

**The relational, discursive, and performative dimensions of group brands: towards a
conceptual framework**

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Abstract

This conceptual paper introduces the idea of the group brand, which refers to a collection of individuals seen and engaged with as a single brand entity. Although group brands such as musical bands, royal families, and political parties are common in society, branding literature has not treated them as a separate category. While consumer-based brand equity theory (Keller, 1993) focuses on how memories and associations shape brand meaning, most research has concentrated on products, services, places, or individual human brands. This paper fills that gap by offering a structured review of relevant literature and explaining how group brands differ from other types. Using Family Identity Theory, it defines key features of group brands and introduces a model of how consumers engage with them over time. It also presents a typology of group brand forms and highlights their practical and strategic implications. This work opens the door to further research on collective identity in branding.

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Introduction

When in 2006, the 14 times nominated and two times winner of the Grammy Awards, Destiny's Child was disbanded, the world witnessed the separation of gifted individuals who the Billboard ranked as one of the greatest musical trios of all time. Not all those who knew Destiny's Child could tell the identity of those who made up this iconic group. Like the case of Destiny's Child, consumers and marketers frequently engage with group entities in both consumption and promotional contexts without fully grasping the distinct risks, and benefits associated with the group as a collective brand versus the individual members as separate brand identities (Vinokur, 1971).

This disconnect can be traced to a significant gap in the marketing literature. While extensive research exists on fan behaviour and established brand categories, such as product, service, place, corporate, and human brands (Osorio, Centeno, & Cambra-Fierro, 2023; Kavaratzis, & Hatch, 2013; Thomson, 2006; Thomson, MacInnis, & Whan Park, 2005; Balmer & Gray, 2003), there remains a silence around collectives of individuals who function as symbolic, identity-driven consumption objects. Prior studies have examined how individual brands or celebrities offer symbolic and emotional value to consumers (Ilicic, & Webster, 2016), but little has been said about the collective brand meaning generated when such individuals coalesce into groups. As a result, organizations navigating such group dynamics lack theoretical guidance for leveraging these entities in branding strategies to optimise value.

Despite this omission, branding literature provides an interesting lens through which to examine this phenomenon. Central to consumer-based brand equity theory is the idea that a brand exists when consumers develop, and store associations related to a consumption object in memory (Keller, 1993). From this perspective, groups of public figures, when collectively imbued with meaning and capable of generating symbolic value, qualify as brands. This study introduces the notion of the "group brand," conceptualized as a *distinct symbolic representation of pluralised individuals capable of being productised as a vehicle for consumers to signal their identity*.

Further, evidence from both lived realities and extant scholarship underscores the uniqueness of group brands compared to traditional brand categories. Brands, broadly conceived, serve as symbolic resource through which individuals find and express identity (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008). However, the collective, human-based nature of group brands introduces novel complexities to meaning-making, particularly in terms of group cohesion, member visibility, and the dynamics of individual versus collective appeal. Scholars such as Fournier & Eckhardt (2019), Close, Moulard, & Monroe (2011), and Thomson (2006) point to the symbolic potency of human figures as brand, yet none have extended this exploration to a unified group of individuals.

Despite its growing relevance in contemporary discourse, the focal construct in question, group brand, has not been previously articulated or systematically defined in existing literature hence, it remains conceptually ambiguous, theoretically underdeveloped, and empirically unexamined. The absence of a clear definition, delineated dimension, and a systemic understanding of consumer interaction across its lifecycle prior to this paper has limited its integration into broader theoretical frameworks and its application in managerial practice although consumers have engaged with these groups without proper understanding of its evolution which leads to a fragmented understanding of its practical relevance and behavioural outcomes.

Research on human brands (e.g., Thomson, 2006; Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015; Close, Moulard, & Monroe, 2011) has predominantly focused on individual celebrities or public figures — also referred to as person brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) or celebrity brands (Ilicic & Webster, 2016). While this body of work provides a foundation for understanding the brand dynamics of individuals, it overlooks how symbolic value is co-created and experienced at the group level.

To address this theoretical void, our study conceptualizes group brands and proposes a framework for understanding how consumers relate to them at different stages. Specifically, we ask a central question: *what are the defining characteristics and dimensions of a group brand?* Following this, we ask other critical sub-questions: *how do consumers interact with group brands across different phases of consumption? In what ways do group brands differ from individual human brands, both in structure and symbolic function? And what are the implications of group brands for marketing practice and brand management?*

The primary objective of this conceptual paper is to initiate and deepen scholarly discourse on the notion of group brands. The first section offers a critical review of the brand literature, tracing its evolution over several decades with a particular focus on the emergence of human brands. Despite this advancement, the literature has yet to explore collectives of individuals as a distinct brand type. To address this omission, the paper proceeds by interrogating the nature of groups — highlighting their defining characteristics and distinguishing them from other brand forms. Through a systematic review of brand scholarship from both managerial and consumer-based perspectives, the paper articulates a clear conceptual definition of the group brand construct.

The second section of the paper is devoted to unpacking the dynamics that underpin group brands. Particular attention is paid to how group brands are formed and the functions they perform, as these foundational elements shape how consumers interact with them. This inquiry culminates in a typology that differentiates between various forms of group brands and outlines their implications for consumer-brand relationships. A theoretical foundation using Family Identity Theory (FIT) is then established to support the construct and its associated propositions.

In all, this study addresses these critical gaps by conceptualizing the construct, articulating its core dimensions, proposing a staged model of consumer interaction, and outlining both theoretical and practical implications and concluded with suggestions for future research.

1. Conceptual Background

The construct of brand was fluid for many decades until scholars like Aaker (1991, 1996), Kapferer (1994, 1998), De Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1998), and many more created fine lines to decouple it from ambiguity. Following historic development of the brand concept, we have seen the development of the construct into other forms. So, what is a brand?

1.1. What is a brand?

A classic description by Aaker (1991) refers to the brand as a name or symbol that distinguishes one product from another with respect to seller and competition. This is like the view of Kotler and Keller (2015) who viewed the brand as a name, sign/symbol, design, or term that does two things, first to identify a (set of) products and second, to differentiate them from any other. While these definitions are valid, this study relies on Holt (2004) and Kapferer (2008) description of the construct in that a brand is a shared, desirable, exclusive idea embodied in a symbol that consumers use to construct their identities. This combines the managerial and consumer perspectives of what a brand is as shown in Table 2 below. These complementary perspectives explain the dual function of brands within the marketplace. From a managerial standpoint, brands are conceptualized as strategic assets that facilitate product differentiation, enhance market competitiveness, and contribute to long-term value creation. Conversely, the consumer perspective foregrounds the brand as a constellation of cognitive associations, emotional responses, symbolic meanings, and experiential touchpoints that are encoded in memory and activated during purchase or consumption episodes (Keller, 1993). This bifocal understanding underscores the dynamic interplay between organizational intent and consumer interpretation in shaping brand meaning and performance.

Table 1: Key Brand Definitions

Author(s)	Definition of 'Brand'	Significance	Perspective-Reference (APA 7th)
Kotler & Keller (2015)	A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design—or a combination of them—intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors.	Emphasizes differentiation and identification, forming the foundation of branding in marketing.	Managerial
Aaker (1991)	A brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors.	Introduced the concept of brand equity, highlighting brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations.	Managerial
Keller (1993)	A brand is a set of associations linked to a product in consumers' minds.	Established the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, emphasizing brand knowledge, brand image, and brand meaning.	Consumer

Kapferer (2008)	A brand is a shared, desirable, and exclusive idea embodied in products, services, places, and/or experiences.	Introduced the Brand Identity Prism, covering brand personality, culture, and relationships.	Consumer
De Chernatony & Riley (1998)	A brand is a complex multidimensional construct whereby managers augment products and services with values and identities recognized by consumers.	Provides a broader, strategic definition integrating consumer perception and managerial intent.	Managerial
Holt (2004)	Brands serve as cultural symbols that consumers use to construct their identities.	Introduced Cultural Branding, explaining how brands gain deep emotional and symbolic meanings.	Consumer

One of the earliest descriptions of brand comes from the seminal work of Aaker (1991), “a brand enables customers to remember the core information about a product and prevents competitors from making imitations”. Arnold (1992) further suggested that brand can occur at any of the levels: a brand, a company, a range of products, or an individual product line. Compared to more recent literature on brand, the concept can now be used over a blanket of many other things as pointed by Keller (2002). The robust and classic description of brand by de Chernatony and McDonald (1991) had included any identifiable product, service, person, and place that consumers and customers find a fit between the needs and perception closely. Although the mention of product as a form of brand has been dated as far as Levitt (1969), it was only until more recently that person was associated with brand (de Chernatony and McDonald, 1991).

Going by Shariq (2014) and Sammut-Bonnici (2014) earlier description of what a brand is, identity is woven into the meaning of a brand. Brands acts as symbolic resources used by people to express their identities – social or personal (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2003). It is typical for consumers to select brands that align with their self-concept. This helps to reinforce aspects of their personal or aspirational identity (Aaker, 1999).

Beyond product, service, person, place, or organization as agreed by Keller (2002) and Sammut-Bonnici (2014), other brand types have been studied but these are yet to be systematically categorized. To help achieve our objective in this section of the paper, we, therefore, highlight extant review of literature on the types of brands that have been identified before now because these will readily differ from our proposition.

Different scholars including Fournier have investigated different types of (sub)brands like product brands (Herr, Farquhar, & Fazio, 1996; Page & Herr, 2002; Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008), service brands (Choi, Ok, & Hyun 2017), human brands (Grant, 1989; Malär, Krohmer, Hoyer, & Nyffenegger, 2011; Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013; Thomson, 2006).

But as scholars expand the vehicle for brand expressions, the concept of corporate brand was formed although this was used synonymously with organisational brand (Aaker, 2004). Over time, the idea of corporate brand became sticky, and it received considerable acceptance through various investigation by academics (Hatch, & Schultz, 2003; and Urde, 2003; Balmer, 2003; Balmer &

Gray, 2003; Kates, 2004; Aaker, 2004; Argenti, & Druckenmiller, 2004; Keller, 2012; Brexendorf, & Keller, 2017).

Institutional entities like the monarchs have been suggested to have strong corporate brand characteristics, hence ‘brand-like’ although the authors concluded these are not corporate brands (Balmer, Greyser, and Urde, 2006). The monarch brand-type was identified and previously viewed from the lens of a corporate brand. So, while product brand extended into service brand, corporate brand metamorphosised almost naturally because it is argued to be a highly coveted asset (Balmer, Greyser, and Urde, 2006)

Similar to what we are proposing, however, is the idea of a human brands. These are individuals who have achieved some level of image or celebrity status and may not consider themselves as brands, but when gauged from the consumers point of view, these humans are brands (Ilicic, & Webster, 2016). Different nomenclatures have been used to refer to these individuals: human brands (Thomson, 2006; Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015; Close, Moulard, & Monroe, 2011), celebrities or celebrity brand (Jones, Cronin, & Piacentini, 2022; Ilicic & Webster, 2016), person brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) or public figures (Bhattacharjee, Berman, & Reed, 2013).

While prior literature has explored the notion of individual human brands as explicated above, the specific case of group of individuals as brands, where multiple individuals coalesce to form a unified brand identity, remain largely underexamined.

1.2. What is a group

To develop a nuanced articulation of our focal construct, it is essential to first engage with the concept of the group. The notion of group has garnered sustained scholarly attention within management literature. Foundational contributions such as those by Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, and Gilson (2008), the evolutionary synthesis presented by Cronin, Weingart, and Todorova (2011), and the recent exploration of diversity dividends in group dynamics by Martins and Sohn (2022), collectively offer conceptual scaffolding that can inform a more precise explication of the construct of group brand.

Historically, the concept of the ‘group’ has attracted sustained interdisciplinary interest, engaging scholars across a diverse array of academic domains. Scholars from family studies in social psychology (Epp & Price, 2008; Scabini & Manzi, 2011.), organisational psychology and management (Brady, Cohen Mohliver, Gantman, & Langdon, 2022; Park & Shin, 2022; Zhang, He, Park, Xing, & Wu, 2023), entrepreneurship (Schwarzer, 2020), and economics (Nosenzo, Quercia, & Sefton, 2015; Charness, Rigotti, & Rustichini, 2007; Sutter, 2009; Charness & Sutter, 2012). All of these scholars have done extensive studies that enriches our knowledge of the group. While disciplinary application may be different, the core of the concept is consistent across disciplines.

Within the confinement of management studies, ‘group’, also often interchanged with ‘team’, is described as a dynamic whole wherein the whole is distinct from the sum of its members or constituents (Lewin, 1951). In previous scholarly studies where the group is studied at the level of the whole as opposed to the constituent parts, a group is conceived as a constellation of interdependent individuals with boundary conditions that show mutual interest (Levine & Moreland, 1990). Following this, the individuals who constitute membership of this group, therefore, do so formally by “mutual claiming and granting of membership” and informally by acquiring relationship to co-create the group boundary conditions (Levitt & Rothbard, 2022). We further see that individuals who identify as members of a group have behaviours that are inconsistent with those who are independent of any group (Charness, Rigotti, & Rustichini, 2007; Sutter, 2009). Since cognition, emotion, and behaviour are interdependent triads (Storbeck, & Clore, 2007), we may conclude that the emotions and cognition of those within a group are also distinct from those outside of one.

Considered differently, a group is similar to a family structure at the level of the couple. In fact, better put, a family is a unique group type. All entities emerged from a voluntary convergence of interests, motivated by the pursuit of mutual benefit among their respective members. This is true for monogamous and polygamous couples as a family. Children are not a necessary condition before a family is constituted (Settles, 2023; Oxford Academic, 2023) because two married people who choose to delay, denounce, or find it tough to have a child cannot be said to be a lesser family than those with children.

While each member of a focal family group is a representative of whatever group of family, they must strive to differentiate themselves from the family of origin and build an identity with their new group/family (Bowen, 1978; Cowan and Cowan, 2005; Scabini and Manzi, 2011).

With this understanding of a group both from a family orientation and a management perspective, it becomes easier to explicate both the meaning of and the dynamics that exist within a group brand.

2. What is a group brand

2.1. Conceptual definition

We define a group brand as *a distinct symbolic representation of pluralised individuals capable of being productised as a vehicle for consumers to signal their identity*. This scenario involves a communal brand that encompasses plural distinct (un)branded persons within its structure with emphasis on the group as a unit and not the individual members. In other words, the individuals may or may not be symbolic, but the group is.

From this definition, four things stand out. First, a Group Brand (GB) is not just functional in nature but is a symbolic phenomenon, not a tangible one. Second, humans are involved as opposed to non-

humans in the case of product, service, and place brands and these humans have perceived coherence. Third, GB is commodifiable meaning one can commodify it – it can be marketed, sold, or leveraged as products or experiences in themselves. Fourth, aside the transactional nature, it is an experience that tells stories of its consumers i.e. consumers affiliate with the GB not merely for utility, but to express who they are, aspire to be, or wish to be seen as. Putting these together, we observe that the object of transaction is the experience with the collective individuals as a unit, not the individuals themselves.

The example of Destiny's Child mentioned earlier typifies our discourse. No one referred to these three artists as GBs, yet the three individuals were known together as a unit. Today, we still find gifted people come together to form legendary music groups like the South Korean boy band, *BTS*, and BlackPink. So also, there are talented individuals who join football or other sport clubs to establish dominance in different leagues around the world like Arsenal FC, Golden State Warriors, and Inter Miami FC. But again, the same can be said of persons that constitute bourgeoisie and aristocrat families like The Kardashian Family and The British Royal Family. All these examples are groups that have evolved or been formed deliberately over the years but have come to be known as brands – *GB*, a distinct and previously unstudied brand form.

Consumers and customers buy GBs such as Real Madrid FC or Arsenal FC tickets, attend concerts for bands like Destiny's Child and BTS, vote for the Conservative Party and Democratic Party, watch TV series like the Kardashians Family and the Suits series, and celebrate royal families like the British and Swedish royals. In a similar way, consumers also purchase and engage with individual brands within these GBs, such as Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid FC), Bukayo Saka (Arsenal FC), Jungkook (BTS), Joe Biden (Democratic Party), and Kim Kardashian (Kardashian family), Meghan Markle (The British Royal family). All of these are evident from Table 2 where we show that individuals within the broader GB have distinct celebrity status depicted by the number of followers they have across different social media platforms. These different GBs have consumers of their brands while the individual human brands within the group also have their consumers and customers reflected in the uneven number of followers these individuals also command.

There have been extant studies that show that each of the individuals in these groups are celebrities or brands while developing the concept of the human brands. Politicians have severally been conceived as brands worthy of 'market share' (Thomson, 2006), athletes have been studied to have personal brands (Kunkel, Doyle, & Na, 2022), A-list Hollywood movie stars like Tom Hanks and Meryl Street are referred to as celebrity brands (Luo, Chen, Han, & Park, 2010; Centeno, & Wang, 2017), and bourgeoisie individuals like Kim Kardashian is a celebrity (Englund, 2024) by all standards when considered that she has an excess of half a billion followers and subscribers across all social media platforms.

In the case of product and service brands, extant literature identifies the tangible good and the service-providing company as the respective focal points of branding (Berry, 2000). However, a more nuanced analysis of GBs reveals a distinct structure. While the interaction with consumers may be mediated through performances, political ideologies, or symbolic representations—such as music for BTS, governance for the Democratic Party, or ceremonial roles for the British Royal Family, these functional outputs are not themselves the brands. Rather, it is the collective entity, the group, that constitutes the brand. In other words, the brand resides not in the consumable product or service, but in the cohesive identity and relational meaning of the group as a unit. This distinction underscores the need to reconceptualize the locus of brand identity in group-based contexts. However, like in a family, each person has the potential to be an individual, or relational brand that is distinct from the collaborative or group brand (Epp and Price, 2008). Empirical observation reveals that individuals within GBs also pursue benefits associated with individual brand; however, in such instances they no more operate within the definitional boundaries of a GB. There is a group fan base and there is an artist fan base, and this is evident in the individual social media followership of most (if not all) of the individuals within the group brand. We see the followership of some of these individuals and their group from the Table 2 below. We see Cristiano Ronaldo (~800 million) versus his club Al Nassar (18.2 million), Kim Kardashian (~443 million) versus The Kardashian Family (~204 million), and Donald Trump (~143 million) versus The Republican Party (~0.6 million).

Table 2: Distribution of Group and Individuals within Group Brands Engagements with Consumers

Group Brand	Persons within Group Brand	Instagram account	IG Followers (in million)	X account	X Followers (in million)	TikTok account	Tik Tok Followers (in million)	S. Media Presencwe (in million)	Group Type
Real Madrid FC	Real Madrid FC	@realmadrid	171	@realmadrid	52	@realmadrid	55	279	Sport Entertainment
	Kylan Mbappe	@k.mbappe	123	@KMBappe	15	ambaby80	4	141	Sport Entertainment
	Vini Jnr	@vinijr	53	@vinijr	10	@vinijr	25	88	Sport Entertainment
	Luka Modric	@lukamodric10	37	@LukaModricSol	6	@lukamodric10.official	0	43	Sport Entertainment
Bourgeoisie Family	The Kardashians	@kardashians	4	@kardashianshulu	199	@kardashianshulu	1	204	Bourgeoisie Family
	Kris Jenner	@krisjenner	52	@KrisJenner	12	@krisjenner	4	68	Bourgeoisie Family
	Kourtney Kardashian	@kourtneykardash	220	@kourtneykardash	26	@kourtneykardashian	7	253	Bourgeoisie Family
	Kim Kardashian	@kimkardashian	358	@KimKardashian	75	@kimkardashian	10	443	Bourgeoisie Family
	Khloé Kardashian	@khlockardashian	304	@khloe	30	@khlockardashian	6	340	Bourgeoisie Family
	Rob Kardashian	@robkardashianofficial	3	@robkardashian	7	@robertkardashianofficial	0	10	Bourgeoisie Family
	Kendall Jenner	@kendalljenner	289	@KendallJenner	31	@kendalljenner	6	327	Bourgeoisie Family
Republican Party		@gop	1					1	Political Party
	Donald Trump	@realdonaldtrump	30	@realDonaldTrump	98	@realdonaldtrump	15	143	Political Party
	James D. Vance	@jd Vance	1	@jd Vance	3	@jd	2	7	Political Party
	Marco Rublo	@marcorublo	1	@marcorublo	5			6	Political Party
Destiny's Child		@destinyschild	0	@destinyschild	78			78	Music Entertainment
	Beyonce	@beyonce	313	@Beyonce	15	@beyonce	6	334	Music Entertainment
	Kelly Rowland	@kellyrowland	17	@kellyrowland	7	@kellyrowland	2	25	Music Entertainment
	Michelle Williams	@michellewilliams	1	@RealMichelleW	8	@michellewilliams	0	2	Music Entertainment
BTS	Jungkook	@jungkook.bts.official	4			@jungkook	20	25	
	V	@Thv	67			@bts_official_bighit	71	138	Music Entertainment
	Jimin	@j.m	53					53	Music Entertainment
	Suga	@agustd	49					49	Music Entertainment
	Jin	@jin	50					50	Music Entertainment
	RM	@rkive	47					47	Music Entertainment
	J-Hope	@uarmyhope	50					50	Music Entertainment
The Suit		@nbc suits	2					2	
	Gabriel Macht (as Harvey Specter)	@iamgabrielmacht	3	@GabrielMacht	0.530	@gabrielmachtofficial	0	4	Movie
	Sarah Rafferty	@iamsarahgrafferty	3	@sarahgrafferty	0.303			3	Movie
	Rick Hoffman	@rickehoffman	1	@RickHoffman_	0.206	@rickehoffman	0	1	Movie
	Patrick J. Adams (as Michael Ross)	@patrickjadams	4	@patrickjadam	0.349	@patrick.j.adams	0	4	Movie

Source: Created by authors from research work.

2.2. Definitional boundary and the group brand

As a previously unresearched subconstruct of the brand, and a conceptual introduction into the literature of brands, we further differentiate group brand from potentially related constructs (MacInnis, 2011). As a definite unit of meaning for consumers, group brand possesses inherent attributes that separates it from any seemingly similar construct. For example, we show that monarchs are examples of group brands definitionally. But Balmer, Gretser, and Urde (2006) investigated the monarchs as a similitude of a corporate brand but were clear to mention that these are not corporate brands but institutional groups that appear to have strong corporate brand characteristics. Although acknowledging that many monarchies, such as the Swedish Crown, function as enduring brands, often surpassing corporate brands in longevity, the authors contend that, due to their non-corporate nature, such entities fall outside established brand classification frameworks.

2.3. Agency and the group brand

A major distinguishing attribute of the group brand construct is its human agency. Humans possess “authenticity and potent-cultural meaning” that is unmatched by non-human brands, key ingredients that resonate and form deep connections with customers (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Co-brands are also devoid of agentic attributes – characteristics or behaviours that are associated with agency, which is the capacity of an individual to act independently, make choices, and exert control over their environment (Ng, Kim, & Rao, 2015). This is a critical deviation from other brand types like product, service, and corporate brands that are non-human. What can be referred to as agencies of other brands are external to the brand hence responsible for shaping consumer response (Sung, La Macchia, & Stankovic, 2023). The work of Moor, & Lury (2011) reveals that the appraisal of brands is done by third parties that are external to the brand and the brands do not have a role to play in how these emotions are being appraised or interpreted.

Group brands are capable of agency appraisal, which refers to whether an outcome is attributed to the self or others, can significantly shape the specific positive emotions that may be experienced. However, this concept when examined within the context of non-human brands, cannot directly position themselves as the agents responsible for eliciting such emotions. Instead, the entities identified as the sources of emotional influence are often marketers (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005) or fellow consumers (Sung, La Macchia, & Stankovic, 2023), rather than the brands themselves. Although person-brands have human agency, yet as a concept, it is theorised to be inseparable (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019). From our theorising, we state that group brands do not just have

separability, but the entities within the brand have fluid identities that could be patronised by consumers and customers independently. These characteristics of the group brand have implications for theory and practise, but it sits outside the scope of this research.

3. Group Brand Dynamics

3.1.Type of group brands

A scrutiny of the Family Identity Theory (FIT) reveals that family (depending on the degree of delicacy of analysis) is formed in two ways (Epp & Price, 2006). At the primary degree of delicacy, families are formed by the deliberate conscious coming together of two individuals to constitute a union called marriage. However, we show that at a secondary degree of delicacy, there is the inclusion of other members (children and their spouses) whose permission and/or consents are not sought but automatic in becoming part of the alpha family (Epp & Price, 2006). This forms the basis for the theoretical underpinning for the types of group brands.

Insights emerging from both academic discourse and real-world contexts reveals that there are two ways in which group brands can be classified – formation and function. Formation-wise, we emphasize that GBs can come into existence in particular ways. On the other hand, function-wise, we refer to the purpose for which a GB serve. In other words, there are two dichotomies to discussed. The first dichotomy highlights organic versus assembled GB and they fall into the formation classification. The second dichotomy discusses funnelling versus terminal GB which relates to functional classification.

The first dichotomy of organic and assembled have intersection points but mostly divergent points. By formation, group brands are *assembled* or *organic*,

First, we explain the functional dimension of the GB. To understand the different type of GB, we show that some serve as a funnel for individuals (e.g. Real Madrid FC) although the group brand is expected to exist in perpetuity. There has been different individual (brands or not) that have passed through Real Madrid FC, but the club remains because it serves as a channel to churn out the individuals that comprise it as a going concern. Conversely, terminal GB, by design is tied to the individuals that constitute it (e.g. Destiny's Child). So, when the individuals disengage, dies, or pursue independent agenda, the GB dissolves naturally. As a comparison, funnelling GB is not dissolved as its individual constituents move on, but the same cannot be said about terminal GB.

Table 3: Categorisation of group brands

Type of Group Brands	Function			
	Funnelling GB		Terminal GB	
	<i>Serve as a perpetual channel that processes individuals who may (not) become brands themselves.</i>		<i>Serve as a transient end-to-end brand that terminates after the individuals that constitute it.</i>	
Formation	Assembled GB	Sport Clubs e.g. <i>Arsenal FC</i> <i>(Bukayo Saka)</i> , <i>Golden State Warriors</i> (<i>Steph Curry</i>), <i>Inter Miami</i> (<i>Lionel Messi</i>), <i>Los Angeles Lakers</i> (<i>LeBron James</i>)	Political Party e.g. <i>Democratic Party</i> (<i>Barack Obama</i> , <i>George W. Bush</i>), <i>Republican Party</i> (<i>Donald Trump</i>), <i>Conservative Party</i> (<i>Kemi Badenoch</i> , <i>Boris Johnson</i>)	Movies/Series Cast e.g. <i>Suits</i> (<i>Gabriel Macht as Harvey Specter</i> , <i>Sarah Rafferty as Donna Paulsen</i> , <i>Meghan Markle as Rachel Zane</i> , <i>Patrick Adams as Michael Ross</i>),
	Organic GB	Bourgeoisie/ Aristocrat Family e.g. <i>The Kennedy</i> (<i>Robert Kennedy</i> , <i>John F. Kennedy</i> , <i>Caroline Kennedy</i>),	Bourgeoisie Family e.g. <i>The Kardashian</i> (<i>Kim Kardashian</i> , <i>Kourtney Kardashian</i> , and <i>Kendall Jenner</i> , <i>Lamar Odom</i>),	Music Band e.g. <i>BTS</i> (<i>Jungkook</i> , <i>Jimin</i> , <i>Suga</i>), <i>Destiny's Child</i> (<i>Beyonce Knowles</i> , <i>Kelly Rowland</i> , <i>Michelle Williams</i>)

The functional dimension of GB has significant implication on how consumer groups support or resist group brands. From our theorising and review of scholarly work, we propose that young consumer groups (characterised by immaturity, little or no work experience, primarily consumers/dependents) have a different selection mechanism from older consumer groups (characterised by maturity, significant work experience, primarily workers, and lived beyond a generation).

From our examination, we argue that

1. *Young consumer groups (YCG) choose group brands more for specific individual of interest that thrills them within the group brand.*
2. *Older consumer groups (OCG) are more inclined to look more wholistically at the group and what it stands for over time.*

Although generally, there is preference for the consumption of heritage by older people (often found with Funnelling GB) and preference for short lived yet deep fanatical experience by younger people (typical of Terminal GB). Yet, we are not suggesting that younger people do not make support decisions for funnelling group brands, instead our argument is that the support or lack of it for a funnelling group brand like a football club will not be for its longevity status but more for its performance per time. In other words, younger consumer groups are more likely to switch

commitment because of more fleeting events which could be an underperformance of a sport club in few games.

Next, we discuss the second dichotomy (organic versus assembled). The first dichotomy of organic versus assembled relates with the formation dimension of the group brand. By formation, we suggest that the group brands can be organised in two broad ways: *assembled* and *organic*.

In the light of our analysis, the concept of an ***assembled group brand*** refers to a collective of individuals who deliberately come together to form a unified identity. This collective identity supersedes the recognition of the individual members, emphasizing the group as a singular entity. However, this coming together may be project based or an attempt in perpetuity. Some assembled group brands include music groups like *K Pop Boys*, *Destiny's Child*; sports teams like *Arsenal FC*, and *Golden State Warriors*; movie series like *Suits* and *Game of Thrones*.

The second group brand type, *organic* group brand, is understood to have evolved naturally as observed in the case of bourgeoisie family (The Kardashians, The Obamas) and aristocrat/monarchical families (like the Japanese and Swedish crown). These two examples are similar in developing the idea of groups, but we observe that all family groups too were formed originally through deliberate unification at the primary level of delicacy when the couple was formed (Gittins, 2017). Many scholars have argued that married couples are a fundamental core unit of a family (Gittins, 2017, Cherlin, 2004, and Coontz, 2006) even in the absence of children as previously argued in this paper. This is further emphasized by Burch (2019) when distinguishing the experiences of family pre-presence of children as a couple and post-presence of children as expanded family and how these relate with work. At the secondary level of delicacy when children begin to emerge into the collective, then self-generated and organic groups are formed. The coming together of 2 (in the case of monogamy) or more people (in the instance of polygamy or polyandry) to form married couple – depending on religious or social norm – can readily be argued as a family. With this, it can further be agreed that the concept of ‘shared commitment’ and ‘functional role’ present in group brands as seen in music groups, sport teams, and TV series cast have some presence but not equally prominent in families (Walsh, 2003; Popenoe, 1993). These shared commitment and functional roles are shaped by the different relationship dynamics that exist within group brands and will be better understood when underpinned with the family identity theory. As such, from our description, we submit that there are two main types of group brands when described by formation as shown in Table 2 above, *assembled* group brand and *organic* group brand.

These dichotomies of GB have been observed to be mutually independent. For example, an assembled group brand may serve either a funnelling or terminal function as seen in Table 3.

3.2. Individual dynamics within group brands

Our understanding of group brand was shaped by our deep knowledge of how a family is formed and operates as such we borrow from the literature of Family Identity Theory (FIT). FIT provides a valuable framework for understanding group brands in a highly relatable and accessible manner, offering insights into the dynamics and characteristics that define individual but more of collective brand identities. This is not only because the family is a constituent that everyone is familiar with, but also because it shares copious relatable parallels that can explain the group brands (Epp and Price, 2008). A group brand is an important “collective enterprise” central to many consumption experiences but not adequately described in literature. Like a family, it has far-reaching individual, relational, and collective nuances that influences consumer and customer decision, behaviour, and actions (Epp and Price, 2008). An important implication of the group brand, as exemplified by the family structure, is the emergence of individual brand identities and relational preferences.

Could the ‘group’ be a neutral environment for the development of individuals and relational brands without implications? We argue not so particularly for ***assembled group brands***, but possible for ***organic group brands*** as we shall see (Cigoli, & Scabini, 2007). At the core, individuals are driven by their values (Malone and Fiske, 2013; Hitlin, 2003; Berzonsky, Cieciuch, Duriez, & Soenens, 2011), which may be different from (and worst still, at conflict with) that of the group brand. Arguably, previously formed values in individuals will shape their identities which may over time not be a fit with the group. The same cannot be said of the organic groups that evolved like a family. Unlike the family and organic groups, there will be tension between individual identities and values, and those of the assembled group brands, hence the development of new relational identities which by implication may then spiral into another brand perceived by consumers.

FIT can be used to account for the role of different individual, and relational units in structuring group brand activities (Epp and Price, 2008). But while each group may have a well-thought-out identity which it seeks to project, individual members within a group may have been shaped by their personal values to evince other suppressed identities. Within a family structure, for example, a son is automatically a brother if he has a sibling. He is not shaping that new identity of brotherhood. But an individual within an arranged (non-familial) group brand has the propensity to begin to desire another unshared identity especially knowing that there are potential separate benefits to having a distinct identity that can command value outside the group brand.

As each sub-group within the broader group brand, analogous to family units, constructs its own identity, competing interests, preferences, and demands emerge, this leads to increasingly selective and fluid interpersonal relationships, shaped by situational factors, and the formation of blended entities that diverge significantly from their original design (Epp & Price, 1980). Such fluidity in identity construction has critical implications for consumer perceptions and, consequently, the evolution of these brands.

The family unit has been immensely helpful in our understanding of the formation process of a group brand. As opposed to conceptions that the group brand is distinct totally from a family because of its formation, another critical point of difference is the psychological non-cancelability of the family which can take place in a group (Scabini and Manzi, 2011). Meaning, the individual identity is still a part of the family biologically even if psychologically, the person has dissociated self.

3.3.: Relationship within the group brand

In reviewing behaviour within GBs at different stages of their development, we shed light on three stages – forming, storming, and adjourning. We emphasize these three stages above others because these identified stages are readily perceivable by and reaction-worthy for the consumers.

4. How consumers relate to group brands

In reviewing consumers behaviour towards group brands at different stages of their development, we shed light on three stages – forming, storming, and adjourning. We emphasize these three stages above others because these identified stages are readily perceivable by and reaction-worthy for the consumers.

4.1: Individual, Relational, and Collective Bundles

As expected, there is the group level interaction of the brand with consumers as alluded to earlier. As the subject of our study, we find consumers interact with the group as a collective identity that serves the purpose of “a repository of meaning...to use in living their own lives” (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008) and “responsive relationship partners” (Thomson, 2006). While much research has studied the interaction of endorsements by human brands and consumers, some studies have investigated the human brand itself except that the focus remains on an individual identity (Parmentier, 2010) as opposed to a GB that boasts of multiple individuals and how these interact with consumers as a unified whole. In a bid to maintain a unified front, GBs seek to always project

a singular voice but with the advent of social media where engagements are highly increased in volume and frequency, it is more difficult to ensure harmony between group-consumer engagement and celebrity-consumer engagement when the celebrity is a member of the group. It is to resolve this potential dissonance that GBs maintain an official social media account. When the individual's, on the other hand, have a parallel account, it often does not go without the caveat "opinions are my own". Views expressed with disclaimers are used when an individual is also known to be a part of a larger group but needs to distinguish self from the group.

Following the kind of interactions that occurs within the group at the collective level, relational sub-groups are also very likely (Epp & Price, 2008). Soccer, for example, has a long-standing sub-group classification of attackers, mid-fielders, and defenders that have been traditionally seems as famous trios. There was an age of "MSN" (Messi, Suarez, and Neymar Jr) at Barcelona FC (Hassan, 2024) and another nicknamed "BBC" which included Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, Gareth Bale over a period of 5 years between 2013 and 2018 at *Real Madrid FC* (Planet Football, 2022). Consumers do not find this relational engagement only is football, but also in Aristocrat Families like Prince Harry and Meghan Markle (from the larger group of *The House of Windsor* aka *The British Royal Family*) as well as Sarah Rafferty and Patrick Adams (from *Suits*) on the platform of *Sidebar*.

Consumers relate to group brands at three levels: individual within the group, subgroups within the group, and the group as a unit. Although consumers seek relationship with the group brand, this does not preclude them from attempting to form another relationship with individual members of the group. This may be an attempt to get closer to or engage the group through the celebrity status of one of its members for consumers who consider themselves as fans (Jones, Cronin, and Piacentini, 2022; Wies, Bleier, & Edeling, 2023; Tafesse, & Wood, 2021). We find these cases evident from the data presented in Table 1 where The Kardashians as a group brand has 203.5m followers on all three major social media platforms (Instagram, Tiktok, and X) but the group's constituent individuals like Kourtney Kardashian, Kim Kardashian, Khloé Kardashian, and Kendall Jenner have 246m, 443m, 340m, and 327m followers respectively across all same social media platforms. A reference to other group brand types on Table shows how consumers of the group brands also engage the individual constituent brands independently.

In the final analysis, it is the feeling of relatedness that makes an individual feel close with another (Deci & Ryan, 2000), but in this case, it is closeness with the group brand. It is the cohesiveness of

the individual identity with the group identity that shows the collective relationship within group brands.

4.2 Consumers' answers to group brands when "forming"

But how do consumers respond to group brands at different stages of the group's metamorphosis? From studies on consumer-brand relationship literature, we are nudged to believe that consumers have eclectic reactions to different developmental phases of group brands.

The forming stage is often an excitement stage when consumers get to witness a newness of a group brand particularly an assembled group brand. Although organic group brands are also perceived positively by fans, it is imperative to understand the dynamics of this relationship at this level.

Collectives when forming

Once consumers consider the excitement due to the entertainment or perceived illusionary companionship formed with a group identity, it expects that this relationship is in perpetuity (Beck, 1988). This initial stage of forming and possibly storming (although often unseen by the outside world), consumers throw their supports behind their collective human brands.

We propose:

Proposition 1: consumers have a positive reaction to group identities in group brands when it is in its forming stage.

Individuals when forming

A group identity is loved and supported because consumers are attracted to its service performance. The support and admiration for the group is transferred to all individual that make up the group. Although different consumers may have different favourites, but this is not readily publicly communicated to bring out any form of tension or unease between the individuals within the brand or fans whose favourites are other individuals within the group brand.

We, therefore, propose that:

Proposition 2: consumers will have a positive reaction to individual identities in group brands when it is in its forming stage.

Relational when forming When consumers have positive disposition and support for individuals within group brands, they do not then antagonise or resist intragroup relationship identities (a form of sub-group within the larger group). The idea of anything hindering this intragroup tie could lead to consumer dissatisfaction or dissonance. This, we believe, to be true especially if the intragroup

relationship identity does not weaken the tie that binds the group. There is no evidence in group literature that conjectures consumers supporting one individual within a group while despising the relationship formed with same individuals within the group in a forming stage of group evolution.

We, therefore, propose:

Proposition 3: consumers have a positive reaction to relational identities in group brands when it is in its forming stage.

4.3: Consumers' answers to group brands when "storming"

Consumer response to group brands during storming stage is dependent on a number of factors which include presence of social drama (Epp & Price, 2008), evolution of newness (Manning, Bearden, & Madden, 1995; Jie, & Li, 2022; Im, Bhat, & Lee, 2015), and source of conflict (Palmeira, Hartmann, Chan, & Sekar, 2023). Each of these factors will be considered independently for clarity.

We define social drama as any news that challenges the status quo or overturn norms (Epp & Price, 2008). This may lead to heightened emotions expressed through complications unpredictability, and/or excitement. The consumption of human brands come with the expectation of sensational events that creates a buzz in the media (Hung, 2014). Some of these buzzes are exaggerated often deliberately to instigate adrenaline rush for excitement seeking public. This is not different from the generic analogy that "if a dog bites a man, it's not news. But if a man bites a dog, that's news" because of a combination of its novelty, unexpectedness, and rarity.

Evolution of newness on the other hand implies a new offering from the group brand either at an individual or relational identity level. Imagine, for example, that a member of the K-Pop releases a single EP that was considered rhythmic with heartfelt lyrics but rather than being pop, it is reggae. This newness which is similar to presence of drama in terms of deviation from norm is considered a positive development when viewed independently from group psychological contract or group expectations (Manning, Bearden, & Madden, 1995; Jie, & Li, 2022; Im, Bhat, & Lee, 2015).

Lastly, consumers may be moved by the sentiment of antagonising anyone perceived to be responsible for the storm especially when the storm is creating an unpleasant result in the offering of the group brand. For example, for a football GB, this could be losing matches; for a music group, this could be not releasing new songs; for a political party, this could be losing election; and for a TV series cast, this could be not having the whole cast present in an episode.

Individual versus the group => proposition 4-1: "attitude" toward the individual

Drawing on insights from psychological literature, extant research indicates that consumers are generally more inclined to experience empathy toward perceived underdogs (Jun, Sung, Gentry, & McGinnis, 2015). In comparative contexts, individuals are typically viewed as more vulnerable or disadvantaged relative to groups, thereby evoking stronger empathic responses. However, when an individual is already salient or positioned as the focal figure within a group, the group itself may be reclassified as the underdog, particularly when it is perceived to be contending with formidable external pressures or asymmetrical power dynamics. This shift reflects a broader cognitive pattern wherein observers extend support toward those perceived to be confronting unfavorable odds. However, it must be understood that support in this case is short-lived until normalcy is restored as a result of the GB entering the norming stage. Based on this reasoning, we theorize that:

Proposition 4: consumers will be more inclined to support the underdog in either case of individual versus group storming until norming.

This newness in music genre may not just intensify the feelings of former fans but may ignite interest of previous non-fans who are lovers of the new genre. This kind of newness is refreshing and welcomed by consumers who are open to reggae but repulsive to consumers who like the maintenance of status quo. Therefore, if the drama evolves into a tension from creating something different in function and/or form, we argue that consumers will show support towards the newness (Cronin, Weingart, & Todorova, 2011).

4.4 Consumers' answers to group brands when "adjourning"

The adjourning stage is characterized by a range of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses that emerge as intra-GB relationships dissolve. This phase is distinct in that it is not merely the cessation of interaction but the culmination of accumulated experiences, often accompanied by emotional ambivalence, cognitive dissonance, and paradoxical commitments from consumers. Consumers may simultaneously hold conflicting beliefs, such as residual loyalty and emergent disaffection, which they must either reconcile or suppress. As such, managing the psychological aftermath of this stage requires conceptual clarity that separates adjourning from earlier developmental phases, particularly storming.

Whereas the storming stage typically reflects initial tensions arising from the convergence of previously unacquainted entities, often preceding alignment in the norming and performing stages, the adjourning phase occurs post-performing stage, following periods of relational cohesion. While early-stage storming may, in exceptional cases, accelerate relational breakdown and lead directly to

adjourning, it is more analytically useful to recognize the distinct emergence of a post-performing storming phase. In this latter manifestation, tensions arise not from unfamiliarity but from disillusionment, unmet expectations, or evolving interests, particularly among group brands (GBs). These intra-GB disagreements mark the deterioration of previously stable dynamics and frequently precipitate the process of adjourning.

Beyond this situation in which consumers find themselves, attention is paid to the specific context of the GB adjourning. From real life and the interrogation of literature, there are three important considerations include adjourning type (distasteful vs. mutually respectful dissolution), expectation of a losing party (underdog vs. topdog), interplay of perceived unfairness (unfair actor vs unfair receiver).

As shown, the adjourning stage for group brands can be attributed to multiple potential causes. These potential causes could result in either type of outcomes. First, there may be an amicable resolution which could be mutually respectful or a tension-based distasteful split. The effect of the type of split impacts stakeholders like children when couples split (Wallerstein, 1991; Cao, Fine & Zhou, 2022; Douglas, 2020) , and fans when music groups dissolve (Cable, 2015). Consumers reactions to a friendly dissolution may be hurtful but this is subtly compensated for by the friendliness that still exist among their once-adored group. The hurt is expected to be fleeting because of the compensation by way of still knowing that the persons within-group brands have not put them in a precarious situation of having to choose one person over another.

However, in instances where the group experiences an unfriendly breakup, consumers will be displeased even though they are compelled to choose – to support one faction over (an)other(s) depending on the split units.

We, therefore, propose that:

Proposition 5. Consumers will experience short-lived displeasure when group experiences friendly adjourning.

Proposition 6. Consumers will experience dissonance because they are forced to support a side.

Following similar argument in psychology literature that points to consumers being more disposed to support underdogs (Jun, Sung, Gentry, & McGinnis, 2015), this remains more evident in a situation of adjourning. However, conversely to the adjourning stage, support for the underdog is not short-lived but akin to being permanent.

Based on this reasoning, we theorize again that:

Proposition 7: consumers will be more inclined to support the underdog in either case of individual versus group adjourning.

The last consumer consideration, from our theorising, is the perception of unfairness from either dissolving party. Consumers will typically expect fairness from all individuals or clusters within the GB even if there is a GB dissolution. If, for any reason, consumers perceive (correctly or erroneously) that there was an underhand in the treatment of any side of the divide, it will tilt their favour in support of the party that has been treated unfairly. Again, this pushes us to theorise:

Proposition 7: Consumers will support the dissolution side that is perceived to have been treated unfairly.

Knowing this, it is therefore likely that all parties may strive to position herself as the party that has been treated unfairly using their social media platform to promulgate the narrative.

Conclusion

This study introduces the novel concept of Group Brands (GBs), collectives of human agents perceived as a unified brand entity—extending the literature on human brands beyond individual endorsers. We define and typologize GBs based on their formation and function, offering insights into how consumers respond across the brand's life stages, including differences between younger and older consumer groups. Theoretically, this work provides a foundational framework for exploring the unique identity dynamics, risks, and symbolic power of GBs. Practically, it alerts managers and public relations professionals to the distinct challenges posed by group brands, including reputational risks tied to individual members. The study advises on investment strategies, whether to back entire groups or selected individuals, and encourages proactive risk mitigation and strategic differentiation based on GB type. Ultimately, it equips marketing and brand professionals with a nuanced understanding of GBs to support more informed, data-driven decisions.

Limitations and further research

This study conceptualizes group brands (GBs) as entities whose identity is situated at the group level, not reducible to individual members. It introduces the notion of **group brand multiplicity**, where individuals may belong to multiple GBs simultaneously. While this opens intriguing avenues for future research—such as identity shifts, in-group tensions, and brand mobility—our investigation is intentionally limited to consumer-observable dynamics. The study also acknowledges the need to explore varied theoretical lenses beyond Family Identity Theory,

including Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorization, and Conformity Theory. Additionally, we note that consumer loyalty may vary based on whether attachment is to the group or to a specific individual within it, particularly during group tensions or dissolution. Our focus, however, remains on defining and conceptualizing GBs through relational, discursive, and performative dimensions, laying the groundwork for further psychological and behavioral inquiry into this emerging construct.

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