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## **Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation Declaration Form**

I, Ariful Hasan, declare that this dissertation has been composed by myself, that the work contained herein is entirely my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification, in whole or in part, except as specified.

Signature: Ariful Hasan

Date: 03/02/2026

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## **Abstract**

The research under consideration is entitled Evaluating the Impact of Digital Marketing Strategies on Corporate Brand Performance: A Case Study of Bunzl PLC, and it explores the revolutionary aspect of digital touchpoints in creating a competitive advantage and brand equity in the context of the specialist distribution industry. This study is based on the rationale that the growing need of traditional distributors to move to value-added digital ecosystems based on changing B2B buyer requirements and global supply chain volatility necessitates the discontinuation of transactional and physical-based models. The study will apply a qualitative research design by collecting data on the secondary level and adopting a multi-case research technique, which profiles Bunzl PLC and the world peers such as Ferguson, Grainger, Sysco, and Brenntag in order to guarantee a solid cross-case synthesis. The analysis of the data conducted within the frames of Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) and COBRA frameworks has shown that the digital strategies contribute to the brand performance mainly with the help of functional utility, transparency of the operations, and search precision instead of emotional resonance. The main results prove that real-time inventory visibility and AI-based search are two of the significant mediators of brand trust and reliability. Hypothetically, this study adds to the CBBE model a sophisticated Digital Utility-Trust mechanism, which stipulates that data verifiability is the key factor that contributes to credibility in the business world. In a practical sense, it offers managerial advice to Bunzl PLC on how to carry out predictive ecosystems and global-local digital governance. The study is limited because it relies on publicly available secondary sources and may be affected by potential attribution bias in corporate reporting.

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing, Corporate Brand Performance, Bunzl PLC, Brand Equity, B2B Distribution, Digital Transformation, CBBE Model.

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# **CHAPTER 1: Introduction and Rationale**

## **1.1 Research Background**

Bunzl PLC operates in a rapidly changing global speciality distribution sector. As an international distribution firm that serves foodservice, cleaning and hygiene, healthcare, and safety, Bunzl is affected by competition, changing client needs, online ordering, and supply chain visibility. Bunzl has over 130 distribution hubs globally, which affects its operations (Porter's 5 Forces, 2024; Bunzl plc, 2020). As technology solutions like IoT, data analysis, and AI revolutionise operations, customers are demanding online ordering, fast fulfilment, and simple tracking from distribution businesses. Digital channels enable real-time insight, simplify order processing, and make supply chains more responsive, transforming customers into conventional structures (Channel Post MEA, 2022).

This research will examine Bunzl PLC's e-commerce, customer-facing, and data-driven digital marketing efforts and their implications on brand performance. Brand strength in distribution means that products are easy to find, reliable, efficient, and trusted by customers. Instead of facilitating transactions, online interactions and information systems increase brand recognition, loyalty, and interaction.

This issue is timely due to market dynamics. Supply chains are digitising worldwide, and IoT, big data analytics, and cloud computing are being used to improve efficiency, transparency, and resilience. The technologies assist companies to quickly adapt to disruptions and foster decision-making throughout the value chain (PMC, 2025). Moreover, the total investment in digital supply chain infrastructure worldwide is also expected to increase exponentially until 2035 due to the need to automate, increase visibility, and optimise in real time (WiseGuy Reports, 2024). According to the strategic report prepared by Bunzl himself in 2020, 66 per cent of all customer orders were received digitally, and that indicates the company is moving fast towards digital channels (Bunzl plc, 2020).

The main problem is that, despite the heavy investment of Bunzl in digital platforms, the effects of this activity on corporate brand performance are under-researched. There are critical questions: Does the use of digital services raise customers' perception of the reliability and innovative spirit of Bunzl? What is the role of digital

engagement features as far as brand loyalty, satisfaction, and long-term customer relations are concerned? These problems are strategic since the enhanced performance of the brands can consolidate customer retention, cross-selling, and the competitive edge of Bunzl in the segmented distribution markets.

Although the literature on digital transformation in supply chains has extensively examined the key aspects, including efficiency, cost-cutting, and brand agility, relatively scarce literature has examined how digital marketing strategies could cause brand outcomes in specialist distributors (Preprints.org, 2024). This is the novelty of the current study, which is taking the branding theory and linking it to digital transformation and customer engagement in an industry that is traditionally operational and not customer-facing. The results will contribute to both managerial practice and academic literature regarding the role of digital capabilities in creating corporate brand value within the complex distribution environment at Bunzl.

## **1.2 Research Rationale**

This study is necessary, as it will fill the gap between the theory of digital marketing and the reality of the corporate brand performance of a large distributor and provide the necessary insights that can help Bunzl streamline its digital investments to build brand equity.

### **1.2.1 Theoretical Justification**

Social media, content marketing, email marketing, and online advertising improve brand awareness, image, and loyalty, according to the literature (Owais, Zaman, and Alam, 2025). Customers' perception, sentiment, and behaviour toward a brand determine brand equity, according to the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) hypothesis (Keller, 1993). Consumer engagement—cognitive, emotional, and behavioural—mediates the link between digital marketing and long-term loyalty (Wasik, Primasari, and Setiawan, 2025). COBRA (Consumer Online Brand-Related Activities) research classifies engagement into consumption, contribution, and creation and how social media interaction strengthens brand relationships.

Despite these findings, the literature includes many undiscovered areas. Many studies examine consumer items and B2C contexts, but few examine how digital marketing affects industrial or distribution company brand success. Second, engagement has been widely studied, but its effects on loyalty and brand equity are debatable. The

results show that personalization and content quality are crucial (Preprints.org, 2024), but researchers disagree on which works best and how they interact. Third, the empirical models are inconsistent: some research show that digital marketing directly causes loyalty, while others say brand awareness or engagement are needed (Rahman and Sulisty, 2025). The fast-changing digital ecosystem, including new platforms, algorithm updates, and data protection problems, shows that prior models may not adequately represent reality.

This article reveals a research vacuum in empirical theory-based research on how digital marketing techniques affect corporate brand performance (recognition, engagement, loyalty, and brand image) in major specialized distribution organizations. Current study focuses on transactional performance (e.g., sales or buy intentions) or consumer goods firms without understanding how digital interaction builds brand equity in an organization. In the B2B environment, conventional models lack structural and relational dynamics including long-term contracts, service dependability, and institutional trust, which hinders theoretical growth. Lack of study on this gap prevents practitioners from developing digital ways that encourage short-term engagement and brand loyalty. Wasik, Primasari, and Setiawan (2025) and Owais, Zaman, and Alam (2025) argue that academic literature needs more contextualized research outside consumer industries and into underrepresented areas.

### 1.2.2 Practical Justification:

The examination of how Bunzl PLC's digital marketing techniques effect corporate brand performance is important to managers and organizations. Such a paucity of link proof has major practical ramifications. After investing heavily in online storefronts and digital technologies to meet consumers, Bunzl is unsure how they can build brand equity, client loyalty, and retention. Without such understanding, managers may spend a lot of money on digital functions that improve transactions but not brand value, which is essential in distribution markets where profitability depends on customer trust, reliability, and contract renewal (McKinsey, 2017). Table shows advantages of aggressively digitizing supply networks.

| Operational Improvement | Quantitative Benefit | Source          |
|-------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Cut Lost Sales          | up to 75%            | McKinsey (2017) |

|                            |        |                 |
|----------------------------|--------|-----------------|
| Decrease Operational Costs | 30%    | McKinsey (2017) |
| Decrease Inventory         | 50–75% | McKinsey (2017) |

*Table 1: Operational Improvement Benefits*

This mismatch is a strategic issue for the industry. Companies that aggressively digitize supply chains may reduce missed sales by 75%, operating expenses by 30%, and inventory by 50-75% (McKinsey, 2017). These activities improve dependability, customer happiness, and business brand perceptions. The production of digital value is likewise rapid. A worldwide study found that 51% of organizations are automating processes and redirecting personnel to higher-value tasks via supply chain digital transformation, while 47% want to improve disruption response (ToolsGroup, 2022). Organizations are investing in digital platforms to improve customer experience and save costs, which is part of brand strength.

Managers consider this desperate. Distribution leaders struggle to measure digital marketing ROI, balance global branding and local consumer expectations, and manage digital engagement initiatives equally across geographies. Digital touchpoints may promote brand loyalty, repeat business, and reputation, but managers lack reliable data to make strategic choices. Because digital platforms lack brand-performance measures, organizations struggle to assess, prioritize future investments, and align digital capabilities with long-term brand strategy (McKinsey, n.d.-a).

This gap is expensive. Bunzl risks losing clients to more technologically adept organizations that can engage them deeper due to its failure to employ digital infrastructure to boost the brand. Better digital brand performance would boost cross-selling, client retention, and contract negotiations. Results produce cumulative competitive advantages that directly impact Bunzl's long-term strategy.

Practice supports the research's need. McKinsey (n.d.-b) stresses that effective digital transformation requires a bigger transformation of operations, including technology, process design, and cross-field cooperation. A cross-functional strategy reduced a manufacturer's seven-day planning process to three hours, saving money and improving customer service (McKinsey, n.d.-b). This affects brand dependability and service quality, highlighting the need of aligning digital activities with brand performance aims.

This research empirically links Bunzl's digital marketing methods to corporate brand success, filling a practical need. It will also provide managers with evidence-based information to prioritize commercial and brand-building digital efforts. Lastly, a digital implementation and brand strategy will help Bunzl stay competitive in specialized distribution areas.

### **1.3. Research Contribution and Motivation:**

The study contributes to the academic, empirical, and practical literature since it directly fills the gaps stated during Sections 1.2.1 and 1.2.2. The research contributes to the body of knowledge in the digital marketing field and provides a practical managerial insight into the implementation of the digital marketing strategies of the corporate brand of Bunzl PLC in relation to its performance in the specialised sphere of distribution.

#### **1.3.1 Theoretical Contribution**

Three significant ways research creates theory are below. First, it directly addresses the literature gap on the function of digital marketing techniques in corporate brand performance in a digital marketing distribution scenario, which existing research have ignored. Digital transformation research emphasizes the benefits of digital transformation in supply chain and operations (Ivanov and Dolgui, 2020; Brusset and Teller, 2017), but little is written about how digital touchpoints affect brand equity, loyalty, and customer perceptions in non-consumer sectors. This study uses digital marketing theory and brand performance literature to demonstrate how digital tactics produce brand value cohesively.

Second, the study narrows the theoretical position by incorporating global distribution firm boundary requirements. Retail and service-based digital marketing models cannot represent long-term contracts, procurement-based purchasing procedures, or distribution's emphasis on dependability and risk minimization (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Digital capabilities like data-driven communication, customized portals, and seamless ordering experiences maintain confidence, brand credibility, and perceived operational excellence, as shown by Bunzl.

Third, digital transformation may strengthen business branding, as shown in the research. The dynamic capacities concept, specifically the idea that detecting, seizing, and reconfiguring activities boost competitiveness, supports this (Teece, 2007). Since

digital platforms strengthen client interactions and connections over time, the research shows how digital efforts become brand-building rather than the operational instrument.

### **1.3.2 Empirical Contribution**

The research methodologically adds value in terms of the secondary data and multi-case comparative technique, which fits best with the study of emerging and under-theorized phenomena. Case research allows in-depth, context-specific analysis of the ways in which organisations bring strategies to practice. The analysis of several cases across the various business units at Bunzl or comparing Bunzl to peers relevant to the industry creates an impact on understanding the contingencies that impact the effectiveness of digital marketing.

The multi-case design enables:

- a) The cross-case study to determine recurring tendencies in the effect of digital tools on brand perception.
- b) Contextual variation, because distribution operations vary by industry, geography and types of customers.
- c) Understanding the difference in digital maturity, with which digital marketing tools prove to be the most effective at a particular stage of development.

The secondary data will include the annual reports, digital strategy documents, brand performance indicators, market analysis, and industry benchmarks, which will offer complete and credible evidence. Triangulation is also possible, and empirical validity is enhanced.

### **1.3.3 Practical Contribution**

The study delivers three key benefits to managers: first, it guides decision-making by providing strategic focus on investments to build digital capability areas with the greatest brand impact and the highest ROI in digital marketing. Second, it produces a digital brand-building strategic framework, which is an actionable model and workbook. These combined efforts address the practical justification's pain points: assessing digital ROI, growing effective digital practices, and aligning operational digitalisation with brand strategy.

## **1.4 Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions:**

### **1.4.1 Research Aim:**

The aim of this research is to evaluate how Bunzl PLC's digital marketing strategies influence its overall corporate brand performance.

### **1.4.2 Research Objectives:**

- a) To analyse the effectiveness of Bunzl PLC's digital marketing strategies in enhancing brand awareness, customer engagement, and loyalty.
- b) To assess the relationship between Bunzl PLC's digital marketing initiatives and measurable improvements in its corporate brand performance.

### **1.4.3 Research Questions:**

1. How do Bunzl PLC's digital marketing initiatives enhance its brand performance and customer relationships?

## **1.5. Dissertation Structure:**

The remainder of this dissertation is organised into five chapters to provide a clear, logical progression from theory to findings and conclusions.

| <b>Chapter</b>   | <b>Title</b>                      | <b>Description</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Chapter 2</b> | <b>Literature Review</b>          | Investigates academic and industry sources related to digital marketing strategies, corporate brand performance, and the digital marketing distribution context. Identifies theoretical frameworks, critical constructs, and research gaps that justify the study. |
| <b>Chapter 3</b> | <b>Research Methodology</b>       | Describes the research methods, approach, philosophy, and ethical considerations. Details the procedures for data collection, analysis, and validation to address the research aim and objectives.                                                                 |
| <b>Chapter 4</b> | <b>Data Analysis and Findings</b> | Presents research findings, including statistical results, pattern interpretation, and                                                                                                                                                                             |

|                  |                                |                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                  |                                | an analysis of how findings respond to the research questions.                                                                  |
| <b>Chapter 5</b> | <b>Discussion and Analysis</b> | Discusses findings in comparison with the literature, identifies theoretical and practical contributions, outlines limitations. |
| <b>Chapter 6</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>              | Provides recommendations for Bunzl PLC and directions for future research.                                                      |

This form is to achieve a systematic process in the grounding of concepts to actionable information and to be consistent and focused throughout the dissertation.

## **CHAPTER 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction:**

This chapter critically analyses the literature available in the field to provide a theoretical basis for comprehending the role of digital marketing and customer experience management (CEM) in facilitating better brand achievements in the modern digital setting. This chapter aims to summarise existing scholarly views, outline the prevailing themes, and point out the lack of conceptual understanding of digital engagement and customer experiences provided by social media. In such a way, the chapter places the study in the context of wider academic discussions and proves the relevance of a customer-centred approach to the analysis of the digital marketing strategies.

The Chapter 1 challenge underlined the need to understand how digital platforms and online interactions shape brand perceptions, engagement, and loyalty. As consumers increasingly use social media for information, connection, and value co-creation, digital touchpoints have become central to brand relationship-building and long-term performance. The literature study argues that digital marketing's success depends on consumers' perception, experience, and emotional involvement with businesses in digital ecosystems, not only technology. This chapter covers social-media-based digital marketing, web-based consumer contact, customer experience management, and how interactive content, personalization, and digital journey design increase brand value. The examination only examines digital consumer interactions and does not include organisational or operational issues. Instead of discussing business-to-business relationships, it concentrates on digital consumer applications.

The chapter has many parts. The former addresses digital marketing and customer experience theories. Social interaction, content initiatives, and digital touchpoints affect customer perception in the second. The final half examines how customer experience management affects loyalty, satisfaction, and brand equity. The chapter concludes by identifying key literature gaps and justifying the present study.

The chapter is organized topically and ends with a logical framework. Every section critically analyses competing views, presents unresolved disputes, and identifies the theoretical hole this dissertation addresses.

## **2.2. Thematic Overview of the Literature:**

### **2.2.1 The Digital Foundation of Corporate Brand Equity: Theory and Online Engagement**

This section discusses the theoretical models that underpin brand value in the digital era and how online consumer interactions can be turned into core brand deliverables like awareness and image. The theme's key idea is the shift from passive to interactive communication, which is related to the study's goal of assessing digital strategy's impact on brand awareness and engagement. This literature study provides a conceptual gap between a firm's digital activity and consumer brand attitude, which drives corporate brand performance (Keller and Brexendorf, 2022). In the B2B distribution context, general digital marketing concepts are utilized to identify the gap.

The Keller (1993) idea of Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) is the standard customer perspective on brand performance. Based on this paradigm, brand equity is the difference brand understanding makes in customer reaction to brand marketing. In the CBBE model, Brand Salience (identification), Brand Meaning (performance and imagery), Brand Response (judgments and emotions), and Brand Resonance (loyalty and strong connections) create a pyramid. Digital advertising and presence drive brand salience, whereas online reviews, service dependability perception, and content affect brand performance and imagery (Qualtrics, n.d.). Resonance, the height of the pyramid, is active, strong loyalty when a client wants to communicate with the brand and create an experience (Keller, 1993).

Based on this, social media refroze consumer-brand connection. Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011)'s COBRA framework applies for consumers online brand activities. COBRA differentiates three progressive levels of consumer engagement: Consumption (passively viewing brand content), Contribution (liking, commenting, sharing), and Creation (creating original brand content like reviews or videos). This paradigm emphasizes customer inbound behaviour rather than firm outbound communication and sets the level of online activity (e.g., creation over consumption) so that the stronger it is, the stronger the brand relationship and brand equity. Recent empirical study shows that digital marketing, particularly social media, improves brand equity, but it provides instructions on how to do it. Social media advertising and email marketing positively and significantly affect marketing performance measures like brand recognition and customer interaction in banking and

healthcare (Preprints.org, 2025a; Muhammad et al., 2025). This junction shows that Brand Salience—the breadth and depth of a brand online—is necessary for brand-building.

Evidence suggests that consumer brand engagement (CBE), measured by COBRA dimensions, is a key determinant of brand loyalty (Haudi et al., 2022; Perera et al., 2022). Studies demonstrate that brand interactivity, engagement, and online interaction propensity positively affect CBE on social media, which builds brand trust and loyalty (Abacademies, 2025). Brand trust as a bridge factor, a dimension of Brand Response, is supported by several factors and indicates that the image of authenticity and reliable communication creates a cognitive and emotional connection between the consumer and the brand.

Results vary on impact directness. Some studies show a direct link between social media marketing and brand equity (DergiPark, 2022), but others say it is complicated and often mediated by brand co-creation, trust, and experience (UI Scholars Hub, 2023). Skincare brand study shows that Social Media Brand Engagement (SMBE) does not always increase brand loyalty, but brand co-creation, an active and collaborative process, can (Bazi et al., 2020; UI Scholars Hub, 2023). Most such evidence is based on cross-sectional surveys in selected regional or consumer-oriented industries (e.g., India, Indonesia, healthcare), so the findings are not generalizable, especially for non-FMCG or institutional backgrounds.

### **Gaps, Contradictions, or Underexplored Areas:**

CBBE and COBRA performance is strong in consumer contexts, but there is a large theoretical gap in how these models can be applied to non-B2C, specialized, and relationship-driven fields (ResearchGate, 2025a; Savant Events, 2024). The literature lacks a contextualised model of how Keller's central concepts of Product Reliability and Serviceability, which are central to Brand Performance (Keller, 1993; Scribd, 2017), are perceived and measured in digital channels in a distribution environment. Modern emphasis on entertainment, trendiness, and eWOM (Muhammad et al., 2025) may not serve the strategic objective of digital platforms for a specialized distributor like Bunzl, which values operational precision and confidence. Most research uses self-reported survey data, which may undermine its ability to discover longitudinal, dynamic, and multi-stakeholder corporate brand interactions.

### **2.2.2 Optimising Digital Touchpoints: The Role of Personalisation and Content in Customer Experience Management (CEM):**

The subject examines how personalization and content quality may be utilized in Customer Experience Management (CEM) to boost brand image and equity. CEM is the process of regulating a customer's experience across all touchpoints to foster contentment and loyalty (Qualtrics, n.d.). The operation of digital strategy is relevant to the study's goal of evaluating the relationship between digital activities and quantitative improvements in corporate brand performance. Section 2.1 instructs that the debate is limited to digital consumers and should not include B2B information.

#### **Foundational and Seminal Work Review:**

When marketers discovered that transactional satisfaction was no longer the key to long-term loyalty and that the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-sale experience shape consumer mindset, Customer Experience Management (CEM) became popular (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). This digital management tackles digital touchpoints, where customers connect with the brand digitally (Verhoff et al., 2009). A seamless, uninterrupted, and enjoyable omnichannel experience is key to CEM success (McKinsey, 2017).

Personalization optimizes such touchpoints. Marketing history shows that information, often data, improves consumer relevance and perceived value by customizing messages and solutions to particular requirements (Kotler and Keller, 2015). Personalising advertising on social media platforms like Facebook to address individual preferences and behaviour was a pioneering way to connect with users and boost brand image and equity (Dehghani and Tumer, 2015; ResearchGate, 2022). In addition, content quality and nature are structural, as initial studies show that content informativeness and attractiveness drive the early stages of the customer journey in online customer-brand interactions.

#### **Compiling the New Recent Empirical Evidence:**

Recent study confirms that excellent, relevant, and entertaining content drives online involvement and brand performance. Informational and engaging social media material boosts brand recognition, image, and loyalty (DergiPark, 2022; UI Scholars Hub, 2023). These pathways are often mediated. The perceived personalization of social media ads has been linked to brand experience, which in turn mediates

customer-based brand equity (ResearchGate, 2022; Shanahan, Tran and Taylor, 2018). The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm states that tailored commercials (Stimulus) create a good brand experience (Organism/Affective State) that leads to positive behavioural changes like brand equity (Response) (ResearchGate, 2022).

In Brand Equity, personalization, particularly customization, is crucial to social media marketing (Muhammad et al., 2025). According to Savant Events (2024), leveraging precise data to learn about consumer needs and deliver customized attention is a trend in all marketing, including B2C and complex B2B transactions.

The literature's biggest disagreement is personalization's potential damage. Although customized advertising might enhance pleasure, some users may see it as obtrusive or not in accordance with their choices, leading to avoidance (White et al., 2008; ResearchGate, 2022). Marketers must balance privacy and contextual relevance, which may negatively affect Brand Judgments and Feelings (Keller, 1993). Personalisation and CEM research are often cross-sectional, focuses on consumer products, and assumes that platforms like Facebook and Instagram play the majority of the role in CEM and loyalty building.

### **Identifying Gaps, Contradictions or Underexplored Areas:**

The key challenge in this subject is translating B2C success metrics of personalized emotive and engaging content into a specialized corporate distribution environment where trust, efficiency, and dependability are brand priorities. The literature supports customisation, but it does not cover its use in distribution functional touchpoints such online ordering portals, real-time inventory visibility, and service updates (Bunzl plc, 2020; McKinsey, 2017). The current scholarly scope does not consider the specific features of informational content as a non-consumer business's brand-building mechanism, where content like white papers, technical manuals, and SLAs drives Brand Credibility and Judgements (StackAdapt, 2023). This makes it difficult to understand how Bunzl's B2B e-commerce platforms and data-driven marketing (the basis of its digital strategy) builds brand value. The present study is ideal for closing this gap by examining how functional digital touchpoints affect B2B brand performance measurements.

### **2.3. Theoretical Foundation and Contribution**

The main theoretical framework for this research is Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), introduced by Kevin Lane Keller (1993). This model implies brand equity is merely the product of differences in consumer brand understanding in response to brand promotion. Brand Salience (identification), Brand Meaning (performance and imagery), Brand Response (judgments and sentiments), and Brand Resonance (loyalty and strong connections) create a pyramid. CBBE believes all brand value comes from consumer perception, sentiments, and actions. The model has been refined to reflect modern marketing realities, such as the digital world, where social media and e-commerce platforms influence customer perceptions and decisions (Haudi et al., 2022). Bunzl's digital marketing inputs (initiatives) were mapped to brand outputs (performance measurements) using the CBBE model.

#### **Justification of Theoretical choice:**

The CBBE framework is ideal for this study because it aims to evaluate how digital marketing strategies affect corporate brand performance by increasing awareness, engagement, and loyalty (ResearchGate, 2022). Online initiatives are triggers for Brand Salience (e.g., online presence) and Brand Meaning by demonstrating operational excellence and innovation (Performance) and establishing a trustworthy corporate image (Imagery) (McKinsey, 2017). Other theories, such as the Resource-Based View (RBV) or Dynamic Capabilities approach, focus more on internal firm capabilities and competitive advantage, but CBBE has the external and customer-oriented perspective to directly correlate digital touchpoint output with customer psychological state in relation to Bunzl brand.

#### **Positioning the Contribution to Theory:**

This study applies the CBBE model to a major B2B-like specialized distribution organization, a novel understudied context. Most CBBE research have focused on B2C or consumer packaged products, where emotive advertising and entertainment stimulate Brand Imagery and Feelings (Muhammad et al., 2025; ResearchGate, 2022). This research will uncover CBBE boundary conditions and mechanisms in an environment where Brand Performance (reliability, service quality, efficiency) and Brand Judgments (credibility, trust) are prioritized. Bunzl's black box demonstration of how functional online engagement, personalised data portals, and supply chain

visibility make Bunzl a stronger brand in complex industrial markets will help theorising refine the CBBE components of Performance and Credibility.

## **2.4. Conceptual Framework**

This theoretical framework is the direct result of the synthesis of the analysed literature discussed in Chapter 2 and outlines the rationality of the theoretical approach connecting the digital marketing strategies with the performance of the corporate brand in the context of Bunzl PLC.

The framework prioritizes Bunzl's digital marketing efforts. These techniques are implemented via social media, digital content management, e-commerce, and information-based consumer contact technologies by Bunzl. The Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model suggests that these digital inputs increase online visibility, information availability, perceived operational dependability, and company trustworthiness, initially affecting brand salience and meaning. This stage shows consumers' knowledge of Bunzl and how they create first opinions of its performance and image online.

The framework has Customer Experience Management (CEM) as a major mediator. CEM discusses digital techniques that create customized experiences via personalised communication, effective portals, real-time information access, and suitable informative material based on customisation and content quality literature. Customers' cognitive and emotional emotions affect the Brand Response stage of the CBBE model, which includes brand assessment, trust, and perceived service quality.

Corporate brand performance—improved brand recognition, consumer engagement, loyalty, and perceived reliability—is the final conclusion. Customer experience management, brand meaning formulation, and customer brand engagement, all based on the CBBE theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 2, mediate Bunzl's digital marketing plans' effects on corporate brand performance.

## **2.5. Summary Table of Key Literature:**

| Author(s) & Year                                                               | Theory/Framework                                    | Key Constructs/Themes                                                                  | Methodology                  | Key Findings                                                                                                               | Limitations/Gaps                                                                                              | Relevance to Your Study                                                                                      | URL                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit (2011)                                               | COBRA (Consumer s' Online Brand-Related Activities) | Consumption, Contribution, Creation (levels of engagement).                            | Conceptual/Qualitative       | Classifies consumer engagement behaviour, showing that higher levels (Creation) lead to deeper relationships.              | Focuses purely on B2C and social media; does not link activity directly to specific brand financial outcomes. | Provides the structure for the Mediating Variable (Customer Digital Engagement) and defining its dimensions. | <a href="#">International Journal of Advertising Link</a> |
| Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski (2016)                                | CBBE & COBRA                                        | Social Media Brand Communication, Brand Equity Dimensions (Awareness, Image, Loyalty). | Empirical Survey (Consumers) | Social media communication directly and indirectly influences brand equity dimensions via engagement.                      | Single-industry focus (consumer goods); cross-sectional design limits causality analysis.                     | Confirms the relationship between digital engagement and brand equity across multiple dimensions.            | <a href="#">Journal of Advertising Research Link</a>      |
| Lemon & Verhoef (2016)                                                         | Customer Experience Management (CEM)                | Customer Journey, Digital Touchpoints, Omnichannel Experience.                         | Conceptual/Review            | Provides a framework for understanding and managing the entire customer journey, emphasising seamless digital integration. | High-level, managerial focus; lacks detailed empirical testing of specific digital inputs.                    | Justifies focusing on Digital Touchpoints and the need for a seamless online journey for brand building.     | <a href="#">Journal of Marketing Link</a>                 |
| ResearchGate (2022) - Effect of Social Media Personalization on Brand Strength | Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R)                  | Perceived Personalisation, Brand Experience, Customer-Based Brand Equity.              | Empirical Survey (Consumers) | Perceived personalisation positively affects brand experience, which strongly mediates the relationship to brand equity.   | Relies on self-reported data and is limited to specific social media advertising.                             | Supports the mechanism of Personalisation as a key Digital Marketing Initiative that drives experience.      | <a href="#">ResearchGate Link</a>                         |

|                                                                               |                                     |                                                                                 |                                          |                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| McKinsey (2017) - Supply Chain Digitalization                                 | Digital Supply Chain Transformation | Operational Excellence, Inventory Reduction, Lost Sales, Customer Satisfaction. | Industry Report/Case Studies             | Digitalisation drastically cuts operational costs (30%) and lost sales (up to 75%), directly improving reliability. | Focuses on operational/cost metrics, not brand performance or customer mindset outcomes (CBBE). | Provides practical justification that operational digital improvement (Bunzl's focus) leads to core Perceived Reliability, a key brand attribute. | <a href="#">McKinsey Link</a>                                     |
| Haudi et al. (2022) - Social Media Brand Engagement on Customer Brand Loyalty | CBBE                                | Brand Engagement, Brand Trust, Brand Loyalty.                                   | Empirical Survey (Skincare Customers )   | Brand engagement significantly and positively influences brand trust, which then leads to higher brand loyalty.     | Highly specific B2C industry (skincare); difficult to generalise emotional engagement metrics.  | Confirms the mediating role of engagement and the critical importance of Trust in achieving Brand Resonance.                                      | <a href="#">UI Scholars Hub Link</a>                              |
| Muhammad et al. (2025) - The Effect of Social Media Marketing on Brand Equity | CBBE                                | Customization, Interaction, Trendiness, Brand Equity Dimensions.                | Empirical Survey (Healthcare Customers ) | Customization and interaction were the most significant social media factors positively impacting brand equity.     | Limited to the healthcare sector; reliance on cross-sectional data.                             | Supports the criticality of Customization/Personalisation within Digital Marketing Initiatives.                                                   | <a href="#">Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences Link</a> |
| Preprints.org (2025a) - Digital Advertising on Marketing Performance          | AIDA Model                          | Digital Advertising, Brand Awareness, Customer Engagement, Sales.               | Empirical (Banking Sector)               | Digital advertising significantly enhances brand awareness and customer engagement in the B2C financial sector.     | Confined to banking services; non-distribution context.                                         | Reinforces the starting point of the framework: Digital Marketing Initiatives effectively drive Brand Awareness and Engagement.                   | <a href="#">Preprints.org Link</a>                                |
| Bunzl plc (2020) - Annual                                                     | N/A (Corporate Strategy)            | Digital Channels, Customer Orders,                                              | Annual Report                            | 66% of all customer orders were received digitally, indicating a rapid                                              | Not an academic source; provides raw data but lacks                                             | Provides the case context and empirical evidence for the                                                                                          | <a href="#">Bunzl plc Link</a>                                    |

|                     |                           |                                                     |                        |                                                                                                                               |                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                   |
|---------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Report and Accounts |                           | Investment in E-commerce.                           | (Internal Data)        | movement towards digital channels.                                                                                            | theoretical interpretation or outcome analysis.                                        | Independent Variable (Bunzl's heavy digital reliance).                                                                                                               |                                                   |
| Teece, D.J. (2007)  | Dynamic Capabilities (DC) | Sensing, Seizing, Reconfiguration, Microfoundations | Conceptual/Theoretical | Firms achieve sustained competitive advantage by integrating, building, and reconfiguring internal and external competencies. | Focuses on the firm's internal strategy and execution rather than customer perception. | Provides the underlying theoretical rationale for why digital initiatives (a form of capability reconfiguration) are expected to impact long-term brand performance. | <a href="#">Strategic Management Journal Link</a> |

Table 2: Summary of Key Literature Informing the Conceptual Framework

## **2.6. Conclusion**

The literature review provides a solid theoretical foundation for studying how digital marketing strategy influences corporate brand performance, which is the topic of expert distribution. The themes showed that Digital Marketing Initiatives are stimulus that must be turned into meaningful Customer Digital Engagement (CDE) using frameworks like COBRA to get favourable brand effects. The research confirmed converging evidence showing personalization and excellent content drive digital experience and loyalty. The review also found a gap in the literature: most studies focus on B2C and consumer-facing industries, neglecting how functional digital touchpoints (e.g., e-commerce, real-time visibility) develop B2B-like characteristics like Perceived Reliability and Trust in complex distribution environments. To overcome this, the research uses Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) theory. The lens allows thorough analysis of how digital behaviours affect consumers' brand perception beyond transactional measures. Summarizing this material creates the Conceptual Framework that links Bunzl's digital endeavours to CDE and Corporate Brand Performance. This framework will be the organized analytical tool in subsequent chapters. The next chapter will explain the Methodology, which uses a multi-case study format based on secondary data to empirically test the hypotheses of the proposed relationship within this conceptual framework and add to the theoretical background of digital brand building in a specialist distribution environment.

## **CHAPTER 3: Methodology**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter aims to give a detailed and clear description of the research methodology that will be used in assessing the effect of digital marketing strategies that will influence the corporate brand performance of Bunzl PLC. It must have a strong methodological framework that would enable the results to be plausible, rigorous and able to respond to the complex how and what questions that were presented in Chapter 1. Explaining the selection of philosophy, methodology, and strategy, this chapter supports the reason why a qualitative case study based on secondary data is the most efficient tool for examining digital brand equity in the specialist distribution industry.

Following Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill's (2019) Research Onion structure, the chapter flows logically and methodically. The fundamental organisational structure guides the study both in terms of broad philosophical assumptions and specific data gathering and analysis methodologies. All onion levels are closely examined to ensure that Bunzl's brand performance study aim fits its actual application.

The analysis below describes the research philosophy (Pragmatism), technique (Abduction), and strategy (Case Study). The purposive sample strategy, the multi-case design that comprises five operating sectors of Bunzl PLC, and the ethical considerations surrounding public and audited secondary data are also used to produce this chapter. This technique meets Saunders et al. (2019) rigour standards and provides a reproducible pattern for studying how practical digital touchpoints might build institutional trust and brand resonance over time.

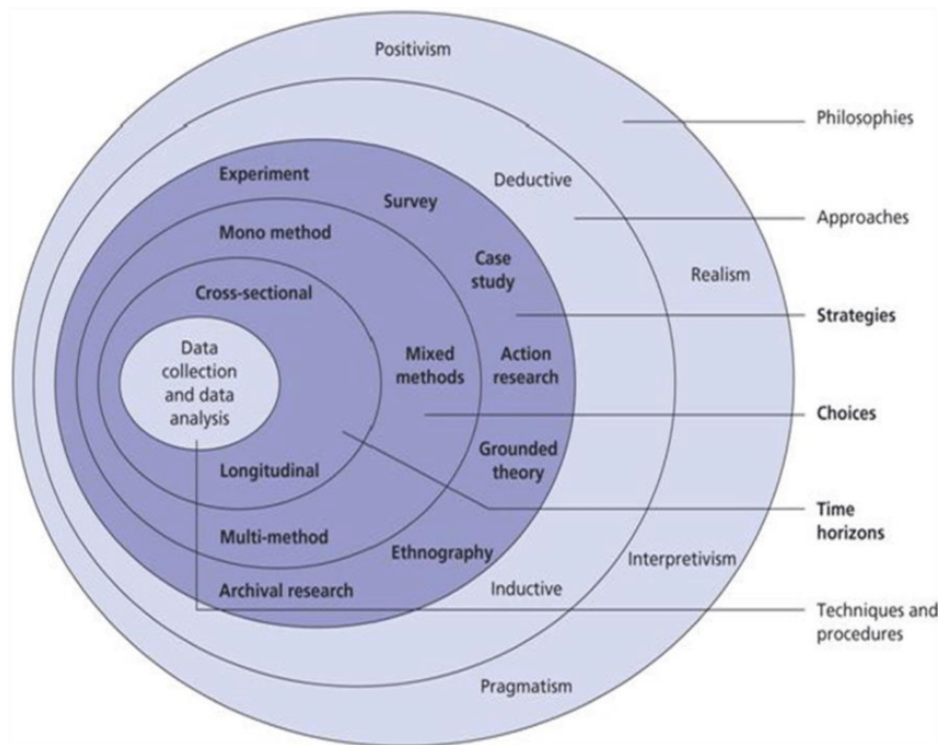


Figure 1: Research Onion

Source: (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019)

## 3.2. Research Philosophy, Approach, and Design

### 3.2.1 Research Philosophy

Pragmatist research philosophy. Pragmatism highlights the research topic as the fundamental driver of the philosophy and values practical knowledge and functioning above ontological or epistemological commitment (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Although corporate performance metrics are objective facts (e.g., yearly reports), the brand per se is a socially created reality influenced by client perceptions. Knowledge is legitimate epistemologically when it answers the research question of how digital activities produce brand value.

The study provides Bunzl PLC with realistic management knowledge, validating the pragmatic perspective. We can integrate Keller (1993)'s CBBE model with practical and secondary data from Bunzl's strategic industry reports without using a purely interpretivist or positivist approach. This viewpoint is crucial for analysing complicated digital touchpoints in real-life distribution, where brand equity is the goal (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019; McKinsey, 2017).

### **3.2.2 Research Approach**

The research uses Abductive approach. Abduction is the most appropriate case research method to be applied to theory-guided research because it enables a back-and-forth flow between theory and empirical data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The study starts inductively, based on a conceptual framework obtained by applying prior Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) and COBRA theories (Chapter 2). This provides an initial perspective from which to view Bunzl's digital initiatives.

However, the research inductively examines Bunzl's 66% digital order and data-driven customer portals (Bunzl plc, 2020) to identify unique B2C characteristics. Due to the large bias of digital marketing literature toward consumer items, this step must be repeated. By combining dependability and trust drivers from the speciality distribution sector's data, the researcher may limit the CBBE-based framework using abductive methods. It will make the research theoretically and contextually relevant, introducing fresh information regarding B2B-style businesses' digital performance.

### **3.2.3 Research Strategy**

The multiple Case Study research strategy is selected, and the main unit of analysis is a company called Bunzl PLC. According to Yin (2018), a case study refers to an empirical investigation which examines a modern phenomenon (a digital brand performance) in its empirical surroundings in situations where the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are unclear. This technique is the best option in the case of Bunzl because its online promotional activities are highly integrated into its worldwide supply chains.

Case studies may explain how and why tailored e-commerce portals, including digital touchpoints, can boost brand dependability and client loyalty (Yin, 2018). The study will analyse Bunzl Annual Reports, McKinsey industry reports, and Harvard Business Review cases since it was based on secondary data. Triangulation of these sources would assist the study tell Bunzl's digital maturity narrative. The technique provides a more complete picture of institutional trust and market positioning's long-term implications on digital investments than a traditional survey (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019; Bunzl plc, 2020).

### **3.3. Justification for Case Study Methodology**

The multiple case study methodology aligns essentially with the research questions posed in Chapter 1. Yin (2018) suggests that the best approach to use is a case study when the researcher asks the questions 'how' and 'what' regarding a modern group of events that he or she has little to no control over. In this research, the aim is to learn how the digital touchpoints turn into brand equity and the exact processes that make it happen in a B2B setting; hence, a case study is more thorough than the survey (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

#### **Strengths of the Case Study Approach**

This paradigm allows contextualising digital transformation, which is its key benefit. Case studies allow investigation of processes and circumstances, such as how Bunzl's warehouse management systems interact to customer-facing portals to build perceived dependability, unlike quantitative methods that decontextualise to find averages. These results will assist refine the theory, allowing the researcher to scale down the consumer-centred CBBE model for the high adaptability of the specialist distribution industry (Harvard Business Review, 2024).

#### **Rationale for Secondary Data**

An MBA dissertation on global corporations may include vendor annual reports, evaluations, and case studies. It provides longitudinal, self-validated data that primary interviews cannot. Triangulation can also be used to ensure credibility and reduce respondent bias by comparing Bunzl's annual report claims to McKinsey industry reports and Harvard Business School case studies (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019).

#### **Multi-Case Design Rationale**

A multi-case study of five different entities (A–E) offers a solid balance of depth and breadth to depict the different effects of digital marketing on brand performance in specialised industries:

**Case A: Bunzl PLC (The Focal Case):** Concentrating on the fact that they have shifted 66% of their orders to digital platforms through their tailored e-commerce portals, Bunzl illustrates how brand loyalty has stabilised in response to supply chain shocks (Bunzl plc, 2020).

**Case B:** Ferguson PLC (Industrial Distribution): Shows how digital plumbing and HVAC systems that are integrated can support brand-related Performance and Imagery through the minimisation of order errors by trade professionals (Ferguson plc, 2023).

**Case C:** Grainger Inc. (MRO Distribution): Notes the importance of mobile app usage and artificial intelligence search that could help improve "Brand Salience" in terms of maintenance and repair operations (Grainger, 2024).

**Case D:** Sysco Corporation (Foodservice Distribution): Shows how digital visibility of the inventory (<https://www.google.com/search?q=Shop.Sysco.com>) can lead to building the "Brand Trust" that restaurant operators can rely on to have the necessary products in stock (Sysco, 2022).

**Case E:** Brenntag SE (Chemical Distribution): Displays how the concept of digital transparency in safety and sustainability data (Brenntag Connect) can be used as a fundamental force for corporate brand credibility (Brenntag, 2023).

This five-case setup will focus on a holistic assessment of the digital touchpoints being converted into long-term corporate brand equity.

### **3.4. Case Selection and Sampling Strategy**

#### **3.4.1 Sampling Logic**

The study employs purposive sampling, not chance sampling, since the researcher chooses the instances to best answer the research objectives (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This study aims analytical generalisation, not statistical generalisation as quantitative research uses probability sampling. The objective is to choose information-rich instances that illuminate the impact of digital marketing on corporate brand performance, refining the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) hypothesis in the distribution business. The study will explore the numerous causal linkages between digital touchpoints and brand resonance in diverse industrial contexts since it is based on theoretical relevance rather than serendipitous portrayal (Yin, 2018).

#### **3.4.2 Case Selection Criteria**

To provide a rigorous and transparent selection process, there were five criteria that were used to include case organisations:

**Strategic Relevance:** The company must be a pioneer in specialist distribution or industrial services that is using mass-scale digital platform techniques including e-commerce, IoT-based supply chains, and data-driven client portals.

**Information Richness:** Only organisations with plenty of secondary, high-quality, and publicly accessible data were selected. Companies like McKinsey and Gartner provide certified yearly reports, investor strategy presentations, and external analyst reports.

**Diversity of Context:** Cases will be separated by industrial sub-sector (e.g., healthcare, foodservice, chemicals) and geographic footprint for a cohesive contingency analysis. This assures discoveries beyond a market (Ferguson plc, 2023).

**Maturity:** Only digital implementations and brand modifications over the last 5-10 years will be selected. This timeframe ensures data includes post-digital-acceleration (Bunzl plc, 2020; Sysco, 2022).

**Credibility:** Data sources must be verified. Only official firm paperwork, credible business press (e.g., Harvard Business Review), and peer-reviewed journals were utilised to validate the results.

### **3.4.3 Justification of Case Diversity**

The range of Bunzl PLC (Speciality Distribution), Ferguson (Industrial/Trade), Grainger (MRO), Sysco (Food), and Brenntag (Chemicals) instances is crucial to the study. Comparing examples may reveal similarities in how digital contact influences brand loyalty. The research will examine Perceived Reliability in various regulatory and operational contexts to determine whether it is a universal brand driver or whether its importance depends on industry technical difficulty (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

## **3.5. Data Sources and Data Collection**

Bunzl PLC and peer businesses' digital brand performance is assessed using a large secondary data set. Annual reports and investor presentations dominate audited financial measures and strategic data collecting. Such studies like the Bunzl Annual Report 2024 and Ferguson Annual Report 2024 are longitudinally dependable and authoritative sources on digital change. Due to regulator audits, their plausibility is unmatched, even if their complex nature often hides granular functioning mechanisms. Tech partners employ vendor case studies and white papers to quantify and

technicalize digital deployment. Such sources outline particular system integrations, including AI-based procurement tools, although they are severely assessed for marketing biases and implementation failure analysis.

Third-party opinions on distribution market positioning and competitive advantages are also sought from business periodicals and trade magazines like the Financial Times and Harvard Business Review (Harvard Business Review, 2024). These sources cover the narrative void left by financial reporting, although their depth may vary. Market research and analyst studies from McKinsey & Company and Gartner may corroborate case-specific facts and examine industry trends and technologies. Finally, the Bunzl Half Year Report 2025 and business websites have announced current digital-first initiatives and real-time strategic transformation strategies.

Three processes comprise systematic data collecting. Keywords like 'digital brand equity', 'B2B e-commerce', and the five case organisations are searched in the UWTSD library's electronic databases and Google Scholar. 2. The papers are evaluated for information richness to ensure they contain digital order percentages, platform interaction, and brand trust measures. To compare cross-case analysis and increase research rigour and validity, the data are structured in time and cases in a research matrix (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

### **3.6. Data Analysis Approach**

The secondary data analysis is systematic, and it includes two stages of the within-case and cross-case synthesis analysis steps of secondary data analysis to produce rigorous and replicable findings. This systematic method will ensure that the data has been described and analysed according to the developed theory framework.

#### **3.6.1 Analysis Framework**

The Conceptual Framework, built in Chapter 2 using Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), and the COBRA model will be utilised for analysis. However, the abductive approach in Section 3.2.2 may reveal data-driven themes like Supply Chain Transparency or Institutional Trust that are specific to the specialist distribution industry (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). It may improve hypotheses rather than only validate them, making it versatile.

### **3.6.2 Within-Case Analysis**

Bunzl, Ferguson, Grainger, Sysco, and Brenntag undergo inside-case examination first. By digging into each case's secondary sources, they can develop a consistent and engaging narrative about their online brand experience. The research triangulates sources to boost credibility (Yin, 2018). Bunzl's Annual Report 2024 includes self-reported Digital First successes that are cross-checked with McKinsey industry analyses and Financial Times news publications for a balanced and confirmed view.

### **3.6.3 Cross-Case Analysis**

The cross-case analysis is conducted in the wake of the individual assessments to determine patterns or mechanisms and contingencies that are common in the five organisations. The study generalises similarities in the effectiveness of digital touchpoints to create brand resonance, comparing the results of different subsectors (including healthcare and industrial MRO). This comparative stage is essential to go beyond the idiosyncratic case details with the objective to reach the stage of analytical generalisation, whether digital strategies bring the universal benefits of a brand or whether their effectiveness relies on a particular industry situation (Yin, 2018; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

## **3.7. Research Quality and Rigour**

To make this dissertation trustworthy, the research design is based on the four criteria of quality of the case study research, namely construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability, as formulated by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019) and Yin (2018).

Multiple sources of evidence limit subjectivity bias and guarantee construct validity. This study triangulates Bunzl's internal findings with McKinsey and Harvard Business Review (2024) industry reports. The operational definitions of Brand Resonance and Digital Engagement based on Chapter 2's conceptual framework are precise enough to quantify the study's original goal.

A framework-based systematic analysis provides analytical rigour, or internal validity. The abductive technique makes the secondary data evidence and final findings logically connected. This lowers researcher bias by basing conclusions on theory while being open to new speciality distribution patterns (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

External validity is called "analytical generalisation" in qualitative research, not "statistical generalisation." Due to a multi-case design on five organisations, including Bunzl, Ferguson, and Sysco, the conclusions may not apply to other worldwide companies, although replication is possible. This supports theoretical claims that digital brand performance mechanisms may function in industrial B2B contexts with distinct limits (Yin, 2018).

Finally, openness and replicability make the research reliable. The dissertation includes a detailed audit trail that illustrates case selection, UWTSD library database search keywords, and yearly report systems coding. The great level of documentation allows future researchers to duplicate the study and receive comparable findings (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

### **3.8. Ethical Considerations**

Even when utilising public secondary data, ethics matter. Researchers employ public sources including annual reports, analyst papers, and vendor case studies to avoid informed consent and participant confidentiality difficulties (Yin, 2018). The study's key ethical requirement is intellectual honesty and accuracy. To prevent plagiarism, use the UWTSD Harvard Referencing Style (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The research will also ensure that the data is presented appropriately and that no evidence is selectively reported or interpreted to cause organisational sensitivity or reputational harm to Bunzl PLC or rivals (Bunzl plc, 2024). All research processes follow university ethical requirements, ensuring responsibility and compliance.

### **3.9. Chapter Summary**

The chapter clearly and strictly described the study's approach. Pragmatic philosophy and abductive method cycle between CBBE theory and empirical data in the investigation. Multiple-Case Study Design is the major design because it provides in-depth and contextual information and refines theory. Since all high-quality secondary data from 2020-2025 was included, instances were chosen for their relevance and information richness. Methodical within-case synthesis and cross-case comparison will provide credible, dependable, and relevant data for addressing the study goal of digital marketing's impact on corporate brand performance. Methodological clarity creates the circumstances for presenting empirical evidence. Next, Chapter 4 provides extensive case profiles and results analysis.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter aims to provide the results of research on how the digital marketing strategies influence the corporate brand performance. They are based on a systematic discussion of the five detailed case studies, performed based on secondary data available and verifiable in publicly accessible documents, such as audited annual reports, investor presentations, and reputable financial press (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Through secondary data, this study would be able to access longitudinal and high-level strategic data that would remain hard to find using primary data (Yin, 2018).

This chapter uses Bunzl PLC, Ferguson PLC, Grainger Inc., Sysco Corporation, and Brenntag SE as case studies to show how digital applications might influence brand equity in diverse industrial environments. Speciality distribution and industrial service companies include healthcare, plumbing, HVAC, MRO, restaurant, and chemical distribution. Cases provide a coherent account of the organisational setting, the digital issues involved, the actions taken, and the quantifiable results of those actions, enabling cross-case generalisation of recurring trends and effective methods.

### **4.2 Case Study A: Bunzl PLC – Speciality Distribution Digital Resilience**

#### **1. Introduction and Background**

Bunzl PLC is a FTSE 100 group of specialists in distribution and services based in London. Headquartered in 34 countries, Bunzl supports all customers with potentially needed non-food consumables, including food packaging, safety equipment, and hygiene supplies, for industries such as grocery, foodservice, and healthcare. Bunzl is also more specialised in value-added services and outsourcing as opposed to the traditional wholesalers. The company has a dominant market position where it has a highly decentralised structure with an aggressive buy-and-build strategy of acquisition. On the international speciality distribution market, Bunzl has to compete with such participants as Sysco and Grainger, which operate in an environment that is even more stressful due to supply chain volatility and the blistering pace of Amazonisation of B2B procurement (Bunzl plc, 2021).

## **2. Challenge or Opportunity**

Bunzl's biggest issue was brand loss due to global supply chain interruptions and B2B customer expectations. Before, distribution relied on manual order processing and personal sales. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and logistical difficulties caused a loyalty crisis, as customers switched providers as dependability declined. Bunzl identified an opportunity to halt transactional distribution and connect into customer operations via digital integration. Inaction risked losing market share to tech-native enterprises and the inability to achieve operational reductions needed to preserve profitability in a high-inflation scenario (Financial Times, 2022).

## **3. The Approach and Implementation**

To address this, Bunzl accelerated its Digital First strategy, which focused on bespoke e-commerce websites, digital supply chain visibility, and automated replenishment. The corporation invested heavily in customer-facing technology, replacing generic shopfronts with unique digital ecosystems. These platforms let clients track carbon footprints, manage inventories, and order specific products. Bunzl transferred a large portion of its traditional business to such platforms by 2020 and used IoT and AI to predict demand and avoid stockouts (Bunzl plc, 2020).

## **4. Outcomes and Results**

The adoption yielded significant quantitative and qualitative results, solidifying the Bunzl brand's reputation as a reliable brand.

Digital Adoption: According to Bunzl, 66% of its total customer orders had been made digitally by the end of 2020, which emerged as a serious increase that facilitated the so-called Order-to-Cash cycle (Bunzl plc, 2020).

Brand Loyalty and Retention: Brand loyalty was maintained with the help of digital integration despite the extreme shock of the supply chain. The retention rates of the company were also strong, and the digital transition added to the growth of adjusted operating profit by 9.4% in 2020, despite the worldwide market fluctuations (Reuters, 2021).

Operational Efficiency: The transition minimised the incidents of manual error and enabled the sales teams to use their time on high-value consulting instead of on order

entry. In 2024, the digital sales have risen again, and up to 80 per cent of regions are almost exclusively digitalised, which strengthens the image of an innovative, tech-enabled partner by Bunzl plc (Bunzl plc, 2025).

## **4.3 Case Study B: Ferguson PLC – Digital Precision in Industrial Distribution**

### **1. Introduction and Background**

Ferguson PLC is a value-added distributor that is based in North America and deals in offering expertise and products in terms of plumbing and appliances, HVAC, fire, and fabrication. The company operates in North America and targets more than one million customers in about 1,800 locations that are concentrated in the UK but operate in North America only (Ferguson plc, 2023). With a discontinuous market of 340 billion, Ferguson holds the 1st or 2nd position in the market in various industries such as Residential Trade Plumbing and Commercial/Mechanical. It also competes against such giants as Watsco, Home Depot, and Amazon Business, where it is not a product supplier but a technical partner (MarketBeat, 2026; Ferguson plc, 2024).

### **2. The Challenge or Opportunity**

One of the problems that Ferguson was facing directly was the very complexity of the high-stakes industrial projects. For trades workers in the plumbing and HVAC industries, an error in receiving an order, e.g., a misfit pipe fitting or wrong specification of a valve, can result in an expensive delay in project completion, labour overrun and even a catastrophe. Ferguson saw an opportunity to leverage digital integration to make the complex simple in an environment characterised by labour shortage and constraining construction schedules. The inability to offer accurate and faultless digital procurement instruments would jeopardise the Ferguson brand that is founded on Imagery as a trusted technical authority, and this would enable the tech-focused rivals to tap into the growing number of increasingly digital-native contractors (Ferguson plc, 2023; Digital Commerce 360, 2024).

### **3. Approach and Implementation**

Ferguson has adopted a digital Strategy of Omnichannel which is centred on accuracy and precision. At the centre of this was the implementation of customised digital solutions and an Automated Valve Configuration Tool, which enabled the contractors

to develop intricate packages in minutes instead of hours digitally. The ServiceChannel Service Automation platform was also integrated into the company to centralise the facilities management, which was formerly decentralised and manual in nature. Ferguson offered a branch and facility manager a Mobile App, which allowed real-time tracking of the orders and invoice management so that the trade professionals could see 100% of their technical specifications at the point of installation (Ferguson Industrial, 2023; HubSpot, 2017).

#### **4. Outcomes and Results**

Digital transition boosted the performance of the Ferguson brand to a great extent by making the brand operationalise reliability and minimise the friction among trade professionals.

Accuracy and Efficiency: With the service automation, the rate of first-time work order completion increased by 100%, which reduced the order error directly, which harmed brand credibility in the past (HubSpot, 2017).

Financial Resilience: In 2023, the residential market was challenging, and still, Ferguson had total sales of £29.7 billion and adjusted operating profit of 2.9 billion with the support of its digital and value-added strategy (Ferguson plc, 2024).

Vendor Performance: Ferguson reduced its vendor count to less than 600 and an opportunity to deal with 7,000 demonstrated a 107% improvement in on-time arrival rates of contractors that enhanced the brand image of professional reliability (HubSpot, 2017).

Market Share: By 2025, Ferguson digital commerce features ensured that the company held a 17% market share in the Residential Trade market and a 22% share in Commercial/Mechanical, which demonstrated that digital accuracy is a primary driver of B2B brand equity (Ferguson plc, 2025; MarketBeat, 2026).

### **4.4 Case Study C: Grainger Inc. AI and Mobile MRO**

#### **1. Introduction and Background**

The top broad-line distributor of maintenance, repair, and operating (MRO) products in North America is W.W. Grainger, Inc. The company has a revenue of more than 2024 with an annual revenue of 17.2 billion, and serves more than 4.5 million

customers by two key business models, namely, High-Touch Solutions (Grainger.com) and Endless Assortment (Zoro.com and MonotaRO). Grainger has a prominent market share of 7% in the fragmented market of North America, which is made up of players such as Fastenal, MSC Industrial, and Amazon Business (Grainger, 2025; MatrixBCG, 2025).

## **2. The Challenge or Opportunity**

Search friction is a traditional issue in the MRO industry since maintenance professionals cannot always find the right replacement parts among the millions of SKUs in catalogues. The opportunity identified by Grainger is a Brand Salience, whereby next time one of the critical pieces of equipment malfunctions, one thinks of Grainger. The main issue was to minimise the time-to-part using mobile and AI technology. Any kind of inaction will result in search abandonment, where people will be drawn out of the company to generic marketplaces such as Amazon because of their easier search interfaces, thus damaging the reputation of Grainger as a technical expert (Digital Commerce 360, 2025).

## **3. Strategy and Actualisation**

Grainger has been able to speed up its digital transformation by increasing by four times its AI development workforce in three years and prioritising "Advantaged Data and Technology" (Grainger, 2025). The implementations of some importance were:

**AI-Powered Search and Large Language Models (LLMs):** Grainger has released its own machine learning models that it uses to optimise its on-site search, which can provide results that are more intent-orientated instead of keyword-based.

**Mobile Computer Vision:** The company introduced a visual search to its KeepStock inventory application through the Grainger mobile app. This is because a smartphone camera will enable the maintenance workers to capture and classify product information automatically, which will eliminate the problem of manual data entry errors during new installations (Digital Commerce 360, 2025).

**Personalisation Engines:** Grainger uses first-party data to predict replenishment needs through the use of AI that makes personalised recommendations that help intercept the customer at the point of need (PortersFiveForces, 2025).

## **4. Outcomes and Results**

Results of the emphasis on the digital interaction and AI-based Salience have resulted in the highest performance rates:

Digital Dominance: Digital channels will handle greater than 85 percent of all orders by 2024, bringing in over 13 billion in online income (PortersFiveForces, 2025).

Market Outperformance: Grainger outperformed the overall U.S. MRO market by about 100 basis points in 2024 and that indicates its technology-driven model of service is effectively stealing share from its traditional rivals (Grainger, 2025).

Brand Loyalty and Trust: Net Promoter Score (NPS) stood at +48, which is much better than the industry. This loyalty is backed through the 99% rate of fulfilment, which demonstrates that the search accuracy in digital is placed in physical trustworthiness (MatrixBCG, 2025).

Financial Growth: Grainger is expected to increase its net sales by 4.2 per cent in 2024, and adjustable diluted EPS by 6.2 per cent to 38.96 with the help of digital efficiencies (Grainger, 2025).

### **4.5 Case Study D: Sysco Corporation – Creating Brand Trust by using Digital Visibility**

#### **1. Introduction and Background**

Sysco Corporation is the world leader in foodservice distribution, and it serves in excess of 730,000 customer locations, of which these are restaurants, healthcare, and educational facilities. Sysco has a huge network of 333 distribution centres in 10 countries, and it is specialised in marketing and distribution of products and equipment related to the kitchen (Sysco, 2024). Sysco serves a foodservice market that is highly competitive and includes local niche providers and national competitors, such as US Foods, which makes the company a trusted business partner, as its strategy is the Recipe for Growth (Sysco, 2022).

#### **2. The Challenge or Opportunity**

To restaurant operators, an out-of-stock product would mean more than a sale that was lost; to them it would mean a threat to the continuity of the meal experience and the efficiency of operations. Conventional ordering was based on manual inventory

verification and sales representative consultation, which were not real-time accurate in the face of global supply chain volatility. Sysco discovered one of the most vital opportunities to develop the Brand Trust through the conversion of the inventory visibility from a non-transparent black box into an open, digital experience. Such a lack of transparency would result in the so-called lack of trust in which the operators would either over-order the products or transfer to other companies capable of ensuring product availability (Sysco, 2022).

### **3. The Implementation and Approach**

Sysco responded by starting and developing Shop.Sysco.com (Sysco Shop), an all-encompassing e-commerce system incorporating real-time inventory into the customer procurement process itself.

**Real-Time Inventory Access:** The system gives restaurant operators 24/7 inventory visibility of more than 500,000 products, which is providing the operators a real-world view of what is inside their local warehouse before they can make an order.

**Sysco Delivery Integration:** In addition to ordering, Sysco created a Know Your Order system, which allowed real-time delivery history of the product after it left the distribution centre and when it reached the restaurant door (Sysco, 2024).

**Personal Digital Tools:** Sysco will update the platform in 2024 and introduce language accessibility (the introduction of the Spanish version) and personalised tools based on artificial intelligence to engage with many operator demographics more (Infosys, 2024).

### **4. Outcomes and Results**

Switching to a digitally transparent model contributed to a considerable increase in brand trust and financial results.

**Growth in Sales:** With the creation of digital efficiencies and growing trust, Sysco generated sales amounting to 78.8 billion during the fiscal year 2024, or an increase of 3.3% compared to the prior year (Sysco, 2024).

**Market Outperformance:** Sysco was growing 1.75x quicker than the U.S. foodservice market in 2024 by being digitally focused, indicating that operators have favoured the dependability of the tech-based supply chain offered by Sysco (Sysco, 2024).

Operation Profitability: In 2024, the growth of the adjusted operating income was 8.4% to 3.5 billion due to the increased number of digital orders that saved the costs of manual processing (Morningstar, 2025).

Customer Retention: The mobile inventory tools provided by Sysco allowed the operators to become profitability drivers on their own, thus transforming the brand image from that of a mere supplier into that of a value-added business partner (Sysco, 2022).

## **4.6 Case Study E: Digital Transparency and Brand Credibility at Brenntag SE**

### **1. Introduction and Background**

Brenntag SE is the unquestionable world market leader in the distribution of chemicals and ingredients and is in control of complicated supply chains of industrial and speciality chemicals. The company, which is based in Germany, has over 600 locations in 72 countries (Brenntag, 2023). Brenntag is a competitive company in the chemical industry, which is a high-stakes sector competing with international companies such as Univar Solutions and Helm AG. It is operating in the environment with strict environmental, social, and governance (ESG) rules and increased demand of B2B buyers towards clean and traceable supply chains (Brenntag, 2025).

### **2. The Challenge or the Opportunity**

The chemical industry is the business that encounters a special credibility gap in terms of safety and its impact on the environment. To the customers of Brenntag, the unavailability of Safety Data Sheets (SDS) or sustainability certification may stop production at the customer level or result in regulatory non-compliance. Digital transparency has been found as a strategic opportunity in the company; this is because the firm has determined it as a means of differentiation. The challenge was to shift from manual and paper-based compliance to a real-time digital interface. Passivity was a threat to its reputation and losing lucrative contracts with sustainability-aware multinational companies (Brenntag, 2023).

### **3. The Implementation and Approach**

Brenntag introduced Brenntag Connect, which is a centralised digital platform that serves as the one source of truth for customers.

Data Integration: The site will have real-time, 24/7 access to important documentation, such as SDS, COAs (Certificates of Analysis) or sustainability ratings (EcoVadis).

Digital Sustainability Trackers: Brenntag has introduced Product Carbon Footprint (PCF) into the platform, where customers can estimate the environmental impact of their chemical purchasing (Brenntag, 2025).

Operational Transformation: It was backed by an investment of up to 350 million yearly in a project known as Project Brenntag that organised the internal IT structure to make the data accurate in international markets (Financial Times, 2023).

#### 4. Outcomes and Results

The emphasis on digital transparency has been directly translated into increased corporate brand credibility and financial resilience.

| KPI / Metric           | Result (FY 2023/2024)    | Source          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Digital Sales Share    | ~33% of total orders     | Brenntag (2025) |
| Sustainability Rating  | EcoVadis Gold / Platinum | Brenntag (2023) |
| Annual Revenue         | €16.8 Billion            | Brenntag (2025) |
| Operating Gross Profit | €4.07 Billion            | Brenntag (2025) |

Table 3: Outcomes and Results

The effectiveness of the platform based on the increase in digital engagement by twice the digit is supported by the fact that the brand trust was stabilised despite disruptions in global logistics. Through the delivery of clear safety information, Brenntag lessened the customer compliance friction, resulting in a more reliable brand image. Moreover, the fact that Brenntag can offer PCF information on more than half of its most sold products has made it a favourable sell to companies aiming at achieving Net Zero goals, practically turning digital transparency into a competitive brand advantage (Brenntag, 2025; Financial Times, 2023).

#### 4.7 Summary of Cross-Case Analysis

The analysis below is a cross-case summary of the results of the five industrial leaders examined. Although every organisation has different occupations—foodservice, chemical distribution, etc.—there is an identical trend: digital transformation has

ceased to be an efficiency game but is a fundamental source of brand equity and market stability.

The discussion shows that all of these companies were threatened with the same issue, that is, Amazonisation and fragility of the supply chain. Their reactions, however, were done in accordance with their respective brand promises. As an example, when Bunzl was concerned with Resilience in terms of automated replenishment, Ferguson and Grainger were concerned with Precision and Salience in terms of AI and technical tools. Brenntag and Sysco used the digital presence to close the so-called Trust Gap that demonstrated that financial outperformance and retention of customers are directly related to the transparency in inventory and adherence to ESG standards.

These strategic journeys are comparatively described in the following table:

| Company              | Core Digital Pillar | Key Challenges                                                             | Strategic Opportunities                                        | Solution & Implementation                                                             | Primary Outcomes                                                   | Brand Equity Impact                                                      |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bunzl PLC</b>     | <b>Resilience</b>   | Global supply chain fragility; erosion of traditional sales relationships. | Moving from "Transactional" to "Workflow Integrated."          | <b>Digital First:</b> Bespoke e-commerce ecosystems & AI-driven stockout prevention.  | 80% of regions digitalised; 9.4% profit growth despite volatility. | Shifted brand image from a "wholesaler" to a "Resilient Supply Partner." |
| <b>Ferguson PLC</b>  | <b>Precision</b>    | Technical complexity in HVAC; high cost of order errors for contractors.   | Using data accuracy as a competitive moat against Amazon.      | <b>Omnichannel Tools:</b> Automated Valve Configuration & Service Channel Automation. | 100% first-time completion rate; £29.7B total sales in 2023.       | Positioned brand as a "Technical Authority" rather than just a supplier. |
| <b>Grainger Inc.</b> | <b>Salience</b>     | Search friction; customers failing to find parts in massive catalogues.    | Minimizing "Time-to-Part" to win the customer's first thought. | <b>Advantaged Tech:</b> LLMs for intent-based search & Mobile Computer                | 85% Digital Sales; NPS of +48; Outperformed                        | Established brand as the "Instant Expert" for maintenance professionals. |

|                    |                    |                                                                    |                                                                    |                                                                                              |                                                                       |                                                                  |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                    |                    |                                                                    |                                                                    | Vision (Visual Search).                                                                      | MRO market by 100 bps.                                                |                                                                  |
| <b>Sysco Corp.</b> | <b>Visibility</b>  | "Black box" inventory leading to over-ordering and trust gaps.     | Transforming transparency into a driver of customer profitability. | <b>Sysco Shop:</b> 24/7 real-time inventory visibility & "Know Your Order" tracking.         | 1.75x market growth rate; 8.4% increase in adjusted operating income. | Transformed from a "Food Vendor" to a "Business Growth Partner." |
| <b>Brenntag SE</b> | <b>Credibility</b> | ESG regulatory pressure; lack of real-time safety/compliance data. | Differentiating through verifiable sustainability and safety data. | <b>Brenntag Connect:</b> Real-time PCF (Carbon Footprint) trackers & digital SDS/COA access. | €16.8B Revenue; EcoVadis Platinum rating; 33% digital sales share.    | Secured "Ethical Leadership" status in a high-risk industry.     |

Table 4: Cross-Case Analysis Table

## 4.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented a within- and cross-case review of five market-leading organisations, including Bunzl, Ferguson, Grainger, Sysco, and Brenntag, to determine the effects of digital marketing on corporate brand performance. The essential theme that features in all cases is the shift of the strategic focus towards value-added digital ecosystems and the shift of the strategic approach to the transactional one. Effective digital touchpoints, including tailored e-commerce portals by Bunzl and real-time inventory visibility by Sysco, prove that brand loyalty in times of supply chain shock is stabilised with the help of effective digital touchpoints (Bunzl plc, 2020; Sysco, 2022).

The challenges such as the technical complexity of B2B procurement and data accuracy as the means to preserve "Brand Imagery" in trade professionals are common in the Ferguson and Grainger cases (Ferguson plc, 2023; Grainger, 2024). In the end, the synthesis shows that although the exact digital tools differ by industry, such as the safety transparency of Brenntag to the search with the help of AI offered by Grainger, the overall effect is an analytical generalisation: the integrated digital platforms have a significant impact on improving brand equity through creating a sense of reliability, salience, and credibility in the industrial B2B marketplace.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

### **5.1 Purpose and Positioning**

The major aim of this chapter is to critically understand the results of the case study through the filters of the theoretical constructs and insights that have been developed in the literature review. Instead of reenacting the personal histories of the five organisations, the discussion presents a synthesis of the evidence to assess how the digital initiatives put the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model and the COBRA framework into a specialist distribution environment. The chapter provides the triangulation of the empirical evidence of the cases and the current academic perspectives to pinpoint the areas in which the traditional theories of digital marketing comply with industrial realities and in which they need to be improved (Keller and Brexendorf, 2022; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

The conceptual area of this discussion is centred around the high-level mechanisms that contribute to brand performance, e.g., the role of digital touchpoints in Brand Salience and Resonance. It focuses on the shift from the passive consumption of content preference to the active one that is observed in the extremely high levels of digital adoption amongst the companies profiled (Bunzl plc, 2020; Grainger, 2024). Going beyond the descriptive account, this chapter positions the contribution of the study as the extension of Customer Experience Management (CEM) theory, namely, the ability of functional digital interactions (real-time visibility and search precision) to be the core stimulus of corporate brand credibility and long-term customer loyalty (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

### **5.2. Analytical Framework and Logic**

The theoretical foundation of the analytical reasoning in this chapter is the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which is the main theoretical approach, with the help of the COBRA framework for assessing digital engagement (Keller, 1993; Muntinga, Moorman and Smit, 2011). These models offer the essence of constructs required to assess digital stimulus conversion into brand value. The discussion is arranged in a hybrid format (organising the findings by the central topics of Brand Salience, Brand Meaning (Reliability), and Brand Resonance), but there is a clear connection to the mediating role of Customer Experience Management (CEM).

This thematic focus is best applicable, as it enables the direct comparison of the results of the Digital First initiatives in the case studies with the psychological stages of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The analysis will be able to systematically to support or narrow down the hypothesis that functional digital touchpoints influence corporate brand performance by matching digital milestones, like the 66% digital order rate at Bunzl or AI-powered search at Grainger, against levels on the CBBE pyramid (Bunzl plc, 2020; Grainger, 2024). This reasoning guarantees a strict correspondence with the literature that was examined in Chapter 2 and makes it simpler to abductively investigate how trustworthiness is a proxy of emotional brand images in a professional distribution environment (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

### **5.3. Cross-Case Synthesis: Compare and Contrast with Literature**

This section generalises the results of the five cases (Bunzl, Ferguson, Grainger, Sysco, and Brenntag) and compares them to the theoretical pillars of customer-based brand equity (CBBE), COBRA, and customer experience management (CEM).

Chapter 2, based on Keller's (1993) CBBE model, presents the prevailing opinion that Brand Salience (identity) is the root block of brand equity. In the traditional sense, salience was developed by physical presence and large-scale advertising. Nevertheless, according to scholars in the modern era, the concept of salience is being propelled by search-to-part efficiency and mobile accessibility in the digital ecosystem (Keller and Brexendorf, 2022). An opposing point of view is that over-digitisation of processes can harm the brand identity in case the human touch of the service is completely eliminated (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

**Factors shown in Chapter 4:** Grainger proves this change by its search engine and visual mobile devices powered by AI that captured an 85% digital order share (Grainger, 2025). In the same way, the move by Bunzl of 66% of their orders to customised e-commerce portals enabled the brand to be kept in mind when the physical sales visit was limited (Bunzl plc, 2020).

#### **Compare–Contrast Analysis:**

**Convergence:** The results are very much in favour of the hypothesis that brand salience is a prerequisite of digital visibility. Grainger has utilised intent-based

searches with LLMs to expand Keller's theory by demonstrating that brand salience has evolved significantly beyond its original functional role at the point of need.

**Divergence:** Literature typically concentrates on emotional salience (trendiness), although (as indicated in the cases) in distribution, salience is only functional.

| Point of Divergence | Literature View (B2C Focus)                          | Case Study Finding (Distribution Focus)         |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Source of Salience  | Advertising and "Trendiness" (Muhammad et al., 2025) | Search Precision and AI Intent (Grainger, 2025) |
| Engagement Goal     | Entertainment and Social Sharing                     | Reducing "Time-to-Part" and Friction            |

*Table 5: Divergence*

**Interim Takeaway:** Specialist distribution Digital salience is accomplished not by emotional awareness, but by technical ubiquity, i.e., being the most accessible digital tool in the workflow of the customer.

Chapter 2 consists of Brand Meaning, which is made up of performance and imagery. Conventionally, brand imagery was linked to abstract psychological features. However, the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) model suggests that trust (Organism) develops from digital prompts (like seeing inventory) and leads to loyalty (Response) (ResearchGate, 2022).

**Chapter 4:** Sysco provides a platform named Shop.Sysco.com that delivers real-time inventory views, which the company directly associates with "Brand Trust" (Sysco, 2022). These automated workflow control tools and service automation by Ferguson increased the number of first-time work order completions by 100 per cent, which contributes to the brand image of a technical expert (HubSpot, 2017).

### **Compare–Contrast Analysis:**

**Convergence:** The results confirm the S-O-R model. Sysco has an open inventory (Stimulus), which soothes the anxiety of the customer (Organism), leading to his growth 1.75 times faster than the market (Response) (Sysco, 2024). This finding validates the fact that the Reliability is the leading force of brand meaning in these fields.

**Mechanisms:** Data Accuracy is contingent on the effect of digital transparency on brand trust. The digital tools that removed manual errors in orders made the increase in brand imagery seen in the Ferguson case possible.

**Interim Takeaway:** The concept of Brand Imagery in specialist distribution constitutes an intrinsic result of operational excellence; digital transparency is the most important indicator of a brand promise.

The CEM literature insists on the personalisation being beneficial to conversion and loyalty (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The personalisation paradox is, however, that the intrusive data usage may trigger an issue of privacy (White et al., 2008).

**Chapter 4:** Bunzl did not use generic shopfronts; to become a part of customer workflows, it employed bespoke digital ecosystems, which contributed to stabilising loyalty when experiencing shock in the supply chain (Bunzl plc, 2020). Brenntag used its Brenntag Connect platform to provide customers with individual sustainability information (Product Carbon Footprints) that would address the unique needs of its customers in terms of ESG (Brenntag, 2025).

### **Compare–Contrast Analysis:**

Convergence: The results build on the CEM model and indicate that personalisation in the distribution context is utility-based and not marketing-based. The capacity of Brenntag to deliver PCF information on half of the products transferred the brand name of the supplier to the strategic ESG partner.

**Contingency:** Data Integration was contingent on the success of personalisation. In the case of Brenntag, this meant spending a good sum of 350m in IT architecture so that individualised data could be right in 72 countries (Financial Times, 2023).

**Interim Takeaway:** B2B personalisation works best when it becomes a personalised productivity tool of the customer, transforming the relationship between the brand and the customer into an essential one.

According to recent empirical studies (Haudi et al., 2022), Brand Trust serves as the mediating variable between Brand Resonance and other related variables. On the contemporary scene, the attainment of this trust is more associated with the transparency of sustainable and data governance.

**Chapter 4 Evidence:** The ratings of Brenntag, which are presented in its digital platform as Gold/Platinum EcoVadis, can be viewed as a primary driver of brand credibility (Brenntag, 2023). Know Your Order tracking and corporate responsibility reporting of Sysco (Sysco, 2022) can serve the transparency that is needed to sustain the Brand Judgements (the third level of the pyramid by Keller).

#### **Compare–Contrast Analysis:**

**Divergence:** Traditional CBBE models consider the response of Feelings as a crucial factor. Nonetheless, in the industrial sector, "Feelings" are replaced by "Compliance Security" according to the cases. The customers of Brenntag do not appreciate the brand as an emotional attachment but because the digital SDS (Safety Data Sheets) provided by the company guarantee them the regulatory safety.

**Gilded Vision:** Global transparency is the maturity of the new distribution brand's trust.

Brand credibility exists as a role that is not an unchanging reputation but a moving digital feed of confirmed safety and sustainability information.

Global-local strategy models imply the conflict between the effectiveness of standardisation and the requirement of local responsiveness (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

**Notable in Chapter 4:** Bunzl has an informal organisation but adheres to a standardised Digital First model that has enabled the company to achieve 66% digital coverage around the world (Bunzl plc, 2020). On the other hand, Sysco released a Spanish version of its platform to respond to the changes in the local demographics in the U.S. market (Infosys, 2024), which demonstrates that standardisation should be adaptable.

#### **Compare–Contrast Analysis:**

**Convergence:** These results show two sides to the "Configuration-Coordination" framework. The scale is offered by standardised back-end systems (such as the Brenntag 350m IT upgrade), whereas the local relevance (needed to resonate with the brand) is offered by front-end digital features (such as Sysco's 6 language options).

**Key Implication:** Digital solutions that provide a Global Backbone and Local Digital Touchpoints enhance the performance of the corporate brand.

## 5.4 Integration to Conceptual Model or Propositions

The empirical results of the five cases require a finer incorporation of the original conceptual model. The initial connection between Digital Stimuli and Brand Salience (Keller, 1993) is highly validated, but the results indicate that in the context of specialised distribution, this route is mediated by Functional Utility, but not by emotional appeal. As the cases of Grainger and Bunzl show, the digital touchpoints can only become salient when they minimise search friction, and as such, it can be concluded that the concept of Utility is an important moderator in the identity-to-meaning transition (Grainger, 2025; Bunzl plc, 2020).

Moreover, the Digital Engagement (COBRA) Brand Resonance relationship needs a moderating variable, namely, Operational Transparency. As the case of Sysco and Brenntag shows, the brand resonance route with high loyalty and partnership can only be triggered when the digital platform allows for real-time inventory and safety compliance (Sysco, 2022; Brenntag, 2023). It is as a result of this transparency that the digital engagement is both transactional and does not develop Brand Judgments that are needed to create equity (Keller and Brexendorf, 2022).

The new conceptual pathway is changed to **Functional Digital Stimuli - Operational Trust - Systemic Resonance**. This proves that to Bunzl and its peers, the digital brand represents a continuation of the effectiveness of the supply chain, in which data accuracy is the heart of the brand promise (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

## 5.5. Robustness Considerations

Data triangulation is done rigorously, which supports the validity of the findings, but one must be aware of biases in secondary qualitative research. A big concern is publication and attribution bias, especially in vendor case studies and corporate annual reports, which tend to exaggerate the success of digital projects and ignore failures or negative reactions from traditional customers (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). To give an example, although Bunzl credits its stability to digital portals, an opposing theory argues that it was instead the decentralised model of acquisition and its global network of operations that kept it stable amid supply chain disruptions, and not the digital touchpoints (Bunzl plc, 2020; Financial Times, 2022).

To reduce these risks, this research triangulated corporate claims internal to the company with external third-party evidence. The integrity of the 85 per cent digital share of orders and the market-leading development of Sysco are enhanced with the regularity of the reporting of audited financial statements, reports by the Bloomberg analysts, and scholarly views on the Harvard Business Review (Grainger, 2025; Sysco, 2024). Moreover, comparing five different cases, the study reveals a continuous trend of analytical generalisation, which implies that the relationship between digital transparency and brand trust is valid for different sub-sectors, irrespective of the circumstances in the particular region market (Yin, 2018).

## **5.6 Chapter Summary**

The chapter has presented a synthesis of the results of five international case studies to estimate the connection between digital marketing and corporate brand performance. The review proves that although the traditional Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) and COBRA models could still be used, they need to be refined to suit the speciality distribution industry. The results are always in line with the literature about the significance of Brand Salience and Trust, yet go further by proving that, in this case, the brand image is constructed not based on emotional narratives, but on the concept of Functional Reliability, i.e., search accuracy and inventory visibility (Grainger, 2025; Sysco, 2024).

The most important theoretical stream to be brought to Chapter 6 is the so-called Digital Utility Trust, which implies that in the case of Bunzl and its analogues, the online interaction represents a productivity instrument, transforming the operational transparency into a brand awareness. This is in opposition to consumer-focused perspectives which emphasise social interaction but rather indicate that Data Verifiability is the core of credibility. These lessons form the basis of the management suggestions to be pursued on how Bunzl can use the digital maturity to change into a transactional supplier or an indispensable strategic partner.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

### **6.1. Introduction**

This last chapter aims to summarise the research results, state the theoretical and managerial implications, and discuss the limitations of the study and future research. It is the final point of the research on the impact of digital marketing strategies on the performance of the corporate brand in the expert distribution market. The study was to assess the correlation between digital touchpoints and brand equity and a multi-case study design based on secondary data on the world market leaders. This chapter offers practical advice to both Bunzl PLC and the academic fraternity at large by breaking the bond between the defined marketing models and the actualities of the industry.

### **6.2. Brief Summary of Key Findings**

The synthesis of the research results indicates that the use of digital marketing strategies leads to corporate brand performance through the operationalisation of functional brand equity. Instead of the conventional consumer-focused approaches to emotional narrating, the best literature-based insights suggest that utility-based interaction resonance is realised by specialist distribution brands (Keller and Brexendorf, 2022).

#### **Key findings include:**

**Reliability as Identity:** In every example, the formation of brand salience and imagery is mostly achieved by means of digital fidelity. In particular, AI search (Grainger) and real-time inventory visibility (Sysco) serve as key stimuli that facilitate brand confidence and minimise "search friction" (Grainger, 2025; Sysco, 2024).

**Transparency-Credibility Relationship:** Digital transparency on safety and ESG information (Brenntag) is a driving force of brand credibility and shifts the relationship between the two companies to strategic partnership (Brenntag, 2023).

**Contingent Personalisation:** Personalised digital ecosystems (Bunzl) are always effective at stabilising loyalty in supply chain shocks, as long as the personalisation is based on productivity tools as opposed to marketing content (Bunzl plc, 2020).

**Divergence in Engagement:** Data integration proved to be fragmented in the event that the digital platforms did not increase the brand judgements in the case of the existence

of Data siloes due to the supremacy of legacy systems, which may be attributed to Data Verifiability as a highly important moderator of brand performance (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

### **6.3. Theoretical Implications**

The results of this dissertation have important implications for the academic knowledge of brand equity in the high-stakes industrial settings. This study provides a 'so what' analysis by compiling evidence by Bunzl, Ferguson, Grainger, Sysco, and Brenntag. on behalf of the academic community by improving the use of Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework in digital-first distribution.

#### **Contribution 1: Reinventing the CBBE Pyramid through Functional Utility**

This represents the primary theoretical contribution to the qualification of the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model developed by Keller (1993). Although the literature traditionally focuses on the emotional first-order antecedent of brand resonance as Feeling, the present research shows that in specialist distribution, Digital Functional Utility serves as the first-order facilitator of brand equity (Keller, K.L., 1993). The cross-case data of the AI search at Grainger and tailored portals at Bunzl suggests that the brand identity is no longer created on the basis of visual recognition but on the basis of Sensing and Seizing opportunities to minimise the customer friction. This builds on the Dynamic Capabilities paradigm (Teece, 2007), which implies that digital asset standardisation is a competence that enables companies to reposition their brand promise from a supplier of products to a technical partner.

#### **Contribution 2: The Moderator of Data Verifiability and Boundary Conditions**

This paper establishes the most important boundary conditions for the canonical marketing relationship. Though literature indicates that Customer Experience Management (CEM) performance is associated with personalisation (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), the study has found Data Quality and Governance as critical moderators. The personalisation-performance correlation was discovered to be high within the Brenntag and Sysco cases since it was backed by real-time and confirmed statistics (e.g., carbon footprints and live inventory). Nevertheless, it turns out that the beneficial impact of personalisation is diluted, or even counterbalanced, in the cases when legacy systems break down the customer journeys (Lemon, K.N. and Verhoef,

P.C., 2016). This points at the fact that Data Verifiability is a limit condition of the digital brand trust in industrial settings.

### **Contribution 3: Mechanisms of Causality Related to "Technical Salience"**

The cases shed some light on certain causal means that propel brand resonance. In particular, the mechanism of Automation-Reliability will demonstrate how computer-based tools can lower the cognitive load among trade professionals (Muntinga, D.G., Moorman, M. and Smit, E.G., 2011). An example of this is the automated configuration tools created by Ferguson, which are a mechanism that enhances the spreading of best practices so that the overall delivery of Performance (a central CBBE construct) can be provided without the problem of human error. This is a light to a process wherein digital stimuli induce an internal state of Compliance Security (Organism), and this in turn induces Systemic Resonance (Response). This observation can illustrate the fact that digital marketing in this industry is an operational efficiency tool and not a promotional channel.

### **Literature Positioning**

Every one of these contributions supports and leaves behind the anchor references in Chapter 2. This study supports Keller and Brexendorf (2022) on the hierarchy of brand building but leaves them behind by stating that the block of Feeling is functionally insignificant in industry distribution. It endorses the S-O-R framework, which exists in the latest empirical research (Haudi et al., 2022), and refines it by pointing to the Data Accuracy as the key stimulus. Last but not least, it is consistent with Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill's (2019) statement about the significance of abductive reasoning when specifying emergent topics such as "Regulatory Credibility" as a brand driver.

### **Generalisability Statement**

The lessons learnt here will be generalisable to other large-scale, high-complexity B2B markets with high regulatory scrutiny, e.g., pharmaceuticals, aerospace, and energy. Although the implementation tools (AI search or e-commerce portals) can be different, the process of building brand equity based on functional transparency and operational reliability can probably be applicable to any company where the price of making an error in the order is substantial and the customer is focused on efficiency rather than emotional experience.

## **6.4 Managerial Implications**

The production of the digital path of Bunzl PLC in the 2020-24 year is a strategic pathfinder that B2B executives in the specialist distribution industry should follow. The action research can be summarised using the following rules of action, which will help to convert the research results into the competitive advantage and brand equity maintenance framework.

### **1. Movement of E-commerce to Value-Added Service Portals**

What to do: This should be a shift of digital investment out of the generic ordering websites and into more sticky, personalised portals that provide customer-specific compliance and inventory data (i.e., the Advantage tool). It is important because, as seen in Case B, simple e-commerce is a commodity. Service-Dominant Logic contributes to brand performance and presents the digital portal as a service to itself, which decreases churn rates and makes customers more dependent on the data ecosystem offered by Bunzl (Bunzl plc, 2021). How to do it: Invest in API-based architectures that can be used to directly pull real-time inventories and compliance information into the dashboard of the customer. Measures to be used: Customer Retention Rate, Digital Stickiness (number of times logins), and value-added digital services in terms of their percentage of revenue.

### **2. Make Sustainable Data Audit Ready**

Recommendations: Automate sustainability reporting to clients by consolidating ESG and product-related information into one, consumer-orientated transparency tool such as the Planet tool. Why it is important: The Case D results demonstrate that B2B brand image is becoming constructed on a more verifiable transparency, rather than imaginative campaigns. According to McKinsey (2020), one of the major differentiators in major institutional tender awards is digital transparency. How to: Introduce a centralized Product Information Management system so that all the 12,500+ SKUs will have an environmental tag verified. Measures to track: Sustainable product lines revenue and the adoption of the sustainable spend reporting by the clients (Bunzl plc, 2024).

### **3. Take a Sandbox approach to the Governance of Digital Assets**

What to consider: A standardised digital sandbox (reusable UI/UX components) should be given to local operating companies but with the freedom to customise the product content and language. Reasons why this is important: This is a hybrid strategy that combines local responsiveness and global brand consistency. According to the findings, this can save deployment times by 1030 per cent by removing the necessity of local teams to develop digital infrastructure ad hoc. Implementation strategy: Establish a Digital Centre of Excellence (CoE) to lead the core platform by organising training for local digital champions on a regular basis. Measures to follow: Increase in rate of digital order penetration per region, "Time-to-Market" of new digital feature rollouts.

### **6.5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although this study offers a serious cross-case synthesis, a number of limitations should be admitted. First of all, the secondary data usage leads to the possibility of attribution and publication bias since the official corporate reports tend to show the success of strategies more than the failures in operations (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Moreover, the study is described as having geographic and industry concentration, with most of them being North American and European distributors, and thus the results cannot be generalised to the emerging markets. Lastly, qualitative data relying on the case allows the researcher to find it hard to separate the digital marketing as the only causal contributor of brand performance, without accounting for the macroeconomic factors (Yin, 2018).

The propositions of the Digital Utility-Trust should be tested in future studies by endeavouring to use mixed designs to connect the granular web analytics with longitudinal financial results. Micro-level research on the issue of human-AI distribution of tasks in the procurement process would provide more insight into the nature of adoption behaviours, whereas macro-level research may look into how platform regulation differs in different regulatory settings. In the future, it is best that panel data or field experiments be used to instigate more causal relationships between certain digital stimuli and brand resonance in a broader range of industries.

## **6.6. Closing Statement**

This study proves that functional utility and operational transparency are the drivers of digital brand performance that operate in specialisation, rather than emotional storytelling. This research offers a map on how to create a brand resonance based on digital reliability under a high-stake, data-sensitive B2B context by optimising the CBBE model to focus on the importance of Technical Salience and Data Verifiability.

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