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Governing value propositions in digital promotion: A practice-based perspective on brand legitimacy

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Abstract

The governance of value propositions in digital promotional environments remains hardly explored, particularly within trust-sensitive, semi-regulated industries where overclaiming carries immediate reputational and regulatory consequences. Existing marketing literature has predominantly treated Value Proposition Design (VPD) as a static, front-end planning instrument, failing to account for the iterative, real-time discipline required to sustain brand legitimacy across fragmented digital platforms. Drawing on a strategy-as-practice (SAP) framework and Brand Image Theory (BIT), this study investigates how entrepreneurs in the Malaysian health supplement industry internalise and enact VPD as a lived governance mechanism rather than a completed strategic canvas. A qualitative, multi-case study methodology was employed, comprising 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with practitioners across five organisations ranging from micro-artisanal startups to a Government-Linked Company (GLC), with data analysed thematically using NVivo 15. Three interconnected dimensions of practice-based governance were identified: the lived enactment of value through professional identity and daily sense-making routines; the 'Governing Anchor' as an internal disciplinary mechanism that regulates promotional intensity and ensures cross-platform message consistency; and relational legitimacy built through interactional credibility and 'purity routines' that translate ethical conduct into enduring consumer trust. The findings introduce the concept of integrity-market fit, proposing that sustainable brand legitimacy in semi-regulated digital markets is achieved not by maximising promotional reach but by calibrating it through a 'rule of restraint' grounded in professional ethics. This study contributes a novel theoretical framework that extends VPD beyond product-market fit, offering practitioners a model of disciplined digital conduct applicable to health supplements and other high-credibility sectors.

1. Introduction

As digital transformation changes the way enterprises operate, the value proposition must shift from a planning tool to a 'governing anchor' that preserves real-time advertising. Especially in semi-regulated emerging markets, such as the health supplement sector, the traditional boundaries of marketing are blurred as entrepreneurs navigate complex platform dynamics and heightened consumer scrutiny (Rivas and Boillat, 2023). In these environments, the entrepreneur's daily digital conduct becomes the primary vehicle for brand meaning. While foundational marketing theories have long emphasised the importance of value creation (Marchowska-Raza and Rowley, 2024), there remains a critical need to understand how these value propositions are governed and enacted as a lived practice to secure long-term brand legitimacy.

At its core, a Value Proposition (VP) is defined as a strategic statement of the benefits a firm intends to deliver to its customers and other stakeholders (Payne and Frow, 2014). It represents the essence of strategy and the firm's single most important organising principle (Frow and Payne, 2011). Other scholars use the term 'value proposition' to describe a firm's strategy for highlighting the advantages of its products compared to competitors' products (Osterwalder et al., 2015; Camlek, 2010). However, as organisations undergo digital transformation (DT), the VP is no longer a static promise but a dynamic,

joint evolution of value creation and capture (Ceccotti et al., 2024). In the context of digital promotion, the VP's role shifts from a broad conceptual promise to a social monitoring strategy that mediates the benefit-risk dilemma of social media (Yang et al., 2026).

This study introduces the concept of governing value propositions, which refers to the active, real-time discipline applied to promotional claims to ensure they remain within ethical, regulatory, and strategic boundaries, aligning with the findings of Milne et al. (2022). Unlike traditional Value Proposition Design (VPD) by Osterwalder et al. (2015) which focuses on product-market fit, governing the VP involves operationalising trust. In digital promotion, where entrepreneurs must manage diverse platform roles — from the entertainment-led awareness of TikTok to the personal message reassurance of WhatsApp — governance serves as the narrative anchor that stabilises brand meaning across fragmented digital spheres (Corsaro and Murtarelli, 2024).

Despite the strategic significance of VPD, current marketing literature has predominantly treated it as a static, front-end planning tool, a canvas to be completed before market entry. Research suggests that while the VP is critical, fewer than 10% of firms formally develop them, and even fewer effectively implement them within digital ecosystems (Payne and Frow, 2014). This conceptualisation fails to account for the dynamic, iterative nature of digital promotion, in which value claims are continually negotiated. In contrast, statistics by Solomons (2023) on the global branding industry overview show that in 2025, 78% of customers believe that custom content shows a brand's interest in long-term relationships with customers, with roughly 55% of consumers willing to pay a premium for products that promise high value in terms of green impact. Even though brand management has changed strategically, there is still a significant gap between the intensity of promotions and the brand's legitimacy. Current research effectively models the outcomes of brand strategy, such as brand price premiumness as a driver of trust and the role of consumer brand involvement in fostering advocacy (Cheung and To, 2024; Dwivedi and McDonald, 2025). However, these studies primarily focus on the consumer's response to the brand rather than the practitioner's internal governance of that brand.

A significant gap exists in understanding how entrepreneurs in trust-sensitive industries (i.e., supplement sectors) move from strategy to implementation (Payne et al., 2020). Trust-sensitive industries are businesses where reputation is everything, because the stakes are so high that customers and partners will not engage unless they feel completely confident in the organisation's reliability (Lee et al., 2024). In the health supplement sector, reputation is not just a marketing asset; it is a safety requirement as consumers are literally ingesting these products, and the stakes are deeply personal (Mang et al., 2024). For these practitioners, one misleading TikTok claim or a single 'unfiltered' promotional blunder does not just hurt sales — it shatters the brand's legitimacy instantly. This is why a governing anchor is so vital: it ensures that every digital interaction reinforces the safety and integrity that the audience demands (Masrianto et al., 2022). There is a lack of focus on how value is governed in real time, particularly when digital interactions significantly affect stakeholders' perceived value and regional brand legitimacy (Liu et al., 2024). This gap is problematic in semi-regulated industries, where overclaiming can lead to an

immediate loss of consumer trust. Consequently, there is an urgent need to shift the focus from what a value proposition is to how it is governed in practice.

The study employed purposive and theoretical sampling to select five case studies that represent a spectrum of the Malaysian supplement and wellness industry, ranging from micro-artisanal firms to a Government-Linked Company (GLC). Drawing on a practice-based perspective and Brand Image Theory (BIT), this study investigates how entrepreneurs in the Malaysian health supplement industry internalise and enact VPD as a mechanism for promotional governance. The objective is to move beyond product fit to explore how disciplined communication routines foster brand legitimacy. This study seeks to answer:

i. How do entrepreneurs experience and enact Value Proposition Design as a lived practice within semi-regulated digital environments?

ii. In what ways does VPD function as a governance mechanism to discipline promotional intensity and maintain message consistency?

iii. How do these practice-based routines contribute to the formation of durable brand legitimacy and consumer trust?

2. Value Proposition Design as a lived practice

Traditional views of VPD emphasise the alignment between product features and customers' pains and gains (Osterwalder et al., 2015). However, recent shifts suggest that strategy is better understood through 'strategy-as-practice' — focusing on practitioners' micro-level activities (van Rensburg and Schrager, 2026). The shift towards a strategy-as-practice perspective offers a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of strategy development, thereby enhancing the traditional VPD approach by incorporating strategists' everyday practices and interactions.

A value proposition is a statement that communicates the measurable value or tangible benefits a product or service offers to customers (Camlek, 2010; Ballantyne et al., 2011), illustrating the return on investment or other positive outcomes (Rosério and Raimundo, 2021). This integration can lead to more effective and adaptive value propositions that better meet customer needs and drive innovation. Payne et al. (2020) argue that scholarly research provides limited guidance on turning the VP idea into action. By reframing VPD as a lived practice, this study views it as an ongoing process of sense-making and channel governance. This aligns with Ceccotti et al. (2024), who find that digital transformation triggers a joint evolution of value propositions, requiring firms to constantly adapt their core dimensions to the digital environment.

2.1 Promotional governance and digital objects

In digital markets, value is often communicated and measured through 'digital objects' such as the nature and characteristics within joint value spheres (Corsaro and Murtarelli, 2024). This requires a form

of promotional governance — a set of internal rules that help entrepreneurs decide when to intensify or withhold persuasion. Yang et al. (2026) demonstrate that nuanced social media strategies, such as social monitoring, act as distinct value propositions that promote co-creation while mitigating the risks of digital exposure. In the semi-regulated health supplement market, governance mechanisms are vital to ensuring that the value proposition remains a reciprocal promise (Barrow et al., 2026; Milne et al., 2022). By fostering transparency, ethical conduct, and effective communication, companies can build and maintain consumer trust, navigate regulatory challenges, and create long-term value (Koufopoulos, 2023; Amri et al., 2023). Governance, therefore, becomes the mechanism that ensures the VP remains a reciprocal promise rather than an aggressive sales pitch.

Entrepreneurs in the Malaysian health supplement industry often internalise VPD through their personal values and internal motivations (Hamzah et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2022). These personal characteristics significantly influence their entrepreneurial orientation, a crucial factor in developing effective value propositions. For example, entrepreneurs' culture, such as art, food, music, and lifestyle, influences the culture of products and services, leading to the development of business ventures among entrepreneurs (Ratten, 2022), which incorporate a value proposition that fits customers' needs and satisfaction (Sharma et al., 2024). Meanwhile, factors such as past behaviour, perceived behavioural control, and influencer impact significantly affect consumer decisions regarding health supplements (Boon-Liat et al., 2024). These insights help entrepreneurs tailor their value propositions to meet consumer expectations effectively.

2.2 Brand Image Theory (BIT)

Brand Image Theory suggests that brand value is the sum of consumer associations (Bosman, 2000; Jiang et al., 2024). This theory is supported by multiple studies that emphasise the importance of consumer perceptions and associations in forming a brand's image and value (Dwivedi and McDonald, 2025; Liu et al., 2025). For example, the associations that form a brand image can be categorised into several dimensions, including product performance and utility (functional), emotional responses, cultural significance and values, aesthetic and visual appeal, and reputation and trustworthiness (Cao and Nguyen, 2025). While early models focused on mass-media cues, digital-era BIT emphasises interactional credibility.

Liu et al. (2024) and Bailey (2025) highlight that stakeholder interactions and perceived value are fundamental to co-creating brand value. Brand Image Theory underscores the significance of consumer associations in determining brand value (Gómez-Rico et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2022). By understanding and managing these associations, companies can build a strong brand image that resonates with consumers, ultimately enhancing brand equity and loyalty. For entrepreneurs in sensitive sectors, legitimacy is earned through 'repeated, ethically bounded interactions.' VPD acts as the organising principle that ensures these interactions remain consistent, preventing the fragmentation of brand image across different digital platforms (Frow and Payne, 2011; Hamzah et al., 2023).

For practitioners, this study moves beyond abstract strategy to provide a blueprint for digital conduct. By identifying specific routines of 'soft governance,' the findings offer actionable insights into how to stabilise brand messaging across networks and how to use VPD to navigate the 'trust-deficit' common in semi-regulated digital marketplaces. This contributes to the strategic marketing imperative of developing superior, implementable value propositions (Payne and Frow, 2014). Based on these theoretical gaps, this study explores how practitioners operationalise governance to maintain brand integrity.

2.3 The themes

The purpose of the suggested themes for each research question is to align with the strategy-as-practice lens and the academic discussion in the literature. These themes are designed to connect abstract design with real-world operations, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Alignment of RQs, proposed themes and key theories

Research Question	Proposed Theme	Key Theoretical Alignment
RQ i: The lived enactment of value	Lived Practice & Sense-making	Strategy-as-practice; Implementation (Payne et al., 2020; Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022; van Rensburg and Schrager, 2026)
RQ ii: The governing anchor	Promotional Governance & Discipline	Social monitoring (Yang et al., 2026); Joint Spheres (Corsaro and Murtarelli, 2024)
RQ iii: Relational legitimacy and trust	Interactional Credibility	Stakeholder perspective (Frow and Payne, 2011; Jaufenthaler, 2023); Social capital (Liu et al., 2024; Sabia et al., 2025)

2.3.1 Theme 1 (For RQ i): The actualisation of value

From Strategy-as-Concept to Strategy-as-Practice: The Iterative Negotiation of Value. This theme examines how the 'static canvas' of VPD evolves into the everyday activities people engage in. Using Payne et al. (2020), Rouleau and Cloutier (2022), and van Rensburg and Schrager (2026) as a guide, it examines the implementation phase, during which entrepreneurs determine the value of their product by using it in real life. This value is designed and performed through creating content every day, responding to market feedback in real time, and identifying key elements that have not been addressed in previous studies.

2.3.2 Theme 2 (For RQ ii): Discipline and governance in promotions

The Governing Anchor: Finding the Right Balance Between Promotional Intensity and Cross-Platform Consistency. This theme looks into the governance role of the value proposition. It examines how VPD functions as a set of internal rules of engagement based on the work of Yang et al. (2026) and Corsaro and Murtarelli (2024). It looks at how entrepreneurs use their core value statement to decide when to

push (intensity) and when to pull back (restraint). This ensures the brand message stays consistent across different 'joint value spheres' (for example, from TikTok awareness to WhatsApp conversion).

2.3.3 Theme 3 (For RQ iii): Trust and relational legitimacy

Interactional Credibility: Building Long-Lasting Brand Legitimacy through Limited Communication. This theme changes from the activity to the result. Drawing on Liu et al. (2024) and Frow and Payne (2011), it examines how the disciplined routines from Theme 2 build 'Social Capital.' It examines how consistent, ethically guided communication grounded in the VPD creates a 'trust surplus' (Jaufenthaler, 2023; Sabia et al., 2025) that protects the brand in environments that are only partially regulated. This turns short-term digital interactions into long-term institutional legitimacy.

Furthermore, while frameworks like DART (Dialogue, Access, Risk Assessment, and Transparency) have been established as mechanisms for value co-creation and brand satisfaction (Oklevik et al., 2024), there remains a 'certainty gap' regarding the specific micro-mechanisms by which value emerges from these interactions. This is particularly evident in digital environments where the pressure for 'engagement' often conflicts with the professional ethics of trust-sensitive industries like health supplements. Current models emphasise maximising brand experience strength, yet they offer little guidance on the 'Rule of Restraint' required when the practitioner's personal identity is the primary vehicle of value. Consequently, there is an urgent need for a practice-based perspective to explore how the Value Proposition Design (VPD) functions as a governing anchor that disciplines promotional conduct to secure long-term brand legitimacy.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Research design and participant selection

This research employs a qualitative, multi-case study methodology to investigate the 'lived enactment' of Value Proposition Design (VPD), and to achieve a comprehensive understanding of promotional governance in the semi-regulated Malaysian health supplement sector. The methodology, through a strategy-as-practice lens, emphasises the micro-level activities and daily digital behaviours of practitioners, contrasting with the perception of strategy as a static, preliminary planning instrument (Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022). This approach aligns with the academic transition towards understanding strategy through the quotidian practices and interactions of strategists.

We purposively selected 12 individuals in different portfolios to represent different roles in the digital marketing ecosystem, including founders, CEOs, and marketing professionals. This selection criterion provided a comprehensive perspective on the 'benefit-risk' dilemma of social media and the various ways practitioners navigate distinct platform roles (Xiao, 2022), ranging from TikTok's entertainment-driven awareness to WhatsApp's high-touch reassurance. The participants ranged from artisanal startup founders to seasoned brand managers at major pharmaceutical corporations, yielding a robust dataset

for examining how VPD functions as a 'narrative anchor' that maintains brand meaning across disparate digital domains (Nizomutdinov and Vidiasova, 2025).

3.2 Cases selection and participant profile

As mentioned earlier, the five companies presenting five case studies were selected based on purposive sampling, as they represented the various versions of the Malaysian supplement sectors. This diversity ensures maximum variation, capturing a broad range of strategic enactments (Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022). The health supplement sector was selected because it represents a semi-regulated, emerging market where traditional marketing boundaries are blurred and consumer scrutiny is high.

Table 2
Case study selections and participants' profiles

Case Study	Organisation Type	Participants (Key Roles)
Company A	Artisanal/Small-scale	Five founder/entrepreneur, marketers (Self-taught)
Company B	Emerging SME	A Founder, CMO (Backstage Logistics)
Company C	Media/Agency Partner	Three strategic veterans (10 to 22 + years experience)
Company D	Established Mid-Tier	A CEO (Legal background), Medical Consultant
Company E	Large Corporate/GLC	Head of Event Promotion & Brand Manager

Table 2 shows that 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including CEOs, CMOs, Brand Managers, and Strategic Media Partners. These companies range from artisanal to Large Corporations. Participants were selected based on their 'theoretical proximity' to the research questions — specifically, their direct involvement in shaping the brand's value proposition and governing its digital promotional intensity (Payne et al., 2020; Ceccotti et al., 2024). The companies range from 100-year-old legacy family brands to modern, clinically led firms, allowing the study to observe how institutional legitimacy versus personal expertise operates across different organisational scales. Each company actively utilises diverse digital objects and platforms, ranging from TikTok for awareness to WhatsApp for high-touch reassurance, to manage the benefit-risk dilemma of social media.

3.3 Data collection

The primary data were gathered via semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a methodology that enabled participants to offer comprehensive narratives of their experiences in trust-sensitive sectors. This format facilitates examination of how entrepreneurs move from planning to putting their plans into action in the complex world of digital marketing. The interviews were designed to understand how value is governed in real time, especially in places where digital interactions significantly shape how people perceive value and brand legitimacy. This aligns with current research: the value proposition is a dynamic, joint evolution of value creation and capture, not a static promise. The 12 practitioners (P1–P12) were

selected to provide a practice-based perspective on how value propositions are governed and enacted as a lived practice:

- Role diversity: The sample includes founders, doctors, lawyers, and marketing managers to capture a holistic view of how professional identity influences promotional governance.
- Expertise as a filter: Practitioners with specific clinical or legal backgrounds (e.g., P1 and P10) were selected to examine how expertise shapes promotional intensity and ethical conduct.
- Strategic involvement: All participants are directly involved in the real-time discipline of promotional claims, providing insights into the micro-level routines that move a value proposition from strategy to implementation.

The interview guide focused on pinpointing specific practices of soft governance and on how entrepreneurs assimilate VPD through their individual values and motivations. The main topic of conversation was how to ensure that promotional claims remain within the bounds of morality and the law. The study focuses on these lived experiences to fill a gap in the current marketing literature, which often does not offer clear guidance on how to turn a value proposition idea into real digital behaviour. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure member checking and data validity, transcripts were shared with participants for verification of intent (Wang et al., 2024; Lincoln and Guba, 1986).

3.4 Data analysis and coding via NVivo 15

The analysis followed a thematic approach, using the systematic procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012). NVivo 15 was used to analyse the data, facilitating a systematic thematic coding process to identify patterns in how entrepreneurs use VPD (Feng and Behar-Horenstein, 2019). The software's capabilities in organising, coding, querying, and visualising qualitative data make it an effective choice for such analyses. The analysis employed a practice-based framework to classify the data into three principal dimensions corresponding to the research questions: the lived enactment of value, promotional governance, and relational legitimacy.

This process involved defining what people do and how they interact within joint value spheres. This was done to learn how internal rules help entrepreneurs decide when to push or hold back persuasion. The coding framework specifically sought evidence that sense-making and channel governance were ongoing processes. This method bolsters Brand Image Theory (BIT) by analysing the management of consumer associations and interactional credibility via consistent, ethically constrained interactions.

The study employs NVivo 15 to systematise intricate social monitoring strategies, advancing the discourse beyond product-market fit to examine how structured communication practices cultivate enduring brand legitimacy and consumer trust. For example, word frequency and text search features help identify common themes and patterns in the data by analysing the frequency of specific words and phrases. Matrix coding enables comparisons across groups within the data, highlighting differences and similarities in how value propositions are used (Feng and Behar-Horenstein, 2019). These tools can be

used to gauge the emotional tone of the data and visualise key themes, which is useful in understanding the impact of value propositions on digital marketing strategies (Gupta et al., 2024).

3.5 Methodological rigour and ethical considerations

Trustworthiness was established through four criteria: credibility (triangulation of data across five cases), transferability (thick description of case contexts), dependability (maintenance of a digital audit trail in NVivo), and confirmability (reflexive notes on the researchers' influence) (Wang et al., 2024; Stalmeijer et al., 2024). This approach provides a virtual experiment for the qualitative phenomenology approach. Ethical approval was secured from the authors' institutional ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent, with organisational anonymity maintained through pseudonyms where requested.

The research was conducted in strict accordance with the ethical framework established by the institutional research ethics committee. A key part of this ethical framework was the promise of anonymity, which meant that all participants' names and their companies were kept hidden. This precaution was necessary because the health supplement industry is 'trust-sensitive' and could be subject to regulatory scrutiny. Participants provided informed consent, which ensured they understood that their daily digital conduct and business plans would be used for research. All data, including interview transcripts and NVivo coding files, were kept strictly private to ensure that the research methodology reflected the study's main ideas of openness and ethical behaviour. This level of ethical rigour ensures that the results on brand legitimacy are based on a process that protects the privacy and professional reputations of the participants.

4. Results

The results of this study illustrate that for practitioners in the trust-sensitive health supplement industry, a Value Proposition (VP) is not a static planning document but a dynamic governing anchor that stabilises brand meaning across fragmented digital platforms. An examination of the 12 semi-structured interviews indicates that, for these practitioners, the value proposition is anchored in a dynamic narrative that sustains brand significance amid platform instability and regulatory uncertainty. The results can be grouped into three main areas: (1) the lived enactment of value, (2) promotional governance and discipline, and (3) relational legitimacy and trust.

Table 3
Profile of participants and digital value proposition strategies

Case Study	Participant	Professional Background	Key Value Proposition Strategy in Digital Promotion
Company A (Clinical/Artisanal/Government-linked Corporatised)	P1	Andrologist (30 + years experience)	Individual-expert enactment: Uses personal clinical authority and over 30-year benchmark as the primary vehicle for trust.
	P2	Marketing Veteran (32 years experience, ex-Nestlé)	Institutional standardisation: Anchors value in pharmaceutical-grade clinical evidence (Physta) and Government-linked company (GLC) institutional heritage.
	P3	Creative Director (20 years experience)	Emotionalised storytelling: Transforms scientific data into high-end animation and visual narratives to elevate brand presence.
	P4	Media Agency CEO (20 years experience)	Data-driven accountability: Uses Business Model Canvas (BMC) and click-stream data to ensure regulatory-compliant engagement.
	P5	Marketing Manager (30 years experience)	Pragmatic adaptation: Blends 'fast' digital content (short funny videos) with 'high-proof' technical data (doping test results).
Company B (Traditional-based/Corporatised)	P6	Marketing Manager (Heritage SME/Corp)	Defensive transparency: Protects a 100-year legacy by splitting social media into 'Awareness' and 'Transaction' accounts.

Table 3
Profile of participants and digital value proposition strategies (continued)

Case Study	Participant	Professional Background	Key Value Proposition Strategy in Digital Promotion
Company C (Strategic Media)	P7	CEO (Artisanal Wellness)	Vulnerable authenticity: Uses personal skin-recovery stories and live-streamed production to prove 'organic purity.'
	P8	CMO (Operational Lead)	Operational alignment: Ensures 'back-stage' logistical rigour (packaging/stock) matches 'front-stage' promotional claims.
	P9	Media Strategist (20 + years experience)	Relational resilience: Focuses on 'radical authenticity' and channel diversification (podcasts/events) to build community.
Company D (Professional/Legal)	P10	Lawyer & CEO/CMO	Legalistic integrity: Enacts value through 'Professional Custodianship,' treating safety and KKM (Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia — Ministry of Health) compliance as a moral duty.
Company E (Large Pharmaceutical)	P11	Head of Event & Promotion	Trackable synergy: Shifts institutional legitimacy into relational trust via physical sampling at events linked to e-commerce.
	P12	Brand Manager (30 years experience)	ROI-focused governance: Prioritises 'measurability' over 'passive awareness,' using data to pivot strategies in real-time.

Table 3 presents the profiles of the 12 participants across five case studies. It shows how different the organisations are in terms of size, ranging from small artisanal startups (Company C) to large government-linked pharmaceutical companies (Company A). Table 4 demonstrates how the participants from five companies govern and enact their Value Proposition Design (VPD) through their lived professional experiences. The results are structured to align with the methodology's dimensions, moving from individual enactment to broader institutional legitimacy. The following section explains each of the three core themes in detail. These findings are supported by verbatim participant quotes and are consistent with existing scholarship in marketing theory and strategy-as-practice.

Table 4
Thematic analysis of VPD governance and lived enactment (n = 12)

Research Dimensions (Themes)	Sub-Themes & Practice Definitions	Key Findings: The Lived Enactment & Real-World Experience	Representative Participant Evidence (Verbatim)
Theme 1: The Lived Enactment of Value (Strategy-as-Practice)	1.1 Professional Identity as 'Living' VP	Strategy is enacted through the person's status; they are the value proposition.	P1: "People don't believe in the product; they believe in me." P10: "As a lawyer, I investigate... to ensure safety... This is what I fight for."
	1.2 Sense-making via Knowledge-Sharing	Using digital presence to educate and simplify technical data for consumers.	P5: "Turning clinical results into funny, easy-to-understand short videos... people want information right away."
	1.3 Negotiating Authenticity (Ingredients)	Micro-decisions on quality and transparency become the 'proof' of the claim.	P2: "If people buy from us, they are buying the research... It is a standardised extract." P7: "We use fresh plants directly."
	1.4 Dealing with Regulatory/Ethical Reality	Negotiating the VP against the risks of semi-regulated environments.	P10: "Academics should speak out... Supplements can harm if they are not safe." P4: "Using data-driven insights to connect demographics safely."
	1.5 'Monday Morning' Reality (Sustainability)	VPD as a practice of daily endurance, consistency, and pivoting based on data.	P12: "Starting an account is easy... mastering it is hard. We made mistakes, but we learn and pivot." P6: "A 100-year legacy."
Theme 2: The Governing Anchor (Promotional Governance)	2.1 Disciplining Intensity (Rule of Restraint)	Exercising 'soft governance' to prevent over-claiming and aggressive sales.	P6: "We have two TikTok accounts... one for awareness and one for sales... to avoid confusion during a ban."
	2.2 Calibrating Evidence for Consistency	Aligning 'front-stage' digital promises with 'back-stage' operational reality.	P12: "Traditional ads help brand presence, but digital is cheaper and more trackable... I can see direct sales."
	2.3 Governing the 'Joint Value Sphere'	Managing the co-production of value by setting strict standards for influencers.	P10: "Ambassadors [like Pak Nil] only consent after the product proves effective for him... that is ethical."

Research Dimensions (Themes)	Sub-Themes & Practice Definitions	Key Findings: The Lived Enactment & Real-World Experience	Representative Participant Evidence (Verbatim)
	2.4 Expertise as a 'Push' Filter	Professional tenure acts as a filter to reject hype in favour of strategic stability.	P12: "Social media is easy to start but complex to master... keep watching trends, check data."
Theme 3: Relational Legitimacy & Trust (Interactional Credibility)	3.1 Personal vs. Product Credibility	Trust is a dynamic outcome of personal testimony vs. institutional weight.	P9: "Customers trust brands that show real reviews and have open conversations... being real is important."
	3.2 Institutional Legitimacy (Longevity)	Utilising heritage or GLC status as a primary signal for consumer trust.	P6: "Fighting trademark violators... using our 100-year legacy to protect the family name online."
	3.3 The 'Purity' Routine Encounter	Trust is built through encounters like live-streamed production or sampling.	P11: "Emphasise offline plus online synergy — like marathons, sampling, then direct to TikTok for repeat purchase."
	3.4 Expertise as a Meaning Stabiliser	Using veteran status (20–30 years) to prevent brand meaning from fragmenting.	P3: "Blending innovative visuals with narratives... to elevate the brand's presence and connect on a deeper level."

The data presented in Table 4 demonstrate a clear shift from Strategy-as-Concept to Strategy-as-Practice. By identifying 'soft governance' mechanisms based on themes such as 'the lived enactment of value,' 'the governing anchor,' and 'relational legitimacy & trust,' each theme breaks into the coding section or sub-themes, as shown in the treemap in Fig. 3 (Appendices). This study provides empirical evidence of how practitioners maintain brand legitimacy in semi-regulated environments. This aligns with Brand Image Theory (BIT), where the stability of brand associations is maintained through the disciplined, professional conduct of the strategist rather than mere platform visibility.

i. The lived enactment of value (strategy-as-practice)

The findings reveal that VPD is a lived experience in which strategy is enacted through the practitioner's professional identity and daily sense-making routines. As established in the Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) literature (Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022), strategy is something people do. This reflects a framework in Payne et al. (2020) which the 'ingredients' of the VP are negotiated daily through micro-decisions and sense-making for the consumer.

- **Professional identity as the living VP**: A significant tension exists between individual-expert enactment and corporate-heritage enactment. For P1, the VP is inseparable from his over 30-year clinical benchmark:

People don't believe in the product; they believe in me... It's not just about selling; it's about using science to discover a way out. (P1)

I want academicians to look at this matter and speak out loud... Supplements can harm the public if they are not suitable... This is what I fight for. (P10)

This suggests that in digital spaces, the 'person' is the value. Conversely, for P10, her identity as a lawyer transforms the VP into a 'Professional Custodianship,' where regulatory compliance is enacted as a moral duty to protect public health.

- **Knowledge-sharing as sense-making**: Strategy involves translating complex scientific data into digital hooks. P5 and P3 manage the tension between clinical studies and social media speed by turning lab results into funny, easy-to-understand short videos. This iterative sense-making ensures the VP remains relevant to a consumer base that wants information right away.

Turning scientific clinical results into funny and easy-to-understand short videos... because people want information right away. (P3)

- **The 'Monday Morning' reality of sustainability**: Long-term viability is a practice of endurance. P12 describes the daily struggle of mastering digital tools: "We made mistakes too, but we learn and pivot." This highlights that VPD is an ongoing journey of adapting the brand's core meaning to a changing digital landscape.

This aligns with Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) research, which demonstrates that strategy is part of the practice (van Rensburg and Schrager, 2026). It further supports the work of Payne et al. (2020), Rouleau and Cloutier (2022), and van Rensburg and Schrager (2026), who argue that value proposition implementation is an iterative process of sense-making in which practitioners must negotiate the benefit-risk of their claims in real time. This lived enactment suggests that brand image is not a static perception held by consumers, but a precarious professional conduct maintained by the practitioner.

ii. The governing anchor (promotional governance & discipline)

In the volatile digital landscape, the value proposition acts as a governing anchor — an internal ruleset that practitioners use to discipline their promotional intensity. This soft governance ensures that front-stage digital hype does not overshadow the backstage operational or regulatory reality, preventing the overclaiming common in semi-regulated markets. Participants utilise the VP as an internal regulator to discipline promotional intensity, ensuring that front-stage digital hype does not compromise back-stage integrity.

- **The rule of restraint**: A core finding is the exercise of soft governance to prevent brand dilution. P6 enacts a defensive strategy by splitting its social media presence: one account for value-as-legacy (awareness) and another for value-as-transaction (sales). This disciplines the promotional 'push,' ensuring that if a sales account is banned, the 100-year-old family legacy remains intact.

We have two TikTok accounts: one... for brand awareness and one... for sales. Why? To avoid confusion during a ban... we set up a separate awareness account. (P6)

- **Expertise as a filter**: Experienced practitioners use their tenure to filter out digital 'noise.' P12 rejects the passivity of traditional billboards in favour of the 'trackable and measurable' accountability of digital Return on Investment (ROI). This data-driven governance ensures that every promotional interaction is calibrated for maximum impact and transparency.

Digital, I can see direct sales... so it's cost-effective... we spend on billboards, but can you recall the billboard you saw just now? People drive by, forget. (P12)

- **Governing the joint value sphere**: Governance extends to third-party interactions. P10 enforces strict ethical standards for brand ambassadors, requiring personal validation of product efficacy before endorsement. This ensures that the co-production of value remains rooted in practical truth.

Influencers must also be ethical... Pak Nil [ambassador] will only consent... once the product has demonstrated its effectiveness and suitability for him. That is ethical. (P10)

These findings align with Brand Image Theory (BIT), which holds that consistent associations are vital for long-term equity. They support Corsaro and Murtarelli's (2024) view that new trends in digitalisation have played a significant role, leading practitioners in fractured digital 'joint value spheres' to exercise promotional discipline to maintain a stable brand narrative. Furthermore, they reflect the standardisation practices suggested by participants as a form of institutional governance to mitigate digital volatility.

iii. Relational legitimacy & trust (interactional credibility)

This theme posits that brand legitimacy is not a fixed attribute but a cumulative outcome of interactional credibility. Trust is co-produced through purity routines — such as live-streaming production or sharing vulnerable personal testimonies — and institutional stability, where a firm's heritage or corporate scale serves as a defence against digital scepticism (Ratten, 2022; Sabia et al., 2025). In contrast to the findings of Jaufenthaler (2023), the final dimension shows that legitimacy is not an institutional given but an interactional achievement earned through repeated, ethically bounded encounters.

- **Interactional credibility vs. institutional weight**: While large firms like Company A leverage government-linked company (GLC) status, artisanal brands like Company C build legitimacy through vulnerable storytelling (Frow and Payne, 2011; Liu et al., 2024). P9 notes that trust results from transparent conversations and a sense of belonging, moving legitimacy away from static claims toward dynamic relationships.

Customers are more likely to trust brands that show real reviews and have open conversations... being real is important in marketing. (P9)

- **The purity routine**: Trust is solidified through physical-digital synergy. P11 grounds digital claims in the 'purity routine' of physical sampling at marathons: "Sampling, then direct them to TikTok... for repeat purchase" (P11). This physical encounter looks organic and serves as the 'anchor' for subsequent digital trust.

We connect with our audience... by sharing educational content and customer testimonials to build a community around healthy skincare. (P7)

If people buy from us, they are buying the research that went into it... we follow the standards of a multi-corporation company even though we sell online. (P2)

These results align with Liu et al. (2024) regarding cluster social capital, where the institutional longevity of a brand (e.g., Company A's GLC status or Company C's education backing) serves as a durable signal of trust. They also mirror the findings of Yang et al. (2026) and Sharma et al. (2024), who suggest that interactional credibility in digital spaces is maintained through emotionalisation, turning cold data into stories that foster a sense of belonging (P9).

Figure 1. Word clouds of the lexical representation of value proposition governance [Figure to be inserted here — please upload as a separate file]

The word-frequency query in Fig. 1 is drawn directly from the semi-structured interview transcripts of 12 participants (P1–P12) and serves as a lexical map of the lived experience of Value Proposition Design (VPD). For example, the high frequency of 'product' and 'audience' indicates that practitioners do not perceive the Value Proposition as a fixed internal document, emphasising Interactional Credibility (Theme 3) instead. The lexical emphasis on 'audience' reinforces the finding that legitimacy is co-produced through ongoing dialogue and 'transparent conversations' (as noted by P9), aligning with the findings of Sharma et al. (2024) and Ratten (2022), where social trends and customers' satisfaction determine the firm's performance. The prevalence of 'content', 'social', and 'TikTok' indicates the specific arena where strategy is carried out, supporting Theme 1 (The Lived Enactment of Value) by showing that practitioners use digital artefacts to implement their strategy. The specific mention of 'TikTok' shows the 'Monday Morning Reality' (P12) of having to learn how to use unstable platforms to maintain a brand's presence.

There are many promotional terms, but the words 'trust', 'strategy', and 'ingredients' provide evidence for Theme 2 (The Governing Anchor). These terms are the 'internal ruleset' that practitioners use to decide how much to promote, with the emphasis on 'Purity Routines' (Theme 3.3), where technical transparency regulates and solidifies brand significance in a semi-regulated market. Even 'doctor' and 'expertise' are not frequently visible, but they remain important, as they represent the Professional Identity (Theme 1) and serve as the 'living' vehicle for the value proposition. This confirms that, for clinical and legal practitioners (P1, P10), their professional status is what keeps the brand from appearing 'amateurish' (P12) in the digital sphere.

The word-frequency analysis shows that practitioners' discourse is not just about sales, but is also heavily focused on engagement and community. This lexical distribution provides a quantitative representation of the study's qualitative results, indicating that in trust-sensitive sectors, the Value Proposition is regulated by structured communication and interactional transparency rather than by forceful mass-market dissemination.

5. Discussion and implications

Based on a thematic analysis of practitioners in the health supplement sector, the study proposes a process-driven governance model (see Fig. 2). This model synthesises the transition from internal professional enactment to external relational legitimacy, providing a visual roadmap for the following theoretical debate.

Drawing on the Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) perspective, Fig. 2 illustrates the transition of the value proposition from a static strategic document to a 'lived enactment' of professional identity (van Rensburg and Schrager, 2026). The model demonstrates how the Governing Anchor serves as a mediating mechanism between internal practitioner discipline and external market perception. By operationalising the Rule of Restraint, practitioners move beyond the traditional goal of maximising consumer brand involvement (Cheung and To, 2024) and instead focus on maintaining interactional credibility. This process-driven approach suggests that Integrity-Market Fit is achieved when daily Purity Routines align with the DART framework's principles of transparency and risk assessment (Oklevik et al., 2024), ultimately securing sustainable brand legitimacy in trust-sensitive digital environments (Liu et al., 2024).

The purpose of this study was to explore how practitioners in trust-sensitive industries govern their value propositions to maintain brand legitimacy in a volatile digital landscape. By adopting a Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) lens, this research shifts the focus from branding as a static output to branding as a 'lived enactment.' The following discussion synthesises these findings into the proposed Model of VPD Governance, contrasting the 'Rule of Restraint' with contemporary marketing theories of engagement and advocacy.

Current literature frequently evaluates brand success through quantitative outcomes, such as brand price premiumness (Dwivedi and McDonald, 2025) or the intensity of consumer brand involvement (Cheung and To, 2024). While these studies provide valuable metrics for brand equity, they often bypass the internal micro-processes required to sustain such equity in semi-regulated digital spaces. Our findings introduce the 'Governing Anchor' as a necessary internal precursor to these external outcomes.

Unlike traditional models that prioritise maximum visibility, the practitioners in this study utilised their Value Proposition Design (VPD) as a disciplinary tool to navigate the 'benefit-risk dilemma' of social media. This aligns with Yang et al. (2026) concept of social monitoring strategies, but extends it by demonstrating that monitoring is not just an external technical check, but an internal 'moral compass' that dictates what a practitioner refrains from posting.

A significant theoretical contribution of this study is the Rule of Restraint. While the established DART framework (Dialogue, Access, Risk Assessment, and Transparency) emphasises co-creation through active engagement and brand experience strength (Oklevik et al., 2024), our data suggest that in trust-sensitive sectors like health supplements, too much dialogue can lead to a promotional decrease.

Participants (P1–P12) identified that 'Restraint' is a strategic withholding of information to prevent the over-simplification of complex health claims. This suggests that Integrity-Market Fit is achieved not by maximising the brand experience, but by calibrating it. This adds a crucial 'governance layer' to the DART model: while transparency is essential (Oklevik et al., 2024), it must be moderated by professional ethics to ensure that digital interactions do not sacrifice long-term legitimacy for short-term viral engagement. Our model posits that brand legitimacy is a byproduct of Purity Routines — the daily, repetitive acts of radical honesty. While Cheung and To (2024) argue that brand involvement leads to advocacy, our findings suggest that, for practitioners, the goal is Interactional Credibility.

By leading with contraindications rather than miracles (as seen in P2 and P4's testimony), practitioners engage in a form of 'professional custodianship' (van Rensburg and Schrager, 2026). This practice-based perspective confirms that strategy is not what an organisation has, but what its members do. These routines ensure that the brand remains a 'trustworthy anchor' (Liu et al., 2024), creating a stable regional brand legitimacy even when platform algorithms favour sensationalism over accuracy.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

The main theoretical contribution of this study is the combination of Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) and Brand Image Theory (BIT) to explain how digital promotion is governed from the inside. Traditional literature often treats the value proposition as a preliminary strategic framework; however, this study provides empirical evidence that VPD operates as an internal regulatory framework, or soft governance mechanism, that maintains brand significance. We augment the implementation framework of Payne et al. (2020) by designating 'Promotional Discipline' and the 'Rule of Restraint' as essential practitioner routines.

This shows that brand image is not just how customers see it; it is also a professional behaviour that the practitioner upholds through their moral duty and expert gatekeeping. A critical examination of the findings in light of Rouleau and Cloutier (2022) indicates that the lived enactment of strategy is profoundly influenced by practitioners' social and professional identities. Previous research concentrated on organisational-level strategy. However, our findings indicate that in trust-sensitive digital markets, individual expertise — exemplified by a doctor's clinical benchmark or a lawyer's ethical oversight — constitutes the actual practice of strategy. This contradicts the conventional perspective of strategy as an organisational asset, proposing instead that it constitutes a personal demonstration of credibility.

Additionally, our concept of Interactional Credibility aligns with recent research by Liu et al. (2024) on the function of social capital. We contend that in a digital 'trust-deficit' environment, institutional scale alone

is inadequate. As Corsaro and Murtarelli (2024) proposed, value is co-produced within fragmented joint value spheres. Our research expands on this by illustrating that Purity Routine and concrete physical-digital interactions serve as the critical anchors that maintain brand coherence. This study transcends product-market fit to introduce a novel theoretical framework — integrity-market fit — in which legitimacy is upheld through the disciplined, ethical behaviour of marketers and practitioners within a dynamic digital ecosystem.

5.2 Managerial implications

These results give marketing managers and business owners a 'Monday Morning' guide to managing value in unstable digital spaces. First, professionals should adopt Professional Custodianship by presenting themselves as knowledgeable gatekeepers rather than merely sellers. They earn legitimacy when they show that their commitment to public safety is more important than their business interests. Second, companies need to use the Rule of Restraint in their digital content strategy. Brands should use a dual-identity structure that keeps long-term Value-as-Legacy stories separate from short-term Value-as-Transaction tactics to avoid brand dilution or platform-level risks, such as account bans. Finally, managers should base digital claims on real-life 'Purity Routines'. By combining offline interactions — like event-based sampling or live-streamed production — with digital tracking, entrepreneurs, content creators, influencers, or marketers can create a synergy of proof that makes customers less sceptical and encourages loyalty.

5.3 Limitations and future studies

This study offers a comprehensive, practice-oriented insight into Value Proposition (VP) governance; however, it is not devoid of limitations that present opportunities for subsequent academic exploration. Initially, this research employed a qualitative multi-case study design concentrated on the Malaysian health supplement industry. Although this methodology facilitated 'thick description' and profound insights into the lived experiences of 12 practitioners, the results are constrained by the specific context of those practitioners. The semi-regulated nature of the Malaysian market and the distinct cultural interpretations of trust in Southeast Asia may limit the direct applicability of the findings to highly regulated Western pharmaceutical markets or to less sensitive consumer goods sectors.

Subsequent research may apply the 'Governing Anchor' framework across industries, including financial services and sustainable fashion, to determine whether the 'Rule of Restraint' persists as a predominant governance mechanism in other high-credibility sectors. Second, this study focused on the practitioner's perspective, which is the supply side of the value proposition. We identified practitioners' use of 'Purity Routines' and 'Interactional Credibility' to cultivate legitimacy. However, we did not empirically assess consumers' reception of these practices. There could be a perceptual gap between what a practitioner considers a well-planned marketing plan and what a customer considers brand transparency. Future research may employ a dyadic methodology, integrating practitioner interviews with consumer focus groups or experimental surveys to quantify the effects of particular governance routines — such as

segregating social media accounts for awareness versus sales — on consumer trust and purchase intentions.

Third, the study's temporal scope was cross-sectional. Because digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram are constantly changing their algorithms and community standards, the 'Monday Morning' realities that participants like P11 and P12 discuss are also likely to change. A longitudinal study tracking these brands over multiple years would yield a more comprehensive insight into the evolution of 'Meaning Stabilisers' and 'Professional Identity' as a brand transitions from a growth phase to institutional maturity.

Finally, future research may incorporate quantitative metrics within the Strategy-as-Practice framework. For example, researchers might use big data analytics to find a link between the 'Rule of Restraint' (lowering the frequency or intensity of promotions) and long-term brand equity scores. This would give us the statistical weight needed to support our qualitative finding that 'Strategic Silence' can be better for brand legitimacy than aggressive promotion in the digital age. In the future, it will be important to connect these qualitative insights with quantitative evidence to develop a comprehensive theory of 'Integrity-Market Fit' in the global digital economy.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that in the digital age, a value proposition is only as robust as the professional conduct that governs it. By recording the lived experiences of 12 practitioners across organisational levels, we illustrate that VPD governance is not a singular event but an ongoing process of sense-making, adaptation, and ethical regulation. The results show that when professionals use the value proposition as a Governing Anchor, they can navigate the trust deficit in markets that are not fully regulated. In the end, brand legitimacy is a mutual promise made through interactional credibility and evidence-based routines. In a fragmented information marketplace, companies must transition from a product-market fit approach to a practice-based model of integrity-market fit to attain sustainability. This study offers the essential analytical framework for academics and professionals to comprehend how structured communication practices transform abstract strategy into enduring, reliable brand equity.

Declarations

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Data availability

The data supporting this study comprise verbatim interview transcripts and NVivo 15 coding files. These are stored securely on the institutional repository. Due to the confidentiality agreements established with participants and the ethical requirements governing this research, the raw data are not publicly available. Reasonable requests for access to the data may be directed to the corresponding author and are subject to institutional ethical approval.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. No financial or material support was received from any commercial entity in the health supplement industry, or any other party that would constitute a conflict of interest in reporting these findings.

Ethical statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the authors' institutional ethics committee. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation, and were made fully aware that their daily digital conduct and professional strategies would be used solely for academic research purposes. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout; all participants and organisations are referred to exclusively by pseudonyms. All data, including interview transcripts and NVivo coding files, were stored securely in accordance with institutional data protection protocols.

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Figures



Figure 1

Word clouds of the lexical representation of value proposition governance

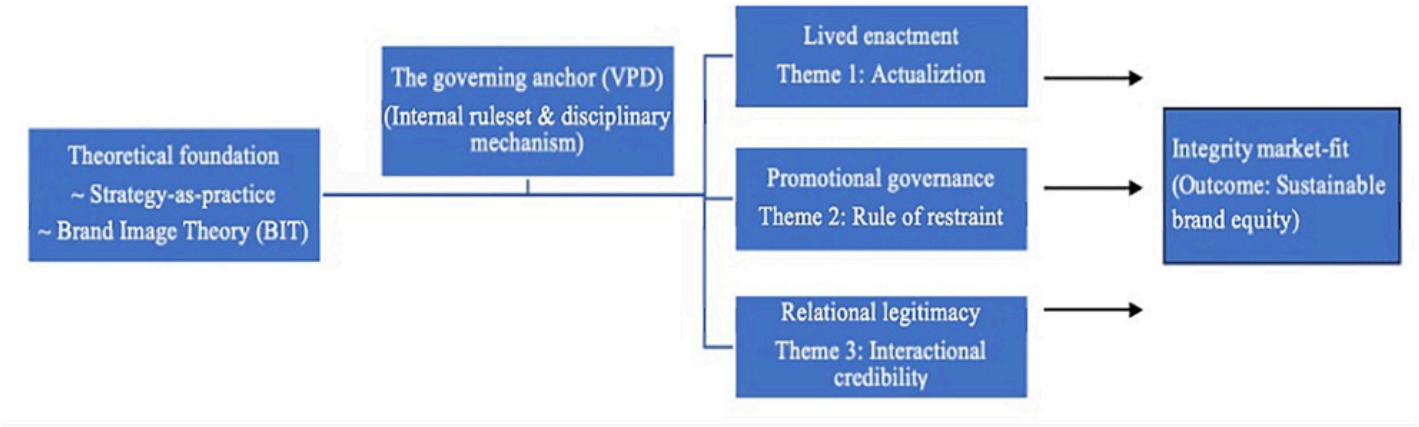


Figure 2

The Emergent Process Model of VPD Governance and Brand Legitimacy

Supplementary Files

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- SupplementaryFigures3to8.pdf