

## **Enabling Brand-Reseller Relationships in Business-to-Business**

### **Structured Abstract**

*Purpose:* The paper identifies important enablers of the brand-reseller representative relationship in its study of a business-to-business market to bridge a gap in theory and practice. Based on brand managers' understanding about brand personification and support from resellers, the research study for the paper demonstrates influences of the reseller representative effects on brand performance, enabling and managing reseller networks.

*Design/Methodology/Approach:* The purpose of this paper required the researcher to collect qualitative data in the market from both reseller firms and companies offering branded products to resellers. It draws upon qualitative methodology and data collected from 12 business-to-business resellers for brands and 8 brand managers working for international brands in India.

*Findings:* Brand personification and representation in research propositions investigated showed the enablement aspects of brands in competitive reseller networks.

*Research limitations/Implications:* The qualitative nature of the study overcomes its small sample size as the study's insights assist brand managers to incorporate the

emotional aspects of personification to benefit a brand managed relationship on social and business grounds.

*Originality/Value:* Examined under the lens of the brand manager and reseller relationship, theories of branding and relationship marketing are integrated with the dynamics of how a brand can be effectively managed in practice by managers so as to effectively build empathetic relationships with resellers.

*Keywords:* *Brand-Reseller Relationships, Brand Personification, Reseller Networks, Reseller concerns, Brand Support*

## **Introduction**

Key enablers, which drive brand and reseller relationships, are mutual benefits and the enabling capability of a brand, such as brand personification, for ensuring resellers' ease or convenience of working with such brands (Barnes et al, 2007). These mean brand managers developing mutually sustaining relationships with potential resellers accompanied by a promise of enabling mutual growth and commitment to such relationships (Zineldin, 2000). There is a natural desire by people to form and maintain interpersonal relationships and the dynamics of reseller motivation require managers to carefully manage their brands in their relationships with resellers. Moreover, brands become personified products of enhanced standing, celebrity and even cult status which are promoted by the creation of emotional linkages (Tantisenepong et al. 2012; Thompson-Whiteside et al. 2018). Brand personification embodies points of reference for their owners, such as offers of brand promise e.g. perceptions of quality, in order to

motivate resellers to get engaged with their brands (Gronroos, 2009). From the literature discussion in the paper, there is a perceived gap in the current literature in business-to-business markets about key enablers in brand-reseller relationships with reference to brand personification, reseller networks and brand managers' understanding of business requirements of resellers. So the objective of this paper is to highlight the ability of brand managers in developing and understanding the concerns of resellers related to their brands. Brand awareness, brand knowledge and brand satisfaction cumulatively improve brand perceptions of resellers and affects the levels of commitment they make to brands based on the brand's enablement capabilities (Srinivasan et al, 2005; Keller and Lehmann 2006).

The paper has the following structure. It takes readers through the theories of brand personification, relationship marketing and enablement capabilities with generation of research propositions supported from the literature review. The research methodology and ethical nature is explained. Findings from interviews and data analysis are presented. These are followed by consideration of limitations and future research, managerial implications, conclusions and recommendations.

## Literature review

The role of brand personification in stimulating interpersonal relationships to support the development of consumer-brand relationships is theorized in the academic literature on reseller brand relationships (e.g. Fournier and Alvarez, 2012; Gupta et al, 2018), consumer brand relationships (e.g. Voorn et al, 2015; Gaber et al, 2019) and in human personality as a theory to underpin brand personality (e.g. Davies et al, 2017; Bairrada et

al, 2019). In marketing research studies, brand personification is used as a projective technique where individuals are asked to think about brands as people, projecting their personalities onto brands to express their feelings about how brands could look, think and feel. Businesses have been using brand personification to popularise their brands with consumers who perceive their brands as more than objects, thereby developing brand loyalty. The practitioner literature (e.g. Maehle and Supphellen, 2011) demonstrates the sustained interest in brand personification within marketing theory and practice. Further, due to consumer engagement regarding brand personification, various theories and dimensions of brand personality (Davies et al, 2017), impact of brand personality on consumer behaviour (Bairrada et al, 2019) and development of product types and personality in brand relationships (Voom et al, 2015) are offered in the literature.

Brands as names are assigned to products in the form of labels and customers use these names when they want to refer to the products of a company (Aaker, 1997). Marketers identify brand building as an important aspect for developing relationships with resellers (Keller, 2003; Gupta et al, 2010). It is the brand relationship with the reseller, which makes profits and not just the product (Zeithaml et al, 2001). In addition, relationship marketing having emerged as a paradigm shift in brand management theory (Sheth et al., 2000; Vargo and Lusch, 2004) from being only a marketing function appearing as an antecedent to brand management, is now an established part in the literature for companies' strategic business planning (Gummerson, 2004). Companies know brand related intention of their resellers extends beyond brand related behaviour and includes reseller preferences, likings and motivations as drivers of relationships (Gilliland and Bello, 2002).

Brand manager-reseller relationships depend upon resellers' perception of the brand with the belief of minimum risk involved in the brand related activity (Danes et al. 2010). Resellers' motivations depend upon their brand knowledge to generate levels of brand satisfaction with their customers, which in turn help to establish reseller brand preferences (Keller, 2003). Through developing a feeling of security in the minds of resellers the brand-reseller relationship serves to encourage brand preferences and availability of a brand's products to consumers (Gupta et al. 2018; Japutra et al. 2019). In the research study for this paper in a business-to-business market, resellers act as a conduit useful for information exchanges with their brand managers to represent their brands to customers and thus, make use of brand personification. This research contributes to the existing knowledge in the field of branding for influencing customer behavior, which suggests that brands when represented enable resellers to associate and develop relationships with the brand (O'Cass and Grace, 2004, Gupta et al, 2018). Companies personify their brands to communicate brand value and to promote their brands to customers (Chun and Davies, 2006; Gupta et al,2008). When brands represented are used to manage relationships with resellers, it has been noticed that the companies behind the brands can more successfully respond to reseller requirements (Gupta et al, 2010). Resellers by personifying brands to their customers, could make relationships with them stronger, encouraging their customers to select a particular brand amongst all competing brands (Narayandas and Rangan, 2004). However, it has been noted by various sources that the related motivations of resellers depend upon various factors e.g. reliability of product and after-sales support (Roper and Davies, 2010), and

satisfaction of resellers from their relationships with brands (Glynn et al., 2007; Oumlil, 2008).

A study conducted by Zablah et al. (2004) explained interaction management enabled from an interpersonal perspective, as a strategic tool for building relationships. However, there is a gap in the literature about how to build a successful brand manager-reseller dyadic relationship. From business marketing research to business customer psychology literature, the influence of brand personification has been found (Chun and Davies, 2006; Roper and Davies, 2010; Delbaere et al. 2011). However, these studies do not consider the role of brand personification to enhance and enable the brand-reseller relationship with mutual understanding. Hence, the research for this paper also considers the relational facet of brand-reseller relationship in conceptualizing an individual personifying the brand as a relationship building tool, thus acting as an enabler to bring focus of brand activities into the dyadic requirement of the brand-reseller relationship in a business to business market.

Increasingly, the literature is becoming populated with studies about how firms engage in online social media to enhance their customer relationship management for achieving a superior financial performance (Schivinski and Dabrowski 2016; Wang and Kim, 2017, Gaber et al, 2019). For instance, interpretivist consumer researches show how advertising campaigns are perceived by consumers (Pirani et al., 2018). However, such studies are limited when it comes to the social and psychological differences in relationships for business-to-business customers and resellers. Concerns of resellers in a market can be based on small issues, moving resellers away from brands leading to problems, such as breakdown and dissolution of relationships with brands in consumer

relationships within an interpersonal setting. In the case of business-to-business markets, resellers wish to associate with a brand that provides relational benefits such as growth and profitability (Gilliland and Bello, 2001). Although branding is considered as the cornerstone of business-to-business marketing, its ability to fulfill the need of the brand-reseller relationship has never been examined in a systematic way e.g. in connection with how to support resellers' brand personification efforts or to that they be compensated with a reward or other value influencers to influence brand selection by resellers given that there are other competing brands in the market (Lin et al. 2018).

Brands that are able to successfully keep their resellers satisfied and motivated in dynamic conditions emerge as market leaders (Wind and Rangaswamy, 2001) enabling managers of brands to act on opportunities before their competitors do. Motivations of resellers are capable of driving brand related behaviour of consumers in competitive markets, which can have a profound influence on brand-reseller relationships (Parvatiyar and Sheth, 2001) and on brand representation by an individual for consumer markets (Waitz et al; 2010).

Resellers make evaluations that influence their motivations of being in a relationship with brands. For instance, branding contributes to relationship marketing by diverting resellers' attention towards removing barriers and bridging the gaps in their understanding about brands, thereby making the relationship valuable for everyone in the value chain with mutual benefits (Weidner et al, 2009). Sharing of resources for revenue generation develops satisfied brand-reseller relationships (Glynn et al, 2007). Confidence in the relationship builds mutual expectations of support in achieving business objectives (Kern and Willcocks, 2002; Tran and Cox, 2009; Moller et al, 2009). Relationships allow

both brand managers and resellers to share selling opportunities available to them (Glynn et al., 2007). Understanding and fulfilling reseller requirements by sharing brand resources for mutual benefits creates a difference in the minds of the resellers and improves the quality of relationships.

To be effective, marketing requires to deliver via manufacturers and suppliers' interactions with customers to aid profitability in their networks of relationships with different customers from large ones to small, depending on customer needs. Interaction is explained as a way of developing a dialogue oriented towards building and maintaining a long-term winning relationship with value jointly created by the parties involved in the relationship. Interaction in the case of the research study of this paper is along the lines of contact and dialogue with the resellers, understanding and catering to their needs in helping them understand more about the brands so that commitment to the brand could develop brand loyalty with resellers and their customers. Though the sample was small, in practical terms, in our research, customer retention to help the success of brands is more important than being more thinly spread across the market chasing market share with more and more resellers, i.e. a joint problem-solving approach, a view that is supported in the literature.

When interacting with resellers, brand managers need to present justifications fitting resellers' organisational agendas and propose corrective actions to turn negative brand evaluations by resellers into favourable assessments (Kim and McGill, 2011). Sheth et al. (2000) Evolution of customised solutions provided to resellers, was acknowledged as target marketing in the relationship marketing paradigm, elevating the level of customer-oriented marketing. Stakeholders acknowledged that customer-oriented



management as relationship marketing was bound to provide to shareholders, value in terms of business growth and subsequently, higher profits (Schau, 2009). However, leveraging relationships in a reseller market involves market or reseller specific initiatives from any given brand (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2004; Berry, 2018 ). Such relationships are termed as dyadic relationships, as both brand managers and resellers contribute to and benefit from such a relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006). Brands provide an assurance of quality to resellers and resellers contribute to the sale of products of the brand to their set of resellers (Glynn et al., 2007). Combining and coordinating the contributions of both brand and reseller as resources, leads to efficient functionality in the context of dyadic relationships of resellers with the customer on one side and seller on other side, so the brand representative brings value in the exchange (Day, 2000).

Dyadic relationships between brands and their resellers play an important role in growing a brand, as resellers use brand elements to build competencies by providing inroads into a potential market (Bloom et al., 2003; Keller and Lehmann, 2006). The organizational agenda of brands behind relationship marketing in reseller networks can be attained with sincere efforts to understand the concerns and motivations of customers (Day, 2000). Relationship marketing is seen as an art of building interactive relationships with potential and existing resellers by working towards their motivations for sustainable business opportunities (Piercy and Lane, 2003). Brand values, when represented by an individual, motivates in a relationship with resellers to become a long-term relationship (Payne et al, 2017). Such relationships when nurtured with ingredients of proximity and similarity and with components of flexibility and co-operation enable brand managers to address the changing business requirements of the individual reseller and to initiate

valuable long-term relationships (Molina and Kinder, 2001). Brand communications creates awareness and initiates relationships while brand value enables brand reseller relationships to strengthen (Migdow et al, 2009).

The literature explains the relationship between brands and consumers, but do not further address the role of the brand to enable development of relationships with resellers (Buur, 2018). However, it is important to understand that from the perspective of brand-reseller relationships, the managers of brands operating through reseller networks become aware that the requirements of resellers of their brands are different from end users i.e. consumers. This paper is an attempt to build on the existing theories of brand representation, to conceptualize its role in developing mutually beneficial and collaborative relationships between brand managers who are also brand representatives and their resellers.

The notion of interaction is implied as a two-way process or mutually defining one in conceptual and practical terms as in any effective relationship there needs to be some reciprocity. Theoretically, relationship marketing as coined by Berry in 1983, see Berry's paper on summation of perspectives: Berry (2018) online, is seen as essentially a marketing strategy initiative for a service organization in its plan to target customers (acquisition and retention) with the aim of commitment, support and development of the customer relationship. In practical terms, our research study showed how planning and offering support through the impact of a brand representative maintained an important brand presence with resellers, helping both sides mutually in their desire to build upon the needs of the resellers, mutually maintaining or 'supporting' such a relationship. It includes growing the potential or demand of this customer base by brand managers

committing to offering support during the whole process from product sales to after-sales service.

### Research Propositions

The literature about branding in dyadic business relationships contends that when brands surpass the qualification of personification, they become an active and contributing member in these relationships (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009; Fournier and Alvarez, 2012; Thompson-Whiteside et al, 2018). Chernatony and O'Riley (1997) proposed that brands should use the personification facet of their brands to develop relationships with resellers. Silwa and Alwi (2008) used data collected from 511 interviews to explain that personification as a metaphor enabled resellers to understand and make sense of their experiences. Saren and Tzokas (1998) reviewed the concept of relationship marketing and explained that personification can be used as a campaign to create affective and emotional bonding between firms and resellers. Gupta et al. (2010) used the brand knowledge transfer model of Keller (2003) to discuss the influence of the brand when represented by an individual dealing with the business customers' knowledge about the brand. Donoghue (2000) studied projective dimension of brand personification as a qualitative research method to understand motivations of resellers. Drawing on the dyadic relationship literature, a brand managers could use the attributes of brands to create brand awareness, brand knowledge and brand value to motivate preferences of resellers. However, limitations of the literature integrating the three dimensions of brand personification for business markets, as suggested in the following research propositions, was the motivation for this research. Building on the previous knowledge, this study

integrates these dimensions to explain how companies could use personification to enable effective relationships with resellers.

Resellers, when they interact with brand managers, become confident of the value that the brands contribute so their preferences are concentrated towards the brand (SoMay and Scull, 2002; Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2011). Given that resellers have a strong role to play in driving consumer markets, reseller motivation becomes a highly important enabler on the agenda of brand managers. However, there is a gap in available research studies to explain in business-to-business markets, how brand managers could use relationship marketing to motivate their resellers, to become a contributing member in a dyadic brand-reseller relationships. To address this gap in the current literature, this paper conceptualizes the role of a brand when represented for reseller networks and creates enablement capabilities for the brand. Thus, enabling brand managers to understand the requirements of resellers, to ensure that resellers receive the support in the format that they require, in order to sell the products of the brand. Therefore, the following proposition is presented.

P<sub>1</sub>: A brand, when represented by an individual reseller and extending the brand personification effect, is closely tied to brand differentiation and continuing support from the brand manager.

A brand, when represented, stimulates for consumers a feeling of accessibility (Tanure and Durate, 2005; Wierenga and Soethoudt, 2010). The accessibility of the reseller to the brand breeds cooperative coordination between the brand and the reseller and ensures that marketing efforts of the brand motivate resellers to stay in a relationship with the brand.

This contributes additional value to the relationship, by integrating its value chain developed for reseller networks into its consumer marketing strategies to promote to the resellers. Simultaneously, the representative brand acts as a conduit that connects the business opportunities available with both the reseller and the brand, thereby enhancing performance of the brand reseller relationship.

*P<sub>2</sub>: A brand, when represented by an individual for managing brand-reseller relationships, contributes to business opportunities available to both the brand and the reseller.*

In highly competitive markets, support is available to resellers from various brands (Jaworski et al. 2000). Resellers choose a brand based on the incentives promised by the brand and ease of doing business with a brand (Vijayasarathy, 2010). The brand representative uses frequent interactions with resellers to understand the benefits and support offered to the resellers by competitors. The market and competition information received by the brand representative during interactions with resellers enables brand managers to understand motivations of resellers and to suitably react to the initiatives of the competition, by taking a quick action, favourable to the brand prior to the competition (Jaworski et al. 2000; Ballantyne, 2007).

*P<sub>3</sub>: A brand when represented by an individual for managing the brand-reseller relationship, will enable its brand managers to react to the information received with timely actions favourable to the brand.*

Research Methodology

### *Philosophical underpinnings*

Qualitative market research for this paper is inherently interpretivist. Contrast with positivist orthodoxy in quantitative research, which dominates orthodox scientific investigations and social science studies, interpretivism enables a qualitative approach and emphasises the exploration of subjective meanings in human behaviour (Bell et al, 2019). Qualitative research regards exploration of differences between individuals and between groups as providing deeper meaningful data about their relationships (Wright and Wright, 2017).

From a methodological perspective the qualitative market research methodology with in-depth interviews, is highly relevant for this study. There is support from the literature that instead of being guided by the will of the researcher, the selection of appropriate methods in qualitative research is appropriately determined by the research questions and objectives formulated (e.g. Silverman, 2014, Bell et al, 2019) .

### *Data collection and ethical considerations*

The purpose of this paper requires the researcher to collect qualitative data from both reseller firms and companies offering branded products to resellers. Hence, views of both resellers and brand managers were considered appropriate to find answers to the research propositions. Data was collected from managers of international brands being sold in India through resellers. Brand managers were contacted through emails and via researcher professional networks to ask for cooperation in the study. Confidentiality was offered and accepted to avoid personal data identification of brand managers' and reseller names in published papers. This ethical consideration is in line with what Wiles et al

(2012) stated, “.....conducting research ethically is considered the cornerstone of good practice and regarded as a professional necessity” (2012, pp. 329).

Brand managers were also invited to submit names of resellers to participate in the research. They were informed that participation was voluntary and that confidentiality and anonymity of the interview respondents were respected. As Silverman (2014) stated, it is necessary to obtain informed consent from interview participants and ensure their confidentiality in presenting research findings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 respondents working as senior marketing and sales managers or decision makers for the reseller firms and 8 brand managers monitoring sales of their products through reseller networks. The Interview is an effective technique (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015) and in this study, was favoured over using a focus group. It is not possible to conduct one focus group of these two sets of respondents, considering that they would see others in the group as their competitors, thereby, not likely to be responding or being less likely to contribute market information in answer to the interview questions. To reduce bias one researcher conducted all the interviews asking the same questions.

An interview guide that was prepared based on the review of literature and anecdotal information available to the researcher, was very helpful during the interviews. This is because the views of these business respondents contain expert insights into exploring benefits of having brand representatives in managing reseller networks

### *Sampling*

Non-probability sampling techniques underpin qualitative investigations. In this study a purposive sampling technique was adopted as the brand managers and resellers were

identified as knowledgeable in their fields. As in marketing research texts (Silverman 2014, Shiu et al, 2009), non-probability sampling techniques including purposive sampling (Suri, 2011) provide for the selection of units deemed most relevant to the qualitative research purpose and research questions.

In this study the ages of the respondents of both the types were between 28 to 45 years and all of them were men. The respondent sample of reseller segment reflected the diversity in the types of resellers in reseller networks of international brands. Three categories were identified. The first category were respondents who represented reseller firms in the business of trading *information technology products*. They bought products from national distributors of international brands to sell them further along to other resellers. The second category of interviewees were selling directly to consumers. A third -category of resellers was identified as retail and non-retail resellers by respondents from within the first two categories. This meant a set of respondents were selling out of a non-retail set-up, whereby the customer could not walk in to have a look and get a feel of the product, whereas, others were selling from a retail outlet.

These categories in the sample were found to be primarily homogeneous and especially with so with the brand managers. Unlike more formal Western systems, the business culture in India, allows more informal contacts between brand managers and their resellers and often, they share similar cultural characteristics too. Although all the participants considered each of their brands to be different, the products offered were quite similar.

#### *Data analysis and Discussion*



A traditional method for analysis of expert insights is to develop and evaluate the concepts being explored. Conceptualization as developed from a review of the literature was refined based on the thematic analysis of comments made during the interviews by the two sets of interviewees (Altheide, 2000). The qualitative content analysis in the research

allows the inductive exploration of underlying themes from the interview data.

Clear assessment about the brand when represented by a reseller representative -is clearly important to establish rigour and integrity to maintain the credibility of the findings. Judgements made by the respondents about the “soundness of research in terms of methodology” combined with “integrity of participants and their responses” from verbatim descriptions of in-depth comments made by the respondents, were helpful to establish *reliability of research findings* (Leung, 2015). It was also important to address the issue of *researcher personal bias*, by inviting other research scholars to comment on the rigour demonstrated in the application of the research method.

Clarity of the process while making interpretations will enhance validity via precision in the use of data that accurately relates to the research question and links between previous academic studies and reflections on findings (Kornbluh, 2015). The consistency in analytical procedure to analyse the data collected from both sets of respondents revealed reliability, based on meticulous analysis that clearly justified the decisions made to be consistent with transparent interpretations made by the researcher. Furthermore, the availability of two sets of data was supportive. This is in order to establish philosophical rigour of the study with sufficient depth and relevance of data collected (Kornbluh, 2015; Bell, 2019).

The data was analysed to examine the influence of the brand representative on enablement capabilities for brand-reseller relationships, specifically: (a) brand personification extension by resellers and understanding of brand managers about supporting resellers; (b) enablement of brand managers in the brand-reseller relationship; and (c) business opportunities available to brand managers and resellers with importance of reacting to the information received and timely actions favourable to their brands.

Two of the respondents from the reseller segment and two from brand managers, highlighted the influence of a brand represented by a person i.e. the reseller in the following words for (a) Brand personification extension by resellers and understanding of brand managers about supporting resellers.

*\* Respondent (Brand manager): "The person personifying the brand to the reseller helps us to synchronize the implementation of any initiatives of the brand with the activities of the resellers on the ground using the information in a very strategic manner".*

*\* Respondent (Reseller firm): "As the person representing the brand I try to recognize issues my company has in selling its brand and use the information I provide to fit support for the brand according to the requirements of my company".*

*\* Respondent (Brand manager): "To push my brand through existing or potential resellers, I need a person presenting the brand in reseller networks to collect and provide the information about the kind of support resellers need from the brand".*

*\* Respondent (Reseller firm): "Representing a brand in person helps me understand how one brand is different from other brands in the market and the support needed".*

The thematic content is that brand personification by resellers is closely tied to brand differentiation and continuing support from brand managers.

Brand managers were asked about the influence of the brand for management of reseller networks. Respondents highlighted the influences in the following scenarios for (2) what the enablement of brand-reseller relationship means.

*\* Respondent (Brand manager): "My brand's representative..... helps my sales team make sure that our marketing initiatives fit the requirements and capabilities of resellers, thereby increasing our return on investment from each promotion".*

*\* Respondent (Reseller firm): "Representing a brand helps me understand the brand before and after the sale of a product of that brand category".*

*\* Respondent (Reseller firm) 'Competition in the market requires brand managers to notice the opportunity and act upon it before competitors do. We as resellers can provide information to brand managers through their representatives, but it is up to the brand manager to react to the information and create opportunity for the brand'.*

*\* Respondent (Brand manager): "Ensuring engagement of resellers before taking an action in a competitive market is very critical because we don't want a boomerang effect and hurt the brand.*

*\* Respondent (Brand manager): "To drive any market against competitors of a particular product or a particular brand depends totally on the information available to the brand manager through the person reseller who represents the brand.*

*\* Respondent (Brand manager): The reseller individual develops brand-reseller relationships on the ground to collect information that can enable a brand manager to drive a market".*

The thematic contents of this is that when a brand is represented by an individual this alone is an enablement act. A brand manager can use the eyes and ears of the reseller on the ground to garner the available information in order to take timely actions in a competitive market.

Brand managers try to create and use brand differentiation before their competitors take further notice and resellers were intrigued about the research concerning their contributions. Two of the respondents from the brand managers and two from the resellers' segments highlighted (c) business opportunities available to brand managers and resellers with importance of reacting to the information received and taking timely actions favourable to their brands.

*\* Respondent (Brand manager): "The person representing my brand in reseller networks brings back not only reseller but also market information, so we can create new business opportunities to strengthen ours and the business of the reseller".*

*\* Respondent (Brand manager): "My brand's representative collects specific information about strengths and weaknesses of different resellers, which helps our business".*

*\* Respondent (Reseller firm): "Everyone tries to generate demand for its products in the consumer market.....and I try to create new opportunities for my business".*

*\* Respondent (Reseller firm): "I prefer to sell the brand that not only creates walk-ins at the retail counter, but also creates through initiatives, like training or bulk sales".*

The thematic content of this is the importance of generating marketing intelligence and demand in the brand-seller relationship to create the first-mover advantage in the market. This adds a competitive edge over rivals.

## Findings

The analysis of interview data and resulting thematic contents showed the enablement effects of brand-reseller relationships for brand personification, brand differentiation, support for brands and creating opportunities in the marketplace. Resellers needed to know how far brand managers would go to provide the required support for them, whether information exchange could be more open and what incentives there were to provide for resellers commitment to a brand. The findings also revealed that the ability to increase business opportunities for both brands and resellers, was affected by resellers' brand knowledge of brand managers, such as their operational policies for each brand in sales and after-sales support. Brand-reseller enablement could help create first-mover advantage in the market, meaning that brand managers need to take decisive action before competitors did, based upon inputs of their resellers' strengths, concerns and feedback.

These research propositions and findings are in line with the literature review and highlights how the brand when represented enables the collection of intelligence, which in our case is in the form of its overall potential supported by the individual capabilities of resellers in relation to their brands. These findings provide evidence for previous studies and theoretical underpinnings used to make propositions regarding the impact of the brand, Brand personification has a strong connection to the reseller as the individual representing and extending the attributes of the brand in the minds of their consumers. Moreover, the effect of the brand represented is geared to *enablement* of: (a) brand managers to develop competitive advantage in the market for their brands; (b) resellers to find the product when a requirement from consumers arise; and (c) in the case of

technology products, dependent upon resellers' brand knowledge to engage consumers and close the sales.

The findings of this research demonstrate the role of brand personification for enabling and nurturing resellers by considering issues faced by brand managers in reseller networks. The implementation of this conceptualisation helps to bridge the gap in theory and practice for the marketplace by explaining how brand personnel should use the personification concept to develop abilities required during their encounters and interactions with resellers.

For the dyadic relationships of sellers and customers, brand representatives bring value to the exchange via personification of brands. Brand personification means that the personality of the brand is defined in the relationship by understanding reseller motivations and building value in the relationship. This is done by the brand managers offering rewards to resellers and engaging them to participate actively in feedback within the relational exchange. This supports marketing strategy when a brand offers more value to the product asset when it is seen as being compensated with a reward. It is also a marketing tool to influence the selection of brands given that there are other competing brands out there in the market.

Brand managers play an important role in finding solutions to resellers' problems or resolving reseller issues in selling their brands by listening to them and giving emotional support, thereby creating empathy. This gives resellers a feeling of proximity to the brands and ensure that there is no interference from the competition in growth avenues being looked at jointly by the brand managers and the resellers. Although it is assumed by marketing researchers that branding can drive customer demand it has never

been previously tested from the context of the represented consumer technological brands in a business-to-business market. Findings contribute to the branding literature and relationship marketing literature, by implying that representation of a brand by an individual can be useful to both the brands and resellers as they can leverage the relationships for individual profits and mutual benefits. Theoretically grounded, this research supports knowledge about benefits of branding to create differentiation in a competitive market.

This research clearly delineates brand representatives away from sales persons of the brand. Sales persons are controlled by the sales managers and are expected to foster brand-reseller relationships for sales. While concentrating on sales they tend to give up their focus on brand as they are expected to keep a strong grip on the numbers being sold in the market place by the reseller. The focus of brand representative instead is to ensure that resellers are able to differentiate between the brand and its competitors and emotionally not numerically drive them to sell the brand. Another study to clarify the confusion about sales persons as brand representative would be useful. Product category is another element that may influence the brand-reseller relationship, which should be studied in future by research scholars.

The findings show that understanding of mutually beneficial relationships enhance the outcomes of relationship between brand managers and resellers. However, it was considered that enablement of both in the relationship dose not translate into a higher level of favour for resellers if brands lack the desired resource inputs.

Managerial Implications

This study introduces the concept of an individual who personifies the brand in a study that includes brand managers and resellers, to understand each other and leverage from their relationships. The concept has been explored in the academic literature and the study attempts to go beyond where the concept has been restricted in order to study it. After reviewing the determinants of resellers' needs as the central aspect of the brand-reseller relationship, the concept of brand personification as represented by a person was researched in the field. This has implications for managers of brands. Brand managers have a key role as they are positioned to identify the individual needs of business resellers and to create empathy with them. That is, by showing understanding of resellers' needs for support regarding brands. While resellers are in an empathic state, a brand manager can transfer brand knowledge and enable resellers to understand and favourably evaluate the value that each brand contributes to their businesses. These employees can collaborate with resellers and cooperate with their own and other departments of the organization, to ensure that resellers view their dealings with the brand smoothly and comfortably. Employees representing the brand while understanding reseller motivations could also extract reseller feedback about competitors' activities. Such information when used by managers to create reseller-oriented marketing strategies could create competitive advantage in their markets.

#### Limitations and Future research

While the research for this paper offers a contribution, it suffers from the limitations of a small sample size, oriented to consumer technology products and restricted to one country, though these could point the way to open up various avenues for future research.



Namely to increase sample size, more diversification in types of brands to include and comparative research in two or more countries.

For future studies on this topic, researchers should examine the influence of brand representatives on other outcomes of branding and relationship marketing impacting on an organisation, such as growth and performance. Dominance of men in the reseller networks could also be studied.

### Conclusions and recommendations

The literature review for this paper identified a gap in that former theories, such as those concerning relationship marketing was too myopic or did not go far enough to answer questions about how to create bonds within the brand managers and resellers' relationships. This paper provides an alternative proposition based on researches for brand relationship building. Existing theories of both branding and relationship marketing in a business-to-business domain have been separately suggesting selection of brand by resellers as a consequence of satisfaction and value contribution. Indeed, the satisfaction and value contributions are important to resellers for making inferences about the brand. Work in this area, has already highlighted issues about the implications of previously drawn theories of satisfaction and contribution. For instance, reseller knowledge and reseller concerns enable brand managers to motivate resellers to commit to the brand and make the brand manager-reseller relationship beneficial to both. This paper makes a contribution by demonstrating that a commitment and support received from brand managers by the resellers were instrumental in positioning brand preferences in the mind

of the resellers, thus encouraging bonding within their brand manager-reseller relationships.

The paper also shows where previous studies have aided understanding about brands leading to the research in this paper about representation of the brand by an individual for managing resellers. The literature review lent support to the role of brand personification as a tool since the role of the brand representative acted as a conduit or a channel of communication to the resellers to improve problem-solving. The findings of the paper explored the relevance of empathy in the brand related behaviour of resellers making it viable for the brand representative to convince resellers of the value offered by the brands to the latter's businesses.

It is recommended that within the dyadic relationships of sellers and customers, companies appoint brand representatives or brand managers to highlight value in the exchange with resellers, to understand reseller motivations and build value in the relationship. Brand personalisation and offering small incentives to resellers and engaging them to participate within their relational exchanges are also enablers to support marketing strategy. There is support in the literature to combine multidimensional nature of brand representation into a single paradigm. This helps to explain brand initiatives to encourage reseller motivations for driving brand related behavior for consumers. Finally, the combination of branding and relationship building requires consistency to enable brands to be more competitive in the marketplace.

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