



## FROM LEGITIMACY TO LEVERAGE: HOW B2B BRANDING INFLUENCE EVOLVES ACROSS ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION STAGES

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** - The study investigates the contingent influence of B2B branding on organizational buying decisions, addressing when, how, and to what extent branding matters across different decision stages and contexts.

**Design/methodology/approach** - Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the research combines semi-structured interviews with B2B industry experts ( $n = 12$ ) followed by a time-bound LinkedIn survey of IT/ITES professionals ( $n = 107$ ). The study integrates institutional theory, rational choice theory, and the resource-based view within a unified analytical framework.

**Findings** - B2B branding functions as a multidimensional strategic resource that serves as a legitimizing signal, significantly shaping early-stage purchasing decisions, especially in high-risk contexts. However, its influence diminishes relative to functional factors (e.g., after-sales service, price, technical specifications) in later selection stages. The research reveals systematic variations in brand sensitivity across risk contexts, Decision-Making Unit (DMU) roles, and decision stages.

**Practical implications** - The findings provide actionable guidance for aligning brand strategies with specific purchasing scenarios in technology-intensive industries. Marketers should emphasize brand credibility during early consideration phases, while procurement professionals can adopt contingency-based evaluation models that weight brand factors appropriately based on purchase risk and complexity.

**Originality/value** - The study develops an original integrated contingency framework that synthesizes multiple theoretical perspectives to explain the dynamic influence of B2B branding. It establishes branding as a stage-contingent strategic resource and advances beyond simplistic "brands matter/do not matter" dichotomies, offering a nuanced understanding of branding's evolving role in organizational decision-making.

**Keywords:** Business-to-Business marketing, B2B Branding, Buying behaviour, Brand Sensitivity, Decision-Making Unit (DMU)

## 1. Introduction

Business-to-business (B2B) buying is a paradigm of decision-making that is fundamentally different, as it involves multiple stakeholders, long decision-making time, and high exposure to organizational risk (Grewal et al., 2015; Steward et al., 2019). B2B choices, unlike in consumer markets, are formed as a result of multifaceted social processes within Decision-Making Units (DMUs), where the intersection of technical specifications, financial, and relationship aspects is observed (Donald W. Jackson, 2015). This compounding is amplified in technology-intensive industries where fast innovation, performance variability, and huge investment needs increase the stakes as well as the difficulties involved in the selection of suppliers (Kovalchuk et al., 2023). Although the role of branding in organizational buying has been a subject matter of scholarly interest in the last four decades, there are still basic questions about the contingent role of branding in the buying process. Although the initial studies had largely rejected the applicability of branding to ostensibly rational B2B situations (Saunders and Watt, 1979; Sinclair and Seward, 1988). Modern literature has recognized branding as a multidimensional phenomenon, capable of alleviating perceived risk, simplifying complicated judgments, and indicating quality assurance (Webster & Keller, 2004). Nevertheless, there is still a considerable level of uncertainty as to when, how and to what degree branding can have an effect on purchasing outcomes at various stages of the decision-making process, risk situation and organizational context (Seyedghorban et al., 2016).

Such ambiguity is based on three research gaps that continue to exist in the current literature. To begin with, although empirical research supports the significance of branding in high-risk contexts (Akbari and Hakimpour, 2018; Bennett et al., 2005). There is limited knowledge of how the role of branding varies in a dynamically changing purchasing funnel (initial consideration to final selection and post-purchase evaluation). Second, the available literature has little information on how various members of DMU may place different weights on brand and function-related criteria depending on their roles, responsibilities and risk exposures (Alexander et al., 2009). Third, the B2B procurement is going digital, with the emergence of online platforms, algorithmic decision tools, and virtual relationship management, which puts brand influence into new contexts that are under-theorised and under-researched (Haase et al., 2020). The implications of these gaps are of great practical value. B2B marketing professionals find it difficult to rationalize brand investments when quantitative returns on those investments are elusive. Whereas the professionals who make purchases are under pressure to strike a balance between brand promise and cost-containment goals (Emiliani, 2006). This conflict is especially sharp in the technological fields where product commoditization jeopardizes product differentiation but, at the same time, demands a more trust-based association with suppliers (Beverland, 2007; Upadhayay et al., 2020).

In order to overcome these issues, the present study deploys an integrative theoretical framework that consists of institutional theory, rational choice theory, and the resource-based view to investigate the contingent impact of branding in B2B. With mixed methods research in the field of IT/ITES, where technological complexity, obsolescence and high risk of investment make the field fertile to study brand dynamics, two important research questions were explored:

**RQ1:** How does the relative importance of branding versus functional attributes (price, technology, after-sales service) vary across different stages of the B2B buying process?

**RQ2:** Under what purchase conditions (e.g., risk level, product complexity, purchase type) does branding serve as a primary decision heuristic versus a secondary consideration?

By answering these questions, this study will be able to make a contribution both in theory and in practice. Theoretical concepts of branding in B2B are researched by coming up with a contingency model that discusses the conditions and reasons why B2B branding should be a legitimizing gatekeeper during high-risk early-stage selections, and abdicate power to functional criteria during late-stage selections. In practice, this offers evidence-based advice to match brand strategies with particular buying conditions and priorities of decision-makers.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the evolution of B2B branding literature, identifying key themes, theoretical foundations, and persisting gaps. Section 3 presents our integrated theoretical framework. Section 4 details our mixed-methods research design. Section 5 presents and interprets findings. While, the theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and future research objectives are covered in Section 6, along with conclusions and limitations.

## 2. Literature Review: The Evolving Understanding of B2B Branding

### 2.1 Historical Trajectory: From Irrelevance to Strategic Imperative

The academic debate on B2B branding has been radically transformed in the past 40 years, reflecting the more general changes in theory and practice in industrial marketing. This evolution, as compiled in Table 1, reflects shifting assumptions regarding the role and value of branding in the context of organizations.

**Table 1: Trajectory of B2B Branding Research**

Trajectory of B2B branding research	1972–1991	1992–2006	2007–2023	Future Research
	Irrelevance of branding	Benefits of branding	Brand equity	Integrated brand equity
Intellectual structure	Product perception	Brand equity	Equity	Market share
	Production-differentiation	Loyalty	Performance	Financial performance
	Commodity product	Performance	Satisfaction	Economic performance
	Brand name	Competitive advantage	Buyer–supplier relationship	buyer–supplier relationships
	Brand effectiveness	Quality assurance	Brand image	Buyer perception of brand
		Distribution efficiency	Brand importance	Brand engagement
		Intangible assets	Corporate reputation	B2B service branding
			Relationship Marketing	Solution branding
			Service Orientation	Multiple Stakeholders
Theoretical foundations		Cognitive psychology	Cognitive psychology	Improved cognitive psychology
			Social exchange theory	Extended social exchange theory
			Resource-based view	Resource-based view
				Information economic view

(Source: Adopted & modified from Seyedghorban et al., 2016)

Nevertheless, the B2B branding research has evolved significantly since the 1970s. Initially, academics were quite sceptical and questioned the importance of branding to rational corporate consumers who considered functional features (Saunders and Watt, 1979; Shipley and Howard, 1993). This view was based on the existing assumptions that B2B buying was inherently different to the consumer market as it was objective and aligned to certain factors such as price, specifications and delivery terms rather than subjective perceptions (Mudambi et al., 1997). This opinion was refuted when researchers in the 1990s began to report the advantages of branding, including reduction of risk (Hutton, 1997), higher prices (Bendixen et al., 2004), and loyal customers (Selnes, 1993), bringing in such concepts as brand equity (Keller, 1993) and brand orientation (Baumgarth, Branding has been acknowledged as a strategic requirement since 2007, in the context of such trends as product standardization, intensifying competition (Akbari and Hakimpour, 2018), and digital transformation changing buyer-seller relationships (Steenkamp, 2020), and addressing such aspects as trust-building, brand image, value co-creation, and ecosystem development (Mingione and Leoni).

### 2.2 Theoretical Foundations: Multiple Lenses on B2B Brand Value

#### 2.2.1 Cognitive and Psychological Perspectives

Cognitive psychology has provided a lot of knowledge regarding the influence of branding in B2B decision-making. Research has indicated that brands are heuristics which simplify complex evaluations in difficult

situations (Webster & Keller, 2004). This heuristic function is particularly beneficial when the specifications of products are too technical or difficult to compare directly (Kuhn et al., 2008). The outcomes of performance are unclear or difficult to predict before purchase (Marquardt, 2013). There are various stakeholders of varying expertise who must agree. In addition to simplifying, branding takes into account the psychological and emotional needs of DMUs. Recent studies in B2B contexts have undermined the traditional rational/emotional dichotomy by proving that decision-makers desire to reduce anxiety, enhance their professional credibility and justify decisions to satisfy the needs of superiors that can be satisfied by strong brands (Newell et al., 2022). It is this emotional aspect that can make technically similar offerings be rated differently on brand perceptions and engagement (Fehl et al., 2025; Wijaya & Annisa, 2020).

### **2.2.2 Relational and Network Perspectives**

The concept of relationship marketing theory has redefined the concept of B2B branding based on long-term value creation focused on partnership, as opposed to transactional exchange (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2016). In this perspective, brands serve as the foundations of relationships that facilitate cooperative innovation, knowledge sharing and trust-building (Zhang et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2024). Some of the key lessons of this stream include, first, Brands as Trust Signals, where Strong brands reduce transaction costs as reliable quality signals in a low-quality information setting (Wang and Sengupta, 2016). Second, Co-created Brand Value is not created by suppliers unilaterally, but it evolves through the interactions of buyers and sellers (Koporčič et al., 2015; Koporcic and Tornroos, 2019). Finally, Ecosystem Considerations where Branding will influence more stakeholders, other than a dyadic relationship.

### **2.2.3 Economic and Strategic Perspectives**

Brands are viewed as intangible assets that support long-term competitive advantage by the resource-based view (RBV) and associated strategic frameworks (Kozlenkova et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2018). Price Premium Capture: Strong brands will be priced higher by distinguishing otherwise similar services and reducing price elasticity (Persson, 2010). This perspective identifies various ways in which branding generates economic value (Alavijeh et al., 2019). Customer Retention: Through recurring purchases and a decreased inclination to switch, brand loyalty lowers the cost of acquiring new customers and raises lifetime value (Rauyruen et al., 2009; Sharma et al., 2019). Strategic Flexibility: established brands provide platforms for the introduction of new products, expansion and strategic alliances (Beverland et al., 2007; Notteboom et al., 2022).

## **2.3 Critical Constructs in B2B Brand Evaluation**

### **2.3.1 Price-Brand Trade-offs**

Price-brand perception relationship is one of the most widely studied fields in B2B branding. Though initial studies introduced the opposition of the branding and price variables (Mudambi et al., 1997), later studies demonstrate more complicated relations, including the Risk-Mediated Trade-offs: Customers are more ready to pay brand premiums as a guarantee of failures in performance in high-risk situations (Kulkarni and Joshi, 2017). The other aspect is the overall cost of the considerations: More advanced buyers will evaluate brand value on the basis of total cost of ownership, considering such factors as the effect on productivity, maintenance, and downtime costs. Moreover, Value Signalling has determined the premium pricing, which demonstrates exclusivity and quality, and discount pricing can cast a question on quality.

### **2.3.2 Technical Specifications and Performance Assurance**

In activities that are highly technical, branding and technical assessment interrelate in complex ways. Studies show that there are several trends, such as the Credibility Enhancement: When independent verification is difficult or costly, strong brands enhance perceived credibility of technical assertions (Iyer et al., 2020) And during the evaluation process, the reputable brands are assumed to be on the right side of the argument with ambiguous metrics, which influences the interpretation and weighting of the technical specifications. Also, the creativity of the brand can outdo certain technical advantages because of novel ideas and upgrades in the future (Xie & Zheng, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Some of the key lessons in this stream include first Brands as Trust Signals.

### **2.3.3 Service and Support Considerations**

The importance of after-sales considerations in B2B branding has risen with the inclusion of product and service components commonly known as servitization (Davis et al., 2008). This ultimately enhanced the perception of the brand, especially in a more commoditised product category where the quality of the service is the primary source of brand differentiation. The support ecosystems of companies are evaluated by buyers on a broader set of criteria, including community resources, technical support, and training, among their core products (Pöyry et al., 2020). The Relationship Continuity of service interactions, on the other hand, present sustained touchpoints that enhance or undermine brand perceptions across the customer lifecycle (Sharma et al., 2019).

#### **2.4 Digital Transformation and Evolving Brand Dynamics**

B2B commerce has transformed in a fundamentally new way due to the digital transformation of B2B, currently accelerating the transformation of the product-centric transaction to the digitally enabled service ecosystems. This change is associated with and builds upon the Resource-Based View (RBV) in which the value of a brand is more and more based on its capacity to coordinate and combine digital, informational, and relational resources as a part of a larger network (Steenkamp, 2020). At the same time, the advent of procurement software and AI-based systems has transformed the brand evaluation process with implications on brand strategy and improved buyer decision-making by using various algorithmic approaches (Fagundes et al., 2023; Pandey, 2019). But besides traditional brand signals, new forms of social proof are available in online reviews, case studies, and user communities (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). Nonetheless, online touchpoints increase expectations of personalized brand experiences, which are akin to business-to-consumer (B2C) practices (Steenkamp, 2020).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in the study is integrative that combine institutional theory, rational choice theory and resource-based view (RBV) to explore the contingent and dynamic role of B2B branding in the various stages of organisational buying. Although the application of each theoretical lens individually to B2B settings has been previously established (Yang and Su, 2014), the combination of the two in branding studies is yet to be developed. This combined structure offers a more detailed insight into when, why, and how branding is important in complicated B2B buying decision processes, especially in technology-intensive markets with information asymmetry and performance uncertainty.

#### **3.1 Institutional Theory Perspective: Brands as Sources of Legitimacy**

Institutional theory is an idea which explains that organizational behavior is shaped by technical efficiency as well as social and environmental demands for legitimacy. In B2B, decision-making is often based on industry norms, professional standards and mimetic isomorphism, not just on the basis of objective standards (Mudambi, 2023). In this perspective, brands are legitimizing cues that reduce perceived risk among decision-makers in several ways: Cognitive legitimacy: Established brands provide the familiar schemas with which to simplify the process of evaluating complex options (Bendixen et al., 2004). Normative legitimacy: Opting for renowned brands resonates with professional procurement criteria and echelon of industry: “best practice”. Besides, branded suppliers are perceived to be more regulatory compliant with regulations and contracts, hence organizations tend to prefer branded solutions instead of cheaper unbranded solutions because of the perceived credibility and validity of branded solutions (Donald W. Jackson, 2015). The theory of institutionalism supports this preference, especially where there is uncertainty and issues of legitimacy, as the recent studies indicate (Suter et al., 2020).

#### **3.2 Rational Choice Theory: Brands as Decision Heuristics**

According to the rational choice theory, the decision-makers seek to maximise benefits and minimise costs by using evaluations (Simon and Sullivan, 1993; Susanti et al., 2020). This is demonstrated in the evaluation of price, quality, specifications and service in B2B markets. But there are limitations of bounded rationality, information, time, and cognitive constraints on thorough evaluations (Pandey and Mookerjee, 2018). Brands are heuristics, and they simplify decision-making in the face of complexity in products (Saab and Botelho, 2020), uncertainty in performance (Kovalchuk et al., 2023), and switching costs. Branding is considered not as an irrational choice but as a cognitive efficiency system that reduces the costs of search and provides

sufficient decision quality. Therefore, the role of branding increases in risky, complicated situations in which rational choices are usually considered to be shortcuts in cognition and an emotional reaction.

### **3.3 Resource-Based View: Brands as Strategic Assets**

Resource-based view (RBV) emphasizes that a competitive advantage is sustained by valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources, and strong B2B brands are strategic assets (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). These brands lower the cost of transaction for buyers and guarantee consistency in performance. Encourage & facilitate relationship-specific investments (Persson, 2010). In the case of suppliers, popular brands make possible price premiums and assist in acquiring new customers by lowering perceived risk (Homburg et al., 2010) and improving customer retention (Rauyruen et al., 2009 ;Alavijeh et al., 2019). Brand equity in the technology industry offers stability against uncertainties because innovation in the industry is very high. The significance of branding to long-term customer engagement and subsequent repurchase of the product, even when the performance is uncertain, is highlighted in (Marquardt, 2013).

These theoretical positions might appear to be mutually incompatible, but rational choice theory focuses on the economic efficiency of such a solution, and institutional theory focuses on social legitimacy that they actually coexist to justify the contingent relevance of B2B branding. The RBV introduces brands as strategic resources which sustain competitiveness, institutional pressures clarify how they are justified in risky contexts, and rational choice clarifies how they operate as cognitive heuristics in settings of bounded rationality. All these combined give a complex explanation of the dynamic nature of branding.

### **3.4 Theoretical Integration: A Contingency Framework for B2B Brand Influence**

Such an integrated approach fills important gaps in the literature about branding, including the contingent nature of the influence of branding in different situations of purchase. How personal brand perceptions combine to organisational decision-making. The proportion of brand versus functional features of buying stages (Steward et al., 2019).

Based on this notion, branding will exert the most influence on high-risk purchases in the initial stages of the buying cycle, particularly in regulated markets. It has the most impact on jobs with responsibility and risk reduction. It has less effect on later stages and routine purchases, particularly in the case of functional features that are readily compared and in cases where DMU positions (financial controllers, procurement specialists) are focused on operational efficiency. These theoretical predictions lead to two other research questions: RQ3 examines how varying DMU positions value brand-related factors over function-related factors, and RQ4 aims at determining the most significant brand value dimensions in the technology sector purchasing.



Figure 1: A contingency framework for B2B brand influence

According to Figure 1, the influence of the brand in B2B markets depends on the stage of purchase and the context. The figure is not a constant effect but indicates that in different situations, branding can have varying levels of importance, and this leads to the varying levels of brand influence, which are low brand influence and strong brand influence. It implies that brand issues are more relevant in some decision situations and phases than others.

### 3.5 Research Questions Derived from Theoretical Framework

The following research questions are addressed by this study using this integrated theoretical framework:

**RQ1:** How does the relative significance of branding versus functional attributes (price, technology, after-sales service) vary across different stages of the B2B purchasing process?

**RQ2:** Under what purchasing conditions (such as risk level, product complexity, or purchase type) does branding function as a primary decision heuristic rather than a secondary consideration?

**RQ3:** How do different DMU roles distinctly prioritize brand-related versus function-related criteria in organizational purchasing decisions?

**RQ4:** What specific brand value attributes (quality assurance, risk reduction, relationship facilitation) are most salient in the technology sector B2B purchasing?

The research will seek to build a more context-sensitive and nuanced view of the strategic role of B2B branding by answering these questions based on a mixed-method inquiry. This will not merely be a dichotomy of brands that matter or do not matter, but a model that is contingent and will guide both theory and practice. This theoretical combination of institutional theory is used to explain how brands gain legitimacy, rational choice theory is used to explain how they reduce the complexity of decisions, and RBV is used to explain how they generate strategic value is unexplored in branding research. The study provides a more in-depth explanation of the timing and manner of branding being important in organizational purchasing activities by integrating various perspectives, particularly in the technology-intensive sector, where there is high performance uncertainty and where information asymmetry is a major concern.

## 4. Methodology

The research involves using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Moeller et al., 2016). The design starts with the qualitative exploration with expert interviews to gain the contextual considerations and decision-making processes, which is then followed by quantitative validation by a time-delimited online survey to test the emergent patterns and to quantify the relative importance of the constructs. This methodology capitalizes on the richness of qualitative research but adds to the generalizability with quantitative indicators (Poth and Shannon-Baker, 2022).

#### 4.1 Research Context and Scope

The research is specifically on the IT/ITES (Information Technology/ Information Technology Enabled Services) industry, which has been chosen as a strategic research context due to a number of reasons. To begin with, the purchase of technology in this industry is usually characterized by high levels of complexity, a high rate of obsolescence and high levels of uncertainty about the performance in the long run, which leads to an increased level of risk perception and increases the value of brand reputation as a quality signal. Third, IT/ITES procurement is becoming more and more a combination of functional (technical specifications, price) and relational (service support, partnership potential) aspects, which makes the interaction between rational and cognitive elements of decision making richer. This recognises that results may not immediately apply to all B2B scenarios, even though this sector-specific approach allows for better contextual insight. However, other high-risk, technology-intensive businesses dealing with comparable decision-making issues might find the insights especially helpful (Beverland et al., 2007).

#### 4.2 Qualitative Phase: Expert Interviews

##### 4.2.1 Sampling and Data Collection

The methodology of the paper is mostly exploratory and inductive. It is an interview (12 semi-structured) with industry experts in middle-to-senior management positions in the IT/ITES sector, between December 2022 and February 2023. Participants will be chosen purposely by the following criteria:

- minimum 8 years of experience in B2B decision-making roles within IT/ITES
- current involvement in procurement, sales, or marketing functions
- geographic diversity across major technology hubs.

The sample of the last group was chosen among professionals with middle-to-senior management experience (mean 10-12 years) and who worked in manufacturers, distributors, consultants, and end-user organizations (Table 2). Interviews were conducted in accordance with the semi-structured protocol that was created as a result of literature review and pilot testing. The main areas of discussion were: stages of the purchase process, prioritization of decision criteria, risk perception, brand evaluation processes, and situational factors that affect decisions. Audio recordings were made of interviews with consent, thirty to forty-five minutes long, and the qualitative data was transcribed word-for-word. Thematic saturation was reached when 10 interviews were conducted, and 2 other interviews proved that no new themes were found (Brennan et al., 2014).

The research was also conducted following ethical principles of business research (Bell and Bryman, 2007). Table 2 presents the information on the semi-structured interviews with the industry experts. It describes the most important details of the interview participants and the process of the interview, so the reader can get the idea of the background of the experts and the method of data collection applied in the study. The table, hence, gives a clear picture of the sources of qualitative evidence used in the research.

**Table 2: Details of the Semi Structured interview with Industry experts**

One to One Semi-structured Interview's details with Industry Experts						
Industry	Position	Gender	Location	Interview	Duration	Attributes
Information Technology	Senior Sales & IT Manager	Male	Delhi & NCR	2 no's	30 to 35 Min.	Product Technology; Price, Brand Knowledge, after Sales service and Relationship marketing
AV Industry	Consultant / Procurement	Male & Female	Bangalore	4 no's	30 to 45 Min.	
Office Automation	Sales & IT Manager's	Male	Delhi & NCR	3 no's	30 to 40 Min.	
Display Technology	Business Head / Project Head	Male	Pune	3 no's	30 to 45 Min.	

#### **4.2.2 Data Analysis**

Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was coded by two researchers, independent of each other, to ensure reliability, and the intercoder agreement was found to be 87% (Cohen's Kappa = 0.83), with disagreements being settled by discussion. The analysis was conducted as an iterative process of open coding, theme development, and constant comparison with the support of the reflexive journal to record the decisions and reduce bias. Emerging themes were validated by member checking with three participants. The overall thematic structure underwent five iterations, with each theme becoming evidence-based (at least) on eight interviews to guarantee saturation and representativeness (Brennan et al., 2014).

### **4.3 Quantitative Phase: LinkedIn Online Survey**

#### **4.3.1 Survey Design and Administration**

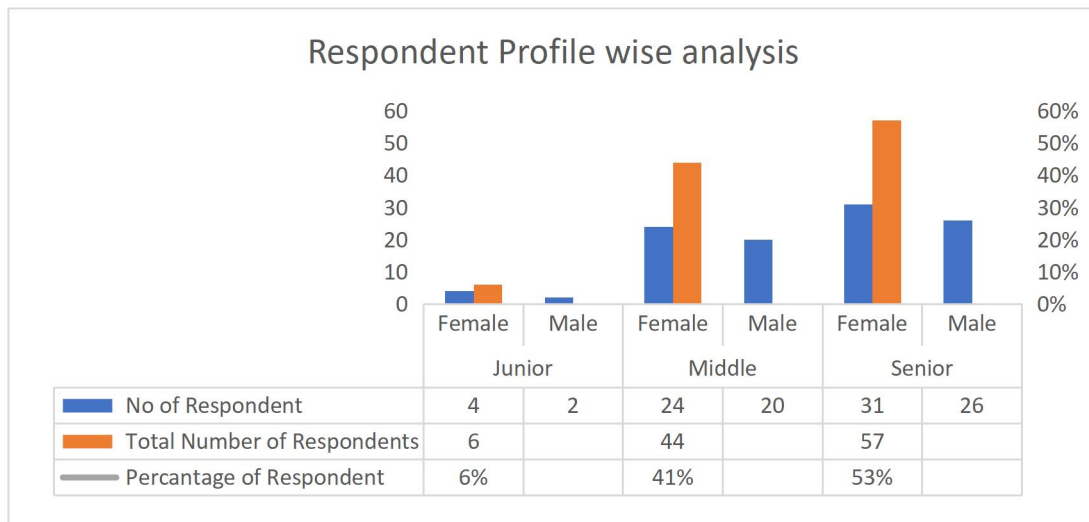
A time-bound online survey was conducted using the B2B technology marketing community in LinkedIn, which was used to triangulate and quantify qualitative phase results in April 2023. LinkedIn was chosen because it has a number of methodological benefits: It provides access to professionals specifically engaged in organizational purchasing and marketing. Profile information enables verification of respondent credentials and sector affiliation and the professional networking context increases response quality and relevance (Bryman, 2016; Dasanayake, 2022).

To make it sector-specific, there was a multi-stage verification protocol. To begin with, the survey was shared only in LinkedIn communities focused on IT/ITES professionals (such as in B2B Technology Marketing Community, IT Procurement Professionals and Technology Solutions Providers). Second, the questionnaire started with three screening questions that asked the respondents to confirm current employment in IT/ITES sector and to verify involvement in organizational purchasing decisions within the past 12 months as well as specify their primary functional role.

Third, the LinkedIn profile URLs provided by the respondents were cross-referenced with their survey answers and 30% of the profiles were manually checked to determine consistency between the reported credentials and the actual professional experience. This screening allowed us to reject 3 responses that fall into the category of non-qualifying sectors and made our final sample (n=107) comprise of actual IT/ITES decision-makers.

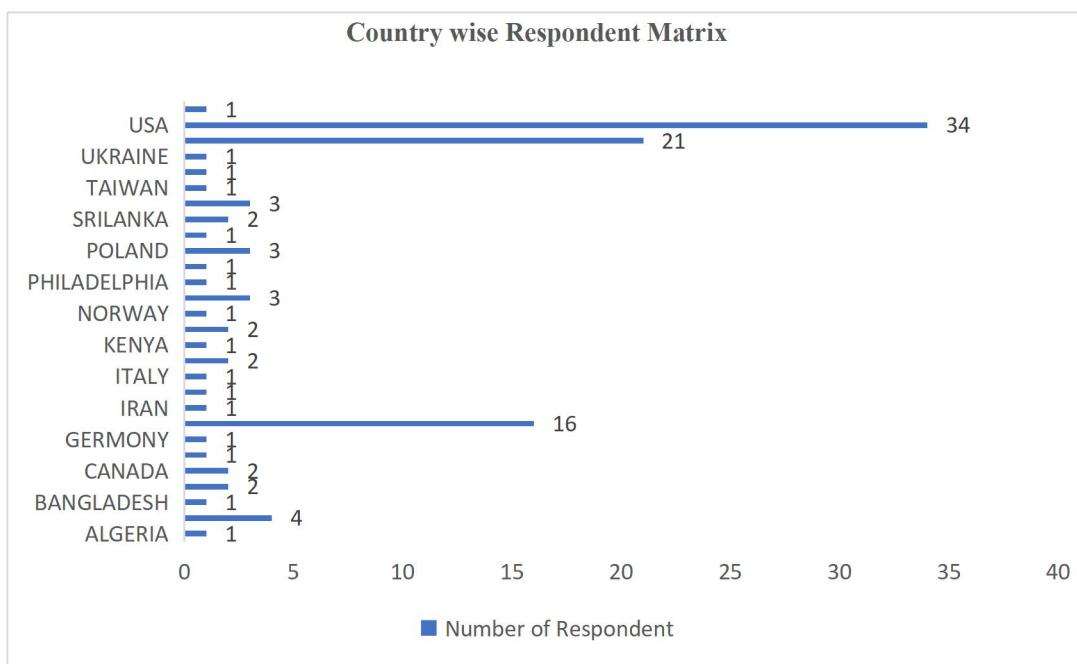
#### **4.3.2 Data Processing and Analysis**

Phantom Buster automation tool was used to extract data with LinkedIn profile data collection being organized and survey responses being organized. Once we had extracted the data, we applied a series of cleaning measures, Such as Duplicate removal: Removing multiple submissions of the same LinkedIn profiles. Validation checks: Checking respondent profiles against screening criteria. Checking of completeness: Dropping of incomplete responses. Checks of consistency: Detection and exploration of outliers and unreasonable response patterns. This procedure led to 107 valid responses to analyze. The sample consisted of a variety of organizational levels: junior management (22%), middle management (48%), and senior management (30%), 68% males, and 32% females as presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: LinkedIn Online Poll Responded Profiling Analysis**

While Respondents represented 28 countries, with predominant representation from India (42%), the United States (18%), the United Kingdom (12%), and Germany (8%), as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: LinkedIn Online Poll Responded Country-wise Matrix**

#### 4.4 Methodological Integration

The mixed-methods design allows complementary advantages of both qualitative and quantitative designs (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012). The qualitative results give deep and contextual insights into how and why branding affects decision-making, whereas the quantitative results give generalizable insights as to the extent to which various factors are significant. Integration was done at three levels: Design level: Step-by-step integration in which qualitative knowledge was used to develop quantitative instruments. Level of analysis: Qualitative and quantitative patterns are presented jointly to reveal convergences and divergences. Interpretation level: Interpreting quantitative patterns with the help of qualitative explanations and evaluating the dominance of qualitative insights with the help of quantitative results (Fetters et al., 2013).

## 5. Comprehensive Results and Interpretation

### 5.1 Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis of Expert Interviews

Interpretation of interview transcripts identified four intersecting themes that elucidate how branding plays a contingent role in making B2B purchases. Figure 4 visualises these themes as it shows the thematic structure and interrelationships.

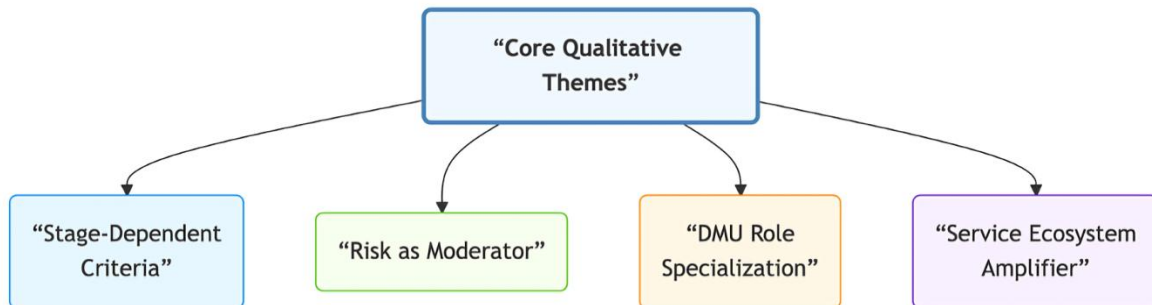


Figure 4: Core themes from qualitative analysis

#### Theme 1: Stage-Dependent Decision Criteria

One similarity of the interviews was the active changing of the decision criteria at different buying phases, and it was expected that it would follow the patterns of institutional theory concerning the legitimization process (Yang and Su, 2014). During the initial phases (problem recognition and information search) branding was used as a major filtering system: Brand reputation is absolutely essential when first identifying potential suppliers. This begins with the best 3-5 in that space since that leaves an assurance that the selection is looking at viable options. But as the decisions moved to technical consideration and vendor choice functional requirements prevailed: When the brands have passed the first credibility check, the competitive arena is entirely changed to technical requirements, price and terms of support. This is where the brand is provided with a seat at the table, yet not the business. This effect of stage is based on the rational choice theory, which focuses on making an efficient decision with the help of brands as a heuristic tool to narrow the initial search space and utilize careful analysis to the shortlisted alternatives (Brown et al., 2011).

#### Theme 2: Risk as Primary Moderator of Brand Sensitivity

The contingency view that was projected by the integrated theoretical framework was very strong, based on the interview information. There was a systematic difference in brand sensitivity by the degree of perceived risk on three dimensions:

- Financial risk (purchase value, budget impact)
- Performance risk (technical uncertainty, integration complexity)
- Social/organizational risk (career implications, decision accountability)

The presence of high-risk situations evoked a so-called risk-averse justification, the choice of branded solutions, with the main aim to justify and minimize personal/organizational responsibility. This is consistent with the institutional theory that focuses on legitimacy seeking behavior within uncertain settings (Michell et al., 2001).

**Theme 3: DMU Role Specialization and Brand Perception**

In line with the considerations of the resource-based view regarding how to create value in the form of relationships (Wang and Sengupta, 2016). The analysis of the interview data demonstrated that systematic differences in brand perception according to the roles at DMU were observed:

- Technical evaluators prioritized brand-associated performance reliability and innovation capability
- Financial decision-makers valued brands for total cost of ownership predictability and resale value
- End users emphasized brand-related ease of use and support responsiveness
- Senior executives viewed brands as strategic partnership indicators and industry leadership signals

The internal negotiation dynamics of the role specialization foster the brand perceptions debate and reconstruction in the DMU in line with the extensions of the social exchange theory to the RBV (Seyedghorban et al., 2021).

**Theme 4: Service Ecosystem as Brand Value Amplifier**

One of the most relevant findings was the increasing role of service ecosystems as a concern in brand assessment. Members always highlighted that brand value is not limited to product attributes, but it includes:

- Pre-sales consulting and solution design
- Implementation support and integration services
- Post-sales maintenance and upgrade pathways
- Partnership flexibility and customization willingness

It is not only the hardware that is worth the premium, but their 24/7 worldwide support, their training programs, and their willingness to co-develop solutions. This ecosystem view is consistent with recent developments in RBV that focus on value creation by networks. It questions conventional product and service brand dichotomies in B2B settings (Mingione and Leoni, 2020) and is a challenge to the traditional dichotomies of product and service branding presented in B2B settings (Davis et al., 2008).

**5.2 Quantitative Findings: Survey Results and Statistical Analysis**

**5.2.1 Overall Construct Importance**

Survey results (Table 3) reveal clear priorities in IT/ITES purchasing decisions. The ranking of mean importance scores was:

**Table 3: LinkedIn Online Poll Results against each construct**

Key Attributes	Response Received
Price	31%
After Sales Service	32%
Technology	27%
Branding	10%

The prevalence of after-sales support is more indicative of the nature of the sector: a dynamic technological environment, the complexity of system integration, and the high cost of downtime, which implies the importance of after-sales service. This result builds on past studies that have focused on service aspects when buying technology. The comparatively low aggregate branding score (10%), at first, seems to be in opposition to the qualitative focus on brand importance. This difference, however, is analytically significant; branding, in most buying situations, is a qualifying criterion, not a maximizing criterion. Brands should be of a certain minimum threshold to qualify but preference to be final is given on the basis of functional features (Selnes, 1993).

**5.2.2 Cross-Group Analysis**

The analysis further revealed significant differences in construct weighting across organizational levels.

- Senior management allocated significantly more points to branding (14.3%) than junior (7.1%) or middle management (8.5%)
- Junior management prioritized price (36.8%) over other constructs
- Middle management showed balanced allocation with slight service preference (33.2%)

These dissimilarities justify qualitative Theme 3 on DMU role specialization and imply that brands are more important as risk-reducing instruments to those with the ultimate responsibility of results (senior management); moreover, these individuals perceive brands as effective risk-reduction (Kulkarni, 2017). Geographic analysis showed some slight yet interesting tendencies: the participants in the emerging markets, India, and southeast Asia placed a bit more weight on branding (11.4%) compared to the participants in the developed markets (7.8%). This could be representative of an institutional difference. The supplier ecosystems and regulatory frameworks of emerging markets are not yet well-developed, making brand signals more important (Suter et al., 2020).

### **5.2.3 Experience-Based Differences**

The results of the correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation between professional experience and the importance of branding ( $r=0.42$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The more advanced respondents used more points on branding, and this is in line with the qualitative perspective that brand sensitivity is learned out of decision experience, and variation in performance that is witnessed among suppliers.

## **5.3 Integrated Interpretation: Reconciling Qualitative and Quantitative Findings**

The apparent contradiction between qualitative emphasis on branding and its low quantitative ranking is resolved through our integrated theoretical framework. Three key integrative insights emerge:

### **Insight 1: Branding as Gatekeeper, Not Differentiator**

Qualitative data indicates the importance of branding in the initial filtering of the product, and quantitative data demonstrates how it has a minor role in the final selection. This confirms our theoretical hypothesis that brands are used as heuristic filters (rational choice theory) that create legitimacy (institutional theory) but give way to functional consideration to maximize utility. According to one interviewee: "Brand puts you on the list, but not the order".

### **Insight 2: Contextual Contingency Explains Variance**

The average branding importance is 9.2%, which conceals high situational variation. The importance of branding doubled in new purchases when the responses of the survey were processed based on the purchase type (new buy vs. rebuy) (18.1% vs. 4.3% in rebuys). This is just in line with qualitative Theme 2 on risk moderation, and it favours contingency approaches to B2B branding (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012).

### **Insight 3: Service-Brand Synergy Creates Competitive Advantage**

The high significance of after-sales service (32.4%), along with the qualitative focus on service ecosystems, indicates that service delivery mediates brand effects. Brands with strong service excellence will use the service excellence as a justification to charge a premium price and create loyalty, whereas brands with a weak brand may focus on price. This service-brand synergy is one of the strategic resource combinations that are in line with RBV (Xie & Zheng, 2020).

#### **5.4 Methodological Integration: Convergent and Complementary Insights**

The mixed-methods design not only allowed convergent validations of the most important findings but also offered some supplementary information that enhanced the knowledge of the dynamics of B2B branding. First, qualitative information related to the stage-specific effect of branding underpinned the survey design directly, specifically, the forced-choice allocation task, which demonstrated the comparably low priority of branding (9.2) on final selection, although its qualitative significance was high in the initial stages. This qualitative validation of the qualitative patterns is a strength of our triangulation. Second, although after-sales service was the most significant construct in general (32.4%), the qualitative interviews offered a contextual account to this observation, showing that service ecosystems enhance brand value in technologically oriented industries where the obsolescence rate is high, and integration is complex. Third, the qualitative observation of role-specific brand perceptions was quantified through a study that indicated significant differences between the junior management (7.1% brand allocation) and the senior management (14.3% brand allocation) in that the different members of DMU use brand information in fundamentally different manners. This assimilation shows that branding does not work as a factor of equal importance but as a contextually relevant resource whose value changes in a systematic manner across stages of decision, level of risk, and position in the organization, which is more subtle than either methodological approach could provide on its own.

#### **6. Theoretical Contributions**

The research contributes to the theoretical knowledge base by proposing and empirically supporting a combined contingency model to integrate organizational buying stage contingent impacts of B2B branding by synthesizing institutional theory, rational choice theory (RCT), and the resource-based view (RBV) (Brown et al., 2011). The resulting synthesis produces a new understanding that branding is a legitimizing heuristic accruing strategic value as a process that is dynamic, multi-mechanism, and invisible when viewed through institutional, cognitive or resource-based perspectives in isolation. By showing how brand influence depends systematically on the purchase situation, stage of decision-making, and the role of a Decision-Making Unit (DMU), in contrast to the simplistic dichotomy of brands matter/do not matter, this study provides valuable gaps in the literature on the dependence of branding influence, particularly in high-stakes and technologically sophisticated contexts where uncertainty about performance and information asymmetry are common. Thus, our study offers a more complex, theoretically grounded framework that not only explains whether branding has an impact on B2B decisions but, more to the point, when, why, and how the effect manifests and declines throughout organizational purchasing process (Seyedghorban et al., 2021).

#### **6.1 Managerial implications**

The research is useful to the B2B marketers and procurement professionals, as it focuses on the stage-based message that would suit decision-making positions. Initial communications are supposed to create brand credibility and mitigate risk, whereas subsequent phases are concerned with technical and financial information (Lynch and de Chernatony, 2007). Technology industries have a major differentiator in after-sales service that necessitates effective service branding. Also, it is necessary to create an influence through strategic professional social presence (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). According to Castillo-Villar and Murillo (2025), to reveal the underlying assumptions, procurement professionals must be involved in the systematic discussions on brand perception in the DMU. Sun, Y. (2024) also stressed the need to develop a consensus so that the tendency towards brand preferences would not act as unquestioning prejudice, which Alexander et al. (2009) also mentioned. An approach that is contingency-based weighting should be embraced where there is more emphasis on brand aspects in high-risk and high-complexity purchases and functional and economic criteria in routine procurements (Brown et al., 2011). Thus, the decision-stage map of managers shows that investments in B2B branding are most reasonable as a means of risk elimination and preliminary attention, and need to be reinforced by high-quality service ecosystems to gain final approval. Lastly, brands are to be considered as the predictors of the chance of a long-term partnership through the prism of such factors as commitment to innovation, ecosystem power, and cultural fit, affecting the success of the relationship after the first transaction is made.

#### **6.2 Future Research Directions**

The future studies in this area should proceed in several directions, including the development of dynamic models of brand perception evolution through the buying and relationship lifecycle, the study of the cross-

cultural aspect of how various markets perceive brands, and the development of models combining emotional reactions and cognitive analyses in decision-making and the use of both traditional and new research methods, including neuro-marketing and big data analytics. Moreover, we would recommend that upcoming projects ought to be based on dynamic models, cross-cultural dynamics, the impact of digital and artificial intelligence that aligns with current trends, and the integration of the ESG elements.

### 6.3 Limitations

Though the study presents valuable insights on how the B2B branding influences organizational decision-making, some limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on the IT/ITES industry, though reasonable, given the purchasing complexities associated with technology, may limit the generalizability of findings to other industries. Although the mixed-methods approach improves validity, the sample size used is rather small to be representative of the diversity of B2B decision-makers in various industries and organizational levels. Additionally, the cross-sectional method of the study fails to consider changes in brand perception over time, which might emerge during the course of long-lasting buyer-seller relationships. Furthermore, the professional knowledge gained by the author provided a better context, but is bound to affect interpretative frameworks, which is compensated for by triangulation with empirical data and interviews with experts. Finally, utilizing LinkedIn to redistribute surveys could introduce sampling bias towards digitally engaged professionals and businesses, potentially marginalizing opinions of those who have less engagement with social media.

### 7. Conclusion

The research highlights the strategic significance of B2B branding and that its influence on organizational buying is multifaceted and context-specific. The results indicate that the success of branding is dependent on the purchase situation and the level of decision-making. The synthesized theoretical perspective created in the present study that integrates institutional, rational choice, and resource-based theories gives a more elaborate insight than all theoretical perspectives about the intricacy of the real-life B2B decision-making process that reflects the interrelation of economic, social, and strategic aspects. To practitioners, although brand investments may result in concrete gains in risk mitigation and decision-making convenience, one should be mindful of the fact that returns are situation-specific and should be implemented strategically as opposed to being utilized in general terms. With digital transformation and the heightened competition on the global level, B2B branding will probably gain importance but become more complicated. The initial branding studies have been replaced by more complex questions regarding how, when and why brands affect organizational performance. The study helps to answer those questions and formulate new questions to be investigated in the future. In conclusion, B2B branding is not only a marketing capability but also a core mechanism of how companies operate in uncertain industrial environments to build trust and create value.

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**Declarations:**

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