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Research on Qianhe Flavor Industry's Brand Image Construction from the Perspective of "Brand as Management"

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Abstract: This study explores the brand image construction of Qianhe Flavor Industry through the lens of the "Brand as Management" theory. By analyzing brand positioning, multi-channel communication, and brand culture, the paper demonstrates how brand strategy can serve both internal coordination and external differentiation. Using a qualitative case approach, the study highlights the importance of integrated branding in achieving market relevance and organizational alignment. The findings offer strategic insights for traditional Chinese food enterprises seeking brand renewal. Qianhe's case exemplifies how legacy brands can achieve sustainable growth through culturally rooted, digitally enhanced brand management practices.

1. Introduction

In today's intensely competitive and fast-changing market landscape, brand image plays a pivotal role in driving corporate development and strategic differentiation [1]. It functions not only as a symbol that distinguishes a company externally but also as a vital instrument for internal coordination and management [2]. As consumer preferences evolve and markets become increasingly saturated, companies must move beyond product attributes and leverage brand value to establish long-term customer relationships and internal alignment [3].

The "Brand as Management" theory reflects this paradigm shift by emphasizing the brand's central role within the corporate management framework [4]. Rather than treating the brand solely as a marketing tool, this theory conceptualizes it as a strategic asset that influences internal operations, guides organizational culture, and shapes resource allocation [5]. When effectively integrated, a brand can unify cross-functional teams, reinforce corporate values, and support the achievement of long-term strategic objectives.

Simultaneously, the digitalization of the business environment—marked by the proliferation of social media platforms, e-commerce ecosystems, and big data analytics—has significantly altered the dynamics of brand management [6]. Firms are now able to engage in real-time interactions with consumers, gather rich consumer insights, and respond more agilely to market shifts [7]. However, the increased transparency and speed of information dissemination also require brands to maintain consistency and responsiveness across digital touchpoints, which adds considerable complexity to brand governance.

This study examines the application of the "Brand as Management" theory in the context of Qianhe Flavor Industry, a prominent enterprise in China's condiment sector [8]. By analyzing the company's brand positioning, communication strategy, and cultural development, the paper aims to shed light on how internal management practices can be

informed and enhanced through brand-driven approaches [9]. The findings may offer valuable implications for enterprises striving to build resilient, consumer-centric brands in the digital age [10].

2. Literature Review

The literature on brand image construction and management is extensive and multidisciplinary, encompassing contributions from marketing, management, psychology, and sociology. Early research primarily focused on brand identity and positioning, examining how companies could differentiate themselves in crowded markets. Aaker's work on brand personality was seminal, introducing the concept that brands could be endowed with human-like traits, making them more relatable to consumers [11]. This line of thought helped establish the idea that brand image is not merely about logos or slogans, but also about emotional connection and perceived values [12].

Subsequent studies expanded to include the consumer-side perspective, investigating how individuals perceive, interpret, and form relationships with brands [13,14]. These works revealed the complexity of brand image formation, highlighting the influence of cultural, social, and psychological factors. For instance, the mere exposure effect demonstrated that repeated exposure to a brand increases familiarity and, consequently, consumer preference. Likewise, social identity theory explained how consumers adopt brands to express and reinforce their personal and group identities [15]. Brands thus serve as symbolic markers of status, taste, and belonging.

The concept of consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) further developed the consumer-centric view, with Keller proposing that brand knowledge—comprising brand awareness and brand associations—plays a vital role in shaping consumer responses [13,14]. This model shifted attention to how brand meaning is constructed in the minds of consumers and how it ultimately impacts purchasing behavior, loyalty, and advocacy. Christodoulides and de Chernatony further supported this consumer-driven understanding of brand equity [2].

As branding evolved beyond marketing departments and became a strategic concern at the organizational level, the "Brand as Management" theory emerged. This theory recognizes the reciprocal relationship between brand identity and corporate management. Scholars such as Urde and Hatch & Schultz emphasized that brands are not external assets alone but integral to internal governance structures [8,9]. Brands inform and improve internal processes such as organizational design, leadership style, and employee engagement. For example, brand-centered leadership has been associated with enhanced employee identification and creativity, particularly in knowledge-intensive industries.

Moreover, strong internal brand alignment has been shown to support organizational resilience, especially during crises. Research by Balmer and Greyser highlights how consistent corporate branding enhances trust and provides a stable platform from which companies can navigate market uncertainties [1]. In this context, brands act as both strategic assets and adaptive mechanisms.

In recent years, digital transformation has significantly impacted brand management research. The proliferation of social media, user-generated content, e-commerce platforms, and big data analytics has created both opportunities and challenges. Brands can now engage in real-time conversations with consumers, track sentiment across platforms, and tailor messaging based on behavioral data [3,5]. This enables highly personalized and dynamic brand experiences that were previously impossible.

However, the digital environment also amplifies risks. The speed and transparency of information flow mean that inconsistencies between brand promises and actual customer experiences are quickly exposed. Brands are now held accountable not just by regulators or traditional media, but by consumers themselves. According to Lipsman et al., social media has become a double-edged sword, offering visibility and engagement on

one side, but also demanding continuous responsiveness and reputational management on the other [7].

In emerging markets, scholars have noted the role of cultural narratives and regional identity in brand construction. Zhou and Hui argue that symbolic value plays a particularly critical role, with consumers assigning meaning to brands that reflect broader sociocultural ideals [10]. This aligns with Holt's theory of cultural branding, which posits that iconic brands succeed by aligning themselves with prevailing cultural tensions and narratives [12]. Similarly, Li and de Burgh-Woodman emphasize that in China, branding functions as both a commercial and cultural act, deeply embedded in evolving consumer identities [6].

Additionally, empirical studies have confirmed that brand awareness significantly influences market performance and brand equity outcomes [4], reinforcing the managerial imperative for integrated branding strategies that operate across both traditional and digital channels.

In sum, brand image construction has evolved from a functional marketing tactic to a dynamic and multidimensional management practice [16]. Modern branding requires not only market insight and consumer psychology, but also organizational alignment, digital agility, and cultural sensitivity. This literature provides a strong theoretical foundation for analyzing Qianhe Flavor Industry's brand image strategy from the perspective of "Brand as Management," offering insights that bridge historical context with modern relevance [17].

3. Research methodology: The "Brand as Management" Theory

The "Brand as Management" theory offers a progressive and comprehensive understanding of the role of brands within corporate structures. It argues that a brand is not merely an external marketing symbol but a core component of internal management. This theoretical perspective holds that brands influence essential managerial functions such as strategic planning, resource allocation, organizational structure, and employee behavioral regulation [1,18].

At its foundation, the theory emphasizes the brand's function as a unifying mechanism that aligns various departments and business units toward shared strategic goals. When brand values and philosophy are deeply embedded in daily operations, they promote internal coherence and reduce fragmentation across the organization. For instance, if a brand is positioned around sustainability, its marketing, product development, human resources, and even logistics should all reflect that commitment. In this sense, brand identity becomes an operational standard that guides collective organizational behavior and decision-making [1,17].

Furthermore, the theory underscores the dynamic nature of brands, portraying them as evolving entities that respond to changing market environments and consumer expectations. Brand image serves as a diagnostic tool: when a company faces declining brand sentiment, this may reveal deeper problems such as poor service quality, product inconsistency, or internal misalignment. In the digital era, where feedback from social media and consumer platforms is immediate and public, brands can provide real-time insights for managers to assess strategic fit and operational performance [3,4,19].

Based on this framework, the present study adopts the "Brand as Management" theory to analyze how Qianhe Flavor Industry constructs its brand image from the inside out. The analysis is structured around three core dimensions: brand positioning, brand communication, and brand culture. For brand positioning, the study applies SWOT analysis and competitive benchmarking to assess how Qianhe differentiates itself from major industry players such as Lee Kum Kee and Haitian [2]. In the area of brand communication, the focus is placed on the company's engagement with user-generated content (UGC), cooperation with key opinion leaders (KOLs), and its strategic use of popular short-form video platforms [4,20]. As for brand culture, the investigation considers internal practices

such as onboarding procedures, employee participation in brand-related activities, and the integration of brand values into everyday work routines, as well as external manifestations of cultural resonance, such as consumer narratives and social media testimonials [16,19].

By applying this three-pronged analysis under the theoretical lens of "Brand as Management," the study aims to uncover the extent to which Qianhe's internal management practices support its external brand identity. This methodology not only enables a focused case study of Qianhe but also contributes to the broader understanding of how brand-centric governance can enhance organizational performance and strategic agility.

4. Current Situation of Qianhe Flavor Industry's Brand Image Construction

4.1. Brand Positioning

Qianhe Flavor Industry has established a foundation in the high-quality and health-conscious segments of the condiment market. However, this positioning remains generic and fails to carve out a distinctive niche in consumers' minds. The brand faces intense competition from established players offering similar propositions. Haitian Flavor Industry emphasizes product quality and innovation, Lee Kum Kee highlights traditional craftsmanship and health, while Joyoung leverages technological advancement and convenience.

A major challenge lies in the lack of a well-defined brand differentiator. While quality and health are essential, they no longer serve as unique selling points in a saturated market [21]. Qianhe must conduct a systematic SWOT analysis to identify its internal strengths—such as advanced fermentation techniques, regional sourcing advantages, or sustainable packaging practices—and align them with external opportunities. Additionally, a competitor benchmarking matrix could clarify where Qianhe stands in terms of product range, consumer perception, and innovation compared to leading brands.

One promising path is specialization. Qianhe could focus on niche categories such as zero-additive soy sauces, fermented condiments tailored to local cuisines, or gourmet product lines for the premium market. Alternatively, it could differentiate itself by targeting a culturally or demographically defined consumer group, such as health-conscious millennials or eco-aware urban families. A strong positioning strategy requires coherent brand meaning across channels. Furthermore, online brand experience has been found to reinforce differentiation and long-term relationships with consumers [22].

4.2. Brand Communication

Qianhe's current communication strategy relies heavily on traditional advertising and in-store promotions. While these methods still hold value, they lack the reach and emotional impact necessary to engage digital-native consumers. Younger audiences are increasingly influenced by social media trends, peer-generated content, and the perceived authenticity of influencers and brand communities.

Qianhe's limited presence on popular short-form and video-sharing platforms means it is missing crucial opportunities to create viral resonance. In contrast, brands such as Haidilao have successfully built digital ecosystems where consumer participation becomes part of the brand narrative. To remain competitive, Qianhe should consider collaborating with health-focused or culinary influencers, leveraging UGC campaigns that encourage recipe sharing, and launching hashtag challenges that promote brand interaction.

Moreover, current messaging lacks emotional storytelling and identity appeal. Rather than focusing solely on product attributes, Qianhe should develop a narrative that evokes cultural roots, family traditions, or sustainability values—elements that build deeper emotional connections. Interactive brand content has been shown to significantly increase engagement among young consumers [23]. Additionally, social metrics such as likes, comments, and shares are influenced by visual richness and emotional tone [24], suggesting that content quality must match platform dynamics.

4.3. Brand Culture

Brand culture is the soul of a brand, shaping both internal identity and external resonance. Currently, Qianhe's brand culture remains underdeveloped, with little visibility of its historical narrative, corporate values, or symbolic assets. Unlike Lao Gan Ma, which built cultural resonance through its founder's compelling backstory and consistency, Qianhe has yet to form a recognizable brand myth [25].

To address this, Qianhe could start by constructing a brand chronicle—highlighting its origins, breakthroughs, and ethical commitments—and integrating it into external storytelling and internal training. Internally, brand culture should be woven into recruitment, onboarding, and employee engagement. For example, staff can be encouraged to participate in brand ambassador programs, workshops, or cultural events that reinforce core values.

Furthermore, consumer co-creation can be a powerful cultural lever. Testimonials, cooking stories, and family traditions shared by loyal users can be curated to form part of the brand's collective memory. In the social media era, brands thrive when they behave like cultural icons embedded in conversations and content flows. Simultaneously, strong brand cultures internally reinforce values that lead to customer-based brand equity and trust [26].

5. Strategies for Qianhe Flavor Industry's Brand Image Construction

5.1. Precise Brand Positioning and Differentiated Management

To stand out in the competitive condiment market, Qianhe must undertake a strategic repositioning initiative that goes beyond generalized appeals to health and quality. This involves conducting a thorough market landscape analysis to identify unmet consumer needs, emerging demand niches, and positioning gaps that align with the company's strengths. One promising avenue is to specialize in organic, functional, or zero-additive condiments, which appeal to health-conscious and environmentally aware consumers.

Differentiated brand management should permeate every aspect of the organization—from product innovation to packaging aesthetics, from customer service tone to channel strategy. Internally, this requires cross-departmental alignment, where R&D is tasked with developing products aligned with the brand promise, while marketing crafts a narrative that communicates the brand's uniqueness. Externally, the brand positioning should be consistently expressed across online content, point-of-sale messaging, and corporate social responsibility activities.

Furthermore, Qianhe should institutionalize a feedback loop to monitor market trends, competitor responses, and evolving consumer values through sentiment analysis, user data, and periodic brand audits. This allows for dynamic brand recalibration and ensures positioning remains both differentiated and relevant in a rapidly evolving marketplace. Studies confirm that consumer satisfaction and strategic brand adaptation are not linearly related—flexibility and context-sensitive responsiveness are crucial for long-term value [27].

5.2. Multi - Channel Brand Communication and Integrated Marketing

A digital-first and content-centric communication strategy is essential for Qianhe to reach a younger, more media-fragmented audience. This begins with a greater presence across leading short-form video and social media platforms, supported by search engine marketing and data-driven ad personalization. The brand should leverage influencer collaborations with lifestyle KOLs and nutrition experts to build authenticity and trust in the health-conscious segment [28].

Compelling brand storytelling is central to effective communication. Content formats can include recipe tutorials using Qianhe products, behind-the-scenes videos of traditional fermentation processes, or co-branded live streams with chefs and cultural figures.

User-generated content (UGC) campaigns such as family cooking contests or #Qi-anheHomeTaste challenges can further boost emotional engagement and community participation [29].

Offline communication should not be discarded but integrated. For instance, traditional media placements during Spring Festival can echo themes from social media campaigns, while in-store promotions can incentivize digital engagement via QR code redirection to exclusive offers or content. Designing these multi-channel strategies based on the functional architecture of social media platforms can greatly enhance effectiveness [28]. Moreover, integrated communication is proven to strengthen brand trust and consumer loyalty across cultures and demographics [30,31].

5.3. Brand Culture Construction and Corporate Value Inheritance

Developing a compelling brand culture is essential for building internal cohesion and external emotional resonance. Qianhe should begin by systematically mining its organizational history and founder story to articulate a brand narrative rooted in authenticity, quality, and tradition. This narrative must then be translated into internal values and behavioral codes that guide employee conduct, managerial decisions, and product commitments.

Internally, this can be achieved by embedding brand culture into training modules, internal communications, performance evaluations, and reward systems [32]. Employees should understand not only what the brand stands for, but also how their actions reflect and reinforce that meaning. A structured internal brand ambassador program could incentivize alignment and cultivate a stronger sense of shared mission. Embedding brand identity within the corporate cultural framework enhances both employee engagement and customer perception [29].

Externally, the brand culture should be communicated through cultural storytelling in marketing, brand heritage exhibitions, collaborations with culinary schools or museums, and participation in local food culture festivals. Strategic partnerships with influencers who authentically embody Qianhe's values—such as simplicity, health, and family tradition—can help transmit the brand spirit in an emotionally accessible way. Long-term, a culturally rooted strategy grounded in strategic brand management can enable brand longevity and meaningful differentiation [31,33,34].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Qianhe Flavor Industry's brand image construction is a multifaceted and dynamic endeavor that demands not only strategic foresight but also long-term organizational commitment. By adopting the "Brand as Management" theory, the company can elevate its brand from a mere marketing asset to a central pillar of internal coordination and corporate governance. This approach allows the brand to function as both a cultural compass and a competitive differentiator.

Through precise brand positioning, Qianhe can better identify and communicate its unique value propositions in a saturated market. A robust, multi-channel communication strategy—particularly one that leverages digital platforms and consumer co-creation—enables the brand to build emotional engagement and expand its reach among younger demographics. Meanwhile, the cultivation of a strong brand culture ensures internal alignment, enhances employee engagement, and reinforces authentic brand expression at every consumer touchpoint.

Collectively, these strategies position Qianhe not only for improved brand equity and market performance but also for long-term resilience in an increasingly volatile consumer landscape. Moreover, the Qianhe case offers valuable insights for condiment and traditional food enterprises seeking brand renewal in rapidly evolving digital markets. It illustrates how integrated brand thinking—anchored in both internal culture and external perception—can serve as a viable pathway for legacy brands aiming to remain relevant and

competitive. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on how strategic brand management can drive sustainable business value in culturally rich yet rapidly evolving markets.

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