LUND UNIVERSITY
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Corporate brand identity – brand image alignment

An investigation of the consumer's perception and how it aligns with the corporate brand identity of a manufacturer, when being communicated through online retailers

by

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Abstract

Keywords Corporate brand identity, brand image, corporate consistent communication, corporate brand identity - brand image alignment

Purpose The purpose of this research paper is to explore, define and characterise the phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment when the manufacturer is selling its product through online retailers.

Methodology A qualitative single case study with a social constructionist and abductive approach has been executed. The company, used as a single case study, is the Swedish outdoor, active and urban lifestyle company Thule.

Theoretical Perspective The field of corporate brand alignment is being taking in consideration. Furthermore, its main components, corporate brand identity, brand image and corporate consistent communication, play the role of the three theoretical realms. Hence, a preliminary framework is being created

Empirical Data The primary data consists review of Thule corporate website, the collection web and textual data from 24 pre-selected websites, two semi-structured interviews with Thule managers and eight semi-structured interviews with consumers regarding the Thule brand. The secondary data used is related to Thule's company presentations and end of the year reports. trademark and brand guidelines, as well as the disclosed contracts between Thule and the online retailers.

Conclusion It can be seen that the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment can be influenced negatively if the key brand elements are not being communicated by the online retailers as per manufacturer's requirements. Further, a revised corporate brand identity - brand image framework with additional brand and other influencing elements in it, is presented.

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1.Introduction

The following chapter focuses on introducing the topic of the thesis, its purpose, limitations and contributions that it brings. First, a background of the online sales channels' evolution and use of multi-channel strategy by manufacturers, is briefly presented, followed by challenges of having such strategy. Then, the problematization and positioning of the research is defined, followed by the definition of a purpose for this study. Further are presented the delimitations and the contributions of this thesis. The chapter continues with the presentation of the main research question and its sub-questions. The chapter ends with a final two sections providing the overall outline of the thesis and introducing the reader with the definitions of key terms that are being used in the rest of the research paper.

1.1 Background

Nowadays, due to the evolution of technology in the past decade, purchasing manufacturers' *(see 1.7. for definition)* goods online became a lot more convenient choice for the consumers *(see 1.7. for definition)*, as it allows the latter to instantly search through large amount of data related to products and services (Mohapatra, 2013). Selling through Internet grew into a powerful tool for manufacturers as the amount of people, who have access to Internet, increased continuously in the recent years (Timiras, Catalina & Nichifor, 2015). A Nielsen's report from 2014 showed that the worldwide online sales reached \$1.5 trillion in 2014, marking an increase with nearly 20%, compared to only an year ago. In his book, called "E-commerce strategy", Mohapatra (2013) identified several advantages of online compared to offline sales channels. First, from a consumer's perspective, buying through Internet allows finding a vast amount of different products and services, and compare their prices instantly in order to choose the best offers without the need of visiting different offline stores before making a final decision. Then, from manufacturer's perspective, Mohapatra (2013) underlined the possibility that online sales channels allow to track consumers preferences and adapt the manufacturer's product and services to them. The development of online sales channels made manufacturers reconsider their business model, focused on offline sales up until this moment. They are now starting to look into the possibility of implementing the newly emerged multi-channel sales strategy, consisting of selling products both online and offline.

Even if the presence of online shoppers keeps growing, the traditional offline retailing is still the most preferred shopping channel among consumers (Dickenson, 2015). The development of the online sales channels and the steady performance of the offline sales channels lead up to the creation of the so-called multi-channel presence that has been implemented by the majority of manufacturers – both big and small (Prasarnphanich & Gillenson, 2003). Multi-channel strategies became extremely attractive for companies which, by applying them into their business model, are now able to adapt their products and services much better to the different type of consumers (Kumar & Reinartz, 2012). Multi-channel manufacturers can propose different offerings to their consumers, both offline and online while strengthening the brand-customer relationship (Frasquet, Molina & Descals, 2015). The consumer of today is empowered by the digital revolution allowing him to do his research, before buying a product or a service, and to make the wisest purchase regarding its price and quality (Griffiths & Howard, 2008).

Currently, it is widespread to see both purely online or offline present companies having a multi-channel business model to maximise their profits by reaching all of their potential consumers. Manufacturers, such as The Gap (Prasarnphanich & Gillenson, 2003) and Alibaba (Xiaohan, 2017), are excellent examples of businesses, which have implemented the multi-channel strategy successfully. Usually, manufacturers are presented with two possible paths of selling their products: either by using direct channels, hence bypassing the retailers, or by using indirect channels where the sales are made through the retailers (Wu, Cai, Chen & Sheu, 2015). A good example of a prominent manufacturer, using numerous intermediaries to manage its end-consumer relationship, is Henkel - a company that has an intensive use of retailers, both online and offline, and thus is also confronted of managing consumers' relationships indirectly (Kumar & Reinartz, 2012). Furthermore, the current CEO of Henkel is focusing on a vast amount of resources aiming at creating a strong presence within the digital distribution using online retailers *(see 1.7. for definition)* (Bellon,, 2016). Nonetheless, even if the fast development of technology, related to online sales, creates the urgent necessity for manufacturers to become multi-channel actors, achieving such multi-presence comes with some challenges that need to be handled appropriately by the companies in order to see the long-term benefits. One of these challenges is closely related to the corporate brand identity *(see 1.7. for definition)* of manufacturers and how they preserve its alignment with the brand image, created within the consumers when selling products or services through multiple channels.

According to Prasarnphanich and Gillenson (2003), an issue of being present both online and offline could potentially arise due to the differences in product offerings, promotions, and customer service policies among different channels. Such differences might be dangerous for a brand as it can cause a significant contrast in the way it is communicated to consumers, which might eventually lead to a dilution of this brand (Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2004). Such brand dilution, resulting to a deterioration in the alignment between corporate brand identity and brand image *(see 1.7. for definition)*, could cause serious problems that can slow down the integration of online and offline activities (Prasarnphanich and Gillenson, 2003). Another challenge, acknowledged by Prasarnphanich and Gillenson (2003), is related to the potential lack of control that can be experienced by manufacturers with multiple intermediaries, such as retailers. Furthermore, Parasarnphanic and Gillenson (2003) stated that the lack of control, when selling through intermediaries, often leads to a wrongly communicated brand message which again endangers the alignment between key elements, such as corporate brand identity and brand image. In the same vein, Kumar and Reinartz (2012) specifically focused on manufacturers who choose the use of indirect channels suggesting that the former would have to ensure the control of all online and offline retailers' customer relationship management activities in order to ensure correct communication of the company's corporate brand identity. In a similar study, conducted by Agnihotri (2015), he presented the alignment between the different brand elements *(see 1.7. for definition)* as being an important challenge for manufacturers who are having multi-channel strategies and multiple intermediaries, both online and offline. Furthermore, Agnihotri (2015) revealed the importance of establishing the alignment mentioned above for the manufacturer to be valued by their consumers and thus gain a much needed competitive advantage over the competition. Agnihotri (2015) also underlined the fact that having alignment between the manufacturer's corporate brand identity and the consumers' perceptions of a brand, would facilitate the latter in processing all the information provided to him by the manufacturer and its offline and online intermediaries.

Chakraborty and Chung (2014) discussed the importance of correct communication between the communicator (manufacturer) and the recipient (intermediary or consumer) that often can become a hurdle if not managed appropriately. Information inconsistency has been covered in details in Rangaswamy and Van Bruggen's (2005) study regarding the opportunities and challenges in multi-channel marketing. These authors argued that the consumers of multi-channel manufacturers, using different intermediaries to sell their products, often complain about the inconsistency of messages they have been exposed to across the different online and offline platforms. Rangaswamy and Van Bruggen (2005) suggested that manufacturers need to focus on researching what can be done in order to reduce the occurrence and negative impact on consumers' perceptions of various misalignments, when partnering with online and offline retailers. Negative impacts, emerging from the misalignment of key brand elements, may result into a dilution of the brand (Chevalier and Gérald Mazzalovo, 2004). Furthermore, if they can impose difficulties for brand managers to find the reasons for a brand message being misunderstood by the stakeholders(Schein, 1984). Also, misalignments can impact the brand's ability to the from competition (Janonis, Dovaliené & Virvilaité 2007). Finally, misalignment between key element, such as corporate brand identity and brand image might even cause frustration, misunderstanding and incorrect strategies on an internal level for the manufacturers(Mohr & Nevin, 1990).

1.1.1 Problematization

The current literature focuses on the challenges that multi-channel manufacturers are facing when trying to maintain the control of their indirect sales channels and communicate the brand message correctly, aiming at aligning the corporate brand identity and consumer's perception of the brand (Chakraborty & Chung, 2014; Rangaswamy & Van Bruggen, 2006;). According to Nandan (2005), the corporate brand identity, defined within the company, and the brand image, which represents the consumer's perception of a particular product or service, need to be harmonised to add value to the company and attach the consumer to it. Nandan (2005) further stresses the ease with which these two key elements can be misaligned if the communication is not consistent. Kapferer (2004) focuses on the importance of good communication between the sender (the manufacturer) and the receiver (the consumer) to achieve alignment between the brand identity and image. However, Kapferer (2004) also acknowledges the existence of a noise, which he explains as a set of any external factors that can produce meaning, distract or affect the process of communicating the brand message before it reaches the receiver. Such noise can have a negative effect on the communication and, if not managed correctly, it might influence the consumer's perception of a brand (Kapferer, 2004). Being inspired by the Shannon, Weaver model of Communication, the "Sender-Receiver" model suggests that this potential noise, which can interrupt the communication process, might be coming from the channels through which the messages are transmitted (Shannon, Weaver and Wiener, 1950). Hence, an example of an external factor that can disrupt the communication of the brand message, thus preventing the consumer from receiving the brand message as the manufacturer initially intended it, could be the online retailers' websites presenting the brand in a poor way. Furthermore, Ulas and Calipinar (2008), who focus their research on supply chain management, added to the argument stating that a well-coordinated and consistent communication of the brand identity throughout the whole supply chain will strengthen the brand and what it stands for in the eyes of the consumers. Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004) further developed this topic by explaining that in order to achieve brand alignment, all messages, sent from the sender (the manufacturer) to the receiver (consumer), need to be presented and delivered in the same way. Successful brand management, according to Torn and Dahlen (2007), requires manufacturers aiming at a complete alignment between the way they are communicating the corporate brand and how the consumer perceives it.

To date, no research appears, to the best of our knowledge, to directly discuss the alignment of the manufacturer's corporate brand identity and consumer's brand perception (brand image), when the communication of the brand message is done through the online sales channels of the retailers. Therefore, more research is needed to shed light on how brand image and corporate brand identity align in an online selling environment.

1.3. Research Purpose

The purpose of this research paper is to explore, define and characterise the phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment *(see 1.7. for definition)* when the manufacturer is selling its product through online retailers. As this phenomenon can be investigated through multiple perspectives, this paper only focuses on the consumer one. Having in mind all this, the following research question is suggested:

RQ_{main}: How does the consumer's perception of a brand align with the corporate brand identity of a manufacturer, communicated by the online retailers?

The following sub-questions were added to help to answer the research question, as thoroughly as possible:

RQ1a: How does the consumer perceive the manufacturer's corporate brand identity, communicated by the online retailers?

RQ1b: To what extent does the consumer's perception of a brand align with manufacturer's corporate brand identity, communicated through online retailers?

RQ1c: What are the online brand elements influencing the alignment between manufacturer's corporate brand identity and brand image, when selling through online retailers?

RQ1d: What are the websites related causes influencing the alignment between manufacturer's corporate brand identity and brand image, when selling through online retailers?

The aim of the paper, after answering all the above-presented questions, is to create a new framework, that can be used by manufacturers in identifying whether the brand perception of consumers aligns with the corporate brand identity. Subsequently, the framework will help the manufacturers to define the key online brand elements, influencing the alignment of the corporate brand identity and brand image, when selling through online retailers. Furthermore, the framework will also help in the identification of the causes influencing this alignment. For the construction of the framework, brand alignment theories will be used along with brand identity, brand image and corporate communications. This will be a qualitative study using semi-structured interview and web textual and visual analysis.

1.4 Contributions

The research paper looks at broadening the existing literature on corporate brand alignment providing managerial implications on this topic. Regarding,the theoretical contribution, this research aims to develop a framework showing how the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment can be achieved when online retailers are included in the equation. To date, research has not been able to specifically investigate how manufacturers can accomplish a corporate brand identity- brand image alignment when using online retailers. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the fast development of online sales makes this topic an important one to research for the academic world.

As for the practical contributions, the development of new theoretical framework would be helpful for companies to evaluate the best possible ways of achieving corporate brand identity - brand image alignment when selling through online retailers. Understanding the consumer's perception regarding the brand will help managers put the focus on the most critical brand elements and make sure that they are communicated correctly by the online retailers. Enriching the understanding of companies on how the end user perceives the brand is essential for managers as it will allow them to target the problematic aspects more specifically and tailor to the customer understandings, hence differentiating the company from competitors.

1.5 Delimitations

The corporate brand identity-image alignment is a broad concept that includes multiple aspects depending on different settings - whether offline or online sales channels are investigated, or whether direct or indirect sales channels are taken into consideration. This study is focusing exclusively on manufacturers using online and indirect sales channels, such as online retailers. The reason for this decision is based on the continuous and steady development of online sales channels, mentioned above. Any offline elements, such as retailers' physical stores, are disregarded in the thesis. Furthermore, manufacturers selling directly to their consumers are also not considered throughout the research process, as it is assumed that there are fewer challenges in such business model regarding the communication of the correct brand message to the consumers. The scope of this paper is solely focused on corporate branding as it has a broader focus on the whole company and the communication domain that involves multiple stakeholders (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Also, the corporate brands have more strategic meaning for the companies and are focusing on the long-term perspective - a fact that fits with the intended new framework that will be developed within this thesis.

The topic of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment can also be researched from the perspective of different actors, such as manufacturers, online retailers and consumers. The decision of focusing solely on the consumer's perception has been based on two reasons. First of all, it was assumed that a manufacturer would communicate the correct brand message to its stakeholders thus minimizing the possibility of creating misalignment. Second of all, we looked at the consumer's perception as an initial step regarding the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment topic. In case a lack of alignment was found, then it would be more appropriate to investigate the topic from online retailers' perspective and find the reasons behind this. However, in order to familiarize themselves with the online sales platforms of the online retailers and see how the different brand elements are communicated, we conducted an initial analysis of the pre-selected websites used for the research. Finally, the paper evaluates the extent at which the consumer's perception is aligned with the corporate brand identity of the manufacturer. Ensuring such alignment would guarantee that the desired brand identity is transmitted to the consumer in a correct manner.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

The research paper is divided into six main chapters. The whole outline of the thesis is constructed in a way that would clearly guide the reader towards the development of the new framework, which is constructed from a preliminary framework, presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis. A brief description of the chapters is presented below:

Chapter 1: Introduction – aims at providing general background and introduce the reader into the research topic and key definitions used throughout the paper. The sections conclude with the presentation of the paper's problematization, purpose and research questions,contributions, delimitations and definitions of terms.

Chapter 2: Literature and theoretical review – aims at presenting the current literature on this topic focusing on corporate brand alignment, corporate brand identity and brand image. The chapter also discusses consistent corporate communication, which is considered by the academic world as an essential element for achieving the alignment mentioned above.

Chapter 3: Methodology – aims at providing the methodological considerations and choices made by the authors of this paper, and the reasoning behind them. Furthermore, this chapter reveals the paper's research philosophy, research strategy and design where the case study is also being presented. Next, the chapter discussed the data collection strategy and data analysis. Finally, the methodological limitations and ethics of the paper are discussed.

Chapter 5: Analysis – aims at showing the empirical findings following the data collection and focuses on the main results which will contribute to the development of the newly developed framework.

Chapter 6: Discussion – aims at elaborating on the main findings from the previous chapter, while referring back to the literature and theoretical review. Moreover, the revised framework is presented and explained in details.

Chapter 7: Conclusion – aims at summing up the paper by revising the thesis' purpose and research question. The chapter ends up with the presentation of the paper's theoretical contribution, managerial implications, limitations and the recommendations for future research.

1.7 Definition of Terms

This chapter presents the definitions of key terms that are being used throughout the whole thesis. The following definitions are adapted for this research to fit its specific context related to the phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment when the communication is done through online retailers. When a proper definition was missing in the literature, the authors of this thesis have constructed their explanation. Alternatively, if a precise definition was available in the academic literature, it was adopted to conduct the research.

Manufacturer: Is the owner of a brand, producing goods that are later being sold to consumers through direct (bypassing retailers) or indirect sales channels (with retailers as intermediaries).

Online Retailers: Are the intermediaries that have both online and offline selling platforms, through which the manufacturer can sell its produced goods.

Consumer: Is the end consumer/user or buyer of the specific goods produced by the manufacturer.

Corporate Brand identity: Is "what helps an organisation, or part of it feel that it truly exists and that it is a coherent and unique being, with a history and a place of its own, different from others (Kapferer,2012, p149). It also should answer the questions: "Who are we? Where do we come from? What do we stand for? What is our raison d'être? and, What is our wanted position?"(Urde, 2013, p.744).

Brand image: Is characterised as the consumers' perceptions of a brand, mirrored by the brand associations held in consumers' memory (Keller, 1993).

Corporate brand identity- brand image alignment: A phenomenon that investigates the alignment between the manufacturer's brand identity and the consumer's brand perception (brand image) when the communication of the brand message happens in an online environment, through the websites of online retailers.

Consistent corporate communication: Is the transmission of brand messages, from the sender (brand identity) to the receiver (brand image), with the same tone and same brand elements such as logo, slogan and images, on all sales channels (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2004)

Brand element: Is the metaphoric key to unlocking brand value or equity for the brand holder (Rowley, 2004). It can also be characterized as a key tool for creating a specific perception in consumers' minds (Kladou, Kavaratzis, Salonika & Rigopoulou, 2015).

2. Literature and theoretical review

The following literature and theoretical chapter mainly focus on four different research areas, as the aim of the thesis is to combine these fields into a preliminary framework. First, the research field of corporate brand alignment is presented, since this is the overall topic that is studied in this thesis. Considering that the main components of corporate brand alignment are corporate brand identity, brand image and corporate communication (see 1.7. for definition), it was decided that these three will be also presented as individual literature areas in this chapter. Finally, at the end of the literature and theoretical review, the preliminary framework is presented, based on the insights found from the four different research areas, which show how the phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment, when using online retailers, can be conceptualised.

2.1. Corporate brand alignment

In the brand management literature, different authors have addressed the term brand alignment in many different ways, of which several stand out: congruence, level of fit, similarity or coherence (Gosselin & Bauwen, 2006). For example, Stephen and Coote (2007) have described brand alignment as the desired coherence that achieves the positive effect for all the involved actors. Whereas Fombrun, Gardberg and Sever (2000) argued that brand alignment means a consistent stakeholder perception through coherent brand positioning. Regardless of the term used, a vast amount of studies considered that strong brand alignment has a direct impact on the corporate brand performance (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; 2003; Schultz & de Chernatony, 2002; Brown, Dacin, Pratt & Whetten 2006; Gosselin & Bauwen, 2006). Several other scholars (Einwiller & Will, 2002; Balmer, 2012; Hatch & Schultz, 2001, 2003, 2008) have also emphasised the importance of a strong alignment between multiple stakeholders' perceptions, being one of the key factors to an organisation's success.

A vast number of authors have proposed a big array of models focused on the identification of the key elements of the corporate brands, and showing the possible inconsistencies between them. Those models also suggested ways to strengthen the brand via the alignment of those key elements. One of the most acknowledged models of corporate brand alignment is the "vision-culture-image"(VCI) model by Hatch and Schultz (2001). They have named the components “vision”, “culture” and “image” - the *strategic stars* of the corporate brand. The aim of the VCI model also called “Corporate Brand Toolkit”, is to assist managers to identify the gaps between the corresponding components of the corporate brand. The gaps between the corporate vision, culture, and image are revealed through the use of series of diagnostic questions (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). The first set of questions reviews the link between vision and culture: that is, how managers and employees are aligned. The second type of questions focuses on uncovering possible misalignments between the attitudes of employees (culture) and the perceptions of the outside world (image). The third and last set investigates the vision-image gap, examining if management is taking the company in a direction that matches with what the stakeholders want from the company. Despite being so popular among academics and practitioners, the model was also criticized as “lacking explicit notion of the corporate brand and subsuming it behind the metaphors of gravitation and attractive forces”(Tarnovskaya & Bertilsson, 2017, p.50). Other academics have noted that the VCI model lacks clarity, therefore they have added some missing elements and further developed them (Chernatony, 1999; de Chernatony & Harris, 2000; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001) . The papers of de Chernatony(1999), then followed by de Chernatony and Harris (2000), and Harris and de Chernatony (2001) have proposed an extended version of the VCI model that consists of brand’s vision, culture, personality, positioning, and presentation (the elements of the brand identity). They argued that all these elements have to be aligned with the brand reputation. Overall, this extended version of the VCI model gave special focus on the corporate brand, its vision and the values embedded in the organisational culture.

Further, are listed other studies that have put the spotlight on the corporate brand values as the “skeleton” of a brand. That is also the centre of one of the later studies of Urde (2009) offering a model called “Core Value Grid”, as shown in Figure 1. The model is used to determine the nature of internal and external values, whether they are aligned (true- hallow) or misaligned (potential-aspirational) (Urde, 2009). According to Urde(2009), the true values are internally embedded in the company and also over time perceived and appreciated by the customers. The second type is aspirational core values, which are internally rooted but not recognised by the customers. Opposite to the second type, the potential core values are recognised and appreciated by the customers, but not determined and understood by the organisation (Urde, 2009). The last type, hollow core values, miss “ both the internal foundation of the organisation and the appreciation and credibility as perceived by the customer” (Urde, 2009, p.633). The different types of values, constructed by the various organisational stakeholders, can “float around, actually obstructing the communication effort” (Urde, 2009, p.633) and create misalignment between the values embedded in the brand identity and the values that are perceived by the consumers. To avoid misalignment, Urde (2009) suggested that an organisation’s task is to build true corporate core values.

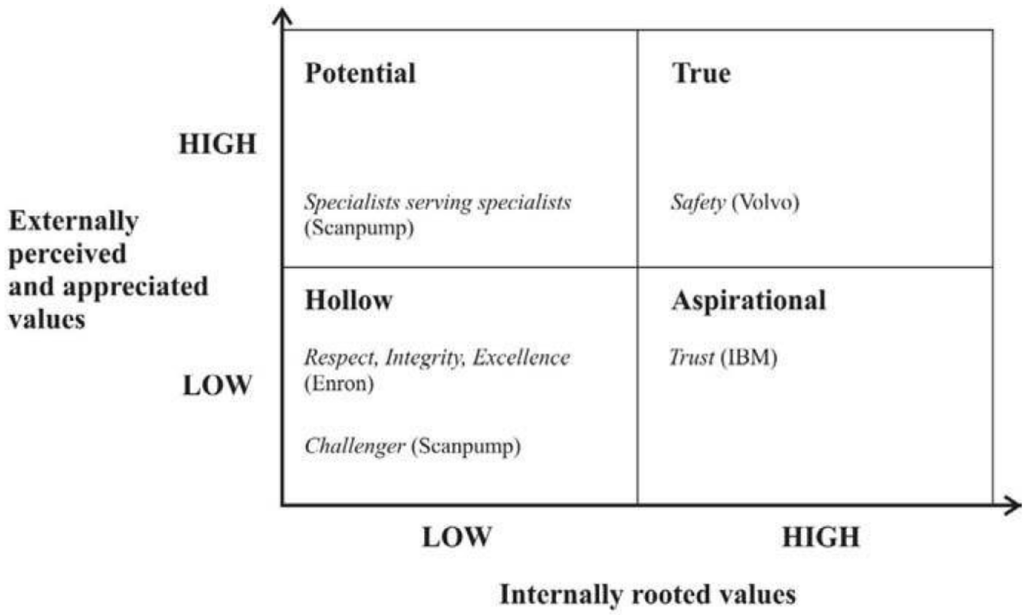


Figure 1. The core value grid (Urde, 2009)

After uncovering the multiple corporate brand values of an organisation, another conceptual model, administered and revised in several articles by Balmer and his co-authors, suggested that corporate branding should be multidisciplinary. Those article aimed to align several internal and external aspects - also referred as corporate brand identities (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Balmer, 2001, 2008, 2012). The model AC4ID Test, introduced by Balmer (2012), illustrated that an organisation could have multiple identities, and all of them should be meaningfully aligned. The seven identities that a corporation can have are the actual, communicated, conceived, covenanted, cultural, ideal and desired (Balmer, 2012). The actual identity is an internal dimension referring to what the organisation is, more specifically the current values held by employees and management. The communicated identity is what the firm states its corporate brand to be. The third, conceived identity, is how other external stakeholders perceive the corporate brand. Next, the covenanted identity is represented by the promise that the corporate brand gives to the external stakeholders. The fifth identity is the cultural, expressing what the brand culture is found to be. The ideal identity shows what the corporate brand should be. The last identity is the desired one, explaining what the management wants the corporate brand to be. Balmer (2012) stated that a general guiding rule "should be a meaningful strategic alignment between the seven dimensions of corporate brand identity" (p. 1064).

All the above listed studies presented only some of the important elements in the pursuit to achieve brand alignment. However, none of them have shown the significance of the brand communication as a process that connects the brand identity and brand image. Kapferer (2004) created one of the first models named "Sender-Receiver model", demonstrating the relation between traditional communication models, identity and image. To create his model, Kapferer (2004) used the communication model of Shannon, Weaver and Wiener (1950), designed to develop the effective communication model between sender and receiver, however it was not constructed to be applicable to the branding environment. In the "Sender-Receiver model", on one side the sender is directly connected to brand identity, whereas on the other side the receiver is explicitly linked to brand image. Nandan (2005), similarly to Kapferer (2004), described the communication process consisting of brand message that have "packaged" or "wrapped" brand identity, and then it is 'unpackaged' or 'unwrapped' by the consumer in the form of brand image. Kapferer (2004) stated that identity defines the firm's reality, while image defines the perception of the consumer. He also noted that the two concepts discussed above, brand identity and brand image, are products of the communications environment in which they exist. But before projecting an image to the public, the organisation must be aware at what is the exact message they want to communicate and how they want to send it (Kapferer, 2004). As shown in Figure 2, an image is the perception of the public, resulting from decoding a brand message, communicated by the company, represented by various marketing and brand elements such as brand name, visual symbols, products, advertisements, sponsoring, articles (Kapferer, 2012). The public may judge those brand messages through the prism of their own subjectivity, using their own interpretations, responding differently to brands (Kapferer, 2012). As in the Shannon, Weaver model of Communication, the communication process in the "Sender- Receiver model" can be defined by the encoding and decoding activities, that might be interrupted by a noise. Kapferer (2004) explained the concept of noise as any external factors that can add meaning, distract or affect the communication process, by occurring before the message is delivered to the receiver. Shannon, Weaver and Wiener (1950) added that an example of noise could be also the channel through which the communication is transmitted. Furthermore, Kapferer (2004) stated that the noise could have positive impact on the communication where the message can be perceived from the receiver better than in reality. However, it could also have a negative impact where the message is interpreted worse than in reality. Therefore, if at the end, the brand identity is not communicated properly in the minds of the consumers, it can result into a misalignment between the brand identity and the brand image (Kapferer, 2004). Considering all the above-shown evidences, it is visible that without using the word "alignment" or any of the identical terms with the "Sender-Receiver model", Kapferer (2004) aims to propose a framework for achieving brand alignment. However, Kapferer (2004) did not specify if the brand identity, positioned on the sender's side, is corporate or product, which makes it unclear for the practitioners who want to apply it.

FIGURE 7.1 Identity and image

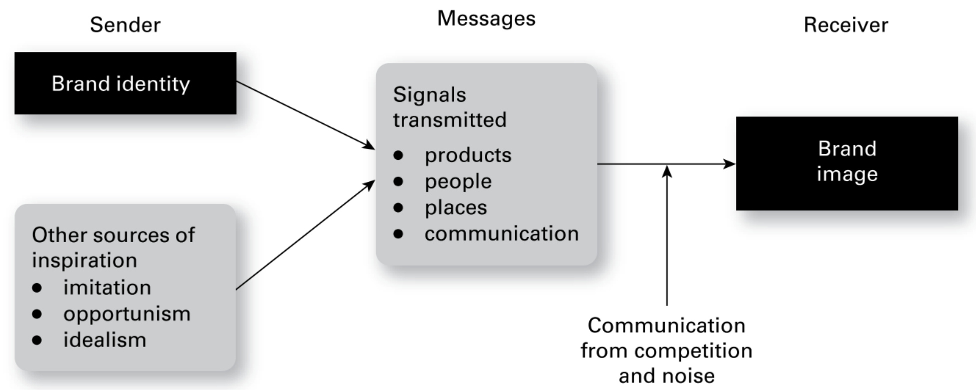


Figure 2. Sender- Receiver model (Kapferer, 2012)

Many other researchers have presented how an inconsistent communication can have a direct influence on the transmission of the company's brand values (Chevalier & Gérald Mazzalovo, 2004; Schein, 1984; Dovaliené & Virvilaité 2007; Grönroos, 2007; Mohr & Nevin 1990). According to Chevalier and Gérald Mazzalovo (2004), the inconsistency might result in a dilution of the brand meaning or can even change the imprinted brand value. Further, Shein (1984) revealed that if there is an inconsistent high level of communication and the discrepancies are not understood, the brand management will have the complication to understanding "why" messages are misunderstood. Furthermore, if the communication gaps between the brands' and the customers' values continue to grow, the brand values will become disillusioned and the brand's ability to distinguish from the others, when using market positioning and unique selling propositions, will disappear (Janonis, Dovaliené & Virvilaité 2007). Grönroos (2007) further added that the inconsistency could have a negative influence on consumers evaluation, which can result in them perceiving the brand as having lack of quality (Grönroos, 2007). This was also confirmed by Mohr and Nevin (1990) stating that ineffective communication can result into mutual feelings of frustration, misunderstandings and incorrect strategies.

The review of the corporate branding literature has shown that the concept of alignment has been applied in various ways, putting the focus on different elements within. Nevertheless, one specific scenario has been narrowed down in this thesis - corporate brand identity- brand image alignment, when using the online sales channels of retailers; where the main actors involved are online retailers, manufacturer and consumer. To the best our knowledge, there are no studies available that have researched the effect of the external noise, represented by the websites of the online retailers, on the alignment between the corporate brand identity and the brand image of a company. Consequently, the next few sections will look at the different components involved in the achievement of corporate brand alignment, starting with the corporate brand identity, followed by a brand image and finally consistent corporate communication.

2.2.Corporate Brand Identity

This section aims first to present the different brand identity definitions proposed by various authors, then look at how the literature differentiates the product from corporate brand identity, ending with the presentation of the different frameworks attempting to define brand identity.

Kapferer first introduced the notion of brand identity in 1986, by defining it as a means to achieve exclusive and purposeful interpretations of the company's brand. From that moment on, there have been many discussions on the brand identity definition topic (Janonis, Dovaliené & Virvilaité 2007). Nevertheless, in the first American book on the subject of brand equity (Aaker 1991), the word "identity" was completely absent, as well as the whole concept. Keller (1998) also presented it only in two pages within his book " Strategic Brand Management-Building, Measuring and Managing Brand Equity". Today the word "identity" has many different meanings. One of the definitions, proposed by Kapferer (2012, p.149), states that " brand identity is what helps an organisation, or part of it, feel that truly exists and that it is a coherent and unique being, with a history and a place of its own, different from others". Similarly, Urde (2013), in his article "The corporate brand identity matrix", described brand identity with the internally rooted questions such as: "Who are we? Where do we come from? What do we stand for? What is our raison d'être? and, What is our wanted position?" (p.744). Moreover, some authors have argued that brand identity has the role of a differentiator factor (Chernatony & Harris, 2001; Kapferer, 2004; Upshaw, 1995; Nandan ,2005). Chernatony and Harris (2001) supported that by suggesting that brand identity is composed of values, aims and moral images that all together define the essence of individuality that differentiate the brand. This goes in line with another definition offered by Kapferer (2004), which claimed that brand identity represent the distinct characteristics that makes a brand more unique in relation to others. Upshaw (1995) argued that the main reason to make the brand a differentiator is the aim to attract the attention of consumers. In addition, Nandan (2005) gave an extended argument on the subject, by stating that the brand identity originates in the company and the main aim of a company is to create differentiated products with unique features. He continued by saying that by the means of brand identity, a company seeks to convey its individuality and distinctiveness to all its relevant publics. From the various available definitions, it can be concluded that being in a possession of an identity means being your true self driven by personal goal that is both different from others and resistant to change.

After viewing, how the brand management literature developed from the 80s up to nowadays, it is important to make a distinction between the two types of brand identity: product and corporate. To date, several studies have indicated identical definitions of 'corporate brand', all revealing that behind the brand there is an organisation (Ind, 1997; Balmer, 2001). Ind (1997) defined the corporate brand as "sum of values that define the organisation". Balmer (2001) also considered that the corporate brand involves "the conscious decision by senior management to distil and make known the attributes of the organisation's identity in the form of a clearly defined value proposition"(p.281). There is also a number of studies that have highlighted the main differences between a corporate brand and a product brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Balmer, 2005; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Urde, 2013). Urde (2013) said that the main difference can be even recognized in the languages used when speaking about the different type of brand. More specifically, in the case of a corporate brand, he stated that the company will use "we" when speaking of itself, internally and publicly. While, the other stakeholders and customers will use 'they'. On the other side, when speaking about the product brand, both management and the other stakeholders will use "it" (Urde, 2013). Balmer and Gray (2003) noted several different ways in which corporate branding varies from product branding. The first is that the focus transfers from the product to the corporation. Secondly, from a managerial perspective the product brand is controlled by the middle-management marketing function, while corporate brands are governed by the higher executive level. The third way is that the typical target audience of the product brands are only specific consumers, while corporate brands usually relate to all of the company's stakeholders. Fourth, related with the above mentioned management perspective, the product-brand management typically administered within the marketing department, while the corporate branding requires the assistance from the whole corporation, as well as a cross-functional coordination. Finally, Balmer and Gray (2003) stated that the product brands have a relatively short-term orientation, compared to the heritage and history of the to corporate brands. Due to all those evidences corporate branding is more strategic compared to the the normally functional product branding (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Hatch & Schultz,2003). Balmer and Gray (2003) also added to those five differentiators, that product brands are accentuated in marketing communications, while corporate brands are dependent on corporate communications. Hence, it has been emphasised that product brands are unarguably part of the marketing field, on the contrary corporate brands have an important role in the organisation's corporate strategy (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Hatch & Schultz,2003). Considering all this evidence, we chose to focus the research only on corporate branding. The main reason is the broader focus of the corporate brand and the communication domain that involves multiple stakeholders, as specified by Balmer and Gray (2003) and Hatch and Schultz (2003).

As stated above, to ensure a corporate brand alignment, it is essential first to define or analyse the corporate brand identity. Furthermore, to provide an authentic message being sent to the consumers, it is crucial for the company to be aware of its deepest values. For this reason, we examined several different tools that can help in this "assignment". The following review of the literature, focused on the subject of defining the brand identity, presents the development of the models, from the early product brand models, focusing on brand image, to identity-based product and corporate brand frameworks (Urde, 2013). One of them is the early product brand models named Brand Concept-Image Model. It points out the idea of selecting, implementing and controlling a brand image over time (Park, Jaworski & MacInnis,1986). Kotler (1984) argued that models like Brand Concept-Image Model were constructed for image-driven product companies that have the primary aim to satisfy the needs and desires of the consumers. However, as Urde (2013) criticised them, models like this only consider the internal aspects of the brand, therefore they can not be used to define the corporate brand identity.

A more influential framework was established by Kapferer (2004), called Brand Identity Prism *(see Figure 3)* and based upon the pioneering work of Asch (1946). This framework made a breakthrough in the literature by changing the direction of the earlier models from ‘image’ to ‘identity’. The Brand Identity Prism of Kapferer (2004) contains six facets: physique, relationship and reflection plus personality, culture and self-image. All together those six facets define brand’s identity. The facet “physique” of the brand corresponds to the visual aspects that come immediately to consumer’s mind when the name of the brand is mentioned. The “personality” facet is acknowledged as the character and the identity of the brand, more specifically how the brand is explained through human characteristics. Moreover, the facet called “culture” of the brand is connected to the core values that the brand stands for. That culture differentiates the brands, by developing a ideological glue that connects everything together in long-term. The social communication of the brand with the external world is represented by the “relationship” facet. How the customer wishes to be seen when using the brand concerns the “reflection” facet. The last facet “self-image” refers to the image that consumers have in their mind when using the product. Moreover, Kapferer (2012) also included two perspectives in the prism: the picture of the sender (brand perspective) and a picture of the recipient (customer perspective). The picture of the sender is separated into “physique” and “personality”. The picture of the recipient is comprised of “reflection” and “self-image”. The two other dimensions, incorporated in the prism, are the externalizing or internalizing factors. The facet “relationship” belongs to the first dimension whereas “culture” refers the second one. The aim of the “relationship” is to externalize the brand to the outside world where “culture” focused on internalizing the brand within the organisation (Kapferer, 2012).

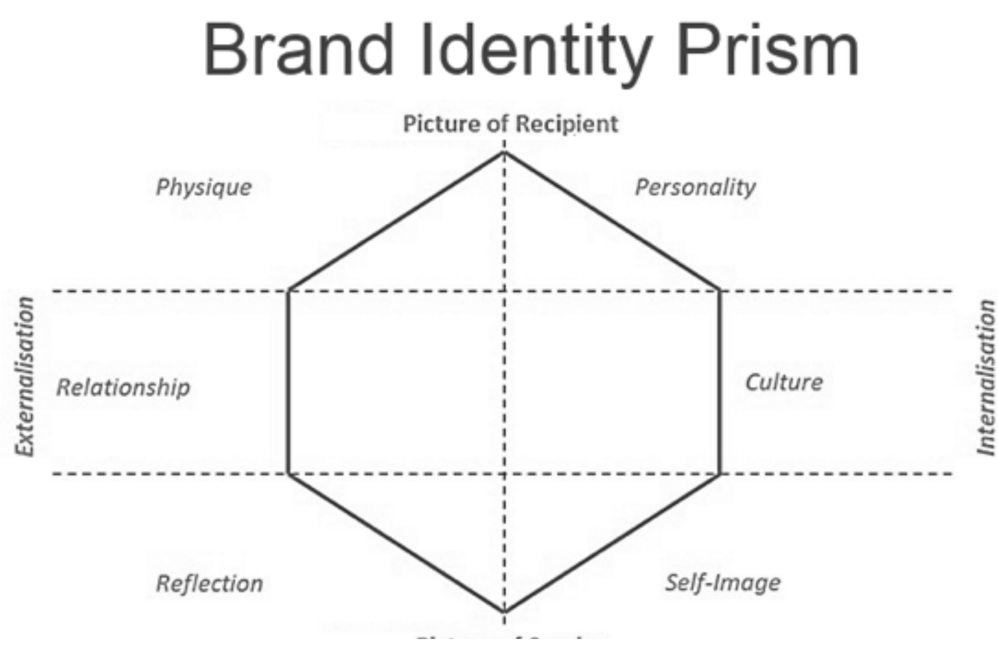


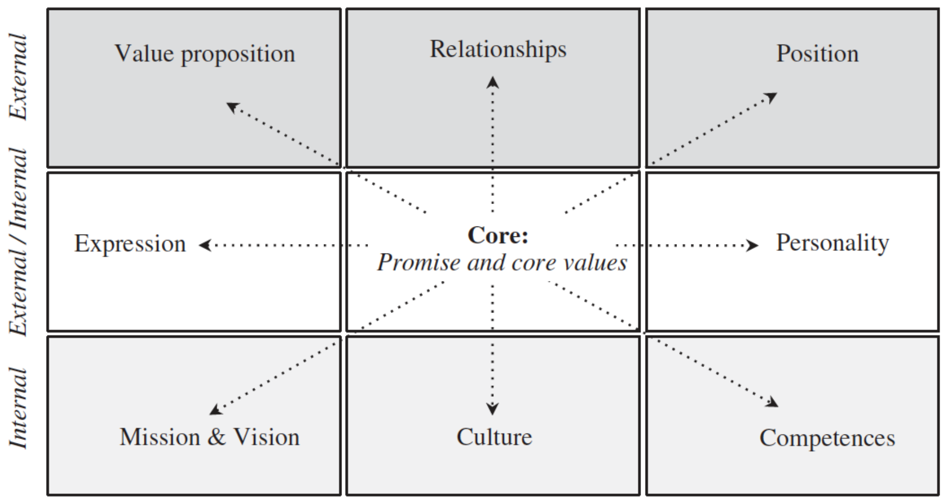
Figure 3. Brand Identity

Prism (Kapferer, 2012)

In their book “Pro logo - Brands as factors of progress”, Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004) supported the Kapferer’s prism by defining it as a major innovation. They characterised it as “a tool that, for the first time, made systematic study possible while showing the complexity of any approach to brand identity”(p.102). Nevertheless, Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004) also mentioned that the framework possesses some limitations. More specifically, they criticised the two facets of self-image and reflection, as being more related to the perception of the brand’s identity than with the actual identity of the company. Besides, they continued their critique by arguing that the “relationship” dimension resides more to the cultural domain, where they both overlap. Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004) also added that, after applying the model for several times on different occasions, they observed that it lacks “homogeneity in its categories”(p.102). In the same vein, Urde (2013) highlighted that the Brand Identity Prism is more suitable for the analysis of product brands than corporate brands. He stated that the main reason for that is the focus on self-image and reflection, which describe “what I say to myself through my choice of a brand” and “what others say about or think of my choice of a brand” accordingly. On the contrary, Urde (2013) also provided another perspective by saying that the culture facets and the division between internalisation and externalisation place the prism as a link that connects the models relating separately to product brand and corporate brand identity. To conclude, the models shown above indicated that the vast majority of literature is focused on product branding. Rather less attention is given to the research on corporate branding. Several lines in “The corporate brand identity matrix” article by Urde (2013) also supported this statement, by adding that the managers and companies are forced to either transform frameworks that are developed for product brand management, or develop improvised hybrid models. Moreover, Urde (2013) also revealed that the frameworks, developed for product brands, lack elements like mission, vision and core values of the corporation, as well as its culture and competencies, which are all critical elements of the corporate brand.

To emphasise again, a significant and growing body of the academic world has investigated product branding; therefore we wanted to present the limited existing corporate brand identity frameworks, as the focus of this study will be the alignment between corporate brand identity and brand image when using online retailers. In the Brand Identity Planning Model (Aaker, 1996, p. 85) the corporate brand identity is defined as “the timeless essence of a brand”. Urde (2013) stated that this model is a useful framework, where the brand identity is a fundamental part. However it is also considered too general to be used as a managerial framework, specifically for corporate branding. Other two authors, Collins and Porras (1997) forwarded the research on the subject of the company’s identity essence, exhibited in their Core Ideology Model. The model emphasises the importance of the purpose and the core values as key components of a corporate brand identity. The model also provides useful elements in line with the topic of analysing and/or defining corporate brand identity; however it still does not generate a managerial framework (Collins & Porras, 1997). In the Aaker's Brand Identity Planning Model (1996), new brand identity elements are introduced - the value proposition and position. Their purpose is to "provide texture and completeness" for the brand identity(Aaker, 1996, p. 176). All the above-listed models and frameworks were either only investigating product brand identity, or were models used just to align and managing the corporate brand identity, but none of them defined or analysed the corporate brand identity.

As stated by Urde (2013)The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix *(see Figure 4)* is a tool that both defines, analyses, coordinates and builds corporate brand identity for improved performance. The CBIM contains nine elements that have either internal, external or



mixed(internal/external) orientation.

Figure 4. Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (Urde, 2013)

According to Urde (2013), externally the CBIM is focusing on the company's value proposition to customers, the relationships between stakeholders and the company's current position in the market. The elements of the CBIM, who reflect both on external and internal qualities, are company's personality, expressions and the core values. Finally is the bottom layer of the CBIM, constructed of internal elements that "relate to the realities of the organisation and its values" (Urde, 2013, p. 751) which form the corporate brand identity of an organisation and acknowledge to be a unique feature of the framework. Those internal elements are the company's mission and vision, the established culture of the company and its unique competencies. All nine elements of the matrix are related to each other, which can be seen through the arrows connecting each component *(See Figure 4*). What this means is that all components are factors and need to be adjusted to reflect the 'core' of company's brand and vice versa.

In the following paragraphs, the individual elements of the CBIM will be presented and explained. First, will be introduced the internal elements, after that the internal and external factors, followed by the external components. The corporate mission can be defined as the reason why an organisation "exists and what engages and motivates it, beyond the aim of making money" (Urde, 2013, p. 751). On the other side, vision can be identified as an extension to the "mission" that indicates the future direction and inspiration for the organisation. Culture is characterised as a reflection of "corporate attitudes, values and beliefs, and of the ways in which the company works and behaves" (Urde, 2013, p. 751). Competencies are a set of skills or know-how that define what the company is particularly good at and what makes them better than the competition(Urde, 2013).

Urde (2013) defined expression as the "verbal, visual and other forms of identification as part of a corporate brand identity" (p. 752). The element expression can be divided into tangible or intangible features such as "tone of voice, design, graphic style and logotype (Urde, 2013, p. 751). These expressions can be directed either internally in the company or externally towards stakeholders (Urde, 2013). According to Urde (2013), the brand core is the heart of a corporate brand identity, and therefore it is positioned at the center of the CBIM to underline its significance. The core defines the key promises of a company, the core values that sum up what the brand stands for. Urde (2013) also stated that the core of the CBIM assists in the decision for what precisely the brand identity of a corporate brand is. At last, personality aims to define the combination of human characteristics or qualities that form company's corporate character (Urde, 2013). He further added that personality is one of the most essential elements in the CBIM framework as it plays the role of a bridge between the internal and the external elements in the framework.

Looking at the external elements, Urde (2013) defined the value proposition as the key offerings of a company and the way they want to become visible to customers and non-customers. Moreover, Aaker (1996) defined value proposition as the "statement of the functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits delivered by the brand that provides value to the customer [...] and drive purchase decisions" (p. 7). The factor relationships refer to the connections that the company has with customers and non-customer stakeholders (suppliers, partners, retailers, etc.) In the CBIM, there is a vertical arrow linking relationship and culture. Another arrow that connects the position and "mission and vision". The reason for that is because according to Urde (2013) corporate brand's intended position needs to be mirrored in the organisation's "reason for being and direction" (p. 753). This element refers to the current positioning of the company in the mind of the consumers and other stakeholders (Urde, 2013).

Urde (2013) stated that these nine elements are a key to identify a corporate brand identity. By aligning the nine elements a company can solidify its corporate brand(Urde, 2013). For instance, a company's mission and vision should correspond to its core value and brand promise, so that it can achieve a market position which compliments to the corporate brand identity (Urde, 2013). In the same vein, a company's value proposition and competences should align with the core values and brand promise, for both value proposition and competences to be genuinely connected.

Considering all of this evidence, it seems that either the majority of the literature is only focused on investigating product brands or only proposes models used to align and manage the corporate brand identity. The only model found that can both define and analyse a corporate brand identity is CBIM. However, that models, to the best of our knowledge, has never been applied into a brand alignment setting, where the identity is defined, then communicated through an online retailer, towards the consumer. Therefore the practicality of the CBIM model in that setting can be concluded to be questionable.

2.3. Brand Image

This area focuses on brand image and more reviews explicitly its various definitions, followed by the two types of brand image and concluded with the demonstration of a model that can assist in the identification of the brand image.

A great deal of previous research has been concentrated on defining a brand image, by emphasising its different characteristics (Nandan, 2005; Kotler, 1988; Herzog, 1963; Ditcher,1985**;** Park & MacInnis, 1986; Keller, 1993). Looking back to the "Sender-Receiver model", the first section of this literature and theoretical review, brand image is positioned on the receiver's side (Kapferer, 2012). According to Nandan (2005), brand image is related to the consumer's perception and enclosed as a set of beliefs that consumers have about the brand. Kotler (1988) also supported that view by defining a brand image as 'the set of beliefs held about a particular brand' (p. 197). A number of studies also defined a brand image as a sum of the consumers' impressions. Herzog (1963), is one of the first authors that introduced the brand image as the total of impressions that consumers collect from many sources. Later researchers like Ditcher (1985) viewed brand image as outlining not individual traits of the product, but the total impression in the minds of the consumers. Brand image can also be characterised as the consumers' perceptions of a brand, mirrored by the brand associations held in consumers' memory (Keller, 1993). This view of brand image is similar to the interpretation given by Aaker (1991) and Park and MacInnis (1986). Aaker (1991) claimed that 'a brand image is a set of associations, usually organised in some meaningful way' (p. 109), while, according to Park and MacInnis (1986) brand image is 'the understanding consumers derive from the total set of brand-related activities engaged by the firm (p. 135). Noticeable in all the above definitions is that brand image is a consumer-constructed notion of the brand.

Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) introduced another view of brand image by arguing that individuals perceive the brand image in different ways considering that they encode the message, sent by the company, depending on their life experiences and specific human characteristics. The two authors, Grönroos (2007) and Kapferer (2008), have further developed that view, by highlighting that is it is impossible to affect an image since it is created in the mind of the consumer, which hinders the opportunity to influence the perception of a brand. However, Faircloth, Capella and Alford (2001) confronted the above view, by stating that it is possible to affect the brand image since brand associations could be manipulated in the aim to build the desirable image. To continue this thought, De Chernatony's(1999) argued that companies can shape the stakeholders' desires and self-images that together establish the brand image.

On the basis of the consumers' perceptions, a brand image can be divided into two main types – functional and symbolic brands (Bhat & Reddy 1998**;** Nan & Heo 2007; Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986). According to Ries and Trout (1986), to define a position the desired brand image it is important first to determine the type of brand image the consumers keep in their minds. On one side, the functional brands address general needs that have more practical and immediate nature, on the other the symbolic brands satisfy needs like self-expression, self-image identification, and prestige (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). According to Keller (1998), functional brands correspond to product-related attributes connected to more intrinsic benefits of product and service consumption. These intrinsic benefits are usually connected to the individual's basic physiological and safety needs (Maslow, 1970). Conversely, the symbolic brands as presented in Keller's model of brand equity (1993), are generally linked with the customer's need of social recognition, personal expression and esteem. Further, Bhat and Reddy (1998) stated that mainly, symbolic brands are affected less by product attributes comparing to functional.

Throughout the literature and theoretical review, there was only one model found that can assist in the identification of the brand image. According to Kapferer 1992, brand image resides in an associative memory network that is essential to consumer decision making and possibly provides brand evocation and evaluation, ultimately contributing to customer-based brand equity (Holden, 1992). Keller (1998) further developed that idea in a chapter of his book 'Strategic Brand Management- Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity, where he argued that brand image is one of the components of customer-based brand equity. He explained that brand knowledge is key to establish brand equity. Keller (1998) stated that the "Associative network memory model" (*Figure 5)* could assist in the understanding of how brand knowledge exists in the consumer's memory. That model " views memory as a network of nodes and connecting links, in which nodes represent stored information or concepts, and links represent the strength of association between the nodes" (p.71).

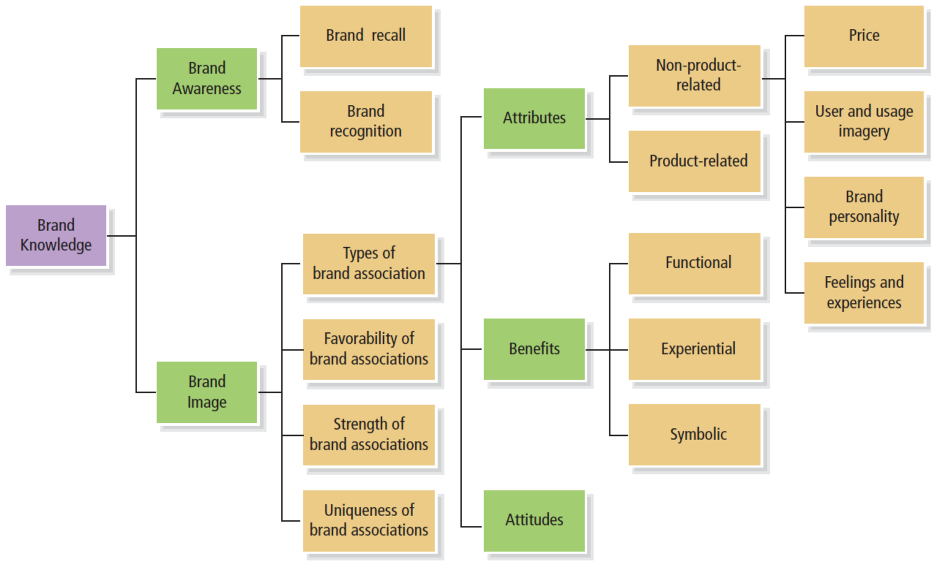


Figure 5. Associative network memory model (Keller, 1998)

As seen in Figure 5 the brand knowledge consists of two components: brand awareness and brand image. Keller (1998) defined the brand awareness as the strength of the brand node or trace in memory, that can evaluate the consumer's ability to identify the brand under different circumstances. According to Keller (1998) once an acceptable level of brand awareness is built, marketers can put more focus on designing the brand image. Brand image has been recognised by the marketers as an important concept, however they have not always agreed on how to measure it. According to Keller (1998) one generally accepted view is that a "brand image is consumers' perceptions about a brand, as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory"(p.72). Keller (1998) also says that this view is in line with the above presented "Associative network memory mode" *(see Figure 5)*. In other words the brand image is represented by the brand associations, which are other informational node connected with the brand knowledge, containing the meaning of the brand for consumers (Keller, 1998). Furthermore, the associations can be divided into subgroups, like attributes, benefits and attitudes (Keller, 1993). Keller (1993) did not give a further explanation of the subgroup attitudes. According to Faircloth, Capella and Alford (2001), attributes have a direct impact on brand image and are widely defined in research. Chen (2001) added that brand attitudes are most common defined to be consumers' overall evaluation of a brand. In the same way Keller (1998) defined brand attributes as descriptive features that characterize a product or service. On the other side are the benefits expressed by the consumers values related with the product or service and the types of needs those product and service fulfil. The product and service benefits can be divided into functional, experiential or symbolic benefits (Keller, 1993). First the functional benefits are related with the intrinsic product advantages, moreover the symbolic are the extrinsic product advantages and the experiential are linked with the product consumption advantages. After displaying the different types of associations Keller (1998) stated that associations can be also assessed on the basis of three other key dimensions-strength, favorability, and uniqueness-making up the sources of brand equity. The open-ended questions that can be used to identify the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand associations are as follows:

1. What are the strongest associations you have to the brand? What comes to mind when you think of the brand? (Strength)

2. What is good about the brand? What do you like about the brand? What is bad about the brand? What do you dislike about the brand? (Favorability)

3. What is unique about the brand? What characteristics or features does the brand share with other brands? (Uniqueness)." (Keller, 1998, p.343)

According to Keller (1998), once the consumer has a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and also possesses a strong and positive and unique brand association in mind, then the customer- based brand equity occurs. He further stated that if consumers associations are unique, strong and favourable, a positive brand image can be created, which then will transform the consumer brand behaviour towards brand equity enhancement (Keller, 1993).

To conclude there is a vast amount of literature that presents what is brand image and its different characteristics. However, throughout the literature review, only one model, that can assist in the identification of the brand image, was found. According to that Associative network memory model by Keller (1998), brand image is directly linked to the brand associations consumers have towards a brand. Which clearly can indicate that the consumers' perception is very much dependent on the range of associations they have towards the brand.

2.4. Consistent corporate communication and brand elements

As specified in the first section of this chapter, to achieve corporate brand alignment between the corporate brand identity and brand image, it is essential to have consistent communication of the brand messages sent from the company to the consumers through all communication channels. For that reason, this section lists the academic literature on the subject of what is communication and how it can be used in a branding context, then the influence the online environment has upon the communication. Moreover, it will be presented the literature on the subject of consistent corporate communication, what is it and why is it important.

According to Andersen (2001), communication is characterised as the human act of transfusing a message to others and forming it as understandable as possible in a meaningful way. Additionally, Fill (1999) supported the idea that communication is a process where individuals share meaning. He specified that to establish a successful communication between a sender and receiver it is crucial that both parties fully understand the meaning of each other's communication; otherwise no dialogue will occur. Two other authors, Finne and Grönroos (2009) expanded the idea by highlighting that communication starts with a sender who forms a message. After that, through coding, noise and decoding processes that message is sent to the receiver (Finne & Grönroos, 2009).

A vast number of authors attempted to define communication and how it can be used in a branding context, where the sender establishes the brand identity and receiver generates the brand image of a company. According to Gray and Balmer (1998), two main types of communication deal with how the brand is transmitted to the external world. They argued that to communicate product brands companies should use marketing communication, while corporate brands are dependent on corporate communications. They further specified that corporate communication is the critical link between the corporate identity and brand image and it has a direct impact on how both are aligned. Other two researchers that support this statement are Das, Prakash and Khattri (2016) who pointed out that corporate communication is an active process of discovering, developing and bringing the right image or identity of a company to the marketplace. The definition they have established is stating that the corporate communication "is the aggregate of messages from both official and informal sources, through a variety of media, by which the company conveys its identity to its multiple audiences or stakeholders". Riel (1995), in his book "Principles of Corporate Communication", further specified that what differentiates communication from the corporate communication is that the latter adopts a "corporate" point of view. He further stated that the word "corporate" is derived from the latin "corpus" meaning "body" or "the whole". It requires the communication specialists to focus, first and foremost, on the challenges of the organisation as a whole. Riel (1995) identified that corporate communication consists of marketing communications, organisational communications, and management communications. Where, marketing communication deals with those forms of communication that assist the sales of products, services, and brands. On the other side management communication investigates how the managers communicate externally and internally. Finally, the organisational communication encompasses public relations, public affairs, investor relations, corporate advertising, environmental communication, and internal communication. Riel (2005) argued that collectively all those three types of communications have a direct impact on the how the brand messages are communicated from the company towards the consumers.

Moreover, O'Reilly (2005) stated that the corporate communication has gone through a significant development in the past decade due to the appearance on a global scale of "Web 2.0". According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2012), Web 2.0 is "a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (p. 61). Additionally, Kaplan and Haenlein (2012) stated that the online environment had opened new opportunities for the contemporary corporate communication, by contributing with the possibilities for dialogue, branding, interaction and engagement, as well as transmitting the organisation’s corporate identity. However, according to Gulbrandsen and Just (2016) online corporate communication can also blur the boundaries between organisations and their external environment more than ever before (Gulbrandsen and Just 2016). That is why consistent communication is considered to be important in the prevention of that fogginess.

Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004) highlighted that to achieve brand alignment the brand messages should be transmitted with the use of consistent corporate communication, represented by the same tone and same brand elements such as logo, slogan and images, on all sales channel. Similarly, Christensen, Firat and Torp (2008) stated that consistent corporate communication refers to "aligning symbols, messages, procedures and behaviours", which allows the company to communicate inside and outside the borders of the organisation, constantly and with continuity. The authors also added that the aim of the consistent corporate communication is to harmonize all the tools and media, with the aim provide a single consistent message every time the consumer comes into contact with the brand. Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004) also argued that the message of the brand’s identity is influenced by the altering interpretations depending on who is on the receiving end and how it is communicated, which might result into a communication gap between the two sides. In the same manner, De Chernatony (1999) stated that such communication gaps can occur if the brand values are not communicated in a consistent manner and might result into a dilution of the brand meaning or can even change the imprinted brand value (Chevalier & Mazzalovo (2004). Together, these authors have not considered the aspect of the indirect online sales channels and how they can have an impact over the consistent corporate communication.

As specified by Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004), the consistent corporate communication can be established by continuously conveying brand messages. Where the brand elements have been identified as the central ingredients of the brand messages, with the main aim to communicate the brand essence of a company (Chevalier & Mazzalovo (2004). According to Rowley (2004, p.135), the brand elements help the buyer by ‘…conveying a bundle of attributes about the product or service. The brand elements thus become the metaphoric key for unlocking brand value or equity for the brand holder. In the same manner, Kladou, Kavaratzis, Salonika and Rigopoulou (2015) illustrated the brand elements as the main identifiers for catching the attention of an external audience. They further stated that the brand elements are a key tool for impressing, which relates to how the brand creates impressions in people's’ minds. The authors have considered that the brand elements, that have the power to leave “scars” of the perception of the consumers are the brand name, logo and tagline.

Some of the mostly presented brand elements in many academic articles and books are brand names, logos and symbols, taglines and packaging (Keller, 2012; De Chernatony, 2010**;** Gray & Balmer, 1998; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). According to Keller (2012) brand name is a fundamentally important as it directly relates to key associations towards a product. He further stated that it is required for a brand name to be as clear and understandable as possible. At the same time it should be familiar and meaningful for the consumers. Additionally, brand names should be unique, different, and unusual (Keller, 2012). Furthermore, De Chernatony (2010) stated that brand name is recognised as the most seen information by consumers and it can favour the development of brand awareness and construct the desired brand image for a new product. Keller (2012) stated that even though that brand name typically is the fundamental brand element, visual elements like logo also play an essential role in building brand awareness. For Gray and Balmer (1998) the logo is at the heart of the corporate graphics design system. Keller (2012) added that logos have a long history as a means to signify origin, ownership, or association. The author also asserted that logos are represented by either corporate names or trademarks (word marks with text only) written in an unique form. Another crucial brand elements is tagline. Keller (2012) defined tagline as short descriptive or persuasive statement about the brand. The author further stated that taglines are also strong branding tool, as they are an effective means to build brand equity. He even compared the tagline to "hooks" or "handles" that can help to the consumers absorb the meaning of a brand. The last brand element listed is the packaging of a product. Packaging characterized as action of designing and producing the product wrapping or containers (Keller, 2012). As all the other brand elements, packaging also has a long history. It is very important for the marketers to select the aesthetic and functional components of packaging properly in order to accomplish the set marketing objectives and meet consumers' needs (Keller, 2012). According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) all the listed above elements are the main initiator of brand awareness or ease the formation of strong, favourable and unique brand associations.

All the above-listed elements were presented in the literature as being typical when communicating the brand through offline sales channels. The authors, Cleff, Walter and Xie (2007)**,** argued that in a physical store the customers can use all their five senses- they can see, touch, smell, taste and try out the brand. However, in online sales channels, the use of all the five senses for a consumer is not possible (Cleff, Walter & Xie, 2007). But there is still the possibility to create a virtual brand experience through audio, video, games or communities, to attract the attention of the consumers (Cleff, Walter & Xie, 2007). For Cleff, Walter and Xie (2007) interactivity with users offers favourable circumstances to create an emotional bond, potentially even stronger than when using only offline sales channels. In the same manner, Morgan-Thomasc and Veloutsou(2013) stated that without the atmosphere of the store and the sensual clues like touch, taste and smell, the challenge for online sales channels to create the same brand experience is more significant compared to the brands that also have offline presence. They concluded that if a company has online sales channels, it is important to communicate the brand elements developed mainly for one of the humans' senses, related to seeing objects. The brand elements that can be used in an online context are the visuals like a logo, graphics (images and videos)(Cleff, Walter & Xie, 2007). In the same manner, Rowley (2004) introduced the same online brand elements; logo and graphics. Rowley (2004) defined the logo as the sign for everything that the brand stands for. He added that the logo should be presented on the homepage, and on all the places of the site where it adds value. The other online brand elements are graphics, which according to Rowley(2004) includes images, videos and other interactive visuals related to the brand. Where images and videos are a visual representation of brand values (Rowley, 2004).

To conclude the majority of the literature listed above defines what communication, corporate communication, online corporate communication, as well as consistent corporate communication is. Nonetheless, no academic literature was identifying online corporate consistent communication and stating why it is important for achieving brand alignment. The same pattern was seen in the literature describing brand elements. Only two authors have suggested brand elements that can be used in an online context.

2.5. Preliminary framework

Following the literature and theoretical review, we identified a lack of a framework related to the corporate brand identity and brand image alignment, when indirect online sales channels are involved. The preliminary framework, shown in Figure 6, connected the main models and concepts displayed in the literature and theoretical review. Furthermore, as the literature and theoretical review did not touch upon the online sales channels, this framework was strictly focusing on the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment when the manufacturer is using online retailers to sell its products. This also showed the different brand elements, used to communicate the brand message to the consumer. Thereby, the preliminary framework contains all appropriate models found in the brand literature, merged and modified with the only purpose of answering the main research question of this thesis. The following paragraphs present the main models included in the preliminary framework, why they have been incorporated and how they have been adopted.

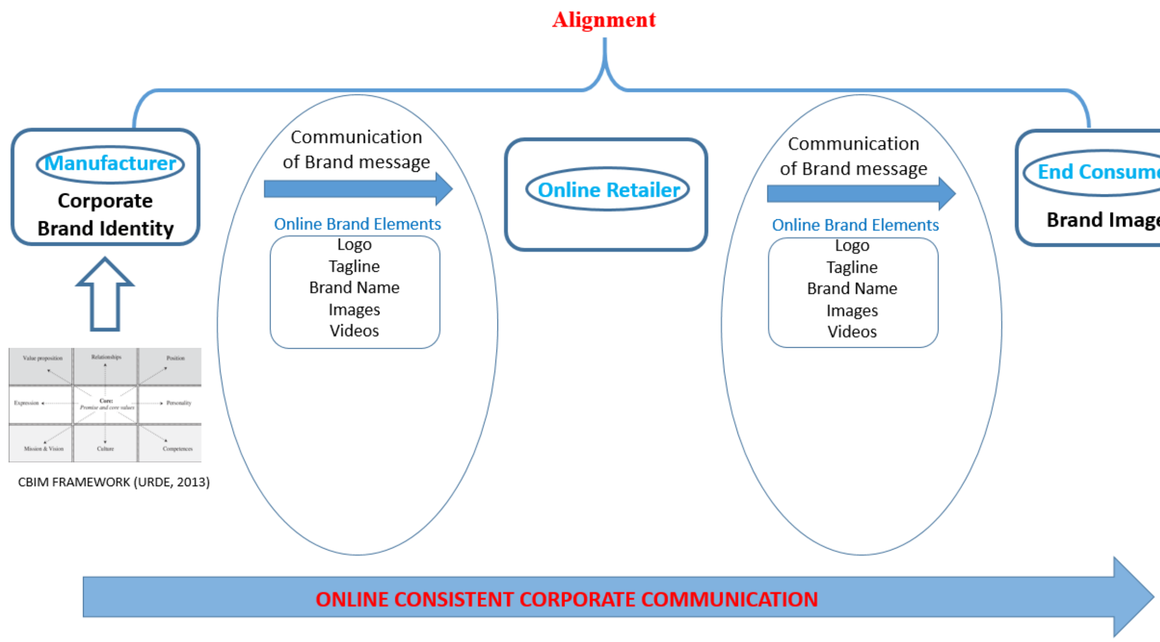


Figure 6. Preliminary framework - Corporate brand identity-brand image alignment, through online retailers

As concluded in the above-presented literature and theoretical review, to date, there was a vast number of studies that have investigated the concept of alignment, putting the focus on different elements within. Nevertheless, none of them presented the specific scenario of corporate brand identity- brand image alignment, when using the online sales channels of retailers, where the main involved actors are online retailers, manufacturer and consumers. Therefore, the "Sender-Receiver" model of Kapferer (2004) served as a base of the preliminary framework. That model was selected as it was one of the first models that had shown the significance of the brand communication between brand identity and brand image. Moreover, Kapferer (2004) also considered the encoding and decoding activities within the model that might be interrupted by a noise. As stated above, the "Sender-Receiver "model was inspired by the Shannon, Weaver model of Communication that also suggested that this potential noise, that can interrupt the communication process might be the channels through which the messages are transmitted (Shannon, Weaver and Wiener, 1950). Based on that ground, it was suggested in the preliminary framework that noise is represented by the online sale platform of the retailers, meaning their websites, therefore in between the sender (brand identity) and the receiver (brand image) was added the third actor (online retailer).

As presented above, to ensure corporate brand alignment one of the essential first steps was to define or analyse the brand identity. Due to the scope of this paper, only models, which can define or analyse corporate brand identities, were considered. The chosen framework for that purpose was the CBIM by Urde (2013). First, because it was the only one model found that can define or analyse a corporate brand identity. Second, the CBIM model is suitable to be applied in a managerial environment. Third, the model considers nine different elements, from different perspectives, as being key to identify corporate brand identity. Finally, with the help of the CBIM, an identity answering the following questions: “Who are we? Where do we come from? What do we stand for? What is our raison d’être? and, What is our wanted position?”, will be defined(Urde, 2013, p.744).

To define and ensure corporate brand alignment, next step is also to identify the brand image and then compare it with the corporate brand identity. Positioned on the receiver’s side, the brand image was characterised as the consumers’ perceptions of a brand, mirrored by the brand associations held in consumers’ memory (Keller, 1993). A step in the identification of the brand image is to understand the type of brand image (functional or symbolic) that consumers keep in their mind (Ries & Trout, 1986). Throughout the above - presented literature and theoretical review, only one model, which can assist in the identification of the brand image, was found. The Associative network memory model proposed by Keller (2013) defined that brand image as being directly linked with the brand associations that consumers have towards a brand. To define the brand image in that framework, only the top of mind association, a consumer has towards the brand will be considered. This will help to identify the types of brand image they have.

A third step in achieving corporate brand alignment was to ensure consistent corporate communication. Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2004) defined consistent corporate communication as the transmission of brand messages, from the sender (brand identity) to the receiver(brand image), with the same tone and same brand elements such as logo, slogan and images, on all sales channels (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2004). The brand elements have been identified as the central ingredients of the brand messages; therefore a particular focus in the preliminary framework was given to them, as being the main identifiers for catching the attention of an external audience (Kavaratzis, Salonika & Rigopoulou, 2015). Majority of the literature suggested only offline brand elements, concluding that there is a lack of literature highlighting the elements used in an online sales setting. Looking at the listed offline elements: brand names, logos and symbols, taglines, and packaging, the preliminary framework consisted only of elements that can have a generic use, both for offline and online sales setting. Therefore, the element-packaging, as it represented the physical look of a wrapped product, from the list was removed. Considering that in an online environment the consumers cannot use all the five senses, the packaging can not be presented as an influencer. Finally, the two online brand elements: images and videos, proposed by Rowley (2004), were also added.

Merging and modifying all these models helped to establish the design of the preliminary framework. It was not only created with the purpose of answering the main research question of that paper but also to guide us in the data collection and analysis process. Furthermore, additional communication elements were expected to emerge from the data collection, which was all presented in the discussion section of this paper *(see Chapter 5*).

To conclude, the preliminary framework showed that to achieve the much needed corporate brand identity - brand image alignment, both manufacturer and the online retailer must communicate the different brand elements, found out through the literature and theoretical review, as consistently as possible. As the consistent corporate communication incorporates the communication of all different brand elements, the former has been added as an important prerequisite in order to achieve the above-mentioned alignment

3. Methodology

The following part of this research paper will focus on providing a thorough description and argumentation of the choices made regarding the different aspects of the methodological research approach. First, the relativism and social constructivism positions will be presented as being the underlying philosophical assumptions of the thesis. Second, the choice of conducting qualitative research and focusing on an abductive approach will be argued for. Next, the research design will be presented elaborating on the reasoning behind the choice of including a single case study. Further, the chapter will examine the data collection process, sampling methods, as well as the types of data analysis used in the paper. Finally, the trustworthiness and authenticity, as well as the methodological limitations and the ethical considerations of the paper will be discussed in details.

3.1 Research philosophy

Guba and Lincoln (1994) emphasize the great importance for researchers to have clearly defined research paradigm that would serve as a guiding point when structuring the overall paper approach. The authors define paradigm as being “a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.107). It is important to have a clearly defined research paradigm since it is going to influence the rest of the researchers’ decisions throughout the paper (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In regards to the correct research methods used, the different paradigms suggest the use of either qualitative or quantitative research strategy (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The choice of the specific paradigms is defined through the researcher’s decisions and assumptions regarding the ontology and epistemology - key concepts in the philosophy of social sciences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The rest of this section will provide the reader with the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions applied in this thesis.

The first philosophical assumption, ontology, is focusing on the nature of reality and existence (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012) distinguish between two main positions within the ontological assumption – realism and relativism. The first one is supporting the idea that there is only one clearly objective truth. The second one sees the truth as a compromise between many truths and perspectives in the social world which could lead to the assumption that the reality, presented through relativism, is subjective. This research paper is following a relativist ontology as its writers believe in the existence of many perspectives on tackling the researched problem. For instance the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment phenomenon can be seen through the lenses of consumers, manufacturers or online retailers, therefore is not a single reality that can be discovered. This specific research position is also being chosen as it also assumes that different viewpoints could come up with a different observers, in different time and places (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012).

The second philosophical assumption, epistemology, is focusing on the theory of knowledge and aims at showing researchers how to inquire about the nature of the world in the best possible way (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). The main positions within this philosophical assumption are positivism and social constructionism (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The positivistic view looks at the existing outside world and its objective measurement through sensation, reflection or intuition, whereas the social constructivism view looks at the outside world as something more subjective that is based on social constructs determined by people's interactions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). The social constructivism is chosen to be the most appropriate position for this thesis because we identifies that the different aspects of reality investigated throughout the whole paper are rather subjective as they are influenced by people and their interaction with each other and the reality surrounding them.

Once the philosophical positions are defined, the level of engagement between the researcher and the research context also needs to be taken into consideration (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). The research style, defined by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012), can be either detached or attached depending on the object of study and the way the authors want to research it. This paper focuses on attached constructivism as we find an important value in getting closer to the different objects that are being studied, such as individuals and complex organisations, in order to understand their relationship and communication (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). The key point, in this case, is that "any meaning structures must come from the lived experience of individuals" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012, p.61)

To conclude, even if relativism and social constructionism have many strengths, such as allowing natural ways of data collection and ability to understand people's meaning, it is also important to mention their flaws. (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). One of the main weaknesses of the social constructionism, underlined by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), is related to the data and the need for excessive time and resource investment during its collection. Another important vulnerability in this approach, stated by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012), is its low credibility within the research world due to the high subjectivity that comes with it. As for the relativism and its critics, Guba (1992) is the one describing this position as being nothing else than "rank subjectivity". Still, he also defends relativism to some extent claiming that research papers will always have at least some degree of subjectivity and it cannot be avoided.

Having in mind the main research question and sub-questions of the thesis, and their purpose, we consider the ontological and epistemological positions, described above, as being the most suitable for the study. It is also believed that knowing the strengths and the downsides of these positions could strengthen the research paper as the “full awareness of philosophical assumptions can both increase the quality of research and contribute to the creativity of the researcher” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012, p.47)

3.2 Research Strategy and Approach

3.2.1 Qualitative Research Strategy

According to Landrum and Garza (2015), the most frequently used strategies are qualitative and quantitative. The selection of the research strategy was influenced first by the purpose of the study, and then by the philosophical stance of the research, chosen. As a reminder, the purpose of this research was to explore the phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment in an online environment. The data required to achieve that purpose was consisting of close interactions with consumers, indicating that this was a setting where qualitative research methods fit better compared to quantitative research. Additionally, when considering the epistemological and the ontological orientations, presented in the previous section, a qualitative research strategy was defined as being the most fitting because it attempted to understand the social world through human considerations and intuitions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The qualitative research strategy gave the possibility to answer not only the questions *what, where, when,* or *who* questions regarding the investigated phenomenon of corporate brand identity-brand image alignment, but also explained why and how it occurred (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Qualitative research strategy was the most appropriate one to use as it enabled the researchers to gain new and deeper insights into the consumer’s experience, behaviours, beliefs, emotions opinion and the perception they had towards the brand (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). With the use of qualitative research strategy, we managed to gain deeper insights into the consumers’ perception and how it aligned with the manufacturer’s corporate brand identity, communicated by the online retailer. Moreover, the online brand elements and causes were part of the investigation. We were not interested in measuring the corporate brand identity-brand image alignment, which could be possible with the use of quantitative research, but rather to have an understanding why specific results are present - one of the main characteristics of qualitative research. In addition, Watkinson (2013) highlighted that customer experience is a qualitative feature based on the statement that “an experience is perceived by an individual’s sensory and psychological faculties: it is not something that can be measured quantitatively like profit, cost, weight or task completion times” (p.16). Finally, the qualitative research strategy contributed with a meaning and relevance to a social phenomenon with the use of interpretation of its social beings and by that placed the individuals in the centre of attention (Mason, 2011).

3.2.2 Exploratory and Abductive Approach

As defined above, there was no previous research conducted on the topic of corporate brand alignment between the manufacturer's corporate brand identity, when communicated by online retailers and the brand image. Therefore, this thesis assisted with important fundamentals that pioneered the research into the phenomenology of corporate brand identity-brand image alignment. We aimed to seek new insights into that phenomena, therefore the applied study was an exploratory, which was particularly connected with qualitative research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). The other two types of study that were not chosen due to the specific purpose of this paper, were descriptive and explanatory studies. The first type of study is focusing solely on portraying the phenomenon, whereas the second type investigates the relationships between variables (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). On the contrary, as stated by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009, p. 139), an exploratory study "is particularly useful if you wish to clarify your understanding of a problem, such as if you are unsure of the precise nature of the problem". Further, as explained by the three authors, the exploratory studies are conducted to find causes, consequences and guiding principles that can be addressed to a certain phenomenon- in this situation is a corporate brand identity-brand image alignment, when indirect online sales channels are involved. As an exploratory study, this thesis attempted to define the extent to which the brand image corresponds to the manufacturer's brand identity, communicated by the online retailers. Moreover, being an exploratory study, this thesis also aimed to define the brand elements and causes that have an impact on the phenomena, described above.

The central research approaches used in business research are inductive and deductive (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Inductive approach is mainly linked with qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In the inductive approach, the researchers collect data and develop theory as a result of the data analysis (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009) On the contrary, Bryman and Bell, 2011 emphasised that a deductive approach is a linear process that creates theory from existing literature and from that hypotheses can be formulated to reach conclusive findings. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016), there is also a third approach that is a combination between the two prior explained approaches. Abduction refers to the process when the researchers find a base framework through literature review and then, with the help of different data collection methods, this framework is systematically developed, in order to establish a more extensive understanding of the empirical object and supplement the base framework (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). This paper followed mainly an abductive approach, where deduction was applied during the process of investigating for an existing framework that would support answering the research question. However, induction was also used to extend the preliminary framework generated from the deduction. The abduction allowed us to overcome the main limitations of using a single approach - deduction or induction. The former was not considered as the most appropriate approach to use due to the usual testing of hypotheses (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016), whereas the latter did not guarantee that useful data patterns and theory would emerge at the end (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). Aligned with the chosen epistemological stance of constructionism, choosing an abductive approach gave the possibility to gain a deeper knowledge into the phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment, when the online retailers are included in the equation. Further insights into the phenomenon were gained first by generating a preliminary framework, based on the literature found on the subject of corporate brand alignment. Second, that preliminary framework was used as a base for the data collection, represented by web textual and visual data from 24 websites and semi-structured interviews with both managers of Thule and consumers. Finally, the preliminary framework also assisted in the analysis of the two types of data collected. First, by proposing already suggested categories from the theory, which made the data more structured. Second, with the possibility to use coding, new categories emerged from the data, represented by the additional influencing elements. All that was done with the goal to define how the consumer's perception of a brand align with with the corporate brand identity of a manufacturer, communicated through the online retailers.

3.3. Research Design

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016), research design is related first with the action of identifying the needed types of data to be gathered, secondly with the ways in which the data will be gathered, thirdly with the place from which the data will be gathered, and lastly with how will the data be analyzed and presented at the end. For Bryan and Bell (2011), the research design "provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data" (p. 40). In addition, Bryan and Bell (2015) highlighted that the decision about the research design reflects the choices taken about a range of elements in the research process and their priority. The authors also presented that a typical research design, related with constructionism, is a case study. Bryan and Bell (2015) further stated that a case study involves the investigation of an issue and an in-depth focus on a particular setting or context. Eisenhardt (1989, p.548) asserted that "case study is particularly well-suited to new research areas or research areas for which existing theory seems inadequate" which certainly is the case with the under-researched area of corporate brand alignment when an online retailer communicates the corporate brand identity of a manufacturers towards the consumer. Moreover, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) stated that the case study strategy has the ability to define answers to the question 'why?' as well as the 'what?' and 'how?'. That ability defined also the reason why the case study strategy is most often used in explanatory and exploratory research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Due to those characteristics, we have found the most suitable research design to be the case study. The case study lead to a detailed exploration of a specific case, which in this thesis was the organisation Thule, presented later in this section. The aim was to investigate a bounded situation within that organisation. The presented bounded situation was defined by analysing how the consumer's perception of the Thule brand aligned with the corporate brand identity of a manufacturer using online retailers to sell its products.

3.3.1 Case argumentation

Selecting a case study can often be an obstacle for researchers who aim at building theory from it, as Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) argued that the selected case(s) in a research paper should always be representative of a certain population in the eyes of the majority of readers. Miles and Huberman (1994) criticised the use of single case studies by stating that they can be too descriptive and narrow compared to using multiple cases. However, even if multiple-case studies allow the analysis of the data across different situations (Yin, 2003), making it a lot stronger and more reliable (Baxter & Jack, 2008), they are still the less preferred choice in the academic world when aiming for the creation of extra and stronger theory (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). For this study, we have chosen to conduct a single-case study, because it provided the opportunity to observe and analyse a phenomenon that few have examined before (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). Single case study allowed us to present an existing phenomenon in much more details compared to multi-case studies (Siggelkow, 2007). The decision to use a single case was also supported by the philosophical stance of the paper taken earlier by us. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012), the advocates of single cases typically identify with constructionism, while supporters of multiple cases usually fit with more positivist epistemology.

In the beginning, we had a predefined list of criteria for the selection of a company that would be suitable enough for the scope of the research. First of all, the company should have been strong representative of the phenomenon regarding corporate brand - brand image alignment. Secondly, it was obligatory to find a company that bases its business model on indirect sales channels with a strong focus on online sales. Lastly, we looked for a critical case as such type of cases yields "the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (Patton, 2002, p.236). After taking into consideration all of the above-mentioned criteria, Thule was the company chosen for the single case study. Thule is one of many companies that are struggling with the relatively new and under-researched phenomenon of achieving corporate brand identity - brand image alignment, when online retailers are involved in the sales.

Depending on the purpose of the research paper, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) defined two types of case study research: Intensive versus extensive. Intensive case study research focuses on investigating one case in as much depth as possible, whereas the extensive case study research uses several case studies to identify the existence of common patterns. We chose to conduct an intensive case study research in order to achieve thick, holistic and contextualised description and interpretation (Eriksson & Kovalainen,2016). This intensive case study aims to learn in details how this phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment fits in the selected case. Finally, we decided to investigate that phenomenon of corporate brand identity- image alignment from the perspective of consumers as knowing their brand perception would provide us with better direction of any further research regarding the manufacturer or the online retailer.

3.3.2 The case study: Thule

To better evaluate the phenomenon of how the consumer's perception aligns with the corporate brand alignment of a manufacturer when the latter sells through an online retailer, this research paper is basing its findings on a single case study. To study the above-mentioned phenomenon in the best possible way, an appropriate company, which use online retailers' websites as one of its core sales methods, needed to be chosen. For this reason, Thule, a Swedish outdoor/urban and active lifestyle multinational company, was selected for case study. A brief background of the company and how its choice fits with this thesis' research is discussed below.

Thule is a multinational company that is currently being considered as the undisputed market leader in the Bike Racks, Roof Racks, Cargo Carriers, Winter and Watersport Racks product categories, as well as becoming an important player within the Backpacks, Juvenile and Luggage segments. Founded in 1942, by Erik Thulin, Thule began its existence as an automotive-focused company selling products and easing the transportation of different gear for customers (Thule Group, 2018). Today, the company has transformed into a multinational corporation, incorporating multiple products, with about 2 200 employees, 9 production facilities, 35 sales offices worldwide and sales in 140 markets having net sales reaching SEK 5.9 billion in 2017 (Thule Group, 2018).

The Thule brand currently stands for more than 70% of the Thule Group sales, compared to only 33% back in 2009 – a fact showing the growing importance of the brand (Thule Group, 2017). This shift in the performance of the brand could easily be explained with the arrival of the new senior management of Thule Group and CEO Magnus Welander. Back in 2010, the senior management initiated an important process of rebranding by introducing multiple new product categories that added the much anticipated emotional value to the whole consumer experience. The emotional aspect was significantly lacking before this period as the brand was considered mainly functional with little or no emotional connection due to it being associated mainly with the automotive industry (Interview with Manager 1, 2018) (s*ee Table 1)*. Thule Brand is currently offering a wide assortment of products such as bike racks, roof racks, cargo carriers, winter & water sport racks, sport strollers, child bike seats, sports and travel bags. What connects all these different from each other, at first glance, products is that they allow consumers to bring what is most important to them from A to B in the safest, easiest and most stylish way (Thule Group, 2017). The core values of the brand have always been concerned with the development of safe, easy-to-use products with an exceptional level of quality, having a contemporary look and feel (Thule Presentation, 2017).

The majority of Thule's business model is based on the B2B market as they are selling the vast majority of their products to consumers through retailers – both offline and online (Interview with Manager 1, 2018). With the multiple unique active retailers that are currently offering Thule products, it is increasingly challenging for the company to control the way in which the brand is being communicated. This challenge is a risk endangering the alignment between how Thule wants to present the brand and how the consumers perceive it after the purchase from an online retailer (Interview with Manager 1, 2018). Thule is expecting to be perceived by its consumers as being an outdoor/urban and active lifestyle company which can also be summed up in the Thule brand's tagline: *Bring your life* (Thule Group, 2017). The main type of customers to which the company wants to communicate such corporate brand identity are communities in which an active lifestyle is valued and also those in which design and innovation are discussed (Welander, 2017). One of the main challenges for the Thule is to make sure that the brand message is consistent throughout all different product categories and sales channels, offline and online, to align the consumer's brand image with the company's corporate brand identity (Interview with Manager 1, 2018). To ensure the existence of such corporate brand identity - brand image alignment, Thule makes sure to produce its own marketing material, in the form of brand name, logo, tagline, images, videos, product descriptions and company description, and share it with all retailers who are planning to sell the Thule brand (Interview with Manager 1, 2018). With the use of media bank Thule communicates all its marketing materials to all its retailers (both online and offline). Thule expects that all its retailers will use the distributed marketing material, as well as follow the specific requirements of how to use the content, defined in their Brand and Trademark guidelines. To some extent, this allows Thule to communicate its corporate brand identity in the same way to all the retailers achieving the much needed- control over the way they are selling the Thule products. However, the company is still unsure of the way the consumers perceive the Thule products and thus wants to investigate the level of alignment between the corporate brand identity and brand image (Interview with Manager 1, 2018).

In summary, the arguments explained above support the decision of using Thule for this research paper. This multinational company is considered applicable by us as it covers all the pre-defined criteria: using indirect sales channels for all their activities, as well as relying on online retailers to reach consumers. Having said all this, Thule provides the researchers with a suitable business model allowing to investigate how does the consumer's perception of the Thule brand align with the corporate brand identity set by the manufacturer, when the latter is using online retailers to sell its products. To further investigate the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment within Thule's online sales channels, appropriate methodological choices are presented in the whole chapter 3 of this thesis (*See Section 3)*.

3.4. Data Collection

In the attempt to investigate closer the phenomenon of corporate brand identity-image alignment, when using the online sale platforms of retailers, both primary and secondary data were used. While primary data was collected first - hand from the us, represented by interviews and web textual and visual data, secondary textual data was collected by other researchers for a different purpose, expressed by written information like company reports, presentations and contracts with retailers. The following sections will explain the different types of primary and secondary data collected in more details, supported by the arguments why the specific choices were made and how and from where the data was gathered.

3.4.1 Primary data collection

Primary data is empirically collected data by the researchers, directly for the purpose of answering the research questions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009), there are many methods of gathering primary data connected to case studies; such as observations, interviews, and questionnaires. As specified above, since the research question was divided into four sub-questions, different types of primary data was used in order to answer each one of them. The first sub-question aimed to investigate the consumer's perception, therefore the chosen type of data was semi- structured interviews with consumers, selected on the basis of predefined list of criteria (*see 3.4.3 for more details on Sampling*). The goal of the second sub-question was to define the corporate brand identity of Thule, for this reason semi-structured interviews with Thule managers were conducted. Afterwards, the data from both interviews was compared, thereby to receive an answer on the extent at which both corporate brand identity and the brand image align. Furthermore, the data from the semi-structured interviews with the consumers was also used to answer sub-question three, intending to define the key brand elements that might have had influence over the corporate brand identity-brand image alignment. Finally, sub-question four was exploring the causes, related to the analyzed websites, that can influence the researched brand alignment. To help define the causes, we gathered web textual and visual data from 24 pre-selected websites (*see 3.4.3 for more details on Sampling)*. That data was collected with two main purposes: first to get familiar with the structure of the three web tabs (shown in section 3.4.3), which later were also used as a base for the semi-structured interviews with the consumers. Furthermore, the secondary purpose was also to gain basic knowledge of how different brand elements were communicated by the online retailers and whether or not they corresponded to the Thule's expectations.

Web textual and visual data collection

As it will be specified further in section 3.4.3, the focus of the semi-structured interviews with the consumers was to show them the 24 pre-selected retailers' websites. Therefore, the web textual and visual data was collected from all those websites, with the sole purpose of conducting an initial website analysis. The process of the collection of the web textual and visual data started with the selection of the websites from which the data would be gathered. The list of 24 pre-selected retailers' websites was provided by the Sales & Marketing Planning Manager of Thule. Then, the specific data to be collected within those websites was based on the specific brand elements that the retailers were required to communicate to the consumers. Part of the elements was defined from the preliminary framework presented at the end of Chapter 2 of this paper. Two additional brand elements (product and company description) were supplied by the Sales & Marketing Planning Manager during his interview. Further, according to the contract Thule has with all its online retailers, the latter are obligated to show the brand elements throughout their whole website. Due to that reason, the data was gathered from three specific tabs of every website: the online retailer's website homepage, the page dedicated to the Thule brand and the product page within the retailer's website (Appendix A). Once gathered, all that data was analysed based on a specific list of criteria shared by the company and collected from different corporate documents, such as contracts with retailers, the Brand and Trademark guidelines of Thule, as well as the corporate websites. More information, about how the analysis of that web textual and visual data was conducted, is presented in section 3.5.1 of this thesis.

Semi-structured interviews

The main purpose of this research paper was to define the corporate brand identity-brand image alignment, through online retailers, from consumer's perspective. Therefore, the main focus of the data collection process was to gather data that could assist to identify the consumer's perception. The researchers were interested not only at the consumers' viewpoint, represented by their perception, feelings and emotions towards the Thule brand, but also why they maintained that viewpoint. This was followed by a comparison between the consumers' perception and the insights given from Thule managers about the company's brand identity. For all those reasons, the most appropriate way of collecting the above-mentioned consumers' perception and managers' insights was found to be interviews. That decision was made because the purpose of the qualitative interviews is to gather the meaning and interpretation of a phenomenon in relation to the respondent's worldview (Easterby-

Smith Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). An alternative approach to collecting that data was focus groups. However, one of the main characteristics and outcomes of focus groups is collecting data through group interaction on a specific topic, rather than individual opinions (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2001). We wanted to avoid the respondents to influence each other, which might have even resulted into some of them not sharing their opinion publicly (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug 2001). To conclude, the most appropriate way of collecting individual opinions was defined to be qualitative interviews.

Qualitative interview can be divided into three types: highly structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Easterby-Smith Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The highly structured interviews are established on base of carefully predefined questions, tested with pilot interviews until the researchers are assured of their validity. Usually the interviewer asks each interviewee the same questions, sometimes even with a selection of predefined short answers (Easterby-Smith Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). That type of interviews lack deep understanding of respondent's viewpoint. The second type of interviews is semi-structured, characterized with the use of topic guide. The topic guide gives a loose structure of the questions asked. And the third last type are the unstructured interviews, which has the structure of an open discussion sometimes executed without even asking questions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The chosen type of qualitative interviews was semi-structured, due to the possibility to reach answers to specific topics within the phenomenon of corporate brand identity- brand image alignment. This less structured approach gave the flexibility in terms of the direction of the interview and the questions asked, which allowed new and previously not considered by the researchers insights to emerge (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Both, the interviews with the two managers of the Thule and the consumers were chosen to be semi-structured, because that type of interviews gave the possibility to gain an extended understanding of their view on the researched subject. The other two types of interviews were not considered relevant, as they could not deliver the kind of information needed to answer the research question. Implementing semi-structured interviews, made it possible to ask questions, that did not follow a strict order - something that is one of the main characteristics of the topic guide (Bryman & Bell, 2015). All the questions asked both towards the consumers and the Thule managers were based on a topic guide (Appendix B, C & D). The topic guides contained a "prepared list of areas (rather than specific questions) that needed to be covered during the course of an interview" (Easterby- Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p. 342). The topic guides also gave the opportunity to generate thick data and at the same time avoid superficial answers from the participants. This was very important for this study as the aim was to examine multiple truths and to review different interpretations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Further, in the next two sections the semi-structured interviews with the Thule managers and then ones with the consumers will be individually explained .

Interviews with Thule managers

The first interview conducted was with the Sales & Marketing Planning Manager of Thule. The topic guide (Appendix B), prepared before the interview, contained introducing questions related to the history and general information about the company and their business model. Further, questions, aiming to understand why Thule is a representative company for the phenomenon investigated, were added. That interview not only helped to get familiar with the company but also gave information to the researchers about the most relevant and important online retailers for the management in the specific product categories of Thule. Furthermore, the Sales & Marketing Planning Manager also provided us with a list of brand elements that the online retailers are expected to communicate on their websites. All that facilitated and made more focused the collection of the web textual and visual data, as well as its analysis, that supported the preparation for the semi-structured interviews with the consumers. The second interview was with the Global Brand Communication Director. For that interview, the researchers were also using a topic guide (Appendix C) containing introducing questions concerning the information about the repositioning of the brand and how and what they communicate to the retailers. The second type was related with the CBIM questions, aiming to assists in the identification of the corporate brand identity of Thule. Both of the interviews were conducted in the meeting rooms of Thule's headquarter in Malmo with a duration of around 2 hours. As shown in Table 1, due to confidentiality reasons, throughout the whole paper the managers will be kept anonymous, therefore instead of their names will be used: Manager 1 and Manager 2.

Company	THULE	Position at Thule
THULE	Manager 1	Sales & Marketing Planning Manager
	Manager 2	Global Brand Communication Director

Table 1 Naming of the interviewed Thule managers

Interviews with consumers

For the semi-structured interviews with the consumers were chosen eight different respondents, selected on the basis of predefined list of criteria (see more information in section 3.4.3). For each product category (Automotive, Luggage, Bike and Juvenile) were interviewed two respondents. Before the interviews, a confirmation email, containing the time and date of the interview, was sent to all the chosen respondents were sent. The selected respondents were not informed about the subject of the interviews, as that would have influenced their answers on some of the questions. To lead the interview direction, as mentioned above, was used a topic guide (Appendix D). When developing the guide, the problematization, research purpose and questions were considered. The topic guide started with pre-website questions like: "Would you please tell us your name and current occupation?". That kind of questions were asked in order to get familiar with the person and his profile. Several other introducing questions like: "Do you know what does the brand stands for? What do you associate the brand with?" were asked with the aim of revealing the initial top of mind brand associations of the consumers (their pre-websites exposure perception). If the respondent did not know what the brand stands for, they were not asked to provide any further associations. The next section of the topic guide was related with the visual presentation of the online retailers' websites of Thule. Each respondent was given six different websites to look at, where they had 5 minutes to look at every website (that included the three different web tabs shown in Appendix A). Before the presentation of the websites, the interviewees were instructed to look at the different brand elements, generated from the literature review: logo, images, videos, brand name and tagline. Moreover, they had to look for the two additional brand elements, product and company description, that emerged throughout the interview with Manager 1. After every single website, the interviewees were asked about their opinion based on the listed brand elements. The interviewers have not created predefined questions for that section of the interview as they were interested in having open discussion with the consumers, in order to understand more about their experiences, feelings and emotions. The consumers were asked a question in relation to their perception towards the brand before the beginning of the interview, as it was important to know if their perception will change after looking at the websites. After the visual presentation and the discussion based on it, the respondents were asked questions related with their post-website exposure perception. The questions were divided into two sets: for the ones that did not have a pre-website exposure perception and for the ones that had. For the respondents that had an initial one, after looking at the those webpages, did their perception change and if it did, why. On the other side the interviewers also wanted to know, for the respondents that did not have an initial perception, what opinion the websites formed in their mind. At the end were asked concluding questions, mainly concerning further explanation of the topic researched.

A step after the creation of topic guide was to test the questions with a pilot interview. The purpose of this pilot interview was to reflect on how potential respondents might interpret and feel about the questions, in order to assure that they will be clear and easy to understand. The respondent that participated in the pilot interview was asked the introducing question, then presented to the six different websites. The interviewers gave the interviewee time to look at all the six websites before asking for his opinion. Which resulted in confusion and uncoordinated answer, as the interviewee forgot his answers while looking at all the different web pages. Therefore, after that pilot interview, the interviewers changed their technique and asked for the respondents' opinion after every single web page shown.

Before every interview, the respondents were asked for a consent regarding the recording of the discussion, which was used only for the purpose of analyzing their answers. Throughout, the whole interview techniques like probing, follow-up questions and active listening were used to help the flow of the interview. The follow up questions were used to get the interviewee to give more details on his or her answer, such as "Could you say some more about that?"; "What do you mean by that . . . ?". Also laddering up and down on respondents' answers was applied. The laddering up helped in the understanding of the reason behind the concrete answer of the interviewee, implemented by asking questions like "Why?". Laddering down questions like "Could you give me an example of that?" were asked when the researchers sought to obtain illustrations and examples (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Unless the different techniques, the researchers of this paper, also had different roles. Throughout the interviews, the researchers were switching the roles of a moderator and a notes taker. The length of the interviews was measured with an approximate duration of 45 minutes. The locations of the interviews was chosen to be the working places of the respondents. As shown in Table 2, due to confidentiality reasons, throughout the whole paper the interviewees will be kept anonymous, therefore instead of their names will be used: Respondent 1, 2 , 3 and etc .

Table 2. Naming of the interviewed consumers

Interview scope	Respondent Number	Professional Occupation
AUTOMOTIVE	Respondent 1	Director at a Partnership Foundation
	Respondent 2	Requirement Officer
BIKES	Respondent 3	Teacher/Professor
	Respondent 4	Director of Learning and teaching
JUVENILE	Respondent 5	Economist
	Respondent 6	Career Coach
LUGGAGE	Respondent 7	Program Coordinator
	Respondent 8	Communications Officer

Both, the interviews with the managers and the consumers were recorded on a digital recordable device (iPhone) and were later transcribed by the researchers. The reason for using an iPhone was due to its unobtrusive presence during the interview, as well as being able to record for longer periods of time than an audio recorder. The interviewers were aiming to transcribe the interviews, as soon as they were completed, in order to to ensure that no additional comments or facial expressions, that might have had an impact on the respondent's answer, would be forgotten.

Corporate websites

Being publicly available, the corporate websites of Thule (thule.com & thulegroup.com) were used to gather data that have helped the collection of the other above displayed primary data. First from those websites was collected information about the company Thule and its business model. Moreover, the websites were used to obtain knowledge about the different elements of the CBIM.

3.4.2 Secondary data

Secondary data is information that is not gathered directly by the researchers and also characterised as being collected for other purposes, but the research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). Although gathered for other studies or other purposes, it could still be applicable for answering the aim of this study (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). Mostly, secondary data is used to support primary data, for example government or company reports, articles and books, advertisements, as well as archival data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). For this thesis were used numerous types of secondary data, for instance, Corporate reports, Company presentations, Brand and Trademark guidelines document, as well as Contracts with retailers. All those documents were provided to us by the management of Thule. They were created for other purposes than this research but were also found useful in the investigation of the phenomenon.

From the official contract of Thule with their online retailers was gathered information about the specific requirements that the company has towards their intermediaries. In the contract were stated the rules that the online retailer is obligated to have a professional looking homepage, with a great Thule focus. If the logos of other companies are shown on the homepage of the retailer, then they the online retailer is also obligated to list the logo of Thule also there. Further, all the online retailers were required to have a designated Thule page where the Products are promoted and where the Thule company story is available for reading. Additionally, the contract stated that the online retailers are obligated on the homepage, the Thule page and the product page to comply with the Thule Brand & Trademark guidelines. That Brand and Trademark guidelines document is distributed to all the stakeholders of the company including the retailers. That document lists the correct usages of brand elements and of what is or is not acceptable. That guidelines were used with the purpose of comparing the requirements presented with how the different elements like logo, brand name and tagline are presented on the 24 websites of the online retailers. The corporate reports and presentations were used with the main aim of gathering information about the company, the history and the business model of the company. All those documents were used with the main purpose of supporting the collection of the above stated primary data.

3.4.3 Phases of data collection process

Table 3 presents the four different phases of the data collection process. The aim of the first phase was to gain initial knowledge about the company, its history, business models, and to define why it can be classified as a suitable company for the investigated phenomenon. That information was gathered from the interview with Manager 1, the corporate websites, reports and presentations. Moreover, additional brand elements emerged from the same interview. The aim of phase two was to define the corporate brand identity of Thule. The interview with Manager 1 and 2 helped to accomplish that phase. Additionally, information about the nine elements of the CBIM (Urde, 2013) was also gathered from Thule's corporate websites. The desired outcome of phase three was to prepare the interviewers for the semi-structured interviews with the end-consumers. The web textual and visual data was used to get familiar with the 24 preselected online retailers' websites. The contracts between Thule and the online retailers, and the Brand and Trademark guidelines document were used to guide the gathering of the web textual and visual data. The last phase aimed to gather the consumers' perception towards the Thule brand. The semi-structured interviews contributed for that phase. Based on those semi-structured interviews, we were able to define if the perception of the consumers aligns with Thule's brand identity,communicated by the online retailer. Furthermore, the semi- structured interviews also generated additional influencing elements.

Table 3. Phases of Data Collection Process (in green the new elements used for the final framework)

STAGE	OUTCOME	PRIMARY DATA	SECONDORY DATA
PHASE 1	• General Info about Thule • Thule's Business Model • Challenges for Thule • **Additional Brand Elements**	• Semi- structured Interview with Manager 1 of Thule • Thule corporate websites	• Thule reports/presentations
PHASE 2	• Defining Thule's Corporate Brand Identity	• Semi-structured Interview with Manager 2 of Thule • Thule corporate websites	• N/A
PHASE 3	• Preparation for interviews with end consumers • Creation of Topic Guide	• Web textual and visual data (24 websites)	• Contracts b/n Thule and online retailers • Thule trademark & brand guidelines
PHASE 4	• Gathering consumers' perception about Thule • **Additional Influencing Elements**	• Semi-structured interviews with consumers	• N/A

3.4.3. Sampling

By using different sampling techniques, we were enabled to significantly reduce the amount of data that needs to be collected from a specific population (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2008). Sampling always comes in hand during qualitative research when it is impossible for the researchers to look at the entire population mainly due to time constraints and a limited budget (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2008). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2008) divided sampling techniques in two types - probability (representative) sampling and non-probability (judgemental) - with the second sampling method being the most appropriate one to use for this qualitative research paper. The non-probability sampling techniques enable the researchers to use their own judgement when selecting the sample for them to be able to answer the research question and meet their objectives. The following paragraphs will explain in details how the sampling was done for different elements during the data collection process.

Sampling of consumers

One of the main challenges of researchers dealing with interviews and the selected sample of respondents is whether it will generate enough valuable information that will be used in answering the research question (Mason, 2011). Still, authors such as Bryman and Bell (2015) and Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2008) could not come up with a specific answer regarding the number of interviews that need to be conducted in order for the sample to count as reliable. Indeed, the choice of a sample size is highly dependent on the actual research question and objectives, set by the researchers, based on the availability of resources (Patton, 2002).

After evaluating the aims and the objectives of this paper, it was decided to implement purposive sampling when deciding on the respondents for the interviews. Even if it is not considered as being statistically representative of the total population, purposive sampling seemed like the most appropriate method for this research paper as it enabled the use of our judgement when deciding on the amount and type of respondents (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2008). Next, a maximum variation sampling, which is a subcategory of purposive sampling, was pursued by us as it would allow us to understand how different groups of people see the discussed topic (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2008). Further, this particular strategy helps to adding a higher level of representativeness to the paper as it allows maximum diversity of responses related to the research question (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2008).

For this research paper, a total of eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted - one pilot interview with a consumer, eight interviews with other consumers and two interviews with employees from the management team of Thule. The respondents for the interviews with the consumers were chosen based on a predefined list of criteria. First and foremost, the consumers, who were targeted, had to have a stable income in order to allow themselves a highly priced product like Thule if they decided to buy one. Another predefined selection criteria was aiming at finding consumers that would be suitable for answering questions regarding one of the four main product categories in which Thule is currently present - Automotive, Bikes, Juvenile and Luggage. To do so, people who own cars or bikes, who have children, and who travel regularly, were chosen to be interviewed. Being familiar with the Thule brand was not a criterion in the selection of customers as a maximum variety of perspective was the aim of this data collection. However, an important criterion was to find consumers who have had online shopping experience in the past as the scope of our paper is finding out consumers' brand perception when shopping through an online retailer, and compare it with the corporate brand identity of a manufacturer. Furthermore, for all of the respondents, a prerequisite was that they needed to have an active lifestyle, whether they were outdoor lovers or urban explorers. In the end, two consumers were interviewed for each of the four product categories mentioned above. Also, before the actual data collection process, a pilot semi-structured interview with a consumer, answering questions regarding the Automotive product category was conducted in order to assess the topic guide and make the necessary adjustments making sure that the collected data will enable the investigative questions to be answered. The criteria applied for finding an appropriate respondent for the pilot interview were the same as the one used for the actual interviews.

Two interviews with Thule employees were conducted, using purposive sampling again, aiming at reaching to managers whose position at the company was closely related to the research question this paper is focusing on. The main criteria when choosing the managers for the interviews was that they were all working in close relation with the brand Thule and the sales strategy of the company. Hence, interviews with the Sales & Marketing Planning

Manager and the Global Brand Communication Director were conducted. Interviewing people with such positions within the company would give broad and in-depth knowledge regarding the product specifications, corporate brand identity of the company, and how it is made sure to align with the consumers brand perception. Since both knowledgeable and relevant managers were approached, a level of high saturation was reached rather quickly, which lead to a decision of not conducting any more interviews with company employees as they would not provide the researchers with new information.

Sampling of the websites used for the interviews

As mentioned above, eight consumers were interviewed regarding the four different product categories where Thule is currently present. The core of the conducted interviews consisted of showing six different retailers' websites, selling Thule goods of the specific product category, to the interviewees. A total of 24 retailers' websites were pre-selected by Thule managers and given to the researchers - six websites for each of the four different product categories of Thule: Automotive, Bike, Juvenile, Luggage. The websites were provided to us during the initial meeting with the Manager 1 of Thule. The websites were representative for the five key European markets for the company - Sweden, Netherlands, France, Germany, UK. The reason behind Thule's choice of providing these exact websites was the fact that they were considered the most relevant and important for the company in the specific product categories of Thule. The focus was put on these online retailers with the purpose of finding out how does the corporate brand identity, align with the brand image, perceived by the consumers when purchasing Thule's products through these online retailers. A list of all 24 analyzed websites and the Thule products, chosen for the analysis, can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4 List of the 24 analyzed websites of the online retailers and the Thule products chosen for the analysis

PRODUCT CATEGORY	WEBSITE	PRODUCT	
AUTOMOTIVE	www.halfords.com www.norauto.fr www.mekonomen.se www.gttowing.co.uk www.hammersleys.com www.shop.reinartz-autoteile.de	Thule Touring 200 Roof Box	
BIKES	www.probikeshop.fr www.Shop.zweirad-stadler.de www.fahhrad-xxl.de www.smith-sport.de www.rutlandcycling.com www.hollandbikeshop.com	Thule EasyFold XT 933	
JUVENILE	www.jollyroom.se www.babyhuyswebshop.nl www.babyland.se www.kopbarnvagn.se www.babyton.de www.babybrands.de	Thule Urban Glide 2	
LUGGAGE	www.travelbags.nl www.taschenkaufhaus.de www.otto.de www.luggagesuperstore.co.uk www.outnorth.se www.mesbagages.com	Thule Subterra Carry on Rolling	

During the interview with the Manager 1, it was understood that Thule expects from all of the online retailers to communicate the corporate brand identity of the company correctly by using the appropriate brand elements (images, videos, logos, tagline, brand name, company and product description) provided by the company. Furthermore, as part of the contract between Thule and the online retailers, during the same interview, it was stipulated that all these brand elements should be well presented throughout the retailer's website. Therefore, a decision was taken, together with Thule, to show three specific tabs within the 24 selected websites to the interviewed consumers - the retailer's website homepage, the Thule's company and Thule's specific product page within the retailer's website.

3.5. Data Analysis

One of the most occurring problems for researchers, who choose to do qualitative research, is to try and compress a huge amount of data and be able to tell a story that would be well argued to convince the reader completely (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). To present a good research paper, its authors need to ensure a clear explanation of how raw data was transformed into meaningful findings through a specific type of data analysis (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). One big challenge of producing quality findings is often related to the time and effort that researchers invest into analyzing the empirical data aiming at understanding the studied phenomena (Bengtsson, 2016). One of the most common types of data analysis in qualitative research, is the content analysis.

In their book “Qualitative methods in Business Research”, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) talk about two types of qualitative content analysis: categorization versus interpretation of the data. By implementing a categorization of the data collected, the researchers would be able to describe the data in a way providing a more general and holistic view of the researched phenomenon. Coding lies as an essential element part of such analysis, thus the coding units need to be chosen very carefully for them to capture the data in the best possible way. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) stress further that the systematic coding plays an essential role in the traditional content analysis where the qualitative data is being quantified through various coding procedures. The second type of qualitative content analyses, the interpretation of the data, aims at making sense of a certain phenomenon from a meaning-making perspective in a given context. To do this, this type of qualitative content analysis does not necessarily suggest the use of formal coding. The following paragraphs will offer the reader with a transparent overview of which one of the two types of content analysis was chosen to extract as much value as possible from it.

3.6.1. Analysis of Online Retailers’ websites

In reviewing the types of content analysis, Bauer (2000) underlines the fact that it can deal not only with textual materials, as being generally accepted among researchers, but this analytical method can also be applied to images, videos or even sounds. Bauer goes even further by identifying two types of textual materials: some that are made in the process of research (i.e. interview transcripts, observation protocols), and others produced for a different purpose (i.e. newspapers, web-texts). The important thing, according to Bauer, is that no matter the type of textual materials, they can all be manipulated in a way that helps the researchers answering the pre-defined research questions. Elsewhere, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016), also support the argument that either text, audio or visual data can be used when conducting a qualitative research content analysis. Taking into consideration all these opinions regarding the content analysis, we believed that the qualitative research content analysis method was the most appropriate one to use in order to come up with valuable findings from the websites data collection, consisting of texts, images and videos. The main purpose for us was to analyse the 24 pre-selected websites and familiarize themselves with the structure of the three web tabs, within each of the websites that were later going to be presented to the interviewees - the retailer’s website homepage, the page dedicated to Thule brand and the Thule’s specific product page within the retailer’s website. Furthermore, a secondary purpose of the initial website analysis was to gain basic knowledge of how different brand elements are being communicated by the online retailers and whether or not they correspond to the expectations. These expectations were set by Thule in the brand and trademark guidelines, as well as in the contract between the manufacturer and the online retailer. Even if evaluating how online retailers communicate the Thule brand was not within the scope of this paper, we wanted to have a better understanding of how strictly are the brand communication requirements, set by

Thule, followed by the online sellers. Having such supporting data would later help us connect it with the analyzed data from the semi-structured interviews with consumers, and come up with key conclusions on what might influence the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment. Therefore, for the websites analysis, the interpretation content analysis was the more suitable than the categorization content analysis as the former aims at making sense of a certain phenomenon from a meaning-making perspective in a given context, whereas the latter only provides the researcher with a more general and holistic view of the researched problem (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Furthermore, it is highly recommended to use interpretation content analysis in intensive case studies, where the emphasize falls on more qualitative and ethnographic research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

3.6.2 Analysis of Interviews

However, for the purpose of this research paper, coding was necessary as it would allow identifying the existence or non-existence of relationships between two or more concepts (e.g. brand elements). (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). In such type of data analyses, researchers are not focusing on the general meanings of concepts, instead they are interested in the context-specific meaning of concepts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Overall, it is suggested to use categorization in extensive cases studies, where the research lies on a more positivistic approach, and interpretation of the data in intensive case studies, where the emphasize falls on more qualitative and ethnographic research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The purpose of interpreting the data is the construction of a detailed rich and nuanced explanation of the contextual meanings of the analyzed data (Bengtsson, 2016).

Interviews with end-consumers

Having in mind everything said above, this research paper focused on interpreting the collected data through the use of coding. The reason for this decision was related to the abductive approach, undergone by us. This approach lead to the creation of preliminary framework which consisted of initial brand elements (logo, tagline, images, videos, brand name), derived from literature review, that were used as coding categories. Furthermore, two additional brand elements (product and company descriptions), derived from the interview with Manager 1, came out and became coding categories as well. For Eriksson & Kovalainen (2016), good coding categories should be broad enough to categorize all the content and completely independent so that the data put in them does not influence other procedures in the coding process. For us, the above mentioned initial brand elements completely corresponded to this description. Next, after transcribing the interviews, the actual process of systematic coding began. First of all, the relevant data from the transcribed interviews of all 8 respondents (2 for each product category) were dissected sentence by sentence. Each of the sentences, containing main findings about the different brand elements, were further summarized in the form of simple codes. Once all the relevant sentences were given codes, the latter helped identifying general patterns related to each of the brand elements. Through the interviews with consumers and their transcription, additional two coding categories emerged - coding categories that represented relevant issues regarding the research topic of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment. The new coding categories were two elements that further influenced consumers' perception of the Thule brand - Website design and layout. Therefore, the final coding template consisted of coding categories, derived from three different sources: the literature review, the initial interview with Manager 1, and the interviews with consumers. An example from the coding template, displaying how the codes for the category "Logo" was done, is presented in Appendix E.

Interviews with Thule managers

As part of the data analysis, the two interviews with Thule managers were fully transcribed in order to extract as much valuable information as possible regarding the Thule's stance on the researched topic. As with the consumers' interviews, here interpretation was also used as a method of analysis as the focus was on the meaning of the communicated information by both Thule Managers. This method of analysis was chosen also because we did not only show interest in the general meaning of concepts, but also in their local and context-specific nuances (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Unlike the analysis of consumers' interviews, here the interpretation analysis for both interview was conducted without the need of coding. As mentioned above, Interpretation analysis can be based on coding but this is not necessarily required as the main purpose of this method is to obtain different understanding of the different contextual meanings.

The analysis of Manager 2 interview was guided by the initial aim of constructing the company's CBIM (Urde, 2013) that would have later be used in the analytical part, when implementing Thule's case in the newly developed theoretical framework by us. The reason for analysing without any sort of coding is that the whole topic guide was directly based on the 9 different CBIM elements, thus minimizing the risk of invaluable information and making it much more simple to analyze.

As for the interview with Manager 1, after transcribing the full interview, we read it together in details before extracting the most important sections and include them in a summary. The importance of this first step is supported by Williamson (2002) who argued that researchers need to ensure full understanding of the interview or observation and familiarize themselves with all its aspects before they begin with the dissection of the data, looking for specifics. The summary helped to identify interesting points such as the two additional brand elements, product and category description. Through a second listen of the interview's recording with Manager 1, a summary with the four product categories (Automotive, Bikes, Juvenile, Luggage) and the 24 websites, used for the Data analysis, was created. Through the summary of the interview, an extremely important information was extracted; an information that together with the data from the interview with Manager 2 would later be used for the creation of Thule's CBIM, needed for the analysis.

3.7. Critical Reflection on Research Paper Quality

3.7.1. Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Reliability and validity are very common concepts measuring the credibility and integrity of a research paper (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill,2008), however their most appropriate use is in the quantitative research area (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Guba and Lincoln (1994) were one of the first authors to develop a different evaluation system for qualitative research. These two authors introduced the concepts **trustworthiness** and **authenticity**. While the reliability and validity concepts are suitable for the research philosophies where there is one and absolute truth regarding the social world (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016), trustworthiness and authenticity is the best possible match for research papers that lie on relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology. As this research paper lies on the same philosophical assumptions, relativism and constructivism, the concepts suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1994) were used as evaluation criteria. Guba and Lincoln (1994) further develop the concept of trustworthiness as they divide it into four different elements: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

The term **credibility** refers to the plausibility of the paper's findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Through credibility, the researchers achieved an internal validity meaning that there is a strong connection between their empirical findings and their results (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This thesis provided a high level of credibility due to its data being assessed and analysed by two completely independent researchers - also called an analyst triangulation or a triangulation of researchers (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). However, a limitation that might influence the overall credibility of the paper is the related to the fact that Thule can be considered as being a *best-case example* to display the studied phenomenon *(see section 3.3.2)*. Further research is necessary to confirm the phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment, when using online retailers, in other outdoor active lifestyle companies.

The term **transferability**, paralleling to external validity, aims at showing the extent to which the findings of the paper can be adapted in different contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The use of thick description, first introduced by Geertz (1973), is suggested in qualitative research as it provides a database for readers to decide whether a possible transferability of findings to other situations, time and population (Bryman & Bell, 2011). A thick description refers to a "detailed accounts of a social setting that can form the basis for the creation of general statements about a culture and its significance in people's lives" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.719). To establish transferability in this research paper, we have described all aspects of data collection in great details to provide the readers with a richer and fuller understanding of the research setting. However, one of the limitations of this research paper, that can potentially have a negative impact on its external validity, is the use of a single case study analysis. We compromised on generalisability as they have only looked at one company that is representing only one particular sector - the outdoor active lifestyle. Moreover, the relatively small sample of interviewed consumers can further reduce the generalizability of the paper. The fact that the interviewees were only Swedish citizens might make it harder for future researches to use the findings when investigating the phenomenon in different geographical regions.

Dependability in qualitative research aims at establishing the research study's findings as being consistent and repeatable with a research process being logical, traceable and well documented (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The researchers of this paper have adopted an *auditing* approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011), that ensured the ease of accessibility of all records created throughout the different phases of the research process, such as the transcripts of all interviews conducted, the fieldwork notes, as well as the different drafts of product formulation. All this data could help further improve the trustworthiness of the research paper.

The final aspect of the concept of trustworthiness, **confirmability**, is concerned with the objectivity of the researchers towards the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, Bryman and Bell (2011) recognize that it is impossible to reach a complete objectivity in business research papers. Therefore, they suggest that the researchers clearly show that they have acted in good faith meaning that personal opinions or theoretical inclinations were not allowed. To ensure confirmability, this thesis provides the readers with an objective summary of the important findings, following the conducted interviews, before focusing on their analysis. Regarding the way the interviews were conducted, the investigators made sure to avoid any sort of leading questions towards the interviewees and to not express their own beliefs regarding the topic, hence achieving a high level of objectivity throughout the interviews and discussions.

To conclude, Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest the criteria of **authenticity** as an addition to the trustworthiness criteria, consisting of the four elements discussed above. Authenticity concerns a wider set of interrelated issues that have a wide political impact of research, such as ensuring fairness when representing the different viewpoints and thoroughness in the creation and treatment of various statements and utterances in the paper (Bryman & Bell, 2011).To establish the much needed authenticity, we made sure to interview different members of the social structures, such as consumers and employees of the company. Another aim of the researcher was to make sure that the context of the study was clearly understood by all participants. Even if it could have been useful to include more entry-level managers of Thule in order to evaluate if they were completely aligned with the Thule's culture and desired identity, it has been decided to only go with high-end managers as they would naturally provide most knowledge. The authenticity of the paper can be however challenged when it comes to books as their credibility is questionable since there is not an existing peer reviewing system. However, to compensate, we used only peer-reviewed academic articles and aimed at using well-cited and reputable authors and journal for the literature and theoretical review.

3.7.3. Ethics in research

Research ethics is closely related to the empirical data gathering in a research paper (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). A lot of attention has been brought to the ethical concerns in business research in relation to the conduct of the entire research project (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2008). In qualitative research with a business orientation, it is most often related to looking at research ethics for the ethnographic data-collection or interviews in a case study, and not for any other sections of the research process conducted throughout the paper (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

The main ethical concerns, that Bryman and Bell (2011) underline, arise in the relationships between researchers and research participants in the course of data collection process. Diener and Crandall (1980) divide the ethical issues into four main areas: *harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, deception.* We took all needed precautions to ensure that the respondents' were not harmed or adversely affected as a result of them participating in the research project. First of all, the confidentiality and anonymity were ensured as the identities and records of individuals are confidential and will not be available to public access. Regarding Thule, who was chosen to be the company used for the case study, a confidentiality agreement was signed on our behalf ensuring that sensible data does not get disclosed publicly. In order to avoid a lack of informed consent, all participants have been briefed in details about the project's purpose and their role in it, giving out as much information as possible, and they all made an informed decision wishing to participate in the study. However, as Homan (1991) mentions, it is rarely advisable to reveal all the information about the project as this might influence respondents' answers which would then lead to a biased data. Furthermore, all participants were told, at the beginning of the interview, that a recording technique will be used, to which they all agreed. A verbal interview consent was reached with an interviewed people before the beginning of the actual interview. We made all the necessary to avoid any sort of invasion of privacy when conducting the interviews with respondents. In order to do so, the interviewees have been questioned in a place and time that suits them the most, with all personal information kept confidential. Finally, we ensured the avoidance of any sort of deception by presenting their research results in an honest and objective way trying to provide the respondents with all the necessary information about the project.

4. Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the empirical findings, which were explored through an analysis based on the preliminary framework, presented in section 2.5. The chapter begins by presenting the corporate brand identity of Thule, followed by the analysis of consumers' perceptions before the interviews. Then the five key brand elements, which are part of the preliminary framework, were analysed. Furthermore, four new elements, which were explored throughout the different stages of data collection, were presented and analysed - two new brand elements and two additional elements influencing the consumers' perception. Finally, a concluding insight of the research was developed by presenting the consumers' perceptions after the interviews.

4.1. CBIM of Thule

As specified in Chapter 2 of this study, before projecting an image to the public, the organisation must be aware exactly of what is the message they want to project and how they want to send it (Kapferer, 2004). That statement of Kapferer (2004) means that the first step towards corporate alignment is to identify the corporate brand identity of a company. Therefore, the role of this part of the analysis is to identify the corporate brand identity of Thule.

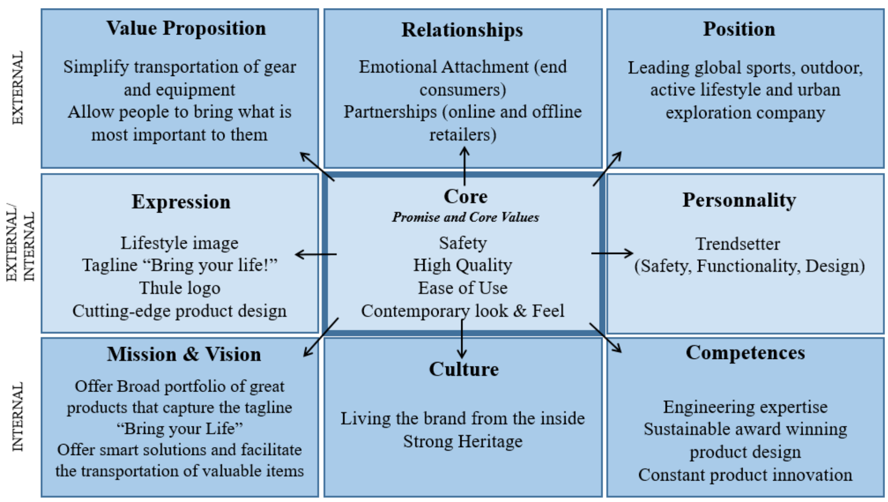


Figure 7. The CBIM of Thule

As defined in the summary of Chapter 2, the Urde's (2013) framework CBIM has been chosen as the foundation (*see in Figure 7*)for the analysis of semi-structured interviews with the Sales & Marketing Planning Manager (Interview with Manager 1, 2018) and Global Brand Communication Director (Interview with Manager 2, 2018). Its nine elements will serve as an analytical tool with the purpose of defining the corporate brand identity of Thule. The analysis will start with the internal elements of the CBIM. Those internal elements are represented by the company's mission and vision, the established culture of the company and its unique competencies. Moreover, the analysis will continue with the external elements of the framework, focusing on the company's value proposition to customers, the relationships between stakeholders and the company's current position in the market. The last three elements analysed will be both external and internal qualities. They represent the company's personality, expressions and the core values. As it can be seen in Figure 7 all nine elements of the matrix are connected with arrows. Which means that all components are adjusted to reflect the 'core' of company's brand and vice versa.

4.1.1 Internal categories

Mission and vision

According to Urde (2013) the mission is a vital part to the corporate brand identity, it can be defined as the reason behind why an organisation "exists and what engages and motivates it, beyond the aim of making money"(p. 751). Manager 2 of Thule, stated "our mission is to offer a broad portfolio of great products that capture our tagline "Bring your life!" First, the mission reflects that the company offers a wide assortment of accessories to simplify the transportation of the consumers, represented by various gear and equipment. Further, the mission also introduces their tagline "Bring your life" that directly refers to outdoor, recreational activities and active life. So all together the company aims to produce a wide variety of products that can be associated with adventure and with experiences (Interview with Manager 2 2018).

Furthermore, according to De Chernatony and Riley (1998), the vision of a company is the component which "specifies the brand's purpose, its philosophy and view on the world(p. 1083). Urde(2013) also defined it as the extension of the mission, that gives a future direction and inspiration for the organisation. As stated by the Manager 2 the future direction and inspiration of Thule are "to be the most admired provider of smart solutions that make it easier for people to bring with them what they care about the most when they enjoy their active lives". The company wants to inspire and motivate both employees as well as customers. And with the help of their "smart solutions" to help them to enjoy and live their life.

Culture

According to Urde (2013), culture is an element that is deeply rooted in the corporate brand identity as an intangible resource. He also characterised that this element is as a reflection of "corporate attitudes, values and beliefs, and of the ways in which the company works and behaves" (p. 751). When conducting the interview with the Manager 1 and Manager 2, they both have warmly described the culture of the company. They also added that the environment in Thule is friendly, inspiring and supporting with intense tempo and constant attention on the surroundings. One of the most important component of Thule's culture is that the employees are "living the brand from the inside"(Interview with Manager 2, 2018). What differentiates the culture of Thule is the encouragement for the employees to have an active, outdoor, healthy and balanced lifestyle while using Thule's products. Therefore, the employees should first use the products in order to believe in them and in the brand and only after that to sell them. The belief of the management is that in order to maintain the culture for the company is very important to experience the brand core. According to a statement given by the CEO of Thule:

" I believe our brands are the most valuable assets we have as a company. I am equally convinced that we can only maintain and improve their value in the market if all our employees act as ambassadors of our brands and products, in the best possible way. I would love to have every employee devoted to building our brands and doing everything to understand what our brands stand for, what kind of company we are, and why people buy our products." (Thule Group, 2017).

This statement proves that the culture in the company is indeed strong, by revolving around the new core of the company, related to active, outdoor and urban lifestyle. Another significant aspect of the corporate culture mentioned by the Manager 2 is the heritage of the brand. As mentioned above in the case presentation section, Thule was founded in 1942 by the Erik Thulin, began its existence as an automotive-focused company selling products easing the transportation of different gear for customers. Since then the company kept its focus and love towards the outdoor. Another important element of the corporate culture is the country of origin. Thule uses its country of origin, Sweden, as a very powerful association. Sweden, being part of the logo the company wants to communicate to all its stakeholders premium quality, durability and design.

Competences

According to Urde (2013) the competences represent the skills or know- how, that reveal to the company is particularly good at and makes them different from the competition. Back in 2010, when the process of rebranding was initiated, related with changing the orientation of the company from completely automotive to an active, outdoor lifestyle one. That went hand in hand with introducing new products that added the much anticipated emotional value to the whole consumer experience. Manager 2 shared that as a consequence of changing the strategy, the expectations and demand towards expertise in the area of marketing and consumer focus increased. They needed to increase the marketing resources, but mainly the one related with the personnel. She also added that they started to value even more the skills, experience and ambition of the people that want to work with Thule. Further, she shared that nowadays their competences are directly related to Thule's core values (which will be specified further in one of the following paragraphs). Concluding, the competences that maintain Thule's market leading position are engineering expertise ("We have one of the best engineers in the world producing one of the best products in the world"- Interview with Manager 1, 2018).Moreover, also sustainable award-winning product design and constant product innovation cutivate Thule's a position of a leading company within the Automotive category.

4.1.2 Internal/ External categories

Expression

Expression can be divided into intangible or tangible such as "tone of voice, design, graphic style and logotype" (Urde, 2013, p. 751). Manager 2 (2018) listed the elements that Thule uses to identify itself to the external world: lifestyle images, tagline and logo. First, the lifestyle images that the company uses in its marketing communication materials, as well as on their website and provides them to all its retailers. These images depict the products of Thule in different adventurous, active and outdoor contexts. Secondly the tagline " "Bring your life !" is communicating that " whatever your passion, whatever your pursuit. Wherever you're going, whatever you're bringing. With Thule, you're free to live your active life to the fullest. (Thule, 2018). Moreover, the Thule logo with its white letters on a black background stands out on every product web page and marketing material. According to the Manager 1 (2018), the cutting- edge product design is also one of the most important expression of the brand. He argued that the design of the products is one of the main differentiators in the eyes of the consumers. All of those variables that represent the company are directly connected to Thule's new strategy to be an outdoor, active lifestyle and urban exploration company.

Core values

Urde (2013) stated that the core values or also called brand core are the heart of the corporate brand identity, and therefore it is positioned at the center of the CBIM to underline its significance. Being positioned in the centre, the brand core is ideally coherent with the other elements, and vice versa. As stated by Manager 2 the core values are vital and are seen as the heart of the business strategy as well as the guiding star for the brand direction. She also emphasized that for Thule is of great importance"the core values and the brand promise to be consistent and everyone throughout the organisation to believe in them." Thule's core values are Safety, High quality, Ease of use, Contemporary looks & feel. These three dimensions display that all the solutions of the company are user-friendly, innovative and have premium quality. First, they would like to understand the consumers' needs for transport of baggage and equipment. Moreover, to manufacture products of the highest quality and standards. Finally to develop innovative products to enable people to live an active life.

Personality

According to Urde (2013) personality is the element that defines the combination of human characteristics or qualities that form company's corporate character. He further added that personality is one of the most important elements in the CBIM framework as it plays the role of a bridge between the internal and the external elements in the framework. Manager 2 shared that " the mix of having a sporty, active and joyful traits makes us trusted, respected and professional frontrunner- also called trendsetter- because we mainly set standards in areas such as safety, functionality and design." She also stated that the personality that they want the brand to express is " I am an outdoor, active person, that loves to bike, ski but I also love enjoying time with my family in the city." With their personality, Thule wants to link the inside and the outside organisation.

4.1.3 External categories

Values proposition

The value proposition of a company represents its key offerings and the way they want to become visible to customers and non- customers (Urde.2013). Aaker (1996) defined value proposition as the "statement of the functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits delivered by the brand that provide value to the customer [...] and drive purchase decisions" (p. 7). The value proposition was clearly formulated by the Manager 2 into two different parts, first to " simplify transportation of gear and equipment" and further to " allow people to bring what is most important to them ". With this two key offerings, the brand promises to develop products that transport what their customers care for, ranging from bicycles to kids. Manager 1 also added that Thule has a diverse portfolio of products, but the aim of all them is to make it possible for people to transport all the essential things in their life. Few common denominators can be seen between the above listed key offerings and the brand core of Thule that consists of safety, high quality, ease of use and contemporary look and feel. Firstly, their equipment transports things in a qualitative, with the main aim to ensure that those things are save throughout the transportation. Secondly, the products are easy to use and have contemporary look and feel, so that they can be recognised and be able to provide excitement to the people using it. If a direct comparison is done between the core values of Thule and value propositions, it is visible that they are overlapping and marks that there is a correlation between what the brand stands for and what the proposition is.

Relationships

The component relationships refers to the connections that the company has with customers and non-customer stakeholders (suppliers, partners, retailers, etc) (Urde, 2013). Urde (2013) argued that the relationships that the company has with the external world, expressed by how the company delivers its products and services, should be reflected in the brand identity. According to the Manager 2, the relationships that Thule has with their clients have changed over the last years. She stated that that now they strive to keep a close relationship with the customers: "we would like to be emotionally attached to our customers, we would like our products to become part of their life “. She also explained: “we have three customer categories, occasional users, elite and dedicated users. For u,s the dedicated users are one of the most important and our focus is mainly of building and maintaining close and long- term relationships with then since they can directly affect and can inspire the other customers.” Furthermore, the Manager 2 also mentioned the relationships they try to cultivate with their retailers: “we try to create long-term partnership with our retailers based on trust”. Manager 1 also added that they try to support their retailers, by supplying them with all marketing materials, technical and sales information, they might need. They even plan to help their online retailers to update their website, by sponsoring them with a budget to improve the layout and the design of their websites.

Position

According to Urde (2013) the element position is related to the current positioning of the company in the market and the minds of the consumers and other stakeholders (Urde, 2013). As mentioned above, Thule transitioned from being a functional brand, only focused on engineering and technology, towards a more emotional company focused on active, outdoor and urban lifestyle. During that transition process, their positioning also changed. This is exemplified by the statement taken from the interview with Manager 2:

“ We do not want to be perceived anymore only as an automotive and accessory company, instead we would like to be associated with being a leading global sport, outdoor, active lifestyle and urban exploration company.”

All Thule’s activities within the last few years were mainly concentrated towards implementing the full transition from a functional company towards a symbolic one, that creates emotions in the minds of the consumers, and starts perceiving them as a “global sports, outdoor, active lifestyle and urban exploration company”.

Urde (2013) stated that these nine elements, that were analysed above, are a key to identify a corporate brand identity. For example, the mission and vision of Thule should be in line with the core values and brand promise: Safety, High quality, Ease of use, Contemporary look & feel, so that the company can achieve its market position of being a leading global sports, outdoor, active lifestyle and urban exploration company. In the same vein, Urde (2013) also stated that the company’s value proposition, in the case of Thule divided into two sections “ to simplify transportation of gear and equipment” and “to allow people to bring what is most important to them “ and the engineering expertise, sustainable award winning product design and constant product innovation, should be aligned with the core values and brand promise for Safety, High quality, Ease of use, Contemporary look & feel, in order for both value proposition and competences to be truly connected.

4.1.4 Corporate brand identity of Thule

After analysing all the nine elements of the CBIM and presenting how all of them are connected, the corporate brand identity of Thule can be defined. Looking at the corporate brand identity definition exhibited in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the Thule corporate brand identity should be a combination and be inline with all the nine elements of the CBIM, as well as it should answer on the questions: "Who are we? Where do we come from? What do we stand for? What is our raison d'être? and, What is our wanted position?"(Urde, 2013, p.744). Moreover, it should communicate the uniqueness and heritage of the company (Kapferer,2012). Based on all of those conditions the corporate brand identity of Thule was defined to be "we are Swedish outdoor/ active/ urban lifestyle company. We stand for high quality, design, ease of use and safety." This is the ideal identity of Thule, presenting what the management wants the brand identity to be (Balmer, 2012). As stated by Balmer (2012) in his AC4ID model a general guiding rule "should be a meaningful strategic alignment between the seven dimensions of corporate brand identity" (p. 1064). Therefore the next section will move towards the receiver side and reveal the results that will show the perception of the consumers and identify whether there is an alignment between all the seven identities of the company.

4.2. Pre-website exposure consumer perception

The aim of the interviews, conducted with the consumers, was to identify if their perception about the Thule brand matches up with Thule's corporate brand identity, identified in the previous section. Thule has been labelled as being a Swedish outdoor active/urban lifestyle company that creates products of great quality, design and ease of use. The idea behind investigating the initial consumer's perception of Thule, before the interviews happened, was to evaluate the extent at which the communication of the brand, made through the different online retailers, would influence and eventually change consumer's perception about the brand. Knowing this would also help define whether the brand image of Thule has rather functional or symbolic meaning – two terms previously introduced in the literature review (Bhat & Reddy 1998; Nan & Heo 2007; Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986). Following the interviews conducted with Thule managers, it has been concluded that having a symbolic brand image is a prospect that the Thule management has been looking forward to in the past five years when the actual rebranding process began.

To evaluate the initial perception of the consumers, the interviewees were asked a set of questions after being shown the Thule logo (*see Figure 8*) at the beginning of the interview. The four questions that were asked of everyone were:

1. What does the brand do?
2. What does the brand stand for?
3. What are the core values/key brand messages communicated by the company?
4. What do you associate the brand with?

Figure 8. Official Thule brand logo (adapted from Thule 2018)

What was found out directly, after showing the Thule logo to the interviewed people, was that they all recognized it without much doubt? This can easily be explained by the fact that all the interviewees were Swedish natives, which makes it easier to identify a specific Swedish brand like Thule that is constantly being present around them. Moreover, "Sweden" is written on the logo itself which makes it even easier for Swedish people to recognize as a home brand. However, one of the respondents, interviewed for the automotive product category, did not have anything else on their minds except the initial recognition of the logo.

"I have seen the logo of the brand but I have no idea what does it stands for" (Respondent 2, Automotive)

Another respondent recognized the logo but had a completely different perception of what the company does compare to its actual identity:

"I think they do workwear and clothing. Probably machines as well? I recognize the name from several ads but I am not sure what the ad is representing" (Respondent 8, Luggage)

Having someone without any initial perception of Thule and another who had one, but very different to what the company does, was useful in a way as it was used later on when analyzing the post-website exposure consumers' perception of the brand. We were able to find out if the post-website exposure consumer's perception is influenced by the fact that the interviewed people had or did not have any perception of the brand before to the presentation of the different online retailers' websites. Regarding the six respondents who knew more about Thule than just recognizing the company's logo, the majority of them related the brand with roof boxes for people preferring the outdoor and active lifestyle. They also thought of the brand as one having a very high standard of quality, which according to some of them, was not due to them having personal experience with Thule product but mainly because "Sweden" is written on the logo and the country is often associated with the manufacturing of high-quality products:

"Yes, I recognize Thule! They have roof boxes for cars. It is a company for an active family and for an active life in general. Thule is famous for its high quality and easy to use" (Respondent 1, Automotive)

Looking at the different product categories – automotive, bikes, juvenile and luggage – it was clear to see that no matter the category, for which the individuals were interviewed, all of them associate Thule brand with automotive related products, mainly mentioning the roof boxes. For example, even if the interviewed people were the ones who have kids and were potential buyers of a child's stroller or the ones who had bikes and enjoyed travelling with them during vacations, all of them did not recognize Thule as a company producing products related to juvenile and bikes categories. The reason behind the fact that the brand was mainly related to the automotive products, focusing on roof boxes and other transporting accessories, is the long history that Thule has within the automotive industry. This strong connection with the automotive world throughout the years transformed Thule as a functional brand – a brand offering products addressing the generic needs that have more practical and immediate nature.

To sum up, after evaluating the interviewees' answers of how they perceived Thule initially, it can be concluded that the consumer's perception of the brand does not completely match with the corporate brand identity, set by the manufacturer and summed up, in the previous section of this analysis. The current identity defines Thule as being a Swedish outdoor/urban, active lifestyle company that stands for high quality and design of its products as well as ease of use and safety. So far, it has been seen that most consumers look at Thule as of an outdoor lifestyle company that has high quality as one of the main core values. However, an important aspect from the corporate brand identity of Thule, missed by all the interviewed consumer, was the fact that Thule also tries to communicate itself as an urban lifestyle company mainly with it's two relatively new categories - juvenile and bikes. However, so far, consumers do not associate the brand with being urban and this is one of the main misalignments that we have found out at this stage of the research. It was to follow up on these statements throughout the interviews and see if the consumers' perceptions of the brand have somehow changed after seen the pre-selected websites of online retailers.

Researching into the different brand elements is important as they serve to create certain impressions in consumers' minds and are responsible for initiating strong brand awareness and unique brand associations (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). The following sections will focus on analyzing each of the brand elements, mentioned in the literature review, as well as introducing some additional communication elements that emerged during the interviews and that need to be addressed by companies in the future.

4.3. Online Brand Elements

4.3.1 Preliminary online brand elements

The preliminary online brand elements, discussed in this section, were all taken from the preliminary framework, presented in section 2.5, that was created based on the literature and theoretical review done. These brand elements are *Logo, Tagline, Images, Videos, Brand*

Name. The researched academic literature showed that these elements have an essential influence in ensuring the alignment between corporate brand identity and brand image when using online retailers. Therefore, the following subsections will focus on these specific online brand elements. Their analysis was done through the interviews with consumers. The initial website's analysis was only used to familiarize the researchers with the online platforms of the retailers and also to create a basic knowledge of how the different brand elements are presented and if they correspond to manufacturer's expectations. However, as mentioned in section 1.5. of this paper, this initial website analysis is not within the scope of the research and only has a support function for us.

Logo

The first brand element that is going to be analyzed is the Thule logo, looking at identifying whether consumers acknowledged its presence on the retailers' websites and how they perceived it. Having a look at the interviewees' answers would bring us one step closer to identifying whether or not an alignment between the corporate brand identity and brand image exists. Furthermore, as mentioned in the literature and theoretical review earlier, the logo is one of the key brand elements that need to be communicated in the right way, following the manufacturer's requirements, in order to ensure the above-mentioned alignment (Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2004).

Throughout the initial stage of analyzing the 24 pre-selected websites, the researchers wanted to see how the Thule logo was presented. Many websites had the complete lack of Thule logo by it not being present on neither of both the dedicated company page and the specific product page. The websites regarding one of the four observed product categories, the automotive one, were seen as being the least strict by not having the logo present at all. Some of the exceptions were Norauto.fr and Hammersley.com but even if they had the Thule logo present in one of the analyzed web tabs, it was often not the official one used by the company (see *Figure 9*).

THULE® SWEDEN

Figure 9. The wrong Thule logo used by many of the online retailers (adapted from ebsadventure 2018

The same argument can be confirmed for the rest of the three product categories and the websites that were analysed. Even further, there was an example of an online retailer showing both the correct *(Figure 8)* and the wrong Thule logo (*Figure 9)* on the different pages related to Thule – the company page and the product page. For Thule, knowing that the online retailers do not show the Thule logo or even if they do, it is often not the official one, is a very serious challenge that needs addressing as the logo is often regarded as the key brand element signifying origin, ownership, or even association with the brand (Keller, 2012). The logo is also regarded as a strong branding tool that needs to be consistently communicated in the best possible way in order for it to add value and be the sign for everything that the brand stands for in the eyes of consumers (Rowley, 2004). The fact that many online retailers do not present the Thule logo at all or if they do, not in the right way, is even more concerning knowing that having the brand logo consistently on their websites is one of the requirements set by Thule in the contract between the two parties. Having the brand logo on the online retailers' websites is very important for Thule as the logo is strongly related to consumer's awareness about the brand(Interview with Manager 1, 2018).

Throughout the interviews with the consumers, it was important to see if they were able to acknowledge the presence of the Thule logo on any of the web tabs that have been shown to them. Also, we wanted to know how do consumers feel about this brand element and how important it is for them. First of all, the interviewees acknowledged the fact that many of the websites did not have the Thule logo present and they also saw the different versions of the logo, not knowing which one is the official one. The majority of the interviewees all agreed that the lack of a brand logo might be regarded as a serious issue it is perceived as one of the important brand elements:

"It is important to see the logo, I believe. Since many people know Thule mainly as an automotive company, maybe having the logo more present on the websites next to their other products will help people knowing that the company has a larger variety of products available" (Respondent 6, Juvenile)

Furthermore, the respondents stated that the logo is usually the first element that comes under the consumer's sight when searching through a webpage. Another advantage of the logo, mentioned by some of the respondents was the fact that it helps companies like Thule to differentiate from the competition. On the other hand, there were also respondents who did not feel the necessity to see the logo of the brand as it was also present on the product itself and is clearly shown by the product images on the web page:

"For me, it is not important to see the logo, as I see it on the product itself through the images shown on the website" (Respondent 1, Automotive)

Even if there was not a clear consensus among the interviewed consumers whether or not the logo should be present on the product page when it can be seen printed on each of the Thule products, all of the consumers agreed that it can help to communicate an identity of a brand:

"I think seeing the logo could bring something to me. It would communicate the identity of the company in some way" (Respondent 6, Juvenile)

"Even if I see the logo of Thule on the web page, I do not associate it with the suitcase offered by the company." (Respondent 8, Luggage)

In addition to the presence of the Thule logo on the observed online retailer's websites, the majority of the respondents also discussed the size and the position of the logo. The size of the Thule logo in most of the websites was described as "too small to get my attention" by the interviewed people which also does not play in favour of Thule and the brand awareness that the company is aiming for. Furthermore, the position of the logo also seemed to play an important role for consumers when looking at a specific product page. In order for this brand element to be on the most visible place of the page, some of the respondents suggested that it should be big enough and on the top left of the page, next to the product images.

To conclude, the logo is regarded as an important brand element by the consumers, but unfortunately, the online retailers do not do enough to follow the requirements set by Thule regarding the way of presenting the logo to the general public. The fact, that many of the online retailers use different versions of the Thule logo is a clear sign that there is a room for improvement in the communication of this brand element in order to ensure its positive influence on consumers' perception of the Thule brand.

Tagline

The focus is now moved towards the tagline of Thule "Bring your life" and how is it presented on the different websites that were analyzed, as well as how did it influence the perception of the interviewed consumers. As mentioned earlier in the review of the academic literature, the tagline can be a powerful branding device that can become extremely efficient in communicating the brand identity to the different stakeholders. In Thule's case, "Bring your life" expresses the brand essence of the company, being an active outdoor company, and making an important emotional bond with the general public. Allowing the consumers to see this tagline as often as possible, when they shop Thule products online, would switch their perception of Thule from a more functional to a more symbolic brand.

The above-mentioned arguments for the power that a tagline can have over people were well proved after the conducted interviews with consumers. All of the respondents showed their desire of seeing the brand tagline at some point during their online shopping experience as it can immediately connect them with the brand identity of the company. Unfortunately, in the case of Thule, nobody from the interviewees could find the Thule's tagline on the shown websites throughout the interview. The reason for that was not the positioning of the tagline itself, but the fact that it was not present at all in almost all websites that have been chosen for analysis.

"The tagline…I cannot find it. And also, I do not know what is the tagline of Thule either." (Respondent 4, Bikes)

The only exceptions were two websites within the Luggage product category, taschenkaufhaus.de and outnorth.se, where the tagline was present in some form within the dedicated Thule company page. In order to be completely accurate, on the second website, the tagline was only visible due to the fact that it served as a thumbnail *(see Figure 10)* of a Thule video used on the Thule company page. Many of the consumers showed their concerns of the missing tagline as it might have helped them construct their perception of the brand correctly:

“I think that if I have seen the tagline saying “Bring your life”, I would definitely have come up with the right perception a lot easier than I did only by looking at the other brand elements on the websites” (Respondent 6, Juvenile).

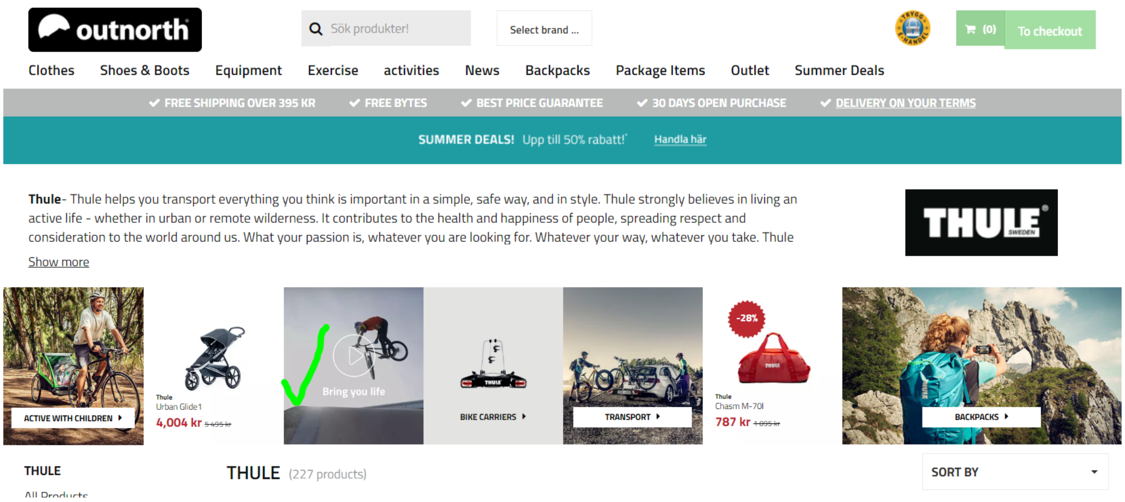


Figure 10. Image showing the tagline “Bring your life” as being part of a video thumbnail (adapted from Outhnorth 2018)

Currently, the requirements of Thule regarding the tagline are not as strict as they are with some of the other brand elements, such as logo, but the company needs to further discuss and eventually change this due to the apparent importance of the tagline for the consumers was confirmed by themselves on multiple occasions throughout the conducted interviews.

Images

Next on the list of analyzed brand elements are the images used by online retailers to communicate the Thule brand to consumers through their websites. Thule has always put a lot of effort into providing their own images, both product and lifestyle images, to the online retailers through an online platform where they can all be downloaded by the sellers. The product images *(see Figure 11)* consist of multiple pictures, shot in a professional studio with white background, showing the product from different angles, as well as explaining his main functions and how it fits in a real setting (e.g. roof box shown on a car, bike trailer at the back of a car, luggage next to a person, etc.). On the other hand, the lifestyle images *(see Figure 12)* are more focused on creating emotions within the consumer's mind placing the product in the environment and communicating the outdoor active/urban lifestyle of Thule. It is understandable why a company would invest a lot of time and budget for producing quality material that represents what they do, as according to Rowley (2004) images are regarded the as a visual representation of brand values (Rowley, 2004). A well-made image may indicate the content and the nature of the product or service offered (Rowley, 2004). Therefore, Thule expects that the online retailers to use the official images available through the special online media platform and display them as the most prominent element on retailers' web pages. However, as the further analysis will show, making sure that every online retailer is using the right material is one of the biggest challenges in front of Thule in aligning its corporate brand identity and brand image.

Figure 11. Product Picture of Thule stroller (Adapted from Jollyroom 2018)

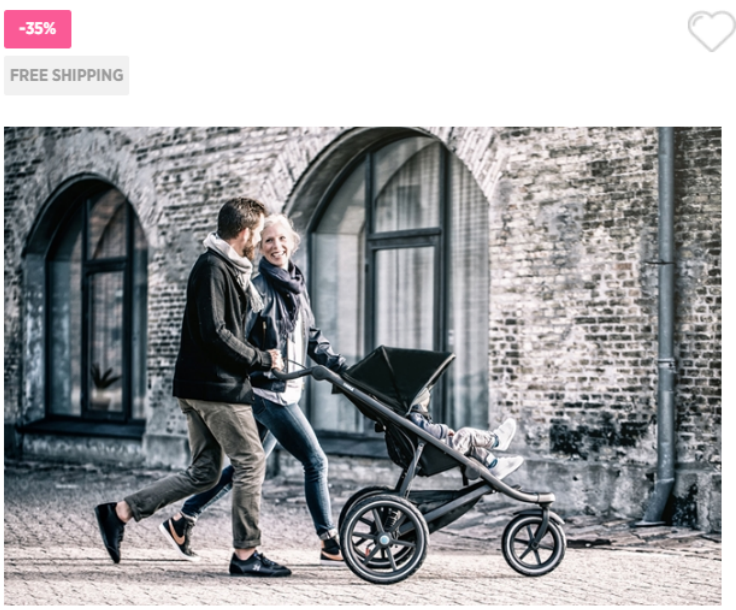


Figure 12. Lifestyle image of Thule stroller (Adapted from Jollyroom 2018)

What could be easily concluded from the initial website's analysis by the authors of this paper was the fact that the majority of online retailers do not use all Thule product and lifestyle images that are available through the above mentioned online media platform. Hence, often a product was not displayed from all angles and was not shown in a real setting which was also acknowledged by some of the interviewed consumers:

“I like the product images available here, as it gives you the possibility to see the product from all angles. However, an image from the back is missing. Also, I would prefer to see an image showing how the roof box is being opened just so I can see the exact size and imagine it in my head. This is kind of missing on this product page” (Respondent 1, Automotive)

What consumers expect from websites selling a different product is having access to multiple good product images showing as many details of the product as possible as this would help consumers make up their mind a lot easier and choose the right product. What was defined as a good product image by all of the interviewees, was an image that is big and clear enough showing the product’s physical appearance, as well as functionalities, in the best possible way. However, everyone interviewed agreed on the fact that product images, even if being big and clear, are not enough to solely communicate the corporate brand identity. This is the reason why the lifestyle images were created by Thule at first place and also why all the respondents had something to add about the lifestyle images and if they were an important data that should not be missing on a selling website. First of all, interviewees all agreed that lifestyle images can be very influential if shown correctly:

“I think that lifestyle images can really change people’s impression of a brand and give them emotions about it” (Respondent 1, Automotive)

However, in order for the lifestyle images of a brand to have the expected effect, consumers need to feel connected with the image set and imagine themselves being part of the environment that the particular image represents.

“Unfortunately, I cannot associate with the lifestyle images as I simply do not see myself in it. The setting of such image should be urbaner in order for me to be able to connect my activities with what the picture is trying to show” (Respondent 4, Bikes)

“Looking at the lifestyle images, I cannot identify myself with them as they represent a situation that I would never be in. If I would see myself in that image, then I would expect something more urban” (Respondent 3, Bikes)

Even further, sometimes not the setting of an image is the problem, but the person/people who are presented with it:

“These outdoor urban activity pictures do not appeal to me as there is only a man on the photo. It does not connect with me as a woman” (Respondent 8, Luggage)

“Most of the pictures are only with men at them, which brings me to the conclusion that the product is for males’ professionals” (Respondent 8, Luggage)

Even if all the interviewed people had something to add about the lifestyle images and what do they expect to see when going through the different websites, a common comment was the fact that there were simply not enough lifestyle images, representing Thule’s brand identity, presented by the online retailers. Furthermore, the majority of respondents added that they would appreciate the more saturated presence of lifestyle images as they would make it easier to associate with a situation of using the specific product. Most of the respondents mentioned that the lifestyle image should be kept away from the product page as that is where they just want to focus on the product and eventually purchase it:

“I would not like to have lifestyle images next to product images within the product page” (Respondent 1, Automotive)

“I think lifestyle images should be only presented in the Thule page, whereas the product images should be presented only on the product page” (Respondent 4, Bikes)

One of the most important insights that were taken from the interviews with consumers is the fact that they all declared the images as the brand element that comes up first within their sight when they are on a webpage. Moreover, images were also the most important brand element for the consumers which may be the difference between purchasing or not purchasing a specific product:

“The first element I see on a product page when buying a product, is the image” (Respondent 4, Bikes)

“Images are definitely the most important element for me when I am looking at a product” (Respondent 5, Juvenile)

“I would say an image is the first brand element I see on a product page” (Respondent 7, Luggage)

To further confirm that images are the most important brand element for consumers, we asked one additional question to all of the respondents related to a situation when they see a product of a completely unknown brand and the first piece of information they look at in such situation:

"If I do not know the brand at all, the first thing that attracts me is still the image. It can be a really powerful tool for us consumers" (Respondent 6, Juvenile)

To conclude, images have been confirmed to be the most important element for consumers as they can certainly "change people's impression of a product and give emotions to people" (Respondent 1, Automotive). Even if most of the analyzed websites have already placed a good amount of product images, it is important that Thule makes the online retailers use all the available media data from the available online platform. As it was confirmed, consumers prefer seeing as many product photos as possible, showing the good from different angles, as well as showing some of his main functionalities (e.g. a photo of a roof box being opened from both sides). However, the real issue here was confirmed to be the lack of lifestyle images – something that can create a much more emotional bond between consumers and the brand, and move away from the functional bond that is still being strong when asking consumers for their perception about Thule as a brand.

Video

According to Rowley (2004), videos are considered being part of graphics – an online brand element including images and other interactive visuals through which a brand can be communicated. Just as images, videos offer the possibility of a unique virtual brand experience that can attract the attention of the consumers and influence their perception (Cleff, Walter & Xie, 2007). By analyzing how much of a presence Thule videos have on the different websites and to what extent are they influencing people's perception, we wanted to see their importance in aligning the corporate brand identity and brand image.

Similarly, to the Thule images, videos are also being created by the brand itself and can be divided in two types – instructional and lifestyle videos. The expectations here are similar to the ones imposed for the Thule images as online retailers are demanded to use the videos provided by Thule via the special online media platform. Unfortunately, after the initial analysis of the 24 websites, it has been concluded that the lifestyle videos are rare to see on both brand and product page. The only exception of a website, that offered its customer the Thule lifestyle video on the specific product page was Hollandbikeshop.nl. Even if the interviews with consumers revealed the fact that videos were not considered as key brand elements by the majority of respondents, they all agreed that watching one of the Thule lifestyle videos changed their perception of the brand in the right direction:

"I think the lifestyle video would be a very nice feature. Definitely, a nice feature that definitely can influence me as a consumer when looking to buy a Thule product" (Respondent 8, Luggage)

The instructional videos of the Thule products, which made part of the product pages within the different websites, received mostly approvals by the consumers as they help to create an image of the product itself and how exactly does it work and looks like:

“I really prefer instructional videos. For example, a few days ago, I was looking to buy a backpack and I was trying to find instructional videos for this product showing all the nice features and some tips of using the product” (Respondent 4, Bikes)

“I think having an instructional video is very useful for us, the consumers. I really want to see how a product works and seeing a video makes everything a lot more realistic while reducing the need to visit the physical store for further observation of the chosen product” (Respondent 6, Juvenile)

Even if instructional videos had a positive reception in general, some interesting interviewees’ statements made it clear that videos can often be missed intentionally if they are too long for, for example:

“I am not a big fan of videos because they are too long for me. The only possible way of me focusing my attention on an instructional video on a website is if its length is shorter than a minute” (Respondent 7, Luggage)

A general assumption could be made, following the interviews, regarding the effect that videos have on consumers’ perception and if they are more preferred than images. Even if videos can indeed influence people in a way, people still prefer to see images of the product rather than seeing a dedicated instructional video. The reason for this might be hidden in the low attention span that is currently circulating among the online shoppers. Another possible reason for not watching the available videos was found throughout the interviews with the consumers. The majority of them acknowledged the fact that the instructional videos of Thule products they saw were always at the very bottom of the product page which made them well hidden as nobody would like to scroll that much to reach the video. Therefore, many of the consumers suggested that changing the position of where the videos are placed on a product page might increase the number of people who are actually watching them:

“Here is a video down here. Quite often, the videos are actually together with the images at the top of the page and for this one, I had to scroll down a lot. And I am not keen at all to scroll down to find stuff.” (Respondent 4, Bikes)

“They have a video, but the position is not very convenient, to be honest. I had to look for it quite a while. If I was to put it somewhere, I would put it next to the images.” (Respondent 5, Juvenile)

To conclude, consumers still prefer to have images available and just look at the videos as a secondary element when evaluating the functionality of the product. Furthermore, some of the consumers mentioned the fact that they would only watch an instructional video if they are already in the last stage of purchasing this product. Also, watching an instructional video is a lot more often to see among consumers who do not plan to visit the offline store at all and would like to make up their minds only during the online shopping experience. As for the lifestyle videos of Thule, the company is paying a lot of money for these productions

(Interview with Manage 1, 2018) so it is unacceptable for the management to that these videos are not being present in the vast majority of the websites that were analyzed. Having in mind the fact that consumers confirmed that lifestyle videos can help them identify the company's brand identity easier makes it imperative for Thule management to find a way of reaching a consistency in showing these videos to the general public as much as possible.

Brand name

The brand name was already being mentioned in the literature review as a key brand element that can be extremely effective in improving the recall ability and brand recognition. This is one of the main reasons why Thule has specific guidelines related to the correct use of the brand name by online retailers. In order for the name to be well distinguished, it is important to be set apart from the surrounding text by capitalizing the first letter or capitalizing the entire word (e.g. Thule; THULE) (Thule Brand and Trademark Guidelines, 2018). Another important way of positioning the brand name into consumers' minds is to always add it in front of any Thule product that is sold online (e.g. Thule Urban Glide).

After analyzing how all 24 websites present the brand logo of Thule, it was clear to see that everyone was trying to follow the correct way of presenting it to the general public. The only evident issue with the brand name could be seen on some of the websites, related to the luggage product category, where the guidelines were not completely followed. When asked about the preferred position of the brand name on a web page, the interviewees all agreed that it should be placed on a different location than where the logo stands as it often creates unnecessary visual repetition of the Thule name. People agreed that the two brand elements, logo and brand name, should be evenly distributed on the product page – one being at the top left and the other being at the top right of the web page. Finally, when people hear the brand name they do not it with a specific value or product of the company.

4.3.2 New online brand elements

One of the objectives, that this research paper had, in addition to analysing the different key brand elements, identified within the preliminary framework presented in section 2.5, was also to search for other online brand elements that might have an important role in the alignment between corporate brand identity and brand image. Indeed, two new online brand elements have emerged through the interviews with the Sales & Marketing Planning Manager of Thule - Product and company descriptions. They are classified as brand elements, as stated by Rowley(2004) those elements can unlock certain brand value and equity for the brand holders - something, discussed by Rowley (2004). Furthermore, Kladou, Kavaratzis, Salonika and Rigopoulou (2015) present the brand elements as key tools for creating a specific perception in consumers' minds. The content of both product and company description, created by Thule, aims at communicating the corporate brand identity of the company. The following two subsections will analyses the two new online brand elements in more details, analysing how consumers perceive them and how the online retailers present them on their websites.

Product description

To start with, the first new brand element, that is going to be discussed, is product description. In order to have full control of what text has been communicated to the consumers, Thule invests significant resources to create its own textual content that is also available in multiple languages (Interview with Manager 1, 2018). By doing so, the manufacturer expects to reach the consistency needed to ensure that the consumers' perception of the Thule brand aligns with what the corporate brand identity.

To start with, a basic analysis of the 24 websites has been conducted by us in order to see the extent at which the retailers have been transferring the same message through the product description. Usually, the product description is available through the special online media platform from where every online retailer is able to download it in the appropriate language. What has been seen on the websites is that almost every website has used the expected product description of the particular Thule product that gives all the necessary technical specifications of the product to the consumer. Also, it communicates its main features with a tone of voice corresponding to the brand identity - focusing on the active and outdoor/urban aspect. The majority of the 24 websites did not seem to emphasise on the product description as it was often put at the bottom of the page and it was needed to scroll down in order to see the full lenght of it. However this specific structure of the product pages did not seem to be ideal - an argument that occurred during the interviews with the consumers. Almost each one of them stated that the product description is the second most important brand element for them, after images, and they are always searching for it but are annoyed of scrolling down the webpage in order to get to it:

"First, I look at images of the product and then I move to product description...I read the technical specifications so I see if I will be able to fit my skis in the roof box, for example" (Respondent 1, Automotive)

"The product description is the second most important brand element off, after images" (Respondent 4, Bikes)

"I think that the product description is very important, when purchasing such product, as it allows you see if the product's features and specifications, is really what you look for" (Respondent 6, Juvenile)

As every consumer acknowledged the imperfect positioning of the product description on the product pages of the websites, they also gave their opinion on where this brand element would fit best. As expected, consumers would prefer to avoid scrolling down to find such an important information for them, hence they would prefer the product description next to or directly below the product descriptions, which can be find on the top of the page:

"I would prefer to find the product description place right under the images" (Respondent 3, Bikes)

"I like it most when the product description of the product is on the right next to the images and below the price tag" (Respondent 4,Bikes)

One of the respondent suggested a very interesting feature that can potentially make the consumer experience on the product page even better and gives consumers more control when searching through the product page:

"They currently have the product description to the right at the moment. What I would like to see is a feature that hides the description and allows consumers to choose when to see the full text" (Respondent 8, Luggage)

To conclude, product description came out as being one of the most important brand elements that consumers look for when purchasing a product. This finding suits Thule perfectly as the company aims at transmitting the brand personality and values through the product description; thus increasing the possibility for the consumer to receive the right brand message. However, Thule needs to work close with online retailers in order to discuss any possibilities of bringing the product description higher in the product page and make it easier to access by consumers. The issue that arises is related to the fact that it may be difficult to persuade an online retailer to modify its product page layout as then it should change for all other brands. Later in this section, a more detailed analysis, related to the websites' layout and its importance for communicating the correct brand message to consumers, will be presented.

Company Description

The second additional communication element that came from the interview, conducted with Thule Sales & Marketing Planning manager, is company description. Just as with the product description, the text presenting the company needs to be written in a way that connects it with the manufacturer's identity. Through the company description, companies like Thule are able to communicate their mission, vision, core values and even the tagline, which were defined as a vital part for the brand identity of Thule in the point 5.1 of this analysis. Therefore, Thule also attributes resources to create this content as much relevant to the brand identity as possible. Logically, Thule has also translated the company description in multiple languages and made it available for use by the online retailers, selling Thule products. What is important to mention is the fact that the company description does not only communicate the history of the company, thus showing its heritage. Thule also makes sure that the company description contains the active, outdoor/urban lifestyle spirit in it in order to emotionally attach the consumers who read it.

The first impression, following the analysis of all 24 websites, was that not many of them had dedicated Thule page where the company should normally be presented. Furthermore, those websites who had such page did not have a company description at all but only Thule products listed in a catalogue. The majority of websites, who had a description of what Thule does, did not communicate the brand identity of the company only focused on its history.

Also, there were some online retailers who included company description related to only one product category. For example, the automotive websites focused on the history of Thule as well as the company's link to the automotive industry. By doing this, the online retailers do not communicate the brand as a collection of multiple product categories and also do not transmit the outdoor, active/urban lifestyle of the brand. When looking at the company description created by Thule management, it covers all products categories sold by the company, which gives the right perception of the consumer - one presenting Thule as a company with rich product portfolio. Furthermore, the original company description created by the company includes the brand tagline "Bring your life" and all it stands for - something that immediately presents Thule as a lot more than simply a functional brand, related to automotive industry only.

Once the analysis of all websites ended, it was necessary to see how people would react to the company description while showing them the specific websites. First of all, just as it was observed by us, the interviewed people acknowledged the fact that there was a clear lack of company description in the majority of websites they say. However, all of the respondents stated that the company description is more like a bonus content than a key brand element that they would definitely need to read in order to decide whether or not to purchase a product. All the interviewees confirmed the argument that the nowadays consumer would not like to read an excessive amount of company description as his attention span is lower than ever. Instead, what the respondents would like to see is a brief company description explaining what the company does and what it stands for. Based on what the people answered, a short company description would be a great way for a consumer, who has never heard of a brand, to get to know the company:

"For people who do not know the brand, it is very important to read the company description" (Respondent 3, Juvenile)

"If I do not know the brand, a short company description of what they are doing, as well as their vision, is what I look for" (Respondent 2, Automotive)

However, one of the consumers was a lot more pessimistic about the company descriptions that are presented on websites and what they are actually trying to do:

"I do not buy it to be honest because all the companies write how good they are. But I guess that is what they are supposed to do. Still, I do not read company descriptions at all for this reason" (Respondent 1, Automotive)

To conclude, company description seems to be one of those brand elements that needs further alignment as the online retailers often create this content about a brand themselves instead of using the original text provided by Thule. Such a maneuver cannot satisfy company like Thule for which it is extremely important to be consistent in the way they communicate the brand message. The only way to achieve such consistency, which would later lead to an alignment between the identity of the company and the perception of consumers, is to make sure that all different intermediaries, such as online retailers, communicate the brand in a correct way. Also, the answers of the respondents proved that the text should be precise without any unnecessary details as nobody would like to spend too much time in reading a long company description.

4.4. Additional Influencing Elements

The above section included the analysis of the preliminary brand elements, identified through the literature review, and the new brand elements that were identified throughout the interviews with one of Thule's interviewed managers. However, throughout interviews with consumers, new additional communication elements emerged as being important for either both the manufacturer and the consumer - website design and layout. Website design related to the color aesthetics presented on the website (e.g. background colors, text colors, etc.), whereas the website layout is related to how are the different website's elements structured (banners size, position of different brand elements, etc.)

4.4.1 Website Design

The design of the website came out as one of the two newly discovered factors influencing the consumer's perception about a brand. Together with the layout of the website, these two additional influencers were discovered throughout the interviews with consumers, during which the latter acknowledged the importance of the website itself when perceiving a specific brand. What is meant by website design in this paper, is the overall look of the website, its aesthetics, color scheme, basic page setup and background images(s). As the website design was not a subject of investigation throughout the initial website analysis, conducted by us, the following paragraphs are solely representing the consumers' point of view.

Before more details regarding the website design observation are revealed, it is important to mention that the topic guide, used for the interviews with consumers, did not include any sort of questions related to this subject. The discussion about website design happened naturally, while the consumers were observing the websites that were showed to them. Even at the first sight of the websites, interviewees had spontaneous comments about the overall look of the homepage, focusing on its colors specifically:

"I really do not like the colors, I think it looks cheap. The orange makes the product look cheap. I mean, that is obviously one classy premium product. I would like to see more calm colors, such as green, for example" (Respondent 4, Bikes, Discussing hollandsbikeshop.com)

All the respondents agreed that colors plays an important role when communicating a specific perception to the consumers. The answer of Respondent 4 was only one of many that discussed the colors of the homepage of the websites that were seen. A good example of a better looking website, given by the same respondent, was Fahhrad-xxl.de which incorporates the colors green and blue - colors that instantly relate to the outdoor and active lifestyle:

"It makes me feel excited a lot more about outdoor and excitement. The colors are more subtle. I connect them with outdoor, the colors green and blue" (Respondent 4, Bikes. Discussing Fahhrad-xxl.de)

What has been found out throughout the interviews with consumers was that not only colors were the only elements influencing the consumer's perception of a brand. Many consumers mentioned the role of the overall thematics of the websites, including background visuals and texts. For example, when interviewing Respondent 8 regarding the Luggage related websites, the only website that was classified as one that communicates similar message than the one of Thule, was Outnorth.se. The main reason for Outnorth.se to be shown as a good example by the respondent was that all the overall design of the homepage, including background images, colors and themes, were closely relating to the outdoor lifestyle:

"All websites, except Outnorth, should definitely think about the surrounding backgrounds. It would really help to have a homepage with more outdoor lifestyle images as background" (Respondent 8, Luggage)

A good example of a website, communicating anything else but outdoor active lifestyle, is Mesbagages.fr and was discussed by both consumers, interviewed for the luggage product category:

"This is a page I would never go in. So many stuff blinking everywhere…" (Respondent 7, Luggage)

"Very cheap website. It is clear that this want to be perceived in such cheap way due to all promotions out there. I would not be comfortable buying a Thule suitcase for a site looking like that. I think that Thule wants to be perceived as a premium brand so the image that this websites shows does not correspond to the brand identity of the company." (Respondent 8, Luggage)

As a conclusion, it has clearly been confirmed by the respondents that the first impression of website and its homepage in particular has crucial importance for consumers as this can influence their decision to further continue searching through the webpage and eventually getting to the Thule brand or product pages. However, the extent at which the manufacturer is able to influence the design of a website is often very limited, as the responsibility of building a web page is to the online retailer and it might be difficult to persuade him reshape its website design just for the purpose of communicating correctly one specific brand.

4.4.2 Website Layout

The second of the additional elements, that was found out during the interview with consumers, was website layout. More precisely, website layout concerns the structure of the content of a single web page, including the page margins, text blocks and position of images.

As with the website design, the layout has not been part of the initial website analysis, conducted by us, thus all the following insights are coming from the consumers' interviews.

One of the most important inputs that have been taken from the discussion about this topic was that respondents expect to see different elements placed on different positions in a page. The positioning of some brand elements, such as logo, videos and product description has already been discussed and showed how much of importance this has for the consumers. Furthermore, the position of each of the brand elements can determine the likelihood of them being seen by consumers, hence allowing the latter to receive the correct brand message. As mentioned earlier, if a product description is at the very bottom of a page, for example, then consumers will be less likely to read through it, even if they consider it as one of the most important elements they look for on a website. Interestingly enough, it was discovered that even the layout of the website homepage is very important for some of the interviewees. If its structure is not clear enough, they will not proceed further to the company and product pages of Thule, hence avoiding to be exposed to all the brand content that communicates the brand identity:

"The slides with the promotions take too much space from what I want to see. When I want to go to such websites' homepages, I want to search for the product I look for straight away" (Respondent 2, Automotive)

"There is too much bike related information on the homepage and this is something which would not make me go further in my research of a roof box" (Respondent 1, Automotive)

To conclude, based on the answers given by the end-consumers, website layout does not have a direct influence on the consumer's perception. However, a well-structured homepage layout might be a good reason for the consumer to continue his search for the specific product of a brand. This will increase the chance of him being exposed to the original content created by the manufacturer trying to communicate what the brand stands for by showing its identity. Just as with the website design, manufacturers will have the difficulties of influence websites' overall layout as this might often be related too many resources invested by the online retailers.

4.5 Post-website exposure consumer perception

After each of the brand elements and additional communication elements has been discussed in the previous chapter through the supportive analysis of the 24 websites and interviews conducted with consumers, this chapter will focus on identifying any differences in people's brand perceptions of Thule after being introduced to the specific websites.

First, it is important to mention that no significant variation in the answers of respondents, those had an initial perception of Thule and the one person who did not have any, was observed. In the section, discussing the pre-website exposure consumer perception of the brand, it was found that people recognized Thule mostly as an automotive company as they gave an example of car accessories (e.g. roof boxes) that have been sold by the company. This assumption made by the consumers lead to the conclusion that the brand is perceived as rather functional and not emotional. Based on the conducted interviews, it can also be said that sometimes it takes many more years in order to reposition the brand – from being purely automotive company to being an outdoor, lifestyle and urban company that moves towards a more symbolic brand, that would enhance consumer's self-expression and self-image identification.

After showing the researched websites to the interviewees, many of them have realized that Thule's product portfolio offers much more than simply accessories for their cars helping them to transport some belongings. However, even though respondents were much more informed about the brand, their answers were still leaning towards representing Thule as a functional brand:

"After seeing the websites, now I can certainly say that Thule sells outdoor equipment for storage and usage" (Respondent 4, Bikes)

"They do sell luggage and bike carriers apparently but their main products are still roof boxes that are used for storing equipment when travelling" (Respondent 7, Luggage)

Furthermore, to strengthen the argument that the brand has still been perceived as mainly functional even after showing the websites to the interviewees, all associations, mentioned in the pre-website discussion has been kept and confirmed by consumers.

"I still think that Thule is an active and outdoor company" (Respondent 5, Juvenile)

"I have not change my opinion that the brand stands for quality and ingenuity. It stands for Swedish, Quality and Design" (Respondent 4, Bikes)

"The company is focusing on producing roof boxes and bike trailers and it stands for high quality) (Respondent 2, Automotive)

Of course, it has to be mentioned that it was already expected to see consumers, interviewed for Juvenile and Luggage products, being more exposed to other diverse Thule products than the consumers interviewed for Automotive and Bike products. This was shown in the post-website exposure comments as the first two groups have been a lot more aware of what else Thule does, thus influencing their perception of the brand to a higher extent. One good example of that related to the pre- and post-website exposure perception of Respondent 8 who was interviewed for the Luggage product category. At the beginning, as already mentioned above, he considered Thule as company producing work wear - a perception that was too far from the actual identity of the brand. After showing this respondent the six luggage related websites, selling Thule products, his final perception of the brand changed in a good direction:

“Now when I saw all this, I think they are an outdoor company. Maybe also an urban company as they sell luggage."(Respondent 8, Luggage)

This respondent was also the only one who put Thule in an urban context, which is one of Thule’s aims especially for Juvenile and Luggage categories, as the company is currently product products that are made to be used in an urban environment. However, the rest of the respondents in these two product categories did not come even close to mentioning Thule as being an urban company. This might be explained with the lack of correct communication of the brand message through the websites that have been shown to them - something that was also suggested by some of the respondents:

“I am still really confused, as they [Thule] do not really show the outdoor or urban message through the websites I saw. I think they really need to consider putting a lot more effort in this specific area” (Respondent 8, Luggage)

When asked, all the consumers came up with similar suggestion on what needs to be done more by the online retailers in order to communicate the correct brand identity of Thule. For example, the respondents regarding the Automotive product category, were the most critical regarding the general layout and design of the automotive websites:

“The majority of websites show only cars and car attributes. This does not suggest outdoor active lifestyle at all” (Respondent 2, Automotive)

“I think the only one that communicates Thule’s brand identity is the last website [reinartz-autoteile.de]. I really do think that those lifestyle images can really change people’s perception by giving some emotions to the people” (Respondent 1, Automotive)

All of the consumers, regardless of the product category they have been interviewed for, agreed that the majority of the websites have missed the outdoor message. In their opinion, online retailers really need to think for the background images of the homepage, as well as investing in the creation of a dedicated Thule page within the website, communicating the brand identity through the right images.

To conclude, the aim of this section was to evaluate the post-website exposure brand perception of the interviewed consumers and compare it with the corporate brand identity of Thule, identified earlier at the end of section 5.1.4. In it, Thule has been identified as a Swedish outdoor/active/urban lifestyle company that stands for high quality, design ease of use and safety. What has been concluded is that the urban side of the brand is yet to be injected into consumers’ minds as only of the interviewees considered Thule as such after seeing the websites. However, the majority of consumers are perceiving the company as an outdoor company that offers products with a high quality and this perception has not changed any further after showing them the websites. Furthermore, Thule is still perceived as a functional brand, as consumers still see it as a brand offering products addressing the generic needs that have more practical and immediate nature. What is certainly lacking, in order for the consumers to perceive Thule as a more emotional brand, is the presence of enough outdoor/active/urban lifestyle images throughout the websites that would communicate the brand identity of Thule in the best possible way.

5. Discussion

This chapter will aim to reflect and elaborate on the key findings of the thesis, found in the previous section, to answer the research questions. The main research question will be answered by answering the sub-questions beforehand. The new further developed framework will be presented showing its new components. Finally, throughout the whole discussion, the key findings and the framework will be related to previous literature, reviewed in the paper.

5.1. How does the consumer perceive the manufacturer's corporate brand identity, communicated by the online retailers?

The first sub-question aimed at identifying the consumers' perceptions of the brand and comparing it with the manufacturer's corporate brand identity, when the latter has been communicated through online retailers. The authors of this paper wanted to identify, based on consumers' answers, whether Thule is being perceived more as a functional or symbolic brand, based on the top of mind associations the consumers had before and after the interviews. Functional and symbolic brand image has been introduced by multiple academic writers (Bhat & Reddy 1998; Nan & Heo 2007; Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986) in the past decades. The management of Thule wants the consumers to perceive them as a brand who offers a lot more than a product. They aim at creating an emotional bond with consumers that will strengthen the brand loyalty even further. Through the lifestyle images and videos, and the symbolic slogan "Bring your life", Thule wants to communicate the idea of transporting anything people care for safely, easily and with a style while living their active life. However, before positioning the desired brand image in consumers' minds, manufacturers need to make sure that the current brand image is people's mind is identified in order to see the adjustments that need to be made (Ries and Trout, 1986). This study demonstrates that the current brand image of consumers regarding Thule, identified through the analysis, is of a company that offers products which have practical utility but do not create the expected emotions within consumers' minds. More precisely, consumers perceive Thule as an outdoor company selling accessories that serve to transport belongings. Needs like self-expression, self-image identification and prestige, introduced by Bhat and Reddy (1988) as key components of a symbolic brand, are yet to be fully discovered about Thule by the consumer.

5.2. To what extent does the consumer's perception of a brand align with manufacturer's corporate brand identity, communicated through online retailers?

Now when the perception of consumers regarding Thule is clear, another part of the main research question aimed at identifying the extent at which the Thule's corporate brand identity is aligned with the brand image, stuck in consumers' minds. In order to come up with a conclusion, it is needed to identify the nature of the internal and external values of the company and see whether they are aligned (being true or hallow) or misaligned (being potential or aspirational) (Urde, 2009). After the analysis of all conducted interviews, Thule's core values have been classified as being aspirational due to the fact that they are internally rooted by the management and the employees of the company, but are however still not completely recognised by the customers. Even if it is impossible to fully evaluate the extent of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment looking at Thule's case, it can be however confirmed that some adjustments need to be done, by both manufacturer and online retailers, in order to reach complete alignment. The reason for that is the fact that consumers, as mentioned before, still perceive Thule brand as a purely functional brand, answering to their needs, whereas Thule is communicating its brand as being a symbolic one, aiming at creating an emotional bond with the consumers.

In order to ensure that the actual brand image corresponds to what Thule expects, it is important for the company to also make sure that its different identities are also aligned. Balmer (2012) first introduced the AC4ID framework that communicates the idea that corporate brands are a constellation of seven identity types: actual, communicated, conceived, covenanted, cultural, ideal and desired. The idea of the framework is that all these identities need to be meaningfully calibrated with the corporate brand promise. This thesis has mainly focused on two of the above mentioned identities - communicated and conceived. Throughout the analysis, it has been found that the communicated identity (what the firm states its corporate brand to be) and the conceived identity (how other external stakeholders perceived the corporate brand) are partially misaligned. Currently Thule wants to communicate to its consumers that they are being an outdoor/active/urban lifestyle company that has quality, design, ease of use and safety as core values. Some of the core values, such as quality and ease of use, have been recalled by the consumers throughout the interviews, but the rest have not been mentioned, which creates a certain level of misalignment. Some sort of misalignment can be seen in the fact that Thule want to be also perceived as an urban lifestyle company but the consumers do not have relevant associations in their minds and thus neglect the urban brand message that the company is trying to send. Based on that, it can be concluded is that the consumer's perception of Thule brands does not align with the corporate brand identity.

5.3. What are the online brand elements influencing alignment between the manufacturer's corporate brand identity and the brand image, when selling through online retailers?

Even if multiple authors have discussed the different brand elements (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2004; Kavaratzis, Salonika & Rigopulou, 2015; Keller, 2012; De Chernatony, 2010; Gray & Balmer, 1998; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000) and how they can become the key of unlocking brand value and equity for the brand holder, none of them have actually evaluated their importance to the consumers. This is the first study, to the best of our knowledge, that identifies which brand elements are the most important for consumers.

Furthermore, the results from this thesis are all based on the brand elements being communicated to consumers in an online environment - something that has also not been done, to the best of our knowledge.

To find out which brand elements influence the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment most, the results of the research had to show which of the brand elements were considered as most important by consumers, thus influencing their perception of the brand the most. The study has shown that images, both product and lifestyle images, are the first thing that is seen by consumers when looking for a specific brand on a website. What this means is that, if this brand element is not correctly communicated to the consumers, the chance of creating wrong brand image increases significantly as this is the element that consumers will look at the most. Sending the wrong message to the consumers through the images, created by the manufacturer himself, can then lead to a misalignment between corporate brand identity and brand image. Another strong influencer of the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment is the additional brand element, that was discovered following the data collection - the product description. This is the first study, to the best of our knowledge, to discover the influence of such content in an online environment. For the interviewed consumers, product description was the element that is most often consulted after seeing the images at first. Therefore, this is also a brand element, that can potentially have a major influence, in aligning the corporate brand identity with brand image, if not communicated correctly. Another important brand element, that consumers would have liked to see more often on the websites is the Thule tagline “Bring your life” as it communicates what the brand stands for only in a few words. On the contrary, the least important brand elements for consumers, hence the elements influencing the alignment the least, are the videos and the company description. Where the company description is an additional brand element found throughout the data collection process. Even the lifestyle videos have been regarded by consumers as something that can show Thule’s brand identity easily, but it is not something that they search for intentionally when looking at a website. As for the company description, the consumers did not show enough trust in the content it provides as every company is trying to present itself in the best possible way creating this description. Furthermore, for consumers who already knew Thule, reading the company description was not something that they considered of doing as they believed in knowing what the company does already.

To conclude, two additional elements, website design and layout, were observed to have a major influence on consumers’ perceptions of a brand. It has been stated by the interviewees that these two elements can have a serious influence on how they see a brand, thus creating a different brand image than the desired one by the manufacturer. Unfortunately, these two elements are considered external to the manufacturers as online retailers are the ones being responsible for the execution of a website.

5.4. What are the websites related causes influencing the alignment between the manufacturer’s corporate brand

identity and brand image, when selling through online retailers

Once the most important brand elements for consumers have been identified, the initial website analysis helped the researchers understand how these elements were presented and whether or not the reasons behind them being perceived wrongly by consumers are related to the way the online retailers communicates these brand elements. Few important findings have emerged from the analysis. First of all, there is a severe lack of lifestyle images in all of the 24 websites that were used for the analysis. Even if some of them have higher amount of these images, the overall perception is that online retailers do not use the full capacity of the media content provided by Thule. As it has been confirmed by both Manager 1 and Manager 2 of Thule, lifestyle images serve as important influencers of consumers' perception and have key role in transforming the brand from being a functional to being a symbolic one. Therefore, one of the main findings of the thesis is that this is one of the big causes influencing the lack of alignment of Thule's corporate brand identity and consumers' brand perception, when using online retailers. Second important finding was related to the product description and its position on the product page, which is far from being user-friendly. The fact that the product-description is mostly positioned at the very bottom of the web page does not allow consumers to be exposed to it enough, hence limiting the visibility of the second most important brand element for consumers. As the product description also brings the spirit and the identity of the brand with it, it not being seen by consumers is another potential cause for the lack of alignment. The most likely explanation of this negative finding is that online retailers do not consider product description important for them as they focus a lot more on showing the price tag and product promotions on the top of the page, hence taking most of the available space there. Finally, tagline was an element that was not intentionally searched by consumers, but when they were told what it was, they all agreed that it would have had essential impact on their perception of the brand. Unfortunately, almost none of the analyzed websites did not have the tagline of Thule present at all. Missing such a strong influence of people's perception is another important cause that is the reason for not having the desired alignment between the corporate brand identity of Thule and the brand image. A possible explanation of this finding might be the fact that the trademark and brand guidelines, provided to the online retailers by Thule management, did not oblige the latter of introducing the Thule tagline on their websites.

To conclude, answering the four sub-questions helped us to identify how does the consumer's perception of a brand align with the corporate brand identity of a manufacturer, communicated through the online retailers. It has been confirmed that currently, Thule's corporate brand identity is not completely aligned with the brand perception of the consumers. Even though the majority of them see Thule as an outdoor and active lifestyle brand, the consumers are yet to perceive Thule as being an urban brand that allows people to transport their most important belongings not only when going outside of the city, but also when they are in it. Furthermore, the brand is currently perceived mainly as a functional brand, that does not create the expected emotions in consumers' minds due to them still relating the brand with the automotive industry only. The main cause for not reaching the much needed corporate brand identity and brand image alignment included the inconsistent and incorrect communication of the different brand elements by the online retailers.

5.5 Introduction of the revised framework

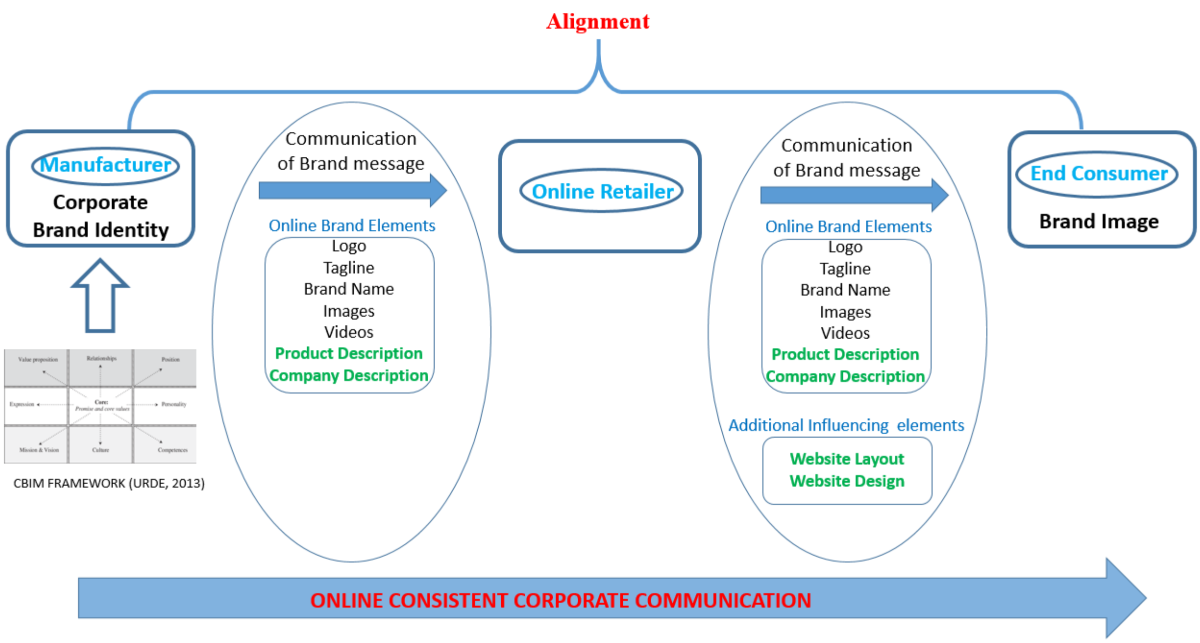


Figure 12. Revised corporate brand identity - brand image framework

After answering the main research question, this final subsection will introduce the revised new framework that was developed, based on the preliminary framework, introduced in section 2.5, and the data collected. Following the conducted analysis of all the data collected throughout the research paper, new additional elements, serving for communicating the brand message, were introduced. First of all, throughout the interview with Manager 1 of Thule, two additional brand elements were added to the framework - product and company description - as they were considered important factors for the manufacturer in communicating the correct brand message. The creation of content for these two brand elements is the job of Thule and it is made available to the online retailers for them to communicate them exactly as the manufacturer expects. Therefore, these two brand elements have been added in both relationships, described in the framework - from manufacturer towards the online retailer and from online retailer towards the consumer. Secondly, throughout the interviews with consumers, two new elements, influencing their brand perception, emerged - website layout and design. According to the interviewee's answers, the overall impression of the websites, such as their colours and thematics, might have an influence on how they perceive a specific brand (e.g. cheap looking website would lower down the look and reputation of a high premium brand). On the other hand, a website that does not have a user-friendly way of structuring its content might prevent the consumer from continuing his research any further, hence limiting his exposure to the brand content, that communicates the manufacturer's identity. As it was mentioned above, the design and layout of the online retailers' websites can hardly be influenced by the manufacturer, Thule in this case, and therefore these two elements have only been added to the online retailer-consumer relationship.

To conclude, what the newly developed corporate brand alignment - brand image framework aims at showing is all the elements needed, both brand elements and other influencing elements, in order to achieve the much needed corporate brand identity - brand image alignment, when the brand is being sold through online retailers. Also, the framework shows that the alignment would be possible when all different elements have been communicated from the manufacturer to online retailer and from online retailer to consumer in a consistent way.

6. Conclusion

The final chapter of this thesis will present a summary of the purpose, aim and research question in order to confirm that all different aspects of the paper were answered successfully. Moreover, the theoretical contributions and managerial implications will once again be briefly discussed. Finally, the paper will end with the recommendations for future research.

As presented at the beginning of the paper, the purpose of this paper was to explore, define and characterise the phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment, when using online retailers. The whole paper was done from a consumer perspective as this was considered to be an initial step within this research topic of corporate brand alignment within an organisation. Hence, four sub-questions were identified in order to answer the main research question of this paper:

RQ_{main}: How does the consumer's perception of a brand align with the corporate brand identity of a manufacturer, communicated through the online retailers?

RQ1a: How does the consumer perceive the manufacturer's corporate brand identity, communicated by the online retailers?

RQ1b: To what extent does the consumer's perception of a brand align with manufacturer's corporate brand identity, communicated through online retailers?

RQ1c: What are the online brand elements influencing the alignment between manufacturer's corporate brand identity and brand image, when selling through online retailers?

RQ1d: What are the websites related causes influencing the alignment between manufacturer's corporate brand identity and brand image, when selling through online retailers?

Moreover, through the use of an abductive approach, a newly developed corporate brand identity - brand image alignment framework was presented. The framework was specifically focused on examining the above mentioned alignment in an online environment, when sales of manufacturer's goods to consumers are being sold through the use of online retailers. The use of this framework helped identifying whether or not the corporate brand identity of Thule aligns with the consumers' perception of the brand. Next, the theoretical contributions and managerial implications, resulting from the thesis as a whole, will be presented.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The newly developed framework will contribute to the broadening of the existing literature on corporate brand alignment and add up to the some of the most acknowledged corporate brand alignment models such as the VCI model (Hatch & Schultz, 2001), "Core Value Grid" model (Urde, 2009) and AC4ID Test model (Balmer, 2012). Furthermore, the framework is adapted to the online selling environment which makes it the first model, to the best of our knowledge, discussing the alignment between corporate brand identity and brand image, when using online retailers as intermediaries. Moreover, by incorporating the Sender-Receiver model of Kapferer (2004) in it, the framework underlines the importance of communication between the brand identity and brand image. The framework also takes the external noise, that may occur (e.g. online retailers' websites) throughout the communication of the brand message, in consideration. By combining all these different models and factors, the newly developed framework is considered to be revolutionary to the corporate brand alignment literature, as it considers the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment, the importance of consistent brand communication, and the external noises that might occur at the same time.

6.2 Practical Implications

The findings of the thesis and the newly developed corporate brand identity - brand image alignment framework can be helpful for managers who are at a stage of identifying consumers' perception of the brand and whether it fits with what the company is trying to communicate. First of all, the framework allows managers to reevaluate their own corporate brand identity, through the use of CBIM, and make sure that they communicate the right message to the online retailers. Then, through evaluating the perception of their consumers, managers will be able to identify if the brand image aligns with the communicated corporate brand identity. In case a certain level of misalignment is found, the framework would help the company identify which of the brand elements have the most influence over the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment. The presented brand elements and additional influencing elements (website design and layout) will assist managers in conducting the interviews with their consumers in a way that will allow them to find out the most important elements for the end users, hence prioritizing their correct communication.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This paper has introduced a revolutionary framework that looks at the corporate brand identity - brand image alignment in an online environment and the importance of having a consistent communication in order to achieve such alignment. Since this exact research scope is first of its kind, to the best of our knowledge, it also comes with a set of intrinsic limitations that will be presented briefly. At the end of this subsection, a number of suggestions for future research will be presented.

One of the major limitations of this paper is the fact that a single case-study was used in order to develop the new framework. What this means is a limited generalizability of the paper, possible different results and perhaps another variation of a framework which would derive from introducing more companies from different industries. Another limitation that might hinder the generalizability of the thesis is the relatively low amount of interviewed consumers and the fact that they were all Swedish natives, even though we were well aware of this selection since it was decided during the theoretical sampling process. All these limitations make it unclear whether or not the findings of the paper are transferable to other business contexts, such as companies operating in different sectors.

The fact that the presented revolutionary framework is one of a kind, to the best of our knowledge, creates even stronger need for future research that would help validate the findings, derived from this paper. First of all, since the qualitative research brought a significant depth of this paper, researching the phenomenon of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment from a quantitative perspective would bring more objectivity on how the different brand elements are perceived by consumers. Furthermore, it would be extremely valuable to expand the scope of the research outside of Sweden, in order to identify the similarities and differences in consumers' perceptions of a brand, hence increasing the generalizability of the paper. Next, a necessary step forward in investigating the above-mentioned phenomenon would be to focus on multiple case studies consisting of companies from different industries as this would allow the researchers to see whether or not similar findings emerge, hence making the framework applicable in multiple contexts. Finally, as this study was conducted solely from consumers' perspective, it is highly recommended to base any future research on online retailers' and manufacturers' perspective. This would include interviewing retail managers as well as managers and employees of the manufacturer in order to further investigates the causes of possible lack of corporate brand identity - brand image alignment.

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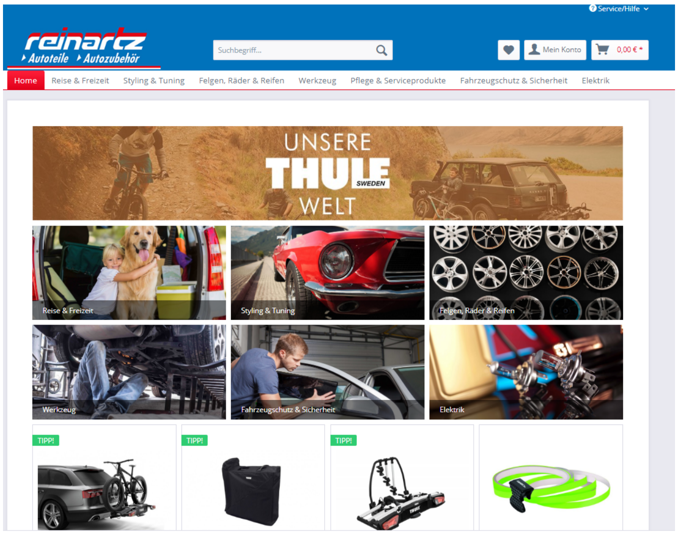
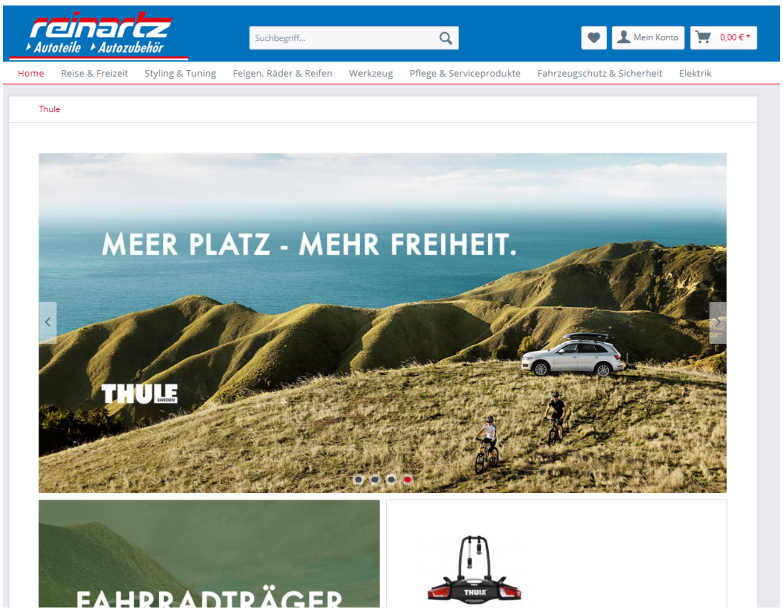
Appendices

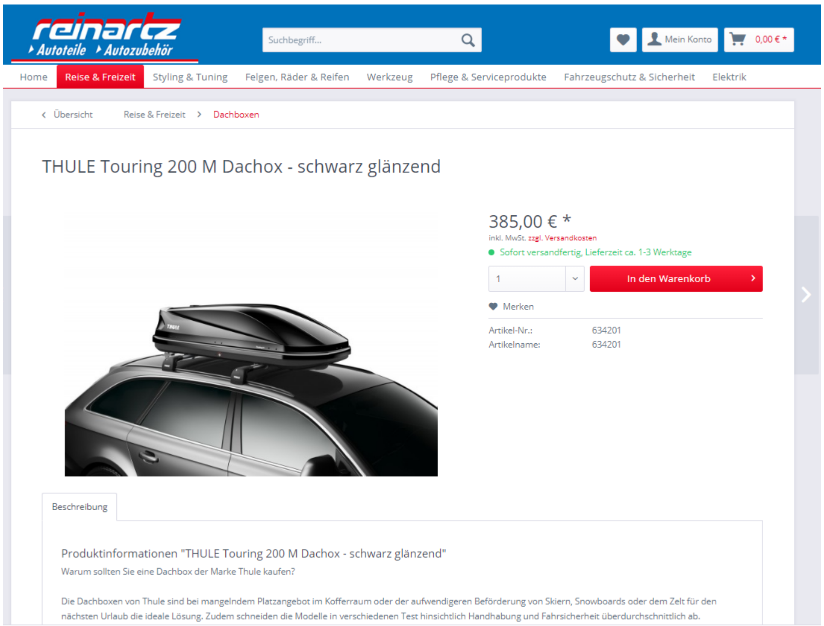
Appendix A - Homepage, Thule Page, Thule Product page within the analyzed websites



Screenshot 1. Example of a homepage used for the initial website analysis and consumers' interviews(adapted Reinartz 2018 a)



Screenshot 2. Example of a dedicated Thule page (within the website) used for the initial website analysis and consumers' interviews (adapted Reinartz 2018 b)



Screenshot 3. Example of a dedicated Thule product page (within the website) used for the initial website analysis and consumers' interviews (adapted Reinartz 2018 c)

Appendix B- Topic guide interview with Manager 1

Introducing questions:

1. Can you tell us a little bit more about the company Thule? (in relation to history, product categories, position of the market and current structure of the company?
2. What is the current business model of Thule?
3. When and how a decision to reposition the brand of Thule was made?
4. What are the core values of Thule?
5. What is the internal culture of Thule?

Questions related with the challenge investigated:

6. Who are your customers ?
7. What kind of retailer do you have?
8. Do you experience any difficulties when selling your product only through retailers?
9. How do you communicate your brand to your retailers?
10. Is there any difference when selling your brand through offline and online retailers?

Appendix C- Topic guide interview with Manager 2

Introducing questions :

1. How did Thule decide to reposition its brand identity few years ago? What were the reasons behind that?

2. How do you communicate your brand identity to your retailers (using online sales channels)?

3. What are the key brand elements that you communicate to the consumers (e.g. logo, symbol, slogan, etc.). Which of these elements are the most important for you?

CBIM Questions:

1. What engages you, beyond the simple aim of making money (mission)? What is your direction and inspiration (vision)?

2. What are your attitudes and how do you work and behave?(Internally and Externally)?

3. What are you particularly good at, and what makes us better than the competition?

4. What do we promise, and what are the core values that sum up what our brand stands for?

5. What combination of human characteristics or qualities form your corporate character?

6. What are your key offerings and how do you want them to appeal to your customers?

7. What type of relationship do you want to have with your online retailers ? What type of relationship do you want to have with your consumers? In what manner do you work with your customers?

8. What is your intended position in the market, and in the hearts and minds of key your customers?

Concluding questions:

10. Do you think that your online retailers manage to consistently communicate your brand identity to your consumers?

11. How do you think your consumers perceive you now and before the repositioning

Appendix D- Topic guide interview with consumers

Pre- website exposure questions:

1.Would you please tell us your name and current occupation?

By showing them the logo of the company the consumers were asked the following questions:

2. Do you know what does the brand do?

3. Do you know what does the brand stands for?

4. What are the core values/key brand messages that the company is communicating?

5. What do you associate the brand with?

VISUAL PRESENTATION:

- Showing them six websites within the specific category and three sub pages from each website: Home page, Company page, Specific product page.
- Interviewee needs to review the The homepage of the retailer and the Thule page within the retailer's website and have general impression only.
- Interviewee needs to review the product page and follow the guidelines provided (Check the different brand elements like logo, slogan, images available, videos available, product description, company description if available)
- Duration of visual test (max. 5 minutes for every website or less if the individual finishes with the observation)

Post-website exposure questions:

- To Consumers who knew the brand and had an opinion on what it stands for before the visual presentation:

1. Now when you saw these pages, did your perception for this brand changed?
2. Do you think that all of the shown websites have successfully communicated the brand identity that you mentioned before the visual presentations?

3. Do you think that there is any difference in the way the different websites communicated the brand based on what you have seen?
4. What is the first element that attracts your attention when you open a webpage?
5. If you don't know a brand, which elements will the the first one that will attract your attention?

- To consumers who did not know the brand before the visual presentation:

1. Now when you saw these pages, what do you think that the brand does?
2. What does the brand stands for? What are the core values/key messages of the brand?
3. What do you associate the brand with?
4. Do you think that all of the shown websites have successfully communicated the brand identity that you just mentioned?
5. What is the first element that attracts your attention when you open a webpage?
6. If you don't know a brand, which elements will the the first one that will attract your attention?

Closing Questions:

Do you have any questions?

Appending E – Example of Coding for logo

CODING CATEGORIES		Findings from interviews					
		Name	Full Answer	Codes	Website	Tab	General Patterns
Logo	Automotive	(Respondent 1)	For me it is not important to see the logo, as I see it on the product	Logo not important	Mekonomen	Product Page	- It has been seen that the majority of the websites do not even have the logo - Some of the respondent think that the logo is one the important brand elements (the third most important) becuase they believe that this is the first element that they see on the web page. It also helps them to differentiate them from the other companies. - It seems that for some consumers, the logo's size is too small to get their attention and thus need to be bigger. - The position of the logo sems to play an important for consumers when looking at a product page
			I see the logo of Thule	Logo present	Halfords	Thule Page	
			The logo on the product is small but you can see that it is a Thule product	Logo on the product	Halfords	Product Page	
		(Respondent 2)	There is no logo of Thule Here	No logo	Mekonomen	Thule Page	
			No Logo	No logo	Mekonomen	Product page	
			The Brand Logo is there	Logo present	Hammersleys	Thule Page	
			Dont see the logo	No logo	Hammersleys	Product Page	
			The Logo of Thule is shown	Logo present	GT Towing	Homepage	
			No Brand Logo	No logo	Halfords	Thule Page	
			Logo is not important	Logo not important	NA	General	
			Logo is not big enough and not visible	Logo is small and not visible	GT Towing	Product Page	
	Bike	(Respondent 3)	The logo , there is contrast between the white and the black and attracts my attention. Because I have used the brand and I have seen it before I can straight way see the brand.	Good contrast of logo attracting attention	Hollandbikeshop	Product Page	
			I think that it is important the logo to be displayed on the product page	Logo on the product page	Hollandbikeshop	Product Page	
			I prefer when the logo should be on the left side of the product page and not next to the name of the product	Logo positioned on the left	Stadler	Product Page	
			The first thing I seen on a webpage is the logo	Logo is first to see on a webpage	Rutland	Product Page	
			There is no logo here	No logo	Smitsport	Product Page	
		(Respondent 4)	Here is the logo. But that was not the first thing I have seen. It was the image, the product looks very stylish	Logo present but not the first thing to see	Hollandbikeshop	Product page	
			If I look at a product that looks very nice, then I look at the brand. So I expect the brand to be to the right	Logo positioned on the right	Hollandbikeshop	Prodduct page	
			That logo I have seen. That one is on a white background. The other one was in a black box	Different logos shown	Rutland	Product page	
			There is no logo	No logo	Smitsport	Product page	
			That I like, the logo and then the rating below	Logo with product rating bellow prefered	Fahhrad XXL	Product page	