The roles of business partners in corporate brand image co-creation

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the roles of business partners in co-creating a corporate brand image.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts different business partners’ perspectives to analyse corporate brand co-creative actions through a case study within a business-to-business company (B2B SME) context. Interviews with the case company’s manager and key business partners were used as the primary source of empirical data.

Findings – The study suggests a typology of seven roles which business partners adopt in corporate brand image co-creation: co-innovator, co-marketeter, brand specialist, knowledge provider, referee, intermediary and advocate. The study also highlights the management of co-creative relationships in corporate brand image co-creation in the context of business partners.

Practical implications – This study increases the understanding of the complexities and dynamics related to corporate brand image construction and helps managers size the potential of business partner relationships in corporate branding and manage co-creative brand partner relationships.

Originality/value – The roles are examined by applying a conceptual framework built by combining branding research in a novel way with the role theory. The study also provides a multi-stakeholder perspective to brand co-creation.

Keywords Corporate image, Brand co-creation, Corporate branding

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

A strong corporate brand is a valuable intangible asset, because it symbolises quality, trustworthiness and distinctiveness. Organisations that are weak in branding terms, may lack clear corporate brand promise (Balmer, 2010). Corporate brand image refers to how a company is perceived by customers and other stakeholders (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). A good corporate brand image influences how people perceive the quality of the company’s products and services and helps to achieve customer preference and a sustained superior performance (Roberts and Dowling, 2002). While brand identity has been described as the internal perception of the company’s central qualities and strengths (Kapferer, 2008) defined by brand managers (Rode and Vallaster, 2005), corporate brand image ultimately resides in the minds of the brand’s audience and is not under the company’s full control (Hatch and Schultz, 2003).

Corporate branding shares the same objective as product branding in creating differentiation and preference. However, while a product brand represents a single product or service, a corporate brand represents an entire organisation with a more strategic and longer-term perspective (Balmer, 2001b; Balmer and Gray, 2003). Whereas, a product brand mainly targets customers, a corporate brand needs to create relationships with different stakeholders and is characterised by a multi-stakeholder orientation (Balmer, 1995). Managing it is therefore more complicated (Knox and Bickerton, 2003).

Recent branding research further emphasises that stakeholders are integral to the corporate branding process rather than external targets (see Leitch and Richardson, 2003; Gregory, 2007). The corporate brand is increasingly considered to be co-created through dynamic, interactive social processes in multi-stakeholder networks or service ecosystems rather than as a resource generated within a company (Merz et al., 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Central to this current view is the proposition that all stakeholders are perceived as potentially having an active role in branding (Leitch and Richardson, 2003), and a company’s ability to utilise the resources (e.g. knowledge and skills) of its stakeholders in branding is decisive in terms of the brand’s success (Merz et al., 2009).

Although the literature increasingly acknowledges external stakeholders as active co-creators, rather than passive targets in corporate branding (Hatch and Schultz, 2010), insight is still lacking into how (Payne et al., 2009) and why (Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2012) a brand image is co-created, especially at the corporate level (Balmer, 2010; Hatch and Schultz, 2010), as well as what roles external stakeholders play in the co-creation process (Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011). Furthermore, the existing literature on brand co-creation is mainly conceptual (Boyle, 2007; Helm and Jones, 2010) or focuses on either the company’s or the customer’s perspective alone (Mühlbacher and Hemetsberger, 2008). Studies that consider the broader stakeholder ecosystem and multi-stakeholder perspective in corporate brand co-creation do exist (Määläskä et al., 2011; Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2012; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013). However, the existing research is lacking and calls for empirical work that genuinely involves the perspectives of multiple different actors in co-creation (Frow et al., 2015). The
different actors’ perspectives are particularly relevant in corporate brand co-creation owing to its multi-stakeholder orientation (Hatch and Schultz, 2010).

This study poses the following question: What different action-based roles do business partners play in co-creating a corporate brand image? This study examines corporate brand image co-creation from a multi-stakeholder perspective through an analysis of the brand co-creative actions and brand image perceptions of different business partners of a small business-to-business company (B2B SME). Understanding the phenomenon from the partners’ perspective is particularly important in the B2B context, where the value of the brand is greatly based on the business partners’ desire to align with the corporate brand (see Balmer, 2010). Furthermore, a B2B SME and its partner network offer a particularly attractive setting in which to examine brand co-creation, because they are characterised by strong partner interdependencies (Ford et al., 2003). SMEs are reliant on collaboration and resource integration with partners to counter their resource limitations (Bretherton and Chaston, 2005), for example, in branding.

The study proceeds by showing how development of corporate branding literature and its integration with a brand co-creation view enable us to theorise how the corporate brand image is co-created. We then review role theory and relate it to the corporate branding literature to further understand why corporate brands are co-created. After describing the methodology and analysis, we suggest an empirically grounded typology for seven roles that business partners adopt in corporate brand image co-creation. Finally, we present the theoretical and managerial implications, limitations and future research opportunities.

2. How is a corporate brand image co-created?

A corporate brand is traditionally seen as a promise (Balmer and Gray, 2003) created within and delivered by a company and communicated externally (Balmer, 2001a) to create a positive brand image (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001). The concept of a brand promise has been at a core of the corporate brand literature since the early articles within the field (Balmer, 2001a; Balmer and Gray, 2003). Still, academics have increasingly described how a brand promise provided by a company or its management not only is the foundation of the branding process but also the interaction between a company’s identity, culture and stakeholder images (Hatch and Schultz, 2003) matters. The real value of a corporate brand resides in the emotional ownership the brand’s stakeholders experience (Balmer, 2005) and in understanding how different stakeholders experience, interpret and influence corporate brands as being important for managing brands (Melewar et al., 2012). The recent brand co-creation perspective further emphasises the role of external stakeholders as active co-creators in branding (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Gyrd-Jones and Kornum, 2012; Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013).

The concept of co-creation has received an increased amount of attention in branding research since the seminal works in the fields of value co-creation (Prahalad, 2004) and service-dominant (S-D) logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Originally, “value co-creation” referred to a company’s innovation process in which customers were invited to share ideas and actively participate with the company (Thomke and Von Hippel, 2002). More recently, the S-D logic has moved away from regarding value co-creation as taking place in direct interactions between company and their customers to include all stakeholders within the value-creating ecosystems (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). The multi-stakeholder perspective in value co-creation has particularly important implications for corporate branding, given its multi-stakeholder orientation (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Balmer, 2001b).

In this study, the corporate brand image is conceptualised as a set of external perceptions or mental associations about the company as a whole that builds up over time through brand experiences (Balmer, 2001b; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Brown et al., 2006). A brand experience (Prahalad, 2004) is formed through various touchpoints in the brand relationship continuum (Payne et al., 2008). The recent brand co-creation literature (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007; Vargo and Lusch, 2004) further emphasises that these touchpoints involve both direct interaction (e.g. service encounters) (Payne et al., 2008, 2009) and indirect interactions (e.g. word-of-mouth) with the company (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007).

Accordingly, corporate brand image depends greatly on the stakeholders’ perception and satisfaction based on the company’s communication and performance (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001). However, rather than being dependent on the company’s internal actions alone, the overall corporate brand image also depends on the actions of external actors within the value-creating ecosystem (e.g. resellers, aftersales service) (Morgan et al., 2007).

In practice, multiple interrelated stakeholders are involved in the various brand touchpoints, who play a role in co-creating the corporate brand image (Jones, 2005). Previous research shows that business partners especially can have a major impact on a company’s operations and performance, including its corporate brand image (Morgan et al., 2007). A study by Mäläskä et al. (2011) shows that network partners can influence the company’s brand image directly, for example, by influencing the functional brand value, providing references and promoting the brand by word-of-mouth, or indirectly, for example, by giving feedback and advice or by influencing management decisions. Reciprocity and mutual benefit (Hatch and Schultz, 2010) are emphasised as the principles of brand co-creation (Ballantyne et al., 2011; Gregory, 2007). However, the influence of the co-creative actions on the brand can be either positive or negative (Vallaster and von Wallpach, 2013).

Corporate brand image can thus be seen as the outcome of interactions between different actors (Perks et al., 2012) that involve brand co-creative behaviours by the company and actors within its network (Mäläskä et al., 2011). Consistent with the S-D logic, corporate brand co-creative actions can take place in interactions with the company or between external actors within the service ecosystem that contribute to the overall brand image (Payne et al., 2009; Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). We use this distinction as the first analytical dimension in the empirical analysis of the business partners’ co-creative actions regarding the corporate brand image.
3. A role theoretical perspective on why corporate brands are co-created

The concept of “role” originates from the metaphor of a theatre and refers to a character in a play whose behaviour is guided by their “part” and the “script” (Thomas and Biddle, 1966). The concept has been applied to understand and explain the actions of multiple actors involved in dynamic social phenomena (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Montgomery, 1998), such as service interactions and relationships in marketing (Parker and Ward, 2000). We previously defined corporate brand image as emerging largely from the co-creative actions of multiple actors. Therefore, role theory seems appropriate for examining co-creation of the corporate brand image by business partners and developing a stronger theory of corporate branding (c.f. Mukherjee and Balmer, 2006).

Role theory can be roughly divided into two views: the structural functionalist approach and the symbolic interactionist approach. The structural functionalist approach argues that actors’ behaviour is largely based on explicit and mutually agreed role expectations. In organisational settings, role expectations can be expressed through formal or informal negotiations and contracts (Solomon et al., 1985). For example, according to Burmann and Zeplin (2005), managers can assign employees to act as brand ambassadors, whose role is then to communicate the brand’s meaning to their colleagues and customers to strengthen the brand identity and image (Schultz and de Chernatony, 2002). The previous research has also applied the concept of brand ambassador to resellers in business-to-business (B2B) markets, because they are perceived as playing a key role in transferring brand knowledge and awareness (Gupta et al., 2010). A company may also assign consultants and creative agencies to roles that involve them working with managers in forming a brand strategy (Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011). In line with this, Määlskä et al. (2011) argue that external network actors can be involved in promoting a company’s brand based on a contractual agreement. According to Solomon et al. (1985), successfully performing this role is then reliant on a mutual understanding of the expectations and the actor’s ability to perform a certain role. A mutual understanding of role expectations can be enhanced by having explicit communication between the actors (Solomon et al., 1985).

Symbolic interactionist role theory argues that, rather than being explicitly assigned, roles can also be proactively adopted (Ashforth, 2000) as actors actively try to interpret and adapt to a given situation (Mead, 1934). This approach contends that the concerns of actors’ motivations and their subjective willingness to act in a particular way are seen as particularly decisive denominators of role enactment (Parker and Ward, 2000). For example, according to Jacobs (2003), motivated and satisfied employees communicate the brand values to external audiences of their own accord, thus adopting the role of brand advocates. Furthermore, enthusiastic customers and other external stakeholders can take the initiative to contribute to a company’s product innovation, design and marketing (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). According to Määlskä et al. (2011), participation by external network actors in branding is greatly driven by mutuality beyond formal contracts. This is in line with the brand co-creation view, emphasising that it is the reciprocity and mutual benefit in interactions that underlie the principles of brand co-creation (Ballantyne et al., 2011; Hatch and Schultz, 2010).

In conclusion, the existing research pursues empirical evidence on both company-assigned and proactively adopted brand co-creator roles. In this study, we use this distinction as the second analytical dimension to further analyse the roles of business partners in corporate brand image co-creation.

Roles arise from the characteristics of the actors’ actions in a specific context, rather than from their formal positions (Heikkinen et al., 2007). Furthermore, the actors are not bound to one role; they can have multiple roles and adopt different roles in different situations (Winship and Mandel, 1983; see also Biddle, 1986). Based on these conceptions, in this study, a role is determined based on the business partners’ co-creative actions in regard to the brand image (i.e. what they do), rather than on what their positions are (e.g. customer, supplier, reseller).

We depict the two analytical dimensions in Figure 1. First, we conclude that corporate brand image co-creation can take place through business partners’ interactions with the company or with other actors in the value-creating ecosystem (the two circles in Figure 1). Second, we conclude that brand image co-creative actions can be assigned by the company based on agreed role expectations, or they can be proactively adopted by the business partner (the solid/dotted arrows in Figure 1).

4. Methodology

4.1 Case study design and criteria for case selection

This study examines the roles of business partners as corporate brand image co-creators beyond their formal roles by adopting a qualitative, single case method targeting analytical generalisation through theoretical triangulation (Woodside, 2010). A case study is adopted to examine corporate brand co-creation, because it enables the building of the conceptual base of a phenomenon that lacks a strong existing theory (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Involving multi-stakeholder perspectives to study a complex and contextual phenomenon involving human interactions, such as brand co-creation (Payne et al., 2009), requires an in-depth approach that can only be effectively reached through a single case study (Feagin et al., 1991).

The empirical case in this study is Solution Ltd. and the setting comprises its manager and key business partners whose roles as corporate brand co-creators we aim to examine. Solution Ltd. is a B2B SME that produces indoor positioning solutions, mainly for the health-care and security markets, and

![Figure 1 Brand Image co-creation within the value-creating ecosystem](image-url)
it employs approximately 20 people. Solution Ltd. is based in Finland, but it operates in more than 20 countries around the world through its reseller network. Solution Ltd. has received several international innovation awards and has been acknowledged as one of the fastest-growing companies in Finland in terms of turnover in 2016.

Solution Ltd. meets the criteria of a unique (Yin, 1989) and information-rich case, manifesting the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). Three criteria emerging from the purpose of the study (Stake, 2000) were considered to evaluate the suitability of the company for study: first, the company must demonstrate good performance, indicating best practices within its sector (Payne and Frow, 2014). Second, the company must give high priority to branding in its business development. This was confirmed in the interview with the managing director:

We have had the goal right from the beginning that we were going to create a consistent and uniform corporate brand image. We want our brand to be visible in everything we do – the software and the physical products, just everything.

Third, the company works closely with its partners and actively involves them in its operations in general and its branding in particular. The importance of the partners to Solution Ltd. was evident in the following explanation:

Our partners are very important to us, because we operate through them and employ only the key experts ourselves. We have also tried to offer them incentives so that they would speak positively about us and, of course, be happy to do it. (Managing Director)

4.2 Data collection

The study relies on interviews with intentionally selected informants as its primary data source. The first interview was conducted with the managing director of Solution Ltd. in 2010 and was followed by a second interview in 2012. During this two-year interval, the first author also attended two meetings held between the company and its marketing agency. We used the insights obtained from the meetings as background information about the company’s branding strategy, actions, targets and the people involved. Those partners who had the closest and most active relationship with, and therefore knowledge about, the company were selected as the key informants for the research. Knowledgeable key informants can provide deep, rich data on behaviour while reducing the cost of collecting the data (Seidler, 1974, p. 817). In-depth, qualitative interviews with representatives of a customer, a reseller, a supplier, a marketing agency and an investor/board member were conducted. These were supplemented by a follow-up interview with the managing director. The kind of secondary data that Yin (2009) recommends are used in a case study, including company webpages, press releases, brochures, promotional videos and manuals, and were used to confirm the evidence obtained in the interviews (e.g. co-marketing campaigns), increasing the construct validity through data triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

The semi-structured interviews predominantly focused on the interviewees’ own actions and perspectives in relation to the phenomenon. We were particularly interested in how the partners felt they were involved in co-creating the corporate brand image, i.e. what actions they perceived they had taken to contribute to it and why. We used a semi-structured interview guide to modify the questions to fit the situations of the different business partners and to elaborate on the topics that they felt were important. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Table I summarises the details of the interviews.

4.3 Data analysis

The analysis process was highly iterative, involving an abductive interaction of the theory and empirical data to elicit new insights, which is typical of qualitative inquiry (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). To ensure a systematic analysis, a three-step approach including data reduction, display and verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was used, because it is considered especially useful in case studies (Robson, 2002).

After thoroughly reviewing the entire data set, we proceeded with a systematic analysis of the interviews, focusing particularly on the partners’ actions perceived as influencing the corporate brand image. We identified various actions that we coded as brand image co-creative actions using NVivo software. The distinction by Mäläskä et al. (2011) between external actors’ direct and indirect influence on brand image enabled us to evaluate the business partners’ activities as corporate brand co-creative actions.

Two theoretical dimensions we defined earlier guided the subsequent analysis of the coded actions:

1. Did the actions take place in interaction with the company or other actors in the value-creating ecosystem?
2. Were the roles assigned by the company or were they proactively adopted on the initiative of the business partners?

We used the two dimensions to construct a 2 × 2 coding matrix, in which we placed the coded data extracts. The coding matrix enabled us to compare similarities and differences in the actions and made the analysis more systematic and transparent (Robson, 2002, p. 482). We analysed the categories both separately and in relation to one another to identify distinguishable roles (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis continued until no new themes emerged. After revising and clarifying the categories, we named the roles to best represent their respective corporate brand image co-creative actions. Seven distinguishable roles emerged from the analysis. We
invited the informants to provide feedback on the draft findings and role descriptions to ensure that the interpretations were accurate (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

5. Empirical findings

In this study, we identify and describe the business partners’ different roles in corporate brand image co-creation through an analysis of their brand image co-creative actions. Based on the case analysis, we suggest a typology of seven action-based brand image co-creator roles for business partners that we identified. We classified the roles under four categories based on whether the role was perceived as company-assigned or proactively adopted and whether the actions occurred in a relationship with the company or other actors in the value-creating ecosystem. We refer to the roles that performed brand image co-creative actions with the company as relationship-level roles, whereas we categorised the roles that performed those co-creative actions with other actors in the ecosystem as ecosystem-level roles.

5.1 Company-assigned relationship-level roles

5.1.1 Co-innovator

A co-innovator participates in the company’s innovation and development processes to initiate new product/service features and to find better, more efficient and more profitable courses of operation. Examples of the co-innovators in this case were the customer and reseller. The customer, for example, described their participation in the company’s product innovation as follows:

We have been developing the system in cooperation with them [Solution Ltd.]; together we have found, and are still finding, new applications for the solution. (Customer)

The reseller described their involvement in the pricing of Solution Ltd.’s offering to increase its competitiveness and demand:

We have worked closely together from the beginning to get the pricing to a competitive level. (Reseller)

Both the customer and reseller perceived that through co-innovation activities, the quality of Solution Ltd.’s products/services had improved, which was also backed up by the managing director:

We would have never been able to do these [solution features] alone. (Managing Director, Solution Ltd.)

In addition, the partners’ active involvement in Solution Ltd.’s innovation and business development had enhanced their perception of the company’s image as a trustworthy partner. For example, the customer stated:

It gives us the feeling that they really want to solve the customer’s problems. (Customer)

The co-innovators were thus interpreted to influence the corporate brand image directly through increased partner satisfaction and indirectly through their input into the company’s product/operational performance.

The co-innovator role was assigned by the company with a desire to use its partners’ knowledge, creativity and judgment. According to the reseller:

He [Solution Ltd.’s managing director] very openly asked us to help them with the pricing […] We have been selling such systems for decades, so we have a quite good understanding of the price levels in the markets. (Reseller)

5.1.2 Co-marketer

The co-marketer engages in marketing activities with the company. Such collaboration enables the actors to combine resources, cut marketing expenditure and exploit each other’s networks. The reseller and customer in this case enacted as co-marketers. The reseller, for example, stated that:

We do some co-marketing. We split the costs by sharing an exhibition stand. Now we are organising a roadshow together. They [Solution Ltd.] asked who we should invite and I gave them about a hundred names, which we then combined with Solution Ltd.’s contact register. (Reseller)

The co-marketer was interpreted as influencing the corporate brand image in two ways. The first was direct, through the associations that such collaboration creates in the eyes of other market actors:

We can see that they have managed to get some good partners like Company X [the reseller] on board to co-market their solutions. (Supplier)

The second was indirect, through the resources and networks they provide access to:

They [the partners] have opened many doors for us to build it [the brand image]. (Managing Director, Solution Ltd.)

Joint marketing campaigns were also considered to receive more attention and visibility than those implemented alone. Other co-marketing activities in this case included a jointly organised open house event, a co-produced promotional video, shared press releases and joint advertising. The co-marketer’s role is enacted on the basis of clearly defined shared interests and concrete mutual benefits, although it was often done without a formal contract.

This type of cooperation can be regarded as the classic form of value co-creation in which external actors are invited to innovate together with a company (Thomke and Von Hippel, 2002). However, the partners emphasised that to be worthwhile, such cooperation should also result in concrete value outcomes for them:

The benefits achieved should be visible in both of our operations (Customer). We’ve looked at the pricing together so that it would leave profit for both of us. (Reseller)

The study shows that direct monetary benefit often guided the co-innovation; yet, it was not the only motivational factor. For example, another central driver was that co-innovating was perceived to serve the partner’s performance quality. According to the customer:

We are co-developing the solution so that it would better correspond to our own needs. (Customer)

The perceived future potential related to the co-innovation in terms of access to other resources and new business opportunities was also seen to increase the partner’s willingness to adopt a role as co-innovator. The customer, for example, saw that their involvement in the innovation processes opened them to the possibility of offering consulting services to other organisations on related issues.

Accordingly, the role of co-innovator was enacted in a proactive manner with the company to create mutual value, and the role expectations were explicitly communicated. The co-innovator’s role also involved sharing confidential information and was characterised by a high level of trust and transparency in the relationship.

5.1.3 Corporate brand image co-creator

The role of co-brand image co-creator was enacted in all cases in a relationship with the company. The partners perceived that their efforts affected the corporate brand image. According to the reseller:

It’s really a matter of exposure, that we wouldn’t have been so well known without our collaboration with Solution Ltd. (Reseller)

We refer to the roles that were proactively adopted and were perceived to serve the partner’s performance quality. Alongside the co-innovator role, the co-brand image co-creator role is often enacted by the reseller. For example, the customer stated:

It’s making us more visible, almost like a representative of the corporate brand. (Customer)

Co-creators are involved in the co-creation of corporate brand image through their active efforts that either increased the visibility and reputation of the company or acted as an interlocutor between the company and other market actors. For example, the reseller stated:

It gives us the feeling that they really want to solve the customer’s problems. (Customer)

The co-brand image co-creator role was assigned by the company with a desire to use its partners’ knowledge, creativity and judgment. According to the reseller:

He [Solution Ltd.’s managing director] very openly asked us to help them with the pricing […] We have been selling such systems for decades, so we have a quite good understanding of the price levels in the markets. (Reseller)

5.1.4 Co-promotion

The co-promotion role was enacted in a relationship with the company. The partners perceived that their efforts affected the corporate brand image. According to the reseller:

It’s really a matter of exposure, that we wouldn’t have been so well known without our collaboration with Solution Ltd. (Reseller)

We refer to the roles that were proactively adopted and were perceived to serve the partner’s performance quality. Alongside the co-innovator role, the co-promotion role is often enacted by the reseller. For example, the customer stated:

It’s making us more visible, almost like a representative of the corporate brand image. (Customer)
5.1.3 Brand specialist
A brand specialist is involved in designing the company’s branding strategy and representations (e.g. the name, logo, website, brochures, packaging and exhibitions). A brand specialist possesses specialised branding knowledge that a small company often lacks in-house and cooperates with the company to ensure they have a professional and consistent corporate brand appearance that includes visual, verbal and experimental brand representations. The distinctive, professional and consistent brand representations of Solution Ltd. were often referred to by the interviewees when evaluating its corporate brand image. For example, the customer stated that:

'It gave us a good impression that the whole company appearance was in place – all the materials, webpages, brochures and everything were finished. (Customer)'

Consequently, we interpreted that a brand specialist influences the corporate brand image directly. In this case, the role of the brand specialists is evident for the marketing agency, and it also applies to other specialised service providers. Also, the investor/board member sporadically acted as brand specialists when, for example, they were assigned to renaming the company. The marketing agency players elaborated their role as follows:

'Our job is to make sure that the corporate brand is integrated, complete and credible in all its aspects, and wherever the target group gets to experience the brand, it is consistent. (Marketing Agency)'

The role of brand specialist was assigned by the company and was based on a contractual agreement or a commission. The analysis further suggests that a brand specialist’s ability to play the role properly – that is, not as a separate cosmetic function but integrated with the corporate strategy – requires explicit communication between actors with trust and transparency in the relationship:

'It is essential that we are well informed about the company’s strategy or otherwise we cannot support it and bring it to fruition. (Marketing Agency)'

The data show that close, long-term cooperation with a brand specialist enables accumulated learning that improves consistency between the corporate and brand strategies and increases efficiency. According to the managing director of Solution Ltd.:

'We can just send them [the marketing agency] a message saying “Can you do an ad?” and some additional information. We don’t need to discuss how the ad should look or anything, because they already know. (Managing Director, Solution Ltd.)'

5.2 Proactively adopted relationship-level role
5.2.1 Knowledge provider
A knowledge provider proactively offers a company new ideas and insights on how it can improve its operations and performance. The study shows that partners with substantial experience are valuable sources of technical, market and customer knowledge in their own areas of expertise and can support the company’s decision-making. In this case, the reseller, supplier, investor/board member and marketing agency all acted as knowledge providers, giving advice related to their own expertise. The supplier, for example, advised the company on issues concerning production efficiency and product quality:

'I just heard today from their [Solution Ltd.] managing director that many deals have been closed based on reference visits or contacts for us. (Customer)'

A knowledge provider was seen as contributing to the corporate brand image indirectly through the input that it brought to the company’s overall development, similar to co-innovators:

'It [co-operation with partners] has helped us to learn and focus on the right things, and you can also tell that based on the customer satisfaction surveys. (Managing Director, Solution Ltd.)'

However, unlike a co-innovator, the role of knowledge provider was not assigned by the company; rather, it was proactively adopted by the partners in their own personal willingness to maintain a good partner relationship. Such support was perceived as being particularly vital in the company’s early stages because of its limited experience. The director of the marketing agency elaborated their motivation to act as a knowledge provider as follows:

'Partners think about each other, even when they are not making an order. We are in this together. (Marketing Agency)'

The analysis further indicates that building and nurturing direct, interpersonal and open partner relationships, especially at the management level, reinforces such knowledge sharing:

'Right from the beginning he [Solution Ltd.’s managing director] started to share their ideas with us, and we also started to tell him our views on what we think should be done. (Marketing Agency)'

The investor/board member, however, saw that it was also a part of his formal, position-based, role to act as a knowledge provider.

5.3 Company-assigned ecosystem-level roles
5.3.1 Referee
A referee convinces other market actors about the capabilities and trustworthiness of the company and the quality of its offering on the company’s behalf. In this case, the customer, reseller, supplier and investor/board member all acted as referees. The customer, for example, elaborated the arrangements concerning reference visits to their premises as follows:

'Potential customers, resellers and even investors have visited us […] We first tell them a little bit about our business and this [Solution Ltd.’s] solution and then take them to see how it works in practice. We also receive a lot of phone calls from potential customers. (Customer)'

A referee plays a central role in increasing the company’s credibility and winning confidence in the eyes of new customers, and a referee also prospects and influences the corporate brand image directly and concretely, as illustrated by the following:

'I just heard today from their [Solution Ltd.’s] managing director that many deals have been closed based on reference visits or contacts for us. (Customer)'

Referees are considered especially vital for a small company’s credibility when investments are substantial and long term, as is often observed in B2B markets.

Accordingly, a referee interacts directly with the company’s other stakeholders, aiming to purposefully influence the corporate brand image. The referee’s role was assigned by the company. The investor/board member, for example, described how they acted on the company’s initiative:
We were brought onto the front line [by Solution Ltd.’s managing director] to meet customers and partners in an exhibition to inspire confidence. (Investor/board member)

The role enactment was driven by explicit reciprocal interests based on direct or indirect, monetary or other benefits. The customer, for example, elaborated their motivations to act as a referee as follows:

We built our own image by showing that this was a safe place, and at the same time they [Solution Ltd.] become displayed. We have clear common interests. (Customer)

Some of the partners, however, perceived that due to their noteworthy status within the markets, they also automatically acted as a referee for the company.

5.3.2 Intermediary
An intermediary delivers the products and/or services related to the company’s offering on its behalf. An intermediary plays a central role as a corporate brand image co-creator, as they provide the interface between the company and its customers. For example, the service encounter provided by the reseller is a key denominator of the customer’s perception of the corporate brand:

When we install the systems, we have to make it work as promised because we are there in the middle. If we break the promise given to the customer, they do not necessarily think that it is us who broke it, but they will be disappointed with Solution Ltd. (Reseller)

Accordingly, the role of an intermediary is seen as influencing the corporate brand image directly, because customers do not distinguish between the company’s performance and that of the intermediary. The role of intermediary was typically played by the reseller, and it also corresponds to its formal, position-based role. In this case, the supplier also acted as an intermediary, as they shared responsibility for the corporate brand’s operational performance and reliability:

They [Solution Ltd.] are somewhat dependent on us actually supplying their products on time and at the expected quality level to their customers. (Supplier)

The role of an intermediary was assigned by the company, and it was based on a contractual agreement. In principle, an intermediary acts for the corporate brand’s benefit because they share a common commercial interest. However, the analysis shows that besides the standard contractual terms and conditions, an intermediary has to be aware of the intended image and brand promise pursued by the company, and also needs to be as capable and willing to co-create the brand image as the company desires. Otherwise the actions it takes can have unintended or even negative consequences:

One of our partners had billboards presenting our products at an exhibition, which were OK, but had nothing to do with our corporate brand image. The products did not look like they were supposed to. They stood out like a pimple on a face. (Managing Director, Solution Ltd.)

The study suggests that active dialogue and training enable intermediaries to internalise the intended corporate brand image, while clear and mutually satisfactory expectations of the collaboration increase their willingness to engage in co-creation.

5.4 Proactively adopted ecosystem-level role
5.4.1 Advocate
An advocate promotes the corporate brand through word-of-mouth endorsements and spreads information about the corporate brand to other actors in the value-creating ecosystem through their personal networks. For example, the investor/board member stated:

I am involved in another company that operates in the same sector. When I meet its customers and stakeholders, I often tell them about Solution Ltd.’s products and the opportunities have helped them forward. (Investor/board Member)

Advocates seem to have a direct influence on the corporate brand image, especially if the networks they are involved in are relevant to the company’s development and growth. All the partners in this case acted as advocates.

The advocates indicated their personal willingness to act as spokespersons, and the role was proactively adopted. The advocate’s role was greatly stimulated by the company’s distinctiveness and excellence and the partner’s strong belief in the company:

It is a very exciting company, and they have very good products. (Supplier) I truly believe in their idea. (Reseller)

The advocates were also eager to express their affiliation with the company for their own benefit:

They are a very inspiring customer, and it is very nice to tell people about them as our own reference. (Marketing Agency)

6. Discussion
6.1 Theoretical implications
This study examines corporate branding in an inter-organisational setting and elucidates the business partners’ roles as co-creators of the corporate brand image from the perspectives of the different partners. As previously explained, the roles in this study are determined based on the partners’ actions, that is, what they do rather than what they are (i.e. their status or position). To identify and describe the different action-based roles, we conducted an empirical case analysis based on two theoretical dimensions describing the partners’ corporate brand image co-creative actions. First, we classified the corporate brand image co-creator roles under four categories, based on whether the role was perceived as company-assigned or proactively adopted, and second, on whether the actions occurred in relationship with the company or with other actors in the value-creating ecosystem.

As a conclusion, the study suggests a typology (Figure 2) that classifies and differentiates between the following seven action-based roles of business partners in co-creating the corporate brand image that emerged from this case study: co-innovator, co-marketer, brand specialist, knowledge provider, referee, intermediary and advocate. Each of the roles clarifies the respective corporate
brand co-creative actions and their influence on the corporate brand image.

This study elaborates the findings of Mäläskä et al. (2011) by demonstrating the partners’ capability to co-create the corporate brand image both directly and indirectly. The study shows that business partners can have a direct influence on perceptions of the corporate brand image through their involvement in the different touchpoints that corporate branding incorporates (Balmer and Greyser, 2006), such as customer service and communication. Partners may not only communicate for the corporate brand on behalf of the company, but they can participate in the ongoing discourse about the brand with the company and within the wider brand ecosystem. Furthermore, the brand co-creative partner relationship itself influences the partners’ relationship experience with the company and their corporate brand image perceptions. The study also shows that partners influence the development of corporate brand image indirectly through their contribution to the quality of products and services, and their input to the company’s learning and overall development. Such co-creative behaviour between the company and its partners influences the brand image in the long term. The findings suggest that the division of direct and indirect influence is particularly important for understanding the complex, holistic and long-term nature of the phenomenon of corporate branding, which involves multiple touchpoints and stakeholders and represents the company as a whole (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Hatch and Schultz, 2003).

Third, role theory helps us gain further insights into the reasons and motives behind partners’ corporate brand image co-creative actions. Our study demonstrates that business partners can act as brand co-creators on the company’s assignment. The assigned roles reflect the essence of brand co-creation in the sense that the company sees the value of the co-operation for the development of its corporate brand image in the long term, beyond single actions, and emphasise the relationship orientation with the partner beyond individual transactions. Therefore, to assign the role of brand co-creator, the company acknowledges the importance of the particular partner relationship from the corporate brand image perspective. Performing an assigned role requires that the partner is also committed to the relationship and corporate brand development (Balmer, 2001b). The study shows that high levels of mutual trust and transparency are required from the relationship for the company to assign the role of brand co-creator to its partners.

Our study also demonstrates that multiple interest groups of a corporate brand (Balmer, 1995) can be proactive in brand co-creation (Ashforth, 2000) and act on subjective willingness (Parker and Ward, 2000) beyond the company’s assignment or explicit role expectations. The study shows that the partners’ subjective willingness to co-create the corporate brand image is greatly based on their desire to be associated with the company’s potential success. This finding supports and elaborates the findings of Balmer (2005, 2010) who emphasises emotional ownership as the basis of corporate brand value to its stakeholders. This study further shows that good interpersonal relationships, especially at the management level, and a willingness to preserve the business relationship add to the partners’ subjective willingness to adopt a role as a co-creator of the corporate brand image.

This study shows that shared expectations and mutual benefits are the central drivers of business partners’ corporate brand co-creation, which supports the existing literature on brand co-creation (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). These findings indicate that, because of the mutual orientation and interdependency of business partners and the long-term nature of business relationships (Ford et al., 2003), the co-creation of a corporate brand image is particularly evident between B2B partners. These findings imply that the co-creative activities between business partners have long existed, but in the previous research, their influence on corporate brand image has not been made explicit. This study further suggests that due to their long-term nature, brand co-creative business partner relationships play a key role in brand image construction, especially at the corporate level, considering the long gestation of a corporate brand (Balmer and Gray, 2003). However, not all business partners contribute equally to corporate brand image co-creation and they are not equally assigned to co-create the brand because the relationships and also the partners’ capabilities to co-create differ.

This study contributes to the theory of brand co-creation by suggesting that co-creative business relationships should be seen as opportunities to co-create the corporate brand image in
the long term beyond separate practices (Frow et al., 2015). The study emphasises the quality of the relationship, namely, mutuality, trust and transparency, in managing corporate brand image co-creation in the context of multiple business partners. This adds to the findings of Payne et al. (2008), who highlight designing the brand encounters in the management of brand co-creation in customer–supplier relationships. To manage the corporate brand image co-creation between business partners, it is important to acknowledge the different brand co-creator roles and to develop the brand co-creative partner relationships.

Fourth, in line with role theory (Solomon et al., 1985), the findings of this study also imply that the partners’ ability to play a specific role and carry out certain brand co-creative actions is a central determinant of the outcome of co-creation, whether it would be positive or negative. This finding adds to the findings of Mäkikoski et al. (2011) that partners can damage the brand unintentionally, and they stress that to secure a good corporate brand image, the company should provide their partners with the necessary resources and expertise to co-create.

Furthermore, our study demonstrates that corporate brand co-creation occurs within the stakeholder ecosystem beyond the company’s direct control or involvement, as suggested in the value co-creation discussion found in the S-D logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2008). The previous research on brand co-creation conducted in product or service branding contexts focused on brand–customer encounters (Payne et al., 2009) and falls short in explaining co-creation in the context of a corporate brand that is strategic and multidisciplinary in scope (Knox and Bickerton, 2003) and is multi-stakeholder-oriented (Balmer, 1995), and thus goes beyond designing and managing the customer experience. This study is also the first to examine corporate brand image co-creation from the perspective of multiple business partners; previous research on brand co-creation has focused mainly on the perspective of either a company (Juntunen, 2012) or customers (Brodie and de Chernatony, 2009).

6.2 Managerial implications

The seven roles we revealed in this study show that there is considerable potential in a company’s partner relationships that can be leveraged in corporate branding. Managers can use knowledge of brand co-creator roles to identify the actors who can influence their corporate brand image and distinguish those co-creative brand image actions that could aid managers to integrate the actors into the branding process in a more concentrated manner.

First of all, knowledge of the roles can help a company evaluate the co-creation potential of both prospective and existing partners in relation to its corporate brand image. Selecting partners who can play a role as brand image co-creators beyond their formal roles as partners (e.g. customer, supplier, etc.) and contribute resources to a company can open up new possibilities that may benefit the company in the long run. It is especially crucial for managers to recognise and govern those partner relationships without whose contribution the corporate brand promise cannot be realised.

All the roles identified in this study could potentially add value to the company’s brand image, and it could be beneficial if all of them are played by someone. Knowledge of the roles should be considered when designing a marketing and distribution strategy and when building an optimal partner network to support them. Establishing co-creative partner relationships is particularly relevant for B2B SMEs for them to acquire and sustain a good corporate brand image, considering their limited branding resources and the importance of referrers in B2B markets. Building and maintaining intensive co-creative partner relationships requires a company to expend time and resources. Selecting key partners carefully is therefore critical. Actors with complementary resources and a willingness to co-create present the greatest corporate brand image co-creation potential.

Managers can also benefit from using knowledge of roles to encourage and stimulate the business partners to co-create the company’s brand image. To fully exploit the partners’ potential in corporate brand image co-creation, companies should take an active stance in assigning the roles to their most important partners and in developing co-creative relationships with them. However, it may not be advisable for managers to attempt to control co-creative actions so as to be solely in charge of the brand image, as such control is impossible, and the attempt would jeopardise the authenticity of the co-creation and undermine its benefits. Instead, dialogue should be adopted to encourage partners to play the role of a brand co-creator, rather than using a top-down approach to role assignment. Transparent and interactive partner relationships, especially at the management level, will increase the partners’ willingness to enact roles as corporate brand image co-creators.

It also became evident during the study that all of the partners had their own reasons for engaging in co-creating a brand image. Generating a sense of shared objectives with partners to foster greater integration is essential in corporate brand image co-creation. Explicitly expressed mutual value outcomes would further encourage partners to act as brand image co-creators.

The knowledge of roles can be used to ensure the partners’ ability to co-create the corporate brand image. The key actors involved in corporate brand image co-creation should have a clear understanding of the company’s brand promise and the desired brand image. That understanding is especially important when the partners interact with other actors in the ecosystem to co-create the brand image, such as an intermediary. In addition, managers should provide their partners with the skills, knowledge and other resources required to deliver the desired image outcomes. When managers fail to provide the appropriate conditions, there is a danger that partners may inadvertently damage the brand image. An attempt to co-create the brand image with partners requires purposeful and active involvement from the company in the on-going corporate brand discourse, because it takes place anyway, whether the company is involved in it or not.

7. Limitations and future research

A single case method enabled us to study the phenomenon and an empirical example of it in depth from multiple partners’ perspectives and to provide an analytically general overview of the different roles that they may play in co-creating a brand image. However, the empirical context of a B2B SME limits the general application of the findings. Furthermore, although our study adopted multiple partners’ perspectives, it did not
include all important stakeholders. The literature emphasises the importance of regulators, the media and special interest groups, for example, and it would be interesting to include their views in future research. Further research analysing the roles of multiple actors as co-creators of corporate brand image in other empirical settings and in different contexts of branding is also needed to extend and compare the findings.

Although emphasised in role theory, the actor’s motivation and willingness in role behaviour were not our primary focus, and this study only shed some light on the issues. It would, thus, be beneficial to gain deeper knowledge about the motivators, both exogenous and endogenous, that drive the partners’ brand image co-creation, and about the circumstances under which they are most willing to engage in such actions. The direct and indirect influence of co-creative actions on brand image also requires further research and the application of quantitative measures.

This study took place over a relatively short period of time. Indeed, because business relations are always evolving, the significance of different actors and their roles is likely to change over time, representing a limitation for studies of this type. Longitudinal studies could capture the dynamism and evolution of the roles in more detail.

**Note**

1 A pseudonym is used to preserve the firm’s anonymity.

**References**


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