

Towards an Integrative Framework of B2B Branding– A Bibliometric Study and Conceptual Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to identify the most influential publications addressing B2B branding, and based on their contributions, tentatively propose a framework of business-to-business (B2B) branding. We use bibliometric methodology, exploring some of the most cited B2B branding literature, in order to discover the determinants and benefits of a strong B2B brand. Analysis of the selected publications indicates that the most significant determinants of a strong B2B brand are quality, reliability, distribution services, supplier reputation and support services. Respectively, price premium, halo-effect, reduction in risk, customer confidence, differentiation, loyalty, barriers to rival entry and referrals were perceived as the most significant benefits of having a strong B2B brand.

Keywords: B2B branding, bibliometrics, citation analysis

INTRODUCTION

During the past decades, B2B branding has attracted wide interest among academics and practitioners of business. However, most of the branding tenets are largely developed in the context of consumer products, and despite the numerous papers on B2B branding (e.g. Mudambi, Doyle and Wong 1997, Michell, King and Reast 2001, Webster 2004, Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt 2004), the discussion on B2B branding in general remains rather fragmented. To this end, the purpose of this paper is to identify some of the most influential publications addressing B2B branding, and based on their contributions, tentatively propose a framework of business-to-business (B2B) branding.

A variety of models and frameworks on B2B branding have been introduced in the past (Mudambi et al. 1997, Kim, Reid, Plank and Dahlström 1998, Lynch and De Chernatony 2004, Van Riel, De Mortanges and Streukens 2005, Han and Sung 2008, Jensen and Klastrup 2008, Kuhn, Alpert and Pope 2008), but a coherent conceptualization is yet to be made and the debate on the basic assumptions of B2B branding is still afloat (Mudambi et al. 1997, Cova and Borghini 2006).

Closer scrutiny on extant literature reveals that when discussing drivers for a strong B2B brand, authors emphasize such factors as image (Michell et al. 2001, Walley et al. 2007), quality (Gordon, Calantone and Di Benedetto 1993, Van Riel et al. 2005) communications,

(Morrison 2001, Lynch and De Chernatony 2004), distribution services (Mudambi 2002), company reliability (Webster and Keller 2004), reputation (Hutton 1997), and performance (Mudambi et al. 1997).

From the supplier's perspective, B2B brand benefits include stronger relationships with the customer (McQuiston 2004), price premiums (Bendixen et al. 2004), reputation (Lehmann and O'Shaughnessy 1974), loyalty (Hutton 1997), and increased trust (Han and Sung 2008). From the customer's perspective, B2B brand benefits include product identification (Anderson, Narus and Narayandas 2009, p. 140), customer confidence (Michell et al. 2001) and reduced risk (Webster and Keller 2004).

As a consequence, the terminology surrounding the B2B branding discussion is vast. Our aim is to develop an integrated model that explicitly accounts for the determinants and benefits of a successful B2B brand. We attempt to do this by identifying some of the most influential B2B branding publications, and based on their contributions, tentatively proposing an integrated framework of business-to-business (B2B) branding. We address the following research question: *What are the fundamental (i) determinants, and (ii) benefits of having a strong B2B brand?*

This paper contributes to the growing body on literature of B2B branding. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: First, we introduce the bibliometric citation analysis as a method for analyzing the literature and describe the process of data collection and analysis. Second, we analyze the selected key publications and, as a result, propose a tentative framework on B2B branding. The last section presents our conclusions, limitations and avenues for future research.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology for identifying the milestone publications from the field of B2B branding is bibliometric citation analysis. Bibliometrics is the quantitative study of referenced literature (Small 1973, Egghe and Rousseau 1990, Diadato 1994, Ratnatunga and Romano 1997, Wormell 1998). In the context of our research agenda, bibliometrics provides two key advantages. First, bibliometric methods can identify dominant features among academic publications and latent intellectual structures of a discipline (Borgman 1990, Schneider and Borlund 2004). Second, the use of citation counts is a well-established method of measuring the influence of an individual article (Garfield 1979, Diodato 1994). Citation analysis rests on the premise that authors are informed well enough to identify influential works in their research field by citing them (Pilkington and Liston-Heyes 1999, Wakefield 2008), and that frequently cited publications provide a greater contribution to the academic discussion than less cited ones (Sharplin and Mabry 1985, Nisonger 1994). In the past, citation analysis has been used in a variety of disciplines, such as entrepreneurship research (Schildt et al. 2006), strategic management (Franke et al. 1990), operation management (Pilkington and Meredith 2009), organizational behavior (Culnan et al. 1990) and project business (Artto and Wikström 2005), and this paper applies the methodology to B2B branding literature.

Data collection

The original data source was compiled as follows: A list of the 50 most influential marketing journals at present (Hult, Reiman and Schilke 2009) was cross-referenced against the ISI Web of Science database, resulting in 32 matching journals. As the purpose of this study was to focus on publications addressing B2B branding, all the purely consumer-oriented journals were removed from this set. Now we were left with 27 journals, to which were added the Journal of Brand Management and the Journal of Product and Brand Management, since these journals were considered relevant to our study, even though they didn't exist in Hult et al (2009) list. However, these two journals were not available in the ISI Web of Science database, so they had to be accessed through their respective websites. The complete list of journals included in the analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Journals used in citation analysis

Journal	
Business Horizons	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing
California Management Review	Journal of international Business Studies
Decision Sciences	Journal of International Marketing
European Journal of Marketing	Journal of Marketing
Harvard Business Review	Journal of Marketing Research
Industrial Marketing Management	Journal of Product and Brand Management
International Journal of Market Research	Journal of Product Innovation Management
International Journal of Research in Marketin	Journal of Retailing
Journal of Advertising	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science
Journal of Advertising Research	Management Science
Journal of Business	Marketing Letters
Journal of Business Ethics	Marketing Science
Journal of Business Research	Psychology and Marketing
Journal of Brand Management	Sloan Management Review
Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing	

The temporal scope of the search was delimited to articles published in 1975-2009 in selected journals due to the limitations of the ISI Web of Science database. However, at the point of acquiring the data, it became evident that no publications matching the search criteria were available prior to the year 1993, and therefore the lower limit rose to 1993. Keywords were set as “*industrial*” OR “*B-to-B*” OR “*business-to-business*” OR “*B2B*” AND “*brand****”. The database search was conducted in late December 2009, thus it included all the articles for the year 2009 that had been accumulated in the database at that point in time. The search provided 72 articles, of which 41 articles were rejected based on a careful reading of the title, abstract and keywords, since their relevance was perceived as insufficient. A manual search was conducted of the two journals absent from the ISI Web of Science database through their websites using the same search parameters, and seven additional articles were identified. Thus the final data set included a total of 38 relevant articles from the years 1993-2009 (see Appendix 1) about B2B branding.

Citation analysis

The final data set of 38 relevant articles contained a total of 1931 references, of which 1430 references were different. We identified 86 different persons authoring the 38 selected articles, and six authors had published more than one paper, but no more than three papers. The remaining 70 authors had published only one paper, with 27 persons acting as first authors. This indicates that the field of branding in a B2B context is widely-spread among the relatively sparse literature that does exist.

In our analysis, we are interested in finding key sources from the set of referred articles. In order to identify the most influential publications, all the referred works were ranked by the number of received citations. Using a cut-off level of a minimum of 6 received citations, a list of the 24 most cited works, including both articles and books, was created (see Table 2). However, it is important to note that citation analysis tends to ignore the most recent publications since they haven't had the time to gain enough citations.

The procedure for citation analysis was the following. Articles were searched through the ISI Web of Science database, from where they were imported to Sitkis software (Schildt 2002). Sitkis is used to parse the data for further analyses in desktop programs, such as Microsoft Excel 2007. After forming the list of the 24 most cited items, all the titles and the abstracts of these works were carefully read and all but B2B branding publications were removed. This left us with the most cited 12 publications (highlighted works in Table 2) addressing B2B branding.

Table 2. The most cited 24 items

Rank	Author	Year	Journal	Volume	# Citations
1	MICHELL P	2001	IND MARKET MANAG	30	18
2	MUDAMBI S	1997	IND MARKET MANAG	26	18
3	GORDON GL	1993	J PRODUCT BRAND MANA	2	17
4	SHIPLEY D	1993	IND MARKET MANAG	22	16
5	AAKER DA	1991	MANAGING BRAND EQUIT	book	14
6	HUTTON JG	1997	J PRODUCT BRAND MANA	6	14
7	MUDAMBI S	2002	IND MARKET MANAG	31	14
8	BENDIXEN M	2004	IND MARKET MANAG	33	12
9	KOTLER P	--	MARKETING MANAGEMENT	book	11
10	SAUNDERS JA	1979	IND MARKET MANAG	8	11
11	AAKER DA	1996	BUILDING STRONG BRAND	book	10
12	KELLER KL	1993	J MARKETING	57	10
13	HAGUE PN	1994	POWER IND BRANDS	book	8
14	SHAW	1989	IND MARKET MANAG	18	8
15	SINCLAIR SA	1988	IND MARKET MANAG	17	8
16	AAKER DA	2000	BRAND LEADERSHIP	book	7
17	BERRY LL	2000	J ACAD MARKET SCI	28	7
18	LEHMANN D	1974	J MARKETING	38	7
19	MORGAN RM	1994	J MARKETING	58	7
20	ANDERSON JC	1988	PSYCHO BULL	103	6
21	LOW J	2002	IND MARKET MANAG	31	6
22	WEBSTER FE	1972	ORG BUYING BEHAVIOR	book	6
23	WEBSTER FE	2004	J BRAND MANAGEMENT	11	6
24	ZEITHAML VA	1988	J MARKETING	52	6

ANALYSIS OF THE KEY SOURCES

We chose the remaining 12 items on B2B branding, which can be considered as the most influential works of the issue at this point in time, and carefully read them through several times. The key motivation in carrying out this qualitative process was to reveal the contents of the most cited publications and capture the insights shaping the B2B branding discussion. We looked for the factors influencing to the strength of a B2B brand, which occurred most frequently in the B2B branding literature.

The value of a brand, as perceived by a customer, is a sum of various factors which eventually determine whether a purchase is made. Authors address these factors with different terms, such as expected brand values or issues (Gordon et al. 1993, Hague and Jackson 1994, p. 103, Mudambi et al. 1997), criteria for selecting a favorite (Hutton 1997) or a preferred brand, (Bendixen et al. 2004), derivatives from brand equity (Michell et al. 2001), brand associations (Jensen and Klastrup 2008), determinants (Van Riel et al. 2005) or benefits from brand naming (Shipley and Howard 1993). This multifaceted terminology illustrates the ambiguity of the branding discussion. In this paper, we attempt to pin these factors together by calling them brand determinants; factors that extant literature identifies as influencing the strength of a B2B brand.

Much like the value, the advantages of a particular brand are the sum of certain factors. Although extant literature uses terms such as brand-equity behavior (Hutton 1997) or competitive differentials (Michell et al. 2001), brand benefit is the concept most often used (Shipley and Howard 1993, Hague and Jackson 1994, p. 40-42, Bendixen et al. 2004, Webster and Keller). Thus, in this paper, we use the concept of brand benefit to pin together the advantages of a strong B2B brand.

By conducting the qualitative analysis as described, we identified the determinants and benefits of a strong B2B brand from the literature, and they are presented in Table 3 with the main findings from the 12 most cited B2B branding publications.

Table 3. Most cited B2B branding publications

Author	Year	Methodology	Determinants for strong B2B brand	B2B brand benefits	Main findings
Mudambi et al	1997	Exploratory interviews	Quality, distribution services, support services, supplier reputation, supplier relationship	Comfortability	Intangible factors and naming strategies have a significant role in B2B branding
Michell et al	2001	Survey	Quality, image, performance, service, availability, familiarity, supplier relationship, price	Confidence, reputation, competitive advantage, barriers to entry, loyalty, price premium, halo-effect, differentiation	Brand value is associated with perceived quality, image, market leadership, company reputation and credibility
Gordon et al	1993	Survey	Quality, familiarity, value for the price, company reputation	Loyalty, halo-effect	Brand equity is present in the B2B sector, brand loyalty = firm loyalty in studied product category
Shiple and Howard	1993	Survey	-	Product identity, makes buying easier, helps positioning and segmentation, competitive advantage	Brand names are a major asset for B2B firms, especially for larger firms
Hutton	1997	Survey	Reliability, reputation	Price premium, referrals, halo-effect, risk-avoidance	Good B2B brand equity leads to a price premium, referrals and halo-effect
Mudambi	2002	Survey	Distribution services, product properties, relationship with the supplier, support services, reputation, prior purchase history	-	Highlights the importance of branding in a B2B context. Identifies 3 buyer clusters to whom branding is the most important
Bendixen et al	2004	Conjoint analysis	Quality, reliability, performance, after sales services, ease of operation and maintenance, price, supplier reputation, supplier relationship	Price premium, halo-effect, referrals	Buyers are willing to pay a premium, make referrals and extend the halo effect for their favorite brand
Saunders and Watt	1979	Survey	Reliability of delivery	-	Brand-naming strategies have mixed effectiveness
Author	Year	Methodology	Determinants for strong B2B brand	B2B brand benefits	Main findings
Hague and Jackson	1994	Book	Quality, price, delivery, service	Price premium, barriers to entry, trust, reduced uncertainty, confidence, satisfaction, differentiation	Guidelines for building and managing a successful industrial brand
Sinclair and Seward	1988	Survey	Price, availability	Premium, differentiation	Brand-naming strategies have mixed effectiveness
Lois and Blow	2000	Case study	-	Product distinctiveness, premium	Introduces 3 ways to avoid becoming generic brand name
Webster and Keller	2004	Conceptual paper	Company reliability and credibility, product performance	Risk-avoidance, loyalty, relationship	Industrial branding can enhance product differentiation, customer relationships and loyalty

In the following, the most cited B2B brand determinants and benefits are briefly summarized, and some of them, such as distribution and support services, are grouped under broader categories.

B2B Brand Determinants

Quality

Quality, as perceived by the customers, is mentioned in five publications, and clearly it commands an important role, as four publications rank it as the most important criterion for selecting a certain brand. Good quality is considered to have a significant influence on company reputation (Mudambi et al. 1997) and customer loyalty (Gordon et al. 1993, Michell et al. 2001).

In Mudambi et al (1997) quality is defined as a “combination of a technical product specifications, underlying design features, reliability and innovation”. Hague and Jackson (1994 p. 8) consider that depending on the industry, the definition of quality can include reliability, durability, strength, longevity, power, engineering integrity and fit for purpose. Furthermore, Gordon et al (1993), Michell et al (2001) and Bendixen et al (2004) all lean on Aaker’s (1991) definition of perceived quality, which is essentially customer’s subjective perception or overall feeling of a brand, and this is often based on dimensions such as reliability and performance.

Reliability

Reliability is discussed in several publications; however, majority of them include it as an underlying dimension of quality (e.g. Gordon et al. 1993, Hague and Jackson 1994, p. 8, Mudambi et al. 1997). Michell et al. (2001) found reliability as one of the primary drivers for brand loyalty.

Three surveys that use reliability (Hutton 1997, Michell et al. 2001 and Bendixen et al. 2004) as indicator for brand preference selected their criteria based on factors adopted from consumer branding literature.

Distribution Services

A number of distribution related issues are discussed in six publications with two top criteria positions (Saunders and Watt 1979, Mudambi 2002), and here they are grouped under distribution services. In Mudambi’s study (2002) of industrial bearing buyers, branding receptive firms perceived ordering and delivery services significantly more important than other firms. Sinclair and Seward (1988) emphasize the importance of product availability, while Michell et al (2001) argue that product availability is only of average importance for industrial buyers.

For Hague and Jackson (1994 p. 130) distribution services consist of delivery times, express services and most importantly, reliability of delivery, which is also highlighted by the study of Saunders and Watt (1979). In the same vein, study by Mudambi et al (1997) emphasizes product availability, reliability of delivery, ease of ordering and lead times. In addition,

Mudambi et al (1997) highlights the substantial importance of a suppliers' capability to respond buyer's emergency requests.

Supplier Reputation

Supplier reputation is mentioned in six publications. Webster and Keller (2004) argue that branding should emphasize intangible features, such as trustworthiness, credibility and company reliability as a basis for differentiation. In Mudambi et al (1997) respondents noted that purchasing from the market leader can elevate the buyer's status, and Mudambi (2002) found that buying from the market leader can increase the acceptance of the buyer's own products.

However, in the conjoint analysis of Bendixen et al (2004), the supplier reputation reached only the eighth place in the importance of selecting ones preferred brand. Gordon et al. (1993) and Hutton (1997) argue that overall company reputation has a positive influence on brand, and Hutton also observed that the [brand] reputation has the biggest impact on the price premium.

Support Services

Support services include a wide range of issues, and they are discussed in five publications although none of them ranks these within the top three criteria. For Mudambi et al (1997) support services include technical support, troubleshooting, available hotlines, on-call services, regular site visits and training upon request, whereas Michell et al (2001) criteria uses a simple definition of a mere service, and Bendixen et al (2004) criteria in turn uses after sales services. Hague and Jackson (1994) consider that sales support, after sales service including troubleshooting and maintenance and credit control comprise support services, and Mudambi (2002) argues that technical support services include design advice, product testing support and troubleshooting.

B2B Brand Benefits

Price Premium

Six publications discuss price premium as a benefit of having a strong B2B brand, and four of these rank price premium as the number one brand benefit. However, only two studies actually measured the premium percentage which buyer's were willing to pay. Hutton (1997) observed that leading brands commanded a premium of 12 to 19 % over a new, unknown brand, whilst Bendixen et al (2004) conjoint analysis resulted in 14 % premium for brand leaders.

In a survey of UK industrial firms, Michell et al (2001) found that the majority of respondents agreed that branding can lead to price premium. Other publications draw on either past literature (Sinclair and Seward 1988, Lois and Blow 2002) or former industry expertise (Hague and Jackson 1994) when discussing price premium as a brand benefit.

Halo-effect

The halo-effect refers to the buyer's willingness to extend the brand preference over product lines of the same supplier. Four publications discussed this phenomenon. Hutton (1997) and Gordon et al. (1993) found that both a positive and a negative halo-effect can occur between

dissimilar product categories. On one hand, a strong brand can positively affect the sales of other products. On the other hand, product failure in one category can damage the whole brand. In addition, Hutton's study (1997) found that brand's reputation is the most important factor influencing the willingness to consider other product lines under the same brand.

Also, Bendixen et al (2004) found a positive halo-effect with strong brands in his study of medium-voltage electrical equipment. In contrast, in Michell et al study (2001) the possible extendibility of a brand was given only average importance among all respondents.

Risk reduction

Three publications identify risk reduction as an outcome of a strong B2B brand. Hutton (1997) studied hypothetical buying situations and found that buyers were more inclined towards a well-known brand when the buying situation was complex, involved high risk or extended service or when the buyer was under time or resource constraints. Also Webster and Keller (2004) argue among the same lines, that the brand's value increases as the buying process becomes more complex.

Hague and Jackson (1994) argue that a strong brand is often a sign of quality and reliability, thus mitigating both the risk of an unexpected product defect and the felt uncertainty of a buyer.

Customer confidence

A number of publications argue that a strong brand increases customer's confidence. In Michell et al (2001) study, 88 % of respondents agreed that branded products offer more confidence in purchase situation. Mudambi et al (1997) noted that buyers tend to be more comfortable when dealing with suppliers with a stable and reliable reputation. Also, Mudambi (2002) discusses the potential added comfort of buying a familiar brand.

Loyalty

Customer loyalty is discussed in three publications, of which Gordon et al. (1993) ranks it as the primary brand benefit. Gordon et al (1993) studied brand loyalty by examining purchase frequency patterns for circuit breakers, and their study revealed that the majority of respondents favored their preferred brand well over 65 percent of the time. Also, the same study found that loyalty to brand equals loyalty to distributor, and that loyalty is likely to affect different product categories of the same supplier.

In their study, Michell et al. (2001) used criteria derived from consumer branding literature, and found that quality and reliability are the main sources generating industrial brand loyalty. In addition, Webster and Keller (2004) note, that an industrial organization may implicitly encourage brand loyalty by inclining to use familiar suppliers.

Other Benefits

Other benefits related to a strong B2B brand which are discussed in more than one of the selected publications are the brand's ability to *differentiate* company's offering from competitors (Shipley and Howard 1993, Michell et al. 2001) and to hinder competitor's attempts to come into the same market by providing *barriers to entry* (Hague and Jackson 1994, Michell et al. 2001). In addition, both Hutton (1997) and Bendixen et al (2004)

mention the buyer's willingness to make *referrals* about the brand to others. In his study, Hutton (1997) found that product reliability was the most significant factor driving buyer's willingness to make referrals.

The suggested elements of a strong B2B brand in terms of the identified determinants and benefits are depicted in Figure 1.

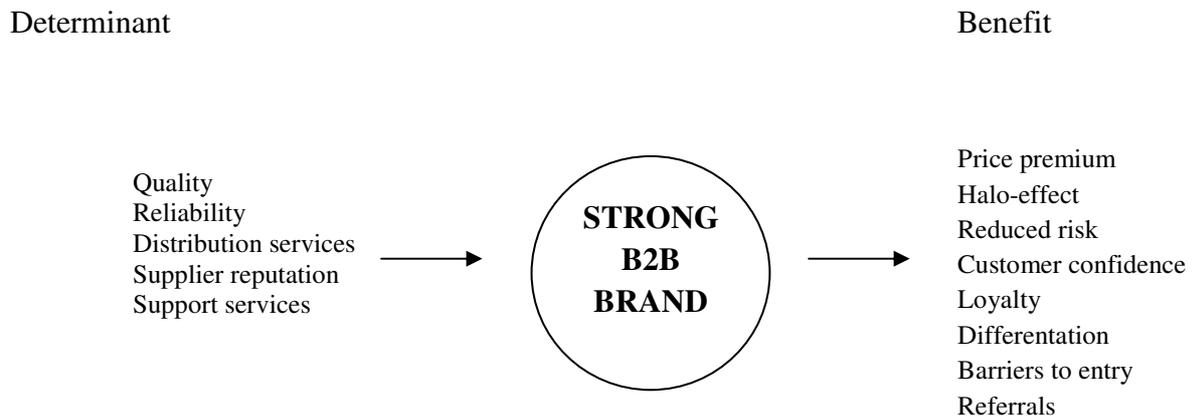


Figure 1. Determinants and benefits of a strong B2B brand

DISCUSSION

The motivation behind this study was to shed light on the factors underpinning a strong B2B brand. We attempted to do this by first identifying some of the most cited publications on B2B branding by utilizing a bibliometric citation analysis, and then, based on the contributions of these publications, proposing an integrative framework that identifies the key B2B brand determinants and benefits.

This study addresses scholars' calls to shed light on specific variables that influence the success of a B2B brand (Mudambi et al. 1997), and it also answers the broader need for better understanding of B2B branding (Michell et al. 2001, Mudambi 2002, Aspara and Tikkanen 2008). A B2B brand is a complex and interrelated concept, consisting of both tangible and intangible elements (Mudambi et al. 1997, Michell et al. 2001, Bendixen et al. 2004). However, to understand the B2B branding phenomena, the difficulty lies in organizing all the influencing factors (Mudambi et al 1997). This paper has first identified the most influential B2B brand factors based on the frequency with which they are used in the most cited B2B branding literature, and thereafter organized them into B2B brand determinants and benefits.

By examining the most cited literature on B2B branding, this study has identified quality, reliability delivery services, company reputation and support services as main determinants for a strong B2B brand. For industrial buyers, functional attributes seem to be more important than price, and this is also consistent with the recent research (Van Riel et al. 2005, Walley et al. 2007). Yet it should be kept in mind that when product properties such as quality and reliability are at the required level, the role of the price will increase substantially (Gordon et al. 1993). Intangible elements have a role to play in determining the value of a B2B brand (Mudambi et al. 1997), but it is clearly the tangible elements that matter the most.

This study has also identified price premium, halo-effect, reduced risk, customer confidence, loyalty, differentiation, barriers to entry and referrals as the primary benefits of a strong B2B brand. Interestingly, of these, only risk reduction and enhanced confidence are benefits per se for the buyer, while the others are benefits for the supplier.

It seems that whereas a strong brand provides several benefits to a B2B supplier, for a buyer, the brand benefits simply culminate in a means to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty. B2B branding research has received recent criticism for being too supplier oriented (Cova and Borghini 2006), and in fact, the 12 most cited publications on B2B branding reflect this trend too, as only three of them view the phenomenon from the buyers' perspective (Hutton 1997, Mudambi 2002, Bendixen et al. 2004). This imbalance between the brand benefits for suppliers and buyers might be one reason for the dominant supplier perspective.

Literature on B2B markets places increasing importance on relationships between suppliers and buyers (e.g. Håkansson, 1982, Håkansson and Snehota 1995, Ritter, Wilkinson and Johnson 2002), and the relationship dimension is also seen as central to brand promise (Beverland, Napoli and Lindgreen 2007). However, the few of the selected publications which discuss the working relationship have a different perception of its influence on the selection of a preferred brand.

On one hand, Webster and Keller (2004) bring forth the brand's role as a relationship facilitator between suppliers and buyers. They argue that while brand reflects the characteristics of the supplying firm, the strongest brand tends to win over the relationship with the customer. In her study of industrial bearing buyers, Mudambi (2002) discovered that branding receptive firms placed greater importance on the quality of the relationship compared to other firms. On the other hand, Michell et al (2001) found that relationship with the supplier was only one of the weakest variables associated with brand loyalty, and Bendixen et al (2004) found that relationship with the supplier has only minor influence for selection of a preferred brand.

Prior research on B2B branding is clearly dominated by quantitative studies, and the use of qualitative methods among the extant research is scarce. In addition, most of the research has been merely explanatory in nature. Scholars have already pleaded for empirical support for B2B branding models (Beverland et al. 2007, Cretu and Brodie 2007), and the findings from the present study highlight the need for qualitative research in future studies on B2B branding.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this paper, we have tentatively proposed an integrative B2B branding framework based on the contributions of the most cited B2B branding publications. We have identified quality, reliability, distribution services, supplier reputation and support services as primary determinants for a strong B2B brand and price premium, halo-effect, risk reduction, customer confidence, loyalty, product differentiation, barriers to rival entry and referrals as primary benefits of having a strong B2B brand.

For business managers, these determinants provide advice how industrial buyers perceive the value of a B2B brand. Tentative suggestions that stem from this study are the following: In

order to build a strong B2B brand, firms should 1) focus on physical product properties. It is essential that buyers perceive firm's products as high quality and reliable; 2) invest in seamless distribution network. Especially the delivery reliability is in central role when buyers evaluate the supplier's distribution performance; 3) create favorable perceptions of the company as a whole; 4) offer a wide range of services that support the buyer. Also, knowing how buyers perceive the value of B2B can help firms to create different branding strategies for different customer segments (Mudambi 2002).

It seems that in B2B market the emphasis is on the company brand orientation instead of product brand orientation (e.g. Gordon et al. 1993, Mudambi et al. 1997, Webster and Keller 2004). That is, in B2B market, the decision whether to buy culminates to a choice of a supplier; contrary to consumer market, where the decision usually culminates to a choice of an individual product

A limitation of the study is that it relies on a single database. However, a manual search of two additional journals not included in the SSCI was conducted in order to extent the scope within the relevant source material. A wider study might flag more relevant source articles, thus affecting the citation analysis and probably raising new articles to the platform. In addition, the manual article selection process can be criticized for being liable to subjective bias, but it was necessary in order to separate articles of no significant relevance to the given agenda.

Further research should concentrate on testing the empirical validity of the framework. One fruitful approach for this would be to follow the lines of Tuli, Kohli and Bharadwaj (2007), by comparing and contrasting the proposed framework with the industrial supplier's and buyer's views of B2B branding, and based on that, to draw implications for suppliers on how to effectively create, manage and reap the optimal benefits of their B2B brands. This approach would further respond to the calls to increase the use of qualitative research on B2B branding and to study branding from the buyer's perspective.

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APPENDIX 1 – The Final Data Set of 38 Articles

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