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UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Understand Corporate Branding in SME context: An Exploratory Study

Abstract

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) represent the fundamental majority of the world economy. They are the backbone for economy and corporate branding can be a new way for SMEs to differentiate themselves from their competitors, while improving customer satisfaction and loyalty by creating values for customers. However, existing corporate branding studies focus on more on multinational/large companies, yet corporate brand should be applied to SMEs. The existing literature on corporate brand building process in SME context is underexplored and needs to be clarified explicitly. The aim of this study is to explore corporate brand building process in the context of SMEs and to identify the antecedents and its consequences on company non-financial performance. In order to achieve the goal of this research, a qualitative approach was adopted. Fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with SME owner-managers. Snow-balling sampling was adopted in order to gain deeper understanding of corporate branding as a concept. The data was transcribed and analysed using NVivo 11 to create where themes were created to define constructs. This research aimed to provide theoretical insights to explore how the corporate branding process built within in the context of SMEs, therefore contributing to knowledge in the existing literature. Also, this study contributes to practice by helping SMEs to understand and implement corporate brand building process as a long-term strategy to have competitive advantage and to enhance their non-financial performance.

Keywords: Corporate Branding, SMEs, Emerging Markets

Track 15: Marketing and Retail

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UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Introduction

Many researchers and academics emphasize the significance and value of corporate branding (Balmer 2013; Bickerton, 2000; Balmer, 2001; Harris and De Chernatony, 2001). A well-developed corporate branding constitutes an intangible asset of a company (Fombrun, 1996; de Chernatony, 1999) in order to develop a strategic value. A strong corporate brand provides benefits to the organization with an increase in “public profile, customer attractiveness, product support, visual recognition, investor confidence, encapsulating organizational values, and staff motivation” (Balmer and Greyser, 2003, p.973). Understanding the significance of corporate branding is vital for companies because it provides the competitive advantage of a company, ensuring stakeholders’ satisfaction and loyalty and brings high profit (Griffin n, 2002).

The importance of corporate branding for companies is crucial; therefore it is studied by many researchers. However, previous studies relating to corporate branding have mostly focused on large/multinational companies (Krake, 2005; Bocconcelli et al., 2018) and disregard SMEs (Wong and Merrilees, 2005; Rode and Vallerster, 2005) despite ninety percent of all companies being SMEs in Europe (Ec.europa.eu, 2016). Branding, brand management and corporate branding for SME’s has been considerably neglected (Merrilees, 2007; Krake, 2005). Corporate branding is important for SMEs in order to grow in the market (Berthon et al, 2008; Abimbola, 2001; Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Wong and Merrilees, 2005). Although SMEs are smaller in size, emerging researches have shown that SMEs should be aware of using corporate branding (corporate communications) in order to give right messages to their internal and external stakeholders for creating value (Gabrielli and Balboni, 2010; Nielsen and Thomsan, 2009). However, owing to limited work in this context, it is unclear of the exact process of corporate brand management within the SME context.

Corporate branding is defined differently from previous scholars; According to Balmer (2013), the corporate brand is an unofficial contract (promise), and fulfilment of the promise (Riley and De Chernatony, 2000), which is given by the company to its internal stakeholders. Others explain the corporate brand as an organizational identity (Abratt and Kleyn 2012; Schultz and Hatch 2008) and its visual, verbal and behavioral expression (Knox and Bickerton 2000). On the other hand, Urde (2003) defined corporate branding more comprehensively as corporate branding refers to the process which is composed of organizational core values. These values which cover both internal and external perceptions classified under three; organization values, brand values and customer values. Even though organizations seem sharing similar core values, their explicating and expression are become dissimilar. A corporate brand cannot be limited with only the corporation itself, it can be reflected by its subsidiaries.

Although, it is known that a corporate brand provides value, competitive advantage, satisfaction and loyalty (Davies et al. 2003), very little is known about the SMEs corporate brand building process and its effects on their performance. This study, therefore, provides theoretical insights and practical advice in order to explore how the corporate branding process is built within SMEs. For this purpose, the research objectives of this study are considered as 1) to explore how corporate branding forms in SME context 2) to investigate how operationalize and measures the concepts at SME corporate brand level and 3) to develop a comprehensive conceptual model to understand three core values and their impact on SME Performance. For this reason, fifteen semi-structured

UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

in-depth interviews with SME owners- manager were conducted in order to get their point of view on Corporate Branding concept.

The present study examines the corporate brand building process in SME context and identify the antecedents and its consequences on performance. The main aim of this identifying key themes if corporate branding in this context. Main research questions are:

- How corporate branding is defined at SMEs level? **RQ1**
- How corporate brand has impact on SME non-financial performance? **RQ**

Literature Review

Marketing Strategies of SMEs

SMEs are pivotal engine of European economy by triggering the economic growth, creating jobs for the unemployed, increasing productivity, encouraging innovation and enabling social stability (European Commission, 2016). Many scholars claim that definition of SMEs may differ according to the industry, country (Atkins and Lowe, 1997) and statistical issues. The European Union defines the SMEs according to two criteria; annual turnover or balance sheet total and staff headcount. According to this criteria, SMEs are enterprises with less than 250 employees or with less than \leq € 50 m annual turnovers. SMEs are divided in three relating to their employee number micro-sized (<10), small-sized (<50) and medium-sized (<250). Ninety percent of Europe enterprises are comprised by micro-sized SMEs (Ec.europa.eu, 2016).

SMEs do not only comprise a large percentage of the European economy, but they also contribute to the economic growth by creating jobs for the unemployed, thus increasing productivity and encouraging innovation. Classic Marketing approach such as 4P, planning marketing research strategy is only for large organizations, requires more skills and financial resources (Kotler et al., 2008; Jobber 2009). However; SMEs have their own constraints .They do not have professional knowledge regarding marketing and branding activities (Gilmore et al., 2006). According to Krake (2005), owners- managers of SMEs are the key decision makers responsible for the implementation of branding within SMEs. Their main constraints are time and the financial budget for branding (Merrilees 2005). They have short-term plans and small budgets for marketing in compare to large companies. SMEs have flexibility and close interactions with stakeholders compare to large companies, thus branding activities must be immediate strategic plans for them. SMEs usually have a misunderstanding of corporate branding by thinking it requires too much resources. However, corporate branding starts with a covenant and identity before the establishment of the company. There is a conformity among SME branding researchers that the corporate branding in this context is under-researched and it is surprisingly difficult to find a paper dedicated to SME corporate branding (M'zungu, Merrilees and Miller, 2019). So this study is focusing on SMEs and how exactly Corporate Branding is implement and provide benefit.

Corporate Branding and Its Components

UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Even though the term ‘corporate branding’ was born almost 20 years ago in literature (Balmer, 1995), it still continues to develop. Academics define corporate branding in different ways. According to Balmer (2013), the corporate brand is an unofficial contract (promise), and fulfilment of this promise (Riley and De Chernatony, 2000), which is given by the institution or organization to its stakeholders. Others explain the corporate brand as an organizational identity (Abratt and Kleyn 2012; Schultz and Hatch 2008) and its visual, verbal and behavioral expression (Knox and Bickerton 2000). On the other hand, Urde (2003) states that the corporate branding process comprises of organizational core values. The existing definitions of Corporate Branding from different perspective is summarized in table below:

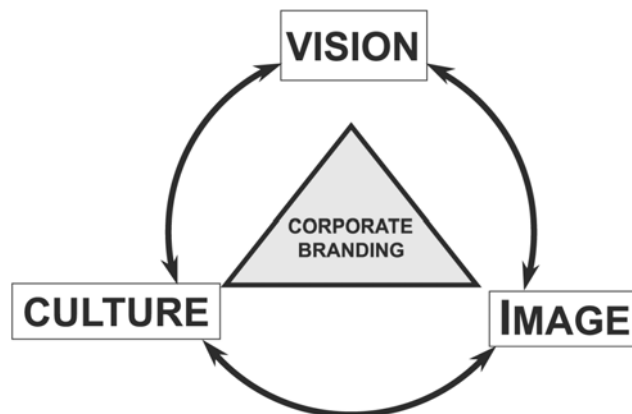
Table 1: Corporate Branding Definitions

Defined as	
Contract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal contract (covenant) between institutional brand and its stakeholders (Balmer, 2013) • Marks, Image building devices, and symbols (associated with key values) (Balmer and Gray, 2003) • Reciprocity, mutual exchange, and fulfilment of promises (Riley and De Chernatony, 2000)
Organization Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expression and images of organization`s identity (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012) • Corporate identity (Melewar, 2003) • A strategic asset to differentiate from competitors and manage the organizational identity (Schultz and Hatch, 2008) • A tool to differentiate organizations in the minds of stakeholders and particular customers (Olins, 1995, p.16)
Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate branding process is combination of core values; organization, brand and customer values (Urde, 2003) •

According to Schultz and Hatch (2008) a successful corporate brand is a valuable strategic asset for the company, which provides market access and penetration, and differentiation from its competitors. Schultz and Hatch proposed a model illustrated in Figure 1 shows affective corporate brand requires a continuous alignment between vision, culture and images. In their model, vision reflects the organizational identity and claim that a holistic and bilateral relationship between managers, employees and stakeholder exists.

Figure 1: Schultz & Hatch`s Corporate Branding Model

UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY



Based on Schultz & Hatch Model 2008

Schultz and Hatch (2008, p.68) states that alignment between corporate vision (identity), image and culture is essential for a successful corporate branding. However, corporate reputation cannot be excluded from this sequence. Pringle and Gordon (2001) define this alignment as conformity between the internal and external values of the organization. Therefore the external stakeholder rather than the customers is an important part of external value. Briefly, conformity starts with a corporate identity (manager), the vision is then passed to the employees, who carry the message to both the customers and other external stakeholders. Thus, the owner and/or manager, employees, customers and other stakeholders should behave and carry the same message in accordance with the corporate identity for the success of the corporate brand. It is therefore concluded that the larger the gap between the corporate branding components which are corporate identity, corporate culture, corporate image and corporate reputation, the poorer the success of the corporate brand will be. For a strong corporate brand it is important to have a consistency between corporate identity and corporate image of the company (Fombrun, 1996; Hatch and Schultz, 2001). Corporate image is a mirror for the whole corporate identity and culture.

A successful corporate brand differentiates the company from its competitors, combines all its stakeholders and makes them feel part of the company (Schultz and Hatch, 2008 p.100). In addition, it makes a contribution to the company by increasing “public profile, customer attractiveness, product support, visual recognition, investor confidence, encapsulating organizational values and staff motivation” (Balmer, 2003 p.302). The corporate brand presents values to its internal and external stakeholders. Thus, this value offers differentiation, competitive advantage, satisfaction and good financial performance (Alwi and Silva, 2007), reputation, loyalty (Davies et al. 2003) and profitability (Griffin n, 2002).

Previous research (Roberts and Dowling, 2002) found that companies that has a good corporate reputation are highly related to company’s strategic values that provide them competitive advantage and high return. A strong corporate reputation provides better financial returns to the company (Chun, 2005) and represents a strong relationship between the company and its stakeholders (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012). In addition to financial return, corporate reputation helps companies to build, sustain and defend that reputation by having a unique identity and build a consistent and coherent corporate image (Fombrun, 1996). Through the corporate reputation

UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

companies might build a close relationship with customers by letting them to focus on not only product quality but also the company as a whole.

On the other side, it helps companies to improve stakeholders' perception related to quality (Grewal et al., 1998) that encourages them to investment decision and product choices (Fombrun et al., 2000). Similarly, a favorable corporate reputation increases employee motivation, productivity, employee retention rate, enhancing recruitment process (Turban and Cable, 2003) and attract high quality employees to the organization (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). Previous studies claim that, there is a positive relationship between corporate reputation and corporate value (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Godfrey, 2005; Houston, 2003).

Abimbola and Vallaster (2007) highlighted that the entrepreneurs are the role models who actively affect the organizational culture, business approach and daily basis decision-making of their companies. As a consequence of that, SMEs organizational identity is usually a reflection of personality and characteristic of SMEs' the owner/manager (Olins, 1978). Similarly, Rode and Vallaster (2005) proposed that owner and/or manager of the company inspire the distinctiveness of the company. The viewpoint and experiences of the owner and/or manager of the company strongly shape the identity of the firm (Wickham, 2001).

Even though large companies focus on to improve the corporate brand to get competitive advantage, generally SMEs has pretty close and frequent relationship with their stakeholders. For instance they can build long-term relationship between its external and internal stakeholders (Johanson and Mattsson, 1988). This close relationship and networking provide to improve SMEs' corporate brand as a consequence their corporate value. Benefits related to SMEs surviving and financial achievements lead companies to improve their corporate reputation (Shaw, 1995).

Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty

Company performance is explained with financial and non-financial performance. Financial performance refers to the company profit, stock returns, price, and cost of capital investments. On the other hand, non-financial performance refers to the company reputation, customer satisfaction and loyalty. The main concern of this research to explore how corporate branding enhance the non-financial performance of the SMEs. Thus, performance explained by satisfying customers and having long term loyal customers.

According to Oliver (1999, p.42) "*customer satisfaction is an essential and necessary ingredient for the emergence of loyalty. Although satisfaction may not be the core element of loyalty, particularly after loyalty has been established, it is difficult to entertain loyalty development without satisfaction*". Studies show that customer satisfaction is a trigger for customer loyalty, which will affect the financial performance of the company (Anderson et al., 1994; Ittner and Larcker, 1998; Chun and Davies, 2006). There are two different approaches about definition of satisfaction, whether it should be defines as *process* or *outcome* (Yi, 1990). According to Davies et al., (2003), customer satisfaction is in compliance with corporate branding that takes place with the customers experience with the organization after consumption of good or service.

UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Selnes (1993) defines the customer loyalty as “*intended behaviour related to a product or service*”. Customer loyalty is related to probability of repeating purchase in future or renewal of contract for service. When customers are satisfied with the company, product or brand, they might to continue the relationship with that company (Selnes, 1993). Loyalty might be express with the word-of-moth, if customers recommend product or the company to the others, it is an indicator of strong loyalty (Selnes, 1993) According to scholars (Dick and Basu, 1994; Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978) loyalty has two-dimensional constructs; attitude and behavior. Attitude refers to the consumers` attitude towards the company or the brand. Behaviour refers to the repeating purchase behaviour for same brand or company (Dick and Basu, 1994).

Methodology

Adopting a research philosophy is has an influence on research approach and methods (Collis and Hussey, 2014). Chosen research paradigm reveals the way to reach the purpose of the study. This study has an interpretivist stance in where knowledge is not obvious, in order to reveal it, deep thinking is needed (Schwandt, 2000). Thus, inductive research approach used that start by collecting detailed information from the participants and then create categories and themes according to the information to narrow the scope of research. Created categories or themes are developed into model or theory (Creswell, 2014, p.65). To achieve research aim and objectives, this research was conducted qualitative analysis.

The qualitative analysis are conducted not only get a better understanding of the research phenomenon but also to explore any additional measurements items which are different than existing ones (Churchill, 1979; Steckler et al., 1992; Creswell et al., 2003). In order to aim to enhance conceptual model and increasing validity of the research, this study has conducted the qualitative study (Robson, 1993). Interviews are one of the common qualitative data collection methods which allow for gathering comprehensive information from participants who experienced the research phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). Semi-structured interviews preferred to follow the set of themes, but at the same time, the researcher might ask new questions to probing into the phenomenon (Mazaheri et al., 2013).

Semi-structured interview with fifteen Turkish retail SME owners/managers was conducted to gain deeper insight on corporate branding in the emerging markets, Turkish context. Interview questions derived from the existing literature and the researchers` assumptions. Interview questions help participants to convey their opinions or knowledge more explicitly without constraints. The main themes which are identified before the interviews are corporate branding concept, barriers to have a corporate brand, relationship with stakeholders, SME success and growth. Snowballing sampling techniques is adopted for qualitative data collection. Table 2 presents the sample of study.

Table 2: List of Interview Participants

	Person				Company			
	Sex	Position	Age	Education	Industry	B2B - B2C	Size	Age

**UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN
EXPLORATORY STUDY**

1st Interviewee	M	Owner	48	High School	Furniture Manufacturing	B2C (Global)	30	20
2nd Interviewee	F	Manager	43	High School	Chemistry Manufacturing	B2C (Local)	25	10
3rd Interviewee	M	Owner	55	Elementary School	Oil/Fuel Sale	B2C (Local)	8	65
4th Interviewee	M	Owner	38	High School	Food	B2B (Local)	13	13
5th Interviewee	M	Owner	31	High School	Transportation	B2B/B2C (Local)	10	4.5
6th Interviewee	M	Co-Partner	40	High School	Excavation Machine Production	B2B/B2C (Local)	20	19
7th Interviewee	M	Manager	38	Primary School	Machine Production	B2C (Global)	100	25
8th Interviewee	M	Manager	37	Bachelor	Manufacturing (Tea Boilers)	B2B/B2C (Local)	230	20
9th Interviewee	M	Owner	62	Elementary School	Food	B2B (Global)	28	23
10th Interviewee	M	Manager	35	Bachelor	Manufacturing (Clothes)	B2B (Global)	60	30
11th Interviewee	M	Owner	26	Bachelor	Food	B2B (Global)	45	2
12th Interviewee	M	Owner	38	Bachelor	Pharmacy	B2C (Local)	4	14
13th Interviewee	M	Owner	26	High School	Car-Repair	B2C (Local)	10	30
14th Interviewee	M	Co-Partner	48	High School	Food	B2C (Local)	20	2
15th Interviewee	M	Owner	46	High School	Infrastructure Sale	B2C (Local)	1	3

Based on the existing literature and results of qualitative data which was examined through NVivo 11 to identify key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After 15 interviews were conducted within 4 weeks, the transcripts are translated from Turkish to English, the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews was inserted into NVivo 11 software. Coding was designed based on the literature and transcripts, in order to explore the items from interviews Thematic Analysis is adopted to analyze the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is “*a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data*”. Basically, it is a method to organize and describe dataset in detail. In the thematic analysis, recurring themes are defined as data for qualitative analysis (Braun and Wilkinson, 2003, p.30). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.61, 96 and 116), there are three coding levels under grounded theory methodology; open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding is “*the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data*” (Collis and Hussey, 2014, p. 178). Open coding is the basic level of coding, it includes initial coding; first interview data was read, breaking down and labelled as a node in order to be more recognizable and clearer. During this

UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

process, 68 initial free codes are revised and categorized based on potential themes from interviews. And then similar concepts were put under same categories or subcategories. In the next stage, axial coding was used as an extension of open coding. Axial coding is “*a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories*” (Collis and Hussey, 2014, p. 179). Axial coding differs from open coding with connecting categories or subcategories in more conceptual level. The link between items was identified according to study constructs. In this study, open coding and axial coding were used to explore constructs and identified measurement items. Produced items for each measurement will later be used further quantitative study to validate model and generalized findings. Interview guide composed of five sections that is summarized in in Table 3:

Table 3: Interview Guideline

Themes	Related Questions
1. SME Owner-Manager and Company	This section includes questions about the personal detail of the participant such as gender, age, marital status, and experience in the industry, their role in the company. Moreover, questions regarding the company for which interviewee works asked, such as company history, size, age, industry.
2. Corporate Branding Concept	This section aims to explore the concept of corporate branding from the perspective of SME owner-manager and to explore their understanding of the concept. These questions aim to enlighten how SMEs might have a corporate brand and what kind of process they need to follow.
3. Barriers to having Corporate Brand	With this section, it is aimed to what makes SME owner-manager hesitate to have a corporate brand in their company.
4. Relationship with Company Stakeholders	This section aimed to understand SMEs and their relationship with stakeholders such as customers, suppliers. If SME is a human how their stakeholders define the company. Questions asked to identify who are the most important stakeholder for the SMEs which has a major role to decide on quantitative data collection sample.
5. Success and Growth	This section aims to understand what are the main aim and objectives of the company in the short and long term. Is financial or non-financial indicators are important for SME success.

Findings

UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

In this study, corporate brand building process in SME context examined and the antecedents and its consequences on performance are identified and described. Information gathered from semi-structured interview shows in alignment between the existing literature. Items identified from qualitative data relatively show similarity with existed items in the literature.

According to the semi-structured interviews, SMEs want to have a corporate brand but there is a misconception about corporate brandings, such as it requires more financial resource, more human expertise. For example, they believe when they grow enough, they might have a corporate brand in their organization.

“Large companies have corporate branding not SMEs like us. For example, if we ask anyone from here and ask “give an example for the corporate brand in Kayseri city?” everyone will remember BOYDAK (largest company in the area) because they are a large company and working professionally. For example in those companies, all works are not carried out by only one, they have different departments such as marketing department is separate, the sales department is different, production is different. But in SME case, everything is bound up only one person. So we do not have corporate branding, and there cannot be corporate branding in SMEs.” (Interview 4)

Understanding of Corporate Branding: In regard to the corporate brand definition it is a process which is a combination of core values; organization, brand and customer values (Urde, 2003) the comments of interviewees are in line with the existing literature. The SME owner and/or manager are aware of corporate branding, which is more comprehensive than product branding and entrepreneurial branding.

“Corporate Branding is not related to only one product. It begins when a customer enters the door. Everything such as; entrance the door, cars belongs to the company, the appearance of staff (their hair, dress, nail polish, watch) should represent our company. Because we believe “people welcome you with your appearance and send with your ideas”. People recognize the brand, first posture, appearance and attitude of the salesperson.” (Interview 2)

Align with the literature; corporate branding cannot be limited with one stakeholder of the company, it has a multi-stakeholder orientation, corporate branding targets all stakeholders and all products and brand of the organization. Implementation of corporate branding is required the overall support (Balmer and Gray, 2003).

“For corporate branding case, all employees represent the company, which means the employees have responsibilities too. Thus, they work to make our company name well-known and solve the flaws and mistakes without coming to us. Because of that, they work here in the long-term and take responsibility in the workplace. This also lessens our burden.” (Interview 9)

Entrepreneur Personality: The participants were agreed on the importance of personality of SME owner and/or manager on all decision, similar to literature. SME owner and/or manager are the key decision makers and responsible for most of the company activities. Their personality and behavioural characters have a strong influence on their decisions (Burns, 2010). Carson and Gilmore (2000) claimed that SMEs marketing competency is directly related to owner and/or manager's marketing skill, for example:

UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

“I am the only one who is responsible for everything in here. Employees start and leave the job, this is not important. However, if I left, this company would collapse. I, Ms. XX must be here all the time. While everything is bound up to me, I cannot expand the business because of my health issues... self-confidence is the other component of making a sale. I believe self-confidence is the half of the success. If I said I am going to do this, I would definitely do it.” (Interview 2)

Product/Service Quality: Corporate branding provides more sense of trust and quality to its stakeholder (Balmer and Gray, 2003). SME owners and/or managers are the key decision makers and responsible for most of the company activities.

“Our customers know that we are not going to sell a broken, damaged product, they trust us, and we try not to let them down.” (Interview 9)

Corporate Image: The corporate image in the research is the general idea of how customers perceive the company (Davies and Chun, 2002). Based on the comments from participant it seems that they define the company according to their interactions of all communication, impressions, feelings, beliefs and their knowledge about it. For instance, participants want their customers to define themselves with the identity they want to have such as; flexible, friendly, honest, innovative, planned, proactive, problem-solver, sincerity, supportive, trustworthy, unique.

“Our customers believe our name, I and my partner are known as trustworthy, and always prefer quality. Our employees know us earlier than this business.” (Interview 14)

Company Performance: Company performance has been presented with financial indicators such as; profit, market share, growth rate. However, financial indicators show only past performance of the company, while SMEs are focusing on long-term relationship and non-financial performance. Even though financial performance was asked to the participants, several times, they emphasize the customer satisfaction and loyalty. Trust is more important than the financial gain; according to the participant customer satisfaction is more important. They believe that satisfied and loyal customers will help to enhance financial performance in time. Participants explain what company success means for them.

“Sometimes, even though we know we will make a loss, we accept the work; the aim of this is improving relations with customer and gains their trust for future works. It seems we have lost in the first work, but we will gain it in the long term.” (Interview 4)

“Success is on-time delivery, customers’ satisfaction and pay taxes on time.” (Interview 13)

Discussion

This study proposes key indicators on how SME firms could achieve a more effective positioning of their businesses and differentiation over their competitors through a corporate branding approach (Schultz and Hatch, 2008), which in turn will help to sustain the firm in the longer term (Balmer, 2006).

Little is known about the corporate branding in SME context. Thus this study aim to explore how entrepreneur personality characteristics effect the corporate branding for better performance in SME context. And what are the ante cents of the corporate image. The study result shows that entrepreneurial personality is one of the major antecedent of corporate image. SME customers

UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

have a close relationship with of owner/manager of the company. Align with the literature (Rode and Vallaster (2005), personality characteristic of Entrepreneur has an impact on the corporate brand.

Besides, even though the corporate branding is more holistic approach to product branding, they are quietly intertwined, similar to literature (Ojasalo, Nätti and Olkkonen, 2008), in this context it is better not to separate them. Product/Service quality is the most favorable marketing tools. SMEs are well-known with product-driven approach, which is considered to be less effective as it focuses mostly on functional values, daily operations as a result of SMEs' lack of time, human and financial resources (Mowle and Merrilees, 2005). Although Witt and Rode (2005) argue that building a corporate brand image for the SMEs should begin with a well-developed corporate identity from the founding of the company, but this is not usually the case for many firms where a more marketing process relying on more tactical (4Ps) such as product and communication are the common approach. Communicating the firm at product/services level limits the capability of image and reputation building and thus is a less sustainable form of differentiation (de Chernatony et al, 2000).

Finally, Hirvonen and Laukkanen (2014) found a positive relationship between brand identity and brand performance. Brand identity helps to create an emotional bond between customers and brand. Thus, it helps to enhance their loyalty, trust and commitment to the company (Ghodeswar, 2008). Additionally, it is claimed that there is a positive relationship between brand identity and brand equity (Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, and McDonald, 2005). Similarly, our findings show that non-financial performance, the customer satisfaction is important to build a long-term relationship with customers that will help to strengthen the customer loyalty.

Managerial implications of this study presenting a new comprehensive branding approach (corporate brand) to SMEs firstly through a strategic level before engaging with tactical (4Ps) approach. By proposing important themes, this could help SME firms to communicate their philosophies and stances better, become a competitive brand and achieve better performance.

Future developments of this work will propose a framework and empirically test it in order to validate model and generalize findings.

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UNDERSTANDING CORPORATE BRANDING IN SME CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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