A framework for conceptualising and managing brand identity and reputation in higher education; an exploratory case approach

European academia has gone through major changes in recent years many scholars argue that the importance of brand management has increased (Chapleo 2011) as there is a need to succinctly articulate the essence of the institution in an increasingly competitive market.

Finland, the country from which our sample was selected, is one of the Nordic countries with 14 universities that conduct scientific research and provide undergraduate and postgraduate education based on it. In addition, six university consortia, which are networked organisations linking regional activities among the branch units of parent universities, operate in areas with no university (Ministry of Education and Culture 2014).

This article is based on one of the author's doctoral thesis (Suomi 2015). According to the literature review conducted for the study most studies on HE brands and branding have been conducted in major English-speaking nations (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006) and very little light has been shed on brand management in other educational contexts. Studies conducted in private university settings (e.g., Curtis, Abratt & Minor 2009; Joseph, Mullen & Spake 2012) in particular may not be comparable to those carried out in countries in which education is provided by the state. Second, existing studies typically focus on the perceptions of universities and their brand-related issues among just one or a few stakeholder groups (McAlexander, Koenig & Schouten 2004; Bennett & Ali-Choudhury 2009): educational managers should acknowledge the diversity of stakeholder expectations and interests as a requirement for successful branding (e.g., Vidaver-Cohen 2007). Third, studies have typically been conducted on the university (Gray, Fam & Llanes 2003) or business-school level (Argenti 2000). There is thus a need for research on the level of educational programmes given that many Master's programmes are regarded as key products of the respective universities (Nicholls et al. 1995). Fourth, studies thus far primarily focus on well-established and strong HE brands (Melewar & Akel 2005), resulting in a lack of research on their establishment in terms of a building brand identity, for example. Finally, in line with Wæraas and Solbakk's (2009, 452) suggestions that more in-depth case studies should be conducted in this area, the current study, which was carried out on the programme level, focuses on a new Master's degree programme in the context of publicly funded higher education in Europe. The intention is to examine the building of a brand identity and reputation in the HE context for a particular course that is considered fairly typical. As a particular contribution a potential new approach to building a brand identity and reputation in higher education is suggested.

This article builds on the academic literature on branding in HE as well as brand identity and its counterpart, brand reputation. These two aspects of brand management derive from the work of de Chernatony (1999) and de Chernatony and Harris (2000), but are defined differently here to reflect more recent co-creation approaches to branding (Iglesias et al. 2013). This new approach is highly relevant to service contexts (Pinar et al. 2011), in which consumers and other stakeholders participate in the production process. According to de Chernatony (1999), the main distinction between the concepts of brand identity and brand reputation is one of perspective - the internal versus the external. It is argued here, however, that both concepts could cover the assessment of various stakeholder groups, both internal and external. As far as the current study is concerned, brand identity reflects the essence of the brand, whereas brand reputation reflects the stakeholders' assessment of it.

Brand identity

Alsem and Kostelijk refer to (2008) a brand identity (the identity of a brand) as reflecting the organisation's view of what it stands for, thus implying a managerial, supply-side orientation.

Nandan (2004, 265), in turn, describes it as “how a company seeks to identify itself” and Ghodeswar (2008, 5) as “a unique set of brand associations implying a promise to customers”. Given the HE context in this article, brand identity is defined here as: “*the essence of the brand, which is co-created with stakeholders”* (Suomi 2015, 40). Various scholars maintain that brand identity comprises several components (de Chernatony 1999; Kapferer 2000). De Chernatony’s (1999) identifies six: *vision, culture, positioning, personality, relationships* and *presentation*, all of which should form a consistent entity. This could be regarded as a precondition for a favourable brand reputation (de Chernatony 1999; de Chernatony & Harris 2000). As de Chernatony (1999, 157) suggests “by auditing the gaps between brand identity and brand reputation, managers can identify strategies to minimize incongruence and develop more powerful brands”.

Brand reputation

de Chernatony (1999) describes a brand reputation as a stronger concept than its image as it evaluates perceptions across several stakeholder groups. A holistic view is adopted in the current study, in which brand reputation is defined as: “*stakeholders’ overall assessment of the brand”* (Suomi 2015, 45). It is widely argued that (brand) reputation cannot be managed as such because it relates to stakeholders’ perceptions and assessments (e.g., Rayner 2003). It would therefore be useful to identify possible predictors with a view to maintaining control and consistency (e.g., Vidaver-Cohen 2007). In the business-school context, Vidaver-Cohen (2007) identified eight quality dimensions, building on Reputation Institute’s RepTrak (Reputation Institute 2014), that could be considered predictors of reputation: *performance, service, products, leadership, governance, workplace climate, citizenship and innovation.*

Methodology

The *case study* was chosen as a research method given the aim to gain a rich understanding of the phenomenon in its real-life context (e.g., Saunders et al. 2003; Yin 2003), and to focus on depth rather than breadth. The current study represents the single-case approach (Yin 2003), which allows participant observation in multiple settings over long periods (Mir 2011). The Master’s degree programme comprising the case gave the researcher the opportunity to monitor the building of the brand identity before the launch. This was particularly advantageous given that the development of a brand identity may start several years before operational activities begin (Lemmetyinen & Go 2010). The programme is organised jointly by two Finnish university units, a school of economics and a department of art, in a Finnish university consortium. Although case studies are not generalizable to populations, many scholars acknowledge their relevance (Gummesson 2005), and single-case studies are considered particularly suitable when context-specific topics are under investigation (Halinen & Törnroos 2005).

Snowball sampling was used to locate information-rich informants (Patton 2002). Sampling is not entirely pre-specified in qualitative studies (Miles & Huberman 1994) and the author was aware of the point of saturation in the data gathering (Strauss & Corbin 1998, 136). The qualitative data comprised 21 interviews with internal and external stakeholders of the Master’s degree programme in question as well as a survey of students (Appendix 1). Semi-structured interviews seemed appropriate given the complex and ambiguous nature of the phenomenon (Gummesson 2005), as well as the need to ensure that the informants could expand on ideas and concepts as they wished (Chapleo 2011). The interview and survey data were collected in three phases between February 2010 and October 2011. The interviews were carried out face-to-face and took from 20 minutes to one hour and 35 minutes. The amount of student respondents was 32. They represented current students on the programme: the total number of students was in total 45 at that time. 34 students were studying for a degree in business and 21 for degree in arts.

The interview protocol for data set 1 (Appendix 1) was designed in accordance with de Chernatony's (1999) "Components of Brand identity" in order to ensure construct validity (Saunders et al. 2003; Yin 2003). Given the lack of existing models in HE, de Chernatony's model seemed a good starting point. The interview data was also analysed in line with de Chernatony's (1999) model as according to Yin (2003, 14), a case study "benefits from prior development of theoretical propositions. Further, the interview protocol for data set 2 and the survey, i.e. data set 3, loosely followed Vidaver-Cohen's (2007) "Quality dimensions and reputational attributes in business schools" model, also in order to guarantee construct validity (Yin, 2003).

The aim of the data set 2 and data 3 were to explore the dimensions that personnel, students and other stakeholders appear to consider particularly relevant for reputation in higher education. Participant observation came about through the author's direct involvement in the programme in question, where the 'personal-self' became inseparable from the researcher-self (Creswell 2003, 182). Given that qualitative methods emphasise uniqueness and authenticity, the aim of replicability in its traditional meaning is abandoned (Janesick 1994). In line with Silverman (2001) all the interviews were recorded. Transcripts were read through several times during analysis (Dubois & Gadde 2002; Iacano et al. 2009). Some scholars do not advocate single-case designs (e.g., Yin 2003). This view is not uncontested, however, Dubois and Gadde (2002, 554), for example, favouring the single case because "learning from a particular case (conditioned by the environmental context) should be considered a strength rather than a weakness. The interaction between a phenomenon and its context is best understood through in-depth case studies".

Findings

Brand identity **:** The starting point in the data analysis was de Chernatony's (1999) six-dimensional model 'Components of brand identity', to which place was added as a potential new component in the in HE context (Suomi, Lemmetyinen & Go, 2013; Ali-Choudhury et al. 2009).

First, the results show how a group of key persons from cultural and educational areas shared a common *vision* of an HE programme that combined business and art in a novel way 10-15 years before it started. Second, *culture* was reflected in the creativity, the multidisciplinary approach and the student orientation in the programme design, although conflicts between the personnel and management of the two organising schools made things difficult. Third, in terms of *positioning* the programme could be considered particularly successful: its multidisciplinary nature and its position at the interface of business and art clearly differentiated it from other educational programmes from the beginning. These unique characteristics ensured that it did not fall into a trap that is common in HE (Chapleo 2005; Jevons 2006): struggling to find a real and convincing differentiator. Fourth, describing its *personality*, one of the informants aptly suggested that if the Master's programme were human it would be "brave and unprejudiced", and another said it was a combination of "fire and ice" (de Chernatony 1999). Fifth, *relationships* cover various relations between personnel, customers and other stakeholders (de Chernatony 1999), and seemingly provided the best opportunities but also constituted the threats to the programme. Sixth, with regard to *presentation*, the programme personnel came up with a name that reflected its multidisciplinary nature. However, they faced an apparently common problem in higher education: complex brand architecture (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana 2007) in the proper sense of the word. This resulted in incoherence and a distorted brand identity.

It seems from the study data that *place* (location) could also be considered a component of brand identity in that the informants attached particular importance to it in connection with the authenticity of the educational brand (Suomi *et al*, 2013). Place does not refer exclusively to the location of the education in the present context, and also reflects the regional identity intertwined with a strong local event-management heritage. Clearly the programme would not have been the same had it been arranged elsewhere, and thus this dimension relates to the authenticity of an educational brand.

Thus far models identifying components of brand identity widely disregard place (de Chernatony 1999; Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2002). Clearly, the place is not only the location of the education, it also concretely demonstrates the symbolic value of the creative industry as a source of inspiration for the personnel in the organising units, as well as the regional identity intertwined with a strong local event-management heritage. The programme would clearly not have been the same had it been located elsewhere. The results of the study show how its brand identity was built, beginning many years beforehand among local stakeholders representing cultural and educational areas as well as an institution developing art and education in Finland, and drawing from the local cultural identity.

Brand reputation: The starting point in the data analysis was Vidaver-Cohen’s (2007) categorisation with its eight dimensions of reputation quality (See Appendix 2). The close and informal collaboration with local stakeholders appeared to form one of the programme’s most distinctive characteristics and its greatest source of value creation. The collaboration theme clearly emerged from the data.

Collaboration with stakeholders on the *teaching* dimension refers to the active engagement of lecturers from outside the university such as from business and cultural life (Ng & Forbes 2009; Ngueyn et al. 2012). Our results clearly demonstrate that the students valued the relationships they formed with their peers (Bruce & Edgington 2008). On the *research* dimension, establishing relationships with other researchers is an inherent requirement on the local, national and international level in contemporary academia.

The organisers of the festival and the programme personnel collaborated both formally and informally in developing *relations and co-branding*. Indeed, it appears from the results of this study that a potentially fruitful approach to branding in higher education would be to work with stakeholders with the potential to bring synergy to the service in the form of co-branding.

Interaction with society occurred within formal and informal networks involving the host city, the State, the media, other educational institutions, and cultural and business communities. S*tudents* form networks during their studies, and naturally belong to other networks extending beyond their study programme. The power of student networks should not be underestimated in relation to the programme’s brand reputation, particularly in this digital era with the rapid sharing of experiences via social media (Bruce & Edgington 2008).

As mentioned above, the *uniqueness* of the programme lay in its collaborative nature, the multidisciplinary teaching and content originating from a strong local event-management heritage. On the level of *visibility*, it appears that a new programme in the context of public education operating with rather limited marketing resources requires a proactive approach to awareness enhancement. Traditional forms of marketing such as radio and print advertisements are of minor significance and are considered too expensive. They thus give way to more innovative forms of promotion such as through stakeholders who act as references and create publicity.

A proposed framework for building brand identity and reputation in higher education

Figure 1 summarises the main findings of the study. The novelty of the approach is the inclusion of the quality dimension of reputation as a bridge linking the work of de Chernatony (1999) and de Chernatony and Harris (2000) with the Reputation Institute’s RepTrak (Reputation Institute 2014). The various quality dimensions are seen as predictors of the brand’s reputation (Reputation Institute

2014; Vidaver-Cohen 2007; Ponzi et al. 2011), and should reflect its identity on a more concrete level.

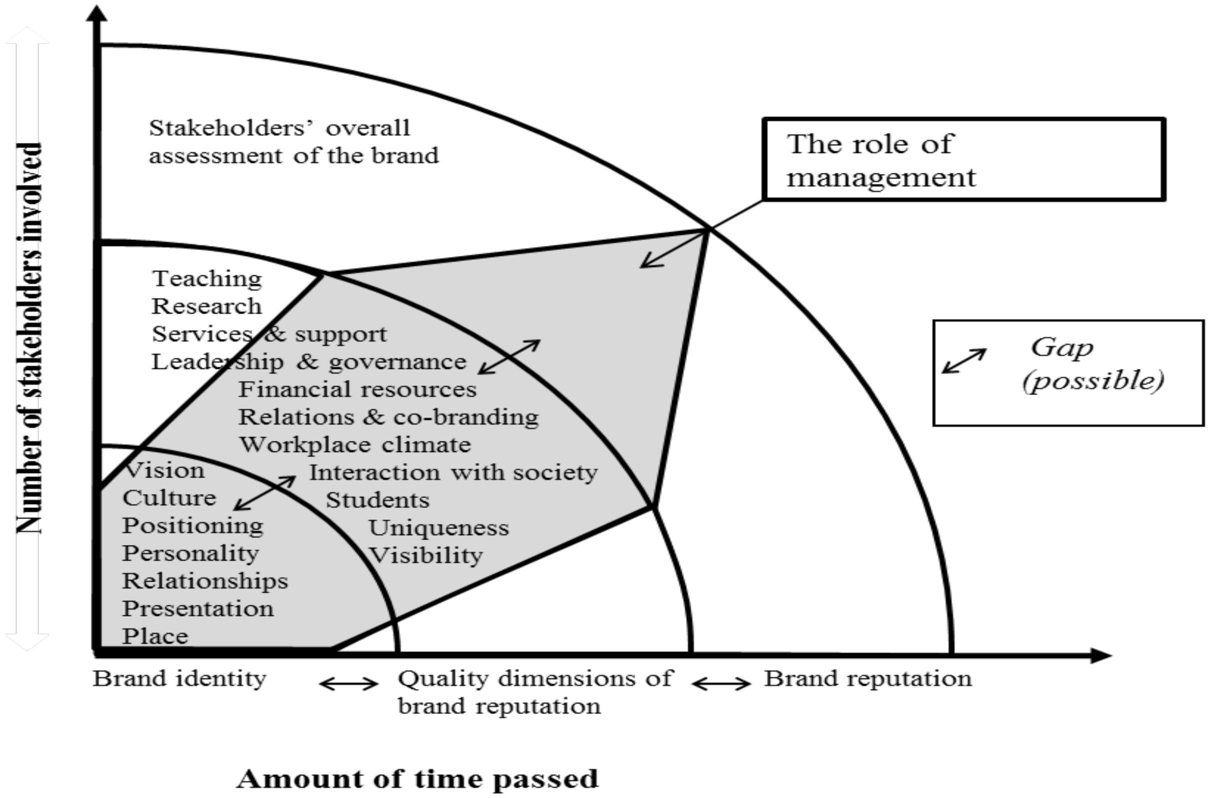

Figure 1. A proposed empirically grounded framework for building brand identity and reputation in higher education.

The brand identity, or essence, comprises several components (de Chernatony 1999; Ali-Choudhury et al. 2009), potentially also including place in the HE context, as suggested in this study (Suomi *et al* 2013; Ali-Choudhury et al. 2009). The role of management on this level is significant given its responsibility for the recognition and conscious building of each component of brand identity (de Chernatony 1999; de Chernatony & Harris 2000). Although a limited number of people are involved at this stage, those engaged in idea generation and the early stages of brand building represent both internal and external stakeholders. On the time dimension, brand identity is considered a predecessor of brand reputation (de Chernatony 1999; Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2002). It is not static (Lowrie 2007) and can be redefined over time, optimally without diluting the essence of the brand (Lemmetyinen & Go 2010).

The quality dimensions of brand reputation predict the quality and performance of the brand. Whereas brand identity is widely acknowledged as invisible and intangible (e.g., de Chernatony 1999), quality dimensions are more concrete and relate to actual implementation. Potential gaps between the two levels should be monitored given that the quality dimensions should echo the brand's identity on a more tangible level (de Chernatony 1999; de Chernatony & Harris 2000).

Brand reputation, referring to the stakeholders' overall assessment of the brand is depicted on the outermost level in the figure. Given that building a reputation takes time (Roberts & Dowling 2002), managers should be committed to it in the long term. It reflects the brand's identity (see also de Chernatony 1999; de Chernatony & Harris 2000), and brand's quality and performance through the distinct quality dimensions. Stakeholders' assessments are also affected by their expectations of the brand (Vidaver-Cohen 2007). Thus, a stakeholder may assess a certain brand rather negatively as a result of holding unrealistic expectations of one or more quality dimension, even the performance on the dimension(s) would suggest else .

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the building of a brand identity and reputation in the HE context, an area that is the subject of a significant and growing body of academic work. The essential role of both internal and external stakeholders in establishing an HE brand has been discussed and findings indicate that the process may get underway several years before operational activities start. It may be concluded from the results that, in the HE context, the place and close collaboration with local organisers of cultural events may constitute valuable sources of differentiation for educational programmes. Studies thus far have largely ignored the brand synergy gained from cultural events organised in the host cities of HE institutions, and the possibilities of co-branding between these institutions and cultural events.

The suggested new approach clearly distinguishes between the three levels: brand identity, the quality dimensions of brand reputation (i.e. predictors) and brand reputation as a whole. It thus expands the work of de Chernatony (1999) and de Chernatony and Harris (2000), and links it to the RepTrak quality dimensions of reputation (Reputation Institute 2014). In this it responds to the common criticism that measures of reputation do not make a clear distinction between the predictors and the construct (Vidaver-Cohen 2007; Ponzi et al. 2011). Moreover, it links the literature on brand management (de Chernatony 1999; de Chernatony & Harris 2000) and reputation management (Reputation Institute 2006) in a novel way.

If, as suggested in this article, a brand's reputation comprises the stakeholders' overall assessment of it (Suomi 2015, 45), it cannot be fully managed. Nevertheless, much can be done. A starting point would be to identify and consistently build the components of the brand's identity and the quality dimensions of its reputation, and to narrow the potential gaps between the three levels depicted in Figure 2 above (brand identity, the quality dimensions and brand reputation).

Although this study was based on a single case, the findings provide useful insights that could be of interest to a wider academic audience: a university's core product is an interactive and often unstructured education service with many similar structural aspects regardless of the service provider (Chapleo 2007; Ng & Forbes 2009). Moreover, it is argued that higher education in general is particularly complex in terms of its stakeholder environment, thereby differing from many other contexts (e.g., Chapleo & Simms 2010). It is also a field in which branding efforts may well be challenged because of strong internal resistance (Wæraas & Solbakk 2009; Whisman 2009), which also applies to brand-differentiation efforts in the HE context (Chapleo 2005; Jevons 2006). Finally, the various sub-brands and the complex brand architecture appear to jeopardise successful branding in this context in particular (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana 2007; Chapleo 2009). Although it is not claimed that the results of this case study are generalizable, they do enhance understanding of the process of building a brand identity and reputation in the European public sphere of higher education, thereby contributing to the literature on HE branding.

In terms of limitations, there is clearly a need for both qualitative and quantitative research covering various HE programmes in other countries and cultures. Future studies could take prospective students into account, which would allow comparison between a brand's identity and its reputation in this setting. The study context - a new multidisciplinary programme - differs in certain respects from many other academic courses of study. It would therefore be valuable to extend the research to other types of programme and educational institution in order to enhance understanding of what comprises a brand's identity and the quality dimensions of its reputation.

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Appendix 1 The informants of the study (Suomi 2015)

DATA SET 1		
Informants	**Date**	**Place**
A representative of an institution developing art and education in Finland	May 19, 2010	Helsinki, Finland
Planning officer	May 19, 2010	Helsinki, Finland
Professor (The informant was interviewed for the 2nd time on 2011)	Feb 3, 2010	Pori, Finland
Professor (The informant was interviewed for the 2nd time on 2011)	Feb 4, 2010	Pori, Finland
Professor	Feb 9, 2010	Pori, Finland
Researcher	April 30, 2010	Pori, Finland
Researcher	May 3, 2010	Pori, Finland
Researcher	Feb 24, 2010	Pori, Finland
Researcher	Feb 28, 2010	Tampere, Finland
The director of the School of Economics	Feb 15, 2010	Pori, Finland
The former director of the local music event	Feb 18, 2010	Pori, Finland
DATA SET 2		
Informants	**Date**	**Place**
Student respondents (S 1-32)	Dec 1, 2010	Pori, Finland
DATA SET 3		
Informants	**Date**	**Place**
A representative of a regional development agency	Sep 21, 2011	Pori, Finland
Planning officer	Sep 27, 2011	Pori, Finland
Planning officer	Sep 28, 2011	Pori, Finland
Professor	Sep 15, 2011	Pori, Finland
Professor	Sep 20, 2011	Pori, Finland
Professor	Sep 27, 2011	Pori, Finland
Researcher	Oct 7, 2011	Pori, Finland
The director of the University Consortium	Sep 16, 2011	Pori, Finland
The head of development at the School of Economics	Sep 29, 2011	Pori, Finland
The marketing manager of the University Consortium	Sep 30, 2011	Pori, Finland

Appendix 2

Table 1. Potential predictors of brand reputation in HE (Suomi 2015; Suomi 2014)

Quality dimensions of brand reputation	**Content**
Teaching	Quality Variety in terms of the courses on offer Academic research as a basis
Research	Competence as researchers and success in publishing Outcome visibility Membership of international researcher communities
Services and support	One-on-one student counselling Open and extensive communication
Leadership and governance	Strong key figures Ambitious yet achievable aims A clear focus on future development
Financial resources	Sufficient to fund teaching and other and the services of key contributors Sufficient to fund a varied course programme
Relations and co-branding	Focus on developing teamwork skills among students Encourage student networking Exploit local, national and international business contacts Cultivate relations with potential employers
Workplace climate	Open, regular communication Minimal sick leave A good social climate A realistic workload Conflict management
Interaction with society	Promotes new solutions and innovations Promotes new research Promotes engagement in regional issues Promotes the training professionals for business
Students	Competent students Graduates with a good career potential Graduates with value set against the loss of income incurred during studies Graduates who will disseminate word-of-mouth
Uniqueness	In the curriculum content In the teaching methods In the multidisciplinary
Visibility	Stakeholder awareness Media publicity