ECONSTOR
Make Your Publications Visible.

A Service of

ZBW Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft
Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

Grimm, Nils; Sahhar, Yasin; Moss, Christoph; Henseler, Jörg

Article — Published Version

Condemned to authenticity: corporate branding through an existentialist lens

Journal of Brand Management

Provided in Cooperation with:
Springer Nature

Suggested Citation: Grimm, Nils; Sahhar, Yasin; Moss, Christoph; Henseler, Jörg (2025) : Condemned to authenticity: corporate branding through an existentialist lens, Journal of Brand Management, ISSN 1479-1803, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, Vol. 33, Iss. 2, pp. 138-153, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-025-00396-x

This Version is available at:
https://hdl.handle.net/10419/338858

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.



https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

WWW.ECONSTOR.EU

Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Journal of Brand Management (2026) 33:138–153
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-025-00396-x

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Condemned to authenticity: corporate branding through an existentialist lens

Nils Grimm[1,2] · Yasin Sahhar[3] · Christoph Moss[4] · Jörg Henseler[1,5]

Revised: 20 February 2025 / Accepted: 28 April 2025 / Published online: 11 September 2025
© The Author(s) 2025

Abstract

Corporate branding has long been shaped by the assumption of a fixed, essential pathway towards an 'authentic moral identity,' reinforcing essentialist thought. However, as corporate brands increasingly navigate complex landscapes, essentialism reduces morality and authenticity to a set of criteria, overlooking its subjective and emergent nature. This conceptual paper critiques essentialist thought in corporate branding, arguing that *conscientious* corporate brands engage in a process of becoming worthy of moral consideration, which resonates with existentialist philosophy. Existentialism shelves predetermined essences and confronts human existence by emphasizing the primacy of authentic constructed meaning, (inter) subjective experience, freedom, and responsibility. What could existentialism mean for authentic corporate brands? And how can corporate brands pursue their true authentic self? By framing corporate brands as 'condemned to authenticity'—in a state of perpetual becoming—we propose an existentialist rethinking of authenticity. This lens reshapes corporate branding towards nested, emergent phenomena, offering tenets grounded in existentialist thought, and addressing both theoretical and practical implications for brand orchestration.

Keywords Corporate branding · Existentialism · Authenticity · Brand-for-itself · Organizational becoming

"To one who is praised. – So long as you are praised think only that you are not yet on your own path but on that of another." – Friedrich Nietzsche (1996, p. 290).[1]

Introduction

Does the age of B Corp substantiate a new slave morality[2]? Where others perceive societal progress for the common good, Nietzsche may have been repelled. Let us start

[1] Aphorism 340 emphasizes the value Nietzsche places on self-authorship and authenticity.

[2] We may perceive of B Corp as occupying a new moral high ground in the business world, advocating for a redefinition of values towards a self-defined common good. The B Corp certification involves adhering to specific norms and standards, aiming for a common

✉ Yasin Sahhar
y.sahhar@utwente.nl

Nils Grimm
n.grimm@utwente.nl

1 Department of Design, Production & Management, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands

2 International School of Management, Dortmund, Germany

3 Department of Entrepreneurship & Technology Management, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands

4 Independent Researcher, Dortmund, Germany

5 Nova Information Management School, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

with an anecdotal case reference: Ritter Sport maintained operations in Russia out of an articulated commitment to its employees and their families, convinced 'that a cessation of deliveries (…) would ultimately not affect those who are responsible for this devastating war or those who are waging it' (Schader and Kukral 2023). "Quadratisch. Praktisch. Blut." [Square. Practical. Blood.], tweeted then Ukrainian Ambassador to Germany, Andrii Melnyk (2022), in analogy to the brand claim 'Quadratisch. Praktisch. Gut.' [Square. Practical. Good.]. German media commented on the 'destructive creativity' (Ziesemer 2022) of critics. The 'rigid stance (…) garnished with a hint of responsibility for the poor cocoa farmers', was ultimately just a renunciation of principles in favour of profit. Or was it? This illustrative case hints that when assessing *moral authenticity*, we often neglect its subjective, idiosyncratic nature.[3] In truth, what we label as 'moral authenticity' is little more than submission to the prevailing moral consensus.

In the case of Ritter Sport, the harsh and high-sounding critique stems from the corporate brand's rejection of the moral consensus, as it chose its self-narrative over the dominant social norms and expectations. The company's *perceived* failure to submit became the very source of outrage, revealing how closely morality can be tied to conformity in the eyes of critics. Ritter Sport's choice, whether deemed moral or not, represents a refusal to be shaped by societal expectations and renders their approach an existentialist quest—one where the firm seeks its own moral stance and navigates its own path. On similar footing, consider the Associated Press (AP), rejecting pressure to conform. Despite a presidential executive order demanding that it refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the 'Gulf of America,' the AP remained steadfast in its decision to use the established terminology, refusing to adhere to the imposed political terminology. In doing so, the AP not only stood by its editorial independence but also lost certain privileges such as access rights, further demonstrating the existentialist cost of finding one's own way as a corporate brand. We may also think of Patagonia, a brand frequently acclaimed for rejecting the logics of consumerism, allowing themselves and their stakeholders to reflect on the deeper implications of their actions. In the face of expectations and pressures, these brands hold fast to their convictions. Without passing judgement, these illustrative anecdotes highlight the subjective, idiosyncratic nature of moral authenticity in the corporate realm—and foreshadow the struggles of brands on an existentialist quest.

Arguing that there are no moral phenomena but only moral interpretations of phenomena (Nietzsche 2002), we problematize morality and authenticity in the field of corporate branding. The status quo—which rigidly replicates an essentialist worldview—insinuates that morality and authenticity are dichotomous, static, and dogmatic, rendering a deprived and monolithic rather than a rich and pluralistic theoretical debate on brand morality, i.e., a theory through typification (Sandberg and Alvesson 2021). This essentialist framing—even in its most conciliatory dialectic synthesis (Mingione 2015)—pushes for the revelation of a somewhat performative identity (Abratt & Mingione 2017) and the reconciliation of brand (static) and branding (dynamic) towards alignment (Mingione & Abratt 2022), while reducing the irreducible, abstracting the inabstractable, and overlooking the contextual forces at play. We, therefore, claim it is necessary to reassess the origins and meaning of brand morality. In doing so, we dwell on existentialist philosophy (Nietzsche 2002; Sartre 1956; Heidegger 1962; de Beauvoir 1949; Kierkegaard 1992; Golomb 1995; Aho 2020) given its close alliance with the quest for meaning and authenticity. Existentialist philosophy problematizes human existence by asserting that essence is neither pre-given nor intrinsic but can only be understood and constructed through authentic engagement, (inter)subjective experience, freedom, and responsibility.

Against this backdrop, we are guided by the following central research questions: How can corporate brands pursue their true authentic self? and What could existentialism mean for authentic corporate brands? This conceptual paper is intended to incite readers as a theoretical provocation (Cornelissen et al. 2021), challenging established assumptions and encouraging critical reflection and discourse on the complexities of corporate branding as a conscientious endeavour. Therefore, we embark on a quest to delve into the meaning of brand morality (Grimm et al. 2025), and brand authenticity (Södergren 2021) to offer a contemporary lens for *conscientious* corporate brands (Ind and Ryder 2011; Iglesias and Ind 2016; Abratt and Kleyn 2023). We open conscientious corporate branding to existentialist interventions and derive an existentialist-informed view. From our perspective, *conscientious* corporate branding may be perceived as an existentialist corrective, with the quest for authenticity as its major—becoming—purpose.

Footnote 2 (continued)

understanding of "good" corporate agency. B Corp serves as "a way of publicly claiming an identity" (Diez-Busto, Sanchez-Ruiz, and Fernandez-Laviada 2021), a pardoning label that supersedes scrutiny (Villela, Bulgacov, and Morgan 2021). Nietzsche might have rejected the imposition of a particular set of values, which could stifle individual creativity and the emergence of self-defined values. He could have seen the movement as fostering a herd mentality, and thus, diluting greatness through a rigid stance on common good and standardized 'moral' practices.

[3] For a discussion of a typification of authenticity, see, e.g. Carroll & Wheaton (2009)

Problematizing essentialism in corporate branding

Every norm in corporate branding exists on a spectrum from extremely useful to utterly useless. It is all the same. No framework has inherent value; whether a norm is beneficial or detrimental depends entirely on how a corporate brand engages with it in any given situation. Morality is a double-edged sword, influenced by the antipole of rationalist and subjectivist perspective (Haidt 2008). The rationalist perspective posits that moral judgments and decisions are primarily the results of rational deliberation and logical reasoning (Kant 1998, 2012; Kohlberg 1971, 1981). In contrast, the subjectivist perspective emphasizes that moral judgments are deeply influenced by individual experiences, contexts, and dynamics (Haidt 2001; Haidt and Joseph 2004). This subjective lens highlights that morality cannot be universally codified, as it varies across different contexts and stakeholder interactions. In other words, while Nagel's 'view from nowhere' (1989)[4] presents a noble ideal of objective, dispassionate moral reasoning, it remains a fiction in the context of corporate branding. Corporate brands are always already situated within a specific context that inherently shapes their moral decision-making processes.

Albeit this situatedness, rationalist thought continues to permeate the corporate branding literature, drawing on a greater utilitarian tradition in business ethics (Bowie 2017). As Kapferer notes: "The mantra of traditional brand management is the DNA and genes of the brand: the brand essence. Tons of money is poured into in-depth research, to unveil it at last and worship it as the Holy Grail." (2012, 128) This perspective characterizes corporate branding as rooted in essentialist notions as a project of the privileged few towards coherence, uniqueness, and resistance to change (Christensen et al. 2008). A corporate brand is often viewed as encompassing a 'true self' defined by core values, clear vision, and consistent purpose—with an intent to align elements of the corporate brand (Aaker 1991, 1996; Balmer 1995, 2012; Hatch and Schultz 2001, 2003; Ind 1997). Consequently, addressing a fixed set of questions regarding the brand's identity[5] is believed to lead to favourable outcomes. The focus on a corporate brand's "permanent crusade" (Kapferer 2012, p. 150) reinforces the essentialist belief in a stable core at the heart of the corporate brand, entailing a linear cause-effect approach to corporate branding. Scholars once held an optimistic view that a blueprint could guide corporate brands towards iconic status (Holt 2004). This approach relies on rational analysis to craft narratives resonating with stakeholders. Emphasis is placed on maintaining consistency across corporate communications (van Riel 1997, 2007; Steyn 2004; Balmer 2017). The goal is to ensure that the brand's moral narrative (purpose, or in Simon Sinek's terms 'the Why') is unambiguous, rational, and unchanging, thus reinforcing a stable moral identity in the minds of stakeholders. The pursuit of alignment (e.g., Mingione & Abratt 2022), under this view, is rather perceived as a self-actualizing process, revealing and solidifying what is already 'true' about the brand's self. In other words, for essentialism, the very idea of alignment presupposes an essence that must be identified and shared, making the quest for alignment both a symptom and a goal of a more static, less responsive, essentialist worldview.

This essentialist view in a unique, unchanging core is foundational to how corporate brands differentiate themselves, closely tied to notions of authenticity (Södergren 2021). Authenticity is often defined as the conformity of corporate brand projections—actions, communications, and strategies—with its stated purpose and values (Beverland 2005), i.e., clarity and self-congruence as antecedents (Fritz et al. 2017). This perspective assumes that a corporate brand possesses an inherent essence, and authenticity is achieved when expressions of the corporate brand align seamlessly with its essence (or when the process of corporate branding informs the essence of the corporate brand—and vice versa, see Mingione & Abratt 2022). Traditionally upheld as the gold standard in corporate branding, this view posits that any deviation from the corporate brand's core is seen consecutively as a compromise to its authenticity. The adage to 'live and comply by your mantra' exemplifies this mindset, resulting in a parade of high-sounding narratives (Hirsch 2016) that may lack substance or fail to resonate with the complexities of real-world experience. Even if ambiguity is acknowledged, authenticity is framed as reducing tensions to a performative threshold, ensuring that deviations remain legible within an overarching narrative of self-actualization (Carroll & Wheaton 2009). Such an approach risks shaping a veneer of authenticity, overshadowing the dynamic nature of corporate branding in a rapidly evolving landscape, where adaptability and contextual relevance may hold greater significance.

[4] Thomas Nagel's concept of the 'view from nowhere' refers to the idea of achieving a perspective that is completely objective and free from personal biases or situational influences. Nagel argues that this ideal viewpoint allows for a neutral evaluation of moral judgements, emphasizing the importance of impartiality in moral reasoning. However, he acknowledges that such a perspective is largely fictional, as human experience is inherently situated and influenced by individual circumstances, making true objectivity elusive.

[5] see, e.g. Kapferer (2012): p. 150.



Amid foregrounding corporate branding as a conscientious endeavour (Iglesias, Ind, and Schultz 2022), once again, we grapple with the essence of corporate brands and their core values (Urde 2016, 2009, 2003) in search of that which "represents the timeless essence of the brand […] central to both [its] meaning and success" (Aaker 1996, p. 85). Unlike essentialist thought, which defines brand essence in terms of stable attributes, modern views (Ind and Ryder 2011; Rindell et al. 2011; Iglesias et al. 2011, 2013; Rindell and Iglesias 2014; Iglesias and Ind 2016; Schmidt et al. 2022; Abratt and Kleyn 2023; Markovic, Iglesias, and Ind 2023) increasingly embrace the fluidity and contextuality of brand experiences. Corporate branding is increasingly recognized as the project of engaging stakeholders in co-creation (Ind et al. 2013; Iglesias et al. 2013; Iglesias and Ind 2020), fostering responsive relationships in societal changes (Schmidt et al. 2022). Conscientious corporate branding, described as a passionate and co-created commitment (Ind and Iglesias 2022; Iglesias and Ind 2020), reflects the idea of an ever-evolving process rooted in lived experiences and contextual nuances rather than an outcome of a fixed identity. Thus, morality in corporate branding may be an emergent property (Vargo et al. 2023) of the corporate brand as an assemblage of various interrelated elements (Lury 2009). This perspective rejects the pre-determinacy of morality in corporate branding; instead, it arises dynamically through interactions among these elements at different layers of abstraction, e.g., (Grimm et al. 2025). As these elements come together, they shape and reshape the corporate brand's moral stance.

While scholars begin to feel unsettled by the essentialist worldview—an oversimplified worldview, that cannot account for the greater challenges at play; a dogmatic stance that meets a dynamic world—even the modern view continues to fall prey to the categorical imperative (Ind and Iglesias 2022). This is particularly evident in how the conscientious corporate brand heuristic builds on rationalist views of morality, thereby reinforcing essentialist thought despite ostensibly embracing fluidity and contextuality. Rationalist morality, by nature, assumes moral outcomes arise from deliberation and reason—a discursive synthesis (Mingione 2015) towards an essential moral truth. Even in more dynamic approaches to corporate branding, this commitment to a preordained moral order persists, implicitly sustaining the essentialist premise that authenticity derives from an inherent, discoverable brand essence—one that demands compliance with its moral truth. *Why* would corporate brands opt for rationalist morality? Nietzsche may have answered: "Because they desire the unconditional confidence of others, they need first of all to develop unconditional self-confidence on the basis of some ultimate and indisputable commandment that is inherently sublime, and they want to feel like, and be accepted as, its servants and instruments." (Nietzsche 1974, p. 80) In doing so, they create the illusion of moral certainty, clinging—through mindless obedience—to an essentialist notion that shields them from the ambiguity of the real world. With the rationalist approach to brand morality, one cannot help but sense corporate branding in the trenches of *bad faith*, deceiving others and themselves about the unfathomable and emergent nature of an authentic moral identity.

Towards an existentialist view on corporate branding

Introducing existentialism[6]

Defining existentialism is a self-defeating endeavour, as it tries to capture the essence of some thing that rejects the inherent essence of all things. Existentialism views one's existence as prior to one's essence, tracing back to the renowned maxim "*Existence precedes essence*" (Sartre 1956) or as Heidegger similarly writes: "*The essence of Dasein lies in its existence*" (1962, p. 42). Existentialism questions the human condition and is concerned with the being (i.e., related to *ontic* concerns: factical roles and factual properties of some individual entity's existence) of Being (i.e., related to our *ontological* existence as being-in-the-world) (Heidegger 1962; Dreyfus 1991). Human beings, or every one-self, are as life unfolds in this sense condemned to the perpetual act of self-making, self-defining, and self-transcending (Nietzsche 2002; Sartre 1956). In basic terms, existentialist thought shelves human existence as objectively present substances but rather embraces the idea that we are always 'not yet' as we press forward in self-fashioning and refashioning our existence (Aho 2020).

Existentialism can be understood as an inquiry into the uncompromising (becoming) nature of our situated human existence and its possible—incomplete and unfathomable—meaning. In existentialists' views, every attempt to strictly define the essence of some beings or things is futile and self-defeating. The whys and wherefores can be addressed by taking one's way and embracing critical and fresh thinking based on phenomenological experience, that is, experience that one lives through (van Manen 2016). Heidegger even claims that phenomenology (i.e., the inquiry into lived experience) can only help us understand our Being, our ontology (Heidegger 1962). Not surprisingly, existentialists

[6] While the term 'Existentialism' (as an 'ism') was introduced rather late by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in 1943, existentialist thought and philosophy have already developed from the nineteenth century onwards (Aho 2020). In this, we do not claim that existentialism is a unified 'school', but rather, we acknowledge the pluralistic views of existentialist thinkers. Hence, in this paper, we build on core existentialist thought.

centre the individually intersubjectively nested experience. They prioritize, generally speaking, principles of commitment, authenticity and freedom (Aho, Altman, and Pedersen 2024). On a similar footing, existentialism shelves universal truths, essentialist principles, and deterministic values. Nietzsche, quite forcefully, wrote "I mistrust all systematizers and I avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity" (Nietzsche 1954b, p. 470). Existentialism accepts, in this way, a *transvaluation of all values* (Nietzsche 1954a) and embraces the idiosyncratic nature of meaning, values, and morality. Its thematically rich tapestry is woven—yet distinct—from the threads of various philosophical traditions. Heraclitus, Socrates and Plato shared an interest in the perpetual becoming of the self, questioning the Howness and Why-ness of Being (see, e.g., Plato's Theaetetus, 152d-e).

Hence, the quest for the authentic self commences from a place of ambiguity, as a fundamental aspect of the human condition: existence is characterized as inherently indeterminate and perhaps even indeterminable (Heidegger 1962). We are "incapable of furnishing (…) [the human Being] with any principle for making choices", because then, "the notion of having-to-be would have no meaning" (de Beauvoir 1949, 9). Sartre captures the point of departure for Being as Nothingness (Sartre 1956). Human Beings are nothing but what they make of themselves. From this perspective, problematizing our intimately intertwined existence and essence is a vital a priori condition towards authenticity. "To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it." (de Beauvoir 1949, p. 10). Ambiguity leaves us with an infinite set of possibilities towards the future. The freedom of choice presents itself to us with the heavy weight of responsibility (Sartre 1956). The project towards the future belongs to me, and all choices are my own, and even the context I find myself in, from this point forward, it is that of my own choosing. Hence, existentialism rejects inherent logics.

Our commitment to the meaning of existence is, through the lens of Kierkegaard, one of passion. Kierkegaard, particularly in *Either/Or* (1992) and *Fear and Trembling* (1985), discusses passion not merely as an emotional intensity but as a commitment to a subjective, lived experience—a leap of faith in pursuit of an authentic life. Therefore, passion is a defining force of individuality—something that drives one to engage deeply with existence.

Authenticity: a primal existentialist quest

In the existentialist tradition, authenticity is not a fixed state to be achieved, but a perpetual process of becoming—an ongoing endeavour to shape one's self in response to the realities of existence. Heidegger (1962) positions authenticity as an ontological prerequisite of our conscience, suggesting it arises from our ability to confront our finitude and live true to our 'ownmost' potential (potentiality-for-Being). For Heidegger, *Dasein* (Being) is always faced with its finite nature, and authenticity means resisting the inauthentic existence dictated by *the They* (das Man)—the anonymous social norms that shape much of our daily lives. Authenticity demands that we transcend the conditions into which we are thrown (Geworfenheit)—the arbitrary circumstances beyond our control—and actively reflect on our freedom to shape our existence. This reflection and transcendence of thrownness are essential steps towards authentic selfhood.

Sartre rejects the idea of a *fixed* identity on similar grounds, framing consciousness as a *decompression of being*. For Sartre, the logic 'A is A' implies that *being* is fully self-contained and complete within itself. Consciousness, however, is never fully 'A'. It is "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is" (Sartre 1956, p. 58), capturing the idea that we are constantly in a state of becoming. If we were full of ourselves—completely self-contained and self-sufficient—there would be no space for growth, change, or projects towards the future. Sartre argues that *Being-for-itself* is marked by nothingness or incompleteness, a *lack* that fuels our drive to create meaning. We can draw parallels to the existentialist-inspired psychoanalytical theory, arguing that lack equals the—impossible to fulfil—desire, the metonymy of being (Fink 1995; Lacan 2011). If we were complete, without the pull of the possibility to become what we are not yet, life would lack purpose, reducing any future-oriented project to a mere routine.

Realizing the 'contingency' of existence—the feeling that life has no inherent purpose—arises when confronted with the void, revealing ourselves as the lack of what we are not yet. Meaning is not given; it is created. Shielding ourselves from this awareness leads to a shallow or inauthentic life, avoiding the responsibility and freedom of shaping our own path. Authenticity, then, is a never-ending project, with each action and decision sculpting who we are in the absence of any predetermined essence.

Nietzsche, in his call for the *transvaluation of all values*, further adds to our understanding of what it takes to *become* authentic. He rejects the notion of fixed moral truths, asserting that authenticity involves a process of *self-overcoming* (Übermensch). For Nietzsche, authenticity is about continuously creating and recreating oneself, rejecting externally imposed values, and forging one's own path. He challenges us to go beyond mere acceptance of societal norms and to become creators of our own values, perpetually redefining our identity in response to life's inherent chaos and ambiguity.



Making sense of existentialist thought: implications for corporate branding

Just as Zarathustra speaks to the need for humanity to create its own values starved of inherent meaning (Nietzsche 1969), corporate branding, too, begins to expedience the *existentialist void*. Albeit relying on a positioning towards the 'common good', the understanding is creeping in, that this common good for *conscientious* corporate brands cannot be defined or cribbed. It is nested within multiple perspectives and emerges from communication. Thus, conscientious corporate branding, much like the existentialist quest towards the authentic self, starts from a place of ambiguity.

Corporate branding sets out to reject the traditional identity-project (Hatch and Schultz 2001; Balmer 2001; De Chernatony 2002; Balmer and Gray 2003), shifting the focus from a stable 'core' identity to embracing the co-creation of meaning (Iglesias and Ind 2020; Kornberger 2010; Kornum et al. 2017; Biedenbach and Biedenbach 2022; Vallaster and von Wallpach 2013; von Wallpach et al. 2017a, b). Rather than prescribing a definitive subject, we emphasize the ongoing negotiation of meaning among multiple actors—legal owners, leadership, employees, customers, and other stakeholders—each contributing to the brand's evolving existence. Today, corporate branding is commonly concerned with *intangible experiences and perspectives* (Iglesias, Ind, and Schultz 2022). Therefore, we do *not* refer to something fixed and concrete, an object that exists 'out there' independently of perception; in corporate terms: an unchanging, intrinsic entity with inherent characteristics. This essentialist perspective views a brand as a *'Brand-in-itself'*, merely reflecting perceptions or imposed meanings. Instead, we speak of *dynamic*, *reflective*—even *reflexive*—entities, continuously evolving based on a fluid, collective experience, shaped by multiple interrelated elements. This mirrors Sartre's *Being-for-itself*, which emphasizes a conscious, self-aware state. Focusing on the *intangible*—or even the *unfathomable*—in corporate branding shifts the conversation towards a reflective process, a *collective experience of the corporate self*, that involves empathetic engagement, concerted perception, and negotiation of the 'brand-self'. Since by nature, emergent properties—such as *brand morality*—cannot be engineered into existence, corporate branding becomes a journey of collective sense- and meaning-making, rather than a fixed definition of 'who we are'. Corporate brands are not confined to rigid identities or fixed narratives, dictated by some framework; rather, they cannot be. There is nothing intrinsic to the corporate brand awaiting revelation or realization; the corporate brand is perpetually becoming through the process of revealing and realizing. A *Brand-for-itself* encompasses the idea of an autonomous entity that actively shapes its trajectory. A brand-for-itself is innately social and nested in a nexus of social connections, or as Heidegger would put it 'thrown into the world.' Therefore, meaning-making of brands-for-themselves necessitates engaging in dialogues, reflections, and experiences with a plenitude of actors. For within that meaning-making, the brand-for-itself discloses itself—to itself, and to others.

The existentialist lens requires us to recalibrate our understanding of underlying assumptions for *conscientious* corporate brands. Unsettled by the prevailing essentialist view (Gyrd-Jones et al. 2013; Iglesias, Ind, and Schultz 2022), and acknowledging that the *internal–external locus* is misguided (von Wallpach et al. 2017a, b; von Wallpach et al. 2017a, b; Iglesias and Ind 2020), corporate branding becomes reframed as the *nexus of experience*. Deeply rooted in an *assemblage view* of the organization—with interrelated elements, such as actors and narratives, coalescing towards a shared sense of the corporate brand (Lury 2009; DeLanda 2016) – this perspective emphasizes collectively shaped meanings, multi-contextuality and adaptability, perpetual experiences, and engagement as central to the corporate brand's trajectory. *Value experience* (Sahhar and Loohuis 2022), and more specifically, the moral stance—brand morality—is perceived as an emergent property of the assemblage (Vargo et al. 2023). The birthplace of any moral stance, for *conscientious* corporate brands, therefore, is its communications. Communication becomes constitutive, as a perpetual performative act.[7] Corporate communications become the project of (self-) discourse and disclosure.

In further detail, corporate branding increasingly focuses on the *corporate narrative* (Argenti 2022; Cornelissen 2022), the story of interwoven perspectives on phenomena, and here, more precisely, moral phenomena. Through an existentialist lens, the *narrated self* is perceived as an alternate concept of conscience (Siegried 2010). One cannot control the emergence of neither conscience nor authenticity. Rather, one must face the continuous struggle between our situatedness (or in Sartre's terms, our facticity) and transcendence (Aho 2020). This struggle ontologically informs the authentic self. As we argue that conscience entails the reflection of multiple moral interpretations of phenomena, the corporate narrative embraces this ambiguity, acknowledging that the corporate brand's story is never fully told. The narrative becomes a sequence of continuous sense- and meaning-making, rather than merely recounting a stable past or projecting a stable present.

Conscience, in this view, is not an inherent moral compass by which to live and be judged but a continuous process of self-disclosure and self-reflection. For corporate branding, this translates to an ongoing *passionate* commitment to engaging and disclosing moral interpretations of phenomena

[7] This perspective seems inspired by organizational scholarship, more specifically, the communicative constitution of organizations, see e.g. Putnam & Nicotera (2009), McPhee & Zaug (2009)



in the corporate context. Rather than adhering rigidly to moral containers, conscience becomes an active, reflective—even reflexive—practice, defined by the corporate brand's response to changing contextual conditions. Performative communications (Christensen et al. 2013; Schoeneborn et al. 2020)—projections into the future with references to past and presence—serve the *Brand-for-itself* as a soliloquy with its own potentiality for being or *becoming* itself.

Authenticity, often still viewed as the alignment of a corporate brand's actions with its 'core values', in this view, is redefined as an evolving project towards the corporate brand's upmost potential for *being itself*. Rather than referencing a static essence, a brand's authenticity is continuously (re)shaped through its interactions, demonstrating adaptability and self-overcoming. Authenticity is *perpetual becoming of the corporate brand*. Therefore, authenticity is inherently elusive and subjective, deeply dependent on perspective and context. It can hardly be packaged, or objectively measured. It exists as an interpretive experience, perceived differently by each stakeholder. It is not 'told' in the traditional sense; it is sensed, and continually co-shaped. The brand's authenticity, then, becomes a relational quality—emerging from the interplay between perspectives. Kierkegaard's idea of the *leap of faith* is particularly relevant here. Against the notion of corporate branding as a stabilizing momentum, it becomes a deeply subjective, lived process that requires corporate brands to commit despite the ambiguity and complexity of the marketplace. The brand assemblage must incite itself about its reason for being and becoming what it truly is. However, many corporate brands succumb to these external pressures, adopting values and narratives that conform to the prevailing moral climate for the sake of legitimacy. This can be viewed as brands throwing themselves to the moral majority, prioritizing short-term corporate pragmatism over existentialist self-creation, and in doing so, eroding their authenticity.

Authenticity: perpetual becoming of the corporate brand

Corporate branding often corrupts authenticity by transforming the process of authentication into a strategic tool. Authentication, in this sense, becomes a means to an end—a way to gain social approval—rather than a genuine engagement with the evolving self. For instance, consider Bud Light—mindlessly catering to a social issue, deceiving themselves and their stakeholders about their reason for being (Maloney 2023). As a result, authenticity is commodified, detached from its ontological roots, and turned into a marketable trait. Corporate brands thus *perform* authenticity, aligning with predefined moral values for commercial benefit, while bypassing the deeper existentialist quest for an authentic self. If corporate brands shield themselves from

Table 1 Juxtaposition of corporate branding: Essentialist vs. existentialist worldview

Juxtaposition of essentialist and existentialist perspectives on corporate branding		
Concept	Essentialism	Existentialism
Conscience	A fixed, inherent and unchanging moral compass, guiding corporate behaviour and decision-making	Subjective, performative construct of individual existence; product of one's ongoing reflection and engagement with the world, influenced by one's choices and the context of one's existence
Authenticity	Alignment with a static set of core values or identity, corresponding to a specific type, projection or perception	Dynamic journey of becoming, soliloquy with potentiality, commitment to subjective values, shaped by interactions and context
Corporate brand	Brand-in-itself: representations to conform to established norms and standards; symbol of reliability, consistency, tool to manage (moral) projections and perceptions	Brand-for-itself: manifestation of unique perspectives beyond or irrespective of external norms, self-defining, self-expressive and engaging on a deeper level
Corporate communications	Project of disciplining, conveying and aligning	Discursive process, that facilitates dialogue and co-creation of meaning. Offering context and acknowledging stakeholders' degree of freedom
Corporate brand narrative	Linear story reflecting stable characteristics, evidence of adherence to moral compass, holding stakeholders accountable	Ongoing, multi-perspective story, embracing ambiguity and change; moral compass, disciplining the corporate brand
Corporate moral agency	Static – contingent on the intentionality as a collective – dichotomous concept: corporation is or is not conscientious	Dynamic capability, contingent on (aggregated) moral projections and sharedness of experiences

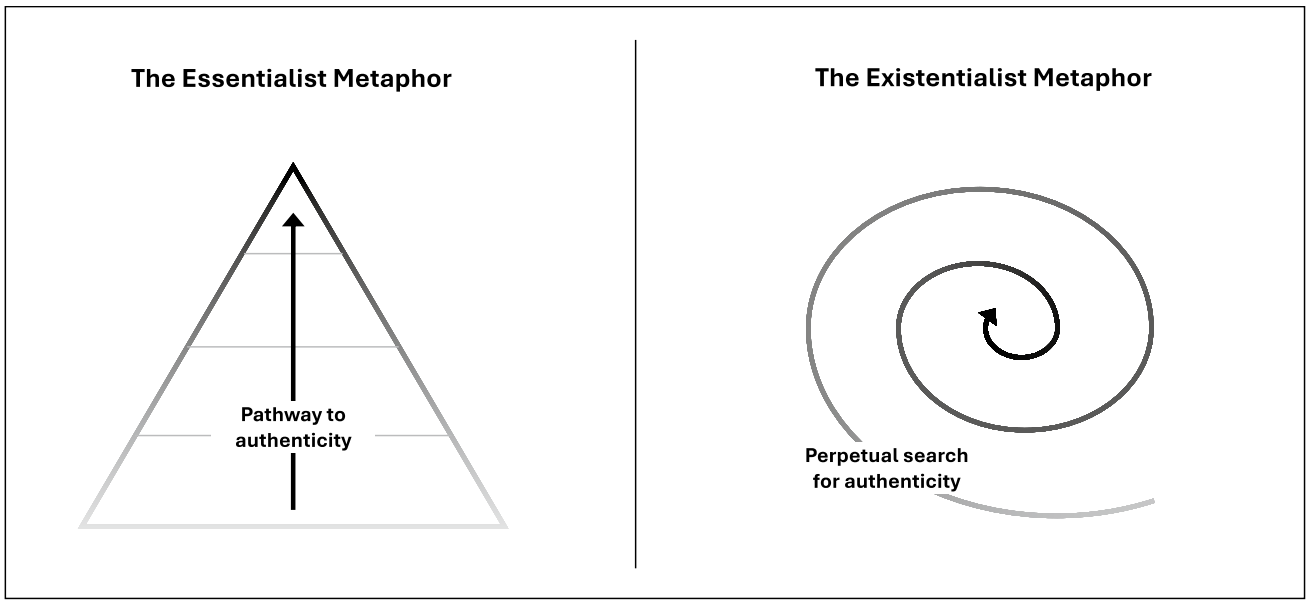


Fig. 1 The essentialist and existentialist metaphors on conscientious corporate brands

the ambiguity of creating their own meaning, by seeking refuge in the societal norms at hand, they act in *bad faith*.

Through processes of authentication, brands take deliberate actions to project their genuineness via curated narratives, orchestrated initiatives, and careful alignment with stakeholder expectations. While these efforts may create a perception of integrity, the authenticity they present is performative at best—a façade of moral alignment. In doing so, corporate brands fail to engage in the perpetual process of becoming, which is central to existentialist authenticity. Instead, they risk becoming stagnant and out of touch, fixated on maintaining a symbolic, static identity rather than embracing the fluidity and responsiveness needed in an ever-changing landscape. True authenticity, in contrast, requires corporate brands to continuously evolve, acknowledging uncertainty, change, and even contradiction as part of their ongoing existence. In line with the existentialist tradition, authenticity, for conscientious corporate brands, takes precedence over morality. Communication nurtures the perpetual becoming of the corporate brand (Table 1).

Wayfinding in the existentialist realm of corporate branding

Considering the existentialist lens, how do we find our way? Is it all ambiguous, out of our control? Not quite. Albeit not being able to provide a blueprint towards authenticity for *conscientious* corporate brands, we illustrate both perspectives (i.e., essentialist and existentialist) according to a metaphor (Biscaro et al. 2025; Cornelissen 2024). The essentialist perspective, metaphorically captured into the essentialist *pathway to authenticity* is in stark contrast with the existentialist *hermeneutic spiral* (Fig. 1). The former depicts a 'stepwise' pathway to authenticity in an arena of universal assumptions to authenticity. The latter is a perpetual process of meaning-seeking and interpretation. For conscientious corporate brands, forgive us for the platitude, it is about the journey, not the destination.

Through the existentialist lens, a conscientious corporate brand requires—what we coin—a *Brand for-itself*. A Brand-for-itself embraces ambiguity as an inherent aspect of existence, rather than fleeing into a confined static and unreflective state of established norms and values. The foundation for shaping a Brand-for-itself from an existentialist perspective is formed by seven non-exhaustive tenets.

Tenet 1. Authenticity takes precedence over morality

"We know the authentic effects of the true fire through everyone of its million disguises" (Emerson 1950, p. 209). We have an intrinsic capacity to detect authenticity in a world full of imitation and disguise, full of *bad faith*. This underscores the importance of originality, of a *being in style* (Nietzsche 1974; Aho 2020), in the face of societal norms. Conformity to societal norms and standards is the essentialist pathway towards a moral identity. This is all but authentic, since existentialist authenticity rejects inherent logics, and requires us to confront the ambiguity of creating our own. Authenticity is a performative construct, something that is always becoming (Barad 2003). It is the a priori

condition to a viable moral stance, and it is about confronting the potentiality of becoming who we are. As there are no hidden layers to reality, authenticity emerges from communication. Throughout the brand assemblage, *conscientious* corporate brands foster empathetic dialogue to allow for the emergence of their authentic self.

In the advent of authenticity, emerges a *Brand-for-itself*. As such, it acts not merely as a vessel of conformity to social norms but as a self-determining entity, engaged in ongoing, reflective becoming. It transcends mere function to embody its own project towards the future.

Tenet 2. A *brand-for-itself* is constituted in communication

As a *Brand-for-itself*, corporate brands are never static, but perpetually created through the ongoing exchange of perspectives (e.g., on moral issues). Therefore, we may think of corporate brands as text, which either informs moral judgements, communicates moral decisions, or takes stand towards moral dilemma. The hermeneutic perspective on branding (Hatch and Rubin 2006) renders *conscientious* corporate brands as constituted in communication (Putnam and Nicotera 2009; McPhee and Zaug 2009). More precisely, we may perceive of these corporate brands as constituted in narratives with moral relevancy. As these narratives are continuously self-narrated and re-narrated, formed and reformed, through interactions with stakeholders, they reflect the collective experience of those engaging it.

As a *Brand-toward-finitude*, its story is perpetually unfolding, never reaching a definitive conclusion. Much like Heidegger's *Being-toward-death*, the corporate brand remains in a state of perpetual self-narration. Each interaction, decision, and change in societal context reopens and reframes the narrative, resisting finitude or complete coherence. In this way, the corporate brand is an entity 'toward-finitude'—aware of its inevitable incompleteness and constantly in the process of becoming, where each chapter may only set the stage for the next.

Tenet 3. A *brand-for-itself* embraces ambiguity

"…and consciousness, which is taken to be the seat of clear thinking, is on the contrary the very abode of ambiguity." (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 387) We may perceive of conscientious corporate brands as living, evolving entities. As scholars rightfully pointed out, conscientious corporate brands are inherently co-shaped through continuous interaction with stakeholders (Iglesias and Ind 2020; Biedenbach and Biedenbach 2022; Iglesias et al. 2023). The ongoing dialogue renders the conscientious corporate brand relevant and responsive, reflecting the existentialist emphasis on active engagement with the world (being-in-the-world) and the fluid, ever-changing nature of becoming oneself. A conscientious corporate brand's identity is neither fixed nor predetermined. Instead, it becomes an ongoing project towards the future shaped by the experiences and inputs from all its constitutive elements. As we suggest, this co-shaping of a conscientious corporate brand's identity may induce a (sub-)conscious experience as we, as a collective moral actor. Corporate brands may focus on collective agency as the intersubjective individual experience as we, with a high degree of sharedness amongst individual experiences of who we are or what we value (Becker et al., 2023).

Tenet 4. The *brand-for-itself* is informed by its *brand-in-the-world*

As a *Brand-in-the-world*, conscientious corporate brands thrive to become a nexus of experience. Disclosing the corporate brand in sequence and subjective reality addresses the need for 'contextual relativism' as an advanced skill in moral reasoning (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2004). For conscientious corporate brands, this highlights, that we may not meaningfully assess morality beyond the phenomenological horizon, beyond what we perceive of the emergent brand morality in each situation. The position towards the 'common good' is derived from this self-disclosure: "Since we cannot do without an orientation to the good, and since we cannot be indifferent to our place relative to this good, and since this place is something that must always change and become, the issue of the directive of our lives must arise from us." (Taylor 1989, p. 47) Brand morality becomes a matter of a fleeing and (sub-)conscious experience in harmony (Sahhar and Loohuis 2022).

Entangled within the nexus of experience and meaning, emerges the *Brand-in-the-world*, characterized as embedded within, and shaped by its context. Just as humans exist in a world, they both influence and are influenced by, a *Brand-in-the-world* does not stand apart from its surroundings as static entity; it is dynamically engaged in, responsive to, and shaped by its relations with stakeholders, markets, and societal norms and values. A *Brand-in-the-world* acknowledges and navigates the complexities of the world it inhabits, moving beyond transactional interactions to nurture a situated authenticity that reflects its evolving role in the broader assemblage. Rather than retreating into an idealized, essentialist core, a *Brand-in-the-world* embraces its interconnectedness, finding purpose and identity through continuous, active engagement with its contexts and communities that both shape and depend on it.



Tenet 5. A *brand-for-itself* flourishes within the midst of irreducible normative plurality

Much like innovation, an authentic moral identity cannot be created outright; instead, it emerges through a corporate brand's capacity to navigate complex moral landscapes skilfully. This requires fostering *practical virtues* as problem-solving abilities, allowing corporate brands to engage with and respond to competing moral claims (McMullin 2019). More specifically, conscientious corporate brands must attend to three distinct domains: first-person claims of the self, which relate to self-fulfilment and the realization of unique potential[8]; second-person claims of others, involving moral responsibility and relational integrity; and third-person claims rooted in shared, intersubjective norms and rationality (ibid.).

This process necessitates practical rationality, a norm-governed attunement to how the world discloses as meaningful and valuable within each situation (McMullin 2019). Through this lens, corporate brands are called to develop a unique 'style of being' that goes beyond mere compliance with or alignment to the moral majority (which we coin *corporate branding in bad faith*), instead embracing an evolving identity that reflects their collective character and direction. In line with Nietzsche's notion of nurturing one's style (Nietzsche 1974; McMullin 2019), conscientious corporate brands may thus approximate a moral stance that resonates not by adherence to singular ideals but through an adaptive balance of the many, sometimes conflicting, perspectives they embody. This balancing act forms a vital character trait for operating authentically within a pluralistic moral landscape, embodying the conscientious corporate brand's commitment as an existentialist corrective to essentialist prevalence.

Tenet 6. A *brand-for-itself* involves sequential and contextual learning

Conscientious corporate branding necessitates continuous learning. This demands ongoing reflection, a refined empirical sensitivity to the evolving landscape, and the discovery of suitable responses (Chia 2017; Hutchins 1995). In this, we argue that conscientious corporate brands need to build on multiplex knowledge. In addition to more overtly embedded forms of knowledge (such as *episteme* and *techné*), conscientious corporate brands need to be attuned to the wisdom that is inherently institutionalized (such as *phronesis* and *metis*) (Chia 2017). Conscientious corporate brands that skilfully cope with and balance both forms of knowledge and wisdom increasingly develop the capacity to weigh multiple moral perspectives and adaptability to anticipate in complex environments.

Tenet 7. A *Brand-for-itself* pursues perpetual becoming towards the *Über-Brand*

In the quest for authenticity and self-realization, a *Brand-for-itself* embodies the Nietzschean ideal of *perpetual becoming*, striving to transcend conventional constraints. This journey is characterized by an ongoing process of being attuned with the evolving brand assemblage, wherein the corporate brand continually seeks to redefine itself in response to dynamic relational interactions. The *Über-Brand* represents an aspirational state of authenticity and higher virtues, serving as a guiding vision for corporate brands to emulate.

Implications

Despite the growing emphasis on authenticity, existentialist thought has largely been absent from scholarly discussions in corporate branding, arguably, because it rejects its instrumental connotation and the categorical framing of that which cannot be framed. To the essentialist, existentialism may appear fuzzy, lacking the clear pathways and definitive structures that characterize more traditional approaches to branding and identity. This perceived ambiguity can be unsettling, as it challenges the desire for concrete definitions and stable meanings. However, this very lack of rigidity is what renders existentialism profoundly true and relevant. It acknowledges the complexities and uncertainties inherent in human experience and corporate branding, allowing for a more authentic engagement with the evolving realities of stakeholders. This paper introduces existentialist thought, opening new avenues for understanding how conscientious corporate brands may serve as an existentialist corrective, allowing for a deeper reading of their communications and narratives. To our knowledge, we are among the first to put the existentialist lens to work in corporate branding, bridging a significant gap in literature. This paper challenges traditional essentialist views and sets the stage for future research exploring the implications of existentialist thought in various aspects of corporate branding, marketing and organizational studies. Within this, we believe that our paper encourages scholars and practitioners in the realm of corporate branding to engage in 'critical thinking' (Dreyfus 1997; Heidegger 1966) instead of trusting on prescriptions. Doing so may help them to transcend the tensions of everyday experience embedded in organizational dogmata.

While the insights generated by corporate branding scholarship are valuable, it is crucial to remain wary of overemphasizing their implications. This paper serves as a reminder

[8] For a further debate on meaningful choice and the immersive self-realization of stakeholders, see Anker (2023).

to ground theoretical advancements in concrete case-level analyses (Cooren et al. 2011), ensuring that our understanding of corporate branding remains tied to real-world practices and the complexities of stakeholder interactions.

Our exploration delineates the limitations of existing branding frameworks that prioritize stability and core identities. By highlighting the need for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of corporate brands, we encourage researchers and practitioners to reconsider the parameters within which corporate branding operates, emphasizing the importance of dialogue, co-creation, and the subjective experiences of stakeholders in shaping brand narratives. In the willingness to embark on the existentialist quest, we may delineate conscientious corporate branding as a field of inquiry in its own right.

Amongst brand practitioners, we encourage discomfort, liminality and reflection: 'Making brands uncomfortable again' involves challenging the status quo and embracing the ambiguity inherent in the branding process. Brands—acting in good faith—naturally move away from polished, predetermined narratives that prioritize conformity to societal norms and instead lean into the complexities and contradictions of their identities. By openly confronting uncomfortable truths, brands may create space for critical reflection and dialogue among stakeholders. This discomfort can lead to deeper understanding and authentic engagement, enabling brands to evolve in response to the realities of their operating environments. As fragmentation emerges as a seminal hindrance to the formation of a brand purpose, brand managers become conductors of their assemblage. The existentialist lens is a call for brand managers to realizing freedom in orchestrating a brand purpose irrespective of the normative toolboxes. In this sense, we argue that brands are *condemned to authenticity*.

If challenged, they may answer: "'This – is now *my* way: where is yours?' Thus I answered those who asked me 'the way'. For *the* way – does not exist." (Nietzsche 1969, p. 166).

Appendix: Glossary

Concept	Explanation	Exemplary further reading
Ambiguity	As we cannot shelve human existence with principles for making choices, the starting point for any being is complex, unfathomable, and at times contradictory	de Beauvoir: The Ethics of Ambiguity
Bad Faith	The act of self-deception, lying to oneself about one's freedom, and avoiding one's responsibility by fleeing into societal norms, and standards on how to be	Sartre: Being and Nothingness
Being-in-itself (être-en-soi)	A mode of existence characteristic of inanimate objects, which simply are without consciousness or the capacity for change	Sartre: Being and Nothingness
Being-for-itself (être-pour-soi)	The for-itself is "a being which is what it is not and is not what it is" (Sartre 1956, p. 58). It represents the self-conscious, free aspect of human existence that confronts its own freedom and sets out to create meaningful choices. A mode of existence characteristic of conscious beings, who can reflect, project and change	Sartre: Being and Nothingness
Being-in-the-world	Heidegger's term for the fundamental way human beings are always already situated and engaged in the world	Heidegger: Being and Time
Dasein	A term used by Heidegger to denote human existence or "being-there", emphasizing our presence in the world and our awareness of it	Heidegger: Being and Time

Concept	Explanation	Exemplary further reading
Facticity	The aspects of one's life that are given and unchangeable, context of the past, the circumstances of one's coming to be (at birth), which limits one's freedom	Sartre: Being and Nothingness
Freedom	The central tenet in existentialism, highlighting one's ability and responsibility to shape one's own life	Sartre: Being and Nothingness de Beauvoir: The Ethics of Ambiguity
Master morality	Nietzsche's concept of a morality that is rooted in a sense of self-affirmation, and the creation of one's own values. Master morality celebrates individual excellence and the assertion of one's will to power, encouraging individuals to transcend conventional moral norms and create their own path. Master morality is the antipode to *slave morality*	Nietzsche: Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche: On the Genealogy of Morals
Nothingness	The absence of essence or intrinsic meaning in the human experience	Sartre: Being and Nothingness
Otherness (The Other)	The recognition of the existence of other conscious beings who perceive the world differently, often leading to the development of self-awareness	Sartre: Being and Nothingness
Phenomenology	A philosophical approach that concentrates on the inquiry of meaning through the study of lived experience	Heidegger: Being and Time Husserl: Logical Investigations Sartre: Being and Nothingness Merleau-Ponty: Phenomenology of Perception
Responsibility	The acknowledgment that individuals must take full responsibility for their actions and the consequences of their choices	Sartre: Being and Nothingness
Slave morality	Nietzsche's concept of a morality that arises from the oppressed and values traits like kindness, empathy, and humility. In Nietzsche's conceptualization, human beings take refuge in such values, as they feel constraint by society to develop their own path. Slave morality is the antipode to *master morality*	Nietzsche: Beyond Good and Evil Nietzsche: On the Genealogy of Morals
Thrownness (Geworfenheit)	Heidegger's concept describing how human beings are thrown into the world and situations—seemingly—beyond their control, which shape—or inform—their existence	Heidegger: Being and Time
Transcendence	The ability to go beyond one's immediate circumstances and limitations through realizing one's freedom of choice; the *for-itself* continuously transcends the given situation	Sartre: Being and Nothingness
Übermensch (Overman)	The ability to reach beyond one's immediate circumstances and limitations by realizing one's freedom in meaningful choices	Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Concept	Explanation	Exemplary further reading
The They (das Man)	Heidegger's term for the anonymous collective that dictates norms and conventions, often leading individuals away from authentic existence	Heidegger: Being and Time
Will to Power	Nietzsche's fundamental concept describing the driving force of human beings to transcend the current situation, the drive to assert and enhance one's values	Nietzsche: The Will to Power Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Acknowledgements We are thankful for the constructive and helpful comments of the conference participants at the Global Brand Conference 2024 in Edinburgh, UK. While preparing this study, we used Grammarly Pro to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. After using the tool, the authors have reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication's content. This work was supported by national funds through FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia), under the project UIDB/04152/2020 (https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/04152/2020)—Centro de Investigação em Gestão de Informação (MagIC)/NOVA IMS.

Funding Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, UIDB/04152/2020, Jörg Henseler.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

References

Aaker, D. A. 1991. *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name*. New York: Free Press.

Aaker, D. A. 1996. *Building strong brands*. New York: Free Press.

Abratt, R., and N. Kleyn. 2023. "The conscientious corporate brand: Definition, operationalization and application in a B2B context." *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* 38 (10): 2122–2133. https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-10-2021-0468.

Abratt, R., and M. Mingione. 2017. "Corporate identity, strategy and change." *Journal of Brand Management* 24 (2): 129–139. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-017-0026-8.

Aho, K. 2020. *Existentialism: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Aho, K., M. Altman, and H. Pedersen, eds. 2024. *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Existentialism*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Anker, T. B. 2023. "Meaningful choice: Existential consumer theory." *Marketing Theory* 24 (4): 591–609. https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931231207317.

Argenti, P. A. 2022. "Integrating multiple voices when crafting a corporate brand narrative." In *The Routledge Companion to Corporate Branding*, edited by O. Iglesias, N. Ind, and M. Schultz, 259–280. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Balmer, J. M. T. 1995. "Corporate branding and connoisseurship." *Journal of General Management* 21 (1): 24–46.

Balmer, J. M. T. 2001. "Corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate marketing - Seeing through the fog." *European Journal of Marketing* 35 (3–4): 248–291. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560110694763.

Balmer, J. M. T. 2012. "Strategic corporate brand alignment: Perspectives from identity based views of corporate brands." *European Journal of Marketing* 46 (7): 1064–1092. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561211230205.

Balmer, J. M. T. 2017. "The corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and behaviours continuum." *European Journal of Marketing* 51 (9–10): 1472–1502. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-07-2017-0448.

Balmer, J. M. T., and E. R. Gray. 2003. "Corporate brands: What are they? What of them?" *European Journal of Marketing* 37 (7–8): 972–997. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560310477627.

Barad, K. 2003. "Posthumanist performativity: toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter." *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (3): 801–831. https://doi.org/10.1086/345321.

Becker, L. B., I. O. Karpen, M. Kleinaltenkamp, E. Jaakkola, A. Helkkula, and M. Nuutinen. 2023. "Actor experience: Bridging individual and collective-level theorizing." Journal of Business Research 158: 113658. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113658.

Beverland, M. 2005. "Grafting brand authenticity: The case of luxury wines." *Journal of Management Studies* 42 (5): 1003–1029. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00530.x.

Biedenbach, G., and T. Biedenbach. 2022. "Co-creating conscientious corporate brands inside-out through values-driven branding." In *The Routledge Companion to Corporate Branding*, edited by O. Iglesias, N. Ind, and M. Schultz, 480–495. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Biscaro, C., E. Bruni, J. P. Cornelissen, and C. Oswick. 2025. "Metaphor and Organization Studies: Going beyond resonance to further theory and practice." Organization Studies 0 (0). https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406251314572.

Bowie, N. E. 2017. *Business ethics: A Kantian perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Carroll, G. R., and D. R. Wheaton. 2009. "The organizational construction of authenticity: An examination of contemporary food and dining in the U.S." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 29: 255–282. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2009.06.003.

Chia, R. 2017. "A process-philosophical understanding of organizational learning as "wayfinding"." *The Learning Organization* 24 (2): 107–118. https://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-11-2016-0083.

Christensen, L. T., M. Morsing, and G. Cheney. 2008. *Corporate communications: Convention, complexity, and critique*. London: SAGE Publications.

Christensen, L. T., M. Morsing, and O. Thyssen. 2013. "CSR as aspirational talk." *Organization* 20 (3): 372–393. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508413478310.

Cooren, F., T. Kuhn, J. Cornelissen, and T. Clark. 2011. "Communication, organizing and organization: An overview and introduction

to the special issue." *Organization Studies* 32 (9): 1149–1170. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840611410836.

Cornelissen, J. P. 2022. "Corporate brand narratives." In *The Routledge Companion to Corporate Branding*, edited by O. Iglesias, N. Ind, and M. Schultz, 338–342. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Cornelissen, J. P., M. A. Höllerer, and D. Seidl. 2021. "What Theory Is and Can Be: Forms of Theorizing in Organizational Scholarship." *Organization Theory* 2 (3). https://doi.org/10.1177/26317877211020328.

Cornelissen, J. P. 2024. "Defining the Role of Metaphor in Organization Studies." In *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphor in Organization Studies*, edited by A. Örtenblad. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

de Beauvoir, S. 1949. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. New Jersey: Citadel Press.

De Chernatony, L. 2002. "Would a brand smell any sweeter by a corporate name?" *Corporate Reputation Review* 5 (2–3): 114–132. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1540169.

DeLanda, M. 2016. *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Diez-Busto, E., L. Sanchez-Ruiz, and A. Fernandez-Laviada. 2021. "The B Corp Movement: A Systematic Literature Review." *Sustainability* 13 (5): 2508. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13052508.

Dreyfus, H. L. 1991. *Being-in-the-World: A commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dreyfus, H. L. 1997. "Heidegger on Gaining a Free Relation to Technology." In *Technology and Values*, edited by A. Feenberg and A. Hannay, 25–33. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Dreyfus, H. L., and S. E. Dreyfus. 2004. "The ethical implications of the five-stage skill-acquisition model." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 24 (3): 251–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467604265023.

Emerson, R. W. 1950. *The Complete Essays and other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Random House.

Fink, B. 1995. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fritz, K., V. Schoenmueller, and M. Bruhn. 2017. "Authenticity in branding – exploring antecedents and consequences of brand authenticity." *European Journal of Marketing* 51 (2): 324–348. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-10-2014-0633.

Golomb, J. 1995. In search of authenticity: from Kierkegaard to Camus. In *Problems of modern European thought*. London: Routledge.

Grimm, N., Y. Sahhar, C. Moss, and J. Henseler. 2025. "The moral states we seek: conscientious corporate branding for the perplexed." Journal of Brand Management. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-025-00391-2

Gyrd-Jones, R., B. Merrilees, and D. Miller. 2013. "Revisiting the complexities of corporate branding: Issues, paradoxes, solutions." *Journal of Brand Management* 20 (7): 571–589. https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2013.1.

Haidt, J. 2001. "The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment." *Psychological Review* 108 (4): 814–834. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.108.4.814.

Haidt, J. 2008. "Morality." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3 (1): 65–72. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2008.00063.x.

Haidt, J., and C. Joseph. 2004. "Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues." *Daedalus* 133 (4): 55–66.

Hatch, M. J., and J. Rubin. 2006. "The hermeneutics of branding." *Journal of Brand Management* 14 (1): 40–59. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2550053.

Hatch, M. J., and M. Schultz. 2001. "Are the strategic stars aligned for your corporate brand?" *Harvard Business Review* 79 (2): 128–134.

Hatch, M. J., and M. Schultz. 2003. "Bringing the corporation into corporate branding." *European Journal of Marketing* 37 (7–8): 1041–1064. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560310477654.

Heidegger, M. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. New York: Harper & Row. Originally published in 1927.

Heidegger, M. 1966. *Discourse on Thinking*. Translated by J. M. Anderson and E. H. Freund. New York: Harper & Row. Originally published 1959.

Hirsch, P. B. 2016. "Profiting on purpose: Creating a master narrative." *Journal of Business Strategy* 37 (4): 47–51. https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-05-2016-0043.

Holt, D. B. 2004. *How brands become icons: The principles of cultural branding*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Hutchins, E. 1995. *Cognition in the Wild*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Iglesias, O., and N. Ind. 2016. "How to be a Brand with a Conscience." In *Brands with a Conscience: How to build a successful and responsible brand*, edited by N. Ind and S. Horlings. London: Kogan Page.

Iglesias, O., and N. Ind. 2020. "Towards a theory of conscientious corporate brand co-creation: The next key challenge in brand management." *Journal of Brand Management* 27 (6): 710–720. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-020-00205-7.

Iglesias, O., J. J. Singh, and M. Casabayó. 2011. "Key changes and challenges for brands in an uncertain environment." *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 20 (6): 436–439. https://doi.org/10.1108/10610421111166577.

Iglesias, O., N. Ind, and M. Alfaro. 2013. "The organic view of the brand: A brand value co-creation model." *Journal of Brand Management* 20 (8): 670–688. https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2013.8.

Iglesias, O., N. Ind, and M. Schultz. 2022. "Towards a paradigm shift in corporate branding." In *The Routledge Companion to Corporate Branding*, edited by O. Iglesias, N. Ind, and M. Schultz, 3–23. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Iglesias, O., M. Mingione, N. Ind, and S. Markovic. 2023. "How to build a conscientious corporate brand together with business partners: A case study of Unilever." *Industrial Marketing Management* 109:1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2022.12.008.

Ind, N. 1997. *The corporate brand*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Ind, N., and O. Iglesias. 2022. *In good conscience: Do the right thing while building a profitable business*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Ind, N., and I. Ryder. 2011. "Conscientious brands editorial." *Journal of Brand Management* 18 (9): 635–638. https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2011.16.

Ind, N., O. Iglesias, and M. Schultz. 2013. "Building brands together: Emergence and outcomes of co-creation." *California Management Review* 55 (3): 5–26. https://doi.org/10.1525/cmr.2013.55.3.5.

Kant, I. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Originally published in 1781.

Kant, I. 2012. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated and edited by M. Gregor and J. Timmermann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Originally published in 1785.

Kapferer, J.-N. 2012. *The New Strategic Brand Management - Advanced insights and strategic thinking*, 5th ed. London: Kogan Page.

Kierkegaard, S. 1985. *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by A. Hannay. London: Penguin Books. Originally published 1843.

Kierkegaard, S. 1992. *Either/Or*. Edited by V. Eremita. Notes and introduction by A. Hannay. Translated by A. Hannay. London: Penguin Books. Originally published 1843.

Kohlberg, L. 1971. "Stages of Moral Development as a basis of moral education." In *Moral Education: Interdisciplinary Approaches*,

edited by C. M. Beck, B. S. Crittenden, and E. V. Sullivan. New York: Newman Press.
Kohlberg, L. 1981. *Essays on Moral Development*, vol. 1. New York: Harper & Row.
Kornberger, M. 2010. *Brand society: How brands transform management and lifestyle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kornum, N., R. Gyrd-Jones, N. Al Zagir, and K. A. Brandis. 2017. "Interplay between intended brand identity and identities in a Nike related brand community: Co-existing synergies and tensions in a nested system." *Journal of Business Research* 70:432–440. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.06.019.
Lacan, J. 2011. *Desire and Its Interpretation: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VI*. Edited by J-A. Miller. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Lury, C. 2009. "Brand as assemblage." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 2 (1–2): 67–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350903064022.
Maloney, J. 2023. "How Bud Light Blew It: With one blunder after another, the brewing giant behind the brand became a case study in how not to handle a culture-war storm." The Wall Street Journal.
van Manen, M. 2016. *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*. New York: Routledge.
Markovic, S., O. Iglesias, and N. Ind. 2023. "Conscientious business-to-business organizations: Status quo and future research agenda." *Industrial Marketing Management* 112:8–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2023.05.021.
McMullin, I. 2019. *Existential Flourishing: A Phenomenology of the Virtues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
McPhee, R. D., and P. Zaug. 2009. "The communicative constitution of organizations - A framework for explanation." In *Building theories of organization: The constitutive role of communication*, ed. L. L. Putnam and A. M. Nicotera, 23–48. New York: Routledge.
Melnyk, Andrii (@MelnykAndrij). 2022. "Quadratisch. Praktisch. Blut." X [former Twitter], 2 April 2022. https://twitter.com/MelnykAndrij/status/1510297743696273416.
Merleau-Ponty, M. 2002. *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge.
Mingione, M. 2015. "Inquiry into corporate brand alignment: A dialectical analysis and directions for future research." *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 24 (5): 518–536. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-05-2014-0617.
Mingione, M., and R. Abratt. 2022. "In search of corporate brand alignment." In *The Routledge Companion to Corporate Branding*, edited by O. Iglesias, N. Ind, and M. Schultz, 149–168. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
Nagel, T. 1989. *The view from nowhere. First issued as an Oxford University Press*. Paperback edition. New York and London: Oxford University Press.
Nietzsche, F. 1954a. "The Antichrist." In *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by W. Kaufmann. New York: Viking Press. Originally published 1895.
Nietzsche, F. 1954b. "Twilight of the Idols." In *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by W. Kaufmann. New York: Viking Press. Originally published 1889.
Nietzsche, F. 1969. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books. Originally published 1883–1885.
Nietzsche, F. 1974. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Translated by W. Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books. Originally published 1882.
Nietzsche, F. 1996. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits, Part II*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Originally published 1878.
Nietzsche, F. 2002. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Translated by J. Norman, edited by R.-P. Horstmann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Originally published 1886.
Putnam, L. L., and A. M. Nicotera, eds. 2009. *Building theories of organization: The constitutive role of communication, Communication series Organizational communication*. New York: Routledge.
Rindell, A., and O. Iglesias. 2014. "Context and time in brand image constructions." *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 27 (5): 756–768. https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-09-2014-0172.
Rindell, A., G. Svensson, T. Mysen, A. Billström, and K. Wilén. 2011. "Towards a conceptual foundation of Conscientious Corporate Brands."*Journal of Brand Management* 18 (9): 709–719. https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2011.38.
Sahhar, Y., and R. Loohuis. 2022. "Characterizing the spaces of consumer value experience in value co-creation and value co-destruction." *European Journal of Marketing* 56 (13): 105–136. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-04-2020-0313.
Sandberg, J., and M. Alvesson. 2021. "Meanings of theory: Clarifying theory through typification." *Journal of Management Studies* 58 (2): 487–516. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12587.
Sartre, J-P. 1956. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by H. E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press. Originally published 1943.
Schader, N., and T. Kukral. 2023. "Die Russland-Geschäfte der deutschen Wirtschaft " tagesschau.
Schmidt, H. J., N. Ind, F. Guzmán, and E. Kennedy. 2022. "Sociopolitical activist brands." *Journal of Product and Brand Management* 31 (1): 40–55. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-03-2020-2805.
Schoeneborn, D., M. Morsing, and A. Crane. 2020. "Formative Perspectives on the Relation Between CSR Communication and CSR Practices: Pathways for Walking, Talking, and T(w)alking." *Business and Society* 59 (1): 5–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319845091.
Siegried, M. 2010. "Das erzählte Selbst. Ein alternativer Entwurf von Authentizität in Heideggers frühen Freiburger Vorlesungen." *Phänomenologische Forschungen* 2010: 191–213. https://doi.org/10.28937/1000107837.
Södergren, J. 2021. "Brand authenticity: 25 Years of research." *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 45 (4): 645-663. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12651
Steyn, B. 2004. "From strategy to corporate communication strategy: A conceptualisation." *Journal of Communication Management* 8 (2): 168–183. https://doi.org/10.1108/13632540410807637.
Taylor, C. 1989. *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Urde, M. 2003. "Core value-based corporate brand building." *European Journal of Marketing* 37 (7–8): 1017–1040. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560310477645.
Urde, M. 2009. "Uncovering the corporate brand's core values." *Management Decision* 47 (4): 616–638. https://doi.org/10.1108/00251740910959459.
Urde, M. 2016. "The brand core and its management over time." *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 25 (1): 26–42. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-05-2015-0875.
Vallaster, C., and S. von Wallpach. 2013. "An online discursive inquiry into the social dynamics of multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation." *Journal of Business Research* 66 (9): 1505–1515.
van Riel, C. B. M. 1997. "Research in corporate communication: An overview of an emerging field." *Management Communication Quarterly* 11 (2): 288–309. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318997112005.
van Riel, C. B. M. 2007. *Essentials of corporate communication: Implementing practices for effective reputation management*. New York: Routledge.
Vargo, S., L. Peters, H. Kjellberg, K. Koskela-Huotari, S. Nenonen, F. Polese, D. Sarno, and C. Vaughan. 2023. "Emergence in

marketing: An institutional and ecosystem framework." *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 51 (1): 2–22. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-022-00849-8.

Villela, M., S. Bulgacov, and G. Morgan. 2021. "B Corp Certification and Its Impact on Organizations Over Time." *Journal of Business Ethics* 170 (2): 343–357. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04372-9.

von Wallpach, S., A. Hemetsberger, and P. Espersen. 2017a. "Performing identities: Processes of brand and stakeholder identity co-construction." *Journal of Business Research* 70:443–452. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.06.021.

von Wallpach, S., B. Voyer, M. Kastanakis, and H. Mühlbacher. 2017b. "Co-creating stakeholder and brand identities: Introduction to the special section." *Journal of Business Research* 70: 395–398.

Ziesemer, B. 2022. "Von wegen Gutmenschenschokolade: Wenn aus Ritter Sport "Ritter Mord" wird." Stern.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Nils Grimm is a PhD candidate at the Chair of Product–Market Relations, embedded in the Department of Design, Production & Management at the Faculty of Engineering Technology of the University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands. Furthermore, Nils Grimm is doctoral researcher and guest lecturer at the Marketing, Sales, Tourism & Sports Department at the International School of Management in Dortmund, Germany. His broad research interest ranges from corporate branding, to corporate communications and the orchestration of integrated communication departments. Nils Grimm gained valuable insights from his career path as a public relations consultant, and as a marketing manager in the industry in Germany.

Yasin Sahhar is Assistant Professor with the Entrepreneurship and Technology Management research group at the University of Twente, The Netherlands. His research focuses on understanding how people experience and how phenomena 'work.' He is particularly interested in areas such as customer experience, value creation and destruction, temporality, and desire-anxiety. His academic interests also extend to philosophy, for example, existentialism and axiology. Dr. Sahhar's work is distinguished by its explorative, theory-building approach, employing interpretive and phenomenological methods. An award-winning scholar, Dr. Sahhar has presented his research at leading conferences and published in renowned journals, including the *Journal of Service Theory and Practice*, *European Journal of Marketing, and Journal of Brand Management.*

Christoph Moss is a professor and independent researcher. He most recently served as program director for Digital Marketing at the Marketing, Sales, Tourism & Sports Department at the International School of Management, Germany. His research focuses on integrated corporate communications and digital marketing. He is a renowned academic industry consultant.

Jörg Henseler is a professor and holds the Chair of Product–Market Relations at the Department of Design, Production and Management at the University of Twente, The Netherlands. He is also a visiting professor at Nova Information Management School, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal. His research bridges behavioural and design science and focuses on the management of products, services and brands. Web of Science/Clarivate has repeatedly distinguished him as a highly cited researcher.