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B2B Branding in the Business-to-Business Context: A Literature Review

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A B S T R A C T

Business-to-Business (B2B) branding has existed for over four decades. Nevertheless, the changes in the economy and the environments have raised the awareness of firms operating in the B2B industry about the importance of branding for their success. Conversely, brand management strategies in the Business-to-Consumer (B2C) market considerably differ from the B2B industry even though most of B2B branding models are based on B2C ones. Thus, the purpose of this study is to review the body of literature of B2B branding to figure out if B2C brand models still work for B2B market. The review reveals two classification of B2B branding literature: (1) Applicability of B2C brand equity models in the B2B context and (2) Network-focus B2B branding models. Therefore, this study recommends conducting more studies on B2B branding from network approach and also from small firms perspectives. Finally, this study advances the literature by underlining the importance of developing B2B branding models from network standpoint.

Key Word: Brands, B2B brands, B2C brands, network, stakeholders.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Companies with prevailing brands have better stock performance worldwide (Abrahams, 2016). In fact, top global brands valuation exceed billions of dollars. For instance, Apple has a valuation of over $400 billion as per 2021 (Interbrand, 2021). Thus, most firms focus on building strong brand; moreover, the branding's body of literature has expanded in terms of published researches on brands over the past decades (Raki & Mahani, 2018). In fact, branding is the art of crafting, building, managing and improving a brand (Aaker, 1992) whereby the characteristics of the establishments such as size and industry context influence significantly the branding process (Berthon et al. 2008). Therefore, B2C branding strategies diverge significantly from the B2B market (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Herbst & Merz, 2011)

The differences between B2C and B2B is explained mainly by the size of buyers which is larger in B2C market (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011), the nature of personal interaction between the consumers and the sellers which is minimal in the B2C context (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). However, despite these differences, B2B branding strategies are basically drawn from the B2C industry. Several researchers argued that CBBE models could be applied in the B2B context as well (e.g., Davis, Buchanan-Oliver & Brodie, 2009; Biedenbach, 2012).

Hence, this study reviews the B2B body of literature to uncover the applicability of B2C models in the B2B context. The first section of literature examines the controversial definition of brands, meanwhile the second section explore the literature of B2B branding. The third section classifies the review results into two main categories. By doing so, this paper contribute meaningfully to the body of knowledge.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Branding Concept

Brand Controversial Definition

The word brand is originated from the Ancient Norse brandr which means “to burn”. The early and current use of brands was to indicate the ownership of livestock (Maurya & Mishra, 2012). However, defining a brand is subjected to several opinions' divergence between scholars where two different approaches appear: Customer-based and Measurement-based (Kapferer, 2008). On the customer side, Keller (2013) reflected that brands provide value to the company and simplify decision-making for customers through generating mental association with the product or service. Meanwhile, on the measurement-side, scholars and experts seek to quantify the added-value of the brand as they consider that brands make long-term profits (Kapferer, 2008). As a result, each approach influences the brand definition and function.

Notably, the most cited definition of a brand is provided by the American Marketing Association (AMA). According to AMA, brand is “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the sellers’ goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers” (as cited in Keller, 2013). In other words, brands identify product or definition is subjected to criticism. AMA definition is purely customer-based as it focuses on the technical features of the brands. For instance, Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015) stated that AMA’s brand definition remains unchanged for 80 years; it becomes consequently out of date due to the development of marketing environment in the form of theory and practices.

Furthermore, Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) and Keller (2013) argued that brand is more than physical components (e.g., name, logo); as it has rational and tangible differentiating features allowing the brand to be distinguished from other competitors. Moreover, the AMA’s definition applies only for physical products but not for services as the definition dismisses the role played by consumers as co-creators of services (Gronroos, 2007). Hence, AMA’s definition should be updated (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015)

Brand Evolution

According to (Keller, 2013, p. 30), brands went through six periods of historical development:

- Early origins (before 1860): The origins of brands go back to the old pottery and stonemason‟s marks. They were used to provide information about the source of the handcrafted merchandises and to guarantee its quality.
- The emergence of the national manufacturer brands (1860-1914): Multiple factors have participated in the development of branding (e.g., improvements in transportation and production process).
- The dominance of mass-marketed brands (1915-1929): Improvement of marketing regarding techniques, specialized branding, recruitment, and research.
- Challenges to manufacturer brands (1930-1945): Brands faced multiple challenges (e.g., the great depression and World War I and II). However, some companies kept investing in branding, such as Procter & Gamble, which installed the brand management system.
- Establishment of brand management standards (1946 -1985): Branding has called for more advanced skills and techniques as the market demand grew up, and the economy took off. Branding becomes

more pervasive (1986 to Now): Brands were managed as intangible assets; meanwhile, companies started to look at the advantages of having strong brands.

Brand Role

Based on AMAs definition, brands facilitate the identification of products, services, and business as well as differentiate them from the competition. Consequently, brands protect both the consumer and the producer from competitors through enhancing customer recognition of the company, especially if the brand has a strong visual identity. For companies, brands generate customers' loyalty, which ensures future sales to the firm (Horváth & Birgelen, 2015). Brand loyalty builds barriers to other firms to enter the market (Abrahams, 2016). Additionally, Madden, Fehle and Fourier (2006, p. 233) argued that "*brands decrease the volatility and vulnerability of cash flows*". Moreover, brands promise quality, origins, and performance, thereby increase the perceived value to the customer, and reduce the risk and complexity involved in the buying decision (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Besides, brands allow firms to use brand extension by introducing a new product. 80 to 90 per cent of new products are brands extension (Kotler, Keller, Ancarani & Costabile, 2014). For consumers, brands serve as a good source of information about any product or service. For instance, brands can provide information about the source or the producer of the products and the product characteristics (Keller, 2013). Furthermore, brands help consumers in their purchasing making-decision since it embeds confidence in products even though the buyer never tried the product before. Moreover, it comprises meaning and feeling involving around the product (Jueterbock, 2012). Finally, brands guarantee quality products (Magnusson, Haas & Zhao, 2008). However, crafting and managing brand (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2013) should be adjusted to the context of the business (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011) per se. The structure of the market (e.g., B2C, B2B, and B2B2C) affects brands and their extensions (Liu, Foscht, Eisingerich & Tsai, 2018). The Business-to-Customer (B2C) firms sell products or services directly to consumers (e.g., Pepsi); whereas B2B firms deal with other businesses and have no direct link with the end product such as Cisco (Chauhan & Anbalagan, 2013). In other terms, consumers are end-users, whereas B2B buyers are customers but are not consumers (Priem, Wenzel & Koch, 2018). However, the focus of this study is B2B branding.

2.2 | Business-to-Business Branding

B2B Branding has existed for over four decades (Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2015). In the beginning, B2B branding was not admitted by academics such as Saunders and Watt (1979), and Sinclair and Seward (1988) along with experts who were only motivated by products quality rather than building brands (Leek & Christodoulies, 2011; Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2016). Nevertheless, the changes in the economy and the environments have raised the awareness of firms operating in the B2B industry about the importance of branding for their success (Koporčiš, Tolušiš & Rešetar, 2017).

Conversely, brand management strategies in the B2C market considerably differ from the B2B market (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Herbst & Merz, 2011). First, the size of buyers in B2B market are fewer compared to B2C (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011), while the perceived risk and uncertainty faced by the buyers is high (Herbst & Merz, 2011). Hence, building trust with B2B customers is very crucial to reduce the perceived risk (Herbst & Merz, 2011). Second, the personal interaction between the consumers and the sellers is minimal in the B2C context (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). Therefore, the relationship and the networking skills are more significant in the B2B context compared to B2C market (Ohnemus, 2009). Third, the purchasing-decision is more rational (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007) and complex (Cretu & Brodie, 2007) in the B2B context. According to Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt (2004), brand name represents only 16% of industrial buyers purchasing decision. Meanwhile, quality is an essential criterion for purchasing decision (Aaker, 1991; Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004). Fourth, according to Eiriz and Wilson (2006, p. 287), relationship marketing covers three different aspects: 1) "*the rationale for establishing, developing, maintaining and terminating relationships; (2) the processes through which relationships are established, developed, maintained and terminated; and (3) the structures appropriate to managing such processes*".

In this respect, based on Eiriz and Wilson (2006)'s suggestion, the B2C strategies are not appropriate for the B2B sector at the rationale, structure, and process levels. At the rationale level, the B2C branding is emotionally oriented as it targets a large audience; while the B2B branding is rationally driven as it targets a smaller size market. At the process level, the B2B branding seeks to establish personal relationships which are translated into open communication, whilst, the B2C branding focuses on transactional relationship. Finally, at the structure level, unlike the B2C branding, the B2B branding is oriented toward building long term relationship.

However, the development of e-commerce has led to the emergence of a new business model B2B2C. Introduced initially in China, B2B2C brands stand for Business-to-Business-to-Consumer (Zhao & Guo, 2012). According to Kambol (2018, p. 38), "*B2B2C is an emerging e-commerce model that combines B2B and B2C for a complete product or service transaction*". For example, Amazon is a typical B2B2C model (Cai, He, Dai & Zhu, 2018) with a brand valuation exceeding 249 billion dollars (Interbrand, 2021). This new business platform is the heart of the value creation (Zhao & Guo, 2012) and the result of the innovation of the traditional e-commerce model by incorporating production resources with retail resources (Cai, He, Dai & Zhu, 2018).

Therefore, the study of B2B branding has received more interest, even though B2B brands are less researched compared to B2C brands (Koporčiš, Tolušiš & Rešetar, 2017). At the research level, the 1990‟s researchers working in the arena of brand research noticed an increasing number of empirical studies were being produced, adding to knowledge in this field of research. For example, a seminal work by Aaker (1991) entitled 'Managing brand equity' which was initially made for B2C brands, was cited by researchers from B2B branding field (Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2016). As such, B2B brands are gaining interest from both academics and practitioners (Koporčiš, Tolušiš & Rešetar, 2017) where branding is a crucial tool for B2B actors to provide value to their customers.

In practice, building a strong brand is a sizeable success trigger for B2B firms (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). For instance, a well-established brand diminishes the threats related to products and services (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). Other than that, it also reduces the cost of searching for information (Backhaus, Steiner & Lugger, 2011). Then, increase the likelihood of a company in buyers-bidding situations (Wise & Zednickova, 2009), and licensing (Ohnemus, 2009). Also, firms with substantial brands can benefit from premium prices (Keller, 2013) from both consumers and investors (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2007).

The premium price is a strategy that consists of setting the rates at a higher level in regard to competition and consumer's value (Hinterhuber & Liozu, 2018). For instance, Spark Therapeutics launched a drug with a price set at $850,000 which makes it the most overpriced therapy worldwide (Crow, 2018). In contrast, Hinterhuber and Liozu (2018) argued that even though premium pricing depends on marketing changes, the possibility of premium pricing is limited in the B2B context as there are no luxury products in this particular industry. In this situation, B2B pricing comprises quantification that should include customer value (Hinterhuber, 2017; Hinterhuber & Liozu, 2018). As a result, it is inevitable that the financial performance of the firms is influenced by a strong brand (Hirvonen, Laukkanen & Salo, 2016; Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018) because it has a positive influence on consumers' minds (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Spence & Hamzaoui-Essousi, 2010).

Furthermore, unlike B2C consumers market, B2B industry is subjugated by corporate branding (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006; Baumgarth, 2010; Balmer & Burghausen, 2015). This is true because several scholars argued that corporate brands are essential in the B2B sector compared to products or general brands (Aspara & Tikanen, 2008). For instance, almost one third (31 per cent) of B2B firms focused on corporate branding strategies, while nearly half (47 per cent) preferred to mix corporate branding with other branding hierarchy (Richter, as cited in Baumgarth, 2010). This dominance is explained by "*the number and variety of products and services, the high level of customized offerings, and short life cycles; second, current developments in brand management thinking and practice*” (Baumgarth, 2010, p. 654). Meanwhile, past studies have contributed to the B2B branding body of literature from two distinct perspectives that could be classified as follows:

•Applicability of B2C brand equity models in the B2B context.

•Network-focus B2B branding models.

2.3 | Classification of B2B Body of Literature

Applicability of B2C brand equity models in the B2B context

As discussed earlier, in most cases, brand equity was measured from the CBBE perspective (Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010). Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) models are adopted mainly in products and services contexts (Christodoulides, De Chernatony & Furrer, 2015; Çifci et al., 2016; Sarker, Mohd-Any & Kamarulzaman, 2019). The CBBE models were initially developed for the B2C domain (Davis, Buchanan Oliver & Brodie, 2009), yet their applicability for B2B context is debatable (Leek & De Chernatony, 2011) and under-researched (Keränen, Piirainen & Salminen, 2012). However, several researchers argued that CBBE models could be applied in the B2B context as well (e.g., Davis, Buchanan-Oliver & Brodie, 2009; Biedenbach, 2012). On one hand, Biedenbach (2012) investigated the multidimensional models of brand equity proposed by Aaker (1992, 1996) and their interrelationships in the B2B context provided an empirical evidence about the positive performance of the four multidimensional model of brand equity (brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty) in the B2B context. On the other hand, Kuhn, Alpert and Pope (2008) undertook a qualitative study on senior buyers of waste management electronic tracking using Keller's model (1993) and proposed a revised Keller CBBE Model (see Figure 1).

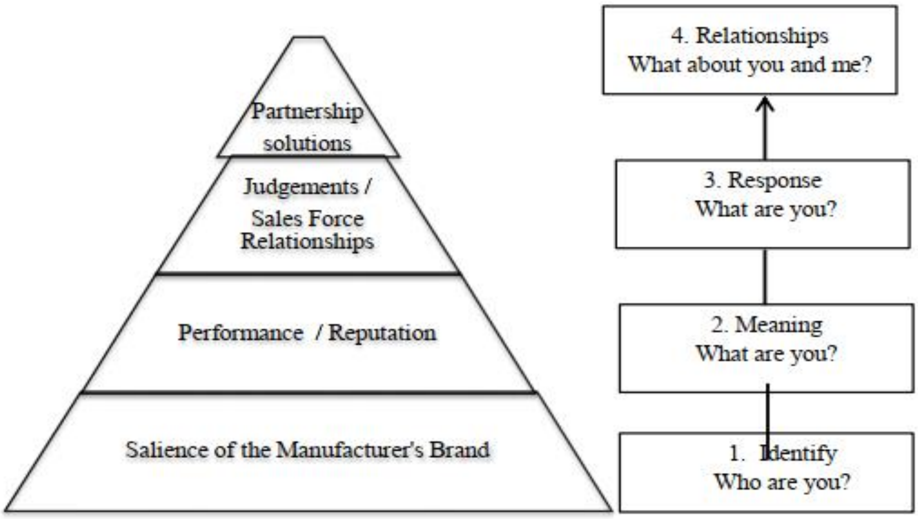

Figure 1: The Revised Keller Pyramid for the B2B Industry Source: Kuhn, Alpert and Pope (2008, p. 50).

This research is among the first studies to analyze the applicability of the model proposed by Keller (1993) in the B2B setting (Biedenbach, 2012). As illustrated in Figure 1, the results showed that four brand building blocks (salience, performance, judgments, and resonance) are applied to B2B context. The other remaining brand building blocks (feelings and imagery) did not apply to B2B setting. Moreover, human capital has a significant part in building brand equity in the B2B context. Also, the new model substitutes imagery by reputation and feelings by salesforce relationship. Reputation was found more critical in a B2B context as supplier reputation is more significant than price. For the feeling block, this dimension does not apply to B2B market since the purchasing decision is rational. As a result, Keller's Model (1993) could be applied to B2B context with consideration of the industry characteristics. Similarly, Ćorić and Jeliš (2015) have conducted a qualitative study to investigate the applicability of Keller's CBBE model in the B2B chemical market. The findings showed the applicability of the six brand building blocks of the model but with adjustment to the B2B marketing approach, as demonstrated in Figure 2.

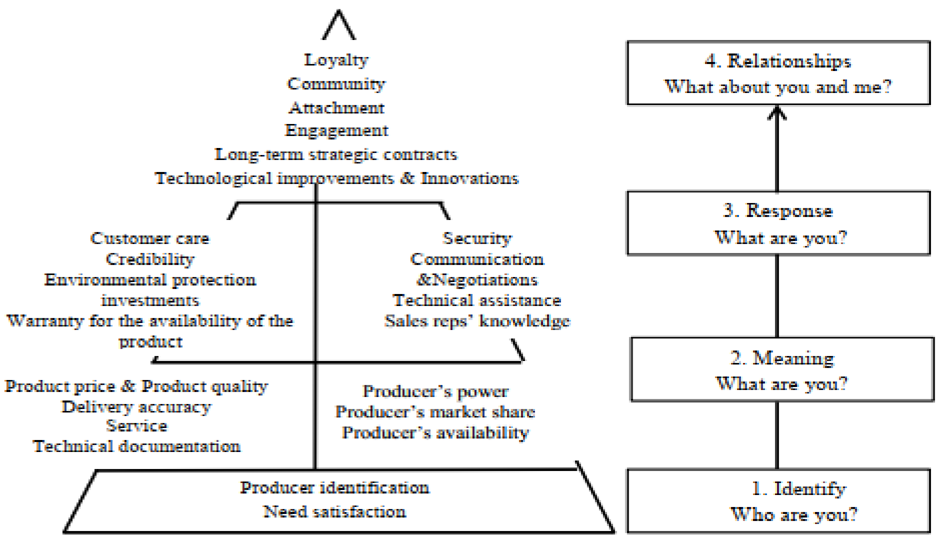

Figure 2: The Revised Keller Pyramid for the B2B Chemical MarketSource: Šoriš and Jeliš (2015, p. 1014)

Network-Focus B2B Branding Models

Even though several researchers applied the CBBE models in the B2B context as discussed earlier, Leek and Christodoulides (2011) argued that these models had not been widely verified in the B2B context because of the nature of the relationships which gives an impact to the branding. For instance, Ford, Berthon, Brown, Gadde, Håkansson, Naudé and Snehota (2002) stated that 88 per cent of B2B relationships surpassed five years old. Meanwhile, the branding literature has shifted from a consumer-based perspective towards a multiple stakeholders‟ perspective (Mingione & Leoni, 2019). According to Heding et al. (2009), starting from 2000, the community approach dominated the branding arena where consumption choices are influenced by contextual and cultural artefact; and brandings strategies depend on macro and consumer culture. Brand community is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001, p. 412).

Similarly, Mertz, He and Vargo (2009) pointed out that the early 2000s marked the beginning of stakeholder-focus brand era, stating that: "*Brand scholars in the early 2000s started to examine the collective and dynamic processes that underlie brand consumption within society. Specifically, since the early 2000s they began to adopt a stakeholder perspective to branding, which denotes that (1) brand value is co-created within stakeholder-based ecosystems, (2) stakeholders form network, rather than only dyadic, relationships with brands, and (3) brand value is dynamically constructed through social interactions among different stakeholders*" (Mertz, He & Vargo, 2009, p. 337).

This approach indicates that brands are a part of a dynamic social process (Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014), whereby the brand value is co-created and continuously shaped through network relationships of multiple stakeholders (Mertz, He & Vargo, 2009; Kaufmann, Loureiro & Manarioti, 2016; Pathak & Pathak-Shelat, 2017). In regard to B2B branding, B2B branding field is dominated by corporate brands (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006; Baumgarth, 2010; Balmer & Burghausen, 2015), and is regarded as a relational process that occurs through interpersonal interfaces. This leads to the development of the corporate identity and reputation (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017; Chang, Wang, & Arnett, 2018, Koporcic & Halinen, 2018; Koporcic, & Tornroos, 2019; Koporcic, & Ivanova-Gongne, 2020). As an effect, corporate brand does not only target the customers but also other stakeholders (Cho and Fiore, 2015; Chang, Wang, & Arnett, 2018; Iglesias, Markovic, Singh, & Sierra, 2019).

In fact, corporate brand is driven by network-based and coherent interactions (Mingione & Leoni, 2019), whereby interactions are indispensable to cultivate trustful relationships (Mingione & Leoni, 2019). Therefore, the application of B2C branding models in the B2B context is not totally appropriate. Thus, a handful number of researchers took into account the particularity of the B2B context by including the stakeholder dimensions from network perspective (e.g, Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018; Koporcic, N., & Tornroos; Koporcic, & Ivanova-Gongne, 2020) and stakeholders‟ perspective (e.g., Jones, 2005; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016). The study undertaken by Mäläskä, Saraniemi and Tähtinen (2011) has demonstrated how social and business network actors (i.e., stakeholders) show impact to the SME's brand image and acquaint with the concept of branding pool. This concept entails the independent network actors that directly contribute to B2B SME branding activity. Meanwhile, depending on the relevance of their influence, branding actions could be direct or indirect. On the one hand, "the direct actions influence branding separately from the company-governed branding process" (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011, p. 1149), by influencing the functional brand value, providing references, creating the word-of-mouth or media publicity, co-promoting, creating a competitive brand position, designing and communicating the brand. On the other hand, the indirect actions are the "*network activities that contribute to an SME's internal operations that may consequently, that is indirectly, affect the construction of the brand*" (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011, p. 1148) such as giving feedback, advice and offering financial support. As such, SMEs managers can utilize stakeholders to manage their branding pool to enhance their brand performance.

In 2018, Koporcic and Halinen presented the concept of Interactive Network Branding (INB) by linking dynamic branding processes and their impact and interconnection with business network processes (Koporcic & Ivanova-Gongne, 2020). Koporcic and Halinen (2018) INB and proposed an INB process model which lays down the role of various interactions of the INB. The model distinguishes between three types of interactions: (1) internal interactions, (2) external interactions, and (3) boundary spanning. Internal interactions refer to the interactions between people from different positions and hierarchy level inside the firm. In contrast, external interactions are interactions (direct or indirect) between the firm and people representatives of other companies. These interactions take the form of word-of-mouth, referrals, and references. Meanwhile, boundary spanning interactions comprise of interactions occurring at the borderline between the representatives of an organization (salespeople) and its external actors (network environment). As such, the INB is a result of personal connections between representatives of the company (Iglesias, Landgraf, Markovic & Koporcic, 2020), who should be attentive to their influence on corporate identity and reputation (Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). Moreover, INB impact three phases of business relationship development, namely the pre-relationship stage, the early stage, and the development stage (as cited in Koporcic & Ivanova-Gongne, 2020) whereby the external dimension is found to be dominant for the pre-relationship stage while the internal dimension for the early stage (Koporcic & Ivanova-Gongne, 2020).

However, even though network theories highlighted that the brand value is formed in networks rather than in a static relationship between stakeholder and brand (Mertz, He & Vargo, 2009), a broader understanding of the stakeholder influences on the brand from focused stakeholder approach is needed. In fact, a firm's networking system is part of its stakeholders (Mertz, He & Vargo, 2009) to whom the firm is obligated at legal, contractual and moral levels (Jones, 2005). The first article on B2B branding from stakeholder perspective is Jonas's (2005) (Mertz, He & Vargo, 2009). Jones (2005) claimed that brand value is co-created through interaction with multiple strategic stakeholders; thus, a stakeholder brand equity model was proposed (see Figure 3), which emphasized the critical role of multiple stakeholders in developing brand equity.

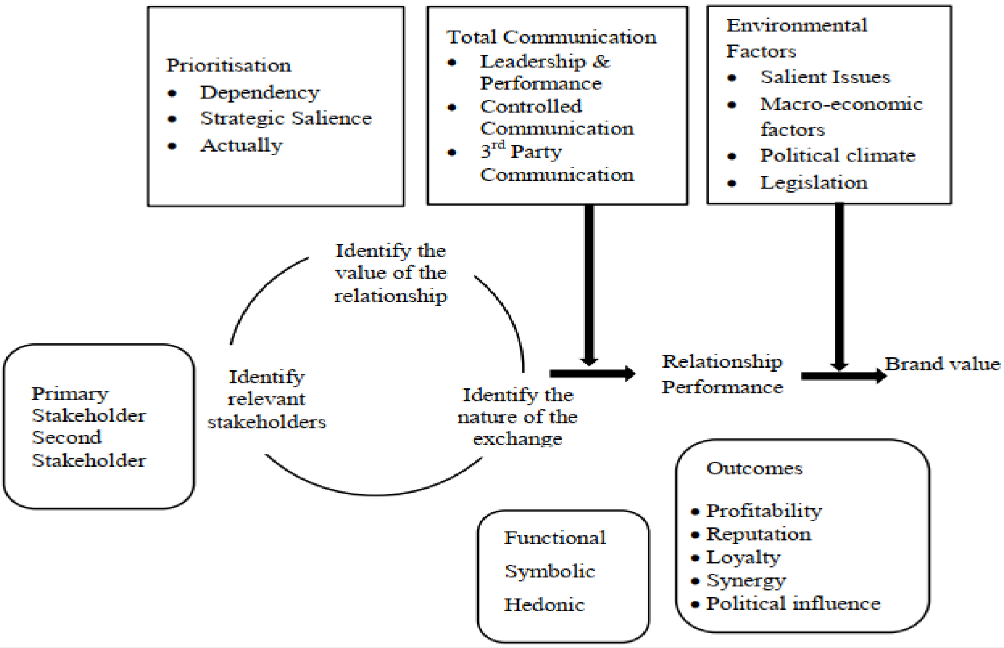

Figure 3: The Stakeholder-Brand Value Model Source: Jones (2005, p. 26)

The model serves as a tool to evaluate the value of numerous stakeholder groups in creating and maintaining long-term brand value. The model entails three steps

- Identification of the relevance of the stakeholders (primary and secondary). A primary stakeholder is a person with regular and stable interaction, who influences the brand value directly. The impact of secondary stakeholder happens at a specific time.
- Prioritization of the relevant stakeholders‟ relations (in regard to their contribution to the creation of the brand value) through assessment of their relationships in terms of dependency, strategic significance, and actuality
- The Identification of the nature of the exchange between stakeholders (functional, symbolic, or hedonic).

This model highlighted the important role of communication in generating goodwill, trust, and reputation (Jones, 2005). It also captured the complex nature of B2B relationships and the impact of environmental factors such as salient issues, macroeconomic factors, political climate, and legislation.

3 | CONCLUSION

B2B branding field has noticed an increasing interest (Keränen, Piirainen & Salminen, 2012; Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2016) where corporate brands dominate the B2B field (Baumgarth, 2010). Besides, B2B branding is regarded as a relational process that occurs through interpersonal interfaces which leads to the development of the corporate identity and reputation (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). However, more B2B study is needed to extend the understanding of the B2B branding through the network lens. Therefore, this study has sought to recommend research from the network theory lens, given the particularity and the nature of the relationship in the B2B context.

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