Brand repositioning in a business relationship context - a longitudinal study of brand adaptation

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Abstract

Recent research in marketing has begun to address the role of different stakeholders as contributors to, or co-creators of, brands and meanings, instead of the traditional view of brands as entities that are outcomes of managerial processes in a single firm. This paper approaches brand development and management from a network perspective, and investigates how brands interact with and adapt to resources on the customer side. It combines network theory's conceptualizations of resource interaction with the notions of co-creation of brands, meanings and symbols from service dominant logic of marketing.

A longitudinal case study describing the development phases of a furniture brand, against the backdrop of developments in the firm's customer relationships, serves as an illustration of the process of brand adaptation. The study period from 1999 to 2014 provides a possibility to identify the process nature of brand development and repositioning, including the launch of products, designs and other brand development efforts brought on by customer interactions.

The paper examines the brand as a symbolically embedded resource, subject to interactive development and adaptation. Conceptually, it offers a new perspective to a phenomenon that has previously foremost been studied as a firm level managerial process and contributes with new empirical evidence to understanding brands from an interactive process perspective. Furthermore, a focus on the examination of brands provides novel insight into the types of adaptation that takes place in buyer-seller relationship, drawing focus on symbolic embeddedness.

Key words: symbolic value, symbolic embeddedness, brands, customer relationship management

INTRODUCTION

Within the marketing discipline, the acknowledgement of symbols and intangibles as a fundamental part of exchange goes back many decades. Sidney Levy emphasised already in his 1959 article that sellers of goods are, wilfully or not, engaged in selling symbols and Theodore Levitt (1981), in a similar vein, drew attention to intangibility of all products, whether being a good or service. He pinpointed the difficulty of assessing, experiencing or pre-testing not only services, but even physical products in advance. And when the buyer cannot fully do that, metaphorical surrogates for tangibility receive an increasing role. Levitt (1981:97) stated that "the less tangible the product, the more powerfully and persistently the judgment about it gets shaped by the packaging – how it's presented, who presents it and what is implied by metaphor, simile, symbol and other metaphors for reality".

The vast literature on brands and meanings, which has followed along these footsteps, has mainly had a consumer marketing focus, while branding research in B2B settings has more sparse (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Cretu & Brodie, 2007; Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007) In a review of b2b branding research Keränen, Piirainen & Salminen (2012) conclude that even if the topic has gained more attention recently, the extant literature is still fragmented and warrants further examination. The nature of business markets does indeed differ from consumer markets in many respects, for instance with regard to the number of individual buyers and the degree and depth of interaction between buyer and seller (see for instance Ford et al., 1998). But even though the brand literature is mostly interested in the final customer and business marketing in the relationships between companies, it does not mean that the symbolic aspects of exchange would not be of relevance also in business-to-business interaction. The intermediate actors, such as retailers and resellers do also act as customers, who evaluate the offerings of their suppliers Business network scholars Håkansson & Waluszewski (2002); Håkansson et al. (2009) for instance point out that when actors are making decisions about physical resources (such as products) it is not only the resource in itself that is considered, but also the image of it. This means that the actors evaluate the business partners' resources also on an intangible level, based on perception, assumption, knowledge and representations.

The discussion on the role of these intangible and symbolic aspects and empirical studies that would focus on examining them, have been particularly limited in the business network research tradition. However, another theoretical stream, which shares a similar perspective on the interconnected nature of business exchange and focuses on the interaction (although usually labelled 'integration') of resources for joint value creation (or 'co-creation), is the service-dominant (S-D) logic of marketing (see Vargo & Lusch 2006 for the principles of S-DL, and Ford 2010 for a comparison with the business network approach). Within this theoretical stream, there has recently been increasing interest towards brands, meanings and symbols as a significant part of the value co-creation process (see e.g. Peñaloza & Venkatesh, 2012; Flint, 2006; Ballantyne & Aitken 2007; Brodie, Glynn & Little 2006; Brodie 2009). Some of the S-D L based studies, such as Fyrberg & Jüriado (2008) and Archpru, Corsaro, Kelleher, Maglio, Seo, Lusch & Vargo (2014) even focus more explicitly on the network level, which brings the discussion even closer to the starting point of this research. Even though Archpru *et al.* (2014) use the term *service ecosystem* (see Lusch & Vargo, 2014) rather than *network*, they still refer to market interactions on a network level, involving multiple firms, suppliers and customers, which in our opinion resonates well with our business networks viewpoint. While network theory suggests resources to be interacted and their management to be a question of not only the activated resource level, but also the image level (Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002; Håkansson et al., 2009), resource discussions within S-D L provide additional insight into understanding this image level interaction by addressing how firm-provided resources such as brands, and the meanings they carry, become integrated into the customer sphere in the form of value propositions and symbolic cultural resources for consumer use (Norrgrann, 2015).

Archpru et al. (2014) call for more empirical studies on the role of symbols in value co-creation, as they state to "only have begun to scratch the surface for understanding the particular processes by which symbols guide the coordination, communication, integration and evaluation in service ecosystems". This provides an indication of the significance of the topic of our study, also from the perspective of the service-dominant logic.

Our paper also addresses the gap in the business network literature's discussion of resources concerning the role of symbolic resource aspects. To do this, we combine business network – related discussions on resources with the aforementioned S-DL – based conceptualizations in order to explore how brands and other signs are used as symbolic resources that firms provide for their (retail) customers and how the brand that a focal firm provides, adapts when interacting with the customer's resource network. We delimit our perspective by focusing particularly on the provision side of resources, i.e. from the selling firm's perspective, how they attempt to relate their offering to the various customers (business relationship level) by attempting to offer them useful operant resources and thereby help them provide value propositions for consumers.

After presenting the theoretical standpoints of the paper in the next section, we continue with an empirical account of a case study from the furniture industry. The case, which comprises longitudinal data from a period of 15 years, illustrates how brand and product design provide symbolic resources for business relationships.

In the analysis, we examine the dynamics and interlinkages between the development of symbolic resources and customer relationships and we conclude with a discussion on the role of symbolic resources in being valuable for the customer.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of resources

Our conceptual starting point is the notion of resources. We apply the business network research tradition's (IMP) broad view of resources as *anything that has known use*, be it a product, facility, organizational unit or a relationship (Håkansson & Snehota 1995; Håkansson & Waluszewski, 2002). The IMP view on resources has particularly emphasized the interconnectedness and embeddedness of resources, i.e. that the value of a resource is dependent on with which other it is combined. Therefore, it is argued that resources are best understood from an interaction perspective, as a relative phenomenon, rather than regarding them as "given" assets of an organization. In the context of this paper, this approach to understanding resources draws the attention to the way in which the focal company attempts to make the resources it offers (the focal resource here being the product is sells) align with the resources of the customer, e.g. its assortment, that it in turn offers to the final customer. This reflects the dual nature of resources discussed by Håkansson & Snehota (1995), that a resource has both a provision side and a user side; the resource that the selling firm offers, is used as a resource by the buying firm. From the management point of view, the question is thus to attempt to provide resources that are as useful as possible for one's business partners.

The service-dominant logic (see Vargo & Lusch, 2006) basically adheres to the same notion, although with more emphasis is on the outcome of resource use, i.e. value (see Ford, 2010) and how it is co-created. The S-D L literature also approaches resources from a more networked perspective, with the semantic distinction that they use the term 'resource integration' to correspond to IMP's 'resource interaction'. The service literature, being more concerned with value realization for the final user, than the IMP perspective, uses in our perspective the useful concept of *value proposition* (see Vargo & Lusch, 2006) for dealing with the interface between resource provision and resource utilization to describe the selling firm's aims to provide valuable resources, without always fully knowing if and how value actually will become realized for the customer. Service scholars (see e.g. Grönroos 2008) refer to the notion of value-in-use, i.e. that value is not delivered by the supplier, but something that takes place in the customer's sphere. Grönroos (2008) argues that the role of the supplier is thus to be a *value facilitator* in the process of value creation. In this paper, we will not delve into the value discussion, but remain on the level of the resources, seeing them from the focal firm's point of view as a value propositions towards its B2B customers and, eventually, the final users.

Symbolic resources

As we referred to in the introduction, the IMP discussion of resources has not dealt particularly with their symbolic aspects such as brands. Also within service literature, Brodie, Glynn & Little (2006) criticized the lack of attention to branding in the original S-D L article by Lusch & Vargo (2004). Subsequent work within S-D L has to some extent begun to address also these issues, even though Archpru *et al.* (2014) still call for more empirical studies for a deeper understanding of the role of symbols.

Symbols can be seen as institutions that influence resource integration and exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). Levy (1959:119) defines them as " instances where experience is mediated, rather than direct; where an object, action, word or picture, or complex behavior is understood to mean not only itself but also some other ideas or feelings". A way to study symbols and signs is through semiotics, which suggests that actors assign meanings to signs, which then become symbols, according to particular "rules" of interpretation that define their social world (Peirce 1932 in Archpru et al, 2014). Brands can be seen as symbols (c.f. Aaker & Joakimsthaler 2000: 44), but also for instance product design and communication can provide symbolic resources.

Symbolic interactionism explores how individuals attach meaning to interactions within a social context, which is largely facilitated by symbols. (Archpru et al, 2014). Meaning is not seen as inherent in objects, but as emerging from social interaction, with humans as active interpreters and modifiers of meanings. (Flint, 2006) An interactive perspective to meanings is also proposed by Peñaloza & Venkatesh (2006), who suggest and expansion of the SD-L value discussion into including the exchange and use of meanings in order to better capture the nature of the exchange relations. Venkatesh et al. (2006) even propose the idea of a sign economy, consisting of more nuanced, interactive, enacted markets, jointly produced by consumers, marketers and other culturally constituted forces in the economic system; producing as they engage in exchanges according to mutually negotiated systems of language and meanings.

Extending the more interactive co-creation perspective to comprise meanings, however raises the similar question that Grönroos (2008) addresses with value, i.e. is it a question of co-creation, with multiple actors as active participants in the creation of symbols (Archpru et al 2014) or something that happens in the customer's sphere – images formed in actors' minds - like value-in-use? To what extent are the meanings actually shared, or do symbolic meanings emerge that are different from the ones the supplying firm intended to propose?

On the network level, Archpru et al (2014) propose that symbols guide actors in the enactment of practices that enable the co-creation of meanings. In this way, symbols help actors coordinate interaction, communicate information, integrate resources and evaluate value. They further argue that the interpretation of symbols is important for the overlapping and integration of institutional logics; symbols become reinterpreted in new social contexts and new symbolic meanings emerge, possibly varying across the micro, meso and macro levels of analysis. According to Archpru et al (2014) the notion of shared understanding does thus not mean that symbols have the exactly same meaning for different actors, as they all have their own, unique socio-historical backgrounds, but that shared understandings occur when actors with varying viewpoints interact. In other words, even if the phenomenological value of symbols may vary from one actor to another, for interaction to occur, there must be overlap in the meanings of value for particular resources. Critical for this process is that the potential value (value proposition) is articulated and communicated, and symbols constitute a central tool for doing so.

Brands as resources in customer relationships

Brands have been a much researched marketing topic for several decades, having been defined in a variety of ways. For instance the AMA definition (2004) sees the brand as 'a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers'. Brands have been approached from multiple perspectives, such as a consumer angle, focusing on e.g. identity, image and similar issues; from an organizational perspective stressing e.g. positioning; a financial viewpoint, focusing on e.g. equity; or a relational perspective, which examines e.g. commitment and experience. Some of the definitions regard the brand as an entity, whereas broader perspectives consider brands also as processes. (Brodie 2009) According to such a process perspective, Brodie et al (2006) see service brands as facilitating and mediating the marketing processes used to realize experiences that drive the co-creation of value. Brands provide sign systems that symbolize meaning in the marketing network and hence function as fundamental resources.

Brodie et al (2006) base this definition on the foundation of the promises framework or value triangle, initially presented by Calonius (1986) and elaborated by Bitner (1995) and Grönroos (2006). The value framework focuses on the marketing processes of *making* promises (organization to customers), *enabling and facilitating* promises (internal marketing within the network) and *keeping and supporting* promises (interaction between the organization's representatives and the customer). (Brodie et al., 2006). In a review of the evolution of conceptual approaches to brands Merz, He and Vargo (2009) identify the most recent stage of brand literature as the *stakeholder-focus brand era*. The fundamental idea within this line of thinking is the focus on brand communities and all stakeholders as operant resources and brand value being co-created as a "continuous, social, and highly dynamic and interactive process between the firm, the brand, and all stakeholders" (Merz et al., 2009).

In empirical studies that take the intermediate actors in the supply network into consideration when examining brands (see e.g. Glynn & Brodie, 2004 on manufacturer-reseller relationships) brands were identified to act as facilitators of relations in channels, creating meaning and experience for the resellers. In Glynn & Brodie's (2004) study revealed three types of value from brands for the resellers; (1) non-financial benefits such as advertising benefits, (2) customer brand equity and (3) benefits for the reseller's customers. Brands thus create value not only in the end customer relationship, but also within other marketing relationships (Brodie et. al. 2006). Fyrberg & Jüriado (2009) extend the aforementioned value triangle through a closer investigation of the network aspects of it. They conceptualize the key actors in the co-creation process as (1) brand governor, (2) providers and (3) customers as the three corners of the brand relationship value triangle. The link between governor and providers deals with internal interaction in the network and an exchange of meanings and experiences; the interface between providers and customers in turn represents the co-creation of meanings, while the brand governor-customer axis involves the reciprocal development of value proposition suggested by customers. (Fyrberg & Jüriado, 2009)

Connecting this to the business network approach, brands can be interpreted as resources, whose symbolic characteristics are formed as the resource structures of different network actors are confronted. A brand, imprinted with a set of meanings from the brand governor, interacts with and adapts to the symbolic resource structures of actors on the buying side. In the empirical section below, we shall explore how this interaction and adaptation may take place.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical basis of the paper is a longitudinal case study of a furniture manufacturer. The case firm, Junet, was chosen because it is a company whose development the researcher has had an opportunity of following during a 15 year time period, from 1999 to date, through interviews at repeated points in time. This provides a unique possibility to identify the process nature of symbolic resource development, including the launch of new collections, designs and designer co-operations, as well as other brand development efforts, and the parallel processes of how the firm has developed its network of customer relationships. Against the conceptual notion of resource value changing over time (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995), a longitudinal time perspective is of particular advantage for understanding the dynamics and longer term effects of investments made in resources and their implications on the network level.

The case study method enables the investigation of a focal phenomenon within its real-life context, where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1989). As Johnston, Leech & Liu (1999) state, the case study method does not attempt to isolate the phenomenon from its context, but, on the contrary, sees the phenomenon as being of interest precisely because of its context. In this paper, we adopt a focal firm perspective (see Halinen & Törnroos, 2005) where the main units of analysis are the symbolic dimensions of the resources that the case firm is providing and their manifestations in brands, designs and semiotics in communication. These resources are mirrored against the context of the events, changes and developments that the focal company faces, particularly with regard to the processes of customer relationship development. It also takes into account developments in the network context of the focal company, which affect the aforementioned processes. Such network effects are considered both on the meso level, i.e. relating to the most central partners on the supply side, as well as more macro level developments, which affect the product-market decisions of the focal firm.

One of the strengths of case study research is the ability to draw on several different types of data and triangulate them to provide a holistic picture of the studied phenomenon (Yin, 1994; Johnston *et al*, 1999). In this research, the construction of the case study report relies above all on qualitative personal interview data from repeated occasions within the study period, in the form of thematic interviews as well as "situation update"- discussions in connection to the managing director's recurring guest lectures/company presentations. The empirical material consists of five personal interviews/discussions with the managing director (the person on this post changed in 2013) in 1999, 2000, 2010, 2013 and 2014, one with the firm's brand agency representative (responsible for e.g. a brand investigation carried out among retailer sales staff) in 2009 and a telephone interview with a reseller (in 2000). Most interviews were fully transcribed, or, in other instances, interview notes were taken and used for case description write-up.

In addition to interview data, the researcher was able to utilize observation as a technique for triangulation, since several of the interviews took place in the premises of the focal firm. This, in addition to the researcher's observations from retail settings, allowed for instance a concrete examination of the firm's products and ways to display them, as the office and production facilities at the beginning of the study period also functioned as a showroom for the company. Furthermore, various printed and electronic documents, such as company presentation materials, brochures, catalogues, price lists, company web pages and social media profiles have also been used as sources of case evidence. The printed materials originate from the time around the different interview occasions, thus representing the communications at different points in time. A content analysis of this material contributed in particular to the interpretations of the symbolic and semiotic aspects of the value proposition of the firm. The promotional documents were analysed with an emphasis on finding

In the longitudinal analysis, the snapshots of reality gained at the different interview occasions as well as informant's reflections on developments over time are analytically used to make interpretations of continuity and gain a holistic understanding, rather than making comparisons of the different cross-sectional points in time, in a linear and objective manner (see Hassett & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, *eds*., 2013). The analysis of the case history was organized around identifying three main types of units of analysis: products, their symbolic representations in the form of brand or sub-brand names, and main customers. These dynamically interlinked categories helped to analytically distinguish four development phases in the case, as well as general development trajectories. The drawn conclusions were also finally presented to and discussed with the case firm's manager, ensuring a member check, i.e. testing of the researchers interpretations with members of the group where data were collected. Such a procedure is, along with techniques such as triangulation and prolonged engagement, a way in which this study has attempted to follow Lincoln & Guba's (1985) suggestions for achieving trustworthiness of qualitative findings.

ADAPTING SYMBOLIC RESOURCES IN THE CASE OF JUNET

Case firm description

The focal firm of the case study is Junet, which is a joint venture founded by five SMEs in 1993. The five original partners were manufactures of complementary pieces of furniture; one specialized in cabinets, another in upholstered furniture etc., who decided to join forces with the aim of creating and selling a new, joint furniture collection, initially mainly aimed at export customers. Thanks to the businesses' complementary nature, the founding partners have simultaneously also acted as the main suppliers for Junet, hence term 'net' in the corporate brand name. The prefix in turn has its origin in the location of the firms in the village of Jurva, Finland, which has historically had a high concentration of carpenters and furniture makers, and has on the national level been associated with a tradition of quality and skills in carpentry; a heritage which Junet has been drawing on both in terms of concrete competence and as a symbolic element in its communication.

The Junet venture represents only one customer relationship for the partner firms, who alongside this engagement also have maintained their previous activities, selling their individual products to other customers under their own brands. For the different partner firms, the Junet relationship has been of varying importance. For some of the member firms that are smaller in size, the Junet relationship has been one of the more significant in their portfolio, while for others, it has played a more minor role. Also, the significance of the Junet involvement has varied even for the same partner firms over time, depending on developments in their other customer relationships and also on the furniture items that have at different points in time been more in focus in the Junet collection.

The focal firm and its resources are thus significantly characterized by the joint venture member firms / suppliers. An additional, externally sourced resource contributor has been the freelance designer(s) that the firm has used. In this manufacturing sector, companies are differentiated partly based on the design(er) intensity of their products and Junet opted from the very beginning for an approach that emphasizes the role of product aesthetics and a distinct style, illustrated by e.g. the following brochure excepts: *"The design and form is essentially Finnish country style, with modern elements added where appropriate … All Junet furniture has consistently been based on these elements and that is why we can now call it the Junet style"* (Junet brochure, 1999). It is also characteristic of the designer focus, that the names and introductions of the designers have had a prominent role in marketing communication, in both printed and online materials.

Analysis of symbolic resources and customer relationships

A summary of the longitudinal case analysis is presented as a table in Appedix 1. When examining the case in a longitudinal time perspective based on the developments of both the symbolic resources and the customer relationships, four distinct phases were distinguished. The phases illustrate shifts in brand-related and market decisions and new directions and adaptations regarding product design and form (for visual examples of this, see Appendix 2). The phases are mostly chronologically sequential, but some of the phases overlap in time.

The first phase, timed in the 1990's is here termed the **Landhausstil phase.** This depicts the initial formation of the Junet venture and the creation of the first, joint collection between the partner firms. The aim was to overcome the severe domestic recession by joining forces and exporting to the European market, which was at the time beginning to open up to free trade. The collection of products, that was developed for this purpose were *"based on traditional Finnish carpentry skills and craftsmanship, combined with the technology used in modern furniture production"* (1990's Junet brochure). Furthermore, the communication stressed *that "the colour scheme is based on historic styles… adapted to match present day's needs"* and that *"all pieces have been designed to be fully compatible, giving the customer a wide choice of furniture and upholstery"*. The products were/are also made to order, enabling customer specific choices of colours and fabrics. When the initial recognition was being built among customers, quality of the raw materials as *"ecologically sound… pine and birch from renewable Finnish forests"* as well as of the craftsmanship were emphasized, alongside the wax treatment of the surface, which was a production related novelty for the firm, but also a feature that distinguished the early collection aesthetically and haptically. As the main customers during this phase were in Germany, the term "Landhausstil" was used as a characterization. At the most, Junet had up to a hundred resellers, the most significant being a German furniture chain for whom the nature of the supplier as a small, Nordic company, providing a full spectrum of compatible quality, massive wood products made of sustainable materials aligned well with the retailer's ecological profile.

Towards the end of the 90's sales on the German market dropped radically due to the general economic situation as well as the entry of Eastern European competitors. The availability of similar looking, but cheaper alternatives revealed that the Junet brand itself appeared not to hold sufficient content for the customers in such an economic and competitive setting. The next phase was therefore marked by a gradual withdrawal from exports and refocus on the domestic market, here termed the **Nezz phase**. The Junet brand was not an unknown phenomenon domestically in the 90's, even though its customers had mostly been international up to that point. The export joint venture had received a fair share of attention in the industry due to its novel way of organizing itself, and the existing domestic retailers of the partner firms were curious of the Junet collection. The brand building efforts towards export customers as well as the existing parallel customer relationships of the firms thus paved the way for Junet’s domestic brand building and symbolic valuableness. For the domestic market, Junet launched both its existing collection of traditional furniture, but the designer also developed an additional collection, of a more contemporary style, featuring straight lines, new materials and metal details. Due to the diverging appearance from the prior products, the modern collection received its own sub-brand name, ‘Nezz’. The name itself also differed from the previous collection names such as Viena or Wiljami, which associated more to tradition and folklore. This phase was characterized by increased brand awareness building also towards consumers, through print advertising and presence at furniture fairs.

Approximately a decade later, the brand was reassessed and refined, leading into the **Feels like Sunday phase;** a slogan coined by Junet’s new advertising agency. Somewhat prior to this, also the customer portfolio underwent reorganization. Distribution had thus far been very scattered and the number of retailers high, with, according to the managing director, too little time to devote to all customers to e.g. ensure proper product display. Junet chose to enter an exclusive retail distribution agreement with the chain Vepsäläinen, who is profiled as a brand retailer in furniture, with for instance Artek, Fritz Hansen, Vitra and similar high-end brands in its assortment. Thereby, Junet was able to focus its relationship management activities more. The Vepsäläinen context however demanded ever-increasing brand building investments and also efforts to clarify Junet’s position among the brands in the retailer’s assortment, which was done through an investigation of sales staff’s product/brand perceptions. As a consequence, the company logo was renewed, the product naming policies unified and new products by new designers introduced. The new products reflected the new brand strategy emphasizing warmth and cosiness, marking a clearer distinction from e.g. the other, more clinically modern design brands in the retail setting in question. The new slogan “feels like Sunday” aimed at providing a promise of a stress-free, enjoyable Sunday morning – feeling and reflecting the relaxed and genuine, yet qualitative nature of the brand. The form language of the new products was also softer and rounder, colours still mostly light and “Nordic” and the products were given names in Finnish, with meanings such as “joy” (Ilo) and “for you” (Sinulle).

The branding efforts and focused distribution were initially successful, and at best, Junet was chosen supplier of the year at Vepsäläinen. However, the general downturn in the economy in the 2010’s started to affect the furniture sector severely and caused Junet to reconsider both its offerings as well as relationships. A cheaper collection of products was launched by suggestion of the retailer, but even this did not compensate the loss of sales. The economic pressures grew increasingly when one of the Junet partners (at the same time its biggest supplier) filed for bankruptcy in 2013. In 2014, the exclusive distribution agreement with Vepsäläinen was terminated and a second chain, Kruunukaluste, was introduced as an additional retailer in the hope of generating more sales.

The fourth phase, **the project track** is a public space furnishing path that runs through the entire history of the firm, parallel with its retail relationships. Its relative role has varied over time, but it has gained particular strategic importance over the last years. In the 90’s, Junet utilized the design of its new collection and its flexible and versatile production possibilities in its value propositions for project customers in e.g. hotel and holiday housing construction projects in Germany. In such projects, the country style appearance of the products and durability of the physical products were valuable characteristics for the customers, coupled with the capacity to offer adapted solutions. Also on the domestic market, Junet was involved in similar types of projects. One of the advantages was that even though the projects varied, the customer interface many times remained the same. Junet was thus in a closer and more continuous business relationships with the purchasing side architects, compared to the more “market” mechanism nature of its numerous retailer relationships of the time. In the late 2000’s Junet began tapping into a new sector, which has become increasingly important, namely elderly care furnishing. For such project customers, e.g. private firms running elderly homes, the symbolic resources that Junet proposes, make use of for instance the durable and sturdy product quality, natural materials, domestic origin and warm and cosy imagery along the lines of the latest brand renewal. Junet believes that the consumer branding efforts have been useful for building recognition also among the senior housing decision makers. Therefore Junet chose to introduce *“Junet seniori”* as a sub-brand for this project market and the web shop for these products. Even if brand recognition spins off positively from consumer products to the senior market, as suggested by the managing director in the 2014 interview, it remains yet to be seen if there are image effects – possibly also negative ones - the other way around.

On the whole, the time span that has been analyzed shows some developments or trajectories on a more general analytical level. The first is the shift from more arm’s length customer relationships, first abroad but then also to some extent on the domestic level, towards increasing concentration on fewer, significant customers, where the value proposition of the firm and the profile of the customer are more aligned. For instance the choice to focus on Vepsäläinen as an exclusive distributor in the first decade of the 2000’s, or the rationale in entering specific projects, illustrate this tendency.

Another, more general observation is the role of the brand and its gradual development from being merely a trademark or a name for a new venture into an actual brand with a symbolic content, one that customers and consumers recognize and associate with meanings. This process has taken time and required investments in visibility, for example regular advertising in the leading interior decoration magazines, using advertorials, social media, being present at fairs and introducing new products at a steady pace to stay “on the agenda”, in the mindsets of consumers and industry actors.

When looking at the study period on an aggregated level, what can be said about the role of the symbolic resources in the firm’s efforts to be valuable, i.e. provide a lucrative value proposition for its customers? Our interpretation is that on one hand, the process of brand development and the underlying strategic orientation of attempting to make high quality, well designed products in a flexible and adaptable manner has been guiding the firm’s activities all along, although taking its expression in somewhat differing products and communicative choices at different points in time. This brand building can be seen as an incremental development process. Particularly concerning project customers and retail buyers, the symbolic resources provided appear to relate to the capabilities of Junet as a supplier and a brand holder, rather than to its individual products. The craftsmanship tradition is a similar example of an undercurrent that branding has tapped into in a variety of ways at different times.

On the other hand, the study period with its economic ups and downs and the consequent shifts in product-market strategies shows that the Junet brand has not only followed a linear path of becoming gradually stronger and imprinted with meaning, but been required to repeatedly reassess and refine its way and means of relating to its customers. Here, the role of material vs. symbolic dimensions of the offering appears to receive a special role. In situations of lesser competitive pressures, it appears as if the tangible features can already be sufficient for the value proposition (e.g. in the early, more successful phases on exporting and selling to domestic retailers), while when other, strong resources compete of the customer's attention (in e.g. the Vepsäläinen environment or the later years on the German market), the role of the immaterial/symbolic characteristics become emphasized. In our interpretation, the Junet brand was in such, more pressured situations not able to provide sufficient symbolic resources to remain interesting enough for its customers, once the physical or economical features of the offering were no longer to the firm's advantage. This would support the notion proposed by Hellén & Gummerus (2013) that a product's tangibility/intangibility is a rather ambiguous concept, and should be assessed in terms of perceptions rather than seen as an inherent feature of the offering. Therefore, instead of claiming that branded furniture would by nature be something "very symbolic", the role of the symbolic aspects for the assessment of the offering might better be framed as varying according to the perceptions of actors. Seeing from a network point of view, these perceptions are again linked to the actors perceptions of other resources, such as the competing products. So, at a certain point in time, with a certain network of resources surrounding it, the product may be judged more on its tangible properties, whereas in other situations, the symbolic ones may become more emphasized.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Based on our findings, we agree with Brodie (2009) and Brodie et al. (2006) in regarding brands not only as entities, but as processes, that facilitate and mediate in the marketing processes used to realize experiences driving value co-creation. Brands provide sign systems that symbolize meaning for different actors in the marketing network and hence function as fundamental resources. Our empirical account shows, that in order for a firm to adapt and survive, it must continuously be able to provide resources that are perceived valuable by its customers. On the brand management level, this draws attention to the dynamics of the brand and the need to evaluate it against the firm's network of marketing relationships and the changes occurring in them. Our findings thus indicate that the role of the symbolic content of brands is a dynamic concept, where the valuableness of the resource varies depending on the resource constellation around it, as network theory (see Håkansson & Snehota, 1995) suggests. That is, when the focal brand is in the customer context challenged by other brands offering competing symbolic, utilitarian or economic benefits (e.g. acknowledged design or a lower price), this puts pressure on resource management for a better alignment with customer resources.

The paper offers a methodological contribution through the use of longitudinal and semiotic analysis, which we consider as useful tools for an increased understanding of the dynamics of symbolism, when mirrored against changing customer relationship over a longer time perspective.

Particularly from a network theoretical point of view, a limitation of the study is the focus on the brand governor and the provision side of resources. Extending the perspective to comprising selected customers' viewpoints would be recommended in further research on the topic.

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Appendix 1: Longitudinal analysis of Junet

MAIN UNITS OF ANALYSIS	
Products	New collection, massive, waxed wood 'Landhausstil' Customised colors, sizes; contemporary designs heat-treated materials; new, contemporary products by new designers introduced at a faster pace
Brand	Junet (corporate and product); Junet / Nezz (the modern collection); Junet, new logo and slogan "Feels like Sunday" renaming Nezz products; Junet Junet seniori
Customers	International retail International projects; Numerous domestic retailers Hotel & holiday housing projects; Exclusive retail (Vepsäläinen) Subcontracting; Vepsäläinen + Kruunukaluste; Elderly care housing projects
CONTEXTUAL FACTORS	
Managerial focus	Organizing the net Internationalizing; establishing position on the domestic market; key customers and projects brand management
Developments in the network context (macro/meso)	Export promotion EU-membership; Competitive pressure, plagiarism Increased imports Ikea's market entry; new designers new advertising agency; member bankruptcy; RECESSION; RECESSION
ANALYTICAL TRAJECTORIES	
	From trademark to brand (and sub-brands); From markets to relationships; From international to domestics; From home furniture market to increasing focus on projects
TIME	1993 → 2000 → 2009 → 2014

Appendix 2 Examples of Junet products illustrating the four analytical phases. Photos courtesy of Junet Oy

The 'Landhausstil' phase (1990's)

The 'Nezz' phase (early 2000's)

The 'Feels like Sunday' phase (2010's)

The project path (elderly care, 2014)