TITLE: The role of co-creation in corporate branding: the case of a Higher Education Institution

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PURPOSE OF PAPER

While it is argued that, in theory, co-creation can play an important role in the formation of a corporate brand particularly in reinforcing internal corporate identities and external corporate images and ensuring their compatibility (Dowling, 1993; Pich 2012; Spry, 2014), there is limited empirical evidence devoted to co-creation and its relationship with internal corporate identity and external image. Responding to this identified gap, this paper reports on findings from a larger study looking at corporate branding in Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) by drawing on primary data which specifically considers how co-creation can help close the gap between corporate identity and corporate image.

De Chernatony and Harris (2000: 268) define corporate identity as being 'an organisation's ethos, aims and values that create a sense of individuality…'. Specifically, Balmer and Gray (2003: 981) claim that values are derived from 'a federation of subcultures' which give an organisation its uniqueness. However, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006:857) suggest that having a unified culture in such organisations is 'virtually impossible' as evidenced by Roper and Davies (2007) where employees' opinion of the corporate brand was low. According to

Kapferer (2012: 151) corporate brand identity *precedes* corporate brand image and it is therefore essential that 'before projecting an image to the public we must know exactly what we want to project'. However, Melewar *et al* (2012) stresses that a corporate brand needs the engagement of stakeholders to co-construct brand meanings and influence branding strategies. Rindell and Strandvik (2010: 277) describe this concept as the co-creation view where the customer has more of a defined role in the brand building experience. Payne *et al* (2009: 388), who developed a conceptual approach to understand the co-creation of a brand, discovered that senior managers in several companies found the model to be a useful and practical tool in supporting them to 'co-create the brand relationship experience with their customers'.

While Iglesias *et al* (2013) highlight the need for multiple stakeholder involvement in the development and management of corporate brands, research devoted to the exploration of co-creation and its interrelatedness with internal corporate brand identity and external image is limited, particularly in the context of a HEI. This lack of research is surprising given the complexity of multi-faceted features in universities (Chapleo, 2010) as well as additional pressures to attract funding and satisfy students. The aim of this study therefore is to explore co-creation, and the engagement of external stakeholders such as students and other external partners, and examine how this can contribute to closing the identity-image gap discussed above.

METHODOLOGY/APPROACH

A qualitative paradigm was employed as an understanding was required of individuals' perceptions and expectations concerning corporate branding. This was an important consideration as qualitative data is characterised by a 'richness and fullness' (Saunders *et al,* 2010: 482). Qualitative data was collected within a single revelatory case (Yin, 2009) as the

researchers had access to an environment that had not previously been studied in the context of corporate branding. The research conducted in this study took place at a post-92 University in the United Kingdom (UK) and more specifically in a Faculty of Education, particularly focusing on its Initial Teacher Training (ITT) provision. Balmer and Liao (2007) deem the case study approach the most relevant when little is known about a particular phenomenon. Further, this approach 'can give a powerful boost to knowledge and understanding' (Robson, 2011: 255). Bell (2005) claims that case studies are useful in identifying key issues, while Cohen *et al* (2007) maintain that it may only take the occurrence of one single event to provide an important and significant insight into either a person or situation which Gerring (2007: 40) describes as 'light bulb moments'.

The research included fourteen in-depth interviews with employees involved with Initial Teacher Training (ITT) within a university's faculty of education and members of the university's marketing department. Stage two involved three focus group discussions with teacher trainees on Primary, Secondary and Masters education courses. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted between August 2013 and February 2014. Themes covered were primarily the different interpretations of corporate branding and those key components that operate in the corporate branding sphere including corporate identity and related values, corporate image, corporate reputation and co-creation. Interviews/focus groups were transcribed by the researchers and analysed using Butler-Kisber's (2010) two stage thematic inquiry analytical process and clustering patterns (Miles and Huberman (1994).

FINDINGS

The University's corporate identity was unclear to its internal stakeholders which has led to the perception that it has a middle-of-the-road position in the marketplace *'trying to do everything for everybody'*. Most of the employees' interviewed were unenthusiastic about the

University's values, particularly the language that was used, and their launch was not viewed as an all-inclusive process. Communications in the University has not helped the situation, as it was generally viewed as top-down and hierarchical.   The University is also losing sight of some of its target markets as overall students feel undervalued by the University.

Ongoing changes in the teacher education sector has resulted in a shift in the Faculty's identity and the way in which staff work in terms of programme design and delivery. This has resulted in the Faculty embracing different cultures within different programmes teams. Far more importance is attributed to "true" values rather than impartial marketing values, which are teacher-specific, far-reaching and something to which students can relate. Consequently the Faculty of Education was perceived much more positively by students. The values of staff link strongly to the relationships they hold with the students which is evidenced by the positive comments received concerning the staff. This is due to the wider partnerships that have been developed with schools and colleges and the subsequent co-creation of a Vision for a Teacher statement and related values which are congruent with all stakeholders. Training programmes have emerged with their own unique identity and a positive brand image is perceived by the students who were excited not only at securing a place on the different programmes but expectations when they joined the programmes were *'surpassed'*.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study adds to the limited knowledge on co-creation and particularly how it can positively contribute to the relationship between internal corporate identity and external corporate image in an HEI environment. This finding is particularly useful for post-92 UK universities where there is little to differentiate offerings between competitors (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007), for example, most hold a similar position on the regional league

tables. Furthermore, through co-creation it is the ITT programmes that have evolved with their own identity, values and image which has implications for both the corporate branding and educational literature as this could apply to a number of different training establishments and schools.

Underpinning these new contributions is the Faculty of Education's Vision for a teacher, which was developed with wider partnerships and underpins the ITT courses. This resonates with Rindell and Strandvik (2010) and their idea of co-creation of "brand image" but not specifically the vision of an organisation. There has been some research on the idea of the involvement of staff in developing a vision (Hemsley-Brown and Gonnawardana, 2007) and values (Keene and Fairman, 2011). However, as far as the author knows, there is no evidence of research into co-creation of programmes with external organisations.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The University is clearly seen as the "umbrella brand" but managers need to focus on what is distinct and unique about the University so that its identity can be understood through its image, by both internal and external stakeholders. The results of this case study research have important implications for managers, as evidence suggests that staff are already practising corporate branding, but in the context of their own environments and, in the case of this study, their own programmes. The partnerships held with external stakeholders and their involvement in co-creation of the brand is unique. This may provide the very source of competitive advantage required for a post-92 university seeking to hold a corporate branding with a competitive edge (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012). Differentiation needs to be more than outstanding teaching and widening participation (Temple, 2006). Implications for professional practice is that there is a disparity between the students' views of the University and that of a Faculty. Attention therefore needs to be paid to the uniqueness of different

disciplines, the particular external environments in which they operate and the diversity and demands of both their programmes and students.

LIMITATIONS

The research study only considered one university and the very specific context of teacher education. While the problem of generalisability (Butler and Kisber, 2010) is acknowledged, the focus was on depth rather than breadth. As claimed by Yin (2009) the revelatory case study provided the researchers with the opportunity to explore corporate branding in a context that had not previously been researched and a phenomenon was uncovered that is considered to be revelatory in nature (Yin, 2009). It is felt that more research into this area would provide a more holistic representation, particularly if external schools and colleges, ie the partners were included, as they played a key part in the co-creation of the Faculty's Vision for a teacher and the programmes.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE

This paper fulfils an identified gap in the body of knowledge that there is limited research devoted to exploring the interconnectedness between corporate identity, corporate image and co-creation. There has been some research on the involvement of staff in developing a vision (Hemsley-Brown and Gonnawardana, 2007) and values (Keene and Fairman, 2011). This resonates with Rindell and Strandvik (2010) and their idea of co-creation of "brand image" but as far as the author knows, there is no evidence of research into co-creation of teacher education programmes with external partner organisations as opposed to customers. The findings generated in this research may be used by stakeholders within and beyond HEI's so as to understand how their brands are developed and how they are understood. This research may be used as a basis for future comparative studies with other contexts to explore

similarities and differences across research areas and assess the transfer potential of the concept of co-creation in the branding process.

KEYWORDS

Corporate branding, Brand identity, Brand image, Co-Creation, Education

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