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Brand Power and Brand Focus as facilitators of Relationship Quality in the wine sector

Namércio Cunha and Sandra Maria Correia Loureiro

Abstract

The effectiveness of long-term relationships with business partners has been getting more attention in recent years from both academics and managers. This study explores a dyadic perspective of wine producers and distributors that identified Brand Focus as new sub-construct of Long-term Relationship Sustainability and Brand Power as new sub-construct of Power, employed to describe the Relationship Quality (RQ) between two important players of the market. The main findings highlight contributions made to brand relationships acting as facilitators of RQ in the wine sector.

Keywords

Relationship Quality; Brand Focus; Brand Power; Long-term Relationship Sustainability; Power; Wine sector

1. Introduction

Nowadays, firms should go beyond merely designing a product according to the expectations of the consumer and being able to manufacture it with the best quality, in order to be competitive and successful in the wine business industry or in other industries. In the midst of aggressive offers that could arise from any part of the world, it is crucial to develop new strategic approaches, which go beyond the traditional marketing tools.

Firms need to be geared towards the reciprocal and symmetric interdependence of business partners in order to have access to expert know-how and resources, as well as complement their internal competence and increase the competitive performance (e.g., De Wulf et al., 2001; Dyer and Singh, 1998; Hammervoll, 2012; Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997; Kim et al., 2010; Walter et al., 2003; Zacharia et al., 2011). Indeed, exchange relationship management is regarded as one of the most important strategic resources for the success of business companies (De Wulf et al., 2001; Hammervoll, 2012; Johnson, 1999; Powers and Reagan, 2007; Smith, 1998). Hence, it is not a

surprise that producers, distributors, retailers, customers and even competitors (stakeholders) join forces to co-create value solutions. Establishing and maintaining appropriate exchange relationships, while at the same time developing quality relationships, results in superior and distinct advantages for the business partners (e.g., Cannon et al., 2010; Gummesson, 1997; Hammervoll, 2012; Jap et al., 1999; Johnson, 1999; Nyaga and Whipple, 2011; Rauyruen and Miller, 2007; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Wagner et al., 2010; Zacharia et al., 2011).

In this vein, a dyadic perspective of buyer-seller relations, or in other words supplier-customer, is becoming more important to achieve business success, where partners should be concerned about joining forces and working together in order to improve their performance and add value to their products/brands (Cannon et al., 2010). This means that the management practices implemented for one partner should also be perceived as effective and fair for the other partner (Arranz and de Arroyabe, 2012; Buzzell and Ortmeier, 1995; Cook et al., 2011; De Wulf et al., 2001; Gruen and Shah, 2000; Kumar et al., 1995; Terpend and Ashenbaum, 2012; Wagner et al., 2010; Zacharia et al., 2011). In sum, the success of a company can be influenced by the style of the relationships developed with other players (Anderson and Narus, 1990).

Following this appeal for research on RQ among stakeholders, the current study aims to explore how distributors and wine producers describe the Brand Focus and Brand Power as facilitating facets of RQ. The wine sector is selected as a field of research because it has unique features which have not yet been deeply studied and could explain management specificities. Therefore, in order to carry out our intention, we will present three main reasons that explain why the wine sector was chosen:

- i) Portugal is an old wine country full of tradition and heritage, “in which the wine culture has been flourishing for centuries” (Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2012);
- ii) The wine sector has not been deeply analyzed and studied in previous research;
- iii) This sector plays an important role in the national economy, and the recognition of the quality of the work carried out in this sector is being acclaimed internationally.

This article is organized as follows: after the introduction of our topic research, we present the theoretical background that supported this study. This is followed by a description of the methodology. The following sections discuss research findings from the empirical study and the implications for managers of this study are discussed. Finally, the limitations and new research directions are suggested.

2. Theoretical Background

Relationship marketing shifts the traditional concepts of short-term exchange and transactional marketing to a social psychology and interpersonal relationship (Fournier, 1998; Tsai, 2011). Grönroos (2011, p. 245) defines relationship marketing as “the process of establishing, maintaining and enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers for the benefit of all involved parties, through a process of making and keeping promises.”

Marketing moved its attention from the initial goods-dominant view, where tangible outputs were central, to a service-dominant view, in which the focus is on the intangible outputs and on the relationships. Service-Dominant Logic stresses that firms and customers jointly create value and build relationships. This approach also highlights that customer desires are ever-changing; consequently, firms must also change (Finney et al., 2011). Therefore, relationship marketing emerges as the core strategic element to be competitive in 21st Century. Athanasopoulou (2009) and Palmatier et al. (2006) maintain that within the field of relationship marketing, the concept of RQ promotes a development of a whole new stream that gains presence in the main marketing journals. This concept has been developed based on human relationship literature and relational marketing, and it is used to predict dyadic consequences of established relationships by evaluating the partner’s performance in its partnership role (Fournier, 1998).

Wine producers and their relationships with distributors are engaged in understanding how to achieve and maintain a high level of customer satisfaction. Understanding how to develop relationship strategies that go beyond traditional marketing and help to strengthen the RQ with the customer and for that reason develop, in a consistently way, loyalty and profits (Cunha et al., 2015).

In the wine sector, the distributor is an important player who greatly influences the retail of bottled wine and consequently the consumer. Moreover, producers and distributors may work together by focusing on their customers and improving the relationship they have with them (Crosby et al., 1990).

The willingness and the ability to create effective long-term relationships with positive results for both partners is a core asset studied by researchers in order to better explore and understand the concept of RQ (Athanasopoulou, 2009; Bobot, 2011; Palmatier et al., 2006;).

Based on a systematic literature review, it was possible to find significant gaps in RQ topic research:

First, the lack of studies on the relationship dyadic. The previous studies tend to analyse the relationship only from the point of view of one part of the relationship, the seller or the buyer. Therefore, new studies are demanding that the perspective of all parties involved in a relationship should be considered in order to accurately grasp the true nature of the relationship;

Second, in the few studies that address several different aspects of the relationship between two partners in a business context, for example, that of Athanasopoulou (2009), and other more recent studies analysed in the systematic literature review, it was not possible to effectively find the major constructs related to RQ in a dyadic relationship;

Third, there is a lack of identification of the relevance of the brand to the RQ in a dyadic relationship.

Therefore, the research purpose of the current study is to explore how distributors and wine producers describe the Brand Power and Brand Focus, and also which aspects they most value.

3. Methodology

We conducted a qualitative research using an in-depth interview process with wine industry professionals, taking into consideration all criteria of an exploratory study and a qualitative approach (Grounded Theory). In comparison to a quantitative approach, this one is more researcher-dependent in which the data is interpreted in order to extract its meaning and is converted into information (Zikmund and Babin, 2010). For Aaker et al. (2010, p. 162) “The basic assumption behind qualitative methods is that an individual’s organization of a relatively unstructured stimulus indicates the person’s basic perceptions of the phenomenon and his or her reaction to it.”

A total of eleven relationships were analysed, which were developed among top managers of wine producing and distributing companies. These companies were contacted in order to obtain the final sample of 22 distributors and 22 producers interviewed.

All of the in-depth interviews were transcribed by the interviewer to ensure its reliability (Oliveira, 2012). After this procedure, we sifted the data through a cyclical process in which data interpretation, coding, and conceptualizing occurred

simultaneously, “albeit at different rates of progress” (Lindlof, 1995, p. 215; Rego et al., 2015). We dedicated time and attention to analysing the responses of each interview, which allowed us to identify the major themes/categories related to the research topic. Then, the emerging categories were used to code the data interviews. On occasions in which the themes/categories were unable to clearly code some data, a data reanalysis was carried out. This process could be considered finished when the “dialogue” between data and the themes/categories became clear and interpretations were stabilized. This process of category creation is based on the Grounded Theory which requires the researcher to actively interpret the raw data and code constructs that emerge from the respondent data as signifiers, parts, properties, or instances of other coded constructs (Batra et al., 2012).

The range of categories that emerge from the cyclical process was hierarchically organized in different levels of abstractness (Batra et al., 2012; Shaver et al., 1987), using a semiotic clustering process, also described as the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012), that was used to analyse data and build meaning. For the hierarchization of categories, researchers try to find coded constructs that can best be subsumed under a single higher-level category (Batra et al., 2012; Gioia et al., 2012). The data gathered by the transcriptions were processed (content analysis) through the application of specialized software: WEBQDA.

4. Findings

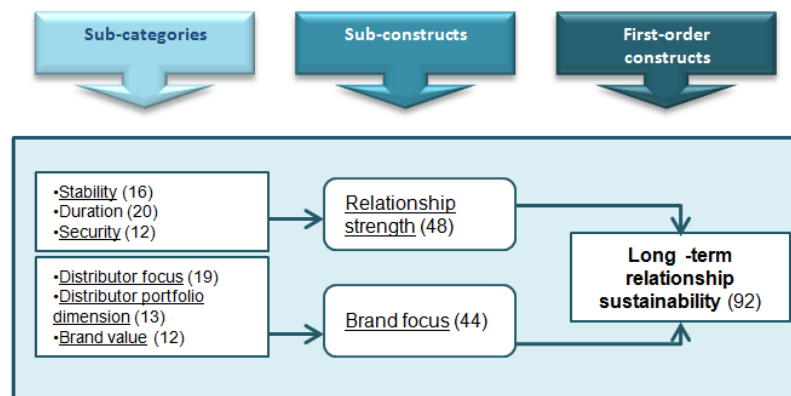
The major research data helped us to determine that the following aspects (constructs) are the most cited by the participants: Relational Interdependence, Communication Capabilities, Organisational Social Capabilities, Partnership, Trust, Commitment, Communication contents, Power, Satisfaction, and Long-term Relationship Sustainability.

From the collected data emerges a sub-construct related with the first-order construct Long-term Relationship Sustainability, the Brand Focus of the business partners. According to the literature, Long-term Relationship orientation may be defined as the perception of mutual dependence of outcomes in such a way that joint relationship outcomes are expected to profit from the relationship in the long run (Ganesan, 1994). The results of this research emphasise the importance of this construct for the sustainability of the business relationship.

An example of sentences from the interviews: *“But usually, our agents have already come from a previous relationship. They, they have grown with us, let’s say, and that is how it has remained.”*

In a more detailed analysis of the keywords that characterise the Long-term Relationship construct, we find the following sub-constructs: the strength of the relationship and the focus on the brand (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Sub-categories of the first-order construct, Long-term Relationship Sustainability



Notes: In each theme, the number of references are indicated; the themes that are underlined are potential new constructs in relation to the literature review.

Source: authors’ elaboration.

Brand Focus is a very valued sub-construct, especially by the producers, but also recognized by the distributors as being representative of the attention and dedication that the other partner shows towards the brands. The attention paid to work, and the importance and recognition of the brand may be influenced by the number of brands represented by the distributor. Despite not being referred in the RQ literature, this construct, clearly, becomes a facilitator of the relation between both partners, strengthening the commitment in the relationship.

Examples of sentences from interviews: *“He has a very strong focus on Quinta Douro’s wines, he believes in the brand and prioritizes the promotion of the brand, in relation to other brands in his portfolio.”*; *“Because Big Producer has distributing companies, obviously it can manage the focus it should give each brand, during its lifespan.”*

This sub-construct of the Long-term Relationship Sustainability construct is subdivided into three other sub-categories: (i) distributor focus on brand, (ii) dimension

of the distributor portfolio and (iii) the value of the brand. All of these sub-categories were not referred to in the RQ literature.

i) Distributor Focus

The producers yearn to work with a distributor that has top-of-mind brand awareness. This fact allows the brands of the producer to be well managed through the distribution channel and could contribute to good results of the business relationship developed between them. In this manner, they can observe whether the sales force is focused on their brand, as well as observe the work that they are developing. The distributors are aware that if they are more focused on a brand, the results for the business relationship will be more significant.

Examples of sentences from interviews: *“There has been a focus, and they are selective of the brands they choose.”*; *“Because we believe that working the brand is better if it’s done by us. That is, it’s not that we have people with more professional qualities, but because we have more focus. For us, the distribution is the key to success.”*

ii) Distributor Portfolio Dimension

This sub-category is thought to characterize the brand focus. A reduced amount of brands represented by the distributor can contribute to a higher dedication to the partner’s brand and consequently the relationship between each other. Both parties of the relationship are aware of this. Therefore, it is important to have some selectivity in maintaining a balanced portfolio of represented brands, representing the most sought out wine regions and preferably, with only one or two producers of each of these regions. This way, the sales team will be more focused working on the partner’s brand, something that is very valued by the producer.

Examples of sentences from interviews: *“They focus on the brands they have and, maybe, they prefer not to increase their portfolio too much and work the brands they have. I think this is an advantage and, by what I gather, they have gone down those lines, new producers are incorporated, but occasionally, and they are subject to a selection process.”*; *“In relation to others, we also have this advantage, we have very few producers per region. We have many regions with a single producer, and we have two regions with two producers. This obliges us to focus on them, on fewer products but we easily create a brand for these producers.”*

iii) Brand Value

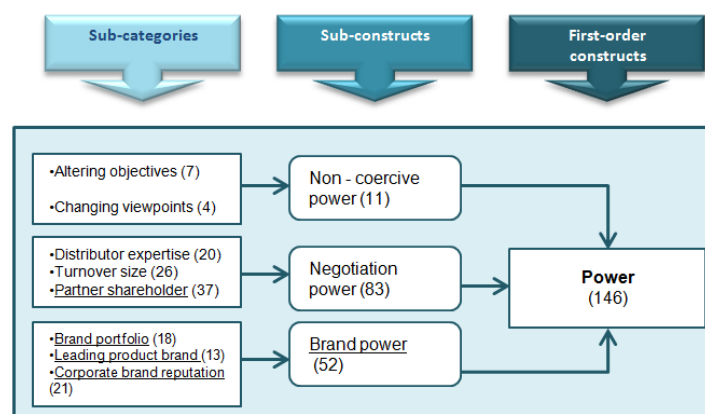
Knowing how to manage the brand and create value becomes a valued factor by the partners. Managing the brand is the responsibility of both parties: offering strong brands in the market. This requires avoiding laid-back attitudes in the products' commercialization to achieve intended results through consistent dynamics which promote the brand's value in the long term perspective.

An example of sentences from the interviews: *“Most importantly is that our distributor makes our products a brand. Not just sell the wine, but also build a brand.”*; *“And, in fact, they expect the brands to be valued and be worked in a consistent manner.”*

The research data also calls our attention to the first-order construct Power. This construct represents the influence that one part has in relation to the other company (Anderson and Narus, 1984), such as, a firm's ability to control the decision variables in the distribution strategy of another partner (El-Ansary and Stern, 1972; Sanzo et al., 2003; Wilkinson, 1979). The partner's capacity for power is demonstrated through non-coercive power, as well as through power of negotiation or brand power (see figure 2).

An example of sentences from interviews: *“There are partners, who are not company shareholders but are very important to the company, in terms of sales turnover or strategic interests for the portfolio.”*

Figure 2. Sub-categories of the first-order construct, Power



Notes: In each theme, the number of references are indicated; The themes that are underlined are potential new constructs in relation to the literature review.

Source: authors' elaboration.

In this part of the study, our focus is geared towards the Brand Power sub-construct that is revealed by the quality of the represented portfolio, the representativeness of that

brand in the market and the prestige that it has. These aspects represent a high value to the business relationship between business partners.

Examples of sentences from interviews “*Cepa is the first brand that sold the most in the off-trade channel in Portugal, Cepa from Douro. For them it’s also interesting, because for them it opens up doors to other wines, to other products...*”; “*...but today, if you open VIP-Distributor’s web page, you can see the producers we have, we already have great quality producers in Portugal and abroad. So, you won’t find any producer that is questionable, no, you won’t.*”

This sub-construct of the Power construct is subdivided into three other sub-categories: (i) brand portfolio of the company, (ii) product brand leader and (iii) corporate brand prestige. These constructs are not mentioned in the RQ literature.

i) Brand Portfolio

A wide-ranging brand portfolio with strong market brands is a factor that gives value to the existing business relationship and is a good facilitator of RQ. This is a means of creating synergies between brands in such a way that the market offer is more complete, in terms of regional coverage or market segments.

Examples of sentences from interviews: “*A distributor with a large portfolio like the one ABC-Distributor has, or like others have, is relevant because it creates synergies, which is important to have with different brands.*”; “*The center of Terroir-Producer has a characteristic, at the portfolio level, it has a very balanced portfolio and, ten brands, at least, it can be seven, but ten of our brands are the premium brands in the market, they are brands that have a great influence in consumption, in the market.*”

Managing well-known brands in the market is an advantage much appreciated by distributors, inasmuch as it opens up doors for them for the distribution of all their range of products. This factor adds value to the relationship and functions as a facilitator of RQ.

Examples of sentences from interviews: “*Working with the leading wine brand in Portugal is by itself a flagship to any other company. If I were to knock at the door saying, ‘look, this is the Select-Producer portfolio, do you want it?’ It has the leading brand in Portugal that by itself is extraordinary, it represents a big slice of the gross sales and of Vini-Distributor’s profit.*”; “*It has good things, it has really good things, which are, in fact, our brands are strong, they are leaders in some wine markets, we are leaders, and as such, they become very strong. So, Luso-Distributor benefits, because it has strong brands.*”

iii) Corporate Brand Reputation

The prestige of the producer's brand adds value to the exchange relationship between business partners. Counting on strong brands that distinguish themselves in the market, therefore, making the distributor's portfolio more appealing in the distribution channel, is a factor that differentiates the producer's brands and favours them in the relationship with the other party.

Examples of sentences from interviews: *"First, very strong brands, with a lot of history and tradition, which is very relevant, it's a very strong argument."*; *"We have big brands, we have Jose Fontes's brands, that practically speak for themselves, we are basically talking about Alentejo, but also, more recently, about Douro, which is starting to gain some relevance, also, and other regions, but it is well-known and will always be recognized as being part of Alentejo wines."*

5. Conclusion and implications

In a global world that easily replicates similar resources that offer goods and services, the way the players manage their business relationship could make the difference, and consequently ensure the sustainability of a successful business (Bobot, 2011; Chung et al., 2006; Nyaga et al., 2013; Smith, 1998; Van Bruggen et al., 2005).

This study allows us to confront the theoretical concepts presented by the RQ literature with what really happens in a dyadic exchange relationship between companies. When we listened to two participants (two partners) in an exchange relationship, we tried to understand which dimensions were considered relevant to the success of that relationship by both parties involved.

For a deeper understanding of how the constructs could contribute to a high RQ, we developed a second screening process to analyze the data groups that formed the first-order constructs. This detailed observation allows us to identify two sub-dimensions levels. The analysis and comprehension of these results will enable us to measure the partner behavior in an exchange relationship.

The current exploratory study gives light to new sub-constructs of the first-order constructs Power and Long-term Relationship Sustainability, Brand Power and Brand Focus respectively, which are not explored in the RQ research. These sub-constructs were revealed to be important to both producers and distributors. They stress its relevance as facilitators of RQ between business partners.

This means that brand dimensions are strategically relevant to managers of the partner companies. The business relationship with more longevity could describe its sustainability. But this relationship is also described by an evident Brand Focus which requires from the managers an extreme awareness to evaluate the attention that the other partner dedicates to the brand. The manager of the producing company must work to ensure that there is top-of-mind brand awareness in the distributor. Moreover, the producer needs to evaluate the dimension of the distributor's portfolio. When the portfolio is very vast, it reduces the distributor's ability to focus on specific brands. We may also say that both partners consider it very important to understand the efforts carried out to add value to the brand. This aspect is even more important than selling the wine. Instead of simply looking to lower the price, it is critical that the partners work in a consistent manner with a long-term perspective to help the construction and sustainability of a brand in the market.

The sub-construct Brand Power contributes to the capacity to influence other partners. If the producers need to have a competent distributor to open channel doors, then the distributor requires producers with interesting brands. So, managers must evaluate the quality of the portfolio of their partner to understand if it is balanced and if it increases synergies with other brands. A portfolio that promotes a complete diversity of wine regions with different wine categories and includes recognizing brands, could be more interesting to the final consumer and will add more value to the partner. On the other hand, if the player works with leading producers' brands, it represents a flagship, a reference to any other company. This partner will certainly have more opportunities to open new doors in the retail market, which will help him to promote other brands. But the source of leading brands are corporate brands that achieve a reputation and credibility in the wine market, supported by heritage, in some cases family history, and with winemakers that represents a guarantee of quality in all the labels they produce and introduce in the market.

In sum, more than ensuring the best product, it is critical to build a wine brand that has the ability to communicate the uniqueness and authenticity (Beverland, 2006) of that wine among thousands of labels. Brand Focus and Brand Power represent RQ facilitators of partner's relationship.

Until the moment the wine is consumed by the final customer, long and consistent work involving the brand is required by producers and distributors. Only in this manner is it possible to build the expected value that the final consumer is looking for.

6. Study Limitations and Further Research

Limitations

This research was conducted keeping in mind the inquisitiveness and ethical principles of quality and accuracy, which must guide a scientific investigation. However, we are aware of the constraints involved, but also that it is an opportunity for further studies. Even so, every research design presents some limitations (Zikmund and Babin, 2010). Below are the key limitations related to the current study:

- i) The convenience sampling limits how well the study represents the intended population (Aaker et al., 2010; Zikmund and Babin, 2010);
- ii) Our study is also focused on relationships in a specific industrial sector which restrict the generalization of the results;
- iii) In order to minimize self-assessment bias, we instructed the interviewees, who were representatives of the organization exchange relationship (mostly owners/managers), to answer from the perspective of the organization (Bloemer et al., 2013).

Further research

The current study analyses the perspectives and the contexts used more repeatedly in previous studies regarding the type of market, relationships, and perspectives. When the exchange relationship is a B2B, the majority of the studies analyses organizations related to industrial goods and takes into consideration the perspective of the buyer. There are few cases that analyse a dyadic perspective. In situations of B2C, companies related with the product market are analysed, but only from the perspective of the buyer. Regarding future research, several suggestions are put forward:

- i) Future studies should analyse the antecedents and consequences in a dyadic perspective, and through a similar process of analysis pursue a detailed model of constructs;
- ii) Expand upon our study for the analysis of international relationships between exporting and importing wine companies. It would also be interesting to replicate the study in other countries.
- iii) Identify wine marketing activities with more relevance that promote wine brands to national and international consumers.
- iv) Additional research should explore the features of the Portuguese and international wine consumers and their expectations related to Portuguese wine.

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