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## Gestalt as a Determinant of Brand Management – A Sociological Perspective on Branding in German-Speaking Discourse

### 1. Introduction and Description of the Problem

Although the importance of the brand as a business asset is increasingly emphasized (Baumgarth, 2014, p. 13), the subject matter as such continues to be characterized by ambiguities and definitional gray areas. The topic of branding has long been characterized by a variety of perspectives and approaches – the statement of this fact now introduces every serious scientific analysis (cf. Hellmann, 2003, pp. 69–106). The economist Jean-Noel Kapferer noted back in 2012, “Curiously, one of the hottest points of disagreement between experts is the definition of a brand” (Kapferer, 2012, p. 7). This is certainly a consequence of the fact that the brand functions within the scope of a broad scientific frontier. The brand may be a topic in economics, but in the fields of psychology and law, as well, there are diverse approaches to scientifically comprehend the brand as an economic, psychological, and legal phenomenon (Burmans, Halaszovich, Schade, & Pichler, 2018, p. 2f).

Sociology plays a special role in German-language brand research. The topic of branding as a genuinely sociological object of research, as Claudia Regnery has demonstrated in her work *Die Deutsche Werbeforschung 1900 bis 1945* (*German Advertising Research 1900 to 1945*), began as early as around 1900, with authors such as Werner Sombart, Alfred Vierkant, Leopold von Wiese, Wolfram Deckert, and Hans Lorenz Stoltenberg (Regnery, 2003). Subsequently, Hans Domizlaff, branding practitioner and one of the founders of German advertising theory under the term “Markentechnik” (Branding Technique), took a predominant role in the operationalization of branding from the 1930s to the 1960s (cf. Burmann, Halaszovich, Schade, & Pichler, 2018, p. 5). Domizlaff repeatedly made use of sociological approaches in his style and formulation, even though his writings specifically addressed a practice-oriented audience of entrepreneurs, advertisers, and designers—rather than an academic one—and did not fulfill classical presumptions of scientific sources.

Today, the phenomenon of branding is permeated primarily by numbers and data. This is not surprising when we simultaneously contemplate the fact that the usual perspective of contemporary science tries to attribute phenomena to

numerical explanatory parameters. Macrosociologist Steffen Mau describes this connection as follows, “Numbers offer an – often very persuasive – answer to our needs for objectification, factuality, and rationalization. While numbers abstract from concrete social contexts, they are not just mathematics. Behind them are value assignment processes that give numbers a meaning or ‘value’ in the first place. Quantifications can therefore be seen as manifest forms of attributing value, which is why it is not only interesting that quantification takes place, but also how and by whom” (Mau, 2017, p. 29).

The use of indices and ratios is particularly pronounced in the day-to-day operations of a business. As Timm Homann described a good two decades ago, “Key figures may seem to arise from analytically sober motives, but everyone knows the professional atmosphere that fills a conference room when numbers and their combinations are tossed around with unassuming matter-of-factness. Leaders whose reasoning is based on this number-juggling ability always prevail. Managers who argue about the supposedly softer parameters of ‘smiling faces,’ ‘continuous level of quality,’ and ‘stylistic presentation of goods’ – meaning those who focus on the corporate image in all its complexity – are often regarded as unprepared and are doomed in the decision-making process [...]” (Homann, 1999, pp. 322–323).

It becomes clear that, in addition to the supposedly “hard parameters” of brand science, the sociological drivers of brand formation and brand constitution are not sufficiently covered by the previous disciplines. This is where a Gestalt sociological approach steps in and becomes all the more urgent. In his essay entitled “Marke als Kommunikation und Metaprodukt. Sozialwissenschaftliche Grundlagen” (Branding as Communication and Metaproduct. Social-Scientific Foundations), Kai-Uwe Hellmann outlines the relevant sociological points for a theory of the brand (cf. Hellmann, 2019). Hellmann points out that “this field of research is still far too virgin and a social science – not to mention, a sociologically based evaluation and assessment of all the work available to date” is still lacking (Hellmann, 2019, p. 98). A particular difficulty would lie in a “multidisciplinary understanding” of the brand and its management. Here, numerous authors have made selective use of the complex hand tools of sociologies (Hellmann, 2019, p. 97). Regardless of this “self-service characteristic” and a sociologizing attitude toward the brand, there are two sociological schools of thought about branding that should be taken seriously. Hellmann substantiates this view with the systematized features of a sociological penetration of the brand that are only present there, stating, “It is also noteworthy that some contributions are oriented toward the Gestalt- or system-theoretical” (Hellmann, 2019, p. 98). In the following, Hellmann describes the system-theoretical approach that he has significantly developed and advocated in the past and continues to advocate today.

## 2. The Article's Primary Research Question

In order to specifically promote the analysis of the sociological brand perspective called for by Hellmann—which is not widely available—it is the aim of this article to document for the first time the Gestalt sociological perspective in its basic features, its definitional self-understanding, its development and deepening in terms of content—from the beginning until today—and its guidelines for scientific discourse. Due to the inclusion of a “Gestalt sociological consideration” in the two leading German-language microeconomic approaches by Christoph Burmann on the one hand (cf. Burmann, Halaszovich, Schade, & Pichler, 2018, p. 26) and Franz-Rudolf Esch on the other hand (cf. Esch, 2019, pp. 95–120), it is especially important to review the status quo diachronically and synchronously and to become clear(er) about the differences between the two approaches. This is all the more true because Hellmann clearly highlights the importance of the Gestalt-theoretical approach as a driver of the paradigm shift in the classical view of brands at the end of the 1980s. He notes, “The description of the brand as a form of communication has made the concept of the system respectable again, so to speak. Admittedly, it generally remains a case of pure labeling without any depth of meaning – not to mention the possibility of using not only the concept of the system, but also the system’s theory for self-description. Only a handful of texts are an exception. This includes, first of all, individual contributions by the founders, employees, and comrades-in-arms at the Institute for Brand Technology in Geneva. What these works have in common is that they all refer to Hans Domizlaff, which is particularly evident in the theoretical language of mass psychology or Gestalt psychology. This is especially true for Alexander Deichsel, who describes the ‘brand as a Gestalt system.’ Accordingly, brands are entities that are first and foremost committed to their birth and their history: The origin of a brand effectively determines its future” (Hellmann, 2003, p. 433).

This essay will discuss the following:

- a) Documentation of the genesis and status quo of a Gestalt sociological perspective.
- b) The core Gestalt sociological concepts of the brand.
- c) Placement of the Gestalt sociological analysis within the context of economic research on branding.

## 3. The Brand as an Entity

The sociological approach to branding dates back to the German sociologist and socio-economist Alexander Deichsel (\*1935), professor of sociology at the University of Hamburg from 1977 to 2000. Deichsel made clear at the beginning of his work on the sociology of branding, “The economic market

turns out [...] to be a dense structure of social relations” (Deichsel, 1987, p. 182). Deichsel writes, “The sociologically interested thinkers have dealt with the collective quasi-person early on. [...] Social entities in this understanding are by no means phantasmagorias, invented gods, but are ‘products of practical thinking’ [...]. They are social thought structures with regard to cultural life, as conceptions of something that is supposed to be valid or not supposed to be valid” (Deichsel, 1987, p. 176). According to Deichsel, brands belong to the category of “social entity.”

Deichsel relates his work to the theoretical foundations of one of the co-founders of German sociology, Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936). Tönnies defines the social as follows: “We find repeated to the point of fatigue, even by well-known sociologists, the old assertion that man is by nature a social being. And yet it is just as correct as the opposite assertion, that he is by nature egoistic – meaning unsocial – becomes social only by reason, by his well-understood interest, and consequently behaves in this way only according to circumstances – namely when and to the extent that he believes that it corresponds to his advantage to trust in his opponent (to a certain extent, and at least potentially, everyone is the opponent of the other) and to seek a *modus vivendi*” (Deichsel, 1987, p. 183). In this way, Tönnies makes it clear that not everything is always and everywhere “social” in the sense of an alliance, but that the “social” occurs at the moment when it is willed as an affirmative relationship. This premise is crucial, because it assumes that people can form relationships not just with other people or with groups, but also with things. The sociologist Uwe Carstens phrases it this way, “Thus, for Deichsel, sociology is the ‘doctrine of alliances.’ Whereby alliances exist not only with people, but also with things, systems, organisms, facts, brands. [...] According to Deichsel, Gestalt systems consist of social wills, of relationships between wills. Sociology describes these relationships and thus provides materials to guide this Gestalt system by going into the system and looking for the elements that can be made to move” (Carstens, 2015, p. 47).

Deichsel writes with regard to the brand alliance, “The product brand can now be thought of as a social entity. As brands, Nestlé, Mercedes, and Lufthansa constitute such social umbrellas, under which those who act there – meaning those who buy and use such products – demand and expect certain things, a social umbrella that prohibits the product from having certain standards and other, deviating characteristics. The brand appears here as a ‘social will’ because both the producer and user as empirical persons enter into a complicated, thoroughly incorporeal relationship” (Deichsel, 1987, p. 177). In another context, Deichsel, referring back to Tönnies, clarifies that “[Tönnies] means by this a package of thoughts structured in terms of content [...]” (Deichsel, 1988, p. 185). A few years later, Deichsel, together with the communication scientist Klaus Brandmeyer, state

that “Brands are idea-based organisms with the authority to establish guidelines” (Brandmeyer & Deichsel, 1991, p. 35).

In his foreword to the book (dissertation) “Marke als System” (The Brand as a System) by his student Thomas Otte in 1993, Deichsel provides a definition of the brand concept shaped by Gestalt sociology for the first time, stating, “Since brands are a particular form of assemblage and are about the formation of relationships, the brand is an important subject of the social sciences. As a concept, ‘branding’ allows for sociological structural analysis; for sociology is the study of alliances – alliances between people, between things, and between things and people. People gather around products” (Otte, 1993, p. 5). And elsewhere, Deichsel differentiates a Gestalt sociological approach from brand psychology, “People enter into alliances with the super-personal entity of the ‘brand,’ the significance of which to their lives definitely goes beyond psychologically recognizable image bonding and recall values” (Deichsel, 1993, pp. 46–47).

Finding 1: In a Gestalt sociological understanding, brands are ideal social entities that are able to ally people with things.

#### 4. The Understanding of Gestalt in Brand Sociology

Starting in 1990, Deichsel began to outline the term “Gestalt” in isolation, since, it can be assumed, the previous approach did not sufficiently capture and operationalize its specific normative character. Deichsel states, “Thus, the empirical Gestalt structure of an epoch or a population is structured through repetition, variation, and innovation” (Brandmeyer & Deichsel, 1990, p. 138). Klaus Brandmeyer and Thomas Otte wrote in 1992, “A brand is – according to our core thesis – a living system that is formed and kept going by an infinite number of subsystems [...]. A brand is therefore a system in which people and things, mind and matter, are interlinked to form a Gestalt whole and interact with one another” (Brandmeyer & Otte, 1992, p. 27). Timm Homann sees the “brand as a holistic Gestalt composition. In this sense, the brand is never empirically real, but is instead the stylistic will and normative law of a social system” (Homann, 1999, p. 11). Thus, the first sociological considerations of the brand come extremely close to Walther Schering’s classical Gestalt concept, “The social group is a Gestalt, meaning a whole in which what happens in one part is determined according to the inner laws of this whole; the social group thus forms the founding unit in social activities” (Deichsel, 1997, p. 409).

Finally, Deichsel condenses his Gestalt sociological conception of brands in his fundamental book *Markensociology (Brand Sociology)*, stating, “The brand-like quality of the product is the result of an energy of social will that is built up over

many years. Time and again, the company has reproduced its performance and, in this way, made possible the formation of a brand image in the minds of the public – and especially the clientele” (Deichsel, 2004, p. 31).

Deichsel, Errichiello, and Zschiesche jointly provide a preliminary conclusion with regard to their understanding of brands. In *Grundlagen der Markensoziologie (Fundamentals of Brand Sociology)* (2017), they say, “A brand is understood as a dynamic energy system whose smooth or efficient functioning is responsible for building the unique strength of the company’s brand” (Deichsel, Errichiello, & Zschiesche, 2017, foreword IX).

The notion of a “social entity” differentiates the sociological understanding of a brand from the concept of “Intentional Design” as articulated by Herbert A. Simon in his book, *The Sciences of the Artificial*. According to this, the creative work on and about things is characterized by the fact that every kind of shape carries with it a specific type of message. Materialized things are characterized by the fact that they are created in a specific socio-psychological context and, accordingly, also structure the social reality of their users. Klaus Krippendorff has summarized this connection as follows, “Design is making sense (of things)” (Krippendorff, 1989, p. 9). Krippendorff states, “However, making sense always entails a bit of a paradox between the aim of making something new and different from what was there before, and the desire to have it make sense, to be recognizable and understandable. The former calls for innovation, while the latter calls for the reproduction of historical continuities” (Krippendorff, 1989, p. 9).

While the approaches of Intentional Design focus on the haptically graspable object and its manifest and latent messages, the Gestalt sociological approach ventures further. This is because even social entities, that is, non-tangible entities—as well as imagined entities—also have the ability to structure reality. Digital brands—especially those from the platform economy, such as Airbnb, Uber, or Booking.com—are examples of social entities that are highly marginal in the real analog world (for example, with hardly any operating sites, employees, or machinery). However, as “entities,” they can amass global significance and attention – and are even capable of disruptively changing markets and structuring them in new ways.

Finding 2: The brand distinguishes its normative character as intentional (meaning, as a social entity). Only its structural performance explains its transcultural and transhistorical function. The norming capacity—in the sense of a brand’s offering of an alliance with the public—is understood by brand sociology under the term Gestalt.

## 5. Self-Similarity Forms a Gestalt

The brand-sociological understanding of brands emphasizes, above all, a recognizable type of action and appearance. Deichsel writes, “Finally, the Gestalt is fixed. The stability of the Gestalt structure means that the brand remains recognizable over time” (Deichsel, 2006, p. 109). Brand sociology, with recourse to biological and mathematical theories, describes this normative force as “self-similarity.” Self-similarity is the self-reproducing will to adhere to a recognizable characteristic that manifests itself in perceptible aspects for the public. Self-similarity is a central prerequisite for the survival and strengthening of brands. Because every successful brand has a core crystallization, a brand concept that circumscribes certain design specifications. Brandmeyer illustrates the homology between organic and hyper-organic systems with an example, stating, “Just as in the first branching of a fern, the fully grown plant is already recognizable; [...] the idea and the signature of the company founder can be recognized in the first and the last Laura Ashley store opened” (Brandmeyer, 1995, p. 211).

The principle of self-similarity is a structural principle for all living systems. It protects the system while transforming and adapting to the changing conditions of environment in which it is embedded. The Nobel Prize winner for physics, Gerd Binnig, points out that self-similarity is a basic principle of the evolution of life, stating, “We found Darwinian processes such as reproduction, mutation, and selection everywhere. We found everywhere the building block characteristics and purposeful action, which we defined as the self-restriction of a system to a field of possibility” (Brandmeyer, 1995, p. 211). A brand is therefore not arbitrary and free in its decision-making processes, but is always bound to the core idea of the system, with the goal of stabilizing itself as a form and ensuring its own survival.

Accordingly, Brandmeyer and Otte argue, “A brand is essentially the return of the same thing over and over again” (Brandmeyer et al. 1992, p. 28). In this sense, strong brands remain true to their particular impression or characteristics, even if the individual elements (e.g., employees, raw materials, machinery) change over time.

Self-similarity encompasses all subsystems of the brand that can be experienced by the clientele and not just the aspects such as design, logo, or corporate identity. Branding consists of multiple components. In terms of self-similarity, would it be “typical of Rolex” if you could buy their watches at a central train station? Would it be “typical of Nivea” if the skin cream cost more than \$100? Is it “typical of Mercedes” if a two-seater car made of plastic parts is launched on the market? On the basis of these questions, it becomes clear that self-similarity represents a universal system concept and cannot be reduced to questions of design.



Finding 3: Brand sociology integrates the notion of self-similarity as a structure-defining mechanism with the concept of a Gestalt. In this context, self-similarity establishes a specific type of Gestalt that is able to adapt to changing environmental conditions in order to remain viable in this way.

## 6. A Gestalt Generates a Positive Prejudice

The brand as a unique Gestalt system has built up and successfully anchored a range of self-similar characteristics over the course of its history. Self-similar performances have been continuously provided under a name—usually over long periods of time—constituting certain Positive Prejudices among the clientele. The importance of self-similarity for the innovative capacity of brands is particularly noteworthy. After all, innovations are not only beneficial for a Gestalt system, they are vital: a car model, not to mention a computer, which has been identically reproduced since 1970 would have no chance on the market today. Therefore, Deichsel writes, “New performances and products that have a self-similar relationship to the Positive Prejudice can benefit from the brand energy that has been built up – and at the same time, recharge the brand further” (Deichsel, 2006, p. 16).

In this context, Brandmeyer and Deichsel speak of branded goods as “trust-building mechanisms” (Brandmeyer & Deichsel, 1991, p. 15). However, a prerequisite for building trust is that a defined image about a product or service can be formed. If a brand continuously and consistently maintains its quality standards, presentation, style, and distribution, only then does it become a recognizable offer. Therefore, buyers have developed very clear and unambiguous images about a brand (in the best case), and these are referred to as “Positive Prejudices” in brand sociology. Basically, Deichsel understands a Positive Prejudice as “when there is unanimity of opinion among the public about a company’s performance [...] and a stable alliance structure has been formed in this manner” (Deichsel, 2006, p. 81).

Positive Prejudices are the basis of all successful branding. The Positive Prejudice equips a product with a message that turns the unknown product into a trustworthy brand. In the understanding of brand sociology, every established company is its own cultural body with evolved structures, a social system with its own rules and its own history – a Gestalt.

As with any cultural system, judgments are formed over time. First, buyers have gained experience with the products and have established an initial opinion. If the performance of the product is provided successfully again and again and finds buyers, this lays the foundation for the brand’s strength: people



who become customers through repeated purchases of the product and their satisfaction with the performance. The trust has been condensed into a Positive Prejudice with corresponding beneficial consequences: whereas every objective judgment requires effort and a personal commitment from the individual, because opinions must be obtained and comparisons made, a Positive Prejudice is easy to work with – both on the part of the clientele and on the part of the company. Efforts to test and persuade are drastically reduced; the clientele saves time; the company saves money. From the moment a Positive Prejudice about the performance comes into existence, brand strength is created: People have developed a personal bond with the product and consciously choose it. The Positive Prejudice within the clientele brings with it a reliable basis for calculations – the economic goal of the development of each brand. In this context, Carl Christian von Weizsäcker has emphasized that “even in times of globalization, the most effective and least expensive means of winning customers is trust” (Weizsäcker, 2001, pp. 249–261).

With regard to its definition of prejudice, brand sociology refers to the classic approaches of social psychologist Gordon W. Allport from the 1950s and 1960s (cf. Zschiesche, 2008; Errichiello, 2012). As Allport summarized in 1954, “Perhaps the shortest of all definitions of prejudice is thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant. The crisp phrasing contains the two essential ingredients of all definitions – reference to unfounded judgment and to a feeling tone” (Allport, 1971, p. 20). This often-cited quotation contains a comparatively less frequently documented extension that brand sociology specifically emphasizes and addresses in its economic implications (Zschiesche, 2008). As Allport puts it, “It is, however, too short for complete clarity. First of all, this phrasing refers to negative prejudice. But some also have positive prejudices about others” (Allport, 1971, p. 20).

Finding 4: Positive Prejudices are the collective ideal results of a self-similar Gestalt management.

## 7. The Economic Understanding of Brands

How can the sociological perspective on the brand be integrated into economic and business research? The main issue here is to clearly distinguish the Gestalt concept in brand sociology from that of brand identity.

According to Franz-Rudolf Esch and others, the origin of the concept of brand identity is based on identity research, since a brand—like a person—has a “unique face” that can be distinguished by identifying characteristics (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 178). Furthermore, Esch states that identity can be divided

into three components. The first is the concept of the self, or the self-image, which represents the cognitive component. The second is the emotional component, which reflects self-esteem. The third is the ideal self, which illustrates the motivational component of identity (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 178). Based on this system, the brand identity indicates which properties a brand stands for (cf. Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 179). Additionally, brand identity “[...] comprises the essential, character-defining, and temporally stable properties of a brand. Brand identity can thus be interpreted as the roots of a brand, which represent the starting point for all brand considerations. It is therefore a reflection of all of a company’s strategic conceptions about the fundamental substantive orientation of a brand” (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 179). Esch further postulates that brand identity is an interplay between the brand and its environment, and thus, identity is a self-reflective process. There are four points to be emphasized within the concept of an identity. First, brand identity always has objectively verifiable and assessable characteristics (hard facts). Second, brand identity encompasses emotional worlds and the sensory presentation of the brand. The third point of the brand identity describes the origin and also the history of a brand, and the fourth point defines the ambitions of a brand – meaning its developments and goals (Esch & Langner, 2019, p. 179).

In addition to Esch’s understanding of identity, we will also discuss a widely used approach, and the way in which brand identity is assessed, by Burmann and others. The authors supplement the outside-in perspective of the brand with an inside-out perspective. Burmann defines the self-image as the brand identity, whereas the brand image is formed through the external target group. The identity, which serves as a foundation, is communicated by the internal target group through a brand value proposition. The brand value proposition represents benefits relevant to buying behavior, which the brand itself—meaning the internal target group—should provide to the external target group, while simultaneously addressing the brand-related needs of the latter. Likewise, the brand behavior within the internal target group (those providing the products and services of the brand) guides the way all employees interact with the customer. Juxtaposed with this, on the side of the external target group, is the brand experience of the customer, which defines the interaction with the brand at so-called Brand Touch Points during the corresponding customer journey (Burmann, Halaszovich, Schade, & Pichler, 2018, p. 15).

Finding 5: The classical concepts of economic brand identity draw a comprehensive picture of the constituent characteristics—meaning the identity—of a brand. In this context, both the internal *and* the external perspectives are depicted in modern brand research.

## 8. The Contribution of Gestalt-Oriented Brand Sociology to Brand Research

In the last two decades, Esch—and especially Burmann—have analyzed and expanded the concept of the brand and the notion of brand identity to include so-called “soft facts” and to integrate the external perspective with regard to how it impacts the brand – which we can refer to as the impacting perspective. Burmann himself writes with regard to identity-based brand management, “The identity-based brand management approach presented here is thus the only one that uses a modern understanding of the brand that brings together the management and impacting perspectives. [...] Experiences with the brand are compared with what is needed from the brand, and these are reflected in the brand image” (Burmann, Halaszovich, Schade, & Pichler, 2018, p. 13f).

Despite this inclusion of supposedly “soft factors” in the understanding of the brand, both approaches focus on a brand perception that is based on realities. It is obvious, for example, that the “outside-in perspective” primarily seeks to capture those aspects that are subject to the classic canon of business factors and ratios. It is true that an inside-out perspective has also been developed, particularly by Burmann. In reality, however, this is reflected in numerical indicators and measures in the context of market, consumer, and advertising research.

The unique characteristic of a Gestalt-oriented brand sociology lies in a “hyper-descriptive” understanding of the brand as a social entity. Using this logic, the special forces of attraction or repulsion of a brand cannot be described conclusively by means of business management or behavioral psychology indicators, but can at the very most be mapped. Much is said about the external effect(s) of a brand, but very little about the causes behind it. A brand sociological approach uses the Gestalt approach to try to holistically grasp the causes for the perception of a brand. An advertising campaign, the condition of a delivery car, the friendliness of an employee in the call center, the value of a package, and so on establish an overarching general image in the minds of the public – and this image is independent of the listed elements of experience. The customer does not perceive a brand as a sum of factual and emotional characteristics, but forms a holistic coherence from all the facets of the brand that he perceives and experiences. The customer, in turn, classifies any (new) details as being harmonious or takes note of them as being unharmonious. The elements of this general picture are quite heterogeneous and multi-layered—depending on the experiences and points of contact of the individual accessing them—but a general concept, and overarching Gestalt, are formed.

The Gestalt does not consist of statically existing elements – these are constantly changing. People, machinery, products, services, and even customers change completely over time. And despite the constant shifting, the Gestalt remains as

a whole. The existing Gestalt concept is, in its essence, a generalized idea about the appearance, form, content, and stylistics of a brand. Humans possess the ability to perform strong interpretations: even with only two or three observed details; they can build up an image and associate with it a certain expectation that incorporates or rejects all further incoming details as suitable or unsuitable to that image.

Only with this social feedback does the Brand System come into being. The substantive facets of a Gestalt are manifold, but always reveal an individual structure that brings everything that is perceived into an individual order. A Gestalt arranges details into a whole. Thereby, the principle of unity works in any historical–empirical constellation. The unique Gestalt, outwardly clearly demarcated from any other and organized in its essential peculiarities, is an entity in its own right. Models and ratios can depict the characteristics of this entity, but the entity itself cannot be explained by those alone. The notion of the creation of a Gestalt is brought to a new level against the backdrop of the increasing economic and social relevance of digital brands. At this new level, real yet digital elements of customer experience are likely to significantly affect the public’s image of a brand, meaning the concept of its Gestalt. The fact that more and more brands that started out as purely digital (e.g., Amazon) are growing and expanding into the physical world may be an indication that a Gestalt’s relevance is primarily conditioned by and through real-life (or physical) experiences (Figure 1).

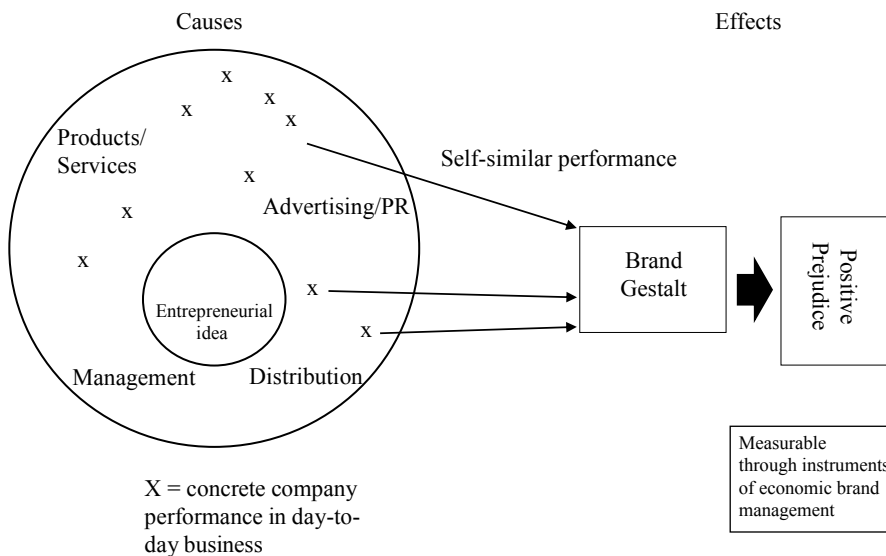


Fig. 1. The cause-effect principle of brand sociology (Own Source).

## 9. Foundations of a Gestalt-Oriented Brand Sociology

The resistive, stabilizing, and energetic properties of a Gestalt are crucial in brand sociology. They are instruments for successfully leading business entities in the market and for anchoring specific performances collectively in the long term.

In terms of a brand sociology, the following apply:

- The brand Gestalt is absolutely unique due to the complex systemic connection of the individual elements.
- If the elements are perceptibly coherent with each other and there is a clear inner order, then the brand develops an appeal on the part of the consumer.
- If the Gestalt is consistently maintained over time, familiarity toward the brand is established first, followed by trust.
- In addition, the brand Gestalt provides the company with a distinctive position that clearly sets it apart from its competitors.
- The more self-similar each individual element represents the whole, the more effective this delimitation is.

In summary, the field of a Gestalt-oriented brand sociology is a causal preliminary stage to the economic models of the brand. The Gestalt of a brand emerges from concrete performances in the activity sectors of the brand: products/services, advertising, distribution, and management.

### Abstract

For almost 40 years, a specific form of brand management with scientific and practical resonance has been evolving in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland – along with a multitude of microeconomic schools and authors. This form of brand management goes by the term “Brand Sociology” and sees the brand as a Gestalt system of alliances. Brand Sociology fills a gap in the classical economic approach and makes it possible to understand the central target variables of brand management as social dynamics and to direct them in a targeted manner. The following article traces for the first time the foundations and history of a Gestalt sociological approach to brand research and relates its contribution in the field of interplay between Gestalt research, sociology, and identity-based brand economics.

**Keywords:** Brand management, Brand sociology, Trust as an economic factor.

### Zusammenfassung

Neben der Vielzahl mikroökonomischer Schulen und Autoren hat sich seit nahezu 40 Jahren in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz eine spezifische Form der Markenführung mit wissenschaftlicher und praktischer Resonanz entwickelt. Diese Form der Markenführung firmiert unter dem Begriff der „Markensoziologie“ und versteht die Marke als gestalthaftes Bündnissystem. Die Markensoziologie füllt eine Lücke in der klassischen wirtschaftlichen Betrachtungsweise und macht es möglich, die zentrale Zielgrößen

des Markenmanagements als soziale Dynamik zu verstehen und gezielt zu steuern. Der nachfolgende Artikel zeichnet erstmalig die Grundlagen und Geschichte einer gestaltpsychologischen Markenforschung nach und verordnet ihren Beitrag im Spannungsfeld von Gestaltforschung, Soziologie und identitätsbasierter Markenökonomie.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Markenführung, Markensoziologie, Vertrauen als Wirtschaftsfaktor.

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## Errichiello, Gestalt as a determinant of brand management

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