

4.4: Virtuous Brand Machines: A Theoretical Exploration

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Keywords: Brand virtues, Brand machines, Virtuous machines.

Extended Abstract:

In the current era, artificial intelligence (AI) performs numerous tasks without human supervision. Firms utilise AI to automate customer communication to respond to their favour (e.g. repeat purchase; positive eWOM). This programmatic branding is efficient in achieving marketing outcomes like improved brand equity and market share. However, firms may be confronted with moral issues when the algorithms behind the automation fail to factor in the ethical standard of the marketplace. Human intervention is essential to teach brand machines to behave according to human morals. The integration between AI and ethical branding is undeveloped in the literature despite the increasing number of AI-activated brands. Consequently, this paper explores the recent development of AI and its application in corporate branding by applying virtue ethics, business ethics, and human-like brand theory as an initial theoretical framework to introduce the concept of virtuous brand machines.

Keywords: Brand virtues, Brand machines, Virtuous machines.

Introduction and Research Aim

Firms use branding to instil human-like traits in their product and services as unique characteristics for different reasons (Woods, 2020). For instance, create brand attachment (Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009), integrate with a specific segment, interacting with a multi-national market, or gain a favourable perception (Chun, 2019). Customers also adopt a brand's personality to express their self-image to peers (Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2017). The self-image is moderated by our moral code of conduct to make them socially acceptable (Whetstone, 2001). Likewise, branding needs to follow moral practices when shaping perceptions and positions in the marketplace (Chun, 2005). Moral branding, therefore, needs to be implemented at an external and internal level to be consistent (Morsing, 2006; Solomon, 1992b).

The other end of morals is virtues (Solomon, 1992a). For example, consider the virtue of generosity; if brands do acts of giving, people may call them generous. Brands that portray themselves by this virtue need to consistently perform acts of giving to be seen as a generous brand. Therefore, adopting a virtuous position is not about being right and wrong or good and evil. Instead, it is being consistent in all aspects of the business with regard to the virtue. Thus, branding by virtue is multidimensional and comprises interactions with various stakeholders (Chun, 2005).

Brands use technology to communicate their human-like traits. Broadcasting these traits is driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI) to maximise the benefit for the brand (Carah, 2017). These AI agents have the ability to enforce beliefs on consumers (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016) for persuasive and effective reach (McStay, 2017). As yet, AI-branding is significantly impacted by the bias of brand, developer and data (McStay, 2017). Consequent to the proprietary nature of the algorithm, any violation of ethicality remains hidden from the public eyes and knowledge. Thus, the current approach teaches these brand AI-machines human morals (Awad et al., 2018; Ibrahim, Parackal, Mather, & Hansen, 2021; Rahwan et al., 2019) and virtues (Berberich & Diepold, 2018; Govindarajulu, Bringsjord, Ghosh, & Sarathy, 2019) to enhance their autonomous decision making according to human morals. Regardless of the growing interest in ethical branding and the current application of virtuous AI agents, no study has adopted incorporating algorithmic brands and virtues empowered AI agents to

Therefore, the study aim is:

To conceptualise virtuous brand machines (VBM) as a novel concept to improve the ethicality of AI-based marketing.

The research attempts to investigate the following question:

RQ1: How can AI-based branding ensure sustaining the brand's perceived virtue?

Background and Conceptual Model

The task of creating and maintaining a global brand that values people's diversity is incredibly challenging for marketers (Gringarten & Fernández-Calienes, 2019). This is primarily because of the variations in the moral standards between members of society (Chun, 2019). The earlier theories related to business ethics focused on two main approaches, namely Kantian and Utilitarian. These approaches provided a framework for doing business based on wrong and right ethical practices. According to Kantian philosophy, a firm is expected to follow the universal moral code such as 'do not lie' or 'do not steal' (Darwall, 2006; L'etang, 1992).

On the other hand, the Utilitarian approach by Friedman (2002) suggests that the social responsibility for brands is to be lucrative, provided they comply with the competition rules. A firm's practices are acceptable and provide more good than harm (Minow, 1996). The two approaches are criticised as impractical, as they have provided a general ethical consideration to all situations with the same moral principle (Solomon, 1992b). They have also failed to answer a question like "why should a firm be ethical?" (Hosmer, 1994; Solomon, 1992a). Consequent to the criticism, scholars shifted to the moral trait's brands should have "what kind of organisation should we be?" (Solomon, 1999; Whetstone, 2001).

Understanding the nature of the moral traits perhaps could guide to propose a virtuous branding framework. As virtues lead brands to behaviours that people admire (Whetstone, 2001) and morally valued principles (Ciulla, 2007). Brands with authentic virtuous personalities will always insist on operating distinctively according to particular beliefs and morals regardless of any transitory challenges (Azgad-Tromer, 2016).

Virtue is defined as "a trait of character that is socially valued and moral virtue is a trait that is morally valued" (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994, p. 64). Setting an operational definition of virtue that can offer a satisfactory guideline to be utilised in the business is challenging (Solomon, 1992a). Thus, the attention to moral character is towards the traits more than certain actions. In this case, virtue refers to the personality traits that determine whether to accept or decline to participate in actions according to certain moral considerations (Williams, 2006). Delineating a virtue as a moral character enables the virtue ethics theory to have a significant role in applying business ethics, which provides a foundation for brand virtues (Moberg, 1999).

A virtuous person regularly shows personality qualities that comply with moral codes such as honest, reliable, fair, and trustworthy (Paine, 1991). Therefore, the characterisation resemblance can be suggested to be associated with brands. Chun (2005) assumed that individual virtues originated from an individual's personality traits. Accordingly, a corporate virtue can be established and defined by measuring corporate personality. As corporate personalities are collective characters that involve virtues in return (Hartman, 1998). Therefore, virtues are moral traits that have been developed from progressive experience that represent corporate/brand behaviour through daily activities (Chismar, 2001). This impedes the proclamation that virtue ethics is associated with 'being', which is in greater status than the 'doing' as rationalised in the Kantian and Utilitarian approaches.

Brands tend to express their virtuous orientation in their ethical statements as a marketing tool for communication with customers (Ferrero & Sison, 2014). However, this communication is not only limited to the psychological side but also includes a technological side (Carah, 2017). Brands have been empowered by machines for more effective communication and influence consumer behaviour

(Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016). Machines here refer to any brand's AI-enabled platform that aids the brand in branding activities (Belk, 2019).

At the current stage, the increasing cognitive ability of machines exhibits an undeniable degree of autonomy. Each of these machines' cognitive decision takes falls into the human moral and ethical sphere. With the current challenge, these actions cannot be justified by the developers or users. This highlights that these moral agents need fundamental theories to rely on when necessary to make a self-governing decision (Rahwan et al., 2019). Giving the rapid development has made these autogenous machines significantly more capable than humans (Berberich & Diepold, 2018). Therefore, human intervention is necessary to teach and socially engineer these machines to behave according to human morals (Awad et al., 2018; Ibrahim et al., 2021).

On the other hand, human morals are evolving by the changes of society and culture. Subsequently, teaching the machines the fundamental list of morals will not be adequate to keep pace with these alterations (Bauer, 2018). A more effective approach to adopt is teaching the autonomous ethical agents about the core virtues, e.g. generous, honest (Howard & Muntean, 2017). This would ensure that moral machines behave morally with the changes in situations, behaviours, and cultures (Howard & Muntean, 2016). Moreover, virtues have remained stable more than morals, as we can see throughout history (Allen & Wallach, 2012).

Therefore, considering the paper's theoretical argument. Figure (1) illustrates the Virtuous Brand Machines conceptual Model (VBMM).

Therefore, the research proposes the following propositions:

Assumption 1: An AI-amplified branding can be enhanced by incorporating virtuous AI agents.

Assumption 2: Virtuous brand machines can improve the perceived brand virtue.

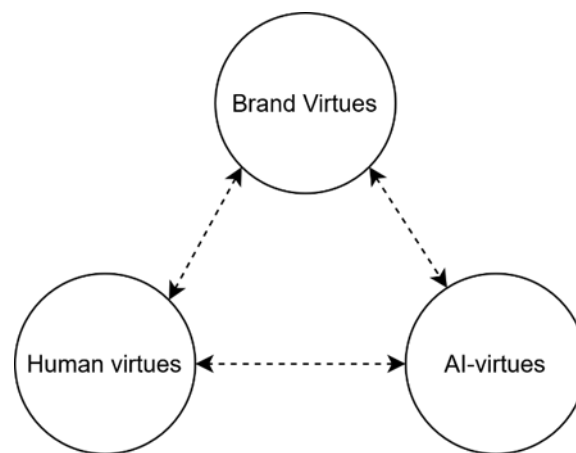


Figure 1 Virtuous Brand Machines Model (VBMM)

Implications for Theory and Practice

The paper aims to provide a theoretical contribution by exploring an innovative concept to contribute to the brand virtues literature investigated previously by (Chun, 2005, 2019), and adopt the integration between virtue ethics theory and business ethics theory (Whetstone, 2001). Throughout proposing a complex concept that aims to advance the brand machine concept (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2016; Carah, 2017) by integrating virtuous machines (Berberich & Diepold, 2018; Govindarajulu et al., 2019) as an opportunity to enhance ethical branding activities. Branding research has been focused on AI privacy or addressing the influence of AI on marketing in a broader term (Ma & Sun, 2020). While there is a noticeable increase of the interest from AI experts to equip machines with virtues as a comprehensive understanding of the human's cognitive system (Allen & Wallach, 2012; Berberich & Diepold, 2018). Moreover, the increase of the customer's awareness has

necessitated the brand to perform according to the community manners. Therefore, this study provides conceptual evidence that AI moral agents can enhance the brand's perceived virtue.

Furthermore, the paper contributes on the managerial level. Firstly, the AI active brand managers by providing a modern concept to improve ethical branding based on virtuous machines instead of illogical 'algorithmic' branding. Secondly, to AI experts, to contribute to the general experiments of enhancing the machine's cognitive processing and autonomous decisions.

This paper only focused on providing a conceptual contribution to brand virtue literature. Forthcoming studies could adopt empirical studies regarding consumer perceptions about the AI amplified brand virtues. Further studies may study the effect of AI-enhanced virtue on brand trust, perception, and personality. Interviews with AI experts, ethicists, and marketers will possibly enhance the understanding of opportunities and limitations to develop such a proposition. Providing

an extended study investigating the privacy and regulatory aspects would participate in generalising the virtuous brand machines concept.

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Session 5: Sustainability, Environmental, and Responsible Marketing Communications in the Age of AI

Session Chair: Professor Ebru Uzunoglu

5.1: Reframing Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) for pro-environmental campaigns: A circular framework for consistency and brand alignment.

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Keywords: IMC, brand promise, consistency, pro-environmental behavior change

Extended Abstract

Adopting marketing communications for environmental causes is becoming increasingly prevalent. However, branding strategies are often overlooked in non-profit and social marketing interventions. This paper, based on my PhD research, investigates Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) as a branding strategy in the context of pro-environmental behaviour change campaigns. Given the abundance of environmental communication, which often dilutes the meaning and believability of environmental claims, this study explores the nature of the brand promise in such campaigns. It examines how integration, the “I” in IMC, is approached across diverse audiences and multiple stakeholders who interact at various touchpoints within the single-use plastics (SUP) ecosystem. IMC is chosen as the theoretical background for this research because the framework ensures that campaigns communicate a coherent brand promise across various communication channels (Fill, 2001; Kitchen et al., 2008). IMC has been shown to positively impact brand equity over time, support recall behaviour, and ultimately contribute to achieving business goals (Batra & Keller, 2016; Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010). In a social marketing context, relying solely on social communication is not sufficient to achieve or sustain social behavioural change (Alden et al., 2011). Therefore, integrating marketing communications becomes essential for ensuring long-term impact in environmental interventions.

While consistency in communicating the brand promise is often assumed in existing IMC conceptualizations and frameworks, its theorization, particularly in addressing wicked problems such as climate change, remains underexplored. This research extends the conceptualisation of IMC by critically examining the meaning of consistency. Specifically, it explores how consistency in communicating the brand promise can be achieved in this context by applying a systems thinking perspective.

The study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on two data sources. In-depth interviews were conducted with nineteen senior marketing practitioners from environmental non-profit organizations, advertising agencies, and strategic marketing consultancies in the UK and Ireland. These interviews were complemented by multimodal documentary data from three SUP campaigns, providing triangulation and enriching the interpretation of participants' perspectives.

The findings identify and support three existing interpretations of consistency within IMC conceptualizations (Nowak & Phelps, 1994) while also revealing new constraints and tensions in achieving this consistency in campaigns addressing single-use plastics (SUPs).

The first conceptualization, "One Voice Marketing Communication" (Nowak & Phelps, 1994: 51), emphasizes the need for a unified message across all campaign materials. However, an additional dimension emerging from this study is the necessity of achieving consistency sector-wide (midstream level). A key challenge in this regard is competition among environmental organizations for funding, which can hinder collaborative efforts. Moreover, non-profit environmental organizations often lack the leverage to enforce such consistency across the sector.

The second conceptualization, "Coordinated Marketing Communications" (Nowak & Phelps, 1994: 51), highlights the need for alignment among various stakeholders. However, tensions arise when coordinating with upstream stakeholders, such as funders, who hold significant influence over creative campaign decisions. These stakeholders may have competing interests, including corporate social responsibility (CSR) or greenwashing agendas, and in some cases, they may even be contributors to the plastic pollution problem (e.g., policymakers and industry actors).

The third conceptualization, "Communication Mix Alignment", focuses on achieving consistency in downstream objectives. Constraints in this area stem from the diversity of target audiences, which include both pro-environmental audiences and the general public, who may not relate to environmental protection. Ensuring alignment in messaging across such varied audience segments presents a significant challenge for campaign effectiveness.

Accordingly, the study proposes a new circular framework for IMC, characterized by flexibility, continuity, and adaptability, reflecting the dynamic nature of brand negotiations (Bruhn and Schnebelen, 2017: 477). By placing behavioural branding alignment at the core, this framework addresses tensions arising from conflicting campaign goals across different levels of the SUP ecosystem (upstream, midstream, and downstream). This conceptualization offers a complementary perspective to existing hierarchical IMC models in both commercial marketing (Schultz & Kitchen, 2000) and social marketing for health interventions (Dahl et al., 2015).

While grounded in insights from environmental marketing campaigns in two countries, this research presents a novel perspective on IMC, encouraging its broader adoption in future marketing research. It particularly emphasizes IMC's role in addressing complex social and environmental challenges, aligning with the imperative of marketing to contribute to a better world (Chandy et al., 2021). Furthermore, it highlights IMC's significance in social marketing decision-making, shaping branding strategies to enhance campaign credibility, mitigate greenwashing risks, and ultimately achieve sustainable behaviour change.

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