

An Inside-Out Model of Brand Orientation for SME Branding

ROHANA MIJAN
Universiti Utara Malaysia

SHUHAIIDA MD NOOR
MASTURA JAAFAR @ MUSTAPHA
Universiti Sains Malaysia

RIZKI BRIANDANA
Universitas Mercu Buana, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The study aims to develop a branding strategy model for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as the industrial revolution 4.0 necessitates the alignment of branding for sustainability. An inside-out model of brand orientation is a comprehensive approach that focuses on strategic brand resources internally, offering an effective branding strategy for SMEs to attain sustainability. This model is essential for SMEs due to the fragmented market segmentation nowadays, and SMEs need to cope by using their internal resources. Thus, it is crucial to ensure they can exploit market opportunities and not lose out in the cloud of digitalisation. This qualitative study relied on data from in-depth interviews with informants from 10 brand-oriented SMEs in Malaysia. The resource-based view (RBV) was applied as the managerial framework, and thematic analysis was used to reveal themes. It was found that the internal strengths and weaknesses of strategic brand resources indicate the creation of a competitive branding strategy. Interestingly, the companies explored not only tangible resources but also intangible resources in creating their branding strategies and communicating those strategies to employees and customers. The model contributes by guiding SMEs in formulating their branding strategies based on their resources. These findings elucidate an option for SMEs to develop their brands based on their existing resources in order to sustain in the market.

Keywords: *Branding, brand orientation, strategic brand resources, small-medium enterprises.*

INTRODUCTION

Companies urgently require branding practice in order to sustain in the market. Branding refers to the strategic process through which a company formulates a competitive brand (Mijan et al., 2020). Branding is always associated with big companies rather than SMEs, as SMEs tend to regard branding practices as financially consuming. The main obstacles against the practice of branding are inadequate resources, which create a gap in advocating consistent branding practices due to a lack of awareness regarding branding among SMEs (Alharbi et al., 2021).

A similar scenario occurs among Malaysian SMEs, where most face resource issues when dealing with branding (Lee et al., 2020; Abdul-Halim et al., 2019). SMEs are an engine for economic growth and elevating the people's living standards in a developing country like Malaysia. However, SMEs struggle to compete with international brands and ensure sustainability in the fragmented market. To lighten the burden of SMEs, various initiatives such as training, workshops, financial assistance, and schemes have been implemented by the government, banks, and authorised bodies to initiate SME branding (SME Corp., 2022).

However, the outcome is insignificant in relation to the implemented initiatives. Most of the initiatives executed are focused on branding tips and strategies with no emphasis on the suitable model of branding strategy for SMEs.

Past studies tend to encourage SMEs to develop limited brand resources (Lányi et al., 2021) with a focus on only one or two brand values (Osakwe et al., 2020; Chua et al., 2019) or brand diversification to expand the impact of branding (Ozdemir et al., 2020). Although this approach is in line with the character of SMEs, it is not a fit solution for the formulation of a competitive strategy since competitors can easily imitate it. In contrast, if a company focuses on the inside-out approach, i.e., an internal analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the company, it would be hard for competitors to emulate the strategies and benefits gained. In turn, SMEs would be able to practise branding continuously and reduce their dependence on financial and external resources such as competitors, customers, and market intelligence (Falahat et al., 2020).

Studies on the competitive strategy for branding commonly employ resource-based view (RBV) (Ahmad et al., 2019; Iyer et al., 2018). RBV provides a complete picture of the internal analysis that leads to competitive strategy and brand competitiveness (Raki & Shakur, 2018). Therefore, this study constructed a branding strategy model to complement SMEs' capabilities. This paper makes theoretical and empirical contributions in three ways. First, it identifies the strategic brand resources, part of the inside-out model analysis for branding strategy. Second, it offers a model for SME branding strategy based on SMEs' capabilities. Third, this study provides evidence to support the scarce empirical findings in branding and SME literature (Chung et al., 2019).

To this end, the researchers reviewed the relevant literature on the brand orientation model for SME branding in relation to the theory and methodology. Consequently, the study's results are discussed, and the meaning of these results is elaborated. This paper concludes by explaining the findings' theoretical and managerial implications and discussing this study's limitations and future research directions.

RESOURCES AND STRATEGY

Different companies have different resources, which are unique to each company. Barney (1991) considered resources diverse and permanent, controlled by the company, and cannot be transferred to other companies. The different resources reflect a company's strategic resources, and these resources form the basis for formulating the company's unique strategies. Companies can utilise strategic resources to formulate strategies and boost competitiveness (Ford, 2020; Gligor et al., 2020).

According to Barney (1991), there are five characteristics of strategic resources. First, resources are considered valuable when they can exploit opportunities or neutralise threats in the corporate environment and improve the company's efficiency. Second, rare resources are scarcely possessed by competitors, so it avoids the similar strategies created. Third, imperfectly imitable resources are difficult to replicate by competitors because they are built in complex environments that were not necessarily experienced by competitors such as history, culture, reputation, protected by law and related. The experience makes brands unique and distinctive. Fourth, substitutability resources refer to the ability of a company to replace alternative sources if the existing resources are no longer strategic in order to ensure the strategy remains impactful. This interchangeability becomes the company's support plan in developing the brand.

Commonly, two dominant debates are being discussed in formulating a strategy-based resource which are market environments and internal resources. According to Porter (1985), strategy formulation should begin by studying the market environment, such as relationships with customers, competitors, and suppliers as well as product threats. This is on the basis that companies have similar resources, such as human resources and product offerings. Therefore, companies need to study the market environment in order to choose the appropriate resources for their strategy formulation.

On the other hand, Alharbi et al. (2021) stated that companies should focus on internal resources to identify their capabilities and determine their strengths and weaknesses that can be exploited to formulate strategies. Knowing the strengths of the resources will allow companies to seize opportunities and address their weaknesses. Thus, companies need to analyse the types of potential resources in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of resources (Ford, 2020). Prioritising internal resources is essential to the formulation of a competitive strategy (Chua et al., 2019) in order to sustain in the industry and generate economic value (Lee & Liu, 2018).

The selection of resources is related to competitiveness. Competitiveness reflects the ability of a company in the same industry to formulate economic value that exceeds the company's profits, and the strategic benefits gained are difficult to replicate by other companies (Barney, 1991). According to Khanna et al. (2022), the impact of the strategy remains effective as long as competitors do not clone the benefits gained. Preserving resources are able to remain long-term future benefits and sustainability in the market as prior practice in brand orientation.

BRAND ORIENTATION

Brand orientation is part of the concept of market orientation but focuses on the internal strength of the company, over the customer in brand building (Chang et al., 2018, Anees et al., 2018). Brand orientation practices have been pictured into two dominant perspectives namely philosophy and behaviour (Raki & Shakur, 2018; Foroudi, 2020). The philosophical perspective refers to the company's thinking over the brand to create value and trust in order to transform a brand into a resource (Bridson et al., 2013). For example, the sharing of a brand meaning within companies to support the brand development activity (Osakwe et al., 2020), a mindset of the company in embedding the brand into the marketing strategies (Tajeddini, & Ratten, 2020) and a company's knowledge on the importance of the brand as a valuable asset that needs to be developed in marketing strategies in order to build a strong brand (Santos-Vijande et al., 2012; Tajeddini, & Ratten, 2020). The philosophical perspective is seen as more implicit as it involves a company's rationale and judgement of brand capability in planning compared to behavioural perspectives.

The behavioural perspective refers to implementing brand planning into action (Bridson et al., 2013). The behaviour is illustrated through branding activity such as interaction with stakeholders (Osakwe et al., 2020), where the internal and external interactions allow a company to spur brand values to employees and customers, leading to brand resource developments. While staff behaviour also reflects the behavioural perspectives where companies tend to execute branding consistently to achieve brand equity (Osakwe et al., 2020). It is achieved through branding activity (Balmer & Podnar, 2021; Raki & Shakur, 2018). The role of brand orientation is explicit and meaningful since both perspectives focus on the internal development of strategic brand resources as equal to a brand-oriented company.

AN INSIDE-OUT MODEL IN BRAND-ORIENTED SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES
Brand-oriented SMEs have an awareness of the importance of branding for brand development. Branding awareness is illustrated by exploring the strategic brand resources to create a competitive branding strategy (Mijan et al., 2020; Urde, et al., 2013). The practice reflects a brand-oriented approach where the focus at each branding stage is fixed and consistent to make the brand a resource that can be developed for the long term (Osakwe et al., 2020).

Before formulating a branding strategy, the company gathers internal information to create strategy-based resources (Osakwe et al., 2020; Urde, 1999). It is found that the brand orientation practice requires an internal exploration of company resources to create a competitive strategy (Osakwe et al., 2020). This practice is also referred to as the inside-out model by Urde (1999). An inside-out model is commonly practised in brand-oriented SMEs. These companies formulate branding strategies based on their strategic brand resources (Urde, 1999). Table 1 shows the common branding strategies practised by SMEs and the strategic brand resources applied.

Table 1: Branding Strategy and Resource Applied

| Branding Strategy | Brand Strategic Resources Applied |
|--------------------------|--|
| Corporate branding | Company name – symbol, logo, and visual identity |
| Product branding | Product name – attributes like function and design |
| Employer branding | Employer’s image and personality |
| Emotional branding | Employer’s personality and brand personality |
| Symbolic branding | Brand personality |
| Internal branding | Employee, culture, and internal communication |
| Co-branding | Any strategic resources |

According to Liow et al. (2019), employee involvement is also part of brand orientation practices. The involvement of employees in branding elevates internal brand communication and will concurrently improve communication skills when dealing with customers (Mijan & Abdullah, 2019; Gilani, 2019). The practice of internal communication must be clear before external communication occurs to avoid miscommunication between employees and customers (Mijan & Abdullah, 2019). Clarity of internal communication allows employees to gain market information (Liow et al., 2019; Piha & Avlonitis, 2018) and convey the brand message to customers clearly.

Communication occurs by highlighting the strengths of brand uniqueness such as logo, uniform and brand name in branding strategy (Mudanganyi et al., 2020; Urde, 1999), employee behaviours (Osakwe et al., 2020), advertising and word-of-mouth (WOM) communication (Liow et al., 2019). Through this strategic communication, a brand-oriented company will acquire market information and adapt the brand to changes based on the capabilities of the company’s resources.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRANDING STRATEGY IN BRAND-ORIENTED COMPANIES: AN INSIDE-OUT MODEL

Brand-oriented companies have guidelines for creating their branding strategies. The creation is based on the context of a brand-oriented company that turns brand resources into strategy (Raki & Shakur, 2018). Brand-oriented SMEs apply five guidelines in formulating branding

strategies, and these guidelines become a model that supports the SMEs' branding (refer to Figure 1).



Figure 1: The inside-out model of brand-oriented SMEs' branding strategy

First, the strategy is based on the brand's vision since the vision consolidates the core values of the brand and reflects the brand's strengths that the company can offer (Liow et al., 2019). Second, the strengths and weaknesses of the company's internal resources are analysed (Osakwe et al., 2020) by exploring the uniqueness of the resources. The screening processes will identify the strategic brand resources to be developed (Mijan et al., 2020). Focusing on internal resources will provide guidance to the company in creating a competitive strategy based on capabilities rather than rivalry (Falahat et al., 2020).

Third, the company explores the tangible and intangible strategic brand resources to expand the strategy (Baporikar & Fotelela, 2021). Some authors proposed focusing on only one or two brands (Osakwe et al., 2020; Abdul-Halim et al., 2019) by understanding the company's weaknesses (Omar et al., 2020). Others suggested diversifying to include more brands to reduce the impact of brand failure, expand the market, and generate more profits (Ozdemir et al., 2020). However, Shahin & Pourhamidi (2020) argued that it is not necessary to focus on the number of brands; instead, SMEs should concentrate on the brand's strengths that suit them, such as the tangible resources, including brand uniqueness, product differentiation, the entrepreneur (Tewary & Mehta, 2021; Koporcic et al., 2021; Hirvonen & Majuri, 2020) and employees (Liow et al., 2019). However, tangible resources offer differentiations but are unable to sustain meaningful relationships (Merk & Michel, 2019). Therefore, SMEs are also encouraged to explore intangible resources such as entrepreneur's personality (Tewary & Mehta, 2021), brand personality (Auemsuvarn, 2019), brand culture (Osakwe et al., 2020; Balmer & Podnar, 2021), and internal communication (Balmer & Podnar, 2021; Liow et al., 2019).

Relying on the weaknesses, SMEs practised a co-branding strategy (Chung et al., 2019). A co-branding strategy can decrease costs, expand the promotion and gain more targeted customers (Pinello et al., 2022). It can also be a backup strategy for SMEs to address resource

shortages. In addition, SMEs exploit their flexibility to adapt to the strengths and weaknesses of the resources (Kusi et al., 2022; Renton & Richard, 2019). The weaknesses should be seen as an opportunity for SMEs to develop a brand because the flexibility enables them to connect with customers directly, and meaningful relationships are built to provide an opportunity to build a strong brand (Renton & Richard, 2019).

Forth, brand-oriented SMEs involve all employees in the brand development strategy (Osakwe et al., 2020; Tewary & Mehta, 2021) despite being portrayed as an entrepreneur's dominant role (Tewary & Mehta, 2021; Koporcic et al., 2021; Ogunsanya et al., 2020). The involvement of employees creates brand commitment (Osakwe et al., 2020; Liow et al., 2019), and embeds through a living the brand in the company (Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2022). Fifth, brand-oriented SMEs communicate their brand messages to employees and customers in order to strengthen the brand development strategy (Liow et al., 2019). The communication strategy includes the branding strategy (Osakwe et al., 2020) and resources involved such as brand uniqueness, product differentiation, human resources, and brand symbolism; advertising; and WOM communication such as demonstration, personal selling, and face-to-face communication. Frequent communications synchronise top-down messages to employees and to customers (Osakwe et al., 2020; Liow et al., 2019).

RESOURCE-BASED VIEW

The resource-based view (RBV) developed by Birger Wernerfelt (1984) is a theory rooted in the economic theory by Penrose (1959). The economic theory discusses how a company is able to achieve superior performance by developing its internal resources. RBV discusses how companies develop internal resources to sustain their competitiveness without being tied to external resources (Lanzolla & Markides, 2021; Temprano-García et al., 2019). This theory is widely applied in research on business strategy and management (Zahra, 2021). Many studies have used RBV to look at the internal resources of companies in developing their brands without emphasising the external resources such as markets, competitors and market knowledge in order to explore the possible causes of sustainable competitive advantage (Falahat et al., 2020; Osakwe et al., 2020; Liow et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2018, Raki & Shakur, 2018; Lee & Liu, 2018).

Other studies tend to be more specific on strategy-based resources such as Nikmah et al. (2021), Rantanen (2021), Dionysus and Arifin (2020) and Maiti et al. (2020). These studies used RBV to identify the strategic resources suitable for industries in different markets and its capacity to contribute to economic growth. Whereas Hossain (2021) used RBV to identify the process of analysing the capability of the competitive strategy in influencing company performance. While Alharbi et al. (2021), Mijan et al. (2020), Alazemi and Ahmad (2020) and Phuong et al. (2022) also use RBV in more specific cases such as identifying the resource used in SMEs, resource capability in creating strategy and impact to company's performance. Hence, RBV becomes guidance in formulating a competitive strategy and is impactful to the competitive advantage.

METHODOLOGY

This study used the semi-structured in-depth interview method in interviewing company representatives. The face-to-face interview was conducted after the appointments were made (Merriam, 1990). Most studies use interview methods to learn the general scenarios of brand development and brand orientation in SMEs (Renton & Richard, 2019; Chung et al., 2019). The questions asked are based on the theme of the study, which is guidelines and

resources related to strategy creation. Semi-structured interviews encourage flexible discussions and enable researchers to gather detailed information from the informants (refer to Table 2).

Table 2: Interview questions based on the objectives of the study

| Theme | Sub-theme | Interview Questions |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Brand development strategy | Guidelines in developing a brand development strategy | 1. How do companies develop their brand resources? 2. What are the strategies used in developing the brand? 3. What are the guidelines adopted in formulating a brand development strategy? 4. What are the processes practised in implementing a brand development strategy? |

Ten companies were selected from the recognition lists, including National Mark from SME Corp., SME Brand Laureate, *Program Syarikat Bumiputera Berprestasi dan Tinggi* (TERAS) (2013), Enterprise 50, and other authorised bodies in Malaysia. The sample size was based on data saturation as Eisenhardt (1989) stated that the number of cases would depend on the data saturation to develop a theory (refer to Table 3).

Table 3: List of companies by business orientation and experience

| Company (Label) | Industry | Experience (years) |
|----------------------|---|--------------------|
| Manufacturing | | |
| A | Garments (school and corporate uniform) | 22 |
| C | Retail (textiles) | 34 |
| F | Food and beverages (sauce and soy sauce) | 29 |
| J | Chemical (lubricating oil and insulation) | 26 |
| G | Healthcare (supplements) | 13 |
| Service | | |
| B | Consultation (civil engineering) | 45 |
| D | Animation (3D animations) | 12 |
| E | Transportation (driving academy) | 19 |
| H | Hospitality (hotels and restaurants) | 24 |
| I | Transportation (express bus) | 14 |

The unstructured thematic analysis was applied because, in qualitative studies, the techniques and procedures for analysing data are not rigid and do not have specific steps, but they provide a complete systematic setting to be followed for data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was to ensure uniformity and consistency in analysing the data. Therefore, the researcher referred to the coding table to explore the branding strategy's main themes, subthemes, and categories.

DATA ANALYSIS

A guided framework from RBV and brand-oriented SME literature was used in analysing the data. The companies were labelled alphabetically to maintain their privacy. The study employed thematic analysis to identify the relationships between themes, sub-themes, and categories, as done by Liow et al. (2019) in analysing the interview data. A coding list adapted from Creswell (2009) was employed to identify the themes related to branding strategy development due to its practicality for qualitative data. Among the six steps are:

- a) Manage and prepare data for analysis, including transcribing interviews and isolating and organising data into different pieces of information.
- b) Read all the data to get general information and an overview of the meaning.
- c) Detailed analysis through a coding process that involves the process of classifying the text (sentences or paragraphs) into sub-themes and categories and labelling according to the terms specified by the informants.
- d) Generate descriptions and themes from coded sub-themes and categories.
- e) Present the theme narratively by including the sub-themes, categories and passages to explain the findings of the study.
- f) The revealed themes pertaining to the objective were compared with the previous studies and theories to support or deviate from previous studies.

VALIDITY & RELIABILITY

There are several ways to ensure the validity of data. First, through the credibility of the researcher and the study sample. In terms of researcher credibility, Pyett (2003) states that in social science research, the researcher masters all aspects of the study including research findings, theory and understanding of the data patterns, whether it is similar or different from the actual situation. The academic qualifications of the researchers are entitled to comprehend the data. Meanwhile, the entrepreneur's position and the company's credibility offer validity and verification to the obtained data, as mentioned by Gilmore and Coviello (1999). Second, this study hired two researchers to analyse and check the level of similarities and differences in the analysis. The two analyses of the researchers were compared to see similarities and differences. If there are many similarities between researchers, then the validity of the data is acceptable, and vice versa (Pyett, 2003).

The validity is counted by conducting the stability test on the data. For example, the researcher asks the same question to the respondent at different times and the respondent gives the same answer. Providing the same answers strengthens the reliability of the data obtained. The researcher also conducted integrity tests (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) by informing the integrity issues, especially regarding the data confidentiality of the respondents during the interview. The assurance of integrity builds trust among respondents to transparently deliver the data. Reliability must be performed to produce the same data in different approaches and repeatedly (Babbie, 1998). Reliability tests reduce errors and bias in studies (Yin, 2003).

THE FORMULATION OF BRANDING STRATEGY

The study found that the planning and branding strategy implementation concludes by referring to the internal strengths and weaknesses of the companies. The brand vision guided the companies in identifying the strengths and weaknesses and mapping the available resources to formulate the branding strategy. According to one study participant:

People know we are a textile company...we also expose our brand towards the leading textile company in Malaysia. Our tagline is Ingat Kain Ingat Jakel. We want people to know that if they want to buy any type of textiles they will find us like curtains, celebrations, weddings... we set the trend by offering a variety of beautiful textiles. (Company C)

The brand vision displays the strength of the brand internally. Thus, all the branding strategies were based on the visions stated. Company D always explored its internal resources' strengths and weaknesses to ensure added value in the branding strategy. The company representative said:

...our animation, Puteri (has) been portrayed in typical Malays customs where we relate with Lime that most Asian knew about it. It is very close. We have studied that, and we found that lime is a very natural element in most people in Asian. They use it for medication, food, beauty...we want to formulate an Asian look and we avoid the copyright plot like Cinderella. We want to create something different from others... (Company D)

Similarly, company C explored the hidden strengths of their intangible resources in developing their brand, as competitors copied their patterns since they were unable to patent all the patterns due to the voluminous number of patterns produced. Company C representative said:

...we did not patent all our patterns because we have thousands of patterns designed. Our brand, Ariani, has been imitated by many competitors. What we do is we create a meaningful relationship with employees and customers. For that we build a strong foundation among employees like giving space to talk, wide working space...then we transfer the value to the customers. Employees and customers feel very comfortable... (Company C)

The companies also utilised their employees in their branding activity as practised by company A. Every decision was based on discussions with employees. Employees became brand ambassadors, mastering brand information and subsequently communicating the information to the public. The informant from company A mentioned:

We are indeed integrated, employee relationships with employers. We always communicate with employees whether it's a message about the brand or a personal problem. When we convey all their brand information to the employees, they can convey what we want to the customer... (Company A)

The involvement of employees enabled the companies to communicate effectively both internally and externally, as stated by the representative from Company G:

Each of the internal staff will be briefed about the brand, tagline, their role... We also emphasise their role in sustaining the brand, our logo. Report to us if there are counterfeit products... So, every time new people come in, I will clear on their role and responsibilities in developing the brand. We will make sure they (staff) know the brand information like the management board. So, they also deliver and carry the same message. All employees know what the branding is. So, brand communication with superiors and subordinates is there for us to make sure they both take care of the brand, quality ... For us, the Chairman, Managing Director also play the same role in creating the brand strategy which is to tell outsiders what Natural Wellness is. They are all marketers and involved in brand development. (Company G)

The study found that brand-oriented SMEs developed their brands by practising the inside-out model. The brand vision led them to explore their tangible and intangible resources and utilise all the strengths and weaknesses in formulating their respective branding strategy. Employees were an asset in boosting brand communication. Employee involvement enabled SMEs to formulate a competitive branding strategy.

DISCUSSION

The basic model for formulating the branding strategy was based on the companies' internal resources. This study shows that the foundation in formulating a branding strategy is the brand vision. This is in line with the studies of Liow et al. (2019), which stated that brand vision plays a vital role in formulating strategy based on company capabilities. Companies obtain brand information from the brand vision, which guides the companies to focus on brand strengths such as product differentiation and brand personality. Besides, exploring internal resources based on the uniqueness of the internal resources and competitors supports the studies of Osakwe et al. (2020), Piha with Avlonitis (2018) and Lee with Liu (2018), which stated that companies should explore their tangible and intangible resources in diversifying their strategies rather than using the umbrella brand (Zahra, 2021).

The explored resources are vast and not limited to typical resources such as brand uniqueness and entrepreneur, as proposed by Koporcic et al. (2021), Abdul-Halim et al. (2019) and Anees et al. (2018), but also include other resources such as product attributes, brand function, brand quality, employees, brand innovation, brand personality, brand culture, internal communication, family practices, and customer service. Osakwe et al. (2020) and Anees et al. (2018) suggested that each level in the company plays a role in developing the brand. However, Tewary and Mehta (2021), Osakwe et al. (2020) and Mudanganyi et al. (2020), found that the entrepreneurs should dominate the branding activity. The more entrepreneurs' involvement in branding, the more visibility for brand distinctiveness.

Communication is an essential strategy in a brand-oriented company in developing their brand (Liow et al., 2019; Anees et al., 2018). In brand-oriented SMEs, resources such as brand uniqueness, product differentiation, human resources, brand symbolism, and brand innovation are employed as communication sources while implementing the branding strategy instead of advertising and WOM communication. This study found that various resources can be explored for communication strategy, which contradicts the findings of

Bridson et al. (2013) that only tangible resources and brand symbolism were utilised. WOM communication is the frequent communication strategy practised by brand-oriented SMEs due to its ability to convince customers by communicating with customers directly. This finding is similar to previous research (e.g. Osakwe et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it contrasts with Merk and Michel (2019) found that employees with brand orientation are unable to create meaningful relationships since it looks like the salesperson downgraded the customer's pride on brand knowledge. WOM communication is effective and cheap, thus reducing the company's financial dependence, especially on advertising. The inside-out model allowed them to formulate a competitive strategy based on capabilities.

CONCLUSION

The inside-out model provides an alternative and guidance for SMEs in developing their brands from internal strengths and weaknesses. It is based on the development of internal resources that are relevant to the company's capabilities. It is suitable for start-up SMEs still looking for their brand resources. The internal analysis allows them to identify their strengths that are not in the hands of competitors. In a broader context, SMEs also need to consider the scope of the market such as society's perception of the country of origin and the socio-culture of the society. These aspects should be considered as they can influence customers' purchasing decisions.

The issue related to a lack of resources is that SMEs tend to focus on financial resources, especially in executing their communication strategy. This study found that brand-oriented SMEs carried out communication strategies in line with their respective branding strategy, exploiting resources to deliver messages to customers and maximising WOM communication. Developing resources as a communication medium is a strategic step in reducing financial burdens. However, the advertising activities carried out still burden SMEs. Therefore, focusing on their internal resources enables SMEs to generate their finances and certainty reducing the company financial burden. For example, by exploiting branding strategies as a brand communication agent and using verbal communication with employees and customers, the company can lessen their reliance on a high-cost advertising strategy.

The dual strategy offers SMEs an option to deliver and strengthen their brand messages. Besides, a trajectory of brand messages and resources create a competitive strategy since the brand vision appraises the strength and weaknesses of the resources rather than constantly changing market information. Hence the benefits of these strategies are sustained and imperfectly imitable. In parallel with digitalisation, SMEs are encouraged to use social media to promote their brands as it is an affordable, practical and influential platform in Malaysia. The data analytics acquired additional insight into their businesses, allowing them to become more relevant and sustainable in the fragmented market.

LIMITATIONS AND REMARKS ON FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has some limitations, which also offer opportunities for future research. First, the obtained sample is limited due to the company's bureaucracy as it is a high-performance company. Thus, future research suggested taking a larger sample of successful SMEs to provide in-depth data of research evidence generalisation across the population of SMEs in the research context. Second, the obtained sample comes from a variety of industries, making it difficult to make assumptions about the study's constructs in specific industry contexts. As a result, there is a need for future research to investigate research phenomena in specific industries. Third, by relating to the digitalisation urge in developing a brand, perhaps the

digitalisation in branding can be an interesting topic for future research because it offers a solution for endless resource limitations in SMEs. The thorough research will help SMEs grow their business and contribute to economic development.

BIODATA

Rohana Mijan (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Multimedia Technology and Communication (SMMTC), Universiti Utara Malaysia. Areas of expertise include branding, digital branding and brand equity. Email: rohana.mijan@uum.edu.my

Shuhaida Md Noor (PhD) is an Associate Professor at the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Areas of expertise include branding, consumer psychology and tourist behaviour. Email: shuhaida@usm.my

Mastura Binti Jaafar @ Mustapha (PhD & Sr.) is a Professor at School of Housing, Building & Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Areas of expertise include sociology, Technology Management, Archaeology and History, Community Development and Construction and Project Management. Email: masturaj@usm.my

Rizki Briandana (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer at the Fakultas Ilmu Komunikasi, Universitas Mercu Buana, Jakarta. Areas of expertise include Communication, Film & TV Studies and New Media. Email: rizki.briandana@mercubuana.ac.id

REFERENCES

- Abdul-Halim, H., Ahmad, N. H., Geare, A., & Ramayah, T. (2019). Innovation culture in SMEs: The importance of organizational culture, organizational learning and market Orientation. *Entrepreneurship Research Journal*, 9(3), 1-14. <https://doi.org/gnc6hb>
- Ahmad, A., Salleh, S. M., & Perumal, S. (2019). Brand related capabilities and the process of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC): A Resource Based View (RBV). *Journal of Contemporary Research in Social Sciences*, 1(6), 136–150. <https://doi.org/jbj5>
- Alazemi, K., & Ahmad, F. S. (2020). Establishing the validity and reliability of Kuwait resources of nation branding model. *International Journal of Society Systems Science*, 12(1), 51-64. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1504/IJSS.2020.106949>
- Alharbi, R. K., Yahya, S. B., & Kassim, S. (2021). Impact of religiosity and branding on SMEs performance: does financial literacy play a role?. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIMA-08-2019-0162>
- Anees-ur-Rehman, M., Wong, H. Y., Sultan, P., & Merrilees, B. (2018). How brand-oriented strategy affects the financial performance of B2B SMEs. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 33(3), 303-315.
- Auemsuvarn, P. (2019). How brand personality can assist in achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in developing countries. *Journal of Business and Retail Management Research*, 13(Special). <https://doi.org/10.24052/JBRMR/V13ISSP/ART-6>
- Babbie, E. (1998). *The process of social research*. USA: Wadsworth.
- Balmer, J. M. T., & Podnar, K. (2021). Corporate brand orientation: Identity, internal images, and corporate identification matters. *Journal of Business Research*, 134, 729-737. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusres.2021.06.016>
- Baporikar, N., & Fotlela, R. (Eds.). (2021). Strategic brand management in SMEs for competitive advantage. In, *Research anthology on small business strategies for success and survival* (Chap. 42, pp. 846-866). IGI Global.
- Barney, J. B. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99-120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639101700108>
- Baxter, P., & Babbie, E. (2004). *The basics of communication research*. Canada: Thompson Wadsworth.
- Bridson, K., Evans, J., Mavondo, F., & Minkiewicz, J. (2013). Retail brand orientation, positional advantage and organizational performance. *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, 23(3), 245-264. <https://doi.org/ibm8>
- Chang, Y. X., Wang, D., & Arnett, B. (2018). Enhancing firm performance: The role of brand orientation in business-to-business marketing. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 72, 17-25.
- Chua, B. L., Kim, H. C., Lee, S., & Han, H. (2019). The role of brand personality, self-congruity, and sensory experience in elucidating sky lounge users' behavior. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 36(1), 29-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2018.1488650>
- Chung, J. E., Jin, B., Jeong, S. W., & Yang, H. (2019). NIE-based SME brand building in foreign markets: An exploratory study. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 28(1), 63–79. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-10-2016-1331>
- Cresswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Dionysus, R., & Arifin, A. Z. (2020). Strategic orientation on performance: The Resource Based View theory approach. *Jurnal Akuntansi*, 24(1), 136-153.

- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532-550.
- Falahat, M., Ramayah, T., Soto-Acosta, P., & Lee, Y. Y. (2020). SMEs internationalization: The role of product innovation, market intelligence, pricing and marketing communication capabilities as drivers of SMEs' international performance. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 152, 119908.
- Foroudi, P. (2020). Corporate brand strategy: drivers and outcomes of hotel industry's brand orientation. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 88, 102519.
- Ford, J. B. (2020). Competitive advantage. In B. B. Schlegelmilch & R. S. Winer (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to strategic marketing* (No. 9, PART III Competitors and Environment). Routledge.
- Gilani, H. (2019). Corporate brand identity and employee brand citizenship behaviour: A conceptual framework. *The Marketing Review*, 19(1-2), 51-84.
- Gilmore, A., & Coviello, N. (1999). Methodologies for research at the marketing/entrepreneurship interface. *Journal of Research in Marketing & Entrepreneurship*, 1(1), 41-53.
- Gligor, D., Feizabadi, J., Russo, I., Maloni, M. J., & Goldsby, T. J. (2020). The triple-a supply chain and strategic resources: Developing competitive advantage. *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, 50(2), 159-190. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPDLM-08-2019-0258>
- Hirvonen, J., & Majuri, M. (2020). Digital capabilities in manufacturing SMEs. *Procedia Manufacturing*, 51, 1283-1289.
- Hossain, M. S., Hussain, K., Kannan, S., & Nair, S. K. K. R. (2021). Determinants of sustainable competitive advantage from resource-based view: Implications for hotel industry. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights*, 5(1), 79-98.
- Iyer, P., Davari, A., Zolfagharian, M., & Paswan, A. K. (2018). Market orientation, positioning strategy and brand performance. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 81, 16-29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2018.11.004>
- Khanra, S., Kaur, P., Joseph, R. P., Malik, A., & Dhir, A. (2022). A resource-based view of green innovation as a strategic firm resource: Present status and future directions. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 31(4), 1395-1413.
- Koporcic, N., Söderlund, B. M., Johansson, J. T., Rämänen, J. S., Johannes Nieminen, J., & Ivanova-Gongne, M. (2021). *Influence of an entrepreneur on corporate brand: A case study of radical coaching company*. United Kingdom: SAGE Publications.
- Krake, F. B. G. J. M. (2005). Successful brand management in SMEs: A new theory and practical hints. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 14(4), 228-238.
- Kusi, S. Y., Gabrielsson, P., & Baumgarth, C. (2022). How classical and entrepreneurial brand management increases the performance of internationalising SMEs?. *Journal of World Business*, 57(5), 101311. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2022.101311>
- Lányi, B., Hornyák, M., & Kruzslicz, F. (2021). The effect of online activity on SMEs' competitiveness. *Competitiveness Review*, 31(3), 477-496. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2022.101311>
- Lanzolla, G., & Markides, C. (2021). A business model view of strategy. *Journal of Management Studies*, 58(2), 540-553.
- Lee, Y. Y., Falahat, M., & Sia, B. K. (2020). Drivers of digital adoption: A multiple case analysis among low and high-tech industries in Malaysia. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Business Administration*, 13(1), 80-97. <https://doi.org/10.1108/APJBA-05-2019-0093>

- Lee, T., & Liu, H. M. (2018). How do firms with management ability promote competitive advantages? an integrated model from entrepreneurial strategy making and internal resources. *Entrepreneurship Research Journal*, 8(2), 1-15. <https://doi.org/gnc6gg>
- Liow, M. L. S., Yeow K. C., Sam, C.-Y., & Heng, J. A. J. (2019). The influence of brand orientation and knowledge creation on organisational performance of Malaysian tourist resorts. *Asian Academy of Management Journal*, 24(1), 175–204. <https://doi.org/gi4sww>
- Maiti, M., Krakovich, V., Shams, S. R., & Vukovic, D. B. (2020). Resource-based model for small innovative enterprises. *Management Decision*, 58(8), 1525-1541.
- Merk, M., & Michel, G. (2019). The dark side of the sales person brand identification in the luxury sector: When brand orientation generates management issues and negative customer perception. *Journal of Business Research*, 102, 339-352. <https://doi.org/jbnf>
- Merriam, S. B. (1990). *Case study research in education*. California: Jossey-Bass.
- Mijan, R., Md. Noor, S., & Jaafar, M. (2020). Exploring strategic branding resources for small and medium-sized brand-oriented companies. *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 12(1), 29-45.
- Mijan, R., & Abdullah, N. A. (2019). How Do the brand-oriented SMEs communicate?. *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication*, 4(17), 71-79. <https://doi.org/10.35631/ijlgc.417007>
- Miller, D. (2019). The resource-based view of the firm. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia: Business and Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.4>
- Mudanganyi, M., Maziriri, E. F., & Chuchu, T. (2020). Brand orientation as a predictor of customer orientation, brand uniqueness and competitor: Evidence from retail SMEs manager in South Africa. *African Journal of Development Studies*, 10(3), 303-318. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-1ff865b13f>
- Nikmah, F., Rahmawati, R., & Sukma, E. A. (2021). Resource-based view: Implementation in Indonesia SMEs to achieve competitive advantage. *European Journal of Research and Reflection in Management Sciences*, 9(1).
- Pyett, P. M. (2003). Validation of qualitative research in the “Real World”. *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(8). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732303255686>
- Ogunsanya, A., Molale, B., & Hueve, W. (2020). An exploration of entrepreneur brand orientation and consumer perceptions of SMEs’ brand positioning. *Journal for Communication Sciences in Southern Africa*, 39(2). <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/ejccomcare-v39-n2-a3>
- Omar, N. A., Kassim, A. S., Shah, N. U., Shah Alam, S., & Che Wel, C. A. (2020). The influence of customer value co-creation behavior on SME brand equity: An empirical analysis. *Iranian Journal of Management Studies*, 13(2), 165-196.
- Osakwe, C. N., Palamidovska-Sterjadovska, N., Mihajlov, M., & Ciunova-Shuleska, A. (2020). Brand orientation, brand-building behavior and brand identity in SMEs: An empirical evaluation. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 38(7), 813-828. <https://doi.org/jbng>
- Ozdemir, O., Erkmen, E., & Kim, M. (2020). Corporate social responsibility and idiosyncratic risk in the restaurant industry: Does brand diversification matter?. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 32(9), 2925-2946. <https://doi.org/jbnh>
- Pinello, C., Picone, P. M., & Mocciaro Li Destri, A. (2022). Co-branding research: Where we are and where we could go from here. *European Journal of Marketing*, 56(2), 584-621. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-02-2021-0073>
- Penrose, E. (1972). *The growth of the firm* (5th ed.). London: Basil Blackwell.

- Piha, L. P., & Avlonitis, G. J. (2018). *Internal brand orientation: Conceptualisation, scale development and validation*. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 34(3-4), 370-394.
- Porter, M. E. (1985, May). From competitive advantage to corporate strategy. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Phuong, L. N., Tuan, K. C., Duc, N. N., & Thi, U. N. (2022). The impact of absorption capability, innovation capability, and branding capability on firm performance—An empirical study on Vietnamese retail firms. *Sustainability*, 14(11), 6422.
- Raki, S., & Shakur, M. M. A. (2018). Brand orientation in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) from Malaysian government perspective. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(7), 377–391.
- Rantanen, I. (2021). *Sustainable supply management as a source of competitive advantage in Finnish SMEs: A resource-based view* (Master thesis, Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology LUT, Finland).
- Renton, M., & Richard, J. E. (2019). Exploring brand governance in SMEs: Does socialisation provide a means to value creation?. *Journal of Brand Management*, 26, 461–472. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-018-00143-5>
- Santos-Vijande, M. L., Ana Belén del Río-Lanza, A. B., Suárez-Álvarez, L., Díaz-Martín, A. M. (2012). The brand management system and service firm competitiveness. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(2), 148-157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2012.07.007>
- Shahin, A. & Pourhamidi, M. (2020). Brand excellence: A holistic model for brands evaluation and ranking - the case of Isfahan brands. *International Journal of Business Innovation and Research*, 22(1), 69–86. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJBIR.2020.107085>
- SME Corp Malaysia. (2022). National mark of Malaysian brand. <https://www.smecorp.gov.my/index.php/en/national-mark-of-malaysian-brand>
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. California: Sage Publications.
- Tajeddini, K., & Ratten, V. (2020). The moderating effect of brand orientation on inter-firm market orientation and performance. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 28(3), 194-224.
- Temprano-García, V., Rodríguez-Escudero, A. I., & Rodríguez-Pinto, J. (2019). Do proactive and reactive causes to delete a brand impact deletion success? The role of brand orientation. *Journal of Brand Management*, 27, 211–226. <https://doi.org/ghpkf9>
- Tewary, A. K., & Mehta, R. (2021). Brand development and entrepreneur's role in small businesses. *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship*, 23(1), 159-174. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRME-06-2020-0074>
- Urde, M. (1999). Brand orientation: A mindset for building brands into strategic resources. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 15(1-3), 117-133.
- Urde, M., Baumgarth, C., & Merrilees, B. (2013). Brand orientation and market orientation - From alternatives to synergy. *Journal of Business Research*, 66, 13-20.
- Wolfswinkel, M., & Enslin, C. (2022). Living the brand. *In Tech Open*. <https://doi.org/jbni>
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study design and method*. USA: Sage Publications.
- Zahra, S. A. (2021). The resource-based view, resourcefulness, and resource management in startup firms: A proposed research agenda. *Journal of Management*, 47(7), 1841-1860. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211018505>