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Building brand equity, literally: Understanding how B2B clients respond to branding and relationship marketing in architecture

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Architectural firms have traditionally established their client base through personal networks and referrals, a proven approach that continues to be at the basis of the industry. Today's increasingly competitive market is forcing them to adopt more proactive branding and marketing communication strategies to expand their client portfolio. This research investigates how B2B clients respond to and interpret branding and relationship marketing efforts of architectural service providers, examining how these communications contribute to the overall value proposition and influence procurement decisions. The study is conducted through semi-structured interviews with clients of an Italian design and engineering firm. Findings demonstrate that clients put a strong emphasis on both the firm's perceived competence and the quality of interpersonal relationships when forming brand equity. While reputation and portfolio establish initial credibility, direct engagement with firm personnel is fundamental for building trust and influencing decisions. Personal contact remains key for engagement, while digital channels effectively support initial information gathering.

Keywords: Architecture and Engineering Firms, B2B Brand, Customer-Based Brand Equity, Relationship Marketing, B2B Buyer Behavior.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The architectural and construction industry is notably a mature industry. So mature, that we could say it is one of the most ancient practices in modern Human's history. No surprise, therefore, that one of the textbooks that shaped architecture theory over the centuries was a roman manuscript: *De Architectura* by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (Kruft et al., 1994; Mallgrave, 2009). Since Roman and medieval periods, architecture has undergone a profound transformation, incorporating materials and technologies that would have been unimaginable to earlier builders. The technical progression that originated during the industrial revolution with its transformative energy sources has endured throughout the contemporary era and is still advancing today (Calder, 2022; Curtis, 1996). The Post-Modernism and Deconstructivism trends gave birth to the recent archistar phenomenon, while architectural styles shifted in response to political, economic, and cultural influences (Crysler et al., 2012). If design and buildings' stories rapidly evolved, what hasn't much changed over the years is how architectural services are provided: the business of architecture.

1.1. Background

Historically, the acquisition of projects by architectural firms is predominantly achieved through established personal networks and client referrals (Kolleeny & Linn, 2002; Low et al., 2016; Nobre & Faria, 2017). Marketing, as we understand it today, was largely an informal process. Doing business relied only on personal connections, essentially being in the right networks and linked to the right organizations, together with steady cultivation of a solid reputation built on word-of-mouth (Kolleeny & Linn, 2002; Mitrache, 2012). Consequently, it wasn't at all unusual for client contacts to simply materialize, often emerging from trusted referrals, inbound leads, or sometimes appearing almost unexpectedly (*Architectural Services Firm Stresses Communication in Marketing Program*, 1981).

However, running parallel to this deep-rooted reliance on personal connections, there existed a significant and long-standing aversion to formal marketing within the architectural profession. This reluctance wasn't just superficial, but it came partly from the profession's intrinsic culture, which historically avoided plain commercial practices. Mitrache (2012) notes precisely the common sentiment: "a good architect would never find himself short of work precisely by way of being a good architect". This conceptual resistance to marketing activities was further reinforced by ethical standards that actively discouraged direct competition. Taking the US context as an example, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) enforced rules dating back as far as 1909 that explicitly forbade architects from using even the most basic forms of marketing, such as advertising or putting the company name on construction signs (Kolleeny & Linn, 2002). Even fair and direct competition between firms vying for

the same project was prohibited until regulatory shifts in the 1970s (Mitrache, 2012). Although legal changes, a considerable reluctance among many architects to actively sell their services persisted.

The US historical aversion wasn't in fact just an isolated issue; reports from various parts of the world repeat a similar hesitation, even in recent years. We see marketing adoption described as rare or unstructured, especially among smaller firms, in places like Portugal (Nobre & Faria, 2017), Romania (Mitrache, 2012), Latin America (Páez Iturralde, 2014), and within small UK practices (Murtagh et al., 2016). Often, these firms lack dedicated budgets or personnel, with marketing duties falling informally to architects themselves. Furthermore, a view of marketing as somehow unprofessional or even distasteful has been noted in countries such as Nigeria (Oluwatayo, 2017). Even where recognized as important, like in Singapore, full adoption of marketing concepts could still be in formative stages (Low et al., 2016). This picture is reinforced by findings from South Africa, where traditional word-of-mouth prevails over active marketing (Verster et al., 2019) and Malaysia, where marketing has frequently been treated as an ad-hoc activity rather than a core strategy (Jaafar et al., 2008).

Intensifying this historical and geographical reluctance is the way architecture is often culturally conceptualized, frequently seen primarily through an artistic lens. Architects often perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as creatives focused on achieving specific aesthetic, technical, and functional ambitions within their built works (Low et al., 2016). Yet, this artistic identity coexists with the reality that architecture operates as a business. And making things worse, it's commonly acknowledged that architects rarely demonstrate equal competence as business managers (Kolleeny, J. F., & Linn, C., 2002). Indeed, success in practice demands not only design ability but also technical knowledge, management capabilities, and business expertise. Perhaps partly due to this complex duality, the unique character of architecture as a design-centric professional service has, at times, been notably overlooked or insufficiently explored within the broader academic marketing literature (Heintz & Aranda-Mena, 2012).

More recently, however, a significant shift has taken place. Architectural firms now operate in a context where they must actively engage in structured marketing to remain viable and competitive in an increasingly crowded marketplace (Hafez & Othman, 2017; Oluwatayo, 2017; Treado & Brunswick, 2018). Indeed, the contemporary economic climate and intensified competitive pressures have transformed the application of dedicated marketing and sales techniques from a potential advantage into an operational necessity for survival and growth within the architectural industry, mirroring parallel developments observed across various other professional service sectors (Nobre & Faria, 2017). Key events, particularly challenging economic downturns like recessions and significant shifts in client culture and expectations, have forced architects to take marketing much more seriously (Low et al., 2016). The clear result is that architects today are far more actively involved in marketing initiatives and

are demonstrably investing financial resources into these efforts (Mitrache, 2012). This transition towards proactive marketing is driven by fundamental need for firms to go out and secure new projects, moving beyond passively waiting for work, and to effectively promote their unique design and technical capabilities to potential clients (Kolleeny & Linn, 2002).

The practice of branding has emerged as an important strategic element. Effectively marketing architectural services in today's landscape involves deliberate and coordinated activities. These are aimed at crafting a distinct and resonant firm brand, encompassing its core identity and values, and then strategically positioning that brand to attract the types of clients and projects the firm desires (Low et al., 2016; Mitrache, 2012), thereby establishing a sustainable competitive advantage in the industry (Heintz & Aranda-Mena, 2012).

Running parallel to the strategic focus on branding, relationship marketing continues to hold profound and fundamental importance within the architectural field, and in the project-oriented firms industry in general (Tikkanen et al., 2007; Treado & Brunswick, 2018). This reflects the inherently collaborative, trust-based, and often long-term nature of design and construction projects. The careful cultivation of strong client relationships is consistently emphasized as fundamental, not just for encouraging repeat business, but also for gaining a nuanced understanding of client needs (Nobre & Faria, 2017). This process is naturally aided by the fact that architectural projects are frequently co-created, demanding a close collaboration, which inherently fosters strong ties and mutual understanding between clients and their service providers over the project lifecycle (Murtagh et al., 2016). Furthermore, proactive networking, extending beyond current clients to actively engage with potential customers, consultants, contractors, and other external partners, is considered highly significant for effectively gathering market intelligence, identifying emerging opportunities, and ultimately securing new projects (Nobre & Faria, 2017). While an "implicit" form of relationship management, based on attentive service and professional integrity, has always been part of the architect-client dynamic, the contemporary professional landscape increasingly demands more conscious, structured, and "explicit" relationship marketing activities that are developed and integrated into the firm's comprehensive business strategy (Kougia & Smyth, 2011).

Finally, completing the picture of modern architectural marketing strategy, digital communications must be recognized as an increasingly central component, as in many other B2B settings (Krings et al., 2021; Siamagka et al., 2015). The strategic and effective use of online platforms, particularly informative firm websites and social media, offers architectural practices a broader reach, connecting them with new potential clients (Low et al., 2016; Oluwatayo, 2017). Consequently, building an integrated marketing communication network (Batra & Keller, 2016), including official websites, insightful cultural blogs, visually engaging social media profiles, and active participation in relevant online communities or

magazines, significantly enhances an architectural firm's visibility and searchability, acting as a persistent form of advertising and brand engagement (Lashgari et al., 2018; Mora Cortez et al., 2020).

1.2. Purpose and Research Question

The core aim of this study, then, is to examine how B2B clients, businesses hiring architecture and engineering firms, perceive and respond to various marketing and branding initiatives directed towards them. More specifically, the research aims to investigate the impact that distinct strategies, particularly those involving branding, digital communication, and relationship marketing, have on the purchasing decisions these clients make. To fulfill this aim, the study seeks to answer the following research question:

In what ways do branding and marketing initiatives by architecture and engineering firms shape B2B customer perceptions and behaviors throughout the journey toward contract finalization?

1.3. Expected Contribution

This thesis aims to contribute to both theory and practice in the context of marketing within the architectural industry.

Theoretically, it seeks to address the underrepresented intersection of marketing and architecture, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of this field. Practically, this thesis aims to provide valuable guidance for architectural firms seeking to adopt a more contemporary, market-oriented approach.

1.4. Delimitations

To effectively study how B2B clients respond to branding and relationship marketing activities, design quality is not considered in this research. This limitation was established to ensure the analytical focus remains centered on the managerial aspects that are within the operational control of an architectural practice, distinct from subjective assessments regarding the aesthetic merit of project outputs. This approach also avoids intrusion into the specialized domain of architectural critique and theory.

Additionally, the study's focus is geographically confined to the Italian B2B market. This specific context offers valuable insights into a setting not represented in existing literature regarding architectural firm branding. Simultaneously, this market represents a suitably complex and developed environment for evaluating the real estate industry for two key reasons. Firstly, the market is characterized by a diverse array of stakeholders and investors, each possessing distinct needs and priorities; these include real estate management firms, various types of investors, SGRs (Italian asset management companies), fund managers, non-profit foundations managing property portfolios, corporations seeking new headquarters, hotel chains, and other types of corporations. Secondly, it

accommodates a comprehensive spectrum of real estate projects, ranging from hospitality developments to data centers, thereby ensuring the sample encompasses activities relevant to the broader field of architectural practice (Norsa, A., 2024).

2. Existing Literature and Research Gap

2.1. Building a B2B Brand

A brand can be conceptualized either as the supplementary value added upon a product or as an intangible and market-based relational asset signifying the connections established between a firm and its clientele (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). Aaker (1991) defines in a famous conceptualization brand equity as "a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm's customers".

Historically, the discipline of branding originated primarily in the business-to-consumer (B2C) sector, with particular importance in fast-moving consumer goods (Ballantyne & Aitken, 2007). In this initial context, a brand was viewed closely linked with the product itself, and branding was essentially understood as the process of adding value to that physical product (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). According to this traditional view, a brand represented a collection of functional and emotional benefits, that together offered a unique and attractive promise to the consumer (Kuhn et al., 2008). The importance of creating value for customers, buyers and other stakeholders has been well documented within marketing research, establishing the added value of a brand as a widely accepted principle in the B2C domain (J. L. Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2003; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011).

Conversely, in the past, little attention was paid to branding in a B2B context. This initiated partly from a common assumption that industrial purchasers operated on a predominantly rational basis, unaffected by the emotional values associated with brands (Coleman et al., 2011; Lindgreen et al., 2010). Furthermore, some viewed B2B branding initiatives as potentially superficial or impractical, given the extensive product portfolios characteristic of many industrial enterprises (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). Also, not all B2B decision-makers were convinced that investing in B2B branding would lead to tangible financial returns, especially given the long-term commitment required (Chang et al., 2018).

Despite this lack of focus, recent years have witnessed a notable increase in research addressing various aspects of B2B branding. The growing academic interest can be attributed to current market dynamics and evolutions, such as the increasing globalization and competition (Seyedghorban et al., 2016), the increase in homogeneity of product quality, and the traditional personal business relationships being integrated with digital communication channels (Baumgarth, 2010). As a result, researchers have begun exploring new areas in B2B branding, also applying B2C concepts to the industrial world. Current

thinking suggests that the fundamental concept of a brand has universal applicability across various commercial domains and industries, requiring certain adaptations to address the specific details of the context (Coleman et al., 2015; Kuhn et al., 2008). Now, B2B brand value is well recognized for its role in adding value in multiple ways, adding a competitive advantage and leading to better financial results (Seyedghorban et al., 2016). Moreover, B2B brands enable a shift from value derived only from goods and services towards deeper relationship-based value with the buyer, given the absolute preeminence of relationship management in industrial settings (Coleman et al., 2011). The changing perspective in literature indicates a growing recognition that B2B brands are indeed capable of creating and delivering substantial value for B2B firms (Glynn, 2012).

2.1.1. B2B Service Brand identity

Brand identity represents the strategic vision for the brand, what the organization intends to evoke in the customer's mind and how it desires to be perceived (Coleman et al., 2011). By its nature, brand identity originates from within the organization, rather than being formulated by consumer perceptions. This means that a brand identity is effective when the firm successfully considers who the customers are, how they will be using the product/service, and which buying situation they will be facing, especially in B2B contexts (Beverland et al., 2007). If carefully developed, a distinctive and relevant brand identity can cultivate preference within the marketplace and add perceived value to the offering. Furthermore, a strong brand identity fosters trust, forms the base of a relationship, facilitates differentiation from competitors, and aids customers in identifying with it (Burmann et al., 2009; Coleman et al., 2011, 2015).

Building upon the general concept, research has specifically investigated brand identity within the B2B services sector, identifying B2B Service Brand Identity (SBI) as a multidimensional construct. Being architecture a B2B service industry, SBI serves as a particularly important framework to evaluate. But what constitutes, in practice, B2B Service Brand Identity? Coleman et al. (2011) developed and validated a scale within the UK IT service sector, proposing five key dimensions that constitute B2B SBI.

The first of these dimensions is “brand personality”, which refers to the human characteristics associated with a brand (J. L. Aaker, 1997). In industrial markets, brand personality can influence a buyer's willingness to pay a premium and serves as a crucial element in brand differentiation. Effective B2B brands are increasingly recognized as needing both functional and emotional appeal, with brand personality significantly contributing to this emotional dimension (Coleman et al., 2011). Cultivating a B2B brand personality perceived as both warm and competent can be achieved strategically through the products offered (emphasizing competence) and through customer interactions, including sales and service support (emphasizing warmth) (Aagerup et al., 2022).

Given the predominance of personal selling and direct interaction in B2B markets (Baumgarth, 2010), the second dimension, "human resources management", becomes critical for successfully implementing the brand strategy, as they are the first contact for perspective clients, especially in AEF (Verster et al., 2019). This aspect encompasses the internal initiatives aimed at ensuring employees understand the brand promise and possess the capabilities to deliver on it consistently (with trainings and performance monitoring), enriching the buying process with a positive and significant influence on overall brand performance (Coleman et al., 2015).

A third dimension is "corporate visual identity", which includes tangible elements such as names, logos, symbols, packaging, and slogans (Coleman et al., 2015). While traditionally considered central in B2C marketing, the importance of visual identity in B2B contexts is also gaining recognition. However, it is worth noting that Coleman et al. (2015) didn't find adequate evidence in the B2B IT service sector specifically, suggesting that corporate visual identity might have an insignificant impact on brand performance, while in architectural firms, the case could be different (Verster et al., 2019) considering the central aesthetical features of an architectural commission.

The fourth element, the "employee & client focus dimension", highlights the importance of aligning the brand strategy with the needs and expectations of both internal stakeholders (employees) and external clients (Coleman et al., 2011). This perspective recognizes employees as key brand ambassadors, particularly in service-oriented B2B contexts, emphasizing that understanding client needs is fundamental to delivering value. Similarly to the findings for corporate visual identity, however, the practical analysis indicated that this focus may also have a non-relevant effect on brand performance in their context of analysis, driven by technology rather than other aspects (Coleman et al., 2015).

As a fifth element in B2B service brand identity, "consistent communications" addresses the need for coherence and uniformity in messaging across all points where stakeholders interact with the brand (touchpoints). Coleman et al. (2015) found that consistent communication could have a negative consequence for brand performance according to the decision makers in a service firm, meaning that integrated marketing communication was not conducted in a single and coherent way. This counter-intuitive result might potentially be attributed to the complexities inherent in many B2B relationships, which may necessitate more tailored or flexible communication approaches rather than strict uniformity.

In the particular context of architecture, brand identity could comprehend two additional factors, as noted by Verster et al. (2019). The first concept can be described as "The building as the brand", where the physical structure of a building serves as a tangible showcase of the firm's capabilities, since completed projects themselves play a vital role in attracting new clients. It could be included in the

“corporate visual identity”, even if separated from the company. The second concept centers on the architect’s personal brand: the personality and reputation of the architect or firm leader often align closely with, or even embody, the brand’s identity, particularly in smaller firms.

2.1.2. Customer-Based Brand Equity

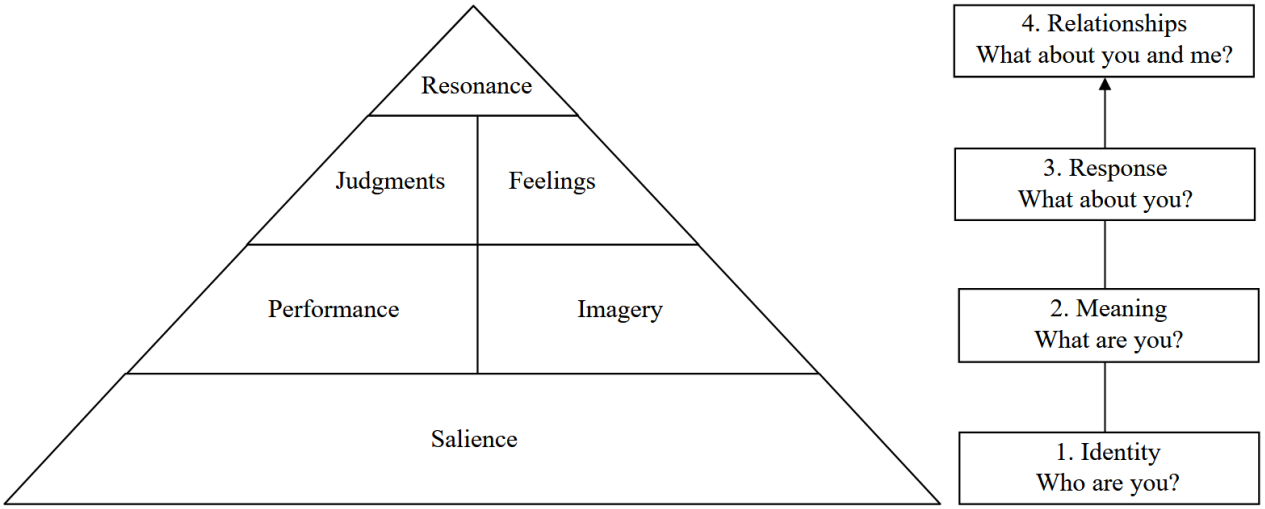
If brand identity represents the firm’s viewpoint, brand equity is what is perceived externally by the market and by the customers. B2B (or industrial) brand equity refers to the added value that a brand brings to a product or service in a B2B context. Similar to its B2C counterpart, this added value can lead to positive outcomes such as customer repurchase, willingness to pay a price premium, consideration of brand extensions, and brand recommendations (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Zhang et al., 2015).

The Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) resonance model derives from Keller’s B2C based literature (Keller, 1993, 2003, 2016a). It stands as a fundamental framework for understanding the process of building brand equity, and consequently, strong brands. Its central premise focuses on shaping how customers think and feel about a brand to grow equity (Keller, 1993). The model imagines a structured progression involving four steps and six key "building blocks" visualized as ascending levels of a pyramid (Keller, 2003).

The foundation of this pyramid is Salience, which addresses the fundamental question of brand identity: “Who are you?” (Keller, 2003). This initial stage centers on ensuring customers are aware of the brand and can readily recall or recognize it within various contexts (Keller, 1993). Building upon salience, the next level focuses on establishing brand meaning (“What are you?”) through two complementary blocks: Performance and Imagery. Performance relates directly to how effectively the product or service meets customers' functional requirements, while Imagery addresses the more intangible dimensions of the brand, such as the brand's perceived personality and values (Keller, 1993, 2003).

Moving higher, the focus shifts to stimulating customer responses ("What about you?") through Judgments and Feelings. Judgments represent the customer's considered opinions and evaluations regarding the brand (quality, credibility, consideration, and superiority). Feelings, instead, encompass the variety of emotional reactions and responses the brand evokes in customers (Keller, 2003). At the top of the model lies resonance, representing the ultimate objective: creating a deep bond and relationship between the customer and the brand ("What about you and me?"). This highest level is characterized by intense loyalty, a strong sense of personal attachment, identification with a brand community, and active engagement with the brand beyond mere purchase behavior (Keller, 2003, 2016a).

Fig. 1. Image from Kuhn et al. (2008)



2.1.3.A B2B adaptation of Customer-Based Brand Equity

Given the B2C origins of the concept, one significant challenge has been the applicability of the consumer-based brand equity resonance model to B2B markets (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011). Nevertheless, some studies have investigated its potential adaptations within diverse business-to-business (B2B) contexts, each focusing on distinct industrial sectors and geographical regions.

Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić (2015) examined the B2B chemical market, conducting interviews with buyers of industrial chemical products within South and Eastern Europe. Davis et al. (2008) explored B2B branding dynamics within the logistics services industry, utilizing mail surveys directed at both service providers and their customers across North America. Furthermore, the applicability was investigated within the electronic tracking technology for waste management, through semi-structured interviews with senior buyers of this technology in the Australian market by Kuhn et al. (2008). Complementing these perspectives, Taylor et al. (2007) explored CBBE within the B2B financial services, concentrating specifically on professional liability insurance in the United States.

Analyzing collectively these sources, the model undergoes significant changes, particularly at its top, to reflect the distinct nature of B2B relationships (Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić, 2015). The “intense and active” (Keller, 2003) loyalty relationship characterizing resonance in Keller's original model is conceptualized differently, indicating that the original subdimensions of resonance - behavioral loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community, and active engagement (Keller, 2016a) - are not entirely applicable in many industrial contexts.

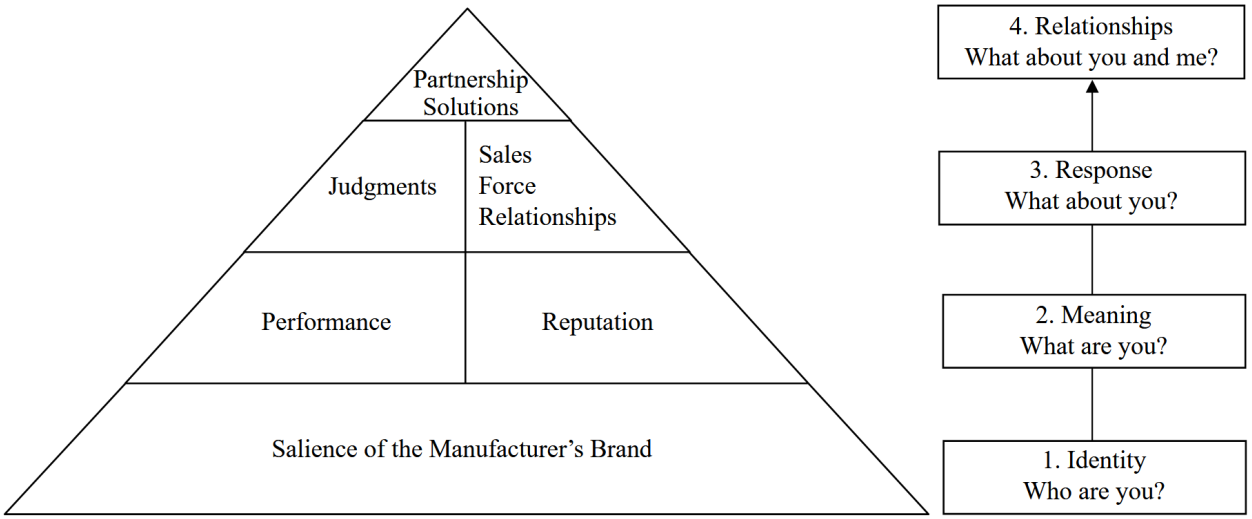
Kuhn et al. (2008) found that brand resonance was not at all evident in every of its subdimensions, leading the researchers to propose "Partnership Solutions" as the appropriate apex for a revised B2B

brand equity pyramid. Similarly, Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić (2015) respondents associated the pinnacle of the equity pyramid not with Keller's original dimensions, but rather with establishing strong partnership relations, and engaging in cooperation to develop solutions aimed at improving customers' production processes. What was "resonance" before becomes in fact a commitment to a long-term and mutually beneficial buyer-producer relationship, fostered by sales representatives. These insights indicate a shift from the more emotionally and psychologically driven connection of B2C markets, to a more rational and strategically aligned partnership in B2B interactions (Kuhn et al., 2008).

Further down the pyramid, another key modification involves the replacement of Keller's "Feelings" block with "Buyer-seller relationship", emphasizing once more the central role of personal interactions with sales representatives, fundamentally shaping a big portion of B2B brand equity. Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić (2015), in fact point out that respondents expressed their emotions through evaluations of the buyer-seller relationship, and Kuhn et al. (2008) also found that buyers frequently referred to their interactions with company salespeople when discussing their relationship with the brand.

While judgments remain untouched in the revised model (though with potentially different subdimensions), "Performance" becomes strongly connected to the producer's corporate brand and to its credibility, rather than to the single product brand. Similarly, "Imagery" maintains relevance but with potentially different interpretations in B2B contexts. At the foundation, "Salience" focuses specifically on the producer's corporate brand recognition, still indicating that awareness is of primary importance (Kuhn et al., 2008; Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić, 2015).

Fig. 2. Image from Kuhn et al. (2008)



While not explicitly revising the original framework, Davis et al. (2008) validate the relevance of Keller's model in B2B logistics, showing that brand image through tangible and relational elements drives brand equity by emphasizing corporate reputation and relationship quality. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2007) find

that in financial services, perceived value and CBBE increase satisfaction and loyalty, underscoring the B2B model's focus on relationship-based brand resonance.

2.1.4. Customer-Based Brand Equity in Architecture

Within architecture, where the practice of brand management is completely overlooked, Smyth & Kioussi (2011) note that brand essentially arises from design quality - "required regardless of market position" - and client reviews. The authors explain that clients take into consideration the firm's reputation, the relationships with the practice, and the practice design when commissioning a project. While not explicitly referring to CBBE, they suggest that after awareness, clients engage with identification with the firm's design, further transferred into a relationship at a later stage, thanks to the company's representatives performing relationship marketing (Smyth & Kioussi, 2011).

The comparative study of South African and Dutch architectural firms by Verster et al. (2019), the only study employing CBBE and its B2B adaptation, revealed differences in the approach to building brand equity in architecture. South African firms primarily relied on internal credibility measures (personal reputation and project portfolio), while showing reluctance toward collaborative partnerships. Dutch firms, conversely, emphasized external validation (awards and competition results) and actively fostered partnerships with community stakeholders and academic institutions, suggesting that external recognition and engagement strategies contribute to stronger brand positioning. Additionally, both groups tended to prioritize advanced brand equity components (judgement and partnerships) without adequately developing their foundational brand identity, potentially undermining their overall brand equity development (Verster et al., 2019).

2.2. Relationship Marketing

B2B markets have distinct characteristics that set them apart from B2C markets, which substantially impact purchasing decisions and marketing strategies (Glynn, 2012; Zhang et al., 2015). Unlike B2C transactions where individual consumers make relatively straightforward purchase decisions, B2B contexts involve complex organizational buying processes requiring specialized expertise and technical knowledge (Bilro et al., 2023). These markets feature fewer but more strategically significant buyers, with transactions characterized by intensive, relationship-driven interactions built on trust and demonstrated reliability (Lacka & Chong, 2016). Purchase decisions typically involve cross-functional teams rather than individuals, following formalized protocols and decision criteria established within the organization. They are in fact frequently shaped by various stakeholders within the buying organization, each bringing their own priorities and evaluation criteria to the process (Coleman et al., 2015). This multiperson approach reflects the increased complexity and risk associated with B2B

purchases, which represent investments with long-term implications and often spanning several years (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Van Zeeland-van Der Holst & Henseler, 2018).

Therefore, B2B buying behavior can be seen as a collaboration between buyers and suppliers, forming a buyer-supplier relationship (Van Zeeland-van Der Holst & Henseler, 2018). Reflecting this key encounter in the B2B procurement/selling process, marketing followed business, passing from a transaction-based approach to a more relationship-based marketing philosophy (Bilro et al., 2023). Relationship marketing has indeed emerged as a critical focus across academic research and service industries also due to its economic advantage: fostering existing customer relationships typically brings higher profitability than customer acquisition strategies, especially in increasingly competitive industrial markets (Chou & Chen, 2018). Relationship marketing can be thus defined as all the strategic marketing and communications initiatives focused on identifying, creating, developing, and continuing effective long-term partnerships with customers and other stakeholders (J. R. Brown et al., 2019). Therefore, relationship marketing requires a philosophical shift from adversarial to cooperative customer interactions, understanding with a learning curve how to better communicate and evolve within a complex networks of partners and stakeholders (Grönroos, 1999).

2.2.1.Social Exchange Theory

A central framework for relationship marketing is the Social Exchange Theory, suggesting that social interactions occur through an exchange process where parties seek to maximize benefits while minimizing costs, expecting reciprocity or repayment of their actions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In B2B contexts, this manifests as companies evaluating the potential advantages and risks of forming business relationships (Bilro et al., 2023), in order to determine whether the necessary assistance and support the firm requires would actually be provided (Ren et al., 2025). These partnerships therefore require sustained engagement, mutual respect, and recognition of each party as an active value co-creator rather than a passive participant. The development and sustainability of such relationships fundamentally depend on key concepts like trust, commitment, and reciprocity (Ren et al., 2025), further explored in the commitment-trust theory.

2.2.2. The Commitment-Trust Theory

The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing provides a foundational perspective, highlighting trust and commitment as fundamental elements for cultivating successful, long-term B2B relationships ultimately leading to enhanced collaboration and value creation (Wieland & Ivens, 2025). The initial study by Morgan & Hunt (1994) posits that trust and commitment are the key mediating variables, driving relationship marketing outcomes such as increased cooperation, the presence of functional conflict resolution, and overall relationship longevity.

Trust itself is defined as the confidence one party holds in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity, and its development is particularly crucial due to the risks and the interdependence involved (Van Zeeland-van Der Holst & Henseler, 2018; Wieland & Ivens, 2025). Several factors are understood to influence the building of trust, including the positive effects of interfirm communication (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017), the significant role of interpersonal relationships and liking between individuals (Van Zeeland-van Der Holst & Henseler, 2018), a supplier's demonstrated investments in the long-term relationship, and the use of knowledge-based communication strategies (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). On a practical level, trust operates in a complex way across interpersonal, inter-organizational, and systemic levels within supply chains, with these levels interacting to influence processes like supplier selection (Wieland & Ivens, 2025).

Commitment, in turn, represents a partner's belief that the ongoing relationship is important and thus deserves maximum effort to maintain (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), a sentiment built by the presence of trust, as a trusted partner is inherently highly valued. However, the interplay between trust and commitment may be more intricate, as Brown et al. (2019) explored potential "dark-side" effects of commitment resulting in weaker trust, suggesting a vulnerability sentiment in situations of excessive commitment.

Beyond these core mediators, other factors have been studied as significant contributors to relationship marketing success. These include overall relationship quality as a predictor of B2B customer loyalty (Bilro et al., 2023); the feeling of gratitude influencing repurchase intentions (Chou & Chen, 2018); the quality and effectiveness of communication channels which mediate the impact of perceived value on loyalty (with personalized channels noted as particularly important) (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017); and the practice of value co-creation where clients actively shape final solutions, thereby fostering deeper relationship development (Nobre & Faria, 2017).

2.2.3. Relationship Marketing in Architecture

Being architecture a B2B service business where value is co-created through interaction between the firm and the client, relationship marketing holds absolute significance (Kougia & Smyth, 2011). Probably, it is the most common form of marketing applied in the industry: while the concept of marketing itself face some resistance being seen as unprofessional (Mitrache, 2012), RM is often practiced implicitly, even if not explicitly recognized (Kougia & Smyth, 2011). This is because many architects understand the value of repeat business and strong client connections, which naturally leads to some form of relationship-building activity (Murtagh et al., 2016).

To be effective, relationship marketing necessitates an in-depth understanding of client needs, tailoring services precisely to align with their expectations, and delivering those services in a manner that ensures

client satisfaction with the fulfillment of the previous commitments regarding time, cost, and service quality (Smyth & Fitch, 2009).

On a practical level, the extended duration typical of architectural projects, spanning from initial studies through to construction completion, provides opportunities for this effective relationship development between the architect and the client, potentially fostering long-term connections. Considering also the architecture market's potentially inconsistent and intermittent nature, with substantial gaps between repeat business (Nobre & Faria, 2017), architects should maintain regular communication with clients to preserve these connections, because they foster client loyalty, generate future work opportunities, and ultimately enhance the firm market position (Smyth & Fitch, 2009). In order to do so, some architectural practices deliberately take on smaller projects to enable more regular client interaction (Nobre & Faria, 2017).

The responsibility for managing relationship marketing efforts in architecture is not limited to a dedicated marketing department, if the firm has one. Instead, firm representatives, and the architects themselves, are fundamentally involved in building and sustaining client relationships (Nobre & Faria, 2017). Smyth & Kioussi (2011) convincedly propose a structured key account management function within architectural firms to facilitate the client relationship and support the brand formation in the client's mind. They note that such a function wouldn't be free of conflicts, potentially eroding the central status of design within the practice from the architects' perspective. Moreover, if the main architect assumes the key account management responsibilities, she might not concentrate adequately on design; while if someone with another background would take the role, they could lack the nuanced understanding of design quality (Smyth & Kioussi, 2011).

2.3. B2B Buyer Behavior

B2B purchasing features multiple stakeholders whose decisions rarely involve impulse buying, instead prioritizing objective criteria like production requirements and cost efficiency (Nyadzayo et al., 2020). The purchasing journey itself is typically long and interactive, involving negotiation, as buyers often look for comprehensive solutions addressing their complete requirements, extending beyond just the core product or service (Grewal et al., 2015).

2.3.1. B2B Buying Journey

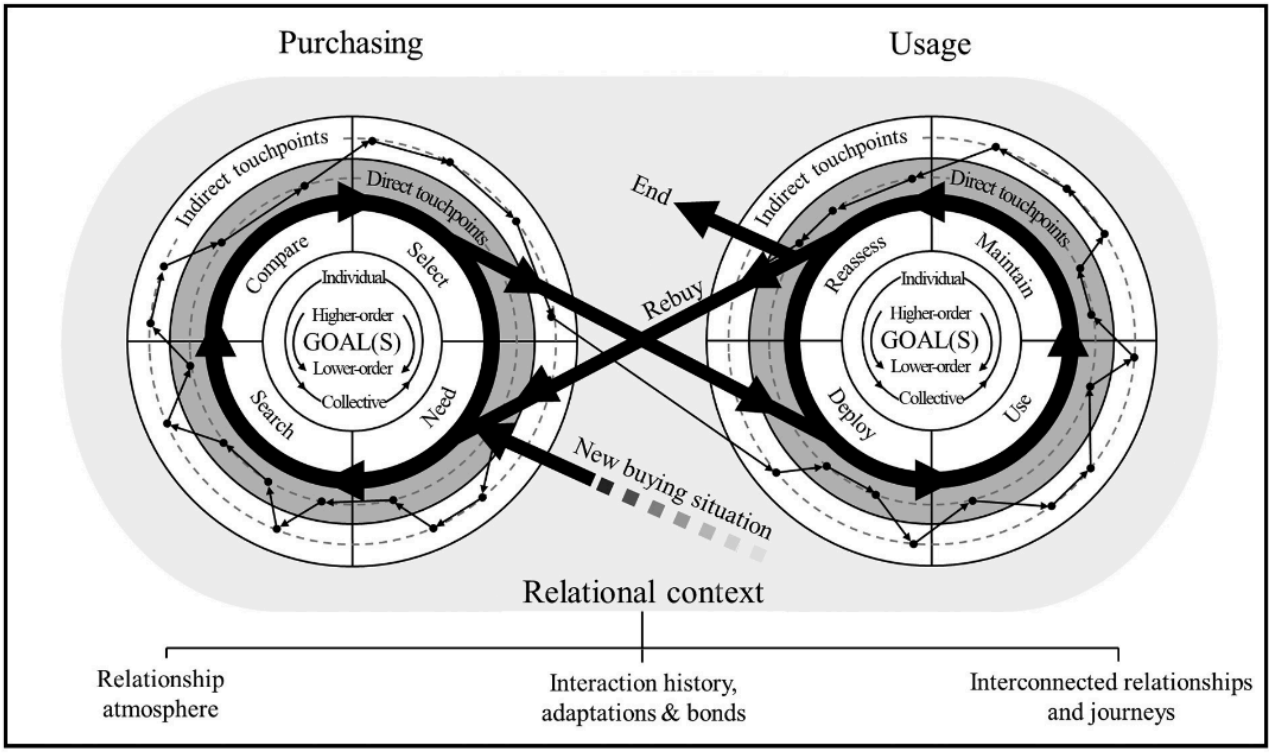
Early research often concentrated on outlining sequential steps, whereas subsequent work shifted towards identifying the various factors influencing this process and understanding their interrelationships (Grewal et al., 2015). Literature identifies various ways to structure a buying process, including three-step (pre-purchase, purchase, post-purchase) (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) or five-phase to seven-phase B2B funnel models (Steward et al., 2019).

The evolution of the concept in the literature has progressed through several thematic waves, including perspectives focused on transactions, situations, influences, responses, relationships, networks, and, more recently, journeys. While still examining single-product transactions from the buyer's perspective, these models moved away from strict linearity, incorporating feedback loops and causal relationships characteristic of contemporary customer journey approaches, recognizing the significant role of behavioral and psychological factors and the touchpoints encountered (Steward et al., 2019).

A critical contribution towards the loop analysis of the process has been the Customer Decision Journey proposed by Edelman & Singer (2015), which poses that after a "classic" journey of consideration and evaluation, the costumer, if successfully engaged, starts a new journey that simplifies or eliminates the evaluation step, just proceeding into a loyalty loop of buying, enjoying, advocating, and bonding with the company, ultimately leading to a new purchase.

More recently, Purmonen et al. (2023) convincedly analyzed multiple approaches, and combined them delineating two main areas of interest, the purchase journey and the usage journey. From their view, the purchase journey comprises four steps: need recognition, information search, comparison of alternatives, and selection. The post-purchase journey, or the usage journey, can also be further divided in four stages: deployment, usage, maintenance, and reassessment.

Fig. 3. Image from Purmonen et al. (2023)



The cascaded line of arrows illustrates one individual path from purchasing to usage. The dots are touchpoints.
The prevalence and length of journey steps and paths are likely to vary according to the purchasing situation.

During the journey, the touchpoints encountered are deemed vital to maintaining the client in the loop. Companies should direct their efforts to construct proactively this journey, strategically crafting processes and experiences with available technologies and possible interactions (Edelman & Singer, 2015). These ideally company-driven touchpoints could either be digital or physical (direct or indirect) (Lundin & Kindström, 2023), reaching complementary benefits when using both (Wang et al., 2019).

During the journey, the supplier selection process incorporates not only objective evaluation criteria but also subjective elements like brand perception and the buyer's assessment of purchase-related risks (B. P. Brown et al., 2011). Also, the advent of digital and information technologies has significantly impacted the B2B buying process, making it more buyer-driven. Empowered by available online resources, buyers can in fact extensively research seller offerings, access product evaluations, and often complete a substantial portion of the buying journey independently before engaging with a salesperson (Grewal et al., 2015). Consequently, this shift places greater emphasis on sellers needing to adopt more collaborative and relational approaches focused on customer solutions, moving beyond purely product-centric strategies.

2.3.2. Digital Communication Sensitivity

Social media has entered the B2B purchasing processes conversation, with "social buying" becoming increasingly significant, especially among millennial decision-makers. If conveyed with the right platform, the right message can influence the information search phase of the buying process (Gustafson et al., 2021). In general, social media platforms' influence appears most definite during the opening phases of the B2B selling process (Enyinda et al., 2021). Through these platforms, buyers actively research vendors and solutions while simultaneously sharing information across their organizations to build an internal consensus.

A presence on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook can in fact influence positively the relationship strength between two business partners, affecting perceived quality and commitment, but also intimacy and satisfaction, ultimately contributing to relationship building. Regular activity on LinkedIn plays a vital role in making the brand appear more reachable and engaged with its audience (Karampela et al., 2020). In particular, helpful or problem-solving content shared by a company (e.g. industry updates or news regarding a phenomena) could lead to a greater relationship value perceptions and brand trust, although requiring emotional engagement to be effective (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019).

2.3.3. Brand Sensitivity

While B2B buyers were traditionally portrayed as highly objective, leaving limited room for subjective, brand-based judgements in their decision-making, research suggests that brands can fulfill important functional roles in business markets (B. P. Brown et al., 2012). Brands act particularly as signals of

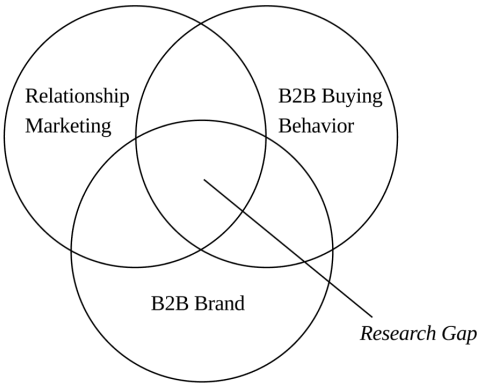
expected product quality and the overall relationship experience a customer might anticipate from a supplier (B. P. Brown et al., 2011). Despite growing evidence of brand influence on organizational buying, understanding when brands matter most has been less clear, asking investigation into the relationship between perceived purchase risk and buyer brand sensitivity. Two contrasting perspectives exist on how buyers manage risk: one view suggests buyers rely on objective criteria and extensive information searches, implying brands are less important in high-risk situations, while a brand-driven view posits that buyers may use brands as risk-reducing heuristics, especially when risk is high. B. P. Brown et al. (2011) support a U-shaped relationship, indicating that buyers exhibit heightened brand sensitivity at both relatively low-risk levels (where brands simplify choice) and relatively high-risk levels (where brands serve as heuristics to minimize perceived risk). Also, the strength of this U-shaped effect appears to be moderated by competitive intensity within the market.

Brand's emotional benefits are also increasingly recognized (Gustafson et al., 2021). Commercial buyers, for example, may value the emotional security provided by a supplier brand possessing a strong and positive image. Giving brands human-like characteristics can foster positive emotional associations and contribute additional value beyond functional attributes. Additionally, He et al. (2018) explore the concept of interfirm Brand Values Congruence (BVC), finding that the alignment of values between buying and selling organizations, leads to potential impact on relationship qualities such as brand trust, word-of-mouth communication, and value co-creation.

2.4. Research Gap

Synthesizing the reviewed literature on B2B branding, relationship marketing, and buyer behavior reveals a notable gap in understanding how these concepts manifest specifically from the B2B client's perspective within the architectural services industry. While research acknowledges the growing importance and adoption of formal marketing and branding by architectural firms moving beyond traditional reliance on networks (Low et al., 2016; Mitrache, 2012; Nobre & Faria, 2017), and general B2B brand equity frameworks exist (Coleman et al., 2011; Kuhn et al., 2008; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), the focus has largely been on firm strategies or adapted models tested in different B2B sectors. Consequently, knowledge regarding how architectural clients perceive, interpret, and respond to these marketing efforts remains underdeveloped.

Fig. 4. Research Gap



This study identifies several specific areas requiring further exploration:

First, despite the development of adapted B2B Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) models emphasizing relationships and partnerships (Kuhn et al., 2008; Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić, 2015), empirical research applying these frameworks to understand client-side brand equity construction in architecture is scarce. Existing work like Verster et al. (2019) provides initial insights into firm approaches but does not delve deeply into how clients evaluate architectural brand dimensions. There is a need to move beyond acknowledging branding's potential importance to investigating its practical resonance with clients.

Second, while the fundamental role of RM and trust-building is well-established in B2B literature and implicitly practiced in architecture (Kougia & Smyth, 2011; Murtagh et al., 2016), crucial questions remain regarding its integration with explicit branding and digital communications from the client's viewpoint. How do clients perceive the balance between personalized, relationship-driven interactions and more formalized, potentially less personal, brand messaging delivered through websites, social media, or other marketing tools? Understanding client sensitivity to different communication modes and to relationship quality in architecture is limited.

Third, the B2B buyer journey is recognized as increasingly complex and digitally influenced (Grewal et al., 2015; Steward et al., 2019), yet the specific path architectural clients take, and how branding and RM initiatives shape their perceptions at different stages of this journey lacks detailed investigation. How factors like brand sensitivity (B. P. Brown et al., 2011), digital communication sensitivity, and the co-creative nature of architectural services influence the client's response to marketing throughout this process requires closer examination.

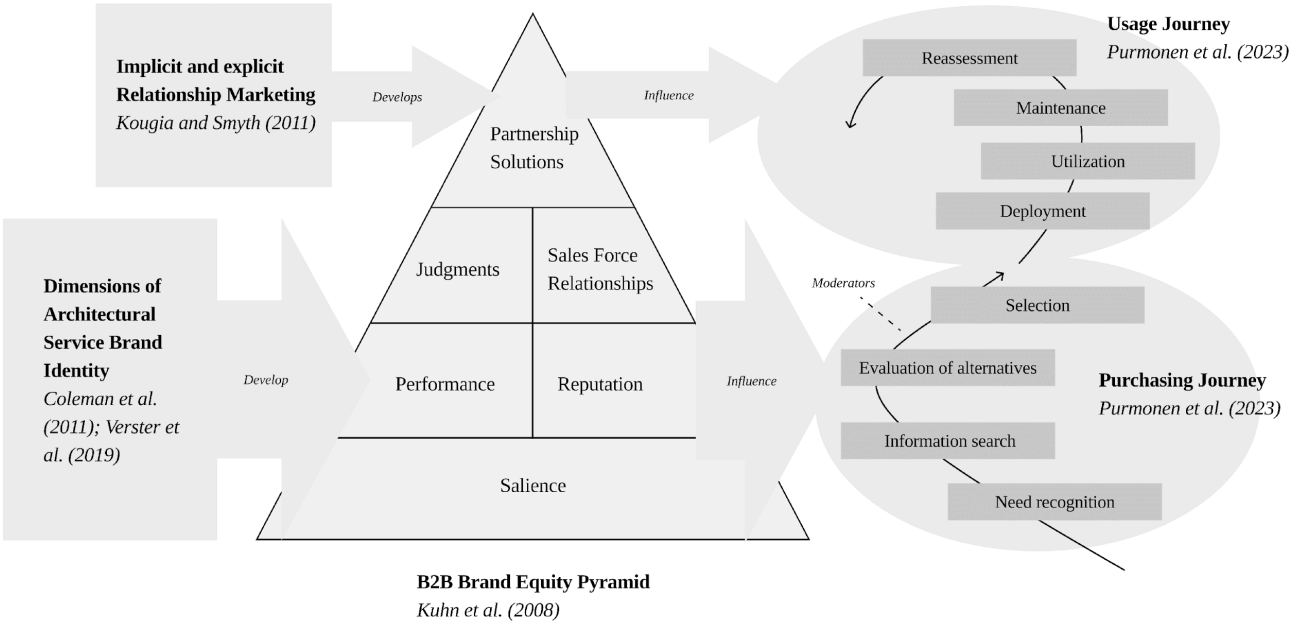
Addressing the research question "*In what ways do branding and marketing initiatives by architecture and engineering firms shape B2B customer perceptions and behaviors throughout the journey toward contract finalization?*"

through interviews with clients of an Italian design and engineering firm offers the opportunity to close these identified gaps.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This study presents a comprehensive theoretical framework (Fig. 5) to analyze the interplay between brand identity and brand equity formation within B2B architectural clients conducting a purchasing journey.

Fig. 5. Theoretical Framework



Drawing upon the brand identity dimensions identified by Coleman et al. (2011) - including employee and client focus, visual identity, brand personality, consistent communications, and human resource initiatives - and further elaborated by Verster et al. (2019) adding "building as a brand" and the architect's persona, the framework posits that these dimensions significantly influence the initial stages of B2B brand equity formation as conceptualized by Kuhn et al. (2008).

Specifically, when clients encounter these brand identity elements, they contribute to the development of key brand equity components: Salience, Performance, Reputation, Judgments, and Sales Force Relationships. These components progressively shape the client's purchasing journey, encompassing stages such as need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, and ultimately, the selection of an architectural firm for their project. This progression aligns with the B2B customer journey framework proposed by Purmonen et al. (2023), which emphasizes the iterative and relational nature of B2B purchasing processes. In this framework, the purchasing journey is also moderated by

contextual and external factors such as design quality, word-of-mouth, referrals, and network relations (Kolleeny & Linn, 2002; Low et al., 2016; Nobre & Faria, 2017).

Upon selection, both implicit and explicit relationship marketing activities, as discussed by Kougia and Smyth (2011), facilitate the construction of the final tier of the brand equity pyramid: Partnership Solutions. This stage fosters a deep, collaborative, and mutually beneficial relationship between the client and the architectural firm, centered on co-creating value. Such partnerships influence the subsequent usage journey, which includes deployment, utilization, maintenance, and reassessment phases, ultimately leading to client retention and potential repurchase decisions for future projects.

To better understand the phenomenon, the research will address these two sub-questions based on the theoretical framework:

1. *How do consumers perceive specific dimensions of brand identity as contributing to brand equity, and in what ways does this perceived brand equity influence their experiences and decisions during the buying process?*
2. *How do relationship marketing strategies facilitate the development of perceived partnership solutions for customers, and how do these influence customers' experiences and decisions during the post-purchase phase, potentially leading to repeat purchases?*

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

3.1.1. Research Approach

This research places clients, their perceptions, responses, and relationships to architectural studios' branding and marketing, at its core. An interpretivist perspective was adopted to examine these human behaviors and social phenomena with appropriate depth. Following this choice, a qualitative method was deemed most effective to understand the subjective meanings and experiences acting in the architectural business sphere, a complex social context where multiple relations form the network underneath a project (Bell et al., 2019). Specifically, the method offered the most effective tools to capture both implicit and explicit communication significance in clients' minds, along with the practical consequences of brand and marketing strategies and their effects on individual choices.

Additionally, given the largely unexplored intersection of architecture, relationship marketing, branding, and buyer behavior, an open-ended approach was employed, allowing potential insights to emerge from empirical data (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007). Complementing this view, instead of moving one-directionally between theory and data (deduction) or from data to theory (induction), an abductive approach was adopted to move back-and-forth between established frameworks and empirical findings.

This approach enabled a more flexible and less constrained perspective when unexpected or novel phenomena were encountered, aligning with the broader aim of the research: theory modification, rather than confirmation or generalization (Bell et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019).

3.1.2. Single-Case Study

A single-case study methodology was selected due to the complexity and opacity of the research domain, which necessitates detailed and in-depth analysis. This approach enables detailed examination of a well-defined context, allowing for extensive exploration (Bell et al., 2019). The single-case study was deemed appropriate considering that the research focuses specifically on understanding the unique dynamics and characteristics of the selected organization and its client relationships, rather than pursuing theory-building or a greater theoretical replication with multiple case studies (Bell et al., 2019; Darke et al., 1998). While multiple individuals from different organizations and different industries participated in the study, all had professional interactions with the case company: the primary objective is to investigate and provide an exploratory study of the specific mechanisms that influenced clients to engage with this organization, with special attention to whether subjective elements of marketing and communication played a significant role in their decision-making.

When selecting the case company, several criteria were established to ensure the suitability of the considered organization. First, the company needed to demonstrate a decisive marketing orientation to effectively assess its impact on client acquisition. This required a dedicated marketing, communication, and business development team operating independently from architectural functions, an arrangement that promotes a more systematic and effective effort (Mitrache, 2012; Nobre & Faria, 2017; Smyth & Kioussi, 2011). Second, the existence of a structured marketing budget was essential, as it signals the firm's financial commitment to client engagement and expectation of measurable returns on this investment (Chang et al., 2018; Mitrache, 2012). Third, the organization needed to demonstrate consistent implementation of integrated marketing communications, evaluated through comparative analysis of its social media presence, web footprint, and visibility in industry publications (Keller, 2016b). Finally, considering the highly fragmented nature of the Italian architectural market (Norsa, A., 2024), the selected firm needed sufficient scale to provide a meaningful client base. Therefore, only firms consistently ranked among the top 200 architecture and engineering practices in Guamari's annual revenue-based listings over the past five years (Norsa, A., 2024), with demonstrated national and international project portfolios, were considered. In addition to revenue rankings and geographic breadth of portfolio, the number of collaborators served as a final principle to assess organizational scale. Following Eurostats Standards, the company needed to qualify at least as “medium-sized”, employing between 50 and 249 collaborators (Eurostat, 2021). In accordance with confidentiality

agreements, the selected company is referenced anonymously as "the case company" throughout this research and is described in detail in section 4.1.

3.2. Data Collection

3.2.1.Interview Sampling

Guided by the research question, a purposive sampling approach was adopted to strategically select clients from whom the learning would be most valuable, while ensuring comprehensive coverage of the studio's client spectrum. Participants were not selected using random methods, thus renouncing to the generalizability of the findings (Bell et al., 2019).

Three criteria were used for selecting information-rich client interviewees. Firstly, the individuals have direct contact and first-hand experience working with the case firm, to ensure that they are subject to a potential relationship marketing set of activities. Secondly, participants must hold decision-making authority within their respective organizations, influencing the procurement outcome or the partner selection process, to explore buyer sensitivity. Lastly, the commissioned projects must have fallen under one of the following asset classes: hospitality, retail, office, student housing, residential, or industrial; aiming to capture multiple perspectives across each category.

This study focuses exclusively on clients who successfully completed the buying journey. Consequently, it excludes prospective clients and businesses that responded negatively to the firm's marketing efforts. Although a broader sample might have offered richer perspectives, this narrow scope is intentional. It allows the research to determine which marketing information was useful in converting a lead and, importantly, to analyze the practical steps of that conversion. The ideal objective is to identify proven best practices from this particular context and to distinguish them from factors that were irrelevant in securing the project.

The final list of perspective companies/individuals to include in the research was refined together with contact person in the company, reducing selection bias. The sample size was not predetermined; rather, interviews continued until data saturation was reached (data quality, detail, and depth according to Bell et al., 2019), at which point additional participants would have contributed with marginal insights to the existing findings.

3.2.2. Interview Process

An initial email was sent to the perspective clients introducing the research, its nature and its intended purpose. In some cases, the email was sent from the contact person to obtain the participation of organizations, deemed vital for the research (Darke et al., 1998).

The interviews were conducted over a one-month period. Microsoft Teams was the preferred digital tool for conducting interviews, enabling participants from various regions across Italy to participate from their respective company offices. The platform's digital format allowed the interview to align with the executives' calendars, enhancing scheduling flexibility (Bell et al., 2019). Of the 18 total interviews, 18 were conducted virtually, with just one conducted in person.

Each interview was scheduled for approximately 30 minutes, though flexibility was provided to accommodate additional perspectives and comments from participants as they desired. All interviews were recorded with explicit consent from participants, and anonymity was maintained throughout the research process.

Each interview began with a clear statement distinguishing the research as an independent academic study rather than an initiative affiliated with the architectural firm. This separation was deliberately emphasized to enable participants to freely express their genuine opinions regarding the firm's brand and marketing approach without concern for organizational consequences. To further facilitate open dialogue, participants were reassured about anonymity, confidentiality, and safe storage of data; ultimately re-stating the academical purposes of the study. The language chosen was Italian, as it was the main language of the interviewees.

Interviews were conducted on an individual basis to ensure confidentiality, with one exception where the primary participant requested the inclusion of team members, as the architectural studio selection process involved multiple stakeholders and perspectives within their organization. As a result, this particular interview evolved into a focus group.

3.2.3. Interview Design

Following the choice of a single-case study, the empirical data for this research was gathered through a qualitative semi-structured interview-based methodology. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility, frequently allowing the sequence of questions to vary as conversations progressed in interesting directions and enabling to pose additional questions about significant themes or particularly insightful responses. Nevertheless, this method ensured consistent comparability across findings, remaining relevant to the study object (Bell et al., 2019).

An interview guide was developed based on the research question and the three main areas of interest emerging from the theoretical framework. The questions aimed to explore the intersection of branding and relationship marketing throughout the buying process. No direct references to frameworks or theories were made, maintaining colloquial vocabulary to ensure complete understanding of the topics. The arrangement of topic areas followed a natural flow, progressing from general to specific topics.

Prior to conducting the formal interviews, a pilot interview was implemented to evaluate timing and design effectiveness.

3.3. Data Analysis Method

Each interview was recorded using Microsoft Teams, which provided automatic transcriptions through its embedded AI tool. While the transcription quality was generally good, all transcripts were reviewed and manually corrected within 48 hours, as the AI often failed to capture the exact wording and phrasing of the dialogue. For the in-person interview, the online AI tool Revoldiv was used to transcribe the audio recording.

A thematic analysis was chosen for its suitability in interpreting qualitative interview data. The process followed a systematic approach: first-order coding yielded 21 initial dimensions, which were then grouped into 8 second-order themes. These second-order themes were further consolidated into 4 aggregate dimensions.

The development of second-order themes and aggregate dimensions was guided by the theoretical framework previously outlined. However, consistent with the study's abductive approach, some themes emerged directly from the empirical data without a direct connection to existing theory, allowing for unexpected findings to surface organically.

The thematic coding and analysis were conducted using NVivo software.

3.4. Quality Considerations

Credibility was pursued through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, ensuring findings authentically represent client perceptions. Interpretations were consistently grounded in direct participant quotations, with the theoretical framework guiding systematic analysis to reflect participants' realities (Bell et al., 2019). Transferability was addressed by providing description of the specific research context, an Italian design firm and its B2B clients, and the investigated phenomenon. This detailed account enables readers to assess the relevance of these context-specific findings to other settings (Bell et al., 2019).

Dependability was sought through meticulous documentation of the research process, including its design, data collection protocols, and analytical methods. The systematic and transparent approach aims to ensure the study's process is traceable and consistently applied (Bell et al., 2019). Conformability was addressed by ensuring findings were firmly grounded in participant data, with interpretations consistently linked to client statements (Bell et al., 2019). The use of a theoretical framework guided analysis, while researcher reflexivity and methodological transparency aimed to minimize potential bias and ensure conclusions were data-driven.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality was paramount in this study, ensuring the anonymity of the Italian case firm and all client participants; identities were disguised in all reporting. Informed consent was secured before each interview, with participants fully briefed on the research objectives, their voluntary engagement, data usage, and recording permissions, alongside their right to withdraw. All data were managed securely in compliance with GDPR, involving anonymization of transcripts and appropriate handling of original recordings post-analysis to protect participant privacy.

4. Findings

4.1. The Case Company

The case company is an architecture and engineering firm operating both in Italy and abroad, covering multiple real estate sectors. It has a marketing team composed of approximately 10 people, whose roles span from graphic design to content strategy, with a dedicated budget. The marketing function manages social media activity across multiple platforms, publishing posts and videos that convey information about the studio's projects, industry updates, cultural recommendations, and the firm's presence at sector events. Additionally, the team publishes newsletters, handles internal communications, and creates all advertising materials to be shared with clients and external stakeholders, such as portfolios and company profiles. The team also operates with a dedicated budget for organizing the firm's events, which vary in focus, ranging from culturally oriented gatherings to more business-casual meetings. The marketing team further oversees brand performance and monitors how audiences respond to communication efforts. A broader branding strategy is defined, implemented, and periodically adjusted to align with evolving goals. As such, the team is responsible for the firm's complete branding activities and integrated marketing communications.

Separately from the marketing team, 10 additional professionals focus on new business development and key account management. This more business-oriented team manages direct communication with key clients, providing updates on new projects, activities, and services. In parallel with account management, the team also engages in business development, attending events, meeting potential clients, and generating new leads through diverse communication strategies. Typically, network maintenance and the establishment of new connections are also supported by senior architects, directors, and founders, who participate in a blended set of technical and business activities. In a broader sense, this aggregated team is responsible for managing all of the firm's implicit and explicit relationship marketing activities.

4.2. Interview Sample

The interview sample consists of 17 participants and one focus group of 4 people, therefore, comprises 21 professionals operating across various roles within the real estate sector, representing a mix of generations including Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers. Participants hold senior positions such as Development Director, Asset Manager, CEO, and Investment Manager, among others, and are employed by a diverse range of organizations, from small, locally based firms to large international companies.

The types of companies represented include developers, asset and investment managers, education and research institutions, foundations, and energy operators. Projects span several real estate sectors, including retail, hospitality, student housing, education, heritage renewal, residential, and office or industrial developments. Procurement processes varied, with most projects acquired through direct assignment, while others involved beauty contests or formal competitions, depending on company policy. All interviews were conducted online, except for one, which was held in person. A comprehensive overview of the sample can be found in the appendix.

4.3. Purchasing Journey

4.3.1. Needs of the clients

The main reasons for seeking external design and engineering expertise are varied and often arise from internal limitations or specific project demands. Organizations in the sample turn to outsourcing when they lack the internal capacity or necessary expertise in areas such as property management, project oversight, construction, technical coordination, and the entire process from preliminary design to construction management.

"*We outsource almost the totality of activities*" (Participant 9)

"*We have neither an internal property manager nor an internal project and construction team. Consequently, everything is outsourced*" (Focus Group, Participant 19)

In many cases, the complexity of coordinating and managing various professionals is a major challenge. This complexity also extends to contract management:

"*We struggle to coordinate multiple figures. Therefore, integrated design becomes fundamental for us.* (…) *It's ideal to have a contract that I sign with one party, and then they do everything, regardless of whether or not I optimize costs*" (Participant 10)

Time constraints are another critical factor. Many projects are bound by tight deadlines and require quick execution, making larger external firms attractive due to their ability to rapidly deploy a sufficient workforce, particularly for architectural work:

"*Very often what we need is speed, because we're working within processes that have deadlines… in these cases, large studios can provide the necessary workforce*" (Participant 11)

Lastly, projects require specialized strategic expertise across various domains, from detailed financial analysis of construction initiatives to addressing highly specific technical requirements tailored to each unique project type and asset class:

"*This aspect [flow management] is one of the most important and strategic elements in developing a hotel*" (Participant 15)

4.3.2. Information search

The identification of architectural and engineering partners involves a variety of methods that blend different tools. A common starting point is researching a studio's online presence. Visiting websites to review past projects is typical:

"*Now everything is easier through websites. Basically, you read up, you do a bit of... you do research on the projects*" (Participant 8)

"*The internet is the tool that gives you the most information because normally all firms list the operations they have completed. So, just by looking at the website, you can understand if the firm has a certain expertise in shopping centers, rather than student housing, rather than residential, rather than infrastructure, etc.*" (Participant 6)

From the initial engagement, a design firm's project history serves as crucial foundational information. Clients consistently evaluate both track record and portfolio as the most revealing indicators of a studio's capabilities and expertise:

"*The website is very useful from the point of view, perhaps, of the track record; it's useful for the portfolio*" (Participant 17)

"*The Company Profile, I would say, is the principal document that identifies any professional in the field, be it a design firm or a construction company*" (Participant 11)

LinkedIn also emerges as a useful tool, especially when beginning from scratch or identifying candidates for specific needs:

"*On LinkedIn, I searched... in my initial search, starting from zero, needing to find names, LinkedIn was my first source*" (Participant 14)

"*We knew the studio was operating in the specific sector thanks to LinkedIn (…) But, by the way, we knew them already thanks to another project*" (Participant 7)

Professional networks further complement this digital scouting. Many respondents emphasized the value of consulting with colleagues to further assess the digital information:

"*The first thing you do is go to the website, look at the works they've done. Typically, within the works done by the studio, there's always a development done with someone who is your former colleague, a person you know*" (Participant 1)

"*Knowing who came before you, and who helped a particular interlocutor complete a project is useful to know*" (Participant 17)

Personal networks and word-of-mouth recommendations play an equally crucial role:

"*We have a series of more or less structured company connections. Depending on where the operation is and what we need, we choose the studios we'll call for offers*" (Participant 6)

"[I searched information] through word of mouth" (Participant 13).

And, additionally, existing relationships are a fundamental factor. If a firm has previously collaborated with a studio successfully, that familiarity builds trust and streamlines the selection process.

"*We've already worked with them, so we recognize them and know them well*" (Participant 6)

"*We basically go based on our existing knowledge. So, together with the technical office, we now have a set of contacts*." (Participant 9)

Once potential partners are identified, in-person meetings are often the next step to get more information. These encounters typically follow online research and network-based vetting:

"*So the the first approach is you see them on the websites, then you compare notes with industry operators, the third thing is definitely getting to know them in person, so that's the third step"* (Participant 1).

Quantitative aspects of research are also considered important:

"*From a quantitative perspective, it's very easy. You do a quick search and understand the main data, like turnover, number of collaborators, etc.*" (Participant 16)

"*volume of business, (…) potential presence of offices abroad that can give a certain tone, a certain luster to my project*" (Participant 8)

Ultimately, the information search is a strategic intelligence gathering exercise that goes far beyond simple data collection. The information search involves understanding not just what a studio does, but

"*what services they provide, what they are strong in, what they are less strong in*" (Participant 6) using multiple touchpoints.

4.3.3. Procurement policies

Procurement policies among the interviewed organizations exhibit a considerable range, moving from rigidly formal competitive processes mandated by internal procedures to more fluid, relationship-centric or needs-driven direct assignments.

For organizations operating in regulated sectors, such as investors controlled by banks, the policy is strictly defined and leaves minimal room for discretion.

"*We are always obliged to hold a tender with at least three participants, for any type.*" (Participant 1)

Similarly, an investor describes its standard procedure:

"Normally we follow an internal procedure that requires us to select at least three providers, whether they are architecture studios, engineering studios, or maintenance companies" (Participant 6).

Another entity with a formal "Procurement policy", despite being private, emphasizes the necessity of competitive processes, particularly for professional assignments or significant contracts:

"*We are always required to essentially initiate tenders, or requests for quotation or requests for information if it's solely for market research*" (Participant 8)

These examples clearly demonstrate a reliance on structured, multi-party competitive bidding as one important method for provider selection.

Conversely, other organizations embrace a more flexible or direct approach, often highlighting their status as private entities as a reason for this flexibility. One private entity explicitly states their lack of rigid obligations:

"*Since we are private entities, we honestly do not have particular obligations; we do not have the usual requirements, like asking for supplier details and so on and so forth*" (Participant 10)

Another entity describes itself as having a "*relatively lean structure*" and notably lacks a formal "*typical supplier register*" (Participant 2). They often opt for "*direct selection, especially of the architect*" valuing "*the direct relationship, in building at the table what is the project and the relationship with an architect*". While direct selection is preferred they may use a "*beauty contest, a competition in which different ideas are gathered*" for certain opportunities to gather diverse insights.

Another investor describes its selection as "*it is not a structured process*", heavily dependent on the "*sensitivity of the asset manager who, let's say, knows the portfolio, has a network of contacts*" (Participant 9).

Most of the organizations employ a mixed methodology, incorporating competitive elements while maintaining flexibility or allowing justified deviations.

"*The rule is the competitive procedure; the exception is permitted provided that it is justified*". (Participant 16)

4.3.4. Selection of the studio

Real estate professionals select design studios based on a range of interrelated factors, informed by their experience and understanding of the market landscape. While the economic offer plays a role, it is never the sole driver: the focus is on the value a studio can bring to the specific project.

One of the first criteria to be assessed is experience and track record. Professionals typically review the studio's past work and outcomes to assess reliability:

"*You definitely rely on the track record, you go and check all the projects the studio has worked on and how they turned out*" (Participant 1).

"*Past experience is a guarantee for the future*" (Participant 9).

Specialization is another fundamental factor:

"*An architect can mean a thousand things. You can't go to someone who designs bridges and ask them to do a hotel, or to someone who specializes in luxury villas that have nothing to do with hotels or industrial warehouses*" (Participant 15).

This sentiment was echoed across various sectors, with cultural preservation firms, for instance, seeking studios with "*historical and conservation sensitivity*" (Participant 3).

Reputation also carries significant weight, particularly feedback from previous clients and the visibility of a studio's portfolio.

"*The studio's reputation is important. That means knowing their client list and the feedback those clients give*" (Participant 10).

Trusted referrals, especially from established operators, can lead to selection with minimal additional checks:

"*A partner that I trust recommended the studio. The credibility is such that I do not do many in-depth checks, right?*" (Participant 12)

Also, knowledge of the territory is a strong advantage. For example, a studio with prior experience in a given city and familiarity with its public administration can streamline processes:

"*The studio we chose had already worked in the same city and had a good understanding of the local administration*" (Participant 5)

"*They had specific local knowledge, regarding the zone where I wanted to start this new project*" (Participant 13).

Just as important as the studio's name are the people behind it. The ability to build a direct, collaborative relationship is essential:

"*The studio listened to us - finding an architect who listens is incredibly rare*" (Participant 15)

"*They're good listeners; it's a collaborative process. What I found in the studio is a constant dialogue with the client rather than taking a rigid stance."* (Participant 16)

The structure and capacity of the studio also matter, especially for complex or large-scale projects that require a robust team.

"*This is a project that probably requires more than a small to mid-sized architect, we need a more substantial team*" (Participant 12)

Availability is equally important:

"*Another key issue is workload. Sometimes an architect is just too busy and may not be able to dedicate the time we need*" (Participant 6)

While cost is evaluated, it is considered within the broader context of added value.

"*It's not just a matter of cost - we evaluate the studio's structure, what we need, what they offer, their location, and of course, the economic aspect*" (Participant 2)

"*We're not looking for the cheapest option - we're looking for whoever can provide the greatest added value for that specific project*" (Participant 17).

Ultimately, the human element remained paramount: "*beyond the brand, it depends on the people*" (Participant 2) and on the "*national level leadership*" (Participant 16), encapsulating the deeply personal nature of studio selection. This approach transformed the selection process from a mere procurement exercise into a strategic partnership, where compatibility, expertise, and shared vision became the true currencies of professional collaboration.

4.4. Brand Equity

Brand Equity significantly shaped the perceptions and initial engagements of interviewed organizations with the studio. Many interviewees were familiar with the studio, not through direct collaboration, but through its prominent reputation in the industry. Widely recognized as the "*one of the most important players*" (Participant 2) the studio conveyed scale and prominence, known to those in architecture, real estate, or development thanks its activities, events, and industry presence.

4.4.1.Reputation

Interviewees frequently knew the studio by name or reputation due to its market size and position, even without prior work experience. This awareness was embedded in industry knowledge:

"*Obviously the firm is a well-known company, so we obviously already knew them beforehand*" (Participant 1)

"*I knew them by reputation, (…) but since I had never worked with them, I didn't really know them personally (…) basically, I knew them because in our world, you know, those 4 or 5 architects who do hotels are known*" (Participant 15)

The studio's reputation drove high expectations, with clients anticipating professionalism:

"*The studio, as a name, as a size, as a capability, undoubtedly guarantees me a level of professionalism, of know-how, that is, how shall I say, interesting, more than sufficient for a whole series of initiatives and situations...*"

The studio brand equity relied on its significant size, comprehensive service offerings, and perceived professional competence:

"*The size of the company is quite significant, being a very large studio. In my opinion, this brings at least two very positive aspects: one is the speed of execution, and indeed, they manage to be very fast. The other is the number of different roles and fields they can cover, so you basically have a lot of expertise*"

"*The studio makes me think about multidisciplinary. It's something you rarely find, and above all, something I've found that many claim to be able to do, but which in my opinion few actually do*" (Participant 1)

The experience of working with the studio has met or even reinforced expectations for several participants, confirming the image they had initially formed. For these professionals, both the perception and the actual collaboration aligned well, validating the studio's reputation as a high-quality, attentive partner.

"*My first impression strongly matched the idea I had formed, and the stories I had heard about them.*" (Participant 1)

"*The studio met expectations—we expected a high-level partner in terms of quality. There was talk, there was the idea of a certain standing, and we anticipated a certain level of attentiveness.*" (Participant 5)

4.4.2. Personal communication

Personal communication emerged as a critical and intricate dimension of professional interactions. The interviews revealed a profound emphasis on interpersonal relationships that extended beyond formal professional exchanges:

"*I am of the old school: I call, I go out on the street, I offer coffee, I get offered coffee, business in Italy is done this way, I have no doubts*" (Participant 1).

Face-to-face interactions were consistently valued as irreplaceable mechanisms for building trust and understanding. In fact, personal interactions allow one to "*perceive reactions, the way of doing things, the way people position themselves, perceive their attention to the problem, perceive their attention to questions, the responses given even through eye movement, hand gestures*" (Participant 12).

The digital age, while providing convenience, was not seen as a substitute for personal interaction: while websites can be attractive showcases, they remain "*quite aseptic*" (Participant 2) and fail to capture the full complexity of professional relationships.

"*From my point of view, all those in-depth initiatives are interesting, so they can be round tables, conferences, etc., where ultimately you expose yourself much more in explaining what you do*" (Participant 2)

As one participant articulated, personal relationships are "*made by people*" with digital communication serving as a means to "*convey and involve relationships between people*" (Participant 17).

4.4.3. Sales Force Encounters and Workplace exploration

Salesforce encounters were unanimously considered critical by all respondents, playing a decisive role in shaping their positive perception of the studio. From the very first meetings, many participants were struck not only by the studio's professionalism but especially by the quality and warmth of the people they met.

"*We were immediately favorably impressed by the professionalism, but above all by the people (…) the empathy that developed between us led to further collaborations.*" (Participant 12)

The human factor emerged as a key differentiator.

"*The studio convinced me because of the quality of the people I met.*" (Participant 13)

Being welcomed into the studio's physical space was also highly valued, allowing clients to experience firsthand the environment and culture of the team working on their behalf.

"(The salesperson) invited me to your offices for a more in-depth meeting (…) and gave me a tour of the space." (Participant 6)

"*I also had the chance to visit the studio spaces—I was fascinated, truly beautiful. I wanted to work there myself.*" (Participant 8)

These visits often confirmed the expectations formed beforehand, particularly in terms of the atmosphere and team dynamics.

"*When I came, I found a company of extremely high standing, with people who clearly were not working like slaves. It was a very calm, relaxed environment, and I have to say it matched exactly what I had been told.*" (Participant 1)

4.4.4. Brand personality and communication

The studio's brand personality is primarily associated with a strong sense of professionalism and authority, with "great professionalism" being one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics across all interviews. At the same time, the brand is not perceived as static or overly traditional—instead, it is viewed as innovative, dynamic, and aligned with contemporary values, particularly in regard to sustainability.

"*The studio has extremely interesting aspects tied to environmental protection; there is a strong awareness.*" (Participant 15)

It is also considered a generator of ideas and trends.

"They are generators of… new ideas, of… trends." (Participant 13)

Despite being a large and institutional player, the studio is seen as collaborative and attentive, with an emphasis on relational care and the ability to manage complexity with sensitivity.

"*They show attention to problematic situations and an ongoing dialogue with the client.*" (Participant 16)

When it comes to communication style, some contrasts were noted. While their general tone is seen as refined, the tone of email communications can sometimes come across as too casual - something that may appear out of sync with their institutional reputation.

"*A 'hyper-fresh' approach in emails can feel like a misalignment when it comes from what's known to be a major architecture company - it almost feels like a startup.*" (Participant 4)

LinkedIn is widely regarded as a key platform. It is seen as "super useful," "fundamental," and "effective" for sharing updates, accessing information, and fostering professional connections. However, its use requires care.

"*It needs to be used with great prudence and caution*," (Participant 3) to avoid the risks of over-sharing or personal content that could undermine professional credibility.

For many, LinkedIn has replaced traditional industry news sources.

"*Instead of scrolling through the real estate daily, I just open LinkedIn, see what people are announcing, and by the end, I'm informed.*" (Participant 10)

Perceptions of social media more broadly vary. Some professionals avoid them, insisting on maintaining a clear separation between personal and professional communications.

"*We are professionals; let's share professional information through professional channels.*" (Participant 1)

Others see value in casual updates, particularly when they come from the studio's own channels.

"*Every now and then I check to see what's happening on social media. When I see one of their reels, I get a sense of what they're working on. It's actually nice.*" (Participant 11)

4.5. Project Reassessment

4.5.1. Reassessment drivers

Availability during the project was considered fundamental by clients, especially in complex or high-pressure situations. Regular, in-person weekly meetings were seen as key to successfully navigating challenges and keeping the process on track.

"*We had a very important, very difficult challenge, so the weekly face-to-face contact, everyone around the table, really helped the process.*" (Participant 7)

Clients in the selected sample also carefully evaluated the quality and thoroughness of the studies and design plans delivered. Timeliness was another appreciated aspect, with some pleasantly surprised by the pace: *"They were super fast, I didn't expect it."* (Participant 13)

However, communication and operational smoothness were not always consistent. Some experienced procedural friction: "*I had the feeling of always being a bit entangled in bureaucratic steps.*" (Participant 8), and "*I noticed a bit of rigidity*." (Participant 9)

On a more positive note, the prestige of the studio's name added clear value to the project's perception and visibility: "*Seeing that the project was done by them also helped our project to be promoted properly—so there was also an indirect publicity that we really appreciated.*" (Participant 17)17)

4.5.2. Repeated Business

A strong and positive relationship with the studio often led to repeated collaborations in the selected sample. Clients described a natural progression from one project to the next, driven by satisfaction and continuity.

"*After finishing project number one, we started project number two.*" (Participant 7)

In some cases, prior collaboration established a foundation of trust and familiarity that encouraged ongoing partnership.

"*The studio had already worked with us previously, so we wanted to continue the relationship*." (Participant 16)

At the core of this continuity lies trust, which was repeatedly cited as a fundamental element of the client-studio dynamic.

"*It truly is a company you enjoy working with and one you trust to work with."* (Participant 16)

4.6. Relationship Marketing

4.6.1. Relationship maintenance

The ongoing relationship with the studio is primarily maintained through key account management and direct, personal contact with a salesperson. This continuity is highly valued, especially when ideas or new initiatives arise, as it allows for smooth and reciprocal communication with someone already familiar.

"Take the case of (Salesperson), for example. We have a direct relationship—if there's an idea or an initiative, it's much easier to reach out to someone you're already in contact with, and with whom you have a sense of what they can do, in the most reciprocal way possible." (Participant 2)

Participants often emphasized the value of keeping these interactions informal, suggesting that a casual meeting can be more effective than a structured appointment.

"*It may also be a generational thing. I repeat, when (Company representative) calls me for a meeting, a presentation, or an update, going to lunch is, in my view, much more effective*." (Participant 10)

Importantly, not every encounter needs to be tied to a concrete business purpose. Informal check-ins are seen as just as valuable for maintaining the relationship.

"*I met with a salesperson just to chat—not necessarily with a goal in mind, but simply to talk. In the end, that's what it's about, right? You do not always need to meet to discuss something specific; even a 15- or 30-minute catch-up can be worthwhile."* (Participant 17)

This approach fosters a more meaningful, personal bond, going beyond traditional client-consultant dynamics.

"*They're not consultants to me—they're colleagues. I think that says a lot. I always say it: I have a personal relationship. The empathy between us helped a lot, as did the transparency in saying when things were going well and when they weren't. Also, the maturity, the capability, and the flexibility to adapt*." (Participant 7)

Ultimately, the consistency and quality of interaction with the studio reinforce its presence in the minds of clients when new opportunities arise. Regular contact, relationship-building, and prior positive experiences make the studio a top-of-mind option for future projects.

"*It's clear that, on the client side, it almost becomes automatic—when someone asks you for a design studio... it's obviously the first one that comes to mind*." (Participant 10)

4.6.2. Events

Events are widely regarded by real estate professionals as a strategic and intelligent method for design studios to strengthen relationships and expand their network in a less formal, more engaging setting. They are seen not only as social moments but as key business opportunities that enhance visibility and client loyalty.

"*It's a way to meet clients in an informal setting, and for me, it's a more intelligent way to do business and networking.*" (Focus Group, Participant 19)

Studios that host events, ranging from parties to exhibitions or research-based gatherings, are perceived as open and outward-facing, a quality that is highly appreciated in professional relationships.

"*The fact that the studio hosts events and parties... for us, those are very important indicators of openness.*" (Participant 3)

However, organizing events is not seen as a simple or cost-free strategy. It requires substantial investment, both financially and in terms of time and energy from the team:

"*We all know these things are a hassle to put together and involve investments beyond the actual costs - it's mostly a commitment of human resources and energy.*" (Participant 6)

Despite the effort involved, events are recognized as an effective way to nurture client relationships over time and are explicitly considered a marketing tool.

"*They are a perfect marketing tool to maintain client relationships.*" (Participant 7)

"*It's a great tool to keep in touch.*" (Participant 10)

One of their most valued aspects is their efficiency: in just a few hours, a studio can interact with many stakeholders, reinforcing connections that may lead to new opportunities.

"*Events are essential because they allow you to concentrate a number of contacts in just a couple of hours. That, in my opinion, is fundamental - because business generates more business*" (Participant 17).

4.6.3. Newsletters

Opinions on the studio's newsletters are more mixed compared to the generally positive views on events. While newsletters are clearly recognized as a communication tool used by the studio, their reception varies among recipients. Some professionals appreciate them as a way to stay informed and connected.

"I receive newsletters once a week. There are some interesting things in them, even just to read and stay updated" (Participant 15)

The tone and frequency of the studio's communications are often praised, with particular attention to their respectful and professional approach.

"*They're really consistent, polite, and elegant about it because they do not stalk you—they just send you the information, and that's appreciated*" (Participant 1)

However, not everyone engages with the content. Some recipients admit they ignore the newsletters entirely:

"*I receive the newsletter, but I never look at it*" (Participant 10)

"*Even if I got a newsletter... I wouldn't read it. I do not think it's something that particularly grabs attention, at least for me - because there are just so many of all kinds*" (Participant 6)

Despite this, the practice of sending newsletters is still viewed positively overall, particularly as a gesture that contributes to client engagement and relationship building.

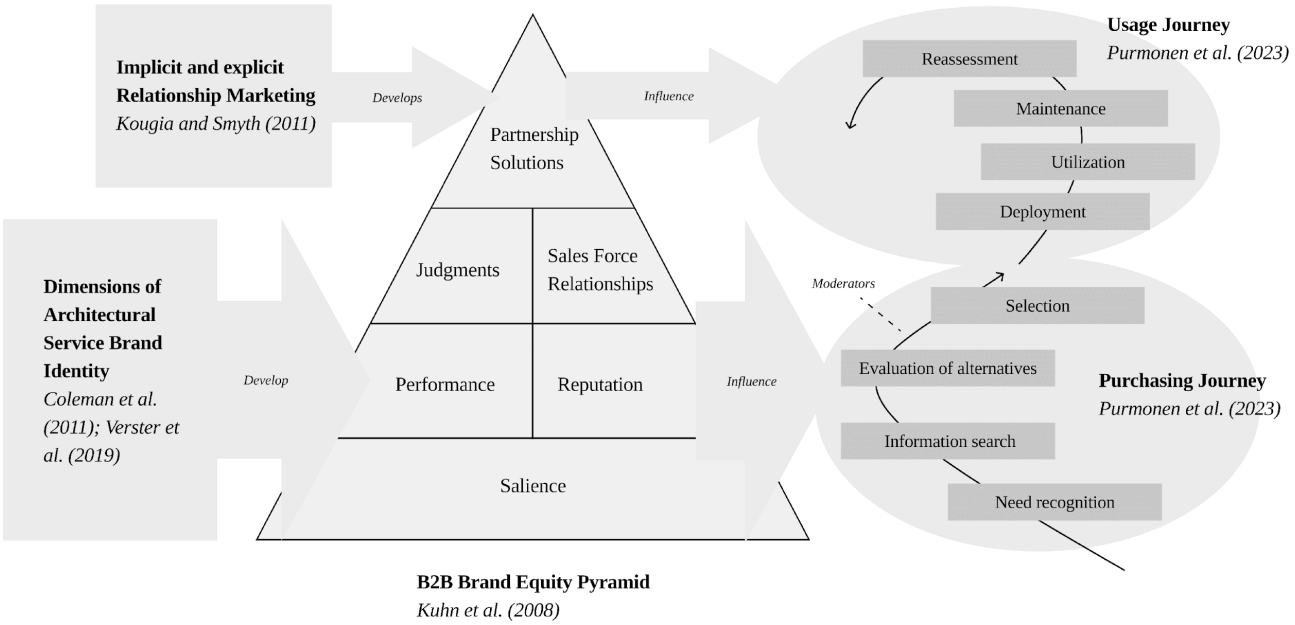
"*I think they're right to send them, because it's absolutely a source of engagement and connection with the client*" (Participant 14).

5. Analysis

5.1. Brand Identity, Perceived Brand Equity, and the Buying Process

The investigation into how clients perceive brand identity dimensions as contributors to brand equity, and how this perceived equity influences their purchasing journey showed multiple insights. The findings strongly suggest that theoretical models of B2B branding, when appropriately adapted, can resonate significantly within the architectural services context from the client's viewpoint observed in the selected sample. Clients actively interpret various signals from firms, constructing perceptions of brand equity that guide their decision-making processes.

Fig. 6. Theoretical Framework



The resonance of specific brand identity dimensions, as outlined by Coleman et al. (2011) and elaborated for architecture by Verster et al. (2019), was evident throughout the client narratives. A particularly dominant theme was the focus on employees and clients. The quality of personnel, the perceived willingness to listen and collaborate, and the impact of initial encounters with firm representatives were consistently highlighted as critical elements shaping the firm's perceived identity. This might underscore that in service-based industries like architecture, the human element is not merely supplementary but constitutes a core component of the brand itself.

Clients also articulated a distinct brand personality associated with the studio, encompassing professionalism, innovation, and collaboration. This perceived personality set expectations and influenced judgments, revealed potential friction points where touchpoint execution could undermine the brand image, emphasizing the need for coherence across all interactions. Furthermore, while visual identity wasn't always explicitly named, the importance clients placed on reviewing past projects via websites and the positive impressions formed during visits to the firm's physical offices demonstrate the contribution of tangible and aesthetic elements to brand perception, aligning with the "building as brand" concept. The emphasis on key individuals and the desire for direct relationships also supported the notion of the architect's persona significantly influencing the selected client perceptions.

These perceived identity elements fuel the construction of brand equity, largely aligning with the adapted B2B Customer-Based Brand Equity model proposed by Kuhn et al. (2008) and Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić (2015). Foundational brand salience was observed in the sample, with the studio enjoying high

recognition even among those without prior engagement. Moving up the pyramid, performance and reputation emerged as fundamental. The interviewed clients consistently evaluated track records, project outcomes, reliability, and specialization as indicators of performance, treating past experience as a guarantee for future success.

Reputation not only drove initial expectations but was also seen as adding tangible value to some of the client's own project through association. Clients formed critical judgments regarding quality, credibility, and collaborative fit based on these perceptions. Perhaps most significantly, the findings provide support for the adaptation replacing "Feelings" with "Sales Force Relationships", among the interviewed clients. The described criticality of encounters with salespeople and the emphasis on the quality of these interpersonal interactions confirm that in this specific B2B context, relationships with key representatives are a primary driver of brand equity, shaping perceptions more profoundly than generalized brand sentiment.

The brand equity thus constructed exerts considerable influence over the client's purchasing journey, mirroring the stages identified by Purmonen et al. (2023). While need recognition is internally driven, brand salience ensures the firm enters the initial consideration set. During the information search phase, the clients subject to this study actively seek out signals related to brand identity (e.g., portfolio) and equity (e.g., reputation, track record), heavily utilizing digital touchpoints like websites and LinkedIn, reflecting the buyer empowerment (Grewal et al., 2015) and the "social buyer" behavior (Gustafson et al., 2021).

The evaluation of alternatives becomes a complex assessment weighing various equity dimensions: performance indicators like specialization, reputational factors, judgments on quality and collaboration, and the perceived strength of the potential relationship with key personnel. Ultimately, the selection decision appears driven by an overall assessment of value, where accumulated brand equity, particularly the trust engendered through positive interactions and demonstrated reliability, often mitigates cost concerns. This supports the concept of brand sensitivity proposed by B. P. Brown et al. (2011), suggesting that the interviewed clients utilize the firm's brand and reputation as a heuristic to reduce the inherent risks associated with commissioning significant architectural projects.

5.2. Relationship Marketing and the Development of Partnership Solutions

The findings illuminate the critical function of Relationship Marketing, both in its implicit forms embedded within service delivery and its explicit manifestations through targeted outreach, aligning strongly with the commitment-trust theory foundational to B2B relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Relationship marketing strategies were observed in practice through various client descriptions. Explicit relationship marketing efforts included dedicated contact persons functioning akin to key account

managers, the strategic use of events for networking and relationship building, and communication tools like newsletters. Concurrently, implicit RM occurred through the quality of collaboration during projects, demonstrated availability and responsiveness, and the successful fulfillment of commitments, which inherently builds trust over time.

This duality supports observations by Kougia & Smyth (2011) and Murtagh et al. (2016) regarding Relationship Marketing 's often implicit yet vital role in architecture in the selected sample. The data strongly reinforces the centrality of trust and commitment, as trust was frequently cited as a fundamental requirement and outcome, built incrementally through reliable performance and positive interpersonal interactions, particularly with designated representatives.

This established trust fostered client commitment, clearly evidenced by instances of repeat business and the expressed desire to maintain the relationship proactively. The high value placed on direct, often informal, communication channels like calls or lunches for relationship maintenance, compared to more formal or mass digital communications, aligns with research highlighting the effectiveness of personalized channels in B2B contexts (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017). Furthermore, the specific appreciation for continuous contact with a familiar representative lends strong empirical support to the strategic value of key account management structures within architectural firms, as proposed by Smyth & Kioussi (2011).

These sustained relationship marketing efforts appear instrumental in elevating the client relationship towards the "Partnership Solutions" apex of the adapted B2B CBBE model (Kuhn et al., 2008). Trust acts as the essential foundation upon which partnerships are built. The interviewed client emphasis on collaboration, dialogue, and feeling listened to reflects the co-creative dynamic central to B2B partnerships (Nobre & Faria, 2017; He et al., 2018). When clients describe their counterparts not merely as consultants but as "colleagues," it signifies a qualitative shift towards a relationship defined by mutual respect, transparency, and shared objectives, moving significantly beyond a simple transactional exchange.

The quality of this established relationship and partnership level profoundly impacts the client's post-purchase or usage journey experience, as conceptualized by Purmonen et al. (2023). Ongoing project interactions, including communication effectiveness and responsiveness to challenges, serve as continuous touchpoints that test and potentially strengthen the relationship. Clients actively engage in reassessment based on these experiences; positive evaluations rooted in trust and smooth collaboration reinforce the partnership, while friction or rigidity can undermine it. Crucially, this reassessment can informs future behavior. The findings link positive relationship experiences and established trust to client retention and repeat business in the selected sample, effectively closing the loyalty loop described

by Edelman & Singer (2015). A strong partnership makes the firm the default, top-of-mind choice for subsequent projects, demonstrating the long-term value generated by effective relationship marketing.

5.3. Conclusions

The analysis presented offers significant contributions towards filling the specific research gaps outlined earlier regarding client-side perspectives in architectural B2B marketing.

Firstly, it provides empirical insight into how architectural clients construct brand equity. By confirming the applicability of adapted B2B CBBE frameworks in the selected sample and highlighting the specific importance clients place on performance, reputation, and especially interpersonal sales force relationships culminating in partnerships, this study moves beyond acknowledging branding's potential to detailing its practical resonance from the interviewed client's viewpoint. Secondly, the findings illuminate the nuanced balance the interviewed clients perceive between relationship marketing, formal branding, and digital communication. It confirms the continued primacy of personalized, trust-based interactions while showing how digital tools are integrated for information and updates. Importantly, it reveals client sensitivity to the integration and consistency of these elements, suggesting that purely digital or impersonal approaches may be less effective than hybrid strategies, and that communication style must align carefully with overall brand perception. Thirdly, the research details the specific journey the selected architectural clients undertake, illustrating how brand equity and relationship marketing initiatives influence distinct stages like information search and evaluation. It provides context-specific evidence for concepts like brand sensitivity as a risk-reduction strategy and reveals particular patterns of digital channel usage and preference within this industry.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study enriches the under-explored domain of B2B marketing in architectural services by providing empirical, client-centric insights. It validates and refines adapted B2B Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) models for professional services (Kuhn et al., 2008; Sinčić Ćorić & Jelić, 2015), confirming the critical importance of the Buyer-Seller Relationship and Partnership Solutions levels as perceived by the selected clients within architecture (Verster et al., 2019). The findings reveal how clients construct equity based significantly on perceived performance and reputation (reflecting competence and reliability), while simultaneously elevating interpersonal relationships (Van Zeeland-van Der Holst & Henseler, 2018) and collaborative potential (Nobre & Faria, 2017) to paramount importance, offering nuanced perspectives on the B2B CBBE framework's application in this high-touch specific context. Additionally, the study reinforces the theoretical significance of Relationship Marketing (RM) principles,

demonstrating the practical impact of trust and commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and personalized communication (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017) within the sample of architectural clients (Kougia & Smyth, 2011). It implicitly questions the direct applicability of certain B2C branding concepts like resonance (Keller, 2003) by highlighting the relevance of B2B-specific adaptations (Kuhn et al., 2008). It enhances understanding of the B2B architectural client journey (Purmonen et al., 2023) by detailing the blend of information sources (Grewal et al., 2015), the logic behind evaluations including risk reduction via brand sensitivity (B. P. Brown et al., 2011), and the pivotal moments where brand and relationships exert influence. Finally, it contributes to the theoretical discourse on integrating branding and RM, underscoring the observed client preference for relational depth achieved through personal interaction over purely digital engagement strategies for building core relationships in this sector.

6.2. Managerial Implications

For architectural and engineering firms, the findings suggest a strategic imperative to invest concurrently in showcasing technical expertise (reflecting Performance) and demonstrably fostering strong, direct client relationships (reflecting Buyer-Seller Relationships and Partnerships) to build robust brand equity (Kuhn et al., 2008). Communication strategies should prioritize personalized interactions and leverage high-value opportunities like industry events for meaningful engagement and relationship cultivation, recognizing these as key trust-building arenas (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). While digital marketing efforts, such as compelling online portfolios and active professional network presence, are essential for establishing credibility, demonstrating capabilities, and influencing the crucial initial information search phase (Grewal et al., 2015), they should be viewed as foundational rather than the primary vehicle for deep relationship development. The study underscores that a powerful brand reputation in this sector is intrinsically linked to consistent high-quality service delivery coupled with sophisticated, personalized relationship management (Smyth & Fitch, 2009). Therefore, firms must actively work to discern and adapt to diverse client communication preferences and value perceptions, ensuring operational and communication practices align with client expectations to strengthen partnerships (Kuhn et al., 2008) and foster long-term loyalty.

6.3. Limitations

This study's insights are subject to limitations inherent in its single case study design. Focusing on one specific firm operating within the Italian market restricts the direct generalization and transferability of findings to the broader architectural industry or diverse cultural and market settings. The unique organizational characteristics, client base, and regional business environment of the studied firm inevitably shape the results, introducing a degree of subjectivity and limiting the wider applicability of the specific patterns observed.

6.4. Future Research Directions

To build upon this study, further research could employ comparative case study designs involving firms of varying sizes, specializations, or geographic locations to identify potentially diverse patterns in client-side brand equity construction and engagement preferences within architecture. Quantitative research could also be valuable to assess the broader prevalence of the client preferences identified here, particularly concerning the perceived effectiveness of different communication channels (digital vs. personal) in relationship building. Incorporating perspectives from potential clients who chose competitors, or from former clients, could yield critical insights into barriers to engagement or reasons for relationship dissolution. Finally, exploring cross-cultural variations in client expectations, communication norms, and the importance attributed to relationships versus formal brand attributes within the global architectural B2B market would significantly enrich the understanding of contextual influences on these dynamics.

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8. Appendix

8.1. Overview of Client Companies

	Procurement type	Type of company	Size	Headquarters	Type of project
Company 1	Direct assignment	Asset management	Medium	Ita	Retail and Hospitality
Company 2	Beauty competition or direct assignment	Investments & Asset management	Big	International	Retail
Company 3	Direct assignment	Heritage Asset Management	Small	Ita	Heritage renewal
Company 4	Direct assignment	Venue Management	Small	Ita	Other real estate services
Company 5	Direct assignment	Bank Foundation	Small	Ita	Education
Company 6	Beauty competition or direct assignment	Asset management	Medium	Ita	Hospitality related services
Company 7	Direct assignment	Student Housing & Hospitality Developer	Small	International	Student housing
Company 8	Competition according to company policy	Education Insitution	Big	Italian	Student housing related services
Company 9	Direct assignment or beauty contest	Asset management	Medium	Italian	Residential
Company 10	Direct assignment	Asset management	Big	International	Offices
Company 11	Direct assignment	Asset management	Small	Italian	Residential related services
Company 12	Direct assignment	Research Institution	Small	Italian	Mixed use, Retail
Company 13	Direct assignment	Education Insitution	Small	Italian	Education related services
Company 14	Beauty competition or direct assignment	Real Estate Developer	Medium	International	Residential
Company 15	Direct assignment	Wholesale	Big	Italian	Office and industrial
Company 16	Direct assignment	Hospitality Real Estate Developer	Small	Italian	Hospitality
Company 17	Competition or direct assignment (if motivated)	Retail Real Estate Developer	Medium	Italian	Retail

Company 18	Direct assignment according to company policy and with procurement's approval	Energy	Big	Italian	Mixed use, Student Housing

8.2. Overview of Participants

	Role	Generation	Location	Duration of the interview (minutes)
Participant 1	Development Director	Millennial	Digital	34
Participant 2	Development Manager	Gen X	Digital	39
Participant 3	Founder and Director	Gen X	Digital	33
Participant 4	Asset Manager	Millennial	Digital	35
Participant 5	General Manager	Gen X	Digital	37
Participant 6	Asset Manager	Gen X	Digital	30
Participant 7	Country Manager	Gen X	Digital	33
Participant 8	Infrastructure Director	Gen X	Digital	32
Participant 9	Asset Manager	Millennial	Digital	32
Participant 10	Asset Manager	Gen X	Digital	30
Participant 11	Investment manager	Millennial	Digital	29
Participant 12	CEO	Boomer	Digital	34
Participant 13	Principal	Gen X	Digital	24
Participant 14	Property Manager	Gen X	Digital	30
Participant 15	Business Development Manager	Gen X	Digital	35
Participant 16	CEO	Boomer	Digital	33
Participant 17	Acquisition Manager	Millennial	Participant's office	34
Focus Group (Participans 18, 19, 20, 21)	Innovation Specialist, Project Manager, Finance Manager, Finance Specialist	Gen Z, Millennial, Gen X, Gen X	Digital	39

8.3. Interview Guide

1. Introduction and Interviewee Profile

- Can you briefly describe your company and your role?
- How are you involved in decisions about architecture and engineering services?
- Who else participates in these purchasing decisions?

2. Decision-Making Process

- How did your company select the studio, and what key factors drove the decision?
- What project need prompted the selection, and what information sources did you use?
- How did the studio's communication influence your expectations and evaluation?

3. Brand Perception

- Were you familiar with the studio before the project, and how did you learn about it?
- What values or expectations does the studio's brand evoke?
- How did the studio's reputation influence your final decision?

4. Digital Communication

- Which of the studio's communication channels did you encounter, and how effective were they?
- Was the digital image consistent with your actual experience?
- Did the studio's representatives reflect the communicated values?

5. Relational Aspects

- Does the studio maintain post-project contact, and through what means?
- How important were personal relationships compared to institutional communication?
- Did client references influence your perception and decision?

6. Overall Evaluation and Suggestions

- What were the top communication or brand factors in choosing the studio?
- How could the studio improve its digital communication or marketing?
- What else would you share about your experience or perception of the studio?

8.4. AI Usage

Teams AI (embedded in Teams0 and Revoldiv (https://revoldiv.com/) were used for transcription.

Gemini (https://gemini.google.com/), Claude (https://claude.ai/), and ChatGPT (https://openai.com/index/chatgpt/) were used for research alternative wording and for translate from Italian to English.

AI tools expanded the vocabulary range, enhancing readiness and overall flow. Additionally, the translations were of significantly higher quality than those produced by the author.

Potential risks found using AI and measures taken to reduce these risks

AI tools occasionally attempted to incorporate external links or content unrelated to the provided text for analysis. In such cases, AI was either not used or its output was carefully reviewed to ensure the integrity and relevance of the content.

Insights gained from using AI tools in the thesis writing process

AI served as a highly effective technical partner for translating interviews and providing vocabulary support. However, when tasks extended beyond its expertise, the limitations of the models became evident, rendering them unsuitable for in-depth analysis.