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# Branding Strategies of Service Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Owners

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Walden University  
2018

Abstract

Branding Strategies of Service Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise Owners

by

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MBA, Osmania University, 1997

BSc, Osmania University, 1995

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2018

## Abstract

Most enterprises in the United Arab Emirates are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); some owners of these enterprises lack the knowledge of branding strategies to succeed financially. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore branding strategies used by owners of some successful service SMEs. Krake's funnel model for the role of brand management in SMEs was the conceptual framework used in the study. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with a purposeful sample of 6 owners of medium-sized service enterprises who used branding strategies to improve the financial performance of their companies, and a review of company documents and company websites. Data analysis was conducted using the principles of the content analysis method, which included identifying codes and themes. Findings indicated owners of SMEs should be the personification of their brand, must do internal branding, should use the Internet and social media for marketing and branding, and should use innovative marketing strategies to promote their brand. The implications of this study for positive social change include the potential for owners of SMEs, who successfully implement branding strategies, to participate in the social causes started by the local governments for the welfare of people and communities.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my wife, Najla, and my two daughters, Tanya and Ayesha, for supporting me to be a lifelong learner. Completing my DBA would not have been possible without your love and encouragement. I would also like to dedicate this study to all the SMEs in Dubai who continue to make this city such a great and vibrant place to live.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are a dominating form of business as they are majority wealth creators in most economies (Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010). SMEs catalyze global growth though some SME businesses have low levels of survival, especially in the early phases. In a global context, branding can be an advantage to SME owners (Agostini, Filippini, & Nosella, 2015). An understanding of branding among SMEs is therefore necessary to improve early stage SME outcomes through brand orientation and brand management (Renton, Daellenbach, Davenport, & James, 2016). The role of the entrepreneur is crucial for brand orientation in SMEs to be able to introduce differentiated products in domestic and international markets. High brand orientation in SMEs ultimately leads to better financial outcomes via improved branding practices and performance (Renton et al., 2016).

### **Background of the Problem**

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), SMEs are essential for job creation, export performance, and as a contributor to GDP (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). Thus, SMEs are necessary for the UAE economy. In the Emirate of Dubai, 72,000 SMEs account for 95% of enterprises and 40% of the workforce (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). Dubai SMEs contribute 42% of the annual value-added output (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). Most SMEs in the UAE are family owned. Only a small percentage of SMEs survive in the long term because the failure rate is very high (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014).

Branding in SMEs follows a different pattern compared to large organizations. Most research in branding is related to large organizations and there is little research

about branding in SMEs (Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010). In Dubai, there is only one research study published by Gundala and Khawaja in 2014. Owners of SMEs in Dubai may be able to use my research findings to understand how effectively managing their brands, will help them succeed in business.

### **Problem Statement**

Some owners of SMEs struggle financially because of their weak brand recognition (Hong & Diep, 2016; Renton et al., 2016). Fifty-three percent of service SME owners are unaware of branding strategies, and 23% of service SME owners have insufficient knowledge of branding strategies (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). The general business problem is that some SME owners do not use branding, and this negatively impacts the profitability of their firms. The specific business problem is that some service SME owners in Dubai lack branding strategies to improve the financial performance of their companies.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the branding strategies some successful service SME owners in Dubai use to improve the financial performance of their companies. The targeted population consisted of owners of six medium-sized service enterprises located in Dubai, UAE who used branding strategies to improve the financial performance of their company. The implications for positive social change were that the findings from my research could lead to increased profitability of Dubai SME owners. Dubai SME owners will then have the resources to fulfill social initiatives advocated by the authorities of Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry

(DCCI) leading to a better quality of life for the people of Dubai and other developing countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (Dubai Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 2014).

### **Nature of the Study**

Investigators use a qualitative research method so they can understand the specific perceptions and experiences of respondents about the *what*, *how*, and *why* of phenomena and they use the quantitative method to answer questions like *how many* or *how much* (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Investigators may select a mixed-method approach when they need to use both qualitative and quantitative methods for first collecting qualitative data to understand what variables to study and then test hypotheses in a large sample (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). I decided not to use the mixed-method approach as the purpose of my doctoral study is to explore and understand branding strategies, not measure possible correlations among branding-related variables. A quantitative method is not suitable when there is little or no knowledge of the phenomenon of interest (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014b). When there is little or no knowledge of a phenomenon the qualitative method is helpful to explore and understand the phenomenon (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014b). Thus, I chose a qualitative method for addressing the purpose of my doctoral study.

Researchers use phenomenological designs to describe a phenomenon and its interpretation regarding the meanings of participants' lived experiences (Grossoehme, 2014). Phenomenology was not suitable for my study as I was not trying to find what an experience means to a group of people. In ethnography studies, researchers try to

understand the culture of a group and present it to people who are not part of the group's culture (Grossoehme, 2014). Ethnography research design was not suitable for my study as I was not attempting to understand the culture of a group. A case study design is a specific strategy for qualitative empirical research particularly in the exploratory stage (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Researchers can use a case study design to fill knowledge gaps and highlight unique performances, behaviors, and resource barriers (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Thus, I chose a multiple case study design for my doctoral study.

### **Research Question**

What branding strategies do some successful service SME owners in Dubai use to improve the financial performance of their companies?

### **Interview Questions**

The interview questions I asked the owners of service SMEs were the following:

- 1) What branding strategies do you use?
- 2) How have you assessed the success of your branding strategies?
- 3) Please explain the role your staff members play to create a positive perception of your brand in the minds of your customers.
- 4) What marketing activities do you undertake to achieve brand recognition?
- 5) What methods of communication do you use for branding?
- 6) What strategies do you use to cultivate a passion for the brand within your company (internal branding)?
- 7) How did you address the key barriers to managing and developing your brand?
- 8) How do you create brand identity among your target customers?

9) What else do you wish to add about your company's branding strategy?

### **Conceptual Framework**

For my doctoral study, I chose a conceptual framework based on the theory developed by Krake (2005) for SME branding. As per Krake, the *funnel model* for the role of brand management in SMEs is applicable for both product-based SMEs and service SMEs. Krake first devised the funnel model in 2005 as there was a lack of an appropriate conceptual model for SME branding.

As per the funnel model, the owner defines clear objectives for brand management (Krake, 2005). The owner plays a dual role. First, the owner determines the structure of his or her organization and how the owner and employees will implement brand management (Krake, 2005). Second, the owner is the personification of the brand and thus plays a direct role in communicating the brand to the outside world (Krake, 2005).

As per Krake (2005), the type of market, number of competitors, and the type of service influence SME brand management. Marketing creativity and budget availability affect marketing activities and promotional messages. As per the model, the goal of marketing activities and communication is twofold. First, the owner wants to create brand recognition, and second, the owner wants to generate sales turnover (Krake, 2005). I used the conceptual framework to interpret and understand the results of my study.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Brand architecture:* Roles and relationships between brands are organized through a structured brand portfolio known as brand architecture (Kapferer, 2016).



*Brand citizenship behavior:* Employees' behaviors reinforcing brand identity on a voluntary basis beyond their official duties is brand citizenship behavior (Nouri, Mousavi, & Soltani, 2016).

*Brand commitment:* Employees' emotional attachment to a brand, tending to the brand, and working towards achieving the goals and strategies of the brand is brand commitment (Nouri et al., 2016).

*Brand equity:* Strong brand association, brand awareness, and loyalty along with assets in the form of trademarks, patents, and distribution channels project brand value which is brand equity (Davicik, Vinhas da Silva, & Hair, 2015).

*Brand experience:* Brand experience is a subjective consumer response stimulated by factors such as design, identity, packaging, communication, and environment (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015).

*Brand identity:* Brand identity is the appeal to customers through brand components such as name, logo, or tagline, projecting the value of the company and perception of the firm (Schmitt & Zhang, 2016).

*Brand image:* The total personality of the brand (real and imaginary qualities and shortcomings) as perceived by the consumer through advertisement effects is a brand image (Sasmita & Mohd Suki, 2015).

*Brand management:* The creation, maintenance, and implementation of a favorable reputation of a brand in a systematic manner along with the tangible and intangible characteristics of the brand (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, & Pervan, 2015).

*Brand trust:* The reliability of the brand as perceived by the consumer which evokes a feeling of security and ensures the interest and welfare of the consumer (Bennur & Jin, 2017).

*Internal branding:* Ozcelik (2015) defined internal branding as the employee buy-in both at the intellectual and emotional levels because of the strategic activities of a company.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions in a research study are elements that are somewhat out of the researchers' control, but if researchers do not make these assumptions, then the research study would become irrelevant (Simon & Goes, 2013). I assumed the participants answered the interview questions honestly as I assured them of confidentiality. Another assumption was the owners who participated in my study understood the study relevance and shared with me all their branding strategies. The last assumption was that the SME owners from whom I collected data were most successful in terms of implementation of branding strategies compared to other SME owners in Dubai.

#### **Limitations**

Simon and Goes (2013) defined limitations as potential weaknesses which are out of the researcher's control. One of the limitations of my study was time. I collected data over a certain period, and thus my findings may be a snapshot dependent on the conditions prevailing at that time. The second limitation of my study was that the sample size was small and was from only the emirate of Dubai, and thus, the study findings may

not be generalizable to other cities or countries. The third limitation of my study was that I collected data only from medium-sized service SMEs and the study findings may not be generalizable to manufacturing SMEs, small-sized service SMEs, and trading SMEs.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are characteristics indicating the boundaries of research and limit the scope of research (Simon & Goes, 2013). The first delimitation was the study participants were owners from medium-sized service SMEs only in Dubai. The second delimitation was that I collected data only through face-to-face interviews, archival documents, and websites.

### **Significance of the Study**

Over 90% of enterprises in Dubai are SMEs thus highlighting the need for branding as a strategy to facilitate profitability and sustainability (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). Image, reputation, and profitability go together as can be seen in large enterprises (Chon, 2016). Creating a unique name and image for a product or service in the consumer's mind by SME owners can augment competitive advantage and customer recognition. The value of a good branding strategy can improve staff motivation and referrals generation (Ahmad, Quoquab, Bahrin, & Mansor, 2014). Thus, branding strategies can benefit SME owners and their employees.

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

Lack of branding knowledge is one of the reasons why SME owners do not implement a branding strategy (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). Lack of branding can restrict the geographic reach of SME owners (Ahmad et al., 2014). Thus, the findings of my

study could be of value to SME owners to improve their geographic reach and profitability. A good branding strategy may also lead to loyal customers and improved relationships with business partners.

### **Implications for Social Change**

People expect corporations to give back to society in addition to creating wealth for the internal stakeholders. SME owners play a crucial role in employment generation and economic growth but hesitate to take up socially responsible activities because of the cost (Chon, 2016; Goby & Nickerson, 2016). In 2014, authorities of DCCI, in partnership with authorities of Dubai SME (DSME), an agency of the Dubai Department of Economic Development, launched the *How to Guidebook on CSR for SME's* (Dubai Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 2014). DCCI encourages SME owners in Dubai to take up strategic, socially responsible activities, for example, volunteering with a philanthropic organization like *Dubai Cares* (Dubai Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 2014). Dubai Cares is an organization based in Dubai that makes basic education accessible to underprivileged children in Dubai and other developing countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (Goby & Nickerson, 2016). Supporting these children can enrich lives once the children finish their education. One of the barriers which prevent SME owners from becoming more environmentally responsible is the high cost of investment (Musa & Chinniah, 2016). Thus, successful branding could lead to improved profitability and enable Dubai SME owners to implement green initiatives benefiting the environment and the people of Dubai.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

I conducted an extensive literature review to gain a better understanding of branding in the services sector of SMEs and to identify a conceptual framework for my study. I examined and evaluated various journal articles written by experts in the field of SME branding. I assessed a range of perspectives on the central research question of my doctoral study. In the literature review, one of the reasons to synthesize the results of different studies on a topic is to learn whether findings are consistent across multiple studies (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). My literature review consists of synthesis and analysis of peer-reviewed articles regarding branding, SME branding, SME marketing, SME brand communication, and service sector branding.

After a detailed review of the literature, I understood how researchers and practitioners interpret the branding process in SMEs. My search of Walden University library databases about branding and service sector SMEs showed peer-reviewed articles. A primary search from Emerald Management Journals, Mendeley Database, Google Scholar, Sage Premier, Business Source Complete, and ABI/INFORM indicated a variety of articles related to my doctoral study.

I discovered a variety of sources for this exploratory multiple case study through intense search into research databases. I reviewed journal articles on branding strategies for service firms in various countries, SME approaches to brand management, management perspectives of corporate branding, brand building efforts of SMEs, gaps between brand promise and brand experiences, and effect of branding on customer loyalty. I also reviewed journal articles on innovative SME culture, the influence of brand

management on business performance, entrepreneurial SME, corporate brand, personal brand in SMEs, leveraging brand loyalty in service branding, and leader influence on brand creation process in an SME. I crystallized these articles into themes such as SME branding, SME marketing, and SME brand communication.

For my preliminary search, I used the following terms and keywords: *service branding, service marketing, SME branding, SME marketing, social media branding, brand culture, SME budget, brand identity, branding challenges, communication, and employee role*. I obtained further depth in the literature review by reading articles on *integrated communication, branding in the digital age, corporate branding and innovation, and corporate visual identity*. I used keywords to locate articles on brand differentiation, branding challenges, and branding theory.

I organized the literature review into sections featuring essential themes relating to the research question and the conceptual framework. Specific focus areas included the crucial role of branding in SMEs especially in the service sector, the conceptual framework delineating the funnel model of SME brand management, the status of SMEs in Dubai, branding strategies for SMEs, and SME marketing. Internal branding and brand communication are significant especially for service SMEs as the entrepreneurial nature of SMEs, and the leaders thereof play an important role in shaping the branding process. SME brand communication in the context of social networks and psychological aspects, such as trust and loyalty, indicates a range of opportunities in the context of dynamic technological change.

All articles included in the literature review are from peer-reviewed journals. I used 97 peer-reviewed articles for my literature review. The total number of references used in my study are 176. Out of these 176 articles, 154 articles (i.e., 87.5%) have a publication date in the range of 2014 to 2018. Out of the 176 articles, 156 articles (i.e., 88.64%) are peer-reviewed.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Krake (2005) developed a funnel model theory for the role of brand management in SMEs. The starting point is the owner who determines the structure of the organization and also decides how to focus on brand management as the owner is the personification of the brand, directly communicates about the brand, and lays clear objectives while making the internal employees aware of the brand (Krake, 2005). The organizational structure influences the role of brand management in SMEs (Krake, 2005). The market in which SME operates also exerts an influence on the role of brand management (Krake, 2005). The type of products, the type of markets, the number of competitors, and their sizes also affect the market orientation of the company. SME owners have limited budgets, which restrict their leaders' marketing creativity, market messaging, and resultant sales revenue goal achievement. SME owners have a two-fold objective in their marketing activities which is to create brand recognition and achieve high sales turnover (Krake, 2005).

In the Australian context of SME wineries, Mowle and Merrilees (2005) adopted an empirical approach to providing a conceptual framework highlighting the functional and symbolic perspectives to branding. A conceptual framework underlies the research

by explaining, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things that researchers have to study and think carefully about the constructs and variables to be included in the study (Mowle & Merrilees, 2005). Mowle and Merrilees used a two-type separation of winery operations in their conceptual framework. They divided the level of branding sophistication into two categories as low and high. The first approach (i.e., low-level branding sophistication) is termed as product-driven branding where the high quality and functional value is highlighted bringing about an image of prestige and exclusivity in the wine and therefore in its symbolic value. The second is the marketing-driven branding which has functional values, but SME owners develop the symbolic value through the experiential component of the branding. From a conceptual theory viewpoint, the SME winery-branding framework reinforces the brand regarding the functional and symbolic value and highlights the importance of developing symbolic values associated with the brand (Mowle & Merrilees, 2005).

Horan, O'Dwyer, and Tiernan (2011) explored service SME branding using a qualitative research method and proposed a conceptual framework. Owners of five service SMEs from Ireland participated in their study. As per the conceptual framework proposed by Horan et al. (2011) the four primary branding variables among service SMEs are (a) characteristics of the SME, (b) the role of customer importance, (c) the role of management and staff, and (d) brand equity. Budgetary constraints, procrastination, desire for success, and the influence of owners on change can affect branding (Horan et al., 2011). Both service characteristics and SME characteristics influence the unique situation and specific style of branding in SMEs.



Centeno, Hart, and Dinnie (2013) proposed a conceptual framework for SME branding in which they identified the five phases of SME brand building. Brand as a person, brand as a product and brand differentiation, brand as a symbol, brand as an organization, and brand identity development and brand growth are the five phases which exist in a nontraditional manner in SMEs (Centeno et al., 2013). In the starting stage, SME owners use the first four phases with each of the four dimensions of brand identity (Centeno et al., 2013). In the development stage brand identity is developed. Owners play an essential role and take a lifelong responsibility to project the brand. Owners should develop an inventory of their skills and competencies which affect their brand building activities (Centeno et al., 2013). SME brand managers must learn how to work under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. Owners can develop appropriate brand strategies with emotional benefits and brand value if they are aware of the closeness of their personalities with the brand building process (Centeno et al., 2013). An owner needs to have values such as team play, commitment, open communication, creativity, honesty, flexibility, motivation, innovative thinking, and action (Centeno et al., 2013). Owners must also be in daily communication with their staff and develop a close relationship. The challenges due to lack of finance can be turned into an opportunity through creativity enabling SME owners to stimulate financial and human resources into creative brand activities by becoming proactive.

The fifth SME branding model is the one by Mi and Baharun (2015). Mi and Baharun examined the relationship between branding dimensions such as brand trust, brand orientation, and brand equity. Brand trust is a crucial dimension and can be lost

even through minor trust violations (Mi & Baharun, 2015). SME owners must first build brand trust to gain advantages of brand equity. Brand orientation refers to the degree of understanding that the firm has about the brand as a valuable asset and must develop its marketing strategy to build a strong brand (Mi & Baharun, 2015). Brand equity is the incremental utility and value endowed to a product or service by its brand name (Mi & Baharun, 2015). Brand equity is significant for brand management and influences long-term profitability as it is one of the most valuable intangible assets. All of these factors along with innovation affect SME performance, which can be measured by the return on investment or return on assets. Dimensions of brand equity are closely associated with brand trust, and brand orientation is a critical strategic resource to achieve competitive advantage. Thus, in their study Mi and Baharun (2015) identified the brand dimensions that contribute to marketing and financial performance of SMEs.

Many researchers have used the Krake (2005) funnel model to understand SME branding. The funnel model is a very comprehensive model that considers most factors critical for SME brand management. Thus, I used the funnel model developed by Krake as the conceptual framework for my research. Following is a synthesis of articles where researchers have used the Krake model as a reference for studying SME branding.

**References to funnel model.** Ojasalo, Nätti, and Olkkonen (2008) studied the literature dealing with brand management in SMEs and compared their empirical study on brand building in software SMEs with that in the literature mainly the Krake (2005) funnel model. They found SME owners do not fully understand brand management as noted by Krake (Ojasalo et al., 2008). Software SMEs' brand building resources are

scarce, and they tend to invest in technology rather than brand building, consistent with Krake's findings (Ojasalo et al., 2008). Contrary to Krake's findings, Ojasalo et al. found that cobranding plays an important role in the case of software SMEs. The most important difference in the two studies is that in software SMEs, owners name individual products by combining the product name with a product-specific extension and they also add the company name which is different from Krake's finding among SMEs where the company name is often not the brand name.

Similar to Krake (2005), Bresciani and Eppler (2010) adopted a case study methodology and conducted in-depth interviews with 15 CEOs and communication managers of SMEs to study SME branding. In their literature survey, they studied the funnel model developed by Krake for the role of brand management in SMEs (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). Like Krake, Bresciani and Eppler found that the founder manages the decisions regarding the SME brand. As per their findings, six of the SME owners developed more than one brand like what Krake had found, and all of the SME owners had legally protected their names and logos (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). Their observations regarding the absence of cobranding and partnerships were similar and consistent with Krake. However, in the matter of employing public relations, Bresciani and Eppler found that the result was in stark contrast to guidelines and previous findings by Krake who considered public relations as one of the most suitable activities for SME owners.

Du Plessis, Indavong, and Marriott (2015) concurred with the various difficulties faced by SME owners in brand management as outlined by Krake (2005) and highlighted

the importance of SME owners in influencing the internal structure of the organization. Brand management in SMEs depends mostly on the personification and identity of the entrepreneur who represents the brand and communicates it, both internally and externally, as depicted by Krake in his funnel model (Du Plessis et al., 2015). Du Plessis et al. (2015) concluded that the owners are the critical human resource for building and managing the brand, which is consistent with Krake's findings. Du Plessis et al. agreed with Krake that the brand management process requires an effective managerial team and a strategic marketing action plan. Brand management should be inclusive and involve every employee who works for the company.

Word of mouth is crucial for SME branding. Mitchell, Hutchinson, Quinn, and Gilmore (2015), while discussing SME retail branding agreed with Krake (2005) that customer-brand relationship and word-of-mouth marketing are important characteristics of SME branding. Following Krake, they identified that the owner plays a vital role in the formation of the brand identity and brand associations and must focus on primary brands because of limited resources (Mitchell et al., 2015). Like Krake, Mitchell et al. (2015) found that word of mouth and customer interaction generate brand awareness.

The enhanced role of the owner is another common finding where the owner aligns decisions to the brand identity and thus provides meaning to the firm's identity. Mitchell et al. (2015) found brand management by the owner is a natural outcome of SME structure leading to the funneling of decisions. Krake too had identified this aspect of decision making in SMEs. The research studies on SME branding by Ojasalo et al. (2008), Bresciani and Eppler (2010), Du Plessis et al. (2015), and Mitchell et al. indicate

that SME branding researchers can use the funnel model as a conceptual framework for research on SME branding. Based on these studies I, too, used the funnel model as a conceptual framework for my research on SME branding.

### **Branding**

A brand is a combination of identity and image (Mokina, 2014). Managers of a firm can use branding to create positive competition, identify and differentiate between products and service. Historically the name, emblem, and stamp were used for branding (Ishtiaq & Siddiqui, 2016). Brand name or a symbol serves as the most influential element with which consumers associate a brand (Le Roux & Du Plessis, 2014).

Elements of brand image are trustworthiness of the brand, creative marketing, effective management and administration, customer satisfaction, effective communication, and strategic positioning of the brand (Le Roux & Du Plessis, 2014).

The corporate brand image refers to the entire set of perceptions that stakeholders, both internal and external, have for a corporate brand depending on the functional and emotional attributes of the products (Le Roux & Du Plessis, 2014). Thus, stakeholders play an important role in developing a corporate brand and enhancing the credibility of the brand's products and services. The management process of creating and maintaining a coherent corporate brand image in the minds of the stakeholders is vital to achieving an overall favorable corporate reputation (Einwiller & Will, 2002). Corporate brand identity includes tangible and intangible features that differentiate the business, its products, and services from its competitors based on the functional and symbolic value (Le Roux & Du Plessis, 2014).

The first stage of corporate brand building is the brand formulation or development of the brand vision (Miller, 2014). The second stage is brand orientation and gaining brand buy-in (Miller, 2014). Stage three is brand strategy implementation (Miller, 2014). Managers develop the corporate brand identity as a continual and ongoing interaction between the identities of the business and the consumers. It requires a cohesive strategy to convey brand values and identity through advertising, promotion, packaging, and design (Le Roux & Du Plessis, 2014).

A corporate brand is the direct responsibility of both, the entrepreneur and top management (Biraghi & Gambetti, 2015). The organization should have a central corporate communication team to guide the corporate branding activities (Einwiller & Will, 2002). A corporate brand emphasizes the need to focus on organizational values, culture, communication, and workers leading to positive associations (Mokina, 2014). A corporate brand helps to not only maintain corporate identity but also communicates positioning and marketing (Mokina, 2014). Corporate branding is a marketing tool and provides critical stakeholders with the necessary information. The marketing personnel of business-to-business (B2B) companies prefer corporate branding over product branding (Sheth & Sinha, 2015). Branding is more complicated in B2B than business-to-customer companies because of multiple stakeholders such as end users, regulators, employees, suppliers, investors, and society leading to the preference for corporate branding over product branding (Sheth & Sinha, 2015).

The relationship between the corporate brand, the product brand, and the employer brand is that corporate brand carries the values, vision, and mission of the

company (Mokina, 2014). The main components of a corporate brand interpret corporate values for the target groups of stakeholders. An employer brand translates corporate values to the labor market. Employer brand creates a favorable impression of the company owner as an employer, creates an image of the company, and provides attraction, retention, loyalty, and engagement of staff. The product brand influences the employer brand. The stronger the product brand, the more attractive the company as an employer (Mokina, 2014).

Conceptualization of branding strategies across the brand relationship spectrum ranges from a branded house strategy with all products sharing the same brand name to a house of brand strategy where a product carries its individual brand without being connected to other brands of the same company (Strebinger, 2014). For each product, marketing leaders must make the fundamental trade-off between leveraging the trust of an existing brand versus leveraging specific target market's identity and needs. Findings of some empirical studies indicate that customer loyalty is higher for a house of brands strategy while some scholars argue that branded house strategy leads to increased customer attachment and improvement in the quality of customer relationships (Strebinger, 2014).

Brand architecture of a company could have a matrix of branding similarities and dissimilarities between their products and services. For example, Coca-Cola Company exhibits many values of zero branding similarity between its various soft drinks (example Coca-Cola, Sprite, and Fanta), but medium-to-high branding similarities within each brand (example Diet Coke, Coke Zero and Vanilla Coke; Strebinger, 2014). Two industry

factors affecting brand strategies are the cost to build and maintain separate brands and the rate of innovation (Strebinger, 2014). Older companies have a more significant number of brands than younger companies. The firm sometimes has a brand baggage of weaker brands which need to be shed (Strebinger, 2014).

Company managers influence employees' attitudes, brand identification, commitment, and loyalty through internal branding leading to their performance to fulfill a brand promise (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). It is essential to encourage employees to adopt the key characteristics of their service brands. The objective of internal branding is to ensure that employees transform brand messages into brand reality. Internal branding is an appropriate approach for communicating the brand internally (Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Sultan, & Merrilees, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007).

Coherence between internal and external communication is an essential part of a good branding strategy (Le Roux & Du Plessis, 2014). Through effective internal communication, managers can influence employees and their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors thereby shaping their commitment, vision, approach to service, loyalty, and satisfaction (Lechuga Sancho, Martinez-Martínez, Larran Jorge, & Herrera Madueno, 2018). Therefore, even while recruiting staff, it is necessary to focus on value congruence apart from the emphasis on technical and operational skills (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007).

Senior management of a company bases strong brands on the relationship that exists between the consumer and the brand in an emotional manner induced by the content of the marketing communication system (Kaufmann, Loureiro, & Manarioti, 2016). Strong brands can also be built through a cocreation process involving the brand



managers and consumers (Kaufmann et al., 2016). Brand performance can get affected if the organizational identity emanating from branding is not clear (Maier, 2016).

The Internet has changed the way company managers do branding. The speed and intensity of information dissemination and the interconnectedness of communication between firms and customers in a digitally empowered age are happening at a very rapid pace. Control and empowerment, offline and online activities, brand coherence and fluidity, marketing effectiveness, and brand evolution are various facets due to the technological growth (Erdem, Keller, Kuksov, & Pieters, 2016). The Internet is a powerful branding tool, and online branding has become necessary for service providers who do not have tangible products (Barreda, Bilgihan, Nusair, & Okumus, 2016). An organization's website offers useful insight to the customers, and it is better than conventional media, because of its interactivity. Two-way communication and user control are the dimensions of website interactivity which positively affect brand knowledge, brand awareness, a brand image which in turn contribute to brand value (Barreda et al., 2016).

Social media provides a communication platform for the brands and the consumers and allows development of online communities. Online or offline communities allow interaction for members and participation in fostering the development of social identity (Kaufmann et al., 2016). Exploring the knowledge acquired from social media to improve organizational understanding and knowledge makes the firm more alert to market opportunities. The strategic capability has a significant influence on innovation. The online community is an important source for

radical innovations to fulfill the market's latent needs with product innovations that the customers did not even know they wanted (Melewar & Nguyen, 2014). Social media and product returns during a product crisis can also lead to a significant adverse impact on firms. Word of mouth heightens this adverse effect, and if the company does not engage in social media appropriately, the responses can adversely affect the firm (Erdem et al., 2016).

Besides product branding and service branding, destination branding is also possible. A positive association has to be triggered in place branding so that travelers can distinguish one place from another place (Kladou, Kavaratzis, Rigopoulou, & Salonika, 2016). One of the differences between place branding and product branding is the lack of control over the place by the people responsible for branding it. One element on which place branding mainly depends on is a promotion. Place brands are static, depend on the way message is transmitted and do not behave like commercial products or firms. The destination's identity, logo, and slogan are the core of the brand apart from various communication medium in place branding (Kladou et al., 2016).

Sustainability marketing and brand building if linked with economic, social, and environmental initiatives can lead to a better outcome regarding organizational positioning (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). This process works when stakeholder orientation is combined with a business purpose. The benefits are cost savings, community inclusion, and market development. Similar to Kumar and Christodouloupoulou (2014), Lehner and Halliday (2014) also studied branding and sustainability. From a sustainability perspective, the most valuable brands are those

generating ethical surplus (i.e., creating socio-cultural value) for the brand community because the members of a community together define the values and are increasingly influenced by the ideas of sustainability (Lehner & Halliday, 2014).

### **Service Branding**

In the service industry, consumers experience services and reevaluate services at every touch point (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015). For services, the attribute of a brand may not be tangible, but the brand is visible to customers by the type of service customers get (Prentice & Wong, 2016). Strong brands enhance the trust of customers in intangible services (Karimian, Amirshahi, & Hanzaee, 2015). Features in brands such as effectiveness, efficiency, reliability, and values create a strong emotional connection influencing the consumer's rational and emotional dimension. Therefore, branding is vital for success in service organizations and branding is the cornerstone of service marketing (Sotheara, Jing, & Yat, 2016).

Quite often the most significant barriers to brand success in a service industry emanate from within the company. The service industry is more labor intensive and human performance rather than machine performance plays a critical role in building the brand (Yeboah, Ewur, Adigbo, & Asirifi, 2014). If employees have to deliver the brand effectively, then senior management must take into account and give importance to the impact frontline service employees have on customers (Baker, Rapp, Meyer, & Mullins, 2014; Chung & D'Annunzio-Green, 2018). Quite often, the company managers do not train frontline employees to understand customers. Frontline employees are poorly

paid, have low levels of motivation and responsibility which could be disastrous for a service company and the long-term brand value (Yeboah et al., 2014).

The services branding triangle framework indicates that the management team and frontline employees must successfully carry out three types of brand promise (i.e., making the brand promise, enabling the brand promise, and delivering the brand promise) for a service to develop a strong brand and brand equity (Pinar, Girard, Trapp, & Eser, 2016). This framework identifies management, frontline employees, and customers as the key participants in building strong customer-based brand equity. Making the brand promise refers to the creation of brand identity and communicating this promise to customers. Enabling the brand promise refers to the training of the service personnel so they can deliver the desired brand experience to customers. Delivering the brand promise refers to contact personnel delivering the brand promise during service encounters (Pinar et al., 2016). These three promises must be congruent to ensure enhanced brand performance. When the consumer has a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and holds strong, favorable, and unique brand associations in memory, it leads to high customer-based brand equity (Pinar et al., 2016).

In the service industry employees are brand ambassadors and therefore, brand loyalty by employees is required to attain the goal of satisfied customers (Azizi & Javidani, 2015; Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2014). Employee brand loyalty comprises attitudinal brand loyalty and behavioral brand loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty refers to a person's attitude of spreading the good word about a brand, and behavioral loyalty refers to a person's behavior of buying the same brand repeatedly (Azizi & Javidani, 2015).

Employees' job satisfaction and employee investments (e.g., time, relationships) create a positive effect on attitudinal loyalty (Azizi & Javidani, 2015). However, employee alternatives (e.g., availability of jobs at other companies) has an adverse effect on brand loyalty (Azizi & Javidani, 2015). The more significant the investment in the organization the more loyal the employees would be.

Internal branding efforts are mechanisms to improve employee performance and to provide brand-specific information directly to frontline employees (Baker et al., 2014). Internal branding not only enables improved service delivery but also enhances the brand trust and commitment of employees, and helps to manage employee attitudes and behavior regarding the organization (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015; Li, Guo, Cao, & Li, 2018). In internal branding, rules, rewards, regulations regarding employee behavior, human resource management teams, and internal communications training are important factors that help increase employee commitment (Tuominen, Hirvonen, Reijonen, & Laukkanen, 2016). Greater commitment by employees helps them become familiar with brand values and also helps deliver the brand promise (Tuominen et al., 2016; Yeboah et al., 2014). As employees become more committed to the brand, increased brand commitment leads to an increase in brand trust of the employees. The increase in brand trust then enhances the brand citizenship behavior of employees (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015). For service companies, brand performance enhancement by employees leads to sustainable competitive advantage (Baker et al., 2014).

## Dubai SMEs

SMEs in Dubai pertain to three sectors: trading, manufacturing, and services.

Authorities at DSME, a government agency under the Department of Economic

Development define Dubai SMEs in the services sector as follows (Dubai SME, 2014):

- A micro business is an enterprise which has less than 21 employees and has an annual sales turnover of less than or equal to 3 million UAE Dirham (AED).
- A small business is an enterprise which has less than 101 employees and has an annual sales turnover of less than or equal to 25 million AED.
- A medium business is an enterprise which has less than 251 employees and has an annual sales turnover of less than or equal to 150 million AED.
- A large business is an enterprise which has more than 250 employees or has an annual sales turnover of more than 150 million AED (Dubai SME, 2014).

Among the organizations in Dubai, SMEs account for 95% of establishments (Dubai SME, 2014). From an overall business perspective, 72% are micro firms, 18% are small sized, and 5% are of medium size. A sector-wise analysis shows the trading sector SMEs as 57%, the services sector 35%, and 8% belong to the manufacturing sector (Dubai SME, 2014).

Among Dubai service SMEs, real estate, renting, and business services constitute 33%, followed by 27% of construction and contracting firms. Seventeen percent of services SMEs are transportation and telecommunication firms followed by 10% of hotels and restaurants. Employee analysis shows 63% of service firms have one to 10 employees, 19% have 11 to 25 employees (Dubai SME, 2014). From 2009 to 2012, 38%

of new licenses issued were for real estate, renting, and business services and 31% were for construction and contracting industry. From 2009 to 2012 the highest growth was in the tourist segment (excluding hotels). Service SMEs employ 51% of the total workforce among SMEs in Dubai. However, productivity is the lowest in the services sector (Dubai SME, 2014).

### **SME Branding**

The entrepreneur of an SME is typically the owner and manager, too. Therefore, the entrepreneur's motivation, skills, and abilities are vital to the sustainability of the SME (Hashim, Raza, & Minai, 2018). Many SME owners do not engage themselves fully in the process of building a brand identity because while they believe in branding power, they think the immediate day-to-day business activities are more important than branding (Kennedy & Wright, 2016).

Quite often owners build SME brands in a nontraditional manner based on their entrepreneurial perspectives (Odoom, Narteh, & Boateng, 2017). This process results in the creation of the firm's image based on the personal characteristics and values of the owner. Therefore, in SMEs, a brand is a combination of an entrepreneur's personal brand and company brand known as the total brand (Razeghi, Roosta, Gharache, & Alemtabriz, 2016). If SME branding gains priority, then owners can achieve a total brand. The owner has to use personal creativity, skills, know-how, and attitude towards brand management and adopt the brand as a strategic podium (Muhonen, Hirvonen, & Laukkanen, 2017). SME owners who are entrepreneurially oriented are more likely to become brand oriented (Chang, Wang, & Arnett, 2018).

During the early stages of an SME life cycle, the owner is responsible for building the SME brand, and his reputation decides the reputation of the SME (Koporcić & Halinen, 2018). SME owners can personally influence the company brand during the early stages of the SME life cycle through interpersonal interactions. Owners play a critical role in brand building in boundary-spanning interactions which occur between SME owners and representatives from other companies (Koporcić & Halinen, 2018)

In a family business ownership structure, aspirations, culture, business ethos, and personality of the owners affect the governance structure and decision-making (Bakkour, Fort, & Mione, 2015). Customer-oriented culture is because of the owners and is essential for successful implementation of the brand. Thus, a relationship exists between ownership structure, decision-making, and branding strategies. In the case of SMEs three types of governance induce branding strategies and these are family governance, shareholder governance, and cooperative governance (Bakkour et al., 2015). Family governance refers to small family businesses where the owner commercializes unbranded products. Shareholder governance refers to SMEs where committees take strategic decisions. Cooperative governance refers to small companies who unite their financial and technical knowledge to sell a well-known brand (Bakkour et al., 2015).

In the case of SMEs, employees can play an important role and should be involved in both the branding and rebranding process (Chad, 2015). Turnover intention behavior is the decision of an employee to stay or leave the organization (Ahmad & Daud, 2016). Identifying the factors behind turnover intentions enables an SME owner to understand the character of the workforce and can guide employee retention programs.



Employer branding also has a significant influence on turnover intentions (Ahmad & Daud, 2016). A competent owner understands the psychology of the employees and acknowledges the employees' efforts. An owner may provide a career development program to enhance employee competency and enrich job satisfaction to improve employee loyalty (Chung & D'Annunzio-Green, 2018). SME owners must align the employees' recognition programs strategically with business goals (Ahmad & Daud, 2016).

Brand orientation in SMEs contributes significantly to the development of brand-related performance, through brand awareness, loyal customers, positive image, and good reputation (Hong & Diep, 2016). Brand orientation is a value-added process for SME management to reach long-term strategic goals (Renton et al., 2016). Thus, highly brand oriented SMEs have greater brand focus, better tactical branding practices, and improved brand performance leading to better financial outcomes. Brand oriented values are at the core of strategy development especially when it comes to brand positioning and marketing. Strong brand values lead to better brand orientation (Renton et al., 2016). When brand orientation becomes an integral part of the organization, it helps SME owners aim for growth and profitability (Bakkour et al., 2015).

While customer interaction is vital to brand orientation other stakeholders such as employees are also crucial to champion a trademark, project the brand, and influence the performance in the service delivery process (Liow & Chai, 2015). Brand orientation is a positive force for brand marketing performance (Wong & Merrilees, 2005). Brand orientation implies creation, development, and protection of brand identity by SME

owners (Slavisa, Sasa, & Sladana, 2014). Brand orientation by SME owners leads to brand identity development, and there is a direct positive association between brand orientation, brand values, and brand positioning. Brand orientation efforts by SME owners have a significant impact on brand positioning for service firms as compared to products (Muhonen et al., 2017). A brand-oriented mindset is a prerequisite to concrete brand management activities, and brand values provide the direction for brand identity development.

The key to successful brand building in SMEs is developing a brand identity based on vision, values, personality, benefits, culture, and attributes. The combination of these identity elements helps create a story which sets the firm in a unique position as compared to other SME firms (Kennedy & Wright, 2016). Brand identity elements like mission, vision, values, culture, attributes, benefits, and personality are necessary, so the owners develop knowledge of branding and brand as a strategy with all the employees of the organization. Brand identity development has a positive and significant influence on branding performance (Hong & Diep, 2016). Depending on the life cycle of the SME the entrepreneur can transfer the core brand identity to later generations whereby the SME firm possesses a unique identity even with different owners (Razeghi et al., 2016).

SME owners should integrate brand identity with organizational culture (Rashid & Ghose, 2015). Appropriate organizational culture can lead to branding success (Hoque, 2018). Organizational culture refers to shared values employees practice daily. All employees can learn, share, and practice the organizational culture. SME owners can use internal branding to build an appropriate company culture (Rashid & Ghose, 2015).

Building strong brand equity requires creating a brand consumers are aware of (Odoom, 2016). Brand equity can be built based on associations which can be both symbolic (consumer's need for self-enhancement) and functional (solving consumption-related problems; Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010). SME owners should focus on developing one or two strong brands, unlike large organizations where the marketers develop multiple brands. Self-financed growth through effective brand management is the mechanism suggested for SME owners to create brand identity and manage brand equity (Spence & Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010).

Brand loyalty helps to improve the profitability of SME owners (Ong, Salleh, & Yusoff, 2015c). Brand loyalty is the loyalty derived from the brand in connection with the value saving a product or service has to offer (Ong, Salleh, & Yusoff, 2016). Brand experience has a positive relationship with both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty because of the unique intangible aspect of brand experience (Ong, Salleh, & Yusoff, 2015a; Ong et al., 2015c). Emotional benefits such as brand experience are more appealing to the customers primarily in the foodservice industry (Ong et al., 2015a). Brand experience is the subjective response of the consumers categorized as sensory, effective, intellectual, and behavioral. Brand experience is, therefore, a crucial factor which creates success through differentiation. A unique brand experience makes it hard for competitors to replicate (Ong et al., 2015c).

Brand experience and brand strategy help to gain customer trust (Ong et al., 2015a). The various components used to conceptualize trust are altruism, benevolence, credibility, confidence, dependability, fairness, honesty, integrity, and reliability. Trust in

the context of a brand implies intentions and reliability. In the context of brand trust, intention refers to the consumer's belief that the brand will prioritize the welfare of its consumers when unforeseen issues with product consumption happen (Ong et al., 2016). Intention refers to a consumer's belief that a particular SME brand will act in good faith by prioritizing the consumer's interest when a risky situation related to brand consumption occurs. Reliability relates to the fulfillment of the brand's promise (Ong et al., 2016).

Brand trust is an essential determinant of customer loyalty in the context of SMEs (Ong et al., 2016). The brand trust consists of both emotional-based trust and rational-based trust (Ong, Salleh, & Yusoff, 2015b). Rational-based trust relates to the trustworthiness of a particular brand to consistently deliver what the brand promises. Emotional-based trust relates to the trustworthiness formed because of the owners behaving in a good way to protect customer welfare. Empirical evidence shows both emotional and rational trust positively influence customer's attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Ong et al., 2016).

Brand image is the consumer's mental picture of the offering and includes symbolic meanings or specific attributes of the product or the service (Chinomona, 2016). Therefore, brand image is the soul of the product or service and is an important factor in branding. Brand communication has a substantial effect on the brand image. Brand image in turn influences brand trust thereby implying that brand communication has a strong influence on brand trust via brand image. Therefore, SME owners should pay attention to both brand communication and brand image to build consumer trust (Chinomona, 2016).

The absence of innovative products negatively affects SME branding even if the advertisements are attractive and promotions are enticing (Agostini et al., 2015). Innovativeness helps SMEs to thrive (Salman, Arshad, & Bakar, 2016). If there is pressure, the organization does adopt innovation. Innovations in SMEs also depends on the employees of the organization (Salman et al., 2016). Innovative culture works best where the SME firm's environment is suitable to encourage individual creativity. To achieve total brand, SME owners must focus on market, innovation, and assure the consistency and alignment of the brand message (Razeghi, Roosta, Alemtabriz, & Gharache, 2014). While market performance has a weak impact on brand capability, market performance and financial performance have a positive impact on innovation capability (Moghaddam & Armat, 2015). Innovations are complex and continuously change due to technological opportunities and threats which make it difficult for SME owners to define innovation strategies. To enhance creativity and strengthen innovation in SMEs, a flexible, broad, and flat organizational structure with a learning-based culture is essential (Moghaddam & Armat, 2015).

Four dimensions of SME innovations are product innovation, process innovation, positional innovation, and paradigm innovation (Renton, Daellenbach, Davenport, & Richard, 2015). Product innovation refers to the changes in product offerings. Process innovation refers to the changes in the way SME owners create and deliver products and services. Positional innovation allows for the introduction of products into new user context and is equivalent to pursuing new target segments. Paradigm innovation focuses

on reframing of current business models, products, processes, and market context, opening up market innovation opportunities (Renton et al., 2015).

The findings by Horan et al. (2011) indicate that the primary reasons that restrict SME branding are lack of financial resources, time, knowledge, expertise, and perception that the company does not need a brand. Wong, Holmes, and Schaper (2018) confirmed that financial constraints affect SME branding. In the initial stages of SME life cycle, SME owners are not likely to recruit many new employees (Zakaria, Ishak, Arshad, Abdullah, & Ahmad, 2018). This lack of human resources also affects SME branding.

### **SME Marketing**

Marketing is a social and managerial process to exchange products and values with others. Marketing activities such as planning, marketing research, strategy, and the implementation of the four Ps such as price, place, product, and promotion require skills and financial resources (Resnick, Cheng, Simpson, & Lourenço, 2016). Marketing in SMEs is different from that of large organizations. It is found that SME owners do not know or do not like to adopt marketing practices which apply to large organizations (Resnick et al., 2016). Conventional marketing methods cannot be very effective in the context of challenges faced by SME owners (Gilmore, Carson, & Grant, 2001).

SME owners have an individual management style which is more of self-marketing approach (Franco, Santos, Ramalho, & Nunes, 2014; Resnick et al., 2016). SME owners consider small business marketing as mostly a part-time activity (Resnick et al., 2016). SME owners are unsure whether marketing is worth the effort

considering the time and expenditure required. There is no long-term planning, and the organization progresses mostly opportunistically and intuitively, depending on the owner's inclination and time (Resnick et al., 2016). This perception presents problems because it does not help them in being able to delegate roles. Without any formal marketing planning, the pressure on the owners is very high as they have to obtain new customers. Thus, the practice is to focus on day-to-day tasks and solving customer problems (Resnick et al., 2016).

The traditional approach to treat entrepreneurship and marketing as distinct disciplines has aligned into what SME researchers call as entrepreneurial marketing which is the business philosophy incorporating innovation and creativity to create value for customers and stakeholders (Miles, Gilmore, Harrigan, Lewis, & Sethna, 2015). Entrepreneurial marketing refers to an aggressive untraditional approach which takes into account innovation, opportunities, risks and resources including networking (Franco et al., 2014). Entrepreneurial marketing is a different way of doing marketing by SME owners to create change and adapt to change by being the first to recognize, create, and exploit the opportunity. Entrepreneurial managers may be motivated to use market-driven innovation opportunities, manage risk, create and capture new sources of demand (Renton et al., 2015).

Traditional marketing by marketing managers of large organizations involves a formalized system of investigation and intelligence and comprises of mixed marketing methods where marketers do targeting, segmentation, and positioning concerning customers and products (Franco et al., 2014). However, SME owners base

entrepreneurial marketing on an informal network of gathering information more often through word of mouth. Sources for new opportunities come from an understanding of the marketplace (i.e., customers, competitors, and suppliers) along with the business environment (Miles et al., 2015). Proactive exploration of the market by SME owners enables them to make their businesses competitive. Recognition and pursuit of opportunity are fundamental to entrepreneurship (Miles et al., 2015).

Networking is another marketing tool suitable for SMEs (Franco, 2018; Gilmore et al., 2001). Networking for business activities means SME owners come together with a common objective and cooperate by exchanging and sharing ideas, knowledge, and technology. Such networking can occur through trade events, personal contacts, marketing intermediaries, and owners' social endeavors.

SME networking is mostly informal, loose, unstructured, spontaneous, and reactive (Gilmore et al., 2001). Owners often make an effort to include customers and potential customers in their networking (Gilmore et al., 2001). SME owners can also encourage word of mouth as a valuable marketing tool to positively influence customers (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Abu Bakar, 2018). In the case of B2B SMEs, SME owners can cocreate their SME brands with the help of their business partners (Tormala & Saraniemi, 2018).

### **SME Brand Communication**

SME owners are using social media for instant personal interaction with the brand community. SME brand building has also become multidirectional and interconnected as customers now have options to participate, create, and share content as



well as talk to each other (Lipiainen & Karjaluoto, 2015). This phenomenon applies to both products and service brands bringing in the need for a better understanding of consumer behavior (Davis, Piven, & Breazeale, 2014). Understanding SME brand consumption using Web 2.0 tools demands a shift from marketer-led brand to customer ownership and cocreation of meaning.

Web 2.0 technology is user-friendly, standardized, and simple. SME owners can use these Web 2.0 tools to create an online presence where customers can communicate at will (Stankovska, Josimovski, & Edwards, 2016). Online marketing differs from traditional marketing regarding interactivity, intelligence, individualization, and integration by providing both push and pull strategies in marketing communication (Kumar, Kumar, & Mishra, 2015). In traditional marketing, marketers use newspapers, magazines, radio, or television to deliver one-way messages. However, in online marketing, marketers not only deliver messages but also receive feedback and exchange ideas. The increasing global interconnectivity and technological growth have led to SME business expansion through the use of online marketing (Kumar et al., 2015).

Collaboration, crowdsourcing, and ideation have led to a network of innovative activity along the value chain (Stankovska et al., 2016). The speed of communication is the most critical reason for SME owners adopting online marketing which includes social media applications (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Social media usage is a low-cost option for SME owners (Cheng & Shiu, 2018; Crammond, Omeihe, Murray, & Ledger, 2018).

Social media is a group of Internet-based applications based on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 for creating and exchanging user-generated

content (Karimi & Naghibi, 2015). Social media includes social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace; microblogs such as Twitter, Plurk and FriendFeed; reviews and ratings such as Yelp, Amazon, Trip Advisor; videos such as YouTube and Vimeo; wikis; podcasts; and social bookmarking (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Karimi & Naghibi, 2015; Stankovska et al., 2016).

SME owners utilize social media applications for communications, sales, innovation, problem resolution, customer service, human resources, information technology, driving cultural change, selling, advertising, and marketing at a cheaper cost (Ainin, Parveen, Moghavvemi, Jaafar, & Shuib, 2015; Nobre & Silva, 2014). SME owners use social media applications for the development of a quality relationship which in turn influences consumer's intentions to buy a product (Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay, & Richard, 2017). SME owners are also using social media for brand management (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Abu Bakar, 2018; Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016). SME owners must have clear objectives for using the social media tools or they will not get the desired benefits (AlSharji, Ahmad, & Abu Bakar, 2018). To improve customers' purchase intentions, SME owners must make sure there is online media synergy (Dong, Chang, Liang, & Fan, 2018).

Brand consumption in social media is a two-way process of cocreating experiences. Customers share their experiences on these mobile and web-based platforms and create shared meaning for brands (Hajli et al., 2017). The consumer's functional need for problem-solving, information search, providing feedback, access to deals and rewards, and evaluation of the service offering have led to the creation of online

communities (Davis et al., 2014). Social media is, therefore, a practical tool for brand cocreation using online communities and to establish relationship marketing (Hajli et al., 2017). Online communities play vital roles in enhancing and building brand loyalty, improving market penetration, generating positive word of mouth, and creating interest in products and services.

Customers expect owners to hear, listen to, and take notice of consumer issues and these aspects of social media are essential for SME owners so that owners genuinely become customer-centric. SME owners need to continually monitor the social media communities because the inaccurate or bad information could easily taint the relationship between the consumer and brand (Davis et al., 2014). SME owners can use moderators for their online forums to ensure positive interaction and participation (Davis et al., 2014). Well-monitored social media can provide opportunities to respond to individual consumer's posts and comments quickly with highly personalized content. Some of the other challenges of online marketing are security threats, lack of training, inadequate technological skills, slow adoption of Internet technology, high initial investment, and lack of awareness (Adam, Featherstone, & Day, 2014; Kumar et al., 2015). Information technology infrastructure capability, organizational capabilities, firm size, and type of industry affect social media competence of SME owners (Braojos-Gomez, Benitez-Amado, & Llorens-Montes, 2015).

The purpose of my exploratory multiple case study was to understand the branding strategies used by successful service SME owners in Dubai to improve the financial performance of their company. I identified a conceptual framework drawn from

the review of the professional and academic literature, which is the Krake (2005) funnel model for SME brand management. Findings of my study may further add to the body of knowledge on service SME branding. Based on my review of the literature it was evident that SME branding is a complex phenomenon and largely depends on the owner's initiatives for brand management.

### **Transition**

In Section 1, I discussed the problem statement and the central research question. I also discussed the primary purpose of my study. Other research components included in Section 1 were the background of the problem, nature of the study, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and significance of the study. I concluded Section 1 with a detailed literature review on the subject of SME branding.

In Section 2, I covered the role of the researcher, participants, the chosen research method and research design, the sampling method, ethical research, data collection instrument, techniques for data collection, data organization techniques, and data analysis. At the end of Section 2, I detailed the aspect of reliability and validity as it applies to qualitative research and I described the rigor of my qualitative research. Section 3 comprises of research findings, how the findings apply to professional practice, the implications of the research findings for social change, and the recommendations for action. I concluded Section 3 with my recommendations for future research on the subject of SME branding, reflections, and last, my research conclusions.

## Section 2: The Project

I outlined the critical points of my doctoral research in Section 2 by beginning with the purpose statement. I then discussed my role as researcher and described my study participants. After describing the qualitative research method and a multiple case study research design, I described the population and sampling followed by a discussion on ethical research. Section 2 also includes a discussion of data collection instruments, data collection techniques, data organization techniques, and data analysis. I concluded this section by explaining my strategy for improving the rigor of my research.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the branding strategies some successful service SME owners in Dubai use to improve the financial performance of their companies. The targeted population consisted of owners of six medium-sized service enterprises located in Dubai, UAE who used branding strategies to improve the financial performance of their company. The implications for positive social change were that the findings from my research could lead to increased profitability of Dubai SME owners. Dubai SME owners will then have the resources to fulfill social initiatives advocated by the authorities at DCCI leading to a better quality of life for the people of Dubai and other developing countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (Dubai Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 2014).

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is to try to access the innermost thoughts and feelings of research participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Accessing the

thoughts and feelings of participants may be difficult as it involves the expression of thoughts which are personal to the participants. The experiences could be fresh and immediate whereas other participants may have to relive past experiences. Whichever manner the researchers collect data, they are primarily responsible for safeguarding the participants and their data (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I safeguarded the participants and their data during the data collection process and also after I completed my research. There are various methods of safeguarding the participants and their data, and the researcher must articulate these methods to the participants and must get such methods approved by a research ethics review board (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Before commencing my research, I achieved approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Using an informed consent form, I explained to my study participants how I would maintain their confidentiality and protection of their data.

I worked in marketing and sales roles for 2 decades starting from 1997. However, the concept of SME branding was new to me. I had never worked with SME owners in Dubai who were going to be my research participants. Whatever knowledge I had about SME branding was because of my detailed review of the literature and reading the books on branding. I hoped this lack of experience about my research topic and the participants would enable me to keep an open mind during the data collection process.

The Belmont Report is a guide for researchers to protect the rights of study participants. Respect for persons, beneficence, and justice are the three major principles of the Belmont Report built primarily using the Nuremberg Code and the Declaration of Helsinki (Miracle, 2016). An important aspect is the respect for persons. As per the first

principle, participants have a right to decide whether they want to participate in a study or not (Miracle, 2016). The second principle of the Belmont Report, beneficence, implies doing no harm, increasing potential benefits to research participants, and decreasing possible adverse events (Miracle, 2016). The third principle of justice in the Belmont Report refers to equal treatment and fairness for all participants (Miracle, 2016). The researchers must inform the participants that the participants are free to stop their participation in the research anytime without any fear of reprisal (Miracle, 2016). For my research, I adhered to these guidelines provided in the Belmont Report.

Researchers are fallible (Flick, 2014). Thus, qualitative or quantitative research can have errors and can go wrong. There is no paradigm solution by which researchers can eliminate error and bias in their research (Flick, 2014). Researchers should be open-minded, alert, and detached to minimize bias (Flick, 2014). During the research process, researchers should have the capacity to accept and use criticism as well as be self-critical in a constructive manner. There are many sources of bias in research. These are the reactivity of researchers with participants, selection bias, availability and reliability of various sources of data, value preferences and commitments of researchers, their abilities, their affinity to certain types of people, and the personal qualities of researchers (Flick, 2014).

One of the ways to reduce bias is to be a good listener (Yin, 2017). Being a good listener implies the ability to assimilate vast amounts of data in an unbiased manner. While interviewing, an excellent listener hears the exact words, can gain a valuable perspective, capture the mood, understand the context, and infer the correct meaning as

intended by the interviewee rather than viewing the data through a personal lens (Yin, 2017). This listening skill is also essential while inspecting documentary evidence. Good listening skill leads to a clear understanding of the document as intended by the originator of the document. A closed mind, poor memory, and selective retention are significant deficiencies of a poor listener (Yin, 2017).

Researchers can use the journaling technique to minimize bias (Chenail, 2011). In the journaling approach, researchers record their thoughts before and after the interview (Chenail, 2011). Researchers can use a notebook or a digital recorder for this purpose. Using the journaling process researchers can recognize their thoughts, feelings, and impressions which can lead to bias in research (Chenail, 2011). To minimize bias in my research and to avoid viewing the data through a personal lens I chose to be a good listener, remained open-minded, alert, detached, and used the journaling process.

An interview protocol is not merely a list of interview questions but may also include a script about the prelude to the interview and the conclusion of the interview (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). A proper interview protocol includes interview questions that researchers write after a thorough review of the literature. For a qualitative research study, an interview protocol must include open-ended questions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The researcher must order the interview questions such that the interview first begins with easy-to-answer questions followed by difficult questions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The interview protocol must include big, expansive questions so that participants share information that the researcher may not have thought to ask. The researcher must be ready to make changes to the interview protocol as new data emerges during the



interviews (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The interview questions should be such that the interview does not go beyond one and half-hours. I designed my interview protocol (see Appendix A) using these tips as suggested by Jacob and Furgerson (2012).

### **Participants**

In their studies on SME branding, Agostini, Filippini, and Nosella (2014) and Resnick et al. (2016) collected data from SME owners because they believed the owners would be able to provide insights into the SME branding phenomenon. SME owners are the primary decision makers for their SMEs, and thus it is appropriate to ask them about their branding strategies. I collected data from SME owners for my research on SME branding. All participating owners in my research were from medium-sized service SMEs in Dubai. In the case of Dubai, a medium-sized SME is an enterprise which has less than 251 employees and has an annual sales turnover of less than or equal to 150 million AED (Dubai SME, 2014).

In the study by Mitchell et al. (2015) the researchers approached 35 SME retail firms by sending each of them a letter of invitation followed by a phone call or store visit. The firms were chosen based on owners achieving brand awards, or personal and institutional networks available to the researchers had recommended these firms. I used a similar approach to access the participants for my research. Participants of my doctoral study met the following inclusion criteria: they used branding strategies to improve the financial performance of their company, the age of the participants was 18 years or more, and authorities at DSME had listed SMEs of participants among the top 100 SMEs in Dubai. Authorities at DSME publish a list of top 100 Dubai SMEs every year (Dubai

SME, 2013). I approached the authorities of this organization to obtain the details of the top 100 SMEs from last 5 years. From this list, I selected 20 medium-sized service SMEs that meet the participant inclusion criteria. I then sent a letter of invitation to owners of each of these 20 SMEs requesting them to participate in my research. After sending the letter of invitation, I did a follow-up phone call to confirm whether the owners were willing to participate in my research.

In their invitation letter to the likely participants, Du Plessis et al. (2015) requested SME owners to give a permission letter to conduct the research if they were willing to participate in their study. In the invitation letters that I sent to the SME owners, I did not request them to issue a permission letter if they were willing to participate in my research as it was not necessary as per Walden IRB. I then sought approval from Walden IRB (approval number 02-21-18-0533794) before starting to conduct the interviews with the participants. In this way, I gained access to my research participants.

In qualitative research, research investigators often collect data through personal interviews with participants (Yin, 2017). In qualitative research, researchers often present the research reports in participants' own words (Given, 2008). This approach in qualitative research often translates into a respectful and engaging relationship with participants (Given, 2008). The researcher-participant relationship can affect the data that participants reveal during the interviews. Thus, a positive relationship with the participants can lead to better data (Given, 2008). Researchers should try to build rapport with participants to gain their trust and develop a good working relationship with them (Holloway & Galvin, 2017).

Rapport consists of three aspects: mutual attention, positivity, and coordination (Abbe & Brandon, 2013). These three aspects require different levels of emphasis and are under the control of the interviewer. During an interview with participants, it is easy to establish mutual attention through body language and nonverbal behavior. Some examples of signaling mutual attention are forward leaning of the body and nodding the head in acknowledgment at appropriate times (Abbe & Brandon, 2013). Both, interviewer and participant must develop mutual attentiveness before achieving positivity and coordination. Positivity refers to mutual liking or caring (Abbe & Brandon, 2013). Positivity also includes warmth (e.g., helpful vs. harmful intentions of the participants). The coordination aspect of rapport may manifest as complementarity and synchronous behavior demonstrating convergence between the researcher and the participant (Abbe & Brandon, 2013). Coordination refers to complementarity in behavior between the interviewer and participants highlighting reciprocity (Abbe & Brandon, 2013). Using mutual attention, positivity, and coordination I tried to build rapport with the participants to develop a positive working relationship with them.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

Qualitative research with nonstatistical analytical methods is useful while examining the subjective experiences of human beings (Ingham-Broomfield, 2015). Human experiences can be complicated, and naturalistic inquiry through qualitative research leads to better understanding of behavioral and social sciences (Grossoehme, 2014). Qualitative research is useful for researchers to obtain in-depth knowledge and

information related to people's lived experiences (Grossoehme, 2014). In qualitative research, researchers consider narrative or experiential data to interpret critical aspects of human activities and behaviors (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). Investigators use qualitative research to examine in detail the cases that occur in the natural flow of social interaction (Choy, 2014). Thus qualitative researchers provide a rich description of the phenomenon regarding underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014a).

Quantitative research involves the collection and analysis of numerical data (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). In quantitative research, examiners follow a linear research path and a positivist approach (Choy, 2014). Precise measurement of variables, testing of hypotheses, and seeking a causal explanation are features of quantitative research. Quantitative research leads to verification of correlation between variables which are observable and measurable for analysis using statistical processes (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014a).

The third research method is mixed-methods research. Mixed-methods research involves the integration of qualitative and quantitative data in the same research (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). It is vital that components of both methods be interlinked to lead to an integrated approach to the research question. Combination of both qualitative and quantitative techniques leads to more profound insight than would be obtained by just using one of the methods (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015).

The purpose of my research was not to test a hypothesis or to test the relationship between variables. I did not plan to collect any numerical data for my research. Thus,

mixed-methods and quantitative research methods were not suitable for my study. Researchers cannot convert human beliefs, perceptions, identities, and community characteristics to numbers. Thus, I chose to use a qualitative research method. Other reasons for using a qualitative research approach for my study on SME branding included SME branding and other SME marketing research that is mostly comprised of qualitative approaches. Secondly, qualitative research leads to a rich understanding of SME branding activity. Qualitative methods enable in-depth investigation especially in the context of complex branding issues faced by SME owners.

### **Research Design**

Studying events and behaviors through the human lens is possible by use of phenomenology research design (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014b). Using phenomenology researchers can genuinely describe the meaning of lived experiences of participants who have directly experienced the phenomenon investigated (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014b). Phenomenologists through inductive analysis and in-depth interviews explain the everyday experiences of a person undergoing a particular phenomenon (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014b). Phenomenology research design was not appropriate for my study as my intent was not to understand the everyday experiences people have of a particular phenomenon.

Using ethnography researchers explore and study the lifestyles of groups of people and their culture (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014b). An ethnographer documents the perspectives, practices, and culture of people, to understand the way each group sees the

world (Tavakol & Sandars, 2014b). Ethnography design was not appropriate for my study as my intent was not to understand the culture of any group of people.

Case study design is appropriate for an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Case studies are particularly relevant to organization and management studies (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Thus, case study design was appropriate for my research as my intent was to study branding strategies used by SME owners. Those adopting a case study approach must decide what type of case study will be undertaken (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). This decision depends on the overall objective of the study. Researchers use exploratory case study design for understanding how a phenomenon takes place and explanatory case study design for understanding why a particular phenomenon takes place (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). When researchers want to convince someone that a phenomenon is relevant, they use a descriptive case study design (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). To understand issues in SME branding investigators frequently use exploratory case study design as it enables development of rich description (Renton et al., 2016). The type of case study design I used was exploratory multiple case study design. The decision to use a multiple case study design was because of the medium size of the firms I investigated, limiting the division of the organization into smaller subunits.

Current researchers may choose a data collection technique that past researchers used successfully to reach data saturation point (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Horan et al. (2011) collected data from five SME owners for their study on SME branding. They conducted six meetings with each SME owner. Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) collected

data through interviews with four SME owners for their research on SME branding. Considering these two studies and the findings from a study by Fusch and Ness (2015) that even six interviews may be enough for achieving data saturation, I collected data from six different SME owners using semistructured interviews until I reached data saturation point. One of the ways in which researchers can achieve data saturation is through interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Both Horan et al. (2011) and Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) used qualitative multiple case study design with semistructured interviews for their research on SME branding. I, too, used this approach of collecting data through interviews for my study on SME branding.

Researchers should structure interview questions to facilitate asking multiple participants the same set of questions; otherwise, it will not be possible to achieve data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). For my doctoral study, I asked the same set of questions to all six SME owners. Researchers reach data saturation point when there are no new data, no new codes, and no new themes (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Thus, I conducted interviews with SME owners until no new data, no new codes, and no new themes emerged. To reach data saturation, I also collected data from public records (e.g., about the Dubai SME industry and study participants), company documents provided by participants, SME websites, and SME social media networks.

### **Population and Sampling**

Qualitative researchers can obtain in-depth information through purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015). In purposeful sampling, researchers select participants, either individuals or groups, who have information and experience of a particular

phenomenon of researcher's interest. These participants are accessible, are willing to take part in the research, and have the capability of communicating their experience articulately. Researchers use random sampling in quantitative studies to improve the generalizability of findings and to minimize selection bias (Palinkas et al., 2015). In most qualitative research about SME branding, the researchers adopted a purposive sampling method to select the participants. Some examples of such research studies are Agostini et al. (2015), Du Plessis et al. (2015), Mitchell et al. (2015), and Resnick et al. (2016). In the case of SMEs, owners are the decision makers and know about SME branding (De Massis, Kotlar, Campopiano, & Cassia, 2015). Thus, I decided to use purposive sampling technique for my research, and SME owners from six medium-sized service SMEs in Dubai were the participants in my study.

Sample size in qualitative research depends on a concept known as information power (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). If the selected sample holds more information power, then the size of the sample required is smaller and vice versa. Information power depends on the study aim (Malterud et al., 2016). The broader the study aim, the greater is the sample required compared to a narrow study aim about a phenomenon. Information power also depends on the knowledge and experience of the research participants. The higher the knowledge and experience of the research participants about a phenomenon to be studied, the smaller will be the sample size required (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power is also dependent on the quality of information sharing between the researcher and the participant during the interview process. If the communication during the interview process is clear, then researchers can



gather rich information leading to fewer interviews as compared to the situation when the information sharing between the researcher and the participant is ambiguous and unfocused (Malterud et al., 2016).

The SME owners have good experience and knowledge about SME branding and were able to provide in-depth information on SME branding strategies leading to high information power. The aim of my research was not broad. Thus, based on guidelines suggested by Malterud et al. (2016), small sample size was sufficient for my research. Horan et al. (2011) collected data from five SME owners during their research on SME branding. Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) gathered data from four SME owners for their study of SME branding. Therefore, my decision to collect data from six SME owners for my research was sufficient to generate rich data on the subject of SME branding strategies.

Considering the number of participants in the research by Horan et al. (2011), Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010), and the findings from a study by Fusch and Ness (2015) that even six interviews may be enough for achieving data saturation, I collected data from six different SME owners using semistructured interviews until I reached data saturation point. Current researchers may choose a data collection technique that past researchers have used successfully to reach data saturation point (Fusch & Ness, 2015). One of the ways in which researchers can achieve data saturation is through interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Both Horan et al. (2011) and Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) used qualitative multiple case study design with semistructured interviews for their research on SME branding. I, too, used this approach of collecting data through

interviews for my study on SME branding. Researchers should structure interview questions to facilitate asking multiple participants the same set of questions else it will not be possible to achieve data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). For my doctoral study, I asked the same set of questions to all the six SME owners. Researchers reach data saturation point when there are no new data, no new codes, and no new themes (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I conducted interviews with SME owners until no new information, no new codes, and no new themes emerged. To reach data saturation, I also collected data from public records (e.g., about the Dubai SME industry and study participants), company documents provided by participants, SME websites, and SME social media networks.

Within SMEs, owners are the best resource to provide information about branding strategies as compared to other employees of the firm (De Massis et al., 2015). As per 2014 SME data, 72000 SMEs are in business in Dubai (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). To minimize bias during participant selection, I used the DSME top 100 list published every year by authorities at DSME. I used this list to shortlist SMEs for my research. Selecting participants from the top 100 list led to the collection of rich information for my research as these SMEs were highly successful among SMEs in Dubai. Ong et al. (2015c) used a similar approach to finalize the participants for their research on SME branding. Ong et al. (2015c) selected participants who had won brand awards. The criteria chosen by me to shortlist participants was appropriate.

Questions asked and answers given during an interview can become easy or severe based on the interview location (Gagnon, Jacob, & McCabe, 2015). Allowing participants to choose the place and time for the interview leads to the creation of an

equal relationship between the researcher and the participants (Gagnon et al., 2015). Researchers should be flexible and willing to allow the participants to choose the interview setting as in qualitative research, the researchers are the takers, and the participants are the givers (Herzog, 2005). Researchers can conduct interviews at the participant's home, workplace, or in a neutral setting like a coffee shop or a hotel lobby (Herzog, 2005). I requested participants to finalize a research setting where there is no background noise so that the audio recording of the interviews was possible. To maintain the confidentiality of the interviews, I requested the participants to choose a private place which can be their workplace, my home, or any other private place mutually agreed upon. I decided the interview setting with the participants so that we were comfortable during the interview.

### **Ethical Research**

One of the ethical aspects of research is the informed consent process (Lorell, Mikita, Anderson, Hallinan, & Forrest, 2015; Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). The informed consent process is necessary for the protection of participants (Lorell et al., 2015). Through this process, qualitative researchers inform in advance what data they will collect and how they will use the data (Sanjari et al., 2014). Using the informed consent process, the researcher has the responsibility of informing the participants about the different aspects of the research in a language that is comprehensible (Sanjari et al., 2014). Researchers should do the informed consent process at a place and time that is convenient to the prospective participants, and the participants are given sufficient time to make an informed decision whether they want to

participate in the study or not (Lorell et al., 2015). I followed these guidelines about the informed consent process.

In the informed consent form, researchers should include details about the study and its objectives, role of the participants, the researcher's identity, the name of the organization financing the research, and how the researcher will publish and use the findings (Sanjari et al., 2014). The informed consent form should be easy to understand and should not be very long and complicated (Lorell et al., 2015). Following these guidelines, I prepared an informed consent form for my research. When I sent invitation letters to prospective participants, I also sent the informed consent form for their information. When I made the follow-up phone call to the prospective participants, I asked them if they had any questions about the informed consent form. I answered their questions primarily over the phone, and when the questions were too many, I scheduled a meeting with the SME owners and clarified their doubts. I gave sufficient time to the participants (i.e., SME owners) to decide whether they wanted to be part of my study or not.

The informed consent form should have the information about participant withdrawal procedures (McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014). Participants should have the option to withdraw from the study at any time without any fear of repercussions (McDermid et al., 2014). For my research, I included in the informed consent form that participants could withdraw from my research study at any time if they wished to do so and there will be no consequences to them if they withdrew. I informed the participants that if they chose to withdraw, I would not use any data shared by them. Participants

could withdraw from my study by sending me an email or phone call or meeting me in person to inform that they wish to withdraw. There were no incentives to participants for taking part in my research. The informed consent form had this information about no incentives.

One of the guidelines for ethics in research is to protect the identity of the participants so that they do not face any adverse consequences from others because of their shared views (Flick, 2014). Readers of the research report should not be able to find out the names of the persons and the company which took part in the research. Researchers should not collect any information from the participants that will lead to their identification. During interviews, researchers should ask only those questions that are helpful to answer the research question and should avoid collecting data like name, age, and gender of participants (Flick, 2014). Protection of participant identity should start from the transcription creation stage to the final stage of report writing (Petrova, Dewing, & Camilleri, 2016).

Researchers may protect participant identity by using pseudonyms or codes (Petrova et al., 2016). In place of organization names, I used the code SME1 to SME6. I referred to the first owner from the first SME as SME1O1. For the first owner of the second SME, I used the pseudonym SME2O1. I used similar logic to refer to the owners from other SMEs. During the informed consent process, I informed the SME owners that their identities and company names would remain confidential. I requested the owners not to share any research information with their employees or close friends. This kind of request is necessary to ensure the confidentiality of participants (Petrova et al., 2016). To

ensure participant confidentiality researchers should store data collected (i.e., audio recordings and transcripts) in a safe and secure place (Flick, 2014). I saved the audio recordings and the digital copy of the member checking reports of my research in an external hard drive after the research was over. I will store the hard drive, and physical documents collected during my research in a password protected safe container for 5 years from the date of completion of my doctoral study.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative research (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). For a case study research, researchers can collect data through documentation, archival records, interviews, observations, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2017). For my research, I used the semistructured interviews for data collection. The objective of using semistructured interviews in qualitative research is to gain knowledge from participants based on their experience of the research topic (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Semistructured interviews are helpful when there is objective knowledge about a phenomenon, but subjective knowledge is not available. In semistructured interviews, participants can respond to the open-ended questions in their way, and the researcher can use these responses to probe further. The type of data researchers collect using semistructured interviews is not possible to collect through structured questionnaires, analyzing the literature, or observing the participants (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Researchers can use semistructured interviews to keep the participants' responses focused on the research topic, and this is less likely in structured interviews. In semistructured interviews, researchers ask the same set of questions to all the participants

in the same order (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Besides asking the central interview questions, researchers can also ask subquestions, known as prompts, during semistructured interviews to generate rich data. These prompts can be scheduled or unscheduled based on the feedback obtained from the participants during the interviews (McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

Researchers can conduct semistructured interviews through written questionnaires, face-to-face, using the telephone, or online (e.g., chat rooms, email; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). I used the face-to-face interview method to collect data from participants as it has many advantages. During the face-to-face interviews of my research, I asked open-ended questions to all the participants. I asked the same set of questions in the same order to all the participants. I also made use of prompts to generate a better response from participants. Please see Appendix A for the interview protocol.

While conducting their research on SME branding, Couto and Ferreira (2017) collected primary data from company documents besides interviews. They also considered secondary sources of data such as company websites and social networks of companies. Besides collecting data through face-to-face interviews, I also collected data from company documents, websites, and social networks of companies.

Researchers can use member checking to improve data rigor through interviews (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Member checking process is a tool researchers use to improve the credibility of qualitative research (Cope, 2014). Using the member checking process researchers can reduce researcher bias (Cope, 2014). During the member checking process, researchers request participants to confirm that the

interpretations in the member checking documents of the data collected through interviews are correct. To improve the quality of data collected by me through semistructured interviews I, too, used the member checking process.

### **Data Collection Technique**

In qualitative research, researchers widely use semistructured interviews as a data collection technique (Ingham-Broomfield, 2015; Jamshed, 2014; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Researchers can conduct semistructured interviews over the phone, face-to-face, or online using the internet. The face-to-face interview method has many advantages over the telephonic and online methods (Ingham-Broomfield, 2015; Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Both verbal and nonverbal communication can occur in a face-to-face interview method. In face-to-face interview technique, researchers can clarify any doubts if participants are unclear about the question asked. Researchers can use prompts based on the responses to generate rich data (Irvine et al., 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The personal presence of the researcher during the interview may provide better emotional support to the participants and researchers, therefore, use the face-to-face interview method as a more ethical way of collecting research data (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). One of the disadvantages of the face-to-face method is that the interviewer's physical presence may negatively affect the participants and the data participants provide (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Compared to other methods the face-to-face method is costlier regarding time and money. For my study, I used semistructured face-to-face interviews as the data collection technique because this



technique is widely used and has several advantages. Please see Appendix A for the interview protocol.

One of the most useful tools to permanently record the interviews is an audio recorder (Whiting, 2008). Using an audio recorder frees the interviewer from writing down the participant responses. It is an excellent tool to use for the creation of accurate interview transcripts (Jamshed, 2014). A researcher should get used to the audio recording instrument before using it during the interviews. From an ethical perspective, researchers should seek participant permission before using the audio recorder (Zamawe, 2015). I used a digital audio recorder during the face-to-face interviews to record participant responses. I sought permission from the participants before using the audio recorder.

Documents are prepared as part of the institutional activity (Flick, 2014). Researchers can use company documents as a complementary strategy to other data collection methods like interviews. The advantage of documents is that researchers do not have to rely on any individual's memory while collecting data from documents. Data collected from documents is subject to researchers' interpretations (Flick, 2014). In their qualitative studies on branding; Cooper, Merrilees, and Miller (2015); Lai and Ooi (2015); and Lucarelli and Hallin (2015) collected qualitative data from company documents besides interviews. I solicited company documents from the SME owners and reviewed these for collecting qualitative data related to SME branding.

Member checking involves allowing members (participants) to check (validate) interpretations of the data that participants provided (Birt et al., 2016; Harvey, 2015;

Kornbluh, 2015). Member checking is better with interpreted data than with transcripts (Harvey, 2015). In member checking, researchers create interpretations of the collected data and present it to participants for verification during the member checking interviews (Birt et al., 2016). After I completed the first round of interviews with all the SME owners, I prepared the transcripts based on the audio recordings of the interviews. Based on the transcripts I prepared a synthesis of my interpretations of the data collected during the interviews and noted them in member checking documents. After the first round of interviews, I requested the SME owners for follow-up member checking interviews. During these subsequent interviews, I shared the member checking documents with the participants and requested them to validate the documents to ensure that I had correctly interpreted the data they had provided.

### **Data Organization Techniques**

Writing reflective journals is a strategy that enables reflexivity, whereby, researchers utilize their journal to probe personal assumptions and goals (Ortlipp, 2008). Reflective journals are a means to create transparency in the research process. The researcher's aim in using the reflective journal is to note the decisions and the thought process and experiences behind those decisions visible to the researcher (Ortlipp, 2008). I used the reflective journal to note my thoughts, assumptions, and experiences during the data collection process.

Researchers need to maintain the confidentiality of the participants and should carefully avoid using personal identifiers (Barnhill & Barnhill, 2015). I used pseudonyms in place of participant names to maintain confidentiality. SME1O1 for the first owner

from the first SME, SME2O1 for the owner from the second SME and so on. Researchers can use computer systems for storing the digital data collected during the research provided the computer be password-protected, has a good firewall, and uses antivirus software (Mealer & Jones, 2014). During interviews with the participants, I recorded the interviews using a digital audio recorder. I stored these digital files on my home use laptop. This laptop is password-protected, has a good firewall system, and has antivirus software. I kept this laptop in a safe and secure place in my home until I was using it for my doctoral study.

Using the digital audio recorder, I transcribed the interviews, and from the transcripts, I prepared the member checking documents. Please see Appendix B for interview documentation sheet details. The transcripts can be prepared using Microsoft Word software (Flick, 2014). I used the Word software to prepare the transcripts and the member checking documents. The member checking documents had left and right margins so that I could write notes during the member checking interviews.

All the paper documents generated during the research project should be stored in a locked file cabinet to maintain participant confidentiality (Mealer & Jones, 2014). After the approval by Walden's Chief Academic Officer (CAO), I will transfer all the digital data related to my doctoral study to an external hard drive. After this file transfer, I will delete all the digital data related to my doctoral study from my computer. I will store the external hard drive and the physical copies of the transcripts and the member checking documents in a locked file cabinet that will be accessible only to me. The documents and the hard drive will be stored for 5 years from the date of CAO approval. At the end of 5

years, I will shred the paper documents and will erase the data from the external hard drive.

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers can derive multiple perspectives of a phenomenon by using triangulation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Triangulation is of four types: methodological triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and data source triangulation (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). Methodological triangulation is of two types: within-method and between-method (Wilson, 2014). In within-method, a researcher uses two or more data collection procedures like interviews and documents to gather data. In between-method triangulation, researchers use both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection. I used within-method methodological triangulation in my doctoral study and collected data through interviews, company documents, and company websites.

Data analysis is one of the most complex phases of qualitative research (Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, & Casey, 2015). In their study on qualitative case study data analysis, Houghton et al. (2015) have explained analytical steps and process for data analysis. They have provided an analytical framework based on four stages: comprehending, synthesizing, theorizing, and recontextualizing. Houghton et al. have based their data analysis approach on the principles of content analysis method whereby researchers identify themes and patterns in qualitative data. I used this method in my doctoral study for data analysis. Following is a description of each stage as explained by Houghton et al.:

- **Comprehending** – This stage begins with broad coding. The *code* is a label assigned to the text of raw data (Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Le, 2014). In qualitative data analysis software NVivo, coding is done using structures known as *nodes* (Houghton et al., 2015). I used the NVivo 11 software for data analysis. The benefit of broad coding is that it helps a researcher to develop concepts. During the comprehending stage, researchers can also assign preestablished codes based on the research question (Houghton et al., 2015). For my data analysis phase, I imported all relevant data collected into NVivo to begin the coding process. I made use of the *tree nodes* in NVivo to develop a hierarchical relationship between nodes. Tree nodes can lead to conceptual clarity and identification of patterns in data (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). When the data set is large, researchers can begin with a provisional list of codes to make the coding process more manageable (Houghton et al., 2015).
- **Synthesizing** – In this stage researchers merge perceptions and cases to explain composite patterns. Researchers organize and code the data through a process known as pattern coding (Houghton et al., 2015). Another synthesizing strategy is writing *memos*. Memos are summary information based on the coding system and lead to the development of propositions about the data. I drafted a memo against each theme and each perspective using NVivo software.
- **Theorizing** - In this stage researchers develop a comprehensive and coherent account of the data through examination of the relationships between the various categories of data (Houghton et al., 2015). This stage does not necessarily lead to

the development of theory, but instead, researchers examine the relationships within the data. This stage is about ordering the memos and testing against the data executive summary statements made about the data. Researchers use memos to tie together different pieces of data into a recognizable group of concepts. In this stage, researchers arrange codes under broad themes.

- **Recontextualizing** – In this stage researchers develop propositions (Houghton et al., 2015). Researchers can compare findings with previous research to enhance the rigor of their research.

A *theme* is an element which enables a researcher to answer the research question (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016). Each theme may consist of subthemes that help a researcher to discover patterns in the data collected from participants. I chose the conceptual framework based on the central research question. I created the interview questions in the interview protocol based on the conceptual framework and the literature reviewed. Thus, the data collected through the interviews relate to the central research question and the conceptual framework. During the comprehending stage of data analysis, I read and reread the data collected to identify codes related to the conceptual framework. This coding process led to the development of themes related to the conceptual framework.

## **Reliability and Validity**

### **Reliability**

Researchers refer to reliability in quantitative research as dependability in qualitative research (Morse, 2015). Repetition of research leading to a similar set of

results ensures reliability and dependability refer to the stability of data (Cope, 2014; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Reflexivity proves the dependability aspect of qualitative research and refers to the researcher's expectations and thoughts including assumptions made consciously (Darawsheh, 2014). Reflexivity enables researchers to provide a rationale for their decisions (Darawsheh, 2014). I used a reflective diary that provides the rationale for decisions made and personal challenges experienced by me during my study. Use of a reflective diary has led to the improvement in the dependability of my study.

### **Validity**

Researchers refer to internal validity, external validity, and objectivity in quantitative research as credibility, transferability, and confirmability in qualitative research (Morse, 2015). Credibility in qualitative research depends on how believable the findings are (Morse, 2015). Researchers consider a qualitative study as credible when the readers who have had similar experiences immediately recognize the experiences of the research participants (Cope, 2014). One of the ways to improve credibility is to use triangulation (Morse, 2015). The primary purpose of triangulation is to ensure data is complete. When researchers collect data from multiple sources to present multiple perspectives about a phenomenon the process leads to the completeness of data (Houghton et al., 2013). Within-method type of methodological triangulation refers to collecting data from multiple sources (Carter et al., 2014). I used the within-method type of methodological triangulation to improve the credibility of my doctoral study. Besides

the interviews, I also collected data from company documents, SME websites, and SME social media networks.

Another method to improve credibility is to use member checking (Morse, 2015). Member checking refers to giving the transcribed interview or the interpretations of it to participants for verification (Morse, 2015). I conducted member-checking interviews with the participants during which I requested participants to confirm that my interpretations of the data collected from them through interviews were correct.

When readers can apply the research findings to other settings, then it leads to transferability (Cope, 2014). Researchers should provide sufficient information on the participants and the research context to enable the reader to assess the findings' capability of being transferable (Cope, 2014). To improve transferability researchers should provide thick descriptions (Houghton et al., 2013). I provided thick descriptions of the data collected so that my study is transferable. When researchers highlight participant responses without bringing in researcher bias, it is known as confirmability (Cope, 2014). One of the ways to improve confirmability is reflexivity (Houghton et al., 2013). I used a reflective diary to improve the confirmability of my doctoral study.

Considering the number of participants in the study by Horan et al. (2011), Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) and the findings from a study by Fusch and Ness (2015) that even six interviews may be enough for achieving data saturation, I collected data from six different SME owners using semistructured interviews until I reached data saturation point. Current researchers may choose a data collection technique that past researchers have used successfully to reach data saturation point (Fusch & Ness, 2015).



One of the ways in which researchers can achieve data saturation is through interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Both Horan et al. (2011) and Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) used qualitative multiple case study design with semistructured interviews for their research on SME branding. I, too, used this approach of collecting data through interviews for my study on SME branding.

Data saturation is not possible if researchers do not ask the same set of questions to multiple participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015). For my doctoral study, I asked the same set of questions to all the six SME owners. Researchers reach data saturation point when there are no new data, no new codes, and no new themes (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Thus, I continued to conduct interviews with SME owners until no new information, no new codes, and no new themes emerged. To reach data saturation, I also collected data from public records (e.g., about the Dubai SME industry and study participants), company documents provided by participants, SME websites, and SME social media networks.

### **Transition and Summary**

I chose the participants using a purposeful sampling technique. I obtained IRB approval before starting to collect data. I collected data from participants through semistructured interviews using the face-to-face method, and also collected data using company documents, company websites, and their social media networks. I used the analytical framework suggested by Houghton et al. (2015) for data analysis. This analytical framework is based on the principles of content analysis method for qualitative data analysis. I used techniques like methodological triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity to improve the reliability and validity of my doctoral study. In section 3, I

discussed the findings, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for future research and conclusion.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the branding strategies some successful service SME owners in Dubai use to improve the financial performance of their companies. I collected data from the owners of six medium-sized service enterprises located in Dubai. Five themes emerged from the analysis of data collected through face-to-face interviews based on a questionnaire. The themes were (a) SME owner is the personification of the brand, (b) SME owner decides the organizational structure for brand management, (c) internal branding, (d) use of the Internet for marketing and branding, and (e) innovative marketing strategies. One other relevant finding was about the significant barrier to branding. Results from my study confirm that despite their constraints on financial resources, SME owners can successfully implement branding as a long-term strategy to improve the financial performance of their SMEs.

#### **Presentation of the Findings**

The overarching research question of my study was *What branding strategies do some successful service SME owners in Dubai used to improve the financial performance of their companies?* Five themes emerged from the analysis of data collected through face-to-face interviews. A concept was considered a theme if it was part of the findings of at least three SMEs. The owners interviewed were from SMEs that were listed in the top 100 SME ranking list published by authorities at DSME over the last 5 years. One of the SMEs was a digital learning company, one was a computer security firm, one was a

leading fitness chain in Dubai, one was a media consulting firm, one was a car rental firm, and one was a leading restaurant chain in Dubai.

### **Theme 1: SME Owner is the Personification of the Brand**

Table 1 indicates the subthemes for Theme 1. The subthemes that emerged during data analysis were the following (a) owner's interpersonal interactions for branding and (b) the owner decided the company logo, tagline, internal and external brand documents. During the data collection interviews, 15 times participants discussed Theme 1. In Table 1, *N* represents the number of times participants discussed the subtheme.

Table 1

#### *Subthemes for Theme 1*

Subtheme	<i>N</i>	% frequency of occurrence
Owner's interpersonal interactions for branding	5	33.33
The owner decided the company logo, tagline, internal and external brand documents	10	66.67

*Note.* *N* = frequency.

Krake (2005) funnel model, which is the conceptual framework used in this doctoral study, indicated that the entrepreneur is often the personification of the brand and plays a direct role in communicating the brand externally. In my research, one of the SME owners had this to say:

I do not go directly to market my SME as such, but I give much information to the public through magazines, newspapers like Khaleej Times and Gulf News, TV, and radio channels. So automatically it becomes brand marketing. I mean

indirectly. It becomes a much better way than going to the public and saying come to us.

Data collected from the six SME owners in my research indicated that in all cases the SME owners played a significant role in communicating the brand both internally and externally.

SME owners are crucial for branding. Koporcic and Halinen (2018) also found that owners have a vital role to play in building the brand of their SMEs by personally influencing the perceptions about their firm through interpersonal interactions. When owners use such interpersonal interactions to build corporate identity and reputation of their SMEs, it is known as interactive network branding (Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). Koporcic and Halinen have categorized interpersonal interactions into three types.

- Internal interactions which occur between individuals within an SME.
- External interactions which occur between individuals who are not part of the SME.
- Boundary spanning interactions which occur between SME representatives (i.e., owner, salespeople) and representatives from other companies.

It is in the boundary spanning interactions that interactive network branding occurs.

During the early stages of an SME life cycle, the owner is responsible for building the SME brand, and his reputation decides the reputation of the SME (Koporcic & Halinen, 2018). Through the boundary spanning interactions, SME owners can build their corporate brand.

Entrepreneurs personify their brand through their personalities, unique skills, and customer relations, thus leading to the creation of the brand identity of their SME (Resnick et al., 2016). Razeghi et al. (2016) confirmed that in the case of SMEs, a brand is a combination of an entrepreneur's personal brand and company brand known as a total brand. Chang et al. (2018) confirmed that owners who are entrepreneurially oriented are more likely to take a long-term strategic view and become brand-oriented. Findings of research by Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) indicated that the entrepreneur is the visionary who focuses on brand building and identity creation, which is the starting point of the strategic brand building. These studies confirm that in the case of SME branding, the owner plays a vital role.

In all six cases in my study, the SME owners decided the branding strategies. For SME1, SME2, SME3, and SME6, the owners decided the brand logo, tagline, and even the URL of their company website. SME1O1 conveyed this:

When my partner and I started this firm, we decided the brand name and logo keeping in mind the vision that we had for the firm. We used the color green in our logo to represent the environment. We wanted our values to get reflected in our brand logo. We believe every firm should do a sustainable business and use the earth's resources wisely. We have a company policy of not to print brochures, and we email brochures in the digital format to our clients.

In the branding documents, SME1O1 explained that he chose the color blue in the company logo because it gives the impression of security and leads to trust in the brand.

As per the branding documents, SME101 also chose the color green in the company logo because it represents nature.

Dynamic capabilities and entrepreneurial competencies of SME owners are critical for the better performance of their firms (Hashim et al., 2018). Dynamic capabilities refer to the superior order capabilities to deal with change. Dynamic capabilities of the owner help the firm to do better than competitors (Hashim et al., 2018). Owners are a strategic resource of an SME and are core to the organizational performance. According to the resource-based view, the entrepreneur's competencies enhance not only firm performance but also ensure competitive advantage in a sustained manner (Hashim et al., 2018). Kennedy and Wright (2016) found that besides day-to-day business activities, owners must play an active role in brand success. Thus, for the branding of an SME, the owner is a critical factor.

## **Theme 2: SME Owner's Influence on the Company Structure for Brand**

### **Management**

Krake (2005) funnel model indicates that the SME owners decide the structure of their organization for brand management. They may appoint marketing personnel for brand management (Krake, 2005). Data collected from all six SME owners indicated that SME owners appointed people to do brand management specifically. In all cases, the SME owners recruited new employees, not at the beginning phase, but later stages as the company grew in revenue and profits.

SME1 and SME6 owners informed that after 5 years of operation they decided to hire a marketing manager to look after marketing and branding. The SME2 owner also

decided to hire a marketing manager for branding after several years of operation. In the case of SME3, owner's daughter joined the firm, and one of her responsibilities is to manage branding. For SME4 and SME5 the owners still take care of branding but have appointed employees in 2018 to take care of their Facebook and Instagram accounts respectively. SME1, SME2, SME3, and SME6 are firms that are more than 10 years old. SME4 and SME5 are firms older than 5 years but less than 10 years. Thus, in all six cases, the SME owners influenced the organizational structure for brand management.

Table 2 denotes the subthemes for Theme 2.

Table 2

*Subthemes for Theme 2*

Subtheme	<i>N</i>	% frequency of occurrence
Staffing	7	77.78
Organizational change	2	22.22

*Note.* *N* = frequency.

SME owners influence the organizational structure of their SMEs and are not likely to recruit many new resources during the initial stages (Escrivao Filho, Albuquerque, Nagano, Junior, & De Oliveira, 2017; Zakaria et al., 2018). Escrivao Filho et al. (2017) identified four life cycle stages of an SME. The *genesis* stage is the first stage when an owner starts the SME based on a business idea (Escrivao Filho et al., 2017). The second stage is known as the stage of *existence* (Escrivao Filho et al., 2017). During the second stage, search for consumers and market share begins. During the third stage of *survival*, the SME owner has managed to satisfy customers and has positive cash



flow (Escrivao Filho et al., 2017). During the last stage of *growth*, the SME grows in profitability or size (Escrivao Filho et al., 2017). It is during the third stage that the SME owner decides to slowly change and increase his organizational structure and recruit specialized resources (Escrivao Filho et al., 2017).

The type of resources the SME owner recruits during the first two stages of the SME life cycle are likely to be generalists (AlSharji et al., 2018). During the third stage, the owner can afford to recruit specialized resources because of the improved financial position (Albuquerque, Escrivao Filho, Nagano, & Junior, 2016). However, if the owners are not willing to redesign their organizational structure starting from the third stage, then it could lead to failure of the SME (Albuquerque et al., 2016).

One of the functions of the SME owners is resource leveraging (Hoque, 2018). Owners should analyze the use of existing resources and decide when they should recruit new resources for identified needs. In regard to the addition of new resources, Odoom, Narteh, and Rand (2017) found that having additional resources for SME branding does not ensure optimum benefits unless the SME owner properly integrates these new resources with well-coordinated branding efforts. The SME owners should thus recruit specialized resources to take care of branding as the firm's profitability improves and owners should adequately integrate these new resources.

### **Theme 3: Internal Branding**

As per the Krake (2005) funnel model, the SME owner should do internal branding for building brand awareness among employees. Erkmen and Hancer (2015) have confirmed the importance of internal branding for better service delivery and

enhancing brand trust through employees. According to Anees-ur-Rehman et al. (2018), internal brand communication is crucial if the SME owner wishes to establish positive brand relationships with customers. As corporate brand value is a promise between the firm and its key external stakeholder groups, internally, the employees must understand this and deliver consistently while interacting with customers (Li et al., 2018).

SME101 informed me that he had created company documents to make employees aware of what their brand means. In the branding documents of the company, SME101 has explained in detail what the company logo represents. The document also indicates in detail the owner's vision, mission, and values. This owner informed the following:

We have monthly meetings, and in each of these meetings, I begin the meeting by telling my team what the firm stands for and what our brand means. I find this as an excellent method to ensure we are all aligned.

Thus, the SME owner must make the employees aware of the importance of brand management.

Another owner conveyed that employee welfare is of utmost importance. His firm has won awards for their human resource policies. He invests a lot in employee's technical training because he wants his employees to be at their best when they are providing solutions to customers or attending to service support calls. This owner conveyed that "My staff is trained to serve the customers with three service focuses in mind - care, product knowledge, and efficiency." Thus, SME owners must give importance to employee welfare and training.

For a service SME, employees play a critical role and are directly responsible for service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty, and competitive advantage of the SME (Chung & D'Annunzio-Green, 2018). Therefore, one of the roles of the SME owner is talent management. Motivated and talented employees reciprocate by being committed and loyal, and therefore there is less attrition. Compensation can be in the form of training and development opportunities providing job fulfillment. Chung and D'Annunzio-Green (2018) confirmed that in case of some SMEs, owners allow employees to pursue personal interests within the business because talented employees play a significant role in representing the brand and benefiting the organization. Table 3 denotes the subthemes for internal branding found during data analysis of my study.

Table 3

*Subthemes for Theme 3*

Subtheme	<i>N</i>	% frequency of occurrence
Organizational culture	6	23.08
Employee behavior	3	11.54
Employee training	13	50.00
Internal communication	4	15.38

*Note.* *N* = frequency.

One of the owners built a caring atmosphere at his SME. When customers enter his SME, there is not one but two front desk receptionists who, combined, can speak five languages. The owner of this SME informed that his employees are all highly trained in taking good care of the customers. One of the customers was so pleased with the services

rendered by the SME employees that he wrote a book in praise of the SME. The author of this book also collected feedback from other customers and has documented all the feedback in the book. The SME owner uses this book to share with potential customers as a first step to build brand trust with them.

Organizational culture has a strong influence on branding. Hoque (2018) found there is a strong association between organizational culture of an SME and its brand performance. Rashid and Ghose (2015) confirmed that SME owners could use internal branding to build a brand-oriented organizational culture in an SME. Organizational culture consists of the following four elements (Rashid & Ghose, 2015):

- Symbol – This refers to pictures, logos, or tagline that represent a meaning.
- Heroes – A hero can be human, a role model, a figure; alive or dead, real or fantasy. In the case of SMEs, the owner can be the role model that employees can look up to for motivation.
- Rituals – These are daily acts as practiced by the owner and the employees, such as how everyone respects each other.
- Values – These are morals and principles as practiced by the owner and the employees.

Together these four elements shape the organizational culture. Rashik and Ghose found that for many SME owners having employees with the right personality was very important to ensure employees fit well with the organizational culture.

SME owners must not neglect to invest in their staff to ensure alignment between the employees and the brand vision (Lim & Louken, 2010). Through external

communications such as choice of logo, colors, and tagline SME owners convey to the outside world as to who they are. However, an essential aspect of the branding process is the internal staff who contribute to branding from what they do within the firm (Liu, Ko, & Chapleo, 2017). Employees of the company work in the background as a team and must first believe in the brand to be able to represent it well.

Internal branding includes human resource management, corporate culture, and internal communications (Lim & Louken, 2010). SME owners must focus on the staff because they are the ones who deliver the brand experience. Negative corporate culture can result to staff demonstrating poor attitudes in the work environment and could lead to employees themselves bad mouthing the brand. Internal branding must begin with the employees. A highly motivated staff can influence strong positive support for the SME brand (Lim & Louken, 2010).

SME4O1 informed that daily he engages with his employees to ensure they are not facing any issues. He has built a professional atmosphere at his office, all his employees are aware of what the brand promise is, and they are all aware of how their roles could affect brand delivery. SME4O1 informed that his employees consider his firm as a family because of the corporate culture that he has built. SME4O1 said the following:

My staff is well trained. Whenever they attend client meetings, and clients inform them that they are facing business issues and need a solution, my staff knows what they need to deliver. They come up with a plan, discuss with me, together we agree upon it, and then they deliver the solution to the client. They have a

clear mindset that the client's problem is their problem and they have to resolve it at an optimum cost.

As part of internal branding, SME owners must build a brand oriented culture in their firm and also communicate with employees.

SME owners should engage and involve employees so that they feel like they have a stake in the collective future. Lack of communication by the SME owners and their failure to align the employees with the brand vision can be one of the reasons for employees leaving the firm (Tuominen et al., 2016). Rather than the remuneration package, it is the lack of supervisory support to employees which is the main reason for staff resignations. In the case of SMEs, the owners must themselves walk the talk for any initiative to be implemented successfully (Lim & Louken, 2010). SME owners must use internal branding to improve the performance of the brand. In all the six cases the SME owners have created a positive culture within the firm, have done internal branding, and have ensured there is alignment between the employees and the brand.

Effective communication with employees is an essential aspect of human resource management which helps employees remain focused and productive (Lechuga Sancho et al., 2018). Research by Chung and D'Annunzio-Green (2018) indicates that it is essential that SME owners communicate well with their employees. When owners effectively transfer information within the SME, employees can become part of the owner's vision, mission, values, reduces hierarchical barriers through transparency, and employees may generate ideas through better participation (Lechuga Sancho et al., 2018).

#### **Theme 4: Use of the Internet for Marketing and Branding**

One of the components of the Krake funnel model is the marketing activities carried out by SME owners. Krake (2005) revealed his research findings, which indicated that many SME owners used the Internet for marketing and branding. I, too, found that the SME owners who participated in my research are using Internet tools for marketing and branding. SME5 owner conveyed that his firm relied a lot on word-of-mouth marketing. The SME5 owner had this to say: “Internet has changed the way we do our business advertising and reach out to customers. We are now able to publish information at a rapid pace and a lower cost”. SME5 owner revamped his website a few years back, and customers can now share their feedback online after they experience the service provided by the firm. During the interviews, 30 times participants mentioned about Theme 4 (see Table 4).

Table 4

##### *Subthemes for Theme 4*

Subtheme	<i>N</i>	% frequency of occurrence
Using a company website for branding	8	26.67
Using a company website for marketing	7	23.33
Using social media for branding	10	33.33
Using social media for marketing	5	16.67

*Note.* *N* = frequency.

All six SME owners have built a good website as a starting point to attract customers. I reviewed all these websites and these websites have a very professional look

and feel. All the six SME owners I interviewed confirmed that they use search engine optimization as a tool to increase the visibility of their SMEs when users search for information online. Research also confirms this trend of Internet use. The focus has now shifted from the product, price, promotion, and place (the 4 P's) to engage, equip, and empower (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Abu Bakar, 2018). Companies need to engage with customers online by listening to what they like and dislike (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Abu Bakar, 2018). SME owners can use social media tools like Twitter and Facebook for this purpose.

All six SME owners from my study use Facebook as part of their social media strategy. SME1 and SME2 owners also use LinkedIn, not only to attract customers but also to attract potential employees who are interested in joining the company. The SME2 owner had this to say:

When potential customers are planning to procure our services they are looking for accurate information that will help them in their decision-making. Besides their internal sources, they also look to gather information about our firm from external sources. Our company website and LinkedIn are the tools potential customers rely on to gather their information about us.

SME1 and SME2 encourage potential customers who visit their website to subscribe to SME owners' newsletters by requesting potential customers to share their email id for this purpose.

The fitness chain SME is also present on community forums related to fitness in Dubai where people have queries about their fitness. The fitness chain owner has



appointed a person who monitors these forums and provides appropriate responses. The media consultancy firm's owner has appointed an employee on a full-time basis to take care of the Facebook account. He had this to say: "Internet has been a game changer for us. I use Facebook not only to promote my firm and its brand positioning but also to launch new ad campaigns for our customers". One of the owners uses Instagram to promote his firm in social media. He has also employed a dedicated staff member to look after the company's Instagram account. He conveyed that "Instagram has helped us expand our market and has also enabled brand awareness of my company. It is an inexpensive but reliable tool for us to market ourselves to our customers".

As per the Arab Social Media Report, Facebook is the number one social media platform (90%) used in the Middle East followed by Whatsapp (82%) and then Instagram with 56% usage (Salem, 2017). SME owners are using Facebook as a low-cost marketing tool to drive engagement and to build brand awareness (Ainin et al., 2015). All six medium-sized service SME owners I interviewed have rightly chosen Facebook as their number one social media strategy for marketing and branding. In its 2014 report on the state of SMEs in Dubai, authorities at DSME informed that among 144 countries UAE has a high rank of 30 regarding the use of information and communication technologies. The use of the Internet is more prevalent among service firms as compared to manufacturing and trading firms (Dubai SME, 2014). The surveyors at Google ranked the United Arab Emirates at number one position in global smartphone penetration at a rate of 73.8% (Nelson, 2016). Thus, it is appropriate on the part of SME owners to leverage the Internet and other social media tools as a low-cost option for marketing and branding.

Several researchers have confirmed that social media usage is an effective and low-cost option for SME branding (Cheng & Shiu, 2018; Crammond et al., 2018). Ahmad, Abu Bakar, and Ahmad (2018) did a research on social media usage in SMEs from the United Arab Emirates and found that it is not only cost effective but the technical requirements for its usage are minimal. Social media use has become popular among SMEs in the United Arab Emirates. However, to gain benefits from social media usage, SME owners should have a proper strategy in place and must be clear as to why they are using it else its use will not aid in improving business performance (Ahmad, Abu Bakar, & Ahmad, 2018). AlSharji et al. (2018) have also confirmed this aspect of social media usage.

The findings from my study indicate that SME owners are using multiple online media for marketing and branding. According to Dong et al. (2018); online media synergy can help improve branding and also customer's purchase intentions. Online broadcast media refers to banner advertisements and online video which could be embedded in company websites. Online interactive media refers to social media such as blogs, microblogs, and social network services (Dong et al., 2018). When SME owners provide multiple online media messages to customers, customers perceive these multiple media to be independent sources of information thereby further enhancing the persuasiveness of the information. The increased persuasiveness of information improves brand credibility which also improves consumer purchase intentions (Dong et al., 2018). As compared to the use of single online media with repeated information, synergistic

used of multiple online media has better branding effect. Thus, SME owners using multiple online media should plan to use them synergistically.

### **Theme 5: Innovative Marketing Strategies**

In SMEs, the budget for marketing is insufficient, and therefore SME owners should be creative while deciding their marketing strategy (Krake, 2005). SME2 and SME4 conveyed that they got many clients through word-of-mouth referrals. Word of mouth is a very influential marketing tool and has a significant influence on consumer behavior (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Abu Bakar, 2018). In a global survey by McKinsey 92% reported trusting word of mouth from family and friends. The study findings also indicated that around 50% of consumers regarded word of mouth as the primary factor in their decisions to purchase (Ahmad, Ahmad, & Abu Bakar, 2018). SME2 and SME4 have greatly benefited from this low-cost marketing tool.

DSME authorities ranked SME1 and SME2 in the top 100 SME list during the last 5 years. After this recognition, both SME1 and SME2 owners collaborated with large consultancy firms of world repute to participate in marketing events. These collaborations have helped the SME owners to gain greater brand recognition and also attracted many new customers. In the firm's internal branding documents SME1O1 mentioned that one of his long-term objectives was to accomplish joint marketing opportunities with large consultancy firms to improve marketing and branding.

The owner of the fitness chain frequently appears in talk shows on radio and TV in Dubai to talk about common fitness issues. He also writes articles for newspapers and magazines in Dubai. This way he markets himself and his firm. The owner of the car

rental company has found an innovative way to make a car available to serve the customer within 15 minutes. This owner informed that “Other car rental agencies take between half an hour to one hour to arrange for a pickup, but we get it done within 15 minutes”. This owner uses the company website to market this benefit to the customer.

The findings of my study confirm that SME owners use word of mouth, networking, and also take help of business partners to cocreate their brand. Franco (2018) concluded that entrepreneurial SME owners use the tool of networking for better performance and achieving high growth. Networking is a long-term relationship developed between firms to obtain information, support, and resources. In the case of B2B SMEs, the corporate brand image and brand cocreative actions depend on the role of business partners (Tormala & Saraniemi, 2018). Cocreative influence between the SME and its partners positively affects the brand image, directly and indirectly, through the touchpoints of customer service and communication (Tormala & Saraniemi, 2018). This is in line with the strategy adopted by SME1 and SME2 owners. Table 5 indicates the subthemes for Theme 5.

Table 5

*Subthemes for Theme 5*

Subtheme	<i>N</i>	% frequency of occurrence
Word of mouth marketing	8	61.54
Networking with bigger brands	3	23.08
Owner appearing on TV and radio	2	15.38

*Note.* *N* = frequency.

**Other Relevant Finding: Barrier to Branding**

Krake (2005) funnel model indicates that the lack of a budget hinders the marketing and branding activities of SMEs. Horan et al. (2011) also found that budgetary constraints affect SME branding activities. SME owners have financial constraints, especially during the initial stages of the life cycle of the SME which prevents them from initiating many developmental activities (Bagh, Arif, Liaqat, & Razzaq, 2017; Wong et al., 2018).

In response to question number seven, all the SME owners informed that the most significant barrier that they faced for branding was lack of financial resources. Two of the owners informed that their total branding and marketing budget was two percent of their annual sales turnover. One of the owners conveyed the following:

One of the challenges that we face in branding is the lack of funding for specific events where we wish to be but unfortunately we can't, or it could be certain magazines they ask for sponsorship fund to cover the printing and the branding cost but that can be a bit difficult for us whereas other large organizations are easily able to do this because they have huge funds.

During the initial stages of SME life cycle, the owners have to manage to fund from internal resources rather than taking loans from banks (Bagh et al., 2017). SME owners prefer not to take loans from banks because if they do, banks start dictating their policies and owners do not like to lose control of their SME. Also, the rate of interest on loans given to SME owners is very high which discourages many owners from taking loans (Wong et al., 2018). Bagh et al. (2017) found that in Pakistan financial institutions

provide interest-free loans to SME owners because of their Islamic laws but in return, these financial institutions demand mortgage which is two times the loan amount, and this prevents SME owners from taking loans.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The findings of the research study by Gundala and Khawaja (2014) indicate that SME owners in Dubai do not practice branding strategies and believe that the use of the branding strategies is insignificant to the success of SMEs. Many of the Dubai SME owners do not understand the importance of branding for firm performance (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). Most owners in Dubai have limited knowledge of brand management, and the most progressive of them only focus on networking to gain information (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). Dubai SME owners need to change their mindset toward branding. Though there are substantial barriers to the success of branding in SMEs, the attitude of the owner is crucial for building a strong brand (Biraghi & Gambetti, 2015; Odoom, Narteh, & Boateng, 2017).

The findings of my study confirm that there are SME owners in Dubai who know that strong brand building does not always call for significant investments. The SME owners I interviewed confirm that branding has helped them improve the financial performance of their SMEs. This is in line with findings of Tuominen et al. (2016) who found a strong association between branding and financial performance of SMEs. Anees-Rehman et al. (2018) and Chang et al. (2018) found that even in the case of B2B SMEs branding is beneficial.

To design successful marketing and branding programs, SME owners could use the findings of my study. The findings of my study could also help them have appropriate attitude and opinion towards SME branding. The findings of my study depict how branding is essential for SMEs, particularly in the service industry. This is in line with findings of Prentice and Wong (2016) who confirmed that in the case of intangible services, strong brands enhance the trust of consumers. Not only external branding but internal branding too is beneficial for SME owners. This aligns with the findings of Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) who confirmed the importance of internal branding for firm performance.

Each of the themes presented in the Presentation of the Findings indicates the steps SME owners can adopt in their day-to-day activities which can lead to strong brand development. The owner is the personification of the brand and is all controlling using his unique skills to establish customer relationship and brand identity. The SME owner influences the company structure during each of the four stages of the SME life cycle by recruiting the specific type of resources required and integrating them properly to achieve profitability. Internal branding helps to set up strong brand relationships with customers. Human resource plays a crucial role in the brand management, and owners must train frontline employees to understand customers enabling them to deliver the brand promise. Internal branding efforts help to improve employee performance and thereby enhancing brand trust.

The findings of my study indicate that the use of social media presents a cost-effective option to financially constrained SME owners for marketing and branding.

Social media and other online tools enable owners to save time and also help to reduce the barriers of geographic distances while establishing a brand. Unlike print media which is a one-way communication, in social media, the bonus is that customers have a forum for interaction. In social media, customers not only provide accurate information of what they need but also interact and cocreate a brand. Apart from associating with an active business partner (i.e., a bigger company), the SME owner should employ the services of specialist personnel for managing the brand as the company grows. SME owners can use innovative marketing strategies and affordable means of communication to build their brand.

### **Implications for Social Change**

An SME entrepreneur can promote customer-oriented behavior among service staff and influence external perceptions through internal branding activities. Through proper measures of acquisition, motivation, and retention of the staff the brand owner trains a happy workforce who ensure high service performance. More investment of time and effort in staff and better communication aligns employee perceptions with the broad vision, mission, and values of the SME owner. Prioritization of the customer service through empowered employees helps to resolve customer service issues efficiently by being alert to complaints. High service quality offered to the customers through prompt attention creates a favorable service ethos and a positive work ambiance. Correct brand management can thus lead to customer delight and thereby create social value.

The Dubai government through its Center for Responsible Business supports and promotes socially responsible activities and sustainability among Dubai SME owners



(Dubai Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 2014). DCCI also encourages SME owners in Dubai to take up strategic, socially responsible activities, for example, volunteering with a philanthropic organization like *Dubai Cares*. Dubai Cares is an organization based in Dubai that makes primary education accessible to underprivileged children in Dubai and other developing countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa (Goby & Nickerson, 2016). Supporting these children can enrich the lives of these children once they finish their education. When the SME brand owners align responsible business practices of the company to customer service excellence, it leads to becoming a better and profitable business. This could encourage SME owners to take up socially responsible activities in line with Dubai government initiatives. Also, SME owners can incorporate eco-friendly solutions and services thereby increasing their focus on social initiatives.

### **Recommendations for Action**

As owners are a crucial factor behind the success of their SMEs, they should be passionate about their brand. The SME owner should create a brand name and logo to create a distinct identity for the brand. The SME owner must create company documents to highlight the brand vision, mission, and values so that internally there is an alignment between the brand and all the employees. SME organizations have a small number of employees, and often customers interact directly with the SME owner. The SME owner should, therefore, act as a personification of the brand leading to organizational success. The SME owner should participate in public relation activities that will feature the entrepreneur and the SME thereby giving a fillip to the brand, all the while projecting the vision, mission, and values of the organization.

During the initial stages of the life cycle of the SME, the owner may take care of branding activities. However, as the SME sales revenues increase and there is positive cash flow, the owner must employ full-time specialist employees to take care of branding as done by some of the owners in my research. The SME owners should align the brand within the company. They must ensure employees are customer-centric and they are empowered to take correct decisions while implementing branding activities. For this critical aspect, the SME owner may wish to train and coach front-line employees suitably. Internal branding is essential if the employees have to give considerable attention, loyalty, and commitment at each stage of the company's growth. Through internal branding, employees must become committed to delivering the brand promise.

SME owners must use online media to promote their brand. If possible, they should have full-time employees to monitor social media sites to comprehend better what the customers want and whether customers are satisfied with the brand. Facebook is the number one choice of all SME owners I interviewed. It is the most widely used social media tool by customers in Dubai, and therefore all SME owners should at least use Facebook for marketing and branding. SME owners who have their own company website should use the search engine optimization tool to improve their digital presence when customers do an online search. SME owners must ensure synergy between the multiple online media that they use to improve branding and also customer's purchase intention.

SME owners should promote a brand culture that leads to high word-of-mouth advocacy rates which are a useful tool as shown by past research. Cocreation of brands is

also a tool which owners can adopt, especially B2B SMEs. For this SME owners should tie up with more prominent corporate brands to strengthen their own SME brand. SME1 and SME2 from my research are successfully using this strategy. Despite financial constraints, SME owners must focus on branding as a long-term strategy because the ultimate benefits of having a strong brand outweigh the immediate costs.

The SME6 owner shared with me the secret of his success. His suggestions were:

- Be consistent in your brand messages. Krake (2005) also advocated this practice.
- Be consistent with your brand values.
- Listening to your customers is very important.
- Stick to your core competency. This is in line with the Krake (2005) guideline which suggests that SME owners should focus on creating one (or two) strong brands.

The findings and recommendations of my research may apply to SMEs of all sizes and sectors. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first research done at a doctoral level that focuses on SME branding in Dubai. SME owners, marketing managers, and brand managers from Dubai SMEs should pay attention to the research findings of my study. These findings and recommendations could also be helpful to SME owners, marketing managers, and brand managers from other Gulf regions. SME owners who are not doing branding at all and SME owners who are already doing branding can gain a better perspective by paying attention to the findings of this research because I have based my conclusions on the branding strategies used by owners of some of the top

SMEs in Dubai. I plan to collaborate with authorities at DSME and share the findings of my research with SME owners through conference presentations and personal training.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

From my study of the literature what I understand is that SME branding is an under-researched area. My doctoral study is the first research towards understanding the branding strategies of SMEs in Dubai. One of the limitations of my study is that I considered owners of only medium-sized service SMEs as participants and I did not include SME owners from manufacturing and trading sectors. Further study may be done to examine variations in branding strategies across enterprise sizes (i.e., small and medium) and all business sectors (i.e., manufacturing, services, and trading) as these dynamics can lead to disparities in strategic action and outcome concerning brand building and brand management practices. Just as SME size and sector matters, ownership type (family, cooperative, and state ownership), gender, and age of SME owners may affect branding strategies and further research can be done to understand this. The SME owners who agreed to participate in my study were successfully running their business for more than 5 years. It will be of great academic interest to understand what branding strategies SME owners in Dubai use whose SMEs have just been started or are less than 5 years old. In my doctoral study, I used cross-sectional data from only one emirate (i.e., Dubai) which is another limitation of my study. Future research can be done to understand SME branding strategies of other emirates of United Arab Emirates which will be of immense help to SME owners in the Gulf region. I hope marketing doctoral students, mainly from the United Arab Emirates, will take up this challenge.

## **Reflections**

The objective of my research was to explore the branding strategies of medium-sized service SME owners in Dubai. As I reflect on my DBA journey, I find that it was entirely a process of persistence and reassertions of my convictions. The task seemed difficult sometimes as seen in the couple of breaks I had to take. However, I continued to keep my focus on the target. As SMEs are a significant platform for any economy, I presumed that getting data on SMEs in Dubai would be relatively easy.

Contrary to this presumption it was not only difficult to get data but also challenging to get literature on SMEs in Dubai. Because of the guidance from my mentor, I changed the initial conceptual framework selected to the current funnel model which I found after an intensive search. I now find this conceptual framework more relevant to my study, and I am thankful to my mentor for guiding me. After having read much literature on SMEs and having interviewed SME owners in Dubai, my perspectives towards SMEs have changed, and I am now able to empathize better with their problems. A valuable lesson from my DBA journey is that proper planning can help to prevent any frustration doctoral students usually expect during a research process.

## **Conclusion**

Many SME owners in Dubai do not give importance to branding because they are either not aware of the branding strategies or have insufficient knowledge (Gundala & Khawaja, 2014). During my research, I interviewed owners of six different successful SMEs who were ranked in the top 100 by the authorities of DSME and understood their branding strategies. Despite financial constraints, it is possible for SME owners to

implement branding as a long-term strategy. It is essential for entrepreneurs to give priority to branding. Entrepreneurs should not underestimate their role in achieving brand recognition. They should focus on one brand to build awareness instead of developing several lesser-known brands. It is essential to have a brand logo to create a distinct brand identity. In today's digital world, SME owners should not ignore the role of the Internet and social media for brand development. Good branding strategy is not only beneficial for SME revenue growth but can also lead to happy employees and greater customer delight.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

First Round of Interviews	
Script before the interview:	<p>I would like to thank you once again for agreeing to participate in my study. As mentioned in the consent form, the purpose of my research is to explore the branding strategies that some successful service SME owners in Dubai use to improve the financial performance of their SMEs. This interview may last for 60 minutes during which I will ask you questions about the branding strategies used by you at your SME.</p> <p>I had earlier emailed you the consent form for information. Here are two hard copies of the same. Please let me know if you have questions. ___Yes ___No</p> <p>If no: As you have agreed to participate in my study, please sign the consent form and return one copy to me.</p> <p>Are you ok with me audio recording the interview? ___Yes ___No If yes: Thanks! Please let me know if you want me to switch of the audio recorder at any time. If no: Thanks for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.</p> <p>Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? (Discuss questions if any). If any questions arise at any time during this interview, please let me know, and I will be happy to answer them.</p>
Interview questions:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) What branding strategies do you use?</li> <li>2) How have you assessed the success of your branding strategies?</li> <li>3) Please explain the role your staff members play to create a positive perception of your brand in the minds of your customers.</li> <li>4) What marketing activities do you undertake to achieve brand recognition?</li> <li>5) What methods of communication do you use for branding?</li> <li>6) What strategies do you use to cultivate a passion for the brand</li> </ol>

	<p>within your company (internal branding)?</p> <p>7) How did you address the critical barriers to managing and developing your brand?</p> <p>8) How do you create a brand identity among your target customers?</p> <p>9) What else do you wish to add to your company's branding strategy?</p>
Script after the interview questions are asked:	Thank you for answering all the questions. I will create the interpretations of your responses and will meet you again for the member checking interviews. These follow-up interviews will not last more than 20 minutes.
<b>Member Checking Interviews</b>	
Script before the interview:	<p>Thank you for agreeing to meet me again. Here is a copy of the member checking documents which include the interpretations of your earlier responses. Please review them and let me know if my interpretations are correct or if you want to add something more to your earlier responses.</p> <p>(Hand over the member checking documents to the participant for validation).</p>
Script after the interview:	<p>Has the participant shared additional information during the member checking interview? ___yes ___No</p> <p>If yes: Thanks for reviewing the member checking documents. I will complete my interpretations of your responses and will schedule another member checking interview which will not last more than 20 minutes.</p> <p>If no: Thanks for reviewing the member checking documents. I will share a copy of the summary of the findings for your information after my research is over.</p>

## Appendix B: Interview Documentation Sheets

The interview documentation sheets had the following information at the top of the document (Flick, 2014):

Date of the interview:  
Place of the interview:  
Duration of the interview:  
Interviewer:  
Indicator for the interviewee:

I used this information at the top of the transcripts and the member checking documents as it enabled me to keep the documents organized. All the transcripts and member checking documents end with the following line:

\*\*\*\*\*End of interview\*\*\*\*\*

Adding this line helped to denote the end of the interview for each transcript and the related member checking document.