DEVELOPING INTERACTIVE NETWORK BRANDING IN BUSINESS MARKETS

CASE STUDIES OF SMES

FROM DEVELOPED AND EMERGING BUSINESS MARKETS

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- THANK YOU!

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to create an understanding of how branding occurs in business networks in which small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are embedded. The main objective of the study is to conceptualize, present, and examine this perspective on corporate branding in business networks labelled Interactive Network Branding (INB). This refers to strategic actions that SMEs take to develop corporate identities and reputation, while acting in their roles and aiming towards desired network positions. The phenomenon under investigation concerns the networking and branding processes of SMEs operating in developed and emerging business-to-business (B2B) markets. However, the focus of the research is on individual human actors and their social and business interactions. As representatives of SMEs, these managers are active participants in the INB processes.

The motivation for this study results from two focal research gaps: 1) the limited amount of branding research in B2B marketing studies, especially in business network studies regarding SMEs (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen 2011); 2) the lack of a business network approach in corporate branding literature (Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca 2016). In order to overcome these noted gaps in the current literature, this multidisciplinary study combines two research approaches. The first approach is a network perspective, based on B2B marketing studies of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group. The second approach is from the corporate branding perspective, through business marketing and organizational literature on corporate reputation and identity. In a combined manner, these two approaches complement each other while aiming to fill both of the aforementioned gaps.

The article-based dissertation comprises an introductory part consisting of the summary of the dissertation, after which the original research articles are presented. Each of the four articles addresses the above mentioned gaps, each with a specific focus as follows: (i) developing a conceptual understanding of corporate branding in business networks (Article I); (ii) developing a methodological framework and conducting empirical analysis of Born Global SMEs and their INB processes in foreign business markets (Article II); (iii) developing a conceptual framework and an analytical tool for studying INB processes while focusing on a human level of analysis (Article III); and (iv) investigating the role of INB for SMEs in a domestic emerging market context (Article IV).

In terms of methodology, the empirical part employs qualitative interpretive research by using an abductive logic. A social constructionist view of reality is used to investigate INB processes and interactions between human actors at more depth. The single and the multiple case studies apply a process research approach for studying INB processes as they unfold over time through past, present, and future events. The primary data are collected through semi-structured, face-to-face, expert interviews of B2B SMEs, in which the narratives are used as an analysis tool of a described phenomenon.

This study contributes to B2B marketing, business network and corporate branding literature by developing theoretical conceptualizations of the INB concept, its methodological foundations, as well as empirical endowments. However, the main contribution is directed towards the IMP studies and business network literature, by analyzing corporate branding and individual human interactions in business networks. The main managerial implications concern the individuals in SMEs and their sensemaking processes that have a central bearing on INB processes in business markets.

Keywords: *Interactive Network Branding, corporate identity and reputation, business networks, interactions, qualitative case study, process research, small and medium sized enterprises.*

ABSTRAKT

Avsikten med avhandlingen är att skapa en förståelse för hur branding sker i de affärsnätverk där små och medelstora företag (SMF) är förankrade. Studiens huvudsakliga syfte är att presentera, begreppsliggöra och undersöka branding i affärsnätverk genom ett perspektiv som betecknas interaktiv nätverksbranding (INB). Här syftas på de strategiska aktiviteter som SMF utför för att utveckla företagsidentitet och rykte samtidigt som de verkar i sina nätverksroller och strävar efter att uppnå önskade positioner i nätverket. Det studerade fenomenet består av SMFs nätverkande och brandingprocesser på industriella (B2B) marknader i både utvecklade och tillväxtländer. Forskningens fokus ligger dock på företagsledare och deras affärs- och sociala interaktion. Som representanter för SMFs är dessa individer aktiva deltagare i INB-processerna.

Motiven för studien kan härledas från två centrala brister i tidigare forskning: 1) den begränsade mängden forskning om branding inom B2B-marknadsföring, i synnerhet inom studier av affärsnätverk och SMF (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen 2011) och 2) avsaknaden av ett nätverkssynsätt i litteraturen gällande branding av företag (Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca 2016). För att fylla de här bristerna kombineras två forskningsansatser. Den första är ett nätverksperspektiv som bygger på B2B-marknadsföringsforskning med ursprung i IMP-traditionen inom Industrial Marketing and Purchasing-gruppen. Den andra ansatsen är ett företagsbranding-perspektiv hämtat ur litteraturen inom industriell marknadsföring och organisationsforskning gällande företagets rykte och identitet. I samspel kompletterar dessa ansatser varandra.

Den artikelbaserade avhandlingen byggs upp av en inledande sammanfattning och därefter presenteras de fyra ursprungliga forskningsartiklarna. Alla de fyra artiklarna behandlar de ovan nämnda bristerna ur skilda perspektiv: (i) utvecklingen av en begreppslig förståelse för företagsbranding i affärsnätverk (Artikel I); (ii) utvecklingen av ett metodologiskt ramverk för och utförandet av en empirisk analys av s.k. Born Global SMFs och deras INB-processer på internationella industriella marknader (Artikel II); (iii) utvecklingen av ett begreppsligt ramverk och ett analysredskap för studier av INB-processer med fokus på individnivån (Artikel III); och (iv) forskning av INB:s betydelse för SMF på en inhemsk tillväxtmarknad (Artikel IV).

Metodologiskt bygger den empiriska studien på kvalitativ tolkande forskning med en abduktiv ansats. En socialkonstruktivistisk verklighetssyn tillämpas för djupstudier av INB-processerna och interaktionen mellan individerna. I de utförda enfalls- och multipelfallstudierna tillämpas processforskning för att kunna

följa INB-utvecklingen över tiden genom händelser i det förflutna, i nuet och potentiellt i framtiden. Primärdata som samlats in genom semi-strukturerade intervjuer i B2B SMFs har därefter genomgått narrativ analys.

Denna studie bidrar till litteraturen inom B2B-marknadsföring, industriella nätverk och företagsbranding genom att utveckla teoretiska begrepp för INB-konceptet, dess metodologiska grund och empiriska uttryck. Det huvudsakliga bidraget riktas dock till IMP-ansatsen och litteraturen om affärsnätverk genom analysen av företagsbranding och individers interaktion i dessa nätverk. De viktigaste implikationerna för näringslivet gäller betydelsen av individer i SMFs och deras sensemaking-verktyg vilka har en central betydelse för INB-processer på industriella marknader.

Nyckelord: *Interaktiv nätverksbranding, företagsidentitet och rykte, affärsnätverk, interaktion, kvalitativ fallstudie, processforskning, små och medelstora företag.*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARA   Actors, Resources, and Activities

B2B   Business-to-Business

B2B2C   Business-to-Business-to-Consumers

B2C   Business-to-Consumers

BG   Born Global

CB   Corporate Branding

CEO   Chief Executive Officer

CFO   Chief Financial Officer

EM   Emerging Market

H2H   Human-to-Human

IMM   Industrial Marketing Management

IMP   Industrial Marketing and Purchasing

INB   Interactive Network Branding

JBR   Journal of Business Research

ROI   Return on Investment

RQ   Research Question

SJM   Scandinavian Journal of Management

SME   Small and Medium-sized Enterprise

LIST OF ARTICLES

I. Koporcic, N., & Törnroos, J.-Å. Conceptualizing Interactive Network Branding in Business Markets

Previous version: Koporcic, N., & Törnroos, J.-Å. (2015). Developing Interactive Branding in business networks. Conference proceedings, 31st Annual Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Conference, Sept. 2015, Kolding, Denmark.

II. Koporcic, N., Törnroos, J.-Å., Hannibal, M., & Servais, P. Internationalization of Nordic Born Global firms through Interactive Network Branding: A multiple Case Study

Previous versions: Koporcic, N., Törnroos, J.-Å., Servais, P., & Hannibal, M. (2016). Interactive Branding and Internationalization: Cases of Three Born Global firms. Conference proceedings, 32nd Annual Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Conference, Aug.-Sept. 2016, Poznan, Poland.

Koporcic, N. (2016). Born Globals in Interactive branding environment: A case of the BonAlive. Proceedings of the 3rd Business & Management Conference, pp. 118-126, March 2016, Lisbon, Portugal.

III. Koporcic, N., & Halinen, A. Interactive Network Branding: The Network View on Branding

Previous versions: Koporcic, N., & Halinen, A. (2017). The Network View to Branding: Revisiting the ARA Model. Presented at the IMP Special Issue Journal Seminar, Prato, Italy (18-19 May 2017).

Koporcic, N. (2017). Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) model for studying Interactive Network Branding in business relationships. Conference proceedings of the Association of Marketing theory and practice (AMTP), March 2017, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, United States.

IV. Koporcic, N. Interactive Network Branding in an Emerging Market context: The case study of Croatian SMEs embedded in a business network

Previous version: Koporcic, N. (2017). Interactive Network Branding in Emerging Markets: The case study of a Croatian business network. Conference proceedings, 33rd Annual Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Conference, Sept. 2017, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter starts with the motivation for the study (Section 1.1). The problem setting is then presented, and identified research gaps are elaborated on (Section 1.2). The following section, Section 1.3, presents the objective of the study, together with the four research questions. An overview of the research methodology follows in Section 1.4. The focus of the study and its delimitations are then described in Section 1.5. Finally, the structure of the study is shown in the last section of this chapter (Section 1.6).

1.1. Motivation for the study

The motivation for this study can be best described by the following quotation: "If we see an organization doing well, we want to reproduce the success; if we see one doing poorly, we want to prevent failure. Either way, we need a theory – an explanation of what is causing the observed outcomes" (Pentland 1999, p. 711).

The story starts with my father being an entrepreneur during my childhood. Besides a great opportunity to observe the life cycle of his firm, it gave me insight into the development of various business and close personal relationships over the years. However, what I did not understand was why some customers chose one firm instead of another, when the products and services were similar. Nor did I understand why my father had a small number of suppliers and did not plan to change them, even when new ones came along. Ultimately, I was quite motivated to discover what influence these choices have on the success or failure of a company in its business network.

At the time, it was intriguing that most of the academic literature I was acquainted with could not provide 'real life' stories and practical knowledge applicable to different business contexts. In addition, over the years, I have heard about companies becoming successful without having all the "necessary" physical resources, as well as companies failing to succeed although having "great" predispositions. The traditional micro and macro-economic models I was studying in earlier years seemed inadequate in providing sufficient evidence as to why this happens and why firms have no control over it. In my mind, business markets were much more than places where fierce competition between companies creates a business landscape similar to a battlefield, where the strongest and most competent companies survive, thrive, and succeed in occupying the largest market share - as introduced by classical economic thinking.

Then, after moving to Finland and starting my doctoral studies, my PhD supervisor introduced me to the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group [1] and their theoretical approaches. The IMP researchers have been developing ideas about business relationships and networks that greatly differ from the traditional economic thinking about the nature of business markets. As Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota & Waluszewski (2009, p. 1) argue: "mainstream economic thinking and models have simplified away some fundamental aspects of business life and have, therefore, provided an incomplete understanding of the basic processes and structures of the business landscape". Thus, the focus on one firm and its competitors has shifted towards the focus on a broader network view and collaborative business partners. This perspective on the business world seemed more applicable to a 'real life' understanding, but still somewhat incomplete from my viewpoint.

At that time, I became involved with research on more companies, focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from developed (Finnish) and emerging (Croatian) markets. Due to the specific characteristics and differences of these markets, I was able to understand the business reality of SMEs in more depth. What I found fascinating, while talking with founders and managers of these companies, is the fact that there is more to business relationships than simply the organizational level of interactions. Instead, individual human actors were crucial for their existence and development. Moreover, their interactions influenced not only business relationships per se, but also firms' identities and reputation in a network. This will be discussed in detail in the following section.

1.2. Problem setting

Upon reviewing the relevant academic literature (see Chapter 2 on theoretical background), I came across certain research gaps, which can be grouped in the two main theoretical areas: 1) B2B marketing, with a specific focus on business network studies of the IMP Group, and 2) corporate branding literature with the focus on identity and reputation. Since the main contribution of this dissertation is directed towards IMP studies and business network literature, the following gaps are presented first.

First and foremost, when moving from the traditional economic perspective on business markets, towards the network perspective, it is crucial to review and adapt certain academic concepts and frameworks. As La Rocca (2013, p. 171)

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[1] See Section 2.1. for a discussion on the IMP research.

argues: "Taking the relational rather than the transactional perspective [on business networks] implies the need to revisit some of the central concepts in marketing in general (Morgan & Hunt 1994) and in business marketing in particular (Ford et al. 2010)".

Next, there is a limited amount of research conducted on B2B marketing concerning branding (Bengtsson & Servais 2005, Glynn 2011, Mudambi 2002, Seyedghorban, Matanda & LaPlaca 2016). More specifically, the IMP literature has not yet, in a sufficient manner, acknowledged the importance of corporate branding for a firm's network development (Gregory 2007, Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen 2011). This might be a consequence of the traditional understanding of brand management that has been for many years oriented only towards the business-to-consumer (B2C) context. As a matter of fact, most academic research on marketing in the 20th century has focused on consumers (LaPlaca & Katrichis 2009, LaPlaca 2013). This in turn implied its irrelevance for B2B marketing (Baumgarth 2010), and caused the lack theoretical foundations.

In addition, the prevailing B2B marketing research usually focuses on large corporations operating in consumer markets, which leads towards the lack of research focusing on the B2B level of SMEs (LaPlaca 2013, Bocconcelli & Pagano 2015). More specifically, traditional marketing literature often neglects the interactions, interdependences and resource exchange that occurs in the context of SMEs (Coviello & Cox 2006).

When investigating SMEs, the individual human actors[2], as representatives of those companies, play the crucial role. However, despite the fact that the business network researchers accepted individuals as actors in their conceptual frameworks[3], empirical research has often focused only on the organizational level for analysis (La Rocca 2013, Guercini et al. 2014). Although interactions take place between organizations (i.e. on organizational level), they are carried out through an individual level, i.e. through managing directors. This in turn creates the enmeshed individual-organizational level of actors, on which this study focuses.

Similarly, previous research on corporate branding has often neglected the crucial role of individuals, by being traditionally observed as an organizational activity (Balmer & Grey 2003). These individuals, as the main actors of business networks, act on behalf of their companies while representing them in business interactions (e.g. Hatch & Schultz 1997, Medlin & Törnroos 2009, Törnroos & Koporcic 2015). Simultaneously, organizational studies on branding, although

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[2] See Section 3.2.3. and Section 3.3.1. for more details on individual human actors.
[3] For more elaboration on the actor level see traditional ARA model in the Section 2.1.

focusing on the importance of employees for brand building (Hatch & Schultz 2009), ignore the other business actors and the influence of their representatives on the process at hand. Thus, this research gap denotes neglected research on interactions between individuals in both the IMP and corporate branding studies.

Although corporate branding has gained increased interest from marketing academics and practitioners, development and use of a corporate brand empirically is still unclear (Knox & Bickerton 2003, Kay 2006). At the same time, consensus has not been achieved on the definition of concepts related to brands and branding (Bergstrom, Blumenthal & Crothers 2002, Abratt & Kleyn 2012), denoting another research gap.

Research on corporate branding predominantly takes a one-firm perspective, as it focuses on the single firm and its branding processes (Gregory 2007), neglecting the importance of business partners and broader networks of connected actors. This corresponds to a firm acting in isolation from other business counterparts (de Chernatony 2001, Balmer & Gray 2003). There is also a lack of understanding and connections between internal and external perspectives of corporate branding (see Hatch & Schultz 2001, Schultz & de Chernatony 2002).

Prevailing research on B2B branding has been conducted in a quantitative manner (LaPlaca 2013), detecting a need for qualitative research that follows the traditional IMP studies. Finally, corporate brands are considered to be stable in existence (Balmer & Gray 2003), which neglects the dynamics and constant change of a firm´s identity and reputation. In other words, considering that reputation and identities change over time, the research gap appears as a lack of a process view study (Van de Ven 1992) of corporate branding.

Despite these gaps, strong brands are considered as the most valuable intangible assets of a company (Keller 2003). At the same time, corporate branding plays a central role for marketing management and the firm's strategy creation (Balmer & Gray 2003, Vallaster & Lindgreen 2011). Hence, corporate brands are discussed and defined in this study through the concepts of corporate identity (Gioia 1998, Hatch & Schultz 1997, 2009, Stern, Zinkhan & Jaju 2001) and reputation (Abratt & Kleyn 2012, Dowling 1994, Gray & Balmer 1998, Johnson & Zinkhan 1990), denoting the perceptual connotations that they create in the minds of individuals. Corporate identity is defined as a perception that company representatives form about their own company, while reputation denotes an outsider perception of the company in question (see Schultz & de Chernatony 2002). These perceptions enlighten the importance of individuals for dynamic, interactive, and socially created processes in business networks. In other words,

people represent their companies, interact with other representatives and as a result influence branding and networking processes.

In order to bridge the above-mentioned gaps, and align business network studies with corporate branding literature, four articles have been generated. Two articles attempt to contribute to the conceptual development of the IMP approaches[4], and the other two focus on an empirical understanding of the studied phenomenon through the network lens[5]. The next section goes deeper into discussing the objectives of the study and the research questions for each article.

1.3. Objective and research questions

The main objective of this study is to conceptualize, examine, and present Interactive Network Branding (INB) as a new perspective on corporate branding in business networks. It focuses on SMEs operating in developed and emerging business markets. INB refers to strategic actions that SMEs take to develop corporate identities and reputation, while acting in their accepted roles and aiming towards the creation of a desired network positions. INB is socially constructed and presented as a co-created value outcome of interactions between individuals. In order to reach this overall objective, and to contribute to existing business network research, the following specific questions are addressed and scrutinized:

> **RQ1.** What are the key conceptual tenets of INB, as a relevant perspective on corporate branding in business networks?
>
> **RQ2.** How can INB be applied in the empirical context of small Born Global firms from developed markets?
>
> **RQ3.** How can INB be conceptually developed by focusing on its actors, resources, and activities?
>
> **RQ4.** How does INB influence the network development of SMEs in an emerging market context?

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[4] See the Article I and the Article III.
[5] See the Article II and the Article IV.

The specific empirical context of the INB phenomenon thus includes SMEs from developed (Article II) and emerging markets (Article IV), and their networking and branding processes that are unfolding in already existing, domestic business networks (Article IV), and foreign, new network settings (Article II). As shown in Table 1, each research question has been scrutinized by one article that elaborates on the phenomenon under investigation. This accordingly brings the study closer to reaching its overall objective. Corresponding with the abductive nature[6] of empirical studies, the knowledge is created by going back and forth between theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. Analysis of the results that each paper provides advance the current understanding of branding in a business network context and offer theoretical, managerial, and methodological contributions.

Table 1. *Research questions and related articles*

	Article I Conceptual	**Article II** Empirical	**Article III** Conceptual	**Article IV** Empirical
RQ 1.	X			
RQ 2.		X		
RQ 3.			X	
RQ 4.				X

The first research question, *"What are the key conceptual tenets of INB, as a relevant perspective on corporate branding in business networks?"* is conceptually elaborated through Article I (Koporcic & Törnroos 2015). The article develops the concept of INB by starting with the IMP studies as the background literature. Thereafter, corporate branding is introduced to the network literature by developing internal, external, and mutual INB branding dimensions.[7] The core concepts include business relationships, networks, trust, commitment, interactions, network roles, positions, corporate identity and reputation, and are aligned in a manner that support and supplement each other. To summarize, in Article I, we have focused on elaborating and developing the key constructs of INB, by combining multidisciplinary tenets and stepping into broader network environment where corporate branding is analyzed.

The second research question, *"How can INB be applied in the empirical context of small Born Global firms from developed markets?"* is presented in Article II

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[6] See Section 4.3. for more details on the abductive nature of research.
[7] See Section 3.2. for discussion on INB dimensions.

(Koporcic, Törnroos, Servais & Hannibal 2016). The article uses theoretical concepts introduced in Article I and develops a methodological framework for examining INB processes in an empirical context of small BG firms. The multiple comparative case studies were used to presented similarities and differences between BG INB processes during their swift internationalization.

The third research question, *"How can INB be conceptually developed by focusing on its actors, resources, and activities?"* is presented through Article III (Koporcic & Halinen 2017). It continues to elaborate on INB from the network perspective by focusing on the Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) model. The specific aim is to understand unfolding branding processes in business networks, highlighting the importance of an individual human level of analysis.

The last, fourth question *"How does INB influence the network development of SMEs in an emerging market context?"* is elaborated in Article IV (Koporcic 2017b). The article investigates the importance of INB processes for SMEs in a rapidly changing and emerging Croatian business market. This is done by embodying previously introduced concepts from Article I and Article III, and by using the modified conceptual-methodological framework developed in Article II.

The next section consists of a discussion on the methodological aspects of the conducted study.

1.4. Overview of research methodology

In terms of empirical research and methodology, INB faces divided standpoints as regards its background studies, i.e. corporate branding and business networks studies. On the one hand, traditional branding studies are usually conducted using quantitative research methods and a positivistic approach (Cornelissen, Christensen & Kinuthia 2012). In most cases, data is collected through questionnaires from a large sample of consumers, for the purpose of testing the hypothesis. Not surprisingly, academic articles in the B2B branding area have also mainly applied quantitative research to collect and analyze their data (Keränen, Piirainen, & Salminen 2012[8], Seyedghorban et al. 2016[9]). As a result, branding is presented as a one-way, engineered process (e.g. Harris & de Chernatony 2001), which prevents an in-depth analysis of the INB phenomenon.

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[8] The systematic literature review provided by Keränen et al. (2012) involved 68% of quantitative studies, while only 20% were qualitative.

[9] Based on Seyedghorban et al. (2016) literature review, findings indicate that 58% of B2B branding research had been using quantitative research design, 28% qualitative, 11% conceptual papers, while 3% employed pluralistic or a mixed-method design.

On the other hand, research on business relationships and networks traditionally uses qualitative case studies, as the most appropriate way of understanding what is happening in the network context (Halinen & Törnroos 2005). These studies often follow the constructionism approach (Crotty 1998, Guba & Lincoln 1994, Halinen & Törnroos 2005), which corresponds more to the nature of INB processes, being socially created through individuals. Therefore, this study uses a qualitative case study approach, by researching the phenomenon through multiple (Article II) and single (IV) case studies.[10] In addition, process research [11] is implemented (Pettigrew 1997, Van de Ven 1992), due to the dynamics of business networks and INB processes. These processes are also longitudinal, since they follow the companies retrospectively and in their present moment, as well as being concerned with their future plans (Halinen & Tornroos 1995). Moreover, the study includes going back to informants in order to understand the changes and processes that occurred in the meantime (Farrall 2006). This provides the opportunity to go deeper into the matter by having a closer contact with informants. As is often the case in business network studies, in-depth, semi-structured, personal interviews are conducted in order to collect rich qualitative data (Dubois & Gadde 2002, Halinen & Törnroos 2005, Ivanova-Gongne, Koporcic, Dziubaniuk, & Mandjak 2017).

1.5. Focus and delimitations

In order to give plausible answers to the research questions and present the INB as a perspective on branding in business networks, the study conceptually combines business network and corporate branding literature. It empirically includes developed and emerging markets, and methodologically uses longitudinal process research (see Figure 1).

The business network approach is used in this study to set the ground for an analysis of B2B SMEs and their business relationships and network development. Corporate branding literature is used to emphasize the importance of corporate brand identity and reputation, and their influence on firms' strategizing in the network. The empirical context of this study includes companies from developed markets (Finland and Denmark), as well as companies from an emerging market (Croatia).

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[10] For more details on research methodology and methods see Chapter 4.
[11] See Section 4.4 on the process research.

Business
networks

Corporate
branding

Developed
markets

Emerging
markets

Process
reserach

Longitudinal
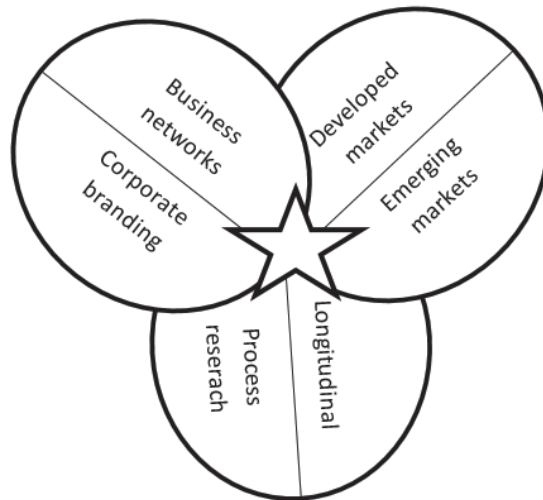
Figure 1. Conceptual, empirical, and methodological focus of the study

In terms of conceptual delimitations, this study focuses on business marketing and organizational studies on corporate branding (see Section 2.2). These theories are, furthermore, combined with the IMP perspective on business networks, with a focus on the network approach and the ARA model (see Section 2.1). The choices are motivated by their abilities to mutually overcome gaps in one another, and to reach the objectives of the study by conceptualizing INB. The key concepts of the INB are delimited to: business relationships and networks, network role and position, strategizing, interactions, corporate identity, and reputation.

Another delimitation lies in the focus of the study on SMEs due to their specific characteristics, ways of conducting a business, as well as the liabilities they face compared with MNCs and their strict rules and bureaucracy. Furthermore, focusing on SMEs provides an opportunity to study the influence of human actors and their social connections on business relationships and complex networks of business actors. This delimitation was necessary in order to draw boundaries for the study, and gain a deeper, more focused understanding of INB.

In addition, the study focuses, throughout both of the empirical articles (Article II and Article IV), on an analysis of business network development and INB processes from a focal firm perspective, i.e. actor-network perspective (see Halinen & Törnroos 1998). This implies that the researcher has observed a network of embedded business actors, with the unit of analysis being the focal firm. However, as argued in the study of Halinen and Mainela (2013, p. 11): "the unit of analysis also should influence the level from which the data is collected, i.e. the unit of observation". As such, the unit of observation corresponds to an

individual manager level. Thus, these two units cannot often be separated, since they influence and interact with each other (Wilke & Ritter 2006, Jaworski 2011, Halinen & Mainela 2013).

In addition, although the empirical context of the study includes both developed and emerging markets, the findings are focused on denoting the importance of INB for each context, without emphasis on the differences between the two.

1.6. Structure of the study

This dissertation summary consists of six chapters (see also Figure 2). The *first chapter* presents the introduction and consists of the motivation for this study, as well as its problem setting. The main objective and four research questions follow, after which the overview of research methodology is presented. The focus and delimitations of the study are elaborated next, with the structure of the study at the end of the chapter. The second and third chapters present the theoretical part of the dissertation. More specifically, the *second chapter* presents a theoretical background on business networks and corporate branding, providing a basis for INB conceptualization and development in *chapter three*. As a novel concept, INB is presented through its branding dimensions, followed by the Pyramid that consists of actors, recourses and activates of INB.

Chapter four presents the research methodology and methods used in this thesis work. It consists of the philosophical underpinnings of the study, as well as a description of the qualitative research approach, which uses an abductive and process research approach. The case research strategy and design, data collection method, methods of analysis, and quality of the research are also discussed. The *fifth chapter* offers the summary of the individual academic articles and an analysis of their results that includes conclusions, findings, implications, as well as the connection with the specific research questions. The last chapter, *chapter six,* elaborates on the discussion of the findings and theoretical, managerial, and methodological implications. In addition, a critical analysis of the study is presented through the limitations, together with future research suggestions. Finally, the four original academic articles are presented.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Motivation for the study; 1.2. Problem setting; 1.3. Objective and research questions; 1.4. Overview of research methodology; 1.5. Focus and delimitations; 1.6. Structure of the study.

Chapter 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Business relationships and networks; 2.2. Corporate branding in B2B markets.

Chapter 3

INTERACTIVE NETWORK BRANDING

3.1. Introducing branding to business networks; 3.2. Interactive Network Branding dimensions; 3.3. The Pyramid of INB.

Chapter 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

4.1. Philosophical underpinnings of the study; 4.2. A qualitative research approach; 4.3. Abductive inquiry; 4.4. Process research; 4.5. Case research strategy & design; 4.6. Data collection method; 4.7. Methods of analysis; 4.8. Determining the quality of research.

Chapter 5

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

5.1. Article I,   5.2. Article II,

5.3. Article III,   5.4. Article IV.

Chapter 6

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1. Theoretical and methodological implications; 6.2. Implications for practitioners; 6.3. Limitations of the study and future research suggestions.

Figure 2. Structure of the thesis

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter provides a literature review of the two main research approaches and their core concepts. These concepts are furthermore used for the development of INB. Firstly, business relationships and networks are presented (Section 2.1), with a specific focus on the actors, resources, and activities in business networks (Section 2.1.1). Secondly, the literature on corporate branding in business markets is reviewed (Section 2.2), focusing on a) organizational literature on corporate identity (see Section 2.2.1), and b) business marketing literature on corporate reputation (Section 2.2.2). Although these research approaches seem to be somewhat distant in traditional marketing literature, it is strongly suggested here that they complement each other in a harmonized manner through the INB conceptualization (Chapter 3).

2.1. Business relationships and networks

"No business is an island"
Håkansson & Snehota (1989)

In order to develop, at that time, a novel understanding of a business landscape, the IMP Group started their first project in 1976 (Turnbull, Ford & Cunningham 1996). The project was based on empirical observations of interactional processes that occur between two or more companies. The aim of the IMP group was to develop an alternative approach to classical economic thinking by promoting interactions and cooperation between companies on the markets. Business relationships were conceptualized and empirically studied by understanding that "it is not so much what happens within a single company but what happens between that company and others that constitutes the core of business" (Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, Snehota, Waluszewski 2010, p. 82). Each relationship is unique and at the same time interconnected with other relationships, which then creates a network of connected actors, i.e. companies. Interactions are presented as links between and within companies, and as a focal characteristic of business networks (Håkansson 1982). The first book, edited by Håkansson (1982, p. 14) included this description: "Industrial markets are characterized by stability instead of change, long lasting relationships instead of short business transactions and closeness instead of distance".

Over the years, the IMP group has developed valuable frameworks for understanding business relationships and networks in B2B markets (see Håkansson

1982, Håkansson & Snehota 1995, Håkansson et al. 2009). Their first approaches became the core of business research, and were called: The Interaction Approach (Håkansson 1982) and The Network Approach (Håkansson & Snehota 1995). Since then, a growing number of researchers have been interested in IMP studies, and attempted to contribute to its further development. Each year an IMP conference and workshops are organized, where researchers gather and papers are presented, discussed, and published in conference proceedings. Since 1984, when the first conference was organized in Manchester, more than 2800 papers have been presented at the annual IMP conferences.[12] As the theoretical roots of their projects, marketing, business economics, as well as organizational and social sciences were used as the main disciplines (see Håkansson et al. 2009, p. 14). They cover many areas of research, such as resource-dependence and social-exchange theory, transaction cost economics, and political economy framework, among others.

Business networks are furthermore described as complex business environments in which companies interact with each other and engage in specific business relationships (Håkansson & Ford 2002). In its basic structure, the network presents a number of individual companies that have their own context (Håkansson & Snehota 1995). However, as Håkansson and Ford (2002, p. 133) argue: "(T)he words network and relationship indicate that there is some kind of special organizational form at an aggregate level above that of individual companies". Instead of fighting against competitors for survival and the largest market share, business relationships embody trust, commitment, interactions, mutually beneficial investments, adaptations, and interdependences between parties (Håkansson & Ford 2002, Håkansson et al. 2009). The higher the importance of a particular relationship, the higher the importance of the individual actors who are part of it (Håkansson and Ford 2002). Thus, companies are never isolated in a business network. Interdependences between them can be described as responsive and interactive strategic processes that are mutually created in a business network (ibid.). Thus, in simple terms, buyers and sellers are active participants in business relationships, whose complex interaction processes aim towards a product or service, as well as financial, informational, and social exchange (Håkansson 1982).

Through exchange relationships, companies become mutually inter-dependent over time, and their various resources, actors and activities connected with other companies within their embedded business network (Håkansson & Johanson 1992, Håkansson & Snehota 1995). With that in mind, the Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) model was introduced by the IMP Group (see

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[12] For the latest information see http://www.impgroup.org/papers.php

Håkansson & Snehota, eds. 1995), focusing on the interrelatedness of business relationships and their embeddedness in the network. Based on its substantial theoretical and empirical ground for further contributions to the field, the traditional ARA model is presented in the next section.

2.1.1. Actors, Resources, and Activities in business networks[13]

The IMP approach has repositioned business relationships and networks of connected actors into the forefront of business market research. Buyer-supplier interactions are defined as a central development function for both efficiency and innovativeness of each company from a business network (Håkansson & Waluszewski 2013). The basic assumption within the IMP tradition lies in a socially constructed world in which heterogeneous business organizations are actively engaged with counterparts in their business network (e.g. Håkansson 1982, Håkansson & Snehota 1995, Halinen & Törnroos 1998).

In order to analyze these interconnections, the Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) Model (Figure 3) was developed in 1992 (Håkansson & Johanson 1992). It presents a different understanding of business markets, compared with those of traditional economic models, by shifting a single-firm and dyadic relationship perspective towards the broader network view (Axelsson 2010). The importance of connected business actors and their relationships is elaborated further by presenting the three layers of the ARA model: activity links, resource ties and actor bonds (Håkansson & Snehota 1995).
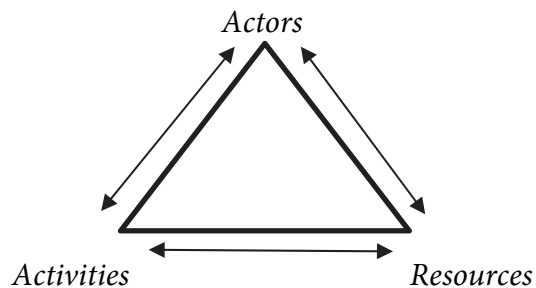
Figure 3. *The ARA model of business networks*
Source: Modified from Håkansson & Johanson (1992, p. 29)

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[13] This section is modified from: Koporcic, N. (2017). Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) model for studying Interactive Network Branding in business relationships. Conference proceedings of the Association of Marketing theory and practice (AMTP), March 2017, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, US.

The *activity layer* links together all the activities in a business relationship performed by two or more actors. These include production, selling, administration, logistics, and other closely linked activities. As a result, activities create and develop resources over a period of time, as well as exchange and combine them with other resources (Håkansson & Johanson). Business activities, in this manner, are never performed in isolation, but rather in cooperation with other actors. Activities can also be described and understood as mutual performance of business partners, where resources are used and where network perceptions of each individual actor are created (Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson 1994). As Håkansson and Snehota (1995, p. 51) describe: "business relationships are the mechanism by which the activity interdependencies are handled". Some connections, i.e. links between activities are direct, while others have intermediate activities that connect them, and are characterized as indirect (Håkansson & Johanson 1992).

The *resource layer* of the ARA model is developed through interactions between companies where assets of each partner are combined and tied together. These resources correspond to financial, time, technological, as well as human assets, and are defined as "means used by actors when they perform activities" (Håkansson & Johanson, p. 28). One, two or more companies from a business network often control all the network resources, while both companies in a business relationship can control, or at least have an influence on each other resources. A direct control is defined as being when a company that owns and produce resources controls them. At the same time, an indirect control corresponds with management and control of resources produced by a firm´s business partners. Furthermore, from the network perspective, a single resource can only have a potential value when one company owns it, while the real value is co-created through interactions with business partners (Baraldi, Gressetvold & Harrison 2012). As such, business relationships can be described as a resource. As Håkansson and Snehota (1995, p. 31) confirm: "A relationship is a resource which ties together various resource elements". Thus, the relationship is a resource of an investment process that involves certain financial costs, which often bear fruit once the relationship is developed. Finally, it is important to understand that, from the IMP perspective, a firm's goal is not solely to economize on their resources, as promoted in traditional models of microeconomics. Instead, firms mutually combine their resources with a goal to create and develop new assets in an efficient and effective manner (Håkansson & Snehota 1995).

The *actor layer* of the ARA model is traditionally presented through individuals, groups of individuals, firm departments, firms alone, or groups of

firms. Actors are interpersonal and inter-firm connections described as "those who perform activities and/or control resources." (Håkansson & Johanson 1992, p. 28). Thus, throughout this layer, both activity and resource layers are interconnected. Actors of a business network are responsible for the start, development, as well as for the end of business relationships, and for various connections with other actors' activities and resources (ibid.). Each actor possesses specific knowledge, experience, as well as certain resources, which demonstrates the broadness of a network and the differences between actors embedded in a specific network. It is therefore relevant to note that "everything is possible if an actor gets the support of the network, while at the same time nothing can be done if the network goes against the actor" (Håkansson & Snehota 1995, p. 201). A network thus provides the validation for each business relationship and the individual actors that are connected to each other through activity and resource bonds. Over time, these bonds become critical points of mutual development and inter-organizational learning. They give a meaning for each actor embedded in a network, and are therefore an important part of business accomplishments (ibid.).

To summarize, activities, resources and actors of business relationships and networks are never independent and single-firm focused. Instead, there is always an interaction and interconnection between them. As presented in the Figure 3, all the layers of the ARA model are connected by interacting and mutually affecting each other. The interplay that occurs can therefore be understood as a driving force for business relationship and network development (Håkansson & Snehota 1995). However, despite its considerable influence on development of business marketing, the ARA model has overlooked the importance of corporate brands for business relationship and network development. Therefore, the crucial characteristics of corporate branding in B2B markets are presented and elaborated on in the next section.

2.2. Corporate branding in B2B markets

"Corporate brands represent one of the most
fascinating phenomena of the business
environment in the twenty-first century"
Balmer & Gray (2003)

Although a substantial amount of research on corporate branding has been done previously in marketing studies, most of it is concentrated on a business-to-consumer (B2C) context, implying its irrelevance for B2B marketing (Baumgarth 2010). As such, corporate branding was defined as a value outcome of communicating the brand through its logo, symbol, or name of a company (Webster & Keller 2004). Often, the focus of research was on emotional consumer responses as well as on unsophisticated product brands (Mudambi 2002). These standardized products, impersonal relationships with consumers, and mass-market advertising, further characterize the B2C field. Simultaneously, the B2B field seemed not to focus on brand research to a sufficient extent (Lynch & de Chernatony 2007, van Riel, de Mortanges & Streukens 2005). One reason for this may be due to the narrow number of main buyers and a belief that individual industrial products cannot be branded effectively, since the number of products that business companies often produce is high (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt 2004, Lynch & de Chernatony 2007). This description correlates with B2B product branding, with the focus on differentiation of a single product or a product category.

However, it is important to differentiate product branding from corporate branding. For instance, product branding focuses its activities on the differentiation and promotion of single products and their offerings, while corporate branding focuses on differentiating and positioning the entire company in a business market (Webster & Keller 2004, He & Balmer 2006). The corporate brand itself has a long-life expectancy (as long as the company exists), while product brand alludes to a single product lifecycle (Hatch & Schultz 2003). The corporate brand is, furthermore, oriented towards all stakeholders (Balmer 2001, Hatch & Shultz 2003), including employees, buyers, investors, suppliers and policy makers, while the product brand only its targeted buyers (He & Balmer 2006). Furthermore, the literature consider corporate branding as the main responsibility of the top-level management, with an influence on all other company members. At the same time, only communication and marketing

departments coordinate product-branding responsibilities (Hatch & Schultz 2003).

Some researchers would say that product branding has its greatest impact in B2C markets, and the reason for its lower importance in B2B field is often justified by an absence of the need to brand every product separately (Aspara & Tikkanen 2008). However, there might even be B2B2C interactions in relation to corporate branding. For instance, having in mind the importance of brands for end consumers, B2C companies may want to add considerable value to their products by entering into a co-branding alliance with a B2B company. In this relationship, a B2C company would use the partner's brand and reputation as ingredients for the development of their own. In addition to this, a strong corporate brand often ensures buyer affirmative perception of the qualities the company wants to be associated with, and act as insurance against financial or poor performance risk (Balmer & Gray 2003).

The latter is especially important for B2B SMEs branding, since these companies often face a lack of resources for extensive investments in marketing communications and branding. As such, branding has often been a broadly neglected subject in the context of SMEs (Merrilees 2007, Krake 2005). However, the small amount of research that has been done on this topic shows a high level of importance of corporate branding for gaining trust, awareness, and recognition on the market (Boyle 2003, Krake 2005), as well as for the creation of the perceived reputation that influences a firm's network position (e.g. Merrilees 2007, Ojasalo et al. 2008, Koporcic et al. 2016[14]). Moreover, it presents a crucial means of SMEs survival, especially for companies operating in fast changing and/or foreign business markets (Merrilees 2007, Ojasalo et al. 2008, Koporcic et al. 2016, Koporcic 2017[15]). Additionally, branding helps towards successful technological commercialization and innovation of SMEs (e.g. Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele & Lye 2011).

Some empirical findings furthermore detect the crucial importance of personal contacts and interactions between firm representatives for network development and brand recognition of SMEs (Ojasalo et al. 2008, Koporcic et al. 2016). It has been argued that personal relationships are a more efficient way of brand building than advertising (Ojasalo et al. 2008), or traditional market research (Koporcic et al. 2016). At the same time, the smallness of these companies provides swift

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[14] See the summary of Article II. in Section 5.2.
[15] See the summary of Article IV. in Section 5.4.

decision-making processes and better flexibility to adapt to constantly changing environments, compared to larger companies (Krake 2005, Koporcic et al. 2016).

However, despite an increasing interest from researchers and practitioners (Mukherjee & Balmer 2008, Schultz & de Chernatony 2002), corporate branding still seems to be missing the universal framework and clear guidance as to how to develop and manage branding inside and outside of a company. In addition, a generally accepted definition of the concept is also lacking. As Ind (1997, p. 2) states: "Corporate branding is one of those things that everyone believes is important, yet there is very little consensus as to what it means". Although this was written two decades ago, the statement is still accurate. To illustrate, the current research on corporate branding spans several disciplines and functions, where each has adopted its own unique lens. Business marketing, management, organizational behavior, economics, sociology, graphical arts, and design, as well as strategy, have all proposed their own specific conceptualizations and various frameworks for studying corporate branding (see Mukherjee & Balmer 2008).

Over the years, there have been many attempts to conceptualize corporate brands in the business world, however, most contributions are still underdeveloped and often confusing (cf. e.g. Aspara & Tikkanen 2008, Seyedghorban et al. 2016). Thus, in order to understand corporate brands as fascinating business phenomena of the 21ˢᵗ (Balmer & Gray 2003), this study combines two distinct but important literatures on corporate branding, namely: organizational literature that focuses on corporate identity, and business marketing literature that focuses on corporate reputation. As a result of their alignment, corporate branding can be defined as a business activity of companies, the purpose of which is to create a stable identity and a positive reputation in a business network (Schultz & Chernatony 2002, Bengtsson & Servais 2005). The following sections present these two literatures on corporate branding in more details, focusing on corporate identity and reputation.

2.2.1. Organizational literature on corporate identity

Organizational literature, in its broader sense, analyzes and focuses on the perspective of a single firm and its intra-organizational level (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000, Aaker 1996, Schultz & Hatch 2005, 2007). It describes how the company is organized, what it consists of and the meaning it has for its employees (e.g. Albert, Ashforth & Dutton 2000, Simões et al. 2005). This organizational perspective focuses on the importance of corporate identity and defines it as "the ways a company chooses to identify itself to all its publics" (Stern et al. 2001, p. 154). Corporate identity, furthermore, relates to relationships

created between individuals inside an organization, i.e. internally (Hatch & Schultz 1997). As Hatch and Schultz (2009, p. 120) argue: "at the heart of any corporate brand you will find the organization´s identity."

The individual human actors of companies present an important part of identity building and corporate brand building in general (Ind 1997). They interact with each other, initiate, maintain or end business relationships; they participate in production, buying and selling of products and services, and, simultaneously act as corporate brand representatives (Ind 1997, Hatch & Schultz 2003, Medlin & Törnroos 2009).

Individual actors from one company communicate and interact with individuals from other companies in order to achieve their own goals, as well as mutual business goals. Through these interactions, the corporate identity of each firm has a bearing on its corporate reputation, and vice versa. Throughout this process, internal identity and external reputation develop in a certain manner, denoting the need for further elaboration of the phenomenon. This is accomplished in the next section by introducing a corporate reputation through the lens of business marketing.

2.2.2. Business marketing literature on corporate reputation

Business marketing literature regarding corporate branding analyzes and focuses on firms' external business partners (Davies, & Chun 2003, Urde & Greyser 2015). The focal concepts defining corporate branding from this perspective are corporate reputation and/or brand image. These two concepts are often used interchangeably (e.g. Dowling 1993, Gray & Balmer 1998), or even as synonyms, following an analogous school of thought[16]. The concept of *corporate reputation* is chosen here since, based on some studies, it intrinsically consists of image. As Dowling (1994, p. 8) argues, and Gray and Balmer (1998) support the argument, reputation is "the evaluation in which an organization's image is held by people".

However, traditional definitions of corporate reputation lack clarity, which has been demonstrated by Walker (2010) in his literature review on the concept (see Abratt & Kleyn 2012). Not only do less than half (44%) of the reviewed articles offer any kind of a definition on reputation, they were also all different from each other (ibid.). In spite of this, this study is in agreement with the definition of Abratt and Kleyn (2012) of corporate reputation as the overall and extensive impression of how other actors of a business network understand and perceive a focal company and what it represents. Reputation is also past loaded, meaning that

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[16] For a closer examination on analogous school of thought see Gotsi & Wilson (2001).

it is based on previous relationships, activities, behavior, and connections with business partners (cf. Anderson et al. 1994). In addition to these, current (present) and potential (future) business partners also have a direct and indirect influence on the reputation that is being built and constantly altered over time. In order to develop this discussion further, the next chapter introduces and elaborates on the direct connection between branding and business network processes.

3. INTERACTIVE NETWORK BRANDING: Towards an understanding of a new perspective

Can you really see and understand something
if you do not have a word for it?
Unknown

This chapter introduces Interactive Network Branding (INB) as a perspective on branding in business networks. First, the theoretical development and a background of INB is presented in Section 3.1. The key dimensions of INB follow in Section 3.2, i.e. the internal, external and mutual INB dimensions. The final section (Section 3.3) introduces the Pyramid of INB, with its actors, resources, and activities.

3.1. Theoretical development: Introducing branding to business networks

The corporate brands and branding processes of single firms have already been researched for a considerable length of time, but nonetheless there is no agreement on their universal framework. One of the reasons for this could be the many-sided literature and background theories. Hence, in order to avoid a similar outcome, this study chooses to focus on business marketing and organizational studies on corporate branding (see Figure 4).

Starting with the business marketing theory on corporate branding (see Section 2.2.2) it can be noted that while this is often focused on corporate reputation, it neglects the importance of brand identity. At the same time, organizational theory on corporate branding (see Section 2.2.1) acknowledges the importance of corporate identity, but consequently disregards reputation. Additionally, what both streams of literature lack is a business network perspective[17]. On the positive side, this perspective is given by the IMP Group studies on B2B relationships, through their interaction and network approach (see Section 2.1 and Figure 4). However, at the same time, the IMP field of literature neglects corporate branding and its importance for business networks[18].

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[17] See Section 1.2. on research gaps.
[18] Ibid.

In order to overcome these gaps in the extant literature, the study aims to create an understanding of how branding occurs in business networks, following the argument: "if we begin to accept the need for comprehensive, integrated frameworks while opening to multiple disciplines, more realistic and actionable guidelines are likely to emerge" (Schultz & Hatch 2005, p. 343). Thus, the concept of Interactive Network Branding is defined as "a *socially constructed value outcome of mutually interacted processes between connected actors in business networks*" (Koporcic, et al. 2016, p. 2). The word "*Interactive*" denotes individual human actors who represent their companies and interact with other representatives. The "*Network*" denotes a B2B context of connected business actors in which INB comes to being. The "*Branding*" denotes activities of SMEs, in which corporate identities and reputation are mutually influenced and created for each embedded firm. This dissertation therefore moves away from the traditional understanding of corporate branding, where the full control of the corporate brand lies inside a single company, and instead, places business relationships and network connections as the focus of the investigation. This focus includes the individual human interactions that mutually co-create the perceived value of their own and other companies' corporate brands.
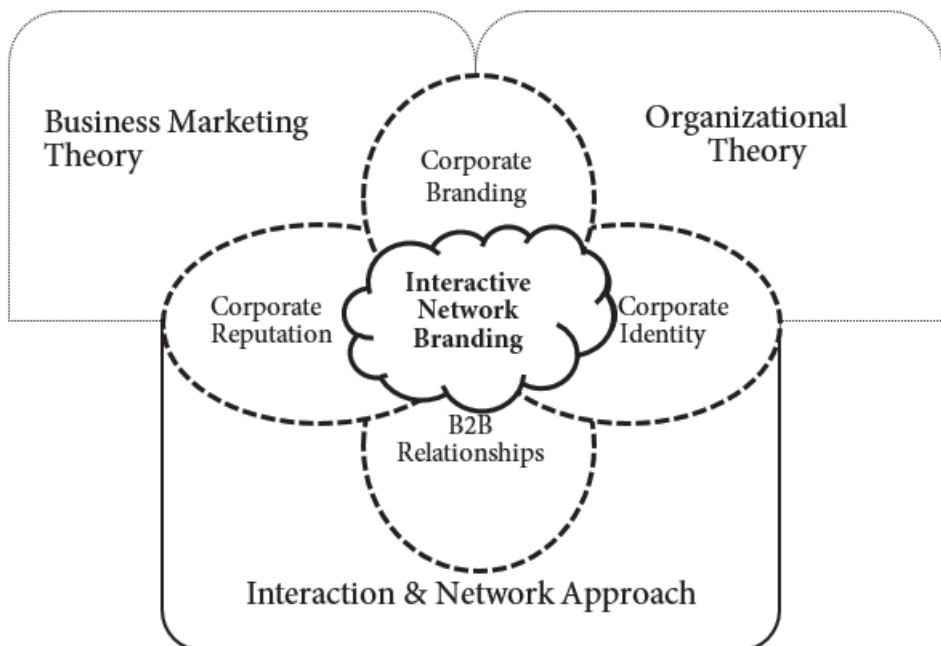
Figure 4. *A theoretical model of Interactive Network Branding*

The uniqueness of this study is found in the combination of corporate brand and network approaches that has not been studied in this manner before. However, some previous studies (e.g. Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen 2011, Mäläskä 2015) conducted research on multi-stakeholder corporate brand co-creation in SMEs, which is similar to the perspective of this study, but was aimed more towards the brand rather than the network domain. Another study tried to combine branding with stakeholder networks (Birkstedt 2012), however, the study focused on multinational corporations, not SMEs. Additionally, another research that has some similarity to this study discusses a strategy-as-practice research on branding, and shifts from the traditional understanding by proposing corporate brand strategy formation through social interactions (Vallaster & Lindgreen 2011). Another article proposed the concept of a "brand oriented network" (Urde & Greyser 2015), introducing the heritage brands in business networks. However, it concentrated on a phenomenon applicable to alliances, joint ventures, and co-branding activities, with a focus on product and heritage brands, and not corporate brands.

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish the INB perspective from the co-branding viewpoint. Co-branding activities are often product oriented and focused on dyadic relationships, where companies meet on the market for a strict, already agreed purpose and a specific joint project. These activities oftentimes erratically and unevenly affect the two companies, in which case one company achieves a better network position and desired reputation at the expense of the other. In contrast, INB is more organically created (e.g. see Iglesias, Ind & Alfaro 2013 on the notion of organically created branding), with the focus on interactions between human actors. Furthermore, it is network and corporate brand oriented, meaning that internal brand identities and external reputation are influenced by each company embedded in the network, and not just by the closest and current business partners.

Although INB has already developed some theoretical and methodological conceptualization (see Articles I-IV), the focus of this chapter is on the following two crucial determents of INB: Interactive Network Branding dimensions and the Pyramid of INB. They are presented next, in order to provide an understanding of how and why INB comes into existence.

3.2. Interactive Network Branding dimensions

The specific position of a firm in its embedded business network, once it has been established, should constantly be developed and maintained (Freeman & Sandwell 2008, Koporcic & Törnroos 2015). In order to do so, companies accept certain roles in a network, and implement INB activities, which affect corporate identities and reputation (see Figure 5). In other words, throughout the interactions, in which companies[19] act in their accepted roles and try to achieve their desired positions, the identities and reputation of each firm is also being influenced and is influencing the identities and reputation of other business actors. These activities correspond to strategizing in business networks.
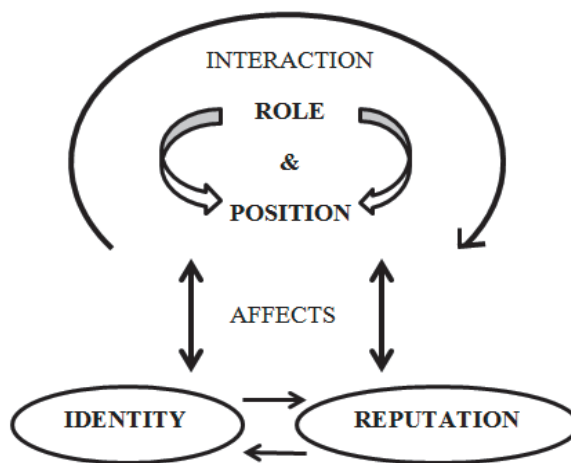
Figure 5. Elements of strategizing through INB

Strategizing is defined by IMP researchers as "efforts of a firm to influence its position in the network of which it is part" (Gadde, Huemer & Håkansson 2003, p. 358). However, besides networking activities, branding presents another crucial aspect of strategizing. From the INB perspective, strategizing denotes both engineered and unplanned branding activities that aim towards the creation of a desired network position. Finally, as Koporcic and Halinen (2017, p. 7) argue: "Strategizing is achieved through collaborations and interactions between individuals that create mutually perceived value outcome for each company, each relationship, and for a broader business network."

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[19] Although Figure 5 presents the organizational level of analysis, it is inevitably connected and enmeshed with an individual, human level.

In order to accomplish the goals of strategizing through INB, companies need to pay particular attention to the following three dimensions of INB, namely the internal, external, and mutual INB dimensions.

3.2.1. The internal branding dimension

The internal branding dimension is characterized by the identities of companies embedded in a certain network of business actors. Identity is defined here as self-referential and mutual understanding that each company builds internally and chooses to be present to other business actors of the same network (Stern et al. 2001, Koporcic & Törnroos 2015). Through business interactions, companies build, re-build and adapt their identities in order to become more attractive to their current and potential business partners. Identity building therefore presents a dynamic process that evolves and changes over time (Gioia 1998, Koporcic & Törnroos 2015).

The internal dimension can also be described as how a company desires to be seen by its public (Stern et al. 2001). In other words, through their identities, companies try to affect and influence what outside actors and the public think of them, i.e. how they perceive them. This follows Koporcic and Törnroos's (2015, p. 10) argument: "However, bearing in mind that companies interact with each other in order to do business, this positioning of a specific corporate identity in the mind-set of other actors in the network becomes a key strategic concern."

The internal dimension, from its theoretical background in organizational studies on corporate branding (see Section 2.2.1), has been developed by predominantly focusing on a single-firm and its employees. Although this perspective develops a profound understanding of individual human actors and their crucial importance for brand building, previous research on this dimension has been done focusing mainly on intra-firm relationships. As such, the importance of inter-firm interactions with individuals from other firms has been neglected. In order to fill this gap, the external branding dimension is elaborated on next, focusing on the importance of business partners and their influence on a firm's networking and branding processes.

3.2.2. The external branding dimension

The external branding dimension has been predominantly developed in business marketing literature as regards corporate branding (see Section 2.2.2), with a focus on external business partners and a focal company's activities to attract them. However, these studies were often conducted solely at an organizational level, studying relationships between companies, but neglecting the importance of

individual human actors as representatives of these companies. Although trust and commitment were investigated, it was once more from the inter-firm perspective, without acknowledging the role of human actors inside or outside the focal firm.

As a key concept describing the external branding dimension, corporate reputation is presented, together with its role for firm positioning in a business network. In simple terms, reputation is understood here as an impression that a certain business actor holds about the focal actor and its corporate brand (Johnson & Zinkhan 1990, Koporcic & Törnroos 2015). The reputation is thus constantly changing and evolving, through positive and negative events and occurrences in the network. During this process, companies interact with each other and try to achieve their desired network positions.

However, as an INB dimension, reputation is understood more profoundly, by being shaped through interactions between human actors, in which each company influences and is being influenced by other actors with whom they cooperate. In other words, this specific type of connection that occurs between human actors influences how each firm is perceived by relevant others (Koporcic & Törnroos 2015).
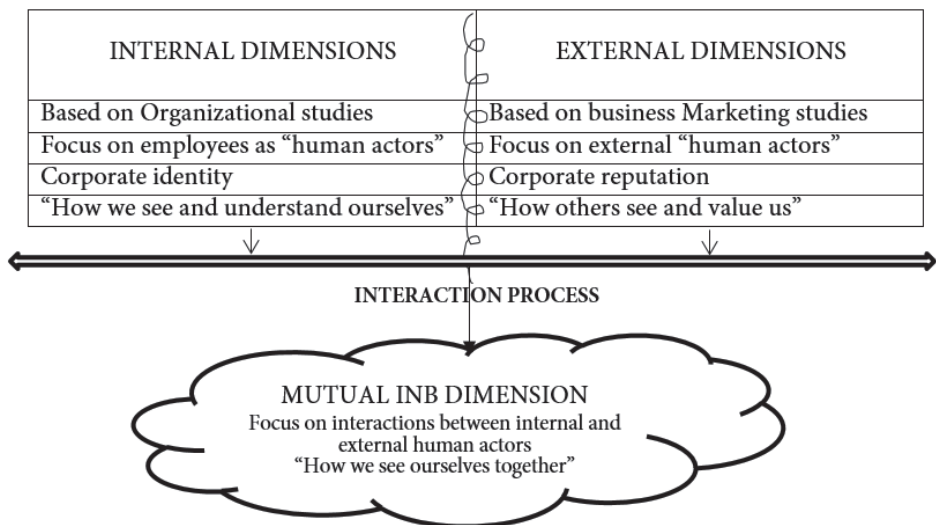
Figure 6. INB dimensions
Source: Modified from Koporcic & Törnroos (2015, p. 10)

Considering that this view slightly differs from the traditional view on external branding, further elaboration is needed to create a full picture of branding in business networks. Therefore, the mutual INB dimension is introduced next.

3.2.3. The mutual INB dimension

Previous research on corporate branding has already included discussions about internal and external dimensions, but mainly just by focusing on their comparison (see Hatch & Schultz 2001, Schultz & de Chernatony 2002). However, their interrelatedness is crucial for the development of the field (Schultz & de Chernatony 2002, Koporcic & Törnroos 2015). Therefore, from the INB perspective these dimensions are closely related in such a way that reputation influences and is being influenced by the firm´s identity, and *vice versa*. In order to understand these connections, the study introduces the mutual INB dimension, described as an "in-between space, where internal dimensions influence the external ones through the process of interaction" (Koporcic & Törnroos, p. 13).

The mutual INB dimension thus presents a point of departure, from which INB has developed and come into existence. INB is characterized by human actors that simultaneously present themselves as individuals and as representatives of their companies, while interacting with each other. They communicate and act both inside their own companies as well as between companies. Agreeing with Håkansson & Snehota (1995, p. 193): "Much of how companies in business markets become related can be explained from how individuals perceive their own [identity] and other companies [reputation]". The influence of one firm's identity and reputation on another is therefore noted. Thus, the mutual INB dimension includes social network connections built by inter-firm and interpersonal relationships between representatives of companies embedded in a business network. These relationships can improve and direct firm strategizing, provide external knowledge and information, and assist in entering new social and business networks. For instance, organizational theory understands the importance of a managers´ flexibility for the strategic development of a firm, as well as for the development, re-configuration and usage of resources in business markets (Wright et al. 2005). These are listed as some of the crucial components, which will make a difference between successful and unsuccessful companies (Uhlenbruck et al. 2003, Wright et al. 2005).

INB thus elaborates on networking and branding processes conducted through business connections, but also through social and personal relationships of individual representatives. Hence, in order for a company to create a desired network position, it needs to be aware of INB processes and the alignment of its

dimensions. In other words, companies need to accomplish coherence between their identity, desired and current reputation, and socially created relational value. As such, "INB can be seen through a specific point in time as an outcome of interactions between these three branding dimensions." (Koporcic & Törnroos 2015, p. 14). In addition, the double-sided arrow (see Figure 6) denotes the INB process as being created by past interactions in the present, as well as noting future expectations of potential and current business partners (see Halinen & Törnroos 1995).

The next section presents the Pyramid of INB, and elaborates further on its actors, activities, and resources.

3.3. The Pyramid of Interactive Network Branding

In order to gain a deeper understanding of INB in business markets, the ARA model of the IMP Group (see Section 2.1.1) has been used as a theoretical background. It presents activities, the resources, and actors of a business network, which are connected to each other through activity links, social bonds and resource ties (Håkansson 1987, Håkansson & Johanson 1992, Håkansson and Snehota 1995). The same outline is used for the novel model[20], while presenting branding and networking of SMEs, in order to illustrate the phenomenon more clearly.

3.3.1. Actors of Interactive Network Branding

In order for business activities to be carried out and resources utilized, companies need human actors. The *actor* part, as a crucial part of INB is thus located at the top of the Pyramid (see Figure 7). Although the traditional ARA model describes actors in a broader manner, actors of INB are individuals, or groups of individuals that have a knowledge and skills, as well as control over resources and firm activities. These actors are connected to each other and are influenced by the knowledge, meaning and capabilities of others (Håkansson & Snehota 1995, p. 192). To emphasize, actors are individuals employed by companies, who act through their roles and whose task is to interact with other individuals while acting on behalf of their companies. They can also be referred to as boundary spanners in business networks, through their direct influence on reputation and identity creation (Koporcic & Törnroos 2015).

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[20] It is important to note that this is a structural, not processual model, which aims to presents the main constructs of ARA for INB.

Thus, connections and bonds between firms are based on social bonds between individuals, which are often created during the first interactions in a business relationships development (Håkansson & Snehota 1995). This is specifically characteristic of SMEs, since they have a smaller number of employees, where each employee carries a considerable amount of responsibility. Founders in those cases are often inseparable from the company, and their identity and reputation collide with the identity and reputation of a firm itself. As a result, this creates an inseparable connection between individual and organizational levels of SMEs. Under these circumstances, individual as well as corporate reputation and identities are built, maintained, enriched or destroyed over a certain period of time, in a harmonized manner.
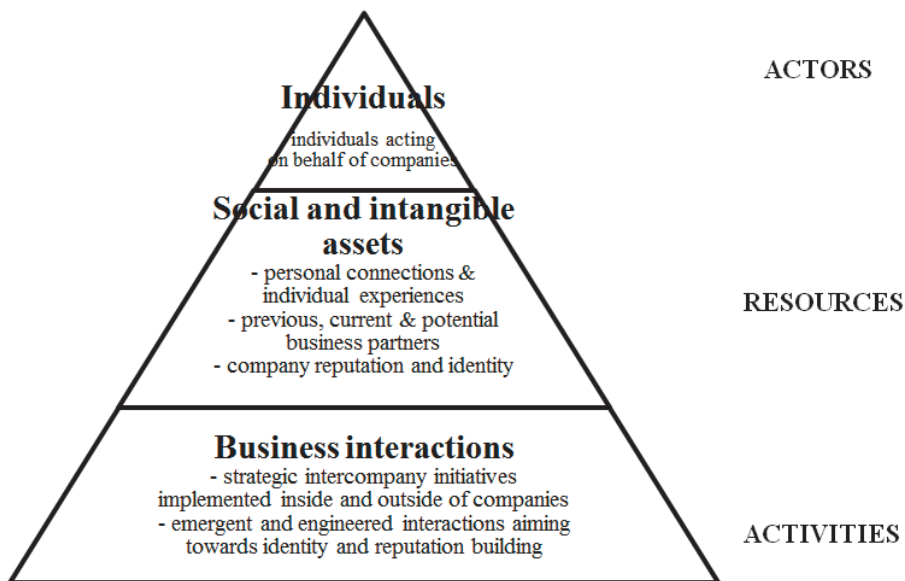
Figure 7. The Pyramid of INB
Source: Koporcic & Halinen (2017, p. 6)

3.3.2. Resources of Interactive Network Branding

In order to perform and carry out business activities, companies need certain resources (Håkansson & Johanson 1992). These consist of all tangible and intangible assets of single companies, of dyadic business relationships, and resources of networks of embedded business actors. While previous research and the ARA model introduced a wide range of resources and their significance for business interactions, INB focuses on the crucial importance of social network connections for firm strategizing in business networks. In line with the social

network theory, social relationships between business partners can be described as informal relationships between entrepreneurs and their business contacts, as well as between friends and relatives (Fombrun 1982, Birley 1985). From the perspective of this study, resources are controlled jointly by individuals from each company, and include personal relationships from previous, current, and potential business relationships. These relationships provide further access to other important resources and necessary information. At the same time, through interactions with current business partners, companies gain a deeper understanding of what their business partners expect from them in a certain relationship (Podolny & Baron 1997). This is again especially relevant for SMEs, because these small companies often have a limited number of resources, which lead towards certain liabilities (Sepulveda & Gabrielsson 2013). Therefore, as previous research highlighted, in order to overcome the liabilities of smallness, newness, as well as uncertainty in business networks, founders often rely on personal, i.e. social connections and networks as their most important resource (Sepulveda & Gabrielsson 2013, Sarasvathy 2001).

Thus, the central part of the Pyramid (see Figure 7) introduces social and intangible assets as a key INB resource. Following the line of reasoning from the previous research on social networks, INB agrees with the resource dependency thinking, and claims that social and personal network connections are important for providing further access to other relevant resources. For instance, when a founder of a small company is starting a business, he/she cannot have all the possible financial, as well as human resources for developing formal and strategic business relationships. Instead, a founder has to rely on his/her existing social network connections (Sarasvathy 2001). In some cases, these include previous business partners that can join the founder´s new business, or can provide knowledge on potential business partners. In other cases, they are family members or friends that are involved in other businesses and can provide sufficient knowledge or expertise. This is also related to the lack of financial resources when starting a business for e.g. conducting formal market research. Instead, companies rely on their trustful social connections and their 'inside information' on specific market characteristics. As Sepulveda and Gabrielsson (2013, p. 793) highlight, in their study on small internationalized Born Global (BG) companies: "…newly incepted BGs have an insufficient amount of basic resources to survive on their own. Consequently, the early types of resources BGs seek externally are those intended to alleviate shortages within the firm (e.g. Partanen et al. 2008), including financing (Kazanjian 1988), organizational resources (Coviello & Cox 2006), or physical assets like machinery, office space, trucks, etc. (Brush et al. 2001)."

Moreover, reputation and identity also play a role as regards resources, especially after the firm has established its position in an embedded network. For instance, reputation in this sense is a resource that firm is bringing in its new relationship, which will often have an impact on the reputation of a new business partner.

To summarize, social and intangible firm assets form a fundamental part of INB, especially for SMEs that are facing various liabilities immediately after their foundation. In order to create or get access to these resources, actors in INB bring companies together and interact – this denotes the INB activities that will be presented in the next section.

3.3.3. Activities of Interactive Network Branding

Organization theorists and economists previously analyzed activities by focusing solely on those that are internal to the company. This perspective neglected the existence and importance of other companies, which was, however, acknowledged in the network studies of the IMP Group. From an IMP perspective, every company is perceived to be connected with a specific number of other companies, and business activities emerge between these companies (Håkansson & Snehota 1995). The activity layer of INB thus presents consistently and closely connected activities of actors embedded in a business network. Some of the activities are carefully planned and engineered, such as strategic intercompany initiatives, while others are emergent and appear as outcomes of certain events and occurrences in the network. These include, among others, activities oriented towards corporate brand development.

However, INB activities are never isolated, instead, they create the lower part, i.e. the base of the Pyramid (see Figure 7), which connects actors and the resources of INB in a concise manner. In other words, the foundation of this layer comes from the interdependency between the other two layers. Activities serve as a tool for achieving the firm's core business, but also for developing its role and position in a network. As already discussed, every company represented by its individual actors is connected to a unique set of other business actors and their representatives. By accepting roles in a network, companies are, through individuals and their sensemaking, executing business activities and creating a network position. As Håkansson and Snehota (1995) describe, a single company is just a `mental construction´ of individuals who plan their business activities with the goal to overcome the lack of resources. This mental construction, i.e. managerial sensemaking (see e.g. Weick 1995, Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, Strandvik & Holmlund 2015), is as such associated with strategizing (Barr, Stimpert & Huff 1992), and described as: "structuring the unknown, which

enables individuals to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute and predict events and actions (Weick 1995)" (Holmlund, Strandvik, Lähteenmäki 2017, p. 215). This process is social and ongoing, which provides a way to capture and analyze INB processes in depth.

To summarize, INB presents the interplay between actors, resources, and activities, which can be looked upon as a driving force and socially constructed value outcome of business relationships and networks. Thus, in order to understanding the INB phenomenon in its real-life context, and to analyze it empirically, the next chapter (Chapter 4) discusses the chosen research methodology and methods of this study.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This chapter presents the research process of the study, concerning the methodology and methods used. First, the philosophical foundations of the study with researcher's scientific positioning is presented in Section 4.1. The following section (Section 4.2) presents a qualitative research approach. A description of abductive research and its phases is found in Section 4.3, after which an elaboration on process research is presented (Section 4.4). Section 4.5 elaborates on the used case research strategy and design. The data collection method is presented in Section 4.6, followed by the methods of analysis (Section 4.7). Finally, the quality of the research has been determined and evaluated in the last section of this chapter (Section 4.8).

4.1. Philosophical underpinnings of the study

Every studied phenomenon in social sciences is investigated with a certain set of methodological choices that are interrelated with philosophical assumptions. Collis and Hussey (2003, p. 46) describe how research should be conducted, i.e. what the research paradigm is: "the research paradigm refers to the progress of scientific practice based on people´s philosophies and assumptions about the world and the nature of knowledge". These principal beliefs will then lead towards the choice of methods for data collection, as well as the perspective from which the data will be analyzed. Initially, researchers need to present their fundamental beliefs and assumptions of the world and reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge and ways it is collected (epistemology), the process of conducting, studying, and interpreting the research (methodology), together with a plausible type of theoretical construction (Fleetwood 2005). As Glynn (2009, p. 39) summarized: "Ontology informs the researcher´s understanding of 'what is' and the structure of that reality and links to epistemology, which is the way of understanding reality".

This doctoral dissertation employs interpretive research and social constructionism as the perspective on reality that has influenced the above-mentioned choices (Crotty 1998, Guba & Lincoln 1994). From the social constructionist point of view, corporate brands are described as dynamic co-creations of social interactions between different actors (Ballantyne & Aitken 2007). Throughout interpretive research, shared beliefs, associations, and interpretations of corporate brands are emphasized (ibid.). This has been broadly

researched in previous years, especially in regard to corporate identity (Schultz & Hatch 1996), and reputation (Balmer & Gray 1998). For instance, as Gray & Balmer (1998, p. 695) argue: "Image and reputation are in the eye of the beholder", indicating the existence of multiple realities, which are socially constructed by the observer. In addition to branding literature, business network studies also use the ideological basis of the social constructionist approach (see seminal work of Berger & Luckmann 1966). As such, social interactions between firm representatives are understood as one of the crucial factors for business relationships and network development (e.g. Håkansson & Shenota 1995, Håkansson et al. 2006). Based on all of the above mentioned, interpretive research is employed to study the phenomena of INB by understanding that individual human actors through their social and business interactions construct its deeper meaning. A constructionist approach, furthermore, focuses on human interpretations of INB processes, comprehension of their experiences, and the relation of these to action (Smircich 1983). The reality is, in this manner, understood as socially created mental constructions of people (Guba & Lincoln 1994, Riege 2003). In addition, the methods of this research intend to provide an understanding of the processes unfolding over time, as well as the context of the specific problems which are influenced by and also influencing the context (Walsham 1995).

As an epistemological perspective on the study that follows the social constructionist approach, subjectivism is presented (Perry 1998, Guba & Lincoln 1994). In this manner, individuals mutually construct the view of the social world in which they interact. Thus, the reality does not exist without individuals who participate in its creation (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). This research therefore aims towards an understanding of social reality, instead of trying to measure and explain that actual reality, as the positivist approach aims to do. Additionally, the study deals with two important research approaches that represent the theoretical views underlying ontological and epistemological layers. These are branding literature (e.g. Fournier 1998), and literature on business relationships and networks (e.g. Anderson et al. 1994), both often employing subjectivism as a paradigm. In addition to individuals from companies, i.e. the informants in the study, the researcher is also actively included in the co-creation of understandings (Lee 2012). New knowledge is thus constructed as an outcome of interactions between informants and the researcher (Guba & Lincoln 1994, Riege 2003). In line with this epistemological perspective, a qualitative research approach is chosen for studying INB, and is presented in more detail in the next section.

4.2. A qualitative research approach

The phenomenon of this study concerns networking and branding processes of SMEs operating in developed and emerging B2B markets. In order to gain a deeper understanding of a given phenomenon, and observe it in its particular context, a qualitative research approach has been chosen (Yin 2003). In addition to the fact that it is the most suitable approach for business network studies (Halinen & Törnroos 2005), qualitative research also provides the benefit of presenting a broader perspective on the identified problem (Glynn 2009). Furthermore, it is useful for "opening the black box" (Doz 2011, p. 583), and answering "who", "how" and "why" questions (Eisenhardt 1989, Yin 2003). The qualitative research approach is also beneficial for interpreting individual stories and narratives (Silverman 2011), i.e. empirical data collected both at an organizational and individual level. In addition, the current study is of an explorative and descriptive nature, since it introduces INB in its specific context as a novel conceptual perspective.

4.3. Abductive inquiry

In the context of B2B marketing, it seems as if there is no single frame of best practice for the use of qualitative studies. However, the unique goal for each study is to give specific attention to the link between its chosen theory, method, and empirical phenomenon (Dubois & Gibbert 2010). In other words: "Development in research depend on what empirical phenomena we are able to capture, how theories are developed to understand and explain [describe] these phenomena and what methods we use and/or develop in the process" (ibid. 129). This research links single and multiple case studies with the theories on corporate branding and the IMP network approach, while observing networking and branding processes of SMEs embedded in developed and emerging markets. As a result, INB has evolved during the study, as a new perspective on branding in business networks. In other words (see Figure 8), the research has focused on capturing the key aspects of the reciprocity between theory, case study method and empirical phenomena (Dubois & Gibbert 2010).
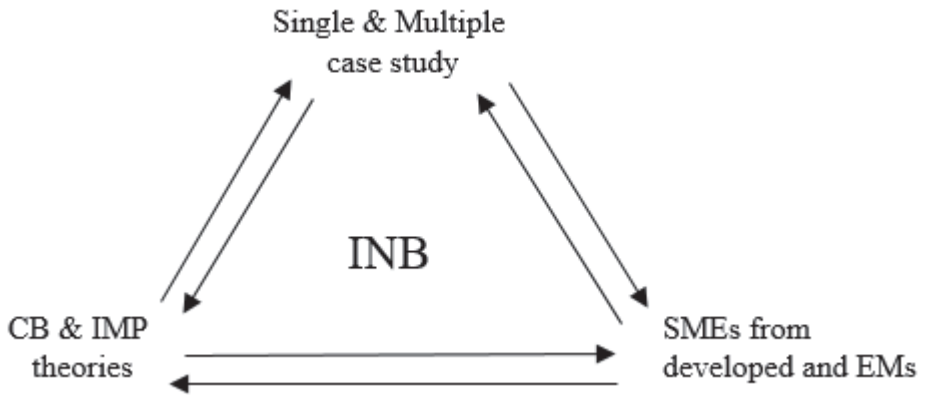
***Figure 8.** Theories, case study method, and empirical phenomena of INB*

Over the years, researchers have developed two generally accepted perspectives on designing the research and managing relationships between the method, theory, and phenomenon. These are declared as inductive and deductive approaches. An inductive approach is employed by a study that uses empirical findings in order to develop a theoretical and conceptual understanding of a phenomenon. In contrast, deductive research is used when a theory is proposed first and conclusions derived based on empirical data that confirms (or rejects) the original theory (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009). However, these approaches face certain disadvantages. For instance, inductive research may face a scarcity of theoretical pre-knowledge, while deductive research can become so saturated with theoretical conceptualization that it limits the results in terms of alternative interpretations.

In order to avoid the disadvantages and limitations of the inductive and deductive approaches, this study combines the two by using abductive research. Abductive research can best be described as a dialectic interaction between theory and practice (Dubois & Gadde 2002). However, merely claiming that the research is abductive is not sufficient (Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010); it is important to indicate the phases in which clear abduction is used, as well as those phases in which the researcher´s reasoning corresponds more to induction or deduction (ibid.). Accordingly, the research process of this study, with its seven phases, is presented next in Table 2, by indicating the specific phases of the research process and their detailed descriptions.

Table 2. Abductive nature of the research process

Phase of the research process	Description of the research process	Type of scientific reasoning[21]	Years
1st Phase	Initial observations of business relationship and network development in Croatian market context	Inductive	2000-
2nd Phase	First theoretical knowledge on business and economics	Deductive	2004-
3rd Phase	Literature review and theoretical development of INB & Article I	Deductive	2014-
4th Phase	Collection of empirical data for development of Articles II & IV	Abductive	2015-
5th Phase	Theoretical development of INB and Articles I & III	Deductive	2016-
6th Phase	Collection of empirical data and development of Article IV	Abductive	2016-
7th Phase	Dissertation preparation	Abductive	2017

1st Phase (2000-): My early observations of Croatian companies are the result of being indirectly involved in the business relationship and network development of a company owned by my father. Over the years, he has developed his SME and maintained long-term, loyal relationships with firm representatives, who have often become his close friends. This phase would therefore correspond to inductive reasoning.

2nd Phase (2004-): The inception of this phase occurred when I enrolled in the high school of business and economics and started to learn about micro and macro-economic theories. After that, I finished my bachelor studies in Entrepreneurship, and master studies in Marketing, again following the traditional economic school of thought. Therefore, the preliminary understanding of business markets and relationships was achieved through my sensemaking based on models and theories learnt at high school and university. Accordingly, this would correspond to the deductive approach.

3rd Phase (2014–): This is an ongoing phase that started after being accepted for a PhD program. It correlates with learning a completely novel perspective on business relationships and networks, which was the opposite of what I have been

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[21] According to Järvensivu & Törnroos (2010).

taught in Croatian universities. As a result of my sensemaking, a many-sided and broader view on international B2B marketing was intrinsically developed, which advanced my abilities as a researcher, and allowed me to question and challenge certain classical theories. This phase, furthermore, describes the initial conceptualization and first attempts to develop the novel INB concept. The goal of this phase was to provide an improved theoretical conceptualization of branding in business networks, and a pre-understanding of the phenomenon that will be investigated in the next phase. At this point, the concept was named Interactive Branding (I-Branding), on which the idea for Article I was created. Since no empirical data was collected at this stage, it represents a deductive phase of the research process.

4th Phase (2015–): This phase presents abduction in a pure sense, since from the beginning of 2015 the collection of empirical data and article writing began. The first interview for Article II occurred on January 2015, the second in April 2016, while a third short interview was conducted in November 2016. The collection of data for Article IV started with the round of interviews in summer 2015 that included four companies from the Croatian business network. In 2016, two interviews on the focal company were conducted, each time with a different representative. Further data collection included additional email interviews with the focal company during the next two years, after which the final round of interviews was executed in April 2017. During this abductive Phase, Articles II and IV were written, by developing a methodological framework and combining theoretical perspectives of Article I with the collected empirical data.

5th Phase (2016–): This phase indicates a further theoretical development of INB after the empirical data had been collected. Therefore, this phase corresponds to a deductive stage of the research process. Taking into account many external audits[22] and constructive feedback on Article I, together with my co-author and a supervisor, I decided to change the name of Interactive Branding (I-Branding) to Interactive Network Branding (INB). In this way, the context of networks is more distinct and highlighted, and we avoid any confusion that may come with associations such as e.g. I-Branding standing for "Internet-Branding", or being related to the branding of the "Iphone". In addition to advancing Article I, this phase resulted in the first attempts to create a new conceptual article (Article III), by providing the initial ideas for a further conceptualization of INB processes.

6th Phase (2016–): This phase of the research process is conducted as a follow-up of Phases 4 & 5. In other words, additional interviews were conducted for

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[22] For more details about external audits, see Section 4.7.

Article IV, which allowed a better and deeper understanding of the theoretical issues developed in Phase 5. At the same time, the methodological framework developed in Phase 4 was modified for Article IV in order to examine the applicability of INB in an emerging market context. Going back and forth between theory and practice allowed a pure abduction process to contribute to the research in its full strength.

7th Phase (2017): During this phase, data that had been collected was revisited, which allowed the conceptual frameworks of the study to be strengthened and modified. Based on the flexibility of the research, it corresponds to a clear abductive reasoning, which allowed moving "back and forth" between the theory and empirical phenomenon (Dubois & Gadde 2002, p. 555). Thus, this final phase presents the alignment of everything that had been done over the four-year period - theoretically, empirically, and methodologically - with a goal to fine tune the dissertation.

4.4. Process research

This study uses longitudinal process research (Pettigrew 1997, Van de Ven 1992), and follows critical events and episodes that occur in their specific context over time (Halinen, Medlin & Törnroos 2012, p. 215). As Van de Ven (1992, p. 170) defines it: "the meaning of process is a sequence of events or activities that describes how things change over time, or that represents an underlying pattern of cognitive transitions by an entity in dealing with an issue". Process in this study thus denotes branding and networking, during which managers capture and comprehend critical events in a business network context, through their time flow. A critical event is understood here as an occurrence that transpires in a business network and has a specific impact (positive or negative) on the firm(s) in question and its network development. The temporal view, or time notion used in this research for understanding the process is socially constructed, and thus refers to a social or event time, i.e. human time (Adam 2000, Halinen et al. 2012). It presents how managers and other representatives perceive time and process of change in their business networks (Adam 2000, Bluedorn 2002). Studying the cases longitudinally provided an opportunity for collecting rich qualitative data that could not be achieved if the cases were only studied at a specific point in time.

The process is captured in this study through the two empirical articles. The first empirical article (Article II), presented here as Study 1, deals with critical events and sensemaking episodes of individuals that represent three BG companies from developed markets. One of the cases (BonAlive) has been

followed by the researcher and second co-author for three years (2015-2017), during which three interviews were conducted (see Table 3). The other two cases were followed by the third co-author, during two years of his doctoral studies (2009-2011), during which 2 interviews per company were carried out. The second empirical paper (Article IV), presented here as Study 2, describes the critical events and their unfolding episodes as they appeared in the business network context of Croatian SMEs. This study has also been followed for three years (2015-2017), with twelve data collection points, involving the main representatives of the companies (see Table 3). This furthermore facilitated the exploration of socially constructed processes in a business network environment.

As a type of process research, and a way of understanding the unfolding processes of business networks, *point mapping* is used (Halinen, Medlin, & Törnroos 2012). It illustrates how individuals develop their relationships, and how branding and networking occurs in a particular context, as an outcome of interactions. Thus, point mapping refers to a collection of empirical data at different points in time (ibid.). As already discussed, both studies were followed regularly and over time. This provided a better "ability to understand the meanings and consequences of events" for the researcher (Halinen et al. 2012, p. 219). Events and processes were described through stories and narratives, starting with a retrospective view (past), after which current happenings were elaborated on (present), as well as forthcoming plans presented (future). In order to capture business network development through INB processes, both empirical studies used critical events and episodes that were analyzed through two developed, processual models (see Figure 11 and Figure 12). In addition to process research, both studies used the case study as a research strategy, which is described in more detail in the following section.

4.5. Case research strategy and design

A case study is traditionally defined as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin 1989, p. 23). Case study research, as a qualitative research strategy offers a many-sided view of a specific situation in its context, and provides an opportunity for studying various facets in relation to each other (Halinen & Törnroos 2005). Furthermore, as highlighted by Halinen & Törnroos (2005, p. 1286): "Case research is particularly welcome in new situations where only little is known about the phenomenon and

in situations where current theories seem inadequate (Easton 1995, Eisenhardt 1989, Yin 1989)."

Considering that this study uses literature on both corporate branding and network theory for introducing INB, the cases were selected to support the theory building (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007). As Bartunek, Rynes & Irland (2006) argue, case studies that build theories are often considered as the most interesting studies. Multiple sources were used for collecting empirical data and to develop an understanding of business network development (Halinen & Törnroos 2005) through INB processes. In addition, the qualitative case study research offered a valuable opportunity for a deeper understanding of individual human interactions and their influence on reputation and identity building. All the case studies are open-ended, exploring real-life situations and offering an understanding of business networks as contemporary bounded environments, as well as presenting rich qualitative data collected through multiple sources over a certain period of time (Creswell 2013).

Before discussing some benefits and disadvantages of single vs. multiple case study, it is important to bear in mind that there is no one "best option". This dissertation therefore employs both types of case studies in order to gain an understanding on the phenomenon by using different lenses. Thus, the first study (Study 1) presents the multiple case study, created to observe and analyze BGs and their INB processes. Each of the three embedded cases in the study is represented by one of the Nordic based SME companies. The reason for choosing a multiple case study was its trustworthiness and strength (Baxter & Jack 2008). In other words, a multiple case study can construct more plausible and reliable theories based on richer empirical evidence within each and across different situations (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007). However, some researchers claim that multiple case studies can be time consuming and very expensive, compared to single cases (Dyer, Wilkins, & Eisenhardt 1991). Thus, in order to avoid financial and time challenges of the study, we had a division of labor in collecting the empirical data. More specifically, when writing the article, the empirical data came from a single longitudinal case study on a Finnish SME, collected by the second co-author and me (during the time period 2015-2017), while the third co-author used his longitudinal cases on two Danish SMEs (2009-2011). By combining our three single cases, we created a multiple case study, which enabled us to examine INB phenomenon from different

angles and perspectives, and at the same time avoid some of the disadvantages of this type of research. Furthermore, the data was analyzed within each case and between the cases, using cross-case analysis.

Study 2 presents a single case study created to observe and analyze INB processes of SMEs embedded in the rapidly changing Croatian emerging market. The focus of the study is on the five companies embedded in a business network. It provides the focal firm's perspective on its business partners and the perspective of those partners on the focal company (Halinen & Törnroos 1998). A single case study was chosen in order to collect rich data with thick description of the network, which enabled discussion and elaboration of the phenomenon from the perspective of every company involved in the study. Some researchers claim that single case study provides better understanding and high-quality theories (Dyer, Wilkins, & Eisenhardt 1991), by providing an opportunity for a deeper focus on the study at hand (Saunders et al. 2009). In addition, this study was initially planned as a comparative multiple case study. Additionally, four interviews were conducted in 2016, at the IMP Conference in Poznan, Poland. The informants were four researchers with a rich experience of conducting research on SMEs from emerging markets[23]. Regrettably, the findings were only used in the first draft of Article IV, after which they were excluded, based on the methodological challenges that appeared in presenting the case and reporting data[24].

Finally, a goal for a researcher is to provide rich qualitative data with clear elaboration and representation so that the reader can easily interpret the findings and use the study in similar research (Stake 1995). However, there is no guarantee that a single or multiple case study alone will always provide the anticipated theoretical insights (Dyer et al. 1991). Therefore, a combination of both can offer a solution. In addition to the research strategy and design, the data collection method is presented next.

4.6. Data collection method

Study 1[25] and Study 2 both consist of qualitative case study data collected over a period of approximately three years (2015-2017). During these years, the research

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[23] Two researchers were Hungarian, one Russian, and one Bangladeshi.

[24] Challenges appeared as complications of combining primary data collected from companies, with secondary data on companies (collected through interviews with researchers).

[25] For the purpose of this Section, i.e. for the presentation of data collected by the researcher during her PhD studies, the focus of Study 1 will be solely on the case of BonAlive, conducted by the researcher herself. The other two cases, conducted by the co-author will not be discussed.

was conducted in parallel (see Table 3) in Finland (for Study 1) and Croatia (for Study 2). The main data collection method applied in both cases were semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews that were often retrospective in nature. The shortest interview was 45 minutes, while the longest lasted 2.5 hours. The interviews were structured but oriented toward encouraging the informants' storytelling. Since the focus of the research was on individual managing directors, in-depth interviews, as an interviewing technique, offered "greater sensitivity to the meaning contexts surrounding informant utterances" (Lee 1993, p. 104). Furthermore, using a semi-structure for the interview provided a more relaxed atmosphere where informants could navigate the direction of their stories. This also affected the trustworthiness of the research, since informants were not influenced and led by researcher's personal opinions[26]. In addition to the face-to-face interview data, it was necessary to conduct additional email interviews for Study 2, as an alternative (Meho 2006). The emails consisted of open-ended questions where the informants could use their own interpretation of the questions and their meaning, and create stories as a result of their sensemaking.

The language of the interviews differs. For Study 1, interviews with the Finnish company (BonAlive) were conducted in English and transcribed verbatim, while the interviews with Croatian companies (Study 2) were conducted in Croatian and then translated in English. The reason for conducting the interviews in Croatian was due to the difficulty of the managers to speak English. Since all the companies were domestically oriented, credible answers and descriptions could be collected only when using the native language. The interviews were used as a primary data collection method, but in addition, secondary data was collected for both studies (e.g. through companies' web pages, online news, a guest lecture, master thesis).

Furthermore, the number of interviews differs for each case (see Table 3). For Study 1, the researcher followed the Finnish company for three years during which three in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Based on the tenets of social constructionism, every interview presents the construction of the informant's perception, and provides novel knowledge, which can be interpreted as an exemplification of a socially created reality (Crouch & McKenzie 2006). The first interview was carried out with my co-author and another researcher, who had previously been involved with the company. This provided easier access to the firm and an open conversation, which anticipated a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The second interview followed a year later, this time with two informants (the founder and the marketing manager). Although the founder of

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[26] See Section 4.8. regarding trustworthiness of a research.

the company could not stay for the whole duration of the interview, clear-cut and expert data was still provided, and additionally supported through a prolonged interview with the marketing manager. The final interview was conducted as a short discussion after a guest lecture on BonAlive, once more with the marketing manager.

For Study 2, ten in-depth semi-structured interviews and two additional email interviews were carried out during the period of three years (2015-2017). Of these, the focal company was interviewed five times, which included three face-to-face interviews and two email interviews. Other companies from the network were also interviewed, in most cases twice, with follow-up emails used only as a confirmation of the validity of the findings. The first round of interviews was organized in the summer of 2015, when four companies in the network were interviewed. A preliminary understanding of INB processes in the emerging Croatian market was obtained. In addition to new insights on the theoretical frameworks from the seminal Article I, some crucial perceptions on data collection and other methodological inquiries were discovered. Most of the challenges that the researcher came across while collecting data in Croatia have been presented in the article written by Ivanova-Gongne, Koporcic, Dziubaniuk, & Mandjak (2017). For instance, gaining access to a network was possible only based on personal connections. The researcher had the 'luck' of knowing the 'right people' that enabled the initial contact with the focal network company. Based on that contact, and after the initial trust had been created through the first interview, all other interviews were agreed upon on the same day. An important learning point about "business functioning" in the Croatian market appeared at the end of an interview, when the managing director of the focal firm called his most important business partners and simply informed them about the interview they were going to have in the following days. All what was necessary for the researcher to do was to call them later, with the reference to the previous phone call, and to agree upon the interview date, time and place. It is important to highlight that all the interviews were elite, i.e. expert interviews, meaning that only managers and owners of the companies were interviewed. By interviewing the same type of informants, comparable data for theory building was provided (Halinen & Törnroos 2005). Additionally, the importance of expert interviews lies in their knowledge of the industry in which the firms operate, and their access to the most important social and business contacts (Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen & Tahvanainen 2002). Taking this into account, obtaining an interview with these people can often be problematic (ibid.). Some of the managers admitted that they would never have agreed to the interview if the researcher had tried to initiate it

on her own. In their words, they do not have time for activities that will not result in profit for them, nor do they have time to teach university representatives how "the real business world functions". Thus, some of them did the interview only as a favor to the focal company representative.

Concerning the interactions during the interview (Ivanova-Gongne et al. 2017), an interesting story occurred. Since the trust was in most cases created even before the interview, through our mutual contact person, most of informants were open and collaborative after the initial small talk. In addition, each informant was provided with the Standard ethics protocol (see Appendix 1 & 2) that he[27] signed. However, one interview that was conducted could not be included in the study based on the informant who did not allow recording of his interview. His reason for this was a high level of distrust in academia, and his worry that the data could end up in the "wrong hands". If not recorded, the researcher could not "use his words against him in the future", so the informant felt less uncomfortable and openly discussed the "actual situation" in emerging markets, where business is not done by any specific rules in textbooks, but by managerial "gut feeling" and personal connections. In addition, although this interview has not been used as data for Study 2, it has definitely broadened the researcher's knowledge about discrepancies between business marketing theories and practice.

Finally, the collection of data for both studies followed an abduction logic, meaning that the data was collected, analyzed and then interpreted through theoretical frameworks, after which a new understanding of the phenomenon and new questions appeared. Going back to the companies after consulting the literature allowed the researcher to observe the phenomenon from different angles and at different points in time. In addition, having a perspective on both developed and emerging markets helped in understanding some of the differences, as well as the specifics, patterns and interdependences of INB in different contexts. The next section (Section 4.7) presents the methods used for the analysis of the findings.

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[27] In the first round of interviews, when the protocols were signed, all informants were male.

Table 3. *Primary data collection details for Study 1 and Study 2*

Study	Firm	Informant	Type of the interview	Interview date
STUDY 1	BonAlive	Chairman of the Board	Face-to-face	29.01.2015
		Founder & Marketing Manager	Face-to-face (2 informants)	15.04.2016
		Marketing Manager	Face-to-face, short discussion after a guest lecture on BonAlive	17.11.2016
	HumaGene	Founder & Head Laboratory Manager	Face-to-face interviews conducted by one of the co-authors of Article II	2009
		Founder & Head Laboratory Manager		2011
	Analyctor	Founder & Head Laboratory Manager	Face-to-face interviews conducted by one of the co-authors of Article II	2009
		Founder & Head Laboratory Manager		2011
STUDY 2	Teri	Managing Director	Face-to-face	30.06.2015
	Filip Promet	Owner	Face-to-face	03.07.2015
	Kuća Piva	Managing Director	Face-to-face	03.07.2015
	Podravka	Sales Director	Face-to-face	06.07.2015
	Teri	Managing Director	E-mail	04.06.2016
	Teri	Owner	Face-to-face	23.07.2016
	Dolce Vita	Owner	Face-to-face	02.08.2016
	Teri	Managing Director	E-mail	26.01.2017
	Dolce Vita	Owner	Face-to-face	14.04.2017
	Teri	Managing Director	Face-to-face	19.04.2017
	Kuća Piva	Marketing Manager	Face-to-face	19.04.2017
	Filip Promet	Owner	Face-to-face	20.04.2017

4.7. Methods of analysis

The qualitative research process is divided into data collection, methods of analysis and interpretation of data. Each part of the process can occur separately or simultaneously (Gummesson 2005). For this research the latter is applicable, i.e. for all empirical cases the analysis was present at every step of the way. Both Study 1 and Study 2 utilize an interpretive approach to analyze the findings, which

means that interpretation starts with the data collection, by creating a preliminary understanding of the phenomenon after the first interviews.

As the primary data source were interviews, the analysis of narratives has been employed for describing the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke 2006) and presenting the connections between events (Elliot 2005, Makkonen, Aarikka-Stenroos & Olkkonen 2012). Narratives were produced predominantly by managing directors, who were asked to describe stories about the critical events and episodes that occurred in business networks, and that have had an important influence on their firms and their partner firms. As Makkonen et al. (2012, p. 288) argue: "The plot connects the events, activities, actors and context, the elements comprising any process phenomenon (see Pettigrew 1997)". Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that an individual story cannot include and comprehend all of the events and episodes of a network, so they should be carefully chosen from an interview, based on their importance (Elliott 2005).

Narratives, as an interpretive process approach for analyzing data in the social sciences, focuses on studying individuals and groups of individuals, and their sensemaking processes (Riessman 1993). Thus, the stories of both studies involved managerial interactions and their meaning for the branding processes and network development of SMEs. Since the storytelling presents a logical way of sharing information (Riessman 1993), as well as experience (Elliott 2005), it provided an instrument for capturing real-life situations, and an understanding of INB as a social phenomenon. Thus, both studies used multiple realities that were interlinked and shaped by the broader context (Riessman 1993).

In addition, processual narrative data analysis provided a description of the dependency and relatedness between the changing process and its context (Pentland 1999). When analyzing the narratives, the opportunity was provided to assess disconnected critical events and managerial experiences beyond their structure and connect them meaningfully (Elliott 2005). In this way, the phenomenon of INB could be contextualized (Silverman 2006), and the dynamics of the social and interactive processes of branding and networking uncovered (Koporcic et al. 2016).

However, qualitative research often results in a significant amount of collected data. Thus, the major challenge while analyzing the data appears to be reducing and structuring. For both empirical studies, the narratives of the individual human actors were combined and reconstructed by the researcher to create a consistent story about each case (Polkinghorne 1995). In other words, the researcher used the stories of different informants from the same embedded networks in order to construct the most important critical events and follow their unfolding interactive

episodes. As Makkonen et al. (2012, p. 292) describe: "When the researcher constructs a case, he/she polishes the plot and for narrative smoothing includes only the elements that serve the purpose of the case description".

In addition to face-to-face and e-mail interview data, secondary data was also analyzed, including the web pages of companies, brochures, marketing materials, master theses, as well as different reports. This was all important for providing knowledge and an understanding of the complexity of INB processes. The analysis provided deeper insights into the social and business connections between individual human actors, and their influence on corporate identity, reputation, and network development. It also provided insights into the difference between emerging and developed markets in terms of 'conducting a business' in these environments.

Furthermore, following the main principles of qualitative data analysis, this research compared the collected empirical data of the two studies with each other, and then with existing and proposed theories and research questions, as well as with findings from previous studies (Marshall & Rossman 2006). After discovering discrepancies, the theoretical frameworks were adapted accordingly, which then helped in modifying the interview questions for a new round of data collection.

Because systematic data collection and analysis have been utilized, the findings of the case study can be generalized (Yin 2012). According to Yin (2003), there are two types of generalization: analytic and statistical generalizations. The later relates to samples of a specific defined population, while the analytic generalization describes the transferability of the phenomenon under investigation and its theory. Considering that the study contributes to both corporate branding and network theories, applying an analytical generalization to the B2B area was found to be most appropriate (Yin 2003, Järvensivu & Törnroos 2010). Finally, Table 4 provides an overview of the methodological choices used in the two empirical studies of the dissertation (Study 1 and Study 2).

Table 4. *Summary of methodological choices in the empirical studies*[28]

	Study 1	Study 2
Methodological approach	Qualitative study	
Research strategy	Multiple case study	Single case study
	Process research	
Type of research	Theory generating, Abductive research	
Data collection	Semi-structured, face-to-face, expert interviews, miscellaneous data, documents	Semi-structured, face-to-face, expert interviews, email interviews, secondary data documents
Methods of analysis	Interpretation and analysis of narratives	

4.8. Determining the quality of research

In order for qualitative research to be trustworthy, the study should fulfill certain quality criteria. There are several ways of achieving this. One of the most applicable options for justifying methodological choices and limiting biases of interpretation in qualitative studies has been presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in their study on trustworthiness. Thus, trustworthiness is important for evaluating the worth of the qualitative research study and includes criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba 1985, Riege 2003).

Credibility can be described as a confidence in the authenticity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba 1985). To achieve credibility of the qualitative data used in this dissertation, face-to-face, in-depth, and semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing informants an easier way of expressing their thoughts and opinions. There are several techniques for establishing the credibility of empirical findings, such as: prolonged engagement, triangulation of data, peer debriefing, negative case study analysis, and member-checking (ibid.) As the first technique for establishing credibility, *prolonged engagement* (ibid.) was applied in both empirical studies (Study 1 and Study 2). Prolonged engagement implies that there was enough time invested by researchers for acquiring certain knowledge about the culture, creating trust between informant and interviewer, as well as for avoiding false interpretation of data (ibid.). For the first study (Study 1), the researcher lived in Finland for two years before the first interview, which resulted

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[28] The author gratefully acknowledges Dr. Maria Ivanova-Gongne for giving the idea for Table 4.

in learning about Finnish culture. In addition to that, the second co-author is of Finnish origin and has been living in Finland his whole life. Therefore, the knowledge about the culture was not questionable, nor the ability to create the initial trust between the individuals. Moreover, false interpretation of the data was avoided by acknowledging the great experience in academia and research of the second co-author. All the above concerns the Finnish case from Study 1. This study was built on multiple case studies, while the other two cases were based on Danish companies, and conducted by one of the Danish co-authors. Credibility was thus achieved from his participation as well, as he is of Danish origin and living in Denmark permanently. Thus, all the elements of prolonged engagement were met. Lastly, the second empirical study (Study 2) was conducted on Croatian companies. Prolonged engagement for this case was also achieved since the researcher is a native Croatian and has lived there for 23 years of her life. In addition, the interviews were agreed on through a mutual contact person, which instantly created initial trust between the researcher and informants in the study.

The credibility of data was further enhanced by using *triangulation of data* (Bryman & Bell 2007). Triangulation describes the use of multiple sources of data collection, different informants, and miscellaneous data sets (Marshall & Rossman 1999), and has been accomplished in both studies. Besides interviews and email interactions, which correspond to a collection of primary data, triangulation was done by collecting secondary data. This secondary data refers to online articles and information about the studied firms, their web pages, and in the case of two Croatian companies (Study 2) some financial and market-share data. Another technique for establishing credibility of findings includes *peer debriefing* (Lincoln & Guba 1985). This involves presentation and discussion of the research and its findings through exposure to questions from experienced academics and colleagues, who can oftentimes play the "devil´s advocate" role (ibid.). In order to improve the quality of papers, as well as to establish credibility and trustworthiness, empirical articles from both studies (Articles II & IV) were presented at different academic conferences and workshops, as well as smaller group meetings and seminars with more detailed discussion and feedback.

The next technique for establishing credibility refers to *negative case analyses* (ibid.). This entail exceptions from the rule that can prove, change, develop or confuse the credibility in general (Patton 2002). In this dissertation, a negative case analysis is not shown, although empirical data on the Croatian companies consist of two firms from a broader business network that do not follow the similar pattern of network development, which might be due to their market orientation.

This will be studied further and more deeply in forthcoming interviews, however, it is not included in this study.

The last technique for establishing credibility corresponds to *member-checking* (Lincoln & Guba 1985), and has been done in both empirical studies by sending to the informants those sections of the transcribed interviews chosen for the articles. After receiving their comments, or in some cases immediate acceptance and validation of the content, the articles have been strengthened considerably and finalized. This process served as a mechanism for making sure that the empirical results have been interpreted in the correct manner. For instance, after sending a transcribed interview data to a small Born Global company (used in Article II, i.e. Study 1), we received important constructive feedback from the owner. More specifically, he felt that additional information was needed to emphasize the uniqueness of the company in its industry. He considered business and personal networking as an important foundation for business relationship building, trust development, as well as commercialization of the company. This corresponds with Silverman's (2011) conclusion that a member check is a useful tool for obtaining additional valuable information. In order to assure that the new data had been interpreted correctly, and that credibility was achieved, the final version of the manuscript was sent to the company. However, the situation with the Croatian companies and the empirical data for Study 2 (Article IV) were somewhat different. While a medium-sized international company took time and effort to check the transcribed text and provide a feedback, the smaller companies were not interested in receiving any report, and accordingly giving feedback. Instead, they provided the researcher with permission to publish her own interpretation of the findings. On the one hand, this may seem to indicate a lack of credibility, but on the other hand, it may prevent the confusion of an informant as regards the created academic terms and frameworks.

Table 5. *Techniques used for establishing trustworthiness in empirical studies*

	Credibility	Transferability	Dependability	Confirmability
Study 1	✓ Prolonged engagement ✓ Triangulation of data ✓ Peer debriefing ✓ Member-checking	✓ Thick description	✓ External audit	✓ External audit ✓ Triangulation of sources ✓ Analyst triangulation
Study 2	✓ Prolonged engagement ✓ Triangulation of data ✓ Peer debriefing ✓ Member-checking	✓ Thick description	✓ External audit	✓ External audit ✓ Triangulation of sources

The second criterion of trustworthiness is ***transferability*** that provides the scope to which the findings can be applicable, i.e. generalizable in different settings and contexts (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The findings of the qualitative study should be presented broadly enough so that the reader can evaluate and assess its applicability to their own context. Although the main aim of the study does not strive for generalization, it could be concluded, while observing the findings, that Interactive Network Branding can be applicable to different industries, both in developed and emerging business markets, and for companies that internationalize, as well as for those whose operations are only domestic. As a technique for establishing transferability, a *thick description* of findings has been suggested (ibid.). In order to do this, a detailed description of the specific contexts from which the cases come, as well as of the empirical data have been provided in both articles.

Dependability, as the third criterion of trustworthiness requires consistent findings in order to provide an opportunity to duplicate the research under the same circumstances, at a different point in time. The findings of others will either confirm the accuracy of the study or not. Dependability also provides an evaluation of the research clarity in terms of data collection and analysis (Lincoln

& Guba 1985). As a technique for establishing dependability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest an *external audit*, which was done after the collection of the data and the presentation of the findings for both empirical studies. External audits were conducted at seminars, conferences, and various academic workshops, by researchers not involved in the studies.

Finally, as the last evaluating criterion of trustworthiness, the ***confirmability*** of findings has been established for both empirical studies. This describes a degree of neutrality in which findings are fully supported by the data, with no bias or influence of the researcher's interest (ibid.). Thus, while conducting the in-depth interviews, my colleagues and I (for Study 1), and then myself alone (for Study 2) did not let personal theoretical preferences or values influence the informants' answers. As techniques for establishing confirmability (see Lincoln & Guba 1985), an *external audit* and triangulation have been used to evaluate the findings and trustworthiness of the study. More specifically, *triangulation of sources* enabled confirmability of the findings by interviewing different informants within the same company (in both studies); while *analyst triangulation* was used for Study 1 (Article II) as it was written with three co-authors, enabling interpretive analysis and reviews from multiple standpoints.

For a study to be properly completed, all the research records of each conducted stage should be saved (Guba & Lincoln 1989). This study, however, encounter a challenge in its early stage, after the first round of interviews for Study 2 had been conducted. These interviews were pilot interviews on four Croatian companies, which acted as a pre-understanding of the issues at hand, and as such were not used in this study. Nevertheless, the records of data have been accidentally deleted and could not be restored again. This unfortunate incident did not negatively influence this study; nor did it have a negative consequence on the trustworthiness of the findings. Instead, it resulted in the interviews being re-conducted with more structure and construction based on the improved theoretical frameworks. Documentation of this study is therefore properly completed, with all the notes, recorded interviews, and signed standard ethics protocols (see Appendix 1 & 2).

Next, Chapter 5 presents all of the original articles, and discusses their overall summaries, as well as the main results.

5. SUMMARY OF THE ORIGINAL ARTICLES AND ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

This chapter analyzes the contents and summarizes the findings of each original article incorporated in the dissertation. It also connects the research questions with their corresponding articles. The articles are presented in chronological order, following the time of writing. This logical order provides the reader with the evolving process of creation and development of a holistic picture of the INB phenomenon. Articles I and III are presented in Section 5.1 and 5.3 respectively, and present a conceptual development of INB. Article II (Section 5.2) and Article IV (Section 5.4) present case studies that investigate the INB as an empirical phenomenon. Each article represents an independent entity that, in combination with the rest of the articles, creates a comprehensive whole. The following sections thus analyze the articles, with a summary of the results presented in Table 6.

5.1. Article I: Conceptualizing Interactive Network Branding in Business Markets

Article I is a conceptual section of the dissertation co-authored with Prof. Jan-Åke Törnroos. It presents the starting point of the INB theoretical discussion and addresses the importance of corporate branding for business-to-business relationships and networks. The motivation for this article is based on research gaps noted both in branding and network literature, where each of these literatures has ignored the importance and potential value of the other. In other words, branding literature has neglected the importance of business networks, while network literature has not, as yet, clearly acknowledged the value of corporate brands for business network development. Thus, the article explicitly deals with the following research question:

> **RQ1.** What are the key conceptual tenets of INB, as a relevant perspective on corporate branding in business networks?

The theoretical development of INB (see Figure 9) starts with the single-firm perspective, denoting the classical perspective of branding studies. A focal company from this perspective operates in the market alone, trying to gain a

Table 6. Summary of the articles included in a dissertation

	Article I	Article II	Article III	Article IV
Title of the article	Conceptualizing Interactive Network Branding in Business Markets	Internationalization of Nordic Born Global firms through Interactive Network Branding: A multiple Case Study	The Network View on Branding: Revisiting the ARA Model	Interactive Network Branding in an Emerging Market context: The case study of Croatian SMEs embedded in a business network
Authors	Nikolina Koporcic & Jan-Åke Törnroos	Nikolina Koporcic, Jan-Åke Törnroos, Martin Hannibal & Per Servais	Nikolina Koporcic & Aino Halinen	Nikolina Koporcic
Keywords	Interactive Network Branding, business networks, interaction, position, corporate identity, reputation.	Interactive Network Branding, Born Globals, internationalization, sensemaking, business networks.	Interactive Network Branding, corporate branding, strategizing, positioning, IMP Network Approach, business markets.	Interactive Network Branding, emerging markets, SME, business network, Croatia.
Role in the dissertation	Develops the concept of INB and basis for understanding a new perspective on branding in business networks. It introduces the internal, external, and mutual INB dimension.	Investigates the role of INB for BG network positioning in foreign markets. Develops methodological framework for empirical analysis of BGs and their INB processes. The model is also applied in Article IV, for studying the phenomenon in a different empirical context.	Develops the conceptual framework and an analytical tool for understanding unfolding branding processes in business networks, highlighting the importance of actors, resouces, and activities of INB.	Investigates the role of INB for SMEs in a fast changing, emerging Croatian business market. Uses the modified framework developed in Article II.
Research gaps covered	Lack of business network approach in corporate branding literature (e.g. lack of networking in branding)	Lack of branding research in B2B marketing and business network literature;		
	Lack of mutual understanding and connections between internal and external perspectives on corporate branding	Lack of process research concerning Born Global companies on their rapid internationalization and network positioning	Focus on a static view of a dynamic phenomenon and often neglected individual level of interaction	Lack of research on emerging markets in B2B context, and neglected networking capabilities regarding SMEs

RQs covered	RQ 1	RQ 2	RQ 3	RQ 4
Method	Conceptual	Qualitative, multiple case study	Conceptual	Qualitative, single case study
Data	Conceptual	6 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and 9 miscellaneous data collection points	Conceptual	10 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and 2 email interviews
Findings	The conceptual framework of INB presenting internal, external and mutual INB dimensions.	The processual framework developed by observing sensemaking processes, together with critical events and episodes related to BG positioning in foreign business markets.	Actors, resources, and activities of INB are socially created. Thus, individual human actors and their interactions influence strategizing in a network, as well as identity and reputation creation.	INB model observing sensemaking processes, critical events and episodes is modified and implemented in EM context, for studying SME strategizing in a rapidly changing Croatian environment.
Implications	*Theoretical:* novel conceptual framework of INB in business networks. *Managerial:* the importance of human actors and their interactions for branding and networking processes.	*Theoretical:* novel methodological framework of BG network development through INB processes. *Managerial:* crucial importance of founders' social network connections for overcoming various liabilities that SMEs are facing when strategizing in a network.	*Theoretical:* novel processual model of INB and firm strategizing for SMEs. *Managerial:* the role of individual human actors for SME branding activities and network positioning.	*Theoretical:* development of INB model applicable to EM context. *Managerial:* the role of social networks and personal connections as crucial for "surviving" in emerging markets.

greater market share than its competitors. In this manner, the company itself is perceived to be in absolute control of managing its corporate identity and reputation from the inside out. However, based on the empirical findings of the IMP Group studies, the single firm perspective has been criticized as being insufficient for a firm's survival in today's turbulent business markets.

The next step in theoretical development of INB introduces a dyadic perspective and focuses on business relationships (see the second, middle box in Figure 9). This perspective elaborates on two companies engaging in a business relationship in order to share resources, create mutual value, and among other things, create a better position in the network. However, this view lacks the branding notion, acknowledged in the classical single firm perspective. Guided by these gaps, and taking the stance of the IMP network approach, an extended network view on companies is introduced (see the largest box in Figure 9). At this point, closely connected dyads are interconnected with other companies and other dyads from the broader network settings. This perspective offers the basis of INB, in which branding and networking come together through individual human actors that represent those companies and act on their behalf. These individuals communicate with each other and through their interactions influence their own and others corporate identities and reputations. Having individuals at the core of INB is illustrated in Figure 9 as a 'cloud' between business actors. This presents the notion of the "in-between", where the value of each company, each specific relationship involved, and a broader network, is mutually created.
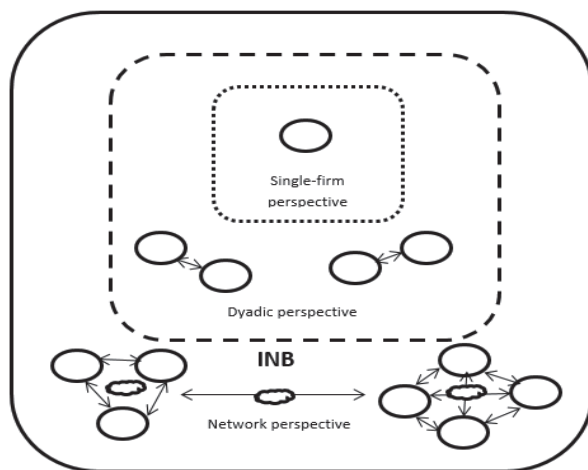

Figure 9. *Conceptual model of INB developed in Article I*
(see Koporcic & Törnroos 2015)

Figure 9, as a conceptual model, thus offers novel viewpoints on corporate branding and networking between business actors. However, in order to develop the concept of INB further, more elaboration on the branding aspects of this developed perspective is needed. Thus, Figure 10 is introduced. As illustrated, INB at its core consists of three dimensions[29]. The internal dimension presents the corporate *corporate identity* and deals with "how we see and understand ourselves", while the external dimension presents the *corporate reputation* and offers an understanding of "how other actors of the network see and value us". Finally, the mutual INB dimension is introduced as an "in-between space" where internal and external dimensions meet, and where the proposed *mutual value* is co-created. As shown in Figure 10, *interaction processes* between companies embedded in a network create a connecting triangle for all three dimensions.
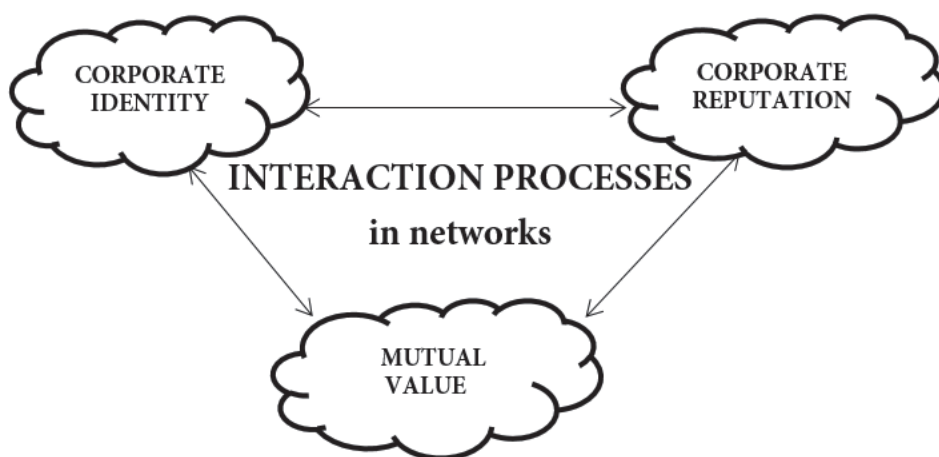
Figure 10. Modified conceptual framework of INB developed in Article I
(see Koporcic & Törnroos 2015)

The findings of this article elaborate on the importance of corporate branding, where INB is understood as a temporal outcome of co-created value of business relationships and interaction processes between companies. In other words, building a corporate brand through a strong corporate identity and reputation in the way proposed is understood as different from a simple "inside of a house" project. Instead, companies are dependent on each other for improving and managing their internal identities and external reputation. In other words, the study claims that branding is an important aspect of business relationships and

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[29] For more details on INB dimensions see Section 3.2. and Figure 6.

networks and should not be researched only from a single firm perspective. Instead, branding processes should be investigated from a broader business network view. This corresponds both to theoretical discussions as well as to the methodological issues at hand, i.e. the ways of conducting research. The study thus proposes and defines INB as strategic in nature and used by companies to create their desired network positions. The main representatives of INB are human actors, i.e. managing directors who bring theory into practice through their social and business interactions. Conceptual ideas developed in this article have been used for empirical investigation and observation of real-life situations in Articles II and IV. Moreover, after collecting the empirical data, the conceptual ideas have been enriched and developed further in the next conceptual exercise (Article III).

5.2. Article II: Internationalization of Nordic Born Global firms through Interactive Network Branding: A multiple Case Study

Article II is written together with Prof. Jan-Åke Törnoos, Associate Prof. Martin Hannibal and Prof. Per Servais. The paper explores the internationalization process of Born Global (BG) firms from a branding and networking perspective. More specifically, it offers an understanding of the role and importance of INB for rapid internationalization and network development of BG companies. The motivation for this study comes from three gaps in the current literature. The first gap is the lack of previous research on branding in business network studies (IMP network literature). The second is the lack of a broader business network view when studying corporate branding (corporate branding literature). The third is the lack of process research in studies on Born Globals (internationalization literature). These research gaps appear regarding both conceptualization and methods, i.e. empirical enquiries. Thus, the second research question that has been tackled in this article is as follows:

> **RQ2.** How can INB be applied in the empirical context of small Born Global firms from developed markets?

The empirical context, i.e. the phenomenon of this study involves three BG SMEs from developed markets, all working in high-tech medical and life science industries. A multiple case study within a B2B field was conducted, adopting the focal firm-network perspective (see Halinen & Törnroos 2005) to analyze the

phenomenon. In other words, the research was conducted from the focal firm perspective on its business network, including previous, current and potential business partners. Thus, one BG firm from Finland and two from Denmark were investigated as individual case studies. This allowed us to make a comparative case study analysis and discover similarities and differences between the companies and their swift internationalization and INB processes. Specific attention was given to the sensemaking processes of managing directors (e.g. Weick 1995, Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, Strandvik & Holmlund 2015), focusing on key events and INB episodes that occurred through the process of internationalization (see Figure 11). The empirical data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured, elite[30] interviews with owners and key managers of the case companies. The data has been complimented with secondary sources published about the focal firms online, to enhance the trustworthiness of the study.
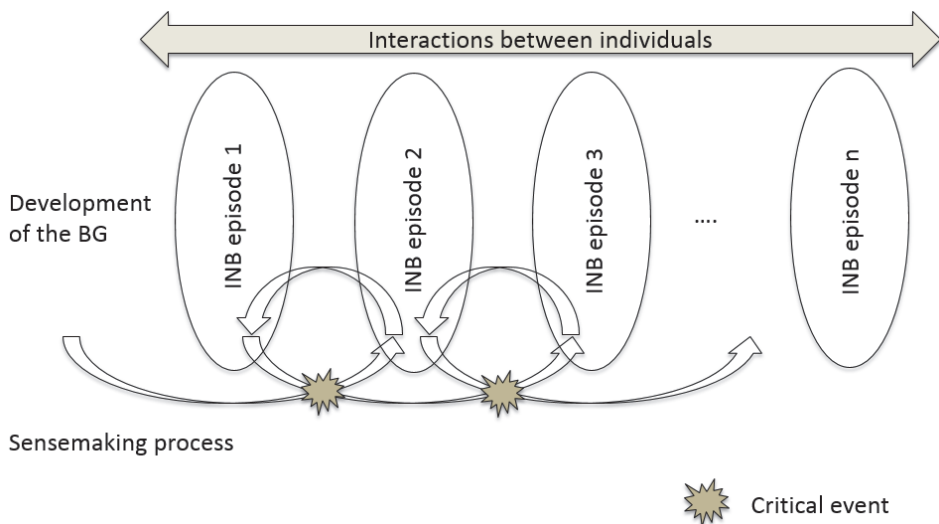
Figure 11. *A process model of INB developed in Article II*
(see Koporcic, Törnroos, Hannibal & Servais 2016)

The research model developed in Article II (Figure 11) presents a methodological framework used to direct the analysis of the data (see Table 7). In other words, it is an analytical tool for studying the phenomenon in a real-life situation, i.e. for analyzing rapid internationalization of BG firms and their network development through INB episodes. The focal starting point resides in the sensemaking

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[30] See Section 4.6. for elaboration on the data collection method and elite interviews.

processes of key individual actors who act and interact with each other through the unfolding internationalization process. The data did not reveal any determent phases or stages of internationalization, instead, the noted processes were irregular and constantly ongoing. The model (Figure 11) revealed specific INB episodes, triggered by critical events occurring during the BG internationalization. The critical events are presented in the Figure as the points of intersection between the sensemaking processes and two consecutive episodes. They are observed in the study and interpreted through individuals and their sensemaking processes.

A new INB episode is always an outcome of a certain critical event, and is at the same time an antecedent for a new forthcoming event. After each episode and critical event, adaptation to the new situation and further interactions follow. Three empirical cases with their INB episodes and critical events are analyzed and presented in the Table 7.

To summarize, the paper presents a process research and a multiple case study built on the extant literature of BG internationalization, corporate branding and networking. The findings reveal the importance of individual human actors and their relationships for enabling the swift internationalization and creation of a network position. Social and business network connections furthermore had an influence on the firm's internal identity, as well as its external reputation, both in domestic and foreign business markets. However, it is important to note that INB episodes come to the fore in an 'in-between' space of internal (identity) and external (reputation) dimension, denoted as the mutual INB dimension[31]. INB is created in this space through interactions between individual human actors, where socially constructed value is co-created through business connections. At the same time, by connecting with the 'right' business partners, these BG SMEs were able to overcome their liabilities of newness, smallness, outsidership, and foreignness (Gabrielsson et al. 2008). This, in return, had a positive effect on the perceived joint value of the BG firm, and accordingly affected its network development and creation of a desired network position.

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[31] See Section 3.2. for an elaboration on INB dimensions, and Section 3.2.3. specifically, for a description on the mutual INB dimension.

Table 7. Analysis of the empirical cases from Article II

CASES	Sensemaking & the 1st critical event	1st INB episode	Sensemaking & the 2nd critical event	2nd INB episode	Sensemaking & the 3rd critical event	3rd INB episode
BonAlive	Managerial sensemaking on the potential value of a bio-glass for surgeries & BG buy out	Developing products, building new business contacts and direct rapid entry into foreign markets	New foreign business opportunities discovered & sensemaking processes of the founder about the 2nd Interactive episode	The extensive international (direct & indirect) entry episode, in which the corporate and the CEO's personal reputation has been noted in domestic and foreign markets	Realized need for further product and corporate brand development	The new era of product inventions, as well as development of strong network connections and branding activities
Huma Gene	BG foundation based on managerial sensemaking about the unique knowledge on genetic engineering of human proteins	The first business interactions, product development and a renowned reputation of the founder	The personal background of the founder and the network connections triggered this forthcoming episode	Internationalization and INB processes achieved through mutual interactions in an extensive academic network	Decision to move into a business oriented large-scale production of standardized products, as a result of a managerial sensemaking process	Approaching larger firms for potential customers (which could, at the same time, threaten the academic career of the CEO)
Analyctor	The BG spun out as an outcome of managerial sensemaking of the potential of protein analyze services	Adaptation and standardization of products by connecting to old and new business partners	Realized the need for moving away from the academic milieu	Turnover rates improved, the number of customers expanded, service was streamlined	"Returning to the roots", based on the managerial need for renewal of his former network connections	Revitalization of relationships with the research community and further development of a network reputation

5.3. Article III: The Network View on Branding: Revisiting the ARA Model

Article III is another conceptual article, co-authored with Prof. Aino Halinen. It presents an extension and further theoretical development of INB with the focus on its actors, resources, and activities. In addition, the article aims to add to the IMP network approach by introducing the process model of branding in business networks. In terms of theoretical background, the paper focuses on literature exploring corporate branding, the Actor-Resource-Activity (ARA) model of the IMP Group (Håkansson & Johanson 1992, Håkansson and Snehota 1995), as well as their studies conducted on strategizing in business networks. As such, the article corresponds to the following research question:

> **RQ3.** How can INB be conceptually developed by focusing on its actors, resources, and activities?

This study presents one of the first attempts to link the IMP network model with branding. The motivation for this comes from the main critiques on the ARA model (see Axelsson 2010), such as: i) it focuses on a static view of a dynamic phenomenon; ii) it often neglects the individual level of interaction; iii) it fails to notice the importance of corporate brands, among other intangible resources. As a way to overcome these gaps, the paper presents INB as *"strategizing in business networks in which companies are developing their corporate identities and reputation by accepting certain roles and constantly developing a network position while interacting with other business actors."* (Koporcic & Halinen 2017, p. 1). These dynamic processes of networking and branding are achieved through individual human actors and their interactions. Considering that individuals act on behalf of their companies, the paper also argues for a conceptual and methodological coalition of individual and organizational levels of analysis. This is elaborated further by describing INB processes as socially created outcomes of individual human interactions.

As a base for conceptual development, the article uses the traditional ARA model, and adds the INB notion to it. As such, the actor layer of the novel model (see Figure 7) presents individuals who interact with each other, and at the same time act on behalf of their companies. This in turn presents the enmeshed individual-organizational level. Based on the IMP line of reasoning, actors in this layer play a crucial role in activities performed by firms in which resources are utilized. Furthermore, the following layer of the new model presents the resources of INB (see Figure 7), which are intangible and socially created assets of

companies. These include personal connections that are of a business or/and social nature, and originate from previous, current and potential business partnerships. In addition, resources allow companies to develop their internal identities and external reputation, which are at the same time intangible resources in essence. Finally, activities of INB are presented through business interactions that imply all the strategic initiatives, both inside and outside of the company, that aim towards identity and reputation building, and the creation of a desired network position.

In addition, the findings of this study are presented through a novel processual model of INB (Figure 12). The main idea of this model is to highlight the role of individual human actors and their perceptions of identity and reputation. These perceptions are constantly being shaped and reshaped through ongoing processes of interaction that occur while utilizing resources. The processual components of this model are found both in branding and networking, and their connection resides in the interaction between the two. These processes change and unfold over time, since human perceptions of identity and reputation are constantly being influenced by and are influencing other network actors.
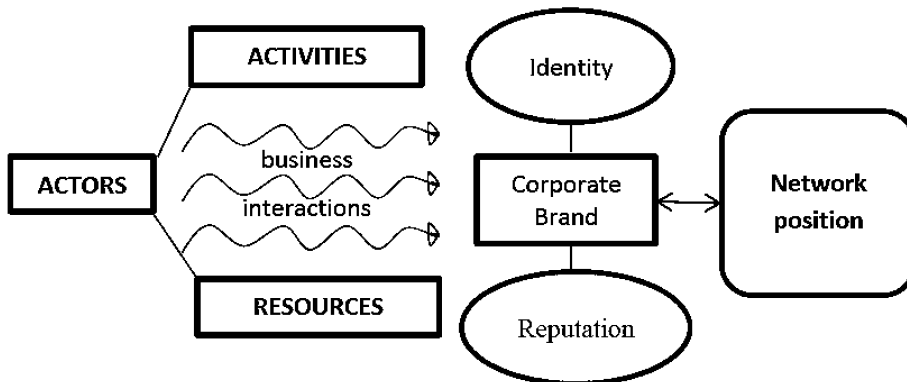

Figure 12. Processual INB model developed in Article III
(see Koporcic & Halinen 2017)

5.4. Article IV: Interactive Network Branding in an Emerging Market context: The case study of Croatian SMEs embedded in a business network

The final article of this dissertation was written as a single-authored paper, investigating network development and firm strategizing of SMEs in an emerging market context. Besides the typical lack of branding in B2B marketing and business network research, the motivation for this study comes from the lack of research on emerging markets in a B2B context (Biggermann & Fam 2011, Burgess & Steenkamp 2013), as well as the neglected importance of networking capabilities regarding SMEs (Coviello & Cox 2006, Bocconcelli & Pagano 2015, Bocconcelli, et al. 2016). Additionally, previous research acknowledged the need for new theoretical models and methods of data collection applicable to the specifics of rapidly changing emerging markets (Burgess & Steenkamp 2013, Wright et al. 2005). Thus, in order to fill these gaps, the article elaborates on the following research question:

> **RQ4.** How does INB influence the network development of SMEs in an emerging market context?

The methodological framework from Article II has been modified and used in order to investigate the empirical settings and the phenomenon of this study in detail. Instead of analyzing the network development of SMEs in foreign markets (Article II), this time the focus of the study was on SMEs from domestic business markets. A longitudinal process research (Pettigrew 1997, Van de Ven 1992) and an in-depth case study on a Croatian business network, focusing on five companies was conducted. The phenomenon was investigated from an actor-network and dyad-network perspective (Halinen & Törnroos 1998). The actor-network perspective corresponds to the focal firm's perspective on its business network, where the information was provided for every business partner included in the study; while the dyadic-network perspective corresponds to the perspective of the business partners on their relationship with the focal firm. Observation of INB processes and their importance for each company, each relationship, and the network as a whole (see Figure 13), has been done over a period of three years (2015-2017).
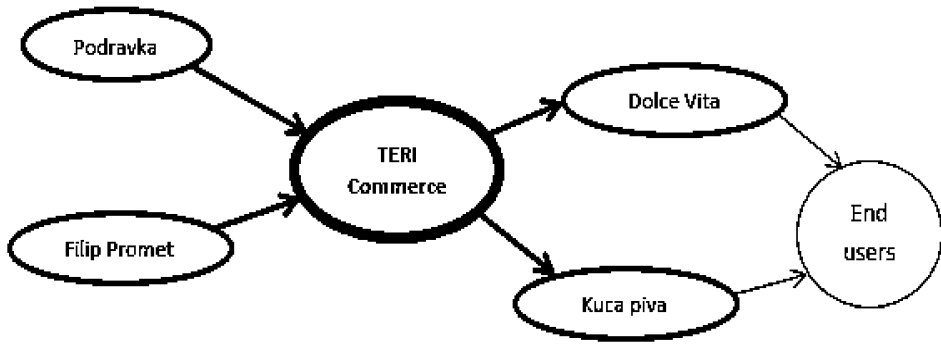
Figure 13. *Network structure developed in Article IV*
(see Koporcic 2017b)

The findings of this study are described here in respect to the findings of Study 1. This comparison is done in order to present some similarities but also the differences between developed and emerging market contexts, in relation to INB.

Similarities were found in INB activities, i.e. in social and business interactions between companies, which were crucial for the creation of network positions in both domestic and foreign business markets. This, furthermore, had an effect on the mutual creation of value, as well as on the identities and perceived reputation of all the companies from the business network. However, the findings concerning the emerging market context (Article IV) showed the higher importance of the INB processes, as in these markets the individual human actors and their social relationships play an even greater role than acknowledged in previous research. In order to study this in more depth, companies embedded in the Croatian business network (see Figure 13) were analyzed focusing on their actors, resources, and activities. Table 8 presents analyses of the findings both through a traditional IMP ARA framework, as well as through an INB ARA framework. Thus, in the INB ARA framework, the findings show that the networking and branding processes of SMEs are enacted by close personal and social interactions. The study shows a blurry distinction between the reputation as well as the identity that a managing director creates for himself and for his company. For instance, Teri Commerce has previously been called Halajko Commerce (from the surname of its owner). After merging with a larger company (Teri Commerce), the name has changed, but all of his business partners still refer to the company as Halajko. Often they refer to Mr. Halajko as the company itself, without distinguishing between the two. Even the manager of Dolce Vita, who is a small buyer focused on end customers, and whose contact person is not always Mr. Halajko himself, still refers

to the company as Halajko. This confirms an enmeshed individual at an organizational actor level that corresponds with the theoretical conceptualization of Article III.

One difference, however, from developed markets (Article II) can be found in the choice of Croatian SMEs not to internationalize. Instead, they decided to stay in their domestic market, where their close personal and business network connections reside. This choice is perceived as a risk reduction mechanism, where trust and commitment between individuals played the main role. It furthermore provided them a sense of security, and "means of survival" in a fast-changing emerging environment.

Table 8. Actors, resources, and activities of a business network presented in Article IV

Actors & network roles (representatives)	Resources		Activities	
	Traditional ARA	INB	Traditional ARA	INB
Teri commerce, distributor & focal firm (manager & owner)	Warehouses, infrastructure, products for distribution	Established social and business network connections, strong corporate brand	Provides products to its buyers and arranges distribution, acts as a mediator between buyers and manufacturers	Connects buyers and sellers, acts as intermediating person/company, lead strategic inter-firm initiatives
Podravka, product supplier (sales manager)	Good quality products (food, beverages)	Besides quality products the company possesses a broad network of business partners and connections	Manufacture and sales the products	Business interactions resulting into creation of organic, perceived reputation of both companies (Podravka & Teri)
Filip Promet, service provider (owner)	Trucks and transport equipment	Provides a loyal and trustful partner accountable for the transportation of focal firm products	Provides logistic services, transportation of products	Social and business interactions that result into identity and reputation building of both actors (Filip Promet & Teri)
Kuća Piva, buyer (director & sales manager)	Financial resource for the focal company	Loyal buyer with strong personal connection and mutual experiences	Ordering and buying the products, arranging special events in cooperation with the focal company	Social and business interactions that result into identity and reputation building of both actors (Kuća Piva & Teri)
Dolce Vita, buyer (owner)	Financial resource for the focal company	Loyal buyer, providing a word-of-mouth recommendation that may attract potential business partners	Ordering and buying the products	Social and business interactions that result into identity and reputation building of both actors (Dolce Vita & Teri)

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although branding and networking in business markets present important processes in today´s fast changing environment, most previous research has often disregarded either one or the other. This multidisciplinary study therefore challenges existing theories by presenting INB, as an attempt to connect corporate branding with business networks - two different, but relevant approaches to business marketing. The study endeavored to develop comprehensive theoretical, methodological and managerial implications on the role of INB in a business context, focusing on the importance of individual human actors and their interactions. This final chapter presents a discussion of the implications, after which the limitations of the study, as well as future research suggestions follow.

6.1. Theoretical and methodological implications

In 2013, a survey was conducted with experienced B2B marketing researchers who acted as Industrial Marketing and Management (IMM) Journal[32] reviewers. Their task was to list 3-5 top needs for business marketing research (see LaPlaca 2013). Out of 11 needs classified in the study, this dissertation covers the following: B2B marketing theory, business network research and branding.

   The first and main theoretical implication relates to the development of INB as a novel concept and perspective on branding in a business network context. The focal contribution of this perspective was primarily directed towards the network literature and the IMP studies (Turnbull et al. 1996, Håkansson & Snehota 1995, Håkansson et al. 2009), which are the basis of this dissertation. Simultaneously however, theoretical implications were also made concerning corporate branding and B2B marketing literature. In terms of corporate branding literature, the study contributed to business marketing and organizational research on corporate branding by bringing closer the reputation of a firm (external dimension) and its corporate identity (internal dimension). A mutual INB dimension[33] was then introduced, providing a new concepttualization of the human interaction processes and interrelations between the two seminal dimensions. The study also expands brand research in general by considering the importance of business relationships and network connections for reputation and identity building. Furthermore, the synthesis of these different theoretical approaches allowed the

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[32] The Industrial Marketing and Management (IMM) Journal is one of the most prestigious Journals in this field.

[33] See Section 3.2.3 for more details on Mutual INB dimension.

creation of a deeper understanding of network development and strategizing, by providing a perceptual view of firm's activities that are aimed towards the creation of a network position.

The first article (Article I) presented the starting point of INB development and the transition from a single-firm, to a dyadic perspective, and finally to the broader network perspective of branding and networking (see Figure 9). In other words, a development started with the single-firm perspective that was traditionally used in corporate branding literature. This one-firm perspective on branding (Gregory 2007), neglected the network view and its relational perspective. Accordingly, a dyadic perspective was introduced, providing a relational (IMP) viewpoint on the issue at hand. This contributed and further developed the single-firm perspective. However, when connecting the dyadic relational perspective to branding, it can often be understood as the co-branding initiatives of two firms. Co-branding, however, is not in the focus of this research, since it is often B2C and product oriented. Instead, the study moved a step further, introducing a broader network perspective, traditionally developed through the IMP studies. This level was enriched by coupling networking with branding processes, thus denoting INB in its core.

The next framework, introduced in Article II, provided both theoretical and methodological implications. The processual model of BG's INB development (see Figure 12) contributed towards the theoretical areas mentioned above, as well as towards the theories of internationalization. Traditional assumptions on the stages of internationalization (Johanson & Vahlne 1990) were challenged by investigating the nonlinear processes of BG firms that occupied network positions in foreign markets immediately after their foundation. The findings showed the relevance and importance of social network connections for overcoming the various liabilities that those SMEs faced from the start (Gabrielsson et al. 2008). The characteristics of SMEs working in a business field and their specific orientation towards branding and network positioning, which differs from large firms, inspired the choice of case companies for both empirical articles, and accordingly influenced further conceptualization. As LaPlaca (2013, p. 144) notes: "…much of theory relates to B2B between large corporations but there is a counter trend towards fragmentation of organizations and growth of SMEs for which existing theory is not appropriate." Furthermore, statistics from the European Union show that 99% of all business firms in the EU are SMEs.[34] Thus, the findings from Articles II and IV provided insights into European SMEs and their INB

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[34] https://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes_hr (11/02/2017)

processes. However, the difference between their empirical implementation lies in the context of the studied phenomenon. Thus, the context specific implications based on empirical findings concern SMEs positioning in both developed (Article II) and emerging markets (Article IV).

Since B2B branding research is still being dominated by the United States, Australia, and Western Europe based researchers (LaPlaca et al. 2015), the Article IV contributed to the empirical research on emerging and non-western markets by investigating the business network of companies operating in the Croatian EM. However, besides the importance of a context of the studied phenomenon, it is necessary to understand empirical foundations of INB research. On the one hand, traditional marketing studies on corporate brands have been observing branding as an inter-organizational activity (Balmer and Grey 2003). This view neglects the role and the critical importance of individuals, as key representatives of brands and firms. On the other hand, organizational studies on corporate branding have focused on the importance of employees for brand building, while ignoring the external business actors and their influence on this process. The solution for this discrepancy has been found within the IMP network approach. More specifically, network literature has been introduced to branding literature, and vice versa, and results are as follows:

i)   branding is understood as a mutual process and activity of interacting business partners,

ii)   the corporate brand is a value outcome of network relationships and individual human interactions,

iii)   INB denotes networking and branding processes of companies embedded in a business network. In this manner, companies accept certain roles and create desired network positions by constantly improving corporate identities and reputation through individual human interactions.

Finally, as an outcome of Article III (Koporcic & Halinen 2017), an additional processual model was developed (see Figure 12), offering a new theoretical framework of the IMP ARA model, in which a dynamic perspective on the phenomenon is provided. The traditional ARA model has been reconstructed by adding INB phenomenon to it. The overlooked importance and value of corporate brands was included at all levels of the model, i.e. through an actor, resource, and activity layer. Equally important, the traditional organizational level of the ARA model analysis was replaced with individual, human level (see La Rocca 2013),

focusing on their social connections. This furthermore had an influence on corporate identity and reputation creation, as well as firm network development.

Methodologically, the study applied a qualitative interpretive case study research with a social constructionist view of reality while using an abductive logic of reasoning. This in turn provided a different view on corporate branding reality, which is traditionally based on a positivist approach (Cornelissen, Christensen & Kinuthia 2012) and quantitative methods of analysis (LaPlaca 2013). Therefore, considering that reputation and identities, as well as network roles and positions are constantly changing and unfolding over time, a longitudinal, process view on branding and networking was used. In order to capture these processes, companies were analyzed through their past happenings, current situation, and future plans.

6.2. Implications for practitioners

When combining different research approaches, such as business network and corporate branding, an important question arises: "How are inconsistencies between theories managed in market practices?" (Kjellberg & Helgesson 2006, p. 852). Since many theoretical gaps could be found for each approach, development and conceptualization of INB has been crucial for dealing with inconsistency.

Based on the findings, the "role-relevant" (Jaworski 2011, p. 211) implications for practitioners are presented. In other words, the unit of observation and the base for these implications are the individual managers who act in their specific roles (Wilke & Ritter 2006, Jaworski 2011, Halinen & Mainela 2013). The implications are therefore focused on managers, founders and owners of SMEs, strategic brand managers, sales managers, as well as other firm actors working on corporate brand building and network positioning in developed and emerging business markets.

First, it is important to clearly define and elaborate on the influence of individuals on internal, external, and mutual INB dimensions (see Figure 10). For instance, employees of a focal company, through their internal resources, information, and knowledge sharing, are constantly building their corporate identity, i.e. internal branding dimension. In other words, the internal dimension and corporate identity come into being from the inside out, i.e. by communicating and representing the company to existing and potential business partners. At the same time, throughout the interactions, these existing and potential business partners from a broader network create and alter their perceptions and associations of the focal company, thus denoting an external branding dimension.

However, these two dimensions do not exclude each other. Instead, their alignment is necessary both for the firm's network development and for brand building processes. Therefore, a mutual INB dimension is created as an outcome of direct and indirect interactions between firm representatives. These interactions enhance firms' network roles and influence the creation of the desired network positions. At the same time, these social and business activities influence individual human perceptions on identity and the reputation of each firm, and finally result in a collision of the internal and external branding dimensions.

The next implication relates to the individual human actors and their sensemaking processes that provide an access to understanding the INB phenomenon at a deeper level. Thus, managers can benefit by understanding the importance of critical events that occur in business networks, the episodes that are triggered by these events, as well as the sensemaking processes through which the critical events are detected in the first place (see Figure 11). In other words, through interactions with representatives of other firms, managers make sense of their own companies, which is then reflected in the corporate identity and internal branding dimension. At the same time, managers can influence their reputation in the embedded network by interacting with other actors, external to the company. Thus, it can be concluded that when interactions between individuals from two or more companies occur, mutual INB dimension come to the fore. Identities influence and are influenced by reputation, and the other way around.

However, it is important to note that the firm creates a brand value through its role and position in the network, enacted again by individuals doing the actual interactions. Thus, branding and networking collide in this manner. Additionally, firm representatives must not forget to keep track of the changes that occur inside their firms and their relationships, as well as those inside their business networks. By being aware of unfolding events and forthcoming episodes, managers can often predict changes and adapt their strategizing accordingly. Other than this, it is also important to be aware of "what others think of us", i.e. of the current reputation in the network, and does it correspond with "what we think of us", i.e. with our corporate identity.

Another managerial implication relates specifically to managers of SMEs that are entering new foreign markets immediately after their foundation. These Born Globals have to deal with various liabilities, such as resource scarcity, smallness, newness, lack of experience, outsidership and foreignness, among others things (Gabrielsson et al. 2008). To overcome these limitations, entrepreneurs and other representatives must develop close social network connections, which will play a crucial role for both a swift network development and branding endeavors.

Moreover, uncertainty in a network can be avoided by entering into relationships with compatible partners. Thus, as regular activities, managers should implement joint networking and branding, i.e. INB activities.

By seeking to understand the issues presented above, business market managers can gain more insights on branding and networking in fast changing business environments. Such insights are crucial for bringing marketing theory and practice closer together.

6.3. Limitations of the study and future research suggestions

In addition to the theoretical, managerial, and methodological implications, this study, as any research process, has some limitations that deserve attention. At the same time, these limitations allow future research suggestions to be provided.

First, this study is of an exploratory nature, since it has introduced Interactive Network Branding as a perspective on corporate branding. As developed and discussed, its main contribution is directed towards IMP studies and business network literature, whose approach has often been lacking a branding perspective. However, this study should not be understood as a criticism of the network approach. On the contrary, studies of the IMP Group have significantly contributed to current understanding of business relationships and networks. Therefore, this dissertation aims to contribute to the IMP line of reasoning and develop it further by introducing branding concepts into the network approach. The challenge, however, arises due to the small amount of empirical data collected on INB, since the data collection period lasted three years. Therefore, further research is needed in order to obtain richer longitudinal data on INB processes.

Second, this dissertation focuses on the importance of branding that is co-created and communicated through human interactions in a business network context. The topic under investigation, INB, is hence complex. Complexity arises from its background theories and combination of different approaches, namely literatures regarding corporate branding, networking and B2B marketing. The study dealt with this complexity by explicitly focusing on IMP studies on business networks, as well as on marketing and organizational studies on corporate branding. However, when observing corporate branding literature, its multidisciplinary roots may cause some limitations. For instance, organizational theory on corporate branding is traditionally based on developing theoretical frameworks, while marketing research on corporate branding has a predominantly stronger empirical basis (Hambrick 2004). Since INB considers both literatures, i.e. organizational theory for development of internal dimension

(identity), and business marketing theory for the external dimension of INB (reputation), diligence is needed in their combinations. Above all, corporate branding literature predominantly follows a positivistic approach and quantitative research design (Cornelissen, Christensen & Kinuthia 2012), while business network literature follows a constructivist approach and often uses a qualitative research design (Halinen & Törnroos 2005). Although this may generate more limitations, at the same time it offers a great possibility for further conceptual, methodological, and empirical investigation of INB tenets.

Third, as a consequence of choosing the above-mentioned theoretical background, the study has excluded a few interesting observations. Based on this fact, future research could observe the duality of INB value outcomes, such as co-creation and co-destruction of value (see Echeverri & Skålen 2011). Furthermore, the influence of cultural heritage and historical perspectives on firms operating in different empirical contexts could be investigated regarding their influence on INB processes. Additionally, the importance and closeness of corporate reputation and the reputation of the manager may differ in different markets and empirical settings. Thus, it would be interesting to empirically investigate this mismatch from a cultural perspective.

Fourth, this study concentrated on observing the phenomenon from an SME perspective. Although this choice can be understood as a limitation, in terms of neglected MNCs, the study sees it as a contribution to the following research gaps: the need for more studies on SMEs in the B2B branding research context (see LaPlaca 2013), in business network research in general (Coviello & Cox 2006), and more specifically in IMP studies (Bocconcelli and Pagano 2015). In addition, choosing small companies provided an easier access to data, since the mangers were more approachable.

Fifth, another limitation can be found in terms of the generalization of the study. It is important to highlight that this study does not aim to make a generalization of INB to all industries and companies, with no regard as to their size. However, the detailed descriptions of the findings from the two empirical articles can be used as a starting point for further research in other contexts (see Lincoln & Guba 1985). As the conceptual and methodological frameworks of INB have been applied in both developed and emerging markets, a suggestion for future research could include investigation of other developed markets (besides Nordic). Equally relevant, INB could benefit from empirical research on those fast changing emerging markets that have different characteristics from the Croatian market, such as for instance, Asia, Africa or South America. Branding and network processes in these markets might differ from the investigated European

contexts. Additionally, negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba 1985) could be useful for providing a different angle on the phenomenon and for establishing the credibility of findings, by providing exceptions to the rule (Patton 2002).

Sixth, this dissertation focused solely on qualitative research, without using mixed or quantitative research methods. Considering the nature of the research, and its focus on SMEs, as well as chosen streams of literature, a qualitative approach seemed most appropriate in order to reach the research objectives. However, further studies on INB could use other methods of process research, such as ethnography and participant observations. In addition, although qualitative research has provided a fruitful description of the phenomenon, another avenue for further research would be a multidisciplinary study where INB is tested through experimental research. This could be done, for instance, by including accounting, i.e. financial inquiries into marketing. By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the benefits and influence of branding and business relationships on the balance sheet would be measured. This financial value of INB could benefit companies both in developed and emerging markets. It could serve as a benchmark and could, furthermore, have an effect on return on investment (ROI). As Axelsson (2010, p. 25) argues: "Still, money brings perceived accuracy and it may be a good idea to put more emphasis on economic estimation of the values created…This would also be a way to emphasize the strategic dimension of relationship management. In business practice, when talking to CEOs and CFOs, having a toolbox of financials is valuable."

Finally, this study has provided the first step towards an academic elaboration on the Human-to-Human (H2H) perspective on business marketing, relationships, and networks, as well as branding. This novel and potential area of academic and practitioner research offered a clearer understanding as regards constructing the reality in which firms operate. In business interactions, humans are the ones who act on two interrelated and enmeshed levels, i.e. on the personal level representing themselves in roles (e.g. managers, sales personnel), and on the organizational level representing the company on behalf of which they interact. Thus, instead of trying to compound or even dilute B2B and B2C areas of research, the H2H perspective is indeed crucial and should be investigated further.

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Appendix 1. Standard ethics protocol[35] (English version)

Hi, my name is Nikolina Koporčić. I am a PhD student at the School of Business and Economics, at Åbo Akademi University in Finland. In addition, I am a researcher on this empirical data collection project, which will be used for academic articles of my dissertation.

I am the principal investigator of this project and I may be contacted at this phone number +358 41 4911 520 should you have any questions.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. Your participation is very appreciated. Just before we start the interview, I would like to reassure you that as a participant in this project you have several very definite rights.

First, your participation in this interview is voluntary.

You are free to refuse to answer any question at any time.

You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.

This interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to members of the research team.

Excerpts of this interview might be used as a part of my academic articles, including my dissertation, but under no circumstances will your name be included in this report.

I would be grateful if you would sign this form to show that you have read its contents.

_____ (Signature)
_____ (Date)
_____ (Place)

Please send me a report on the results of this research project. (Circle one)

                      YES   NO

Email address for those requesting research report:

_____

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[35] Based on McCracken 1988, pp. 69

Appendix 2. Etički protokol (Croatian version)

Poštovani G. _____! Moje ime je Nikolina Koporčić i doktorska sam studentica na Fakultetu ekonomije i poslovanja, na Åbo Akademi sveučilištu u Finskoj. Također, trenutno sam u procesu prikupljanja empirijskih podataka koji će biti korišteni za moje akademske članke te doktorsku dizertaciju.

Glavni sam istraživač u ovom procesu i možete me kontaktirati na slijedeće telefonske brojeve: HR +385 91 1687 354, FI +358 41 4911 520, ukoliko imate kakvih pitanja.

Zahvaljujem Vam na spremnošću za sudjelovanjem u ovom intervjuu. Vaša voljnost je iznimno cijenjena. Prije nego li započnemo s intervjuom, htjela bih Vam obratiti pozornost da kao sudionik u ovom intervjuu imate određena prava.

Prvotno, vaše sudjelovanje je izrazito volontersko.

Slobodni ste ne odgovoriti na bilo koje pitanje, u bilo kojem trenutku.

Slobodni ste odustati od intervjua u bilo koje vrijeme.

Ovaj intervju je strogo povjerljiv i bit će pristupačan samo malom broju istraživača koji će sudjelovati u pisanju akademskih članaka.

Osim što će informacije ovog intervjua biti dio mojih akademskih članaka, kao i dio krajnje doktorske dizertacije, ni pod kojim uvjetima Vaši osobni podaci neće biti otkriveni.

Bila bih Vam zahvalna ukoliko biste potpisati ovaj dokument i time se složili sa njegovim dijelovima.

_____ (Potpis)
_____ (Datum)
_____ (Mjesto)

Molim pošaljite mi izvještaj rezultata ovog projekta. (Zaokružite jedno)

          DA   NE

E-mail adresa ukoliko zahtijevate izvještaj:

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