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Exploring marketing activities to strengthen brand equity within an SME

- A case study on the company PAUL och THOM

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Abstract

Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) are often researched through the perspectives and theories created from studies of large organizations. This constitutes the basis of a theoretical problem when studying SMEs. Specifically, SMEs and large organizations work differently with marketing for achieving competitive advantages, resulting in different requirements for theories and models. There is little literature on marketing in SMEs in particular regarding brand equity, even though SMEs account for the majority of businesses in most economies. Moreover, ways of conceptualizing brand equity in literature offers little guidance for SMEs to realize the full potential of what brand equity as a concept can create.

To begin addressing this theoretical problem this case study has investigated a company that has been working to achieve a recognizable brand name, PAUL och THOM. Thus, the empirical problem addressed in this study is the perceived challenge of strengthening brand equity through marketing activities in an SME, such as catching the attention of consumers in grocery stores within the limited space and limited time to make them consider the products for purchase. Thereby, the study contributes by finding ways, presented in the case company's activities to increase consumers' recognition of the brand.

The used method in this thesis is a qualitative approach combined with a case study design. The study has applied an inductive reasoning based on the generated knowledge from the data collected through semi-structured interviews. This study adopted the Consumer Based Brand Equity model (CBBE) for the understanding of brand equity in SMEs. The CBBE-model constitutes four brand attributes: brand identity, brand meaning, brand response and brand relationship with the brand building tools. These attributes create the basis of the conceptual framework, that shows the interconnection of the brand building attributes to the brand equity. Moreover, the conceptual framework presents the need for seeing the model as a process, where the attributes have to be maintained in the everyday activities in the company.

The main findings of this study are the marketing activities, that are vital for this case company: the joint communication, the change of the brand name, the new type of exposures, the communication through radio and television and the company responsibility throughout the value chain. These marketing activities can add knowledge to SMEs that are interested in strengthening their brand equity. PAUL och THOM has a history of changing their brand in order to increase the awareness and create a more recognized brand on the market.

The main conclusion of this study is related to the complex and developing market, including the behavior of the consumer: one way to succeed on the market was to participate with strategic hubs on the market. Strategic market hubs found in this study facilitated the communication of the brand through using hubs such as: grocery stores, radio, television channel, Facebook and Instagram. This is one way for the wholesaler of getting in contact with a bigger consumer base for SMEs.

This study contributes specifically to knowledge in SMEs that are interested in building brand equity and researchers interested in understanding such processes. It offers in-depth insight on brand equity conceptualized as activities identified from case study research on PAUL och THOM. Moreover, these findings can also help to inform regional business policies, where the goal is to support SMEs to become more competitive in Sweden until 2020. Lastly, this study presents strategic choices and associated activities that can strengthen the brand equity in particular SMEs and identifies how to understand such processes.

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1 Introduction

In the following chapter the area of study and problem statement regarding marketing within SMEs is introduced and then focusing more specifically on the problem regarding brand equity in SMEs. Furthermore, the aim and research questions are presented followed by the delimitations and outline of the thesis, illustrated both in text and visually.

1.1 Area of study

Marketing constitutes the business in terms of the goal to satisfy customers in a sense that is better done than the competitors (Fuller, 1994; Abimbola, 2001; Simpson & Taylor, 2002). Satisfied customers buy more products, they tend to not be sensitive to price changes and entail higher sales and lower costs, which are favorable characteristics for a company (Shocker *et al.* 1994). To achieve these desirable characteristics, marketing can be used to create a strong brand, that is hard to copy (Abimbola, 2001). Marketing also provides the opportunity to focus on the intangible resources, the brand, to differentiate the company and thereby creating competitive advantages (Mzungu *et al.* 2010; Mitchell *et al.* 2013). A competitive advantage is, for example when a company can provide a consumer with a product for a lower price than competitors or to provide a greater value due to differentiation. One example could be the retailers' own brands, that often are cheaper than other brands, that might create a competitive advantage based on the difference in prices. Differentiation between products on the market is about creating a presence within customers' minds and thereby create loyal customers (Wood, 2000) based on the customers' needs (Kotler *et al.* 2017). However, products can only differ to a certain level regarding the material aspects as for example iPhones and Samsung mobile phones, that are quite similar concerning the material. Jet, the brands are differentiating their products and added value can be created by putting effort on branding in a company.

Branding in general can create added value to a product or service, which helps both the company to differentiate their product on the market and the consumer to satisfy their personal needs (Kotler *et al*. 2017). Moreover, branding seems important as consumers get exposed to tons of information every day and need a way to sort this information in our branded societies we live in. Nowadays, consumers are able to compare products and services with a rather little amount of personal time, through the access of internet as for example prisjakt.se (Srinivasan *et al.* 2002) which also makes it easier to switch between brands. A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or some sort of combination between them, which helps the consumer to identify a product or service from the different competitors (Armstrong *et al.* 2017; Kotler *et al.* 2017). However, brands are not only symbols but can also represent ideological dimensions, to provide customers with value and to let people experience feelings such as social approval (Keller, 2009; Ilaw, 2014).

Feelings or expectations connected to a brand and the possible added values from it are needed to differentiate products or services, whereby the tangible attributes no longer are enough (Vraneševic´& Stančec, 2003). Brands are also built upon value based on the relation people can have to a brand connected to their own principles and beliefs (Ilaw, 2014). Moreover, they can reflect the consumers own taste, style, wealth or membership in social groups for example choosing Windows or Apple computers. Thus, the presence of brands does not just shape people but also organizational identities in order to compete in the market (Kotler *et al.* 2017).

Brand equity is a concept in marketing that is about the value of a product or service that can be enhanced through the associations with the brand name and the meaning ascribed to it (Keller, 1993; Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998; Spence & Essoussi, 2010). This implies that a product or service with a well-known brand name should create a different awareness within the consumers' minds, compared to brand names which are less well-known (Keller, 2009). People have probably heard of well-known brands for example Google, Nike and Coca-Cola. One could say that these companies have understood the concept of creating a strong brand and the positive effect it can have on a company's performance. Google has, for example a brand value of 245 billion US dollars (Statista, 2017). Positive outcomes for a company working with brand equity can be an achievement of competitive advantages based on increased customer demand and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991; Bendixen *et al.* 2004; Keller, 2009; Armstrong *et al*. 2017; Kotler *et al.* 2017). Other advantages can be that brand extensions are more easily accepted by the consumers, better trade leverage and larger margins. However, these outcomes are mainly described in larger organizations.

In existing literature, the focus has been on the world's most successful brands, but how small and medium-sized enterprises (**SMEs**) can work with branding is not as developed (Krake, 2005; Berthon *et al.* 2008; Hirvonen *et al.* 2013). SMEs can be categorized into a medium, small and micro enterprises (Ekonomifakta, 2017; European Commission, 2018). Medium-sized companies have a turnover below 50 million euros, less than 250 employees and less than 43 million Euros of a balance sheet total. Small enterprises can have up to 50 employees, 10 million Euros in turnover and a 10 million Euros balance sheet total (European Commission, 2018). Micro-enterprises have up to 10 employees, 2 million Euros turnover and balance sheet total. However, competition is something every organization faces irrespective of its size (Asamoah, 2014). In order to compete in our societies where people get exposed to hundreds of brands every day (American marketing association, 2017) organizations have put much effort and resources on achieving brand equity (Kotler *et al.* 2017). Nevertheless, brand equity is not only important for large organizations but SMEs have to work differently due to their different conditions, in order to strengthen brand equity (Asamoah, 2014).

1.1.1 Problem background

Differences between SMEs and large organizations lie in the availability of resources, the amount of expertise or specialist knowledge and the owner's guidance on the decision making (Fuller, 1994; Coviello *et al*. 2000; Abimbola, 2001; Gilmore *et al.* 2001; Simpson & Taylor, 2002; Zontanos & Anderson, 2004; Krake, 2005; Wong & Merrillees, 2005; Spence & Essoussi, 2010; Horan *et al.* 2011; Jämsä *et al.* 2011; Centeno *et al.* 2013; Asamoah, 2014). These different characteristics are seen as opportunities for SMEs by researchers and as limitations by others (Odoom *et al.* 2017). The differences could be interpreted as limitations because SMEs tend to focus on short-term perspectives and to keep the business running with the available resources (Krake, 2005; Berthon *et al.* 2008; Centeno *et al.* 2013). However, others see limited resources as possibilities to reach more innovative solutions (Centeno *et al.* 2013; Hirvonen *et al*. 2013) such as the influence of the owner/manager, careful planning, spending time to understand what branding should mean for the organization and by involving everybody in the organization (Abimbola, 2001).

Some researchers see the described different characteristics as limiting (Fuller, 1994; Simpson & Taylor, 2002; Krake, 2005; Wong & Merrillees, 2005; Spence & Essoussi, 2010; Horan *et al.* 2011) whereby other researchers see them as advantages for SMEs with their informal and more flexible structures (Abimbola, 2001; Gilmore *et al.* 2001; Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Berthon *et al.* 2008; Centeno *et al.* 2013; Hirvonen *et al.* 2013). The marketing practices from

SMEs have been written from the perspective of large organizations, which probably explains why SMEs marketing practices are seen as informal, short-term and non-strategic (Coviello *et al*. 2000). Such criticism is based on comparing SMEs to large organizations (Zontanos & Anderson, 2004), even though it is known that smaller firms act differently than larger ones (Gaddefors & Anderson, 2009) and theories for large organizations often not are applicable for SMEs (Siu, 2005). SMEs must have succeeded with their marketing as they account for the majority of the businesses in the most economies (Krake, 2005; Opoku *et al.* 2007; Berthon *et al.* 2008; Asamoah 2014, Odoom, 2016).

SMEs are a dominant force in many markets

SMEs are a dominating force in most economies does also apply to the food industry. In the food industry, 99 percent of the businesses are SMEs and in addition one of Europe's biggest industries (Jordbruksverket, 2012). In Sweden, the food industry is the fourth biggest industry. The food industry has grown both in Europe and in Sweden, especially regarding the consumption of meat, which can be connected to food trends such as low carb high fat (LCHF) and glycemic index (GI), to eat slow digestive carbohydrates. In Sweden, the food industry generates 16 billion Euro, employs about 50 000 people and is an important sector. SMEs are not only the majority of businesses but they also provide opportunities to create variation, geographical distribution, niches and local processing of their raw materials (*ibid*.). Thus, might be helpful in generating the double amount of the food that will be needed until 2050 in order to feed every person on the planet (UN, 2018). One sector that contributes to provide food to people, is the fastmoving consumer goods (FMCG) sector. In Sweden, this sector has a rather unique market structure where one actor, ICA, has almost 50 percent of the market share (Jordbruksverket, 2012). Even in the FMCG sector, 96 percent of the businesses are SMEs and the broad existence of them in various industries. Existing literature is underdeveloped regarding brand theories and more specific concerning brand equity for SMEs (Abimbola, 2001; Krake, 2005; Keller, 2009).

Brand equity is an important concept as it enables managers to consider specifically how their marketing strategies might improve the value of the brand (Bendixen *et al.* 2004). However, how to conceptualize brand equity in literature offers little guidance for SMEs to realize the full potential that brand equity as a concept can create (Krake, 2005; Berthon *et al.* 2008; Horan *et al.* 2011). Furthermore, existing literature about marketing suggests that SMEs spend little time and resources on marketing in their daily work (Krake, 2005; Berthon *et al.* 2008; Hirvonen *et al*. 2013) however they do not neglect it (Coviello *et al.* 2000). Still, there is little literature on marketing in SMEs which enables them to evaluate and measure their brand equity (Spence & Essoussi, 2010). In large organizations, brand equity is a developed concept in management theory and practice (Hirvonen *et al*. 2013)

1.1.2 The theoretical and empirical problem

Literature for SMEs about brand equity seems underdeveloped due to the focus on studying larger organizations (Krake, 2005; Spence & Essoussi, 2011). Thereby, SMEs have been needed to adapt to theories based on large organizations. Research has been focused on mentioning the different issues, implications, problems and concerns that a company and the owners'/managers' face in the marketing in SMEs (Simpson & Taylor, 2002; Wong & Merrilees, 2005; Krake, 2005; Berthon *et al.* 2008; Opoku *et al.* 2007; Renton *et al.*, 2015) in order to achieve competitive advantages. Moreover, marketing and marketing activities have not been presented for small firms (O'Donnel, 2011). One could say that researchers have been studying SMEs through the perspectives and theories created for large organizations, which constitutes the basis of the theoretical problem. Thus, SMEs that work differently with marketing compared to large organizations in order to achieve competitive advantages does not fit into theories and models (*ibid.*). O'Donnel (2011) points out that previous studies have highlighted, but nonetheless ignored this dilemma. His contributions are activities that can be seen as key marketing activities SMEs can use to market their products and services.

In this study, the marketing activities are used to understand in what sense they can contribute to strengthening the brand equity. SMEs will have to work differently to strengthen the brand equity (Asamoah, 2014) and thereby create a more recognizable brand and competitive advantage. To begin to address the theoretical problem a case study is conducted in order to investigate how this particular case company has been working to achieve a more recognizable brand name. This study wishes to contribute to knowledge for SMEs that are interested in building brand equity by adding insight into the conceptualized activities of this thesis case company.

Kenning *et al.* (2011) points out that there is a low number of studies regarding wholesalers and there is a scarce number of guidelines for achieving brand equity customized for SMEs (Krake, 2005; Spence & Essoussi, 2010) that makes this case interesting to be further investigated. Moreover, the empirical problem can be connected to the perceived challenges of catching the attention of the consumers in the grocery stores in the limited space and limited time to make consumers consider the products for purchase. Therefore, this study tries to find ways presented in the case company's activities in order to increase the chance for consumers to recognize the brand. In the changing marketing communication environment where technology and internet have changed the way the world interacts and communicates where the brand has become a marketing priority to communicate (Keller, 2009).

The empirical relevance for this case is to provide both, academics and practitioners, a deeper understanding of how brand equity could be strengthened for an SME wholesaler with examples of specific marketing activities. These findings can possibly contribute to the regional business policies for the support of SMEs, in order to increase competitive advantage or creation of new enterprises in Sweden (European Parliament, 2018). This program supports SMEs until 2020 with research and innovation (European Commission, 2018). Moreover, as SMEs are a dominant group in the economies all over the world there is a need to provide insight in the development of creating survival and growth for SMEs (Renton *et al.* 2015) whereby brand equity can be one way to contribute to this development. This study begins to address the gap of knowledge, that researchers have been studying SMEs through the perspectives and theories created for large organizations. Thus, SMEs that work differently with marketing compared to large organizations in order to achieve competitive advantages, does not fit into existing theories and models. Hence, it looks as if SMEs are not working with marketing as they are working in a different way.

1.2 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate developments of brand equity in an SME from the Swedish food wholesale sector and identify a way to conceptualize such processes. This aim is addressed from case study research on PAUL och THOM with a particular focus on the marketing activities they deploy to strengthen their brand equity. Thus, the following research questions were identified to guide research:

- What marketing activities does PAUL och THOM work with to strengthening the brand equity?
- How can the marketing activities be conceptualized to better understand brand equity within SMEs?

The first research question is descriptive to create an overview of the marketing activities that a company can work with, in order to then connect it to the brand equity and to understand in what sense the activities can be seen as strengthening. The second question is more theoretically grounded as the conceptualized activities can contribute to new knowledge useful for SMEs to strengthen their brand equity as most literature is based on marketing models for large organizations.

1.3 Unit of analysis

Odoom *et al.* (2017) identified a lack of existing literature about brand equity in the European context with cases from Italy, Finland and Germany, only. Therefore, the chosen case company is the Swedish wholesaler, PAUL och THOM. PAUL och THOM imports delicacies from Europe and tries to offer high-quality products to their customers (PAUL och THOM, *Om oss*, 2018). The company has 29 employees, a turnover of 16 million Euros and a balance sheet total of 4 million Euros (Alla bolag, 2016), hence the company can be seen as a small enterprise, despite the exceeding turnover. They changed their corporate brand three years ago and has since then undertaken considerable investment in the organizational processes and their marketing to create a more recognizable brand. This makes PAUL och THOM suitable to investigate the notion of brand equity in an SME and to start addressing the gap in the literature. Thereby, lessons can be learned by looking at marketing activities that in PAUL och THOM's case can be deemed successful to build brand equity in an SME.

1.4 Delimitations

This thesis focuses on one Swedish wholesale company and tries to investigate the marketing activities to strengthen the brand equity. Focusing on the internal activities a wholesale company uses to strengthen their brand and thereby increase the brand equity. This research will not focus on creating guidelines to build a strong brand, to produce strategies for marketing or to explore the relationship between market orientation and brand orientation. Furthermore, it is not relevant for this study to look into how brand equity is measured or evaluated as this thesis wants to conceptualize the process of strengthening the brand equity.

1.5 Thesis outline

The structure of the thesis is influenced by a narrative literature review, that is the basis of the introduction for this thesis, in chapter one and illustrated for the whole outline in figure 1.

Figure 1. Outline of the thesis

The introduction consists of the area of study, problem statement, the aim, and the research questions. Chapter two has focused on the methodology used for the thesis whereby the principles, rules, and methods are presented to collect and analyze the data. Chapter three presents the theoretical background and presents used theory. Chapter four is divided into the empirical background and empirical data, to provide by both primary and secondary data. In this chapter the case object, PAUL och THOM is presented. Moreover, chapter five shows the data analysis which is done with an interpretative point of view followed by the discussion. The discussion is about discussing thoughts and ideas about the findings. Lastly, chapter six provides the conclusions of this thesis, connecting the findings to the aim and the contributions.

2 Method

In this chapter the information about what methodological approach, strategy, and design were chosen to conduct this study and thereby ensure the quality and relationship to the aim and research questions. Thereafter, more specific methods and rules are used to guide the collection and analysis of date, to acquire appropriate knowledge. The critical reflection regarding the chosen methodology and methods are presented during the texts in order to show the reflexivity and make potential biases visible.

2.1 Research paradigm, approach and reasoning

The research paradigm is a viewpoint every person takes where individuals share common beliefs and how problems can be addressed and understood in order to achieve knowledge (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A paradigm has different components: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Scotland, 2012). Ontology is about defining what reality really is. Epistemology concerns the heritage of knowledge, how it can be achieved (*ibid.*). The methodology can be seen as the plan about all the choices that a researcher needs to take, in order to choose the more specific methods used to collect and analyze data (Carter & Little, 2007).

The interpretive viewpoint is used for this study and sees reality as something that is created by the interaction of individuals where there is no single reality or truth (Scotland, 2012). This, this means that realities are interpreted and aiming for discovering the meaning of events and activities in different cultures and contexts (Creswell, 2009). Participants' own understanding and behavior are in focus and something the researcher interprets. Furthermore, the standpoint of the constructionism is taken that sees knowledge as constructed through the interaction between humans in a social context (Scotland, 2012). Meaning is seen as something that is created by experiences of the world and by looking at various phenomena, where people construct meaning in different ways. The truth is also something that is co-constructed by people and should be understood by the view of participating individuals in the different events and activities (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Scotland, 2012). To collect data from the participants in this study a qualitative approach was used. This due to its perspective with a focus on the social world and the people in it that are needed defining the reality and achieve knowledge (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

2.1.1 Qualitative approach

In this study, the qualitative approach provided the opportunity to understand the meaning of the company's marketing activities and brand building for strengthening brand equity. The qualitative approach intends to provide a deeper understanding and to grasp the meaning of a phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2015), which in this case is about brand equity in SMEs. In this approach the researcher tries to understand and shed light on a phenomenon and thereby provide new knowledge, meaning or confirmation about something that is known (Brown, 2008). The meanings are created based on the respondents' personal experiences and perceptions about a situation or phenomenon, where the respondents' interpretation and feelings are in focus (Eisenhardt, 1989; Scotland, 2012). Moreover, the approach aims at reaching thick descriptions, with data based on words and texts in comparison to numbers which the quantitative approach uses (Carter & Little, 2007). The qualitative approach is also used especially in new fields where there is little known to create a deeper understanding and to make sense of a phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989).

First, the researcher should try to create an understanding of the context where the respondents act in, to further understand their behaviors and experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Second, the relationship between the respondent and the researcher during the data collection will always provide subjective data, whereby the replicability of the study probably will be reduced. This is because of the co-construction of the data during the process and the fact that knowledge never can be value-free (Scotland, 2012). Moreover, the social settings, the context, the conditions, the culture and people which the interviews or observations are conducted with, will differ and have different experiences and values, even if the researcher and the questions would be the same (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Not only the people participating affect the results, but also the data analysis affects them because the qualitative approach does not follow strict techniques for specific findings and it has an effect on the replicability (Brown, 2008).

2.1.2 Inductive reasoning

The flexibility in the qualitative approach is positive due to the possibility for the researcher to constantly fit the data with the theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Bryman & Bell, 2011). The process provides no strict guidelines and can rather be seen as an iterative process, which means to collect data and to analyze it, and thereafter look at how the questions can be redefined and get more data to generate theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Brown, 2008). With an inductive reasoning, this study tries to use the findings to provide the researcher with the possibility to create new inputs and perspectives for the existing theory. The collected data is used to reach conclusions grounded in the findings and not in the theory as the deductive approach does. The deductive reasoning is used to test hypothesis and theories. However, in new fields as mentioned, the inductive reasoning seems more suitable to provide new perspectives. Therefore, the inductive reasoning is chosen for this study due to the attempt of finding and presenting marketing activities for SMEs to strengthen the brand equity.

2.2 Study design

The aim is to investigate the development of the brand equity in an SME to identify and conceptualize such processes. To fulfill this aim, the qualitative approach combined with a case study design was used. A case study design can be used to explore an issue with one or more cases in a bounded setting, where the goal is to create a deeper understanding about the phenomenon (Brown, 2008; Creswell, 2012). However, it can be used to look at complex issues due to the opportunity to look at one issue in depth (Brown, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Creswell, 2012). Case studies represent a design where an issue is explored within a bounded setting and one or more case objects (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Creswell, 2012). The deeper understanding is reached through the bounded setting. However, a disadvantage can be that the results only provide information about what the setting includes and everything besides is left untouched (Creswell, 2012). But the bounded setting is helpful to reach a manageable amount of data (Eisenhardt, 1989). Without the bounded settings, it would have been more challenging to reach a deeper understanding and to find the meaning of a complex issue (Brown, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Creswell, 2012).

Another discussed aspect of the case study design is that the result is based on the respondents' perceptions and experiences, wherefore generalizability is seen as complicated to achieve (Eisenhardt, 1989; Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, Flyvbjerg (2006) states that transferability still can exist due to the commonalities in the individuals' social background, which provides the possibility to apply the findings in other similar situations (Creswell, 2012) especially in new areas with new knowledge (Yin, 2013). Moreover, patterns, themes, and relationships in the answers of the respondents can be applied in other situations.

Generalizability can also be divided where analytical generalizability is about using found conclusions in one situation in another setting, and not just for theory (Yin, 2013). The findings can also be used to explain gaps and weaknesses in theory even if the purpose is not to find a relationship between the data and a population (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Case studies are used to provide new insights and perspectives which also is done in this study where new insights about brand equity for SMEs are in focus (Eisenhardt, 1989; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Creswell, 2012).

2.2.1 Choice of case object

In this study a non-probability sampling method, the purposive sampling was chosen to select the case for this project. The purposive sampling is focusing on selecting a suitable case object instead of reaching statistically generalizable results (Bryman & Bell, 2011). With the purposive sample, the case is chosen depending on the relevance towards the research question of the study (Saunders *et al*. 2007). This kind of sampling is used in small samples or case studies, in order for the researcher to choose a case that is informative for the research question. This study is based on PAUL och THOM and the choice of this unit of analysis, where the bounded setting is the food industry is based on their work and investments in their activities to strengthen the brand equity. Therefore, they seem suitable to gather information and new insights based on their marketing activities to create brand equity. Beyond the bounded setting of the food industry, the case company and the marketing activities the study can be narrowed down further through the research questions.

The research questions should be used in order to facilitate the process to guide the literature search and what data that should be collected (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Research questions can be based on personal interest, new developments or problems in an organization (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this case, the combination of personal interest and neglected gap-spotting was used. Neglected gap-spotting is when certain areas or aspects in the existing literature are overlooked, under-researched or provide lack of empirical work (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). This applies to the existing literature about brand equity, which is an undeveloped field of study regarding SMEs. The unit of analysis was also chosen based on a previous relationship with the researcher to the case company.

Based on the previous relationship there was knowledge about the company’s change of the brand name combined with the investment in branding and marketing, provided the basis for this thesis. Thus, the idea was created to investigate the experiences of the practitioners during their journey to create a stronger brand. Even though the relationship can be questioned regarding the objectivity towards the findings, one could argue that the insights and relation to the respondents can be beneficial as long as the researcher is reflexive. However, striving for being objective can be seen as limiting (Alvesson *et al.* 2008) and should be more about being reflexive and aware of the effects of the inquiry. Reflexivity can be seen as how the researcher does affect the inquiry through the personal assumptions and biases (Barge, 2004; Alvesson *et al.* 2008). Moreover, reflexivity is about highlighting the biases and to consider their effects on the study which only is one way of seeing this case (Hardy *et al.* 2001). The author is aware of the potential subjectivity of the case company and therefore possible biases and strives at neutralizing that through the respondent validations. That is based on the confirmation of the respondents after they have gone through the transcribed interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To make sure that the researcher has understood their experiences correctly.

2.3 Data collection

As a starting point, a literature review was done to reach an understanding of the existing literature and to create a general understanding of the theoretical perspectives and concepts regarding the chosen phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The narrative literature was chosen for this study due to the goal of reaching an understanding instead of focusing on creating knowledge, as the systematic literature review (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A narrative literature review is used to provide a broad understanding of the existing literature and to reach an impression of the setting to investigate. Due to the choice of the inductive reasoning, the narrative literature review was also chosen to complement with a number of guidelines. However, not to set all main theoretical concepts, because theory should be the outcome of this thesis. To build the guidelines and to make the search for suitable sources easier, the researcher focused on certain keywords to search for the secondary data: *brand equity, branding, brand building, brand management.*

Secondary data such as books, journals, articles, documents, and homepages are information that is gathered and written for other purposes (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Secondary data is based on a researcher's own interpretation and analysis of the primary data. The primary data for this study is the empirical data from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the respondents from PAUL och THOM and the participant observations (*ibid.*). The advantage of primary data is that the data is gathered for the specific study's purpose.

2.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interviews with the qualitative approach are focusing on the respondents' view and what they find interesting or most important during the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were used in this particular study to collect the data in combination with an interview guide and open-ended questions (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). An interview guide is a rather nonspecific list of topics, that can help the researcher to start the interview and to direct the conversation towards the topics and issues of interest (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The interview guide can be seen in the appendix, to further look at the used questions of the interviews. The questions were mostly open-ended to create an understanding of the respondents' experiences and own opinions.

Open-ended questions or observations are often used to gather data about a phenomenon and the context (Carter & Little, 2007; Bryman & Bell, 2015). This provides an opportunity of expressing the respondents' feelings, emotions and opinions which are more difficult to interpret from numerical data (Carter & Little, 2007). However, open-ended questions can provide a lot of data which needs to be handled and can differ in the content and amount due to that the respondents' own experiences and feelings are in focus (Eisenhardt, 1989). One way of minimizing the data was through the research questions which limits the scope of the study.

Other techniques such as ethnography could have been used instead of semi-structured interviews, which also is about gathering rich data and the attempt to understand people´s perceptions and actions in relation to the context (Reeves *et al.* 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, ethnography takes much time in the field, describing the culture and peoples shared experiences. Moreover, the data collection can be disturbed and does, therefore, need to be flexible (Reeves *et al.* 2008). In this study, the semi-structured interview seemed more effective to provide data about the marketing activities compared to ethnography, which also often focuses on societal issues and groups of people. However, participant observations and the informal interviews can be seen as a part of ethnography (Qualitative research, 2018).

This applies to the casual conversations between the researcher and the respondents within the firm during lunch breaks or between the interviews. These informal interviews were not recorded and could have created less pressure for the respondents and make them speak more freely compared to the interviews (*ibid.*).

Influence of the researcher

During the interviews, the researcher needs to be flexible to adjust, add or skip questions, based on the respondents' answers (Eisenhardt, 1989). To follow up stories that the respondents tell can encourage them to keep talking and provides the opportunity of getting meaningful and rich data, which can lead to new inquiries. The researchers should focus on being a good listener in order to understand the respondents' perspectives (Mikhaylov, 2014). Even though the respondents' answers lead the interview, the researcher should always be careful and consider its own influence on the respondent (Mikhaylov, 2014; Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, the respondent and the researcher construct the data together, and the researcher is part of making sense of the respondents' perceptions (Mikhaylov, 2014). After the interview, the researcher also made notes about the context, the feeling, the setting and the overall feeling of how it went (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Moreover, the interviews were face-to-face which also provides the researcher with reactions and expressions of the respondent during the interview. Due to that the qualitative approach is about creating a deeper understanding of a phenomenon in a context-dependent situation such information provides the researcher as well with their own perceptions about the situation.

The researcher can also be affected by three different biases: the processing, the researcher and confirmation bias (Eisenhardt, 1989). The processing bias is about the researcher's premature conclusions that can be wrong when the researcher believes they have all information to understand and make conclusions about the context. The researcher bias is when he or she is seeing or interpreting something which fits their own values, instead of focusing on the respondents' perceptions and values (*Quirks, 2017*). The confirmation bias is when the researcher already has made assumptions about the theory and is filtering the respondents' answers to confirm them or to disapprove them, instead of focusing on the respondents' points of view. Lastly, the researcher should understand the language and cultural context of the setting and thereby has to be trusted to reach shared experiences (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). To minimize the risk of these biases the communication with the respondents and being open by sharing the transcribed texts of the interviews and the empirical chapter was done in this study. Thereby, the respondents can go through the texts in order to see if the researcher has interpreted their answers correctly.

In order to understand the context, the interviews were conducted at the company's main office in Rosersberg, to provide the researcher with a chance of getting a feeling of the environment. The semi-structured interviews were done in a meeting room at PAUL och THOM. The meeting room was chosen due to the low noise and the fact that the employees often have their own meetings there. That makes the respondents more comfortable and the chance of being disturbed is less than in the rest of the office.

2.3.2 Transcription

To transcribe the recorded interviews is something that provides the researcher with an opportunity to create a more thorough examination of what the respondents have answered (Bryman & Bell, 2015). It creates the ability to repeat the examination, the data can be reused and it minimizes the limitations of the researcher's memories (*ibid.*). However, it is time consuming where a one-hour interview can take up to six hours to be transcribed. It can also get more complicated when the interview is translated due to linguistics, where respondents can use cultural words where there are no English words for (*ibid.*). In this study, the researcher chose to perform the interviews in Swedish in order to make it more comfortable for the respondents to answer the questions. The author is aware that the quality of the content can be affected by a side effect due to the possible barriers of the languages.

The used material from the interviews was translated and to gain credibility the respondents validated the interviews (Shenton, 2004; Bryman & Bell, 2015). The time spent on transcribing feels useful to minimize the potential subjectivity bias of the researcher which was done by sending the respondents both the empirical chapter and transcribed interviews. Thereby the respondents had the chance to notice potentially wrong interpretations of the interviews that are presented in the empirical chapter.

2.3.3 Choice of interview respondents

In this study, the respondents were chosen based on their experience about the brand change, the marketing communication, activities concerning building a stronger brand and knowledge of the management. Therefore, people from the management group, from the sales and marketing department were chosen to provide comprehensive information. The respondents were chosen based on the owner's recommendations of people from the different departments with the most knowledge regarding the strategies and thoughts behind the marketing activities. The respondents are presented in table 1. Moreover, the interviews time, when the empirical chapter and transcribed interviews were emailed and lastly when the respondents had validated the texts.

The author is aware of the possibility to mislead the generalization regarding the conclusions of the whole company by choosing respondents recommended by the owner. However, due to the author's relationship to the case company, there is knowledge about which people that have been working with the brand change and what positions they have. Thereby, the author only saw the recommendations as guidelines but not strict to follow.

Table 1. Interview schedule of the time, transcription send and validation received

Interview person and date	**Time**	**Transcription of the interviews and empirical chapter**	**Validation received**
Respondent A - 19 February	34 minutes	4 May	23 May
Respondent B - 23 mars	49 minutes	4 May	28 May
Respondent C - 23 Mars	1 hour 27 minutes	4 May	29 May
Respondent D - 6 April	40 minutes	4 May	22 May

The first interview was the foundation for this study and the main goal of this interview was to collect empirical data in order to grasp the large picture of the company. Thereby, the author of this study received guidelines to further look into what helped shape the questions for the other interviews.

2.4 Data analysis

The data collection of the semi-structured interviews and the participant observations provide rich and deep data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Moreover, the amount of data is often large in qualitative research needed to create meaning and to understand a phenomenon based on peoples' experiences (Eisenhardt, 1989) which is a challenge to go through and draw conclusions on (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A data analysis is often used to describe, to reduce them and to make it simple to understand a large amount of data. It is recommended to organize the data, to divide it into themes and cluster, also called thematic analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Clarke & Braun, 2016). This helps the researcher to organize all the data, to create an understanding of the content from the interviews and to achieve a better structure of the data. It is a way of identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns into themes depending on their meaning of qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Thereby the researcher can more easily create an understanding of what the participants think, feel and have experienced. Moreover, the thematic analysis is not only summarizing the data but also identifying key meanings, guided by the research question (*ibid.*). During the coding process, the research question can also change based on the findings, which it also did during this study opening for one more analytical question.

The themes can be sorted by the different categories of repetition, similarities and differences, missing data, theory-related material, and metaphors or analogies (Bryman & Bell, 2015). These clusters are then inserted into cells and also coded with the themes to sort the data. The coding is used to gather all the interesting information connected to the research questions (Hoonard & Hoonard, 2008). The process of clustering the data provides the researcher with confidence about the material and makes it easier to achieve insights. For this case, the data were grouped into themes addressing the chosen brand attributes and brand strengthening of brand equity, see table 2.

Table 2. Thematic analysis scheme, to show how the ordering was done

Interview	Category/ Theme	Interpretation of transcription	Analysis
Respondent C	Brand strengthening	*"The most crucial part when doing such a change, is to convince the internal capital, the employees, before we start talking to external parties"*	Related to the company's choice of departure starting the journey of change within the company to create a common understanding of the brand, creating a mindset (Urde, 1994).
Respondent B	Building brand meaning	*"We are trying to create a continuity, especially that all our brand touch points stand the same quality. All touch points, that our consumers can come in contact with. We have just started to talk about that, but it is about everything connected from how the product packages feel like to the logos on the cars. Moreover, all colors, nuances and tonalities we use in our pictures matters" (Respondent B, 2018).*	To satisfy customers functional needs a company has to consider the price, service, packaging, style, design and how the product smells or feels like (Keller, 2009).

Advantages with the thematic analysis are the flexibility and the possibility to summarize key features of the large amount of empirical data (Robson, 2011). However, it can be difficult to decide what to focus on in the data and to choose specific aspects, due to limited studies that have described the exact procedures used in ordering the data. Where in this case the researchers own perception of what is relevant in this study regarding the empirical data connected to existing theory is the basis for the themes. Whereby the themes and activities placed under the brand attributes are based on the researcher’s interpretation and could be sorted in a different way.

2.5 Quality criteria

To reach a good quality of the research in this qualitative case study, trustworthiness can be used as a tool to fulfill the quality criteria: confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Confirmability is about how well the data can be confirmed by others then the researcher, who personally has collected analyzed the data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). It is used to gain objectivity concerning the findings of the research that the experiences and values of the respondents not are influenced by the researcher’s own preferences (Shenton, 2004). However, the qualitative approach is focusing on looking at the respondents’ own perceptions and experiences to reach thick descriptions. Those thick descriptions can be useful to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon and help to further extend existing literature, which can support the conformity of the case and its reality (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Moreover, to gain confirmability triangulation and respondent validation was used. Triangulation provides multiple sources to confirm the data and respondent validation is based on the confirmation of the respondents (*ibid.*).

Dependability is the second quality criterion and enables the researcher to see how much he or she should be accounted for concerning the possibility of changing conditions in the phenomenon (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009; Shenton, 2004). In this case, the respondents will be asked about their own perceptions and experiences of the work and marketing activities within PAUL och THOM, which could decrease the dependability of the data. However, the descriptions of those respondents from the management group, sales, and marketing department will provide in-depth and thick descriptions and detailed information, which are in line with the qualitative approach and case study design to understand a phenomenon more deeply. Dependability can also be reached through an opportunity to replicate the study if the research design, methods, and theories are clearly presented. However, case studies are context dependent and affected by the researcher who conducts it.

The third quality criteria credibility can be created by looking at how the study actually complies with reality (Shenton, 2004). Moreover, credibility is about whether the researcher has done the study properly according to good practice where a respondent validation can be one way to confirm that the researcher has understood the social context of the case object correctly (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this study the researcher provided all respondents with the transcription of the interview, to let them go through the data and to confirm that everything was properly understood by the researcher. This was done by emailing the respondents the transcribed text and empirical chapter.

Transferability describes in what extent the findings from a study can be generalized or not to other contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative studies are in general seen as difficult to replicate, due to the researchers’ perceptions of the findings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2007). Since this study is about investigating one case study’s marketing activities and the phenomenon of strengthening brand equity at this specific time, it can seem difficult to reach generalizability for a population also named statistical generalizability. However, case studies can create a generalization regarding theories and not in order to achieve regularities (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The commonalities in the social backgrounds of people give another opportunity in transferring the findings to other situations (Creswell, 2012). Moreover, various patterns and themes can create relations between the answers of the respondents which can be applied to other contexts. The purpose for a case study is to create new insights and knowledge that can explain gaps and weaknesses in theory but also provide findings to other settings, especially for a new theory, where existing literature is scarce (Eisenhardt, 1989; Creswell, 2012) regarding strengthening brand equity in SMEs.

Alvesson *et al.* (2008) stated that their definition of a successful reflexivity was related to contributing with a “productive difference” that can be suggestions of ideas, concepts or challenges about conventional thinking in new fields of study. Thereby, the researchers believe that reflexivity can be useful in improving research through fieldwork that is contributing. This case study wishes to contribute to conceptualizing marketing activities useful for SMEs in order to strengthen their brand equity and thereby reach a productive difference.

2.6 Ethical considerations

The basis for this investigation is based on the empirical data from the interviews and as much as the design of the research is methodologically correct it should have been conducted in a moral and responsible way (Saunders *et al.* 2007). The researcher had to consider certain aspects in order to provide the respondents with the confidence that the information was properly and respectfully handled in the purpose of this study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The researcher also asked the respondents about the consent of using the data for this study (Saunders *et al.* 2007). Moreover, the respondents had the choice to participate and answer the questions or not and to choose whether their answers would be anonymous (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This can be connected to the lack of informed consent, which is one of the ethical principles. The respondents should have gotten as much information as needed about the study, its purpose, how it will be publicized, and used so that the respondent can make an active choice in participating (*ibid.*).

In order to minimize the potential harm that a respondent could be exposed to, anonymity is something the researcher should advocate (Saunders *et al.* 2007; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Harm does not only relate to physical injury but can be stress or harm for future career prospects, it seemed appropriate to have anonymous answers. The last ethical principle is about whether the deception is involved or not (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A researcher could create false information about the study and its purpose in order to get more natural answers from the respondents. However, it is not desirable to create an illusion about the purpose to get “more natural answers” and thereby dishonor the trust and honesty in relation to the respondents (*ibid.*). Therefore, even here the respondent validation can be used to minimize that risk and to ensure that the researcher has understood the respondents’ answers correct.

3 Theoretical framework

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the literature about the gaps in the marketing literature for SMEs. Furthermore, this chapter presents the chosen theoretical concepts and definitions that are summarized. Thereafter the conceptual framework is presented that provides the basis for the analysis of the empirical findings.

3.1 Literature review to understand marketing in SMEs

Marketing strives for satisfying the customers' needs better than the competitors (Fuller, 1994; Kotler *et al*. 2017). To satisfy the customers' needs marketing activities can be used to build a brand awareness and to add value to a product (Ruekert *et al.* 1985). Thus, activities can be sales force training, advertisement, launch activities and events. However, marketing activities are according to several researchers seen as problematic within SMEs, due to the lack of resources (Simpson & Taylor, 2002; Krake, 2005; Wong & Merrilees, 2005; Opoku *et al.* 2007; Berthon *et al.* 2008). Moreover, SMEs are often portrayed as flat with an informal organizational structure, with an experimental attitude to try for the new activities (Centeno *et al.* 2013) which is influenced by the owners/managers values (Gilmore *et al.* 2001; Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Horan *et al.* 2011; Centeno *et al.* 2013). Moreover, the owner is often the main decision maker, who relies on their own experiences and intuitions in handling the organization and the environment (Berthon *et al.* 2008; Spence & Essoussie, 2010).

The environment SMEs exist in can be defined as uncertain, dynamic, fierce competition and complex (Simpson & Taylor, 2002), which often is seen as challenging looking at the differences between SMEs and large organizations. The differences lie in the availability of resources, the amount of expertise or specialist knowledge and the owner's influence on the decision making (Fuller, 1994; Coviello *et al*. 2000; Abimbola, 2001; Gilmore *et al.* 2001; Simpson & Taylor, 2002; Zontanos & Anderson, 2004; Krake, 2005; Wong & Merrillees, 2005; Spence & Essoussi, 2010; Horan *et al.* 2011; Jämsä *et al.* 2011; Centeno *et al.* 2013; Asamoah, 2014). These different characteristics are seen as opportunities for SMEs by certain researchers and limitations by others, regarding their marketing (Odoom *et al.* 2017).

3.1.1 Through the perspective of large organizations

The marketing practices for SMEs have been judged within existing literature from the perspective of large organizations which is presumably why SMEs marketing practices are seen as informal, short-term and non-strategic (Coviello *et al*. 2000). Informal can mean that a company is more decentralized, that the processes are not as formal in order to reach decisions and that they can be based on non-strategic choices such as peoples' intuitions. The criticism is built through the comparison of SMEs resources and practices of the larger firms (Zontanos & Anderson, 2004), which existing theories are based on even though it is known that smaller firms act differently than larger ones (Gaddefors & Anderson, 2009).

SMEs can have advantages due to their informal and therefore more flexible structures and processes (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Centeno *et al.* 2013; Hirvonen *et al*. 2013). The limited resources can instead be seen as a driver for more innovative and creative solutions in developing their brand (Centeno *et al.* 2013; Hirvonen *et al*. 2013). Berthon *et al.* (2008) argue that SMEs can with their creativity regarding innovative solutions, manage and deliver the full potential of their brands even with the mentioned differences. That can be done by minimizing the constraints through careful planning, spending the time to understand what branding should mean for the employees within the organization and also to involve everybody (Abimbola, 2001). Moreover, SMEs often use the owners'/managers' network in their marketing, which can refer to friends and family but also competitors to get advice and new ideas (Gilmore *et al.* 2001; Hirvonen *et al*. 2013). The owners'/managers' own personality and characteristics are affecting the organization, the culture, communication, and behavior (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007) and its employees (Gilmore *et al.* 2001; Horan *et al.* 2011).

The influence of an owner/manager can be linked to the brand identity, which is affected by the education and experiences of that person (Mitchell *et al.* 2013; Asamoah, 2014) and will affect how the brand identity is established (Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Additionally, it seems likely that founders choose a business sector depending on their own experiences to fit the needed marketing of the industry (Fuller, 1994). Wherefore the owner/manager often rely on their own intuition and judgment in various decisions (Berthon *et al.* 2008) and thereby become the center of the company. Thereby, short ways in decision making and communication within the organization (Centeno *et al.* 2013) save time for the employees as well as for the customers (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007).

The brand knowledge is probably the most valuable aspect of creating a value within the mind of the consumer about the brand (Keller, 1993). Brand knowledge is based on the brand awareness and the brand image, thus the recognition and the associations to the brand a consumer has in its mind. How to reach that knowledge and thereby a strong brand differs between researcher's guidelines (Abimbola, 2001; Keller, 2001; Krake, 2005). An integrated strategy which is focusing on an inside-out approach, identity-driven approach, where the brand is central for the company in order to achieve a long-lasting competitive advantage through the brand focus (Urde *et al.* 2013). Brand orientation can be defined as such an integrated strategy and a strategic choice or a mindset, which is about seeing the brand as the starting point while formulating the company's strategy (Urde, 1994).

Brand orientation focuses on building strong brands and as a safeguard for the survival of the company (Urde, 1994). Moreover, it can be seen as a process within an organization where the purpose is to create, develop and protect the brand identity through the constant interaction with the customers to reach a competitive advantage (M'zungu *et al.* 2010). But for SMEs, it seems as if the survival mentality and high sales have been more in focus (Krake, 2005; Berthon *et al.* 2008). Some researchers state that the limited resources can be one reason why SMEs have not developed brand orientation to a greater extent (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). Moreover, achieving strong brands has not been prioritized due to the common survival mentality and an identity-based framework to strengthen brand equity has been absent (Asamoah, 2014). Despite that, research has shown a positive relation between brand orientation and a company's brand performance (Hirvonen *et al*. 2013; Asamoah, 2014; Odoom, 2016). The created value that brand orientation can result in is based on brand loyalty, brand awareness, a certain perceived product quality and brand associations, which can also be described as brand equity (Keller, 1993; Faircloth *et al.* 2001).

3.2 Brand equity

Brand equity is a term that still has no general definition and most researchers have their own definition of it (Keller, 2009; Burman *et al.* 2009; Spence & Essoussi, 2010; Hirvonen *et al*. 2013). Brand equity can be seen as a way of creating a greater importance of the brand and to embed it in the marketing strategies (Burman *et al.* 2009). Brand equity can also be a view of brand performance and the success of the brand in the market (Hirvonen *et al*. 2013). It is about the value of a product or service that can be enhanced through the associations with the brand name and the meaning ascribed to it (Keller, 1993; Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998;

Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Brand equity can lead to a competitive advantage for example customer demand, brand loyalty, brand extensions can be extended more easily, communication would be more accepted, a better trade leverage, larger margins and less vulnerability towards other competitive market actions can be reached (Aaker, 1991; Bendixen *et al.* 2004; Keller, 2009; Armstrong *et al*. 2017; Kotler *et al.* 2017). Moreover, brand equity is used to build and measure whether the brand of a company or product/service is strong (Motameni & Shahrokhi, 1998; Burmann *et al.* 2009; Hirvonen *et al*. 2013; Armstrong *et al*. 2017; Kotler *et al.* 2017). To do so, brand equity needs to be integrated with a long-term focus within brand management to manage the brand as an asset in order to increase the value in the future and create a brand asset mindset to reach a strong brand (Wood, 2000; Armstrong *et al*. 2017; Kotler *et al.* 2017).

Brand equity is a way of creating a greater importance of the brand and to embed it in the marketing strategies (Keller, 2009). Keller (2009) is presenting four steps to build brand equity: identifying and establishing brand positioning, planning and implementing brand marketing programs, measuring and interpreting brand performance and thereby to build. The measuring and interpretation of the brand performance will not be looked at in this study. However, the four steps are about positioning the brand and to create differences from the competitors, choosing brand elements to create a brand identity, integrating the brand into marketing activities, leveraging secondary associations and understanding what brand equity is (*ibid.*). To build up brand equity a consumer-based brand equity (**CBBE**) model can be used by organizations that are interested in creating a mindset focusing more on the brand and the relationship to the customer.

3.2.1 Customer-based brand equity model

The CBBE-model focuses on the perspective of the customer and is defined as a strong brand which needs a breadth and depth of brand awareness (Keller, 2009). The main purpose of this model is that a brand is depending on the customers' thoughts, feelings, and actions regarding the brand. A brand should be based on strong, favorable and unique brand associations that are positive and accessible brand responses which are forging brand relationships (Keller, 1993). To do so, the choices of brand elements that construct the brand identity are crucial such as the brand name, logo, or symbols that should be integrated into the marketing programs. In order to develop these brand responses and thereby relations within the consumers mind the CBBE-model is focusing on four main aspects: brand identity, brand meaning, brand response and brand relationship (Keller, 2009; Asamoah, 2014).

This model approaches brand equity from the perspective of the customer, irrespective if it is an organization or an individual (Keller, 2009). The model is based on four steps to build a brand and brand equity. First, a joint understanding of brand identity within the company is needed, secondly a brand meaning has to be created through unique brand associations (points of difference), thirdly a positive brand response can be created through the marketing programs and lastly a brand relationship or brand loyalty has to be forged (*ibid.*). Questions that should be kept in mind are: *1. Who are you? 2. What are you? 3. What about you? 4. What about you and me?.* These questions can then be connected to the four steps that are the foundation of reaching brand equity and according to Keller (2009) to reach a relationship with the customer.

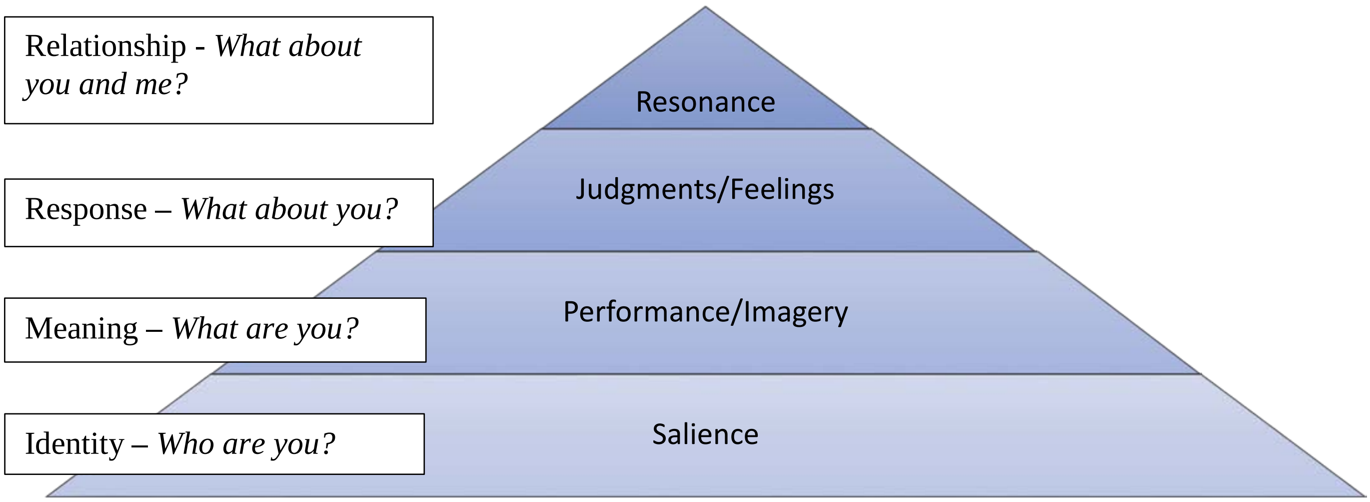

Figure 2. Keller (2009) brand building of customer-based brand equity

This model tries to develop the brand of an organization, to satisfy the customers' needs to fulfill quality requirements, to create a positive image and to reach loyal customers. The CBBE-model describes the four steps that are focusing on brand identity, brand meaning, brand response and brand relationship which are elements that can be used to develop an understanding of what effects brand equity can create.

Brand identity (Who are you?)

The brand identity is defining what the company stands for and in what sense the brand is different compared to competitors on the market (Keller, 1993). The brand awareness can be seen as an outcome of the brand identity as the different brand can make customers to recall and recognize the brand in various situations. The brand awareness tries to connect the needs and basic functions of the customers to a brand (Keller, 2009). When the needs and functions of the customers are defined, the brand should, therefore, provide guidelines to lead the customers with information about what product category they provide. Thereby the process of finding products that the customers need will be facilitated.

To create an opportunity to more easily appear in the customers' consideration set, which includes the brands that have a chance of getting considered for purchase is another outcome of an increased brand awareness (Keller, 1993). Thereby, the brand identity is built on various brand elements in order to create an identity that is different from the competitors (Keller, 2009). The brand elements are then used to reach a connection that a customer can make seeing the brand name, logo, symbol or others which also are seen as the salience of the brand and describes, who the company or organization is. The brand identity should represent what an organization stands for and what they want customers to think about them. However, the thoughts and perceptions of the customers are nothing an organization can decide and the customers' picture and understanding of the brand identity is the brand image, which only exists in the mind of the customers'. Brand awareness is one way to understand that customers can think of brands in different ways.

Brand awareness can be divided into the depth and breadth, where the depth of the brand awareness is how easy it is for the customer to recognize or remember a brand (Keller, 2009). The awareness breadth is about how broadly a brand is remembered by the customer in a purchase situation. Breath is not to just to recall the brand but to think of the brand in various situations, to increase the chances of customers thinking of the brand in as many opportunities as possible. To facilitate that process can be done by creating a brand name that customers can recall and recognize.

The brand name is one way of strengthening the brand equity and an organization needs to find a suitable name that is attractive, easy to recall, short, simple and that can evoke positive feelings (Centeno *et al.* 2013). To decide a suitable brand name Centeno *et al.* (2013) mentioned that SMEs received support from external graphic designers to create a brand with matching colors and symbols to communicate the chosen associations and brand personality. The owner's personal values are often present while defining the brand and brand identity. Not just the owner but also the staff represents the brand and should, therefore, be integrated into a long-term approach (Wong & Merrilees, 2005).

Brand meaning (What are you?)

Brand meaning can be another way of looking at the brand image and what kind of associations the brand should create within the customers' mind (Keller, 2009). The brand meaning is built on two parts: brand imagery and brand performance. The imagery is more connected to intangible perspectives that the customer can base on their own experiences of the brand or by advertisement (*ibid.*). Examples of such intangible aspects can be evoked in purchase situations, in the usage of a product, experiences of customers themselves or through friends and family, heritage and personality.

Brand imagery is about the social needs of the customer and is connected to the intangible aspects related to the brand and can be age, gender, race, income, and careers that are connected to the user and then to the brand (Keller, 2009). The brand personality is more related to the personal values that a company should consider to identify and match to the market segment to attract consumers with similar interests that can facilitate the process to buy a product (*ibid.*).

Considering where the customer should encounter the product, in the purchase or usage situations, it can create beneficial associations and facilitate to decide where and when the brand can be used (Keller, 2009). Brands can be connected to new associations as well as associations from the past that customers have experienced through more personal occasions, through friends and family or events where the brand has been present. Thereby the brand associations can affect customers' brand imagery and the same counts for public associations of a brand (*ibid.*). Publicly accepted products considering fashion trends can also affect the brand personality.

The brand personality can be related to the brand imagery, as consumers often choose brands that are similar to their own personality, even though they sometimes buy brands based on their desired personality instead of their actual image (Keller, 2009). Moreover, consumer needs are also related to the search for brands that are similar to their own self-identity in order to show the world who they are and want to be (Ilaw, 2014). Based on people's own principles and beliefs which they can reflect in their chosen brands that can represent consumers own taste, style, wealth or membership connected to social groups. Brands can be a way of expressing consumers social identities that represent what they feel and such information can be useful in order to satisfy their needs (*ibid.*).

To succeed in the marketing, the product has to satisfy the customers' needs with different attributes connected to the product or service (Keller, 2009). Brand performance is about whether a company can satisfy the functional needs of the customer, based on the product and the customers' experience of it. To do so, chosen product attributes that characterize the product or service should be carefully chosen to be able to satisfy the consumer (Keller, 1993). These attributes can be price, service, packaging, style, and design. They will not always be seen as valuable in the purchase decision, but the customers will have an association in memory from the brand that can be related to the product itself or the package. In that sense, these attributes can facilitate the process of recognizing a brand within the customers' mind. Hence, the performance cannot only rely on the attributes and is also depending on associations such as how the product smells or feels like.

Brand response (What about you?)

The brand response is based on customers reactions to a brand, which includes marketing activities and the information the customers get exposed to (Keller, 2009). The responses can be built in two different ways: within the head (the brand judgments) or more by the heart, (the brand feelings). Brand judgments are the active choices a customer makes through gathering all associations of the brand and creates their own opinion (*ibid.*). The judgments are based on brand quality, brand credibility, brand consideration and brand superiority. Brand quality is about the perceived quality of the brand and thereby the perception of the value and satisfaction (*ibid.*). Brand credibility is based on if the brand can be seen as credible depending on the expertise, the perceived competence of the brand in the market which can create trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness is determined based on whether the brand is dependable or not, regarding the interests of the customers (Keller, 2009). Brand consideration is another brand judgment and is about the consideration of a customer to actually include the brand into the set of brands. This one is a crucial step due to that a brand has to be considered in order to be relevant and possible to be purchased (*ibid.*). Brand superiority is the last one and is about whether the customer sees a brand as unique or not. That means if customers actually see brands with advantages compared to others and the superiority is important in creating a relationship with customers (*ibid.*). In order for customers to see a brand as unique or not brand feelings matter, they can evoke feelings constituted by the marketing activities or programs. Mentioned feelings in theory are warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval and self-respect (*ibid.*).

Brand resonance (What about you and me?)

Brand resonance is the last step and about the relationship of customers connected to the brand and to what extent the customers can identify themselves with the brand (Keller, 2009). The relationship is based on intensity or the psychological bond that a customer can have with a brand and the activity level, based on the loyalty. The loyalty is measured in terms of the repetition of the purchase (*ibid.*). These two dimensions are divided into four different categories: behavioral loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community and active engagement.

The behavioral loyalty is about the quantity and frequency of the brand purchases and can contribute to the brand resonance (Keller, 2009). However, sometimes it is more complicated for example when customers buy a brand because other brands are out of stock, too expensive or not accessible. To achieve resonance the company needs to create a stronger personal attachment, in order to get loyal customers (*ibid.*). Satisfaction can sometimes not be enough and there can be a need for creating an attachment to the brand. Another way of reaching resonance is to create meaning for the customer connected to the brand which can be done through communities (*ibid.*).

If customers can identify themselves with a brand community they can feel a unity with other people (Keller, 2009). Lastly, the affirmation with the most power that can create brand loyalty is when people engage in the brand, looking above the purchase and consumption behaviors. Instead, they are also spending time and efforts to engage in the brand in different ways such as looking into brand websites, participation in chat rooms or even being ambassadors for the brand (*ibid.*). The personal identification related to the brand, the personal attachment and the meaning above the satisfaction seems to be needed in order to create a brand resonance or relationship and thereby loyal customers.

3.2.2 Brand building tools within CBBE-model

The four mentioned steps within the CBBE-model brand awareness, brand associations, brand response and brand relationship, are the basis in order to reach strong, favorable and unique associations, which are the foundation of achieving brand equity (Keller, 2009). To reach customer-based brand equity there is a need of keeping these four concepts in mind choosing the brand building tools: brand elements, developing marketing programs and to use the leverage of secondary associations in order to gain benefits. Benefits can be greater loyalty, larger margins and less vulnerability in relation to competitive marketing actions (*ibid.*). Keller (2009) mentions brand awareness and brand associations as the consumer knowledge effects, where the two aspects are needed in order to reach the consumers' attention and interest in the brand to reach the benefits. However, the brand response and brand resonance are needed to have in mind deciding the brand building tools. That is based on including the consumers' feelings, judgements, and identification of the brand which might be important in order to create loyal consumers. To attract people and to make them interested in the brand is one thing, but to create a long-lasting relationship with them and reach long-term buyers needs more than just recognition.

Brand elements

The brand elements can provide the possibility of creating a brand identity, that is based on a cluster of brand elements that can strengthen each other (Keller, 2009). Brand elements can be logos or symbols, slogans, jingles, the packaging or design of a product. In order to create a name, they have to be simple, familiar and distinctive to create a recognition by the consumer (Keller, 1993). Brand elements are not just about the name but whether they can enhance the brand awareness or the relation to the brand associations. Moreover, they represent the verbal and visual information that identifies and differentiates a product from their competition (Keller, 2009). The brand elements can be chosen depending on the criterions: memorability, meaningfulness, likability, transferability, adaptability, and protectability. They are categorized into the more offensive (memorability, meaningfulness, likability) and defensive strategies (transferability, adaptability, protectability) whereas the offensive ones are used to build brand equity (*ibid.*).

The offensive criterions are important to create easily recognized and recalled associations to a brand, to have an interesting and appealing appearance (Keller, 2009). Memorability is connected to creating a recognition of the brand in order to have the brand in mind during a purchase situation. Meaningfulness simplifies the information for the consumer in choosing brand elements that show what product category the product belongs to and who the product is useful for (*ibid.*). Likability is connected to the brand elements as the brand should be likable and easy to recognize through colorful and interesting brands.

The defensive criterions: transferability, adaptability, and protectability can be used to leverage and maintain brand equity (Keller, 2009). Transferability is about the brand elements chance to maintain the brand equity concerning new products, regarding brand extensions. Adaptability is connected to the brand elements chance of remaining attractive and memorable within the customers' mind over time (*ibid.*). Lastly, protectability is about protecting the brand elements both legally and competitively on the market. The name, package or other attributes should be unique in order to protect them from other brands that otherwise can be copied (*ibid.*). The brand elements can be combined and create the brand identity which in its turn contribute creating a brand image and brand awareness within the customers' mind. These brand elements are then needed to be established in order to market them and to reach a competitive advantage in the market (*ibid.*).

Marketing programs

To build a brand, a marketing program is needed which includes: pricing, distribution channels and communication strategies to market the product (Keller, 2009). These programs are used to increase the brand awareness and to create brand associations within the customers' mind in their purchase and usage situations of a product or service (Keller, 1993). Namely, it can be done by any activity that can make customer's experience the brand which thereby can increase the awareness of the brand. Advertising and promotions such as sports sponsorship, media, publicity in the point of purchase situations are examples to expose the consumer to the brand (*ibid.*). Moreover, companies should plan on what kind of attributes that should be used connected to the product or service in order to let the customer experience them.

Marketing planning is the first step, but within SMEs often a reactive process, where the actions are based on the environment's impact on the company (O'Donnel, 2011). The time on planning seems scarce and is more based on a bottom-up approach, where the customer constitutes the foundation which the company tries to satisfy. Keeping existing customers is often the most important task, due to the effort of acquiring new ones (*ibid.*). However, to acquire new customers the use of word of mouth recommendations and the personal interaction seems common. In the interaction between employees and customers information is provided in an informal way and decreases the costs of gathering information through formal marketing (*ibid.*). The same goes for information regarding competitors, which is often collected through employees, customers, suppliers, and advertisements. The information about competitors is also useful when managing the strategies for the product offer and the pricing in order to provide products that have a high quality and can generate competitive advantages (*ibid.*).

Strategies that can be used are the pricing strategy, product strategy, channel strategy and communication strategy (Keller, 2009). The pricing is affecting the brand associations directly and puts the product in relation to the other products in the product category that affect the brand. Depending on what kind of customer segment a company has focused on the price matters in order to create brand associations such as high-quality products or mainstream products with less quality (*ibid.*). Moreover, a company can choose whether to focus on the value-based pricing or channel strategy. The value-based pricing strategy is about reaching an even distribution of the price based on the product design, delivery, product costs and the product price (*ibid.*). The channel strategy is more about choosing channels that seem appropriate for the price, in order to create the right associations (O'Donnel, 2011).

In order to decide channels, a decision whether it should be through an indirect or direct channel is the first step (Keller, 2009). Direct channels are when the product is sold through a direct contact as for example by the phone, e-mail, company-owned store or visits. Indirect channels are when the product is sold via a third-party broker, wholesalers, distributors or retailers (*ibid.*). Often more than just one channel is used and is depending on the market if it is effective or not in order to deliver the product to the consumer.

The marketing communication strategy is about different options a company can use to choose activities that should promote the brand (Keller, 2009). It can be media, online ads, events, with sponsorship and at the point of purchase. Marketing communication can be done in many ways, through advertisement in the radio, television, by print, direct response, websites and so on (*ibid.*). However, the place of such advertisements should be considered where the consumer gets exposed to it. Product placement in a store is also something to have in mind, and something many companies pay high prices for in order to increase the chance of reaching the consumer with their brand and to increase the brand knowledge (*ibid.*). To do so, a company needs to consider if a pull or push strategy should be used.

The push strategy is when the product is taken to the consumer (Keller, 2009). This is done when a manufacturer is promoting a product and that a retailer is stocking the product to offer the product to the consumer and make it available in the store. Whereas the pull strategy is when the consumer is looking for the brand, and the retailer is selling the product based on the request from the consumer (*ibid.*). Push strategies can include activities such as: to negotiate with the retailer to stock products, the point of sales displays and promotions to increase the demand of the stores. The pull strategies can be achieved through activities such as advertising, promotions and sales promotions (*ibid.*). However, retailers have power over manufacturers due to their possible influence on the consumers’ purchase decisions in the stores (Capon, 2009).

Leverage secondary associations

As brand knowledge can be used to increase brand equity, the usage of secondary associations can provide brand knowledge other entities that can be connected to the own brand (Keller, 2009). Other entities are used in order to provide consumers with the associations from a known organization, company or person that can be transferred to the own brand. It can be connected to the company itself, the country of origin, distribution channel, other brands, events, endorsement or other third-party sources that can be rewards or reviews (*ibid.*). However, it is necessary that the consumers have previous knowledge about the secondary entity in order to transfer those associations, judgments, and feelings to the brand. Sponsorship, promotions or public relations can be ways of reaching the attention of the consumers and of creating brand knowledge (Keller, 2009). However, these can be seen as more expensive alternatives and are often combined with some form of promotions that are sales oriented (Asamoah, 2014).

These associations should, however, be positive and chosen carefully to transfer proper associations to the own brand (Keller, 2009). The researcher describes advantages and disadvantages with the different secondary associations. However, Keller did not discuss the differences between the secondary associations regarding the direct or indirect contact with the consumer. As for example regarding sponsorships and events, whereby sponsorship can be through radio and thereby only come in contact with the consumer through an indirect channel. Events provide the opportunity to come in direct contact with the consumers’.

Moreover, secondary associations are likely to be used when a company tries to sell a new product, where consumers lack information to judge the product.

These three brand building tool categories: brand elements, marketing programs and activities and leveraging secondary associations seem quite general and can, therefore, be connected to a number of the CBBE attributes. Choosing the brand elements based on the mentioned criterions are ways of reaching more recognition of the brand and to make it easier to recall a brand in the mind of the consumer. Furthermore, they contribute to leverage and maintain the brand equity by facilitating the process of creating a continuity of the brand elements.

The brand building tools as described by Keller (2009) are elements that can be used in order to build a brand in general but combined with the CBBE brand attributes they can be used to describe what brand equity is and what it could result in. Moreover, the model seems to be about the effects and the outcomes where the attributes are desirable effects in reaching for example brand awareness and knowledge about the brand at the consumer level. However, the consumer does not seem to be present in the brand building tools and has instead an exclusive perspective from the company. Whereas the consumers' perspective seems absent in the tools they are more in focus in the attributes, which are built on the consumers' perceptions of the brand, their interpretation of it, the responses to it and the relationship they can build to the brand and thereby the company.

3.3 Chosen theoretical concepts

Table 3 provides an overview of the chosen concepts based on the literature review. These concepts offer a vocabulary to help others frame and make sense of brand equity in SMEs and provide an understanding of the concepts in the conceptual framework seen in 3.4.

Table 3 Summary of the chosen theoretical concepts

Chosen concepts	***Definitions/Explanations***
Brand equity	That a product or service with a recognizable brand should generate a different consumer awareness compared to brands less well known.
Creating brand identity	The perception of the organization what they want customers to understand by their brand and what the company stands for.
Building brand meaning	The social and personal needs that can be seen as useful information for a company in order to satisfy their customers' needs.
Reaching brand response	The customers communication regarding their understanding about the brand and if it satisfies their needs both emotionally and functionally.
Achieving brand relationship	The possible relationship to the customers when the personal identification and connection to the brand exist which creates individual meaning.
Brand elements	Can be the brand name, logo, symbols and colors to differentiate themselves from competitors and thereby achieve brand awareness in both purchase and usage situations.
Marketing programs	Marketing activities that can increase the chance of customers experiencing the brand and thereby to achieve an increase of the brand awareness, chosen through various strategies.
Secondary associations	Other brands can be related to the company's own brand by using the knowledge and associations of other brands to increase the awareness of the customers.
Marketing activities	Activities that can be used by a company to achieve an added value to a product and build a brand awareness in order to satisfy the customers' needs.

Keller (2009) provided the pyramid visualization of the four brand attributes whereas it can be understood as if a company has to achieve the first level in creating a brand identity, in order to create meaning and to create a response of the consumer in order to build a relationship. However, the model is describing what the brand attributes and brand building tools are and what the desired outcomes should be, but not what a company actually should do to strengthen the brand equity. These gaps create the conceptual starting point in order to understand the process of strengthening brand equity.

3.4 Conceptual framework

The theoretical framework of the CBBE-model provides the basis for this study to investigate and analyze marketing activities in SMEs and a particular relevance for brand equity in the case study firm PAUL och THOM. However, the model is of limited use when striving to understand in what way the activities can be strengthening for the company's brand equity. The model is describing the attributes and the potential outcomes of them but not how to strengthen the brand. Moreover, the brand building tools could rather be seen and will from now on be defined as brand building activities.

According to Keller (2009), it seems that the brand building and brand equity are separate and quite static. Seeing the marketing activities as a process and instead of a static one-way street, one arrives at the conceptual framework presented in figure 3. The figure shows that attributes, marketing activities and brand equity are interconnected. The brand attributes and brand building activities are used to identify and conceptualize the marketing activities of the company in order to strengthen the brand equity. This is in contrast to Keller's pyramid where the brand attributes are on different levels, which indicates that they have to achieve every level before a company can go on to the next higher one.

The brand attributes in the conceptual framework are combined with brand building activities, whereby the attributes should be seen as a process needing to adapt to the development of the company over time. Thus, this study investigates the experiences of the case company and interpreted their journey by looking at their activities that might have contributed to strengthening the brand equity. However, activities might be harder to categorize under just one attribute and without an order to reach these attributes. Instead, using the brand attributes to identify the conceived marketing activities can be seen as a process that constantly needs to be maintained in the daily work. Thereby, the attributes are used in to create an understanding of why the company chose their brand building activities and their relation to strengthen brand equity. The brand building activities are in the conceptual framework seen as an addition to the brand attributes. That supports and enforces the brand attributes which in their turn contribute to strengthening the brand equity, instead of seeing them as two detached models. Visualized as the second circle in figure 3, it indicates the brand building and marketing activities.

The brand attributes are directly connected to the brand equity but also related to the marketing and brand building activities in the surrounding circle. Creating brand identity is about creating an understanding of what the company stands for. The brand elements are here used to create the visual identity or the brand. Building brand meaning is based on the social and personal needs that a company has to consider in choosing their marketing activities. Reaching the brand response is about the understanding about the brand of the customers and in what sense the brand satisfies both emotional and functional needs of the customers. Achieving brand relationship is something a company can strive for by identifying the personal values of the customers in order to create loyalty.

Figure 3. Visualization of the conceptual framework of interpreted theory

It is argued that creating and protecting brand equity begins with a brand-oriented mindset, which is focusing on building strong brands and safeguarding the survival of the company (Urde, 1994). Moreover, brand equity can be seen as a process in an organization where the purpose is to create, develop and protect the brand identity through the constant interaction with the customers to reach a competitive advantage (M'zungu *et al.* 2010). Thus, the conceptual framework can be seen as the mindset within an organization with a focus on the brand which constitutes the process of understanding how an SME can strengthen brand equity. All in all, the conceptual framework is departing from Keller's pyramid and showing the interconnected process of the brand attributes, activities and brand equity. Second, the attributes are used to conceptualize the marketing activities in the company. Third, the brand building tools are seen as activities and supportive of the brand attributes. Last, the brand-oriented mindset can be helpful to establish in a firm in order to create a common understanding among the employees.

4 Empirical data

This chapter presents the empirical background about the case company followed by the empirical results that were selected from the semi-structured interviews with the respondents. The empirical data is divided into the empirical background, the four brand equity attributes and the challenges and advantages connected to being an SME in PAUL och THOM.

4.1 Empirical background

PAUL och THOM AB is a wholesale company in the food industry (Alla bolag, 2016). The company is focusing on offering delicious delicacies with a high quality from small and local producers (PAUL och THOM, *Om oss.* 2018). The products are imported from different countries in Europe where the main premise is to provide people with taste sensations and to make their everyday life more tasteful. Nowadays, the company has around 500 products in their portfolio such as cheese, olives, grissini, spices, charcuteries and much more. The company changed their company name in 2016, and thereby also their brand name to PAUL och THOM. Earlier, the company was called Gourmetgruppen and was founded in 1994.

The idea of changing the brand to PAUL och THOM was created based on a market survey that a previous employee looked at Gourmetgruppen and their consumers' awareness. The survey pointed out that the previous brand was too generic and insipid in order to reach the consumers' attention. Moreover, the company is quite small with 29 employees (Alla bolag, 2016), has an informal structure, not managed from the top, there are short decision paths, the firm seems innovative and has a familiar atmosphere, which can be interpreted in this citation:

> "*The innovational power is something I believe is where we have short decision paths, we are iterative and we can take it fast from an idea to the decision. That is an advantage however, we are basically half as large as our biggest competitor*" (Respondent B, 2018).

The fact that the company seems familiar is also something based on the relevance of the owner in the firm, where the owner, has an important role of the corporate brand and thereby also affecting the marketing communication. The owner provides much knowledge and experience of the food sector and there is the constant contact between the employees and to the suppliers. Furthermore, much of the work seems based on the owners and employees' feelings. These feelings can be connected to when new products are chosen, what kind of marketing activities that should be done when the products weekly are ordered and so on. At this point, the analytical and statistical tools are not used by the employees in their daily work, but something the company sees as important and are working with it to implement this year. The feelings are also present in choosing the products packaging, the quality, the material, the colors, where the products should be displayed in the grocery stores when talking to the customers. Additionally, the use of the employees' feelings is rooted in the company's mission, that more people should be able to enjoy their food (PAUL och THOM, *Guidelines*, 2015). This is done by sharing the company's knowledge and experience regarding their products to both the customers and consumers in order to facilitate their enjoyment and present in the company's decision making.

> *"Much is about the feelings, the feelings direct the numbers, the analysis and much more. It is about the gut feeling, about the trends regarding the purchase, what we believe, see and read about various aspects. However, the feeling is still the crucial point which we act on and choose our paths based on" (Respondent C, 2018).*

Earlier Gourmetgruppen was a delicacies company which provided exclusive products which mostly were sold through the deli counter or as accessories. This has changed whereas PAUL och THOM offers a smaller assortment with a focus that is more mainstream which is when the special and odd products that before often were sold through the deli counter, with a quite low profit. These were often consumed on special occasions and sold in smaller portions. Being more mainstream can make it more difficult to stand out in the market, to make something different compared to others and at the same time attract as many people as possible. Such a change in going more mainstream can be dangerous when the unique products are minimized and makes the company more vulnerable whereas customers more easily can replace the products (*ibid.*). There needs to be a balance, due to that the special products cannot provide high volumes and much income, whereas the mainstream products are able to do so.

"*Our most valuable products, which provide the highest turnover is the snack segment. That is where we increase the most, we do increase everywhere but it is there where we increase the most. It is exceptional, it is unbelievable*" (Respondent A, 2018).

Despite the risk getting too mainstream, PAUL och THOM seem to have a working concept even though they do not have as formal processes as probably their larger competitors have where the reliance on the employees' gut feeling seems important in deciding what seems appropriate to do and in what order. Of course, these decisions also are connected to the owners and employees' experiences about the sector and work experience in making these decisions. The brand change was one activity that was successful, based on that they only lost seven percent of the sales the first year, which normally can be up to sixty percent and calculated for twenty percent after a brand change.

"Looking at a brand change, the process is often based on a five years period which a company plan their different steps on...and normally you can expect at least twenty percent loss...and when we only had that small loss we was like "huh"?..." (Respondent C, 2018).

The respondents mentioned the importance of the internal implementation which they believe is the main reason for their success, except putting an effort in the right activities and doing them in the right order.

"The most crucial part when doing such a change, is to convince the internal capital, the employees, before we start talking to external parties" (Respondent C, 2018).

Much time was spent on looking at the whole organization, the business capital which is based on different parts which everybody needed to understand. The management was focusing on explaining how they wanted to change the brand and how they should do it. The why was seen as difficult and can still be a challenge. Many of the employees have been working there for almost twenty years, it makes it harder to make such an extensive change.

"But now when the sales figures are rising and the sales people are starting to appreciate working with the new brand it makes people to start understanding the why" (*Respondent C, 2018).*

It took almost two years for the employees to internalize the brand and now it is more unusual for anyone to use the name Gourmetgruppen than PAUL och THOM when they answer the phone or in daily conversations. The owner thinks this success is mostly based on the fact that he himself was a hundred percent convinced that it would work to make the brand a mindset within the company. The communication with the customers was also important in order to make them understand why the brand change was done and what the possible gains would be for them. For the consumers, there was a little endorser on the backside of some products for about six months in order to inform the consumers about the change. That was done to minimize the risk of losing existing consumers from Gourmetgruppen. Otherwise, the previous brand name was not given much attention in order to provide PAUL och THOM space and to get the effect of presenting a new brand, that can create curiosity with the consumer.

4.2 Brand equity attributes

Making the brand to a mindset in the company, whereas the company changed from having a portfolio with various brands throughout their assortment to focus on one brand, the corporate brand. To furthermore present the empirical data, this section is based on the four brand equity attributes to create brand identity, to build brand meaning, to reach brand response and to achieve brand relations connected to the work in PAUL och THOM.

4.2.1 Creating brand identity

The chosen understanding of brand identity for this study is connected to the perception from the organization what they want their customers to understand by the brand which includes using brand elements such as the brand name, logo, symbols, angle, tonality and colors to differentiate themselves from competitors and thereby achieve brand awareness in both purchase and usage situations. The identity should be chosen in order to get in the top-of-mind of the customer where it is easy to recall. Moreover, it is useful to create an understanding of what product category the brand competes.

The first step, creating the new brand was to find fitting brand elements, which was done in cooperation with an external graphic design agency. Having the information about Gourmetgruppen in mind and the brand that did not have clear brand elements, the case company wanted to do it properly this time. Therefore, they made plenty of in-depth interviews in order to understand what values the company was based on. That information resulted in the name PAUL och THOM, whereas the name was created based on the history of the owner's personal experiences within the industry and the uncle who taught him about delicacies already at a young age in Germany. Due to the different culture in Germany concerning the supply of delicacies the interest in offering the Swedish market products from Europe. This information was used, creating the brand name PAUL och THOM, where Paul is the uncle and Thom, is the abbreviation of Thomas. The personal attachment was combined with the personal characteristics of the owner reflected in the brand (the brand can be seen in appendix 2). Combined with the brand name, the symbols, graphic symbols and design, tonality in color and text were also something the company needed to decide to reach a continuity stated in this citation.

"…I thought we were good at making our brochures and everything we did. We made much material, but everything was sprawling. If all the material was presented on a table, there was no connection between them even though they looked nice separately. There was no unified line…" (Respondent A, 2018).

One respondent even stated that the focus was wrong due to the focus on luxurious and perfect details however, the main purpose in PAUL och THOM is instead focusing on the simplicity and the presentation of the product that should get all the attention. When the attention is pointed to the products, the respondent mentioned that they would facilitate the sales process and increase the recognition. Moreover, PAUL och THOM still represents high quality, good raw materials, and qualitative products, and have increased the focus on letting the products take the attention in the stores. In contrast to Gourmetgruppen which had a lot of products in their portfolio, that was too broad in order to succeed in penetrating the market. Additionally, they were mainly focusing on the delicacies and special products, or also called service products. On the contrary, the focus in PAUL och THOM has been to communicate the corporate values to the customers and consumers about the products through using the symbols, colorful colors, layout and text tonality which is the same on all products and marketing material.

"Now there is a recognition undependable if it is a package with sausage, with bread sticks or with ham. All of them has the same tonality which creates a recognition which also can be linked to the colors that we work with and that are quite unusual in the fast-moving consumer goods sector" (Respondent A, 2018).

The brand elements, based on the corporate values are focusing on creating the simplicity and to enjoy food without the need of spending much time on it. The simplicity is the basis and unit of difference compared to the competition on the market, only looking at the brand elements. Based on the market in the food industry and more specifically the retail sector where PAUL och THOM is selling their products, is a sector with a limited surface, limited time to discover the products and to reach a decision. Moreover, the retailers do have their, own brands, that often get the best places where the chance of consumers seeing the product is at the highest. Something the company came up with to compete more effectively in the stores was through changing their approach concerning their exposures and placements of the products in the stores. This was done to catch the attention of the consumer as early as possible when they enter the store.

The presentation of the products, in order to catch the attention of the consumers firstly changed by using more exposures, so-called "displayer" which are products such as olives, pesto, sausages and pickled vegetables were displayed in cardboard sets on quartz pallets. These can be placed wherever the customers think they fit in their own stores. These were used to make the consumers notice the brand in the beginning, after the change. However, these are decreasing whereas more effort has been put on selling the newest development, "spårpaneler", from now on called exposures (appendix 3). They provide other ways of displaying the products in using dead surfaces in the stores that do not have any sales. It can be an empty wall, a pillar or backside of a fridge that normally cannot be used in order to sell products. However, PAUL och THOM has made a solution with their new exposures to use these spaces and thereby also compete more effectively in the stores:

"We can dress these places with our panels, put up our products, generate sales, food pleasure and an impulse for the consumers to buy…whereas the consumers get pleased by finding delicious products" (Respondent D, 2018).

These solutions are in line with the value of simplicity for the customers by having fewer places to check ordering products, to have the products collected at one place and to more easily get an overview. They facilitate the process of putting up the price tags for the customer and provide sales on surfaces that before were not used. For the consumer, it also facilitates the search for the products, they kind of pop up and makes it easier to combine the products when they are at the same place. In that sense, PAUL och THOMs products are simpler to detect in comparison to before where the products were just one in the crowd. Thereby, the unique brand elements that seem different compared to the competitors in the market in combination with the new way of presenting the products. All of that goes in line with the company's mission: the simplicity and that more people should have the possibility to enjoy the food.

To be able to enjoy the food in a simple way without being a Masterchef and to be able to enjoy products from PAUL och THOM on every occasion was the beginning when the new brand name entered the market, now the tapas concept is the next step. The tapas concept is an extension of the simplicity to enjoy food on all occasions, where it should be easy to enjoy food together with friends and family. This is connected to their first slogan 5:2 method, that it should take 5 minutes to prepare the food but enjoy it for 2 hours. This was done in the beginning with the brand release to create attention, to make people curious about the brand as well. Using the trend 5:2 related to weight loss, which people already were familiar too.

"It was so popular with the 5:2 method, and we wanted to use the attention in order to make consumers wonder what they could eat with the 5:2 and wanted them to look at our signs. That is also a way of creating communication and to engage people, to make them question things which also creates feelings. Thereby a little

seed is planted within the consumers heads, negative as positive the questioning by curiosity" (Respondents C, 2018).

Thereby the goal to achieve curiosity within the consumers' minds and to make the consumers wonder what PAUL och THOM is and to create chances for the consumers to think of the brand in various situations was created. This can be connected to the following statement, that was about putting the brand PAUL och THOM into the buzz feed of all information in order to reach the attention of the consumers even though the reactions of people sometimes firstly can be critical and questioning:

"To create a curiosity within all this information that is available out there, to put hooks out there in order to pop up a bit everywhere, that the consumer can start to see and explore the brand in the stores" (Respondent C, 2018).

The next step then was according to the respondents done by educating both customers and consumers about their products and to share their knowledge about the food. This was done through social media, Facebook, Instagram and the home page where simple tips are shared in order to use the products and to provide information about the variety of the products. The latest concept to reach the consumers' attention and association PAUL och THOM wants to create is concerning tapas.

"Our ambition is to be the synonym to tapas in the Swedish market, we want to be the obvious tapas supplier" (Respondent B, 2018).

The company seems to have changed their approach from the customer, the grocery stores to the consumer which has affected the company's strategies and activities. More is based on the consumer and how to make them recognize the brand in order to create an increased awareness in the market. Much effort seems also to be put on evoking an interest and feelings at the consumers at the same time as the consumers should learn more about the brand and the products from PAUL och THOM.

"...the most important thing with our communication is that it should taste. The focus of our brand is based on what the consumers should feel. Much is about the feelings that we want them to experience...it should be about the taste, feelings and that you should enjoy it." (Respondent C, 2018).

Based on the respondents' statements it seems as if the recognition has increased since the brand change to PAUL och THOM and all the specific aspects connected to the brand name, the logo, colors, and symbols seem to have facilitated the way to communicate the brand and to create a meaning.

4.2.2 Building brand meaning

Brand meaning is in this study defined as the meaning that is created within the mind of the customer due to every contact they make with the brand. The meaning is then created based on the product characteristics that can satisfy the customers' functional needs and cohere with the common values of the chosen market segment.

The joint actions in communicating PAUL och THOMs values and the efforts that have been done in order to evoke feelings at the level of the customers regarding their marketing activities but also the contact with the products in stores. To do so, a change in the marketing strategy has developed through the process after the brand change. The company chose to focus more on the consumer, instead of the grocery stores or customers, in order to reach a larger amount of the consumers in the market. The focus changed from being the wholesaler that sold delicacies to a company that is changing the assortment to more consumer packed products. Products such as non-refrigerated ones and packaged products that can be sold beyond the deli-counter. In combination with that change the company also started to focus more on reaching a larger crowd, and thereby “to go more mainstream”.

“We want to go more mainstream…we are within all commercial radio stations and the biggest TV channel in Sweden from the second April. It has become more mainstream and associated to large brands” (Respondent B, 2018)

At the beginning of the brand change the choice of going through the radio instead of print media was to be in the buzz feed and to pop up in the top of the consumers’ minds. It started in September 2016 where PAUL och THOM decided to work with Bauer and Mix Megapol, due to their large scope of listeners. Moreover, the focus was to reach other market segments where families were connected to activities such as “Fjällkalaset” in Sälen and “Sommarkalaset” at Lisseberg and women were reached through “Tjejplanet” to Dubai. Thereby the goal was to attend and to be seen in different contexts in order to create a broader approach of reaching consumers attention, in comparison to targeted media. At the same time as these activities were planned, the sales department also changed their approach to reach collected actions in relation to the marketing.

The sales department had collected actions in relation to the marketing activities where they informed the stores about the different activities mentioned above together with the radio. The collected actions were to carry out activities at each time but to do them collectively in order to create a pull effect and to reach an outcome of it. Thereby the sales department worked already weeks before “Sommarkalaset”, “Fjällkalaset” and “Tjejplanet” to inform the stores and to promote products to match the advertisement. Additionally, activities in the stores such as demo in stores, where a person can present products in a store where consumers can come and taste the product.

“During the advertisement campaigns the demos were done in the stores in order to create a commitment and a pull effect, which needs the cooperation” (Respondent C, 2018).

Even regarding the demo staff, PAUL och THOM made a number of changes to educate them in order to provide appropriate information about the products but also about the company’s values. Whereas the goal was to provide the consumers with the dining experience of the products, instead of just standing there to let them taste. Instead of offering them the possibility to learn more about the products and all the various possibilities to use them in several dishes. This is something that was possible due to the basis that was created with suitable material about the products and PAUL och THOM but also through the cooperation with the demo staff company. The demo staff was chosen to present products from PAUL och THOM and educated in order to get the control about that all of them have the same knowledge. Thereby, it is easier to provide the consumers with interesting information about the products and all the possible functions.

“Anybody can just stand there, open a can and put it up to let people taste. But we wanted them to present them the food experience and journey, to give the consumer something more. Instead of just thinking come and buy, or taste and go on” (Respondent C, 2018).

To employ demo staff is also another way to simplify the work of the customers. It was mentioned during the interviews that the customers have quite stressful work days, where it sometimes also can be difficult for PAUL och THOM to educate the customers due to their limited amount of time. Therefore, the demo employees can relieve some of the work to offer the consumers the products and to share the knowledge about the products.

The company’s positioning on the market is to be, the knowledgeable trading house, which is about finding and offering the best delicacies from Europe and at the same time to spread their knowledge and experiences to both customers and consumers. The knowledge and experiences of the products in combination with their mission to let more people enjoy food creates their ambition to inform people with the knowledge of how to use the products, seen in this statement:

"To just open a product, to offer the simplicity through a product and to not exactly no whether it is a sausage, a meat-ball, hamburger or meat sauce it is so much more than just one product. Moreover, the customer or consumer can feel that they can learn something new and extend their area of usage and can thereby extend their knowledge with simple solutions" (Respondent C, 2018).

It seems as if much effort has been put on creating a continuity and consistency throughout the business where the marketing activities, sales department, exposures and demos in stores have been connected and are more structured then before. With structure, a higher grade of control is meant where for example the sales department has started to rely on the sales numbers of the bestsellers regarding the snack assortment. They provide the information about what products should be presented in the stores. Thereby the recognition from the consumers can be increased when they know how to find us and know what we offer.

"At this point we are talking a lot about the focus of the brand and that a bit more control seems appropriate and important…in order to simplify the process for the consumer to increase their recognition" (Respondent D, 2018).

According to the respondents statements the requirements of structure seem to be stricter throughout the whole organization, not just in the sales department, where also the brand touch points have been taken into account. They concern all the possible situations a consumer can come in contact with the brand, independently whether it is through advertisement, exposures in stores when the consumer looks at a package and so on.

"We are trying to create a continuity, especially that all our brand touch points stand the same quality. All touch points, that our consumers can come in contact with. We have just started to talk about that, but it is about everything connected from how the product packages feel like to the logos on the cars. Moreover, all colors, nuances and tonalities we use in our pictures matters" (Respondent B, 2018).

The tapas concept in combination with the new style of exposures that is a brand touchpoint but furthermore a marketing communication tool in the stores. These exposures provide new ways of displaying the products that create a curiosity from the consumers' point of view. Moreover, they can be seen as a brand touch point as both customers and consumers come in contact with the whole exposure, that should be in a good quality, with material that is from PAUL och THOM and in a good shape. The exposures provide also a continuity throughout different stores whereas the company is starting to work with templates for the different sizes. Thereby, the consumer can always know what they can expect from such exposures, what kind of products there will be and that they will be similar in different stores.

"The products should be placed in a particular order, even though we have not come so far with that project and are still discussing it, but we know that this matters in order to mediate the desired information" (Respondent B, 2018).

Combined with the exposures a lot of effort has been put on the signage that also should facilitate the simplicity both for the customers, where their work can be easier when products have the same prices and signage which lets the consumers more easily grasp the products. Moreover, it should be easy for the customers to review and to fill up the exposures, as it provides the customers with an overview of the products. That saves time compared to check several different corners in the stores as before where all the products where placed.

The possible outcome of the continuity and development of these exposures will according to the respondents increase the recognition due to the improved availability and similarities of exposures in various stores. In combination with these offerings, radio campaigns are done during the spring and summer period, to push the new tapas focus and thereby create a pull effect from the consumers. However, there was done a lot of work before these radio campaign. Already last summer, the management group within PAUL och THOM discussed how they wanted to develop their brand investment, where the coverage was one objective. That is about how many stores the company is cooperating with and how the stores are distributed throughout the country. Last summer they found that both Stockholm and Malmö had potential to increase their number of stores, which thereafter were visited by the sales department for three days. Every sales person that participated got to visit 8-10 stores where in Stockholm 300 stores were visited. Due to the constant growth of the company, the demand is increasing which requires more stores that can offer their products. Where a focus of the sales department also has been to gain new customers, which at the beginning of this year was 229 new stores in only three months.

"We are getting more and more emails where consumers ask where to find our products" (Respondent D, 2018).

The increased demand and the planned advertisement and investment in TV4 with Köket.se was one of the reasons for these weeks in Stockholm and Malmö. Due to that the management group already roughly, new which products they would use during their cooperation with TV4 they wanted to promote the tapas assortment to the customers in time to prepare for the "Let's go tapas" campaign. The new approach of the exposures combined with "Let's go tapas", that according to the respondents is the development of the success factor to keep everything simple but to take it to the next level. Mentioned during the interviews is that "Let's go tapas" was something that developed through the simplicity focus in the company's mission but in the beginning, it was unsure what this concept really should be about.

"It took an unorthodox turn, let's go tapas was developed through all the discussions about tapas, but it was probably based on something we searched for but never really ended up in until we got the jingle from the advertisement company. Thereby the process seems conversely but the concept is truly based in our core values and the simplicity that we know is a working concept combined with our exposures" (Respondent B, 2018).

The concept of "Let's go tapas" was also focused on the consumer and to achieve an association to the more precisely chosen niche of tapas. Furthermore, the concept is connected to the values of the company and thereby creates a top of mind effect connected to the brand, to reach an increased awareness of the brand in the minds of the consumers. The development of "Let's go tapas" was also something that evolved through the company's values but also through the development and trends in the market. One respondent mentioned that the Swedish market has evolved from being more focused on products but now instead is about the service. Thereby, also the demand and consciousness about quality and premium products have increased in various sectors. To satisfy the consumers with the quality, characteristics, and values of the brand the product is not enough.

Taking responsibility throughout the value chain, authenticity and being transparent are a number of comments from the respondents, in order to satisfy the needs above the product itself of both customers and consumers. Based on current trends the respondents said that the most important one at this point seems to be about the origin of the products, where the authenticity and transparency are included. The consumers are being more aware and to question where everything comes from combined with the focus on where the raw material comes from. Moreover, there seems to be a trend concerning that food products should be produced in Sweden and also locally produced. Despite this trend one respondent discussed this subject and was taking it one step further arguing that some products might have a larger effect on the environment, looking at the global perspective, when they are produced in Sweden. One question mentioned was:

"How many companies are sending their products to other countries to process them?" (Respondent C, 2018).

The respondent discussed that many companies process their products abroad but sell them as Swedish produced due to that their raw material is produced in Sweden. There it seems as if it is much about the knowledge and consciousness of the consumers, who often tend to focus on that it is locally produced but not taken the step further questioning. One should wonder if the product would be more beneficially produced abroad where the climate is more appropriate. Lastly, regarding products in the delicacies segment where particular products are legitimate as the serrano ham, that is produced and air dried in the Sierra mountains in Spain. With such products, the quality is also touched upon due to that a serrano ham only can be labeled as a serrano when coming from Spain.

4.2.3 Reaching brand response

The brand response is defined as how the customers think or feel about the brand, how they respond regarding their understanding of the brand and the marketing activities and if it satisfies their needs both emotionally and functionally. Thereby this presents what PAUL och THOM has done in order to communicate their values to both customers and consumers. The brand awareness of the consumers seems to have increased as certain activities have focused on creating a higher chance of reaching the attention of the consumers in the grocery stores. Whereas one respondent mentioned that consumers at the exhibitions this year recognized the brand and telling that they were buying the products in the stores and that they have heard the jingle on the radio.

"It was an incredible difference where the development at the consumer level has changed and they in a clear way recognize the brand and who we are" (Respondent, D).

The jingle regarding the campaign "Let's go tapas" is one of the biggest advertisement campaigns for this year combined with TV4 and köket.se. These are the main activities beyond the events such as "Korvfestivalen" and "Passion för mat", where employees have been in Stockholm and Gothenburg to participate during the events and let consumers taste and learn more about the products. Through the exhibitions, a direct contact with the consumer is possible where the employees can get a feeling about the consumers' reactions about the products. Otherwise, the awareness of the consumers is measured through visit frequencies on the homepage or through the sales numbers.

"The visits on the homepage have increased from 3000 to 6000 clicks, where we can see that people want to know more about us. Moreover, the demand, our sales have increased over 100% in certain segments since January. That implies that we sell more at this point compared to what we normally sell during high season" (Respondent A, 2018).

Through the increased demand and the improved eager of the consumers that want to know more about PAUL och THOM the respondent mentioned the relation of the advertisement to the increased sales in the segments that had been promoted and pushed since September last year. In order to reach a response from both customers and consumers, marketing and advertisement seem to be needed in order to create an awareness of the brand. The last campaigns have been focused on sponsorship in both TV4 and radio. The co-sponsors for TV4 are despite PAUL och THOM, large companies such as Loka, Nestlé, and Abba which all are getting mentioned every day in the advertisement. Moreover, the recipes that are made in cooperation with köket.se are published on their homepage and shown on television. Thereby the education of the consumers again is created in order to show them how to use the products and display their various usage potential.

Combined with the TV advertisement and the published recipes online on köket.se, the company has focused on educating the consumers how to use the products by sharing tips, brochures, and inspiring pictures to engage the consumers. Even in the pictures, the company has guidelines in order to keep the same tonality through all material that is published where the categories are divided into our food, our knowledge and eating together. Through the pictures the company's values can be communicated and additionally the history of the products. PAUL och THOM seems to have good relationships to their suppliers throughout Europe and the company has been visiting most of the farms in order to learn more about their products and to see how they are refined.

The knowledge about the farms and their products provides the company with an understanding of how the products can be used and also the possibility to communicate the history behind them. Moreover, another core value of the company is relations that can be connected to the suppliers and their cooperation with the company. Thereby the relationship provides information about the content that creates the brand:

"We have the contact, we have been there and visited them. We do not need to come up with something, there is a history that can be used in order to catch the attention of the consumer…coming from the agency point of view, we needed to find anything to use in order to engage people…we will win on being transparent and using the authenticity" (Respondent C, 2018).

The content and history can also be connected to the brand identity and the possibility to achieve competitive advantages. The respondents mentioned that the personal brand is getting more important concerning the perspective of the consumer. Whereas it gets important for the company to create appropriate brand associations in order to be exchangeable for the consumer in the stores.

"It is not only about the product quality, because that is simple to copy. There are rumors that the retail chains have such hard controls regarding their suppliers and where the products come from. They could just go there and negotiate with the producers due to their much larger volumes and guaranty of delivery to all their stores" (Respondent B, 2018).

It was mentioned that it is not the quality alone that companies compete about, but about the brand. The brand is the main competitive advantage and according to the respondents the only chance to stay on the shelf.

4.2.4 Achieving brand relationship

The brand relationship is defined as the possible relationship to the customers when the personal identification and connection to the brand exist which creates personal and individual meaning for each customer. In this case, the resonance is connected to the relationship between the company and customers, in the way they can facilitate the process of selling the product for the grocery stores PAUL och THOM.

The mentioned relationship to the suppliers that provide information about the history that shapes the content of the products and thereby also the brand. Additionally, the relationship with the suppliers, that according to the respondents is a good relationship where the owner of the company constitutes the link and is mostly responsible in that area. Through that relationship, almost all new products are created where the supplier and the owner of PAUL och THOM together can come up with new ideas or that the supplier presents news. Moreover, through that connection, it seems simple to contact the supplier when something is wrong regarding things such as the quality of the products or that the deliveries are late. This also provides the company with fast answers when the customers have questions about the products. Moreover, the relationship to the suppliers can provide the basis for the transparency and information for the customers as one respondent mentioned the demand for transparency in the market.

The relations are however not only connected backward to the suppliers, in the value chain but also forwards, concerning the customers and consumers. The company tries to be a good business partner by asking them about their own needs and thereby customize their offering to their specific situation regarding their customer base, goals and timeframe.

"Much is about the personal relation, that we not only are a supplier that delivers products, but we want to create a value and want to be a business partner to our customers" (Respondent D, 2018).

Being a business partner also means to help the customers create an offering and a possibility to create their own relations to their customers. One example was from an event in Luthagens Livs, one ICA store in Uppsala where PAUL och THOM arranged a dinner together with the store where consumers were invited to taste and learn about some of the products. Additionally, the day after a salesperson was demonstrating the products in the store where some of the participating consumers came to buy the products.

"For the customer this creates a relation based on the experiences and memory about the evening" (Respondent D, 2018).

As the offer for the customers is a relationship where good business solutions are in focus and the cooperation to reach that, the satisfaction, and security of offering clear communication, available products and information where the consumers also are included and have the possibility to engage. The respondents have mentioned the importance of peoples' feelings, in the company but it also connects to the consumers' feelings concerning the brand.

"If we can create a feeling and touch the consumers, we will reach the purchase sooner" (Respondent C, 2018).

Other ways of reaching out to the consumers to engage them and to inspire them to enjoy food and learn more about the simplicity that PAUL och THOM offers is through the home page, Facebook, and Instagram. Through these channels, people have the possibility to engage and come in contact with people that have the same interests in food.

4.3 Challenges and advantages within PAUL och THOM

Connecting the investigation of the brand equity within PAUL och THOM being a small and medium-sized enterprise, this part is related to the challenges and advantages are seen in the company which thereafter is going to the CBBE-model. During the interviews, respondents highlighted challenges connected to being a small enterprise and the connection to the available resources. Mentioned scarce resources that PAUL och THOM face were financial resources regarding marketing activities compared to competitors, an opportunity for analytical tools, skills, experiences, and knowledge. One respondent mentioned the difficulty in being few employees, the human capital, that can be a scarce resource in the company where there now are starting to be a few more employees in relation to the increase of the company's financial resources. The financial resources are still one of the main aspect which an organization is based on and crucial for PAUL och THOM, which can be seen in the following statement:

"Social media is our next big investment, but the financial resources are unfortunately crucial, and the main task is to reach the biggest outcome with the resources we have, which is not that easy" (Respondent A, 2018).

The respondents, however, did not see this as something negative, but instead as a driver in actually competing with the much larger competitors, both financially and regarding human capital, which just made them more eager to succeed. Moreover, the respondents enjoyed working with a small enterprise where the work is more familiar and genuine.

"Here you get down into the ground, sowing the seeds, digging and leaking the ground. You have more contact, which makes it much more fun working within a small enterprise" (Respondent C, 2018).

Being a small enterprise has advantages as the respondents describe their power of innovation, their short ways of reaching decisions with an experimental orientation, thanks to their informal structure which was seen as strengths.

"The power of innovation is something I believe is an advantage, having short ways to reach a decision, we are pretty iterative and we can reach fast decisions when we have an idea. But we are also half the size of our biggest competitor" (Respondent B, 2018).

Other mentioned advantages were possibilities to more easily plan activities, to have an overview and to keep track of the information. Moreover, the knowledge of every person is used carefully and employees' networks are seen as sources filled with information regarding various aspects as for example knowledge and experience of the employees in order to understand the market, trends, and advertisement or other stated below. Additionally, the employees at PAUL och THOM seem constantly eager to learn more and search for information in order to develop and to compete with their larger competitors. The drive to learn and to develop themselves can also be seen as an advantage.

"Much information and knowledge are based on the feelings, through discussions with colleagues and experience from the sector" (Respondent C, 2018).

The knowledge and experiences are then used to create new products where especially the owner's intuitions combined with the good relationship with the suppliers are the main sources for creating new products at PAUL och THOM.

"...our CEO has a good fingertip feeling both as an innovator and entrepreneur which determines our products..." (Respondent C, 2018).

The development and use of the gathered knowledge from both the employees and owner however, need to have a common understanding of what the brand should stand for in order to use the knowledge in an appropriate and useful way. To do so, there has been much work spent on the communication in the company in creating a joint understanding even for the people that first was skeptical. The internal communication was a starting point in order to get every person in the organization to understand the importance of the brand. Due to that all departments and people in the company have various priorities and ways of communicating there was a need for a joint understanding. In order to talk to the customers that need information about the benefits by cooperating with PAUL och THOM and what this company can provide for them and lastly to the consumer who is interested in the product itself, the usability, the why, how and what they can do for them.

"...when I explained something to a colleague she said I talked weird and that I needed to talk in a way understandable for them...how to talk to people is also about the communication. An organization...is almost like a whole world's economy" (Respondent C, 2018).

The internal communication seems to be the first step in order to create a common understanding of the brand in order to communicate the organization's values to their environment. Salespeople were provided with new tools, information to prepare material for their meetings with customers, got educated in sales technique and were taught to understand the importance of planning such a meeting, in order to make a deal. Moreover, material for external people such as demo staff got also informed in order to have the same information about all the products to create an experience for the consumer instead of just selling a product. Thereby, people outside the organization also got educated with the knowledge about the brand and the products.

5 Analysis and discussion

The following chapter is about the analysis and discussion of the empirical data which are connected to the conceptual framework regarding brand equity within SME and how brand equity can be strengthened. This chapter is then concluded with an overview of the conceptualized activities and in what sense they have contributed to the process of strengthening the brand equity.

5.1 Brand equity attributes related to the marketing activities

The conceptual framework about the four brand attributes is used to create an understanding of what the company has done and what activities they have worked with regarding the brand building and the contribution to strengthen the brand. To remind the reader of having the research questions in mind that have guided the analysis, they are presented below:

- What marketing activities does PAUL och THOM work with to strengthening the brand equity?
- How can the marketing activities be conceptualized to better understand brand equity within SMEs?

5.1.1 Creating brand identity

The brand name is seen as the first step to increase the brand equity where the name should be attractive, easy to recall, short, simple and evoke positive feelings (Keller, 1993; Centeno *et al.* 2013). The name is one element needed to create the brand identity and to communicate what the company stands for. At PAUL och THOM the main activity and change was the brand change and thereby the transformation going from various products brand to one corporate brand. Through the new brand name, it was mentioned that the goal was to create an increased awareness. This consists with the theory that mentions the increased recognition and possibility to recall a brand in various situations if the brand differentiates the products from other competitors on the market (Keller, 1993).

In order to differentiate the brand, other brand elements such as the logo, symbol, jingles, the packaging, design or slogans can be used to create a cluster that defines what the brand stands for (Keller, 2009). Whereas the brand elements can result in an enhanced brand awareness which fits the case company's result regarding the increased brand awareness after the brand change. The respondents mentioned on several occasions that the awareness has increased whereas this is seen in the sales numbers of the promoted segments, from the direct contact of consumers at events and visits to the homepage. This can be connected to the increased recognition of the brand and the products that now are taking more space in the stores with the brand elements that are different from other competitors.

Previous, the brand elements were varying and contributed to inconsistent communication and various messages. The brand elements should be chosen based on memorability, likeability and meaningfulness criterions in order for consumers to recall and recognize the brand (Keller, 2009). The brand name PAUL och THOM combined with the brand elements were carefully chosen based on the guidelines where the logo, angle, colors, font, symbols, tonality in pictures and texts were based on several interviews with the graphic design company in order to fit that to the company's core values.

Not only the brand elements are carefully chosen but the mission, vision, and core values were also chosen based on the history of the company, the owner's personality, and competences of the staff in the market. Thereby, both the brand name and the brand elements were chosen together with the external graphic design company, which does match with the theory that both mentioned the meaning of including the staff and owner (Wong & Merrilees, 2005) and also graphic designers (Centeno *et al*. 2013). Moreover, such information should be integrated into the company in a long-term perspective in order to achieve an effect (Wong & Merrilees, 2005) which at PAUL och THOM seems to be the case, due to the presented mission, vision, guidelines and core values that every employee has available and is mentioned at every sales conference. Thereby a continuity is developed through all material and communication that goes to the customers as well as consumers. Through the continuity in the marketing material and the communication in the company as well as to the customers creates an increased recognition, which facilitates the process to recall a brand, which complies to Keller (2009).

The brand elements are also about reaching an enhanced brand awareness and about presenting both verbal and visual information that identifies and differentiates the brand from competitors (Keller, 1993). The continuity through the whole organization and simplicity are words mentioned by the respondents during the interviews that the brand seems based on and can be seen as a unit of differences. To make it easier for people to enjoy food and to do so on all occasions was the first step when the brand was new that helped to differentiate the brand on the market. In order to communicate that mission of the company, exposures combined with the slogan of 5:2 method was used. Moreover, the tapas concept takes it one step further for consumers to identify the brand and to relate it to a product category. A brand identity is something that can provide information about the product category a brand belongs to whereas the brand awareness also connects the needs of the customers to the brand (Keller, 2009). However, the brand awareness can be developed when the brand identity differs from the competitors where the name, package or other attributes need to be special in order to not to be copied.

The sector has a limited surface, limited time to reach the consumers and to let them discover the product in order to reach a decision as the respondents mentioned. The brand elements should, therefore, be considered to be transferable, adaptable and protectable to maintain the brand equity (Keller, 2009). To do so, the company came up with their new exposures which can be seen as tools to remain attractive and memorable in the customers' mind, protect the brand competitively and to more easily present new products, that consists with the defensive criterions of the brand elements.

To appear in the consideration set indicates that a customer or consumer gets considered for purchase (Keller, 2009). Through the brand and the brand elements that seem to be different from existing competitors in the market with the colorful colors and font combined with the exposures in the grocery stores, PAUL och THOM has created an opportunity to appear more easily in the consideration set of the consumer at the purchase situation. Combined with the marketing activities the company also does provide the customers with information about the activities in order to sync the products in stores with the advertisement campaigns. Thereby, one could say that the products appear in the consumers' consideration set and probably create a depth of the brand awareness to more easily recall and recognize the brand.

How broadly a brand is remembered in a purchase decision and in varying situations is another aspect to consider through reaching a brand awareness (Keller, 2009). Another change in the focus of the company has been concerning the consumer. Previously the marketing strategies were regarding the customers and less effort was put into reaching and attracting the consumer. Now, one could argue that the company has changed their focus to a consumer perspective with a pull strategy combined with the brand focus integrated into the whole organization. Thereby the brand can appear in several situations such as the grocery stores, demos, the internet, at events, in the radio and at the television which all are striving to communicate the simplicity of the brand and to enjoy the food in an easy way.

The brand awareness can be enhanced through marketing activities that make the consumers experience the brand (Keller, 1993) which applies to this case and the marketing activities the company has worked with. Thereby, consumers get information about how the products can be used in different channels, they can hear, see and taste the products in several occasions which provide opportunities for them to remember the brand and create a breadth of the brand awareness. Regarding both customers and consumers, the marketing activities have not only been about creating an awareness but also about education and being a knowledgeable trading house that helps the customers to reach beneficial market opportunities and thereby also develop a brand meaning.

5.1.2 Building brand meaning

One aspect of the brand meaning is the brand imagery which is connected to the more intangible perspective connected to the brand and the customers own experiences of the brand or advertisement (Keller, 2009). What the company has done in order to create meaning regarding more intangible aspects can be connected to the joint communication through all channels. The focus on the communication through various brand touch points can provide a meaning based on that the customers know what to expect of the brand. That can develop a feeling of confidence even as some new products or concepts are presented if the brand always is present and communicates the same goal.

The other aspect, the brand performance is connected to fulfill the functional needs regarding the product and the customers' experience of it (Keller, 2009). This can be related to the change of focus regarding the assortment of the company as PAUL och THOM cut down the number of products and changed their portfolio to more consumer packed products. As the respondents called it, they went more mainstream regarding the products and decreased the number of special products that previously were more connected to the delicacies company they had been. Thereby, the functional needs of the market segment were converted into the change of products. However, the company has kept a number of special products as they are demanded by some customers even though they do not provide any economic benefit for the company. This can be seen as another way of creating meaning through being accommodating towards customers' requests.

To satisfy customers functional needs a company has to consider the price, service, packaging, style, design and how the product smells or feels like (Keller, 2009). Through the work with creating a structure throughout the organization regarding aspects such as the brand touch points, the control of the salespersons and the customer visits, the exposures, brand elements and choice of new products are all carefully chosen. Thereby, one could argue that the company tries to satisfy the customers' needs by being innovative in their development and choices regarding the products in all steps of the process.

Changes in communicating the products and thereby the brand are related to the choice of marketing channels that the company also changed as the new brand was introduced. The company as mentioned wanted to go more mainstream and thereby used the radio and television to reach the consumers' attention and pop up in the buzz feed. According to the respondents, they believed these channels are more mainstream as the radio and television are played nationwide. Moreover, the marketing channels were chosen based on the assumptions about the marketing segments personal values. Reaching a specific group with a specific age, gender or income is not enough but a brand needs also to be publicly accepted depending on the brand personality based on the public associations of the brand (Keller, 2009). These are developed in the marketing activities and the purchase situation where the intangible aspects are created, which complies with the company and the strategic choices behind the choices of the marketing channels and what segment they wanted to reach.

The marketing channels can be ways of making customers and consumers aware of the product, to promote the brand through the marketing communication (Keller, 2009). Mentioned channels in the theory were events, sponsorship, radio, television, print, direct response, websites, media and online ads whereas the company above the radio and television chose to use online ads through Facebook and the website. Moreover, the print media was according to the respondents too expensive regarding the small segments they reached out to. However, one could say that the exposures in the stores also can be seen as marketing channels as they communicate the brand to the consumers through the products and exposures they are presented on. Thus, the brand elements are of importance, communicating the brand and attracting people through the colorful packages and the products in focus.

Peoples beliefs can be reflected in the brands that should fit their style, taste, and connection to social groups (Ilaw, 2014). It is stated that consumers choose brands that are similar to their own personality and consumers' needs, related to their self-identity and who they are. Even here, the choice of marketing channels affects the understanding of the brand's personality. Moreover, the marketing campaigns and activities such as "Let's go tapas" combined with the radio and jingle are carefully chosen by the company. Thereby, the understanding of consumers choosing brands based on their own personality is guiding, combined with the company's assumptions of the market and the marketing activities in order to reach the right people. This also complies with the channel strategy, where theory says that the products are associated with the choice of channels which affects the perception of the brand (O'Donnel, 2011).

Additionally, the joint actions between the departments is another activity where the marketing department does choose the advertisements and works combined with the sales department that is informing the customers of the activities. Moreover, demo staff is also involved as a middle hand that both are presenting the products and educating consumers that taste the products and thereby touch upon the intangible aspects, through letting the consumers experience the products. Thereby, the planning of the marketing activities in order to let the consumers experience the products is achieved (O'Donnel, 2011).

Marketing planning is something that seems more reactive in SME depending on the impact of the environment on the company (O'Donnel, 2011). Whereas, the distribution is chosen depending on the time and financial resources of the company and can affect the associations of the brand (Keller, 2009). One could say that the distribution of the products delivering their products to the retailer, us the only beneficial alternative. Selling their products on their own would only mean that they would cut their sales to the retailers and would thereby result in an economic loss. Moreover, the sales that are connected to the retailer themselves can be seen as direct channels where the sales department is in contact with the customers, or the customers can order the products through the home page. Whereby, the contact with the consumers where they have the possibility to buy the products is through the retailer which can be seen as an indirect channel. Keller (2009) mentioned that often more than one channel is used to deliver the product to the consumer. However, the direct channel via the phone and homepage are related to the customers, whereas the consumer first can buy the product through the retailers.

Certain other difficulties, that the company mentioned during the interviews, are the limited time for customer meetings with the store owners, responsible people for delicacies or charcuteries. Thereby, the company has worked with educating the salespeople with sales strategies and tools that can be used throughout a customer visit. Due to the customers' hectic workdays, PAUL och THOM also started with adapting the sales peoples work hours based on the customers' wishes. One main focus seems to be to facilitate the work of the customers, where the meeting hours are chosen by the customer even if it is at the weekends. Moreover, the exposures are structured in a way to make it easier for the customer to keep an overview and facilitate the ordering process. As well as the case company is offering food experiences when salespeople or demo staff are offering consumers products on some occasions. This can be related to the brand performance as such actions can be ways to satisfy the functional needs regarding the service of the company (Keller, 2009).

Price is another attributed connected to the brand performance (Keller, 2009) and also matters in order to create brand associations such as high-quality products (O'Donnel, 2011). To reach the high-quality associations that can justify the prices some support is probably needed. One could say that the established relationship to the suppliers is one aspect that contributes to the quality of the products. Hence, all the costs that are included in the product, the control, the monitoring and effort to achieve qualitative products needed to justify the price. However, to motivate that to the customers requires transparency and information that is easy to access if there are questions, which also can differentiate the company from competitors.

Being aware of the competitors' offers can be useful when managing the strategies for the product offer and the pricing in order to provide products with good quality and can generate competitive advantage (Keller, 2009). Something the company seems to do is constantly looking at the development of the market and to be open regarding changes in the market. As one respondent mentioned, that the company needs to be aware of the environment to fit their activities and strategies depending on the market. Otherwise, as one topic that is of interest at this point regarding the origin of products and the transparency of companies, it would be difficult to not adjust to that development. The graphics of the products are about showing the origin country, the product type, and specific or occasional information. Another topic is about the demand of the customers regarding qualitative products and controls of the suppliers of the company has increased, the consciousness of the consumers is also growing. Such information is gathered and used in order to create an understanding of the market which complies with Keller (2009) mentioning being aware of the competitors in order to create a competitive advantage.

To create a competitive advantage by considering the brand imagery that includes the customers' experience of the brand can also be related to the customers' social needs that need to be considered (Keller, 2009). Taking responsibility throughout the value chain regarding the products but also to be open-minded and to look at several options that in some cases should be focused on the global perspective as well combined with focusing on being authentic, could be seen as social needs to consider. These are key thoughts the case company has started to work with and develop. This indicates that the company is keen about listening to the customers, their demands but also their information about the consumers which is gathered through the mentioned relationship between the company and the customers.

5.1.3 Reaching brand response

The relationship between the company and the customers provides information for PAUL och THOM that can be used in order to improve their offerings and marketing activities for them to fit the customers' expectations. As the response is based on peoples' judgments about the brand and the associations that are created in the minds are combined with feelings that should be evoked by companies marketing (Keller, 2009). However, the theory is not mentioning anything about how the feelings should be evoked by the marketing programs. Nevertheless, the respondents mentioned at several times that the feeling about the products and the marketing is important. In the respondents meaning that was based on that the purchase will be expedited, whereas the brand, tips, brochures, demo, and exposures are crucial to evoking feelings as well. The feelings mentioned in theory were warmth, fun, excitement, social approval, and self-respect (Keller, 2009). Whereas the feelings mentioned by the respondents was mainly curiosity and that consumers should feel that it is simple to enjoy the products, but also a "wow" effect, astonishment, negative and positive questioning in the beginning with the 5:2 displays. Thereby, one could say that feelings are included in the marketing activities but they are not exactly the same as those mentioned in theory.

Concerning the judgments that can be used to create a response, theory mentions credibility, quality, brand consideration and brand superiority (Keller, 2009). One could argue that the credibility of the relationships with the suppliers combined with the employees' experiences and knowledge about the market provides them with useful information about what products they should focus on. Moreover, the company seems to have useful competences about the market, customers and about the marketing which probably could lead to trustworthiness, that complies with the theory. The quality or perceived values and whether the brand can satisfy the customers' and consumers' needs (Keller, 2009). Regarding offering qualitative products, the insights into the suppliers' processes and production of the products can be one way to assure the quality. Moreover, the exposures as they provide inspiration of combinations regarding the products, which simplify the choices of the consumers can provide a quality as well as brand superiority. As these exposures both provide benefits for the consumers through the simplicity of finding inspiration for a dinner as well as the customers. One can more easily get an overview of what needs to be ordered and gain economic benefits through the dead spaces, backsides of fridges or pillars in the stores that can be used.

The last judgment aspect the brand consideration is about whether the customer actually includes the brand in their set of brands or not (Keller, 2009). This can be related to the pull strategy, where the consumers in a number of mentioned cases are asking for the products of PAUL och THOM in the stores. Moreover, the connection to the secondary associations whereas the company is focusing on the sponsorship in the television and radio are increasing the brand awareness. But probably also affecting the brand consideration, by using the knowledge from other entities that are well known to increase the consumers' awareness. Even though one mentioned that sponsorship often is sales oriented (Asamoah, 2014) it seems as if the goals can be both sales oriented but also to penetrate the minds of the consumers and to evoke feelings and reactions regarding the brand.

Lastly, the exhibitions where the company can present their products, combined with their knowledge in the direct contact to the consumers is partly providing valuable information about the consumers' perception of the products and feedback, usable to improve the quality.

As well as they can gain credibility by letting the consumers taste the products and learn more about them which then also probably affects the brand consideration. Whereby the judgments seem interrelated looking at one activity and the possible effect.

5.1.4 Achieving brand relationship

The relationship to the brand is related to the extent people can identify themselves and feel a connection to the brand based on the personal values that can create personal meaning (Keller, 2009). The intensity or psychological bond mentioned in theory is more difficult to decide on as the loyalty is more tangible and can be measured based on the repeated purchase. However, the intensity and the loyalty are related as people probably need to feel a psychological bond with a brand in order to buy it repeatedly. In the case company, one could argue that the relationship to the suppliers could be one aspect that leads to the brand relationship for the customers. Firstly, that assumption is made based on the mentioned relationship that the company owner has to the suppliers, that provide qualitative products, which they in some cases come up with together and that they provide products that suit the company's offer. Secondly, the suppliers provide information about the origin, history and thereby content about the products that can be the basis for the transparency building in the company. Thirdly, the good communication with the suppliers provides information if something goes wrong and the constant dialogue simplifies the process of achieving qualitative products. Lastly, having such a good relationship with the suppliers provides the case company with usable information but probably also a confidence in their products.

The confidence in the products combined with the focus to let the products take more space and give them more attention as in the new exposures, thereby this can be related to the behavioral loyalty. The behavioral loyalty was about the quantity and frequency of the brand purchases that could contribute to the brand relationship (Keller, 2009). As the competition about the spaces normally are seen as limited in this sector the exposures provide an opportunity for the customers to get profit on otherwise seen dead spaces and the consumers detect the products more easily. Thereby, the quantity and frequency of the purchases can increase compared to when the products had various brands and where spread through the whole store. This makes it also easier for the consumers to get inspired of combining the products and to see various possibilities, that increases the bought quantity and also the chance of reaching a personal attachment by offering something more than just one product and instead of a whole tapas concept at one place.

The personal attachment or attitudinal attachment can be seen as the meaning that is created for the customer and consumer (Keller, 2009). As the attachment that can be created through the exposures is based on the inspiration that the consumers can get through the whole wall of products that can be combined in various ways. For the customers, the attachment can be related to the customized offers they are provided with, the facilitated ordering system the exposures create, the economic benefit and the simplicity in the signage of the pricing. This relates also to the values of the company being a good business partner, instead of just making benefits for themselves they focus on supporting the customers with personal and unique offerings.

Offering individual solutions that suit the different customers and their own stores is another way to reach an attachment. Moreover, the relationship is built on an exchange where PAUL och THOM is offering unique exposures, assortments, demos or evenings based on the customers' conditions and needs, where the customers they are providing the company with information about the consumers which the retailers have access to every day. Thus, retailers have information about and influence on the consumers' purchase decisions (Capon, 2009). As the only direct contact, the company has with the consumer is via social media and the website the information of the customers about the consumers and their purchases is crucial. Other alternatives for the case company to engage consumers is through the internet.

The engagement and possible creation of a community are at this point done through the homepage, Facebook, and Instagram. Participation in chatrooms, being ambassadors or visiting the homepage are mentioned in theory as ways of engaging above the purchase situations (Keller, 2009). Even though, the digital marketing is getting increased attention in the company, at this point the only possibilities to create the communities is through Facebook where consumers can interact with each other regarding the posts about various products and tips to use them. However, the marketing campaign with Köket.se provides also the consumers with the possibility to gather information at that homepage where they can learn more about the products applications and can interact in their comment fields, can share the recipes with friends and print the recipes right away.

5.2 Marketing activities that can strengthen the brand equity

Keller (2009) states that brand equity is a way of developing an understanding that promotes the importance of including the brand into the marketing strategies. Regarding the work of the case company, this complies with theory as PAUL och THOM has integrated their brand guidelines into various processes and it permeates the organization. Not only through the marketing, but in sales meetings, conferences and in the communication with the customers. Previously as the respondents mentioned, the brand name was the umbrella of various product brands that were communicated through several different brochures and other printed media that did not have the same message. At PAUL och THOM the brand identity combined with the core values seem to be the common denominator.

Brand equity is about an integrated strategy which focuses on an inside-out approach or an identity-driven approach, where the brand is central for the company and the purpose to achieve a lasting competitive advantage with the brand (Urde *et al.* 2013). This can be related to the case company due to the first step in creating the brand identity with the carefully chosen brand elements. Thereby, the company established a common language and the ground to further build the organization on. Through the common values and the identity, the company continues with the same simplicity throughout every activity, every brochure, every strategy and action that should be focusing on the simplicity and to let more people enjoy their food.

Another aspect that can be connected to the brand equity, is the brand orientation which can be defined as an integrated strategy and a strategic choice or a mindset which is about seeing the brand as the starting point while formulating the company's strategy (Urde, 1994). The mindset of the brand, seeing and communicating the brand within the organization that permeates all activities. As one respondent mentioned, the goal is for the consumers to think of the core values when seeing the brand, thereby one could argue that the brand mindset should not just be present in the organization but also in the consumers' minds to reach long lasting relationships and a competitive advantage. This goes in line with theory meaning that strong brands will be hard to copy and provide the opportunity to differentiate the company through the intangible aspects (Abimbola 2001, Mzunug *et al.* 2010).

The increased integration of the brand in the strategies of the organization and the identity-driven approach where the brand is understood as the starting point could be seen as the main factors in order to decide what activities to choose, whereas the strengthening of the brand equity can be connected to the brand orientation itself due to the company's brand focus that contributes to increased competitive advantage. Based on the exposures for example that offer various solutions to the customers and at the same time create an increased awareness of the products and the brand. This is seen in the numbers of the promoted segments, feedback of the consumers at events and the higher number of visits on the homepage. One could argue that this can be connected to the integrated strategy that has contributed to the continuity throughout all activities in the company and the communication to external parties.

The continuity in the communication can also be related to the brand touch points which the respondents mentioned, where the knowledge confidence of the employees facilitates what to focus on based on the brand orientation has helped to satisfy the customers' needs. Moreover, the employees get to spend more time analyzing the market and in what sense they can reach new solutions that benefit the customers. Based on that the company knows the core values and what the organization stands for and should communicate. Thereby, it gets easier to know what kind of feelings they want to evoke through their activities.

Feelings that were evoked such as the curiosity and more precise the questioning that according to the respondents could be both negative and positive is something worth discussing, as the company used feelings but they differed from the theories mentioned feelings. One could debate that the organization must be confident in knowing that their products and knowledge are good, in order to be able to provoke feelings that necessarily not only are positive. To make them question slogans or exposures, especially when that was done at the beginning of the brand change. Combined with the evoked feelings the use of secondary associations has been something PAUL och THOM started in a greater extent in the brand change with the radio and television, to reach an increased recognition of the brand.

Increased recognition and the company's will to offer unique solutions can also be related to the idea of being good business partners. This can be shown in the company as it creates benefits for both customers and themselves in their offerings in order to create long-lasting relationships and loyal customers. The knowledge of the customers is something the company is keen about and also to be open-minded about competitors in the market. PAUL och THOM only saw it as a compliment when competitors started to create similar brand elements regarding the font, colors, and exposures. The case company seems rather to be open-minded and willing to share their knowledge as for example the exposures that got published in a magazine.

The identified and conceptualized activities are summarized in table 4, to provide an overview of the activities and a short description of the strengthening effects they can have on the brand equity in this case company. The presented marketing activities are based on the researcher's interpretation of the empirical data, whereby the activities are subjectively chosen. The findings are context-dependent and based on the company's values of what can be seen as strengthening for them and their specific brand development. Moreover, one could state that the analysis looking at table 4, provides information about the interconnection of the brand attributes and the brand building tools which both are present and used to identify and conceptualize the marketing activities. Thereby, it seems to be more complicated to have them separate as it was hard to keep them apart especially the brand elements that can be seen as the basis of the identity but affect the whole continuity throughout the organization and their communication.

Table 4. Summary of the conceptualized activities within the company

Brand attributes	Marketing activities	Strengthening brand equity
Creating brand identity	Brand change	Increased awareness seen in the sales numbers of the promoted segments, feedback from the consumers at events, increased visits on the homepage. Continuity and simplicity.
- Brand elements	Simplicity (mission)	
	Exposures	
	Education – customers/consumers	
	Marketing strategy	
	Consumer focus	
Building brand meaning	Joint communication	Brand seen as an integrated strategy affecting all brand touch points and the communication. Provides confidence and helps to satisfy the functional needs of the customers. Using information about the market to reach innovative solutions by being competitive.
- Marketing programs	Joint organizational actions	
	Assortment	
	Education – sales people	
	Facilitation for customers	
	Structural changes	
	Marketing campaigns	
	Taking responsibility	
Reaching brand response	Exhibitions	To know what kind of feelings they want to evoke. Being confident about the product information. Offering unique solutions and using other entities brand knowledge.
- Secondary associations	Sponsorship	
	Relationship to suppliers	
Achieving brand relationship	Relationship to suppliers	Loyalty that is seen in the repeated purchases. Creating a relationship by always trying to be a good business partner for both parties.
	Relationship to customers	
	Consumer focus	
	Consumer engagement	

One could argue that the case company has done more than creating a brand identity and a brand name that seems trendy. The case company has strategically chosen their activities in order to appear in certain places such as the grocery stores, on the radio, on the television and on the internet where people are interested and can conduct a purchase. These places or strategic marketing hubs were chosen to present the product and connect the brand through the exposures in stores and recipes online. Many activities have been chosen based on the previous experiences and knowledge of the owner and the employees. However, the company has also been using contacts and other companies in order to choose these hubs. The graphic design company was facilitating the process of creating the brand name, the brand identity and thereby the brand elements. The radio companies have provided the opportunities to appear nationwide, to participate at different festivals and to help create the jingle “Let’s go Tapas”, where the strategic marketing hubs are used to get into direct contact with the consumers.

6 Conclusions

This section addresses the aim of this case study, presented in the first chapter and provides the conclusions based on the main findings. The section then ends with recommendations for future research.

The work of SMEs, e.g. marketing, are often understood through the perspective and theories developed from studies on large organizations. This creates a theoretical shortcoming for understanding SMEs since they work in different conditions from that of large organizations. Furthermore, since the marketing activities in SMEs are understood in relation to large organizations, the work of SMEs to pursue marketing activities always seems to fall short. Thurs the aim of this study is *to investigate developments of brand equity in an SME from the Swedish food wholesale sector and identify a way to conceptualize such processes.*

In responding to this am, this study contributes to new insights to understand marketing in SMEs that can help SMEs to develop marketing activities to strengthen their brand equity. Specifically, drawing on case study research, this concludes that the work of the case company to strengthen their brand equity can be seen as an ongoing process that needs to be maintained in the everyday activities in the company. Hence, brand equity cannot be seen as a steady state achievement but is in constant need of development and improvement to ensure the long-term success of the firm. Therefore, also brand equity also needs to be integrated into the long-term strategic focus in the management in order to enhance a brand asset mindset in the firm which can result in a stronger brand and finally strengthen brand equity.

A second conclusion is that the integrated marketing strategy combined with the brand mindset is found to be important in this case company in order to establish an identity in the organization. The brand was found to be the center in the integrated strategy and was incorporated in the various marketing activities.

A third conclusion is that several marketing activities were found to be vital for the case company. One is the joint communication with the same approach throughout all used channels with the brand in focus. This is and has to be applied by all employees in the organization. This contributed to a successful change of the brand name, combined with the new approach of marketing communication through radio and television which are other vital activities. Showing that SMEs can change their brand even from scratch in order to increase the awareness and create a more recognized brand on the market. Another activity is taking responsibility throughout the value chain, being keen about listening to the customers and listen to their knowledge about the consumers who have the direct contact combined to the company's knowledge about what feelings they want to evoke are the conceptualized marketing activities.

A fourth conclusion is that SMEs can find new ways of presenting their brand and products when they dare to try new ways. PAUL och THOMs developed exposures with the new way of presenting the brand and products that can make SMEs dare to be innovative. This created a better chance of being seen by the consumers despite the limited space in the stores and limited time for the consumers to detect the brand.

The change of the marketing communication environment through technology and internet has changed the way the world interacts and communicates. This change in the communication environment was needed to adapt to the branded societies people live in today showing the use of strengthening brand equity. The fifth conclusion therefore is, that the development of the communication environment has led to cheaper alternatives for SMEs to appear in the marketing communication environment through using social media as relatively cheap options accessible. At the same time, the competitiveness can be seen as increasing and the work to reach the consumers' attention in the marketing communication environment has become even harder. Thus, the use of building brand equity matters as it helps consumers choose the brands they are familiar with and can relate to.

A sixth conclusion is that one way to succeed in the market is to participate in strategic marketing hubs where consumers are present, can inform themselves and also conduct the purchase. This is one way for the wholesaler of getting in contact with a bigger consumer base for SMEs. Strategic market hubs found in this study facilitated the communication of the brand through using hubs such as grocery stores, radio, television channel, Facebook, and Instagram. Where one could say that the case company strategically chose hubs with a contact to the consumers in order to reach their attention and thereby strengthen the brand equity.

This study contributes to the practical guidance based on the identification of the conceptualized activities and the conceptual framework, that can be used by practitioners interested in strengthening brand equity in an SME, particularly in the food whole sector. The conceptual framework, shown in 3.4 provides the interconnection between the attributes and the brand building activities that support the conceptualization of the process of strengthening the brand equity. The relevance of this is that an understanding of how to begin shaping and influencing such processes is created. While SMEs have different resources than larger organizations but still can pursue marketing activities to strengthen brand equity.

Another contribution is shown as the study identifies a way to conceptualize brand equity in an SME that can be useful for others interested in order to understand the process of strengthening the brand equity. Moreover, the study shows strategic choices that can contribute to strengthen the brand equity and thereby to increase the competitiveness. Thereby, this study can contribute to the bigger picture and the regional business policy e.g. as "Fostering business angel activities in support of SME growth" that strives for to increase the competitive advantages for SMEs in Sweden and thereby help them to survive and grow. This can be achieved by providing conceptualized marketing activities and the perspective of using strategic market hubs in order to reach consumers and make them recognize a company's brand.

6.1 Future research

This study has focused on the marketing activities contributed to strengthening the brand equity. One could further investigate how the information is gathered in order to decide on what marketing activities a company should focus on. Furthermore, the measurement of the brand equity and the comparison over time regarding the strength of a brand in a company could be looked into. Preferably about companies that have gone through a change of the corporate brand from scratch. Another angle could be to investigate the differences in strengthening a brand in a company that has chosen to have product brands and not a corporate brand. Another subject study could be the relationship between the market orientation and brand orientation in SMEs.

It would also be interesting to investigate the perspectives of the customers and consumers regarding the development of a brand, as this study only has taken the perspective of the case company. Lastly, further research could look into the importance of the networks of an SME and the effect they can have on choosing strategic marketing hubs.

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Appendix

The interviews were at the end from four respondents, where the questions evolved depending on the development of the interview. However, here a collected guide from all interviews is shown to present all questions that were planned and asked.

Appendix 1 - Interview guide

Can you tell me about what kind of values you believe PAUL och THOM stand for?

Do you perceive any difference in the brand of PAUL och THOM compared to Gourmetgruppen?

What is the background behind the choice of changing the brand?

What are the main differences you perceive from the brand change?

What are the differences in the marketing strategy?

How are you perceiving the increased brand awareness from the consumers?

How has your work been affected through the change of focusing more on the consumer?

In what way has the decision making affected the choices of strategy regarding the activities in the company connected to marketing?

What do you perceive as being the most important thing about your work with the marketing?

How do you perceive your work connected to strengthening your brand?

How did you choose where you wanted to be visible in the market?

How do you reason about the communication with your customers?

Have you thought of using secondary associations, such as endorsement and in what way that can affect the brand building?

What kind of brand image do you want to create in the minds of the consumers?

How are you working in order to satisfy your customers?

What does it imply for you not to sell directly to the consumers?

How is your relationship to your suppliers?

Can you tell me more about “centrallistning” and how that does affect your sales?

How have you been working in order to reach an increased competitive advantage?

How does your work look like at the sales department?

Appendix 2 – PAUL och THOM Logo

Appendix 3 – Exposures