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Introduction

Advancing theoretical and strategic development of branding in industrial marketing

Traditional research on branding, brand equity and measurement, and customer-based brand management (Aaker, 1996; He & Wang, 2014; Keller, 2003; Wang, He, & Barnes, 2017) has been largely focused on business to consumer markets. There is a growing research interest that extends the branding theories and applications to the B2B realm (Baumgarth, 2010; Cretu & Brodie, 2007; Lindgreen, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2010; Marquardt, 2013). Research reveals that well-establish brands in business to business marketing enhance perceived product quality, enable premium pricing strategies, help firms to build sustainable business relations, and improve firm financial performance (Homburg, Klarmann, & Schmitt, 2010; Marquardt, 2013; Michell, King, & Reast, 2001).Such an increasing academic inquiry to B2B branding is parallel with the important role of B2B brands recognized in contemporary business world. For example, B2B brands such as Google, Microsoft, IBM, GE, Oracle, Cisco and Caterpillar have been consistently ranked among the world's top 100 brands (Interbrand, 2017) and/or are among the fastest growing brands in recent years in terms of their brand equity. It is yet to know the underlying mechanism that predicts and explains the factors that contribute to a successful B2B brand.

The extant B2B branding literature mainly focuses on identifying the benefits a strong brand can convey to both the seller and the buyer as well as the importance of branding among B2B companies in firm strategic decision and performance. However, B2B branding research area, compared to consumer branding literature, is much less developed in terms of both research scope and depth, and has not been well developed into a research framework based on solid theoretical foundation that explains wide range of B2B branding issues. New perspectives, theoretical framework, and methodologies are thus called for investigating B2B branding phenomenon. To advance our knowledge and theoretical understanding, and to shed further light on empirical examination and managerial applications, this Special Issue brings together a collection of papers that investigate various contemporary issues, reflecting the state-of-the art in B2B branding research. The collection of 13 papers is grouped into two sections. The first section includes 7 papers examining various B2B branding issues from different theoretical approaches and methodologies. The second section includes 6 papers that address developing branding strategies in industry market.

Industrial brand equity represents total customer value a brand holds based on a set of salient brand associations. Recognizing that successfully establishing prominent builds a foundation for sustaining relational exchange in industrial marketing, Wang, Capon, Wang, and Guo in their article “Building industrial brand equity on resource advantage” identify six industrial marketing brand dimensions based on resource advantage theory of competition. Through a quantitative study with buying center members who are purchase decision makers, this study finds that such six dimensions have significant impacts on customer perceived value and brand loyalty. The authors suggest that industrial brand managers focus on building brand equity through establishing key resource advantages in the different brand usage situations encountered by buying center members.

Building strong brand equity requires management recognition of strategic values of B2B brands and engagement in brand orientation. Chang, Wang and Arnett's study “Enhancing firm performance: The role of brand orientation in business-to-business marketing” reveals that managers may not understand the mechanism that links branding efforts to firm performance, leading to slow adoption of brand orientation. Their empirical study examines the factors that influence managers' adoption of brand orientation and uncovers the underlying processes that B2B branding transfers to superior firm performance. Based on their findings, authors conclude that both entrepreneurial orientation and marketing capability positively influence a firm's brand orientation and the brand orientation can influence a firm's brand performance both directly and indirectly by encouraging customer value co-creation activities.

Brand sensitivity reflects the degree to which brand stimuli are actively considered during buyer deliberations. In their examining the determinants of business-to-business brand sensitivity, Casidy, Nyadzayo, Mohan and Brown in their article “The relative influence of functional versus imagery beliefs on brand sensitivity in B2B professional services” compare the relative influence of organizational buyers' functional versus imagery beliefs on brand outcomes in B2B professional service settings. The results demonstrate the importance of imagery beliefs in organizational buying decisions, but not at the expense of operational competence, a more fundamental functional belief.

The value of B-to-B branding reflects relationships between business suppliers and buyers. Gupta, Foroudi and Yen's study “Investigating relationship types for creating brand value for resellers” investigates three types of brand-reseller business relationships, including real-time relationship, collaborative relationship, and mutually beneficial relationship. They find that brands that engage in real-time and collaborative relationships are regarded by resellers as having higher brand value in comparison to brands that only focus on mutually beneficial relationships. Accordingly, brand managers can incorporate these business relationships to create superior brand value for resellers, thus

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improving their brands' perceived competitiveness.

The traditional business to business relationship has faced new challenges as the emergence of online and mobile technologies. In this regard, the study conducted by Kingshott, Sharma and Chung "The Impact of relational versus technological resources on E-loyalty: A comparative study between local, national and foreign branded banks", extends current research on B2B relationship marketing by exploring different processes in which local, national and foreign branded banks are able to integrate their online platforms into their relational efforts. The results based on business customers in the New Zealand banking industry show that both offline and online service quality affect satisfaction with their e-banking services, which in turn affect the trust and commitment towards the bank and loyalty toward e-banking.

In the global business market, the effectiveness of B2B branding is also influenced by perceived globalness and localness. Mohan, Brown, Sichtmann and Schoefer in "Perceived globalness and localness in B2B brands: A co-branding perspective" explore how brand localness and globalness influence B2B buyers' decision making by examining co-branding relationships that involve alliances between well-known global and/or local B2B brands with unknown B2B brands. The results indicate that perceived brand localness helps lower the information search costs associated with an unknown focal brand, meaning the risk associated with choosing the unknown focal brand is minimized by the presence of the brand ally with high perceived brand localness.

Experiential marketing is a well-studied concept in consumer behavior research but gets little attention in B2B branding literature. Based on a study of expert interviews, comprising the perspectives of operating companies, business visitors, and exhibition designers, Österle, Kuhn and Henseler in "Brand worlds: Introducing experiential marketing to B2B branding" conjecture brand worlds as locations for operating companies and business visitors to personally interact and build relationships during the entire customer journey. Their results show that B2B brand worlds differ substantially from their B2C equivalents in several aspects, but they apply similar experiential techniques. Operating companies' motives focus on providing live product experiences to explain complex products and create product awareness. B2B visitors expect more functional than hedonic benefits, and the visit has to support them in their own business activities. Affordances of the experience scape and the action-perception between visitor, brand employees, and the physical environment are at the core of how the B2B brand world experiences are co-created.

Considering that brand managers often use brand management inputs to build and manage their brands, Rahman, Serrano and Lambkin's study "Brand management efficiency and firm value: An integrated resource-based view and signaling theory perspective" incorporates brand management inputs and performance outputs concurrently in measuring brand management efficiency. The result demonstrates that firms with a higher level of brand management efficiency have a higher firm value. Thus, brand manager can minimize inputs such as advertising, R&D and customer relationship management outlays, and to maximize brand management outputs, including brand equity and a higher firm value.

With an increasement of consumer environmental awareness, there is a growing number of "green" brands in industrial markets. Meanwhile, companies may practice greenwashing that is often characterized by poor environmental performance but positive communication. The consequence of greenwashing, however, may damage the brand trust between green brands and their stakeholders. The study conducted by Guo, Zhang, Wang, Li and Tao "Timely or considered? Brand trust repair strategies and mechanisms after greenwashing in China - From a legitimacy perspective" focuses on brand strategies to repair green brand trust after greenwashing. Their findings provide strategic implications for brand management and trust requirement.

In the supply chains, component suppliers (CSs) must manage their relationship with original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and industrial customers (ICs). Zhang, Fang, Yang and Zhang in "Push and pull strategies by component suppliers when OEMs can produce the component in-house: The roles of branding in a supply chain" examine the effects of CSs' push and pull strategies on OEMs' component adoption decision in situations where OEMs can produce the components in-house. Their findings demonstrate that a strong CS brand image promotes the adoption of the CS's components but a strong OEM brand image curbs it. Both brand images strengthen (weaken) the effectiveness of push (pull) strategies.

To examine supplier response strategies to supply chain competition, O'Connor, Yang and Jiang in "Challenges in gaining supply chain competitiveness: Supplier response strategies and determinants" explore suppliers' response strategies to their biggest challenge when they are dealing with brand name manufacturers. Their findings reveal that the type of supplier response strategies depends on the type of challenge faced as well as various transaction and customer characteristics.

While industrial brand strategies mainly focus on external customers, it is also important for internal branding, targeting to employees of the firm. Based on a case study, Li, Guo, Cao and Li in "Digital enablement and its role in internal branding: A case study of huanyi travel agency" investigate how digitalization can empower employees to reach better branding-supportive outcomes at various stages of the internal branding process. Their findings reveal that depending on the degree to which digitalization can be viewed as an add-on service or an ingrained element in the value chains aligned with strategic goals, digital technologies can be associated with different enablement mechanisms relating to operational optimality, better sensing and responding capability, and ultimately ambidexterity.

Acknowledging that a brand can be endowed with human characteristics that create emotional associations, industrial marketers often create brand images by establishing relevant brand values. He, Huang and Wu in "Influence of interfirm brand values congruence on relationship qualities in B2B contexts" investigate the influence of brand value congruence between buyers and sellers on relationship qualities in B2B contexts. The results show that self-enhancement congruence and self-transcendence congruence positively affect brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through the mediating role of brand identification. Meanwhile, brand sensitivity positively moderates the effect of self-enhancement congruence on brand trust, word of mouth, and value co-creation through brand identification. The authors present implications for B2B companies regarding how to develop effective branding strategies in accordance with brand values.

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Cheng Lu Wang, Ph.D., is Professor and Chairman of the Department of Marketing at the University of New Haven. Dr. Wang's research interests include branding, buyer behavior and international marketing. Dr. Wang's has over 60 scholarly publications appeared in *Journal of Consumer Psychology, Psychology & Marketing, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Consumer Affairs, International Marketing Review, European Journal of Marketing* and *Industrial Marketing Management*, among others. His paper exploring the different mechanism between Guanxi and Western relationship marketing concept received an award as the top-cited articles published in *Industrial Marketing Management*. Dr. Wang also served as the special issue editor for *International Marketing Review, Journal of Consumer Behavior, Industrial Marketing Management, Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing & Logistics, Journal of Consumer Marketing and Young Consumers.* Dr. Wang can be reached at: cwang@newhaven.edu.

Andy W. Hao is Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of Hartford. His research has appeared in *European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing, Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, Journal of Consumer Marketing* and among others. His current research interests include international marketing, branding, e-marketing and social media, and marketing strategy. Dr. Hao can be reached at hao@hartford.edu.

Cheng Lu Wang, Andy W. Hao