Time Dimension in Consumers’ Image Construction Processes:
Introducing Image Heritage and Image-in-Use

2010

Key words: Image heritage, Image-in-use, consumer, branding, time dimension

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Helsinki 2010

ISSN 0357-4598
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TIME DIMENSION IN CONSUMERS’ IMAGE CONSTRUCTION PROCESSES: INTRODUCING IMAGE HERITAGE AND IMAGE-IN-USE

Research paper

This paper focuses on the time dimension in consumers’ image construction processes. Two new concepts are introduced to cover past consumer experiences about the company – image heritage, and the present image construction process - image-in-use. Image heritage and image-in-use captures the dynamic, relational, social, and contextual features of corporate image construction processes. Qualitative data from a retailing context were collected and analysed following a grounded theory approach. The study demonstrates that consumers’ corporate images have long roots in past experiences. Understanding consumers’ image heritage provides opportunities for understanding how consumers might interpret management initiatives and branding activities in the present.

KEYWORDS: Image heritage, Image-in-use, consumer, branding, time dimension
TIME DIMENSION IN CONSUMERS’ IMAGE CONSTRUCTION PROCESSES: INTRODUCING IMAGE HERITAGE AND IMAGE-IN-USE

1. Introduction

Since the 1950’s it has been recognized that brand images are a source for revenue for the company (see e.g. Best Global Brands; Martineau 1958; 2009) Since, it has also been recognized that the brand image is “in the eye of the beholder” (Stern, Zinkhan et al. 2001) built up and acquired over a period of time (Gardner and Levy 1955). Keller defines brand images as “consumer perceptions of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumers’ memory” (Keller 1993; 2008, 86). These associations refer to any aspect linked to the brand held in the consumer’s memory (Aaker 1996).

Branding researchers have developed several models focusing on how consumers perceive and evaluate brands by focusing on certain knowledge structures in the consumers’ minds (1993; e.g. Aaker 1996; Kotler 2003; Keller 2008). Keller’s customer-based brand equity model (CBBE) takes a temporal focus on brand images through its basic assumption that the “power of a brand lies in what customers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time”. Keller’s, as well as a number of other brand scholars’ approaches, are based on various memory network models (e.g. Krishnan 1996; van Osselaer and Alba 2000; van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2001; Warlop, Ratneshwar et al. 2005) focusing on how consumer memory works in a brand context. This paper furthers the understanding of what resides in the consumers’ memory buy focusing on the time dimension in the corporate image construction process. With the time dimension we mean, what specific past experiences do consumers use as an interpretation framework when constructing corporate images in the present? And, how do these past
experiences resonate with the company’s branding history, its brand heritage (Aaker 1996)? These two questions have not to our knowledge been explored in a branding context empirically before, although some authors have urged for this kind of understanding (e.g. Ballantyne and Aitken 2007).

As corporate brand image is considered to be of importance to the success of the company (Koll and von Wallpach 2009), and consumer, and other stakeholder group understanding is considered essential in effective brand management (see e.g. Balmer and Greyser 2003) to explore what resides in consumer memory, and how it influences on the corporate brand image in the present, is of great significance to a company’s success. Seen from a neuroscientist view, “much of what we take for granted as “the way the worlds is” – as we perceive it – is in fact what we have learned about the world – as we remember it.”(Solms and Turnbull 2002, 154)

This paper introduces two new empirically grounded concepts for understanding the time dimension in the consumer’s corporate brand image construction process: *image heritage* and *image-in-use*. Image heritage stands for an individual consumer’s earlier company-related experiences from multiple sources over time activated in a certain situation for interpreting the present company-related experience into images. The concept image-in-use depicts this very moment in the present when the consumer is constructing and reconstructing corporate brand images by reflecting and comparing the present experience with past experiences, the image heritage. Solms and Turnbull explain perception as an automatic reconstruction: “we all automatically reconstruct the reality we perceive from
models we have stored in our memories” (Solms and Turnbull 2002, 155) and argue that humans largely construct rather than perceive the world around them.

The concepts have been developed based on an empirical study with a grounded approach in a retailing context. Thus, the approach is both explorative and novel. The concepts capture the dynamic, temporal, contextual, social and cultural dimensions of consumers’ corporate image construction processes. In conclusion, this paper is rather based on a view on consumers as active constructors of images, meaning and brand relationships (Fournier 1998) than on consumers as passive receivers of messages (for a discussion, see e.g. Gordon 2006; Aitken, Brendan et al. 2008; Merz, He et al. 2009). Therefore, image is considered to be a process rather than an entity (for a typology, see Stern 2006). This approach has been urged for in recent articles by for example Ballantyne and Aitken (2007), and Merz, He and Vargo (2009).

The paper starts with an overview on how the temporal dimension has been recognized within brand image research earlier. Then, methodological considerations are discussed, where after image heritage and image-in-use as concepts are introduced based on an empirical study. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications of the findings on branding research and future research directions are discussed.

2. The time dimension in consumer images
On conceptual level, reputation is the concept most saliently referred to for depicting the time dimension in consumers’ corporate brand images within the field of brands. Fombrun and van Riel (2003) define corporate reputations as:
A corporate reputation is a collective representation of a firm’s past actions and results that describes the firm’s ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders. It gauges a firm’s relative standing both internally with employees and externally with its stakeholders, in both its competitive and institutional environments (Fombrun and Van Riel 2003, 230).

Reputation is regarded as being formed over time based on company actions (Balmer & Greyser, 2003) as a collective representation of the company (Simms and Trott 2006).

Image on the other hand is an individual level concept constructed based on a multiple-variable impression formation process located in the interaction among organizational texts, environmental and individual or personal factors (Williams and Moffitt 1997).

Thus, there is a difference between the concepts *image* and *reputation* both on the locus and source of construction. Regardless of that some scholars use the concepts of image and reputation interchangeable (for a literature review, see Barnett, Jermier et al. 2006) some scholars argue for a particular hierarchy. In line with Wei’s (2002) argumentation based on the present empirical study we suggest that image should subsume reputation as reputation was found to be in the present study one dimension in the consumers’ corporate brand image construction processes.

Nevertheless, within branding literature, the time dimension is both implicitly and explicitly frequently referred to. For example, Christensen and Askegaard point out that “today most people only have time and capacity to relate to a small fraction of the symbols and messages produced by contemporary organizations” (2001, 297). Dowling (2002) claims further that it is more cost-effective for companies to build on existing knowledge about a corporate image “than to create desired images from scratch”.

Additionally, Hatch and Schultz (2002, 204) point out that the timeline in corporate branding is long (life of a company) as corporate brand images live both in the past and the future. Schultz and Hatch (2003) studied the Lego company and suggest that finding the
right balance between respecting a company’s authentic brand heritage and making this heritage relevant to current and future consumers is an ongoing corporate branding concern. The question arises however, which company actions has the consumer notified and what does s/he hold in memory? All company actions over time or only a small part of them, and what part? More recently, Aaker suggested that companies could benefit from “going back to their roots and identify what made them special and successful in the first place” (Aaker 2004, 7). In conclusion, “the facts of the past might not be in doubt, but their meaning always is” (Gioia, Schultz et al. 2000, 71).

Within branding, explicit studies or models notifying the time dimension are few. Dowling’s (2002, 204) model on factors affecting the consumers’ corporate images includes the dimension of “previous experiences with the company and its product/service”, although the dimension is not elaborated on. Dowling’s notion of earlier experiences is of importance as it indicates that consumers’ image constructions are processes influenced by how the consumers’ have experienced the company and its messages earlier.

Braun-La Tour, La Tour and Zinkhan (2007) studied the meaning of childhood memories in present brand preferences. In their study the focus was on automobile memories by three generations of automobile consumers. Findings of their study illustrate how childhood memories symbolize the consumer-brand relationship. In the study the authors used earliest memories (EM) and defining memories (DM) as projective techniques to uncover brand meanings. The authors found in their study that earliest memories occur at the average age of six and defining memories at the average age of 14. Based on the memories, the authors created a memory network map, which the authors suggest can provide insight for marketers. The authors emphasize that previous academic studies focusing on the meaning
of childhood experiences from a brand preferences and relationship perspective are non-existing, although within consultancy the recognition of the issue has been successful. The major implication the authors suggest is that automobile manufacturers should be aware of the role the product has played in consumers’ past for gaining insight into what consumers want in the future (2007). The Braun-La Tour et al. study does not, however, focus on the time dimension per se, but on particularly childhood memories influencing present product choice. The findings are however, supported by Zaltman (Braun-La Tour, La Tour et al. 2007) “Marketers actions, intentional or not, help consumers re-present a particular past experience in new and different terms” (198).

Simms and Trott (2003) qualitative study is also positioned within car industry concerning the BMW Mini’s brand image. In the study, they divided brand associations into two categories, those in relation to the history and heritage, and, those in relation to the product and its personality. They conclude that for the success of the new BMW Mini the brand heritage is vital, although the new BMW Mini car is a very different car from Issigonis’ design classic, yet the history has come to be considered a common among consumers. In sum, the time dimension of brand image, and its importance is notified within the branding literature, yet empirical studies are few.

From an organizational perspective, Aaker (1996) introduced the concept ‘brand heritage’ as part of the brand identity process and more specifically, as part of the company’s strategic brand analysis and self-analysis. Aaker recommends considering and analyzing earlier company actions, its heritage, history and reputation. However, Aaker does not elaborate on the concept further.
Urde, Greyser and Balmer (2007) introduced the concept ‘heritage brands’ into corporate branding. In their literature review they explored the concept “heritage” and its use as a part of corporate brand identity, and identified three approaches in the branding context associated to heritage, namely, retro branding, iconic branding and heritage marketing. The authors define heritage brands as “a dimension of a brand’s identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and particularly in an organisational belief that its history is important” (2007, 4). The authors point out that the difference between focusing on an organization’s history or heritage in a corporate branding context is embedded in the time dimension. They point out, that whereas history is grounded in past times is heritage grounded in past, present and future. Urde et al (2007) suggest that heritage brands not only have a heritage but their positioning and value proposition has been based on its heritage over a long period of time supported by customer-based beliefs. However, the locus for both brand heritage and heritage brands is the company as the concepts are grounded in the company’s corporate brand strategies over time. We may ask, how have consumers, customers and other stakeholder groups followed these strategies, what do they remember and why? And more importantly, what is the role of these memories over time in their current corporate brand images?

Taking a consumer-focus, memory is frequently referred to when considering the temporal dimension in corporate brand images. Keller’s (2007) customer-based brand equity model (CBBE) notifies the temporal dimension on brand images through consumer memory as the basic assumption is that “the power of a brand lies in what customers have learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time. In other words,
the power of a brand lies in what resides in the minds of customers” (59). However, the perspective on equity is grounded on the organization’s view of the corporate brand, as Keller specifies that marketers both are the creators and the source for brand equity and it occurs “when the consumer has high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and holds some strong favourable, and unique brand associations in memory (2003).

To our knowledge, no concept exists to define or describe the understanding on the temporal dimension of corporate brand images on the individual level. Therefore, in this paper the concept image heritage is suggested as a concept for understanding the temporal dimension in individual consumer’s corporate brand images. Table 1 summarizes the discussion of the concepts, perspectives and approaches recognizing a time dimension within branding literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Time dimension</th>
<th>Company/ organisation</th>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Consumer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past, Present and Future</td>
<td></td>
<td>Heritage Brands</td>
<td></td>
<td>Image Heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Urde et al. 2007)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Image-in-Use (Rindell 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td></td>
<td>Brand Heritage</td>
<td>Reputation (Fombrun et al. 2003, 230)</td>
<td>Memory (e.g. Braun-La Tour, La Tour, Zinkhan 2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Concepts, perspectives and approaches with a time dimension
Empirical research focusing on the time dimension in consumers’ corporate image construction processes is also scarce. Thus, there is a need to increase our understanding of the time dimension of consumers’ image construction processes for understanding how past, present, and future merge in the corporate brand image construction process (see e.g. Zaltman 2003).

3. Methodology

This article is based on an empirical study focusing on how consumers construct their corporate brand images, and especially on the time dimension in the consumer’s image construction process. The question posed to all informants was: “What comes to mind when you hear [the name of the company]?” The informants were not informed in advance about the purpose of the study nor the case company. Therefore, the data represents in situ.

The data was collected and analyzed following a grounded theory emerging approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). In total a convenience sample of 23 informants, aged from 21 years to 75 years, took part in the study. Data consists of 12 open-ended in-depth interviews, 11 written accounts, a video-taped group interview, and 7 learning diaries following an emerging multiple-method approach based on theoretical sampling in line with Glaser and Strauss’s view that data can consist of anything that might explain the subject matter (1967). In Table 2 the process of data collection and the analysis is depicted.
### Table 2 Data collection and analysis in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>21-31 years</th>
<th>42-59 years</th>
<th>Over 60 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003 Phase 1</td>
<td>2 interviews</td>
<td>2 interviews</td>
<td>2 interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 Phase 2</td>
<td>11 written accounts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 Phase 3</td>
<td>Group interview with 5 participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 Phase 4</td>
<td>7 learning diaries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005 Phase 5</td>
<td>1 interview</td>
<td>5 interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 2003 Phase 1</td>
<td>14 informants</td>
<td>7 informants</td>
<td>2 informants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 2005 Phase 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total informants</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first explorative phase consisted of six (6) in-depth one-on-one unstructured, open-ended interviews with duration of ½ hours to more than 3 hours. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Emphasis was made on encouraging the informants to freely reflect upon the company with minimal interviewer involvement and pre-determined questions allowing informants freely to elaborate on the company. As the study evolved it became evident for the interviewer that allowing a high degree of free elaboration helped the informants to reach some subjective understanding on how they perceive the company. Based on the analysis from the first explorative phase, data for the second phase was collected on a voluntary basis among eleven (11) graduate students. The informants were asked to write accounts on the overall research question mentioned above. It was pointed out that there were no right or wrong answers, neither any time limit for the writing. After 45 minutes everyone was ready. The students were asked to e-mail the accounts to the researcher. In order to test and get feedback from the conclusions drawn from the second phase, a videotaped group interview with five (5) volunteering students who had taken part
in the second phase was conducted. This video-taped group interview became the third phase. Learning diaries were voluntary written by seven (7) students who took part in the second and third phase and used as data. In the learning diaries the students elaborated further on how they perceive the company and especially how they experience other informants’ reflections during the group interview. These learning diaries were regarded as the fourth dataset. As the data was analyzed both between each interview as well as after each study a fifth phase of six (6) interviews in line with the first explorative study’s interviews were conducted. The aim for this phase was to further deepen the understanding on the consumer’s image construction process and especially the temporal dimension therein. The data were analyzed in terms of systematic coding and categorization of descriptions and statements given by the informants.

The empirical context is one of the biggest non-food retailers in Finland with more than 26 million visiting customers in 2007. The company’s three retailing concepts are department stores, home style stores and a net-online department store. The company was founded in 1953 and it was privately owned until 1976, where after it has been owned by trading companies. The company’s slogans have changed over the years, cheap prices being one of the core identity elements until the 90’s. Today the company describes its offerings as “We offer a wide assortment of quality products at good prices within the relaxed self service environment of our modern chain stores”. Thus the image examined in this study relates to the corporate brand image of a non-food retailer. Despite the context the study focuses on the consumer’s corporate image construction process in general.

Data analysis: Open coding
The analysis included two phases: open and selective coding. In the first open initial coding (Glaser 1978) emphasis was on identifying and grouping the data in relation to the
consumers’ image constructions. Therefore, attention and effort was paid on identifying which ‘easy to understand everyday life categories’ (Glaser 1978) emerged from the data. Therefore, three questions were posed to the data; first, “what constructs the image?” in other words, what is essential to the image construction defined by the consumer? The second question posed, “what defining properties or dimensions of properties does the informant express?” and third, “What represents most of the variety in the image construction and why?” All the emerged categories and relationships between them were analyzed for reaching an emerged understanding on image constructions. Already at this stage preliminary conceptualisations were made on the image construction as a process and the emerged temporal dimension therein. The most salient category that emerged in all accounts was the temporal dimension in the image construction. All informants referred back in time expressing something they had experienced earlier, either memories from past, or contrasting past experiences with present, or they provided past experiences as an explanation and the basis for present images of the company. Therefore, based on the first explorative study the temporal dimension was selected as the core theoretical category for the selective coding on the whole data set and the basis for theoretical sampling (phase 2 to 5). No further data collection was made after the saturation point of data had been reached.

Data analysis: selective coding
In selective coding the purpose was to understand the nature of the core category (Glaser 1978), the temporal dimension, and to conceptualize it. Moreover, an additional purpose was to deepen the understanding of the consumer’s image constructions as a process. The whole corpus of data was transcribed and analyzed for finding clues related to the emerged categories. Thereafter all clues related to a category were analyzed together. Furthermore, categories were compared to other categories for finding relationships between them. Four
specific research problems were specified for the selective phase of the study, namely to deepen the understanding of (1) how to specify the length of the consumer’s time span of company awareness, (2) the content of associations, (3) the temporal focus for image constructions, and (4) how images change.

Next, a presentation of the findings and the developed concepts image heritage and image-in-use which were developed based on the study will be given. Informants in the study will be called consumers in the findings presentation.

4. **Image heritage and image-in-use**

Consumers do not always have one clear and fixed image of a company. On the contrary, they may feel their images are based on a blend of impressions, experiences, contradictions, as well as other peoples’ sayings: “I suppose [the founder of the company] was a respected and admired person for his ability to create a good business. My Granny thought [the company] is the place to buy woollen socks and pants. I don’t remember the slogan. He was respected. Whom did he marry? …People from the countryside used it, and I suppose that’s why it was successful. [the founder] as we know, moved to America… my impression is that it is maybe the same as it was during [the founder’s] time, of course it has grown, but the image is the same… Today it is not personified. Who is it? Nobody!…Images, what is [the company] aiming at? What are the images they hope to create?” (Male, 49 years, Interview). They might even feel they do not know how they think and change their mind during a discussion. “I have a very positive image of [the department for home equipment], and I really wonder, how can it even be so different than the one of the [main department store]. I haven’t thought about it.” (Male, 48 years, Interview) In the present study it could
be clearly recognized that the consumers were into an image construction process trying to make sense of their own ideas about the company. They did not necessary strive for any one output – a consensus. Rather multiplicity of images and temporal multidimensionality emerged frequently where past, present and future merged in the image construction process. “My image is based on my own experiences. I have a lot of them and over a long period of time, that’s one source. [The company] is one of the shops I visit regularly. That’s my source. I have been visiting [the company] since I was 20 years old. I had a flatmate who informed me about the company. She knew what it was like.” (Female, 47 years, Interview). Consumers refer in their speech frequently to own or other people’s experiences of products or companies, or to how the company has presented or presents itself in the media, or to its actions on the market. They tell stories about earlier times, other people’s experiences, and to how the company or its owner used to be in the early years, and how it’s still the same or how the company has changed. Therefore, corporate image emerged as constructed through dynamic relational processes based on a multifaceted network of earlier images from multiple sources over time. The dynamic features refers to that corporate images may change, the relational features to the time dimension in the image construction process, and multiple sources to the consumers own, the social network, or the company as a source for the experience.

In conclusion, taking a time perspective, it becomes clear that images are not only associations, reflections and impressions here and now, but also a blend of both earlier and more recent interactions with reference to the company, its products, service, or other activity on the market. This kind of consumer thinking can be understood in terms of image heritage and image-in-use. Thus, consumers have an image heritage of earlier company
related experiences, which they use as an interpretation framework in a certain situation when constructing and re-constructing images in the present as an image-in-use. Thus, consumers’ have an image heritage of earlier company-related experiences from multiple sources over time, which they may use as a pre-understanding in the present when the image is in use. Thus, images are not constructed solely based on a dyadic relationship between the consumer and the company, but also based on the consumer’s social network and other actors on the market.

The analysis of the data showed that the time dimension can be conceptualized as image heritage defined through its characteristics: the length of awareness, the main temporal position and the content. As consumers refer to earlier times in the company’s history, their awareness of the company and its earlier activity may span even throughout the whole history of the company. Experiences may be own or they may be based on other people’s experiences (e.g. social media, word-of-mouth, reputation). Therefore, the length of the awareness time span depicts how long back in time the consumer refers to in the company’s history. In the present study, informants referred back in time throughout the company’s history till the very beginning of it, but seen from their own perspective and with embedded conclusions drawn. “[The company] sold cheap mattresses and whatever that was cheap. That’s how it grew” (Male, 48 years, interview); “[The company] is an old institution, started with the mail order catalogues, and a nation-wide network of shops stemming from them” (Female, 23 years, written account). The length of awareness can be found by recognizing the earliest experience informants spontaneously mention. The starting point for image heritage is hence, the earliest experience in reference with the
company the informants referred back to in the company’s history. Hence, in a metaphoric sense, the informants expressed a ‘mental relationship’ with the company over time.

*The content* of image heritage consists of memorable earlier company related experiences *from multiple sources* which the consumer associates to when constructing images. Thus, the content depicts what experiences the consumer refers to over time, and the source for the referred experience. *The classification of the source* was made in line with Mead’s (Mead 1934 (2004)) distinction between ‘I’ and ‘Me’ referring to expressions in which the informant reflects upon how the informant experiences or has experienced the company. ‘The company’ refers to expressions in which the informant reflects upon how s/he assumes the company wants to be experienced. “Red colour and the logo, quite well-known, plastic bags, the logo quite well displayed, a little bit like, you know, middle-class.” (Female 21 years, interview). Other sources, like friends, relatives and reputation represented social media: “The clothes from [the company] had a bad reputation ten years ago....[the company] is still considered a cheap store. The truth is, however, that we all go there as you can get almost anything there, and the store is everywhere” (Female, 23 years, written account). Further emerged properties of the ‘content’ category were the informant’s perspective towards the company and emotions and feeling the company evoked. From the company’s perspective, the content depicts the consumer’s “version” of the company’s history.

Although experiences may be many they do not necessary have equal importance for the consumer as interpretation frameworks in the present. *A temporal focus* depicts that specific era or certain experiences along the company’s history that still influence as the main interpretation framework for the consumer when constructing images in the present. “The
reputation of a bargain store will stay forever” (Female, 28 years, written account). As in the scripts above, consumers may for example think the company is the same as 20 years back in time although the company may have developed new strategies, core values or a different market presence during the years. Figure 1 illustrates and summarizes the dimensions of image heritage.

Figure 1 Image heritage dimensions: awareness time spans, content of earlier experiences about the company, and main temporal focus
In conclusion, image heritage can be described as the outcome of consumers’ ‘mental relationship’ with the company over time. Image heritage has a content, which begins to take form when a consumer for the first time experiences something about the company and forms his first impressions of the company. Hence, image heritage has a length and a content which becomes the interpretation framework, for consumer to interpret messages. This interpretation framework’s main temporal focus can be in present or past time. Therefore, this interpretation framework is not necessary the same for the consumer and the company. As a consequence, context gaps may exist between the consumer and the company. Based on the study, image heritage was defined based on the study as the consumer’s earlier company-related experiences with representations to the company from multiple sources over time activated for interpreting company-related experiences into images in the present.

In the present study, the image evolved as an “image-in-use”. Every time something with representations to the company was activated, past and present experiences, as well as future expectations were present ‘at the same time’ as an image-in-use. The concept corresponds to the value-in-use concept with roots in the service literature. Grönroos (2007) and Vargo and Lusch (2004; 2008) point out that value for consumers emerges in consumer activities in consumption as a value-in-use. Therefore, value is not considered as produced and delivered based on the organization’s designing and planning processes, rather value evolves in various consumer contexts. If applied to consumers’ corporate brand images, also images evolve in consumer contexts. Image-in-use represents all these consumer contexts when and with whom (that is, based on what source) the image is constructed and re-constructed ‘in consumption’ in the present. Consequently, image heritage and image-in-
use represent concepts for understanding how corporate brand images evolve over time in consumers’ everyday lives as dynamic processes over time.

5. Discussion

Recently, academics have emphasized a change in thinking from brand images as identifiers of brands to consumer-oriented dynamic and social processes (Merz, He et al. 2009). The present paper takes the challenge and introduces two new empirically grounded concepts, image heritage and image-in-use. *Image heritage* is defined as the consumer’s earlier company-related experiences with representations to the company from multiple sources over time activated for interpreting company-related experiences into images in the present when the image is in use for construction and reconstruction. *Image-in-use* is defined as the consumer’s present company-related image construction and re-construction process influenced by image heritage. The concepts represent a process-oriented dynamic and socially oriented view on the consumers’ corporate brand image constructions. Additionally, the concepts are context bound as they capture the image construction process in the present. Therefore, the concepts image heritage and image-in-use are proposed as concepts for studying the temporal, dynamic, relational, social, and contextual features of consumers’ brand image construction processes.

However, in mainstream branding literature it is more the rule than exception that corporate images are considered to be created and managed by the company (e.g. Aaker 2004; Keller 2008). On a general level, this may have the implication that branding is focused on transactions rather than episodes (influenced by the past and expected future), relationships and networks. In relationships, there is a long-term orientation, they change over time, and
are thus dynamic (Ritter and Gemunden 2003). Moreover, the company is seen as the sender of messages and the consumer as receiver of these specific messages. In this classic communication model (see e.g. Fill 2006) a ‘noise’ factor indicates that the message may not always be interpreted as it was intended by the company. Therefore, it is recognized that the company may not have full control of the consumer’s interpretations. A number of scholars, especially within the Consumer Culture Theory, as defined by Arnould and Thompson (2005) have argued that the consumer is not a passive receiver of messages but an active and central actor and constructor of brand meanings and brand relationships (for an analysis and overview, see e.g. Gordon 2006; Aitken, Brendan et al. 2008). Following these recent thoughts, and in the light of the present study, we propose that the consumer should be considered as the key-actor in the corporate brand image construction process. The present study suggests that the company is but one voice in the consumer’s reality in which social media and personal interpretations of past experiences play an important role. Zaltman (2003) point out that in recent memory research the metaphor of the unchanging photograph no longer holds, consumers link their past, present and future, which influences on how they see their past in the present. Therefore, image heritage depicts how the consumer in a certain context here and now link the past, present and the future as an interpretation framework when the image is in use. Keller stated already in 1993 that the perhaps most valuable asset a company has for improving marketing productivity is the knowledge that has been crated about a brand in consumers’ minds from the firm’s passed investment in previous marketing programs. Memories are, however, ‘remembered’ through the influence of the present context and future expectations. Therefore, consumers’ image heritage is not to be found in the company’s history without exploring how consumers interpret the past and important happenings and eras in the company’s past from
their own perspective. Therefore, we propose that image heritage knowledge should be included as a basic element in strategic branding models (see e.g. Stuart 1999).

In conclusion, if earlier experiences strongly influence situations today it leads to different management strategies compared to a situation where we can start from an empty table. These implications will be discussed next.

Implications for management

We propose that it is important for a company to investigate consumers’ or other stakeholder groups image heritage which still have an impact on how the company and its actions are perceived today. In other words, what is the content of image heritage and how does the content reflect the company’s history and earlier branding activities? How long back in time in a company’s history does various stakeholder groups image heritage span, and what are the main temporal foci in the image heritage, in other words, which are those previous branding activities that still influence as an interpretation framework in present time.

If consumers’ image heritages still live on in their minds, is it then a burden or a resource for the company? Christensen and Cheney (2002) have presented a critical view on current corporate brand identity practices. They argue that the demand for corporate identities is primarily generated by organizations themselves and doubt the assumption that the general public would be genuinely interested and deeply involved in contemporary organizations branding activities.

The findings in this research support their view, as the informants sparingly mentioned corporate communications. On the contrary, as one informant puts it “I don’t follow their advertising but I think it is quite active” (Male, 48 years, Interview). Therefore, corporate brand images may be difficult to change quickly. Solms and Turnbull explicate, “we see
what we expect to see, and we are surprised or fail to notice when our expectations are contradicted” (Solms and Turnbull 2002, 155). As image heritage is rooted in numerous interactions with the company over time, a change in the current corporate brand identity actions may show slowly in consumers brand image measures due to image heritage. For new companies image heritage enhances the importance of considering corporate brand identity matters in an initial stage of the corporate history.

In conclusion, the study illustrates the importance of understanding the company’s history and meaningful parts of it “from the eye of the consumer”. Image heritage knowledge may provide managers with an understanding on consumer evaluations and behaviour on management initiatives and brand developments.

For future research, in order to explore image heritage academically it might be fruitful to study older companies for enhancing image heritage understanding, due to their fairly complex roots of branding activities over time. What is it that still lives on in the various audiences’ minds, and with what effect? To relate this new understanding on image heritage and image-in-use in various branding contexts to new avenues within neuroscience is also of importance.
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