

Using an integrative approach to assess brand identity

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Abstract

There is a wide agreement that identity is a multidisciplinary concept. The authors consider this an opportunity to develop a framework to assess identity.

In a marketing context, literature reveals two approaches on identity: one focus on corporate identity and the other focus on branding. The aim of this paper is to integrate these two approaches to develop a synthesis framework to assess brand identity. Based on literature on identity the authors found nine components related to brand identity. Those components are described in this paper as well as the relation they have with brand identity.

The authors hope that this synthesis approach contributes to a better understanding of the brand identity, and are very encouraging for refining this framework in the future.

Keywords: multidisciplinary concept; corporate identity; brand identity; integrative approach; synthesis framework

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Introduction

Porto Editora dictionary states that identity is a set of components that allow the recognition of someone as such. Organizations despite their not being individuals in the sense described are formed by individuals with values, beliefs, ideologies, personality, ways of acting and communicating therefore they have distinctive traits.

There is a wide agreement that corporate identity forms the bedrock of corporate communications (Van Riel, 1995), corporate reputation (Fombrum, 1996) and corporate branding (King, 1991; Aaker, 1996, De Chernatony, 1999, Harris and De Chernatony, 2001;).

Balmer (2001b) considers there is a conceptual fog about business identity. He outlines fifteen contributory factors to this fog. In his opinion, the terminology, the existence of different paradigmatic views; multifarious disciplinary perspectives re business identity and other factors, are the cause of this fog. The authors consider this an opportunity to develop a framework to assess identity based on different approaches. In a marketing context, literature reveals two approaches on identity: one focus on corporate identity and the other focus on branding. The aim of this paper is to integrate these two approaches to develop a framework to assess brand identity.

1 – The Brand Identity concept

The first identity studies were carried out on an organizational context. Brand is an identity expression, so branding authors tend to apply the corporate identity methodology to develop ways to assess brand identity. According to Balmer (1998), “the use of branding principles to discuss corporate identity has tended to align the area more closely with marketing” (p.985). These two approaches to identity are both developed in literature. Authors like Kennedy, Abratt, Dowling, Balmer, Balmer and Gray, Marwick and Fill, Stuart, Suvatis and De Chernatony amongst others focus on corporate identity while Kapferer, Semprini, Aaker, De Chernatony, Harris, amongst others, focus on brand identity.

Metaphoric analysis between individual identity and social identity are frequent in literature (Barros, 2005). Yet, some authors avoid comparing individual identity with corporate identity. According to Gioia (1998) the key point of the difference between individuals and organizations is that organizations can plausibly present a complicated multifaceted identity, each component is relevant to specific domains or constituents without appearing hopeless fragmented or ludicrously schizophrenic as an individual might. The author claims that corporate identity needs to modify its behavior to adapt to environmental transformations in opposition to individual identity – the latter is more stable. One may say that corporate identity is a result of internal elements like vision, philosophy, culture, personality and others referred to in literature, but also of external elements. This view is far from being the best accepted in brand literature. According to Kapferer (1991) brand identity is an emission concept. Most literature shares this view. Aaker (1996), a brandist, agrees that brand identity is a set of associations the brand strategist intends to create or maintain. Once again the focus is inside the organization, on the elements that allow the brand to be unique.

Literature about other approaches to identity also agrees with this view. On the side of corporate identity approach are most of the Anglophone authors and also the French school of thought about corporate identity (authors like Larçon, Reitter, Ramanantsoa and Moingeon) and the Dutch school of thought on corporate identity. For this school identity is “a set of meanings by which an object allows itself to be known and through which allows people to describe, remember and relate to it” (Van Rekom, 1997, p 411). The last part of this definition refers a relation - something that occurs between a sender and a receiver. The number of meanings presented to people brings about a set of perceptions which the brand strategist should know. Hence the author’s belief that identity is more than an emission concept. It should be framed as stakeholder’s perceptions are known so that the conceived identity fits the actual one kept by stakeholders. When there is no agreement between those two concepts the brand strategist should plan a shift in brand identity or in its communication because there is a gap between identity and its image/reputation. If identity were a mere emission

concept such correction would be impossible for it would lack feedback. Literature discloses authors agreeing with this approach. Serra and Magalhães (1998) refer that Kapferer's interpretation of identity as an emission concept are a denial of the receiver's participation in identity building because he places brand identity before brand image. Semprini (1992) also disagrees with Kapferer. He states that the denial of the receiver's participation is a fallacious exclusion. One can conclude that identity is a multidisciplinary concept. One of the reasons to develop a framework to assess brand identity is the existence of a plethora of concepts to define identity. By using an integrative approach, the authors come to the brand identity components. Some of those components are considered internal to brand identity and others tend to be more external.

The central role of branding is establishing the firm's identity and building its position in the market makes it increasingly imperative for firms to establish a clear branding strategy. This is the reason why brand managers need to know how to assess brand identity.

2 – How to assess Brand Identity?

Due to the lack of consensus about the definition of identity, some authors agree on a joint effort to find a definition. Hence the Strathclyde Statement signed in February, 1995. According to this statement every organization has an identity which articulates its ego, goals and values and presents a sense of individuality that helps distinguish the organization in its competitive environment.

Although this definition is wide accepted in literature there are still many questions about identity management and modelization. Suvatis and De Chernatony (2005) refer that “expressing corporate identity is a dynamic process evolving as the organizational context changes effectively managed through the use of an appropriated model” (p.1). One may say that the identity is distinct from its expression. Based on literature on identity the authors found nine components related to brand identity.

(Table 1 here)

The authors consider reputation a broader concept than image, which is considered a limited concept. According to Fombrum and Van Riel, (1997) image relates to the most recent perception and fluctuates over time in opposition to reputation which is about perceptions of the brand over time and is more stable. In a branding context, De Chernatony (1999) argues that by auditing the gaps between brand identity and brand reputation managers can identify strategies to minimize incongruence and develop more powerful brands. Reputation is a concept which is related to the way that identity expresses itself.

One definition of image is to be found in Porto Editora Dictionary (1999). The concept of image is defined as "... a representation of a person or object; a figure, a picture..." (p. 900). A picture is something static. It is not dynamic as reality is. It is something dependent on a context, a certain time, so it is likely to change with time. So, one may consider that images tend to alter in the short run. This opinion agrees with Kapferer's view about image. According to this author, "brand image is a volatile and mutant notion" (p. 55). Reputation is considered a sum of images in time.

Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) found 160 different definitions of culture. It is an ambiguous concept. In a brand context, the authors consider that culture is a collective way of thinking of those who built, maintain and contribute to the success of the brand. One may say that culture is an internal component of brand identity.

According to Rosinter and Percy (1996), brand positioning reveals what the brand is, for whom it is and what it offers. Harris and De Chernatony (2001) agree that brand positioning is affected by brand artifacts, by Kapferer's (1991) physic which gives cues about brand's characteristics and performance. On this context, the name of the brand is of great importance. "... a carefully chosen new brand name can lend a measure of inherent and immediate strength to the brand" (Kohli *et al*, 2005, p. 1506).

According to Kapferer (1991), "a brand is a personality. It acquires a character..." (p. 56). According to Keller (1993) brand personality is a set of human issues related to brands. Aaker

(1997) uses this concept on her study to define the brand personality dimensions (honesty, enthusiasm, competence, sophistication, rudeness). One can conclude that brand “personality” is an internal component of brand identity. It is its character.

The concept of relationships network was defined after Kapferer’s (1991) concept of relation, and De Chernatony (1999) concept of relationships. Kapferer (1991) and Fournier (1998) conclude that relations between consumer and brand are reciprocal. One may say relationships network is both an internal and external component. It is internal because it relates with employers brand values and it is external because it is related with the way the employers pass those brand values to stakeholders.

Presentation style was a concept born from the connection of four other concepts: Kapferer’s (1991) reflex (reflex as a model of identification), De Chernatony’s (1999) presentation and Aaker’s (1996) concepts of “brand as a symbol” and “brand as an organisation”. This concept is internal because the presentation style depends on brand values and it is external because it is a model of identification on stakeholders.

Communication is an important concept in this literature review due to its link with identity specifically brand identity. According to Ind (1997) communication is the process of translating identity into image. Balmer (1995) defines total corporate communication as primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary communication is related with products, services, employees’ behaviour; secondary communication is related with formal corporate communication and visual systems identification and finally tertiary communication is related with “word of mouth”, media and concurrence and respective interpretation feedback. One may say that communication it is not an internal component as it is not an external component. It is a process, but a relevant one to study identity.

The authors consider environmental influences of great importance on the process of translating identity into image. Other authors also consider them very relevant in their analyses (Kennedy, 1977; Marwick et al, 1997, Van Riel, 1995, and Balmer *et al.* (2000).

The authors decide to integrate the concepts of vision and philosophy in the concept of mission. According to Barandas *et al* (2005) the main objective of a brand's mission is the survival of the brand based on its reason to exist (brand's philosophy) and on long-term projects (brand's vision).

Conclusion

There is a wide agreement that identity is a multidisciplinary concept. Balmer (2001b) considers there is a conceptual fog about business identity. He outlines fifteen contributory factors to this fog. The authors consider this an opportunity to develop a framework to assess identity. In a marketing context, literature reveals two approaches on identity: one focus on corporate identity and the other focus on branding. On this paper these approaches are integrated to develop a synthesis framework to assess brand identity. Based on literature on identity the authors find nine components related to brand identity. Some of them are more related with internal brand identity and the others are considered external to brand identity. Those components are: reputation (a collection of public opinions in time); culture (a collective way of thinking); positioning (brand artifacts); personality (a set of human issues related to brands); relationships network (relations between employers and all stakeholders to deliver brand values); presentation style (model of identification, brand values); communication (total corporate communication); environmental influences (economical, political, social context) and finally mission (reason of existence, vision and philosophy).

The authors hope that this synthesis approach contributes to a better understanding of the brand identity, and are very encouraging for refining this framework in the future.

Table 1

Brand Identity components	Authors
1. Reputation Collection of public opinions in time.	Marwick and Fill (1997), Stuart (1999), Balmer and Gray (2000), De Chernatony (1999)
2. Culture Collective way of thinking; shared culture, facilitates the congruency about brand perceptions, generates competitive advantage	Dowling (1986/93), Kapferer (1991), De Chernatony (1999)
3. Positioning Brand artifacts, objective characteristics, tangible factors	Kapferer (1991), De Chernatony (1999), Harris and De Chernatony (2001)
4. Personality A set of human issues related to brands: honesty, enthusiasm, competence, sophistication, rudeness	Abrat (1989), Marwick and Fill (1997), Stuart (1998/99), Balmer (1995), Kapferer (1991), Aaker (1996), Aaker (1997), De Chernatony (1999)
5. Relationships network Relation; relations between employers and all stakeholders to deliver brand values	Kennedy (1997), Dowling (1986/93), Stuart (1998/99), Kapferer (1991), Aaker (1996), De Chernatony (1999)
6. Presentation style Model of identification; attributes of the brand; brand heritage; brand values	Kapferer (1991), De Chernatony (1999), Harris and De Chernatony (2001)
7. Communication Translates identity into image; total corporate communication (primary, secondary and tertiary)	Dowling (1986/93), Marwick and Fill (1997), Stuart (1998/99), Balmer and Gray (2000)
8. Environmental influences Political context, social context, economical context	Kennedy (1977), Marwick and Fill (1997), Balmer and Gray (2000)

9. Mission Vision, philosophy, reason to exist	Balmer (1995/97), De Chernatony (1999), Harris <i>et al</i> (2001)
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