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Stakeholders' perceptions and reputational antecedents: A review of stakeholder relationships, reputation and brand positioning

S. M. Riad Shams

Abstract

Purpose

It is recognised that reputation is a relational construct; however the impact of stakeholders' various relational dimensions on their perceptions to influence reputation is not widely understood. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to add to our current understanding of stakeholders' relationships, interactions, their subsequent relational dimensions and its impact on stakeholders' perceptions to further influence relational reputation.

Design/methodology/approach

Case study.

Findings

The findings of this study recognise the impact of relationship marketing (RM) on the influence of stakeholders' perceptions. It discusses how RM substantiate the pertinent authenticity (symbolises reputation), relevance and differentiation (represent brand positioning) of an organisation's profile and/or their market offerings, in relation to the interest of the target market through the cause and consequence of stakeholder relationships and interactions to influence their perceptions. The findings acknowledge eleven RM dimensions that have relational implications to nurture stakeholders' perceptions and subsequent relational reputation, which appear viable across industries and markets.

Originality/value

Underlying the cause and consequence of stakeholder relationships and interactions; these eleven RM dimensions emerge as antecedents to form/reform relational reputation. Further academic and professional implications of the findings are briefly discussed.

Keywords

Corporate reputation; brand positioning; perceptive influence; relationship marketing; stakeholder causal scope; relational reputation; perceptions.

Article classification: case study.

Introduction

Stakeholders' perception epitomises corporate reputation. On one hand, the perception of stakeholders about a company or their offerings constructs a kind of influence that motivates stakeholders to associate or not to associate with a company's businesses. Such a perceptive

influence is imperative to nurture or influence reputation. On the other hand, brand positioning symbolises through the degree of relevance and differentiation in respect to the customers' needs and competitive offerings respectively, while reputation promotes that relevance and differentiation through authenticity. However, reputation and brand are not synonymous; they are closely interrelated, as well as interdependent (Ettenson and Knowles, 2008; Govers, 2012). The mutually supporting applications of authenticity, relevance and differentiation nurtures a company's overall image. Simultaneously, "reputation is relational" (Oxford University Centre for Corporate Reputation, 2012, np) that forms or reforms through the stakeholder relationships and interactions. As a consequence, stakeholder causal scope (SCS) analysis approach of stakeholder relationship marketing (RM) plays a significant role to influence stakeholder perception through the cause and consequence of their relationships and interactions, in relation to the mutual application of authenticity, relevance and differentiation of a company profile or their products and services. Stakeholders' perceptions and the subsequent perceptive influence, which can be stimulated through such a relational effort, generally nurture relational reputation. However, RM has a rich history in stakeholder relationship management (Agariya and Singh, 2011); it has a lot to contribute to the contemporary issues of stakeholder relationships and interactions. Since, the existing literature shows that the recognised dimensions of RM are rather limited. Also, the increase of sports business signifies its importance to economic development. Although, the existing literature acknowledges a gap in the sports industry, in order to articulate this significance, either through scholarly research or professional practice. Consequently, a multi case study analysis in the sports industry has been conducted on four organisations, with the purpose of recognising the impact of RM focused SCS dimensions on stakeholder perceptive influence, in respect to authenticity (symbolises reputation), relevance and differentiation (symbolise brand positioning) of a company and/or their market offerings, in order to nurture their relational reputation, pertinent to that stakeholder perceptive influence. Eleven RM perspectives are identified from this multi-case study that helps RM to scrutinise various cause and consequence of stakeholder relationships and interactions (SCS) to influence stakeholder perceptive influence, and appear as antecedents to nurture relational reputation. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows:

- an evaluative viewpoint based on the extant literature, to elaborately justify the significance of pursuant of the study;
- the method of the study;
- findings and discussions referring to the aim of the study and
- directions for further research.

Evaluative viewpoint

Corporate reputation usually forms by the perceptions of stakeholders. How a company's businesses reflect through their stakeholders' views is the key to form and/or reform their reputation. Rossides (2012) describes corporate reputation is the indication of an organisation and their businesses over time, as observed through the perception of their stakeholders and expressed through their thoughts and words, e.g., word of mouth. Therefore, managing the perceptions of the associated stakeholders is integral to managing reputation. On one hand, reputation focuses on the integrity and value that an organisation has among a broad set of stakeholders, including commercial partners, staff, investors, regulators, media, communities, customers and so forth. On the other hand, brand focuses on the promises that a market offering (product and service) or a company has conveyed to its customers and what that commitment means to them (Ettenson and Knowles, 2008). In other words, reputation represents the authenticity of an organisation and/or market offering, with respect to a wide range of stakeholders, including but not limited to customers, and brand represents the relevance and differentiation of a market offering with respect to the customer. Ettenson and Knowles (2008) elaborated that reputation and brand are not synonymous; however they are closely interconnected, interdependent but nearly indistinguishable. A superior brand does not essentially commensurate with an excellent reputation. Again, an excellent reputation does not always reflect as a superior brand. A positive reputation is required, as businesses depend on the goodwill of the market. Simultaneously, a superior brand is vital for customer loyalty, sales and growth (Ettenson and Knowles, 2008; Gundlach and Neville, 2012).

Reputation and brand (both) rely on strategic communications to shape people's (stakeholders') perceptions, and both share a similar goal: ensure that the appropriate audience considers the organisation and its offerings in the best possible light. Damage to one can easily weaken the other. Both are crucial-but in different way (Ettenson and Knowles, 2008, pp. 19-20).

In general, based on authenticity, reputation is a precondition for stakeholders' willingness to do business with a company, while brand turns that willingness to eventuality through a product's or service's relevance to the need of the target market and differentiation, in relation to how the product or service could offer a superior value proposition, compare to other competitive products or services, with respect to that need of the customers. Therefore, the unified and mutually supporting applications of reputation and brand through different

ways, such as authenticity (symbolises reputation), relevance and differentiation (symbolise a brand) are crucial for enduring success, and that can be established through a focus on reputation, as well as brand (Ettenson and Knowles, 2008).

Reputation is relational: companies do not own their reputation, stakeholders and observers do. Reputations are formed largely by the perceptions of these external ‘others’. Companies can influence their reputation, but they cannot control it completely (Oxford University Centre for Corporate Reputation, 2012, np).

From this perspective, stakeholder causal scope (SCS) analysis approach of stakeholder relationship marketing (RM) appears as a key to establish, maintain and enhance (influence and nurture) corporate reputation. SCS is acknowledged as the stakeholders’ “possibility of contributing mutually beneficial value among the key stakeholders” (Shams, 2013a, p. 214; Gide and Shams, 2011a, p. 1063) or cause and consequence of stakeholder relationships and interactions (Business Dictionary, 2010). Thus a SCS is a proposition through the cause and consequence of stakeholders’ relationships and interactions to nurture their contributory scope to their value network. Following the cause and consequence of stakeholder relationships and interactions, associated stakeholders develop their perceptions about a company and their businesses. Consequently, the stakeholders’ perception (good or bad) creates an influence (perceptive influence) that helps SCS to develop stakeholder relationship and subsequent relational reputation through various RM perspectives. Examples are illustrated in the ‘Implications of stakeholder relationship marketing (RM) to perceptive influence and relational reputation’ section of this paper.

Previous studies show that various established organisations differentiate their corporate profile or market offering (product and service) in a way through different RM perspectives that conveys a central idea, relating to their stakeholder relationship value and relevant brand (corporate and product/service) positioning to the target markets (Shams, 2013b). Eventually, the conveyed central idea (which has to be perceived by the associated stakeholders in order to form perceptive influence) helps companies to influence (establish, maintain and enhance) stakeholder relational perception, in order to nurture relational corporate reputation through relevant stakeholder perceptive influence, with regard to the authenticity (reputation), relevance and differentiation (positioning) of their product or service. Since, RM focuses on rational perspectives of business management, while centralising the cause and consequence (SCS) of stakeholders’ mutual relationships and interactions (Shams, 2013b). Therefore, the focus of this study is to analyse the RM centred SCSs to influences stakeholders’ perceptions through the cause and consequence of their relationships and interactions, in order to nurture

relational reputation. Also, RM has a comparatively long history in stakeholder relationship management and to analyse the relevant challenges and opportunities in stakeholders' engagement (Cousens & Babiak, 2001; Fyall, Callod & Edwards, 2003; Stokes, 2005; Stavros, 2005; Hopwood, 2005; 2007; Jones, 2006; Álvarez, Martín & Casielles, 2007). However the established course of actions of stakeholder engagement, and the recognised dimensions of stakeholder relationships and interactions for its management are rather limited (Lagrosen, 2005). As a result, this study aims to analyse the impact of various RM perspective centred SCSs on stakeholder perceptive influence, in respect to the authenticity, which symbolises reputation (Greyser, 2009; Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2010; Molleda and Jain, 2013; Bieri, 2014; Ilicic and Webstar, 2014; Men, 2014; Guo et al., 2015), and relevance and differentiation, which symbolise brand positioning (González-Benito and Martos-Partal, 2012; Elving et al., 2013; Zarantonello et al., 2013; Ezeuduji et al., 2013; Jewell and Saenger, 2014; Keller, 2015) of a company and/or their market offering, in order to nurture relational corporate reputation, pertinent to that stakeholder perceptive influence, so that the relational reputations' antecedents can be recognised from the emergent dimensions of the cause and consequence of stakeholders' relationships and interactions.

Methodology

To attain the aim of this study, a qualitative case study method, designing multiple case analyses is espoused, with respect to the selected cases' relationships and interactions with their key stakeholders. Since, case studies encompass an inclusive approach to qualitative inquiry and are one of the most common ways to conduct qualitative research (Stake, 2000), particularly when the focus is on concurrent spectacle within real-life context (Yin, 2003; 2009). Fundamentally, case studies have a clear place in research, and most significantly deliver a way to clarify the causal links in real-life interferences that are too intricate for survey or experimental strategies (Gomm et. al., 2001; Yin, 2003; 2009). In addition to this, the multiple case designs have widely applied in frequency and the cross-reference from multiple cases is frequently considered more influential, and the whole study is consequently viewed as being more rigour. Since, the convergent outcomes of the multiple cases and diverse sources of data would either authenticate the results of each other or raise dissimilar issues that were not acknowledged through a single source of data, and mutually, the strategy could regulate how far they arrive at convergent conclusions (Lewis-Beck et. al., 2004), in order to reinforce the recommendations, in relation to differentiate the RM centred SCSs as emergent dimensions of the cause and consequence of stakeholders' relationships and

interactions that act as antecedents of relational reputation. To achieve this objective, four cases are selected from the sports industry to review that have been prolifically utilising the cause and consequence of their stakeholders' relationships and interactions to influence their stakeholders' perceptions to form/reform a relational reputation by validating the authenticity, differentiation and relevance of their corporate profile or market offerings. Again, the increase of sporting events implies its significance to enhance business performance and economic development, however the academic and industry research that elucidate this significance is still partial (Kaplanidou and Alexandris, 2013). This is another reason to select the cases from the sports industry, so that the study could contribute further to the understanding of stakeholders' relationships and interactions in the sports industry, their causes and consequences, and how these SCSs dimensions of the sports industry could act as antecedents to form/reform relational reputation, with the aim to enrich business performance. The selected cases are Arsenal Football Club (Arsenal) of the English Premier League, Cricket Australia (CA), the national governing body of the game of cricket in Australia, England & Wales Cricket Board (ECB), the national governing body of the game of cricket in England and Wales and the Hawthorn Football Club (Hawthorn) of the Australian Rules football.

This study uses relevant scholarly literature and media contents review to collect data. According to Creswell (1998) case studies are scrutinised by making a comprehensive depiction of the case and its backgrounds. The issues, concepts and variables from a case would be useful to pursue the aim of the study (Stavros, 2005), where the "...insight, intuition and impression" (Dey, 1995, p. 78) of the collected data are imperative components of analysis. Similarly, an outline is adapted to discuss the RM centred SCSs of the analysed cases as the dimensions of their stakeholders' relationships and interactions, where the potential variables/constructs (various RM centred SCSs as dimensions of stakeholder relationships and interactions) recognised from the cases have been analysed through insight, intuition and impression for understanding the impact of the identified variables/constructs on the aim of the study, i.e. how various RM centred SCSs dimensions influence the authenticity, relevance and differentiation of the corporate profile or the market offerings of the cases to influence their relational reputation. Additionally, along with the traditional deductive positivist epistemology to describe an evaluative viewpoint, centred on the relevant existing literature at the beginning of the article, this paper also adopts an inductive constructivist viewpoint, as a provision of the findings and to further validate its authenticity

from different perspectives, which develops rationally from the scrutinised data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). Thus, following an earlier analysis of pertinent extant literature and a relevant evaluative viewpoint, this paper also evaluates additional literature latter at the case analysis stage, as an inductive research process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Hallier and Forbes, 2004), in order to rationalise the findings, with regard to the previously positioned evaluative viewpoint and the aim of the study.

Findings: Implications of stakeholder relationship marketing (RM) to perceptible influence and relational reputation

Following the aim and arguments, described in the earlier sections of this paper and based on the relevant RM centred SCS dimensions, this section concentrates to analyse from the following perspectives:

- description of a market offering (product or service) or company profile and relevant RM centred SCS dimension as an antecedent of the subsequent perceptible influence;
- unified and mutually supporting applications of authenticity (symbolises reputation), relevance and differentiation (represents brand positioning), centred on the pertinent RM focussed SCS dimensions and subsequent stakeholder perceptible influence;
- significance and evolution of RM centred SCS dimensions as antecedents to nurture stakeholder perceptible influence, in order to influence relational reputation.

The titles of the sub-sections of this section concurrently represent more than one RM centred SCS dimensions.

Customisation and understanding stakeholder's contemporary and latent needs

Hawthorn runs a relational campaign for their membership offerings, which are known as Hawthorn Family Club package (2014). They adopted the Family Club concept, which was initially labelled conferred by the media (Stavros, 2005) for their more family oriented activities and offerings. The Family Club Package (2014) offers comfortable surroundings at stadium for family members with a cheering atmosphere, which is available to Hawthorn members, and potential members (supporter but not member) and their family members. The Family Club membership package increases the SCS opportunity to promote the membership to the supporters, who love Hawthorn but currently are not a member and like to search for opportunities to spend more time with family. Thus, such a SCS through the Family Club membership package, supporters are able to be part of the Hawthorn obsession, not by surrendering their family time, but stimulating it.

RM helps marketers to satisfy and retain customers through understanding their needs (Kurtz, 2009). Likewise, Hawthorn comprehends their supporters' contemporary and latent

needs, as they realised that creating a family oriented membership package, promoting a warm family friendly atmosphere at the stadium would favourably impact on their membership operations. The outcome of such a family focused membership package and other RM based membership offerings is Hawthorn achieved a record of 52,493 members by end of 2009 (New Membership Website, 2010). Also, such a RM centred membership package assists Hawthorn to proffer customised memberships, as Kurtz (2009) described that the level of customisation is high in RM. Hawthorn customises the membership package through the Family Club offering for the customers, who like to spend more time with their family. Therefore, understanding customers' and other stakeholders' contemporary and latent needs and customisation are found in Hawthorn's Family Club membership offering as active RM centred SCS dimensions that help Hawthorn's stakeholders (in this case media, customers, investors, sponsors and so forth) to develop their perception about Hawthorn and their offerings. Moreover, such a perception may be able to create an influence that would help Hawthorn to nurture their stakeholders' willingness to do business with them. For example, investors may consider Hawthorn in the stock market as they perceived that Hawthorn benchmarks in the Australian Rules membership market by nurturing the contemporary and latent market needs and proffering customised offerings, where various relational offerings, including such a family-friendly membership package help them to attain and retain that benchmark.

Following the initial authenticity as a Family Club gained from the media, Hawthorn is able to reinforce that authenticity among customers, investors, sponsors and so forth. Since, such an authenticity regarding the title of Family Club, i.e., creating family friendly atmosphere, market offerings and events help Hawthorn to benchmark in the Australian Rules market. Additionally, investors and sponsors would be motivated to associate with the Hawthorn's businesses, in order to receive the maximum exposure through the benchmark membership business. Therefore, the allied stakeholders' perception (Hawthorn is able to attain and retain the benchmark in membership business through their family friendly offerings) and subsequent perceptive influence not only reinforce the Hawthorn's reputation (authenticity), but also position their brand, where understanding customers' contemporary and latent needs and subsequent customised offering help Hawthorn to authenticate, make relevant and differentiate their memberships. Media and atmosphere have impacts as brand positioning differentiators (Kotler, 2003; Gide and Shams, 2011b; 2011c; Shams and Lombardi, in press). Through the Family Club offering, Hawthorn creates and promotes a family friendly

atmosphere at the stadium. Moreover, Hawthorn utilise the testimony conferred by the media in order to identify, establish, maintain and enhance the Family Club campaign, which helps Hawthorn to differentiate (position) their brand from competitive offerings, which is also relevant (positioned) to the customers' needs (stimulating family time). Therefore, underlying the analysed RM perspectives and identified perceptive influence, the unified and mutually supporting applications of authenticity, relevance and differentiation shape a reputation (Hawthorn offers family friendly atmosphere at the stadium) for Hawthorn among their stakeholders. Such a reputation is a relational reputation, as it is nurtured through their stakeholders' relationships and interactions.

Joint power, innovative offering and relationship factor focused branding

Cricket Australia (CA) encourages their stakeholders to make a contribution back to the society through supporting charities and conveying relevant community beneficial messages, which is known as Cricket Cares (nd). Based on the joint effort of CA and cricket celebrities, they administer a number of foundations to raise funds for various social issues. A RM application is found in the pink driving plate offering of the Road Transport Authority (RTA) of Australia, relevant to the CA's one of the Cricket Cares operation. RTA donates Australian \$15 from the selling of each of the pink driving plates to the McGrath foundation (MX News, 2009), a former Australian cricketer's foundation, who works for breast care nurses. Such a RM practice of McGrath Foundation (nd), supported by CA facilitates further SCS among the associated stakeholders. For example, CA, McGrath foundation, RTA, the breast care nurses and the patients are identified as key stakeholders here, while CA, McGrath foundation and RTA attempt to contribute to the development of the breast care nurses. Consequently, the nurses receive necessary resources in order to organise themselves to fight against breast cancer.

RM originates mutually valuable joint power among associated stakeholders (Kurtz, 2009), while they work interdependently towards mutually beneficial multifarious goals (Shams, 2013a), where a strategic market relationship could promote innovative product or service development (Donaldson and O'Toole, 2007). Furthermore, Lars and Berggren (2010) described that the various aspects of relationships between stakeholders can establish, maintain and enhance a particular brand position. Therefore, the joint power, innovative offering and relationship factor focused branding are found as different RM centred SCS dimensions in such a RM practice of CA and their stakeholders. Since, underlying the pink

driving plate offering, CA nurtures the joint power of McGrath foundation, RTA and the prospective customers of the pink driving plate through the innovative offering of fund raising effort for the McGrath foundation in order to flourish further SCS for the breast care nurses. Simultaneously, CA utilises the relationship factor focused branding as a RM centred SCS dimension through such a RM initiative.

McGrath's success to date has seen him become one of Australia's most popular and well respected athletes. His personal courage and on field success has seen him constantly sought after by the media and he is one of the most iconic faces in Australia today. In 2009 and 2010 he was named as one of Australia's most trusted people. (Saxton, nd, np)

The relational aspects of McGrath and his fans, his fascinating appeal to the Australian community and his reputation as a relationship factor of the target market of the pink driving plate have been utilised in this RM practice to promote and position the pink driving plate. Such a community supportive programme generates a socially caring perception about CA among their stakeholders, where the perceptive influence encourages the stakeholders to engage with the CA's businesses. As a result, the RTA involves with the CA and McGrath's foundation to raise funds, as well as to promote the pink driving plate. Centred on the perceptive influence of the stakeholders formed by their socially caring perception about CA and the described RM centred SCSs, such causes and consequences of relationships and interactions between CA and their stakeholders assist CA to authenticate their socially caring reputation through the Cricket Cares programmes. Moreover, it makes relevant and differentiate their associate offerings in respect to the needs of the target market and the competitive offerings. Since, CA and their stakeholders are able to promote the offering relevant to the need of the community (funds for breast care nurses) and utilises the community engaging positioning differentiator, to differentiate the offering of the pink driving plate, in order to raise funds to fight against breast cancer. Therefore, the analysed RM centred SCS dimensions of this sub-section help CA to establish a unified application through the authenticity, relevance and differentiation of their offerings (Ettenson and Knowles, 2008; Martos-Partal and González-Benito, 2011; Stahl et al., 2012; Zarantonello et al., 2013; Wiedmann et al., 2013; Czinkota et al., 2014; Napoli et al., 2014), so as to nurture their stakeholder relationships (Shams, 2011a; 2011b; 2013c) and subsequent reputation as a socially caring organisation.

Adaptation, relationship and service values instead of bureaucratic legal values and high stakeholder service, stakeholder commitment and stakeholder contact

Based on an adaptive effort of organisational change of the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), this sub-section analyses the impact of the following three RM centred SCS dimensions on the perceptive influence of ECB's stakeholders to nurture their relational reputation:

- adaptation;
- relationship and service values instead of bureaucratic legal values;
- high stakeholder service, stakeholder commitment and stakeholder contact.

ECB launched a strategic planning structure for five years, called as Building Partnership (2009; Collier, 2009), in order to adapt a stakeholder-driven relationship practice by decreasing bureaucracy. ECB targeted the following issues as their key areas of development in an attempt to adapt with the varying business requirements (Shams, 2013a):

- improve accountability;
- slash paperwork and bureaucracy;
- streamline management;
- commercial awareness;
- efficiency;
- performance management.

ECB assumed that they need to raise trust among their stakeholders by effective communication, service and less bureaucracy. Since, stakeholders should know how they can be benefited by ECB and be sure that ECB will meet their commitment. Therefore, ECB established a communication system through which 80% of their communication can be done online to minimise paperwork and bureaucracy (Building Partnership, 2009), in order to implement on time communication. Such an organisational change through efficient RM practice allows ECB to extend and utilise additional RM focused SCS dimensions with their extant and new stakeholders. For example, following the win-win outcome focused existing sponsorship; ECB could further extend their sponsorship scope, as ECB proffers their sponsorship offering to potential sponsors by highlighting the sponsoring needs of the sponsors (Marketing Your Club, 2010). As a result, ECB is able to explain what the sponsors can expect from them and how those sponsoring needs will be delivered. Consequently, ECB's satisfied sponsors can comment on the achievement of their sponsoring needs and further SCS opportunities as:

Our sponsorship of the LV County Championship has proved very successful in getting our message across to cricket fans far and wide. We look forward to strengthening our partnership with the ECB (LV=, 2010, np).

Our support for Twenty20 (cricket) continues to generate great feedback from our customers and our employees—the pace and energy of this form of the game is something that we can all identify with. (Clydesdale Bank and Yorkshire Bank, 2010, np).

RM adapts with varying business needs, and strengthens the relationship and service values instead of bureaucratic legal values (Gummesson, 2002, Shams, 2013d). Also, stakeholder commitment, contact and service are greater in RM compared to traditional marketing (Stavros, 2005). From this perspective, with the aim of achieving their five year long Building Partnership goals, ECB has adapted a stakeholder focused organisational practice by delivering relationship and service values instead of bureaucratic legal values. Focusing on high stakeholder service, stakeholder commitment and stakeholder contact, ECB prioritises the range of stakeholders/sponsors and the significance of individual sponsors' importance, relevant to their business goals, with the aim of a win-win outcome for all involved stakeholders (Building Partnership, 2009). Therefore, the relevance of all three RM centred SCS dimensions of this sub-section are signified in ECB's stakeholder value proposition and offerings. Since, ECB wants to develop trust among their stakeholders by efficient communication, service and commitment, based on their adapted relationship values driven RM practice, which creates a perception of ECB's stakeholders that ECB delivers win-win value for its stakeholders. Consequently, the influence of such a stakeholder perception and its influence delight the sponsors of ECB, as the sponsorships deliver the needs of the sponsors and the sponsors happily consider strengthening their ECB relationship, in order to utilise further SCS centred RM dimensions and relevant relationships and interactions to ensure the subsequent win-win value.

Pertinent to such a perceptive influence, the underpinned RM centred SCS dimensions help ECB to re-position their corporate reputation in the mind of the associated stakeholders, as a stakeholder-driven win-win value focused organisation. The authenticity that ECB has established against such a stakeholder relational reputation encourages stakeholders to continue business with ECB. Since, ECB has proved their authenticity by making relevant their offering with the needs of the stakeholders, as well as differentiating from the competitive offerings. Along with the reliability, responsiveness, communication positioning differentiation variables (Kotler, 2003), ECB also utilise the atmosphere to differentiate their

offerings. A company's atmosphere and culture would have a significant impact on the company's image and subsequent positioning (Kotler, 2003). ECB aims to develop an atmosphere that collectively influences the stakeholder relationship value driven RM practice and culture in order to achieve their Building Partnership (2009) goals, where the associated stakeholders feel the significance of associating with ECB.

Orientation on benefits or knowledgeable customers, proving advantage through customers' or other stakeholders' experience, and quality is the concern of all

Arsenal offers a range of event services. It includes exhibitions, product launching, meetings and conferences, special events, wedding, banqueting, film and photography, legend tours, annual events and so forth (Emirates Stadium Events, nd).

We have successfully used Emirates Stadium since 2006. The venue provides us with great flexibility and state-of-the-art facilities to host a variety of events. But most importantly the dedicated staff always ensures we produce our events to the highest standards. I would not hesitate in recommending this venue to you - Jason Devoto, Managing Director, Events PSi Ltd. (Premier Events, 2013, nd, np)

Emirates Stadium proved to be a superb choice of venue in which to host our annual Customer Exposition and, as with Arsenal, a genuine 'crowd-puller'. The facilities were ideal, the staff were professional and helpful throughout and, most importantly of all, delegate and exhibitor feedback following the event confirmed we had made the right choice - Mark Penny, Vendor Marketing Business Manager, Dixons Store Group. (Premier Events, 2013, nd, np; Exhibitions, nd, np)

Arsenal puts forward their loyal customer in their promotions, as the customer acts as a campaigner of Arsenal's event offerings. Based on such a relationship nurturing promotional campaign with the existing customer, Arsenal not only retains them, but also attracts new customers, where customer knowledge or orientation on benefit is favourably linked to relationship quality (Rajaobelina and Bergeron, 2009; Shams, 2011c). Simultaneously, RM helps to authenticate the advantages of carrying out businesses with a company through customer or other stakeholder's perceived experience (Shams, 2013b; Kurtz, 2009; Milman, 2013). Moreover, RM entrusts all staff members, as well as external stakeholders such as commercial partners to keep a keen eye on service quality and superior product development, as RM broadens the quality attentiveness not only in the marketing department, but also in all departments of a company (Stavros, 2005; Kurtz, 2009). From these perspectives, the following three RM centred SCS dimensions are found in Arsenal's relationship practice:

- orientation on benefits or knowledgeable customers;
- proving advantage through customer's or other stakeholder's experience and
- quality is the concern of all.

Since the current customers are well aware (knowledgeable) about Arsenal's offerings. Consequently, they advocate for Arsenal's services, where Arsenal is able to authenticate (prove) their distinct service facilities and professionalism through their customer's experience. Moreover, the delightful remarks of the existing customers about the service facilities and throughout professional supportive assistance of all of the service staff indicates that Arsenal is conscious about the RM dimension of quality is the concern of all. As a result, through the SCS of the event offerings, Arsenal is able to intensify their competitive advantage by further promoting their services to the wider range of their target market, based on the perceived service experience of their delighted customers. Moreover, the happy customers who have been utilised in this viral marketing would anticipate further advantage as a retentive customer.

Centred on these three RM based SCS dimensions, the Arsenal event offerings create a relevant perception of Arsenal's stakeholders. In this case, Arsenal's existing customer conveys their satisfying perception to the wider range of the Arsenal market. As a result, such an advocacy of the loyal customers let transmit that satisfying perception to the wider range of the stakeholders (e.g. suppliers, members, investors, commercial partners, media, customers, community, regulators and so forth) as a spreading virus (Kurtz, 2009). Thus, the transmission of such a satisfying perception creates a perceptive influence that motivates other existing and potential stakeholders to be associated with the Arsenal businesses. Following the RM applications of these three RM centred SCS dimensions and the associated stakeholder perceptive influence, Arsenal establishes their authenticity through their customers' experiences, while the satisfying remarks of the loyal customers demonstrate that Arsenal's offerings are relevant to their needs. At the same time, the described SCS dimensions facilitate the differentiation of the Arsenal event offerings through the performance, competence, reliability and responsiveness of their staff, as the customers are happy with the performance of the Arsenal staff, and Kotler (2003) described that a company could utilise such qualities of their staff as differentiation factors. As a consequence, the applications of such authenticity, relevance and differentiation collectively nurture the relational reputation of Arsenal. In this case, Arsenal is able to establish their reputation as an organisation, whose customers are satisfied.

Discussions and implications

Existing literature shows that reputation and brand positioning are interrelated, interdependent and difficult to distinguish, however they are not same, both are important in different ways. The different ways refer through the authentication for reputation, and relevance and differentiation for brand positioning of a company profile or their products and services, in relation to the needs of the target market. Moreover, one can weaken, as well as extend or support the other. Therefore, such a mutually applicable significant attributes (authentication, relevance and differentiation) of reputation and brand positioning unlock a new avenue of reputation management through the unified applications of these attributes. Again, reputation originates through the associated stakeholders' perceptions, where stakeholder relationships, interactions and observations help to shape or reshape that stakeholder perception. Furthermore, stakeholder perception creates a kind of influence (stakeholder perceptive influence) that stimulates other existing or potential stakeholders, including customers to carry out businesses with a company. Consequently, the stakeholder perceptive influence helps a company to understand and evaluate the value of their reputation, which assist to nurture and influence (establish, maintain and enhance) their reputation accordingly.

Reputation appears as relational through the relationships and interactions of the allied stakeholders, including customers, while the stakeholder relationships and interactions shape or reshape their perception. From this perspective, this multi-case analysis shows that the SCS dimensions analysis approach of RM plays an imperative role to structure (nurture and influence) the authenticity, relevance and differentiation in a way that the associated stakeholders expect and accept, where the SCS dimensions appear as antecedents to influence their reputation, in relation to that authenticity, relevance and differentiation of the company profile or market offerings. Since, such a relational approach keeps a keen eye on stakeholders' anticipation about a company's businesses. The underlying RM centred SCS dimensions helps to flourish relevant cause and consequence of stakeholders' relationships and interactions through a company's capacity to influence stakeholders (e.g. the effort of the ECB through an organisational change to influence their stakeholders), while the RM centred SCS dimensions impact on stakeholder relationships and interactions to shape or reshape stakeholder's perception through the pertinent authenticity, relevance and differentiation of the company's capacity or market offerings. Here, the authenticity, relevance and differentiation are consequential with the stakeholders' needs, wants and demands.

Collectively, such a relational approach nurtures and influences (establish, maintain and enhance) relational corporate reputation. Although, the lesson is learnt from the sports industry, it would be applicable to any industry and market. Since, it is centred on stakeholder relationship approach of marketing and RM is applicable to any industry and market, however the relationship portfolio should follow and adapt only the given situation of the targeted market (Gummesson, 2002). Therefore, in terms of managerial and scholarly perspectives, the stakeholder relationship focused perceptible influence and its impact on relational reputation could be applicable in any industry and market setting; however the relationship portfolio should pursue only the given situation of the targeted setting. Further theoretical and empirical research on the following areas would be beneficial to augment the findings of this study:

- correlate even further the concepts on perceptible influence, reputation, brand positioning, cause and consequence of relationships and interactions, competitive advantage and economic growth;
- further studies in different markets and industries could strengthen the validity of these RM perspectives, as well as a broader range of other emerging perspectives could be acknowledged and utilised;

Beside the academic interest, further research will also satisfy the need for explicit guidance for practice.

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