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CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE CORPORATE BRAND IN MULTINATIONAL ENTERPRISES

Volokhova Anastasiia
Postgraduate Student at the Department of International Management, Kyiv National Economic University named after Vadym Hetman

The relevance of this topic is determined by the necessity of individuals and business community to operate across geographical and physical boundaries, constantly adapting to diverse markets and conditions. Nowadays, the geographical workforce mobility is higher than ever, forming cross-cultural communities and new breed of double or triple national people, whose values and behaviour is no longer determined by one country of origin. These issues arise sharp so for multinational corporations (MNCs), whose very essence is to operate across the territorial and cultural boundaries while taking into consideration the interest of their multicultural stakeholders, as micro multinational enterprises, that often consist of just few employees but have to face cross-cultural challenges nevertheless.

Under such volatile and complex conditions, it is crucially important that companies not only preserve their identity and do not get dissolved in the plethora of changes, but also manage to communicate this identity to their stakeholders and try to do their best to ensure the desired perceived image such attempts will create. Companies may have a very clear understanding of their business strategy and corporate culture, yet the challenge is to understand, how a particular market will correspond with their efforts. It is not merely enough to enter and function on a market, not enough to sell the product ones. A strong and sound corporate brand is definitely a fundamental base of competitive advantage companies are strategically oriented to get, but once the need for competitive advantage is satisfied, the next level companies strive to achieve is winning customer loyalty, understanding fully well that loyalty is what will keep them on the market in the long term.

It has been well documented in literature that the best tool in achieving customer loyalty is crafting a strong and authentic brand [1]. Brands tell stories and influence stakeholders on deep emotional level, forming bonds that once positive or negative, are very hard to break [11]. Brands are actively managed at either the organisational level (corporate branding), or at the individual product level (product branding) [6]. Examples of corporate brands include Unilever, Proctor & Gamble, Virgin Group and Toyota, whereas product brands include Lipton tea, Head & Shoulders shampoo, Virgin Airlines and Lexus respectively. Several studies have highlighted that globalisation brought a shift in emphasis from product to corporate branding

[2]. This happens due to the fact that corporate brands give marketers the ability to leverage organisational vision and corporate culture as part of the point of difference when targeting customers and other stakeholders (e.g. investors, internal employees, the public) [8] and thus enables forming bonds on much deeper cognitive and emotional level.

Depending on the size and strength, multinational enterprises (MNEs) use their brands as a symbol of internationalisation [4]. This maximises the efficiencies of global operations, products and brands through economies of scale and scope in order to respond to the needs of local markets in an international context [7]. But speaking with one consistent voice in managing multicultural brands is a challenge, because MNEs often comprise of multiple subsidiaries or even employees of diverse nationalities and geographical location, resulting in the same corporate brand potentially being communicated and viewed differently in different markets [4].

Discussing the hypothetical pillar factors that must be taken into account while analysing elements of corporate brand identity, scholars underline the crucial role that notion of culture plays in corporate culture [4] and corporate branding [9], as well as its influence on perceptions formed by stakeholders. Under the present conditions of extremely high workforce and personal international mobility, the culture can no longer be simplified, restrained and defined by belonging to a nation with certain territorial borders [5]. While a classic framework of Hofstede, 1980 [3] which considers culture as a synonym of nation, is still widely applied in academic and managerial circles, culture is often viewed through the prism of social groups or belonging to a certain popular lifestyle culture. In the context of international business, it should be taken into account that an actual geographical location can change over time and modify the behavioural patterns, views and values; and language might no longer be an indicator of shared cultural norms [5].

Referring to the former level, researches often outline Western and Eastern cultures, discussing distinct differences in their life philosophy, preferences, business styles and consumer behaviour [5; 10] which are commonly based on the G. Hofstede's cultural dimensions of cross-cultural communication in business: Individualism v/s collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, masculinity v/s femininity [3] and self-restraint.

While each of these dimensions contributes to an overall corporate brand identity and image, multiple researchers stress that individualistic or collectivistic mindset of consumers plays the most distinct role in how consumers process information communicated by companies and behave as a result [10]. In individualistic cultures, a person is oriented on achieving personal benefits comparing to that of a community and value independence from others most, while in collectivistic cultures people tend to subordinate their needs to that of the larger groups and value interdependence to others

Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences [3]. Such differences are also reflected in analytical (focus on individual object) and holistic (focus on the context of the object) way of thinking, which are commonly attributed to consumers from Western and Eastern cultures respectively [10; 12].

On the level of customers' perception of brand culture, companies may choose to reinforce symbols of belonging to its country of origin and even become a cultural icon, or to minimize such effect in case of negative associations. A brand's cultural symbolism (the degree to which the brand manages to symbolize the image of a certain cultural group [13] can be communicated through visual priming, reinforcing common values and setting an example, and, if cohesive and successful, can lead to the perception of brand strength and authenticity. A common illusion with this regard is that it is much riskier to deal with customers of more distant cultures and that cultural gap always leads to negative effects.

As a conclusion, we need to address that multiple studies focus on fragmented elements of corporate branding, or focus on the issue from the perspective of only one group of stakeholders. Traditionally, academic studies and management would view any brand-related issues through visual brand identity, often forgetting about importance to reinforce it with corresponding corporate culture. Or give an emphasis on corporate culture without a clear vision of how to support the story, which company wants to tell to its stakeholders by real actions. And while multiple academics and practitioners agree on importance of aligning all the elements and acting consistently, it is still rather impossible to systemize all the multiple complex elements managers of MNEs must address while crafting cohesive corporate brand, and which of them will eventually play the most important role in forming customer loyalty.

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