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**Brand Orientation as a Predictor of Customer
Orientation, Brand Uniqueness and Competitor
Orientation: Evidence from Retail SME Managers in
South Africa**

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Abstract

Research on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have led to interest in understanding brand distinctiveness, customers and competition among SMEs. This paper therefore examined the impact of brand orientation as a predictor of customer orientation, brand distinctiveness and competitor orientation. The study was quantitative in nature that 321 owners and managers of SMEs based in the Vaal Triangle region Gauteng, South Africa were surveyed. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and structural equation modeling, conducted in SPSS 24 and AMOS 24 respectively. The main finding was that brand orientation had the strongest and most significant influence on an SME's brand distinctiveness thereby suggesting that managers of SMEs are encouraged to allocate more resources towards of strategic marketing in order to gain a competitive advantage in the market place. The implications for research call for more attention to be paid to brand distinctiveness as it was the most likely precursor of competitive advantage. The lack of test results could have limited the rigor of the research conceptually. The practical implications of the findings suggest that small and medium-sized enterprises should invest in more innovative employee training approaches to stand out from the cluster. Finally, the social implications also suggest that the success of small and medium-sized enterprises is immensely dependent on people's skills, thus again calling for improved training and enhanced teamwork.

Keywords: *Brand Orientation; Customer Orientation; Distinction; Competition; SME's*

JEL classification: M1, M3

Introduction

The role that proper branding plays in the progression of SMEs is immense (Mitchell, Hutchinson, & Quinn 2013). SMEs in retail generally rely on the use of branding to fight competitors' prices and offer added value to customers in order to distinguish their businesses from larger retailers (Hutchinson, Quinn & Gilmore (2015). Regardless of the scope and reach of a business, the ability to establish a strong brand is paramount to a company's success (Abimbola & Kocak, 2007). In addition, strong brands allow smaller organisations such as SMEs to remain competitive in the market place (Abimbola & Kocak, 2007). Branding and brand orientation have created much attention for a considerably long time (Aman, 2015). Furthermore, brand orientation is a rigorous activity of growing a brand which involves SMEs evaluating

both the advantages and disadvantages that they face in the market (Mijan 2015). It should be said that SMEs that desire to succeed must have brand-oriented management as this is central in the market place (Osakwe, Chovancova, & Ogbonna 2016).

Notably, it is also necessary to indicate that limited research exists on how brand orientation impacts customer orientation, brand distinctiveness and competitor orientation in relation to SMEs in South Africa. Human, social and economic investment is key to the development of SMEs in South Africa (Fatoki, 2011). Different approaches have been observed to be valuable to SMEs. For instance, the use of information communication technology by South African SMEs (Ismail, Jeffery & Van Belle, 2011), imitation of sustainable growth operationalisation by SMEs in South Africa (Masocha & Fatoki, 2018), the impact of environmental and social initiatives on dimensionality of Triple Bottom Line manufacturing SMEs in South Africa (Qeque & Dubihlela, 2018). Other scholars (Moos & Sambo, 2018) explored the struggles of less-established SME car manufacturers in low-income areas while Farrington, Venter and Richardson (2018) investigated the impact of certain marketing and branding activities on the financial performance of family-run SMEs. The literature outline the uniqueness of retail branding, though there is restricted comprehension of how SME retailers conduct branding practices (Hutchinson, Quinn & Gilmore, 2015). There is limited research that explore SMEs' approach to brand orientation (Huang & Tsai (2013; Mijan, 2015). Moreover, it is also essential to mention that there is limited literature that focus on brand orientation as a predictor variable of customer orientation, brand distinctiveness and competitor orientation. The following section presents the study's key terms.

Definition of Key Terms

Brand Orientation

Brand orientation commonly involves calculated marketing engagements that enable the brand to be recognised, preferred as the company establishes itself and gains a competitive edge over its rivals (Gisip & Harun 2013). Consumers' attitudes toward brands are generally viewed as perceptions that consumers have in relation to a particular brand (Venter de Villiers, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2018; Yoon & Park 2012). Brand orientation is centered on the importance of the brand identity (mission,

vision, and values) as a guide and a place for organisational culture, behavior, and strategy implementation (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013). In addition, brand orientation is considered to be an approach in which the organisation is centered around the growth and preservation of its brand's identity as it continuously engages its target customers. (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees 2013; Carvalho, 2007). Brand orientation is mostly influenced by an organisation's desire to have a distinct identity which puts branding in the center of its planning (Khan & Adnan, 2016). Brand orientation can also be viewed as the degree to which the brand is placed as a key element in an organisation's marketing strategy (Ahmad & Iqbal, 2013). Thus, it can be stated that brand orientation refers to the creation of a business approach that is centered on *brands*.

Customer Orientation

Customer orientation is when companies' prioritise customers' requests. Companies are therefore encouraged to make every effort to satisfy these requests (Taleghani, Gilaninia & Talab, 2013). Sorensen (2009) is of the view that a customer orientation provides sufficient understanding of a firm's target buyers, so that the firm can continuously create superior value for them. Customers are generally inclined towards brands that provide the most exposure to them (Baker 1999; Venter, Chuchu & Pattison, 2016). Customer orientation requires the constant comprehension of the requirements of customers as well as continuous innovation that creates benefits to them (Mahmoodean, Ashraf & Hassani, 2014). Employees of service organisations are constantly measured on performance, hence being customer-oriented becomes of paramount importance to the success of the organisations (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). Based on the aforesaid on customer orientation, it can be deduced that customer orientation is a marketing approach that necessitates organisations to focus on the desires of their customers.

Competitor Orientation

Competitor orientation involves carefully monitoring actions of a competitor in order to establish how the competitor can be a challenge or threat to the organisation (Zhou, Brown, Dev & Agarwal, 2007). In addition, it is paramount for an organisation to fully understand its competitors' strategies, whether it is for the short-term or long-term (Sorensen, 2009). This will also assist in knowing the competitors'

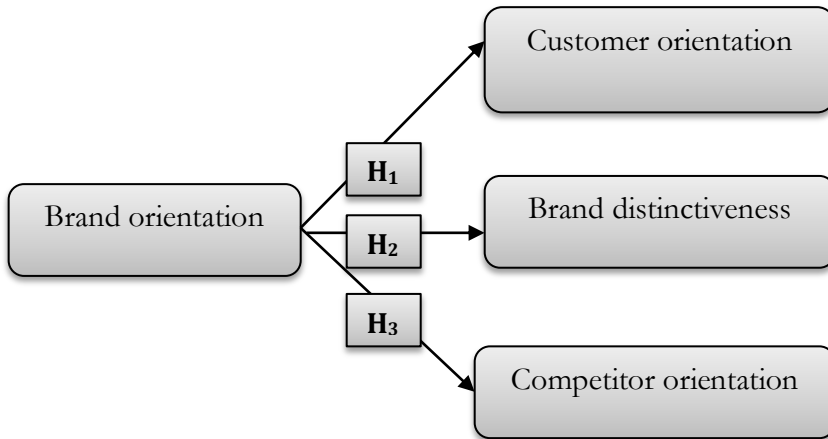
strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, competitor orientation discusses understanding the positives and negatives of current rivals in the market who must be constantly checked on (Njeru & Kibera, 2014). Competitor orientation can improve a company's standing in the market if it is willing to learn from the more successful players in that market (Sing & Tong 2011).

Brand Distinctiveness

Brand distinctiveness is a series of measures that indicate the uniqueness and superiority of a brand in a market (Wong & Merrilees, 2008). It is viewed as a brand's ability to clearly differentiate itself from its competitors (So, King, Hudson & Meng 2017). Brand distinctiveness is necessary because it aids customers in recognising brands effortlessly and facilitates effective communication with customers (Ju, 2013). Furthermore, it assists customers in recalling brands considering that each brand has unique elements intended to make it stand out from the competition especially when consumers become familiar with the brand (Romaniuk, Sharp & Ehrenberg 2007). It is therefore possible to view brand distinctiveness as a brand's aptitude to separate itself from competitors and secure a unique place in the customer's mind in order to satisfy that customers needs and wants.

Linkages between constructs of the proposed conceptual model

Brand orientation is a predictor to three outcomes, namely, customer orientation, brand distinctiveness and competitor orientation. Brand orientation and brand distinctiveness have generally been considered predictors of brand marketing performance (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). The assumption that a company's brand orientation and brand distinctiveness are related has been supported by Warlop, Ratneshwar and Osselaer (2005) and later by Davčik, and Rundquist (2012). This ability to choose certain strategies over others could potentially result in brand distinctiveness. As for customer orientation and competitor orientation, it is suggested by Singh and Ranchhod (2004) that the two are associated. The following section presents the proposed conceptual model depicting the relationships between the constructs.

Figure 1: Research Framework**H₁: Brand orientation is related to customer orientation**

Mijan (2016) suggests that brand-oriented companies emphasise customer relations while Urde (1999) posits that “to be brand oriented is to be more customer oriented”. Customer obsession, an approach based on the premise of beginning with the customer (Amazon, 2010) is influenced by brand-orientated organisations (Urde et al., 2013). In addition, it is assumed that the requirements of customers are met if the brand is strong (Urde et al., 2013). Huang and Tsai (2013) assess the relationship between brand orientation and customer orientation. They found that brand development is achieved when the organisation engages in ongoing interaction with consumers. Companies ought to make use of brand orientation, where the brand is viewed as a crucial and valuable asset to the company, thereby overriding all other aspects that the company could focus on (King, So & Grace, 2013)

H₂: Brand orientation is related to brand distinctiveness

There is a relationship between brand orientation and brand distinctiveness, however this is not a direct association (Zulu, 2017). Brand orientation is related with brand distinctiveness, first, through customer orientation and then through competitor orientation (Zulu, 2017). According to Najafizadeh, Dadgar, Mahmoodi and Mirzaee (2013) and Wong and Merrilees, (2008), SMEs that strive to improve their brand orientation are encouraged to constantly make efforts in establishing their brand(s) as unique in the customer’s mind in order to be viewed as

unique and distinct by their target customers. A study conducted by Maja (2006) explored retail offerings in relation to how brand orientation give premier clothing stores competitive advantages. They found that the combination of brand orientation and brand distinctiveness can ultimately lead to a high-end retailer selling their own brands or that of another company.

H₃: Brand orientation is related to competitor orientation

Brand orientation can be considered a marker of a company's competitive abilities to perform (Khan & Adnan, 2016). Abker, Ibrahim and Eltayeb (2018) posit that there is a relationship between brand orientation and competitor orientation. Strategy in business generally focuses on customers, technology, brand orientation and competitor orientation (Ibrahim, Abker & Eltayeb, 2018). It is advisable for brands to be orientated towards the competition by monitoring and outflanking competitors is this a considered a favourable strategy (Dev, Zhou, Brown & Agarwal, 2009). In addition, Zulu (2016) points out that it is important for brands to have detailed comprehension of their competitors considering that brand orientation and competitor orientation are related.

Research Methodology

The research adopted the survey method with the following constructs: brand orientation, brand distinctiveness, customer orientation and competitor orientation. Responses to the study were obtained from SMEs in the Vaal region of South Africa. A list of SMEs was used by researchers to obtain the required sample of participants who were in some capacity as managers of their companies. Even though a sampling frame was provided in the form of a list, it was not possible to ensure that all possible participants would actually participate hence convenience sampling was used to select participants.

A five-point Likert scale was used to obtain 321 responses. It was based on established scales and adapted where necessary. The questionnaire requested participants' demographic information and responses to constructs of the model under investigation. Statistics were generated through SPSS 24 in order to produce the sample profile while AMOS 24 was used to test the proposed hypotheses. Descriptive statistics illustrated the sample profile while SEM was done following a two-step approach beginning with confirmatory factor analysis followed

by hypothesis testing/ path modeling. Table 1 below presents the study's sample description.

Results

Profile of Participants

At least 60% of the participants were men while 40% were women managers of SMEs. 61% of the participants were below the age of 40, while 40 to 59-year-olds account for 37% of the sample. The rest were older than 60 years and only represented 2% of the sample. Only 8% of the managers that had no formal education while the rest had some form of formal education. The table below presents the correlation between the constructs. In terms of company size, about 55% of the managers stated their companies had a staff complement of less than 10. On the other had about 6% stated their companies comprised of 200 or more staff. All correlations were lower than 1 proving that each construct was uniquely distinct from the next

Table 2: Correlations between constructs

Research constructs	Construct correlation			
	BO	CO	BD	CO
BO	1			
CO	0.530**	1		
BD	0.579**	0.530**	1	
CMO	0.530**	0.479**	0.539**	1

BO: Brand orientation, CO: Customer orientation, BD: Brand distinctiveness

Table 3: Measurement Accuracy Assessment

Research constructs		Item to total	α Value	C.R.	AVE	Factor loadings
Brand Orientation		-	0.876	0.87	0.51	-
	BO1	0.651	0.866			0.696
	BO2	0.744	0.864			0.674
	BO3	0.706	0.871			0.534
	BO4	0.794	0.851			0.763
	BO5	0.778	0.850			0.797
	BO6	0.787	0.855			0.796
	BO7	0.781	0.859			
	BO8	0.794	0.846			0.851

Customer Orientation		-	0.894	0.89	0.55	-
	CO1	0.660	0.886			0.660
	CO2	0.731	0.884			0.654
	CO3	0.762	0.873			0.758
	CO4	0.671	0.879			0.720
	CO5	0.745	0.877			0.791
Brand Distinctiveness		-	0.892	0.87	0.53	-
	BD1	0.660	0.886			0.660
	BD2	0.731	0.884			0.654
	BD3	0.762	0.873			0.758
	BD4	0.671	0.879			0.720
	BD5	0.745	0.877			0.791
Competitor Orientation		-	0.872	0.88	0.49	
	CMO1	0.617	0.879			0.508
	CMO2	0.717	0.856			0.586
	CMO3	0.619	0.853			0.638
	CMO4	0.633	0.856			0.697
	CMO5	0.686	0.856			0.733

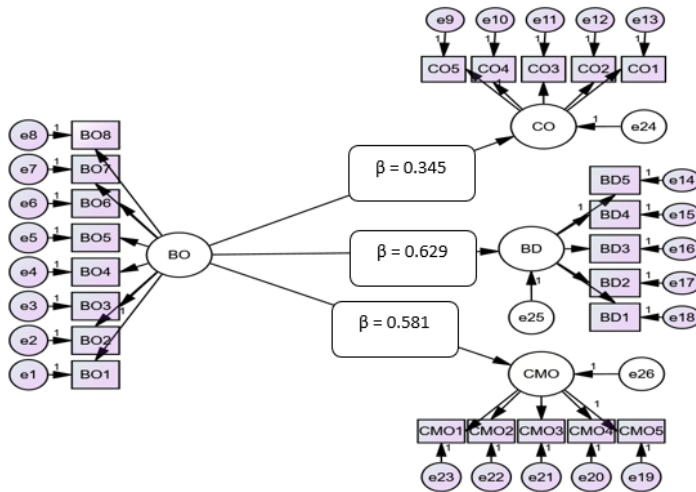
Source: Authors' own work

It can be observed that item loading ranged from 0.508 to 0.851. This meets the 0.5 threshold proposed by (Nusair & Hua, 2010). Alpha values exceeded 0.7 which suggested that the constructs were reliable. In addition, composite reliability and average variance extracted values were generally acceptable as they met the 0.5 (Hulland 1999) and 0.6 (Fraering & Minor 2006) thresholds respectively.

Testing of Proposed Hypotheses

Hypotheses testing indicates that all the structural model fit statistics were sufficed the expected requirements. Chi-square was 2.526, the Normed fit index was 0.908 while the Incremental fit index was 0.939. The Tucker-Lewis index was 0.922 while the Confirmatory fit index was 0.938. Last, the Root standard measure of error approximation was 0.060. Figure 2 presents the SEM path model structure.

Figure 2: Path Model



BO: Brand orientation, CO: Customer orientation, BD: Brand distinctiveness, CMO: Competitor orientation

Table 4: Hypothesis Outcomes

Hypothesis		Estimate	P-Value	Decision
BO→CO	H1(+)	0.345	***	Supported
BO→BD	H2(+)	0.629	***	Supported
BO→CMO	H3(+)	0.581	***	Supported

BO: Brand orientation, CO: Customer orientation, BD: Brand distinctiveness, CMO: Competitor orientation

Note *** significance level <0.01

Discussion of Results

In Table 4 above, it is evident that all the proposed hypotheses are significant and supported at $p < 0.01$ level of significance. The first hypothesis, H1, had an estimate of 0.345. These results suggest that the more a brand differentiates itself from the competition, the more it becomes desirable to customers, hence, the term “customer orientation”. This outcome suggests that SMEs need to merge the orientation of their brands with their organisational goals in order to convince their customers that they offer unique products and services. With reference to the structural model, it should be noted that this was the weakest of all the tested relationships. The second hypothesis, H2, had an estimate of

0.629, this relationship was also supported and significant. This finding matches that of Wong and Merrilees (2005) who found that a relationship existed between the brand distinctiveness of SMEs and the orientation of their brands. This suggests that the more an SME appears to be distinct the more customers feel that they resonate with the SME's brand. This finding encourages SME leaders and managers to seek innovative ways of standing out from the competition. The third hypothesis, H3, had an estimate of 0.581, meaning the relationship was supported and significant. This suggests that SMEs that are more brand-oriented tend to gain the competitive edge in the market. The implication for managers and owners of SMEs is that, the more an SME is perceived as having a strong focus on its brand, the more likely customers would select it over the competition.

Conclusion

The present research set out to empirically test the influence of brand orientation on three potential outcomes: customer orientation, brand distinctiveness and competitor orientation. SMEs that are brand oriented tend to have stronger customer and competitor-oriented strategies. It is therefore established that in order for SMEs to gain competitive advantages in the market, it is imperative to ensure that efforts are made towards providing incentives to employees that drive both customer and competitor-oriented mindsets. It was observed that brand orientation in SMEs has the most significant impact on brand distinctiveness. This suggests that managers and owners of SMEs need to increase efforts aimed at establishing brand-oriented activities in their organisations to achieve brand distinction and rise above the competition. .

Limitations and Implications from the Findings

The importance of brand orientation to SMEs cannot be ignored as confirmed by the present study. It has substantial influence of how small businesses are operated. Therefore, implications for both SME owners and managers emerged from the findings of this research. Practical implication suggest that SMEs ought to invest in more innovative employee training approaches to rise from the clutter. The present study, like most studies, is not immune to limitations. First, the study was conducted on SME owners and managers based in a single region, the Vaal Triangle in Gauteng South Africa. This probably generated both

sample and response bias in that all participants were exposed to the same business environment which could have skewed their feedback.

Recommendations

First, SMEs should direct more resources towards improving the brand orientation of their businesses as this has a very strong influence on how they are perceived by customers and the competition. Second, they should examine whether changes in the proposed model can produce results useful for decision making. For example, assessing the impact of brand orientation on customer orientation and brand distinctiveness if competition orientation was removed from the model. The implications for research call for more attention to be paid to brand distinctiveness as it is the most likely precursor of competitive advantage. The social implications posit that the success of SMEs depend immensely on people skill, again highlighting the importance of improved training and enhanced teamwork.

We recommend that future researchers should survey managers and owners of SMEs in other geographical regions as this would provide more objective results with a more representative profile of SME owners and managers. In addition, the analysis only provided direct causal effects of brand orientation on customer satisfaction, brand distinctiveness and competitor orientation. This study used the survey-methodology which relied on close-ended questions. This would have restricted the respondents in their feedback. Therefore, utilising in-depth interviews can probably provide deeper understanding of the effect of brand orientation in SMEs. Future research should also empirically test the moderating effect of brand distinctiveness on customer and competitor orientation. It would be interesting to see how the three outcomes affect each other. This would complement the present study by providing potentially useful insights into the constructs of this study in relation to the SME sector. It would also be interesting to see if the same results generated in this study will be replicated in future similar studies.

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