The brand-building process of B2B high-tech startups in an omni-digital environment

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Abstract

Purpose – Through the theoretical lens of social practice theory, the aim of this research is to investigate how business-to-business (B2B) high-tech startups build their brands in an omni-digital environment, particularly by focusing on the most important digital touchpoints implemented to interact with stakeholders.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative analysis was performed by conducting 36 semi-structured interviews with key informants operating in B2B high-tech startups, including founders, CEOs, managing directors, marketing managers and other actors from this sector.

Findings – The results reveal the enablers, inhibitors and specific objectives of startups in their brand-building processes across digital touchpoints in an omni-digital environment.

Originality/value – This study offers new theoretical insights into new ventures' brand management strategies through the development of a theoretical framework in which the enablers, inhibitors and specific objectives of the brand-building process of startups are identified. Although the recent literature has addressed the topic of startup brand building, this is the first study, to the authors' knowledge, focused on the brand-building process of B2B high-tech startups in an omni-digital environment.

Keywords B2B, Social practice Theory, Brand building, Digital channels, Omni-digital, Technology startups

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The role of digital touchpoints in firms' branding strategies has been increasingly investigated by scholars in recent years. The digital transformation has led to cultural and operational change, which has forced firms to find innovative ways of operating and interacting with customers, intermediaries and stakeholders in general (Cooper *et al.*, 2023; Hu, 2022; Pappas *et al.*, 2023). However, following the COVID-19 pandemic, as the use of digital channels has increased exponentially, customers have consequently developed new expectations in terms of their relationships with brands (Basu and Swaminathan, 2023).

In this new scenario, the traditional approaches to communicating a brand and interacting with customers and stakeholders appear obsolete. For example, an increasing number of customers appear to have no interest in physical branches (Rajaobelina *et al.*, 2021), as they demand a flexible, convenient and personalised service, as well as a simple experience that can be achieved through digital tools (Alalwan *et al.*, 2023; Dang *et al.*, 2023; Verhoef, 2021). These digital customers already accounted for 32% of the total customer base in 2021, a sharp increase compared to 26% at the beginning of 2020 in the pre-COVID-19 era (PwC, 2021). This paradigm shift represents a challenge for many businesses, which now must rethink their brand-building strategies (Merrilees *et al.*, 2021) to interact more effectively with their customers seeking an omni-digital experience. In particular, small entrepreneurial companies such as high-technological startups, defined by Santisteban *et al.* (2021) as "small, dynamic, flexible, high-risk companies that have a reproducible and scalable business model [...] and provide innovative IT-based products and/or services" (p. 399), need to identify effective solutions for brand building in this omni-digital environment (Mingione and Abratt, 2020; Pakura and Rudeloff, 2023; Zahra, 2021). Brand building represents a challenge for high-tech startups, which are more confident than startups in other sectors in managing data-driven technologies (Battisti *et al.*, 2022; Elia *et al.*, 2020); although digital channels are less expensive than traditional tools, such tools still require specific skills, expertise and resources (Rizvanović *et al.*, 2023). Indeed, Pakura and Rudeloff (2023) recently demonstrated that in building their brands and reputations, startups should initiate systematic processes of environmental scanning and long-term planning, for which social media offer enormous potential if used competently. Employees of high-tech startups usually have high levels of digital skill and expertise in technological applications that allow these companies to effectively build their brands in the new omni-digital scenario (Ferri *et al.*, 2020).

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Recently, several studies on emerging marketing paradigms (e.g. Cai and Choi, 2023; Manser Payne *et al.*, 2017) have begun to reconsider the branding strategies of startups in a digital environment. These studies have highlighted how certain factors, such as the rapid diffusion of digital technologies and consumer empowerment, have strongly influenced corporate branding strategies (Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017). For example, online brand communities allow users to gain and share brand information by developing new relationships and collaborating with other users (Chapman and Dilmperi, 2022). In this type of environment, startups face complex challenges during their brand-building process, such as the risk of losing control of the brand. Thus, both branding scholars and practitioners would benefit from a deeper understanding of how to enact the brand-building processes of startups in the current omni-digital environment, specifically by considering those factors that facilitate and hinder this process.

However, to the best of our knowledge, no empirical studies have considered the omni-digital approach adopted by business-to-business (B2B) startups to build their brands. While the literature has demonstrated how the brand-building process of B2B companies has changed in recent years (Mogaji *et al.*, 2023; Saha *et al.*, 2023), particularly by highlighting the value of branding for B2B firms (e.g. Guenther and Guenther, 2019), in the academic sphere, there is a paucity of studies regarding the brand-building strategies of startups operating in B2B markets (Juntunen, 2012; Mingione and Abratt, 2020).

Hence, in attempting to address this research gap, the aim of this study is to investigate how B2B technological startups adopt an omni-digital approach in their brand-building processes and, more specifically, the digital touchpoints they implement to interact with customers and other stakeholders. Thus, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1. How do B2B high-tech startups build their brands in an omni-digital environment?

RQ2. What are the most important digital touchpoints for startups to interact with their stakeholders?

To address these research questions, we adopted the theoretical lens of social practice theory and conducted a qualitative study consisting of 36 semi-structured interviews with B2B high-tech startups' founders and managers, as well as key actors operating in this sector, such as accelerators, incubators and business angels.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 contains a literature review of the brand-building process of startups and the evolution of the usage of digital touchpoints. In Section 3, the methodology adopted for this study is presented. The results of the empirical analysis are reported in Section 4 and discussed further in Section 5, with reference to the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of this research. Finally, the limitations of the study and future directions for research conclude the paper in Section 6.

2. Literature review

2.1 B2B branding strategies in the academic literature

Over the past few decades, scholars have thoroughly investigated the utility of digital channels for branding purposes, identifying both the advantages that organisations can obtain from the implementation of these tools and the barriers that companies encounter in digital environments (Donthu *et al.*, 2022; Gligor and Bozkurt, 2022). In particular, a relevant stream of research, which considers the notion of strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski and Bednarek, 2018) supported by a theory of action based on social practice (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Giddens, 1984), has aimed to explain complex business phenomena through the lens of social practice theory (SPT). SPT is pertinent here in seeking an intermediate level between structure and agency by focusing on the practice itself rather than the included individuals or social structures (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1977). According to Giddens (1984), the true scope of the social sciences is neither the experience of the individual actor nor the existence of any form of social totality but rather the social practices that are ordered in space and time. From this perspective, actors are not the focus and instead become the bearers of social practices, carrying out the different activities and tasks that the practice requires (Reckwitz, 2002). For example, Heather *et al.* (2019) utilised SPT to analyse the online swapping phenomenon and concluded that brands should focus on improving certain features, such as digital touchpoints, to facilitate easy-to-execute transactions and enable a co-creation process with users.

In this vein, other recent studies (e.g. Fraccastoro *et al.*, 2020) have argued that digital channels have become important enablers for presenting brands in B2B markets, as they allow companies to interact and co-create value with digital users. In particular, studies on B2B branding highlight the significance of understanding brand value in terms of different objectives, such as improving buyers' purchase intentions (Jalkala and Keränen, 2014), increasing the price premium (Balmer *et al.*, 2020), strengthening brand performance (Kristal *et al.*, 2020) and building brand equity (Guenther and Guenther, 2019). Specifically, according to recent studies on B2B branding (e.g. Cortez and Johnston, 2020), the brand-building process should be understood as a dynamic social activity based on interactions and network relationships between companies and stakeholders (Kapitan *et al.*, 2022), which are increasingly taking place through digital channels. In other words, if, in the past, the brand was accepted as proposed by its owner, stakeholders take on a more active role in the digital environment, through which they become the co-creators of the meaning of the brand (Ind *et al.*, 2017). In this regard, according to Tóth *et al.* (2022), digital channels favour a social exchange in which interactions between buyers and suppliers take place under conditions of uncertainty that often generate information asymmetries. Accordingly, buyer reviews are based on information signals, which can have a positive or negative value that influences the attractiveness of companies to other buyers. From this perspective, relationships between companies and stakeholders based on trust and loyalty become central to building a socially accepted and conscientious brand (Beitelspacher and Getchell, 2023; Guzmán *et al.*, 2024).

In this evolving context, Rodríguez-Torrico *et al.* (2023) have underlined how relationships between brands and customers are becoming increasingly complex, as customers use increasingly more channels and devices, both in combination and interchangeably, in a channel-mix context. Therefore, while adapting branding strategies to this channel-mix context has become necessary for companies, effectively positioning a brand and managing it in this scenario can be expensive and challenging (Gao *et al.*, 2021; Neslin, 2022), especially when seeking to create and maintain relationships with customers (Alvarez *et al.*, 2021; Cui *et al.*, 2021).

Researchers generally agree that since the usage of digital channels has increased exponentially, these touchpoints require greater control by companies (Lim *et al.*, 2022). In fact, studies show that while the pervasiveness of digital channels acts as a proxy for connecting or producing new experiential touchpoints between customers and companies, it also requires strong measures of control by the company (Chiang, 2023). In general terms, Bianchi and Mathews (2016) have emphasised that digital channels positively contribute to the reduction of the distance between firms and customers, while also representing an effective channel for establishing business relationships. Similarly, other researchers have demonstrated that digital channels and social media act as facilitators in connecting a brand with its customers, suppliers, business partners and local distribution players (Almeida and Santos, 2020; Marchi *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, many companies include social media in their branding strategies as a tool for both stakeholder engagement (Appel *et al.*, 2019; Cooper *et al.*, 2023) and increasing customer purchasing intentions (Pink *et al.*, 2023), as they allow for the identification and contact of both distant customers and partner organisations (Arnone and Deprince, 2016). Through such practices, companies can seize new business opportunities (Chandra *et al.*, 2009) and increase their brand awareness (Hutter *et al.*, 2013).

2.2 B2B startups' brand building

Scholars have argued that the brand-building process and the consequent perception of the authenticity of brands are based on elements such as uniqueness, brand heritage and commitment to quality (Fritz *et al.*, 2017). As a result, new businesses, such as innovative startups, find themselves facing various difficulties in the brand-building process due to their natural lack of heritage and long-term communications (Fouladi *et al.*, 2021). In reference to B2B startups, Mingione and Abratt (2020) have suggested that "building a brand in the digital age requires different brand-building strategies from the traditional ones in the past" (p. 982). For example, startups are increasingly adopting creative strategies to develop and manage their online presence and build their brands (Chen *et al.*, 2017). In these creative strategies, more companies of a smaller size are involving business partners who can play the role of brand image co-creators, thereby extending their capacities beyond their formal roles as partners. In this way, as demonstrated by Törmälä and Saraniemi (2018), business partners can contribute to bringing long-term branding benefits to small firms.

Accordingly, Petkova *et al.* (2008) have demonstrated that, as compared to large organisations, startups rely more on relationships and stakeholder involvement in the brand-building process than advertising. Indeed, according to Kadam and Ayarekar (2014), new ventures often adopt digital channel management strategies for building their brands and, consequently, attracting customers and partners. Thanks to digital channels, companies have the opportunity to create brand communities, which play a key role in the corporate brand-building process (Ind *et al.*, 2017), as customers develop relationships with both other brands and users (Boon *et al.*, 2015). In such a context, new ventures develop corporate branding strategies by exploiting the dynamics of digital communities (Hajli *et al.*, 2017) based on brand co-creation (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; Marcos-Cuevas *et al.*, 2016). According to a B2B study by Mingione and Abratt (2020), these firms listen to and interact with their targets by following these dynamics, which are not perceived by customers as driven for commercial purposes, thereby allowing them to engage in more effective brand building through digital channels.

Recent branding studies have pointed to the key role of digital channels in building the brands of startups (Wiesenberg, 2020), especially technology startups, where staff are often highly skilled in digital platforms (Ferri *et al.*, 2020). In this vein, Witt and Rode (2005) support the importance of developing the corporate brand already at an early stage of the business through a brand strategy based on coordination with stakeholders and a sound definition of corporate values and identity. According to Bresciani and Eppler (2010), brand-building is fundamental for startups, even in the initial phases of the business, when entrepreneurs usually focus more on the financial and production aspects. In these business startup phases, according to Fouladi *et al.* (2021), the founders of a new venture have a substantial influence on the perception of the brand by stakeholders and, therefore, on the brand-building process, which in this case is characterised by a human-centred approach. Other scholars have demonstrated that startup entrepreneurs engage in the brand-building process in a digital environment by establishing a dialogue with stakeholders rather than adopting a persuasive or informative communication approach (Pakura and Rudeloff, 2023). Hence, digital channels play a key role in branding purposes (Coelho *et al.*, 2018), as they allow companies to overcome the challenges related to a lack of skills and resources by clearly presenting the startup's vision and brand (Rode and Vallaster, 2005).

Especially in B2B markets, where there is more emphasis on corporate branding rather than product branding (Ozdemir *et al.*, 2020), the role of entrepreneurs is central and, in general, the brand-building process of small firms is influenced by a series of factors that make the practice increasingly challenging. A systematic review by Keränen *et al.* (2012) has thus shown that "B2B brands tend to position themselves using terms like a full-service provider or a total solutions provider. This suggests that B2B services could be branded together with the products, as solution offerings" (p. 410). As demonstrated by B2B brand management studies, a favourable, positive and unique brand image allows a company to obtain a strong market position (Merrilees *et al.*, 2011). Considering that the signals sent by brand images allow customers to understand the value they can obtain from consuming the branded product (Kim and Hyun, 2011), B2B companies should base their branding strategies on the most valuable elements of the business asset, thereby connecting the brand with the preferred attributes of its customers to gain a competitive advantage (Davis *et al.*, 2008).

In conclusion, traditional branding strategies seem to have been overcome in recent years by the rise of omni-digital customers, who prefer to interact digitally, regardless of the device being used (PwC, 2018). Indeed, in the context of deal seeking, Gillison *et al.* (2022) found that omni-digital shoppers tend to heavily use smartphones even when searching for deals in a store, which has brought forth even more challenges for brands.

3. Methodology

The objective of this research was to investigate how B2B high-tech startups build their brands in an omni-digital environment, with a particular focus on the digital touchpoints implemented to interact with stakeholders. Specifically, although there are several definitions of "startup" in literature, for our research sample we followed the study by Santisteban *et al.* (2021) on technology-based startups. They argued that "startups are small and characterized by innovation, rapid growth, scalability, and high risk" and, in particular, technology-based startups are "companies that provide innovative IT-based products and/or services" (Santisteban *et al.*, 2021, p. 399).

Considering this exploratory research aim, we opted for a qualitative study involving 36 key informants, including 25 B2B high-tech startups. As suggested by Yin (2013), we conducted a qualitative analysis, as it allowed us to interpret and contextualise the meanings of the organisational beliefs and practices adopted by startups in managing digital touchpoints. Qualitative studies also offer the opportunity to develop a holistic and in-depth vision of the research object under investigation, thereby allowing researchers to understand and explain an emerging phenomenon. In this case, we defined the research problem (Baškarada, 2014) by comprehensively reviewing the existing literature on the topic.

To achieve this research objective, and following the work of previous scholars who stressed the effectiveness of this methodology in branding studies (e.g. Cooper *et al.*, 2023; Jacobson, 2020; Rowley *et al.*, 2012; Sameti *et al.*, 2022), we conducted semi-structured interviews with professionals operating in B2B high-tech startups and other actors from this ecosystem.

3.1 Data collection

Using a theoretical sampling approach (Bendapudi and Leone, 2002; Johnson, 2015), we identified information-rich professionals with an appropriate understanding of the topic covered by this study (i.e. founders, co-founders, CEOs, marketing managers and managing directors) from 25 B2B high-tech startups. To broaden the perspective of this research, 11 actors operating in the technological startups sector, which includes incubators, accelerators, innovation hubs and business angels, were involved in this research (Table 1). These 36 key informants were identified because of their expertise in digital touchpoint management in the high-tech startup sector.

These professionals were contacted individually via LinkedIn or email, and the semi-structured interviews were conducted via online platforms between 2022 and 2023, with an average duration of one hour for each interview. We opted for semi-structured interviews, as scholars have demonstrated that they are appropriate for analysing complex phenomena, such as the omni-digital approach (Wengraf, 2001). The interviews were conducted in Italian or English, depending on the mother tongue of the key informants. Before conducting the interviews, the researchers developed an interview protocol by drawing from the literature review and adopting the theoretical lens of SPT, which meant that the practices implemented by B2B startups in their brand-building process were in focus (Table 2).

In this interview protocol, we listed all the questions for the key informants and ensured that they all reflected back on the key issues that we wished to explore. The interview protocol included some open-ended questions at the start that covered the job position and the professional experiences of the key informants, with a focus on their experiences with branding strategies. The aim of this first phase of the interview was to understand whether the key informants had sufficient knowledge of the topic of analysis (Kleinaltenkamp *et al.*, 2018). Later, the key informants were asked to answer more specific questions related to the research objectives of this paper. These topics included the following:

- digital channels' implementation in the brand-building process of high-tech startups;
- objectives of the main digital touchpoints adopted by startups in an omni-digital environment; and
- main enablers and inhibitors of the brand-building process for new ventures in an omni-digital context.

To achieve a broad understanding of the organisational dynamics involved in managing these channels, we asked the key informants to recount certain episodes and refer to examples and concrete cases. The interviews concluded with a question that asked the professionals if they wanted to address any topics that were not yet mentioned (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2017). After receiving the key informants' permission, the interviews were recorded and transcribed *verbatim*.

The data collection phase ended once the saturation point had been reached, which refers to the point at which no new elements or different insights emerged from the interviews (Yin, 2013).

3.2 Data analysis

After conducting the interviews, we performed an analysis of the textual transcriptions. The aim of this research stage was to reconstruct the communicative intentions of the professionals involved in the study.

More specifically, we conducted a thematic data analysis in three phases (Braun and Clarke, 2006). By following the linear process for analysing data in qualitative research (Williams and Moser, 2019), we opted for an open, axial and selective coding strategy, which allowed us to constantly interact and compare data (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). By using this research approach, we identified and interpreted the themes related to our research objective.

Firstly, with open coding, the key points of the texts were labelled as codes. In this first phase, as suggested by Charmaz (2014), we conducted a structured reading of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews, noting the salient points, identifying the key concepts rooted in the context investigated and comparing them with what emerged from the analysis of academic literature. Secondly, looking at the previously identified codes and re-reading the transcripts, we noted the key words, phrases, episodes and concepts with thematic similarity, after which we grouped these codes to develop some emerging categories. Thirdly, the relationships between the different categories and subcategories were drawn out and expanded into theoretical abstractions. To avoid the influence of subjective biases, this qualitative method was followed independently by the two researchers, thus this improved the quality of the analysis (Corsaro *et al.*, 2012).

Table 1 Key informants involved in this study

Organization	Product/service	Headquarter	Foundation year	Role of key informants	Years of key informant's experience	Key informant's gender
Startup A	Crowdfunding platform	Italy	2020	1. Co-founder and CEO	3 years	M
Startup B	Manufacturing services for industrial companies	Italy	2017	2. Co-founder and CFO	20 years	M
Startup C	Space logistics and transportation	Italy	2011	3. CEO	13 years	M
Startup D	Space logistics	Italy	2022	4. Co-founder	8 years	M
Startup E	AI modelling	Italy	2022	5. Co-founder and CEO	5 years	M
Startup F	Drone inspection services	Italy	2016	6. Co-founder and CEO	17 years	M
Startup G	Telecommunication systems for space applications	Italy	2014	7. Business development manager	4 years	F
Startup H	Components for the aeronautical and aerospace sector	Italy	2017	8. Founder and CEO	7 years	M
Startup I	Deployable structures and textile technologies for space	Italy	2021	9. CEO	4 years	F
Startup J	Pseudo-satellite platform and intelligent software	Italy	2018	10. COO	2 years	M
Startup K	Technological clothing for man in space	Italy	2022	11. Co-founder and CEO	11 years	M
Startup L	Digital consulting and business services	USA	2022	12. Managing director	12 years	M
Startup M	IT consulting and services	Italy	2017	13. Founder and chief risk officer	26 years	F
Startup N	Software and ecommerce development	Italy	2019	14. Co-founder and head of growth	13 years	M
Startup O	Gov-tech platform	Italy	2020	15. Co-founder	6 years	M
Startup P	Digital consulting and services	Italy	2021	16. Co-founder and CEO	11 years	M
Startup Q	B2B tech softwares	Italy	2019	17. Co-founder and CCO	27 years	M
Startup R	Digital services for restaurants	Italy	2020	18. Co-founder and CEO	3 years	M
Startup S	Food tech solutions	Italy	2021	19. Founder	20 years	F
Startup T	Food tech solutions	Italy	2022	20. Co-founder	8 years	M
Startup U	App for restaurant customers	Italy	2021	21. Co-founder	4 years	M
Startup V	Food digital community services	Italy	2019	22. Social media manager	2 years	F
Startup W	App for restaurant customers	Italy	2019	23. Founder and CEO	4 years	M
Startup X	Services for digital freelancers	Germany	2021	24. Co-founder and CEO	7 years	M
Startup Y	Software development	Italy	2019	25. Founder	16 years	M
Accelerator A	–	Italy	–	26. Startup manager	11 years	M
Accelerator B	–	Italy	–	27. Mentor	6 years	M
Accelerator C	–	Italy	–	28. CEO	20 years	M
Accelerator D	–	Italy	–	29. Program director	10 years	M
Incubator A	–	Italy	–	30. Head of incubation and open innovation	25 years	F
Incubator B	–	Germany	–	31. Senior manager	7 years	M
Innovation Hub A	–	Italy	–	32. Startup department manager	6 years	F
Innovation Hub B	–	Italy	–	33. Startup investment manager	10 years	M
Governmental agency	–	Italy	–	34. Head of innovation and startup department	20 years	F
Venture capital	–	Italy	–	35. Managing partner	9 years	M
Business angel	–	Italy	–	36. Business angel	20 years	F

Source: Our elaboration

Moreover, during the data analysis phase, NVivo 13 software was adopted for the systematic coding of the data, which was performed by categorising the topics, identifying the main trends and cross-referencing various information (Mortelmans, 2019). Through NVivo 13, the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were archived electronically, making the analysis, in general, more transparent and reliable.

In particular, to guarantee the reliability of our data analysis, we followed the indications of qualitative research scholars (e.g. Elliott, 2018; Creswell, 2015; Richards, 2015), who identified two types of reliability, i.e. coherence between researchers and coherence of the researcher herself/himself over time. Following these suggestions, the researchers proceeded with individually re-coding a clean version of the previously coded transcripts. To ensure coding consistency, the individually identified codes were compared several times, and the less mutual codes were modified based on the discussion between the two researchers. At the end of this process, in line with the

Table 2 Interview protocol

Topics	Questions
Introduction **Key informant's background** **Startup/company presentation**	• What is your role in the company? • How many years have you been working in this startup/When did you found this startup? • How many years have you worked in this industry? • What were your previous professional experiences? • How many employees work in your startup? • What are your main products/services? • Can you describe the target you are addressing? • What were the key phases in the development of your company?
Implementation of digital channels in the brand-building process	• Which digital channels do you adopt in your startup' branding strategy? • On which social media does your startup have a profile? • Which professional figures within the startup manage these channels? • What was the role of social media in building the brand in the early stages of the startup's launch? • What is the current role of digital channels to communicate your brand's activities?
Digital touchpoints' objectives	• What are the objectives you want to achieve on the different digital channels? • What are the most used digital channels to generate brand awareness? • Which channels do you adopt most to present your products/services?
Enablers and inhibitors of the brand-building process	• How did you achieve these branding objectives? • What were the main difficulties you encountered in achieving your branding goals? • How did you try to overcome these difficulties?

Source: Our elaboration

suggestions by Miles *et al.* (2014), the researchers reached approximately 90% agreement and decided not to proceed with further re-coding. According to Spencer *et al.* (2014), a 100% reliability is not possible in qualitative analysis. Indeed, the purpose of coding is not to produce a perfectly coherent coded set but rather ensuring better interpretation and management of qualitative data (Spencer *et al.*, 2014). Similarly, recent interpretivist studies support other guidelines in qualitative research, i.e. credibility, transferability and dependability (Hemmler *et al.*, 2022). In this regard, as supported by Fouladi *et al.* (2021) in their study on startups and social media, the reliability of the research is achieved through the various documentation collected and the reliability of the coders who conducted the analysis.

After conducting the thematic analysis of the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews, triangulation of the data as a validation strategy was implemented to ensure greater robustness (Yin, 2013). Specifically, "triangulation of data combines data drawn from different sources and at different times, in different places or from different people" (Flick *et al.*, 2004, p. 178). Primary data were triangulated with secondary data, such as reports, statistics and articles from leading newspapers in the sector and a company visit in which we participated (Yin, 2013). In October 2023, we also visited Incubator A to attend events organised by high-tech startups and to meet with the founders and managers of these companies to discuss topics related to the branding strategies of their startups in the digital environment. During these meetings, we took notes and asked the founders and managers specific questions related to practical examples and cases that occurred during the company's growth. Subsequently, the companies shared useful materials for the research, such as company presentations and interviews given by the founders and CEOs to sector newspapers.

Finally, we analysed the social media accounts of the 25 startups interviewed for this study, as well as their corporate websites. The most relevant information was summarised in *ad hoc* documents by the researchers individually, who subsequently discussed the topics covered by this study.

4. Results

The ongoing changes due to the digital disruption and the resulting new relational dynamics between companies and stakeholders represent a complex challenge for new ventures operating in B2B markets, which, unlike large organisations with a longer history, will have to build their own brands and position them effectively. In this vein, the findings of this study focus both on how B2B high-tech startups adopt an omni-digital approach in their brand-building strategies (Section 4.1) and how these digital touchpoints are managed to interact with customers and partners (Section 4.2).

4.1 Startup brand building in an omni-digital environment

Traditionally, startups have had limited economic and human resources to dedicate to branding activities. Accordingly, the B2B high-tech startups involved in this study leveraged digital channels from the early stages of their growth to make themselves known in a short time by reaching various stakeholders in a speedier way and making their brand-building process more effective. Considering that most startups have no previous reputation when they are founded, digital channels represent a key opportunity to reach potential customers and stakeholders, such as partners who could support the business project. In this regard, in addition to working on the technologies of their products and services, the interviewed companies argued that creating a successful digital branding strategy turned out to be essential for their survival and to increase their brand distinctiveness. This implies, on the one hand, that the appropriate communication and language is adopted to interact with different stakeholders and, on the other hand, that the most effective digital channels are implemented to build the startups' brands. In this sense, the mentor of Accelerator B argued for the importance of adopting digital channels in the branding strategies of B2B high-tech startups already from the first stages of the business's development:

> The role of digital channels is very important, especially in the initial phase, when startups do not have the capital to carry out large marketing and branding campaigns. Therefore, using digital media is essential to make the startup known and to evangelise within the sector. (Mentor, Accelerator B)

Hence, in general terms, digital channels were used by the companies involved in this research already in the early stages of their brand-building process to convey their brand identity and values so that they could differentiate themselves from competitors, and to reach their targets and stakeholders.

In particular, the interviewed B2B startups based their branding strategies on digital channels and social media, primarily with the aim of increasing their brand awareness. Considering this branding aim, digital channels were therefore used to communicate the startup's value proposition and its distinctive elements. It can thus be concluded that prioritising brand awareness involves defining the startup's business objectives, which revolve around trying to get customers to recognise the startup's brand, logo, products or services. Accordingly, the CEO of Startup C stated the following:

> I believe that we would never have been able to exist today if we hadn't used social media from the beginning. We used communication a lot to make people understand who we were, and what we wanted to do [...], to make our way in our sector" (CEO, Startup C).

In addition, the brand-building process in an omni-digital environment was conducted by the B2B startups to interact with the market even before the product or service was commercialised, for example, to collect ideas and feedback and, consequently, develop new offerings with perceived unique attributes. In this vein, the mentor of Accelerator B described the following case:

> I'll give you an example: we launched the website of a startup for which I was a consultant without even a product. So, we thought first about the website, then the business model, and then the product. Because we had to be there. The first contacts with customers are often born on LinkedIn, too. (Mentor, Accelerator B)

Furthermore, in the subsequent phases of the startup's growth, digital branding strategies are fundamental to influence the customers' perception of both the company and its products/services; to increase purchase intentions; and, consequently, to generate brand loyalty. Particularly, the key informants included in this research argued that through effective digital branding strategies, they influenced the perception, and therefore the equity, of their brands. For example, some startups emphasised the quality of their products, used attractive packaging or improved the design of their digital platforms to position the brand as superior to its competitors, such as large technological firms.

However, these activities are not always simple or immediate, and the omni-digital brand-building process of B2B high-tech startups presents a number of barriers that require considerable effort to overcome, such as outsourcing the management of the company's digital presence (i.e. brand management by a digital communication agency) or the inclusion of specialised resources in the startup team. This type of investment was considered necessary by the interviewed B2B high-tech startups, as in most cases, the founders and top management are more focused on other business activities and not on branding strategies. Therefore, there is a risk of not satisfying the increasingly high expectations of the different categories of stakeholders who come into contact with the brand on a growing number of digital channels and social media. Consider the following example mentioned by the co-founder of Startup D:

> We have a person in the startup who is working on our social media. But as the CEO and co-founder, I use social media platforms every day to talk to our potential customers and partners. I'm using them as a daily communication tool. (Co-founder, Startup D)

Some specific skills are required to manage a startup's digital branding strategy, such as the professional use of social media platforms, the competence to create *ad hoc* digital content and the knowledge of search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM) mechanisms to optimise corporate websites. However, to make communication more effective and ensure that it is perceived as authentic by customers, the entrepreneurs must be directly involved to create an emotional bond with stakeholders. Indeed, most of the key informants interviewed argued that the founders' social media pages play a key role in the branding strategies of their startups, thus requiring constant commitment to activities on social media platforms. When customers engage in an omni-digital experience with a technology startup, they expect to find answers to their problems on various channels and be able to contact them directly, for example, by sending a direct message to the entrepreneur's personal social media profiles.

4.2 Main digital touchpoints in an omni-digital environment

In the context of B2B high-tech startups, which are mostly fully digital companies, contact between the firms and the stakeholders tends to occur digitally on an increasing number of channels. The interviewed startups thus argued that in today's world, adapting their brand communication to different integrated digital touchpoints is crucial to achieving one's branding objectives. In particular, social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram, as well as TikTok for younger users, occupied a key role in the branding strategies of the startups included in this study. In this regard, the co-founder of Startup T stated the following:

> Our roadmap was planned to activate all digital channels. In particular, LinkedIn is absolutely essential in transferring the story and creating engagement, connection, and networking with respect to our history of business development. [...] All other social media, for example, Facebook, Instagram or TikTok, we believe are extremely functional for building a community of end users, which is absolutely fundamental to our business model. (Co-founder, Startup T)

In addition, in an omni-digital approach, the corporate website is leveraged to present the startup's brands, as stated by the co-founder and CCO of Startup Q:

> We do not produce a mass market product by my personal decision, but we are trying to move into what is called the 1+1 Blue Ocean Strategy rather than a Rapid Ocean Strategy. [...] For example, we are now in the phase of restructuring the website, on which we have decided to insert little content. This choice reflects our idea of identifying an area in the cloud universe where we can have a truly disruptive impact. The area we identified is connected to artificial intelligence and high-tech applications. (Co-founder and CCO, Startup Q)

In general terms, the interviewed startups implemented digital touchpoints in their branding strategies to identify new potential customers; to create an emotional bond with them; to increase their loyalty; and, as a long-term objective, to build a recognised corporate reputation. To achieve these branding objectives, B2B startups have proposed a variety of content forms on digital touchpoints, which have also quickly evolved their communication. To this end, creating content with an emotional storytelling that creatively shares the idea of the startup was appreciated by the stakeholders of the companies interviewed. Furthermore, adapting the communication strategy depending on the interlocutors, such as the shareholders or potential domestic or international customers, was reported to be crucial to the brand-building process. In this regard, Startup P changed its messages to approach new international targets and updated its corporate websites, as explained by the co-founder and CEO of this firm:

> Our positioning to date is very much aimed at a low level in terms of communication. I created our first website, which was then updated several times. Now, however, we would like to give ourselves a different tone to be attractive both to more important customers and in terms of international development, because we would like to approach new markets. (Co-founder and CEO, Startup P)

In addition, digital touchpoints allowed the B2B startups involved in this study to inform users about new products or services and to generally improve the digital positioning of the brand. To this end, considering the omni-digital environment, in addition to the most popular social media mentioned above, the interviewed B2B high-tech startups integrated other channels into their branding strategies.

For example, many key informants stated that they opened official YouTube accounts to create a repository upon which to upload demonstration videos on the potential of their products/services, as well as to provide suggestions to customers. In this high-technological industry, customers have strong expectations of brands regarding the technological innovations of their products/services or new methods of use. For these reasons, newsletters also represented useful touchpoints to update the target about business innovations; to inform them on current trends; and, additionally, to ensure that they would be remembered. Finally, chat messaging apps like WhatsApp were adopted by B2B high-tech startups to facilitate faster, one-to-one communication with customers and partners.

However, although the integration of these additional channels by the interviewed startups allowed them to reach different branding objectives, as reported in Table 3, this implementation was very costly for the firms, as it required the hiring of qualified professionals to dedicate to these activities, more training for internal teams or the outsourcing of the management of these touchpoints.

5. Discussion

This study has illuminated the rapid integration of digital channels into the daily lives of firms, customers and partners, showing how startups now leverage the current omni-digital environment in their brand-building process. In this new scenario, customers and stakeholders expect unique and valuable experiences with brands, and it has thus become increasingly complex for startups to generate engagement and establish business relationships (Wang, 2023). By adopting the theoretical lens of SPT, this study highlights that the brand-building process that takes place on digital channels is based on practices as interactions between companies and active stakeholders that co-create brand value (Marchowska-Raza and Rowley, 2024; Kapitan *et al.*, 2022). Especially in B2B markets, trust-based relationships between companies and stakeholders play a key role in building a socially accepted brand (Guzmán *et al.*, 2024).

In this regard, this study investigated how B2B high-tech startups build their brands in an omni-digital environment (*RQ1*) by focusing on the most important digital touchpoints adopted to interact with customers and partners (*RQ2*). Findings have thus allowed us to develop a theoretical framework that conceptualises the enablers and the inhibitors of the brand-building process of B2B high-tech startups (Figure 1). Moreover, we report the specific branding objectives that startups have seeking to reach through digital touchpoints.

Enablers – The brand-building process of the B2B high-tech startups involved in this research was supported by a series of external and internal enablers. Particularly, this process was more effective when startups quickly changed and adapted their brand communication (thus sharing different messages on social media to approach new targets and stakeholders), integrated new touchpoints that they identified as being of interest in new markets and offered new products/services with perceived unique attributes (Chae *et al.*, 2020). In addition, according to our results, the founders' commitment to the brand-building process of startups is a key element in increasing its effectiveness (Pakura and Rudeloff, 2023). In this way, the positioning of the startup's brand changes and adapts to the specific needs and expectations of potential customers and partners, and the different digital touchpoints become integrated in this process.

From the results of our analysis, it emerged that developing separate branding activities on the different channels is no longer effective in satisfying the expectations of stakeholders, for whom a shared approach that draws the different touchpoints into a unified communication system is necessary (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017). According to Grewal *et al.* (2020), recent technological developments have revolutionised the way in which stakeholders approach companies by multiplying the number of digital touchpoints, which has given them new options to search for information on brands, products and services; make comparisons; and complete purchases (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019; Kostyk and Sheng, 2023). In other words, to establish a profitable relationship with various actors from which to obtain feedback and co-create the brand, it is necessary to manage an integrated communication strategy (Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018).

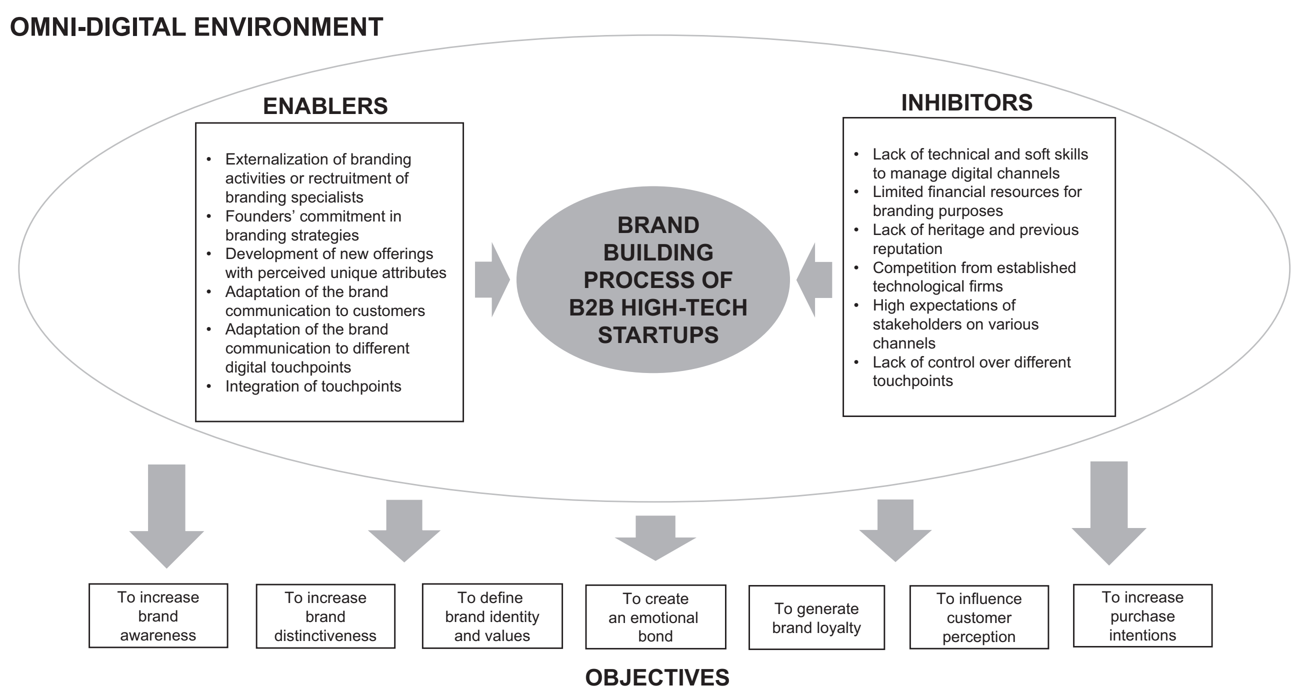
For example, on TikTok, some startups tried to align their corporate tone of voice with that of the platform (and its users); on YouTube and through newsletters, they proposed interesting content for different stakeholders, such as business innovations and current technological trends. In addition, the startups expanded their digital presence by integrating other channels (i.e. WhatsApp and newsletters), which allowed them to manage private chat conversations considered useful for brand communication (Zarouali *et al.*, 2021) and to keep recipients updated. Through WhatsApp, the startups tried to establish a fast and personal communication channel with the target; in contrast, newsletters were mainly adopted to send receivers updates on brand news and periodic insights on specific topics.

Table 3 The main startups' digital touchpoints and their respective branding objectives

Main startups' digital touchpoints	Startups' branding objectives
LinkedIn	• To raise brand awareness • To communicate the brand values • To make the brand distinctive • To propose interesting content for different customers
Corporate website	• To communicate the brand values • To show the products/services' characteristics • To motivate the purchase of the product/service
Instagram	• To raise brand awareness by creating storytelling about the brand • To create engaging content for various stakeholders
Facebook	• To raise brand awareness • To create engaging content for various stakeholders
Newsletter	• To keep the target updated and be remembered
Tik Tok	• To reach new generations with friendly contents • To align the corporate tone of voice with that of the platform (and its users)
YouTube	• To demonstrate how to use the product/service
WhatsApp	• To establish a direct and fast communication with customers • To offer customer care and establish one-to-one communication with customers in real time • To provide answers and resolve problems without redirecting customers to other touchpoints

Source: Our elaboration

Figure 1 Theoretical framework



Source: Our elaboration

To manage all these channels, among the firms involved in this research, those obtaining greater success and growing more rapidly were the companies that had the foresight to invest in digital branding strategies by externalising these activities to digital communication agencies or hiring brand managers with specific technical skills, such as SEO, SEM and digital content creation competences, which are necessary for effective brand communication purposes.

Inhibitors – Although the interviewed startups recognised the great potential of digital channels for branding purposes, our results highlight that the brand-building process in the omni-digital environment poses several challenges for B2B brands.

For example, the customers' decision-making process may be affected by a series of external factors that are not under the control of the company (Lee and Eastin, 2021), thereby compromising the authenticity of the corporate content (Vo *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, from this research, it emerged that on certain social media, such as LinkedIn, Instagram and Facebook, it is increasingly difficult for startups to make their brands distinctive from competitors, including large technology companies with similar products or services and a consolidated corporate reputation.

Furthermore, in the omni-digital environment, startups' stakeholders are able to intercept the company on more and more channels (e.g. official corporate pages, social media of the entrepreneurs), which means they expect to receive answers and quick solutions to their problems by establishing direct communication. However, the small marketing teams of these companies are often unable to internally manage these requests coming from a growing number of channels. Thus, there is a significant risk of losing control of the brand (Lim *et al.*, 2022) and not seizing those important business opportunities that could support the survival and growth of the startup. Indeed, one of the main branding challenges of using digital channels for B2B companies is not satisfying the high expectations of stakeholders who, for example, do not wish to receive standard commercial content (Mingione and Abratt, 2020).

Branding objectives – The B2B high-tech startups involved in this research implemented digital channels and social media in the very early stages of their brand-building process to present their brand values and corporate offerings and to clearly define them. At this stage, the aim of the startups was to define their brand positioning by evaluating feedback and ideas from potential customers and stakeholders (Saavedra Torres *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, the startups' priority in this first stage was to increase their brand awareness and their brand distinctiveness (i.e. to make the brands known in the market by communicating their value propositions and distinctive elements). In this sense, the B2B startups involved in this study stated that they tried to be remembered by customers and partners in a channel-mix context (Rodríguez-Torrico *et al.*, 2023).

In the subsequent stages of the brand-building process, B2B startups seek to strengthen their presence on the aforementioned digital channels and thus create an emotional bond with customers and stakeholders by offering valuable content, for example, by telling brand stories, which represent an effective branding tool to attract customers (Hong *et al.*, 2022). In this way, startups try to increase customer engagement (Cooper *et al.*, 2023), purchasing intentions (Pink *et al.*, 2023) and brand loyalty by influencing customers' perceptions (Parris and Guzmán, 2023).

5.1 Theoretical contribution

This study offers new theoretical insights into the academic literature on new ventures' brand management. Particularly, this is the first study, to our knowledge, to adopt the theoretical lens of SPT in the investigation of the brand-building process of B2B startups. Although recent branding research has addressed the perceived authenticity of a startup's brand on digital channels (Fouladi *et al.*, 2021), the construction of a brand among born-digital startups (Mingione and Abratt, 2020) and, more generally, brand post popularity on the social media of new ventures (Robson and Banerjee, 2023), no previous studies have focused on the brand-building process of B2B high-tech startups in an omni-digital environment.

Specifically, this exploratory study contributes to the academic literature by offering a theoretical framework in which the enablers, inhibitors and specific objectives of the brand-building process of B2B high-tech startups operating in omni-digital environments are identified. Consistent with B2B branding studies (e.g. Cortez and Johnston, 2020; Tóth *et al.*, 2022), our research shows that brand building is a complex process based on exchanges and relationships between the company and its stakeholders, the latter of whom play the role of co-creators of the brand. For example, this was demonstrated in our results by the startups that used digital channels to collect feedback and ideas from potential customers and partners on possible business activities, as well as to adapt their brand communication and marketing offerings.

Our results also show that the startups' brand-building process in the omni-digital environment is different from that of traditional small businesses. For example, according to a study by Ojasalo *et al.* (2008) on software SMEs, brand-building activities take place at the end of the product development process or even after the launch. From our findings, however, it emerged that the brand-building process of high-tech startups begins before the commercialisation of the product/service and, to be even more effective, evolves over time, depending on new business opportunities, such as the identification of new potential customers or the evaluation of how best to approach new international markets.

The findings also support the idea that startups' digital marketing strategies enable dynamic, iterative actions that contribute to their growth (Rizvanović *et al.*, 2023). More specifically, while in the past, the key role of digital touchpoints, such as social media, in the brand-building process was demonstrated (Song and Kim, 2022), the present study revealed the importance of these tools in the very first step of the B2B startups' growth in clearly defining their brand values (Wallace *et al.*, 2022) and increasing their brand awareness by presenting their offerings on the market (Schivinski *et al.*, 2022). In this regard, our study suggests that the brand-building process is more effective when startups are able to rapidly evolve their brand communication by creating different content, approaching and integrating new touchpoints and modifying the structure and content in their digital channels, such as the corporate website.

Furthermore, our research confirms previous branding studies on the importance of developing conscientious B2B brand strategies (Guzmán *et al.*, 2024), thereby highlighting that for high-tech startups, it is necessary to ensure that the brand promise is adequately kept. To achieve this objective, the analysed startups conveyed content on business innovations of interest to stakeholders through various digital channels, such as LinkedIn and newsletters.

Finally, this study contributes to the academic literature by identifying the inhibitors that B2B startups encounter in their brand-building processes in the omni-digital environment. In a context in which stakeholders expect to have the same experience with the brand via different touchpoints (Basu and

Swaminathan, 2023), it becomes increasingly difficult for startups to adequately equip themselves to meet users' expectations. These companies, therefore, often decide to outsource brand management activities by turning to external communication agencies, without being able to completely delegate, as the commitment of the entrepreneurs remains key in the brand-building process to create an emotional bond with customers and stakeholders.

5.2 Managerial implications

This research offers practical insights for B2B startups adopting an omni-digital approach in their branding strategies. Firstly, this study suggests that branding managers operating in new ventures should approach digital channels before commercialising the product/service to clearly define their brand values, solicit the feedback and ideas of users, and monitor the activities of their competitors. In this regard, recent studies on B2B startups (Mintz and Lilien, 2024) have demonstrated that, although the firm valuation increases thanks to systematic investments in marketing, more than half of companies choose not to make these investments in the initial phases of their business. Therefore, B2B startups and entrepreneurs should consider allocating resources for branding activities on digital channels since their firms' foundation.

Secondly, this study revealed the need to constantly update not only the communication content conveyed on the different channels but also the language and the tone of voice used (Jeong *et al.*, 2022), which must be adapted to both the platform and the specific business objectives that the startup aims to reach during its growth. In this regard, our findings highlight the significance of updating the structure of the corporate website and producing emotional and entertaining content for new channels, such as TikTok, which function as key elements in effective branding strategies among startups.

Thirdly, integrating the most popular social media with other tools, such as newsletters, YouTube or WhatsApp, is recommended for professionals working in B2B new ventures. Indeed, in the omni-digital context, stakeholders have high expectations of these brands in terms of innovation and require, for example, demonstration videos on the use of the product/service that can be shared on YouTube or updates on business technologies that can be transmitted via messaging services or newsletters. As argued by Gillison *et al.* (2022), firms should better integrate different online experiences through interactive apps and websites to encourage engagement among omni-digital customers.

6. Limitations and future research directions

This study has various limitations. Firstly, the qualitative methodology and purposive sampling, which were used to select the key informants operating in B2B high-tech startups, limit the generalisability of the results. In particular, most professionals included in this study came from the same geographical context (i.e. Italy). Secondly, to study the omni-digital phenomenon, we considered the perspective of startups and other partners involved in their growth process, such as incubators, accelerators and business angels; however, we did not include the point of view of buyers and customers.

Three directions for future research on this topic have been identified. Firstly, future studies on B2B technology startups could include the perspective of buyers by analysing their purchasing journeys and, in particular, identifying the digital channels through which they engage with companies. As part of this study, researchers could consequently identify the most effective brand communication strategies of B2B high-tech startups for each stage of the buyer's purchasing journey. Secondly, future studies could consider the consumer market (i.e. how B2C startups interact with consumers in an omni-digital environment). In particular, scholars could adopt qualitative (e.g. content analysis) or quantitative methodologies (e.g. questionnaires) to analyse consumer engagement on the different touchpoints adopted by B2C startups that seek to interact with their targets along different phases of the customer journey. Thirdly, although technological startups are less affected by geographical limits than SMEs and traditional businesses in general, future studies could analyse the most effective branding strategies to adopt, depending on the cultural context in which the startup is operating. For example, multiple case studies and comparative analyses could be conducted to investigate this phenomenon from a cross-cultural perspective.

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