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Brand Identity Negotiation in Mediated B2B Relationships: The Co-Creative Role of Dealers. Comparative Case Study.

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Abstract

Brand Identity Negotiation in Mediated B2B Relationships:

The Co-Creative Role of Dealers. Comparative Case Study.

This study explores the dynamics of brand identity co-creation within business-to-business (B2B) contexts, focusing particularly on the role of dealers as intermediaries between suppliers and end customers. Drawing on the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) framework and Social Identity Theory (SIT), this research examines how dealers self-identify with the supplier's brand identity, and how they contribute to the supplier's brand co-creation process. Employing a qualitative approach, the comparative case study analyzes data from two cases within mining industry through semi-structured interviews with respondents coming from both sides of the brand co-creation process: suppliers and dealers, providing a deep exploration into the processes that shape brand perceptions in B2B settings. Results indicate that dealers play a pivotal role in brand identity formation through their dual function as both advocates and interpreters of the brand. The findings highlight the significance of structured communication and formalized interactions in aligning dealer activities with the broader brand objectives, thereby ensuring consistency and coherence in brand representation across different markets. This research contributes to brand management and strategic communication literature by demonstrating how the integration of CCO and SIT can enhance understanding of brand co-creation, offering practical insights for managing complex dealer-supplier relationships and fostering brand identities in B2B markets.

Keyword: Brand Identity, B2B Brand Management, Brand Co-Creation, Communicative Constitution of Organizations, Social Identity Theory

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1. Introduction

Brand identity serves as a linchpin in the strategic orchestration of organizational culture and market perception, emphasizing its capacity to articulate a brand's core values, attributes, and essence (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012). Historically, brand identity was envisioned as a fixed collection of associations, values, or attributes crafted by management to encapsulate the essence of what a brand represents (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Keller, 2001). Brand identity was viewed as a construct shaped by organizations and defined through a top-down, inside-out approach where managers dictated and upheld the corporate brand's identity (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012). In this framework, they acted as the stewards of the brand's identity, safeguarding its stability (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2010; de Chernatony, 2003).

Conversely, a contemporary and increasingly accepted view challenges this static model, proposing that brand identity emerges from a dynamic, co-creative process involving a wide array of both internal and external stakeholders (Siano et al., 2022; da Silveira et al., 2013; Iglesias et al., 2013; Reed, 2019). This process-oriented approach asserts that brand identity is collectively and continuously shaped through interactions that reflect and negotiate a myriad of meanings ascribed to the brand, moving beyond a singular essence or truth of a brand to embrace a multiplicity of interpretations (Von Wallpach et al., 2017). This evolving view of corporate brand identity as a fluid, ever-changing construct is supported by organizational studies that consider identity as a relational and socially constructed phenomenon, emerging from the complex interplay of all stakeholders' perceptions and interactions (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017; Sarasvuo et al., 2022; France et al., 2015; Boyle, 2007).

1.1. Problem Background

Managing corporate brands has become increasingly important but also difficult, and the transition from consumer-focused (B2C) to business-oriented (B2B) relationships immediately introduces another layer of complexity, particularly when a company has intermediaries, bridging the gap between the company and the end customer. For instance, while crucial for market penetration and localized customer interactions, the dealers' role introduces a significant complexity for the supplier's brand management. In this context, the terms "supplier" and "dealer" describe two distinct roles within the distribution and sales processes (Skinner et al., 1992). A supplier refers to a company that produces goods or services and may sell these directly to customers or through various distribution channels. A dealer acts as an intermediary between the supplier and the end customer, typically purchasing goods from the supplier to resell them to the final consumers.

The arrangement, where dealers purchase from manufacturers or service providers to sell products to the end market, is instrumental across various industries for market expansion without direct sales management by the brand (Skarmeas et al., 2008). Utilizing dealers as sales intermediaries offers several strategic advantages for companies, particularly in expanding the supplier's reach and providing localized customer service and support. Dealers, with their local market knowledge and established retailer networks, can facilitate quicker and more efficient market penetration, removing the logistical burdens associated with direct distribution (Webster, 1976). As entities operating under brand representation agreements within designated territories, dealers embody a partnership ethos, contributing significantly to brand reputation through customer support and after-sales services (Webster & Keller, 2004).

By nature, dealers occupy a unique and nuanced position that defies the traditional dichotomy between internal and external stakeholders. This intermediary status affords dealers a unique standpoint — closer to the brand than customers, yet more distant than employees. This relationship, characterized by proximity and distance, grants dealers a degree of flexibility and autonomy in interpreting, negotiating, and communicating the supplier's brand proposition as they eventually act as brand ambassadors who materialize brand values into tangible customer interactions (Mudambi, 2002). Simultaneously, it presents a unique challenge for brand managers who must navigate in this intermediate space to ensure that dealers are adequately aligned with the brand's identity and values while acknowledging their independent operations and perspectives (Fisher & Smith, 2011; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). The challenge intensifies as dealers possess their operational priorities, market strategies, and personal interpretations, which can sometimes misalign from the supplier's intended brand message, affecting the perceived brand value and identity in end customers' eyes.

To illustrate, automotive brands typically establish a global network of dealers to reach diverse markets, offering vehicle sales and comprehensive auto services. Consider a scenario where a dealer acts disrespectfully or incompetently towards customers. Such behaviour could involve poor communication, delayed service, or even unethical practices like overcharging for parts and services. While directly attributable to the dealer, these actions cast a shadow over the supplier's brand as customers rarely distinguish between the dealer's conduct and the brand they represent, many times exclusively. This misalignment between customer expectations and dealer performance can lead to a misperception of the automotive brand itself, suggesting a lack of reliability or integrity that may not reflect the supplier's standards and values. This divergence can lead to a fragmented brand identity, where the image customers interact with differs from the brand's intended identity. This dual role sets the stage for a unique co-creation process, one that is not entirely under the control of brand managers or brand owners, as was earlier presented by other researchers (Fisher & Smith, 2011; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Payne et al., 2007). The tension between intended and perceived identity is not just a B2B brand management challenge; it strikes at the heart of strategic communication.

Brand co-creation, in this case, involves collaborative processes between a supplier and its stakeholders, including dealers and customers, to develop and strengthen a brand's identity (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; von Wallpach et al., 2017). This process encompasses various activities where every interaction, from formal events and personal meetings to shared documents and communications, can transmit and reinforce the brand's values. The B2B context presents a unique environment where not consumers but somewhat intermediary entities, such as dealers, might engage in a similar process of identity alignment with the brands they represent, leading to a symbiotic relationship where identity alignment is both a reflection and a determinant of how brands are perceived and engaged within the market (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). This phenomenon extends beyond simple brand representation, suggesting a more integrated form of identity co-creation where dealers engage in to present a unified image to the market.

1.2. Problem Statement

While the phenomenon of consumers identifying with brands is well-documented in B2C contexts, there is a conspicuous gap when it comes to understanding how dealers themselves assimilate and reflect the brand identity of the products they sell (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). The body of research that explore this area often lacks a focused exploration of the dealer's role in brand identity co-creation. This gap in existing research underscores a critical oversight; without a clear understanding of how dealers, as intermediary entities, navigate their self-identification with the brands they represent, our comprehension of how brands are co-constituted in B2B interactions remains incomplete. By examining the dealer's role in the co-creative process of brand identity formation, this research will also address the strategic negotiation that occurs as dealers and brands work together to maintain brand integrity in the face of market pressures and competitive dynamics. By examining this connection, we can unravel the layers of strategic communication and brand identity negotiation that define the essence of brand management in a B2B context.

1.3. Aim and Research Questions

This research aims to explore the process and implications of brand identity negotiation in B2B relationships, with a central focus on how dealers' self-identification with a supplier's brand contributes to the brand co-creation process. This exploration seeks to dissect the nuanced interplay between dealers' perceptions of the supplier brand's identity and their representation of this and their own identities, examining how alignment or misalignment in self-identification affects the brand co-creation process within the B2B domain. To effectively address the research aim, the study formulates specific research questions designed to explore the multifaceted supplier-dealer relationships:

RQ1: How do dealers contribute to the co-creation of brand identity?

RQ1.1.: How do dealers negotiate between their own organizational identity and the brand identity they are expected to convey to customers?

RQ1.2.: How does the sense of identification that dealers hold with specific brands affect their communication and representation of these brands to customers?

1.4. Delimitations and Scope of the Study

This research is designed to investigate into sectors where dealer networks are prevalent, recognizing dealers' significant role in the communicative constitution of brand identities. By narrowing the investigation to B2B contexts, the study aims to uncover the unique dynamics when brands and dealers co-create brand identity, distinct from consumer-focused B2C interactions. The focus of the study offers a targeted examination of how brands and dealers negotiate brand meanings, values, and promises, excluding broader marketing mix elements and customer relationship management strategies that, while related, extend beyond the study's primary objective. This delineation allows for a thorough investigation into the communicative actions and interactions that directly contribute to the construction and perception of brand identity.

1.5. Contribution to the Field

This research project stands to contribute to the field of strategic communication, notably by expanding our understanding of branding within B2B contexts. As Falkheimer and Heide (2018) articulate, strategic communication is a multifaceted discipline encompassing branding among organisational communication and Public Relations. The focus on the co-creation of brand identity through dealer interactions presents a new empirical avenue to examine how brands are not just communicated but are actively constituted within business relationships. This study's exploration into the dynamics of brand identity negotiation between brands and dealers addresses a gap in the current literature, offering fresh insights into the brand co-creation processes and eventually contributing to both academia and practice. Finally, by situating branding within the broader context of strategic communication, this thesis underscores the importance of communicative actions in shaping brand perceptions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand Management in B2B

Brand management within B2B frameworks significantly diverges from consumer-focused strategies due to the complex relationships and decision-making processes inherent in B2B transactions (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006b). Unlike the B2C market, B2B brand management involves nurturing relationships not just with end-users, but with a network of stakeholders, including suppliers, intermediaries, and organizational buyers (Iglesias et al., 2020). A growing segment of studies is uncovering the significant advantages corporate branding yields in B2B environments. These advantages include establishing a distinct and trustworthy brand presence (Hague & Jackson, 1994; Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007), fostering more stable and profitable partnerships (Wong & Merrilees, 2007; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018; Bengtsson & Servais, 2005), and aiding in achieving desired market positions (Davis & Mentzer, 2008). Moreover, a B2B corporate brand positively impacts customers by streamlining the decision-making process, boosting confidence in purchasing decisions, and diminishing perceived risks (Keller & Aaker, 1998; Bendixen et al., 2004; Mudambi, 2002; Ohnemus, 2009).

The significance of brand development within the B2B sector has evolved further, highlighting its role not just as a mechanism for immediate sales but as a crucial component of a comprehensive strategic vision aimed at cultivating long-term value (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Zulfikar (2023) argue that the overarching objectives of branding focus on increasing profitability through heightened awareness, distinctiveness, and fostering a positive brand image through service and product development. De Chernatony (2003) advocate for recognizing branding as a powerful tool in the industrial domain, warning that marketers dismissing its strategic value may overlook a critical element of business success. Similarly, Hague and Jackson (1994) argue that failing to integrate branding into broader business strategies could lead to adverse outcomes, emphasizing branding's efficacy in securing a competitive advantage.

Another segment of the literature on B2B branding emphasizes the concept of brand equity, engaging in analyses that shed light on its significance and operationalization in business markets (Fagundes et al., 2022; Bendixen et al., 2004; Gordon et al., 1993; Hutton, 1997). Gordon et al. (1993) suggests that solid brands can command higher prices and foster customer loyalty, even in industries driven by specifications and functional value. Hutton's (1997) research investigates into the dynamics of brand equity within B2B purchasing contexts, examining the conditions under which buyers prioritize brand reputation over price or other decision-making factors. This investigation into buyer behaviour highlights the significant impact of brand equity on purchasing decisions, suggesting that a strong brand image can command higher prices and foster brand loyalty in the B2B sector. Fagundes et al. (2022) further explored the significant impact of marketing strategies on brand equity, emphasizing how strategic marketing initiatives directly enhance consumer perceptions and the overall value of a brand. It underscores the notion that, within B2B transactions, the value attributed to a brand extends beyond its tangible offerings to encompass trust, reliability, and the emotional resonance it holds with its customers.

Following the recent studies highlighting untangible brand assets, there is a need to make the distinction between product-level branding and corporate-level branding in B2B contexts, noting that while products must stand out on functional merits, corporate branding requires a broader strategic vision that encompasses corporate values, customer relationships, and reputation management (Mudambi et al., 1997). Scholars like Keller and Lehmann (2006) and Homburg et al. (2010) investigated the significance of corporate branding and communication, questioning its relevance and impact compared to product-specific branding. This product-centric view of branding has often overshadowed broader considerations of brand strategy in B2B markets. Nevertheless, emerging research has begun to adopt a holistic perspective on B2B branding, considering the complex interplay of values perceived during sales interactions and how these perceptions contribute to a comprehensive brand strategy. Similarly, McQuiston (2004) investigates B2B branding by examining buyer behaviour, highlighting the necessity of trust in the company for successful branding. These insights suggest that effective branding in B2B markets requires a broader approach acknowledging the full spectrum of elements integral to brand perception.

However, the challenge for B2B marketers lies in translating the brand's value proposition into meaningful associations that resonate with diverse organizational stakeholders. A critical aspect of B2B brand management is the development of a unique brand identity that can be consistently communicated across various touchpoints (Newsom, 1998; Achrol & Kotler, 1999). This identity forms the basis for the brand's reputation, which, as Hutt and Speh (2004) argue, is crucial in B2B markets where purchase decisions are highly informed and risk-averse. Given the emphasis on cultivating a unique brand identity that effectively communicates a brand's value proposition to diverse stakeholders, it is important to explore the next phase of brand evolution in B2B markets, shifting towards a more inclusive model of brand development, known as brand co-creation.

2.2. Brand Co-Creation

Central to the corporate brand is its identity, which distinguishes a brand and underpins its relevance to stakeholders, facilitating differentiation and competitive superiority (Kapferer, 2012; de Chernatony, 2003; Beverland et al., 2007). Historically, brand identity was viewed as a static construct shaped by internal stakeholders. However, contemporary literature challenges this notion, arguing for a dynamic brand identity co-created by both internal and external stakeholders, thereby blurring the lines between internal perceptions and external brand image (Da Silveira et al., 2013; Iglesias et al., 2013; von Wallpach et al., 2017). In this model, the creation of a brand's identity and reputation, underscored by Keller (2001) and Hutt and Speh (2004) as foundational to B2B brand management, is no longer seen as a linear process directed solely by the brand. Instead, it evolves through active engagement with and contributions from a broad spectrum of stakeholders. The shift reflects a more integrated approach to understanding brand identity, recognizing the interplay between an organization's internal perspective and the external image held by various audiences (Merrilees et al., 2021; Takahashi & Takahashi, 2021).

Co-creation, the collaborative development through interactions between companies and stakeholders, is increasingly recognized as essential for innovation and organizational performance (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010; Füller, 2010; Markovic et al., 2022). The benefits of such collaborative efforts are well-documented, showcasing how engaging with customers and other external actors can lead to enhanced product innovation and marketing performance improvements (Ind et al., 2013; Wilson, 2013; Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2018). Furthermore, research by Törmälä and Gyrd-Jones (2017) focuses on evolving corporate brand identity as a collaborative social process involving the company and its key stakeholders. Their investigation outlines a phased framework that captures the interplay between contextual factors and stakeholder activities. It highlights the transition from an initial, ambiguous brand identity to a more defined, collaboratively shaped identity. This view is aligned with the Hatch and Schultz model (2002) that offers a profound interpretive lens for dissecting the dynamics of brand identity as it oscillates between organizational culture and external perception. The model highlights the cyclical, feedback-driven interaction between an organization's expressed culture, the brand identity projected to stakeholders, and the reinterpreted identity communicated back by those stakeholders. This feedback loop, particularly pronounced in B2B settings, suggests a co-creative process of brand identity formation, where the intended clarity and consistency of the brand's identity may be compromised or enriched by the other stakehokders' interpretative and communicative actions.

Within the brand co-creation studies, a growing body of research focuses on brand value co-creation in B2B contexts (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Berenguer-Contrí et al., 2020; Pathak et al., 2021). These studies assert that co-creation extends beyond mere transactional interactions, exploring into the realms of joint problem-solving, resource sharing, and collective brand development. For instance, Leek and Christodoulides (2012) focus on how the integration of customer knowledge and operational capabilities enhances service innovation and customer satisfaction, thereby elevating both brand value and competitive advantage. Berenguer-Contrí and colleagues (2020) examine the structured processes through which companies interact with key clients to tailor offerings that directly respond to evolving market demands, illustrating how adaptability and responsiveness are crucial for sustained B2B relationships. Similarly, Pathak et al. (2021) explore how digital platforms facilitate real-time collaborations that not only foster deeper engagement but also enable the customization of solutions based on specific client needs and feedback.

Furthermore, the role of social media in expanding the scope of stakeholder engagement, allowing for broader participation in the brand co-creation process (Le et al., 2022; Kamboj et al., 2018; Hofacker et al., 2020). It suggests that the corporate brands identities are not merely declarations by company managers but are the result of ongoing negotiations and interactions that involve a myriad of participants, including customers, suppliers, and partners. Moreover, the literature underscores the fluidity and multiplicity of brand meanings, which stakeholders constantly negotiate and reinterpret. This body of work collectively underscores a paradigm shift in how brand value is perceived, moving from a static to a dynamic, interaction-based process where the contributions of each party not only exchanges brand meanings but contributing to long-term brand positioning.

Another foundational piece by Mäläskä et al. (2011) analyses how corporate brand meaning evolves within SMEs, revealing the significant role of network actors in shaping branding through direct and indirect engagements. These interactions range from word-of-mouth endorsements to influencing managerial decisions, impacting the SME's brand identity and developmental trajectory. Another study by Koporcic and Halinen (2018) introduces the concept of Interactive Network Branding (INB), proposing it as a dynamic, interaction-driven framework for co-creating corporate identity and reputation within B2B networks. This approach underscores the importance of interpersonal exchanges between firm representatives in crafting B2B corporate brands. Lastly, the work of Lussier and Hall (2018) reveals that the interpersonal relationships between sales representatives and customers play a pivotal role in B2B brand management. These relationships become part of the brand's value, with personal trust and commitment influencing organisational buying behaviours. This body of work collectively emphasises the complexity and participatory nature of branding in B2B contexts, marking a shift from founder-centric values to a more nuanced, stakeholder-influenced brand identity as companies mature.

The recent and most profound research conducted by Iglesias et al. (2020) identifies four key stakeholder activities — communicating, internalizing, contesting, and elucidating, collectively shaping corporate brand identity. These activities reflect the sharing and integration of brand values, as well as the debates and discussions that contribute to the brand's evolving meaning. Moreover, the research suggests that the essence of a corporate brand's identity is rooted in the founders' values and guides strategic choices. It also reveals how this identity is constructed through interactions among internal and external parties. The study highlights a dynamic tension between managers' desire to maintain brand identity and the varied interpretations by stakeholders, which enrich the brand with diverse meanings. This underscores the complexity of brand identity in contemporary business environments and sets the stage for further exploration into how these dynamics unfold within specific B2B contexts.

2.3. Summary and Research Gap

In B2B settings, brand management extends beyond immediate transactions to embrace a strategic, relationship-focused approach that involves multiple stakeholders. In synthesizing the extensive literature on B2B brand management and brand co-creation, a significant gap can be highlighted in understanding how dealer and supplier dynamics influence brand identity within B2B markets. While existing studies underscore the importance of brand management in fostering competitive advantages and stable partnerships, they predominantly focus on direct interactions between businesses and their immediate clients. The previous research in multi-stakeholder brand co-creation overlooks the complex interaction layer that dealers, in particular, introduce into the brand perception by acting as intermediaries between suppliers and end customers. Moreover, the literature extensively discusses the co-creation of brand value between companies and customers, often neglecting the role of dealers who frequently shape the final customer's brand experience. This oversight points to a critical research gap: the need for a deeper exploration of how dealers contribute to or detract from the brand identity co-creation in B2B settings. Therefore, it sets a specific research standpoint in this literature, which is positioned to address this gap.

3. Theorethical Framework

3.1. The Communicative Constitution of Organizations

The Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) offers a profound shift from the conventional understanding of organizational communication. Rather than perceiving communication as a tool within an organization's structure, CCO positions it as the very fabric that constitutes organizations (Ashcraft et al., 2009).

3.1.1. CCO Schools

CCO perspective emerged from recognising that organisational processes, cultures, and realities are created, maintained, and transformed through communication (Schoeneborn et al., 2018; Glynn, 2002). CCO is primarily composed of three prominent schools: the Montreal School, Luhmann's School, and the McPhee's Four Flows (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). This multifaceted approach underscores communicative actions' inherent complexity and dynamism within organisational settings.

The Montreal School, notably influenced by the works of Taylor et al. (1996) and Cooren (2004), is centred on the notion that organizations are constituted through conversation and text. This school posits that organizational reality is continuously negotiated and constructed through language (Cooren, 2004). It emphasizes the fluid and emergent nature of organizational structures as they are talked into being. Conversations within an organization are not just a medium for exchanging information but also the very acts that enact organizational life. Key to this perspective is the concept of the communicative event, where meaning is co-constructed, and the organization itself is realized (Schoeneborn et al., 2014).

In contrast, Luhmann’s School of CCO, drawing on the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, views organizations as autopoietic systems that use communication as their primary mode of operation (Luhmann, 1995; Schoeneborn, 2011). Luhmann (1995) argued that these systems are self-creating and maintain their boundaries through communication processes that differentiate them from their environment. This approach focuses on how communication generates and sustains social systems, emphasizing the self-referential nature of communication. It differs from other CCO schools by its macro-level focus on how entire systems operate and maintain themselves through communicative acts rather than on individual or group interactions within the systems.

Compared to the previous two approaches, The Four Flows model of CCO, articulated by McPhee and colleagues (2008), presents a more structural approach to understanding how organisations are constituted through communication. The model identifies four key communicative processes: membership negotiation, self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning. Each of these flows addresses a different aspect of organisational life, from how individuals negotiate their roles to how organisations interface with external environments (McPhee & Zaug, 2008; Heide & Simonsson, 2011). Unlike the Montreal and Luhmann's schools, the Four Flows model provides a more comprehensive framework for examining the communicative underpinnings of organisational existence and effectiveness across both internal and external boundaries without limiting the constitution of organisations to conversational acts alone nor to the structural patterns of communication (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). The choice of McPhee's Four Flows for this research was driven by its ability to address the multifaceted nature of communication in organisations, suited to exploring the interplay between dealers and suppliers in the B2B brand co-creation context.

3.1.2. The Four Flows model

Drawing on Giddens's Structuration Theory, which integrates agency and structure, McPhee's Four Flows articulate a similar duality in organizational communication (McPhee et al., 2014). Each flow offers a unique point: membership negotiation pertains to the ways individuals enter and maintain organizational roles; self-structuring describes the development of organizational rules and roles; activity coordination is concerned with the shared tasks and the alignment of actions within the organization; and institutional positioning involves the interactions with entities outside the organization and the broader societal structures (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). Giddens (1984) conceptualized the duality of structure, arguing that human agency and social structure are not separate entities but are continually shaped and reshaped through interaction.

When applied to the CCO perspective, this duality underscores how communicative actions are enabled and constrained by the existing organizational structures while simultaneously reconstituting those structures (McPhee et al., 2014; Schoeneborn et al., 2014).

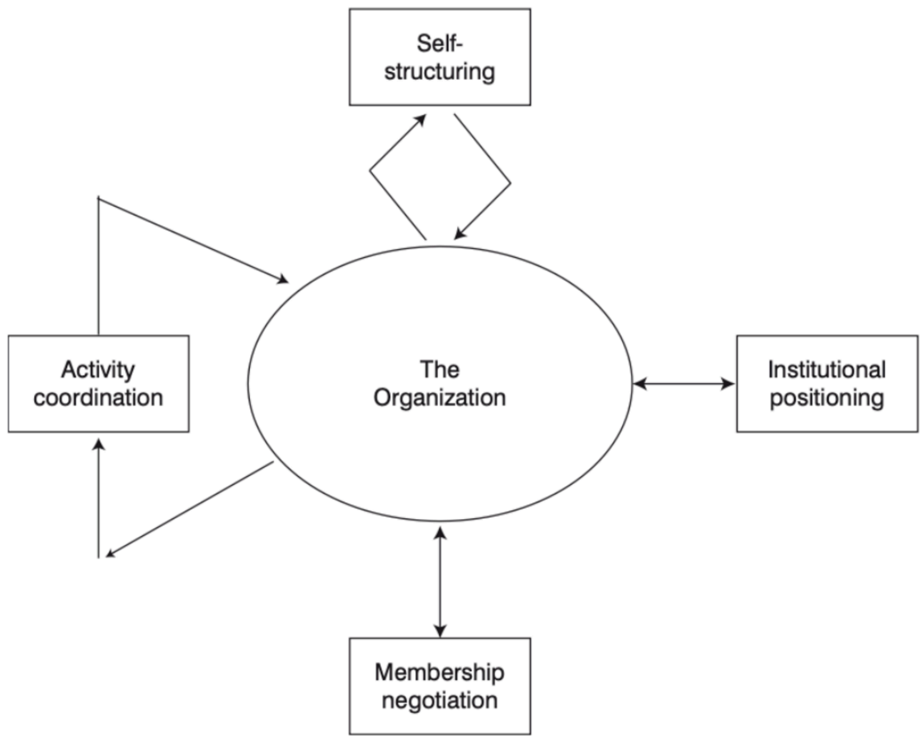

Figure 1. McPhee & Zaug's Four Flows Model (McPhee & Zaug, 2008, p. 33)

To further establish the theoretical foundation of the Four Flows Model, there is a need to explore each of the four central flows that define this framework and through which the communicative practices that constitute organizational reality are examined. Starting from Activity Coordination, as conceptualized by McPhee and Zaug (2008), the flow explores the communication processes that orchestrate and facilitate the day-to-day functioning within an organization. This flow of communication ensures that the tasks essential to the organization's operations are carried out efficiently and effectively. In the context of a B2B environment, especially in relationships that involve brand co-creation between suppliers and dealers, Activity Coordination becomes a critical component. It encompasses all forms of interaction that help align the collaborating parties' brand and marketing strategies, sales efforts, and customer service approaches. Therefore, in the study of B2B relationships and brand co-creation, exploring the mechanisms of Activity Coordination offers insights into how companies can effectively manage their interactions to foster a strong, coherent brand identity.

Self-structuring, as conceptualized within McPhee and Zaug's (2008) framework, pertains to the communication processes that help shape the organizational structure itself. This flow includes creating, adjusting, and reinforcing rules, norms, and roles within the organization. Self-structuring is essential for establishing how the organization functions internally and projects itself externally. In the context of the research, Self-Structuring involves how suppliers and dealers organize their interactions to support the brand's strategic objectives, which might include the development of branding guidelines and other documents that align both parties with the overarching brand goals.

When it comes to Membership Negotiation, as outlined by McPhee and Zaug (2008), it focuses on the processes through which individuals and groups within an organization negotiate their roles, statuses, and responsibilities. This communicative flow is pivotal in defining the involvement and identity of organizational members and determining how they fit into the organizational structure and culture. Within the framework of B2B relationships, particularly in contexts where brand co-creation is a central activity, Membership Negotiation takes on a key role as it establishes how dealers, as intermediaries, might align with the supplier's corporate and brand identity. In brand co-creation processes, Membership Negotiation thus serves as a foundational mechanism that not only dictates the operational dynamics between suppliers and dealers but also shapes the deeper interactions that define a brand's presence in the market.

The difference between self-structuring and membership negotiation components is nuanced yet distinct. While Membership Negotiation focuses specifically on defining and agreeing upon the roles and responsibilities of individual members, Self-Structuring addresses the broader communicative acts that shape the entire organizational framework (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). In the B2B realm, self-structuring is facilitated on a fundamental level through constitutional documents; for instance, in a supplier-dealer context, contracts and dealership certificates play a vital role in the flow. Membership Negotiation is about individuals finding their place within the existing organizational structure, whereas Self-Structuring is about creating and adjusting that structure.

Essentially, Membership Negotiation is a component of Self-Structuring, but it explicitly targets role definition and integration within the organization and the interaction of supplier and dealer (Schoeneborn et al., 2014).

Finally, Institutional Positioning, as defined within the framework of the CCO, refers to the communication processes that shape an organization's public identity and its relationships with the broader institutional environment (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). Institutional Positioning is crucial as it determines how a brand is perceived by direct customers and the wider community, including potential partners, regulators, and other stakeholders. This process involves crafting public messages, managing media relations, and engaging in corporate social responsibility initiatives, among other activities, all aimed at reinforcing strategically advantageous brand image. In comparison to other flows, Institutional Positioning is outward-facing. It deals with the external aspects of communication and the cultivation of the organization's image and reputation in the public domain (McPhee & Zaug, 2009).

3.1.3. Application in Brand Management and Strategic Communication

The application of CCO within strategic communication and branding is especially pertinent. It facilitates a deeper comprehension of how branding efforts are not unilateral declarations but collaborative dialogues that shape organizational identities (Christensen et al., 2008). Each of McPhee's flows can be discerned in brand management practices. For example, membership negotiation can be studied within the context of a brand community, where it can be a salient point of brand loyalty and advocacy (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). In the interplay between the supplier brand and dealer interactions, the CCO framework provides a rich analytical tool for understanding the constitution of brand identity. It posits that the communicative actions between the seller and the buyer are not mere transactions but are formative in the meaning and existence of the brand itself (Kuhn, 2008). Therefore, McPhee's Four Flows Framework, aligning with the idea of a brand's identity being not a static set of characteristics but a dynamic outcome of ongoing interactions and negotiations, is well-suitable for studying the research topic focused on the nuanced interplay between supplier and dealer by allowing for detailed exploration of each communication flow in their relationships.

3.2. Social Identity Theory

3.2.1. Description of the Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory, initially proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), explores how individuals categorize themselves and others into various social groups, leading to a sense of belonging and identity within these groups. It posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem based on their membership in social groups, ranging from nationality and religion to minor groups like clubs or sports teams. This theory illuminates how social identities form the basis for understanding oneself in relation to others, influencing attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions of in-group (us) versus out-group (them) dynamics. Tajfel and Turner's work led to the development of key concepts such as in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination, suggesting that individuals inherently prefer those who belong to their own group over those from different groups. This preference is not necessarily born out of hostility towards out-groups but from a desire to enhance one's self-image through positive associations with the in-group (Tajfel, 1982). Further expanding on SIT, Turner's Self-Categorization Theory elaborates on the cognitive processes behind social identification, proposing that individuals categorize themselves and others to understand and predict social behaviour (Turner et al., 1989). This self-categorization acts as a psychological mechanism that influences how individuals conform to group norms and exhibit group-typical behaviours, reinforcing the social identity.

Furthermore, SIT emphasizes the fluidity of social identities, asserting that individuals may shift between different identities based on the context, thereby adapting their behaviors to align with the perceived norms of the relevant group at that moment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This flexibility highlights the complex interplay between individual agency and social structure in identity formation. The emotional impact of social identification also plays a critical role, as feelings such as pride or shame can significantly motivate actions that support the in-group or oppose the out-group, further influencing intergroup dynamics (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). The versatility of SIT is evident in its application across diverse disciplines, from organizational behavior, where it informs leadership styles and employee engagement (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), to marketing strategies that leverage group identity to influence consumer behavior (Ilaw, 2014).

3.2.2. Application of SIT

In organizational contexts, particularly in organizational behaviour and human resource management, SIT deeply explores how employees identify with their organizations and how this identification influences motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that strong organizational identification leads to a greater alignment between employees' values and those of the organization, fostering a sense of unity and purpose. One critical application of SIT in organizational settings is studying organizational commitment and employee engagement (Haslam, 2012; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). The research has shown that employees who strongly identify with their organization are likelier to exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and reduced turnover intentions. This intense identification fosters a sense of belonging and loyalty, motivating employees to contribute positively towards achieving organizational goals.

Leadership is another area in which SIT has been extensively applied. Leaders who embody the group's identity and articulate a vision that resonates with the collective self-concept of their followers can foster a stronger sense of identification among their team members (Hogg et al., 2012). This process, known as identity leadership, helps build trust, cooperation, and shared values within teams, enhancing overall performance and satisfaction. SIT also provides valuable insights into managing organisational change. Change efforts congruent with the organisation's established social identity are more likely to be accepted and supported by employees (Mühlemann et al., 2022). Understanding and leveraging the existing social identities within an organisation can facilitate smoother transitions and foster a collective resilience to change.

Moreover, research extends the traditional boundaries of SIT by exploring the implications of digital interactions on social identities, revealing how online communities and social media platforms have become new arenas for identity expression and contestation (Dholakia et al., 2004). As an outcome of such digital integration, self-identification with other brands becomes crucial in studying brand identity co-creation (Anderski et al., 2023). Personal values, self-esteem, and the need for uniqueness are frequently cited as individual drivers, suggesting that consumers gravitate towards brands that align with their intrinsic values and help them stand out in a socially meaningful way (Malär et al., 2011; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Social factors, including peer influence and social media exposure, further modulate this identification process, illustrating the complex interplay between individual desires and social dynamics in brand selection and loyalty (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). In fact, SIT has been instrumental in understanding how brands are not just markers of corporate identity but also pivotal in shaping and reflecting the social identities of their customers and business partners. This theoretical perspective has been applied to elucidate how stakeholders, including customers, align with brands that reflect their values and social categories, affecting their loyalty and engagement with the brand (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

3.3. Synthesis

Integrating SIT within the CCO framework broadens the scope for understanding identity dynamics across various communicative flows. In particular, SIT helps explain the dynamics of brand co-creation in B2B contexts, where the brand identity is continuously shaped and reshaped through interactions between the supplier and its stakeholders, such as dealers, attempting to explain processes underlying stakeholders' perception of a brand's identity as congruent with their own social identities. SIT provides a suitable theoretical lens for examining how individual and collective identities within business ecosystems are influenced by perceptions of group membership, brand alignment, and social categorization. These processes are instrumental not only in membership negotiation but also in other CCO flows, such as activity coordination, self-structuring, and institutional positioning. For instance, in activity coordination, the theory helps explain the dynamics of talk-action alignment, where dealers adopt the brand's identity in their operational activities, enhancing the synchronization of identity and action. This alignment fosters a coherent brand representation across different customer touchpoints, influencing brand consistency and reliability perceptions.

Moreover, SIT enhances the understanding of self-structuring and institutional positioning by illustrating how formal structures and public communication are utilized to solidify the brand's identity within the dealer network and the broader market. Dealers engage in self-structuring by adopting the supplier's branding guidelines and communication strategies, which helps to reinforce their own identity alignment with the brand. Similarly, dealers and suppliers collectively project a unified brand image that resonates with societal values and market expectations through institutional positioning, further solidifying their shared identity in the public sphere.

SIT and CCO’s view of communication as a constitutive force makes both theories compatible for conducting the research. Both theories emphasize that communication does not merely transmit information but actively constructs social realities. This underscores the constitutive power of communication in shaping how brand identities are negotiated and understood within and beyond organizational boundaries. It is particularly important to dealers that act as both intermediaries and interpreters of the brand and engage in continuous identity negotiation — balancing alignment with the supplier’s brand and differentiation to maintain their unique organizational identity. In conclusion, the integration facilitates a deeper understanding of how dealers navigate their dual role by shedding light on how communication serves as the vital medium within dealer networks through which identities are expressed, contested, and reinforced, facilitating a deeper understanding of the co-creative processes involved in B2B brand management.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research paradigm

The current study adheres to an interpretive research paradigm as the guiding philosophy, chosen for its rich potential to explore the complex and nuanced reality. At the core of interpretivism is the assertion that understanding the social world requires understanding individuals' subjective meanings and interpretations of their experiences (Schwandt, 2000). This paradigm posits that the reality of organizational life is not a fixed entity to be uncovered but a fluid construct continuously shaped and reshaped through human interactions and perceptions (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). Interpretivism, rooted in the belief that reality is socially constructed and subjective, offers a lens to explore the intricate dynamics of the brand identity formation and negotiation. This viewpoint acknowledges that brand identities and stakeholder relationships within B2B environments are not pre-given entities but are continually shaped through social and communicative processes. These entities gain meaning as they are perceived, discussed, and negotiated by individuals within the corporate sphere. Interpretivism's emphasis on the contextual and interpretative nature of knowledge aligns with the study's focus on the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) and Social Identity Theory (SIT). The paradigm choice facilitates an in-depth exploration of how organizational actors co-create brand identity and negotiate their organizational self-identification, acknowledging the diversity of experiences and perspectives within these processes (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009).

4.2. Research design

The research design employs a comparative case study approach involving two distinct cases. This methodological choice aims to draw richer, more nuanced insights by comparing and contrasting the experiences of two companies that differ significantly in terms of company size, region of operation, and the scope of their dealer networks. This choice is underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, which values nuanced, context-rich investigations into social processes (Johnson & Stake, 1996). It allows for exploring how different stakeholders within and across organizations perceive and contribute to the co-creation of brand identity, offering a multifaceted view of the phenomenon.

The case study approach, as advocated by scholars like Flyvbjerg (2006), is particularly suited to the goals of such study for several reasons. First, case studies allow for an intensive examination of specific instances within their real-life context, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomena (Yin, 2014). The complexity and subtlety of brand co-creation processes necessitate a research design that can capture the richness of their manifestation across different organisational settings. Furthermore, Flyvbjerg (2006) dispels the myth that case studies are of limited value for generalisation, arguing instead for the power of contextualised generalisation. This perspective aligns with the research aim to derive insights that, while deeply rooted in specific cases, offer broader implications for understanding these processes in varied B2B environments. Through comparative analysis between two cases, this research design facilitates the identification of patterns and themes that transcend individual cases, contributing to a richer theoretical understanding of the studied phenomena (Johnson & Stake, 1996). Additionally, the comparative case study design is conducive to theory development, particularly in areas where existing theories may not fully account for the observed realities (Eisenhardt, 1989). To sum, the case study approach entails a potential to uncover novel insights and refine existing conceptual frameworks related to B2B brand co-creation.

4.3. Selection of cases

A strategic approach was employed to choose two companies within the industrial sector, each working with more than five dealers across various regions and countries. The rationale behind focusing on the industrial sector and companies with extensive dealer networks includes several key considerations. Firstly, the industrial sector is characterized by complex B2B relationships, long sales cycles, and high-value transactions, making it an ideal context to study the topic (Anderson et al., 1999). These companies often engage in deeper, more strategic partnerships with their dealers, which is critical for the research focus on brand co-creation processes. Second, by selecting companies that work with a vast network of dealers across different regions and countries, the research aims to capture the variability in co-creation practices influenced by regional market dynamics, possible cultural differences, and varying levels of market maturity. This diversity provides a solid ground for understanding how brands manage and adapt their identity in response to local contexts. The selection process involved a preliminary review of potential companies, assessing their fit based on the outlined criteria. In the first step, these companies were reached to gauge their willingness to participate in the study and to ensure access to relevant data and stakeholders. Central to gathering data for the research was the companies' requirement for anonymity of both the companies' and respondents' names.

The first case, Alpha, involves a medium-sized company, which typically has broader resources and possibly more formalized processes for managing dealer relationships. This company operates locally in Russia, which may lead to more homogenized and region-specific strategies that reflect local market conditions and cultural nuances. The medium-sized local business works with fewer dealers, allowing for an in-depth exploration of more concentrated and possibly more personalized brand co-creation efforts.

Conversely, the second case, Omega, focuses on a small business characterized by more direct and personal interactions between the central management and its dealers and potentially more agile but less formalized processes. This company operates globally, particularly in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, which are usually abbreviated as EMEA. Thus, Omega deals with diverse cultural, economic, and regulatory environments that can significantly influence brand co-creation strategies. It collaborates with an extensive network of dealers, offering a complex and varied set of interactions to study, which can illuminate how brand co-creation practices scale across different markets and cultures. Information about both cases is presented in Table 1.

Case	Country	Industry Sector	Number of Dealers	Company Size	Years in Operation	Key Markets
Alpha	Russia	Mining	7	166	7	Russia
Omega	Finland	Mining	18	27	8	EMEA

Table 1. Detailed information about chosen cases.

By examining these varied contexts, the study aims to uncover broader insights into how organizational characteristics influence the dynamics of brand management in B2B settings. Such methodological setup not only facilitates a deep understanding of the respective phenomena but also provides a basis for generating more generalized findings that can inform theory and practice across different business contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

4.4. Sampling

A nonprobabilistic, purposive sampling strategy is particularly effective for identifying information-rich cases within the confines of limited resources (Patton, 2015). It is predicated on the research's objective to uncover, understand, and gain insights, necessitating a sample that offers the richest learning opportunities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Snowball sampling complemented the purposive strategy, facilitating the identification of cases and participants that are otherwise difficult to reach due to their strategic significance and confidentiality concerns. Expert sampling, a variant of purposive and snowball sampling, was employed to engage individuals with specialized knowledge and expertise in the field, insuring access to deep insights from professionals with firsthand experience (Etikan et al., 2016).

To capture the nuanced interactions and processes of brand co-creation and brand self-identification, it was chosen to include participants from both the supplier-brand and its dealer sides. Participants, presented in Table 2, were chosen from both management and brand management departments within each selected company representing the supplier's brand side. This decision aimed to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of working with dealers. The dealer's focus was on engaging leading figures responsible for brand management, sales, and overall company strategy. These individuals' decision-making roles and strategic influence make them invaluable sources of insight into how dealers perceive, engage with, and contribute to the brand's identity. Such a dual perspective enables a more thorough exploration of the co-creation processes from the viewpoint of those who shape and execute brand strategies.

Alpha	Perspective	Respondent	Position
	Supplier	A	Development Director
	Supplier	B	Sales Director
	Supplier	C	Head of PR and Branding
	Dealer 1	D	Director
	Dealer 2	E	Director
	Dealer 3	F	CEO
Omega	Supplier	G	CEO
	Supplier	H	Sales Director
	Supplier	I	Brand Manager
	Dealer 1	J	Aftermarket Director
	Dealer 2	K	Sales and Marketing Manager
	Dealer 3	L	General Manager & Founder
	Dealer 4	M	CEO

Table 2. Detailed information about chosen respondents within the cases.

In dealer selection, a deliberate approach was taken to ensure diversity across several criteria. First, the number of brands represented in each dealer's portfolio varied significantly among the chosen dealers, providing a broad spectrum of brand management practices and co-creation dynamics. Second, the size of each dealer, measured by the number of employees, was considered. Third, countries of origin were also taken into consideration. The selection is presented in Table 3.

Case	Respondent type	Employees quantity	Brands represented
Alpha	Dealer 1	11	1
	Dealer 2	10	4
	Dealer 3	43	1
Omega	Dealer 1	15	3
	Dealer 2	6	2
	Dealer 3	10	11
	Dealer 4	93	29

Table 3. Detailed information about chosen dealers.

This variety allowed for a richer analysis of how different organizational scales and cultural backgrounds influence the processes of brand co-creation and identity management within B2B relationships.

4.5. Data collection method

Data collection for this study was conducted using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a method widely recognized for its efficacy in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This technique is particularly suited for gathering detailed and nuanced information directly from participants, facilitating an intimate exploration of their experiences and perceptions. Semi-structured interviews offer a flexible framework that allows the researcher to investigate deeply into the topic at hand, providing the latitude to adapt questions based on the flow of conversation and the insights that emerge during the interaction (Kvale & Brinkmann, 1996). This flexibility is crucial for probing into the complexities of the research topic, allowing for the emergence of rich, contextual insights that scripted interviews might overlook (Kallio et al., 2016). This approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing the co-constructive nature of knowledge and the value of understanding phenomena through the perspectives of those who experience them directly (Schwandt, 2000).

Despite their advantages, semi-structured interviews are not without challenges, notably the risk of researcher bias influencing both the questioning and analysis phases. To mitigate the risks, a deductive approach was employed from the outset, guiding the formulation of interview questions based on a theoretical framework. The interview guides for both supplier and dealer are presented in Appendix 1 and 2, and organized thematically, dividing questions into sections that align with theoretical constructs, ensuring that each major theme was thoroughly explored. As the interviews were semi-structured, the approach was sufficiently flexible to incorporate new, unplanned, open-ended questions and follow-up probes that responded to the information provided by respondents (Kvale & Brinkmann, 1996). This preparatory work ensured that the questions were anchored in theoretical underpinnings and relevant empirical findings, thus framing the interviews within a solid conceptual foundation (Bryman, 2016).

In addition to semi-structured interviews, the data collection method for this study also involves the analysis of supplementary documents, which include dealership contracts, guidelines, social media posts, and website content. This approach is adopted to provide a more comprehensive analysis and enable triangulation, enhancing the validity and depth of the research findings by corroborating interview information (Bowen, 2009). This method is particularly valuable in exploring the context in which the interviews occur, allowing for a richer understanding of the organizational practices and the communicative environment. Documents like contracts and guidelines can provide insights into the formal, often unspoken, rules governing relationships and interactions. In contrast, social media posts and website content can reveal the public persona and brand messaging that organizations project externally. This multimodal approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomena.

4.6. Data gathering procedures

Data gathering for this study was planned and executed to accommodate the logistical challenges inherent in researching a globally dispersed sample. Interviews were scheduled from April 5th to April 24th, 2024, with durations ranging between 37 and 101 minutes, totaling 13 interviews of 838 minutes. The detailed information about conducted interviews is presented in Table 4. To navigate the linguistic diversity of the respondents, interviews were conducted in either Russian or English, depending on the participants' preferences and the origin of their company. All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, a decision driven by the platform's accessibility. Communication with participants, including the dissemination and return of consent forms, was facilitated through WhatsApp or Outlook, ensuring participant convenience. Before each interview, participants were briefed on using Microsoft Teams' internal video recording feature, and verbal consent was obtained to confirm their comfort with being audio and video recorded. The transcription process was carried out through Microsoft Teams' in-built transcription function, allowing for a secure conversion of the audio recordings into text without the involvement of external instruments.

Case	Respondent	Position	Language	Length (min)
Alpha	A	Development Director	Russian	86
Alpha	B	Sales Director	Russian	73
Alpha	C	Head of PR and Branding	Russian	44
Alpha	D	Director	Russian	74
Alpha	E	Director	Russian	101
Alpha	F	CEO	Russian	38
Omega	G	CEO	English	60
Omega	H	Sales Director	Russian	69
Omega	I	Brand Manager	English	53
Omega	J	Aftermarket Director	English	48
Omega	K	Sales and Marketing Manager	English	58
Omega	L	General Manager & Founder	English	94
Omega	M	CEO	English	40

Table 4. Detailed information about conducted interviews.

In addition to interviews, the documents were analyzed, which included two dealership contracts, one from each case study. Moreover, the analysis included seven dealership certificates from Alpha's side. To investigate the institutional positioning of the companies, the research also examined website pages from both Alpha's and Omega's sides that provided potential and existing customers with information about the companies' dealers. Lastly, 15 social media posts from each case were analyzed to understand how suppliers and dealers jointly participate in brand storytelling, promotional activities, and customer engagement, all of which are essential elements in the co-creation of brand identity.

4.7. Data analysis plan

The study employs a mixed deductive and inductive approach, reflecting the adaptive nature of qualitative research in a semi-structured interview context, accommodating both theoretical frameworks and emergent data insights. The data analysis framework adopts a structured three-step process as proposed by Miles et al. (2020). This approach, comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, aligns with the study's interpretivism paradigm, facilitating a profound, nuanced interpretation of the qualitative data gathered.

During the first phase, data condensation, valuable information was selected based on preliminary theoretical codes derived from the existing literature and theoretical framework (Miles et al., 2020). This phase involved selecting, simplifying, and transforming the raw data collected, setting the stage for a focused examination of the emergent patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This stage is critical for distilling the vast information into manageable chunks, enabling the researcher to highlight significant patterns and insights. During this phase, preliminary codes are generated, serving as markers for identifying and organizing key data related to the research phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As the analysis progressed to the data display phase, the coding process was guided by the inductive approach, emerging from the data, and the deductive one, guided by the study's theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2009). Here, sub-codes were generated directly from the data, allowing for the construction of narrative summaries that visually and structurally represented the relationships among data elements. This stage was critical for organizing the condensed data into formats that facilitated deeper comprehension and interpretation, bridging the gap between data condensation and the final analysis phase (Miles et al., 2020).

The final analysis phase, conclusion drawing and verification, involved synthesizing the findings, drawing inferences, and constructing meaningful conclusions based on the displayed data. This phase emphasized interpreting the data considering the research questions, theoretical inputs, and the broader literature, assessing how the findings confirm, extend, or challenge established understandings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.8. Validity

Several strategies have been employed to bolster the validity of the research outcomes. These strategies, grounded in the principles of qualitative research, aim to authenticate the study's findings and reinforce their applicability to broader contexts (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Participant validation is a critical strategy used in this study. It involves presenting the findings or interpretations back to the participants to verify their accuracy and resonance with the participants' experiences. This iterative feedback loop allows for corrections and refinements, ensuring that the research accurately reflects the participants' perspectives and enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Another instrument increasing the research validity is the audit trail. According to Merriam (2009), an audit trail is a way to ensure the trustworthiness of the research by providing a transparent description of the research process, including methodology, results, and various types of documentation. The present study included all steps the author conducted during the research process. In addition, step-by-step results of the study were reviewed at peer-review seminars involving other researchers to evaluate and critique the research, providing feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the study as this method also aims at increasing the validity and credibility of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009).

Also, by incorporating document analysis, this research not only enriches the primary data from interviews but also cross-verifies the consistency and reliability of the data, allowing for triangulation of results. Such a multi-source approach strengthens the study's conclusions by providing multiple perspectives on the phenomena under investigation, ensuring that the interpretations are grounded in diverse forms of evidence (Merriam, 2009).

4.9. Statement of Research Interest

Reflexivity involves the researcher's continuous reflection on their assumptions, values, and biases and how these may influence the research process and interpretations (Finlay, 2002). In conducting this research on brand co-creation and organizational self-identification within B2B contexts, my professional background in brand management in both Russian and European contexts, particularly with B2B manufacturing brands that utilize dealership sales networks and strategies, has profoundly shaped the inception and progression of this study. Over the years, I have developed a substantial network within the B2B brand management realm, which has been instrumental in facilitating access to otherwise challenging environments of suppliers and dealers.

My background and connections provide a rich, informed perspective, enabling an in-depth exploration of brand co-creation processes among companies and dealers. However, I am acutely aware of the potential biases my background may introduce to the research process. Confirmation bias is a significant concern, as there is a risk of gravitating towards information and interpretations that confirm my existing beliefs or theories. To counteract this, I have made a concerted effort to broaden my perspectives by engaging with diverse research literature and theories relevant to the study. Availability bias also posed a risk, potentially leading me to preferentially engage with readily accessible information and contacts within my network, thereby sidelining valuable but less accessible perspectives. To address this, I strictly adhered to predefined criteria for selecting cases and respondents, ensuring a balanced and representative sample.

4.10. Ethical consideration

A GDPR consent form presented in Appendix 3 was distributed to all respondents to ensure informed consent and understanding of their rights. Informed consent forms were distributed and signed electronically, confirming participants' understanding and agreement to participate under these conditions. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, all identifying information has been anonymized in the study's findings, given the nature of the research, when participants might discuss sensitive business strategies or personal experiences. The research protocol included measures for respectfully handling such information, ensuring that discussions remained confidential and were used solely for academic research. The collected data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms, have been securely stored by data protection regulations. Access to this data is limited to the researcher, and all electronic files are encrypted to safeguard against data breaches. After participation, individuals were offered a debriefing session to clarify questions about the study. This session also served as an opportunity to reiterate gratitude for their contribution.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1. Pre-Collaboration Interactions

In the landscape of B2B relationships, the brand co-creation journey between dealers and suppliers begins with the crucial phase of initial alignment. The initiation of relationships between suppliers and dealers is intricately linked to the interpersonal connections existing between members of the companies involved. This aspect is vividly illustrated in the Omega case, where the CEO, Respondent G, revealed that a significant portion of their dealers were partners or acquaintances from a previous workplace, drawn by loyalty to the team:

> They would know that they can trust the people and they would see the potential within the product. (Respondent G, Omega).

This reliance on established relationships underscores the role of personal trust, highlighting how past interactions can influence present business decisions. However, the CEO of Omega also noted a shift in their business dynamics by noting that *"Today our revenue streams might be bigger actually from the ones that are new."* The reliance on new relationships becomes crucial, reflecting a dynamic where ongoing business expansion is driven by broader market engagements rather than solely by historical ties.

Contrary to Omega with searching and establishing new ties, the Alpha case provides insight that the majority of their dealers originated from within the supplier's own organization. Individuals who once worked within Alpha's internal operations chose to establish their own businesses, continuing to support Alpha's brand from a new external point of view. This movement from internal to external stakeholder illustrates a unique form of relationship when dealers might already possess a sense of belonging and close self-identification with the supplier, as can be explained by organizational dentification studies (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Trust and familiarity inherent in these relationships provide a smoother pathway for introducing both Alpha's and Omega's products.

Aligned with Achrol & Kotler (1999), all interview participants emphasized the importance of identifying and responding to the prevailing market needs, which guides their decisions in selecting products and suppliers:

> It's always market driven. The question is what the market is looking for. It dictates the demand that pushes us into looking for brands that we don't currently have, and then the quality of that brand also represents a significant factor. (Respondent M, Dealer 4/Omega)

This statement suggests that understanding market demands is pivotal in shaping dealers' brand associations. Quality is not only a fundamental criterion for dealers when selecting suppliers but also a key component of their brand identity. Adding to the point, Respondent L of Case Omega articulated the value-added approach in their selection process:

> We try to find suppliers who really have products with added value…What I see is everybody tries to repeat what has been successful, but with Omega I saw that they want to add value on top of it. As we have 'innovation' in our name, we need to fulfill it fully. This is why I picked Omega and dropped the others. (Respondent L, Dealer 3/Omega)

This approach to supplier selection highlights how dealers engage in a self-identification process that reflects their unique brand identity and values, a phenomenon well-explained by SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For dealers, choosing a supplier like Omega, known for its commitment to innovation and quality, is not merely a business decision but also a strategic alignment of identities. This alignment ensures that their brand identity is consistently represented in the products they associate with. Besides the aforementioned factors when choosing suppliers, the brand as a complex of intangible attributes becomes a critical consideration:

> It's always been our dream to have some of these major manufacturers, like [a big industrial brand]. A customer will immediately buy their parts and everything. (Respondent M, Dealer 4/Omega)

Similar thoughts were articulated by other dealers, indicating that while the initial selection of a supplier may often hinge on tangible, immediate factors like product quality and personal trust, the brand's broader market reputation holds sway when the suppliers are recognizable entities. This is due to more prominent brands' established reliability and positive market perception, which can significantly influence dealer decisions. In these cases, the brand serves as a shorthand for reliability, reducing the perceived risk associated with new business engagements and aligning with dealers' strategic goals to associate with reputable brands (Keller, 2001).

However, besides focusing on tangible assets, companies also try to align themselves on ideological matters. The alignment of visions and missions between suppliers and dealers emerges as a critical factor in forming and sustaining their partnerships. The interviews revealed that this alignment is not only preferable but essential for fostering long-term collaborations:

> We look for the company's vision to align with that of our…We should believe in the same philosophy when it comes to the market. (Respondent M, Dealer 4/Omega)

Such alignment ensures both parties work towards common goals and have similar market and business strategy expectations. This initial alignment of values and organizational culture is pivotal in selecting compatible partners and acts as a foundation for dealers to build self-identification with the supplier, as was highlighted by Respondent J. From the supplier's perspective, Omega's CEO also emphasized the necessity of finding partners who share similar values and visions:

> So, there are many companies that work within different markets, but not everybody is suitable for Omega...So, we need to have the right match of course. We very openly talk about how the two companies could fit together and what are their values and philosophies behind. (Respondent G, Omega)

This supplier-dealer philosophy alignment is critical as it fosters a unified market approach and enhances brand equity. As Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) highlight, value alignment can significantly contribute to identity salience, influencing dedication and loyalty from both sides and setting a solid groundwork for the later brand co-creation process.

5.2. Activity Coordination

As relationships evolve, they organically segue into a structured form of interaction known as activity coordination. This process is essential as both parties begin to interact deeply, co-create products, organize services, and collaborate on events. Activity coordination is not just about working together but crafting a coherent operational rhythm that aligns with strategic goals (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). This synchronization ensures that both parties consistently represent and enact their brand's values and objectives across all interactions.

5.2.1. Main instruments of coordination

Activity coordination between suppliers and dealers is crucial for maintaining a seamless operational flow and is fundamentally driven by regular and personalized communication, as Respondent H explained:

> We communicate with dealers and ask about how this project is going, what news, what help is needed. Some have weekly communications with dealers, some almost every day, while others might communicate every two weeks. (Respondent H, Omega)

The structured interactions are complemented by dynamic, informal communications via digital platforms like WhatsApp or email. The scheduled meetings serve as a critical platform for ensuring that both parties share a common understanding of the brand's values and objectives. Respondent K further supported this point from a dealer's side: *"They have always been, you know, available for help, for assistance, for anything like that."* These routine and frequent interactions, foundational to the Activity Coordination flow, underscore how ongoing communication maintains operational synergy. As mentioned by Respondent A, the implementation of technological tools like CRM systems or E-shop by Alpha to fully integrate their dealers into the supplier's system ensures information. communication consistency and accuracy.

5.2.2. The importance of personal visits

The data revealed the role of personal interactions in reinforcing partnerships and enhancing the supplier’s brand promotion through training programs and direct engagement. Omega’s dealer, Respondent M highlighted the recurring nature of these engagements and their dual focus:

> So, occasionally they will come around and then they will be doing training programs for our customers. Once or twice a year we will visit the customers together…They also provide us with all the marketing materials like the brochures and technical leaflets. (Respondent M, Dealer 4/Omega)

These visits, as highlighted above, facilitate not only the distribution of marketing materials but also the direct engagement and training of the dealer's staff. This hands-on interaction ensures that dealers thoroughly understand the supplier's brand identity, values, and product specifics, which is critical for effective brand representation. The dual focus of these visits — training the dealer's staff and customers — shows that engagement goes beyond mere knowledge transfer; it actively involves dealers in brand message delivery, ensuring they are well-equipped to communicate the brand's value propositions effectively. The Omega’s CEO also emphasized the importance of accompanying dealers on visits to ensure that the brand is represented accurately:

> We understand that within the first few years nobody can sell Omega products as good as the Omega personnel. So, what we need to do and how we approach the final customers is that we simply make a trip together to the customers with the dealers. So, it's going to open our eyes and it's going to open the dealer's eyes. (Respondent G, Omega)

The proactive involvement of Omega's personnel in dealer activities illustrates a critical strategy within the Activity Coordination flow, emphasizing the necessity of hands-on involvement to ensure dealers accurately represent the brand. This point was further supported by Respondent K, who stated:

> And that's where they really showed us on how to approach on selling the Omega brand, you know, the history behind it, where it's coming from, what the whole idea behind everything is. And we actually bought into that (Respondent K, Dealer 2/Omega)

This reciprocal learning environment, essential for maintaining brand integrity across markets, aligns with the CCO framework by fostering communication that helps effectively transmit corporate identity across customer interactions. In addition to the aforementioned, Respondent H also shared the routine and importance of such personal interactions:

> First, they need to be, so to speak, hooked on our ideology, meaning first they need to learn what Omega is, and it all starts. We sell ourselves first, then we sell our personal qualities, and so on. Then we sell our product. And I've noticed in my career, that when a representative from a far-away country, like cold Finland, comes and tells them how things are done, they perceive it differently. (Respondent H, Omega)

This extract illuminates the psychological impact of personal visits, where the physical presence of a representative from the brand's country of origin adds credibility and a sense of importance to the interactions, influencing dealer and customer perceptions. The representative's presence reinforces the prestige of the brand, which can lead to a deeper engagement and commitment from the dealer. This process educates and informs but also builds a psychological connection that can enhance the dealer's loyalty and advocacy for the brand. It transforms the brand from just a set of products to a philosophy dealers can embrace and promote with conviction. This approach leverages social identity dynamics, where the representative's status and the brand's origin contribute to shaping the dealer's perception and, subsequently, how they communicate the brand's identity to the market (Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006).

5.2.3. Brand communication activities

Brand coordination in B2B relationships emerges as a critical element, particularly when dealers lack adequate resources to undertake comprehensive communication initiatives independently. Suppliers ensure that both supplier and dealer brands are cohesively promoted. This synchronization is essential for maintaining brand consistency, as was underscored by brand managers from Alpha and Omega. As one of the managers explained, creating and disseminating brand messages involves close interaction with dealers, ensuring that these messages accurately reflect both parties' joint values and objectives. The process described by Alpha’s Head of PR and Branding illuminates how suppliers and dealers collaboratively work on brand messages:

> If we talk about strategy, we are the creators of the messages. The reflection of these messages occurs in interaction with dealers. How you convey these messages and communicate these values and meanings is crucial. (Respondent C, Alpha)

The emphasis on brand coordination between suppliers and dealers highlights a crucial aspect of brand identity co-creation. The role of suppliers extends beyond providing products; they actively shape and maintain a unified brand message across all channels. Omega’s CEO further elaborated on this point:

> I would like that our people think of these dealers as an extension of our company. Dealers usually don't have as many resources as we do, so we could do the marketing

together, helping them to elevate the Omega brand while also lifting their own brand. (Respondent G, Omega)

Omega's CEO's statement reinforces the intertwined relationship between supplier and dealer in brand communication. By viewing dealers as an extension of the company, Omega acknowledges the mutual benefits of collaborative efforts. Besides touching upon collaborative activities, Respondent G extended beyond mere Activity Coordination to Membership Negotiation flow, as it involves integrating dealers into the broader corporate identity, fostering a sense of belonging (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). This partnership extends from decision-making on brand strategies to executing brand events, as dealers play a crucial role in organizing and managing events that promote the supplier's brand. Respondent D detailed an event organized for all regional customers, which involved extensive coordination and presentation efforts:

> We gathered all the customers in a large hall, made presentations, had Q&A sessions, and received wishes and feedback from the clients. (Respondent D, Dealer 1/Alpha)

This event exemplifies how dealers not only support but often lead significant brand initiatives, enhancing the brand's visibility and engagement with the local community. Transparency and mutual understanding in these relationships are essential for ensuring that both parties' goals are met and that the dealers feel supported in their efforts to innovate and push the brand forward.

In conclusion, the analysis reveals substantial similarities between Alpha and Omega, employing a mix of structured interactions and technological integration to maintain operational alignment and brand coherence. Both companies emphasize the importance of regular, structured communication, supplemented by informal interactions. However, a nuanced difference emerges in the extent of technological tool utilization. Alpha more extensively employs integrated digital platforms to streamline communications and operations with their dealers. Despite this difference, both cases share a common practice in branding activities, ensuring dealers are well-equipped to advocate for the supplier's brand.

To sum up all the findings, the framework presented in Figure 2 was built, illustrating how activity coordination serves as the nexus for interaction, where both parties collaborate to synchronize their efforts and align their objectives:

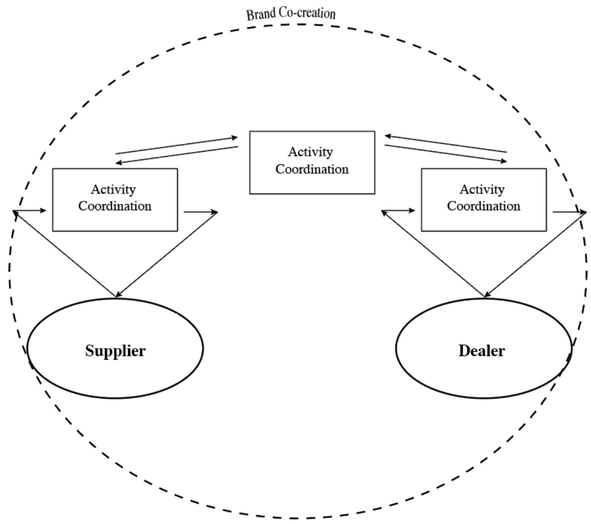

Figure 2. Activity Coordination Flow in Mediated Brand Co-Creation

The framework illustrates this dual nature of activity coordination, emphasizing that while much of the coordination is internal, the actual test of its effectiveness lies in the inter-organizational activities that blend these internal efforts into a cohesive external strategy. The scheme underscores that the flow is not isolated but reciprocally influential and presents just an initial yet foundational phase. This coordination is crucial for establishing a functional relationship that further facilitates self-structuring activities.

5.3. Self-Structuring

Emerging naturally from the bedrock of coordinated activities, the Self-Structuring flow represents the development of systems and processes that formalize the informal practices established during the activity coordination phase (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). As supplier-dealer interactions become more frequent and complex, a natural need for systematization arises. Self-structuring helps set clear boundaries and responsibilities, which is essential for smooth operations and effective collaboration (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). Within this framework, companies begin to crystallize their processes, ensuring that all steps are geared towards mutual benefit and efficiency.

5.3.1. Formalisation through documents

The CCO framework's Self-Structuring aspect is vividly demonstrated in how Alpha and Omega manage their documentation practices to structure their relationships with dealers. This approach not only defines the operational boundaries but also solidifies the identity and roles within the partnerships. In Alpha's case, formalized documents are crucial in structuring relationships with dealers. Respondent E highlighted the reason for that explained ongoing challenges with defining operational boundaries:

> We've been working for 3 years but we don't understand where we can and can't go. Apparently, they don't understand themselves…So, there is such chaos in geographical distribution. (Respondent E, Dealer 2/Alpha)

To address this issue, Respondent B shared insights into the ongoing finalization of Alpha's dealership contract, highlighting an approach to strengthening the partnership and addressing past inefficiencies. Based on a dealership contract analysis, the contract focuses firstly on delineating responsibilities concerning product ranges, territorial boundaries, and industry segments to prevent overlap and ensure market efficiency. They also address operational efficiencies by standardizing warranty claims and service delivery procedures, which helps reduce costs and improve service reliability. These structured agreements are crucial not only for maintaining operational alignment between Alpha and its dealers but also for fostering a stable and cohesive brand identity reliably presented to the market, thus supporting the strategic goals of both parties.

In contrast, Omega's approach to structuring dealer relationships through contractual agreements is distinctly focused on commercial responsibilities, as explained by Respondent H: *"If we are working with a dealer, they are not allowed to represent anyone who offers competing products to ours."* By stipulating that dealers cannot represent competing brands, Omega aims to safeguard its market interests and prevent conflicts of interest that could dilute the brand's impact. Although, unlike Alpha, there are no established brand guidelines that the supplier requires its dealers to follow strictly, Omega's CEO described their approach to maintaining transparency and control by including each customer's name, coming from dealers, in their system. This allows Omega to maintain oversight and a deep understanding of market dynamics, which is crucial for its strategic operations.

Dealership certification is another layer of transparency with partners and the market that suppliers utilize. As Respondent F explained, Alpha's use of them highlights a proactive approach to safeguarding the brand's integrity:

> Unauthorized suppliers start claiming they also represent the Alpha company…Alpha has built a reputable name, which others try to counterfeit. And among our methods to combat this are the official document templates and the message that we are the official distributor, with a dealership certificate confirming this. (Respondent F, Dealer 3/Alpha)

These certificates, publicly available on the supplier's website and included in the research analysis, establish exclusive brand relationships with specific dealers within designated markets or regions and occasionally even within specific product lines. These certificates delineate the formal relationships between Alpha and its authorised dealers. They also serve as a symbolic boundary defining in-group and out-group statuses among dealers if analysed. SIT posits that individuals and groups derive a significant part of their self-esteem and identity from the groups they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the context of Alpha's dealership certificates, this theory helps explain how these formal documents contribute to constructing a positive social identity for the dealers. Alpha effectively elevates these dealers into an 'in-group' by affording these dealers a sense of prestige and legitimacy, which is crucial when the reliability of a company can significantly impact customer trust, especially when concerning potential counterfeit threats.

While Alpha employs formalized documents to structure and safeguard its brand, Omega adopts a different strategy. As Respondent G mentioned, Omega relies more on the quality of interpersonal relationships and less on legal safeguards to maintain dealer loyalty and brand integrity. However, this approach carries inherent risks. As Omega evolves, integrating more formalized structures could help mitigate risks associated with misaligning brand values or expectations, ensuring that the brand identity remains consistent across all touchpoints.

5.3.2. Co-Branding Activities

Another approach to Self-Structuring is through co-branding activities, which are defined in both cases and emphasize the operational guidelines that dealers must follow when communicating the supplier's brand. The statement from an Alpha's

Head of PR and Branding reveals a strategic shift towards formalizing these practices within their dealer agreements:

> The dealers, in all their communications about Alpha, must adhere to specific rules. You know, it's all good that we try to convince them to use our branding, we dance around them, tell them about our philosophy, but we've realized that some things just need to be hammered into KPIs, some things just need to be economically and legally binded. (Respondent C, Alpha)

This structured approach ensures that the Alpha brand is consistently promoted across different platforms and interactions, reinforcing its identity and maximizing brand coherence. Embedding brand guidelines into legal frameworks and KPIs enhances compliance and aligns dealer activities with the brand’s core values and market strategies. This integration method reflects an application of the CCO framework, where organizational identity is co-created and maintained through structured communicative practices. On the other hand, Omega adopts a more flexible approach to co-branding with dealers. As stated by Omega’s Brand Manager, the relationship with dealers is less formalized, which allows for adaptability to the diverse needs and preferences of the dealers:

> We understand that dealers are different. Sometimes they want a co-branded experience but sometimes dealers want to have separately branded products. (Respondent I, Omega)

To further illustrate the same idea from the Omega's dealer, Respondent K, explained why they initiated co-branding of their clothes: *"Branded clothing stands out. People see it. And if you have [supplier's] logo, people start asking questions."* Omega's approach, which emphasizes flexibility and personalization, supports a dynamic brand co-creation model that allows individual dealer identities to coexist with the Omega brand. This is consistent with SIT as it fosters a stronger dealer’s identification by acknowledging and integrating the their preferences.

This analysis segment investigated how both parties began to systematize their interactions through guidelines, contracts, and other formal documents and contributed to expanding the framework presented in the initial stage. Both approaches highlight different strategies within the self-structuring phase of brand management, reflecting a spectrum of practices from strict conformity to flexible adaptation. In comparing Omega's approach with Alpha's, it becomes evident that each brand's strategy towards self-structuring and documentation reflects its broader business philosophy and current stage in the brand lifecycle. Alpha's use of formalized documents underscores a mature brand's need for consistency and control in representation. At the same time, Omega's more fluid approach aligns with a developing brand's need for agility and personalized partnerships.

By combining previously explained Activity Coordination with newly explored Self-Structuring flow, the visual framework in the Figure 3 indicates that both suppliers and dealers contribute to and shape these structures, which in turn influence their operational and strategic actions. The systematic structure significantly influences how organizations perceive and identify themselves both internally and externally. This introspection and mutual understanding facilitate the exploration of membership negotiation.

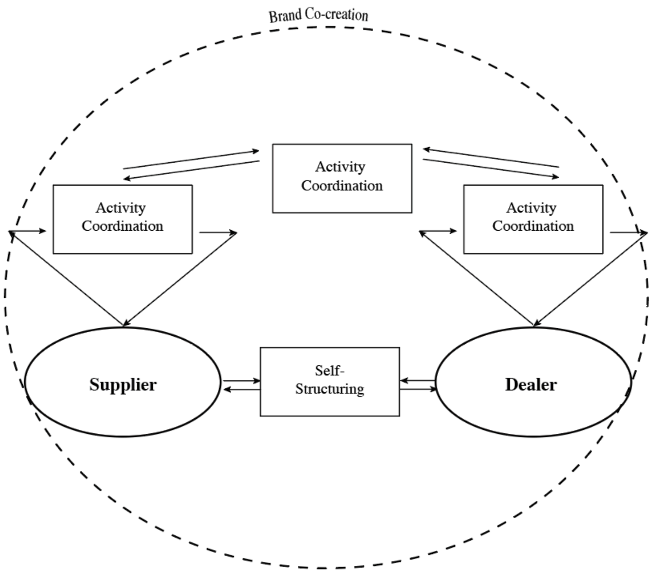

Figure 3. Activity Coordination and Self-Structuring Flows in Mediated Brand Co-Creation

5.4. Membership Negotiation

Membership negotiation is a dynamic process where roles and identities are continuously discussed and redefined (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). This phase is critical as it directly affects how partnerships are perceived and how collaboratively defined roles contribute to a stronger brand representation.

5.4.1. **Independent vs Dependent**

In the Membership Negotiation flow, the distinction between independent and dependent identities plays a crucial role in shaping dealers' strategic choices. The need for dealers to establish their own brand identities, as described by Respondent D, highlights a significant aspect of dealer-supplier dynamics:

> We realized that we needed to have our own unique selling point. And we decided that we would develop ourselves as a service company under the Alpha flag, forming our own structure and business model. (Respondent D, Dealer 1/Alpha)

By positioning themselves as distinct yet aligned with the suppliers they represent, dealers can enhance their market recognition. This strategic autonomy also enables dealers to manage multiple brand representations under a unified dealer brand, as noted by Respondent L:

> If we are at an exhibition with 11 companies, how can I put one forward and the other back? So, it should be under the [our] umbrella, so it should be a brand. This is [us] and these are our partners. (Respondent L, Dealer 3/Omega)

Integrating various brands under a single dealer identity without overshadowing individual brand values exemplifies a delicate balance between maintaining dealer's independence and fulfilling their role as suppliers' representatives. In the context of Membership Negotiation, the situation described by Respondent E illustrates the potential consequences of insufficient supplier support in the relationship-building process:

> We are mostly moving forward on our own because, frankly, when we started working from the ground up, there was nothing from the supplier. (Respondent E, Dealer 2/Alpha)

When dealers perceive a lack of engagement or resources from suppliers, as Respondent E did, they may feel compelled to strengthen their own brand identity independently. This move towards a more pronounced dealer identity can serve as a protective mechanism, safeguarding the dealer's market position against uncertainties in supplier support. However, this dynamic can also lead to a realignment of the dealer's loyalty, leading to prioritizing other brands. It underscores the importance of consistent and supportive interactions from suppliers, emphasizing that the strength of a shared brand identity heavily relies on the mutual contributions and commitments of both parties involved.

5.4.2. Colleagues or Customers

The negotiation of membership is not merely about business transactions but also involves emotional dimension that shape the dealer-supplier relationship. To illustrate, Respondent L elaborates on feeling like both a colleague and a customer, depending on the interaction dynamics with the supplier:

> With some companies, they make you feel like an employee. And some companies make you feel like a customer. And my working culture is closer to being the employee. (Respondent L, Dealer 3/Omega)

From the supplier's perspective, Omega's CEO characterizes dealers as integral to both the customer and their workforce. By positioning dealers as simultaneously employees and clients, the supplier cultivates a symbiotic environment where mutual dependencies drive collective success. This relational dynamic exemplifies B2B brand management research, where partnerships are leveraged to amplify brand impact and operational efficiency (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). This idea was further supported by Respondent K from the Dealer's side:

> So, if I sell a product of Omega, I'll be going out and sell the product as if, you know, I'm a direct worker of Omega. (Respondent K, Dealer 2/Omega)

This highlights a blur of traditional boundaries between 'employee' and 'external partner.' Further illustrating the depth of these relationships, Omega's Sales Director, Respondent H, noted: *"They eventually become a part of our team."* This statement underscores the gradual integration of dealers into the supplier's organizational culture. Such integration not only enriches the dealer's understanding and execution of the brand's ethos but also influences the supplier's practices. The analogy provided by Respondent L further highlights the nuanced relationships dealers maintain with multiple supplier brands, comparing them to varying degrees of friendship:

> Well, I think it is not confusing, but you start to think it's like your friends and your best friends. When you are next to your best friend, you are more relaxed. (Respondent L, Dealer 3/Omega)

Other dealers and suppliers' representatives also used familial or collegial language, symbolising the depth of these relationships, and underscoring the transformative impact of social identity dynamics on organizational interactions, where both parties evolve from mere transactional participants to key stakeholders. SIT posits that individuals strive for a positive self-concept significantly shaped by their affiliations with valued groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In Omega's approach, dealers are seen as part of the 'in-group,' which encourages them to adopt and advocate the brand's identity as their own. This alignment fosters a deeper commitment, which is crucial for maintaining consistency in brand representation and enhancing the overall brand equity.

Similarly, Alpha's approach, where dealers often originate from internal employees, leverages pre-existing relationships and cultural familiarity to foster a seamless transition from internal roles to external partnerships. This continuity is crucial for maintaining the brand's integrity, as these dealers already embody the corporate culture and values. This point is supported by Respondent C:

> I think one of the most important stories is that we communicate our values. In this way, it is like creating a sense of team spirit in the dealer…So, it's also important that they feel like we're all in the same boat. (Respondent C, Alpha)

However, the complexities of membership negotiation are underscored by the critical need for dealers to maintain a distinct identity while effectively aligning with the supplier's brand values. This delicate balance can sometimes lead to tension and misalignment, particularly when dealers prioritize their own brand over the supplier's, risking the cohesiveness of the brand identity perceived by customers, as was highlighted by Respondent A from Alpha regarding their main dealer. Alpha's strategic response to this challenge involves an drastic integration effort, physically uniting the offices with their primary Dealer 3. This integration is designed to assimilate the dealer more closely into the supplier's organizational culture and operations, transforming them into what Respondent A refers to as *"our own sales department."* The physical and operational integration of the dealer into the supplier's environment is intended to reduce the perceptual and practical distinctions between 'us' (the supplier) and 'them' (the dealer), thus promoting a unified corporate identity. Moreover, Alpha's innovative approach of involving dealers' sales managers in the product creation process represents a strategic application of SIT in the realm of co-creation:

It can additionally work in the motivational part, that if you help in creating a product and show an example, you may have some additional bonus. (Respondent A, Alpha)

By engaging these managers in product development and offering incentives such as bonuses for their contributions, Alpha not only boosts motivation but also deepens the dealers' commitment to the supplier's brand success. This involvement in product creation serves as a powerful mechanism for identity integration, as it encourages dealers to perceive themselves as integral contributors to the brand's rather than mere intermediaries. To illustrate the same idea from Omega's perspective, here is how Respondent K perceive themselves:

When you start selling and believing in a product, you actually feel like you are the owner of that product, even though you are not. (Respondent K, Dealer 2/Omega)

This sense of ownership and shared identity can significantly enhance the alignment of business practices and brand representation strategies between the parties. As dealers become more integrated in the various aspects of the supplier's brand, their identity becomes more aligned with that of the supplier, as grounded in the principles of SIT, but there are cultural nuances involved.

5.4.3. Cultural aspect

The cultural nuances of dealer-supplier relationships significantly shape the dynamics of brand co-creation. This facet of the relationship is critical because it influences how brands are perceived and interacted with across different geographical and cultural landscapes. Respondent L, with extensive experience as an international sales manager dealing with companies from Morocco to Kazakhstan, highlights the vast differences in business approaches. Such insights emphasize the importance of cultural adaptability in brand representation. A similar idea was explained by Respondent K, simultaneously touching on a dealer's role in teaching the supplier cultural aspects:

The world's always going this way and South Africa will always be going the other direction. So, things are a bit different here for us. We did teach Omega the way of how we are doing business here. (Respondent K, Dealer 2/Omega)

This perspective highlights the significance of recognizing and responding to diverse cultural identities, which can profoundly influence business operations and interactions. The statement of Omega's CEO underscores the importance of cultural awareness and adaptability:

> We need to be really internationally understanding the needs and be really flexible within this to understand that some even the day-to-day tasks, the demands can be very different depending on which country they come from. (Respondent G, Omega)

Through the lens of Membership Negotiation, adapting to and integrating diverse cultural expectations is crucial for maintaining a flexible and responsive brand identity. This strategic flexibility not only supports Omega's global expansion efforts but also contributes to co-creating a brand identity that is diverse and inclusive, resonating well with global audiences. This adaptability is likened to a symbiotic relationship where both parties inevitably influence each other. *"It is like a marriage. I mean, it's impossible not to affect each other,"* notes Respondent L, illustrating how deeply interwoven cultural elements are within these business relationships. These cultural exchanges extend to the suppliers, who adapt based on feedback from their dealers. Moreover, the local expertise that dealers bring is invaluable as they act as cultural mediators who open doors to local markets by leveraging their understanding of local business etiquette and consumer behaviour, as was expressed by Respondent M. However, while there is an emphasis on maintaining a consistent brand image across markets, the interpretation and execution of this brand image can vary, as was noted by Respondent J.

Alpha's approach to dealer relationships does not explicitly address cultural nuances, as its operations are concentrated within a single market. Without the complexities of international markets, Alpha's branding and dealer relationships are streamlined around a uniform cultural context. This scenario allows them to maintain a consistent brand message and operational approach, minimizing the challenges associated with diverse cultural expectations and practices that typically confront multinational corporations. However, despite the significant differences between Alpha and Omega in addressing cultural aspects due to their respective market scopes, one consistent theme emerges across all interviews: the pivotal role of feedback exchange in contributing to each party's identity. This exchange is not bound by geographical locations or cultural distinctions; rather, it serves as a critical mechanism through which both suppliers and dealers refine their strategies and adapt to each other.

5.4.4. Feedback Exchange & Learning

In the context of Membership Negotiation, the learning process represents continuous interactions and knowledge exchanges between suppliers and dealers. Respondent D highlights the role of dealers in providing market feedback and emphasizes the importance of gathering information from the market. However, although the dealer's side mentioned it, Respondent A from the Alpha side expressed the lack of feedback from their primary dealer, forcing them to include a requirement for dealers into the dealership contract to make them commit to sharing essential feedback and information, which Alpha uses to refine product offerings and align them more closely with customer needs and market trends. This decision highlights that feedback is instrumental for the supplier in adjusting product offerings, marketing strategies, and overall business approaches to better align with customer and market expectations. Similarly, Omega's approach to learning and feedback exchange with dealers underscores the essential role of this collaboration. By positioning the relationship as a partnership rather than a hierarchy, Omega facilitates an open exchange of ideas, which is crucial for co-creating a brand identity that resonates with both the supplier's and the dealers' strategic goals. The CEO reflects on how dealer interactions have led to significant organizational adaptations:

> I think the biggest thing what they've been shaping from our point of view is that some parts of the organization have changed and then we have added certain resources and developed in a way that what needs to be done. (Respondent G, Omega)

This indicates a dynamic where external interactions prompt internal adjustments to meet partner and customer needs better. Incorporating dealer feedback into the brand's operational and strategic framework allows Omega to continuously learn and adapt, which is essential in the rapidly changing global market. Respondent J from Omega describes the partnership as ideally open, which facilitates joint strategy formulation and operational alignment:

> We are as interested to build something together and to be open in the relationship together, which I think is the ideal relationship between the supplier and the dealer. (Respondent J, Dealer 1/Omega)

This statement underscores the reciprocal learning process where suppliers and dealers benefit from shared knowledge and co-develop strategies that reflect both parties' goals and market realities. Omega's dealer, Respondent K, also emphasized how they as a company evolved during the interaction with the supplier: *"I think [Omega[lifted [Dealer 2 brand] really to another level",* highlighting how the supplier's feedback can positively influence the dealer's organisational culture, leading to narrowing the gap between 'in-group' and 'out-group' and strengthening bonding between the parties. This open and honest feedback exchange is crucial for optimising business outcomes through collective efforts, as further explained by Omega's CEO:

> If we understand that we can only win over the customer if we work together, then the discussion and the strategy for the future becomes fruitful because then the people can come together and understand what needs to be changed. But both parties need to understand that they need to change, right? (Respondent G, Omega)

This perspective underlines the importance of collaborative relationships in enriching the dealer's offerings and enhancing their expertise. Similarly, Respondent L touches on the value of expertise within these partnerships:

> Nobody can know everything. You need experts next to you who knows something deeper than you…And this is what I enjoy with my partners. They all have specific disciplines and they're very strong in that disciplines. (Respondent L, Dealer 3/Omega)

Integrating feedback and fostering a collaborative learning environment contributes significantly to co-creating an adaptive brand identity, which is fundamental in maintaining competitive advantage, ensuring long-term sustainability, and strengthening relationships to the point when both parties become ambassadors of each other. Moreover, the feedback loop from dealers to suppliers plays a crucial role in adjusting strategies to better align with market realities. Dealers, with their deep local knowledge and connections, often serve as the ears and eyes of the supplier in the market. Their insights into local preferences and business cultures are invaluable for suppliers looking to tailor their offerings to meet specific regional demands. Respondent B points out that while dealers are crucial in opening doors to new opportunities, they need to evolve from mere conduits to active participants in the sales process, effectively becoming the voice and advocates of the supplier's brand in the market.

5.4.5. Ambassadorship

This ambassadorship role emerges as a critical element in the relationship between dealers and suppliers, underscoring the principles of the Membership Negotiation flow, which views communication as a foundational element in shaping organizational identity (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). From the supplier's perspective, the Omega's CEO discusses the growth process of dealers into brand ambassadors, paralleling it with employee development:

> You know, they grow themselves like every Omega employee. It takes time to grow into that position that you are fully efficient as a brand ambassador. (Respondent G, Omega)

This perspective reinforces the idea of dealers as integral members of the company. Respondent H from Omega adds another layer to the ambassadorship narrative, describing the transformation dealers undergo as they internalize the brand's values and strategies. *"The formation of ambassadors is very strongly felt from the inside,"* he states, emphasizing the profound internal impact of these roles. As dealers become more aligned with the brand, their enthusiasm and commitment to its success grow, enhancing their effectiveness in the market. SIT helps understand how dealers internalize the brand's values, impacting their self-concept and driving a positive representation of the brand to enhance both their and the brand's image (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By embodying the brand, dealers strengthen the brand's presence and ensure its values are conveyed authentically, reflecting a mutual reinforcement of identity and loyalty between the dealer and the supplier. Respondent M articulates this role vividly, emphasizing their commitment to representing their principals' brands effectively in West Africa:

> We don't just go for any brand at all, but a brand we go in for, we become the brand ambassador. We work in partnership, in collaboration. We say that we are the extension of our principals' brands in West Africa (Respondent M, Dealer 4/Omega)

Respondent M's quote emphasizes a profound commitment among dealers to the brands they represent, illustrating that their partnership extends beyond mere transactions to deep-rooted brand ambassadorship. Overall, this sentiment is echoed across other dealers, suggesting a common understanding among them about their role in the brand co-creation process. For example, Respondent J’s view encapsulates the essence of brand ambassadorship, where the relationship is not just about selling products but about fostering a partnership that benefits both entities.

> We are ambassadors of Omega. Nothing needs to be changed, but it needs to be continued for many years in the future. And then together we will be even stronger combined brand. (Respondent J, Dealer 1/Omega)

This perspective highlights the mutual dependence and coexistence that define successful dealer-supplier relationships, where both parties are committed to a unified direction that promises growth and enhanced brand value. This shared perspective underscores the importance of strong, identity-driven partnerships between dealers and suppliers, which are vital for the effective dissemination of the brand's core message, thereby enhancing its overall brand equity.

In the Membership Negotiation analysis, Alpha and Omega exhibit similar approaches in how they engage dealers in the co-creation of brand identity, emphasizing the dealers' integration into the supplier's organizational culture and viewing them but as integral parts of their respective organizations, which is crucial for maintaining a consistent brand representation across all customer interactions. Moreover, both Alpha and Omega highlight the importance of continuous feedback exchange and the role of dealers as brand ambassadors. However, a notable distinction arises in the context of cultural adaptation between globally present Omega and locally developed Alpha. This difference underscores the varied challenges and strategies inherent in global versus localized market contexts.

This nuanced understanding of Membership Negotiation in both cases aids in framing the third step of the framework, presented in Figure 4, which depicts this negotiation as a continuous interaction between the evolving identities of supplier and dealer, influenced by the underlying structures and coordinated activities.

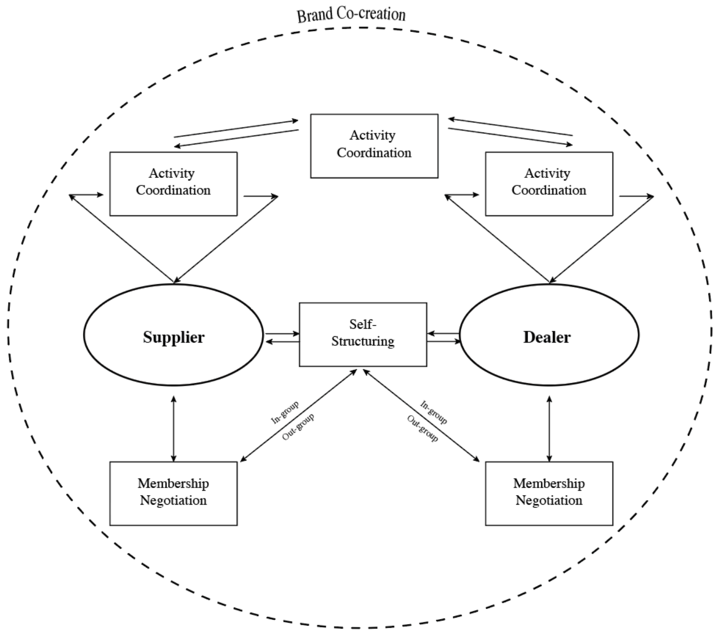

Figure 4. Activity Coordination, Self-Structuring, and Membership Negotiation Flows in Mediated Brand Co-Creation

Finally, the culmination of these flows leads to institutional positioning. This final phase involves vocalizing, articulating, and visually presenting their relationship, statuses, and identities to the external world (McPhee & Zaug, 2008).

5.5. Institutional Positioning

Institutional positioning is not just about maintaining a public image; it is about reinforcing the shared values and unified front in the market (McPhee & Zaug, 2008). It is here that the ongoing updates to the brand identity of the supplier and the dealer are most visible, showcasing a partnership that is not only robust but also adaptable to market dynamics and customer expectations. This outward projection is multifaceted, occurring through various channels and interactions.

The departure of international Western companies from specific regions, particularly due to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, has left a vacuum that local brands struggle to fill. This situation has forced dealers to reevaluate their sales approaches and branding strategies to adapt to a new market reality devoid of previously dominant brands. Respondent B describes a scenario where the market's immediate needs for solutions have led to innovative sales approaches and branding strategies: *"The market in a moment was simply without any ready-made solutions and with a huge list of needs."* The market's urgency for solutions has propelled dealers to become more involved in direct customer education and engagement, such as organizing seminars to discuss capabilities and gather customer feedback directly. Alpha's Dealer, Respondent D further emphasises how geopolitical disruptions have reshaped market dynamics:

> We've come to the point where we have to evolve. With the flag Alpha under the [our brand] as a service company. Now the market demands it after [big industry brands] are gone now. (Respondent D, Dealer 1/Alpha)

Respondent K articulated the same idea of being more than a distributor of other products, emphasising that *"we sell a product, but we deliver a service. This is what sets us apart."* However, contextually, this dealer represents an entirely different geographical location. The respondent's statement leads to the idea of brand value within dealer-supplier relationships, encompassing the interplay of brand representation and the strategic positioning of multiple brands under a single dealer's umbrella. This dynamic is crucial in understanding how dealers leverage supplier brands to enhance their own market positioning and vice versa. The synergy between dealer and supplier brands is crucial, as highlighted by Respondent L's reflection on the reciprocal enhancement of brand perceptions:

> We exchange the branding benefits. If [Dealer3/Omega] is a good company in Turkey and Omega is working with [Dealer3/Omega], Omega will be a good company because you know, good product comes from good companies. (Respondent L, Dealer 3/Omega)

This mutual reinforcement of brand quality and reputation is vital, indicating that the partnership's success hinges on both parties' strengths and reputations. *"The stronger the companies you have, the more your company brand quality goes up,"* remarked Respondent L, emphasizing how the perceived value of a dealer's brand can rise by associating with strong supplier brands. This relationship dynamic extends beyond mere product offerings to encompass training and strategic sales techniques, crucial for maximizing the potential of carrying multiple brands. Respondent M highlighted the synergy created by exhibiting a global team of experts at expos, which elevates the company's brand quality. This not only showcases a strong team but also aligns various brands under a unified presentation, enhancing customer perception and brand loyalty.

The connection between the strong identification of dealers and the suppliers' brands they represent, and the market representation of the brands is highlighted by Respondent J. The dealer emphasises how the deep self-alignment facilitates a seamless representation of the brand to customers. Previously explained, dealers often act as brand ambassadors, but the extent of their alignment with the supplier's branding strategies can vary significantly. For instance, Respondent M from Omega’s Dealer 4 emphasises the priority of projecting their own brand identity at public events, which can sometimes overshadow the supplier's brand. The potential risk of market perception deterioration due to the solid independent brand identity of the dealer with long history in the market illustrates the complex dynamics of identity management within supplier-dealer relationships. An illustrative incident shared by Respondent A from Alpha vividly captures such a scenario, underscoring the practical challenges in institutional positioning:

> So, I came to a conference of buyers from [our customers]. And here one buyer comes to me, and we present the Alpha brand to him. Then the Head of Purchasing comes up to me asking: 'Excuse me, who are you guys?' 'Who are we?', I replied. 'You know, we are your suppliers, we sell you [a large sum] worth of our products.' And after that, we started a new program with dealers. (Respondent A, Alpha)

This episode exemplifies the consequences when dealers fail to represent their supplier's supplier's side their own adequately. Despite Alpha's significant business dealings through Dealer 3, the buyer's lack of recognition of Alpha's involvement highlights a critical lapse in brand representation. This incident not only caused significant confusion at a major industry event but also revealed a deeper issue within the partnership dynamics between Alpha and Dealer 3. The dealer was so focused on promoting their own identity that they neglected to adequately co-brand with Alpha, leading to a situation where long-term customers were unaware of Alpha's role in the supply chain. Such institutional missteps indicate the broader challenges in Membership Negotiation and Institutional Positioning within B2B contexts. Integrating structured communication strategies, formal agreements, and consistent branding guidelines between suppliers and dealers is essential to mitigate these risks, fostering a unified positioning that accurately reflects the collaborative nature of the relationship and enhances brand recognition and trust among customers.

Respondent F from Dealer 3 elaborated on the first corrective measures taken following the problematic episode at the industry event: *"We changed the form of our commercial proposal by putting elements of Alpha brand"*. Alpha's Development Director further reinforced the importance of a structured, multi-faceted approach to resolving identity misalignments in dealer-supplier relationships. He advocates for a sequence of strategic decisions rather than isolated fixes to address such challenges:

> Only such a drastic solution to co-branding is useless, it is only one element. I'm always in favor that a sequence of decisions brings the result, not one single decision, but a series of consecutive decisions. Well, so here's, first, co-branding, second, we're bringing dealers' people in [our CRM system], our information space. In fact, they are our sales department, yes, it is a separate company. (Respondent A, Alpha)

The evolution of Alpha's and Dealer 3's public portrayal of their partnership showcases significant changes in their institutional positioning that extends into the public realms. After the incident that highlighted discrepancies in brand representation, both entities have recalibrated their approach to public collaboration displays. In 2023, the exhibition stand featured an equal representation of both Alpha's and Dealer 3's branding, suggesting a balanced partnership. However, by 2024, the stand's design had shifted dramatically, with Dealer 3's visual presence limited to a reception desk. By deliberate minimizing Dealer 3's visual presence, Alpha asserts a more dominant brand narrative to strengthen its market position.

Conversely, Omega's approach to institutional positioning through physical and digital mediums demonstrates a more flexible and adaptive strategy tailored to the dynamics of each dealer relationship and market context. Omega allows for variability in how its brand is co-represented with dealers, acknowledging its dealers' diverse needs and strategies across different markets. For instance, while Omega's Dealer 3 maintains a balanced representation among multiple brands, Dealer 2 is moving towards a co-branded strategy. This variance highlights Omega's recognition of its dealers' individual needs and strategies, accommodating their unique market positions and brand affiliations.

The additional analysis of social media posts provides insights into how Alpha and Omega articulate their dealer relationships to the public. Alpha's consistent use of terms like "official dealer" and "certified" in their social media narratives underscores their structured approach to dealer relationships, which includes a formal certification process. Conversely, Omega's strategy in social media communications reflects a more nuanced approach that aligns with its global brand presence, which encompasses a diverse network of 18 dealers, each with varying degrees of closeness and ambassadorship to the brand. This difference in approach between Alpha and Omega can be seen as a reflection of their respective strategies for balancing global brand consistency with local market engagement. Alpha's method of jointly presenting case studies emphasises strengthening the perception of a partnership-driven brand ethos. Omega's approach, while maintaining brand centrality in communications, allows dealers to demonstrate their association with global projects by reposting the supplier’s posts. This method serves Omega's global strategy by maintaining a strong brand presence while enabling dealers to customise their involvement narrative, thus addressing diverse market expectations and enhancing local relevance.

As a result of the analysis, a proposed framework in Figure 5 depicts the communicative exchanges between central nodes: Supplier and Dealer. The framework suggests that both parties are active participants in the communication process, with each having the potential to influence and be influenced by the other. The bidirectional arrows imply that communication is not unidirectional or top-down; instead, it is reciprocal, with both parties engaged in a continuous dialogue. It explains how the entities jointly contribute to developing and reinforcing their brand identities through interactions and how the supplier and dealer ensure their strategies are congruent, which can involve adjusting approaches based on market feedback provided by dealers towards suppliers.

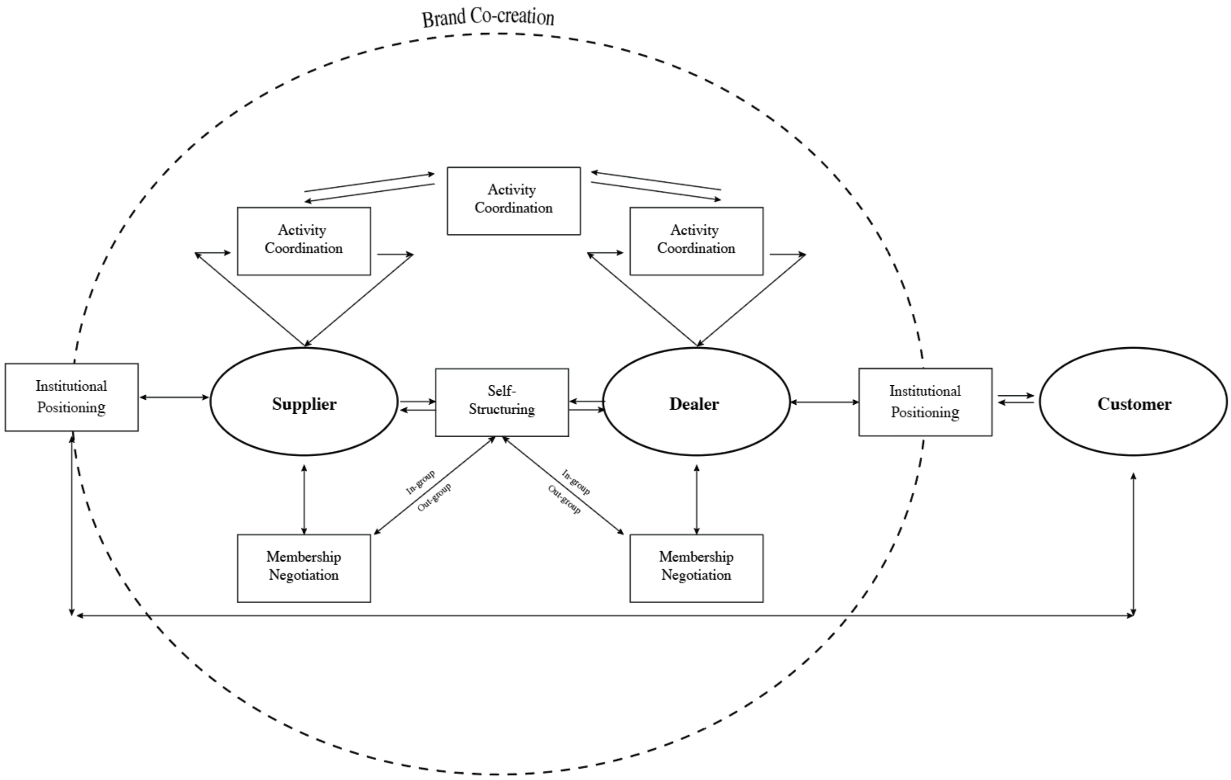

Figure 5. Activity Coordination, Self-Structuring, Membership Negotiation, and Institutional Positioning Flows in Mediated Brand Co-Creation

The model suggests a complex, dynamic relationship between the supplier and the dealer, continuously shaped and reshaped through interactions. In essence, the framework could be interpreted as an extended visualization of the 4 Flows Framework, where organizations are viewed as being constituted through communication, enriched with insights from SIT, which can explain how those organizations form their identities in relation to group membership. It acknowledges that both supplier and dealer are not only communicating entities but also co-creators of the brand identity, and their roles are defined and redefined through their interactions.

6. Discussion

6.1. Contribution to the existing research

Scholarly consensus often highlights the dynamic interplay between multiple stakeholders as central to B2B brand co-creation. For instance, Vargo and Lusch (2004) articulate a perspective where value is co-created interactively through shared processes and resource integration. The concept of brand co-creation in mediated B2B relationships significantly enriches established models such as Hatch and Schultz's, which describes the dynamic interplay between an organization's culture, its identity, and external perceptions (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Initially, this model emphasized the internal-external feedback loop, primarily considering direct interactions between a company and its external stakeholders. However, it did not consider the complex layers of B2B relationships, particularly the nuanced role that intermediaries, such as dealers. The research addressed this gap by illustrating how dealers transmit and actively co-create the corporate identity through their interactions with suppliers and end customers.

Moreover, the research enriches the discussion initiated by Mäläskä et al. (2011) and Törmälä and Gyrd-Jones (2017) regarding the influence of network actors on brand identity within SMEs and B2B networks. By focusing on the dealer's role, the research provided a more granular understanding of how brand identity evolves through interactions that are not solely confined to direct business-client engagements but also significantly influenced by dealers mediating these relationships. The research contributes an additional perspective to the ongoing scholarly discourse on interactive network branding (Koporcic & Halinen, 2018) by showcasing how dealers, as key stakeholders, contribute to the continuous reshaping of brand identity through both formal and informal interactions. Furthermore, exploring how dealers' perceptions and integration into the brand's operational and strategic framework influence the overall brand identity complements the advancements proposed by Iglesias et al. (2020), emphasising the dialogic nature of brand identity co-creation. By documenting how dealers internalise, communicate, and at times contest the brand values, this study provides concrete instances of how these dynamics play out in real-world settings, thus offering substantive enhancements to theoretical models of brand co-creation.

Finally, traditionally, studies, including Mäläskä et al. (2011) and Koporcic and Halinen (2018), have emphasized the dynamic and often informal interactions that shape brand identity within B2B settings. However, this research underscores the importance of a structured and systematic approach to brand co-creation. The strategic implementation of the CCO framework represents a significant departure from traditional brand management models, which often focus on the emergent and unstructured aspects of stakeholder interactions. By contrast, the approach outlined in this research emphasizes the need for formalized processes that underpin and guide the co-creative activities of brand management. This shift highlights the practical necessity of structured interactions in managing the complexities inherent in B2B environments, where multiple layers of interactions define the brand experience. Thus, incorporating a communicative structural approach to brand co-creation offers practical insights for businesses striving to maintain brand coherence and integrity in increasingly complex and competitive markets.

6.2. Practical implications.

It becomes evident that the dynamics of brand co-creation, observed through the comparative analysis of Alpha and Omega, not only contribute to a deeper understanding of brand co-creation from a theoretical perspective but also offer practical insights for strategic communication specialists working in B2B companies and aiming to harness the full potential of their collaborations.

First, the study revealed that both Alpha and Omega emphasize the critical importance of activity coordination between suppliers and dealers. This coordination involves regular and structured communication that is pivotal for synchronizing efforts towards a unified brand representation. Such synchronization ensures that every dealer action reinforces the brand's strategic objectives, mitigating risks of inconsistent customer experiences that could potentially dilute the brand's market strength. Practitioners are advised to leverage regular interpersonal engagements to maintain this crucial alignment, enhancing the overall integrity of the brand across various touchpoints to ensure that dealers align with the brand's core messages while adapting to local market specifics.

Second, the research underscores the importance of self-structuring in defining how brand strategies are communicated and executed. While Alpha employs a formalized structure to ensure a consistent brand experience, Omega's less rigid framework allows for rapid adaptation, which can be crucial in dynamic market environments. For companies, establishing detailed guidelines and protocols is essential not only for maintaining brand consistency. Practitioners should focus on developing these frameworks to ensure that all stakeholders, particularly dealers, clearly understand their responsibilities in upholding the brand's standards.

Third, the membership negotiation process extends beyond mere contractual agreements to encompass a profound alignment of values and brand philosophy. Alpha leverages existing internal relationships to foster brand consistency, whereas Omega integrates external dealers through training and shared initiatives. To encourage dealers to internalize and advocate for the brand's values, companies should consider co-developing marketing materials and participating jointly in brand storytelling, and incentivizing dealers who demonstrate strong brand alignment. This alignment fosters a shared sense of purpose and strengthens the commitment of dealers to act not only as distributors but as active brand ambassadors.

Fourth and lastly, the practical implications for institutional positioning emphasize the need for a unified approach between suppliers and dealers to reinforce brand unity and adaptability. A balanced co-branding strategy is essential, ensuring mutual reinforcement of brand quality though various brand touchpoints. Flexible co-branding approaches are important for accommodating diverse market needs, allowing suppliers to enhance local market positioning and relevance. Effective use of social media is also crucial, as it helps articulate the relationship and reinforce brand identities, with structured certification approaches and flexible strategies catering to different market expectations. In the end, the proposed framework for communicative exchanges underscores the dynamic and reciprocal nature of the supplier-dealer relationship, highlighting the importance of active engagement and ongoing dialogue to ensure a unified and coherent brand presence in the market.

7. Conclusion

The initial idea driving this thesis was to explore and elucidate the dynamics of brand identity co-creation within B2B contexts, mainly focusing on the intermediary role of dealers. This role is both complex and crucial as it bridges the gap between suppliers and end customers, adding layers to the brand management process that were not sufficiently explored in existing literature. In addressing this gap, the thesis sought to uncover how dealers influence the brand identity of their suppliers and the specific communicative actions through which this influence is exerted, thereby shaping the broader process of brand co-creation. The exploration of how dealers contribute to the co-creation of brand identity within B2B contexts in this thesis has revealed intricate dynamics between dealers and suppliers. Central to this discussion were two sub-questions that focused on the negotiation of identities and the subsequent impact on brand communication, leading to the main question about the dealer's role in the overall brand co-creation process. The following questions were designed to explore the research topic:

RQ1: How do dealers contribute to the co-creation of brand identity?

RQ1.1.: How do dealers negotiate between their own organizational identity and the brand identity they are expected to convey to customers?

RQ1.2.: How does the sense of identification that dealers hold with specific brands affect their communication and representation of these brands to customers?

The investigation into how dealers contribute to the co-creation of brand identity within B2B contexts has uncovered a complex interplay between dealers' negotiations of their organizational identities and the brand identities they represent, along with the significant impact of their identification with these brands on their communications and brand representations. *Firstly*, dealers negotiate between their own organizational identities and the brand identities they are expected to convey through a dynamic process of adaptation and alignment. This negotiation involves assimilating the supplier's brand characteristics into their own business practices, which is crucial for ensuring consistent and authentic brand portrayal across different market settings. Dealers engage in this process by utilizing shared branding materials, participating in co-branded events, and attending strategic alignment meetings, which collectively help them embody the supplier's brand identity. This allows dealers to tailor the brand narrative to resonate more effectively with local market nuances.

Secondly, the degree of identification that dealers have with a brand profoundly influences how they communicate and represent the brand to customers. Dealers who exhibit strong brand identification are more committed to its successful representation, as they perceive the brand's success as integral to their own. Strong identification with the brand also enriches the dealers' communication about the brand, often employing language that reflects a resounding endorsement of the supplier's brand. Such dealers are more likely to act as brand ambassadors, ensuring customers perceive the brand positively.

Finally, the findings for the questions 1.1. and 1.2. leads to the conclusion that dealers play a pivotal role in co-creating brand identity by acting as vital intermediaries who do more than transmit a predefined brand identity to the market. Instead, they actively shape and refine this identity based on the continuous negotiations of their own identities in relation to the brand and the influence of their level of identification with the brand. This complex process highlights that effective brand identity co-creation in B2B settings is contingent upon the depth of the dealers' identification with the brand and their ability to integrate this with their organizational goals seamlessly. Therefore, dealers do not merely mirror the supplier's brand identity; they are crucial collaborators in its ongoing development and reinforcement, making them central to the strategic communication and branding efforts of B2B companies.

7.1. Limitations

The major limitation of this research pertains to the structure and delegation of responsibilities within the dealer companies themselves. In all cases, the responsibility for representing specific brands lies with designated individuals within the dealer organizations. These individuals may adopt different approaches to presenting these brands to the market, influenced by their own business acumen and personal perspectives. This variability can introduce a layer of complexity to the study, as it suggests that brand co-creation is not only a function of the formal partnership between the supplier and the dealer but also significantly shaped by the individuals who directly manage the brand's representation. The individual differences in handling brand representation could lead to variations in how the brand is perceived by the market. This may not necessarily align with the collective brand identity intended by the supplier and supported by the dealer.

7.2. Future Research

The research results encourage further empirical research to explore how variations in communicative flows impact brand identity across different industrial contexts and different types and sizes of organizations, including larger organizations with formal structures and established brand management practices. Expanding the scope could validate or challenge the findings of this study's findings and potentially reveal new insights into the adaptability of the theoretical framework applied. Moreover, incorporating the customer's viewpoint would offer a more holistic view of the brand co-creation process, providing a fuller picture of how brand identities are negotiated and established across the entire value chain. In addition, future research should consider examining the applicability of the study's findings to other forms of stakeholder relationships. This could include supplier-supplier interactions, brand-supplier partnerships, and company-retailer dynamics. Additionally, since one of the cases showed different brand management approaches in different regions and cultures, there is a need to design studies that take this factor into account. Such expansions would undoubtedly enrich the theoretical and practical implications of the research, contributing to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of brand management in B2B contexts.

Appendix 1. Interview Guide. Dealers

Introduction to Interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview and for contributing to my study on how dealers contribute to the supplier's brand identity and the overall brand co-creation process Our conversation today will last between 60 to 90 minutes and will be recorded to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis. Rest assured, your information will remain confidential, and your statements will be anonymized to ensure your privacy. The recordings will be securely stored on my hard drive, to which only I have access, and they will be deleted once the study is completed. Before we proceed, do you have any questions about it? If everything is clear, we can begin.

(START RECORDING)

Company Information:

1. Can you tell us about your company?
2. How many employees are in your company?
3. Are you a dealer for one brand or multiple brands?
4. What are your main products or services?
5. How long have you been collaborating with the brand [name]?
6. What is your role in the company?

Activity Coordination:

1. Can you share examples of how you coordinate marketing or sales activities?
2. What types of support does the brand provide to help you better convey their identity and message to the market?
3. How do you manage and integrate the brand's marketing strategies into your own?
4. What tools or resources does the brand provide to facilitate coordination?
5. How often do you meet or communicate with the brand representatives to coordinate activities?

Self-Structuring:

1. What documents do you use with brand [name]?
2. Has collaboration with the brand [name] led to any changes in your business?
3. How do you measure and evaluate the effectiveness of your efforts in representing the brands?

Membership Negotiation:

1. How were you introduced to the brand [name]?
2. Can you describe your initial desire to represent this particular brand?
3. What values or attributes of the brand [name] resonate with you?
4. Do you think your business identity aligns with the identity of the brand you represent? If yes, in what ways?
5. Can you discuss an instance where your feedback or interaction with the brand led to changes or adjustments in the brand's strategy or identity?
6. How important is the brand [name] to your overall business strategy?
7. How do you train your employees to align with the brand's identity and values?

Institutional Positioning:

1. How do you differentiate yourself and your company from competitors?
2. How do you convey the [name] brand in your interactions with clients?
3. How do you balance promoting your own company's identity with that of the brand [name]?
4. What role does customer feedback play in shaping your positioning strategy?
5. How do you ensure brand messaging consistency across customer touchpoints?

Reflective Questions:

1. How do you see your role in shaping and conveying the brand's identity?
2. How do you envision the evolution of your company's identity?

Conclusion:

1. Do you have any additional comments or insights you would like to share?
2. Are there any topics we haven't covered that you think are important for understanding the dealer-brand relationship?

Appendix 2. Interview Guide. Suppliers

Introduction to Interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview and for contributing to my study on how dealers contribute to the supplier's brand identity and the overall brand co-creation process Our conversation today will last between 60 to 90 minutes and will be recorded to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis. Rest assured, your information will remain confidential, and your statements will be anonymized to ensure your privacy. The recordings will be securely stored on my hard drive, to which only I have access, and they will be deleted once the study is completed. Before we proceed, do you have any questions about it? If everything is clear, we can begin.

(START RECORDING)

Company Information:

1. Can you tell us about your company?
2. How many employees are in your company?
3. What are your main products or services?
4. How long have you been collaborating with dealers?
5. What is the scale of your dealer network?
6. What is your role in the supplier-dealer interaction process?

Activity Coordination:

1. Can you share examples of how you coordinate marketing or sales activities with your dealers?
2. What types of support do you provide to help dealers better convey your brand identity and message to the market?
3. What tools or resources do you provide to facilitate coordination with your dealers?
4. How often do you communicate with your dealers to coordinate activities?
5. How do you track and report the outcomes of joint efforts?

Self-Structuring:

1. What documents or guidelines do you provide to your dealers?
2. Has collaboration with your dealers led to any changes in your business operations or strategies?
3. How do you measure and evaluate the effectiveness of your efforts in representing and supporting the brand?
4. What internal processes have you implemented to support your dealers' alignment with the brand's identity?
5. How do you incorporate dealer feedback into your brand strategy?

Membership Negotiation:

1. Can you describe your criteria for selecting dealers to represent your brand?
2. Do you think your business identity aligns with the identities of your dealers?
3. How important are your dealers to your overall business strategy?
4. How do you train your dealers to align with your brand's identity and values?
5. What challenges have you faced in maintaining your identity by dealers?

Institutional Positioning:

1. How do you differentiate yourself from competitors?
2. How do you convey your brand in interactions with your dealers?
3. What role does dealer feedback play in shaping your positioning strategy?
4. How do you ensure consistency in brand messaging across all customer touchpoints?
5. Can you provide examples of how your company has enhanced or detract its reputation through dealer collaborations?

Reflective Questions:

1. How do you envision the evolution of your company's identity in relation to your dealers?

Conclusion:

1. Do you have any additional comments or insights you would like to share?
2. Are there any topics we haven't covered that you think are important for understanding the supplier-dealer relationship?

Appendix 3. Consent Form

Project Title	*Brand Identity Negotiation in Mediated B2B Relationships: The Co-Creative Role of Dealers. Comparative Case Study.*
Purpose of the Study	*This research is conducted by* ***Kseniia Tolchainova*** *at Lund University. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you have been working in relevant business and possess knowledge relevant for this study. The purpose of this research project is to grasp an understanding of brand co-creation process in mediated B2B relationship with deep interest into dealers' contribution to the supplier's brand identity.*
Procedures	• *The procedures involve in-depth semi-structured interview.* • *Interviews will be audio recorded (based on informed consent).* • *Interview Audio Recording will be transcribed. The participant will stay anonymous at any time, and only the researcher can access the transcripts and audio files.* • *After the approval of the study, collected data will be deleted. The study and its results will be published in Lund University's database for student theses.*
Potential Risks and Discomforts	*There is no potential risk identified that could physically or psychologically harm the participant*
Potential Benefits	*There are no direct benefits to participants. However, possible benefits include contributing to the field of strategic communication research by sharing extensive expertise from the practical perspective. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of mediated brand co-creation process in B2B business.*
Confidentiality	*Both companies and respondent names are fully anonymized. Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing the collected data on the interviewer's password-protected personal computer MacBook Pro 14 of in an independent folder secured with password which makes the data completely safe from any external break-in. Interview information will not be shared with other parties outside of Lund University.* *If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of Lund University or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.*
Medical Treatment	*Lund University does not provide any medical, hospitalization or other insurance for participants in this research study, nor will Lund University provide any medical treatment or compensation for any injury sustained as a result of participation in this research study, except as required by law.*
Right to Withdraw and Questions	*Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.*

<table>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2">If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:
Sofia Rosspher
Legal counsel
sofia.rosspher@legal.lu.se
+46 46 222 09 11</td></tr>
<tr><td>Participant Rights</td><td colspan="2">If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:
Sofia Rosspher
Legal counsel
sofia.rosspher@legal.lu.se
+46 46 222 09 11
The data protection officer:
dataskyddsombud@lu.se

This research has been reviewed according to Lund University's procedures for research involving human subjects.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Statement of Consent</td><td colspan="2">Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Signature and Date</td><td>NAME OF SUBJECT</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>DATE</td><td></td></tr>
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