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The Contribution of Human Resource Development Managers to Organisational Branding in the Hotel Industry in India and South East Asia (ISEA): A Dynamic Capabilities Perspective.

Abstract

Purpose – *This research explores the significant contribution of human resource development (HRD) managers in building organisational brands in the hotel industry through the lenses of dynamic capabilities for sustaining competitiveness.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Using a qualitative case study design, this study deployed a semi-structured interview research method. It used a purposive sample of twenty HRD managers across twenty different hotels in India and South East Asia (ISEA) to explore their contribution to organisational brands. The data was analysed using thematic analysis.*

Findings – *The findings show the significance of HRD in building organisational brands. From a dynamic capabilities perspective, it was found that; HRD has an impact on fostering brand awareness culture; HRD functional branding enhances the creation and sustaining of quality service culture; functional branding of HRD helps differentiate the brand and quality service, for product development and innovation by linking talent development and growth of key competencies and capabilities; brand training and behavioural training directly influence the right behaviour knowledge and effective communication that is translated into the enhancement of guest experience; and finally, organisational branding through branding culture and employer branding creates organisational wealth.*

Originality/value – *We propose a new conceptual framework for the branding of the Heroes to reclaim the HRD's splendour in the realm of other functions in the hotel industry in ISEA contexts. While we do not claim an external generalisability, we believe that an analytical application of this framework could be relevant in similar environments. The study also claims that HRD practitioners could use parallel literature repertoires from brand management discourse to value their strategic contributions in building and maintaining their reputational position at the board level. Practical implications and further research are discussed.*

Paper type – *Empirical paper*

Keywords: *Human resource development, organisational branding, India and South East Asia, dynamic capabilities.*

Introduction

For several years, the resource-based view of the firm (RBV) has emphasised the importance of core competencies as the critical basis for sustaining competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993). Recently, a large body of research seems to heighten the importance of the human resource development aspect of the production function (Kesti and Syvajarvi, 2015; Faggian *et al.*, 2019; Winterton and Turnbow, 2020), and how it determines customer

satisfaction and firm performance. The strategic role of HR practitioners has also been a topic of interest in the HR literature (Caldwell, 2011; Nadiv *et al.*, 2017). Yet, Clardy (2008) contends that the discussion of firm strategy typically ignores the vital role of Human Resource Development (HRD) in acquiring, maintaining and developing such resources and competencies. Therefore, he argued for strategic HRD approaches to consist of encouraging staff participation in strategic planning, developing core competencies and staff protection.

The HRD literature has abundantly claimed its strategic effectiveness in developing and supporting the achievement of corporate outcomes. For example, Uraon (2018) underscored how HRD practices enhance organisational commitment. Chami-Malaeb and Garavan (2013) pondered on talent and leadership development as key driver determining employee intention to stay in organisations or leave, while Kuchеров and Zamulin (2016) examined the importance of employer branding. Moreover, the core tenets of the HRD literature is underpinned by the RBV approach to strategy which argues that organisations possess unique bundles of assets and the efficient utilisation of these resources determines the difference in organisational performance (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Barney, 1991; Petaraf, 1993).

However, there are two perspectives that contend against the RBV theory. First, RBV assumes that organisations operate in stable environments (Spicer and Sadler-Smith, 2006; Garavan, 2007). Second, Kaufman (2015) argues that RBV is weak in explaining the contribution of strategic HRD to organisational performance and competitive advantage. Equally, the dynamic capabilities theory which explains how firms choose to develop ordinary and dynamic capabilities by committing to long-term paths or trajectories of competence development (Teece *et al.*, 1997; Teece, 2014), fails to address how firms develop human resources to support the process of building distinctive competencies. The dynamic capabilities theory also fails to demonstrate the process and relationship between how employees as dynamic assets could be developed as conduits of innovation, and how their skills are utilised

in fast-changing business environments. Indeed, Boone *et al.* (2018) maintain that if firms want greater revenues in the long-term than their competitors, they must have access to unique resources that competitors cannot effectively obtain, such as specialized plants, patents, captive customers and unique brands. Although Zhu (2004) indicate that HRD has become an important element for developing capabilities by upgrading skills through training, Som (2007) considers training as a process of building employee competence as it gives an indication of a firm's commitment to building a strong culture and organisational development.

In this regard, the conceptual framework proposed by Garavan *et al.* (2016) suggesting that the contribution of HRD to the dynamic capabilities hypothesis underscores how firms develop core competencies. Consequently, we believe that developing dynamic capabilities in the hotel industry hinges on the effectiveness of the HRD function in embedding the corporate brand perception into the training of staff (Huy and Zott, 2018). Further, Helfat *et al.* (2007, p. 30) confirm an inextricable link between dynamic capabilities and the managerial and/or the organisational processes that underpin them. Salvato and Vassolo (2017) also argue that strategic adaptation is possible when employees are given the opportunity to act, think and feel creatively while performing tasks, by envisioning opportunities to improve how the firm projects their brand. Firm-level innovation is subsequently enhanced when employees are connected through interpersonal relationships and training engineered through the HRD function. Accordingly, we consider the strategic connection that the HRD function has in developing and utilising employees as strategic assets that enable brand development in the hotel industry. HRD managers could enhance their firm's capacity for change by fostering individual integration and developing contexts that improve brand reputation (Salvato and Vassolo, 2017).

This research aims to answer the following research question: *in what ways do HRD managers contribute to the organisational branding through developing dynamic capabilities*

in the hotel industry in ISEA? Thus, this study explores the significant contribution of HRD managers, and considers the need to align the HRD function with the kind of brand an organisation intends to create for the long-term.

The paper is structured as follows: first, it reviews the HRD and branding literature by highlighting the need to adopt an integrative position to present a new concept on corporate value creation. Second, it gives an overview of the hotel industry in ISEA. Third, it demonstrates how the need to develop core competencies and dynamic capabilities depends on talent acquisition, development and the leadership effectiveness of the HRD function. Fourth, the methodology will be presented followed by data analysis and discussion. Implications for theory and management practice conclude the paper.

Literature review

The theory of dynamic capabilities explored in relation to HRD

The work of Teece *et al.* (1997) which focused on how firms develop dynamic capabilities to achieve and sustain competitive advantage has had the broadest impact on strategic management theory and practice for nearly three decades. The dynamic capabilities framework analyses the sources and methods of wealth creation for firms based on firm-specific and complementary assets. Following the obvious lack of application of this framework to inform multiplicity of disciplines, Helfat *et al.* (2009) and Garavan *et al.* (2016) brought to the fore that human capital is the most critical firm-specific resource that can be harnessed, against the opposition of circumstance, to produce corporate success. Specifically, Kaufman (2015) and Garavan *et al.* (2016) present clear parallels between the concept of dynamic capabilities and HRD. They argue that both concepts are underpinned by organisational learning and change, therefore, the development of firms capabilities ultimately depends on HRD.

Whilst Garavan (1991, p.1) defines HRD as ‘the strategic management of training, development and management of professional education interventions’, Horwitz (2015) claims that less empirical work has been done on the particular initiatives and strategies which seek to establish an association between HRD initiatives and individual and firm-level performance. On the other hand, Swanson (2001, p. 304) underscores HRD as ‘a process of developing and unleashing expertise to improve organisational systems, work processes, teams as well as individual performance’. It is from this last definition that organisational policies, practices, work process and systems emerged as the key constituents of HRD. Interestingly, none of these definitions captured the need to otherwise see HRD as a brand-building function that enhances corporate profitability. Hence, this study critically examines how HRD managers contribute to organisational branding through dynamic capabilities.

We consider HRD as a practice that is concerned with what HRD professionals do in relation to developing human capital and building new dynamic capabilities, and how this is influenced by and influences organisational and institutional contexts (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). There is, however, the need to distinguish between ‘practices’ as what people engage with from ‘practice’ as what people do. Practices are described as ‘norms and scripted behaviour’ (Barley and Tolbert, 1997) or as ‘strategy episodes’ (Hendry and Seidl, 2003). They are central to the context in which employees operate consisting of institutionalised and organisational routines (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). On the other hand, practice is what people engage with as well as what HRD professionals do in relation to their profession. This study refers to this as the role as ‘given’ which might be assimilated as performative routines, specific actions by specific people in specific places and times (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Further, this is akin to what Whittington (2006) refers to as praxis, which connotes everyday activities and the relationship between those activities and the context within which they take place (Johnson *et al.*, 2007, p.27).

Different conceptual frameworks have been proposed. For example, Korte and Mercurio (2017) introduce the dynamic HRD approach which focuses on practical outcomes of what HRD professionals think and do in practice (otherwise classified as the role as given). In investigating the impact of HRD practices on organisational commitment and intentions to stay within software companies in India, Uraon (2018) for example, concludes that HRD practices have an impact on employee retention to stay. It further argues that there are three additional devices including affective, continuance and normative commitments which were found to positively influence employee performance. If HRD has such an impact on organisational commitment, retention and effectiveness, our research explores why organisations in the hotel industry continue to undermine the function. Thus, it is important to establish a link between HRD managers' roles and their capability to communicate that to frontline staff, who would then have the responsibility to deliver the guest experience.

Proposition 1: Through the role as 'given' and dynamic capabilities, HRD impacts on fostering brand awareness culture.

Factors such as poor employee branding and high turnover have been highlighted as issues that are faced by HR in the service sector in India (Agrawal *et al.*, 2012). Likewise, in general, the hotel industry in ISEA has, and continues to struggle to establish a strong space and brand for HRD managers who seem to bear the onerous responsibility of communicating the vision of the organisation to all frontline employees (Chand, 2010). Thus, the employee's role becomes crucial in delivering the service as communicated and perceived through the brand (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2017). In particular, the implications of these issues within the hotel industry require unique competencies, behaviours and attitudes, which have to be ingrained in employees who have the essential role of conveying the value of the brand to customers. Juxtaposing these issues with corporate branding concepts, Kumar and Möller (2018) also

argue that the purpose of a brand is to create a favourable organisational image with the view to influencing multiple stakeholders. Thus, we propose:

Proposition 2: internal employee branding training communicates brand values to employees reinforcing a common value-based culture.

Establishing the relationship between HRD and branding

The study by Nieves and Quintana (2018) suggests that human resource practices influence organisational performance through key mediating variables. Although they established the link between HRD practices and innovation performance, they opine that little is known about the variables that can mediate this relationship. In their study, they utilised data from 109 hotel managing firms in Spain. They find that in the hotel industry, some HRM practices affect innovation through their influence on a firm's human capital by indicating that HRD influences the development of core competencies and dynamic capabilities. However, their study fails to explicitly link HRD professionals contribution to human capital through brand communication. Whilst their western-focused study concentrates on Spanish hotels, it confirms the linkage between HRD/human capital and dynamic capabilities.

In examining key definitions on brand, this study argues that the success of individual brands owes much to the effective brand communication with the staff and the public. For example, Wells *et al.* (1997) and Kotler (2000) indicate that a brand can be seen as a process of creating an identity for a product or service using a distinctive name, symbol or design that adds a unique value which closely matches the needs of customers. De Chernatony and McDonald (1998) and Dahlén *et al.* (2010) also indicate that the user imagery of the brand, in terms of people's cognitive and affective disposition, is essential to marketing communications. Moreover, Egan (2015) points out that brands are the product of an organisational intent to distinguish themselves from the competition by augmenting their

products. Despite these key definitions, the strategies needed to create value and positive associations for service-providing organisations that will be recognised and have positive meaning for customers, have not yet been firmly established in the extant literature.

In an attempt to establish the link between HRD theories and the branding literature, this research agrees with Keller (2011) who confirmed that a brand is not built by accident, but it is a product of carefully accomplishing (either explicitly or implicitly) a series of logically linked steps aimed at enhancing the customer experience. Therefore, at the intersection of HRD and brand marketing, employer branding has been proposed as an effective organisational strategy to develop firms capabilities to differentiate from the competition. In support of this assertion, Lievens (2007) agrees that the best approach to recruitment and retention is achieved by promoting a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer. However, the employees who communicate the values of the brand, identities, imageries to customers or the external audiences must do so following the appropriate and relevant behaviours, attitudes and learned standards which, in most cases, spring from the commitment and the involvement of HRD practitioners and specialists whose responsibility it is to instil such systems and behaviours into the employees of the firm. We propose that:

Proposition 3: Functional branding of HRD helps differentiate the brand and quality service, for product development and innovation by linking talent development and growth of key competencies and capabilities.

Service branding in the hotel industry

Service quality has become a critical factor for the survival of service-oriented organisations such as the hotel industry. The service marketing theory is underpinned by four distinguishing characteristics (intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability) making services different from goods (Yilmaz, 2009). Thus, service characteristics make the service brand different from the product brand. Moreover, the service brand has more communication contact

points than the product brand. Consequently, due to the intangible nature of service, it is important for service providers to inform customers who they are, and to place an emphasis on striking the balance between the corporate brand and service brand (Li and Wei, 2018).

McDonald *et al.* (2001) point out that the service brand should complement the company's overall brand strategy. Therefore, this research argues that under such circumstances, the company's senior management should be able to integrate the marketing and the HRD function to implement a corporate brand strategy aimed at developing new capabilities to sustain long-term corporate performance. De Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) confirm the same line of reasoning, whereby they indicate that since consumers cannot evaluate the service quality in advance, it is highly important to transfer all early-stage communication strategies to future commitment. Whilst this commitment would translate into a consumer's expectation of the quality of service to be received, it is equally a well-known fact that excessive brand communications lead to information overload, based on consumer subjective factors (Kotler, 2000). Hence, how firms grasp the acceptable level of brand communication is a difficult task because establishing a consistent brand communication strategy plays a decisive role in product and service value and perception. Thus, this study asserts that the true brand creator in the hotel industry appears to be the integrative role of the HRD function to provide the needed learning and development for staff to exhibit the '*service experienced*', as opposed to the '*service advertised*'. In this sense, the role or the practices of the HRD managers to effectively harness organisational resource (human capital) into a capability becomes crucial (Garavan *et al.*, 2016; Kaufman, 2015). We propose that:

Proposition 4: Brand training and behavioural training directly influence the right behaviour, Knowledge and effective communication that is translated into the enhancement of the guest experience (customer branding).

Role of HRD practitioners

The literature on branding has paid a lot of attention to brand co-creation with employees through the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Punjaisri and Balmer, 2016), employee branding (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2017), and corporate branding (Kumar and Möller, 2018). The lack of research focus on HRD has led to an important question in this study regarding how the task of the HRD function and the practitioners who lead it within service providing organisations could be branded to enhance the development of critical capabilities and competencies. In this regard, Chand (2010) suggests that HRM practices positively impact service quality, customer satisfaction, and performance in India's hotel industry. However, there are scant studies that have evaluated how HRD Managers contribute to this service quality. Whilst the HR department is regarded as the umbrella function, this view does not give a fair share to HRD managers as major contributors to the processes needed to improve organisational branding.

The closest work that deals with this question is that of Mosley (2007) which argues that internal branding is encompassed in the communication of brand values to employees for them to understand corporate values and culture, leading to appropriate behaviours and actions. These strategic actions reinforce a common value-based culture which is attached to some form of corporate mission and vision. Furthermore, Miles and Mangold (2004) maintain that 'employee branding' is a process by which employees internalise the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organisational stakeholders. This internalisation process requires a breaking down of the organisational behaviours, standards and values into key areas of capabilities and competencies to be instilled in employees who then apply this to their roles in the service delivery. It was further argued that employee branding uses organisational systems, structures and internal marketing to motivate employees to support the brand (Miles and Mangold, 2004). We believe that effective customer branding

leads to organisational branding, as happy customers become loyal to the organisational brand.

Thus, we propose that:

Proposition 5: organisational branding through branding culture (articulating service as a symbol of consumption) and employer branding (helping distinguish amongst differentiate hotels' brands from employee perspectives) create organisational wealth.

Our conceptual framework is developed from the five propositions above our conceptual framework in Figure 1 to examine how HRD managers develop organisational branding through dynamic capabilities.

Insert figure 1 about here

In this research, we argue that dynamic capabilities help to promote a reputation for quality, responsiveness to market trends, and the quality and effectiveness of customer service in hotel environments. Grant (2016) indicates that organisational capability requires the expertise of various individuals to be integrated with equipment, technology and other resources. Indeed all productive activities involves a team of people undertaking closely coordinated actions without significant direct or verbal communication. This is called 'organisational routines' and refer to these regular and predictable patterns of activities made up of a sequence of coordinated actions by individuals (Nelson and Winter, 1982). Our argument, is that functional HRD capabilities cannot be integrated directly, but only through integrating the knowledge of individual functional specialists (HRD professionals). We believe that routines form the basis of most organisational capabilities. Thus, through routinisation, HRD professionals translate directions and operating practices into capabilities. This thinking aligns with (Teece et al., 1997) who pointed out that dynamic capabilities are a firm's ability to integrate, build, and configure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments. Therefore, it is the case that HRD managers develop through learning and development strategies, and competencies that enable hotels to be responsive to their customers needs and wants.

HRD professionals achieve the development of these competencies through different ways, such as incubating capabilities. For example, they develop new capabilities in separate units of the organisation and transfer them to frontline staff. This may also occur through managing processes such as; education, training and experiences of employees to determine the skills available to the firm; and the commitment and loyalty of employees to determine the capacity of the hotel to attain and maintain competitive advantage (Grant, 2016). The effectiveness of this process will improve customer perception of brand through taking ownership of the brand and establishing a relationship with customers. This will in turn improve the reputation of the hotels' services with regards to service quality and customer experience.

Specifically, this research seeks to establish how the HRD function could be recognised for its brand-building activities in the hotel industry based on insights from the ISEA region. Though past studies (e.g., de la Rosa-Navarro *et al.*, 2019) have considered the effects of HRM systems on employee reactions in the hotel industry in Europe (Spain), and (e.g., Alberton *et al.*, 2020) considered the individual competencies for hotel sustainability in South America (Brazil), our study is different.

We shift the focus to Asia where we consider the hotel industry in the ISEA region. This region, particularly India, has witnessed a tremendous boom in recent years because of the growth in the tourism industry (Kumar, 2014). Moreover, the need to develop the right competencies and brand awareness has become paramount for the hospitality and hotel landscape which has become increasingly competitive. This challenging role naturally falls within the domain of HRD professionals who are still considered as mere training specialists in most organisations in India and South East Asia (Uraon, 2018).

Methodology

Research context

This research focuses on two international hotel chains with subsidiaries spread across India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Singapore (Lele, 2018). The hotel industry is one of the largest and most rapidly growing industries in these countries. The Southeast Asian region is one of the main tourist destinations in the world (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2015). This has meant that hotels in ISEA face a chronic lack of qualified middle-level and senior managers who are equipped to function effectively in such demanding work environments (Baum, 2018). India is the country where a significant proportion (50%) of our respondents live and work, and it has positioned itself as one of the fastest-growing economies in Asia. India has also grown to become the sixth-largest economy in the world, overtaking France and also quite close to taking over the fifth position from the United Kingdom, if the rate of economic activity and growth continues at its current state (IMF, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2018). Sri Lanka, on the other hand, is a lower-middle-income country with social indicators ranked among the highest in the ISEA region. Indonesia is also the 10th largest economy and is classified as a middle-income country in terms of purchasing power parity.

Moreover, following the Asian financial crisis, the Malaysian economy has been on an upward trajectory with inspiring and growing levels of the middle-class population. Singapore's economy represents one of the world's most business-friendly regulatory environments and is also ranked among the world's most competitive economies (World Bank, 2018). India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Singapore combined are also considered to have the largest democratic systems in the world, and the recent ranking of quality institutions stood at 65, 68, 76, 80 and 36, respectively (Global Democracy Ranking, 2016).

Philosophical stand

This research aims to gain new insights into the new roles HRD play in hotel industry environments. We believe paradigmatically that knowledge is not absolute (complete) but shaped by culture and society (Brunt *et al.*, 2017). Thus, we adopt a nominalism ontology which claims that reality is created by us and as such does not exist independently of our perceptions and meanings. Nominalism assumes that there is no truth and there are no universals but particulars only. Underpinning the philosophical stance of this ontology is that objects in the world are ‘formed’ by the language we use and the names we attach to phenomena. It also argues that facts are human creation (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015). Nominalism goes further by suggesting that the labels and names we attach to experiences and events are crucial. In this study, therefore, how the branding of HRD managers could enhance the perception of corporate image needs to be seen as context-bounded and based on the professionals’ perspectives and languages.

Our epistemological stance in this research is constructivism, which means that our reality is socially constructed by social actors, who need to be engaged in order to establish how/why they construct/see reality the way they do (Lincoln and Guba, 2013). This choice is based on our understanding of how HRD professionals invent structures to help them make sense of what happens around them. Consequently, our attention was focused on the given use of language and conversations as professionals to create meanings. We also adopted the inductive inquiry research strategy (Blaikie, 2010; Collis and Hussey, 2014) by drawing inferences from the semi-structured interviews, analysing and comparing the facts stated by the HRD managers to identify regularities without reference to any hypothesis. We drew on the characteristics of case study design (Blaikie, 2010; Brunt *et al.*, 2017) to ensure the sample was selected to reflect patterns of employment, levels of education, and broader professional experiences.

Methods and research process

Participants read and acknowledged an informed consent document which notified them that their data would be stripped of all identifying information and kept in strict confidence by the researchers (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015). The semi-structured interviews offered in-depth-data (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). All the interviews were conducted in English by the principal researcher and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Pre-defined interview guides were used to ensure that all aspects of the research questions were addressed and that the answers were comparable. In developing the questions, we drew on the previous literature (Ting, 2006). Given the lack of data coupled with limited research on the role and influence of HRD managers in achieving corporate outcomes in ISEA, the study used semi-structured interviews (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). The questions discussed during the interviews centred on three themes. The first related to the nature of the functional role of HRD and Learning and Development L&D managers (their functional relationship with HR and other key stakeholders). The second explored how their role supports the development of dynamic capabilities and competitive advantage at the regional, national and international levels. The third explored whether the perception and expectations of their role influence their contributions to corporate integration, branding and financial performance of their respective organisations.

Sampling strategy

The research adopts a purposive sampling strategy (Blaikie, 2010). Our sample comprised of participants who volunteered for the research by responding through personal contacts of the researchers who were contacted and asked if they would participate. We recruited the HRD managers through the human resources departments. 20 HRD Managers in 20 different properties in ISEA were interviewed and they included 8 men and 12 woman. Moreover, the depth and breadth of the knowledge of the L&D managers who participated in this study have

demonstrates significant international management experience from ISEA countries. Table 1 presents the demography of the participants.

Insert table 1 about here

Data analysis

First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data through transcription. We then read and re-read key themes in the data noting down our initial findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Second, we use an ‘indicator-concept model’ (Figure 2) based on the conceptual framework to code sets of empirical indicators. Empirical indicators derived from line-by-line coding were data presenting either behavioural actions or events, described and taken from interviews (see Table 2). Indicators are sub-elements of a theme/core category (Table 3). A compounded number of indicators helped generate emergent concepts (Table 4). It is believed that the main themes or core categories are the ‘concern of’ or ‘problem for’ the respondents in the setting. They sum up the pattern of what the data was revealing. Once the conceptual code was generated, then indicators were compared to the emergent concept. The building blocks of a theory were further used to create a theory or hypothesis in the interpretation (Burns and Burns, 2008). The coding was grounded in the obtained data. Charmaz (2006, p.43) defines coding as a ‘means of categorising segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarises and accounts for each piece of data (Table 2). The coding of interview transcription provided ideas and understanding about the fundamental empirical problems and processes relevant in the obtained data. Line-by-line coding has the advantages of avoiding a loss in translation and allows seeing the nuances by reading the implicit concerns as well as the explicit statements in the transcriptions.

Insert Table 2 about here

In the process of this coding approach, Glaser (1978) advocates that coding with gerunds helps the researcher to detect processes and stick to the data and it gives a strong sense of action and sequence (Table 2). He further adds that it preserves the fluidity of respondents' experiences and new ways of looking at them. This helped the researchers create a set of indicators (behavioural or events) which were grouped to form themes/categories.

Insert Table 3 about here

Categories were derived from the second phase of coding i.e. focused coding. According to Glaser (1978), this is more directed, selective, and conceptual. The analysis process moved further, by 'raising categories' to concepts (Table 4), meaning subjecting them to further analytic refinement and stressing their relationships with other concepts created (Charmaz, 2006). These concepts provided interpretive frames and offer an abstract understanding of the relationship. We derived five key concepts from these themes: role as 'given', employee internal branding, functional branding, customers/guests branding and organisational branding (Table 4).

Insert Table 4 about here

Findings

Five major themes emerged from our data analysis. The traditional HRD roles, the added-value of HRD on employees in the hotel industry in ISEA, the added-value of HRD functional branding, the creation of service culture orientation and the creation of an organisational service culture that enhances organisational branding. We derived five key concepts from these themes: *role as 'given', employee internal branding, functional branding, customers/guests branding and organisational branding.*

The roles and duties of HRD managers in each subsidiary

Respondents were asked to provide specific examples about what they considered to be their roles and duties. Our first respondent (R1) pondered critically on the question and confirmed that:

My role is to plan, create and communicate yearly, quarterly and monthly training plans, in line with the hotel's business objectives and also to ensure the delivery of the programs as planned. I work closely with the operational teams and provide learning solutions by balancing the L&D and business needs. In doing so, I always identify department-specific training needs and plan sessions related to product and service delivery at regular intervals

This suggests that R1 derives the learning and development (L&D) plan from the hotel's business objectives and also aligns these to the specific needs expressed within the various functional areas of the organisation. This finding is consistent with Garavan (1991) who sees HRD as the strategic management of training, development and management of professional education interventions aimed at gaining and sustaining competitive advantage. This finding also confirms L&D managers as planners and communicators of the organisation's vision and providers of HRD solutions to the business. In a similar line of thinking, R5 declares that:

I consider myself as a navigator, coach, mentor, change champion, developer, quality assurance manager and brand ambassador of the company. The main objective of my role is to ensure that employees have the right knowledge, skills and attitudes to do their jobs competently and confidently and be the carriers of the company's core values so that they can contribute 100% to achieve the overall vision.

In this statement, we noted the traditional roles assigned to L&D managers, such as navigator, coach, mentor change champion, that leads to enhancing knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable employees to be well-equipped to do their jobs. Indeed L&D is seen as 'a process of developing and unleashing expertise to improve organisational systems, work processes, team and individual performance' (Swanson, 2001). The role as 'given' which is assimilated as 'performative routines' that includes the specific actions, by specific people and specific places and times' seems to be the themes in these responses (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). It also

appears that adding to what we called the traditional roles (navigator, coach, mentor and change champion), R5 believes that not only does he contribute to the overall goal and vision and carry the company's core values, he also plays the brand ambassador role which does not seem to fit explicitly into the HRD literature. Conversely, R16 presents in detail the traditional roles of L&D professionals and declares that:

I am responsible for training need analysis, budgeting, instructional designs, facilitation, evaluations or service quality audits, training vendor management, maintaining relationships with educational bodies for potential talent recruitment & support, liaising with external trainers to come up with training needs from external resources, handling management trainee and internship programs

These traditional L&D roles, although they are not redundant and continue to be the bedrock of the function, do little to raise the profile of the function, yet building talent pipelines, and acting as a relationship builder with external bodies requires brand communication to the stakeholders. Korte and Mercurio (2017) introduced the pragmatic HRD framework which focuses on practical outcomes of what HRD professionals think and do in practice ('the role as given'). The role as 'given' lead to practical outcomes of the function and the practice of HRD (Mehdiabadi and Li, 2016), but it hardly highlights the branding function of the managers. Therefore, we conclude that the role as given appears not to reflect the power of branding communication that is embedded in the HRD function in the ISEA contexts, and the specialists who take on these roles to ensure that employees develop the capabilities aimed at translating the advertised-brand into experienced-brand. This confirms our *Proposition 1: Through the role as 'given' and dynamic capabilities, HRD impacts on fostering brand awareness culture.*

Added-value of HRD roles and duties to organisational objectives

The subsequent set of questions we asked focused on establishing how the roles of the L&D managers add value to the overall performance of the organisation. The key theme that emerged from this line of questioning highlighted 'the added-value of HRD function on employee

performance in the ISEAs hotel industry’. This study presents this concept as ‘employee branding’. In exploring the basis upon which to establish and advance our conceptual framework and practical discussion on this idea, R6 points out that:

At the individual level, we work to enhance motivation, stimulation by focusing on skills and knowledge development which also leads to job advancement, personal growth, reduction in stress and work-life balance

The view of this respondent aligns with the findings of Uraon (2018) who concludes that HRD practices have a significant impact on the employee motivation and innovation. Furthermore, it also agrees further that there are three additional commitments devices: affective (creation of job advancement), continuance (reduction in stress and work-life balance), and normative (stimulation and development of competencies) that are found to positively affect employee performance. In contrast to this finding, R8 declares that:

I interact with each employee at least once a month, it helps me to sense their level of job satisfaction or identify any gap that arises. Doing so enables me to determine ways to assist the employee to grow their talent. Sometimes it means guiding them constantly, being there for everyone and being trusted by all

This respondent aims to ensure that, through interactions, she guarantees the satisfaction of the talent, growth, assistance, guidance, and being there. This finding enshrines the unique added value which matches the employees needs closely to that of the organisation (De Chermatony and McDonald, 1998). In essence, this brand communication strategy leads to employee branding (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2017). It also strengthens what employees imagine about the brand in terms of their cognitive and affective disposition to the brand (Dahlén *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, we concur with Nieves and Quintana (2018) that HRD practices affect innovation on the assumption that L&D managers influence the process of human capital development. Thus, we propose that HRD promotes employee branding; thus:

Proposition 2: internal employee branding training communicates brand values to employees, reinforces a common value-based culture.

The importance of HRD role for business success

Respondents were asked to explain how the L&D role is important for the success of their individual properties. The theme derived from the answers of the respondents points towards the added value of the HRD function. In probing the idea that functional branding or the HRD role leads to the development of core competencies, stronger corporate image, improved organisational performance and outcomes, participants were asked why their L&D role is important for the success of the business. The theme derived from the answers of the respondents confirms that the HRD role provides substantial immediate benefits which have direct implications for the long-term profitability of their respective properties. In this regard, R17 indicates that:

Although L&D is looked at as a very redundant function, given the right support and focus, there will be tangible changes over a period of time to the success of our business. As mentioned before, it's only well-trained, proficiently developed staff who remain motivated to work for organisations to achieve their objectives. Well-equipped staff results in great customer service experiences, leading to repeat business, particularly in the hotel industry. Moreover, in this changing world with high attrition, we must keep our staff motivated and give them enough opportunities. There is a huge cost involved when an employee leaves, i.e. hiring, recruitment and training of new staff. It will also take a while to get the new team member trained to current processes and standards. If we keep our current team members motivated through development, it will not only save those costs but of course lead to better customer experiences

It is ironic to note that this respondent started by drawing out the fact that the L&D function is not highly regarded. This finding concurs with Uraon (2018) who suggest that HRD professionals are still considered as 'mere' training specialists in most organisations in ISEA. R17 goes on to stress the importance of the function in impacting excellence in customer service experiences, leading to repeat business. This finding aligns with Fraj *et al.* (2015) who examine how environmental strategies and organisational competitiveness in the hotel industry are prompted by learning and innovation. Thus, learning is the key determinant of environmental success and organisational competitiveness.

R17 further demonstrates how human capital formation depends on L&D activities that contribute to better customer experiences. It is indeed true that this HRD manager sees the direct relationship between the functional activities of the HRD role and customer experiences for service-providing organisations in general and the hotel industry in particular (Keller, 2011). This finding is contrary to the assertion that there is a lack of evidence about how HRD managers contribute to the service quality and customer satisfaction. This study claims that the HRD function does not get a fair share of resources and support from the corporate boards of our sampled hotels as a major contributor to these successes. As Chand (2010) suggests that HRD practices impact positively on service quality, customer satisfaction and performance in ISEA, we propose that the added-value of branding the HRD function conveys a strong communication of the brand to customers who experience the result of this value within the hotel industry. R18 puts it in neatly:

Because you want to be successful and win the competition in the market you need to differentiate your brand and quality of service. Whereas product development, innovation and technology can play an important role, it can be copied by competitors, but the culture of quality service delivery and core values cannot be copied. In this sense, L&D managers play a crucial role in developing, instilling and embedding the culture and core values using systematic approaches and best practices which enhances the success of the business.

The respondent appears to draw out a clear link between the quality service culture and core values to the functional role of HRD and its relevance towards corporate performance. This finding agrees with Thite (2015) who argues cogently that the management and development of people will remain crucial in gaining and maintaining competitive advantage at the micro (organisational) and macro (national) levels. In essence, we claim that branding the HRD function has the potential to create a quality service culture and core value system not only in the hotel industry in the ISEA, but for most service providing organisations as well. *Proposition 4: Functional branding of HRD helps differentiate the brand product and quality service, for*

product development and innovation by linking talent development and growth of key competencies and capabilities.

The added-value of HRD function to customers needs/wants

To further our enquiry on the contribution of the HRD function towards the enhancement of customers needs/wants, our question assessed how the HRD function adds value to customer expectations. Our finding confirmed that the creation of a service culture that enhances customer orientation and satisfaction in the hotel industry in the ISEA context is dependent on the effectiveness of the HRD function in general and L&D managers in particular. In this sense, three of our respondents including R14, R19, and R9 agreed that:

The key contribution of L&D has not been very tangibly communicated and supported. However, it is with the help of effective L&D intervention that our team members can create a memorable guest experience. Each guest experience increases the possibility of return business and of course the revenue related to that. Also, as we continue to develop our team members, they stick around with the organisation creating a strong culture that again has the impact of how guests see us and how we are represented in the minds of our customers (R14)

'L&D ensures that the guest satisfaction score is in line with KPI (Key Performance Indicator) of the corporate values, culture and vision of the hotel' (R19)

'The role of L&D managers definitely leads to more business as a trained employee faces our guests in a confident and positive manner' (R9)

These three participants appreciate the clear link between the effective branding of the HRD function with an improvement in guest experience and guest satisfaction score. They underscored the fact that a trained employee faces their guests in a confident and positive manner (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003). This finding suggests that HRD is the major player in the creation of a service culture that enhances customer orientation and experience. It is also important in the sense that, to the best of our knowledge, no other studies have claimed such a direct link between the effectiveness of the HRD function and customer experience. The branding literature argues that due to the intangible nature of service, it is important for service firms to inform customers who they are, emphasising on striking the balance between business

and the level of service branding (Li and Wei, 2018). Thus, this study stresses the importance of the HRD function in translating the organisation's brand value to employees by embedding the corporate brand into employee training programmes. Respondent 4 mentioned that:

Conducting key communication workshops, brand training and behavioural training directly influence the right behaviour and the delivery of quality customer service experience in a right mental attitude. Knowledge and effective communication, in turn, leads to enhanced guest experience and contributing to the overall business success

This respondent suggests that the organisational brand value is translated by HRD managers to employees who have the sole responsibility of conveying the image to customers. Therefore, L&D managers primary responsibility is delivered by impacting the behaviours and knowledge of the employees who then bears the responsibility of influencing guests experience. Yet again, the current HRD literature appears not to be able to articulate this clearly. This is because the quality service culture orientation positions branding as a process of creating an identity for a service using distinctive name or symbol or design (Wells *et al.*, 1997; Kotler, 2000). Therefore, as a consequence, this study proposes that in the creation of a service culture that enhances customer orientation in the hotel industry in ISEA, the HRD function is the only link between the vision of the organisation and brand image that customers actually experience.

Proposition 4: Brand training and behavioural training directly influence the right behaviour knowledge and effective communication that is translated into the enhancement of the guest experience (customer branding).

The added-value of the HRD function to organisational branding

This aspect of our questions sought answers to how the HRD function enhances organisational branding based on the level of value that is added to organisations. In this regard, our respondents assert that HRD enhances the organisational branding by creating culture and brand awareness which enables the firm to enhance their performance and profits. For example, R15 indicates that:

As far as the organisational value is concerned, I deliver employee satisfaction, cost savings, efficiency and service quality, reduction in absenteeism and employee turnover. More importantly, I have been able to successfully introduce a customised integrated change management system which is unique to our hotel to achieve better employee performance as well as staff retention

Moreover, R8 insists that her role comprises of creating a culture of learning which in turn impacts both productivity and understanding of organisational branding:

Part of my role consists of creating a culture of sustainable learning environment where the organisation's productivity increases, but also makes the employees understand the organisational culture and building industrial relations with the hotel and the educational institutions where we usually recruit from

In the same vein, R12 proves that HRD is responsible to ensure that values, cultures and history pertain to organisational branding and further enhances the hotel's reputation:

L&D ensure that values, cultures, history are translated to team members, as a result, this increases employee happiness, and guest happiness, retention and great places to work for and these factors enriches the overall reputation of the hotel

Extant literature asserts that corporate branding focuses on brand co-creation with employees through the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Punjaisri and Balmer, 2016). In a recent study, Punjaisri and Wilson (2017) argue that employee branding improves organisational performance but it often appears that the emphasis is never on how HRD helps foster the branding of the organisation, and how L&D managers strengthen organisational culture by translating such ideals, values, culture and history into the daily activities of individual employees.

Proposition 5: Organisational branding through branding culture (articulating service as a symbol of consumption) and employer branding (helping distinguish amongst differentiate hotels' brands from employee perspectives) create organisational wealth.

Discussion

This research explores the ways in which HRD managers contribute to organisational branding through developing dynamic capabilities in the hotel industry in ISEA. Helfat *et al.* (2007, p.

30) posit that there is an inextricable link between dynamic capabilities and the organisational and managerial processes that underpin them. Considering HRD as a practice, Feldman and Pentland (2003), indicate what HRD professionals do concerning developing human capital and building new dynamic capabilities. Johnson *et al.* (2007) argued that HRD is influenced by and influences organisational and institutional contexts. Thus, this study argues that HRD (as a practice) does not reflect the power of branding communication that is embedded in the HRD function and the associated authority that is given to the L&D specialists to carry out these responsibilities. This finding agrees with the extant literature in that HRD professionals do effectively develop human capital (Nieves and Quintana, 2018) and new dynamic capabilities (Garavan *et al.*, 2016; Salvato and Vassolo, 2017).

From a practice perspective, this study argues that HRD promotes employee branding through the learning intervention programmes designed and implemented by L&D managers (Keller, 2011). This is a pertinent finding as it concurs with Lievens (2007) who asserts that the best approach to recruitment and retention is to promote a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer. Although previous literature on HRD has elaborated on employer branding (Cascio, 2014), employee branding (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2017), and corporate branding (Kumar and Möller, 2018), there are no studies so far that claim that HRD functional branding enhances the creation of quality service culture in the hotel industry in the ISEA. This is important because HRD as a practice adds to the creation of the image of the function and the creation of new dynamic capabilities. Finally, the study argues that HRD also adds value to the creation of organisational service culture that enhances branding at the micro and macroeconomic levels.

Based on our conceptual framework (Figure 1) that explains the new position of the HRD function branding, the role of L&D managers, the function itself has an auspicious role in developing dynamic capabilities to influence customer brand perception and ultimately

corporate cash flows. The conceptual framework aligns our key findings by proposing that the 'role' as 'given' in HRD practice is often associated with administrative tasks which seem to have some level of mundane outcomes. This is what makes both practitioners and scholars think that HRD is limited in its organisational outcomes. As a result, we propose that HRD thinkers begin to take a fresh look at the branding role of HRD within service-providing organisations. The aim is to foster brand awareness and a 'grooming' culture. Indeed, seen from this perspective, the pre-conditionality and presuppositions would possibly be faded out and the HRD role could be regarded as the agent that promotes employee branding, functional branding, customer branding and ultimately organisational branding which leads to corporate financial performance.

Conclusion and implications

This research offers interesting insights for businesses and HR practitioners in today's business market. It also adds to the ongoing discussion on the linkage between a company's image and brand, and HRD (App and Büttgen, 2016). This research explores the significant contribution of HRD managers in building brands in the hotel industry. It deliberates on aligning the branding of HRD function with organisational branding. Although many studies have claimed the strategic importance of HRD in enhancing human capital in organisations, this study claims that there is a layer of the strategic contribution that derives from HRD activities that are not researched yet. We found that HRD managers need to reclaim new territories by developing new programmes aimed at developing capabilities and competencies to achieve competitive advantage. Moreover, the current roles as given do not reflect the authority of HRD managers in contributing to employee branding, functional branding, customer branding and ultimately organisational branding. From a practical angle, the perspective on policy change could begin from incorporating the HRD function into strategic decision-making forums concerning

branding design and brand functions in organisations. This may require a situation where the top-managementteam (TMT) include HRD at the board level decision-making process. Furthermore, it may also be beneficial to have changes in perspectives in HRD educational content and curriculum (both in the intra-organisational setting and at the tertiary institutional level). This could enhance the ability of future and current HRD professionals to learn about new dimensions which could allow them to engage in decision-making at the TMT level before entering the HR practice (before the job) and whilst practicing in the field (after the job).

Differing from the traditional literature, our research argues that HRD managers are involved in the reputational building of brands through the development of new capabilities and core competencies to improve staff behaviours, and to deliver brand promises made to customers. The model developed in this research reflects the dynamic capabilities of HRD managers within the ISEA context as strong contributors of organisational branding.

The findings of this study have also opened up new avenues for research, in that corporate brand managers may claim that they are the ultimate brand image creators in organisations. We argue that in service-oriented businesses (e.g. the hotel industry), HRD managers are the main proponents of cultivating talents using innovative techniques to impact on behaviours, attitudes and culture which is needed to create brand awareness and brand confidence in employees who translate these to the customers. Although our proposed conceptual framework based in the ISEA context, our intention is to claim that it is analytically firm, relevant and applicable in similar environments. We also understand that the aim of seeking an external generalisation was not our intended strategy, but, in our effort to convey such findings to practitioners, we believe that HRD practitioners should use parallel literature repertoires from brand management discourse to value their strategic contributions in building and maintaining their reputational position at the board level. We suggest that further research should be carried out

to investigate how HRD managers could use reflective practices to improve their professional growth and the learning and development function through reflective practices (Koukpaki and Adams, 2020).

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Table 1: Characteristics of sampled respondents

Respondent Code	Area of Operation & Job Position	Gender	Education	Years of experience
Respondent R1	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	First degree	7
Respondent R2	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Male	Masters degree	15
Respondent R3	Corporate Head office – Learning and Development Manager	Male	Masters degree	5
Respondent R4	Corporate Head office – Regional Head, Learning and Development	Female	Masters degree	8
Respondent R5	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Male	First degree	4
Respondent R6	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Male	First degree	10
Respondent R7	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	Masters degree	7
Respondent R8	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	Masters degree	3
Respondent R9	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	Masters degree	7
Respondent R10	Corporate Head office – Regional Learning and Development Manager	Male	Masters degree	5
Respondent R11	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	First degree	3
Respondent R12	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	First degree	20
Respondent R13	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	First degree	5
Respondent R14	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	Masters degree	4
Respondent R15	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	Masters degree	9
Respondent R16	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	Masters degree	4
Respondent R17	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Male	Masters degree	5
Respondent R18	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Female	Masters degree	22
Respondent R19	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Male	Masters degree	10
Respondent R20	HR – Learning and Development Manager	Male	Masters degree	7
Total of 20 L&D managers were interviewed at 20 different properties	3 L&D Managers based in Regional Head Office and 17 within different subsidiaries in the region	8 men, 12 women	6 respondents hold first degrees and 14 have earned their masters degrees	160 cumulative years of experience

based in the ISEA region				
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Note: HRD = Human Resource Development L&DM = Learning and Development Managers HRM = Human Resource Management

Table 2: Coding using gerund (line-by-line) leading to indicators

Respondents	Answers	Coding using gerund (line-by-line) leading to indicators
R. 4	<i>R4: My roles consist of <u>ensuring the culture of training</u> is followed and practiced in every department. For example, there is regular training; constant check on staff following standard operating procedure, monitoring performance development plan or career development plans, engaging in talent development. <u>Supporting department heads with identifying training needs</u> as per guest feedback and deliver related training programs, <u>manage department trainers and support them through constant mentoring, coaching and feedback.</u></i>	Ensuring the culture of training, Practicing Being regularly trained Checking monitoring Supporting department heads with identifying Delivering related programs Managing department trainers Supporting them
R8	<i>R8: 'I <u>interact</u> with each talent at least once a month, it helps to <u>sense</u> their level of job satisfaction, or any gap arises. - <u>Assisting the talent to grow</u> - <u>Guiding them constantly</u> - <u>Being there for everyone</u> - <u>Being trusted by all</u>'</i>	Interacting with each talent Helping to sense Assisting the talent grow Guiding them Being there for them Being trusted

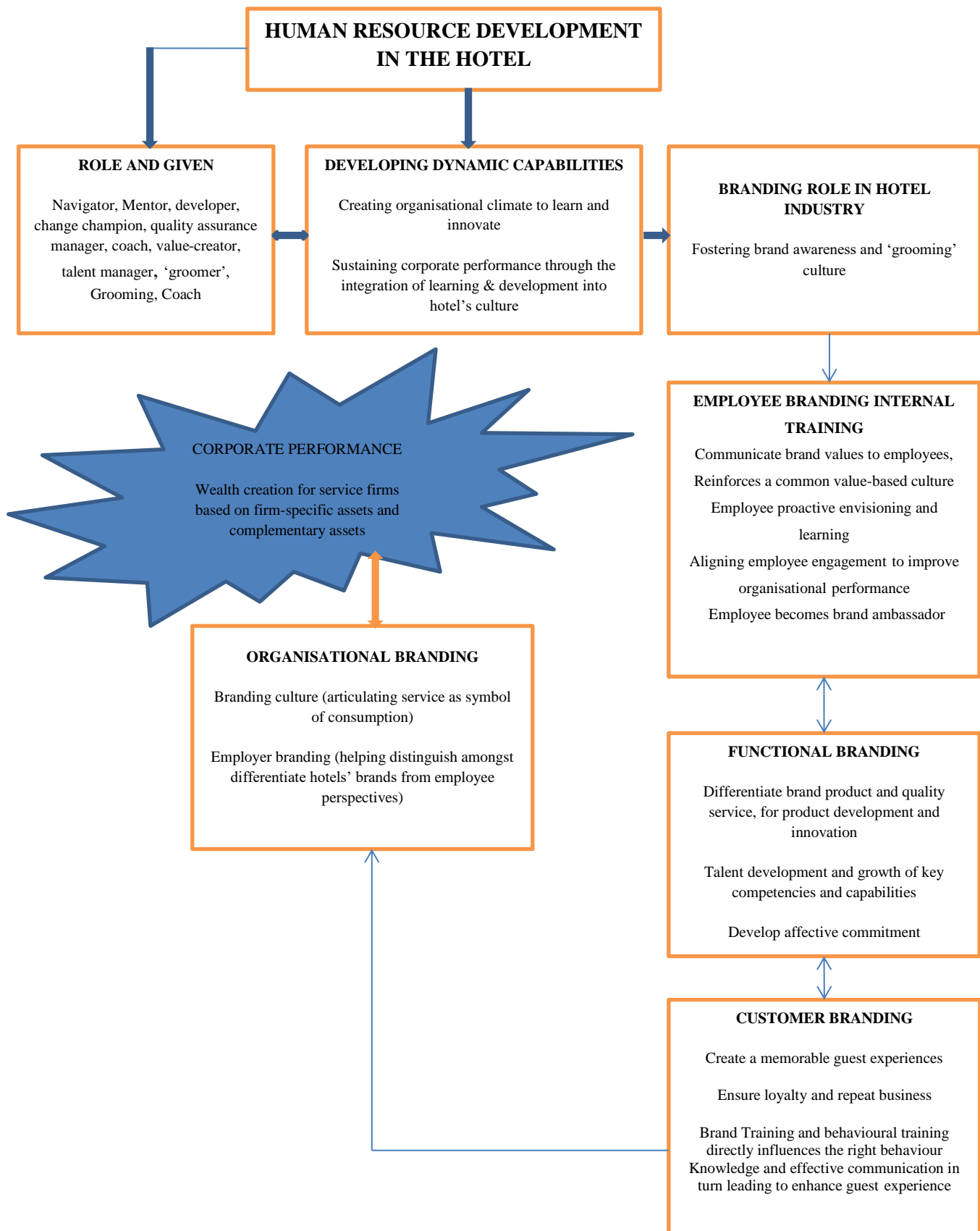
Table 3: Behavioural indicators leading to Themes (categories)

Behavioural and events indicators	Theme
Ensuring the culture of training, Supporting department heads with identifying Managing department trainers Interacting with each talent Assisting the talent to grow Managing department trainers Being there for them	<i>The roles and duties of HRD managers in each property (hotel)</i>
Catching the employees Boosting their knowledge Welcoming them Working to motivate them Being trusted by all	<i>Added-value of the HRD roles and duties to the overall organisational business</i>
Creating culture and brand awareness Improving service culture, operational expertise Driving loyalty Having a core responsibility to showcasing the brand value Ensuring adherence to all brand standards Promoting the organisational brand	<i>The creation of organisational service culture enhances organisational branding in the Hotels industry in ISEA</i>

Table 4: Themes leading to concepts

Themes /categories	Concepts
‘The roles and duties of HRD managers in each property (hotel)’	<i>Traditional HRD roles: ‘role as given’</i>
‘Added-value of the HRD roles and duties to the overall organisational business’	<i>Employee Internal Branding</i>
‘The ceation of organisational service culture enhances organisational branding in the Hotels industry in ISEA’	<i>Organisational Branding</i>

Figure 1: The conceptual framework of the HRD managers' contribution in developing organisational branding through dynamic capabilities.



Data Analysis procedure

Figure 2: 'Indicator-concept model'

