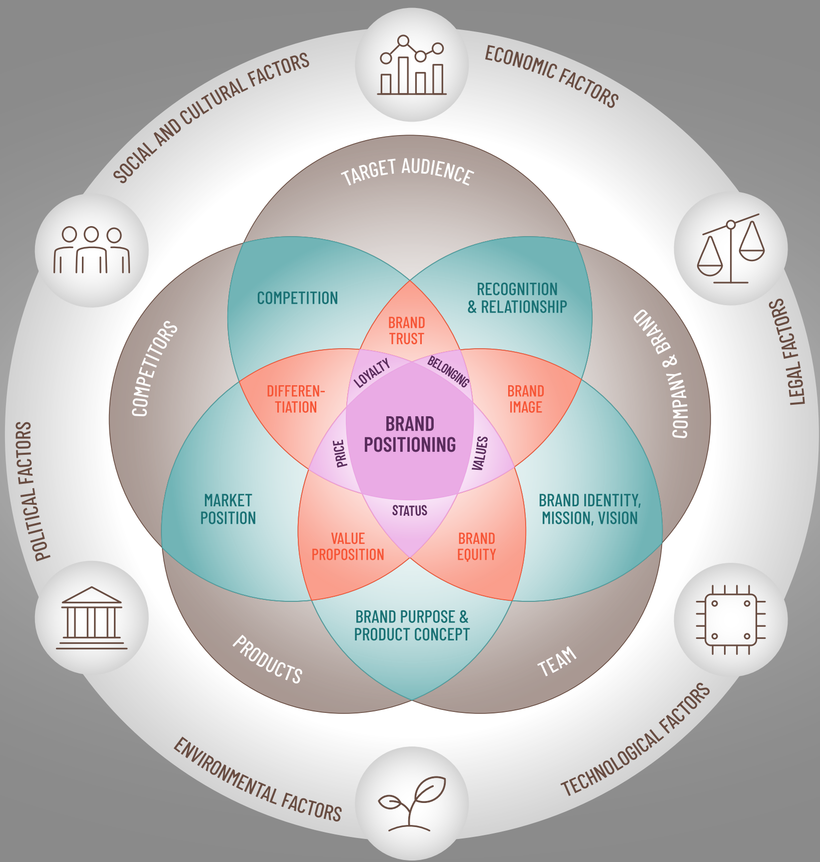
RIGA TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

Evita Štrausa

BRAND POSITIONING FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Summary of the Doctoral Thesis



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RIGA TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Engineering Economics and Management
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BRAND POSITIONING FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

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DOCTORAL THESIS PROPOSED TO RIGA TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY FOR PROMOTION TO THE SCIENTIFIC DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF SCIENCE

To be granted the scientific degree of Doctor of Science (PhD) in Social Sciences (in the field of Economics and Business), the present Doctoral Thesis is submitted for defence at the open meeting of the RTU Promotion Council on 25 August 2026 at the Faculty of Engineering Economics and Management of Riga Technical University, Kalnciema street 6, Room 209.

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DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

I hereby declare that the Doctoral Thesis submitted for review to Riga Technical University for promotion to the scientific degree of Doctor of Science (PhD) in Social Sciences (in the field of Economics and Business) is my own. I confirm that this Doctoral Thesis has not been submitted to any other university for promotion to a scientific degree.

The Doctoral Thesis has been written in English. It consists of an Introduction, three chapters, Conclusions, 34 figures, 30 tables, and 16 appendices; the total number of pages is 209. The Bibliography contains 276 titles.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BD	brand development
BP	brand positioning
CFCA	Central Finance and Contracting Agency
HBPM	holistic brand positioning model
OP	organisational performance
OS	organisational sustainability
LFSCC	Latvian Food Sector Competence Centre
RTU	Riga Technical University
SM	strategic management
TBPCM	theoretical brand positioning conceptual model

INTRODUCTION

In the context of digitalisation and global competition, sustainable business development has become a strategic imperative for organisations (Porter, 1996; Brenner, 2014; Giraldo-Luque & Fernández-Rovira, 2020). Brand positioning (BP) plays a central role by shaping consumer perceptions, driving differentiation, and fostering long-term loyalty (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2001; Kapferer, 2012; Kotler & Keller, 2016). However, despite its importance, BP remains conceptually fragmented and inconsistently applied in practice, lacking an empirically validated holistic framework that connects internal brand logic, strategic management (SM), and organisational sustainability (OS) (Urde, 2003; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; van Riemsdijk et al., 2017).

In the contemporary business environment, BP has become a decisive factor influencing organisational competitiveness and long-term growth (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2001; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Yet, it is still often interpreted as a marketing communication tool rather than a multidimensional construct integrating internal and external dynamics (Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999; Urde, 2003).

Recent studies have expanded the understanding of BP beyond traditional marketing boundaries, viewing it as a mechanism for managing stakeholder relationships, authenticity, and value co-creation (van Riemsdijk et al., 2017; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Ranjan & Read, 2016). Digital transformation and data-driven analytics have further reshaped how BP is developed and evaluated, enabling real-time tracking of associations, sentiment, and positioning outcomes (Cancellieri et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023).

However, despite theoretical and methodological advances, BP remains conceptually fragmented and practically inconsistent. There is still no unified framework that integrates strategic, emotional, and sustainability-oriented dimensions, or clarifies how positioning activities contribute to organisational performance (OP) and long-term viability.

This Doctoral Thesis addresses the conceptual and practical gap by investigating BP not merely as a marketing communication construct but as a strategic and integrative process linking brand logic, organisational capabilities, and stakeholder value.

The research aims to conceptualise and empirically validate BP as a strategic approach to sustainable business development by developing a holistic framework that links BP to OP, OS, and SM.

Research objectives

1. Analyse the theoretical foundations and conceptual development of BP in the context of sustainable business development.
2. Identify and synthesise key positioning elements, models, and strategic approaches through qualitative content analysis.
3. Develop the theoretical brand positioning conceptual model (TBPCM) as a transitional step towards validation.
4. Examine interactions between BP, customer decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and brand loyalty.

5. Formulate and test hypotheses linking BP with OP and OS, including the mediating role of SM.
6. Validate and refine the model through expert engagement, resulting in the holistic brand positioning model (HBPM).
7. Demonstrate the model's applicability through practical case testing *(Joy for Tails)*.

The subject of the research is BP as a strategic approach.

The object of the research is sustainable business development.

The research question: How does BP contribute to OP and OS in the context of sustainable business development, and how does this effect depend on its integration into SM?

The following **hypotheses** are proposed.

H1. OP → OS – higher organisational performance is associated with higher levels of sustainability.

H2a. BP → OP – strong brand positioning is associated with higher organisational performance.

H2b. BP → OS – strong brand positioning is associated with higher organisational sustainability.

H3a. BP → SM → OP – the effect of BP on OP depends on its integration into strategic management.

H3b. BP → SM → OS – the effect of BP on OS depends on its integration into strategic management.

Theoretical and methodological foundations. The theoretical foundation of this Doctoral Thesis builds on the fields of BP, strategic brand management, stakeholder theory, and sustainable business development. The study integrates perspectives from both classical and contemporary scholars, including Ries and Trout (1981) on positioning logic, Aaker (1996, 2012) on brand identity and strategic model building, Keller (2001, 2003) on customer-based brand equity, Kapferer (2012) on brand architecture, Urde (1999, 2003) on brand orientation and internal-external alignment, and Kotler et al. (2010, 2017) on stakeholder-focused, value-driven marketing. Together, these approaches establish BP as a multidimensional and dynamic construct linking brand differentiation, stakeholder relationships, and strategic sustainability.

Methodologically, the research employs a triangulated, inductive design consisting of three interrelated phases.

1. Theoretical phase – a systematic literature review and qualitative content analysis of 31 BP definitions and 56 theoretical sources to identify recurring elements, models, and conceptual relationships, leading to the development of the TBPCM.
2. Analytical phase – refinement of conceptual elements through comparative analysis, thematic classification, and model structuring, resulting in several intermediate frameworks (e.g., stakeholder interaction, decision-making, and brand–customer touchpoints).
3. Empirical phase – validation of the proposed model through focus groups, expert interviews, and a structured survey of senior executives. Statistical techniques, such as

Pearson's correlation and hierarchical cluster analysis, confirmed relationships among BP, SM, OP, and OS.

This triangulated approach ensures theoretical consistency, methodological rigour, and empirical reliability, providing a robust foundation for the development and testing of the HBPM (see also Paul & Criado, 2020; Xiao & Watson, 2019).

During the development of this doctoral thesis, artificial intelligence (AI) tools – Manus (Manus.im) and ChatGPT (OpenAI) – were used for linguistic refinement, text structuring, and the preparation of selected visualisations. The suggestions provided by the mentioned tools and the generated visual materials were critically evaluated, adapted, and validated in accordance with the author's academic requirements. The intellectual content, analytical approach, conclusions, and interpretation of this work remain entirely the responsibility of the author.

Scientific contribution and novelty. This Doctoral Thesis advances both the theoretical understanding and managerial application of BP in the context of sustainable business development. Its central novelty lies in the development and empirical validation of the HBPM – a comprehensive framework that integrates BP into SM and links it to OP and OS.

The validated model demonstrates that BP is not merely a communication tool but a strategic resource that enhances performance and sustainability when embedded into SM processes. This addresses a long-standing fragmentation in BP theory by uniting internal, external, strategic, and outcome-oriented dimensions into a coherent structure.

The **scientific novelty** of the Thesis is reflected in six interrelated outcomes.

- Decision-making interaction model demonstrating how BP influences consumer and managerial choices through experience- and value-based processes.
- Brand-customer loyalty formation model, showing how symbolic and emotional alignment builds long-term relationships.
- Brand touchpoint framework, mapping positioning effects across the customer journey.
- TBPCM was derived from a qualitative synthesis of definitions and models.
- The validated HBPM integrates BP into SM and sustainability logic.
- The interaction model BP–SM–OP–OS empirically confirms that BP significantly affects both performance and sustainability, with its impact amplified through SM integration.

These contributions provide a new theoretical synthesis, methodological innovation, and empirical validation of BP as a systemic mechanism for sustainable business development. The research extends prior studies (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2001; Urde, 2003; Kotler et al., 2017) by demonstrating that BP functions as a **strategic, holistic construct** that drives competitiveness, stakeholder trust, and long-term growth.

Practical contributions. This Thesis offers practical contributions for academic researchers, higher education institutions, business leaders, consultants, and policymakers. The holistic model, developed and validated in this research, provides a practical framework for analysing BP, embedding it into SM, and linking it to OP and OS. Its applicability is demonstrated by the *Joy for Tails* case, illustrating how the model can guide brand creation, export readiness, and long-term strategic growth.

In practice, the model provides a basis for diverse stakeholders, including businesses, academia, and policymakers, to:

- align the set of BPE identified in the HBPM with market dynamics, ensuring coherence and adaptability over time (e.g., brand identity, mission, and culture as part of the broader framework);
- apply BP as a governance mechanism, supporting top management in making consistent, long-term strategic decisions supporting sustainable business development;
- use the model as a reference framework for business and policy initiatives, strengthening competitiveness and innovation capacity beyond the level of individual companies;
- promote the integration of a holistic approach to BP into marketing and business management education, thereby preparing future professionals to apply positioning as a strategic mechanism rather than a narrow promotional tool.

Defence arguments

- BP is not a narrow marketing tool but a strategic and holistic construct that integrates internal brand architecture, stakeholder alignment, and external influences. Empirical results confirm that this approach enhances both OP and OS, with its impact amplified when embedded in SM processes.
- The Doctoral Thesis presents a novel, holistic model that provides a multidimensional, empirically validated framework, linking positioning with performance, sustainability, and SM. This model also addresses long-standing fragmentation in BP theory by consolidating internal, external, strategic, and outcome-oriented dimensions into a coherent system.
- The HBPM proves to be a practical and strategic tool, as demonstrated in the *Joy for Tails* case study, supporting brand creation, export readiness, and sustainable growth in international markets.

Approbation and practical application of the research results. The research was conducted from 2018 to 2024, and the results of the Doctoral Thesis have been approved through participation in international and local scientific conferences, academic seminars, professional discussions, and used in the implementation of projects, participating in eight projects.

1. The practical application of the research was validated and demonstrated in the European Union co-financed project on innovation development, where the *Joy for Tails* brand and product line were developed and introduced to export markets in line with the strategic principles of BP validated in this Thesis (project "Development of New Products – Ice Cream for Pets", implemented under the Research Project No. 5.1.1.2.i.0/1/22/A/CFLA/003 (8)).
2. Although the practical applications are not presented in detail, the research progress, theoretical insights, and results obtained between 2018 and 2024 have been applied to the development of various new products, particularly through analyses of their positioning and alignment with the brand. These developments were carried out within seven research projects, all of which were led and conducted by the author in her dual

role as project leader and researcher. The projects were implemented in collaboration with research institutions, including Riga Technical University, the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies, the University of Latvia, and the Institute of Agricultural Resources and Economics, as well as representatives from industry.

- 03/2024–09/2024, Tērvete Food Ltd. project "Development of new products – ice cream creams". Project aim: Research into new products and technologies in the cream segment. Research outcome: Development of a production technology for ice cream creams. Project No. 5.1.1.2.1.0/1/22/A/CFLA/003 (31), research under the agreement between Latvian Food Sector Competence Centre (LFSCC) and the Central Finance and Contracting Agency (CFCA).
- 03/2023–12/2024, Tērvete Food Ltd. project "Development of new products – ice cream for pets". Project aim: Development of new products for dogs in the pet supplementary feed segment. Research outcome: Commercialisation of three innovative products with functional properties. Project No. 5.1.1.2.i.0/1/22/A/CFLA/003 (8), research under the agreement between LFSCC and the CFCA. Beyond the publications directly addressing the subject of the Doctoral Thesis, two additional scientific articles have been published on product development.
- 11/2020–01/2022, MILZU! Ltd. project "Research on product recipes and production technologies for the introduction of *MILZU!* products in the beverage and cream segment". Project aim: Development of new pea-based products (beverages and meals). Research outcome: Development of three beverage recipes; commercialisation of seven new vegan products made from Latvian grey peas, including innovative products. Project No. 1.2.1.1/18/A/002 (45), research under the agreement between LFSCC and the CFCA.
- 07/2020–01/2022, MILZU! Ltd. project "Research on the processing and scaling of microorganisms for the production of biopolymers". Project aim: adaptation of processes for scaling and production to create a biodegradable material of higher value in collaboration with the RTU and University of Latvia. Research outcome: Development of a new biodegradable material as a plastic alternative, including for food packaging production. Project No. 1.2.1.1/18/A/002 (41), research under the agreement between LFSCC and the CFCA. Beyond the publications directly addressing the subject of the Doctoral Thesis, three additional scientific articles have been published on product development.
- 02/2020–12/2021, MILZU! Ltd. cross-sectoral project "Knowledge transfer and development of new cereal products". Project aim: Development of new high-value products using cereals grown in Latvia and other plant-based additives in collaboration with the Institute of Agricultural Resources and Economics. Research outcome: commercialisation of four new products, including innovative products. Project No. 19-00-A01620-000068, research carried out as part of the activities of the Rural Support Service. Beyond the publications directly addressing the subject of the Doctoral Thesis, three additional scientific articles have been published on product development.

- 10/2016–01/2019, MILZU! Ltd. project "Research on new recipes for *MILZU!* cereal products". Project aim: Development of healthy alternative products – extruded cereal flakes – in collaboration with the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies. Research outcome: Commercialisation of 19 new products, including innovative products. Project No. 1.2.1.1/16/A/004.05, research under the agreement between LFSCC and the CFCA.
- 10/2016–01/2019, MILZU! Ltd. project "Research and development of a cereal flakes packaging-based ecosystem of children's toys to increase the added value of food products". Project aim: Development of an educational construction set in collaboration with RTU. Research outcome: Creation of a concept for the construction set. Project No. 1.2.1.1/16/A/004.04, research under the agreement between LFSCC and the CFCA.

The author has applied the theoretical insights from the Doctoral Thesis in practical work, directing the business development and export of two companies during the research, and managing a manufacturing company. This involved introducing innovative products and new brands, resulting in the development of a new comprehensive BP approach.
The results of the Doctoral Thesis have been used in the study course "Strategic Marketing".

Scientific publications. The progress and outcomes of the Doctoral Thesis have been disseminated through 11 scientific publications, including eight articles published in conference proceedings indexed in Scopus.

1. Strausa, E., Gaile-Sarkane, E. "Embedding Brand Positioning within Strategic Management". The 28th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics: Proceedings International Institute of Informatics and Systemics, USA, 2024, pp. 124–131. (Indexed in Scopus).
2. Strausa, E., Ence, E., Gaile-Sarkane, E. "Positioning as a Catalyst Towards Innovations". The 27th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics: Proceedings Vol. 1, International Institute of Informatics and Systemics, USA, 2023, pp. 196–202. (Indexed in Scopus).
3. Strausa, E., Gaile-Sarkane, E. "Analysis of Brand Positioning and Branding for the Development of New Brand Positioning Model". The 26th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics: Proceedings Vol. 2, International Institute of Informatics and Systemics, USA, 2022, pp. 142–147. (Indexed in Scopus).
4. Strausa, E., Ence, E., Gaile-Sarkane, E. "Values Based Innovation – New Strategic Approach". The 26th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics: Proceedings Vol. 2, International Institute of Informatics and Systemics, USA, 2022, pp. 136–141. (Indexed in Scopus).
5. Ence, E., Strausa, E., Gaile-Sarkane, E. "Values Based Positioning – the Key to Success in Development of a Brand". The 25th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics: Proceedings Vol. 3, International Institute of Informatics and Systemics, USA, 2021, pp. 117–122. (Indexed in Scopus).
6. Ence, E., Strausa, E., Gaile-Sarkane, E. "Taxonomy of Value Development – How to Classify Values for Application in Business?" The 24th World Multi-Conference on

Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics: Proceedings Vol. 3, International Institute of Informatics and Systemics, USA, 2020, pp. 54–58. (Indexed in Scopus).

7. Strausa, E., Ence, E. "Insight into Values in the Context of Brand Positioning". Riga Technical University 61st International Scientific Conference on Economics and Entrepreneurship: Proceedings, RTU Press, 2020.
8. Ence, E., Strausa, E. "Analysis of Values and Interest of Stakeholders: Case of *MILZU!*". The 10th International Multi-Conference on Complexity, Informatics and Cybernetics: Proceedings Vol.1, International Institute of Informatics and Systemics, USA, 2019, pp. 13–17. (Indexed in Scopus).
9. Ozolins, M., Gaile-Sarkane, E., Ence, E., Strausa, E. "Entrepreneurship and Innovation Development at Higher Education Institutions: Opportunities and Solutions". The 10th International Multi-Conference on Complexity, Informatics and Cybernetics: Proceedings Vol. 1, International Institute of Informatics and Systemics, USA, 2019, pp. 24–28. (Indexed in *Scopus*).
10. Strausa, E. "Elements Included in Brand Positioning". Riga Technical University 60th International Scientific Conference on Economics and Entrepreneurship: Proceedings, RTU Press, 2019, pp. 56–56.
11. Ence, E., Strausa, E. "Research on Product Value Added based on Values and Interests of Stakeholders: Case of *MILZU!*". Riga Technical University 60th International Scientific Conference on Economics and Entrepreneurship: Proceedings, RTU Press, 2018, pp. 23–30.

Data approbation was made by presenting the progress and results of the research at nine **international and local conferences** (in Latvia, the USA, and South Korea).

1. The 28th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics (WMSCI 2024), academic report: "Embedding Brand Positioning within Strategic Management", September 10–13, 2024, Orlando, USA.
2. The 27th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics (WMSCI 2023), academic report: "Positioning as a Catalyst Towards Innovations", September 12–15, 2023, Orlando, USA.
3. The 26th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics (WMSCI 2022), July 12–15, 2022, Orlando, USA:
   - Academic report No. 1: "Values-Based Positioning – the Key to Success in Development of a Brand";
   - Academic report No. 2: "Analysis of Brand Positioning and Branding for the Development of New Brand Positioning Model".
4. SOI & Riga Technical University 2021 Conference, academic report: "Values-Based Innovation – New Strategic Approach", July 12–15, 2021, South Korea.
5. Riga Technical University 61st International Scientific Conference "Scientific Conference on Economics and Entrepreneurship" (SCEE 2020), academic report: "Insight into Values in the Context of Brand Positioning", October 16, 2020, Riga, Latvia.

6. The 24th World Multi-Conference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics (WMSCI 2020), academic report: “Taxonomy of Value Development – How to Apply it in Business Development?” September 13–16, 2020, Orlando, USA
7. The 10th International Multi-Conference on Complexity, Informatics and Cybernetics (IMCIC 2019), Orlando, Florida, USA, March 13–15, 2019:
   - Academic report No. 1: “Entrepreneurship and Innovation Development at Higher Education Institutions: Opportunities and Solutions”;
   - Academic report No. 2: “Analysis of Values and Interests of Stakeholders: Case of *MILZU!*”.
8. Riga Technical University 60th International Scientific Conference "Scientific Conference on Economics and Entrepreneurship” (SCEE 2019), academic report: “Elements Included in Brand Positioning. In: Scientific Conference on Economics and Entrepreneurship”, October 11, 2019, Riga, Latvia.
9. Riga Technical University 59th International Scientific Conference "Scientific Conference on Economics and Entrepreneurship” (SCEE 2018), academic report: “Research on Product Value Added based on Values and Interests of Stakeholders: Case of *MILZU!*”, October 18, 2018, Riga, Latvia.

Logic and structure of the research. The research follows a sequential, triangulated design that integrates theoretical synthesis, analytical modelling, and empirical validation. It is structured in three interrelated phases: (1) a theoretical phase identifying and systematising BP concepts and models; (2) an analytical phase developing and refining the conceptual structure; and (3) an empirical phase testing and validating the proposed HBPM through expert interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

This structure ensures coherence between theory and practice and provides a solid foundation for evaluating BP as a strategic approach for sustainable business development. The research focuses primarily on the economic dimension of sustainability and was conducted within the Baltic context, predominantly among export-oriented companies. While this provides valuable insights into strategic and international brand development (BD), future studies could expand cross-country validation and incorporate consumer perspectives to strengthen external validity and generalisability.

The Doctoral Thesis is structured in three interconnected parts that reflect the logical sequence from theoretical analysis to model development and empirical validation. Chapter 1 examines the conceptual foundations and historical evolution of BP, identifying key theoretical elements and strategic dimensions. Chapter 2 develops and refines the conceptual model, linking BP with decision-making, stakeholder interaction, and SM. Chapter 3 presents empirical validation of the proposed model, confirming the relationships among BP, OP, and OS and demonstrating its applicability through the *Joy for Tails* case study.

The Doctoral Thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, conclusions, recommendations, and a bibliography with 276 references. The total length is 209 pages, including 34 figures, 30 tables, one formula, and 16 appendices.

1. THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The first chapter establishes the theoretical foundations of the Doctoral Thesis, reviewing the evolution and conceptualisation of BP as a key construct in strategic brand management. It reviews the evolution of BP as a concept, synthesises its main definitions, and examines different models and approaches developed in academic literature. The aim is to establish a comprehensive understanding of how BP has been conceptualised, analysed, and applied, and to identify the gaps and limitations that the Doctoral Thesis seeks to address.

1.1. The theoretical framework of brand positioning

In today's over-communicated market environment, effective BP is a key determinant of brand success (Maggard, 1976; Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Marsden, 2002; Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010; Kapferer, 2012). Despite its prevalence in marketing literature, the concept remains theoretically ambiguous and fragmented (Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999; Urde, 2003; Keller, 2013). Following Snyder's (2019) integrative review approach, this analysis synthesises key theoretical contributions to clarify BP's main dimensions and conceptual gaps.

The evolution of innovation, globalisation, and digitalisation has fundamentally reshaped market competition and branding logic (Murphy et al., 2006; Porter, 1996; Kollmann et al., 2022). From early perceptions of brand image (Boulding, 1956) to Ries and Trout's (1981) notion of creating a distinct place in the consumer's mind, BP evolved into a strategic tool for differentiation (Aaker, 1996). In the 2000s, insights from neuroscience and digital marketing expanded understanding of emotional and cognitive processes (Ariely, 2010; Kotler, 2016). Overall, BP has transformed from a promotional tactic into a multidimensional strategic mechanism shaped by innovation and technological change. Building on this historical trajectory, BP can be interpreted as a strategic response to increasing market complexity and consumer empowerment.

BP is a multidimensional construct combining tangible offer attributes with intangible brand meanings (Hofer & Schendel, 1978; Barney, 1991). Despite the absence of a unified definition (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999), several conceptual constants recur: perception, differentiation, identity, and value alignment. The qualitative content analysis of 31 definitions conducted in this Thesis identifies these as BP's core dimensions. Positioning translates brand identity into a resonant image (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008), with growing emphasis on values-based alignment (Urde, 1999; Kotler & Keller, 2016). It is a dynamic process requiring ongoing monitoring and, when necessary, repositioning (de Chernatony, 2021).

A positioning strategy defines how a brand occupies a distinctive place in the consumer's mind and within a perceptual market space (Dillon et al., 1986; Park et al., 1986). Various approaches include attribute, competitor, price-quality, and corporate-based strategies (Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Schiffman et al., 2014). According to Riezebos (2003), positioning occurs along intrinsic and price dimensions, yet no single strategy fits all contexts. Effective BP aligns with brand capabilities and competitive dynamics. As Porter (1996) notes, strategic positioning involves "performing different activities from rivals or performing similar activities in different ways." Numerous BP models have been developed to explain the interaction of identity, perception, and value (Park et al., 1986; Aaker, 1996; Urde, 1999; Keller, 2001; Kotler, 2016). While each offers valuable insights, most focus either on internal brand-building or external communication. Few integrate broader strategic and sustainability dimensions. Therefore, BP should be viewed as a complex, multidimensional mechanism that links brand identity, consumer perceptions, and stakeholder value to sustainable business development.

1.2. The importance of brand positioning strategy in business development

BP plays a decisive role in business development by determining how an organisation defines, communicates, and sustains its competitive advantage. In conditions of intensified competition and rapid market change, a clear and strategically integrated positioning strategy enables companies to build distinctive brand identities, strengthen stakeholder trust, and ensure sustainable growth. BP thus acts as a connecting mechanism between marketing communication, organisational strategy, and long-term value creation (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2003; Kotler & Keller, 2016).

From an SM perspective, positioning is a key element in achieving differentiation and competitiveness (Porter, 1980, 1985, 1990). According to Porter, strategic positioning means performing activities differently from competitors or performing similar activities in different ways. This principle emphasises that sustainable competitive advantage is rooted not only in operational efficiency but in a brand's ability to establish a unique position in the minds of consumers and stakeholders. In this way, positioning integrates marketing and management logic, aligning a company's internal resources and external market perceptions (Barney, 1991; Urde, 1999; Aaker, 2012).

Scholars highlight that the brand's strategic role extends beyond mere communication – it defines the company's orientation and value system. Aaker (1996) views positioning as a system that translates identity into externally recognisable meaning, while Kapferer (2012) notes that it represents the synthesis of internal culture and external image. Keller's (2001) customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model similarly links positioning to consumer perceptions and loyalty, showing that a clear, consistent positioning strategy contributes to substantial brand equity and financial performance.

Positioning also plays an essential role in aligning brand and organisational goals. Urde (2003) introduced the concept of brand orientation, which highlights the strategic integration of brand identity into organisational management processes. This approach implies that positioning is not a static marketing activity but a dynamic process of managing relationships, consistency, and meaning over time. Kapferer (2008) and Knox & Bickerton (2003) argue that strategic alignment between brand identity and brand image ensures coherence between internal ambitions and external perceptions, reducing the risk of brand dilution and enabling long-term differentiation.

In addition to internal alignment, BP contributes to external value creation through its role in customer decision-making and relationship building. Brands that maintain a strong and relevant position are more likely to be associated with trust, authenticity, and emotional engagement (Keller, 2013; Urde & Koch, 2014; Kotler et al., 2017). This emotional connection reinforces loyalty and creates a symbolic value that extends beyond functional attributes (Aaker, 1997; Kapferer, 2012).

In the broader context of sustainable business development, BP supports strategic adaptation and organisational resilience. Scholars have emphasised that firms capable of translating brand positioning into strategic capabilities achieve not only short-term performance but also long-term sustainability (Barney, 1991; Ma, 1999; Aiginger, 2006). Positioning fosters innovation by guiding how companies perceive and respond to changes in stakeholder expectations, technological development, and social values. As Kotler (2016) notes, effective brand strategy in the modern economy requires brands to build both rational and emotional relevance, aligning with societal values and stakeholder needs.

Successful brand positioning builds on clear differentiation, innovation, and unrepeatability, reinforced through targeted marketing, customer trust, and long-term loyalty (Porter, 1996; Aaker, 1997; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2013). Existing approaches often remain fragmented – focusing either on communication or perception – thus lacking a systemic framework for linking brand positioning with organisational strategy and performance (Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999; Urde & Koch, 2014). By strengthening differentiation and stakeholder relationships, BP contributes not only to competitiveness but also to the sustainable development of organisations operating in dynamic market environments.

BP should be viewed as an integral part of SM rather than a separate marketing activity. It serves as a bridge between internal competencies, organisational culture, and external market dynamics, creating a basis for sustained differentiation and competitiveness. By linking brand identity, stakeholder relationships, and value creation, positioning becomes a core driver of business development and a fundamental component of sustainable strategic growth.

1.3. Scientific gap and problem statement

Despite extensive research in branding and marketing strategy, the concept of BP remains theoretically fragmented and practically inconsistent. Over the past three decades, BP has evolved into a central concept in brand management and strategic marketing. Numerous conceptual frameworks have been developed, including Brand Concept Management (Park et al., 1986), the Brand identity planning model (Aaker, 1996), the Customer-based brand equity model (Keller, 2001), the 3i model (Kotler et al., 2010), and the Brand hexagon (Urde, 1999). While each of these models contributes to understanding BP, most approach the concept from isolated or partial perspectives.

Theoretical gap. The literature lacks an integrated, holistic model that systematically links BP with SM. Existing models tend to focus on individual aspects of BP, such as differentiation (Aaker, 1996), emotional branding (Keller, 2001), or internal value alignment (Urde, 2003), without offering a comprehensive and integrated approach. Among the nine analysed models, none incorporate both internal brand-building logic and external strategic drivers within a unified framework. Furthermore, BP is rarely conceptualised as a multidimensional construct that includes strategic objectives and measurable business outcomes. The lack of integration among these components limits the applicability of existing models in dynamic business environments and in scenarios for sustainable growth. In addition, empirical validation of these models remains limited, particularly regarding how positioning decisions translate into OS, OP, and competitive advantage.

This theoretical gap highlights the need for a more integrated and practically applicable BP model. Based on the reviewed literature and the identified conceptual limitations, the study provides an analytical examination of the key factors and components influencing BP. This analysis serves as the foundation for the conceptualisation of a holistic approach to brand positioning.

Practical gap. In practice, BP is often treated as a tactical or communication-related activity rather than as a strategic mechanism embedded in organisational development and long-term planning. Such a narrow operationalisation constrains the potential of positioning to influence performance, stakeholder relationships, and sustainable value creation. Organisations lack a structured, practically applicable model that connects business strategy to BP, stakeholder expectations, and performance indicators. As a result, many firms struggle to manage positioning as a continuous, adaptive, and value-generating process.

Moreover, only a limited number of studies have examined the relationship between OS and higher levels of OP, and how BP, when effectively implemented, contributes to both performance and long-term sustainability outcomes. Existing research rarely conceptualises positioning as a systemic driver that extends beyond marketing boundaries and directly supports sustainable growth trajectories. Furthermore, prior studies indicate that the impact of BP on OS depends on the degree of strategic integration – namely, the extent to which positioning is embedded within broader strategic management and decision-making systems. The lack of research from this perspective, particularly incorporating insights from senior executives and company owners who directly shape strategic integration, reveals a significant gap in understanding the long-term value-creation potential of BP.

This conceptual gap defines the scientific problem addressed in this Doctoral Thesis: although brand positioning is widely recognised as a critical component of competitive strategy, its holistic integration into strategic management processes and its impact on sustainable organisational performance remain insufficiently explored and empirically validated. To address this problem, the study proposes and validates the holistic brand positioning model (HBPM) – a multidimensional framework that links internal brand logic, stakeholder relationships, and external market dynamics. By empirically testing the interactions among BP, SM, OS, and OP, the research develops a model demonstrating how BP, when strategically integrated into SM processes, can enhance organisational performance and sustainability outcomes. The study's methodological approach, based on a triangulated research design and multi-level empirical validation, ensures both the theoretical robustness and practical relevance of the developed HBPM.

2. ANALYSIS OF FACTORS AND COMPONENTS INFLUENCING BRAND POSITIONING

Chapter 2 presents the analytical foundation of the research, building on the theoretical synthesis of brand positioning (BP) and its conceptual dimensions established in Chapter 1. The objective of this part is to translate the theoretical constructs into an empirically grounded model through systematic qualitative content analysis, theoretical mapping, and model synthesis. This analytical process serves as a bridge between theoretical abstraction and the development of the TBPCM, which subsequently serves as the basis for empirical validation in Chapter 3. The analytical approach is inductive, following the principles of qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Mayring, 2014) and concept-driven coding (e.g., Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The study aims to reveal patterns, interconnections, and hierarchies among the elements of BP definitions and to identify key conceptual categories that capture the essence of BP as a multidimensional construct.

2.1. Qualitative content analysis of elements of brand positioning definitions

To systematise the conceptual understanding of BP, a qualitative content analysis was conducted **based on 31 definitions** collected from academic sources spanning 1956–2023. The aim was to identify recurring conceptual elements and their interrelationships, which served as the empirical basis for the subsequent development of the TBPCM. Following the logic of inductive category development (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Mayring, 2014), the analysis applied open, axial, and selective coding, supported by a binary coding matrix indicating the presence (1) or absence (0) of each element in every definition.

The identified codes were grouped into six broader conceptual categories.

1. **Customer perception** – the mental image or position the brand occupies in the consumer's mind, forming the foundation of most traditional positioning theories.
2. **Competitive differentiation** – the brand's distinctiveness and its ability to stand out within a competitive environment.
3. **Value and relevance alignment** – the degree to which the brand resonates with consumer values, emotional needs, and expectations, reflecting the shift toward personalisation and meaningful engagement.
4. **Internal brand identity** – the brand's essence, mission, and its role as a means of customer self-expression and identity reinforcement.
5. **Target segment orientation** – alignment of positioning with specific consumer segments and strategic targeting decisions.
6. **Symbolic and visual expression** – the brand's symbolic and aesthetic language, visual identity, and imagery used to evoke emotional and associative meaning.

The frequency analysis of coded elements across 31 BP definitions reveals that the most dominant themes are customer perception (74.2 %) and competitive differentiation (54.8 %), representing the core of traditional positioning logic, where perception and competitive distinction are central components. Value and relevance alignment (35.5 %) and internal brand identity (29.0 %) are moderately represented, reflecting a gradual shift toward more human-centric, identity-driven approaches. Less frequent are references to target segment orientation (16.1 %) and symbolic and visual expression (12.9 %), suggesting underrepresentation of emotional and symbolic dimensions in classical definitions.

These findings indicate that while perception and differentiation remain the conceptual foundation of BP, contemporary interpretations increasingly incorporate values, identity, and emotional resonance, reflecting the transition from transactional to relational marketing logic. The six identified categories serve as the analytical basis for the theoretical synthesis and model development presented in the following section.

2.2. Qualitative content analysis of elements of theories, citations about brand positioning, and analysis of the impact of elements on objects

Building on the results of the qualitative content analysis of BP definitions, a second analytical stage was performed to deepen the theoretical understanding of positioning as a multidimensional construct. A qualitative content analysis was conducted **using 56 theory-based citations and conceptual statements** from academic sources representing different schools of thought in brand management, marketing strategy, and organisational theory. The purpose of this analysis was to identify recurring theoretical elements, their interrelationships, and their correspondence to broader domains of influence.

Findings indicate that BP operates simultaneously across three interrelated domains of influence – market, brand, and consumer – which together form the structural context of positioning. This approach follows the logic of mapping abstract conceptual categories to the objects they affect, thereby integrating multiple theoretical perspectives into a coherent analytical system.

Fig. 2.1. Correspondence of elements to objects of influence (author’s developed framework).

The market domain defines the competitive environment and price–value relationships, corresponding to the principles of differentiation and strategic advantage (Porter, 1996; Riezebos, 2003). The brand domain focuses on internal identity, mission, and organisational culture (Aaker, 1996; Urde, 1999), establishing coherence between a company's values and its external message. The consumer domain represents the perceptual, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of BP, highlighting the role of experience and value-based associations (Keller, 2001; Kapferer, 2012; Kotler & Keller, 2016). In Fig. 2.1. only one element –Relation/Synergy – spans both the brand and consumer domains, indicating a theoretical gap in existing models with regard to the conceptualisation of mutual value creation.

This theory-based synthesis provides an integrated analytical framework that links conceptual elements, theoretical constructs, and practical implications. It reveals that brand positioning cannot be understood within a single theoretical paradigm but should be interpreted as a system of relationships. The analytical mapping of these relationships forms the conceptual foundation for the next stage – the classification and synthesis of brand positioning models.

2.3. Classification of brand positioning models and analysis of unique attributes of the models

To conceptually structure the theoretical landscape of brand positioning, the "of–in–with" perspective of marketing theory proposed by M. K. Lüdicke (2015) was adopted and adapted for analysis. This perspective enables the distinction of brand positioning as (1) an object of theory ("theory of brand positioning"), (2) an explanatory framework for analysing other phenomena ("theory in brand positioning"), and (3) an integrated component within broader theoretical constructs ("theory with brand positioning"). As illustrated in Fig. 2.2, the analysed brand positioning and branding models are predominantly situated within the "in" perspective, where positioning is conceptualised as an internally oriented element of strategic management, while the "with" perspective – emphasising co-creation, stakeholder interaction, and sustainability – remains underrepresented in the literature.

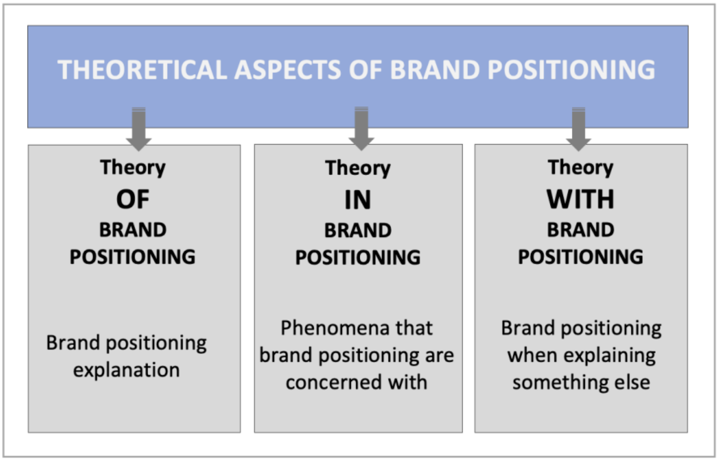

Fig. 2.2. Theoretical aspects of brand positioning (author's adapted and expanded framework from Lüdicke (2015)).

To synthesise the theoretical landscape of BP, a comparative analysis of existing conceptual and strategic models was conducted. The purpose was to identify recurring structural elements, methodological approaches, and the unique attributes that distinguish different conceptualisations of BP. In total, nine representative BP and branding models were analysed, covering the period from 1981 to 2023 (see Table 2.1). The models were selected based on their theoretical relevance, influence in the literature, and conceptual diversity – ranging from classical attribute-based frameworks to holistic, stakeholder-oriented systems.

The comparative analysis identified three main theoretical approaches – component-based, process-based, and holistic – reflecting the evolution of brand management logic and the increasing integration of sustainability and stakeholder perspectives.

1. **Component-based models** (e.g., Ries & Trout, 1981; Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Kapferer, 2012) focus on defining brand attributes and differentiation mechanisms. They conceptualise positioning as a set of variables (features, price, quality, image) that distinguish a brand from competitors.
2. **Process-based models** (e.g., Keller, 2001; de Chernatony & Riley, 1998; Kotler & Keller, 2016) emphasise the dynamic nature of positioning as a continuous management process, including identity formation, communication, and feedback loops.
3. **Holistic models** (e.g., Urde, 1999; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; van Riemsdijk et al., 2017) view BP as an integrative system connecting internal brand logic, stakeholder values, and sustainable performance.

The analytical comparison, based on 56 theoretical sources, demonstrates that the understanding of BP has gradually shifted from the “of marketing” paradigm – where positioning is treated as a subset of communication – to the “in marketing” logic, where it is part of SM processes, and finally to the “with marketing” perspective, integrating stakeholder co-creation and sustainability considerations.

Attribute-based analysis of nine selected models examines each model’s origin, conceptual focus, methodological approach, and intended application – whether it is primarily oriented toward the brand, the company, or the customer. The findings are summarised in Table 2.1, which presents the unique attributes and methodological approaches of the analysed BP and branding models.

Table 2.1

Unique attributes of the models (created by the author)

No. of model	Name of model	Basic, delivered from	Method/ approach	Purpose, direction
1	Brand concept management	Consumer needs	Process approach	Brand
2	Brand identity planning model	Brand identity	Process approach	Brand
3	Brand hexagon	Brand orientation	Holistic approach	Brand & company

Table 2.1 (continued)

No. of model	Name of model	Basic, delivered from	Method/ approach	Purpose, direction
4	Customer based brand equity model	Brand orientation	Holistic approach	Brand
5	Brand asset management process	Brand orientation	Process approach	Brand
6	Internal and external core value-based brand building process	Emotional marketing, values	Process approach	Brand & company
7	The 3i model	Emotional marketing, values	Holistic approach	Brand
8	Market and brand-oriented framework	Brand orientation	Holistic approach	Brand & company
9	6-step branding conceptual model	Emotional marketing, values	Component-based approach	Brand

Different BP and branding models employ various methodological approaches to define and structure the positioning process (Strausa et al., 2022). To examine this diversity, the author analyses nine models, identifying each model's conceptual focus, methodological structure, and strategic orientation. The comparative results are summarised in Table 2.1, which highlights the unique attributes and modelling logic of each framework.

The author identified three dominant methodological approaches used across the models – the holistic, process, and component-based approaches – and synthesised their elements to inform the creation of a new model (Strausa & Gaile-Sarkane, 2022). Upon evaluation, it was concluded that three of these approaches dominate among the models analysed: the holistic approach, the process-based approach, and the component-based approach.

Reviewed models share several core elements that define BP's structure and operational logic. These include brand identity, differentiation strategy, target audience, value proposition, and brand communication. Component-based models primarily focus on tangible or competitive variables, whereas holistic and identity-based frameworks expand BP to include intangible and relational dimensions such as brand essence, trust, and emotional resonance (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012; Urde, 1999).

To study the modelling logic underlying various BP frameworks, the author conducted a conceptual analysis of five distinct methodological approaches identified in the literature: the holistic approach, systems approach, process approach, component-based approach, and analytical approach. These approaches differ in their conceptual orientation, level of integration, and modelling function. Figure 2.3 illustrates the defining logic and core characteristics of each approach.

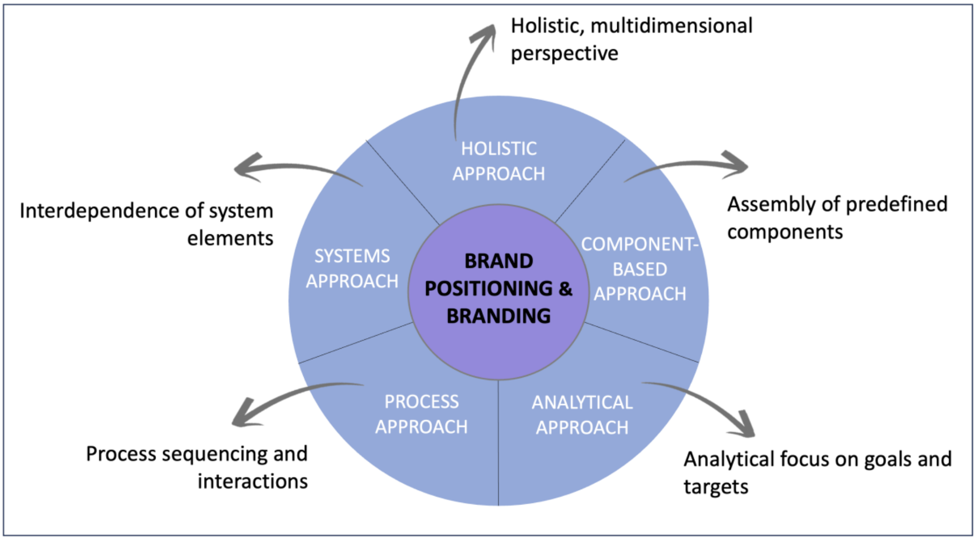

Fig. 2.3. Classification of methodological approaches in brand positioning models (author's adapted conceptual framework).

This classification highlights that while most models successfully address specific aspects of positioning, they often fail to connect internal brand identity, external perception, and SM logic into one consistent framework. Component-based models tend to simplify BP into isolated attributes; process-based models capture its dynamism but overlook its strategic link to OP; whereas holistic models provide integration but often lack empirical operationalisation.

The models were analysed to identify four meta-categories of positioning logic as well:

- parts involved (e.g., brand, company, consumer);
- areas involved (e.g., internal/external);
- positioning objectives (e.g., trust, differentiation);
- expected outcomes (e.g., loyalty, alignment with stakeholder values).

To summarise, the comparative analysis underscores the need to develop a comprehensive, theoretically grounded framework that unifies these perspectives. This synthesis provides the conceptual basis for the author's TBPCM – a model designed to integrate brand logic, stakeholder interaction, and strategic performance into a single holistic system.

2.4. Impact of brand positioning on the decision-making process of the customer

The analysis of theoretical and conceptual sources highlights that BP directly influences human decision-making behaviour by shaping both cognitive evaluation and emotional response mechanisms. In today's saturated market, customers face information overload; therefore, positioning functions as a cognitive and affective filter that simplifies choices, activates memory associations, and strengthens perceived value (Keller, 1993; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007; Kapferer, 2012). Building on behavioural economics and consumer psychology (Ariely, 2010), BP can be understood as part of an integrated brand–human interaction system, where

perception, trust, and emotion guide decisions more strongly than purely functional benefits. This interaction operates through associative learning and symbolic meaning, allowing consumers to identify with brands that align with their values and aspirations.
To illustrate these dynamics, the author developed the integration of cognitive, emotional, and value-based perspectives (see Fig. 2.4).

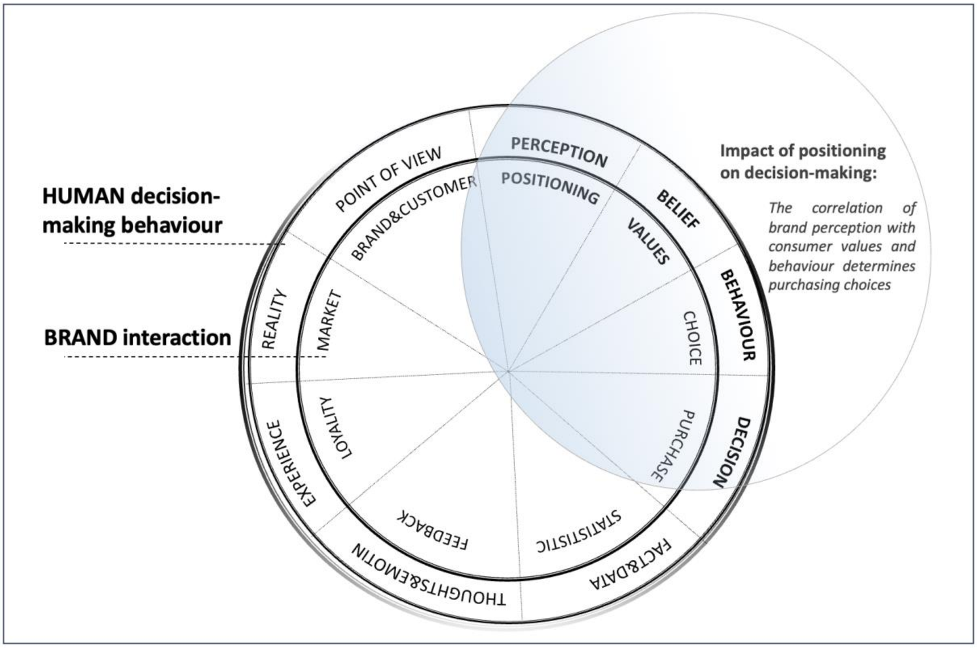

Fig. 2.4. The model of human decision-making process and its interaction with brand positioning (the author's developed framework, scientific novelty).

The author's developed model conceptualises the decision-making process as a dynamic interaction of three mechanisms – cognitive evaluation, emotional attachment, and value congruence – through which brand positioning influences customer choices. The cognitive mechanism represents how customers process information and recognise brand differentiation cues; the emotional mechanism reflects how affective responses and trust lead to attachment; and the value mechanism demonstrates how alignment between brand and individual values reinforces self-concept and social identity.
This structure illustrates that brand positioning affects decisions not only through rational evaluation but also through symbolic and emotional interaction, where consumers prefer brands that resonate with their personal values, provide emotional assurance, and mirror their lifestyle aspirations (Keller, 2001; Kapferer, 2012; Kotler et al., 2017; Iglesias & Ind, 2020).
The brand-consumer interaction extends beyond individual choice to include broader stakeholder relationships that reinforce brand loyalty and long-term engagement. Based on stakeholder theory and relationship marketing (Freeman, 1984; Urde, 2003), the author developed a conceptual model of brand loyalty and stakeholder interactions that shows how BP facilitates emotional and symbolic attachments across different stakeholder groups (see Fig. 2.5).

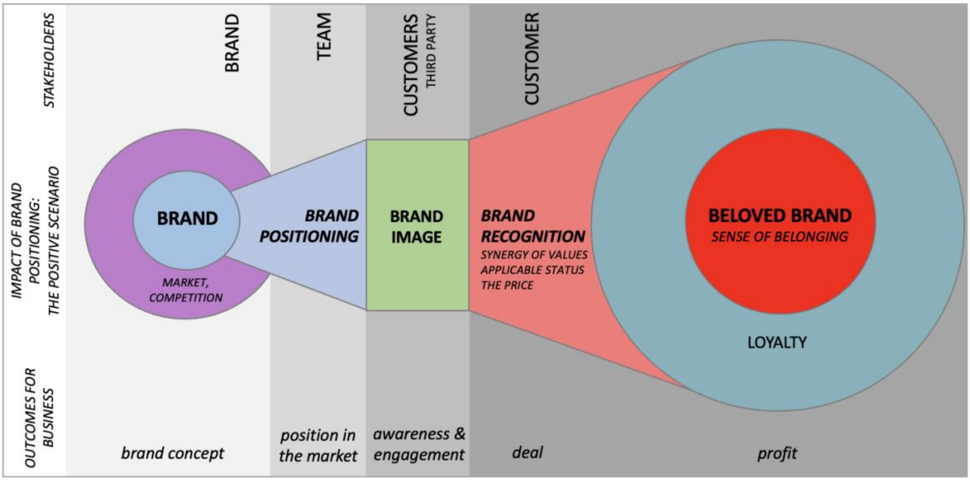

Fig. 2.5. Conceptual model: brand interactions with stakeholders: the context of brand positioning (author-created model, scientific novelty).

The model illustrates that brand loyalty is formed through continuous, multidimensional interactions that encompass emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions. The emotional dimension reflects affective customer attachment formed through brand image and identification with brand values; the cognitive dimension reflects confidence in brand reliability and perceived superiority through brand recognition; while the behavioural dimension includes repeat purchasing and recommendation, which contribute to loyalty – brand equity. Loyalty dimensions are strengthened when BP communicates authenticity, consistency, and alignment with shared values. In this process, stakeholders – including customers, employees, and partners – co-create brand meaning through continuous engagement and alignment with the brand's mission and purpose (Urde, 2003; Iglesias & Ind, 2020).

The comparative interpretation of the two models (see Figs. 2.4 and 2.5) confirms that the frameworks are interrelated and complementary, reflecting different levels of BP dynamics. While the first explains how BP influences individual decision-making through cognitive evaluation, emotional attachment, and value alignment, the second demonstrates how these exact mechanisms, at the organisational level, shape stakeholder relationships, trust, and loyalty.

The unifying element across both models is value congruence – the alignment between brand and stakeholder values – which links cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes into a coherent system of meaning. This alignment ensures consistency between internal brand identity and external perceptions (including brand image), transforming BP from a communicative function into a strategic coordination mechanism that enhances both decision-making effectiveness, persistence, and OS.

Brand positioning serves as an integrative mechanism that links individual decision-making and stakeholder interaction, combining cognitive, emotional, and value-based processes into a unified system. This relationship establishes the conceptual bridge between micro-level consumer behaviour and macro-level brand strategy.

2.5. Development of hypotheses

Based on the theoretical synthesis and analytical findings, the author developed research hypotheses that establish the structural logic for empirical testing of the new positioning model. The conceptual model (see Fig. 2.6), which includes the hypotheses, integrates BP with SM, OP, and OS to determine how BP contributes to both short-term competitiveness and long-term value creation. The hypotheses are derived from the assumption that BP operates as a strategic and integrative mechanism that links internal brand identity, stakeholder relationships, and external market performance (Aaker, 1996; Urde, 1999; Kapferer, 2012; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Empirical studies and theoretical frameworks confirm that strong and strategically aligned brand positioning enhances organisational outcomes by fostering differentiation, customer loyalty, and stakeholder trust (Keller, 2001; Urde & Koch, 2014; Iglesias & Ind, 2020).

The following hypotheses are proposed.

- **H1.** Higher organisational performance (OP) is associated with higher levels of organisational sustainability (OS) *(OP → OS)*.
- **H2a.** Strong brand positioning (BP) is associated with higher levels of organisational performance (OP) *(BP → OP)*.
- **H2b.** Strong brand positioning (BP) is associated with higher levels of organisational sustainability (OS) *(BP → OS)*.
- **H3a.** The effect of brand positioning (BP) on organisational performance (OP) depends on BP integration into strategic management (SM) *(BP → SM → OP)*.
- **H3b.** The effect of brand positioning (BP) on organisational sustainability (OS) depends on BP integration into strategic management (SM) *(BP → SM → OS)*.

The conceptual model (Fig. 2.6) illustrates these hypothesised relationships, where BP serves as the independent construct, OP and OS as dependent variables, and SM as the conditional factor. Arrows indicate the proposed effects (e.g., *BP → OP* corresponds to H2a).

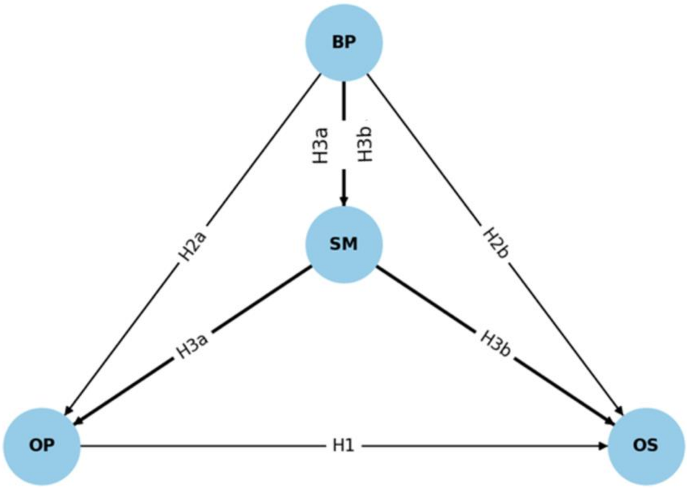

Fig. 2.6. Conceptual model: interaction between brand positioning, strategic management, organisational performance, and organisational sustainability (author's created framework).

The proposed hypotheses translate the theoretical synthesis into empirically testable relationships, forming the foundation for quantitative validation in the subsequent chapter.

3. EMPIRICAL STUDY

The empirical part of the research focuses on validating the theoretical assumptions and hypotheses developed in the analytical phase. The main objective was to verify the internal coherence, practical applicability, and explanatory capacity of the TBPCM, and to refine it into a validated HBPM.

3.1. Overview of the empirical research design

The empirical phase of the doctoral research was designed to verify and validate the conceptual framework developed in the analytical part of the study. Its main objective was to test the TBPCM in practice, evaluate its internal coherence and explanatory capacity, and refine it into the validated HBPM. The empirical research was therefore aimed at confirming how BP, when integrated into SM, contributes to OP and OS. The empirical study design used a triangulated, mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure the validity, depth, and reliability of the findings. The use of methodological triangulation enabled the author to examine the research problem from multiple perspectives and to strengthen the credibility of conclusions through the convergence of results from different data sources (Denzin, 1978; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The triangulated research process consisted of three consecutive stages, each contributing to the gradual refinement and validation of the model.

- **Exploratory phase – focus groups.** This phase aimed to test the conceptual clarity and practical applicability of the TBPCM. Two focus group sessions were organised with marketing, management, and innovation professionals. Discussions explored the role of BP as a driver of strategic integration and its relationship with OP and OS. The results of this stage provided initial empirical evidence for the mediating role of SM integration and highlighted the need to expand the model with external–internal alignment mechanisms.
- **Expert validation phase – in-depth interviews.** In this phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 senior executives and brand managers representing export-oriented companies from the Baltic region. Their insights helped assess how BP functions in real organisational contexts, how it links to decision-making processes, and how brand identity and stakeholder alignment are managed at a strategic level. The interviews confirmed that strong BP enhances competitive advantage, employee commitment, and stakeholder trust, thus reinforcing both OP and OS dimensions.
- **Quantitative validation phase – survey analysis.** The final stage involved a structured survey designed to empirically test the hypotheses developed in the analytical part of the research (H1–H3b). The survey targeted senior-level respondents responsible for strategic brand and business decisions. Statistical analysis – including Pearson's correlation coefficients, hierarchical clustering, and data normalisation – was applied to verify the interrelationships among BP, SM, OP, and OS.

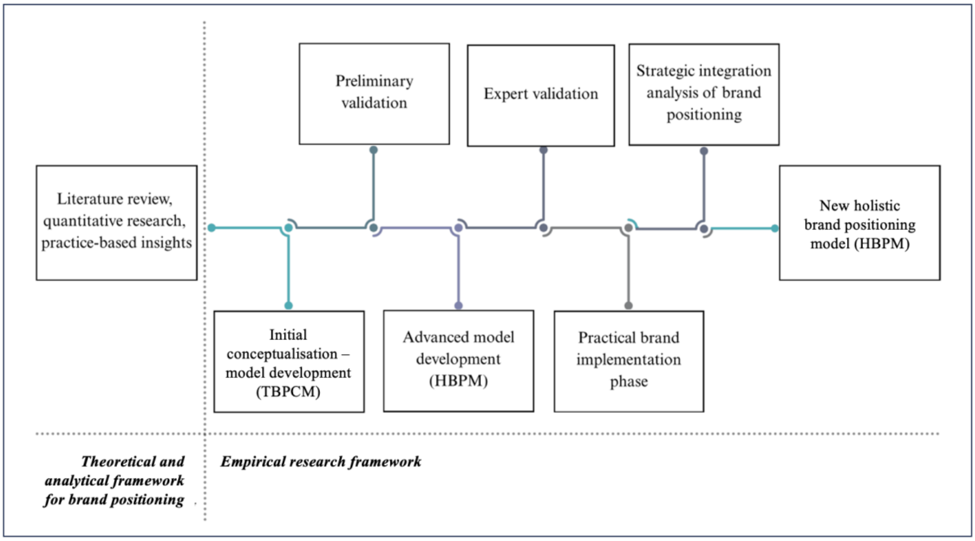

Fig. 3.1. Integrated research structure for the development and validation of the holistic brand positioning model (author's developed framework).

Figure 3.1 illustrates the structure and methodological flow of the research design, combining theoretical and analytical foundations with empirical validation and application stages.

Three-stage triangulated methodology provided a robust empirical foundation for model validation. Each phase contributed to a different level of understanding: (1) the focus groups explored the conceptual logic of BP and its strategic meaning; (2) the interviews validated managerial and stakeholder perspectives; and (3) the quantitative survey statistically confirmed the hypothesised relationships among variables.

The empirical design was implemented primarily in export-oriented, brand-active companies in Latvia. This sampling context reflects organisations with higher levels of strategic and branding maturity, ensuring the study captures the role of BP in competitive, sustainability-driven environments.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods ensured a comprehensive assessment of the TBPCM's theoretical structure. It facilitated the development of the HBPM – a validated framework linking BP to OP and OS through SM.

3.2. Development of a new theoretical brand positioning model

The qualitative validation phase aimed to examine how the theoretical constructs of the TBPCM manifest in real organisational contexts. This phase consisted of two complementary parts – focus group discussions and expert interviews – which together enabled the evaluation of the model's conceptual clarity, managerial relevance, and practical applicability.

Focus groups. The focus group discussions were organised to explore how practitioners perceive the interconnections between BP, SM, OP, and OS. The participants represented marketing, management, innovation, and export professionals from various industries, all with experience in BD and strategic decision-making.

The discussions confirmed that BP is increasingly understood as a strategic rather than a marketing concept. Participants consistently emphasised that effective positioning goes beyond communication – it shapes how the organisation defines its identity, differentiates itself, and aligns internal culture with external expectations.

Several recurring insights emerged.

- Companies with a clearly articulated brand identity and consistent positioning demonstrate stronger stakeholder engagement and more efficient decision-making.
- The integration of BP into SM ensures long-term orientation, supporting both financial results (OP) and sustainable growth (OS).
- Internal alignment between brand promise, organisational values, and leadership communication was identified as a critical success factor.
- A lack of coherence between brand identity and operational practices often weakens both market credibility and employee commitment.

Focus group participants also highlighted challenges in maintaining positioning consistency across departments and markets. These discussions provided early empirical evidence that positioning functions as a coordination system within the organisation, connecting identity, differentiation, and value-based communication with performance outcomes.

The focus group results supported refining the TBPCM by strengthening its external–internal interaction dimension. This addition recognised that positioning operates in two directions: externally (perception and differentiation) and internally (organisational meaning and strategic intent).

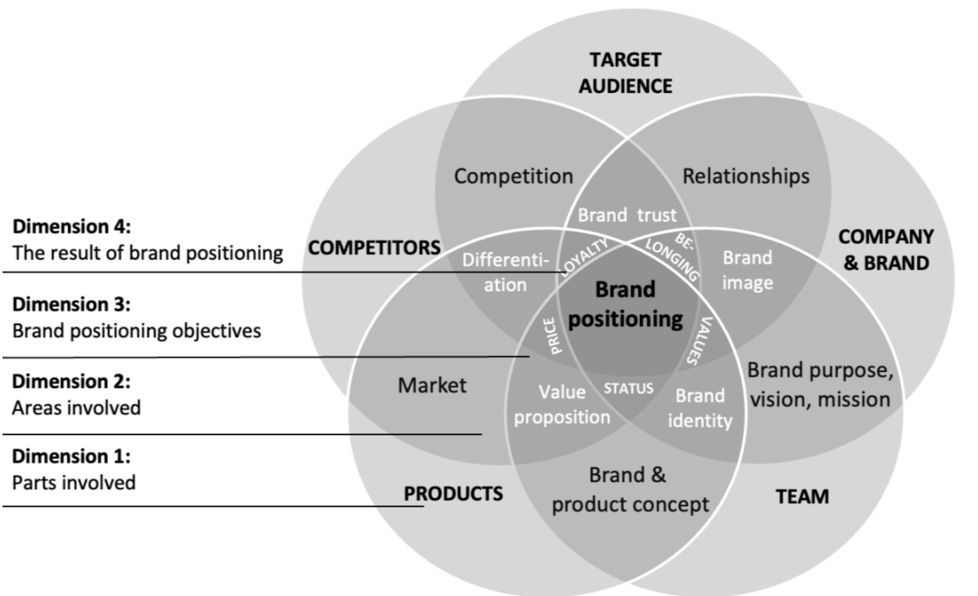

Fig. 3.2. Initial model: Theoretical brand positioning conceptual model (author's developed model).

Expert interviews. Following the exploratory stage, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior executives and brand managers from export-oriented companies in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. The participants represented sectors such as food production, design, creative industries, and technology – fields where BP plays a decisive role in competitiveness.

The interviews aimed to validate the conceptual relationships of the TBPCM and to understand how BP is embedded in the organisational strategy, decision-making process, and stakeholder interactions. The interview results confirmed that successful organisations treat BP as a strategic tool and a foundation for sustainable value creation. Executives noted that a clearly defined BP:

- strengthens **strategic focus** by connecting brand identity with operational decisions;
- improves **communication coherence** across organisational levels and markets;
- facilitates **stakeholder trust** and long-term partnerships;
- encourages **innovation** and adaptability in changing environments.

Respondents also acknowledged that positioning requires continuous management and monitoring, as its effectiveness depends on the alignment between brand values, leadership vision, and stakeholder expectations. This confirms the dynamic and iterative nature of BP, which must evolve alongside environmental and organisational changes.

Expert interviews reinforced the structure of the existing model and additionally revealed the need to introduce a dimension capturing the influence of external factors on brand positioning, as well as to refine the terminology of several elements. The mediating logic was confirmed, demonstrating that strategic management serves as the link between brand positioning and organisational performance and organisational sustainability. This validated the assumption that the impact of brand positioning on performance and sustainability is significantly strengthened when positioning principles are integrated into strategic management systems. The development of the TBPCM was grounded in a rigorous methodological framework that combined systematic literature review and qualitative content analysis. The review followed Snyder's (2019) structured approach for synthesising research in business disciplines, ensuring a transparent and replicable process.

The qualitative phase applied the inductive analytical methods proposed by Elo & Kyngäs (2008) and Mayring (2014), which guided the identification, categorisation, and grouping of conceptual themes within BP definitions. These frameworks ensured methodological consistency and validity throughout the qualitative synthesis and are widely recognised across social science research for their transparency and reliability.

The conceptual development and theoretical contribution of the TBPCM have been peer-reviewed and published in academic literature, further validating its scholarly foundation (Strausa et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical standards were rigorously followed across all research stages. Participation in focus groups, interviews, and surveys was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and data were presented only in aggregated form to protect individual and organisational identities.

The integration of practice-based insights within the research aligns with the academic rationale outlined by MacInnis (2011) and Jaakkola (2020), who emphasise that conceptual development in applied disciplines – such as branding – benefits from combining theoretical and practical knowledge.

Given its integrative conceptual structure, the TBPCM serves as a foundational framework that requires empirical validation and refinement. The following section presents the initial validation of the model through expert input and its iterative transformation into the HBPM.

3.3. Validation of the theoretical brand positioning conceptual model

The purpose of this research stage was to validate the TBPCM developed in the analytical part of the study and refined through the qualitative phase. The validation focused on confirming the theoretical structure, the relationships among the dimensions, and also the model's explanatory capacity for linking BP with SM, OP, and OS. The validation was based on a triangulated empirical design that ensured consistency between the theoretical assumptions and empirical findings. Data were obtained from export-oriented and brand-active companies representing diverse sectors, enabling a multidimensional evaluation of BP within real business environments.

The TBPCM was examined through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data sources to confirm its conceptual robustness and practical relevance. The theoretical relationships identified earlier were empirically tested to determine whether BP serves as a mediating and integrative mechanism between SM and organisational outcomes.

The validation procedure included several interconnected stages:

- **theoretical validation** – confirming the conceptual logic derived from literature and qualitative synthesis, focusing on four primary dimensions: parts involved, areas involved, BP objectives, the result of BP;
- **structural coherence testing** – assessing whether the interrelations between BP, SM, OP, and OS are consistent with the model's theoretical assumptions;
- **empirical confirmation** – analysing patterns derived from focus group and interview results, confirming that BP influences both short-term performance and long-term sustainability through strategic integration.

The results demonstrated that the TBPCM effectively represents the interdependence between brand identity, stakeholder relationships, and organisational outcomes. The analysis confirmed that BP has both direct and indirect effects on organisational success: directly through differentiation and perception, and indirectly through SM processes that translate positioning into measurable performance and sustainability.

Respondents consistently identified SM as the mediating element that amplifies the impact of BP. Organisations that systematically integrate BP principles into strategic planning achieve higher consistency, adaptability, and competitiveness in dynamic markets.

The validation process also revealed the importance of value congruence – the alignment between brand values and stakeholder expectations – as a factor that enhances authenticity,

trust, and loyalty. This alignment strengthens the long-term sustainability of both brand and organisation.
The empirical evidence thus confirmed the internal logic of the TBPCM and provided the basis for its transition into a more comprehensive and testable structure – the HBPM, which added an extra dimension and adjusted elements. The TBPCM validation established the foundation for quantitative analysis, including statistical correlation and clustering techniques, presented in the following section.
The validation of the TBPCM confirmed that:

- BP functions as an integrative mechanism connecting brand identity, SM, and OP;
- SM mediates the relationship between BP and both OP and OS;
- value alignment and stakeholder trust are essential conditions for sustainable brand success.

The validated TBPCM provided the structural and theoretical basis for the next phase of the research – quantitative verification and correlation analysis – through which the HBPM would be empirically confirmed and refined.

3.4. Practical refinement of the model: In-depth interviews and business case implementation

The final stage of the empirical research focused on the practical refinement of the HBPM through verification through in-depth expert interviews and practical validation. The purpose was to verify how the model operates in managerial decision-making and strategic BD, and to confirm its conceptual, methodological, and practical robustness. The section demonstrates the HBPM's capacity to integrate BP into SM processes, enhancing both OP and OS.
In-depth interviews were conducted with senior executives and managers representing export-oriented companies across different industries in the Baltic region. The aim was to refine the conceptual dimensions of the HBPM and verify their interconnections from a managerial and strategic perspective. Respondents acknowledged that BP acts as a strategic coordination system, aligning internal brand identity with external perception and stakeholder expectations. Companies with a clear BP strategy were reported to achieve more substantial competitiveness, stakeholder trust, and long-term resilience. Three essential dimensions emerged as critical to effective model implementation: internal consistency among brand identity, culture, and management practices; strategic alignment across departments and markets; and value congruence between the brand and stakeholders, which fosters loyalty and authenticity.
The interviews confirmed the mediating role of SM in amplifying the effect of BP on both OP and OS. The interview data were structured to ensure consistent linkage between theoretical constructs and managerial insights.

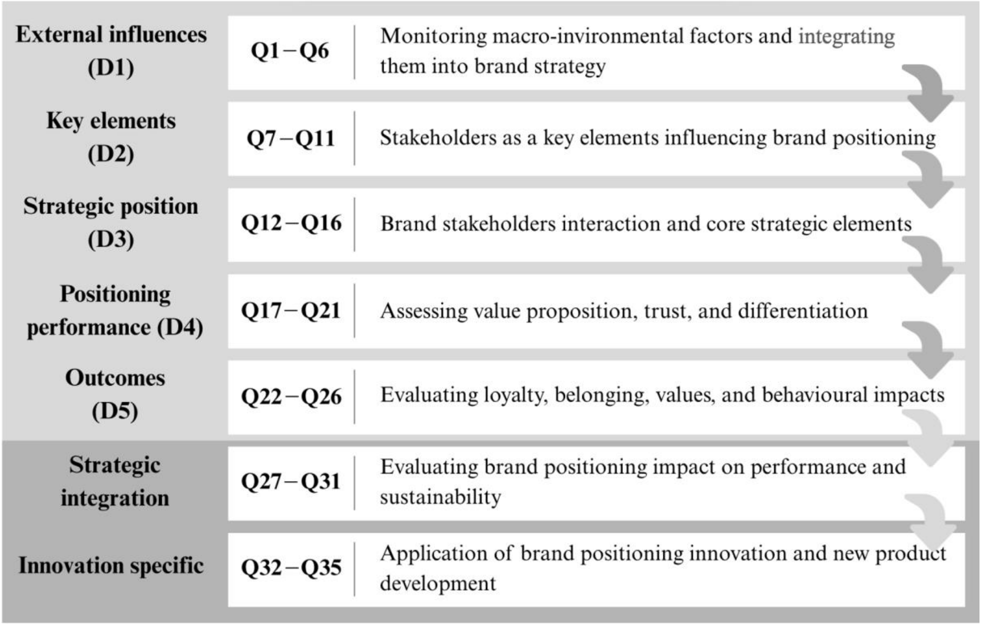

Fig. 3.3. Interview mapping framework aligned with holistic brand positioning model dimensions and strategic topics (author's developed model).

This mapping framework connected 35 interview questions (Q1–Q35) with the seven HBPM dimensions: external influences (D1), key elements (D2), strategic position (D3), positioning performance (D4), outcomes (D5), strategic integration, and innovation-specific aspects. It provided a comprehensive structure to trace how each conceptual element translated into practical managerial insight.

To validate the empirical relationships identified in the interviews, quantitative testing was performed using correlation analysis.

Heatmap analysis of BP scores across dimensions. The study of normalised average ratings across the five dimensions of the developed BP model provides insight into the relative maturity and emphasis placed on each area by participating organisations. The highest score was attributed to external influences (D1) (average score: 0.79), which includes social and cultural, economic, legal, technological, environmental, and political factors. This high score suggests that organisations are not only aware of macro-environmental dynamics but also actively consider these factors in shaping their BP. The external orientation appears well-developed, reflecting responsiveness to market trends and regulatory environments.

Key elements (D2), which received an average score of 0.63, encompass the foundational components necessary to operationalize BP, including target audience, company, and brand foundation, team, products, and competitors. While moderately rated, this dimension reveals that many organisations may not yet fully integrate or align these core building blocks to support a consistent and coherent positioning strategy. The lowest score was found in the strategic position (D3) (average score: 0.52). This dimension comprises elements such as market position, competition, recognition, relationship, brand identity, vision, mission, as well as the brand purpose and product concept. The relatively low rating suggests that organisations often lack clarity or consistency in defining their strategic positioning and struggle to differentiate themselves in the market through an articulated brand essence.

Positioning performance (D4) (average score: 0.57) reflects the perceived effectiveness of BP execution, based on differentiation, brand trust, brand image, brand equity, and value proposition. The results indicate that while some elements are acknowledged, the overall perception of how well BP is translated into measurable brand value remains limited.

Finally, the outcomes (D5) dimension (average score: 0.62) includes outcome-related elements, including loyalty, belonging, values, status, and price perception. These results suggest that although there is a reasonable foundation of customer-based brand value, the emotional connection and long-term customer engagement aspects could be further strengthened.

In summary, the findings highlight a maturity gap between external responsiveness (D1) and internal strategic consolidation (D2 and D3), with further opportunities to enhance performance and customer outcomes (D4 and D5). The results suggest that while organisations are aware of and responsive to external conditions, they may benefit from a more integrated internal brand strategy to ensure clear differentiation and value realisation in the eyes of both stakeholders and customers. The analysis reveals that the strongest positive correlation is observed between key elements (D2) and positioning performance (D4), indicating that companies with well-developed and consciously structured brand fundamentals tend to demonstrate stronger brand performance. This includes higher evaluations in differentiation, brand trust, brand image, brand equity, and value proposition.

Additionally, strategic position (D3) also shows a notable correlation with positioning performance (D4), supporting the theoretical model, which suggests that a strategically reinforced BP focus is positively reflected in brand performance outcomes.

In contrast, external influences (D1) demonstrate weak correlations with the remaining dimensions, particularly with internal brand structure and performance-related areas. This finding aligns with previous observations; while companies perceive external factors as necessary, these are not directly integrated or reflected in internal brand structures or outcome dimensions.

Heatmap analysis of BP scores across elements. A Pearson correlation matrix was computed for the normalised dataset to explore inter-element relationships within the BP model. The resulting correlation heatmap (Fig. 3.4) visualises the strength and direction of associations between the 25 elements (D1.1–D5.5), providing insight into the structural consistency and interdependence across internal, external, and outcome-oriented dimensions. Darker shades, closer to 1.0, represent higher evaluations, while lighter shades, closer to 0.0, reflect lower evaluations.

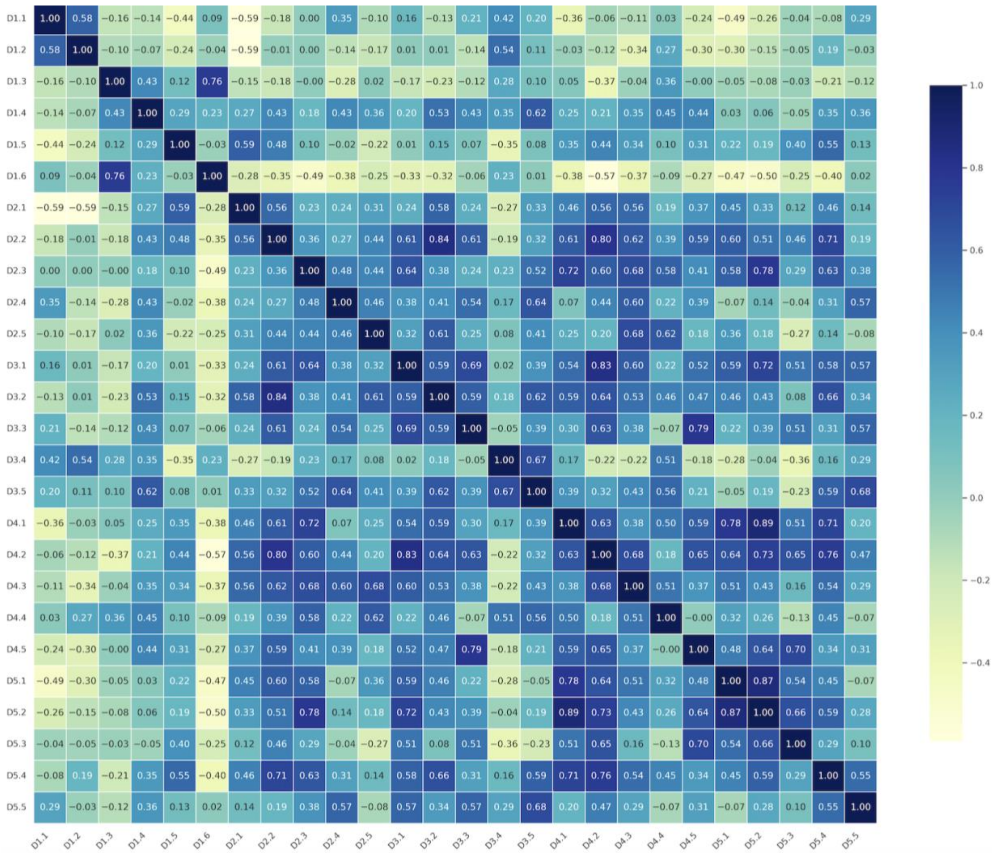

Fig. 3.4. Correlation heatmap across elements (author's developed visualisation based on normalised interview data).

Each element represents a specific aspect of the model – such as brand perception, differentiation, value alignment, SM integration, performance outcomes, and sustainability indicators – allowing for a comprehensive examination of how these variables interact across organisations. The analysis demonstrates a high degree of internal consistency among the main HBPM elements. The strongest positive correlations were observed between SM integration and OP, confirming that managerial alignment amplifies the impact of BP activities.

Similarly, the strong correlations between value alignment and both brand differentiation and sustainability outcomes suggest that brands grounded in consistent and meaningful values are more likely to achieve competitive advantage while ensuring long-term organisational resilience.

Moderate correlations between BP and OP indicate that positioning-based advantages require reinforcement through SM processes to translate into measurable performance results. Meanwhile, weaker relationships between external influence factors and internal identity dimensions imply that contextual pressures affect positioning indirectly through managerial and cultural channels rather than directly shaping organisational results.

The heatmap reveals that the HBPM functions as an integrated system, where inter-element relationships reflect a coherent logic: strong internal management processes and stakeholder-aligned values jointly enhance both performance and sustainability. This reinforces the theoretical premise that BP operates as a multidimensional strategic approach, uniting internal and external dynamics within a single holistic structure.

The organisational heatmap highlights significant cross-company variability in positioning maturity.

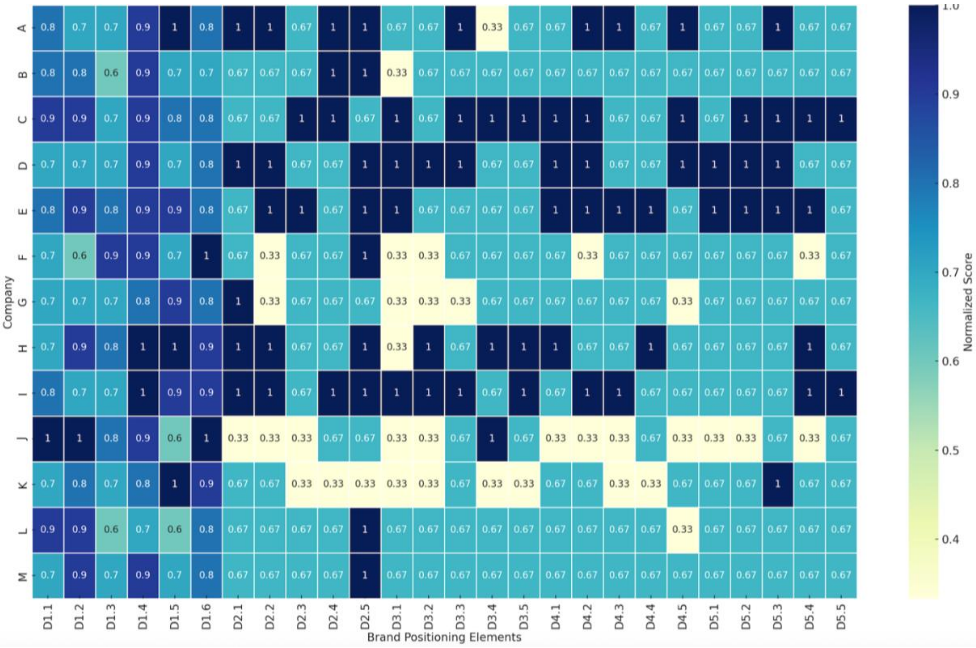

Fig. 3.5. Correlation heatmap across organisations (author's developed visualisation based on normalised interview data).

The results show that companies with a strong alignment between internal identity and SM exhibit higher correlation densities across HBPM dimensions, as illustrated in Fig. 3.5. This indicates that strategic coherence significantly strengthens the interconnections between model elements and contributes to more consistent organisational outcomes. To visualise these interrelations at an aggregate level, radar chart profiles were created to summarise how organisations perform across the HBPM's dimensions.

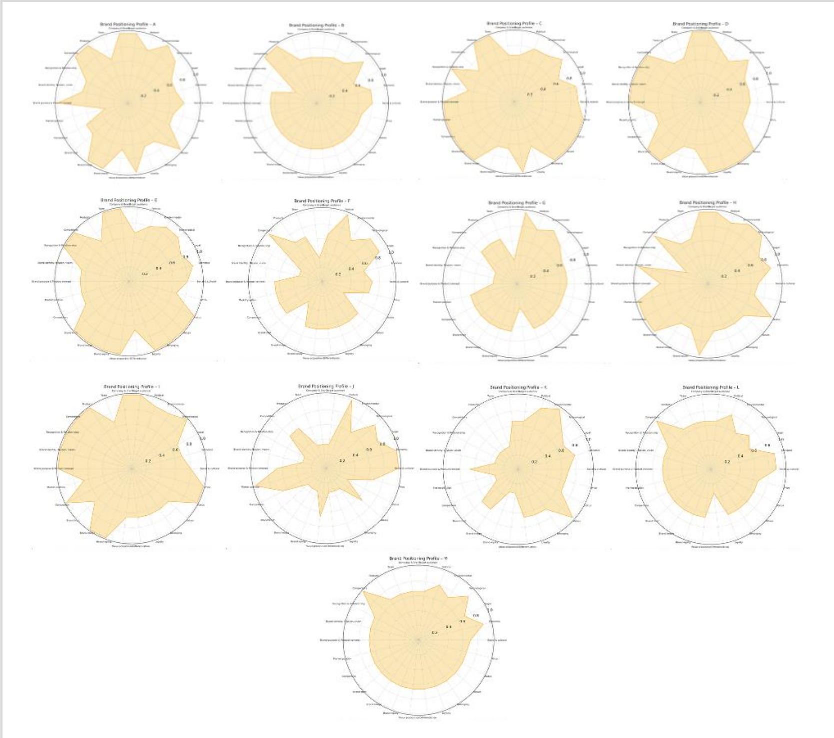

Fig. 3.6. Overview of radar chart profiles across organisations (author's developed visualisation).

The radar chart profiles (see Fig. 3.6) reveal three characteristic strategic patterns:

- **holistically positioned organisations** – balanced profiles across all HBPM dimensions, reflecting coherent SM and stakeholder alignment;
- **reactive positioning organisations** – uneven profiles with weaker internal–external integration;
- **innovation-driven organisations** – dynamic and adaptive profiles, maintaining equilibrium between identity, performance, and sustainability.

The radar chart analysis complements the heatmap findings, confirming that organisations with strong BP–SM alignment achieve the most balanced and sustainable performance results. These visual results empirically reinforce the HBPM's logic: BP maturity is a function of strategic coherence, stakeholder value alignment, and adaptability across organisational contexts.

Practical application of the HBPM model for new BD and strategic positioning. The HBPM was practically validated through its application in developing the new export-oriented brand, *Joy for Tails*, at Tērvete Food Ltd. The entire brand and product development process followed the HBPM structure, ensuring alignment with external context, internal coherence, strategic positioning, performance, and outcome dimensions.

The initiative originated from the company's strategic goal to diversify and was supported by an EU-funded innovation project launched in 2023. Cross-disciplinary collaboration and extensive prototyping (78 prototypes) ensured scientific and consumer validation of the product. A quantitative survey of over 470 dog owners complemented qualitative insights. To demonstrate how the HBPM operates as a comprehensive strategic system in practice, the *Joy for Tails* case was mapped across all five model dimensions. This structured mapping highlights how external context, internal brand foundations, strategic choices, performance drivers, and outcome-related dynamics interact to shape a coherent and export-ready brand. The practical application of the HBPM within this project can be understood through the following dimension-by-dimension interpretation.

- **External influences (D1):** The brand concept incorporated key socio-cultural, economic, technological, environmental, legal, and political factors relevant to the pet sector.
- **Key elements (D2):** Target audience insight, company–brand alignment, multidisciplinary team involvement, and competitor analysis shaped a strong internal foundation.
- **Strategic position (D3):** The brand was positioned as an innovative, health-oriented indulgence supported by clear identity, mission, purpose, and early-stage community engagement.
- **Positioning performance (D4):** Differentiation, trust, image, and equity were strengthened through science-based formulation, transparent communication, and design coherence.
- **Outcomes (D5):** Early efforts focused on building loyalty, belonging, shared values, aspirational cues, and premium price perception.

A complementary conceptual model (see Fig. 3.7) was developed to illustrate how brand image emerges from coordinated interactions between the brand, the internal team, and external third parties. This touchpoint-based perspective reinforced consistent brand perception in both B2C and B2B contexts.

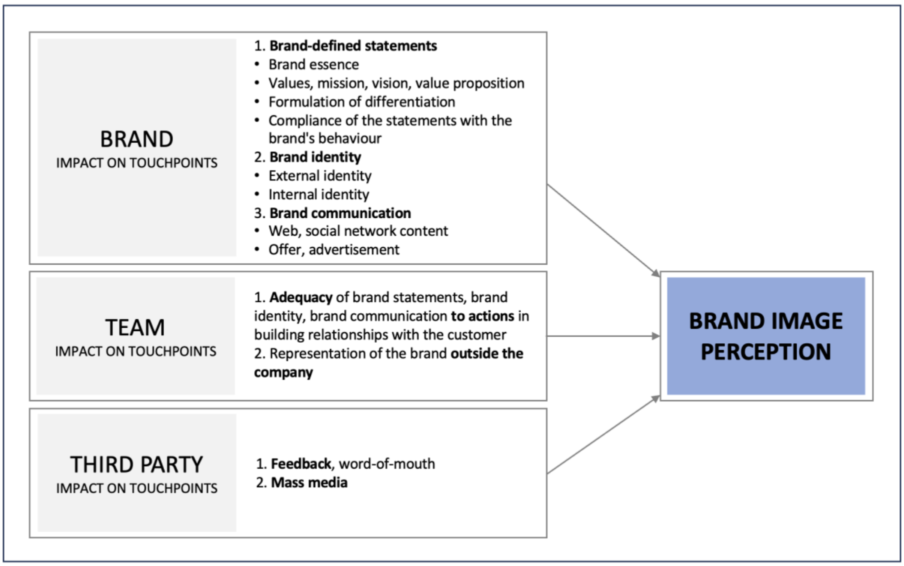

Fig. 3.7. The brand, customer, and third-party touchpoints in the context of brand image development (author’s developed framework, novelty).

The HBPM proved effective for guiding innovation, strategic positioning, and export readiness. The company has expanded into international markets, initiated further product development, and strengthened its strategic communication. The process was supported by three scientific publications covering formulation, strategic integration, and pet food trends.
Overall, the *Joy for Tails* case confirms the HBPM's practical applicability and its value as a multidimensional framework for sustainable brand creation and growth.

3.5. Development of a final holistic brand positioning model

The final stage of the empirical research presents the development of the new, validated model, HBPM, integrating the theoretical, analytical, and empirical findings from all previous phases. The purpose of this chapter was to consolidate the validated relationships identified through expert interviews, correlation analysis, and cross-company comparisons into a single, conceptually and empirically coherent framework.
The HBPM reflects the transformation of the previously developed TBPCM into a **comprehensive, practice-oriented model that unites the internal, external, and mediating dimensions of BP**.
The model was finalised by synthesising the results of the triangulated empirical study, combining qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups with quantitative correlational evidence, adding an additional dimension to the model and refining its elements. The development procedure emphasised the interconnection between BP, SM, OP, and OS. During the refinement process, several structural adjustments were made to transform the TBPCM into the validated HBPM. Element names were clarified and standardised to ensure conceptual precision; the placement of certain elements was rearranged to reflect their interdependencies better; and an additional dimension – external influences – was incorporated to capture broader environmental factors shaping brand positioning. These modifications strengthened the model's internal logic and enhanced its applicability across organisational contexts.
The HBPM was thus designed as a dynamic, multidimensional framework that captures how BP operates as a strategic integrator, linking identity, management, and stakeholder value.

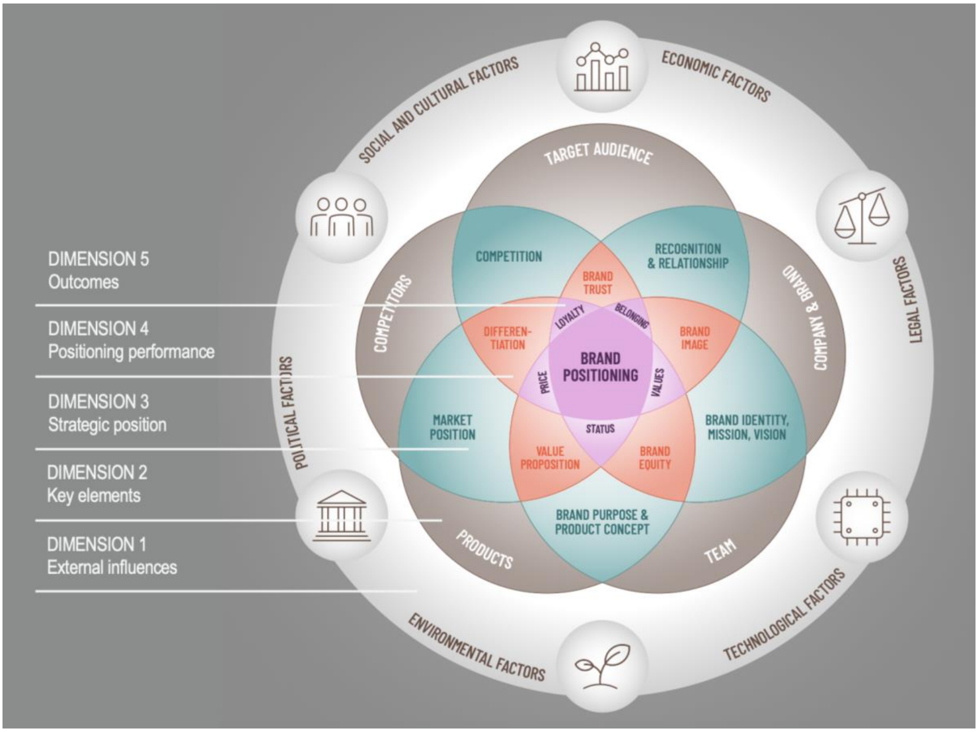

Fig. 3.8. Validated holistic brand positioning model (author's developed and validated framework, scientific novelty).

The HBPM is designed as a systemic framework – each of the five dimensions and their embedded elements interact dynamically rather than in isolation. Figure 3.8 and Table 3.1 represent five dimensions and 25 elements of the validated HBPM.

Table 3.1

Structure and theoretical justification of the holistic brand positioning model (created by the author)

Dimension	Included elements	Theoretical justification
D1: External influences	Social and cultural factors; economic factors; legal factors; technological factors; environmental factors; political factors.	Marsden, 2002; Kotler, 2016; Porter, 1996; O'Rourke & Williamson, 2000; Porter, 1980; Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010; Brenner, 2014; Ritter & Pedersen, 2020; WCED, 1987; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Purvis et al., 2019.
D2: Key elements	Target audience; company & brand; team; products; competitors.	Keller, 2003; Aaker, 1996; Marsden, 2002; Urde, 1999; Kapferer, 2008; Miles & Mangold, 2005; Fayvichenko, 2016; Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Ries & Trout, 1981; Aaker, 1996.

Table 3.1 (continued)

D3 Strategic position	Market position; competition; recognition & relationship; brand identity, vision, mission; brand purpose & product concept.	Porter, 1996; Keller, 2003; Porter, 1980; Aaker, 1996; Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010; Keller, 1993; Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008; Kotler, 2016; Keller et al., 2002.
D4 Positioning performance	Differentiation; brand trust; brand image; brand equity; value proposition.	Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008; Ries & Trout, 1981; Trout, 2000; Kotler, 2016; Chaudhuri, 2002; Nagle et al., 2011; Marsden, 2002.
D5 Outcomes	Loyalty; belonging; values; status; price.	Keller, 2001; Wheeler, 2009; Urde, 1999; Marsden, 2002; Schwartz, 1990; Allen, 2002; Keller, 2003; Almquist et al., 2016; Riezebos, 2003; Nagle et al., 2011.

The relationships between these dimensions and elements form a system in which continuous interaction ensures dynamic positioning and adaptability in a changing environment. The HBPM operates as a multidimensional framework that integrates internal and external strategic factors, allowing organisations to build coherent, competitive, and sustainable BP**. Its practical applicability includes** the following factors.

1. **Strategic BD** supports defining and refining BP in line with organisational values, capabilities, and long-term goals.
2. **Internationalisation g**uides export-oriented firms in adapting brands to foreign markets with cultural and strategic coherence.
3. **Brand diagnostics** serves as an auditing tool for identifying gaps and improvement areas across positioning dimensions.
4. **Innovation alignment** ensures new product development is consistent with brand identity, stakeholder expectations, and strategic direction.
5. **SM integration** facilitates embedding BP into wider strategy processes, strengthening relevance, alignment, and competitiveness.
6. **Academic use** provides a validated, theory-based structure for teaching, research, and conceptual model development.

Reviewing the **unique contributions of the HBPM**, the model offers an integrated, empirically validated approach that unites internal and external strategic factors, strengthens BP's strategic role, and applies a systemic perspective to brand management. It provides practical diagnostic functionality, incorporates a sustainability dimension, and remains adaptable across contexts, thereby significantly advancing both the theoretical and practical foundations of brand management. Its key contributions are:

1) integrative structure of internal and external dimensions;

2) strategic orientation of BP;
3) systemic thinking and relational logic;
4) empirically validated multidimensional framework;
5) practical usability and diagnostic functionality;
6) sustainability perspective and long-term value alignment;
7) adaptability across contexts;
8) theoretical depth and research suitability.

From a theoretical perspective, the HBPM offers a new understanding of BP as a multidimensional, dynamic process embedded in SM. From a practical perspective, the model provides organisations with a tool to evaluate and optimise their brand strategies, align internal and external goals, and ensure long-term competitiveness.

3.6. Hypothesis validation: Integrating brand positioning into strategy

This section empirically validates the hypotheses on the relationships between BP, SM, OP, and OS through a triangulated methodology combining focus groups ($N = 16$), expert interviews ($N = 13$), and an executive survey ($N = 14$). The methodological consistency across all three data sources ensured robust empirical grounding.

Qualitative findings from focus groups and interviews demonstrated a unanimous view that BP is a fundamental component of strategy, not a marketing function. Participants emphasised that a clear and differentiated BP strengthens competitive advantage, decision-making, stakeholder trust, and long-term resilience. Both methods confirmed that BP achieves its strongest effects when embedded in SM processes.

Survey results further validated these insights. Respondents rated the impact of BP on OP and OS as “moderately strong” to “strong,” with substantially higher ratings when BP was integrated into SM. To illustrate this shift in perceived impact, the comparative results are presented in Fig. 3.9.

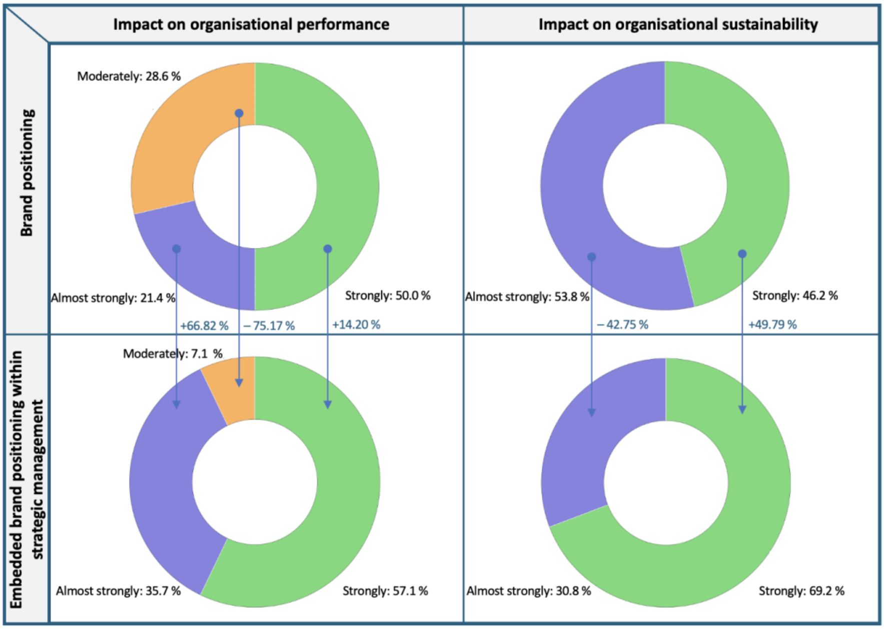

Fig. 3.9. A comparison of the impact of brand positioning on outcomes with brand positioning embedded in strategic management (author's developed visualisation).

To examine the interrelationships among the variables, Fig. 3.10 presents the Pearson correlation heatmap of the survey questions, highlighting the strength and direction of associations between BP, SM, OP, and OS.

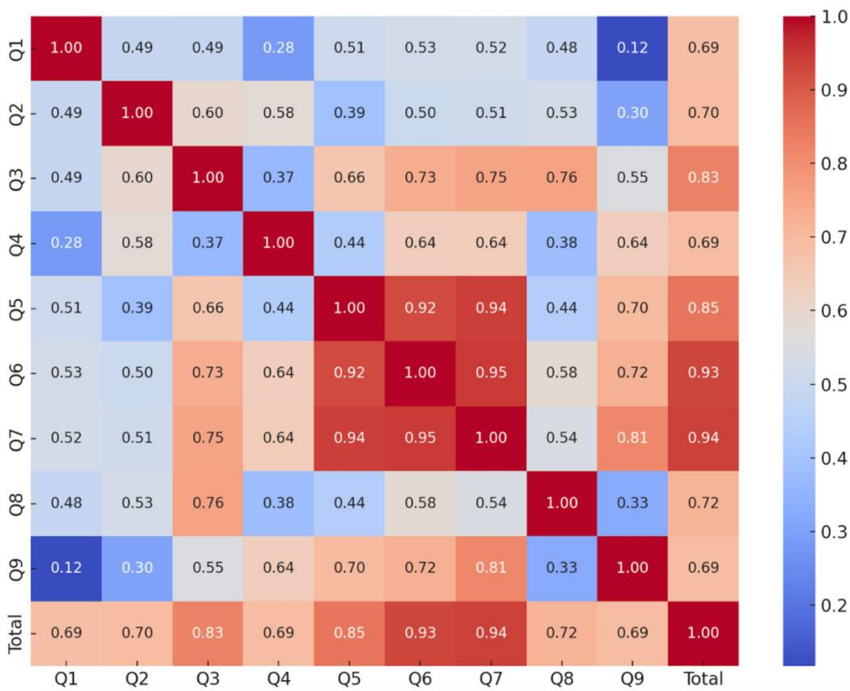

Fig. 3.10. Pearson correlation heatmap of survey questions (author's developed visualisation).

Correlation analysis confirmed all hypotheses.

- **H1:** OP and OS are strongly interrelated (r = 0.95).
- **H2a/b:** Strong BP is associated with higher OP and OS (r = 0.58–0.75).
- **H3a/b:** SM substantially amplifies the effect of BP on both OP and OS (r = 0.92–0.94).

Executives also highlighted the importance of leadership involvement, noting that BP has the highest impact when guided directly by senior management. Control variable analysis indicated contextual differences (e.g., firm size), but these did not alter the overall relationship patterns.

Qualitative coding supported the survey evidence, showing that BP functions as a strategic resource, strengthens differentiation, enhances customer relationships, and contributes to sustainability through stakeholder trust and adaptive capacity. Thematic analysis identified risks such as treating BP as a marketing-only activity, which limits its strategic potential. The final validated model, supported by structural equation modelling, demonstrates that BP influences OP and OS directly and indirectly, with SM acting as the central mediating mechanism. The model confirms that BP should be treated as a systemic, multi-dimensional strategic construct rather than a communication practice (see Fig. 3.11).

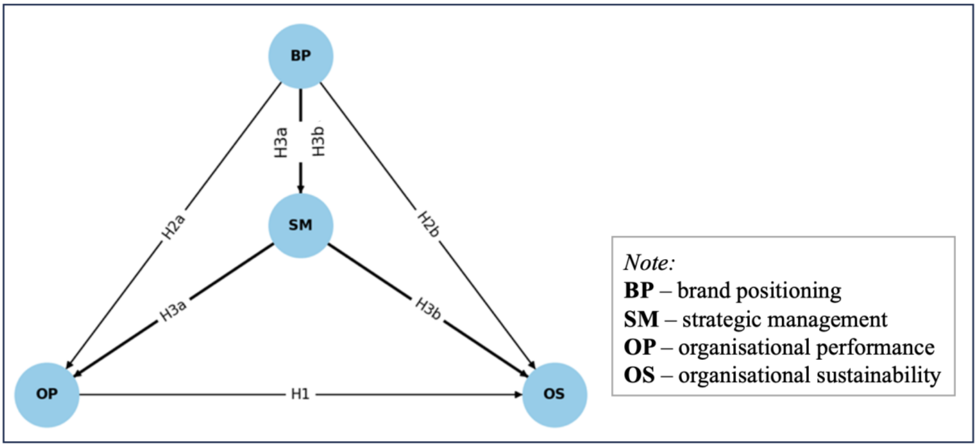

Fig. 3.11. Validated model: interaction between brand positioning, strategic management, organisational performance, and organisational sustainability (author's developed model, scientific novelty).

The empirical results affirm all hypotheses and reinforce the HBPM's conceptual logic, demonstrating that strategically integrated BP significantly enhances OP, OS, and long-term competitive advantage. The empirical analysis confirmed the hypothesised relationships between BP, SM, OP, and OS. These findings provide strong support for the HBPM, developed in this Doctoral Thesis as a comprehensive framework that links positioning with performance, sustainability, and strategic integration. The empirical validation demonstrates the model's relevance to contemporary strategic marketing, where positioning must be treated as a systemic and multidimensional construct.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter summarises the key theoretical, empirical, and practical insights of the Doctoral Thesis and provides recommendations for relevant stakeholder groups. The research examined BP as a strategic approach to sustainable business development, resulting in the creation and empirical validation of the HBPM. Guided by the objectives set in the introduction, the study progressed from theoretical synthesis and model construction to empirical validation and practical application.

The conclusions integrate the theoretical contributions and empirical evidence, highlighting the scientific novelty of the HBPM, its ability to address fragmentation in BP theory, and its practical value for guiding organisations toward sustainable growth. Each conclusion is accompanied by targeted recommendations to ensure that the results are both conceptually robust and applicable across academic, managerial, entrepreneurial, and policymaker contexts.

Conclusions. The conclusions of this Doctoral Thesis are derived from the synthesis of theoretical analysis, empirical validation, and practical application. They reflect the extent to which the research objectives were achieved and demonstrate how the findings contribute to both academic knowledge and managerial practice.

- **The research aim** – to investigate BP as a strategic approach to sustainable business development by developing and empirically validating a holistic approach that links BP with OP, SM, and sustainability – **has been achieved**. This has been realised through the creation of the validated HBPM, which provides a scientifically grounded framework that integrates positioning into SM, empirically confirms its influence on performance and sustainability, and establishes it as a strategic governance mechanism for long-term business development.
- **Answering the research question:** *How, in the context of sustainable business development, does BP contribute to OP and OS, and how does this impact depend on its integration into SM?* **The Doctoral Thesis confirms** that BP influences both OP and OS, and that its effect is significantly amplified when integrated into SM, as demonstrated by the empirically confirmed interaction model.
- **The research confirms all proposed hypotheses (H1–H3b).** The empirical findings demonstrate that OP and OS are interrelated, that BP positively affects both outcomes, and that these effects are significantly strengthened when BP is integrated into SM.

The result of the Doctoral Thesis lies in its unique combination of theoretical synthesis, empirical validation (triangulated research across focus groups, interviews, and surveys), and practical application (the *Joy for Tails* case). This contribution addresses long-standing fragmentation in positioning research and establishes a comprehensive, empirically tested framework that connects positioning with OP and OS. This Doctoral Thesis provides a novel contribution to the marketing and management field by investigating BP as a strategic approach to sustainable business development.

To ensure clarity and systematic presentation, the conclusions are structured in accordance with the research objectives outlined in the introduction. This structure highlights the theoretical advancements, empirical confirmations, and practical implications of the study, while also underlining the novelty and unique contribution of the author's work.

Objective 1: To analyse the theoretical foundations and conceptual development of BP in the context of sustainable business development. The literature analysis showed that BP theory remains fragmented, with existing approaches focusing on isolated aspects – communication, consumer perception, or brand identity – rather than offering an integrated framework that links internal brand logic, external influences, strategic positioning, and outcomes. The key contribution of this stage is a historical-conceptual synthesis that traces the evolution of BP through a structured qualitative content analysis of 31 definitions and 56 sources, yielding a consolidated overview of how BP has been defined and applied in the academic literature.

Objective 2: To identify and synthesise key positioning elements, models, and strategic approaches through qualitative content analysis. The qualitative content analysis of 31 definitions and 56 theoretical sources identified 25 BP elements grouped into five dimensions and classified positioning models into three types: holistic, process-based, and component-based. This synthesis clarified the theoretical landscape and highlighted the core building blocks underpinning effective BP. The findings show that effective positioning requires aligning identity, mission, and vision with value propositions, customer relevance, and stakeholder trust. Internal coherence forms the basis for differentiation and strategic clarity, while external technological, socio-cultural, political, and market influences serve as essential contextual drivers.

Objective 3: To develop a TBPCM based on the extracted positioning logic and structural elements. The development of the TBPCM consolidated fragmented theoretical insights into a single coherent framework. It provided a structured logic of how positioning elements interrelate, which later served as the foundation for the HBPM. The novelty lies in the creation of a theory-driven conceptual model for validation (TBPCM) that integrates strategic, symbolic, and stakeholder-oriented elements within a coherent framework.

Objective 4: To investigate the interaction between BP, customer decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and brand loyalty formation. The empirical investigation demonstrated strong relationships between internal brand architecture and positioning outcomes. Identity, mission, and vision were found to directly influence brand trust, differentiation, and equity. Similarly, the link between target audience clarity and loyalty was confirmed. The research also highlighted the crucial role of management involvement: when senior executives actively engage in defining and steering BP, outcomes are more authentic, consistent, and strategically aligned. The innovative contribution of this stage is the conceptual model of brand-customer interaction and loyalty formation.

Objective 5: To construct hypotheses linking BP with OP and OS, including the mediating role of SM. The study confirmed the proposed hypotheses, demonstrating that BP has a positive influence on both OP and OS, and that these effects are significantly strengthened when integrated into SM. This was empirically demonstrated by the validated model of interaction between BP, SM, OP, and OS, extending existing theories of strategic brand management to a system-level perspective.

Objective 6: To validate the proposed model through focus groups and expert interviews and refine it into the new holistic model. The empirical validation confirmed the internal coherence and external applicability of the HBPM, demonstrating its value as both a conceptual framework and a managerial tool. Beyond establishing the overall structure, the HBPM proved capable of mapping interactions between elements and dimensions, showing how specific strengths or weaknesses in one area affect outcomes in others. The novelty lies in the triangulated validation design, combining focus groups and expert interviews to refine the HBPM into a robust diagnostic tool. The HBPM provides a validated, multidimensional framework that can be applied across academic, business, and policy contexts. It enables the systematic diagnosis of positioning maturity, facilitates alignment with SM, and serves as a practical tool for achieving long-term sustainable growth. Although validated primarily in the Latvian and Baltic context, the HBPM demonstrated international applicability through export-oriented case analysis, positioning it as a versatile and adaptable tool for both domestic and global brand management.

Objective 7: To demonstrate the model's applicability through case-based testing and assess its relevance for strategic decision-making in sustainable brand management. The application of the HBPM in the development of the *Joy for Tails* brand demonstrated its practical value. It showed that the model can guide new brand creation, support export readiness, and align organisational capabilities with market demands. The HBPM is therefore not only theoretically and empirically validated but also practically applicable across industries, particularly for companies aiming to internationalise their operations.

This Doctoral Thesis contributes a validated holistic model for integrating BP into strategic management. The methodological uniqueness of this research lies in its triangulated, multi-layered design, which unifies theoretical synthesis, qualitative insight, and quantitative validation into a single coherent model-building process, transforming fragmented positioning theory into a robust strategic framework applicable across industries and contexts.

Recommendations. The findings of this Doctoral Thesis demonstrate that BP must be approached holistically and embedded in SM as a multidimensional construct integrating internal and external factors. Sustainable brand strategy requires aligning organisational identity, mission, and culture with stakeholder expectations and market dynamics. The empirical validation of the HBPM confirms its role as a strategic approach whose impact increases when integrated into organisational strategy.

Accordingly, the recommendations translate the theoretical and empirical results into practical guidance for academic researchers, business leaders, entrepreneurs, consultants, and policymakers, ensuring that the HBPM's implications are actionable across diverse contexts.

For academic researchers and higher education institutions

- Integrate the holistic approach to BP into research and curricula, recognising BP not as a narrow marketing instrument but as a strategic approach for sustainable business development.
- Apply the HBPM to comparative studies, longitudinal research, and teaching, particularly in strategic marketing, brand management, and sustainability.
- Use the classification of positioning models (holistic, process-based, component-based) developed in this Doctoral Thesis as a conceptual foundation to structure future research and reduce fragmentation in the field.

For business leaders, strategists, and consultants

- Embed BP as a core element of SM, aligning positioning decisions with long-term competitiveness objectives, resource allocation, and sustainable business growth.
- Apply the HBPM as a diagnostic tool to assess current positioning maturity, identify misalignments between internal and external brand dimensions, and prioritise strategic interventions.
- Foster top management involvement in positioning decisions, as leadership engagement is critical for authenticity, coherence, and resilience.
- Incorporate both internal and external dimensions into positioning decisions, systematically considering technological change, socio-cultural dynamics, political factors, and market competition.

For entrepreneurs and export-oriented firms

- Adopt the HBPM as a practical framework for new brand creation, internationalisation, and market entry strategies.
- Ensure that brand identity, stakeholder expectations, and international market requirements are aligned to enhance export readiness and competitiveness.
- Leverage BP as a long-term strategic asset that supports growth, differentiation, and stakeholder trust, particularly in new or competitive markets.

For policymakers and industry associations

- Recognise BP as a strategic construct in competitiveness and sustainability frameworks, moving beyond the traditional view of branding as purely promotional, and supporting its integration into training and business development programmes.
- Utilise the HBPM as a reference framework in designing sectoral or regional development strategies, ensuring that positioning logic contributes to competitiveness and innovation capacity.

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