Clarifying the stage of corporate branding research (1996-2007): a literature review and a classification

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Abstract

This paper clarifies the stage of academic corporate branding studies by taking an extensive look into the corporate branding literature published online between 1996-2007. A range of online databases were searched to provide a comprehensive listing of academic journal articles on corporate branding. The paper suggests classification categories for corporate branding studies, and presents a classification of the articles. Some of the oldest issues that have been studied are corporate brand equity and value whereas some of the most recent areas are ethical issues, consumer loyalty and consumer trust.

Introduction

Corporate branding is one of the most fascinating phenomena both among academics and practitioners nowadays. However, even though there are literature reviews conducted (Hulberg 2006) and several literature reviews executed as a background for both conceptual and empirical studies, there seems to be a lack of comprehensive information on corporate branding studies – what really has been studied in the area. This paper aims to fill this gap by categorizing and combining the academic studies published online between 1996 and 2007.

Data gathering

Relevant material for the study was searched during January 2008. The study was limited to academic online articles only. Consequently, the following databases were searched to provide a comprehensive bibliography of the academic literature: ABI Inform, EBSCO (Academic Search Premier and EconLit), Emerald Fulltext, JSTOR, ISI Web of Knowledge, SpringerLink, Illumina, Oxford University Press Online Journals, and Google Scholar. The terms “corporate brand” and “corporate branding” were searched both as a phrase and separately from article title, abstract, or keywords. The search was executed open-mindedly without any time limits in order to ensure that all essential articles were found. The search was limited to academic full texts only, i.e. practitioners’ publications, conference papers, masters’ and doctoral dissertations, textbooks and unpublished working papers were excluded. The search yielded 174 articles from 48 journals. After eliminating book reviews, editorials, introductions to the special issues, speeches and articles that a) were written by anonymous authors, b) the researcher had no access, c) lacked terms corporate brand or corporate branding in a title, abstract or keywords, d) did not consider corporate branding even though the search term(s) were mentioned in the abstract or keywords, e) were not written in English, and f) were published in some other than marketing, management or communications journal, 117 articles from 28 journals remained. These were further classified.

Classification method

First, the collection of articles was categorized by the year of publication, and by the journal. Journals were grouped on the basis of their disciplinary background. Following Knox and Bickerton (2003), the main categories were marketing, management and communications.
Second, the articles were classified by themes in abductive (Peirce, 1957; Taylor et al., 2002) manner. The categories were created hand in hand a) on the basis of some conceptual studies on the phenomenon (e.g. Balmer, 2001; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer and Greyser, 2006), b) with the help of extensive literature reviews from other fields (e.g. Gallarza et al., 2002; Ngai, 2003; Kovács and Spens, 2005), and c) on the basis of the content of the articles. This led to the following main categories: 1) clarifying concepts, 2) corporate brand management, 3) corporate identity and personality, 4) corporate communications, 5) corporate image and reputation, and 6) other issues. Each of the 117 articles was classified into these categories. In addition, each of the categories was further divided into sub-categories. The sub-categories were mainly formed on the basis of the content of the articles. The purpose was to classify the articles in one category only, and in so doing to give an insight of what were the main issues that have been studied. The process was undertaken in two stages in which the researcher undertook the initial classification which was then further verified by a second independent researcher.

**Classification results**

The articles were found from 17 marketing journals, 8 management journals, and 3 communications journals. The output of research on corporate branding has significantly increased since 2001, and a largest amount of articles was published in 2006. Five journals dominate corporate branding discussions: *European Journal of Marketing, The Journal of Brand Management, Journal of Product & Brand Management, Corporate Communications: An International Journal* and *Corporate Communications Review*. Together these journals have published almost 70 per cent of the corporate branding studies.

Most of the studies were published in marketing journals (Table 1) – as was the first published article found for this study (Wilkinson and Balmer, 1996). Among marketing journals over the third of the articles were published in 2006. This was because of the special issues in *European Journal of Marketing* and *The Journal of Brand Management*. *European Journal of Marketing* had also a special issue in 2003 – which was another important publishing year among marketing journals. Both among management (Table 2) and communications journals (Table 3) there was only one journal in which corporate branding discourse mainly occurred. Among management journals, the journal was *Corporate Communications Review*, and among communications journals it was *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*. Of these, *Corporate Communications Review* published several corporate branding articles already in 1990s. Because of the special issues, in both of the journals most of the studies were published in 2002.

Table 4 presents an overview of the research themes on corporate branding. Several issues have been of interest. For example, corporate brand equity and value are some of the oldest issues that have been studied in corporate branding. Some of the most recent areas are e.g. ethical issues (Palazzo and Bazu, 2007), consumer loyalty (Anisimova, 2007) and consumer trust (Sichtmann, 2007). Several themes discussed in the articles concern consumer perspective on corporate branding in addition to the traditional consumer perspective on product branding. Furthermore, the great amount of studies concentrate on manager’s perspective (e.g. van Riel and van Bruggen, 2002) and employees’ role (Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2000) in corporate branding. Moreover, a great amount of work is done for clarifying the gap between internal and external perceptions of
corporate brand (de Chernatony and Harris, 2000; Chun and Davies, 2006; Davies and Chun, 2002).
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<tr>
<td>3 Corporate identity and personality</td>
<td>Bronn et al. (2006), Handelman (2006), He and Balmer (2007), Topal (2003), Wilkinson and Balmer (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Corporate identity</td>
<td>Keller and Richey (2006), van Rekom et al. (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Corporate communications</td>
<td>van den Bosch et al. (2006), Melewar et al. (2006), Muzellec and Lambkin (2007), Saunders and Guoqun (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Integrated communications and coherency</td>
<td>Fan and Pfitzenmaier (2002), Warnaby et al. (2005)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several articles could have been classified in more than one category. In these cases the main focus of the study dominated. For example, the study of Piña et al. (2006) considered the effect of service brand extensions on corporate image. The study could have been classified either to
brand extensions or to corporate image. In this case, the study was considered as an image study, since it was image that was studied, not brand extensions.

Conclusions and Further Studies

Probably this study is a first identifiable comprehensive literature review on corporate branding. From academic perspective, the study has three main contributions. First, the classification categories created in the study is, at itself, an important accomplishment. Second, the study is the first one to categorize the corporate branding research according to the themes. Third, the study revealed that even though the earliest writings about corporate branding were published over a decade ago, the research in the area is still in its infancy. Corporate brand equity and value are some of the oldest issues that have been studied, and some of the most recent areas are e.g. ethical issues (Palazzo and Bazu, 2007), consumer loyalty (Anisimova, 2007) and consumer trust (Sichtmann, 2007). A great amount of studies concentrates on manager’s perspective on (e.g. van Riel and van Bruggen, 2002) and employees’ role (Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2000) in corporate branding, and a great amount of work is done to clarify the gap between internal and external perceptions of corporate brand (de Chernatony and Harris, 2000; Chun and Davies, 2006; Davies and Chun, 2002). Perhaps these issues could be widened, for example, into network level in further studies. In addition, the study revealed the important journals discussing about the subject, and that there is plenty of room to widen these discussions into the other journals – and even in other disciplines. From eliminated articles it was found that corporate branding discussions are spreading to other disciplines as well, e.g. to destination branding (Vitiello and Willcocks, 2006; Wetzel 2006; Parkerson and Saunders, 2005) and medical marketing (Moss and Schuiling, 2004). From managerial perspective the classification of the articles by themes could be useful, because the managers may utilize the classification when they search information about some particular subject. For example, if the company is changing its name, the managers may choose to study the articles in the category “re-branding” only, and in so doing, find the important information immediately. Of course, this categorization helps researchers as well.

However, it should be remembered that these categorizations are based on researcher’s subjective criteria, even though they are validated with an independent researcher. In addition, there are other issues that may have impacted on the results: the limited amount of online databases, search terms used, selection and eliminating criteria of the articles, formation of classification categories, and classification criteria. Hence, this study leans to subjective ontology which views the world as an ambiguous phenomenon that cannot be studied without a holistic approach. It is assumed that reality is constructed by individuals, and the purpose is to understand the phenomenon. In addition, researcher has an active role in research process. (Burrell and Morgan, 1979.) Therefore, the study operates as a discussion opening about the issue, and, hopefully, encourages other researchers to comment and develop the categorizations by presenting their own point of views.

For understanding the fascinating field of corporate branding even better, more research is definitely needed. The next step is to clarify how different research methods are utilized in academic corporate branding studies so far.
References


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