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Consistency, Continuity, and Inertia: The Paradox of Successful Global Brand Management

Susumu HARADA*

1. Introduction

This study presents the constructive and destructive effects of inertia on global brand management through a case study of the Gap, a U.S.-based apparel brand of Gap Inc.(1) Previous studies identify consistency and continuity as factors underlying successful global brand management. Consistency involves executing every marketing activity to support brand identity and build an organizational culture devoted to it (Gormark and Melin, 2011; M'zungu, Merrilees, and Miller, 2010; Urde, 1994, 1999; Townsend, Cavusgil, and Baba, 2010; Yakimova and Beverland, 2005). Continuity involves communicating brand identity consistently to consumers (Aaker, 1996; Bolombäck and Brunninge, 2009; Hakala, Lätti, and Sandberg, 2011; Urde, 1994, 1999; Urde, Greyser, and Balmer, 2007; Yakimova and Beveland, 2005).

Consistency and continuity aid successful global brand management by increasing managerial efficiency and reinforcing brand uniqueness when competitive environments are stable. However, they sabotage changes in global brand management if they generate unresponsiveness to environmental change—in other words, inertia (Tushman, Newman, and Romanelli, 1986). Although inertia is a crucial concept in global brand management, few studies examine it. Even brand management literature only notes that inertia impedes managerial responsiveness (Bolombäck and Brunninge, 2009; Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006; Wiedmann, Hennings, Schmidt, and Wuestefeld, 2011; Yakimova and Beverland, 2005). These studies have not detailed its origins and effects.

This study illustrates the constructive and destructive effects of inertia on global brand management by taking the Gap as a case study. Figure 1 indicates the changes in global brand value in the apparel industry. Zara and H&M increased their global brand value, while that of the Gap and Levi's declined. Between 2001 and 2013, the Gap brand, accounting for approximately 40% of Gap Inc.'s sales, lost almost half its value (i.e., from $8.7 billion–$3.9 billion).(2) Environmental change in the apparel industry, led by fast fashion brands like Zara and H&M, is an important factor in the Gap's stagnation.(3)

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This research adopts the single case study method because qualitative research using small samples is warranted when it is unclear which variables need investigating (Doz, 2011; Yin, 1994). That is the situation with respect to the origins and effects of inertia on global brand management. The Gap is an appropriate case study because its success and struggles resulted from the double-edged effects of consistency and continuity on global brand management. As previous research indicates, fast fashion brands changed apparel markets to the detriment of the Gap (D'Aveni, 2010; Ghemawat and Nueno, 2006; Wells and Rabe, 2006).

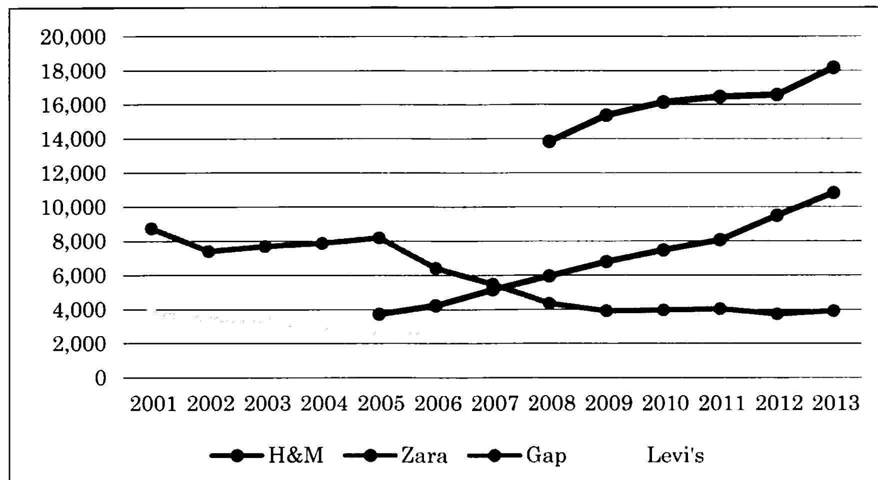

Figure 1: Changes of Global Brand Value in the Apparel Industry (US$ million)

Source: Interbrand, *Best Global Brands*, for each year.

This study proceeds as follows: First, we review previous studies of inertia and its effects. Drawing upon that discussion, we examine inertia in the context of global brand management. We then apply that discussion to the global brand management successes and failures of the Gap from 1964 through the 2000s.

2. Inertia and Its Effects on Global Brand Management

Inertia in organization studies

Inertia—defined as the ability of organizations to adapt—is a recurring topic in studies of organizational management (Becker, 2004; Hannan and Freeman, 1977, 1984; Miller and Chen, 1994; Tushman et al., 1986). Inertia is evident when the degree of organizational change is less than the degree of environmental change (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, 1984; Tushman et al., 1986).

External and internal forces generate inertia (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, 1984). Internal forces include sunk costs, political coalitions, and the tendency precedents have of becoming norms. External forces include all barriers to market entry/exit, tight organizational relationships and loss of institutional support. Hannan and Freeman (1977) highlight political coalitions as internal sources of resistance to change because they disrupt political equivalence in the organization and increase costs of routine organizational change. In addition, organizational routine is self-

reinforcing, and resistance to change is stronger in successful organizations. Even if managers see their environment changing, they may persist with routines that were successful in the past (Tushman et al., 1986).

Inertia has constructive and destructive effects (Tushman et al., 1986). The former include increased efficiency resulting from internal consistency within strategies, structures, people, and processes. In addition, inertia shapes organizational routines and enforces organizational identity and norms. In an industry protected by regulations, these positive effects will be large because environmental changes are relatively small.

However, inertia must be overcome when environments change drastically or business deteriorates. Environmental changes include industrial and product change. Industrial change includes deregulation, new products and production technologies, macroeconomic changes (e.g., oil crises), and changes in law (e.g., strengthening intellectual property protections). Product change includes the transit of products through their life cycles. Organization factors—e.g., changes in firm size—may require new strategies and structures.

Inertia and global brand management

Consistency and continuity spur successful global brand management by creating, building, and positioning brands; however, but they foster failure by creating inertia when environments change. This section addresses this paradox.

A brand-oriented organization establishes a brand identity and diffuses it throughout the organization.[(4)] Consistency in all operational aspects is essential for incorporating creation, development, and protection of brand identity; interacting with customers; and enabling employees to focus on brand management (Gormark and Melin, 2011; M'zungu et al., 2010; Yakimova and Beverland, 2005; Urde, 1994, 1999). Gromark and Melin (2011) identify a significant positive relationship between brand orientation and profitability among Sweden's 500 largest companies.

Extensive research also documents the importance of continuity in building successful brands (Aaker, 1996; Bolombäck and Brunninge, 2009; Hakala et al., 2011; Lopes and Casson, 2007; Park, Jawaorski, and MacInnis, 1986; Wiedmann et al., 2011; Urde, 1994, 1999; Urde et al., 2007). Aaker (1996) indicates how successful brands, such as Ivory and Marlboro, send consumers continuous and consistent messages. Urde et al. (2007) demonstrate that a brand's legacy is an element of continuity. For example, Volvo continually emphasizes product safety to build a brand and IKEA bases decisions on brand value and legacy.

Consistency and continuity generate successful global brand management by reinforcing brand uniqueness. Urde (1994) attributes the success of global brand management at Pharmacia Nicorette to clear brand identity, internal branding, and the redefining of the target group. In particular, internal branding had a significant role in changing the mentality in the organization from a product-oriented one to a brand-oriented one. Brand uniqueness also has cost advantages. Aaker (1996) estimates that advertising expenses are six-times higher to compete against a brand that is well established in the market.

However, consistency and continuity impair global brand management if they create inertia

when environments change. Instead of updating brand identity and position, management allows the brand to lose competitiveness (Yakimova and Beverland, 2005). Why do consistency and continuity generate inertia? For one thing, change entails time and cost. Global brand management must coordinate functions from product development to communications to motivate and achieve successful transformations. Further, by establishing brand uniqueness, consistency and continuity reinforce consumer commitment. Even if mangers change the brand's identity and position, consumers may reject the changes.[5] Birtwistle and Freathy (1998) trace the difficulties Burton Menswear encountered during its successful brand repositioning because consumers were loyal to the brand's longstanding image.

Figure 2 summarizes the paradoxical nature of consistency and continuity. Consistency and continuity reinforce the uniqueness of the brand and condition the organizational culture to focus on brand building; however, they also inspire resistance to changes in brand identity and positioning. In addition, consistency is more important during the early stages of brand building because the members of the organization lack an understanding of brand identity. The brand-oriented mentality prevailing at Pharmaceutical Nicorette was nurtured by the consistency of its global brand management (Urde, 1994). When changing environments compel transforming global brand management, however, consistency and continuity may disturb the transformation. As a result, a mismatch between the existing brand identity and brand positioning and the environmental conditions occurs, and the brand may lose competitive advantage. If we consider the inertia in global brand management, consistency and continuity are considered failure as well as success factors. This is the paradox of global brand management.

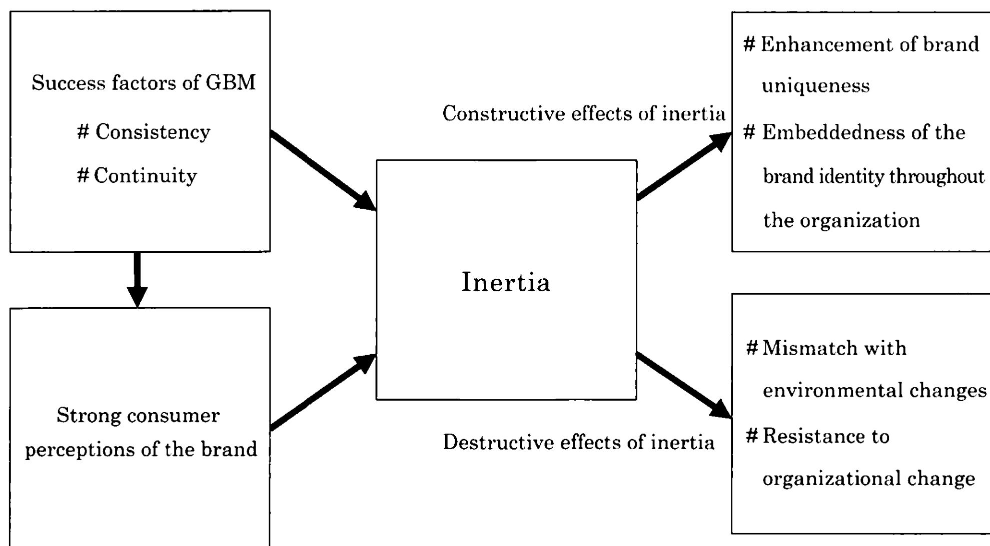

Figure 2: Relationship between Global Brand Management and Inertia

4. The Effects of Inertia on Global Brand Management at the Gap

Building a brand: The Gap 1969 to the 1990s

Gap Inc. was founded by Donald G. Fisher, who opened its first store as a discount retailer of

Levi's jeans in San Francisco in 1969.[6] The Gap prospered along with Levi's popular casual style[7] until a 1978 Federal Trade Commission consent Order prohibited Levi's from dictating retail prices. Other retailers began to discount its jeans and Fisher responded by promoting the Gap as private label casual apparel.

In 1983, Millard Drexler became president of the Gap division. He revamped its brand image[8] from "a discount store of Levi's jeans" to "a good quality basic casual apparel with an inexpensive price." Drexler organized clothing designers to develop products that embodied the new brand identity. He streamlined store design and simplified displays. To dispel the discount store image, he brought magazines into the advertising mix. Targeting Baby Boomers and Generation X, the Gap offered simple, classic, basic casual apparel at low prices. Consumers endorsed that brand identity, and Gap's popularity soared during the 1980s and 1990s.

Figure 3 summarizes Drexler's brand-building. First, Drexler, who had worked at Ann Taylor, anticipated the trend toward casual apparel and emphasized the Gap's identity as a basic casual brand. Second, he integrated every value-chain function except production to control product quality and brand identity. His formulation of a "specialty store retailer of private label apparel" is today abbreviated "SPA." Third, Drexler manufactured products offshore to cut costs, making it possible to sell at affordable prices. Fourth, he continued with the advertising campaigns to establish the new brand image of the Gap. In particular, successful advertising campaigns like "Individual Style" (1988) and "the Khaki" (1998) contributed to reinforcing its brand image. These ongoing advertising campaigns created demand and reduced inventory risks inherent in mass production. In short global brand management under Drexler achieved consistency and continuity in every element of marketing and manufacturing, and the Gap succeeded.

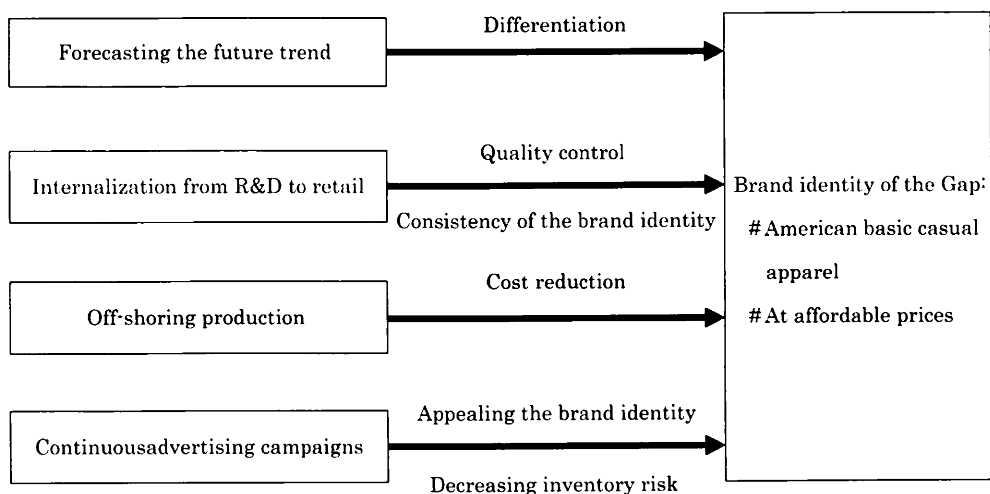

Figure 3: Building a "Gap" Brand: Drexler 1980s-1990s

Environmental changes and inertia

During the late 1990s, however, trends in apparel shifted from casual to fashion-conscious styles,[9] led by fast fashion brands like Zara and H&M. Speed is the signature feature of fast fashion brands. Their lead-times and inventory turnover are short (Bhardwaj and Faihfurst, 2010;

Christopher, Lowson, and Peck, 2004; Ghemawat and Nueno, 2006; Kumar and Linguri, 2006; Hayes and Jones, 2006; *The Economist*, 2005). Gap's lead-time is 12 weeks, and it is faster than the industry average of 18 months. However, Zara's lead-time is much faster: 14–35 days. Zara introduces 11,000 new items per year, whereas competitors introduce 2,000–4,000.

The free-rider effect is another feature of fast fashion brands. High fashion brands such as Giorgio Armani and Dolce & Gabbana set trends (Cillo and Verona, 2008; D'Aveni, 2010) and unveil designs twice yearly. Fast fashion brands imitate those designs immediately and price their products inexpensively. By piggybacking on high fashion brands they absorb demand uncertainty. As a result, Zara can save on advertising to create demand. Its ratio of advertising expenses to net sales is 0.3% compared with the industry average of 3%−4%. Moreover, Zara's failure rate for new products is 1% compared with the industry average 10%. Offering the latest designer apparel at affordable prices, fast fashion brands captured Generation Y, today's main apparel customer (Pentecost and Andrews, 2010), then entered overseas markets aggressively and become popular worldwide.

The Gap tried to become a fashion-style brand in 1995 and 2000 by introducing trend-conscious shirts, leather jackets, and latest-design apparel, but its Baby Boomer and Generation X customers rejected its attempted repositioning.(10) Although the Gap recently returned to basics, it is still losing brand value because of misalignment between its positioning and the market trend. The Gap has struggled to gauge customers' fashion tastes and to attract a younger generation.(11)

5. Implications: The Paradox of Global Brand Management

Figure 4 shows the relation between global brand management and inertia at the Gap. The company succeeded with its casual apparel until the 1990s. When customers began favoring fashion-conscious styles and fast fashion brands, the Gap tried to reposition its brand but lost its core customers in the attempt. Although the Gap has returned to basics, it remains misaligned with current market trends.

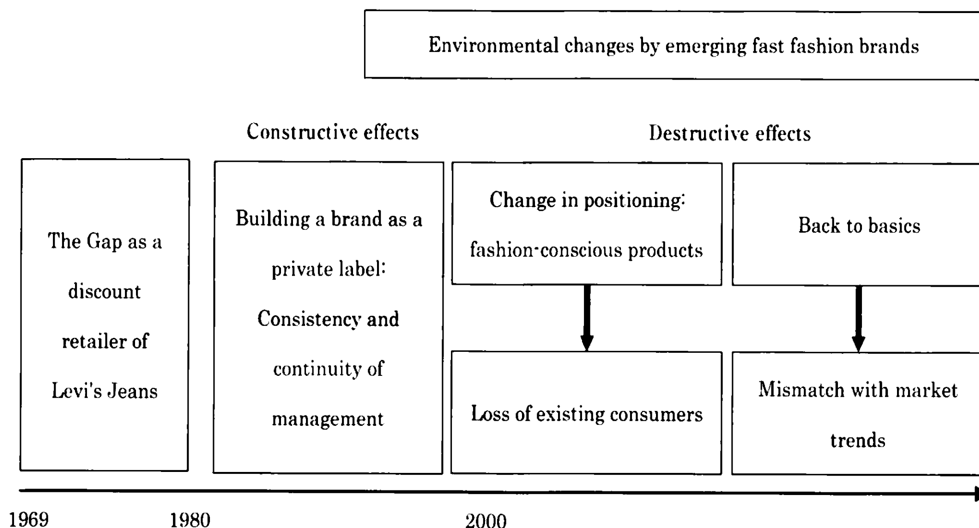

Figure 4: Global Brand Management and Inertia in the Gap

The Gap case study illustrates the constructive and destructive effects of inertia on global brand management. Consistency and continuity in global brand management brought the Gap huge success during the 1980s and the 1990s: Maintaining consistency of brand image from product design to the retail atmosphere and continuity in advertising campaigns reinforced the image of the new Gap brand. However, they also caused the Gap's stagnation in the 2000s because they generated inertia and it sabotaged the changes. An implication in this study, in particular, is that we indicate consumer resistance as a destructive effect of inertia. It is hard to control, and it is a big obstacle to repositioning. This is the inherent effect of inertia in global brand management.

Why did restructuring succeed in the early 1980s and fail in the 2000s? One answer is company size. The Gap operated only in the United States during the early 1980s, but by the 2000s it operated in more than 90 countries. Restructuring is easier at smaller companies (Yakimova and Beverland, 2005). In addition, why did the Gap disregard the threat of fast fashion brands when they become popular in Europe in the 1990s? One answer: The U.S. accounted for 70% of the Gap sales, and the Gap's international marketing strategy was home-centric (Ghemawat and Nueno, 2006).

6. Conclusion

This study has shown the constructive and destructive effects of inertia on global brand management using the Gap as a case study. Previous studies associate inertia with global brand management but not its origins and consequences. Previous research establishes consistency and continuity as essential to successful global brand management because they reinforce uniqueness of the brand. However, consistency and continuity could have negative impacts generating inertia. Inertia causes a resistance to change and hampers global brand management by permitting a mismatch between brand identity and position and market trend. In other words, consistency and continuity are double-edged. This is the paradox of global brand management.

We also have to focus on the destructive effects of inertia on global brand management as well the constructive effects. As shown in the case of Gap, consistent and continued brand management supported the successful brand. In particular, they worked during the early stage of brand building when Drexler undertook to change its image. However, when market trends changed, the brand positioning of the Gap mismatched the environment because of inertia in global brand management.

Future research needs to transcend the limitations of this and earlier studies. Research needs to multiply case studies to generalize concepts presented here and to document the destructive effects of inertia on global brand management empirically. It especially needs to examine how to overcome the negative effects of inertia on global brand management. How global brand management changes is a critical research agenda.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

(1) Gap Inc. has "Gap," "Old Navy," "Banana Republic," "Piperlime," "Athleta," and "Intermix" as own brands. In this study, "Gap" is indicated as an apparel brand, and "Gap Inc." is indicated as a corporation overall.

(2) Using the Interbrand data from 2001 to 2011, Harada (2012) analyzed the changes of brand value in detail.

(3) Poor brand positioning was not the only reason for the Gap's stagnation during the 2000s. It also failed to manage its portfolio of brands and its supply chain management. The Gap introduced Old Navy in 1984 to target budget consumers with apparel priced 40% below the Gap, and doing so cannibalized its sales. According to the company's 2012 annual report, during the 2000s the Gap bought products from 1,000 factories in 40 countries. Gap Inc. operated 3,407 stores in 45 countries and delivered to on-line shoppers in 91 countries in 2012. The Gap lacked the supply-chain capabilities needed to deliver products promptly from multiple sources. Inventories accumulated and were sold at massive discounts.

(4) Urde (1994) advocated the concept of brand orientation and extensive research has adopted it. Urde (1994) defined brand orientation as "an approachin which the processes of the organization revolved around the creation, development, and protection of brand identity in an ongoing interaction with target customers with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantages in the form of brands."

(5) New Coke in 1985 is perhaps the most famous case of consumer resistance to rebranding. See The Coca-Cola Company (2012).

(6) Salmon (2001).

(7) Nevaer (2001), Salmon (2001).

(8) Salmon (2001), Wells and Raabe (2006).

(9) Digham (2002).

(10) Newman and Patel (2004).

(11) Gap Inc.'s 2012 annual report and Keeley and Clark (2008).

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