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The importance of corporate brand identity in business management: An application to the UK banking sector



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Abstract Corporate brand identity management is a key issue for any organisation. Accordingly, its study is a research field of great interest. This paper seeks to broaden the understanding of this strategic activity and its effects. Specifically, it investigates the concept of corporate brand identity from the employees' perspective in the UK financial banking sector and analyses the link between brand identity management and employees' attitudes and behaviours. Results indicate that organisations should pay special attention to the corporate brand identity management, given its influence on employees' commitment with their organisations, as well as their brand performance and satisfaction.

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Introduction

Identity is the cornerstone of one of the most important areas of study in recent years: corporate marketing (Balmer, 2008). This term provides the foundation for numerous concepts, such as corporate brand identity (Balmer, 2012). This identity type encompasses specific values and features that,

associated to the corporate brand, represent an organisation and the products offered to the market (Balmer and Greyser, 2002).

Corporate brand identity is an effective strategic tool and an important source of sustainable competitive advantages, which provides multiple benefits to the organisations (Melewar, 2003). Its management, understood as a comprehensive view of the different dimensions that need to be internally managed and controlled by the organisation (Simões et al., 2005), is essential as corporate brand identity precedes and represents the basis for brand image. Overall, due to its growing importance, some authors have incorporated this concept as a key element

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of the new marketing paradigm (Asem and Kosteljik, 2008).

Despite the relevance of corporate identity management in recent years, there is little research that empirically explores this strategic resource (Arendt and Brettel, 2010; Simões et al., 2005). To date, previous studies have mainly focused on the definition and conceptualisation of this construct. Therefore, several authors advocate further exploration of the empirical impact of its management (Blombäck and Ramírez-Pasillas, 2012).

In addition, research on corporate brand identity management has usually focused on the opinions and perceptions of brand managers, consultants and others experts. Despite the literature has largely acknowledged the critical role of employees in brand success, few works have adopted the perspective of employees in their studies (Burmam et al., 2009; Malhotra and Mukherjee, 2004). This issue is specially important in the services sector, as employees embody the services brands and their performance brings brand promises to life (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011; Wallace et al., 2013).

Within the services sector, the study of corporate brand identity management is specially relevant in the banking sector, which has been notably damaged by the economic and financial crisis. In addition to the financial problems, the banking sector has recently faced diminishing consumer trust and confidence (Colton and Oliveira, 2009). In this sense, a survey developed in the UK showed that a high percentage of customers, around 40%, were totally disengaged with their banks, whereas a 69% asserted that there are no clear differences among the banks (McEwen, 2010). In this context, it is critical to restore customers' trust and confidence, trying to convey a positive and coherent image with the essence of the organisation. It is in this complex process where corporate brand identity management and the role played by employees are crucial.

The aim of this research is, therefore, to gain a better understanding of the effects of corporate brand identity management. To reach this objective, corporate brand identity management is explored from the employees' perspective in a sector of great interest, the UK banking sector. In addition, the research analyses the relationship between corporate brand identity management and employees' attitudes and behaviours. Specifically, it assesses the effect of identity management on employees' commitment to the organisation, as well as the impact that such commitment has on their brand performance and satisfaction.

This research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it extends previous research by providing empirical evidences on the study of corporate brand identity management and adopting the perspective of employees. Furthermore, the findings of this study offer useful guidelines on how to manage the corporate brand identity and provide helpful implications for banks and other organisations.

The paper is organised as follows. It opens with a brief, general discussion of the corporate brand identity concept. The next section develops the conceptual framework and the research hypotheses. This is followed by the methodology and the analysis of empirical findings. The paper then outlines the conclusions and implications of the research. Finally, it addresses the limitations of the study and identifies directions for further research.

Corporate brand identity

The term identity is the basis for a great number of inter-related concepts, such as brand identity, corporate identity or organisational identity, among others (Currás, 2010). The present research focuses on the concept of brand identity, and more specifically, of the corporate brand, which is very common in the services sector.

Brand identity has been studied from a wide range of disciplines. This multidisciplinary nature has led to a variety of definitions and conceptual frameworks that reflect the complex and multidimensional character of this relevant construct. Overall, brand identity includes a set of features and dimensions that determine the brand's way of being, thinking and behaving. It is, therefore, a key concept in brand management, as brand identity defines not only the purpose and meaning of the brand, but also the directions to follow.

Table 1 shows some of the most important brand identity definitions. Several aspects can be highlighted from these definitions. On the one hand, scholars in brand management define brand identity as a unique set of aspects of the brand, as well as the idea or essential meaning associated to it. Similarly, all of them emphasise the internal nature of this construct, which emanates from the organisation. This internal vision is, however, questioned by numerous scholars. In this sense, although emanating from brand managers, brand identity is further developed by other actors, such as employees and consumers (da Silveira et al., 2013). Branding literature has also discussed the stability of brand identity over time. In this sense, although brand identity definitions mainly emphasise that brands should maintain their identity, others reconceptualise brand identity as a dynamic concept. As such, it is possible to distinguish a core identity, comprising the central and timeless essence of the brand and an extended identity, which includes other dynamic dimensions that may change in light of different contexts (Aaker, 1996; da Silveira et al., 2013).

A strong brand identity has several benefits. Brand identity is an essential construct to gain sustainable competitive advantages, and effectively differentiate and manage brands (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2004). Brand identity precedes and represents the basis for its image and reputation. A well managed brand identity may result in positive perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of different stakeholders. For instance, from the point of view of consumers, the creation of a unique, coherent and distinctive identity can add value to the company's products (Coleman et al., 2011) and increase their preference and loyalty (Johnson and Zinkhan, 1990; Simões et al., 2005). Likewise, brand identity can influence the attractiveness of the organisation as an employer. As such, brand identity can help companies to increase the motivation of the employees and attract better and more qualified applicants (Melewar, 2003), as well as greater investments (Arendt and Brettel, 2010; Van Riel, 1995).

Over the last decades, scholars and practitioners have proposed several brand identity frameworks (Aaker, 1996; Aaker and Joachisthaler, 2000; de Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2004). Without being exhaustive, some of these frameworks are briefly described next (see Table 1).

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