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Antecedents And Consequences Of Brand Orientation In Small And Medium-Sized Enterprises

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Abstract

Purpose: *Numerous antecedents and consequences influence brand orientation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the pharmaceutical industry. However, despite their significance, a comprehensive examination of these factors has yet to be undertaken. Therefore, this study aims to identify and conceptualize the antecedents and consequences of brand orientation in SMEs operating in the pharmaceutical industry.*

Methodology: *This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining exploratory and applied methodologies. The qualitative phase utilizes two approaches: meta-synthesis and thematic analysis, while the quantitative phase employs the DEMATEL soft modeling technique. Data collection for the meta-synthesis stage involves analyzing data obtained from a systematic literature review spanning the past 30 years (1994-2023). The case study stage involves interviews with 22 academic and industry experts, and the survey stage utilizes questionnaires. For data analysis, content analysis and thematic analysis are employed in the qualitative phase, and the DEMATEL technique is used in the quantitative phase.*

Findings: *The research findings reveal that the antecedents of brand orientation in pharmaceutical SMEs encompass owner/manager characteristics, physician/patient relationships, the environment, organizational resources, firm characteristics, brand management, and drug/drug group characteristics. The consequences of brand orientation include stakeholders, brand, performance, human resources, and physicians.*

Research Novelty: *The findings of this study provide valuable insights for managers and stakeholders in the pharmaceutical industry. By understanding the antecedents and consequences of brand orientation in the pharmaceutical sector, informed decisions can be made, leading to positive outcomes.*

Keywords: *Brand orientation, antecedents, consequences, small and medium-sized enterprises.*

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Introduction

Branding has transcended from a mere choice to a necessity for many businesses today (Choukpetakul, Anantachai, & Hamilton, 2020). Brands now serve as a crucial point of differentiation (Vyadoot, 2017), and economic value is no longer solely conveyed through superior service offerings; rather, it must be delivered through distinctive brand experiences. In other words, competition has evolved beyond providing functional value to also delivering symbolic value (Oung, Lee, & Ramayia, 2018). Possessing a strong brand empowers small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to differentiate their products or services from competitors, gain customer loyalty and trust, command higher prices than rivals, and exert greater control over brand promotion and distribution (Giese & Harun, 2013; Hollorson & Rovai, 2006).

Despite the undeniable importance of SMEs in the global economy, the majority of branding studies have been conducted on large, and sometimes multinational, companies and organizations, with a limited and scattered number of studies focusing on SMEs (Abimbola & Kokaka, 2007; Adom, 2016; Jantonen, 2014; Rokhmati, Mayasari, & Wolandari, 2021; Capon, Burton, Pier, Hulbert, & Pitt, 2001; Kai, 2006; Knight, 2000; Nevonen, 2016; Rentoen, Dahlénbach, Davenport, & James, 2016). It is noteworthy that the bulk of branding research has been conducted in developed and Western countries, with few studies in less developed countries (Adom, 2016; Adom, Agbemabis, Dorson, & Mensah, 2017), and theories and models derived from Western sources may not be directly applicable to less developed countries and emerging markets (Adom, Narterh, & Boateng, 2017; Dawar & Chattopadhyay, 2002). The primary objective of this research is to configure and test an integrated model of antecedents, elements, and consequences of brand orientation in SMEs.

Research Background

Brands are valuable and strategic assets for companies that can create value and enhance their competitive power. Brand creation and management is not a tactical activity, but rather a comprehensive and strategic activity that encompasses the entire company (Kapferer et al., 2001; Aaker, 2009; Huang & Tsai, 2013).

For many businesses today, branding has gone beyond a mere choice and has become a necessity due to intensifying competition. High competition, especially since the 1980s, has made branding essential for businesses to survive (Choukpintakul, Anantachart, & Hamilton, 2020). Economic value is no longer solely transferred through providing quality services beyond expectations; it requires moving towards differentiated brand experiences. In other words, competition has gone beyond providing functional value and now also delivers symbolic value (Ong, Lee, & Ramayia, 2018). Today, customers are no longer just looking for tangible benefits, but intangible benefits such as unique experiences have also become important in their purchases (Morrison & Crane, 2007; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010).

The serious use of the concept of brand orientation was first introduced by Mr. Arde. He introduced this concept in 1994 after studying for-profit companies (Arde, 1994). A few years later, Arde provided a classic definition of brand orientation. According to his definition, brand orientation is the ongoing creation, development, and support of the brand through customer interactions to enhance the company's competitive power (Arde, 1994). He believed that brand orientation, like market orientation, is a strategic orientation in which companies view their brands as strategic resources for value creation and increased competitiveness (Huang & Tsai, 2013).

Gronroos and Melin (2011) define brand orientation as a conscious approach to brand building in which brand equity is built through interactions between internal and external stakeholders. In this definition, the brand is the central point around which the organization's activities are transformed, brand management is considered a core capability, and brand building is seamlessly integrated into business development and financial performance. This definition has two major differences from the initial classic definition provided by Arde. First, brand orientation is not an occasional or occasional branding approach that is more or less prevalent in many companies, but rather a conscious and intentional approach. Second, the importance of this approach is so serious that it should be the foundation of the organization's processes. According to this definition, a company cannot be considered brand-oriented simply because it uses its brand name on its products and uses brand logos and slogans. For a company to be brand-oriented, it must have brand identity embedded in its strategic thinking. Branding activities in such a company are consistent and continuous, tailored to buyers, and clearly differentiated from competitors, and are supported by senior management (Harrison-Walker, 2014). Past research has also shown that companies with brand orientation perform better than their competitors without it (Reijonen, Laaksonen, Komppula, & Tuominen, 2012; Adom, 2016).

All organizations have brands, but not all of them necessarily have brand orientation. Brand orientation is a conscious and intentional activity, and occasional activities do not lead to brand orientation (Gronroos, 2020). The existence of evidence of brand orientation in an organization does not necessarily mean that the organization has a serious commitment to deliberately becoming brand-oriented. It seems that brand orientation is not a matter of chance, but rather must be implemented in the organization in a fully conscious manner. However, Arde believes that orientation is not necessarily good for all organizations (Hodge, McMullen, & Klince Schaefer, 2018).

The concept of brand orientation emerges when organizations move beyond merely satisfying immediate customer needs towards a powerful and sustainable value-driven brand concept (Hodge, McMullen, & Claussen, 2018). Some argue that brand orientation strategy is necessary for long-term success and even the future survival of the organization (Ozak, 2016). The existing literature on both marketing of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and SME branding stems from general marketing concepts (Wang & Merrilees, 2005). Brand orientation and market orientation are not two completely separate concepts; they share commonalities and brand orientation has a positive impact on the effectiveness of marketing strategy (Wang & Merrilees, 2005; Harrison-Walker, 2014). It also appears that the impact of brand orientation is greater for SMEs that are growing (Rihonen, Laaksonen, Komppula, & Tomminen, 2012; Rihonen, Pardani, Tomminen, Laaksonen, & Komppula, 2014).

According to the definition of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission, SMEs are independent companies that have a number of employees below a certain limit, which varies in the definition of SMEs in different countries. In European Union countries, the most common upper limit for the number of employees for a company to be classified as an SME is 250. In terms of turnover, the average turnover in medium-sized companies (between 50 and 249 employees) is a maximum of 50 million euros, in small companies (between 10 and 49 employees) a maximum of 10 million euros, and in very small companies (less than 10 employees) a maximum of 2 million euros (European Commission, 2021; OECD, 2020). The definition used by the Central Bank of Iran for the classification of industrial units is as follows: units with less than 10 employees are

called "micro", 10 to 49 employees "small", 50 to 99 employees "medium" and over 100 employees "large" (Central Bank, 2014).

Brands in SMEs are built in non-traditional ways with minimal planning and limited resources, unlike large companies. Traditional marketing activities can limit SMEs (Sento, Hart, & Di Benedetto, 2013). SMEs face different conditions due to high levels of uncertainty, rapid changes in consumer composition and preferences, limited access to historical data when dealing with new conditions, and limited data availability. Managers in SMEs are constantly faced with situations where they have to make intuitive decisions (Zakka, Diaye, & Albana, 2017). Having a strong brand allows SMEs to differentiate their products or services from competitors, gain customer loyalty and trust, charge higher prices than competitors, and have more control over brand promotion and distribution (Giesip & Aaron, 2013; Hollorson & Johar, 2006).

The literature on SME branding has been developed within the broader field of SME marketing (Baporikar & Footfullah, 2021). The first call for study in the area of SME branding appears to have been made by Abimbola about two decades ago. The few studies that have been conducted in the area of SME branding have shown their positive role in SME performance (Wang & Merrilees, 2005; Selaese Asamoah, 2014; Yeatman & Krotz, 2016). Branding not only adds more value to SME products but also helps companies avoid price wars (Choukpitakul, Anantachai, & Hamilton, 2020). SMEs engaged in brand building have a significantly greater performance advantage over their competitors (Baporikar & Footfullah, 2021) and brand management is effective in supporting SME performance (Rokhim, Maiyarsih, & Vellandari, 2021). In general, it seems that most SMEs are aware of the importance of branding but do not use it enough for various reasons (Baporikar & Footfullah, 2021).

The underlying assumption might be that branding is similar for both SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and large corporations. However, this assumption is not always accurate (Sennato, Hart & DeTienne, 2013; Krake, 2005; Wang & Merrilees, 2005; Boyle, 2003). While there has been a recent increase in branding research focused on SMEs following calls for more studies in this area, the literature on the topic remains fragmented, opaque, and relatively scarce (Adom, Nartey & Boateng, 2017). Consequently, a significant gap exists within the SME branding literature (Michell, Hutchings & Quine, 2013).

Sennato, Cambra-Fierro, Vasquez-Carrasco, Hart & DeTienne (2019) posit that the "brand-as-person" metaphor emphasizes the influence of the SME owner/manager's personality on brand perception. This occurs when specific characteristics of the SME owner/manager are transferred to the brand, aligning the brand-as-person more closely with the SME owned/managed by the individual. Additionally, some argue that SME owner/managers unconsciously and intuitively humanize their brands. Unlike brand managers in large organizations, SME owner/managers often employ non-traditional and less formalized approaches to brand strategy development. Ultimately, consumers choose a particular brand because they perceive it as similar to their self-concept. This aligns with the way SME owner/managers develop brands as brand-as-person,

Oughani, Hiewa, and Molaee (2022) state that owner-managers in SMEs are highly motivated and have a tendency to set personal goals and achieve high business growth. They have an internal locus of control, which gives them the confidence that they have a great deal of control over their own destiny. These individuals typically have their own unique management style and engage in self-promotion in the absence of a marketing plan. The concept of self-branding

pertaining to owner-managers falls under the broader topic of entrepreneurship. They argue that not only are classic and traditional marketing methods not necessarily useful for SMEs, but these activities may also be potentially detrimental to the reputation of these businesses. Of course, it is an oversimplification to say that marketing models cannot be applied to SMEs at all, as it is clear that owner-managers do the fundamentals of marketing in terms of focusing on the customer and meeting customer needs and identifying market gaps. It is just that SMEs do these things in their own way. Because branding success in SMEs is a function of the owner, a major barrier to brand orientation is the owner's opposing view.

Chaukittipong, Anantachart, and Hamilton (2020) stated that the SME branding literature has been developed within the broader field of SME marketing. And they concluded that branding not only adds value to SME products but also helps firms avoid price wars. Also, the methods used by large companies are not adaptable for SMEs due to the specific organizational structure and the unique personality of the owner-manager. SMEs use customer feedback along with indirect tools like sales to assess brand performance more than others.

Baporikar and Footulla (2021) in a research titled "Strategic Brand Management in SMEs for Competitive Advantage" stated that branding is essential for the survival of SMEs in today's competitive markets. They believe that branding in SMEs is an essential activity to build brand reputation, market products/services, and increase profitability. SMEs engaged in brand strengthening have a significantly higher performance advantage over their other competitors. Branding allows small companies to connect outside of their everyday sales activities.

One of the industries that has undergone significant changes in recent years is the pharmaceutical industry. Today, the pharmaceutical industry is considered one of the most key and largest industries in the world, and having such an industry is considered one of the important criteria for the development of countries. The pharmaceutical industry, on the one hand, is one of the most important industries in any country due to its impact on human health and disease prevention, and on the other hand, it is considered one of the leading industrial sectors of nations due to its profitability and market value (Kazemi, Moghimi, & Pour Ezat, 2018).

For decades, the path to success for pharmaceutical companies seemed straightforward: develop a needed drug, introduce it to physicians through sales representatives, and watch the prescriptions roll in, generating substantial profits for the producing companies (Delor, 2004). However, today's pharmaceutical landscape has rendered this traditional approach to success obsolete. Solely relying on three factors – producing patented drugs, utilizing promotional tools like sales representatives, and leveraging government funding – no longer guarantees a swift return on investment for pharmaceutical companies. The evolving global and environmental landscape has introduced new challenges to achieving success in this industry. Companies now face the complex task of navigating away from government budget dependency, addressing rising consumer awareness and expectations for quality improvement, preparing for integration into the World Trade Organization, and intensifying competitive pressures (Amirshahali et al., 2008).

Across all industries, brand names serve as powerful competitive levers, and there is no reason why the pharmaceutical industry should be an exception (Schulling & Moss, 2004). Therefore, the strategic use of brand names by Iranian pharmaceutical companies becomes particularly crucial as they confront the gradual liberalization, privatization, and eventual integration into the World Trade Organization, leading to fierce competition from imported drugs alongside

domestically produced generic medications (Amirshahali et al., 2008). In light of these developments, a thorough examination of the current state of brand name adoption in Iran's pharmaceutical industry, the prerequisites for effective brand name utilization, and the barriers to its growth is imperative.

Research Methodology

The current study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The philosophical underpinnings of quantitative research lie in the positivist paradigm, while qualitative research is grounded in interpretive methodologies (Azkia & Darban Astaneh, 2009). Accordingly, the philosophical foundation of this research encompasses a combination of interpretive and positivist paradigms. Considering the research objectives and questions, the study is characterized by a developmental-applied nature. Owing to the mixed nature of the research, a variety of qualitative and quantitative strategies have been utilized at different stages of the investigation. Consequently, in the qualitative phase, thematic analysis was employed to develop a comprehensive model of antecedents and consequences, while survey research was utilized in the quantitative phase. Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing and reporting patterns within qualitative data. This method transforms scattered qualitative textual data into rich and detailed information (Abedi Jafari, Taslimi, Faqih & Sheikhzadeh, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, in the quantitative phase, the Dimet method was employed to test the model and enhance its generalizability. Data collection methods and procedures varied across the research phases. Information required to elucidate the theoretical framework and research background was gathered through reviewing credible Persian and Latin books and articles. Empirical data necessary for model development were obtained through interviews, while quantitative data required for model testing and validation were collected using questionnaires. The appropriate interview method, considering the research type (applied-developmental), was semi-structured interviewing. The primary objective of conducting interviews was to acquire empirical data to refine the research model. To this end, after an initial review of the literature and formulating research questions, the interview protocol was established. Next, experts were identified, and interviews were conducted, and the interviewees' comments were recorded.

The target population for both research phases comprised academic and executive experts who met at least five criteria: "key importance," "recognition by others," "theoretical understanding of the topic," "diversity," and "consent to participate." To select academic and executive experts, purposive sampling was employed. In the qualitative phase of the research, a combination of purposive judgmental and snowball sampling methods was used to develop the model. Data saturation was achieved using theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is a method in which the researcher collects relevant data to refine and construct the categories required for theory building (Charmaz, 2014). In theoretical sampling, interviews are continued until theoretical saturation is achieved. In the present study, theoretical saturation was reached after conducting 22 interviews. In the quantitative phase, to ensure model validity and enhance its generalizability, 31 questionnaires were distributed and collected among experts using the Dimet method. The analysis of relationships and model validity was based on the data gathered from these questionnaires.

To ensure the validity of the results, the present study employed three types of validity: construct validity, internal validity, and external validity. In the qualitative phase, Cohen's kappa coefficient was used to assess the reliability of the collected data. The kappa values for

the antecedents, brand orientation dimensions, and consequences were 0.820, 0.871, and 0.743, respectively. The questionnaire for the quantitative phase was developed based on the results of the qualitative phase, which itself was conducted using a systematic process and thematic analysis strategy. This process itself serves as evidence of the validity of the research in this phase. To further ensure validity, the questionnaire design underwent an iterative confirmatory process. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability of the results from this stage, with a value of 0.912.

Research findings

To reach the final research model, each interview was transcribed and coded after it was conducted, and then the next interview was conducted. After 22 interviews and reaching the stage of theoretical saturation, a total of 1794 concepts were identified, of which 1042 were related to brand orientation antecedents. Finally, 140 themes were extracted. The following table shows the themes obtained from the extracted concepts from the interviews in the field of brand orientation antecedents in SMEs, along with their frequencies:

Table 1) Themes related to brand orientation an

theme	Frequency	theme	Frequency	theme	Frequency
The level of competition	10	Company brand number	6	Customer purchasing power	3
risk management	4	Environmental changes	5	team work	6
invest return rate	3	Systematic thinking	9	Perceived quality	7
Internal controls	3	Product differentiation	13	Group and type of patients	8
Company type in terms of shareholding	7	Owner/manager's willingness to brand orientation	6	Brand manager in the company	8
Coordination among decision makers	9	Decision focus	5	Time limitation	4
Characteristics of the market segment	3	Individual development of employees	8	Legal restrictions	5
Product basket	6	development of the country	4	competitive environment	5
Detailed planning	12	Ambition of the owner/manager	4	Competitive Advantage	4
The company's market/resource	6	Free flow of information in the country	3	Employee accountability	4

oriented approach					
The core competencies of the company	4	Organizational worldview	5	Participation of all employees	22
Environmental stability	5	Worldview of the owner/manage r	11	Communication resources	3
environmental changes	15	Company life cycle	15	human resources	14
Company capabilities	6	Product life cycle	15	Company resources	17
Infrastructure	4	Company vision	5	Non-financial resources	5
Consultative culture and obtaining public opinion	15	Employee sense of benefit	5	Funds	25
Internal communication of the company	11	Customer feedback loop	4	Type of industry	4
Core values of the company	7	Owner/Manag er support	7	Product type (medicine)	10
Employee performance management	3	creativity and innovation	6	community needs	7
marketing strategy	10	Marketing knowledge of the owner/manage r	11	customer's need	12
Brand strategy	16	Employees' brand knowledge	10	Organizational empathy	17
company strategy	31	Employees' view of the brand	12	Integration of activities	2
Taking advantage of opportunities	3	Customer's point of view	5	Product orientation	5
Employees' belief in brand orientation	6	Owner/manag er mentality towards brand orientation	7	Business orientation	6
Owner/manager' s belief in brand direction	14	Competitors	10	Flexibility of processes and structures	6

The size of the country's economy	8	The spirit of brand orientation in the entire organization	17	decision process	6
size of the company	11	Product history	3	Market fluctuations	4
Company flexibility	15	Organizational Structure	4	market return	8
Owner/manager flexibility	3	Compatibility with the environment	4	Owner/manager decision making method	8
Company goals	6	Corporate style	4	The role of the owner/manager in the company	4
The importance of brand orientation for employees	11	Social level of the customer	4	The owner/manager's personal goals and vision	4
The importance of brand orientation for the owner/manager	12	Effective suggestion system	8	Personality characteristics of the owner/manager	8
Importance of the product	2	Owner/Manager Qualifications	3	Owner/manager risk taking	5
Awareness of the owner/manager	4	Social situation	6	Brand reputation	6
Foresight	5	Economic conditions	6	Brand credibility	4
Optimality of organizational processes	5	Welfare conditions of society	4	Brand inimitability	4
Owner/Manager Insights	4	Political conditions	3	Brand differentiation	4
Social progress	5	Knowing the brand orientation of employees	2	Customer recognition of the brand	8
Company background	4	Knowing the brand orientation of the owner/manager	13	Close communication with the customer	8
Staff experience	5	Life of the company	13	Entrepreneurial ability	4

Owner/Manager experience	6	Motivational factors of employees	7	Marketing capabilities	3
Board experience	5	Target market culture	6	Brand management capabilities	7
Staff education	6	society culture	8	The size of competitors	4
Education and knowledge related to the brand orientation of the owner/manager	13	Organizational Culture	17	Employee reward criteria	4
Staff expertise	9	Intellectual philosophy of the owner/manage r	12	Willingness to grow and develop employees	7
Optimal allocation of resources	7	The existential philosophy of the company	3	Invest in the brand	5
Brand image	10	Understanding the value of brand orientation in the company	8		

Next, the codes related to the consequences of brand orientation were analyzed, yielding 373 concepts. After reviewing these concepts, 62 themes were extracted, which are presented in Table 2 along with their frequencies. These themes were derived from the extracted concepts from the interviews conducted on the consequences of brand orientation in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Table 2) Themes related to the consequences of brand orientation and their frequencies in the interviews

theme	Frequency	theme	Frequency	theme	Frequency
Quick trust of customers in new brand products	7	Stability and functional strength	5	Promotion of the brand with the customer	5
Company reputation	15	Impact on the market	6	Trust the product	5
Achieving the existential philosophy of the company	6	Belonging to the brand	5	Placement of the product in the eyes of	4

				the customer	
Company dynamics	3	Repeat purchase	3	Meeting the needs of stakeholders	5
Facilitate market activity	2	Market development	5	Brand sustainability	5
Increasing competitive power	7	Brand development	3	Brand influence on others	5
Company productivity	5	International development of the company	4	Brand awareness	3
Improve customer communication	8	Business Development	9	Employer brand	6
increase production	4	Network development and improvement	5	Company survival	4
Facilitate distribution	2	Achievement of objectives	6	Improve employee satisfaction	7
Increase in intangible assets of the company	3	company's growth	8	Improving community health	11
brand value	4	Stakeholder satisfaction	4	Improve profitability	8
Brand trust	8	Customer Satisfaction	4	Increasing customer cooperation with the company	5
Increasing the value of the company	4	Brand recognition	14	Recruitment and recruitment	4
Increasing the number of customers	5	Reputation of senior managers	5	Avoid price competition	8
Increase customer commitment	3	Non-financial performance	8	Increase customer referrals	6
Increased willingness to buy	5	Financial performance	16	Creating developmen t thinking in	4

				the company	
Increase income	10	Entrepreneurship	3	Create differentiation for the company	19
Increase market share	4	Customer behavior control	5	Creating organizational empathy	4
sales increase	6	Corporate social responsibility	13	Making the brand more vulnerable	2
Increased consumption of products	3	Brand loyalty	8		

In the final section, the codes related to the core section (brand orientation) were examined and analyzed. A total of 379 brand orientation concepts were extracted in SMEs. Finally, after reviewing the concepts, 25 themes were obtained, which are shown in the following table along with their frequencies. The themes obtained from the extracted concepts from the interviews in the field of brand orientation in SMEs:

Table 3) Themes related to brand orientation and their frequency in the interviews conducted

theme	Frequency	theme	Frequency	theme	Frequency
Provide complete product information to the customer	7	Continuous quality improvement	17	market studies	28
Continuous improvement of customer experience	18	Formulation of basic strategy	17	Creating a unit in charge of brand orientation	16
Continuation of related activities	36	Commitment to brand orientation	15	Customer support and accountability	21
Choose the right strategy	9	Focus on strategy implementation	8	resource allocation	41
Coherence of activities	7	positioning	7	Awareness of activities	6
Prioritizing activities	13	Recruitment of specialists	16	Brand orientation training	7

Create a commitment to the customer	15	Constant monitoring of brand position	5	Recommended advertising	5
Make the required changes	27	Measuring brand orientation in the evaluation of the whole company	9	Explain brand orientation	6
				Creating a culture of brand orientation	23

After examining the initial themes of the introduction section, through review, analysis, and synthesis of some of the initial themes, a total of 67 primary themes, 5 organizing themes, and 7 overarching themes were identified. These are shown in the following tables:

Table 4) Final Themes of Brand Orientation Introductions in SMEs

Overarching themes	Organizer themes	Basic themes	Overarching themes	Organizer themes	Basic themes
Organizational resources	Company reputation		Owner/Manager Qualifications Decision-making and risk-taking of the owner/manager The leadership style of the owner/manager ویژگیهای مالک/مدیر	Owner/Manager's relevant knowledge and experience	
	Organizational network			Owner/Manager communication skills	
	Economic influence of the company			Owner/manager's belief and emphasis on brand orientation	
	Optimal allocation of resources			Worldview of the owner/manager	
	Funds			Owner/manager opportunism	
	Necessary infrastructure			Owner/manager flexibility	
	Key marketing resources			Ambition and vision of the owner/manager	
	Organizational Culture	Criticism and criticism		Owner/Manager Qualifications	
		Related norms and values		Decision-making and risk-taking of the owner/manager	
		Customer Orientation		The leadership style of the owner/manager	
	Strategy	company strategy		Support of external organizations	

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="13"></td><td rowspan="2"></td><td>Planning style in the company</td><td rowspan="13">Support of external organizations
Macro environmental factors
Characteristics of the industry in the drug group
Stability of drug market and drug group
Drug market size and drug group
The level of competition in drugs and drug groups
Drug market efficiency and drug group</td><td>Macro environmental factors</td></tr>
<tr><td>Market/resource oriented approach</td><td>Characteristics of the industry in the drug group</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Organizational Structure</td><td>Integration of duties</td><td>Stability of drug market and drug group</td></tr>
<tr><td>The existence of a brand trustee in the structure</td><td>Drug market size and drug group</td></tr>
<tr><td>Decision focus</td><td>The level of competition in drugs and drug groups</td></tr>
<tr><td>Communication and optimal processes</td><td>Drug market efficiency and drug group</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">human resources</td><td>Knowledge and experience of employees</td><td rowspan="4">Brand features
Alignment of brands
Brand studies
Branding barriers</td><td>Brand features</td></tr>
<tr><td>Desire for personal development</td><td>Alignment of brands</td></tr>
<tr><td>communication skill</td><td>Brand studies</td></tr>
<tr><td>performance management</td><td>Branding barriers</td></tr>
<tr><td>Employee accountability</td><td rowspan="7">Doctor/patient need
Patient purchasing power</td><td>Doctor/patient need</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="5">Company characteristics</td><td colspan="2">size of the company</td><td>Doctor/patient interaction</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Life of the company</td><td>Doctor/patient experience</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Company background</td><td>The importance of drug group among doctors</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Business orientation</td><td>Physician/patient view of the company</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Dynamic capabilities</td><td>Marketing capabilities</td><td>Patient purchasing power</td></tr>
<tr><td>flexibility</td><td rowspan="2">Type of drug group</td><td>Type of drug group</td></tr>
<tr><td>Foresight</td><td>Differentiation in drug group</td></tr>
</table>

		Sustainable competitive advantage	Differentiation in drug group Perceived quality in the drug group Life cycle of drug group Importance of drug group Drug history	Perceived quality in the drug group
		Entrepreneurial ability		Life cycle of drug group
		Systematic thinking		Importance of drug group
		Performance stability		Drug history
				Drug components

The important point in the theme section of the company's characteristics, company size, company life, etc. is considered as a background. Considering that the society investigated in the research was small and medium enterprises, the size of small and medium enterprises can vary from 5 people to 500 people and the life of a small and medium enterprise can also vary between 1 and even 20 years and the meaning One of the company's characteristics is the characteristics that can be defined in small and medium enterprises. After presenting the themes and categories of the final research model on the antecedents of brand orientation in small and medium-sized enterprises, after reviewing, analyzing and combining the primary themes, finally 43 basic themes, 2 organizing themes and 5 comprehensive themes were obtained, which are shown in the tables. Shown below:

Table 5) The final themes of the consequences of brand orientation in small and medium enterprises

Overarching themes	Organizer themes	Basic themes	Overarching themes	Organizer themes	Basic themes
brand	Belonging to the brand		human resources	Improving creativity and innovation	
	Brand development			employee satisfaction	
	Brand effectiveness			Organizational participation	
	Brand innovation			Reputation of senior managers	
	Increasing brand equity			Attracting elites	
	Brand differentiation		Function	Financial	Increase income
	Brand sustainability				More profitability
	Improve brand personality				Increasing the value of the company
	brand commitment				increase production
	Brand awareness			Non-financial	improving Productivity
	Brand recognition				Success and achievement of goals
	Brand image				Business Development

	Employer brand			survive
	Brand loyalty			Performance stability
Doctor	Improve physician-perceived benefits			Increased dynamism
	Participation of doctors			Environmental compatibility
	The trust of doctors			Facilitate distribution
	Physicians' satisfaction			Creating a sustainable competitive advantage
	Increasing doctor referrals			Increasing competitive power
Beneficiaries	Entrepreneurship			Increase market share
	Economic Growth			
	community health			
	satisfaction of the major stakeholders			

After extracting the primary themes, by examining and combining the primary themes, finally 13 basic themes were extracted for the brand orientation section, which are shown in the following table:

Table 6) The themes of the final base of brand orientation in small and medium enterprises

Basic themes	
Commitment to brand orientation	resource allocation
Measuring brand orientation in company evaluation	Awareness of activities
Creating a unit in charge of brand orientation	market studies
Institutionalization of brand orientation	positioning
Create a commitment to the customer	Formulation and implementation of appropriate strategy
Continuous improvement of customer experience	Making the necessary changes in line with the direction of the brand
Coherence and continuity in related activities	

In order to carry out Dimtel's method in the current research, a questionnaire was prepared to measure the binary relationships of the final themes of the research in the form of a 13x13 matrix., based on the standard Dimtel method, the numbers zero, 1, 2, 3 and 4 were placed respectively. In the first step, after calculating the average of the collected questionnaires, the

results of the relationship, which is called the direct relationship matrix, were normalized. After calculating the normal matrix of direct correlation, a single matrix was formed in this section, and after subtracting the normal matrix of direct correlation from the matrix, the inverse of the obtained matrix was calculated, and in the next step, the normal matrix of direct correlation is multiplied by the above matrix and the total correlation matrix is obtained. which is shown in the following table:

Table 7) Total correlation matrix

theme			Company characteristics	Brand management			Characteristics of the drug/drug group	Brand orientation					human resources
Features of owner manager	0.000	0.017	0.014	0.014	0.014	0.005	0.012	0.013	0.028	0.018	0.008	0.018	0.007
Organizational resources	0.003	0.000	0.014	0.015	0.008	0.003	0.015	0.011	0.027	0.021	0.014	0.026	0.012
Company characteristics	0.008	0.008	0.000	0.012	0.012	0.007	0.019	0.014	0.023	0.019	0.017	0.022	0.003
Brand management	0.006	0.009	0.011	0.000	0.010	0.004	0.017	0.013	0.018	0.017	0.019	0.023	0.001
Doctor/patient	0.009	0.005	0.007	0.006	0.000	0.002	0.008	0.011	0.009	0.011	0.004	0.024	0.000
Environment	0.013	0.015	0.011	0.017	0.002	0.000	0.009	0.014	0.019	0.020	0.018	0.022	0.007
Characteristics of the drug/drug group	0.005	0.005	0.003	0.013	0.008	0.006	0.000	0.014	0.025	0.018	0.020	0.019	0.005
Brand orientation	0.002	0.006	0.002	0.002	0.002	0.001	0.003	0.000	0.022	0.022	0.019	0.024	0.012
Beneficiaries	0.013	0.014	0.014	0.013	0.011	0.006	0.015	0.002	0.000	0.022	0.017	0.019	0.003
Function	0.001	0.001	0.003	0.004	0.002	0.001	0.002	0.005	0.017	0.000	0.017	0.022	0.011
Doctor	0.007	0.003	0.007	0.010	0.009	0.006	0.008	0.001	0.016	0.011	0.000	0.024	0.000
brand	0.010	0.010	0.012	0.014	0.010	0.005	0.017	0.005	0.018	0.016	0.018	0.000	0.001
human resources	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.005	0.001	0.004	0.007	0.006	0.004	0.000

In order to draw the final diagram of Dimtel's method, it is necessary to determine the values of interaction and effectiveness of each theme. For this purpose, first, the sum of the rows and columns of the above matrix was calculated, which are the values of D and R, respectively. Next, D+R and D-R values were calculated, which respectively express the interaction and effectiveness of the final themes of the research, and these values are shown in the following table:

Table 8) interaction and effectiveness of the final themes of the research

theme	D	R	تعامل	Effectiveness/Effectiveness
Features of owner manager	0.1674	0.0772	0.2446	0.0901
Organizational resources	0.1690	0.0940	0.2630	0.0750
Company characteristics	0.1636	0.0991	0.2627	0.0646
Brand management	0.1485	0.1207	0.2692	0.0279
Doctor/patient	0.0949	0.0889	0.1837	0.0060
Environment	0.1659	0.0465	0.2124	0.1193
Characteristics of the drug/drug group	0.1423	0.1298	0.2721	0.0125
Brand orientation	0.1188	0.1050	0.2238	0.0138
Beneficiaries	0.1494	0.2274	0.3768	-0.0780
Function	0.0852	0.2026	0.2878	-0.1174
Doctor	0.1020	0.1759	0.2779	-0.0739
brand	0.1365	0.2465	0.3831	-0.1100
human resources	0.0317	0.0617	0.0934	-0.0300

In the following, the diagram of interaction-influence/effectiveness of the final themes of the research is shown:

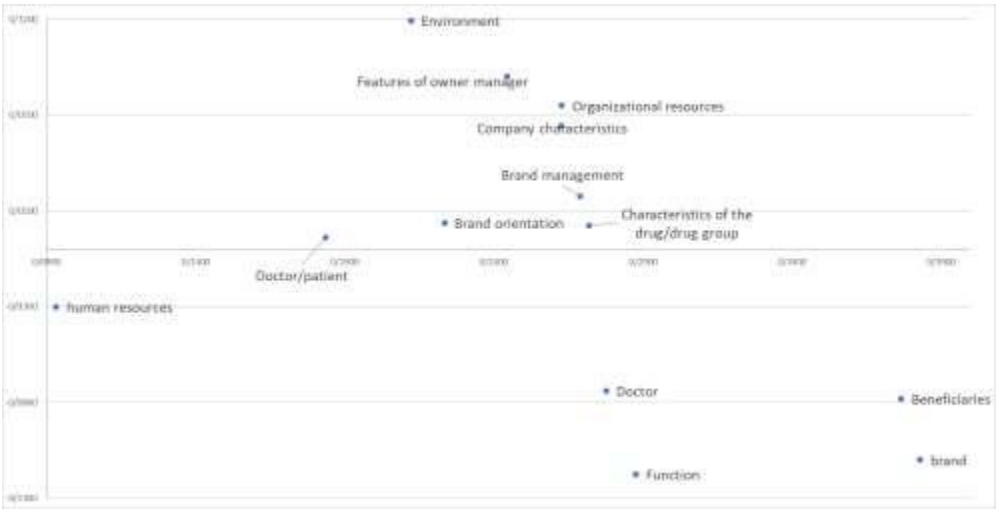

Figure 1) Diagram of interaction-influence/effectiveness of the final themes of the research

As illustrated in the figure above, all antecedent themes of the research are positioned above the horizontal axis, indicating that they all influence both brand orientation themes and brand orientation consequences. The most interaction among antecedents is related to drug/drug class characteristics, implying that this theme has the strongest connection with other final research themes. The research outcome themes are also naturally influenced by the impact of brand orientation and antecedents, and all five outcome themes are positioned below the horizontal axis and are influenced. The most interaction among the outcome themes is between brand and stakeholder themes, and human resources has the least interaction. In other words, the human resource's theme has the least connection with the other research themes. Brand orientation, influenced by antecedents and impacting consequences, ultimately has a value close to zero.

However, it is important to note that the impact of brand orientation on consequences is slightly greater than the influence of antecedents on brand orientation, which is why brand orientation ultimately has a positive influence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the context of the pharmaceutical industry's competitive landscape, where brand orientation plays a crucial role in survival and sustainability, this research aims to investigate this topic using thematic analysis and the DEMATEL method. The outcome is a comprehensive model that outlines the antecedents, elements, and consequences of brand orientation in SMEs operating in the pharmaceutical industry. The findings of the final research model are depicted in the following diagram:

Following 22 interviews with industry and academic experts, meticulous coding, and in-depth analysis of the interviews to extract a unified model of brand orientation specific to the pharmaceutical industry, a total of 1794 concepts were identified. 1042 of these concepts were related to the antecedents of brand orientation, 373 to the consequences of brand orientation, and 397 to the elements of brand orientation in SMEs in the pharmaceutical industry. Finally, after examining the initial themes of the antecedent's section, 67 primary themes, 5 organizing themes, and 7 overarching themes were derived. The first overarching theme was owner/manager characteristics, which included owner/manager's relevant knowledge and experience, communication skills, emphasis on brand orientation, worldview, opportunism, flexibility, ambition and vision, competencies, decision-making and risk-taking, and leadership style. These findings align with previous research by Mohonnon, Hirvonen, and Laaksonen (2017); Resnik et al. (2016); Ozuake, Chuanchua, and Ogbonna (2016); Oganasaniya, Hiva, and Molaee (2022); Senteno et al. (2019); and Alanzi (2018).

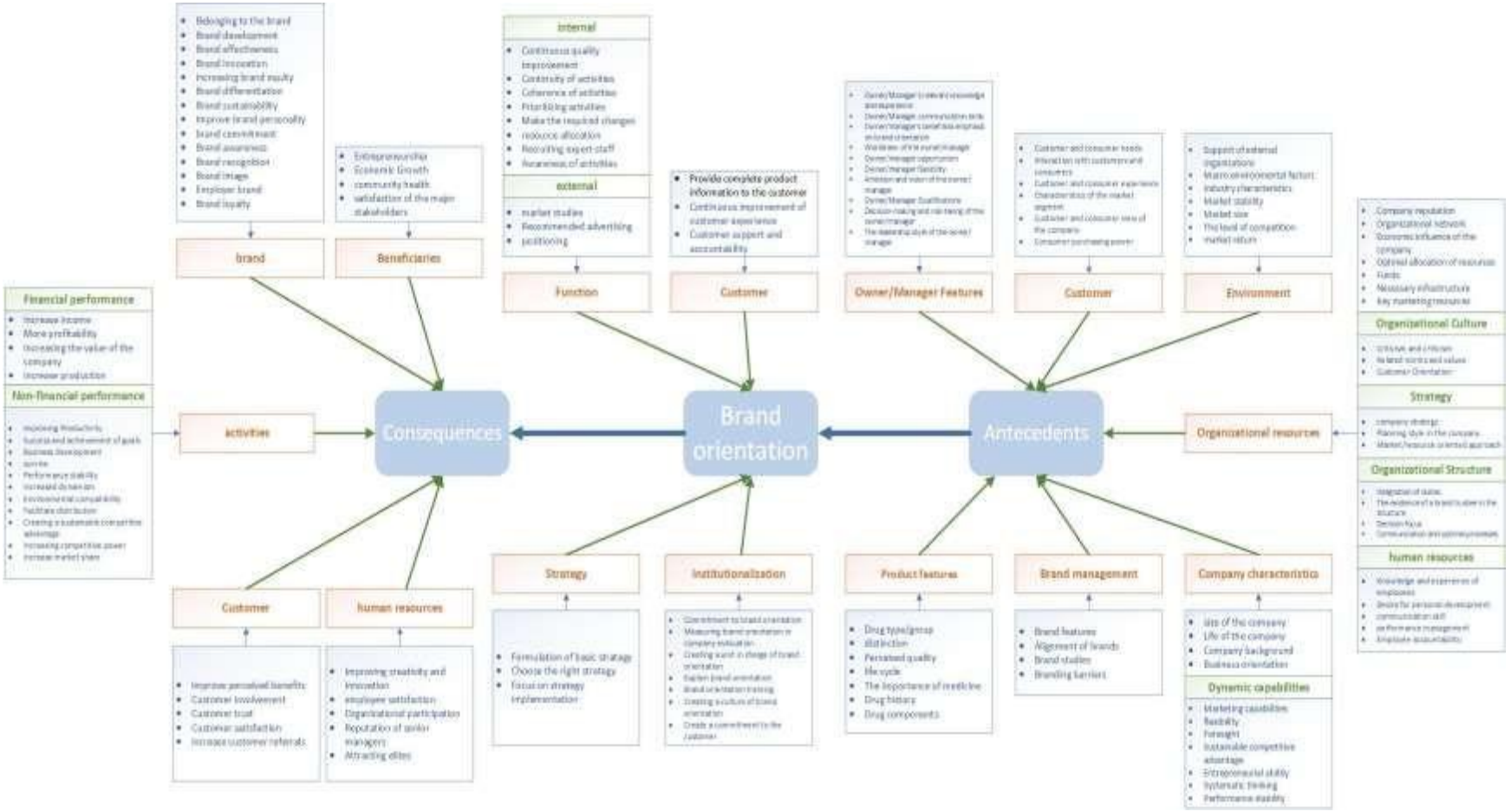

Figure 2) Model of antecedents and consequences of brand orientation in small and medium enterprises

The second theme was organizational resources, which included company reputation, organizational network, the company's economic clout, optimal resource allocation, financial resources, necessary infrastructure, key marketing resources, organizational culture (criticism and feedback, relevant norms and values, and customer focus), strategy (company strategy, planning style in the company, and market/resource-oriented approach), organizational structure (job integration, the presence of a brand manager in the structure, decision-making focus and optimized communication and processes), and human resources (employee knowledge and experience, willingness for individual development, communication skills, performance management, and employee accountability). These findings were consistent with those of Anis-ur-Rahman, Wang, and Hussain (2016); Aydın (2011); Huang and Tsai (2013); and Abimbola and Valster (2007).

The third theme was the environment, which included support from external organizations, macro-environmental factors, industry characteristics in the pharmaceutical group, market stability in the pharmaceutical market and group, market size in the pharmaceutical market and group, level of competition in the pharmaceutical market and group, and market return in the pharmaceutical market and group. These findings were also in line with the research of Hiranrikurana, Soetuduen, and Soetudens (2019); Chockpitakul, Anantachart, and Hamilton (2020); Sepulcri, Minardes, and Marcori (2020).

The fourth theme in the brand orientation antecedents was the characteristics of the drug/drug group, the core themes of which were the type of drug group, differentiation within the drug group, perceived quality within the drug group, the life cycle of the drug group, the importance of the drug group, the history of the drug, and the components of the drug. These findings were also consistent with the research of Nooren (2016); Huang and Tsai (2013); Juntonen, Ailonen, and Johansson (2012); Agostini, Filippini, and Nuvola (2014); Agostini, Nuvola, and Filippini (2015); Renton et al. (2016); Jelinkova and Mozarova (2020); and Walker and Jean (2014).

Firm characteristics were the fifth theme, and the core themes were company size, company age, company history, business orientation, dynamic capabilities (marketing capabilities, flexibility, foresight, sustainable competitive advantage, entrepreneurial capability, systems thinking, and performance stability). These findings were also in line with those of Ozake, Palamidouska, Mikhailov, and Kina (2020); Hiranrikurana, Soetuduen, and Soetudens (2019); Adom and Mensah (2018); Modalige, Ismail, and Dasayake (2022); Piha and Avlonitis (2018); and Balmer and Pounder (2021).

The sixth theme was brand management, and the core themes were brand characteristics, brand alignment, brand studies, and branding barriers. These findings were consistent with the research of Michel et al. (2015); Moilanen, Hietanen, and Laaksonen (2017); Piha and Avlonitis (2018); Balmer and Pounder (2021); and Anis-ur-Rahman, Wang, Sultan, and Meriles (2018).

The seventh and final theme in the brand orientation antecedents section was physician/patient, and the core themes were physician/patient needs, physician/patient interaction, physician/patient experience, the importance of the drug group segment among physicians, physician/patient perceptions of the company, and patient purchasing power. These findings were also consistent with the results of Juntonen, Ailonen, and Johansson (2012); Kalafatis, Remziva, Riley, and Sing; Michael et al. (2015); Renton et al. (2016); Ferling, Crosso, and Hennard (2011); Huang, Michel, and Elliott (2012); Radler (2018), Banerjee (2016), and Crewe, Fiske, and Malone (2012).

Following the analysis and review of 373 initial concepts, 43 core themes, 2 organizing themes, and 5 overarching themes were identified. The first overarching theme was brand, which

included brand belonging, brand development, brand effectiveness, brand innovation, brand equity enhancement, brand differentiation, brand sustainability, brand personality improvement, brand commitment, brand awareness, brand recognition, brand image, employer branding, and brand loyalty. These findings were in line with those of Anisa-ur-Rahman, Wang, and Hussain (2016); Biedenbach and Majinkski (2016); Sepulcri, Minardes, and Marcori (2020); Agostini, Nosla, and Filippini (2015); Adom and Mensah (2018); and Ozakli et al. (2020).

The second overarching theme was physicians, which included improved physician-perceived benefits, physician engagement, physician trust, physician satisfaction, and increased physician referrals. These findings were in line with those of Zhang, Jiang, Shabir, and Zhou (2016); Molianghara (2011a; 2011b); Cassidy (2014); Ong, Lee, and Ramaya (2018); Gisipe and Harun (2013); Delodwala and Dlamini (2018); Ong, Saleh, and Yusoff (2015); and Chwanwaka, Ozakli, and Ogbonna (2015).

The third overarching theme was performance, which included both financial and non-financial aspects of firm performance. The financial aspects included increased revenue, increased profitability, increased firm value, and increased output. These findings were in line with those of Anisa-ur-Rahman, Wang, and Hussain (2016); Adom, Mensah, and Asamoah (2017); Anisa-ur-Rahman et al. (2018); Nouwen (2016); Kinnava, Ozakli, and Stergiadou (2016); Kinnava, Stergiadou, Nikolina, Ozakli, and Ajayi (2017); Ozakli et al. (2020); Moilanen, Hietanen, and Laaksonen (2017); and Pieha, Papadas, and Davous (2021). The non-financial aspects included improved productivity, success and goal achievement, business development, survival, performance sustainability, increased dynamism, environmental adaptability, distribution facilitation, sustainable competitive advantage creation, increased competitive power, and increased market share. These findings were in line with those of Zhang et al. (2016); Adom, Narterh, and Boaten (2017); Moilanen, Hietanen, and Laaksonen (2017); Adom, Mensah, and Asamoah (2017); Vyardot (2017); Lee, Okas, and Suok (2019); and Choukpitakul, Anantachart, and Hamilton (2020).

The fourth overarching theme was stakeholders, which included entrepreneurship, economic growth, community health, and overall stakeholder satisfaction. These findings were in line with those of Rokhmin, Myasari, and Volandari (2021); Mubarak (2016); Khodaparasti and Gharablaghi (2020); and Biedenbach and Majinkski (2016).

The final overarching theme in the brand orientation outcomes was human resources, which included improved creativity and innovation, employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, top management reputation, and talent attraction. These findings were also in line with the research of Zhang et al. (2016); Biedenbach and Majinkski (2016); Mubarak (2016); Anisa-ur-Rahman, Wang, and Hussain (2016); and Resnik et al. (2016).

This study aims to investigate the brand orientation elements in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the pharmaceutical industry. Through a qualitative approach and using grounded theory methodology, 13 primary themes were extracted, which are categorized into three main components: antecedents, brand orientation, and consequences. The findings were supported by the research of Aaker (2013), Keller and Miter (2013), Cassidy (2013 and 2014), Balmer (2013), Hakansson (2012), Anis-ur-Rahman, Wang, and Hussain (2016), and Nouven (2016).

To conduct the DEMATEL analysis, 31 questionnaires were distributed and collected. The average responses were calculated, and the DEMATEL analysis was performed in sequence. The results revealed that all the themes in the antecedent's section are influencers due to their impact on brand orientation elements and consequences. The themes in the consequences

section are influencees due to their susceptibility to the elements and antecedents of brand orientation. Brand orientation itself has a value close to zero because it is influenced by the antecedents and influences the consequences. However, the influence of brand orientation on the consequences is slightly greater than its susceptibility to the antecedents, resulting in a slightly positive influence/influenceability value. This indicates that brand orientation elements are ultimately influencers.

The highest interaction among the antecedents is related to drug characteristics/drug groups. This means that this theme has the most connection with the other final themes of the research. The highest interaction among the consequence themes is related to the brand and stakeholders' themes, while the human resource's theme has the least interaction. This means that the human resources theme has the least connection with the other research themes. The model derived from this research can be used as a source for academic and workshop training on brand orientation. The study also suggests that brand orientation is the key to sustainable success in the market and achieving sustainable financial results. The lack of an appropriate level of this capacity will lead to the failure of pharmaceutical companies. One of the applications of this research is to create the possibility of measuring brand orientation in SMEs in the industry. Pharmaceutical companies can, on their own or with the participation of experienced external consultants, measure their level of brand orientation and use the results to develop organizational improvement programs. Given the importance of the owner/manager's perspective and characteristics, it is recommended that companies that want to be brand-oriented should start by making changes from their owner/manager and develop all the characteristics that are identified in this model for a brand-oriented owner/manager to increase the chances of success in this path. Academic, executive, and applied training will be very fruitful in this way.

Given that the theme of brand orientation has been repeatedly raised in the themes related to strategy and planning in both the antecedents and phenomenon sections, it is recommended to avoid short-term solutions and hasty decisions in this area. All efforts of senior managers should be directed towards the development and implementation of a long-term strategy and resist the temptation to deviate from long-term strategies when faced with daily problems. They should not be discouraged or arrogant by short-term results. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of brand orientation elements in SMEs in the pharmaceutical industry. The findings have important implications for managers and policymakers in developing strategies to enhance brand orientation and achieve sustainable success.

One of the most crucial strategies in pharmaceutical brand management involves concentrating resources and activities on a select few drug groups. This approach is recommended for several reasons. Initially, brand positioning can be targeted at a single specific group. This allows companies to gain necessary experience, knowledge, and skills before expanding to higher-priority groups. However, the selection of drug cases and groups should be based on a well-defined plan and prioritization process, informed by the gathered insights. Success in brand positioning for one pharmaceutical group paves the way for success in subsequent groups. Customers will more readily trust subsequent drug groups based on the positive outcomes of brand positioning efforts. Aligned with the strategic concept of selection, where companies choose and reject certain markets, research may suggest excluding particular groups from the brand positioning cycle.

Given the importance of organizational cohesion and culture in brand positioning, it is essential that all departmental activities across the entire product value chain align with the company's brand focus. As a first step, companies should establish dedicated brand management units within their organizations and define clear responsibilities for these units.These units should

perform crucial functions such as market research, brand studies, and the assessment of brand characteristics like brand loyalty, identity, image, value, and awareness. Without dedicated brand management units, such as a brand management department or public relations department, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) will struggle to successfully implement brand positioning strategies.

For SMEs that may lack the capacity to expand or recreate their organizational structure, brand positioning-related activities can be delegated to an existing department. These units should be evaluated at regular intervals to ensure their effectiveness. Considering the gathered insights, the responsibilities associated with risk management should include the regular and ongoing assessment and analysis of brand positioning-related risks. By proactively identifying and mitigating potential risks, companies can safeguard their brand reputation and minimize the negative impact of brand positioning missteps. By adopting a focused and strategic approach to brand positioning in pharmaceuticals, companies can enhance their brand image, strengthen customer relationships, and ultimately achieve sustainable growth in the competitive healthcare landscape.

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