

## Corporate Rebranding and Its Meaning – Theory Perspective

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to introduce the theoretical conditions related to corporate rebranding issues – in the perspective of marketing theory, management theory and organizational theory, through literature analysis (both Polish and foreign sources – well-known Polish journals and prestigious international journals) from these three areas.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The article is based on a literature review within the field of management and marketing theory, with account being taken of the meaning of the rebranding process in the context of the organizational theory. The article presents models of corporate rebranding and well-structured definitions.

**Findings:** Organizations and their corporate brands that currently operate in a hyper competitive and highly turbulent environment are constantly looking for sources of competitive advantage. Brand creators are trying to give it a unique character and stand out from the others. The brand is therefore assumed to be an entity that directly reaches the hearts and minds of consumers. However, how to maintain this emotion associated with a given brand, how to permanently reach the hearts of consumers who change their tastes and penchants so quickly? This change in the environment and consumer trends often forces evolutions in the entire marketing strategy of the organization as well as in the strategy regarding the brand and/or its architecture. These changes can be both slow and rapid, involving many or just one or more selected elements related to branding (evolutionary and revolutionary rebranding).

**Research limitations/implications:** There are still few publications in the literature describing and explaining the effects of rebranding strategies carried out in various ways, both in the marketing context as well as in the psychological (consumer reactions) and sociological context (consumer trends impact). Neither does this article does explore this research area, which implies further research for authors.

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**Originality/value:** The presented research is a new approach to the subject and thus can make an original contribution to the science of brand management.

**Keywords:** corporate rebranding, management theory, marketing theory, organizational theory, brand management.

**JEL:** M31, M39

## Rebranding korporacyjny i jego znaczenie – perspektywa teoretyczna

### Streszczenie

**Cel:** przedstawienie teoretycznych uwarunkowań związanych z problematyką rebrandingu przedsiębiorstw – w perspektywie teorii marketingu, teorii zarządzania i teorii organizacji, poprzez analizę literatury (studia literaturowe oparto zarówno na źródłach polskich, jak i na zagranicznych – prestiżowe czasopisma międzynarodowe) ze wskazanych trzech obszarów.

**Metodologia:** artykuł jest oparty na przeglądzie literatury z zakresu teorii zarządzania i marketingu oraz z uwzględnieniem znaczenia procesu rebrandingu w kontekście teorii organizacji. W artykule przedstawiono modele korporacyjnego rebrandingu i ustrukturyzowane w formie tabeli definicje.

**Wyniki:** organizacje i ich marki korporacyjne, które obecnie działają w hiperkonkurencyjnym i wysoce burzliwym środowisku, nieustannie poszukują źródeł przewagi konkurencyjnej. Twórcy marki starają się nadać jej niepowtarzalny charakter i wyróżnić się na tle innych. Z założenia marka jest więc bytem, który trafia bezpośrednio do serc i umysłów konsumentów. Jak jednak utrzymać emocje związane z daną marką, jak na stałe trafić do serc konsumentów, którzy tak szybko zmieniają gusta i upodobania? Ta zmiana otoczenia i trendów konsumenckich wymusza często zmiany w całej strategii marketingowej organizacji, a także w strategii dotyczącej marki i/lub jej architektury. Zmiany te mogą być powolne, ale i szybkie, obejmujące wiele lub tylko jeden, lub więcej wybranych elementów związanych z brandingiem (rebranding ewolucyjny i rewolucyjny).

**Ograniczenia/implikacje badawcze:** w literaturze wciąż jest niewiele publikacji opisujących i wyjaśniających skutki strategii rebrandingu realizowanych na różne sposoby tak w kontekście marketingowym, jak i psychologicznym (reakcje konsumenckie) i socjologicznym (wpływ trendów konsumenckich). W niniejszym artykule nie dokonano eksploracji tego obszaru badawczego, co implikuje potrzebę dalszych badań.

**Oryginalność/wartość:** prezentowane badania stanowią nowe podejście do tematu, a tym samym mogą wносить oryginalny wkład w naukę o zarządzaniu marką.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rebranding korporacyjny, teoria zarządzania, teoria marketingu, teoria organizacji, zarządzanie marką.

## 1. Introduction

Brand-related issues are a popular subject of many scientific publications in the field of marketing and management. As T. J. Dąbrowski (2010, p. 81) emphasizes, a brand is a kind of promise made by a company for the future through consistent actions in the past. As long as the promise is kept, the company builds its reputation. Once the company no longer fulfills the promise, it starts to lose its reputation. In other words, reputation of an enterprise reflects its ability to meet the needs and requirements of different groups of stakeholders. It is a part of the company's intangible

assets and affects its value measured in financial terms (Maciąg, 2014, p. 76). A company's reputation and performance determine the effectiveness of branding activities, including rebranding.

## 2. Rebranding – Marketing Significance

Deliberations on rebranding cannot begin without a brief presentation of the axis of action, i.e. the concept of a brand which is etymologically rooted in the Middle Ages. According to researchers, the English word *brand* originates from the Old Nordic *brand*, which referred to the cattle marking system used to identify who the animal belonged to and to confirm quality guarantee (Riezebos, 1996; Murphy, 1991, p. 2). A brand as a symbol has been used in practice for ages. Already in ancient Greece or Rome brands were used as symbols determining the origin of ceramic products or jewelry (Witek-Hajduk, 2011, p. 17), while in around 16<sup>th</sup> century whisky producers used to send their products in wooden barrels with their brand name burnt on the barrel (Kall, 2001, p. 11).

Despite such a long history, the literature does not present a universal and prevailing definition of a brand. According to some researchers, a brand represents everything that company owners want for the target customers to think and feel about the company – its products and services (Mindrut, Manolica, & Roman, 2015, p. 394). A. Grzegorzczak (2005) used a method of analogy to show that if a brand is an abstract which cannot exist without an object it identifies, a name for a human is a category analogical for the brand in reference to a product.

Nowadays a brand as a strategic marketing resource of a company is an important element of market mechanisms, including the changes which take place in companies, such as rebranding changes.

According to the assumptions presented in the literature, a change in the brand image may occur on three different levels in an organization (Lambkin & Muzellec, 2008):

- 1) corporate,
- 2) in a strategic business unit and
- 3) on the product level.

Figure 1 illustrates the simplified three-level brand hierarchy according to Muzellec and Lambkin (2006, p. 806), who refer in their theory to K. Keller's brand hierarchy model to provide better conceptualization of a rebranding process. K. Keller's model consists of several hierarchy levels where the branding strategy is perceived through a number of related products – from corporate through to family and individual ones, and modifiers (Keller, Apéria, & Georgson, 2008, p. 519). As shown in Figure 1, rebranding on corporate levels applies to the whole entity – corporation. A brand change on a business unit level concerns a subsidiary or a whole department in

a larger company. Product rebranding, which applies only to a change in the brand of individual products but often also includes a change in the name is positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy (Muzellec, Doogan, & Lambkin, 2003, pp. 32–33).

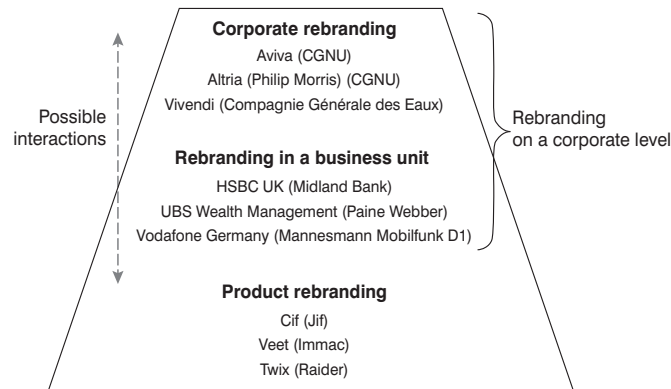


Fig 1. Rebranding types in the context of brand hierarchy. Source: Based on: Muzellec & Lambkin (2006, p. 806).

According to the presented model, product names change on a lower level, e.g. from Raider to Twix, which can help to standardize domestic names on various markets. On a business unit level, a change in the unit name, e.g. Midland Bank for HSBC UK as well as its graphic illustration (logo), helps to identify business units and their dependants under a standardized name. On the corporate level, rebranding reflects a significant change in the company strategy or ownership structure. In some cases, corporate rebranding may not affect any of the lower levels as such but simply reflect mergers and corporate takeovers. Mergers in the financial sector, which resulted in the establishment of the Nordea brand, can be quoted as an example<sup>1</sup>. A. Daly and D. Moloney (2004, p. 30), similarly to H. Stuart and L. Muzellec (2004, p. 473), perceive rebranding as a kind of *continuum*<sup>2</sup> – functioning from revitalization of a current brand to the change in its name, which is related to the change in the brand values and promises.

While the approaches presented by the aforementioned researcher apply to rebranding as a process along a *continuum* of minor to major changes, L. Muzellec and M. Lambkin (2006) differentiate between:

- “evolution” which covers only the slogan or logo (minor changes),
- “revolution” which affects the changes in the slogan and logo elements and can lead to a complete name change, as shown in Figure 2.

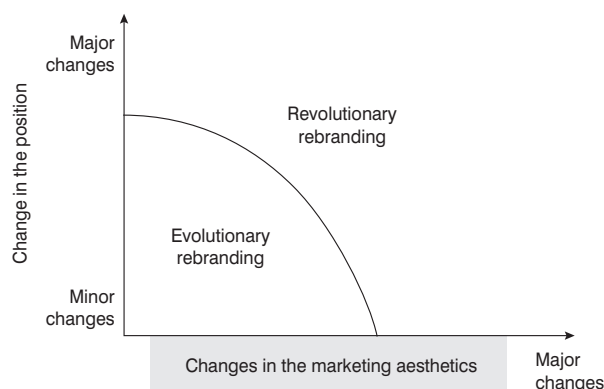


Fig. 2. Rebranding as a continuum. Source: based on: Muzellec, Lambkin (2006, p. 805).

In the context of the presented concept, rebranding is perceived as a two-dimensional change – depending on the degree of marketing aesthetics change versus brand positioning. The model shows the way rebranding occurs along the continuum from the evolutionary (i.e. a minor change in positioning and aesthetics) to the revolutionary one (i.e. a major change in positioning and aesthetics). A complete brand change means a significant change in the brand positioning and a major change in the marketing aesthetics, which redefines the company.

### 3. Rebranding in the Theory of Management and Marketing – Literature Review

Corporate rebranding should be approached – which is suggested by the semantic analysis of the term<sup>3</sup> – in the context of corporate branding, which refers to the initial cohesive communication of the corporate brand and can occur at any time. Corporate rebranding stands for separation or a change between the originally formulated corporate brand and its new development. The wide definition covers a number of statements including a change in the brand position, its transformation, renewal, refreshment and rediscovery (Miller, Merrilees, & Yakimova, 2014). As B. Merrilees and D. Miller (2008) emphasize, a “change in the brand vision” can be called a “brand revision”. The process of revision carried out throughout the whole organization, as the abovementioned researchers emphasize, requires change management. In the case of corporate branding, organizational issues may require some changes but the emphasis is put on all units to consistently follow the specifications of policies and procedures (such as corporate headers or footers, and using the colors required according to

the developed corporate identity). Along with corporate rebranding all units (organization departments) have to make an effort towards a change – from one mind-set/culture to another, new one.

Despite the fact that there is no universal definition of rebranding and because the definitions are often contradictory, there is a need to systematize the typology of the term. Two approaches can be identified in the literature. The first one perceives rebranding as a change in the brand system of Corporate Visual Identity. The other approach describes rebranding as a permanent change in the name and/or logo, excluding changes in typography, color, etc. – it is often called rebranding or renewal, revitalization, etc. (Wojciechowska, 2015). Rebranding is a continuous action and involves activities which can be called a process of brand identity and image change, hence some inaccuracies in rebranding definitions occur. A. Daly and D. Moloney (2004) claimed that rebranding means changing some or all material (physical expression of a brand) and non-material aspects such as the brand value and image and feelings towards the brand. A brand change involves a number of components, which was pointed out by J. Kapferer (2012). As P. Hankinson and W. Lomax emphasized (2006), rebranding does not only entail a change in the organization's visual identity but it also leads to actual changes in the organization. A brand change means a change in the image, which is a long-term objective.

The results of scientific research suggest that when an enterprise decides to change its name, not only its performance is affected but also the communication between the enterprise and the consumers changes (Koku, 1997). Different definitions of rebranding can be attributed to various approaches to a brand as such but also to the issue of a brand change, which is reflected by a wide range of subject matters of studies carried out in relation to rebranding. Table 1 presents a review of studies on rebranding. In some of the studies, especially in the papers published at the beginning of the analyzed period, the brand change phenomenon is referred to as brand repositioning or revitalization. L. Muzellec, M. Doogan and M. Lambkin (2003) as well as G. Rosenthal (2003) stated that rebranding can include areas wider than repositioning and hence repositioning is included in rebranding.

Author/Authors	Purpose of the study	Conclusions
Bolhuis, de Jong and van den Bosch (2018)	Extending the observations concerning corporate visual identity in the context of rebranding through an analysis of internal and external effects of corporate rebranding.	Positive results that a change in an organization's visual identity can bring are available only when the change in the Corporate Visual Identity (CVI) is well thought-out and when the process of new CVI designing and implementation is of high quality. Two general features of "high quality process": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– taking into account the contribution of internal and external stakeholders to the process;</li> <li>– organizations should communicate their new CVI better, including internal and external stakeholders.</li> </ul>
Chad (2016)	Investigating (corporate) rebranding process of a non-profit organization and evaluating the significance of corporate rebranding principles (originally developed by Merrilees and Miller (2008) in reference to profit-oriented organizations).	Validity of employing all six corporate rebranding principles proposed by Merrilees and Miller (2008) to increase the efficiency of a brand change for the non-profit context was confirmed and it was determined that rebranding needs to be approached from the point of view of change management.
Collange (2015)	Understanding consumer response to rebranding in the service sector.	There are three variables which explain the change in the attitude towards a service after a brand change: (1) proximity between the new brand and service, (2) difference between the old and new brand image, and (3) attachment to the place where services are provided. The results help to identify the key factors of successful rebranding in the service sector.
Miller, Merrilees and Yakimova (2014)	Understanding the main factors which enable rebranding implementation and the barriers to corporate rebranding.	An iterative general model of corporate rebranding was proposed; it includes single- and multi-phase factors which facilitate rebranding, and the process barriers.

Table cont.

Author/Authors	Purpose of the study	Conclusions
Lee (2013)	Investigating tensions in the implementation of a strategic brand-oriented approach in an organization during rebranding and satisfying the needs of a number of stakeholders, based on an example of a non-profit organization.	In the non-profit sector, every stakeholder has strong values and is highly involved in the organization but the differences in the values may cause a higher level of resistance when adaptation of the “new” identity fails.
Lambkin and Muzellec (2010)	The selected literature applied to creation of the brand image and branding in the B2B sector and to the issues of mergers and acquisitions to develop a model of brand value transfer in the context of rebranding.	Brand reputation and associations with the brand are correlated with the brand value determined in the client’s brand value models.
Merrilees and Miller (2008)	Emphasizing the essence of corporate rebranding in branding practice, which is neglected in theory and hence creates a need for extending the theory on the subject matter.	Six principles of rebranding were developed, pointing out: -the need to maintain basic values and care for the brand, -combining the existing brand with the corrected brand, -reaching new segments, -gaining stakeholders’ support, -adapting brand elements, -significance of promotion for awareness building.
Muzellec and Lambkin (2008)	Investigating interactions between corporate and product brands – vertical links in the brand architecture (Guinness Ireland Group/Diageo Ireland case study).	Corporate rebranding is characterized by a certain degree of asymmetry – asymmetric approach to a corporate brand image means enabling various stakeholders to shape different images. In this context, a corporate brand can be perceived as a framework through which a corporation is viewed in different ways, depending on the stakeholders’ point of view.



Table cont.

Author/Authors	Purpose of the study	Conclusions
Gotsi and Andriopoulos (2007)	Investigating the relationship between the vision of an organization, its culture and image. The purpose was to generate the key corporate rebranding traps.	An analysis of 14 in-depth interviews with the managers of a key telecommunications producer revealed four corporate rebranding traps. They included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– separation from the brand core;</li> <li>– short-term perspective of stakeholders;</li> <li>– focus on labels and not their meanings;</li> <li>– challenge of multiple identities (one company, one voice).</li> </ul>
Hankinson and Lomax (2006)	Evaluation of the impact of rebranding in big British charity organizations in the context of knowledge, attitude and behavior of employees in light of the implemented rebranding.	Rebranding has a positive impact on the employees' knowledge and attitude but it affects their behavior less.
Muzellec and Lambkin (2006)	Understanding the factors which drive corporate rebranding and analysis of the impact of rebranding strategies on the corporate brand capital.	Drivers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– change in the ownership structure;</li> <li>– change in the corporate strategy;</li> <li>– change in the external environment;</li> <li>– change in the competitors' position.</li> </ul>
Melewar, Hussey and Srivoravilai (2005)	Investigation of rebranding in the context of changing visual brand elements as exemplified by French Telecom.	Rebranding process: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– problem recognition;</li> <li>– strategy development;</li> <li>– making an action plan;</li> <li>– implementation;</li> <li>– follow-up of the actions.</li> </ul>
Daly and Moloney (2004)	Continuation (extending the studies by Muzellec, Doogan and Lambkin, 2003) – presentation of a company case study	Corporate rebranding structure: analysis – market analysis, brand audit, identification of chances; planning – communication to internal customers, strategy name change, rebranding marketing plan, evaluation.
Stuart and Muzelle (2004)	Introduction to the concept of rebranding, the reasons why corporations decide to carry out rebranding and presentation of the issue of the name, logo and slogan.	Definition of rebranding

Table cont.

Author/Authors	Purpose of the study	Conclusions
Causon (2004)	The process of change management in an organization during rebranding and repositioning.	Three stages: – educational, – identification, – implementation.
Kaikati (2003)	Analyzing the process of establishing a global consulting giant, pointing out the main conclusions from rebranding, restructuring and repositioning.	New identity: – communication, – name, – logo. Strategy: implementation/withdrawal
Muzellec, Doogan and Lambkin (2003)	Investigating the phenomenon of corporate rebranding.	Rebranding mix: – repositioning, – name change, – redesigning, – starting the brand “from scratch”.
Lomax, Mador, Fitzhenry (2002)	Seven organizations which implemented rebranding in the last five years were analyzed in a qualitative study.	Conceptual model of a brand change process: – cause, – new brand development, – project management, – closing the initiated process.
Boyle (2002)	Identification of rebranding program problems of Shell Retail shops.	Character of the chain: – task-oriented characteristics; – geographically dispersed location. Significantly positive own brand capital was never created.
Koku (1997)	Comparison of recruitment processes – before and after changing the names of universities	The change in the name did not affect the recruitment.
Koku (1997)	Financial performance of an organization was analyzed for the period after its name was changed.	Changing the company name is an effective strategy for service companies aimed to inform about a higher level of standards.

Tab. 1. Review of literature items describing studies on rebranding. Source: Chai-Lee & Mei-Teh (2011); Gotsi & Andriopoulos (2007); Muzellec & Lambkin (2008); Miller, Merrilees, & Yakimova (2014); Lee (2013); Lambkin & Muzellec (2010); Merrilees & Miller (2008); Bolhuis, Jong, & de Bosch (2018); Chad (2016); Collange (2015), [in]: Mróz-Gorgoń, B., (2019), pp. 96–100.

According to the presented specifications, earlier studies on rebranding carried out by P.S. Koku concerned its impact on corporation performance. The root causes of rebranding practice and process, based on specific

organizational experiences, have been discussed in detail by a number of authors. T.C. Melewar with his team explained the process of rebranding and presented the impact of rebranding on perception of a new image and stock sales prices. The study focused only on visual identification of the company. A study by L. Muzellec and M. Lambkin of 2006 was aimed at investigating the impact of rebranding on brand integrity. J.G. Kaikati and A.M. Kaikati (2003) highlighted six strategic options of rebranding campaign implementation. According to the researchers, marketing specialists can choose among the following six strategic options or their combination:

- strategy of gradual introduction/withdrawal;
- strategy of brands combined under one umbrella brand;
- transparent warning strategy;
- strategy of sudden elimination;
- strategy to prevent acquisitions;
- strategy of rebranding reversal.

A change in the brand image is costly and time-consuming, and alongside with the increase in the number of corporate rebranding activities, the failure rate also goes up (Causon, 2004; Stuart & Muzellec, 2004). J. Kapferer (2004) also claimed that a “brand transformation” may trigger such hazards as a loss of an opportunity to choose, loyal clients and market shares. A brand modification strategy (rebranding) is still widely applied, and has been gradually more popular, but there are scientific reports mentioning both successful and unsuccessful examples of such activities (Stuart & Muzellec, 2004). Unfortunately, only very few researchers who investigated the subject matter focused in detail on rebranding of services, which causes astonishment in the times of blending (adding) of services with products. Studies carried out by P.S. Koku (1997) were the earliest ones of those pertaining strictly to an image change but covered only the area of the company name change.

It needs to be emphasized that studies on corporate rebranding have so far focused primarily on image improvement (Stuart & Muzellec, 2004), investigating the impact on brand architecture (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2008), protection of brand value (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006) and strategy of the name change (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2003). It can be observed that rebranding studies rarely go beyond the visual aspect of brand identification, except for the paper by Gotsi and Andriopoulos (2007), where the authors investigate the relationship between the vision, culture and image of an organization, and the attempt made by Merrilees and Miller (2008) to establish corporate rebranding principles which combine the rules of revising a corporate brand vision, internal branding and the method of their implementation.

#### 4. Rebranding in the Context of Organization Theory

Business practice (The Economic Times, <http>) and scientific papers (Miller, Merrilees, & Yakimova, 2014) provide definitions of proactive and reactive rebranding in relation to the stimuli which trigger the process. The definitions have their connotations with the way activities and approaches of business units are identified in the theory of organizations. Proactive brand changes take place when a company decides that it is possible to develop, introduce innovations, acquire new contractors (partners) or clients and to re-establish relations with (reach) the brand users.

Rebranding is termed as reactive when a brand stopped existing or when a brand was changed due to mergers, acquisitions, legal issues, negative press (e.g. suspected fraud, intended to defame and eliminate competitors or create one's own niche).

T. Bradbury and B. Catley (2007) emphasize that proactive cases are triggered when a rebranding initiative is driven by an identified change to strengthen the brand, while reactive cases are conditioned by external factors with a negative impact on the brand, which activates rebranding actions. Similar identification of changes can also be found in the theory of change management.

D. Miller, B. Merrilees and R. Yakimova (2014) identified two other types of rebranding: urgent and non-urgent and thus specified another aspect of rebranding phenomenon – in relation to the process implementation:

- In urgent cases, there is a set deadline for the new brand introduction, just like in the case of a big telecommunications company (encoded by the scientists under the name “TELCI/TELCOM”) whose managers strived towards implementation of the new brand before the company was transformed into a public company.
- Non-urgent cases have no implementation deadlines, e.g. the rebranding of Pierre Smirnoff took six years.

#### 5. Conclusions and Directions of Further Development

Summing up, it can be concluded that corporate branding and rebranding generally applies to cohesive corporate brand communication and expression and can occur at any time (Balmer, 2010; Merrilees & Miller, 2008). “Corporate rebranding refers to a split or change between the originally formulated corporate brand and the new formula” (Merrilees & Miller, 2008, p. 538). The definition provides a wide framework and includes a number of definitions such as brand position, transformation, renewal, refreshment and rediscovery. Organizations tend to change the brand image to improve operational effectiveness and increase the brand value (Shetty, 2011). Corporate rebranding can be far-fetched and may range from moderate,

minor changes to major radical modifications. An evolutionary approach can also be used to define rebranding and the author follows this approach to describe rebranding as a continuous process in which an organization responds to the dynamics in its business environment, changing its identity to survive and grow.

When corporate rebranding has already been implemented and it penetrates the majority of elements related to a brand and its image, it affects all rebranding levels presented in the model (Figure 1) by adapting products and business units to the new shape (and image). The brand architecture is transformed into a house brand or main brand of the whole hierarchy. Then the new chapter of the brand life cycle can begin.

There are still few publications in the literature describing and explaining the effects of rebranding strategies carried out in various ways, both in the marketing context as well as in the psychological (consumer reactions) and sociological context (consumer trends impact). This article does not explore this research area either, which implies further research for authors.

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#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Please find more about the given examples in: Mróz-Gorgoń, 2019.
- <sup>2</sup> Resulting from the theory of changes – which changes are inevitable and occur continuously.
- <sup>3</sup> According to Random House (2005), the prefix “re-” is used to create verbs which mean that an action is performed again, often with a suggestion that the result of the original action was somehow non-durable or insufficient. In the corporate rebranding process, it usually involves assigning a new meaning to a corporate brand and providing stakeholders with new benefits.

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