Corporate brand identity management in a technological faculty – how brand relationships influence students and companies´ reputations

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Abstract: - Identity is traditionally defined as an emission concept [1]. Yet, some research points out that there are external factors that can influence it [2]; [3]; [4]. This subject is even more relevant if one considers corporate brands. According to Aaker [5] the number, the power and the credibility of corporate associations are bigger in the case of corporate brands.

Literature recognizes the influence of relationships between companies in identity management. Yet, given the increasingly important role of corporate brands, it is surprising that to date no attempt to evaluate that influence has been made in the management of corporate brand identity. Also Keller and Lehman [6] highlight relationships and costumer experience as two areas requiring more investigation. In line with this, the authors intend to develop an empirical research in order to evaluate the influence of relationships between brands in the identity of corporate brand from an internal perspective by interviewing internal stakeholders (brand managers and internal clients).

This paper is organized by main contents: theoretical background, research methodology, data analysis and conclusions and finally cues to future investigation.

Key-Words: - relationships, corporate brand, identity, management, reputations, higher education

1 Introduction

Identity is traditionally defined as an emission concept [1]. Yet, some research points out that there are external factors that can influence it [2], [3], [4]. This subject is even more relevant if one considers corporate brands. According to Aaker [5] the number, the power and the credibility of corporate associations are bigger in the case of corporate brands.

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2 Theoretical background

The authors adopt the relationship concept defined by Hakansson and Snehota [7] "a relationship is mutually oriented interaction between to reciprocally committed parties… it evokes the concepts of mutual orientation and commitment over time… between companies" (p. 25). The authors are interested in relationships in the services sector, namely in higher education.

By reviewing literature the authors select information from relational networks [8] and service relationships [9]; [10]; [11]; [12]. After discussion with experts the authors refine the dimensions and choose those that create relationship value, according to Wilson [8], and characterize service relationships according to Rauyruen et al [11] and Hennig-Thurau and Klee [12]. Following the selected criteria, the authors choose the dimensions that characterize educational service brand relationships:

Table 1

Relevant Dimensions	Authors
Mutual goals	Wilson, 1995
Nonretrievable investments	
Commitment	
Adaptation	
Structural bonds	
Cooperation	
Service quality (trust, commitment, satisfaction, quality perception)	Rauyruen et al, 2005; Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997

Service brands are built internally. Higher education institutions behave like real service brands creating awareness to their home countries. According to Kapferer, [1] one of the reasons to consider a country dynamic is its intellectual power. Countries are associated to its brands in terms of universities, industry, tourism... Also higher education institutions are associated with brands that might increase stakeholders' reputations: recognized research centers, innovative companies...

Managing a corporate brand demands a profound knowledge of brand identity facets and the factors that influence them. According to relevant literature, corporate brand management depends on:

- the congruence between brand identity facets – internal facets (culture, self image and personality) and external facets (physical facet, reflected consumer, relation between consumers and brands) and corporate values [1];
- the congruence between brand identity and reputation [13];
- the alignment between the constituents of corporate identity mix [14];
- the alignment between strategic vision, organizational culture and image [15], [16].

The authors would like to add a new investigation perspective to corporate brand identity arguing that it depends on effective management through selection, designing and investing in powerful brands.

3 Research methodology

The investigation question is "how do relationships between brands influence the management of corporate brand identity and reputation?"

The framework defined to answer the investigation question can be synthesized in this scheme:

Figure 1
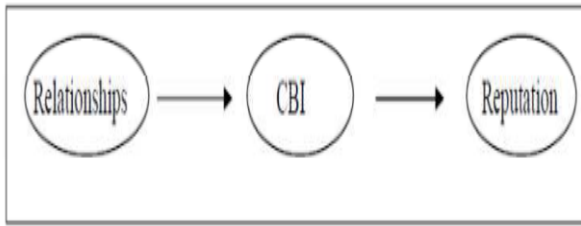
Obs: CBI – corporate brand identity

The unit selected to develop this investigation is a technological higher education institution acting in the Portuguese educational public market. The relationships analyzed were those between the selected educational service brand and recognized:
1- investigation research centers;
2- universities;
3- companies in the market.
The investigation hypotheses are:
H1: The relationship quality is a very important characteristic of a relationship between brands in educational corporate brands.
H2: The perception of the service quality is very important in the perception of relationship quality in the market of educational services (see table 1).
H3: Relationships between brands have impact on the facets of corporate brand identity. According to Ford et al [17] relationships between companies have consequences in identity management. The authors believe that relationships between brands also have consequences in the management of corporate brand identity. The operational solution used to identify the brand identity facets is the brand identity prism [1]. Kapferer was one of the first authors to investigate and define a brand identity framework. The facets of the brand identity prism are formed by internal and external dimensions. As corporate brands are more exposed to reputations of all publics (not only consumers), the authors believe that relationships have a strong influence in the external facets brand identity.
H4: To select brands with good reputation standards increases the perception of internal stakeholders about the consumers' reputation of the corporate brand. A corporate brand has several reputations according to its different publics. This study analyzes the perceptions of internal clients (lecturers/researchers and brand managers) about

external clients (students and employers companies) using the [18] Vidaver-Cohen´s (2007) reputation framework because it is inspired in Fombrum´s RepTrak reputation framework (one of the most reputed frameworks in the area). The Vidaver-Cohen´s reputation framework was refined when used in a business school´s reputation research. The authors use it to investigate the perceptions of the lecturers and brand managers (internal) about the formation of the corporate brand reputation in students and companies. As identity is an emission concept the authors consider that it is important to investigate what internal clients (lecturers and brand managers) think about the reputation of the corporate brand in its most important stakeholders (students and employer companies). According to de Chernatony [13] the congruence between brand identity and reputation is very important for a strong corporate brand and one way to investigate it is analyzing the perceptions of the internal and the external clients.

Table 2 – reputation dimensions

During the study a new hypothesis came out. The authors decide to investigate whether there is an internal perception (lecturers) about the capacity of brand relationships to influence:
- external clients (students and employer companies) and;
- the educational offer (e.g. contents of the graduations courses).
H5: relationships between brands influence external clients and educational service offer.
Data is analyzed using qualitative analysis [19] - content analysis of in-depth-interviews [20] and supported by NVivo9 software.

3

4 Data analysis and conclusions

Data is gathered using in-depth-interviews to eight internal clients (two relationships managers one of which is also a lecturer and six lecturers).

H1 and H2: The results suggest that the relationship quality is a very important issue between educational corporate services and that the perception of the interviewed about service quality perception of the students is a very important item in relationship quality. The results are in line with literature.

H3: The interviewed characterize the internal and external facets of the brand identity prism according to their perceptions and results suggest a strong link between relationships and the external facets characterized as:

- Physical facet: the interviewed consider that students have perceptions about the:

    - high employability of the degrees of the faculty (corporate brand in study);

    - importance of lecturers´ competence;

    - importance of the effectiveness of the interface services regarding support in internships, international mobility,

    - importance of the library service,

    - buildings are adequate to study and to investigate. The employability is considered to be linked to the strong relationships that this institution has in big recognized companies in the area of engineering. A big percentage of the lecturers are not only academics. Most of them also work in the field/industry, and some of them are even highly recognized individuals working in highly reputed companies. The interviewed consider that students praise that, stating that "students know they are having the same opportunity as some recognized individuals" so that, eventually, in a near future, they turn into an equally well reputed person.

- Reflected consumer: the interviewed consider that students want to reflect the profile of a successful person in the future because they studied in that institution. The strong link between this institution and companies in engineering area contributes to this reflected consumer perception. The interviewed consider that the relationships with recognized universities, like MIT, Carnegie Mellon... and with investigation research centers have influence in students´ reflected consumer but only in a higher level (final years of Master or PhD students).

- According to the interviewed the Relation that the corporate brand promises to clients (students and companies) is a very close one, almost maternal with students and mutually committed to success with companies. They believe that students consider themselves a part of the institution, "their like a clan" as some of the interviewed stated. The faculty stimulates this relation between students and the institution since the 1st year. The interviewed believe it to be a consequence of an internal faculty project that stimulates the students´ integration. They consider it to have positive and negative aspects. It has the benefit of integrating students in a different context but it also tends to create a more "childish relationship" where students have all information at their disposal without doing anything to achieve it...

The geographic localization of this institution is a privileged one. It´s located in a Portuguese big town, close to industry and to research centers. Some of the most recognized research centers are located in this institution´s campus and that is a big help for lecturers and students involved in projects with them. The lecturers interviewed have the perception that older students that want to be involved in investigation projects do it, mainly, because of the applied investigation that these research centers offer and its strong ties with industry. Several companies interacting in the market are clients of these research centers. This is considered to be an opportunity to get a future good job by older students.

The results suggest that internal clients (lecturers and relationship managers of the corporate brand in study) consider the selected relationships (with research centers, recognized universities and recognized companies) have a significant influence in the external facets of the brand prism (physical facet, reflected consumer and relation) of the selected corporate brand acting in Portuguese higher education market. These facets are more exposed to relationships than the internal facets of the prism as defined by Kapferer [1]. This conclusion is in line with the corporate brand notion as defined by Balmer [14].

H4: The results suggest that internal clients consider that students and companies (employers) evaluate the corporate brand reputation [18] of the selected faculty as a brand with a very reputational "product" (related with the excellence of its educational methodologies and the level of knowledge of its graduates). They consider "citizenship" (related with the constant successful society interventions; services provided to companies and to society) also a remarkable reputational factor with many expressions in society thru engineering, organizing painting exhibitions in the library, solidarity actions

like blood donations, distributing food and clothes to people in need… Students are highly involved in those actions and most of them are implemented by them.

"Services" and "performance" come next. This investigation suggests that the institution has:
- an effective job place system,
- a high quality instruction,
- a specialized skills training.

About the performance of the brand this study suggests that the corporate brand in study:
- recruits/retains prestigious faculty,
- has a strong record for research,
- attracts quality students,
- obtains lucrative job placements,
- it has strong alumni/business ties,
- it has strong revenues, tuition and value-added programs.

The next item to be evaluated is "Corporate governance". The study suggests that this brand is open and transparent, demonstrates ethical behavior and it is fair in stakeholder transactions.

About "Leadership" the interviewed mentioned the clear vision and competence of the faculty leader. They consider that the perceptions of the clients are very positive about the Workplace and that there are conditions for the faculty to adapt easily to changes in environmental regulations, to be constantly "Innovating" by stimulating and implementing innovative curriculum and innovative delivery methods.

About these results, the authors must add that they represent eight interviews. The dimensions analyzed by the interviewed were very close to each other, meaning that all the Vidaver-Cohen´s [18] dimensions (Table 2) were in a good position and all contribute to a positive internal perception about this brand´s reputation.

H5: regarding the hypotheses that brand relationships influence external clients and the educational offer, the results suggest that there is an internal perspective that relationships between brands and the faculty in study influence older students perspectives but they don´t have much influence in younger students. About the influence of relationships in the educational offer, it is stated by most of the interviewed (lecturers/researchers) that relationships influence their choice when selecting contents to lecture disciplines, especially when related to investigation in the field or their own investigation. Some even point out that some students choose some optional courses in line with the investigation of the main lecturer whom they admire.

5 Cues to future investigation

Another study is being carried out to another technological educational brand and to all the students of both corporate educational brands and to alumni employers (companies) to test the importance of these relationships when students choose the university/faculty to study and companies select graduates to work. Structural equation modeling [21], [22] is being used to find influences of relationships in the identity and reputations of the corporate brand. This way the authors intend to have an internal and an external perspective about the influence of relationships in corporate brand identity and reputation in higher education.

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