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# **IMAGE-IN-USE IN SERVICE**

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# **IMAGE-IN-USE IN SERVICE**

## Conceptual paper

#### Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of image-in-use in service and its implications for value in use. Image-in-use is an expression for the image of a company that in practice is used by an individual customer in a particular context for construction and re-construction. It thus corresponds to the notion value in use suggested in the current service literature. The image-in-use is related to experiences over time of the company captured by the concept image heritage.

#### Design/methodology/approach

Two new concepts *image heritage* and *image-in-use* are introduced based on findings from both empirical studies and theoretical reasoning.

#### **Practical implications**

The paper provides managers a perspective to diagnose how a brand is evolving in consumers' minds and how this can be taken into consideration in the company's branding strategies and operations. Firstly, we argue that corporate brand images are not constructed solely based on corporate branding. Rather, they evolve based on the consumer's numerous experiences with multiple sources over time and result in an "image-in-use". Therefore, from a branding point of view, it is not what the company puts into the brand, but what the customer takes out from it over time that defines the brand image. Secondly, image-in-use is inter-related to value-in-use through service experiences. Thus, any contact points with representations with the company are interpreted by the customer through her image-in-use.

#### **Originality/value**

The approach contributes by integrating branding with current service perspectives. It focuses on the role of images for the emergence of value-in-use.

KEYWORDS: Image heritage, image-in-use, service dominant logic, service logic, corporate brand image





#### **IMAGE-IN-USE IN SERVICE**

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of image in service and advance the understanding, how customers' images of service companies are constructed and continuously re-constructed in various company-related experiences based on the current and earlier experiences. In the paper, two new concepts for capturing the dynamic and relational features of image are introduced: image-in-use and image heritage. It is assumed that the corporate image is created by the customer based on numerous influences over time, where the company's deliberate branding attempts are only one potential source. This individually constructed image is what is used by the consumer.

Rindell (2007) proposes, based on a study on consumers' corporate image constructions over time, that consumers' corporate images evolves as an *"image-in-use"* every time representations with the company are activated and past and present experiences as well as future expectations blend. *"Image heritage"* is proposed based on the same study to stand for the temporal dimension in individual customers' corporate images. It explores the consumer's earlier experiences with representations to the company forming an interpretation framework for the customer's corporate image constructions today. Therefore, image heritage captures the dynamic and relational features of service. (Rindell, 2007) These two concepts, image-in-use and image heritage, will be used as cornerstones to discuss how corporate image is related to customer experienced value-in-use, in line with current discussions in the service literature.





In the service literature different "logics" have recently been discussed (Grönroos, 2007a, Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004, Edvardsson et al., 2005, Vargo and Lusch, 2004, Vargo and Lusch, 2008). In value creation terms, a service-provider-focused view on exchange value has been contrasted with an interaction-focused view (service dominant logic, service logic) on value as it is experienced by the customer (value-in-use) (Vargo and Lusch, 2008, Grönroos, 2007a, Grönroos, 2008). The role of the customer's image of the service provider for value-in-use experiences has however, not yet been explored.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of image-in-use in service and its implications for value-in-use.

For a company, corporate image is consequently not one image but rather a portfolio of images (Grunig, 1993, Brown et al., 2006) where each image has its roots in the past influencing its development and determining reactions to management initiatives (Rindell, 2007, Braun-La Tour et al., 2007, Dutton and Dukerich, 2004/1991, Brown et al., 2006). Therefore, clearly it is important both theoretically and managerially to also understand the company's image from the consumer's perspective. Still, in the mainstream literature concerning corporate identity/image and branding, it is assumed that the company, through consistency in all actions, has considerable influence over how they are perceived by the customers and other stakeholders (see e.g. Keller, 2008, Aaker et al., 2004, Alessandri, 2001).





Both within service and branding literature comparably few approaches focus on understanding the branding of services or understanding the service brand from a consumer perspective (Grace and O'Cass, 2002, Payne et al., 2009) although the service literature emphasizes that services are processes co-generated together with the customer, and that all contact-points between the customer and the service company are momentsof-truth (Grönroos, 2007b). "Everything communicates something about a firm and its goods and services - regardless of whether the marketer accepts this and acts upon it or not." (Grönroos, 2007b, Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001). But it is not only what the company intentionally or unintentionally communicates that forms the image, there are also other external non-controllable sources that communicate something about a company, for example, social media, publicity and even indirect associations based on the company's industry or home country (see e.g. Ratneshwar and Mick, 2005, Dowling, 2002). In conclusion, consumers' corporate images are thus based on multiple, non-controllable influences over time, but what is the connection between corporate image and customer experienced value-in-use? This paper will propose a model that explicates how the image-in-use and image heritage of a company is related to value-in-use.

Next we will start with an overview of how image has been considered in the earlier service and branding literatures.





#### 2. IMAGE WITHIN SERVICE

Image is an element in Grönroos' (1984) seminal service quality model but it has caught less attention over the decades than the suggested technical and functional service quality dimensions. However, all these contact points form and influence the customer's perceived value and image of the service. Explicitly, this introduces a temporal dimension into services through the customer's image construction process. Furthermore, the temporal dimension is even more accentuated when relationships are considered, as the image component covers experiences over a long time-period, influencing the evaluation of a specific service episode. As a conclusion, it can be argued that Grönroos in 1984 implicitly introduced both a relationship perspective and the temporal dimension in image constructions into services by including the image-component into the servicequality model. These contact points, in other words, form and influence the consumer perceived value and image of the service, and is even more accentuated when relationships are considered.

Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) had at the same time introduced a similar conceptualisation of service quality, where the image was notified, with the elements physical quality, interactive quality and corporate quality. They define corporate quality as "...the dimension of quality developing during the history of the service organisation. It is symbolic in nature and it concerns how customers and potential customers see the corporate entity, company or institution, its image or profile" (Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991). Moreover, Liljander and Strandvik (1995) have explicitly used the image concept in their model, linking service episodes with customer relationships. While Grönroos





(1984) used image inside the service quality concept, many others seem to have considered image as another component of customers' mental processing of a service.

Reynolds & Kerin (1985) argue in the retailing literature, that it is essential to focus on individual meanings created, rather than on the attributes as such. "The foregoing implies that we not only need to identify the meanings that serve as the bases for conceptualising the image, but also to understand the structure of the meanings, defined by the network of their associations. Put simply, we cannot understand the image without knowing the network of links, which translate or connect relevant concepts, thereby providing meaning" (Reynolds & Kerin, 1985). This perspective gives ground for a subjectivist stance on corporate image constructions, and implicitly also opens a door for a temporal perspective in the image construction process. However, a very diverse collection of understandings of corporate image and brands emerges from the literature (see e.g. Stern, 2006, Stern et al., 2001).

#### From exchange value to value-in-use

Recently a transition in researchers' perspective and conceptualisation of services has accordingly moved the focus from characteristics of services and delivery of services to *the use of services*. This corresponds to a shift from exchange value to value-in-use. This shift has gradually been built up culminating in a series of recent articles about the new service logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, Vargo and Lusch, 2008, Lovelock and Gummesson, 2004, Grönroos, 2005, Edvardsson et al., 2005, Payne et al., 2009, Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007) in which one of the key propositions is that the customer co-creates value together with the company. Prahalad et al. (2004) proposes that the





move to experience-centric co-creation views opens up new avenues, for example, for understanding the role and meaning of the brand from a service-logic perspective, as it will be the customer experience that becomes the brand. Likewise Grönroos has argued that "the brand as a concept is always an image" (2007, 331) proposing a rather active role for the customer.

In conclusion, from a service-logic perspective and as Grönroos proposes (2007b) it is not the marketer who builds the brand but the customer, as it is the customer who makes critical value assessments when the service appliances are in use (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). Ballantyne and Aitken (2007) take a constructivist view and propose that "the meanings attached to a particular brand are located in the minds of its customers, and the wider community of opinion makers and stakeholders" thus, taking a relational view on image. Therefore, they propose that branding not only becomes a communicative interaction process in line with the S-D logic view, rather, they propose that brand value is confirmed or disconfirmed in use in customer contact points over time. (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007)

#### A customer perspective

Within the framework of the S-D logic discussion Arnould, Price and Malshe (2006), representing Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), contribute to the discussion by proposing a dialectical customer-centric value creation model for capturing the customer's "rich value-creative competencies" (Arnould et al., 2006). They focus on the customers' operant, i.e. often invisible, intangible and social resources (networks and





relationships), and operand, e.g. material objects and physical space and other tangible resources, and specify that customers' operant resources are employed to act on operand and other operant resources. They conclude that both resources closely interact, influence and shape consumers' life and goals, and therefore, a focus on customers' operant resources can "enable firms to anticipate customers' desired values and help them create value in use". However, Arnould et al. (2006) state that consumers deploy invisible, intangible and social resources like networks and relationships (operant resources) in creative ways and derive value-in-use in ways that vary from the firm's intent. Therefore, as consumer resources interact, Arnould et al. (2006) point out that the locus of control shift between the company and the consumer.

Nevertheless, Arnould et al. (2006) propose further that another important conditioning element is the temporal dimension, as meanings and values of brands change over time. They propose that companies can invoke customers' repertoires of memories through branding activities for giving a sense of continuity and connection to the past, enhance consumption over generations, and seek input from customers over time for strategic marketing decisions.

Next, developments and latest understanding within image research will be highlighted.

# 3. CONCEPTS, TIME, AND REALTIONSHIPS WITHIN BRANDING AND IMAGE RESEARCH

In a nutshell, corporate branding and image research can be classified as research fields that has captured "an enduring interest, but relatively little systematic empirical research" (Cornelissen and Elving, 2003). A lot of the effort has been put on defining and





redefining the central concepts corporate identity, corporate brand, corporate image and corporate reputation (for an overview, see e.g. Balmer, 2001, Balmer, 2008, Brown et al., 2006, Stern et al., 2001, Stern, 2006) and on modelling the management processes of corporate branding (for an overview, see Bick et al., 2003).

Originally image, brand and reputation had their roots in the same underpinnings as they all were "in the eye of the beholder" (Gray and Balmer, 1998), whereas identity represented an organizational viewpoint on image management (Balmer, 2008). Today, the most ubiquitous of the concepts is the brand, although seen as the companies' invaluable intangible asset (for an analysis of the concept's ontological standpoints, see Stern, 2006), and "creating and nurturing a strong brand poses considerable challenges" (Keller, 2008, xv). Image and reputation represents however, the consumer's or consumer groups' standpoint (Stern et al., 2001).

Traditionally, the most often used concept for recognizing a temporal dimension within corporate identity, brand and image research is reputation. *Reputation* is defined as being formed over time based on company actions (Balmer & Greyser, 2003) as a collective representation of the company (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2003). *Image*, however, is an individual level concept controlled by the consumer. Hence, reputation narrows down corporate images to a socially constructed mass conception based on only company actions, whereas image is a product of multiple-variable impression formation processes located in the interaction among organizational texts, environmental and individual or personal factors (Williams and Moffitt, 1997). Hence, there is a difference between the concepts *image* and *reputation*, although some writers use reputation and image





interchangeably (Balmer and Greyser, 2003). Therefore, based on proposals put forth within S-D logic, the concept that meets the interests within the field is image, not reputation.

Within image research, a distinction between "what brands do to people" and "what people do with brands" can be made. The first mentioned research stream dominates the field, with its linear state-oriented approach focusing on attitudes and attributes towards and of an entity. The latter research stream is consumer focused and process oriented seeing the consumer as an active meaning creator. (Gordon, 2006) However, processoriented research and views on corporate images are few compared with research focusing on images as state. Nevertheless, we propose that service and service logic propositions benefit mainly from process and relationship oriented views on corporate images, which may be found within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). Within CCT research brands [image] are seen as active partners in the consumer's brand relationship (Askegaard and Bengtsson, 2005, Fournier, 1998, Holt, 2002, Belk and Tumbat, 2005, Pitt et al., 2006). A study with a grounded qualitative approach on how consumers construct corporate images was conducted by Rindell (2007). Based on her study she proposes that "consumers construct corporate images through dynamic relational processes based on a multifaceted network of earlier images from multiple sources over time" (166). The temporal dimension was explicated as "over time" and conceptualized as image heritage. Image heritage stands for the consumer's earlier experiences with multiple sources over time, activated for interpreting experiences with representations of the company in the present (167). Image heritage is specified through its components: the customer's awareness time span which reaches till the customer's first experiences with





the company; the content of stored memories over the years; and the temporal focus depicting concentrations of memory cues with representations to the company.

Next, the role of image-in-use and image heritage in service is discussed

# 4. THE ROLE OF IMAGE-IN-USE IN SERVICE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON VALUE-IN-USE

Customer-focused views that capture the dynamic, relational and temporal dimensions of customers' corporate image construction processes are few. However, taking a time perspective it becomes clear that the image is not only the impression here and now, but also a blend of impressions from both earlier interactions and more recent ones. A key question is: how much of this blend is based on earlier experiences, how much is related to the current situation? If experiences are stored in a sediment-like way and earlier experiences will strongly influence situations today it leads to different management strategies compared with a situation where we can start from an empty table.

Figure 1 gives a simplified picture of how we see the relationship between value in use and image-in-use. It represents an individual customer's level and leads to some managerially interesting propositions. The figure can also be seen as an explication of possible implications of proposition ten (10) by Vargo and Lusch (2007) where they suggest that "value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" and "value is idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual, and meaning laden".

We consequently suggest that image-in-use and image heritage have central roles for customers' value-in-use experience. They act as dynamic mental frameworks that shape

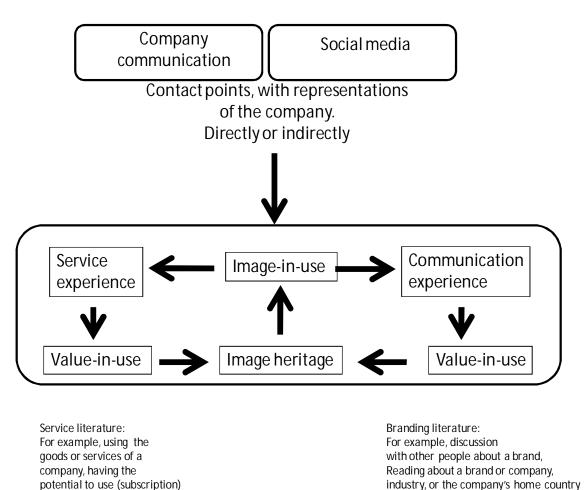




both service interactions with the company as well as communication-relation interactions. A distinct line between these two categories, represented in the figure as the left-hand loop versus the right-hand loop cannot be made. But in most cases we can observe either a service interaction (co-creation) which results in a value experience (value-in-use). In the model we have separated the service experience as such which covers all kinds of experiences (from mundane routine experiences to extraordinary experiences) from value-in-use in order to separate the experience as such from the value judgment. If no service interaction takes place, but the consumer rather communicates with someone about the company or company-related issues, it leads in the model to a communication experience that result in a judgment denoted by the term reflection. Both the value-in-use judgment and the reflection upon communication may result in a new element in the consumer's image heritage of the company. The image heritage will update the image-in-use. Contact points are not only company communication but also other direct and indirect communication in social media and from other sources. The model thus suggests that image-in-use is based on, both direct service interactions and communication with the company, as well as direct and indirect communication with other sources about the company. Image-in-use always has a central role for value-in-use determination because it acts as an interpretation frame for the consumer.







Figur 1 A dynamic view of the relationship between image-in-use and value-in-use

Image heritage can be described as customers' mental relationship with the company over time. Image heritage has *content*, which begins to take form when a customer for the first time *experiences* the company and forms her first impression of the company. *Image heritage influences the image-in-use* which becomes *the interpretation framework* for the customer to interpret any contact point with the company.

Based on our model we propose for further exploration that:





- Image-in-use and image heritage have significant roles for the experience of value- in-use.
- 2) It is not only concrete interactions between the customer and the service provider and the integration of resources that have an influence on experienced value-inuse. This means that value-in-use of service is not the result of customer-service provider co-creation only.
- 3) Value in use that emerges has roots in the image heritage, that influences the current image-in-use, but image heritage itself is also continuously updated by new service *and* communication experiences. Neither of these can to any larger extent be controlled by the service provider. The service provider can only try to influence both and monitoring both image-in-use among customers, as well as value in use becomes important parts of necessary customer insight.
- 4) Image-in-use is formed not only in direct contact points with the service provider as service theorists specify, but also based on customers contact points with the service provider, the brand through for example, social interaction. Also other indirect communicational inputs may have an influence, for example, media exposure of not only the service provider as such but also for example the industry of the service provider. This means that a specific service provider only has limited influence on the resulting image-in-use. In the model we specify that image-in-use is inherently dynamic and the result of all kinds of experiences concerning the service provider.
- 5) .Image-in-use is an expression for the living corporate brand image on an individual customer level. If there is an interest to consider image-in-use on an





aggregate level, for example, a relevant perspective for a manager, it should be noticed that a service provider has a portfolio of images in use in the market. This means that there is not one image-in-use but a large number of different images in use. They probably form clusters.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Proposition ten (10) by Vargo and Lusch (2007) postulate that "value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary." Further explained as "value is idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual, and meaning laden" (Vargo and Lusch 2007). In this paper we dig deeper into how value emerges for the customer and propose that we need to consider not only service interactions between the customer and the service provider but also communication interactions between the customer and other parties *about* the company. In our model we demonstrate how image-in-use is related to valuein-use. The model suggests that value-in-use is not only a resource-based interaction between the service provider and a specific customer (over time), but is also dependent on the independent process that forms the customer's image about the service provider. There are a number of interesting implications that follow from this.

 Value-in-use is influenced by the consumer's image-in-use of the service provider as this functions as an interpretation frame for the current service experience. Image-in-use is on the other hand not related only to direct service interactions with the service provider but also to other information about the company, other companies and even the industry. Image-in-use has a history which can be labelled image heritage. Image heritage has an influence on image-in-use but is





also continuously updated. For the service provider this means that they have even less control over value-in-use than assumed so far.

- 2. Image-in-use does not necessarily correspond to the service provider's communicated or ideal image. It does not have to be true either. Different consumers may have different images-in-use of a service provider. This means that image-in-use is a factor that cannot be controlled by the company but they may try to influence it. In order to do that they need to reveal not only what the portfolio of images-in-use they have among the consumers but also how these images-in-use change. Methods to study this needs to be developed in order to give information about the gap between the service provider's intended and ideal image and the real images-in-use.
- 3. A value proposition should not be developed without considering the portfolio of images-in-use. As the image-in-use acts as an interpretation frame the value proposition will be evaluated against this frame. This might sometimes lead to the consumers avoiding the service provider altogether which makes service interactions impossible.

We make the assertion that the customer always constructs a brand image/company image. A brand does therefore not have one image but rather a collection of images. These images may be more or less alike, and one could strive to, for example, find out the common features in this collection of images. On the other hand one could also focus on the differences and diversity in the images. If the collection of images can be understood as a distribution of images it is quite clear that managing such a collection is not the same





as managing the assumed idealised brand. A managerially essential question is: how close to the intentions and plans are these customer-held images. Even if there is an indefinite number of images in practice it might be possible to group or segment the images into a portfolio of images.

A number of questions arise and represent avenues for further research when the existence of image-in-use and image heritage is recognized. To what extent is it possible to deliberately influence a corporate image? How quickly does it change or how quickly can it be changed? What happens when management feels a need to change the ideal image for strategic reasons? Will the image-in-use change because of the change in the visual identity, brand names, and creative communication solutions? What happens in mergers and acquisitions? What happens when a company is sold to a foreign company (note country image effects)? What happens when a company enters a new market (a new country, a new culture, new customer groups)?

In order to explore image-in-use and image heritage academically it might be fruitful to study older companies that have fairly complex roots because of mergers and acquisitions and changes in their corporate identity. They should have diversity in their image heritage based on the fact that different customers have joined the company at different times and have experienced the changes in different ways. Still, also new customers may be affected by image heritage through their social network and contextual factors. An interest in and further studies of image-in-use and image heritage is clearly aligned with the interactive and relational principles and practices expressed in the new service dominant logic.





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