

Exploring the impact of rebranding on stakeholders: a case study of Hotel Management School NHL Stenden

Anna Spenkelink, Rodney Westerlaken  & Javed Suleri* 

Hotel Management School, NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Leeuwarden

*Correspondence: javed.suleri@nhlstenden.com

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study is to provide a better insight into the impact of rebranding on stakeholders; the case for this study is the rebranding of the Hotel Management School (HMS). This research has explored how the stakeholders have experienced rebranding and how the rebranding has affected the brand identity, image and loyalty. A qualitative research method was used and data was gathered conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the students, staff and industry partners. The data illustrates that due to effective internal communication the employees were not affected by the rebranding. Nevertheless, the brand identity, image and loyalty did not have the same effect on the students and industry partners. Thus, it is recommended that HMS pay more attention to improving the communication, rebuilding and expansion of the brand identity.

KEYWORDS: brand identity, brand image, brand loyalty, communication

Introduction

A brand is a name, term, sign or symbol that identifies the maker or seller of a product (Armstrong et al., 2017). The act of using brand names for advertising and communication with stakeholders is corporate branding (Bhasin, 2019). A successful brand is expected to have a personality and a vision of the world. 21st century brand communication dynamics are different due to shifts in consumer perceptions (Barnham, 2008) and organisations frequently consider refreshing their brand. Hence, countless companies consider rebranding. Rebranding can be defined as creating a new personality by developing a new brand name, logo, symbol, or design (Plewa et al., 2011). The objective of rebranding is often "the creation of a new name, term, symbol, design, or a combination of those, for an established brand to develop a differentiated or new position in the mind of stakeholders and competitors" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 805). As a result, rebranding can range from a small makeover to significant changes such as changing a strategy or even a company name. Furthermore, a brand has a portfolio of meanings, sensations and emotions that are established between a customer and a company (Iglesias & Ind, 2020) and rebranding would subsequently mean a change in this portfolio as well.

The reason why so many companies rebrand could be changing factors concerning their consumers' image of the brand. Moreover, changing the name of an organisation and the brand influences an organisation's brand (Williams, 2012). Researchers have written about rebranding, yet there has not been much research about the stakeholders' opinions, feelings

and experiences of rebranding and whether rebranding affects brand identity, image and loyalty. Thus, this study focuses on these specific aspects.

The Hotel Management School (HMS), a brand of the NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, is one of the largest hotel schools in Europe. The school offers different programmes, such as a Bachelor's degree, an Associate degree, a Work and Study degree, and a Master's degree. The education is highly regarded, which led it being awarded with the "TOP Opleiding Keuzegids 2021" [Top Education Choice Guide]. HMS is among the best programmes in higher education in the Netherlands. Besides this, HMS is one of the most diverse hotel schools in Europe with more than 3 000 students of more than 50 nationalities.

HMS also offers Associate degree education in another location in the Netherlands, Emmen. For this research, the focus is the Leeuwarden main brand. Third-year students of the bachelor programme have the unique possibility to follow two modules or minors in other locations in the Netherlands or abroad. The options for going abroad are to go on exchange to one of 150 schools in 40 countries, go to another higher education institution in the Netherlands, or go to one of the five campus sites connected with HMS. Hotel Management School was formerly known as the school for International Hotel Management of Stenden University of Applied Sciences before the merger of both NHL and Stenden Universities of Applied Sciences in 2018. After the merger in 2018, it rebranded itself and became the Stenden Hotel Management School of NHL Stenden. On 8 February 2021, Hotel Management School (HMS) announced a rebranding. This rebranding had several consequences and changes for HMS's

employees, (current and future) students and industry partners. The changes and consequences are examined in this research.

The first step of the rebranding was changing the name. Previously the school was called "Stenden Hotel Management School", and has changed to "Hotel Management School NHL Stenden". Because of the rebranding, HMS became a sub-brand of the brand NHL Stenden. Besides the new name, the school also changed its appearance by creating a new identity, including a new logo, a new colour palette, a new website and a new educational concept. As a consequence of this rebranding, many students, employees and industry partners have become familiar with the new brand identity. Thus, this study investigates the impact of rebranding on these three stakeholders.

This research aims to determine the opinions, feelings and experiences of the rebranding of HMS on the key players or dominant stakeholders who must be given key consideration (Cornelissen, 2020) as well as the effect on these stakeholders regarding the brand identity, image and loyalty. Next, it could be interesting for HMS's future to gain an insight into how the stakeholders think about the new sub-brand and how they have experienced the changes so far. Therefore, this research explores the impact of the rebranding of Hotel Management School NHL Stenden on its stakeholders. This study focus is on brand identity, brand image and brand loyalty.

The problem statement for this study is: "Exploring the impact of the rebranding of Hotel Management School NHL Stenden on its stakeholders". The research questions for this research are focused on the following subtopics:

- RQ1: How did the stakeholders of Hotel Management School NHL Stenden experience rebranding?
 RQ2: Does the rebranding of Hotel Management School NHL Stenden affect brand identity?
 RQ3: Does the rebranding of Hotel Management School NHL Stenden affect the brand image?
 RQ4: Does the rebranding of Hotel Management School NHL Stenden affect brand loyalty?

Literature review

Brand identity

Brand identity comprises the core values, visions and beliefs of a company. It communicates the purpose, principles, related background issues and ambitions of the brand (Kapferer, 2008). Brand identity is described as an identity that originates from a single source and is communicated to the product through symbols and messages as a non-visible element (Kazemi et al., 2013). In addition, the researchers state that a brand's identity defines its core and authenticity. A brand becomes a channel through which we can connect with consumers and identify ourselves concerning other brands. A brand is a living identity that allows a company to act in the short and long term (Barbu, 2016). If a company or organisation wants to establish a long-term image, it must first establish a brand identity. After that, a brand image can be generated based on the brand identity. So, brand identity is one of the most essential things for an organisation (Kazemi et al., 2013). That is why these two topics are being explored, as they could change positively or negatively through rebranding. This change could have consequences for HMS as a sub-brand. An organisation's identification is the most important, distinguishing and long-lasting feature it has (Barbu, 2016).

Companies try to reveal their true identity to the general

public for the following well-known reasons: increasing sales and creating a more attractive image. Brand identity supports positioning by allowing brands to identify themselves by comparisons to other brands (Barbu, 2016). Therefore, HMS must establish a strong brand identity to have a good position compared to their competitors. The better the brand identity of HMS is presented, the more attractive it will be for the students and the future students it will reach. With a strong brand identity, more employees will be proud representatives of the brand and the brand will continue to make positive impressions in the hospitality industry.

Brand image

How a brand is perceived and decoded is a result of communication sent by that brand to consumers (Kapferer, 2008). A brand image will be created after a brand identity has been established and brand image can be defined as the consumer's impression of the brand's connections, evocations and meanings. To create this brand image, the initiator of an organisation or company creates and projects an image to the general public. In addition, the brand image is the public's view of the brand (Barbu, 2016). So, it is essential to examine whether the public's view is the same as before or has changed due to the rebranding of HMS.

The picture is what others think about us, while the personality is what we feel about ourselves. The public's perception of the brand rewards the initiative to reveal the identity. The brand image should, in theory, be as similar as possible to the one wanted by the company. Attempts to enforce the new identity often face opposition (Barbu, 2016). Hence, this research will investigate whether HMS conveys the correct perception of the brand to the public.

Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is characterised as a customer's behaviour or attitude toward their purchase intention for a particular brand (Worlu & Ahmad, 2019). Multiple factors could affect brand loyalty. First of all, rebranding a company's name or some other part of the business is seen as a factor that can affect brand loyalty positively or negatively, depending on the situation (Worlu & Ahmad, 2019). HMS has also changed its name, so HMS's task is to make sure this is positively changed. Second, changing the logo could affect brand loyalty. Specifically, different degrees of logo modification (evolutionary and revolutionary redesign) would affect brand loyalty (Titi & Anang, 2018). However, if the difference between the old logo and the new logo is not as noticeable, the impact is reduced or eliminated (Ha et al., 2011). HMS has radically changed its logo: the old brand "Stenden Hotel Management School" had a blue swallow as its logo. The new brand HMS has a pink logo with a block around the name. Therefore, the difference is significant and the impact can also have substantial consequences.

Research has shown that customers are more likely to embrace a new brand if the visual identities are similar to the old brand (Bamfo et al., 2018). Besides that, rebranding can also negatively impact brand loyalty due to modifications in core values initially introduced to the consumer (Bamfo et al., 2018). Next to that, without anything new to give, rebranding a logo in the name of aesthetics may not be very effective (Goi & Goi, 2011). The values of HMS remain the same, namely offering high-quality education at the same location with the same employees. By researching

the effect of rebranding on brand loyalty, one can understand whether brand loyalty has changed and whether this is positive or negative.

Rebranding

Rebranding can be defined as creating a new personality by developing a new brand name, logo, symbol, or design. Researchers claim that rebranding aims to create a new position for the organisation or company in the market and create change in an organisation (Plewa et al., 2011). For example, HMS has opted for rebranding to better link up with the main brand (NHL Stenden) and improve its position, as seen in this research. Namely, rebranding aims to reposition an organisation or company by creating a new identity aligned with its goals. In addition, the effectiveness of rebranding depends on aligning the name and logo as soon as possible (Barbu, 2016). HMS has done this by changing the name and incorporating this into a new logo that matches the main brand.

One of the reasons for rebranding could be changes in an organisation, or a company's internal and external environments (Prakash, 2012). After NHL and Stenden merged, there was a change in the internal and external environment. The merger is, therefore, the main reason for the rebranding. In such instances, a metamorphosis — a process that transforms a brand's image — occurs (Plewa et al., 2011). Furthermore, the changes in the image are both radical and widespread (Mróz-Gorgoń & Szymański, 2018). When a company or organisation undergoes such a metamorphosis, a new brand must also be more appealing than the old one, and consumers must feel linked to the location where services are offered, thus, such a broad and radical change in the brand image is essential to investigate properly (Collange, 2015). The brand image of HMS should become more attractive and more robust than the former Stenden Hotel Management School brand. In addition, the connection with the location and services must be maintained.

There are also multiple disadvantages of rebranding an organisation or company. First of all, a brand can lose the reputation and loyalty it has built up. Previously, Stenden had a strong brand called "Stenden Hotel Management School". If the rebranding is not carried out properly, there is a risk of losing its brand identity, brand image and brand loyalty. Moreover, if the reputation and value it has built up is lost, this may result in fewer students, less revenue and less staff. Secondly, there could be a possibility that the stakeholders no longer agree with the new brand. If the stakeholders of HMS no longer agree with the new brand, brand loyalty can be in danger. That is why it is essential to investigate what the rebranding of HMS does to their brand loyalty, to make sure that the stakeholders agree with the new brand and if anything should be changed to keep these stakeholders satisfied. Thirdly, rebranding can also cost a lot of time and money (Goi & Goi, 2011). If rebranding fails, it could have severe consequences for the company or organisation, damaging its brand image (Williams et al., 2021). The reasons for rebranding must be carefully considered since rebranding is not a simple or inexpensive undertaking (Goi & Goi, 2011). For that reason, the brand image, brand identity and brand loyalty should be adequately investigated. If the rebranding is not carried out properly, one or more of these factors could be negatively affected, resulting in severe consequences. By adequately investigating these factors, damage can be prevented, and aspects could be adjusted before it is too late.

Stakeholders during a rebranding

Research has attempted to gain a better understanding of rebranding by measuring induced cognitive and emotional responses (Peterson et al., 2015) and assessing acceptance or resistance to a rebranded organisation or company (Collange & Bonache, 2015). Prior research on rebranding has established the importance of recognising the various stakeholder groups impacted by a company's rebranding (Miller & Merrilees, 2013). Nonetheless, on the one hand, most of the literature on rebranding has focused on managers' behaviour or customer expectations (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Since it has shown that indicating different stakeholder groups is essential for the rebranding, three different such groups of stakeholders were interviewed for this study, namely students, employees and industry partners. On the other hand, few studies have discussed rebranding failures in this research field (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Studies that integrate multiple stakeholders' viewpoints and understand how interactions between them can influence the outcome of rebranding are lacking in this field of study (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Therefore, the opinions and experiences of the stakeholders of HMS were carefully explored and represented. As a result, the outcome of the rebranding can be positively influenced, and the various stakeholders and brand loyalty can be promoted for the new brand. Lastly, an additional obstacle for effective rebranding implementation could be brand identity differences among multiple stakeholders (Wilson et al., 2014). Hence, the intent is to avoid these obstacles by clearly representing the different opinions of the stakeholders of HMS.

Branding of higher education

Multiple studies, such as Williams and Omar (2014), Hemsley-Brown et al. (2016), Rachmadhani et al. (2018) and Esteky and Kalati (2021), have been done on the effect of branding on higher education. Each of them demonstrates that higher education prestige is an essential factor in determining the uniqueness of higher education. However, the adoption of concepts such as brand identity, brand image and brand loyalty is becoming increasingly important with the rise of branding. In addition, this is the reason why organisations are eager to create distinctive university logos, recognise multiple definitions held by stakeholders, strengthen recognisable imagery and enhance credibility in this increasingly competitive global world (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016).

HMS has been awarded "TOP Opleiding Keuzegids 2021" [Top Education Choice Guide], which means that HMS belongs to the best higher education programmes of 2021 in the Netherlands. However, this award is not enough to be unique. That is why HMS needs to rebuild a strong identity and strengthen HMS's brand image to be competitive with other hotel management schools. Before students enrol in higher education, they shape their conceptions of brand image, brand identity and meaning, which they maintain during their studies and even after graduation (Dennis et al., 2016). That is the reason why HMS needs to promote the sub-brand. Establishing a solid brand identity and brand image will have positive consequences for the brand loyalty of HMS. Next, the more appealing the university's brand is to students, the greater their identification is, resulting in common interests, identities and beliefs between the university and the students. However, their ability to

understand the university's brand depends on how the university communicates it (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). A university's continuation depends on the quality of its students, which has an equal effect on brand recognition (Rachmadhani et al., 2018). So, one of the essential things for higher education is the proper way of communicating its brand in such a way that students can identify with it. The marketing of HMS is therefore essential to get high-quality students. More marketing increases brand awareness, which results in an improvement of the brand image. The greater the identification with HMS, the higher the brand identity, resulting in more brand loyalty.

Conceptual model

The conceptual model is used to give an overview of the literature review. This will aid in answering the problem statement and research questions (Figure 1).

Research method

We applied inductive theory to examine the topic and decided to adopt the interpretivism paradigm, and the ontology is based on constructivism. The qualitative method has been chosen for this study and, as an instrument, interviews were used to find the answers to the problem statement and research questions. The data from the interviews were analysed to see if the rebranding affected the brand identity, brand image and brand loyalty and to find out what the stakeholders' experiences were in the rebranding of HMS. Research questions for this research were gathered with eight in-depth semi-structured interviews. The population and the participants for these interviews were students, employees and industry partners involved in HMS. They were invited via e-mail, and the interviews took place via Microsoft Teams. The first group were the students studying for a Bachelor's degree at HMS. The second group of stakeholders were employees working at HMS. The third group of stakeholders were HMS's industry partners.

The procedure of collecting the interviews was done via e-mail. The participants received an invitation e-mail, including

a participant information sheet and a consent form. The participation information sheet included the topic description of the research, the purpose for doing this research and how their privacy was protected. Furthermore, the consent form entailed an agreement, followed by place for the participant's signature. The participants were asked if the interview could be recorded for later review and analysis. After creating the transcript in English and Dutch, the recording was deleted. Lastly, the names, age, origin, etc. were not mentioned in the transcribed interviews to protect the participants' privacy. To process interviews, a coding process was used to analyse the data. The coding process was conducted in five steps: preparation, reading, open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The outcome of the coding steps formed the base and structure of the findings.

Results

Students

A total of three students, three HMS employees, and two industry partners were interviewed. The interviewer made use of a semi-structured interview guide. The open coding led to the main codes "effectiveness of communication", "consequences of COVID-19", "brand identity" "brand loyalty" and "brand image". Axial codes generally acknowledged by students were "impact of communication" and "recognition". Axial codes analysed in the employee stakeholders were "identity", "impact" and "image". Whereas the axial code most highly recognised in the analysis of interviews with industry partners was "impact of communication". Topics discussed in this section are based on selective coding.

First, the students' results are presented by looking at the effectiveness of communication. The students were asked what they thought about the rebranding announcement of HMS. All students did not notice the announcement as one of the students pointed out:

I did not notice the message at all. We received so many e-mails from school that I did not open them. I

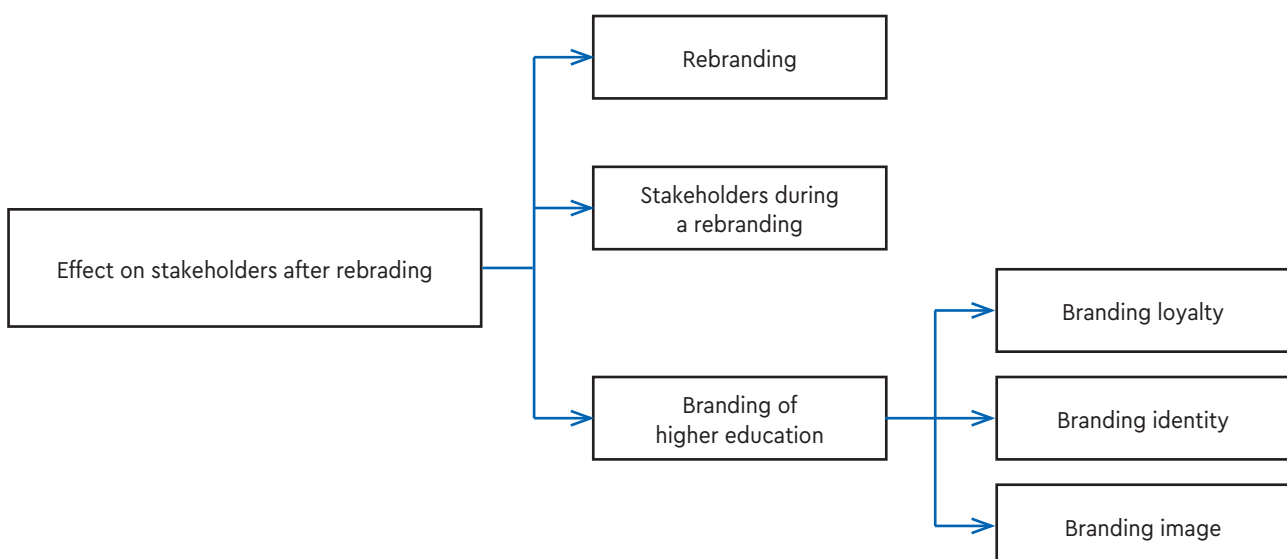


FIGURE 1: Conceptual model

think that just one e-mail is not enough to announce something with such a big impact.

The students felt ill-informed, which resulted in the fact that the students had no idea what the rebranding entailed.

Even though the students had no idea about the rebranding, they were asked what they thought about the reason or purpose for the rebranding: *"Maybe the fusion with NHL Stenden, but I am not sure...However, it is just guessing since the reasons are not mentioned to us".*

Students highlighted that communication could be improved and HMS should inform the students more since one e-mail could be easily missed. Also, they would like to know the actual reason behind the rebranding. In addition, the students were also asked about things that should be changed or should be done differently:

...I would inform all the students from each school year about the rebranding. For example, give a presentation about what has changed and especially the main reasons behind it. Now, I hear many negativities around me of students complaining about new changes or lack of clarity. I think you will gain a lot of positivity when everyone informs you aptly.

HMS could have informed the students in a different way. If this is carried out, negativity can turn into positivity. Besides that, there is also mentioned that HMS could become more professional if everyone used the same name and logo. If this happens, everyone at HMS will promote the same identity, resulting in a more professional attitude. This consistency is necessary since many students and lecturers still use the old brand in presentations and e-mails.

Employees

Employees of HMS were asked how the rebranding was communicated internally. All employees gave the same answer, namely HMS announced the rebranding regularly via the "coffee break meeting" (weekly meeting with all the staff) and multiple times via the newsletter employees receive weekly. Furthermore, all employees confirmed that they had been informed enough and that the information received was clear. Additionally, good internal communication was confirmed by the following answer to the question about what the reason was for the rebranding:

Well, I think there are multiple reasons...but the main reason is becoming part of the main brand (NHL Stenden) and that we are becoming a sub-brand. This is well communicated.

This quote shows good internal communication with the employees. Good communication is vital for this study to compare this way of communicating with other stakeholder groups.

Industry partners

Lastly, the results of the industry partners about the effectiveness of the communication will be discussed. The industry partners were asked how HMS communicated its rebranding with their company. Two interesting answers were given: *"Well, I am somehow involved in HMS. I heard about it that way. However, they have not announced anything to my company".*

Well, they did not communicate a rebranding to our company. So, to be honest, I am not sure if I can do this interview with you. I also have contact with many other companies in the region, and they are also not aware of the rebranding.

Since the industry partners were not informed, it became more challenging to continue the interviews. However, they were continued, as they could result in more interesting recommendations for HMS. On the other hand, not all the questions could be asked since the participants could not answer them.

Further, all participants were asked what they thought the reason or purpose was for the rebranding. One industry partner had no idea about rebranding and could not answer the question. However, the other participant, who is somehow involved in HMS, mentioned multiple reasons for the rebranding:

It has become clear to me that one of the reasons is the fusion and strengthening the position with a whole new appearance. Nevertheless, again, they did not mention this to my company.

Both industry partners agree that HMS should communicate more and inform all the industry partners about rebranding and significant future changes. According to one of the industry partners, poor communication has resulted in a negative brand image for HMS. Lastly, the industry partners were asked if they think the changes made by the rebranding will affect brand loyalty. The answers differ, but they come down to the same solution, namely to improve communication:

I think if they communicate their identity better, this will positively affect the image of HMS, and it could bring the industry and HMS closer together, which increases the loyalty.

It could become negative since they are not communicating with us.

HMS could improve the external communication with industry partners. If not, it could negatively affect brand loyalty.

Consequences of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been with us for nearly two years now. Therefore, it is not surprising that several participants mention this theme in their answers.

Students

All the interviewed students mentioned that they did not see the rebranding changes in, for example, the school building because of the online education they had had for one and a half years.

Well, I saw it when I got back to school again (physically) after one and a half years of online education...but I did not notice it during the online education, so it was a bit of a surprise.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made communication with students more complex, which has resulted in the students feeling ill-informed.

Industry partners

One of the industry partners mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the brand image of HMS:

I think the image of hospitality management education, in general, is negative at the moment due to COVID-19. This can also be seen in the decrease in the number of students registering for hospitality management education. COVID-19 has shown that our industry can be insecure/uncertain. However, this has to do with COVID-19, not with the education itself..

Brand identity, brand image and brand loyalty

The following three themes are combined since they were often interrelated during the interviews.

Students

When the students came back to class, they saw the changes in physical expressions:

When I now walk in school, I see that the name and logo has changed on the banners. However, due to online education for so long, I had no clue at all.

However, most of the students are optimistic about the new changes:

I like the new logo and the new colour palette they are using. I think the old colours were a bit too old. This is more 2021.

It is good that our new name has the words "NHL Stenden" in it. In previous years, it felt like we were separated from the other academies since our name was "Stenden", and now it feels more like we are all studying at the same school. I think this is a good finalisation of the merger process.

Most students like the new brand because of the changes mentioned above. However, one of the students said that they missed the old brand and regretted that the old one is gone. They think that people abroad may not be familiar with the brand anymore. HMS should monitor this by possibly investigating this sensitive aspect of rebranding.

The opinions about the brand image varied among the students. As the industry partners also mentioned, most students think the brand image has negatively changed due to poor communication. However, one student thinks it has positively changed since it is now future-proof. Furthermore, the students were asked whether they believe HMS will attract another type of student because of rebranding. The students believe the kind of student will remain the same.

Maybe more students since the whole appearance looks way better now, but not another type. Besides, HMS can become more attractive, especially for students who just graduated from secondary school and are doubting which education path to choose.

However, another student thought it would attract fewer international students since they are no longer familiar with the brand. This unfamiliarity is something that HMS should monitor as this can have a negative effect. In addition, the students all agree that HMS should work to rebuild its identity. Especially for the external environment since there is a possibility that this group will not recognise the brand anymore. Furthermore, the following recommendation was given by one of the students:

I think HMS could profile themselves more like a school, not only for hotels and restaurants, but also as a school that is way more than that. I say this since 10-20% of the students continue working in the restaurant or hotel sector, but the other 80-90% go to another sector in the industry. I think if you would show this more in the identity, it could attract way more students.

On top of that, all students agreed that the new identity should be communicated further than currently done. Students believe that if this happens, they can familiarise themselves with the new identity. Eventually, everyone will promote the same identity. The last question was whether students think HMS

has to rebuild their brand loyalty. All students agree that brand loyalty will stay the same. However, the following sidenotes were made:

I think that alumni will not say that they are from Hotel Management School NHL Stenden. I think they are saying they are from Stenden.

Nevertheless, the following student disagreed with this:

If you are talking to someone on the other side of the world, I think they will still recognise the Hotel Management School in Leeuwarden.

Employees

The employees noticed some changes due to the rebranding, such as the new name, logo, banners and curriculum. Further, all three employees mentioned that HMS is profiling itself differently, which is more future-proof. That is why it is not surprising that all interviewed employees prefer the new brand instead of the old brand because it is future-proof. Even though the employees like the new brand, the following comment was made:

I prefer the new brand. However, I miss the old brand because I was so used to it. Nevertheless, the new brand is future-proof, and I like the new style.

One of the employees mentioned that they miss the old brand, just as one of the students did. HMS should carefully investigate this in a follow-up study to determine if HMS paid sufficient attention to the emotional part of the rebranding. According to the employees, nothing has to change or should be done differently, confirming excellent internal communication. Not all employees were sure if the brand image was changed positively or negatively. Two employees thought that it is up to the future to decide, while another employee was certain about a positive change:

The brand image is positively changed. The rebranding showed so many changes, and it shows that we are assertive and have more guts than before. I think it is more extrovert, with an identity that shows that we are standing up for ourselves.

The employees also think it is up to the future to figure out how HMS will attract another type of student. Moreover, the employees were asked if they believed HMS had to rebuild a new identity. Most of the employees thought HMS does not have to rebuild, but expand the brand identity:

I think we changed a lot in the identity, for example from the outside, what you can physically see (the image), but because of that, I think we changed ourselves as well, in a positive way. However, this will take some time. It will not change within a few days.

So, the employees thought HMS should expand their identity. Here, a suitable recommendation can be made for HMS. The last question entailed whether employees believed that HMS should work to rebuild brand loyalty. Most employees thought HMS should not rebuild, but expand its brand loyalty.

I think, not rebuilding but expanding more. We have a new office for our industrial relations, and I think the rebranding with a new identity was perfect timing and it fits perfectly in this new office. This will help us in the right direction of expanding.'

Industry partners

Both industry partners did not receive a message about the rebranding of HMS. However, one of the industry partners was informed about the rebranding, but not via their company. The industry partners were asked what they thought about these changes. It is somehow logical that both answers differ since one of the participants was (indirectly) informed, and the other industry partner was not:

I prefer the new brand. I think it is good that they are working to future-proof themselves. They are moving with the changes in the industry.

The other industry partner had no opinion about the new changes. He stated that he was not aware of the recent changes. However, the other industry partner who was involved said the following:

I think HMS needs to show more what they have changed. Many industry partners are not aware yet of all the changes. I think HMS should start promoting its unique selling point. What does the school stand for, how are they unique and how does HMS do differently and better than other hotel schools in the Netherlands? I think they should especially strengthen their identity in this.

Discussion

How did the stakeholders of the Hotel Management School NHL Stenden experience rebranding?

All students did not see the rebranding announcement of HMS. Students felt that they were not fully informed and the actual reason or purpose had not been conveyed. Because of that, the students barely noticed the rebranding and did not know what it entails due to limited communication by HMS in their view. Students felt they should be informed adequately because this could positively affect HMS. The internal communication with the students should be improved by informing students more about the rebranding and the reasons behind it.

On the other hand, looking at the employees, there was good internal communication about the rebranding, and the main reasons for the rebranding were clear. Both interviewed industry partners did not receive a rebranding announcement of HMS through their company. Both industry partners were left with a feeling of being insufficiently informed by HMS. If HMS does not improve communication with the industry partners in the future, it could risk losing its reputation and credibility. Hence, external communication should be improved by informing all industry partners about rebranding.

Does the rebranding of the Hotel Management School NHL Stenden affect brand identity?

Based on the results, it can be said that the internal communication with HMS employees was good. The new brand identity is clear, the reasons and purpose are well explained and the employees are optimistic about the new brand identity. However, it is recommended that HMS should expand its identity and show its unique selling point, aiming more at what the brand stands for and what makes HMS a better hospitality education institution than others in Europe. One of the industry partners (who is a little involved in HMS) agreed with this opinion. Since both industry partners did not know about the rebranding, there was no clear answer if the brand identity had changed. Both industry partners thought that HMS should

enhance communication to develop a better relationship with the industry partners.

Due to COVID-19, students received online education for more than a year. Hence, they did not physically observe the changes in brand identity. Nevertheless, once they started attending classes on campus, they have started observing modifications, and most of the students liked the new brand identity. The students thought that the new brand identity is future-proof, which helps to finalise the merger. However, the students believed that the brand identity should be better communicated to familiarise themselves with the new identity to support the same brand identity. In addition, the students also agree with the employees and industry partners that HMS should rebuild and expand the brand identity. So, the rebranding has affected the brand identity of the industry partners. By improving communication, this could be solved.

Furthermore, the rebranding has not affected the brand identity of the employees, but they would like to expand the brand identity more. Lastly, the students were optimistic about the new brand identity. However, HMS communication should improve, and HMS should rebuild and expand the brand identity more. It will no longer negatively affect the brand identity if this is done.

Does the rebranding of the Hotel Management School NHL Stenden affect the brand image?

Most of the students and one of the industry partners thought the brand image had become more negative since the changes were not communicated sufficiently, from their perspective. Since changes in the brand image are radical and widespread (Mróz-Gorgoń & Szymański, 2018), it is important to communicate more with these stakeholders; otherwise, it could cause differences within various groups of stakeholders (Wilson et al., 2014). The employees were not sure yet if the brand image had changed. Employees thought the future will clarify this, and if HMS promotes the new brand more, it will positively change the brand image. Thus, the rebranding affected the brand image.

Does the rebranding of the Hotel Management School NHL Stenden affect brand loyalty?

The students did not think that rebranding affected brand loyalty. Students believed it would remain the same if HMS keeps in touch with the alumni. In addition, it could be that people will use the old brand name on the other side of the world; nevertheless, according to the students, this will take some time. For the employees, brand loyalty was not negatively changed due to the rebranding. However, students thought HMS should expand their brand loyalty by having more contacts worldwide. Brand loyalty has become negative for the industry partners since HMS did not communicate about the rebranding. It also appeared that some of the stakeholders were still missing the old brand. HMS needs to see if attention has been paid to the emotional part of the rebranding. So, the rebranding has not affected the brand loyalty of the students and employees, but it has affected the brand loyalty of the industry partners.

Exploring the impact of the rebranding of Hotel Management School NHL Stenden on their stakeholders

Comparing the conclusions of the research questions, it can be concluded that the rebranding has impacted the students and industry partners. The rebranding did not significantly affect

the employees, as there had been good internal communication about the new brand and changes. The answers to the research questions have shown significant differences in communication. First, the students were informed, but not enough from the students' point of view. The employees were, according to themselves, well informed, and the industry partners were inadequately informed. Properly informing the two stakeholder groups (students and industry partners) could avoid negative complaints and confusion. If this point of improvement is not carried out, higher education could risk losing the reputation and appreciation it has built up (Goi & Goi, 2011). If that happens, it will result in fewer students since they could hear from other students about the communication, resulting in less revenue and staff retention. All of this shows that HMS should keep the stakeholders satisfied. If not, the stakeholders will no longer agree with the brand (Goi & Goi, 2011). For that reason, it has been essential to do this research by correctly mapping the (emotional) feelings and experiences. If HMS does not react to these (emotional) feelings and experiences, it could have severe consequences for HMS's future.

Limitations and recommendations

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that the interviews were held online (MS Teams). Working online made it more challenging to see the body language and expressions of the participants during the interview. Furthermore, it appeared that industry partners were not fully informed about the rebranding of HMS. For this reason, it was not easy to gain answers.

In addition, many factors have common ground and influence each other, such as brand identity, brand image, brand loyalty and feelings, experiences and communication. Considering that the network of stakeholders for HMS is large, this research had a small sample. Therefore results could have been compromised and should be seen merely as indicators.

From this study's purpose, findings and discussion, some suggestions for the business practice can be derived. HMS should communicate differently about the rebranding and increase external communication about the rebranding by highlighting significant future changes. It is essential to ensure everyone is using the new brand identity to ensure everybody is spreading the same identity. It is recommended to put more effort into developing a good quality connection between HMS and the industry partners. Finally, it is recommended to examine the emotional part of rebranding.

ORCID iDs

Rodney Westerlaken — <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4581-836X>
 Javed Suleri — <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9111-7674>

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