



## Brand equity in the professional service context: Analyzing the impact of employee role behavior and customer–employee rapport

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### ABSTRACT

The study examines whether factors related to customers' perception of employees' behavior in terms of customer perceived role ambiguity, role overload and customer–employee rapport influence the development of brand equity in the professional service context. 632 customers of one of the Big Four auditing companies participated in the study. The results of structural equation modeling show negative effects of role ambiguity and role overload on brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty, which constitute brand equity. The findings indicate a positive effect of customer–employee rapport on the enhancement of B2B brand equity. However, the negative influences of role ambiguity and role overload on customer–employee rapport transfer detrimental indirect effects on brand equity. The study contributes to an understanding of how the real interaction between service providers and customers can influence brand equity in the professional service setting.

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### 1. Introduction

Brand equity defined as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller, 1993, p. 8) has been shown to be of high importance for companies' competitive positions and performance (Kim & Hyun, 2011; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007; Webster & Keller, 2004). The concept of brand equity was originally developed in the B2C market and it is a well-accepted fact that brand equity and brand management are crucial for success in this setting (Keller, 2008; M'zungu, Merrilees, & Miller, 2010; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Some researchers have argued that brand equity has a minor role in the B2B market as the number of buyers and sellers is relatively small, which makes it easier to develop knowledge about each other (Anderson, Narus, & Narayandas, 2009). The exchange in business markets is also assumed to have a more rational foundation, since professional experts in different areas are involved in the purchasing process (Kim & Hyun, 2011).

Previous research on B2B branding has however demonstrated that brands are also important in the decision making process that takes place in the B2B market (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007; Michell, King, & Reast, 2001; Mudambi, 2002; Webster & Keller, 2004), especially in the professional service context (Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatony,

2000; Kim & Hyun, 2011; Roberts & Merrilees, 2007). These studies show that brand equity leads to similar positive outcomes in the B2B setting as in the B2C setting. Brand equity motivates B2B customers to pay a price premium, to consider brand extensions, and to recommend the brand (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004; Hutton, 1997; Michell et al., 2001). Furthermore, successful B2B brands with high levels of brand equity serve as the key for building trust (Roberts & Merrilees, 2007), which is important for the exchange in industrial markets (Hite, 2003). Trust, obligations, and expectations based on relational contracts facilitate knowledge sharing and activity exchange among organizations (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Granovetter, 1985; Hite, 2003), and are of relevance for the maintenance of a relationship (Li & Ferreira, 2008). These factors affect transaction performance, market performance, and profitability performance of a company (Baldauf, Cravens, & Binder, 2003; Han & Sung, 2008).

Earlier studies on the determinants of B2B brand equity mostly elaborated on the influence of marketing-mix efforts on brand equity (Kim & Hyun, 2011). In line with Davies, Chun, and Kamins (2010), we however argue that the real interaction between employees of a service company and the customers affects brand equity in the professional service market, besides the image communicated through marketing efforts. Davies et al. (2010) state that employees within a service organization are the face of the organization, as the employees interact with the customer in service encounters. The personal interaction between the service providers and the customers involves both experiences of how the professional employees engage in their work role to meet customers' expectations and the emotional reactions of the employees during the interaction with the customers. Therefore,

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brand equity can be enhanced or diminished after a service encounter based upon to which extent the employees act upon their role expectations and develop affective relationships with the customers. This is in line with research on how role ambiguity and role overload affect employees' job performance and hence their interaction with the customers (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Örtqvist and Wincent, 2006; Singh, 1993; Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004). Role ambiguity and role overload have been proven to have consequences for the individual resulting in stress and strain (Lee & Schuler, 1980; Rahim, 1996), which have been shown to result in non-satisfactory job performance (Morris, Steers, & Koch, 1979; Tubrel & Collins, 2000).

The constructs of employee role behavior and customer–employee rapport are argued to be important in the marketing context, especially in service marketing, but role ambiguity and role overload have only been used to understand employees' own perceptions of their role behavior and their effects on employees' attitudes and performance (Behrman & Perreault, 1984; Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Singh, 1998; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004). Customer–employee rapport has merely been introduced to explain customer satisfaction and loyalty intentions (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006). The study of their importance for the enhancement of B2B brand equity has so far been non-existing. While we notice a gap in research in this particular area, our study is based on the assumption that the customers' perception of the employees' role behavior and customer–employee rapport is of crucial importance for the enhancement of brand equity in the professional service context. To address this gap in research, we investigate how the customers' perception of employees' behavior and customer–employee rapport affects brand equity of companies providing professional services.

In a study of customers of one of the Big Four auditing companies, we propose and test a structural equation model of influences of employee role ambiguity and role overload on customer–employee rapport and the dimensions of brand equity. Fig. 1 presents the conceptual model. Thereby, this study contributes to research on B2B branding by analyzing how the interaction between customers and service providers affects the development of brand equity. This issue has not been considered in prior research on brand equity, but is of high relevance, especially for B2B service branding. If employee role behavior and customer–employee rapport influence B2B brand equity, it is a signal that this particular stream of marketing research needs to further acknowledge real customer–employee interaction in brand equity models. Besides acknowledging the customers' perception of their interaction experience captured by customer–employee rapport, we argue that customers' perception of the role performance of employees and how they are able to address their role expectations in interaction with customers are also related to the success of the brand building process of their organization. Drawing on role theory (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970), we hypothesize that customer's perception of the employee's certainty about what

he or she is supposed to do, and about the time that he or she has to engage in providing the service is important for the development of B2B brand equity. To our knowledge, these three factors were previously not studied in relation to the enhancement of B2B brand equity. We further notice that no previous research has studied linkages between role ambiguity and role overload and customer–employee rapport.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Dimensions of brand equity and the process of B2B brand equity development

Before discussing the importance of employee behavior on the customer's perception of the brand, we turn to the dimensions that constitute the overall brand equity of a company. Aaker's (1991, 1996) initial model of brand equity originating from research in the B2C market includes four dimensions: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Despite a lack of consensus among previous brand equity researchers about a specific design of an overall brand equity model and about the constructs that can consider the specifics of the B2B market, some studies have provided empirical evidence about the overall importance of the above mentioned seminal model also in the B2B setting (Bendixen et al., 2004; Hutton, 1997; Michell et al., 2001; van Riel, de Mortanges, & Streukens, 2005).

The inclusion of all individual dimensions from Aaker's (1991, 1996) model may although be pursued with caution. Only a few studies (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Gordon, Calantone, & di Benedetto, 1993; Kim & Hyun, 2011) include all four dimensions of B2B brand equity in their conceptual models and the findings of these studies indicate problems with the robustness of this model. Kim and Hyun (2011) test the hypothesized effects of a combined measure of brand awareness and brand associations on perceived quality and brand loyalty. The hypotheses about the impact of brand awareness and brand associations on other dimensions of brand equity are not supported in the study (Kim & Hyun, 2011). The study by Biedenbach and Marell (2010) shows similar inconsistent results in relation to the dimension of brand awareness, which is found to be insignificant for most relationships. The reported high mean value of brand awareness indicates that generally in the B2B setting the customers have high levels of awareness about their current service provider, which might have a minor role for the enhancement of brand equity. Based on the results from these studies and on the fact that the B2B market differs in some important respects from the B2C market, we find that the Aaker's (1991, 1996) model needs to be modified for certain settings. The actors are few in the B2B setting, experts are involved in the decision making process, and the knowledge about the brands and companies at the market can therefore be assumed to be high. The importance of brand awareness for the brand equity enhancement can therefore be questioned. In our study, we research brand equity in relation to one of the Big Four auditing companies. The levels of awareness could be argued to be high, and therefore the brand equity development is more likely to be better captured by brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

The dimension of brand associations is defined in the initial model as “image dimensions that are unique to a product class or a brand” (Aaker, 1996, p. 111). This definition is close to the concepts of organizational image and reputation that have been shown to be of importance in the B2B setting. Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that organizational image involves externally produced meaning-making about the organization. Many studies have shown that these meanings are of importance for firms' branding and for their performance in the B2B context (c.f. Mudambi, 2002; Roper & Davies, 2010; Shaw, Giglierano, & Kallis, 1989; Shipley & Howard, 1993). Also studies on reputation have shown that perceptions and feelings about the organization are important for B2B branding and overall performance of a company (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Davies et al., 2010; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Brand associations in terms of customers' thoughts and

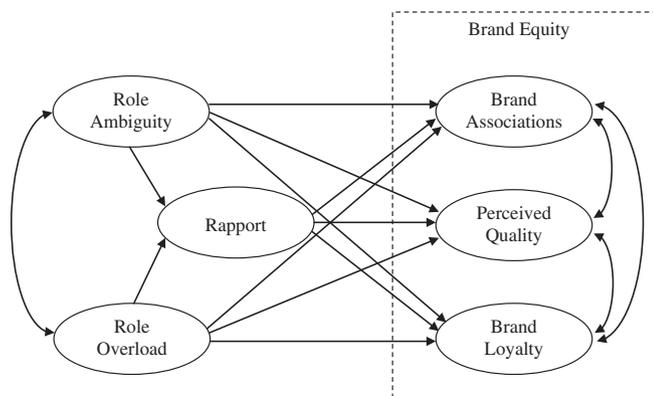


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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