Fly me to the moon: From corporate branding orientation to retailer preference and business performance

Abstract

Purpose – The airline aviation industry is both capital-intensive and competitive. Hence, the evolution of the sector needs original marketing strategies. To study the relationships between corporate branding and corporate image, taking into account two views, namely, corporate strategy and corporate expression in airline identity, this research aims to analyze the main indicators of the corporate branding that affect the outcomes of the corporate image.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to inspect the theories, the foundational configural model was assessed through the perceptions of 395 employees in Indian aviation companies. By employing complexity theory, this study matched the concept of equifinality, and it examined the data via a fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis.

Findings – Findings show that corporate strategy positively influences corporate image and corporate expression. The corporate expression offers the verbal and visual facets of a brand. Surprisingly, the paper shows that there is no link between corporate expression and corporate image. It also suggests that corporate expression, including *corporate community, corporate promise,* and *corporate personality*, are all components of a corporate brand and do not influence the corporate image. Finally, the study highlights that corporate image positively affects superior business performance, which influences superior retailer preference.

Research limitations/implications - Our study identifies the corporate identity's indicators (corporate strategy and corporate expression) that affect the corporate image, which results in stronger, superior business performance and retailer preference. It suggests that managers in the airline industry should follow the recommendations of this research by adopting more objective and fairer procedures to attain superior business performance and retailer preference. In addition, the continued growth and the financial impact of the airline sector require the use of pioneering branding strategies. Future study is needed in various nations to advance the generalizability of the research findings.

Originality/value – The paper is the first to study corporate brand, its sub-dimensions (corporate strategy and corporate expression), and their individual links to brand image, which involves experience, relationships, and visual identity.

Keywords – Corporate brand; corporate image; business performance; retailer preference; corporate branding orientation; airline; fsQCA; configuration

1. Introduction

Global airline aviation is an influential industry, which lies at the heart of global companies (Amankwah-Amoah *et al.,* 2020; Knoblich *et al.*, 2015; Okumus *et al.,* 2020). Competition in the industry, which is based on innovation, has created many benefits for customers. Due to its highly competitive business environment, the airline industry is driving fares down for consumers; in light of challenging market conditions, airline revenues are estimated to be $5 per traveler (ibef.org, 2019). According to a recent brand equity report, by 2026, India will be the third biggest international aviation market in terms of travelers. Indeed, International Air Transport Association (IATA) forecasts the number of passengers to rise rapidly (ibef.org, 2019). However, as airlines strive to compete on lower prices, a different aspect has emerged to differentiate airline services via corporate branding: an efficient airline brand actually offers good results, as it boosts purchase intention, preference, and image (Chen and Chang, 2008; Foroudi *et al.*, 2016). In fact, airlines characterized by successful corporate branding, such as, for example, Emirates airlines (estimated to have a brand value of almost $6.6 bn), are achieving higher performance in comparison with those of their competitors who have not been able to employ brand management strategies and tactics (Al Saed *et al.*, 2020).

Since Balmer (1995) first explained corporate branding, this concept has been explored extensively and in depth by both academics and managers (e.g., Foroudi, 2020). Indeed, creating a corporate brand is an important aspect of corporate management (Singh and Crisafulli, 2020). The corporate brand serves several purposes: (i) to differentiate services and products, (ii) to present an organization's goals, ethos, and culture, and (iii) to offer a centripetal force to support future strategies (Goodall *et al.*, 2006; Melewar and Saunders, 2000). Hence, several companies have seen the corporate brand as a crucial element in establishing an exclusive identity with a reliable ethos based on environmental and social responsibility (Aguinis and Glavas, 2019; He and Mukherjee, 2009; Nguyen *et al.*, 2016; Ozdemir *et al.,* 2020). Nevertheless, despite identity having an undisputed role in corporate brand management, studies about this topic are limited. Although identity has been considered by hospitality and tourism scholars (Foroudi, 2020; Hallak *et al.*, 2015; Liu *et al.,* 2020; Pike and Page, 2014; So *et al.*, 2017), few studies have explored the bond between the corporate brand's sub-dimensions, corporate image, and potential outcomes. Thus, assessing this relationship is essential for developing the topic further. Furthermore, the extant research aimed at analyzing the impact of an airline's identity in the context of an emerging country is weak, and, in India, there are few studies about corporate branding.

To study the relationships between corporate image and corporate branding, taking into account two views, namely, corporate strategy and corporate expression in airline identity, this research aims to answer the following question: What are the indicators of corporate branding which affect the outcomes of a corporate image? First, the dimensions of airline identity are explored, and then, taking into account attribution theory (Jackson, 2019; Kelley and Michela, 1980), an inclusive model is constructed. By investigating the aforementioned model, our research establishes the association between corporate image and corporate identity to improve business performance and consequently generate superior retailer preference. This aspect has been explored theoretically, but due to the lack of research in airline identity, it has not yet been fully developed in any primary research.

In the competitive and segmented airline industry, airlines can embrace *corporate branding orientation* by giving a strong brand orientation to corporate branding (Balmer, 2013). This expresses an organization's goals, culture, and ethos, which helps airlines to promote brands effectively. The paper enriches the existing literature in several ways. Firstly, this paper studies corporate branding and its sub-dimensions (corporate strategy and corporate expression) and their individual links to the brand image, which is divided into experience, relationships, and visual identity. Secondly, to the best of the authors' knowledge, to date, no paper has investigated corporate branding in the emerging country of India. Corporate branding is affected by geographical features, as the importance of corporate branding differs among nations as it does among organizations (Balmer and Liao, 2007; Ngan, and Yang, 2019). Thirdly, this analysis explores the concept of corporate brand orientation, particularly regarding its relationship with corporate image. Hence, new perspectives and implications are identified.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, the theoretical background presents the different concepts and proposes the hypotheses the research will investigate. Then, after the creation of a framework, the methodology is shown. Finally, the results, discussions, and conclusions are presented, the limitations are highlighted, and possible future studies are proposed.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

Branding has been applied in the tourism and hospitality sector to distinguish products and services from those of competing players and to explore consumers' brand relationships (So *et al.*, 2013; 2017). This aspect of branding is even more important when we take into account the rising pressure of competition in the aviation sector, where new brands create huge problems for the existing ones (Winzar *et al.*, 2018). Accordingly, there is the need to better explore the role played by corporate branding in this specific context, as airline companies and other service providers have only limited understanding of the strength of their brand and of how it can influence the possibility of achieving superior business performance and of increasing their level of competitiveness (Herstein *et al.*, 2008). The proposed model will offer an understanding of the link among these aspects.

Based on attribution theory, the paper enriches the concept of *corporate brand orientation*, which presents a perspective in which corporate branding acts as a cornerstone (Balmer, 2013). It is adopted for this paper for several reasons. Firstly, corporate brand orientation is considered a centripetal force that rules the entire company. In addition, it highlights the issue of whether "the organization values brands and its practices are oriented towards building brand capabilities" (Bridson and Evans, 2004: 404). Moreover, it is "the extent to which organisations regard themselves as brands and an indication of how much (or how little) the organisation accepts the theory and practice of branding" (Hankinson, 2001: 231), and it expresses the corporate brand covenant and brand values that form the basis for the corporate culture (Nazarian *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, corporate philosophy and culture are part of corporate branding, and are appreciated by airlines brands that need to distinguish themselves from competing players in a marketplace that is increasingly focused on competing by offering lower prices, as shown in this paper (Chong, 2007; Filipova, 2015; Smith, 2004).

Secondly, corporate brand orientation expresses the aims, actions, and ethos of the company, thus developing its corporate brand (Foroudi, 2020). This identity affects the vision and business strategy of companies. Consequently, corporate brand orientation is linked to the implementation of corporate marketing principles that place the emphasis on consumers, thus showing a long-term perspective (Balmer, 2013). These marketing principles, which are able to influence strategic and tactical decisions, have revealed their essential role especially in the period of deregulation of air travel, which has pushed many companies in the sector to respond to this external stimulus, thus discarding a myopic approach that focused only on reaching short-term objectives (Kangis and O'Reilly, 2003; Mellat-Parast *et al.*, 2015).

Third, as shown in our model, taking into consideration the theory of corporate brand orientation, various concepts seem to be linked (Balmer, 2013). Indeed, corporate brand orientation shows how it is linked to sustainable and corporate social responsibility (CSR) values (Gupta and Kumar, 2013). Specifically, as corporate brand orientation is the basis of the corporate culture and philosophy of an organization, employees' behaviors reflect the corporate brand promise/covenant (Miller and Merrilees, 2013); thus, behaviors communicate, defend, and improve the corporate brand (Morokane *et al.*, 2016). Particularly in the airline sector, behaviors are the basis of the development of the offer itself, as it is not possible to distinguish where the offered service begins and where employees' behaviors end (Boukis *et al.*, 2021; Wheeler *et al.*, 2006).

Lastly, for corporate brand orientation to be efficient, key prerequisites involve recognition among organizational members of the corporate brand culture and corporate brand covenant/promise (Khan and Bashir, 2020). In fact, corporate brand orientation acts as a key factor for corporate brand communications and provides a benchmark that managers can use to assess the corporate brand image and reputation (Tajeddini and Ratten, 2020). Hence, the link between these constructs needs to be explored by managers and practitioners in the aviation industry, as new actors, inspired by insistent competitive strategic approaches, will enter this market, motivated by the main aim of achieving superior business performance and increasing their competitiveness (Sarker *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the paper focuses on this view and analyses several facets of the corporate brand, such as *corporate expression* and *corporate strategy*. This is in line with corporate brand orientation, as acknowledged by Foroudi (2020), who considers various essential items of corporate identity, such as the organization's philosophy, strategy, culture, and design. This is explored in more detail later.

Focus on corporate strategy and corporate expression
This paper identifies different sub-dimensions of corporate strategy: organizational culture, corporate vision/mission, philosophy, socially responsible strategy, differentiation strategy, and corporate governance (Melewar *et al.*, 2018). These sub-dimensions play an essential role in the corporate brand orientation (Balmer, 2013; King, 2017) in this research. *Organizational culture* involves the agreement within an organization about how corporate activities should be seen as a result of a group's shared values (Peter and Waterman, 1982), with learning and knowledge focusing on

issues of internal integration and external adaptation (Schein, 1985). While exploring *organizational culture*, the paper takes into account recent studies that have developed original perspectives on brand management and competitiveness (Xia *et al.*, 2020). Among these studies, competitive productivity (CP) offers an innovative way to consider the existing link between these fields (Hoadley, 2021). In essence, our study reflects the idea that CP combines competitiveness with productivity (Baumann and Pintado, 2013). This complex paradigm can be analyzed from different angles. One of these angles, selected in this research, is the firm CP (FCP), which is "both an attitude and behavior directed at outperforming the competing firms, and past performance through pragmatism" (Baumann *et al.*, 2019: 124). Four items, namely, resource management, corporate culture, brand management, and talent management, are involved in the construct of FCP. This means that a company that is able to leverage its brand and that is focused on brand competitiveness is also able to create and sustain FCP in its business sector, to find new competitive strengths, and to be involved in an innovation-based competitive "fight" (Winzar *et al.*, 2018). This perspective can be easily applied in the tourism and hospitality sector, where brand competitiveness plays an essential role (Gupta *et al.*, 2020).

In addition, in line with previous scholars (Cuomo *et al.,* 2021; Downey, 1986; Melewar *et al.*, 2018), it is claimed that corporate culture is closely linked with corporate identity, in that corporate culture is the *what* of a company while the identity is the *why*. Other scholars have stated that culture is a broad field and that it involves the mission, values, guidelines, principles, philosophy, subculture, history, and founder of the organization, as well as the culture of a country (Czarniawska and Wolff, 1998; Foroudi *et al.,* 2019; 2020; Schmidt, 1995). Based on *philosophy* and *corporate vision,* the *mission* is inextricably linked with the corporate values created by the senior management of the organization (Tahir and Howard, 2003). These values are related to the ideologies, myths, and rituals that aid the organization's culture and create a corporate identity (Liu *et al.,* 2020; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997). Mission/vision statements, philosophy, and values are particularly important for airlines, as they feel the need to leverage them in order to create strong connections among several heterogeneous and international publics, whilst the sector has changed due to the rise of global entrants and new consumer trends (Kemp and Dwyer, 2003; Lin *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, these factors can be considered facets of the corporate brand. Next, the *differentiation strategy* affects the

business's strengths and indicates how a company competes with rival companies (Melewar *et al.*, 2018). The diversity of an organization is based on its forces, which are important features of a corporate identity (Simpson, 1988). Differentiation strategy, which is implemented to distinguish between an organization's core and supplementary services and those of its competitors, allows airlines to create a unique service experience for their clients, to respond to their specific needs, and to offer a price that reflects the proposed customer value (Guan *et al.,* 2021; Zaki Ahmed and Rodríguez-Díaz, 2020). The *social responsibility strategy* is used as the organization's positioning, and it summarizes the 'nature' of the company (Lee *et al.*, 2018; Urde, 2009). By adding a philosophy based on incorporating sustainability into the corporate strategy, which is then expressed in the corporate vision and mission, companies can improve their corporate brand (Balmer, 2013; Urde *et al.*, 2013). Paying attention to the social responsibility strategy allows companies in the aviation sector to engage better with different sectors of the public, including heterogeneous stakeholders, and to build and/or restore trust, thus improving the brand image and brand reputation (Lee and Park, 2010). Lastly, *corporate governance* is linked to dynamics and to the procedures/processes by which organizations are managed (Buertey *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the impact of corporate governance on corporate expression is huge, as it allows promotion/communication in all areas of the existing business sector. After considering the wide range of literature reviewed, this study proposes that all the above dimensions are linked to corporate expression due to the coherent framework of corporate brand orientation, which considers the separate cornerstones of an organization's direction and the forces that guide the organization's philosophy and culture (Balmer, 2013). Hence, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

> **H1:** *Corporate expression is guided by a combination of items [(i) organizational culture, (ii) vision, philosophy, mission (iii) socially responsible behavior, (iv) governance, and (v) differentiation strategy] that predicts corporate strategy, rather than by one best configuration of items.*
> *However, there are numerous, equally efficient combinations of the causal elements.*

Focus on corporate strategy, corporate expression, and image

Researchers have stated that the corporate strategy of tourism services is the fundamental element in a market that lacks differentiation, thus creating consumer misunderstanding and

undermining the planned purpose of corporate branding (Bailey and Ball, 2006; So *et al.*, 2017). Scholars see a corporate tourism strategy as a substantial facet of a tourism identity that establishes what needs to be created and what the profits and the share of the market will be (Harrington *et al.*, 2014). In fact, Simpson (1988) stated that a differentiation strategy is influenced by corporate strengths, which are essential items of corporate identity. Melewar *et al.* (2018) claimed that positioning is related to the corporate brand that an organization uses to distinguish itself from its competitors thanks to an exploration of their weaknesses and/or strengths. Therefore, a corporate strategy is fundamental (Melewar *et al.*, 2016; 2018), as it can make changes to the corporate brand. Particularly, a corporate strategy is considered part of an organization's identity and, in the aviation sector, is seen as an important antecedent of corporate performance and of the organization's ability to provide long-term success (Ludlow, 1997; Mellat-Parast *et al.*, 2015).

Scholars have already highlighted the links between corporate strategy and corporate image (Foroudi, 2019). Worcester (2009) stated that corporate image is the consequence of the knowledge, feelings, and experiences individuals have about a company. In addition, a corporate image is defined as the links formed from word-of-mouth, individual experience, promotion, and advertising (Lemmink *et al.*, 2003). It is a multi-level concept (Davies and Chun, 2012) and is formed from the sum of the perceptions/impressions (Holzhauer, 1999) felt by consumers. To create a favorable corporate image, decisions must be made at the strategic level, as organizations employ both internal operations and marketing items to build a strong image in the public's mind (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014). Thus, the link between corporate image and corporate strategy is apparent in that a corporate mission, culture, philosophy, vision, and so on influence the images of a firm in customers' minds (Foroudi *et al.*, 2018), as all these items come into the public's mind when they are in contact with the organization (Gray and Balmer, 1998). This mixture of meanings accumulated in the memory ranges from a holistic to a complex appraisal of items (Cornelissen, 2000) and can also be seen as the impression developed at a specific time of a concept built on the overall corporate strategy (Simoes *et al.*, 2005; Van der Lans *et al.*, 2009). In the aviation sector, the existing link between corporate strategy and corporate image strongly affects the brands, as they have to compete in a highly competitive market where new companies can enter and base their offer only on competitive pricing (Hwang and Lyu, 2020)

The corporate expression is the verbal/visual demonstration of a brand, and it forms an element of the corporate brand-building process (Hatch and Schultz, 2001). It can be considered to be symbolic communication based on traditional communication but with a contemporary open approach (Urde and Greyser, 2015). Corporate expression is concerned with what is distinctive or exceptional about the company's communication and expression of itself, which makes it easy to distinguish the company from others. Creating a coherent expression of the corporate brand helps corporate brand managers to improve the company's internal and external communication across a multiplicity of channels and media (Balmer, 2001). Thus, because corporate expression is based on a credible cultural manifestation, it serves to generate coherence between the corporate brand's promise and the organization's outcomes and so creates a favorable image in consumers' minds (Hatch and Schultz, 2001).

Previously, Hatch and Schultz (2001) emphasized the value of relationships between corporate branding and corporate expression and noted that the inadequate use of corporate brand expression reduces the influence of the corporate brand on customer perceptions of a company and its corporate image. Corporate expression is important in the aviation industry, as airline companies highlight that it can support the presence and behavior of employees in order to improve a company's brand image and reputation (Ludlow, 1997). It should be noted that some facets of the service offered by these kinds of companies, such as the airport experience, are not always appreciated by users, who are often placed in long queues to be processed, for example, by customs and security (Bigné *et al.*, 2018).

An organization's corporate expression typically encompasses three elements: corporate community, corporate promise, and corporate personality. The first of these, *corporate community*, is a specific, non-geographically related community taking into account the emotional/social connections among the followers of an organization or brand (Weijo *et al.*, 2019). A strong corporate community is needed to create a relevant image and reputation over time, and to achieve this, airline companies usually develop corporate community programs related to both the community in which they are set and the communities they serve (Lee *et al.*, 2013). The corporate community can involve different goals, such as, for example, participating in community projects; contributing to international projects, which aims to boost social identification (Rather and Hollebeek, 2019); and increasing users' awareness about sustainable development topics, etc. (Cowper-Smith and de Grosbois, 2011).

Next, a *corporate promise* is considered by researchers to be the essential delivery mechanism of consumer-facing employees (Balmer and Gray, 2003). Because corporate branding leads to relations between customers and members of the organization, the organization's performance depends on employees' attitudes and abilities to offer a positive brand promise to the relevant stakeholders (Karanges *et al.*, 2019; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; Zyman, 2002). In the aviation sector, internal communication and training programs set the basis for strengthening brand values in the employees' minds, which in turn, boosts their willingness to perform behaviors that can strengthen the brand (Boukis *et al.*, 2021). These actions, if applied systematically over a long time, guarantee that users' experience of the brand promise is positive (Chong, 2007; Zha *et al.,* 2020; 2021). Thus, the clear brand promise influences consumers' preferences and their willingness to buy, and affects the corporate image, (Gapp and Merrilees, 2006).

Finally*, corporate personality* is considered to be the integrated mix of an organization's features, involving rational and behavioral items that are used to differentiate one company from another (Davies *et al.*, 2019). A description of store personality was established by Martineau (1958), who stated that the personalities of retail stores reflect the personalities of organizations or brands. Thus, personality is the corporate brand's main characteristic (Urde, 2013). During the period of the deregulation of air travel, which caused a strong increase in competition in the sector, many companies suffered from an identity crisis. The organizations that succeeded in overcoming this crisis created a unique personality based on solid values and a recognizable brand (Legendre *et al.,* 2020; Ludlow, 1997; Šerić and Gil-Saura, 2019).

Thus, based on Melewar *et al.* (2016; 2018), we conceptualize corporate brand expression as comprising three components (corporate community, corporate promise, and corporate personality). All these elements influence the corporate image due to their outward expression of the values, promises, and characteristics of the corporate brand (Foroudi *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative for the managers of a business to study these factors when communicating the company's corporate brand by making strategic choices in developing a corporate image. By linking corporate strategy, corporate expression, and corporate image, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

> **H2***: A combination of factors [(i) organizational culture, (ii) vision, philosophy, and mission (iii) socially responsible behavior, (iv) related governance, and (v) differentiation strategy] predicts corporate strategy.*

A combination of factors [(i) community, (ii) promise, and (iii) personality] predicts corporate expression.

However, no one best configuration of items results in the corporate image.

Instead, there are numerous, equally efficient configurations of these causal items.

Focus on corporate image, business outcomes, and retailer preference

Nowadays, it is evident that a good corporate image is essential for a company to be successful in its selected marketplace (Davies *et al.,* 2003). Corporate image affects business outcomes because it establishes a mental picture of the organization and affects consumers' association with the organization, hence influencing their attitude and behavior (Balmer, 2011). The corporate image is established over time; it is strictly linked to the corporate identity, and firmly leverages the corporate reputation (Foroudi, 2019). According to Grönroos (1982), corporate image is of huge relevance to service companies, and it is widely based on users' evaluation of the services they obtain. Along the same lines, Nguyen and LeBlanc (1998) highlighted that since services, such as these offered in the aviation sector, are intangible yet are based on performance, a wider knowledge about the constituent parts of the corporate image can surely aid managers to enhance business outcomes/performance and attain a superior retailer preference. In addition, the link between outcomes and customers' attitudes/preferences is the most relevant relationship that has been assessed in marketing and management (Swan and Combs, 1976). It is evident that a better corporate performance has a positive impact on customers' preferences for and attitudes towards products/services. This paper sees retailer preference as the main concern of the retailer, and so it was decided to focus on one company instead of including other competitors in the same sector (Gupta *et al.*, 2018). Hence, the paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: *A combination of factors [(i) corporate experience, (ii) customer relationships, and (iii) visual identity] predicts corporate image.*

No one best mix of items leads to better business outcomes/performance and superior retailer preference. Instead, there are numerous, equally efficient mixes of these causal items.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection, settings, sample

Using several methods of collection, data were gathered from resellers in the Indian aviation sector. India is an interesting context for the study of a corporate brand for several reasons. First, it is the nation with the greatest number of journeys in Asia. Second, India's GDP is developing at a rate of 9% per year, and it is seen as the second biggest developing economy in the world (Gupta *et al.*, 2010; 2016a; 2016b). Third, regarding the Indian aviation sector, it has been conquered by private carriers, like IndiGo, SpiceJet, Vistara, Jet Airways, AirAsia India, and Go Air. Before the spread of the pandemic crisis, these companies had quickly succeeded in attracting more than 83 million passengers (Wang *et al.*, 2018). To comprehend the strength of this particular sector in India, it is possible to compare these Indian companies with Chinese carriers, which, over the same period, provided their offer to 435 million users. In China, however, the number of companies that transport passengers is reduced. There are, in fact, only three big airline groups, namely, China Eastern, Air China and China Southern; these dominate the market and all three are state-owned (Yu *et al.*, 2019). Hence, as the Indian aviation sector is growing rapidly, creating a corporate brand to establish a distinguishable feature becomes increasingly vital.

In a survey, 672 questionnaires were sent to Indian aviation companies; the companies were selected using convenience sampling, with the interviewees who were most easily available being chosen to complete the survey. The survey questionnaires were sent in December 2016; 152 surveys were returned. To boost the data collection, 92 questionnaires were completed using phone-interviews, and 400 surveys were sent to agents and retailers, of which 121 were returned. According to previous scholars (Denscombe, 2007; Foroudi, 2020), questionnaires sent by post tend to achieve low response rates. Then, 69 questionnaires were collected during face-to-face appointments with representatives of aviation companies, with each appointment last between 20 and 25 min. Taking into account past research, this paper applied a non-probability snowballing sampling technique by inviting interviewees to indicate others to support the research and fill in the questionnaire (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

After a two-month period, 434 questionnaires had been collected, but 39 were not taken into consideration as a significant amount of data was missing. Finally, 395 viable surveys were collected for use in the research. The age of interviewees was around 35 years old. Many

participants were male (63%), the majority (79.5%) had a master's degree, and 57% of them held a senior post in their organizations.

3.2 Measurement

The survey presents different measures using scales offered by previous research; these scales were re-structured, taking into consideration suggestions made by scholars. *Corporate strategy* was measured via 5 dimensions (Corporate Culture, Corporate Mission-Vision-Philosophy, Differentiation Strategy, Corporate Governance, and Social Responsibility Strategy) and 37 factors. *Corporate culture* was measured via 16 items and 4 constructs (adhocracy, hierarchy, clan, and market, involving 4 factors each) (Cameron *et al.*, 1991). Taking into account past research, *corporate mission-vision-philosophy,* and *value scales* (8 items) (Baker and Sinkula, 1999), *differentiation strategy* (4 factors) (Slater and Olson, 2000; Xu and Walton, 2005), *social responsibility strategy* (4 items) (Dahlsrud, 2008; Mohr and Webb, 2005), and *corporate governance* (5 items) (Foroudi *et al.*, 2016; Haniffa and Cooke, 2002; Pagano and Volpin, 2005) were chosen and were revised in line with the setting's features with 21 items in total. The items for the *corporate expression* topic were created by the authors taking into account past studies, including *corporate community* (4 items) (Schau *et al.*, 2009), *corporate promise* (4 factors) (Zyman, 2002), *corporate personality* (5 factors) (Aaker, 1997), *corporate experience* (7 items) (Oh *et al.*, 2007; Otto and Ritchie, 1996), *customer relationships* (4 items) (Gilliland and Bello, 2001; Goodman and Dion, 2001; Parvinen and Niu, 2010), and *visual identity* (4 items) (Melewar and Saunders, 2000; Simoes *et al.*, 2005), all of which were also obtained from existing scales, making a total of 28 items. The indicators of *superior retailer preference* (Hsin *et al.*, 2009) and *superior business outcomes/performance* (Wang and Feng, 2014) relied on previously tested scales and were revised according to the setting, with 4 and 5 item measures respectively. The factors rely on 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Table I shows the constructs, measurement items, and scales employed.

"INSERT TABLE I HERE"

4. Data Assessment

The first item measurements were revised according to several reliability assessments of their research sample performance. In accordance with Anderson and Gerbing (1988), a two-step analysis was used in the two-stage procedure. We examined the research measurements via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). CFA offers a more effective understanding of the covariation among several indicators, as the number of identified factors is smaller than the number of measured variables (Hair *et al.*, 2006). In addition, CFA is usually applied for a variety of scopes, such as, for example, psychometric analysis, exploration of method effects, validation of a construct, and as in this case, the examination of measurements (Brown, 2015).

In this paper, twelve items (Market2, PMV2, PMV4, 6, 8, CG3, CCOM3,CPR2, EXP2, EXP4, EXP6, SPR4) were not taken into account, as the total correlation was less than 0.50 (Hair *et al.*, 2006). KMO's measure of sampling adequacy is 0.880>0.6; it highlights that the relations between items are statistically significant (Foroudi, 2019; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). Moreover, Bartlett's test shows that the relation between measures is higher than 0.3 and, thus, is suitable for exploratory factor analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2006). The obtained number of responses fulfilled the requirements of data analysis techniques and showed an insignificant dissimilarity in non-response bias exploration (applying a Mann-Whitney U test). Nevertheless, the casual choice of respondents and the response rate still indicate a need for prudence when evaluating the main findings. The first 50 observations were taken as early respondents and the last 50 were taken as late respondents. Our results show that the significance of any factor is greater than or equal to a probability value of 0.5. In addition, there was no statistically significant dissimilarity among early and late respondents; this means that non response bias was not a concern. During the second phase, the study ran a CFA to evaluate the validity of the scales and measurement (Hair *et al.*, 2006) (Table II).

"INSERT TABLE-II-HERE"

Based on the unidimensional item measurement, CFA gave a satisfactory fit (Df=2.574; RMSEA=.063; TLI=.886; CFI=.892; IFI=.892; GFI=.752). Table II shows that reliability, which was measured using Cronbach's alpha, was higher than .865 (i.e., suitable internal consistency). The reliability of measures based on the combined reliability was observed and was found to be higher than expected (.701>.7). Based on the suggestion by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the results of convergent validity and construct loadings were significant

(CR>1.96). Discriminant validity was explored with average variance extracted (AVE), and the results showed the links among items which have the recommended value of .92 (ranging from .535 to .995). Usually, a standard variance extracted of .5 or above indicates a satisfactory convergent validity. Table II demonstrates that the composite reliability measures were higher than .7.

Data Analysis – Hypothesis testing

This paper explored the conceptual framework by using structural equation modelling. H1 states that corporate strategy is positively linked to corporate image. Results confirm the hypothesis (γ=.675, t=3.434). This seems to be in line with previous research focused on the existing bond between these two items (Foroudi, 2020; Melewar *et al.*, 2018). H2, which considers the link between corporate expression and corporate image, is not confirmed (γ=.028, t=.082, *p*.935), in contrast with what was suggested by Tran *et al.* (2015). The positive link between corporate strategy and corporate expression (H3) is confirmed (γ=.498, t=7.194) as highlighted by Abratt and Kleyn (2012). Moreover, in accordance with other studies (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014; Ali *et al.*, 2020), H4 highlights the impact of corporate image on higher outcomes/performance, and shows that there is a significant positive link (γ=.438, t=5.939). The last hypothesis, which predicts the relationship among higher outcomes/performance and higher retailer preference, is also confirmed (γ=.873, t=5.207): this result resonates with research developed in different fields of study (Gupta *et al.*, 2018; Swan and Combs, 1976). The hypothesis testing is summarized in Table III, and Figure I illustrates the results of the validated structural model.

"INSERT FIGURE-I-HERE"
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Data Analysis - Fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis

To understand the perception of companies/retailers/agents regarding the effect of corporate branding on corporate image, superior business performance, and superior retailer preference, this study adopted a fuzzy-set quality comparative analysis (fsQCA) to give more insight into the data and into complexity theory. Based on previous research, fsQCA is a set theoretic method to identify causal configurations among independent and dependent factors leading to a specific consequence (Ordanini *et al.*, 2013; Wu *et al.*, 2014). The key advantage of employing fuzzy set theory is the notion of equifinality, which deals with causal asymmetry

(Woodside, 2014) and provides a variety of design choices that can all lead to the desired outcome (Fiss, 2011). Woodside (2014) stated that scholars often pay no attention to contrarian cases when creating their conceptualization, presenting fit validity, and testing data; nevertheless, exploring these cases is still instructive. We used contrarian case analysis in this study by developing quintiles on items and by presenting cross-tabulations using quintiles between the topics (please see Appendix I, which shows the link between differentiation strategy and corporate governance). The range of correlation coefficients between the two variables is 0.39<.001. Taking into account the significant positive relationship, Appendix I shows eight cells in the bottom left and top right of the cross-tabulation table (1+23+104+32+52=212 cases) accounting for 212/395=53% of the sample. This means that the analysis shows an interesting asymmetrical relationship between the differentiation strategy and corporate governance. Therefore, fsQCA is more appropriate than a regression-type analysis (Woodside, 2014).

Results from the fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis

To assess the data by employing fsQCA, we followed the calibration principle suggested by Wu *et al.* (2014). By adjusting the extreme scores, we found only a small number of scores below 3. We established 7 as a threshold for complete membership with .95 as the fuzzy score, 5 as the cross-over point with .50 as the fuzzy score, 2 as the threshold for non-membership with .05 as the fuzzy score, and 1 as the minimum score with .0 as the fuzzy score.

Tables IV to VI represent the outcome of the fsQCA investigation in accordance with the research hypotheses. Table IV shows that there is no single construct that delivers conditions suitable for forecasting the outcome for corporate expression. In addition, a robustness test was performed by using alternative methods of calibration and employing the percentage points (95%, 50%, and 5%) as the threshold values according to set memberships (.95, .50, and .05). However, the results for both fsQCA analyses continued to be similar. Table IV illustrates that there is *no one best configuration of corporate strategy items for corporate expression; however, there are numerous, equally efficient configurations of these causal items*. The results suggested five solutions with a consistency of .92 and a total solution coverage of .89, showing that four corporate strategy feature configurations indicate an important amount of corporate expression. Solution 3 indicates the culture*corporate mission, vision, philosophy*differentiation strategy ≤ corporate expression has a distinctive coverage

of .14 with a consistency of .94, showing that the mixture of culture, corporate mission, vision, philosophy, and differentiation strategy is a satisfactory condition for high scores for the concept of corporate expression.

The results from Table V support hypothesis 2: A combination of factors including (i) corporate culture, (ii) philosophy, vision, mission, (iii) socially responsible behavior, (iv) governance, and (v) differentiation strategy predicts corporate strategy. A combination of factors including (i) community, (ii) promise, and (iii) personality predicts corporate expression. No one best configuration of items establishes corporate image. However, there are numerous, equally efficient configurations of these causal items. Table V suggests 13 solutions that show a consistency of .77 and a solution coverage of .79, highlighting that a combination of corporate strategy and corporate expression characteristic configurations can be considered to account for an important proportion of the corporate image. For example, solution 9 shows culture*mission, vision, philosophy, and value*differentiation strategy*corporate governance*corporate community*corporate promise*corporate personality with a consistency of .90 and coverage of .5, demonstrating that the combination of culture, mission, vision, philosophy, value, differentiation strategy, corporate governance features of corporate strategy and the corporate community, corporate promise, and the corporate personality features of corporate expression was a satisfactory condition for high scores for corporate image.

Table VI shows the results that confirm hypothesis 3: *Configurations which lead to high business performance and retailer preference need the existence of at least corporate image causal condition*. Table VI indicates 5 solutions that present a solution coverage of .94 and a consistency of .69, signifying that a mixture of factors including *(i) corporate experience, (ii) customer relationships,* and *(iii) visual identity, predicts corporate image.* No one best configuration of items sets higher business outcomes/performance and higher retailer preference; however, there are numerous, equally efficient configurations of these causal items. Solution 5, in fact, shows that the combination of customer relationships, visual identity, and superior business performance is satisfactory for high scores for superior retailer preference, with a score of .009 for coverage and .92 for consistency. Such solutions highlight the multifaceted and asymmetrical essence of exploring the constructs of higher business performance and higher retailer preference.

5. Discussion and theoretical implications

An important scope of corporate brand management is to create a corporate brand. Nevertheless, very few studies have explored the corporate brand orientation and its relationships with the corporate brand or have proposed a model incorporating corporate image and business outcomes/performance in the emerging country of India. Focusing on the airline industry, this paper's scope is to study how the dimensions of a corporate brand can advance a company's corporate image and generate higher business performance and, at the same time, answer the research question, which correlated to analyzing the indicators of the corporate brand that affect the outcomes of the corporate image. It is important to analyze the link between the dimensions of a corporate brand, corporate image, and business performance in the Indian aviation sector because the increasing pressure in the industry allows new brands to create problems for other brands that have been offering their services for a long time (Winzar *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the paper, by exploring the role played by corporate branding in this specific context, provides useful insights to companies that have a limited understanding of the strength of their brand and of how it can influence the possibility of achieving a superior business performance and of increasing their level of competitiveness (Herstein *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, the paper contributes several insights to the existing literature. Firstly, the paper presents a model that shows the relationship between corporate brand (considering the two perspectives of corporate strategy and corporate expression) and corporate image (see Figure II).

This study makes a contribution to the body of knowledge on the topic of corporate identity and corporate image. The current paper has combined the corporate brand dimensions in a different way to past research. A study by Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) found 7 corporate brand factors, and Nguyen *et al.* (2016) highlighted 8 items that were recognized and analyzed. Several scholars have explored the cultural and ethical principles (Ind, 1992), whilst others have explained the role played by culture and philosophy (Balmer, 1998), and still others have focused on the role of business strategy (Balmer *et al.,* 2020; Kristal *et al.,* 2020; van Riel, 1997). Thus, it is evident that corporate branding is a context-related item, and hence, this study enriches this wide stream of research. In particular, our paper firstly

explores corporate branding and its items by employing *corporate strategy* and *corporate expression,* which present a specific focus on corporate branding in relation to the present background; this has also helped improve understanding of the relationship of individual items to corporate image. The corporate image, in turn, is divided into *experience, relationships,* and *visual identity*.

In addition, as the role played by *corporate strategy* - described as being related to several dimensions such as organizational culture; vision, mission, value, philosophy; differentiation strategy; social responsibility strategy; and corporate governance – is considered in this research, the paper offers some insights regarding this field. In particular, our results reinforce the idea that *brand competitiveness* (one of the items examined in the dimension of organizational culture), to be able to create competitive advantages (Baumann *et al.*, 2016; Gupta *et al.,* 2020; Foroudi, 2020), needs to be linked with other facets of the corporate strategy. The overall synergy among dimensions, as explored in this study, supports the typical FCP logic, which states that an organization that succeeds in developing talent management, in managing resources efficiently, in structuring a strong corporate culture, and in building a valuable brand, with a focus on brand competitiveness, will produce and preserve firm competitive productivity in the setting of the sector. Consequently, this paper gives greater insights into this than has past research, thus boosting the conceptualization of corporate branding and its related elements.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, to date, no previous papers have investigated corporate brand management in the emerging country of India. However, practical research focusing on corporate branding, corporate image, higher business outcomes/performance, and higher retailer preference can offer important insights into the tourism and hospitality sector. As stated by Balmer and Liao (2007), corporate branding changes when analyzed in different geographical contexts, as the importance given to corporate branding varies not only among organizations but also among nations. The same happens to the corporate brand, as highlighted in this paper. While India has a traditional culture, it is encircled by several new cultural trends, which have huge impacts on the significance of the corporate brand. Diverse cultural principles will be linked to the corporate brand, and some features are considered more significant than others.

In this study, we examined our model via fsQCA. The findings show that features of *corporate strategy*, including *corporate culture, mission, vision, philosophy, differentiation, value, corporate governance,* and *social responsibility,* have the greatest impact on corporate image. The model responds well to the traditional culture of India, in which the religious practices of Hinduism permeate everyday life of Indian society. Therefore, values related to acting in a socially responsible way are well placed in our model. Besides, the findings also showed that corporate expression did not have any effect on corporate image. This result, which suggests that elements of corporate expression – including *corporate community, corporate promise,* and *corporate personality* – are all components of the corporate brand that do not influence corporate image, may seem surprising at first. However, when considering the traditional culture of India, as noted above, it becomes clear that Indian consumers may be more value-oriented and may give more value to the deeper aspects of the corporate brand (i.e., mission, vision, philosophy, corporate responsibility, and so on) and perhaps are less concerned with those related to the more 'superficial' aspects of corporate branding tactics, such as promises and personalities. However, the combination of corporate strategy and corporate expression factors could lead to consumers viewing the corporate image in a positive light, but there are numerous, equally efficient configurations of the causal items.

Another significant finding of this research is that among the characteristics that lead to superior retailer preference, some can have a more significant role than others. Corporate experience, in fact, has a direct influence on superior retailer preference. However, we found that a high score combination of customer relationships, visual identity, and superior business performance was part of a condition that was able to forecast superior retailer preference even though the correlation coefficient between them was considerable. Lastly, this paper is the first to combine corporate brand orientation with topics dealing with branding. By implementing it in a new setting, that is, not only in the airline industry but also in the emerging country of India, this paper enhances the theory of attribution and corporate brand orientation. Besides, by exploring the relationship of corporate brand orientation with corporate brand and corporate image, original implications are presented; these comprise new measures and a framework that is firmly embedded in corporate brand orientation.

5.2 Practical implications

The paper is widely relevant to the airline industry since the model shows that higher business outcomes/performance created due to the role played by corporate branding and corporate image can set the basis for a retailer being chosen by customers. Therefore, an important consideration for practitioners is the importance of incorporating and strategically developing a corporate brand to attain a good insight of the topic.

Considering the CP perspective, the paper also aims to advance the decision-makers' understanding of competitiveness. Linking the selected dimension of corporate strategy to brand competitiveness shows that the main aim of creating brand competitiveness involves increasing the performance of the company by leveraging the unique marketing skills, managerial tools, and resources offered by the brand. This is even more true when the highly competitive airline aviation industry is analyzed. Therefore, the paper highlights that all facets of a business, when systematically and strategically arranged by practitioners, offer the brand competitive items.

Moreover, the paper enhances managers' understanding about the social responsibility strategy in India. It emerged that, recently, the government in India has pushed companies to embrace sustainable strategies and tactics (Sarkar *et al.*, 2021). Before the rise of this new trend, scholars and practitioners highlighted that India was among the geographic areas which were less concerned about social responsibility strategy (Bird *et al.*, 2016). However, after the regulatory mandate, India became the first country in terms of sustainability development in Asia and the second worldwide (Kanji and Agrawal, 2016). Although the Indian participation in social responsibility has increased, the significance of this strategy is not fully clear nor fully explored especially in terms of the impact on the corporate branding perspective. Thus, this study offers practitioners several insights in this area, as it highlights the relevance of social responsibility strategy as an essential dimension of corporate strategy, which together with corporate mission/vision/philosophy, corporate culture, corporate governance, and differentiation strategy affect corporate image and help airline companies attain superior business performance.

Besides, even though previous studies have stated that other corporate brand elements increase the branding effects, this paper highlights that leveraging mission, culture, philosophy, value, vision, differentiation strategy, social responsibility strategy, and governance will offer better results in comparison with investing time and money in

corporate expressions, such as developing the corporate community, corporate promise, and corporate personality, which in this case, had no significant effect on the corporate image. This paper thus offers significant indications of where to invest when decision-makers have to create their corporate brand, improve their image, and afterwards, advance their business outcomes/performance. This indicates that these are crucial items that need to be developed systematically in order to create positive outcomes/performance. Hence, the present research helps airline managers comprehend how companies/retailers/agents assess many facets related to brand management. This conceptualization will help organizations to distinguish themselves from other business players in a marketplace that is increasingly focused on competing on lower prices. Lastly, the findings of this paper show that with excellent business outcomes/performance, any company can be preferred by the companies/retailers/agents and that this is not just due simply to low pricing tactics but is also caused by the value offered by the brand.

5.3 Limitations and further research

This paper offers managers and scholars several insights about corporate brand, corporate image, and brand orientation. In fact, this is the first paper to study corporate brand, its sub-dimensions (corporate strategy and corporate expression), and their individual links to brand image, which involves experience, relationships, and visual identity. Nevertheless, there are some limitations. Firstly, the conceptual model was tested in only one country, taking into consideration resellers in the Indian airline aviation industry; thus, the findings may not be generalizable to different contexts. Further studies need to explore attribution theory in different contexts that could be socially different, in both developing and developed geographical areas, and should cross-validate the model to establish the basis for wider generalization. Secondly, the cross-sectional design identifies static relationships among the selected factors. Because the relations among variables are analyzed at one specific point in time, there could be certain peculiarities, which might be different if the answers were obtained in a different period. Thirdly, in this study, time constraints affected data collection; in fact, a convenience sample was selected to gather data. The paper tried to overcome this limitation by applying multiple data collection methods; nevertheless, the authors believe that further studies could better explore the measurement items by applying different methodologies, such as interviews and focus groups. The implementation of other approaches can allow the triangulation of results. In addition, further research could expand the achieved results to the airlines of Western countries, which can add more aspects to the model. There

are several relevant avenues for future research in this area. In fact, it may be important for further research to assess the processes of the corporate brand over time. In addition, it could be relevant to explore if the 'identity-image' link from a developing economy can also be applied to a Western region. Finally, this paper emphasized some sub-dimensions to depict the corporate brand. Future research could evaluate the impact of these and other items, employing, for instance, other corporate brand factors, such as history, the role played by the CEO, or organizational structure.

5.4 Conclusions

The main contribution of the paper is to fill gaps in prior analyses about (1) what the links are between corporate branding and corporate image, taking into account two views (corporate strategy and corporate expression) in airline identity and (2) what indicators of the corporate branding affect the outcomes of the corporate image. The findings of the paper show, first of all, that the corporate strategy positively influences the corporate image and corporate expression. Secondly, the study highlights that there is no link between corporate expression and corporate image. Thirdly, it proposes that corporate expression does not influence corporate image. Finally, it states that corporate image positively affects superior business performance, which, in turn, affects superior retailer preference.

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