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Understanding the transgressive nature of contemporary brands

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Brands beyond boundaries

Understanding the transgressive nature of contemporary brands

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION | LUND UNIVERSITY



Brands beyond boundaries

Brands beyond boundaries

Understanding the transgressive nature of
contemporary brands

Kristijan Petkoski



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This thesis investigates the transgressive nature of brands and aims to develop a conceptual and theoretical understanding of brands as distinct communicative entities capable of transcending boundaries and facilitating social relations. The thesis develops a communication-centered perspective that draws on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. In doing so, it reconceptualizes brands as communication systems that operate by oscillating between self-reference and other-reference and highlights the broader societal function of brands as 'connectivity devices' that transcend boundaries, transgress in different social spheres, and facilitate various social relations. Focusing theoretically and empirically on brand activism as a contemporary form of brand transgression, the thesis examines how activist brands simultaneously engage in economic and political communication, thereby connecting the economic and political systems. Employing second-order observation as an analytical approach, the analysis reveals that brand transgressions are not anomalies or deviations but an inherent feature of brands. Furthermore, it demonstrates that while brand transgressions are paradoxical, these paradoxes can be productively employed as communicative resources for the brands' communicative reproduction and identity formation. This thesis contributes to branding and communication scholarship with a systems-theoretical understanding of brands as transgressive, communicative and socially embedded entities in contemporary society. The thesis is a compilation of four individual articles prepared for publication in different academic journals.

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Brands beyond boundaries

Understanding the transgressive nature of
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Kristijan Petkoski



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To my family, with love

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the transgressive nature of brands and aims to develop a conceptual and theoretical understanding of brands as distinct communicative entities capable of transcending boundaries and facilitating social relations. The thesis develops a communication-centered perspective that draws on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. In doing so, it reconceptualizes brands as communication systems that operate by oscillating between self-reference and other-reference and highlights the broader societal function of brands as 'connectivity devices' that transcend boundaries, transgress in different social spheres, and facilitate various social relations. Focusing theoretically and empirically on brand activism as a contemporary form of brand transgression, the thesis examines how activist brands simultaneously engage in economic and political communication, thereby connecting the economic and political systems. Employing second-order observation as an analytical approach, the analysis reveals that brand transgressions are not anomalies or deviations but an inherent feature of brands. Furthermore, it demonstrates that while brand transgressions are paradoxical, these paradoxes can be productively employed as communicative resources for the brands' communicative reproduction and identity formation. This thesis contributes to branding and communication scholarship with a systems-theoretical understanding of brands as transgressive, communicative and socially embedded entities in contemporary society. The thesis is a compilation of four individual articles prepared for publication in different academic journals.

List of Papers

Paper I

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Paper II

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Paper III

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Paper IV

Petkoski, K. Playing with paradoxes: The strategic use of paradoxes in brand identity formation. (Under review in *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*)

Introduction

Brands in contemporary society

Contemporary society has been characterized as a 'brand society' (Kornberger, 2010). It is undergoing a shift towards a *branding of almost everything*, including organizations, countries, cities, religions, political parties, politicians, and even ordinary individuals (Kotler, 2003). Brands are no longer used only by commercial entities, but they serve as a way of thinking, managing and communicating across diverse domains of society. For instance, it is common for political figures such as Donald Trump and Barack Obama to be presented as brands with unique characteristics designed to resonate with voters. Similarly, places such as Stockholm, London and Singapore are strategically defined and managed as brands, promoting unique narratives and attributes to attract tourists, investors and residents. More broadly, brands have become pervasive and influential entities that interfere in almost everything, beyond their traditional commercial boundaries (Holt, 2006; Kornberger, 2010; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Corporate brands, for example, increasingly engage with social, political and environmental issues alongside their commercial goals (Moorman, 2020; Rust, 2020). Importantly, the term 'brand' is not simply a concept or metaphor borrowed from the corporate world and applied into new domains such as place branding or personal branding. Rather, the expansion of branding has significant implications for how brands are understood and for the evolution of branding as a social practice. Brands increasingly function as mechanisms for organizing, managing, strategizing, and establishing commitments and obligations among diverse social actors.

The expansion and proliferation of brands in society have happened gradually. Historically, brands emerged from the practice of marking the ownership of cattle, food or other goods, which evolved into a modern practice of legal protection of the ownership of trademarks. Brands were initially understood as symbolic representations, such as logos, symbols, texts or images, that were attached to physical products. In premodern markets, the exchange of goods required a

simultaneous presence of the seller, buyer and the product, and these transactions were thus limited to a specific market. Modern brands, in contrast, can be separated from the physical product. This allows the brands as representations of the product to be used in communication in mass media to reach potential buyers, increasing the likelihood of transactions to happen. As such, modern brands enable the consumer and buyer to be connected in abstract markets without the need for their physical presence.

In early forms of product branding, the brand remained closely tied to a specific product and its market. Over time, however, brands became increasingly flexible. For instance, in the early 20th century, companies such as Procter & Gamble and Coca-Cola introduced brand extensions to create new markets and connect consumers with new products (Aaker, 1991; Aaker & Keller, 1990). These extensions illustrate how the autonomy of the brand from the product and its specific market opened up possibilities for expansion of the application of brands in multiple markets. As branding evolved, the understanding of brands also shifted, from being a feature of the product to existing as a perception in the consumer's mind (Sujan & Bettman, 1989). In this consumer-centric conceptualization of brands as mental constructs (Keller, 1993), brands are no longer tied to a specific product and market, thereby enhancing their potential for expansion. Brands as perceptions can transcend traditional product categories, connecting to different products and markets, as well as to objects beyond markets.

The development of brands as distinct entities has paved the way for the emergence of new domains of branding. With increased autonomy, brands do not only represent products or a group of product extensions, but they can serve to represent various kinds of entities. As a result, diverse forms of branding have emerged, including corporate branding (Gray & Balmer, 1998; Hatch & Schultz, 2003), place branding (Kavaratzis, 2005; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013), political branding (Scammell, 2015; Pich & Newman, 2020), personal branding (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) and idea branding (Swaminathan et al., 2020). While product branding was concerned with the legal and commercial dimensions of the brand, new dimensions became important when brands move into new domains. Corporations, for example, are not only concerned with the legal and commercial dimensions, but they now use corporate brands beyond the traditional markets to connect to various stakeholders. Similarly, other types of organizations, such as public institutions, political parties, and places, are not concerned with registering trademarks or selling products to consumers but rather focus on establishing new

types of connections with citizens, voters, tourists and investors. Moreover, brands today can also serve to influence multiple domains and spheres of society. This is particularly evident in corporate practices such as sustainable and green branding (Ottman, 2017; Nascimento & Loureiro, 2024), where companies strategically use their brands to pursue commercial, social and environmental goals simultaneously. Similarly, the brand of Donald Trump is an example of brand that functions simultaneously as a personal, commercial and political brand.

The evolution shows that brands have developed into pervasive entities that engage in complex social relations and perform different social functions (Swaminathan et al., 2020). To account for this expansion and proliferation and capture the shifting nature of brands, I introduce the concept of *brand transgressions*. Transgressions within the sociological literature are understood as social processes that transcend boundaries and exceed limits (Jenks, 2003). Such processes have been explored across diverse fields, including literature, art and architecture. Typically, they involve transcending limits that can be physical, racial, aesthetic, sexual, legal, national and moral. Jenks (2003) emphasizes that transgressions do not simply deny limits or break boundaries but rather exceed them while simultaneously reaffirming their existence. Building on this sociological understanding of transgressions, I propose a conceptualization of *brand transgressions* as boundary-transcending processes and seek to understand the capability of brands to cross boundaries and transgress in different ways.

One of the most prominent contemporary manifestations of the transgressive nature of brands is the phenomenon of brand activism. Brand activism is a specific form of explicit corporate political activity that uses brands as vehicles for political communication and public support of polarizing, controversial socio-political issues (Moorman, 2020; Podnar & Golob, 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020). A typical example of an activist brand is Patagonia, which is fundamentally a commercial entity, but it also pursues a strong environmental mission and engages explicitly in political activism to fight against climate change (Stanley, 2020). Patagonia and similar cases demonstrate how contemporary branding extends beyond traditional market communication, playing a significant role in political discourse and influencing political processes in society. However, brand activism frequently provokes significant backlash, as activist brands not only produce political communication but also become targets for negative communication from political opponents, public attacks and consumer boycotts, which can undermine brand meaning, destabilize the brand identity, and ultimately destroy the brand. The phenomenon of brand activism thus illustrates how transgressions

and diverse social relations emerge and are facilitated through brands, such as the connection between the economic and the political spheres.

Brand transgressions can be understood as a feature of contemporary branding. Modern brands function as transgressive, open and communicatively constructed entities that cross traditional boundaries in new and surprising ways (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Today's brands serve to connect various organizations or entities, including corporations, cities, governments, social movements and celebrities, with different actors such as consumers, employees, journalists, influencers, citizens, voters, tourists and fans. They also engage with various ideas, concepts, ideologies, discourses, narratives and myths across multiple domains and spheres of society, including business, politics, media, education, tourism, entertainment and activism. Through these transgressions, we see that brands have become capable of communicating and connecting with various social entities and mediating complex social relationships. Moreover, these dynamics point to the potential of brands for communicating in spheres that have traditionally been outside the scope of branding. However, brand transgressions are often described as paradoxical and tend to generate various communicative challenges (e.g., Iivonen, 2018; Podnar & Golob, 2024). The increased transgressiveness and openness have also made brands exposed to various forms of undesirable communication and susceptible to various contestations and attacks including public attacks, contestations and boycotts (Dietrich & Russell, 2021; Kähr et al., 2016; Kristal et al., 2018; Siano et al., 2022b). Brands today are no longer created and managed solely by brand managers, nor co-created only with enthusiastic fans that connect and interact in brand communities (Diamond et al., 2009; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Rather, brands are entangled in complex networks of communication and are exposed to various forms of both desirable and undesirable communication.

In this dissertation, I seek to understand the transgressive nature of modern brands and how they function as radically open entities capable of transcending boundaries, facilitating social relations, and communicating across diverse social spheres. The expansion and proliferation of brands across various domains of society indicate that the concept of 'brand' is not simply transferred as a metaphor to new domains. Brands have rather developed a more prominent social function. Therefore, I suggest that it is necessary to develop a more sophisticated understanding of brand transgressions as social processes of transcending boundaries. Moreover, I suggest that branding implies a specific way of observing society, which means a particular way of framing social reality from a given

perspective. This view provides a foundation for understanding both the transgressions of brands and the complexities and challenges they generate. It is based on a specific framework that will be elaborated upon in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

Understanding brand transgressions

Brands and branding have been extensively studied primarily in business and management studies, but also in organizational studies, media and communication studies, as well as in disciplines such as sociology and political science. The concept of brand transgressions was introduced in branding literature within the context of consumer–brand relationships, referring to transgressions as negative events that violate consumer expectations and damage consumer-brand relationships (Aaker et al., 2004; Khamitov et al., 2020). However, in this thesis I utilize the sociological concept of transgressions in a broader sense to describe various forms of boundary-crossing as brand transgressions. More specifically, I aim to capture a growing set of contemporary branding phenomena that could be understood as instances of brand transgressions, such as sustainable branding (Nascimento & Loureiro, 2024), green branding (Bhardwaj et al., 2026), purpose branding (Swaminathan et al., 2020), brand hijacking (Siano et al., 2022a) and brand activism (Moorman, 2020). These examples illustrate how modern brands increasingly operate at the intersection of economic, social and political domains, thus crossing traditional boundaries of branding.

Although brand transgressions occur frequently and are widespread in contemporary society, prior research has examined specific forms of brand transgressions, such as brand hijacking or brand activism, as isolated and exceptional phenomena. For instance, brand hijacking is defined as an unauthorized manipulation, subversion, and reinterpretation of a brand by external parties, beyond the control of brand managers (Siano et al., 2022a). In such cases, the brand boundaries become blurred, and the flow of brand communication becomes unpredictable and uncontrollable. Similarly, brand activism can be regarded as a contemporary manifestation of the transgressive nature of brands. Brand activism is defined as a strategy that involves taking a public stance on partisan sociopolitical issues through public speech or actions, with the aim of promoting social change (Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Activist brands explicitly engage in political discourse, crossing

the traditional commercial boundaries of branding, and assuming a role of both a market and political actor. These two examples illustrate that both brand hijacking and brand activism have been implicitly seen as transgressions. While previous research provides valuable insights into these distinct phenomena as special forms of transgressions, the broader conceptualization of brand transgressions as a general characteristic of contemporary branding could open a new perspective on understanding modern brands as transgressive social entities.

The thesis highlights three key limitations in branding literature that constrain its theoretical capacity to explain brand transgressions and the capability of brands to transcend boundaries, establish new social relations, and communicate across diverse societal spheres.

The first limitation arises from the dominance of the transmission view of communication, which underpins both branding practice and traditional branding theory. Traditional brand management research initially conceptualized brands as symbolic representations of products (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), later shifting towards a consumer-centric conceptualization of brands as perceptions (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2003). This conceptualization, which is the most dominant in the branding research, is based on implicit understanding of communication as transmission, seeing communication as a one-way, linear process of sending and receiving messages or transferring information from one mind to another. Communication scholars have argued that the transmission model represents a simplistic and flawed understanding of communication and should be replaced with a more sophisticated understanding of communication as a constitutive element of social reality and social life (Craig, 1999). Communication, as Craig (1999) explains, should not be treated as a secondary phenomenon but as a primary, constitutive social process that creates and reproduces shared meaning. In contrast to the transmission model that limits communication to the individual mind and sees it as a fixed and linear transfer of messages, I recognize communication as a continuous process embedded within complex social relations.

The second limitation results from the prevailing organization-centric perspective that informs branding research. The dominant underlying assumption in traditional branding research is that the brands as entities are wholly owned and managed by the companies (Aaker, 1991; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2003). Even when the studies take another perspective, such as consumer-focused perspective, they are primarily concerned with managerial and normative understanding from the perspective of the organization that owns the brand. For example, brand

activism has been studied from three main perspectives, including a corporate perspective that looks at the phenomenon as a marketing strategy (e.g., Pimentel et al., 2024), a consumer perspective that is concerned with the effects of this strategy among consumers (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), and a critical perspective that accuses companies for appropriating sociopolitical issues and manipulating consumers (e.g., Mirzaei et al., 2022). Yet, all the three research streams on brand activism often overlook that brands function as open and dynamic entities that cannot be entirely controlled by a single actor, such as corporation or brand owner. Recent studies emphasize that brands are not solely controlled by the corporation but are instead communicatively constructed by multiple actors, including brand managers, consumers, media, political actors, and the broader public (Diamond et al., 2009; Siano et al., 2022b; Swaminathan et al., 2020).

The third limitation occurs as a consequence of the previous two limitations. Namely, branding literature in general, and brand activism literature in particular, fall short in conceptualizing brands as distinct entities capable of producing communication. Brand activism research often conflates the brand with the corporation, resulting in conceptual ambiguity. For instance, when Bhagwat et al. (2020) discuss Starbucks and Nike, it is unclear whether they refer to the corporation or the brand. When the distinction between the corporation and the brand is not clearly established, it becomes difficult to determine whether it is the corporation or the brand that is communicating. This lack of clarity prevents the literature from seeing potential differences in how the corporation and the brand communicate, and specifically seeing what is distinct when brands communicate. Understanding brand transgressions requires moving beyond the transmission view of communication and the organization-centric perspective and therefore distinguishing the brand as a communicative entity separate from the corporation. Therefore, the thesis highlights the need for a more sophisticated understanding of communication that could help to reconceptualize brands as communicatively constructed and socially embedded entities and explain their transgressive nature.

Branding literature proposes several alternative conceptualizations of brands that are implicitly based on different communication theories, extending beyond the traditional understanding of brands as symbolic representations and perceptions. Cultural branding, for instance, conceptualizes brands as symbols embedded within cultural contexts (Holt, 2004, 2006). Drawing on the interpretivist tradition and post-structural semiotics, cultural branding scholars argue that brand meanings are constantly created, negotiated and contested by multiple

actors (Diamond et al., 2009). Another stream of research, influenced by socio-material theories, reconceptualizes brands as complex assemblages or actor-networks composed of multiple human and non-human elements (Lury, 2009; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015), thus emphasizing materiality alongside the dynamic and relational aspects of branding. Within the recent corporate branding research, Hatch and Schultz (2010) draw on symbolic interactionism to conceptualize brands as strategic tools for organizing and facilitating interactions among multiple stakeholders through co-creation. These alternative approaches reflect a theoretical and conceptual progression within branding research, where major theoretical advances have occurred when new understandings of communication were introduced. This indicates that a more comprehensive understanding of brand transgressions needs an alternative understanding of communication that is suitable for explaining how brands function as communicative entities.

In conclusion, I suggest developing a theoretical perspective that could help to conceptualize brands as communicative entities and explain the capability of brands to transcend boundaries and transgress into diverse domains. More specifically, I am interested in how communication theories can help to conceptualize brands as distinct entities that are able to communicate. This means that, instead of distinguishing between brands as entities and communication as messages, communication should be considered as central in such conceptualization. Hence, I propose reconceptualizing brands as specific forms of communication. This approach allows to distinguish the brand not only from the product, corporation or other entities but also from any other form of communication in general. It provides a framework for theorizing brand transgressions through the brands' capability to produce communication and connect to any form of communication and any kind of social entity from their environment. Importantly, viewing brands as distinct communicative entities allows to understand the internal dynamics and the specific mechanisms that enable brands to transgress and transcend boundaries, as well as the paradoxes they generate. For instance, in brand activism, brands serve as vehicles for political communication (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022). This contemporary form of transgression can thus be analyzed as a process in which the brand develops specific mechanisms that allow it to produce commercial and political communication simultaneously, thereby connecting business and politics as two distinct social spheres.

Aim and research questions

The thesis applies a communication-centered perspective that can help to understand the social function of brands as communicatively constructed, transgressive and socially embedded entities. While communication scholarship provides multiple traditions and communication theories (Craig, 1999), the thesis builds on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory as one possible way to understand and explain the communicative mechanisms that enable brand transgressions and the paradoxes that emerge when brands engage in social relations. Therefore, the aim of the thesis is to investigate how social systems theory can advance understanding of the transgressive nature of brands and thereby develop a conceptual and theoretical account of brands as transgressive communicative systems capable of transcending boundaries, facilitating social relations, and reproducing themselves communicatively.

Following this aim, the thesis is guided by and addresses the following research questions:

- 1) *How do different communication theories inform alternative conceptualizations of brands, and what explanatory potential do these conceptualizations offer for understanding brand transgressions?*
- 2) *How can social systems theory contribute to understanding the communicative function of brands and the mechanisms that enable brands to transcend boundaries and facilitate social relations?*
- 3) *What paradoxes emerge from brand transgressions, and how do these paradoxes shape the communicative reproduction of brands?*

To this end, I firstly seek to understand how brands can be conceptualized as distinct entities that are able to communicate and reproduce themselves through communication. The analysis begins with examining various conceptualizations of brands within branding theory and evaluating their potential for understanding the transgressive nature of brands. I then develop an alternative, communication-centered conceptualization of brands to better account for their capacity to transgress, transcend boundaries, and connect to other social entities and social domains. Furthermore, I explore the specific ways in which brands can establish social relations and facilitate connections between various social entities and social spheres. Central to this inquiry is an analysis of the function of brands as distinct

communicative entities and the specific mechanisms that enable brands to transgress and connect different domains and spheres of society. Finally, I aim to deepen the understanding of the communicative challenges and possibilities that brand transgressions generate. While brand transgressions often produce paradoxes that destabilize the brand identity and create communicative challenges, this study seeks to explore whether and in what ways these paradoxes could create new possibilities for the brand identity and its communicative reproduction.

In this thesis, I have adopted Luhmann's social systems theory as an enabling theoretical lens and analytical approach. Social systems theory offers a particular understanding of social reality and social life as constituted by communication (Luhmann, 1995a). Luhmann (1992b) considers communication as the fundamental element and operation of society. In his view, communication cannot be ascribed to individual subjects and is distinct from individual consciousness. In contrast to the classical transmission model of communication, he sees communication as a complex process involving multiple selections that connect to each other. This theory rests on Luhmann's radical claim that only communication can communicate. For Luhmann, communication is the operation through which social systems reproduce themselves. He further describes today's modern society as functionally differentiated, comprising multiple autonomous social systems that perform various societal functions, including the systems of economy, law, politics, art, science, education, religion, and the mass media (Luhmann, 1995c).

Based on this, social systems theory provides a suitable approach for analyzing and understanding the transgressive nature of brands and their capability of transcending boundaries and engaging in complex social relations. I primarily draw on Luhmann's specific view on communication to reconceptualize brands as forms of communication and understand how they function as distinct communicative entities. Additionally, I utilize Luhmann's idea of functional differentiation of modern society to theorize different spheres of society as autonomous communication systems. The analytical approach of this thesis is informed by Luhmann's second-order observation (Andersen, 2003), which focuses on the communicative structures, operations and processes that enable brands to exist as communication systems and connect to other social systems. As such, the thesis adopts an epistemological stance that emphasizes how brand transgressions occur through the brands' capability to facilitate connections between distinct social systems.

To empirically investigate the transgressive nature of brands, this study focuses on brand activism as a specific form of brand transgression. Studying brand transgressions as a general phenomenon would be a challenging task, as transgressions involve different kinds of brands and appear in different forms, and thus capturing the full breadth of brand transgressions within a single study is not feasible. While the overarching interest lies in understanding brand transgressions as a general social phenomenon, this study is delimited to commercial (product and corporate) brands and centers on brand activism as the most recent and salient example of brand transgression. Brand activism is particularly relevant for this inquiry because it encompasses both commercial and political dimensions. It represents a new way of connecting business and politics and can thus be analyzed as a form of transgression that links two traditional distinct spheres of contemporary society. The thesis therefore investigates how brands are capable of producing economic and political communication simultaneously and explores the consequences of connecting business and politics through brand activism.

Outline of the thesis

The thesis is a compilation of four individual articles that were developed as independent studies and prepared for publication in different academic journals. It is structured in two parts: 1) summary of the thesis (kappa), and 2) presentation of the four individual articles.

The kappa is structured in six chapters and presents an overarching discussion of the research project and its key contributions. It begins with an introduction of brand transgressions as the main topic of the thesis, followed by a discussion of the communication perspective needed to understand this phenomenon, as well as the aim and the research questions guiding the project. The subsequent chapter reviews existing research on brand activism, including definitions of the phenomenon and a review of the dominant perspectives in the literature. This is followed by an exploration of various brand conceptualizations within the branding literature and their relevance for understanding brands as distinct communicative entities. The next chapter introduces social systems theory as the theoretical and analytical approach adopted in this thesis. The final two chapters synthesize the main findings from the four articles and the answers to the research questions, outline the conceptual and theoretical contributions of the thesis, and suggest directions for future research.

The second part of the thesis includes the four individual research articles (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the articles

Article	RQs	Key concepts	Contribution
Article 1: Beyond boundaries: Towards a conceptual and theoretical explanation of the transgressive nature of brands	RQ1	brand transgressions, communication systems, other-reference	Brand transgressions conceptualized as social processes of transcending boundaries. Transgressions as an inherent feature of the brands' communicative operations.
Article 2: Re-connecting business and politics through brand activism. A social systems perspective	RQ1 RQ2	brand activism, connectivity, communication systems, other-reference	Communicative function of brands as connectivity devices and vehicles for social mediation. Brands as communicative systems that operate through an oscillation between self-reference and other-reference.
Article 3: Double-coded branding. The political semantics of brand activism strategies	RQ2 RQ3	brand activism, double-coding, political semantics, paradoxes	Brand activism as a way of connecting brands to politics through political semantics. Three distinct strategies of brand activism: brand rebellion, brand advocacy and brand action.
Article 4: Playing with paradoxes: The strategic use of paradoxes in brand identity formation	RQ3	brand identity, paradoxes, deparadoxification	Paradoxes as communicative resources for ongoing brand identity formation. Reframing paradoxes from communicative challenges to communicative possibilities.

Brand activism as transgression

Brand activism represents a contemporary form of brand transgression, wherein brands intentionally engage with divisive and political issues that fall outside the traditional domain of corporate communication. Rather than adopting a neutral or apolitical stance, these brands position themselves as agents of social change, publicly aligning with specific values, ideologies or movements. This approach challenges conventional branding practices by blurring the boundaries between commerce and activism and reconfiguring the role of the brand as both a market and political actor. Although brand activism has been researched extensively in previous research, the phenomenon has not been previously theorized and understood as a form of transgression.

In the following section, I present a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on brand activism. This includes positioning the phenomenon within the branding literature, examining the various definitions of brand activism and related concepts, outlining key theoretical developments, and reviewing the dominant research perspectives. The review concludes by identifying a central research problem that this thesis seeks to address, namely the need for a more refined understanding of how brands function as communicative entities within broader social and political contexts.

Brand activism as a form of explicit corporate political activity

Corporations have a long-standing history of political engagement, and the topic of corporate political activity (CPA) has been extensively examined in academic literature (e.g., Hillman et al., 2004, Walker, 2012; Lenway et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2022). This literature defines corporate political activity (CPA) as “corporate attempts to shape government policy in ways favourable to the firm” (Hillman et al., 2004). It encompasses various forms of corporate involvement in

politics, including lobbying, campaign contributions, government relations, financial donations, and support for grassroots movements (Hillman et al., 2004, Lenway et al., 2022). The primary goal of these activities is to gain market advantages and financial benefits by influencing policymakers and shaping public policy. Typically, corporate political activities have been covert in nature and not publicly disclosed (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Werner, 2017). For example, lobbying often involves informal, behind-the-scenes interactions with public officials that remain invisible to the general public (Levasier, 2025).

In recent years, however, a notable change has occurred in the ways companies engage in political discourse. Many corporations are adopting a more visible and public-facing approach to political involvement, openly addressing major social, political, and environmental issues and advocating for social change (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). This evolution reflects a broader transition from firm-centric political strategies and activities aiming solely for corporate benefits to initiatives that engage with wider societal challenges. It is more common for companies today to publicly promote their political engagement through branding and marketing communication (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Prominent examples of such explicit corporate political activity include Nike's endorsement of NFL player and activist Colin Kaepernick in his protest against racial violence and police brutality (Banet-Weiser, 2018), and Patagonia's direct criticism of President Trump and its explicit call for customers to vote against his administration (Stanley, 2020).

The growing popularity of explicit political engagement by corporations has been influenced by recent societal developments and increased demands in a highly politicized world. Contemporary society faces numerous pressing challenges, including climate change, political instability, armed conflicts, migration crises, racial injustice, and the covid-19 pandemic. These challenges have provoked widespread protests and social movements, underscoring the need for urgent action. Simultaneously, the public trust in government institutions to address such issues has declined, while consumer expectations for corporate engagement in societal matters have risen (Edelman, 2023).

Some scholars argue that in today's polarized and politicized society, companies cannot remain apolitical without risking reputational harm and may even face significant backlash for their silence on socio-political issues (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Moreover, the pervasive influence of social media has amplified public dissatisfaction and polarization, serving as a platform for political confrontation, criticism, and calls for boycotts. For instance, corporations such as McDonalds

and Coca-Cola have encountered public criticism for maintaining operations in Russia after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. As such, the increased use of political communication by companies reflects not only a response to the expectations of politically conscious consumers (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), but also a response to the pressures from the increasingly turbulent and unpredictable political environment (Lenway et al., 2022).

Within the branding literature, this shift toward explicit corporate political involvement is conceptualized and labelled more broadly as corporate sociopolitical activism (Bhagwat et al., 2020), or more specifically as brand activism (Moorman, 2020). These contemporary forms of engagement have been distinguished from both traditional corporate political activity (CPA) and other corporate efforts for doing good in society, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR). According to Bhagwat et al. (2020), corporate sociopolitical activism is different from traditional CPA in that it involves explicit political stances and public communication, including direct support for or opposition to political actors, or public influence on voters during elections. Unlike traditional CPA, which tends to be covert and aimed at regulatory influence, sociopolitical activism is conducted openly in the public sphere. While corporate sociopolitical activism and CSR both involve public communication, they differ in content and the aim of the activities. CSR typically focuses on noncontroversial issues that are generally accepted in society, such as environmental sustainability, health campaigns, or education initiatives. CSR activities help companies to achieve legitimacy and favourable public perception. In contrast, corporate sociopolitical activism engages with divisive and contested issues, which often leads to losing certain consumer segments.

Brand activism represents a specific form of explicit corporate political activity, where the brand serves as a vehicle for political communication and expressing political positions on controversial and polarizing sociopolitical issues (Cammarota et al., 2023; Pimentel et al., 2024; Podnar & Golob, 2024). Branding scholars distinguish brand activism from other CSR-related marketing strategies, including cause-related marketing, corporate social marketing, and advocacy advertising. As Vredenburg et al. (2020) note, traditional CSR marketing activities typically address noncontroversial and broadly supported causes, such as breast cancer awareness or children vaccination, that aim to promote general benefits and social good. Brand activism, in contrast, entails taking explicit stances on controversial sociopolitical issues, aligning the brand with either progressive or conservative ideologies. Therefore, while brand activism

may appeal to consumers that share the same values with the brand, it can also lead to potential backlash from publics that hold opposing views.

The emergence and rise of brand activism mark a significant shift in the nature of corporate political activity, moving from covert strategies to more explicit, public engagement with divisive sociopolitical issues. This shift reflects an increasing role of brands as vehicles for political communication and influence. However, the concept of brand activism remains entangled with overlapping terms in the literature, and it is therefore necessary to clarify definitions before proceeding further.

Definition(s) of brand activism and related concepts

This thesis focuses on brand activism as a distinct form of explicit corporate political activity and uses it as an umbrella term for this phenomenon. However, it is important to acknowledge that the literatures on branding, communications, and management provide several overlapping concepts and definitions that describe similar or closely related phenomena. Terms such as corporate sociopolitical activism, corporate advocacy, or brand activism are often used interchangeably or inconsistently, leading to conceptual ambiguity. Therefore, it is important to critically review these related concepts, identify the key differences and similarities, and establish a clear conceptual foundation for the present study.

On the one hand, the literature offers several corporate-focused conceptualizations of this phenomenon. Bhagwat et al. (2020) introduced the concept of corporate sociopolitical activism, defined as “a firm’s public demonstration (statements and/or actions) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue.” They emphasize that this strategy is characterized with both high publicity and high partisanship. Similarly, Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020) describe corporate activism as a company’s proactive engagement in social change, defining it as “a company’s willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviours of actors in its institutional environment.” Corvellec and Stål (2019) further conceptualize corporate activism as a market-based form of corporate political activity, arguing that corporations act as political actors aiming to shape regulatory agendas and facilitate social change through market mechanisms.

Some scholars use the term corporate advocacy to describe corporate engagement with socio-political issues, introducing related terms such as corporate social advocacy and corporate political advocacy. For instance, Dodd and Supa (2014, 2015) define corporate social advocacy as “taking a public stance on a controversial social-political issue by corporations, most often in the form of a CEO statement.” Similarly, Wettstein and Baur (2016) define corporate political advocacy as “voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same.” Hydock et al. (2020) also use this term in reference to corporate public standpoints on divisive sociopolitical matters.

On the other hand, the literature has also developed brand-focused definitions and conceptualizations of the phenomenon. Sarkar and Kotler (2018) were among the first to define brand activism, describing it as “business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society.” They argue that brand activism addresses the most pressing societal issues, and that it is the responsibility of businesses to act accordingly. Furthermore, drawing on Bhagwat et al. (2020) and their definition of corporate sociopolitical activism, Moorman (2020) offers a more specific definition of brand political activism, describing it as “public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name.” These two foundational definitions have influenced further conceptual refinements (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021). Thus, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) define brand activism as “the act of publicly taking a stand on divisive social or political issues by a brand or an individual associated with a brand.” Similarly, Vredenburg et al. (2020) conceptualize brand activism as “a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success.” While the term brand advocacy has also emerged (Oka, 2018), referring to brands exerting pressure on governments, it has not gained acceptance and is more commonly associated with consumer advocacy and brand loyalty.

The literature thus presents a diverse array of overlapping concepts that describe notably similar phenomena. However, two conceptual inconsistencies are apparent. First, existing definitions tend to be informed by an organization-centric perspective and the terms company and brand are frequently conflated. For instance, Moorman (2020) suggests that brand activism involves public

communication made by or on behalf of a company using its brand name, but when cases such as Nike are discussed, the terms company and brand are used interchangeably. Similarly, when Bhagwat et al. (2020) discuss the case of Nike, it is unclear whether they refer to the corporation or the brand. Furthermore, Schmidt et al. (2021) borrow the exact definition of Bhagwat et al. (2020) to define brand activism, stating that it is the brand that demonstrates public support or opposition of sociopolitical issues. However, these scholars do not engage in a discussion about the distinction between the company and the brand, leaving somewhat unclear whether it is the company or the brand that communicates. Overall, previous research lacks conceptual clarity about how brands communicate as distinct entities from the corporation, and what the implications are when brands are seen as distinct communicative entities.

Second, the terms activism and advocacy are often used interchangeably in reference to corporate or brand engagement with sociopolitical issues. Nevertheless, these terms carry different meanings and should not be understood as synonyms. Activism typically implies a proactive stance aimed at structural change (Heath, 2018), while advocacy may refer to more conventional efforts to influence opinion or policy (Heath, 1980). Clarifying this distinction is essential for advancing theoretical precision in the study of brand and corporate political engagement.

Building upon this conceptual overview, the following section examines the theoretical developments and dominant perspectives in previous research on brand activism.

Theoretical developments and main perspectives

Previous research on brand activism has examined the phenomenon from various perspectives, offering a broad understanding of the involvement of different actors, strategic approaches and activities, as well as various drivers and consequences. Within branding literature, brand activism is primarily explored in three dominant streams of research, applying a corporate, consumer, and critical perspective. In the following sections, I will present and discuss these perspectives and their implications for understanding brand activism.

Corporate perspective

Within branding research, brand activism is predominantly studied from a corporate and managerial perspective, often grounded in a normative understanding of the phenomenon. This stream of research conceptualizes brand activism as a strategic marketing tool employed by companies to differentiate themselves in the marketspace and achieve competitive advantage. It typically investigates how brands should be managed when engaging in sociopolitical issues, examining the effectiveness of brand activism strategies, the processes and activities involved, and different factors such as authenticity, legitimacy, polarization, the nature of the sociopolitical issues addressed, and the degree of corporate involvement (Pimentel et al., 2024; Cammarota et al., 2023).

Researchers in this field characterize brand activism as a strategy and practice rooted in the company's purpose and values (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021). They explain that brand activism goes beyond mere advocacy and advertising, involving a variety of practices, activities, initiatives and campaigns aimed at addressing societal problems. The authenticity of these efforts, and their alignment with the corporate purpose and values, are considered as crucial factors for the effectiveness of the brand activism strategy (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Legitimacy is another significant factor, as companies and brands must be regarded as legitimate actors within the political sphere. However, addressing contested and divisive sociopolitical issues often elicits polarized public responses, which may in turn undermine the company's legitimacy (Rim et al., 2020). According to Moorman (2020), brand activism can be informed by various political ideologies, such as liberal or conservative views, which directly impacts the public perception and responses. She further argues that brands differ in the extent to which they act as political actors. Some companies fully integrate political missions in their branding strategies with the aim of enacting societal change, while others adopt a more cautious approach, engaging in political discourse only when it aligns with their marketing objectives.

This corporate-focused body of research also considers the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the brand activism efforts, including CEOs, managers, employees, and investors (Olkkonen & Morsing, 2023; Pasirayi et al., 2022). For example, several studies focus on the central role of corporate leaders, emphasizing that brand activism is typically driven by the personal values, public visibility, and influence of CEOs (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). While CEO-led activism can positively affect stakeholder engagement and enhance the overall effectiveness of brand activism strategies, it can also have negative consequences, particularly

when CEOs make personal statements on political issues that diverge from company values or consumer expectations (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018, 2019).

This stream of research further highlights that brand activism can be both a successful and risky strategy for the corporation. It thus investigates different factors that impact the performance of the brand positively, as well as the potential risks that can undermine it (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Pasirayi et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2022). Some studies show that successful implementation of brand activism can strengthen corporate reputation, enhance brand image, and foster brand loyalty (Schmidt et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022). When brands support issues that resonate with their consumers, they may achieve increased purchase intention, greater market share, and improved financial outcomes (Korschun et al., 2019). As a result, the company may gain support from current investors and attract new investors that share the company's values and sociopolitical stances (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). Additionally, brand activism can enhance employee's engagement and strengthen commitment to the company (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021; Moorman, 2020). However, several studies demonstrate that brand activism can be a risky strategy if the messages and the efforts are not aligned with the company's values and purpose. As a result, the brand can be perceived as inauthentic, and it can attract public criticism, consumer boycotts, reputational damage, employee disengagement, decreased firm value, and investor dissatisfaction (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Pasirayi et al., 2022).

Consumer perspective

The second stream of research examines brand activism from a consumer-focused perspective, exploring the role of consumers as active participants in activism-related brand practices. This body of literature represents consumers as politically conscious individuals that can influence and shape corporate strategies and practices (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022). It suggests that consumer behaviour is often guided by personal political beliefs and ideologies, and that consumers make purchasing decisions based on the sociopolitical stances of the companies and brands. This literature emphasizes that consumers are increasingly aware of the corporate role in society, expecting corporations not only to conduct business responsibly but also to publicly take stances on social and political issues. Consequently, consumers are viewed not merely as passive buyers but as active participants in brand activism initiatives, campaigns and activities (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022).

Research in this stream shows that brand activism campaigns can lead to positive effects when consumer and brand values are aligned (Chu et al., 2022). Consumers with high level of political interest are particularly inclined to engage with activist brands (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022). When brand's political stance resonates with consumers, it fosters positive emotional responses, greater brand engagement, and increased loyalty. Supportive consumers are also more likely to publicly endorse the brand and amplify its message through word-of-mouth, particularly via social media platforms (Chu et al., 2022). Kozinets and Jenkins (2022) highlight the role of social media in enhancing consumer participation in brand activism, allowing them to express their opinions, demonstrate support, and share their views about the brand and the issue it supports.

However, brand managers cannot fully control consumer engagement and reactions to brand activism. The outcomes of brand activism campaigns can be unpredictable and can often take unexpected turn, especially when consumer values diverge from those expressed by the brand (e.g., Fernandes, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Weber et al., 2023). For example, if a brand endorses a conservative stance while its consumers hold liberal views, this misalignment can lead to boycotts and public backlash (Fernandes, 2020). Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) demonstrate that brand activism has an asymmetric effect on consumer attitudes, intentions, and behaviour. They highlight that consumer attitudes decrease substantially among those who disagree with the brand's position. Moreover, the negative consequences may persist even when brands withdraw their statements or issue apologies after facing backlash, eroding trust among both supporters and opponents. Similarly, Weber et al. (2023) argue that corporate engagement in political activities may result in more negative and polarized reactions due to their controversial nature. They highlight that these activities may intensify public polarization and radicalization, particularly on social media, where expressions of anger and conflict proliferate rapidly.

Overall, this stream of research reveals that while brand activism has the potential to generate positive consumer responses, it can also be a risky strategy. Consumers may experience and express strong negative emotions such as anger and hate, express publicly their disagreement and criticism, and often boycott the brand. This backlash may ruin brand image and corporate reputation and ultimately lead to consumer alienation.

Critical perspective

A third perspective within branding literature adopts a critical lens, interrogating the broader implications of corporate involvement in sociopolitical discourse. This stream questions the legitimacy of brand activism, particularly the motives behind corporate engagement and its actual impact on society and politics. While many branding scholars emphasize the transformative potential of brand activism, critical scholars argue that such efforts are often manipulative or unethical. They label these practices as forms of *woke-washing* (Sobande, 2019; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Tressoldi et al., 2024). Similar critiques are found in terms such as *greenwashing* (Vollero, 2022), *rainbow-washing* (Wulf et al., 2022), *diversity-washing* (Olbermann et al., 2024), and *fem-washing* (Hainneville et al., 2023), which respectively describe superficial corporate support for environmentalism, LGBTQ+ rights, racial justice, and gender equality.

According to this perspective, brand activism is seen as woke-washing when it is perceived as inauthentic, inconsistent with the brand's purpose and values, or used to mislead consumers with illegitimate arguments (Tressoldi et al., 2024). Critics contend that aligning brand messages with social movements and sociopolitical stances is often an opportunistic tactic to enhance brands and attract politically conscious consumers (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Companies are frequently accused of exploiting and commodifying social issues for commercial gain without contributing to meaningful societal change (Scalvini, 2024). Sobande (2019) argues that while brands publicly champion issues such as feminism, equality or social justice, they often simultaneously reinforce stereotypical representations, or fail to address the issues in a way that will advance structural shifts and promote solutions.

Furthermore, critical scholars emphasize the detrimental consequences of brand activism practices for society. According to them, brands that engage in sociopolitical activism are primarily driven by commercial goals. Tressoldi et al. (2024) show that there is often a mismatch between the brands' communication and advertising that aims to publicly support diversity and equality and their internal culture and practices. These inconsistencies undermine the credibility of brand activism and contribute to public cynicism. Thus, not only do these activities and campaigns fail to address the root causes of the issues they spotlight, but they may also worsen them. According to Banet-Weiser (2012), corporate involvement in activism can also be problematic since brand campaigns with political messages tend to oversimplify the issues, selectively represent certain dimension while neglecting others, and distort public perception of the issue.

Ultimately, companies may assume authority over issues, but they may lack the legitimacy, expertise, or intent to address them effectively. Brand activism, in this view, intensifies political polarization, particularly fuelling negativity and hate in social media, which can have detrimental impact on the issues and on society in general.

Synthesis of previous research

The preceding review of brand activism literature reveals that the phenomenon has been understood through three predominant theoretical perspectives. Each of these three streams of research is guided by specific aims and interests, contributing with significant insights into various dimensions of brand activism. The corporate perspective conceptualizes brand activism as a marketing strategy and is primarily concerned with identifying the factors that influence the effectiveness of this strategy and its impact on the performance of the company. The second stream, adopting a consumer perspective, focuses on political consumption and the role of consumers in shaping corporate political engagement. This research emphasizes consumers' perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and responses to brand activism activities. The third stream, advanced by critical scholars, interprets brand activism as a manipulative and unethical corporate practice. This perspective is particularly concerned with the negative consequences of brand activism for society and the inadequacy of companies in addressing sociopolitical issues or contributing to social change.

What is common across these three perspectives is that they are all informed by a transmission view of communication and are based on a dominant assumption that the corporation is the entity that owns the brand and sends communication. From the corporate perspective, it is the corporation that communicates about the brand and therefore control over the brand is regarded as essential for the effectiveness of the strategy. From the consumer perspective, the consumers involvement in brand activism can be seen either as a form of co-creation or a form of public criticism or boycotts of the brand. Yet, this perspective is still preoccupied with managing the brand communication and the consumer perceptions. From the critical perspective, brand activism is understood as a corporate attempt to manipulate consumers and public opinion for commercial gain. In this perspective, the focus is still on the corporation as the sender of communication. Therefore, all three streams of research are concerned with a

normative understanding of the phenomenon and are preoccupied with the corporation as the sender of communication.

As a consequence of these dominant assumptions, existing research on brand activism falls short in conceptualizing brands as distinct, communicatively constructed entities. First, as demonstrated in the reviewed definitions of brand activism, scholars tend to conflate the distinction between the company and the brand. This conflation is evident across all three research streams, resulting in ambiguity regarding whether it is the company or the brand as separate entity that produces political communication. Second, the literature often overlooks that brands in contemporary society function as open and dynamic entities that cannot be entirely controlled by a single actor, such as corporation or brand owner. Instead, brand communication emerges from a multitude of sources, including brand managers, consumers, media, political actors, and the broader public (Diamond et al., 2009; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Understanding brand activism as transgression requires moving beyond the transmission view of communication and the organization-centric perspective and acknowledging brands as communicatively constructed entities that are separate from the corporation. This is particularly important in the case of brand activism, as activist brands are characterized by radical openness and continuous exposure to various forms of communication. These include both positive communication such as campaigns, consumer engagement and public endorsements, as well as negative communication such as boycotts, media scrutiny, public criticism and oppositional reactions from political actors.

In order to understand brand activism as a specific form of brand transgression, in the next chapter I examine various conceptualizations of brands and discuss their potential for explaining how brands function as transgressive communicative entities.

Conceptualizations of brands

This chapter examines established and emerging theoretical approaches to branding, with a particular focus on how these approaches conceptualize brands and understand their nature and function. While branding research has traditionally been rooted in managerial and psychological perspectives, contemporary scholarship has become increasingly informed by sociological perspectives. This chapter explores how different theoretical traditions, including brand management, cultural branding, socio-material branding and corporate branding, construct varying understandings of brands as symbolic, cultural, material and organizational entities. Through a comparative analysis of these perspectives, the chapter seeks to highlight both their theoretical contributions and their conceptual limitations, particularly focusing on the underlying understanding of communication that has informed each conceptualization.

The chapter is organized into five main sections. The first section outlines the traditional brand management approach, focusing on its evolution from symbolic representations to consumer perceptions. The second section introduces the cultural branding perspective, emphasizing the interpretive and socio-cultural dimensions of branding. The third section presents a range of alternative approaches, with a particular focus on the socio-material perspective that conceptualizes brands as assemblages or actor-networks. The fourth section discusses the corporate branding perspective, highlighting its conceptualization of brands as strategic organizing tools co-created through stakeholder interactions. The final section provides a comparative summary of these four approaches, identifies the theoretical gaps they leave unaddressed, and proposes the need for an alternative approach capable of understanding brands as distinct, communicatively constructed social entities.

Brands as symbolic representations and perceptions

The dominant theoretical approach in marketing and branding literature is the traditional brand management approach, which is grounded in the work of established scholars such as Aaker (1991), Keller (1993, 2003), and Kapferer (2008). This approach primarily focuses on the development and management of brands. Initially, marketing scholars conceptualized brands as *symbolic representations* of products, shaped by economic and legal understanding of the market. Brands were viewed as marketing tools enabling companies to differentiate themselves in the marketplace and helping consumers to identify their goods and services easily (Keller, 2003). Consequently, the primary concern for companies was to legally protect the ownership of the trademarks and various verbal and visual elements, such as names, logos, symbols and slogans, against imitation by competitors.

This initial conceptualization of brands is based on the assumption that brand managers can exert control over both the brand and the brand messages they transmit. Consumers are seen as passive recipients of the brand messages that are sent to their minds and are expected to understand the brand according to the intended meaning of the brand messages. Any deviation in consumer perceptions from the intended brand identity is regarded as a misalignment that should be corrected through additional messaging. The implicit underlying understanding of communication in this approach is a transmission model of communication, whereby communication is seen as a linear, one-way process of sending brand messages (Aaker, 1991).

Later, scholars in this tradition shifted from symbolic representations of brands towards a more consumer-centric view on brands as mental representations. Brands were then conceptualized as *perceptions* constructed in the mind of the consumer (Keller, 2003). This conceptualization of brands is influenced by cognitive psychology and information processing theory. The focus of brand management research turned to understanding how consumers learn, process, and retain brand-related information in their memory, and how these processes shape brand perceptions (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). This conceptualization still reflects a transmission view of communication, but it reframes consumers as active receivers that can process and respond to brand messages. While the early conceptualization distinguished between the brand as an entity and the perception of the brand, this distinction is blurred in the conceptualization of the brand as a mental construct.

The brand management approach provides practical insights into brand development, emphasizing the importance of connecting the brand with the consumers. Over time, this approach evolved from a sender-controlled perspective to one that prioritizes understanding and navigating the consumers' mind space. While brands as symbolic representations were tied to products or specific markets, the reconceptualization of brands as perceptual constructs allowed brands to be treated as distinct entities which opened up possibilities for new applications. Thus, brands were firstly used to launch brand extensions, and later, new domains of branding emerged, such as for example corporate branding (Gray & Balmer, 1998; Hatch & Schultz, 2003) or place branding (Kavaratzis, 2005). However, the emphasis of consumer perceptions in this reconceptualization amplified the challenge of control over the brand. Even in later research that adopted a consumer co-creation paradigm and highlighted the collaborative and participatory role of consumers, the emphasis remains on managerial strategies to control and influence consumer co-creation practices (e.g., Essamri et al., 2019). Although the brand management approach acknowledges the autonomy of brands as perceptual constructs, it remains constrained by its understanding of communication as transmission.

Brands as cultural symbols

Cultural branding has emerged as a theoretical alternative to traditional brand management. This approach critiques the dominant organization-centric perspective and the psychological understanding of brands as mental representations for neglecting the socio-cultural context in which brands reside and the cultural processes that shape them (Schroeder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006). According to cultural branding scholars, brands cannot be controlled solely by the corporation and the brand managers nor reduced to individual perceptions. Instead, they conceptualize brands as *cultural symbols* embedded in a broader cultural context (Holt, 2004, 2006). Brands, from this perspective, convey symbolic and ideological meanings derived from cultural myths, discourses, and ideologies. The emphasis, therefore, is on the relationship between brands and their socio-cultural and historical contexts (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010).

This approach reflects a poststructuralist view that sees brands as socially constructed entities that cannot be fully managed and controlled by corporations. It shifts focus from controlling consumers' perceptions to a dialectical relationship

between consumers and brands, recognizing consumers' agency in interpreting brand meanings (Holt, 2002, 2004). This means that consumers use brands not only for their functional benefits but as symbolic and cultural resources to construct their personal narratives and identity projects (Elliott, 1994; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; McCracken, 1990). Brand consumption, in this view, fosters connections among consumers with shared beliefs, values and identities, leading to the formation of specific social groups such as brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), subcultures (Elliott & Davies, 2006), and consumer tribes (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar, 2007). In general, cultural branding aligns with the co-creation paradigm, which conceptualizes value creation as a collaborative process between companies and consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Therefore, this research emphasizes that brands are collaboratively co-created with consumers, particularly within the communities and subcultures they identify with. For instance, Schau et al. (2009) demonstrate how consumers' practices within brand communities contribute to value creation and building the brand.

The theoretical foundation of cultural branding is primarily inspired from the interpretivist tradition and is further fuelled with insights from post-structuralist semiotics. Moving beyond the transmission view of communication, this approach sees communication as a cultural and symbolic process of meaning-making, therefore suggesting that brands and brand meaning are created and negotiated in their social environment (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). Initially emphasizing consumer co-creation, cultural branding evolved towards understanding brands as complex social entities encompassing multiple cultural and ideological meanings which are constantly created, negotiated, and contested by multiple actors (e.g., Diamond et al., 2009; Humphreys & Thompson, 2014; Luedicke et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2006).

Additionally, this approach draws on the semiotic tradition to offer an understanding of how brands connect to symbolic and cultural meanings. From a semiotic perspective, brands are seen as dematerialized commercial signs, distinct from the product, that derive meaning through cultural and social interpretation (Askegaard, 2006; Manning, 2010). More specifically, this approach draws on the semiotic distinction between the signifier and the signified, where the brand name represents a signifier that acquires meaning by associating with other pre-existing meanings. From this perspective, brands are seen as dynamic signifiers that constantly refer to new signifiers which results in new and unexpected meaning. Therefore, the brand as a sign cannot be controlled. Cultural branding scholars

have offered a solution for the challenge of control over brand meanings by linking brands to cultural myths (e.g., Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2006; Holt & Thompson, 2004). Namely, cultural myths contain condensed ideological content that can stabilize the uncontrolled free flow of signification and create a sign that 'naturalizes' its own meaning (Barthes, 1972).

By shifting attention from the organization and the individual perception to the cultural context, the cultural branding approach offers an alternative understanding of brands as socially constructed symbols. Rather than understanding communication as transmission of messages and focusing on control of the perceptions in consumers' mind spaces, this approach understands communication as a meaning-making process and focuses on the cultural meanings of brands. Therefore, with its predominant understanding of brands from an interpretivist perspective, this approach can explain and capture how consumers interpret the multiplicity of meanings a brand can acquire. Although this approach has moved from organization-centricity and solved some of the limitations that the transmission view of communication poses in traditional brand management, it has missed the opportunity to fully employ the semiotic model of communication in understanding brands as distinct social entities.

Alternative conceptualizations of brands

Beyond the traditional brand management and cultural branding approaches, several alternative approaches have emerged in the branding literature. These include a critical approach arguing that brands are built on the immaterial labor of consumers (Arvidsson, 2005), semiotic approach drawing on Peirce's structural semiotics (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001), hermeneutic approach focusing on the historical evolution of brand meanings (Hatch & Rubin, 2006), and systems approach that conceptualizes brands as social systems (Giesler, 2003; Luedicke & Giesler, 2005). Although these approaches are informed by specific communication theories and offer more nuanced theoretical insights into the communicative nature of branding in contrast to dominating conceptualizations of brands, they remain scattered and occupy a marginal position within the broader literature.

One approach that has received more attention among branding scholars in recent years is the socio-material approach, which conceptualizes brands as complex and dynamic assemblages (Lury, 2009). This approach is based on an ontological turn

towards socio-materiality, drawing primarily on assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and actor-network theory (Latour, 2005). Scholars within this tradition emphasize the multiplicity, heterogeneity, and relationality inherent in social life, viewing brands as socio-material configurations composed of diverse human and non-human elements (Lury, 2009). More specifically, brands in this approach are conceptualized as complex and dynamic assemblages or actor-networks composed of various heterogeneous elements, including human actors, objects, concepts, and ideas (Lury, 2009; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2015; Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

In contrast to cultural branding which centres on interpretation of meaning, the socio-material approach reintroduces materiality in the conceptualization of the brand and emphasizes the relational aspects of branding. It focuses on how the various social, material and semiotic components of the brand assemblage relate to each other and how they gain their capacities through interaction with other entities (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). Branding, in this view, is understood as a dynamic process of establishing relationships between multiple human and non-human entities (e.g., Giesler, 2012; Molander et al., 2022; Preece et al., 2019).

Building on insights from Latour's (2005) material-semiotic perspective, this approach posits that symbolic elements, such as ideologies or myths, are inseparable from material objects (Parmentier and Fischer, 2015). In his semiotic-inspired theory, Latour (1996) argued that objects are necessary to provide energy for ideas to travel and that ideas are constantly translated based on the conditions and needs of the objects. The process of formation of actor-networks is a dynamic process of establishing relations between material and non-material entities that undergo constant translations and transform into new functions (Latour, 2005). Similarly, the assemblage view of brands draws on DeLanda's (2006) ideas of how the heterogeneous components of assemblages gain capacities through interactions, emphasizing the dynamic relations between meaning and materiality. Thus, in this conceptualization of brand as assemblages or actor-networks, brand meaning and brand materiality are seen as separate yet interrelated components of the brand. Importantly, in this interplay between materiality and meaning, material components and practices can actively shape and contest brand meaning (Michel & Zeitoun, 2022).

The socio-material approach offers more nuanced understanding of brands by employing a more sophisticated theoretical model of communication that addresses the limitations of the previous approaches. Brand management research, focusing firstly on symbolic representations as material expressions of brands and

lately reframing brands as mental constructs, remained organization-centric and couldn't distinguish the brand from the corporation. The cultural branding approach reconceptualized brands as cultural symbols, focusing on the interpretations of the cultural meanings associated with brands from consumers' perspective. In contrast, the socio-material approach moves beyond a single perspective and develops a decentered conceptualization of brands as dynamic social entities embedded in networks of relationships involving humans, technologies, objects and ideas (Lury, 2009; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). Within this framework, brands are viewed as fluid and evolving assemblages or actor-networks that are not controlled and governed by a single actor. This approach is particularly suited for capturing the dynamic and relational nature of brands as well as the interplay between meaning and materiality. However, due to its strong emphasize on continuous transformation, it is less capable of explaining the communicative mechanisms through which brands maintain stability over time.

Brands as strategic organizing tools

A significant body of branding research has focused on corporate brand management, which differs from traditional, consumer-centric brand management by highlighting the strategic and organizing role of brands. Corporate branding scholars conceptualize brands as *strategic organizing tools* that serve to unify and guide the entire organization, while facilitating interaction with all relevant stakeholders (Balmer, 1995; de Chernatony, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Jones, 2005). Unlike product branding, which often involves managing multiple brands across product lines and market segments, corporate branding advocates for a single, cohesive corporate brand with a strong brand identity that can integrate the whole organization.

This approach emphasizes the importance of both the internal and external dimensions of the brand, suggesting that corporate brand management requires an understanding of how the corporate vision, internal culture, and external images are aligned (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). It acknowledges the importance of communicating with multiple internal and external stakeholders in the corporate branding process, such as employees, managers, consumers, media, and governments (de Chernatony & Harris, 2000). Therefore, this research proposed shifting from a consumer-centric model of brand equity to a stakeholder model,

arguing that brands establish relationships with a variety of stakeholders that contribute to the creation of brand value (Jones, 2005).

Later theorization in this research field introduced a co-creation perspective (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). This perspective suggests that brands are socially co-created entities and emphasizes the role of stakeholders as active participants in the brand co-creation process. Drawing inspiration from symbolic interactionism, particularly Mead's dynamic model of the self (Hatch & Schultz, 2002), this turn in corporate branding research highlights the subjective interpretation of stakeholders. It suggests that corporate brands are not fully controlled and managed by the company. Rather, brand co-creation is a collaborative process that involves ongoing interactions among multiple internal and external stakeholders. The focus, therefore, is on the symbolic acts of brand interpretation performed by various stakeholders.

Scholars advancing this stakeholder perspective have demonstrated how brands are co-created in a dynamic process, situated within complex social networks. For example, Gyrð-Jones and Kornum (2013) illustrated that co-creation involves a wide variety of stakeholders nested in complex online and offline ecosystems. They argue that the brand co-creation process depends on the cultural complementarity between the brand and these stakeholder ecosystems. Similarly, Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) demonstrate that brand meaning results from the simultaneous interactions of interdependent stakeholders within complex and dynamic networks. They conclude that brand managers cannot control brand meaning and are instead one of many actors who co-create the brand.

Co-creation has become a widely accepted paradigm in branding research, and its benefits are well acknowledged. However, from another perspective, brands may encounter several challenges when engaging in co-creative practices. These include loss of control over the brand, difficulty in managing destructive or oppositional stakeholders, and challenges in maintaining a coherent brand identity (Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2019). Some scholars contend that co-creation is inherently chaotic, unpredictable, and entirely beyond the control of organizations (Fisher & Smith, 2011). Although the corporate branding approach was partly inspired by symbolic interactionist understanding of communication and interaction among stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz, 2002), framing branding as an evolving and dynamic process not fully controllable by brand managers, it still approaches co-creation from a corporate perspective. A prevailing assumption within this approach is that brand managers can nurture the relationship with the stakeholders and influence the brand meanings they associate with the brand.

(Siano et al., 2022b). By positioning branding as a governing mechanism for the corporation, this approach cannot fully embrace brands as distinct entities.

In conclusion, the corporate branding approach offers a more nuanced and insightful perspective on brands comparing to traditional brand management approach by framing branding as a dynamic, co-creational process involving multiple stakeholders. Departing from the transmission view of communication, this approach aligns with cultural branding theories in recognizing brands as co-created entities, while extending the analysis beyond the interpretation of meaning to conceptualize brands as complex social processes. Furthermore, it shares affinities with the socio-material approach by acknowledging the relational and networked nature of brands within broader social contexts. However, this approach remains organization-centric, emphasizing the organizing function of the corporate brand as its central feature. In this view, the corporate brand acts as a unifying mechanism that integrates the organization internally and facilitates connections with external stakeholders.

Summary and conclusion

The four branding approaches, including traditional brand management, cultural branding, socio-material branding, and corporate branding, offer distinct theoretical lenses for understanding the nature and function of brands (see table 2 for overview). The traditional brand management approach conceptualizes brands as symbolic representations and consumer perceptions and focuses on how managers can shape consumer perceptions through sending brand messages. Cultural branding challenges this sender-oriented view by conceptualizing brands as cultural symbols embedded in socio-historical contexts, shaped through shared myths, ideologies and consumer interpretations. The socio-material approach further expands the theoretical lens by reconceptualizing brands as dynamic assemblages or actor-networks composed of human and non-human elements, emphasizing the relational interplay between meaning and materiality. Finally, the corporate branding approach sees brands as strategic organizing tools that unify the organization internally and facilitate interactions with multiple stakeholders through co-creation processes.

Table 2. Overview of branding approaches and conceptualizations of brands

	Brand management	Cultural branding	Socio-material branding	Corporate branding
<i>Conceptualization of brands</i>	Brands as symbolic representations and perceptions	Brands as cultural symbols	Brands as assemblages and actor-networks	Brands as organizing and governing tools
<i>Perspective</i>	Managerial and psychological perspective	Interpretivist and semiotic perspective	Socio-material perspective	Managerial and social interactionist perspective
<i>Understanding of communication</i>	Transmission of messages	Symbolic meaning-making	Translation and transformation	Symbolic interactions
<i>Focus</i>	Focus on control of brand and brand perceptions	Focus on interpretations of cultural meanings	Focus on relations and interactions between brand components	Focus on relations and interactions with stakeholders
<i>Function of brands</i>	Commercial entities facilitating market transactions	Symbolic entities facilitating meaning-making process	Relational entities facilitating social relations	Organizational tools providing governing mechanisms

Among these approaches, the socio-material approach and corporate branding offer more relevant theoretical insights into brands as distinct social entities. The socio-material approach, through its grounding in assemblage theory and actor-network theory, moves beyond the transmission view of communication and the organization-centric perspective. This approach offers a decentered conceptualization of brands, reintroduces materiality into brand theory, and accounts for how brands emerge, evolve and gain agency through complex relational networks of humans, technologies, objects and meanings. Corporate branding moves beyond the transmission view of communication and the consumer-centric paradigm, seeing brands as organizing mechanisms that integrate multiple stakeholders and foster a dynamic co-creation across organizational boundaries. Both approaches embrace the view that brands cannot

be fully controlled and instead recognize brands as social entities embedded in broader social, material, and organizational contexts.

However, despite these theoretical advancements, both the socio-material and corporate branding approaches face important limitations that highlight the need for further conceptual development. While the socio-material approach is effective in capturing the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of brand assemblages, it is less capable of explaining the communicative mechanisms through which brands stabilize and maintain their existence over time. Corporate branding, although recognizing that brands are co-created by multiple stakeholders, retains an organizational perspective that limits its ability to fully embrace brands as distinct and uncontrollable entities. In general, these approaches indicate a theoretical and conceptual evolution within branding research, where significant theoretical advancements have emerged when new understandings of communication were introduced. However, I suggest that there is a need for an alternative understanding of communication that is better suited for explaining how brands function as distinct communicative entities.

In the next chapter, I will present social systems theory and discuss how it has informed the theoretical approach to branding that I develop in this thesis. I will further explain how social systems theory was applied as an analytical approach to understand the transgressive nature of contemporary brands.

Theoretical perspective and analytical approach

This chapter introduces the theoretical perspective and the analytical approach that guide the understanding of the social function of brands as transgressive communicative entities. The thesis applies a communication-centered perspective based on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. Communication scholarship offers multiple traditions and communication theories that could provide a possible way of describing and analysing the transgressive nature of brands. This thesis proposes social systems theory as a communication theory that offers rich conceptual toolkit and multiple analytical strategies that could help to understand brands as communicative entities and explain the communicative mechanisms that enable brand transgressions.

The chapter is organized into three main sections. The first section outlines the central premises and the epistemological foundations of social systems theory, with particular emphasis on Luhmann's understanding of communication, social systems, and functional differentiation of modern society. The second section discusses the analytical concepts and guiding distinctions that inform the conceptualization of brands as communication systems and the theorization of brand transgressions. The final section explains the use of second-order observation as the analytical approach guiding the thesis, describes the three analytical strategies employed in the studies, and discusses key methodological considerations.

Theoretical foundations: Social systems theory

Niklas Luhmann was a prominent German sociologist and one of the leading social theorists of the twentieth century. His work made a lasting contribution to contemporary social theory, particularly through his development of systems

theory and his analysis of modern society. Building on and significantly extending Talcott Parsons' systems theory, Luhmann developed a comprehensive theory of society that conceptualizes modern society as a constellation of functionally differentiated systems, such as the economy, politics, law, religion, art, science etc. Luhmann's theory has been widely applied in fields such as sociology, political science, and organization studies, offering valuable insights into the self-referential and communicative operations of social systems. In particular, organization scholars have employed this theoretical lens to study organizations as autonomous social systems (Meyer & Boxenbaum, 2010; Seidl & Becker, 2006; Schoeneborn, 2011; Seidl & Mormann, 2014). Although it is a theory with communication as focus, social systems theory has been less applied in strategic communication research and remains relatively underutilized in branding research (cf. Giesler, 2003; Giesler & Venkatesh, 2005; Gur, 2012; Lies, 2024; Luedicke & Giesler, 2005; Luedicke, 2006), where its alternative understanding of communication and society could offer new theoretical and analytical insights.

Social systems theory is a multifaceted theory that challenges the assumptions of traditional sociology and provides a radical constructivist understanding of society (Luhmann, 1995a). In developing his theory, Luhmann (1992a) raised three important concerns about the concept of society in classic sociology. First, he problematized the assumption that society consists of human beings and relations between human beings and argued that society instead should be understood as communication. Second, he disagreed with the view that societies are regional and territorial units and suggested that society as a whole should be understood as a communication system that consists of different functional subsystems. The third concern is related to the epistemological question of how to observe society. Luhmann argued that society cannot be observed from outside, but each social subsystem observes society from inside and provides a unique perspective and description of social reality. The following introduces the main premises of social systems theory, including Luhmann's understanding of communication, his view on social systems and functional differentiation of society, and the epistemological foundations of the theory.

Luhmann's understanding of communication

The central premise of social systems theory is Luhmann's understanding of communication as the fundamental element and operation of society (Luhmann, 1992b). Social systems theory proposes that society, as a whole and in all its details, is constituted by communication. This radical view suggests that

communication is not a property of human beings, it cannot be ascribed to individual subjects, and it is distinct from individual consciousness. In Luhmann's view, psychic systems are constituted by consciousness, whereas communication is a property of social systems. Furthermore, he challenged the classic transmission model of communication that understands communication as an action and as a process of transmitting messages from a sender to a receiver. He argued that it is not subjects that communicate. For him, communication is not merely a transfer of information between subjects, and nothing is transmitted in the communication process. Instead, Luhmann sees communication as a more complex process of multiple selections that connect to each other and only together make the communication happen. In other words, Luhmann argues that only communication can communicate, and only communication can produce new communication.

More specifically, Luhmann (1992b) suggests that communication should be understood as a synthesis of three selections of information, utterance, and understanding. The first selection of information refers to the content of the message that is communicated. The second selection of utterance refers to the expression of the information. Luhmann (1992b) emphasizes that communication happens when the third selection of understanding is made, which means that the difference between information and utterance is understood. This means that communication can occur only if the information and the utterance are understood as different selections. Thus, communication cannot be reduced only to a matter of utterances, but it occurs as a unity of all the three selections of information, utterance, and understanding. Importantly, the third selection enables the continuity of communication by referring to the previous utterances or information. Therefore, Luhmann (1995a) defines communication as a network of recursive connections, rather than a simple transmission of messages between a sender and a receiver. Importantly, he explains that every communication refers to and is connected to previous communication. With every new communication there is a horizon of possibilities for new connections to happen and thus, for the communication to continue.

Social systems

Social systems theory maintains the idea that society is a communication system as a whole and is constituted of social subsystems that perform various societal functions. Luhmann was particularly interested in describing social systems and their specific functions and communicative operations. Importantly, he

distinguishes social systems from other types of systems such as living systems and psychic systems, arguing that social systems have their own specific characteristics and ways of operating. Importantly, Luhmann defines social systems as boundary-maintaining systems (Hernes & Bakken, 2003). According to Luhmann, social systems reduce environmental complexity by establishing a boundary that separates the system from its environment. Thus, Luhmann defines a social system simply as the difference between the system and its environment (Luhmann, 1995a, 2006). As Luhmann explains, a system emerges by establishing a clear boundary that separates it from its environment. Establishing this distinction is essential for the system to start to operate, which implies that the system cannot exist without its environment. Moreover, each system has its own system-specific environment. Importantly, the environment of each system may contain other systems, including other social systems as well as living systems and psychic systems.

Luhmann (1995a) describes social systems as operationally closed, autopoietic and self-referential systems that maintain their existence and their boundaries by producing and reproducing their communicative operations. First, Luhmann explains that social systems are operationally closed around their specific operations and cannot cross their boundaries or interfere in the operations of other systems. The system's structure and boundaries are produced and reproduced by the operational closure of the system. Yet, social systems are cognitively open towards their environment and can observe other systems from their environment. Second, social systems are autopoietic systems that can produce and reproduce their communicative operations. What drives the autopoietic reproduction of social systems is the flow of communication, or the ability to connect specific system-relevant communication with new communication. Third, social systems are self-referential systems, which means that they need to refer back to their own operations in order to maintain their boundaries and their existence.

Although these features suggest that social systems need to stay distinct from the environment, they can still relate to their environment. Luhmann suggests that the relations between different systems are established through structural couplings. As he explains, in structural couplings, the systems maintain their individual operations and autopoietic reproduction, but they are attentive to the other system and adjust to each other. In other words, the systems do not interfere each other's operation, but they can productively irritate each other's communication. As a result, each system develops internal structures that reflect their environment and the other system as part of the environment.

Functional differentiation of society

The development of social systems is a result of an evolutionary process and a feature of modern society. Luhmann (1995a) describes modern society as functionally differentiated and explains that it consists of different social systems that fulfil specific functions in society. Functional differentiation as a mode of organizing society is different from previous pre-modern forms of organization and differentiation of society. Luhmann (1982) first explains that pre-modern tribal societies were based on a segmentary differentiation. These societies consisted of segments with no major differences between them, such as clans or tribes. He further explains that more developed societies were characterized with a hierarchical differentiation (Luhmann, 1982). These societies consisted of unequal segments that were positioned hierarchically on different levels and ranks, such as estates, classes or castes. The evolution from hierarchical to modern societies resulted into a functionally differentiated society. Importantly, Luhmann (1995c) does not differentiate between modern and post-modern society and claims that postmodernity does not reflect a structural shift in society. Instead, he suggests that labelling today's society as modern society would be more accurate.

Luhmann (1995c) therefore describes today's modern society as a functionally differentiated society that consists of multiple autonomous functional social systems, including the systems of economy, law, politics, art, science, education, religion, and the mass media. As described earlier, each functional social system reproduces itself and differentiates from other societal systems through its own system-specific communication. Moreover, each social system observes society from its own lens and produces different descriptions of society. However, Luhmann (1995a) further highlights that none of the systems has primacy over the others and there is no one system that has a dominating role in society. Modern society consists of autonomous social systems that reproduce themselves autopoietically while remaining structurally coupled to other systems in their environment. This view on society as functionally differentiated implies that modern society is polycentric, which has consequences for studying contemporary social phenomena and their understanding requires considering the perspectives of multiple social systems as observers.

In this thesis, I particularly focus on understanding the link between brands and the social systems of economy and politics. Luhmann describes that these systems have unique functions in society, and their autopoietic reproduction is enabled by distinct communicative operations, mediums and mechanisms. The economic system is a subsystem that deals with the problem of scarcity of different resources

in society, including goods, services and money, and its specific function is to regulate scarcity (Luhmann, 1982). The communicative operation of the economic system is based on the distinction of payment/non-payment, where money serve as a medium and prices as a mechanism to enable payments. The function of the political system is to make collectively binding decisions (Luhmann, 2000a). This subsystem operates by making a distinction between the government and the opposition, using power as a medium and elections as a mechanism to regulate who is in power to make political decisions.

While economy and politics function as autonomous subsystems, they also depend on each other and are interrelated in structural couplings. For example, one way how the systems of economy and politics are coupled is through taxes. The political system (or the government) depends on the economic system to collect taxes to enable it to realize its political program (Borch, 2011). These two systems can also be coupled with other systems, such as for example with mass media. The political system is coupled with mass media through news. So, media use the political system to produce political news that require a response within the political system, while the political system depends on media to influence public opinion (Luhmann, 2000b). Similarly, economy and mass media are coupled through advertising, where the economy, or commercial organizations, depend on the media to be able to advertise and therefore sell their goods and services (Luhmann, 2000b).

Epistemology of social systems theory

To elaborate the epistemological foundations of social systems theory, it is necessary to introduce the concepts of observation, distinction, re-entry and paradox. The main idea of social systems theory is that modern society is polycentric, constituted of multiple social systems that observe in its own way by making distinction. Inspired by Spencer-Brown's work and notion of distinctions as forms with two sides, Luhmann explains that drawing a distinction means indicating one side from the other, or in other words, making a difference between the marked and the unmarked side. Thus, he defines observation as 'operation using a distinction for indicating one side of the distinction and not the other' (Luhmann, 1993). Every observation is based on using a particular distinction, such as for example, consciousness/communication, subject/system, economy/politics etc. An important implication of this definition of observation is that every observation is constituted of a distinction and indication that appear simultaneously, which means that every distinction is a two-sided distinction.

Based on this understanding of observations, Luhmann explains that the communicative operations of social systems are based on making distinctions. Social systems observe by making a distinction between what should be included in the interior of the system and what should be excluded and belongs to its environment. Social systems are constituted by reproducing their communicative operations, that is, by consistently and repeatedly using the same distinctions to observe.

An important argument in Luhmann's theory is that every observation has a blind spot. As an operation that draws a difference, the observation is not capable to see that difference. To overcome the problem of the blind spot of the observation, Luhmann (1995b) proposed that the distinction should be re-entered into the distinction itself. When the system observes by making a distinction between the system and its environment, the distinction of system/environment is re-introduced on the inside of the system. The re-entry of the distinction permits the system to observe by making a difference and to also observe the unity of the difference at the same time. Luhmann calls this a second-order observation. While first order-observation refers to the distinction that the systems is using to observe, second-order observation refers to how the system observes using the same specific distinction. The second-order observation observes both the indication and the difference, which means that it is able to observe the blind spot of the first-order observation. Andersen (2009) explains that observing in the second order means to observe observations as observations. The emphasis on the second-order observation is essential in Luhmann's epistemological focus of how systems observe and how they see the world.

Furthermore, Luhmann argues that observation is a paradoxical operation because it needs to refer to the unity of the difference (Luhmann, 1995b, 2006). This means that every observation needs to select one side of the distinction, but at the same time it needs to observe the other side of the distinction that is not selected. This paradox produces a question of how to observe something that is not observable and thus creates impossible conditions for the communication. While paradoxes threaten the operations of the system (Andersen, 2011; Seidl et al., 2021), Luhmann (2006) suggests that they can be productively unfolded, and the communication can be deparadoxified. Andersen (2003) describes that this can be done by applying different strategies of deparadoxification that can, for example, help to unfold the paradox temporarily, or make the paradox less visible by supplementing the communication with new distinctions. Luhmann's epistemological focus on paradoxes is thus related to observing how paradoxes

develop and become visible, how they are deparadoxified, and how new conditions are created that enable the communication to continue. This approach to paradoxes allows to observe how social systems handle paradoxes and how they continue their communicative operations.

Conceptual foundations: analytical concepts and guiding distinctions

Having outlined the theoretical foundations, I now turn to how social systems theory guides the conceptual development of the thesis and informs the analysis of brands as transgressive entities. First, social systems theory offers a particular understanding of social reality and social life as constituted by communication. Drawing on key insights from social systems theory, I propose conceptualizing brands as a form of communication with similar feature to social systems. This approach places communication as central in the conceptualization of brands and understanding how they function. Based on Luhmann's understanding of communication as making distinctions, I argue that brands function as communication systems that reproduce themselves by constantly making distinctions between themselves and other social entities. More specifically, I have mobilized two key concepts from social systems theory that guided the theorization of brands and brand transgressions: *allopoiesis* and *connectivity*.

Autopoiesis vs. allopoiesis

Luhmann's social systems theory is fundamentally grounded in the concept of *autopoiesis*, originally developed by Maturana and Varela to describe systems that reproduce and maintain themselves through their own operations (Buchinger, 2006). Luhmann adopts this notion to argue that social systems reproduce themselves through self-referential communication, continually generating the communicative events that constitute them. Within this framework, social systems are operationally closed and capable of producing the elements necessary for their continued existence through internally generated operations. Although Luhmann's work predominantly emphasized autopoietic systems, later scholarship has noted that certain social systems demonstrate *allopoietic* characteristics, which means that they lack stable boundaries and depend on other observers from their environment to maintain their operations (Misheva, 2002).

Systems such as the media (Misheva, 2005), the arts (Misheva, 2002), or the legal system in peripheral countries (Neves, 2001) have been described as having allopoietic characteristics in this sense, as their identity and reproduction often rely on other observers.

Building on these conceptual developments, I have mobilized the notion of *allopoiesis* to advance a reconceptualization of brands as systems of communication. Although the term does not appear explicitly in my research articles, it has served as a guiding idea for conceptualizing brands as communicatively constituted systems with allopoietic characteristics that reproduce themselves only through continuous reference to other entities. The conceptualization is further refined with Luhmann's distinction between *self-reference* and *other-reference*, which clarifies how brands reproduce their own communicative identity while simultaneously engaging with other external entities. Such a communication-centered perspective offers a fundamentally different understanding of brands comparing to existing branding theories and opens new possibilities for theorizing and understanding their transgressive nature. Specifically, viewing brands as communication systems that remain open to their environment allows to conceptualize brand transgressions as the ability of brands to cross boundaries, connect to diverse social entity, and thus engage in complex social relations.

Differentiation vs. connectivity

Luhmann (1995a) identifies functional differentiation as a foundational feature of modern society, arguing that society consists of multiple autonomous functional systems, each operating according to its own code and internally generated communicative operations. These systems are autopoietic and operationally closed, meaning that although they may observe and respond to one another, they do not directly interfere in each other's operations. For example, while the economic and political systems observe each other and relate in different ways, they remain distinct and autonomous (Borch, 2011). Brand activism is an example that illustrates this dynamic by showing how brands can establish communicative links between economy and politics despite their operational closure and autonomy. Thus, *differentiation* and *connectivity* are equally important concepts in understanding modern society and social relations.

Drawing on the view of modern society as functionally differentiated and constituted of multiple functional social systems, I argue that brands can be

understood as transgressive entities capable of forming connections across different social domains and systems. I theorize brand transgressions as a process through which brands transcend boundaries and connect different social entities and systems. This conceptualization makes it possible to capture and analyze the connectivity capacity of brands by examining how brands establish relationships across functional social systems, how they facilitate social connectivity and specific forms of social relations, and how these connections enable brand transgressions. Focusing on brand activism as an example of brand transgression, I analyze the mechanisms that enable brands to connect economy and politics, how this connection has developed historically, and how it emerges in different forms. This perspective further allows to analyze and understand the communicative possibilities and the challenges when brands operate across and transcend system boundaries. More specifically, the analysis focuses on the communicative conditions that emerge when brands connect business and politics.

Second-order observation: analytical strategies and empirical material

The analytical approach of this work is inspired by the epistemological foundations of social systems theory and the idea of second-order observation of social phenomena. Social systems theory allows to analyze how social systems emerge through communication, how they exist and maintain their operations, how social systems establish connections or couplings between themselves, and how they interrupt each other productively and destructively (Andersen, 2003). Applying a second-order perspective as a meta-analysis, the thesis explores the communicative structures and operations that enable brands to exist as communication systems, the relationships that brands develop with other social entities and systems, as well as the communicative challenges they face in these processes. Thus, the analysis in this thesis focuses on understanding how the conceptualization of brands as communications systems can help to explain the transgressive nature of brands, as well as the mechanisms that enable brands to transgress and connect to different social entities and social systems.

Social systems theory offers multiple analytical strategies for conducting a second-order observations, including form analysis, semantic analysis, systems analysis, differentiation analysis, media analysis and observation analysis (Andersen, 2003, 2008; Sohn, 2021). These strategies are related but each of them offers an

analytical framework with different focus and could be applied to understand different aspects of the phenomenon of study. The specific analytical strategies applied in this thesis that are particularly productive for analysing the communicative mechanisms that enable brand transgressions are form analysis, semantic analysis and observation analysis. Form analysis refers to the examination of the guiding distinction for observation, or the form through which communication occurs. Semantic analysis focuses on understanding how meaning is condensed in semantic forms that enable communication. Observation analysis seeks to understand the consequences and paradoxes of observing through self-reference and other-reference as well as how new conditions are created that enable the communicative operations to continue. The three analytical strategies are applied to analyze the empirical material comprised of various texts. The first two articles represent a theoretical inquiry, analyzing academic branding literature. The last two articles study specific empirical contexts, analyzing texts from multiple sources as the main empirical material. Each article provides a detailed description of the empirical material and the analytical procedures. Table 3 and the following sections provide an overview of the three analytical strategies and describe the empirical material analyzed in each of the studies.

Table 3. Overview of analytical strategies and empirical material

	Article 1	Article 2	Article 3	Article 4
Research questions	RQ1. How do different communication theories inform alternative conceptualizations of brands, and what explanatory potential do these conceptualizations offer for understanding brand transgressions?	RQ2. How can social systems theory contribute to understanding the communicative function of brands and the mechanisms that enable brands to transcend boundaries and facilitate social relations?	RQ3. What paradoxes emerge from brand transgressions, and how do these paradoxes shape the communicative reproduction of brands?	
Analytical strategy	Form analysis	Form analysis	Semantic analysis	Observation analysis
Empirical material	24 academic texts (books and academic articles) of established and emerging branding theories	27 academic texts (books and academic articles) from mainstream branding scholarship	Primary: 102 articles from industry publications (1982–2024) Secondary: 77 texts that cover older debates and refer to iconic cases (1920s–1970s)	Case study: 12 brand campaigns (2012–2024), corporate texts and documents, 4 in-depth interviews

Form analysis

Form analysis is an analytical strategy that focuses on examining guiding distinctions. According to Luhmann (1995b), a distinction is a form with two sides that make a difference between a marked and an unmarked side. The two sides of the distinction form a unity, which means that the distinction functions as a boundary that simultaneously separates and connects the two sides. Therefore, the guiding distinction of form analysis is unity/difference (Andersen, 2003), which helps to analyze how any given distinction simultaneously separates and unites two sides. Form analysis can be applied in two different ways by looking at

the communicative structures of distinctions (Sohn, 2021). The first way focuses on analyzing the meaning of concepts in opposition to their counter-concepts, while the second on analyzing the meaning of concepts in a specific context. Form analysis is a suitable strategy for analyzing the guiding distinctions employed in branding theories and different conceptualizations of brands, as well as for tracing the shifts in the meaning of the concept of 'brand' and its various applications. Furthermore, form analysis is suitable for conceptualizing brands as communication systems and understanding how they function by using distinctions i.e. how brands distinguish between themselves (self-reference) from other entities from their environment (other-reference).

In this thesis, I firstly employ form analysis to address RQ1 in the first article, specifically examining the distinctions that are used to conceptualize brands in various branding theories and understand their potential for explaining brand transgressions. It is important to highlight that this study is not a literature review of different branding theories, but rather a second-order observation of the guiding distinctions in different conceptualizations of brands. A similar approach, for example, has been applied by Roth et al. (2025), who examine the guiding distinction that shape theory-building and empirical studies in management and organizational research. The empirical material used for the first article is comprised of classic works of most established scholars in academic branding literature, including 24 texts (books and academic articles) that specifically develop or discuss different conceptualizations of brands. The analysis focuses on two established and two emerging theoretical approaches, exploring how the underlying communication model in each approach informs the distinctions employed in conceptualizing brands (e.g., brand vs. perception; brand vs. culture), and the implications for their potential for understanding the transgressive nature of brands. The concept of form is particularly utilized to analyze and further develop the conceptualization of brands as communication systems that operate by making distinctions. The brand in this conceptualization is seen as a form i.e. a distinction that operates through self-reference/other-reference. I demonstrate how this form-based conceptualization offers an alternative way for understanding the transgressive nature of brands comparing to the established approaches in branding theory.

I further employ form analysis to address RQ2 in the second article and examine the specific ways in which brands facilitate connections between social systems. The analysis focuses particularly on brand activism as a contemporary example of brand transgression and a special way of connecting business and politics through

brands. The aim is to explain the specific communicative function of brands and how they are capable of connecting business and politics as two distinct domains of society. From a social systems perspective, business and politics are analyzed as two autonomous social systems (i.e. economic system and political system). The analysis focuses on understanding the mechanisms that enable and prevent brands to transcend their boundaries and connect these two distinct and autonomous systems. Form analysis is specifically applied to examine different historical and contemporary distinctions that define brands and uncover the evolution of brands as connectivity devices. The empirical material for this study is comprised of classic works in branding literature, including 27 academic texts (books and academic articles) that specifically discuss the function of brands in different periods. The focus is primarily on mainstream branding literature that is most common within the branding scholarship. Branding literature grounded in alternative theoretical traditions was excluded (e.g., semiotics, hermeneutics), because these theories operate on different distinctions than those shared in the mainstream branding literature and branding practice.

Semantic analysis

Semantic analysis is an analytical strategy employed to trace the evolution of popular language and generalized forms of meaning used to reproduce social communication (Luhmann, 1995a, 2006; Andersen, 2003, 2011). Luhmann defines semantics as generalized forms of meaning (concepts, ideas, images and symbols) that form semantic reservoirs which are available to communication and make it efficient and reliable (Andersen, 2003, 2009, 2011). This analytical strategy documents the evolution of semantics as communicative forms of meaning that undergo a constant, but slow evolutionary process of variation and selection, analyzes the semantics that succeed to gain widespread popularity and use, and examines how the social structures that are reflected in different semantics. This strategy is applied to address RQ2 in the third article of the thesis. The article conceptualizes political brand activism as brand communication that is deliberately double-coded with both a brand message and a political message. Applying historical semantic analysis, it examines the emergence of different strategies of political brand activism and the political semantics that underpin them. The article further investigates the risks associated with each strategy and the potential critique they attract by examining the different paradoxes that emerge as a result of integrating different political semantics into the double-coded brand communication.

The empirical material for the third article is comprised of articles from industry publications and historical literature, collected in two stages. The analyzed texts describe and discuss examples of iconic and revolutionary advertising campaigns from US and European brands in different periods, starting from the late 1920s and onwards. The primary data consists of long-form articles published in the three leading industry publications *AdAge*, *Adweek*, and *Campaign* from the period of 1980s-2020s. These publications are the most influential among industry professionals that include the most important debates on politicized branding and reflect the major shifts in thinking on brand strategy and brand practice. The final body of texts consisted of 102 articles published between 1982 and 2024 that discuss 'branding' in addition to political, societal, environmental, or racial issues. Articles that addressed political elections and political campaigns but did not discuss brand strategy were excluded. The selected texts offer a rich material on various strategic aspects of mainstream branding related to political issues as discussed among branding professionals, including a discussion of successful cases of mainstream brands and examples of controversial brand strategies.

The secondary data included texts from the period between 1920s and 1970s that cover older debates on politicized branding that were not covered in the primary material. These texts served to identify older semantic forms as well as to identify relevant cases and advertising campaigns from that period. This body of empirical material consisted of 77 texts that refer to various topics related to politicized branding and advertising campaigns with political messages. This material included 8 branding books published by recognized book publishers and 69 other texts from trade and business press, news websites, relevant blog posts and opinion articles, industry reports published by advertising agencies, consultants and industry bodies, and corporate websites.

After closely examining, reading and interpreting the empirical material, three broader themes that reflect three political semantics were distinguished. The three political semantics that underpin the three distinct strategies of political brand activism were identified by searching for different explicit references to political ideas, concepts and issues in the brand communication. The analysis focused on observing various brand strategies, identifying the political messages and the implied role of the brand in each strategy. Furthermore, the analysis focused on identifying the main perceived critique associated with each strategy provoked by the inherent paradoxes of connecting business and politics through brand activism.

Observation analysis

Observation analysis is an analytical strategy employed to identify the paradoxes that emerge when systems observe through self-reference and other-reference and examine how new communicative conditions are created to enable the communicative operations to continue (Sohn, 2021). For Luhmann (1995b), paradoxes are inevitable in any communication and in any observation. While paradoxes create impossible conditions for the communication to continue, they can be communicatively unfolded or deparadoxified (Luhmann, 2006; Seidl et al., 2021). Namely, paradoxical communication can be unblocked by applying different strategies of deparadoxification, such as for example reframing and moving the paradox into a temporal, factual, or social dimension (Andersen, 2003). Thus, observation analysis focuses on understanding how paradoxes become visible and how they are deparadoxified in order to create new communicative conditions and new possibilities. Drawing on these insights, the thesis analyzes the paradoxes of brand activism and specifically how activist brands use paradoxes in constructing their identity as communication systems. Contrary to the view in the branding literature that brand activism as a risky strategy and paradoxes as problematic elements that can destabilize the brand identity, the thesis explores how paradoxes can be used as communicative resources for the identity formation of activist brands.

This analytical strategy is applied to address RQ3 in the fourth article, which employs an empirical case study approach. The article examines the Swedish activist brand Oatly that positions as a leader of a global plant-based sustainability movement. Oatly has experienced a globally popularity and success in the past decade (Wood, 2020), but it has also been highly controversial, criticized, and boycotted by consumers and activists (Contagious, 2023). Oatly is a prominent example of an activist brand that demonstrates various forms of transgressions and frequently uses paradoxes in its brand communication (Ledin & Machin, 2020; Koch & Ulver, 2022). Therefore, it represents a relevant and information-rich case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) that can offer insights about the use of paradoxes as communicative resources in brand identity formation. The empirical material consists of Oatly's brand campaigns from the period during which Oatly rebranded itself and positioned as a sustainability-focused activist brand and began to proactively use paradoxes in its communication (2012 to 2024). The material includes twelve brand campaigns that were launched globally or in Oatly's main markets and contain statements with clear significance for the brand's identity construction. The analysis was complemented with additional

material that served to contextualize the campaigns and the strategies behind them, including corporate text from the company's websites, annual sustainability reports, press releases, corporate statements and videos, newspaper and magazine articles, blog posts, as well as four in-depth interviews with senior managers who were directly involved in the brand campaign development.

The analysis of the empirical material was conducted as a second-order observation, using a meta-analysis of brand communication and drawing on the concepts of paradox and deparadoxification (Luhmann, 1995a, 1995b, 2006). It began with a close examination of the selected campaigns and the identification of key brand identity claims within each campaign. The analysis then focused on identifying both intentional and unintentional paradoxes that emerged when opposing identity claims were communicated, particularly when the boundaries of the brand identity were crossed or contested. Finally, the analysis explored the specific strategies through which Oatly's brand identity was constructed and examined the communicative possibilities these strategies opened up for sustaining the continuity of the brand identity.

In the next two chapters, I will first present a summary of the four articles and then provide a concluding discussion of the overall findings and the main implications of the social systems perspective for communication and branding research.

Summary of articles

The following chapter presents a summary of the four research articles that comprise this dissertation. The articles were developed as individual studies, each making a specific contribution to the understanding of the transgressive nature of contemporary brands. Together, the articles contribute with an extended understanding of brand transgressions, the communicative function of brands, and the specific mechanisms that enable brands to transcend boundaries and facilitate connections between different social entities and social systems.

Article 1. Beyond boundaries: Towards a conceptual and theoretical explanation of the transgressive nature of brands

This article introduces the idea that contemporary brands are transgressive and pervasive entities that increasingly cross boundaries in novel and surprising ways and form complex social relations. However, existing research provides limited explanations for such transgressions. The article aims to reconceptualize brand transgressions from a broader perspective and develop a conceptual and theoretical explanation of the transgressive nature of brands. To this end, the article conducts a meta-theoretical analysis of four approaches to branding, examining how the underlying models of communication shape different conceptualizations of brands and evaluating their potential for explaining transgressions. It further draws on Luhmann's social systems theory to develop an alternative understanding of brands as inherently transgressive communicative entities.

Drawing on a sociological understanding of transgressions, the article reconceptualizes brand transgressions as social processes of transcending boundaries. The analysis reveals that conceptualization of brands as cognitive, symbolic or socio-material entities rely on distinctions that are implicitly or explicitly grounded in different communication theories, leading to divergent

interpretations of transgressions. Furthermore, it demonstrates that conceptualizing brands as communication systems helps to explain the integrative mechanisms that enable transgressions and stabilize social relations. The article contributes to communication scholarship by demonstrating that transgressions are not anomalies or accidental deviations but an inherent feature of the communicative operations of brands. It offers a theoretical perspective that reframes contemporary brand phenomena as transgressive processes and clarifies the role of brands in shaping and facilitating complex social relations.

Article 2. Re-connecting business and politics through brand activism. A social systems perspective

The recent surge of brand activism demonstrates how companies engage more explicitly in politics, using the brand as a vehicle for political communication and public support of polarizing and controversial socio-political issues (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Previous research shows that the shifting control over the brand is radicalized when brands engage in socio-political issues. However, this research stream tends to conflate the corporation with the brand and lacks a conceptual clarity about the communicative function of the brand as a distinct entity, which prevents it from explaining how the brand specifically produces political communication. This article aims to understand the communicative function of brands and the mechanisms that enable them to connect business and politics.

Drawing on social systems theory and form analysis, the article conceptualizes brands as connectivity devices and explains how they are capable of connecting business and politics as two distinct spheres of society. The analysis shows that the social function of brands has evolved over time and that brands with their progressive detachment from products and markets have developed their capacity for social connectivity. The article demonstrates that brands connect business and politics by internalizing and reproducing the economy/politics distinction within their own structure. This mechanism enables brands to function as communicative connectivity devices capable of connecting different communication systems. Overall, this article emphasizes that although the increased connectivity makes brands more difficult to control, their openness and flexibility simultaneously enhance their value as vehicles for connectivity and social mediation.

Article 3. Double-coded branding. The political semantics of brand activism strategies

Branding with an explicit political message is rapidly on the rise in recent years, but the literature shows that this strategy can face a high risk of provoking negative responses, backlash and boycotts (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022). This article broadens the narrow understanding in the current research of what it means for brands to be political and the view on brand activism as a singular strategy of using explicit political messages, arguing that rather there is a range of brand activism strategies that can provoke different responses. Conducting historical semantic analysis of professional branding discourse, the article traces the historical development of different forms and strategies of politicized branding and investigates how brands connect to politics in different ways.

The article defines political brand activism strategies broadly as brand communication that is deliberately double-coded with both a brand and political message. The analysis has identified three distinct strategies of brand activism that mobilize three distinct political semantics: brand rebellion drawing on the semantic of political movements, brand advocacy drawing on the semantic of issues politics, and brand action drawing on the semantic of government politics. The analysis also shows that the backlash and the critique are responses to the inherent paradoxes of connecting business and politics and are framed by the political semantic that underpins each strategy. The article contributes with a typology of brand activism strategies, offering guidance for brand managers to regain strategic flexibility when developing politicized branding strategies and to understand the potential backlash and critique that each brand activism strategy can provoke.

Article 4. Playing with paradoxes: The strategic use of paradoxes in brand identity formation

This article examines how activist brands strategically use paradoxes in their communication and how these paradoxes contribute to the ongoing brand identity formation. Although previous research has acknowledged the presence and inevitability of paradoxes in branding (Brown et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2013;

Brown, 2014; Brown, 2016), the specific role and the strategic value of paradoxes in brand identity formation is undertheorized. This study builds on Luhmann's concepts of paradoxes and deparadoxification and adopts a second-order observation as analytical approach to explore how paradoxes emerge and operate within brand communication, how they shape the identity construction, and how they can be utilized to create new communicative possibilities. The empirical analysis is based on an in-depth case study of Oatly, focusing on the brand's provocative and paradoxical messaging across its campaigns.

The analysis identifies three distinct strategies of using paradoxes in Oatly's brand communication and identity formation: introducing and maintaining paradoxes, deparadoxification, and integrating multiple paradoxes. These strategies illustrate how paradoxes can be introduced in creative and playful ways, communicatively unfolded when they become problematic, and integrated into the brand identity structure. The findings demonstrate that paradoxes can be leveraged as strategic tools and communicative resources that enable the formation and continuity of brand identity. The article contributes with a conceptual clarification of paradoxes in branding from a communication-centered perspective and advances the understanding of their strategic use as integral elements of the brand's communicative operations and identity formation. The study demonstrates the strategic advantages and creative possibilities of using paradoxes in branding.

Concluding discussion

This chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings, highlighting main conceptual and theoretical contributions, and offering suggestions for future research. It begins by synthesizing the main insights gained across the four articles, which together conceptualize contemporary brands as transgressive communication systems capable of crossing social boundaries and connecting distinct societal spheres. The chapter then elaborates on the overall contributions of the thesis to communication and branding scholarship, emphasizing the development of a social systems perspective on brands and the theoretical understanding of the transgressive nature of brands. The chapter closes with a suggestion for potential directions for future studies and a concluding reflection on the relevance and the broader societal implications of this research.

Summary of findings

Brands as transgressive communicative entities

The thesis introduces the idea that modern brands are pervasive social entities that transcend boundaries, transgress across diverse social spheres, and engage in complex social relations. Traditional brand management theory has limited potential for understanding and explaining the transgressive nature of brands due to the predominant transmission view of communication and the organization-centric perspective that prevents it from understanding brands as distinct communicative entities. This inquiry started by examining various conceptualizations of brands within branding research based on alternative communication theories, and by searching for a conceptualization suited to explain the transgressive nature of brands. Specifically, this part of the research addressed the first research question of the thesis:

How do different communication theories inform alternative conceptualizations of brands, and what explanatory potential do these conceptualizations offer for understanding brand transgressions?

The process of addressing this question began by developing a conceptualization of brand transgressions as a phenomenon. The thesis draws on a sociological understanding of transgressions as social processes of transcending boundaries and exceeding limits (Jenks, 2003), suggesting a conceptualization of *brand transgressions* as social processes of transcending boundaries. This conceptualization reframes diverse brand-related phenomena that involve crossing of social, cultural or political boundaries as forms of transgression. Next, the analysis focused on a critical examination of two established and two emerging branding approaches which are grounded in different communication models, to understand their potential for explaining brand transgressions. The first research question is addressed in the first two articles of the thesis, which provide a meta-analysis of established and emerging branding theories and conceptualizations of brands as cognitive, symbolic and socio-material entities (Article 1), and advance the conceptualization of brands as communication systems as a viable alternative for explaining brand transgressions (Article 1 and Article 2).

The findings of the meta-analysis of the branding theories demonstrate that, while the established branding approaches could offer a limited understanding of brand transgressions, the emerging approaches offer a high potential for theoretical explanation of brand transgressions. The brand management approach, as the most dominant in branding literature, firstly framed brands as symbolic representations of products and legal trademarks (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), later evolving into consumer-centered conceptualization of brands as mental perceptions (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2003). Informed by a transmission model of communication, this approach emphasizes control of the brand and the brand perceptions and therefore sees transgressions as external risks for the brand that cannot be controlled. In contrast, the cultural branding approach emerged as a critique to the conceptualization of brands as mental constructs, conceptualizing brands as symbols that convey diverse cultural meanings (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010). Rooted in the interpretivist tradition and a semiotic model of communication, the cultural approach better accommodates brand transgressions by moving away from the transmission view of communication and explaining transgressions as links to cultural meanings through myths. However, this approach lacks clarity on the underlying mechanisms that make the brand prone to transgressions. The emerging socio-material approach reflects an ontological

turn towards socio-materiality, reconceptualizing brands as dynamic assemblages or actor-networks composed of various human and non-human entities (Lury, 2009; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). This approach solves the limitations of the transmission view of communication and the organization-centric perspective in traditional brand management by drawing on material-semiotics understanding of communication and offering a decentered conceptualization of brands. Therefore, it offers an analytical potential for capturing and understanding brand transgressions as dynamic relations with diverse social entities established through translations. However, this approach is less suitable for explaining how brands also possess integrative communicative mechanisms that enable and stabilize transgressions.

The subsequent exploration continued with searching for an alternative conceptualization of brands as distinct communicative entities that could help to explain brand transgressions as an inherent feature of the brand. The findings show that brands function as communicative entities that have evolved over time and gradually developed a potential for connectivity. Brands firstly emerged as part of the economic system and primarily served to connect products with consumers within a specific market. From a communication perspective, the connectivity was limited, as they were closely tied to the product and its specific market, thereby producing communication that was primarily product focused. In the second stage, brands gained independence from individual products and markets, which created possibility for additional connectivity. This development was visible in the rise of brand extensions, through which companies were able to connect a brand to multiple products and access new markets. In the third stage, brands evolved into fully detached entities with a stronger capacity for social connectivity. This transformation is reflected in the emergence of new forms of branding, such as corporate branding, place branding, and personal branding, where brands represent different kinds of entities and are used across different spheres of society. The analysis shows that brands are communicative entities that share similar features to social systems and have relatively permanent communicative structures. As such, they are capable of crossing boundaries and establishing social relations with different social entities and social systems.

Building on Luhmann's social systems theory, the thesis develops an alternative conceptualization of brands as communication systems. This conceptualization moves beyond the transmission view of communication and the organization-centric perspective, suggesting that brands function as distinct social entities that create their identity and reproduce themselves through their own communicative

operations. However, brands are different from autopoietic social systems because they are not fully self-referential systems and lack a stable identity. Rather, brands rely on and operate by continually referring to other social entities from their environment. This conceptualization therefore sees brands as allopoietic and open systems of communication. In other words, the dependence on external entities makes brands highly open entities with flexible identity boundaries that can easily be crossed, which enables brands to establish connections with various social entities. From social systems perspective, the boundary-crossing is a structural consequence of how brands operate, making transgressions integral feature of the ongoing construction and reproduction of brand identity. Therefore, this conceptualization of brands allows to understand brand transgressions as communicative processes of transcending boundaries, connecting to diverse social entities, and facilitating social relations. Furthermore, instances in which brands facilitate connections across diverse social spheres, such as economy, politics, art or religion, can also be understood as forms of transgressions. In this sense, brand activism can be reframed from a social systems perspective as a form of cross-systems transgression. Brands in this case establish and facilitate the connection between economy and politics as two distinct social systems, while the boundaries between the two systems remain intact.

In sum, the conceptualization of brands as allopoietic communication systems allows to understand brands as radically open entities that are extremely capable of transgressing and connecting to other social entities through what Luhmann (1999) describes, an open reference to the world.

The communicative function of brands and the mechanisms of brand transgressions

The thesis further explored how the conceptualization of brands as communication systems could specifically help to understand the capability of brands to transgress, establish social relations and facilitate connections between various social entities and social spheres. This inquiry addressed the second research question of the thesis:

How can social systems theory contribute to understanding the communicative function of brands and the mechanisms that enable brands to transcend boundaries and facilitate social relations?

The thesis advances understanding of how brands have evolved and transformed into distinct entities with a specific communicative function. The analysis of the

evolution of branding shows that the separation of the brand from the product, and later the separation of the brand from the corporation, have made possible the development of brands into distinct communicative entities with significantly increased connectivity potential, which has allowed for a vast expansion of the application of brands. More specifically, brands function as connectivity devices with specific communicative structures that enable them to connect different social spheres. From a social systems perspective, brands can be understood as communication systems that have developed relatively durable communication structures that facilitate connection between social systems without the need for the two systems to engage in a time-consuming synchronization of their communicative operations. This development of brands into social entities with specific structures have brought forth the contemporary phenomenon of brand activism. Although primarily associated with the economic system, activist brands also produce political communication and thereby function as transgressive connectivity devices that link the economic and the political systems. This communicative structure permits the economic system to continue its operations based on commercial communication (i.e. payments), while simultaneously allowing the brand to initiate and respond to political communication.

The thesis further explains the specific communicative mechanism that enables brands to transgress and function as connectivity devices. The analysis shows that brands possess a mechanism that operates through constant oscillation between self-reference and other-reference. As such, brands operate by creating a unity of the distinction between self-reference and other-reference. In the context of brand activism, the oscillation between economy and politics, viewed as self-reference and other-reference, allows the brand to mediate between the two distinct systems. The distinction between economy and politics depends on who observes the brand and will be formed differently based on the perspective of the observer. Importantly, for this unity to be maintained, it must be accepted by the observers. For example, on the one hand, the company observes the brand from the perspective of the economic system because it needs to generate sales and payments, and the political communication is therefore mobilized to create symbolic messages in the market. These messages may potentially resonate with politically conscious consumers and stimulate payments, but the unity between economy and politics may be rejected by consumers who see these messages as political washing. Political actors, on the other hand, observe the brand from the perspective of the political system because of its intention to generate political debates and influence political processes. However, the unity of the distinction of politics and economy may also be rejected due to the simultaneous commercial

motives of the brand. In general, the brand's ability to connect different systems in a single unity through the mechanism of self-reference and other-reference makes it an efficient connectivity device.

The phenomenon of brand activism has further been explored from a historical semantic perspective to understand how the mechanism of self-reference and other-reference works. The semantic analysis of brand activism shows that the connection of economy and politics through brands has emerged in three distinct forms by mobilizing different political semantics as references to the political system: brand rebellion, brand advocacy and brand action. The first strategy of political brand activism, *brand rebellion*, positions brands as symbolic resources for consumers to express their affiliation to countercultural movements and their rebellious political identity. This strategy mobilizes the semantic of political movements and is based on understanding of politics as rebellion against the dominant political powers. The second strategy, *brand advocacy*, positions brands as advocates and voices for specific political issues and causes. This strategy mobilizes the semantic of political issues and is based on understanding of politics as raising awareness, generating public debate, and pressuring politicians to address the issue. The third strategy, *brand action*, frames brands as political actors that engage directly in political processes. This strategy mobilizes the semantic of government politics and is based on understanding of politics as taking direct action and involving in governmental legislation or electoral politics to advance specific political initiatives and goals.

Interpreted in systems theory terms, all three forms of brand activism facilitate connections between the social systems of economy and politics through the mechanism of self-reference and other-reference. Importantly, the operational closure and functional differentiation of these systems remain unaffected in all the forms of brand activism. Namely, both the economy and the politics continue to function independently based on their own communicative operations. Brands as commercial entities are primarily associated with the economic system, and as such they cannot fully act as political entities and enforce political change. Although they can indirectly generate pressure on politicians or directly influence political processes such as voting and law-making, the political system ultimately remains inaccessible. However, the transgressive nature of brands demonstrates that they are effective mediators between economy and politics and may inspire or catalyze political engagement.

The paradoxes of brand transgressions

The thesis finally addressed the paradoxes that emerge when brands transcend boundaries and facilitate social relations. It explored how the paradoxes of brand transgressions could be understood from a social systems perspective, focusing specifically on the paradoxes of brand activism as a form of brand transgression. This part of the inquiry was guided by the third research question:

What paradoxes emerge from brand transgressions, and how do these paradoxes shape the communicative reproduction of brands?

Within the branding literature, different forms of brand transgressions are often perceived as risky and challenging because of their inherently paradoxical nature. Namely, each transgression creates a paradox because it connects two social entities or social systems that are at the same time autonomous and independent from each other. This paradox is particularly visible in brand activism since activist brands simultaneously connect and keep divided the systems of economy and politics. The paradox emerges in all the three identified strategic forms of brand activism that position the brand as political symbol, political advocate or political actor. However, the paradox manifests differently in each strategy and provokes different form of critique and backlash. Thus, brand rebellion attract criticism for inauthenticity and appropriation of political movements for commercial purposes, brand advocacy campaigns are criticized for ineffectiveness of messages to translate into action and for their limited potential to resonate into the political system, and brand action campaigns are criticized for the lack of legitimacy of brands as political actors since they cannot be officially elected political entities, and therefore, cannot participate directly in the processes of the political system. The backlash against brand activism can be interpreted as a ‘negative’ communicative response to these inherent paradoxes. However, from a social systems perspective, paradoxical communication can also invite different types of responses simultaneously and thereby create new communicative possibilities (Luhmann, 1995b).

This notion of the communicative possibilities of paradoxes was further explored in the analysis of Oatly as a prominent case of a transgressive activist brand that frequently uses paradoxes in its brand communication and identity construction (Ledin & Machin, 2020; Koch & Ulver, 2022). The analysis shows that paradoxes have been central in the ongoing process of brand identity formation and the reproduction of the brand as a communication system. More specifically, the analysis has identified three distinct strategies of using paradoxes proactively in

Oatly's brand communication. The first strategy refers to introducing and maintaining the paradox of similarity and difference, which has been employed in several creative and playful ways in the brand communication, even when facing legal constraints. The second strategy of deparadoxification refers to communicatively unfolding and transforming paradoxes that provoke negative responses, rather than hiding them, so that the brand can continue its communicative reproduction and keep building its identity. The third strategy refers to actively embracing and strategically integrating multiple paradoxes into the brand identity formation. This strategy also generates a meta-paradox, which means that identity paradoxes create both impossibilities and possibilities for constructing and maintaining the brand identity.

From a social systems perspective, the paradoxes that emerge from the transgressions of brands can be understood as an inherent feature of the brand's communicative reproduction and the process of brand identity formation. Brands function as communication systems that constantly oscillate between self-reference and other-reference. As shown earlier, this mechanism enables brands to transgress and establish various social relations but also produces various paradoxes. It is important to highlight that these paradoxes are observer dependent. They become visible when the observer does not accept the unity of the distinction between self-reference and other-reference, such as the distinction between economy and politics in the case of brand activism. Consequently, the paradoxes may block the communicative reproduction of the brand identity. However, the analysis has shown that paradoxes can be deparadoxified in different ways, leading to an acceptance of the unity of the distinction by the observer. Thus, instead of blocking the reproduction and the identity formation, the paradoxes can create new communicative possibilities. In this sense, the brand can be understood as a unity of multiple paradoxes that serve as communicative resources for reproducing the brand and maintaining the brand identity. In other words, brands function as dynamic 'paradox machines' that utilize the paradoxes of transgressions to enable their communicative reproduction.

Conceptual and theoretical contributions

This thesis provides a conceptual and theoretical understanding of brands as transgressive communicative systems capable of transcending boundaries, facilitating social relations, and reproducing themselves communicatively, and

thereby contributes to communication and branding scholarship in three main ways.

First, the thesis mobilizes the conceptual vocabulary and analytical strategies of Luhmann's social systems theory to contribute with a social systems perspective on brands as transgressive communicative entities. More specifically, the thesis places communication as central in the conceptualization of brands as communication systems. The social systems perspective moves beyond the transmission view of communication and the predominant organization-centric perspective in traditional brand management research, arguing that it is not the organization (i.e. the corporation) that produces the brand communication but rather the brand is a distinct entity that reproduces itself communicatively. Moreover, this perspective suggests that the organization is not the only observer of the brand, but in a polycentric society, brands could be observed from multiple observers and therefore from multiple perspectives.

Compared to the established conceptualization of brands as cognitive (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), symbolic (Holt, 2004) or socio-material entities (Lury, 2009), the conceptualization of brands as communication systems offers an alternative understanding of how brands function as distinct communicative entities. It further extends the previous understanding of brands as communication systems (Giesler, 2003; Luedicke & Giesler, 2005) by explaining that, although brands have similar features to autopoietic systems, they function as allopoietic systems with flexible boundaries. Brands oscillate between self-reference and other-reference, and as such function as connectivity devices in society. Therefore, the main argument that the thesis advances is that brands are radically open communicative entities that are extremely capable of transcending boundaries and connecting to other social entities. This reframing expands the conceptual vocabulary for understanding how brands operate as social mediators in a functionally differentiated society. Finally, social systems theory has been less utilized in strategic communication research, although it has been suggested as one of the theoretical traditions within communication scholarships (Craig, 1999). This thesis demonstrates the theoretical and analytical potential of social systems theory as a communication theory in explaining communicative phenomena such as brand transgressions.

Second, the thesis contributes with a conceptualization of brand transgressions as social processes of transcending boundaries and reframes diverse brand-related phenomena that involve crossing of social, cultural or political boundaries as forms of transgression. Furthermore, through its empirical and theoretical work,

the thesis shows that brand transgressions are not anomalies or accidental deviations that occur through external processes but are rather inherent to the way brands operate as communication systems. Transgressions occur as communicative processes of transcending boundaries whereby brands transition into new domains, connect diverse social entities, or connect distinct communication systems such as economy and politics. In these processes, brand transgressions may produce various paradoxes that could provoke negative responses. However, these paradoxes can also serve as communicative resources and open communicative possibilities, creating new pathways for brands' communicative reproduction, identity formation and societal relevance. Therefore, this conceptual shift of transgressions from anomalies and deviations to inherent features of brands, allows to explain their generative potential in how brands navigate complexity and maintain their continuity.

Third, the thesis contributes with an understanding of the phenomenon of brand activism as a form of brand transgression. Previous research provides a narrow definition of brand activism as a marketing strategy that involves taking a public stance on partisan sociopolitical issues (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This research stream often conflates the brand with the corporation and assumes that brands can be controlled as entities (Pimentel et al., 2024; Cammarota et al., 2023). Drawing on social systems theory and the notion of functional differentiation of society, the thesis reframes brand activism as a communicative process of connecting economy and politics as two distinct social systems and emphasizes the role of brands as communicative entities that mediate between the two systems. Furthermore, the thesis elaborates how brand activism has emerged and developed historically in different forms, placing it in a broader framework that offers a typology of three distinct brand activism strategies, including brand rebellion, brand advocacy and brand action. This typology provides conceptual clarity by distinguishing between different modes of political engagement, each associated with distinct political semantics and understandings of politics. Finally, the thesis extends previous research that emphasizes the paradoxical nature of brand activism (Podnar & Golob, 2024) by theorizing paradoxes as productive communicative resources that enable and facilitate the brand identity formation and continuity. The thesis contributes a novel theoretical lens for understanding how brands navigate the tension between economic and political legitimacy, and how the dynamic use of paradoxes allows activist brands to remain flexible, responsive and resonant in complex social environments.

Concluding remarks

The thesis provides an explanation of the function of brands in contemporary society by reframing them as transgressive communicative entities embedded within broader societal structures. Moving beyond managerial, cultural and socio-material understanding of brands, the thesis develops a social systems perspective that conceptualizes brands as communication systems that operate by oscillating between self-reference and other-reference. The project draws on Luhmann's social systems theory and its rich conceptual framework. While the Luhmannian concepts of communication, social systems, autopoiesis, self-reference, functional differentiation and observation have been essential in developing the social systems perspective, I have also mobilized the concepts of *allopoiesis*, *other-reference* and *connectivity* that have been less developed in Luhmann's theory. These concepts have been central in the conceptual and theoretical development of the thesis, leading to stimulating ideas and novel insights about brands as transgressive, allopoietic and open communication systems and their function of connectivity devices that facilitate social relations.

The conceptual and theoretical ideas presented in this thesis have implications both for research on brands and for understanding modern society. The thesis opens several potential directions for future research and invites communication and branding scholars to deepen the understanding of brands as transgressive communicative entities. First, while the empirical focus of the thesis has been on corporate and product brands that connect the economic and the political systems through brand activism, future research could examine how different kinds of brands, such as political brands, place brands, personal brands or idea brands, function as transgressive communication systems and facilitate various social relations. Second, future studies may identify, reframe and study other existing brand-related phenomena as forms of brand transgressions. The social systems perspective may be particularly useful to investigate how transgressions emerge and manifest across different social spheres, identify new forms of cross-systems transgressions, and study how brands mediate between different social systems, such as for example between art, science, religion and politics. Third, future research could explore more deeply the communicative mechanisms that enable brand transgressions and stabilize social relations, the communicative challenges of maintaining brand transgressions, and the different paradoxes that arise when connecting traditionally separate social spheres. Finally, researchers could adopt a social systems perspective to better understand the societal problems that brands seek to address through their connectivity function as communication systems.

In conclusion, this thesis provides a systems-theoretical foundation for understanding brands as transgressive entities in an increasingly complex contemporary society. By conceptualizing brands as dynamic and open communication systems, it positions communication as central to understanding how brands function as distinct communicative entities that transcend boundaries, transgress in different social spheres, and facilitate social relations. It further advances the argument that brand transgressions are not anomalies or deviations but rather inherent features of contemporary brands that make them socially relevant and communicatively alive. In doing so, the thesis demonstrates how brands have developed a proactive and mediating role in society, functioning as connectivity devices that facilitate relations between increasingly differentiated social systems. Consequently, this project not only offers an alternative theoretical perspective on brands and branding but also highlights the broader societal function of brands as social entities actively engaged in ongoing communicative processes throughout society.

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Brands beyond boundaries

This thesis investigates the transgressive nature of brands and aims to develop a conceptual and theoretical understanding of brands as distinct communicative entities capable of transcending boundaries and facilitating social relations. The thesis develops a communication-centered perspective that draws on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory. In doing so, it reconceptualizes brands as communication systems that operate by oscillating between self-reference and other-reference and highlights the broader societal function of brands as 'connectivity devices' that transcend boundaries, transgress in different social spheres, and facilitate various social relations. Focusing theoretically and empirically on brand activism as a contemporary form of brand transgression, the thesis examines how activist brands simultaneously engage in economic and political communication, thereby connecting the economic and political systems. Employing second-order observation as an analytical approach, the analysis reveals that brand transgressions are not anomalies or deviations but an inherent feature of brands. Furthermore, it demonstrates that while brand transgressions are paradoxical, these paradoxes can be productively employed as communicative resources for the brands' communicative reproduction and identity formation. This thesis contributes to branding and communication scholarship with a systems-theoretical understanding of brands as transgressive, communicative and socially embedded entities in contemporary society.