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# The Relationship Between Branding and Diffusion of Innovation: A Systematic Review

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## Abstract

Branding and diffusion of innovation are two of the most approached research fields in marketing over time and still highly interesting for the scientific community. Nonetheless, the studies that conjunctively tackle these two areas are not many, and a big picture of the interactions between branding and diffusion of innovation is lacking. This paper offers a systematic review of the most relevant work for our purpose. We identify five topics which relate branding to diffusion of innovation: product innovation launch, brand's role of mitigating the repercussions of product innovation failure, innovation diffusion theory as an explanation of brand equity development, brand risk and innovation, and brand influence on innovation adoption and diffusion. For each topic, we discuss key findings and we question contradictory results. Moreover, we address unsolved issues as research priorities for the scientific community.

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## 1. Introduction

Branding and diffusion of innovation are probably the broadest subjects in marketing, after decades of being extensively studied, and both still with great potential of future headway. While research in branding has achieved real progress in understanding the development of brand equity and in assisting brand managers' decisions, diffusion of innovation has refined the research approach (Peres, Muller, and Mahajan, 2010) and has developed a manifold of ways to model the spread of an innovation in a social system.

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Despite being major components of the body of knowledge in marketing, the relationship between branding and diffusion of innovation is a blurred picture, without any clear view that sums up different perspectives of this relationship. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the two fields contain numerous cross-references, as any product innovation needs to be branded while it is diffused on the market and also, any brand goes through a diffusion process. Thus, clearing up the issues that put together branding and diffusion of innovation brings interoperability to the theories comprised, it clarifies the current state of knowledge and enlightens gaps that require future research.

It is generally agreed that great scientific progress can be achieved by employing multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, which bring together two or more disciplines, independent or not, allowing additional understanding of an issue. In many cases, a discipline is the research object, while the other is the instrumental one, which provides methodological support.

This paper aims to offer a systematic review of the relationship between branding and diffusion of innovation. Practically, we sum up the interdisciplinary studies that tackle these two fields inside the marketing literature, highlighting the most meaningful conclusions and arguing controversial results. Finally, we propose directions for future research that could provide a thorough comprehension of the two areas of interest.

The relevance of such a review resides from Keller and Lehmann's (2006) considerations made in their review of the branding field:

'Consider the impact of a brand extension in the context of the Bass model of new product diffusion. Assuming there is some level of fit with a parent brand which has positive equity, a brand extension has advantages in terms of assumed product quality and the willingness of the firm to stand behind the product in the event of problems. These expectations should increase the number of people willing to buy the brand extension initially ( $p$ , the coefficient of innovation) and the speed of diffusion of the extension through word of mouth ( $q$ , the coefficient of imitation) since it will seem less risky to those consumers who wait for others to buy it first. A stronger brand can more easily gain wider distribution which will also lead to faster trial among innovators (in effect, makes the market potential  $m$  larger). Thus, a reasonable prediction is that stronger brands will, *ceteris paribus*, have both faster diffusion and great market potential.'

Aaker (2009) also states that the development of a strong brand is what makes the difference between the long term success and failure of a new product, but also warns that not any new product deserves such an investment. Despite these articulate allegations coming from salient figures of branding, the big picture of the epistemological links between branding and diffusion of innovation still lacks.

## 2. Methods

A total of 419 references were selected – 397 scientific papers and 22 books –, after removing duplicates. The search strategy was based on the following online databases: Elsevier Science Direct, ProQuest Central, EBSCO, Google Scholar and JStor, using collocations like 'brand innovation', 'brand diffusion', 'brand adoption', 'branding diffusion', 'branding adoption', 'diffusion of innovation' and 'brand adopters', until the results became completely redundant. The procedure was undertaken between February and April 2014. Also, the papers published between 2000 and 2013 in three of the most prestigious marketing journals, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research* and *Journal of International Marketing* were covered. We used the same collocations in Google Books database for finding relevant books, and also, *a priori* known books were considered.

After the title and abstract analysis, 55 articles were retained, while the other 342 were ruled out. In this phase, the inclusion criterion was the existence of any clue concerning joint approach of branding and diffusion of innovation, or any comprised concept. The content analysis focused on the methodological strictness and the overall scientific quality. The inclusion criteria were the use of empirical data and the proposition of well explained theories that explicitly or implicitly link branding to diffusion of innovation. We also employed two exclusion criteria, the attempt to create a private epistemological universe and the study of business-to-business markets, in order to keep things simple. Seven books and 35 scientific papers were finally held for the review.

Five topics can be distinguished by scanning these references: product innovation launch, brand's role of mitigating the repercussions of product innovation failure, innovation diffusion theory as an explanation of brand equity development, brand risk and innovation, and brand influence on innovation adoption and diffusion. In the first topic, brand's role is comprised in brand strategy, through the strategic decision of using a new brand, a brand extension, or a combination of the two for a product launch. In turn, the topic of brand influence on innovation

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