CONGRUENCE IN THE POSITIONING OF SERVICE BRANDS: AN EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION

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ABSTRACT

In view of the relatively high cost to produce extensive advertising campaigns, it is essential that marketing managers and advertising executives justify whether consumers accurately perceive positioning strategies that appear in marketing communications (Fill 1999; Schultz 2006) and whether their adopted positioning strategies are consistent with the former and the latter. While positioning activities and the determination of congruence in terms of management's adopted positioning strategies, the firm's actual positioning practices and target consumers' perceptions are pivotal for the success of the brand in the marketplace (see Porter 1996; Schultz 2006), it is worrisome to realize that congruence in the positioning deliberation of service brands appear to have eluded marketing scholars' attention (Rigger 1995). Therefore, we infer that the main concern in evaluating the effectiveness of the offerings' positions in the marketplace ought to be whether the firm has achieved congruence between management activities and the target audience's perceptions (Park et al. 1986; Hooley et al. 2004; Blankson 2008). Although this dearth in knowledge about congruence in the positioning activities of service brands is now receiving attention (Blankson 2004; Blankson and Kalafatis 2007a), given this state of meagre empirical research, congruence in positioning deliberation is in danger of being under-researched (Pollay 1985; Piercy 2005). This lacuna underscores the timely need for this study.

In order to examine congruence between adopted, communicated and perceived positioning strategies, an appropriate typology is required. However, in the absence of empirically derived consumer-generated positioning strategies (Aaker and Shansby 1982; Crawford 1985; Ries and Trout 1986; Easingwood and Mahajan 1989), the call for, and appreciation of, consumer-based positioning strategies (Dibb *et al.* 1997; Fill 1999; Burton and Easingwood 2006) and criticisms levelled against extant typologies of positioning strategies (Kalafatis et al. 2000; Blankson and Kalafatis 2001), it was decided to adopt the generic, i.e., appropriate for services and goods, consumer-derived typology of positioning strategies put forward by Blankson and Kalafatis (2004). This typology was developed following established psychometric and scale development guidelines. In addition, the rationale for adopting this generic typology of positioning strategies stems from the fact that it has been applied in managerial/corporate contexts (i.e., positioning adopted by managers) (Kalafatis et al. 2000; Blankson *et al.* 2008) and consumer contexts (i.e., consumers' perceptions of firms' positioning strategies) (Blankson and Kalafatis 2007a, b) and exhibits reliability. Moreover, the typology has been found to possess explanatory power, having been applied in the UK services industry (Blankson 2004).

The overall reliability of the 29 items supporting the eight dimensions is high at .875 on the Cronbach coefficient Alpha. In addition, the item-total correlations for the 29 items are acceptable with each item above the cut-off point of .3. We tested the individual dimensions and they exhibit moderate to high internal consistency ["top of the range" = .887; "service" = .894; "value for money" = .813; "reliability" = .736; "attractiveness" = .829; "country of origin" = .681; "the brand name" = .710; "selectivity" = .664]. The validity of the research was tested through content, convergent, and predictive validity. Concerning content validity, the measures developed for the positioning constructs were derived from an exhaustive step by step approach that involved examination of the relevant literature, followed by generation of statements, pre-testing of the questionnaire, and underwent detailed evaluations by academicians and experts in the industry. Convergent validity was tested through exploratory factor analysis where the identified latent factors can be seen as underlying dimensions of the research construct. Previous research on this topic has been limited. However, congruence in the positioning of service brands is an important research agenda for both marketing scholars and practitioners. This study has made contribution to the subject of congruence in service brands' positioning—an important research agenda that was proposed to the research community by Hooley *et al.* (2001, p.514–515) when they noted that the various dimensions of competitive positioning have not been researched empirically and warrant more detailed study.

References available upon request