Minna Mäläskä

CO-CREATION OF CORPORATE BRAND THROUGH STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS IN B2B SMES
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Academic dissertation to be presented with the assent of The Doctoral Training Committee of Human Sciences, University of Oulu for public defence in the Arina auditorium (TA105), Linnanmaa, on 4 September 2015, at 12 noon

UNIVERSITY OF OULU, OULU 2015
Mäläskä, Minna, Co-creation of corporate brand through stakeholder relationships in B2B SMEs.
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Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation in the context of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in business-to-business (B2B) markets. The aim of this study is to better understand how external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand—brand image and identity—and what characterises these brand co-creative stakeholder relationships. Branding is regarded as a social and interactive process in which the company and its stakeholders are both considered active participants. In addition to the corporate branding literature, this study builds on industrial network theory, service-dominant logic and organisational identity theory.

The empirical contribution of the study is conducted using qualitative interview and case study methods to analyse the phenomenon longitudinally and from a multi-stakeholder perspective. The primary empirical data are generated through interviews of B2B SME experts and the case company’s management, employees and key partners during the period 2010–2013. Narrative approach is employed in the data generation and analysis.

The study shows that corporate branding is a holistic process that is influenced by various stakeholders. In particular, the key partners can be actively involved in co-creating a company’s corporate brand. External stakeholders are involved in corporate branding through interactions with the company and other stakeholders. The study identifies a number of co-creative actions performed by external stakeholders that influence the corporate brand image, either directly or indirectly. The study also shows that stakeholder cooperation, interaction and dialogue are central in corporate brand identity development, as they help companies to understand and adapt to the competitive environment and to define the corporate brand’s unique and central features in relation to it. At the relationship level, corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships are characterised by dependency and mutuality. The significance of various stakeholder relationships in branding, however, varies across situations, at different stages of the company’s lifecycle and at the relationship portfolio level; they can be understood as context-dependent, evolving and dynamic.

Managers can use the findings of this study to identify the key stakeholders that are central in co-creating corporate brands and to employ their resources and integrate their activities to strengthen the corporate brand.

Keywords: business-to-business relationships, co-creation, corporate branding, identity, image, small and medium sized enterprises, stakeholder network
Mäläskä, Minna, Ulkoiset sidosryhmät B2B pk-yrityksen yritysbrändin yhteisluojina.
Oulun yliopiston tutkijakoulu; Oulun yliopisto, Oulun yliopiston kauppakorkeakoulu, Markkinoiminn yksikkö

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Asiakirjat: identiteetti, imago, pienet ja keskisuuret yritykset, sidosryhmäverkosto, yhteisluominen, yritysbrändi, yritysten väliset liikesuhteet
Acknowledgements

When I began working as a project researcher and decided to pursue a PhD, I would never have imagined how many great and interesting people I would have the opportunity to meet, the places I would be able to visit, and the projects in which I would be able to be involved. For me, writing this thesis represented something more than simply performing research; it was about becoming a researcher. It certainly has not been an easy journey, but I must say, it has been a great deal of fun. Although this work has been quite lonely, it certainly would not have been possible to accomplish alone. Now, after four years, and enriched by so many experiences, I have the opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have helped me succeed.

First, I want to thank the two great academics and amazing, intelligent women behind my research, my supervisors Professor Pauliina Ulkuniemi and D.Sc. Saila Saraniemi. Pauliina, your door was always open to me, and you always took the time to kindly and patiently guide me. You have a great ability to help me clear my mind and advance my research. Thank you for the invaluable help and advice. Saila, thank you for encouraging me to take on this challenge in the first place and for your tireless support and guidance along the way. Thank you also for your contribution to our joint research papers and for sharing your knowledge about scientific writing. It has been a thought-provoking experience and a great pleasure to work with you both in research and teaching.

My warmest thanks also to Professor Jaana Tähtinen for the comments and enlightening discussions of issues related to my research, which have been a great help and joy to me. Thank you also for your contribution as a co-author to my first academic journal publication.

I also wish to thank Associate Professor Richard Gyrd-Jones for reading and commenting on my work and especially for the inspiration and friendship that have carried me through the intensive and challenging phase of finalising this thesis and made me look forward to having completed my PhD.

Thanks also to my pre-examiners, Associate Professor Sylvia von Wallbach and Associate Professor Anne Rindell, for investing your time to evaluate my research and for the insightful and constructive comments that helped me to improve it.

pleasure to get to know and share this journey with such bright, clever and fun people like you. The same goes for M.Sc. Vuokko Iinatti. I wish you all the best from the bottom of my heart. Special thanks to Teea for your friendship, which helped me to cope with the bad days and made the good days even better.

I am also thankful to Oulu Business School and the Department of Marketing and all my colleagues there for providing a stimulating research environment and a friendly and supportive work community. I also had the opportunity to work on interesting and inspiring research projects and wish to thank all the people and companies involved.

I also want to thank all the people who I interviewed for their time and insights. I had the opportunity to work with an interesting and inspiring case company. Thanks to Sami Herrala and 9Solutions for co-operation and interest in this project and the rich data that enabled to perform this research.

I also wish to thank Oulu Business School and the Martti Ahtisaari Institute for funding and supporting my studies. Special thanks to the Director of the Martti Ahtisaari Institute, Professor Veikko Seppänen, for your professional advice and encouragement. I am also thankful for the financial support received from Tekes, the Foundation for Economic Education, the Tauno Tönning Research Foundation, the Marcus Wallenberg Foundation, the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation and the Finnish Cultural Foundation.

I am also grateful to my family and friends, who have consistently offered me their kind and patient support with love and care. To my mother Birgit and father Pentti, thank you for believing in me and for encouraging and enabling me to experience life and for providing all the help and support imaginable without my even asking. To my sisters Hanna and Niina, I can always count on you no matter what. Thank you for that and much more. Many thanks also to all my friends, especially Minna and Jessica. Your company is like a spring of energy to me that keeps me going.

This book is dedicated to my fiancé Teemu and my son Aapo, who was born during this process, the men of my life. Aapo, thank you for making all my worries vanish with just one smile. Thank you also for being the best deadline ever! You are my precious little sunshine. Teemu, you were always there whenever I needed it the most. I want to thank you for all your kind efforts to relieve my stress and cheer me up when I felt tired and down. Your care kept me going, and your love made me believe in myself. Thank you for always standing by my side. I love you both sincerely!

Kempele May 2015

Minna Mäläskä
List of publications

This thesis is based on the introductory chapters and the following research papers:


II Mäläskä M & Saraniemi S (2014). The roles of business partners in corporate brand image co-creation. Submitted manuscript on third review round in an academic journal.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and justification of the research

A strong brand creates a competitive advantage through distinction, differentiation and preference and is considered one of a company’s most valuable intangible assets (Keller 2003: 3). Branding is increasingly employed as the central element of business and marketing strategy in companies of all sizes and in various industries. Especially corporate level branding that promotes the company as a brand has moved to the centre of both professional and academic interest in recent years (e.g., Balmer & Gray 2003, Hatch & Schultz 2003).

Brands have existed for centuries in marketing practice, and branding is among the most prominent and studied phenomena in marketing research (Keller & Lehmann 2006). However, the way we see and approach brands, namely, how the brand is conceptualised, how we believe brands develop, who is involved in that process and how brands should be managed has evolved over the past decades (see Louro & Cunha 2001, Merz, He & Vargo 2009).

The traditional conceptualisations of brands are characterised by strong managerial orientation. Brands are understood as created within a company and targeted to customers and other external stakeholders who are primarily treated as a passive audience (de Chernatony 2001, Balmer & Gray 2003). However, contemporary branding research increasingly rejects the traditional top-down view of branding and emphasises the active role of customers and other company stakeholders in the branding process (Leitch & Richardson 2003, Gregory 2007). Rather than as a resource generated within and controlled by a company, the brand is increasingly considered to be co-created through dynamic, interactive social processes in multi-stakeholder networks (e.g., Faurholt Csaba & Bengtsson 2006, Merz et al. 2009, Hatch & Schultz 2010). This is partially due to the prevalent changes in the competitive environment that have also affected the general evolution in marketing research and is also due to the theoretical advancements in the understanding of the brand phenomenon itself.

The contemporary business environment is inevitably more dynamic and networked, thereby increasing the interdependencies among market actors. Given the pace of development, the complexity of technology and global competition, there is simply inadequate time for a single organisation to obtain expertise and resources in all of the necessary business areas (Wilkinson & Young 2002, Leitch
To keep pace with the change and deliver competitive value, companies must actively collaborate with other market actors (Ramírez 1999, Rust & Thompson 2006) and seek to harness their knowledge in innovation and production (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004). The co-creation of value through integrating competences and resources is one of the most effective modes of operation and production for contemporary marketers (see e.g., Karpen & Bove 2008). However, adopting the co-creative approach increases the resource linkages and interdependencies between companies and necessitates a fundamental shift in their business thinking and operational principles.

The co-creative approach has also resulted in new ways to theorise about and practice branding. Although the efforts of a company’s managers and employees to develop a strong brand remain central in branding, a brand’s success or failure in the networked and co-creative business environment cannot be explained solely by the company’s internal strategic decisions or actions. Instead, the successful establishment of value-creating networks (e.g., Kothandaraman & Wilson 2001) and the management of stakeholder relationships that enable brand co-creation are increasingly important. As Mühlbacher et al. (2006) state, one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary branding scholarship is to understand the complex multi-stakeholder brand co-creation processes and relationships and to integrate this understanding with brand management practices.

The contemporary understanding of the co-created brand mirrors the general shift from the firm-centric perspectives to relationship- and network-centred perspectives in marketing theory and practice (e.g., Gummesson 1997, Håkansson & Snehota 2006), and this has been considered a paradigmatic shift in branding (Gregory 2007, Christodoulides 2008, Hatch & Schultz 2008, Merz et al. 2009). Despite the increasing acknowledgement of the importance and active presence of multi-stakeholder relationships and networks in the contemporary branding literature (see e.g., Ind & Bjerke 2007, Fyrberg & Jüriado 2009, Morgan, Deeter-Schmelz & Moberg 2007), little research exists on how brands are actually co-created (Payne et al. 2009), especially at the corporate level (Hatch & Schultz 2010), or on how external stakeholders are involved in the corporate brand co-creation process (Vallaster & Lindgreen 2011). The existing research on brand co-creation is primarily conceptual (Boyle 2007, Helm & Jones 2010) or focuses on various brand aspects such as value (Merz et al. 2009), meaning (Vallaster & von Wallbach 2013) or experience (Payne et al. 2009) while overlooking the key concepts of brand theory—identity and image.
Understanding the social nature of corporate brand co-creation requires broadening the analytical perspective of branding to also encompass actions taken by external actors and interactions involving multiple actors within its economic and social context. However, the existing literature on brand co-creation remains customer-centric, and these studies are conducted either from the company’s or the customers’ perspective (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger 2008). Studies that consider the broader stakeholder network in which corporate branding occurs or the perspectives of multiple different stakeholders in corporate brand co-creation are scarce (Leitch & Richardson 2003, Vallaster & von Wallbach 2013). The multi-stakeholder perspective on brand co-creation is particularly relevant in corporate branding due to its multi-stakeholder orientation (e.g., employees, customers, investors) (Balmer & Gray 2003).

The multi-stakeholder perspective on corporate brand co-creation can be considered especially relevant for B2B companies and SMEs because they are generally highly dependent on strategies that enable resource integration with relationship partners to deliver their offerings and survive competition with large multinationals (Äyväri & Möller 1999, Bretherton & Chaston 2005). However, there is very little research on corporate branding in B2B SMEs in general, and corporate brand co-creation in particular, because majority of the branding research considers the perspective of large consumer companies and is only applicable to B2B SMEs to a limited extent (Inskip 2004, Krake 2005, Merrilees 2007).

Furthermore, the dominant branding theories are largely derived from a positivist standpoint, maintaining the assumptions of linearity and consistency in brand communications (Cornelissen, Christensen & Kinuthia 2012). Positivist thinking has been criticised for being one-sided and theoretically restrictive because it analytically disregards the social, interactive and dynamic nature of brands (da Silveira, Lages & Simões 2013, Gioia et al. 2010, Cornelissen et al. 2012). Furthermore, positivist-oriented theories typically present branding as a structured, one-way process (e.g., de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley 1998, Harris & de Chernatony 2001). A number of scholars oppose the linear models of branding and address the need for more interpretive approaches in branding research (e.g., Faurholt Csaba & Bengtsson 2006, Cornelissen et al. 2012; see also Hatch & Schultz 2002, Ravasi & Schultz 2006). This study adopts the social constructionist approach to extend our understanding of the understudied phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation in B2B SMEs from a multi-stakeholder perspective.
1.2 Purpose of the study and research questions

This study examines the phenomenon of **corporate brand co-creation** in the context of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in business-to-business (B2B) markets. Specifically, drawing on the gaps in the previous literature, the purpose of this study is to contribute to understanding the processes of actions and interactions through which external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand (e.g., Merz et al. 2009, Payne et al. 2009). The study also seeks to advance both theoretical and practical understanding of corporate branding in B2B SMEs—another understudied research area. The study distances itself from the notion that a company maintains exclusive control over its corporate brand and instead focuses particularly on the social, dynamic and interactive nature of corporate brand co-creation by adopting a **constructionist approach** (e.g., Berger & Luckmann 1966, Gergen 1999).

The main research question is: **How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand?**

The main research question is answered through three complementary sub-questions. The first and second sub-questions focus on brand co-creation with an emphasis on different aspects of the brand phenomenon, namely, identity and image, while the third sub-question focuses on the characteristics of B2B SME network relationships in corporate brand co-creation.

**RQ1:** *How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand image?*

**RQ2:** *How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand identity?*

**RQ3:** *What characterises the relationships among stakeholders involved in corporate brand co-creation?*

This study consists of three separate but related research papers that elaborate on the phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation from different theoretical and empirical perspectives. Each paper advances the existing understandings of the parts of the whole and the analyses they provide makes it possible to answer the research questions. Table 1 outlines the individual research papers and presents
the authors’ contributions to them and how the papers relate to the research questions.

The first sub-question, “How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand?” is answered based on the findings obtained through research papers 1 (Mäläskä et al. 2011) and 2 (Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015). This study defines corporate brand image as the externally held perceptions of the corporate brand that are formed based on interpretations of all brand-related information. The first research paper draws on industrial network theory to better understand B2B SME corporate branding in the context of interconnected and interdependent network actors and particularly: How do external network actors participate in B2B SME corporate branding? The second research paper continues to elaborate on B2B SME corporate branding in an inter-organisational setting from the service-dominant (S-D) logic perspective to better understand the dynamics of corporate brand-image co-creation and particularly: What different action-based roles do business partners play in co-creating the corporate brand image? The paper employs role theory as an analytical tool to study business partners’ corporate brand image co-creative actions because it is particularly useful to understand and explain the behaviour of social actors (Biddle & Thomas 1966, Katz & Kahn 1966). Role theory is a perspective in sociology and social psychology that assumes that a considerable share of human activities are contingent on socially defined (Biddle 1986) or proactively adapted (Ashforth 2000) roles and the rights, duties and expectations related to them. The study empirically examines how external stakeholders co-create the corporate brand image by analysing the actions of network actors (Mäläskä et al. 2011; see paper 1) and key business partners (Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015; see paper 2) in relation to the construction of corporate brand image. The analysis includes perceptions of B2B SME experts and professionals concerning how external actors had influenced another company’s corporate brand image (Mäläskä et al. 2011, see paper 1) and the perceptions of business partners concerning their involvement in the co-creation of the corporate brand image of a B2B SME (Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015, see paper 2).

The second sub-question, “How is corporate brand identity co-created by external stakeholders”, focuses on the process nature of corporate brand identity development and how external stakeholders influence it. The question is primarily answered on the basis of the findings obtained through a longitudinal qualitative case analysis conducted in the third research paper (see Mäläskä 2015), which answers the question: How does corporate brand identity develop in the context of
B2B new venture development? The answer to the second sub-question is also supported by the findings from papers 1 (Mäläskä et al. 2011) and 2 (Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015).

The third sub-question, “What characterises corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships?” addresses the types of stakeholder relationships in which brand co-creation occurs. The findings of papers 1 (Mäläskä et al. 2011), 2 (Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015) and 3 (Mäläskä 2015) identify the actors involved in corporate brand co-creation and the nature of their relationships with a company and provide insights to answer the third sub-question.

Table 1. The research papers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Paper specific RQ</th>
<th>Author’s contribution</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Network actors’ participation in B2B SME branding</td>
<td>Mäläskä M, Saraniemi S &amp; Tähtinen J</td>
<td>How do network actors participate in B2B SME branding?</td>
<td>The author had the main responsibility for partly planning and writing the paper and for the data collection and analysis</td>
<td>RQ 1 partly RQ 2 RQ 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The roles of business partners in corporate brand image co-creation</td>
<td>Mäläskä M &amp; Saraniemi S</td>
<td>What roles do business partners play in co-creating corporate brand image?</td>
<td>The author had the main responsibility for partly planning and writing the paper and for the data collection and analysis</td>
<td>RQ 1 partly RQ 2 RQ 3</td>
</tr>
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1.3 Methodology

The research methodology includes the study’s philosophical approach, its theoretical underpinnings and the approach employed for the data collection and analysis. Clarity in methodological statements serves to establish the credibility of the research results and will help others to extend them in the future. This study builds on the extant research on brand co-creation (e.g., Hatch & Schultz 2010), corporate branding (e.g., Balmer & Gray 2003), and branding in B2B companies and SMEs (e.g., Ojasalo, Nätti & Olkkonen 2008). To further elaborate the
emerging discussion on corporate brand co-creation, this study integrates theories on industrial networks (e.g., Mattsson 1985, Håkansson 1982, Håkansson & Ford 2002, Ritter & Gemünden 2003 Håkansson & Snehota 2006), service-dominant logic (e.g., Vargo & Lusch 2004, 2008, 2011) and organisational identity (e.g., Gioia, Schultz & Corley 2000, Scott & Lane 2000, Hatch & Schultz 2004, Ravasi & Schultz 2006) and relates them to existing branding research. This study adopts a social constructionist research philosophy to analyse branding (e.g., Berger & Luckmann 1966, Gergen 1999). Various qualitative methods, such as, the narrative approach, a longitudinal case study and abductive reasoning are employed to answer to the research questions. The research philosophy, theories and strategy employed in this research are discussed in further detail below.

1.3.1 Research philosophy

A research philosophy is essentially a worldview (Patton 2002) or a belief system (Guba & Lincoln 1994: 107) that provides lenses and frames that address how reality should be understood, approached and interpreted (Guba 1990, Denzin & Lincoln 2000: 157). A researcher’s research philosophy substantially reflects her own philosophical stance, experiences, beliefs and values and ultimately is a matter of her personal choices.

In scientific research, it is important to explicitly consider and discuss the philosophical support and position because this helps to guide and justify the decisions underlying the theoretical and methodological choices made throughout the research process. The philosophical underpinnings also inform the research strategy and help the researcher to acquire knowledge and develop understandings of the research phenomenon.

How a corporate brand is perceived; what it is composed of; and how it is formed and by whom differ substantially depending on the philosophical approach employed. The social constructionist approach (see, e.g., Berger & Luckmann 1966, Gergen 1999) is adopted in this study because it corresponds with an understanding of corporate brand co-creation that emphasises the interactions between a company and its multiple stakeholders in branding activities (see Hatch & Schultz 2010). The constructionist view emphasises the relational and inter-subjective nature of a corporate brand and challenges the dominant positivist branding theories that treat the brand as primarily being a creation of a company (see e.g., Kotler 1991, Aaker 1996, Balmer & Gray 2003, Keller 2003). The premises of the social constructionist approach and their
implications for branding research are further elaborated below through questions of ontology and epistemology.

The question of ontology concerns the philosophy of existence and the assumptions and beliefs we hold about the nature of reality around us. Social constructionist philosophy holds the relativist ontological belief of the “social” reality (Guba & Lincoln 1994; see also Burrel & Morgan 1979). The term social reality refers to the human world, which differs from the natural, physical world and, therefore, demands a different theoretical analytical approach (Patton 2002). Rather than being objectively given, the constructionist approach regards the world and its meaning as locally and specifically constructed by humans through their actions and interactions (Guba & Lincoln 1994). According to social constructionist philosophy, there is no reality that exists independent of the people who participate in it (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 14). From the social constructionist perspective, a brand is essentially understood as a complex social construction (Handelman 2006).

Social constructionism and social constructivism are alike to the extent that both regard reality as constructed by human beings. However, these two perspectives should not be conflated. The difference is that, while constructivism focuses on the individual’s perspective of reality generated inside his/her mind as a consequence of social interactions, constructionism focuses specifically on the collectively created, shared reality (Crotty 1998). Accordingly, ‘for social constructionist, what we take to be real is an outcome of social relations’ (Gergen 1999: 237). Rather than objective or subjective, social constructionism is characterised by inter-subjective orientation that also underlies the premises of value co-creation as defined in service-dominant logic (Löbler 2011).

From the social constructionist perspective, a corporate brand is understood as a shared reality that is dynamically co-constructed through on-going social interactions and communication between a company and its multiple stakeholders (see Ballantyne & Aitken 2007). The social constructionist view particularly emphasises the active role and interconnectedness of various stakeholders involved in the process of constructing the shared associations and beliefs related to a brand (Fournier 1998, Ballantyne & Aitken 2007, Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger 2008).

The epistemological question concerns the nature of the relationship between the researcher and reality and knowledge (Guba & Lincoln 1994: 108, Crotty 1998: 8). Epistemology informs what is considered adequate and legitimate knowledge, what can be argued based on that knowledge and what defines
scientific reasoning (Braun & Clarke 2006, Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 14). One’s ontological and epistemological perspectives are typically mutually independent, that is, the researcher’s ontological belief implies a particular epistemological stance and, conversely, one’s epistemological stance implies an ontological belief (Crotty 1998, Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 16).

Social constructionist philosophy represents a subjectivist epistemology that maintains that we understand the social, human world via interpretive processes (Guba & Lincoln 1994: 111). Consistent with relativist ontology, subjectivist epistemology disregards the existence of an objective truth and emphasises that reality relies on individuals’ knowledge, interpretations and definition of it (Neuman 1997: 69, Guba & Lincoln 1994: 111). Constructionist research distances itself from the positivist desire to create a “true” picture of the actual reality and to measure and predict it. Instead, it attempts to increase understanding of the social reality and create new lines of thought (Guba & Lincoln 1994).

From the social constructionist perspective, there is no single, verifiable truth concerning a corporate brand that exists and is ready to be discovered; rather, there are only socially constructed and contextually situated interpretations of it. Furthermore, a brand can be perceived differently, and multiple, equally valid perceptions of it can exist simultaneously. To increase understanding, the constructionist approach is particularly interested in the social aspects of a brand and branding: the brand’s shared meaning, perceived image, value and the relationships between companies and their stakeholders (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger 2008, see also Guba & Lincoln 1994).

In addition, the context plays a crucial role in the social construction of reality and knowledge (Guba & Lincoln 1994:111). According to the constructionist perspective, no brand can be understood freely in isolation from the context in which it exists because it is essentially constructed in interaction with that context (see Langer & Varey 2005). Constructionist research, therefore, places particular emphasis on the context of a phenomenon and the process whereby the phenomenon influences and is influenced by its context (Crotty 1998: 23, Myers 2009: 39).

In conclusion, brands as a social phenomenon can only be accessed through the multiple meanings that people assign to them in a specific social and cultural setting (see Orlikowski & Baroudi 1991), and these meanings are made visible, for example, in language, documents, and other artefacts (Myers 2009: 38, Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 19). The constructionist approach also emphasises the
researcher’s active role in constructing interpretations of reality based on all observations that she makes (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 39).

By considering the active interaction and relationships between a company and its stakeholders and the context, constructionist approach enables the researcher to capture the social and dynamic nature of a corporate brand and to create a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation (see Langer & Varey 2005). This study adopts a social constructionist philosophical approach to corporate branding and combines it with theories that can be considered appropriate to further elaborate and extend our understanding of the social and dynamic multi-stakeholder interactions and relationships involved in corporate brand co-creation. The theoretical positioning of the study is presented next.

1.3.2 Theoretical positioning

Theory provides the framework for the systematic inspection and critical understanding of and generalisations about a phenomenon (Silverman 2001). The research phenomenon of this study is corporate brand co-creation and is examined in the context of B2B SMEs. This study is theoretically positioned at the intersection of the corporate branding, B2B branding and SME branding and brand co-creation literatures. The aim of this study is primarily to contribute to the emerging theory of brand co-creation within branding research that understands brands as being co-created through relationships and social interactions between a company and all of the stakeholders in its network (Merz et al. 2009). This stream of branding research is authored by many scholars (e.g., Jones 2005, Handelman 2006, Mülhbacher et al. 2006, Ballantyne & Aitken 2007, Ind & Bjerke 2007, Mülhbacher & Hemetsberger 2008, Payne et al. 2009, Hatch & Schultz 2010, Vallaster & Lindgreen 2011, Cornelissen et al. 2012, Gyrd-Jones & Kornum 2012, da Silveira et al. 2013, Vallaster & von Wallpach 2013) who draw upon various disciplines and theories, such as consumer behaviour, sociology, social psychology, social identity, organisational identity and corporate identity, and recent research in marketing, such as service and relationship marketing, service-dominant logic, consumer culture theory and netnography to understand the brand concept from the perspective of co-creation.

To further the understanding of the phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation and extend the existing theoretical discussion, this study integrates
insights and concepts from industrial network theory, service-dominant logic and organisational identity theory. These theories mirror well the paradigmatic shift in branding towards brand co-creation and are therefore selected to develop the theoretical basis of this study. Both industrial network theory (e.g., Mattsson 1985, Håkansson 1982, Håkansson & Ford 2002, Ritter & Gemünden 2003 Håkansson & Snehota 2006) and service-dominant logic (e.g., Vargo & Lusch 2004, 2008, 2011) elucidate the shift from company-centric thinking to broader network- and relationship-centric thinking in marketing. Organisational identity theory, particularly the social constructionist perspective on organisational identity (e.g., Gioia et al. 2000, Scott & Lane 2000, Hatch & Schultz 2002, Ravasi & Schultz 2006) offers insights into the social, dynamic and interactive process underlying corporate brand identity. In paper 2 (Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015), role theory (Biddle & Thomas 1966, Biddle 1986, Ashforth 2000) is also applied as a tool to analyse the co-creative actions of business partners concerning the brand image; however, this is not considered a key discussion in the theoretical development in this thesis. Figure 1 outlines the theoretical positioning of the study.

Fig. 1. Theoretical positioning of the study.
1.3.3 Research strategy

A research strategy is a plan of action that describes how the research problem at hand is to be solved. Rigorous application of theories and methods requires a conscious and systematic research strategy and the assumptions of which are consistent with the research objectives (Braun & Clarke 2006) and philosophy of the study (Reicher & Taylor 2005: 549).

This study examines the phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation from the social constructionist perspective in the context of B2B SMEs. Understanding a phenomenon from the social constructionist perspective demands methods that allow for thick and contextualised descriptions (Guba & Lincoln 1994). Different qualitative methods, such as narrative interviews and a longitudinal case-study for data generation and analysis are therefore applied to conduct this study. Qualitative methods are designed to assist a researcher in interpreting and explaining complex, contextual and abstract social phenomena that are difficult to directly access or measure (Ghauri & Gronhaug 2002: 88), such as brands. Qualitative methods are also considered particularly suitable for understanding stakeholder relationships and interactions in B2B networks (Dubois & Araujo 2004) and for gaining particular insights into managerial decision-making and practice in SMEs (Shaw 1999).

This study involves three research papers that each followed a unique research path and involved a number of decisions regarding the theories and methods along the way. These decisions were evaluated in relation to the specific objectives of each research paper, but more important, they also greatly reflect the researcher’s personal learning and development in the process. A more detailed description of the research process, including the different data generation and analysis methods employed, is presented and justified in chapter 4.

1.4 Key concepts of the study

*Corporate brand* refers to a collection of corporate associations and meanings (Aaker 2004) that are expressed and mediated through its design, products and behaviour and all company-related communication.

*Corporate brand identity* refers to the internal perception of the unique and central features of the corporate brand (de Chernatony 2006: 45) that are collectively shared (at least to some extent) by the organisational members.
Corporate brand image refers to the externally held perceptions of the corporate brand that are formed based on interpretations of all brand-related information.

Corporate branding refers to the continuous, social and dynamic process of interactions between a company and its stakeholders (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger 2008) that underlie the development of corporate brand identity and image and in which every actor has an active role. Corporate branding includes the goal-oriented planning, coordination and control of internal branding activities but is not limited to these aspects.

Network refers to a set of relationships among self-organised, interrelated and interdependent actors who can influence other actors within the network (e.g., Möller & Wilson 1995; Håkansson & Snehota 1995).

Corporate brand co-creation in this study refers to interactions between a company and its stakeholders that contribute to the corporate brand construct, i.e., image or identity.

SME refers to small and medium-sized enterprises, which are defined as enterprises with fewer than 250 employees that are managed by their owner(s) and that have either an annual turnover below 50 million euros or an annual balance-sheet total below 43 million euros (European Commission 2009).

1.5 Structure of the study

The study is structured in six chapters. The first chapter is the introduction. It presents the background and justification of the research and specifies the purpose of the study and the research questions. The research methodology is also presented, including the philosophical approach and theoretical positioning of the study, the strategy for data collection and analysis, and definitions of the key concepts. The second and third chapters include the theoretical part of this study. In the second chapter, the specific characteristics of corporate branding and of branding in SMEs and B2B companies are discussed to provide a common theoretical basis for understanding the phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation in the specific context of B2B SMEs. The third chapter discusses the theoretical development. First, the conventional perspectives on corporate branding are presented, and then, the paradigmatic shift towards corporate brand co-creation is discussed and further elaborated in light of social constructionist organisational identity theory, industrial network theory, and service-dominant logic. Chapter 3.3 presents the theoretical framework and outlines the co-creation
view of corporate branding in the context of B2B SMEs based on the synthesis of the three theoretical approaches applied in this study. The fourth chapter presents the research method of the study, including the description of the research process, an introduction to and justification of the narrative approach, case study design and case description and details of the data generation and analysis. The fifth chapter provides an overview of the individual research papers and their key findings, contributions and linkages to the research questions of this study. The sixth chapter discusses the findings and their and implications. It presents the conclusions and answers to the research questions, advances the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study and offers managerial implications. Finally, the study is evaluated, followed by reflections, limitations and future research suggestions. The three original research papers are presented at the end.
2 Corporate branding in B2B SMEs

Corporate branding and branding in B2B SMEs has certain characteristics that distinguish it from the branding of consumer products and in well-established large multinationals, and these particularities have implications for both branding practice and research. These characteristics are next discussed in greater detail to provide a common theoretical basis for and understanding of corporate brand co-creation in the specific context of B2B SMEs. First, the corporate brand construct is clarified through comparison with the notion of a product brand. Thereafter, the nature and characteristics of branding in B2B markets and SMEs are discussed.

2.1 Corporate branding

Corporate branding leverages the company as the centre of a brand’s functional and symbolic value associations (Argenti & Druckenmiller 2004). Corporate branding shares the same objective as product branding, that is, to create differentiation and preferences in markets (Knox & Bickerton 2003). However, corporate branding differs from product branding in terms of its context, scale and disciplinary origins, and these differences have implications for both research and practice.

First, whereas a product brand differentiates a single product or product category, a corporate brand differentiates and positions an entire organisation in the market (Webster & Keller 2004, He & Balmer 2006). Accordingly, a corporate brand focuses attention on the values and behaviour of a company beyond the quality of its products and services (Hatch & Schultz 2003). A corporate brand is, thus, subjected to a more comprehensive assessment and evaluation and posed to a greater transparency compared with a product brand.

Second, a corporate brand differs from a product brand in terms of to whom it relates. Whereas a product brand primarily targets its customers, a corporate brand’s intended audience is all company stakeholders (Balmer 2001a, Hatch & Schultz 2003). Accordingly, a corporate brand has several interest groups in addition to the customers, such as, employees, investors, partners, suppliers and regulators (Knox & Bickerton 2003, He & Balmer 2006, Fiedler & Kirchgeorg 2007, Roper & Davies 2007). Corporate branding is, thus, characterised by a multi-stakeholder orientation.

Third, a fundamental conceptual difference between corporate and product branding is that they have different disciplinary roots. While product branding
primarily resides within the marketing and communications domain, the origins of corporate branding lie substantially within the organisational and corporate identity literatures (Balmer & Gray 2003). Indeed, organisational identity is the central defining element of a corporate brand, and the two concepts are often used interchangeably in the literature (Balmer 1998). Product brand identity, by contrast, primarily concerns the quality and personality traits assigned to a product (Underwood 2003).

Fourth, a corporate brand’s time perspective is more long-term and covers the company’s entire lifecycle instead of just the life of a single product (Hatch & Schultz 2003). In other words, a corporate brand needs to establish its raison d’être within the markets and society as a whole, whereas a product brand’s primary ambition is to attract customers and help deliver sales. In the literature, a corporate brand is often conceptualised as a promise between the company and its stakeholders (Balmer 2001a, de Chernatony & McDonald 2003, see also Aaker 1996) that provides the both parties with certain expected value and differentiates the company from competitors (Argenti & Druckenmiller 2004). In addition to differentiation and preference creation, corporate branding is essentially a matter of belonging. As Hatch and Schultz (2003: 1046) state, the success of corporate branding lies in the brand’s ability to “express the values and/or sources of desire that attract key stakeholders to the organisation and encourage them to feel a sense of belonging to it”.

Furthermore, the distinction between a corporate and product brand in the previous literature has been made with respect to the level of management over these constructs. Given its multidisciplinary nature and multi-stakeholder orientation, it is a more complex task to conceptualise and manage a corporate brand compared with a product brand. Whereas product brands are considered to be managed by the marketing and communications department, corporate brand management is considered the top-management’s responsibility (Hatch & Schultz 2003). However, delivering the promise conveyed by the corporate brand is an organisation-wide function that encompasses all organisational members. By implication, the corporate brand strategy cannot be markedly distinct from a company’s overall business strategy; on the contrary, there is a need for mutual support between them.
2.2 Branding SMEs

Although branding has been among the most studied subjects in marketing for decades, the SME context remains largely overlooked (Inskip 2004, Krake 2005, Merrilees 2007). This is because branding has traditionally been strongly associated with extensive marketing investments and, thus, been seen as relevant only for large companies.

However, the limited research conducted in the area has shown that, rather than being a privilege of large companies, branding, especially at the corporate level, can also be an affordable way for SMEs and new ventures to achieve recognition, awareness and trust (Abimbola 2001, Boyle 2003, Inskip 2004, Krake 2005, Mowle & Merrilees 2005, Wong & Merrilees 2005, Abimbola & Kocak 2007, Abimbola & Vallaster 2007, Ojasalo et al. 2008). Branding is argued to be a crucial activity for the survival and growth of SMEs in global and saturated markets because it aids in the commercialisation of new technology and innovations (Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele & Lye 2011), facilitates the identification and retention of customers (Boyle 2003) and helps a company to improve its competitive position in a distribution network (Merrilees 2007, Ojasalo et al. 2008). However, owing to the distinctive contextual differences, branding in SMEs and new ventures demands different principles and practices from those employed for large organisations (Inskip 2004, Wong & Merrilees 2005, Berthon, Ewing & Napoli 2008, Bresciani & Eppler 2010).

Small companies, especially those operating in B2B markets (Ojasalo et al. 2008), typically provide specialised products or services to a specific and often very narrow target market and do not need to attract the general public as is the case for mass consumer markets (Krake 2005). Interactive relationship building and face-to-face communications with key stakeholders are considered more effective ways for SMEs to attain brand recognition and preference than, for example, advertising (Ojasalo et al. 2008). These firms’ limited promotional resources can be compensated for with creativity (O'Dwyer, Gilmore & Carlson 2010), personality (Boyle 2003), and consistency in brand communications (Krake 2005). The flexibility of structures and processes and the speed of decision-making, moreover, enable SMEs to adjust to changing circumstances and to effectively tap market opportunities, which offer them an advantage in branding compared with large enterprises (Krake 2005, Abimbola & Vallaster 2007).
More significant obstacles hindering SMEs’ ability to successfully conduct branding initiatives than the lack of financial resources appear to be related to the lack of branding knowledge (Rode & Vallaster 2005) and narrow interpretation of the real meaning of a brand (Bresciani & Eppler 2010). According to Inskip (2004), branding is a somewhat unfamiliar construct for SMEs and is often confused with more narrow concepts such as public relations (PR) and reputation building (see also Merrilees 2007). Therefore, SMEs tend to adopt a rather superficial perspective on branding with a focus on brand design and communications (Wong & Merrilees 2005). Branding is conducted either as a separate functional activity or outsourced to advertising agencies and receives little or no attention in an SME’s daily affairs. Although professional brand communications assistance is often of great value for SMEs (Inskip 2004), Krake (2005) emphasises that, to result in real competitive advantage, a brand should be considered an integral part of a company’s business strategy and be accommodated in its daily actions. The role of the manager/entrepreneur in guiding this strategic and integrated approach to branding in SMEs has been particularly emphasised in previous research (e.g., Krake 2005, Rode & Vallaster 2005, Merrilees 2007).

2.3 Branding in B2B markets

B2B branding is another under-researched area, largely because of the traditional assumption that branding is irrelevant to business customers (Leek & Christodoulides 2011). However, the few studies conducted in the area confirm the opposite view. According to Mudambi (2002) and Brown et al. (2011), brand image plays a central role in reducing a business customer’s perceived risk and enhancing purchasing confidence, especially in complex purchase situations (see also Bengtson & Servais 2005). Others have shown that branding has a positive impact on a B2B company’s perceived product or service uniqueness (Michell, King & Reast 2001) and quality (Cretu & Brodie 2007) and enhances a company’s demand and revenues (Low & Blois 2002, Ohnemus 2009). However, researchers have emphasised that the dominant branding methods developed for consumer markets, particularly fast-moving consumer goods, are not directly applicable to B2B marketing, which traditionally emphasises the importance of long-term business relationships (Leek & Christodoulides 2011). Instead of disregarding branding as irrelevant for B2B companies, the distinctive features of the B2B context should be acknowledged and considered a starting point in B2B branding.
research and theory implementation (see Lynch & de Chernatony 2004, Webster & Keller 2004).

Compared to consumers, business customers are considered more objective and rational because of their strong profit orientation and budget constraints (Webster & Keller 2004). Business customers are, thus, generally more sensitive to functional brand attributes, such as price, product quality, technical specifications, delivery time and service ability, rather than symbolic and emotional brand value (e.g., Ford et al. 2002, Beverland, Napoli & Yakimova 2007, Leek & Christodoulides 2012). Mudambi (2002) further stresses that the aspects of emotional brand value relevant to B2B buyers primarily concern risk reduction rather than self-expressive benefits.

In contrast to consumer markets, B2B markets are characterised by a small number of large customers (Beverland et al. 2007) and complex and customised offerings that involve large and long-term financial investments (Baumgarth 2010). According to Mudambi (2002), to reduce the risk associated with such investments, B2B branding should focus on building trust and legitimacy in the B2B market. Trust and legitimacy in the B2B market is ultimately achieved through the consistent presentation and performance of the company and interactive relationship development with customers, partners and other stakeholders over time (Ritter & Gemünden 2003, Håkansson & Snehota 2006). The relevance of B2B branding, particularly at the corporate level, has been emphasised and demonstrated in previous research (Mudambi, Doyle & Wong 1997, Mudambi 2002, Kuhn et al. 2008). Corporate branding is considered a more appropriate option for B2B companies than product branding because it facilitates concurrent communication and interaction with various stakeholders, whereas a product brand primarily reaches customers (Argenti & Druckenmiller 2004). A strong corporate brand also provides an impression of the company as a competent and trustworthy supplier and partner (Bengtsson & Servais 2005). Building a single corporate brand also reduces the need to manage a large number of individual line brands (Aspara & Tikkanen 2008), which is difficult, especially if a company’s product line is very extensive and diverse or involves highly customised offerings.

The importance of interpersonal relationships and direct human interactions in B2B branding has also been emphasised in the literature (Campbell, Papania, Parent & Cyr 2010, Lindgreen, Beverland & Farrelly 2010). The role of salespeople is considered particularly central in building a B2B brand because they represent the key communication interface between the company and its
customers during the often intensive and long selling process (Lynch & de Chernatony 2004, Lynch & de Chernatony 2007).

Furthermore, building a strong B2B brand involves active networking and a mutual orientation and long-term commitment between relationship partners. Integrating resources and aligning competencies and processes among several actors in the production and distribution network has traditionally been at the forefront of value creation in B2B markets (Vargo & Lusch 2011). Organisational co-operation and networking allow access to additional skills and resources and is often considered as a prerequisite to operate in B2B markets (Håkansson 1982, Ford et al. 2002). Engagement in the co-production of product and service offerings and mutual service provisions also causes interdependencies between B2B market actors (Gummesson 1997, Ford et al. 2002). Accordingly, given these interdependencies, B2B branding should focus on building business relationships and processes that support the delivery of a company’s brand promise (see Ballantyne & Aitken 2007).
3 Theoretical development

This chapter first presents the conventional perspectives on corporate branding and then discusses the paradigmatic shift toward corporate brand co-creation in light of social constructionist organisational identity theory, industrial network theory, and service-dominant logic. These theories were identified as relevant in the course of the research process to further elaborate the emerging discussion of corporate brand co-creation and to challenge the prevailing assumptions underlying positivist branding research. The final part (chapter 3.3) presents the theoretical framework and outlines the co-creation view of corporate branding in the context of B2B SMEs based on the synthesis of the three theoretical approaches adopted in this study.

3.1 Conventional perspectives on corporate branding

The brand literature commonly distinguishes between the brand identity and image (see e.g., de Chernatony 1999). These sub-concepts characterise closely related but distinct perceptual dimensions of a brand. The distinction between identity and image in the branding literature rests on the understanding that a brand can be perceived differentially by its internal and external audiences (Veloutsou 2008).

Brand identity refers to the organisational members’ internal perceptions of the unique and central features of a brand (de Chernatony 2006, see also Aaker 1996, Balmer 2001a, de Chernatony 2010). The concept of brand image, by contrast, refers to how the brand is perceived by customers and other stakeholders (Ballantyne & Aitken 2007). Keller (2003), for example, notes that brand image heavily relies on the brand audiences’ responses to the brand identity claims and is also influenced by information and signals emanating from external sources; therefore, the brands as projected by the company and those perceived by the customers are seldom identical.

In the branding literature, identity, that is, the unique and essential idea of a brand (de Chernatony 2010) has traditionally been understood as a coherent and stable entity (Kapferer 2008) emanating from within the organisation (see Aaker 1996). At the corporate level, brand identity is closely related to the organisation’s identity, which describes what is central, distinctive and enduring about an organisation (Albert & Whetten 1985). It answers the questions of “who are we” and “what do we stand for” as a company (Balmer & Gray 2003, Gioia et al.)
A distinctive and strong organisational identity is considered an effective means to establish, differentiate and manage corporate brands (Joachimsthaler & Aaker 1997, Kapferer 2008, Keller 2007). This is because identity cannot be easily imitated, unlike other brand features such as communications and design (Balmer 1995, Kapferer 1994: 49). A strong identity also serves as an important guide for a company’s activities and behaviour at both the strategic and tactical levels (Dutton & Dukerich 1991, Balmer 2008), which then translates into a positive corporate brand image (Urde 2013).

Compared with organisational identity research, the branding literature particularly emphasises the aspirational nature of identity (da Silveira et al. 2013). For example, Aaker (1996: 68) defines brand identity from the strategist’s perspective as “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create and maintain”. Schultz and Hatch (2006) further note that corporate brand identity claims communicate the desired identity rather than describe the internal reality of a company. Accordingly, the aim of corporate brand identity is to convey not only the unique but also the idealised qualities and strengths of an organisation with clear external objectives. Hence, in addition to “who we are” as a company, corporate brand identity addresses the vision of “how we wish to be perceived” in the eyes of our stakeholders (see Hatch & Schultz 2003, Keller 2007: 60, 672).

The majority of the concerns related to identity in the conventional work on brand management, thus, lie in defining the ideal mix of identity features and communicating them externally to enhance the corporate brand image (see e.g., de Chernatony 2001, Vallaster & de Chernatony 2005, Balmer 2008). According to this logic, corporate brand identity is a collection of organisational identity features and their symbolic representations that are deliberately chosen by managers to express the ideal self-perception of the organisation to its audience. Especially in SMEs and new ventures, corporate brand identity formation is largely explained by the founders’ personal values and vision of how they want the company and its brand to be (see e.g., Balmer 1995, Hatch and Schultz 1997, Rode & Vallaster 2005).

The conventional branding literature also acknowledges the importance of targets in corporate branding. De Chernatony (2001), for example, asserts that, to create a successful corporate brand identity, it is necessary for a company to have an understanding of both its internal and external stakeholder relationships. However, in branding and the development of brand identity, external stakeholders are generally regarded as passive targets. For instance, Kapferer
(2008) states that brand identity, as the innermost substance of the brand, reflects the company and should be identified internally rather than being dictated by the public.

Accordingly, a common view of the conventional perspectives is the understanding that corporate brand identity is defined by the brand strategist and communicated by the marketer to evoke a brand image that corresponds to the identity. However, the branding literature emphasizes that the firm-generated brand identity is by no means automatically accepted by its external audiences (Veloutsou 2008). Thus, the extent to which a company can control its corporate brand identity in a world in which targets are becoming increasingly reflexive, informed and interconnected remains an open question (Faurholt Csaba & Bengtsson 2006).

Increased interaction and dynamism within the competitive environment and stakeholders’ access to organisational processes through networking and co-creation has called into question the understanding of brand identity simply as a managerially defined and stable construct (da Silveira et al. 2013). Rather, brand identity is increasingly considered to be co-created with customers and other stakeholders (Faurholt Csaba & Bengtsson 2006). Furthermore, researchers within the field have recently expressed an increasing need to theorise on the dynamic and social nature of corporate brand identity and called for more interpretive, macro-level analysis of the phenomenon (Cornelissen et al. 2012, da Silveira et al. 2013).

3.2 Paradigmatic shift towards corporate brand co-creation

The contemporary view of the co-created brand has been referred to as a paradigmatic shift in branding (Gregory 2007, Christodoulides 2008, Hatch & Schultz 2008, Merz et al. 2009), and it mirrors the general move from firm-centric perspectives to relationship- and network-centred perspectives in marketing theories and practice (e.g., Gummesson 1997, Håkansson & Snehota 2006). The paradigmatic shift towards corporate brand co-creation is further elaborated in the following section in light of social constructionist organisational identity theory, industrial network theory, and service-dominant logic.
3.2.1 Insights from organisational identity theory—a dynamic approach to corporate brand identity

The insights developed within organisational theory are used in this study to elaborate and theorise on the dynamic and social process of corporate brand identity development and corporate brand co-creation. The dynamic and social nature of identity construction is more widely recognised in organisational identity theory (see e.g., Gioia et al. 2000, Hatch & Schultz 2002, Handelman 2006, Gioia et al. 2010) than in branding research. Scholars adopting the social constructionist perspective in particular have elaborated on the dynamic and social nature of corporate identity (see Ravasi & Schultz 2006). Considering the status of organisational identity theory as the parent discipline of the corporate branding literature (Balmer & Gray 2003), organisational and corporate brand identity are likely to involve similar dynamics. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary perspective offers a richer and more meaningful approach to study corporate branding because, although relatively well-established, branding research, especially in the context of SMEs, has been argued to lack theoretical rigor (Abimbola & Kocak 2007).

Organisational identity from the social constructionist perspective resides in (to some extent) collectively shared beliefs and understandings of the central and relatively permanent features of an organisation (e.g., Gioia et al. 2000). The social constructionist view highlights the central role of organisational members’ and external stakeholders’ collective sense making in the construction of shared meanings and understandings of the corporate brand identity over managerially projected brand identity claims (see Ravasi & Schultz 2006, Scott & Lane 2000). Hatch and Schultz (2004: 378), for example, simply argue that, rather than being managerially defined, “organisational identity is a relational construct formed in interaction with others”, while Handelman (2006: 110) proposes that rather than being passive adopters, external actors act as “active co-producers of corporate identities”.

The previous research on organisational identity has highlighted the role and importance of the organisational context in the formation of the organisation’s identity. The study of Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger (2007), for example, shows that organisations tend to define themselves and their identifying distinctions and similarities in relation to other organisations, competitors and non-competitors, in their field, while the industry in which they operate also provides a categorical
imperative for the basis of organisational identity formation (see also DiMaggio & Powell 1983).

Clegg et al. (2007) further argue that identity construction in organisations is essentially an attempt to obtain legitimacy, endorsement and support for its actions and goals, rather than done simply for the company’s own sake. In support of this, Gioia et al. (2010) find that obtaining legitimising feedback from a company’s stakeholders is an important aspect of corporate identity construction, especially in the company’s early stages, because it enables a company to validate its emerging identity both internally and externally. Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) note that, to gain legitimacy and to resonate with meaning, identity claims should accord with the organisation’s broader cultural context.

Furthermore, previous research on organisational identities has indicated that changes in the company’s internal and external contextual conditions at both the micro and macro levels can challenge the collective self-perceptions and self-categorisations and alter the meanings associated with the corporate brand identity (see Gioia et al. 2000, Gioia et al. 2010). For example, the growth of a company inevitably changes its identity because growth entails a diversity of opinions and practices (Steiner 2003). Corporate brand identity can also be influenced by changes in market needs (see Gioia et al. 2000), competition, industry, environmental conditions and actions taken by other actors in the company’s network, such as competitors and partners (da Silveira et al. 2013, see also Keller & Lehmann 2006).

Past research has also demonstrated that the way organisational members believe that others perceive their organisation (i.e., construed image; Dutton & Dukerich 1991) and how the members would like to be perceived (i.e., desired image; Gioia & Thomas 1996) can trigger attempts to change the corporate identity or image (Gioia et al. 2000). In their classic study on organisational sense-making Dutton & Dukerich (1991) observe that the external images of an organisation act as a mirror that influences how organisational members think about their organisation. Discrepancies between internal and external identity/image perceptions can prompt the organisation to question its self-definition and to change its identity. The findings of these studies demonstrate reciprocal interdependency between corporate brand identity and image and challenge the common belief in branding research concerning the causal relationship between identity and image and the assumption that a strong and distinctive brand identity results in strong brand image (see e.g., Van Riel & Fombrun 2007, Witt & Rode 2005).
According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), social actors form identities essentially by learning, via interaction, to perceive themselves as others do (see also Mead 1934). By building on the findings of Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Mead (1934), Hatch & Schultz (2002) emphasise that an active process of self-reflection accommodates and connects external images and expectations with internal cultural values, through which organisational members come to understand and explain themselves as an organisation and develop a sense of how the organisation wants to be perceived (see also Hatch & Schultz 2003). Cornelissen et al. (2012) further extend these previous findings by arguing that corporate identity emerges through communication between a company and its stakeholders, which is ultimately a matter of the actual events and interactions between the actors, rather than internal interpretations of external images.

According to Gioia et al. (2000), rather than being a stable and fixed entity, organisational identity is characterised by “adaptive instability”, meaning that both stability and change simultaneously exist in the organisational identity construction process. To remain attractive and competitive in a turbulent business environment, corporate brand identity should be able to adapt in response to changing environmental demands and feedback from outsiders (Hatch & Schultz 2002, da Silveira et al. 2013). Gioia et al. (2000), however, reiterate that image-driven identity changes are always, to some extent, constrained by the company’s contextual conditions. As they state, “Organisations cannot construct just any arbitrarily chosen identity. Changes in identity are constrained with non-specified, but nonetheless moderating, environmental bounds” (Gioia et al. 2000: 73). While undergoing identity changes and adaption, a company should, however, remain consistent by being respectful of its core values (da Silveira et al. 2013) and cultural heritage (Hatch & Schultz 2002). Accordingly, the notion of enduring in the context of corporate brand identity has a dynamic meaning, as some identity attributes can be more enduring than others (cf. da Silveira et al. 2013).

In conclusion, extant research implies that corporate brand identity is a dynamic process that originates from within the company and develops over time through inputs from both inside and outside rather than being defined solely by a brand strategist (da Silveira et al. 2013). The literature suggests that organisational identities and brands should be regarded as temporary products of collective meaning making that are shaped by contextual framing and interactions and negotiations between a company and its multiple stakeholders (Cornelissen et al. 2012; see also Gioia et al. 2000, Scott & Lane 2000).
3.2.2 Network approach to branding—actor interdependencies in branding

The network approach to markets emerged in the mid-1980s in the business and industrial marketing literature in response to challenges raised by increased market dynamism, connectedness and interdependency between market actors in the contemporary economy (Mattsson 1985, Håkansson 1982). The network approach proposes a fundamental shift in thinking on the nature of markets from a collection of independent market actors to networks of inter-firm relationships. Accordingly, based on the network approach, networks of inter-firm relationships can be understood as operational structures in which all market actors now must operate. The central elements describing networks are actors, resources and activities (Håkansson & Johanson 1992).

Network actors possess resources that add value for other actors within a network (Wilkinson & Young 2002). Given the vast competition and speed of technological and economic development, no single company can possess resources and develop expertise in all necessary business areas alone (Leitch & Richardson 2003). In an attempt to increase effectiveness and competitiveness in a networked economy, network actors perform activities that combine various resources that allow them to focus on their own areas of core competencies and outsource other, less central business activities (Jarillo 1988, Prahalad & Hamel 1990).

According to Håkansson and Snehota (2006), a company’s effectiveness is determined by its ability to mobilise activities and exploit the resources, skills and knowledge of other actors in its network, rather than its ability to control and exploit internal activities and resources alone (see also Ritter & Gemünden 2003). Forming value adding, co-operative network relationships is therefore considered a prerequisite for companies to access necessary resources and compete in the contemporary business environment (Frels, Shervani & Srivastava 2003).

However, while network relationships represent a great opportunity for a company to access additional resources and influence other actors, they are also a force by which other network actors can influence the company and might even limit or harm its operations (Christopher & Gaudenzi 2009, Ritter & Gemünden 2003, Håkansson & Snehota 2006). Accordingly, the existence of interdependencies in network relationships implies that the actions of one network actor can influence all actors connected in the network and have positive or negative, marginal or substantial effects (Håkansson & Ford 2002, Wilkinson &
Young 2002). Furthermore, given the dynamism of a networked economy, these effects are very difficult to predict and beyond the control of a single company (Håkansson & Ford 2002, Ritter & Gemünden 2003).

Arguably, all companies currently face a networked business environment. The increasing dynamics and interdependencies between market actors in the contemporary networked environment also present new challenges for branding theory and practice. Due to the increase in outsourcing and co-producing business activities, partner firms, such as value adding customers, component manufacturers and service providers, make more integral contributions to a company’s competitiveness and market performance, as well as its brand. Morgan et al. (2007), for example, examine the potential effects of the multiple brand relationships in a strategic service network (see Jarillo 1988; Parolini 1999) in which the overall branded offering is co-produced in collaboration between a focal firm and its partners. The results indicate that, especially in service network contexts, a partner firm’s performance has a key influence on customers’ perceptions of a focal firm, including its corporate brand image (Morgan et al. 2007, see also Fyrberg & Jüriado 2009).

The relationship-centric network approach presents both opportunities and challenges for corporate brand management. Network actors possess important resources that can be leveraged in branding, such as knowledge, expertise and market access (Leitch & Richardson 2003). The ability to utilise the resources made available through network relationships is especially crucial for SMEs’ and new ventures’ corporate brand building and overall performance because their own resources are generally very limited; this makes these firms highly dependent on the resources and knowledge of external actors (Äyväri & Möller 1999). Cooperative relationships with reputable and central network actors are particularly beneficial for SME corporate branding because they generate positive word-of-mouth and help SMEs to acquire trust and legitimacy in the market (Larson 1992, Ojasalo et al. 2008) and to promote their business (Gilmore et al. 2006). Strong network relationships also reduce risks and support the continuity of an SME’s business (O’Donnell 2004).

However, the greater the extent to which organisations become a part of relationships and networks, the more reliant overall corporate brand performance and image will be on the related actors. Given the mutual interdependencies in the networked economy, it is increasingly likely that a company’s corporate brand image (and identity) can be seriously improved but also damaged by the actions of other actors within the network (Christopher & Gaudenzi 2009). Furthermore,
owing to the dynamics of network interactions, brands are increasingly exposed to external influences that can be difficult or even impossible to predict and manage (Einwiller & Will 2002). For example, companies can intentionally attempt to alter the meanings and perceptions attached to a competitors’ brand to improve their own competitive position (Leitch & Richardson 2003). Accordingly, in a highly dynamic and interconnected network environment, brands are only partially under the control of a single company (see Morgan et al. 2007).

Network theory emphasises that no company can really be understood or evaluated without reference to the related network actors, as companies exist in an interdependent, interrelated and dynamic networked context (Jarillo 1988, Wilkinson & Young 2002). In line with the network approach, Leitch and Richardson (2003) argue that the network of relationships in which a company is embedded should be regarded as a core component of its corporate brand identity rather than as an external element. Accordingly, the network perspective extends the traditional company-centred view that considers the corporate brand to be derived solely from the organisation’s own identity and characteristics (see e.g., Balmer 2001b). It further implies that corporate brands should essentially be analysed and managed within the broader context of related actors instead of from the standpoint of a single company (see Leitch & Richardson 2003).

Accordingly, the network approach challenges the traditional firm-centric, top-down view of corporate branding and offers a broader and more integrative perspective to analyse branding because it considers all individuals, groups, organisations and institutions interested in and connected to a brand and accords them an active role (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger 2008, see also Gummesson 2006). Who the salient actors are within a company’s network and how they can influence branding through the activities they perform and the resources they possess are important questions to consider when employing the network approach to corporate branding.

### 3.2.3 Service-dominant logic in branding—a new logic of co-created brands

The emergence of the service-dominant (S-D) logic has shifted the dominant focus in marketing from creating value for customers to co-creating value with customers (Vargo & Lusch 2004) and other stakeholders (Vargo & Lusch 2008), and this also has important implications for branding. The concept of value co-creation originally derives from the innovation literature, which recognises the
benefits of customers’ active involvement in a company’s processes as co-innovators or co-producers of products and services (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2000, Thomke & Von Hippel 2002). Such co-creative activities enhance the company’s capacity for insight to develop innovations that are valued by customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004). The S-D logic proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004) goes further and challenges traditional goods-centric thinking by placing service at the centre of all marketing and value creation and always regarding the customer as the co-creator of value. The S-D logic breaks from neoclassical economic theory, which primarily focuses on transactions, and follows the general paradigmatic change in marketing that emphasises service interactions and relationship quality as the foundations of competitive advantage (Gummesson 1997, Grönroos 2006).

What is considered value co-creation and what the roles of a company and customers are in this process remain a matter of debate in service marketing research (see e.g., Grönroos 2008, 2011); these questions lie outside the scope of this study. Concurrent with social constructivism, corporate brand co-creation in this study is understood from an inter-subjective perspective that acknowledges the dualistic nature of brand value; that is, it may be perceived and constructed differently by different actors. However, value is always contingent on both the value proposition and its use and is therefore relational and inter-subjective (see Löbler 2011). The S-D logic further emphasises the process orientation, over the output orientation, in brand co-creation.

From the customer’s perspective, and according to the S-D logic, (corporate) a brand is conceptualised as a relationship experience (Prahalad 2004). Accordingly, rather than being embedded in a physical good or single transaction, brand value emerges through interactions between the customer and the supplier (Merz et al. 2009) and the perceived value-in-use of the company’s offering over time (Ballantyne & Aitken 2007). Given the interactive nature of relationship experience and the inter-subjective nature of value, customers are considered integral to the branding process and co-creators of brand value (see e.g., Payne et al. 2009). Research on corporate branding has further expanded the focus beyond customers to include other important stakeholders, given the multi-stakeholder orientation of a corporate brand (Hatch & Schultz 2010).

From the company’s perspective, and according to the S-D logic, a corporate brand is defined as a relational asset, the value of which to the company is contingent on past, present and future interactions with its various stakeholders (Ballantyne & Aitken 2007). Accordingly, rather than creating an appealing
company name and logo, corporate branding is an on-going process of communicating and enacting the corporate brand promise in everything that the company does. The promise that a corporate brand conveys can be built up or broken down in every interaction along the continuum of stakeholder relationships, whether physical (e.g., product use) or mental (e.g., advertisement), direct (e.g., service encounter) or indirect (e.g., word-of-mouth) (Ballantyne & Aitken 2007).

More recently, the S-D logic has moved away from regarding value co-creation as taking place in direct interactions between a company and its stakeholders to include all interactions occurring within value creating ecosystems (Vargo & Lusch 2008). According to this view, corporate brand co-creation involves dynamic interactions with and between the various stakeholders rather than only interactions between the company and its customers (see Ballantyne & Aitken 2007) and it is, thus, in line with the network theory. Recent research on brand and online communities has demonstrated the importance of interactions between community members in the process of collective value creation (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould 2009) and multiple stakeholders in co-constructing brand meaning (Vallaster & von Wallpach 2013) to support this argument.

Due to actor interdependencies, especially in B2B markets, a company can never be in complete control of its corporate brand experience or value through its own actions but can only make brand promises (cf. value propositions) (Ballantyne & Aitken 2007, Lusch & Vargo 2006). Fulfilling the corporate brand promise is largely dependent on the actions of related actors within the value creating ecosystem (e.g., resellers, aftersales service). In practice, there are various interrelated stakeholders that can influence the brand experience and value beyond the company’s direct control (see Jones 2005, Brodie, Glynn & Little 2006) and, thus, play a significant role in co-creating the corporate brand image that is reliant on both direct and indirect brand experiences (Ballantyne & Aitken 2007).

The view of brand co-creation within the value creating ecosystem encourages a broader perspective than is typically found in the branding literature and is also consistent with the network theory, which emphasises the interdependence and interconnectedness of actors (see e.g., Håkansson & Snehota 1995, Gumnesson 2006). The S-D logic further suggests that all economic and social actors should be regarded as resource integrators and service providers in value creation rather than as producers or consumers of value (Vargo & Lusch 2008). The traditional distinction between market actors as the producers and
consumers of value is not adequate in the context of co-creation because it suggests a linear, one-way process (Vargo & Lusch 2011). Instead, the S-D logic proposes that the contextual roles of different actors as value co-creators are better understood and explained from the perspective of *mutuality* in interactions and resource integration because it is seen as the mechanism generating and sustaining the two-way process of co-creation (Vargo & Lusch 2008, 2011). The S-D logic provides an appropriate perceptual lens to study corporate brand co-creation, especially between companies and their business partners, because such relationships are considered as mutual by nature.

### 3.3 Synthesis of the theoretical approaches—the co-creation view of corporate branding in a B2B SME context

A corporate brand is increasingly understood as something that is co-created between a company and its various stakeholders, instead of being produced by a company alone (e.g., Hatch & Schulz 2010). However, the existing literature does not provide a single, explicit definition of what constitutes corporate brand co-creation in particular or value co-creation in general (see Grönroos 2011). Given the novelty of the research area, a synthesis of the insights obtained from the theories of organisational identity and industrial networks, service-dominant logic and the social constructionist research philosophy enables the characterisation and conceptualisation of corporate brand co-creation and the provision of a more elaborate understanding of the phenomenon. The ideas of dynamic identity, networked business environment, and co-creation of value fundamentally further challenge some prevailing assumptions underlying the existing branding literature and suggest interesting avenues for further research (cf. Alvesson & Sandberg 2011).

The traditional, company-centric view regards the company as the creator of a corporate brand and emphasises the role and importance of managers and employees as the main actors in branding (e.g., de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley 1998, Harris & de Chernatony 2001). The traditional branding theories are, however, largely derived from positivist standpoint, which maintains the assumptions of linearity and consistency in brand communications (Cornelissen *et al.* 2012). Considering the reflexivity of modern society, traditional one-way communication can no longer be considered a sufficient method for branding.

Furthermore, the traditional views appear to rely on the assumption that there is a clear boundary between internal and external stakeholders. However,
considering the partner dependencies in the contemporary network economy, the boundaries between internal and external stakeholders, especially close business partners, often become blurred. According to the co-creation perspective, all actors—both internal and external stakeholders—are seen as actively participating in and contributing to the corporate branding process through their actions and resources.

The traditional company-centric view also primarily focuses on dyadic company-customer relationships. By considering network theory and the multi-stakeholder orientation of corporate brands, the co-creation view emphasises that corporate brands exist in and are part of networks of interrelated and interconnected relationships. Consequently, according to the co-creation view, the nature of corporate brand interactions and relationships become more complex and multifaceted and encompass multiple different stakeholders. Furthermore, the sphere of corporate brand communications covers the on-going brand-related public discourse that goes beyond the company-governed and company-moderated brand communications emphasised in the company-centric view.

The co-creation view of corporate brands also challenges the traditional belief that is often presented in the branding literature that brand identity and image, that is, the internal and external perceptions of the brand, are causally related. Previous theories arguing for a causal relationship between brand identity and image appear to hold the assumption that corporate brand identity attributes are clear, stable and well recognised among the managers and organisational members. However, Corley and Gioia (2004), for example, argue that newly established firms in particular often face “identity ambiguity”, which implies difficulties in clearly defining the core identifying features of an organisation. Considering the dynamic nature of identity construction presented by organisational identity theory and the active role of multiple actors stressed in the SD-logic, within the co-creation view of corporate brands, the brand identity and image are perceived as interrelated and mutually influencing one another.

Overall, the co-creation view of the corporate brand distances itself from the company-centric, static and managerially focused conceptualisations of the corporate brand and understands the brand as being actively co-created through an interactive and social process involving multiple meaning-making actors. The question of how external stakeholders are involved in activities and resources related to the corporate brand that contribute to the corporate brand image and or identity, however, warrants further research. The co-creation view of corporate brands further emphasises the creation of mutual value as the central function of a
brand. Whereas the company-centric view has traditionally considered the managerial perspective and focused on the structures and outcomes of branding, within the co-creation view, the processes, interactions, relationships, networks and shared meaning become the locus of research and deserves further inspection. Table 2 summarises the co-creation view of corporate brands in comparison with the company-centric view.

Table 2. Comparison of company-centric and co-creation views of corporate brands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic variables</th>
<th>Company-centric view of corporate brands</th>
<th>Co-creation view of corporate brands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualisation of corporate brands</td>
<td>Identifier</td>
<td>On-going, interactive and social process of meaning making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand identity</td>
<td>Symbolic representation, material object</td>
<td>Shared beliefs concerning the unique and distinctive features of a brand created through interactions and communications between a company and its stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Managerially defined, ideal self-perception of the brand’s unique and distinctive features</td>
<td>Dynamic, emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Static, fixed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand image</td>
<td>External reflection of the brand identity The “truth” about a brand</td>
<td>Actively produced interpretations of the brand based on all brand-related information and public discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity–image relationship</td>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>Interrelated, mutually influencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main actors</td>
<td>Managers, employees</td>
<td>Multiple stakeholders, internal and external</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles of internal/external stakeholders</td>
<td>The company as the creator and producer of a brand and external stakeholders as passive brand recipients and consumers</td>
<td>All stakeholders as active participants in the branding process through their actions and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of brand relationships</td>
<td>Dyadic, company-customer</td>
<td>Networked, interrelated and interconnected and involving multiple stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of brand interactions</td>
<td>Direct, one-way</td>
<td>Complex, bidirectional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sphere of brand communications</td>
<td>Company-governed and company-moderated brand communications</td>
<td>On-going public discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand’s function</td>
<td>To protect the brand owner from imitation</td>
<td>To provide mutual value to various stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective of branding</td>
<td>To enhance company image and awareness</td>
<td>To create shared meaning with and legitimise brand’s existence in the eyes of the stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To acquire resources</td>
<td>To (co-)create resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of research</td>
<td>Structures and outcomes, management perspective</td>
<td>Processes, interactions, relationships, networks, shared meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 Research method

This study applies qualitative research methods that are informed by a social constructionist research philosophy to gain in-depth understanding and enrich the theory of corporate brand co-creation. This study involves three individual research papers that each has a unique purpose, and the theories and methods were selected accordingly. This chapter explains how the research process as a whole unfolded and how and why particular theories and methods were used.

4.1 Research process

The research process originally emerged from a theoretical and practical interest in studying B2B SMEs’ networks and their implications for B2B SME branding. In 2009 and 2010, the researcher worked as a master’s thesis student in research project funded by Tekes (the Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation) called CoBra (Corporate branding) at the marketing department of Oulu Business School. CoBra was a 2-year project (1.3.2008–28.2.2010), the aim of which was to understand and clarify the role and importance of corporate branding in the particular context of B2B SMEs. Branding is commonly associated with consumer companies, such as Coca-Cola, that are known worldwide. However, by working with several local small B2B companies during the research project, it became evident that the issue of branding is also of particular interest to SME practitioners operating in B2B markets. The competitive advantage resulting from a strong brand was acknowledged and welcomed by B2B SME managers. However, a lack of both practical knowledge and theoretical understanding related to branding in the specific context of B2B SMEs caused confusion and distortion concerning branding practices and their implementation in companies.

Stakeholder relationships and networks, by contrast, are more widely recognised as key for B2B SMEs’ operations and success in both research and practice. Nevertheless, the role of stakeholder relationships and networks was not explicitly considered in B2B SME branding. No existing research had incorporated the insights of network theory into branding, and the literature in general offered very little reference to the relational, multi-stakeholder perspective to branding with only a few exceptions (see e.g., Jones 2005, Gregory 2007). Previous branding research conducted in the network context primarily focused on the travel industry and place branding (see Hankinson 2004), while external actors’ involvement in branding had primarily been studied in the context
of consumer brand communities (e.g., McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig 2002, Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001, Muñiz & Schau 2005). These discussions provided some theoretical stepping-stones to understand branding from a relational, multi-stakeholder network perspective; yet, these discussions were of limited value in the specific context of B2B SMEs. Furthermore, at the early stage of this research process, the theoretical discussion on brand co-creation had barely begun in the wake of the emergence of the S-D logic (see Merz et al. 2009) and primarily focused on service branding (e.g., Brodie et al. 2006, Brodie & de Chernatony 2009). Accordingly, the initial purpose of this study was not to study brand co-creation per se but rather B2B SME branding in networks. The research topic was eventually revised as a result of concurrent advancements in both the theoretical discussion and the researcher’s theoretical and empirical understanding of brand co-creation and B2B SME corporate branding more generally.

The research process was characterised by abductive reasoning. An abductive research process is performed through dialectic interaction between existing research and empirical insight (Dubois & Gadde 2002). The role of existing theory in abductive research is to conceptualise and provide a pre-understanding of the phenomenon under study. The conceptualisation of a pre-understanding conceptualisation makes it possible to frame the study and helps to understand and interpret the empirical evidence related to the phenomenon, without being restricted to previous views (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

An abductive approach is appropriate in situations in which the phenomenon under study lacks strong theoretical foundations and the information at hand is therefore incomplete (Dubois & Gadde 2002). This study elaborates on the emerging, yet un-established, theory of brand co-creation by building on insights and concepts from industrial network theory, S-D logic and organisational identity theory and adopting a social constructionist perspective, which suggests that brand value and meaning emerge from company-stakeholder interactions rather than from the company’s actions alone. Hence, the study adopts different theoretical assumptions and a different worldview from more conventional perspectives to branding. Considering the relative lack of prior academic research on the topic, an abductive research approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to extend existing theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998) and to discover new ones (Dubois & Gadde 2002). An abductive approach is also often used in constructionism (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010).

The research process of this study can be divided into three sequential, yet overlapping, phases that are characterised by different research problems whereby
one problem informed and motivated the next. Different theoretical discussions and research methods were employed at different phases, as they were considered relevant and insightful to elaborate on and respond to the specific research problem at hand in each phase. All of the discussions provided slightly different theoretical lenses to view corporate brand co-creation as a socially constructed phenomenon and revealed different aspects of it. All the three phases also involved unique empirical data and research and each generated a research paper as an outcome. The theoretical and empirical understanding of the phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation developed throughout the research process and provided insights that that made it possible to answer the research questions. The research process of this dissertation and its three interdependent phases are outlined in Figure 2.

The theoretical basis of the study evolved in response to the insights that emerged from the empirical data and the development of the researcher’s personal theoretical understanding of the phenomenon throughout the research process. Given the abductive concurrency of the empirical fieldwork and theoretical conceptualisation, it was impossible to identify all the literature in advance, but the need for theory was instead identified during the process (see Dubois & Gadde 2002). The decisions concerning research methods were guided by the unique purpose of each research paper and the underlying philosophical assumptions. The choice of theories and methods was ultimately made through a subjective assessment.

In the first phase related to the research conducted for research paper 1, brand co-creation in B2B SMEs was elaborated from the network theory perspective. The research was driven by a desire to further understanding of the influence of external actors on branding in B2B SMEs. The new branding logic, which emphasises multi-stakeholder interactions in branding, resonates with network theory, which presumes that network actors are interdependent and influenced by one another’s actions (see e.g., Håkansson & Snehota 1995). Network theory is also widely used to study the actions of and interactions among actors within B2B relationships (Gummesson & Polese 2009). An expert interview method adopting a narrative approach to data collection (see e.g., Riessman 2008) was undertaken to obtain empirical insights into how network actors participate in B2B SME’s branding and to develop the existing theory. The results of the first research paper highlight the importance of network relations in B2B SME branding and provide initial information on the network actors’ different branding activities. The paper thus provides an overview of the understudied phenomenon of branding in an
inter-organisational setting in which the brand image is constantly exposed to external influences.

In the light of the findings of the first research paper, it became evidently useful and interesting with respect to both theory and practice to deepen existing understandings of the role of a company’s key stakeholders in brand co-creation. Accordingly, the relational view, which regards the external stakeholders as active participants rather than passive targets in branding remained the central interest of the research. However, in the second phase, which concerns the research conducted for research paper 2, the focus was narrowed from the network to a company’s key business partners, with a particular interest in studying their involvement in the co-creation of corporate brand image and in considering the reasons that they were willing to engage in such co-creative actions. The purpose of the second research paper was to examine corporate brand image co-creation in greater detail and from different business partners’ perspectives, which required a company-level investigation, thus suggesting a case study approach. One of the informants involved in the first study was contacted to participate in the case research. Based on the pre-understanding obtained through the first interview, the company that he represented was seen as providing an attractive setting in which to study corporate brand image co-creation (the case selection is explained in greater detail in chapter 4.3). The roles of business partners as brand image co-creators were examined from the perspective of the S-D logic, which emphasises mutuality in interactions and resource integration between actors as the force sustaining value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch 2008, Vargo & Lusch 2011). Concepts from role theory (see e.g., Biddle & Thomas 1966, Biddle 1986, Ashforth 2000) were applied as a tool to analyse the partners’ brand image co-creative actions.

In the third phase, related to the research conducted for research paper 3, corporate brand identity development was examined through longitudinal case analysis by building on the insights from the organisational identity theory. During the first and second phases of the research process, the researcher closely followed the development and growth of the case company. Through the interviews and archival materials collected during the first and second phases, the researcher became familiar with the “story” of the case company, which seemed to include interesting references to the social, interactive and dynamic nature of the corporate branding process. The data collected over time enabled longitudinal examination of how the corporate brand identity developed. Organisational identity theory, especially the social constructionist perspective on it, provided
useful insights to theorise on the phenomenon of corporate brand identity development as a social process. Organisational members’ narratives were collected and analysed to capture the collectively shared beliefs and understandings concerning the corporate brand identity development process. Familiarity with the company, its members and operational principles achieved over the years enabled an in-depth access to persons, issues and data.

4.2 Narrative approach

The first and third research papers in this study employ a narrative approach. While in the first paper, narratives are used as a data collection method, in the third paper narrative approach is employed in both data collection and as a method of data analysis. Narrative is an interpretive approach in the social sciences that focuses on examining how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives through stories (Riessman 1993). The narrative approach stresses the simultaneous presence of multiple, interlinked realities and
embraces the importance of a wider social context in shaping them and is therefore concurrent with constructionist research philosophy (ibid.).

Hinchman and Hinchman (1997: xvi) define narratives in human science as ‘discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insight about the world and/or people’s experiences of it’. Accordingly, a narrative is a story with a beginning, middle and end, which provides an understanding of its essential elements (i.e., focal events, relevant actors and their motives) and the reasons for and consequences of them in a wider contextual setting (cf. Elliott 2005, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki & Aarikka-Stenroos 2013).

The narrative form of communication is considered central to the process of knowledge sharing and interpreting and understanding social phenomena. Storytelling is a natural way for individuals to share information (Riessman 1993: 2–4) and to express their feelings and experiences (Elliott 2005). The narrative approach, thus, provides an effective means to develop a close relationship with the interviewees and access to real-life incidents (Czarniawska 1998, Cohen & Mallon 2001, Polkinghorne 2007). According to Riessman (1993: 5), the narrative approach particularly emphasises the value of understanding a social phenomenon from the perspective of the individuals involved in it. Narratives allow the interviewees to evaluate the relevant information for a given subject and an opportunity to offer new insights into a phenomenon (Aarikka-Stenroos 2010). For these reasons, a narrative approach was considered an especially effective method for data collection in the first phase to obtain rich empirical evidence concerning network actors’ participation in branding in terms of specific factual actions, activities and events.

In the third phase, a narrative approach was adopted as the method for both data collection and analysis to study corporate brand identity development. Narratives provide both temporal and thematic insights into a social phenomenon and make it possible to demonstrate the interrelations and causal links between events under specific circumstances (Elliott 2005: 11-13). Narratives are therefore considered particularly suitable for capturing and explaining complex, social processes (e.g., Pentland 1999, Elliott 2005, Makkonen, Aarikka-Stenroos & Olkkonen 2012) such as identity development.

Humphreys and Brown (2002) propose that narratives are especially appropriate for studying identity in an organisational context because narratives make it possible to penetrate the shared cultural values and beliefs of organisational members (see also Pentland 1999). Accordingly, narratives of
organisational members provide first-hand information on their perceptions of the central and unique features of a corporate brand. As they are always situated in a specific time, place and culture, narratives also reveal contextual information about a phenomenon (Aarikka-Stenroos 2010) that is essential to consider for understanding and explaining processual development and change (Pettigrew 1990, Pettigrew, Woodman & Cameron 2001). By telling stories, informants interpret past experiences and choose to report certain actions and events based on their perceived significance (Elliott 2005: 14). Narratives, thus, reveal evidence of a personal meaning attached to specific actions and events (Polkinghorne 1988, 2007) and allow the researcher to evaluate their implications in relation to the whole (Elliott 2005: 7). Furthermore, longitudinal narrative data provide information beyond individual experiences and make it possible to explore and explain changing interrelations between a process and its context (Pentland 1999).

As a method of analysis, the narrative approach is particularly useful for examining processes because the time and sequence are naturally built into a narrative structure (Pentland 1999, Mäntymäki-Paavilainen & Aarikka-Stenroos 2013). An analysis of the narrative structure enables the researcher to evaluate apparently independent and disconnected events and experiences and render them as meaningful and related parts of a whole beyond their explicit evaluation (Elliott 2005: 18, Polkinghorne 1988: 36). Furthermore, examining the narrative structure of the data, beyond their semantic content, makes it possible to contextualise a phenomenon (Silverman 2000) and to uncover the broader mechanism shaping it (Pettigrew 1997, Pentland 1999).

In conclusion, the narrative approach can be considered an effective means to uncover the social, dynamic and interactive process of branding in general and brand identity development and brand co-creation in particular. The data generation and analysis processes are more thoroughly described and explained in chapters 4.4 and 4.5.

4.3 Case study design and case description

The research method used in the second and third research papers centres on a single case study. A case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin 2003: 13). It is especially appropriate for answering “how” and “why” questions that go beyond statistical generalisation (ibid.) such as those presented in this research.
Both the second and third research papers involve the same purposefully selected company: an SME that operates in B2B markets. The company was established by three first-time entrepreneurs in 2009 on the basis of a technical innovation that offers a novel technological solution for indoor positioning. Currently, the company develops, manufactures and sells integrated indoor positioning solutions based on the original technological innovation that includes both hardware and software. The solution is primarily intended for use in the security and health care sectors (i.e., hospitals, nursing homes, and schools). Since its foundation, the company has grown steadily to employ approximately 20 persons. The company is based in Finland and the UK, but it operates in more than 20 countries around the world through its reseller network. The reason that the company was selected for investigation and how the case in the case study is defined and studied differs between the two individual research papers. As Stake (1995) notes, case study is essentially a choice of an object to be studied rather than a methodological choice or a data collection technique per se.

The purpose of the second research paper was to explore the business partners’ different roles in corporate brand image co-creation from the perspectives of multiple partners. The study determines and examines the roles based on the partners’ brand image co-creative actions, that is, what they do that influences the corporate brand image, rather than on what their positions as business partners are (see Heikkinen et al. 2007, Biddle 1986). A case study approach was chosen because it is particularly useful to study contextual and dynamic, real-life phenomena that involve human actions and interactions that are not covered by a comprehensive theory (Yin 2003: 18) such as brand co-creation (Hatch & Schultz 2010). Given the novelty of the research topic, it was also necessary to explore the phenomenon within its natural setting (Yin 2003). B2B SMEs in general were regarded as a particularly attractive setting in which to study brand image co-creation because their contextual characteristics, namely, partner interdependency and resource limitations, make them reliant on collaborative strategies with external actors (see e.g., Ford et al. 2002, Bretherton & Chaston 2005).

To generate empirical data on the phenomenon of corporate brand image co-creation from a multi-stakeholder perspective, a managing director of a B2B SME was asked to participate in the research and about the possibility of securing the participation of the company’s key business partners in interviews. The managing director had participated in the first study and was therefore familiar to the researcher, and he agreed to grant access to conduct the research. Based on the
pre-understanding obtained through the previous interview conducted for the first research paper, the company that he was operating appeared to offer a rich and informative empirical example (Yin 2003) of the phenomenon of corporate brand image co-creation—one that would make it possible to thoroughly capture and study the phenomenon. This is because the company was branding at the corporate level and its business strategy was strongly based on close co-operation and resource integration with its various key business partners. The company was, thus, chosen to represent the empirical context of the phenomenon of corporate brand image co-creation that was defined as the case (see Stake 2000). The research setting comprised the manager and the company’s key business partners (i.e., the actors in the case, see Stake 2000) whose actions and the reasons for those actions were examined to explain the phenomenon in greater depth. The understanding obtained concerning corporate brand image co-creation within the representative empirical setting can be compared with the general understanding of the phenomenon and vice versa.

The analysis of the data from the second research paper indicated that corporate brand identity should be examined as an on-going, evolving and social process that involves multiple internal and external stakeholders rather than as a static managerially defined entity. The case study method was adopted because it enables a multifaceted, in-depth exploration of such a complex, social phenomenon as identity development is, especially in an organisational context (see Eisenhardt 1989, Creswell 1998, Woodside 2010).

The same case company was studied for the third research paper because, based on the insights obtained from the first and the second research papers, the company appeared to offer a particularly revealing and information-rich case example (Patton 2002) of the process of corporate brand identity development. During data collection, the company had passed through its new venture phase and showed signs of its corporate brand identity development and change along with its growth and expansion. Moreover, given the data collected during the three-year period, the case enabled adopting a longitudinal approach towards the phenomenon. A longitudinal approach is particularly useful for the in-depth exploration of development and change within organisations and for comprehending the nature of complex social processes because it provides evidence of related events and experiences over a period of time (Bryant 2006, Court 2010) and provides access to the contextual conditions that are relevant and meaningful yet difficult to distinguish from the concept at hand (Yin 2003 see also Stake 1995, 2000). Dubois and Gadde (2002) argue that learning through a
longitudinal, in-depth case study is the most advantageous method to understand interaction and interdependencies between a phenomenon and its context, which is considered especially decisive for constructionist research (Guba & Lincoln 1994, Crotty 1998).

Furthermore, the case company made it possible to collect sufficient data from different perspectives (e.g., managers, employees) and sources (e.g., interviews, marketing material, etc.) for an in-depth analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994). Overall the company provided a unique opportunity to study the process of corporate brand identity development in action and to obtain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon in its natural setting (Yin 2003). The opportunity to investigate, document and explain this type of longitudinal case can be considered especially valuable for advancing the knowledge of corporate brand identity as a complex, social phenomenon.

4.4 Data generation

Interviews are a key means of accessing the subjective realities of research participants and are the most commonly used data generation method in interpretive constructionist research (Walsham 2006). All three studies used qualitative interviews as the primary data generation method. The interviews were conducted with purposefully selected individuals who possessed particular knowledge related to the research problem at hand. In the second and third studies, the interview data were supplemented with secondary data that offered insights into the company being studied, including memos from meetings, web pages, Facebook pages and marketing material, such as brochures, product catalogues, promotional videos and presentations of the case company over its history.

The interviews were conducted between February 2010 and May 2013 in three stages that all included a different set of participants except one person, namely the managing director of the case company, who was interviewed in both the first and second interview stage. At each stage, the interviews were guided by a slightly different approach and protocol based on the research problem and methodological decisions made and involved different interview guides (see Appendices 1, 2, 3 and 4). Specifically, narrative or semi-structured approaches to data collection or a combination of the two were adopted. The researcher personally conducted the interviews.
The first phase of data generation involved narrative key informant interviews of B2B SME professionals. Members of a regional association of professionals working in high-technology industries were invited to participate in the research. The main criterion for the selection of the interviewees was that they had years of personal experience in SMEs operating in B2B markets either at the management or expert (e.g., consultant) level. The number of the interviewees was increased by using the snowball method, as the first two participants were asked to recommend other knowledgeable candidates. Face-to-face narrative interviews were conducted with a total of six B2B SME experts. The interviewees were both technically oriented and sales and marketing personnel and had somewhat different academic and professional backgrounds, which guaranteed a variety of perspectives and experiences. The dominant concern when conducting the interviews was the interviewees’ personal experiences of and professional insights into the realities of their practice related to the phenomenon under study, i.e., *network actors’ participation in B2B SME branding*. Following the narrative approach, the interviewees were invited to share stories from their past that they perceived to be relevant to the subject matter. When conducting the interviews, the aim was to maintain a conversational style, and the interviewees were encouraged to freely voice their own thoughts and experiences. A few clarifying questions were asked to set the scene and to stimulate the storytelling, such that the ‘power of the knowledge’ rested with the narrators (see Czarniawska 2004: 48). The focus was the evidence and details related to various actions, those of either the narrator himself or someone else, which the narrator considered meaningful in relation to a B2B SMEs branding process.

The second stage of the data collection was performed in 2012 and involved interviews with the case company’s managing director and key business partners. Before conducting the personal interviews, the researcher attended two meetings held between the company and its marketing agency. The insights obtained from the meetings were used as background information on the company’s branding strategy, actions, targets and the persons involved. The managing director was then interviewed to obtain further, in-depth information and determine his opinion on how the partners were involved in co-creating the company’s corporate brand image. The insights obtained were complemented with the interview of the same person conducted two years earlier. The information from the meetings and the interviews with the managing director provided the rationale for selecting the most appropriate partners to act as informants for the research. Subsequently, interviews with seven persons, including representatives of a Customer, a
Reseller, a Supplier, a Marketing agency, and an Investor/board member were conducted. The focus of the interviews was the business partners’ corporate brand image co-creative actions and the motives and reasons underlying those actions, that is, how the partners felt they were involved in co-creating the corporate brand image, i.e., what actions they perceived they had taken to contribute to it and why. A semi-structured interview guide was used to modify the questions to fit the situations of the different business partners and to elaborate on the topics that they felt were important. In addition, secondary data were collected to complement the interview data.

The third stage of the data generation was performed seven months later and involved members of the case company from different organisational levels (i.e., managers and employees) and functions (i.e., marketing, sales and R&D). The aim was to develop holistic insight into the process of corporate brand identity development by listening to the different voices in the organisation. The interview data collected at the third stage were added to the existing data on the case company consisting of the interviews with the managing director conducted in 2010 and 2012 and all of the secondary data generated throughout the research process. According to Pentland (1999), the story of an organisational process can be accessed through its representatives who have experienced it and are able to share it. Langer and Varey (2008) further emphasise that studies on corporate brand identity should not be based on examining management decisions and opinions alone. Solely considering management’s perspective would be insufficient or even misleading because their experiences and opinions of the realities of the company often differ from those of employees. Hence, to create an integral and persuasive construction regarding the development of corporate brand identity, it was important to include perceptions from across the organisation.

In total, 15 organisational members were interviewed in the third stage in early 2013. A combination of a semi-structured and narrative approach was adopted for the interviews. The questions revolved around the interviewees’ perceptions and experiences of the company’s uniqueness and distinctiveness; developments and progress; changes and turning points over the years; its culture, values and vision; and the challenges and opportunities facing it. The questions were structured around present, past, and future issues to address the process elements of the development of the corporate brand identity. In addition, the interviewees were invited to narrate their personal experiences and past events related to the issues that appeared significant in relation to the research
phenomenon. The interviewees were not asked to produce a single, comprehensive story but rather to describe what happened and when and why in greater detail, that is, to present smaller, episodic narratives or chains of events related to the research phenomenon (see Flick 2002). According to Flick (2002), the value of this type of episodic interviewing that combines the narrative and semi-structured interviews lies in its ability to generate both narratives and more specific answers regarding the topic at hand. The researcher can then use a rich collection of episodes to contextualise the phenomenon and to capture the sequence of activities, content, and flow that construct the full story (Paavilainen-Mäntymäki & Aarikka-Stenroos 2013).

With the consent of the participants, all of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis by the researcher. Table 3 outlines the interviews, the type of the interviews at each stage, the interviewees, the dates and length of the interviews and their connection to the individual research papers as a data source. Altogether, the data include 27 hours and 45 minutes audio recordings and 389 pages of interview transcripts of 27 interviews.
Table 3. Interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Paper 1</th>
<th>Paper 2</th>
<th>Paper 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1st interview stage: Narrative interviews with B2B SME experts and professionals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Director</td>
<td>11.2.2010</td>
<td>1 h 2 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Consultant</td>
<td>12.2.2010</td>
<td>1 h 6 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and Marketing Director</td>
<td>16.2.2010</td>
<td>1 h 18 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>19.2.2010</td>
<td>1 h</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;D Director</td>
<td>19.2.2010</td>
<td>1 h 8 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of International Sales</td>
<td>26.2.2010</td>
<td>1 h 38 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2nd interview stage: Semi-structured interviews with the case company’s manager and key business partners</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>16.5.2012</td>
<td>40 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investor/ Board member</td>
<td>28.8.2012</td>
<td>58 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing agency:</td>
<td>18.9.2012</td>
<td>1 h 6 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>18.9.2012</td>
<td>1 h 6 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Director</td>
<td>18.9.2012</td>
<td>1 h 6 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer:</td>
<td>5.9.2012</td>
<td>55 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Manager</td>
<td>5.9.2012</td>
<td>55 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner/Consultant</td>
<td>17.9.2012</td>
<td>50 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier</td>
<td>19.9.2012</td>
<td>40 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3rd interview stage: Semi-structured/ narrative interviews with the case company’s employees</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice President Marketing and Sales</td>
<td>12.4.2013</td>
<td>55 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations Manager</td>
<td>19.4.2013</td>
<td>1 h 44 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesperson Finland</td>
<td>19.4.2013</td>
<td>1 h 20 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesperson Germany</td>
<td>22.4.2013</td>
<td>1 h 19 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;D Manager</td>
<td>23.4.2013</td>
<td>52 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software Developer</td>
<td>23.4.2013</td>
<td>1 h 5 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Manager</td>
<td>23.4.2013</td>
<td>53 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Application Engineer</td>
<td>23.4.2013</td>
<td>54 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics Designer</td>
<td>25.4.2013</td>
<td>1 h 2 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software Developer</td>
<td>25.4.2013</td>
<td>1 h 6 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Financial Officer</td>
<td>25.4.2013</td>
<td>1 h 41 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmer</td>
<td>29.4.2013</td>
<td>38 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software Developer</td>
<td>29.4.2013</td>
<td>35 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Application Engineer</td>
<td>29.4.2013</td>
<td>46 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesperson Finland</td>
<td>8.5.2013</td>
<td>1 h 34 min</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5 Data analysis

Although the data collection and analysis are usually reported as separate, successive phases of the research process, they typically overlap in qualitative research. Each research paper employs an interpretive approach to the analysis of qualitative data. Interpretation of the data in each research paper began as the data were being collected and transcribed. After this initial stage of the analysis, the whole data set was read through several times to obtain an overall picture of the studied phenomenon before proceeding to actual coding and categorising the data. In each research paper, the interviews were treated as the primary data source. QSR N’Vivo software was used to store and manage the interview data and to assist in the analysis process to maintain consistency within the analysis (Patton 2002). However, the specific method of analysis differed in each individual research paper, and the analysis process consistently followed a unique path.

The data set used in the first research paper consisted of narratives of B2B SME experts concerning the research topic. The narrative data were analysed thematically (i.e., analysis of narratives; see Polkinghorne 1995: 5–6, 13–21) with the aim of providing a rich overall description of the under-researched phenomenon (see Braun & Clarke 2006). The focus was particularly on the semantic content of the data, that is, “what” was told instead of “how” things were told or what the ‘latent’ themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006) could be. The unit of analysis was the branding actions of network actors. The abductive process involved thematic coding of the identified actions of network actors that were considered to contribute to a B2B SME’s branding efforts, then merging the codes into broader themes and classifying the themes into categories through comparison, refinement and verification of the findings. No rigid coding frames were applied; rather the codes were developed over the course of the analysis while attempting to answer the research question. The interview question also served as the first organising scheme because it reflected the theoretical pre-understanding of the phenomenon. In addition, the data were searched for meaningful units that were perceived to capture something essential regarding the research phenomenon (Braun & Clarke 2006).

In the second research paper, observations from two meetings with a marketing agency were used as background information and to guide the actual data collection. The primary data consisted of interviews with the case company’s managing director and key business partners. The preliminary analysis focused on identifying the partners’ brand image co-creative actions. The first stage of data
editing and reduction was performed in a flexible manner (Braun & Clarke 2006), while remaining sensitive to existing theories (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Flexibility in interpretive analysis is important because it allows new insights to emerge (Braun & Clarke 2006). After the data reduction, the analysis proceeded with a more systematic coding and categorisation of the empirical evidence (Miles & Huberman 1994). To confirm the actions reported in the interviews, the secondary data consisting of company web pages, press releases, brochures, promotional videos and manuals were analysed in parallel with the interviews, which added to the construct validity (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). To understand the actions and their reasons in greater depth, the unstructured set of identified actions was further analysed based on two dimensions drawn from existing theory that were derived abductively (Dubois & Gadde 2002). A 2x2 coding matrix constructed based on the two theoretical dimensions drawn from previous research was used to visualise and organise the data (Miles & Huberman 1994) to compare similarities and differences in the actions and to categorise them (Robson 2002: 482). The first dimension distinguished between the actions that took place in interaction with the company and the actions that took place in interaction between stakeholders, and the second dimension distinguished between the actions that corresponded with agreed-on role expectations and those that were proactively adopted from the business partners’ initiatives. In addition, the actions were perceived to influence the brand image either directly or indirectly—a categorisation that emerged inductively from the data.

The focus of the analysis in the third research paper was the company members’ perceptions of the corporate brand identity and its development and change over time. A narrative analysis approach (see Polkinghorne 1995) was adopted with an emphasis on both the thematic and sequential ordering of the data (see Elliott 2005). Corporate brand identity is an abstract and multifaceted construct that is impossible to unliterary express and therefore difficult to directly access (Silverman 2000). In fact, according to Cornelissen et al. (2012) the “actual” identity is impossible to define because it is always open to interpretation, and multiple, equally valid interpretations can co-exist simultaneously. To uncover what the interviewees believed was central and unique about the corporate brand, the interview data were coded for different meanings that the interviewees attached to the corporate brand identity through their communicative statements (see Cornelissen et al. 2012) to identify common themes. Then, the different brand identity meanings were analysed in relation to the context of the development of a new B2B venture by examining the narrative
structure of the data (Pettigrew 1997, Pentland 1999). This involved reconstructing data consisting of different company members’ narratives into an overall company story with a beginning, a middle and an end (see Polkinghorne 1995: 5–6, 13–21). The secondary data also played a central role in the analysis. For example the company’s marketing materials, such as different versions of the company’s web pages, manuals and brochures were carefully studied, which helped to fill in the details and better capture the process changes in the corporate brand identity development process. The analysis made it possible to distinguish the key activities, the internal and external contextual factors, and the interplay between them and the change in the meanings attached to the brand identity. As a result, four sequential, yet partially overlapping, phases in the development of corporate brand identity and in the context of the development of a new B2B venture were identified.

The findings from all of the individual research papers informed the answer to the main research question of the study. Table 4 outlines the research methods and design of the individual research papers. An overview of the individual research papers is presented next.
Table 4. Research methods and design of the individual research papers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods and design</th>
<th>Paper 1</th>
<th>Paper 2</th>
<th>Paper 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research method</td>
<td>Interview research</td>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>Longitudinal case study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research perspective</td>
<td>Network perspective</td>
<td>External, perspectives of multiple business partners</td>
<td>Internal, organisational members’ perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary data</td>
<td>6 expert narrative interviews</td>
<td>2 interviews with the managing director</td>
<td>15 semi-structured interviews and episodic narratives of organisational members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 semi-structured interviews of 7 business partners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary data</td>
<td>Not used</td>
<td>- Memos from 2 company–marketing agency meetings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Web pages (1.0, 2.0, 3.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Facebook pages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Product sheets, manuals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Press releases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Brochures/product catalogues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Promotional videos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical method</td>
<td>Thematic analysis of narratives</td>
<td>Coding and data display</td>
<td>Narrative analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of the analysis</td>
<td>The branding actions of network actors that affected an SME’s brand image</td>
<td>Business partner’s brand image co-creative actions and their motives</td>
<td>Company members’ perceptions of the corporate brand identity and its development and change over time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 Review of the results of the papers

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the need to understand the processes of actions and interactions through which external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand and to advance understandings of corporate branding in B2B SMEs. The three individual research papers and their main findings are presented next. Table 5 presents a summary of the research papers and how they answer this study’s research questions.

5.1 Network actors' participation in B2B SME branding (Research Paper 1)

The first research paper explores how network actors participate in branding in the context of B2B SMEs. The study is among the first that augments the brand co-creation literature and addresses the issue of multi-stakeholder corporate brand co-creation by using network theory and concepts. The study views the branding process in an inter-organisational setting, focusing particularly on the ‘loose’ network of actors (see e.g., Möller & Wilson 1995, Håkansson & Snehota 1995) that participate in B2B SME branding, as opposed to an intentionally formed ‘strategic network’ (see e.g., Jarillo 1988, Parolini 1999) or a collectively constructed ‘network brand’ governed by a group of actors (Hankinson 2004, Moilanen 2008). Using narrative interviews of B2B SME experts and professionals, the study analyses the branding actions of network actors that influence a B2B SME’s branding.

The study shows that social and business network relationships influence the B2B SME’s branding, as does the nature of the company’s internal branding decisions and identity. The study presents a comprehensive view of the branding actions that are performed by network actors, in the context of B2B SMEs. The study further distinguishes between the network actors’ direct and indirect branding actions. The direct actions influence branding separately from the company-governed brand management process, whereas indirect actions influence branding through the changes brought about in the SME’s internal operations.

The direct actions include influencing the functional brand value, providing a reference, creating word of mouth (WOM) and media publicity, co-promoting the brand, and in addition designing, communicating, and positioning the brand. The direct participation does not stop at brand image creation and with external
stakeholders but also involves the creation of brand identity and the internal stakeholders of the company. The indirect actions include influencing the company’s managerial decision making, providing feedback, offering financial support, and creating new contacts.

The findings propose and define the concept of a *branding pool*, expanding the focus of branding beyond the boundaries of an individual organisation into the context of nets. A branding pool refers to those network actors that directly participate in B2B SME branding activity. The branding pool is always company specific and depends, for example, on the specific industry, business model, and stage of business (for context-specific constructs, see Halinen & Törnroos, 2005). Accordingly, the depth of the pool is always contextual, as is the extent of the impact that the actors within it exert on the SME branding processes at a given time.

The study suggests that the influence of network actors may be either positive or negative, stressing the need to attempt to identify and orchestrate the activities of the branding pool. An SME cannot manage its branding pool, but it can mobilise stakeholders in branding to improve brand performance in the market.

The concept of the branding pool can be employed in future research to identify the key actors that play an important role in a company’s brand success by performing direct branding activities. It further became apparent during the study that it is important to consider both interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships within a B2B SME’s network when identifying its branding pool.

5.2 The roles of business partners in corporate brand image co-creation (Research Paper 2)

The second research paper continues to elaborate B2B SME corporate branding in an inter-organisational setting to further understand the dynamics of corporate brand-image co-creation. The study explores *what different action-based roles do business partners play in co-creating a corporate brand image?*

The study examines the roles of business partners in co-creating a corporate brand image by analysing their corporate brand co-creative actions through a case study within a B2B SME context. The study applies a conceptual framework developed by combining the literature on brand co-creation and service-dominant (S-D) logic with role theory in analysing the actions. Role theory is a perspective in sociology and social psychology that assumes that a large share of human activities are contingent on socially defined (Biddle 1986) or proactively adapted
(Ashforth 2000) roles and the rights, duties and expectations related to them. This study conceptualises corporate brand image from the social constructionist perspective as a shared reality, resulting from an interactive processes involving the co-creative actions of interrelated actors concerning the corporate brand.

The study adopts the perspectives of multiple business partners’ to analyse the phenomenon. The empirical data were generated through interviews with the manager and key business partners of the case company including a customer, reseller, supplier, an investor/board member and a marketing agency. The interview data were complimented with data from secondary sources, such as memos from meetings and marketing material.

The study shows that partners can play different roles as corporate brand image co-creators beyond their formal, i.e., position-based, roles as business partners (e.g., customer, supplier) by performing various corporate brand co-creative actions. The study suggests a typology of seven action-based corporate brand image co-creator roles that business partners can play, which were identified based on the case analysis: Co-innovator, Co-marketer, Brand specialist, Knowledge provider, Referee, Intermediary and Advocate.

The study further demonstrates that these different roles describing corporate brand image co-creation are based on agreed-on role expectations that are negotiated between the company and its partners or are proactively adopted by the partners. Furthermore, brand image co-creation occurs in direct partner-company relationships or in interactions between partners and other actors within a value creating ecosystem that is beyond the company’s direct control.

The study shows that mutual benefit is the central driver of brand image co-creation and role adoption. The findings suggest that because of their mutual orientation and interdependency, the co-creation of corporate brand image is particularly evident between B2B partners. The partners’ involvement is also dependent on how they engage in co-creating the brand image and what their co-creation capabilities and resources to co-create are.

This study also identifies the ability of partners to co-create corporate brand image both directly and indirectly. The study suggests that business partners are able to contribute to the corporate brand image through their input into the company’s overall development, although they are not involved in traditional brand communication as such. Partners may not only communicate for the brand on behalf of the company but can also participate in the on-going discourse concerning the corporate brand with the company and within the wider value creating ecosystem. The study argues that using a social constructionist approach
to examine the branding phenomenon (cf. Cornelissen et al. 2012) is particularly useful for understanding the social nature of corporate brand co-creation.

5.3 Development of New B2B Venture Corporate Brand Identity (Research Paper 3)

The third research paper further challenges the predominant objectivist view of branding and elaborates the view of corporate brand identity as a social phenomenon. The paper examines the development of corporate brand identity in the context of the development of a new B2B venture through a longitudinal, qualitative case analysis. The data were generated through 17 semi-structured narrative interviews with managers and employees of the case company, which were analysed narratively. Based on this analysis, the study describes the process of corporate brand identity development in the context of the development of a new B2B venture and provides a processual framework for understanding how corporate brand identity develops in the context of a new B2B venture.

The analysis reveals that the development of corporate brand identity and the context of new B2B venture development are largely intertwined and mutually interdependent processes. The study argues that the development of corporate brand identity is contingent on various internal and external contextual factors and activities that characterise the context of new B2B venture development at a given time.

The study also shows that the development of corporate brand identity is closely related to the organisation’s understanding of its market. The study argues that corporate brand identity development is essentially an interactive learning process that requires social interaction between the company and its external constituents in the market and should not be considered the decision of internal management alone.

Based on the analysis, the study identifies and classifies four sequential, yet partly overlapping, phases that describe the developments of corporate brand identity and the context of a new B2B venture as parallel processes: 1. Latent corporate brand identity—searching for market opportunities, 2. Emergent corporate brand identity—identifying and adapting to the target market, 3. Clarified corporate brand identity—focusing on the target market and 4. Adjusted corporate brand identity—exploring new market opportunities. This study further specifies the different meanings attached to the corporate brand identity within each phase from the internal perspective and explains how they evolve in
response to different activities in and changes to various internal and external contextual factors.

The study finds that the social processes of market interactions are central to the development of corporate brand identity because they enable organisational learning and reflection. The study suggests that new B2B venture managers should identify, clearly define and learn about the company’s target market and focus on building a corporate brand identity that not only reflects its internal qualities but also appeals to the target market. Managers should also actively reflect on its corporate brand identity to be capable of adapting to changes in the firm’s operational context.

Table 5. Summary of the research papers.

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<tr>
<th>Summarising point</th>
<th>Paper 1</th>
<th>Paper 2</th>
<th>Paper 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>Key findings</td>
<td>The study identifies a set of actions performed by network actors that influence the company’s brand image either directly, by influencing the functional brand value, providing a reference, creating WOM and media publicity, co-promoting the brand, and indirectly, by influencing the company’s managerial decision making, providing feedback, offering financial support, and creating new contacts.</td>
<td>The study finds that partners can play different roles as corporate brand image co-creators beyond their formal roles by performing various brand co-creative actions, and identifying seven action-based brand image co-creator roles that partners can play. The study shows that partners’ corporate brand image co-creative actions take place in their relationship with the company or other actors in the network and are based on agreed-on role expectations or are proactively adopted by the partners.</td>
<td>This study shows that corporate brand identity develops along with a company’s understanding of and adaptation to its competitive environment and addresses the role of company–stakeholder interactions, cooperation and dialogue in the process. The study identifies four phases in the process of corporate brand identity development that are intertwined and mutually interdependent with the phases of the development of a new B2B venture: 1. Latent identity—searching for market opportunities, 2. Emergent identity—identifying and adapting to the target market, 3. Clarified identity—focusing on the target market and 4. Adjusted identity—exploring new market opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summarising point</td>
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<td><strong>Key contributions</strong></td>
<td>The study uses industrial network theory to advance branding research and presents a comprehensive view of network actors' branding activities. The study also distinguishes between the direct and indirect branding activities of network actors and suggests the new concept of the branding pool to conceptualise and identify the most prominent actors that directly participate in branding.</td>
<td>Being the first to adopt role theory in a brand co-creation context, the study defines and conceptualises the specific roles that business partners can play in the process of corporate brand image co-creation: Co-innovator, Co-marketer, Brand specialist, Knowledge provider, Referee, Intermediary and Advocate. In addition, the study contributes to the extant branding literature by examining brand co-creation from a social constructionist perspective.</td>
<td>Building on organisational identity research and the social constructionist perspective, the study offers an empirically grounded process model of corporate brand identity development and identifies four phases that characterise and explain the development of corporate brand identity in the context of a new B2B venture in greater detail.</td>
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<td><strong>Answers</strong></td>
<td>RQ1 &amp; RQ3</td>
<td>RQ1 &amp; RQ3</td>
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6 Discussions and implications

This chapter discusses the main findings of this study and their implications. Conclusions are reached by answering the research questions. The theoretical and conceptual contributions and managerial implications of the study are then discussed, which is followed by an evaluation of the study and its limitations and suggestions for future research.

6.1 Conclusions

The primarily purpose of this study was to contribute to the need to understand the processes of actions and interactions whereby external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand. This study also sought to advance both theoretical and practical understandings of corporate branding in the understudied context of B2B SMEs. The following main research question was presented: How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand? The main research question is approached through three complementary sub-questions: 1) How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand image? 2) How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand identity? 3) What characterises the relationships among stakeholders involved in corporate brand co-creation? The first and second sub-questions focus on corporate brand co-creation by addressing different aspects of the brand phenomenon, namely, identity and image, while the third sub-question focuses on what characterises corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships. The study’s research questions are answered based on the synthesis of the theoretical approaches of this study and the empirical understanding obtained through the three original research papers. The three sub-questions are addressed in the following section, after which the answer to the main research question is presented.

How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand image?

The first sub-question (How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand image?) is answered based on the findings from research papers 1 (Mäläskä et al. 2011) and 2 (Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015). An answer to this question includes insights into different actions through which external stakeholders participate in corporate branding, how corporate brand image co-creation occurs and how those actions influence a corporate brand image.
A corporate brand image concerns the externally held perceptions of a company as a whole. The present study concludes that corporate brand image is not solely the creation of a company but is also influenced by the company’s external stakeholders and is somewhat dependent on their effort and ability to co-create it. Mäläskä et al. (2011) and Mäläskä and Saraniemi (2015) identify and specify several actions performed or contributed to by external stakeholders that influence the corporate brand image (see papers 1 and 2). The findings support and extend the recent assumption that companies do not have total control over their brand image (Morgan et al. 2007); rather, brand image results from a process of interactions between a company and its stakeholders and is essentially co-created (Merz et al. 2009).

The findings of this study emphasise that, especially at the corporate level, brand image co-creation is a holistic process that involves various stakeholders in addition to customers and actors at different organisational levels and functions in addition to marketing and communications. This is in line with Hatch and Schultz (2010), who suggest that corporate brand co-creation should follow an organisation-wide and multi-stakeholder approach. This study extends the previous findings by showing that key business partners in particular can be intensively involved in co-creating a company’s corporate brand image for their own and the company’s benefit. As shown by Mäläskä and Saraniemi (2015) (see paper 2), a company’s business partners can adopt different roles as brand image co-creators beyond their formal roles as business partners based on mutual agreement with the company or their own personal interest and willingness to co-create.

This study further shows that corporate brand image co-creation occurs through brand image co-creative interactions between a company and its stakeholders and between different stakeholders in a network (Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015). This finding supports the stakeholder brand equity model proposed by Jones (2005), which emphasises that in addition to interactive relationships with various stakeholders, corporate branding also involves the interconnected relationships among multiple stakeholders in a company’s network. As illustrated by Mäläskä and Saraniemi (2015) (see paper 2), corporate brand image co-creative interactions between a company and its stakeholders involve knowledge sharing and cooperation related to co-innovation, co-marketing and brand design, for example. Advocating, recommending and distributing the brand are examples of corporate brand image co-creative
interactions that take place between stakeholders in a network that are beyond the company’s direct involvement and control.

The study also finds that external stakeholders can influence the corporate brand image either directly or indirectly. External stakeholders can create or alter the corporate brand image association held by other market actors directly through their corporate brand related actions, such as service performance and word-of-mouth communications. Collaboration with certain actor(s) in itself can also create or alter a company’s corporate brand image associations in a market. In addition to having a direct influence, external stakeholders can also indirectly influence a corporate brand image through their contributions to the company’s overall performance, competitiveness and development in terms of the resources, information and networks to which they provide access. The study suggests that distinguishing between direct and indirect influences on brand image is particularly important for understanding the complex and holistic nature of the phenomenon of corporate branding that represents the company as a whole and involves multiple stakeholders. This study further stresses that corporate brand image co-creation can result in either positive or negative influences on corporate brand image depending on the performance quality of external stakeholders.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be argued that external stakeholders are active co-creators and transferees of corporate brand image associations in the market. Furthermore, collaboration with different stakeholders in different areas of business can be considered an effective means to improve the corporate brand image. This is especially the case in B2B SMEs, which generally rely on external resources and for which credibility is often highly dependent on external references. In summary, this study concludes that various external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand image through interactions with a company or other stakeholders that influence the corporate brand image either directly or indirectly.

**How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand identity?**

The second sub-question (*How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand identity?*) is primarily answered based on the findings obtained from the third research paper (see Mäläskä 2015) and supported by the findings from papers 1 (see Mäläskä *et al.* 2011) and 2 (see Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015). An answer to this question includes insights into the process nature of corporate
Corporate brand identity in this study is defined as the organisational members’ collective perception of the unique and distinctive features of a corporate brand. In the previous literature, corporate brand identity, especially in SMEs, has traditionally been understood to be anchored in the founder’s personal vision and values (Abimbola & Vallaster 2007) and conceptualised as a rather static and consistent entity (e.g., Hatch & Schultz 2003). However, this study finds that, rather than stable and fixed, corporate brand identity is an ongoing and dynamic process that involves interactions between a company and its various external stakeholders.

This study suggests that corporate brand identity develops along with a company’s understanding of and adaptation to its competitive environment and addresses the central role of company-stakeholder interactions, co-operation and dialogue in the process of corporate brand identity development (Mäläskä 2015). Branding research generally regards identity as something emanating from and residing inside the organisation (Aaker 1996, Kapferer 2008). While previous research also acknowledges and emphasises the relationships with the targets as an important element of brand identity, their role in the development of brand identity is considered passive (de Chernatony 2001, Kapferer 2008). This study finds that internal characteristics, such as a founder’s vision and philosophy, are the key guiding features of corporate brand identity development at an early stage. However, based on the findings of Mäläskä (2015) (see paper 3), a corporate brand identity that is relevant, meaningful and appealing to its target audience can only be developed in active interaction with its targets, instead of in isolation. This is in line with de Chernatony (2001), who argues that to create a successful identity, it is necessary for a company to have a good understanding of its customers and other stakeholders. However, this study further emphasises the active role of multiple different stakeholders in the process.

This study shows that stakeholder interactions, co-operation and dialogue not only enhance a company’s understanding of its stakeholder relationships and competitive environment but also its own strengths and weaknesses and competitive position, consequently strengthening its corporate brand identity. As demonstrated by Mäläskä (2015) (see paper 3), through stakeholder interactions, co-operation and dialogue, organisational members become capable of better defining themselves as an organisation and express the idea of the central and unique features of the corporate brand. This is in line with and further elaborates
on Faurholt Csaba and Bengtsson (2006), who suggest that branding is better understood as an on-going and dynamic process of identification that involves multiple brand meanings and stakeholders in the brand rather than defining a fixed set of identity features. The findings of Mäläskä (2015) (see paper 3) indicate that learning, reflecting and adapting through stakeholder interaction, cooperation and dialogue is especially vital for the development of new ventures’ corporate brand identity because companies in their early stage often have a vague understanding of themselves, their relationships and the market.

This study further extends these previous findings by showing that the meanings associated with the corporate brand identity evolve over time as organisational members modify their interpretations of the corporate brand’s central and distinctive features as a result of an interactive process of learning, reflecting and adapting (Mäläskä 2015) (see Figure 1 in paper 3). Adapting the corporate brand identity according to changing environmental demands and external feedback is an attempt to ensure that it is attractive to its target audience, which is in line with da Silveira et al. (2013) (see also Hatch & Schultz 2002). The finding of this study further emphasises that corporate brand identity is co-created within and in response to the social and economic context in which companies and their stakeholders coexist. Changes in the internal and external contextual conditions maintain the continuous and dynamic process of corporate brand identity development.

The findings of Mäläskä et al. (2011) (see paper 1) and Mäläskä & Saraniemi (2015) (see paper 2) further show that external stakeholders perform indirect brand co-creative actions that contribute to a company’s internal operations, competence and overall development and, consequently, its corporate brand image. These indirect brand co-creative actions can also change the organisational members’ self-perceptions of the company and influence the company’s corporate brand identity. The findings of Mäläskä et al. 2011 (see paper 1), for example, show that companies adjust their internal operations and branding decisions in response to the feedback, needs and requirements of external actors. This finding supports and extends the findings of Handelman (2006), who proposes that external actors are actively involved in co-producing corporate identities.

This study also found that the internal perceptions of corporate brand identity are influenced by the brand’s external image. In the branding literature, brand identity and image are traditionally considered causally related, two opposite ends of a linear process of company-governed brand communication (e.g., Aaker 1996, Witt & Rode 2005). However, the theoretical and empirical findings of this study
indicate that the previous assumptions regarding a causal relationship between brand identity and image are oversimplifying and misleading. This study suggests that the creation of corporate brand identity and image are not separate and sequential processes but, instead, develop in parallel as the organisational members’ incorporate their reflections of the external image into their definitions of the corporate brand identity (Mäläskä 2015) (see paper 3).

Based on the findings of this study, corporate brand identity is an on-going, social and dynamic process that involves a company’s internal and external stakeholders and is not a static collection of managerially pre-defined identity features. These findings support and amplify the arguments of Hatch and Schultz (2004) and Cornelissen et al. (2012), who emphasise that corporate identity is ultimately constituted through interactions and communications between an organisation and its stakeholders, rather than defined solely by managers. In summary, in response to the second sub-question, this study concludes that external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand identity through their interactions, co-operation and dialogue with the company, indirect brand co-creative actions and identity-image interplay.

What characterises the relationships among stakeholders involved in corporate brand co-creation?

The third sub-question (What characterises the relationships among stakeholders involved in corporate brand co-creation?) addresses what types of stakeholder relationships are conducive to brand co-creation. The findings of papers 1 (Mäläskä et al. 2011), 2 (Mäläskä & Saraniemi 2015) and 3 (Mäläskä 2015) regarding the actors involved in corporate brand co-creation and the nature of their relationships with a company provide insights to answer to the third sub-question.

The study shows that at the relationship level, brand co-creative stakeholder relationships are characterised by dependency and mutuality. The findings of this study suggest that the level of dependency determines an external stakeholder’s salience in the brand co-creation; the greater the company’s dependency on an external stakeholder, the stronger is that stakeholder’s influence on a company’s corporate brand. For example, Mäläskä and Saraniemi (2015) (see paper 2) show that, especially for a small B2B company, the corporate brand image can be highly dependent on the company’s partner delivering the brand promise to its customers. The findings of Mäläskä (2015) (see paper 3) further highlight that
given its resource dependency, a small company may ultimately adjust its operations and branding decisions to meet the needs and requirements of external actors. In addition, this study shows that corporate brand co-creative relationships are especially apparent between actors with a shared orientation. As shown by Mäläskä and Saraniemi (2015) (see paper 2), explicit reciprocal interests based on mutual, direct or indirect, monetary or other benefits motivate external stakeholders to engage in brand co-creative actions. Through brand co-creation, actors can, for example, gain access to or create new resources and enhance competitiveness. In addition to shared economic interest, close inter-personal relationships also add to the sense of mutuality and encourage external stakeholders to co-create a corporate brand. This finding supports Vargo and Lusch (2008, 2011), who suggest that mutuality in interactions is the key mechanism generating and sustaining the two-way process of value co-creation between market actors. This study further suggests that corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships are particularly evident in B2B corporate branding, given the resource interdependence and mutuality between business partners.

At the relationship portfolio level, brand co-creative stakeholder relationships can be characterised as context-dependent, evolving and dynamic. The concept of the branding pool introduced in the paper 1 emphasises that every company is engaged in a unique and evolving set of corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships. The constellation of relationships depends, for example, on the type of company, specific industry, business model, and stage of business and embodies both economic and social elements. The longitudinal analysis of brand identity development in Mäläskä (2015) (see paper 3) further demonstrates the evolving nature of corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships. The findings of Mäläskä (2015) (see paper 3) show that the role and importance of various stakeholders as corporate brand co-creators vary across different phases of the company’s development over its lifecycle. For example, while the initial importance of investors is often emphasised because these individuals serve as the first ‘referees’ of the company and their approval contributes trustworthiness and legitimacy to an SME’s corporate brand, the customers’ and partners’ roles as referees later become more valid and important. The findings of Mäläskä (2015) (see paper 3) also reveal the dynamics of the development of corporate brand co-creative relationships. The model of the development of corporate brand identity in the context of B2B new venture development presented by Mäläskä (2015) (see paper 3) suggests that corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships are
likely to be influenced by the processes of internal and external contextual change and events of the past, present and future and are, thus, dependent on the time and situation.

In summary, this study concludes that the relationships among stakeholders involved in corporate brand co-creation are characterised at the relationship level by interdependency and mutuality and at the relationship portfolio level as context-dependent, evolving and dynamic.

**How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand?**

The main research question (*How do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand?*) is finally answered based on the answers to the sub-questions. This study shows that corporate brand co-creation is a continuous and interactive process that involves not only the managers and employees of a company but also a dynamic and evolving group of external stakeholders. The findings further demonstrate that both corporate brand image and identity are susceptible to external stakeholders’ influence and develop through a co-creative process between a company and its various stakeholders. In the context of corporate brand co-creation, brand identity and image are difficult to separate from one another because they are mutually influential and in constant interplay.

This study concludes that external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand by engaging in different corporate brand image co-creative interactions with the company and/or other stakeholders in a network. External stakeholders co-create the corporate brand image with a company, for example, by co-marketing, co-innovating, sharing knowledge and designing the brand. Advocating, recommending, delivering and producing the brand are examples of brand image co-creative interactions among external stakeholders.

While some external stakeholders’ corporate brand co-creative interactions can be understood to directly influence the corporate brand image, for example, by enhancing brand trust and credibility, awareness, satisfaction and appearance, others indirectly influence corporate brand image through their impact on a company’s performance and competitiveness and the resources and networks that they provide access to and the development of its corporate brand identity.

This study shows that corporate brand identity develops along with a company’s understanding of and adaptation to its competitive environment. The development of corporate brand identity involves processes of learning, reflecting and adapting in which external stakeholders play a central and active role. Co-
operation, interaction and dialogue with external stakeholders enable learning about the company itself, its relationships and competitive context and contribute to the development of the organisational members’ collective understanding of the central and unique features of a corporate brand. Organisational members’ interpretations and perceptions of the corporate brand identity are also influenced by their reflections of the corporate brand image, which is substantially co-created with external stakeholders, as elaborated in the answer to the first sub-question. Furthermore, co-operation, interaction and dialogue with external stakeholders enable organisational members to access and reflect upon externally held corporate brand image associations. The study further shows that stakeholder co-operation, interaction and dialogue play an important role in the development of the corporate brand identity, as companies adapt their internal operations and management decisions according to the feedback, needs and requirements of external stakeholders in an effort to create a meaningful and distinctive corporate brand.

The findings of this study emphasise that corporate branding is a holistic process that requires cooperative interactions between a company and its various stakeholders instead of relying on the company’s actions alone. However, this study further asserts that although corporate brand co-creative interactions with external stakeholders benefit corporate branding in principle by leading to improvements in brand trust and awareness or company’s competitiveness, for example, co-creation can result in either a positive or negative influence on the corporate brand, depending on the external stakeholders’ performance quality and ability to co-create. Not all stakeholders contribute equally to corporate brand co-creation, nor are they all equally invited to co-create the brand or engage in such interactions because their interest in co-creating—and indeed their co-creation capabilities—differ.

The degree of external stakeholder involvement in brand co-creation depends on the nature of the organisation, and in principle, every company works with a unique set of stakeholders whose significance in branding is dependent on the situation. Who are the most significant stakeholders in terms of corporate brand co-creation and the level of influence they have on corporate brand image or identity are also likely to change over time in line with developments and changes in the competitive environment and the company itself. The findings of this study regarding how do external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand are outlined in Figure 3.
6.2 Theoretical contributions

This study of the co-creation of corporate brands through stakeholder relationships provides several theoretical contributions to the emerging theoretical discussion on brand co-creation and branding in B2B SMEs, particularly at the corporate level.

invert the traditional company-centric, top-down view of branding. A synthesis of these dimensions permits the creation of more elaborate insights into the co-creation view of the corporate brand (see Table 2) and the revelation of new aspects of the phenomenon. The theoretical insights provided by these discussions and the findings of this study show that the network of stakeholder relationships in which companies are embedded is integral to the branding process and important to consider when analysing corporate brand image and identity constructions, development and competitive performance.

This study’s second contribution to the brand co-creation literature is that it adopts a multi-stakeholder perspective to study corporate brand co-creation (see Gyrd-Jones & Kornum 2012). Brand co-creation has been defined as a process that involves all company stakeholders (Merz et al. 2009). A comprehensive understanding of corporate brand co-creation can therefore only be obtained by including the views of all relevant actors. However, no previous studies have integrated the perspectives of multiple business partners, organisational members and the network to study corporate brand co-creation. Existing branding research sheds light on the contribution that various external stakeholders such as customers (Merrilees 2007), partners (Morgan et al. 2007), suppliers (Campbell et al. 2010, Erevelles, Stevenson, Srinivasan, & Fukawa 2008) or resellers (Ojasalo et al. 2008) can make to co-creation of brands. However, the previous research on brand co-creation has primarily focused on either the company’s or the customers’ perspective (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger 2008, Vallaster & von Wallpach 2013).

The study’s third contribution to the understanding of brand co-creation is made by describing how external stakeholders co-create a corporate brand. The study offers an empirically grounded model of the corporate brand co-creation process (Figure 3) that clarifies the relationship dynamics between a company and its external stakeholders in the co-creation of corporate brand image and identity. Although external stakeholders are increasingly recognised as co-creators rather than passive targets of branding, the previous literature has been limited with respect to how a corporate brand is co-created with and influenced by external actors (e.g., Payne et al. 2009, Vallaster & Lindgreen 2011). This study shows that both corporate brand image and identity are susceptible to the influence of external stakeholders and develop through a co-creative process that involves a company and its stakeholders. This study also presents a comprehensive view of corporate brand image co-creative actions involving a company and its stakeholders and distinguishes between external stakeholders’ direct and indirect influence on corporate brand image. This study also highlights the key role of
stakeholder co-operation, interaction and dialogue in the development of the organisational members’ collective understanding of the corporate brand identity through the processes of learning, reflecting and adapting. Supporting the dynamic view of brand identity, the findings of this study are in line with and further elaborate those of Faurholt Csaba & Bengtsson (2006) emphasising the process of identification in branding. This study also supports and extends the dynamic view on identity construction proposed in organisational identity theory (e.g., Gioia et al. 2000) and more recently in branding (da Silveira et al. 2013), suggesting that corporate brand identity develops over time through mutually influencing inputs from both internal and external actors.

This study also enriches the theoretical understanding of corporate brand identity development as a social and dynamic process by applying the insights and concepts from organisational identity theory and by examining the process empirically. To the best of the author’s knowledge, this is the first study to offer a longitudinal case analysis of the development of a corporate brand identity that makes it possible to examine and reveal the process nature and dynamics of the phenomenon in detail. Such insights would have been inaccessible if one were to employ snapshot methods. The question of how identity develops has been more widely addressed in organisational identity research (Hatch & Schultz 2002, Corley & Gioia 2004, Gioia et al. 2010). However, this question remains substantially neglected in the branding literature. The need for a deeper understanding of the social and dynamic process of identity development has only recently been addressed in branding research (Cornelissen et al. 2012), and the issue remains only conceptually examined from the perspective of well-established companies (da Silveira et al. 2013).

This study makes its fourth contribution to the understanding of brand co-creation by defining the characteristics of corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships and distinguishing between relationship-level and relationship-portfolio-level characteristics. Extant research emphasises that brand co-creation takes place in network or service ecosystems (Merz et al. 2009, Gyrd-Jones & Kornum 2012), brand or online communities (Vallaster & von Wallpach 2013) or brand interest groups (Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger 2008). However, there is no consensus definition of what characterises corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships.

Finally, this study contributes to the nascent research on B2B SME branding by emphasising and demonstrating the importance of external stakeholder relationships and networks in B2B SME corporate branding and by identifying
and characterising corporate brand co-creative stakeholder relationships. External
stakeholders’ role in B2B branding has received very little attention in the
literature despite that business relationships and networks are commonly
considered valuable resources and essential to the competitive positioning of B2B
companies (Håkansson & Snehota 2006, Jarillo 1988). Instead, the limited
research on B2B branding has primarily focused on examining the brand’s role in
B2B relationships (Lynch & de Chernatony 2004) or influence on B2B purchase
decisions (Mudambi 2002) and the preferred brand attributes in B2B markets
(Bendixen et al. 2004, Beverland et al. 2007). The majority of the research on
branding in general and brand co-creation in particular is conducted in consumer
markets (Leek & Christodoulides 2011). Although the importance of branding for
B2B SMEs’ growth and performance has been increasingly emphasised in the
recent literature (Baumgarth 2010, Merrilees et al. 2011), the existing research
offers few empirical insights into the strategies and means by which brands in
B2B SMEs should be built and managed. This study contributes to the existing
knowledge by showing that building brand co-creative relationships with external
stakeholders and exploiting external stakeholders’ resources and knowledge are
particularly decisive in branding B2B SMEs given their limited branding
resources, partner dependency and the importance of referees in B2B markets.

6.3 Methodological contribution

In addition to the theoretical contributions to the discussion of brand co-creation,
the present study can also be argued to provide a methodological contribution
through its methodological choices. This study contributes to the literature by
demonstrating the benefits of adopting the social constructionist approach in
research on corporate branding and particularly that on brand co-creation. The
constructionist perspective understands a brand as a shared reality that is
collectively constructed through interactions (Ballantyne & Aitken 2007). The
constructionist approach provides an alternative set of basic assumptions that
differs from that of the positivist view, which considers brands as the creation of a
company and primarily treats external actors as passive targets and consumers of
company-generated one-way brand communication (e.g., Balmer & Gray 2003,
Keller 2003).

The constructionist approach goes beyond firm-centric and customer-centric
models of branding and regards the broader group of interconnected and
interdependent actors as co-constructors of a brand and emphasises the multiple
stakeholder perspectives and collective meaning creation underlying the branding process. Examining a brand as a social construction is thus particularly suitable to understand branding, especially at the corporate level, because this context involves a wide range of stakeholders.

The study shows that focusing on the social aspects of a brand such as relationships and shared meaning and understanding as emphasised in the constructionist approach makes it possible to shed new light on the branding process and to reveal aspects of branding beyond the managerially controlled, internal branding process and activities. Such aspects remain generally overlooked within positivist approach, which primarily focuses on management decisions and promotional attributes such as logos and slogans as objects of analysis.

This study shows that the constructionist perspective is particularly appropriate to examine corporate brand co-creation because it offers deeper insights into the social dynamics and stakeholder interactions underlying the branding process and, thus, extends the firm-centric perspective in branding found in positivist research. In line with Payne et al. (2009), this study also finds that examining the relationships and interactions involved in brand co-creation requires considering its broader context, which implies a constructionist perspective.

### 6.4 Managerial implications

The findings of this study have important implications for corporate brand management, especially in B2B SMEs and new ventures. A significant implication is that the increased emphasis on value co-creation in contemporary business practice and the network dynamics in the business environment indicate that relationship interdependencies must be more systematically accounted for in branding. Particularly in the case of branding at the corporate level in a B2B environment, these relationship interdependencies constitute multiple stakeholders beyond the customers, which adds to the complexity of brand management. Accordingly, instead of simply controlling internal branding processes and communications, the establishment of value adding networks and the management of brand co-creative partnerships are increasingly important for a corporate brand’s success. In addition, brand managers need to recognise that the corporate brand image is not solely reliant on the company’s actions and the behaviour of its managers and employees but also on the actions of related actors.
that it cannot necessarily predict or manage. This shifts the focus of corporate brand management outside of the organisational boundaries.

The major managerial challenge is to identify the external actors who can influence the corporate brand image and performance and to develop relationships with those actors who can support the company in its branding efforts. The study identifies various actions that external actors perform that are important for corporate branding and can influence the corporate brand image either directly or indirectly. Managers can use their knowledge of these actions to exert concerted effort to detect the most prominent actors within their company’s network and build relationships with these actors to improve corporate brand image and performance. Tracking the prospective network actors in the company’s environment is a continuous process because the effect and importance of different actors in branding can change over time and new influential actors may emerge. For example, integration with the providers of a new technology can create new business opportunities for a company and its corporate brand.

Integrating the key business partners into the brand image co-creation process and utilising their knowledge, skills and other resources in corporate brand building should be considered a central function of corporate brand management in addition to managing internal branding strategies and tactics. Especially at the corporate level, brand image co-creation should be considered a holistic and integrated process that includes the involvement of partners in various organisational processes and functions from product/service innovation to marketing communications and delivery. Interactive relationship building, mutuality and shared objectives in partner relationships are important for engaging partners in corporate brand co-creation. For example, managers can encourage and motivate partners to act in favour of the brand, e.g., to promote and recommend it in the market or engage in the company’s product/service development, by establishing attractive terms and conditions and promoting mutual value outcomes. Considering the limited resources available, corporate branding, especially in B2B SMEs, should focus more on the resources generated through stakeholder relationships that lead to the co-creation of mutual value for all parties involved, rather than capacity generated internally. Close and interpersonal relationships especially at the management level foster brand image co-creation between business partners and are particularly advantageous for small B2B companies. It is also important for companies to offer sufficient support and
training to their intermediaries to ensure that they have the required knowledge and ability to co-create the corporate brand image as desired.

Despite the increased emphasis on co-creation and mutuality in branding, establishing a unique and distinctive corporate brand identity remains a central issue that underlies the foundation of every company and a challenge that all managers must confront. The manager/entrepreneur is a key figure in corporate branding, especially during the company’s early stage. However, rather than a simple top-down managerial decision, corporate brand identity management should be understood as an on-going and reflexive and interactive process that involves learning through experience and adaptation to contextual changes in the internal and external business environment.

New venture managers are particularly likely to have a vague initial understanding of a company’s own market and competitive position, which results in ambiguous corporate brand identity statements. The establishment of a strong, personal and integrated visual identity helps managers to acquire recognition and reinforces a nascent corporate brand identity. In addition, well-defined and shared organisational values act as operational guidelines that aid managers in navigating a turbulent and dynamic business environment. However, an understanding of what is distinctive and unique about a corporate brand identity can only be generated in relation to its context. The development of such understanding does not occur in isolation but requires interactions, communication and dialogue with company’s stakeholders. The better a company understands itself, its competitive environment and target market, the better it is able to formulate meaningful, convincing and attractive corporate brand identity statements. Interactions and communication with stakeholders enable managers to make sense of what defines the company and to (re-)define its corporate brand identity claims. The dynamism of the competitive environment indicates that there is also dynamism in a corporate brand identity. Corporate brand identity statements and management’s vision need to be actively evaluated and revised in response to changes in the internal and external context.

Furthermore, instead of simply attempting to develop a strong corporate brand identity from the inside out, managers also need to be responsive to the needs of the firm’s target market. Ultimately, corporate brand identity is not established solely for the sake of the company or its managers; it should engender attraction and preference amongst its audience. Corporate brand identity claims ultimately gain legitimacy and relevance through the market’s response. To most effectively appeal to a brand’s target audience, managers should strive to
understand the values that are relevant to that audience and incorporate those values into the firm’s operations and symbolic representations of the corporate brand. A company must learn to speak the same language as its target audience to be able to create a meaningful corporate brand identity. Active and collaborative dialogue with stakeholders is the most advantageous and efficient approach to doing so, especially for B2B SMEs attempting to generate a better understanding of customer and stakeholder needs and preferences.

6.5 Evaluation of the study

Scientific research should be evaluated on the basis of its objectives, philosophical underpinnings and methodology (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). The objective of this study was to generate new knowledge and understanding concerning corporate brand co-creation in B2B SMEs by adopting a constructionist approach and qualitative research methods. Therefore, criteria proposed for assessing the quality of qualitative research undertaken from a constructionist standpoint are applied to evaluate the study.

One key criterion to evaluate constructionist qualitative work is trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 2000). Trustworthiness corresponds to issues that the quantitative perspective terms reliability and validity (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The trustworthiness of this study is next addressed using Cuba’s (1981) four criteria to evaluate qualitative research processes: 1) credibility (in lieu of internal validity), 2) transferability (in lieu of external validity/generalisability), 3) dependability (in lieu of reliability), and 4) confirmability (in lieu of objectivity) (see also Miles & Huberman 1994).

Credibility addresses the question, how congruent are the findings with reality? (Merriam 1998). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), ensuring credibility is one of most important factors in establishing trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry. In constructionist research, which disagrees with objectivist understanding of reality, the notion of credibility refers to the extent to which the results are an acceptable representation of the data and are believable to others (Polkinghorne 2007). Specific strategies and methods used in this study to increase its credibility include rigorous selection of data collection and analysis methods, data triangulation, prolonged engagement with the research participants, reflexivity obtained through peer debriefing, and member checking and transparency of the research process ensured through a detailed description of the research process (see Shenton 2004, Lincoln & Guba 1985).
Rigorous selection of research methods involves using carefully selected, defined and applied methods and procedures for data collection and analysis that are in line with the research purpose and philosophy. Different qualitative methods, such as narrative, longitudinal case-study, and interview approaches to data generation and analysis were applied to conduct this study because they provide an opportunity to obtain deep insights into the participants’ experiences and allow thick and contextualised descriptions of a social phenomenon that is as complex as brand co-creation and are concurrent with the constructionist approach (Guba & Lincoln 1994). The participants involved in the study were purposively selected because they had first-hand knowledge and experience concerning the phenomenon under study and were therefore able to provide detailed and relevant information for analysis (Patton 2002). Careful attention was also paid to the selection of an informative case example to ensure the validity and reliability of the empirical evidence (ibid.).

The interview guides were structured based on the conceptual pre-understanding of the topic to ensure that all the theoretically relevant topics were covered. However, from the constructionist perspective, an interview is considered a knowledge construction that involves the researcher and the interviewee in which both are actively involved. Constructionist research, thus, needs to employ interview strategies that allow for the co-construction of meanings while prioritising the meanings of participants over those of the researchers (Polkinghorne 2007). At the beginning of each interview session, it was emphasised that the primary interest was the participant’s own experiences and perceptions to which only they had access and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions that were about to be asked (Shenton 2004, Polkinghorne 2007). The researcher adopted an active listening stance and carefully attended to the interviews. The interview guide was always applied in a flexible manner to encourage new insights to emerge. To delve more deeply into the meanings of the participants’ statements beyond mere literal expressions, the interviewees were asked to describe the experiences that they cited as meaningful in greater detail (Polkinghorne 2007). If faced with unexpected or otherwise interesting responses, further clarification was sought. However, the interviewees were able to select what experiences and events to report, which ensured that they were given the primary voice (Ibid.).

Data triangulation refers to the use of different data sources to obtain information about the research phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). Constructivism appreciates multiple perspectives on reality. Therefore, to acquire
valid, reliable, and diverse constructions of reality, the use of multiple data sources is appropriate (Johnson 1997, Polkinghorne 2007). The study involves a wide range of informants to ensure a rich picture was obtained of the phenomenon, and by triangulating the different viewpoints and experiences, constructed an informed view of reality (Shenton 2004). In addition, supporting data were obtained from secondary sources such as documents and observations to provide background information and to help interpret the meanings and verify particular details that the participants provided. The data sources used in this study are summarised in table 4 and their analysis is detailed in chapter 4.5.

**Prolonged engagement** refers to investing sufficient time to understand the phenomenon and its context and to the notion of building trust between the researcher and the participants (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The interviews with the organisational members concerning their perceptions of corporate brand identity development (3rd interview stage) were preceded by several visits to the company’s premises during the earlier studies and interview rounds. During these visits, informal conversations between the researcher and the personnel took place that enabled the establishment of a familiar and trusting relationship before the actual data collection dialogues. The pre-understanding of the organisational history and culture obtained through the longitudinal process permitted engaging in elaborate discussions with the participants concerning the research topic and access to rich data. However, the researcher maintained a clear role throughout the process to avoid overly close involvement and ensure professional judgement on organisational issues (see Lincoln & Guba 1985).

**Reflexivity** in qualitative social inquiry is defined as ‘active acknowledgement by the researcher that her own actions and decisions will inevitably impact upon the meaning and context of the experience under investigation’ (Horsburgh 2003: 308). Reflexivity is an essential aspect of constructionism and involves understanding one’s own experiences and perceptions of the world and their influence on the theoretical and methodological decisions and making these experiences and perceptions explicit to oneself and others throughout the research (Mauther & Doucet 2003, Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 20). One important way to engage in reflexivity is by exposing the research project to peer scrutiny through meetings and critical discussion with other researchers (Mauther & Doucet 2003, Shenton 2004). Each research paper has been presented at internal and external research seminars and international scientific conferences. These presentations allowed a wider group of colleagues and academics to comment on the research and discuss the methods and findings. The individual research papers
have also been peer reviewed. The insights and perspectives provided by various experts served to create reflections on the research process and were carefully considered and selectively incorporated based on their perceived relevance to improve the quality of the papers.

**Member checking** refers to testing the representation of the phenomenon against the perspectives of the participants to verify one’s findings (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The draft findings of each paper were sent to the participants to allow them to review whether the selected quotations reflected their intended views and whether the interpretations made were based on an accurate understanding of those views. All of the participants were encouraged to provide feedback. In addition, after both of the case studies (research papers 2 and 3), a follow-up discussion was held between the researcher and the managing director of the case company and the findings were thoroughly discussed.

**Transparency** of a research process is a central means to increase the credibility of qualitative work because it enables the reader to evaluate the appropriateness of the research procedures and make his/her own judgements of the results (Lincoln & Guba 1985, Polkinghorne 2007). This study follows abductive reasoning, which is a state-of-the-art process that unfolds over the course of the research and involves unique circumstances. To enhance transparency, the study includes a detailed description of the research process, data generation (chapter 4.4) and analysis (chapter 4.5). In addition, the reflections on the experiences that influenced the decisions that we made along the way are clearly articulated.

**Transferability** concerns whether and to what extent a study’s findings can be generalised to other settings (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Generalising the findings obtained through constructionist inquiry is, in a statistical sense, impossible. Instead, the aim of constructionist analysis should be to ensure analytical generalisation, which is achieved by connecting the empirical findings to the existing theory (Yin 2003: 5, 43). The researcher should also provide sufficient detail on the phenomenon under study and the context in which the study was undertaken to allow comparisons to be made and facilitate the transfer of findings to other similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba 1985, Eisenhardt 1989). The phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation in B2B SMEs is elaborated in detail in chapters 2 and 3 to offer readers a comprehensive understanding of it. The empirical context in which the research was undertaken is described in the methods section (chapter 4.3) to allow readers to identify the boundaries of the study (Shenton 2004: 70). This includes background information, on, for example, the
participants, the characteristics and setting of the case, the number and length of the interviews and the time period over which the data were generated (*ibid.*). However, it should be noted that the researcher cannot make the ultimate judgement concerning transferability because she knows only the “sending context” (Shenton 2004: 70). Instead, it is left to the readers to evaluate whether the prevailing context is similar to their own positions and to determine the extent of their confidence in transferring the findings (Eisenhardt 1989, Polkinghorne 2007). To enhance analytical generalisation, the empirical findings are thoroughly argued and discussed in connection with the existing theory in chapters 6.1 and 6.2.

**Dependability** refers to the extent to which the study can be repeated and similar findings obtained if conducted in a similar context and with similar participants (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Realising the dependability criterion is difficult in constructionist research because the interpretations of a phenomenon made by the researcher are always to some extent subjective because she identifies, evaluates and reports findings based on her own evaluation (Riessman 1993, Braun & Clarke 2006). Researcher should, however, strive to enable the study to be repeated in the future (Shenton 2004). In the present study, dependability was established by providing an in-depth methodological description of how the study was performed (chapter 4). In addition, the interview guides used in the study are provided in Appendices 1, 2, 3 and 4.

**Confirmability** refers to the extent to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others (Lincoln & Guba 1985). To achieve confirmability, the researcher must be clear about the background beliefs and assumptions and take steps to demonstrate that the findings emerge from the data and not from the researcher’s own predispositions (Polkinghorne 2007, Shenton 2004). The perspectives adopted and interpretative claims made in this study reflect and are informed by the constructionist philosophical approach that is detailed in chapter 1.3.1. Abductive reasoning was followed to infer theoretical explanations of the empirical observations. Direct quotations were also included in the research papers to enhance the confirmability of the interpretations and conclusions (Polkinghorne 2007). The various criteria used to evaluate trustworthiness and the strategies employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study are listed in table 6 below.
Table 6. Trustworthiness of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trustworthiness criterion</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Strategies and methods employed to ensure trustworthiness of the study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>How congruent are the findings with reality?</td>
<td>Rigorous application of the data collection and analysis methods, data triangulation, prolonged engagement with the research participants, reflexivity through peer debriefing, member checking and transparency of the research process through detailed description of the research process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>To what extent can the findings be generalised to other settings?</td>
<td>Detailed description of the research phenomenon and its empirical context, the data, the case and the participants involved and discussion of the findings in relation to existing theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>Can the study be repeated and similar findings obtained?</td>
<td>In-depth methodological description of how the study was conducted, availability of the interview guides used in the study (Appendix 1, 2, 3 and 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmability</td>
<td>Can the results be confirmed or corroborated by others?</td>
<td>Explicit description of the background beliefs and assumptions, theoretical reflection, direct quotations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.6 Reflections, limitations and future research suggestions

The study employs qualitative research methods that made it possible to study corporate brand co-creation in depth and thoroughly capture the phenomenon. Qualitative research does not attempt to make statistical generalisations to a larger population in a conventional sense. Instead, the aim of qualitative research is to obtain a broader understanding of the phenomenon and develop theory from the data that permits analytical generalisation (Yin 2003). The findings of this study are generated in close interplay with and discussed in relation to the existing theory to justify their analytical generalisation. Accordingly, as shown in chapter 6.2, the findings of the study allow generalisations to be made that contribute to the advancement of the theory of brand co-creation.

The study examines corporate brand co-creation, particularly, in the context of B2B SMEs. The specific characteristics of the study’s empirical context are clarified, which makes it possible to derive appropriate contextual generalisations that are applicable to other similar contexts. However, it can be further argued that the B2B SME context is particularly conducive to studying the phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation because, compared with that in large multinationals, branding in B2B SMEs is generally more reliant on strategies that
enable co-creation and resource integration to counter resource limitations. From this perspective, examining the phenomenon of corporate brand co-creation in the B2B SME context makes it possible to observe different elements of brand co-creation in operation and to reveal new aspects of and nuances related to this understudied phenomenon that would be less visible in other contexts. Accordingly, the findings of this study provide grounds for theory development on the phenomenon of brand co-creation in general and can also inform more mainstream branding research beyond the context of B2B SMEs. Of course, further research into other empirical settings, different industries and in different branding contexts (e.g., product/service branding) is also needed to test and evaluate the findings.

The aim of this study is to improve understandings of the brand phenomenon from a social constructionist perspective, which clearly differs from the objectivist view. These different philosophical viewpoints conceptualise brands very differently and focus on different aspects of the phenomenon. However, they are both essential to understand the multifaceted and context-dependent phenomenon of brands. Although the study argues for the benefits of the social constructionist approach in studying brand co-creation, the philosophical approach employed here presents certain barriers to understanding and reveals limitations that should be acknowledged. For example, constructionist research is only able to interpret and construct the meaning of social phenomena but never to explain such phenomena in the sense of causal relationships. Accordingly, the findings of this study should be understood as complementing and enriching rather than contradicting findings that reflect more traditional, positivist research philosophy.

The limitations of the study also inspire and direct suggestions for future research. This study suggests that corporate brand identity develops along with a company’s understanding of and adaptation to its competitive environment and addresses the role of company–stakeholder interactions and dialogue in the process. However, additional research is needed to better understand how the development of such understanding takes place and what factors within or outside the organisation facilitate or restrict learning and the development of corporate brand identity. For example, insights from organisational learning theories could be applied in the future to further advance theoretical understandings of the process of corporate brand identity development and would also be beneficial from the perspective of brand identity management.
The study provides new knowledge concerning the actions of external stakeholders and interactions between a company and its partners that underlie the dynamism of corporate brand co-creation. However, further research is needed to understand why external actors participate in brand co-creation and to more thoroughly explain the mechanisms that enhance or undermine the interactive process of brand co-creation.

The study shows that brand co-creation has implications for both the internal and external perceptions of a corporate brand (i.e., identity and image). A more detailed analysis of the nature of the effects (positive vs. negative) of brand co-creation on different aspects of brand perceptions (e.g., brand knowledge, awareness, and trust, perceived brand value-in-use, competitiveness, uniqueness, attractiveness and distinctiveness, etc.) would be an interesting avenue for future research. Such knowledge would help brand managers to pursue more systematic brand co-creation initiatives and to better design their branding strategies and tactics and form brand co-creative relationships with different actors.

This study suggests that brand co-creative stakeholder relationships evolve over time and that the importance of different stakeholders as brand co-creators is emphasised at different phases of the company’s development. This temporality of brand co-creative relationships demands further research. Examining brand co-creative network relationships from the organisational lifecycle approach could, for example, offer interesting insights into the issue. The influences of major changes in central corporate brand co-creative business relationships on the brand in question would also be interesting to examine. For example, how long-term corporate brand co-creative relationships between companies can be terminated and how the termination of such relationships influence brand identity or image would be interesting to examine.

Furthermore, the recent brand co-creation literature introduces and widely applies the concept of brand meaning. Brand meaning is a relatively new concept within the broad conceptual spectrum found in the branding literature and discussion. Additional research is needed to provide conceptual clarity concerning how brand meaning differs from the previously established concepts of brand identity and image and how these concepts are related to one another.
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Appendix 1 Narrative interview guide, B2B SME expert narratives (1st interview stage)

The following interview guide was used in the first data gathering stage that involved B2B SME experts and professionals who were selected as the key informants based on their experience. The interview guide was applied in a flexible manner, and the questions were slightly modified according to the interviewee’s position (e.g., customer or manager).

- Could you first tell a little bit about yourself and your professional history?
- How would you describe your company’s/a B2B SME’s network?
- What or whom do you think are the key stakeholders of a B2B SME/your company? Why?
- How would you describe your own role in this network?
- Can you think of any examples or real-life cases in which an action of an external actor (a person or organisation) would have had an impact on (a/your) company’s corporate image and reputation? Describe what happened, i.e., the event/action and its influence (e.g., positive/negative)?
- Can you think of any examples or real-life cases in which your personal opinions or acts or your organisation’s undertakings would have affected another company’s corporate image and reputation? Describe what happened, i.e., the event/action and its influence (e.g., positive/negative)?
- Can you think of any similar situations or cases in general in which a company’s internal or external stakeholders would have affected another company’s corporate image and reputation? Describe what happened, i.e., the event/action and its influence (e.g., positive/negative)?
- Do these issues that emerged somehow relate to corporate branding in your opinion? How / How not?
- What other activities affecting a corporate brand come to your mind?
- How can company stakeholders contribute to corporate brand image in the market?
- What is a corporate brand in your opinion?
- Is there anything you would like to add in relation to the issues we have discussed?
Appendix 2 Interview guide, Managing director of the case company, (2nd interview stage)

The following interview guide was used for the interview of the case company’s managing director in the second data gathering stage.

- How would you describe your company?
- What are the company’s main competitive advantages?
- How does the company differ from its competitors?
- How would you describe the company's image in the market?
- What kind of an impression about the company do you want to give to your customers/stakeholders?
- How would you describe the company’s development over the years?
- How would you describe the development of the company’s image over the years?
- Can you think of any key turning points/success factors/major drawbacks in the company’s history?
- Can you think of any actions/events in the company's history that would have had a significant impact on the company's image?
- What have been the biggest challenges related to the building of the company’s image?
- How would you describe the company's strategy and objectives?
- How would you describe the company's strategy and objectives related to branding?
- Have the company's strategy and objectives changed over the past few years? How? Why?
- Who do you consider the most important stakeholders for the company's growth and development?
- Who do you consider the most important stakeholders for the company's reputation and corporate image?
- How would you describe stakeholder cooperation and its importance to the company's growth and competitiveness?
- How would you describe stakeholder cooperation and its importance to the company's image?
- How have the company’s stakeholder relations contributed to the company’s image?
- Have company’s stakeholders influenced (e.g., improved/damaged) the company's image through their own actions?
- What are the biggest future opportunities/challenges for the company?
- What are the biggest opportunities/challenges related to the management of the company’s image?
- What are the biggest opportunities/challenges associated with stakeholder cooperation?
- To what extent do you feel that you are able to control the company’s image?
Appendix 3 Interview guide, Business partners of the case company, (2nd interview stage)

The following interview guide was used in the second data gathering stage that involved the key business partners of the case company who were selected as key informants based on the prior interviews with the case company’s managing director. The interview guide was applied in a flexible manner, and the questions were slightly modified according to each interviewee’s role as a business partner (e.g., customer or supplier).

- Could you first tell me a little bit about yourself and your company?
- How would you describe your co-operation with Solution Ltd.?
- How it all did start? How long have you been working with Solution Ltd.?
- How would you describe the activities, practices and people involved in the co-operation?
- Do you engage in any co-operation related to marketing or branding?
- How would you describe Solution Ltd. as a company?
- How would you describe Solution Ltd.’s corporate image?
- How does Solution Ltd. Distinguish itself from its competitors?
- How has the company developed over the years? Why?
- How has the company’s image developed over the years? Why?
- Can you think of any particular event or action in the past that had a very positive impact on your image of the company?
- Can you think of any particular event or action in the past that had a particularly negative impact on your image of the company?
- Do you feel that you as a partner have somehow influenced Solution Ltd.’s image or reputation in the market? How?
- How would you describe the benefits and value that you receive from your relationship with Solution Ltd.?
- How would you describe the benefits and value that Solution Ltd. receives from its relationship with you?
- How would you describe your relationship with Solution Ltd.? How is Solution Ltd. as a “partner”?
- How would you describe your relationship with Solution Ltd. in relation to your other partners/clients?
- How would you describe your or your company’s role in Solution Ltd.’s partner network?
- What mutual objectives or goals do you have with Solution Ltd.?
- How would you describe Solution Ltd.’s corporate brand?
- Is there anything you would like to add?
Appendix 4 Interview guide, Organisational members of the case company, (3rd interview stage)

The following interview guide was used for the interviews with organisational members that were conducted in the third data gathering stage. The questions were structured around present, past and future topics concerning the phenomenon of corporate brand identity development.

Present
- Could you first tell a little bit about yourself, your background and how you ended up working for the company?
- How long have you worked for the company now?
- How would you describe your role in the organisation?
- How would you describe the company?
- What is best about the company? What are you particularly proud of about the company?
- What are the company’s key competitive factors?
- How would you describe the company’s operating environment?
- How does the company differ from its competitors in your opinion?
- What could be done better?
- What kind of an impression of the company do you want to give to your customers/stakeholders?
- How would you describe your work?
- What is it like to work for the company?
- How does working for the company differ from other companies you have previously worked for?
- How would you describe the people in the organisation?
- Who are the most important partners/stakeholders from your perspective?
- How would you describe the cooperation with these stakeholders?
- What kind of feedback/input/demands do you get from customers/other stakeholders?
- What kind of image or reputation do you think the company has in the market?
- What makes you think so? How does it come up? Could you give an example?
- Has the company’s image in the market changed over the years? How?
- What makes you think so? How does it come up? Could you give an example?

Past
- How would you describe the development of the company?
- Has the company changed over the years? How? Why?
- Can you think of any actions/events in the company’s history that would have had a significant impact on the company's business development?
- Can you describe any turning points in the company’s history?
- What happened? Why? What was the result?
- Has your own work changed during the time that you have worked for the company? How? Why?

Future
- How would you describe the company’s vision?
- Where do you see the company in 5 years?
- What are the company’s biggest challenges/opportunities in the future?
- How could the company’s image be improved in your opinion?
Publications


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Original publications are not included in the electronic version of the dissertation.
59. Pernu, Elina (2013) MNC making sense of global customer relationships
60. Lehmimäki, Tuula (2013) The contextual nature of launching industrial new products
61. Palo, Teea (2014) Business model captured?: variation in the use of business models
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