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**Navigating the emergence of brand meaning in service ecosystems**

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## Navigating the emergence of brand meaning in service ecosystems

### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to clarify how brand meaning evolves as an emergent property through the cocreation processes of stakeholders on multiple levels of a brand's service ecosystem. This provides new insight into the intersection between brands, consumers, and society, and emphasizes the institutionally situated nature of brand meaning cocreation processes. It further lays a holistic foundation for a much-needed discussion on purpose-driven branding.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Combining the ecosystem perspective of branding with the concept of social emergence allows clarification of brand meaning cocreation at different levels of aggregation. Emergence means collective phenomena – like social structures, concepts, preferences, states, mechanisms, laws, *and brand meaning* – manifest from the interactions of individuals. Drawing on Sawyer's (2005) social emergence perspective, we propose a processual multi-level framework to explore brand meaning emergence.

**Findings:** Our framework spans five levels on brand meaning emergence: individual (e.g., employees and customers); interactional (e.g., where work teams or friend groups interact); relational (e.g., where internal and external actors meet); strategic (e.g., markets and strategic alliances); and systemic (e.g., regulators, NGOs, and society). It acknowledges that brand positioning is an inherently co-creative process of negotiating value propositions and aligning behaviors and beliefs among broad sets of actors, as opposed to a firm-centric task.

**Originality:** Service research has only recently embraced a macro-micro perspective of branding processes. This paper extends that perspective by paying attention to the nested service ecosystems in which brand meaning emerges and the degree to which this process can (and cannot) be navigated by individual actors.

**Keywords:** brand meaning cocreation, service ecosystems, brand management, brand hierarchy, purpose-driven branding, social emergence

**Paper type:** Conceptual

## Introduction

Brands represent considerably more than just logos, symbols, and names. They take on social and cultural meaning for multiple stakeholders beyond firms and customers (Bergvall, 2006; Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015). However, even though managing brands is, “in essence, about managing brand meanings” (Fournier, Solomon, and Englis, 2008, p.35), major brands continue to attract attention for letting themselves – and society – down. This can lead to severe reputational damage and cognitive dissonance for stakeholders. Think about Walmart, long respected for its approach to ‘shared value creation’ (Porter and Kramer, 2011), which aims to deliver value to other stakeholders beyond just shareholders. However, the brand has recently been severely criticized for selling Brazilian beef linked to rainforest destruction (Wasley and Heal, 2021). Meanwhile, Disney continues to entertain its customers and delight its shareholders, but in 2019 was called out by Abigail Disney (grandniece of Walt Disney) for the ‘naked indecency’ of the CEO’s remuneration, which was 1,424 times the median pay of Disney workers (Disney, 2019). What is apparent in these examples is an incongruence in how these brands cocreate brand meaning with different groups within society. Between these two firms, workers and the natural environment are suffering, and brand equity is being undermined.

Branding literature increasingly reflects that brand meaning is cocreated by multiple actors, including family and friends, retailers, employees, regulators, and media (Fyrberg and Jürriado, 2009; Hatch and Schulz, 2010). Additionally, the institutionally situated nature of how brand meaning is cocreated is becoming recognized (O’Guinn, Muniz and Paulson, 2015; Tierney, Karpen and Westberg, 2016). However, the interdependence of guiding institutional arrangements that shape brand meaning cocreation, and the actions of actors embedded within them, is not fully clear. Institutional arrangements are interlinked, interdependent sets of formal and informal institutions that guide and organize social interaction (Nicosia and Mayer, 1976;

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3 Vargo and Lusch, 2016). For example, institutional arrangements that guide processes of brand  
4 meaning cocreation associated with Disney include (but are not limited to) regulations and laws  
5 that specify Disney's responsibilities toward employees and shareholders, internal norms  
6 adopted by managers and workers within Disney, consumer beliefs and assumptions of Disney  
7 products, formal contracts between Disney and its collaborators (e.g., contract manufacturers  
8 and licensees), and norms and expectations held by media commentators. Hence, the  
9 institutional arrangements that influence *different* actor groups (e.g., managers, workers, young  
10 children, parents, reporters, pressure groups) are not always shared. Brand meaning cocreation  
11 processes will unfold differently within these diverse groups. However, different groups are  
12 also not fully divorced from one another; they too are interdependent through their interactions  
13 (e.g., where Disney workers and theme-park visitors intersect). Hence, how different  
14 institutional arrangements impact brand meaning cocreation processes involving different  
15 groups needs further elaboration.

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33 Recently, Sarasvuo, Rindell and Kovalchuk (2022) undertook a comprehensive  
34 literature review about cocreation in branding. This led them to distinguish between cocreation  
35 outcomes for marketers, those for stakeholders, and mutual outcomes shared by both, which  
36 lead to brand meaning. Our research expands on these cocreation outcomes by providing an  
37 ecosystemic conceptualization of branding. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to *clarify*  
38 *how brand meaning evolves as an emergent property on multiple levels of a brand's service*  
39 *ecosystem*. Service ecosystems are "relatively self-contained, self-adjusting systems of  
40 resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value  
41 creation through service exchange" (Lusch and Vargo, 2014, p.161). Service ecosystems are  
42 nested at different levels of aggregation (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016), the largest being the  
43 global economy and the smallest being interactions between two individuals (Maglio &  
44 Spohrer, 2008). Examples of intermediate levels include (but are not limited to) phenomena  
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3 like markets, industries, brand communities, organizations, work teams, and families. Each  
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5 level features different sets of institutional arrangements that are, themselves, generated by the  
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7 behavior, practices, expectations, and assumptions of embedded actors. Hence, the service  
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9 ecosystem framework allows conceptualizing the emergence of brand meaning as an evolving,  
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11 dynamic process involving different but interdependent groups of embedded actors and guiding  
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13 institutional arrangements.  
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17 Our contribution is as follows. While recent brand literature offers important insights  
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19 into the intersection of branding, consumers, and society (Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015;  
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21 Sarasvuo *et al.*, 2022), the emergence of brand meaning at different, nested levels of  
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23 aggregation is not yet explained. We provide a framework that shows how brand meaning  
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25 unfolds at multiple levels, resulting from dynamic cocreation processes among various actors.  
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27 Further, institutional arrangements that reside at these different levels and how brand meaning  
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29 is embedded within them is explicated on *individual* (e.g., employees and customers);  
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31 *interactional* (e.g., where work teams or friend groups interact); *relational* (e.g., where internal  
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33 and external actors meet); *strategic* (e.g., markets and strategic alliances); and *systemic* levels  
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35 (e.g., regulators, NGOs, and society). Thus, our framework provides new insight into the  
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37 intersection between brands, consumers, and society, provides greater detail of the  
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39 institutionally situated nature of brand meaning cocreation, and lays a holistic foundation for a  
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41 much-needed discussion on purpose-driven branding.  
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47 The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we examine contrasting  
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49 conceptualizations of branding to justify the service branding perspective. We then draw on  
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51 the social emergence perspective (Sawyer, 2005) to develop a theoretical framework for  
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53 integrative branding within nested service ecosystems that reflects the critical role of actor  
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55 interactions at different levels. The framework explores how branding processes can reflect  
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57 congruence – alignment and consistency – between a brand’s value propositions, behavior, and  
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3 its different stakeholders' aspirations. The final section draws theoretical and managerial  
4 implications and identifies areas for future research.  
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## 10 **Towards a service ecosystem perspective of branding**

### 11 *From trademarks to interactive branding*

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14 Traditionally, branding research was underpinned by theories from micro-economics and  
15 psychology (Brodie *et al.*, 2017). From economics, signaling theory is used to explain how  
16 identity formation unfolds (e.g., Erdem and Swait, 1998; Spence, 1976). From psychology,  
17 associative memory concepts are used to develop theory about consumer brand knowledge  
18 (e.g., Keller, 1993). This early research focuses primarily on consumer goods and choice and  
19 how consumers grow to identify (with) certain brands. Most of this work takes a managerial  
20 perspective (see Jacoby *et al.*, 1971; Levy, 1955) where a brand represents a “promise of the  
21 bundle of attributes that someone buys” (Ambler and Styles, 1996, p.10). Hence, the buyer is  
22 merely a receiver of brand communications (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). While this research  
23 provides micro-level guidance, little insight is offered into the intersection between brands,  
24 consumers, and society, or dynamic brand-building processes.  
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40 In response, Brodie *et al.* (2006) emphasize the critical role of brand meaning from an  
41 organizational perspective, where brands signal identities that inspire processes of brand  
42 meaning creation. To do so, service brands offer value propositions. Value propositions are  
43 “invitations from actors to one another to engage in service” (Chandler and Lusch, 2015 p.8),  
44 and trigger value cocreation processes through firm-customer, firm-staff, and staff-customer  
45 marketing. Such processes successfully build customer brand perceptions and inspire  
46 employees to deliver trustworthy service offerings (Brodie *et al.*, 2009). For example, the  
47 behavior of Disney theme-park staff must be aligned with Disney marketing collateral and  
48 customer expectations and experiences. Nevertheless, this Relationship-Focus Brand Era  
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3 (Merz *et al.*, 2009) still somewhat overemphasizes the role of organizations in managing brand  
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5 meaning.  
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8 *From experiential to stakeholder-centered branding*  
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10 More recent research recognizes the dynamic nature of brands comprising social, relational,  
11 cultural, and experiential dimensions (e.g., Merz *et al.*, 2009; Cayla and Arnould, 2008). Firms  
12 garner great value from the meaning of their brands (Moor, 2008), cocreated through time as  
13 consumers use brands to reflect their ideal self (Belk, 1988). For example, people worldwide  
14 can be seen wearing clothing with Harvard or NASA branding despite having no direct  
15 association with the organizations.  
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24 Consumer culture theory has been used to explore brand experiences as consumption  
25 practices (e.g., Arvidsson, 2006; Onyas and Ryan, 2015). Cayla and Arnould (2008) argue  
26 branding is a specific form of communication that tells stories in the context of products and  
27 services that promise to fulfill unmet desires and needs. Drawing on social practice theory,  
28 branding is viewed as ongoing processes of meaning creation. These processes unfold within  
29 brand communities, social networks (e.g., Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould, 2009), and brand  
30 relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1998), involving diverse actors cocreating value and brand  
31 meaning for themselves and others (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould, 2009). Stakeholder theory has  
32 been used to study cocreation of brand meaning through the activities of various sets of market  
33 actors (e.g., Muzellec and Lambkin, 2009). Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) posit brands  
34 are in a constant state of flux as stakeholders constantly negotiate and (re)define brand  
35 meanings through discursive activities. Likewise, others suggest brands are cocreated by  
36 diverse actors like employees, regulators, retailers, media, and family and friends (e.g., Fyrberg  
37 and Jürriado, 2009; Hatch and Schulz, 2010).  
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56 These recent approaches highlight customers, brand communities, and other  
57 stakeholders contribute to continuous, dynamic, and interactive brand value cocreation  
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3 processes (Merz *et al.*, 2009). However, despite the stakeholder-centricity of these approaches,  
4 they do not fully cover the systemic and institutional nature of brands.  
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### 7 *Brands as nested service ecosystems*

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10 The notion of brand ecosystems is not new. However, a systematic treatment of nested  
11 ecosystems has largely been ignored with either managerial perspectives being dominant  
12 (Winkler, 1999), the system definition being selectively narrow (Bergvall, 2006), or the system  
13 being seen as existing on a single plane comprising large generic actor groups. For example,  
14 using the business ecosystem perspective (Moore, 1996), Pinar *et al.* (2011) explicate a brand  
15 ecosystem framework for higher education that recognises the activities undertaken “in a value-  
16 creation network that provide value to the institution’s various constituencies, both internal and  
17 external” (p.731). The actor groups include students, their parents, employers, donors, and  
18 alumni. While this systemic view offers important contributions regarding the potential  
19 influence a brand has on shaping institutions, this view remains firm-centric.  
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33 Telescoping out further, service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2016) has  
34 been utilized to provide a theoretical explanation for the cocreation of brand meaning (Merz *et*  
35 *al.*, 2009). Cocreation processes are perceived as unfolding within interactive buyer-seller  
36 dyads and within networks and systems (Ind, Iglesias, and Schultz, 2013). Tierney *et al.* (2016)  
37 explore how common, shared – and diverse – meanings develop within highly networked  
38 contexts. Adopting a service ecosystem perspective, the authors emphasize the iterative and  
39 institutionally situated nature of brand meaning cocreation processes, which involve direct and  
40 indirect interactions and integration of resources, shaped by governing institutional  
41 arrangements. Institutional arrangements are the overlapping formal and informal rules, values,  
42 and norms that guide and coordinate embedded actors’ practices, behaviors, and assumptions  
43 through time and space (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; 2008). These institutionally embedded  
44 cocreation processes lead to 1) cocreated brand value – an actor’s assessment of the value they  
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3 derive from collaborative brand-related activities (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2021), and 2) cocreated  
4 brand meaning – the emotional and cognitive understanding an actor ascribes to a brand  
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6 (Tierney *et al.*, 2016).  
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10 The extant research, reviewed above, reflects multiple actors socially construct brands  
11 through time (Pettigrew, 1997). However, where network perspectives have been adopted, the  
12 activities of different groups at the micro-level are typically the focus, with primacy given to  
13 dyadic and triadic relationships. Little consideration is given to the guiding or institutional  
14 factors that govern and influence choices, behaviors, and practices. Even when institutional  
15 arrangements have been recognized as guiding cocreation processes, little attention has been  
16 given to the generative properties of the cocreation processes that unfold within and between  
17 different actors at different levels. As O’Guinn *et al.* (2018, p.134) opine, even the “more  
18 socially inclusive models [of branding] still have an institutional blind spot where midlevel  
19 (i.e., all group, not individual and cultural) entities and processes manifest.”  
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### 36 **Emergence of brand meaning**

37 The challenges to developing shared brand meaning are in achieving congruence between value  
38 propositions, brand behavior, and the expectations and experiences of different actors (Berthon  
39 Pitt, and Campbell, 2009) at different levels of aggregation. To draw on an earlier example,  
40 while Disney continues to offer value propositions reflective of family-friendly morals, it  
41 remains dogged by accusations of poor treatment of its workers (at the micro-level) (Dreier,  
42 2020), and misrepresentations of minorities (Elman, 2020) and women (Romadhon, 2020) at  
43 the societal-macro-level. Such criticisms present an ongoing reputational risk to the brand and  
44 undermine the overall brand meaning Disney hopes to promote.  
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55 Combining the ecosystem perspective of branding (Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015;  
56 Tierney *et al.*, 2016) with the concept of emergence (Elder-Vass, 2010) allows clarification of  
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3 brand meaning cocreation at different levels of aggregation. Systems theory specifies that  
4 systems take on emergent properties as interactions unfold (Elder-Vass, 2010; Sawyer, 2005).  
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6 A system has emergent properties when it features qualities greater than the sum of its  
7 constituent parts (Simon, 1962). Humans do not have the individual capacity to generate  
8 emergent properties, but collectively, humans possess emergent causal powers because social  
9 events manifest from interactions (Elder-Vass, 2010). Emergence means collective phenomena  
10 – like institutions, structures, concepts, preferences, states, mechanisms, laws, and brand  
11 meaning – manifest from the interactions of individuals (Goldenberg, Libai and Muller, 2001;  
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13 Pena and Breidbach, 2021; Vargo and Lusch, 2014).  
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24 Drawing on Sawyer's (2005) social emergence perspective, we propose a processual  
25 framework of brand meaning emergence that accounts for brand meaning cocreation across  
26 five nested levels of service ecosystems. This framework reflects processes of emergence  
27 involving combinations of actors at different levels of aggregation (see Figure 1). These levels  
28 are 1) *individual* and 2) *interactional* at the micro-level; 3) *relational* and 4) *strategic* at meso-  
29 level; and 5) *systemic* at macro-level. Each level (or analytical frame) exists as analytically  
30 separate from the actors within, due to the causal power of each level over its embedded actors.  
31 This causal power is reflected in the way the emergent, governing institutional arrangements  
32 of each frame shape the behaviors and practices of embedded actors (Taillard et al., 2016).  
33 Brand meaning is also an emergent property generated by the interactions performed by actors  
34 (as reflected in the horizontal double-headed arrows in Figure 1). Hence, while each frame is a  
35 product of interacting individuals, each frame also shapes and guides the behavior, actions, and  
36 practices of embedded actors (Baker and Nenonen, 2020). These upward and downward causal  
37 powers that exist at each level are depicted by the vertical double headed arrows in Figure 2.  
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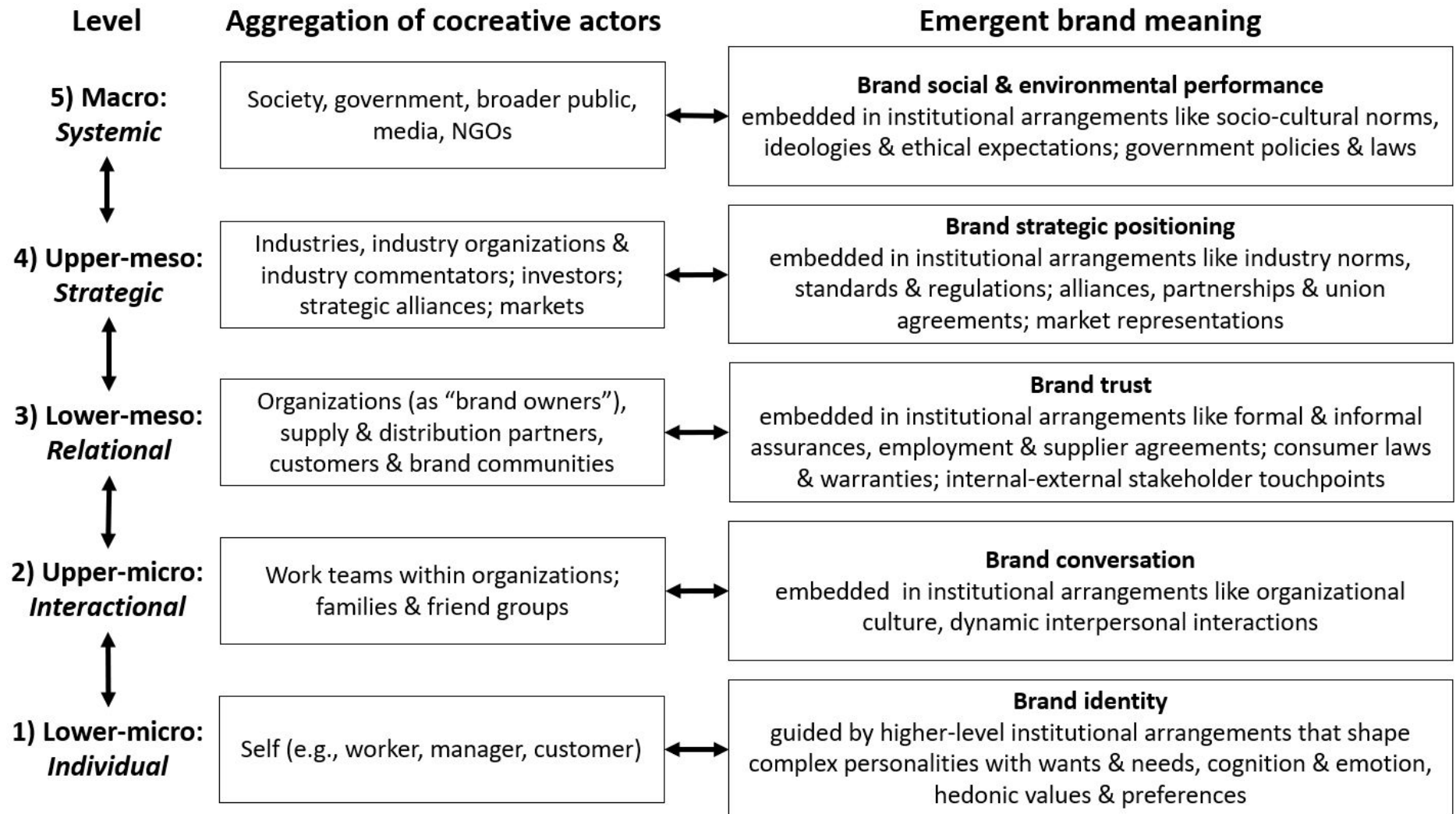


Figure 1: Multi-level process framework of brand meaning emergence within nested service ecosystems (adapted from Sawyer, 2005)

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3           Within and between each level, both brand owners and other stakeholders perform  
4 critical roles in branding processes and the cocreation of shared brand meaning. We argue, if a  
5 brand owner achieves congruence between value propositions and brand behavior enacted  
6 within each level and between different levels, shared brand meaning will manifest.  
7 Importantly, *complete congruence in brand meaning is an ideal state and might never be fully*  
8 *achieved* since value propositions of actors change over time (Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Hence,  
9 incongruence – because of misaligned value propositions – drives change in brand meaning  
10 and allows brands to evolve. At the same time, misaligned value propositions cause tensions  
11 and increase pressures within and between nested levels of service ecosystems. Organizations  
12 that are 1) aware of increasing pressures building up in their brand’s service ecosystem, and 2)  
13 prepared to relieve such pressures by (re-)aligning their value propositions and behavior,  
14 cocreate more meaningful and resilient brands that are considerably less prone to external  
15 disturbances and reputational risk. Finally, shared meaning paves the way for a coherent  
16 articulation of brand purpose – a critical success factor in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hajdas and Kłeczek,  
17 2021) – and how transformative branding (Spry *et al.*, 2021) might be accomplished in practice.

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19           In the remainder of this section, we discuss congruence within and between a brand’s  
20 five nested service ecosystem layers. Drawing on academic and media articles, brand strategies  
21 will be illustrated with examples of firms such as Patagonia that closely and continuously align  
22 their value propositions with those of their stakeholders at all levels. We further refer to  
23 examples of companies that demonstrate incongruence between their value propositions and  
24 behavior, and those of their stakeholders. We will show how these incongruences create  
25 pressures that, if not relieved, lead to distortions in brand meaning (e.g., through scandals,  
26 negative press, or financial penalties).  
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## **(Re)alignment processes to influence the emergence of brand meaning**

### *Level 1: Individual-brand congruence (lower-micro level)*

The *individual* level comprises *individual* actors' complex personalities with wants, needs, values, and preferences, guided by higher level institutional arrangements (Figure 1). At the *individual* level, complex identity processes unfold that compare one's *self-identity with the identity or 'persona' of the brand*. These processes manifest in both external stakeholders (e.g., customers) as well as internal stakeholders (e.g., workers and managers).

Managers have long used organizational values as recruiting and publicity tools (Braddy, Meade, and Kroustalis, 2006). Congruence between the value proposition of an employee (based on their self-identity) and the value proposition of an organization positively impacts employee satisfaction and organizational performance (e.g., Finegan, 2000; Fitzgerald and Desjardins, 2004) by delivering benefits like reduced turnover and increased commitment (Johnson and Jackson, 2009). Employees that value achievement, honesty, and fairness are more likely to be attracted to brands that demonstrate these values (Judge and Bretz, 1992), while brands that focus on corporate responsibility enjoy a competitive advantage in the quality of staff they attract (Turban and Greening, 1997).

Customers were traditionally drawn to brands based on price, quality, and speed. But today, experience, affective qualities, and public good are additionally critical (Lee, Olson, and Trimi, 2012). At this level, individuals are drawn to brands that personally 'resonate;' that enable them to express and communicate themselves (Fournier *et al.*, 2008). The more brands enable a sense of self-identity, self-efficacy, and belongingness in individuals, the more likely those individuals will experience a sense of ownership and enact behaviors like loyalty, trust, and generation of positive word-of-mouth (WOM; Baker, Kearney, Laud, and Holmlund, 2021).

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3 The US outdoor clothing brand and B-Corporation, Patagonia, is an example of a firm  
4 that has a strong emphasis on people – both customers and employees (Grewal, Roggeveen,  
5 Sisodia and Nordfält, 2017). Employees of all levels benefit from profit-sharing, can have paid  
6 time off for environmental projects, and enjoy comprehensive healthcare coverage. For  
7 conscious consumers, Patagonia’s core values, which include causing no unnecessary harm  
8 and building the best product, are critical. Inversely, brands that purport to offer a particular  
9 value proposition but demonstrate conflicting behavior attract criticism (Lawrence and  
10 Lawrence, 2009). Amazon, the giant US e-commerce and technology firm, calls itself “Earth’s  
11 best employer.” Yet, it has a reputation for relentless working practices leading to employees  
12 having to urinate in plastic bottles rather than having breaks (BBC, 2021a). This incongruence  
13 on the lower-micro level of Amazon’s service ecosystem builds up tensions between what the  
14 brand proposes and its actual behavior that over time – as we will explain next – ripples through  
15 to the upper-micro, meso- and macro-levels. Hence, managers are encouraged to ensure their  
16 brand’s value proposition is congruent with working practices, life values, and aspirations of  
17 both workers and customers.  
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#### 40 *Level 2: Interaction-brand congruence (upper-micro-level)*

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42 The *interactional* level features the smallest service ecosystem (Maglio & Spohrer, 2008),  
43 encompassing interactions within an organization (e.g., work teams) or within families and  
44 friend groups. A focus on this level enables a view of groups with ‘thinner bonds’ (O’Guinn *et*  
45 *al.*, 2018) than those present in, for example, formalized brand communities, NGOs, or media  
46 organizations. Interactions at this level transmit brand meaning through conversations and  
47 information exchange, which frequently manifests as positive or negative WOM.  
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56 Personal interactions are enormously influential in stimulating subjective emotional  
57 responses toward a brand (Tierney *et al.*, 2016). For example, when choosing healthcare  
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3 providers in the US, customer decisions are predominantly guided by WOM from friends and  
4 relatives rather than price or quality information (Tu and Lauer, 2008). Congruence at this  
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6 *interactional* level, reflected in positive WOM, influences *individual* level value propositions  
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8 (e.g., which brands are deemed desirable by individuals).  
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11  
12 Equally important is shared brand meaning amongst employees, who populate a firm's  
13 'internal market,' due to the critical role of employees in "influencing how the external market  
14 makes sense of the brand" (Dean *et al.*, 2016, p.3042). Shared brand meaning at this level  
15 emerges from social interactions between management and workers, and exposure to internal  
16 communications. Initiatives such as access to healthcare and positively influencing employee  
17 attitudes and emotions around health and well-being (Aksoy *et al.*, 2020) generates work team  
18 success, reduced stress, and increased well-being (Brown and Trevino, 2006; Hewlin, Dumas  
19 and Burnett, 2017). Hence, organizational culture and working practices are a key determinant  
20 in the cocreation of brand meaning within the firm.  
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23  
24 Trader Joe's, the large US grocery chain that focuses on selling environmentally  
25 friendly products, demonstrates engaged employees lead to delighted customers (Heskett,  
26 Sasser and Schlesinger, 1997). The chain creates work environments that reward employees  
27 for performance and knowledge growth. Patagonia empowers staff to make transparent,  
28 democratic decisions and apply equal consideration to quality, products, and the environment  
29 (O'Rourke and Strand, 2017). In contrast, in 2021 Amazon worked hard to prevent  
30 unionization of one of its warehouses in Alabama. It used fake Twitter accounts to argue against  
31 unionization (BBC, 2021b), launched an anti-union website, and engaged in one-on-one and  
32 group conversations with workers to spread anti-union views (O'Brien, 2021). This behavior  
33 conflicts strongly with the value proposition the firm presents to its workers ("Earth's best  
34 employer"), thereby increasing tensions and generating reputational risk for the brand  
35 (Fleming, 2021).  
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6 *Level 3: Congruence in brand-network relationships (lower-meso-level)*

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8 The lower-meso *relational* level features exchanges and interactions between brand owners  
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10 and primary external stakeholders both forward and backward in the value chain (e.g., suppliers  
11 and distributors) plus customers (e.g., in-store or on digital channels) (Brodie *et al.*, 2006).  
12  
13 Within business-to-business (B2B) partnerships, congruence involves shared goals, values, and  
14 aligned behaviors, which increases trust and creates mutual value for all stakeholders (He,  
15 Huang, and Wu, 2018). Congruence is embedded in mutually beneficial agreements and  
16 trustworthy working practices. Patagonia promotes transparency in its supplier relationships  
17 and works in close partnership with like-minded suppliers (O'Rourke and Strand, 2017;  
18 Patagonia, 2021a). This approach includes a joint code of conduct with strict policies  
19 addressing forced labor, discrimination, overtime payments and hours of work, health and  
20 safety, and animal welfare.  
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33 Interactions with customers as primary external stakeholders are critical at this level.  
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35 The rise of online conversations (e.g., brand fan groups) and the impact of influencers means  
36 brand managers can struggle to maintain control of brand meaning and experiences  
37 (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). Hence, opportunities to ensure congruence when managers do have  
38 control are becoming increasingly important, e.g., in brand-provided online communities. At  
39 this level, family (or umbrella) brands (those used in multiple product categories, e.g., ESPN)  
40 and individual brands (that occupy one product category, e.g., ESPN online) (Keller, 2013),  
41 market segmentation models, and brand-customer communications are key for reflecting  
42 congruence (Brodie *et al.*, 2006).  
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54 Again referring to the Patagonia brand, a core strategic advantage arises from its  
55 communications with customers and brand fans about its sustainability initiatives (Rattalino,  
56 2017). Patagonia's "Don't buy this jacket" campaign in 2011 discouraged customers from  
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unnecessarily purchasing replacement clothing. The campaign was part of its broader “Common Threads Initiative,” which involved assisting customers in reselling used Patagonia-branded clothing to one another.

Managers must be cognizant that brand meaning at the *relational* level is cocreated through authentic and sustained relationships at touchpoints between external and internal stakeholders. Customers rarely engage in brand cocreation alone, hence, brand meaning cocreation involving both internal and external actors are critical (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, and Knox, 2009). To grow and sustain long-term B2B relationships, brands must be trustworthy and reciprocal towards like-minded organizations (Dyer and Singh, 1998). Alignment of stakeholder value propositions creates brand trust (Brodie *et al.*, 2009), which then bleeds down to the *interactional* level (e.g., as WOM), while also influencing the upper ecosystem levels (e.g., the brand’s strategic positioning), discussed next.

#### *Level 4: Strategic (upper-meso-level) congruence related to brand positioning*

The *strategic* level of brand meaning involves the positioning of corporate and family brands (Brexendorf and Keller, 2017; Keller, 2013) within industries and markets, embedded in institutional arrangements like industry standards and norms, strategic alliances, and collective bargaining agreements.

Strategic alliances are enormously dependent on both shared values and trustworthy behavior, which deliver benefits such as increased innovation and entrepreneurial behavior (Antoncic and Prodan, 2008; Spekman *et al.*, 1996). Through collective effort, industry members behave strategically to protect their own interests and those of the industry. However, these collective efforts can undermine brand trust. In 2015, it was revealed that Volkswagen had been deliberately installing software (called defeat devices) in their diesel-powered cars to avoid emissions standards, leading to the so-called ‘Dieselgate’ scandal (Jolly, 2021). Although

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3 the scandal was originally thought to just involve Volkswagen, it involved collusion with  
4  
5 BMW and Daimler (owner of the Mercedes-Benz brand). Despite claiming their diesel engines  
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7 reduced dangerous emissions, the three carmakers intentionally engaged in collaborative  
8  
9 deception – behavior wildly incongruent with their value propositions of state-of-the-art  
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11 environmentally friendly vehicles.  
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15 In contrast, the Sustainable Apparel Coalition is a non-profit alliance whose members  
16  
17 collectively produce about a third of all footwear and clothing sold in the world (Patagonia,  
18  
19 2021b). The Coalition includes apparel, footwear, and textile brands, universities, trade  
20  
21 associations, and suppliers to the apparel industry. The Coalition developed the Higgs Index,  
22  
23 “a suite of tools that standardizes value chain sustainability measurements” (Sustainable  
24  
25 Apparel Coalition, 2021, para. 2). In so doing, the Coalition is 1) responding to the swaths of  
26  
27 fashion consumers who demand greater sustainability, and 2) delivering to its vision “of a  
28  
29 global consumer goods industry that gives more than it takes” (ibid., para.3).  
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32  
33 For managers, beyond abiding by industry standards and expectations, strong alignment  
34  
35 between the value propositions of alliance partners builds relationships characterized by high  
36  
37 levels of trust, innovation, and shared value creation in the long-term. Congruence between  
38  
39 value propositions and brand behavior cements a brand’s positioning within its market.  
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#### 42 43 44 *Level 5: Systemic (macro-level) congruence with socio-cultural-ethical expectations*

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46 Finally, at *the systemic* level, brands provide symbolic meaning and generate value for society  
47  
48 and the broader environment (Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015). Here, a brand’s social and legal  
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50 right to operate is determined (Carroll, 1991) by actors including regulators and NGOs, and  
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52 various ‘cultural arbiters’ like media organizations (Fournier *et al.*, 2008). By extension, brand  
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54 meaning is embedded in institutional arrangements like societal ethical expectations, socio-  
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56 cultural norms, and government laws and policies.  
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3 At this level, managers determine whether brands should resonate, reflect, and reinforce  
4 socio-cultural paradigms, or alternatively, deliberately challenge or reshape them (Fournier *et*  
5 *al.*, 2008; Holt, 2012). As previously mentioned, Patagonia encouraged customers to not buy  
6 their clothes. While somewhat counter-intuitive as a branding strategy, this innovative  
7 approach was congruent with the Zeitgeist of affluent conscious customers (thereby generating  
8 increased sales), and a broader movement toward sustainable business practices. Alternatively,  
9 cultural branding strategies can leverage counter-cultural ideologies or marginalized  
10 communities to innovate institutionalized socio-cultural norms (Holt, 2012). The iconic  
11 American brand, Jeep, has begun to attract criticism for its continued use of Native American  
12 names on its vehicles, labeled as exploitative and kitsch (Lee, 2021). However, such criticism  
13 might be an example of the kind of ‘wokeness’ the Jeep brand, its buyers, and wider  
14 stakeholders do not identify with. By continuing to label its vehicles in the same way, it could  
15 be argued that Jeep is demonstrating continued congruence between its brand meaning and its  
16 stakeholders’ sensibilities.

17  
18 From a legal perspective, brands must demonstrate behaviors congruent with regulators  
19 that enforce community interests, as reflected in the significant penalties imposed on  
20 Volkswagen and BMW for the Dieseltgate scandal (Jolly, 2021). Congruence between a brand’s  
21 value proposition and social and legal expectations is essential as it 1) mitigates risks associated  
22 with interference and penalties, 2) reduces tensions related to increasing public pressure for  
23 social and environmental responsibility, and 3) enables cocreation of a brand meaning accepted  
24 by regulators and communities – either broad social groups or key subgroups. Importantly,  
25 greenwashing – disingenuous communications about environmental performance – should be  
26 avoided as it is particularly destructive to brand reputation (Guo *et al.*, 2017), hence,  
27 authenticity is key.

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3           Secondary, peripheral stakeholder groups become critical at the *systemic* level (e.g.,  
4 environmental groups, ethical and fair-trade proponents, and media representations of brands).  
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6 For example, a Greenpeace report in 2012 about environmentally unsound waterproofing used  
7  
8 on Patagonia's jackets immediately put severe pressure on the brand (O'Rourke and Strand,  
9  
10 2017). A petroleum-based repellent provided Patagonia's products with the most durable finish  
11  
12 (satisfying its value proposition of providing the best products). But the toxicity of the repellent  
13  
14 directly contradicted the brand's value proposition of doing no harm. In response, Patagonia  
15  
16 invested in a textile start-up, Beyond Surface Technologies (BST), that was taking innovative  
17  
18 approaches to waterproofing. Together, BST and Patagonia engaged in co-innovation projects  
19  
20 involving universities and museums focused on biomimicry to create a non-chemical solution.  
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22 In so doing, the company relieved pressure on the brand through re-establishing congruence.  
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28           At this level, strategic leaders must be openminded about their brands, brand  
29  
30 responsibility, and changing ideologies and norms. Managers wanting to promote pro-social  
31  
32 value propositions can embed the seventeen UN Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., good  
33  
34 health and wellbeing, responsible production, decent work, and improved industry) throughout  
35  
36 all five nested ecosystem levels. When managers proactively ensure value propositions, brand  
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38 behavior, and societal ethical expectations are closely aligned, regulatory interference,  
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40 penalties, and accusations of greenwashing are reduced enormously.  
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## 48 **Implications**

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50 This paper set about to extend contemporary approaches to branding that recognize the  
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52 importance of networks and ecosystems in the cocreation of brand meaning (e.g., Conejo and  
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54 Wooliscroft, 2015). We offer novel insights into the intersection of branding, consumers,  
55  
56 stakeholder groups, and society. Integrating social emergence (Sawyer, 2005) with the service  
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58 ecosystem perspective (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; 2016) provides a holistic framework for brand  
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3 meaning cocreation processes that unfold through five different levels of nested systems: 1)  
4 *individual* and 2) *interactional* at micro-level; 3) *relational* and 4) *strategic* at meso-level; and  
5  
6 5) *systemic* at macro-level. Our research expands on the conceptualization by Sarasvuo *et al.*  
7  
8 (2022) of the mutual outcomes shared by marketers and stakeholders that lead to cocreating  
9  
10 brand meaning.  
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15 These systems feature guiding institutional arrangements that are generated by  
16  
17 embedded actors while jointly organizing cocreation processes within. Actors embedded at  
18  
19 each level have upward causal powers over (re)configuring the institutional arrangements at  
20  
21 each level, while those same institutional arrangements shape and govern actor behavior and  
22  
23 brand meaning cocreation processes. Thus, brand meaning emerges at these different levels  
24  
25 through an interdependent, dynamic process. As reflected in Figure 1, brand identity is  
26  
27 embedded in the complex personalities of individuals who wish to project a desired self, while  
28  
29 brand conversations are embedded in institutional arrangements like dynamic interactions and  
30  
31 organizational culture, and WOM within work teams, friend groups and families. Brand trust  
32  
33 is embedded in the relational exchanges between brands and their customers, suppliers,  
34  
35 distributors, and other close B2B partners. Within markets and industries, brand positioning  
36  
37 unfolds in relation to others in the market, embedded in institutional arrangements that include  
38  
39 industry standards, agreements, and alliances. Finally, a brand's social and environmental  
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41 performance is judged in relation to institutional arrangements that include social and ethical  
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43 norms, expectations, and regulations.  
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50 At different levels – and between different levels – incongruence between brands' value  
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52 propositions and behavior, and the value propositions of other actors, manifests as tension and  
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54 cognitive dissonance. These tensions deliver conflicted brand meaning within actor groups and  
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56 risks of reputational damage and regulatory interference. To relieve such pressure, brands need  
57  
58 to continuously align their value propositions and behaviors with those of their immediate and  
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3 peripheral stakeholders on all levels of the ecosystem. Importantly, these alignment activities  
4  
5 can be directed through the institutional arrangements present at each level. For example,  
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7 achieving alignment in goals, objectives, practices, and contracts will positively impact brand  
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9 meaning cocreation processes involving workers, managers, business partners, and strategic  
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11 alliance members. Such congruence enables greater managerial control of brand meaning  
12  
13 cocreation (Swaminithan *et al.*, 2020), leading to the emergence of more culturally significant  
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15 brands (Holt, 2012) and the potential to engage in truly transformative branding (Spry *et al.*,  
16  
17 2021).  
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21  
22 Patagonia provides a coherent exemplar. Patagonia expresses a corporate-level value  
23  
24 proposition of doing no harm (Level 5) and building the best product (Level 3). However, the  
25  
26 brand came under pressure from an environmental group in relation to the damage caused by  
27  
28 waterproofing treatments (Level 5). In response, the start-up textile firm, BST, accepted  
29  
30 Patagonia's investment offer and the two enjoyed a favorable joint working relationship based  
31  
32 on trust and transparency (Level 3). The two firms had similar approaches to innovation,  
33  
34 employee involvement and the importance of work teams (Level 2). In responding to the  
35  
36 pressure applied by the environmental group, Patagonia could protect its market and brand-fan  
37  
38 relationships (Level 4). It also continued to fulfill employee expectations of the brand, while  
39  
40 enabling conscious consumers the opportunity to reflect their own self-identity through  
41  
42 wearing Patagonia branded clothing (Level 1).  
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#### 49 *For practitioners*

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51 Practitioners interested in shifting their branding strategy from *managing a service brand* to  
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53 *navigating the emergence of brand meaning in service ecosystems* should focus on: (1) sensing  
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55 and seizing pressures in the different levels of their brand's ecosystem, (2) relieving such  
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57 pressures by reducing incongruence in value propositions and behaviors on all levels, and (3)  
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3 reinforcing congruent brand meaning creation across the brand's service ecosystem. That is,  
4 brand managers and strategic leaders must incorporate congruence as a key strategic  
5 imperative, and branding processes must look past just customers and markets. A focus on  
6 congruence between institutionalized processes like partnerships, organizational culture, and  
7 agreements, partnered with congruence between value propositions and those of other actors,  
8 will contribute considerably to greater control of brand meaning cocreation.  
9

10  
11 For example, being responsive to evolving societal ethical expectations reduces risks  
12 associated with regulatory interference, penalties, and accusations of greenwashing. Building  
13 reciprocal, trustworthy B2B partnerships and strategic alliances requires congruence in value  
14 propositions, goals, and objectives. Both employees and customers generate positive WOM  
15 through rewarding experiences congruent with brand value propositions and, for workers, a  
16 positive organizational culture. In adopting congruence as an imperative, brand strategists will  
17 ultimately deliver more value and impact. This requires active listening to the close and more  
18 distant stakeholder network. Social listening (following and moderating social media) and  
19 listening to employees and close B2B partners are critical. However, equally important is to  
20 sense trends beyond the immediate network, industry, and market.  
21  
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23  
24 Reducing incongruence requires an agile structure to act swiftly and quickly when  
25 required. Brands embedded in a strong network of trusted relationships can more quickly  
26 access the necessary resources to balance out incongruences and reinforce congruent brand  
27 meaning creation. More generally, as illustrated with the Patagonia case, healthy and  
28 sustainable brands are based on a balanced approach of ensuring economic viability, while also  
29 ensuring social responsibility and environmental stewardship.  
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## Suggestions for future research

Importantly, our framework reflects the inherently dynamic process of cocreating brand meaning through interactions between actors on different ecosystem levels. Actors are involved in ongoing processes of making and responding to their own and others' value propositions. Hence, a multi-level systemic perspective provides an alternative way to think about strategic brand positioning. Aligned with work on branding that draws on an ecosystem perspective (Giannopoulos *et al.*, 2020; Conejo and Wooliscroft, 2015; Tierney *et al.*, 2016), we propose that brand positioning is not entirely a firm-centric task. Instead, it is a continuous process of negotiating value propositions and aligning behaviors and beliefs among broad sets of actors. Future research may want to explore these dynamic interplays between value propositions and behaviors on various levels of nested ecosystems in greater detail, and the role that brand managers must play in activating and enabling these interplays. Further, misalignment in value propositions and behaviors, and subsequent conflict and tensions, provide an interesting area for future research.

As emphasized by Hajdas and Kłeczek (2021) there is relatively little academic research on purpose-driven branding. Despite significant practitioner interest in brand purpose, scholarly research has lagged, resulting in a limited understanding of the concept (Alegre *et al.*, 2017, Khalifa 2012). While previous branding literature has focused on the brand mission (Alegre *et al.*, 2017; Campbell and Yeung, 1991; Khalifa 2012), core values (Yoganathan *et al.*, 2018; Urde, 2016), and brand meaning (Batra 2019; Fournier and Alvarez 2019; Holt 2004), these concepts relate largely to identity and communication issues and their outcomes. The mechanisms of transforming brand meaning are less understood. This paper offers a framework to explore change and transition processes toward purpose-driven branding by implementing congruence at individual, interactional, relational, strategic, and societal levels. Swaminathan *et al.* (2020, p. 16) argue that brands can act as “vehicles for bringing about social

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2  
3 change” and call for research to understand how social change can be fueled through branding.  
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5 Our framework offers guidance for future research that studies these change processes and  
6  
7 potentially identifies constellations of internal, external, and multi-level value propositions that  
8  
9 comprehensively shape brand meaning.  
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12 This research promotes a service ecosystems perspective of branding that explains 1)  
13  
14 how brands generate social norms and beliefs that guide actors’ resource integration processes,  
15  
16 and 2) how brands are shaped by these very same actors (Vargo and Lusch, 2016; Conejo and  
17  
18 Wooliscroft, 2015). As Vink *et al.* (2020) highlight, the service ecosystem perspective not only  
19  
20 provides a systemic and holistic understanding of value cocreation, it also offers important  
21  
22 insights into how actors influence value cocreation processes by reconfiguring institutional  
23  
24 arrangements that govern and organize them (Vargo, Wieland, and Akaka, 2015). We offer a  
25  
26 more fine-grained explanation for how such shaping processes unfold through (in)congruence  
27  
28 of value propositions and behaviors. Like natural ecosystems, service ecosystems exhibit  
29  
30 emergent properties (Taillard *et al.*, 2016) that are beyond the control of any individual actor.  
31  
32 Our framework accounts for the nexus between the shaping and emergence of brand meaning  
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34 by pointing toward the importance of continuous alignment processes. Future research could  
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36 explore how such alignment processes can be facilitated. More generally, we encourage  
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38 scholars to develop further strategic branding frameworks, models, and methodologies that  
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40 account for systemic complexity and the quality of emergence.  
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47 Finally, following a systemic and institutional logic of branding means technologies  
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49 and technological development cannot be ignored when discussing the emergence of brand  
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51 meaning. Taking the proposed multi-actor perspective to the extreme entails conceptualizing  
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53 technologies as actors (e.g., Storbacka *et al.*, 2016). Hence, technologies also deliver value  
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55 propositions, including digital and social media platforms, artificial intelligence, smart devices,  
56  
57 and more. As evidenced by the growing literature on social media brand engagement (e.g.,  
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3 Dolan *et al.*, 2019; Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie, 2014; Chahal, Wirtz, and Verma, 2020),  
4  
5 such platforms significantly influence the trajectory of brand meaning on the strategic and  
6  
7 systemic level. New service encounters with humanoid bots and advanced self-service  
8  
9 processes influence brand meaning on the individual and interaction level. Blockchain  
10  
11 technology lays the foundation for new decentralized brand systems to form with no central  
12  
13 actor facilitating brand meaning development. As summarized in Table 2, numerous  
14  
15 contemporary phenomena make for interesting future research possibilities. For instance, how  
16  
17 does brand meaning evolve depending on the degree of decentralization of a service ecosystem;  
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19 and how do digital technologies influence the alignment or misalignment of value propositions  
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21 and brand meaning?  
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Table 1: Future research

Research themes	Research questions
<b>Research theme 1:</b> Dynamic interplay of value propositions and brand meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How do value propositions manifest in brand meanings and vice versa? How do brand meanings influence value propositions?</li> <li>▪ What facilitates and potentially accelerates the alignment process of value propositions and shared brand meaning creation?</li> <li>▪ How can misalignment and alignment processes be balanced to allow for change and stability in brand meaning?</li> <li>▪ How can evolving incongruent value propositions be traced and used as triggers for change?</li> </ul>
<b>Research theme 2:</b> Value proposition constellations that shape brand meaning with social purpose and environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How can social change be fueled through branding?</li> <li>▪ How can constellations or patterns of value propositions be identified on various system levels that strengthen/weaken brand meaning with a social purpose?</li> <li>▪ What are complementing, reinforcing and/or conflicting value propositions for shaping meaningful brands with a social purpose?</li> <li>▪ How can conflicts be solved between the goals and objectives of various value proposition-adopting actors?</li> </ul>
<b>Research theme 3:</b> The nexus between shaping and emergence of brand meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How can branding theory and strategic branding frameworks be further advanced to account for emergence?</li> <li>▪ How can focal actors (e.g., firms) create branding processes that account for/encourage/recognize emergence?</li> <li>▪ How can branding strategies be created that deliver congruence of value propositions between actors at different systemic levels?</li> <li>▪ What methodologies are best suited to explore the emergence of brand meaning from a systemic perspective?</li> </ul>
<b>Research theme 4:</b> Role of technology and digital platforms in enabling brand meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How do the value propositions of technologies unfold?</li> <li>▪ How can branding theory and strategic branding frameworks be further advanced to account for technology as actors?</li> <li>▪ How do digital technologies influence the (in)congruence of value propositions and subsequent brand meaning?</li> <li>▪ How does brand meaning evolve depending on the degree of decentralization of a service ecosystem?</li> </ul>

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