

Research paper

Corporate brand positioning in complex industrial firms: Introducing a dynamic, process approach to positioning

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ABSTRACT

Approaches to positioning predominantly examine the input and outcome effectiveness of certain positioning strategies. However, less is known about the positioning management process and internal dynamics. This study remedies this limitation by identifying corporate brand positioning (CBP) in industrial firms as a strategic development process. Based on comparative case studies within two globally operating industrial multi-business firms, this study opens the proverbial 'black box' to reveal how CBP occurs over time and what the driving mechanisms are. Findings suggest understanding CBP as a recurring, multi-level process, making it more than just a corporate-level marketing activity. Positioning episodes are found to pass through seven stages, each creating enablers and barriers for change. CBP should be viewed as a political process that integrates stable corporate and business levels and temporary levels that emerge in micro-events of reflective strategic practice.

1. Introduction

Positioning strategies are often regarded as lying at the core of marketing management (Kotler & Keller, 2016), brand management (Keller & Lehmann, 2006), corporate brand management (Knox & Bickerton, 2003), and competitive strategy (Porter, 1996). Positioning in general has been a central concept in marketing thought (Doyle & Saunders, 1985; Maggard, 1976) since Ries and Trout's seminal work in 1972 (Ries & Trout, 2001) where positioning forms part of the triumvirate of segmentation, targeting and positioning (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Following a systematic and analytical process, positioning strategies are supposed to indicate the direction for the brand's marketing activities to achieve the goal of either building strong brands and achieving or defending an intended position (Keller & Lehmann, 2006).

Despite the evident importance of the *positioning process*, empirical research predominantly examines the input and outcome effectiveness of certain position strategies (Urde & Koch, 2014). Process in this context is mainly considered to be the logic by which independent variables are taken to be contributing factors to a certain outcome, assuming a cause and effect relationship (Sminia, 2009). This approach can be satisfactory if the conditions for the strategy process are stable and decision-making can approximate to perfect knowledge conditions. This is however far from the case. Disruptive environments and complex organizational structures deem rational decision-making processes

dubious at best. Consideration of the complex and episodic nature of decision-making regarding positioning processes is neglected. Positioning is often seen more in terms of the identification of a competitive *position* rather than as a dynamic and intra-organizational process of *positioning*. As a consequence, the positioning concept is theoretically and practically poorly developed to provide guidance on the management and maintenance of positioning over time (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986; Urde & Koch, 2014). The lack of a *processual approach to positioning brands* is surprising, both from a theoretical and practical viewpoint. Knowing what actually constitutes positioning dynamics – how things evolve over time as well as why they evolve in a certain manner – would increase the concept's theoretical value and practical relevance. This is important because findings that point towards a brand's performance based on either intended position characteristic A (found to perform badly) or B (found to perform well) say little about how to go about moving from A to B (Langley, 1999). Uncovering such 'positioning journeys' (the position development process) is therefore necessary for *refining* the widely used yet notably vague positioning concept (MacInnis, 2011).

The context of this paper is *corporate brands in industrial markets* (that is, branding at the organizational level); this provides specific challenges in terms of the development of positioning strategies due to their advanced complexity, foundation in organizational values, and higher strategic priority compared to product brands (Gyrd-Jones,

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Helm, & Munk, 2013). Furthermore, for industrial multi-business corporate brands with many internal and external stakeholders, finding a common denominator for a meaningful position is especially challenging (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Explicitly multifaceted, corporate branding processes are characterized by high levels of ambiguity and tension (Ibid) between often competing management logics (Tollin & Jones, 2009) requiring a greater insight into the processes of positioning explicitly as a change process (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). Considering corporate branding's role as an increasingly important management practice (Merrilees & Miller, 2008; Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011), it is therefore necessary to investigate how firms position their brand towards multiple stakeholders and specifically how firm, market, or environmental factors that inhibit or facilitate corporate brand strategies in an industrial marketing context (Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Lindgreen, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2010). The process approach focuses on understanding how positioning activities and choices evolve over time, and why they evolve the way they do (Langley, 1999). This does not deny the existence of states, events, and entities, but insists on unpacking them to reveal the complex processes (patterns of activities as well as underlying mechanisms) that are involved in, and contribute to, their constitution (Langley, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is therefore to *uncover the temporality and inherent mechanisms of corporate brand positioning as a process*. We define corporate brand positioning (CBP) as the firm-level management process, driven by internal and/or external exigencies, that intentionally and unintentionally result in the articulation of an intended position for the corporate brand in its targeted markets and the minds of key stakeholders. The paper raises questions regarding the interplay between managerial agency and structural constraint (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006; Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011), investigating 'what remains the same' and 'what changes' over time becomes central in this research.

This research makes two main contributions. First, we offer an alternative view on positioning, seeing it as a complex and dynamic intra-organizational process and empirically researching the phenomenon in this way. By doing so it reveals positioning as a dynamic process-oriented construct that operates across firm levels and over time. Reoccurring events, activities, and choices of 'strategizing for positioning' are mapped on corporate level, business level, and temporary cross-organizational levels that consists of micro-episodes of reflective strategic practice. Implications concern roles and responsibilities for managing the positioning process that go beyond a corporate level marketing activity (Balmer, 2009).

Second, the paper reveals that positioning over time develops and interplays between managerial agency and structural constraints. Applying a change management perspective allows us to see how managers respond reactively or preemptively to internal or external developments that require elements of change, but also continuity. This provides implications for better understanding critical antecedents and the time dimension (Langley et al., 2013; Quintens & Matthyssens, 2010) that makes positioning processes recur. Importantly, this allows us to see positioning as a political process where brand change agents are political brokers that negotiate with a variety of internal and external stakeholders.

At a practical level, this study provides answers to how corporations can handle the complexity of successfully positioning their brand. We identify seven CBP stages, thereby providing academics and practitioners with more realistic insights into the 'black box' of the strategy process and how positioning 'journeys' evolve over time.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Process perspective in marketing research

It can seem remarkable that one should offer a process perspective

on positioning as something new. "Process" would appear to underpin the whole field of marketing: from the marketing process (Day, 1990), marketing related processes (e.g. Tharp & Scott, 1990), to processes of positioning (Urde & Koch, 2014). Whilst marketing is defined as a process (AMA, 2013), marketing and strategic marketing management have been dominated by an emphasis on normative models of strategy formation (e.g. Aaker, 1991; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Marketing processes in these terms refer typically to a step-wise process, from business mission, marketing audit, assessment of internal capabilities and identification of goals, to development of core strategy, marketing mix decisions and implementation encapsulated in the marketing planning process (e.g. Evans & Laskin, 1994; Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2012). In the field of positioning this approach is largely replicated as a rational decision-making process of analysis and implementation (Hooley, Piercy, & Nicoulaud, 2008). Such models work on the assumption of a relatively predictable context within which managerial decision-making can take place; one in which there is internal political agreement about the facts and priorities upon which marketing decisions are made (Hutt, Reingen, & Ronchetto Jr, 1988) and one where the external environment is relatively stable and predictable.

Building from theories of non-rational decision making (March & Simon, 1958) and behavioral theory (Cyert & March, 1959; Pettigrew, 1977), the process school (Mintzberg, 1978) suggests that decision making is a process of compromise and "muddling through" (Lindblom, 1969) internal political processes and external coalitions (Hutt et al., 1988; March, 1962). Whilst process approaches have been widely utilized in fields such as organizational change (e.g. Pettigrew, 1987) or strategy formation (e.g. Mintzberg & Waters, 1985) it is rarely applied in marketing research. Hutt et al. (1988) is one of the first examples of the application of a process perspective specifically in marketing. They find that actors within the organization play key roles in respectively managing stability and change, top-down and bottom-up processes. The process approach highlighted the dynamic, interactive and contextual nature of decision-making. Grönroos (2004) presents a framework to analyze the nature and content of relationship marketing as a set of three key processes: communication, interaction, and value, each defined in terms of acts and episodes that occur over time. These are influenced by, but not controlled by planned communication; value emerges through a combination of planned and unplanned acts over time.

In the context of branding, process approaches are emerging. Csaba and Bengtsson (2006) note that brands emerge through continuous dialectic processes of interaction. Asmussen, Harridge-March, Occhiocupo, and Farquhar (2013) highlight the brand democratization processes whereby multiple stakeholders have differing levels of influence on key brand processes. Common to these two approaches is the decentralization of management control and the emphasis of the dynamics and interaction processes over time that influence brands, in unpredictable and contextually defined ways. There is currently a strong and developing empirical evidence that suggests brands continuously emerging as dynamic outcomes of stakeholder interactions (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, & Espersen, 2017; von Wallpach, Voyer, Kastanakis, & Mühlbacher, 2017). Wider, von Wallpach, and Mühlbacher (2018) present a process philosophy to understanding brand emergence that comprises: (1) heterogeneity, (2) continuous multiplicity, and (3) change. They offer a view that the brand process is constituted by complex assemblages (see also Lury, 2009) rather than managerial manifestations, where these assemblages are "not the same from one moment to the next. Even if brands manifest to observers in a certain stabilized, momentary way (e.g., through temporary manifestations, such as brand-related products or texts), they are in continuous flux." (p. 302).

In their review of positioning schools in brand management, Urde and Koch (2014) invite us to consider brand positioning as a process, arguing that the context within which positioning strategies are formed

is continually changing; opening up the possibility that brand positions might change over time accordingly. Whilst not developing a process model of positioning, they suggest that an in-depth theoretical and practical investigation of the dynamics of positioning would be valuable for the research field.

2.2. Positioning – from content to process

Since several theoretical disciplines such as marketing, branding and strategy have adapted the positioning concept over the years, it is not surprising that the concept lacks a general agreement concerning its meaning (Urde & Koch, 2014). Traditionally, brand positioning is about developing a proposition to get into the minds of customers (Hooley et al., 2008; Ries & Trout, 2001). This involves highlighting distinctive features of a brand and making them attractive to customers and non-customer stakeholders. Kotler and Keller (2016) point out that the terms points of parity (similar features shared by all competitors) and points of difference (distinct brand aspects) describe what must be balanced to influence customers' perceptions. Such an *image perspective* on positioning is particularly relevant for product branding (Urde & Koch, 2014). This approach recognizes that the actual power in constructing a brand resides in the minds of customers and in what they have learned and experienced of the brand over time. A considerable amount of brand positioning research focuses on such consumer psychology issues and categorization approaches by assessing brand position associations and evaluations by consumers, thereby providing brand managers with insights on what to highlight when positioning brands (Jewell & Barone, 2007; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002; Punj & Moon, 2002).

More recently an *identity perspective* to positioning has emerged (de Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Riezebos & van der Grinten, 2012). Here, positioning takes advantage of a specific aspect of identity, at a given point in time, in a given market, and against a defined set of competitors (Kapferer, 2012). An identity approach helps to reinforce the meaning behind a brand for customer and non-customer stakeholders, and provides the opportunity to develop the brand's position with a strategic approach to brand management (de Chernatony, 2010). In essence, making a well-considered position choice that is grounded in identity can be the start of product or service innovation, design strategy, employee motivation, and the communication and image-building process (Riezebos & van der Grinten, 2012).

Both these meta-theoretical approaches are, however, based on what can be described a static 'position typology fixation' where the predominant understanding of the brand manager's role is to select between position choices. Over the years, positioning typologies have been created based on conceptual or empirical foundations as well as on managerial- or customer-derived grounds (Urde & Koch, 2014). Besides this focus on *input* factors (such as low price versus high price, premium quality versus basic quality, innovation versus imitation), marketing scholars have mostly understood positioning as an important management *outcome* (e.g. Kalra & Goodstein, 1998; Pechmann & Ratneshwar, 1991; Sujjan & Bettman, 1989) with a major focus on advertising effectiveness (Kalafatis, Tsogas, & Blankson, 2000). The dominant static research approaches on both input factors (such as typologies) and outcomes (such as advertising effectiveness) are important; yet, they remain silent regarding the dynamic (that is, processual) aspects of positioning brands.

2.3. Corporate branding – from static to dynamic

Corporate brands are distinguishable from product brands in terms of their complexity, foundation in organizational values, and higher strategic priority (Gyrd-Jones, Helm, & Munk, 2013). In this context, some scholars refer to positioning as one element in constructing the corporate brand (Knox & Bickerton, 2003), while others understand it as a strategic function creating differentiation points in relation to

competitors (Kapferer, 2012), but also aspects of collective corporate brand membership (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). These examples imply that the input and outcome fixation of the positioning concept has been adapted to corporate branding, leaving unclear how CBP processes occur over time. Research focusing on dynamic aspects, such as corporate brand formation or maintenance, is rare (e.g. Balmer, 2010; Melewar, Gotsi, & Andriopoulos, 2012; Miller, Merrilees, & Yakimova, 2013). For any corporate brand aiming to build differentiation, a major paradox arises because differentiation (mostly external) may only be achieved at the expense of integration (mostly internal), the reason being that diverse stakeholders and various organizational subcultures make consensus difficult (Gyrd-Jones, Helm, & Munk, 2013). Thus, the likelihood of successfully integrating an imposed identity and differentiation during the positioning process is reduced. Functional or divisional silos can contribute to the failure of implementing a new brand strategy – despite a strong brand vision and management commitment (Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees, & Miller, 2013).

Some studies have recently shifted towards a dynamic perspective (e.g. Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011), but do not specifically focus on the role of positioning. Merrilees and Miller (2008) developed a holistic corporate rebranding model that aims to integrate all aspects of the rebranding process. This model is supposed to serve as a theoretical corporate rebranding platform, and reflects a process that covers rebranding triggers, three broad phases in the rebranding process (that is, brand re-vision, stakeholder buy-in, and rebranding strategy implementation), and rebranding outcomes (Merrilees & Miller, 2008; Miller et al., 2013). While this linear model provides a useful start for understanding and investigating CBP processes, it leaves many relevant questions unanswered: Where and when do such processes occur within an organization? What exactly drives these processes to occur? What are the actual mechanisms involved?

2.4. Theories of change

To answer these questions, we turn to change management theory. The usefulness of utilizing organizational change theories for investigating dynamic questions in corporate brand management has been highlighted as a promising road to explore (see also Miller et al., 2013; Schultz, 2005). Henry Mintzberg was one of the first strategy researchers to ask 'how' questions in regards to investigating how a strategy is actually realized (Sminia, 2009). His 'tracking strategy' approach, aiming to describe strategy as a pattern in a stream of action over a long period of time, led to the realization that making strategic decisions (that is, intended strategy) does not automatically mean that such decisions are to be actually realized and implemented (Mintzberg, 1978). Essentially, the image of strategy formation became one in which a realized strategy was understood as a convergence of intended and emergent strategies (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). In brand positioning projects, what types of strategy activities and choices can be referred to as intended and emergent?

For Andrew Pettigrew, change is a phenomenon that "creates tension over the existing distribution of resources through threatening the position of some whilst opening up opportunities for others. As such, change stimulates power plays and heightened political activity" (Dawson, 2012, p. 124). His contribution that any strategic change content "is ultimately a product of a legitimization process shaped by gross changes in the outer context of the firm and by political and cultural considerations inside the firm, though often expressed in rational/analytical terms", still has a major impact on practical intervening strategies to create change in organizational settings (Pettigrew, 2012: 1308; Sminia, 2009). In brand positioning projects, what are the historical, contextual, and processual factors that shape positioning dynamics?

Van de Ven and Poole (1995) developed a meta change theory that aimed to explain development and change in organizations. They presented four distinct types of process theories: life-cycle-type theory,

teleological-type theory, dialectical-type-theory, and evolutionary-type theory. These process theories represent different sequences of change events that are driven by different conceptual motors and operate at different organizational levels. This idea derives from a realist ontology in which it is believed that underlying causal mechanisms that cannot be directly observed interact to produce empirically observed phenomena (Easton, 2010; Langley, 2011; Van de Ven, 2007).

The life-cycle change motor assumes that an entity (for example, an organization) goes through distinct stages of development following an internal logic that governs its progression, while maintaining its identity (Sminia, 2009, p. 108). This understanding of change focuses on stages of organizational growth, maturity, and decline, conceptualizing change as a natural part of human or organizational development (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). On this basis, does CBP mean going through distinct stages of development that follow an internal, planned logic?

The teleological change motor assumes that an entity develops a common goal in an identifiable manner, and then goes on to meet the requirements and constraints associated with this end state (Sminia, 2009, p. 108). This understanding of planned change assumes that organizations are purposeful and adaptive, and change because individual leaders, change agents, and others see the necessity for change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). This mechanism corresponds with the understanding that the brand manager is the agent in charge of making a position decision (e.g. Riezebos & Van der Grinten, 2012). Do individual leaders or change agents actually drive CBP as a precise change process?

The dialectical change motor believes that some form of contradiction fuels the change process, which results in states of conflict that must be dealt with (Sminia, 2009). Such a dialectical understanding refers to political models, where change is characterized as the result of clashing ideologies or belief systems (March, 1962; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). On this ground, can positioning be conceived as resulting from states of conflict and contradictions (Gyrd-Jones, Helm, & Munk, 2013) – such as different opinions on how to position the brand – inherent in the process?

Finally, the evolutionary change motor assumes that change occurs due to some form of external pressure accompanied by a mechanism of variation, selection, and retention (Sminia, 2009, p. 108). Main assumptions underlying this understanding are that change occurs in response to external, environmental circumstances, and that organizations as diversified, interdependent, and complex social systems evolve naturally over time because of such external demands (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Is CBP perhaps an evolutionary process, where external pressures and demands are predominant?

The discussion of change mechanisms brings us back to the purpose of this paper: to uncover the temporality and inherent mechanisms of

CBP as a process. We visualize this purpose in a research model (Fig. 1).

Core positioning stages (drivers, actions, and outcomes) are set in the overall context of corporate brand positioning in complex industrial multi-business firms. Context refers to ‘relevant circumstances’ that may be important concerning the focal entity and the environment (Easton, 2010). CBP drivers refer to the initial conception of a need to change a current position. CBP action is of peculiar interest as it aims to provide insights into the ‘black-box’ of which elements constitute the actual CBP work and how the process unfolds. Subsequently, this leads to the location and explanation of outcomes. Stages proposed are meant to be understood as intertwined and overlapping, rather than following each other in a strict and causal order.

3. Methodology

As a response to the limited understanding of CBP processes, we conducted retrospective as well as real-time comparative case studies (Langley, 2011) within two globally operating, multi-business engineering firms, in order to allow for an in-depth exploration from different perspectives. The study focused on several case studies, defining several positioning and re-positioning projects as cases, thereby creating multiple embedded cases in each firm context (Yin, 2009).

3.1. Case company choice

The key characteristics that make the case companies PowerTech (power and automation industry) and PolymerTech (polymer engineering industry) interesting research objects are their organizational structure, heritage, and increasingly dominant brand logic. As for organizational structure, PowerTech and PolymerTech feature organizational complexity due to multiple business areas, business units, and product groups. Moreover, the liability of being (former) conglomerates provides an interesting context for studying CBP. Considering the aspect of heritage, both companies possess a long history, dating back more than hundred years. A long brand heritage and track record makes it interesting to investigate positioning work, both retrospectively and in real-time. Finally, what makes the selected cases interesting is the increasingly dominant brand logic manifested in the companies, such as increasing resources for brand management and enhanced status for executive management.

3.2. Generating process data

As this study draws on temporally unfolding positioning phenomena in rich detail, the data source incorporates a variety of available qualitative research techniques: interviews (retrospective and real-time;

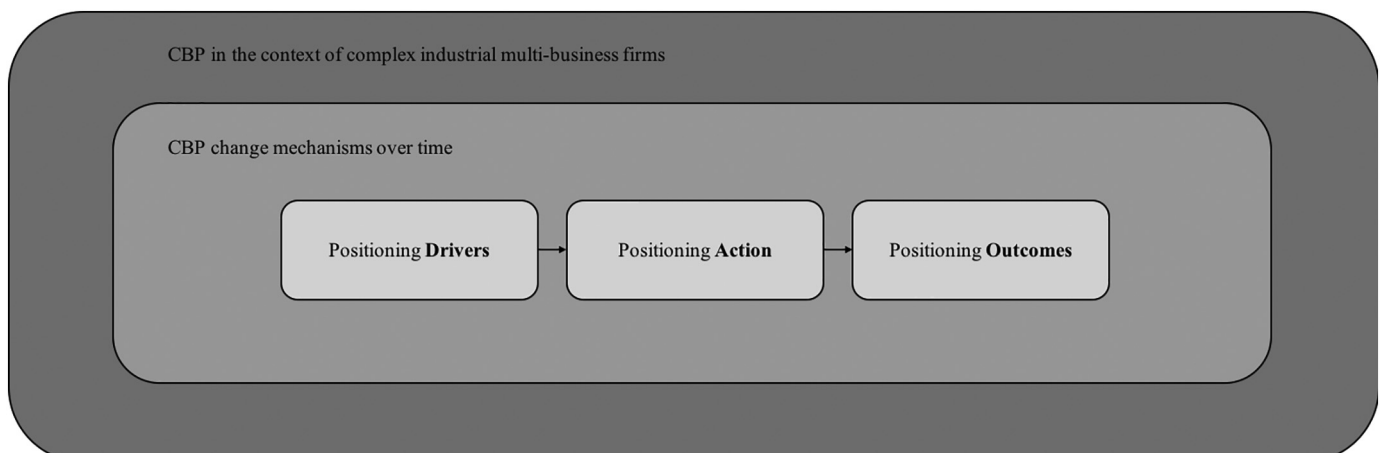


Fig. 1. CBP research model.

individual and group), archival documents (internal and external; public and private), and observations (non-participant and informal).

Interviews were the main data generation source due to their temporal adaptability via respondents' memories (Langley, 2011). We conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews with executive and middle managers situated at different firm levels (that is, corporate and business level) and at different functions (that is, general, marketing, brand, sales, product, and communication managers). In addition, we combined retrospective interviews to investigate past events with real-time interviews that examined current events. In total, we conducted 35 interviews. Follow-up questions exceeding the semi-structured guideline had the aim of identifying and cultivating empirical material on categories and relationships that had not been anticipated and that emerged throughout the research process (Yin, 2009). Eighty percent of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, while some were conducted via telephone. After each interview, we transcribed the material.

Organizational documents were another important data source, because they provided records of CBP arguments and justifications (Langley, 2011). We used external and internal documentary information in order to explore historical positioning efforts. To address the difficulty of “find[ing] out what happened in the past by asking present-day respondents”, the solution was to navigate between the diverse data sources (Silverman, 2011: 192). Public domain documents included, for instance, annual reports, mission statements, press releases, external company magazines, and advertisements. Internal documents included brand policy, brand books, code of conduct brochures, brand strategy guidelines, internal and external correspondence, and digital channel communication such as company intranet and newsletters.

Finally, *meeting observations* (non-participant) were important for understanding evolving patterns of interaction and behavior during CBP work. For example, including non-participant observation as a form of organizational ethnography to generate real-time positioning process data in the PolymerTech case context further developed insider perspectives on ‘position strategizing’. Supplementing interviews with non-participant observation addressed potential differences between what people think and feel compared to what they actually do (Silverman, 2011). Table 1 provides an overview of case company context and data collection.

3.3. Within- and cross-case analysis

First, we analyzed the empirical material generated within cases before starting to search for cross-case patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989). The overall idea was to become intimately familiar with each case as a stand-alone entity, allowing the unique patterns of each case to emerge before moving to generalizing patterns across cases (Langley, 2011). We used the research purpose, uncovering the inherent mechanisms of

corporate brand positioning, as a matter of establishing the course of the project and with the aim of constructing or reconstructing a chronology of positioning events. Deciding where to start, where to stop, and what to look for needed to be a compromise between what the data indicated about the positioning process we investigated and what we theoretically could expect to be part of the process (Sminia, 2009).

As suggested by process researchers, we approached within-case analysis via writing case narratives, visually mapping key positioning incidents, and bracketing distinct temporal phases within each case company context individually (Langley, 1999). In particular, the actual empirical material prompted more clearly defining the cases as episodes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, we ‘selected’ cases on the basis of discovering events of change related to positioning PowerTech and PolymerTech over time. With regard to PowerTech, we discovered three episodes of CBP; with the PolymerTech corporate brand, two cases were revealed. In total, we utilized five episodes of CBP change processes for corporate-level case analysis. Table 2 provides an overview of positioning episodes and a brief description.

With regard to positioning the corporate brand at business level, the PowerTech and PolymerTech businesses were selected as embedded cases to gain insights into how the corporate brand is utilized for positioning products and solutions. After the initial within-case analysis of temporal-bracketing positioning episodes, we coded interview transcripts, organizational documents, and observational material according to the categories ‘context’, ‘drivers’, ‘events’, ‘actors’, ‘activities’, ‘challenges’, and ‘outcomes’. The coding procedure helped to better understand emerging patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Table 3 illustrates exemplary interview questions and corresponding codes for analysis.

Cross-case analysis was essential to examine similarities and differences seen in the empirical material. We followed Langley's (2011) advice to ask questions such as “How are events ordered?”, “What is the typical sequence of phases?” or “Are there different paths and cycles through the phases?” In order to understand the processes that constitute, relate to, and help explain CBP, we analyzed each positioning episode, regarding the aspects highlighted in the research model: (a) Drivers providing organizations with incentives for brand position change; (b) Actions in the form of positioning activities and choices; and (c) Outcomes by means of changes in the corporate brand position principles and perceptions. Organizational change concepts (see Section 2.4) helped to uncover inherent positioning mechanisms.

Concerning research quality assessment four criteria are typically discussed: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 2009). However, these notions have been imported from particular kinds of quantitative research, making their meaning in the exploratory qualitative case study approach less clear and evident. Arguably, it is the reliability part that is most pertinent to qualitative

Table 1
Case company background and empirical material.

Company	History	Brand strategy	Core businesses	Empirical material
PowerTech Corporate Level	Formally created through a merger in 1988; Headquartered in Switzerland	Mother brand strategy, in which the mother brand guarantees the quality and added value of the entire portfolio	Power Products & Systems, Discrete Automation and Motion, Low Voltage Products, Process Automation	5 in-depth interviews; 1 industry fair visit; Document studies
PowerTech Business Level	Flatness measurement and control systems; Headquartered in Sweden	Mother brand together with product name such as the unit's flagship product brand.	Force measurement products designed to improve control, productivity and quality in a wide variety of processes and industries	8 in-depth interviews; Document studies
PolymerTech Corporate Level	Founded in 1905 the company soon became Scandinavia's leading rubber-production company; Headquartered in Sweden	Mother-daughter brand strategy, in which the credibility of the mother brand is the basis of the daughter brand's identity	Coated Systems, Industrial Solutions, Offshore and Construction, Sealing Solutions, and Wheel Systems	11 in-depth interviews; 2 formal non-participant meeting observations; Document studies
PolymerTech Business Level	Founded in 1988 and producing brake shims for passenger cars; PolymerTech acquired the company in 1992; Headquartered in Sweden	Product brand name for brake-shim products; PolymerTech brand name for other portfolio products	Noise damping shims and insulators for disc brake pads, noise damping laminates, tuned absorbers	11 in-depth interviews; 1 industry fair visit Document studies

Table 2
Overview of positioning episodes (cases).

Episode	CBP drivers (selection)	CBP action (selection)	CBP outcome (selection)
PowerTech Episode 1 (1988–1997): Positioning a multi-domestic firm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Merger between “Power and “Tech” - CEO vision - Acquisition-driven conglomerate formation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Determining envisioned brand characteristics - Internally preaching new brand name and values internally to overcome resistance - Strategically communicating achievements and challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low integration of communication department in corporate strategy discussions - Strong visual identity (logo) focus - Understanding of ‘brand’ as name conveying an image
PowerTech Episode 2 (2001–2005): Crisis, turnaround, and repositioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Company crisis including bankruptcy threat - Succeeding CEO with expanded responsibility - Non-core business divestments; focusing on power and automation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reactive crisis and change management - Focusing company on core strengths - Internally searching for distinct culture, including global management workshops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Streamlined divisional structure - Broadened understanding of ‘brand’ (behavior, culture, value) - Deeper integrated brand and corporate strategy discussions
PowerTech Episode 3 (2007–2013): Business stabilization and repositioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Executive committee brand repositioning proposal - Conservative and old-fashioned brand image - Fragmented brand design and guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaborating with external brand consultants to structure process and creatively differentiate brand - Agreeing on intended position scenarios and verifying options - Steering internal brand and marketing institutions to diffuse and exchange updated brand knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brand platform and position policy documents - ‘Owning’ brand attributes (such as ‘leading-edge technology’) - Culture and visual identity-centric brand comprehension
PolymerTech Episode 1 (1999–2005): Brand strategy formation and positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Company crisis due to accumulation of bad press coverage - New CEO enforcing strategic shift - Divesting non-core businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Laying foundations for repositioning by acquiring companies within polymer business - Using acquired companies as representations of change and positive outlook - Creating brand position policy documents to educate and guide employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Closer link between brand and corporate strategy since key acquisition - Increased focus on corporate brand - Brand strategy and position policy documents
PolymerTech Episode 2 (2011–2014): Strategic reorientation and repositioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changing brand perception - Digital developments - Improving brand position 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pitching for project internally - Organizing various workshop formats for position development - Producing standardized (universally relevant) and customized (business-specific) brand position elements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased integration through brand networks - New brand position statement and platform - Positioning guidance for customized stakeholder communication

case research. In this context, the notion of trustworthiness has been developed to judge the quality of a case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Against this background we adopted confirmability, credibility, dependability, suitability, generality, integrity, and transferability as constituents of trustworthiness throughout this paper to meet the highest quality standards (see also Langley, 2011; Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011).

4. Patterns of positioning work

Our attempt to better understand how processes of positioning unfold uncovered distinct CBP drivers, actions as well as outcomes across the studied episodes.

4.1. Drivers: why do corporate brands engage in positioning work?

Two broad patterns become apparent concerning why position change occurs: changes in different *internal conditions* (such as business ownership in the form of mergers, acquisitions, or divestments, strategy

modifications, personnel changes, and business logic alterations) and changes in the *external environment* (such as competitor initiatives, crisis situations, and market changes). We categorized drivers according to their reactive or preemptive change characteristics (Miller et al., 2013; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

Preemptive change take place, for example, before a crisis situation and through believing in the need for brand position change as well as enhancement to meet future competitive demands. In preemptive change episodes, PowerTech and PolymerTech identified opportunities to enhance the brand and its position. This occurred when internal processes triggered position change; for instance, a new corporate structure, strategy, vision, or newly hired managers coming into the organization acting as change agents (all episodes). Additional preemptive elements in driving position change were: taking actions to change an ‘outdated image’ of the corporate brand (PowerTech’s episode 3) or change to business logic (e.g. from function to benefit communication in the case of PolymerTech episode 2). Deeply rooted decentralization structures and entrepreneurially run businesses in both PowerTech and PolymerTech exemplified the need to progress slowly

Table 3
Exemplary interview questions and corresponding codes for analysis.

Examples of interview questions	Analysis categories/codes
What is your understanding of the brand strategy and how is the relationship with corporate strategy?/What are the most important stakeholder groups for corporate- or business-level branding?	Context
What are the reasons for investing in corporate brand positioning activities?/What was the motivation to initiate this positioning / repositioning project?	Drivers
Do you see any historical events that were crucial for building the brand over time?/Do you remember particular events when positioning was discussed?	Events
Who were major participants and what was their role?/What was your role during the process?	Actors
What were the steps and activities in brand positioning?/What did you do in order to establish a position for the corporate brand?	Activities
What were major challenges throughout this project?	Challenges
What were moments of success in corporate brand position finding?	Outcomes

and with incremental changes (not radical), to the corporate brand and its position (PowerTech episode 3 and PolymerTech episode 2). Therefore, preemptively driven CBP projects required significant internal buy-in and convincing activities to explain why changes to the corporate brand position will be helpful in the long run.

Reactive change elements are common after a crisis and appear in response to internal or external pressures for change; that is, reactive cases have external factors that negatively affect the brand, thereby activating positioning efforts (clearly visible in PowerTech's episode 2). The analysis has shown that CBP episodes are reactive when business ownership drivers such as mergers, acquisitions, or divestments are in place. In such a case, reactivity was also interrelated with urgency after a merger (PowerTech episode 1), when a new brand name and its intended position needed to be found rather quickly. Engaging reactively in CBP projects also occurred when external drivers were in place; for instance, when competitors began initiatives to brand and reposition, or when crisis situations lead to a decrease in the value of the organization in the eyes of external stakeholders.

4.2. Action: what activities and choices constitute the positioning work?

The case contexts stress the time-consuming nature of CBP activities and choices, mostly justified by continuous buy-in attempts on several organizational levels (the political dimension of positioning work) at various stages in the process. The risk of losing momentum due to project delays caused by many rounds of discussions (to find consensus), along with approval-waiting loops, also influenced the pace of change. In this respect, pace of change was also coupled with the risk of brand dilution due to too many compromises (such as repeatedly discussing linguistic or visual details) during CBP stages. Patterns across cases show how managers try to keep a positive momentum when stuck in approval-waiting loops. This was done through internal brand and marketing network events (for example, presentations, meetings, or workshops) or external momentum-keeping activities (for instance, fairs) to keep a high level of urgency and necessity. Such internal and external momentum-keeping activities were a means to create legitimacy for communicating a certain rationale during a project of strategic position change towards different internal stakeholders. Overall, we found that seven stages (represented by distinct management activities and choices) represent CBP work. Table 4 summarizes these seven stages, key activities and choices, as well as an illustrative example.

Based on the empirical case evidence (as illustrated in Table 4) the importance of educating organizational members regarding the need to change, continuously communicating the brand's changed intended position, and documenting the brand change for internal use and support, was found to be vital throughout development stages.

Beyond uncovering a CBP activity landscape, case evidence has also pointed towards the importance of choices concerning positioning content and process. As for *content choices*, informants searched for balanced ways of aiming for differentiation without losing integration across businesses. This challenge has been illustrated as one of the major paradoxes of corporate brand management (Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees, & Miller, 2013). Dealing with this paradox, CBP certainly required a balancing act from project leaders to incorporate elements of credibility and aspiration, functionality and emotionality for a high-level corporate brand position that is able to support more specified business-level value propositions as well as other stakeholder target groups such as future employees or the financial community. Value propositions on corporate and business levels then needed to be actively communicated within the framework of the overall CBP strategy. As for *process choices*, project leaders chose to involve direct superiors only at high-level (PowerTech episode 3; PolymerTech episode 2), letting them act as transmitters between the executive management board and operational project leaders. This illustrates the political dimension of CBP work in multi-business industrial firms. Additionally, the choice of 'outsourcing' major parts of the positioning work to external

consultants and the rationale behind such choices (see Table 4, stage 2) is noteworthy. PolymerTech's second episode also highlighted the importance of commensuration, simplifying information and decontextualize knowledge, exemplified in early stages of positioning work. This was a means for organizing CBP and to efficiently manage the process. As a consequence, brand analysis information seemed more robust and definitive than it would have if presented in more complicated forms.

4.3. Outcomes: how can positioning work be evaluated?

Outcomes can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, we can refer to CBP outcomes as the external changes in market position, image, and reputation or even financial performance *after* episodes of CBP have been completed, internally implemented, and externally communicated. Such external outcomes have been referred to as brand positions that are 'owned' (e.g. 'technology leadership' brand association in the case of PowerTech). On the other hand, CBP outcomes also emerged *during* the development process, and were shaped by the interests and commitments of individuals and groups or the influence of the structural context around decisions that were taken (see also Pettigrew, 1987). Outcomes in this context are not to be understood as changes in external position, image, or reputation, but rather as micro outcomes being produced in the course of the CBP work and across multiple organizational levels (e.g. convincing CEO and executive management). Moreover, brand position statements defined in words, in form of documents and guidelines, as well as visually supplemented brand position elements, were tangible achievements following from the process. The importance of written documents as strategic manifestations (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011), developed and shaped through communicative interactions in brand board meetings, marketing council committees, or more informal interactions, adds to the outcome dimension.

4.4. CBP episode process model

While the patterns of CBP drivers, actions, and outcomes analysis provide a useful insight into CBP development, they did not sufficiently capture the detail that the CBP work took place at different firm levels (see also Burgelman, 1983), or even outside the organization (in the sense of external consultants feeding relevant CBP input). Fig. 2 reveals three essential firm levels for positioning: corporate level management (nuanced by differentiating between executive and corporate brand management), business level management (nuanced by differentiating between a business level delegates and product area management), and an additional inter-firm 'interaction level'.

The cross-level interaction between corporate level and business levels is significantly important for the whole process. Strategic events such as cross-group interviews with executive managers, brand change workshops, global management conferences, brand education, and pilot implementation works have been important sources for CBP development progress and manifestation. These short-term events outside the normal work routines of corporate and business level managers, provided the necessary space for strategic rethinking.

5. Mechanisms of positioning work

Empirically observed temporal patterns (as discussed in the previous Section 5) have a similar status to empirically observed correlations: without explanation and conceptual interpretation, they are incomplete (Langley, 2011). The pattern might need some underlying logic that enables understanding why progression through phases would occur precisely in this way. This is where mechanisms complement the process patterns initially found and presented in the previous section. Here we present some underlying mechanisms, or combinations of mechanisms (Easton, 2010), that make CBP sequences more understandable. The analysis of processes, incidents, and events that

Table 4
Seven stages of positioning work.

Stages	Key activities	Key choices	Key challenges	Empirical example
(1) Organizing for internal support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparing initial content and goals for intended corporate brand position - Buying-in to superiors, CEO, and executive management - Organizing brand consultancy pitches - Collaborating with consultants bringing in an 'outsider perspective' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involving superiors only on high-level - Let superiors take role of political connector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Convincing superiors - Succeeding in initial CEO buy-in - Navigating internal politics 	<p>"In general my principle was: stay a couple of steps ahead of them [superiors and CEO], make it tangible, and link it to the business. Again, they need to be convinced, otherwise it won't happen." (PolymerTech, global brand director)</p> <p>"You hire an agency because sometimes you want crazy ideas, but you also have to understand that some ideas are just crazy and nothing you really need. [Our brand manager] was really fantastic to balance creativity and what makes sense for ABB from a branding point of view." (PowerTech, head of corporate communications)</p>
(2) Arranging for external support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reviewing current corporate brand position elements - Conducting competitor analyses - Conducting external research to inform the positioning process - Conducting internal research (such as cross-group key executive manager interviews) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Outsourcing parts of positioning work to external consultants (due to lack of internal resources, inspirational and creative value provision, and political reasons) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finding trustworthy and reliable partners for positioning projects 	<p>"We have a few major competitors globally and we compared with them. And all the local ones, you have to ignore them at this level of analysis. We do localize in the implementation, but not too much at the high strategic level because then you will never get it done. You need to really focus on the big players." (PowerTech, global brand director)</p>
(3) Analyzing the brand internally and externally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organizing group-wide marketing workshops to discuss intended position scenarios - Doing self-image and identity exercises - Discussing current positioning approaches across levels - Debating future scenarios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Selecting only global competitors to secure feasibility for comparisons - Deciding upon the ratio of external and internal research - Phrasing internal interview questions as 'business-oriented' to facilitate acceptance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Balancing competitive and aspirational positioning aspects on corporate level - Finding optimal level of relevance for as many businesses as possible 	<p>"There could be a quicker way of doing things, which would mean less hours spent, but you would have many more difficulties creating the understanding internally, creating this support and buy-in, and it's essential of course that the buy-in is created and that the things we develop are liked; especially among Swedish companies where the buy-in is created on consensus, rather than with power." (PolymerTech, external brand consultant)</p>
(4) Re-imagining the brand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Narrowing down differentiating elements for intended brand position - Producing linguistic drafts - Visually translating position elements - Turning strategic changes into applicable corporate stories - Conducting further group-wide marketing workshops - Verifying and fine-tuning brand position elements - Educating managers across group in latest marketing knowledge to secure positive impact of changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appointing brand delegates to transfer and diffuse brand position changes to respective business units - Designing messages for corporate level use - Designing messages for business-, segment-, or industry-specific position purposes to enhance relevance - Introducing initial work-in-progress results via global management forums to spark interest among top managers across group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating close link between corporate and business levels - Finding appropriate balance between participation (pull) and policing (push) - Convince businesses to change despite having a direct mandate to enforce changes (context of decentralized organizations) - Balancing bottom-up process and top-down processes - Keeping high level of internal awareness - Creating brand engagement by continuous communication 	<p>"We constructed a very simple kind of branding schematic that worked all the way down to 'how do you actually put together business stories about products' and 'what are the marketing messages that you need to support the core brand proposition and where will you get support yourself'." (PowerTech, head of corporate communications)</p>
(5) Specifying brand position elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparing brand position documents such as brand books, brand stories, and platform documents. - Arranging pilot implementation workshops with selected business units - Turning intended brand positions into applicable business stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Utilizing external events such as Investor Relations meetings or group-wide industry fairs to test internal and external reactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making sure businesses are able to leverage updated corporate brand position for specific usage in offerings - Customizing and managing the level of pace 	<p>"Exposing the customer to the full offering of PolymerTech we aimed to do with the digital showroom. [...] Taking the customer on a journey from space to seabed, and leveraging the most attractive, interesting and powerful products, solutions and applications where we as a group play a significant role." (PolymerTech, global brand director)</p> <p>"Bringing everyone to a similar level of knowledge involved quite a lot of travelling, many presentations, discussions, and workshops. It took quite some time to create the awareness and develop the understanding internally. [...] After that and with the help of the senior management, it was much easier." (PowerTech, global brand director)</p>
(6) Educating and convincing internal stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparing brand position documents such as brand books, brand stories, and platform documents. - Arranging pilot implementation workshops with selected business units - Turning intended brand positions into applicable business stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Utilizing external events such as Investor Relations meetings or group-wide industry fairs to test internal and external reactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making sure businesses are able to leverage updated corporate brand position for specific usage in offerings - Customizing and managing the level of pace 	<p>"We constructed a very simple kind of branding schematic that worked all the way down to 'how do you actually put together business stories about products' and 'what are the marketing messages that you need to support the core brand proposition and where will you get support yourself'." (PowerTech, head of corporate communications)</p>
(7) Implementing intended position				

Firm level	CBP actors	CBP drivers	CBP action	CBP outcome
Corporate Level Management	CEO and executive management	Preemptive and reactive CBP drivers	Authorizing and approval activities throughout the process	Produces CBP outcomes internally along the way (during positioning episodes) as well as externally (after positioning episodes have been completed)
	Corporate brand management		Coordinating and mediating along the outlined CBP stages: <i>buying-in, organizing, analyzing, imagining, involving, educating, integrating, and implementing activities</i>	
Cross-Level Interaction	Corporate level management - Business level management - Brand consultants		Micro-episodic events and activities of reflective strategic practice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Workshops • Test events 	
	Business level delegates		Disseminating relevant knowledge for CBP	
Business Level Management	Product area management		Implementing changes of intended position to product portfolio	

Fig. 2. CBP episode process model.

occurred in moving the case organizations from one positioning state towards another revealed, in essence, that CBP develops and interplays between institutional constraints and managerial agency.

5.1. Positioning and its institutional constraints

The empirical case evidence shows that step-by-step product-positioning models (e.g. de Pelsmacker, Geuens, & van den Bergh, 2007; Jowitt & Lury, 2012) are not fully realistic, and are, therefore, less useful in the context of positioning the corporate brand of complex industrial organizations. This is because problems arise, for example, from institutional and structural constraints to be found in organizations.

5.1.1. Positioning as evolution and revolution

Positioning's revolutionary change character was most clearly visible in PowerTech's second positioning episode, where the corporation and its brand suffered a severe crisis. This episode has illustrated that "real change requires crisis conditions" (Pettigrew, 1987: 665). Revolutionary change was driven externally (multiple crisis aspects) and implied the discontinuation of previous corporate strategy and positioning. This generated novel second-order change, where a previous 'belief system' was replaced by a new one (Weick & Quinn, 1999):

[The Dormann Letters were] very much part of the strategic conversation, which also had a branding aspect to it because it was very much about changing culture, changing behavior, and making people understand what the company stood for. [...] Almost like teachers, we came back to the same things over and over again so that people understand that this was a question of survival.

(PowerTech, head of corporate communications)

Most positioning episodes investigated, however, followed an evolutionary event sequence (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Changes in intended position did not depart too much from the existing framework of what the corporate brands stand for, historically. Acquiring certain traits through learning and imitation (such as becoming more market-oriented) produced variations of a position over time. PolymerTech's most recent episode illustrates this mechanism:

There was a need to clarify what PolymerTech was today and where to move for the future. Building a platform of strategic positioning,

clarifying the promises, different target groups, and below working with other elements such as target group messaging and visual identity to strengthen that message. That's basically why and how it started as an evolutionary journey.

(PolymerTech, head of corporate communications)

The evolutionary character of the brand and its position becomes even clearer on businesses levels, as product evolution and position development constantly emerge over time:

We don't discard development because it doesn't meet the brand itself and what it stands for. I would say we have more or less been involved in developing [product brand] and the other products for so long; it's a constant evolution.

(PowerTech, business unit director)

Positioning's evolutionary character usually followed the mechanism of variation, selection, retention, and back to variation, responding to competitive selection and resource scarcity (such as adapting to changes in the environment to keep a competitive edge). While more rare episodes of revolutionary change created second-order change (creating a new 'corporate brand belief system' in PowerTech's second episode), more frequent episodes of evolutionary change usually produce moderate changes in current 'corporate brand belief systems', as they build upon history, heritage, and the brand's track record (first-order change).

5.1.2. Positioning as institutionalized life cycles

Considering the nature of the corporate brand as being inevitably tied to the existence of the organization it represents (Gyrd-Jones, Helm, & Munk, 2013), it might appear counter-intuitive to introduce the notion of life cycle (event sequence of start-up, grow, harvest, terminate, and start-up again). Reflecting upon the activities and choices that represent corporate brand positioning work in recurring episodes over time makes the life cycle mechanism appear more reasonable. It is not the corporate brand as such that inherits a life cycle mechanism; in fact, it is an 'institutionalized positioning program' (activities, choices, events, etc.) that prescribes specific contents of the activity stages, as cases have shown. PolymerTech's most recent episode provides an example:

It was a process involving all senior management. It's done 'by the book' in the sense that we looked at external stakeholders and how

they interpret PolymerTech as a brand; image and so forth. The same thing we did internally; not only how we are perceived but also how we would like to be perceived. We involved lots of people in different functions, geographies, and businesses and through different forums.

(PolymerTech, head of corporate communications)

Positioning activities resembled a prescribed life cycle over time, as they typically followed the logic of initiation (start-up), development, implementation, and internal/external communication (grow). In a best-case scenario, they further cater for positive results and outcomes for the brand (harvest) before internal or external drivers require changes in positioning strategy again (start-up or re-positioning). However, in CBP cases 'start-up' never occurs from scratch, as deeply rooted values, heritage, and track record (the organization's and corporate brand's necessary relation), to some extent, pre-determine how the brand and its position will develop (as explained in Section 2.4). Due to the life cycle's regulated and institutionalized program (Weick & Quinn, 1999), a second-order change is less likely to occur.

5.2. Positioning and the role of managerial agency

Following a teleological and dialectic perspective on change, we can see positioning as a strategic, purposeful planned process. From this perspective positioning programs are the direct consequence of managerial agency.

5.2.1. Positioning as purposeful enactment

Development in the teleological change understanding (the character attributed to processes being directed towards an end or shaped by a purpose) is something that moves the organization towards a final state through purposeful cooperation and enactment (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). In the context of this paper, the final state refers to an altered corporate brand position that should ultimately contribute to the firm's competitive advantage. Despite the teleological change motor's focus on the purposiveness of the actors and goals (the traditional assumption that brand manager's position brands), environmental or resource limitations on change also need to be acknowledged. Consider, for example, the role of change agents and their institutionalized positioning knowledge. Change agents coming into the organization first tackled the process as learned from previous projects (mostly in a consumer branding context), following a *deliberate* strategizing pattern. After realizing that things work differently in their new context (industrial multi-business firms), the CBP resembled more like an *emergent* process for new and unexpected learning and reevaluation (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). While a teleological mechanism can list a set of possible paths for change, it cannot specify exactly what trajectory an organizational entity will follow or prescribe a certain path. The contextual factors impacting CBP (for example, slowing down the change process) should not be underestimated, as the following quotation illustrates:

If we have had a management team with more maturity in the branding field and if I have had a bigger mandate, that would not be the model we would choose. But now that's the way the world looks, so we need to make the best out of the situation. [...] We are working extremely hard with the internal anchoring [...] It is a process that needs to take place in steps and requires a lot of political massaging and tweaking.

(PolymerTech, global brand director)

To conclude, positioning's teleological character usually follows the mechanism of recurring, discontinuous episodes of goal setting, implementation, and adaption of a means to reach an intended 'end state'. However, structural constraints (Giddens, 1984) affect the teleological positioning process. The mode or sequence of change is essentially constructed by individual actors and emerges as the process unfolds

(Weick & Quinn, 1999).

5.2.2. Positioning as balancing power between opposing forces

A dialectical change mechanism (based on the philosophical method of examining and discussing opposing ideas in order to find 'truth') helps to explain resistance to change and conflict between corporate- and business-level brand positioning over time. At times, a 'corporate-level positioning thesis' was faced with a 'business-level positioning anti-thesis', as all episodes revealed. Such mechanisms of pluralism, confrontation, and conflict (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Weick & Quinn, 1999) are constitutive of CBP change processes as well. For example, corporate level leaders faced potential conflict when implementing a 'one company, one brand' strategy and cultural changes, as in the case of PowerTech:

Some people looked back like 'Oh, it was better when we were Power in Sweden, what the hell, why did we make that merger?' You had people who felt like that sometimes. Then it was important to rally around [the new corporate brand] PowerTech

(PowerTech, former CEO)

Such tensions and conflicts resulting from a 'corporate-level thesis' and 'business-level anti-thesis' may also result in changes to the overall strategy:

We were a one-brand company before. This changed during the last couple of years. Now we are taking more care of the respective cultures and it's not only about using the PowerTech logotype. Here, the integration strategy is to say 'A Company within PowerTech'

(PowerTech, head of corporate communications, Sweden)

Incidents of resistance to change on business level are also prime examples of contradictory values that occasionally compete which each other for brand domination and control. One PowerTech business unit, for example, refused to remove its heritage brand after forced corporate level changes:

We were supposed to come up with plans for [new] names for the different products but I refused. [...] The head office [...] wanted us to remove the [product brand] name. But I said that this was not a good idea because 'that's what we are living on!'

(PowerTech business unit, communications manager)

6. Discussion

This research presents a view of CBP that is complex, episodic, contextually situated and involving multiple actors at multiple levels within the organization. At the broadest level it defines positioning as a process consisting of three stages: impetus, process and resolution. They start with an understanding of a need to change (an impetus) before entering stages of positioning. Such positioning stages are characterized by buying-in, organizing, analyzing, imagining, involving, educating, integrating, and implementing activities, as exemplified by the seven CBP stages of corporate brand positioning in multi-business firms (the process). Episodes then end by dissolving in implementation activities and continuous branding activities on corporate and business levels, once a common ground and guidelines have been agreed upon (resolution). Yet, like strategic change processes in general, positioning processes are contextually located, continuous processes with no clear beginning or end (Pettigrew, 1985). Fig. 3 gives a revised overview of the process of CBP.

In fact, positioning is a recurring process that alternates, over time, between corporate and business levels as well as a cross-level interaction level that illustrates temporary micro-episodes of reflective strategic practice outside the normal work routines during strategic change projects (Hendry & Seidl, 2003).

The impetus for change comes from positioning drivers; we saw two impetuses for change: external crisis and internal decisions regarding

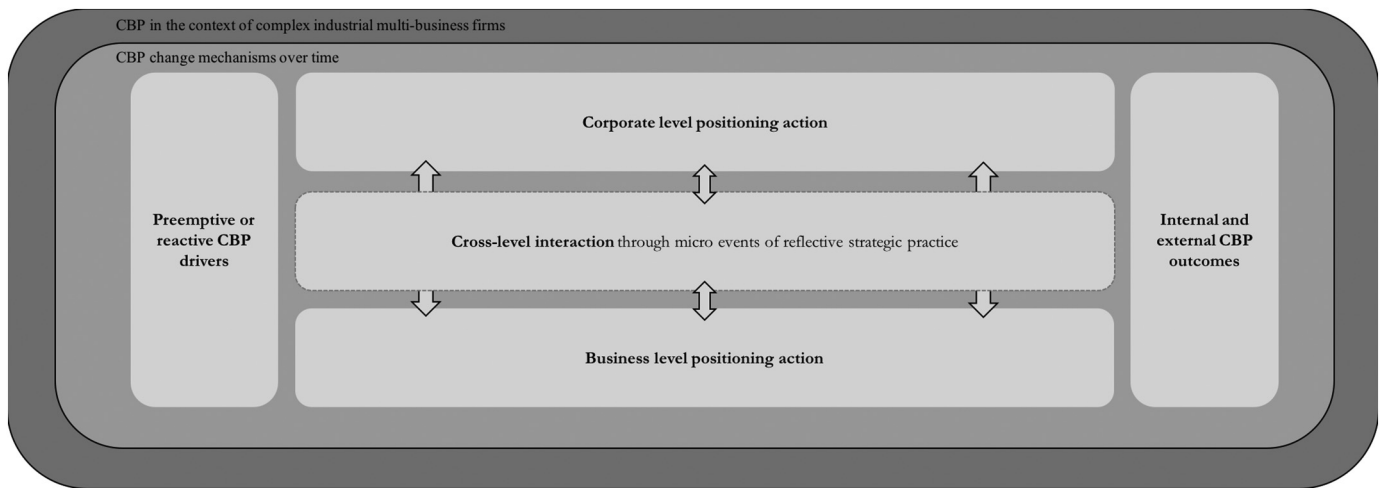


Fig. 3. CBP across firm-levels and over time.

changes in strategic direction. External exigencies create a process which is defined as reactive change and is often coupled with urgency. When impetus for change must come from inside the organization (preemptive change), i.e. without a severe business or corporate crisis, internal brand change agents should not expect too much too soon (Pettigrew, 1987). From this perspective, changes should be coupled with non-urgent timeframes (Miller et al., 2013), which means granting enough time for position reformulation and implementation.

The second stage, positioning actions, reveals multi-level processes of stakeholder buy-in, not, as if often assumed, during one ‘step’ at the end of the chain (Miller et al., 2013), but as a continuous “political” negotiation between levels within the organization. What is not discussed in the existing literature is this interplay between corporate-level brand positioning strategists and their business level colleagues. Continuous buy-in activities occur on several organizational levels such as CEO ‘upstream’ buy-in, corporate-level functions ‘sidestream’ buy-in, and business-level ‘downstream’ buy-in. Just as the firm can be conceived as a political coalition with potential inherent conflicts (March, 1962), so can corporate brand change agents be understood as political brokers that negotiate with a variety of internal stakeholders. Normative positioning models do not account for such dynamics of actually doing CPB work.

Empirical positioning research has been, for the most part, ‘outcome-driven’ (Kalafatis et al., 2000; Porter, 1996; Urde & Koch, 2014). The identification of positioning as a strategic development process does not dismiss the importance of outcome; however, outcome is understood differently on the grounds of the empirical study, and is comprehended in two ways. In one way, brand position outcomes are referred to as the external changes in market position, image, and reputation once CBP episodes have been completed, implemented, and externally communicated. In the second way of viewing it, brand position micro-outcomes are referred to as the internal changes being produced during episodes of brand position change – driven by change enablers (such as strong leadership) or barriers (such as overly strong stakeholder tensions) (Miller et al., 2013). This idea of outcomes mirrors the idea of processes as becoming and ‘produced in the moment’ of positioning work (Langley et al., 2013; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Whilst presenting seven stages of positioning work across firm levels (Table 4; Fig. 2), we also find powerful mechanism underlying positioning work (Svensson, 2007), which can be explain by different conceptual motors (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). We observed strong institutional structures related to stages in the company life-cycle and evolutionary trajectories in corporate positioning strategies. These suggest that, in practice, positioning strategies emerge less from systematic, planned action but, rather as consequences and reflection of

their institutional embeddedness (Dacin, Beal, & Ventresca, 1999). Our observation that positioning strategies did not depart too much from existing frameworks suggest organizational inertia and a certain degree of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, the analysis of the evolutionary nature of positioning in the case companies we discovered that evolution can elicit two different processes: one characterized by iterative decision-making in the context of competitive selection and resource scarcity, whereby managers were involved in strategic processes of analyzing, matching and selection (Hooley, Broderick, & Möller, 1998) creating first-order change. However, we also observed episodes of revolutionary change creating second-order change (Weick & Quinn, 1999) resulting in, for example, changes in the corporate brand belief system.

Whilst there are strong institutional frameworks limiting managerial agency in many of the reported episodes, we also found evidence of managerial agency whereby managers purposefully enact change. The managerial acts occur within contextual factors, but are simultaneously directed by goals and the actors' intentions and purpose. Managerial agency, in the context of corporate brand positioning, can be understood as a “positioning journey” whereby managers navigate, through explicit negotiation and implicit sense-making (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), a path to change across multiple levels in the organization and in the context of internal institutional (life-cycles, corporate heritage, culture, and values) and external institutional (market norms, competitive positions) frameworks. At times, conflicts emerged due to time delays in the positioning decision-making process (Miller et al., 2013). However, this balancing process of opposing opinions and agendas between the different positioning practitioners can be constitutive of the resulting synthesis of change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995) and/or continuity to the brand's intended position.

7. Conclusion

This study proposes that exploring positioning processes over time is indispensable, as doing so offers a more realistic understanding of how such ‘journeys’ unfold. The findings refined the established positioning concept, which now received a deeper meaning. CBP episodes are essentially change management phenomena, in which organizations reactively or preemptively respond to internal or external developments. Importantly, positioning theory needs to integrate the context, activities, choices of managing position change (process approach), and the input factors required to achieve intended position outcomes (variance approach).

7.1. Theoretical implications

The first and overarching contribution is offering an alternative view on positioning, seeing it as a *complex, episodic, and dynamic process* and empirically researching the phenomenon in this way. Therefore, distinguishing between the static ‘position’ notion and the dynamic ‘positioning’ notion is important: *position* describes the strategic choice of a position for a brand (intended position) and the resulting outcome (actual position); *positioning* is the management process that seeks to establish a new position in markets and minds or modifies (fortifies or changes) an existing one (Urde & Koch, 2014). This initiates the need to shift the focus of brand positioning research from explaining the extent of realized positions with static variance theory (that is, using terms of relationships among dependent and independent variables) to explaining the development of intended positions with dynamic process explanations (that is, using terms of the sequence of events leading to an outcome). By clarifying the episodic nature of CBP processes as well as their multi-level embeddedness, this study also demarcates positioning conceptually from continuous brand management activities. In this way, this study mitigates the diagnosis that “the entire enterprise of branding itself can be understood as an exercise in positioning” (Marsden, 2002, p. 307).

The second contribution of this research paper relates to the learning that positioning and repositioning are essentially change management phenomena as organizations reactively or preemptively respond to internal or external developments that require elements of change, but also continuity. As for deeper change processes, this study contributes by uncovering CBP as a phenomenon driven by a variety of change mechanisms including evolution, life cycle, dialectics, and teleology (van de Ven & Poole, 1995). These composite explanations shed light on different aspects of CBP organizational processes reinforcing one another. The evolutionary and life cycle characters of position change were visible on an organizational level (structure). Recurring positioning episodes slowly changing the organization and its brand (evolution) and institutionalized positioning procedure as exemplified in activity stages of positioning (life cycle) contribute to understanding the mechanisms of positioning. Teleology and dialectics were evident on group and individual levels (agency). Initiatives and creativity of individual change leaders to influence the process (teleology) and conflict related to autonomy and control within and across organizational levels (dialectics) equally contribute to understanding the mechanisms of position change over time. Moreover, this study adds to the understanding of first-order change characteristics (‘prescribed change’, as in life cycle and evolution) as well as second-order change (‘constructed and emergent change’ as in dialectics and teleology) in the context of positioning strategy development. In essence, positioning develops and interplays between managerial agency (teleological and dialectical elements) and structural or institutional constraints (evolutionary and life cycle elements) over time.

7.2. Managerial implications

This paper gives answers to several managerial issues regarding CBP: Where and when do CBP processes occur within an organization? What exactly drives CBP processes to occur? What are the actual activities and challenges involved in CBP processes? Who are the CBP actors, and what are their roles? Projects intended to position a corporate brand and its multiple businesses may, if not well managed, take many resources and excessive amounts of time, become costly, and be potentially destructive for both the business and the brand(s). Thus, managers need to know the challenges of strategizing for positioning to be better prepared when assigned to leading change. We find that impetus for CBP can come from many parts and that it is not the prerogative of the corporate brand manager. In so far as multiple actors may instigate a CBP process, it is also important to accept that structural constraints will most likely inhibit a friction-free step-by-step

process of making “razor sharp” position choices (Riezebos & van der Grinten, 2012, p. 166).

Moreover the investigation of organizational processes to position corporate brands illustrated that CBP challenges are different across firm levels. Thus, we offer ‘role-relevant’ managerial implications (Jaworski, 2011) for differently situated managers on corporate- and business-levels as well as for cross-level collaboration.

Corporate-level brand managers are responsible for clarifying and guiding a corporate brand towards the intended position. For example, a project leader with the responsibility and accountability for the corporate brand needs to consider how to make use of enablers (for instance, creating a close link between corporate and business level) and how to overcome barriers (for instance, brand position dilution by over-compromising) in the process of reaching an intended position.

Business-level brand managers, such as product brand managers need to consider enablers and barriers in the process of applying and integrating a corporate brand towards an intended position for concrete solution manifestations. Corporate level-led change projects may not be required on the business level, since some units in a multi-business firm have a well-working positioning strategy and flourishing business. In some situations, planned changes may initially be seen with resistance and opposition. There might have been earlier corporate-driven projects that have been less successful or were even destructive for the business.

Finally, CBP processes require *cross-level collaboration* where positioning becomes a product of many actors (such as CEOs, executive management, corporate brand project leaders, business-level brand delegates, product-area managers, and consultants) and their collective actions (Becker, 1974). To facilitate such collaboration processes, we recommend CBP project leaders to form a *brand coalition* across firm levels. This should be done to facilitate enforcement of changes in decentralized industrial multi-business firms and to reduce the risk of unproductive tensions later in the process. Importantly, we advise project leaders to create a sense of urgency (see also Kotter, 1995) by implementing planned changes early on in the mental and physical agendas of key people in the organization. This is advisable even if positioning projects might not be as urgent as a severe crisis situation.

7.3. Limitations and future research directions

This exploratory research paper refines our knowledge about positioning strategies and suggests positioning is the result of multiple actors’ interactions, interpretations and impositions on the positioning process. Whilst, we explore at a descriptive level these interactions at the level of internal political negotiation and we also suggest positioning processes occur within the duality of institutional constraint and managerial agency we need to accept the context-dependency of conducting process-focused case research. This is a limitation. There can be no definitive criteria to judge the ‘truth’ of this particular version of CBP, and only further empirical material can distinguish it from alternative explanations. We therefore recommend that further work explore the nature of positioning work in the context of ‘producing marketing’ (Svensson, 2007). How can corporate brand positioning be understood through the interplay of strategy practices generally (Whittington, 1996) and corporate branding practices specifically (Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2011)? We most certainly see the need to develop a more complex understanding of what positioning work might be and what temporality means for positioning. In this context, we stressed the importance of actors in disseminating knowledge in CBP work. While we do not explicitly discuss this further, future research could more closely look at how positioning actually relates to knowledge management and knowledge transfer literatures.

Another limitation we acknowledge is our data generation limited to internal, managerial practices on the basis of interviews, document studies, and observations. While this contributed to a better understanding of the dynamics of CBP, it also limited other emerging research

perspectives, including emerging research perspectives such as co-creation of the brand with external stakeholders and the roles of multiple actors in the wider branding pool (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013; Mälåskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011). Future research could address how such individual or group actors possibly inform the CBP process.

Finally, our research approach and findings revealed positioning's role as mediating between corporate strategy and brand strategy. Most cases have shown that CBP follows corporate strategy changes. However, the closer the corporate *brand* strategy core is connected to the corporate strategy core, the more equally both elements develop, reinforcing each other over time. This is something future research could explore further.

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