Title: The impact of brand reputation on brand architecture strategies.

Abstract

The brand architecture of an organisation has become increasingly important to global management and marketing professionals, as it deals with structures and designs of brands which are constantly influenced by a changing environment. The primary purpose of the study was to investigate the impact brand reputation has on brand architecture strategies, and an automotive company was chosen as the focus of the research. A quantitative content analysis methodology was used along with a webpage keyword counting application (WebWords) which uses a four step progressive filtering process in filtering traditional and consumer generated media. The study found that the branded house and sub-brand strategies were most vulnerable to reputational damage based on the number reputational hits received.

Keywords: Marketing, Branding, Brand Architecture and Brand Reputation.

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Introduction and Objectives

Due to the complexity of the modern business environment organisations have had to hold multiple brands, brand extensions, and complex structures to cope with pressures and complexities (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000:8). These brand structures can be labelled as the brand architecture of an organisation. The brand relationship spectrum (BRS) by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000:8) illustrates brand architecture strategies managers, marketers and brand owners can implement within their brand portfolio. In order for managers, marketers and brand owners to make informative decisions regarding these strategies, insight into which of these strategies would be more vulnerable in terms of brand reputation needs to be researched (Douglas & Craig, 2003:10). Existing evidence is largely survey based, therefore no study to date has used quantitative keyword analysis to examine how brand architecture strategies are impacted by brand reputation.

Strategy literature has argued that from a resource-based view, sustainable competitive advantage is created primarily from intangible capabilities, notably innovation, organisational architecture, strategic assets, and reputation (Omar, Williams & Lingelbach, 2009:177). Herbig and Milewicz (1995:5) define reputation as the estimation of consistency over time of an attribute of an entity. Hannington (2004:3) regards corporate reputation as one of the most important assets of a company since it has a large impact on the financial health of the company, as well as future business prospects. According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000:10), there are four strategies and nine sub-strategies which can be described as follows:

- A house of brands – "A house of brands strategy involves an independent set of standalone brands, each maximising the impact on the market" (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000:10). For example, Lexus (Toyota).

- Endorsed brands – Endorsed brands are independent but are endorsed by another brand. The endorsement provides credibility and usually plays a minor driver role (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000:12). For example, Universal Pictures (Sony).

- Sub-brands – "Sub-brands are brands connected to a master or parent brand and augment or modify the associations of that master brand" (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000:14). For example, HP DeskJet (Hewlett Packard).

- A branded house – In this strategy the master brand moves from primary to dominant driver, and the sub-brand moves from modest driver to being a descriptor with little or no driver role (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000:15). For example, Virgin Active and Virgin Mobile.

In 2009 and 2010, Toyota experienced numerous reputational issues on a global scale. Ritson (2010:18) argues that Toyota's brand architecture could multiply the problem should any reputational crisis occur. Toyota possesses three of the four brand architecture strategies from the BRS, namely the house of brands, sub-brands and branded house strategies. The Toyota brand is a branded house brand, while Auris, Avanza, Corolla, Prius, Verso and Yaris are all sub-brands since they are linked to the Toyota master brand. The Lexus brand falls under the house of brands strategy as it is a separate brand from the Toyota master brand. Toyota is an excellent case for analysis since it possesses brand architecture strategies on opposing sides of the spectrum of the BRS, and there are numerous reputational issues to measure and test to see which of the BRS strategies are most vulnerable to reputational damage.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the impact brand reputation has on brand architecture strategies. In order to perform this investigation, the brand architecture was plot for Toyota South Africa (Pty) Ltd, and then assessed according to the BRS. Following the assessment, the sales were compared to the reputation hits Toyota received from both CGM

and traditional media over 2009/2010. The brand architecture strategies were then aligned and compared to the reputation hits received over this period, from which conclusions, managerial implications and recommendations were made.

Conceptual Framework / Literature Review /Research Model

Branding has been used since the earliest times when producers used brands or marks to distinguish their products (Hart, Murphy & Blackett, 1998:1). Branding has changed and developed considerably in the last century. One of the most important aspects of branding in the automotive industry is building the customer-brand relationship. The more precise the consumers' perception of that brand relationship is, the more it will lead to brand acceptance (Hankinson & Cowking, 1993:3).

Toyota holds considerable brand value, and is currently valued at $24 198 million, based on a a study conducted by Millward and Brown Optimor (2011). Toyota lies 27th overall, and 1st in valued automobile brands, with an increase of 11% in brand value from 2010 to 2011. Interestingly Lexus lies 10th in terms of valued automobile brands, which in itself belongs to the Toyota Corporation (Millward and Brown Optimor, 2011:40). This gives us an indication of how strong Toyota's brand portfolio has become.

Creating brand value is the key to brand success, as shown by the Toyota brand. Raggio and Leone (2008:252) mention that behaviour loyalty and price premiums, known as market-level outcomes, combined with marketplace activities such as advertising and price promotions contribute the most to brand value. In order to continue building brand value, organisations usually use brand extensions to launch new products (Yorkston, Nunes & Matta, 2010:80). Extending brands is one of the most frequently used branding strategies (Volckner & Sattler, 2006:18; Martinez & Chernatony, 2004:39), as it is deemed to be profitable since the parent brand already exists, allowing the new brands to be easily recognized (Volckner & Sattler, 2006:18).

Brand Architecture

Branding and brands have become increasingly complex. Managers, marketers and brand owners have had to create and manage a complex structure of brands, which is now defined as the brand architecture of the organisation (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000:8; Schultz, 2002:8). The brand architecture of the organisation is in fact a measure of past management decisions, as well as the competitive forces it faces, often regarded as the brand baggage of the organisation (Sanchez & Rajagopal, 2004:233). Brand architecture is also a reflection of the market in which the organisation operates, displaying local, national and global brands (Sanchez & Rajagopal, 2004:233). Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000:8) define the brand architecture of an organisation as "an organising structure of the brand portfolio that specifies brand roles and the nature of the relationships between brands" (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000:8).

Brand architecture represents a structural link between the organisation and the consumer (Strebinger & Treiblmaier, 2006:84). This is important for Toyota since the organisation has always adopted a quality and reliabity approach for their consumers (Liker, 2010:29). Ritson (2010:18) has argued that Toyota's brand architecture has become its biggest strategic problem by focusing on the sub-brand approach. This is because if anything had to happen to Toyota's brand, it will affect all its sub–brands (Ritson, 2010:18).

In order to understand brand architecture strategy, particularly Toyota's, it is important for the categories of brand architecture to be highlighted. At the top of the brand architecture of an organisation usually lies the corporate brand (Aaker, 1996:242; Hart et al., 1998:65; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2008:284). The corporate brand is defined as "the corporation behind the product or service offering" (Aaker, 1996:242). In this case, Toyota South Africa (Pty)

Ltd would be the corporate brand. Following the corporate brand usually lies the product-line brands (Aaker, 1996:242). Product-line brands are usually associated with the organisation's specific products (Aaker, 1996:243; Hart et al., 1998:164). Toyota and Lexus would then be product-line brands in this case. It is important to note that Toyota is both a product and a corporate brand, which is a strategy Toyota has used in its model.

Under the product-line brands, sub-brands are usually found. These brands refine and distinguish between different product offerings (Aaker, 1996:243). Corolla, Auris, Avanza, Prius, Verso and Camry would all be sub-brands of Toyota. IS, GS and LS would all be sub-brands of Lexus. The sub-brand approach is a dominant feature in Toyota's overall model.

In this research, an analysis of Toyota South Africa's brand architecture will be performed using this tool. This research will evaluate the tool itself in order to see which of the strategies suggested by BRS would be more vulnerable in terms of brand reputation. The BRS is related to the driver role played by the brands. The driver role is the degree to which the brand drives the purchase decision and user experience (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000:10).

This research analyses which of the BRS strategies would be more vulnerable in terms of brand reputation, the house of brands strategy (Toyota and Lexus) or the branded house strategy (Toyota and its sub-brands, Corolla, Auris, Avanza, Prius, Verso and Yaris). Using this research, brand reputation will be linked to the various brand architecture strategies.

Brand Reputation

Herbig and Milewicz (1995:5) define reputation as "the estimation of consistency over time of an attribute of an entity" (Herbig & Milewicz, 1995:5). This estimation is based on the entity's willingness and ability to perform an activity repeatedly in a similar fashion. An attribute is some specific part of the entity – price, quality and marketing skills (Herbig & Milewicz, 1995:5). The Toyota brand has always expressed quality, reliability and safety as its attributes to its consumers which have been questioned of late due to numerous vehicle recalls (Liker, 2010:32). In order to fully grasp the concept of brand reputation it is important to understand its components, brand image and brand identity.

Brand image is seen as the external view by stakeholders (usually consumers), while brand identity is the brand seen from the internal perspective (employees) (Davies, Chun, da Silva & Roper, 2001:114; Schultz & Werner, 2005:2). In Toyota's case, after the reputational issues it faced in 2009/2010, that firm would be more concerned with consumer loyalty and sales. For this reason, this research will focus largely on the brand image of Toyota rather than its identity.

Since the emergence of the web, information has been able to be communicated freely and at a fast speed Spangler, Chen, Lelescu, Behal, He, Griffen, Liu, Wade and Davies (2009:243),. New forms of media have been introduced, such as blogs, forums, message boards and websites (Spangler et al., 2009:243). In 2009/2010 Toyota experienced a blow to its reputation by announcing three major recalls totalling eight million vehicles globally (Mittal, Sambandam & Dholakia, 2010:9), which was noted as a *product-harm crisis* where a product malfunction has potentially harmed the stakeholders' perceptions of the organisation's brands (Mittal et al., 2010:9). Since Toyota is a product brand, linked to multiple sub-brands, this crisis could have a significant reputational impact across its brand architecture. Traditional media, along with consumer generated media (CGM) had much to report on the various incidents. The key to this research will be utilising these forms of communication to shed light on how the various brands of Toyota were impacted in terms of reputation.

Research Method

According to Spangler et al. (2009:243), consumer generated media (CGM) such as news websites, blogs, forums and message boards have become the "voice of the people", which allows companies to leverage CGM in terms of their reputation analysis (Spangler et al., 2009:243). Traditional media are also important to take into account since they can influence stakeholders' perceptions about the company's brands (Einwiller, Carroll & Korn, 2010:300).

In order to analyse Toyota's brand reputation, the concept of Corporate Brand and Reputation Analysis (COBRA) was applied to a custom designed, webpage keyword counting program (WebWords) which filtered both CGM and traditional media. COBRA uses a four-step progressive filtering approach (Spangler et al., 2009:245) to extract keywords which the website keyword counting program captured, counted and plotted against the date of the media articles. Orthogonal word filtering, which filters a negative word with the brand (e.g "Toyota" and "Recall"), was performed on the title of the article took place, which placed all the articles collected in a negative reputational context. The more frequently the keyword or brand is mentioned throughout the remaining of the article, the more it affects its reputation.

The study was performed in a South African context, therefore all data collected were collected from local media websites. Local sales figures were collected from the National Automotive Association of South Africa (NAAMSA, 2010). A total of 269 webpages were collected, captured and filtered, 202 webpages from traditional media and 67 webpages from CGM. Time series analysis was performed using a Poisson and Linear regression.

The reputational hits on each brand from WebWords were then aligned to the brand architecture strategy under which it falls. The more hits the strategy received, the more vulnerable that particular strategy was.

Reliability of the data captured was checked by screening, by the researcher, of the webpage article to ensure that the webpage article contained the relevant orthogonal word in the title and that the article was of a negative nature. WebWords was also tested to ensure the accuracy of the counted keywords. All the data, figures and tables were checked by the researcher to ensure that the information displayed was correct and accurate.

Findings

In South Africa, Toyota has six main sub-brands, namely the Auris, Avanza, Corolla, Prius, Verso and Yaris. All these brands are directly linked to the master brand of Toyota, and therefore Toyota is a co-driver with the sub-brands, which provides credibility to the sub-brands. . A problem for Toyota from a branding point of view, is the fact that should any reputational issues affect any of the sub-brands, the reputational damage will in effect lead back to Toyota as a product, but more importantly as a company.

As the Lexus brand is introduced, it needs to be noted that the Lexus brand is not supposed to be associated with the Toyota product brand at all. It is however associated with the corporate brand of Toyota, since it falls under the organisation's overall product strategy. Therefore, from a reputational view point, Lexus is not connected to the Toyota *product* brand, but is connected to the Toyota *corporate* brand. In terms of the BRS, this is a classic house of brands strategy.
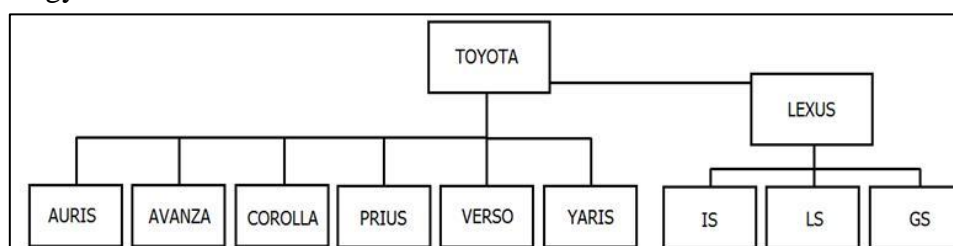

Figure 1: Brand Architecture of Toyota South Africa (Pty) Ltd (Source: Adapted from Toyota SA website (2011)

Over the 2009/2010 period the largest monthly sales took place in March 2009. The lowest sales of the period took place in April 2010. In late January, early February 2010, Toyota had to deal with a large recall of over 2.2 million vehicles globally due to faulty accelerator pedals and brake glitches. Domestic sales then dropped from January 2010 to April 2010.

With regard to the Lexus brand, it also experienced a drop in sales in early 2009 with relation to the global economic sales and low domestic. In December 2009 and January 2010, Lexus experienced strong sales growth. A slight drop in sales occurred in February 2010.

A line graph of the hits was compared with the bar graph of the sales figures. The following graphs below show the reaction of sales, if any, to the hits based on negative reputational issues. Therefore, the spikes in the time series reflect negative reputational issues occurring at that particular point in time.
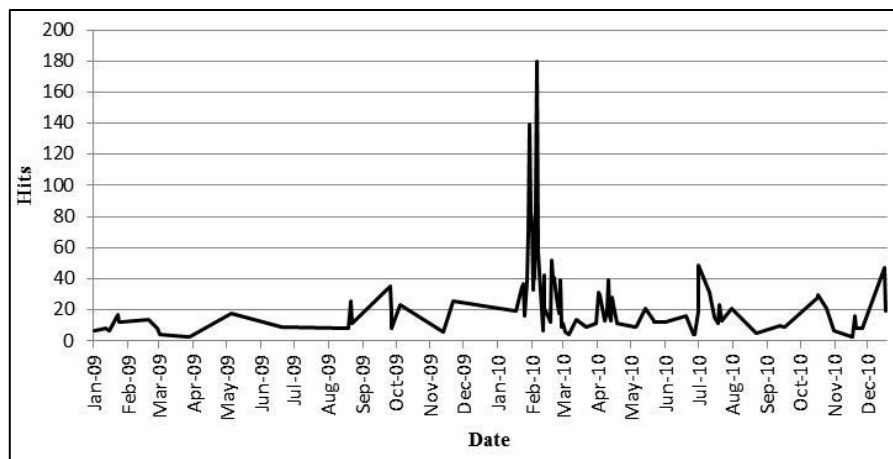

Figure 2: Traditional Media Hits of Toyota South Africa (Pty) Ltd for 2009/2010
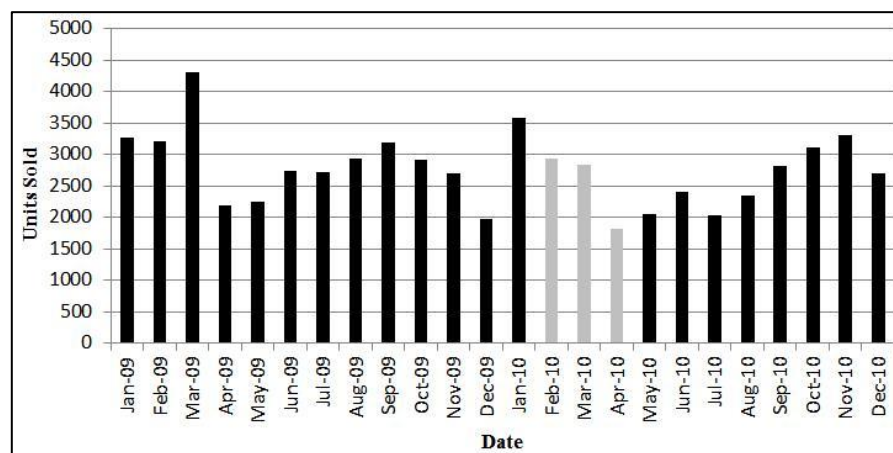

Figure 3: Sales Figures of Toyota South Africa (Pty) Ltd for 2009/2010 Source: NAAMSA (2010)

In Figure 2 it is shown that the largest reputational hit took place between January 2010 and February 2010. If this is subsequently compared with the sales figures in Figure 3, it can be observed that there is a decrease in sales from February 2010 to April 2010, with April 2010 being the lowest sales month over the two year period. It is to be noted that the drop in sales could be related to the reputational damage suffered by the Toyota brand; however there could be other internal or seasonal issues that might have caused the drop as well.

The fifth objective was to align the results gathered from WebWords to the brand architecture strategies of Toyota. In Figure 4 it can be seen that the Corolla brand (a strong sub-brand of Toyota) follows a similar pattern to that of Toyota.
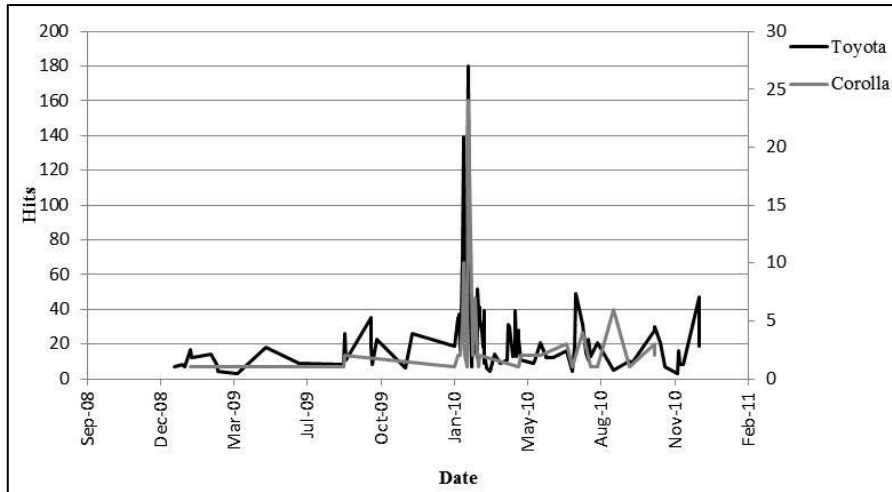
Figure 4: A comparison of reputational hits between Toyota and Corolla (Branded House and Sub-brand)

The large reputational hit at the end of January 2010 is reflected by both brands. Due to the fact that these two brands are connected, should any reputational hit occur on the one brand, this will automatically affect the other. The branded house and sub-brand strategies are therefore vulnerable to reputational damage due to this connection.
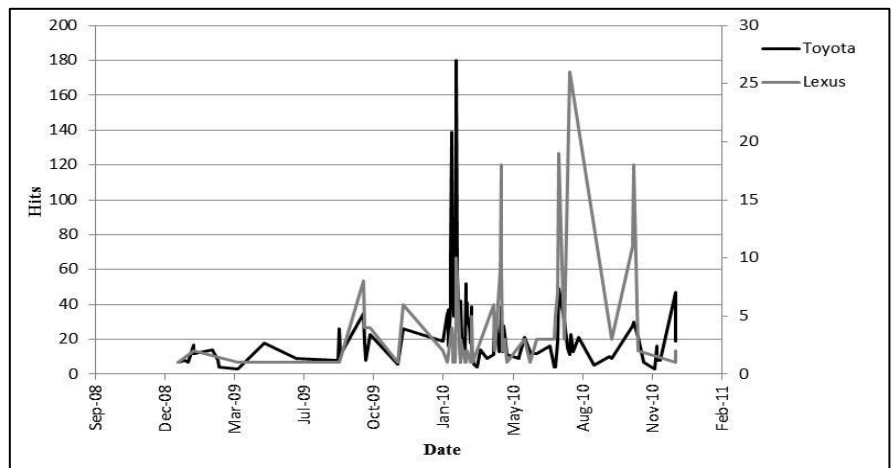

Figure 5: A comparison of reputational hits between Toyota and Lexus (Branded House and House of Brands)

When comparing the Lexus brand (a house of brands brand of Toyota) and the Toyota brand shown above in Figure 5, it can be seen that Lexus does not follow the same pattern as the Toyota brand. Since the Lexus brand is a house of brands brand, this is correct and should not be connected to the Toyota master brand (shadow endorser). In terms of reputational damage, it means that since the brands operate in isolation, any reputational damage affecting the one brand, will not necessarily affects the other, making the house of brands strategy safer.

Orthogonal keyword and Poisson regression analysis was performed on the data in order to understand the impact on the brands and brand architecture strategies.

Table 1: Percentage of Hits of Brands Associated with Orthogonal Word

	Recall	Crisis	Problem	Damage	Danger	Fault	Trouble	Defect	Average
Lexus	42%	30%	14%	37%	39%	41%	39%	55%	**37%**
Auris	23%	9%	20%	4%	11%	32%	0%	11%	**14%**
Corolla	47%	28%	40%	27%	39%	53%	19%	35%	**36%**
Prius	44%	41%	46%	31%	18%	44%	45%	29%	**37%**
Verso	25%	3%	19%	2%	11%	30%	3%	12%	**13%**
Yaris	7%	0%	6%	4%	4%	7%	0%	6%	**4%**

In Table 1, it can be seen that all the highlighted cells are only associated with the Lexus, Corolla and Prius brands. The Corolla and Prius sub-brands are an ideal comparison as they hold a similar driver role to that of Lexus. Even though Lexus, Corolla and Prius received similar averages, the Corolla and Prius brands are connected directly to the Toyota master and corporate brand, whereas Lexus is not.

Further Research

A quantitative content analysis methodology using keyword counting and filtering on a South African automotive company had not been performed before in South Africa, which makes this research the first of its kind. The research however has the potential to be developed further.

Keyword quantitative content analysis proved to work well for the study, but in terms of the data, especially with regard to Poisson regression, a larger data set and timescale should be used in future research. The study was limited to a South African context which placed a limitation on the amount of data available particularly with regard to consumer generated media. Future research should seek to increase the sample size possibly on a global scale. Opening the research to include other automotive manufacturers or across different industries, for example, could be done to allow a cross-industry comparative study.

Only three of the four brand architecture strategies were researched in the study. Future research should include the endorsed brand strategy. Furthermore, this research only focused on the four main brand architecture strategies from the brand relationship spectrum, while there are nine sub-strategies that could be further researched.

The study focused on the negative reputational issues the organisation encountered, but there are numerous positive issues that offset the negative issues, which should be included in future research. Finally, reputational hits could be compared not only with sales, but with other financial measures such as investor confidence, profitability and earnings per share. This will provide a full report on the reputational damage to the company and whether the brand architecture of the company has insulated it from reputational issues.

Managerial Implications

Based on research and theory, brand architecture has become an important facet of an organisation. It is important that managers, marketers and brand owners spend sufficient time formulating a coherent brand architecture with sufficient strategic consideration. This is particularly important to organisations which are new to the market, as it strategically maps out the organisation's future brand portfolio. Once the brand architecture of the organisation has been formulated, it is imperative to review it constantly, possibly half yearly, as this will allow business strategy to be continuously aligned with the branding of the organisation.

In this study, it is clear that the house of brands strategy lessens the overall impact on the brand portfolio, since it is not directly connected to the master brand. The branded house and sub-brand strategies, on the other hand, suggest the opposite since all the sub-brands are directly connected to the master brand. The driver role each particular brand plays is the key to the vulnerability of the brand. The larger the driver role the brand takes on, the more vulnerable it is to reputational damage. Sub-brands can possess different driver roles, for example the Prius brand holds a larger driver role than the Verso or Yaris brands. The advantage of this is that the Prius brand becomes increasingly recognisable with its own set of brand values, for example, environmentally friendly, safety and technologically advanced. The disadvantage of an increased driver role of a sub-brand is that it is still connected to the master brand (Toyota), and that should any crisis occur to the sub-brand it affects both the master and sub-brand's reputation.

In this study, it was shown that during a critical reputation crisis, Toyota and it sub-brands were experiencing reputational hits and a drop in sales, while the Lexus brand received minimal hits and a slight increase in sales in the same period. If any crisis were to occur regarding a house of brands brand, the reputational damage on the branded house brands could be minimal, and vice versa. Introducing multiple house of brands brands, could prove useful. Toyota has already introduced a new house of brands brand in the United States, namely the Scion (MSN, 2011:1). By building a diversified brand architecture investors are likely to feel less risk averse about investing in a company since the brands will be more diversified in terms of risk of reputational damage.

Since Toyota is both the product and corporate brand, it opens up the possibility of reputational damage to occur on both the product and the corporate side of the master brand. Should a reputational crisis occur on such a brand, it is of critical importance that managers, marketers and brand owners manage such crisis as swiftly and effectively as possible to ensure that the brand image and brand identity remained intact. In order to minimise overall reputational damage on an organisation's brand architecture, constant revision, monitoring and diversification of the organisation's brand architecture is critical.

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