
Innovation and Environmental Profiling as Antecedents of Corporate Image: Cruise Ships as Contribution to Corporate Profiling

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Abstract:

Purpose: It is possible for a company to make various tactical choices in order to achieve the desired positioning of the brand name in a market. Two such tactical choices are to develop an environmental profile, and/or to pursue innovative design. This study will look at how a shipping company, „The Fjords“, has strengthened its brand profile through investments in new and environment-friendly technology using innovative design.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Based on a survey where 573 international tourists answered questions regarding their perception of the vessels and the corporate image, the study shows that development of new and environmentally friendlier vessels may accordingly be a means towards enhanced value creation for the company.

Findings: The study clearly indicates a significant improvement of the corporate image among tourist travelling on a vessel that is an innovative design with a green environmental profile compared to the views of tourists using traditional ferries.

Practical Implications: The research results can be used by „The Fjords“ to create their future policy.

Originality/Value: Original research based on traditional empirical methodologies.

Keywords: Corporate image, fjord cruise boats, innovation, environmental profiling.

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1. Introduction

The travel sector is a growth business, with an underpinning of small and medium businesses offering travel products and services such as accommodation, restaurants, and transport, as well as various adventures and activities. One result of this is that providers of various travel-related products and services must to, a greater extent than earlier, be seen as innovative, and capable of positioning their products for survival in this competitive situation. One innovative strategy for a travel industry provider will be the developing of a unique design. Research has previously shown that product design has a direct influence on consumer response (Bloch, 1995; Crilly *et al.*, 2004), perceived value (Rindova and Petkova, 2007; Kumar and Noble, 2016), attitudes and endorsements (Homburg, Schwemmler and Kuehnl, 2015; Oklevik, Nysveen and Pedersen, 2018).

Research has further indicated that the introduction of new *greener* products has a positive effect on the customers' attitudes to the brand names launching these green products (Olsen *et al.*, 2014), and that the perception of a company's green image contributes positively to the general public's attitude towards the company (Jeoung *et al.*, 2014). A common trait with all these studies is that standardised metrics were used on the consumers' or tourists' responses, typically in the form of linear scales with 1 to 5 questions. For the current study, we wish to step outside standardised metrics, by testing whether the effects of product design and environmental profile on the perceived corporate image will also hold true while using as a basis such image elements as the company itself defines as important. The contribution here is accordingly both contextual and relevant for travel business management, in that we are demonstrating that the launching of a travel product that comprises both innovative design and a distinct environmental profile, produces a significant improvement of the corporate image along 7 out of 8 dimensions that the company regards as important.

Even if the literature cites examples of the effects of design and environment profile on consumer perceptions, these two factors have largely been evaluated separately (Crilly *et al.*, 2004, Jeoung *et al.*, 2014). The current study accordingly contributes to the research tradition by studying the effects of these two factors concurrently. In this article, this research issue is therefore raised: What are the effects of innovative design and environmental profile on the corporate image?

2. Theoretical Background

As stated in the introduction, companies' ability to project an image of innovativeness and environmental friendliness looks increasingly important to achieving success in the market (Lin, 2015; Omerzel, 2016; Olsen *et al.*, 2014; Jeoung *et al.*, 2014). A company's *innovativeness* is described in the literature as "a company's receptiveness to the tendency to adopt new ideas leading to development and launching of new products (Rubera and Kirca, 2012). One way of innovating for a travel company is to develop and be innovative in the design of their products and services. Several items

in the available literature demonstrate that design development is vital in order to achieve positive consumer and tourist feedback (Homburg *et al.*, 2015; Oklevik *et al.*, 2018). The study by Homburg *et al.* (2015) makes the point that consumers perceive design through various dimensions such as aesthetics, functionality and symbolism.

Strong consumer perceptions of one or more of these design dimensions will in the next instance generate positive consumer evaluations, such as higher satisfaction and more positive attitudes. In the study by Oklevik *et al.* (2018), the framework of Homburg *et al.* (2015) was tested on two groups of international tourists taking part in a boat cruise. The study shows that out of the three design dimensions, particularly aesthetics and functionality were important for the tourists' evaluation of the vessel, and for their intention to endorse the trip to others. We can also find contributions in the literature showing how design development may be a successful strategy for improving one's corporate image (Yang and Tan, 2017; Schmitt, Simonsson and Marcus, 1995). In the study by Yang and Tan (2017) it was demonstrated that developing an event may provide rewards in the shape of enhancement of the corporate image of the business that is the organiser of the event.

The study comprised a questionnaire among 280 tourists who had taken part in an event in Macau. Schmitt *et al.* (1995) argue that focus on aesthetics is a key to promoting the corporate image, and presents a four-step framework for how this can be accomplished in a company. The article gives arguments for aesthetics and design playing a vital role relative to several aspects in the enterprise, including buildings, products, presentations and publications.

Olsen *et al.* (2014) studies how new green product launches can improve the attitudes of consumers towards a brand name, as well as under which circumstances such launches are at their most effective. An example would be positive attitude changes following green product launches being at their most prominent for product categories providing consumers with only a brief or short-lived experience or benefit. Such product categories may, for example, be various travel-oriented experiences, or products related to direct consumption, such as food or drink. The study of Jeong *et al.* (2014) showed that when restaurant guests perceives the restaurant as one which has implemented green practices, this will in the next instance strengthen the environmental profile of the restaurant brand, which in itself leads to more positive attitudes among the guests. The authors are pointing to consumers and restaurant patrons being to a greater degree than before aware of environmental issues, frequently giving rise to a demand for environmentally-friendly products and services.

A total of 361 restaurant guests from the Starbucks restaurant franchise were interviewed. In an overnight accommodation context, Yadav *et al.* (2016) finds positive effects of a green image on the corporate image – and in consequence, an intention of return visits. Similar effects have also been documented in the hotel industry (Nysveen, Oklevik and Pedersen, 2018). This study involved 283 previous guests from the Hotel Alexandra in Loen, Nordfjord, participating in a questionnaire

into their perceptions of the hotel brand, the perceived green image and guest satisfaction. The study shows that when hotel guests perceive the hotel as “green”, positive and strong experiences are generated, leading to higher guest satisfaction in the next instance.

The image of a company can according to the literature be measured in many different ways, for example through brand personality (Aaker, 1997), name brand experiences (Brakus *et al.*, 2009), or brand image (Hsieh, 2002). There are also examples in the literature that image is subject to specialised metrics (Batra and Homer, 2004; Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004). For the current study, we have opted not to use one of the established scales for measuring the corporate image, because the company has itself defined eight image elements as strategically important for the company. We have accordingly chosen to use these as the basis for testing the research issues. The study then follows a tradition in the literature, by using as its starting point how the employees in a company believe outside parties perceive the company (Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Pina *et al.*, 2006).

3. Research Objectives, Methodology and Data

The context for this research work is the Nærøy fjord, classified as a part of the UNESCO World Heritage (<http://en.naroyfjorden.no/>). The Nærøy fjord is a nature-based attraction characterised by its pristine nature and landscape, with huge contrasts between steep mountains and the deep fjord. The Nærøy fjord is a side branch to the bigger Sognefjord. Anyone who introduces travel industry products in settings like these, should make sure that they are not perceived as “noisy” (Bitner, 1992), and that they fit well into the nature-based surroundings. On the Nærøy fjord, tourists can take part in various ferry cruises, such as the regular return trip between Flåm and Gudvangen. The company that is the focal point of the current study, „The Fjords“, is a subsidiary of Fjord1 and Flåm A/S. The company specialises in tourist transportation.

The year 2016 saw „The Fjords“ launching its vessel “*Vision of the Fjords*”. The vessel represents evolution in various ways. Firstly, it is one of the first hybrid vessels to enter commercial passenger traffic. The boat runs alternatively on electrical power or diesel fuel. This makes the boat more environmentally-friendly than traditional diesel-driven ferries. Furthermore, the vessel benefits from its unique and innovative design. The striking design is claimed to be inspired by the Oslo Opera House as well as the Trollstigen mountain road in Geiranger. On board, the travellers may step outside on deck, and in addition to the inside stairways, slanting walkways are found along both sides of the vessel, as shown in picture 1.

Further to this vessel, the company also operates more traditional ships on the Nærøyfjorden. These are older car ferries that have been decommissioned from ordinary traffic and deployed here to service the tourist trade. One such traditional ferry is the vessel “*Fanaraaken*”, built in 1973 (picture 2).

Picture 1. *Vision of the Fjords.*



Source: The Fjords.

Picture 2: *Fanaraaken, photo: Svein Ulvund*



Source: Svein Ulvund

Because the two boats each represent a unique and quite different product, where *Vision of the Fjords* has claimed a clear-cut position as environmentally-friendly with a freshly developed and bold design, they lend themselves well to performing a natural experiment. This experiment was simply about doing concurrent interviews of tourist on the different boats, with a view to finding out what would be the effects of an environment-oriented and unique design on the corporate image of the shipowners operating the ships.

Two researchers conducted interviews with travellers on the two boats at the same time, whereby the objects being interviewed would answer in writing to questionnaires in English. To boost the response percentage, each responder would receive a chocolate bar as a prize. A total of 296 respondents completed the questionnaires on the *Fanaraaken*, and 342 on the *Vision of the Fjords*. Eight respondents were rejected from the *Fanaraaken* and 21 from the *Vision of the Fjords* for reasons of insufficient involvement in filling out the forms correctly. These responders had ticked off identical responses to all the questions on page 1 of the form. Further rejects were 22 responses from the *Fanaraaken* and 15 from the *Vision of the Fjords* due to incomplete responses to the questionnaire. The result was a net of 267 responses for the *Fanaraaken* and 306 for the *Vision of the Fjords*.

Table 1 reveals the demographic background properties of the respondents. The whole selection consisted of somewhat more women than men (55.5% women and 44.5% men), and the female surplus on *Vision of the Fjords* was greater than on the *Fanaraaken* (57.4% vs. 53. %). Respondents were relatively young, with 66.4% at age 44 or younger. The proportion of younger travellers was somewhat higher on the *Vision of the Fjords* than the *Fanaraaken*. A clear majority of respondents (73.2%) had more than three years of higher education, and the average education length was more or less the same within the selections from the two boats. 60.3% of the respondents had purchased the trip on the Nærøy fjord as a part of a more extensive package trip (Norway in a Nutshell). This is a packaged trip that may contain the boat trip on the Sognefjord, train on the Bergen or Flåm railways, and/or bus transport. The package can be put together using various components. Some 40% of the travellers had bought their fare from other sources than Norway in a Nutshell. These had purchased individual tickets on their own. The share of travellers with a ticket that was a part of a package trip was slightly lower on the *Fanaraaken* (56.9%) than the *Vision of the Fjords* (63.2%). Moving on, the greater shares of the travellers were Europeans (44.3%), North Americans (24.6%), and Asians (22.7%). Table 1 presents further details.

Table 1. Demographics and background properties of the selections.

Items	Aggregate data set (n=573)	<i>Fanaraaken</i> (n=267)	<i>Vision of the Fjords</i> (n=306)
Gender			
*Male	44.5	46.9	42.2
*Female	55.5	53.1	57.4
Age			
*16 - 24	20.2	19.7	20.6
*25 - 34	28.0	22.7	32.6
*35 - 44	18.2	14.3	21.2
*45 - 54	15.1	21.7	11.6
*55 - 64	11.2	12.9	10.0
*65 -	7.3	11.2	4.0
Education			
*A levels	5.2	6.7	4.0
*O levels	11.3	10.3	12.2
*College/university ≤3 years	10.1	8.3	11.6
*College/university >3 years	73.2	74.7	72.3
Nationality			
European	44.3	48.7	40.5
North America	24.6	21.7	27.1
Latin America	2.4	3.7	1.3
Asia	22.7	17.6	27.1
Australia/New Zealand	2.8	3.7	2.0
Others	3.1	4.5	2.0
Norway in a Nutshell			
Yes	60.3	56.9	63.2
No	39.7	43.1	36.8

4. Research Results

The corporate image for „The Fjords“ was measured by means of eight questions in the questionnaire. These are image elements that have been defined by the company itself as vital, and include the following: innovative, environment-friendly, safe, professional hosts, storytelling, media-friendly, different, identity-promoting. All elements were measured along a seven-point scale, where 1 is “disagree strongly” and 7 is “agree completely”. Furthermore, attitudes towards the company were measured using three questions with a 7-point semantically differential scale (good/bad, favourable/unfavourable and positive/negative) (Nysveen, Pedersen, and Thorbjørnsen, 2005). Additionally, information on background properties was gathered, such as age, gender, education, nationality, and whether the trip was purchased as a part of a package tour (Norway in a Nutshell) or not. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for corporate image and attitude towards the company, for the aggregate selection and for the two group samples separately.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics, variables in the study.*

Items	Aggregate data set (n=573)		Fanaraaken (n=267)		Vision of the Fjords (n=306)	
	Average	Std. v.	Aver	St. v.	Average	St. v.
Corporate image	5.31	1.05	5.02	1.11	5.55	0.92
* innovative	5.10	1.49	4.56	1.50	5.57	1.32
* environment-friendly	5.35	1.39	4.88	1.48	5.77	1.15
* safe	6.03	0.99	5.79	1.04	6.23	0.90
* professional hosts	5.80	1.16	5.55	1.25	6.02	1.03
* storytelling	4.87	1.56	4.89	1.52	4.85	1.60
* media-friendly	5.15	1.43	4.92	1.42	5.34	1.41
* different	5.22	1.48	4.81	4.81	5.56	1.32
* identity-promoting	4.95	1.53	4.75	1.54	5.14	1.50
Attitude to company	6.21	1.04	6.01	1.16	6.39	0.88
*Bad/good	6.22	1.04	6.03	1.17	6.40	0.88
*Unfavourable/favourable	6.18	1.09	5.97	1.21	6.37	0.93
*negative/positive	6.24	1.09	6.06	1.20	6.39	0.96

Source. Own study.

Table 3 provides an overview of the items used. The dataset was analysed with exploratory factor analysis (EFA), by use of IBM SPSS 25. The analysis showed a two factor solution, which captured almost 67% of the variance in the dataset, and a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin coefficient at 0.89. The rotated factor matrix showed that the three items measuring attitude toward the company loaded at the same factor, with factor loading coefficients range from 0.92 to 0.93. Further, the eight items measuring corporate image loaded at the second factor with standardised factor loadings range from 0.61 to 0.80. In order to further analyse the measurement properties of the variables in the study, we also conducted a confirmatory factor analysis, with Mplus 8. The results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. *Item Wording and Standardized Factor Loadings*

Dimension	Items	Loadings	α	CR	AVE
Corporate image	* innovative.	0.75	0.89	0.86	0.43
	* environment-friendly.	0.70			
	* safe.	0.58			
	* professional hosts.	0.67			
	* storytelling.	0.65			
	* media-friendly.	0.63			
	* different.	0.57			
	* identity-promoting.	0.70			
Attitude to company	* Bad/good	0.91	0.96	0.95	0.85
	* Unfavorable/favorable	0.94			
	* Negative/positive	0.92			

Note: Cronbach's α , construct reliability (CR), and AVE from the confirmatory factor analysis.

Source: Own study.

Confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model of the independent, mediating, and dependent variables showed acceptable fit for the model ($\chi^2/df = 4.81$, CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.088). The factor loadings for all items appear in Table 3, all at 1% level. However, five of the standardized loading estimates for the corporate image (0.68) are slightly below 0.7 but still considerably higher than the lowest acceptable level of 0.5 suggested by Hair *et al.* (2006). Therefore, we considered the construct validity of the measurement model acceptable. The Cronbach's alpha and construct reliability levels reported in Table 3 were also acceptable for all constructs.

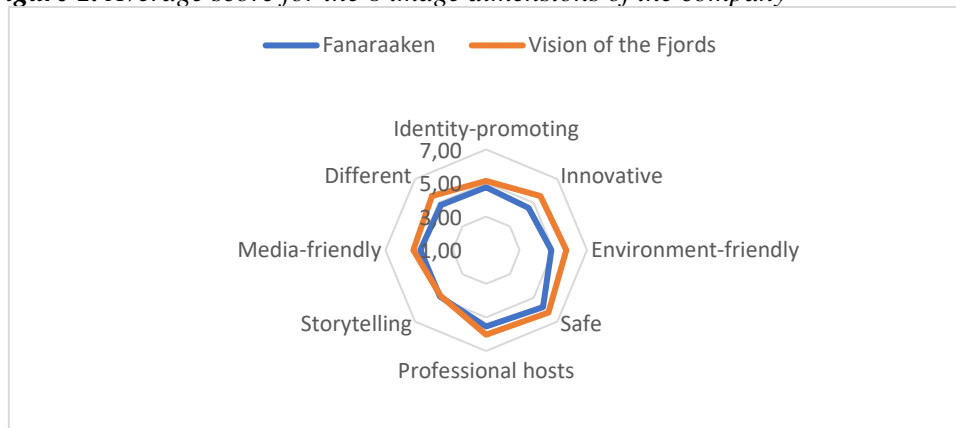
Table 3 shows a positive distance between the construct reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) for all the constructs, indicating acceptable construct validity. According to Anderson and Gerbing (1988), discriminant validity can be achieved when the correlations are less than 1 by an amount greater than twice the standard error of the estimate of the correlation. All correlations among the six constructs are significantly less than 1. Furthermore, according to Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion, discriminant validity is achieved if the square root of AVE is higher for each latent construct than the correlation between constructs. The correlation between corporate image and attitude toward the company is 0.54 ($p < 0.01$), while the square root of AVE for corporate image toward the company is 0.66. Thus the Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion is met. Consequently, both construct reliability and discriminant validity of the constructs are.

Is the corporate image different among the two samples?

To answer the question whether the corporate image is different among the two selections, T-test was used for averages in two independent selections. The reason for this is that the two selections are independent of each other; the persons on each of the two ships are unrelated to the persons on the other. A nearer description of this

test can be found in Wenstøp (2006). All in all, tests were averaged for all 8 measured points for corporate image, as well as the aggregate measurement, making altogether 9 tests. The results show that the 8 measures for corporate image and the aggregate measurement are significantly higher ($p < 0.01$) in the selection from *Vision of the Fjords* than what is the case for *Fanaraaken*. An exception was noted for the question whether the company was perceived as having a story to tell, where the average from the selections from each of the two boats are not significantly different from each other ($p < 0.10$). Figure 1 gives a summary of the results.

Figure 1. Average score for the 8 image dimensions of the company



Source: Own elaboration.

In order to further deepen our understanding the impact of corporate image, an analysis with corporate image as independent variable, and attitude toward the company was conducted. The results show positive influences of corporate image on attitude toward the company ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$). The model explains 29% of the variance in attitude toward the company (R^2).

For the purpose of studying whether the various perceptions of corporate image is stable across geographical segments and package tourists, the analysis was expanded. The full selection was divided into two groups, according to whether they had purchased the tickets as a part of a *Norway in a Nutshell* package, or whether they had booked and bought the ticket directly. This distinction shows that travellers who have purchased the tickets as a part of a bigger package (*Norway in a Nutshell*) seem to have a higher average score for the 8 image dimensions than those who booked individually, while not all the differences are statistically significant. However, for the dimensions of innovative (average «nutshell» 5.23 vs 4.91) and environment-friendly (average 5.44 vs 5.18) the averages are significantly higher by a 5 % level for the “Norway in a nutshell” group than for the other travellers. For the dimension of identity-promoting, the average is 5.03 for the Norway in a nutshell group, while it is 4.78 for others – a difference which is significant at the 10 % level.

Package tourists and individual bookers:

The next step to the analysis is to see whether we can spot these differences even when checking the two groups of tourists against the two boats. The sample was therefore split in two groups according to boat, followed by separate analyses being made for each boat. The results show that on *Vision of the Fjords*, there were no systematic differences in perceived image in any of the 8 dimensions between the *Norway in a Nutshell* travellers vs the other travellers. Conversely, on the *Fanaraaken* there were systematic differences to be found. The analysis shows that the perceived corporate image is generally higher for travellers in the *Norway in a nutshell* group, relative to the individual bookers, in all the 8 dimensions. The difference is statistically significant at the 5% level, for four of the dimensions (identity-promoting, innovative, environment-friendly and different), and on the 10% level for the dimension storytelling. For the three remaining dimensions (safe, professional host, media-friendly) the dimensions were not significantly different.

Table 4. Corporate image, by geographical segment. Aggregated sample.

	Europe	Asia	North-Amerika
Identity creator	4.98	5.27	4.59
Innovative	5.03	5.24	5.08
Environmentally friendly	5.32	5.59	5.24
Safe	6.02	5.94	6.12
Professional host	5.76	5.68	5.99
Storyteller	4.95	4.92	4.64
Media friendly	5.08	5.22	5.20
Different	5.23	5.04	5.43

Source: Own study.

Table 4 shows how the perceived corporate image looks broken down by geographical segment. The selections from the two boats have here been joined together, as there were smaller differences between the boats when checking by geography. It appears that different geographical segments emphasise and perceive the 8 dimensions differently. For example, Europeans and Asians perceive the company as significantly more identity-promoting than North Americans ($p < 0.01$).

There were no differences between these three segments in the matter of perceiving the company as innovative, safe and media-friendly ($p > 0.10$). Asians perceive the company as significantly more environment-friendly than what the Europeans and North Americans do ($p < 0.05$).

North Americans, on the other hand, perceive the company as significantly more professional hosts than what the Europeans and Asians do ($p < 0.05$). Asians and Europeans perceive the company as significantly more storytelling than the North Americans ($p < 0.05$). And finally, the North Americans regard the company as significantly more different than what the Europeans and Asians do ($p < 0.05$).

5. Conclusion

For the purpose of this study, a natural experiment, was conducted, whereby tourists on the two boats *Fanaraaken* and *Vision of the Fjords* were interviewed in parallel over the course of four days during August of 2016. A total of 345 tourists were interviewed on board the *Vision of the Fjords* and 296 on the *Fanaraaken*. The shipowner „The Fjords“ has defined 8 dimensions as essential for the brand: innovative, storytelling, safe, identity-promoting, different, environment-friendly, media-friendly, professional hosting.

The results from the study indicate that the corporate profile was significantly improved among tourists travelling on board the *Vision of the Fjords* compared to tourists on the *Fanaraaken*. This applies to seven of the eight brand name dimensions. For the eighth dimension, storytelling, there was no significant difference in the perceptions among the two groups of tourists being interviewed. A factor may be that the public address system on the *Vision of the Fjords* was out of service during the days when the interviews were being conducted. The travellers were therefore not exposed to guiding during the trip, which would ordinarily have been the case. This may explain some of the missing findings in this dimension.

The results show that a company can improve its corporate image through the implementation of a service and product innovation. In the example used in the current study, this innovation comprises the development of a unique and environment-friendly design on a fjord boat. Still, the study displays some nuances. Tourists who have purchased the trip as a part of a fuller package, perceive the corporate image as consistently better than other tourists. This difference is clearly apparent for the older vessel «*Fanaraaken*», and much less so on the hybrid vessel «*Vision of the Fjords*».

The company's efforts on the newly designed and environment-friendly vessel accordingly contribute to the perceived corporate image being more evenly spread between package tourists and individually booking travellers. The study also shows that different geographical segments among the travellers perceive 5 of the 8 corporate image dimensions differently. The three dimensions of innovative, safe and media-friendly were perceived the same across all the geographical segments. This lays the grounds for employing various elements in the market communication towards the different segments.

For instance, Asians perceive the company as being more environment-friendly than other travellers do. This means that market communication utilising elements of environment and corporate profiling will probably be more effective when addressing the Asian markets than with the European or North American markets. Correspondingly, corporate profiling vs. the North American market may see a relative advantage in focusing on elements like different and professional hosts.

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