

# Unbranding: Disenfranchising Terrorism, Disenchanted Terror

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**Abstract:** The Theory of Brand Reduction (TBR), or unbranding, genericizes an organizational brand in order to reduce or limit its impact within its category or brand group. Unbranding asserts a product is identified by its brand and is perceived by stakeholders based on the characteristics of that brand. For example, terror is a product of some organizations - a means to an end - usually political in nature. Unbranding posits the center of gravity (COG) of an extremist group or organization is its brand. Current and previous counter-terrorism efforts have addressed elements of products but not the source of power of the brand. Unbranding posits that terror is a product and terrorism is a franchise into which members 'buy' a brand of terror, establish a franchise of their own, using or adapting franchise 'rules' but relying on the franchise brand value and name to grow and expand. This paper explicates the core concept of unbranding and proposes six hypotheses for future research.

**Keywords** — unbranding, salience, resonance, extremist, generic

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## INTRODUCTION

A brand is generally defined as a type of product manufactured by a particular company under a particular name while the American Marketing Association [1] defines it as "A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods as distinct from those of other sellers." A brand can be powerful and emotional. A brand can change or influence perceptions and change behavior. While often considered to be the realm of advertising or marketing, a brand is much more. A brand is the organization itself. Keller and Swaminathan [2] note firms and other organizations have realized that one of their most valuable assets is the brand names associated with their products or services.

While there is a plethora of research focusing on branding, unbranding is explicated here as a method to marginalize an organizational brand in order to reduce or limit its impact within its category or brand group. While sounding ominous in a communication world which emphasizes harmony, positive contribution, and constructive theory, unbranding is primarily focused on extremism and removing the center of gravity and power of an extremist organization. Unbranding expands the concept of branding far past advertising, marketing, or public relations.

A brand is more than a product – it is a perceived entity, founded in reality but residing only in the mind of stakeholders. Brand characteristics explain and highlight differences from other brands and provide mental structures and information in order to shape opinions and influence decision-making. Brands can be rational and tangible but can also be symbolic, emotional and intangible. A brand can make an intangible and abstract concept more concrete, shortening the mental distance between the stakeholder and the brand. A brand is a perceptual entity rooted in reality – it reflects the perceptions and perhaps even the idiosyncrasies of consumers. In contrast, a generic brand lacks a recognizable name, logo, or distinct features. It does not differentiate itself from others in the same category and targets a specific consumer base which is dynamically different than a consumer base of a brand name product.

When considering between a brand or generic product, there is a value exchange involved - an associated cost balanced by a perceived, or calculated, return. Such a value exchange can be motivated by many things, including brand loyalty, social acceptance, social status, or personal image. Unbranding is underpinned by the concept that different motivations drive branded and generic decisions. Extremist organizations depend on their brand name to entice supporters and benefactors, but most critically for recruits. An extremist organization must be perceived worthy of dying for. Conversely, a generic organization has neither the salience nor the resonance for that level of brand commitment.

**LITERAURE REVIEW**

When it comes to studying the branding of extremist organizations, there have been a few studies on how Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) brand themselves, about violent propaganda and extremism in the online environment, how ISIS, as just one example, brands itself, how marketing and branding may shape Halal into a brand, and measuring resonance of Da’esh propaganda but none of these studies offer a method how to negate, degrade or diminish such activities.

Schoeneborn and Scherer [3] argued that the destabilization of terrorist organizations could be accomplished by creating ambiguity around mass media reports of terrorism. Using Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) Theory, Bean and Buikema [4] explored what kinds of communication actually constitute terrorist organizations such as al-Qa’ida; what are the theoretical possibilities for communicatively de-constituting terrorist organizations; and how can the answers to these questions be used to develop counterterrorism strategy.

Other foundational studies have approached terrorism as a small group [5] an organization [6], at the individual level [7] and as a movement [8]. Each of these approaches contributes to the field of research. TBR, explores terrorism with a fresh approach, viewing terror as a branded product, with each established terrorist group having a brand that is designed to the same thing other brands do – distinguish the goods of one producer from those of another.

Extremist communicators place branding, and publicity to support the brand, at the forefront of their efforts [9]. To achieve their goals, extremists need to publish their group ideology to justify their actions; generate an endless supply of recruits to fuel their actions; solicit funds and resources to enable their actions; and generate much-needed publicity to highlight their successes to potential benefactors and recruits. Decreased legitimacy and credibility, the denial of political-figure status, and inhibiting publicity of ideologies is a direct threat to a terrorist brand survival. With limited or no media coverage, terrorist operations, viewed as brand-awareness and publicity-seeking tactics, must be increased in either intensity or volume to attract more attention. The intensity course of action will increase the chances terrorist operatives will be caught as more activity equates to more exposure time and more chances to be identified, tracked, and caught. It will also cause more losses to terrorist ranks, reducing the ability to conduct more operations, and cause more damage to local stakeholders that will drive them towards local government support. The volume course of action will deplete the terrorist or terrorist group of available resources. The organization will eventually run out of assets or simply become ineffective. Losing popular support, failure to transition to a new generation, or implosion are all possible outcomes through this track. This is Cronin’s [10] failure option for how terrorist groups end.

**METHODOLOGY**

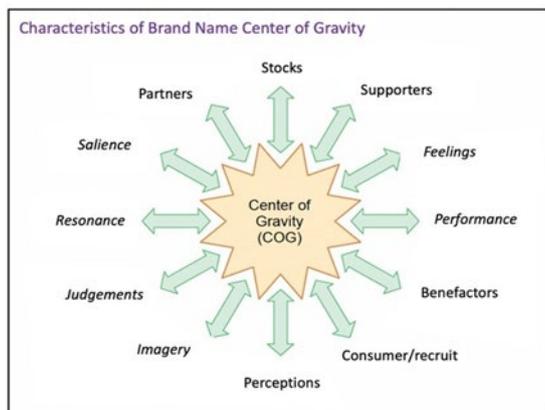


Figure 1. Brand Center of Gravity. Adapted from DOD (2017)

TBR works on perception of success and the COG of terrorism. A COG is the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act. Given that a brand name can be as much as 60% of an organization’s value in the case of Mercedes Benz and 21% for Apple, a brand name is arguably the center of gravity for the organization when seen as a source of power that generates business and loyal consumers. Stocks, partners, consumers, and performance measures such as trust and reputation are directly impacted by a successful, or failing, brand name. Figure (1) illustrates an adapted view of COG – with the brand name as the COG and how each of the brand building elements are related. With changes in one or more of the related characteristics, the brand name can be positively, or negatively, impacted.

Brand building is a process, contingent on successfully achieving the objectives of the previous one [2]. Asking the question, ‘Is salience required to accomplish the first step of brand building?’ would identify salience as a critical strength in achieving the first step of brand building. Each stage of the four building blocks goes through the same interrogative process. Steps two and three contain critical strengths that would be addressed by hard (military) and soft (diplomatic) power. Asking the question “Is resonance required to accomplish the fourth and final step of brand building?” would again determine that resonance is a critical strength in achieving the final step of branding. Thus, terrorists’ organizations rely on salience and resonance to build a strong brand name just like any other organization.

Each step in the process has characteristics that can be addressed as critical elements for each brand-building stage. After identifying the main critical strengths, salience and resonance, the next step would be to determine what elements are needed to achieve both salience and resonance. For salience, the answer would be to identify themselves to potential consumer/recruits, benefactors, and supporters through breadth and deep awareness and category structure. For resonance, the answer would be to create opportunity for active engagement, build a community, earn attachment and ultimately loyalty. With critical elements now identified, the next step would be how to address each critical element with

the intent to degrade or negate the outcomes of each critical element. Unbranding seeks to destabilize existing brands by decreasing salience through degraded brand awareness, including breadth and deep awareness, and decreasing resonance by degrading the sense of community, active engagement, attachment, and ultimately loyalty.

## DISCUSSION

Extremist groups and organizations rely on the same business elements as any organization to be successful. They require powerful benefactors and supporters, as well as funds and resources, in order to recruit and supply replacement forces to sustain operations that the group believes will achieve its desired end state, be that creating chaos or obtaining political status. To earn the attention of potential supporters, the terrorist organization must generate constant positive publicity in order to demonstrate performance and validate their effectiveness as an organization, as well as have enough brand differentiation to position themselves against other terrorist organizations in a meaningful way that matters to consumer/recruits, benefactors, and supporters.

Without a brand central to that effort, there is no way to tie in the elements needed to build and sustain an organization. Consider past attacks by any extremist group in any country. In the instances in which attacks were claimed (as some are not because they didn't have the desired effect of the originator) the name of the group is used to claim that event. No matter how many leaders of that group are removed from the battlefield, no matter how many funding streams are denied or degraded, no matter the attempts to dissuade potential recruits of the group, the brand – the center of gravity – of the organization remains and endures. If that brand is perceived as credible, successful, and productive, leaders will continue to emerge, funds will be found, and recruits will continue to be plentiful. However, when that brand is perceived as not credible, unsuccessful, or generic, unbranding posits that the organization's brand cannot endure.

With past, and current, focus on using hard and soft power as the primary maneuver, all a terrorist organization must do to survive is endure by keeping the perception of success in motion until the opposition loses political will or is exhausted of resources. Thus, with a brand name founded in perception only, unbranding need not eliminate a brand in its entirety, but simply weaken it enough for a period such that the organization cannot generate enough performance and judgement to sustain the brand's existing perceptions.

In addition to establishing the core concept of unbranding, the author outlines six hypotheses to explore in furthering the core concept. The six hypotheses include:

- An extremist group requires salience with stakeholders to build its brand.
- An extremist group requires brand awareness and categorical structure with stakeholders to maintain its brand.
- An extremist group cannot maintain its brand if it is perceived as generic.
- A generic brand will have less attitudinal attachment than a strong brand.
- A generic brand will have a more passive community than a strong brand.
- Generic brand loyalty is dynamically different to strong brand loyalty.

Future research will further explicate the theory and process/methodology of unbranding, including establishing a potential set of metrics to assess branding/unbranding. The author will apply unbranding to a comparative analysis of case studies of extremist organizations, using the proposed metrics to assess successful, failed, or enduring brands. The analysis will explore how the organizations' brands developed over time and succeeded, failed, or endure.

## CONCLUSION

The Theory of Brand Reduction addresses how to un-brand an existing brand and how to prevent new brands from flourishing. Using TBR to assess and address the center of gravity of an organization - the brand name - provides a systematic approach based on four steps of brand construction to de-construct the brand to a point where is unable to sustain itself or overcome the lack of promotion or endorsements. TBR allows for complete assessment of a brand and both the physical and cognitive dimension it exists in. TBR reduces the brand value of an organization to a generic brand, which is not enough for most benefactors to waste money on, for supporters to waste time on, or for consumer/recruits to give their life to the generic brand name of Acme Terror. Hard and soft power, that of military and diplomatic engagement, used as a primary maneuver has had minimal return on investment as evidenced by recent history. Non-state actors, such as terrorists, use informational power as their primary maneuver while Western and Coalition forces traditionally use hard power as their primary maneuver. The application of unbranding offers potentially significant resource savings for the United States and its partners as the prime enabler and force multiplier in disenchanting terror and disenfranchising terrorists.

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