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# **Importer Brand Orientation and Typologies: Extending the Resource-Based View (RBV) in International Marketing**

## **Abstract**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face internationalization challenges due to limited resources and capabilities, positioning importer partnerships as critical for brand building. Yet, the importer's role in international marketing strategy remains underexplored although findings indicate that the importer has not only a complementary role, but a key role in the dyadic relationship in implementing marketing strategies.

Extending the resource-based view (RBV) (Barney 1991; Dyer and Singh 1998), this study explores brand-building patterns of importers in export–import relationships and the factors influencing them, providing exporting SMEs a foundation for leveraging brand collaboration with international partners. The study is based on a qualitative case study of a medium-sized German firm with export activities in more than 80 countries, offering rich insights into a medium-sized firm with scarce resources and a large international partner network.

The findings categorize importers as distributors, brand executors, and brand builders, demonstrating how brand orientation shapes brand-building patterns of importers. The study advances international marketing literature by moving beyond exporter-centric views, offering a structured typology approach to understanding importer brand-building patterns, and a theoretical framework and practical guidance to both researchers and brand owners in exporting firms to leverage importer brand collaboration.

## **Keywords**

International business

International brand building

Importers perspective

Extended resource-based view

Brand-building typology

## **Congress tracks**

International Marketing

Marketing Strategy

## **Introduction**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute the backbone of the European economy (Commission et al. 2023), yet internationalization remains particularly challenging for them due to constrained resources, limited market knowledge, and reduced power compared to larger firms (Brouthers, Nakos, and Dimitratos 2015; Chandra, Paul, and Chavan 2020; Gilmore 2020; Goncalves et al. 2024; Paul, Parthasarathy, and Gupta 2017). To overcome these liabilities, exporting SMEs rely on foreign partners to access critical knowledge, extend capabilities, and enhance competitiveness in international markets (Bocconcelli et al. 2018; Zahoor et al. 2020).

Brands constitute a strategic intangible resource for internationalizing SMEs, especially in industries with minimal product differentiation, brands provide a unique and inimitable competitive identity (Chang, Fong, and Chang 2024; Hooley et al. 2005; Odoom, Narteh, and Boateng 2017; Renton et al. 2016).

However, in export-led internationalization, brand outcomes are not exclusively determined by the exporter; they are significantly shaped by importer partners who act as brand custodians in their local markets (Pegan, Vianelli, and de Luca 2020; Pyper and Doherty 2022). Despite this, the importer's role in international brand building has been largely overlooked, with prevailing research maintaining an exporter-centric perspective (Aykol and Leonidou 2018; Leonidou et al. 2014; Pyper and Doherty 2022).

This study addresses this gap by conceptualising importers as strategic brand resources in export-import collaborations. Extending the RBV (Barney 1991; Dyer and Singh 1998), it explores brand-building patterns of importers in export–import relationships and the factors influencing them, providing exporting SMEs a foundation for leveraging brand collaboration with international partners.

Based on a qualitative case study of a medium-sized German firm with export activities in more than 80 countries, the findings introduce a typology that classifies importers as distributors, brand executors, and brand builders, demonstrating how brand orientation shapes their brand-building activities. This research advances international marketing strategy literature by highlighting importers as strategic resources for internationalizing resource-constrained firms, thereby demonstrating the relevance of the extended RBV to the domain of export–import brand collaborations. By shifting the analytical lens from the exporter to the importer, this research provides actionable guidance for SMEs seeking to leverage importer collaboration to achieve competitive brand advantage.

## **Theoretical background**

SMEs represent 99% of all businesses in the European Union, generate 85% of new jobs, and are expected to drive major economic growth through international expansion (Commission et al. 2023). Yet, internationalizing SMEs face greater entry challenges than larger firms due to constrained resources, limited market knowledge, capabilities, and power (Brouthers et al. 2015; Chandra et al. 2020; Gilmore 2020; Goncalves et al. 2024)

To overcome these liabilities, export-led SMEs have to collaborate with foreign partners (Bocconcelli et al. 2018; Zahoor et al. 2020), thus gaining access to critical knowledge and co-developing idiosyncratic resources that enhance competitiveness and performance in international markets (Zahoor et al. 2020; Zahoor et al. 2022). Collaborative internationalization constitutes a competitive advantage for resource-constrained SMEs, as combining internal and external network resources may place them in a superior position and

enhance foreign market performance (Child, Karmowska, and Shenkar 2022; Musteen, Datta, and Butts 2014; Nakos, Dimitratos, and Elbanna 2019; Zahoor et al. 2020).

For internationalizing SMEs, brands represent a valuable intangible strategic resource, especially in contexts where product differentiation is minimal (Abimbola, 2001; Merrilees and Abimbola, 2007; Renton *et al.*, 2016; Odoom, Narteh and Boateng, 2017; Chang, Fong and Chang, 2024). As the firm's most valuable intangible asset, branding represents a complex, high-level marketing capability (Merrilees and Frazer, 2013) that yields a unique and ownable identity difficult to imitate, transfer, or copy (Hooley *et al.*, 2005), while enhancing competitive advantage and firm performance (Day, 1994; Shah, 2015; Chang, Fong and Chang, 2024; Ghasempour Ganji and Kazemi, 2024; Juntunen, 2025).

Consequently, the reliance on channel partners in export-led internationalization emphasizes the importance of examining importer brand-building patterns as critical, as partners can shape or alter branding efforts (Pegan, Vianelli and de Luca, 2020; Pyper and Doherty, 2022). When exporters rely on foreign intermediaries, key marketing responsibilities in the overseas market shift to the importer (Obadia, Bello and Gilliland, 2015; Chung *et al.*, 2019). The importer assumes crucial roles (Theoharakis, Angelis and Batsakis, 2019; Kantaruk Pierre, Descotes and Pla-Barber, 2024): importer, distributor, primary source of market intelligence, and co-developer or implementor of marketing strategy. As the central conduit for market information, they sense and seize opportunities and channel insights back to the exporter, strengthening market-responsive strategies and potentially enhancing brand performance (Paul, Parthasarathy and Gupta, 2017; Obadia and Bello, 2019). Importers typically control domestic channel selection, execute sales and marketing activities, invest in equipment aligned with the exporter's product line, and train personnel to deliver associated services (Skarmeas, Katsikeas and Schlegelmilch, 2002).

While the strategic importance of foreign partners has been emphasized (Obadia and Vida, 2011; Nakos, Dimitratos and Elbanna, 2019; Child, Karmowska and Shenkar, 2022; Obadia and Vida, 2023), the perspective of the importer - particularly in brand-building - remains largely overlooked (Leonidou *et al.*, 2014; Skarmeas, Zeriti and Baltas, 2016; Aykol and Leonidou, 2018; Ribau, Moreira and Raposo, 2018; Skarmeas, Saridakis and Leonidou, 2018; Stoian, Dimitratos and Plakoyiannaki, 2018; Skarmeas, Zeriti and Argouslidis, 2019; Pyper and Doherty, 2022; Chang, Fong and Chang, 2024). Beyond their unsolicited order, research often ignores importers or assumes they simply follow the exporter's strategy (Lye and Hamilton, 2001) instead of seeing their potential to influence competitive brand advantage with the exporter (Lye and Hamilton, 2001; Leonidou *et al.*, 2022). Importers hold a decisive role in dyadic relationships, serving as the critical success factor and essential market link that advances exporter performance (Obadia and Vida, 2011; Aykol and Leonidou, 2018).

This study's objective is to explore brand-building patterns of importers in export-import relationships and the factors influencing them, providing exporting SMEs a foundation for leveraging brand collaboration with international partners. Grounded in the extended RBV (Barney 1991; Dyer and Singh 1998), this research advances understanding how SMEs can achieve a competitive brand advantage by conceptualising the role of importers as a strategic brand resource. The lens of the importer is made the main object of this research.

The traditional RBV has been a dominant theoretical lens, emphasizing a firm's internal resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991). Yet, for resource-constrained firms, internationalization depends on partner networks, exposing a key limitation of the RBV in capturing the complexity of interfirm cooperation. It neglects the strategic role of foreign market partners in building competitive advantage (Lavie, 2006; Zahoor *et al.*, 2020). The

relational view addresses this gap by positing that competitive advantage extends beyond firm boundaries and arises from the unique integration of complementary interfirm resources and capabilities (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Dyer, Singh and Hesterly, 2018). Thus, the extended RBV was adopted as it captures competitive advantage arising from interfirm resource integration beyond firm boundaries.

To investigate importer brand-building patterns and the factors that influence these, this study draws on Louro and Cunha's (2001) brand paradigm framework, which conceptualizes brand paradigms as sets of shared assumptions, beliefs, values, and practices that shape the objectives, conceptualization, and structures of branding within organizations, thereby explicitly linking brand management to the RBV. The framework distinguishes brand centrality (tactical to strategic) and customer centrality (firm-controlled to co-created), while analysing brand definition, roles, performance metrics, and management structures. It thus provides both a holistic basis and coding categories for examining importer brand-building, serving as the theoretical scaffolding from which the distributor–executor–builder typology was derived.

## **Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative single-case study strategy (Yin 2018), focusing on a German medium-sized firm exporting to more than 80 markets. The revelatory case design was chosen due to rare access to importer-exporter relationships, a field often constrained by information scarcity (Ahmed, Evangelista, and Spanjaard 2021; Child, Karmowska, and Shenkar 2022). The embedded case design enabled cross-country comparison of importer brand-building practices while maintaining analytic focus on the firm-level context.

The qualitative approach was selected to uncover the “how” and “why” behind importer brand-building patterns, contributing to the international marketing literature where quantitative breadth dominates (Aykol and Leonidou 2018; Leonidou et al. 2022; Paul, Parthasarathy, and Gupta 2017). Sixteen semi-structured interviews were the primary data source, supported by documentation such as business and marketing plans (Yin 2018). Sixteen purposively selected importers across Europe, Asia, and the Americas provided diverse insights across firm sizes, brand portfolios, and market contexts. Interviewees held senior roles (brand, marketing, or sales managers), ensuring data richness. Sampling was informed by the exporter's market assessment but extended to include markets known for brand excellence in execution. Data collection ceased once saturation was reached (Eisenhardt 1989).

Rigour was enhanced through established validity and reliability procedures. Truth value (validity) was supported by reflexivity, triangulation of interviews and documentation, and approval of verbatim transcription when needed (Noble and Smith 2015). Reliability was ensured by maintaining a transparent chain of evidence, storing and coding data systematically in NVivo, and separating primary data from researcher memos.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), complemented by Eisenhardt (1989) case study roadmap and Saldaña (2021) coding manual, was employed. A theoretical semantic analysis guided the exploration of brand-building patterns, while inductive latent analysis was applied to analysing influencing factors. An iterative six-step coding process (Braun and Clarke 2006) ensured depth and validity, progressing from within-case analysis to cross-case pattern matching.

## Findings

The findings identify brand orientation as a major factor influencing the extent to which brand-building is prioritized and strategically emphasized with the importer, leading to three typologies classifying importers by brand-building sophistication: distributors, brand executors, and brand builders. The evolution from low to high brand orientation can be conceptualised as a spectrum, with brand orientation as the primary pillar shaping how importers engage with brands: from distributors with the most basic brand philosophy, to brand executors, and ultimately to brand builders demonstrating the highest levels of brand commitment and engagement.

A comparative framework (see Table 1) of the three typologies, grounded in Louro and Cunha (2001) brand paradigm framework, highlights their distinct patterns to brand management. While each typology has unique features, they are not entirely discrete and may overlap in practice.

A commonality across all brand-building typologies is the definition of the brand as an intangible strategic asset throughout the value chain in shaping market positioning. Further, multilateral customer centrality is emphasized with all importers. Within Louro and Cunha's (2001) brand paradigm framework, the emphasis on brand and customer centrality corresponds to the relational paradigm. Yet the extent to which brand-building is strategically emphasized differs depending on how customer centrality is enacted. While all three typologies emphasize multilateral customer centrality, their emphases diverge: distributors focus primarily on customers (e.g., retailers), brand executors balance attention between customers and end-consumers, whereas brand builders concentrate predominantly on end-consumers as co-creators of the brand.

Distributors focus primarily on importing and distributing products. The brand role for distributors lies in opening doors to customers and facilitating sales, enhancing the firm's reputation through the brand portfolio, and marketing brands mainly through point-of-sale (POS) activities. They view brands primarily as tools to facilitate transactions, emphasizing sales over brand marketing and lacking advanced brand management capabilities. Performance is measured mainly through sales and market metrics, with imported brands managed predominantly through sales structures. Their multilateral approach derives mainly from customers rather than end consumers. While they recognize brand value in theory, their focus remains on product distribution to customers.

Brand executors perceive brands as core enablers, emotional connectors and as a reliable quality seal to consumers, focusing on the tactical execution of strategies set by brand owners. Their activities extend to POS, brand experience, and awareness building, implemented efficiently either because the brand has a tactical role in their portfolio or is still developing. Brands operate in a dual role - they function as door openers and sales facilitators to customers while also serving as emotional connectors to consumers. Reputable import brands act as gateways to extend market reach and are seen as cornerstones of business credibility and positioning. Performance is measured primarily through sales and market figures, with brand health metrics applied only supplementarily. Brand or category managers typically oversee management, serving as the first point of contact for all brand-related and adjacent matters.

Brand builders adopt a consumer-focused approach that emphasizes emotional connections and brand reliability. They engage strategically to build long-term brand identity in collaboration with consumers, applying both theoretical and practical brand knowledge in execution. For them, brands are foundational to business reputation and act as door openers to otherwise inaccessible customer segments. Their activities encompass POS, brand experiences, and

awareness campaigns overseen by brand managers, with performance measured primarily through sales and market figures; brand-health metrics for imported brands are used only supplementarily. Their main source of market input comes predominantly from consumers.

## **Discussion**

This study contributes to international marketing strategy literature by examining how exporting SMEs leverage brand collaboration with international partners, by introducing a novel typology that provides exporters with a foundation for understanding importer brand-building patterns. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the study offers the first holistic examination of importers' brand-building typologies and patterns in export–import relationships, shifting the analytical lens from the exporter to the importer. Further, the findings challenge the prevailing exporter-centric view in international marketing research by showing that importers are not passive distributors but a relational brand resource within export–import collaborations, supporting the extended RBV.

The study categorizes importers as distributors, brand executors, and brand builders, demonstrating how brand orientation shapes brand-building patterns of importers. The findings both confirm and extend existing literature: they corroborate the role of brand orientation as a determinant of brand-building sophistication but extend prior schemes by providing the first importer-focused typology in export–import contexts.

Specifically, the findings reinforce literature on brand orientation by illustrating that stronger brand orientation supports more advanced brand development (Chang, Wang, and Arnett 2018; Hirvonen, Laukkanen, and Reijonen 2013; Li et al. 2023; Muhonen, Hirvonen, and Laukkanen 2017; Urde 1999; Wong and Merrilees 2005), evolving from mindset to concrete brand management (Hirvonen and Laukkanen 2014), strengthening brand engagement and capabilities (Ranjan 2024; Wong and Merrilees 2015), and enhancing brand value, co-creation and firm performance (Ghasempour Ganji and Kazemi 2024; Ismail and Mohamad 2025). They also align with research on international networks, which highlights that partners differ in their capabilities (Aldibiki and El Ebrashi 2023; Andersson and Sundermeier 2019) and thereby influence the trajectory of international growth differently. Further, the findings extend internationalizing SME research (Leonidou, Katsikeas, and Samiee 2002; Tajeddini and Ratten 2020; Wong and Merrilees 2007) by emphasizing the centrality of brand from the importer's perspective in driving international market strategies, albeit to varying dimensions depending on their brand orientation.

The typology offers a structured approach to understanding importer brand-building patterns, providing a theoretical framework and practical guidance to both researchers and brand owners in exporting firms in assessing, selecting and developing effective brand partnerships across markets by understanding recurring patterns.

For exporting brand owners, the study highlights differentiated strategic approaches. Exporters collaborating with distributors must shift from purely sales-driven activities toward brand-building through training, joint marketing, incentive alignment, and structured feedback. With brand executors, effectiveness depends on clear guidelines, toolkits, regular communication, and test-and-learn budgets supported by brand health data. In contrast, brand builders demand deeper strategic collaboration, including best-practice sharing, advanced metrics, and sustained resource support to maximize their sophisticated brand-building capabilities.

### **Limitations & future research directions**

This study is limited by its single-case, cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported perspectives of importer managers, which constrains generalizability and may introduce bias. The study's focus on a single, highly internationalized SME limits the transferability of its insights to firms in other industries or with lower levels of international engagement. Future research adopting longitudinal, multi-case, and dyadic designs across industries and contexts could validate the importer typology, explore relational mechanisms in greater depth, and enhance the theoretical and practical understanding of collaborative brand-building.

	<b>Distributor</b>	<b>Brand Executor</b>	<b>Brand Builder</b>
<b>Brand Definition</b>	Brand as an intangible asset  Multilateral orientation (Focus: Customer)	Brand as an intangible asset  Multilateral orientation (Focus: Customer, Consumer)	Brand as an intangible asset  Multilateral orientation (Focus: Consumer)
<b>Brand Role</b>	<b><u>Priority 1</u></b> <b>Customer:</b> Door opener, Sales facilitator  <b><u>Priority 2</u></b> <b>Firm:</b> Fuels reputation	<b><u>Priority 1</u></b> <b>Consumer:</b> Core enabler and emotional connector, Reliability and quality seal  <b><u>Priority 2</u></b> <b>Customer:</b> Door opener, Sales facilitator  <b><u>Priority 3</u></b> <b>Firm:</b> Cornerstone of business, Fuels reputation	<b><u>Priority 1</u></b> <b>Consumer:</b> Core enabler and emotional connector, Reliability and quality seal  <b><u>Priority 2</u></b> <b>Customer:</b> Door opener Sales facilitator  <b><u>Priority 3</u></b> <b>Firm:</b> Cornerstone of business, Fuels reputation
<b>Brand Dimension</b>	<b><u>Priority</u></b> Branded and Non-branded POS	<b><u>Priority</u></b> Branded and Non-branded POS Brand Experience Brand Awareness	<b><u>Priority</u></b> Branded and Non-branded POS Brand Experience Brand Awareness
<b>Brand Performance</b>	<b><u>Priority</u></b> Sales and market-based	<b><u>Priority</u></b> Sales and market-based <b><u>Supplementary</u></b> Brand Health	<b><u>Priority</u></b> Sales and market-based <b><u>Supplementary</u></b> Brand Health
<b>Brand Management Structure</b>	Sales	Category Manager or Brand Manager	Brand Manager

**Table 1: Overview of brand-building typologies and their patterns (developed for the study)**

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