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Rebranding after international acquisitions: challenges of legitimation in emerging and developed countries

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Abstract

Purpose – This study describes how a multinational enterprise (MNE) gains acceptance after rebranding acquired brands from different countries among its internal and external stakeholders and identifies factors that influence this process.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employed a single case-study approach, including 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews with employees of a firm involved in the rebranding process in six countries. The countries are Sweden, Germany, the United States, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico.

Findings – The findings reveal how the MNE integrated brands it acquired in different international markets into one overarching corporate brand. The study shows that in emerging countries, external legitimation (external implementation process, country profiles and customer buy-in) constitutes the most significant challenge. By contrast, in developed countries, internal legitimation (employee buy-in and internal implementation process) is more challenging.

Research limitations/implications – The study contributes to and extends the rebranding literature by using a legitimation lens to analyze the rebranding process. This lens shows how internal and external stakeholders are both crucial to successful rebranding. The study provides a comprehensive perspective of the process, identifies challenging factors and differentiates between their importance in emerging and developed countries.

Originality/value – To address the dearth of research on how firms legitimize a new brand in different national contexts, the study compares the rebranding process in multiple countries and discusses the factors influencing the rebranding process.

Keywords International branding, Rebranding, Acquisitions, Legitimation

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Acquiring an international presence through mergers and acquisitions has long been a strategic avenue for multinational enterprises (MNEs) aiming to enhance growth and bolster competitiveness (Casillas *et al.*, 2015). Instead of acquiring market and technology knowledge through experience, which takes time (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977), financially robust MNEs often opt to purchase these assets through acquisitions to gain faster access to international markets by exploiting economies of scale and scope (Lambkin and Muzellec, 2008; Heininger, 2022; Spiller, 2022). After acquisition, the buyer not only gains control of tangible assets but also inherits the acquired company's brand, which is a valuable intangible asset. However, the main reason for an acquisition is seldom the brand *per se*, but access to new markets and products (Lambkin and Muzellec, 2008). In acquisitions, a lack of brand focus is common (see Ettenson, 2006) and can lead an MNE to have many different brands in different markets without a clear strategy for how to deal with these brands.

Because the identities of the acquired brands are often different from the identity of the buyer's existing brands (Bruce, 2022) a common approach is to rebrand the acquired brands and integrate them into the buyer's existing brand structure. Although this is an increasingly common occurrence (Heininger, 2022; Spiller, 2022), some aspects of the rebranding of acquired brands are unclear and therefore require further research. Despite the critical importance of rebranding, a critical gap exists in understanding the holistic impact of rebranding on both internal and external stakeholders.

Existing research primarily focuses on either the internal or the external perspective. A review of studies from authors such as Muzellec *et al.* (2003), Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) and Daly and Moloney (2005), among others, highlights a predominantly unilateral focus either on internal factors like organizational culture and employee buy-in or external factors such as consumer perceptions and market positioning. Other examples, such as Collange and Bonache (2015) delve into how customers perceive and rationalize rebranding efforts, whereas Joseph *et al.* (2021) explore internal stakeholders' perspective, particularly employees. This dichotomy neglects the interconnected nature of internal and external stakeholders in the rebranding process, which is crucial for the success of rebranding initiatives. To remedy this omission, our research aims to address this gap by investigating the influence of both internal and external stakeholders on the rebranding process.

Another neglected aspect in the rebranding literature is that previous studies have overlooked the influence of international differences on the rebranding process. Few studies have investigated how different national institutions affect rebranding processes, and few studies have investigated rebranding in emerging countries, despite the unique challenges posed by weak infrastructure and fluctuating institutions in emerging countries (Kiss *et al.*, 2012; Ernst *et al.*, 2015; Zhang and White, 2016). The incomplete understanding of rebranding in an international context with a focus on both internal and external stakeholders is evident. Table 1 is illustrating the research gap we are aiming to close.

	No focus on how international differences affects the rebranding process	Focus on how international differences affects the rebranding process
Focus on either internal or external stakeholder	Muzellec and Lambkin (2006), Bamfo *et al.* (2018)	Muzellec *et al.* (2003), Lambkin and Muzellec (2008), Beise-Zee (2022)
Focus on both external and internal stakeholders	Daly and Moloney (2005), Lambkin and Muzellec (2008)	*Research gap*

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 1. Positioning table for the study on rebranding after acquisitions

This paper seeks to address these gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis of rebranding processes in both emerging and developed countries with the purpose to describe how an MNE gains acceptance among internal and external stakeholders for the rebranding of acquired brands from different countries and to identify factors that influence this process. Addressing these gaps is essential due to the fundamental role successful rebranding plays after acquisitions to create a cohesive identity that reflects the new entity for both internal and external stakeholders. Rebranding is not only an aesthetic exercise; it is a strategic process. To understand it, we adopt a legitimation lens (see Deephouse *et al.*, 2017). This lens allows us to investigate factors related to the acceptance of rebranding both within the company and outside of it, thereby integrating the disparate internal and external rebranding research streams. This comprehensive approach provides a more nuanced view of the rebranding process, including the challenges related to internal (employee buy-in and internal implementation processes) and external (external implementation processes, country profiles and customer buy-in) legitimation. The study contributes to international branding and marketing literature by introducing a legitimation lens. Legitimation theory allows us to identify that in emerging countries, rebranding factors related to external legitimation are more challenging, while in developed countries, rebranding factors related to internal legitimation are more challenging.

Rebranding after acquisitions

Rebranding, defined as the process of creating a new image or positioning through changes to a company's name, symbol, design, or a combination of these elements (Lambkin and Muzellec, 2008), can occur at different levels (Singh *et al.*, 2012). The term "rebranding" indicates that the brand has been relaunched with a different concept (Stuart and Muzellec, 2004), and it can occur at three distinct levels in an organization: corporate, strategic business unit and product levels (Muzellec *et al.*, 2003). One type of rebranding strategy is brand integration, which refers to the strategy of uniting the corporation and its constituent businesses and products under a single name, and it is the most common strategy used in companies (Muzellec *et al.*, 2003). The most common reason firms use this strategy is structural changes, particularly mergers and acquisitions (M&As) (Stuart and Muzellec, 2004; Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006)

During the acquisition process, managing brand identity can be a challenging task, especially when the acquisition involves multiple subsidiaries and cultures (Gotsi *et al.*, 2008). Acquisitions often require significant changes in organizational culture and identity (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006) and the legitimation of a new brand strategy. Rebranding during an acquisition occurs when an enterprise purchases the brand of another company and is granted the right to use the brand assets, with the aim to enhance brand value and increase market appeal (Zeng, 2017). When two companies enter the rebranding process, they are effectively creating a new corporate identity, and this new identity must be nurtured to allow stakeholders to identify with the new organization (Balmer and Dinnie, 1999). Therefore, managing the brands' identity during the acquisition process is critical.

The acquisitions-related marketing literature is slowly expanding (Heinberg *et al.*, 2016), as M&As are the most common reason for companies to rebrand (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006). Rebranding after an acquisition can give firms the opportunity to leverage both companies' brands to send a clear signal to employees and the outside world. However, such processes can sometimes destroy rather than create brand value for the involved companies. This is unsurprising because acquiring a whole company is a complex endeavor that requires many considerations. Corporate brand strategy is just one of them and therefore is generally not given the attention it deserves (Ettenson, 2006). Even if it were, a successful rebranding process would require that those affected accept and perceive it as legitimate.

According to Joseph *et al.* (2021), previous rebranding studies have predominantly focused on external stakeholders, particularly customers. Collange and Bonache (2015) examine consumer perceptions and reactions to rebranding. Marques *et al.* (2020) concentrate on consumer perception of rebranding and its impact on brand equity. Roy and Sarkar (2015) assess the impact of rebranding on consumer attitudes.

While focusing on customers is natural in rebranding studies, as their perceptions, preferences, and behaviors are central to the success of any rebranding initiative, other stakeholders are also important. For example, Kaikati and Kaikati (2003) highlight the crucial role of internal stakeholders in rebranding success, whereas Daly and Moloney (2005) focus on employees' perspectives on rebranding communication strategy, emphasizing the significance of internal consensus. Gotsi and Andriopoulos (2007) reinforce this stance by advocating for early engagement of staff to endorse new corporate brand values through the behavior of leaders. Table 2 provides a review of rebranding literature.

Although research has noted the importance of both internal and external stakeholders, few studies have examined the influence of both in the rebranding process. Lee (2013) discusses the necessity of aligning market-driven requirements with organizational identity, acknowledging the interplay between internal adaptation and external stakeholder expectations in the nonprofit sector; however, international differences are not considered. This neglect highlights a notable gap in rebranding studies – namely, the absence of an international perspective. Few studies have addressed how international differences affect the rebranding process. Kaikati and Kaikati (2003) emphasize the relevance of local markets and brand nationality in rebranding campaigns. Amujo and Otubanjo (2012) discuss how nation branding and identity redeployment in post-disaster contexts can stimulate tourism, underscoring the importance of socio-cultural contexts in rebranding. However, studies explicitly focusing on institutional differences between emerging and developed countries in the rebranding literature are lacking.

Considering the theoretical basis of previous rebranding studies, the primary focus is on branding theory. In addition, research has adopted perspectives from marketing and organizational science, such as internal branding and organizational change (see Table 2). However, to understand how an MNE can gain acceptance from both its internal and external stakeholders in different countries and to identify factors that influence the rebranding process, we argue for a legitimation lens. Legitimation deals with both internal and external stakeholders and institutional differences between different countries.

Legitimation of rebranding

Legitimation is a central concept in institutional theory (Deephouse *et al.*, 2017). Organizations need to appeal to resourceful and powerful groups of stakeholders to successfully adapt to different economic, regulatory, societal and cultural factors to remain legitimate (Angeli and Jaiswal, 2015). Suchman (1995, p. 573) defines legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions." Tyler (2006, p. 375) further states: "Legitimacy is a psychological property of an authority, institution, or social arrangement that leads those connected to it to believe that it is appropriate, proper, and just." In the case of a successful rebranding strategy, different stakeholders need to believe in the new branding strategy and find the new brand appropriate (Hakala *et al.*, 2017; Gustafson and Pomirleanu, 2021). These include both external stakeholders, such as customers and regulatory authorities, and internal stakeholders, including the firms' international subsidiaries.

Internal legitimacy refers to "the acceptance and approval of an organizational unit by the other units within the firm" (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999, p. 72). The achievement of internal

Table 2.
Review of literature on rebranding

Authors	External factors	Internal factors	Main findings	Theoretical basis	International differences	B2B or B2C context
Muzellec *et al.* (2003)	No explicit mention of external factors	The execution of rebranding is discussed as mainly a marketing function, which involves internal processes such as repositioning, renaming, redesign and relaunch	Conceptual review of rebranding, factors leading to it, and the process and examination of rebranding cases	Corporate rebranding	Secondary data from the UK, USA, the EU and others	Focus on both B2B and B2C industries
Kaikati and Kaikati (2003)	Focuses on logo reception in different cultures and marketplace standing	The study centers on how internal stakeholders – management, employees and other internal agents – are involved in, affected by and responsive to the rebranding process	Effective communication from top management is crucial in guiding employees through the rebranding process. Additionally, selecting unique symbols and appropriate colors for the new brand name can significantly enhance visibility and distinction in a competitive marketplace	Brand awareness and brand equity	Secondary data from examples from multiple countries	Focus on B2C context
Daly and Moloney (2005)	Discusses brand's communication of values and target audience, including external audiences	Highlights employee consideration in the communication strategy	Framework for rebranding management: analysis, planning and evaluation	Corporate rebranding	International rebranding campaign, focus on Ireland, without directly comparing international differences	Focus on B2C context
Muzellec and Lambkin (2006)	No explicit mention of external factors	Importance of organization culture and structure in shaping corporate brand	Focuses on the drivers and implications of corporate rebranding, including the reasons behind rebranding decisions, the impact on brand equity and the proposed conceptual model for understanding corporate rebranding	Rebranding; brand hierarchy and brand equity	International rebranding campaigns, without directly comparing international differences	Focus on B2C context

(*continued*)

Authors	External factors	Internal factors	Main findings	Theoretical basis	International differences	B2B or B2C context
Gotsi and Andriopoulos (2007)	No explicit mention of external factors	Emphasizes the importance of aligning internal processes and systems to encourage employees to endorse the new corporate brand values through their attitudes and behaviors	Insights into pitfalls of corporate rebranding and important factors. These are: disconnecting with the core; stakeholder myopia; emphasis on labels, not meanings; one company, one voice: the challenge of multiple identities	Corporate brand management; brand identity and equity; organizational culture	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2C context
Merrilees and Miller (2008)	No explicit mention of external factors	Focus on internal approach and alignment of values and culture with rebranding	Indicates the need for maintaining core values and cultivating the brand, linking the existing brand with the revised brand, targeting new segments, getting stakeholder "buy-in," achieving alignment of brand elements and promoting awareness building	Corporate rebranding	Primary data from Canada, with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2C context
Lambkin and Muzellec (2008)	No explicit mention of external factors	Oriented toward understanding and improving internal brand management strategies and decisions within the context of M&As	Branding problem varies with size and international status of the acquiring company and national identity of the acquirer and the acquired brand play an important role in the decision as to whether to rebrand	Rebranding, brand hierarchy; and branded-house strategy	Secondary data from multiple banks from different countries	Focus on B2C context
Gotsi *et al.* (2008)	No explicit mention of external factors	Internal segmentation in the culture of an organization affects overall alignment with brand values	Aligning corporate culture with new brand values is a complex process that requires integration of various subcultures in an organization	Corporate brand management; cultural alignment and corporate rebranding	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2C context

(*continued*)

Table 2.

Table 2.

Authors	External factors	Internal factors	Main findings	Theoretical basis	International differences	B2B or B2C context
Lambkin and Muzellec (2008)	Since corporate reputation drives brand equity in B2B markets, the adoption of a single name across an entire product line is recognised as having some major benefit for both buyers and suppliers	B2B stakeholders (customers, employees and financial analysts) welcome acquirer brand redeployment, particularly where there is a perceived benefit from the infusion of value from the new owner	Transfer of a brand name during acquisitions encapsulates significant brand equity, often supported by a broader transfer of marketing assets	Brand equity and brand transfer	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2B context
Lee (2013)	Mentions balancing market requirements with organizational identity in nonprofit sector	Discusses tensions in managing rebranding and internal stakeholder reactions	Identify, describe and explain the tensions involved in managing the process in which organizations must meet expectations from different stakeholders	Corporate rebranding and brand orientation	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Nonprofit sector
Miller *et al.* (2014)	No explicit mention of external factors	Importance of strong internal leadership as an enabler of successful corporate rebranding. Discusses how internal leaders who possess strategic relevance and commitment to rebranding can differentiate strong from weak outcome cases	Critical to successful corporate rebranding are the identification and application of six major enablers, including strong rebranding leadership and coordination among multiple functions and stakeholder groups	Corporate rebranding	Review with no direct international comparison	Literature review

(*continued*)

Table 2.

Authors	External factors	Internal factors	Main findings	Theoretical basis	International differences	B2B or B2C context
Collange and Bonache (2015)	Comprehensive model of consumer attitudes toward the practice of product rebranding has been proposed and tested	No explicit mention of internal factors	Surprise impacts attitudes toward product rebranding through a three-way process (automatic, higher-order cognitive, higher-order affective): a direct negative effect, an indirect effect mediated by incomprehension about the reasons for the change and an indirect effect mediated by the negative emotions generated by the change	Consumer attitudes and surprise	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2C context
Roy and Sarkar (2015)	Assesses impact of rebranding on customer-based brand equity and consumer attitudes	No explicit mention of internal factors	Customer-based brand equity of an established brand diminishes following rebranding news, while that of a less-established brand is enhanced	Rebranding and brand equity	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2C context
Bolhuis *et al.* (2018)	Corporate visual identity can significantly impact the impressions of external stakeholders, primarily concerning the modernity and visual appeal of the organization	Employees, being more consistently exposed to and integrally involved with the organization, experience a more profound influence from changes in corporate visual identity	Organizations should incorporate the input of internal and external stakeholders in the rebranding process and communicate well about the new corporate visual identity, both to their internal and to their external stakeholders	Corporate visual identity	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Focus on both contexts

(*continued*)

Table 2.

Authors	External factors	Internal factors	Main findings	Theoretical basis	International differences	B2B or B2C context
Bamfo *et al.* (2018)	Rebranding had no statistically significant effect on perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty	No explicit mention of internal factors	Rebranding activities in the Ghanaian banking industry had no significant effect on customers' attitude towards the brand	Branding; customer satisfaction and loyalty	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2C context
Marques *et al.* (2020)	Underscores the importance of consistent interaction with the brand in facilitating the adaptation to and acceptance of new brand images and structures	No explicit mention of internal factors	Brand awareness and loyalty are the factors that relate the most to consumers' perceptions of the brand before its rebranding	Private label brand; rebranding and consumer-based brand equity	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2C context
Joseph *et al.* (2021)	No explicit mention of external factors	Focus on internal perspectives of employees on rebranding efforts	Emphasizes importance of rebranding communication by leadership and employee buy-in	Internal branding; corporate brand identification; employee engagement	Primary data from UK with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2C context
Beise-Zee (2022)	Leveraging the visible and tangible elements of a spin-off in a rebranding campaign is essential	No explicit mention of internal factors	Perceived corporate resources play a critical role in retaining brand equity during rebranding efforts	Rebranding brand equity and resource-based view	Primary data with no direct international comparison	Focus on B2B context

Source(s): Created by authors

legitimacy is important when an MNE with subsidiaries in different countries implements new strategies (Ciabuschi *et al.*, 2017; Pratt and Foreman, 2000). Prior studies have shown that the evaluation and legitimation of brands and products are related to the image of the firm and/or the country of origin (He and Zhang, 2018; Held and Bader, 2018).

External legitimation refers to the acceptance and validation of the new brand by external stakeholders (e.g. partners, customers, regulatory authorities, even competitors) (Drori and Honig, 2013). External legitimacy can be acquired, for example, by partnering with successful and established external entities (Rao *et al.*, 2008; Turcan, 2012). Previous research has noted the importance of establishing a legal entity and completing a business plan for new ventures external legitimation (Delmar and Shane, 2004).

Research has used internal and external legitimation as a theoretical lens to examine the emergence of new firms, industries, technologies and products (Rao *et al.*, 2008; Geels and Verhees, 2011; Zhang and White, 2016). However, few studies have used a legitimation framework to assess rebranding strategies (Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007), and to our knowledge, no research has explored in-depth how firms internally and externally legitimize a rebranding process after acquisitions (Vaara and Monin, 2010; Sinha *et al.*, 2015; Heinberg *et al.*, 2016). Legitimation is a context-dependent process influenced by a combination of institutional and industry-specific factors.

Rebranding in different institutional contexts

International rebranding means that MNEs must adapt to different institutional contexts (i.e. adapt to institutions that influence their behavior and strategy; North, 1990; Peng *et al.*, 2009). Institutions' most fundamental roles are to reduce uncertainty, define the boundaries of what is legitimate and provide "rules of the game" (North, 1990; Scott, 1995).

In an international rebranding strategy, MNEs must handle organizational differences between, for example, cultures and structures. Moreover, they must manage institutional differences, depending on the context. Rebranding can be a consequence of an acquisition strategy. If a firm owns many different brands, communicating an integrated message to stakeholders in different countries can be challenging (Singh *et al.*, 2012).

A product's national origin can communicate product quality (Wang and Rafiq, 2014) and can positively influence customers' purchase intention (Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Knight and Calantone, 2000). Previous studies have argued that institutional differences between different parts of an MNE play an important role in the legitimation of the organization (He and Zhang, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). However, empirical studies on such differences are scarce (Zhang *et al.*, 2019).

The concept of a country's institutional profile underscores the significance of the institutional environment in a given country, whether it be the home or host country (Van Hoorn and Maseland, 2016). When firms operate in a particular country, they encounter a spectrum of challenges and opportunities that emanate from the unique institutional environment of that country (Kostova, 1997; Dunning and Lundan, 2008).

Prior research has shown that particularly contexts with unsettled institutional frameworks, or so-called institutional voids, are possible for MNEs to influence, but also that these institutional voids can hinder business activities (e.g. Meyer and Peng, 2005). The term "institutional voids" describes an uncertain regulatory environment or an inefficient judicial system with strict and complex bureaucratic systems to establish and enhance business transactions (Liedong *et al.*, 2020). Institutional voids are often prevalent in emerging economies. They can manifest in different forms (Liedong *et al.*, 2020) and create challenges for different business operations (De Lange, 2016). Presumably, institutional voids could therefore affect a rebranding process. In developed countries, institutions are more settled and difficult to influence but easier to comprehend (Cantwell *et al.*, 2010).

Corporate and national cultures are essential factors in shaping the M&A processes and outcomes (Weber and Tarba, 2010), so the institutional context can influence the rebranding process and the legitimacy of a new brand. As context is responsible for sustaining organizational characteristics, it not only involves where the action takes place but also influences and shapes organizational occurrences (Buchanan *et al.*, 2015), such that it can create conditions, restrictions and possibilities for companies (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). Moreover, considering that foreign subsidiaries must comply not only with the rules and standards of the local environment in which they operate but also with the parent company's requirements to succeed (Westney, 1993), we argue that the institutional context both at headquarters, where the rebranding decision is made, and in markets, where the rebranding process is implemented, influences the rebranding process and, therefore, the legitimation of the new branding strategy.

Method

We chose to use a single case-study approach to capture the exploratory nature of our research and to be able to investigate rebranding in its real-life context (Pettigrew, 1997; Langley, 1999). Studying a single case in-depth enables researchers to identify nuances and details of the process of rebranding in different national contexts (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Andriani and McKelvey, 2007). We employed the Gioia method to analyze our data, as it is suitable for in-depth qualitative analysis, allowing us to systematically identify and develop key concepts through a process of data categorization into first- and second-order themes (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Corley and Gioia, 2004).

The life sciences sector is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world, a context that provides ample opportunities for individual firms to implement international growth strategies (Cushman & Wakefield, 2019). Prior studies have shown the complexity of internationalization of life science firms due to the many institutional differences between national markets in this sector (Andersson *et al.*, 2013; Laurell *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, we consider the life sciences industry a relevant sector to investigate an international acquiring growth strategy and the subsequent rebranding strategy.

Research setting

Getinge AB is a global medical technology company that was founded in Sweden in 1904 and had a history of producing equipment and systems for the healthcare and life sciences industries. In the 1960s, it was acquired by the Swedish MNE Electrolux, which enabled it to expand internationally. In 1989, Swedish entrepreneurs Rune Andersson and Carl Bennet acquired Getinge from Electrolux and took the company public in 1993 by listing its shares on the Stockholm Stock Exchange. In the following decades, Getinge made numerous acquisitions of medical technology companies in Europe and the United States, including Maquet in 2000 and Atrium, Datascope and the Cardiac Surgery and Vascular Surgery divisions of Boston Scientific Corporation in 2010. These acquisitions helped Getinge become a global leader in the surgical workflow field. As of 2022, the company had more than 10,000 employees worldwide and sold its products in 135 countries. It has production facilities in China, France, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Turkey and the United States. In 2017, the company's top management decided to implement a single-name strategy to simplify its customer offering and to clarify the company's position further as a world-leading medical device company (Getinge, 2017). The rebranding strategy was a long and complex process but was regarded as necessary after many international acquisitions.

We selected Getinge as the focus of our investigation because the company recently underwent a rebranding process following a long-term international growth strategy involving the acquisition of multiple international brands. Moreover, one of the authors has a long-standing relationship with the company, which allowed us to access valuable data on the rebranding process.

We used qualitative data from in-depth interviews to understand the process of implementing a rebranding strategy after an MNE acquisition (Sarala *et al.*, 2019). First, to collect these data, we conducted three semi-structured in-depth interviews, each lasting from one to three hours, with top executives involved in the rebranding process. All interviews were recorded (except for the first interview) and transcribed. Second, we conducted 15 personal semi-structured in-depth interviews with employees of the firm involved in the rebranding process in different countries (Andriopoulos and Slater, 2013): Germany, in which a company acquired in 2000 had recently been rebranded; the United States, in which an acquired company had experienced two rebranding processes after it was acquired; and the Latin America team responsible for the Brazil, Colombia and Mexico markets. We chose these countries partially as a result of interviews with the executives responsible for the process, who indicated that these markets are vital for the company and have experienced issues that have both hindered and facilitated the implementation of the rebranding strategy. Moreover, the markets are diverse in terms of institutions, geography, culture and their level of development. Therefore, they allow us to highlight the challenges of rebranding across markets. This is important because, when acquisitions face cultural, geographic, or institutional distances (Chakrabarti and Mitchell, 2013; Mukherji *et al.*, 2013), their failure rate tends to go up. Still, although this is a common situation facing many companies post-acquisition, how country differences affect success in acquisitions is an under researched area – the marketing and M&A research stream largely focuses on a relatively small number of regions and countries (Christofi *et al.*, 2017). To complement the interviews, we reviewed secondary sources, including internal emails, brochures, websites and press releases (Saldaña, 2021). We employed purposive sampling in the selection of our interviewees, considering their roles, experiences and involvement in Getinge's rebranding process.

Interview sample

We reached saturation with regard to the rebranding process after interviewing 18 people in different subsidiaries of the company in different countries (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). We chose these interviewees by their proximity to and influence over the rebranding process. Specifically, the CEO and the president in Latin America provided a strategic overview of the rebranding initiative. Sales managers and marketing team members offered insights from a customer-facing perspective, highlighting market reception and shifts in perception after the rebranding. We also included the R&D team because of its role in ensuring that the rebranding aligned with the company's product innovations and core strengths, emphasizing brand authenticity. Moreover, the marketing manager position changed during the data collection, which enabled us to gather two perspectives on the rebranding process (during and after implementation). Table 3 provides information about the interview sample.

The interviews took place between March 2019 and July 2022 and lasted an average of 49 min, for 14 h and 30 min of interviews in total. We conducted many of the interviews in person (61.11%), and all were recorded with the interviewee's permission. We spoke to three people from Sweden, six from Germany, two from the United States, and seven from the Latin America team.

To ensure consistency in our interviews, we developed general topics centered on the firm's rebranding process. We began with open-ended questions about the interviewees' role in the company and involvement in the rebranding process and then asked about their thoughts on the positive and negative aspects of the process. We identified these topics through initial interviews with the three top executives involved in the firm's corporate rebranding.

Interview	Country/region	Formal position	Form of interview
Interview 1	Sweden	President, life science*	Personal (Sweden subsidiary)
Interview 2	Sweden	Vice president, strategy and project office*	Telephone
Interview 3	Sweden	Director, brand management*	Personal (HQ in Sweden)
Interview 4	Germany	Project manager, R&D	Personal (Germany subsidiary)
Interview 5	Germany	R&D director	Personal (Germany subsidiary)
Interview 6	Germany	Director of global business development	Personal (Germany subsidiary)
Interview 7	United States	Territory manager	Telephone
Interview 8	Germany	Assistant engineer	Telephone
Interview 9	United States	Senior director, marketing	Telephone
Interview 10	Germany	Senior marketing communications manager	Telephone
Interview 11	Germany	Product sales manager	Telephone
Interview 12	Latin America	Marketing communications manager, Latin America	Personal (Brazil subsidiary)
Interview 13	Latin America	Senior sales director – Latin America	Personal (Brazil subsidiary)
Interview 14	Latin America	President - Latin America	Personal (Brazil subsidiary)
Interview 15	Latin America	Marketing manager – Latin America	Personal (Brazil subsidiary)
Interview 16	Latin America	Managing director – Brazil	Personal (Brazil subsidiary)
Interview 17	Latin America	Finance director – Brazil	Personal (Brazil subsidiary)
Interview 18	Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Latin America	Sales director – BENELUX and Latin America	Telephone

Note(s): *The first three semi-structured interviews conducted
Source(s): Created by authors

Table 3.
Interview sample

Data analysis

To gain a more detailed understanding of the process, we also explored the institutional context of each site, using a thick description approach to clarify the sequences of the process and illustrate the influence of national contexts (Langley, 1999). The findings were presented as a case description. We then compared the implementation of the rebranding strategy in each country and identified the factors that influenced the process. We conducted data analysis by carefully reading the interview texts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. We then compared their individual analysis and resolved any disagreements through discussion and further analysis of the interviews. In a workshop, all researchers participated in the discussion of different interpretations of the data and compared them with existing literature (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). We used the Gioia method as a tool for the analysis. The Gioia method is a qualitative approach to data analysis that meet the rigorous standards of research (Magnani and Gioia, 2023). This method provides greater rigor, since it employs a more systematic research approach (e.g. Grøgaard *et al.*, 2019). The Gioia method involves a progression towards greater abstraction, transitioning from raw data to first- and second-order themes, culminating in aggregate dimensions. Initially, we identify examples by quotes extracted from the data, through which we inductively discern first-order themes with informative labels (Gehman *et al.*, 2018). Subsequently, we derive second-order themes and aggregate dimensions by synthesizing the emerging data from the field with existing theory.

This research process was abductive, as it involved considering both data and existing theory simultaneously (see Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Gioia *et al.*, 2012).

This process generated 11 first-order concepts that represented the experiences and views of the interviewees. We then combined these to form five second-order themes that represent theoretically distinct concepts. Finally, we identified two aggregate dimensions representing the factors influencing the rebranding process (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Yin, 2011). After this process, we presented the results to the firm for validation. The company affirmed the findings, ensuring their relevance to the rebranding strategy.

In the next section, we present an informative story on the new concept development, with careful presentation of the evidence. This is exemplified by the inclusion of quotations from the informants (Gioia *et al.*, 2012).

Findings: the rebranding process of Getinge

Background

Getinge initiated the rebranding process to change the perception that the company was a set of small entities rather than a large MNE. In 2015, the brand portfolio consisted of more than 60 brands with different stages of growth, success, position in the market and history. The rebranding process was part of a reorganization in which the firm sought to simplify its strategy, as many brands were tied to different international supply chains and different sales organizations. A reorganization therefore promised considerable economies of scale.

> When Getinge acquired those companies among Maquet, and this is why it was obvious that this step will come, because if you don't have a strong brand, a strong company, you will stay like small pieces fighting in that area. (Director, Germany)

> In line with our ongoing transformation to make our company even more customer-centric, we have taken the next step of unifying all of our brands under the single brand of Getinge. This new brand structure will further strengthen our position as a leading global medtech company. Some of these brands, such as Maquet, will become product family names under the Getinge master brand. (President, United States)

Rebranding was taken into consideration, according to the company's president of life sciences, as it is regarded as a tactic that can reduce expenses in the future. He said: "The branding started to be necessary due to the growing need for cost cuts. It became necessary after so many acquisitions to reorganize the brands." Rebranding was also important to simplify customer offerings and clarify the company's position as a world-leading medical device company rather than many different small companies.

> Even if we are one of the top 25 players in the world, we were seen as a group of small, small entities. (Vice president, Sweden)

Another reason to rebrand was that hospitals, an important customer segment, had changed their buying behavior. In the past, they operated in a more decentralized manner, and Getinge could directly promote products to different parts of the hospital. However, buying decisions had become more centralized, with hospitals tending to want more system solutions and an overview of all Getinge's offers.

The whole reason for going into this whole reorganization was that we had seen a customer changing behavior that when they buy, you do not buy one product you want to have a big supplier that you can buy a lot from instead, so you minimize your number of suppliers, from a hospital perspective. (Director, Sweden)

Moreover, top managers considered the efficacy of the sales teams when deciding to begin the rebranding process. They realized that Getinge was visiting the same clients on different occasions with different sales teams and that improving this process was necessary.

That is a fairly inefficient way when the same company goes to meet the same customers with five different products, [at] five different time points. (Vice president, Sweden)

Structure, analysis and re-evaluation of the rebranding strategies

Figure 1 illustrates the intended brand architecture before and after the company's rebranding process in three phases. Initially, the company adopted a house-of-brands strategy. The figure depicts the progress from a house-of-brands to a hybrid branded-house approach from 2000 to 2018. This progression reflects the strategic decisions in managing the relationship between the corporate brand and its product brands.

In 2000, the company initiated a house-of-brands strategy following the acquisition of Maquet. Although Getinge owned all the brands in the portfolio, the Getinge and Maquet brands were communicated as separate brands to customers. In 2010, the company's acquisition of Datascope led to a rebranding change, in an effort to integrate Datascope with Maquet while continuing with the house-of-brands strategy. In 2017, the company planned to rebrand to a branded-house strategy, in which it aimed to consolidate its brands under one master brand, Getinge.

So [we] had a pre-launch for certain people, so we did a presentation for communicators already in December or something like that. So that they [could] prepare the material to communicate that change, so first we did a communication like, now we are getting Getinge as one brand. (Director, brand management, Sweden)

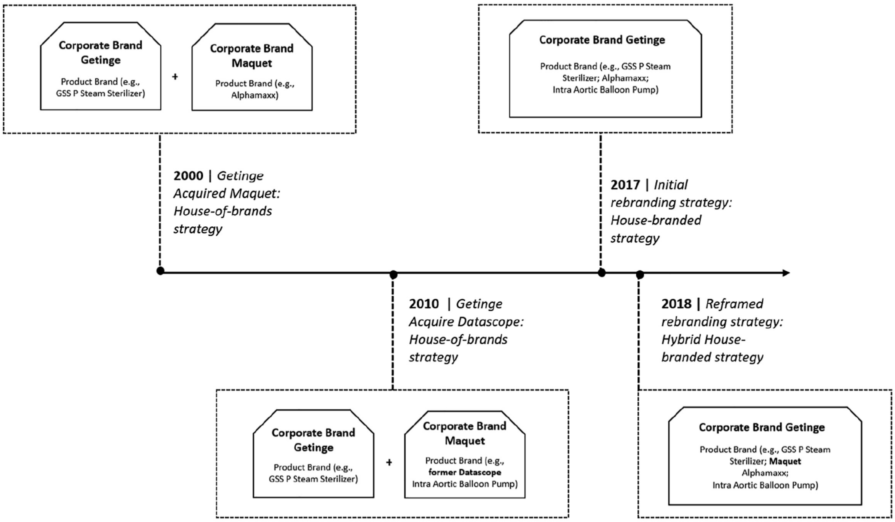


Figure 1.
Evolution of brand architecture strategy

Source(s): Created by author

However, after some internal pushback, the company turned to a hybrid branded-house strategy. Getinge remained the corporate brand, and the Maquet brand was included in the product brands. This means that the corporate brand is now Getinge on all levels but that the products that before had the brand name Maquet still have Maquet as part of their product names. This change allowed for the continuation of the high-profiled brand name Maquet. The result is a brand architecture that is simpler, with a clear focus on an overarching brand, and product brands that benefit from the historical name of the old brand. This approach effectively connects all elements of the company's portfolio under one unified umbrella.

> We decided on a hybrid version of one master brand, but on a product category level we kept the Maquet [name] on the table [for] equipment brand[s], but the logo on the product will always be the Getinge brand. (Vice president, strategy and project office, Sweden)

Analysis and planning (headquarters in Sweden)

The brand change process began in 2017 and was scheduled to last for more than seven years. According to the project coordinator, this long process was necessary because "it is not that expensive, and we do not lose customers." The process was planned to happen in six steps: (1) analyzing the brands separately; (2) interviewing employees (54 interviews) and customers (100 interviews); (3) planning; (4) launching, which entailed conferences; meetings and internal training; (5) corporate brand integration; and (6) product rebranding.

By unifying all brands into one, Getinge aimed to offer holistic solutions, including planning, maintenance and support of systems of products and services from a single source. To align the transition with Getinge's overall strategy to build one company, the firm implemented the rebranding process with a new promise to customers and new logos. The first stage was a two-month internal campaign that focused on why the change was occurring.

> So the first thing that we did as a company, [we] started the conversation around why we are making these changes, why we are bringing [these] brands together, all the individual company and product names are eventually becoming under the Getinge brand. (Director, United States)

Although the rebranding process occurred simultaneously in all its subsidiaries, the process happened more quickly at the company's headquarters in Sweden. The company was already using the Getinge brand there, so changes to the logo and visual identity were the focus. Moreover, because functions such as human resources, marketing and communication were also based in Sweden, many employees there were already working on the macro rebranding process and had no execution problems or perceived significant changes in their daily activities.

The brand change process was easier than expected in Sweden, according to the vice president of strategy and project office. However, the countries that faced the most difficulties in implementing the new brand were Germany, the United States and Brazil. Understanding the perception of the brand in these countries was challenging for the headquarters team, as they were not as familiar with the local context.

Implementation: Germany

The rebranding process was less accepted at the German subsidiary. According to the interviews, this was because the newly acquired company had a successful history with its previous brand, Maquet. In Germany, where Getinge's position in infection control had been historically weak, Maquet still had a strong presence, even after the acquisition.

According to the team responsible for the rebranding process, the Getinge brand was not well received because of employees' and customers' perception that the Maquet brand was superior. The process began with meetings with the German unit leaders, followed by a presentation to all employees of the unit, explaining the reasons for the change. However, employees did not agree with the choice of Getinge as the main brand. Some changes were also noticed before the official internal meeting, with some employees becoming aware of the change through the new wallpaper on company computers.

> So Maquet is bigger than Getinge . . . So it was more like a small company buying a big one and giving the big one its name. So, you could imagine that not everybody likes it. (Product sales manager, Germany)

Because the previous brand Maquet is so well-known in the German market, the brand change proved difficult. In the former headquarters of Maquet in Rastatt (Germany), it is still possible to find the brand name at the location, on internal signs, and even on signs of the street on which the company is located.

As observed, one difficulty of the rebranding stems from the many employees with more than 20 years of work at Maquet not accepting the new brand as the main one. For example, employees still answer the phone using the name Maquet, and they say both internally and in social settings that they work for Maquet.

The presence of the Maquet brand is still widely apparent in the company, and according to one interviewee, it will take time for the presence of the old brand to disappear. Because the products have not yet been changed to the main Getinge brand due to the use of old materials, this process also helps preserve the old brand. Interviewees also highlighted the language aspect, as with the increase of communication in English, some employees could not fully understand the change.

> I think that this would cause the negative things that not all the employees are able to follow up with the speeds, follow the language in the same structure, like today so more or less, I would say the negative is that we will lose some percentage of effectiveness because of language translations. (R&D director, Germany)

Implementation: the United States

The rebranding outcomes were different at the US subsidiary, which was already in the process of changing due to a previous rebranding in 2008, from Datascope to Maquet. This first change was difficult for employees and customers because of Datascope's strong brand image in the country. The sales team also received the change poorly, as it changed the brand's visual identity, including the product colors by which customers used to order. This interference with the way products were used in hospitals was an issue. As the first change of the brand was so intense, the second change for Getinge did not interfere in the employees' daily lives:

> And back in 2008, we were really upset about [the change]. Angry, we [did] not want to lose our name. We [had] pride in that name. (Territory manager, United States).

The change of brand in the subsidiary took place as planned, through an internal conference with employees, press media and communications sent to all customers in the country. However, the main challenge was during medical congresses in which the company participated with the new brand.

> When I really notice the difference is when I worked at a conference this year, and people came to me and said, "What in the world is that? What happens to Maquet?" And [they] don't know even how to pronounce [the name], they do not know what they do not know. (Territory manager, United States).

Even with the difficulties presented, the US interviewees believed that the main problem of brand acceptance is not with customers but internally:

> Honestly, I am not worried about the customers, I am more worried internally. I do not think it is going to be a problem with the customers because we will put together a communication. (Senior marketing communications manager, United States).

Implementation: Latin America

In Latin America, the challenges were different. Owing to team restructuring and the office's move to a new location in Brazil, the rebranding process happened quickly. First, the subsidiary's leadership was modified as a result of judicial problems with the Brazilian government. The "Operação Lava Jato" in Rio de Janeiro was a nationwide initiative to combat money laundering and corruption in Brazil, and Getinge was investigated during this operation. Recognizing the need for transparent action, Getinge restructured the entire company's commercial unit, which had significant impacts on its operations, employees, relationships with stakeholders and corporate reputation. This is an example of the instability of institutions in emerging countries and how they affect rebranding. The reconstruction meant that a new team entered the company simultaneously with the new brand. Second, the entire team moved to a new office that was already fully equipped with the visual identity of the leading brand Getinge. Moreover, owing to a high turnover of employees in emerging countries, the teams in Colombia and Mexico also changed during the process.

With these significant changes in staff and location, the process of implementing the new brand was quick. According to the president in Latin America, when he found materials with old Maquet or Datascope branding, he himself took the materials out of circulation. These changes were positive, improved employee engagement and increased headquarters' confidence in the region's leadership.

> We have been rebuilding Latin America a lot here, especially Brazil, which has gone through some challenges, and this reconstruction helped to regain the confidence of the staff at the headquarters in Gothenburg. (President, Latin America)

In Brazil, customers recognized the brand change, and the rebranding process left the brand with a multinational identity.

> When we bring customers here, they realize that it is indeed a respected multinational. So it changes a lot . . . it is a job of professionalism that people also see. (President, Latin America)

To encourage the sales team to get used to the new brand, sales managers began meting out "fines" every time sales representatives mentioned the old brand name Maquet, which made this activity fun and interactive:

> There was a pot that every time someone said the word Maquet, they had to pay a fine, they had to put a real coin in it, and we started then, man, no no, this is not Maquet, fine. (Senior sales director, Latin America)

The Latin American workforce is younger than employees in other Getinge locations, partially due to the high turnover rate among workers in emerging countries, but also because of the clear out of old staff related to the corruption problems mentioned previously.

> Today, the Latin American team is a much younger team. And being young and with less time in the company, they are much more connected with this brand issue. (Marketing manager, Latin America)

> People from Latin America have a different relationship with work than people from Europe; here it is a survival factor, thinking "If I don't work well . . . the company can fire me and I won't get a job soon." (Marketing manager, Latin America)

Although the stakeholders in Latin America were generally positive about the change, one difficulty is that even with the new brand's restructuring, the company's legal name remains registered as Maquet. This has caused confusion among customers, who receive the Getinge product with a Maquet invoice, and among employees because of the employment contracts.

> So some continued to send [the invoice] like Maquet, and then it doesn't help, obviously, which also doesn't help my invoice leaving Maquet from Brazil. (Senior sales director, Latin America)

Analysis

Drawing from the details of the case study, Figure 2 presents the outcomes of the Gioia analysis performed on the interview data. After we developed themes and dimensions influencing the implementation of the rebranding process using Gioia *et al.*'s (2013) method, we identified two aggregate dimensions influencing the process: internal and external legitimation.

Internal legitimation

Our findings corroborate previous research that shows that resistance to change can significantly impede a rebranding process (Gotsi *et al.*, 2008). The presented case study indicates that internal legitimation depends on two main factors; whether employees are onboard with the idea to rebrand (employee buy-in of the rebranding) and how the rebranding is implemented (the internal implementation process).

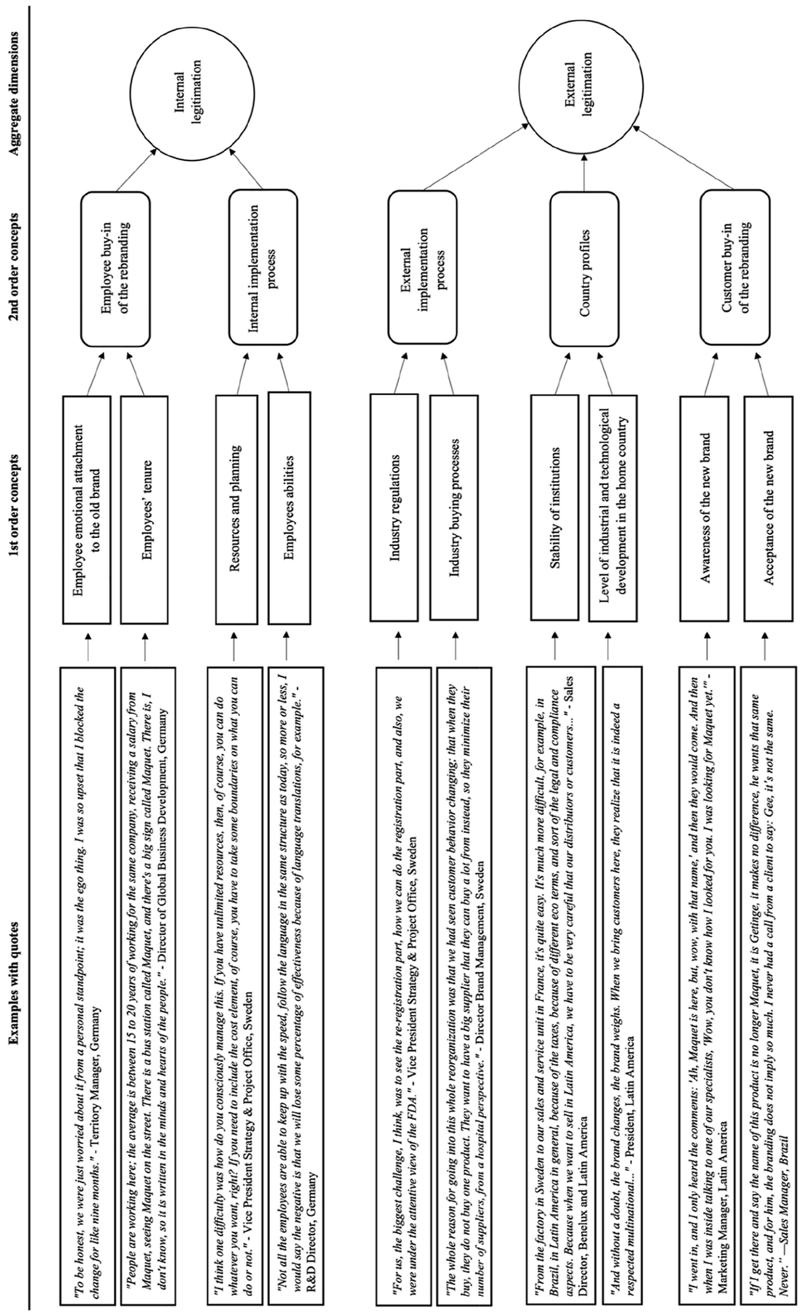
Research suggests that rebranding will only be successful if employees accept the new brand (Fram and McCarthy, 2004; Daly and Moloney, 2005). Thus, a critical element in effective corporate rebranding is that the company's employees understand the reason for the changes to the brand and support the new corporate brand strategy, especially in a business-to-business or service marketing context, in which personal contacts are important to communicate the perception of the firm and brands (De Chernatony, 2010; Aagerup *et al.*, 2022). Employees' buy-in is correlated with how effectively they transmit the message to others. During the interviews, employee buy-in of the rebranding emerged as a significant factor in the rebranding process. We set two first-order factors for this dimension: *employee emotional attachment to the old brand* and *employee tenure*.

First, Employees' emotional attachment to the old brand was related to the pride they felt in working for a respected company. Employees were also not convinced that the new brand signaled the same high quality to customers as the old brand. Especially the sales teams noted the difficulty of convincing customers of a message they themselves did not believe.

> . . . we were really upset about it. Angry, we do not want to lose our name. We have pride in that name. (Territory Manager, the U.S.)

Second, our study sheds light on the disparities in employees' adaptation depending on their tenure with the company, echoing the findings of Gotsi *et al.* (2008). We classified this aspect into two key facets: adjustment of long-standing employees to the new brand and the receptiveness of new hires to the rebranding efforts. Notably, employees with longer tenures had more difficulty in embracing the transition. While tenure often fosters a sense of loyalty and familiarity, it can also impede adaptability during periods of rebranding. These insights underscore the importance for firms to implement tailored strategies when navigating transitions for their long-serving staff. Recognizing the depth of loyalty cultivated over employees' tenure can inform strategies geared toward facilitating a smoother rebranding process.

> People are working here, the average is between 15 and 20 years for working for the same company, receiving a salary from Maquet, seeing Maquet on the street, there is a bus station called Maquet, so it



Source(s): Created by author

Figure 2.
Internal and external legitimation factors

> is written in the mind[s] and heart[s] of the people. (Director of global business development, Germany)

Unsurprisingly, we found that long-tenured employees with strong emotional attachment to the old brand were less likely than others to comply with the brand change. This behavior was more or less overt. Usually, it manifested as reluctance, oftentimes unconscious, to adapt.

> Am I proactive in communicating with our customers? No. I've talked to some people about the change, and they say, "OK, no big deal at all." But I did not actively go out and tell our customers. It didn't even cross my mind. (Territory manager, Germany)

These findings complement previous rebranding studies that argue that companies may not achieve the full potential of a new brand during new brand implementation as a result of a lack of internal buy-in (Yakimova *et al.*, 2015).

In addition to employee buy-in, we identified two process-related themes associated with the rebranding implementation: resources and planning and employees' abilities. First, because of the vast number of activities that must be timed and coordinated, planning is crucial. Our case, however, revealed that sometimes, the internal brand communication suffered because other matters took priority. For example, the US territory manager was unpleasantly surprised that the color-coded packaging was suddenly changed, which meant that he no longer knew which products came in which boxes. His confusion could have been avoided by clear and timely communication. The lack of planning meant that he was not told of the change, and what could have been a routine update became a major irritation. Rebranding also requires adequate resources, and a lack thereof can affect the effectiveness of the process.

> I think one difficulty was how do you manage this consciously. If you have unlimited resources, then, of course, you can do whatever you want, right? If you need to have the cost element included, of course, you have to [set] some boundaries of what you can do or not. (Vice president strategy and project office, Sweden)

Prioritizing urgent matters related to operations over marketing issues is a common mistake (Ettenson, 2006). Our findings validate previous research by identifying that this tendency also exists in life sciences.

Second, we found that when the acquired companies were suddenly incorporated into a one-company, one-brand organization, employees were suddenly expected to communicate in English. In Germany, this was not a welcome change. The switch emphasized employees with different language skills and cultural backgrounds faced difficulties understanding and embracing the brand change. This further slowed down the transition.

> I think that this [change] would cause the negative things that not all the employees are able to follow-up with the speeds [or] follow the language in the same structure like today, so more or less I would say the negative is that we will lose some percentage of effectiveness because of language translations. (R&D director, Germany)

External legitimation. Legitimation is mainly related to corporate concerns about stakeholder perceptions and societal expectations. While research has studied external legitimation in various contexts (Turcan, 2012; El-Bassiouny and Letmathe, 2018), the rebranding literature lacks insight into this issue. During our assessment, we were also able to observe more differences between emerging (Brazil, Colombia and Mexico) and developed (Sweden, Germany and the United States) countries.

Several themes became evident from the case findings. First, several interviewees spoke of specific regulations and practices, especially in Latin America. The dimension of *external implementation process* can be explored through two first-order concepts: *regulations* and *industry buying processes*. Regulations were mentioned in the interviews because when a firm modifies key brand elements, such as the company name, the change must take specific country regulations and timelines into consideration, which can cause significant operational difficulties.

> So there are some complexities to [rebrand]. But the bigger issue is the timing because you have to reregister all the bodies in the world. That you are changing the brand name, it is not something that we can snap our finger and be done. (Marketing communications manager, Latin America)

The rebranding process faced challenges in effectively communicating with external stakeholders, largely due to the slow pace of change driven by regulatory factors. Insights gleaned from interviews with the sales team shed light on this issue. They noted that inconsistencies in brand names across invoices, items, products, websites and other materials created confusion among customers, ultimately impeding sales efforts. The sales team also emphasized the importance of retaining the old brand (Maquet) on items, citing its association with high-quality products as crucial for maintaining customer trust and sales momentum.

> One thing that also makes it difficult sometimes is the name of the company itself. We are registered as Maquet, so here in Brazil, what we did was to give the fancy name Getinge, but employment contracts are Maquet. (President Latin America)

The institutional voids in the Latin America regions created barriers and delayed the implementation of the necessary legal name change due to the complex nature of the industry's regulatory framework. These voids, characterized by inadequate legal structures and political and cultural barriers, decelerated the rebranding process and, as a result, confused customers during the new brand adaptation period.

Moreover, changes in buying behaviors in the life sciences industry are also a significant factor influencing the rebranding process. According to the interviews, the new preference from hospitals to purchase from a single supplier rather than multiple entities was one of the reasons to start the rebranding process. This shift was primarily driven by the need for efficiency in operations and cost reductions, making the brand change necessary to align to this industry trend.

> And we see [the shift] with competitors doing that also. So, it's where the whole industry goes. (Sales manager, Germany)

Second, the dimension of *country profiles* can be comprehensively understood by examining two primary concepts*: the stability of institutions* and *the level of industrial and technological development in the home country*. The case of Maquet in Brazil aptly illustrates the stability of institutions. Here, the company encountered protracted legal procedures, which put the brakes on its endeavor to change its name, serving as a vivid example of the sluggish and bureaucratic processes prevalent in the region.

The drawn-out process of altering a brand's name underscored the challenges inherent in rebranding, stemming not only from country regulations but also from cultural barriers characteristic of emerging economies. These barriers include a lack of transparency and clarity in the rebranding process, as well as the need for additional measures to combat corruption – a common issue in emerging markets

> From the factory in Sweden to our sales and service unit in France, [altering the brand's name] quite easy. It's much more difficult, for example, in Brazil, in Latin America in general, because of the taxes, because of different eco terms, and sort of the legal and compliance aspects. (Sales director, Benelux and Latin America)

The level of industrial and technological development in the home country, in this case, Sweden, can present both barriers and facilitators during the rebranding process. In emerging countries (e.g. Brazil), the home country's advanced industrial and technological competence is viewed with admiration, enhancing the perceived quality and professionalism of the brand. However, in developed countries (e.g. Germany, the United States), such advancements may not be as impressive, given the comparable industrial and technological advancements of these countries. Consequently, when customers in emerging countries visit the company, they are impressed and perceive it as a symbol of a "respected multinational corporation" rooted in the home country standards. Finally, *customer buy-in of the rebranding* was also a factor highlighted during the interviews. This aspect influences the perception and reception of the Getinge brand among its customers and external stakeholders in general. This dimension can be explored through two first-order concepts: *awareness of the new brand* and *acceptance of the new brand*. Interviewees expressed how customers had a difficult time recognizing the new brand (Getinge) compared with the old brand (Maquet). Customers are not fully aware of the brand transition, and Maquet still predominates in their minds.

> I went in, and I only heard the comments, "Ah, Maquet is here, but, wow, with that [new] name," and then they would come. And then when I was inside talking to one of our specialists, "Wow, you don't know how [long] I looked for you. I was looking for Maquet yet." (Marketing manager, Latin America)

However, after customers learn about the rebranding, most of them accept it, as long as they believe that the value proposition is the same as before.

> If I get there and say the name of this product is no longer Maquet, it is Getinge, it makes no difference, [the customer] wants that same product, and for him, the branding does not imply so much. I never had a call from a client to say: "Gee, it's not the same." Never. (Sales manager, Brazil)

As the company operates in life sciences, one explanation for the observed challenges could be that customers in this industry often engage more with the product's functional utility and less with the symbolic elements. Instead, the greatest challenge in establishing external legitimacy in a rebranding process is informing customers about the change and then convincing them that the new brand represents the same functional value as the discontinued brand.

Discussion

Role of internal and external legitimation in the rebranding process

As the case findings indicate, the major obstacles can be distinguished by context and legitimation throughout the rebranding process. By focusing on the context of the countries where the rebranding implementation took place, we show that in the emerging countries of Latin America, the company faced more significant challenges in external legitimation, due to factors related to the external implementation process, country profiles and customer buy-in of the rebranding. In this vein, several interviewees noted the specific industry regulations and complex change processes. That is, regulations and the lack of clarity of communication delayed the process, as did the slow pace of the national institutions responsible for implementing the change, such as governmental institutions responsible for approving the legal name change. These findings align with previous research that highlights how consumer goods ingrained in a culture for an extended period, such as food, are significantly shaped by the local national culture. By contrast, industrial goods, services and novel high-tech products such as medical technology items tend to be less affected by national culture (Andersson, 2006).

The internal legitimation of the transition was not a hindrance during the process, given Sweden's positive national image, the strong appeal of international companies in emerging countries, and the high staff turnover in emerging countries. This is in line with prior research stressing that a brand's national origin can communicate product quality and positively influence customers' purchase intention (Peterson and Jolibert, 1995; Knight and Calantone, 2000; Wang and Rafiq, 2014). In line with this discussion, we propose the following:

P1. In emerging countries, rebranding factors related to external legitimation (external implementation process, country profiles and customer buy-in) are more challenging.

P2. In emerging countries, rebranding factors related to internal legitimation (employee buy-in and internal implementation process) are less challenging.

While resistance to change is likely during a rebranding process (Gotsi *et al.*, 2008), the differences in legitimation challenges between different countries are noteworthy. As institutions are more settled and difficult to influence (Cantwell *et al.*, 2010), internal legitimation was the main barrier in developed countries. Although we agree with Fram and McCarthy (2004) and Gotsi *et al.* (2008) that internal marketing is essential during the rebranding process, we argue that internal legitimation challenges are more prevalent in developed countries. Our study shows that in Germany and the United States, the major challenge of brand acceptance was on the employee rather than the customer side. In developed countries, the resistance to the brand change was partially a result of employees' doubts about whether the new brand represented the same high quality to customers as the old brand. By contrast, in the emerging countries of Latin America, the employees accepted the change without difficulty. Therefore, we propose the following:

P3. In developed countries, rebranding factors related to internal legitimation (employee buy-in and internal implementation process) are more challenging.

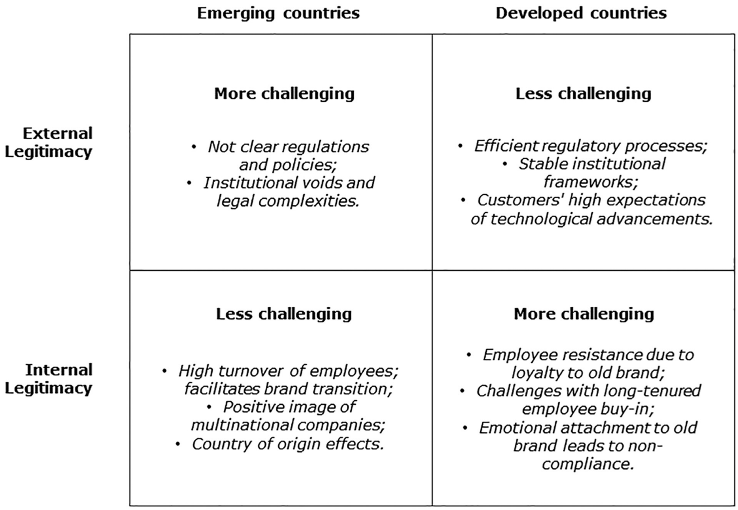
P4. In developed countries, rebranding factors related to external legitimation (external implementation process, country profiles and customer buy-in) are less challenging.

Conclusion

From the data, we conclude that the different types of challenges to the rebranding process include external and internal legitimation, with the degree of prominence depending on the country's context. On the one hand, external legitimation refers to the acceptance and validation of the new brand (after rebranding) of external stakeholders (e.g. partners, customers, even competitors). Challenges include regulations and practices, country profiles and customer brand knowledge. On the other hand, internal legitimation refers to the acceptance and validation of the new brand from internal stakeholders (e.g. employees), with challenges including employees' emotional attachment to the old brand and their tenure. We considered emerging countries those with institutional voids. These voids can hinder unique external legitimation, as firms must deal with inconsistent regulatory environments and often diverse, rapidly changing internal landscapes. This reflects the potential instability of operating in these markets, particularly during periods of organizational change such as rebranding. By contrast, we viewed developed countries as those with more stable institutions and typically long-tenured employees. While these conditions may provide a more predictable environment for rebranding, they also present distinct challenges internally, as long-tenured employees may resist rebranding efforts because of their loyalty to the existing brand. Figure 3 summarizes our conclusion, though with certain limitations. The study focuses on a singular context within the life sciences industry, guided by insights from a single case study approach.

Theoretical contributions

This research examined the process of rebranding from both an internal and external perspective in three emerging and three developed countries and identified factors that



Source(s): The authors

Figure 3.
Challenges in the rebranding process in emerging and developed countries

influenced this process. The study extends international branding and marketing literature by invoking a theory that rebranding studies have not used before – namely, legitimation (Deephouse *et al.*, 2017) – to analyze the rebranding process in different national contexts. Legitimation theory allows us to consider how both internal and external stakeholders are crucial to successful rebranding, thus integrating the two previous research streams (e.g. Gotsi and Andriopoulos, 2007; Collange and Bonache, 2015; Roy and Sarkar, 2015) and providing a comprehensive view of how a company gains acceptance of rebranding among its internal and external stakeholders in different national contexts.

Legitimation also highlights the importance of acceptance and not only communication. Contrary to Muzellec *et al.* (2003), who found that the execution of rebranding is mainly a marketing function, our study identifies the complexity of the process beyond marketing activities, involving deeper legitimation considerations. Prior research has emphasized the importance of internal communication during the rebranding process and portrayed rebranding as a top-down activity implemented by top management (Gotsi *et al.*, 2008). However, we argue that top-down strategies are not enough and that internal stakeholders may push back against such methods, which will force management to revise their initial strategy. Rebranding only works if stakeholders accept it, and legitimation theory therefore allows us to understand this reaction. That is, by identifying different relationships between well-accepted constructs (internal and external legitimation) in different national contexts (emerging and developed countries), we can identify different challenges in the rebranding process and explain why these difference occur (Whetten, 1989; Yadav, 2010).

Moreover, relating the specific characteristics of the life science industry (functional products, high complexity and high level of regulation) to the case allows us to extend theory on rebranding. We identify that to successfully rebrand functional products in the mind of the customer, information about the change is more important than persuasion – as long as customers know about it, rebranding is acceptable. We also identify that the success of rebranding of functional products is not dependent on adaptation to local cultures. We further identify that for rebranding of highly complex products it is crucial to engage employees early and effectively in the rebranding process, and provide them with the rationale behind the change to equip them with the knowledge to embody the new brand. While this is important in all rebranding ventures, highly complex products are especially vulnerable to misalignment between brand promise and employee actions, which can lead to confusion, and diminish trust among clients and partners. Finally, we also identify that for rebranding in highly regulated industries, success is determined to a considerable degree by the company's knowledge, not only of regulations, but also of buying processes (e.g. customers behaviour change) and institutional stability (e.g. compliance aspects).

The study also contributes to the international business literature by describing and analyzing how firms implement a rebranding strategy after acquisitions across geographic markets. This is a common challenge for practitioners, but one that is under-researched (Christofi *et al.*, 2017). In contrast with previous studies (e.g. Kaikati and Kaikati, 2003; Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006), we found that informal institutions (culture) influenced the rebranding process less than formal institutions (laws and regulations) in emerging countries. More specifically, the study describes how rebranding plays out differently in developed and emerging countries, which is an area that has previously received scant attention (Stuart, 2018). We identify that in emerging countries, rebranding factors related to external legitimation are more challenging, while in developed countries, rebranding factors related to internal legitimation are more challenging. This difference allows us to differentiate between markets and advocate for different actions to legitimize rebranding depending on the country's development level. The developed framework (Figure 3) can be useful in a variety of contexts and from a managerial perspective when implementing the rebranding process across multiple global subsidiaries.

Managerial implications

This study has significant implications for companies undergoing rebranding. It provides a detailed analysis of the rebranding process in an MNE, shows that different challenges exist in developing and emerging countries, and reveals the strategies needed to overcome these challenges (e.g. in our case, the original brand strategy with just one master brand was changed to also include product names, which made the rebranding process easier to accept by internal stakeholders in developed countries). The study also highlights the emotional connection with an old brand when implementing a new brand (Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2013). Legitimation strategies should be modified in accordance with the context in which subsidiaries are located, with a focus on external stakeholders in emerging countries and internal stakeholders in developed countries.

For both emerging and developed countries, acquiring local knowledge during the rebranding process is essential. In emerging countries, external legal and legislative expertise are necessary to address regulatory and institutional issues effectively. This team should include legal professionals familiar with the local business environment as well as cultural connections that can facilitate smoother communication between the company and local regulatory bodies, for example. In developed countries, it is vital to have internal local expertise, such as brand ambassadors, to effectively promote the new brand. Managers should prioritize internal campaigns, using tools such as intranet portals or dedicated training modules to strengthen the rebranding process. It is recommended to involve employees in the rebranding process actively. Finally, the study showed that in emerging countries, regulatory processes take time. Different timetables in different countries are necessary, as influencing regulatory processes in different countries is difficult for firms.

Limitations and future research

The rebranding topic discussed in this study has significant scope for further research. One limitation is the use of a single case study, which cannot produce results that are directly generalizable to other contexts but is suitable for investigating processes and developing theory through analytical generalization (Yin, 2011). We argue that our findings regarding the external legitimation of brands are relevant for other life science firms (and other sectors with strong regulatory requirements). However, we suggest that further research tests the propositions developed herein with a larger sample of MNEs in this and other sectors. Furthermore, a comparison within emerging countries and within developed countries is crucial to establish if the challenges observed are consistent across similar economic landscapes.

Additionally, given the conclusion that institutional voids in emerging countries pose unique challenges for external legitimation during the rebranding process, future research can explore deeper on how companies deal with these voids during the rebranding process. This could include, for example, studying how firms engage with local external stakeholders. Moreover, we suggest to expand the scope of research to include different stakeholders, beyond employees and customers, could find deeper insights into the rebranding process. For example, engaging with regulators, would provide a richer understanding of external legitimation.

Finally, another aspect to consider is the contrast between employees' emotional connection with the old brand and customers' rational thinking in the industry. Future studies on rebranding could investigate this seemingly contradictory insight. Such studies could benefit from a comparative analysis across different economic contexts to see if these emotional and rational dynamics are applicable or vary.

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