B2B service brand identity: Scale development and validation

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ABSTRACT

Several brand identity frameworks have been published in the B2C and the B2B brand marketing literature. A reliable, valid and parsimonious service brand identity scale that empirically establishes the construct's dimensionality in a B2B market has yet to be developed. This paper reports the findings of a study conducted amongst 421 senior executives working in the UK IT Service sector to develop and validate a B2B Service Brand Identity Scale. Following established scale development procedures support is provided for a B2B Service Brand Identity Scale comprising five dimensions; employee and client focus, visual identity, brand personality, consistent communications and human resource initiatives. Concluding remarks discuss theoretical and managerial implications with limitations and directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s brand identity has been the subject of increased academic interest (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Alsem & Kostelijik, 2008; Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007; Beverland, Napoli, & Yakimova, 2007; de Chernatony, 1999; de Chernatony, McDonald, & Wallace, 2010; Kapferer, 1997, 2004; Keller, 1998, 2003; Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan, & McDonald, 2005). Organizations that present a cohesive, distinctive and relevant brand identity can create preference in the market place, add value to their offer and command premium prices (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004; Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Ohnemus, 2009; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997). Building brand identity also fosters trust, facilitates differentiation (Ghodeswar, 2008) and helps customers' identification with the brand (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). More broadly, developing a B2B brand has a positive affect on perceived quality (Cretu & Brodie, 2007), helps build customer loyalty (Persson, 2010) increases company power in the distribution network (Ohnemus, 2009), drives sales volume and revenue (Glynn, 2010) whilst adding to balance sheet value in the event of sale (Low & Blois, 2002). Consequently, research providing brand identity management insight has the potential to be of considerable academic and managerial interest.

Although several brand identity frameworks have been published in the B2C literature (Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; de Chernatony et al., 2010; Kapferer, 2004) only a small number of studies have considered brand identity in a B2B context (Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007; Beverland, Napoli, & Yakimova, 2007). The development and validation of B2B related frameworks is of particular note given the unique characteristics of B2B markets.

Such characteristics include multifaceted supply chain relationships (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Campbell, Papania, Parent, & Cyr, 2010; Gadde & Hakansson, 2008; Glynn, 2010; Lee, Lin, Lee, & Lee, 2010; Lindgreen, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2010), a complex selling process to a decision making unit (Bendixen et al., 2004; de Chernatony et al., 2010; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004), highly customized solutions (Baumgarth, 2010), a smaller number of more powerful clients (Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007), high value transactions (Campbell et al., 2010) and the predominance of personal selling (Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007; Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2004; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2007) which places a greater emphasis on managing the human resource which implement the brand strategy (Baumgarth, 2010; Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010).

This research contributes to the dearth of empirical research on brand identity in a B2B service context by developing a valid, reliable and parsimonious B2B service brand identity scale. The scale provides a psychometrically sound way to measure and reveal the construct's dimensionality. To date, the nascent B2B brand identity literature has been conceptually orientated (Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007; Beverland, Napoli, & Yakimova, 2007) and so our inquiry intends to address this gap given it is empirically informed.

The paper opens by reviewing the conceptualization and dimensionality of brand identity with the latter providing the basis for

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exploring the content domain of B2B service brand identity. It then explains the methodology followed to collect data through a postal survey and the analysis procedures to establish the psychometric properties of the scale. Concluding remarks highlight theoretical contributions, managerial implications and limitations with avenues for further research also being suggested.

2. Literature review on brand identity

Several frameworks that conceptualize brand identity have been published. These appear to have been developed predominantly with B2C brands in mind (Table 1).

Aaker (1996) advances the Brand Identity Planning System comprising product, the organization, a person and a symbol perspectives whilst Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) Band Leadership Model augments Aaker's (1996) work via the inclusion of 'brand essence' and 'elaboration of brand identity'. Building on earlier work (de Chernatony, 1999), de Chernatony (2006) regards vision, culture, positioning, personality, relationships and presentation as components of brand identity whilst Kapferer's (2004) Hexagonal Identity Prism model conceptualizes brand identity via facets of personality, culture, self image, reflection, relationship and physique.

Although these frameworks have been widely referenced in the academic literature they have not been subject to empirical investigation. From a scale development perspective, the current frameworks are problematic. It is unclear how some dimensions e.g. 'product' or 'organisation' (Aaker, 1996) could be scaled given they are so broadly conceived. It is also debatable if some dimensions such as 'elaboration of brand identity' (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000) or 'presentation' (de Chernatony, 2006) are activities or constructs with the former being unsuitable for scaling. The logic underpinning some frameworks is also open to discussion. Kapferer (2004) considers self image and reflection facets of brand identity. These consumer based constructs appear to be at odds with the consensus of opinion that brand identity is an 'input' (cf. de Chernatony, 2006). These scholars' frameworks appear to have been generically developed. Whilst de Chernatony (2006) and Aaker's (1996) work may have some service brand applicability as they account for internal stakeholders and the organization/symbol respectively these frameworks, in their entirety, do not account for the distinctive challenges service branding brings. This specifically relates to the pivotal role employees play for service brands. It is also unclear how applicable these frameworks are in B2B markets which also present unique marketing challenges (Malhotra, 2005).

Embryonic brand identity research is starting to emerge within the B2B literature. Beverland, Napoli, and Lindgreen (2007) draw on Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) Global Brand Leadership Framework to postulate an Industrial Global Brand Leadership Framework which is intermittently referred to as 'brand identity'. These scholars contest brand identity is built around five capabilities. These are relational support, coordinating network players, leveraging brand

architecture, adding value and quantifying the intangible. Brand identity was regarded in this study as "the key words or phrases that sum up the core values of the brand" (p. 1086). Equating brand identity with words or phrases simplifies the construct's complexity and detracts from its rich and multidimensional nature. In another study, Beverland, Napoli, and Yakimova (2007) identify key attributes business marketers can use to build a strong brand identity. These attributes include product, services, logistics, adaptation and advice which are referred to as the "basis" (p. 395), "forms" (p. 397) or "pillars" (p. 397) of brand identity. Arguably such an approach confuses brand identity building and brand positioning which the branding literature regards as distinct but related constructs where the former influences the latter (cf. Kapferer, 2004). Instead, Beverland, Napoli, and Yakimova (2007) do not appear to consider brand identity (the means) per se but the positioning (the ends) of brands around product benefits, levels of service, logistics or by being adaptive and providing advice.

2.1. Defining B2B service brand identity

Drawing on the corporate identity work of Hatch and Schultz (2000), de Chernatony (2006), considers brand identity as "the distinctive or central idea of a brand and how the brand communicates this idea to its stakeholders"(p. 45). In what could be considered a somewhat abstract definition, Kapferer (2004) defines brand identity as "specifying the facets of the brands' uniqueness and value" (p. 95) whilst Aaker (1996) regards brand identity as "…what the organisation wants the brand to stand for in the customer's mind" (p. 25) or more simply put "how strategists want the brand to be perceived" (p. 71). Aaker's (1996) work raises several points. First, brand identity emanates from the 'organization'. It is not a consumer or client side construct. Second, within the organization, the "strategist" plays a pivotal brand identity role. Third, brand identity is visionary in nature. Considering the construct as visionary is consistent with both de Chernatony (2006) and Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000). The latter researchers regard brand identity as the "vision of how that brand should be perceived by its target audience" (p. 27). However, several issues materialize from Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) definition. For example, these authors refer to a "vision" but do not elaborate on whose vision this actually is. This is a benefit of Aaker's (1996) work insofar the vision lies with the "strategist". Furthermore, it may be more appropriate to define brand identity in the context of stakeholders and not an audience. Broadening the scope of the construct's definition in this way overcomes a limitation of Aaker's (1996) work which appears to be customer centric.

Aaker (1996) and Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) work was considered particularly useful in terms of specifying brand identity due to the clear, concise and unambiguous way the construct has been defined. This helps specify the 'domain' of the construct (Churchill, 1979) and so lay the foundation for subsequent scaling (Netemeyer, Bearden, & Sharma, 2003). Furthermore, Aaker's (1996) work provides some sampling frame guidance in the form of the brand "strategist" i.e. a senior marketer. Consequently, guided by this rationale we define B2B service brand identity *as the strategist's vision of how a B2B service brand should be perceived by its stakeholders.* The next section explores the domain of the B2B service brand identity construct within the parameters of the aforementioned definition.

2.2. The domain of B2B service brand identity

Based on the literature review B2B service brand identity is a multidimensional construct and its facets in a B2B service context are:

2.2.1. Marketing culture
Several brand identity scholars have noted the important role 'culture' plays in building brand identity (Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; de Chernatony et al., 2010; Kapferer, 2004). However, culture

Table 1
Current dimensions of brand identity.

Dimension of identity	Kapferer (2004)	Aaker (1996) Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000)	de Chernatony (2006)
Physique	√	√ (product?)	
Relationships	√		√
Vision		√	√
Reflection (external)	√		
Personality	√	√	√ (emotional aspects)
Culture	√		√ (& vision)
Self image (internal)	√		
Organization		√	
Symbol		√	
Positioning			√ (functional aspects)
Presentation			√