Qualitative Market Re

Introducing integrated hybrid communication: The nexus linking marketing communication and corporate communication

Journal:	*Qualitative Market Research*
Manuscript ID	QMR-09-2021-0123.R1
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	Corporate communication, marketing communication, SME brand Communication, SME brand Identity, corporate brand, total communication

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

Introducing integrated hybrid communication: The nexus linking marketing communication and corporate communication

1. Introduction

This study investigates how firm brands communicate their brand messages by exploring two communication strategies, namely marketing communication (MC) and corporate (firm) communication (CC). In particular, the study examines how these two communication strategies are designed, interconnected and conducted in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This study was motivated by both theoretical and practical reasons, which are explained next.

Theoretically, it has long been established that brands are important to the entire organisation (a wide-identity-based view of the firm approach to a brand)[i], and therefore should be treated as a strategic rather than a tactical matter (Balmer and Podnar, 2017). In particular, an organisation's brands can be derived from the organisation's core values and promises (Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Greyser and Urde, 2019), and firms should communicate the messages of these elements/values e.g. SME owners could consider communicating their brands to include the founder, mission, vision, value proposition, organisation or product personality, identity, culture, image, and reputation, (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007; Balmer and Podnar, 2021). Communicating a brand using this approach (a wide-identity-based view of the firm) could enhance the firm's brand equity and the growth and survival of the business (Luxton et al., 2017; Hodge et al., 2018; M'zungu et al., 2019).

Drawing on the above discussion, we identify three main theoretical gaps in organisations' brand communication theories. Firstly, the implementation of communicating these wide-identity-based views of the firm within the SMEs' total marketing approach is limited. Specifically, the wide-orientation identity-based approach is often overlooked by small business owners because of: (1) misconceptions about what a brand is and what the process

should be; (2) lack of knowledge to execute this approach; and (3) overlooking the organisation's brand communication aspect, where communication can be used as a positioning tool. Secondly, while previous research provides extensive guidelines for how established, larger corporations should use corporate marketing and corporate communication to achieve their corporate brand equity, comparatively little research exists in the context of SMEs (Luxton et al., 2017; M'zungu et al., 2019), particularly in emerging economies such as Malaysia (Harrison et al., 2017). The literature on brand communication typically focuses on products rather than on organisations. Yet a corporate brand is an image-building device that is important to any corporation or organisation, regardless of its size (Balmer, 2017) and the brand literature, prior to the formal introduction of the corporate brand notion (Balmer, 1995) sometimes made implicit references to brands at the organisational level. Hence, the notion of the corporate brand within SMEs is appropriate, and indeed, the increasing interests of scholarly works regarding this have begun decades ago, e.g. in *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal,* which has dedicated a section on the topic in its special issue (led by Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007).

Thirdly, communication is the voice of brands and is also a powerful tool to build brand differentiation and brand equity and help to clarify positioning (Fuchs and Diamantopoulos, 2010). However, in SMEs, brand communication typically focuses on products rather than on organisations (Ilia and Balmer, 2012; Kitchen, 2017). Positioning as a tool is ignored (Chen et al., 2017; Hodge *et al*., 2018). Therefore, the current study explored how communication can be used as a positioning tool to build image for SME owners via a wide-identity-based view of the firm (as proposed by Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Balmer, 2017; Kitchen , 2017). The study will specifically contribute to theory not only by exhibiting exactly how the theory that underpins the current study's objective works in SMEs but also by empirically validating the theory of corporate identity—the corporate communication framework, introduced by Balmer

and Gray (1999). The study hopes to identify exactly which brand messages SMEs should use and the tools they could use, addressing shortcomings that have hampered their business growth and image thus far.

Practically, the study is motivated to address this topic due to increased attention to the provision of guidance to SMEs' owners regarding the process by which to develop, grow and communicate their brands. SME owners face challenges when growing their business (especially their brands) due to inherent resource limitations, which may hinder their ability to communicate their firm brands (Gabrielli and Balboni, 2010; Luxton et al., 2017). There are already reported cases of failure owing to unnecessary spending on brands, which can result in financial losses or even threaten their survival (Koporcic, 2020). Thus, it is the intention of this paper to provide practical guidelines to SMEs/brand managers on how these firms could practically apply the identity-based view of the firm with corporate brand orientation when conducting marketing and communication activities so as to sustain business and achieve competitive advantage (De Roeck et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2017; M'zungu et al., 2019)

Therefore, we address the fundamental research question: ***How are marketing communication and corporate communication strategies (1) designed and (2) conducted in order to achieve firm brand equity in SMEs?*** To answer the research question, we draw on empirical evidence from selected SMEs from several industries, thus ensuring that the findings are non-sector-specific.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we review the literature related to IMC and CC strategies in the SME context. Then, the methodology employed is detailed and the empirical findings are explicated. Next, the research insights are discussed in the context of the extant literature. Finally, we consider the study's implications for management, discuss the limitations of the inquiry, and provide recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

The literature review is divided into two parts. First the definition and historiography of MC, IMC and CC is discussed and the theories underpinning this study are identified. The second part reviews the literature on MC/IMC and CC use in the SME context.

The historiography of marketing and corporate communication

A review of previous research identifies two perspectives on how MC and CC are viewed and related to firm outcomes. Specifically, while several studies view MC or Integrated Marketing Communication (hereafter IMC) as a more traditional concept that is aimed at communication with an external audience (such as customers) and tends to focus on the mainstream product marketing communication (Berthon et al., 2008; Spence and Hamzoui-Essoussi, 2010), other scholars propose that IMC is aimed at both internal and external communication (or communication with multiple stakeholders), and provides a more total approach to communication by communicating the organisational-wide orientation towards the brand (the identity-based view of the firm) (M'zungu et al., 2019; Balmer and Podnar, 2021). At this level, elements of marketing and corporate communications are integrated to form the total communication of an organisation (Orazi et al., 2017), although evidently, they can be utilised jointly or individually as needed, as typified in the literature (Kitchen, 2017). Thus, both concepts are needed and are inextricably intertwined. Nevertheless, IMC aims at more mainstream marketing, communicating product brand promises (brand values, identity, image and reputation) with a focus solely on customers (Balmer and Podnar, 2021; Porcu et al., 2017), whereas corporate communication aims to communicate corporate (or firm) brand promises to multiple stakeholders (Urde and Greyser, 2016; Koporcic, 2020). Therefore, due the lack of consistency regarding definitions and boundaries of MC or IMC, they do not encompass the

whole organisation brands (Porcu et al., 2017). Indeed, there are vested interests in keeping these two constructs apart (Greyser and Urde, 2019). Although communicating product brand identity is vital, it is insufficient to build a firm's brand image and brand equity (Orazi et al., 2017): this is because there are fundamental differences between corporate and product brands in terms of the nature, formation, scope and management (Koporcic, 2020).

Balmer and Gray (1999) introduced a Corporate Identity − Communication framework in order to bridge the gap between scholars and practitioners with regard to understanding how to communicate the entire organisation brand (viz an organisational-wide orientation to brand, which encompasses (1) the product, (2) the management, and (3) the organisation's image, reputation and firm brand equity). This framework is an extension of the IMC concept (Schultz et al., 1994) and is characterised by a three-part focus − primary, secondary and tertiary communication, which address the total communication of the brand. That is, rather than communicating IMC or CC separately, an organisation needs to consider a more holistic approach to brands when communicating to all of its stakeholders, since these concepts are inseparable because an organisation's brand messages can derive from any of: (i) management, (ii) organisational and/or (iii) marketing communication. This perspective (known as total communication) serves as the basic foundation of the current study's underpinning theory and approach to how brand messages can be communicated within the current study's context, namely SMEs. Nevertheless, although the framework is appropriate for SMEs, the lack of empirical approaches means that we are yet to witness how it will be applicable at the SME level. In fact, the pressing concerns amongst scholars are how to communicate brands in their totality within small businesses, and what are the brand messages that they need to communicate in order to help them to grow?

We propose that in the context of SMEs, using an organisational-wide orientation to the brand approach to communication is highly relevant (Ots and Nyilasy, 2017; Porcu et al., 2017);

however, the following two questions arise: what defines this totality within SMEs' firm communication strategy and what is involved? Their strategy might differ from those used by larger corporations, creating a research gap, which this study aims to fill. To date, this topic is still under-researched at the SME level (Gabrielli and Balboni, 2010; Hodge et al., 2018; Koporcic, 2020). CC, on the other hand, despite its academic advocates, is less explored in general, and with few exceptions (e.g., Vinten, 1999; Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009, which represent initial attempts), and it is hardly touched upon in the SME context (Eggers et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2017). While many publications testify to CC or MC adoption by larger corporations, far less attention has been dedicated to CC strategies in SMEs (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009; Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014; Luxton et al., 2017; Porcu et al., 2017; Koporcic, 2020). Yet, the applicability of total communication at firm level within the SME context is recognised (e.g., Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007a, b; Merrilees, 2007; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009; Gabrielli and Balboni, 2010; Luxton et al., 2017; M'zungu et al., 2019), since the corporate brand notion includes all modes of organisation, including for-profit, non-profit and public-sector entities, and organisations of all sizes, from small family-run firms to multinational corporations (Merrilees, 2007; M'zungu *et al*., 2019).

This gap had led to inadequate understanding of how to practically apply and strategise communication which is underpinned by an organizational-wide philosophy and culture (Balmer and Gray, 1999; Balmer and Greyser, 2006; llia and Balmer, 2012), also commonly known as the identity-based view of the firm (llia and Balmer, 2012). This knowledge ultimately will aid SMEs to make sound decisions regarding their brand communication strategy and thus to spend their money wisely. Communication is not only a good means to develop SMEs' brand awareness and enhance positive brand identity-image, but also to develop SME owners' overall brand equity over time (Hodge *et al*., 2018). Chen et al. (2017) add that SMEs may be in a good position to achieve increased brand trust, growth, and

competitive advantage by emphasising their brand identity-image in their communications.

Since previous literature is more centred on the tools used by SMEs, rather than the entirety of

their brands' values, this paper attempts to bridge this gap. Hence, the next section gives special

attention to how SMEs could achieve firm brand equity by considering both MC and CC in

their total integration communication planning and activity.

Marketing communication, corporate communications and SMEs

The IMC-SMEs literature proposed that tool and strategies practiced in the SMEs can be

subdivided into the five: 1. Advertising (Krake, 2005), 2. Sales Promotion (e.g. Gilmore et al.,

2006), 3. PR/MPR (e.g. Merrilees, 2007), 4. Direct Marketing and digital communication (e.g.

Gabrielli and Balboni, 2010; Hanna et al., 2011; Berthon et al., 2012) and 5. Personal Selling

(e.g. Thrassou and Vrontis, 2006). Scholars suggest that brand and IMC are more relevant

concepts in the context of SMEs as compared to identity-based concepts such as 'corporate

brand' and 'corporate communication' (Merrilees, 2007; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009), which

may be seen as fanciful additions once the firm has gained a presence in the marketplace. We

contend this, and propose that corporate communications are also applicable to many SMEs.

According to the literature, we found several elements pertaining to both MC and CC, which

in effect overlap and can serve as a basis for SME communication strategies as discussed below.

Identity/Roots: Founder/owner personality and firm core values. Communicating the

identity or roots is about an 'inside-out approach' of a firm (Balmer, 2017) (as compared to the

outside approach of IMC), and is about an organisation's unique characteristics, which are

often rooted in the founder's vision, legal requisites, corporate strategy, culture and legal

imperatives (Balmer, 2017; Yang *et al.,* 2018). Significantly, employees have strategic

importance as noted early on by Balmer (1995). Although SMEs do not necessarily have a

formal marketing communication activity, such as large multinational firms, they could still go

beyond merely product and brand communication elements by differentiating their brand and

firm through emotional and symbolic attributes of the corporate/SME brand via both product brand image and owner/manager's values (Spence and Hamzaoui-Essoussi, 2010). Likewise, Rode and Vallaster (2005) explain that SMEs present their business through the personality of the entrepreneur/founder, which then translates into operating systems/managerial practices, and eventually into the culture, vision and mission of the firm. The SME owner/manager's personality may be the most important source for developing a firm's core values and brand identity (Yang *et al.,* 2018), which if competently conveyed through an integrated communication strategy may enhance both the product and firm brand identity (Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Merrilees, 2007). Equally, previous research acknowledges the relevance of the owner/manager's role for effectively diffusing the corporate vision, mission and goals, among firm employees (as well as seeking their consensual agreement with the above mentioned), for enhancing corporate identity management (Tourky et al., 2020). However, external stakeholders should also be addressed (Simões *et al.,* 2005).

Build relationships across multiple stakeholders (using roots). While MC/IMC is necessary for SMEs as they directly impact sales, market share, obtaining acceptable prices and communicating, overall brand reputation through CC offers the potential to reach multiple stakeholders rather than customers alone (Orazi *et al.,* 2017; Koporcic, 2020). Porcu *et al.* (2017) argue that most companies treat IMC as simply a marketing device rather than a strategic business process, thus this represents more of a customer orientation type of communication rather than stakeholder orientation. Orazi *et al.* (2017) explain that in a smaller firm, the owner/entrepreneur, via brand personality, could achieve an impact not only on how they design their mission and corporate strategy, but also on how they build relationships with local environment or relevant stakeholders (Harrison *et al.,* 2017). Previous studies tend to concur that in many cases SME communication activities of necessity focus on the individual brand at the product level, with customers as a primary target (Wong and Merrilees, 2005;

Mitchell *et al.,* 2015), and little attention may be paid to communicating to multiple

stakeholders (Eggers *et al.,* 2013; Koporcic, 2020). IMC could and likely does cover a broader

marketing mix function that fits into the corporate function (Ots and Nyilasy, 2017). However,

IMC to date provides limited guidance regarding how a firm can coordinate and integrate

contact points between the brand and multiple stakeholders; hence, how alignment between

brand identity and brand image with the overall aim to generate brand equity are still unclear

(M'zungu et al., 2019; Koporcic, 2020). Specifically, firms need to consider stakeholder-

centred orientation/strategic focus and organisational alignment dimensions in their total

integrated communication rather than product or consumer orientation alone. Hence, SME

managers consider incorporating relationship building elements into their total communication

strategies, targeted at larger audiences (Eggers *et al.,* 2013) such as retailers, end users and

suppliers who may be central to the corporate mission and the brand (Ots and Nyilasy, 2017)

and owners/managers may need to adopt an integrated communication strategy embedded in a

"firm's overall business philosophy and mission" whether expressed or nascent (Simões *et al.,*

2005: 156).

Product or service brand values or attributes. From the outset, scholars have noted that

brand attributes are applicable to the corporate as well as to the product and service levels with

the corporate brand requiring a more holistic, albeit complicated, organisational approach

(Balmer and Gray, 2003). Despite resource constraints (Mitchell *et al.,* 2015), SMEs naturally

focus more on product and brand based communication given the imperative to generate returns,

and this proscribes understanding of what the business could be or could achieve (e.g.,

competitive advantage) (Eggers *et al.,* 2013). Bresciani and Eppler (2010) report, that in

Switzerland, start-ups do focus upon external communication, but do not make considerable

use of conventional communication activities such as advertising targeted at mass media, rather

focussing more on events (a form of PR) and classic business dinners (a form of personal

selling). They explain that in delivering CC, traditional forms of advertising (with mass target) are thought to be expensive and rather ineffective, while networking and word-of-mouth are likely to play an important role. Furthermore, they note that SMEs cannot afford significant promotional expenditure, but they appear to use online advertising as a core tool to build both their firm and product brand. However, as explained, several opportunities are not exploited by SMEs not necessarily because of inadequate budget but rather managerial ineptitude or misconception (caused by a short-sighted outlook of what constitutes communication activity/ lack of communication awareness) (Gabrielle and Balboni, 2010).

Other marketing related activities. As business environs are constantly changing and globalisation continues apace this places SMEs under increasing competitive pressure, and developing and maintaining relations with multiple stakeholders has become much more important. Research increasingly focuses, both conceptually and empirically, on SMEs' engagement (and communication) in CSR strategies to internal and external stakeholders such as employees, community/society at large, NGOs local authorities, supply chain and business counterparts (e.g., Nielsen and Thomson, 2009; Vallaster et al., 2019; Cesinger, et al., 2021). Social responsibility activities practised by SMEs are largely driven by the characteristics/values of owners/managers (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Cesinger, et al., 2021). They are communicated internally through meetings, newsletters/use of corporate magazines, publicity awards and employee welcome packs, as well as externally via employers' organisations, or through an SME's website and available media (Murillo and Lozano, 2006). While the reason for engaging and communicating CSR activities was genuine, directly deriving from the owner/manager's moral values, all SME decision-makers investigated by Jenkins (2006) recognised that, later, they perceived intangible business benefits from these activities, most commonly represented by higher employee motivation and image improvement (Vallaster *et al.*, 2019).

In summary, CC is relevant to SME communication strategies because it can address brand messages at firm level across a widened stakeholder base. Furthermore, a balance between IMC and CC could strengthen their firm brand identity and equity as they partially intersect and capture a more holistic brand identity of the firm rather than merely the product or service promoted (Porcu *et al.,* 2017; Koporcic, 2020). By addressing CC (via e.g., corporate advertising[ii] such as sponsorship, foundations, charities and advertising), the firm is 'present' and 'visible' among its stakeholders and eventually may be able to address global targets and build image and reputation in the long-term (M'zungu et al., 2019; Koporcic, 2020;). Therefore, combining marketing (MC) and corporate communication (CC) to some degree may be necessary for SMEs to achieve uniqueness. Undoubtedly, the full dimensions of their overlaps need to be identified in order to obtain full scale advantages.

3. Methodology

Research design

Given that this study seeks to provide in-depth understanding into IMC and nascent CC strategies in the SME context our research: *How are marketing communication and corporate communication strategies (1) designed and (2) conducted in order to achieve firm brand equity in SMEs?* Considering the relative dearth of research on these themes, particularly in the SME context, a qualitative approach is appropriate for investigating the phenomena under study. The case study method was chosen, as this is well positioned to investigate questions regarding contemporary phenomena (Yin, 2014). A multiple case study approach (as opposed to a single case) was selected as it facilitates direct comparison, thus revealing whether findings regarding IMC and CC strategies are specific to individual cases, or can be replicated across a number of distinct cases (Eisenhardt, 1991; Yin, 2014). As compared to single case studies, multiple case studies are generally considered to be more robust, and to provide opportunities for "broader

exploration of research questions and theoretical elaboration" (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007:

27). Case studies are particularly suitable to address 'how' (and 'why') research questions and

enable the in-depth analysis of understudied phenomena in specific settings (Rashid et al., 2019;

Yin, 2014). Prior research also underscores the increased potential of case studies towards

theorisation (Tsang, 2014; Welch et al., 2011). Our choice of research design aligns well with

an increasing tendency toward the case study method for empirically investigating marketing

strategies in SMEs (e.g., Wong and Merrilees, 2005; Bresciani and Eppler, 2010; Spence &

Hamzaoui-Essoussi, 2010). We selected the number of case studies following Eisenhardt's

(1989) suggestion, where it is optimal to investigate between four and ten cases in order to

ensure sufficient empirical data without creating analytical overload.

Research context and sampling

Considering the research design, we aimed at attaining analytic generalisation (rather than

statistical generalisation) (Yin, 2014). In order to ensure participants selected for this study

represented particularly suitable cases for research, we relied on purposeful sampling (Patton,

2015; Piekkari *et al.,* 2010). The criteria used for selecting our sample were:

1. Firms should be Malaysian-based;

2. Firms should be characterised as an SME and should comply with the new SME

   definition endorsed at the National SME Development Council (NSDC) of Malaysia in

   2013[iii] generally considering the employee criterion;

3. Firms should have been operating as businesses for a minimum of three years

   (Abimbola and Kocak, 2007), in order to ensure they had sufficient time to develop

   communication strategies;

4. Firms should be involved in international activities, as they provide legitimacy to the brand (Spence and Hamzaoui-Essoussi, 2010) and therefore we could expect communication strategies to be developed and/or emerging;

5. Firms should (in their composite) belong to several industries in terms of the sector of activity thus ensuring that the findings are non-sector specific (Abimbola and Kocak, 2007).

In choosing the sampling frame we consulted lists made available by the Malaysian External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) and conducted initial discussions with Malaysian SME trade advisers. Our final sample comprises seven cases, coded Case I to VII to ensure confidentiality. Appendix A presents the sample profile. The subsequent paragraph justifies further the context chosen for our current study.

Insert Appendix A here

SMEs in the Malaysian Emerging Economy

This study was undertaken in the Federated Kingdom of Malaysia. Today, Malaysia represents one of the fastest emerging economies in South-East Asia, and has undergone rapid economic development during the past few decades. Since 1983, Malaysia has started engaging in sustained privatisation initiatives, by means of which the national government aims to enhance the role of the private sector to foster the development of a market-based economy, increase efficiency and productivity and consequently boost economic growth (Economic Planning Unit, 2013). Further, according to the Economic Planning Unit (2013), a key policy pursued by these privatisation programmes and initiatives aims directly at enhancing the performance of SMEs, given that SMEs appear to represent the future driving force for economic development. According to the SME Census (2011), SMEs represent 97.3 per cent of all firms in Malaysia – over 645,000 business establishments.

Over time, various agencies specialising in supporting SMEs were created, signifying a clear determination and a sustained effort to improve SMEs' start-up, survival and success rates. For example, the Small and Medium Industries Development Corporation (SMIDEC) was established in 1996 to support SMEs regarding infrastructure, finance and market related advisory services. In 2004, the National SME Development Council (NSDC) was created to perform a more strategic role – specifically to design and implement strategies to support the development of SMEs at the national level, across all industries, simultaneously assuring coordination with ministries and agencies. Furthermore, at the initiative of the NSDC the Small and Medium Enterprise Corporation Malaysia (SME Corp. Malaysia) was established in 2009, as a single agency in charge of creating policies, strategies and coordinating activities with other government bodies. The above initiatives have yielded results, as SMEs' contribution to Growth Domestic Product (GDP) has increased steadily during recent years, from 29.4 per cent in 2005 to 33.1 per cent in 2013, while the share of employment in SMEs to total employment has also registered a growing trend over recent years, from 57.1 per cent in 2010 to 57.5 per cent in 2013 (Department of Statistics, Malaysia - SME Corp. Malaysia 2013/2014). Although, in general terms, Malaysian SMEs have developed and performed well, they could further increase their results and their overall contribution to GDP. To this end clear targets have been set for future years, as SMEs are expected to contribute a 41 per cent to the Malaysian GDP by 2020 (SME Masterplan 2012-2020). While the supportive programmes implemented in recent years have been instrumental to provide infrastructure, financial and market access support, EPU (2013) acknowledges among its current policy support initiatives increasing brand awareness. Moreover, several advisory services have already been set up to help Malaysian SMEs communicate their branding strategies. We are in consensus with this initiative as we believe that effective and integrative communication strategies should be designed and

implemented in SMEs for them to be able to efficiently transmit their firm/corporate brand to their multiple stakeholders. The aforementioned arguments make the Malaysian emergent market a particularly fruitful ground for conducting the present research.

Data collection

The main source of data is represented by in-depth interviews, as interviews are acknowledged to be a particularly efficient way of collecting rich empirical data (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The interviews were conducted in West Malaysia, with either one main owner/manager, or where applicable (and possible), with a small team of knowledgeable decision-makers involved in designing and/or implementing IMC and CC. Similar to many other studies, we contacted managers by email and phone to invite them to take part in this research. A semi-structured interview design was chosen. This enabled us to ensure that similar interview guidelines were utilised in all cases, while at the same time allowing sufficient flexibility for interviewees to express their views regarding IMC and CC strategies conducted or emergent in their SMEs. First, interviewees were asked to provide general details about the activity and profile of their firm. Next, open-ended questions related to the IMC and CC strategies the SMEs engaged in were discussed with the interviewees. They were encouraged to provide real-life examples and clarify details regarding issues of interest to this research. In total, nine senior decision-makers were interviewed. Given that English is a recognised business language in Malaysia, and in line with stated interviewee preference, interviews were conducted mainly in English. However, the interviewees were provided with the opportunity to express their viewpoints in the Bahasa Malaysian language, if they preferred to do so, as we ensured that at least one of the research team members taking part in the interviews, was a native speaker. We conducted interviews until we reached data saturation (Glasser and Strauss, 1967; Saunders et al., 2018). Each interview lasted, on average, 60 minutes. Following standard procedure in

qualitative research, all interviews were audio recorded (with the consent of the interviewees) and transcribed verbatim. This resulted in 140 pages of single-spaced transcripts. The transcript material was further supplemented by structured field notes taken during the interviews by a research team member (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Aware of the possible intellectual and/or political problems that may occur regarding research interviews (Alvesson, 2003), further data sources were considered in the data collection stage. We followed established guidelines for triangulation of data in case study research (Woodside and Wilson, 2003; Piekkari *et al.,* 2010; Yin, 2014) to develop a comprehensive database and ensure the validity of our findings. Specifically, direct observation of the specific environments of the cases was undertaken by the researchers. In addition, firm archives, websites and leaflets/brochures/catalogues/CD-ROMs and any other audio and video materials made available by interviewees complemented interview data. By using multiple sources of evidence and maintaining a clear chain of evidence we were able to alleviate construct validity concerns, simultaneously, elaborating a robust case study database that increased the reliability of the study (Yin, 2014). To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of managers and their firms, the names of research participants were coded (Bell and Bryman, 2007).

Data analysis

To begin with, we created full reports for each of the seven case firms. We then analysed the data by conducting a cross-case analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). This technique enabled us to iteratively compare between the findings and previously identified theory (Piekkari *et al.,* 2010). NVivo 11 was used to elaborate a case study database, thus facilitating data management across several sources of empirical evidence, as well as coding the data. The coding strategy follows a few well-established steps. First, we read through the

transcripts. In order to find passages that correspond to a priori identified constructs/ideas in the relevant theory and/or empirical literature (Paré, 2004). Next, second-order codes were formed, based on grouping previously identified first-order codes from the empirical data from all seven cases. For example, communication related first-order codes such as: brochures, leaflets, logos, packaging-outers, point-of-purchase display (offline), newspaper, online, radio and TV ads, social media platforms and websites formed the *advertising conceptual construct*; Product/service, brand, quality and other attributes formed the *product/service conceptual construct*. Subsequently, we further clustered previously identified second-order codes into *core conceptual constructs*. For example, advertising, sales promotion and direct marketing constitute communication tools that commonly help in shaping the *MC core construct*, while PR, corporate advertising and personal selling/professional meetings generally shape the *CC core construct*. The CC core construct partially overlaps with the MC core construct, but also includes constructs related to managerial personality/core values and to multiple stakeholders.

4. Findings and discussion

MC and CC intertwined in the SME context

To this end, we structure our findings and corresponding discussion in four requisites which show how MC and CC intertwined in the SME context giving rise to an *Integrated Hybrid Communication perspective*. These four steps explain how IHC works: (1) Communicate the identity/roots; (2) Establish and communicate the relationship; (3) Communicate the product/service; and (4) Communicate other firm activities (e.g., CSR)

Communicate the identity/roots. Most interviewees indicate that in some way or another communicating the identity or the roots (*Owner/manager's personality/core values, firm ethos)* is highly relevant for their business start-up and development. This is conveyed through storytelling. Specifically, interviewees spoke about how the company was founded, their

entrepreneurial journey while highlighting their passion for business. The *owner/manager's*

personality/core values appear to influence the entire philosophy of each SME, transmitted

through the firm's message (e.g., mission, vision and implementation strategies).

> "Our founder decided to venture into the animation industry. Together with his wife, they develop the business model and the direction of the company; their vision is to provide a platform for the local talents to showcase their creativity and to produce quality products with good moral values, local cultures with global appeal." (Manager, Case I)

The founder of Case III, who has a caring personality, explains that in her view the nutritional

habits of the domestic market could be healthier, and it is her keen aspiration translated in the

firm's vision to help toward achieving this purpose through her healthy herbal based food

products:

> "Knowing seaweed is about being health conscious. […] I would like our younger generation to know about my product-seaweed: It is a healthy product and they should embrace this as part of healthy lifestyle." (Founder, Case III)

The core values of the managers/owners are reflected in the way they implement business

strategies and run their daily activities and are effectively communicated to their customers:

> "Normally our customers would be coming back to our shop because of who we are. We are friendly. We are not arrogant. We are available to chat with them whenever they need to. They will remember our face, our smiling face. Our friendliness. They remember this and it stays with them." (Founder, Case VI)

In light of our empirical findings, it appears that firm founders attempted to communicate firm

brand identity from the early stage of the business to increase brand awareness. We corroborate

prior research by Hatch and Schultz (2008) by showing that strategic vision rapidly can become

a central idea behind the company or what it embodies and expresses senior management

aspiration for what the organization will achieve in the future. Their core values become the

core values of the firm and influence mission, vision and implementation as well as

communication strategies (Krake, 2005; Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009; Spence and Hamzaoui-Essoussi, 2010). Predominantly because of this, and at times coupled with resource scarcity, it is hardly possible to differentiate between MC/IMC and CC strategies in terms of their design and implementation. Since this is normally the responsibility of a sole decision-maker or a small managerial team (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007), who often feel enthusiastic and passionate regarding their firm and product/service, distinctions are not made between the two, which is also reflected in SMEs' nascent communication strategies.

Furthermore, we extend earlier research by Eggers *et al.* (2013) who point out that brand authenticity, for example stemming from firm and founder values, helps fuel SME growth in today's markets by showing that founder personality and core value strongly impact upon the firm from its embryonic development stages.

Establish and communicate the relationship with multiple stakeholders. All respondents explained the importance of building and nurturing relationships with key stakeholders. Consensus exists among the owners/managers that multiple external and internal stakeholders (e.g., supply chain, business partners, NGOs, community, governmental agencies and bodies, funding institutions, retailers, wholesalers and other actors in their industry, as well as firm staff) are addressed by their firm (Schultz *et al.,* 2011). The quotes below illustrate how relationships are built and/or maintained with different external stakeholders:

> "You have to translate all the good of the brand name into your appearance, the way you talk, the way you present yourself, the way you face the customer, the way you conduct the negotiation, the way you talk about your competitors. That is the way we establish the relationship with our main buyers. […] We (i.e. all cable manufacturers) are not enemies. It's all based on friendship. We cooperate" (Manager Case VII)

"We use forums, NGO talks, medical authorities, government certification and testimonials in order to increase awareness of our coconut oil. I'm also putting effort to increase more funding through working with the NGOs." (Founder Case II)

SME managers are keen to stimulate appropriate communication with their internal stakeholders, namely the employees, thus allowing them to transmit their (and their firm's) values to their staff:

"Last time we went to Lumut for a family day event. We had a sports club, team building for staff and management … we were happy. This is an annual event." (Manager, Case VII)

Decision-makers were keen to communicate their core values and implement them, not only regarding their customers as single stakeholders, but also by addressing the local community, business peers and, to some extent society at large. This aligns well with prior findings (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Nielsen and Thomson, 2009; Vallaster *et al*., 2019) that acknowledge SMEs' engagement (and communication) in social responsibility strategies to internal and external stakeholders such as employees, community/society at large, NGOs local authorities, supply chain and business counterparts. Social responsibility activities practised by SMEs are largely driven by the characteristics/values of owners/managers.

Communicate the product/service. Our empirical evidence shows that product brand communication remains the focal aim of the SMEs considered in this study. In the words of interviewees:

"Our product has moral value and positive elements […] We use moral content to communicate and teach the kids. When the kids imitate [the behaviour of the cartoon characters], parents love it. They will encourage the kids to choose our product over those more violent types of cartoons." (Manager, Case I)

> "We have a variety of the roti canai [traditional food] we also have products that are suitable to vegan and vegetarian customers. Children love our products. We also conduct research among our loyal customers to understand more about our products and they told us it is the taste of our products and the quality of the ingredients that we use that they like." *(*Manager, Case V)

Moreover, most owners/managers stressed the importance of having professional well-designed packaging and/or point-of-purchase as previously discussed.

These findings align well with prior research in the SME context (e.g., Gabrielli and Balboni, 2010; Spence and Hamzoui-Essoussi, 2010) noting that product brand communication is key for SMEs. The focus of product/service brand communication was not only related to quality and/or performance, but also included visual elements of the brand such as: design, name, logo, colours and other visual elements (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010).

Communicate other firm activities. Notably, respondents also refer to national branding/destination marketing to increase their brand equity (brand loyalty), corporate social responsibility or the marketing mix, for example:

> "Normally after they have bought our product, we talk about Malaysia as a whole. We'll tell them to come again, visit Malaysia […] Not just my shop of course." (Founder, Case VI)

This corroborates prior findings by Kotler and Gertner (2002) that businesses are also able to attract consumers to repeat purchases due to enhancing brand identity via association with country of origin. As a consequence, they compete in the market for tourists, factories and businesses, not to mention foreign direct investment.

Furthermore, despite relatively limited resources, some interviewees clearly highlighted their involvement in CSR activities (and/or goodwill non-chargeable help). For example:

> "To have maximum presence as possible and in line with our target market – children - we work very closely with UNICEF and we also have CSR whereby we at times go into hospitals all over Malaysia." (Manager, Case I)

Often CSR related activities are practised by participating in events ranging from education and charities, to festivals and entertainment. By attending these events, SMEs can on the one hand be helpful to the community, while on the other they can experience greater visibility and realise financial benefits. Additionally, the core elements of a corporate brand, shaped through corporate identity, include products, services and corporate social responsibility programmes (Vallaster *et al*., 2019; Cesinger, *et al.,* 2021). A synopsis of the findings is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

An Integrated Hybrid Communication (IHC) perspective

Based on the analysis of our empirical evidence we note that the SMEs considered in this study select a mix of MC and CC activities to communicate their product (and firm brand) to multiple stakeholders. We are therefore able to introduce an *Integrated Hybrid Communication (IHC) perspective* (illustrated in Figure 1) to explain how SMEs can utilise both MC and CC to establish their firm brand equity.

Insert Figure 1 here

IHC is a concept that communicates SMEs at both product and firm (corporate) brand level. It combines both product marketing and corporate communication as a framework for SMEs to help build their firm and product brand awareness and identity-image. IHC provides guidelines on how SMEs communicate their identity/roots through messages delivered via relevant communication tools employed in relationships established with multiple stakeholders. Thus,

SMEs would be able to enhance clarity, consistency and communication impact and in long run they would be in a good position to achieve firm brand equity across relevant stakeholders. This is presented in detail in Figure 2 and Table 2.

Insert Figure 2 and Table 2

5. Conclusions

The theoretical contribution of this article relates to the formal introduction of a new integrated communication approach between marketing and corporate communication, namely an IHC perspective, to explain how SMEs can utilise both MC/IMC and CC to establish their firms' brand awareness, identity and brand equity. Earlier, in order to bridge the gap between scholars and practitioners, we suggested how SMEs can apply the identity-based view firm approach (Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Balmer 2017) in order to help them to communicate their entire organisation's brand, and our theoretical views are underpinned by an organisational-wide philosophy and culture (Balmer and Greyser, 2006; llia and Balmer, 2012) and Balmer and Gray's (1999) Corporate Identity – Communication framework. Our findings corroborate previous findings by Rode and Vallester (2005), Nielsen and Thomsen (2009), Vallaster et al. (2019) and Koporcic (2020) in that CC strategies have begun to emerge and are developing in SMEs. Perhaps not surprisingly, firm size, calculated in terms of the number of employees (which we consider a proxy for resource availability), seems to influence, to some extent, the level of engagement and formal organisation of CC strategies. Moreover, what was implicit in the data were the distinctive – often discernible – approaches utilised by SME managers.

In particular, four requisites inform the communication strategy used by SMEs, and these protocols are as follows:

1. **Communicate the identity/roots**: this requisite addresses the firm's corporate identity, and it can be delivered through CC via elements such as the founder/owner's personality, their core values/philosophy, and their determination to make the business a success.

2. **Establish and communicate the relationship**: this requisite is positioned at the corporate level, since it involves addressing multiple stakeholders (e.g. employees, business partners/competitors and customers) through CC using relationship-building activities and behaviour.

3. **Communicate the product/service:** this requisite addresses the product/service level and mainly focuses on a single stakeholder, namely customers, with an emphasis on product performance/quality.

4. **Communicate other activities of the firm:** this requisite is situated at both the product/service and the firm level, and it includes activities such as CSR and brand identity via association with country of origin.

Our findings suggest that SMEs should focus on brand messages with firm and product identity as a starting point, with a two-part focus (instead of three parts, as based on the original framework proposed by Balmer and Gray in 1999): that is, (1) primary and (2) secondary communication. This addresses the total communication of the brands within SMEs (see Figure 2 and Table 3 for an outline of the brand messages to be communicated in SMEs' overall communication strategies). Hence, this theoretical contribution has led to the introduction of a new integrated communication approach for SMEs – a combination between marketing and corporate communication, viz: an Integrated Hybrid Communication (IHC) theoretical perspective to explain how SMEs can utilise both MC and CC to establish their firm brand awareness and brand equity. In particular, we detail a more systematic and holistic approach to the strategic design of SMEs' total communication campaigns, combining their MC and CC in order to achieve their objectives, such as brand awareness.

We explain the application via the IHC concept: SMEs could communicate at the product and the firm brand level (rather than merely at the product/service level). By utilising the aforementioned, SMEs can bolster the awareness of their corporate and product brands (including their respective images) by embracing not merely a customer but also a multiple stakeholder approach (Balmer, 2017; Kitchen 2017). Owners/managers are the driver/s and shaper/s of both MC and CC strategies. Their core values become the core values of the firm and influence its mission, vision and implementation as well as its communication strategies (Balmer, 2017; Yang et al., 2018; M'zungu et al., 2019; Koporcic, 2020). However, the complexities inherent in the above, coupled with issues such as resource scarcity, mean that it is difficult to differentiate between MC and CC strategies, especially in the context of the embryonic or developing business. Often, management decisions apropos the above are the responsibility of the SME manager/owner (or the CEO/Senior Management team) (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007; Hodge et al., 2018). Not uncommonly, the above are passionate about their organisation and corporate brand, and also (where applicable) about their product and service brand lines: as a consequence, the communication differences and management approaches to IMC and CC are often fuzzy.

By providing guidelines as to what can be done, which message/content to deliver, and the relevant vehicles to deploy to attain clarity, consistency, and impact, and ultimately with regard to communications, the task of management becomes surer and easier. We have drawn on empirical evidence from selected SMEs in several industries in advancing the territory, as explicated in our article.
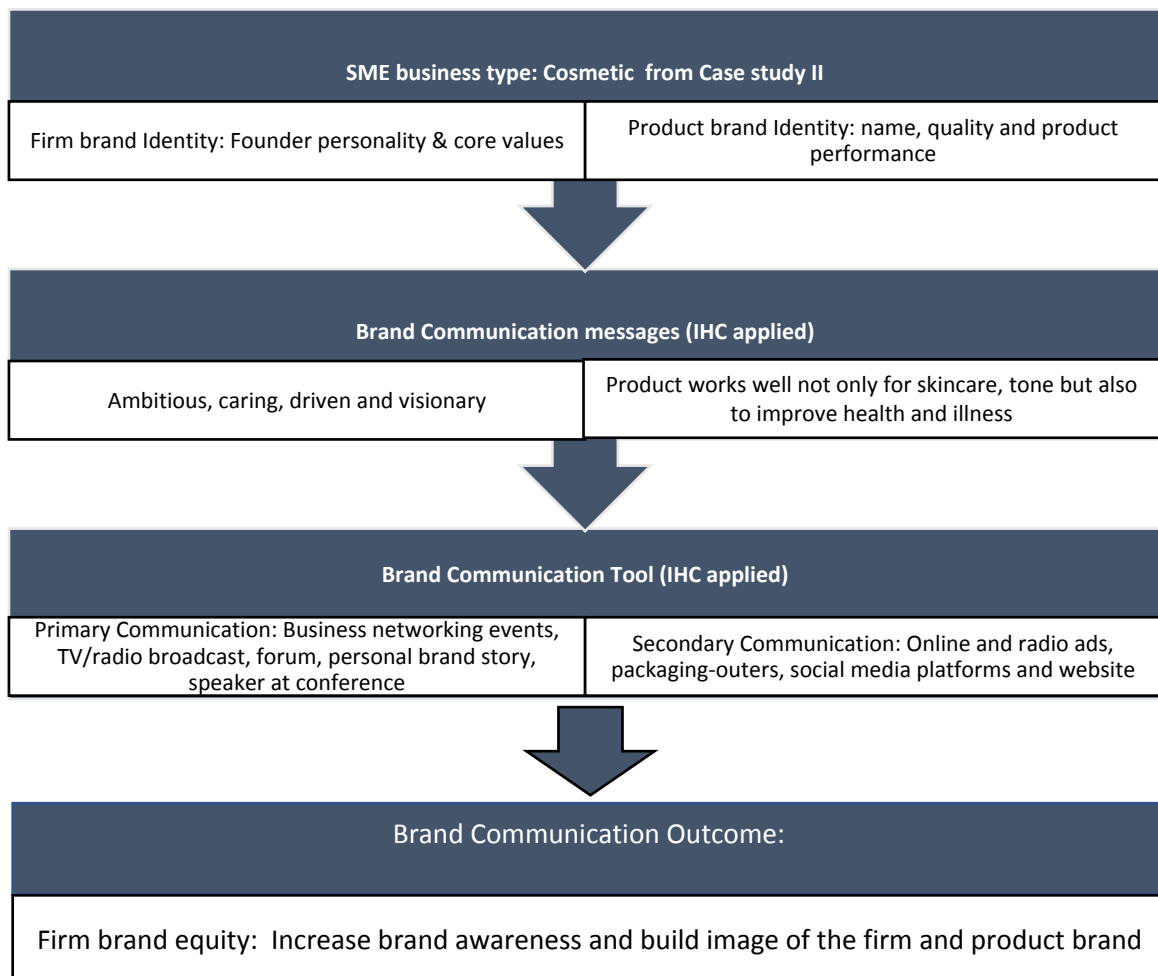
Therefore, this article introduces and explains the theoretical notion of IHC, which shows how SMEs communicate their product/service and their firm identity/core values (e.g., through founder/managerial personality, reflected in the product and the firm's brand) to multiple stakeholders. Nevertheless, we provide fresh insights, by observing that the firm-level

communication strategies, although in some cases in their infancy, are also integrated, in the sense that a combination of marketing (product-focused) and corporate marketing (organisational-focused) communication tools and approaches are marshalled. The principal insight related to our research question is the recognition that the investigated firms utilise a hybrid communications strategy, namely "integrated hybrid communication", which spans marketing communications (typically having a product focus) and corporate communications (having an organisation focus).

6. Practical recommendations

The current study emphasises that managers should develop corporate brand communication strategies from the start-up of a firm (Balmer et al., 2011; Navis and Glynn, 2011; De Roeck et al., 2013). Thus, communicating the firm or corporate brand promise rather than merely the product brand promise is essential in the SME context in order to establish its brand equity since the primary - and often the only brand - is the corporate brand (Porcu et al., 2017). In particular, we offer a fresh approach to SME owners/managers on how they could design their brand communication strategies via the proposed four requisites. First, in using the four requisites, owners/managers of SMEs could adopt a more holistic approach, by strategically planning communication activities using both communication typologies (i.e. product and firm level). Second, SME owners/managers need to be conscious that by skilfully integrating product level and firm level communication they will be able to transmit a more comprehensive message that provides good opportunities for their brand identity and differentiation in the national and international markets from the early stages of the existence of the firm (Yang *et al.,* 2018). Third, owners/managers should recognise, make use of, and combine, the different communication tools according to what is more suitable for the specific message they would like to convey. Fourth, owners/managers in SMEs should aim to expand their national and

international business networks, in order to communicate their message to wider audiences, and hopefully - to build long-term business relationships and enhance firm reputation. Fifth, we corroborate a key precept of corporate branding/corporate marketing (Balmer, 2013; M'zungu et al., 2019) in stressing in today's more open, transparent and interconnected business and social environment addressing and meeting the needs of multiple stakeholders is a sine qua non for the owners/managers of organisations and, as we have shown here of SMEs in particular. Moreover, the aforementioned may usefully be appraised of the *Integrated Hybrid Communications* perspective in meeting strategic objectives. To conclude, we present the Integrated Hybrid Communications in a summative manner in Table 3 and we demonstrate its application in SMEs as follows:-

SME business type: Cosmetic from Case study II

Firm brand Identity: Founder personality & core values	Product brand Identity: name, quality and product performance

Brand Communication messages (IHC applied)

Ambitious, caring, driven and visionary	Product works well not only for skincare, tone but also to improve health and illness

Brand Communication Tool (IHC applied)

Primary Communication: Business networking events, TV/radio broadcast, forum, personal brand story, speaker at conference	Secondary Communication: Online and radio ads, packaging-outers, social media platforms and website

Brand Communication Outcome:

Firm brand equity: Increase brand awareness and build image of the firm and product brand

7. Limitations and future research

The study is not without limitations. Based on the case analysis from a rapidly developing economy, we provide fresh insights into how SMEs could integrate their communication strategies so as to increase their survival chances and business growth, as well as to achieve competitive advantage. The findings thus, should be considered in line with the context under study, and they should not be generalised beyond it. However, the need to develop SMEs is required in every economy. Thus, the present findings could be seen as relevant to various audiences (academic, practitioners and/or policy-makers) such as for managers from Western and/or European settings who are interested in operating in the Malaysian economy. We therefore suggest that future research should be conducted following a quantitative research design in order to be able to validate our proposed framework to larger populations of SMEs and to other markets. This study brings an initial explanation into how SMEs conduct integrated communication strategies, stemming from the owner/manager's personality and directed at multiple stakeholders, by using a cross-sectional design. It would be interesting for further studies to adopt a longitudinal design that would allow investigating how interactions between MC and CC strategies change over time.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

8. References

Abimbola, T., & Kocak, A. (2007), "Brand, organization identity and reputation: SMEs as expressive organizations: A resources-based perspective", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 10(4), pp. 416-430.

Abimbola, T., & Vallaster, C (2007), "Brand, organisational identity and reputation in SMEs: an overview", *Qualitative market research: An international Journal*, 10(4), pp. 341-348.

Abratt, R., & Kleyn, N. (2012), "Corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate reputations: reconciliation and integration", *European Journal of Marketing*, 46(7/8), pp. 1048–1063.

Alvesson, M. (2003), "Methodology for close up studies: Struggling with closeness and closure", *Higher Education*, 46(2): 167-193.

Balmer, J.M.T. (1995), "Corporate branding and connoisseurship", *Journal of General Management,* 22(1), pp. 24-46.

Balmer, J.M. and Gray, E.R. (1999), "Corporate identity and corporate communications: creating a competitive advantage", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal,* 4(4), pp. 171-176

Balmer, J.M.T., & Gray, E R. (2003), "Corporate brands: What are they? What of them?", *European Journal of Marketing*, 37(7/8), pp. 972-997.

Balmer, J.M. and Greyser, S.A. (2006), "Corporate marketing: Integrating corporate identity, corporate branding, corporate communications, corporate image and corporate reputation", *European Journal of Marketing*, 40(7/8), pp. 730-741.

Balmer, J.M.T., Powell, S.M., & Greyser, S.A. (2011), "Explicating Ethical Corporate Marketing. Insights from the BP Deepwater Horizon Catastrophe: The Ethical Brand that Exploded and then Imploded", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 102(1), pp. 1-14.

Balmer, J. M.T. (2013), "Corporate brand orientation: What is it? What of it?", *Journal of Brand Management*, 20(9), pp. 723-741.

Balmer, J.M.T. 2017. The corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholders, attributed identities, identifications and behaviours continuum. *European Journal of Marketing,* 51(9-10), pp. 1472-1502.

Balmer, J.M.T. and Podnar, K. (2021), "Corporate brand orientation: Identity, internal images, and corporate identification matters", *Journal of Business Research*, 134, 729–737.

Bell, E. and Bryman, A. (2007), "The ethics of management research: an exploratory content analysis", *British Journal of Management*, 18(1), pp.63-77.

Berthon, P., Ewing, M. and Napoli, J. (2008), "Brand management in small to medium-sized enterprises", *Journal of Small Business Management*, 46(1), pp. 27−45.

Berthon, P.R., Pitt, L.F., Plangger, K., & Shapiro, D. (2012), "Marketing meets Web 2.0, social media, and creative consumers: implications for international marketing strategy", *Business Horizons*, 55(3), pp. 261-271.

Björkman, I., & Kock, S. (1997), "Inward international activities in service firms - illustrated by three cases from the tourism industry", *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 8(5), pp. 362-376.

Bresciani, S., & Eppler, M.J. (2010), "Brand new ventures? Insights on start-ups' branding practices", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 19(5), pp. 356-366.

Chen, C.C.M., Nguyen, B., Melewar, T.C. and Dennis, C. (2017), "Investigating the uses of corporate reputation and its effects on brand segmentation, brand differentiation, and brand positioning: Evidence from the Taiwanese pharmaceutical industry", *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 47(3), pp. 240-257.

Cornelissen, J.P. (2001), "Integrated marketing communications and the language of marketing development", *International Journal of Advertising*, 20(4), pp.483-498.

Cornelissen, J. (2014). *Corporate communication: A guide to theory and practice*. London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.

Davies, G., Chun, R., da Silva, R. V., & Roper, S. (2004), "A corporate character scale to assess employee and customer views of organization reputation", *Corporate Reputation Review*, 7(2), pp. 125-146.

De Roeck, K., Maon, F., & Lejeune, C. (2013), "Taking up the challenge of corporate branding: an integrative framework", *European Management Review,* 10(3), pp. 137-151.

Dubé, L., & Paré, G. (2003), "Rigor in information systems positivist case research: current practices, trends, and recommendations", *MIS Quarterly*, 27(4), pp. 597-636.

Eggers, F., O'Dwyer, M., Kraus, S., Vallaster, C., & Güldenberg, S. (2013), "The impact of brand authenticity on brand trust and SME growth: A CEO perspective", *Journal of World Business,* 48(3), pp. 340-348.

Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989), "Building theories from case study research", *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), pp. 532-550.

Eisenhardt, K.M. 1991. Better stories and better constructs: the case for rigor and comparative logic. *Academy of Management Review,* 16(3), pp. 620-627.

Eisenhardt, K.M. and Graebner, M.E. (2007), "Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges", *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(1), pp.25-32.

Gabrielli, V., & Balboni, B. (2010), "SME practice towards integrated marketing communications", *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 28(3): 275-290.

Glasser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967), "The development of grounded theory", Chicago, IL: Alden. Economic Planning Unit. 2013. http://www.epu.gov.my/en/dasar-penswastaan, Accessed July 29, 2015.

Greyser, S.A. and Urde, M. (2019), "What does your corporate brand stand for", *Harvard Business Review*, 97(1): pp.80-88.

Gilmore, A., Carson, D., & Rocks, S. (2006), "Networking in SMEs: evaluating its contribution to marketing activity", *International Business Review*, 15(3), pp. 278–293.

Hanna, R., Rohm, A., & Crittenden, V.L. (2011), "We are all connected: the power of the social media ecosystem" , *Business Horizons,* 54(3), pp. 265-273.

Harrison, R., Scheela, W., Lai, P.C. and Vivekarajah, S. (2018), "Beyond institutional voids and the middle-income trap: The emerging business angel market in Malaysia", *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 35(4), pp.965-991.

Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (2008), *Taking brand initiative: How companies can align strategy, culture, and identity through corporate branding*. USA: John Wiley & Sons.

Hodge, N.M., McMullen, C. and Kleinschafer, J. (2018), "Taking a deliberate approach: the enactment of brand orientation in an SME context", *Journal of Brand Management*, 25(4), pp. 395-408.

Illia, L. and Balmer, J.M. (2012), "Corporate communication and corporate marketing: Their nature, histories, differences and similarities", Corporate communications: An International Journal, 17(4)4, 451-433.

Jenkins, H. (2006), "Small business champions for corporate social responsibility", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 67(3), pp. 241-256.

Kliatchko, J. (2008), "Revisiting the IMC construct: a revised definition and four pillars", *International Journal of Advertising*, 27(1), pp. 133-160.

Kitchen, P.J. and Schultz, D.E. (2003), "Integrated corporate and product brand communication", *Advances in Competitiveness Research*, 11(1), pp. 66-86.

Kitchen, P.J. (2017), "Integrated Marketing Communications: Evolution, Current Status, Future Developments", *European Journal of Marketing*, 51 (3), pp. 394-405.

Koporcic, N. (2020), "Interactive network branding: Demonstrating the importance of firm representatives for small and medium-sized enterprises in emerging markets", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing,* 35(7), pp. 1179-1189

Kotler, P., & Gertner, D. (2002), "Country as brand, product, and beyond: A place marketing and brand management perspective", *Journal of Brand Management*, 9(4), pp. 249-261.

Krake, F.B. (2005), "Successful brand management in SMEs: a new theory and practical hints", *Journal of Product & Brand Management,* 14(4), pp. 228-238.

Luxton, S., Reid, M., & Mavondo, F. (2017), "IMC capability: antecedents and implications for brand performance", *European Journal of Marketing*, 51(3), pp. 421-444.

Merrilees, B. (2007), "A theory of brand-led SME new venture development", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 10(4), pp. 403-415.

Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, CA: Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

Mitchell, R., Hutchinson, K.., Quinn, B., & Gilmore, A. (2015), "A framework for SME retail branding", *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(17/18): 1818-1850.

M'zungu, S., Merrilees, B. and Miller, D. (2019), "Strategic and operational perspectives of SME brand management: A typology", *Journal of Small Business Management*, 57(3), pp. 943-965.

Nielsen, A.E., & Thomsen, C. (2009), "Investigating CSR communication in SMEs: a case study among Danish middle managers", *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 18(1), pp. 83-93.

Ots, M., & Nyilasy, G. (2017), "Just doing it: theorising integrated marketing communications (IMC) practices", *European Journal of Marketing*, 51(3), pp. 490-510.

Orazi, D. C., Spry, A., Theilacker, M. N., & Vredenburg, J. (2017), "A multi-stakeholder IMC framework for networked brand identity", *European Journal of Marketing*, 51(3), pp. 551-571.

Paré, G. (2004), "Investigating information systems with positivist case study research", *Communication of the Association for Information Systems*, 13(18): 233-264.

Patton, M. Q. (2015), *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Porcu, L., Del Barrio-García, S., Kitchen, P. J., & Kitchen, P. J. (2017), "Measuring integrated marketing communication by taking a broad organisational approach: The firm-wide IMC scale", *European Journal of Marketing*, 51(3), pp. 692-718.

Phelps, J., & Johnson, E. (1996), "Entering the quagmire: examining the 'meaning' of integrated marketing communications", *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 2(3), pp. 159-172.

Piekkari, R., Plakoyiannaki, E., & Welch, C. (2010), "Good' case research in industrial marketing: insights from research practice", *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39(1), pp. 109-117.

Rode, V., & Vallaster, C. (2005), "Corporate branding for start-ups: the crucial role of entrepreneurs", *Corporate Reputation Review*, 8(2), pp. 121-135.

Rashid, Y., Rashid, A., Warraich, M.A., Sabir, S.S. and Waseem, A. (2019), "Case study method: A step-by-step guide for business researchers", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 18, pp. 1-13.

Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H. and Jinks, C. (2018), "Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization*", Quality & Quantity*, 52(4), pp.1893-1907.

Schultz, D.E. Patti, C., & Kitchen, P.J. (2011), *The Evolution of Integrated Marketing Communications: The Customer-Driven Marketplace*. London: Routledge.

Simões, C., Dibb, S., & Fisk, R.P. (2005), "Managing corporate identity: an internal perspective", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 33(2): 153-168.

SME Corp. Malaysia (2013/2014), http://www.smecorp.gov.my, Accessed July 29, 2015.

Spence, M., & Hamzaoui-Essoussi, L. (2010), "SME brand building and management: an exploratory study", *European Journal of Marketing,* 44(7/8), pp. 1037-1054.

Thrassou, A., & Vrontis, D. (2006), A small services firm marketing communications model for SME-dominated environments. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 12(3), pp. 183-202.

Tourky, M., Alwi, S.F.S., Kitchen, P., Melewar, T.C. & Shaalan, A. (2020), "New conceptualization and measurement of corporate identity: Evidence from UK food and beverage industry", *Journal of Business Research*, 109, pp. 595-606.

Tsang, E.W. (2014), "Generalizing from research findings: The merits of case studies", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 16(4), pp.369-383.

Urde, M. and Greyser, S.A. (2016), "The corporate brand identity and reputation matrix–The case of the nobel prize", *Journal of Brand management*, 23(1), pp. 89-117.

Vallaster, C., Kraus, S., Lindahl, J.M.M. & Nielsen, A. (2019), Ethics and entrepreneurship: A bibliometric study and literature review", *Journal of Business Research*, 99, pp. 226-237.

Vinten, G. (1999), "Corporate communications in small-and medium-sized enterprises. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 31(3), pp. 112-119.

Wong, H.Y., & Merrilees, B. (2005), "A brand orientation typology for SMEs: a case research approach", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 14(3), pp. 155–162.

Welch, C., Piekkari, R., Plakoyiannaki, E. and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, E. (2011), " Theorising from case studies: Towards a pluralist future for international business research", *Journal of International Business Studies,* 42(5), pp.740-762.

Woodside, A.G., & Wilson, E.J. (2003), "Case study research methods for theory building", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 18(6/7), pp. 493−508.

Yang, H., Dess, G.G. and Robins, J.A., (2019), "Does entrepreneurial orientation always pay off? The role of resource mobilization within and across organizations", *Asia Pacific Journal of Management,* 36(3): 565-591.

Yin, R.K. (2014). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. CA: Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

---

[i] According to Balmer and Greyser (2006), there are eleven Ps (instead of the traditional 4Ps) when organisation brand is defined and communicated (known as "the identity-based view firm" which unpinned by six characters of the corporate marketing (i.e. the 6Cs). These identity views are important when an organisation is considering what type of brand messages to communicate to its stakeholders (also known as the corporate level concepts). These corporate level concepts (6Cs) are rooted within the brand orientation of an organisation and they are: Culture, Communication, Conceptualisation, Constituencies, Communication and Covenant and the specific dimensions represented them are 11Ps namely: Philosophy and ethos, Product, Price, Place, Promotion, Performance, Positioning, Personality, People, Perception and Promise (Balmer and Greyser, 2006: 736). The identity-based view firm has received increased interests over the years in IMC and CC (e.g. example: Cornelissen et al., 2001; Kitchen and Schultz, 2003; Kitchen, 2017).

[ii] According to Cornelissen (2014) corporate advertising overlaps with PR when discussing CC.

[iii] According to SME Corp. Malaysia (2013), a business is considered a SME if it meets either one of the following two qualifying criteria: a) Manufacturing: Sales turnover not exceeding RM50 million OR full-time employees not exceeding 200 workers; or b) Services and other sectors: Sales turnover not exceeding RM20 million OR full-time employees not exceeding 75 workers.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46

Table 1. Summary of findings

		INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS IN SMEs	
Cases	**SME Brand Identity/Roots**	**Main Communication Tools for Product and SME Brand**	**Multiple Stakeholders**
Case I	**- Owner/Manager's Personality/Core Values:** Creative, driven, innovative and risk taking • **Mission:** Clearly defined and aligned with the values/expectations of the stakeholders • **Vision:** Clearly defined future business aspirations • **Implementation Strategies:** Specified means of achieving the mission and vision	**- ©/Advertising:** Brochures, logo, online ads, packaging-outers, point-of-purchase display (offline), social media platforms and website **- Sales Promotions:** Price discounts and samples (particularly for non-core products) **- PR:** Charity activities, events, online corporate videos, personal representation of the SME by owner/manager and sponsorship **- Direct Marketing:** E-shopping **- Personal Selling/Professional Meetings:** Direct approach to the broadcasting/3D animation film industry	- Broadcasting and 3D animation industries, customers, community, employees, government agencies, hospitals, media, NGOs, media and society at large
Case II	**- Owner/Manager's Personality/Core Values:** Ambitious, caring, driven and visionary • **Mission:** Fairly clearly defined • **Vision:** Clearly defined future business aspirations • **Implementation Strategies:** Some specified means of achieving the mission and vision	**- ©/Advertising:** Online and radio ads, packaging-outers, social media platforms and website **- Sales Promotions:** Exhibits/trade fairs, free trials and samples **- PR:** Business networking, personal representation of the SME by owner/manager and professional newspapers/radio interviews **- Direct Marketing:** E-shopping **- Personal Selling:** Not applicable	**-** Community, customers, employees, health ministry and industry, government agencies, intermediaries, NGO, media and society at large
Case III	**- Owner/Manager's Personality/Core Values:** Caring, driven, hardworking and tenacious • **Mission:** Under development • **Vision:** Fairly clearly defined future business aspirations • **Implementation Strategies:** Under development	**- ©/Advertising:** Fliers, free newspaper ads, local TV ad, online videos, packaging-outers, social media platforms and website **- Sales Promotions:** Exhibits/trade fairs, free trials and samples **- PR:** Business networking, events, personal representation of the SME by owner/manager **- Direct Marketing:** E-shopping **- Personal Selling:** Not applicable	- Community, customers, employees, funding body government agencies, intermediaries and society at large
Case IV	**- Owner/Manager's Personality/Core Values:** Caring, creative, determined, driven and generous • **Mission:** Clearly defined and aligned with the values/expectations of the stakeholders • **Vision:** Clearly defined future business aspirations • **Implementation Strategies:** Some specified means of achieving the mission and vision	**- ©/Advertising:** Social media platforms and website **- Sales Promotions:** Exhibition, events and trade fairs **- PR:** Business networking, events and personal representation of the SME by owner/manager **- Direct Marketing:** E-mail and phone calls/tele-marketing **- Personal Selling/ Professional Meetings:** Advice on services leading to business relationship building	- Business partners, customers, government agencies and media
Case V	**- Owner/Manager's Personality/Core Values:** Hardworking, hopeful, resilient and traditional • **Mission:** Under development	**- ©/Advertising:** Packaging-outers, social media platforms and website **- Sales Promotions:** Exhibits/trade fairs, free trials and samples **- PR:** Generally, under development, occasionally personal	- Airline industry, community, customers, employees and government agencies

	• **Vision:** Some future business aspirations • **Implementation Strategies**: Under development	representation of the SME by owner/manager - **Direct Marketing:** E-mail - **Personal Selling**: Not applicable	
Case VI	- ***Owner/Manager's Personality/Core Values:*** Confident, driven, friendly and hardworking • **Mission:** Under development • **Vision:** Clearly defined future business aspirations • **Implementation Strategies:** Under development	- **©/Advertising:** Point-of-purchase display (offline) and social media platforms - **Sales Promotions:** Price discounts - **PR:** Under development - **Direct Marketing:** E-shopping - **Personal Selling/ Professional Meetings:** Advice on products leading to business relationship building	- Customers, employees, government agencies and suppliers
Case VII	- ***Owner/Manager's Personality/Core Values:*** Driven, hardworking, tenacious and understanding • **Mission:** Clearly defined and aligned with the values/expectations of the stakeholders • **Vision:** Clearly defined future business aspirations • **Implementation Strategies:** Some specified means of achieving the mission and vision	- **©/Advertising:** Point-of-purchase display (offline) and social media platforms - **Sales Promotions:** Exhibits/trade fairs and price discounts - **PR:** Business networking, events and personal representation of the SME by owner/manager - **Direct Marketing:** Catalogues, E-mail - **Personal Selling/ Professional Meetings:** Advise/demonstration on how to install and maintain and relationship building with business partners	- Community**,** customers, electricity industry, employees, government agencies, intermediaries and suppliers

Table 2: Comparison between MC, CC and IHC

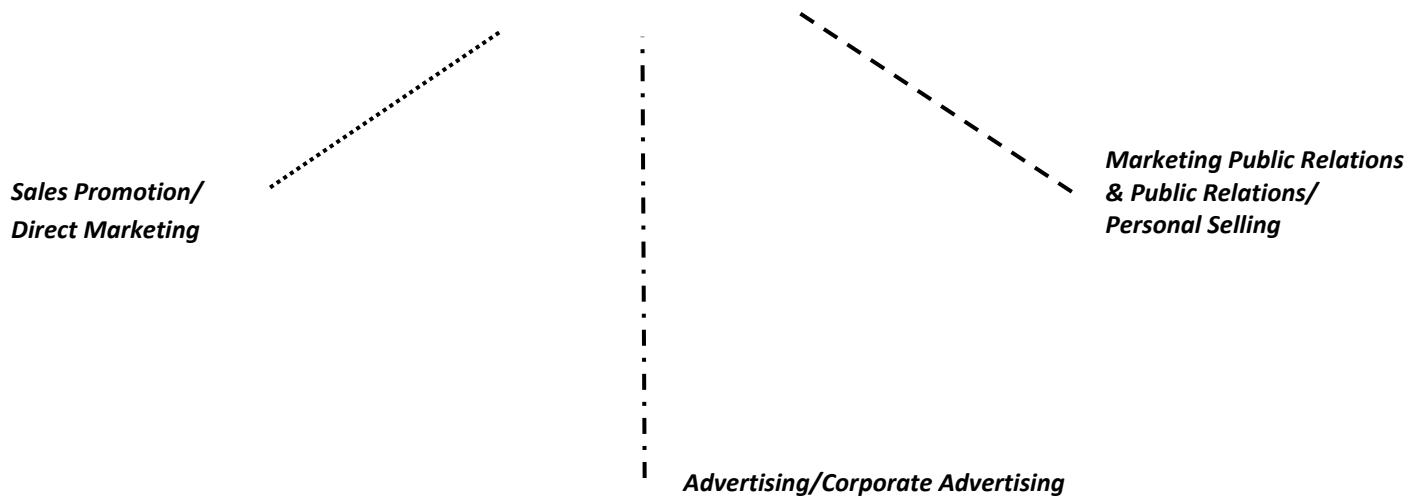|	MC	CC	IHC
Orientation	**Product marketing**	**Corporate marketing**	**Firm marketing**
Company size	SMEs and larger corporation/company	Larger corporation/company	SMEs
Industry type	Product related (e.g., FMCG, manufacturing) with product-dominant type	Product and/or corporate/institution and service related (e.g., Dell, or – airline, banking)	Any
Foci	Customer	Multiple stakeholders	Multiple stakeholders
Content/Message	Product and service brand values -Visual and non-visual brand elements -Performance – rational/quality and emotional benefits	Corporate brand values/ethos Represent the total brand and company brand promise/association Corporate Philosophy/Mission/Vision	The roots/SME brand identity Founder/entrepreneur identity Managers/Employees identity Firm values Mission/Vision/Philosophy Relationships Product and service brand values Other marketing activities (e.g., nation/destination brand - if applicable) CSR activities
Type of value to be addressed	Mainly functional and emotional	Functional, emotional and symbolic	Functional, emotional and sometimes symbolic
Aim	Marketing strategy	Marketing, corporate and business strategy	Firm and business strategy
Responsibility	Marketing/Brand manager	CEO/Top management and all personnel	Founder/entrepreneur/SME owner
Time/ Duration	Short-term focus	Long-term focus	Long-term focus
Outcome	Product brand equity (product identity, image, reputation, customer satisfaction, loyalty and engagement)	Corporate brand equity (corporate brand identity, corporate brand image, corporate reputation, stakeholder support and engagement)	Firm brand equity (founder, firm and product identity, image awareness, firm reputation, relevant stakeholder support and engagement)

Note: The illustration provided in Table 3 is a result of discussed literature review and qualitative findings in the earlier sections of this manuscript.

Figure 1. Integrated Hybrid Communication (IHC) Perspective

Sales Promotion/
Direct Marketing

Marketing Public Relations
& Public Relations/
Personal Selling

Advertising/Corporate Advertising

Note: "– –" Mainly CC communication tools; "…" Mainly MC communication tools; "-.-." Both MC and CC communication tools:

Figure 2. Integrated Hybrid SME Communication Framework

Primary Communication

Mission

Vision

MANAGERIAL PERSONALITY/ CORE VALUES PRODUCT IDENTITY

Implementation Strategy

Advertising/Corporate Advertising

Sales Promotions

Marketing Public Relations & Public Relations

Direct Marketing

Personal Selling

MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

Business Partners

Community

Competitor

Customers/Consumers

Employees

Funding Institutions

SME [FIRM & PRODUCT] BRAND IDENTITY	SECONDARY COMMUNICATION	SME BRAND EQUITY

Note:
1. This framework shows the brand messages that are addressed by SMEs investigated here in the totality of their firm and product brand communication strategy, tools they utilised across their audiences (i.e. multiple stakeholders). It does not claim that each individual SME will utilise all five communication tools or address all brand messages to all stakeholders.
2. In particular, we exhibit how the proposed underpinning theory namely "The Corporate identity—The Corporate Communication Framework (Balmer and Gray, 1999) has been adapted and modified to include "Firm and Product Identity" using primary and secondary communication. Example of brand messages delivered via primary communication is product and corporate identity (e.g. product, managerial personality and core values) and Secondary communication can be conducted via Advertising, Sales Promotion, PR, Direct Marketing and /or Personal Selling).
3. This modified version is named as Integrated Hybrid Communication (IHC), designed specifically to address the communication strategy in SMEs.

Appendix A: Sample Profile

	Main business activity	*Start-up year*	*Number of employees*	*International activity: main foreign markets (Mainly export-based)*
Case I	3D animation production	2005	160	Brunei, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan Turkey, Mongolia, South Africa
Case II	Cosmetics manufacture	2004	10	Brunei, China and Indonesia
Case III	Food and beverage manufacture	2008	7	Brunei, China, Myanmar and Singapore
Case IV	Business consulting	2006	6	Cambodia, Brunei, Singapore, Morocco and Australia
Case V	Food and beverage manufacture	1996	10	Brunei, Singapore, Thailand
Case VI	Textile designer and retailer	2009	5	Sales to international clients from domestic point-of-purchase/ Imports
Case VII	Electrical cable and conductor manufacture	2007	100	Bangladesh, Brunei, Iraq, Jordan, USA, Vietnam

Note: Case I: This firm is not a typical manufacturing firm, as its main business activity is the production of 3D animation films. However, it also engages in merchandise production and licenses the manufacture of related goods. Highly entrepreneurial oriented, it experienced increased growth rates soon after start-up in 2005. Considered the aforementioned we decided to include Case I in our purposeful sample for this study (although it may be argued that its size, measured as the total full-time employee slightly exceeds the threshold for non-manufacturing firms according to the new SME definition endorsed in Malaysia. 2. Case VI: Although this SME does not engage directly in exporting, (given its sector of activity), it engages in inward internationalisation (Björkman and Kock, 1997) as it commercialises products to international customers at its point-of-purchase located in the domestic market; it also engages in importing. 3. Case VII: This firm, initially established in 1974, was acquired by its present Malaysian owner in 2007. This resulted in strategic changes for this firm that are likely to have influenced its communication strategies. Thus, we consider 2007 the rebirth year for this SME.