B2B branding in SMEs: Developing the research field

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Branding research is traditionally oriented towards consumer based brand management, brand equity, and quantitative measurement methods (e.g. Aaker, 1991, 1996; Keller, 1993, 2003). As such, this approach largely neglects branding theories and their relevance for the business-to-business (B2B) world (e.g. Baumgarth, 2010; Biedenbach and Marell, 2010; Cretu and Brodie, 2007; Michell et al., 2001).

Recently, B2B branding research is starting to gain more academic interest. B2B branding is often predominantly adapting insights from the B2C context, without considering the differences and complexities concerning B2B market characteristics. This results into bringing inconclusive contributions to the field (Seyedghorban et al., 2016) as well as a lack of relevance and conceptual clarity (Fetscherin and Usunier, 2012). In addition, B2B studies traditionally examine multinationals (MNCs), while neglecting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Although the interest in studies that highlight branding as important for SMEs and despite a growing interest, research in this area is still scarce.

SMEs differ from large corporations and MNCs not only in size but also in relation to their limited financial and human capabilities. As a consequence, B2B branding processes of SMEs are somewhat different from that of the large corporations. In most cases, SMEs cannot afford developing detailed branding strategies or branding departments and brand managers (Koporcic, 2017; Koporcic and Halinen, 2018). Instead, SMEs need to use different strategies, relying on individual managerial actors, both inside and outside of their companies. These strategies are relying on interactions between firm representatives, who are focused on managing their business network and other branding relationships (Koporcic and Halinen, 2018; Koporcic et al. (Eds.), 2018). Some studies have acknowledged that B2B branding processes of SMEs often begin before the firm is even established (see Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Merrilees, 2007; Juntunen et al., 2010). The role of managers as key branding ambassadors in many SMEs is thus topical issue for further inquiry.

These issues and perspectives show a diametrically different approach in relation to traditional brand management literature that argues that brand managers are being in control of brand outcomes. Instead, empirical research on B2B brand management demonstrates how connected business actors from a network setting exert an influence on branding of each embedded firm (see Koporcic and Halinen, 2018; Wider et al., 2018). Some findings highlight the importance of individual interactions, where brand managers act as boundary spanners between companies (Koporcic and Halinen, 2018). This is especially evident in emerging
countries with a turbulent environment, where the interpersonal element of B2B branding is vital and a predominantly culturally-laden element (e.g. Koporcic, 2017). Other studies highlight, for instance, that “together with brand management, stakeholders shape brands by participating in brand-related interaction” (Wider et al. 2018, p. 301).

Thus, a consensus has been reached recently, that B2B branding should be considered to be a dynamic, social process, co-created through interactions between actors in business networks (Merz et al., 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018; Koporcic and Halinen, 2018; Wider et al., 2018). In other words, all business actors of an SME network are active participants in their B2B branding processes (Leitch and Richardson, 2003; Koporcic and Halinen, 2018; Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018), and should be treated in this manner also in research encounters.

The track aims at stimulating:

- Discussions concerning the role of B2B branding in SMEs, focusing on their potential benefits and shortcomings
- Further directions for theoretical development of B2B SME branding
- Discussion on the managerial role in corporate branding processes
- Further steps for developing research methods in this field

Key topics for discussion:

- The current state of research on B2B branding in SMEs
- New theoretical perspectives and conceptual ideas (interdisciplinary)
- Methodological advances (qualitative vs. quantitative)
- The unique characteristics of B2B branding in SMEs
- Contemporary trends influencing the phenomena (across nations/cultures/languages)
- B2B branding in SMEs operating in developed and/or emerging markets
- Cross-cultural B2B branding
- Problems that SMEs face in managing their brands
- Managerial implications of the SME branding phenomena

In summary, we believe that this special track will bring together high-quality research on B2B branding in the context of SMEs. The resulting discussion will contribute to novel theoretical, managerial, and methodological approaches on the topic at hand. Therefore, we are encouraging submissions from our Nordic NFF scholars, especially with a marketing and management background.