Exploring The Determinants Of Retail Corporate Branding

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ABSTRACT

Corporate brands are an increasingly important element of organizational and marketing strategy. The globalization of the corporate world has recently seen a shift in marketing emphasis from product brands to corporate branding. Corporate branding has emerged to be a key element of differentiation strategies and a vital source for competitive advantage.

Among the many dimensions of brand management, retail branding has emerged to be of interest to many academics, though has had only limited contribution towards its conceptualisation. The rise of the retailer as a brand is one of the most important trends in retailing. Retail branding has been termed different to an extent from the concepts of product branding due to its multi-sensory nature of service marketing. This thesis draws on this notion of difference of retail branding and sets to explore the concept of corporate branding within the retailing context. The aim of this thesis is to bring the two concepts of corporate branding and retail branding together, and develop a more robust framework for understanding the phenomenon of retail corporate branding. A review of the literature on corporate branding shows a growing body of conceptual work, but also highlights that much of the recent work in the field has not focused on identifying key elements that would contribute particularly to the concept of retail corporate branding. There is, therefore, a clear need to understand how a retail corporate brand is defined, developed and communicated.

Exploratory research is conducted using case study interviews to provide an in depth understanding of the phenomenon of retail corporate branding and what elements contribute towards it. This involved conducting in depth interviews with corporate managers of UK's largest retail organizations, examining their corporate branding and addressing a set of research questions. The findings offer both new insight to academics, and a set of guiding principles and practices for managers engaged in managing corporate brands at an organizational level.

The conclusion and central contribution of the study offer a conceptual model which identifies the constituents of retail corporate branding and indicates the interplay amongst these elements. The exploratory findings from this research make a conceptual contribution by identifying and adding new dimensions to the extant literature. Future research can take these findings as a starting point and investigate them further to broaden our understanding of an emerging research phenomenon.

RETAIL CORPORATE BRANDING

Corporate brands are an increasingly important element of organizational and marketing strategy (Balmer, 2001a; Olins, 2000). Among the changes that businesses make as they move towards globalization is a shift in marketing emphasis from product brands to corporate branding (Balmer, 1995, 2001a, b; de Chernatony, 1999; Dowling, 2001, 1993; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2001, Ind, 2001; Knox et al., 2000; Olins, 2000; Schmitt and Simonsen, 1997, Melewar 2003, Melewar and Walker 2003). Differentiation requires positioning, not of products, but the whole corporation.

Corporate branding is a potentially strong tool for aligning a corporate strategy and ensures that the corporation is leveraging adequately on the untapped internal and external resources. A strong corporate branding strategy can add significant value in terms of helping the entire corporation and the management team to implement the long-term vision, create unique positions in the market place of the company and its brands. Hence a corporate branding strategy can enable the corporation to further leverage on its tangible and non-tangible assets leading to branding excellence throughout the corporation (Keller, 2003). There has been considerable research and academic contribution on the subject of corporate branding of manufacturing based

organizations, but research and literary contributions on the subject of corporate branding for retailing services is miniscule and almost negligible.

This paper takes a look at the retail corporate branding process and explores the determinants of retail corporate branding. Since there has been significant academic contribution on the corporate branding of product manufacturing organizations, and negligible academic literature on corporate branding of retail firms, a major concern of the research was be to identify the constituents of retail corporate branding. This was achieved by identifying and studying the different constructs of corporate brand management of retailers in the UK.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Corporate branding for a retailer firm addresses its competitive positioning strategy (Porter, 1985; Dowling, 1986). It can be argued that corporate branding is essentially a strategic task spanning across functional boundaries and internal and external spheres of an organization (Hatch et al 2001, Melewar 2003).

Both scholars and practitioners suggest that effective corporate branding results in business survival and profitability (Balmer, 2001b; Gray and Balmer, 1998; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997). It is an effective mechanism to maintain or accomplish competitive advantage (Fombrun et al., 1997; Fombrun , 1996; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997). Corporate brand congruent with the strategic brand vision (Da Silva and Alwi 2006; Schultz and Hatch 2003) dwells on developing brands at an organizational level (Knox and Bickerton 2003), which requires managing interactions with multiple stakeholders (Gray and Balmer 2001, Knox and Bickerton 2003, Hatch and Schultz 2003, Aaker 2004). In summary, from the corporate brand vision, every activity of the company should be seen through the lens of the brand (Melewar 1999).

The ensuing interest in the corporate brand can be seen in the writing of practitioners (Macrae, 1996; Mitchell, 1997; Ind, 2001; Olins, 2000) as well as in the academic literature (Balmer, 2001; Abratt, 1989, Dowling, 1986, 2001, Keller, 2003; Keller and Aaker, 1998; de Chernatony, 1999; Knox et al., 2000; Bickerton, 2000; Gray and Balmer, 2001; Harris and de- Chernatony, 2001; Newman, 2001, Melewar 1999, Melewar and Walker 2003, Melewar 2008), but academic contribution towards corporate branding of retailer firms has remained relatively under researched and an underdeveloped subject (Ailawadi and Keller 2004; El-Amir and Burt 2010)

The literature review of corporate branding also has clear links to work on corporate image and corporate identity (Melewar 2003, 1999, Balmer and Gray, 1999; Fiol et al, 2001), corporate personality (Olins, 2000), and corporate reputation and responsibility (Bickerton, 2000). Within this broad field of work, there has been consideration of a variety of sub-issues. International branding (de Chernatony et al., 1995), added value from branding (de Chernatony et al., 2000), the distinction between products and services (McDonald et al., 2001) and ethnocentrism in corporate identity development (Thomas and Hill, 1999) have all been topics of study. Within most of this work, however, retailing is conspicuous by its absence. Hence there is an obvious gap in the academic contributions towards the subject of corporate branding of retailing firms and these gaps have been highlighted by many academic scholars (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Burt and Sparks, 2002, Alexander, 1995, Melewar 2003, 1999).

Much of the past work on corporate branding has been concerned with the conceptual argument as to why interrelations between internal and external dimensions need understanding and how they can be analyzed (Hatch and Schultz, 2001; de Chernatony, 2001; Ind, 1997; Balmer, 2001, Melewar 1999, 2003).

There have been significant academic contributions on corporate branding for product based organizations. (Balmer, 2001; Abratt, 1989, Dowling, 1986, 2001, Keller, 2003; Keller and Aaker, 1998; de Chernatony, 1999; Knox et al., 2000; Bickerton, 2000; Gray and Balmer, 2001; Harris and de-Chernatony, 2001; Newman, 2001, Melewar 1999). The academic conceptual models for corporate branding have been criticised and developed through course of time. From Kennedy's (1977) model of corporate identity to Balmer's (2001b) seven deadly skills of corporate branding, the corporate brand management models trace the development of the subject area of corporate branding and its links to strategic corporate factors like corporate identity, corporate reputation, corporate personality, and corporate culture (Bick et al, 2003).

The rise of the retailer as a brand is one of the most important trends in retailing (Moore and Birtwistle, 2005, Balmer 1995). Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in the idea of corporate branding, both at practitioner and academic levels. Much of this interest in corporate branding has been driven by ideas emanating from consumer goods and product markets, but retail corporate branding remains an under researched area (Moore and Birtwistle, 2005, Burt and Sparks 2002). There has been considerable research and academic contribution on the subject of corporate branding, but research

and literary contributions on the subject of corporate branding for retailing services remains underdeveloped and needs more focus (Davies and Chun 2002, Ailawadi and Keller 2004). While there is some work on services, and retailing does get a mention occasionally in the literature (Berman and Evans 2004), it is perhaps insufficiently recognized that some retailers could be considered as leaders in corporate branding (Ailawadi and Keller 2004; Melewar 2008). This research thesis brings together the concepts of corporate branding and retail brands and explores the corporate branding within the retail context.

Previous studies within the retail context have identified the brand as a critical asset to the company (Moore, et al. 2004; Moore, et al. 2005; Davies and Chun 2002). However, despite the development of an increasingly successful retailing sector in terms of sales volume, and the increasing dominance of retailer brands within the market (Burt and Sparks 2002), representation of retailers within the branding literature appears to be limited (Moore 2005; Grime, et al. 2002; Moore, et al. 2005, Burt and Sparks 2002; Ailawadi and Keller 2004). Because of this dearth of literature within the context of retailing, and in order to provide a theoretical basis for the concept of retail corporate branding, and a clear understanding of the study of the brand strategies of retailers, this study draws upon literature from a wide variety of disciplines, (from corporate identity, corporate image, brand management, to service branding and retailing) in particular the branding and the retail marketing literature.

The development, positioning and portrayal of the branding within the retailing sector has been subject to a small number of empirical and theoretical studies (Burt 2000; Burt and Sparks 2002; Davies and Brito 2004, Melewar 2008) Existing theories therefore, within the branding and retail marketing literature, fail to isolate a core description of the form, function and management of the brand in the retailing sector (Ailawadi and Keller 2004, Roper and Parker 2006).

The justification for this study therefore relates to its contribution to knowledge in undertaking an exploratory research into the British retailers in terms of the creation and development of the retailers' corporate brands and its process. Additionally, it considers the management processes that support this creation and development, and the operational procedures involved in the implementation of British retailer corporate brand strategies.

This paper identifies that the determinants of corporate brand management needs more detail and clarification when applied to retail organizations. In this regard, a new exploration is needed to identify the determinants of corporate branding of retail organizations.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Within the broad remit of corporate branding this research aims to explore the concept of corporate branding within the realm of retail organizations. The primary aim of this research is to extend current knowledge within branding theory and expand it towards the retail sector.

This research aims to focus on the different factors contributing towards the corporate branding of a retailing firm. By combining the two areas of corporate branding and retailing, the study hopes to shed some light on the area of retail corporate branding, which might be of benefit both conceptually and managerially.

The main objective of this research is to address the academic gap and contribute towards the subject of retail corporate branding, which would have managerial as well as academic implications. The objective of the research is to explore the constituents of retail corporate branding. The research conducts a study of the corporate brand building of a retailer firm and its determinants. By 'determinants' means what exactly are the different constructs and variables that contribute towards building a retail corporate brand. This research extends the academic theoretical foundation for corporate branding laid by previous academics and applies it to the corporate retailing structure.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Due to lack of literature on the focus subject and the exploratory nature of the research, the methodology for the research was of qualitative nature (Zikmund, 2000). The target population to conduct the research was UK retailing firms and their top and middle management.

A multiple case study approach was conducted for the research since it would make the findings more robust and it would also make it possible to detect possible similarities and/or differences. The five retail organizations selected to conduct the research were applied to, on the basis of having diverse if not polar situation, as well as on gaining access to the right people with maximum relevant and precise information. The selected retail organizations are from the grocery and fashion sectors. Out of the five retail organizations, two are fashion retailers, two are grocery retailers while one retailer caters fashion as well as food retailing. There is a good mix of grocery and non-grocery retail firms. These retail organizations represent the grocery and retail sector of the United Kingdom due to its diversity

and selection of cases.

To achieve the exploratory objectives of this research, in-depth interviews were conducted and the respondents were selected carefully. The research selected five case studies of retail organizations. The identified case studies were Debenhams, Marks and Spencer, Aldi, John Lewis and Sainsbury's. An average of four to five in-depth interviews were conducted within each case study. Interviews were held with corporate managers, brand managers, store managers and any other corporate staff that has an impact on corporate branding of a retail firm. The researcher gave particular attention to the quality of the interview and the right person to ask the right questions, rather than having a large quantity of interviews.

The selection of participants was based on their corporate and managerial roles in context of corporate branding. Selection of interviewees was based on their position in the organization and what level of command and control they had in contributing towards corporate branding of their respective organizations. In this regard, certain corporate directors and managers were identified who would have a significant influence over the corporate branding process of their respective organizations.

Data is collected through in-depth interviews with the corporate managers of these retail firms. An average of six interviews per case study has been conducted to make the findings robust and authenticated. Some of the interviews were recorded by Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim, while other interviewees did not allow the use of Dictaphone, hence notes were taken in detail to capture the true essence of the conversation. A probing technique of questioning was adopted for the one to one interviews. The questions were mainly of '*how*', '*what*' and *'why'* nature. The fluidity of the interview would depend upon the response of the interviewee. In this manner, a more unbiased and in depth interview would be possible and the findings would be more robust.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Every interview was recorded either on tape, and where not allowed, notes were taken highlighting the bullet points. Each and every case was transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were then analysed using interpretive thematic analysis technique, where through pattern recognition, the researcher attempts to 'construct a representation of meanings as recurring themes producing an interpretation of interpretations' (Denzin 1970).

The data was analysed using content analysis technique

and the results would be evaluated to address the research topic (Zikmund, 2000).

Analysis by thematic content analysis identified the key findings and contributors for retail corporate branding. QSR NVivo was therefore chosen as a suitable software package, to store, link and analyse documents and concepts arising from the interviews as sources of information.

The responses from each of the interviewee were coded and categorised in selection of identified and pre-determined themes. Certain patterns would then be identified after categorizing the codes responses. The key elements of the research findings would help in defining the themes and codes for analysis.

As analysis continued, new concepts and themes emerged. The researcher reflected back to the existing literature, relate the analysis and findings, consider rival theory explanations, and through a continuous process of theory reflection, data analysis and answering the questions of 'how' and 'why' relating to the research questions, would attempt to devise a conceptual framework for retail corporate branding based on its determinants identified.

The cross case analysis identified the different variables, constructs and contributors towards the retail corporate branding.

The analysis of data was not centrally concerned with the 'repeatability of data from case to case, but rather with the inner consistency and pattern of meaning that obtains within each case' (Yin 2003). This resulted in identifying emerging themes within each case study which were then analysed in cross case comparison.

Following are the factors identified that contribute to the retail corporate branding of the five cases studied during the research.

CORE VALUES AS DNA OF CORPORATE BRANDING

The data analysis indicated core values as a pivotal factor of the corporate branding for retail organizations. These corporate values are reflected in every operational strategy that the organization adopts. All the interviewees stressed upon the fact that every branding strategy of their organization is wrapped around its core values. It was observed that almost all the interviewees had a good understanding of their organizational core values and how they incorporate them in their everyday activities.

Statements like core values as '*DNA of our business'* and '*it all starts from core values*' give an indication that the starting point for the process, or at least the origin of the phenomenon would be core values. The major obvious difference was that the corporate directors emphasised more on the strategic implications of core values, whilst the store managers explained how they incorporate core values in their everyday operations and activities. When explored in great detail, it was indicated that all four organizations have a firm understanding that core values is what corporate branding is wrapped around. It is the core values that shape the corporate brand and any element within the corporate branding of the retail organizations would radiate the core values. For example, one of the organizations had *process* as a part of their core values. Hence productive and simplistic processes were adopted at every level of the organization and it was communicated throughout the organization that simple yet productive processes is a core value of the organization and should be reflected in everything they do. This reflects and relates to the literature support provided by Balmer and Greyser (2003) and incorporates the core values theory by Urde (2001). The literature suggests that 'core values of an organization is the glue that holds the corporate brand together' and is the essence of any corporate brand. This can be reflected in the retail firm's corporate core values which indicate that every strategy of communication, management behaviour, corporate identity and ethical management, adheres to its core values. The data also incorporates Urde's (2001) concept of core values affecting and influencing every aspect of corporate brand and every level.

TOTAL CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Another important and decisive element that contributes towards corporate branding of retail organizations is their strong corporate communication. The data reveals that a consistent and continuous communication process is pivotal in radiating an organizations corporate brand. The data revealed that after defining the core values at the top management level, it should be consistently communicated throughout the organization so that every level of the organization is aware of the core values and can contribute towards corporate branding. Almost all of the interviewees throughout the case studies asserted that it is vital to communicate these core values to every corner of the organization as well as communicate them externally to its stakeholders. Several different modes of communication have been identified throughout the case studies and a sum of all those communications is termed as total corporate communication. There is an important need to communicate it at the same levels throughout the organization. From the

top director to the lower level floor employee, everyone should have the right message and the right image of the corporate brand and core values. Hence accuracy is of immense importance. This communication is conducted by internal and external communication systems. The external communication is done via media, advertising, press releases, leaflets etc. While the internal communication is done by induction, training, team briefs, conferences, newsletters, memos and annual meetings. The interviewees asserted that giving out the right and accurate message is very important otherwise it can distort the corporate image. The right image being aligned with the corporate identity that the organization intends to create.

The data gave many insights in successful corporate communication where an organizations core values were communicated throughout the many levels of the organizations, becoming a part of its corporate culture, and then becoming voice and actions of its employees. For example, communicating a core value on its environment friendly stance, the organization adopted a strategy to give out free jute bags to all its customers. Each employee at many levels was communicated the reason behind this strategy as it adheres to their core value and how their organization contributes towards the betterment of the environment. The front line customers would then communicate these core values to customers as well as communicate their corporate identity.

The data also indicated many instances of negative communication where inconsistency and confusion was salient in organizational as well as marketing communication. This resulted in either a confused or distorted image of the organization in the minds of its stakeholders. This unsuccessful communication was strengthened by resorting to the core values of the organization and devising a clear and robust communication policy. For example, one of the subject organizations had a clear communication policy where the staff members of one team could be communicated via their direct head or supervisor only, and did not have any interactions with heads of other departments. This was to keep communication simple and clear. Similarly, in other subject organizations, consistency of communication messages within as well as outside the organization was stressed upon. This resulted in a clear, robust and strong corporate communications in terms of organizational, management, marketing and internal communications.

Hence, total corporate communication plays a vital role in corporate brand of retail organizations and is a major contributor to shape the corporate brand. The consistency and accuracy are the main ingredients towards a successful

and efficient corporate communication.

CORPORATE CULTURE
Another emergent element highlighted in the data analysis was the strong and robust corporate culture of retail organizations. Corporate culture of retail firms appeared to be a medium through which the organization translates it core values to its employees. The corporate managers stressed the importance of corporate culture as a factor that makes the colleagues belong to the organization. The data analysis indicates that corporate culture is a very effective medium to absorb the corporate brand through total corporate communication, and then translated into everyday performance of every colleague of retail organizations. Each respective retail organization claims to have a very strong and distinct corporate culture, which reflects its corporate brand. This corporate culture is introduced to every colleague in their induction process and is communicated and reinforced throughout a colleague's time in the organization. This enables every colleague to belong to the organization and be able to 'live the brand'.

EMPLOYEES LIVING THE CORPORATE BRAND
Perhaps the most important aspect of this research and the most vital influence on corporate branding is the employees of retail organizations live the corporate brand (Fram and McCarthy, 2003; Bendapudi & Bendapudi, 2005). There seems to be a mutual consensus amongst all the subject organizations that their employees are true ambassadors of their corporate brand. The front line employees of these retail organizations are communicated the core values of their respected organizations through a strong and radiant corporate culture. These core values become a part of the employees everyday life, and during the training as well as throughout an employees' career, it is made sure that the employee is communicated the right and consistent message regarding the reinforcement of their organization's core values. It is of immense importance that the core values and corporate branding messages are kept consistent and accurate.

The data revealed that extreme care is given to the interaction of a colleague with a customer and every colleague is trained in delivering. For example, in one of the subject organizations, a colleague when asked where a specific product is, would never point towards it, but take the customer to the product and ask if there is any further need for his services. This organization claims this to be the point of difference between themselves and other competitors. All of the subject organizations also stresses on its colleagues to interact with customers and talk to them and try to sell

more products to the customer by encouraging them to try something new. This adds value to the sales.

Another example is where one of the core values for a retail organization is innovative ideas; the organization encourages its colleagues to try something new as well. Every colleague is given an opportunity to try a new product and give feedback on it. This makes them taste the feel and brand of the products and equips them well to introduce the product to the customers. The shop floor employees are the true brand ambassadors of retail organization as they communicate the corporate brand through their actions and performance. So, colleagues are the most important internal customers of the retail firms and they try to communicate the corporate brand to its internal customers first, who then would communicate it to external customers.

The data further indicates that these retail organizations keep the brand alive by having a constant backwards and forward communication and keep the corporate brand a vital part of every colleagues working environment so they can absorb it and are able to live the brand.

All the cases indicate that the retail firms expect their employees to live the corporate brand and radiate it positively. The front line employees are a major source of communication with their customers and radiate the corporate brand through their interactions with their customers. For example, a staff member when interacting with a customer would communicate their brand values. As in the previous example, the staff members of the organization would explain why they were giving free jute bags to customers and how their organization contributes towards the betterment of the environment. Hence this interaction influences the perception of a customer about their organization and contributes towards the corporate image they form. This is also aided by the quality of customer services, the behaviour of the staff member, which reflects the corporate culture and training they receive. It is important in this regard that the shop floor employees get the right training and the right corporate culture to nurture the corporate brand so that they can communicate it correctly to its customers. The shop floor employees communicate the corporate brand by interacting with the customers and their fast, efficient and professional performance.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
Perhaps the most contributing factor towards retail corporate branding is corporate social responsibility. This is also termed as ethical management. The ethics were referred to issues like respect for individuals, working conditions, sourcing from suppliers, integrity, contribution towards the community and

sustainable environment. The subject retail organizations realize that their stance on corporate ethics and corporate social responsibility is a vital contributing factor towards their corporate brand. The data revealed that customers of retail organizations expect them to operate ethically and be socially responsible. They expect their retail firms to operate on *fair trade* and respect the environment. This is not only limited to the customers, but every stakeholder of retail organizations expect it to be socially responsible and proactively address these issues. The corporate managers argue that these factors are sometimes decisive in choosing an organization by a customer to shop from. A customer or a stakeholder judges a retail organization by its stance on corporate social responsibility. So, a customer might not visit a retail store just because it does not support fair trade, does not sell free range eggs or does not procure beef from British farmers. Whilst on the other hand, customers of a certain subject organization would bring back the packaging of a product they bought from them, and seek how they dispose it off. This would ascertain the customers that the subject organization has a positive waste management as well as recycling policy, and is contributing towards the sustainability of the global environment. The end result is a positive corporate image in the mind of its customers, as well as a decisive factor in choosing a retail organization to shop from.

CORPORATE IDENTITY

A strong brand identity is a salient feature of a retail firm's corporate brand. Retail organizations claim that their corporate identity is monitored and controlled by many inputs by the organization. Every retail firm has to position themselves bearing a distinct corporate identity to be able to differentiate themselves in the market. The data revealed that retail organizations put great effort to create a distinct identity based on the core values of the organization. They relate this to their goal as it is the goal of the organization to provide their customers with an ever improving shopping experience, in terms of healthy, fresh and safe food at competitive prices. This corporate identity is achieved by maintaining a distinct and differentiated approach to its retail ambience, the products, packaging, pricing, customer services, and even its ethical management. At the corporate level, a lot of effort is put into operations and strategies to keep the corporate identity aligned with the corporate brand values. This applies to all total corporate communication of the organization. Every message communicated within or outside the organization would have a distinct identity of the respective retail organizations. This maybe in the form of colour format, the logo, the message, pricing and even packaging of the products. All these factors contribute

towards corporate identity. Furthermore, issues like ethical management, store atmosphere, sourcing with integrity and respect for environment, all contribute towards corporate brand identity. The corporate identity creates a distinct recognition for retail organizations which is a vital part of its corporate branding.

RETAIL SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

The data analysis indicates that retail shopping experience is a major contributing factor towards corporate branding of retail firms. It is observed that retail organizations put great emphasis on retail shopping experience and makes sure that the customers have a memorable shopping experience and they come back again. Although this factor should come under the heading of Corporate identity, but given the great emphasis of interviewees and detailed data analysis, the researcher feels retail shopping experience should be explained as a separate yet very vital contributing element towards corporate branding of retail organizations.
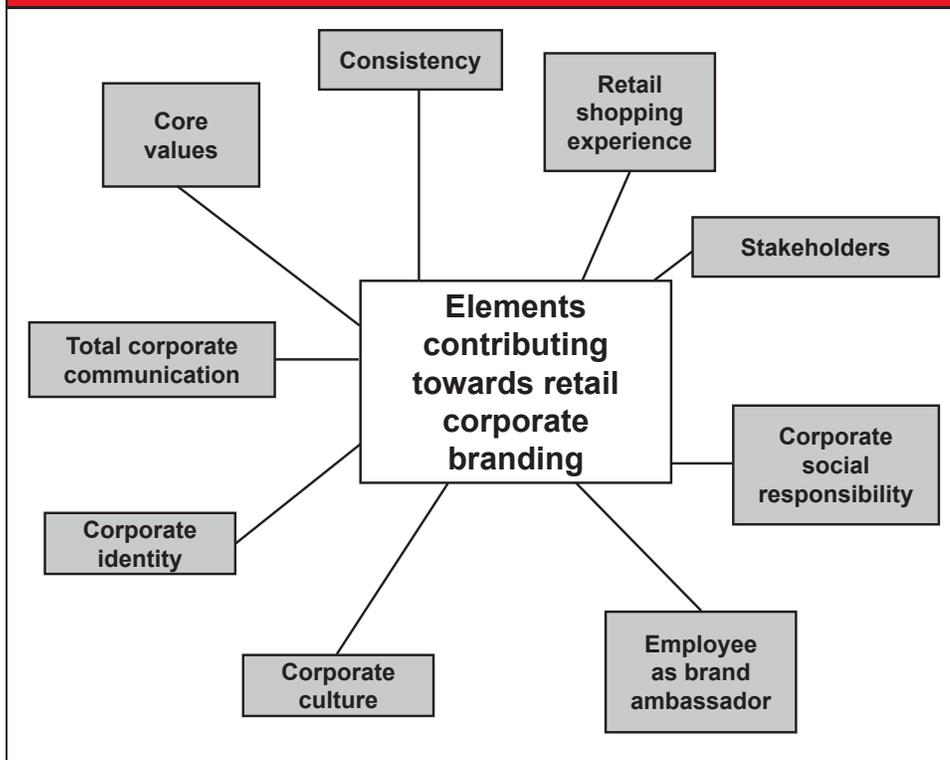
The data further revealed that there are many factors that contribute towards the retail shopping experience of retail organizations. Factors like store atmosphere, customer services, product availability, store layout format, visual presentation of the store, hygiene and safety condition of the store, and even access to the store in terms of its location and facilities.

It is this retail shopping experience that contributes towards the corporate branding of retail organizations and is a vital factor. The retail shopping experience conveys the corporate brand to its customers and creates an ever lasting impact on their minds. A major strategy of retail firms is to keep the retail shopping experience aligned with the corporate branding of the organization, so that the customers get the right and consistent message.

CONSISTENCY

Another important emerging theme highlighted in the data analysis is consistency. This applies to the overall process of corporate branding. The data revealed the every interviewee stressed the importance of consistency in corporate branding process and its communication. The data indicate that total corporate communication needs to be consistent throughout the organization so that the internal communication is aligned with external communication. Consistency is also very important in creating the corporate identity as inconsistency in brand identity would result in a gap in corporate image of the organization. A lot of care and effort is put in having consistent strategies for corporate identity activities like store layout, promotional material, product availability and product

FIGURE 1
Elements contributing towards corporate branding of retail organizations

Consistency

Core values

Retail shopping experience

Stakeholders

Total corporate communication

Elements contributing towards retail corporate branding

Corporate social responsibility

Corporate identity

Corporate culture

Employee as brand ambassador

ranges, and standards of customer services. All these factors are standardised to align the corporate branding process.

STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholders emerged to be yet another influencing factor on corporate brand. The usual external stakeholders of retail organizations were identified as customers, investors, suppliers, media, government bodies and even competitors. These stakeholders can influence the corporate brands by their feedbacks and inputs.

These organizations monitor activities of organizations and can stress them to adhere to ethical and socially responsible activities. So its no more an option but a stressed requirement by controlling agencies. Customers and employees are major stakeholders of retail organizations. As mentioned in the total corporate communication section, their feedback and word of mouth can influence the corporate brand.

The findings and emergent themes of determinants of retail corporate branding are summarized in Figure 1.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

After exploring the determinants of retail corporate branding, a conceptual framework model (Appendix A) has been devised

that reflects the retail corporate branding. The interplay among the proposed factors that contribute towards retail corporate branding is explained, as well as the process identified. For the ease of identification, factors of core values, corporate philosophy and strategic management have been consolidated under the heading of corporate vision. Whilst issues relating to corporate identity and corporate image have been consolidated separately to show their distinct positioning in the corporate branding process. The research identified the constituents of a retail corporate brand and devised a conceptual framework model for retail corporate branding.

LIMITATIONS

It is generally accepted within the literature that the research process is subject to some form of limitations (Webb 1994). One of the major limitations of this research thesis is that it has adopted the corporate view throughout the research. The whole research process, data collection, analysis and findings are viewed from the point of view of the retail corporation, hence a top to bottom approach. Therefore this research is limited to what the respective retail organizations claim to be their corporate branding and how they claim to manage it. The research process is limited to the perception of the corporate managers and store managers of the subject retail organizations and builds the whole thesis on their perspective of corporate branding. In this regard, it can be criticised that the customer point of view is not incorporated in this thesis and it can be an area to be explored in future research prospects.

Finally, case studies have been criticised in the past because of perceived difficulty in deriving generalisations and obtaining universal findings from a small number of case studies (Yin 2003). While it could be argued that the case studies involved the largest, most successful and well established retailers of the UK, who have a long history and heritage behind them which contributes to their strong corporate branding, as well as they have evolved over the last century into a coherent and complex infrastructure which supports an intricate, but ultimately successful, brand strategy. But it can be criticised that these cases may not be

entirely representative of all retail organizations in the UK retail sector. It could, however, be claimed that the detailed findings and the conceptual model defined offers valuable insights into the implementation of retailer corporate branding strategies which are highly relevant and contemporary and provide a wealth of detail from which relevant conclusions can be drawn.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

The aim of this study was to explore the corporate branding of retail organizations and build a conceptual model that represents the elements that constitute the retail corporate branding and indicate how a retail firm would manage it. This was carried out from the perspective of the large retailers in the UK. The predominant contribution of this research has been the examination of retailer corporate brand strategies and the identification of the pivotal role of the many elements that contribute towards it. The research is innovative and original because there has not been any academic research on the subject of retail corporate brand management. The academic literature lacks any contribution on this subject and this research would definitely pave way for further research directions on the subject of retail corporate branding.

A key contribution of this study was to develop a model of retail corporate branding. This model directs attention to the complexity involved in the efficient and effective management of the retail corporate branding, and can be applied by practitioners in managing the process of brand creation and development and extended by researchers within alternative retail contexts.

SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This was an exploratory study, based on a diverse and fragmented theoretical framework and the conceptual model for retail corporate branding presented within the thesis would benefit from validation within the retailing sector, and application within a number of case study companies.

The conceptual model, however, provides a "snap shot" of the interactivity and complexity involved within the implementation process and further consideration may be given to how, in such a dynamic and complex environment, the dimensions of the own brand may change over time. As proposed by de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998), however, the dimensions of the brand, being an evolving entity, need to be tested over time in order to allow for the examination of that evolution. This would require a longitudinal study.
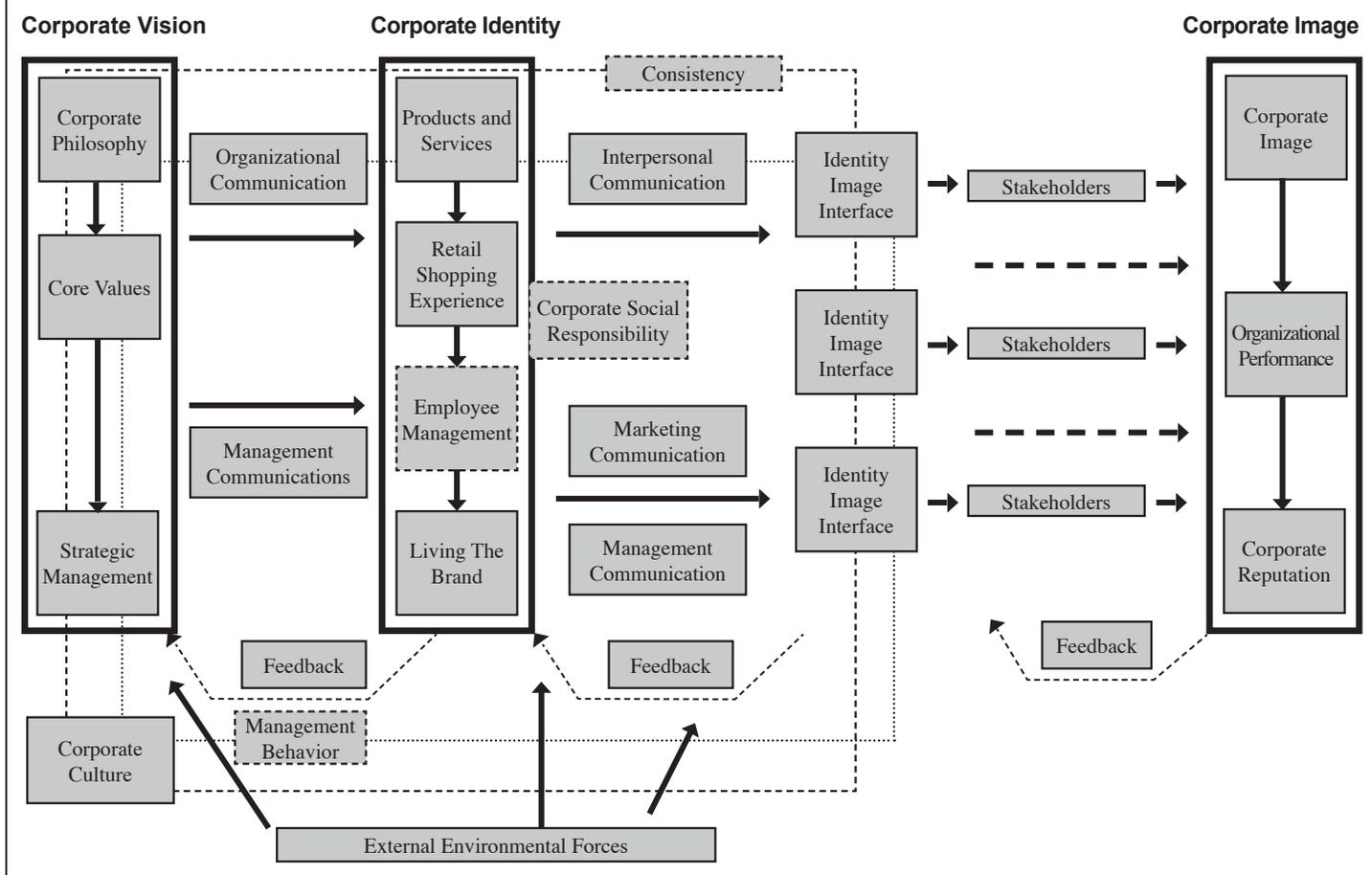
Secondly, the retail organizations consistently highlighted issues associated with staff training and development, particularly where they affected customer service and the presentation of the own brand within the public domain. A joint study with human resource specialists may highlight issues which retailers could build upon to ensure that the brand is represented by motivated and highly trained staff. Furthermore, a study can be undertaken to assess the impact of employees living the brand on retail corporate branding or vice versa.

Another interesting research can be to carry out bottoms up research on retail corporate branding. As mentioned in the limitations of this thesis, the present research was undertaken from the point of view of top to bottom, hence a corporate view. It would be interesting to conduct a research from the customers' perspective (retail image) and how effective is the retail corporate branding relating to the claims made by the corporate managers.

Future research should be directed at determining the efficacy of the model by examining other retail organizations. Examining the fit between the literature and the case studies of retail firms revealed important emerging themes. Each of these offers potentially interesting and insightful directions to pursue. Future research should explore the role of core values, corporate communications and employee management as critical success factors for the retail corporate branding.

APPENDIX A
Conceptual model for retail corporate branding

Corporate Vision   **Corporate Identity**   **Corporate Image**

Corporate Philosophy	Organizational Communication	Products and Services

Consistency

Interpersonal Communication — Identity Image Interface → Stakeholders → Corporate Image

Core Values → Retail Shopping Experience

Corporate Social Responsibility

Identity Image Interface → Stakeholders → Organizational Performance

Management Communications → Employee Management

Marketing Communication

Identity Image Interface → Stakeholders → Corporate Reputation

Strategic Management → Living The Brand

Management Communication

Feedback   Feedback   Feedback

Management Behavior

Corporate Culture

External Environmental Forces

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