Building a warm and competent B2B brand personality

Ulf Aagerup

Department of Business Administration, Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping, Sweden, and

Svante Andersson and Gabriel Baffour Awuah

Department of Business Studies, Halmstad University, Halmstad, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate how business-to-business (B2B) companies build brand personality via the products they provide and via their interactions with customers.

Design/methodology/approach – A multiple case study, which spans 10 years, investigates via interviews, observations, workshops and document analysis how two fast-growing B2B companies selling industrial equipment to manufacturers build brand personality.

Findings – The studied companies concentrate on different brand personality dimensions depending on the activities in which they engage. By focusing on brand competence in the realm of the actual product and brand warmth in the realm of the augmented product, the companies manage to create a complete and consistent brand personality.

Research limitations/implications – The research approach provides in-depth knowledge on how the companies build brands for a specific type of B2B product. However, the article's perspective is limited to that of management and therefore does not take customer reactions into account.

Practical implications – The study describes how firms can build strong B2B brands by emphasizing competence in product design and R&D and warmth in activities related to sales and customer service.

Originality/value – The study introduces a conceptually consistent view of brand personality in the form of warm and competent brands to the B2B marketing literature. It builds on and contributes to the emerging research on B2B brand personality. By relating the companies' brand-building activities to the type of products they sell, this study illustrates how context affects B2B brand building, and by integrating brand personality theory with product levels and marketing philosophy, it extends previous theory on B2B branding.

Keywords Branding, Brand personality, Business-to-business, Brand management, Industrial marketing

Paper type Case study

1. Introduction

It is important for all companies that their intended customers know about them, and have strong, positive and unique associations toward them. In the realm of consumer marketing, positive outcomes of this kind are considered the result of brand management (Keller, 1993).

However, although brands are increasingly recognized as important success factors in business-to-business (B2B) (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2010; Chang *et al.*, 2018), previous research on B2B branding has largely ignored the question of how to manage brands. Instead, they have focused on what B2B brands are (Beverland *et al.*, 2007), how particular attributes of the company affect them (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010; Zhang *et al.*, 2015; Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2018) or how brands affect business outcomes (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2007; Persson, 2010; Chang *et al.*, 2018; Rahman *et al.*, 2018). While these are worthy areas of research, the dearth of studies of the brand management process is problematic. Strong brands lead to many desirable outcomes for B2B firms; they improve customer relationships (Glynn, 2010), reduce price sensitivity (Persson, 2010) and raise the value of B2B companies (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2007; Rahman *et al.*, 2018). Knowing how to manage brands is therefore an important but overlooked success factor for B2B companies. The presented study produces knowledge that can help B2B companies succeed in this regard. It focuses on the activities firms carry out to build brands. B2B companies build their brands predominately via the products they offer, and via their interactions with customers (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007; Kotler *et al.*, 2006; Melewar and Lim, 2010) . We therefore focus our investigations on activities related to the design and manufacturing of the products, and on activities related to sales, order fulfilment and customer service.

To address the specific knowledge needs of B2B firms with respect to brand management, it is important to determine what the desired outcome of brand management is. It is our contention that the brand management process should build a strong brand personality. There has, however, to date been a scarcity of brand personality studies in B2B brand research. The most influential scholarship on B2B branding has so far focused on concepts such as brand equity, the power of brands and brands as strategic resources (Seyedghorban *et al.*, 2016). Conversely, in the realm of consumer marketing, brand personality has been a main concern since the 1970s (Kapferer, 1994, p. 44; Hanby, 1999), and it is one of the most studied constructs of brand associations (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Radler, 2018). A possible reason for the dearth of research on B2B brand personality may be that, although we know that imagery beliefs are important for B2B brand evaluations (Casidy *et al.*, 2018), B2B brands have traditionally been regarded as functional in character, focusing mainly on variables such as product quality, price and technology (Leek and Christodoulides, 2011). Brand personality has, on the other hand, been seen as the brand's symbolic character, separate from the functional benefits of using the brand Plummer (1984). More recently, however, scholars (Vinyals-Mirabent *et al.*, 2019) have begun to realize that brand personality is not an isolated type of association; it is conditioned by several types of inputs. For example, brand quality and innovativeness contribute to brand personality (Coelho *et al.*, 2020) and underestimating the role of functional value in brand personality research is therefore a mistake (MacInnis, 2012). There is ample evidence for the benefits of a strong brand personality. Firms can use it to differentiate products to drive customer preference and usage and as a common denominator to market a brand across cultures (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). Moreover, brand personality is positively related to levels of trust and loyalty (Fournier, 1994; Kumar *et al.*, 2006; Doney *et al.*, 2007) and, in some cases, positively influences customer–brand relationships (Chang and Chieng, 2006). Brand personality can also increase the perceived value of an offering (Coelho *et al.*, 2020; Kolbl *et al.*, 2020) and positively influence brand preference, affection and purchase intentions (Zhang, 2007). These outcomes are desirable for all types of brands, and therefore Radler (2018) identifies B2B brand personality as a research area worthy of attention. With this study, we attempt to answer her call by investigating how B2B companies build brand personality via the products they provide and via their interactions with customers.

We are not alone in this endeavor. During the past decade, the brand personality concept has slowly gained a foothold in B2B marketing literature (Herbst and Merz, 2011; Veloutsou and Taylor, 2012; Coleman *et al.*, 2015). However, conceptual issues need to be addressed in

this budding research stream, and this paper attempts to problematize previous conceptualizations of B2B brand personality and propose an alternative to them. First, we argue that previous studies of B2B brand personality do not actually describe personality, or even use the brand as a person metaphor. As a result, the B2B brand personality construct becomes less useful. The brand as a person metaphor only has value if it helps us understand a brand's character by likening it to a person (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). When researchers (Coleman *et al.*, 2011) apply traits that one would never use to describe a person, the metaphor crumbles. We address this problem by introducing the warm and competent brand personality concept (Kervyn *et al.*, 2012) to B2B. Warmth and competence are equally useful to describe humans (Fiske *et al.*, 2007) and brands (Malone and Fiske, 2013), which means that the application of the warm and competent brand personality dimensions remedies the conceptual inconsistency present in previous B2B brand personality research and allows the brand as a person metaphor to regain its usefulness. What is more, the warm/competent conceptualization evaluates a brand on whether it has good intentions toward the customer and whether it is able to carry out those intentions – two aspects that should be as relevant for B2B brands as they are for consumer brands.

Finally, we investigate how product type influences the activities needed to build B2B brands. Previous research (Voorn and Muntinga, 2017; Kolbl *et al.*, 2019) has established that with regard to brand personality, different rules apply for different types of products. Most studies on B2B brands (Glynn, 2010; Persson, 2010; Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2007; Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010) have focused on products that represent a large percentage of a company's spending, and directly affect the profitability of the company. Under these conditions, companies must develop expertise on these types of products to be able to evaluate their options carefully. However, more knowledge is needed regarding brand building for B2B products that are not at the core of the buyer's business. To fill this need, we focus on capital items bought because they help manufacturers manage their plants better and prevent negative outcomes such as interruptions in production. These products are important but they are not always at the forefront of buying organizations' consciousness, which in turn can affect how customers evaluate brands.

The study contributes to the research stream on B2B branding by delineating the activities that build B2B brands. The paper validates the notion that brand personality is useful when conceptualizing B2B brands while at the same time problematizes previous studies' conceptualizations of brand personality. We identify that brand competence is created via the actual product whereas brand warmth is built via the augmented product. Using the brand as a person metaphor allows us to identify that a brand can emphasize different personality dimensions in different situations and remain consistent. This in turn lets us advocate a more nuanced form of brand consistency. Finally, we identify a product type for which buyers exhibit different information-seeking and buying behaviors, and which therefore requires different brand-building activities than previously studied products. By relating B2B brand building to product type, the paper extends previous understanding of B2B branding.

2. Corporate business-to-business brand personality
B2B companies rely on corporate, rather than product branding (Sheth and Sinha, 2015), and we therefore focus on companies that use the same name for their company and their products. Although less common in B2B than B2C, brand personality is a widely used brand concept (Radler, 2018). It captures the human characteristics associated with a brand Keller (2003), and in doing so, provides understanding of the brand's character (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). Stakeholders infer a brand's personality from all the information they take in from their direct and indirect contacts with the brand (Johar *et al.*, 2005).

Because B2B companies normally have fewer but deeper customer relationships than business-to-consumer companies do (Kotler *et al.*, 2019), trust plays an especially important role. Trust is an explanation for why brand personality builds commitment (Valette-Florence and Valette-Florence, 2020). It is created not only via social interactions but also via the technical, functional and economic quality of the products (Doney *et al.*, 2007). The few but deep customer relationships in B2B also means that interactions with customers are a B2B firm's principal branding opportunity (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). These occur both directly, through the customer's interplay with the seller, and indirectly, through the customer's experiences with the product (Balmer, 2003). Consequently, while consumer marketers traditionally rely on advertising to instill their brands with the desired connotations (Biel, 1992), B2B companies build strong brands mainly via product design and manufacturing and via their direct contacts with customers (Kotler *et al.*, 2006; Melewar and Lim, 2010). It is thus the employees' actions that articulate corporate brand personality (Simões, 2015). To gain a competitive advantage, it is crucial that the firm's culture ensures that employees understand the contribution they make to other stakeholders and how this relates to the firm's success (Bennett and Karvinen, 2006; Doyle and Stern, 2006). If they do, they will act in accordance with organizational values and culture and together build a strong corporate B2B brand personality (Hatch and Schultz, 2003).

2.1 Business-to-business brand personality conceptualizations

Recently, brand personality has gained some traction in B2B marketing literature. Veloutsou and Taylor (2012) showed that brand personality is useful when conceptualizing B2B brands. Coleman *et al.* (2015) found that brand personality has a positive influence on brand performance. There have also been efforts to conceptualize more specifically what B2B brand personality is. Herbst and Merz (2011) developed an industrial brand personality scale which encompasses three dimensions: performance, sensation and credibility. These are derived from a larger number of items that have been reduced via factor analysis in much the same way as previous brand personality scales (Aaker, 1997; Geuens *et al.*, 2009). Coleman *et al.* (2011) presented an industrial brand identity scale specifically for services incorporating brand personality along with dimensions such as employee and client focus, visual identity, consistent communications and human resource initiatives. This literature represents a move toward a conceptualization of industrial brands that has dominated consumer brand research and practice since the 1970s (Kapferer, 1994). Introducing a personality-based view of B2B brands, however, requires conceptual consistency. We find three problems with current conceptualizations: scales use words to describe brands that one would not use to describe people; scales use words that are not descriptors of personality; and scholars do not demonstrate an understanding of how personality works.

The scale of Coleman *et al.* (2011) is an example of the first type. It encompasses dimensions such as visual identity, consistent communications and human resource initiatives – words that are not typically used to describe people. In fact, they are essentially no different from other conceptualizations of B2B brands (Beverland *et al.*, 2007) that describe how different attributes of the offering make up B2B brands. This is problematic because the brand personality construct assumes that customers anthropomorphize brands (Fournier, 1998) and treat them as if they were people with whom they might like to form relationships (Bennett and Hill, 2012). Customers choose which brands to form relationships with and which type of relationships to form, according to their perception of the brands' character. Therefore, the personality metaphor only provides a better understanding of brands if brands are actually thought of as people. The temptation to conceptualize B2B brand personality with non-human items is understandable because brands are not people.

Brand associations are therefore colored by product attributes and corporate associations (Hayes *et al.*, 2008; Coelho *et al.*, 2020). However, if one believes in the brand as a person metaphor, one should use the same words to describe brands that one would use to describe people. This is especially important when it comes to corporate brands. A corporate brand personality can be defined in terms of the human characteristics or traits of the employees of the corporation as a whole (Keller and Richey, 2006, p. 74; Ozdemir *et al.*, 2020). If corporate brand personality is made up of human personalities, it is a serious problem if the conceptualization of brand personality is incompatible with human personality.

The Herbst and Merz (2011) scale is an example of the second type (scales that use words that are not descriptors of personality). It encompasses items such as educated, young and good looking. These are relevant descriptors of humans but they are not measures of personality. Personality is a vast area of research, and personality is conceptualized in different ways (Dollinger, 1995). Personality is, however, considered by most scholars to describe a person's character, which predicts how the person will react toward other people in recurrent interpersonal situations in life (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003). A common conceptualization of human personality is the Big Five personality dimensions [or OCEAN after its dimensions: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (McCrae and Costa, 1989)]. Markers of achievements, age and physical descriptions do not fall under this rubric. The Herbst and Merz (2011) scale is therefore vulnerable to the same criticism that scholars (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Geuens, 2009) previously have levied against Aaker's (1997) more consumer-oriented brand personality scale – that they are conceptually inconsistent with the personality theory on which they draw.

The third conceptual issue is that scholars do not demonstrate an understanding of how personality works. Although many definitions of personality exist, most analysts (Aaker, 1997) agree that it is tied to descriptors that are stable over time and that personality describes what someone is like at the core (Dollinger, 1995). Personality is thus not something that can be easily altered to make other people like you. Attempts to do so are easily detected, and the individual who engages in such behavior is perceived as inauthentic (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). Consequently, when Freling and Forbes (2005) suggest that brands simultaneously may use different personalities to appeal to different customer segments with different preferences, it is a sign that they do not use the human personality metaphor correctly. Authenticity is of central importance for the evaluation of both people and brands (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2006; Beverland, 2006), which means that personality-switching should be avoided. This in turn is congruent with the generally accepted notion that brand consistency is a vital part of success (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2010; Schallehn *et al.*, 2014). What is more, even if a company considered it a good idea to simultaneously use different personalities to appeal to different customer segments externally, it would be difficult from an internal branding perspective to do so. Internal branding is important because employees who know what the brand stands for live that vision, and customers are much more likely to experience the company in a way that is consistent with what is promised (Mitchell, 2002). Intrinsically living the brand means that each employee does it effortlessly because he/she believes in what it stands for (Riordan, 2019). Living the brand in a consistent way would however be difficult if companies were to demand of employees that they switch the way they do their job depending on with whom they interact. For example, imagine telling customer support to be open and friendly when some customers call, but to be strictly professional and reserved in the contacts with others. It would not make the employees believe that the brand reflects something real, and it would therefore not be conducive to internal brand commitment.

2.2 Move toward brand warmth and brand competence

Since Aaker's (1997) ground-breaking study on the Big Five brand personality scale and subsequent scholars' (Geuens *et al.*, 2009) adoption of similar trait-based brand personality scales for different markets and industries, consumer brand personality research has evolved shifting from multi-dimensional scales to a more parsimonious approach (Davies *et al.*, 2018). During a transitional period, Bosnjak *et al.* (2007), Okazaki (2006) and Aaker *et al.* (2004) developed frameworks that used between two and four dimensions to describe brand personality, although the dimensions differ between the studies. Even though novel approaches are continuously being proposed (Moussa, 2021), the most recent decade's development seems largely to have settled on a two-dimensional brand personality conceptualization of warm and competent brands (Aaker *et al.*, 2010; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012; Bratanova *et al.*, 2015; Davies *et al.*, 2018). Brand warmth and brand competence are particularly useful when it comes to conceptualizing B2B brand personality. One of our objections to existing conceptualizations of B2B brand personality (see Section 2.1) is that even though corporate brand personality is the aggregate of the employees' personalities, different words are used to describe the two. For scholars who anthropomorphize brands (i.e. attribute human form or personality to them), it makes sense to evaluate a brand on the same dimensions as a person, and warmth and competence describe the vast majority of perceptions that people have about others (Fiske *et al.*, 2007). In social psychology, Fiske *et al.* (1999) developed the stereotype content model (SCM), which outlines the importance of warmth and competence for social judgements. Kervyn *et al.* (2012) later applied the model to brand personality. If one believes, as Fournier and Alvarez (2012) do, that brands are active entities with agency, this is reasonable. The framework for brand perception, which is called the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF), is an adaptation of the SCM; only instead of explaining factors that determine how people perceive other people, it explains factors that determine how people perceive brands. Similar to the SCM, the BIAF posits that customers perceive brands via their warmth and competence. Warmth and competence thus solve the problem of incompatibility between human and brand personality conceptualizations. Brand warmth and brand competence are both positive measures, which means that customers perceive brands more favorably the warmer and more competent they are (Malone and Fiske, 2013). Normally, brands tend toward a warm personality if they are active in caring industries such as charity or health care (Aaker *et al.*, 2010). By contrast, high-quality engineered luxury normally skews more toward brand competence (Kervyn *et al.*, 2012). There is evidence that indicates that when combined, warmth and competence can reinforce each other, such that being high in both dimensions provides brands with an extra advantage that surpasses the individual contributions of each (Aaker *et al.*, 2012).

2.3 Operationalization of brand warmth and brand competence

According to Kervyn *et al.* (2012) and Bratanova *et al.* (2015), warm brands have the consumers' interest at heart, care about the quality of their products and strive to provide their customers with good products. Cooperation is related to warmth (Russell and Fiske, 2008; Fiske *et al.*, 2012). When companies involve their customers and allow them to weigh in on the products' design or manufacturing, the brand will be perceived as warmer. Warmth is typically characterized as an affective dimension (Bennett and Hill, 2012), which means that customers perceive it emotionally. This is congruent with the findings of Zhang *et al.* (2021), showing that highly affected communication styles are associated with brand warmth.

Competent brands have good product knowledge, which encompasses design, manufacturing and quality control (Kervyn *et al.*, 2012; Bratanova *et al.*, 2015). Trust is therefore associated with competence (Hill and Lineback, 2012). In contrast to the link between cooperation and warmth, competence is related to status (Russell and Fiske, 2008; Fiske *et al.*, 2012). Status refers to a relative social or professional position or standing, which means that brands that stand out among their peers as better or more important in some way therefore will be perceived as more competent. Competence is typically characterized as a cognitive dimension (Bennett and Hill, 2012), which means that customers perceive it rationally. Even though it is highly desirable to create brands that are perceived as both warm and competent (Aaker *et al.*, 2012), it may not be easy. When we juxtapose the dimensions, we find that they can be hard to reconcile. Cooperation (which leads to brand warmth) is related to harmony within a group, while status (which leads to brand competence) conversely comes from distinguishing oneself from others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, if activities that convey brand warmth are carried out via the same brand touchpoint as activities that convey brand competence, resulting brand warmth could feasibly attenuate brand competence, and vice versa. The challenge therefore becomes to deliver brand warmth and brand competence, while at the same time avoid them canceling each other out.

2.4 Offer
To describe the investigated companies' brand building activities, we use Kotler *et al.*'s (2019) well-known three-level product concept, according to which an offer comprises a core product, an actual product and an augmented product. The core product refers to the benefits sought, or the reason customers buy the offering. The actual product is the object customers buy and can be described by its quality, features, design and so on. The augmented product refers to added products or services that are not essential for the actual product to work but that increase its perceived value to customers. This means that a company engages in activities that either create actual or augmented products, and that these in turn together deliver the benefit that is the core product. It is thus not possible to directly create the core product – it is achieved via the actual and augmented products. To produce an actual product, a company engages in activities such as design and manufacturing, which are examples of the seller's indirect interactions with the customer, as described by Balmer (2003). Here, the seller's employees have limited contacts with the buyer's employees, so the brand building occurs indirectly via the customer's experience with the products. To produce an augmented product, the company engages in activities such as training, after-sales service, delivery and maintenance. These activities are examples of the seller's direct interactions with the customer, as described by Ballantyne and Aitken (2007). During these activities, the firm's employees are in direct contact with customers and become important carriers of the firm's brand personality (Bowman and Ambrosini, 2000).

We can define different types of industrial products according to the role they play for the buyer. Doing so is important because this role can shape buyers' preferences and, thus, their purchase behaviors. Kotler *et al.* (2019) distinguish between products that constitute the produced goods (materials and parts) and products that are used to manufacture the product but do not constitute the product (capital items). Many studies on B2B branding (Glynn, 2010; Persson, 2010) focus on companies that deal with materials and parts. Researchers have also examined the marketing of capital items; however, when doing so, they tend to concentrate on purveyors of, for example, machinery or IT solutions (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2007; Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). These are capital items that are central to

the buyer's ability to make money; choosing the best option will raise productivity, which naturally makes purchases of this kind highly engaging for the buyer. Moreover, because this type of product is directly related to the buyer's core business, we can reasonably assume that the buyer will be highly interested and knowledgeable when evaluating the best option. The Kotler typology of industrial products does, however, not account for the possibility that companies that buy capital items can exhibit different types of buying behaviors, and that the seller therefore must adapt his or her promotion to be effective. There are different types of capital items that are bought not because they directly raise productivity but because they enable the buyer's ambition to run its manufacturing plant. They are also bought to help protect against negative outcomes such as production interruptions. These types of products may be compared to what Kotler (2019) call "unsought products," which are products for which the customer has low interest and awareness, and which therefore requires aggressive promotion to convince customers to buy. Examples in the consumer market are life insurance, fire extinguishers and home security systems. In this study, we identify that there is a type of industrial capital item that fits the "unsought product" description. We therefore call this product type "unsought capital items."

In summary, we propose that B2B companies carry out activities in their operations to deliver a core product/benefit via an actual product and an augmented product. By choosing which activities to carry out, and how to carry them out, firms build B2B brand personality. Figure 1 illustrates this process.

3. Method
We adopted a qualitative case study approach, as described by Gummesson (2002) and Yin (2009), to investigate the under-researched area of how B2B companies build brand personality. The case study approach is appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon and when existing theory is not exhaustive or adequate. Case study methodology permits multiple data collection approaches, such as interviews, observations and analyses of websites and company brochures. By analysing cases, researchers can assess evidence for cross-case patterns (Yin, 2009; Fillis and Lee, 2011). This study is part of a larger research project in which we followed the development of five Swedish companies for more than 10 years. For the current study, we report on two firms we call Excellent and Absolute (not their real names). The project started in 2007 with observation studies, in which we followed each CEO for a week, using Mintzberg's (1973) technique of direct observations. The extended observation of the CEOs and their firms resulted in a deep understanding of the firms' development and also created a trustful relationship that facilitated further data collection.

The research team regularly (two to four times a year from 2008 to 2018) took part in workshops with the company CEOs to discuss critical factors for international growth in their respective firms. We took notes during these meetings. However, as these meetings included strategically sensitive material, we did not record the meetings, nor do we use any information without the firms' consent. During data collection, we identified that brand-related questions were strategically important for the firms' development. The workshops took place at the different firms, at different times. During each workshop, we toured the company's workplace and observed how different departments changed over time. We also had opportunities to pose questions to personnel in different positions. We continuously reviewed each firm's website, annual reports and other secondary documentation. To obtain even more in-depth information about the companies' brand-building activities, we constructed an interview guide, built on extant literature (see Appendix) and carried out
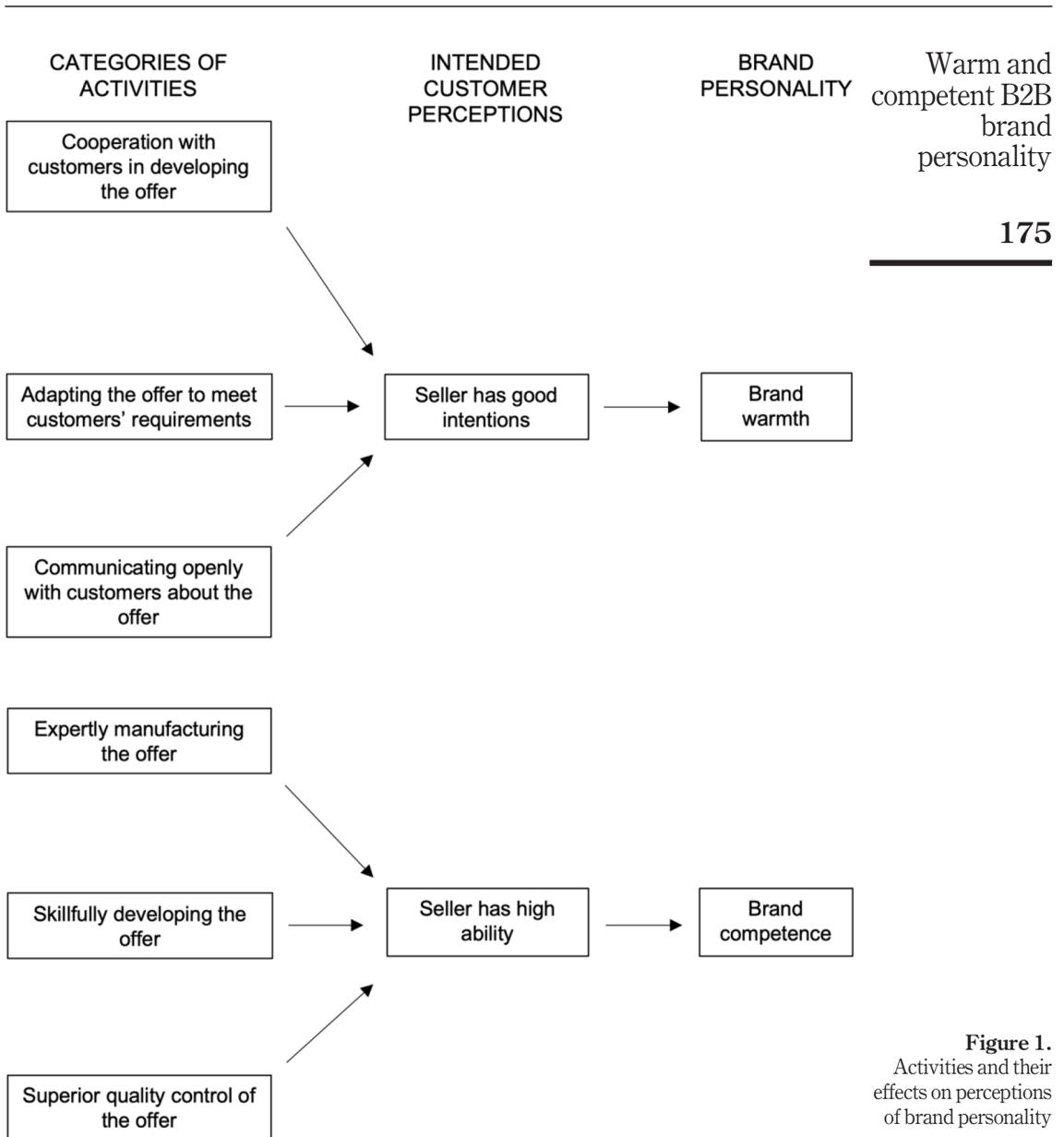
CATEGORIES OF
ACTIVITIES

INTENDED
CUSTOMER
PERCEPTIONS

BRAND
PERSONALITY

Cooperation with
customers in developing
the offer

Adapting the offer to meet
customers' requirements

Communicating openly
with customers about the
offer

Seller has good
intentions

Brand
warmth

Expertly manufacturing
the offer

Skillfully developing the
offer

Superior quality control of
the offer

Seller has high
ability

Brand
competence

Figure 1.
Activities and their
effects on perceptions
of brand personality

interviews with the CEOs. The interview with Excellent's CEO took 1 h and 50 min, and the
interview with Absolute's CEO took 1 h and 40 min. Both firms use one brand promise for
the whole company and use the same brand name for their products, so the CEO was the
person most knowledgeable about the brand development process. Questions included how
their firms worked with brand-building activities, product development and features, price

strategies, market communication, distribution and service, adaptability, organization and leadership.

The case sampling strategy we used for the two companies followed the literal replication technique and theoretical replication logic, as recommended by Yin (2009). The key factor underpinning the selection of the cases was conceptual relevance rather than representative grounds, so we used purposeful sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Purposeful sampling is widely used to identify and select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). The participants in the overall project were internationally active companies in the B2B sector that had had an internationalization strategy from inception. The two firms we chose for this study are internationally successful B2B firms that have built strong brands in their respective niche markets. They also share a similar corporate brand approach, and their customers buy their products for similar reasons. By contrast, the other firms in the project have more diverse product portfolios and use a multi-brand approach, by which they use different brands for different products. Finally, in contrast with the other firms, both Excellent and Absolute sell unsought capital items. Table 1 presents the basic characteristics of the case companies.

Data analysis included several steps. The information from the interviews and other sources served as descriptive narratives, which helped us process the large volume of data (Mintzberg and McHugh, 1985). This step allowed the unique patterns of each case to emerge before cross-case comparison (Eisenhardt, 1989; George and Jones, 2000; Yin, 2009). We identified patterns in how the case firms worked with their core, actual, and augmented products, to build brand personality and the patterns were replicated across the cases (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Langley, 1999; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The analysis included workshops with the entire research team, which carried out the interviews with the firms. Transcripts as well as narratives of the cases were distributed before the workshops. In the workshops, we continued to analyze the data, and we identified activities that the companies used to build their brand personalities at the different product levels.

4. Results
4.1 Excellent
Excellent is a Swedish family-owned company whose overall goal is to grow by 10% annually without external financing. The Excellent group has four divisions: Excellent, Excellent wire tray, Excellent software and Excellent engineering. Although the corporation

Company	Year founded	Mode of foreign market entry	Products	Turnover in millions of euros (2015)	Export sales as percentage of total sales (2015) (%)	No. of employees (2015)
Excellent	1990	Distributors, agents and sales offices in 56 countries (e.g. USA, Germany, Europe)	Mesh wall systems for machine builders, warehouse designers and building contractors	47	77	200
Absolute	1993	Distributors in USA, South America, Europe and Asia Subsidiaries in USA and China	Industrial air filtration	30	70	35

Table 1.
Basic characteristics of the studied firms

has different divisions, each one uses the corporate brand Excellent. Excellent was founded in 1990 and, from inception, aimed to enter international markets, establishing a subsidiary immediately in The Netherlands. In 1991, the company set up additional subsidiaries in France and in the UK, and its products were sold in Iceland, Denmark, Finland and Norway. In 1992, the company established new subsidiaries in Germany and Spain. The firm was started by three founders, two with industry experience and one with international experience from another manufacturing industry. The founders have a strong position in the local industry network, and they use their local relationships to find talented employees and high-quality suppliers. According to Excellent's CEO, the company's success, which is based on a niche market strategy, stems from its quality, quick delivery and after-sales services. The organization is flat, with few middle managers, and employees are encouraged to make their own decisions.

4.1.1 Core product. Excellent's core product is a safe work environment, which in turn provides customers with several benefits. It reduces injuries among customers' employees and prevents costly delays because of incidents that require production to be stopped. Compliance with health and safety laws also prevents costly legal processes. Excellent's core product does not directly help customers make money but rather constitutes a kind of insurance against several possible negative outcomes that could stop customers from making money. A secondary benefit, apart from a safe work environment, is to make the manufacturing environment look good. Excellent's products are assembled around high-value machinery, which customers are proud to show off. Therefore, aesthetics are important to project a positive impression of the customer's factory.

4.1.2 Actual product. Excellent provides protection for machinery in the form of modules that come in different sizes. The modules are assembled around the machinery to prevent the people who work in the plant from accidently coming into contact with it. The machine guard systems are available in mesh, sheet metal and plastic panel sections. Excellent supplies a wide range of doors, locks and accessories, which together constitute a complete machine guard solution that specifically meets different company needs. The production is automated to manage high volumes and speedy deliveries.

The product is standardized across markets but is flexible enough to accommodate customers around the world. As all standard products are kept in stock, Excellent can ship orders the same day as they are placed. Standardization is possible because Excellent bases the product specifications on European Union regulations for machinery protection. This way, because the system fulfils some of the most stringent requirements in the world, the products can be used anywhere. Flexibility is important because machinery is installed in different types of facilities with different distances to walls and ceilings, so each installation needs to accommodate each customer's unique requirements. Flexibility is achieved through clever product design. Excellent has developed a system of mesh wall modules that feature a proprietary fitting system that allows almost unlimited configurations. Moreover, unlike most competing products, Excellent's mesh wall modules can be assembled without the need for tools.

To provide aesthetically pleasing machine safety solutions, Excellent invests substantial resources in product development, which is focused not only on functionality but also on design. As the CEO stated:

> We develop our products to become even smarter; they will be even more flexible and attractive. They have to be beautiful to look at. They must become more convenient to use and easier to assemble.

Customers often regard Excellent's mesh walls as less important than the machinery they guard. Because protection for machinery is a secondary consideration for manufacturers, Excellent knows that its customers do not have deep insights into how the machinery is best protected. Excellent therefore does not use customers' insights for changes in the actual product. Instead, new technology comes from the in-house R&D department. As the CEO explained:

> We work like Apple; we do not ask the customers what they want, we think we know our products and what the customers need.

4.1.3 Augmented product. Because protection for machinery constitutes such a minor part of customers' total investment in a manufacturing plant, Excellent is seldom required to provide services that assist in the customers' purchase, such as financing or help in applying for permits. The customers themselves have usually already handled these types of issues. For Excellent, the augmented product is therefore mainly a result of interactions with the customer. The customer interactions happen when Excellent first contacts the customer, whether in person or through other marketing channels. These interactions also occur during delivery or installation or when the Excellent staff handles any unforeseen issues that arise. Such interactions may not be essential for the actual product to work, but they increase its perceived value and create a positive impression of the Excellent brand in customers' minds. Because Excellent views the design and quality of its machine guards to be the brand's unique selling proposition, the company treats information about the actual products as trade secrets. By contrast, the augmented products are considered add-ons that anyone could offer, and therefore the company is transparent with regard to information about them. For example, when customers forget to place their orders on time and therefore need express delivery, Excellent quotes the actual additional costs, without subsidizing or padding them. By being honest, Excellent earns the customers' trust.

Excellent promotes its brand through ads in professional magazines, by sending newsletters to customers, and by maintaining a website and a presence on social media. Excellent's marketing communication spending is relatively high for a B2B company, but it deems this necessary because much of the company's continued growth comes from new customer acquisitions. Thus, getting the word out and raising awareness among potential customers are important. Most actual sales, however, come from direct personal selling. Personal sales happen during traditional sales calls, but also at trade shows, which are an important marketing tool for Excellent (for both new and existing customers). A key success factor is the sales reps, who are instrumental to closing contracts. To augment its sales expertise, the firm has also hired an independent expert in machine safety to write an instruction booklet on how regulations can be interpreted and how Excellent's products can be used to meet the regulations. To obtain the booklet, which is published in Swedish, English, Spanish, German, French and Dutch, customers need to meet with Excellent's sales personnel. With regard to logistics, transport and service, Excellent listens carefully to customers to understand their needs, and tailor-made solutions are often the norm.

After a customer installs machinery in its manufacturing plant, safety equipment must be put in place quickly and in accordance with regulations. Excellent helps customers protect their machinery so that they can quickly and smoothly get started with their production. Customers can choose how involved they want to be in the installation. If they prefer installing the mesh wall modules themselves, Excellent provides, free of charge, a computer program that helps calculate the types and quantities of modules required to protect the machinery in the customer's specific location, in accordance with European

Union regulations for machine safety. However, if the customer prefers to simply buy the assembly service, Excellent provides project managers and fitters to assemble the walls.

If something goes wrong in the process of ordering, specifying or delivering the product, customers can suffer greatly, because failure to protect the machinery leads to production shutdowns. Therefore, it is important that the customers trust Excellent and believe that the company will do whatever is necessary to satisfy their needs. To this end, Excellent tries to build a company culture that focuses on action, speed and customer satisfaction. This is communicated in a code-of-conduct manual and a newsletter for employees, as well as in meetings and other activities. All personnel are informed about orders, sales and key production performance indicators, to highlight which tangible goals are important for the company. Because Excellent encourages individual initiatives, staff members are also confident acting on this knowledge without being told to do so.

To summarize all three product levels, Excellent delivers the core product of a safe manufacturing environment by providing smart, flexible and attractive actual products in combination with an augmented product that is characterized by a focus on action, speed and customer satisfaction. Although Excellent's offerings have a premium price and competitors can deliver the same function, the total offering, which includes calculation of the protection required, fast delivery and smooth installation, is difficult for competitors to match.

4.2 Absolute

Absolute's headquarters are located in Lidköping, Sweden. The company's vision is to be a world-leading industrial air filtration company. Absolute, which supplies the manufacturing industry, has enjoyed fast growth for more than two decades. Absolute was founded in 1993. Export efforts began in 1995, when the first units were sold to Norway, closely followed by Finland, Germany and Switzerland. Already in the early years, the company had most of its sales in international markets. During the next few years, Absolute established distributors around Europe. In 2000, it founded its first subsidiary in the USA. The CEO joined the company in 2000, and the company's sales have since increased 10-fold. Absolute was introduced on the Stockholm Stock Exchange in 2014.

4.2.1 Core product. Industrial air filtration does not generate revenue for Absolute's customers; rather, it is a necessary precaution against a potential problem. Companies do not invest in air filtration to perform better but rather because a lack of air filtration would hurt their operations. The main benefit of a good filtration system is that it protects employees' health, reduces the risk of accidents because of slippery surfaces and reduces the need for cleaning and maintenance. Air filtration is not the most important installation in the scope of a complete factory and therefore it is sometimes given less consideration than the larger investments in machinery. This relative lack of customer involvement indicates how Absolute can create benefits for the customer. Absolute's CEO summarized the core product as "world-leading solutions for reliable, problem-free clean air." He explained that when the products work well, customers do not need to worry about air filtration at all; rather, they can focus on their own productivity and the air filtration system should just be there for reassurance:

> When they've bought our stuff, their problems are over. And they get clean air.

4.2.2 Actual product. The actual products Absolute offers are different types of air filtration solutions for a variety of industrial applications, which it markets to companies around the world. Absolute's largest category is wet filtration systems, which mainly help remove the oil mist that results from the machining of metal. Absolute sells other products as well (e.g.

filtration systems for welding, foundries and food treatment), but these are limited to local markets. As the CEO explained:

> Absolute's products are clearly superior to other offerings in the market. There are some large competitors that have begun to catch up by adopting our innovations, but so far, we are a leader in product performance. Compared to most local alternatives, Absolute's products have dramatically better performance [. . .]. If we capture seventeen barrels of oil [in our filters] we let three teaspoons through [. . .]. Absolute is not like Rolls Royce, an extremely high-quality product that however sells in very low volume. Nor is it like GM or Toyota who sell the greatest number of cars. Rather, Absolute is like BMW, a company that sells a good volume of premium products and that is world leading in product performance.

Prices are similar globally. There is pressure to reduce prices in markets in which the purchasing power is lower than it is in Sweden. However, if prices were reduced in one country and not in others, the CEO maintains that news would spread quickly, and large clients would simply buy all their Absolute products from the cheapest country and redistribute them within their organizations. Furthermore, if Absolute were to match the prices of its local Chinese competitors, for example, it would signal that the products are comparable. As the CEO noted:

> Absolute products are 100 times better, and although it is impossible to charge 100 times more for them, a high price is an important signal of quality.

As mentioned, Absolute's customers should not have to think about air filtration, which works in the background, allowing them to get on with their business. As a consequence, customers will never become air filtration experts, and therefore Absolute does not solicit product development input from them. Instead, new technology comes from the in-house R&D department.

4.2.3 Augmented product. For Absolute, the augmented product is mainly a result of interactions with customers, usually when Absolute first contacts and sells to the customer, and also during delivery, installation and customer training and when Absolute staff handles any unforeseen issues that arise. These interactions increase the product's perceived value and create a positive impression of the Absolute brand in customers' minds. Absolute has a single-mindedly aggressive approach to sales: it targets new customers without any systematic consideration that some may be more valuable or suitable than others. Smaller competitors sometimes beat Absolute because customers want the convenience of having a local supplier that they can call if problems arise, but Absolute's uncompromising attitude means that the CEO never accepts losing a customer. Therefore, Absolute goes to great lengths to deliver products on time to the right location, without always analysing the profitability of each accommodation. The company delivers directly from its own warehouse, which provides industry-leading delivery times. In addition, Absolute has built a satellite warehouse in the USA that makes next-day delivery possible, an extremely fast turnaround for the industry.

As mentioned above, because Absolute considers itself an expert in air filtration, it does not collaborate with customers in the specification, design or manufacturing of the actual product. For the augmented product, however, the picture is different. Personnel from corporate sales and marketing meet distributors regularly and work together to continuously develop business plans and support local sales activities. In the case of large system sales, Absolute employees get involved and aid the distributor in producing tenders and providing technical support.

An important realization regarding the augmented product is that good hardware is only half the air filtration solution. A filter can only remove oil particles better than other filters if

it is installed correctly. In the air filtration industry, however, it is not unusual to run into unforeseen problems that make installations difficult. Therefore, it is common for sellers to back out of contracts when they realize that conditions in the factory will make it impossible to profitably fulfil the order. By contrast, when faced with difficulties of this kind, Absolute will do whatever it takes to make the filtration work. As the CEO explained:

> So you run in to problems from time to time when you really have to bite the bullet. You go, 'no, this is impossible', but for us this is a matter of faith; we never ever give up on a customer. Or on a customer's problem. Even if we lose money, we do whatever it takes to solve [the problem] and we have as far as I know to this day never abandoned a customer.

This uncompromising attitude creates trust and convinces the customer that Absolute has the customer's best interests at heart, which in turn instills confidence. This is especially important in markets in which manufacturers buy equipment from an independent distributor. For example, when Audi purchases air filtration products in Austria, the Absolute reputation is a guarantee that Audi will not be left in a bind if its local air filtration distributor runs into problems.

To be able to create a reputation as a company that solves problems for the customer, Absolute's personnel need to be able to make their own decisions and take actions to satisfy customers' expectations. As the CEO noted:

> Our employees know as long as they help our customer, they are doing the right thing. I do not micro-manage the staff. Sometimes I may think they have chosen a solution that is too expensive, for example, airfreight for spare parts. But I will not tell the employee that, but instead give him positive feedback for solving the problem. The word of mouth that we always solve customers' problem is our best marketing tool.

To summarize all three product levels, Absolute delivers the core product of reliable, problem-free clean air by providing actual products with clearly superior performance. In addition, its augmented product is characterized by uncompromising efforts to accommodate customers' needs and wants.

5. Integrative analysis of the results

In the following section, we do an integrative analysis of how the independent results from the cases relate to each other as well as to brand personality theory. The objective is to create understanding of the data and what it means for theory development and practice.

5.1 Core product provides peace of mind

Both investigated companies sell unsought capital items that provide the benefit of preventing loss of productivity. The products do not directly generate profits, but they are nevertheless valuable, because without them, production will stop. The core product (the benefit buyers seek) is thus a kind of insurance against negative outcomes. To deliver this benefit, we find that the studied companies focus on building trust with the customer. This is in line with the findings of Valette-Florence and Valette-Florence (2020) that brand personality builds commitment via trust. Trust is traditionally associated with competence (Hill and Lineback, 2012), and we indeed find that the companies work hard to establish a customer perception that they are leading experts in the industry (thus denoting brand competence). In B2B, trust is also created via social interaction and open communications (Doney *et al.*, 2007), and we indeed find that to build trust, the companies try to convince their customers that they have their best interests at heart and that they will do whatever it

takes to solve their problems. In addition to brand competence, the companies thus also focus on brand warmth to build trust.

5.2 A competent actual product provides peace of mind

As observed by Simões *et al.* (2015) and Ulaga and Eggert (2006), it is important to differentiate the offer from that of competitors and make the offer easy to recognize for customers. This relates to competence because competent brands have good knowledge of product design, manufacturing and quality control (Kervyn *et al.*, 2012; Bratanova *et al.*, 2015), and indeed, both Excellent and Absolute stress that they are experts in their respective fields and that their products are unique. However, we observe that the investigated companies' customers behave differently compared to other B2B buyers. Normally, when companies buy capital items that are directly used in the production of their wares (e.g. machinery), they are highly involved in the process and have a great deal of knowledge about the options. Manufacturing is how they make their money, and they do not believe that someone else can take responsibility for how they should do it. When customers buy products from Absolute and Excellent, the customers' motivations are different, which affects their buying behavior. Because poor product performance can lead to costly interruptions, it is important to the customers that the products work, just like it is for buyers of normal capital items. The studied companies' customers are, however, not especially interested in *how* the products work, and they therefore do not make the effort to become product experts. This lack of customer interest and expertise in turn explains why Excellent and Absolute do not solicit design input or provides adaptations – it would not improve the products, and the customers would not welcome the opportunity to contribute.

In addition to product expertise, competence is also related to status (Russell and Fiske, 2008; Fiske *et al.*, 2012), so brands that stand out among their peers will be perceived as more competent. That status is important becomes obvious when the company CEOs talk about their actual products in relation to those of competitors. They both stress their products' technical superiority to other products. In the case of Absolute, the CEO even illustrates what the brand stands for by comparing it to a known status brand (BMW) and by naming the high-status customer to which it caters (Audi). Both companies also use a premium pricing approach. In addition to generating profits, which are necessary for continued rapid growth, premium pricing signals superiority, which in turn builds status (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999).

Competence is typically characterized as a cognitive dimension (Bennett and Hill, 2012), which means that customers perceive it rationally. If customers evaluate the actual product rationally, Excellent and Absolute will succeed because customers will realize that the actual products represent superior functionality and design. In the studied companies, the competent actual product thus provides the rationale for buying the brand from a functional standpoint.

5.3 A warm augmented product provides peace of mind

A warm brand satisfies customers' needs by involving them in decisions on how the offering is delivered; warmth is cooperative in nature (Russell and Fiske, 2008; Fiske *et al.*, 2012). In contrast to their actual products, the investigated companies' augmented products fit the description of warm brands. Both companies allow tailored delivery, training and service options, and they care more about solving potential problems than maximizing profits at every turn. With the augmented product, Excellent and Absolute can instill customers with confidence that they have their best interests at heart. A possible explanation for this lies in the context of unsought capital items, which is distinct from regular capital items in the way

described above. Customers tend to focus on regular capital items such as machinery at the expense of unsought capital items because they are central to operations and require a much greater investment. They therefore sometimes forget to order Excellent's and Absolute's products well in advance, or they find that they must modify their initial order because of unforeseen events. Such situations do not require great competence on the part of the supplier – they do however require goodwill. Absolute's CEO's promise to solve any situation a customer may face, even when he is not obligated by contract to do so, is a sign of warmth that allows customers to relax and confident that even if they are not on top of every detail of their air filtration, Absolute is.

Warmth is typically characterized as an affective dimension (Bennett and Hill, 2012), which means that customers perceive it emotionally. In the studied companies, the warm augmented product makes the buyer believe that the seller cares, which in turn makes the buyer like the seller. A key dimension in building a warm brand personality is the customers' contacts with the suppliers' sales and service personnel. Education and culture-building activities that promote this customer-oriented behavior is instrumental to achieving the warm brand personality component. Because the employees make up the firm's brand personality (Simões, 2015), the firms have built flat, decentralized organizations that enable staff to independently make quick decisions to show the customers that they care about satisfying their needs.

5.4 A warm and competent brand personality
Brands that achieve both warmth and competence enjoy disproportionately positive evaluations (Aaker *et al.*, 2012), and both Excellent and Absolute carry out activities that build both dimensions. Given the rapid, profitable and sustained growth that the investigated companies have enjoyed, it is safe to assume that their customers evaluate their offerings positively. The findings of this study are thus in line with the BIAF of Kervyn *et al.* (2012). What is new here is the realization that companies can assign different brand-building roles to different organizational functions so that brand competence is created through inflexible, single-minded development and delivery of a superior actual product and brand warmth is built through a customer-oriented and flexible augmented product. This way, the companies avoid the risk that the cooperation-based, harmony-focused emotionally perceived warmth dimension clashes with the status-based, cognitively perceived competence dimension. By splitting brand-building tasks between corporate functions in this way, the companies create brands that are perceived as both warm and competent while at the same time avoiding warmth and competence canceling each other out because of their opposing directions (fitting in vs standing out). The relationship between product level and activities and their effects on perceptions of brand personality is summarized in Figure 2.

6. Discussion
The following section discusses the implications of the study's results for theory, practice and future research. As such, it aims to describe the significance of the findings in light of previous knowledge of B2B branding, and to explain how the presented results inform our understanding about B2B branding.

6.1 Theoretical implications
The study is related to the growing stream of research on B2B branding (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2007; Persson, 2010; Chang *et al.*, 2018; Rahman *et al.*, 2018). The paper validates the conclusion by Ozdemir *et al.* (2020) and Keller and Richey (2006) that a corporate brand personality can be defined in terms of the human characteristics or traits of the employees of
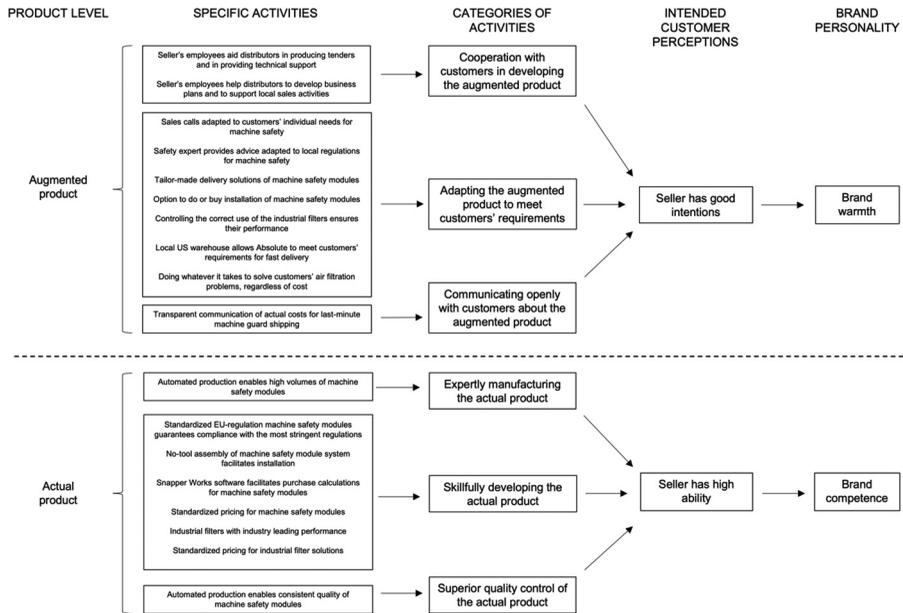
Figure 2.
Relationship between product level and activities and their effects on perceptions of brand personality

the corporation as a whole. This in turn underscores the importance of corporate culture for B2B brand building, which is in line with Baumgarth's (2010) and Baumgarth and Schmidt's (2010) findings. The results are also in line with Roper and Davies's (2010) conclusion that employee training is important to create a strong B2B brand.

This study extends the use of the construct of warm and competent brands to B2B. This is especially relevant because it fits with existing notions of what the important success factors in B2B are. B2B research has traditionally focused on functional benefits over emotional and symbolic benefits and on the importance of relationships for business outcomes (Beverland *et al.*, 2007). As delineated previously, functional benefits relate to competence and relationships to warmth. We thus show parallels between previous B2B research and the conceptualization of warm and competent B2B brands, and we find that the two streams of literature are compatible. This strengthens the case for the warm versus competent conceptualization of B2B brand personality.

In addition, we build on and contribute to the emerging research on B2B brand personality. Our results validate Veloutsou and Taylor's (2012) conclusion that brand personality is useful when conceptualizing B2B brands. We problematize previous studies' conceptualizations of brand personality. We argue that previous attempts (Coleman *et al.*, 2011) have used the brand personality moniker without really describing brand personality. By instead choosing a conceptualization of personality that has had a great impact on the literature on human personality (Fiske *et al.*, 2002) and that also has been applied successfully to consumer brands (Kervyn *et al.*, 2012), we introduce a conceptually consistent view of the brand as a person to the B2B marketing literature.

Using the brand as a person metaphor allows us to contribute to theory on brand consistency. Branding literature often stresses that a brand should be consistent; it should project the same identity in all its contacts with the customer to create a believable brand image (Schallehn *et al.*, 2014). This is sometimes interpreted to mean that a brand should be

one-dimensional and exude just one characteristic in all its touchpoints to make brand communication clearer. We disagree with this view and find that the brand as a person metaphor helps clarify how brand consistency works. A human's personality is made up of different traits or dimensions that co-exist simultaneously (McCrae and Costa, 1989), and it is how these traits or dimensions are combined that determines the overall personality. Emphasizing different sides of a personality depending on the situation is, however, possible. Using a human to illustrate, we propose an example; a footballer exhibits competence by scoring goals on the pitch but warmth when joking with teammates in the locker room. He thus displays different facets of his personality in different situations, and teammates will not perceive this as inconsistent. They would, on the other hand, most likely find it strange if there was no pattern to the behavior, and the footballer sometimes made jokes during the match but was result oriented while showering and changing. Personality is a description of what someone is like at the core (Dollinger, 1995), so to self-present differently under unchanged circumstances will be perceived as inconsistent and inauthentic.

Carrying this metaphor over to brands suggests that a company can emphasize different facets of its brand personality depending on the situation and still appear consistent, but that each brand touchpoint should exhibit the same character to every customer, every time the customer comes into contact with it. The studied companies act this way. They consistently build brand competence through activities related to the actual product and brand warmth through activities related to the augmented product. They however do not, as Freling and Forbes (2005) would suggest, adapt their brand personality to different market segments. Our findings further enable us to nuance previous theory on brand consistency and advocate a view that it is the overall brand personality that should be consistent, but that its constituting warm and competent dimensions, as long as they are consistent across customers and time, can be emphasized to different degrees depending on the task at hand.

Finally, while prior studies on B2B branding have largely ignored the effect that product type has on how companies build B2B brands, we find that it helps explain the activities companies engage in. We also find that existing classifications of industrial products (Kotler *et al.*, 2019) do not take the buyer's motivations or behaviors into account. These are considerations Kotler *et al.* use to classify consumer products. Our data, however, suggest that customer motivation and behavior play a role also in B2B and we therefore consider the omission of these factors in the classification of industrial products an oversight. In this study, we focus on companies selling a type of capital item for which customers display low awareness and interest, and for which they therefore do not actively seek information. As a consequence, the sellers have to promote their products aggressively to succeed. This description fits the criteria for an unsought product as presented by Kotler *et al.* (2019) in their classification of consumer products, and we therefore call these industrial products "unsought capital items." The contributions of this paper with regard to product classification are the following. The study identifies that the customers' motivations and behaviors are relevant factors not just for consumer products but also for the classification of industrial products. We use this insight to coin the "unsought capital item" product type, and we delineate how companies can build brand personality for such products. By integrating criteria previously used separately for consumer products and industrial products, we extend theory on product classification and enhance the explanatory power of product type for B2B brand building.

6.2 Managerial implications

For fast-growing industrial firms selling unsought capital items, providing products that offer superior functional value to customers is critical, though instilling confidence and

likeability is also important. This can be achieved by splitting tasks between functions. By allowing the people responsible for R&D to pursue product optimization without interference from outside influence, while giving personnel in sales and customer service the role of caring service providers, firms can create a brand personality that is both warm and competent. To ensure a consistent brand, managers need to create an organization and culture that balances the need of independent product development and design of the core product with agility and creativity to satisfy customers' demands regarding the augmented product (e.g. fast deliveries, education, assembling alternatives). Such an organization is flat and gives employees the power to make own decisions, as long as it satisfies customer demand. This type of organization and activities both strengthen relationships with existing customers and engender a positive reputation of the company for new customers.

Although product type might determine how companies should act to build strong brands, providers of unsought capital items are not the only companies that can learn from this study. This article shows that successful B2B companies emphasize brand competence when they carry out activities that are related to the part of the offering where they enjoy a unique competitive advantage. By contrast, in areas in which the B2B companies do not possess superior and unique abilities, they instead emphasize brand warmth. By juxtaposing these findings against a company's marketing philosophy (Kotler *et al.*, 2019), the presented results inform companies in different contexts how to build brands. For example, a company with a product focus (a marketing philosophy that sees a superior product as the critical success factor) should emphasize brand competence for its actual products and brand warmth for its augmented products. Conversely, a company with a sales focus (a marketing philosophy that considers the sales method as the critical success factor) should emphasize brand competence for its augmented products (customer interactions) and brand warmth for its actual products (the physical items sold). By considering a company's marketing philosophy, it may thus be possible to generalize the findings to industrial products on a broader scale.

6.3 Limitations and future research
The article's perspective is limited to that of management, and therefore it does not take customer reactions into account. Moreover, the industry setting limits the generalizability of the findings. With these limitations in mind, avenues for future research become obvious. They include investigations of how customers evaluate B2B brands, as well as research on B2B brands in other industries. B2B comprises many different contexts, and it is likely that those contexts shape the ways brands are built.

This study is an early foray into the B2B brand personality research stream, and the use of the warm and competent B2B brand personality conceptualization is still in its infancy. Thus, possibilities abound for research on B2B brand personality. One foray is to replicate the Kervyn *et al.* (2012) study and quantitatively validate the brand warmth and brand competence dimensions specifically for B2B. To avoid criticism of the kind levied against Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale that it is not culturally universal (Azoulay and Kapferer, 2003; Geuens *et al.*, 2009), a replication study would benefit from being carried out in several culturally disparate locations. Previous research (Voorn and Muntinga, 2017; Kolbl *et al.*, 2019) has shown that when it comes to brand personality, different rules apply for different types of products. Replication studies would therefore ideally comprise different product types and different industries.

A second avenue for future research is to study how brand personality affects B2B relationships. Relationships are central to B2B marketing (Grönroos, 2011) and brand personality theory is intertwined with relationship theory (Radler, 2018). After all, we choose

brands whose personality we like because we would like to form relationships with them (Fournier and Alvarez, 2012).

A third conceptual area to explore is that of self-image congruity for B2B brands. It is well established that when consumers encounter brands that in some way resemble themselves, they reach different forms of satisfaction or avoid different kinds of dissatisfaction, which in turn results in positive attitudes or persuasion to buy a brand – a phenomenon called self-image congruity (Sirgy, 1982). It is reasonable to assume that companies too would seek out sellers with brand personalities that the buyer identifies with or aspires to. Research into B2B self-image congruity could identify new methods to match companies whose personalities fit and that therefore are suited to do business with each other.

In conclusion, B2B brand personality is a promising research stream because there is a distinctly human element to B2B branding. Companies are made up of people, and B2B brands are built largely via the interactions of those people. If we fully commit to the brand as a person metaphor, we see that B2B brand personality describes a brand's character and predicts how the brand will react toward customers in recurrent situations – this is knowledge that is most useful to both practitioners and scholars.

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Appendix. Interview guide

(1) Can you describe the most important need that you satisfy for your customers? How do you act to satisfy this need?

(2) How do you provide value for your customer?

(3) Some products are purchased because they allow the buyer to gain an advantage of some kind. These are called gain creators. Other products protect the buyer from negative outcomes. These are called pain relievers. Would you say that you provide gain creators or pain relievers?

(4) How important is it that the buyer knows your company and has experience from doing business with you? Does such experience mean that you can provide more value? Can you give an example?

(5) To what extent do you adopt the offering to your customer needs and wants? Is such customization valuable to you? Can you give an example?

(6) How quickly do you respond to your customers' demands? Is the timeliness of your response to the demands important? Can you give an example of a situation when a timely response from you was valuable?

(7) How important is it that you are located close to your customers? Is it important that you have a facility near the customer?

(8) How do you interact with your customer?

(9) How do your operations affect your reputation? What activities are most important? Product, price, place, promotions?

(10) When it comes to the offer, please comment on the importance of the following dimensions: product scope, attributes, quality/value, uses, functional benefits.

(11) Please comment on the importance of the following: the character of the offer and what it says about the type of person/firm that would use it; the name, symbols and logotypes that represent the offer; the relationship that your customer has with the offer; any emotional benefits your customer derives from the offer; the country of origin; organizational associations.

(12) How does your pricing strategy affect your reputation (high/low, stable/flexible, fair/unfair)?

(13) How does your distribution affect your reputation (many/few outlets, type of outlets)?

(14) What do you do to promote your products and company? How do the promotional activities affect your reputation? What type of promotion do you think is most influential in this regard? Please elaborate.

(15) How does word of mouth affect your reputation? What sources are most important?

(16) How does media coverage (editorial, not advertising) affect your reputation? Which sources are most important?

(17) How would you describe your brand if it were a person?

Corresponding author
Ulf Aagerup can be contacted at: ulf.aagerup@ju.se