAL stakeholders turn brand meaning into a brand manifestation that can be experienced by (other) external and/ or internal stakeholders

Source: The researcher.

These findings are further developed and discussed in the next chapter. This will be supported by comparing and contrasting these findings with the existing literature.

Based on the empirical findings, the concept represented in Table 5-2 is helpful when it comes to the deconstruction of complex brand-related sense making processes. A case in point is provided by Richard. The scenario that emerged during the interview with him involves the sense making of a number of internal stakeholders (of his organisational brand) such as employees in general, or more specifically the marketing team, the new CEO, and a senior manager; as well as external stakeholders such as customers. Using Table 5-2 to deconstruct this complex situation, it becomes clear that it entails mainly sense making processes of Types 1 and 2 (see Table 5-2).

Richard talks about how different divisions of his organisation, due in part to a recent merger, the arrival of a new CEO, and conflicting messages from senior management, struggle to make sense intrapersonally of what the corporate brand currently stands for (Process 1, Table 5-2). The employees look to the new CEO for direction and try to give meaning to what he says about his vision for the brand (as an internal brand manifestation, see Process 2, Table 5-2), while another senior manager adds to the confusion by providing contradictory messages (internal brand manifestations) about what the brand represents (also Process 2, Table 5-2).

> … what [the corporate brand] represents has changed. And we've got a new CEO coming in on [mentions the date] this year and he decided what it represents to him but all the sub-brands are still wrestling with: what does it represent? And then you've got [mentions a senior manager of one of the organisation's divisions] saying: 'Well, actually it represents [provides the senior manager's explanation which is different to the CEO's perspective].' So everyone's got their own ideas of what it represents. (Richard)

Richard then describes how the brand manifestations created by customers (Process 4, Table 5-2) are transformed into the organisation's brand meaning by the firm's frontline staff and subsequently the marketing team (Processes 1 & 2, Table 5-2).

> the marketing teams take … the lead pretty much from the frontline staff, who are dealing with the customers, and they have sucked up what the brand is [in the customers' minds] and then try to personify it rather than creating a brand and pushing it out to the frontline and saying: 'This is what we think.' Which, given that I've got this premise that a brand is always delivered by its people and [mentions the industry his organisation is in] is a people business and it's about speaking to the customers − fundamentally that's the right way around. So we've created the brand around what our frontline think [and say] we are. Which is kind of, basically, what customers think we are. So maybe we've just emphasised an existing customer sense. (Richard)

More generally, the findings suggest that an adequate brand conceptualisation needs to be able to accommodate static and more outcome-oriented approaches (Conceptualisation Level 1) as well as dynamic and rather process-oriented perspectives on brands (Conceptualisation Level 2).

Subsequently, it can be concluded on an individual level, that brand meaning is a result of an individual's accumulated experiences associated with a brand combined with this individual's related thought processes. Then, on an inter-subjective level,

brand meaning is a result of all stakeholders' accumulated experiences associated with a brand (combined with these stakeholders' individual brand-related thought processes).

In terms of limitations, this means that brand meaning is not only subject to experiencing direct and/or indirect manifestations of a brand. Brand meaning can be influenced through information that a brand stakeholder subjectively relates to a brand. For example, a consumer can change her mind about the Shell brand when reading something about the BP brand or the oil industry as a whole.

Nevertheless, overall the four identified key components (on Conceptualisation Level 1) as well as the identified brand-related sense making processes (Conceptualisation Level 2) and the approach represented in Table 5-2 contribute to improving the critical issue of concept clarity in brand theory development as well as brand management practice. For example, while some previous research indicated that due to the internet-based democratisation of brand management the boundaries of internal and external stakeholders have become increasingly blurred, the present research findings with marketing practitioners show that, at least from a managerial perspective, this differentiation still remains very relevant.

CHAPTER 6:
DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will compare and contrast the findings of the conducted empirical research with the existing literature. In this context it will be discussed to what extent new insights and knowledge have been created through the findings of the empirical research. In relation to research objective 4 this chapter will also develop a conceptual framework which demonstrates how the identified key components and processes of brand managers' brand conceptualisations are interrelated. This framework represents one of the main contributions of this investigation and will be evaluated in further detail within this chapter. Furthermore, a new brand definition will be proposed following the newly developed social constructivist brand conceptualisation framework. Based on these new developments, consequences for marketing practice in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management will be discussed in this and the next chapter.

6.2 Towards The Development Of A Social Constructivist Brand Conceptualisation Framework

Due to the developments of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, a number of researchers, such as Hatch and Schultz (2010), have supported the idea that we now live in "the era of stakeholder-focused branding" (p. 591). Prominent concepts such as 'brand co-creation' (e.g. Iglesias et al., 2013; Merz et al., 2009) and 'marketing with' rather than 'marketing to' stakeholders (e.g. Lusch, 2007; Lusch & Vargo, 2009) have emerged in the literature. However, "the work of describing how brands are co-created with their stakeholders has barely begun" (Hatch & Schultz, 2010, p. 591). This still appears to be the case following more recent research (e.g. Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Singaraju et al., 2016). More importantly, for the research at hand, it has not been clear so far whether the changes in brand management, identified in chapter 3, have also led to a change in brand

conceptualisations, for example, compared to earlier empirical research conducted by de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998a & 1998b).

This research therefore investigated the combined cognitive brand conceptualisation space (Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011) of UK-based brand managers to develop a better comprehension of the incorporation of co-creation with stakeholders as part of their brand conceptualisations.

6.2.1 The Struggle With Brand Terminology

The struggle with brand terminology is still very present in the literature (e.g. Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a & 2015b; Gaski, 2010 & 2015; Jones & Bonevac, 2013) as well as in the conducted interviews. As pointed out in the literature review, one of the main challenges with the concept of brands is that it covers a multitude of issues and interpretations in marketing (Berthon et al., 2011; Jensen & Beckmann, 2009; Schroeder, 2015). As a consequence, the way in which the term brand is defined, depends on the particular perspective of the observer (Gabbott & Jevons, 2009; Richards et al., 1998). In terms of implications, the empirical research supports the findings of the literature review that brand managers have to deal with a potentially immense complexity when it comes to conceptualising brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Melewar et al., 2012; Merz et al., 2009; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015).

Despite the brand research literature varying in its acknowledgement of the complexity of the brand phenomenon, one common emerging insight is the realisation that the phenomenon's multi-faceted nature presents a major stumbling block for the progress of brand discourse. Some research, for instance, highlights that this multi-faceted nature is one of the reasons for the absence of a widely accepted definition of the term brand, which has subsequently been hindering the progress of empirical brand research as well as theoretical concept developments (Avis, 2009; Gabbott & Jevons, 2009). Helping to improve the terminological clarity of the brand phenomenon through an analysis which aims to untangle the complexity of its multi-faceted nature has therefore been the focus of this research.

An important insight emerged from the early interviews, as they highlighted something that has not been identified to this degree in previous empirical research. The insight in question is the finding that even practitioner experts, such as Andrew and Bob, with many years of experience in world leading marketing organisations are not necessarily very comfortable or familiar with the terminological differentiation of product, service and corporate brands, while in the academic literature these terms are used regularly (e.g. Balmer 2001b). This supports a point made by Wymer (2013, p. 1) who argues that the lack of agreement on how brands should be conceptualised between practitioners and academics can have a negative impact on "the research community's ability to discover and disseminate knowledge to the practitioner community".

The first three interviews provided early evidence that there are discrepancies in the way brand terminology is used in theory and practice. While in the academic literature about corporate brand management, for example, there are clear differentiations between product and service brands on the one hand and corporate brands on the other, in corporate brand management practice it seems that there are also differences but these might not necessarily be explicitly articulated through the terminology used. Also, sometimes managers simply do not feel comfortable with the terminology used by academic researchers – as in Charlotte's case. Since the overall research aim is to explore the different elements and processes of brand conceptualisations in brand management *practice*, regardless of whether it is on a product, service or corporate level, as discussed in the findings chapter, I decided not to explore further the conceptual differences between product, service and corporate brands in brand management practice. Neither, subsequently, did I use or prompt the managers anymore with terms such as product, service or corporate brand.

Not emphasising the differences between product, service and corporate brands is in line with various scholars who see the different types of brands as rather similar (e.g. Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatony, 2000; Iglesias et al., 2013; Rahman et al, 2009). Iglesias et al.'s (2013) research shows, for instance, that "there are no significant differences between brands in different business settings, regarding brand value co-creation" (p. 682). The adopted approach is also in line

with a social constructivist perspective to view product, service *and* corporate brands primarily as complex social phenomena involving a broad range of stakeholders on all levels as pointed out in the literature review (e.g. Iglesias et al., 2013; Merz et al., 2009; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2009 & 2010). The remaining research therefore focused on exploring in further depth the initial insights about (a) the controllability of brands and (b) brands as living entities in the context of managers' conceptualisations of brands.

To conceptualise means "to form an idea or principle in your mind" (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2015) based on, for example, observations, experience and data. The emphasis is thus less on a concrete, consciously and explicitly expressed definition of 'brand' but rather how the term is used in everyday language of brand management practice. One of the key themes that emerged from this investigation of brand conceptualisations in brand management practice was the conceptualisation of brands as living entities.

6.2.2 Brands As Living Entities

The interviews elicited that some brand managers conceptualise brands as something that has the characteristics of a dynamic, living entity, in some cases even with human-like characteristics (see section 5.2.2). These findings correspond with the literature on brand personality, which Aaker (1997), for example, described as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 347). Based on the identification of the four key brand building elements (on Conceptualisation Level I, section 5.3), an organisation's brand personality might, for instance, be conveyed through brand manifestations created by internal and/or external stakeholders. Based on the experience and cognition of these manifestations by a stakeholder this might then be turned into meaning in this stakeholder's mind regarding the organisation's brand personality. The brand meaning in turn can motivate the stakeholder to create a new manifestation which again might influence how other stakeholders, who experience this manifestation, perceive the organisation's brand personality.

Some of the comments from the interviewees indicate that brands can be conceptualised not only as entities that have human-like characteristics but can also

have their own evolving nature or lives of their own from a more process-oriented perspective. For instance, "a brand has a life … a brand is like a person" (Gina). This links well to the literature, which identifies brands as living beings (e.g. Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Balmer, 2006; Berthon et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2003; Kozinets, 2016). Brands have been described as being alive in the literature, for instance, by Hanby (1999). Furthermore, Balmer (2006) proposes that brands have lives of their own. Sherrington (2003) sees them as living organic entities, or Kapferer (2004) as living systems (see also Giesler & Venkatesh, 2005; Luedicke, 2006a and 2006b). Following the interviews, employees can "*live* the brand" (Leonard). Or, a brand can build relationships with people (Gina, Hendrik); and brands are about multiple relationships (Richard). These associations related to brands as evolving social entities, which can develop relationships with people, link well to the relationship-focused and stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisation perspectives (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Heding et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Merz et al., 2009) elicited from the literature in chapter 2.

Implicit or explicit conceptualisations of a brand as a living social entity have emerged as an important category based on the interviews with the managers. But, compared to the four key elements of the brand identified in the analysis in section 5.3, this category seems to possess per se a higher level of complexity. The reason seems to be that it entails intrinsic processes involving an interplay of elements from three or all of the four key component categories (manifestations, meanings, external and/or internal stakeholders). The brand as a living social entity category subsumes all brand conceptualisations which combine brand meanings and brand manifestations with internal and/or external stakeholders and also several of the more process-oriented conceptualisations. A holistic approach of interpreting brands as dynamic and complex living entities also allows the acknowledgement of phenomena such as multiple brand narratives which can entail complementary as well as contradictory brand stories – which has been exemplified in the literature (e.g. Diamond et al., 2009; Thompson et al., 2006).

A conceptualisation of brands on a more process-oriented level which might entail the manifold combination of various elements of all four different categories

(Conceptualisation Level I), reflects not only the evolving nature of the brand phenomenon (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a) but also its complex and multi-faceted nature (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Berthon et al., 2007 & 2011; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Diamond et al., 2009; Franzen & Moriarty, 2009; Giesler & Venkatesh, 2005; Luedicke, 2006a & 2006b; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006). This has important consequences for brand management theory as well as practice. One important consequence is that concept clarity is urgently needed.

6.2.3 From Meaning Making Processes To Sense Making and Sense Giving

In the analysis of the primary data it has emerged that the four different core processes identified can potentially all be combined by the brand managers. For example, when Steve talks about internal training, e.g. induction training, and then the rolling out of a customer relationship management (CRM) programme, first internally but then also with their external stakeholders to develop stronger bonds and relationships in line with their brand vision. Steve concludes: "So that's one way in which we've taken action to reinforce what Organisation S's vision is – [mentions the vision]." The internal training entails interpersonally-oriented brand meaning transformation processes as well as intrapersonally-oriented brand manifestation transformation processes amongst internal stakeholders. Organisation S's CRM project roll-out then enables further brand meaning and brand manifestation transformation processes through interactions between internal as well as external brand stakeholders. Maurice also makes a few points which incorporate all four core processes.

> We express it [the brand's essence] in the form of words, we express it in a positioning statement, we express it in the form of value proposition, …, we express it in the form of attributes, … We have that expressed out, we have it published and expressed, we have a brand book which is openly available to all of our people and our suppliers. … We want our people to drive results and if our people drive results our customers will see us as a results-driven organisation. (Maurice)

Based on these findings in relation to the identification of the four different elements as well as processes, and taking into account the call for more integrated brand

conceptualisations in the literature (Berthon et al., 2011; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Diamond et al., 2009; Fournier, 2015; Iglesias et al., 2013; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006; Schroeder, 2015; Veloutsou & Guzman, 2017) it appears paramount to aim in the present context for the creation of a more integrated conceptualisation. In terms of process-oriented brand conceptualisations, Maurice, for instance, stated:

> if our people [staff] do things like that [behaviour which reflects the organisation's stated brand values] then our customers will see the expression of that in their behaviour and so [align] internal and external brand.

This relates well to de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998a), who concluded that the employees' activities and consumers' perceptions of an organisation emerge as the two main boundaries of its brand construct, as identified in the literature review. However, through the new empirical evidence it can be concluded that – based on the overall analysis of brand managers' thinking – brand manifestations can not only be created or co-created by the focal organisation's internal but also its external stakeholders far beyond the involvement of employees and consumers. This indicates that de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley's *conditio sine qua non* definition of the brand construct needs to be extended.

Brands can be conceptualised as co-created (Edward, Felicia, Jeffrey) through the processual combination of tangible and/or intangible brand manifestations as well as the brand perceptions and meanings that are subsequently generated all the way through "from start to finish" (Sherry, 2005, p. 41). This can include internal as well as external stakeholders. While de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley's research was conducted more than 15 years ago, when research topics such as brand stakeholders and brand co-creation were less prevalent, even recent research about managers' conceptualisations of brands seems to marginalise some crucial areas of contemporary brand conceptualisation debate such as external brand stakeholders' capabilities to create key brand manifestations.

For instance, a study examining managers' conceptualisations of corporate brands in IT start-up organisations first acknowledges the relevance of brand manifestations generated by external stakeholders in the context of co-creation, such as brand-related word-of-mouth (see Juntunen, 2012, p. 238), but then omits these

findings when developing a conceptual framework of corporate brand components (see Juntunen, 2012, p. 242). As outlined above, the present empirical research has clearly indicated the relevance of adopting a holistic perspective not only in terms of stakeholders but also in terms of co-creation processes. This insight has also been acknowledged in recent research conducted by Iglesias et al. (2013) and Dennhardt (2014) as well as in practice-oriented work by authors such as Rowles (2014) and Kendall (2015).

Ind and Bjerke (2007a & 2007b) with their participatory market orientation support these findings as well by conceptualising employees, customers and other stakeholders not only as co-creators of brand meaning but also as collective developers of brand manifestations. This even entails the co-creation of physical products beyond the idea of community brands or open-source brands. Felicia, for instance, suggests that her organisation's brand is influenced and co-created by a number of internal as well as external stakeholders. In this context there are some further less obvious parallels between the empirical findings of this research and the literature. The intrapersonally-oriented brand meaning creation processes and the interpersonally-oriented brand manifestation creation processes identified in the primary data can be aligned to the so-called concepts of sense making and sense giving in the literature.

The concept of sense making has mainly been developed in the discipline of organisational behaviour – particularly by Karl Weick (see further Weick, 1995 & 2001) – but has also entered the marketing discipline (see e.g. the special issue of Psychology and Marketing, 2001). The concept can mean different things to different people (Klein et al., 2006a) but is quintessentially about "the making of sense" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). It is about giving meaning to experience. This includes processes such as structuring known as well as unknown stimuli by placing them into a mental frame of reference (Starbuck and Milliken, 1988; Waterman, 1990; Woodside, 2001). Such a mental framework can be used as a generalised point of view that directs people's interpretations.

This approach to sense making, which focuses primarily on the placement of stimuli into perceptual frameworks, has been regarded by some researchers as rather

restricted. Klein et al. (2006b) point out, for example, that sense making needs to be interpreted as a two way process of fitting data that are perceived into a frame (mental model) but also fitting a frame around perceived data. In the case of cognitive dissonance, for instance, this can mean adjusting existing and/or creating new mental models.

On an even broader level, sense making may include reciprocal interaction between processes of perceiving information, meaning ascription, and action (Thomas et al., 1993). From this perspective, the concept of sense making can be regarded as a more interwoven interplay of interpretation as well as (re)action (Weick et al., 2005). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) have adopted such a broadened approach and split the concept of sense making in two: sense making and sense giving. These two concepts emerged during their research about strategic change initiation in organisations.

Their study showed that strategic organisational change within an American higher education institution consisted of processes of meaning construction (sense making) as well as meaning communication (sense giving). Based on the processes of sense making, managers conducted processes of sense giving, for example by attempting to influence the sense making of others. For the context at hand, the concept of sense making appears to be primarily concerned with people's perception, cognitive data processing, understanding and meaning ascription while the concept of sense giving, rather, seems to be concerned with people's acting, reacting, communicating and/or behaving based on their sense making.

Subsequently, the intrapersonally-oriented (inwards-aimed) processes which primarily focus on the transformation of the experience of one (or more) brand manifestation(s) into brand meaning could be construed as brand sense making processes. The interpersonally-oriented (outwards-aimed) processes which primarily focus on the transformation of one (or more) brand meaning(s) into brand manifestations – that can be experienced by others – could be construed as brand sense giving processes. In terms of stakeholders, sense making and sense giving processes, as part of brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice, can involve one or more internal and/or external stakeholders. This will be further explained and discussed in the following sections of this chapter. Equally, the managerial

implications of these theoretical considerations in the context of conceptualising brands as living entities need to be further evaluated.

6.3 A Social Constructivist Framework For Brand Conceptualisations

Following on from the insights of the literature review and the empirical primary data analysis, an integrative social constructivist (Melewar et al., 2012) framework has been created which visualises the multi-faceted nature of the brand phenomenon. It is based on the brand managers' brand conceptualisations, identified in chapter 5 (see e.g. Table 5-2), in combination with the concept of sense making and sense giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), and some of the findings from the literature review (e.g. Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Diamond et al., 2009; Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger, 2008), particularly the analysis of the (balanced) stakeholder perspective (see e.g. Tables 2-3 and 2-4). This framework is represented in Figure 6-1.

Figure 6-1: A Social Constructivist Framework For Brand Conceptualisations

The operand and operant processes, indicated through the arrows, are embedded in socio-cultural discourse and individual situation-specific contexts.   1a+1b and 2a+2b represent operant brand sense giving processes while 3a+3b and 4a+4b represent operand brand sense making processes.
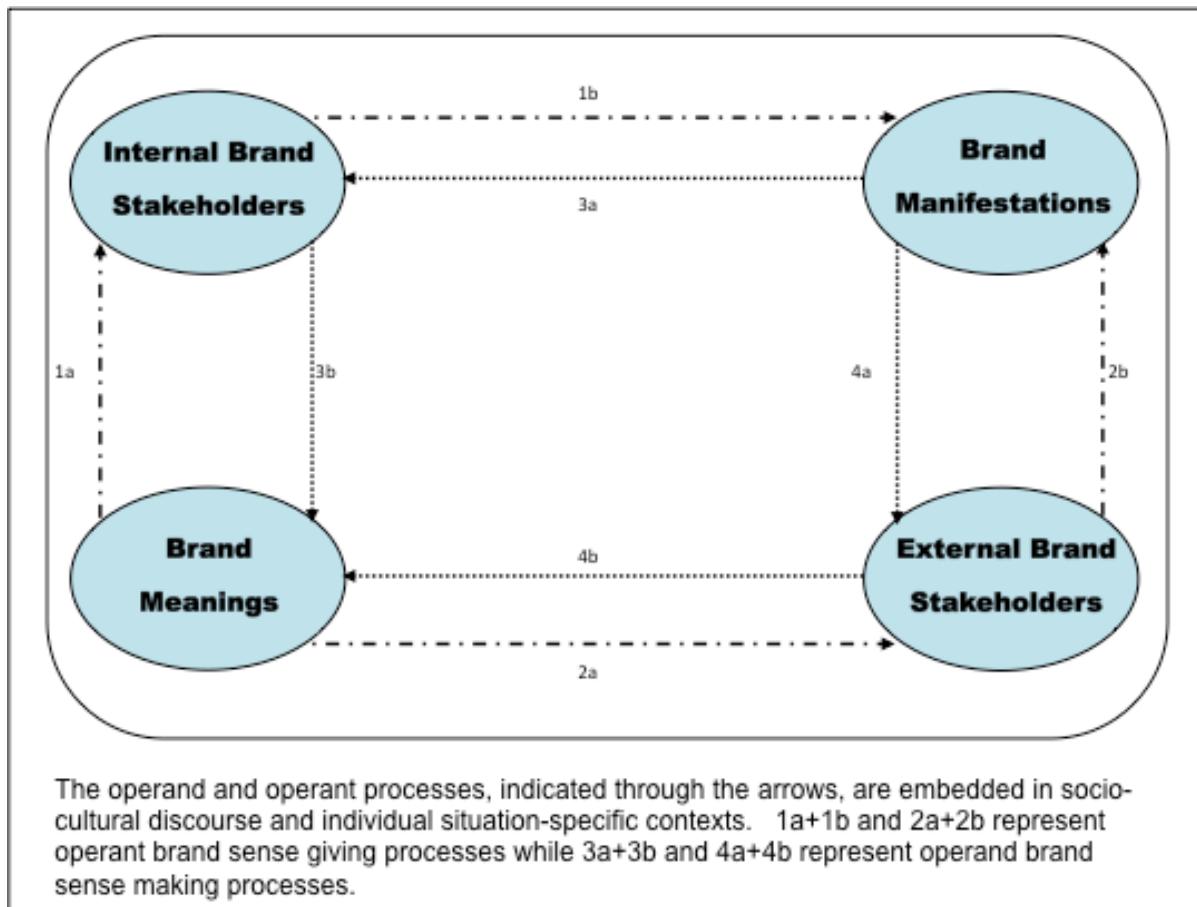
Source: The researcher.

From a brand managerial perspective, a brand as a complex phenomenon comprises elements of up to four interrelated concepts: brand meanings, brand manifestations, internal brand stakeholders and external brand stakeholders. The interrelations between the four key components are created through the four core processes: internal and external brand stakeholders' sense making and sense giving processes. This is represented in Figure 6-1. Sense giving (1a+1b or 2a+2b) can be interpreted as an operant process. Sense making (3a+3b or 4a+4b) can be interpreted as an operand process. The social constructivist approach thus also allows the acknowledgement that the represented processes in Figure 6-1 might be embedded in a wider socio-cultural discourse as well as a situation-specific context (Diamond et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013; Melewar et al., 2012).

Furthermore, based on the findings of chapter 5, brand meanings can exist on a subjective as well as intersubjective level in people's minds (e.g. Berthon et al., 2011). Brand meanings can be expressed through manifestations that are associated with the brand in the eye of the beholder. A manifestation of a brand is anything that can be experienced by people and is associated with this brand in the eye of the beholder. In other words, brand manifestations can be understood as tangible and/or intangible brand experience points. In contrast to Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008), brand manifestations are here therefore not only interpreted as 'material expressions" (p. 6) but also potentially as immaterial expressions of a brand. Experiencing a brand manifestation can lead to (1) the creation of new meaning; as well as (2) the adjustment of an existing meaning; or (3) the reaffirmation of an existing meaning in a stakeholder's mind associated with a particular brand (Asmussen et al., 2013a).

The adoption of a social constructivist perspective allows in this context the interpretation of a brand as a social phenomenon that comes to life in the interaction between internal and/or external stakeholders in a potentially – at least partially – uncontrollable way as a complex and dynamic social process (Melewar et al., 2012). Such an adopted approach also emphasises the perpetuality of brand meaning and brand manifestation (co-) creation in the ongoing interaction between the different internal and/or external brand stakeholders.

Figure 6-1 shows that brand meanings in an internal brand stakeholder's mind can *motivate* this stakeholder (1a) to *create* a brand manifestation (1b) which can then be *experienced* by other internal (3a) and/or external stakeholders (4a). Equally, brand meanings in an external stakeholder's mind can *motivate* this stakeholder (2a) to *create* a brand manifestation (2b) which can then be *experienced* by other external (4a) and/or internal stakeholders (3a). An internal stakeholder's *experience* of a brand manifestation (3a) may lead to the *creation, adjustment or reinforcement* of brand meaning in this stakeholder's mind (3b). Again, the same applies to external stakeholders. The *experience* of a brand manifestation by an external stakeholder (4a) may lead to the *creation, adjustment or reinforcement* of brand meaning in this stakeholder's mind (4b). In either case (3a+3b or 4a+4b) the experienced brand manifestation(s) might have been created by one or more internal (1b) and/or

external stakeholders (2b). This example implies the potential for co-creation of brand manifestations either amongst internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, or amongst one or more internal and external stakeholders. Furthermore, it also implies the potential for co-creation of brand meanings amongst internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, or amongst one or more internal and external stakeholders.

The differentiation between co-creation of brand manifestations and meanings shows that, in service dominant logic terms, any stakeholder can become an operand and/or operant brand resource (see Constantine & Lusch, 1994; Merz et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004 & 2008). As explained earlier, in the literature review, an operand resource can be defined as a resource on which an operation or act is performed to produce an effect (e.g. through the exposure to a brand manifestation a brand meaning is created, adjusted or reinforced in a brand stakeholder's mind). In contrast to this, an operant resource can be defined as a resource which acts on other resources to create an effect (e.g. the creation of a brand manifestation which can then be experienced by other stakeholders as operand resources). A stakeholder's act of *externally* creating or co-creating a brand manifestation (1b or 2b), which can be experienced by others (3a and/or 4a), turns this particular brand stakeholder into an *operant* brand resource. While another stakeholder's act of *internally* (co-)creating, adjusting or reinforcing a cognitive brand meaning in his or her mind (3b or 4b), based on the experience of a brand manifestation (3a or 4a), turns this stakeholder into an *operand* brand resource.

This analysis means that a stakeholder can switch between being an operand and operant resource in a far more dynamic way than has been previously stated in the above reviewed literature. Taking into account that these operand and operant processes are embedded in a socio-cultural discourse and individual situation-specific contexts, the framework in Figure 6-1 provides a further insight of how the different facets of a brand can be used and combined from a process-oriented perspective in a brand managerial context.

Overall, this social constructivist, integrative model visualised in Figure 6-1 can be described as a further development or evolution of theoretical conceptualisations and empirical findings presented in previous literature. The conceptual work by the

Innsbruck school (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006) has theoretically established the relevance of brand manifestations and brand meanings. Through the present research the relevance of brand manifestations and meanings has been confirmed *empirically* based on the analysis of interviews with brand managers. Furthermore, the Innsbruck school's conceptualisation of brand interest group has been re-defined. First of all, it has been established that the term 'group' can be misleading since brand stakeholders can be separate individuals as well as groups. In some cases a single individual can have a considerable impact on a brand (see e.g. the Dave Carroll case of 'United Breaks Guitars'). It therefore appears to be more suitable to talk about brand stakeholders rather than brand interest group(s) – at least from a brand managerial perspective.

Another important finding of the present research is that, in contrast to the Innsbruck School (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006) and other literature (see further Asmussen et al., 2013a; Hillebrand et al., 2015), from a managerial perspective it is important to differentiate conceptually between internal and external stakeholders. This is essential from a brand managerial perspective since various consumer-oriented as well as managerial researchers have pointed out that the boundaries between internal and external stakeholders get increasingly blurred.

Finally, the framework presented in Figure 6-1 can be interpreted as an evolutionary step forward regarding the work of the Innsbruck School in terms of the identification and integration of the four clearly defined core processes which brand managers incorporate in their brand conceptualisations. The conceptual as well as concrete introduction of SDL thinking, in terms of stakeholders as operand and operant resources, is a departure from the conceptual frameworks of the Innsbruck School (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006).

Even earlier than the Innsbruck school, the Copenhagen School (particularly Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Antorini & Andersen, 2005; and others in Schultz et al., 2005a) made considerable contributions to the integrative conceptualisation of brands through their research on corporate brand management. The Copenhagen School as a whole acknowledges that external stakeholders have become increasingly relevant

and powerful (Antorini & Andersen, 2005; Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Schultz, 2005a). For instance, Antorini & Andersen (2005) and Antorini & Schultz (2005) found that consumers now have unprecedented access to new forms of production, information and communication technology.

A closer integration is therefore proposed by the authors between the organisation and its internal and external stakeholders. In this context the authors recommend *democratising* the management of corporate brands. More concretely, Antorini and Schultz (2005) conceptualise the creation of a brand as a social process which includes the social interaction between internal and external stakeholders. For instance, the employees' interpretations of the top management created corporate brand vision and the interaction between employees and external stakeholders provide a platform where these interpretations and subsequent ideas about the brand "are tested, modified, converted to narratives about the corporate brand, and hence come to life, i.e. become enacted by internal and external stakeholders" (Antorini & Schultz, 2005, p. 226).

Furthermore, Antorini and Schultz (2005) mention the co-creation not only of brand meaning but also of brand manifestations as a communications goal for the second wave of corporate brand management. However, they do not further explain why they limit the co-creation of brand meanings and manifestations to an organisational (communications) goal when the co-creation from a stakeholder-oriented perspective goes far beyond the focal organisation behind a brand and that organisation's interactions with internal and external stakeholders (Asmussen et al., 2013a). An explanation for this limitation was given in the earlier literature review in which Antorini and Schultz's (2005) approach was identified as primarily an inside-out stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisation perspective. Melewar et al. (2012) call this control-oriented, inside-out approach a normative perspective. In contrast to this, the framework developed for the present context (Figure 6-1) can be described as a balanced, social constructivist approach (Melewar et al., 2012).

As pointed out above, a social constructivist perspective interprets a brand as a social phenomenon that comes to life in the interaction between internal and/or external stakeholders in a potentially – at least partially – uncontrollable way as a complex

and dynamic social process. The present empirical research shows that, from a brand managerial perspective, external stakeholders can be crucial for the sense making and sense giving processes of a brand.

Furthermore, despite taking the generally increasing empowerment of external stakeholders into account, Antorini and Andersen (2005) convey the impression that external stakeholders *can* still be managed. They provide the idea of creating a community (online and/or offline) as a space for stakeholder integration. To a certain extent it might be possible to control such a brand community space created by the organisation (see e.g. Cova & Pace, 2006; Sloan et al., 2015). However, the authors do not address conceptually – from a managerial perspective – brand manifestations that are initiated by external stakeholders in (online/offline) areas or spaces that potentially are not controlled by the corporation (Bhalla, 2011). In some cases, for instance, the organisation may even be completely unaware of the initiation of some or all of the manifestations in such areas or spaces. Gina, for example, points out when talking about "Facebook groups for our brands", that "some [were] started by our brand managers … and some [were] started by actual consumers". The implications of this particularly for brand management will be discussed in further detail in section 6.6.

6.4 Towards The Development Of A New Brand Definition

Despite the concept of 'brand' being described as contested (Schroeder, 2015), disputed (Oana, 2014), and changing depending on various factors (Kendall, 2015), the aim of this research project has been to elicit all the different core elements and processes which brand managers integrate within their conceptualisations of brands across the board. Subsequently, the combined cognitive conceptualisation space of 20 brand managers, who came from a broad variety of brand management backgrounds and industries, has been investigated.

The social constructivist grounding of the research was helpful because it allowed the acceptance of everybody's conceptualisation(s). Multiple conceptualisations

amongst different brand managers or even by an individual brand manager were acceptable. This approach differentiates the research at hand therefore considerably from recent brand definition debates such as the one by Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015a & 2015b) and Gaski (2015). Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015a & 2015b), for instance, argue that the AMA's brand definition (see American Marketing Association, 2015a; and see further chapter 2) is completely outdated. They suggest that their proposed concept of brands as "semiotic marketing systems" (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a, p. 287) reflects more adequately consumer-brand interactions in the social media age.

As the literature review in chapter 2 shows, Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015a & 2015b) have a point in that the AMA's definition is very narrow. The interviews conducted with the brand managers also show that the AMA definition is not sufficient anymore. However, Gaski (2015) suggests that new conceptualisations of the term brand should not imply that traditional meanings of the term, such as the AMA definition "must now be disallowed" (p. 388). The literature review in chapter 2 clearly shows that while the different brand conceptualisation perspectives have emerged historically – they all still exist today in brand discourse. Furthermore, the same brand managers might use different perspectives in different contexts or even combine different perspectives in the same context.

Dennhardt (2014, p. 35) therefore proposes: "To describe a brand more precisely the definition of a brand alone is insufficient and more detailed characteristics of brands have to be outlined." This proposal is in line with Kornberger's (2010, p. xiv) demand for an analytical apparatus and adequate theoretical language:

> What is needed is not a value judgement about brands but an analytical apparatus, a theoretical language that enables us to understand the magnitude and the intensity of the transformation brands bring about.

Having developed an analytical apparatus, represented through the framework in Figure 6-1, together with detailed characteristics of each identified brand conceptualisation building block and process in chapters 5 and 6, and the understanding of stakeholder-oriented brand conceptualisations in chapter 2, this enables the proposal of a new brand definition for the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

The aspects of the controllability of brands, in the context of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, play a crucial role in creating this new definition and should therefore be discussed first before the new definition is developed.

6.4.1 The Controllability Of Brands

The controllability of brands emerged as one of the most important factors of brand discourse in the interviews with the brand managers as well as in the literature (see, for example, Table 2-4, p. 63). The literature review showed that from a goods-, image- or identity-focused perspective the brand manager and his/her organisation have a high level of control over their brand and its perception (Table 2-4, p. 63). In line with this finding, from the interviews, various aspects emerged which could be categorised as parts of a conceptualisation that a brand can be controlled at least to a large extent by the focal organisation behind the brand. Based on the interviews, these highly controllable aspects of a brand are, for example, not only its advertising, company-owned retail stores and call centre operations, company websites, brand induction training for employees, internal communications and company-organised events, but also key visual elements such as the logo or corporate colours as part of the brand's visual identity.

This rather limited, control-oriented perspective on brands is still promoted widely in the literature, for instance, by Gaski (2015) or in current textbooks such as Johansson and Carlson (2015). Furthermore, the influential American Marketing Association (2015a) still uses today a definition of the term brand which implies that the focal organisation behind a brand can shape and control it. However, the interviews clearly show that this perspective on brands is insufficient in reflecting the whole diversity of brand conceptualisations applied in current brand management practice. Gina, for example, acknowledges that not all brand touch points are organisational ones and can therefore not be controlled to the same extent. For instance, a consumer-created Facebook group cannot be controlled to the same extent as a brand manager-created one.

Andrew stresses the importance of how the brand is perceived and that this perception can only be controlled to a limited extent by the organisation or brand manager: "at the end of the day, what it is all about is perceptions, meaning a brand has," but "these perceptions, they evolve all the time and are being influenced by things that I [as a brand manager] don't have a handle on." This is more in line with the relationship or stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisations in the literature which assume a medium or low level of organisational control over their brand and its perceptions (see Table 2-4, p. 63).

One of the key findings from the review of these two conceptualisation approaches, particularly the stakeholder-focused one, is that brands are difficult to control due to their complexity and multi-faceted nature. Various authors have captured that the conceptualisation of brands is a complex matter (e.g. Berthon et al., 2011; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a & 2015b; Dall'Olmo Riley, 2009; Gyrd-Jones et al., 2013). Leading researchers have therefore concluded that brands are best studied in their totality (Diamond et al., 2009). While some empirical research has been conducted to conceptualise brands from such a holistic perspective (Diamond et al., 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013), none of these studies have tried to capture systematically the various core building blocks as well as processes which brand managers across a range of industries use when they conceptualise brands. Iglesias et al. (2013), for instance, interviewed a range of brand managers and consultants but focused more on the value creation processes than the conceptualisation of brands.

The relevance of an in-depth investigation of the whole diversity of brand managers' brand conceptualisations became clear very early during the interviews. In terms of key building blocks, the first analytical memo (Figure 5-1, p. 156) shows, for instance, that Andrew integrates a broad range of brand resources within his brand conceptualisation space. Compared to this, some conceptualisations in the literature are rather narrow and restricted. For example, under the umbrella of some brand conceptualisations in the literature the processual co-creation of brands between internal and/or external stakeholders is widely ignored (goods-, image-, and identity-focused perspectives). Other conceptualisation approaches, however, take it as a relevant part of the brand (relationship-focused and inside-out stakeholder-focused perspective) or integrate it fully as a fundamental basis of the

brand (outside-in and balanced stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisation perspectives; see Table 2-4, p. 63).

These latter two approaches are also more likely to conceptualise brands as living entities which appears to be a good point of departure for the development of a social constructivist multi-perspective brand definition (see, for instance, Figure 6-2).

Figure 6-2: Analytical Memo – A Brand As Living Entity
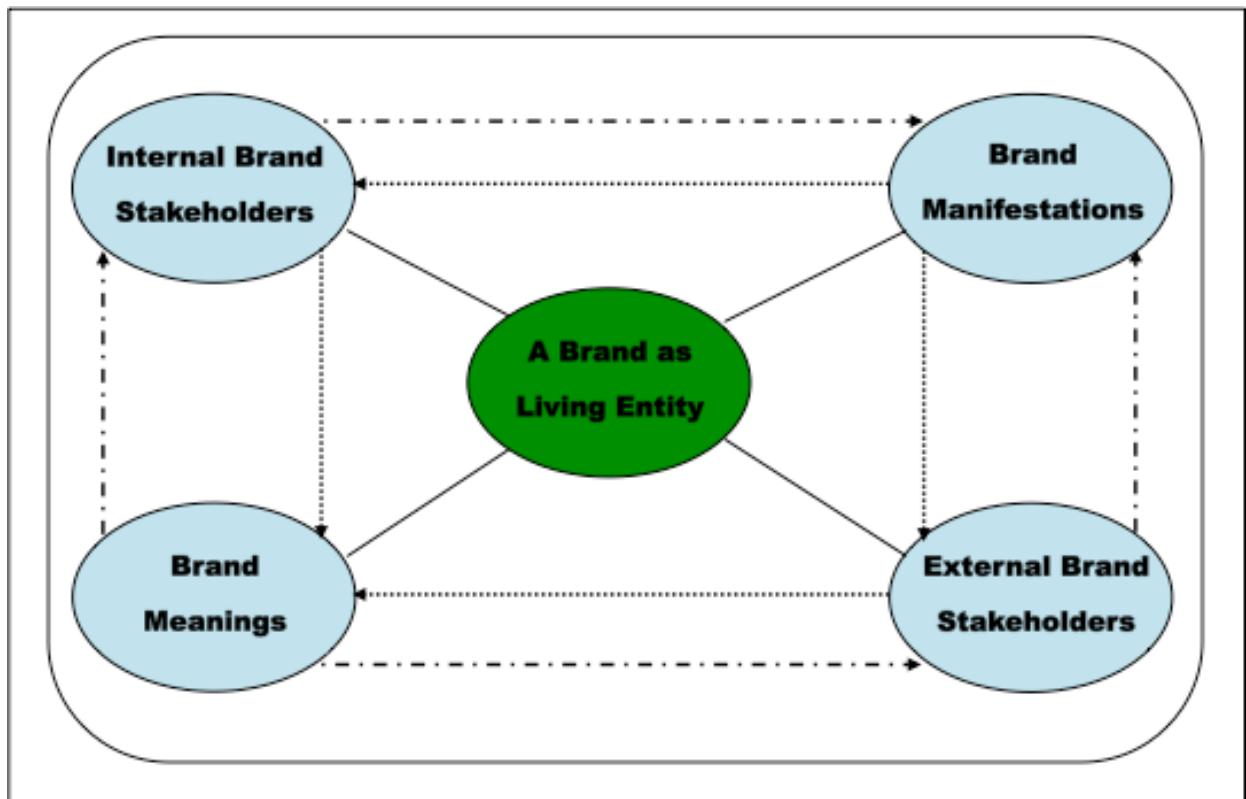
Source: The researcher.

6.4.2 Brand Meanings Are Important But Not Enough

The brand meanings or brand images which exist in people's minds emerged as one of the main categories of brand managers' brand conceptualisations during the empirical research. Felicia, for example, mentions that it is part of her organisation's culture "to look after the image" which stakeholders of the brand create in their minds about Organisation F (Felicia). The interview with Bob also supported the idea that a key component of the brand is brand meaning in people's minds. Bob suggests

that a brand is something "people have an opinion about" and with a strong brand "people *know* what it is for".

Brands are also something which is subjective (Jeffrey), they are what people think of an organisation (Richard) or know about a company (Jeffrey). The brand meaning category can also entail a "vision" or "mission statement" (Steve) or "values" in people's minds (Gina, Steve), as well as "loyalty" (Gina, Ian) and "goodwill" (Ian); or "trust" (Bob, Felicia, Maurice, Quentin).

Quintessentially, brand meanings of a particular product or organisation are anything that people have in their minds about this particular product or organisation. This concept of brand meaning or brand image has already been investigated comprehensively in previous work (e.g. Brown et al., 2003; Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). The literature review showed that, as a brand conceptualisation category, this concept can also be related to earlier findings in empirical research with marketing practitioners. For example, de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998a) identified the following elements which could be subsumed under the present brand meanings category: brand as image, risk reducer, short hand, adding value, value system, goodwill, vision, or positioning in people's minds. Juntunen's (2012) case study research with managers and employees of three IT start-up companies also identified several brand elements which can be subsumed under the brand meanings category: brand as image, trust, awareness, and credibility. The rich diversity of brand meaning elements which was found in the present as well as in previous research underlines why this category has become a major contributor to the complexity which brand managers potentially face when conceptualising brands.

In relation to the five key brand conceptualisation perspectives identified in the literature review (see Table 2-4, p. 63), this category fits in very well with the image-focused perspective which defines a brand as all kinds of knowledge, associations and emotions in consumers' minds related to a product. Gardner and Levy (1955, p. 35) already suggested over 60 years ago that potentially all "ideas, feelings, and attitudes that consumers have about brands are crucial to them in picking and sticking to [the] ones that seem most appropriate". While in this context

it can be important to communicate the functional benefits of a product such as high quality or homogeneity (Jones, 1986, Willmott, 2010), Gardner and Levy (1955) concluded that establishing unique symbolic values of a brand in a consumer's mind might be even more important than its functional benefits.

More recently, Iglesias et al. (2013) conducted research with brand managers and consultants which also stresses the relevance of the brand meanings category. They particularly emphasised the subjective dimension of brand image in the sense that each consumer develops a unique image of a given brand over time and that the meanings derived from this image are individual and subjective. This latter finding is of particular relevance since most of the early literature assumes that images are not individual and subjective but can to a large extent generally be moulded by a knowledgeable brand manager in the consumers' minds. Iglesias et al.'s (2013) findings are supported by Pitt et al.'s (2006) conceptual research on open source brands. They conclude that brand meanings, in general, are difficult to control but organisations still try via concerted communications activities at all organisation-stakeholder touch points to achieve a kind of brand consistency and therefore an intended brand meaning.

Due to new developments, such as social media platforms, more and more brand-stakeholder touch points are created which cannot be controlled by the legal owner of the brand (Asmussen et al., 2013a; Pitt et al., 2006). An example of this is an online community that has been created by users and not producers. Iglesias et al.'s (2013) and Pitt et al.'s (2006) conclusions that brand meanings are rather individual and subjective also resonate with the empirical findings of the present research. Jeffrey for example emphasises the intangible and rather individual character of a brand in a person's mind:

> … brand is one of those really interesting things where we talk about … [it] as if it's a real thing. When the reality is that it only truly exists for the person you are communicating to.

Based on these brand meaning-focused examples, in combination with de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley's (1998a & 1998b) research with marketing practitioners, it can be deduced that not only brand meanings but also brand

conceptualisations are a potentially dynamic social system of knowledge, feelings and evaluations which are continually evolving through social discourse (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008). Subsequently, marketing practitioners, when talking about brands, might draw on different elements, themes or perspectives of their personal mental brand conceptualisations depending on which element, theme or perspective they perceive subjectively as the most appropriate one in a particular situation (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a & 1998b). One of the difficulties which follow from this insight is that practitioners have potentially not only different understandings of what a brand is in general, but also that they might focus on *different parts* of their multi-faceted conceptualisations at *different times* or in *different contexts* when participating in brand discourse. This can have major negative consequences, for example, in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of communication amongst a brand management team (see also de Chernatony, 2010). These results confirm the importance of developing an integrative brand conceptualisation framework which is capable of incorporating a broad variety of brand conceptualisations (see Figure 6-1).

Brand meanings have been established as a key building block for the framework represented in Figure 6-1. However, for the development of a social constructivist brand definition, they are not sufficient without the incorporation of brand manifestations. Based on the empirical research findings, brand manifestations could be interpreted as 'the other side of the same coin.' In other words, from a social constructivist perspective, brand manifestations create brand meanings and brand meanings can motivate the creation of brand manifestations. For the development of an adequate social constructivist definition, brand manifestations therefore need to be taken fully into account (Diamond et al., 2009).

6.4.3 The Need For Brand Manifestations From A Social Constructivist Perspective

The findings have shown that brand manifestations can, in general, be tangible, intangible or a combination of both. Furthermore, the analysis of the interviews revealed a variety of these brand manifestations can be controlled to a large extent by the focal organisation behind the brand. Manifestations that can be controlled to a

large extent are, for instance, an organisations' "marketing communications" (Maurice) such as the organisation's "advertising" (Felicia); blog (Charlotte; Gina; Hendrik; Nina); Twitter account (Bob, Hendrik, Ian, Kirk Nina); "customer service" (Hendrik); and the staff's behaviour in general (Hendrik; Maurice; Nina; Steve); particularly the leadership's behaviour as brand ambassadors (Maurice); and the internal culture as a whole (Felicia; Nina). These are all manifestations which are typically created – or at least managed – by employees, i.e. internal stakeholders.

The idea of these kinds of organisation-controlled brand manifestations builds particularly on the product design literature (e.g. Bevolo & Brand, 2003) and traditional brand management with an internal strategic orientation (Hoskisson et al., 1999; Louro & Cunha, 2001). This idea is also in line with some of the findings presented in the empirical research-based brand conceptualisation literature. De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley's (1998a & 1998b) investigations with brand management consultants, for example, elicited the following brand elements which could be categorised as tangible and/or intangible manifestations widely controllable by the focal organisation: brand as logo, identity system, legal instrument, or a vision and positioning expressed in marketing communications (1998a); as well as a distinctive name, sign of ownership, legal protection, symbolic feature, functional capability, mechanical parts, and service (1998b). More recently, Juntunen (2012) in her research about start-ups in the IT industry identified the following brand elements which can be categorised as organisation controlled brand manifestations: customer service, delivery times, communications, corporate culture, and the corporate brand personified through the entrepreneur or a manager.

This sort of *every touch point of the organisation* concept which has been identified, to a certain extent, in previous empirical research, can be interpreted as a key part of the second category contributing to the complexity which brand managers face when conceptualising brands (see Figure 6-1). However, what has not been identified in previous empirical research focusing on practitioners' brand conceptualisations is that the brand manifestation concept needs to be extended beyond the touch points which the focal organisation can control, to reflect the whole range of tangible and intangible brand manifestations present in brand managers' combined cognitive brand conceptualisation space. Andrew, for instance, considers that "A brand is what

people say about you [as an organisation]", in other words, brand-related word-of-mouth (WOM). These 'people' talking about a brand, organisation or its products can be anybody, for example, an organisation's employees but also somebody's 'friends and colleagues', i.e. people who are not necessarily paid or controlled by the focal organisation.

Particularly relevant in terms of expanding the concept of brand manifestations appears to be brand-related *electronic* WOM, or brand-related user generated content (Rowles, 2014). Some of the participants mention in this context, for instance, blogging (Bob; Charlotte; Gina) and micro-blogging, e.g. via Twitter (Bob; Ian; Nina), and video-sharing websites such as YouTube; or more generally content on "social media" (Ian) or "someone else's website and they're talking about us and using our imagery [without the focal organisation being able to control this]" (Ian).

These empirical findings, regarding the need to extend the brand manifestation category beyond the experience points controlled by the focal organisation, can be interpreted as evidence which confirms and builds on the theoretical integrative thinking in recent academic work on brands and brand management (e.g. Berthon et al., 2007 & 2011; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a & 2015b; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006; O'Guinn & Muñiz, 2010). As previously mentioned, Mühlbacher et al. (2006), for example, define brand manifestations as "material expressions" (p. 6) of the brand which can be created not only by the focal organisation but also, for instance, by innovative consumers and customers. An early case in point is the Apple Newton online community creating their own software applications (Muñiz & Schau, 2005) even after the official production of the devices by Apple had been discontinued. The need to widen brand manifestation thinking even further than that and include all creations of tangible as well as intangible expressions or "objectifications" (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008, p. 13) of the brand not controlled by the focal organisation has become especially apparent in relation to the emergence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon. For instance, brand-related user generated content, such as product reviews, can play a pivotal role nowadays when it comes to the creation of brand-related experiences and perceptions which in terms of

magnitude can go far beyond the scope of traditional WOM (Christodoulides, 2008 & 2009; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Rowles, 2014).

Subsequently, the fundamental relevance of (co-)creation not only of brand meanings but also brand manifestations, by external stakeholders, on a potentially unprecedented large scale needs to be taken into account in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. Brand marketing messages, or more generally, information for that matter, can now flow in all directions: "top down" from the company to the brand's stakeholders as well as "bottom-up" and "peer-to-peer" (Mitchell, 2012, p. 87).

Therefore, the case for considering consumers as entirely passive receivers of brand managers' marketing messages – as assumed from the goods-, image- and identity-focused perspectives (see Table 2-4, p. 63) – appears to be increasingly untenable. The case of co-creation of brand manifestations applies not only to the online world but also offline. In some industries, customers often modify and individualise products considerably post-purchase outside the control of the manufacturer of the original product, for instance in windsurfing, snowboarding, mountain biking or skateboarding (Pitt et al., 2006; von Hippel, 2005).

The fundamental relevance of brand manifestations as part of brand managers' brand conceptualisations has considerable consequences not only for the developed framework in Figure 6-1 but also for the creation of a social constructivist brand definition and the management of brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. Just as one case in point Quentin, for instance, says: "if a brand [organisation] now isn't behaving well they are not going to be able to hide. And they used to be able to hide before there were Twitters and Facebooks …, but they can't hide anymore." Or, as Dennhardt (2014, p. 38) puts it: "The advent of user-generated content is democratizing branding."

The consequences of this paradigm shift for a social constructivist brand definition will be discussed in section 6.5 while the consequences for brand management will be further elaborated on in section 6.6 and chapter 7.

6.4.4 The Relevance Of Brand Stakeholders

The empirical findings have provided evidence that brand stakeholders are another core element of the brand from a complex social constructivist perspective. Unlike the goods-, image-, identity- and relationship-focused perspectives identified in the literature review (Table 2-4, p. 63), the results of this investigation support the idea that a broad variety of internal as well as external stakeholders can constitute key elements of the brand concept from a brand managerial perspective. These conclusions resonate with Merz et al.'s (2009) and Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger's (2008) theoretical work as well as Diamond et al.'s (2009) empirical research. These latest findings can also be interpreted as building on the 5th brand conceptualisation perspective which emerged from the literature review: the stakeholder-focused brand conceptualisation perspective (Table 2-4, p. 63).

Other research supports the present findings that brand stakeholders should be integrated into the brand construct *as part of the brand* in the sense that they are an inherent part of the "social process" or socio-cultural phenomenon called brand (Diamond et al., 2009; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008). Furthermore, a key aspect of the present findings is that, from a managerial perspective, the differentiation between internal and external stakeholders is still relevant. This finding is in contrast to Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008), who do not differentiate between internal and external stakeholders in their brand framework, and also to a variety of researchers who claim that generally, in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, the differences between internal and external stakeholders are becoming increasingly blurred (see further Asmussen et al., 2013a; Pitt et al., 2006). The present research found that internal stakeholders are assumed to be controllable to a high degree while this is not assumed to be the case with external stakeholders. This insight will be discussed in further detail in the following.

6.4.4.1 External Brand Stakeholders

To be able to grasp the complexity of stakeholders which brand managers have to deal with, at least potentially, in the context of conceptualising brands, an integrative

approach appears to be most suitable. This indication is in line with research conducted by Diamond et al. (2009) and Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger (2008). The findings of the present research support such an approach by showing that a diverse range of external stakeholders beyond consumers, customers or clients is part of the brand managers' combined cognitive brand conceptualisation space. This space includes suppliers (Charlotte; Maurice); wholesalers (Charlotte); pressure groups, special interest groups, governments and local communities (Bob); members of parliament (Charlotte; Edward); unions (Felicia); the media (Bob; Charlotte; Felicia; Quentin); industry experts (Gina; Hendrik); influential bloggers (Bob; Gina; Ian); trade bodies (Hendrik; Ian); celebrity endorsers (Charlotte, Gina; Kirk); competitors (Daniela); marketing communications agencies (Bob; Charlotte; Felicia); and management consultants (Felicia; Hendrik), to name but a few.

Juntunen's (2012) research also confirms the relevance of a broad range of external constituents in the context of managers' brand conceptualisations. External stakeholders such as advertising agencies, university researchers, students, financiers, lawyers, graphic designers, employees and managers of other companies, but also relatives and friends, were identified by her participants as being potentially part of the brand co-creation process at the investigated IT start-ups via, for instance, brand-related word-of-mouth (see Juntunen, 2012, p. 238). However, in her resultant corporate brand components framework she omits any brand manifestations created by external stakeholders (see Juntunen, 2012, p. 242).

In contrast to this omission, the present findings confirm that not only consumers, customers or clients but also a broad variety of other external stakeholders can become creators and co-creators not only of brand meanings but also brand manifestations and therefore become an intrinsic or endogenous part of the brand itself (Schau et al., 2009). Interestingly, for Iglesias et al. (2013), all stakeholders who (co-)create brand value should be considered as part of the brand. However, they do not specify whether or not (1) stakeholders who (co-) destroy brand value (e.g. anti-brand communities) should be considered as part of the brand too; and (2) whether stakeholders should only be considered while actively creating value as operant resources or also while not actively creating value as operand resources. Nevertheless, based on these combined findings, external stakeholders can be

interpreted as a main category within brand managers' combined cognitive brand conceptualisation space.

6.4.4.2 Internal Brand Stakeholders

The key findings from the primary research regarding internal brand stakeholders are to some extent in line with findings from previously conducted investigations (e.g. Juntunen, 2012). The primary research shows that some brand managers view all employees as part of the focal organisation's brand manifestation creation activities. For example, "a brand is always delivered by its people [employees]" (Richard). Or: "For the brand … the people who work for you are your biggest and best asset" (Nina). Asked about who is responsible for the firm's brand within her organisation, Daniela answered: "I think we [employees] all are and this is what we are trying to communicate to everyone in [mentions the place of work]." These empirical findings resonate particularly with the service brand literature in which employees' ability to 'live the brand' is seen as crucial for an organisation's success (Brady et al., 2005; de Chernatony et al., 2011; de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Ind, 2007). The findings are also supported by corporate brand management literature which claims that "the corporate brand is created *across* the organization" (Antorini & Schultz, 2005, p. 220).

Based on the relationship and stakeholder-oriented brand conceptualisation perspectives, internal stakeholders are clearly interpreted here as operant resources (Merz et al., 2009). On a more general level, the current findings link to Gummesson's (1991) idea that every employee within an organisation is a part-time marketer. Or, as French et al. (2011, p. 1) put it: "We're all marketers now". Every employee has a certain responsibility for the provision of brand manifestations – not only the marketing department – since any employee's actions might have an impact on other internal (but also external) brand stakeholders' experiences of the organisation.

The interviews with the brand managers also revealed that various participants see particularly the organisation's leadership team as important when it comes to representing and potentially personifying the brand or, leading by example, as the

ultimate brand ambassadors for internal as well as external stakeholders. This may include the leadership team in general (Hendrik; Richard); or more specifically the internal brand owner or brand manager (Gina); the founder (Nina; Steve); owner of the organisation (Jeffrey; Maurice); or CEO of the firm (Hendrik; Nina; Richard). Jeffrey mentions, in this context for instance, that he, as one of the owners and senior managers of his company, represents the organisation's brand – particularly to the firm's B2B clients: "to a greater or lesser extent [mentions his business partner and co-owner] and I *are* the brand". These findings are mirrored by Juntunen's (2012) research in which employees are also identified as playing an important role as brand co-creators. Nonetheless, it is particularly the entrepreneur, i.e. founder, or senior manager who "personified" the start-up brand in her research (Juntunen, 2012, p. 243).

Juntunen's research findings are also in line with the brand management literature that sees the senior management team as the key creators of the brand (Aaker 1991 & 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Davidson, 2005). However, since the early 1990s external stakeholders of an organisation, such as consumers, have also been interpreted as actual or – at least – potential co-creators of the brand (Gilly & Wolfingbarger, 1998; King, 1991). This might have initially been seen as having less of a strategic impact since it was often limited to the co-creation of brand meaning. Nevertheless, since the emergence of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, consumers, and other external stakeholders, have been acknowledged as co-creators of not only brand meaning but also brand manifestations (Berthon et al., 2011; Diamond et al., 2009; Mühlbacher et al., 2006; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008). This latter insight will be discussed in more detail later on.

6.5 A New, Social Constructivist Brand Definition

The idea of a continuous and evolving complex process, between elements of the four different identified categories (brand meanings, brand manifestations, internal brand stakeholders, external brand stakeholders), which can develop its own dynamics or even a life of its own, has led to the creation of a key category under which brands can be conceptualised as a living entity (see section 5.2.2 and 6.2.2).

While this idea of a complex process can be traced back to the interviews as well as some of the literature there appears to be an important difference between the two.

Leading consumer culture theory (CCT) researchers such as O'Guinn and Muñiz (2009 & 2010), as well as Sherry (2005) and Holt (2004) see a brand as something that is primarily intangible, such as the outside-in relational or outside-in stakeholder perspective identified in chapter 2 (see Table 2-4, p. 63). These authors differentiate the brand clearly from its product. While this is a popular differentiation in the academic brand literature (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a), it ignores that marketing practitioners, such as brand managers, often do not clearly differentiate between the product and the brand in everyday parlance. This latter insight has been supported by the interviews with brand managers as part of the current investigation as well as some researchers looking previously at the managerial perspective of brand conceptualisations (e.g. Gaski, 2015; Keller, 2013).

Since from a social constructivist perspective all brand conceptualisations should be acknowledged and accepted, the approach of interpreting brands as something that can also entail tangible and intangible elements, such as products, needs to be taken into account. The conscious integration of brand manifestations within the conceptualisation of brands, as well as internal and external brand stakeholders, is therefore part of a more holistic definition effort (Asmussen et al., 2013a; Berthon et al., 2011; Diamond et al., 2009; Mühlbacher et al., 2006; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008). The term holistic is thus understood not only as integrating multiple perspectives (Refai et al., 2015) which were identified through the empirical social constructivist research as well as the literature review in chapter 2, but also as integrating brand meanings with brand manifestations, plus internal and external brand stakeholders.

Subsequently, the following social constructivist definition, shown in Figure 6-3, has been developed, based on some sources from the literature (Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Asmussen et al., 2013a; Diamond et al., 2009; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Melewar et al., 2012; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2008) as well as the empirical findings presented in Figure 6-1.

Figure 6-3: A Social Constructivist Brand Definition

From a social constructivist perspective, a brand can be defined as a living entity. This living entity consists generally of

(1)   brand meanings, brand manifestations, internal brand stakeholders and external brand stakeholders; and

(2)   the sense making and sense giving processes which underlie the dynamic development of its components and subsequently the evolution of the entity as a whole.

Source: The researcher.

Based on such a definition, brands can be interpreted as open systems (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Wooliscroft & Lawson, 2003). As such an open and dynamic system, following the definition and the visual framework represented in Figure 6-1, brands as living entities integrate their stakeholders inside as well as outside the focal organisation (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a). From such a systemic perspective "brands are seen to take on a life of their own above and beyond the intentions of their creators or the interpretations of their consumers. Indeed, brands thus viewed 'use' companies and consumers to perpetuate themselves" (Berthon et al., 2011, p. 183). The consequences of this definition and the conceptual framework for theory and practice are further evaluated in the next section as well as in the next chapter.

6.6 Conclusions

This chapter compared and contrasted the findings of the empirical research with those of the literature review. As contributions to knowledge the social constructivist framework for brand conceptualisations was developed (Figure 6-1) as well as a new brand definition (Figure 6-3). It has been shown that elements of brand conceptualisation perspectives identified in the literature review in chapters 2 and 3 can be integrated in the new framework, such as ideas from service and corporate brand management, brand image and reputation, product management, and brand community thinking. A case in point for this is the image-focused brand conceptualisation perspective which fits well into the category of brand meanings.

Another example is the construct of internal culture as a key element of the identity-focused brand conceptualisation perspective. Based on the social constructivist approach, internal culture can be deconstructed in the three elements of internal brand stakeholders, brand meanings and brand manifestations and the sense making and sense giving processes which are underlying the dynamic development of the three component parts.

Using the identified four core processes of sense making and sense giving, it has been elicited that brand value co-creation can not only take place in direct interactions between the focal organisation and its consumers but also through the interactions of any brand stakeholders – no matter whether they are internal and/or external ones. This has extended the insights of existing literature such as Iglesias et al. (2013). Given the polysemic nature of brand meanings (Wilson et al., 2014) it has been made clear that these meanings can be created on an individual subjective as well as intersubjective level. It also appears that the internet-based democratisation of brand management has not only led to a powershift from internal to external stakeholders. It also seems that, compared to earlier conducted research, such as de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998a), marketing practitioners do now incorporate more explicitly external stakeholders within their brand conceptualisations.

This has considerable consequences for brand management practice. The empirical research provides evidence that 'the old control logic' (Bob) in brand management is not working anymore. Due to the growing power of external brand stakeholders in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, some commentators are now talking about a "new joint ownership of brands" (Kendall, 2015, p. 4). Or, as Preece and Kerrigan (2015, p. 1208) put it: "we can no longer clearly identify who owns a brand; we are in an era where brand identity and ownership rests in the hand of agencies, consumers, the brand [focal organisation] itself and the media."

Brand experiences can still be controlled to a large extent when it comes to certain touch points on which the focal organisation 'has a handle on'. This applies to the production of goods, the production and distribution of marketing communications

materials or the internal employee training. However, when it comes to the involvement of (e)WOM and social media engagement as part of the experience of brand touch points, the focal organisation behind the brand might not be involved at all and has subsequently no or hardly any control (Rowles, 2014). External stakeholders as part-time brand managers, might "consider brand building activities not as a job, but part of their pastime" (Dennhardt, 2014, p. 37). They might be passionate brand advocates or adversaries. In the former case, they might do the most effective marketing of the brand for the focal organisation (Hendrik). In the latter case, they can cause considerable damage to the brand.

Brand management approaches which ignore the relevance of external stakeholders might be considered as "inorganic" (Iglesias et al., 2013, p. 683). Brand managers can still "guide, influence and inspire consumers to co-create brand meaning, but unilateral identification and building of all aspects of brand positioning […] is no longer possible" (Haarhoff & Kleyn, 2012, p, 112). Adequate managerial approaches need to move beyond a control-centred perspective which focuses, for instance, primarily on the continuous adjustments of vision, culture and image (see Hatch & Schultz, 2003). A "co-creational" paradigm is needed which broadens the concept of brand management and is able to acknowledge and integrate wider societal processes (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013, p. 1859).

Brand management should be interpreted as a collaborative process in which all internal and external stakeholders co-create the brand (Merz et al., 2009). Brand-related communication is, in this context, therefore only possible through the creation of manifestations associated with the brand in the eye of the beholder. The management of a brand could therefore be interpreted as brand manifestation and process management rather than brand meaning management.

In conclusion, brand management can not only be conceptualised as brand meaning management but, more precisely, as brand manifestation management. This conceptualisation entails (a) the creation of tangible as well as intangible brand manifestations; and (b) the control of access provision to these manifestations. The advantage of using such a conceptualisation is that it allows to move beyond traditional approaches towards an understanding of brand management as consisting

of complex organisational as well as non-organisational processes (see also Asmussen et al., 2013a). These processes can potentially (i) not only involve consumers and employees but also other brand stakeholders; (ii) not only be co-creative and constructive but also co-destructive; (iii) be highly dynamic and fragmented; (iv) be directional as well as non-directional; (v) be dialogue-oriented as well as multilogue-oriented; and (vi) include or exclude an organisation and its brand managers from a multilogue amongst stakeholders about a focal organisation's brand.

The success of such a new co-creative brand management approach "appears to be based on the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of stability and change, control and freedom" (Rossi, 2015, p. 10). Further consequences of these paradigmatic changes not only for brand management practice but also for theory will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Introduction

The purpose of the conclusions chapter is to summarise and evaluate the process and outcomes of this research. The research objectives will be revisited in order to discuss to what extent each has been achieved. This will take place in the following section, 7.2, in combination with the contribution to knowledge related to each of the four research objectives being examined. The wider implications of these contributions for brand management practice as well as theory will also be discussed at the end of section 7.2. Next, the challenges of achieving quality in qualitative research will be considered. The overall strengths and limitations of the research will then be discussed before some future research avenues will be outlined. Finally, a reflection will be provided on the process of this research and my development as a researcher.

7.2 Contribution To Knowledge

The lack of clarity when it comes to the question 'What is a brand?' is an important issue in marketing practice (e.g. de Chernatony, 2010; Kendall, 2015; Phillips, 2011) as well as marketing theory (e.g. Berthon et al., 2011; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Gaski, 2010). The present research contributes to addressing this issue primarily through (a) the identification of the fundamental elements and processes of brand conceptualisations (see further 7.2.3); and (b) the integration of these elements and processes within a conceptual framework and definition (see further 7.2.4) in the current age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

To be able to do this, the research at hand has investigated the phenomenon of brands as complex and multi-faceted phenomena specifically from the perspectives of brand managers since this group represents one of the key stakeholders in brand definition discourse (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Keller, 2013; Low & Fullerton, 1994). Particular attention has thereby been paid to the internet-based democratisation of brand management. The overall research question has subsequently been stated as follows: How do brand managers conceptualise brands in the age of the internet-based

democratisation of brand management? This question has been operationalised through four research objectives. Each of these will be reviewed as follows: (1) to what extent the respective research objective has been achieved, and (2) to what extent this 'achievement' can be considered as a contribution to knowledge. Additionally, in section 7.2.5 the contribution to research methodology will be discussed. Finally, in section 7.2.6, some of the wider implications of the research contributions for brand management theory as well as practice will be explained.

7.2.1 Contribution In Regard To Research Objective 1

Research Objective 1: To produce a critical literature review of key debates, theories and empirical studies within brand conceptualisation discourse

This research objective was achieved to a high degree in chapter 2. The reason for this evaluation is that, while no literature review on the topic can ever be exhaustive (Berthon et al., 2011), a broad variety of relevant ideas and approaches of brand conceptualisation discourse was critically interrogated, discussed and synthesised. Based on this, the literature review produced one key contribution by identifying the five major brand conceptualisation perspectives within current brand discourse (Table 2-4, p. 63). This structured overview can be seen as an evolutionary step forward compared to previous reviews of the literature. The advantage of this new approach is that it absorbs and integrates three comprehensive existing taxonomies of brand and brand management perspectives (Heding et al., 2009 & 2016; Louro and Cunha, 2001; Merz et al., 2009) into one overall structure.

The literature review in chapter 2 and Table 2-4 (p. 63) therefore make a contribution particularly to brand management theory. For example, while some of the five brand conceptualisation perspectives have been declared as rather irrelevant in the current age by some authors at the centre of the theory-driven brand definition debate, such as the goods-focused approach (criticised e.g. by Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a), it has been shown in chapter 2 that *all* five perspectives are still very much in use today. The review shows that it needs to be acknowledged and taken seriously in future theory development that different brand conceptualisations exist at the same time in current brand discourse.

In terms of the contribution to brand management theory, the review and new taxonomy in chapter 2 also elicited that the most recent brand conceptualisation approach, the stakeholder-focused perspective, exists in the literature in more variation than the work by Heding et al. (2009 & 2016), Louro and Cunha (2001) or Merz et al. (2009) actually suggests. The literature review in chapter 2 has identified (a) an inside-out, (b) an outside-in, and (c) a balanced variant within the different stakeholder-oriented approaches in the literature. This is an important finding since the stakeholder-oriented perspective is seen as the one with the most potential (e.g. by Kornum et al. 2016; Merz et al., 2009) and will therefore require considerably more attention in future research when it comes to its different variants.

The analysis in chapter 2 also helped, in combination with the review in chapter 3, to identify and clarify the research gap that there has been no adequate analysis yet of how brands are conceptualised in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. Furthermore, it emerged (1) that a qualitative research design would be best suited to deal with the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the research topic, and (2) that a more in-depth comprehension of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon was needed.

7.2.2 Contribution In Regard To Research Objective 2

Research Objective 2: To develop an in-depth understanding of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon and its relevance for brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice

This research objective was addressed in chapter 3. The level of achievement regarding the objective was mixed. The first part of the objective was achieved to a high degree within chapter 3 through the development of a new framework which clarified the basic structure of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon. The second part of the objective could only be addressed tentatively since the literature on the relevance of this still relatively recent phenomenon for brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice was rather sparse.

Overall, despite these limitations, in regard to research objective 2, one contribution to knowledge was made in chapter 3.

The contribution was made through the literature review-based development of a framework which clarifies the basic structure of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon. This new framework consists of three interdependent democratisation developments – democratisation of technology, democratisation of information and democratisation of social capital – and provides a deeper understanding of the internet-based democratisation of brand management as a holistic, socio-technological phenomenon.

The elicited insights help to better explain the complexity of some of the challenges which brand managers are facing today in contemporary brand management practice. For instance, empowered by the internet, technically literate brand stakeholders of an organisation have, more than ever before, a choice of moving between three different levels of activity and involvement regarding brand co-creation. They can (1) in the traditional, rather passive sense, co-create meaning out of the brand manifestations which they experience that are provided to them by the brand's focal organisation and/or other brand stakeholders; (2) become more active through co-creating not only brand meaning but also brand manifestations in collaboration with the brand's focal organisation and/or other brand stakeholders; or (3) create brand manifestations by themselves, on a previously unparalleled magnitude, outside the control of anybody else including the brand's focal organisation. Clarifying these three different levels of co-creation can help brand managers and their organisations to better comprehend and 'manage' the involvement of different stakeholder groups within brand management practice.

The contribution made in the literature review of chapter 3 is also helpful for brand management theory since it identified a *dialectical logic* when it comes to the internet-based democratisation of brand management. The insight that internet-based democratisation activities in the brand co-creation process can be user-initiated as well as organisation-initiated on all levels has hardly been acknowledged in the empirical brand management literature so far. The reason for this seems to be related to a "conflictual dialectic" (Cammaerts 2008, p. 363). On the one hand, the observed

democratisation phenomenon appears to empower and liberate people when it comes to user-initiated activities on the internet, related to organisations' brands. However, on the other hand, it also seems to potentially enable organisations to exploit, control and/or deceive people through organisation-initiated activities on the internet. This will be addressed further in the section on future research avenues.

Unlike the three different levels of brand co-creation, the relevance of the democratisation phenomenon as a whole, specifically for brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice, could only be established to a rather limited degree in chapter 3 since the literature on the phenomenon itself has been very sparse on this specific topic. Nevertheless, the literature review confirmed that the democratisation phenomenon itself is very relevant for the marketing industry (e.g. Dennhardt, 2014; Kendall, 2015; Kucuk, 2012; Neudecker et al., 2015). Kendall (2015), for example, points out that "We live in a broader 'everything-is-media' world" (p. 5) in which virtually every technically literate person can now become a media publisher or broadcaster and brand builder or critic on an unprecedented scale. The elicited importance of the democratisation phenomenon for the marketing industry on the one hand, but the lack of literature addressing to what extent this phenomenon has an impact on the brand managers' brand conceptualisation practice, on the other hand, underlined that the chosen research question was *relevant* in terms of Tracy's (2010) framework for quality in qualitative research. In conclusion, the development of the framework which clarifies the basic structure of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon represents a contribution to knowledge for brand management practice as well as theory.

7.2.3 Contribution In Regard To Research Objective 3

Research Objective 3: To establish the key components and processes which brand managers use as integral parts of their brand conceptualisations in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management

This research objective was achieved to a high degree in chapter 5 through the elucidation of the four key *components* and *processes* which the brand managers used as integral parts in their combined brand conceptualisation space. The study at

hand represents the first empirical investigation which systematically analysed the intrapersonally- and interpersonally-oriented processes related to brand stakeholders' meaning making in the context of conceptualising brands. This systematic in-depth analysis makes a crucial contribution to the understanding of the complex and dynamic processes when it comes to the multi-layered co-creation of brands on a holistic level (Diamond et al., 2009; Kornum et al., 2016).

Overall, this empirical investigation shows, for example, that the heated debate between Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015a & 2015b) and Gaski (2015) on current brand definition discourse does not represent the full picture. Their approaches do not capture and reflect the diversity and complexity of brand conceptualisations, which brand managers apply in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. Keller (2013) emphasises that this issue, when it comes to the understanding and acknowledgement of different brand conceptualisations, is not only important for brand management theory but also practice "because disagreements about branding principles or guidelines often revolve around what we mean by the term brand" (p. 30). Based on the present research findings, non-holistic conceptualisation approaches do not address the problem of misunderstandings in brand discourse (Berthon et al, 2011; de Chernatony, 2010) since these non-holistic brand conceptualisations are not able to capture and reflect the diversity and complexity of comprehensions which brand managers hold in their combined cognitive brand conceptualisation space. Subsequently, the identification of the various core elements in combination with the core processes of brand managers' brand conceptualisations can be interpreted as a relevant contribution to brand management theory as well as practice.

7.2.4 Contribution In Regard To Research Objective 4

Research Objective 4: To develop a new conceptual framework which is able to integrate all core components as well as core processes

This research objective was mainly addressed in chapter 6. The level of achievement regarding research objective 4 was established as high due to two contributions: the creation of a new conceptual framework which shows how the core building blocks

and processes of brand managers' brand conceptualisations are interrelated (see Figure 6-1, p. 198) and a new social constructivist brand definition (Figure 6-3, p. 219). The framework extends existing research on brands and improves the critical issue of concept clarity in brand theory development as well as brand management practice. More specifically, while most of the individual key building blocks of the framework have been identified in previous research (Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Berthon et al., 2011; Iglesias et al., 2013; Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006), this is the first investigation which identifies systematically the key processes and interrelationships between the four key elements. The analysis of the different core sense making and sense giving processes shows how complex the brand phenomenon can be. It can involve tangible as well as intangible brand manifestations, brand meanings, internal and/or external brand stakeholders and various processes of co-creation on different levels between them.

Overall, the research has shown that the multi-faceted nature of brands as complex phenomena presents a major stumbling block for the progress of brand discourse in marketing theory as well as practice. The findings indicate that the analysis of brands in their totality across different industries and types of organisation has the potential to help move wider brand research discourse forward since a combined cognitive conceptualisation space has been established. The research findings have also elicited that one way to overcome the above mentioned stumbling block is to embrace and encompass the complexity of the phenomenon. While previous empirical research on brands has reduced this complexity (e.g. de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Iglesias et al., 2013; Juntunen, 2012), or focused on just a single brand without providing a clear definition (Diamond et al., 2009), the research at hand was able to propose a new brand definition (Figure 6-3, p. 219). This definition, together with the aforementioned framework, addresses Kornberger's (2010, p. xiv) request for theoretical contributions within brand discourse that help "to understand the magnitude and the intensity of the transformation brands bring about."

Unlike previous empirical research, the new definition suggests – from a social constructivist perspective – conceptualising brands, in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, as living entities. Consequently, this definition, which integrates for the first time systematically the different analysed

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core sense making and sense giving processes (Hopkinson, 2015) is helpful for brand managers, as well as theorists and researchers, since it reflects the complexity and dynamism of brands in the combined cognitive conceptualisation space of brand managers in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management (across a variety of B2B as well as B2C industries). It also allows the integration of narrower definitions or conceptualisations within the overall framework and therefore bringing different conceptualisations together. This is particularly helpful for the issues which Keller (2013) pointed out for brand management theory as well as practice. For instance, using the social constructivist framework and definition can help brand management teams to establish and clarify their different approaches when it comes to their conceptualisations of brands which will subsequently support a clearer implementation of brand management processes.

Hanby (1999) suggests that brands can be interpreted as something dead (i.e. inanimate objects) or alive (i.e. social living entities). The latter conceptualisation fits, of course, very well into the newly proposed framework (Figure 6-1) and definition of brands as living entities (Figure 6-3). However, the strength of the newly created framework and definition is that Hanby's (1999) former conceptualisation can also be integrated within the developed framework and definition. An inanimate product itself, for example, can be integrated as a manifestation of a brand in the eye of the beholder.

7.2.5 Contribution In Regard To Research Methodology

No research objective was developed specifically in regard to research methodology. However, one contribution could be made in chapter 4 through the development of the Three Pillars of Research Design Framework (Figure 4-1, p. 103). Based initially on an extension of Crotty's (1998) four building blocks (epistemology, theoretical perspective[s], methodology, and methods), this new framework can help researchers to identify and reflect on the different factors which might influence the way in which they conduct their research. The advantage of this model is that it differentiates between the researcher's paradigmatic grounding (Pillar 1), the conducted topic-specific literature review (Pillar 3), and considerations regarding the

theoretical perspective(s), methodology and method(s) used within the development of the core research design (Pillar 2).

In contrast to other existing frameworks, the concept presented differentiates between the paradigmatic grounding and the theoretical perspective(s) of the research. The advantage in the present case, for example, was that the researcher could position himself as a social constructivist on a paradigmatic level without predetermining what the most adequate theoretical perspective(s) for the core research design would be. Furthermore, researchers can use the framework for paradigmatic grounding, developed in Table 4-2 (p. 107), and the key philosophical questions and answers, presented in Table 4-3 (p. 109), to establish more easily their own positioning within paradigmatic research discourse. This allows for more reflective research.

7.2.6 Wider Implications For Brand Management Practice and Theory

The research has clearly indicated that brand management is undergoing radical changes in a world of social media-empowered individuals, groups and organisations. In the literature, marketing consultants at leading companies such as McKinsey, Wolff Olins or GfK describe what has happened in brand management as fundamental changes (Edelman, 2010), big tectonic shifts (Jones, 2012), or a paradigm shift (Neudecker et al., 2015) respectively. These comments correspond with emerging calls in the literature (e.g. Fisher & Smith, 2011; Holt, 2016; Iglesias et al., 2013) for the development of a new brand management paradigm. However, as a prerequisite for developing this, the present research project has focused, first of all, on understanding how brand managers conceptualise brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

The empirical findings have shown that the democratisation phenomenon appears to have impacted on brand managers' brand conceptualisations. The results show that four core elements and processes are needed to adequately reflect the diversity of brand conceptualisations in brand management practice. The analysis also provided an in-depth insight into the inherently multi-faceted nature of brands as complex

phenomena from the brand managers' perspective. As one result, different challenges could be empirically identified, at least from a managerial perspective, for the debate about how to define the term brand.

First of all, the research indicates that some brand managers have simple mental representations of what a brand is while others have more complicated and multi-faceted ones. Secondly, the same manager might focus on different aspects of the multi-faceted phenomenon in different contexts when talking about brands. This can lead to a situation in which a manager appears to have a simple and clear mental representation of the phenomenon when talking about brands in one context but which might then change when elaborating on brands in another one. In contrast to previous research with marketing practitioners, it was therefore crucial that each interview for this investigation would cover a range of brand-related topics and contexts. A manager might talk about brands in relatively simple terms using elements from one or two of the four categories in a particular context while in a different situation switching to a higher level of complexity by combining elements from three or all four of the categories – including interrelated processes between the different elements.

An important conclusion for brand management practice is that managers need to be as clear and explicit as possible about their brand definitions and conceptualisations in all managerial contexts but should, at the same time, not neglect the complexity of everyday brand management. To be able to do this, it is therefore recommendable to adopt a brand management paradigm that (a) allows the provision of a clear direction while also addressing the complexity of brands in terms of stakeholders and co-creation processes, and subsequently (b) can deal with the internet-based democratisation of brand management in which not everything about a brand can be managed and controlled by the focal organisation but can at least be understood.

Based on these conclusions and the identification of the four different key categories and processes it might be helpful, from an integrative point of view, to conceptualise brands as visualised in Figure 6-1 (p. 198) and defined in Figure 6-3 (p. 219). Looking at the wider implications of these overall findings for the brand management discipline, and based on this new definition, the development of a new

brand management approach needs to be developed which integrates not only organisation-initiated but also stakeholder-initiated brand management activities.

For brand management theory, the research results have two main implications. Firstly, the new brand framework and definition support the argument that one way to improve brand discourse is to conceptualise brands in their totality (Diamond et al., 2009; Kornum et al., 2016). Secondly, it supports the notion that brand management researchers need to take the implications of the internet-based democratisation of brand management into account. Following this, they should consequently help brand management practice to develop a new adequate brand management paradigm.

The consent in the literature is growing that current brand management practice as well as theory, which often still assumes that brand managers can control a brand, needs to be adjusted (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Gamble & Gilmore, 2013; Holt, 2016; Iglesias et al., 2013; Wiedmann, 2014). As Meyers (2003) already noted over ten years ago, "brand managers are losing not only their ability to control what is said about their brands and where, but even their ability to control and define who is a stakeholder" (p. 31). The advent of user-generated content has democratised brand management (Dennhardt, 2014). Stakeholders can now become pivotal authors of brand-related stories and all other kinds of brand manifestations. Furthermore, "digitally empowered consumers can now easily generate and organize anti-consumption movements and change the dynamics of the consumption markets" (Kucuk, 2012, p. 1).

Subsequently, brand management thinking needs to move from 'marketing *to* stakeholders' to 'marketing *with* stakeholders' (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013; Lusch, 2007; Lusch & Vargo, 2009) when it comes to brand co-creation. In other words, brand management researchers need to help practitioners to develop co-creational brand management practice. The identified core elements and processes of the social constructivist brand conceptualisation framework should be helpful in this context. The new model clearly shows that brand managers need to 'let go' of the control paradigm. Instead, they should adopt a more humble, open and participatory management concept (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Iglesias et al., 2013). In other words, they should adopt a more democratised approach (Antorini & Schultz, 2005).

While the empirical research has shown that the differentiation between internal and external brand stakeholders is still relevant, from a brand managerial vantage point, stakeholders who have traditionally been interpreted as external to an organisation, for instance consumers, might have to be considered now as endogenous to the brand (Merz et al., 2009). Subsequently, concepts such as the 'extended enterprise' should be further investigated in this context (Post et al., 2002). The traditional mindset that places the focal organisation in the centre of the brand also needs to be revisited (Antorini & Schultz, 2005; Esmann Andersen & Nielsen, 2009). Future research avenues will be discussed further in section 7.6.

7.3 The Emphasis On Quality In Qualitative Research

Due to a lack of relevant empirical research, the complexity of the research topic, and the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher, the decision was made by the investigator that it is most adequate to develop a qualitative research design. This decision had fundamental consequences for the whole research project. For instance, since qualitative research still endures criticism in terms of quality criteria such as generalisability, validity and reliability (Bryman, 2004; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014), the qualitative research literature review showed that it was important to implement alternative criteria of quality in qualitative research. However, the aim of living up to a framework such as Tracy's (2010) with its eight quality criteria became a considerably complex endeavour.

Firstly, the *worthiness of the topic* needed to be clarified through the literature review in chapters 2 and 3. Secondly, for the purpose of being able to achieve *meaningful coherence* throughout the research process, the Three Pillars of Research Design Framework (Figure 4-1, p. 103) was created. This was helpful as a kind of intellectual scaffolding (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) to enable the provision of an adequate internal logic for the research. One of the strengths of the Three Pillars Framework was that it allowed the researcher to achieve the third criterion, *sincerity*, to a high level through enabling a comprehensive but structured and research-based self-reflection. The relevance of self-reflection only became fully clear during the researcher's endeavour to achieve *rich rigour*, another of Tracy's (2010) eight

quality criteria. One of the aspects of this quality criterion is the choice of an adequate data analysis process. This turned out to be more complicated than anticipated due to the choice of GTM as the research methodology. Nevertheless, the Three Pillars Framework provided useful guidance in combination with Table 4-2 (p. 107) and Table 4-3 (p. 109) for a research-based self-reflection.

When it comes to GTM topics such as theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation or memo writing, there is a comparatively high degree of agreement in the literature. However, when it comes to theoretical coding, as part of the constant comparative analysis, the literature entails a comparatively low degree of agreement in terms of how exactly it is done. Furthermore, when it comes to advice on data analysis in GTM beyond coding, the literature is often rather vague and points out that the creativity and conceptual thinking skills of the researcher are key (e.g. Charmaz, 2006 & 2014; Glaser, 1978 & 1992). This vagueness of the literature was not particularly helpful but it seems that this is not something that only applies to GTM. Data analysis beyond coding appears to be still one of the more vague areas in the qualitative research literature (Saldaña, 2009; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014).

The relevance of the researcher as the research instrument and his creative as well as conceptual thinking skills therefore became particularly clear. This relevance, which emerged over the course of the research, led, amongst other points, to explaining the paradigmatic grounding and the combined theoretical perspective of the researcher in such depth in chapter 4. As previously mentioned, it has been acknowledged as good medicine (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in qualitative research to express 'where you are coming from'.

While this required a considerable amount of effort, some valuable insights were revealed. For instance, the hermeneutic aspects of the constructivist GTM Three Phase Framework (Figure 4-2, p. 118) have only emerged through this theoretical work and were not made explicit in the existing GTM literature. In regard to the investigation of the paradigmatic grounding of the researcher, it was reassuring to see that a team of brand researchers developed a similar approach to Table 4-2 (p. 107: consisting of ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology) for their meta-theoretical analysis on brand worlds (see Berthon et al., 2011).

When qualitative researchers such as Denzin (1994, p. 500) state that "in the social sciences, there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself", it is also important to remember Tracy's (2010) requirement for *credibility*. Tracy (2010) highlighted that credible qualitative research uses evidence that is "showing rather than telling" (p. 840) and provides an adequate degree of multivocality. Consequently, I decided to use a considerable amount of verbatim quotations by a variety of individual brand managers in chapter 5 to balance GTM's approach of focusing on codes, categories and abstract theoretical concepts, rather than thick descriptions, with the aim of achieving 'voice' and multivocality. However, this aim caused challenges which will be addressed in the next section.

In terms of *ethical considerations* (Tracy, 2010), the presentation of information about the participating brand managers (Table 4-5, p. 131) has been adjusted to protect their anonymity, as discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Additionally, the findings chapter has presented another example when a particular interview question was adjusted due to situational ethical concerns. The direct question 'What is a brand?' or 'How would you define the term brand?' appeared to trigger some level of discomfort for the first interviewees (particularly Bob). A more indirect questioning style was therefore adopted for the subsequent interviews.

Finally, while qualitative research is focused on inductive methods, it is usually less concerned with the transferability or generalisability of the research findings – in contrast to quantitative investigations which focus on deductive methods. Since GTM uses a combination of induction and deduction, right from the early publications, proponents of this methodology have supported the idea that GTM has explanatory power (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which is in most cases associated with generalisable deductive research. While this does not mean generalisability in a measurable sense, the aim of this research has been to produce middle range theory (Charmaz, 2000). Merton (1949 & 1968) explains that middle-range theories are not all-encompassing grand theories but theories that are applicable to specific areas only. In the current context, that is brand conceptualisation of brand managers rather than brand conceptualisations in general. This resonates with existing brand research literature which claims that middle-range theory is required to integrate different

specific conceptualisations into a more inclusive theoretical context (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015a; Brodie & de Chernatony, 2009). This has been achieved in the present case as explained above through the provision of the new framework and definition. Nevertheless, further limitations to the generalisability of the study will be discussed in the next section.

7.4 Strengths And Limitations Of The Research

The adoption of a reflective approach has been a strength. It allowed the sincerity of the research project to be improved by reducing ambiguity in terms of the researcher's biases, values and experiences that might have had an impact on the analysis and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2007; Tracy, 2010). The combination of a certain degree of 'voice' and multivocality with concrete details as well as conceptual frameworks has been another strength of the research. This way a broader variety of evidence was used that is "showing rather than telling" (Tracy, 2010). This meant, for instance, that from a phenomenologically-oriented theoretical perspective the participants were given a voice underpinned through direct verbatim quotes. Equally, however, as a core aim of GTM, insights from individual participants were compared, contrasted, and ultimately synthesised to lift the findings to a higher conceptual level and develop more abstract and theoretical frameworks.

While this specific modus operandi was intended to represent a strength of the research design, it also represented a challenge. A compromise had to be implemented for this 'combined perspectives' approach in terms of the presentation of individual examples and voices versus the lifting of the data to a higher theoretical level beyond singled-out examples. This compromise made it sometimes very difficult to achieve a high level of multivocality within the realms of a GTM research design. Some sections of the Findings chapter, for example, can come across as rather dominated by a few voices. A case in point is section 5.2. This section was originally dedicated to the analysis of the first three interviews only since the first phase (which consisted of these three interviews) was absolutely crucial for the rest of the research. However, to improve the multivocality in this section, I added relevant findings from later interviews which were related to the findings from the first three participants to increase the level of multivocality.

Another advantage of this particular investigation is that it goes beyond individual case studies and industries, in contrast to previous research, such as Diamond et al. (2009) and Juntunen (2012). Furthermore, it focuses exclusively on brand managers, thus differing from de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998a & 1998b) and Iglesias et al. (2013). The empirical evidence at hand moves beyond individual cases with a new social constructivist approach towards the conceptualisation of brands. The results provide additional evidence to Diamond et al.'s (2009) investigation that conceptualising brands in their 'totality' has the potential to enable sustainable progress within brand discourse as explained above.

In terms of the limitations of the research, related to the internet-based democratisation of brand management, it needs to be acknowledged that the priority in chapter 3 has been to clarify the multi-layered nature of this phenomenon on a holistic, socio-technological level. Subsequently, the research suggests that it is useful to consider the basic structure of this phenomenon in terms of the three key developments and their respective key facets as presented in Chapter 3 (Figure 3-1, p. 73). Nonetheless, although these key developments and facets have been separated analytically, and although various influences of key developments have been portrayed as unilateral in the ideal-typical conceptualisation of this complex topic, it needs to be recognised that many aspects of this phenomenon are in fact interrelated and multilateral. Despite this limitation, overall the developed framework in Figure 3-1 (p. 73) provided some direction for this concrete investigation; and can also provide more general direction for future research through its contribution towards the clarification of the multi-layered nature of the internet-based democratisation of brand management phenomenon. Also important to learn was that the democratisation phenomenon is not accessible to everybody and that it has a conflictual dialectic that needs further investigation.

Despite the explanatory power of the applied grounded theory methodology and the achieved theoretical saturation during the data collection, the sample size of 20 brand managers can be interpreted as a limitation. While the theoretical sample of brand managers was recruited across different industries and types of organisation, it is a limitation that the research has been conducted exclusively with UK-based brand

managers. A more international sample might have provided other insights. In this context, it needs to be acknowledged that not only the primary data collection (interviews) but also the secondary data collection (literature review) was mainly focused on the analysis of brand conceptualisations in the Western world. The literature review was limited to publications in English. Last but not least, the research was conducted with brand managers from corporate brand-oriented organisations. Further research, for instance, with brand managers from non-corporate brand-oriented organisations might provide additional or other findings (e.g. FMCG or not-for-profit brands). Equally, stakeholders other than managers, might have the potential for further relevant contributions.

Nevertheless, the framework developed in Figure 6-1 (p. 198) based on the present research enables (a) practitioners as well as academics to develop a more in-depth understanding of the inherent multi-faceted nature of brands as complex phenomena, and (b) managers to deal more appropriately with the complexity issues when managing brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

While the applied social constructivist GTM approach has largely been interpreted as useful and a strength of this research project so far, the multi-theoretical perspective of the researcher, presented within chapter 4, might be questioned as 'overcomplicated' or blurring the lines between different schools of thought. It could be questioned whether the integration of perspectives with opposing views in certain areas is legitimate.

The strengths of the research in terms of openness, sincerity and self-reflexivity can also be seen as a weakness. Certain biases of the researcher, which have been openly presented as part of the reflective interpretivist and social constructivist GTM school, might be questioned by Glaserian-oriented GTM researchers as an obstacle which might lead the researcher towards 'forcing' the data into preconceived categories instead of letting the theory 'freely emerge'. On the other hand, critical researchers might suggest that the self-reflection has not gone far enough and should be more integrated with wider critical reflections on the interplay between my research and its embeddedness in a broader macro-societal context.

Nevertheless, one strength of this research is that it has contributed to addressing Kornberger's (2010, p. xiv) call for "an analytical apparatus" and "a theoretical language that enables us to understand the magnitude and the intensity of the transformation brands bring about." The framework presented in Figure 6-1 (p. 198) provides such an analytical apparatus for the comprehension and analysis of brands, particularly, in combination with the definition presented in Figure 6-3 (p. 219). In combination with these two contributions, the concept presented in Figure 3-1 (p. 73) about the internet-based democratisation of brand management helps to understand the magnitude of the transformation brands bring about. Finally, the research overall, but specifically the new brand definition, contributes to a new theoretical language that enables practitioners as well as academics to develop a better comprehension of brands as complex social phenomena.

7.5 Avenues For Future Research

This research substantiates the notion that a prospective new brand management approach needs to integrate not only organisation-initiated but also stakeholder-initiated brand management activities. In terms of future research directions, the in-depth exploration of power structures in heterarchical open source brand management scenarios appears to have considerable potential. In these scenarios, power and control over core brand manifestations, such as the development of new products, is radically more decentralised and heterarchical compared to conventional product or corporate brand-oriented organisations (Ind, 2014). This area of research can be expected to provide valuable insights into the development of a new co-creational brand management paradigm that will be applicable not only to open source and community brands but also conventional product and corporate ones.

As explained above, in the limitations section, despite the explanatory power of the applied GTM and the theoretical sample of brand managers across different industries and types of organisation, it can be seen as a limitation that the research has been conducted exclusively with UK-based brand managers. Further research, for instance, in other geographical regions or with stakeholders other than managers,

would therefore have the potential for additional relevant contributions. For example, investigating brand management consultants' conceptualisations and comparing them with the findings of the brand managers' combined cognitive conceptualisation space might potentially provide further insights about how these two key stakeholder groups can collaborate more efficiently with each other in practice.

Furthermore, the conceptualisation of brands in particular industries or specific types of organisations could potentially provide additional relevant insights. Comparisons between FMCG versus service-oriented organisations, or non-profit brands (Laidler-Kylander & Shepard Stenzel, 2014) might also contribute to new findings. Another interesting avenue in terms of new research angles could be the investigation of brand conceptualisations by brand managers with different kinds of responsibilities. As Valledy (2014) points out, different kinds of brand managers have different kinds of responsibilities in terms of the management of a brand and might subsequently also use potentially different brand conceptualisations.

In that context it would, of course, also be extremely helpful to test the relevance and applicability of the developed conceptual framework (Figure 6-1, p. 198) and definition (Figure 6-3, p. 219) with brand management practitioners. This could be done via a number of different research designs and data collection methods. For example, interviews, focus groups, ethnographic research or action research could be helpful for the collection of primary data. Particularly relevant would be research scenarios in which practitioners have to apply and/or integrate the new conceptual framework and definition within their everyday work.

The democratisation of internet technology has been extensively discussed in the literature review. Related to this, several of the interviewees used the word "revolution" (e.g. Bob; Leonard) in the context of the democratisation of internet technology. This is reflected in the literature. American Express CMO, John Hayes, for example, has compared this "new age of marketing" with the "Industrial Revolution" (p. 5 in Collins et al., 2011). He recalled a conversation about this he had with an American Express employee:

> "As we try to go to market with your idea," I said, "the world is going to decide whether or not this has real value, talk about it, and then *position* it pretty much how they want to position it." The person [American Express

employee] responded, "OK, so we really have lost control?" I said, "Yes, that's right. I don't get to control everything that's said about us." Then I said to the person, "But understand, you're still 100 percent accountable for the outcome." The reaction to me was, "That's not fair." And it's not. But it's the world we live in. It's more exciting because if you really do have a great product or a great program, it can catch fire in the marketplace. That's exciting. But the challenge for most people who are marketers today is, "How do you hold me accountable for the success of this when I can't control what somebody might say about it or what somebody else might contribute to this conversation?" (p. 5 in Collins et al., July 2011; emphasis added).

This scenario encapsulates a lot of the different points which the democratisation of internet technology brings with it from the brand managers' perspectives. An important insight in this context of the research appears to be that, through the lens of the internet-based democratisation of brand management, the marketing industry might be considered as approaching a 'third wave' of brand management – following the second wave of corporate brand management, identified by Schultz et al (2005a). The present research provides evidence that the brand management process is a social process that bounces back and forth not only within the organisation through sense making and sense giving processes between an organisation's management and its employees, as Antorini and Schultz (2005) identified, but also between the inside and outside of the organisation. Under the first wave of corporate brand management, corporate brands were managed by the marketing department. Under the second wave, corporate brands were managed by the whole organisation. However, my research indicates that a third wave of (corporate) brand management is required under which the "traditional corporate mindset" (Antorini & Schultz 2005, p. 225) might need to be readjusted, regarding the traditional brand control paradigm, as explained above.

The organisation needs to move to a mindset where it perceives itself as *part* of a *network* of relationships with other brand stakeholders (Antorini & Schultz 2005; Esmann Andersen & Nielsen, 2009; Ots & Hartmann, 2015; Post et al, 2002). The strict separation between the organisation and its brand stakeholders in the ongoing creation process of brand meanings and manifestations is becoming increasingly difficult (e.g. Närvänen & Goulding, 2016; Pitt et al, 2006). External stakeholders, such as individual customers or small NGOs as "gifted amateurs" are now able to "'punch above their weight'" (Harris & Rae 2009, p. 694) and take on large

organisations in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management – see, for example, the musician Dave Carroll taking on United Airlines (Carroll, 2012). Or, as Booth and Matic (2011) put it, the "'nobodies' of the past are now the new 'somebodies'" (p. 184). These preliminary insights need to be investigated through further empirical research.

Moving forward in this context towards the development of a new, more balanced and stakeholder-integrating brand management paradigm appears to be essential, since the lack of an adequate brand management framework has implications not only for brand management but marketing as a whole (Asmussen et al., 2013a; Hillebrand et al. 2015).

7.6 Reflection On The Research Process As Well As My Development As A Researcher

The cultural historian, Richard Tarnas, wrote that "Each generation must examine and think through again, from its own distinctive vantage point, the ideas that have shaped its understanding of the world" (Tarnas, 1993, p. xiv). This quote reflects very much how this research project 'felt' to me. A lot of research had already been conducted on brands when I started my journey on this research project. De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley's (1998a) research was particularly influential for me at the beginning; but it was conducted before internet-based social media would become a socio-technological mainstream phenomenon.

This earlier research was an important springboard; but the brand management world has appeared to be going through some considerable changes since that research had been conducted. So, it felt that there was an opportunity to conduct new research for the 'next generation' of brand management. Also, this new research needed to be conducted from the right 'vantage point'. This vantage point turned out to be a social constructivist one. De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998a) did not discuss their paradigmatic grounding. They also conducted expert interviews but did not discuss their theoretical perspective or methodology in detail. The second generation GTM, such as constructivist GTM, had not even been fully developed at the stage when de

Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley conducted their investigation. So, a lot had changed.

At the beginning of my research, trying to develop a systematic understanding of the phenomenon of the internet-based democratisation of brand management took a lot of time and energy. Nevertheless, it led to my first journal publication (Asmussen et al., 2013a) and provided supporting evidence of how immensely brand management has been changing. This meant that a new understanding of brands was needed. Further important publications emerged such as Heding et al. (2009) and Merz et al. (2009). But these works did not try to develop one integrative brand concept. The article published by leading brand and internet researchers such as Sherry, Kozinets and Muñiz together with Diamond and others (Diamond et al., 2009) was very encouraging since it was one of the first papers that established the need to view brands in their totality. Later, Ind et al. (2012 & 2013) and Iglesias et al. (2013) developed further relevant ideas in the context of brand co-creation with stakeholders.

Also, inspirational was the work by the Innsbruck School (Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger, 2008; Mühlbacher et al., 2006) and the Copenhagen School (Schultz et al., 2005a). However, a lot of the literature on brands I actually read after the fieldwork was done. This was helpful to keep an open mind. The preparation for the fieldwork, again, required a lot of time and effort since the 'confrontation' with academic qualitative research was a brand new experience for me. I had conducted qualitative research before, as a marketing practitioner, but being confronted with concepts such as ontology and epistemology was a completely new ballgame. The development of the frameworks and tables presented in chapter 4 helped me to develop not only a paradigmatic positioning but also an identity as an academic researcher, which is one of the developments that I would categorise as an important personal outcome of the whole research journey.

In terms of the overall results, I hope that the main contributions of this thesis will help to move brand discourse forward. Firstly, the newly developed social constructivist framework (Figure 6-1, p. 198) and proposed definition (Figure 6-3, p. 219) which together provide a new conceptualisation approach on brands in their

totality. Secondly, the framework which explains the phenomenon of the internet-based democratisation of brand management (Figure 3-1, p. 73) should also be helpful in moving brand discourse forward, particularly, in the context of technology and its influence on brand stakeholders.

The social constructivist framework has addressed the overall research question: How do brand managers conceptualise brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management? In contrast to previous approaches (e.g. Iglesias et al., 2013), it can explain not only phenomena such as brand co-creation but also brand co-destruction, for example, through anti-brand communities. This is important for brand managers to understand brands as contemporary phenomena. Thus, it also impacts on contemporary brand management practice.

These insights have not only had a considerable impact on me as a brand researcher but also as a teacher of brand management modules. Furthermore, the findings which emerged from this thesis have also profoundly influenced my work with the marketing industry, specifically the Branded Content Marketing Association (BCMA) on the topic of defining branded content for the digital age (Asmussen et al., 2013b; 2013c; 2014 & 2015).

I have learnt through the work on this thesis that in-depth understanding is best achieved through a continuous dialogue (Schwandt, 2000) in the widest sense of the word. In the present context, this does not only entail the direct face-to-face engagement with the brand management industry via the expert interviews but equally the engagement with and in-depth immersion in the data. The presented findings would not have been achieved without a GTM process that allowed the integration of all of these aspects of this research concept. A key research insight is therefore that these findings were not simply discovered but achieved only through an engagement in dialogue (Schwandt, 2000).

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: An Application Of The Framework Presented In Table 4-2 To Identify The Paradigmatic Grounding Of The Researcher

Since the application of the framework presented in Table 4-2 (p. 107) needed to include a number of self-reflections, the *first person* is used to address this adequately.

The area of *ontology* is concerned with the researcher's assumptions about the *nature of reality* (Table 4-2, p. 107) in regard to the conducted research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). The key question is whether – from the researcher's point of view – the object being investigated is the product of the perception and consciousness of social actors or whether it exists independently of that (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Remenyi et al., 1998). The assumption that an object of investigation in the social world can exist independently of the social actors' perceptions and actions implies that there exists a single, external and objective reality 'out there' to be discovered (Bryman, 2004; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

I share neither this assumption nor its implications in my area of research. From my point of view, reality is multiple and socially-constructed, as seen by social actors. For example, the object being investigated by my research is the manager and how he or she is conceptualising brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management. One of my principal goals therefore is to develop an in-depth understanding of the subjective realities of these managers when it comes to the complexities of conceptualising brands in the internet-based democratisation of brand management. Based on my assumption of the existence of multiple realities, my ontological standpoint can be interpreted as a constructivist perspective (Patton, 2002).

The topic of *epistemology* appeared to be more complex than the other five areas (Table 4-2, p. 107) in that not one but two key philosophical questions emerged through the conducted literature review. The *first question* in the area of epistemology is concerned with what constitutes acceptable knowledge in the field of

study (Bryman, 2004; Johnson & Duberley, 2000; Saunders et al., 2007). The paradigmatic issue here is whether or not knowledge about the social world can, and should only, be accepted according to principles and procedures used in the natural sciences (Bryman, 2004; Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). From my point of view, researchers who study the social world should use not only principles and procedures that are used in the natural sciences but also, if not especially, principles and procedures which reflect the distinctiveness of humans from the 'natural order':

> The world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not 'mean' anything to the molecules, atoms and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientist – social reality – has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting, and thinking within it. Via a series of common-sense constructs, they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behaviour by motivating it. The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men [and women], living their daily lives within the social world. (Schutz, 1967, p. 59)

The *second philosophical key question* in the area of epistemology is concerned with the relationship between the researcher and that being researched (Creswell, 2007; Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The question is basically asking whether the researcher "is part of what is being observed" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002, p. 30) or if the posture of the researcher is one of independence and "objective detachment" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). My position was to collaborate closely with the participants of my research to understand in depth *their* conceptualisations of brands. From my perspective, this implies that not only the participants' but also the researcher's own account of the social world is a *subjective* construction (Johnson & Clark, 2006). In other words, the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as *objective* or definite (Bryman, 2004).

From my constructivist perspective, knowledge is created in the interaction between investigator and respondents (Bryman, 2004). This means that the investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the 'findings' are literally created as the investigation proceeds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). What is

known is inextricably intertwined with the interaction between the investigator and the object or group (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The area of *axiological assumptions* (Table 4-2, p. 107) focuses on questions about the *role of values* for the researcher (Creswell, 2007). This includes, but is not limited to, values the researcher possesses in the fields of aesthetics, ethics, religion or the process of social enquiry itself (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Saunders et al., 2007). In this regard, some researchers acknowledge that their research is value-laden and therefore that bias is present while others exclude or deny the influence of personal values on their work. I agree with Creswell (2007) that all social actors, including researchers, bring values to a study, but only some researchers make those values explicit. Furthermore, I believe that acknowledging and being open about the role that our own values might play in the research process is of great importance if a researcher wishes to maximise the credibility of his/her investigations (see Saunders et al., 2007; Tracy, 2010). The whole of sections 4.3 and 4.4.1 are a case in point since they were both motivated – at least in some respect – by the values of sincerity (Tracy, 2010) and transparency to write this reflective account in the first place.

The area of *methodology* (Table 4-2, p. 107) deals mainly with the question of *how researchers should go about finding out knowledge* (Guba, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The philosophical decision that investigators make, implicitly or explicitly, is whether they believe that the best way of generating relevant knowledge is to use a subjective or an objective methodology (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). My position is that methodological decisions are heavily dependent on the researcher's ontological and epistemological assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Based on my previously discussed assumptions, I consider a subjective methodology to be the most appropriate for my research in order to allow the objects of investigation to unfold their "nature and characteristics during the process of investigation" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 6).

The area of *rhetorics-related assumptions* (Table 4-2, p. 107) focuses on the *language used in research* (Creswell, 2007). The investigator has to decide whether he wishes to use literary, informal and personal language, including referring to himself using the first-person pronoun 'I', or if he is more comfortable with formal

and impersonal terminology. I have to admit that decisions related to this point have been a bit of a personal struggle. I see myself as a constructivist researcher. Therefore, I have tried to familiarise myself with the use of informal and personal language and with referring to myself using the first-person pronoun in my work. The current section is a case in point. However, it still feels unfamiliar to use some of the language and style of qualitative research and you will notice that some parts of this thesis still include formal language and third-person references. One rather informal decision I have made is to use pseudonyms for the people I have interviewed instead of calling them expert 1, expert 2, and so forth. The pragmatic advantage that comes with the pseudonyms I have used is that the gender of the interviewee could be 'preserved' in this way (e.g. Andrew = expert 1, male; Bob = expert 2, male; Charlotte = expert 3, female).

The area of *human nature-related assumptions* (Table 4-2, p. 107) considers *what model of human nature* is reflected in social research (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). At one extreme a determinist view can be identified which regards humans and their activities as completely determined by the environment in which they are located (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). At the opposite end of the spectrum stands a voluntarist view that humans are completely autonomous and free-willed (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). My standpoint here is closely linked to the analysis presented earlier when 'positioning' myself in relation to the epistemological key question within wider paradigmatic discourse. The meaning of reality is not simply imprinted on people by their environment nor is it constructed independently of it. The meaning of reality appears to be formed partly through subjectively perceived and interpreted interaction with others and partly through rather inter-subjective historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives (Creswell, 2007). However, I believe that voluntarist aspects dominate for the present context of my research and therefore that humans are relatively but not completely autonomous and free-willed when it comes to their conceptualisations of brands. My standpoint therefore is positioned close to the subjective, constructivist approach (Patton, 2002).

Appendix 2: Introduction And Evaluation Of The Four Most Relevant Interpretivist Schools Of Thought

The following introduction and evaluation of the four most relevant interpretivist schools of thought, for the present context, helped providing a rigorous theoretical foundation for the methodological considerations in section 4.4.2 with the aim of achieving meaningful coherence and internal logic (Tracy, 2010; see Table 4-1, p. 102 & Figure 4-1, p. 103).

Weber's Concept Of Verstehen

Central to the interpretivist approach of studying people's social worlds from their perspective(s) is Max Weber's (1864-1920) concept of verstehen (in-depth interpretive understanding). While the interpretation of this concept amongst academics has changed considerably over time (Crotty, 1998), the verstehen tradition stresses in general an understanding that focuses on the meaning of human behaviour in the context of social interaction (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2007). Also relevant to this approach is that Weber puts an emphasis on the meaning of an individual's actions rather than macro-sociological phenomena (Weber, 2009). This fits in with the constructivist (rather than constructionist) grounding as well as the aim of investigating the conceptualisations of brands from the micro-level perspective of individual brand managers themselves.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology entails several sub-disciplines with, in some parts, grave differences between them (Crotty, 1998). Nevertheless, generally phenomenologists reject positivism and causal explanations (Schwandt, 2007). Instead many of them are concerned with how individual human beings make sense not only in social interaction itself (like the verstehen approach) but also depending on the environment and world around them in everyday life in which they practice this meaning making (Bryman, 2004). This is a relevant cue for the present research project since the literature review in chapter 3 indicated that the 'world' in the brand managers' everyday life has changed considerably due to the internet-based democratisation of brand management.

Additionally, unlike some members of the verstehen school of thought, most phenomenologists support the idea that the study of the social world requires a fundamentally different research perspective from that of the natural sciences (Bryman, 2004; Crotty, 1998; Schutz, 1967). Furthermore, Blaikie (2007) points out another difference between the verstehen and the phenomenologist approach which is relevant for the current context: Weber did not distinguish between the meaning that a social actor attributes to his or her own action and the meaning that an observer might attribute to this action. Weber appeared not to be particularly interested in the specific meanings that social actors give to their own actions, but seemed to assume that the researcher observing a social interaction would be sufficiently able to arrive at the meaning which the social actors attribute to their interaction (Blaikie, 2007). In contrast to this, for Schutz (1967) and other phenomenologists it is paramount that the researcher tries to gain access to the social actors' own meaning making to be able to interpret their actions and their social world from *their* point of view (Bryman, 2004).

This indicates, in terms of methodological considerations, that face-to-face interviews with brand managers are beneficial to address the overall research question most adequately. Based on the paradigmatic grounding as well as the overall research aim this means: (1) the focus should be on the individual brand managers' meaning making in the context of their social interaction with stakeholders in their everyday life world(s); and (2) the researcher's (theoretical) thought constructs, in order to adequately grasp the brand managers' everyday life reality, as far as possible, should be founded on the thought objects constructed by the common-sense making of the managers living their daily lives in their multiple stakeholder life world(s).

Hermeneutics

In the context of social sciences, hermeneutics is concerned with the theory and method of the interpretation of human action (Bryman, 2004). It stresses the need to understand human action from the perspective of the social actor and is in this sense particularly close to the phenomenology tradition. However, it differs from this other school of thought to some extent by aiming to gain an understanding of a text which is potentially deeper than the author's own understanding. The term 'text' is

interpreted here in the widest sense of the word, i.e. it also includes unwritten sources – such as human behaviour, interactions, events, situations, etc. (Crotty, 1998). The objective of achieving an understanding of a 'text' that might go even further than the author's own understanding derives from the assumption that meanings are often implicit and thus might not even be recognised by the author (Crotty, 1998).

Another important aspect of the hermeneutic school of thought is the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Schwandt, 2007; Figure 8-1). This concept can be divided into a number of different aspects. Three of these aspects are described in the following:

1) **No tabula rasa**: "… in order to understand something, one needs to begin with ideas and to use terms, that presuppose [at least] a rudimentary understanding of what one is trying to understand. Understanding turns out to be a development of what is already understood, with the more developed understanding returning to illuminate and enlarge one's starting point" (Crotty, 1998, p. 92).

2) **The parts versus the whole**: Regarding the nature and means of interpreting a text, the hermeneutic circle also signifies a "process or condition of understanding, namely, that coming to understand the meaning of the whole of a text and coming to understand its parts were always interdependent activities. Construing the meaning of the whole meant making sense of the parts, and grasping the meaning of the parts depended on having some sense of the whole" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 133; see Figure 8-1).

Figure 8-1: The Hermeneutic Circle As Method Of Interpretation

Image removed

Source: Schwandt, 2007, p. 133.

However, despite the circle indicating a necessary condition of interpretation, various hermeneutic researchers assume the circularity of the process to be only temporary (Schwandt, 2007). Eventually the interpreter/researcher can come to "something approximating a complete and concrete understanding of the meaning of a text in which whole and parts are related in […] harmony" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 133-134).

3) **All understanding is situated**: In Martin Heidegger's (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1900-2002) work, which could be described as part of the school of thought of philosophical hermeneutics, the concept of the hermeneutic circle is interpreted even more radically (Schwandt, 2007, p. 134):

> … the circularity of interpretation is not simply a methodological principle but an essential feature of all knowledge and understanding. In other words, the fact that every interpretation relies on other interpretations, and so on, points to the finite and situated character of all understanding. The hermeneutic circle thus signifies the universality of hermeneutics – interpretation is a ubiquitous and inescapable feature of all human efforts to understand; there is no special evidence, method, experience, or meaning that is independent of interpretation or more basic to it such that one can escape the hermeneutic circle. Moreover, all efforts to interpret (to understand) always take place within some background (e.g.; historical tradition, web of belief, and practice) that cannot be transcended. In this sense, we always 'belong' to history. The image of the hermeneutic circle is thus transformed into a picture of how the interpreter is bound to a tradition and history on the one hand and to the particular object of interpretation on the other.

This idea is presented in Figure 8-2.

Figure 8-2: The Hermeneutic Circle In Philosophical Hermeneutics

Image removed from electronic version

Source: Gallagher, 1992, p. 106.

The hermeneutic circle in philosophical hermeneutics works as follows (as adopted by Gallagher, 1992, p. 106-107; Schwandt 2007, p. 134-135): The anterior operation of tradition (a), as a forestructure of understanding, both conditions and suggests the foreconceptions (b) – i.e. prior knowledge – which the inquirer brings to interpret the object – a text or another human being. The feedback from the reading of the text – or from another human being's response in a conversation – motivates a new projection of meaning, i.e. interpretation. The relations (b) and (c) represent the hermeneutic circle. The relationship signified by (d) indicates that in the process of interpreting, the inquirer's relation to a particular tradition can change; foreconceptions can be challenged and modified, and so on.

Based on my investigation of the hermeneutic circle and the hermeneutic school of thought, with a particular focus on philosophical hermeneutics, two areas of relevance have emerged for the research:

(A) Tabula rasa is not desirable. Based on a social constructivist grounding, 'bracketing out' of preconceptions is very difficult if not impossible to achieve since the researcher needs *something* as a foundation to understand/interpret something. In other words, understanding is *always* interpretation (Gadamer, 1970; Schwandt, 2000). Consequently, in the spirit of Goulding (2003) and Garrison (1996), a preunderstanding of a situation is necessary for the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of this situation subsequently; the researcher should start the work with an *open* mind, not an *empty* one. Or, as Dey (1999) puts it: "There is a difference between an open mind and an empty head" (p. 251). In this sense, it can be concluded that prejudgements and biases are actually necessary to be able to develop an adequate understanding of something. However, it is also important to acknowledge and clarify that an initial bias does

not stop the researcher from moving beyond these first preconceptions (Schwandt, 2000). As a social constructivist researcher I need to be open about my biases and prejudgements and show how my 'initial' understanding has then evolved during the research process. This is also in line with Tracy's (2010) requirement for sincerity as part of her framework for quality in qualitative research.

(B) There is not only one meaning 'out there'. Some of the literature about the hermeneutic circle implies that it is possible to come to "something approximating a complete and correct understanding of the meaning of a text" (Crotty, 1998, p. 133). As a social constructivist I disagree that there is something like a complete or correct understanding. There is not just one meaning or understanding 'out there'. As Connolly and Keutner (1988, p. 17) say: "The text [or social action] is not an 'object out there' independent of its interpretations".

As a consequence of the elicitation of these two areas of relevance, there are now the following practical consequences: (1) I have to acknowledge that all of my understanding is situated and that – in the sense of philosophical hermeneutics – every interpretation of mine regarding the brand managers' conceptualisations of brands relies on other interpretations of mine. Through my reflections in the thesis I should therefore make an effort to reflect at least some of my situatedness when I interpreted the brand managers' perspectives. I should do this, for example, by discussing how my understanding has evolved regarding their brand conceptualisations and show how I have moved beyond my initial understanding. (2) I have to acknowledge that there is a double interpretation going on in my research: I am providing an interpretation of others' – the brand managers' – interpretations/ conceptualisations (Bryman, 2004) of brands. (3) It is beneficial to develop a research design that includes direct dialogue with brand managers as a data generation method. Overall, it becomes clear in section 4.4.2 that the thinking of the philosophical hermeneutics school had a considerable impact on the core methodological development of the research design (see e.g. Figure 4-2, p. 118).

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is closely linked to the American pragmatist George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), his student Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), and the Chicago School in American Sociology (Crotty, 1998; Flick, 2009). Symbolic interactionists believe that social actors are continuously interpreting the symbolic meaning of their environment and the interactions they have with their environment – which includes the behaviour and interaction of other social actors (Blumer, 1969; Bryman, 2004). Based on the results of their interpretations they then act; for example, they adjust their behaviour towards other social actors. In other words, people interpret the meanings of objects in their environment (e.g. another person's behaviour) and then act upon those interpretations (Blumer, 1969; Locke, 2001). Meaning therefore informs and guides action. This sequence indicates that the internet-based democratisation of brand management could indeed have an impact on brand managers' brand conceptualisations. However, the meaning does not arise directly from the object but from the social interaction and context related to it. This process is a continuous, ongoing one which means that meanings are not fixed or stable but potentially always in progress in the world of the participants.

As identified by previous interpretivist schools of thoughts, researchers therefore have to explore this world closely from the perspective of the subjects they study (Blumer, 1969; Flick, 2009; Stryker, 1976). The researcher might therefore only be able to understand social actors if he (Schwandt, 2007): (a) actively enters the setting or situation of the people being studied; and (b) sees the people's particular conceptualisation(s) of the setting or situation, what they take into account, and how they interpret this information. Symbolic interactionists conclude that, in terms of research design, qualitative inquiry would therefore be the only way of understanding how people perceive, understand, and interpret their world (Patton, 2002). Additionally, proponents of symbolic interactionism, such as Blumer (1969), were some of the first researchers to use interview methods with key informants as experts to help the researcher comprehend the phenomenon under investigation from the inside (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, based on Blumer (1969), the research design also needs to be able to cope with the brand managers' potentially very varied and multiple meanings in the context of brand conceptualisations. Such a research design should lead to a better understanding of the complexity of views rather than narrow the meaning into a few categories.

Appendix 3: Andrew's Use Of Different Conceptual Perspectives In The Context Of 'Brands Are About Multiple Relationships'

Stakeholder relationship	Examples from the Interview with Andrew
The brand and its various audiences	"And it's with brands ... what you are on the outside you are on the inside. That's the reality. Don't try to be something else to **customers** than to your **employees**. And the same is true with your **shareholders** and **all the other stakeholders**."
The brand and consumers	"…the question is how do we build in these [online community] services there, so to make it more relevant to our **consumers**. So that to me seems more natural rather than trying to invent new community services which I don't think the brand can do." "… you need to find a good balance between what the brand is known for today and where do we want to move **people [current and future customers/consumers' perception]** tomorrow." "… **they [consumers]** still want [to associate themselves with] brands with a personality that is bigger than their personal image." "Organisation A is very much present as a **consumer** brand which has to do with its heritage

	where it comes from …"
The brand and B2B clients	"Interestingly perceptions have changed slightly, specifically in the area of **multinational companies** [as Organisation A's B2B clients] … even at that end the brand has gained a lot more credibility."
The brand and other organisations	"… so increasingly we need to look at what things do we do on our own and where do we actually partner with **other companies and other brands** …" "… we are thinking about a service that is mainly distributed through **Facebook** which helps people to create common projects. Which is very much in line with what the Organisation A brand is all about."
The brand and its (online) critics	"… it really depends on what we look at, where it might be detrimental against the business, and it might be outrageous lies … then we would probably think about legal steps. But usually as much as possible we leave these things; there was a site all about 'why I hate Organisation A', 'why Organisation A was bad'. Now you have two choices there; either you go and beat **the guys [online critics]** and threaten with legal action or include yourself in the conversation which, to me, is more sensible …"
The brand and internal stakeholders (generally)	" … brand values are a tool that gives **people [employees]** guidance …" "We don't look at **internal [i.e. employees']** perceptions, we form them (laughs). That is a bit of a joke. … [But this] is certainly the job we are trying to do …. Being responsible for the brand is actually not so much a job that is to do with the outside …we need to understand the outside … but it is much more a job about getting **people** to understand **on the inside** what best to do with the brand and how best to do it ... so it is about forming those perceptions of the brand internally.
(generally and with focus on an international level)	"… we try to help **people [Organisation A's employees and managers to]** create events, create engagement with the brand **internally**. We do this through brand induction training. Or, for example when launching a big international campaign we make sure that there is something that gets the message through internally to keep **people [employees]** involved. Not just an email that says 'by the way next week on TV...bla, bla, bla, bla.' It's something that gets **people [employees]** to work with what we are trying to do next. So it's lots of things that we try to do to make the brand live **internally**. It is quite interesting to look at how **[Organisation A's employees and**
(with focus on an international level)	**managers in] different countries** do this; you have the full range from quite superficial where we paint the wall [in the corporate colour], to the journey you make through the company – from being hired to getting your first pay cheque to being fired even. This is actually being mapped out

	and managed from a brand point of view."
(with focus on an international level)	"We – as a [geographically] quite fragmented organisation – actually have to integrate lots of **different [internal** as well as external**] cultures and perceptions**, so the [Organisation A] brand is not 100 per cent the same in **[mentions one country market]** as it is in **[mentions the country of the global headquarters]**…"

Source: The researcher.

Appendix 4: Four Key Themes Emerging From The First Three Interviews
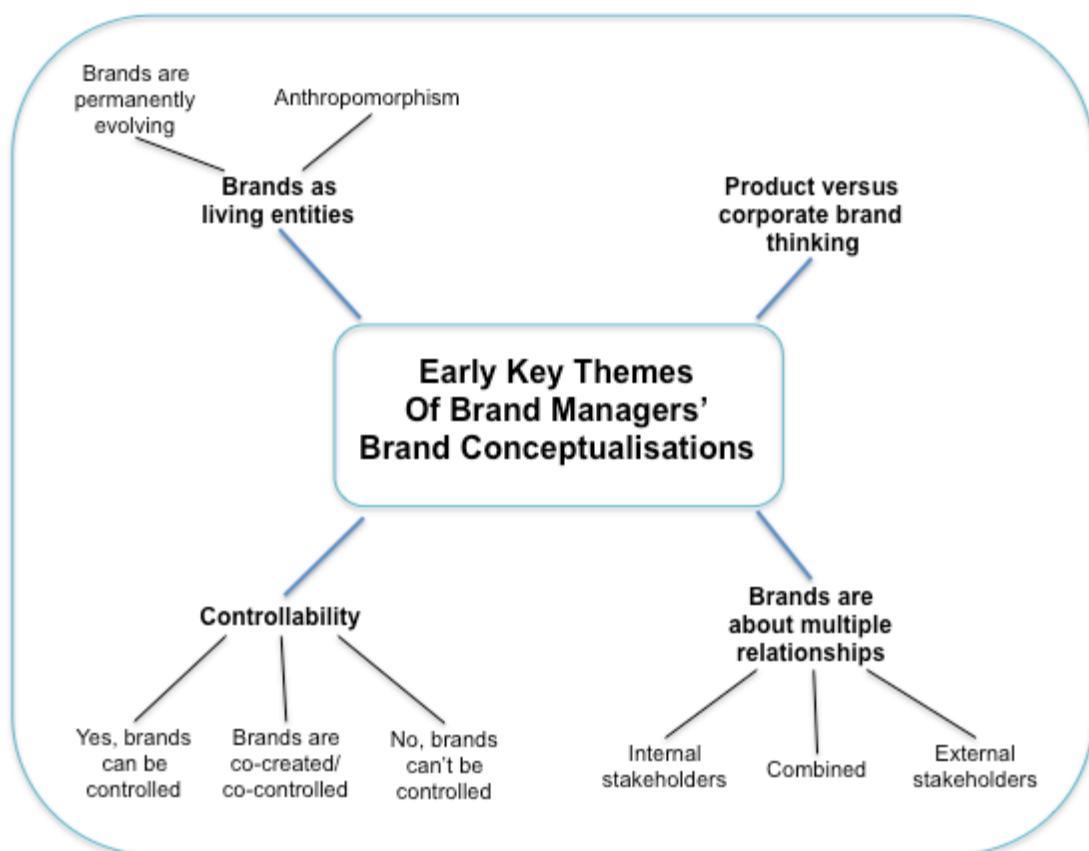
Source: The researcher.

Appendix 5: Interview Guidelines for Interview with Expert 8

Interview Guidelines

- Participant Information Sheet
- Confidentiality
- Focus: YOUR opinion, thoughts, experiences
- Open interview

1.   ORGANISATION: First of all, could you please describe your organisation to me?

2.   JOB ROLE: Could you please describe your job role for me?

3.   IMPORTANT THINGS: What do you see as the most important aspects of your job?

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4.   BRAND I: Please think about a brand that you would describe as a "strong brand". And tell me WHY you think it is a strong brand.

5.   BRAND II: Please think about a brand that you would describe as a "weak brand". And tell me WHY you think it is a weak brand.

6.   BRAND III: Could you now please describe your own organisation as a brand.

----
7.   BRAND MANAGEMENT I: Which parts of your brand do you feel you can control as a manager? And are there any parts where you feel you are maybe not in control?

8.   BRAND MANAGEMENT II: Do you follow a certain brand management concept or is your management style more based on your personal experience?

9.   BRAND MANAGEMENT III: Could you describe the way you manage your brand a little bit more?

10.   RESPONSIBILITY: Apart from you, who is responsible for the management of your organisation's brand?

----

11.   CHALLENGES: So what do you feel are the greatest challenges in managing your organisation's brand?

12.   UGC: How relevant is User-Generated Content or social media in this context? For example: the influence of online forums, social networks, blogs, Twitter or YouTube?

13.   UGC CHANNELS: What are the most important channels that customers and other stakeholders have used to voice their opinion about your brand/organisation? (Examples?)

14.   UGC's IMPACT: To what extend has UGC/social media had an influence/impact on your work?
   14.1 Impact on your organisation's brand?
   14.2 What do stakeholders expect from you?

15.   ADJUST: How do you/your organisation as a whole adjust to the UGC phenomenon? (Example?)

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16. STATISTICS: Age; Number of employees in the UK/worldwide; B2C or B2B?

17. COMMENTS: Do you have any further comments or thoughts that we haven't spoken about today?

Appendix 6: Consent Form For Participants

CONSENT FORM

OXFORD
BROOKES
UNIVERSITY

Project title: How do brand managers conceptualise brands in the age of the internet-based democratisation of brand management?

Name, position and contact address of researcher:
Bjoern Asmussen
Lecturer and Doctoral Student,
Business School
Oxford Brookes University
Wheatley Campus
Wheatley
Oxford OX33 1HX

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. ☐

3. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded ☐

5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications ☐

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   Date   Signature

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