Tracking Employer Branding Strategies in the Evolving Global Indian Information Technology Industry- A Longitudinal Multi-Case Study

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Abstract

This paper represents a longitudinal study that tracks the corporate branding strategies of three Indian IT-BPO case study organisations, particularly focusing on their development of employer branding strategies to attract human resources at both national and international level. A longitudinal qualitative case-study methodology was utilised spanning three phases over five years from 2005 to 2010. The findings provide insights into the facets of each organisation's 'corporate' and 'employer' brand, with evidence of a strong link between both. Interesting findings suggested the initial use of 'brand India' alongside 'industry identity'. And there was a strong reliance on employees and HR to boost its overall brand identity, image and reputation.

Key words
Corporate branding, employer branding, brand India, business process offshore outsourcing (BPO), global brand development.

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Introduction
Corporate and Employer Identity, Image & Reputation
The growth of the Indian economy and the increasing use of Indian firms, and their resources, are salient issues in the current environment (Capelli et al., 2010; Kumar et al., 2010). Arguably the greatest area of growth in this respect is with regards to the business process outsourcing industry which was worth $69.4 billion in 2009, and growing; currently estimated at almost 6% of India's GDP and employs close to 2.2 million people (e.g. NASSCOM, 2010). However, for established firms the outsourcing of business processes potentially carries a number of risks (Earle, 1996; Aron et al., 2005; Aubert et al., 1998; Trott & Hoecht, 2006). Therefore, for Indian firms the development of positive reputation and identity is a key issue in order to compete with more established firms, particularly those originating or associated with countries that have a more established reputation with regards to IT-BPO service delivery, and grow their success at an International level. In particular, developing a positive reputation holds the potential to benefit the number of customers a firm has, develop revenues and goodwill, as well as increasing positive word-of-mouth (Herbig & Milewecz, 1995). Furthermore, with regards to employees the development of an image and reputation can be important in these recruitment markets and to aid in the retention of employees, in this context frequently referred to as an 'employer brand' (see Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Thus for firms in this industry corporate branding, and employer branding, can play a potentially critical role.

This study focuses on understanding how firms within the Indian IT-BPO industry are developing their image, identify and reputation, with a particular focus on employer branding. Unlike other industries, the IT-BPO industry is a 'skills' and 'people' intensive industry. Hence it becomes imperative that these organisations concentrate in firstly attracting and then retaining such skilful people to work for them and thereby portray a competitive 'brand' that it can boast off to stakeholders and to gain business. To this effect Indian companies have always been aware of unique business practices as is evident from Cappelli *et al*'s, (2010: 5) recent work where they state that- 'The India Way is characterised by four principal practices: holistic employee engagement, improvisation and adaptability of managers, creative value delivery to customers, and a sense of broad mission and purpose'. In particular, and in this context, the study examines the following questions:
1. To what degree are IT-BPO organisations building brands, as opposed to merely trying to survive within the competitive environment?
2. What aspects of that reputation and identity are firms in the IT-BPO industry focusing their efforts on building to differentiate themselves?
3. What aspects of branding are these firms focusing on in order to build a differentiated 'employer brand', in this developing industry?
4. How does the development of the corporate and employer brands of these organisations fit within the wider context of the development of a 'brand India'?

Within these overall aims we place a particular focus on developing understanding of the employer branding aspects of these companies' brand building. In addition, we consider it important to note that the 'branding strategies' adopted by the firm's studies in this research paper may vary in the degree to which they are formalised, and may also be in some respects be based on or restricted by the capabilities that exist within these developing Indian firms.

The following section of this paper will examine the literature of corporate and employer branding, and then discuss business process outsourcing, as well as the development and evolution of branding strategies in the Indian IT-BPO industry. From the research a framework is developed that illustrates and links the importance of corporate and employer brand building in this emerging industry in India.

Literature Review, proposition and framework development
Managing Corporate Identity & Reputation
An organisation's corporate identity is a strategically planned and purposeful presentation of itself in order to gain a positive corporate image in the minds of the public; this identity is established in order to gain favourable corporate reputation over time (Alessandri 2001). This identity is vital to how the organisation distinguishes itself, and articulates what it is, what it does, and how it does it (Markwick and Fill, 1997), both at a national and international level. This identity is presented to an organisation's various stakeholders through a number of cues, which represent how the organisation wishes to be perceived (Markwick & Fill, 1997). Based on the identity projected by the organisation, as well as other information sources, individuals in each stakeholder group will form an image of the organisation. Over a period of time, through repeated impressions of the image, a firm's reputation will develop (Gray & Balmer, 1997). Consequently, corporate reputation is more durable than images and it takes longer to change (Fill, 2002).

The following discussion will briefly explore the literature on corporate identity, image, and corporate reputation. With a particular focus on what are arguably two of the most recent overviews of the literature on corporate and organisational identity and reputation, Walker's (2010) systematic review of the literature, and Lange et al.'s, (2011) review on organisational reputation.

Walker's (2010) study presents an overview of the literature with regards to the key aspects of corporate reputation, which also acts as a concise overview of the key issues with regards to management. The study summarises these aspects as; the stakeholder groups perceiving the reputation, the attributes which define the reputation, and the measurement concerns (e.g. the purpose of the issue and whom the group is that is being targeted). Reputation building clearly relates to each of an organisation's stakeholder groups, particularly; employees, customers and suppliers, but also wider stakeholder groups such as investors, the government, and regulators (e.g. Melewar, 2008). The focus of this research is to understand the points of difference IT-BPO firms are targeting in the development of their branding strategies, with a particular focus on customers and employees/potential employees.

Lange et al.'s (2001) work also provides a useful overview of the literature on corporate reputation, the framework developed in their paper examines the relationships between three of the key aspects they identify within the literature, summarized as; being known, being known for something, and generalised favourability. With regards to the latter, this is likely to consist of factors such as; credibility, trustworthiness, reliability & responsiveness (Fombrun, 1996: p.396).

For organisations each of these elements are critical, and we propose that in the context of the emerging IT-BPO industry each of these will evolve as the industry develops, which forms our first and second propositions:

P1- The focus of IT-BPO branding strategies will initially focus on generating awareness at an International level, in order to develop a client base.
P2- As the industry develops, firms within the Indian IT-BPO industry will focus on building different elements of their individual brands in order to differentiate themselves, and establish favourability with the various stakeholders, at both a national and international level.

Whilst the models detailed in the preceding discussions provide a useful summary and overview of corporate identity, image, and reputation management, they arguably fail to provide a detailed insight into the complexities of these interrelated factors. In this respect arguably one of the most useful overviews is provided by Stuart (1999) who provides a summary of the main models developed through the preceding years, and summarises the corporate identity management process in the following model.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

This model provides insight into how a company's image and reputation are built, through the corporate personality, strategy, and identity. This research focuses on building an understanding of the strategies used by IT-BPO firms in India, and thus focuses on understand the image and reputation that they are trying to achieve through their projected identity. Within the context of Stuart's model, it is important to also note, that the image and reputation developed in the 'eyes' of each of the stakeholder groups will be built up over a period of time, based on both projected (controlled) communications and other uncontrollable communications (such as media coverage, word of mouth, and arguably employees own communications). Thus in the case of the IT-BPO sector the reputation and image held in the minds of stakeholders will have to be consistent to, and may partly be constrained by, wider perceptions held with regards to India as a whole, and the capabilities of IT-BPO companies in India. Based on this we develop the following proposition:

P3- The corporate brands of IT-BPO firms will be strongly linked to perceptions of brand India as a whole.

In this respect the importance of the organisation's identity arguably becomes all too clear, as it directly links to the interface through which stakeholders will develop the image of the organisation. In this respect, within this section, we consider it necessary to detail one final model type of model in order to highlight the key aspects of corporate identity, and identify the complexity of this concept, and its elements. Based on the model of Melewar and Jenkins (2002) and Melewar and Karaosmanoglue (2006), arguably two of the most accepted models, the main elements of this identity are; corporate communications, design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry identity, and corporate strategy. With regards to this study it is important to note that the model highlights the importance of country of origin, employees, and aspects of the brands history and origin, which we will link later to other aspects of the study.

Employer Branding
The preceding section has provided a brief overview of the pertinent aspects of the literature on corporate identity and reputation. Whilst this literature is relatively well developed and established, its focus has traditionally tended to be at a consumer level. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of branding to employees and recruitment markets, which has led to the

development of the term 'employer branding' (see Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Backhaus and Tikko, 2004; Edwards, 2009; Martin et al, 2011; Bellou et al, 2015; Cascio and Graham, 2016). An online search on the 15th of March 2018 for the term 'employer branding' on google scholar resulted in about 47,300 results. Similarly, a search on Taylor and Francis online for the same terms brought out 65,696 results. The major (top 10) journals publishing these included Journal of Marketing Management (684); Journal of Advertising (658); International Journal of Advertising (520); The Service Industries Journal (412); Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing (348); Business History (334); Journal of Marketing Communications (317); Journal of Promotion Management (294); The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research (273); Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising (263). The International Journal of HRM (IJHRM) showed 254 results. Though not all papers in this search would have a focus on employer-branding per se, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there is still growing interest on this topic. The latest article in IJHRM with 'employer branding' in its title was published online on 07 Nov 2016 (De Stobbeleir et al, 2016) and hence as Martin et al, (2011: 3634) conclude in their analysis on employer branding "…research in this field needs to catch up with practice as well as to inform it, so it is worth much more academic 'airtime' than it gets at present".

As has been detailed above, this article aims to provide particular insights with regards to IT-BPO branding within this context. Whilst an employer brand forms part of a larger corporate branding strategy, and must be consistent with all other branding efforts of the firm (Sullivan, 1999), the communication of this brand to current and potential employees has been found to be critical aspect of reputation management (Ritson 2002; Balmer et al. 2003). With potentially wide reaching benefits, such as reducing the cost of employee acquisition, relations, increasing retention and even offering lower salaries for comparable staff to firms with weaker employer brands (Ritson 2002). However, not only has this area of corporate branding received relatively little attention, most studies to date have largely focused on developed countries and markets (e.g. Berthon et al., 2005; Ritson, 2002). This further informs the rationale for our study.

Ambler and Barrow's (1996) original definition, and the most accepted definition, of an employer brands highlights the critical aspects of this type of branding, they define it as 'the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company' (p. 187), for more information and a detailed breakdown see Backhouse and Tikko (2004). More recently, Martin et al (2011:3618-9) define employer branding "…as a generalised recognition for being known among key stakeholders for providing a high quality employment experience, and a distinctive organisational identity which employees value, engage with and feel confident and happy to promote to others". Based on the preceding discussion, and in the context of our study, we suggest that with regards to national recruitment markets the development of an employer brand will be key to attracting employees to an individual firm, over its competitors. At an international level, within recruitment markets, this brand will be particularly key in order to attract employees from other nations and highlight the benefits of working for these individual Indian firms. Based on this we develop the following propositions:

> *P4- The development of an employer brand will be a core strategy for IT-BPO firms in order to attract human resources at a national and international level.*
> *P5- Employer branding activities to an International recruitment market will be more closely related to the overall brand India in order to link benefits of working for a company that is Indian owned or with major operations in India.*

The remaining sections of the literature review will briefly outline the literature on organisational outsourcing and country of origin branding. The focus of on these elements of the literature links the more general preceding discussions to the unique characteristics of the industry that forms the focus of this study.

Relating Branding Strategies to Brand India, and the Industry Context
Whilst the preceding discussions provide an insight into corporate and employer branding as a whole, when researching these subjects within the context of the Indian IT-BPO industry, we consider it necessary to consider some of the unique features of this industry in order to frame the study.

Firstly, it is necessary to consider the nature of the BPO industry. The growth of this industry in India is in part a reflection of the growing use of outsourcing across a number of industries. This is arguably typical for a whole range of business activities, as firms seek to focus on their core capabilities (Hoecht & Trott, 2005) relating the provision of this service to the literature on the risks of outsourcing (e.g. Earle, 1996; Aron et al., 2005; Aubert et al., 1998; Trott & Hoecht, 2006). It is clear that the purchasing of these services carries a number of risks for client firms, including; possibilities of weak management, hidden costs, loss of innovative capability, and particularly with regards to the issue of employees/employer branding, the issues of inexperienced staff, weak management, and outdated skills (for a more complete list see Earl, 1996). Based on these risks we propose that:

> *P6- In the early stages of the industry's development, firms within the IT-BPO industry will focus their corporate branding strategies on providing reassurance to relevant stakeholders.*
> *P7- During the cyclic economic fluctuations firms in the Indian IT-BPO industry will focus their strategies on proving reassurance to stakeholders of the continued sustainability/survival of their business.*

The second aspect of the competitive situation we consider necessary to discuss relates to the Indian focus of this study, in this context we relate our model to the literature on Country of Origin branding. Country of Origin is an important issue in branding and has received great attention in the literature (including Lin and Sternquist 1994; Haubl 1996). Indeed, it has been suggested that many brands may even be defined and described in terms of their origin (Thakor and Kohli, 1996). A brand's country of origin can be summarised as where the corporate headquarters of a company marketing the product or brand is located (Ozsomer & Cavusgil, 1991, as cited in Al-Sulaiti and Baker (1998), and in the case of some brands their association with a country that is seen to possess some natural expertise, such as German automotive brands which are associated with good craftsmanship and quality engineering, can provide a strong advantage (Haubl, 1996). One other consideration with regards to the literature on country of origin branding, is the issue of country of manufacture branding, which represents the country the product is actually produced in (Hui and Zhou, 2003). Relating this to our study we effectively separate the origin of the brand (e.g. established/with headquarters in a developed country), with the actual place the service is being delivered from (India), which enables us to develop the following two propositions:

> *P8- In the early stages of their development, less established IT-BPO companies will rely more heavily on their COI in their branding strategies, in order overcome a lack of*

awareness of their individual points of differentiation (due to being relatively new at an international level), and benefit from the established reputation of brand India.

P9- Those IT-BPO firms that have headquarters and associations with other more developed countries (other than India), but operating in India, will heavily link their brand to this 'other' country in order to benefit from its image.

Thus it is important to differentiate between those firms originating from and operating in India, as opposed to those firms that operate in India but are associated with a larger corporate body originating from another country. In the case of the latter the links to a more developed country, such as a large American firm that runs IT-BPO operations from India, could clearly result in very different perceptions.

The preceding discussions provide a context to the study, and an overview of the relevant literature. Based on the nine propositions developed we present the following model that summarises the relationships we examine in this paper.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The model focuses on the key stakeholders of the IT-BPO firms, with a particular focus on employees. It also identifies the influence of the industry and nature of the service, as well as the country of origin and delivers (or 'manufacture), which are seen as influences to this image. The Once again we highlight that a particular focus of this study is on the HR and employer branding aspects of this model.

Research Methodology

A longitudinal qualitative case study research design (Pettigrew, 1990) was used for this research which set out to achieve in-depth examination of branding strategies in three chosen BPO case study organisations. This formed part of a larger research project. The three case-study organisations operate in the IT-BPO sector in India and are each headquartered in India (Alpha), UK (Beta) and US (Gama) respectively. The fieldwork for this research took approximately five years- from June'2006 to April'2010. The following table depicts the research list and types of informants for Alpha, Beta and Gama.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The aim was to take into account the interactions between different factors and contexts enabling a rounded analysis of the issues and making use of a range of types of data in order to "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics" (Yin, 2003: 2) such as the organisation's 'branding strategies'; 'evolution of brand name'; its relationships in using branding to attract employees, customers etc (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). In order to locate the appropriate case study organisations a detailed market search was carried out in Mumbai, Gurgaon, Mangalore and Bangalore. Eight organisations were identified and Alpha, Beta and Gama were selected for two main reasons: One- the researcher had networking contacts with the three organisations and Two- wider and deeper access to data over a longer time period was agreed by the organisations.

In terms of locations, each case study organisations two Indian offices or operations were selected and included as part of this research. Alpha's HQ in Mumbai (where a range of BPO operations take place) and their office in Bangalore (also where a range of BPO operations take place); Beta's operations in Mumbai (where their research process outsourcing (RPO) operations take place) and Gurgaon, near Delhi (where they process payroll); Gama's rural BPO (RBPO) operations in Mangalore (where a multitude of BPO operations take place); Bangalore (their 'centre of excellence') were selected for study. A proper 'feel' and 'understanding' of the issues, from a range of perspectives, was sought and the development of the research was undertaken. The research was carried out over a period of five years and the researcher, an Indian national, made ten visits to the Mumbai, Bangalore, Mangalore and Gurgaon offices over a five-year period to interview, observe and gather data. This longitudinal study was undertaken in three tranches or phases over almost five years, which coincided with three economic phases i.e. a pre-recession economic growth stage, a stage of downturn or recession and a return to an economic growth stage again.

Findings and data presentation
To preserve organisational anonymity, the three case study organisations are referred to here as Alpha, Beta and Gama. A brief description of each follows.

Case study organisational context: Alpha
Alpha is among the leading global information technology consulting, services and business process outsourcing organisations, offering services to clients across 55 countries, and headquartered in Mumbai, India. It started its operations in 1968 and was a part of Asia's largest business conglomerates-the Alpha Group. Pioneer of the flexible global delivery model for IT services, Alpha focused on delivering technology-led business solutions to its international customers across varied industries. This company's vision was to be a global top 10 IT services company by 2010. Alpha offers a comprehensive range of IT services including BPO to 7 of the top 10 fortune 500 companies with over 140,000 associates (Alpha names its employee's associates) and growing (their plan for 2010 is to recruit 30,000 new recruits), from over 30 nationalities and offices in over 33 countries, it is today a $6 billion Indian MNC.

Case study organisational context: Beta
The company is a small but fast growing organisation. Beta is a small but fast growing organisation who started off employing about 180 people in 2005; 80 percent of whom were based in India. Clients come from three main industry sectors: financial services, construction and what Beta refers to as 'general practices' such as HR consultancy organisations etc. These clients were based in UK, US, parts of EU, the Middle East and Asia Pacific region. Dossani & Kenney (2003) have highlighted the role of non-resident Indians (NRIs) in acting as a catalyst for offshore services in India and Beta was indeed established by two young UK-based NRI entrepreneurs in 2005. A merger with a UK based executive recruitment outsourcing organisation (referred to by Beta as 'research process outsourcing') occurred in 2006 and hence it's UK headquartering. The organisation has experienced rapid growth since then. In 2008 Beta acquired organisations in the Asia pacific region. In April 2009 they acquired organisations based in Singapore, Eastern Europe and UK. Beta's operations are based on two aspects of KPO that reflect different types of the BPO 'offer': the provision of research process outsourcing (RPO) and the development of longer-term business relationships with client organisations with the potential to enhance core competencies.

Case study organisational context: Gama
They are a niche BPO services provider focused on mid-market companies. Gama is managed by experienced BPO professionals from the US. The aim to help leverage expertise whilst creating a strong value proposition for mid-market companies leveraging best-shore proposition for cost and service efficiency. Gama's vision is "to position rural talent to deliver leading IT solutions to global business by leveraging strengths of rural India supported by best practices established by growing IT industry" (vision statement). Gama 's mission is to build a model development centre at tier 2 and 3 Indian cities, currently starting with Surathkal, South India with 500+ associates who could deliver quality IT solutions supported by Centres of Excellence (COE' s) in leading cities. This is the initial stage of their road map to building low cost capacity of 10,000 associates across 15 locations across the Globe. Currently they have two BPO operations in Suratkal and Pimpri (near Pune in Western India) and two 'centres of excellence in Bangalore and Mumbai.

Findings
The key findings are summarised under the following three sections, with 'representative quotations' provided in each section in tables.

Managing Corporate Identity & Reputation
The findings suggest that Alpha, Beta and Gama, all pursued branding strategies seriously. Each had created a brand identity and reputation that they used to attract potential employees, retain talented people and project an image of reliability and quality consciousness to its clients and customers. Each of the three case study organisations operated in different locations, had different service offerings and catered to a different set of clients, customers and each had different types of employees with different skill sets and competencies. However, each had developed brand strategies based on the above and targeted towards stakeholders. Branding was a key part of each firm's strategies. With regards their image there were different facets that enabled them to grow, both with regards to employees and customers. At the beginning of the research period each company had a number of common facets they focused on developing an image for. With regards to employees it was an attractive welfare, pay package, and autonomy to choose the area of work (as detailed further on in the findings), from a customer point of view, it was price and innovation, with no compromise on quality and efficient services. Specific findings are detailed in the following sections.

Alpha was, a globally renowned MNC, to a degree already had a brand image, identity and reputation to live up to and maintain, as the company has been operating since 1968. However, with its recent phenomenal growth it had had to develop branding strategies that were uniform and acceptable globally. As they expanded, their strategies evolved as they had to accommodate global demands of employees, clients and customers. Only recently they had grown from 43000 employees to 163000 employees over a period of five years. This growth required the projection of a positive image to potential employees, enabling them to attract an increase in overseas employees from seven percent to thirteen percent in five years. This also linked to positive effects on their brand image due to their expansion providing a better more established reputation, but also the international nature of their workforce itself helped the company to develop a positive reputation as being a more international multicultural firm. Beta's strategy on the other hand was

of expanding by following a route of mergers, takeovers and joint ventures. Thus their corporate and brand identity and reputation had to be modified and accommodated according to their new acquisitions, mergers and joint ventures as also the new service offerings and client types they inherited. This firm's service offering was in the area of research process outsourcing (RPO), which is linked to the broader concept of knowledge process outsourcing (KPO), which requires researchers to be highly analytical, qualified and experienced. Thus the firm had to communicate an 'advanced', 'top-end' image, and to more of a niche market than was the case for Alpha. Gama was different in its strategies from the onset. They always portrayed themselves as one of the pioneers in successfully following the rural BPO model (with the firm operating in rural areas with lower staff costs, but the risk of negative perceptions associated with staff from less developed areas). They claim to have turned this around through advertisements, portraying an image of corporate social responsibility due to encouraging money into these rural areas, and also building skills within these rural communities. An interesting strategy was their deliberate choice of operational location. They chose their rural operations within the campuses of regional engineering colleges, so as to attract engineering students who opted to work part-time during term and full time off term. This was seen as potentially the future of BPO in India, in order to keep costs low.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The relationship between the Corporate Brand and Brand India
With regards to the use of 'Brand India' within each organisation's overall branding strategy, all three case study organisations acknowledged the fact that India as a brand was a factor in its own individual growth. However, it was clear that in the case of each firm the importance of brand India to their image to some degree reduced through the research period. Towards the start of this period each firm associated themselves with the image of India with regards to providing service of a good quality at a reasonable price, and with some emphasis on innovation in their relative services. However, as each firm grew and developed during this period they began to focus on other facets of their image, reducing the relative importance of brand India. This is highlighted in figure 3, which emphasises the reliance of each brand on these common themes towards the beginning of the research, whilst each developed separate positioning towards the end of the research period, as has been described above. The key elements of each company's projected identity, towards the end of the research period is summarised in table two.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Thus these results show that to a degree relying on Brand India now seems a thing of the past for them. In 2005 they were all trying to portray themselves as an Indian company with cheaper prices, but with quality. But by 2010 they didn't have to do that anymore as their image and brands were now established. Thus each firm only used certain aspects of their Indian associations to communicate their image. Interestingly this also shows that whilst Alpha used its Indian origins to position itself, it was imperative to the two strategies of the other firms that they were not just associated with India, but also had associations with other countries. Each was also now looking to carry their brand name internationally, and with regards to their competition across both India and with regards to competition from other countries, which was seen to be vital when other countries could potentially offer services at a lower cost (such as the Philippines and China). Finally, in this context, it is also worth noting that Alpha adopted a strategy of expanding in terms

of its locations and operations beyond India by opening offices abroad in regional centres that would be much closer to the expanding customer base. Thus, for instance, it has expanded into operations in Latin America and China, although it has offices in nearly three dozen countries other than India itself. This internationalization strategy was underpinned by a growing concern to recruit non-Indian nationals, with 'foreign' recruits expanding from a base of approximately seven per cent of all recruits at the beginning of the research to about twelve per cent of the total workforce by the end. Thus it was seen to benefit the company in terms of building a global or multinational brand, but also benefit its employee branding more specifically.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Employer Branding
Within each firm there were notable changes with regards to the reach of their recruitment strategies, and thus their employer branding. Towards the beginning of the period each largely recruited at more of a national level (e.g. within India), whilst this grew more to attracting HR at an International level within each organisation. In the case of Beta this transition was arguably more notable and more challenging, with its initial recruitment policies being more regional at the beginning of the research period. However, their growth meant that they had to continue to attract people at a regional level, but also required strategies to attract more qualified staff to these regional areas at a National, and to a degree an International level.

In terms of employer branding, within each firm, strong initiates were evident to enable them to offer additional benefits to employees, and hence enabling in the attraction and retention of staff. Their strategies are summarised in Table 4, which highlights the key aspects of their strategies that they communicated to potential staff and employees'. From these results it is clear that the key elements the companies focused on were with regards to; compensation, external activities and linkages, and internal aspects of their HR management.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

The table above shows that each firm focused on a number of programmes and activities within their HR strategies, in order to develop a positive image as an employer. Whilst these initiatives were quite diverse there were clear commonalities. Firstly, it is perhaps unsurprising the firms used more basic financial incentives to attract and retain staff. This was particularly so in the case of Beta, although this lessened during the course of the research. However, what was interesting was that financial incentives were only a relatively small part of the image they projected to attract and retain staff.

Training was seen to be paramount to developing a positive image, and each company invested in training in order to develop their staff and improve customer services, throughout the study period. For example, Alpha had been investing more than 6 per cent of its revenues in training. All three of the chronological phases discussed here were also characterized by a heavy expenditure on training, learning and development by the companies, despite the economic situation. Gamma's training shifted over time away from technical skills towards cross-cultural, language and social skills (including such things as dining table manners and telephone skills) as the firm internationalized, in order to help its image with international clients and HR markets. The

establishment of a positive reputation was vital for each firm, in order to successfully compete within the marketplace, both with regards to attracting HR, and attracting business from clients. The results also showed a clear link between using branding to attract staff, training them, and the building of a positive image. Thus each of these activities were key to the firms continued successes, as the provision of good services to customers partly linked to or required well-trained staff. Thus practices for enhancing the level of services were beneficial not just for the attraction of staff, but also thus helped with attracting and reassuring B2B customers.

Another common theme emerging from the interviews was that each firm sighted the importance of establishing links with academia. In the case of Alpha, the company also developed links with academia, through an Academic Interface Programme (AIP), which again helped it to identify and secure good younger staff, as well as enhancing its image to employees/potential employees, and customers.

With regards to HR and branding, an interesting link was that Alpha achieved accreditation during the course of the research, which was seen to enhance the company's image. This company also benefitted from receiving a best employer award in a survey, as well as the 'Recruiting and Staffing Best in Class (RASBIC) award in the 'best use of technology for recruiting' category. More widely the fact that Alpha achieved this accreditation was perhaps unsurprising, as the results clearly indicated that Alpha was leading the way in their strategies to use branding to attract staff, and this helped them to achieve high quality staff recruitment and retention in their phenomenal growth. The firm also tried to project itself as an 'employer of choice' by deploying 'employer branding' strategies, which seemed to have paid off well. They were seen to lead the way in collaborating with universities and academia, attracting both fresh graduates and experienced industry professionals, and were fair paymasters. In addition, they were communicated the autonomy they gave to their employees to choose the area and function of work or projects. The company projected this heavily internally and externally (e.g. through media and website communications). Apart from this they had welfare measures and were seen to be 'paternalistic' in their approach as they expanded this initiative from national to international level and finally to a global level. This meant that the firm had what they considered to be a 'national welfare society'.

Alpha indicated that its 'Alpha family' branded program which was aimed to go 'beyond the corporate', was core to its attraction of staff. These programmes included activities such as social meetings, theatre, adventure sports, trekking and so on for the families of Alpha employees. For each firm these were important to their strategies of attracting staff, as the companies were able to attract staff at a national and international levels based on the benefits of working for an Indian firm, as well as where relevant the benefits of living in India, and their region. But also, with regards to employees that had to relocate, it was necessary to promote the benefits of working for that firm, in the appropriate area critically, in some respects overcome some of the issues and weaknesses of living in the country/area. For example, this involved promoting the unique aspects of their offering, such as their own schools, activities, and social events, for example. In the case of Alpha, the company took the principle of this further than its competitors, having established a specific network of interaction between corporate and the extended families, and to add value to each other's life in various ways. Over the five-year research period it was seen that this initiative had evolved and was trying to accomplish the goal of serving the society and give a better interactive social life in three different ways: socialisation within the community of associates and

spouses; easing relocation; serving the community. Interestingly there were clear benefits of investing in staff and social activities, as well as building its image for CSR. It was found that whilst Alpha pays less than some competitors, the company marketed the attractions of belonging to a much larger Indian group or 'family' to counter this.

The results for the other firms also provided useful insights into their strategies. For Beta its niche market for highly trained 'research' staff led them to 'employer branding' strategies that were innovative and indigenous. Attrition and retention is typically high in the Indian IT-BPO industry. However, they used 'Employer branding' strategies to stem this and to cope with this. In particular, their highly niche offering (KPO) was only delivered by a few firms in India and thus the firm focused on promoting their training to develop employees in this area, but with the benefit of the staff becoming more focused in KPO services, meaning they would find few other firms to move onto, particularly when they were more experienced. The firm also promoted its training and shadowing services offered to new staff, which was a relatively unique offering. Gama faced several HR branding related issues being a rural BPO. There were no benchmarks or best practices that they could follow as it was 'new territory' for them. Another issue was that talented people did not want to work in rural India. However, their employer branding strategies turned this around as they advertised their vacancies to the broader market within the context of 'corporate social responsibility'. As working 'for or with them' would enable a contribution to the underdeveloped areas of India. Furthermore, they promoted the 'thought' that trained and qualified staff working in these areas would gain valuable experience gaining initiative and opportunity and this paid off. Thus the firm was able to attract people into these less developed areas, as well as drawing in the local population based on the training and exposure they would gain working alongside talented and qualified people.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Key Findings and Branding challenges in each firm during the research period 2005-2010
All three case study organisations had branding strategies in place and they continuously built on these as they evolved and grew. A key facet of Alpha's strategies was its claim to being a global leader in the services they offered their global clients and potential customers. Having been an IT-BPO organisation since 1968, the company had grown extensively at a global level in recent years. Thus their stakeholders and audiences were now multi-national and around the world. They now looked to consolidate, grow and compete with global leaders from that position. For Beta growth strategies have been through joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions. Hence they too are constantly seeking to grow, but for their high knowledge service, it was necessary to ensure this was consistent with the point of differentiation based on its specialist knowledge and quality, as well as staff. Thus it there were clear differences in the strategies of Alpha and Beta, as Beta were making smaller acquisitions and mergers, working with other small companies to develop their specialist and differentiated services in the Asia pacific, America, and Europe area. This helped them to build on their differentiation as they only acquired small firms within their specialist KPO area, with specific and highly developed skill bases. This enabled them to maintain their niche positioning, build quality, and continue growth. For Gama, their success continually built on their 'rural BPO model' as their main selling point or differentiator and they used this as a tool to attract future and newer business. Thus it continued to grow based on the CSR benefits of their 'Rural BPO' image, as well as the cost advantages.

All three case study organisations were growing, despite Beta suffering poor financial results in the depths of the recession. The five years of longitudinal study has seen them expand exponentially. Each firm adopted different strategies to survive the recession. Alpha adopted a strategy of being careful with their expenditure and one of cost-cutting; however, this was carefully managed in a way that they tried to still maintain and build on their image and reputation. Firstly, whilst they laid-off some staff, they did this through a process where they made performance standards tougher, which hence boosted output and quality, and ultimately improved performance. The company's revenues were not affected, but it used the period as a way of boosting performance, and building their training. Thus the strategy was seen as 'getting ready for the end of the recession'. In the case of Beta, in the recession itself the firm did not fare as well, suffering some losses. However, the firm still tried to use this as an opportunity to boost perceptions and its internal HR. Through its acquisitions in this period the company was effectively able to influence consolidation in this period, acquiring other companies in the niche segment to further build their skills and expertise within their HR. Thus it was able to build a great position of leadership compared to its competitors. Gamma, like Alpha, also improved its performance in this period, as its lower price 'rural BPO model' enabled it to successfully compete in the market, offering cheaper services. But again it was able to do this whilst maintaining perceptions that this could be consistent with a 'CSR' model of operating. Thus it can be seen that though different strategies, each survived the recession and have also thought at a strategic level in order to develop themselves in a sustainable manner, and to be poised for greater growth internationally and globally.

INSERT TABLE 6

Discussion
We now extract the above findings in order to address the research questions that were framed earlier in this paper. Firstly, we enquired to what degree were Indian IT-BPO organisations building brands, as opposed to merely trying to survive within the competitive environment. It was evident that 'brand building' was vital and very much omnipresent as part of the overall corporate strategies of all three case-study organisations. Hence brand building was important for survival in the competitive market they operated in. It is interesting to note, in regards to Lange et al.'s (2001) research, effectively Beta and Gama's strategies moved as they developed effectively moving from largely wanting to raise awareness (being known), towards building their own identity (being known favourably for something).

The results showed variability with regards to the level of strategic development of each firm's brand. For example, within Alpha strategies were reasonably well developed at the commencement of the research, due to the company being relatively well established. Whilst within Beta, with regards to employer branding, there was a clear transition over a period of 4-5 years from personnel administrators to strategic HRM has been evident in various aspects of HRM practices such as recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation management, performance and reward management, attrition and reward strategies and staff welfare.

Secondly we examined what aspects of reputation and image firms in the IT-BPO industry focusing their efforts on building. Even though all three were different in what they did, how they did it and who they catered to, they were very aware of the importance of brand identity, image

and reputation. Alpha had to maintain a brand it had already built, being part of a wider Alpha group. In sharp contrast Beta and Gama in relative terms had to start from scratch, thus in the case of both Beta and Game their brand building initially focused on generating awareness at an international level to develop its client base, this confirms proposition one. It was interesting how each had different growth strategies, which related to the different positioning each adopted, as they evolved and grew. Their growth overseas too meant raising brand awareness from national levels to international levels. Later on as they developed, and the industry grew, all three organisations were able to differentiate themselves in the marketplace and build a niche for themselves individually. Brand strategies were utilised to do this, hence confirming proposition two.

Our third question looked at what aspects of the brand these firms were focusing on in order to build their 'employer' branding, in this developing industry. It was clear that 'employer branding' was entwined within their corporate branding, as is suggested within the literature (e.g. Sullivan, 1999). Employer branding was key, within an overall branding strategy, due to the people intensive nature of the industry and quality services, which required a talented and dedicated workforce as the crux of the quality and efficiency they can deliver to clients and customers. This confirms the fact that employer branding is key to these firms attracting HR at a National and International level, confirming proposition four, five, and eight. Alpha claimed to lead in terms being an 'employer of choice' having won several national and international industry accolades and awards whilst pursuing a strategy of employer branding. Beta on the other hand claimed to be one of the best paymasters and took on quality 'researchers' for 'top end' work. Thus Beta too attracted talent by utilising an employer branding strategy. Gama claim to have turned a negative view of not working in rural India into a positive view by portraying an employer brand strategy of rural BPO being opportunistic and futuristic. In the case of each firm the attraction of employees fitted within their overall branding strategy, but also enabled them to build a positive reputation through the quality of their HR.

Our final research question examined the development of corporate and employer brands of these organisations and how they fitted within the wider context of the development of a 'brand India'. All three case study organisations were in unison that being part of a 'brand India' was a major reason why they initially developed as an international brand, which clearly supports proposition three. A large part of their initial success was achievable due to the brand image India had built overseas in providing cheap but efficient and quality IT-BPO services. Thus these firms were able to benefit from associating themselves with brand India in the early stages of development in order to improve perceptions among employees, shareholders, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders, thus confirming proposition six. They argued that the government along with industry worked to build this brand and that now they were ready to move internationally, having established themselves in the market abroad. The onus was to maintain that brand and utilise and capitalise on it when expanding to international markets and competition. A sense of socio-nationalism was present within all three organisations. However, the results have also shown that towards the end of the research period the firms relied less on the India brand, with each having their own image development strategy.

The findings also suggested that with regards to those international employees that would work for the firm in India, which was only a relatively small proportion. The firms aimed to build on

perceptions of the relevant perceptions of brand India, with regards to aspects such as infrastructure and healthcare for example, but also used their brand image to portray individual advantages of working for the firm. This included some of the previously mentioned aspects of the employer image as mentioned in the findings, such as benefits and family support schemes. This is summarised in Figure 4.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Those firms with headquarters outside India were able to benefit from their links to other countries or their country of origin, which has clearly links to the prior research in this area (e.g. Lin and Sternquist 1994; Haubl 1996; Thakor and Kohli, 1996). To some degree this was an advantage to these firms (as has been described). However, in the case of Alpha, this company drew heavily on its Indian origins and the fact that it was the largest and most established Indian firm in the sector. Furthermore, with regards to the country in which the service was actually produced (which we link to country of manufacture in the context of this industry), in the case of both Beta and Game it is worth noting that whilst each had associations outside of India, their links to the country in this respect was still a key part of their brand.

The results of the research showed that during the cyclic economic fluctuations the three case study organisations followed austerity strategies, even though productivity, business, and profits did not suffer as much as was expected. Interesting the firms used this period to their advantage by deploying strategies that would reassure stakeholders. For example, Alpha expanded the EVA model to its reward and performance management, to boost its stakeholder's morale. Furthermore, the firms used this period to their advantage and improved their training, and services despite the economic conditions. Beta recruited less and concentrated on business development and strategies of acquiring international organisations that could not cope in the recession. Gama's business during this period actually improved due to their price positioning, however they were cautious and adhered to austerity measures such as stopping training for staff whose work did not entail customer facing roles. Thus each firm went beyond reassurance and actually used this period to their advantage.

Conclusions and limitations

This research has explored and tracked the key elements of the 'branding' strategies of the Indian IT-BPO industry, with regards to the key aspects of the identity they portray in order to establish their desired image and reputation with various stakeholder groups (with a particular focus on corporate branding). This industry has had a profound influence on modern businesses across the world, thus this can be considered to be an issue of great significance. No advanced country has been left unaffected by offshore outsourcing to India. It was thus timely to provide the empirical evidence in the form of this paper. This was done in the form of a longitudinal case-study of branding strategies within three different Indian IT-BPO organisations. The research shows that each firm adopted strategies in order to build unique and positive perceptions with their relevant stakeholder groups. However, an interesting external factor was seen to be very relevant to the Indian IT-BPO industry- that of 'brand India' alongside 'industry identity' which suggested a sense of socio-nationalism, which was particularly evident towards the beginning of the research period.

This was less so towards the end, as each build their own image and points of differentiation. The current inclination, albeit to varying extents, shown by the three case-study organisations were of developing a 'global brand' image.

Whilst it is accepted and can be argued that only three organisations would lead to generalisations in results and findings, the counter-argument that it was longitudinal in nature and perhaps not done earlier would negate the argument. The other possible limitation could be the qualitative nature of the study. In future a quantitative study could be done to verify these findings. Overall the scope for further research is enormous and this could be taken as a starting point for future research in this interesting and evolving industry.

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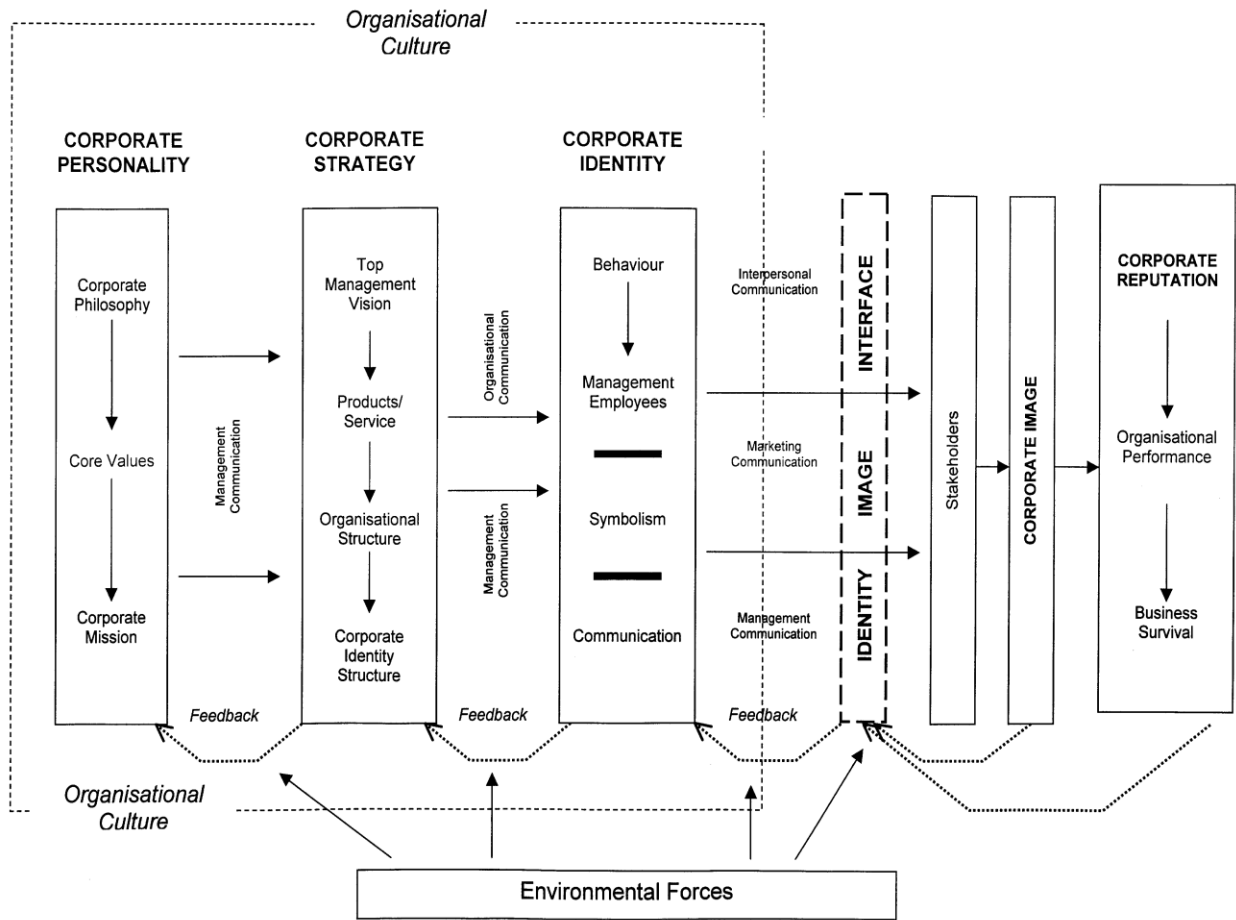
Figure 1: Stuart's (1999) Model of Corporate Reputation Management

International
Stakeholders &
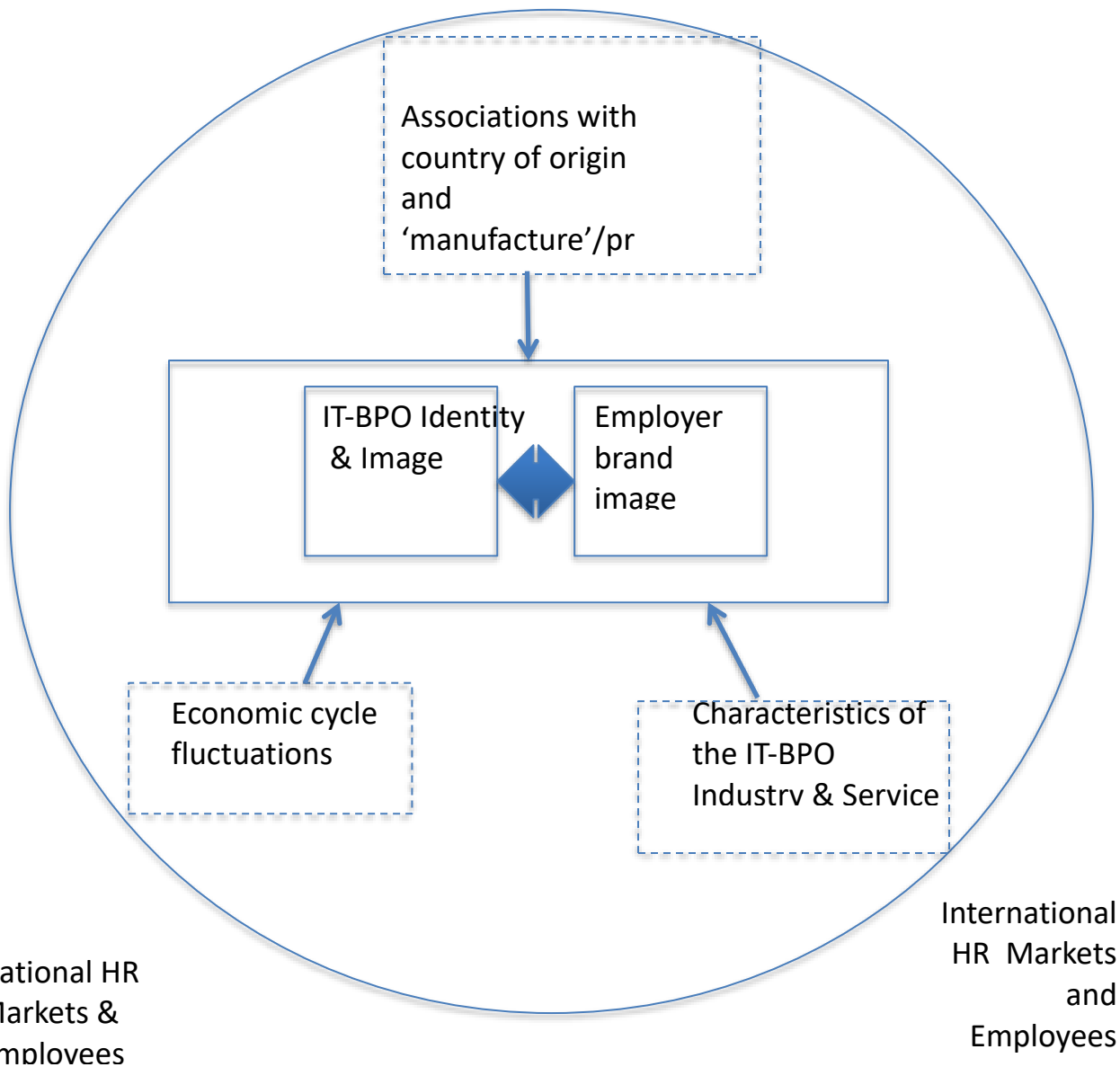Customers

National
Stakeholders &
Customers

Associations with
country of origin
and
'manufacture'/pr

IT-BPO Identity
& Image

Employer
brand
image

Economic cycle
fluctuations

Characteristics of
the IT-BPO
Industry & Service

International
HR Markets
and
Employees

National HR
Markets &
Employees

Figure 2: Model summarizing branding in the Indian IT-BPO industry
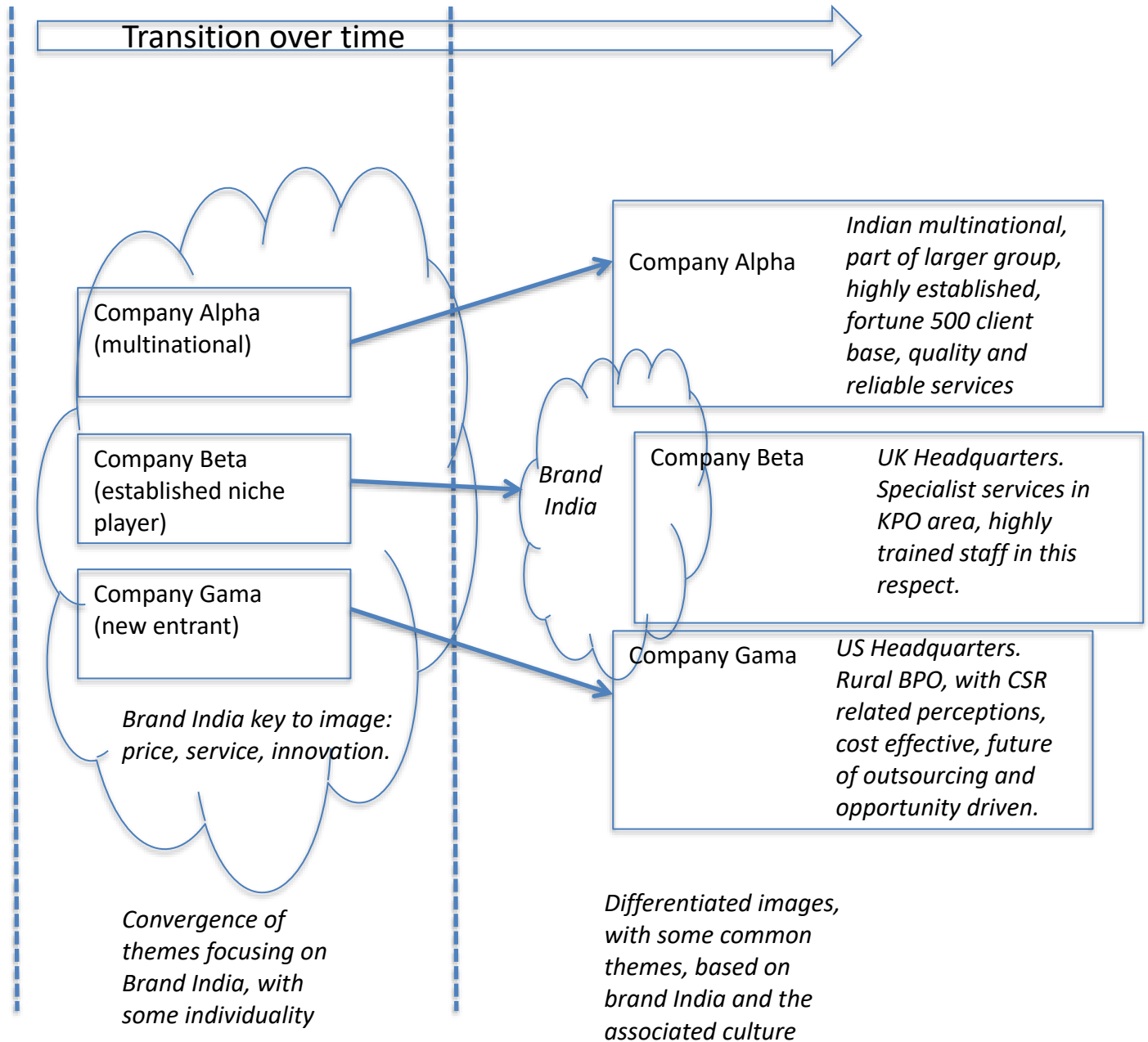
Figure 3: Illustration of the evolution of the IT-BPO brands over time, in each of the cases studied in this paper
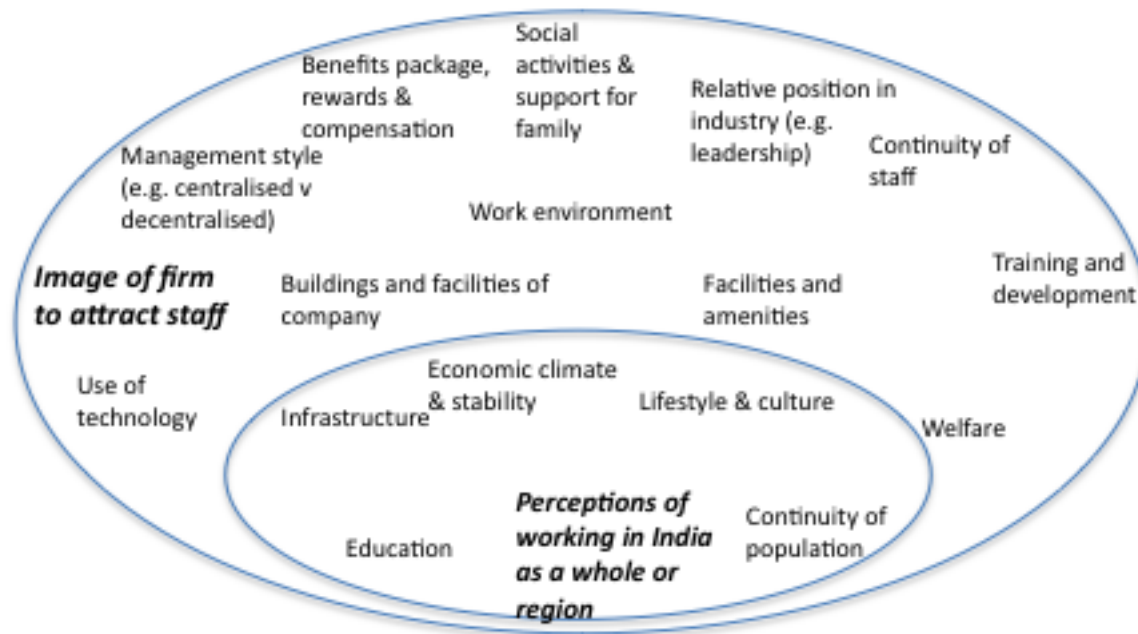
Figure 4: Illustration of the key elements of the employer brand which were also linked in and constrained by perceptions of elements of brand India as a whole.

Company (pseudo name)	Founder	Top Management (Chief HR/Operations Manager)	Total
Alpha	-	5	5
Beta	2	3	5
Gama	2	3	5
Total	4	11	15

Table 1: Research: List and types of informants for Alpha, Beta and Gama.

Case	Key elements of image
Alpha	Later communicated itself as being a leader in the industry and highly established. It also benefitted from being part of a larger conglomerate, which was seen to benefit its overall image and provide reassurance for stakeholders. The company also tried to communicate itself as setting standards. However, in the case of this brand it did try to benefit from being recognised as being the largest firm in the sector that originated from India, thus drawing to a small degree on the Indian associations. The company tried to position itself as heading the brand image of India for this type of service.
Beta	Communicated it-self as being a leader in the specialist KPO sector of the industry, with highly trained and well qualified employees. Thus the emphasis was on the provision of a specialist service from well qualified staff. Again this company only drew on its associations with India to a small degree, particularly with its associations to UK, where its headquarters were situated. In the case of this firm therefore these associations provided reassurance to customers, due to being associated with an established country.
Gamma	Benefitted from having its headquarters in the US, where most of its business originated. The company operated as a rural BPO service provider which enabled it to focus on quality, but at a particularly reasonable cost. The company also tried to communicate this as being part of the future of BPO service provision, as this rural model not just lowered costs, but also enabled it to benefit society by providing work in rural areas and building skills in these areas. Thus the firm only used brand India to a degree and largely to highlight the potential corporate responsibility benefits of working with it, and providing jobs and training in rural areas of India.

Table 2: Summary of key elements of brand images projected by each company towards the end of the research period

Research Themes	Representative quotations
Managing Corporate Identity & Reputation	
Importance of branding to each case firm and points of difference	Alpha- *We compete in a globally competitive market, as an Indian MNC with a global brand name it is paramount we maintain this identity and repute in the BPO domain. Our stakeholders will be very aware of this and we just cannot let them and our organisation down (Chief HR manager, Bangalore)* Beta- *Being a new kid on the block we have realised very quickly that our survival and future growth depends on building a brand and niche for ourselves in this competitive industry. Of course we have strategies in place to achieve this. (Board member, Mumbai)* Gama- *Our unique service offering and rural location model are our brand strength. Our mission and vision is to build, improve and grow on this model. This differentiates us from the competition.(Managing director, Bangalore)*
The challenges in branding through the period of expansion: building & differentiating the	Alpha- *We have moved from being merely international to truly global. Our overall group is now a globally renowned brand name and the BPO branch has done a lot in achieving this. We have evolved quickly over the years and no longer need to differentiate as much as we used to (Chief HR manager, Mumbai)*

brand at a national and international level.	Beta- *Our growth internationally meant building on our brand awareness and consolidating our position in the BPO market. We are constantly working on this and branding is core to our overall strategy. (Board member, Mumbai)* Gama- *Being one of the first to enter into the rural BPO area, we have built on this as a brand and promoted ourselves well. This makes us unique in what we do and how we do it. Cost of course plays a major part as we offer cheaper rates due to cheaper overheads. (Managing director, Bangalore)*
The link between brand India and the corporate brand image of each case firm.	Alpha- *As an Indian MNC already having a global presence, our BPO branch had to live up to its reputation. We started several years ago and in fact now we are leaders in India and have benefited from brand India to a large extent (Chief operations manager, Mumbai)* Beta- *Indian BPO organisations have built a brand image and reputation and we are part of that industry. Certain standards and practices are continuously improved upon and followed. For example, at Beta, innovative ways of doing things are encouraged and global best practices are replicated. This has led to a hybrid Indian branding strategy which has been very successful till date.* *(Board member, Mumbai)* Gama- *Our branding strategies of promoting the rural BPO model are in sync with brand India supporting this model. We highlight our strength of supporting the rural community as a corporate social responsibility initiative where there is a win-win situation created for rural talent and entrepreneurs. (Director, Bangalore)*

Table 3: Key findings and representative quotations (Managing Corporate Identity & Reputation

Alpha	Beta	Gamma
Compensation & financial strategies: -EVA scheme a differentiator	**Compensation & financial strategies:** -Bonuses	**Compensation & financial strategies:** -Profit sharing and business ownership schemes
Externally focused strategies: -Relationships with Universities -Awards won	**Externally focused strategies**: -None specifically	**Externally focused strategies**: -Some small scale relationships with local universities -Some centres within University facilities
Internal Strategies: -Employee camps -Training	**Internal Strategies:** -Training	**Internal Strategies:** -Cross Training (no cost) -Mentoring, shadowing
Employee benefits: - 'Alpha family' programme going 'beyond the corporate -Schools -Children and healthcare facilities	**Employee benefits:** -transport to and from their residences to offices and back. -medical allowance, company insurance, congenial working environment, free beverages,	**Employee benefits:** -Free meals everyday -Help in attaining loans for vehicles and houses -Insurance schemes

-Social meetings, theatre, adventure sports, trekking.	subsidised canteen etc., at both locations.	

Table 4: HR activities referred to by interviewees as being key to the organisation's projection of their employer brand to recruit and retain employees

Key themes	Representative quotations
Employer Branding	
Importance of employer branding to attract and retain employees, and key points of differentiation	Alpha- *The IT-BPO industry is a labour or HR intensive industry. People are core to what we do. Of course technology is key but people too are important as they run the technology. Hence to attract the best global talent we need to have a strong brand supporting us. We have been a employer of choice, having won several industry awards and we pride ourselves for this (Chief HR manager, Mumbai)* Beta- *We have created a niche market and a unique brand image to attract specialised expertise in the form of 'researchers'. Employer branding in this industry is very important and we do all to achieve and maintain a good brand, especially now that we have operations and branches in several countries. (HR and Training director, Mumbai)* Gama- *As you are aware, when we started out we found it very difficult to attract good people and thereafter even retain them for our rural operations. Urban talent was hard to find. Today we have turned that around. Talented people want to work for us at our rural operations. We know even though this is for a short period, it still serves our purpose. Our full time rural employees are dedicated and learn from them. There is a lot of cross learning and training that we are benefitting from. This has formed an image of a differentiated employer brand for us which is now known internationally as we were one of the first to successfully follow the rural BPO model in India. (Director, Mangalore)*

Table 5: Key findings and representative quotations with regards to employer branding

Key themes	Representative quotations
Evolving branding strategies in the IT-BPO industry in India	
The challenges of differentiating in the global IT-BPO market, through the research period	Alpha- *Being a global organisation Alpha's stakeholders today are global. Our brand image is what keeps us in the global market. We cannot afford to compromise this position if we are to maintain and then consolidate our global market position (Chief operations manager, Bangalore)* *We have differentiated ourselves from our competitors within our different service offerings and relationships we built with our employees and clients. It has taken us a long time to build this and then come up with a global brand image. (Chief HR manager, Mumbai)* Beta- *Our overall strategy of acquiring, mergers and joint ventures has led to an array of stakeholders in different geographical locations. We have been able to have a consistent and synergetic brand image that is acceptable to all these stakeholders. This is also because what we do is in a niche RPO market that we have created for ourselves. (Board member, Mumbai)*

	Gama- *We are different from others in what we'd; the costs we offer and the services we offer. Our model is seen to be futuristic within the industry. The other options for Indian IT-BPO organisations is to go abroad in search of newer markets providing the same costs and talents. Hence we see ourselves as the pioneers and this is our brand image. (Managing director, Mangalore)*
The context of the Indian market in which the firms operated	Alpha- *Today our competition is mostly not with other Indian IT-BPO multinationals. The top players from India have each carved a place in the market with a select clientele base. Today we compete with the global players. We are also collaborating with global players for a common goal and part of the wider global market. (Chief operations manager, Mumbai)* *Geography today is not as important as quality and cost of services. Customers and clients want services better, faster and cheaper and this has become the order of the day. Hence it does make sense to be an Indian BPO or IT MNC with major operations in India because India is still the leader of providing effective, fairly cheap and quality services. (Chief operations manager, Bangalore)* Beta- *India has been great in terms of creating a brand for IT and BPO services. We came here from the UK because of this. We have witnessed the government working together with industry bodies and pioneers to create this brand image. We have also been through a lot of challenges along the way both for Beta and the industry at large. However, these have been overcome resiliently till date. However, complacency would lead to Indian organisations losing their market share. We know it well. The Philippines, China, Eastern Europe and South Africa are on our heels. In fact, Beta has several collaborations and joint ventures in a few of these countries. This seems to be strategically the way forward for us as an industry. (Board member, Mumbai)* Gama- *After being successful in our model in India, we aim to replicate this model in China and are in talks in Krakow, Poland. India as a brand has achieved success for our model and this now needs to be tested at other locations. As one of the first to be successful with the rural BPO model we plan to try this out elsewhere. Our shareholders and investors support this. . (Managing director, Bangalore)*

Table 6: Key findings representative quotations (Evolving branding strategies in the IT-BPO industry in India)