



A proposed brand architecture model for UK fashion brands

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Abstract

Corporate brand identity is becoming a strategic issue in the UK fashion industry, as it is complex and constantly under pressure to differentiate. Fashion brands are expanding through a range of channels and rapidly changing takeovers, and it is unclear whether internal stakeholders are aware of the possible consequences of these approaches. In particular, there appears to be no literature on how retail and wholesale brands develop and manage their corporate brand identities during these changes and whether they draw on any meaningful connections with their customers. To understand how brand architecture might support the development of brand strategies in the UK fashion industry, perceptions of corporate brand identities were explored in retail and wholesale brands. Fifteen qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with elite informants. The findings reveal that retail brand identities can become disconnected from their sub-brands; therefore, brand identity may be invisible to consumers, while wholesale brands maintain a strong visible brand identity dependent on the brand's values, historical legacy, innovation and positioning. A brand architecture model is developed that more accurately reflects the complex dimensions of UK fashion brands, particularly when channels expand and takeovers take place. These perspectives have not been reported in the literature.

Keywords Corporate brand identity · Brand architecture · UK fashion industry · Channels · Elite interviews

Introduction

Today's current climate has intensified change in the UK fashion retail industry and the different ways in which it is evolving. Generally, retailing in the UK is transforming partly due to technology advances, while COVID has reshaped the entire industry (Siu et al. 2019; Shankar et al. 2021). For example, the growth of distribution channels has expanded with corporate brands creating new values through the purchase of subsidiaries (Bai et al. 2021). Fashion is no exception, and this rapidly growing sector (Bockholdt et al. 2020; Mishra et al. 2021; Fraquet-Deltoro et al. 2021), with

constant restructures, has resulted in increasingly diverse channels. However, it is unclear how these restructures impact brand identity and whether or not stakeholders' perceptions are changed. For example, a corporate brand is underpinned by core values, encompassing shared patterns of beliefs and expectations (Brandão et al. 2020; Balmer and Podnar 2021; Balmer 2022), while a restructure may cause a misalignment with different product brands and their identities. This misalignment is more common in fashion retail and wholesale brands as new fashion brands are constantly emerging (Fuduric et al. 2022). This also heightens the need to seek further ways to differentiate from the competition as these brands might otherwise become ambiguous (Rashid and Barnes 2020) in terms of their brand identity and relationships they hold with their customers.

As a way of understanding how fashion retail and wholesale brands manage their portfolio of products, this paper draws on the notion of 'brand architecture'. Brand architecture, sometimes referred to as brand strategies, involves the management of multiple 'brands' in an organisation (Gabrielli and Baghi 2016; Kato 2021; Zelenskaya and Elkanova, 2019) and the way in which product brands and corporate brands relate (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Muzellec and

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Lambkin 2008). By providing a structure to brand management, profitability and efficiency can be enhanced (Uggla 2006; Leijerholt et al. 2019), creating synergies and clarity, which can help an organisation leverage brands across markets and different segments (Åsberg 2018), and attain a strong competitive advantage that is hard to copy (Brandão et al. 2020; Khan et al. 2023; Shankar et al. 2024). Consequently, the value of the individual brand is enhanced as is the entirety of the portfolio. However, to date, brand architecture has not been explored in the literature, particularly following a restructure, in the context of UK fashion retail and wholesale brands. This is important as developing brand strategies improves performance and build on customer relationships (Crick 2020; Jung et al. 2020).

This research explores perceptions of corporate brand identities of retail and wholesale brands to understand whether brand architecture might support the development of brand strategies in the context of the UK fashion industry. This study encompasses the participation of elite informants, i.e. those who operate at the top of organisations in the UK fashion industry. The following questions are thus addressed:

- 1) Explore perspectives concerning corporate brand identities of retail and wholesale brands in the UK fashion industry.
- 2) To what extent can brand architecture support the development of an appropriate brand strategy in a fashion industry that is constantly evolving?

Literature review

Corporate brand identity and image

A key component of brand architecture is understanding how corporate brand identity and image are managed at the corporate and sub-brand levels as a transition occurs between these two concepts (Kotler et al. 2009). While brand identity refers to the internal perception of an organisation (Leijerholt et al. 2019; Balmer 2022; Ferreira-Rosende et al. 2022), brand image concerns how identity is viewed externally, particularly its distinctive attributes (Uggla 2006; Balmer and Podnar 2021; Khan et al. 2023; Shankar et al. 2024). This suggests fundamental ‘core values’, inherent to an organisation’s identity, can be shared with external stakeholders (Iglesias et al. 2020, p34). Hatch and Schultz (2002) emphasise the importance of reducing any gaps between identity and image to achieve coherence across stakeholder groups as the corporate image can be the most effective form of differentiation. Similarly, Spry et al. (2020) and Khan et al. (2023) maintain that it is only when core values are shared at the ‘product’ level with internal and external stakeholders that brand identity and image become convincing. Organisational

restructuring can bring about changes to the brand portfolio and, as a part of this process, the way in which brands are managed may differ (Tidd et al. 2005; Tan et al. 2023). However, there is a scarcity of research into retail and wholesale brands and how their identities are managed within the UK fashion industry (McColl and Moore 2011) and yet it is an industry where most restructures have taken place (Rienda et al. 2021). If brand identities are not managed, this in turn can influence brand image (Pich et al. 2020) particularly brand associations (Hsieh and Lindridge 2005) that are developed through reasoned or emotional perceptions (Simms and Trott 2006). Consumers recognise a brand’s characteristics and differentiate these from competing brands (Aaker 1996; Schnittka et al. 2012). Therefore, fashion retail and wholesale brands must position themselves in a manner that ensures market relevance is retained and a definitive set of attractive brand values and lifestyle associations are communicated (Roncha and Montecchi 2017; Marques et al. 2020). It is therefore planned to investigate and understand any gaps between identity and desired image particularly following an organisational restructure in the UK fashion industry. Further, it is proposed that this potential problem should be studied from a brand architecture perspective to better understand how such changes in the management of different brands might affect consumers’ connections with a brand in particular, brand identity and desired brand image (Pich et al. 2020).

Brand architecture in the UK fashion industry

Brand architecture, sometimes referred to as brand strategies, involves an organisation managing their product brands and services (Gabielli and Baghi 2016; Zelenskaya and Elkanova, 2019). Petromilli et al. (2002) discuss different types of brand architecture that provide an external ‘face’ (p.23) for the business strategy and organisational objectives. However, most authors agree that brand architecture is the way in which product brands and corporate brands relate (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Brexendorf and Keller 2017; Pritchard et al. 2022; Kato 2021). Key brand strategies include a ‘branded house’, often referred to as an integration strategy (Muzellec and Lambkin 2008), using a single master brand for related products, e.g. the Virgin Group. Conversely, the ‘house of brands’ approach is often referred to as a separation strategy (Muzellec and Lambkin 2008; Rajavi et al. 2023), which can encompass different brand names for diverse product categories, e.g. Procter and Gamble uses Pampers for nappies (Leijerholt et al. 2019; Pritchard et al. 2022). However, organisations seldom follow these ideal-type strategies and tend to use a ‘mix and match’ approach depending on ‘branding similarities’ between products and services (Strebinger 2014, p.1783). Generally, this hybrid approach, which combines both branded house and house



of brands (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Ailawadi and Keller 2004), occurs when a master brand and sub-brand(s) make a significant association that can be communicated to consumers (e.g. Polo Jeans by Ralph Lauren).

Brand architecture in the UK fashion industry is multifaceted due to global economic pressure, volatile consumer demand, competition from international retailers, and the changing structure of retailers and their channels (Perry and Wood 2019; Rashid and Barnes 2020). As a result, an important gap in the brand architecture literature is emerging from the perspective of the fashion industry, the way in which it is structured and the resulting impact on brand identity and brand image. Similarly, Gotsi and Andriopoulos (2007) and Marques et al. (2020) suggest that re-branding creates distance between the corporate brand and its identity. However, as far as authors are aware, no study to date has acknowledged if and how restructuring and takeovers can impact corporate brand identity and desired image. Indeed, this non-awareness increases when retailers adopt a hybrid approach utilising various distribution channels, such as online stores, department stores, or independent stores or outlets (McCormick et al. 2014) or when the corporate brand creates new identities through sub-brands (Boisvert and Ashill 2018). For example, Zelenskaya and Elkanova (2019) maintain that sub-brands not only attract niche markets, but also build high credibility (and consumer-based brand equity) in the eyes of consumers. Despite these anomalies, brand architecture remains an under-researched area (Uggla 2006) in the UK fashion industry. For example, the complexity and challenges of managing multifaceted sub-brands, within a corporate brand, is not considered in the context of the fashion industry. Further, there have been several calls for research in different contexts. For example, Leijerholt et al. (2019) examines the public healthcare sector, and Spry et al. (2020) focuses on higher education (HE) and emphasises the need for further research on brand architecture. Meanwhile, Sevel et al. (2018) advocates empirical research that delves into internal stakeholders' identification with both corporate and product brands.

Methodology and analysis

As this study aimed to explore fashion retail and wholesale brands' identity and image, a qualitative approach was adopted as it is deemed appropriate to investigate in-depth perspectives (Saunders et al. 2018). Further, a qualitative approach is a suitable method for exploratory research (Angelini and Gilli 2021) that provides a deep understanding into attitudes, perceptions, and feelings (Warren and Karner 2010). In addition, a qualitative approach has the potential to provide rich accounts and explanation to complex issues often unachievable with quantitative research (Bell et al.

2019). The research design was organised into two phases. Phase one focused on 'elite' semi-structured interviews, and phase two focused on triangulating the captured insights with a variety of sources and content.

Phase one involved utilising 'elite' semi-structured interviews as its principal data collection method and elite semi-structured interviews are consistent with a qualitative approach (Pich et al. 2020). Elite interviews can reveal first-hand accounts and opinions and knowledge from participants deemed to be 'highly skilled experts' in their area of profession (Solarino and Herman 2021; Aguinis and Solarino 2019; Pich et al. 2020). Further, elite interviews can be semi-structured in nature (Empson 2018) and involve accessing key individuals often holding senior positions within the organisation (Scally et al. 2021). The rationale for adopting elite interviews is based on the premise that the participants possess insider knowledge, detailed experience and desired information sought by the researchers (Liu 2018). Nevertheless, elite interviews have limitations; thus, the word 'elite' can be seen as contentious, rich insight may be overlooked if participants in junior positions are not included and gaining access to individuals in senior positions can be difficult (Empson 2018; Li 2021). However, if access is granted, elite interviews can enable researchers to enter the 'hidden world' of the participant and organisation and reveal detailed and complex insights.

This study adopted purposive sampling to select and recruit participants. Purposive sampling involves researchers using their own judgement to identify, select and rationalise the most appropriate sample to take part in the study (Bell et al. 2019). More specifically, participants are identified based on their knowledge, experiences and expertise in order to address the overall research objectives (Palinkas et al. 2015; Bell et al. 2019). Further, a purposive approach is a consistent sampling strategy for elite interviews (Scally et al. 2021). However, in some cases where there was limited access to the elite informants, therefore a snowball strategy had to be utilised.

In terms of this study, fifteen semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 'elite' informants (Aguinis and Solarino 2019) from both fashion retail and wholesale brands to understand how brand identity is managed in the UK fashion industry (Jonsen et al. 2018). The participants were the key decision makers responsible for making crucial choices within the field, holding comprehensive and specialised knowledge. They also held the authority to considerably influence significant results, either individually or through cooperation, as exemplified by roles such as board of directors' members (Aguinis and Solarino 2019). The elite informants were from different level of expertise and represented ten fashion brands encompassing fast fashion, design-led fashion brands, outdoor sports brands, etc. with headquarters in the UK. Notably, during the interviews, we



encountered a challenge in distinguishing between retail and wholesale brands, as they frequently utilised similar distribution channels. Retail brands often relied on wholesalers, and vice versa, as shown in Fig. 2. Furthermore, we identified instances where a brand that we initially categorised as a retailer also functioned as a supplier, even though their identity as a supplier was less apparent compared to their online retail presence. This brand, while not widely recognised, played a dual role within the industry. These included chief executive officers (CEOs), international director, executive director, head of departments and other senior key informants, as presented in Table 1.

Due to commercial confidentiality, the fashion brands are not identified. Since there was no pre-existing database of experts in fashion retail and wholesale brands to serve as a sampling frame, a list of respondents was created by gathering information from various sources. The elite informants from retail and wholesale brands were identified via LinkedIn (2020), the Association of Suppliers to the British Clothing Industry (ASBCI) (2014), the fashion

network events (2015), Internet Retailing Expo (IRE) 2021 and personal contacts. These events were considered beneficial for this study as the key speakers were representatives from the fashion industry, incorporating various retail and wholesale brands. All the elite informants from retail and wholesale brands were approached via the three-stage process of formal letter, email, and phone call. However, where it was possible to identify the name and email of the person responsible for key decision making in the organisation (e.g. CEO or director of marketing) via personal contacts, the informants were contacted directly. This research was part of a much larger study. The research for this paper was conducted in two stages; the first stage were conducted between 2015–2018. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 min and continued until theoretical saturation reached (Farmaki et al. 2021). The interview guide was developed from the existing literature (Martenson 2007; Burt and Davies, 2010; Picot-Coupey et al. 2014) and structured via a series of themes and sub-themes. This provided a degree of structure to the interviews yet also offered flexibility to the interview process,

Table 1 Industry experts from the UK fashion industry

	Industry	Portfolio strategy	Target market	Elite interviewees/Key informants	Respondent's expertise	Headquarters
Company A	Fast fashion retailer	Retail brand	B2C, age 16 to 30	2	Buyer and senior buyer	London
Company B	Quality led retailer	Retail brand	B2C, age 35 to 50, women and men	2	Head of department and a buyer	London
Company C	Occasion wear design-led retailer	Retail brand	B2C, age 35 to 55	1	Senior buyer	London
Company D	Sports and leisurewear design-led retailers	Retail brand	B2C, age 50+	1	Buyer	Manchester
Company E	Plus size clothing and fast fashion online retailer	Retail brand	B2C, age 46+	3	Head of department, senior buyer and a buyer	Manchester
Company F	Performance design-led brand	Wholesale brand, but not owned by supplier or manufacture	B2C, age 16 to 34	2	Senior designer and a designer	Manchester
Company G	Watersports premium clothing brand	Wholesale brand, formerly manufacturer as well. Now also a retail brand	B2C, age 26 to 55+	1	CEO	Manchester
Company H	Outdoor clothing for countryside	Wholesale brand, formerly manufacturer as well. Now also a retail brand	B2C, age 40+	1	International managing director	Northumbria
Company I	Young fashion retailer	Wholesale brand, expanded into a retail brand	B2C, age 16 to 24	1	Regional Manager	London
Company J	Component supplier for outdoor clothing and wholesale brand focusing on wind protection	Manufacturers, but separate brand identity as also a wholesale brand	1) B2B, but now a B2C as well	1	Executive director	Manchester



which is an important characteristic of semi-structured interviews (Bell et al. 2019).

Phase two focused on triangulating the deep insight captured from the elite semi-structured interviews with a variety of sources and documents. Phase two was carried out from 2018 to 2021. Sources and documents included company websites, social media accounts, industry specific reports, and news articles. All secondary sources and documents were published and in the public domain. In addition, triangulation involved reviewing and reflecting on the notes taken during the elite interviews. Triangulating the transcripts with the additional sources, and material provided additional understanding into the phenomenon under study and the opportunity to compare transcripts from the semi-structured interviews (Bell et al. 2019; Taylor et al. 2021; Logman 2021). Further, the additional data provided a greater understanding of the dynamic national and international fashion industry, and detailed accounts of the background and values of the organisations featured in this study.

To ensure trustworthiness, accuracy and rigour, several strategies were adopted including *piloting*, *data triangulation*, *external verification*, and a *systematic analytical process*. Firstly, a *pilot study* was conducted with two key informants from different organisations to improve the interview guide and to ensure research objectives were addressed (Bell et al. 2019). Pilot studies are crucial in any study as they evaluate data collection tools and offer researchers the opportunity of a test-run before the full data collection phase is carried out (Gillham 2005). Further, pilot studies offer researchers the opportunity to reflect on all stages of the data collection process [including analysis] and seek feedback from participants on the content and overall experience, which can clarify the data collection tool and strengthen the research process (Pich et al. 2015). Following the pilot study, very few changes to the semi-structured interview guide were required. However, the pilot study highlighted that it was crucial to use industry specific terminology in the interviews to improve rapport and clarity of questioning. In addition, the pilot study highlighted the emergence of two additional sub-themes [national–international expansion, and distribution channels], which opened a new line of enquiry. Therefore, the pilot study identified subtle changes and improvements to the interview guide, which provided

rigour and trustworthiness to the research process (Warren and Karner 2010; Pich et al. 2015).

The second strategy was *external verification*. External verification involved sending interview transcripts to participants via email to review and reflect on the substance captured in the interviews (Pich et al. 2020). Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and transcripts ranged from 6000 to 8000 words. Participants were encouraged to address any errors and asked to clarify/expand on any points made during the interviews (Ekman et al. 2021; Taylor et al. 2021). All participants verified the interview transcripts. No errors or changes were identified as part of the external verification strategy. The third strategy utilised to strengthen trustworthiness, transparency and rigour was a *systematic analytical process*. This study adopted a three-stage template analysis procedural approach (see Table 2), reproduced from King and Horrock, (2010), and these included: descriptive coding, interpretive coding and overarching coding.

The first stage involved creating a template, also referred to as descriptive codes, using the process of reading through the data several times, becoming familiar, and then creating initial themes or sub-themes from the literature, interview questions or through the transcript of the interviews (King and Horrock, 2010; King et al. 2018). In terms of this study, an initial template of themes and sub-themes was created from the first five interview questions and literature review, which included heritage history, innovators of materials, portfolio expansions of retail brands and international take overs (see Fig. 1). The rest of the data were then worked through line by line, looking for text that may be relevant to each of the themes (Yates and Skinner 2021). This helped to understand the brand's history, how it had evolved, including re-branding (Brandão et al. 2020) and extension of channels (McCormick et al. 2014), retail settings and customers.

Once the descriptive codes were gathered, the second stage involved interpreting the codes by referring back to the transcripts and placing the information gathered from the interviews under appropriate themes (King and Horrocks 2010). The themes were: 1) The importance of aligning corporate brand identity with heritage, 2) A takeover affecting the alignment of corporate brand identity and 3) The utilisation of different channels and growing consumer demand have caused a disconnect between corporate brand identity

Table 2 Stages in the process of thematic, template analysis reproduced from King and Horrock (2010, p.153)

Stages	Procedures
Stage one: descriptive coding	Also referred as higher code. This involves drawing or generating themes from the literature, interview questions or through the transcript of the interviews
Stage two: Interpretative coding	Clustering descriptive codes and compiling under the themes to develop an understanding on the 'meaning' of the research question. This can be done using NVivo or manually
Stage three: Overarching themes	Representing the relationship between the level of coding and analysing via constructed diagram, framework model or developed typology



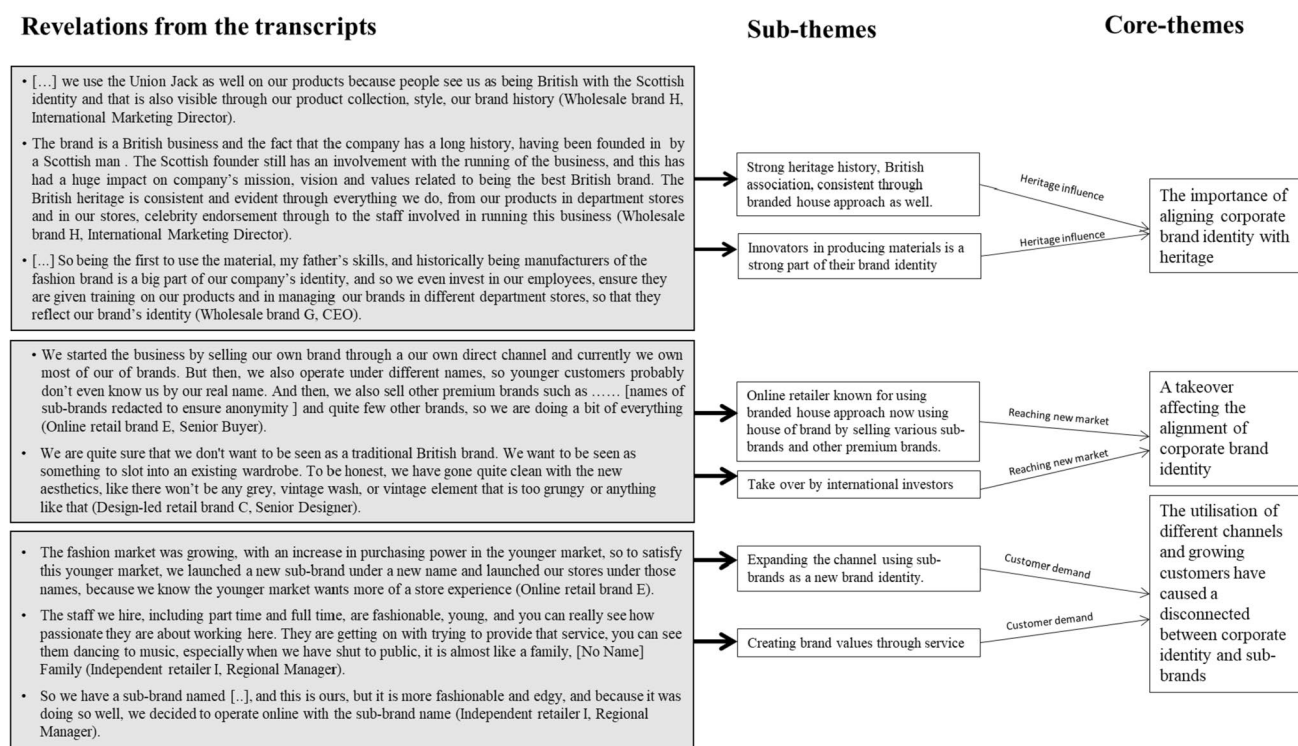


Fig. 1 A visualisation of the analytical process of stages

and sub-brands. A visual representation of our analytical process can be seen in Fig. 1.

What primarily evolved were the differences and similarities between fashion retail and wholesale brands (Rashid and Barnes 2020) and visibility and invisibility of corporate brand identity. The third stage explored the interrelatedness of themes by comparing data within each category which offered an in-depth perspective on the complexity of the organisations and why they had adopted particular brand architecture approaches (Crick et al. 2018; Spry et al. 2020). An illustration of this is shown in Fig. 2.

Key Findings

Three key themes emerged from the data analysis: the importance of maintaining an alignment with corporate brand identity and heritage; takeovers affecting the alignment of corporate brand identity; the utilisation of different channels and growing consumer demand causing a disconnect between corporate brand identity and sub-brands.

The importance of aligning corporate brand identity with heritage

The international marketing director of wholesale fashion brand H highlighted the importance of being recognised as

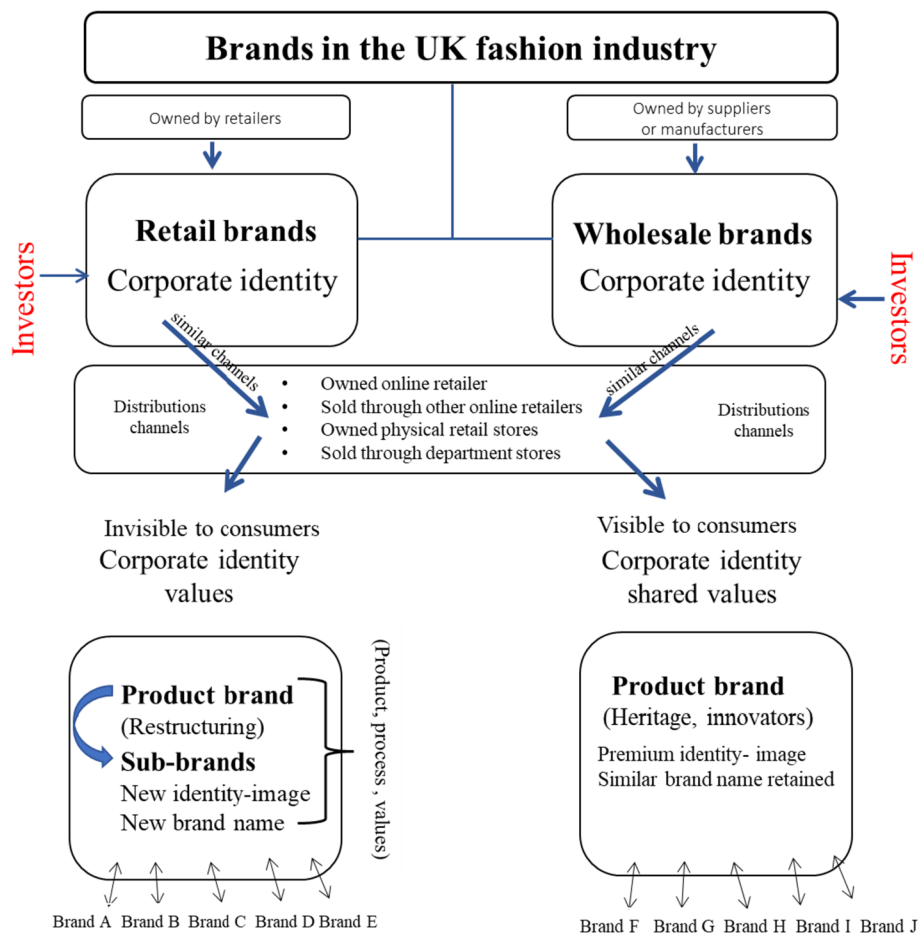
the best British fashion brand, and it was therefore crucial to align the company's vision and values with its heritage. Importantly, the values were shared among the company's range of products and services, primarily due to the significant influence of its rich history. This included the cultural identity of the founder, the brand's hundred-year involvement in the market and its association with British heritage. Historically, the company not only produced clothing in-house in the UK, but an innovative water-resistant material had also been developed. Products are sold in a variety of department stores, and this remains a core selling strategy due to the demands of the target audience. For example, the International Marketing Director commented:

[...] we use the Union Jack as well on our products because people see us as being British with the Scottish identity and that is also visible through our product collection, style, our brand history (Wholesale fashion brand H, International Marketing Director).

The brand is a British business and the fact that the company has a long history, having been founded by a Scottish man. The Scottish founder still has an involvement with the running of the business, and this has had a huge impact on the company's mission, vision and values related to being the best British brand. The British heritage is evident through everything we do, from our products, celebrity endorse-



Fig. 2 Twin brand architecture model for retail and wholesale fashion brands: a case of visibility and invisibility



ment through to the staff involved in running this business (Wholesale fashion brand H, International Marketing Director).

Another wholesale brand that aligned corporate brand identity with heritage is wholesale fashion brand G. This British brand has a strong global reputation in the sports industry. The CEO of fashion brand G explained that following a move to the UK, the founder (the CEO's father) of the company partnered with a British fashion designer to establish this wholesale brand. Not only did the brand win several awards, but was also the first to incorporate novel and innovative materials and technologies. This image of commitment to designing and producing high-quality garments has led to a sizeable reputation in the market for the company's branded products sold in various department stores. The company was able to clearly align the corporate brand identity with this heritage; hiring and training their own staff to work in various department stores. Similar to company H, and due to unexpected customer demands, the company have opened a few own retail store outlets. However, a branded house approach has been maintained through sharing core values and operating

under the same corporate brand name, but with lower price points. For example, the CEO explained:

[...] So, being the first to use the material, my father's skills, and historically being manufacturers of the fashion brand is a big part of our company's identity, and so we even invest in our employees, ensure they are given training on our products and in managing our brands in different department stores, so that they reflect our brand's identity (Outdoor clothing brand G, CEO).

A takeover affecting the alignment of corporate brand identity

The Head of Department from online fashion retailer E, explained that the company continued using its original brand name following a takeover, and adopted a house of brands approach with plus-size clothing and other premium brands via its own-branded retail website. The corporate brand structure has become complex, as sub-brands have established stores with their own identities, which are different from the new corporate name. Consequently, it was felt



that although internal stakeholders are well-connected to the brand values, these may be invisible to external stakeholders. For example, the senior buyer of the online fashion retail E explained below:

We currently own most of the brands we sell, but they all operate under different names, so younger customers probably don't even know us by our corporate name. And then, we also sell other premium brands such as [names of sub-brands redacted to ensure anonymity] and quite a few other brands, so we are doing a bit of everything (Online fashion retail E, Senior Buyer).

Further, a premium design-led formal wear retail brand (Company C) initially selling own-brand labels, was bought by a South African investor, and as a result, the new corporate identity was not clear in either their products or processes. Further, to compete with the other premium brands in the market, particularly wholesale brands, Company C (originally a branded house approach), expanded into a wholesale brand by selling own label products in various department stores. Similarly, the senior designer from brand F, a premium design-led sportswear brand, explained how they had shifted focus to the entire European market rather than solely the British market. This enabled the company to concentrate on a 'new clear aesthetic style' (Senior designer, Company F). The findings revealed that this was due to a German private equity investor buying the fashion brand and instigating changes to Company F's corporate goals, style and promotion. For example, the Senior Designer highlighted:

We are quite sure that we don't want to be seen as a traditional British brand. We want to be seen as something to slot into an existing wardrobe. To be honest, we have gone quite clean with the new aesthetics, like there won't be any grey, vintage wash, or vintage element that is too grungy or anything like that (Performance design-led retail brand F, Senior Designer).

The utilisation of different channels and growing consumer demand have caused a disconnect between corporate brand identity and sub-brands

All respondents maintained the fashion industry has evolved considerably over the years due to the growth in consumer demand and the use of online platforms. Thus, the UK fashion industry now has a wide range of distribution channels, which has resulted in consumers disconnecting from the corporate brand identity. For example, when online retailer E adopted the hybrid approach (discussed in previous section), it established brick and mortar stores and traded under a sub-brand name to attract a younger market. However, the senior

buyer stressed that the company was still maintaining its relationship with existing customers, who had very different profiles to those associated with the sub-brand. As a result, the corporate brand identity was invisible to both these target markets. For example, the senior buyer commented:

So, we are recognised as [No Name], which is young and fun, and then the core product name we sell under is [No Name], which is different to our corporate brand name. This target's older, plus-size clothing and wider fit shoes, and we are mainly an online retailer. But then the fashion market was growing, with an increase in purchasing power in the younger market, so to satisfy this younger market, we launched a new sub-brand under a new name and launched our stores under those names, because we know the younger market wants more of a store experience (Online fashion retailer E, senior buyer).

Similarly, Independent Retailer I, traditionally recognised as a sports brand, was bought by a Scottish businessman who wanted to change the brand identity and instore experience to make the company more fashion orientated. Thus, Independent Retailer I adopted a hybrid approach (house of brands and branded house) selling premium fashion clothing products. It also realigned its corporate brand identity and brand values, targeting young males influenced by hip-hop music. Further, the Independent Retailer I established a separate online identity for its sub-brand that had British associations and fashion focused. For example, the regional manager commented below:

The staff we hire, including part time and full time, are fashionable, young, and you can really see how passionate they are about working here. They are getting on with trying to provide that service, you can see them dancing to music, especially when we have shut to public, it is almost like a family, [No Name] Family (Independent retailer I, Regional Manager).

Discussion and conclusion

This research aimed to explore perceptions of corporate brand identities of retail and wholesale brands to understand whether brand architecture might support the development of brand strategies in the context of the UK fashion industry. This study included those organisations experiencing development of channel extensions and takeovers and were carried out with the elite informants. Further, this study addressed explicit calls for further research on how UK fashion retail and wholesale brands manage their identity following the restructuring of distribution channels and its impact on corporate brand image (McColl and Moore 2011;



Marques et al. 2020; Rashid and Barnes 2020; Riendal et al. 2021; Balmer 2022). The under-researched theoretical lens of brand architecture (Ugglå 2006) was adopted to frame the investigation and provide insight into how the changing structure of retailers and their channels influenced corporate brand identity and image (Perry and Wood 2019; Rashid and Barnes 2020). A visualisation of this is outlined in Fig. 2.

As evident in the findings (outlined in Fig. 2), this study highlights the importance of ensuring that corporate identity is deeply rooted in heritage and history with its internal stakeholders (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Burghausen 2023). Consequently, external stakeholders have positive perceptions of the corporate brand values (Simms and Trott 2006; Koubaa, 2008; Khan et al. 2023) with defined differences and uniqueness (Aaker 1996; Schnittka et al. 2012). For example, our findings reveal that when a wholesale brand with a premium identity adopts a branded house approach (Ugglå 2006; Muzellec and Lamkin, 2008), the company's products and services are united with a common identity. As a result, strong core values are shared, and thus visible and understood by internal and external stakeholders (Harris and de Chernatony 2001; Ugglå 2006; Kato 2021; Balmer 2022), comprising factors such as heritage, innovation, and invention (Muzellec and Lambkin 2008; Balmer and Chen 2017; Spry et al. 2020).

Conversely, there is evidence in this study (see also Fig. 2) that some UK fashion retail brands have developed a corporate brand that is not always visible to external stakeholders (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2008). Thus, understanding the corporate brand identity of a fashion retail brand can be difficult, especially if the brand restructures (Brandão et al. 2020). For example, it is evident from the findings that when an international investor bought design-led retailer (Company C), a disconnect occurred when a new corporate identity was initially introduced to the key informant (Hatch and Schultz 2002). This could have been due to the restructuring exercise, implemented at corporate level, which demanded substantial resources despite there being no re-assurance of successful outcomes (Joseph et al. 2020). Further, when retail brand (Company F) restructured from a house of brands to a hybrid approach (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Ailawadi and Keller 2004), new customers were not made aware of the corporate brand identity because the brand wanted to maintain existing relationships as well as target different markets through the sub-brands (Crick 2020; Jung et al. 2020). The findings also highlight sub-brands of Company I as they created their own identity. This could be considered a useful approach Zhou et al. (2021) and Rajavi et al. (2023) maintain that if there is an ineffective brand expansion this produces negative feedback which can impact brand image.

Some companies clearly restructure to retain market relevance (Marques et al. 2020). For example, Company E

originally operated as an independent sports retailer but due to the takeover, a hybrid approach was utilised (e.g. Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Ailawadi and Keller 2004). As a result, the personality changed, more fashionable clothing was introduced and a new brand identity was developed through the existing sub-brand (e.g. McCormick et al. 2014; Boisvert and Ashill 2018).

Our findings also reveal that organisations operating in the UK fashion industry have a wide range of distribution channels, which has resulted in a disconnect from the corporate brand identity (Gotsi and Andripoulos, 2007). For example, online retail brand (Company F) established a new sub-brand as it traded under a different name utilising a different channel (brick and mortar store) to attract a younger market. However, both retail and wholesale brands need to communicate distinct brand values (Marques et al. 2020; Roncha and Montecchi 2017). For example, when Company G changed focus to Europe, this resulted in closure of physical stores due to the lack of demand. Further, the retail website interface changed as did, the colour of the product line. Therefore, this became a strategic issue for Company G, as it appears that the core values were changed or abandoned, and their brand identity weakened (Balmer and Podnar 2021; Marques et al. 2020).

Framing these findings alongside the brand architecture literature, this study clearly demonstrates that corporate brand identity is important in creating a positive brand image when wholesale brands (owned by manufacturers or suppliers) (Martenson 2007) adopt a branded house strategy. Thus, and while wholesale brands target new markets through various distribution channels, the brand name is retained, and there is no direct impact on consumers. However, retail brands are more complex and although they also use several different channels, some develop new identities through sub-brands to reach new markets, while others may change their personality due to takeovers.

Theoretical contributions and managerial implications

To date, brand architecture remains an under-researched area of study (Spry et al. 2020; Ugglå 2006) in the context of UK fashion retail and wholesale brands. This is important as developing brand strategies improves performance and builds on customer relationships (Crick 2020; Jung et al. 2020). Thus, this study contributes to the literature by exploring the context of the fashion industry with a particular focus on wholesale and retail brands and how their identities are managed within the UK fashion industry (McColl and Moore 2011). For example, wholesale brands have adopted a brand house approach in order to maintain consistency in their core values. In contrast, when a fashion retail brand expands their channels, such as brick and



mortar to online, there is a disconnect with the corporate brand identity due to expansion of sub-brands with their own-brand identities in order to reach a different market. This highlights another level of branding to an already complex and fast-moving picture of the fashion industry. For example, a consistent branded house approach is crucial for wholesale fashion brands with a strong historical heritage in order to enhance their desired brand image (Kotler et al. 2009; Muzellec and Lambkin 2008; Kato 2021). Conversely, UK fashion retail brands adopt a hybrid approach in order to provide visibility to customers.

This study therefore builds on the notion of brand architecture in the UK fashion industry (Gabrielli and Baghi 2016; Pritchard et al. 2022; Zelenskaya and Elkanova, 2019). In particular, it takes into consideration expanding channels and takeovers and their impact on retail and wholesale's corporate brand identity and image which, as far as the researchers are aware, has not been established in any other research. This in turn addresses explicit calls for further research on corporate brands in different settings (Chapleo 2015; Melewar and Nguyen 2014; Leijerholt et al. 2019; Sevel et al. 2018; Spry et al. 2020; Balmer 2022). Finally, this study proposes a nuanced brand architecture model entitled *the twin brand architecture model for retail and wholesale fashion brands* (Fig. 2). This model more accurately reflects the management of complex brands particularly when channels expand, and takeovers take place, and considers the impact this has on corporate brand identities.

In terms of managerial implications, practitioners need to consider: practitioners working in the UK fashion industry need to understand the importance of corporate brands from the perspectives of different stakeholders. Attention also needs to be paid to the uniqueness of different sub-brands, their environments and the diversity, and demands of customers. Finally, practitioners can use our model as a guide to appraise and reflect on current brand strategy before designing and managing a future brand strategy. In particular, they can investigate and understand any gaps between identity and desired image particularly following an organisational restructure and expansions in the UK fashion industry. This will help in re-positioning the corporate brand in a manner that ensures market relevance is retained and a definitive set of attractive brand values and lifestyle associations are communicated (Roncha and Montecchi 2017; Marques et al. 2020).

Limitations and directions for further research

Like all studies, this research has some limitations. For example, fashion companies rarely offer full databases online, thus identifying the UK fashion industry key informants was difficult, and as a result the sample was small and the study exploratory in nature. Further, as retail

and wholesale brands are constantly evolving and changing their structure, blurring the difference means that it is difficult to categorise them in terms of types of fashion brands. Thus, this study recommends further research that explores brand categories in more depth to better understand the similarities and differences in order to address the complexities highlighted in this paper. This will provide a more rounded perspective of approaches to brand architecture. For example, this could include a guide that appraises current strategy and identity in order to maintain/amend depending on what fashion brands are trying to achieve. Further, this would provide opportunities for cross-comparative and/or longitudinal studies with manufacturers/suppliers to explore how they develop their brand identities to further clarify the model developed in this study. Additional research could investigate the transferability of the developed framework in contexts within and beyond the retail sector. Finally, further research could be devoted to adopting a quantitative approach to evaluate the correlation between identities and architecture.

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Declarations

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