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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 58 (2012) 1121 – 1130

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

Analyzing Social Responsibility as a driver of firm's Brand Awareness

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Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is understood as liabilities a person or organization has towards its social context, including people as well as physical environment, when conducting any activity whose consequences will not only affect the subject who carries it out. However, there has been scarce attention in academia and practice to CSR's influence on brand awareness. To shed light on this issue, this study gives insight on the effect CSR reporting initiatives and effective communication has in consumer's perception and knowledge of a company's brand. To achieve this goal, 16 of Spain's most renowed and well known service companies were considered, including a wide range of service-related sectors: airlines; transportation; tourism and leisure; bank and financial services; insurance; gas, petrol and electric suppliers; retailers and private security. CSR variables were measured by considering i) holding ISO 26,000 certification; ii) whether the firm is privately or state-owned; and iii) global reporting initiative (GRI) report review organism. We also controlled with the variable joining the carbon disclosure project (CDP). Findings prove the positive association between ISO 26,000 with the firm's brand awareness. Notwithstanding this, our results show private ownership firms have a negative impact on brand awareness. Considering public sector can tackle broader topics, influence greater communities and engage a greater number of stakeholders, these findings result consistent. Furthermore, it was shown that reported information being reviewed by organisms other than GRI organism is positively associated with the company's brand awareness in the service sector. This will be our contribution.

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Keyowords: Sustainability; Corporate Social Responsibility; Brand Awareness; Strategic Management.

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doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.09.1093

1. Introduction

The United Nations organization, as well as the European Union and other transnational organizations consider corporate social responsibility (CSR) as the obligations a person or organization has towards its socio-economic context, in which people as well as physical environment are included, when conducting any activity whose consequences will not only affect the subject who carries it out.

In the case of companies, responsibility is towards all its stakeholders and the environmental footprint derived from all its productive and economic activities. Clarkson (1995) determined firm's operations would be obstructed if such company fails to its major stakeholders. De Busy et al. (2003) identified employees as the most important enterprises' stakeholders as they the firm's public figure with customers, suppliers and other individuals in the social context. This premise proves to be especially true in the case of service industries, where employees are a key element in communicating the firm's essence and message (Summer, 2005).

According to the above discussion, service companies need to balance the triple bottom line elements (people, planet, and profit) in order to achieve sustainable development (Norman and MacDonald, 2004; Hacking and Guthrie, 2007; Venkatesh, 2010). Similarly, the effect of firm's CSR activities and consumer's brand awareness in the company's overall performance is an important key issue, which needs to be addressed (see, e.g., Brunk and Blumelhuber, 2011; Melo and Galan, 2011). This study tries to shed light on this topic. Thus, the effect CSR has on the most-well-known Spanish service firm's brand awareness is analyzed. Specifically, we explore whether the firm's ownership (public/private), been reviewed by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) organism; holding ISO26000 certification, and subscription to Carbon Disclosure Project guidelines may have an effect on the firm's brand awareness.

The article will be outlined in the following order. Firstly, the conceptual model and hypotheses are developed. Secondly, the empirical analysis is described, followed by detailed results. The results are then discussed with regards to implications revolving academia and practice. Limitations and recommendations for further research are addressed in the last section of this study. To the author's knowledge there are no empirical studies testing the effects of CSR reporting and activities in Spanish firm's brand awareness. In fact, there has been scarce attention in academia and practice to CSR's influence on brand awareness. This will be our contribution.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Literature on Corporate Social Responsibility and Brand Management

So far, academia has not provided many studies analyzing CSR reporting strategies and initiatives and their effects on brand awareness. Specifically, marketing studies have provided great understanding of the CSR–financial performance relationship, examining outcomes such as improved loyalty (Du et al. 2007), willingness to pay premium prices (Creyer and Ross 1996), and in crisis' circumstances, lower blamed attributions (Klein and Dawar 2004). All the aforementioned marketing results consequently promote a better financial performance for the company. For instance, Von Arx and Ziegler (2009) found the stock markets in the US and Europe (particularly US) rewarded investments in stocks of those companies with a high intensity of environmental and social activities compared with other firms in the same sector. Furthermore, Ameer and Othman's (2011) study confirmed companies emphasizing sustainability practices (i.e. CSR-related strategies and activities) have higher financial performance than firms without these initiatives.

Nonetheless, CSR's influence in marketing lacks consistent findings and is equivocal as the general business case (Margolis and Walsh 2003), due to the lack of unique definition for "CSR activity" among researchers. Maignan and Ferrell (2004, p. 17) state "past findings remain hardly comparable because they focus on specialized facets of CSR"; as researchers use a wide variety of CSR activities as center of their studies. In spite of this, Mark-Herbert and Von Schantz (2007) found that CSR actions, independently of their nature, result in a key element for creating a strong brand when being effectively communicated. Similarly, a study conducted in 2009 by Conec Inc. (an American public relations and marketing agency) concluded 79% of consumers would switch to a brand associated with a good cause.

Furthermore, information on a firm's sustainability performance, as well as enhancing its level of reliability through external parties, is positively associated with companies' market value, especially true during periods of economic uncertainty (Lackman et al., 2011). Firms also adopt CSR as a core corporative element and communicate this to the stakeholders, thus increasing the firm's positive image Bronn and Vrioni, 2011).

2.2. Service Sector and Brand Management.

According to the latest World Bank Reports, in terms of global economic development, latest trends are towards abandoning the first two sectors, namely agriculture and industry; orienting each national economy towards the service industry. In this sector; the basis is set on producing intangible goods, out of which some have existed since early modern age; e.g. education, health; while others have emerged with globalization and recent market expansion; e.g. modern information and communications as well as business services.

Services requires specific elements to deliver them; involving less material inputs (mainly raw materials) and more human capital, compared to industrial or agricultural goods. Therefore, there is a higher demand for skilled and capable workforce, with higher education, resulting in higher investment on a national scale in public and private education. Additionally, a lower use of natural resources automatically diminishes the impact on local, regional and global environment, thus reducing agriculture or industry's environmental footprint. It is therefore deemed relevant to analyze the behavior of businesses in this sector, and the relationships between them and their conducting corporate social responsibility actions.

Based on the Service Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), an emerging study-trend focuses on the value-adding processes leading to creation of the customers' experiences (Berry, 2000; de Chernatony and Segal- Horn, 2003). In this context, branding is a key factor which acts as an interface not only between the firm and end customers, but also the whole corporation, its employees and stakeholders network. Academia makes reference to this approach as the "service brand" This concept does not imply the same as branding of services. However, the terminology is used in a similar way as "where the service-centered dominant logic represents a reoriented philosophy that is applicable to all marketing offerings, including those that involve tangible output (goods) and the process of service provision" (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, p. 2). Consequently service brand is an integrative concept; being "service" superordinate to "goods" and/or "services" branding (Brodie et al., 2006).

i. The conceptual framework for the service brand is first based on the model developed by Calonius (1986), then refined by Bitner (1995) and Grönroos (1996, 2006, 2007). García et al. (2005) explains that in this framework, three different types of marketing are identified as follows: External marketing; consisting of the communication among the company and customers, where firms make promises with regards to the service offer. Then, external

marketing activities associated with "making promises"; largely makes reference to traditional communication channels and initiatives used for external marketing.

ii. Interactive marketing; mainly based on the interactions between the organization's employees or network and the final customer, where a service experience is created while being associated to the promises regarding the service offer.

iii. Internal marketing; regarding the creation of value by using processes and supporting resources, which create and deliver promises about the service offer concerning the organization and employees or people working closely with the firm.

Related to the above discussion, we can argue the internal, external and interactive marketing activities of the firm create brand perceptions of consumers, employees and the organization's. Additionally, the framework contributes to depicting service brand as a key element to integrate and align customer, organization in conjunction with employees' brand perception and attitudes. This allows us to consider the corporate brand is a combination of company image and reputation (Balmer and Gray, 2003).

In this context, there are communications building awareness of the brand name as well as its logo. Brand name for the service is in some cases the same as the firm's name. This could create a complication yet as long as names stay the same in the conceptual framework with a clearly differentiated communication about brand and company images. This barrier should not take exist. Both are separate but interrelated concepts; as interactive marketing relates interactions and experiences between the firm; service providers (front-line employees) and customers. Brodie *et al.* (2009) determine that positive experiences are associated with "making of promises" which will result in building customer trust; while if the experience is negative and it doesn't correspond to what was promised; it will lead to a loss of customer's trust. In sum, has to be made between customer trust in the service providers' behaviors and customer trust (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002 in the company's management policies and practices.

2.3. CSR and Brand Management

As stated in the Introduction section, CSR can be defined as the responsibilities a firm has towards its environment. Though there is no consensus on the definition, academia and practitioners agree the company's accountabilities can be described in two lines: those required by law - including International and local regulations applicable -, and any further voluntary actions to contribute to the community. The United Nations Organization created the Global Compact, an organization regulating firms' CSR actions, identifying human rights, labour rights environment and anti-corruption as reporting guidelines. Based on these, the Global Reporting Initiative emerged creating a framework for sustainability reporting. In these, firms can find guidelines and areas and specific information regarding what they should focus on in order to show how companies effectively commit to society.

When analysing CSR and brand management; focus will be set on three main areas: marketplace (branding, product, and services); corporate image and branding.

i) Marketplace (branding, products and services)

As it was aforementioned, the services sector is one of the most important contributors to developed countries' economies. Past research explored specifically the insurance industry how company's reputation and information on its buyer's service expectations (Yoon et al., 1993); concluding a consumer's response is consistent with the perception he/she has on the firm's reputation. Likewise,

assessing value proposition that is offered to customers and employees conducts to researchers' conclusion that there is external as well as internal branding; and both shall be analysed and strategized through a consistent lens (Fleming and Apslund, 2007).

Consumer decisions on non-CSR matters (for instance a new service) are also influenced by CSR activities; particularly in the case of CSR-sensitive publics (Klein and Dawar, 2004). Furthermore, Becker-Olsen *et al.* (2006) establish the improvement that can be achieved on consumers' beliefs, attitudes and intentions based on CSR proactive initiatives. Harrington (2008) deems crucial integrating CSR as a way in which stakeholders can be engaged thus contributing to creating and achieving competitive advantage. Podnar and Golob (2007) also perform an analysis in these lines; and following an empirical study reach to the conclusion of a high expectance from the part of consumers for firms to comply with their ethical and philanthropic outlook besides being fulfilling their legal obligations. Furthermore, Seikh and Beise-Zee (2011) state both, CSR and customer-related marketing (CRM), have a constructive effect on consumer's attitudes.

i) Corporate Image and Branding

There have been several studies concerning the consistency between companies' policies and actions with their corporate image (Williams and Barrett, 2000; Werther and Chandler, 2005; Sacconi, 2007). Dowling (1993) recognised the firm's vision, corporate strategy, culture, organizational design, and marketing communications are to be coordinated and aligned. He and Li (2011) analyzed service firms' brand management related to CSR actions. They concluded customers' loyalty is higher towards firms perceived as more socially responsible.

Bronn and Vrioni (2011) stated firms can increase their positive image by adopting CSR as a core corporative element and communicate this to the stakeholders. In line with those findings,Bigné-Alcáñiz et al. (2012) identified image based on CSR has two core antecedents: credibility and altruistic contribution; factors that firms shall take into account when incorporating socially-responsible activities and practices. It is then concluded firms shall integrate CSR into its strategy, mission and culture (transferring it to all the organization's members and actions).

Related to the association between firm's corporate names, it is worth mentioning that reputation and strategy was firstly addressed by Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). De Chernatony (1999) conceptualized brand building as a brand identity-reputation gap model of brand management; a process which should minimize the mentioned gap. Based on this argument, Harris and De Chernatony (2001) determined stakeholders should be presented with a coherent brand identity, thus requiring greater emphasis on internal brand resources for an appropriate branding.

Corporate identity has several dimensions, for instance brand loyalty, corporate culture, brand awareness, among which occur several interactions that have been fully covered by several studies (see, e.g. Balmer, 2001; Davies et al. 2001; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Also in these lines, the analysis on the attitude consumers have towards the firm based on cause-related marketing (Nan and Kwangjun, 2007), along with customer's corporate image perception are core elements of interest (Kitchin, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004). Particularly, in services sectors due to the fact that corporate brand is dominant (Yoon, 1993; LeBlanc and Nguyen, 1996; Davies et al. 2004). It helps to identify CSR as a clear brand awareness and enhancement driver (Middlemiss, 2003). Furthermore, a firm's marketing and CSR actions create a synergy in brand enhancement (Blimenthal and Bergstrom, 2003).

It is also important for companies to highlight philanthropic aspects of its culture and values, as well as its corporate social responsibility. They are essential when building stronger consumer-company bond and a positive brand attitude (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Marin and Ruiz 2007; Lii and Lee, 2012). For instance, one of the most useful firm's competitive advantages is a socially-responsible brand position (see, e.g., Dumwright, 1996; Maignan et al., 2005). This is because when a strong corporate responsibility set of values are connected to an organization; it can provide a tool to minimize anti-branding attacks affecting strong brands (Kay, 2005). Additionally through CSR and the triple bottom line approach, a strong brand can be viewed as community property, i.e. all members of a community feel identified with it and are loyal to it. If consumers co-produce brands, this can create a new paradigm for corporate branding and strong brands.

In line with the above arguments, we argue that brand awareness is affected by CSR reporting guidelines, standards, and company description. We thus propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Being partially or totally state-owned is positively associated with the company's brand awareness in the service sector.

H2: Reported information being reviewed by third parties or organisms external to the firm, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) organism, is positively associated with the company's brand awareness in the service sector.

H3: Holding an ISO 26,000 certification is positively associated with the company's brand awareness in the service sector.

3. Methodology

The effect CSR has on the most-well-known Spanish service firm's brand awareness is analyzed in this study. Specifically, we explore whether the firm's ownership (public/private), been reviewed by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) organism; and holding ISO26000 certification may have an effect on the firm's brand awareness. We focused on the Spanish service sector.

To achieve this goal, the dependent variable of this study (brand awareness) was assessed by considering data from the last report published by the *Forum of Leading Spanish Brands* (Foro de Marcas Renombradas Españolas -FMRE- www.brandsofspain.com). According to the technical specifics of this report, the research takes its theoretical basis from the concepts developed by Simonson (1993), Herr, Farquhar and Fazio (1996), and Peterson, Smith and Zerrillo (1999).

Related to the independent variables considered in this work, the firm's ownership (PRIVATE), was measured with a binary variable that takes a value of 0 when the service firm is public, and a value of 1 when the business is private. Similarly, holding ISO26000 (ISO), and been reviewed by The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) organism were assessed by a singular variable which assigns value of 3 in the case the firm does their report is only self-checked; value of 2 for those reports which were checked by a third party; value of 1 if it was reviewed by the GRI; and finally, value of 0 in the event it was assessed by the OECD.

The information for all these variables was obtained from the Global Reporting Initiative Reports, as well as information disclosed on each of the corporation's official website. In conjunction with the above mentioned independent variables, this paper controls for the Carbon Disclosure Project Guidelines (CDP)

certification. This was measured with a binary variable that takes a value of 1 when the service firm holds this certificate, and a value of 0 otherwise.

The analysis of the hypotheses proposed in this study was conducted by computing OLS regression analysis. 16 of Spain's most well-known service companies were selected, including a wide range of service-related sectors: i.e., travel services (Renfe and Iberia), entertainment and leisure (Meliá Group, NH), financial services (BSCH, La Caixa, Banco Sabadell, BBVA), retailers (El Corte Inglés), private security (Prosegur), insurance (Mafre), and energy provider (Gras Natural, Unión Fenosa, Iberdrola, Endesa, and Repsol-YPF). In order to provide conclusive evidence for firms providing services, it was deemed relevant to incorporate firms from a wide variety of economic activities.

4. Results

The descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. The analysis of the hypotheses proposed in this study was conducted by using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis to assess the market conditions that may drive international diffusion of franchising across the APAC markets. To test the existence of collinearity among the variables, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), and Tolerance were computed. As shown in Table 2, none was statistically significant, suggesting that collinearity was not a problem in our regression models.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

VARIABLES	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
BRAND	30.000	99.000	72.725	18.411
CDP	0.000	1.000	0.142	0.363
ISO26000	0.000	1.000	0.142	0.363
PRIVATE	0.000	1.000	0.380	0.506
GRIREVIEW	0.000	3.000	1.687	0.873

Table 2: Regression Analysis

Variables	ß Coefficient	t-student	p-value	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	48.462	5.795	**0.001**		
CDP	12.702	1.505	0.183	0.700	1.429
ISO26000	38.402	4.550	**0.004**	0.700	1.429
PRIVATE	-18.435	-2.778	**0.032**	0.849	1.177
GRIREVIEW	13.654	3.328	**0.016**	0.720	1.388
Dependent Variable: BRAND					
R^2	0.822				
Adjusted R^2	0.703				
F= 6.925	P-value = **0.020**				

As shown, the model proves to explain the variation in Brand Awareness (BRAND) to a degree of 70% based on the Adjusted R^2; with a statistical significance of 0.02. The premises upon which the model was constructed are deemed accurate. Related to the repressor variables, the constant ß Coefficient is statistically significant at the 0.001 level. This means that despite the fact the model collectively explain approximately 70% of variation in brand awareness contained in the sample, yet there are variables not included which could clarify on the factors affecting the variation of our dependent variable (BRAND). Moreover, Table 2 provides support to argue the significant effect of GRI review reporting, ISO 26,000 and ownership (PRIVATE) on the firm's brand awareness. Specifically, results support H3 at the 0.01 level, confirming that holding an ISO 26,000 certification positively affects the company's brand awareness in the service sector.

Furthermore, H2 was also supported at the 0.05 level. It shows that reported information being reviewed by organisms other than Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) organism is positively associated with the company's brand awareness in the service sector. As shown in Table 2 and contrary to expectations, being partially or totally state-owned is negatively associated with the company's brand awareness in the service sector. Hence, H1 was not supported, as our premise was a positive influence of this variable in BRAND.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study's results provide consistent conclusions with regards to the effects CSR actions have on brand awareness. From the factors suggested, GRI review organism proves to be a crucial factor influencing consumer's brand awareness. Consumers have higher regards for reports which have been reviewed by external organizations compared to documents issued by the firm lacking external confirmation of that information. Notwithstanding this, considering how the variable has been measured and the firms included in the study, it is not essential to be reviewed by supranational organizations (such as Global Compact; OECD; GRI; etc.).

Furthermore, reports issued by private ownership firms have been found to have a negative impact on brand awareness. Considering public sector can tackle broader topics, influence greater communities and engage a greater number of stakeholders, these findings result consistent.

With regards to holding an ISO 26,000 certification, it has also proved to be to be an element influencing consumer's brand awareness. This certification intends to assist organizations who wish to contribute to sustainable development, a feature that has also been previously evidenced as influential of consumer's loyalty and high perceptions. Then, ISO 26,000 establishes a common framework in the field of social responsibility, encouraging firms to go beyond legal compliance; another element which can influence consumer's perceptions. This is one of the few internationally recognized certifications regarding the standards for CSR actions and reporting; our findings prove the ISO 26,000 to be essential for firms to hold it in order to achieve higher brand awareness.

Considering the abovementioned findings, it shall be noted that the study is limited as the spectrum of the analysis only reaches Spanish service sector firms included in the Global Compact organization. It would be useful for a future study to analyze non-service sector (product-oriented firms), and test generalizability of the results obtained in this study. The study could be replicated for a similar sample in another geographic region different from Spain. We thus propose it as a further research line. Finally, conceptually and empirically more work is necessary to refine the model, identifying the CSR variables driving a firm's brand awareness.

In sum, the present study provides insights which prove that brand awareness of service firms depends on various CRS indicators that managers may evaluate before selecting suitable management strategy. To the author's knowledge, no previous study exists that explore this topic. We hope it serves as a useful starting point for future researchers interested in addressing this issue.

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