THE CORPORATE BRANDING NETWORKS BEHIND B2B SMES: REVEALING THE ACTORS

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper and literature addressed: The purpose of this paper is to identify stakeholders that might play a part in an SME's corporate branding activity and to describe the interdependencies between the actors in relation to the corporate brand in a B2B setting. The paper elaborates on the recent interest in 'relationship-centred' B2B branding that considers the focal network actors as embedded in the brand building process rather than as external targets. The focus is on corporate branding in SMEs in particular. The current research on B2B branding is mainly about product branding in large companies, so tends to overlook the SME environment, and also largely ignores the view of the network actors on how they are engaged in the corporate branding of other companies.

The study relies on the corporate branding and stakeholder research integrated with literature on industrial relationships and networks especially from the small and medium sized business viewpoint. The result is a detailed examination of corporate branding research and SME branding research concerning the inter-organizational nature of corporate branding that is intended to conceptualize the phenomenon.

Research method: This study adopts the network perspective to reflect the perceptions of multiple actors operating in the network instead of a focal company alone. The empirical data were gathered in 13 in-depth interviews with SME managers and key company stakeholders to provide evidence of stakeholders engaging in SME corporate branding in B2B markets. The empirical data are analyzed in terms of systematic coding and categorization of qualitative evidence given by the interviewees.

Research findings: The study revealed that B2B SMEs are connected with a wide range of network actors that may affect the SMEs' corporate branding. These actors are classified as follows: *Brand advisors, Brand associates, Brand advocates, Brand authorities and Brand assistants*.

Main contribution: The study makes two preliminary theoretical contributions. First, given the network approach, the study contributes to the research on industrial networks by suggesting that SMEs' overall brand performance is influenced by different network actors who the company is not necessarily able to control. Second, it extends both the existing SME corporate branding and stakeholder discussions by revealing and conceptualizing five groups of stakeholders/actors involved in the corporate branding process. The actors form five groups that can be further divided into two categories; first, those that are *involved in the brand management process* through intentionally established (i.e. strategic) network relations, and second, those that *contribute to the brand development* process through a broader network of interconnected relations. Considerations for brand managers and suggestions for future research are also presented.

Keywords: Network actors, B2B SMEs, corporate branding, industrial network relations

INTRODUCTION

A strong brand is considered to be a key intangible asset for a company (Keller & Lehmann, 2006) as it may be realized as concrete financial value and sustainable competitive advantage (see e.g. Louro & Cunha, 2001; Balmer & Grey, 2003; Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Branding is traditionally associated with large consumer-focused companies (Wong & Merrilees, 2005; Merrilees, 2007). However, in increasingly competitive global markets, branding capability is further recognized as a key determinant of market performance in the context of B2B SMEs (Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele & Lye, 2010; Juntunen, Saraniemi, Halttu & Tähtinen, 2010; Ojasalo, Nätti & Olkkonen, 2008) especially at the corporate level (Abimbola, 2001; Inskip, 2004; Krake, 2005).

A strong brand symbolizes quality, trustworthiness and distinctiveness (Balmer, 2001b; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Inskip, 2004; Krake, 2005) and thus improves the profile of a company in the markets. However, traditionally there has been an implication that such meanings associated with the brand are something the company or the brand managers can generate and control unequally (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; Veloutsou, 2008). Instead, owing to the interdependencies of the 'new' networked economy characterized by the complexity of its relationships (Gummesson, 2007), globalization (Möller & Halinen, 1999) and digitalization (Christodoulides, 2008) the principles of branding have changed dramatically. Whereas branding has conventionally been conceived of as an internally guarded one-way process to shape the images retained by the recipients, the contemporary conceptualization of the phenomenon views the external network actors as active constituents of the branding process rather than passive targets (Einwiller & Will, 2002; Leitch & Richardson, 2003; Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Christopher & Gaudenzi, 2009).

Network relationships provide a great potential for SMEs especially to increase brand value and awareness, because the lack of resources and limited industrial influence hinder their ability to achieve widespread brand recognition (Krake, 2005; Wong & Merrilees, 2005; Spickett-Jones & Eng, 2006; see also Äyväri & Möller, 1999).

Whilst scholars and practitioners of branding have gradually come to reject the traditional 'firm-centric', top-down view of brand management and to refer to the challenge of the collective and dynamic nature of branding (Louro & Cunha, 2001; Veloutsou, 2008), the roles of the various network actors in the process remain generally overlooked (Gregory, 2007; see also Brodie, Glynn & Little, 2006). By adopting the network perspective, this study aims to move from viewing corporate branding in isolation into an inter-organizational setting and to identify the network actors that might be relevant to an SME's corporate branding in the B2B context, and further, to elucidate their interdependencies in relation to the brand. The aim is achieved through answering the following research question: *Who are the external network actors involved in the branding process in B2B SMEs?*

The paper proceeds with a review of corporate branding, industrial network and stakeholder research focusing on the context of B2B SMEs. It then describes the research design and methodology, and follows that with an analysis of the empirical data, which is supported by extracts from the interviews conducted with the managers and stakeholders of the SME. As a result we identify and conceptualize five groups of external stakeholders involved in or contributing to SME brand management and development activities in an industrial setting,

those are: brand associates, brand advisors, brand advocates, brand authorities and brand assistants. Finally, we present the theoretical and managerial implications and consider the limitations of the study.

CORPORATE BRANDING IN B2B SMES

The definition of corporate brand relevant to this research is derived from the psychological interpretation that highlights the close connection of corporate brand to the stakeholder approach and, thus, see it as a 'collectively determined (Merz *et al*., 2009) distinctive image (or imagery picture) of a corporation, tightly anchored in the psyche of the stakeholders, that influence the behaviour of stakeholders' (Mefferet & Bierwirth, 2005: 144 via Fiedler & Kirchgeorg, 2007).

Corporate branding, for one, is the management of the corporate brand (Fiedler and Kirchgeorg 2007). Einwiller and Will (2002: 101) (building on the definition of Van Riel & Van Bruggen, 2002) have defined corporate branding as a "systematically planned and implemented process of creating and maintaining favorable images and consequently a favorable reputation of the company as a whole by sending signals to all stakeholders by managing behavior, communication, and symbolism". Apart from this definition, it is widely acknowledged in business that besides the firm-originated signals, there are unplanned and uncontrolled influences deriving from external sources that may affect the brand substance. The active role of external parties in branding should be further emphasized. Thus, this definition is an add up to the relational approach to corporate branding emphasizing the role of external actors, which views branding as a social and dynamic process, in which brand value and meaning is co-created through interaction with various network actors (Louro & Cunha, 2001; Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; Merz et al., 2009). In particular, this perspective on the corporate branding is the one accepted and further examined in this study.

Corporate branding shares the same objective as product branding in creating differentiation and preference (Knox & Bickerton, 2003) but from the whole company-wide perspective (Hatch & Shultz, 2003). The public perceptions of the brand are thus related to the whole company and what it represents in addition to, or even instead of, its product/service offerings (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2008; Inskip, 2004). Instead of appealing only to customers, corporate brands need to acquire legitimacy in the eyes of wider group actors such as investors, partners, suppliers, regulators, special interest groups and local communities (Balmer, 2001a; Hatch & Shultz, 2003; He & Balmer, 2006; Fiedler & Kirchgeorg, 2007; Merrilees, 2007; Roper & Davies, 2007). Brand values and associations are delivered and developed over time through a process of interactions between a company and all the related network actors (Gregory, 2007; Merrilees, 2007).

The previous research conducted in the area has shown that corporate branding is also an affordable way for an SME to convey its unique qualities (see Boyle, 2003; Inskip, 2004; Krake, 2005; Mowle & Merrilees, 2005; Wong & Merrilees, 2005; Abimbola & Kocak, 2007; Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Merrilees, 2007; Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008), however, the process differs from the practices adopted by large organizations (Berthon, Ewing & Napoli, 2008; Inskip, 2004), for example, by emphasizing the role of entrepreneurs (e.g. Krake, 2005; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Merrilees, 2007; Juntunen *et al*., 2010). It is suggested that entrepreneurs

can build a strong brand by taking an unconventional approach to branding (Boyle, 2003). Whereas large firms may have the ability and resources to conduct extensive promotions, B2B SMEs more frequently rely on personalized and interactive relationship activities and face-to-face communications with key actors to attain brand recognition (Wong & Merrilees, 2005) as there is not the need to attract the general public like in the consumer markets (Krake, 2005; Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008). Capabilities to tap into market opportunities as they arise and the ability to make fast decisions and adjustments to meet changing circumstances owing to the flexibility of structures, offer SMEs a great opportunity to exploit their network relationships in brand building (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Krake, 2005). Moreover, due to the limited promotional resources of SMEs, creativity and consistency in branding principles and practice are of particular importance in order to appear distinct (Boyle, 2003; Krake, 2005; Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele & Lye, 2010); the question though is which brand management principles, practices or philosophies are most amenable to the SME situation (Abimbola, 2001; Berthon *et al.*, 2008).

NETWORK APPROACH OF THIS STUDY

Researchers have started to emphasize the fact that, apart from the systematically planned process of creating and communicating a favourable brand image, overall brand performance is reliant on a range of external actors (Einwiller & Will, 2002; Christopher & Gaudenzi, 2009; Merz *et al.*, 2009; see also Veloutsou, 2008). Morgan, Deeter-Schmelz and Mober (2007) have studied B2B branding in a "strategic" service network context where the total brand experience is co-produced in a collaboration between a "hub firm" and its alliance partners (see also Jarillo, 1988; Parolini, 1999). The results indicate that the focal firm's brand image is not only affected by, but greatly reliant on its partners' performance (Morgan *et al.*, 2007). Also Fyrberg and Jüriado (2009) studied this kind of formalized service network in order to detect the interaction between network actors in a brand co-creation process. Our study extends the view beyond the strategic partner/focal firm relationship and focuses on the independent external actors operating within the overall self-organized business networks (see e.g. Möller & Wilson, 1995; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995) that might be relevant to SME corporate branding. In parallel with the term '*external actor*' we use the term '*stakeholder*' which is widely used in network related branding studies (e.g. Gregory, 2007; Jones, 2005).

Companies, and particularly SMEs, have little control over external network actors (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Ritter & Gemünden, 2003). Instead, in the interrelated business network environment, actors are exposed to the control and influence of others (Ritter, Wilkinson & Johnston, 2004) and are always, to some extent, dependent on each other for knowledge and other resources (Christopher & Gaudenzi, 2009). Some of the network relations themselves may even constitute one of the most – if not the most – valuable resources possessed by a company and be essential to its competitive positioning (Jarillo, 1988; Håkansson & Snehota, 2006). In line with the view of the industrial network theory (see e.g. Håkansson & Snehota, 1995; Möller & Svahn, 2003; Ritter & Gemünden, 2003; Håkansson & Snehota, 2006) the dominant emphasis in branding discussion is on managing network relationships rather than merely controlling the internal strategies of individual organizations (Christodoulides, 2008; Leitch & Richardson, 2003). This consequently shifts

the focus of corporate branding outside of the boundaries of one organization and into a network context.

NETWORK ACTORS WITHIN SME'S CORPORATE BRANDING SCOPE

Håkansson and Johanson (1992: 28) define network actors loosely as "those who perform activities and and/or control resources". All individuals, groups of individuals, parts of firms, firms and groups of firms which carry out interactive exchange relationships with other actors can, therefore, be counted as network actors forming the networks. Moreover, according to Gummesson (2007) networks, in principle, are scale-free, meaning that there is no limit to their potential size. However, in practice, networks are limited by specific conditions and circumstances related to the company or the market they operate in (*ibid.*). Industrial network relations mainly exist for economic reasons and are described as complex and multifaceted as they extend both horizontally and vertically and include both cooperative and competitive elements (Möller & Halinen, 1999; Wilkinson & Young, 2002). Rocks, Gilmore and Carson (2005) further conclude that it has been very difficult to develop interpretative models of SME networks because they are very contextual, coincidental and organic in nature, and strongly influenced by the personality of the key actors (see also Komulainen, Mainela & Tähtinen, 2006; Äyväri & Möller, 1999; O'Donnell, 2004; Street & Cameron, 2007).

Jones (2005), however, notes that there are various contingence-specific external actors in a company's network (some of which have generally been overlooked) that can play a significant part in (co-)constructing the brand meaning. Based on the previous research on branding in SMEs, external network actors may play a critical role in *contributing to the brand's functional performance* (Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008) and *assisting in developing the corporate brand concept* and *communications design* (Inskip, 2004). Network partners also *act as a reference* (Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008), *moderate the brand knowledge* and *awareness* (Gupta, Melewar & Bourlakis, 2010) and *give leverage* to a small company (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007). In addition, network actors are a valuable *source of market knowledge* and *feedback* (Juntunen *et al.*, 2010).

Accordingly, from the managerial point of view there is considerable potential in the SME's network that should be leveraged to improve its corporate brand awareness and performance. Access to both formal and informal business and social networks is crucial, particularly for SMEs (Street & Cameron, 2007) as they are claimed to be highly dependent on their capability to acquire resources through social (Komulainen *et al.*, 2006) and industry network contacts in order to manage competition (Äyväri & Möller, 1999; see also Håkansson & Snehota, 2006).

Stakeholder literature emphasizes that organizational performance is linked to stakeholder relations (Freeman, 1984; Jones, 2005). According to Jones (2005), the stakeholder approach provides a tool for managing relationships in the network, but also a tool for prioritizing those relationships according to their strategic importance. The challenge for the manager is to be able to identify the relationships that are sources of brand value.

The literature provides multiple ways in which stakeholders may be categorized (see Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997). For example, Mitchell *et al.* (1997) and Scott and Lane (2000) assert that power, legitimacy and urgency determine how salient a stakeholder's contribution will be to a manager. Later Gregory (2007) and Jones (2005) utilized this

division in their brand related stakeholder studies. Another categorization provided by Johnson and Scholes (2002) suggests that the importance of each stakeholder group and the amount of attention that should be devoted to them depends on where they are positioned in the power/interest matrix.

Jones (2005) suggests a process model for identifying stakeholder value relations consisting of the following phases 1) stakeholder identification, 2) stakeholder prioritization, 3) identification of the nature of the exchange. Furthermore, he suggests detecting a list of primary concerns for each of the stakeholders that will aid the firm "in sorting the stakeholders and in grouping them together" (Jones, 2005). This approach, however, does not recognize the potential of stakeholders to co-create brand value, but emphasizes a firm-centric perspective and what a firm can do for those stakeholder groups that have some expectations. In this study, we propose that classifying the stakeholder groups according to (the meaning of) their branding activities would be more helpful from a brand (value) co-creation perspective.

According to Gregory (2007), there appears to be increasing recognition in the marketing and organizational literature that the building of a corporate brand can be a mutual process. Although Gregory (2007) recognizes that the literature (e.g. Hatch & Schultz, 2003) does not explicitly indicate how stakeholders should be involved in the branding process and how stakeholders develop corporate brands, she provides a communication strategy model for various stakeholders, while still concentrating on the firm's (corporate brand) perspective and activities, not on the external actors' perspective or their branding activities.

Finally, Juntunen *et al.* (2010) have classified the key external actors contributing to SMEs' corporate branding in B2B markets as: *customers*, *suppliers*, *investors* and *shareholders*. They further noticed that partners, media, research and education institutes and competitors can be involved in the branding functions and activities in different company growth stages (*ibid.*). This study aims to provide further empirical evidence of the role of external network actors in SME corporate branding as their presence and importance in this process have already been widely addressed in the literature (see e.g. Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007; Brodie *et al.*, 2006; Ind & Bjerke, 2007; Leitch & Richardson, 2003). This aim is achieved through classifying the external actors according to their branding activities in the SME's network.

METHODOLOGY

The study applies qualitative methods as they are considered particularly suitable for understanding the context-specific nature of networks (Bonoma, 1985; Tsoukas, 1989; Halinen & Törnroos, 2005), for explaining complex constructs (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2002, 88) such as branding (Cooper, 1999) and for gaining special insights into managerial decision-making and practice in SMEs (Shaw, 1999).

The empirical data were gathered during 2009 and 2010 through personal interviews with 13 SME managers and professionals and their key stakeholders including customers, partners and a consultant. To achieve rich data on the phenomenon, we did not focus on a certain network but chose representatives from different SME networks as key informants. The main concern driving the selection of interviewees was that they be able to provide different professional views of the phenomenon, through holding different positions in their respective

networks, and having different operational responsibilities and some years of personal experience of B2B SMEs. The interviewees were mainly either technically oriented or sales and marketing people (see Table 1.).

The interviews were semi-structured on the basis of the literature review. The dominant focus was on the interviewee's personal opinions and experiences related to the research issue, and the theoretical assumptions were used to guide the conversation. The interviews were audio taped and the recordings transcribed for analysis.

Table 1. Interviews

	Interviewee	Field of business	Date	Duration
1.	Managing Director	Electronic Manufacturing	3.2. 2009	1 h 41 min
2.	Director of International Sales	Electronic Manufacturing	4.2.2009	1 h 11 min
3.	Managing Director	Electronic Manufacturing	13.2.2009	1 h 2 min
4.	Key Account Manager	Electronic Manufacturing	18.2.2009	1 h 30 min
5.	Managing Director	Environmental technology	18.2.2009	1 h 36 min
6.	Project Engineer	Environmental technology	2.3.2009	40 min
7.	Environmental Manager	Bioenergy	3.3.2009	1 h 16 min
8.	Business Director	Software	11.2.2010	1 h 2 min
9.	Business Consultant	Business development and financing	12.2.2010	1 h 6 min
10.	Sales and Marketing Director	Software	16.2.2010	1 h 18 min
11.	Managing Director	High-technology	19.2.2010	1 h
12.	R&D Director	Mobile phone	19.2.2010	1 h 8 min
13.	Director of International Sales	Software	26.2.2010	1 h 38 min

The main focus of the analysis was on the interviewees' choice of the important company stakeholders they considered to have made a meaningful contribution to the SME's brand building. The subsequent analysis attempted to identify patterns in those contributing activities performed by the different actors in relation to the brand which allowed us to further divide the actors into different categories. These categories were, thus, not predefined but instead emerged inductively from the empirical data in the course of the analysis process (see Hill & Wright 2001).

By adopting a network/multi stakeholders approach we aimed to go beyond examining the individual actor or focal company or net alone, and examine the phenomenon as a whole. Triangulation of researchers was ensured by three researchers individually classifying the data.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The nature of corporate branding in SMEs

The empirical study shows that for many SMEs, corporate branding is a fairly subconscious activity, inherent in the daily business and largely embedded in the manager's daily contact with customers and other stakeholders. However, the level of brand orientation and familiarity clearly varied amongst the interviewees. Face-to-face communication and personal selling were generally recognized as the most important situations to generate positive brand associations. The data strongly suggest that networking is essential for SME's corporate branding as it greatly depends on the key personnel who handle such inter-personal stakeholder interfaces.

> "We don't have any comprehensive branding program. […] However, I wouldn't say that we don't have a brand but it is more like embedded in all of us. It (corporate brand image) largely forms through the business acquaintances and personal contact network ... through these people our company and expertise will become branded as the word spreads." *R&D Director*

> "I dare say that in most of the cases it (corporate branding) is rather stochastic activity and not very determined or focused. But sometimes you also come across with some exceptional cases where small companies have started to build a brand at very early stage which, of course, will pay back later in the future." *Business Consultant*

The interviewees concede that small companies are to some extent dependent on their inter-firm and inter-personal network relationships as they provide resources in terms of reference and contacts, branding knowledge, technology expertise and access to markets etc.

> "The truth is that we are a small company and we have certain objectives for the future but we also have limited internal resources so we need partners in order to grow. That makes us also somewhat dependent on some of our stakeholders." *Sales and Marketing Director*

All the interviewees identified several important, yet evolving and partly overlapping, stakeholder groups in their social and the companies' business network that proved of relevance to their SME's corporate branding. It was stressed that, in principle, each company stakeholder can play an central role in engendering favourable brand associations and building a positive brand image through network interactions and word-of-mouth communications. However, respondents particularly emphasized the role of strategic partners,

such as the key technology partners, value-added resellers and channel intermediaries as the key determinants of customer satisfaction and the overall corporate brand experience.

> "Our products are kind of very complex and then there is the partner, agent and intermediaries and we need to ensure that the same message goes through them to the end customer. […] Nowadays the situation is, however, that a competitor may sometimes also be a partner." *Sales and Marketing Director*

Some of the stakeholders were perceived as more influential than others in terms of corporate branding. The analysis further shows that some of the external stakeholders are involved in the strategic brand management process of SMEs, whereas some are of importance in contributing to the corporate brand development and overall performance. In the analysis, we identify five different groups of stakeholders, the actors involved in or contributing to SME's brand management and development activities namely: brand associates, brand advisors, brand advocates, brand authorities and brand assistants.

Brand Advisors

Brand Advisors include the external stakeholders that are involved in an SME's brand related management decisions. Many of the interviewees felt that the profound idea of corporate branding in SMEs is to become a distinguished and respected player in the industry through professional behaviour and appearance. Owing to the lack of internal branding knowledge and resources, the interviewees generally perceived SMEs as needing specialized advice when designing their corporate branding vision, strategy and activities in order to achieve distinction and credibility.

> "In the very beginning we had this profound discussion about our corporate values; what do we want to represent, how we want our customers to perceive us, and what we appreciate in our work and so on. However, over the last years the company idea has developed a lot as we have gained more knowledge and understanding about this business and how we see ourselves in the future. Thus, we have gone through the same conversation with them again to adjust our marketing communications and image. The original logo for example has been changed. As we leave this job to professionals we have time to concentrate on our own core competence." *Managing Director*

> "I, as marketing and sales director, drafted the first version of the press release … then we sent it to the marketing and communications agency and they sent us the new version. […] It caused a wow-effect the way they managed to put it." *Sales and Marketing Director*

Advertising and PR agencies, marketing/business consultancies, research institutes and experienced investors and other business partners can play a major role in guiding the strategic branding choices (such as brand architecture and communications design) of SMEs. These stakeholders can be of great importance in co-creating the substance of an SME's corporate brand especially in the start-up phase. Their influence on branding decisions depends greatly on the intensity and duration of such consultative relationships.

Brand Associates

Brand Associates were identified as the external stakeholders that are involved in delivering on the functional brand value. SME's corporate brand performance in business-to-business markets is mainly associated with its product/service performance and, therefore, often considered as equal to the technical expertise and innovativeness of the company. Hence, a strong corporate brand is primarily seen as resulting from the superior customer-perceived brand value and operational reliability in the markets which, in turn, can be affected by the related performance of external stakeholders. Typical examples of such stakeholders include intermediaries and suppliers, channel partners and component manufacturers.

> "In our business the reliability comes second, right after the technology, as the most important thing in terms of branding..." *R&D Director*

> "If something goes wrong in the process, we are the ones to blame because it might look like it's our responsibility even though it's not." *Business Director*

> "The customer's problem can be caused by us or some third party that we can't really do anything about" *Managing director*

Brand Advocates

Brand Advocates include the external stakeholders that contribute to creating brand knowledge in the markets. The empirical study reveals that some marketing-oriented and pro-active external stakeholders can be a key to acquiring additional brand recognition and awareness by communicating the brand's functional and symbolic values in their own networks and serving as a reference. Such stakeholder involvement can be based on contractual agreements with direct economic benefit or pure mutuality. These actors typically include technology and investor partners, customers and members in the marketing and distribution channel, and also media.

> "They (customers) talk with each other and spread the knowledge of our company and do the marketing for us, basically without knowing" *Project Engineer*

> "We are like references for them so the other customers are constantly asking us about this company…we have been spreading the message about the company and its product and services on many occasions though I have no personal interest regarding this company" *Environmental Manager*

> "We have printed the logos of three of our partner firms on the last page of our brochure…So, as such, official co-marketing has also been practiced." *Business Director*

The interviewees clearly highlighted the role of satisfied customers in recommending the corporate brand to new potential customers. Recommendations coming from customers and other reputable stakeholders such as respected investors were seen to symbolize the trustworthiness and competitiveness of the SME and leverage its corporate brand. Stakeholder connections with big industry players and other opinion leaders were further

emphasized in the interviews as they can attract widespread attention and thus boost the value of the SME's corporate brand. The impact of the media on corporate branding was also recognized especially as the digital channels can multiply the effect of traditional communication as the following example illustrates.

> "After the keynote speech that our customer gave in an exhibition all the technical journals and local newspapers wanted to write a story about us and there is also a video running on the Internet." *R&D Director*

Brand authorities

Brand authorities were identified as the external stakeholders that govern an SME's branding decisions. The interviewees broadly acknowledged that, given the lack of industrial influence SMEs can exert, there are external stakeholders that can govern their internal corporate branding decisions regardless of the company's brand vision or mission. Typical examples of external stakeholders that provide the general definitions of policy for companies to act on are governmental agencies and regulators, trade and industry associations. In addition, the empirical study also reveals that powerful channel partners, industry leading competitors, key customers and especially stock owners can be in a position to determine an SME's corporate branding strategy for their own or mutual benefit. For example, selling under a big customers' brand name (i.e. an ingredient brand) is often considered the most efficient but is also sometimes the only way for SMEs to get their value-added products to the market, resulting in the SME's brand becoming more or less integrated with the customer's brand and sometimes even vanishing under it.

> "When the investors come along their goal is to multiply their investment and they will take care of that the company does things right and starts to act professionally." *Sales and Marketing Director*

> "In the case of a very close customer relationship, the customer can affect the company's brand but also its processes. That is, in that case one might require the other to change their mode of business operations and adjust to the customer's interests especially if the co-operation is long-term and takes time … If the business is, in this way, based on a one big customer relationship it is inevitable that the brand will develop and evolve in compliance with the customer's will." *Director of International Sales*

> "Public authorities are an important stakeholder group as we must comply with certain regulatory requirements. Given the industry we are operating the green values are important." *Key Account Manager*

> "We have to choose the same direction because we are dependent on them (public sector decision-makers) in a certain way…we would have to amend, so that, the influence can be very strong. […] Let's say that if someone like Google, Nokia or Microsoft would say that this stuff is nonsense and nobody does that then there is no hope to survive in this world" *R&D Director*

Brand assistants

Brand assistants include the external stakeholders that facilitate the SME's branding effort. The interviewees also mentioned some contingent-specific external stakeholders that facilitate a small company's corporate branding by providing valuable feedback and support in branding issues and acting as bridges to new relationships, networks and resources. These stakeholders often include an SME manager's personal friends, business colleagues and close channel partners. In addition, different public and private investors may offer assistance to foster SME growth and development. Considering the limited resources available for SMEs, such stakeholder connections were perceived as providing additional opportunities in terms of corporate branding, yet were greatly reliant on an SME manager's personal contact network and his/her ability to form and exploit such contacts.

"There are actors in the local business network who clearly have a positive volition and also capabilities to assist a small company's success and also the capacity to contribute to the brands' growth and development for example by telling what the company should do and where it should show which is by no means unimportant." *Business Consultant*

"He knows everyone who needs to be known and is able to contact people with the right connections." *Managing Director*

"…organizations that offer support and cost-free services in this matter and … give concrete advice in terms of consultancy and training can again take it (i.e. corporate branding) forward." *Managing Director*

"I have mentioned several times that they (the company) should have a better and more descriptive name" *Customer*

Summary of the empirical findings

The empirical study revealed that B2B SMEs are connected to a wide range of network actors that may affect their corporate branding. In Table 2, the external stakeholders involved in B2B SME branding are presented in more detail and divided into five different categories of which the brand advisors can be further seen as those that are directly *involved in the brand management process* through intentionally established (i.e. strategic) network relations. Whereas the brand associates, brand advocates, brand authorities and brand assistants *contribute to the brand development* process more indirectly through a broader network of interconnected relations.

Table 2. External stakeholders involved in B2B SME branding

Brand Advisors	Brand Associates	Brand Advocates	Brand Authorities	Brand Assistants
Advertising and PR agencies Marketing/business consultancies Research institutes	Intermediaries Suppliers Strategic partners Component	Technology and investor partners Customers and members in the	Governmental agencies Regulators Trade and industry	Manager's personal friends Business colleagues

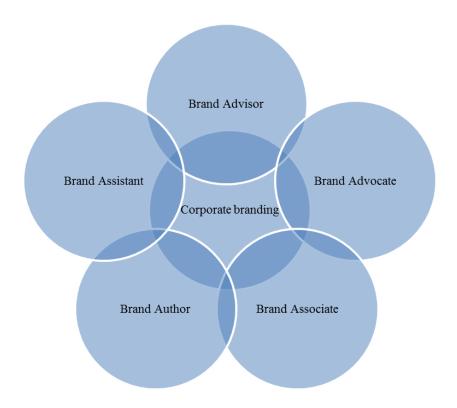| Experienced investors Business partners	manufacturers	marketing and distribution channel Media Opinion leaders	associations Channel partners Industry leading competitors Key customers Stock owners	Close channel partners Public and private investors

THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study aimed to move beyond viewing corporate branding in isolation into an inter-organizational setting and to identify the external actors that might be of relevance to SMEs' corporate branding in an industrial context and to elucidate their interdependencies in relation to the brand.

On the basis of the literature review, we presumed that in the dynamic and interrelated business network environment, corporate branding can be influenced by the actions and reactions of different external actors. Our findings contribute to research on corporate branding and industrial networks by revealing that there are several different external actors that together constitute an SME's business and social network that are either intentionally involved in or unintentionally contribute to the corporate branding process.

The study offers two *preliminary theoretical contributions*. Firstly, the study contributes to the research on industrial networks by suggesting that an SME's overall brand performance is influenced by various network actors that the company is not necessarily able to control. Previous research on branding in SMEs has suggested that network actors may play a critical role, for example, in contributing to the brand's functional performance (Ojasalo *et al*., 2008) but often studies (e.g. Jones, 2005; Gregory, 2007) emphasize a firm-centric perspective, describing what a firm can do to engage the stakeholders in the branding process.

Secondly, the study contributes to the corporate branding and stakeholder research by identifying and conceptualizing five groups of external stakeholders that is the actors involved in or contributing to SME brand management and development activities (see, Figure 1).

Figure 1. The 5 A's involved in corporate branding (*by the Authors*)

Brand advisors are involved in brand related management decisions. Stakeholders belonging to this group are, for example, advertising and PR agencies and research institutes. Brand advisors become involved in the focal firm's strategic brand management process. Four other groups contribute to the brand development process through a broader network of interconnected actors. *Brand associates* are involved in delivering the functional brand value, as strategic partners, intermediaries and suppliers for instance. *Brand advocates* contribute to creating brand knowledge, and include the media and customers. *Brand authorities* govern branding decisions and may typically be governmental agencies, stock owners and industry leading competitors. Finally, *brand assistants* facilitate the company's branding effort and are often a manager's personal friends, business colleagues or close channel partners. Stakeholder groups were partly overlapping and the role and importance of different stakeholders would be expected to evolve over the course of time.

Through this classification, we further developed the literature on stakeholder classifications, especially in the SME corporate branding context (see Fyrberg & Jüriado, 2009; Gregory, 2007; Jones, 2005). The ideas of Jones (2005) and Gregory (2007) amongst others have brought stakeholders into the branding process as participators, whereas Brodie *et al*. (2006) and later Fyrberg and Jüriado (2009) have emphasized the role of the various actors in brand co-creation. However, those classifications and perspectives have, to date, remained firm-centric and have not provided particularly comprehensive descriptions of the various actors.

Indeed, based on the previous research on branding in SMEs, external network actors may have a critical role to play in *contributing to the brand's functional performance* (Ojasalo *et al.,* 2008) and *assisting in developing the corporate brand concept* and *communications design* (Inskip 2004). Network partners also *act as a reference* (Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008), *moderate the brand knowledge* and *awareness* (Gupta *et al.*, 2010) and *give leverage* to a small company (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007). In addition, network actors are a valuable

source of market knowledge and *feedback* (Juntunen *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, Fyrberg and Jüriado (2009) suggested that the main actors in service brand networks are customers, providers and the brand governor (e.g. the owner of the firm). This study, however, answers the need for a more comprehensive model for external stakeholder involvement in corporate brand building (Gregory, 2007) providing the classification of the network actors in the branding process.

For small business managers, the study offers perspectives that should be taken into account when considering the role of corporate brand management in the company. This study considers the (pro)active role of an SME's external stakeholders in creating customer-perceived brand value, increasing brand knowledge and/or influencing branding decisions in the company. It indicates that SME corporate branding involves both coordinated and uncoordinated behaviour and activities taking place in the company's network, meaning that the brand substance develops in the markets, whether systematically or otherwise.

Given the tendency to overlook corporate branding issues in industrial SMEs, there is a danger that the corporate brand will become either superficial or distorted if the responsibility to build brand image and awareness comes to rest heavily on the external actors. Furthermore, given the dynamics of business networks and the impact of modern information and communication technology and the social media, the activities performed in a network setting can have unexpected and far reaching consequences for SME corporate brand development. Thus we recommend SMEs regularly evaluate the substance of different external stakeholders in relation to the predefined corporate branding strategy. The conceptualization of the 5 A's assists SME managers to make a concentrated effort to detect, build and exploit such stakeholder contacts as can positively influence their branding efforts in different circumstances, in the light of both their business and social networks. We do not propose that SMEs should strive to manage or control all the branding-related activities and information in the interlinked and dynamic network, as that would be well-nigh impossible. Instead we would urge SMEs to encourage their external stakeholders to participate in constructing the corporate brand value and to facilitate such activity.

This study has some obvious limitations and more investigation, both qualitative and quantitative, in this area would be required to provide more reasoned generalizations. Our empirical findings and conclusions are based on the personal views expressed in interviews of 13 SME managers and their stakeholders; yet the method chosen did not provide first-hand insights from all the external stakeholders claimed to influence SMEs' corporate branding. More research is thus also required on the multiple approaches of different stakeholders to justify their relevance to SME branding. In order to gain deep understanding, it would be vital to examine this area in detail, first in one network and then widening the research to other networks. In examining the networks, the role of the stakeholders would naturally be of interest, but so would the events and processes in which they are engaged.

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