Faculty of Economics and Business

Exploring Brand Management of Emerging-Markets Small and Medium Enterprises Operating in the Business-to-Business Industry

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Exploring Brand Management of Emerging-Markets Small and Medium Enterprises Operating in the Business-to-Business Industry

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

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DEDICATION

First and Foremost, Thanks and Praise to Allah, the Most Gracious and Most Merciful. May His abundant Peace and blessings be upon our beloved Prophet Mohammed (SWT).

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my beloved parents, Mr M'Barek Raki and Mrs Fatna Hanjri, whom teaching and the blessed souls who taught me to carry out in this life without them. To them, I owe every breathing cell in my body and every lovely memory which soothes and quenches my feeling. Also, I would like to extend my dedication to the memory of my brother Aziz Raki, my grandparents, Mr Mohamed Hanjri and Mrs Rkia Souif, my Uncle, Mr Aberrahim Hanjri, and my stepmother, Mrs Fatna Rhouat, who enlighten my way with their angel smiles.

All these beautiful souls raised me with love and compassion to whom I shall be indebted to, and I am honoured to dedicate this humble work.

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ABSTRACT

Emerging Markets SMEs operate in a heightened competitive environment where external support such as the government is of great importance to develop their brands and remain competitive. Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to explore B2B brand management in emerging markets SMEs from the stakeholders' perspective, and consequently to develop a B2B Brand Management Framework, whereby SMEs can achieve as well as sustaining competitive advantage, and realise B2B brand performance. In this respect, this study identified stakeholder theory as an underlying theory to this inquiry and explored brand building process from the perspective of the SME and the government. Hence, this study employed semi-structured interviews under the case study approach. The case study investigated eight SMEs operating in the B2B industry and three governmental agencies in charge of SMEs brand development programmes in Malaysia. The findings highlighted the major role played by the government in enhancing the brand performance of the beneficiaries and have led to the development of Stakeholders B2B Brand Management Framework. The framework suggested that brand building in the B2B context requires the identification of two dimensions: (1) understanding of the brand, and (2) branding process. Finally, this study has contributed by linking stakeholder theory with the B2B branding and consequently proposing Stakeholders B2B Brand Management Framework to respond to the increased demand of more B2B branding frameworks.

Keywords: B2B brands, branding, emerging-markets SMEs, government, stakeholder theory

Meneroka Pengurusan Jenama bagi Syarikat Kecil dan Sederhana yang Muncul di Industri Perniagaan ke Perniagaan

ABSTRAK

Pasaran PKS berkembang dalam lingkungan yang semakin kompetitif di mana sokongan luaran seperti pemerintah sangat penting untuk mengembangkan jenama mereka dan terus berdaya saing. Oleh itu, tujuan tesis ini adalah untuk meneroka pengurusan jenama Perniagaan-ke-Perniagaan (PKP) di PKS pasaran baru muncul dari perspektif pihak berkepentingan, dan akibatnya untuk mengembangkan Kerangka Pengurusan Jenama PKP, di mana PKS dapat mencapai dan mempertahankan kelebihan daya saing, dan menciptakan prestasi merek PKP. Oleh itu, kajian ini mengenal pasti teori pihak berkepentingan sebagai teori asas untuk penyelidikan ini dan meneroka proses pembinaan jenama dari perspektif PKS dan kerajaan. Kajian kes menyiasat lapan PKS yang beroperasi dalam industri PKP dan tiga agensi kerajaan yang bertanggungjawab bagi program pembangunan jenama PKS di Malaysia. Penemuan ini menyoroti peranan utama yang dimainkan oleh pemerintah dalam meningkatkan prestasi jenama benefisiari dan telah mendorong pengembangan Kerangka Pengurusan Jenama Pemangku Kepentingan PKP. Kerangka kerja mencadangkan bahawa pembinaan jenama dalam konteks PKP memerlukan pengenalan dua dimensi: (1) pemahaman jenama, dan (2) proses penjenamaan. Akhirnya, kajian ini telah menyumbang untuk menghubungkan teori pihak berkepentingan dengan penjenamaan PKP.

Kata kunci: *Jenama PKS, penjenamaan, pasaran baru muncul PKS, kerajaan, pemegang saham teori*

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LIST OF ABREVIATIONS

AMA	American Marketing Association
BBRC	Borneo Business Research Colloquium
B2B	Business to Business
B2B2C	Business to Business to Consumer
B2C	Business to Consumer
BRIC	Brazil, Russia, India and China
CBBE	Customers-Based Brand Equity
COO	Country of Origin
EBBE	Employee-Based Brand Equity
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
FBBE	Financial-Based Brand Equity
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
FTSE	Financial Times Stock Exchange
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMP	Good Manufacturing Practices
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points
IBBC	International Borneo of Business Conference
ICQ	Innovation, Commitment, and Quality
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IFC	International Finance Corporation
KPI	Key Performance Index
MICCI	Malaysian International Chamber of Commerce & Industry

INSEAD	Institut Européen d'Administration des Affaires
ISO	International Organisation for Standardisation
KL	Kuala Lumpur
LED	Light Emitting Diode
MATRADE	Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation
MED	Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Development
MITI	Ministry of International Trade and Industry
NEM	New Economic Model
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSDC	National SME Development Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
R&D	Research and Development
RIMC	Research and Innovation Management Centre
SEO	Search Engine Optimiser
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UKAS	United Kingdom Accreditation Service

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This chapter outlines the background of the study leading to the underlining of the problem statement. Then, the problem statement has led to the formulation of the research questions. The general and specific objectives of the study are employed to address the research questions. Besides, the scope of the study is delimited to frame the problem statement. Then, the significance of the study is drawn by the accomplishment of the objectives of the study. Finally, the definition of the terms, the structure of the thesis, and the summary of the chapter are presented.

1.2 Research Background

In most economies, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) play a unique role in economic growth, and their prominence is well-acknowledged worldwide. The SME sector has become popular worldwide since the 1960s (Keskin & Şentürk, 2010). As of 2017, the SME sector accounts 90 per cent of the established companies and is responsible for 50 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and two-thirds of jobs worldwide (IFC, 2018). Also, SMEs contribute considerably to poverty reduction through employment and income growth (Erenkol & Öztaş, 2015; OECD, 2017). In the European Union states, there are 25 million small establishments, representing 99 per cent of all businesses; employing nearly 95 million people who represent 55 per cent of total jobs in the private sector (Keskin & Şentürk, 2010). Moreover, the world's best-performing countries, such as Japan, Hong

Kong, and Taiwan, have reached their industrial growth based on SMEs (Chowdhury, Azam & Islam, 2012).

Meanwhile, in emerging markets, registered small establishments constitute 50 per cent of total employment (Ayyagari, Demirgüç-Kunt & Maksimovic, 2014) and 33 per cent of GDP (OECD, 2017). Emerging markets constitute "*low income, rapid growth economies using economic liberalisation as their primary engine of growth*" (Hoskisson, Eden, Lau & Wright, 2000, p. 249). Notably, the proportion of SMEs in emerging markets is lower compared to developed markets. An encouraging environment contributes to a higher proportion of developed countries for entrepreneurship, along with political stability, and easy access to the market (Ayyagari, Beck & Demirguc-Kunt, 2007).

The SME sector contributes positively to job creation, poverty reduction (Vidučić Vidučić, Vidučić, Boras & Šušak, 2013; Subhan, Mehmood & Sattar, 2013; Ayandibu & Houghton, 2017), reduction of regional development gaps, and to developing innovative capabilities (Vidučić et al., 2013). However, the SME sector is more vulnerable to changes in the business environment as compared to large organisations (Appiah, Selassie & Burnley, 2015). In this sense, SMEs face a high failure rate in their first five years irrespective of economies (Chong, 2012). For example, the failure rate of SMEs in South Africa is estimated between 70 per cent and 80 per cent (Adeniran & Johnston, 2011), while Australia's failure rate is estimated around 23 per cent (Watson, 2003).

The failure of SMEs is attributed to multiple factors, such as economic and human costs (Fatoki, 2014), the entrepreneur's attitude, managerial and technical skills, and demographic characteristics (Man, Lau & Snape, 2008; Rasmussen, Mosey & Wright, 2015). Meanwhile, West and Wood (1972) stated that 90 per cent of all businesses fail because of experience and competence. However, the impact of entrepreneurial competencies on business growth and survival depends on the context, i.e. developed or developing country (Solesvik, 2012). For instance, the institutional framework such as laws and regulations is important in enhancing the entrepreneurship (Iakovleva, Solesvik & Trifilova, 2013). Solesvik (2012) pointed out that the Ukraine formal institutions are undervelopped and not supportive towards entrepreneurship, which impacts negatively the entrepreneurial sector.

In Malaysia, according to the Census of 2011, the SME sector represents 97.3 per cent of total establishments with a total 645,136 SMEs; contributing by 32 per cent to GDP, 59 per cent to employment, and 19 per cent to exports in 2010 (Tehseen & Ramayah, 2015). Considerably, the SME sector contributes significantly to the economic development and employment (Ab Rahman, 2012; Ates, Garengo, Cocca & Bititci, 2013; Ahmad, 2014). However, the failure rate is estimated at 60 per cent as reported by Portal Komuniti KTAK (as cited in Ahmad & Seet, 2009). Therefore, the Malaysian government has designed various programmes to support SMEs (Ahmad & Seet, 2009; Chong, 2012) in order to increase the contribution of SMEs to GDP by 41 per cent, 62 per cent in employment, and 25 per cent in exports by 2020 (Tehseen & Ramayah, 2015).

In 2017, government assistance covered a total of 168 SME development programmes implemented by 16 ministries and more than 60 agencies with an overall expenditure of RM10.46 billion to sponsor 596,086 SMEs (SME Corp Malaysia, 2017).

Fifteen programmes with a budget of RM200.7 million were executed by SME Corp Malaysia to benefit 4,459 SMEs (SME Corp Malaysia, 2017). One of the outstanding programmes provided to SMEs is the National Mark of Malaysian Brand. This scheme was introduced in 2009 by SME Corp Malaysia to enhance the competitiveness of Malaysian brands domestically and internationally. Nevertheless, even being helpful, the government support is not a full answer to reduce the rate of business failures (Ahmad & Seet, 2009). Instead, other alternatives are being offered to SMEs to avoid the failure situation, such as being brand-oriented. Indeed, several studies demonstrated that branding has a positive impact on SMEs performance (Reijonen, Hirvonen, Nagy, Laukkanen & Gabrielsson, 2015; Hirvonen, Laukkanen & Salo, 2016; Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir & Zhu, 2016). Moreover, having a brand can solve competitive issues because the essence of the brand is about differentiating products and services in the market place and make a presence in the mind of the customers (Keller, 2013). Therefore, the Malaysian government along with others such as Turkey offered specific programmes to enhance branding among SMEs. In turn, joining these programmes is considered as a strategic branding process.

Brands are "*lifeblood for companies*" (Steenkamp, 2014, p. 5) and the key engine for the firms' growth and survival (Urde, 1994; Baumgarth, 2010; Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010). Notably, brands increase sales for the firm through customers' loyalty (Horváth & Birgelen, 2015). In this sense, brands play a crucial role in serving a good source of information about products and services for customers (Keller, 2013) and guaranteeing their quality (Magnusson, Haas & Zhao, 2008). Also, brands create competitive advantage (Chiambaretto & Gurău, 2017), and consequently increase the performance of firms (Ahmad & Iqbal, 2013). Meanwhile, according to a recent report by

Interbrand (2018), the Top Four Best Global Brands are B2B brands: Apple, Google, Amazon, and Microsoft. Indeed, a well-established B2B brand diminishes the threats related to products and services (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). Besides, strong B2B brands increase a company likelihood in buyers-bidding situations (Wise & Zednickova, 2009), in-licensing (Ohnemus, 2009), and in commanding premium prices (Keller, 2013) from both consumers and investors (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007).

However, emerging-markets brands are absent from Interbrand Top Brands list; expect for Huawei (Interbrand, 2018). This situation is explained by the fact that emerging-markets brands face primarily negative association and fierce competition (Magnusson, Haas & Zhao, 2008); even though Kumar and Steenkamp (2013) stated that the next big brands would come from emerging markets. The negative association involves the low perception of emerging-markets brands (Herstein, Berger & Jaffe, 2014) such as being linked with poor quality (Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp & Ramachander, 2000). Meanwhile, fierce competition comes mainly from international competitors, since local consumers prefer imported products (Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Merunka, 2007). In this respect, it is indispensable for policymakers to promote domestic products (Smaoui, Kilani & Touzani, 2016). An example of such efforts is the 'National Mark of Malaysian Brand' offered by the Malaysian government. This programme is a governmental promotional tool which reflects the philosophy of the Malaysian government about branding. Indeed, this programme testifies that the Malaysian government is demonstratively aware of the significance of brands for SMEs growth.

1.3 Problem Statement

Even though brands play a significant role for the growth of businesses, they are complex to build and manage due to the size of the company (small or large) and the context of the industry (B2B or B2C). In terms of size, branding practices were initially developed by large firms (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). However, it is claimed that those practices are not suitable for small organisations (Odoom, Narteh & Boateng, 2017). In terms of industry, branding frameworks are originated from B2C field (Davis, Buchanan-Oliver & Brodie, 2000) and their applicability in the B2B market is debatable (Leek & De Chernatony, 2011) and under-researched (Keränen, Piirainen & Salminen, 2012). Also, the relationship nature of B2B industry influences the course of brand development because developing long-term B2B relationships (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011) depends on the positive interaction of internal and external branding efforts (Gromark & Melin, 2011; Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013).

Furthermore, numerous researchers have suggested that multiple strategic orientations can enhance the development of B2B brand equity of SMEs (Glynn, 2012; Reijonen et al., 2015; Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2016; Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018). Others have recommended taking into account stakeholders' approach during brand building, and development (e.g., Merrilees, Miller & Herington, 2012; Raki & Shakur, 2018b); as multiple-stakeholders' engagement are crucial to value-creation (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar & De Colle, 2010). Thus, SMEs have to look for external alternatives to build their brands. In the case of Malaysia, the policymakers provide SME-Brand development programmes whereby the participants SMEs can benefit from in order to enhance their brands. In fact, the government such as Malaysia has launched SME-Brand development programmes to tackle the challenges faced by emerging markets government (e.g., negative association and competition). However, limited studies have looked into the role played by secondary stakeholders such as the government, and hence its impact of the course of brands building process and consequently the brand performance.

In the absence of suitable frameworks for B2B brands in SMEs setting, both academics and practitioners have an incomplete understanding of how B2B brands are built or managed (Kapferer, 2008; Leek & Christodoulies, 2011). They are similarly incoherent with the relational nature of the B2B context and the small size of the business. Therefore, an exploratory study investigating branding from stakeholder perspective enables the study of the interaction between the firm and the secondary stakeholder (the government) and its impact on B2B brand development. This can aid in enriching the understanding of the complex and multidimensional nature of B2B brands.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the problem statement elaborated above, two research questions are identified:

- RQ1: How B2B SMEs recipients of government support build and manage their brands?
- RQ2: Do the government SMEs development programmes lead to the enhancement of the brand performance of the participant SMEs?

This study is grounded in stakeholder theory to explore branding among merging markets SMEs which face obstacles related to the particularities of emerging markets such as negative association. Thus, RQ1 was formulated to study branding among the beneficiary SMEs as they succeed in obtaining government support which would leave an impact on their brand performance. In turn, RQ2 was developed to study the impact of the government support on brand performance.

1.5 Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to explore B2B brand management in emerging markets SMEs from stakeholders' perspective, and consequently to develop a B2B Brand Management Framework; whereby emerging-markets SMEs operating in the B2B industry can get benefit from by reducing the failure-risk and competing in domestic and international markets. Hence to achieve the general objective and to address the research questions above, three specific objectives are employed:

- To evaluate brand building and management in B2B SMEs benefiting from government supports
- To investigate the impact of government SME-brand development programmes on the brand performance of the participant SMEs
- To develop a B2B brand management framework for emerging-markets SMEs from stakeholders' theory perspective

RO1 addresses the branding strategies of the B2B SMEs recipients of government supports. Meanwhile, RO2 covers the impact of government SME-brand development programme on the SMEs brands performances to answer RQ2. However, RO3 is related to the development of the framework.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is the domain or parameter defining the boundaries of the research (Simon & Goes, 2013). As outlined earlier, the general objective of the study is to propose a B2B brand management framework for emerging-markets SMEs. Hence, this thesis investigated the best branding practices of Malaysian SMEs operating in the B2B industry which benefited from government supports. In this respect, Malaysian SMEs winners of the National Mark Malaysian Brand certificate appeared to be a suitable sample study for conducting this research for two main reasons.

First, Malaysia is an emerging market (FTSE, 2019) where SMEs are put at the centre stage of the government's interest to reach the vision of 2020. Besides, Malaysia is the second emerging market, after Turkey, which provides SMEs a branding programme known under the name of the 'National Mark of Malaysian Brand'. Such programmes are in alignement with the conceptual framework founding the study (stakeholder theory). In other words, this study aims to investigate branding from the perspective of two major stakeholders (government and brand owners/managers).

Second, the National Mark of Malaysian Brand scheme was launched a decade ago and had a total of 138 recipient SMEs. The graduate SMEs went through rigorous auditing of their processes, including branding. Being a graduate with such programme testifies the quality of brands owned by these SMEs. Meanwhile, the B2B sector is selected as the industry context of the study because branding practices in the B2B industry is different from the B2C context; and because the majority of the recipient SMEs is operating in the B2B industry.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is twofold: academic and industry. This study is significant from an academic standpoint mainly because it suggests a B2B brand management model from stakeholders' theory perspective. The model highlights the relational nature of B2B branding. This model is built in response of calls from scholars to address B2B branding in emerging-markets SMEs and to propose frameworks for B2B managers (e.g., Leek & Christodoulies, 2011; Koporčić, Tolušić & Rešetar, 2017).

Second, this study makes a significant contribution to the stakeholder theory by linking B2B branding field and emerging markets SMEs from stakeholders' theory lens. Indeed, to date, multiple studies tackle B2B branding from a single perceptive (Merrilees, Miller & Herington, 2012). Also, limited studies grounded in stakeholder theory were undertaken in SMEs settings (Freeman et al., 2010). However, this study is among the rare researches that investigated the impact of government programmes as a secondary stakeholder on brand performance.

Third, seminal scholars based in developed countries have dominated the branding research field in general (e.g., Keller, 2013; Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013), and B2B branding in SMEs setting in particular (e.g., Coleman, De Chernatony & Christodoulides, 2015; Agostini & Nosella, 2016; Muhonen, Hirvonen & Laukkane, 2017). However, the socio-cultural, economic, and political characteristics of emerging markets have an impact on the course of the small businesses in emerging markets (Javalgi, Todd & Granot, 2011; Arief, Thoyib, Sudiro & Rohman, 2013), and consequently on the performance of the brand. For instance, a study was undertaken by Laukkanen, Nagy, Hirvonen, Reijonen and Pasanen (2013) in Finland (developed market) and Hungary (emerging market) has demonstrated that brand performance is positively related to the market performance (firm's success). Therefore, this study is significant to academia because it conducts empirical research in Malaysia (emerging market).

Fourth, the majority of previous studies in the branding field have used qualitative (e.g. Renton, Daellenbach, Davenport & Richard, 2016; Kennedy & Wright, 2016) or quantitative methods (e.g., Odoom, Narteh & Rand, 2017; Yieh, Yeh, Tseng, Wang & Wu, 2018). However, there was no indication of the characteristics of the selections of the SMEs for the study. In other words, were these SMEs considered as running successful brands? Therefore, to fill this methodological gap, this study has embraced the 'success stories' approach in selecting SMEs for the study. As such, SMEs awarded the 'National Mark of Malaysia Brand' scheme are the scope of the study (refer to Section 1.6).

From a practical standpoint, this study has shed light on the National Mark of Malaysian Brand scheme, which could serve as basic benchmark for other emerging and frontiers markets. Moreover, the proposed model responds to an increasing need for more effective B2B branding mechanisms. As such, this study provides B2B SMEs managers with useful insights and practical guidelines to build sustained brands. Accordingly, the outcomes may not only increase the brand owners' awareness of the importance of branding and its key dimensions but also draw their attention to policymakers' branding programmes.

1.8 Key Terms and Definitions

This section defines the fundamental concepts necessary to the understanding of the current study. The concepts are as follow:

- Brands of any features (e.g., name, term) that share an embodied idea in products or services which distinguish the goods or services of the firm from the competition.
- Brand Management is the process of creating, building, managing, and sustaining a brand.
- Business-to-business is a type of commerce transaction that exists between businesses or an operation that occurs between a company and other company to transfer services and products.
- Emerging markets constitute low income, rapid growth economies using economic liberalisation as their primary engine of growth.
- SME is a firm that meets one of the two quantitative aspects (turnover or number of employees) based on two distinct sectors (manufacturing and service). Thus, in manufacturing, and the turnover of an SME does not exceed RM50 million or 200 employees. Meanwhile, in the service sector, an SME does not exceed RM20 million or 30.

1.9 Structure of the Study

This thesis covers seven chapters, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

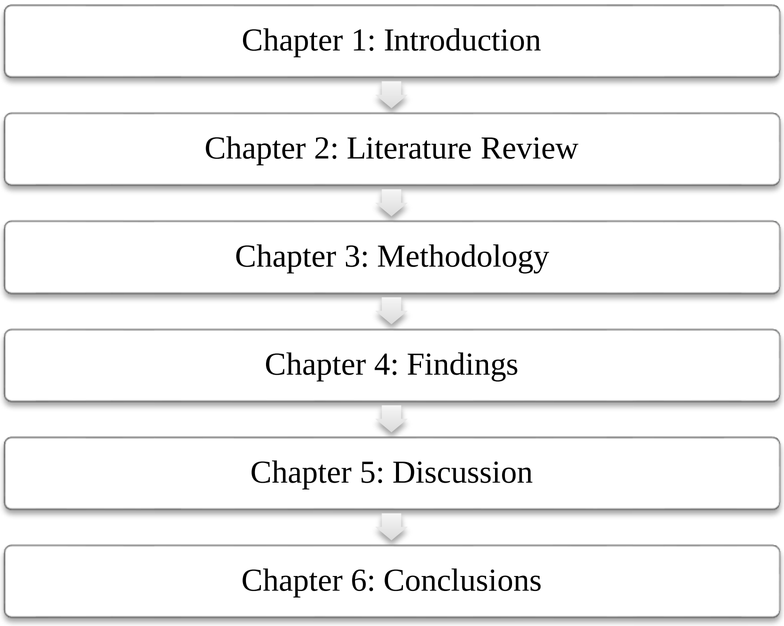

Figure 1.1: Thesis Structure

- **Chapter 1** provides an outline of the study which addresses the research background, the problem statement, the research questions, the research objectives (general and specific); the scope of the study, the significance of the study, key terms and definitions, and the structure of the thesis.
- **Chapter 2** reviews the recent and relevant literature related to the three domains of inquiry, namely: (1) emerging-markets SMEs, (2) B2B brands, and (3) stakeholder theory, and their interaction. The knowledge gaps are highlighted with every interaction between the three domains. This chapter ends with exposing the conceptual framework.
- **Chapter 3** introduces the philosophical blueprint of the present study at three levels: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Besides, this chapter

explains the research methods regarding data collection and analysis. At the end of the chapter, the undertaken research ethics and quality procedure are emphasised to ensure the reliability and the validity of the study.

- **Chapter 4** exposes the main findings from the government and the participant of SMEs.
- **Chapter 5** discusses the findings from Chapters 4 and proposes the B2B brand management framework.
- **Chapter 6** builds on the preceding chapters and provides a conclusion of the empirical findings and exposes the contribution and the implication of the research. Limitations of the research are drawn, and recommendations for future work are exposed.

1.10 Summary

This chapter aimed to set the scene of the research; by articulating the research background, and the problem statement. The problem statement has led to the formulation of the research questions and objectives. The achievement of the research objectives highlights the significance of the study. Finally, key terms definition and the structure of the thesis were presented. The next chapter will review the relevant and current literature on B2B branding in SMEs from emerging markets and consequently highlights the research gaps that need to be filled.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview

This chapter reviews the relevant literature and consequently sheds light on the research gaps. The review covers three domains of research including B2B Brand, Emerging-Markets SMEs, and Stakeholder Theory. Section 2.2 addresses emerging markets SMEs, whereas Section 2.3 addresses branding in the B2B context. Meanwhile, the theoretical foundation underpinning the study and linking both domains: the SME sector and the B2B branding field is delineated in Section 2.4. The analysis of the research gaps is outlined in Section 2.5. The initial conceptual framework framing the research is demonstrated in Section 2.6.

2.2 Emerging Markets SMEs

Small businesses constitute the backbone of many economies as they contribute significantly to poverty reduction through employment and income growth (Erenkol & Öztaş, 2015, OECD, 2017). At a global scale, small businesses account 90 per cent of the established companies, contribute up to 50 per cent of global GDP, and are responsible for the two-thirds of the employement (IFC, 2018). In emerging markets, the registered small establishments contribute up to 50 per cent of total employment (Ayyagari, Demirgüç-Kunt & Maksimovic, 2014) and 33 per cent of GDP (OECD, 2017). For instance, SMEs contribute to the Malaysian National GDP by 37.9 per cent in 2017 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). Meanwhile, in Brazil SMEs generate 27 per cent of the country's GDP, and provide 52 per cent of employment (Coelho & Nunes, 2017).

2.2.1 Characteristics of Emerging-Markets SMEs

The term ‘emerging market' was first introduced by the then World Bank economist, Antoine Van Agtamael in 1981, to describe the markets situated between the developing and the developed countries (Mardiros & Dicu, 2014). Also, to substitute the earlier classification of developing and less developed countries (Aghara, Anyanwu, Nwaizugbo, Okpala & Oparah, 2011). Since that time, multiple global institutions have provided lists of emerging markets (e.g., the World Bank and the Financial Times Stock Exchange). However, this study adopts the classification of Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) as it provides a detailed classification of emerging markets (i.e. advanced and secondary).

FTSE Emerging Markets indices are part of the FTSE Global Equity Index Series which provides investors around the world with a comprehensive means of measuring the performance of the most liquid companies in the emerging markets (FTSE, 2019). As such, according to the recent report of FTSE (2019), emerging markets account 24 countries categorised as follows:

- Ten advanced emerging countries including Brazil, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Malaysia, Mexico, South Africa, Taiwan, Thailand, and Turkey
- Fourteen secondary emerging countries including Chile, China, Colombia, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Kuwait, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Qatar, Russia, UAE, and Saudi Arabia (commencing from March 2019 and to be completed by March 2020)

Emerging markets are characterised by a large number of small and medium businesses. However, the features of emerging markets influence the growth of the SMEs. For example, market cultural characteristics affect the performance of emerging-markets SMEs (Javalgi, Todd & Granot, 2011; Arief, Thoyib, Sudiro & Rohman, 2013). According to Xu and Meyer (2012), there are four features portraying the emerging markets. First, emerging markets are less effective due to the lack of transparency and regular information. Second, governments are economically engaged through state-owned or controlled companies. Third, social-cultural dimensions (e.g., network-based behaviours) impact how business is interconnected. For example, 'Guanxi' (Chinese definition of networking) has an essential position in the success of domestic SMEs in China (Clegg, Rhodes & Kornberger, 2007). Fourth, the economical, institutional, and political parameters are very volatile, causing struggles in taking strategic business decisions. For example, budget hotels in India suffer from bureaucracy from both vendors and contractors, bureaucratic delays, and non-standardization of regulations (Rishi & Joshi, 2016).

Furthermore, the business, as well as the competitive environment, is regarded as highly uncertain (Wright, Filatotchev, Hoskisson & Peng, 2005). For instance, reliable sources are hard to access (Child & Hsieh, 2014). Also, emerging markets need a considerable investment fund to establish adequate levels of infrastructure. In fact, infrastructure is responsible for countries' growth. According to Fay and Toman (2010), \$1.5 trillion is necessary per annum through 2020 to help low and medium-income countries to develop reliable infrastructure. For example, the Asia-Pacific developing region would need to mobilize $800–900 billion annually to develop infrastructures such as ICT, water supply and sanitation, and electricity access (ESCAP, 2015).

Sheth (2011, p. 3) defined five dimensions of emerging markets which have a significant impact on marketing in terms of theory, strategy, policy, and practice. The five dimensions are:

- Market heterogeneity in emerging markets is characterised by fragmentation, locality, small-scale, and owner-managed businesses. Besides, emerging markets tend to have consumers making less than $2 a day.
- Socio-political institutions (e.g., government, local community, non-governmental organisations, business and religious groups) have a significant influence on emerging markets compared to market competition.
- Unbranded competition constitutes 60 per cent of the consumption of emerging markets due to non-availability of branded products in rural areas.
- The chronic shortage of resources in terms of production (e.g., lack of electricity and skilled labour), exchange (e.g., high transaction costs), and consumption (e.g., running water).
- Inadequate infrastructure as compared to developed countries. Examples of infrastructures are roads, logistics, market transaction enabler (e.g., point-of-sale terminals and basic banking functions), communication, information, and transaction technologies (e.g., telephones and electricity).

2.2.2 Challenges and Opportunities for Emerging-Markets SMEs

Despite the significant contribution of the SME sector to the economic prosperity of emerging markets, they are still confronting multiple obstacles, internally and externally. This situation occurs because the SME sector is more vulnerable to changes in the business environment compared to large organisations (Appiah, Selassie & Burnley, 2015). In extreme cases, SMEs fail specifically in their first five years irrespective of economies (Chong, 2012). For example, the failure rate of SMEs in South Africa is between 70 per cent to 80 per cent (Adeniran & Johnston, 2011). Meanwhile, the failure rate in Malaysia is around 60 per cent as reported by Portal Komuniti KTAK (as cited in Ahmad & Seet, 2009).

In reference to internal struggles, SMEs failure is partially related to the lack of management and technical skills. West and Wood (1972) indicated that 90 per cent of all businesses fail because of experience and competence. In the same vein, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2017) stated that SMEs productivity is hindered by the shortage of workforce skills and poor management practices. For instance, in South Africa, 90 per cent of interviewed entrepreneurs believed that SMEs fail because due to the lack of technical and managerial abilities (Smit & Watkins, 2012). Meanwhile, financial issues pose a massive block in the growth of the SMEs (IFC, 2018). According to OECD (2017), access to public funding is very challenging for small businesses compared to large organisations. Concerning external challenges, SMEs face mainly fierce competition from local companies as well as multinational companies. More than 20,000 international firms are operating in the emerging economies (Eyring, Johnson & Nair, 2011); mainly due to the facilitation of technological advances and the dropping off of trade barriers (Kumar, Mudambi & Gray, 2013).

These challenges hinder the development the growth of the SMEs. However, emerging markets offer three areas of competitive advantages (Sheth, 2011, p. 21) listed as follows:

- Policy-based comparative advantage: Sheth (2011) noted that successful emerging markets such as Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC), are the result of political engagement through robust economic reforms and industrial policies. For instance, China established ‘SMEs Promotion Law', which contributes to the development of the SME sector regarding size and financial performance (Singh, Garg & Deshmukh, 2009).
- Raw material–based comparative advantage: Sheth (2011) pointed out that emerging markets have raw material advantages (e.g., industrial raw materials, energy, and human capital) and substantial agricultural and cattle-based natural resources. This comparative advantage drives investments to have access to raw materials.
- NGO-based comparative advantage: According to Sheth (2011), NGOs in emerging markets serve a large scale of poor consumers as they reach inaccessible markets. Besides, NGOs impacts market practices through mixing social purposes with modern business.

Furthermore, SMEs look for support from external partners such as the government. In return, the government is concerned by its nation image which is formed through different components such as socio-economics, politics, history, products, and services (Van Ham, 2001; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009); and also through its corporate brands (Dinnie, 2008; Gotsi, Lopez & Andriopoulos, 2011). In practice, most governments seek to strengthen the role of SMEs in the economy through providing various programs and institutions aiming at promoting SME development. For instance, in 2018, Malaysian government provided a total of 151 SME development programmes to benefit 613,576 SMEs (SME Corp Malaysia, 2018). However, Gotsi, Lopez and Andriopoulos (2011) argued that the nation's image and corporate image influence is reciprocal. Thus, policy makers offer brand development programmes for SMEs to enhance their visibility and competitive advantage. An example of such governmental efforts is SME brand development programmes offered by the Turkish government in 2004 under the name of 'TURQUALITY' and by the Malaysian government in 2009 under the name of the 'National Mark of Malaysian Brand'. This situation testifies that both governments are demonstratively aware of the significance of brands for SMEs growth.

2.3 B2B Brand Management

B2B Branding has existed for over four decades (Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2015). In the beginning, B2B branding was not admitted by academics such as Saunders and Watt (1979), and Sinclair and Seward (1988) along with experts who were only motivated by products quality rather than building brands (Leek & Christodoulies, 2011; Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2016). Nevertheless, the changes in the economy and the environments have raised the awareness of firms operating in the B2B industry about the importance of branding for their success (Koporčić, Tolušić & Rešetar, 2017). However, to understand B2B brand management, one should first understand brands and brand management.

2.3.1 Understanding Brand Management and Brands

Brand management has existed for centuries (Keller, 2013) because "*humanity has always used symbols to express individuality, pride, loyalty, and ownership*" (Anttiroiko, 2014, p. 48), while brand management research field has emerged since the eighties (Koporcic, Ivanova-Gongne, Nyström & Törnroos, 2018). Notably, the past decades have seen a growth of interest in brand management from both researchers and experts (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013). For example, brand management was the top-five research themes between the period 1994 and 2008 in China (Wang, 2012). Meanwhile, brand management has been derived from the field of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). It is a combination of "*art and science*" (Keller, 2013, p. XIX) which consists of creating, measuring, managing and sustaining brand equity (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2013). Indeed, brand management aims to endow products and services with the power of brands. It is to create differences between products and services in the mind of the consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2016), to ensure that the firm is benefiting from a brand as its sales driver (Krüger & Stumpf, 2013), and gain a competitive position (Kim & Hyun, 2011; Chiambaretto & Gurău, 2017).

Meanwhile, the word *brand* is originated from the Ancient Norse *brandr* which means “to burn”. The early and current use of brands was to indicate the ownership of livestock (Maurya & Mishra, 2012). However, defining a brand is subjected to several opinions' divergence between scholars where two different approaches appear: Customer-based and Measurement-based (Kapferer, 2008). On the customer side, Keller (2013) reflected that brands provide value to the company and simplify decision-making for customers through generating mental association with the product or service. Meanwhile, on the measurement-side, scholars and experts seek to quantify the added-value of the brand as they consider that brands make long-term profits (Kapferer, 2008). As a result, each approach influences the brand definition and function.

Notably, the most cited definition of a brand is provided by the American Marketing Association (AMA). According to AMA, brand is "a *name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the seller's goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers*" (as cited in Keller, 2013). In other words, brands identify product or service in the marketplace and distinguish them from competitors. Nevertheless, the AMA definition is subjected to criticism. AMA definition is purely customer-based as it focuses on the technical features of the brands. For instance, Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015) stated that AMA‘s brand definition remains unchanged for 80 years; it becomes consequently out of date due to the development of marketing environment in the form of theory and practice.

Furthermore, Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006) and Keller (2013) argued that brand is more than physical components (e.g., name, logo); as it has rational and tangible differentiating features allowing the brand to be distinguished from other competitors. Moreover, the AMA's definition applies only for physical products but not for services as the definition dismisses the role played by consumers as co-creators of services (Grönroos, 2007). Hence, AMA's definition should be updated (Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015). However, even though updating the definition of the brand is not the aim of this study, highlighting the importance of reconsidering the definition of the brand in regards to the changes in the business environment is highly significant.

Meanwhile, multiple researchers have emphasized the significant role played by brands for the growth of the organisations (e.g. Kapferer, 2008; Gromark & Melin, 2011; Krüger & Stumpf, 2013; Conejo & Wooliscroft, 2015; Odoom, 2016) as well as for consumers (Jueterbock, 2012; Keller, 2013). For instance, based on AMA's definition, brands facilitate the identification of products, services, and business as well as differentiate them from the competition. Consequently, brands protect both the consumer and the producer from competitors through enhancing customer recognition of the company, especially if the brand has a strong visual identity.

For companies, brands generate customers' loyalty, which ensures future sales to the firm (Horváth & Birgelen, 2015). Brand loyalty builds barriers to other firms to enter the market (Abrahams, 2008). Additionally, Madden, Fehle and Fourier (2006, p. 233) argued that "*brands decrease the volatility and vulnerability of cash flows"*. Moreover, brands promise quality, origins, and performance, thereby increase the perceived value to the customer, and reduce the risk and complexity involved in the buying decision (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Besides, brands allow firms to use brand extension by introducing a new product. 80 to 90 per cent of new products are brands extension (Kotler, Keller, Ancarani & Costabile, 2014).

For consumers, brands serve as a good source of information about any product or service. For instance, brands can provide information about the source or the producer of the products and the product characteristics (Keller, 2013). Furthermore, brands help consumers in their purchasing making-decision since it embeds confidence in products even though the buyer never tried the product before. Morever, it comprises meaning and feeling involving around the product (Jueterbock, 2012). Finally, brands guarantee quality products (Magnusson, Haas & Zhao, 2008).

According to (Keller, 2013, p. 30), brands went through six periods of historical development:

- Early origins (before 1860): The origins of brands go back to the old pottery and stonemason’s marks. They were used to provide information about the source of the handcrafted merchandises and to guarantee its quality.
- The emergence of the national manufacturer brands (1860-1914): Multiple factors have participated in the development of branding (e.g., improvements in transportation and production process).
- The dominance of mass-marketed brands (1915-1929): Improvement of marketing regarding techniques, specialized branding, recruitment, and research.
- Challenges to manufacturer brands (1930-1945): Brands faced multiple challenges (e.g., the great depression and World War I and II). However, some companies kept investing in branding, such as Procter & Gamble, which installed the brand management system.

- Establishment of brand management standards (1946 -1985): Branding has called for more advanced skills and techniques as the market demand grew up, and the economy took off.
- Branding becomes more pervasive (1986 to Now): Brands were managed as intangible assets; meanwhile, companies started to look at the advantages of having strong brands.

2.3.2 Understanding Brand Equity

Brand management consists of creating, measuring, managing and sustaining brand equity (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2013). Thus, building a strong brand leads to the formation of brand equity. According to Keller (2013, p. 57), brand equity "*consists of the marketing effects uniquely attributable to a brand. That is, brand equity explains why different outcomes result from the marketing of a branded product or service than if it were not branded*". In other words, brand equity is "*the added value a product accrues as a result of past investments in the marketing activity for the brand and the bridge between what happened to the brand in the past and what should happen to it in the future*" (*ibid*, p. 21). Meanwhile, King and Grace (2009) noted that brand equity comprises three components, namely (1) Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE), (2) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), and (3) Financial-Based Brand Equity (FBBE).

2.3.2.1 Employee-Based Brand Equity

The concept of the employer brand (EBBE) was first introduced by King and Grace (2009) to extend the dimensions of brand equity literature by including internal branding, since investing in employees leads to consumer-based brand equity, which in turn enhances the financial-based brand equity. In practice, employees are necessary resources for the success of brands (De Chernatony, Drury & Segal-Horn, 2003) as they serve as ambassadors of the brands (Khan & Ede, 2009). The EBBE is defined as "*the differential effect that brand knowledge has on an employee's response to their work environment"* (King & Grace, 2009, p. 130). Meanwhile, Berger-Remy and Michel (2015, p. 33) argued that EBBE is "*the added meaning the brand may give employees over and above their job or profession and the firm's corporate reputation, causing positive or negative behaviour towards the organisation*". In other words, the concept of EBBE suggests that brand can prompt the attitudes and conducts of employees on both sides whether positive (e.g., positive word of mouth) or negative (e.g., disengagement from work).

To illustrate, a study conducted by King, So and Grace (2013) demonstrated the importance of service orientation for generating positive behaviour from employees in the hotel business operating in China. Thus, the branding process should be managed with employees (Joukanen, Niinimäki & Sundell, 2018). Also, managing successful internal branding is based on two dimensions, namely (1) increasing employee fit by satisfying their needs and facilitating their value congruence with their work context (macro and micro), and (2) enhancing employee brand knowledge/identification (Boukis, Gounaris & Lings, 2017). As a result of a successful EBBE, CBBE is improved (King & Grace, 2009).

2.3.2.2 Customer-Based Brand Equity

Brand equity was mainly measured from CBBE perspective (Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010). Measuring CBBE is very important to understand brand equity dimensions. CBBE occurs when the consumer holds unique and robust brand associations

(Keller, 2013). Besides, the widely adopted CBBE models are Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) (Christodoulides, De Chernatony & Furrer, 2015; Çifci, Ekinci, Whyatt, Japutra, Molinillo & Siala, 2016). Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) are mainly applied in products and services contexts (Sarker, Mohd-Any & Kamarulzaman, 2019) because they provide a variety of measures to estimate brand equity (Agarwal & Rao, 1996).

Aaker's (1991) Model

David Aaker is a well-acknowledged American professor inducted in the AMA Chapter's 2015 Marketing Hall of Fame for his significant contribution to the marketing field (Scott, 2015). In 1991, Aaker developed a brand equity model that was updated in several works (e.g., 1996, 2002, and 2012). According to Aaker (1991), brand equity is a set of assets and liabilities entailing four determinants, namely: (1) brand awareness, (2) brand associations, (3) brand loyalty, and (4) perceived quality. Brand awareness determines the level to which a brand is known to the public; it involves anchor associations, familiarity-liking, substantiality and commitment, and brand consideration.

Meanwhile, brand association expresses the level to which a particular product or service is identified within its category. It involves information retrieving, a reason to buy, attitude, and several brand extensions. However, brand loyalty expresses the connection of a customer to a brand whereby it is driven by marketing cost reduction, trade leverage, acquisition of new customers, and better response time to competitive risks. In turn, perceived quality is related to the degree to which a brand delivers brand quality. It is measured through quality, brand position, price, availability, and brand extensions. Finally, the combination of the four assets contributes in generating the competitive advantage.

Keller's (1993) Model

Keller is one of the most recognised researchers in the marketing field. In 1993, Keller developed a Customer-Based Brand Equity Model. This model is known as 'Keller Pyramid'. Keller Pyramid was introduced to demonstrate how an organisation can build a strong brand. This model emphasizes that brand development goes through four stages. Each stage corresponds to a question asked by customers, a specific objective and equivalent building block:

- Formation of brand identity: This stage aims to create a brand identity. Brand identity is achieved through brand salience, which consists of identifying deep and broad brand awareness.
- Formation of brand meaning: This stage comprises of brand performance and brand imagery. Brand performance refers to the level of satisfaction of customers on their functional needs by the product or service. Whereas, Brand imagery defines the psychological or social needs of customers. Brand performance and imagery form the opinions of the customers (points-of parities and differences).
- Formation of brand responses: This stage denotes the customer's opinions in terms of judgment and feelings (quality, credibility, consideration, and superiority).
- Formation of brand relationship: This final stage seeks to develop a strong bond between the customer and the brand through brand resonance. Brand resonance expresses the level of identification that the customer extends for a brand. Brand resonance comprises intensity (sense of loyalty and community) and activity (active engagement and attitudinal attachment)

Notably, a well-established brand resonance creates strong brands, which in turn enhances financial brand equity. However, formatting brand resonance is a big task for brand managers as it requires developing customer-based brand equity.

2.3.2.3 Financial-Based Brand Equity

From a financial perspective, brand equity is defined as "*total value of a brand which is a separable asset - when it is sold or included in a balance sheet*" (Feldwick, 1996, p. 11). In a simple term, the financial worth of a brand is "*the price it brings or could bring in the financial market"* (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 745). Keller and Lehmann (2006) stated that different approaches could measure the financial value of the brand, such as the component of market value (e.g. profits) and Tobin's Q (the market value of assets divided by their replacement value as estimated by book value). Besides, the FBBE approach is constructive in cases of merger, acquisition or divestiture (Wood, 2000).

However, the contemporary branding research underlines that social interaction between the firm and its stakeholders is an integral part of the branding process (Jones, 2005; Ballantyne, & Aitken, 2007; Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009; Baumgarth, 2010). In fact, Heding, Knudtzen and Bjerre (2009, p. 20) suggested three periods of historical development of brands started from mid-eighties. The first period (1985-1992) was characterised by the economic and identity approach; whereby the brand is a part of the traditional marketing mix, and it is communicated linearly from the brand owner to the consumer. Meanwhile, three approaches were linked to the second period (1993-1999): the consumer-based approach, the personality approach, and the relational approach. From the consumer-based perspective, various consumer-based brand equity models were developed, such as Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) models. The personality approach emphasizes the importance of personality traits as a bond between brand and consumer. In the relational approach, the brand is perceived as a reliable partner. The last period (2000-2006) was characterised as the community approach and the cultural approach where consumption choices are influenced by contextual and cultural artefact. The community approach is related to the relational approach with a social perspective. Thus, Baker and Saren (2010) suggested an additional brand equity dimension entitled 'Network-based Brand Equity' (NBBE).

2.3.2.4 Network-Based Brand Equity

The network approach of branding comprises '*co-branding, brand alliances and network and […] recognizes that the equity of the brand comes not only from the end-customer, but also from a range of relationships within the marketing system'* (Baker & Saren, 2010, p. 402). Therefore, the brand value is co-created and continuously shaped through network relationships of multiple stakeholders (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Kaufmann, Loureiro & Manarioti, 2016; Pathak & Pathak-Shelat, 2017), whereby '*the organization marketing the brand no longer has such direct influence over the processes of value creation but becomes a partner in the co-creation of value*' (Baker & Saren, 2010, p. 383).

Nevertheless, crafting and managing brand equity (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2013) should be adjusted to the context of the business (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011) per se. The structure of the market (e.g., B2C, B2B, and B2B2C) affects brands and their extensions (Liu, Foscht, Eisingerich & Tsai, 2018). The Business-to-Customer (B2C) firms sell products or services directly to consumers (e.g., Pepsi); whereas B2B firms deal with other businesses and have no direct link with the end product such as Cisco (Chauhan & Anbalagan, 2013). In other terms, consumers are end-users, whereas B2B buyers are customers but are not consumers (Priem, Wenzel & Koch, 2018).

However, brand management strategies in the B2C market considerably differ from the B2B market (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Herbst & Merz, 2011). First, the size of buyers in B2B market are fewer compared to B2C (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011), while the perceived risk and uncertainty faced by the buyers is high (Herbst & Merz, 2011). Hence, building trust with B2B customers is very crucial to reduce the perceived risk (Mudambi, 2002, Herbst & Merz, 2011). Second, the personal interaction between the consumers and the sellers is minimal in the B2C context (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). Therefore, the relationship and the networking skills are more significant in the B2B context compared to B2C market (Ohnemus, 2009). Third, the purchasing-decision is more rational (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007) and complex (Cretu & Brodie, 2007) in the B2B context. According to Bendixen, Bukasa and Abratt (2004), brand name represents only 16% of industrial buyers purchasing decision. Meanwhile, quality is an essential criterion for purchasing decision (Aaker, 1992; Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004).

Fourth, according to Eiriz and Wilson (2006, p. 287), relationship marketing covers three different aspects: 1) "*the rationale for establishing, developing, maintaining and terminating relationships; (2) the processes through which relationships are established, developed, maintained and terminated; and (3) the structures appropriate to managing* *such processes"*. In this respect, based on Eiriz and Wilson (2006)'s suggestion, the B2C strategies are not appropriate for the B2B sector at the rationale, structure, and process levels. At the rationale level, the B2C branding is emotionally oriented as it targets a large audience; while the B2B branding is rationally driven as it targets a smaller size market. At the process level, the B2B branding seeks to establish personal relationships which are translated into open communication, whilst, the B2C branding focuses on transactional relationship. Finally, at the structure level, unlike the B2C branding, the B2B branding is oriented toward building long term relationship.

Meanwhile, the development of e-commerce has led to the emergence of a new business model B2B2C. Introduced initially in China, B2B2C brands stand for Business-to-Business-to-Consumer (Zhao & Guo, 2012). According to Kambol (2018, p. 38), "*B2B2C is an emerging e-commerce model that combines B2B and B2C for a complete product or service transaction*". For example, Amazon is a typical B2B2C model (Cai, He, Dai & Zhu, 2018) with a brand valuation exceeding 100 billion dollars (Interbrand, 2018). This new business platform is the heart of the value creation (Zhao & Guo, 2012) and the result of the innovation of the traditional e-commerce model by incorporating production resources with retail resources (Cai, He, Dai & Zhu, 2018).

Meanwhile, the study of B2B branding has received more interest, even though B2B brands are less researched compared to B2C brands (Koporčić, Tolušić & Rešetar, 2017). At the research level, the 1990's researchers working in the arena of brand research noticed an increasing number of empirical studies were being produced, adding to knowledge in this field of research. For example, a seminal work by Aaker (1991) entitled 'Managing brand equity' which was initially made for B2C brands, was cited by researchers from B2B branding field (Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2016). As such, B2B brands are gaining interest from both academics and practitioners (Koporčić, Tolušić & Rešetar, 2017) where branding is a crucial tool for B2B actors to provide value to their customers.

In practice, building a strong brand is a sizeable success trigger for B2B firms (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). For instance, a well-established brand diminishes the threats related to products and services (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). Other than that, it also reduces the cost of searching for information (Backhaus, Steiner & Lugger, 2011). Then, increase the likelihood of a company in buyers-bidding situations (Wise & Zednickova, 2009), and licensing (Ohnemus, 2009). Also, firms with substantial brands can benefit from premium prices (Keller, 2013) from both consumers and investors (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007).

The premium price is a strategy that consists of setting the rates at a higher level in regard to competition and consumer's value (Hinterhuber & Liozu, 2018). For instance, Spark Therapeutics launched a drug with a price set at $850,000 which makes it the most overpriced therapy worldwide (Crow, 2018). In contrast, Hinterhuber and Liozu (2018) argued that even though premium pricing depends on marketing changes, the possibility of premium pricing is limited in the B2B context as there are no luxury products in this particular industry. In this situation, B2B pricing comprises quantification that should include customer value (Hinterhuber, 2017; Hinterhuber & Liozu, 2018). As a result, it is inevitable that the financial perforamce of the firms is influenced by a strong brand (Hirvonen, Laukkanen & Salo, 2016; Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018) because it has a positive influence on consumers' minds (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Spence & Hamzaoui-Essousi, 2010).

Furthermore, unlike B2C consumers market, B2B industry is subjugated by corporate branding (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006; Baumgarth, 2010; Balmer & Burghausen, 2015). This is true because several scholars argued that corporate brands are essential in the B2B sector compared to products or general brands (Aspara & Tikanen, 2008). For instance, almost one third (31 per cent) of B2B firms focused on corporate branding strategies, while nearly half (47 per cent) preferred to mix corporate branding with other branding hierarchy (Richter, as cited in Baumgarth, 2010). This dominance is explained by "*the number and variety of products and services, the high level of customized offerings, and short life cycles; second, current developments in brand management thinking and practice*" (Baumgarth, 2010, p. 654). Meanwhile, past studies have contributed to the B2B branding body of literature from two distinct perspectives that could be classified as follows:

- Application of the B2C brand equity models in the B2B context
- Stakeholders-focus B2B branding models

2.3.3 Application of the B2C Brand Equity Models in the B2B Context

As discussed earlier, in most cases, brand equity was measured from the CBBE perspective (Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010). Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) models are adopted mainly in products and services contexts (Christodoulides, De Chernatony & Furrer, 2015; Çifci et al., 2016; Sarker, Mohd-Any & Kamarulzaman, 2019). The CBBE models were initially developed for the B2C domain (Davis, Buchanan-

Oliver & Brodie, 2009), yet their applicability for B2B context is debatable (Leek & De Chernatony, 2011) and under-researched (Keränen, Piirainen & Salminen, 2012). However, several researchers argued that CBBE models could be applied in the B2B context as well (e.g., Davis, Buchanan-Oliver & Brodie, 2009; Biedenbach, 2012). On one hand, Biedenbach (2012) investigated the multidimensional models of brand equity proposed by Aaker (1991) and their interrelationships in the B2B context provided an empirical evidence about the positive performance of the four multidimensional model of brand equity (brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty) in the B2B context. On the other hand, Kuhn, Alpert and Pope (2008) undertook a qualitative study on senior buyers of waste management electronic tracking using Keller's model (1993) and proposed a revised Keller CBBE Model (see Figure 2.1).

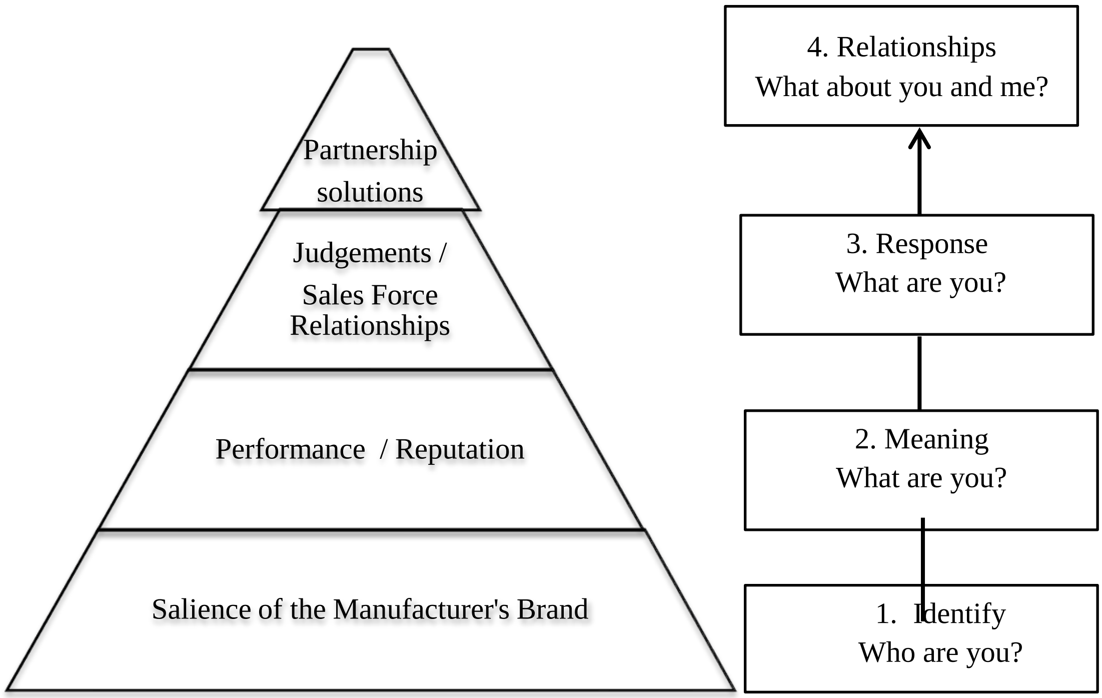

Figure 2.1: The Revised Keller Pyramid for the B2B Industry
Source: Kuhn, Alpert and Pope (2008, p. 50)

This research is among the first studies to analyse the applicability of the model proposed by Keller (1993) in the B2B setting (Biedenbach, 2012). As illustrated in Figure 2.1, the results showed that four brand building blocks (salience, performance, judgments, and resonance) are applied to B2B context. The other remaining brand building blocks (feelings and imagery) did not apply to B2B setting. Moreover, human capital has a significant part in building brand equity in the B2B context. Also, the new model substitutes imagery by reputation and feelings by salesforce relationship. Reputation was found more critical in a B2B context as supplier reputation is more significant than price. For the feeling block, this dimension does not apply to B2B market since the purchasing-decision is rational. As a result, Keller's Model (1993) could be applied to B2B context with consideration of the industry characteristics.

Similarly, Ćorić and Jelić (2015) have conducted a qualitative study to investigate the applicability of Keller's CBBE model in the B2B chemical market. The findings showed the applicability of the six brand building blocks of the model but with adjustment to the B2B marketing approach, as demonstrated in Figure 2.2.

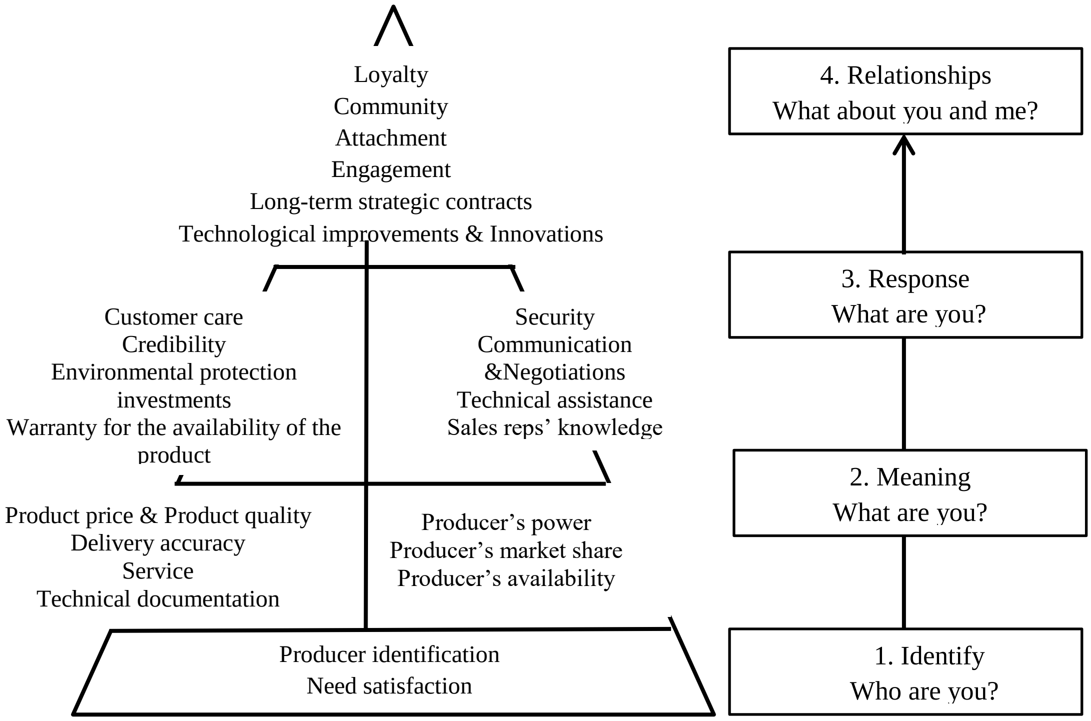

Figure 2.2: The Revised Keller Pyramid for the B2B Chemical Market
Source: Ćorić and Jelić (2015, p. 1014).

2.3.4 Stakeholder-Focus B2B Branding Models

Even though several researchers applied the CBBE models in the B2B context as discussed earlier, Leek and Christodoulides (2011) argued that these models had not been widely verified in the B2B context because of the nature of the relationships which gives an impact to the branding. For instance, Ford, Berthon, Brown, Gadde, Håkansson, Naudé and Snehota (2002) stated that 88 per cent of B2B relationships surpassed five years old. Meanwhile, the branding literature has shifted from a consumer-based perspective towards a multiple stakeholders' perspective (Mingione & Leoni, 2019). According to Heding et al. (2009), starting from 2000, the community approach dominated the branding arena where consumption choices are influenced by contextual and cultural artefact; and brandings strategies depend on macro and consumer culture. Brand community is defined as "*a* *specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand*" (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001, p. 412). Similarly, Merz, He and Vargo (2009) pointed out that the early 2000s marked the beginning of stakeholder-focus brand era, stating that:

> "*Brand scholars in the early 2000s started to examine the collective and dynamic processes that underlie brand consumption within society. Specifically, since the early 2000s they began to adopt a stakeholder perspective to branding, which denotes that (1) brand value is co-created within stakeholder-based ecosystems, (2) stakeholders form network, rather than only dyadic, relationships with brands, and (3) brand value is dynamically constructed through social interactions among different stakeholders"* (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009, p. 337).

This approach indicates that brands are a part of a dynamic social process (Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014), whereby the brand value is co-created and continuously shaped through network relationships of multiple stakeholders (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Kaufmann, Loureiro & Manarioti, 2016; Pathak & Pathak-Shelat, 2017). In regard to B2B branding, B2B branding field is dominated by corporate brands (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006; Baumgarth, 2010; Balmer & Burghausen, 2015), and is regarded as a relational process that occurs through interpersonal interfaces. This leads to the development of the corporate identity and reputation (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). As an effect, corporate brand does not only target the customers but also other stakeholders (Daly & Moloney, 2004).

In fact, corporate brand is driven by network-based and coherent interactions (Mingione & Leoni, 2019), whereby interactions are indispensable to cultivate trustful relationships (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Mingione & Leoni, 2019). Therefore, the application of B2C branding models in the B2B context is not totally appropriate. Thus, a handful number of researchers took into account the particularity of the B2B context by including the stakeholder dimensions from network perspective (e.g, Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018) and stakeholders' perspective (e.g., Jones, 2005; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016).

From network perspective, network theories have been applied to an extensive variety of marketing issues (Webster & Morrisonm, 2004) and mainly to B2B settings (Baker & Saren, 2010). According to Gummesson (2006), network theory indicates that people act like nodes in a network of relationships where they interact. In B2B context, few studies have dealt with B2B branding from network perspective. Mäläskä, Saraniemi and Tähtinen (2011) extended the B2B branding theory through the use of the network theory.

As shown in Figure 2.3, the study demonstrated how social and business network actors (i.e., stakeholders) show impact to the SME's brand image and acquaint with the concept of branding pool. This concept entails the independent network actors that directly contribute to B2B SME branding activity. Meanwhile, depending on the relevance of their influence, branding actions could be direct or indirect. "*The direct actions influence branding separately from the company-governed branding process*" (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011, p. 1149), by influencing the functional brand value, providing references, creating the word-of-mouth or media publicity, co-promoting, creating a competitive brand position, designing and communicating the brand.

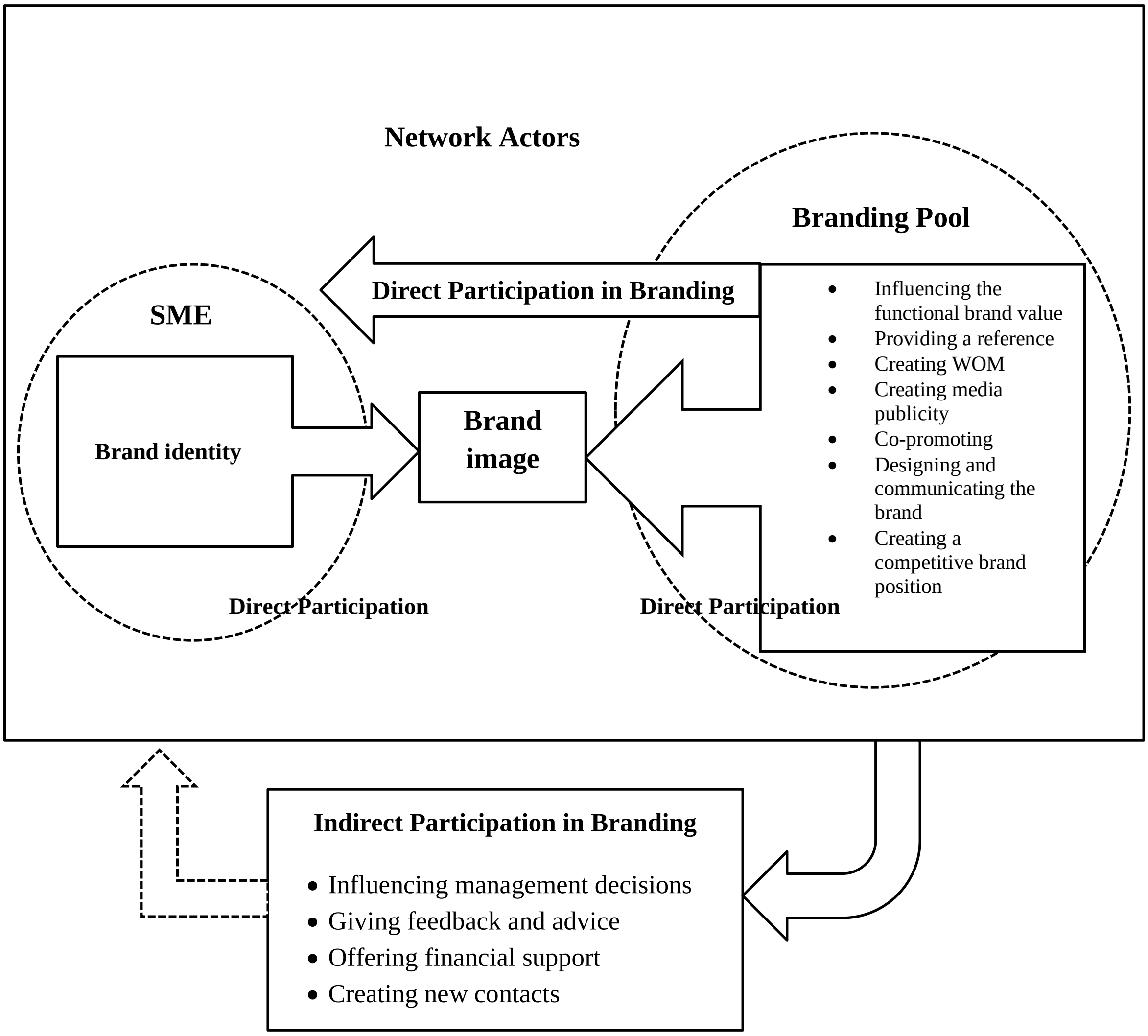

Figure 2.3: Network Actors in B2B SME Branding
Source : Mäläskä, Saraniemi and Tähtinen (2011, p. 1149)

Meanwhile, the indirect actions are the "*network activities that contribute to an SME's internal operations that may consequently, that is indirectly, affect the construction of the brand"* (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011, p. 1148) such as giving feedback, advice and offering financial support. As such, SMEs managers can utilize stakeholders to manage their branding pool to enhance their brand performance. Meanwhile, Koporcic and Halinen (2018) investigated Interactive Network Branding (INB) and proposed an INB process model which lays down the role of various interactions of the INB. The model distinguishes between three types of interactions: (1) internal interactions, (2) external interactions, and (3) boundary spanning. Internal interactions refer to the interactions between people from different positions and hierarchy level inside the firm. In contrast, external interactions are interactions (direct or indirect) between the firm and people representatives of other companies. These interactions take the form of word-of-mouth, referrals, and references.

Meanwhile, boundary spanning interactions comprise of interactions occurring at the borderline between the representatives of an organisation (salespeople) and its external actors (network environment). As such, the INB is a result of personal connections between representatives of the company, who should be attentive to their influence on corporate identity and reputation (Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). However, even though network theories highlighted that the brand value is formed in networks rather than in a static relationship between stakeholder and brand (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009), a broader understanding of the stakeholder influences on the brand from focused stakeholder approach is needed. In fact, a firm's networking system is part of its stakeholders (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009) to whom the firm is obligated at legal, contractual and moral levels (Jones, 2005).

The first article on B2B branding from stakeholder perspective is Jones's (2005) (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009). Jones (2005) claimed that brand value is co-created through interaction with multiple strategic stakeholders; thus, a stakeholder brand equity model was proposed (see Figure 2.4), which emphasized the critical role of multiple stakeholders in developing brand equity.

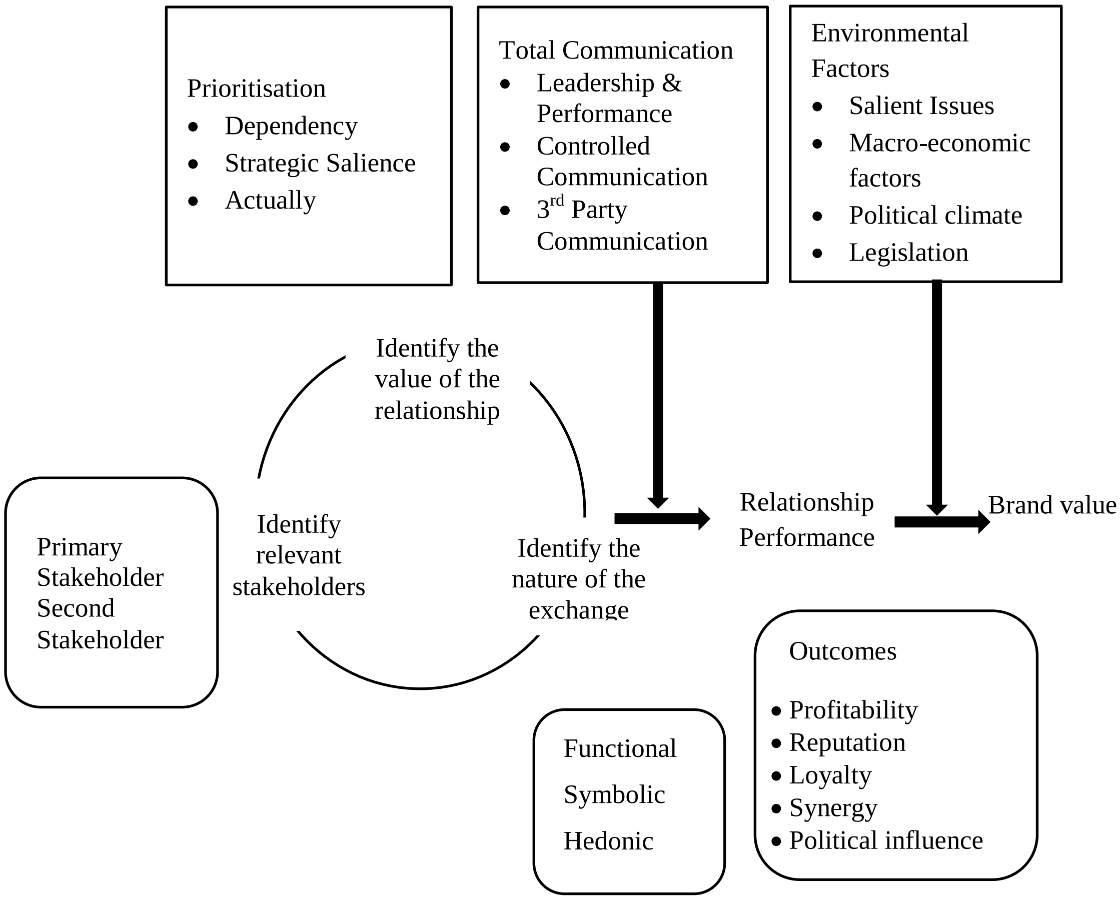

Figure 2.4: The Stakeholder-Brand Value Model
Source: Jones (2005, p. 26)

The model serves as a tool to evaluate the value of numerous stakeholder groups in creating and maintaining long-term brand value. The model entails three steps:

- Identification of the relevance of the stakeholders (primary and secondary). A primary stakeholder is a person with regular and stable interaction, who influences the brand value directly. The impact of secondary stakeholder happens at a specific time.

- Prioritization of the relevant stakeholders' relations (in regard to their contribution to the creation of the brand value) through assessment of their relationships in terms of dependency, strategic significance, and actuality.
- The Identification of the nature of the exchange between stakeholders (functional, symbolic, or hedonic).

This model highlighted the important role of communication in generating goodwill, trust, and reputation (Jones, 2005). It also captured the complex nature of B2B relationships and the impact of environmental factors such as salient issues, macro-economic factors, political climate, and legislation. In line with Jones (2005), Tarnovskay and Biedenbach (2016) investigated the contribution of B2B corporate managers and local stakeholders in emerging countries (i.e. Brazil, India, and Russia) to the value-creation of the brand. The outcomes showed that despite the procedures are set by the corporate managers for local branding processes; the contributing activities by local stakeholders ranged from "weak" to "strong" are depending on the country under investigation in the study as described in Table 2.1. For instance, local managers in Brazil are more proactive compared to their Russian and Indian homolog.

Table 2.1: Contributing Activities by Stakeholders

Stakeholders	**Emerging Markets**		
	Brazil	India	Russia
Local managers	Strong and proactive	Strong and proactive	Week and reactive
Local partners and end-customers	Strong	Relatively weak	Relatively weak

Source: Tarnovskay and Biedenbach (2016, p. 297)

Furthermore, Törmälä and Gyrd-Jones (2017) argued that brand identity is not static as advanced by scholars such as Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2012), and Urde, Baumgarth and Merrilees (2013). It is instead formed through dynamic relationships between the firm and the secondary stakeholders. Accordingly, a brand identity framework in the context of a new B2B venture was suggested. This framework emphasized the four stages in the development of brand identity:

- Latent corporate brand identity: at the early years of existence, venture firms are more dynamic in searching for business opportunities (e.g., potential investors and partners). At this stage, the corporate brand identity is drawn from the personal values of the founder.
- Emergent corporate brand identity: at this level, the venture firm seeks to identify the target market to put the technology into practice, comprehend its value and benefits to the customers.

- Clarified corporate brand identity: at this stage, the venture firm focuses on and adapts its brand identity to the core customers. It is to have a clear vision for the future of the company and to add meaning to the brand identity. As such, the development of the brand identity is subjected to an interactive process between the firm and its market interactions.
- Adjusted corporate brand identity: this phase aims to explore new market opportunities through adjusting the corporate brand identity.

As a whole, B2B branding field has noticed an increasing interest (Keränen, Piirainen & Salminen, 2012; Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2016) where corporate brands dominate the B2B field (Baumgarth, 2010). Besides, B2B branding is regarded as a relational process that occurs through interpersonal interfaces which leads to the development of the corporate identity and reputation (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). However, more B2B study is needed to extend the understanding of the B2B branding through the stakeholder lens. Furthermore, most branding has been undertaken in large organization context (Lassen, Kunde & Gioia, 2008), whereby branding strategies cannot always be applied for SMEs (Berthon, Ewing & Napoli, 2008). Therefore, this study has sought to ground the research from the stakeholder theory lens, given the particularity and the nature of the relationship in the B2B context in SMEs.

2.4 Stakeholder Theory

From a conceptual perspective, this study adopted the stakeholder theory. The first section addresses the origin and relevance of stakeholder theory. Meanwhile, the second section discusses the core components of the theory. The final section describes the reasons for choosing this theory as the foundation underpinning the study.

2.4.1 Origin and Relevance of Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory was initially presented in 1984 by Edward Freeman in his seminal work ‘Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach’ (Freeman, Harrison & Zyglidopoulos, 2018). The notion of ‘stakeholder’ was first delineated in the early sixties by the Stanford Research Institute to challenge the concept of ‘stockholder' as the only group that the management should worry about (Freeman et al., 2010). However, the philosophical background of the concept stakeholder dated back in the 18th century in the well-established works of Adam Smith ‘The Theory of Moral Sentiments' (1759/1976) and ‘The Wealth of Nations' (1776/1976) where he contended that economic and ethical interests could coexist (Andriof, Waddock, Husted & Rahman, 2002). Adam Smith's framework, which integrates business and ethics, was the foundation of the corporate social responsibility (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2011), and consequently the stakeholder theory (Friedman & Miles, 2006; Freeman, Harrison & Wicks, 2007).

Stakeholder theory is a pragmatic theory that is value-creation oriented as it focuses on the joint-ness of stakeholder interests (Freeman et al., 2010). It aims to solve the problems related to value creation, trade, the ethics of capitalism, and the managerial mindset. In line with this, stakeholder theory was initially proposed to the strategic management to extend the view of the top management through considering the needs of a large number of stakeholders (Clement, 2005).

Over time, this theory of management (Reynolds, Schultz & Hekman, 2006), has drawn on *"four key academic fields – i.e., sociology, economics, politics and ethics – and especially the literature on corporate planning, systems theory, corporate social responsibility, and organisational theory*" (Wagner Mainardes, Alves & Raposo, 2011, p. 229), and has gained an immense importance. In the beginning, stakeholder theory attracted the interests of business ethics scholars, and it evolved into raising questions of justice in corporations (Freeman et al., 2010). Besides, stakeholder theory has not only been used by corporate managers but also tested and refined by researchers (Tullberg, 2013) such as Donaldson and Preston (1995) and Friedman and Miles (2006).

In practice, it has been noticed that a broad application of the stakeholder theory in multiple domains; such as business disciplines (e.g., strategic management, finance and, marketing), business ethics, corporative governance, and corporate social responsibility (Freeman et al., 2010; Wagner Mainardes, Alves & Raposo, 2011). This is due to the practicality of the theory in managing the progressive requirements and challenges of the business, and to the increasing interests of the community towards firms' attitude (Freeman, Harrison & Wicks, 2007). Examples of application of stakeholder theory include and not limited to: application in project management (e.g., Eskerod & Huemann, 2015; Mok, Shen, & Yang, 2015), sustainability management (e.g., Hörisch, Freeman & Schaltegge, 2014), tourism (e.g., Khazaei, Elliot & Joppe, 2015), Marketing (e.g., Knox & Gruar, 2007; Buyucek, Kubacki, Rundle-Thiele & Pang, 2016), information systems and technology (Mishra & Mishra, 2013), and e-government (Scholl, 2001; Pandey & Gupta, 2017).

2.4.2 Core Components of Stakeholder Theory

A stakeholder is "*any group or individual that can affect or be affected by the realization of an organisation's purpose*" (Freeman, Harrison & Zyglidopoulos, 2018, p. 26). This definition was first delineated in the book of Freeman (1984). Even though various definitions were proposed for the last thirty years (e.g., Clarkson, 1991; Kaler, 2002), the early definition of stakeholder by Freeman (1984) is widely used as it is clear and pragmatic (Freeman, Harrison & Zyglidopoulos, 2018). Meanwhile, according to Donaldson and Preston (1995, p. 70), stakeholder theory entails three supportive and interlaced aspects:

- Stakeholder theory is normative – it is the core and the fundamental basis of stakeholder theory. It entails that stakeholders have legitimate intrinsic interests. In other words, stakeholders' interest should be considered.
- Stakeholder theory is instrumental - it provides a model explaining the networks between the stakeholder management and the achievement of firm performance.
- Stakeholder theory is descriptive - it describes the company as a group of stakeholders competing for fundamental interests. In other words, stakeholder theory is useful in helping to understand and manage organisations, which is why the language of stakeholder theory is used widely in business, not for profit, and government (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2011).

Meanwhile, the concept of stakeholder involves that the firm is positioned at the centre of interconnection between primary and secondary stakeholders (Freeman, 1984, Freeman et al., 2010, Freeman, Harrison & Zyglidopoulos, 2018). Primary stakeholders refer to individual or group of individuals who are directly engaged in the processes of value-creating of the company. In contrast, secondary stakeholders are not directly involved with the value creation, but they may affect or influence primary stakeholders (Freeman, Harrison & Zyglidopoulos, 2018). Meanwhile, Carroll and Buchholtz (2011) stated that primary stakeholders refer to contractual actors who have a direct and contractual relationship with the firm, while secondary stakeholders refer to diffuse actors who do not entrain any contractual relationship with the company yet still influenced by its activities. As illustrated in Figure 2.5, the firm is at the centre and is concerned with the relations of primary and secondary stakeholders.

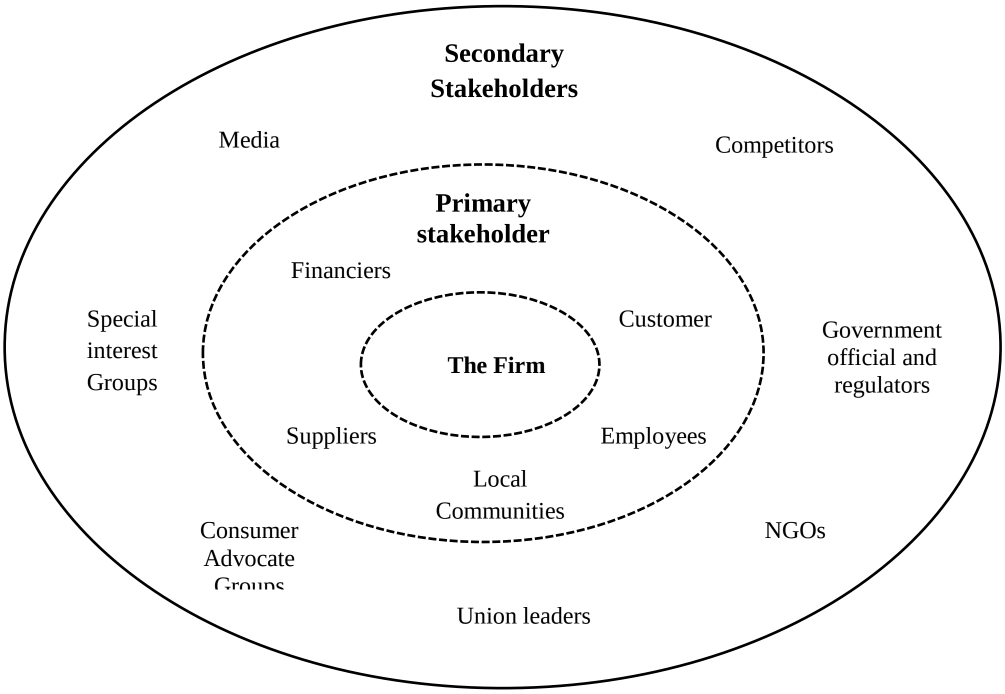

Figure 2.5: Stakeholder Theory Map
Source: Freeman, Harrison and Zyglidopoulos (2018, p. 16)

Freeman, Harrison and Zyglidopoulos (2018) explained that the term 'firm' is used and does not include employees. This is because it is to determine the actions undertaken (mainly by managers) inside the firm to organise and allocate the resources to stakeholders (including employees). Primary stakeholders include financiers, customers, suppliers, employees, and local communities. Financiers (e.g., banks, stockholders) own a financial stake in the company. Hence, their preferences and morals affect the direction of the firm (Freeman et al., 2010). In turn, the firm should run the business in respect with other stakeholders' interests not only the financiers. Enron scandal is a suitable example to encourage putting forward the stakes of other stakeholders in harmony with financiers. Customers expect products or service with excellent value for money; employees demand fair remuneration and job security, whereas suppliers look for dependable customers (Pearce, 1982). As such, firms should be attentive to its relationship with the employees and make sure that their prices and quality offered to its customers are in harmony. Meanwhile, local communities help firms in creating value for its stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010), as they include leaders of local government, political, and social organisations (Freeman, Harrison & Zyglidopoulos, 2018).

The secondary stakeholders comprise of the media, competitors, special interest groups, government officials and regulators; consumers advocate groups, NGOs, and union leaders. These stakeholders are qualified as 'secondary' because they have an influencer stake in the firm (Freeman, 1984). In other words, even though they are indirectly involved with the process of value-creating, they are able to affect negatively or positively the interests of the firm in creating value (Su & Tsang, 2015). For example, watchdog groups (e.g., the media, NGOs, consumers advocate groups and the union leaders) are reflecting the interests of the consumers as well as the society. In this case, the firm should engage and foster a good relationship with these groups of stakeholders (Freeman, Harrison & Zyglidopoulos, 2018). Concerning competitors, the firm should maintain a fruitful partnership as they are relevant stakeholders. The business world testifies of multiple examples of competitors engaging in partnerships through joint-ventures or alliances. For instance, Renaults and Nissan which was formed in 1999 between carmakers Renaults (France-based) and Nissan (Japan-based), sell cars under the name of eight brands (Renault, Nissan, Renault Samsung, Infiniti, Venucia, Dacia, Datsun and Lada), and generate a revenue of €129 billion (Ashkad, 2016).

However, Freeman et al. (2010, p. 27) argued that "*no stakeholder stands alone in the process of value creation. The stakes of each stakeholder group are multifaceted and inherently connected*". In other words, each stakeholder has a legitimate claim (Santana, 2012). The interaction between stakeholders is at least a two-way relationship and is responsible for the value creation of the firm. Santana (2012, p. 258) defined stakeholder legitimacy as "*a composite perception by the focal organisation's management of the legitimacy of the stakeholder as an entity, legitimacy of the stakeholder's claim, and legitimacy of the stakeholder's behaviour at a certain point in time*". Additionally, stakeholder theory puts forward the necessity of taking into account the interests of stakeholders (Kaya & Marangoz, 2014). Managing the interests of stakeholders is not only about maximizing the wealth of shareholders (Phillips, Freeman & Wicks, 2003). Instead, the managing process involves balancing and harmonizing those interests. The balance of different stakeholders' interest is a process of assessing, weighing, and addressing the competing claims of stakeholders (Reynolds, Schultz & Hekman, 2006).

2.4.3 The Rationale for the Adoption of Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory was adopted as the theoretical foundation for the current study for several factors. First, the scope of the study involves investigating the impact of the government programme on the brand performance of the participant SMEs. The government programme puts the government body (provider of the programme) and the recipients (SMEs) into relation. Besides, past studies argued that multiple stakeholders play a significant role in brand building (Gregory, 2007; Khan & Ede, 2009; Merrilees, Miller & Herington, 2012) as co-creators of brand meaning (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Payne, Storbacka, Frow & Knox, 2009; Hatch & Schultz, 2010). In the case of this study, the co-creators of brands are the recipients of SMEs and the government.

Second, there is no tailored solution for all businesses in implementing branding strategies given the size, sector, location, and other factors. Each organisation is capable of precisely determining its branding strategy and shaping its goals. Freeman (1984) argued that organisations should take into account the other stakeholders' interests when taking strategic decisions, along with their interest's intersection. Failure to do so, stakeholders can be a source of brand threats. For instance, Domino's employees made a disgusting video in the restaurant's kitchen and posted it online. In a matter of a few days, it went viral through the social media; Domino's reputation was damaged (Raki & Shakur, 2018b, p. 402).

Third, the stakeholder theory has a variety of impact on many disciplines, including branding (Fiedler & Kirchgeorg, 2007; Gregory, 2007). Several studies on branding have used stakeholder theory as their theoretical lens in different branding sub-categories such as city branding (Merrilees, Miller & Herington, 2012; Henninger, Foster, Alevizou & Frohlich, 2016), and B2B branding (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016).

However, the focus of the study is exploring B2B branding in emerging markets SMEs from stakeholder perspective whereby the government is a crucial secondary stakeholder. Thus, a supporting theory is needed to explain the choice of the government as the only secondary stakeholder under investigation. This way, the theory of national competitive advantage was selected as a supporting theory to deeply explain the engagement of the government in creating competitive advantage for the SME sector and understand what factor can influence the competitiveness of the SME sector at macroeconomic level.

The theory of national competitive advantage was introduced by Micheal Porter in 1990. The theory explains why some industries have more competitive advantage in particular country as compared to another. Ellis and Pecotich (2002, p. 34) argued that "*for Porter (1990), national competitiveness is synonymous with national productivity: a nation attains its primary economic goal of a high and rising standard of living for its citizens by increasing the productivity with which the nation's limited resources are transformed into output*". Porter's (1990) outstanding work is also known as the "Diamond Model". The Porter's (1990) model is systemic and is depending on the interaction among the factors made for the analysis of competitiveness described below. Ziraga and Wandebori (2015, p. 646) summarized the factors as follow:

- *Factor conditions* are identified as company or organization's resource. There are human resources, physical resources, knowledge resources, capital resources and infrastructure. An industry is usually a specialized resource which is the key of their competitive advantage in their competition landscape.

- *Demand condition* is affecting the landscape of the industry. The home market can help company and organization create competitive advantage. Which, if the demand condition of the home market is leading the others market preference and push company to innovate faster, it might lead the industry to make advanced products as the competitive landscape
- *Related and supporting industries* can support the inputs process for innovation and internationalization. The supporting industry might lead the others industry to have a cost-effective process and also stimulating the rapid upgrading process of current product.
- *Firm strategy*, structure and rivalry are the most important and the determinant factors of the company or organization competitive advantage. The goals and company management are important in shaping the landscape. While the presence of rivalry is creating the pressure in a way the company develop itself.
- *Government* can influence the four determinants of competitiveness. Government influence supply conditions, key production factors, demand conditions in the home market and competition condition.
- *Chance* is also identified as the opportunity of an occurrence that is beyond the control of a firm. The chance creates discontinuity which might add competitive positions and possibility to lose in competitions.

As a whole, stakeholder theory is a pragmatic theory that focused on the jointness of the interest of stakeholders contributing to value-creation. Supported by Porter's theory of national competitive advantage, stakeholder theory was selected as the conceptual foundation of this study to enable a focused investigation of the branding process, the influencing stakeholders, and the impact of the Malaysian brand program on brand building.

2.5 Research Gaps Analysis

The literature reviews presented in Section 2.2, Section 2.3 and Section 2.4 showed that previous works helped in understanding branding in the B2B context. However, branding literature has moved from customer approach to stakeholder approach since 2000s (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009). It is inevitable that studies reflect the particularities of the B2B context and consider the evolving logic of branding literature in which the brand value is co-created and continuously shaped through network relationships of multiple stakeholders (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Kaufmann, Loureiro & Manarioti, 2016; Pathak & Pathak-Shelat, 2017). Consequently, this study identifies three types of research gaps, namely: (1) theoretical gap, (2) contextual gap, and (3) methodological gap. The gaps are depicted where the three circles intersect as described in Figure 2.6.

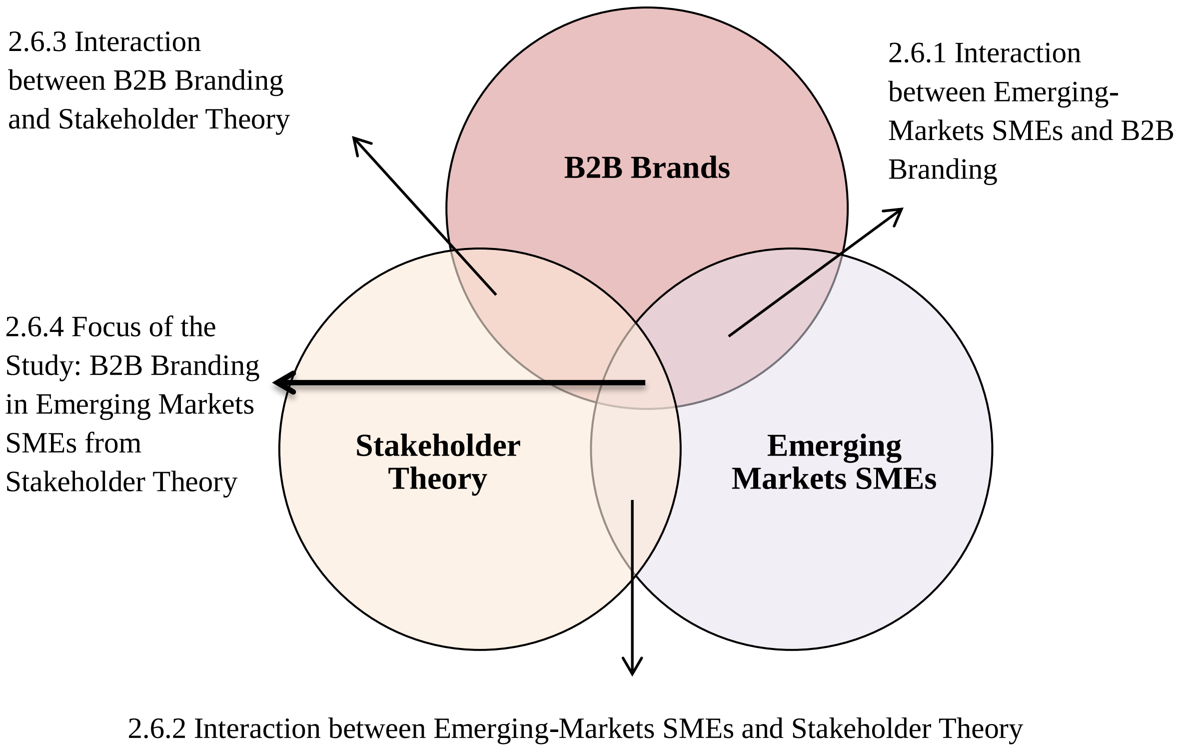

Figure 2.6: Focus of the Study

The first intersection is occurring between emerging-markets SMEs with a distinct research field ‘B2B branding’. The second intersection is concerning B2B branding and the stakeholders' theory adopted for this study. The third intersection addresses the interaction between emerging-markets SMEs and the stakeholder theory. The fourth intersection is the focus of the study which occurs between all the three circles. Each interaction generates a related knowledge gap explained in the following subsections.

2.5.1 Interaction between Emerging-markets SMEs and B2B Branding

For a long time, emerging markets have become the world's manufacturing hub due to cheap labour and low production costs. For instance, China is known as the ‘world factory’ (Yang & He, 2017) as they produce 70 per cent of the world's most goods

(Tucker, 2006). Nevertheless, firms from emerging countries have small profit margins, which continue to reduce due to fierce competition, domestically or internationally (Birnik, Birnik & Sheth, 2010). For example, China contributed to the added value of iPhone exports to the US in 2009 by 3.6 per cent (Xing & Detert, 2010) because firms such as Apple realised that higher added value at the early and later stages of the supply chain (Rungi & Del Prete, 2018). This leaves emerging markets midstream firms with lower margins. Therefore, branding has emerged as a pivotal strategy to escape the commodity trap (Roy & Banerjee, 2012) in both sectors (B2B and B2C) that emerging-markets firms have long been caught with, to gain in competitive advantage (Baumgarth, 2010; Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010), and to consequently increase profit margin (Birnik, Birnik & Sheth, 2010).

However, even though several researchers have demonstrated the benefits of branding (Urde, 1994; Baumgarth, 2010), brands from emerging countries are still absent from the ranking list of the Best Global Brands; except for two Chinese brands Huawei and Lenovo (Interbrand, 2017) as described in Table 2.2. Huawei was the first to join the Best Global Brands' ranking list in 2014 and was ranked at 88th, followed by Lenovo ranked at 100th in 2015. However, Lenovo left the ranking in 2018. The arrival of Huawei might be behind the prediction of Interbrand as stated by Interbrand, that more brands from emerging markets will join the Interbrand list shortly since they have become more mature regarding the understanding of global markets (Hales, 2015). This prediction is in line with David Aaker’s remark that indicated that the next big brands would come from emerging markets (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2013). Indeed, the absence of emerging markets brands from Interbrand Top Brands; except for Huawei (Interbrand, 2018) is mainly related to two relevant factors, namely (1) negative association and (2) fierce competition (Magnusson, Haas & Zhao, 2008; Herstein, Berger & Jaffe, 2014). However, even though Huawei and Lenovo are larges companies from emerging markets, they were cited in this study as an example of successful emerging markets brands due to the limited numbers of global brands from emerging markets.

Table 2.2: Ranking of Chinese Brands in InterBrand

Year	HUAWEI		LENOVO	
	Brand Value	World Rank	Brand Value	World Rank
2018	7578	68		
2017	6676	70	4004	100
2016	5835	72	4045	99
2015	4952	88	4114	100
2014	4313	94		

Source: www.interbrand.com

There are several studies reported that a negative perception of emerging market brands among consumers are from both emerging and developed countries. It is known as negative association (Aaker, 1992) or stigma (Magnusson, Haas & Zhao, 2008). This perception involves prejudices and stereotypes linked to the country of origin. Even though Tanusondjaja, Greenacre, Banelis, Truong and Andrews (2015) affirmed that emerging markets consumers of domestic brands consider local brands as high quality, brands from emerging countries are mainly related to poor quality (Batra et al., 2000). For instance, brands from Brazil, Turkey, and India are seen to be lower than the ones produced by developed countries (Herstein, Berger & Jaffe, 2014).

Additionally, depending on the product category, the same country could have both positive and negative associations; for example, Russia caviar has a positive linkage; while Russian cars have a negative association (Chailan & Ille, 2015). Besides, emerging countries face two paradoxes: (1) trust vs risk and (2) localness vs globalness (*ibid*, 2015). The first paradox is in line with a negative association and assumes that preconceptions are linked with a product's Country of Origin (COO) and reinforced by a significant number of risks. For instance, the Chinese milk powder contamination crisis in 2008 had a long influence on customers' trust in the Chinese food industry (Zou & Li, 2016).

In reference to fierce competition, brand managers from emerging markets not only suffer from competition from local players, but also foreign brands originated from other emerging and developed countries. This intense competition rises with the opportunities offered by emerging markets to both domestic and international competitors (Tanusondjaja et al., 2015). Also, emerging markets face competition in developed markets as well **w**hen trying to go global (Magnusson, Haas & Zhao, 2008). In SMEs setting, despite the importance of branding for the survival of SMEs (Urde, 1994; Baumgarth, 2010; Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010); few studies have been conducted on branding from SMEs perspective compared to large organisations (e.g. Wong & Merrilees, 2005; Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010; Centeno, Hart & Dinnie, 2013; Reijonen, Párdányi, Tuominen, Laukkanen & Komppula, 2014). Besides, the majority of firms, even though they understand the importance of branding, they still find it challenging to implement branding strategies (Gromark & Melin, 2011). This concludes that branding in SMEs is not at the strategic level of decision-making (Centeno, Hart & Dinnie, 2013; Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010). Thus, brand theories from SMEs setting remain underdeveloped (Centeno, Hart & Dinnie, 2013).

Meanwhile, being brand-oriented increases the chances of developing strong brands (Laukkanen, Nagy, Hirvonen, Reijonen & Pasanen, 2013; Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018) as it sets the strategical and the operational ground for brand management (Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir & Zhu, 2016). In the context of SMEs operating in the B2B market, it has been argued that brand orientation has a positive impact on SMEs performance (Reijonen et al., 2015; Hirvonen, Laukkanen & Salo, 2016; Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir & Zhu, 2016). For instance, a study conducted on Chinese B2B service pointed out that a firm with a high level of brand orientation can communicate its brand effectively to customers which leads to best word-of-mouth, and consequently strong brand equity (Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir & Zhu, 2016). However, despite the growing interest in B2B branding, only alimited amount of studies has been conducted from this perspective (Kuhn, Alpert & Pope, 2008). In fact, the B2B branding has lesser amount of research as compared to the B2C branding market (Koporčić, Tolušić & Rešetar, 2017), where the concept of brand equity originated from.

Also, B2B managers complain about the shortage of brands theories, as most frameworks come from B2C brands (Kapferer, 2008). As such, B2B managers are left with minimal frameworks for guided directions (Leek & Christodoulies, 2011). However, several scholars suggested that brand equity frameworks could be appropriate to B2B context (De Chernatony & Riley, 1999; Davis, Golicic & Marquardt, 2009); even though their applicability is still under-researched (Keränen, Piirainen & Salminen, 2012). In the Malaysian context, regardless of the importance of SMEs for the Malaysian economy and branding for the survival of SMEs, the literature survey has demonstrated the lack of studies on branding in Malaysian SMEs. The existent body of studies concerning SMEs in broad standpoints such as Halal industry (e.g. Ismail, Othman, Rahman, Kamarulzaman & Rahman, 2016), competitive strategy (e.g. Rosli, 2012), and branding leadership (e.g. Ahmad, Quoquab, Bahrun & Mansor, 2014). In addition, the majority of previous studies in the branding field have used qualitative (e.g. Renton, Daellenbach, Davenport & Richard, 2016; Kennedy & Wright, 2016) or quantitative methods (e.g., Odoom, Narteh & Rand, 2017; Yieh, Yeh, Tseng, Wang & Wu, 2018). However, there was no indication of the characteristics of the selections of the SMEs for the study. In other words, were these SMEs running successful brands?

Overall, the interaction between emerging-markets SMEs and B2B branding has led to the emergence of the contextual and the methodological gaps which this study aimed to fill. The contextual gap has risen from the lack of studies on B2B brands in emerging-markets of SMEs as compared to developed markets, large firms, and B2C brands; and also, in the Malaysian context. The context gap was highlighted by previous studies but poorly investigated. Meanwhile, the methodological gap has emerged from the lack of studies addressing B2B branding best practices. In fact, this study aims to explore B2B branding from a stakeholder's perspective whereby SMEs interact with their external environment. Thus, since the government was selected as the external stakeholder under investigation; it was a thorough and careful selection for the interviews of SMEs which has interaction with the government in order to build their brands. Hence, the SMEs winners of Malaysian Brand Mark were the scope of the study.

2.5.2 Interaction between B2B Branding and Stakeholders Theory

Brand building is on an evolutionary process (Aoun & Tournois, 2015). It embodied multiple approaches expressing its maturity level and interplay with the changes in the environment. In the beginning, brand building strategies were dominated by the economic (linear communication and traditional mix-marketing) and the identity approach (one unified identity). In the mid-nineties, the consumer-based approach (e.g. Keller and Aaker models), the personality approach (personality traits of brands), and the relational approach (partnership) characterized brand building strategies. However, the start of the new millennium has witnessed an emergence of community approach (relational approach associated with social perspective) and the cultural approach. Since that time, the literature has noticed an increasing acknowledgement of multiple stakeholders' role in brand building; whether in the case of primary stakeholder (Khan & Ede, 2009) or secondary (Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

Without a doubt, the brand building process requires interaction between both stakeholders (primary and secondary) (Gregory, 2007; Merrilees, Miller & Herington, 2012). Their significance depends on their engagement, commitment (Raki & Shakur, 2018b), and the context (Hankinson, 2001). In the context of SMEs operating in the B2B markets, there are limited applications of the concept of stakeholders (e.g., Jones, 2005; Roper & Davies, 2007; Balmer, 2008; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018) even though stakeholders are dynamic contributors to brand building process (Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). Past studies have focued on branding from primary stakeholders such as customers (e.g, Jones, 2005), and employees (e.g, Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). Meanwhile, secondary stakeholders are mostly investigated in place branding (e.g, Henninger, Foster, Alevizou & Frohlich, 2016). Besides, even though previous works have proposed stakeholder brand value models (e.g, Jones, 2005; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017), these models did not examine how the stakeholders create the brand value in an interchanging environment where secondary stakeholder play an important role.

2.5.3 Interaction between Emerging-Markets SMEs and Stakeholders Theory

Stakeholder theory is still at the infant stage, despite the increasing level of interest from professional marketers and academics (Driessen, Kok & Hillebrand, 2013; Kull, Mena & Korschun, 2016). In SMEs context, it is believed that successful SMEs function within an ecosystem. With this in mind, SMEs should develop strategic objectives by taking into account the ecosystem. Thus, SMEs should identify the key stakeholders (primary and secondary) impacting their business growth. For instance, the Malaysian government launched in November 2017 with Alibaba (a giant online platform), Malaysia's Digital Free Trade Zone (DFTZ); where this digital platform aims to facilitate trade (Yean, 2018).

In this situation, trader of SMEs should open themselves up and embrace the new business wave that sooner or later will influence their business. Other than that, they should identify the key stakeholders of DFTZ (e.g., government agencies, e-marketers), and communicate with their strategic partners (primary and secondary) to undertake strategic decision-making. The process of engaging stakeholders in decision-making occurs through dialogue and making stakeholders participating in business management (Manetti, 2011). However, limited studies have addressed stakeholder engagement in decision-making. Freeman et al. (2010) argued that stakeholder theory is less applied in smaller firms which explains the call to study stakeholder management practices in such settings. Also, several scholars claimed an urgent need to undertake studies explaining business models in emerging markets (e.g., Peng, Wang & Jiang, 2008; Sartor & Beamish, 2014).

As a whole, the interaction between B2B branding and stakeholder theory, and the interaction between emerging-markets SMEs and stakeholder theory have led to the emergence of the theoretical gap, which this study aimed to fill. The theoretical gap reflects the need for studying B2B brands from stakeholder theory lens. In fact, previous studies have focused on studying B2B brands from a primary stakeholders perspective, mainly managers and employees even though branding literature has moved from customer approach to stakeholder approach since 2000s (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009). Also, the particularities of B2B context and the evolving logic of branding literature whereby the brand value is co-created and continuously shaped through network relationships of multiple stakeholders (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Kaufmann, Loureiro & Manarioti, 2016; Pathak & Pathak-Shelat, 2017) should be considered.

2.5.4 Focus of the Study: Interaction between all Three-Circles

The focus of the study occurs between the three circles as illustared in Figure 2.6 earlier. Each interaction has generated a related knowledge gap explained in the subsections above. In this respect, the interaction between all three circles has led to the formulaton of the research questions described below.

Formulation of Research Questions

Multiple strategic orientations are complementary (Hakala, 2011) and could affect the development of B2B brand equity in SMEs setting (Glynn, 2012; Reijonen et al., 2015; Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca, 2016; Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018). For example, Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan and Merrilees (2018) tested on 250 Finnish SMEs of the impact of the brand, market, and entrepreneurship orientations on brand equity. The results demonstrated that unlike market orientation, brand and entrepreneurial orientations have a positive impact on brand equity. In this respect, building a strong brand is a sizeable success trigger for B2B (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Reijonen et al., 2015; Hirvonen, Laukkanen & Salo, 2016; Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir & Zhu, 2016). However, emerging-markets SMEs face negative brands association and fierce competition (Batra et al., 2000; Herstein, Berger & Jaffe, 2014; Tanusondjaja et al., 2015). Therefore, emerging-markets SMEs extend their strategic orientations and look for external supports such as the government.

Furthermore, B2B brands are less researched compared to B2C brands (Koporčić, Tolušić & Rešetar, 2017), and limited studies have been conducted on SMEs perspectives compared to large organisations (e.g. Centeno, Hart & Dinnie, 2013; Reijonen et al., 2014). As such, B2B managers are left with minimal frameworks for guided directions (Leek & Christodoulies, 2011). Besides, past studies made no indication of the nature of SMEs' subject of investigation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate branding best practices by

SMEs operating in the B2B industry which have benefited from governmental supports by asking:

RQ1: How B2B SMEs recipients of government support build and manage their brands?

Moreover, past studies have suggested taking into consideration stakeholder theory in the brand building process (e.g., Merrilees, Miller & Herington, 2012; Raki & Shakur, 2018b) since the engagement of multiple stakeholders is an essential driver for value creation (Freeman et al., 2010). Additionally, Freeman et al. (2010) call for more studies and practical frameworks on how firms balance stakeholder interests. In the Malaysian context, the government provides a specific branding programme under the name of 'National Mark of Malaysian Brand' in order to enhance branding among the participants SMEs and improve the visibility of Malaysian brand overseas (Tamyez, Nor & Mohamad, 2016). However, even though limited authors have mentioned the importance of this programme (e.g., Tamyez, Nor & Mohamad, 2016); no studies tackling this programme have been conducted before. Therefore, this study includes a secondary stakeholder (government) into the inquiry of the brand building process to address the question:

RQ2: Do the government SMEs development programmes lead to the enhancement of the brand performance of the participant SMEs?

2.6 The Conceptual Framework

Every researcher should identify a conceptual or a theoretical framework depending on the nature of the study. Hence, a conceptual framework is *"an end result of bringing together a number of related concepts to explain or predict a given event or give a broader* *understanding of the phenomenon of interest – or simply, of a research problem"* (Imenda, 2014, p. 189). In contrast, a theoretical framework is "*a structure that guides research by relying on a formal theory [...] constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships*" (Eisenhart, 1991, p. 205). Besides, Imenda (2014) argued that the theoretical framework is mainly located in the quantitative paradigm, and its applicability is beyond the scope of the study. On the contrary, the conceptual framework is located in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approach and its application are limited to the scope of the study. In this respect, the review of the literature and the research gaps highlighted above has led to the development of an initial conceptual framework, as illustrated in Figure 2.7, to address the research objectives and to guide the research.

Figure 2.7: Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in the stakeholder theory. This approach indicates that brands are part of a dynamic social process (Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie, 2014), whereby the brand value is co-created and continuously shaped through network relationships of multiple stakeholders (Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Kaufmann, Loureiro & Manarioti, 2016; Pathak & Pathak-Shelat, 2017; Freeman, Harrison &

Zyglidopoulos, 2018). In regard to B2B branding, B2B branding field is dominated by corporate brands (Baumgarth, 2010) and is regarded as a relational process that occurs through interpersonal interfaces which leads to the development of the corporate identity and reputation (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2016; Törmälä & Gyrd-Jones, 2017; Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). In turn, corporate brand does not only target customers but also other stakeholders (Daly & Moloney, 2004; Saraniemi & Ahonen, 2004). As such, this framework assumes that B2B brands are developed through the engagement of the SME (the blue area) and the secondary stakeholder (i.e. government) (the purple area). A secondary stakeholder refers to the entity or person who can influence the firm such as government (Freeman, Harrison & Wicks, 2007).

Consequently, this study selected government as the secondary stakeholder because the government can influence the competitiveness of the firm (Porter, 1990). In fact, the policy makers provide supporting system to the SME sector to make it more competitive as the SME sector plays an important role in the growth of economies. The supports include providing brand enhancement programme such as the programme offered by the Malaysian government under the name of "National Mark of Malaysian Brand".

2.7 Summary

In summary, this chapter reviewed the literature critically in three domains of research (emerging-markets SMEs, B2B brands, and stakeholder theory). This critical review sheds light on three relevant research gaps and has led to the proposition of an initial conceptual framework to address the research objectives and guide the research. The next chapter will explain the methodology undertaken to fill these research gaps.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview

This chapter exposes the procedures adopted to answer the research questions highlighted in Chapter 1. Thus, this chapter introduces the research paradigm underpinning this study in Section 3.2, whilst the research design is exposed in Section 3.3.

3.2 Research Paradigm

Research is a way of thinking (Kumar, 2011), led by a worldview or a set of beliefs known as a paradigm or blueprint, where the researcher holds a broad view about the nature of the research (Creswell, 2009). Paradigm carries the definition of a "*basic belief system based on ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions*" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). Meanwhile, business research is a multi-disciplinary field of study where a variety of research strategies is adopted in guiding a research inquiry. However, two traditional schools of thoughts are dominating the research field: (1) positivism and (2) constructivism.

Positivism is identified as a "*scientific method*" or "*doing science research*" (Creswell, 2009, p. 6). It is associated with empirical testing where research is conducted objectively and value-free (Keele, 2010). In contrast, constructivism is known as "*naturalistic inquiry*" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105), where the researcher investigates meaning and explanation (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). In this case, the research is subjective, and value bound (Keele, 2010). The following sections will shed light on the research blueprint (ontology, epistemology, and methodology) from positivism and constructivism standpoint leading to the formulation of the research paradigm of this study.

3.2.1 Ontological Stance

Ontology "*comes from the Greek word meaning to be or exist*" (Cann, 1993, p. 39). Therefore, ontology deals with the nature of reality (Krauss, 2005; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009) and what can be known about it (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). On one hand, positivists believe in a single reality. They suggest that reality exists externally to social entities (Krauss, 2005; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009) beliefs, and understanding (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). In other terms, the researcher and the participants are independent entities. Those social entities should be treated in the same manner as physical phenomena are treated by scientists (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). On the other hand, constructivists reject what the positivist school suggests (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In this sense, constructivists embrace the idea of multiple realities (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013) because the social phenomenon is created from the perceptions of social actors (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009) and that the reality resides in the human mind (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013).

3.2.2 Epistemological Stance

Originated from the Greek term episteme (Krauss, 2005), epistemology is a branch of philosophy that deals with the acquisition of knowledge (Creswell, 2009; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013), and what is accepted as knowledge in a field of study.

In other terms, how do we know what we know? (Creswell, 2009). Hence, positivism and interpretivism are the main epistemological standpoints (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). According to positivists, science is "*seen as the way to get at the truth*" and "*the world and the universe are deterministic, they operate by laws of cause and effec*t" (Krauss, 2005, p. 3) and law-like uniformities (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). Therefore, epistemology employs deductive reasoning to formulate, test propositions and hypothesis through the use of a logical process (Krauss, 2005; Greener, 2008).

In contrast, interpretivism describes what is necessary for the researcher to understand the divergence between humans as social actors (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009). Therefore, an interpretivist has to explain social phenomena based on a different level of meanings rather than just cause and effect (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). Unlike positivists, the interpretivists use inductive approach; which begins with an investigation of the focus of the study (Greener, 2008); then generating the theory from the data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Greener, 2008).

3.2.3 Methodological Stance

The above ontological and epistemological stances are translated into methodological strategies. According to Greener (2008), the research paradigm affects the choice of the methodology and consequently, the methods. Hence, the methodology is the strategy that is related to the choice of methods to generate research outcomes. Two traditional methodologies are distinguished: quantitative and qualitative. In business research, researchers use both approaches, whether separately or combined.

On the one hand, quantitative research is derived from the positivist paradigm. It is related to deduction and hypothesis testing (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Greener, 2008). On the other hand, qualitative research is the result from constructivist ontology and epistemology in which is claimed that there is no single reality (Krauss, 2005). Meanwhile, before starting the research, the researcher should indicate the components of the research paradigm and ensure that they are in alignment with the research questions and objectives. Thus, the next section will explain the adopted research paradigm for this study.

3.2.4 Formulating the Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

A research paradigm is a set of beliefs that governs and guides an inquiry. It is composed of ontological and epistemological stances. These philosophical worldviews affect the methodology directly. Hence, the research methods cover the research. In fact, choosing the research paradigm which is in line with the research questions is a relevant aspect of a research (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). Ontologically, this study adopts a constructivism paradigm which claims that reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), and focuses on the meaning-making in the individual’s mind (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2000). In fact, in line with the literature review, constructivist research considers that brands are complex and dynamic social interaction between internal and external stakeholders (Melewar, Gotsi & Andriopoulos, 2012); whereby external stakeholders have become significant and influential (Antorini & Andersen, 2005). Moreover, based on the overall aim of the study, two main stakeholders (brand owners/managers and government) are the focus of this research in order to explore the specific meaning-making in their individual minds.

Epistemologically, the reality depends on the context of the interviewees. Therefore, in order to gain knowledge, this study used interpretivism, which is associated with inductive reasoning (epistemology). In other words, the researcher interacts and affects the reality under exploration (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). Meanwhile, methodologically, this study adopted a qualitative inquiry for five reasons below:

- Shaw and Gould (2001) argued that qualitative research is interpretive, which is in concordance with the paradigm of the study.
- Llewellyn, Elliott, Shapiro, Hardy and Firth-Cozens (1988) stated that the fundamental purpose in qualitative research is to understand an event, process or a situation in a great deal of depth, which is the real aim behind this study.
- The literature review highlighted the early phase of branding research arena (Hirvonen, Laukkanen & Salo, 2016), and that more qualitative researches on B2B branding in SMEs are recommended (e.g. Centeno, Hart & Dinnie, 2013).
- Qualitative methods allow more significant interaction between the researcher and the study participants with open-ended questions or less formal relationships in order to benefit from the flexibility of the research design of a qualitative inquiry.
- Quantitative and mixed-method approaches are not suitable for this study. On one hand, quantitative is frequently used for making propositions and hypothesis that are built upon literature review, and then tested instead of exploring and understanding a business issue. On the other hand, mixed methods are time and cost consuming in designing and implementing the research compared to a qualitative inquiry. Besides, this research has no

intention to generalise the findings by using quantitative or mixed methods; it aims to propose a suitable B2B brand management framework instead, as stated in the objectives of the research (refer to Chapter 1 – Section 1.5).

3.2.5 Adoption of the Case Study

Following the adopted research paradigm elaborated earlier in Section 3.2.4 (Interpretivism), the research design of this study is exploratory. In other words, this study uses exploratory research to gain new insights on B2B branding from the stakeholders' perspective. In turn, research design "*reflects decisions about the priority being given to a range of dimensions of the research process*" (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 40). In simpler term, the research design is the process that the research undergo to collect information in a structured and approved method. Methods are, consequently, the techniques and procedures used to collect and analyse the data (Crotty, 1998). These techniques and procedures should be compatible with a pre-determined methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In this respect, since qualitative is the adopted methodology for this study, multiple techniques are employed in a qualitative approach; the most common ones are:

- Ethnography is originated from anthropology (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009). It is "*a process that describes and interprets social expressions between people and groups*" Berg (2001, p. 134). Yin (2011) argued that ethnography comprises of a real-world setting. Thus, according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhil (2009), the researcher may need to build a trusting relationship with participants and subsequently, build strategies to deal with the new research environment.

- Action research is a qualitative approach where the researcher assumes an action role (Yin, 2011). It involves a close and active collaboration between participants and researchers (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009; Yin, 2011)
- Observation involves recording, describing, analysing, and interpreting people's behaviour (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009). It requires the researcher to locate himself in the context of being observed (Yin, 2011).
- Case study comprises of "*the empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, using multiple sources of evidence*" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009, p. 588) to allow the investigator to adequately understand how the specific researched phenomenon operates or functions (Berg, 2001).

However, this study adopted a case study as a qualitative technique to collect data for three reasons: First, case study is a qualitative technique which allows the investigator to examine a phenomenon, gather data in-depth from multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2009), and to frame a general understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2003). Second, the case study focuses on 'How-type' of questions (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008), which is the case of the research question of this study (refer to Chapter 1- Section 1.4). Third, B2B branding in SMEs is still insufficiently researched as exposed by scholars such as Hirvonen, Laukkanen and Salo (2016). In this sense, this field of research calls for more in-depth studies allowing more understanding of the complex nature of B2B branding.

Forth, the case study was broadly employed in studying branding of SMEs (e.g., Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Horan, O'Dwyer & Tiernan, 2011; Mitchell, Hutchinson & Bishop, 2012).

3.3 Case Study Research Design

According to Yazan (2015), three prominent methodologists have dominated the case study method research, namely Stake (1995), Merriam (1998), and Yin (2003). In fact, these three authors have provided processes to follow when conducting case study research (Creswell, Hanson, Plano & Morales, 2007). Stake (1995) did not propose any particular design for a case study and argued for a more flexible one (Yazan, 2015). However, Yin (2003, p. 22) suggested five important components of a case research design, namely (1), research question, (2) Propositions, if any, (3) unit(s) of analysis, (4) the logic linking the data to the propositional, and (5) the criteria for interpreting for findings. Meanwhile, Merriam's (1998) approach is based on the work of Yin and Stake, and defines five steps of research design: (1) conducting literature review, (2) constructing a theoretical framework, (3) identifying a research problem, (4) crafting and sharpening research questions, and (5) selecting the sample (Yazan, 2015, p. 149).

In this respect, based on the suggestions of Yin (2003) and Merriam (1998), the case study design of this study covers the following steps:

- Conducting literature review
- Constructing a theoretical framework
- Identifying a research problem
- Crafting and sharpening research questions
- Selecting the unit of analysis

- Collecting data
- Analysing data
- Assuring research quality

However, other aspects of this research such as the literature review and theoretical framework were elucidated in Chapter 2. At the same time, the research problem and questions were covered in Chapter 1. The remaining steps are explained below.

3.3.1 Units of Analysis

This third component is related to defining which case is under investigation. A case can be an individual, a group of individuals, event, programs, or institutions (Yin, 2002). Also, a case study can be single or a combination of multiple cases (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009). In this respect, based on the research objectives, this study distinguishes two units of analysis whereby each unit covers multiple case studies:

- Unit of analysis 1: Government agencies in charge of SMEs development programmes
- Unit of analysis 2: The Malaysian SMEs winners of the 'National Mark of Malaysian Brand' programme

Multiple-case studies are more suitable than a single-case study. First, this study involves exploring branding from stakeholder's perspectives (SMEs and government). Second, multiple-case designs are stronger than single case (Yin, 2002) because the findings of the cases can be generalised (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhil, 2009). However, Yin (2002, p. 59) argued that "*the rationale for multiple-case designs derives directly from* *your understanding of literal and theoretical replications"*. As such, replication replaces sampling logic. Ridder (2017, p. 287) stated that "*in the case of literal replication, cases are selected to predict similar results. In the case of theoretical replication, cases are selected to predict contrasting results but for theoretical reasons".* Meanwhile, both unit of analysis were selected purposefully. In fact, purposeful selection provides cases with rich information for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). However, the respondents were chosen conveniently based on the availability of the respondents.

3.3.1.1 Unit of Analysis 1

Concerning the first unit of analysis, this study selected three agencies in charge of SME development programmes, namely, MATRADE, SME Corp Malaysia, and SIRIM QAS. SME Corp Malaysia is a central coordinating agency since 2009, and it is under the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development Malaysia (MED). SME Corp Malaysia was established in 1996 under the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) to enhance the development of Malaysian SMEs. The missions of SME Corp Malaysia comprise of:

- Framing and implementing the SME development programmes across all related Ministries and Agencies
- Serving as the reference centre for research and data dissemination.
- Providing business advisory services for SMEs in Malaysia
- Taking charge of the Secretariat of the National SME Development Council (NSDC) chaired by the Prime Minister of Malaysia

SIRIM QAS International Sdn. Bhd. is a Malaysian leading certification, inspection and testing body, with an ambition to reach the same position as the Asian level by 2020. It was created as a wholly-owned subsidiary of the SIRIM Group in March 1997 to facilitate the access to markets for their customers. Besides, SIRIM QAS International is nationally and internationally accredited and recognised, as the certification, inspection, and testing services are conducted according to international standards. For instance, this institution is recognised by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) to certify the following management systems:

- ISO 9001 Quality Management System
- ISO 14001 Environmental Management System
- ISO/IEC 27001 Information Security Management System
- ISO 13485 Quality Management System for Medical Devices.

MATRADE is functioning within the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI). It was established in March 1993. MATRADE is considered as Malaysia's national trade promotion and marketing agency. It aims to assist firms (i.e. SME and Non-SME) to enter international markets. It has five regional offices located in Eastern, Northern, Southern, Sabah, and Sarawak, and multiple overseas offices covering the five continents.

These agencies were selected as the unit of analysis for three reasons. First, Malaysia's 2020 vision to achieve an industrialized nation has put SMEs at the central point of MITI for the purpose of enhancing Malaysian SMEs competitiveness. Furthermore, MITI aims to make SMEs contribute to GDP up to 41% by 2020 instead of

32% in 2010. Same goes to employment and exports with ambitious targets as follows: 62% and 25% (Hamzah, 2012). To achieve these goals, many programs have been developed and executed by SME Corp, SIRIM QAS, and MATARDE. Therefore, these implementing agencies were contacted as they have long experience in dealing with SMEs. Thus, they understand all the challenges and opportunities faced by SMEs. Second, the three agencies provide marketing and branding programs to help SMEs in promoting their products and services. Concerning SME brand development programme, SME Corp Malaysia, in collaboration with SIRIM QAS; provides the 'National Mark of Malaysian Brand' certification scheme in. This program aims to enhance the visibility of Malaysian products and services domestically and internationally.

3.3.1.2 Unit of Analysis 2

Concerning the second unit of analysis, eight SMEs were selected following two criteria of selection: (1) an SME must still have the certificate, and (2) an SME must be operating in the B2B industry. In this sense, the SMEs winners of the 'National Mark of the Malaysian Brand' were designated as the second unit of analysis, mainly because this category of SMEs went through a rigorous auditing procedure in order to be awarded the 'National Mark of the Malaysia Brand' certification. The certification process audits all their internal processes, including branding. In fact, winners of the National branding award are more likely to be able to tell brand success stories than those firms which failed to achieve an award. Meanwhile, the choice of the B2B industry is motivated by the need to filll the gap identified in the literature review; where minimal studies were undertaken in the B2B settings. The respondents are brand owners and managers.

The choice of this category of SMEs is first driven by the research framework underpinning this study. In fact, this type of SMEs has joined SME development programme offered by the government to enhance their brands. In this sense, branding is influenced by an external stakeholder which is the government. Second, these SMEs have gone under a rigorous certification process that audits their branding process; which ensures that these SMEs do have a branding process and saves time in looking for the appropriate sample of SMEs with branding process amongst the large number of the SMEs population in Malaysia (a total 645,136 SMEs). Third, this type of SMEs is run by managers who are brand-oriented as reported by SME Corp (Raki & Shakur, 2018a). Being brand-oriented signifies that SMEs put their branding at the top of their management and focus on generating added values for their brands (Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong & Hossain, 2016). Besides, those managers have the knowledge and expertise needed for this study since they have succeeded in obtaining the certificate of the 'National Mark of the Malaysian Brand' scheme. Fourth, prior researches on SMEs were with no specific criterion except for the industry. This inquiry is among the limited studies to take into consideration the successful branding stories of the awarded SMEs operating in the B2B sector. In fact, success stories influence positively other businesses.

Furthermore, as per January 2019, the recipients of the National Mark accounted 126 firms, including four non-SMEs. As described in Table 5.1, 20 SMEs were operating in the service sector, and 102 SMEs were operating in manufacturing. The manufacturing sector dominated the winning platform (almost 84 per cent) with significant industries such as food and beverages, and electrical & electronics. While the service sector accounted 22 per cent of the winners mainly from Kuala Lumpur. Futhermore, Selangor was the leading state regarding the numbers of the awarded SMEs as it was accounted for approximately 38 per cent of the recipients from both sectors. Moreover, approximately 96 per cent of the awarded SMEs were owned by men versus 4 per cent owned by women. Besides, the majority of businesses were operating in the B2B industry.

This study has sought to diversify the location and the sector where SMEs are operating to achieve triangulation in the research. As illustrated in Table 3.1, all the recipients of the Malaysian Brand are located in the West Peninsular of Malaysia. So far, no recipients come from the Eastern part of Malaysia: Sarawak or Sabah. Therefore, this study focused on collecting data from West Peninsular. Also, a detailed description of the SMEs is presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.1: Distribution of the Recipient SMEs by State and Sector

	Service	**Manufacturing**	**Total**
Johor	3	15	18
Kedah	2	7	9
Kelantan	-	1	1
Kuala Lumpur	6	6	12
Melaka	-	7	7
Negeri Sembilan	-	3	3
Perak	-	8	8
Penang	4	14	18
Selangor	5	41	46
Total	20	102	122

Company A was established in 1991 and is located in Kuala Lumpur. It started as a trader of lubricants, a joint-venture with an international partner. After the termination of the partnership, they transformed their business into a manufacturer of lubricants. They achieved four stars and kept working hard to reach five stars. They received the National Mark of Malaysian Brand award in 2012.

Company B was founded in 1998 as a consulting engineering company and services provider. In 2005, they expanded their business into manufacturing and refurbishment of mechanical seals. With 20 years of existence, company B has been able to achieve outstanding recognition from the public and private sector. Today, company B is a 'five stars' SME and very proud of this significant achievement, such as the National Mark of Malaysian Brand award in 2014. However, the turning point for company B was the partnership with a giant domestic partner which provides support to local small businesses.

Company C was established in the late nighties as beverages distributor under a different name by a 23 years old passionate and ambitious man. In 2002, it became a beverage manufacturer and significant player in the industry as they were the first to introduce ice-blended drinks. Company C is an SME and was the first company to be approached by the government to join the programme; because company C has built a significant reputation as a corruption-free company. They received the National Mark National Mark of Malaysian Brand award in 2010.

Table 3.2: Description of the Participant SMEs

SME	Year of Establishment	Year of Certification	SCORE	Owner's Gender	Sector	State
A	1991	2012	4 stars	Female	Lubricants	Kuala Lumpur
B	1998	2014	5 stars	Male	Mechanical Seals	Kuala Lumpur
C	2002	2010	4 stars	Male	Food & Beverage	Selangor
D	1989	2017	4 stars	Male	Food & Beverage	Penang
E	1993	2017	5 stars	Male	Electrical & Electronic	Selangor
F	2003	2015	3 stars	Male	Service	Penang
G	2010	2017	4 stars	Male	Service	Kuala Lumpur
H	1990	2014	3 stars	Male	Furnishing & Hardware	Selangor

Company D was founded in 1987 as a small food repacking business with five employees within a small residential house. In 1997, they developed into a medium-sized manufacturer of premixed general. Today, the firm is a leading confectionery producer with 12,000 square feet establishment and ‘four stars’ SCORE. Company D received National Mark of Malaysian Brand award in 2017.

Company E was founded in 1993 as a small business operating in electronics and electrics. Today, the company has a 110,000 square foot factory. The past 6 to 7 years ago, it is known for the introduction of LED lighting in Malaysia. Before that, the industry uses conditional lighting, which is characterised by lower and stagnant technology. The advent of LED lighting has revolutionised the industry and has made company E innovation-oriented. They received the National Mark of Malaysian Brand award in 2017.

Company F started as a sole proprietor in 2003. Progressively, the sole proprietor was upgraded to incorporate (Sdn.Bhd.) in 2006. The National Mark of Malaysian Brand award was received in 2015. The firm has three stars SCORE and has ambitious plans to reach five stars SCORE.

Company G was established in 2010 as a small company with only five to six employees. However, the founder’s passion for the industry has begun since 1979. Achieving a SCORE of four stars, company G received the National Mark of Malaysian Brand award in 2017.

Company H has three stars SCORE and was awarded the National Mark of Malaysian Brand in 2014. With a humble beginning, it started as a trading company. In 1994, it transformed its business into a manufacturer of laboratory services.

3.3.2 Data Collection Procedure

Preceding data collection, the type of data (primary data and secondary data) to be collected should be determined. Primary data refers to *"information obtained first-hand by the researcher on the variables of interest for the specific purpose of the study. Secondary data refer to information gathered from sources already existing*" (Sekaran, 2003, p. 219). Indeed, primary data can be gathered in many ways (e.g., interviews, surveys, and observations). However, it is often time and resources consuming. On the contrary, secondary data are easily accessible and relatively inexpensive as compared to primary data since it has already been collected. It can be easily obtained from the literature, government, and institutions (e.g., media and NGOs).

In this respect, this study uses both secondary and primary data. Secondary data was used first to understand the participants' environment in order to formulate the questions of the interviews. Second, secondary data was used to support the findings. As such, the primary data comprises of key informants for each case study, whilst secondary data covers the government websites, documents concerning brand development programs, and the websites of SMEs. Websites are very important as they provide detailed information about the case studies. However, for primary data, this study has sought to use semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions to permit free expression of thoughts, ideas, and recommendations from participants of both categories (government and SMEs). In this respect, both units of analysis were selected purposely before data collection. In fact, Merriam (1998, p. 66) suggested that "*purposive or purposeful sampling usually occurs before the data are gathered*".

Meanwhile, as illustrated in Figure 3.1, this study covers two phases: preliminary and primary study. The aim of this preliminary study is divided into three categories. First, it attempts to get a broad understanding of the phenomena under-research. Second, it aims to shape the course of the study through refining the research purpose, questions and objectives. Third, it intends to identify the scope of the study, and consequently, select the suitable sample of SMEs for the study.

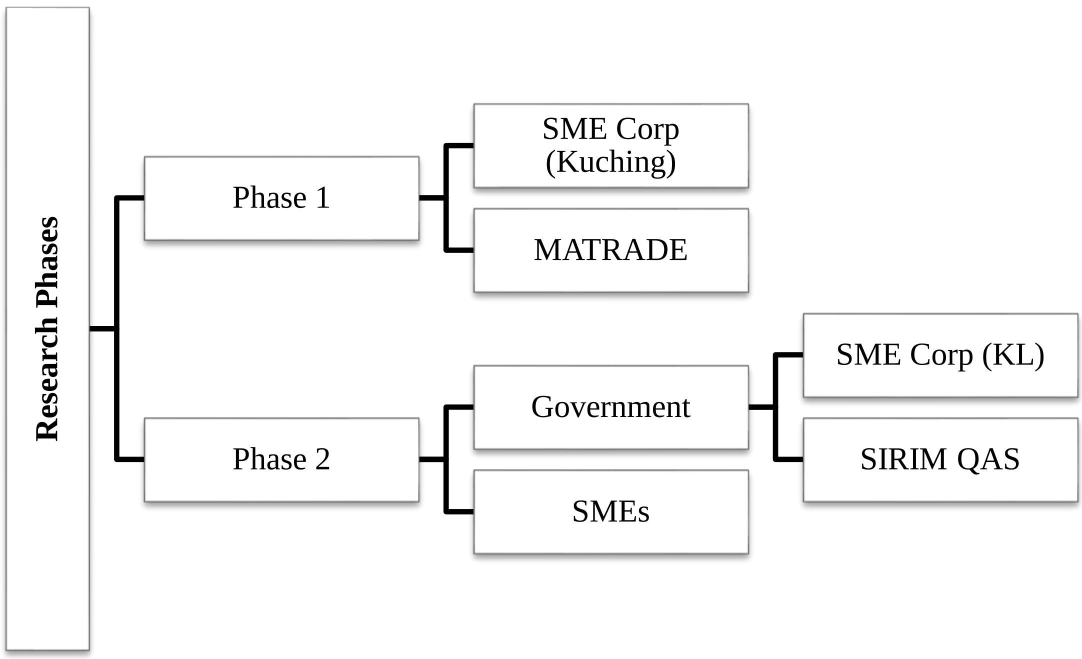

Figure 3.1: Research Phases

3.3.2.1 Data Collection from Phase 1

Initially, MATRADE and SME Corp were contacted through emails to get an interview appointment as illustrated in Table 3.3. The emails contained details about the research such as the research topic, the objective of the research, and the questions of the interview. Meanwhile, the first interview took 70 minutes; while the second interview lasted around 90 minutes.

Table 3.3: Details of the Interviews with the Government Agencies in Phase 1

Agency			**Interview**		
Organisation	Location	Informant	Type	Date	Duration
MATRADE	Kuching	Director	Face-to-face	17/06/2018	70′
SME Corp	Kuching	Director	Face-to-face	24/06/2016	90′

The mobile phone was used as a recording device for the entire session for the first interview, while only note-taking was permitted for the second interview. The primary outcomes from Phase One have led to the framing of the topic of the study and narrowing down the scope of the study to the SMEs winners of the 'National Mark of the Malaysian Brand' scheme. In fact, past studies argued that multiple stakeholders play a significant role in brand building (Merrilees, Miller & Herington, 2012) as co-creators of brand meaning (Payne, Storbacka, Frow & Knox, 2009; Hatch & Schultz, 2010). In the case of this study, the co-creators of brands are the recipients of SMEs and the government, which plays a crucial secondary stakeholder through offering branding development programs. Thus, the theory of stakeholder was confirmed as the theoretical lens underpinning this study to deeply explain the engagement of the government in creating competitive advantage for the SME sector.

3.3.2.2 Data Collection from Phase 2

After framing the research topic and the theory underpinning the study, the purpose of this phase was to investigate branding from the perspective of two stakeholders: brand owners or managers and the government as the secondary stakeholder. Hence, data collection from this phase consists of two key stages: collecting data from government and collecting data from SMEs. In doing so, this phase addresses RQ1 and RQ2 by examining the branding process and assessing the impact of government supporting programmes on the performance of B2B brands. In regard to data collection from the government, data were collected from SME Corp Malaysia (KL) and SIRIM QAS as described in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4: Details of the Interviews with the Government Agencies in Phase 2

Agency			**Interview**		
Organisation	Location	Informant	Type	Date	Duration
SME Corp	Kuala Lumpur	Manager at Business Development Division	Face-to-face	05/06/2018	47′
			Email	11/08/2018	-
SIRIM QAS	Selangor	Manager of Sales and Business Development at the Management System Certification Department	Phone	05/06/2018	20′19″
			Email	06/06/2018	-

Concerning SME Corp Malaysia (KL), the researcher was able to have a preliminary conversation with the person in charge of the branding program who recommended the researcher to contact a key informant from SIRIM QAS. However, a protocol had to be respected. A formal letter was sent to headquarter to get the approval of interviewing the general director. After that, the manager of the program was able to email the answers with the attached document containing rich information about the program. Meanwhile, regarding SIRIM QAS, the researcher called the person in charge of the certification process as advised by SME Corp manager. During the phone conversation, the researcher was able to explain the research project and get an overview of the program. After that, detailed answers were emailed with the documents related to the certification. Both conversations (face-to-face and phone) were meaningful to the researcher who decided to accept emails as interview technique, in respect of the availability and the engagement of the willing participant.

Meanwhile, the interview questions were framed around the National Mark of Malaysian Brand and its impact on the brand performance of the participant SMEs to answer RQ2 (refer to Appendix A). The interview questions were formed based on the review of the literature and the theories underpinning the study. The questions were presented in a structured way to guarantee the flow of the conversation (see Appendix B) and were designed to answer RQ2. In other words, the questions aimed to investigate the impact of the government programmes on the brand performance of the participant SMEs.

Concerning collecting data from SMEs, data was collected to gain practical insights on branding activities using semi-structured interviews. The companies were chosen from diverse subsectors to assure a proper triangulation in the data collection. However, the common aspect is being winners of “The National Mark of the Malaysian Brand” award. As presented in Table 3.5, four interviews were conducted face-to-face in the respondents' headquarters.

Table 3.5: Description of the Interview with the SMEs

Company			Interview		
SME	**Location**	**Informant**	**Date**	**Type**	**Duration**
A	Kuala Lumpur	Business manager	29/01/2018	Face-to-face	21′54″
B	Kuala Lumpur	Business manager	30/01/2018	Face-to-face	33′36″
C	Selangor	Owner/ General manager	13/02/2018	Face-to-face	56′58″
D	Penang	Business manager	07/03/2018	Phone	20′05″
E	Selangor	Factory Manager	19/03/2018	Face-to-face	33′51″
F	Penang	Owner/ General manager	19/03/2018	Phone	27′17″
G	Kuala Lumpur	Business manager	28/03/3018	Phone	39′27″
H	Selangor	Owner/ General manager	22/03/2018	Email	-

Three interviews were undertaken by phone, and one interview was carried out by email. The last interview was accepted to be conducted by email in respect to the avaibility of the respondant. In fact, online communication such as emails allows the researcher to collect rich data from geographically dispersed interviewees (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; Walker,

2013) and overcome financial issues related to real time interviews (Walker, 2013). Also, Gibson (as cited in Hawkins, 2018) stated that emails allow participants to respond to email interview at their suitable time.

The interview questions were formed based on the review of the literature and the theories that underpin the study, and after an initial analysis of the website of SMEs which accepted the invitation to participate in the interview. The questions were presented in a structured way to guarantee the flow of the conversation (see Appendix A) and were designed to answer RQ1. Moreover, this study used interview protocol for both unit of analysis (see Appendix C) to ensure the coverage of all areas of interest. Also, the mobile phone was used as a recording device for the entire session, whether during face-to-face or phone calls interviews.

As reported in Table 3.3 and Table 3.4, data were collected in both phases of research through three different means: face-to-face, phone, and email. Face-to-face is the most used means of interviews followed by phone in qualitative research. In fact, face-to-face and phone interviews allow a mutual interaction between the researcher and the respondent. However, one hour of recorded data takes five to six hours to transcribe (Bryman, 2001). Thus, technology is progressively used to gather data efficiently, save time, and cost (Walker, 2013; Hawkins, 2018). In fact, Gibson stated that the data is effortlessly adapted to transcribed data (as cited in Hawkins, 2018). However, despite the perks of emails, this study only used email interviews three times according to the availability of the respondents in order to be able to capture the social cues of the interviews.

3.3.3 Analysing Data

The data analysis of the multiple case studies went through a four-step process, namely: (1) sorting the raw data, (2) transcribing the data, (3) selecting the coding method, and (4) coding the recorded data.

3.3.3.1 Data Sorting

The collected data are considered as raw data. However, the raw data should go through a classification process. This process consists of identifying what should be considered as recorded data. At this point, the researcher decided to consider interviews and field-notes as recorded data.

3.3.3.2 Transcription

Transcription consists of converting audio or image data to text (Davidson, 2009). It includes selective or verbatim transcription. Selective transcription entails transcribing structures which answer the research question (Houghton, Casey, Shaw & Murphy, 2013). However, this study undertook a verbatim transcription as it consists of transcribing every audible word from the recorded data to reduce the research bias. One editing format was adopted for all the transcribed audios (e.g. font: Times New Roman, font-size: 12 points and single spacing).

3.3.3.3 Selection of the Coding Method

Once data are sorted and transcribed, the researcher should identify what coding method suits the study. Coding consists of observing the phenomena, gathering information about the phenomena, and studying the phenomena in a way to detect common and different patterns (Seidel & Kelle, 1995). Coding is not a synonym of analysis; it is instead an essential aspect of it (Basit, 2003). Patton (2002) considered that every qualitative inquiry is unique, so does the analytical part of the study. However, research questions, objectives, and paradigm, impact the choice of coding method (Trede & Higgs, 2009; Saldaña, 2013). Thus, the researcher should determine which method of coding is suitable for the study.

Saldaña (2013) distinguished two types of research questions (RQ): Ontological RQ and Epistemological RQ. Ontological RQ deals with the reality of the participants to capture their experience (e.g., emotions, values). In contrast, epistemological RQ aims to get the knowledge and to understand the phenomena. In simpler words, epistemological RQ addresses the meaning behind the reality of the participants. In this respect, the primary research objective of this study is to explore B2B brand management in emerging markets SMEs from stakeholders' perspective, and consequently to develop a B2B Brand Management Framework. It was formulated based on the interpretivism research paradigm and was supported by two epistemological RQs (refer to Chapter 1 – Section 1.4). These RQs aimed to examine the brand building and management process of successful B2B SMEs and the impact of the government programme on their brand performance. Accordingly, the coding methods which are in alignment with epistemological RQ are: "*descriptive, process, initial, versus, evaluation, dramaturgical, domain and taxonomic, causation, and pattern coding, plus theming the data*" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 61).

3.3.3.4 Coding Process

The coding process of the current study went through three main stages to achieve the primary purpose of the study (refer to Chapter 1- Section 1.5). The three stages are (1) open coding, (2) selective coding, and (3) pattern coding. The first process of coding consists of assigning notes (codes) to a portion of text or paragraph to summarize the data and facilitate its understanding. This process is known as ‘open coding’. Meanwhile, the second process of coding entails selective coding. It was conducted to code similarities or differences, sequencing or frequency, and group them into categories.

The categories were used to form a broader understanding and explanations of what is going on. According to Richards and Morse (2007, p. 157) "*categorizing is how we get ‘up’ from the diversity of data to the shapes of the data, the sorts of things represented”*. Finally, pattern coding is used to allocate categories to concept and illustrate how these concepts are interrelated. The concepts are “*how we get up to more general, higher-level, and more abstract constructs*” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 157). The outcome of pattern coding leads to "*development of theory*" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 55). Meanwhile, each stage of the coding process was carried out through a set of coding methods described in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6: Description of the Coding Phases and Methods

Method		Description	Main Authors	Justification
STAGE I	Initial	It is an open-ended technique for a researcher's first review of the corpus	Glaser and Strauss (1967); Strauss (1987)	To start the coding process as it is an open coding method
	Process	It entails the utilization of "ing" form to indicate the action in the data	Bogdan and Biklen (2007); Charmaz (2002); Corbin and Strauss (2008)	To get broader ideas

Table 3.6 continued

	Descriptive	It summarises the essential idea of the corpus	Miles and Huberman (1994); Wolcott (1994)	To provide a categorised summary
STAGE II	Dramaturgical	It employs the terms and conventions of character as it seeks to reflect the participants' needs and wants	Feldman (1995); Berg (2001)	To explore the participants' experiences and actions
	Domain &Taxonomic	It is used to analyse, synthesize, and organize the data through the creation of patterns	McCurdy, Spradley and Shandy (2005)	To structure the data into categories and subcategories
STAGE III	Pattern	It entails grouping summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs	Miles and Huberman (1994)	To explain the data and to generate relevant themes from the data

Source: Adapted from Saldaña (2013)

3.3.4 Research Quality

Research quality is an important aspect of case study design. It covers research etchis, valitidy, and relibity.

3.3.4.1 Interview Interaction and Research Ethics

On the subject of the interaction during the interviews in both phases (phase 1 and phase 2), English was used as the main language because the researcher is a foreigner and does not master the Malay language. The informants were very welcoming by showing willingness and openness in answering the questions and guiding the researcher throughout the process. Nevertheless, any inquiry should abide to the research ethics. Thus, this research adopted UNIMAS Research Policy (version 8.0) edited by the Research and Innovation Management Centre (RIMC) in 2011. Besides, consent and confidentiality were considered during qualitative research as they are very crucial in research ethics (Richards & Schwartz, 2002).

In this respect, before interviews, every participant in the study has been freely consented to participate in the research. In other words, the respondent was informed about the nature of the research through consent form sent to participants by email and presented for those with whom the researcher had face-to-face interviews. This form described the aim of the research, the interview process, and confidentiality. A sample of the informed consent forms is provided in Appendix D. Confidentiality entails the protection of the participants' identity (King, Henderson & Stein, 1999). Hence, this study intends to keep anonymous the identity of the respondents and hold confidential the findings: only the supervisor, the examination committee and potential assistants; who would have access to the data. The data is protected in hard disk with a password.

3.3.4.2 Research Validity and Reliability

Marczyk, DeMatteo and Festinger (2005) stated that any inquiry aims to produce valid conclusions concerning the researched subject. Having accurate results in qualitative inquiry has long been regarded as central critic of quantitative researchers' argument, that qualitative is mainly interpretative and hence, subjective. Nevertheless, to ensure the quality of the research findings and reduce the bias in the qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln (1994) elaborated a parallel system to the quantitative validity system. Indeed, Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggested that 'trustworthiness' or 'credibility' corresponds to 'internal validity' in quantitative, 'transferability' is parallel to 'external validity', 'dependability' is comparable to 'reliability', and 'conformability' corresponds to 'objectivity' (Kumar, 2011). Therefore, this study adopted Guba and Lincoln (1994) framework to ensure accuracy and quality of the inquiry as illustrated in Table 3.7.

Credibility is used to ensure that the findings were right for the data. Quoting Trochim and Donnelly (2007, p. 149), "*credibility involves establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participant in the research*". Hence, this study has sought to achieve credibility through the use of triangulation, member checking, and peer-debriefing. Triangulation consists of employing multiple methods, sources, investigators, observations, and document analysis (Creswell, 2009). In this respect, this study referred to multiple sources of information (e.g. interviews and websites) and gathered data from three geography locations and six B2B sectors because errors during the interview can happen and influence the precision in the data gathering.

Table 3.7: Evaluation of the Research Quality

Research Criteria		Research Quality Techniques
Quantitative	Qualitative	
Internal Validity	Credibility	Triangulation Member checking Peer-debriefing
External Validity	Transferability	Interview protocol Database for SMEs Audit trail
Objectivity	Confirmability	Triangulation Peer-debriefing Recording interviews and verbatim transcription Audit trail
Reliability	Dependability	Triangulation Audit trail

Also, the diversification of the industry environment is motivated by the fact that the influence of business on a branding mechanism has not been studied in-depth, as stated by Strebinger (2014). Meanwhile, peer-debriefing implies to present the findings to peers for critical feedbacks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this sense, this study has sought to present the findings in four academic platforms, as illustrated in Table 3.8. The feedbacks were constructive and helped the researcher to enhance the quality of the data analysis (refer to Appendix A for more details on publications).

Table 3.8: Peer-debriefing

Conference	Year	Type of Research	Theme
1st BBRC	2016	Full Paper	Results of the preliminary study
2nd BBRC	2017	Abstract	Results of the literature review
3rd BBRC	2018	Poster	Results of the first stage of coding
8th IBBC	2018	Full paper	Results of the second stage of coding

Member checking involves the submission of the transcripts to the respondents to obtain their comments and feedback on the findings (Creswell, 2009). However, after transcribing the data, this study has sought to hire a research assistant for checking the transcription for two reasons. First, the assistant had to review the transcript in order to ensure their authenticity with the audio data. Second, not all the respondents answered on time when they were asked to check the transcripts. The assistant signed a non-disclosure form to protect the data (Refer to Appendix F).

Transferability refers to "*the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings*" (Kumar, 2011, p. 349). It involves having a well-described study that will enable the reader to determine whether the findings may apply to another context. However, this study makes no claims of transferability, but it provided a detailed description of steps to follow in order to achieve the research objectives explained in the sections above. Also, this study used interview protocol and built a database of SMEs to ease the sampling process.

In regard to confirmability, the findings should be grounded in the data, and they should not just be made up by the researcher. It is achieved through the use of triangulation, peer debriefing, and audit-trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Audit-trail consists of a detailed description of the research phases from the beginning to the results reporting as well as the availability of research records of impressions and personal reactions (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In this vein, this study recorded the interviews and used verbatim transcription to reduce the research bias. Also, this study employed triangulation and peer debriefing. Audit trail consisted of note-taking of the fieldwork and providing the interview questions (refer to Appendix A and B) and a detailed description of the steps of data collection and analysis (refer to sections above). Meanwhile, according to Trochim and Donnelly (as cited in Kumar, 2011, p. 185), dependability "*is concerned with whether we would obtain the same results if we could observe the same thing twice*." It comprises triangulation and audit-trail to make sure the reconstruction of evidence is made possible.

3.4 Summary

This chapter addressed the methodology adopted for this research, and the rationale behind such choice (e.g., ontology, epistemology). A qualitative approach was selected to collect the primary data in order to address the research questions using case study. Two units of analysis were selected: three government agencies and eight SMEs. The data were collected in two phases. Once data were collected, an analysis process was undertaken. The data analysis included data sorting, transcription of interviews, selection of the coding methods in concordance with research objectives and questions, and the coding process. The next chapter will expose the empirical findings from both units of analysis: the government and the SMEs.

\CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

4.1 Overview

This chapter presents the main empirical findings from the government and the SMEs. Section 4.2 exposes the data analysis of the study and the presentation of the themes. Section 4.3 depicts the emerged themes from the analysis of the interviews with the government, whilst Section 4.4 presents the findings from the interviews with the eight SMEs.

4.2 The Data Analysis and Presentation Process

The data analysis methods outlined in Chapter 3 was applied in the data analysis. In fact, the data analysis went through three stages: (1) open coding, (2) selective coding, and (3) pattern coding. Open coding is an initial stage consisting of going through the corpus of the interviews to generate codes. The emerged codes are organised into categories. An example of how the codes and categories were generated is displayed in Tables 4.1and 4.2.

Table 4.1: Example of Open and Selective Coding

	Transcripts	**Codes**	**Category**
Interview Question1	(What is your definition of a brand?) A brand is something that people can recognize your products and your goods	Recognizing products	BR

Codes were created and assigned to each interesting portion of the interview. As displayed on Tables 4.1, code like “Recognizing products” reflected the reason behind having a brand. Thus, was labelled as Category BR (referring to Brand). This procedure was used for each category and their corresponding codes as illustrated in Table 4.2. In fact, categories were generated through selective coding. Selective coding consisted of coding similarities or differences, sequencing or frequency, and assembling them into categories.

Table 4.2: Example of Categories for Three SMEs

	Example of SMEs		
Category	**A**	**B**	**E**
BR	Recognizing products	Representing the company	Image of the company

In total, 19 categories were generated (refer to Appendix G- List of Categories). At an initial stage and following the dramaturgical method, five categories were predetermined (attitude, emotion, objectives, obstacle, and tactics), whilst the remaining subthemes were generated after analysis. Once the categories were identified, a pattern coding was initiated. Pattern coding includes categorizing themes to summarise the categories. For example, category BR reflects Theme 1 from SMEs' findings. Thus, two themes were generated from the findings from the government and three themes were produced from the findings of the SMEs presented in subsections below.

4.3 Themes from the Government Interviews

The analysis of the interviews with the governing bodies of the National Mark of Malaysian Brand has led to the development of two major themes (see Table 4.3), namely (1) National Mark of the Malaysian Brand, and (2) the impact of the government programme on the brand performance of the recipient SMEs.

Table 4.3: Themes Developed from RQ2

Themes	Categories
Brand Orientation from Government Perspective	▪ SCORE ▪ Brand Orientation Typology
Impact of Government Programme on Brand Performance	▪ Presentation of the Programme ▪ Impact of the Programme

Theme 1 – Brand Orientation from the Perspective of the Government

Before addressing the findings from the government interviews, it is very important to describe SCORE, a rating system that the government relies on to evaluate the participants SMEs.

SCORE

SCORE is an analytical method developed by SME Corp to rate the performances and the capabilities of SMEs to improve their competitiveness. Each score rating corresponds to specific characteristics of SMEs, and for each SME, there is a specific assistance programme (SCORE, 2019). SCORE has become the pride of SME Corp since it has received requests from several countries (i.e. UK, Japan and South Korea) to study SCORE system and to replicate it for their SMEs (Premalatha, 2013). As demonstrated in Table 4.4, SCORE 0-2 refers to SMEs with the basic and manual or semi-automated business operation. Meanwhile, SMEs with three stars are those capable of implementing a quality system and improve their process.

Table 4.4: SME Characteristics According to SCORE

Score rating	SME characteristics	Assistance programme
0-2 stars	Very basic with manual/ semi-automated processes	Business Accelerator Programme-BAP (minimum of two stars) Shariah Compliant SME Financing Scheme-SSFS (minimum two stars) SME@University programme SME University Internship Programme SME Expert Advisory Panel-SEAP (minimum of two stars)
Three stars	Semi to fully automated Able to implement a quality system and undertake product and process improvements	Malaysian Brand (minimum of three stars) E50 Award (minimum of four stars) InnoCert Business Matching TERAS (minimum of three stars)
Four stars	Fully automated Invest in process /product/improvements	
Five stars	High level of automation Good branding/packaging	

Source: http://www.score.gov.my

SMEs with four stars are fully automated and able to invest in the improvement of their products or services. Meanwhile, SMEs with five stars are highly automated with good brands. Besides, both four stars and five stars SMEs are prepared for export.

Brand Orientation Typology

The directors of MATRADE and SME Corp (Kuching) described Malaysian SMEs as market-oriented entities as they are not entirely attentive to the importance of branding. The director of SME Corp (located in Kuching) stated that 40 per cent of SMEs considered that brands are important for their growth due to the fact they are medium-to-well established firms, which means that these SMEs have at least two years of presence. Among those 40 per cent, only 15 per cent have a well-established branding process. In fact, these SMEs have 3 stars and above, according to SCORE rating system. However, 60 per cent of SMEs are market-oriented since they believe that branding costs both time and budget. In contrast, the director of MATRADE pointed out that 60 per cent considered branding despite limitations of resources and mind-sets. The differences in percentage are explained by the fact that SME Corp deals with SMEs with SCORE ranging from zero star to five stars, whilst MATRADE has an upgraded type of SMEs starting from 3 stars.

This study has identified four types of brand orientation among Malaysian SMEs based on their level of brand awareness and the SCORE rating system (See table 4.5). The four classifications are entitled in ascending order as follows: Absent brand orientation, low brand orientation, medium brand orientation, and high brand orientation. An SME with a score going from zero to two stars, has no knowledge of the importance of branding, and thus has no brand orientation because of the low level of marketing activities. It is instead concentrating essentially on developing its products and reinforcing its products quality.

Table 4.5: Malaysian SMEs Brand Orientation Typology

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Classification according to SME Corp</th><th colspan="3">Classification according to authors' findings</th></tr>
<tr><th>Score rating</th><th>SME characteristics</th><th>Brand awareness</th><th>Brand orientation</th><th>Brand activities</th></tr>
<tr><td>0-2</td><td>Very basic with manual or semi-automated processes</td><td>Lack of awareness</td><td>Absent</td><td>Trading mindset (sales and turnover) and lack of promotion</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>Semi to fully automated
Able to implement quality system and undertake product and process improvements</td><td>Aware but not investing or investing a little in branding</td><td>Low to Medium</td><td>Packaging and networking</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>Fully automated
Invest in process or product or improvements</td><td>Aware and investing in branding</td><td>Medium to High</td><td rowspan="2">Brand management process</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>High level of automated
Good branding or packaging</td><td>Investing in branding</td><td>High</td></tr>
</table>

Nonetheless, an SME with 3 stars is identified as a low to medium brand-oriented firm. In fact, a 3-stars SME is conscious of the advantages of branding but is facing limitations of budget and time. Thus, for a 3-stars SMEs, even though it's a short-term profit mind-set; they tend to work on packaging and networking to communicate its products. Meanwhile, an SME with 4 stars has a medium to high level of brand awareness, invest in branding. Hence, it is identified as a brand-oriented firm. Lastly, an SME with five stars is strongly brand-oriented as it considers branding as long-term strategy and possesses a strong brand management process which is translated to day-to-day branding activities. As a result, an SME with a high level of awareness for branding and/or with high number of SCORE is more brand-oriented.

However, both directors of SME Corp and MATRADE highlighted that mind-set, resource limitations, and competition are the main obstacles that are refraining Malaysian's SMEs from considering branding for their business growth. Therefore, to overcome branding challenges, both agencies propose trainings programs and workshops. For instance, SME Corp offers specific branding development program under the name of "National Mark of Malaysian Brand", with the purpose of improving branding position in SMEs and enhancing SMEs brands locally and internationally. This programme provides 50 per cent of financial support. To date, hundreds of companies have profited from this program.

Theme 2 – Impact of Government Programme on Brand Performance

With the increase of emerging markets, SMEs play an essential role in the Malaysian economy in terms of GDP and employment. As a result, SMEs' new definition of the National SME Development Council (NSDC), Malaysian SMEs GDP grew at a remarkable rate of 13.6 per cent compared to 2013 (6.4 per cent). It is due to the fact that more than 8,000 firms that were previously classified as large firms are now categorised as SMEs (SME Corp Malaysia, 2014).

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2018), the contribution of the SME sector to the national GDP reached 37.1 per cent in 2017 as compared to 36.6 per cent recorded in 2016. The contribution of SMEs GDP agriculture, which is dominated by rubber, oil palm, and livestock, recorded 50.7 per cent. Other sectors contribute as following: construction (47.1 per cent), service (40.6 per cent), manufacturing (34.6 per cent), and mining & quarrying (1.9 per cent). However, the SME sector faces severe challenges, mainly international competition. Therefore, the Malaysian government has taken various steps to prepare domestic firms against the internationally competitive market and to facilitate market access by offering financial and technical support. In 2017, a total of 168 SMEs development programmes were implemented by 16 Ministries and more than 60 agencies with an overall expenditure of RM10.46 billion to sponsor 596,086 SMEs (SME Corp Malaysia, 2017).

SME development programmes are classified under six focused areas: access to financing, market access, human capital development, innovation and technology adoption, infrastructure, legal and regulatory environment. In terms of branding programme, SME

Corp, in collaboration with SIRIM QAS, provides SME-Brand Development Programme. This programme is under the market access focused area, and it is known as the 'National Mark of Malaysian Brand' certification scheme. It aims to enhance the visibility of Malaysian products and services domestically and internationally. Before joining the programme, the candidate firm must have a minimum of 3 stars under the SCORE rating system.

Presentation of the Programme

The National Mark of Malaysian Brand is a blueprint offered to Malaysian firms (SMEs and non-SMEs) to promote and improve the visibility of their brands through association with the National Mark logo which portrays the quality, excellence, and distinction of Malaysian products and services. This certification was launched in 2009 to change the negative perception of domestic products and services (e.g., lower quality and packaging standards), and to create globally-competitive companies through raising the importance of branding as a mean of improving competition and gaining market share. Also, Malaysia Brand Mark has been registered in several countries, such as Japan and Belgium (see Table 4.6). The registration process is very crucial to protect the intellectual property rights and the brand equity of the National Mark of Malaysian Brand. Meanwhile, overseas registration is fulfilled by MATRADE offices.

Table 4.6: Countries Recognizing the National Mark of Malaysian Brand

Country	**Status**
Belgium / Luxembourg	Certified
Netherlands	Certified
Japan	Certified
Republic of Korea	Certified
Australia	Certified
United States of America	Certified (conditional until 2017)
Thailand	Certified (conditional until 2017)
Singapore	Pending
People's Republic of China	Pending
Hong Kong	Pending
India	Pending

Source: www.nationalmark.gov.my

Regarding the emblem, the National Mark of the Malaysian Brand is a combination of four rings to communicate what the scheme stands for, as described in Figure 4.1.

The emblem of the National Mark of MALAYSIAN BRAND

Toothhed red ring seal to express that the mark represents an endorsement.

'MALAYSIAN BRAND' appears at the top to communicate the name of the mark. At the bottom appears three powerful words endoresed by the mark: - Quality, Excellence and Distinction.

Graphic at the center of the logo represents the Malaysian National flower:'Bunga Raya. The petals and the stamen of the flower are designed by three letter 'M', 'S', 'I' and 'A'; forming a a popular abbreviation for the country (Msia).

Brown background behind the graphic represents the national flower with a number of shapes in a lighter tone. It is a symbol of the large variety of products and services endorsed by the mark.

Figure 4.1: The Emblem of the National Mark

Source: www.nationalmark.gov.my

The National Mark of the Malaysian Brand scheme has several pre-requirements that companies must fulfil before submitting their candidature. First, the firm must have an incorporated or registered business in Malaysia under:

- Companies act 165 (Act 125)
- Registration of business act 1965 (act 197) or

- Certificate(s) of practices from professional bodies

Second, the business must have a registered brand and be operating from licensed premises. Besides, the candidate firm must have a minimum 3-STAR rating under SME Corp's SCORE programme. Third, the company must have any one of the following standards certifications according to the business context:

- ISO 9001 Quality Management System
- ISO 22000 Food Safety Management System
- HACCP Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point
- ISO/TS 16949 Quality Management System for the Automotive Industry
- ISO 13485 Quality Management System for Medical Device
- Alternatively, any other equivalent acceptable Management System

Meanwhile, firm that are interested in joining the program must go through the following process:

- Submission of the questionnaire
- Submission of the application
- Auditing (Stage 1 & 2)
- Submission of audit outcomes to the approval panel
- Insurance of the certification
- Renewal assessment

In the beginning, the interested organisation must submit the completed application and questionnaire depending on the business industry (service or manufacturing). The questionnaire aims to confirm the compliance of the firm with the criteria of the National Mark of Malaysian Brand scheme. Once submitted, a quotation is issued if the firm meets the requirements. If the firms accept the quotation, they must apply the national mark of Malaysian brand scheme; where they declare the accuracy of the information provided in the questionnaire and agree to pay all fees detailed in the quotation.

Upon acceptance of the application, a two-stage rigorous auditing process is performed. The first stage entails verifying the adherence of the firm to the certification criteria and assessing the readiness of the organisation to progress to the second stage of auditing. In turn, in the second stage, the auditors verify the implementation of the recommendations. The audit is to generate an audit report for validation. Once the report is approved, all fees are paid by the audit firm. Then, the certification agreement is signed, and the Malaysian Brand Certificate is issued. The certification duration is two years subject to renewal. Moreover, to renew the certificate, the company will have to go through the same process of auditing to ensure adherence to the certification standards. This procedure is called ‘Recertification'.

Concerning the audit assessment criteria, the auditing process covers the seven areas as follows:

- Management Commitment and Capabilities investigates the success of the brand from the perspective of the top management
- The company’s financial capability studies the allocated resources to maintain a sustainable brand and business

- Brand Management and Marketing investigates how a brand is delivered to the customers
- Operation Management examines the factors sustaining the brand promise of the products/services
- Quality and Standards of Products or Services study the plans undertaken by the organisation to guarantee that the products or services consistently meet the customer requirements
- Management Best Practices inspects the management of internal processes to improve brand equity and ensure business sustainability
- Social Responsibility examines the contribution of the company to its stakeholders

It is important to highlight that four of the criteria are needed in generic ISO 9001 Certification (i.e., Management Commitment & Capability, Operation Management, Quality & Standards of Product/Services, and Management Best Practices). Besides, the awarded SMEs benefits from several advantages, such as:

- The monetary incentive under the Business Accelerator Programme Incentives from the SME Corp
- Access to on-going local and international trade promotion activities
- Access to advertise and promotion activities by MATRADE
- Access passes to MICCI-SME Corp mentoring programme
- Invitations to specific training opportunities organised by the SME Corp Malaysia and its partners
- Media coverage

- Get listed in SME Corp database as top priority list that will be used for business linkages program and networking opportunities

Impact of the Government Programme on the Brand Performance

Brand Management and Marketing is the third criteria investigated during the auditing process. SIRIM QAS emphasised that firms under auditing process have been evaluated during their ISO 9001 audit for quality and financial activities during their yearly financial or accounting audit. However, the audit of the branding process is new to most of the companies. Hence, the auditors emphasized on this standard during the auditing process. SME Corp added that this criterion is fundamental because the essence of the program is to promote and to enhance the brand of participant SMEs.

A Hundred of SMEs have been awarded the Malaysian Brand certificate since it was launched in 2009. According to SME Corp Malaysia, the impact of the program on awarded SMEs was found positive as the annual sales turnover increased on average by 15 per cent every year from 2010 to 2014. Besides, most of the recipients managed to penetrate new export market such as ASEAN countries, European countries (e.g., Albania, Belgium), and North America (e.g., Mexico, USA). Moreover, the positive impact of the scheme is also measured by the number of recipients renewing the certification. SIRIM QAS stated that "*Only about 15 per cent of the companies discontinued the certification status. Since the year 2009, we have certified 138 companies, and 117 of them are still valid and active*".

Also, SIRIM QAS emphasised that the participant of SMEs were collaborative as they were open to comments from the auditors and ready to put the recommendation into action for improvement. Meanwhile, SME Corp Malaysia underlined that the relationship with SMEs starts before the participation in the program and continues after receiving the certification.

4.4 Themes from SMEs Interviews

The analysis of the interviews with eight recipients of the 'National Mark of Malaysian Brand' certification has led to the development of three major themes. As illustrated in Table 4.7, two themes emerged from the analysis of RQ1, namely (1) understanding of the brand and (2) brand building and management, whilst one theme was developed from RQ2 entitled "impact of the government programme on brand performance".

Theme 1 – Understanding of the Brand

The theme 'Understanding of the Brand" has emerged to reflect on the participants' view on brands. The participants hold different perceptions of the concept of 'brand'. Their understanding of the concept defines their brand identity.

Table 4.7: Themes Developed from RQ1 and RQ2

	Themes	Categories	Subcategories
RQ1	1.Understanding of the Brand	Brand definition	Purely tangible
			Purely intangible
			holistic
		Brand Orientation	Brand Motivation
			Brand Attitude
		Brand Identity	Value
			Vision
			Positioning
	2. Brand Building and Management	Internal Branding	Employer branding
			Quality and Innovation
			Marketing Arm
		External Branding	Customers
			Sponsors
			Government support
RQ2	3. Impact of Government Support	Market Performance	
		Brand Performance	
		No significant impact	

Brand Definition

The respondents embraced three different meaning of the concept of the brand classified in three categories: (1) purely tangible, (2) purely intangible, and (3) holistic as described in Table 4.8. The term holistic covers both tangible and intangible meanings. On the one hand, companies A, B, G, and H have provided a tangible definition of the brand. In other terms, they regard the brand as a combination of design, name, slogan, and colour; which permits the firm to stand out from the competition and to be recognised.

Table 4.8: Brand Definition

Definition	SME	Example of Answers
Purely Tangible	A	▪ Recognizing products
	B	▪ Representing the company
	H	▪ Differentiating from competitors in the market
Purely Intangible	C	▪ Describing the belief, the value system and guiding the directions of the company
	D	▪ Similar to a person and representing the core value
	F	▪ Representing the value of the company
Holistic	E	▪ Representing the image of the company
		▪ Brand characteristics (design/name/slogan/colour)
	G	▪ Making product and service stand out
		▪ Similar to Quality

Companies A and B defined a brand as an instrument of recognising their products and representing their company. For instance, the manager from company A stated that:

"*A brand is something that people can recognise your products and your goods… Let us see; for example, for the last 50 years in Malaysia, people will mention toothpaste Colgate as toothpaste. When they are going to a shopping mall, they are looking for toothpaste; people will look for Colgate. Never mind about the other brand, but people will recognise toothpaste as a Colgate, which is why the brand is important to us".*

Business development manager from company B explains:

"I believe that a brand is something that represents our company. So, people will get know us by recognising the brand what we are marketing. It is a branding instead of the product alone. We name the products with a brand, and we market them to ensure that every customer or client recognises our brand and to make our brand is known or recognised by them by the client".

On the other hand, companies C, D, E and F stated that brand represents the company in terms of the core values and the belief system. Company C argues that brand allows them to have an identity and to guide their business, the CEO argued:

"What we believe is that brand is a set …yeah…and … the brand is something that allows us to ***have an identity*** *that we are what we do, our belief system, our value system, our promises. It basically tells us about what we are doing and the direction we are going and where we are going. So that reflects the significance of creating a brand and to us."*

He explains further that *"People do not buy products; people buy the brand. People do not buy an iPhone. No…they do not buy handphone; they buy Apple. Yeah, they buy Samsung, and the brand comes and goes".* This means that people are associated with what the brand brings to them, not the product itself. Meanwhile, company F claims that even though the value of the firm comes from selling of products and services, brands represent the value of the company and generate the long-term trust from customers. The CEO mentioned that "*to have a sustainable business; we need to create a reliable brand, a valuable and reliable brand so that people can trust us, and we can do long term the business".*

Also, the marketing manager from company D posits that brand is similar to a person. In other terms, brands match up consumers' personalities. He explains that:

> "*I see our brand as a person. We perceive our brand as a personality, a set of personalities. Like this kind of personality. Let us say, for example, consumers A. they are very carrying person…. so, they will look for a brand that matches their personality. If I am a very cool person, if I look for sportswear, I go for Nike, Adidas. So, this is the brand personality in the market. They do actually define a personality. When we develop our brand manual, this is one of the guidelines*".

However, two companies out of eight described brands from a holistic perspective: tangible and intangible. In other terms, a holistic perspective covers physical and emotional characteristics of the brand, Company E designated brand as a combination of design, name, slogan, and colour, which represents the image of the company. When the manager was asked how he defines a brand, his answer was: "*It is the image of the company, the* *first impression. OK, of course, related to the design and the name, and actually, there are a lot of other considerations to include in the branding, which is like the logo itself, company slogan and then the mission, the colour. Also, it helps us to unify all our actions*". Meanwhile, company G argued that a brand is an approach of making products or services stand out from the competition and guarantees satisfaction. The manager explains further:

> "*Branding is very important to us … It is like a way to make our product and services stand out from the competition because there is a lot of [referring to competitors]. Like in any industry, there will be many competitors as well. That is why the products and services under [company name] will provide a minimum level of services that you can; the customer can expect and rely on*".

Brand Orientation

The understating of the concept of 'brand' defines the brand orientation, which is critical to SMEs' business strategies and performance. In this respect, the data analysis shows that all participants highlighted the prominence of branding as well as the significance of investing in the branding process. To put it differently, the participants are brand-oriented, which explains the reason behind joining the National Mark of Malaysian Brand scheme.

The key motivations driving the SMEs to consider branding can be grouped into two categories, namely (1) competitive advantage and (2) value creation as illustrated in Table 4.9. The value creation refers to creating a brand promise of a valued, differentiated, and trustworthy experience that is delivered consistently.

Table 4.9: Brand Orientation Motivation

Motivation	SME	Example of answers
Competitive Advantage	A	▪ Selling products ▪ Surviving with the brand
	B	▪ Ensuring the recognition of the brand
	D	▪ Recognizing the brand and making it memorable ▪ Keeping customers' loyalty ▪ Distinguishing the product in the market
	F	▪ Strengthening the image of the company
	G	▪ Making the brand known ▪ Promising minimum level of services to customers
	H	▪ Differentiating from competitors in the market ▪ Gaining exposure and awareness from the marketplace
Value Creation	C	▪ Creating value for employees, customers and partners ▪ Representing the identity and core value
	E	▪ Leaving a good impact on customers
	F	▪ Creating a trustworthy and long relationship ▪ Changing the mindset of the customer on the nature of the business ▪ Generating people's trust

According to six respondents out of eight, branding is primarily motivated by competitive advantage generating. The six respondents seek through branding to increase their sales, survive in the market, and be able to make their products and services stand out from competitors. For instance, company A is purely motivated by generating sales and perceiving branding as a surviving strategy after ending the joint-venture with a Korean partner and establishing a new independent business. Indeed, company A started as a trader operating in the gas and oil sector. Shortly later, their international partner left the country due to the Asian economic crisis in the mid-1990s. After ending the joint-venture, they transformed their business model from being a trader to a manufacturer. For that reason, having a brand stands as an advantageous solution to compensate for the disengagement of its strategic partner. The manager explains that when the partner left them, they have to *"continue surviving with the brand. So, we branded it as a [company name] ..."*

Companies B, D, G, and H agreed that branding is highly important for their brand recognition, to make it memorable, differentiated from competitors, and to gain exposure and awareness from the marketplace. For instance, company D clarifies:

> *"Why do you have a brand ... So, this is like making everyone remember the products by recognising the brands? Let us take, for example; we are talking about a car. OK, so we have Toyota, we have Mercedes; we have Proton ... Why do they choose to have a brand? This is how they actually differentiate themselves from different people, different brand when they actually succeed in their brand management strategy for people to recognise their name, they say oh that colour is for that name of that car. So, this is why we choose to have a brand as well*".

Meanwhile, company D adds that branding is essential for maintaining customers' loyalty. In the same line, company G states that branding is a way to promise a minimum level of services to customers. However, three respondents argued that branding is motivated by value creation for the firm and customers. Company C claimed that branding creates value for the company, employees, partners, and consumers. For the firm, value creation takes the form of brand reputation expressed by customers and partners attitude. Whereas, creating value for consumers and partners is about providing valuable products or services and being solution-oriented. The CEO deliberated:

> *"We are not talking about selling them a solution; we are talking about selling them a brand promise ...yeah. We do not put our self as a very product-oriented, but we focus our self on a very solution-oriented brand and promise oriented. Because people need to believe in us before they become our customers and before they say I want to do business, yeah. Things like that".*

In the same vein, company F refers branding as building a sustainable business, changing the mindset of the customer of the nature of their business, generating customers' trust, consequently, creating a reliable and long-term relationship. Meanwhile, company E claimed that investing in branding is motivated by leaving a good impact on customers because customers' satisfaction is crucial to building a stable relationship. Company E stated that *"customer if they trust your brand ... they will share with friends, co-workers they will say OK ... oh [company name] brand is very good ... so next time we shall continue to use it"*.

Brand orientation shapes the attitude towards branding. The findings demonstrated that the respondents share a positive attitude towards branding as they are brand-oriented and diligently work on their branding process daily. Two respondents out of eight have changed their brand names or logos to make it simpler and accepted by the industry. For instance, company C explained that in the beginning, they chose a name for their business, reflecting the personality of the owner. However, the firm's name created confusion among customers. Along the way, they learned how to rename their company's name by a name-reflecting the industry and improving their self-presentation to the customer in order to strengthen their business image. Meanwhile, company E elaborated on the logo as follows:*"... Our logo changed. Last time it was a blue colour. After that, we have a square orange, which was more complicated. So, it is getting simpler and simpler. Probably it did not leave much impact on the customer [Talking about old logo]*".

The statements of both company C and E demonstrated the understanding of branding has evolved which impacted their attitude to adjust their strategy and change their name (for company C) or logo (for company E). This is to adapt to the environment and make what represents their firm simple and accepted. Indeed, brand attitude witnesses the level of maturity of brand orientation. To illustrate, company B stated that in the beginning, they ignored the importance of branding. Today, they embrace the concept of branding. For example, when they meet with their clients, they focus on bringing their brand rather than selling. In other terms, they present their brand from the outer side (attire, brochures, presentation) to the services they are providing to their clients. This attitude explains why this SME is invested in branding as they consider that long-term investment helps in bringing the brand. In the same line, company C stressed that branding is costly but ready to invest when the budget is available. The CEO explains further that "*Normally, we invest in things quite costly, like a billboard. The time when we are quite doing well, we have some extra budget yeah that is the time we do this kind of activities. However, when in the time we do not have sufficient budget, so we no longer do things like billboards".*

Additionally, company G highlighted the importance of branding and how they work hard to make their brand stand out. They are actively engaged to the point of refusing to outsource their branding activities. When the brand manager was asked about getting outside help to develop their brand, her answer is: "*It is all internal because I do not agree to get outside. I mean include whoever or consultants to consult for us. Because no one is better than our self for our brand and that is why we do much training at initial stage*".

Overall, the understanding of the brand covers three categories, namely: (1) brand definition, (2) brand orientation, and (3) brand identity. The brand definition comes in three forms (tangible, intangible, and holistic) and impacts their brand orientation, which is motivated by competitive advantage and value creation. Besides, brand identity covers value, vision, and positioning. Meanwhile, the attitude of the respondents is very positive as they recognise the importance of branding and invest in the development of their brands. Finally, all the participants stated that having a successful brand involves the engagement of the owners and all departments.

Brand Identity

Brand identity includes brand value, brand vision, and brand positioning (Muhonen, Hirvonen & Laukkanen, 2017). The findings revealed four dimensions of brand value: (1) employees' satisfaction, (2) firm's culture, (3) quality, and (4) innovation. In terms of brand vision, all the respondents are looking forward to expand their markets domestically and internationally as the vision is related to a long-term strategy. In turn, brand value and vision defined brand positioning. In this respect, the respondents are brand-focused and updated to the market trends through employing various methods such as surveys and websites data analysis.

Meanwhile, positioning is employed to distinguish the respondent of SMEs from the competition. For instance, company G positioned itself as a service-based firm which offers hotel quality standards at an affordable price. The manager clarified: "*Like when we started to build our brand. Canapé or what we call single food is a trend in Malaysia, but not many caterers are doing it. It is not only limited to hotels […] Most of the caterers who are catering canapé; they are not 'halal'. But we are strictly 'halal'. So, this is our position*". Meanwhile, company C claimed that they are solution-oriented, not product-oriented. Being solution-oriented reflects how a company presents itself to its customers. The CEO explains:

> "*We are not talking about selling products we are talking about selling them a solution, we are talking selling them a brand promises yeah we do not put our self as a very product-oriented, but we focus our self on very solution-oriented very brand and promise oriented. Because people need to believe in us before they become our customers and before they say I want to do business with you, yeah. Things like that*".

Theme 2 – Brand Building and Management

The second theme uncovers the established strategies and undertaken tactics to develop the brand and to tackle the challenges. All the participants reported that branding is a daily-basis activity. It entails internal branding and external branding. However, both internal and external strategies are guided by brand orientation. Thus, the third theme covers two categories, namely: (1) Internal Branding and (2) External Branding.

Internal Branding

According to the respondents, internal branding refers to building a brand from inside out. It involves three dimensions: (1) employer branding, (2) quality, and (3) innovation. Both dimensions have resulted from brand identity and impacting the marketing arm.

Employer branding

All the respondents highlighted that employees are prominent assets for their business growth. For instance, company E described their employees as 'quality and services area', he explains:

> "E*mployee actually it is similar to what I mention just now … it is the trusted areas like quality and services. So, if the employees are not happy or they did not contribute much to the quality, so quality issue arises, then it will affect our brand; that is why we think their contribution to the growth of the company is very significant*".

In the same line, company G perceived the employees as an essential asset which explains why they put in their website that their ‘people come first'. The manager stated:

> "*Why I put people first? Because employees are our assets and we understand one thing. If we treat the employee well, they will treat the customer well. Moreover, we work with our heart. The tag line with the employees internally is we love what we do. So why we are saying putting people first? Like you are working in a company six days per week, or some days per week you are here more than you are going home, Right? Moreover, we are here as a big family. We are not here like a big corporate, have many protocols, have many labours. That is why we appreciate the employees very much; that is why we believe that people come first*".

This statement clarifies that the SME is totally aware that the firm's attitude towards employees will impact customers either way (e.g., positive and negative). Notably, the prominence of employees in brand building process is due to three reasons. First, employees represent the firm (especially the sales personnel) as stated by company G and B. Company G spend half of the time focusing on the employees. Meanwhile, company B declared that "*employees bring the high weight for the brand*" and that 70 per cent of time and energy goes to employees.

In this respect, company B underlined that they help their employees to bring the brand in many forms, such as providing proper attire and training the employees on how to communicate the image of the brand. Second, employees are responsible for production or service delivery. A defective product or a lousy service can injure the financial interest and the reputation of the company. For instance, company E claimed that unhappy employees influence the quality of products and services negatively, which subsequently, will leave a negative impact on brand image. Third, employees are a source of innovation. The respondents SMEs are tapping into the creative ideas of their employees. They managed to hold frequent meetings, brainstorming, and offer a platform for sharing session such as expressing ideas and feelings.

In many cases, employees engage directly with customers; whether with other employees who represent the customer's firm or the owners. In this sense, it is crucial to have fully engaged employees who can bring the brand to the customers as planned. Table 4.10 demonstrates the three aspects of employer branding as reported by the respondents: (1) internal communication, (2) training programmes, and (3) healthy working environment.

Table 4.10: Employer Branding Aspects

Employer Branding Aspects	**SME**
Internal communication	All the respondents
Training programmes	B, C, E, F, and G
Healthy working environment	C, G, and F

Internal communication is a crucial aspect of internal branding. Strong communication helps to build a sustainable business in which the SMEs interviewees seek for. For instance, to achieve successful communication, company C, D, and G hold regular meetings to practice brainstorming, open discussion, and sharing. Moreover, the respondents stated that the brand manual is a strategic internal branding tool. The brand manual is a reference manual which defines their ways to carry the brand as described by company B. Company F and E argued that brand manual represents the company's vision, mission, core values, and commitments. Company C and B added that brand manual assists employees and guides the directions of the company.

Focusing on employees takes mainly the form of providing training workshops and a suitable environment for working. For instance, company G added that they treat their employees well, and they are being patient in education and training them. Company G explained that *"We do much training to train our employees to share with them what is our direction and what we do. Also, how we want to brand our self. What is our position, of course, it took us a little while to do this [...] We make sure you work in a very happy environment."*

In a similar vein, company F elaborated that the whole team should be committed to develop their brand. As such, they are receiving training on different company activities as well as attending branding seminars. In turn, a rewarding system is put in place to encourage the team and make sure that they achieve the same objectives. Besides, company C claimed that they make sure that all the employees express their feelings and clear off their negative emotions through communication training sessions. Company C explained further that:

> *"Once we identify some dispute we clear off. We encourage staff or our colleague to explain or express. Sometimes they keep quiet because they do not know what to say, so we are training them to express themselves. If you do not like, you say you*

do not like. So, in all aspects because how we treat our staffs in terms that during their welfare physically or mentally are equally important to provide them with space to work in this environment like healthy space to work in. That will be important".

Notably, employees are part of the firm's culture, which influences and is influenced by the shared values of the firm. The findings revealed that the owner is the primary influencer of the firm's value. Hence, the brand identity values are mainly at the early stage of the firm's establishment. For example, company C argued that their value system and company culture should be adopted by the employees as well as they make sure that their employees follow the rules and responsibilities. Also, in company C, they are taught about it from the time they joined the company. Company C elaborated further that:

"*First thing, the value system or the company culture needs to be adopted by our staff. So, what we mean by our company culture. In a real matter is the way we do things. How is the way we do things here? So, every employee who comes in the interview is briefed about who we are and what we do. For example, we always tell them the first thing we are corruption-free company since day one, yeah."*

Quality and Innovation

The findings revealed that quality and innovation are important factors that the respondents rely on to build a reliable brand. Quality covers product characteristics, service delivery, and after-sales services. Meanwhile, innovation takes multiple forms depending on the sector. For instance, in food and beverage, company C and D diversify their products according to the festivals and seasons. In this sense, company C claimed that innovation comes more with festivals; the CEO illustrates:

> "*Innovation beverages always come during the festival. So, whenever there is a festival, by right now we have Chinese New Year, then Hari Raya, then we have Eid Fitri drink for this and Christmas drink, we have moon cake festival drink. We Malaysian we have multi-racial traditions; every month you can see the festival, people celebrating. We have Diwali drink. So, when it comes to festival season, we always have a joint promotion with the customers*".

In the same vein, company D stated that they promote different products according to the seasons as they rely on market data. The manager explains:

> *"We are actually trying to do much different promotion for different festivals throughout the year. So, a lot of different ideas, for example, now we really have an idea for Christmas this year, for the promotion Christmas this year. So, much creative process…brainstorming…The discussion we went through last year and early this year. Also, we keep on going, and now yes, we are ready to launch for the Hari Raya for example, we are going to get ready for the Christmas also."*

Marketing Arm

Marketing and innovation are two principal sources of revenue-generating as claimed by company B. The respondent from company B explained:

> *"I believe that two things generate money ... marketing and innovation. So, these two things company is not familiar with this [referring to other SMEs]. I believe the company will say that spending money on marketing is a waste of money. However,*

for us, marketing and innovation is a revenue generation; it is not a short period; it is a long period. You spend you would be recognised …that something that the potential client will say I saw this company somewhere then manage to contact. So, we grow big, especially for the exhibition".

Meanwhile, all the recipients are investing in marketing to promote their brands. However, concerning innovation, only six out of eight respondents (C, B, E, D, F, and G) have reported that they are relying on research and development (R&D) and innovation to develop their brands. Consequently, enhancing their business. Company C invested more on search engine optimiser (SEO) than in traditional marketing (printed version such as billboard and ads in magazines). Also, it is implementing innovation, commitment, and quality (ICQ) as a strategic tool to share its business core values through its brand name. In the same line, company G relied on innovation in promoting its brands and also using digital marketing up to 98 per cent. However, company D argued that traditional marketing is still useful; he explained:

"*We cannot go without the traditional media newspaper, magazine, and billboards. Those are traditional. However, they are still effective. So, definitely, we cannot go without social media. That is for sure, no question about it. So, both are still equally important. However, let us say, for a low budget I will definitively choose to go for IT one -The social media, Facebook*".

Meanwhile, company H explains that it is very crucial to carry out their responsibilities in alignment with its mission to create a good perception of the brand and generate awareness. He added that making big marketing plan is costly. Thus, they are searching for more suitable plans for that purpose, such as providing briefings and seminars to specific clienteles in the industry, and participating in exhibitions locally and abroad. However, company E and F rely on customers' services to enhance their brand image. For example, company E as an electrics and electronics industry player, they look forward to developing a trusted brand by providing what customers expect. The manager clarified:

> *"I mean they [referring to customers] will expect us to attend all their needs on time. So especially we are in the lighting industry customer cannot afford to have a night without lights. For example, there is road lighting. Can you imagine the whole road dark for the whole night? So, it can cause a danger to the road user. So, we are there to support them at any time. They shall trust us on this [...]. In the house, of course, quality is the main concern for us. So, we shall deliver what the customer expectations in terms of priority and functionality and after that, we have a service team and this stand by the team to get all after the sale needs."*

However, internal branding is constrained by three main challenges: (1) customers' mindset, (2) resource limitations, and (3) competition. The primary challenge faced by the recipients during the development of their brands is the customers' mindset. A mindset refers to a set of judgemental criteria capable of affecting the customers purchasing behaviour (Goldsmith, Xu & Dhar, 2010). However, a negative customers' mindset hinders the growth of the firm as reported by the respondents. Customers' mindset covers three aspects: (1) country of origin, (2) size of the firm, and (3) perception of the brand strategy.

Regarding the country of origin, company A elaborated that customers regard imported products as superior to local products. The manager mentioned that everywhere, "*the mindset is the same, imported goods are the best, the local brand is worse*". In the same vein, company B argued that they are facing customers' perception of the Malaysian brand. The manager clarified that "*for the time being, the Malaysian brand is not as powerful as a Japanese or German brand. So, it is something that we want to promote to Ex-Mobile, to promote to shell; but it is not something wow, it is not a German company"*. In other words, the customers are not impressed by local brands compared to foreign ones such as Japanese and German brands.

Furthermore, the size of the firm posed a massive block to the respondents, especially at the beginning of their existence because their firm belonged to the small and medium category. For instance, the manager from company H explicated that it was very challenging for them to get their products accepted by customers because they started as a small business. Instead, they managed to do small projects at the beginning, and gradually, they capitalised on their experience in the field. Similarly, company B claimed that it would be complicated for them to be accepted and trusted by customers without receiving sponsorship from a big domestic organisation. The manager clarified that "*it is a challenge for us in terms of acceptance from the clients that's the most challenging; because this brand [company name] has only been recognised after being helped by [company name] actually. How [company name] wants to grow big if there is no step or there is no* ***first step****, so [company name] has given us the first step"*.

Meanwhile, company D stated that it is difficult for them to predict the customers' perception of their brand strategy. The manager elucidated that "i*t is not important what message do we convey to that. It is important how the consumer do they conceive our brand strategy. So, this is the challenge. Sometimes, we have actually to do many reviews, changes along the way*". In the same vein, company C illustrated the challenges in the customers' mindset through an early experience when they have to change their company name because the name was confusing with the computer industry. The CEO explained that "*when we have a sale call: good morning sir I am calling from [old company name], and they always thought that we sell computers ... because the name is a very catchy name they call me 'computer' ... they call me service provider I say no we sell soya bean and sugar cane"*:

Furthermore, the recipients reported that resource limitations are the biggest obstacles facing the development of their brands. A resource limitation entails financial limitation and human resource (HR) limitation. As demonstrated in Table 4.11, four respondents out of eight highlighted that only financial resources are the main branding challenge. Company E pointed out that promoting the brand at a global scale is very challenging because of the financial resources needed to set up sale offices abroad. They can only participate in a few exhibitions and use online marketing such as Google PayPerClick. Also, the interviewee claimed that because of limited resources, they could not afford to hire external branding expert to help them in developing their brands. Meanwhile, company B and H underlined that investing in marketing such as promotion and exhibition is very expensive.

Table 4.11: Resource Limitations

Resource Limitations	SME	Example of Answers
Purely Financial	A	▪ Budget limitation
	B	▪ Exhibition is expensive
	E	▪ Limited resources
	H	▪ Making a big marketing plan is costly
Financial and HR	C	▪ Limited financial resources
		▪ Staff come and go
		▪ Issues of the flexibility of employees
	D	▪ Skills and budget
	F	▪ Cost and Team performance
	G	▪ Budget and Staff qualification

However, four out of eight respondents emphasised that both financial and human resources pose a massive block for developing their brands. Company D explained that developing a brand is very subjective. The marketing manager explained that *"depending [referring to brand development] on how much budget is allocated to, you know, to advertising, to do promotion, to be on the web, or among the national market and overseas markets… So, it depends on the skills and the budget allocated to brand management".*

In the same line, company C explained that promoting their brand depends on the availability of financial resources. The CEO explains that "*the time when we are quite doing well, we have some extra budget, yeah, that is the time we do this kind of activities* [referring to branding]. *However, when in the time we do not have sufficient budget, so we no longer do things like billboards".* Also, company C reported further of issue of flexibility of their employees. For instance, the employees refuse to take in charge other responsibilities. In other terms, they have a hard time to digest the corporate culture. Meanwhile, company F stated that transforming their business model is very costly. The CEO explained that:

> "*When you develop an online [platform] to enhance your auction business, what we are caring about is the costing. Finance is also essential. So, we need to raise fund to make our self, more online available. So, for that also, this is one of the reasons we are applying for the Malaysian brand to get the grant to support to subsidise our finance cost to develop the system*."

Company G indicated that staff performance and qualification are big issues that should be tackled through training and providing a healthy environment. The manager added:

> "*First is building our brand internally. We took some time to educate our staff. The staffs are working with us; they might not be a very high qualification. That is why we took a long time to educate them on how important is our brand. When we want to change the company uniform, we will not need to do brand new; because as an advertising tool and we want to decide what kind of service we wanted to use. Basically, we are starting from within, which is internal. Secondly, it is financial. All this needs money you know to profit to build the brand. So, then for the timing, we cannot take our free own times to do it. We could do it very fast*."

The third challenge is related to competition. Company A argued that the dominating competitors in the market influence the customers purchasing preference. The manager illustratds as follows:

> *"PETRONAS [domestic brand]… the corporate colour is green, normally some of their product they produce in green colour. Then there is a mindset among the consumers when the lubricant is green colour; it is good. So, we have to bring our QA [Quality Assurance] service mentioning that … that one is only colouring we pour on the lubricant. If we put orange, it will become orange. If we put black, it will become black something like that, that is how we work".*

Company G claimed to struggle with massive competition and imitation from some industry players. The manager explained that "*like in the market, we have a lot of followers … to be honest… as the other caterers are following us. They follow exactly what we are doing. This is up to our surprise".* Meanwhile, company B expressed its expansion plan for the future as it competes only with five top brands, mainly foreign firms. However, against these challenges, the respondent SMEs build their brand not only internally but also externally through searching for external support such as the government.

External Branding

According to the respondents, external branding covers interactions with customers and partners. Regarding customers, the customer represents an essential asset for the recipients after employees. Company E claimed that customer is the second most valuable asset for the company; because when a client trusts a brand, he will become a loyal client and he will share with friends and co-workers. In this respect, the participants work very hard to bring their brand and build trust among the customers. For instance, company A enlightened that it is vital to treat customers' complaint to maintain a trusted relationship.

Company C argued that they share their uniqueness with their customers to highlight their brand by using social media (e.g. WeChat, Facebook). Sharing does include not only the characteristics of their products and services but also their value system. Company C easily admitted that they are a free-corruption company. Besides, they use surveys to detect their customers' needs in order to adapt their packaging. Meanwhile, company E emphasised that it is essential to deliver what the customer expects in terms of priority, functionality, after-sale services and to provide support any time.

In regard to sponsorship, the respondents highlighted that they are being sponsored by different partners, such as the government and the suppliers. For instance, company B argued that supplier-sponsorship helped them immensely at the beginning of their business. The sponsorship was the first giant step and push they have received from a large local brand (a domestic company that offers assistance to small businesses). Through sponsorship, company B was able to gain more clients. However, company B is looking overseas for a similar marketing arm to promote its brand on a global scale. The manager clarified:

> "*In Malaysia, we are lucky we have [sponsor name] for us to grow big, but internationally we have to go by our own … I can say, and we have to have some partner or counterpart in that country. So, in that country, we need some marketing arm promoting the technical capabilities that [company name] has so it is different*".

Meanwhile, sponsorship is not only related to receiving technical and financial support from others but also sponsoring other businesses such as company A. Company A pointed out that they are supporting other business to generate customers' trust. The manager explained that "*we join and sponsor some of the racing team. So, when the car you sponsored using your lubricant become the champion, there will be a trust [...]. That is all about the motorsport when you do lubricant you do the sponsorship; you have to join the race, participate in the race".*

In regard to government support, the applicants have participated in the National Mark of Malaysian Brand scheme for five reasons illustrated in Table 4.12. All the respondents stated that budget is one of the biggest challenges in developing their brands, as demonstrated earlier. For that reason, the financial aspect stands as the dominant motivation behind participating in the National Mark of Malaysian Brand. For example, company D explained that the grant is the main reason that motivated them to participate in the National Mark of Malaysian Brand scheme.

Table 4.12: Motivations behind the Certification

Motivations	**SMEs**
1. Financial	All recipients
2. Market Expansion	A, G, and H
3. Brand Enhancement	B, E, and F
4. Technical Support	B, C, and G
5. Nature of the Business	A and E

In the same vein, company H emphasised that joining the programme was mainly to "*receive fund assistance for brand development*". Similarly, company B explained that they are lucky to receive the award and chosen to go to this programme, mostly to cover the expenses of exhibitions. Meanwhile, company F decided to join the scheme to transform its business model and create an online platform; The CEO explains:

> "*When you develop online [referring to website] to enhance your business, what we are caring about is the costing. Finance is also critical. So, we need to raise funds to make our self, more online available. So, for that also, this is one of the reasons we are applying for the Malaysian brand to get the grant to support to subsidise our finance cost to develop the system*".

The second reason highlighted by three out of eight participants is market expansion. Company H emphasised that they looked to being awarded for gaining exposure and awareness from both the domestic and international market. However, company A explained that being audited made the government know more about them, which made it easy for them to gain their trust and convert them into clients. The manager clarified "*because we have got endorsed, once we got the certificate. They have audited and endorsed our background; they have studied about us. There is a trust for us to supply for them".* Meanwhile, company G elaborated that joining the programme was to gain the certification in order to help them with the export. The manager elucidated *"We are carrying a guaranteed Malaysian brand which is recognised by the government; especially we are halal certified. We wanted to bring our product to bring [company name] to the Middle East countries, China or even South East Asia."*

Brand enhancement stands as the third motivation behind joining the programme. Enhancing the brand entails strengthening the brand image and achieving a public recognition as reported by the recipients. To illustrate, company B indicated that *“we want to be recognised by the government; this is '5-star' company ...' Malaysian brand' company*”. Likewise, company F indicated that “*When we win the award, it means that we are at a branding status, the Government of Malaysia recognises us. It also means that we are actually having a sizable corporate government of our company".*

However, company B, C, and G have joined the National Mark of Malaysian Brand scheme to be evaluated by a third party. They regarded the programme as significant because it allowed them to assess their progress. Company G explained that *“If we are going for Malaysia Brand, our company will be like evaluated through a rigorous and fairness kind of body of quality ... because SME Corp will be engaging a third party, which is very recognised or prestigious auditors in Malaysia to audit us."* Meanwhile, company C deliberated:

> *"We cannot say ... we are good because we are saying it to our self a third party must give that credit or this thing. That is why we choose to participate in awards. So, we allow our self to be rated. We allow our self to be elevated by a third party, by the market, by people who have credit abilities”.*

Nevertheless, company A and E explained that joining the programme is profoundly related to the nature of their industry. Company E pointed out that they recently just started focusing on getting certifications and approval due to the specificities of the electrics and electronics sector. The manager clarified that *If we do not have the* *certification, we cannot even enter the tender*". He elaborated further that the certification is essential to:

> *"[…] boost the confidence of our customers currently. Actually, we start from step by step, like for example, we got ISO in 2015 … ISO in 2015. Then we got a green tag Malaysian last year right. Then the Malaysian brand also last year. So, we got step by step. Because customer normally will first look at what is the company achievement. If we do not achieve anything, so this company does not really improve in their so-called like compliances or the quality. Oh for the Malaysian brand. Malaysian brand we approached"*

Similarly, company A explained that they deal with B2B clients from the public and corporate sector who requisite trusted professional certifications such as the National Mark of Malaysian Brand. The manager explained further that they joined the programme because "m*ainly most of the big clients for us are companies; they will be government and corporate sectors. Because most of an especially government and the corporate sector, they required us to have the Malaysian brand. Because that you can say that if you have the certificate, they will entertain like; they will allow you to supply them*."

The participants expressed a pleasant feeling for being selected to join the programme, being assisted during the auditing process, and being exposed after receiving the awards. They all admitted having a close relationship with SME Corp or other agencies such as SIRIM QAS (auditing body), and MATRADE (export platform). Besides, since they are actively engaged with other SME Corp programmes, eventually, leads them to renew their certification. Moreover, the recipients admitted having to provide full cooperation, abiding the rules and regulations, and at the same time, working together with SME Corp and SIRIM QAS to make a successful auditing process. Company A and G described the relationship as "*like family*". Meanwhile, all the recipients witnessed professionalism from auditors from their welcoming and fair treatment from SME Corp personnel. For instance, Company C used to have a negative perception of government performance, but joining the programme has changed its perspective. The CEO explained "*We are very surprised. We do not expect that the government agency has a high standard of inspection. We have a very good relationship with both SIRIM and SME Corp. I can say that the officer or the directors from both SIRIM and SME Corp are very humble and very approachable*".

As a whole, before being awarded the certification, the participants must go through a fair and rigorous auditing process to make sure that the participants are complying with the rules and regulations. Company G explained that high qualified auditors undertook the auditing process and that the process disposes of better judging criteria and recognition. In this sense, the auditing process covered the whole system as reported by the recipients, and it entails the following:

- Preparing the questionnaire
- Using same ISO process
- Site visiting (Interview at the factory and office)
- Choosing the personnel randomly
- Checking how the conduct of the employees and how they are managed
- Checking the understanding of the factory workers of brands
- Checking the internal process (branding/training/brand manual)

After being awarded, SME Corp Malaysia encourages recipients towards export and connects them with MATARDE. MATARDE interferes for exporting purposes. Company A described MATARDE as the gateway access to the overseas market. SME Corp Malaysia takes the initiative to email recipients about the programme updates or any opportunity that recipients could benefit from, as explained by most participants. As such, SME Corp Malaysia keeps a close relationship with the recipients through the following:

- Giving advice
- Taking the initiative to email
- Promoting the Malaysian Brand logo in other countries
- Sending invitations
- Proving good platform for exposure (press/newspapers/magazines/exhibition)
- Showing where to spend the grant (packaging/ export/marketing materials)
- Covering the eligible expenses

As a whole, building and managing a brand comprises of internal branding and external branding. Internal branding relies mainly on employees. Besides, quality, innovation, and marketing stand also as a significant factor in developing brands. Meanwhile, external branding is related to interaction with the environment of the firm, including the government.

Theme 3 – Impact of the Government Programme on Brand Performance

All the participants agreed on the quality and the distinction of the programme as they expressed a satisfying feeling towards the certification. This is true as they are continuously renewing their certification every two years. However, even though five respondents out of eight have mentioned that the certification alone is not enough for developing their brand; all the recipients agreed that it has a positive impact on their branding development, turnover, and market expansion for the majority of the participants, as illustrated in Table 4.13. For instance, company F refers the certification as a "*good foundation*" to further develop their brands, while company D described it as a "*win-win solution*" for both parties: company D and government.

Table 4.13: Impact of the Certification

Nature of Impact	**SME**	**Examples of Answers**
Market Performance	C, F, G and H	▪ Positive impact on market share
	C, E and F	▪ Improved financial performance
Brand Performance	A	▪ Considering local brands as international
	C	▪ Awards encourage staff/customers/suppliers
No Significant Impact	B	▪ Not totally boosting the performance
	F	▪ Not many changes at the domestic level
	H	▪ Not many changes at the export level

Regarding market performance, five respondents out of eight have reported having better market performance after being awarded the National Mark of Malaysian Brand. Company C, G and H underlined that the certification has a positive effect on their domestic market share growth. For instance, company G indicated that even though they did not put in any place of measurement tool to check the impact of the award, the results were satisfying. The manager clarified: *"Yes, of course. The impact of the government award is away more impact than those in private sectors because the judging criteria they are and the recognition of the government, which is very important to us*."

Meanwhile, company C, E and F highlighted an improvement of their turnover after receiving the certification. Company E pointed out that their turnover has doubled for the past five years. However, the improvement of the turnover is not related to the certification. The manager clarified that "f*or the local market, I did not see much, but for the overseas market, I think yes. Previously, we do not have much global market sales. I can say that it is about 99 per cent of local markets. However, we can see our overseas sales keep on increasing in these two years*". Similarly, company C explained that "*when we were awarded the national mark, we see that their impacts in terms of revenue yes more customers coming in. Yeah, customers are easily close to prospect, especially for the export market. We are being given a platform to expose our self".* The CEO added further that even though that has been awarded other certification, the National Mark of Malaysian Brand has a significant impact, he explained:

> *"I think first; we are very grateful; this is the first level of achievement that we have. Before this National Mark, we have an award from the industrial award from MITI, great excellence award and then the E50, enterprise 50. Then we have this national marks come along the way; what we see is progress."*

Concerning brand performance, company A and C indicated that the certification has positively influenced their brands. For instance, company A explained that *"from this certification, the impact is that they boom our brand …OK. Yes, people started opening* *their eyes. Wow! This is a local brand; they are equal to the big name such as the other players.* Meanwhile, company C highlighted that the certification has a positive effect on employees and partners; such as customers and suppliers. The CEO explained:

> "*It is not easy to get those awards by government; they have very strict criteria of auditing and once we are shortlisted ... and once we are given award ... we also were given the award and also many facilities. So that encourages us to move on and that kind of encouragement, encourage our staff as well. Our staff are equally excited that they see progress in the company. Our suppliers are also excited. Our customers are also equally proud, so we thank God for all these things that come along to our side, which I believe whatever we do correct from day one things, will be easier*".

Nonetheless, only three respondents, B, E and H, claimed that the certification does not have a sufficient impact. Even though company B considered succeeding in renewing the certification as one of their Key Performance Index (KPI), they claimed that 'Malaysian Brand' certification did not help in increasing the performance of the brand because of the nature of the customers. The manager added that the certification has an impact of five out of ten and explained that *"we are not dealing with household product …our client actually; they do not care about Malaysian Brand ... what is important for them is giving them the best bid. However, for the long term, who knows this Malaysian Brand will help us"*. Additionally, company E has noticed progress only at the national level. In contrast, company H has observed an improvement in their turnover and brands only at the national level. Internationally, no much change has been noticing because "*brand is not widely promoted by the authorities, and most are not aware of the distinctiveness of the Malaysian Brand mark"* as argued by the manager.

Overall, the respondents have participated in the National Mark of the Malaysian Brand for six reasons, namely: (1) financial, (2) market expansion, (3) brand enhancement, (4) technical, (5) nature of the business, and (6) business transformation. Meanwhile, five participants have indicated a positive impact of the certification on their market and brand performance. However, only two respondents have explained that the certification does not have a significant impact on their business growth.

4.5 Summary

This study interviewed three governing bodies: MATRADE, SME Corp Malaysia, and SIRIM QAS. Two themes emerged from the analysis: (1) brand orientation from the perspective of the government, and (2) the impact of the programme on the performance of the brand performance. The first theme addressed the brand orientation typology, whilst the second theme highlighted the positive impact of the government support on brand performance of the participants. Also, this study interviewed eight SMEs, whereby three themes have emerged from the analysis, namely: (1) understanding of the brand, (2) brand building and management, and (3) impact of the government programme on brand performance. The first theme reflected the perception of the participants towards the brand. It covers brand definition, brand orientation, brand identity, and brand attitude. Meanwhile, the second theme tackled the brand building and management strategies which entail internal branding and external branding. The last theme highlighted the National Mark of Malaysian Brand and its impact on brand performance. In this respect, the main conclusion of this study is that government branding programmes benefit massively to the enhacement of brand performance of the participamt B2B SMEs. The following chapter will discuss the findings from this chapter and will elaborate the proposed framework.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 Overview

This chapter provides a discussion for the findings presented in Chapter 4. Resting on stakeholder theory, Section 5.2 discusses the themes highlighted earlier. Meanwhile, Section 5.3 presents the proposed B2B brand management model.

5.2 Discussion of the Themes

Chapter 4 unfolds five themes; two themes have emerged from the findings of the government to answer RQ2, while three themes were developed from the results of the SMEs to answer RQ1 and RQ2. Nonetheless, the four themes employed the process of cross-interpretation as they reflect the perspectives of both stakeholders under investigation (government and SMEs). These themes are:

- Themes 1 from the government interviews had to be cross analysed with category “Brand Orientation” from Theme 1 extracted from SMEs interviews
- Theme 2 from the government interviews had to be cross analysed with Theme 3 from the findings of the SMEs

As such, the three themes have resulted from the cross interpretations are as described in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Theme Emerged from the Cross-Interpretation of the Findings

	Themes	Categories
RQ1	1.Understanding of the Brand	Brand definition
		Brand Orientation
		Brand Identity
	2. Brand Building and Management	Internal Branding
		External Branding
RQ2	3. Impact of Government Programme on Brand Performance	

Meanwhile, to foster the understanding of the findings, the themes are explored in relation to the literature highlighted in Chapter 2. The discussion of the three themes is the foundation for the proposed Stakeholders B2B Brand Management Framework. The argument of each theme is guided by 'Stakeholder Theory'.

5.2.1 Theme 1 – Understanding of the Brand

As presented in Chapter 4, three categories were identified to explain the respondents' perceptions of the brands, namely: (1) brand definition, (2) brand orientation, and (3) brand identity.

5.2.1.1 Brand Definition

Defining a brand is very subjective. The respondents hold three stances in describing the brand, namely: (1) purely tangible, (2) purely intangible, and (3) holistic. On one hand, three out of eight respondents (i.e. A, B, and H) defined the brand from a tangible standpoint. In other terms, they consider the role played by brands in representing the firm includes generating sales, making products and services standing out from the competition, along with the external characteristics of the brand (e.g. name, slogan, and colour). Similarly, the widely cited brand definition proposed by AMA is purely tangible. AMA defined a brand as: *"A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the seller's goods or services as distinct from those of other seller*s" (as cited in Keller, 2013).

However, Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015) argued that AMA's brand definition remains unchanged for 80 years; it becomes consequently out of date due to the development of the marketing environment in the form of theory and practice. Meanwhile, Keller (2013) and Kotler and Pfoertsch (2008) claimed that brand is more than a physical component (e.g., name, logo). In a similar vein, three out of eight respondents (i.e. C, D, and F) perceived the brand as a representative of the core value and the belief system of what the company believes as well as what the products and services represent.

Conversely, Jones and Bonevac (2013) argued that the value system does not represent the brands because brands permit consumers to recognise the products without considering any value system. This statement can be true for B2C brands. However, the respondents operating in the B2B sector tend to sell an image and brand their organisations according to their value system. For instance, company C decided to establish a corruption-free firm and made it known to all stakeholders using all means of communication, such as business cards, website, and emails. Indeed, company C is an example of a firm that brand itself as a corruption-free organisation which pays off along the way. They were among the first to be approached by SME Corp Malaysia to join the National Mark of Malaysian Brand. This situation contradicts the claims of Jones and Bonevac (2013) because brands are social processes comprising multiple stakeholders (Iglesias, Ind & Alfaro, 2017) due to the development of service sector (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Firms do not live separately from their ecosystem. They affect as well as they are being affected. Consequently, its belief system is expressed through its branding strategy.

Therefore, following the suggestion of Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015), this study has sought to propose an updated definition of the brand in order to express the respondents' perception, cover the intrinsic value and the tangible characteristics of the brand. The proposed definition combines AMA's definition with other scholars' definitions (e.g., Kapferer, 2008; Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2008) for a broader understanding of the brand. AMA definition has focused on the technical role played by brands. In contrast, Kotler and Pfoertsch (2008) and Kapeferer (2008) looked at the emotional or intangible function of brands. Thus, the brand is a combination of:

> "*a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies the seller's goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers*" (AMA); which represents the core value and the belief system of the firm [authors' suggestion] and a "*promise, the totality of perceptions – everything you see, hear, read, know, feel, think*" (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2008, p. 5), and shares a "*desirable and exclusive idea embodied in products, services, places and/or experiences*" (Kapferer, 2008, p. 13).

5.2.1.2 Brand Orientation

Strategic understanding of the brand is considered as an antecedent of brand orientation (Hankinson, 2001). Brand orientation is "*an approach in which the processes of the organisation revolve around the creation, development, and protection of brand identity in an on-going interaction with target customers to achieve lasting competitive advantage in the form of brands*" (Urde, 1999, p. 117). Meanwhile, Wong and Merrilees (2005, p. 157) argued that brand orientation is "*the extent to which the marketing strategy and activities are centred on the brand*". However, the findings of this study identified two drivers for brand orientation, namely, (1) competitive advantage and (2) value creation. Six respondents out of eight developed brands in order to distinguish their products and services to ensure the recognition of their brands. In contrast, only three respondents out of eight are brand-oriented for the value that brands create for the firm and partners.

Furthermore, all participants highlighted the importance of having a brand and how hard they work to make their brand stand out. For instance, one of the participants (company A) stated that their brand is a survival tool after the termination of the joint venture. Surviving means becoming competitive or just fitting in (Jones, 2005). Correspondingly, the extant literature pointed out the prominence of branding for the survival of SMEs such as Urde (1994) who stated that branding is a survival strategy. Similarly, Laukkanen et al. (2013) pointed out that the market orientation of small business entrepreneurs pays off when it is implemented through brand orientation. Moreover, brand orientation increases the chance of developing strong brands (Laukkanen et al., 2013; Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018) as it sets the strategic and the operational ground for managing the brand (Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir & Zhu, 2016).

Malaysia's and the world competitive business environment are the key factors that spur Malaysian SMEs to adopt strategic branding. Emerging-Market SMEs face fierce competition from the domestic market as well as international. As reported by Eyring, Johnson and Nair (2011), more than 20,000 international firms are operational in emerging markets. This issue is due mainly, to the facilitation of technological advances and the dropping off of trade barriers (Kumar, Mudambi & Gray, 2013). Therefore, firms focus on components of distinctions, offering a competitive advantage (Ghodeswar, 2008) to differentiate products and services from competitors (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006).

In the context of SMEs operating in the B2B market, it has been argued that brand orientation has a positive impact on SMEs performance (Reijonen et al., 2015; Hirvonen, Laukkanen & Salo, 2016; Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir & Zhu, 2016). For instance, a study conducted on Chinese B2B service pointed out that a firm with a high level of brand orientation can communicate its brands effectively to customers which leads to best word-of-mouth, and consequently substantial brand equity (Zhang, Jiang, Shabbir & Zhu, 2016). Meanwhile, powerful B2B brands establish long-term relationships (Andersson, Vierimaa & Sundkvist, 2018; Ruohonen, Vikström & Saarela, 2018), command high-price premiums (Keller, 2013), reduce the cost of searching information (Backhaus, Steiner & Lugger, 2011), increase the company's likelihoods in buyers-bidding situations (Wise & Zednickova, 2009), and licensing (Ohnemus, 2009).

In the context of emerging-markets countries, policy makers across the world make efforts to meet the specific needs of the SME sector (e.g. Turkey, Brazil, and Malaysia). In fact, the government or nation image is formed through its corporate brands (Dinnie, 2008;

Gotsi, Lopez & Andriopoulos, 2011); whereby the nation image and corporate image influence are reciprocal Gotsi, Lopez and Andriopoulos (2011). In this sense, the government support comes mainly in two forms: direct (i.e. financial and technical) and indirect (soft power). In Malaysia, the government support does not only cover financial and non-financial aspects, but also offer specific SME brand enhancement programmes. In fact, Malaysian government is fully aware of the importance of improvement of the local brands. According to the interviewed agencies, the government understand that most SMEs are market-oriented entities and that only limited SMEs have a well-established branding process. Thus, the National Brand of Malaysian Brand was launched in 2009 to enhance branding among SMEs.

Branding motivations determine the attitude towards branding, while a firm's brand attitude demonstrates the level of maturity of their brand orientation. In the beginning, the respondents ignored the importance of branding. However, the recognition of the prominence of branding has evolved throughout the growth of the firms. It started with changing the brand names and logos to avoid confusing the customers as well as to make them simple and accepted by the industry. Logo changes without strong foundations may generate negative feedbacks (Banerjee, 2008). Notably, choosing or substituting a brand name may take a long time. Respondent B explained that this process could take around three months to make sure that their customers embrace their new brand names. Meanwhile, the change should be done progressively in order to reduce the risk related to customers' resistance (Descotes & Pauwels-Delassus, 2015). Leonardi and Barley (2008) explained that the change is positively embraced if implemented gradually. However, the decision of changing the names or logos was impacted by the responses or advice given by customers and the industry players. This means that the respondents are reacting positively to their business environment and it helps in strengthening their brand image.

Furthermore, having a successful brand involves the engagement of the owners as well as all departments as reported by the majority of the respondents. For instance, one of the respondents refused to outsource their branding activities due to the fear of external consultants might not understand the particularity of their business. Meanwhile, the extant literature highlighted that the employees serve as ambassadors of the brands (Khan & Ede, 2009) and that they are essential resources for the success of brands (De Chernatony, Drury & Segal-Horn, 2003). In turn, the branding process should be managed with employees (Joukanen, Niinimäki & Sundell, 2018) as claimed by the respondents. Meanwhile, several participants underlined that it is depending on the availability of the budget whether they recruit skilled employees in branding, or they participate in national and international exhibitions. This attitude testifies the level of brand orientation of the informants. However, in the context of the interviewed SMEs, several factors (e.g. budget and human resources) influence brand orientation and consequently, the brand building and management strategies.

5.2.1.3 Brand Identity

Brand identity is resultant of brand orientation (Muhonen, Hirvonen, Laukkanen, 2017). Ghodeswar (2008, p. 5) defined brand identity as "*a unique set of brand associations implying a promise to customers and includes a core and extended identity*". It is an on-going process (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Da Silveira, Lages & Simõe, 2013). In fact, a well-defined brand identity eases strategic direction for the firm, creates value for the stakeholders (Elikan & Pigneur, 2019), differentiates from competitors (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002), helps with customers' brand identification (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010), and consequently improves the SME brand performance (Hirvonen & Laukkanen, 2013).

Brand identity comprises of brand value, brand vision, and brand positioning (Muhonen, Hirvonen, Laukkanen, 2017). Defining the brand's value and vision is a starting step in the building of brand identity (Aaker, 1991; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2002; Keller, 2013). The brand identity concept is defined as '*entity of core values supporting and leading to a promise*' (Urde, 2013, p. 752). Meanwhile, the brand vision is related to the long-term strategy, determines the purpose of the brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2002), and influence the positioning (Elikan & Pigneur, 2019). In turn, brand positioning happened once the brand is built. Kapferer (2012, p. 152) defined "*positioning a brand means emphasizing the distinctive characteristics that make it different from its competitors and appealing to the public*". In the context of SMEs, Krake (2005) suggested that SMEs should create a positioning strategy to differentiate themselves from big organisations. Berthon, Ewing and Napoli (2008) argued that SMEs enjoy focused positioning, which leads to brand performance.

Based on the findings, this study highlights four significant dimensions of brand value (i.e. component of brand identity): (1) employees' engagement, (2) firm's culture, (3) quality, and (4) innovation. The employees' engagement and education level have a significant impact on firms' performance. Indeed, the understating of the brand values by employees reinforce the brand image (M'zungu, Merrilees & Miller, 2017; Anees-ur-

Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018) and influences the attitudes and conducts of employees (Berger-Remy & Michel, 2015). Thus, the respondents put their employees 'first' and communicate their values through strong, internal relationship and communication means (e.g. websites).

Firm's culture is "*the pattern of shared values and beliefs that help individuals understand organisational functioning and thus provide them with the norms for behaviour in the organisation*" (Deshpandé & Webster, 1989, p. 4). In essence, firm's culture defines brand orientation (Balmer, Brexendorf & Kernstock, 2013; Huang & Tsai, 2013) and it is not only a concern of large organisation but also the SME sector (Baker & Sinkula, 2009). In the SMEs context, a firm's culture is dominantly influenced by the owner or manager's character and values (Denison, Haaland & Goelzer, 2004). Similarly, the findings of this study confirm that the founder profoundly impacts the direction of the firm and consequently, brand strategies.

Industrial buyers consider quality as an essential criterion for purchasing decision (Bendixen, Bukasa & Abratt, 2004). Quality covers product characteristics and service delivery. In turn, according to Grönroos (1983), service quality entails technical quality (what is provided), functional quality (how it is delivered), and customers' perceptions. Meanwhile, being quality-oriented is a crucial fulcrum for firms' performance (Ramayah, Samat & Lo, 2011; Golder, Mitra & Moorman, 2012). Thus, quality should be managed strategically (Ho Voon, 2006) because it affects the reputation of the firm as reported by the respondents. Meanwhile, a brand-oriented firm is likely to improve its innovation performance. Innovation is the result of a healthy working environment and a significant contributor to business growth as pointed out by the respondents.

5.2.2 Theme 2 – Brand Building and Management

In line with the findings of Lassen, Kunde and Gioia (2008), this study highlights that despite the challenge discussed above, the participant SMEs were able to develop their brands through adopting an inside-out approach. In this sense, branding occurs daily; and it entails internal branding and external branding.

5.2.2.1 Internal Branding

Concerning internal branding, the respondents highlighted the importance of working on their brands internally at three levels: human resource level, quality and innovation level, and marketing level. At the human resource level, the respondents highlighted the prominence of employees in understanding and executing the brand strategies. The respondents perceive employees as an 'asset' for the development of the brand for three reasons: (1) employees represent the company, (2) responsible of production and service delivery, and (3) source of innovation. Similarly, Joukanen, Niinimäki and Sundell (2018) pointed out that branding should be managed with employees as they serve as 'ambassadors' of the brands (Khan & Ede, 2009). Meanwhile, the literature refers to managing jointly brand and employees as 'employer branding' (Sengupta, Bamel & Singh, 2015). The term was proposed by Ambler and Barrow (1996), and it is defined as ''*the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company''* (Ibid, p. 187).

However, Berger-Remy and Michel (2015) stated that the meaning of the brand could influence the attitudes and conducts of employees on both sides whether positive (e.g., positive word of mouth) or negative (e.g., disengagement from work). In other terms, positive engagement of employees and their understanding of the brand values strengthen the brand image (Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018; M'zungu, Merrilees & Miller, 2017). Thus, the respondents stressed the importance of engaging employees in the brand building process. To have a successful engagement, the respondents rely on regular training programmes, creating effective internal communication, and providing a healthy working environment.

Offering regular training programmes helps to reach the required qualification in order to improve the skills of the employees such as technical and communication skills. Not only that, it can aid in educating them on the brand, and thus achieve the set goals. Cascio and Graham (2016) stated that training is a crucial component of the employer's branding. Training has a positive impact on the behaviour and the performance of the employees (Brown & Sitzmann, 2011) when is completed (Sitzmann, 2012; Ployhart & Hale, 2014), undertaken regularly, and supported by a reliable internal communication as highlighted by the respondents. In turn, strong internal communication is crucial to communicate brand strategies. Indeed, a strong brand is developed through an influential internal culture and successful internal brand communication (Lynch & De Chernatony, 2004; Khan & Ede, 2009). In this respect, SMEs have established a reference manual called ‘brand manual’ to communicate the company's vision, assists employees to bring the brand, and guides the directions of the company as described by the respondents.

Similarly, Baumgarth (2009) stated that employees' behaviour roles and brand positioning should be detailed in a written manual. Also, Baumgarth (2010) suggested that brand orientation should be shared through rules such as manuals. However, even though Erdoğmuş and Cicek (2012) argued that disseminating information is very important for brand engagement, limited studies have emphasized on brand manual as an essential internal communication tool. Thus, this study supports the findings of Erdoğmuş and Cicek (2012) and Baumgarth (2009; 2010) by emphasizing on the establishment brand manual to disseminate the brand strategy. Moreover, brainstorming, open discussion, rewarding system, and regular meetings are frequently used to ensure that the brand strategy is on track as reported by the respondents. Meanwhile, providing a healthy environment, either emotional or physical, is vital to reach the objectives. In the same line, Boukis, Gounaris and Lings (2017) pointed out that managing successful internal branding is based on two dimensions, namely (1) satisfying employee needs and facilitating their value congruence with their work context, and (2) enhancing employee brand knowledge and identification.

At the quality level, all the respondents care about was strengthening the quality of their products and services. Also, they work hard to obtain the ISO certifications and other quality certification related to their business sectors such as GMP, HACCP, and Halal certifications. This is in order to demonstrate the quality level of their products and services and to be on par with the industry standards. Meanwhile, the extant literature highlighted the importance of quality for firms (Golder, Mitra & Moorman, 2012). In reality, firms struggle to produce high-quality products in order to generate a good perception and experience for their consumers (Raj & Roy, 2015). This is true because perceived product quality has a positive impact on customer satisfaction, which in turn is narrowly related to customers' preference and buying choices (Nikhashemi, Valaei & Tarofder, 2017). This situation explains why the respondents have joined and renewed periodically the National Mark of Malaysian Brand scheme to prove the quality status of their brands.

Innovation and marketing are interrelated, and are principal sources of revenue-generating as claimed by company B. This statement is in line with Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele and Lye (2011) who argued that branding and innovation contribute to marketing performance that can be enhanced by market orientation and management capabilities. In the SMEs respondent’s context, only six out of eight respondents have stated that they are relying on R&D and innovation to develop their brands along with enhancing their business. Hence, all the recipients are investing in marketing to promote their brand.

Regarding innovation, Kim, Lee and Lee (2013) stated that innovation is an essential factor among others that generates a competitive advantage for firms using Web 2.0. Indeed, innovation stands as a significant contributor to business growth as pointed out by the respondents. In the context of SMEs, Beck and Schenker-Wicki (2014) considered SMEs as a locomotive of innovation and development. Meanwhile, Sawhney, Wolcott and Arroniz (2006, p. 76) defined innovation as: *as the creation of substantial new value for customers and the firm by creatively changing one or more dimensions of the business system*. The authors indicated that the firm can innovate through 12 dimensions: offerings, platforms, solutions, customers, customer experience, value capture, processes, organisation, supply chain, presence, networking and brand.

The frequency of innovation depends on the sector, as stated by the respondents. For instance, in the food and beverage industry, the innovative process depends on festivals and seasons. Meanwhile, as discussed earlier, employees are a source of innovation. In this sense, innovation results from a healthy working environment and effective internal communication. Similarly, Ren and Zhang (2015) suggested that firms interested in innovation should first, provide supporting innovation climates (e.g. socio-emotional support and or work equipment) and then, remove threatening job stressors (e.g. time pressure and job insecurity). As a result of innovation, business performance is improved (Rubera & Kirca, 2012). SMEs' human capital should be creative and innovative as well because employees' creativity is considered one of the fundamentals of firm innovation (Hon, 2012). Also, creativity and innovation, which are crucial factors for the survival, growth, development of SMEs, enhancement of competitive advantages and firm performance (ibid, 2012).

In terms of marketing, both traditional (e.g. billboards and magazines) and digital (e.g. websites and social media) marketing are used but at a different proportion depending on the requirement of the sector. For instance, in Electrics and Electronics, where the customers are mainly public tender, the SME does not need to use digital marketing to enhance their presence. On the contrary, in food and beverage, digital marketing is more profitable and less costly compared to the traditional platform. Surprisingly, the literature has not addressed the impact of the industry on the adoption of either digital, or traditional marketing, or combining both. Instead, the literature highlighted the benefits of digital marketing regardless the firm size and industry (e.g. Jones, Borgman & Ulusoy, 2015); and the need of integrating digital marketing in the academic inquiry (Wymbs, 2011).

However, the size of the firm, resources, and lack of goal setting and measurement have a strong influence on the adoption of digital marketing (Kim & Hyun, 2011; Barnes, Clear, Dyerson, Harindranath, Harris & Rae, 2012; Bordonaba-Juste, Lucia-Palacios & Polo-Redondo, 2012). Thus, this study supports these findings and elaborates further that the industry has an essential impact on the adoption of digital marketing. However, even though Järvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluoto and Jayawardhena (2012) and Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides (2011) claimed that the dearth of time and human expertise are the main obstacles of digital marketing usage in firms regardless of their size, this study argues that digital marketing present multiple benefits explained below making organisations especially small ones moving to digital marketing.

According to Kannan and Li (2017, p. 23), digital marketing is defined as "*an adaptive, technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver, and sustain value for all stakeholders*". Mostly, digitization has a positive effect on small business performance and competitiveness by providing opportunities to reach existing and potential customers (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). To illustrate, a study on 12 UK-SMEs confirmed five benefits of web for small business: '*internal operational efficiency, enhanced capability, external communications, enhanced service offerings and lifestyle benefits'* (Barnes et al., 2012, p. 706).

Moreover, social media is affordable from the perspective of sharing information and customer interaction (Jones, Borgman & Ulusoy, 2015). Additionally, Alford and Page (2015) pointed out that unlike traditional marketing, digital marketing can measure customer interactions accurately through web metrics. Similarly, Company C invests more on search engine optimiser (SEO) as it helps in bringing in traffic and provides valuable information. Meanwhile, the majority of the respondents combine both strategies (digital and tradition). Using both marketing platform for building a strong brand has become essential to business growth in SMEs (Dumitriu, Militaru, Deselnicu, Niculescu & Popescu, 2019).

The findings of the fourth theme revealed three categories of obstacles faced by the respondents during building their brand, namely: (1) customers' mindset, (2) resource limitations, and (3) competition. Regarding customers' mindset, the findings of this study argue that negative industrial buyers' mindset was found to be related to three aspects: (1) the country of origin, (2) the size of the firm, and (3) perception of brand strategy. Country of Origin or COO is viewed as an external signal of quality, such as brand and price (Thøgersen, Pedersen, Paternoga, Schwendel & Aschemann-Witzel, 2017). According to COO, is defined as "*The place, region or country to which the brand is perceived to belong by its customers*" (Thakor & Katsanis, 1997, p. 27).

The respondents claimed that their customers prefer imported brands because they perceive international brands as higher quality. Besides, customers are not captivated by domestic brands. This finding supports the study undertaken by Herstein, Berger and Jaffe (2014). The authors referred to COO as 'the made-in pitfall' and pointed out that despite the excellent quality of emerging-markets products; companies from the inferior COO image are still facing a negative association of their brands. In contrast, Tanusondjaja et al. (2015) revealed a similarity between buyers of domestic brands and buyers of international brands. Domestic brands buyers consider local brands as high quality and capable of satisfying their expectations. Also, Chailan and Ille (2015) claimed that depending on the product category; the same country could have both positive and negative associations; for example, Russia caviar has a positive linkage; while Russian cars have a negative association.

However, this study concludes that emerging-markets brands are still associated with a negative perception. A study was undertaken by Magnusson, Westjohn and Sirianni (2018) in a retail store, revealed that brand is favourably positioned if they are consistent with their COO stereotypes. In other terms, brand evaluations are influenced by COO. Meanwhile, customer’s mindset has a direct impact on the behaviour of customers (Kumar, Pozza & Ganesh, 2013) and performance of the firm (Srinivasan, Vanhuele & Pauwels, 2010; Hanssens, Pauwels, Srinivasan, Vanhuele & Yildirim, 2014; Petersen, Kumar, Polo & Sese, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings reveal that the size of the firm influences the customers buying decision. For instance, company B and H explained that it was very challenging for them to be accepted and to get their products accepted by customers because they are mid-sized industry player. However, limited studies have exposed the size of the firm as one of the criteria in B2B purchasing decision such as Kavak, Tunçel and Özyörük (2015). The results of the authors’ study revealed:

> *"Ten major components of SMEs' organisational buying behaviour which are product specific factors, supplier-specific factors, buyer firm-specific factors, economic factors, market-based factors, customer-based factors, relationship-*

based factors, decision-makers, information sources, and intermediaries" (*ibid*, 2015, p. 287).

Furthermore, the findings revealed that the perception of the brand strategy is very critical. For instance, changes of logo and name may confuse customers. In this sense, changes of logo without strong foundations may generate negative feedbacks (Banerjee, 2008). Meanwhile, choosing or substituting a brand name may take a long time. Respondent B explained that this process could take around three months to make sure that their customers embrace their new brand names. Meanwhile, the change should be done progressively in order to reduce the risk related to customers' resistance (Descotes & Pauwels-Delassus, 2015). Leonardi and Barley (2008) explained that change is embraced positively if implemented gradually. However, the decision of changing the names or logos was impacted by the responses and advice from customers and the industry players. This means that the respondents are reacting positively to their business environment to strengthen their brand image.

In reference to resource limitations, lack of financial and human resources are the second significant obstacle facing the development of the brands as reported by the respondents. Park, Lee and Kim (2019) classified two types of necessary resources for SMEs: (1) monetary resources and (2) nonmonetary resources. The lack of those resources hinders the development of the brand, and consequently, the growth of SMEs. The lack of technical and managerial skills can lead to SME failure (Smit & Watkins, 2012). Meanwhile, the findings reveal that all the respondents perceive financing obstacles as a massive block for their business growth. This result is in line with the report of IFC (2018), Rocha, Farazi, Khouri and Pearce (2011) and Şener, Savrul and Aydın (2014) argued further that financial limitation in small organisations have almost twice the obstacle effect compared to large companies. Besides, lack of resource weakens the capabilities of SMEs to face global competition (Routroy & Pradhan, 2014; Loader, 2015).

Furthermore, it is observed that lack of finances is perceived as barriers to small business growth in both developed countries such as Canada (Gill & Biger, 2012); and developing countries such as Algeria (Bouazza, Ardjouman & Abada, 2015), Nambia (Baporikar, Nambira & Gomxos, 2016), and Malaysia and Pakistan (Khalique, Isa, Shaari & Abdul, 2011; Khan & Khalique, 2014). However, lack of financial resources will also impact the HR development. For instance, company E stated that they could not afford to hire outside branding expert to help them in branding because of restricted resources.

Meanwhile, four respondents out of eight stated that employees play an essential role in their business growth. In this sense, managerial skills are essential for SMEs (Zarook, Rahman & Khanam, 2013) as it defined the success and growth of SMEs (Fatoki & Odeyemi, 2010). Nevertheless, lack of qualification, commitment, and integration within the corporate culture can affect the brand negatively. Accordingly, the business growth, as reported by the respondents. Raki and Shakur (2018b) argued that stakeholders could hinder the brand and illustrated it with the experience of Domino's Pizza, whose employees filmed a negative incident, which had damaging consequences on the brand reputation.

Competition is the third challenge revealed in the findings. Leading competitors have the power to influence the customers' purchasing preference, as demonstrated by company A. Meanwhile, company G expressed their struggle with massive competition and imitation of their services. Similarly, the extant literature highlighted that competition (e.g. Birnik, Birnik & Sheth, 2010; Khan & Khalique, 2014) is a significant challenge faced by SMEs. Raki and Shakur (2018a) interviewed two government agencies that confirmed Malaysian SMEs are facing stiff competition, which explains the intervention of the government to support the SME sector.

Overall, developing industrial brands in SMEs setting is constrained by three barriers: (1) customers' mindset, (2) resource limitations, and (3) competition. Industrial buyers' mindset is influenced by country of origin (COO), the size of the firm, and the brand strategy. Meanwhile, the lack of resource limitations, whether financial or human resources, is equally constraining. Finally, SMEs are facing both domestic and international competition.

5.2.2.2 External Branding

The respondents highlighted that customers represent a valuable asset after employees. In this sense, to maintain customer's loyalty, the respondents have to share the firm's values and belief system, deliver the expected service, and treat the complaints. Notably, customers' mindset has a direct impact on the performance of the firm (Srinivasan, Vanhuele & Pauwels, 2010; Hanssens et al., 2014; Petersen, Kumar, Polo & Sese, 2017). Their perception is created through a long-term process (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001), partners, whether potential or current (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012), and networks

(Balmer, 2001). Therefore, the participants underlined the importance of partnership with suppliers (sponsorship), customers (co-branding), and the government (sponsorship). Meanwhile, Sandbacka, Nätti and Tähtinen (2013) stated that networking benefits firms by facilitating access to resources.

Co-branding was highlighted only by company C as it is planning to reach a new target of consumers. Similarity, Capon, Berthon, Hulbert and Pitt (2001) stated that co-branding between suppliers and customers is profitable and have become a common practice. Co-branding, also referred to as co-creating or brand alliances, is an emerging body of research, especially in the context of B2B SMEs. Co-branding is "*the strategy of presenting two or more independent brands jointly on the same product or service*" (Erevelles, Stevenson, Srinivasan & Fukawa, 2008, p. 940). A well-established example of co-branding is a combination site of service station and fast food restaurant. Meanwhile, Erevelles, Stevenson, Srinivasan and Fukawa (2001) demonstrated five benefits from co-branding, namely (1) relationship benefits, (2) competitive benefits, (3) cost benefits, (4) double-marginalization benefits, and (5) advertising support benefits. Meanwhile, Kalafatis, Remizova and Singh (2012, p. 623) stated: "*that co-branded product with comparable equity levels shared equal benefits co-branding, whereas lower equity brands benefited more from the alliance than higher equity partners".*

Sponsorship stands as a strategic external branding tool to promote the brand. Thus, aid in the growth of the business, as stated by the respondents. The sponsorship comes in the form of technical and financial support from either the government or the business sector. In turn, the SMEs can provide sponsorship to other businesses as a form of promotion. Government sponsorship will be discussed in Section 5.2.3. Sleight (1989, p. 4) defined sponsorship as "*Sponsorship is a business relationship between a provider of funds, resources or services and an individual, event or organisation which offers in return some rights and association that may be used for commercial advantage".* Meanwhile, sponsorship takes the form of cash payment, or provision of in-kind products or services to an individual, cause or event (Allen, O'Toole, McDonnell & Harris, 2002). Sports sponsorship dominates the international sponsorship market (Athanasopoulou & Sarli, 2015). This study supports this finding as one the participant SMEs (company B) sponsor motorsport to strengthen its brand image.

In general, branding is a daily-basis activity which comprises internal branding and external branding. Internal branding occurs at three levels (human resources, quality and innovation, and marketing). Meanwhile, external branding is related to an external strategic partnership with the government, customers, and suppliers.

5.2.3 Theme 3 - The Impact of the Government Programme on Brand Performance

The lack of resources deters the development of the brand, and consequently, the growth of the SMEs. Being an emerging-market manufacturer or service provider poses tremendous challenges for SMEs. Hence, SMEs look for support from external partners such as the government. In turn, the government or nation image is formed through different components such as socio-economics, politics, history, products, and services (Van Ham, 2001; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009); and also, through its corporate brands (Dinnie, 2008; Gotsi, Lopez & Andriopoulos, 2011). Gotsi, Lopez and Andriopoulos (2011) stated that the nation image and corporate image influence are reciprocal. The authors' results revealed that the influence could be either positive (e.g. case of Nokia in Finland) or negative (e.g. Enron in the USA).

The meeting point of these two different worlds (Government and the SME sector) is translated in the real field through SME development programmes proposed by the government and accepted by the SMEs. In this sense, emerging-markets governments across the world make efforts to meet the specific needs of the SME sector (e.g. Turkey, Brazil, and Malaysia). The support comes in two forms: direct (i.e. financial and technical) and indirect (soft power). To illustrate, Turkey is an excellent example of active direct and indirect forms. On one hand, in the year 2004, Turkey introduced ‘TURQUALITY' scheme to enhance the perception of the Turkish products and its public image (Mangir, 2013; Yülek, 2018). This programme is a direct support to SMEs; and it covers several sectors such as textile, electronics, food, and cosmetics (Mangir, 2013). It is considered as one of the world’s first branding dedicated scheme but not the only one as claimed by Askin (2016) and Ögel, Ögel and Helvacıoğlu (2016). The Malaysian government launched in 2009 a similar programme which is the subject of the study.

On the other hand, TV series production is a prominent tool of Turkish soft power (Berg, 2017). According to Sakin (2019), TV drama is broadcasted in nearly 70 countries which make Turkey ranked the second after the U.S., in terms of revenues ($350 million). The Arab world constitutes half of the audiences (Yanardağoğlu & Karam, 2012). As a result, according to Berg (2017, p. 41), Turkey “*is gaining increased visibility through the presence of Turkish dramas on Arab television”.* Meanwhile, Otmazgin (2008, p. 77) stated that “*Hollywood is the most significant American tool to perpetuate soft power,* *which then gets converted into accessible consumption products and marketed globally*". In fact, COO is used as an assessment tool of products and services when customers have no knowledge concerning a product (Johansson, 1989). In this sense, Turkish drama builds a positive country experience in mind and the heart of the consumers of the drama. This situation occurs because Turkish drama projects a positive image of the country (Temizkan as cited in Yesil, 2015).

In turn, this situation creates a foundation for Turkish brands through generating a positive association in the mindset of consumers. For instance, the recent political tension between Turkey and Saudi Arabia (because of positive Turkish attitude towards Qatar and the murder case of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul capital of Turkey) did not affect the Arab tourism industry especially from Saudi Arabia (Kucukasci, 2019). The same source reported that the number of Saudi tourists has increased from 18,601 in 2016 to 44,508 in 2018. In this respect, soft power acts like Trojan horse as it infiltrates the customers' minds, creates a positive image on the country, and calls indirectly for consumptions of all kind (e.g. culture, products, and services).

Before Turkish propaganda, Korean wave or 'Hallyu' which refers to Korean cultural trend started in the late 1990s (Bok-rae, 2015). Chen (2016) identified five factors that explained the popularity of 'Hallyu' exports, namely (1) government engagement in culture promotion, (2) the expansion of media technologies in East Asia, (3) the diaspora of South Korean, and (4) Korean art (TV, music) which resonates with East Asian consumers. As a result, a positive impact of 'Hallyu' on the country image has been noticed (Cho, 2010) and consequently, tourism and export have been improved (Hogarth

2013; Lee, 2015). For instance, a study on the data of the Korean cosmetics export to 74 countries around the world confirmed that Hallyu has a direct impact on cosmetic export mainly to 9 ASEAN countries compared to the rest of the world. The authors illustrated with the example of the brand ‘The Face Shop’ and its success after signing with a popular actor from Korean TV drama, Bae Yong-Joon.

In Malaysia, gastro-diplomacy is a significant soft power to enhance the state brand. In 2010, MATRADE launched ‘Malaysia Kitchen for the World' to raise the awareness of the global communities on Malaysian dishes and restaurants (Debora, Ongkowidjojo & Hikam, 2015). Solleh (2015) argued that Malaysia gastro-diplomacy approach is on the right path even though branding a nation is a long run. Hussin (2018) reasoned that Malaysian soft power was not practised against its neighbouring countries as the USA did to the world, yet Malaysia seems to achieve the desired outcomes in development and tourism from its soft power policies. Meanwhile, Malaysian gastro-diplomacy has noticed an increase in popularity of Malaysian cuisine and consequently, the export of food products (Debora, Ongkowidjojo & Hikam, 2015).

Furthermore, according to SME Corp Malaysia (2019a), SME Corp Malaysia launched in 2017 on YouTube a mini-drama series called ‘Chor & Chah’ in collaboration with Malaysia and Suhan Movies. The target audience is the youths and the bottom 40 per cent of the income pyramid (B40) to encourage them to enter the field of entrepreneurship. This initiative is an innovative means of communication to display relevant governmental information on the business.

In a direct support form to SMEs brands, a total of 151 SME development programmes were planned in 2018 to benefit 613,576 SMEs (SME Corp Malaysia, 2018). Concerning branding programmes, the National Mark of Malaysian Brand was introduced in 2009 by SME Corp Malaysia, in collaboration with SIRIM QAS to enhance the competitiveness of Malaysian brands domestically and internationally as presented in Chapter 4. In this sense, joining the government program is essential as it provides technical and financial support. In reality, the entire participants SMEs have joined the programme and continue to renew the certificate mainly for financial purposes. However, market expansions, brand enhancement, and technical assistance were also found to be essential drivers to encourage SMEs to participate in the programme. The firm interested in joining the program must go through a rigorous auditing process as reported by the governing body and the participants.

The findings revealed that according to SME Corp Malaysia, the impact of the programme on the awarded SMEs was found positive as the annual sales turnover of the recipients increased on average by 15 per cent every year from 2010 to 2014. Besides, most of the recipients managed to penetrate new export markets such as ASEAN countries, European countries (e.g. Albania, Belgium), and North America (e.g. Mexico, USA). In the same line, seven recipients reported that government support is positively related to branding enhancement, turnover growth, and market expansion. This explains why the respondents are renewing their certifications every two years as required by SME Corp Malaysia. In fact, the findings from SIRIM QAS indicated that the majority of the recipients renew their certification; only 15 per cent do not. Meanwhile, to ensure the positive benefits of the programmes, SME Corp Malaysia included a rigorous auditing system to make sure that the recipients are eligible for the award. However, one company (B) declared that the certification did not boost their performance entirely. Besides, among the seven satisfied recipients, two recipients reported a partial positive impact.

Similarly, the extant literature reported contradictory statements in regard to the impact of government support (financial and non-financial) on SMEs performance. The scholarly addressed government support from a various domain such as R&D. However, only Turkey with a similar programme has studied the impact. Thus, due to the sacristy of the literature on the subject, this study has sought to study the impact of other programmes to frame the findings.

Several researchers confirmed a general positive influence of government support on SMEs performance. For instance, Songling, Ishtiaq, Anwar and Ahmed (2018) pointed out that government assistance enhances technological growth in the industry sector. In Malaysia, Shamsuddin, Sarkawi, Jaafar and Abd Rahim (2017) revealed that both financial and non-financial support by government has a positive impact on SMEs growth. Moreover, the positive effect of the 'Malaysian Brand' certificate on SMEs is similar to 'TURQUALITY'. According to Eren-Erdogmus, Cobanoglu, Muge, Yalcın and Ghauri (2010), the TURQUALITY certificate has a favourable impact on the export by 38 per cent in 2007. In the textile sector, a study by Mangir (2013) on 25 firms operating in the clothing and apparel industry reported a direct and positive effect on the recipients in terms of turnovers, employees and store numbers. As of 2017, 'TURQUALITY' program supported 162 firms with 74 brands (Nas, 2017). Askin (2016) argued that value is created for both the government and the following firms.

However, Nguyen, Van, Bartolacci and Quang Tran (2018) claimed that only financial support has a positive effect on firms' financial performance compared to technical assistance. In a similar vein, Kim, Kim, Suh and Zheng (2016) demonstrated that only direct financial support was found to have a positive impact on product innovation. Meanwhile, Shin, Choy, Lee and Park (2019) confirmed that biotechnology firms' recipients from the Korean government R&D subventions indicated improved technological innovation, yet financial performance was not significant. However, this study supports the findings of Shamsuddin, Sarkawi, Jaafar and Abd Rahim (2017) and confirms that both financial and technical assistance has provided significant results.

To illustrate, the recipients join the programmes for six reasons (financial, market expansion, brand enhancement, technical, nature of the business, and business transformation), yet the results were positive for the majority. In essence, combining efforts from both the government and SMEs can lead to a positive corporate and nation image. This study supports the statement of Gotsi, Lopez and Andriopoulos (2011), which indicated that the nation image and corporate image influence are reciprocal. In general, SMEs look for external support because of financial and non-financial constraints. The most crucial sponsorship received is government assistance. In turn, emerging-market countries are aware of the negative association and the importance of the SME sector for social and economic development. Thus, direct and indirect ways are conducted by the government to assist SMEs in their growth journey. The support was found positive, as reported in many pieces of research and supported by this study.

5.3 Stakeholders B2B Brand Management Framework

Developing long-term B2B relationships (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011) depends on the positive interaction of internal and external branding efforts (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013; Gromark & Melin, 2011) along with the regularity of internal and external brand communication (Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018). Thus, stakeholder theory seems to be a meaningful theoretical lens. The framework of Stakeholders B2B Brand Management was developed based on the interpretation of the findings from the Chapter 4. In this respect, the discussion of the three themes identified in the earlier sections pointed towards two dimensions for building strong B2B brands as depicted in Figure 5.1, namely: (1) understanding of the brand and (2) branding process to enhance brand performance despite the challenges; through the positive interaction between primary and secondary stakeholders.

The first-dimension “Understanding of the brand” results from the interpretation of Theme 1- Understanding of the brand. The first dimension comprises brand definition, brand orientation, and brand identity. The most important component of the first dimension is the brand identity which is impacted by brand orientation and brand definition. Hence, defining the brand identity is the first step and most fundamental dimension towards creating a positive brand performance. In essence, the brand identity is a source of competitive advantage (Hirvonen & Laukkanen, 2013; Muhonen, Hirvonen & Laukkanen, 2017) because it reflects the value system, vision, and the positioning (Muhonen, Hirvonen & Laukkanen, 2017).

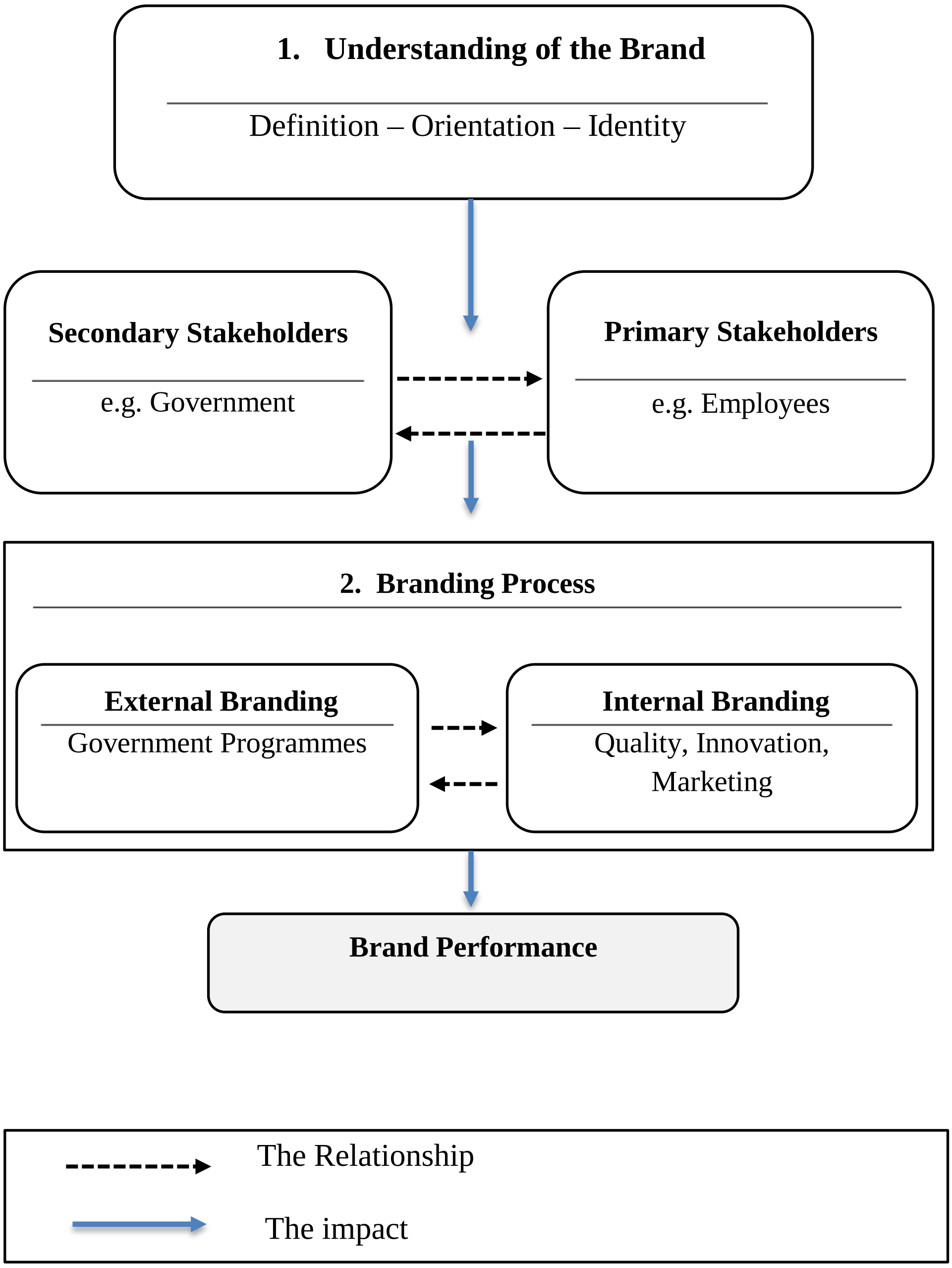

Figure 5.1: Stakeholders B2B Brand Management Framework

In particular, brand identity refers to the ability of brand owner or manager to identify the purpose, the cause, and the vision of a brand. In other terms, is being able to answer the question of why the firm desires to have a brand? Because "*people do not buy*

WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it” (Sinek, 2009, p. 46). Also, since brand identity reflects the vision of the firm and its positioning, it is vital to identify where the brand should go (vision) and 'WHO' it will reach (target market). Having a well-stated purpose eases the communication process as it helps different stakeholders, whether internal or external, to understand the branding strategy clearly. Sinek (2009, p. 50) gave the example of a global success, Apple and argued that Apple *“unlike its competitors defined itself by WHY it does things, not WHAT it does. It is not a computer company, but a company that challenges the status quo and offers individuals simpler alternatives*". Similarly, but on a smaller scale, company C made it clear from the first day that the firm was established to be a free-corrupted organisation. Indeed, this is the way company C chooses to be run and reacted to the environment. In essence, the brand identity is formed through effective internal and external branding.

The second dimension “Branding Process” results from the second Theme – Brand Building and Management. Branding process covers internal and external branding. Internal branding mirrors the relationship between the brand owner or manager and the employees. The brand owner or manager is the primary influencer of brand identity (Horan, O'Dwyer & Tiernan, 2011; Centeno, Hart & Dinnie, 2013; Reijonen et al., 2014). For instance, in the service sector, branding is impacted by brand owners or managers intervention (Horan, O'Dwyer & Tiernan, 2011). Thus, brand owners or managers should know about branding area, conduct a full investigation (market and self-analysis), and improve their management skills (Kennedy & Wright, 2016). Also, the brand owners or managers should identify the critical stakeholders both before and after firm establishment (Juntunen, Saraniemi, Halttu & Tähtinen, 2010). However, even though this study highlights the role played by SME owner or manager in the brand building process, it contradicts the findings of Centeno, Hart and Dinnie (2013) which claimed that brands mirror the character of the SME owners at the early stage of brand building yet reduces as the SME grows. This study emphasises that the influence of brand owners or managers does not decrease after the early stage of brand building; it continues along the branding process as long as the owner is engaged.

Internal branding entails strenghtning the brand at three levels: (1) human resource management, (2) quality, and (3) marketing and innovation. Employees are real asset for the development of B2B brands because they are source of innovation, and are responsible for production, quality, and service delivery. In fact, along with brand owners or managers, employees as ‘ambassadors' (Khan & Ede 2009), engage in the brand building process (Juntunen, Saraniemi, Halttu & Tähtinen, 2010), communicate the brand identity to the external world (Khan & Ede 2009; Juntunen, Saraniemi, Halttu & Tähtinen, 2010), and relate the company and its stakeholders (Juntunen, Saraniemi, Halttu & Tähtinen, 2010). To illustrate, Raki and Shakur (2018b, p. 402) gave an example of "*preparing an ad campaign involves the intervention of brand managers/owners and the related employees, in addition to external stakeholders (e.g. media, sponsors and partnering companies)”*.

Therefore, employee's involvement in the brand building process is very critical (Juntunen, Saraniemi, Halttu & Tähtinen, 2010); during the making and implementation of branding strategies (Reijonein et al., 2012). Thus, providing regular training programmes helps to reach the required qualification in order to improve the technical and communication skills of the employees, educate them on the brand, and thus achieve the set goals. Meanwhile, the brand identity and strategy should be communicated to all the employees (Kennedy & Wright, 2016). In this respect, strong internal communication is vital to communicate brand strategies. Indeed, a strong brand is developed through an influential internal culture and successful internal brand communication (Lynch & De Chernatony, 2004; Khan & Ede, 2009). Thus, the brand manual is an effective means to communicate the company's vision, assists employees to bring the brand, and guides the directions of the company as described by the respondents.

Concerning marketing, both marketing platforms (e.g, traditional and digital) are meaningful to build strong B2B brands depending on the requirement of the sector. However, digital marketing is advantageous regardless the firm size and industry (Jones, Borgman & Ulusoy, 2015). Meanwhile, along with marketing, investing in innovation is also indispensable. In fact, being innovation-oriented is impacted by the sector and occurs through a healthy working environment and an effective internal communication. Meanwhile, quality is a crusial element for developing resilient B2B brands. Without a doubt, customers' satisfaction, preference, and purchasing choices are influenced by the quality level of products or services (Nikhashemi, Valaei & Tarofder, 2017). Thus, before engaging in branding process, B2B SMEs should focus on reinforcing the quality level of their products and services, and follow the industry quality standards.

Meanwhile, external branding refers to interactions with external partners in order to enhance brand reputation. This study states, as shown in Figure 5.1 that the secondary stakeholders (e.g. government) influence the brand identity of the SMEs. Meanwhile, this study researched the influence of one secondary stakeholder, i.e. the government. Indeed, all the respondents reported joining multiple workshops and seminars organized mainly by SME Corp Malaysia. These workshops opened the mind of the participants and equipped them with new skills. Also, during the assessment process of the National Mark of Malaysian Brand, the government auditors have suggested to the participants to embrace Corporate Social CSR, to have more quality certifications related to their industry, and be innovative. This means that the continuous interaction process between the SMEs and the supporting platforms enables the SMEs to be updated of the perception of the participants on the business trends. Thus, it is not surprising to see the respondents include, for instance, innovation as a critical component of their value system.

In general, for each competitive advantage generator which is able to enhance the competitiveness of the SME is transformed into a well-established scheme and offered to SMEs. For instance, the National Mark the scheme under the study was created to put forward branding in SMEs setting. Also, the government established Innovation Certification for Enterprise rating and Transformation (1-InnoCERT) scheme. It is to nurture innovative enterprise through harnessing and intensifying home-grown innovation, and research and development (R&D) (SME Corp Malaysia, 2019b). Recently, a new platform was created in 2017 called ‘Digital Free Trade Zone’ (DFTZ) which aims to facilitate trade for SMEs, permit international marketplaces to source from Malaysian firms, and foster an ecosystem of innovation in e-commerce and internet economy (Yean, 2018).

In this situation, the state plays the role of a vector of sustainable development. It plans strategically, allocates the necessary resource, selects the eligible SMEs, and provides technical and financial support. In turn, the Malaysian SMEs should open up themselves and embrace the programmes offered by the government and communicate effectively to undertake strategic decision-making. The process of engaging stakeholders in decision-making occurs through dialogue and making stakeholders participating in business management (Manetti, 2011).

Furthermore, brand building process covers HOW the inputs should be used and WHAT output to deliver. Baccarini (1999, p. 27) pointed out that "are the resource inputs and activities required to deliver each output. The activities explain how the project will be done and are defined, inter alia, by the work breakdown structure, responsibility chart, schedule, and budget". In turn, inputs refer to a human, physical (materials and equipment, documents, and facilities), and financial resources. Meanwhile, 'outputs' are related to answering the question of WHAT results do we deliver? The outputs are "the immediate, specific, and tangible results or deliverables produced by project activities" (Baccarini, 1999, p. 27). In other terms, outputs are the assets and services produced by the brand building process to achieve the branding purpose, which is brand performance. Meanwhile, the impact of the secondary stakeholder (i.e government) is measured through market performance (e.g, turn over) and brand performance (e.g, brand recognition).

Figure 5.2 illustrates the sequence of the two dimensions during internal branding to highlight the interaction between both dimension highlighted in Figure 5.1.

Understaing of the Brand

Employee's satisfaction

Branding Process

Input: branding training courses and experts	**Output:** Skilled employees

Figure 5.2: Sequence of the Two Dimensions

This study points out that ‘employees’ satisfaction' is one of the essential values constituting the brand identity as demonstrated in the findings (refer to Chapter 4 – Section 4.4) since employees are significant contributors to brand performance. Thus, in order to reach employees’ satisfaction, the firm puts in place training programs and provides qualified trainers. In turn, employees should attend the workshop. The expected result is reaching the required qualification. As a result, well-trained employees will represent better the brand. In this sense, branding process should refer to the brand identity. If activities are undertaken, then outputs are generated; in turn, if the output is delivered, then the brand performance is reached. However, despite the challenges, the two dimensions and the positive interaction between the different stakeholders lead to the enhancement of brand performance.

The proposed Stakeholders B2B Brand Management Framework falls under the stakeholder theory to respect the relational nature of the B2B business landscape. The suggested model assumes that brand value is co-created through the interaction of primary and secondary stakeholders, which is in line with previous models discussed in Chapter 2 – Section 2.3.4. However, two main differences should be stated:

- Tarnovskay and Biedenbach (2016) studied the contribution of B2B corporate managers and local stakeholders in emerging countries (e.g., Brazil, India, and Russia) to the value-creation of the brand. Nonetheless, this study investigated B2B brands in emerging markets SMEs from the perspective of brand owners or managers (primary stakeholder) and the government (secondary stakeholder).
- Jones (2005) proposed a model which serves as a tool to evaluate the value of numerous stakeholder groups in creating and maintaining long-term brand value. Similarly, Törmälä and Gyrd-Jones (2017) identified four stages in the development of the brand identity. However, both models do not delve into examining how the stakeholders create the brand value. This study's framework tapped into the core value of the brand and build upon to reach brand performance through brand inputs and activities.

5.4 Summary

This chapter discussed the three themes undergo the cross-interpretation process from Chapter 4 in relation to the literature. The discussion was the groundwork for the proposed Stakeholders B2B Brand Management Framework. The first theme explained the respondents' understanding of the brand. The second theme deliberated on branding are the brand bilding and management strategies which involve internal branding (quality, employees, marketing and innovation) and external branding (strategic partnership with the government, customers, and sponsors). The last theme addressed the impact of the government programme on the brand performance. Meanwhile, the final section presents the proposed Stakeholders B2B Brand Management Framework.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 Overview

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study. A summary of the findings which provides answers to the research questions is exposed in Section 6.2. Meanwhile, research contributions and implications are presented in Section 6.3 and Section 6.4 consecutively. Research limitations and recommendations for future research are made in Section 6.5.

6.2 Summary of the Findings and Fulfilment of the Research Purpose

This study has identified knowledge gaps drawn from the interaction of three research fields (B2B brands, emerging-markets SMEs, and stakeholder theory). The review revealed that branding academics and professionals have an incomplete understanding of how B2B brands are built and managed in coherence with the relational nature of the B2B context. Therefore, two research questions (RQ) were formulated:

- RQ1: How B2B SMEs recipients of government support build and manage their brands?
- RQ2: Do the government SMEs development programmes lead to the enhancement of the brand performance of the participant SMEs?

Meanwhile, three specific research objectives (RO) were developed to answer RQ1 and RQ2 along with the general research objective. RQ1 and RQ2 were attained through achieving RO1 and RO2 successively. Meanwhile, RO3 have resulted from the accomplishment of RO1 and RO2. Each objective fulfilment is discussed in the following sections.

6.2.1 Achievement of Research Objective 1 (RO1)

RO1 was set to evaluate brand building and management in successful SMEs operating in the B2B industry. This objective is fulfilled by answering RQ1. By answering RQ1 two themes were generated, reflecting on the brand building process (i.e. internal and external branding). The two themes are described in Chapter 4 – Section 4.4. The themes underlined the effectiveness of deploying brands as a strategic tool to reach the firm's growth. Also, it has been found that orchestrating internal and external resources is the best strategy to achieve positive results.

6.2.2 Achievement of Research Objective 2 (RO2)

RO2 was developed to investigate the impact of government SME-brand development programmes on the brand performance of the participant SMEs. This research objective was achieved by answering RQ2. The findings from RQ2 were presented in Chapter 4, Section 4.3 and Section 4.4. Also, the results revealed that the lack of resources (financial and non-financial) inspires SMEs to look for support from external partners such as the government. Moreover, it was found that the most prominent sponsorship received by the SMEs is the government assistance. The government assistance entails two forms: direct (financial and technical) and indirect (soft power). The direct support was found to have a positive impact on the firm's growth. Meanwhile, soft power from other countries experience (e.g. South Korea and Turkey) has also a positive influence through export growth.

6.2.3 Achievement of Research Objective 3 (RO3)

RO3 was set to develop a B2B brand management framework for emerging-markets SMEs from stakeholders' theory perspective. This objective was achieved through proposing a Stakeholders B2B Brand Management Framewwork (refer to Chapter 5 – Section 5.3, page 194). The framework was developed from the literature and based on the results from Chapters 4. Meanwhile, the findings revealed that being brand-oriented help SMEs to distinguish itself from the competitors and to achieve financial performance. Noticeably, developing strong B2B brands relies on a sequence of two dimensions, namely (1) understanding of the brand, and (2) branding process. Each dimension is interfered by primary (brand owner or manager and employees) and secondary stakeholders. In this sense, healthy interaction between the primary and secondary stakeholders leads to better brand performance regardless of the challenges. The framework highlights the importance of having engaged employees and strategic partners to enhance brand performance. Finally, the framework is under testing on an SME operating in accounting and consultancy business through following the guidelines described in Section 6.4.1. Marketing audit was undertaken to assess the company marketing and branding orientation at the preliminary stage (refer to Appendix G).

6.3 Research Contribution

The three research objectives have been successfully treated, and consequently, this study has been able to make some valuable contributions to the body of knowledge. Indeed, research contribution refers to the work undertaken by the researcher, and it is theoretically linked to the filling of the research gaps. As such, a research contribution must be original and significant (Baptista, Frick, Holley, Remmik, Tesch & Âkerlind, 2015). Consequently, as illustrated in Chapter 2, Section 2.5, research gaps are of threefold: theoretical, contextual, and methodological. Each filling of the gap is a contribution to the body of knowledge.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the body of knowledge in respect of the interaction of three domains of research (emerging-markets SMEs, B2B branding, and stakeholder theory) and hence, reply to a critical call for research in these fields (e.g., Freeman et al., 2010; Merrilees, Miller & Herington, 2012). First, this study investigated the B2B branding practices from two stakeholders' perspectives brand owners or managers and government, whereas previous research approached branding from a unique stakeholder perceptive. Second, this study addressed stakeholder engagement in decision-making, mainly primary stakeholders (brand owners or managers and employees). Also, this study revealed that the government, as an important secondary stakeholder has a positive effect on brand performance. Third, this study developed a B2B brand management framework using "Stakeholder Theory" to determine the relational blueprint of B2B branding. Besides, this study used the theory to explain the impact of the significant stakeholders in the B2B branding process in an in-depth manner. In doing so, this study contributes to enrich the body of business models in emerging-markets SMEs. Fourth, this study contributes to the body of knowledge through two main implications for managers and policymakers addressed in detail in Section – 6.4.

From a contextual standpoint, this study shed light on B2B branding practices of SMEs in Malaysia to fill the scarcity of studies in B2B brands in emerging-markets and SMEs context. Finally, this study adopted the best practices approach to fill the methodological gap. Thus, branding practices of awarded SMEs were selected as a reference for making sustainable B2B brands because these SMEs went through a rigorous auditing process evaluation of their management and branding processes.

6.4 Research Implications

The implication of this research is twofold: implications for managerial practices and implications for policymakers.

6.4.1 Managerial Implications

The analysis of the findings revealed several key points that could be highlighted as managerial implications for B2B SMEs. To begin with, SMEs owners play a strategic role in the SME and have a significant impact on the structure and culture of the firm; thus, they should be brand-oriented to rip off the benefits of developing brands. Undoubtedly, being brand-oriented consists of putting the brand at the centre of marketing and strategy decisions. Meanwhile, it is vital to adopt an inside-out approach to be able to have successful brands. This approach consists of internal branding and external branding.

Internal branding consists of working on the brand at three levels: quality level, human resource management level, and marketing and innovation level. Quality is very crucial for the firms' growth (Golder, Mitra & Moorman, 2012). Perceived product quality has a positive impact on customers' satisfaction and consequently, customers' preference, together with the customers' purchasing choices (Nikhashemi, Valaei & Tarofder, 2017). The importance of quality for the SMEs respondents is translated into their decision to join the National Mark scheme in order to testify their quality status. In this sense, the SME should focus on strengthening the quality of its products and services before carrying out any branding process.

Employees are real 'asset' for the development of the brand because they represent the company. They are responsible for production and service delivery, and are a source of innovation. Also, the SMEs owners should pay attention to how employees perceive the brand. According to Berger-Remy and Michel (2015), the meaning of the brand can impact the attitudes and the conducts of employees. Also, the understanding of the brand values strengthens the brand image (M'zungu, Merrilees & Miller, 2017; Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018). In this respect, SMEs owners should make sure that their brand meaning and strategy is well perceived; through establishing a useful communication tool such as the brand manual. The brand manual is a reference guidebook that SMEs owners can create to communicate the firm's vision, assist the employees to carry the brand, and guide the directions of the company. The brand manual should include details of employees' behaviour, roles and brand positioning (Baumgarth, 2009).

Furthermore, SMEs owners should engage their employees in the brand building process (Joukanen, Niinimäki & Sundell, 2018) because a positive engagement of the employees strengthens the brand image (M’zungu, Merrilees & Miller, 2017; Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan & Merrilees, 2018). Thus, to have a successful engagement, the SMEs owners should establish regular training programmes, create an effective internal communication system, and provide a healthy working environment. Clearly, training is an essential component of the employer's branding (Cascio & Graham, 2016) because training programmes help in improving the technical and communication skills of the employees along with educating them on the brand, and consequently achieve the set goals.

Meanwhile, training should be supported by reliable internal communication. Alongside brand manual, SMEs owners should practice brainstorming or open discussion, establish a rewarding system, and hold regular meetings to ensure that the brand strategy is on track. Also, providing a healthy environment, either emotional or physical, is very fundamental to reach the branding objectives. In reality, managing successful internal branding is based on satisfying employees' needs and facilitating their value congruence with their work context, and enhancing employee brand knowledge and identification (Boukis, Gounaris & Lings, 2017).

Marketing and innovation are interrelated and are principal sources of revenue-generating. Thus, SMEs owners should be innovation-oriented and invest in marketing to promote their brands. On the one hand, innovation depends on the sector that emerges from a healthy working environment and effective internal communication. In this sense, interested SMEs should provide supporting innovation climates and remove threatening job stressors (e.g. time pressure and job insecurity) (Ren & Zhang, 2015). Meanwhile, "*innovation covers 12 dimensions: offerings, platforms, solutions, customers, customer experience, value capture, processes, organisation, supply chain, presence, networking and brand*" (Sawhney, Wolcott & Arroniz, 2006, p. 76). Thus, SMEs owners should consider which dimension is a priority to develop further and could have a positive impact on their brands.

On the other hand, SMEs owners should decide on what marketing platform (i.e. digital, traditional, or both) to invest in, depending on the sector and the strategic directions. Digital marketing is more profitable and less costly compared to the traditional platform. At the same time, it provides opportunities to reach competently existing and potential customers (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). However, using both platforms has become indispensable to business growth in SMEs (Dumitriu et al., 2019); Hence, SMEs owners can use both marketing platforms and most importantly should keep up with market trends to design a suitable marketing strategy.

Referring to external branding, SMEs owners should consider developing external networking to help with their branding progress. Also, it is crucial to adopt a smart external communication to disseminate the brand value to different stakeholders. In this respect, as suggested by Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997), SMEs owners should identify the stakeholders; determine the stakeholders' power, interest, and delineate the impact analysis. In practice, the most relevant external stakeholders for SMEs are government, customers, and suppliers. Meanwhile, across the world, the governments are providing technical and financial supports to SMEs covering multiple areas (e.g. innovation, export). Thus, SMEs owners should look for appropriate programmes that fit their brand ambition. Customer is another vital stakeholder that SMEs owners can have with an effective partnership. Partnering with customers or co-branding is a common practice and very profitable (Capon, Berthon, Hulbert & Pitt, 2001). In the same way, sponsorship stands as a strategic external branding means. In this situation, the SME can either receive sponsorship or support other businesses. Sponsorship comes in the form of cash payment or provision of in-kind products or services to an individual, cause or event (Allen, O'Toole, McDonnell & Harris, 2002).

To sum up, emerging markets SMEs interested in building their brands should follow the four steps described below:

- Mind-shift: SMEs owners/managers should change their mindsets from being market-oriented and start focusing on the brand as a strategic source of competitive advantage. This means that SMEs owners/managers should adopt the mindset of being brand-oriented, and thus consider investing in building brands.

- Brand Identity value: SMEs owners/managers should identify their brand identityvalue. In other terms, determine what their brands stand for. Also, SMEs owners/managers should define the brand vision and thus the positioning. This means that SMEs owners/managers should highlight what makes them different from their competitors.

- Develop internal branding: SMEs owners/managers should build their brand internally to establish internal brand ambassadors. Hence, employees should be involved in branding decision-making. In this respect, SMEs owners/managers should enhance their internal communication by using multiple techniques such as establishing brand manual, practising open discussion, and brainstorming. Also, SMEs owners/managers should be creative and innovative, follow the market' trends and use IT to develop their brands internally.

- Develop external branding: SMEs owners/managers should identify the most important external stakeholders capable of influencing their brand value positively. Hence, SMEs owners/managers should expand their network and adopt smart external communication.

6.4.2 Policy Implications

The empirical findings and the review of the literature highlighted the importance of the programmes developed by the government to enhance the competitiveness of the SME sector. Example of such programmes is the National Mark of the Malaysian Brand scheme introduced by SME Corp Malaysia to improve the presence of local brands domestically and internationally. However, this study emphasises the role of soft power to strengthen the image of the nation. Indeed, a robust country image builds a positive association in the mind of consumers. Thus, this study even though praises the efforts that were undertaken by the Malaysian government have produced fruitful results, it suggests that the Malaysian government should focus on developing soft power, frame it as a supportive tool for its SME development strategies, and export it to the neighbouring countries and others such as Arab countries.

Indeed, developing soft power is an essential move because of countries with positive influence export more to their fans (Rose, 2016). In this sense, the Malaysian government can benefit from the Turkish and Korean experiences, which are dominating the Arab TV and consequently, the marketplace. Moreover, this study states that Malaysian experience in promoting SMEs may be helpful to other emerging and frontier markets such as Morocco (the researcher’s home country). The lessons comprise of the following three points:

- Identify the SME development roadmap: this step is crucial to set the strategic directions and to ensure the effectiveness of the policies. Also, the roadmap covers the economical and social missions for the development of the SME sector. Thus, policymakers should study the SME sector carefully in order to understand its challenges and potential opportunities regarding the local business landscape and to ease the establishment of a successful SME development blueprint.

- Set comprehensive and integrative strategies: planning a strategy should be comprehensive and integrative. Thus, the policymakers should relate their planning to the nation branding strategy since countries with greater influence benefit better from the export. Also, having a comprehensive and integrative strategy means that the policymakers ought to provide a comprehensive view of the necessary financial and capital resources. Meanwhile, under a comprehensive and integrative strategy, policymakers should be creative and establish parallel supportive programmes either direct (e.g. entrepreneurship programmes) or indirect (e.g. soft power such as TV production) that can enhance the competitiveness of the SME sector.

- Set Focus SME development programmes: this step is crucial to avoid waste of energy, time, and money; because the SME sector covers multiple business settings and industries. Following the footstep of Malaysia, interested countries can establish a similar brand development programmes mirroring their branding nation strategies in order to improve the marketing and the exports capacity.

6.5 Research Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Although this study has made significant contributions, some limitations need to be deliberated as avenues for future research. First, even though this empirical study included only eight cases of SMEs, this study has no intention to generalise the findings. However, it would be interesting to undertake interviews with other SMEs from different sectors (e.g. sectors not covered by the study) to detect if any new information would arise. Also, quantitative research methods can be used to have an accurate picture and thus generate the findings. Moreover, the suggestions provided in Section 6.4.1 can be employed by SMEs interested in building strong brands in regard to their industry context and growth needs.

Second, this study concentrated on people in direct relation to the programme (brand owners or managers). However, it has been found that employees have a direct impact on brand building process. Thus, it would be thoughtful to include this category of stakeholders in future research to study all the internal dimensions of the branding process in-depth.

Third, the precision in the data gathering is impacted by the category of interviewees. Even though the majority of studies in branding did not distinguish between brand owners or managers, this study argues that the answer given by brand owners are more profound compared to brand managers. Thus, this study recommends differentiating between both categories of interviewees to frame the study with precision.

Fourth, the current study relies only on interviews to study the impact of the programme on SMEs' growth with no return to the measurement for confirmation. It would be interesting to use other measures of firm value such as turnover.

Fifth, it has been found that 15 per cent of participants SMEs did not renew. It is recommended to carry out a study on this category of SMEs who joined the programme but did not renew to see how their brands evolve without the help of the government. Also, this study focused on SMEs winners of the National Mark of Malaysian Brand. Future research may expand the current study design to include other winners from other programmes (e.g.1- InnoCert). Consequently, those firms could have different levels of brand orientation, which may impact the firm's value.

Sixth, brand management has progressed from the 'economic approach' (firm-centric) to the 'cultural approach' (macro-centric) as described by Heding, Knudtzen and Bjerre (2009). However, the emergence of the gig economy has made a drastic change in the business model. For instance, the 'retail apocalypse' has impacted the retail business in most developed countries (Helm, Kim & Van Riper, 2018). For instance, Macy's has long dominated the retail business. However, the emergence of e-commerce has made a drastic change in Macy's business premises. As such, hundreds of stores were closed as the firm is shifting toward online business. Consequently, marketing and branding strategies are affected to keep up with this new advent. For example, 94 per cent of US firms use social media as their marketing tools (Bosari, 2012); which leads to the digitisation of marketing and branding activities. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the digital revolution and its impact on branding activities.

Seventh, this study proposes to keep updating the concept of the brand by taking into consideration the nature of the industry (e.g. B2B and B2C) because branding is different in B2C compared to B2B as explained in Chapter 2. In fact, this study concluded that there is a difference between B2C and B2B branding in emerging markets context whereby the government plays an important role in supporting SMEs in their business growth including their branding engagement. Moreover, the impact of the gig economy on branding should be considered because branding is part of the whole firm's system. Clearly, the gig economy has affected the firms at multiple levels, such as HR and logistics. For instance, the gig economy redefined the workplace where most employees prefer flexibility (Gleim, Johnsona & Lawson, 2019). Employees are a significant contributor to brand enhancement as they serve as ambassadors of the firm (Khan & Ede, 2009). Meanwhile, the advent of the New Economic Model (NEM) paved the way for a new type of employment known as teleworking (or distance working) where employees are enjoying work/life balance. Thus, questions should be raised to determine the impact of the NEM on firms' branding systems and consequently, how the brand should be redefined.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A– Interview Questions with Governing Bodies

	Questions	Theories guiding the questions
Phase 1	1- Do Malaysian SMEs consider Branding?	Theory of brand awareness
	2- On a scale of 1 to 10, how many SMEs are aware of the importance of branding? and;	
	3- Malaysian SMEs consider what kind of branding?	
	4- What are the challenges that Malaysian SMEs are facing in terms of branding? and;	Theory of competitiveness in reference to Porter (1990).
	5- What are the solutions offered by your organization to overcome branding challenges?	
Phase 2	1- What are the components of your Malaysia brand certification?	Theory of competitiveness in reference to Porter (1990).
	2- What are the benefits of Malaysia brand certification?	
	3- How important is branding in the certification process?	
	4- What do you think about the SMEs performance and reputation after winning the certification?	Theory of stakeholder in reference to Jones (2005) and Freeman et al. (2010).
	5- How do you manage the relationship with SMEs during the certification process?	
	6- Do SMEs renew after the certification‘s expiration? And do they ask for more branding programs?	

Appendix B – Interview Questions with the SMEs

Questions	**Theories guiding the questions**
1- Why did you choose to have a brand?	Theory of brand identity
2- How did you develop your brand? And how long it took from you to develop your brand?	Brand building blocks in reference to Aaker (1991) and Keller (1996)
3- How do you manage your brand?	
4- What are the challenges faced by your company when developing your brand?	
5- How do you see your brand in the next five years?	
6- Why have you chosen to go for Malaysian brand certification?	Theory of competitiveness in reference to Porter (1990).
7- Was the brand certification enough for building your brand?	Theory of competitiveness in reference to Porter (1990). Theory of stakeholder in reference to Jones (2005) and Freeman et al. (2010).
8- What do you think about company performance and reputation after being awarded the certification?	
9- How did you manage the relationship with SME Corp Malaysia and SIRIM QAS during the certification process?	
10- Would you go for renewing the certification? And are you still in contact with SME Corp. for SMEs promoting programs?	

Appendix C – Interview Protocol

- Date:____________________________
- Start Time: _____________Stop Time: _________________________________
- Interviewer:____
- Organisation: ____
- Location: ____

Opening:

At the opening, the interviewer should do the following:

- Thank the manager for the interview opportunity.
- Introduce his/herself.
- Provide a clear and brief description of the researched topic and the purpose of the study.
- Provide the timeline of the interview.
- Explain about respondent's rights during the interview (protection and confidentiality).
- Deliver informed consent form for signing and provide further clarification if requested.
- Ask for permission to record the interview.
- Take notes about the interview session whether during the interview or after it. This step will help the researcher to describe the respondent's attitude toward questions and any events that will occur during the interview.

Body

- Get background information on the organisation.
- Ask questions.
- Use probes when needed to clarify respondents' answers and get more detailed information on the researched topic.

Closing

- Summarize the major topics addressed during the interview.
- Provide an explanation about the next step of the interview and that the respondent will receive the interview transcript to give a feedback on initial findings.
- Thank the respondent for his/her time and collaboration.

Appendix D – Informed Consent Form

Topic of the Research	Exploration of Branding in Malaysian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

INTRODUCTION:

You are invited to take part in a dissertation study supervised by Dr Mahani Mohammad Abdu Shakur and conducted by the doctoral candidate referenced below: Samira RAKI, (email address), (cell).

You are being asked to participate in this study because your company has been awarded "Malaysian Brand Mark". Your participation in this research is highly valuable to the study, but it is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to contribute to the research, or you may stop the interview at any time. Please read this form and ask any questions you may like before proceeding with the interview.

PURPOSE: This study is seeking to explore branding in Malaysian SMEs.

PROCEDURE: You are being asked to participate in an individual interview. The interview will be conducted by the doctoral candidate or her representative.

RISKS AND CONFIDENTIALITY: There is no risk to you for participation in this study, and your answers are purely voluntary. Any information from you will remain confidential between you and the university researchers; and will only be used for the study purposes and will not be used against you or result in any negative consequences.

Upon completion of this study, you will have the opportunity to see the study results.

The results will be disseminated at the faculty colloquium, conferences and/or published in a journal. If the data is published, no individual information will be disclosed unless you decide otherwise.

Once the research is concluded, all audiotapes will be destroyed. The researcher will need to keep the transcripts, with no identifying names, as supporting data for the study. This will be kept safely and securely for an indefinite time with access to no one but the researcher and the university.

COSTS: There are no costs to you of participation in this study beyond your time.

QUESTIONS: Should you have any inquiries, please direct them as per the persons and numbers listed in the introduction above.

By signing below, you agree to take part in the research:

Name/Organisation	Date	Signature

Appendix E – List of Publications

Journal Papers

- Raki, S., & Shakur, M. M. A. (2018). Brand orientation in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) from Malaysian government perspective. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 8*(7), 377-391.
- Raki, S., & Shakur, M. M. A. (2018). Brand management in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) from stakeholder theory perspective. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 8*(7), 392–409.
- Ab-Rahim, R., Shah, S.-U.-M., & Raki, S. (2018). Impacts of NGOs microfinance on women empowerment in Northern Pakistan. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *8*(12), 1–13.

Conferences Papers

- Raki, S., Shakur, M. M. A, Hajazi, M., U., Kamaruzaman, M., N., & Ya'kob, S., A., (2018). Brand management in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) operating in the business-to-business (B2B) industry. *Proceeding of the 8th International Borneo of Business Conference* (pp 202-213).
- Shah, S.-U.-M., Ab-Rahim, R., & Raki, S. (2018). The social impact of microfinance on poverty reduction. *Proceeding of the 8th International Borneo of Business Conference* (pp 1092-1101).

Academic Awards

- Winner of “Best Researcher Award” in Organizational dynamics, Knowledge and Business Strategies, and “Best Researcher (Overall) Award” at Borneo Business Research Colloquim (BBRC), 2018. Research Title: Development of Brand Management Model for Small and Medium Enterprises (SME)s.
- Winner of “Best Paper Award” at BBRC, 2016. Research Title: Brand Orientation in Malaysian SMEs from the Perspective of SME Corp and MATRADE.

Appendix F – Non-Disclosure Form

I hereby …….…………… declare checking the transcripts of a doctoral research undertaken by Ms ……………….......... Thus, I declare this work will remain confidential.

Signature

Phone Number:

Email:

Appendix G – List of Categories

Categories	**Abbreviation**
Attitude	ATT
Brand	BR
Brand characteristics	BCH
Brand Manual	BRM
Business	BIZ
Clients	CLT
Competitors	COMP
Emotion	EMO
Government	GOV
History	HIS
Objectives	OBJ
obstacles	OBS
Opportunities	OPP
Results	RT
Success	SUC
Suppliers	SUPP
tactics	TAC
Trust	TRT
Value	VAL

Appendix F – Marketing Audit

Marketing Audit			
Auditor	Ms Mobile: Email:	**Company**	Name: General Manager: Mobile: Email:
Date	-------------------------------	**Venue**	---------------------- ---------------------- ----------------------

Signature	
Auditor	Company

Executive Summary

- **What is a Marketing Audit?**
  - Marketing Audit is a comprehensive objective review, analysis and evaluation of organisation marketing goals, strategies, action plans, performance, and results. It is a vital part of the marketing planning process, and it is conducted whether at the beginning of the process or during the implementation of the plan.
  - Marketing audit considers both internal (e.g. marketing plan) and external (e.g. customers, competition and marketplace) factors are influencing marketing planning.

- **Objectives of this marketing Audit**
  - Determine the state of the art of your marketing management and the level of your brand orientation.
  - Get an in-depth understanding of your marketing management (strategy, functions, and environment).
  - Develop a marketing and branding strategy and action plans.

Marketing Audit Questions

Part I: State of the art of your Marketing Management

A- General Questions

1. Describe your business?
2. What is your ideal client?
3. Do you have a marketing strategy?
4. How do you describe your marketing management?
5. What are your marketing goals, and how you can achieve them?

B- Marketing Functions

Service

6. What is the current situation of your service?
7. How profitable is your service portfolio?

Price

8. Is your pricing in the right way?

Place

9. Is your business located in the right place, facilitating access of clients?

Promotion

10. How do you promote your business?
11. Do you use traditional marketing channels? If so, what tools do you usually use?
    a. Advertising.
    b. Direct marketing.
    c. Public Relationship.
    d. Others: ……………………………………………………
12. Do you have a website?
13. Do you use online marketing? If so, what tools you usually use?
    a. Search Engine Optimised (SEO).
    b. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google, etc.).
    c. Emails/Newsletters.
    d. Blog
    e. Testimonials.
    f. Online banner ads.
    g. Others: ……………………………………………………
14. Which marketing channel is generating more sales?
15. Do you have a prospect database?
16. Do you have referral partners?
17. Do you have a key marketing message that you are using in all marketing channels?

People

18. Do you have a marketing team or a marketing manager?
19. What are the roles of the marketing manager/team?
20. How does your marketing team/manager communicate with other internal functions?
21. Are your employees dealing with your clients?
22. How effective is your CRM (Relationship between sales and customers)?

Process

23. Do you have a website?
24. Describe your marketing process?
25. How much time you usually spend on marketing every week?
26. Do you have a marketing plan?
27. Do you have a marketing calendar?
28. Do you use any marketing analysis tools? If so, what are those tools?

Physical Evidence

29. What is the situation of your business's physical evidence?

C- Marketing environment

30. Describe the following Macro-environmental (PESTLE) factors?

Political factors	
Economics factors	
Sociocultural factors	
Technological factors	
Legal factors	
Environmental factors	
Political factors	

2- Micro environmental (SWOT)

Internal factors - Strengths

31. What are your distinctive skills?
32. What specialised knowledge do you have?
33. What experience do you have in general and in marketing in specific?
34. What is the most profitable area in your business?
35.

Internal factors – Weaknesses

36. Which area in your business do you need to improve?
37. What are your resource limitations?
38. What is the least profitable area in your business?
39. Which area in your business costs you time and/or money?

External factors – Opportunities

40. What are your current business goals?
41. How can you do more with your present clients?
42. Do you know your most profitable clients?
43. Do you any potential target audiences you need to reach?
44. Are you targeting prospect sharing the same profile as your most profitable clients?
45. Do you know what motivates your clients to choose your service?
46. Are there any new services that provide an opportunity for your business?

External factors - Threats

47. What challenges do you face?
48. What is the strong point of your competitors?
49. What is your business environment threat?

D- Marketing Resources

50. Do you have a budget for your marketing plans?
51. Are you getting value from investing in marketing?

E- Brand orientation

52. What do you think of having a brand?
53. What is your definition of a brand?
54. What are the benefits of having a brand?
55. Do you think that having a brand will have value for your business?
56. If you have enough budgets, would you invest in branding?
57. How do you visualise your brand?