HOW DO HOTEL UNIFORMS CREATE PERCEPTIONS OF HOTEL IMAGE AND COMPETITIVENESS FROM EMPLOYEE'S PERSPECTIVE: A CASE STUDY OF HYATT REGENCY TASHKENT

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ABSTARCT:

Staff uniform can be used as one of marketing tools, which are neglected by competitors in creating successful corporate image and high competitiveness. This research aims to investigate how staff uniform can create employee perceptions on a corporate image of an organization and can increase its competitiveness by increasing employee satisfaction.

In order to achieve the research objectives, appropriate research methods have been selected. The study has been based on interpretivism philosophy. Accordingly, mixed research approach – adductive research approach has been selected. The case study type of research strategy was also appropriate. When it comes to research design, qualitative research has been selected. In total, 4 employees of Hyatt Regency Tashkent have been interviewed and the data collected has been analyzed by applying content analysis technique, identifying themes patterns and so on.

The findings suggest that Hyatt Regency Tashkent has been operating in the growing and ever-competitive market. All of the interviewees are young with fresh knowledge, wear uniform and have been working since opening of the hotel. The employees wear uniform every day and uniform features mostly meet their expectations. The employees have very positive perceptions on corporate image of their hotel. They feel strongly satisfied because they have many sources of satisfaction. Thus, they show great productivity, positive attitude and strong commitment. By wearing uniform, whose features meet expectations of the employees, they start thinking that the company has professionalism, management cares about them and the organization has been running effectively. What is more, uniform can increase competitiveness of the hotel on several business conditions. One of them is employee satisfaction, which is created when employees feel proud, cared, and comfortable.

KEYWORDS: competitiveness, corporate image, customer satisfaction, staff uniform

INTRODUCTION:

Corporate image/corporate identity is the reputation of corporations and even small companies, and it can be understood as the way, in which those organizations are presented to and perceived by the public such including

customers, employees, investors, governments and all others (Olins, 2000). According to Mitki and Jaffe (2008), the importance of managing corporate image has been increasing in service sectors. They explain that service providers are increasingly interested in changing their corporate image to achieve a more modern and updated identity. One of the key determinants of corporate image is employee uniforms, which can create overall expected service quality and ambience level. As hotels provide guests with both tangible and intangible services, employee uniform as a tangible service element, can have a powerful role in shaping customer opinions, thus affecting their experience, satisfaction and loyalty (Tu et al., 2011). At the same time, uniforms can impact employee perceptions on hotel image, as well as employee satisfaction and commitment levels too. First of all, uniforms should have a design in a way to make employees feel comfortable, confident, and proud while serving the guests, who often pay attention to staff uniform and comment on it (Daniel et al., 1996). Second of all, uniforms serve as the shop front of a company, they can symbolize a company corporate image, they can serve as important channels, through which the company can express its professional services, service quality and cultural values (Kandampully, 2007). In this vein, the relationship between hotel staff uniform and hotel staff perceptions on hotel image should not be neglected, as it can affect significant organizational performance elements such as staff attitude and behavior to guests and other stakeholders of hotels. (Kim et al., 2012).

As it is in the case of almost any industry in the world, hotels have also been facing the challenge of satisfying and retaining customers, who have too many choices, thus are critical about their service purchase. However, meeting expectations of external stakeholders is not the end of challenging story for hotels – they must consider the importance of attitudes,

satisfaction and retention of their internal stakeholders such as employees (Peters, 2017). While ambience and corporate image can affect overall customer satisfaction, these attributes of hotels can also impact on employee perceptions (Yeh et al., 2013). Although it has been clear that staff uniform is important for hotels to consider in influencing their customer purchase behavior, the focus of this research is on the role of hotel staff uniform in hotel staff perceptions about hotel corporate image, and the role of staff uniform on hotel staff satisfaction.

ANALYSIS OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE:

Uniform features and benefits: It has been confirmed in several studies (Kandampully, et al., 2007; Quinn, 2008) that a staff uniform is very important in representing an organization's image and culture. The effect of a staff uniform on corporate image is important in creating a work environment that provides greater employee satisfaction and performance than for employees who do not wear a hotel uniform. As a result, the outcomes of employee satisfaction and performance will have a large impact on the customer experience (Earle, 2003).

This research area focuses on employee satisfaction and indicates that the design features of a uniform such as its function, its importance to the job task, the fit and comfort of a uniform are very important for employees. If the uniform design features positively impact on employees, then those employees will have positive attitude toward both their job and the organization that they work for (Nelson and Bowen, 2000). In addition, it was confirmed by Adomaitis et al., (2012) that both formal and informal clothing of employees can affect their behavior at work, as well as customer responses such as actions and reactions. Further, staff uniforms can also increase the organizational productivity and serve as a morale booster for employees (Solomon, 1986). What is more

important, the uniform of personnel can shape customer expectations in regard to the level of performance quality that is required (Wang, 2010).

If the literature is reviewed in regard to the benefits of uniforms, several categories of benefits have been discovered. According to Sterman (2011) a staff uniform can protect those who wear it. At the same time, the uniform can foster standardization in the process of service delivery. Martinez-Tome et al., (2000) also determined there are other important purposes of staff uniform management and its design. They found that employees have high needs for functionality which can be met through their uniform. It can also provide workers, particularly in the hotel catering sector, with better health and safety standards (such as?). In comparison, Lurie (1983) looked at the benefits of uniforms from a marketing perspective. He explained that uniforms enable companies to use visual symbols when transferring company values to, and among employees. It is worth noting here that uniforms have communicative power both in the internal and external operations of corporations. Furthermore, when taking into account that in many hotels, uniforms make up a part of the employee benefit package, it can be argued that uniforms add to the level of employee satisfaction and commitment (Dipietro et al., 2008). Overall, the features of staff uniforms in service industries, including the hotel sector are their functionality, material comfort, fitness to the tasks of the job, their color, and overall suitability.

Corporate image: The word "image" can have different meanings depending on what aspect of it is considered. To be more exact, researchers defining, explaining and discussing image have approached the subject either positively, or consider it as a fake and being far from reality. The latter stream of thought indicates that image has artificial characteristics

and behavioral patterns (Taskiran and Gokce, 2017). Regardless of the complexity and inconsistency of thoughts on corporate image in the literature, it is impossible to deny the importance of image in personal and business life (Ozupek, 2013, cited in Taskiran and Gokce, 2017).

According to Hsu et al., (2010) image is a, "form of subjective perception which is not based on the content of actual events and personal behaviors are not completely based on information or news, instead, they are based on perceptions and their consequences" (page?). When it comes to corporate image, it can sum up the total perceptions of individuals about an organization. It should be noted that such conceptualization is relevant not only to perceptions of people external to an organization, but also to the members of that organization as well (Rho and Lee, 2015). Interestingly, Waiwei (2007) suggested to divide corporate image into functional and emotional components. The former is about material qualifications and is easy to measure, while the latter component includes psychological factors such as emotions and attitudes. The source of such attitudes and emotions are outcomes of processing personal experiences, observations, perceptions, knowledge, attitudes and information. Therefore, the implication here is that corporate image serves as the outcome of comparing different characteristics of companies.

It has been argued by Rahhanaphan and Mat (2014) that corporate image is the hardest resource for companies to imitate. They explained the reason for them by explaining that corporate image as an attractive concept, depending on intuition that is linked to attitude. It also requires a tremendous amount of time to develop fully. Corporate image is based on corporate identity, where both physical and cultural characteristics of companies are involved. The link between corporate image and

identity is that image which is a reflection of identity (Olmedo-Cifuentes and Martinez-Leon, 2014).

In regard to the effectiveness of corporate image, Tran et al., (2015) stated that corporate image is the first impression of a company and a positive impression reflects the company without making detection too. The researchers pointed out that because of corporate image being the internal picture that is reflected externally, it does not become negative unless companies want this to occur. To be exact, corporate image is created from within an organization. For instance, a company may indicate in the design of employee uniforms that its employees are their partners. This can show that the company is valuing and respecting its internal stakeholders.

Creating or changing corporate image is conducted through the process of communicating the corporate image to both internal and external stakeholders of companies. According to Balmer and Gray (2003), corporate communication refers to… "the process through which stakeholders perceive that the organization's identity, image, and reputation are formed" (page).

Melewar and Jennikis (2002) also pointed out that companies that operate in the service sector are becoming increasingly aware of the significance of creating, developing and maintaining their corporate image. The main reason is that corporate image enables companies to achieve and keep reputation in the perceptions of internal and external stakeholders. Balmer (2001) explained the requirements that are needed for developing an effective corporate image. According to the author, corporate image needs to highlight the ethos, goals and values of organizations and their need to own its feeling of individuality, which enables the organization to differentiate itself from its competitive environment. To be effective, corporate image needs to reflect

organizational goals and values in the form of both visual symbols (e.g., logo, uniforms, promotion) and non-visual symbols (e.g., procedures, common language, and methods of training). Researchers have also mentioned the challenges associated with corporate image management. For instance, Olins (2000) asserted that time and environmental factors affect corporate image and make it inconsistent. As a result of this, management of companies are required to reconsider their corporate/organizational image on a regular basis. In addition, the process of communicating the corporate image to multiple target audiences also creates a challenge for managers (Kedidi and Torfve, 2005).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Participants and sampling: The participants of the research are the employees of the case organization – Hyatt Regency Tashkent. As the main research goal is to examine how uniform affects employee perceptions on company image and employee satisfaction, it was logical and correct to target employees to investigate this topic. When selecting the employees, it was required that they had to be current employees of the selected organization, and they had to be wearing uniform too. This means that the researcher used purposive sampling method. The employees were approached at the office of the case company, meaning that convenience sampling method has also been used. When it comes to the sample size, the research has been based on a single sample company because this is a case study.

Demographics of the respondents: There are 4 interviewees participated in the interview process and 2 of them are males and 2 of them are females. This is a positive scenario for the research findings to be reliable because there is no gender bias. However, when it comes to age, all of the participants are aged between 23-35.

Although absence of representation of other age categories might create age bias, young people may have shared their fresh knowledge. Next, half of the respondents work in low management, while the rest work in middle management positions at the case company. Then, 3 of the sample employees are front-office staff, while the rest works in food & beverages department. This may also come out as a beneficial situation because front-office employees interact with guests more, meaning they have the most pressure to wear uniform. The more experience with uniform, the better knowledge they can share on its effectiveness. Finally, 3 out of 4 employees interviewed have been working at Hyatt Regency Tashkent since fall of 2016 and this means that most of the respondents have been working in the company since its opening.

Data collection and analysis: In this research, methods of collecting both secondary data and primary data have been used. Secondary data collection has included gathering industry-related and company-related information, as well as accessing academic sources to present the evidence of reviewing the literature. Some of the main sources accessed were Research Gate, Science Direct and JSTORE. The researcher looked for definitions of the research concepts (e.g. staff uniform, employee perception on corporate image) and their dimensions (e.g. how employee think about the company, how employee think about the company services).

When it comes to collection of primary data, interview has been used as a research instrument. The interview created in an electronic format and was sent to the employees of the case organization to complete. The interview had a total of 27 questions. Out of them, 6 asked the respondents (employees of Hyatt Regency Tashkent) for their demographics information and general information about their employment in the sector and in the organization. Rest of the questions were designed to assess the presence and strength of the research concepts, as well as to identify how they become effective. The researcher drew upon his own knowledge of the topic to determine what kinds of data will provide the best information to help answer research questions.

Coding: Inductive coding method has been used as little information was known about the research subject and conducting heuristic or exploratory research. The majority of the data collected was coded and the researcher was able to form a narrative.

Stage 1. Initial Coding: The researcher read through data found and got familiar with it. At this point, broad code names were established.

Stage 2. Line-By-Line Coding: At this phase, the data was further examined with a closer eye. Codes had more details.

Stage 3. Categorization: When the line-by-line coding was finished, the process of putting similar codes into the same categories has started and codes were moved around in order to find out a way that reflects the analysis the best. By analyzing and sorting your codes into categories, consistent and overarching themes for the data were detected.

Stage 4. Determining Themes: The categorization of codes reflects themes. The bigger categories are the overarching themes while the sub-categories supporting themes. The themes can tell the same story from different perspectives, or several different stories that connect with each other. With great narratives created from the themes, the messy qualitative data became in a meaningful order.

Finally, data analysis has been conducted by using the content analysis technique. This ensured application of a research technique to produce replicable and valid inferences through interpretation of textual material. In other

words, this technique allowed systematically evaluating texts. Specifically, the researcher structured the raw collected data similar to the literature review structure, then sub-themes have been identified to include newly emerged insights on the issue.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS:

Staff Uniform:

Theme 1: High uniform wearing frequency
The sample of Hyatt Regency Tashkent employee wear uniform every working day because it is a must.

Theme 2: Satisfactory uniform features
Both male and female personnel of the hotel have confirmed suitability of the uniform. One of the responses has revealed however, that there is lack of consistency on this matter:

"...sometimes they would give new employees uniforms left from old employees" – BV

All the interviewees agree that their uniform has such features as professional, safe, functional, suitable. However, half of the employees disagree that their uniform has sufficient level of comfortability. The following statements reflect this situation and confirm the issue of using previous staff uniform by the hotel.

"Not so much comfortable, especially shoes" – NE

"...but sometimes, it would feel uncomfortable as sometimes I would wear uniforms bigger than my size".

When the employees were asked if they would change anything with their uniform, shortcoming of the hotels uniform features were obvious: quality of its material and color.

Employee perceptions on corporate image

Theme 1: Positive employee opinion on the company
From the interviews, it has been identified that the employees perceive Hyatt Regency Tashkent as a company, which cares and creates value to its employees, while delivering high service to its guests. This has been clear from their opinions:

"One of the best hotels providing high level of service quality" - BV

"Guest oriented and at the same time caring about its internal customers as much as possible" –NA

All of the employees of the hotel would recommend working at the hotel to their friends and family. This shows how the employees strongly and positively think about the hotel.

Theme 2: Positive employee opinions on company services

Given that fact that hotel facilities are its products, half of the sample employees think that Hyatt Regency products are modern, and convenient, while the other half think that there is room for improvement:

"Design is well done, but there's some room for improvement" - BV

"They are all of great design and comfortable. Yet there are some areas to work on" - AA

Employee satisfaction

Theme 1: High employee satisfaction and varied sources of satisfaction
Almost all of the employees of the case organization feel satisfied at all times, but the sources of their satisfaction differ from the good atmosphere and colleagues, low workload and stress to feeling sufficiently cared and good salary.

Theme 2: Employee productivity

While half of the respondents feel productive at all time, the productivity of the rest is not consistent because of what they do. For example, one of them stated that:

"Mostly I am//however, as because we work by standing, physically it is hard, but legs hurt" – NA

Theme 3: Employee attitude and commitment

It has been identified that the sample group of Hyatt Regency Employees have a very positive attitude towards guests, which largely decides their satisfaction from their jobs:

"I do love the hotel//the guests are utmost important to me as because of them I come to work"- NA

"yes, and as well as its guests" - NE

Most of the employees have the intention to stay at Hyatt Regency Tashkent, which shows overall high level of their commitment too.

How staff uniform affects employee perceptions on corporate image

Theme 1: Uniform and the hotel

Overall, the uniform can offer several benefits to Hyatt Regency Tashkent. For example, it can increase effectiveness of achieving high customer perceptions on the hotel services. In addition, the uniform can help the management foster manners, positions and respect throughout the organization.

Theme 2: Uniform and corporate image

The sample of hotel employees perceive that the hotel focuses on professionalism, its employees are committed to their jobs and keep neat look. Most of them also think that Hyatt Regency cares about its employees and the management is effectively running the hotel. However, half of the responses indicate that Hyatt Regency Tashkent does not try to maintain a status or prestige by its employee uniform:

"I would not say it gives better status or prestige, it meets the borderline requirements" – BV

"Hotels aim is not prestige but simplicity yet elegance". – AA

Theme 3: If and why the uniform is good enough

Some of the employees of the hotel think that the hotel's uniform is good enough, while some others want improvement. One of them thinks that the hotel provides them with moderate-quality uniform to keep costs low:

"maybe because of budget" – NE

Uniform and employee satisfaction

Theme 1: Uniform and competitiveness

It has been found that the uniform can affect competitiveness of the case company by increasing effectiveness of its marketing, increasing employee satisfaction, and increasing customer satisfaction.

Theme 2: Uniform and employee satisfaction - AA

It has been clear that uniform of Hyatt Regency Tashkent adds to satisfaction of its employees by making them feel proud, feel cared, being comfortable, being tailor-made, giving appreciation from people. However, not all of the employees participated in the process of making them:

"It makes us feel more empowered but at the same time they do not leave us much choice" - AA

Overall, it has been identified that high employee uniform wearing frequency and presence of satisfactory uniform features in Hyatt Regency Tashkent creates positive employee opinions on the organization and its services. In simple words, good employee uniform can lead to positive employee perceptions on the corporate image in the case of Hyatt Regency Tashkent. In addition, such a uniform can lead to high employee satisfaction, positive productivity, employee attitudes and commitment too. To sum up, good employee uniform can lead to positive corporate image and employee satisfaction, which can well increase competitiveness of the case organization. These relationships have been better understood by the manual coding process, which is presented in the tables below:

Table 1: Coding used for the "staff uniform" variable

Preliminary codes	Final codes	Categories	Themes
Often Must Special design Purposed design No change Every day Old Uncomfortable Too big size Low material quality Always Comfortable Suitable Color change Every day Not much comfortable Quality change	Always Must Special Purposed Color change Material change No change Old Uncomfortable Too big Low quality Suitable	Always worn Specially designed Changes needed Inconsistent comfort	High uniform wearing frequency; Satisfactory uniform features;

Table 2: Coding used for "employee perceptions on corporate image" variable

Preliminary codes	Final codes	Categories	Themes
Top-class Great employee value Great design Comfortable Areas to work on One of the best High service level Well done design Room for improvement Guest-oriented Caring about employees Always recommended Up-to-date Convenient Professional service High service level Recommendable to the interested Classic style	Employee-oriented Customer-oriented Comfortable Quality design	High customer service High employee satisfaction Quality facilities	Positive employee opinion on the company; Positive employee opinions on the company services;

Table 3: Coding for "employee satisfaction" variable

Preliminary codes	Final codes	Categories	Themes
Satisfactory atmosphere, colleagues, and managers Great guests Guests with different backgrounds Inconsistent satisfaction at work Mostly productive Love Great guests Interesting Conditional wish to stay Feeling cared Mostly productive Physically hard for legs Strongly loved Customers are most important Staying 1 more year Good salary Conditional productivity No wish to stay long	Good working environment Great employee satisfaction on guest behavior High employee positive attitude Moderate employee motivation Moderate employee commitment Moderate employee satisfaction High employee productivity Some employee complaints on work terms Considerable employee loyalty	High employee satisfaction on the company High employee satisfaction on services Positive employee attitudes Positive employee commitment	High employee satisfaction and varied sources of their satisfaction; High employee productivity; Positive employee attitude and strong commitment;

CONCLUSION:

It was identified that uniform is largely present among staff members of Hyatt Regency Tashkent. Features of the uniform meet expectations of the employees most of the time, but there is some room for improvement. Employees perceive Hyatt Regency Tashkent as a company, which cares about its employees and delivers high level of services to customers. They have strongly positive opinions on the company overall and on its products and services.

Staff satisfaction is high in the hotel because there are many sources of satisfaction. The level of their satisfaction is reflected by their high productivity, positive attitude and strong enough commitment. Staff uniform can add to marketing success and bettering organizational environment as a whole.

Presence of staff uniform shapes opinions and thoughts of employees about the organization. For example, the uniform gives them feeling of professionalism by the company, committed and neat-looking employees. Uniform also affects the way employees think about the management. By having adequate uniform, which meets most of their expectations, the employees start thinking that their management is effectively running the company and is caring about the employees. Although staff uniform can give a company some prestige, this is not the goal of Hyatt Regency Tashkent. Staff uniform can add to competitiveness of the company in terms of its marketing, customer relations and human resources success. When it comes to employee satisfaction, employees of the hotel form better feelings about themselves, more positive attitudes towards the company, and better relations with the guests.

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