



**UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU**

Turku School of
Economics

Branding in SMEs: Practices, Processes, and Stakeholder Roles at Abi Goes Tallinn

Entrepreneurship

Master's Thesis

Author:

Veikka Partanen

Supervisors:

EdD Kaisa Hytönen

Dr. Sc. (Econ. & Bus. Admin.) Pekka Stenholm

29.4.2025

Turku

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

Master's thesis

Subject: Entrepreneurship

Author: Veikka Partanen

Title: Branding in SMEs: Practices, Processes, and Stakeholder Roles at Abi Goes Tallinn

Supervisors: EdD Kaisa Hytönen & Dr. Sc. (Econ. & Bus. Admin.) Pekka Stenholm

Number of pages: 34 pages + appendices 3 pages

Date: 29.4.2025

Abstract

This thesis explores the role of branding in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through a qualitative case study of a Finnish event brand Abi Goes Tallinn (AGT). Branding is often discussed in the context of large corporations and their considerable marketing budgets, but less attention is given to how SMEs optimize their limited resources to develop and maintain their brands. This study focuses on SME branding practices and processes, and how employees and customers contribute to its communication and perception.

The research was guided by Kevin Lane Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity model and the research questions derived from it. The data was collected through six semi-structured interviews: three with AGT employees and three with customers. After collection, the data was thematically coded with the help of a codebook, identifying patterns related to brand identity, stakeholder roles (internal and external), and overall brand perception.

The findings indicate that branding in SMEs is not an isolated marketing function, but an integral and continuous process embedded in day-to-day operations, company culture and customer experiences. AGT's brand is shaped by strong internal alignment, cost-effective marketing tools like social media, and active engagement from both employees and customers. Customers play a vital role in amplifying the brand through word-of-mouth and user-generated social media content, reinforcing emotional connections and brand resonance.

This study concludes that branding has a critical role in SME operations. It is argued that in SME branding, success does not necessarily arise from scale, but rather from consistency, values and emotional connection. When developing an SME's brand, balancing a combination of strategic planning and organic development allows the brand to evolve naturally and remain aligned with its fundamental values. The study also includes limitations: the small sample size must be acknowledged when evaluating the applicability of the results in a broader context.

Keywords: branding, brand, SME, customer-based brand equity

Pro gradu -tutkielma

Oppiaine: Yrittäjyys

Tekijä: Veikka Partanen

Otsikko: Branding in SMEs: Practices, Processes, and Stakeholder Roles at Abi Goes Tallinn

Ohjaajat: KT Kaisa Hytönen & KTT Pekka Stenholm

Sivumäärä: 34 sivua + liitteet 3 sivua

Päivämäärä: 29.4.2025

Tiivistelmä

Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tutkitaan brändäyksen roolia pienissä ja keskisuurissa yrityksissä (pk-yrityksissä). Tutkimus tehdään laadullisena case -tutkimuksena, joka keskittyy suomalaiseen Abi Goes Tallinn (AGT) brändiin. Brändäyksestä keskusteltaessa keskitytään yleensä suuriin yrityksiin ja niiden mittaviin markkinointibudjetteihin, mutta huomattavasti vähemmän huomiota keskitetään pk-yritysten tapaan optimoida rajalliset resurssinsa ja kehittää brändejään. Tämä tutkimus keskittyy pk-yritysten brändäyskäytäntöihin ja prosesseihin, ja siihen miten työntekijät ja asiakkaat ovat osallisena brändin viestinnässä.

Tutkimusta ohjasi Kevin Lane Kellerin asiakaslähtöisen brändipääoman malli ja siitä johdetut tutkimuskysymykset. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin kuudella puolistrukturoidulla haastattelulla: kolme AGT:n työntekijää ja kolme asiakasta. Aineisto koodattiin temaattisesti koodikirjan avulla, jotta siitä voitiin tunnistaa brändi-identiteettiä, sidosryhmien rooleihin ja yleiseen brändikäsitykseen liittyviä havaintoja.

Tulokset osoittavat, että pk-yritysten brändäys ei ole pelkästään erillinen markkinointitoiminto, vaan keskeinen ja jatkuva prosessi, joka on juurtunut syvälle päivittäisiin toimintoihin, yrityskulttuuriin ja asiakaskokemuksiin. AGT:n brändiä muovaa vahva sisäinen asennoituminen, kustannustehokkaat markkinointikanavat kuten sosiaalinen media, ja sekä työntekijöiden että asiakkaiden aktiivinen sitoutuminen brändiin. Asiakkailla on elintärkeä rooli brändin vahvistamisessa ns. ”puskaradioviestinnän” ja käyttäjien luoman sosiaalisen median sisällön keinoin.

Johtopäätöksenä on, että brändäyksellä on tärkeä rooli pk-yrityksen toiminnoissa. Tutkimus esittää, että pk-yritysten brändäyksessä menestys ei tule niinkään toiminnan suuresta skaalasta, vaan yhtenäisyydestä, arvoista ja tunneyhteydestä. Strategisen suunnittelun ja organisaation kehityksen tasapainoinen yhdistelmä mahdollistaa brändin luonnollisen kehittymisen, samalla pysyen arvoilleen uskollisena. Tutkimuksessa on myös rajoituksia: rajallinen otoskoko täytyy ottaa huomioon tulosten laajempaa soveltuvuutta arvioitaessa.

Avainsanat: brändäys, brändi, pk-yritys, asiakaslähtöinen brändipääoma

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction.....	7
1.1	Background.....	7
1.2	Research Scope and Approach	8
2	Theoretical Background	10
2.1	Branding and its Importance in SMEs.....	10
2.2	The Concept of Brand Equity	10
2.3	Keller’s Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model	11
2.4	Internal Branding and Services	14
2.5	Summary.....	14
3	Methodology	16
3.1	Research Approach.....	16
3.2	Study Context	16
3.3	Data Collection	17
3.4	Data Analysis.....	19
3.5	Ethical Considerations.....	20
4	Findings and Analysis.....	21
4.1	Developing and Maintaining a Brand Identity with Limited Resources	21
4.1.1	Core Values and Employee Alignment.....	21
4.1.2	Social Media and Visual Consistency.....	22
4.1.3	Brand Actions	23
4.2	The Role of Employees and Customers in Shaping and Communicating an SMEs Brand ..	24
4.2.1	Employees as Brand Ambassadors	24
4.2.2	Customers and Content Creation	24
4.2.3	Emotional Engagement and Community	25
4.3	Summary: Role of Branding in SME Operations	26
5	Discussion.....	27
5.1	Main Findings.....	27
5.2	Managerial Implications.....	30
5.3	Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research	31

References33

Appendices35

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Branding is a profoundly essential component of business strategy as it shapes how customers perceive the company and engage with it (Aaker, 1992; Keller, 1993). While branding is often explored in the context of large corporations, less attention is given to how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) develop and sustain their brands (Juntunen, 2024). The European Investment Fund (EIF, 2024) defines SMEs as firms with less than 250 employees and an annual turnover of less than 50 million €. Their business operations are economically and societally relevant, accounting for 99,8 % of all non-financial businesses in Europe and employing over 65 % of the European workforce (EIF, 2024). This gap in the research is particularly interesting, as SMEs often face unique challenges in building, maintaining, and leveraging their brands effectively (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). These challenges include but are not limited to, the apparent lack of monetary resources, brand development and management know-how, and time (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). Regardless of the challenges, it is generally agreed that branding is vital for growth and success, especially in SMEs (Suomi & Aro, 2025).

Hence, studying SMEs and the intricacies of their operations is crucial for better understanding them and offers invaluable learning points for future entrepreneurs wishing to embark on a journey of creating and maintaining a successful business. When discussing SMEs, branding is often seen as being a key differentiator in the competitive markets of today (Horan et al., 2011), helping the businesses establish their identity amongst the competitors, fostering relationships, and creating long-lasting customer loyalty, which in turn brings in the revenues (Keller, 2001; Horan et al., 2011).

In SMEs, branding functions not only as a means for differentiation but also as a tool to build credibility and foster customer trust, especially when marketing resources and capabilities are limited (Eggers et al., 2012; Muhonen et al., 2017). According to Muhonen et al. (2017), SMEs often rely on the entrepreneur's (owner-manager's) personal identity, rarely following textbook branding theories. Hence, branding in SMEs is not only a scaled-down version of what large corporations are doing branding-wise but a process of its own, deeply intertwined with the firm's internal culture and the people working there (Yin Wong & Merrilees, 2005; Miles & Mangold, 2004).

The following chapter will define the research problem addressed in this thesis, highlighting the gap in existing literature and the practical challenges SMEs face regarding branding. Next, specific research questions guiding this thesis will be laid out. These questions aim to uncover some of the intricacies of SME branding through the context of a case company, Abi Goes Tallinn (AGT). This format will provide a structured approach to the research problem at hand. The last section summarises the research objectives as well as the complete outline of the thesis. It will explain the intended contributions to both academic knowledge and practical applications within the field of SME branding.

1.2 Research Scope and Approach

This study aimed to explore the role of branding in SME operations. The answer to the research problem was two-fold: firstly, the development and maintenance of the brand with limited resources was studied. Secondly, the role of the employees and customers in communicating the brand was examined. The case of AGT was used as an illustrative example. The study applied Kevin Lane Keller's Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model (Keller, 2001) to understand how SME branding efforts influence brand perception, customer engagement, and business success. Customer-based brand equity is defined as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (Keller, 1993). This phenomenon is worth studying methodologically because it offers a unique perspective on how an SME can implement and maintain a successful branding strategy with limited resources, utilising its employees and customers as brand ambassadors.

The main research question guiding this thesis is: "*What is the role of branding in SME operations?*" To address this, the following sub-questions were formulated to guide the focus of the study: "*How do SMEs develop and maintain a strong brand identity with limited resources?*" and "*What role do employees and customers play in shaping and communicating an SME's brand?*" The first sub-question focuses on the practices and processes SMEs use to build and sustain their brand, while the second looks at internal and external brand touchpoints, particularly the involvement of the two stakeholders in brand-building: employees and customers. These questions aim to provide a thorough understanding of branding practices used by SMEs and their impact on business operations.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: it begins with an in-depth review of the theoretical background, emphasising branding in SMEs and Keller's CBBE framework in the preceding literature. The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative research approach: semi-structured interviews of AGT employees and customers. Findings and analysis will present key insights into SME branding strategies through the lens of the case of AGT, followed by discussion of the main findings, practical implications and recommendations for SMEs. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to create a better understanding of how SMEs perceive branding and how they utilise it in their operations. AGT will be used as a lens through which the thesis will examine the topic.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Branding and its Importance in SMEs

Branding is a critical element in business as it serves as a tool for creating value, fostering customer relationships, and differentiating yourself from competitors (Aaker, 1992; Keller, 1993). When considering SMEs, branding, like most operations, is hindered by limited resources (Horan et al. 2011). Branding practices in SMEs are often less formalised, rooted in the owner-manager's intuition rather than a deliberate and rational strategy based on branding theory (Juntunen, 2024; Muhonen et al., 2017). Some SMEs overlook the potential benefits of branding while the company's concepts and values reside in the entrepreneur's mind (Astner & Gaddefors, 2024). This dynamic allows for increased adaptability and flexible business structure but often lacks a formalised process (Muhonen et al., 2017). Whether this is a negative or a positive aspect is up for debate.

Similarly, Krake (2005) asserts that in SMEs, the entrepreneur often embodies the brand and plays a key role in cultivating a culture of passion for the brand within the company. It is essential for establishing identity in the markets and establishing loyalty in the customer base (Aaker, 1992). In this thesis, branding is approached as both a strategic and a cultural practice that enables SMEs to differentiate themselves. This study will focus on how SMEs leverage the power of branding in their business operations to navigate the ever-changing markets. According to Aaker (1992), “building and maintaining strong brands is a full-time job” and should be treated as such in companies engaging in such activities.

2.2 The Concept of Brand Equity

Brand equity is a particularly critical concept in marketing and branding. Aaker (1992) defines brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to the brand's name and symbol. Brand equity can subtract or add to the value a product or service provides to both the consumer and the firm. The assets created by brand equity are brand loyalty, brand name awareness, perceived brand quality, and other brand associations, as well as other proprietary brand assets like trademarks (Aaker, 1992). In other words, brand equity is the greater confidence consumers place in a brand than in its competitors (Lassar et al. 1995). Aaker (1992) also highlights that while many companies manage their brands to some extent, many fail to recognise and harness their full potential.

From the consumers' perspective, brand equity stems from confidence in the brand and perceived superiority relative to competitors (Lassar et al., 1995). In SMEs, brand equity can function as a trust-building mechanism, helping firms compensate for their smaller size or lack of established reputation (Eggers et al., 2012). However, many SMEs lack formal systems for managing or measuring brand equity, which can, in turn, hinder their ability to monitor brand performance over time (Aaker, 1992). In the SME context, brands often develop organically through stakeholder interactions as well as trial and error (Muhonen et al. 2017), meaning that so does brand equity. Brand equity provides a valuable lens for understanding why customers choose small firms over better-known alternatives and how those firms can cultivate long-term relationships.

2.3 Keller's Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model

Kevin Lane Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity model from 2001 provides the main theoretical framework of this study. It is a framework for understanding how customers perceive and respond to a brand. It emphasises that a brand's power lies in the customers' minds — what they have seen, heard, felt, or learned over time. Keller (2001) describes the model as a roadmap for building, measuring, and managing brand equity. It is structured around a hierarchy of brand-building blocks in a pyramid form, culminating in brand resonance. Next, these building blocks and their structure are dissected to evaluate their validity for this study.

Keller's model emphasises four principles: identity, meaning, responses and relationships (Keller, 2001). Firstly, *identity* or *brand salience* is the foundation of the pyramid (see Figure 1), and it focuses on the awareness of the brand in question. It could raise questions like: "How often is the brand easily recalled or recognised?" or "How pervasive is brand awareness?". Awareness entails linking the brand name, logo, and other elements to specific, preferably positive, memory associations (Keller, 2001). For an SME, developing this building block involves ensuring that the target audience recognises and recalls the brand in relevant contexts, such as when encountering it in social media.

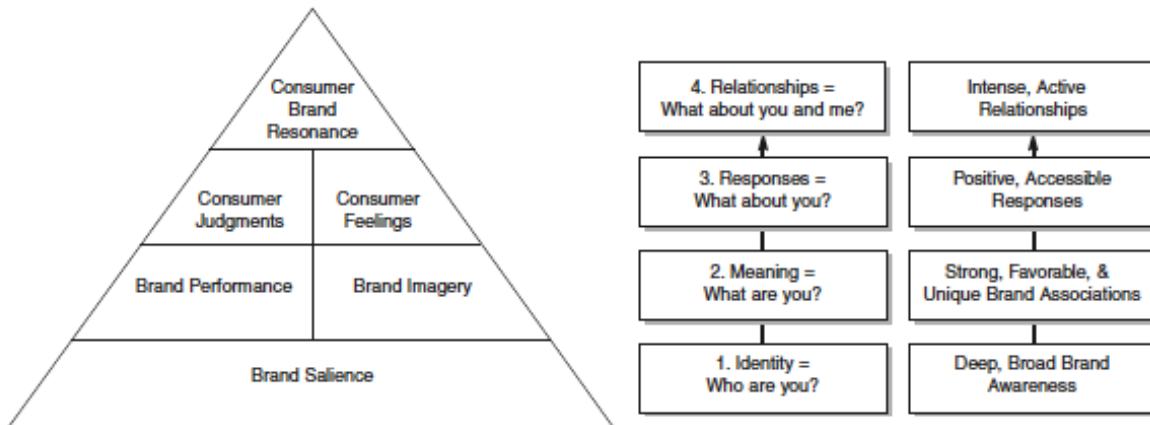


Figure 1: CBBE pyramid (Keller, 2001)

The second level, *brand meaning*, consists of two blocks: brand performance and brand imagery. Brand performance is the practical performance the brand offers to meet the customer's functional needs. The goal is to create a product or service that at least meets but preferably surpasses the customers' expectations. On the other hand, brand imagery is the psychological and social associations the customers form with the brand (Keller, 2001). These are more abstract than the brand's performance, but at least as, if not more important, when considering the whole brand meaning block. When developing customer-based brand equity, creating strong, favourable and unique associations is essential for the brand's success (Keller, 2001).

The third level, *brand response*, concerns the judgements and feelings the brand evokes in the customers. How do the customers respond to, for example, marketing activities done by the brand? Brand judgements are all about the brand's credibility and quality. They are "customers' personal opinions and evaluations with regard to the brand" (Keller, 2001). Keller divides these judgements into four types of summary brand judgements: brand quality, brand credibility, brand consideration and brand superiority. Brand quality is on top of a long list of attitudes that customers hold toward a brand: if the customer perceives an SME brand to be of low quality, they are unlikely to purchase it, let alone feel connected to it. Brand credibility, on the other hand, considers the company behind the brand. Customers may form perceptions of credibility on three different levels: perceived expertise, trustworthiness and likability. Do the customers see the SME as an expert in its area, sensitive to the interests of its customers, and worth spending time with? Brand consideration deals with the extent to which the customers view the brand as worth their time and money. It does not matter if an SME's

brand is the most credible or of the highest quality if a customer does not consider it in their purchase decisions. Lastly, the extent to which the customers perceive the brand to be unique and superior to other brands is called brand superiority. It is an imperative consideration in the list of brand judgements, as it is the last considered factor when building active and lasting relationships with the brand's customers.

On the other hand, brand feelings refer to customers' emotional responses and reactions to the brand. In the CBBE model, Keller (2001) lists six brand-building feelings: warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval and self-respect. *Warmth* deals with the calm and peaceful feelings a brand elicits: do the consumers feel affectionate about the brand? *Fun* is all the playful and joyous feelings the brand brings out in the consumers' minds and *excitement* points to the energetic and exciting sides of the brand in question. *Security* has to do with the feelings of safety, but *social approval*, on the other hand, is when customers want others to approve of their usage of the brand in question. Finally, *self-respect* arises when the consumer's connection to the brand makes them feel a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Lastly, the tip of the CBBE pyramid is the *consumer brand resonance*. The customer-brand relationship is at the level at which the customers identify themselves with the brand. The resonance is the intensity and depth of the psychological bond between the brand and the customer, and it can be divided into four sub-categories: behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community and active engagement. *Behavioural loyalty* refers to how often customers purchase the brand and how much they purchase in terms of quantity. *Attitudinal attachment* is how customers need to have a strong personal attachment to the brand for resonance to occur. Simply having a positive attitude towards the brand is not enough: true resonance requires the customers to perceive the brand as something special for them personally (Keller, 2001). Brand resonance also depends on creating a *sense of community* around the brand. Customers of the brand may feel a "kinship or affiliation with other people associated with the brand" (Keller, 2001), further strengthening the relationship. Lastly, *active engagement* is crucial in fostering a thriving brand relationship. A strong and active brand resonance is created when customers invest time, energy, money or other resources into the brand. Using Keller's model offers a lens through which to evaluate any SME's brand, its branding practises and strategies, and how it builds and sustains brand equity through its activities and relationships with its customers.

2.4 Internal Branding and Services

The branding of services presents a set of challenges different from those around product-based branding. It can be challenging for the company to establish consistent brand associations as services are inherently intangible and might be hard for the customers to evaluate (Krishnan & Hartline, 2001). Unlike physical products, services rely heavily on customer experiences and interactions with the service and the brand (Krishnan & Hartline, 2001). These play a significant role in shaping the brand perception (Keller, 2001). The customer-centric nature of services emphasises the brand and its capability to foster emotional connections, build brand trust, and deliver on expectations.

One of the critical aspects of service branding is the reliance on employee performance and behaviour (Punjaisri et al., 2009). The employees become the embodiment of the brand, and their enthusiasm, or lack thereof, can be transferred to the customers at any customer-employee interaction (Miles & Mangold, 2004). These interactions can be numerous, which means that internal branding efforts to align employees with the brand's values and goals are imperative for maintaining a strong and favourable brand image (Punjaisri et al. 2009). In addition, service branding can be linked back to Keller's CBBE, which emphasises the meaning of identity, responses, relationships (Keller, 2001). These are many times formed through service interactions. Applying appropriate branding principles involves ensuring that every interaction – whether through social media, emails, or customer support – reinforces the company's brand identity and the positive image it has created (Miles & Mangold, 2004).

2.5 Summary

This chapter has provided a comprehensive review of the key theoretical concepts relevant to understanding branding in SMEs. The first section highlighted the specific nature of SME branding, emphasising the influence of limited resources, the central role of the owner-manager, and the informal yet intuitive way branding is often approached in these organisations. SMEs tend to lack formal brand management structures, yet they rely heavily on authenticity, flexibility and internal branding to shape their brand (Astner & Gaddefors, 2024; Krake, 2005). This sets the foundation for understanding the context in which branding activities occur in small firms. Next, the concept of brand equity was explored, drawing particularly from Aaker's (1992) and Lassar et al.'s (1995) earlier work. Brand equity is a strategic asset that adds value to a firm through customer perceptions of quality and loyalty (Aaker, 1992). Lassar et al. (1995) extend this view by focusing on customer

confidence in the brand's superiority relative to competitors. In SMEs, brand equity tends to emerge through direct relationships and accumulated trust, yet it is seldom systematically tracked or leveraged through formal metrics (Eggers et al., 2012; Juntunen, 2024).

The core theoretical framework for this thesis is Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model (2001), which provides a structured understanding of how a brand is built in the minds of consumers. It comprises four key "building blocks" — brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, and brand resonance — that describe how customer perceptions of and emotional attachments to the brand evolve. This model is particularly suitable for understanding branding in SMEs, as it emphasises customer experience and long-term relationship building, both of which are essential in the context of resource-constrained branding efforts (Keller, 2001; Juntunen, 2024). Additionally, the chapter addressed the dynamics of internal branding in service SMEs, where the intangible nature of offerings makes it harder for customers to evaluate the brand before experiencing it. In such contexts, employee behaviour and customer interactions play a decisive role in shaping the brand image (Krishnan & Hartline, 2001; Punjaisri et al., 2009). Therefore, internal branding efforts – such as fostering alignment between employees and brand values – are crucial for consistent brand communication.

These theoretical insights will be applied in the analysis of interview data from the case company, *Abi Goes Tallinn*. Keller's CBBE model will be used as a coding framework for analysing both employee and customer interviews. Meanwhile, themes such as brand equity, internal branding, and service branding will help contextualise the findings and offer a deeper understanding of branding practices in SMEs. Together, these perspectives support a more comprehensive view of how SMEs can build and sustain meaningful brands despite their apparent limitations.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore how SMEs perceive branding in their operations. Given the focus on understanding the meanings, experiences and perceptions of individuals, a qualitative method was most suitable for this specific study. This research approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena and human experiences that will likely be overlooked in quantitative studies. Kevin Lane Keller's Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) (Keller, 2001) model guided the research throughout this study and served as the theoretical framework for analysing the collected data.

The decision to adopt a qualitative approach is rooted in the study's purpose: to gain a deeper understanding of how branding is developed and maintained in the specific context of SMEs, where branding tends to be informal, resource-constrained, and often driven by individuals rather than formal structures (Krake, 2005; Muhonen et al., 2017). Branding in SMEs is a phenomenon shaped by subjective perspectives — such as employee interpretations and customer experiences — and requires methods that allow for the exploration of lived realities (Galletta, 2013). This approach also supports the interpretive paradigm of this study, which acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions between people (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Ultimately, a qualitative framework is best suited for approaching the dynamic and context-specific ways SMEs like AGT approach branding.

3.2 Study Context

In this study, the role of branding is studied through Abi Goes Tallinn, a Finnish SME specialising in trips for high school seniors. The idea behind the company is simple: after finishing their studies in February of their senior year, Finnish high school students have traditionally gone on a 23-hour cruise "abiristeily". In 2014, three high school seniors from Turku wanted to bring a new product to the market, and Abi Goes Tallinn was born. Having held its first event in February 2016, it has since revolutionised the market and achieved market leadership in its niche. Essentially, the market only has two main competitors: Abi Goes Tallinn and Abiristeilyt. The potential customers on the market are new every year, as around 30 000 new students graduate annually (Vipunen – Opetushallinnon

tilastopalvelu, 2023). In 2024, AGT had around 17 000 visitors, accounting for approximately 56 % of the graduating generation. It must also be considered that not all the graduating students participate in either of the market competitors' events. The AGT event happens once a year for multiple days, each day being practically identical. Almost 2000 customers arrive by ferry daily from Helsinki, Finland, to Tallinn, Estonia. In Tallinn, the customers stay in four-star hotels in the city centre. The festival-style event happens in Kultuurikatel, an event centre next to Tallinn's Old Town. It includes, for example, shows by top Finnish pop and rap artists, DJ sets, karaoke, beer pong championships, and more. The next day, the customers return to Helsinki by ferry, and another batch of 2000 students arrive to celebrate. In 2024, this went on for 10 consecutive days.

3.3 Data Collection

Six semi-structured, thematic interviews were conducted to collect the data for this study. To obtain a complete and balanced view of the case company and their operations, three of the interviewees were employees of AGT, and three were customers who had visited AGT in February 2024. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a balanced perspective of the phenomena through both internal and external stakeholders.

The semi-structured interview was chosen as the data-gathering method to allow participants to provide detailed, elaborative responses while maintaining a structured alignment with the research questions. This method is especially effective when the goal is to understand individual perceptions, meanings, and experiences in detail while providing enough structure to ensure relevance to the research aim (Galletta, 2013). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews enables the researcher to follow up on interesting themes or ideas introduced by participants while staying focused on the research questions (Galletta, 2013).

The interview questions (see Appendix 1) themselves were derived from Keller's CBBE model (2001) to ensure theoretical alignment. Each of the model's four levels – brand identity, brand meaning, brand response and brand relationships – was used for formulating the questions for both stakeholder groups. For instance, brand identity was explored by asking customers when and how they first heard of AGT (Appendix 2, question 1). On the other hand, brand meaning articulated

questions related to the customers' expectations and perceived experiences of the event (Appendix 2, question 2). Similarly, employee interviews were shaped to explore internal perspectives on the same levels of the CBBE pyramid, focusing on how branding is developed and communicated within the company (Appendix 1, for example questions 2. and 12.). This method of constructing the interview questions based on Keller's model ensured that the obtained data would provide meaningful insights, that are also analytically compatible with the CBBE framework.

The participants of the employee interviews were selected with purposive sampling to ensure that the data collected would offer as much valuable insight as possible. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research when participants are chosen based on their knowledge, relevance, and ability to speak directly to the phenomenon being studied (Galletta, 2013). They were selected based on their involvement in the company's branding efforts, and they were contacted directly by the researcher. The average age of the employee interviewees was 30 years, and they had been working at AGT between 5 and 11 years. The consumer participants, on the other hand, were recruited through a survey posted on AGT's Instagram account. The survey was created to collect contact information of participants of the 2024 event willing to attend the interviews, and it received nearly 40 responses. Out of the responses, three were chosen based on their geographic location for ease of organising in-person interviews. The average age of the customer participants was 19 and they had all attended AGT in February 2024.

Five of the interviews were conducted in person in Helsinki and Turku. For the location, a quiet office space with limited distractions was chosen to ensure that both the interviewee and the interviewer could focus. Due to scheduling difficulties, one customer interview was held online via a remote video call. All interviews were done in Finnish and voice-recorded with the participants' permission. The customer interviews took approximately 15-25 minutes, and the employee interviews approximately 17-39 minutes. After transcription, the complete interview material was around 34 pages long.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic coding, a method well-suited for identifying patterns and themes in the data. This approach allowed for a structured but flexible exploration of the collected interview data. To assist in analysing the data, a codebook (see Appendix 3) was constructed. As in the case of the interview questions, Keller's model's (2001) four levels were used as the thematic foundation of the codebook. The model (see Figure 1, page 12) guided the development of three overarching categories: *role of branding*, *brand identity and resources* and *internal and external stakeholders*. The developed codebook provided a systematic guide for analysing the interviews. It was divided into the three themes, each connected to a research question and highlighted with a colour.

- Yellow: role of branding (Research question: *What is the role of branding in SME operations?*)
- Teal: brand identity and resources (Research question: *How do SMEs develop and maintain a strong brand identity with limited resources?*)
- Green: internal and external stakeholders (Research question: *What role do employees and customers play in shaping and communicating an SME's brand?*)

Each transcript was then coded according to the codebook by colouring any sections linked to the corresponding research questions and identifying themes and patterns that would become the basis of the analysis. These sections were then compared to Keller's CBBE model. This analysis connected the theoretical concepts and unique, context-specific insights into AGT's branding efforts. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for exploring meanings within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study used deductive strategies: the CBBE model served as a guide to identify expected themes (e.g., brand identity or internal branding) (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The coding process involved three rounds. First, the transcripts were read in full to gain familiarity with the content. Second, meaningful units of text were highlighted based on relevance to the research questions and Keller's CBBE framework. Third, these coded segments were assigned to thematic categories using the colour-coded codebook (see Appendix 3). Finally, employee and customer perspectives were not only analysed separately but also compared and contrasted to examine the overlap between internal and external stakeholders' perceptions on the matter. This analysis added depth to the findings and aligned with the study's aim of exploring how brand identity is created and

maintained internally and externally. This approach also helped the researcher organise the material without losing the nuances of what the interviewees said.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical research practices were thoroughly considered and upheld throughout the study to ensure the integrity of the research process and the participants' rights. Participants were explicitly informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence and the right to review, modify, or request the deletion of their data. Written consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews commenced, ensuring that their participation was voluntary and based on an informed understanding of the study. To maintain confidentiality, all data collected were anonymised during transcription, and no identifying details were included in the final analysis or report. Each interviewee was given a code: E1, E2 and E3, respectively, for the employees and C1, C2 and C3 for the customers. Data storage adhered to secure protocols, with digital files stored on password-protected devices and access limited only to the researcher.

The study also adhered to principles of respect and non-malevolence, ensuring that participants were not subjected to any discomfort or harm during the research process. The interview questions were designed to be non-intrusive and relevant to the study's objectives, further safeguarding the participants' well-being. This aligns with ethical guidelines for qualitative research that emphasise participant autonomy, transparency, and minimising harm through careful research design and awareness of the researcher's role in the research process (Galletta, 2013). Since the study used semi-structured interviews, care was taken to foster a respectful and open dialogue, as recommended by Galletta (2013). Interview settings were calm, private, and familiar to the participants whenever possible, supporting their comfort and willingness to share insights. No sensitive personal data was collected, and the subject matter — branding and experiences with a festival-style event — was not expected to cause emotional strain on the participants. However, all necessary steps were taken to maintain a safe and ethical research environment aligned with established academic standards.

4 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Developing and Maintaining a Brand Identity with Limited Resources

4.1.1 Core Values and Employee Alignment

The limited resources of most SMEs create a space where creativity can — and must — flourish. According to both E1 and E2 interviewees, Abi Goes Tallinn’s brand identity is rooted in three key values: fairness, creating memorable experiences, and reliability, which have slowly developed over the years. These values are based on the ideas of the original owner-manager, and they guide the company’s operations and differentiate it within the market, just as proposed by the literature (e.g. Astner & Gaddefors, 2024). The employees highlighted these values as essential components of AGT’s brand, reflecting a shared commitment to providing inclusive, high-quality experiences for their customers:

“(AGT is) Caring. Above all that. --- And my favourite thing: good times.” (E2)

The development of AGT’s brand identity is deeply influenced by the personal values of its employees. Interviews revealed that the brand’s core values resonate strongly with the team, creating a sense of authenticity and internal alignment. This connection between employee values and the brand reinforces a cohesive identity and ensures that the brand is consistently represented in customer interactions.

“AGT’s employees are part of the brand. --- Some might think that employees are a resource; I think that they are part of the brand, and we must take care of that brand, and that’s why we put so much effort into our employees.” (E1)

The interview data suggests that these brand values are not just theoretical ideals but actively embodied in the team’s daily work. Employees described shared enthusiasm for the event, internal communication habits, and informal decision-making practices that reflect the brand values, suggesting that AGT’s brand identity is lived rather than merely stated.

“...the leading factor (to come to work at AGT) is --- the sense of community, the fun.” (E2)

This alignment between values and actions reflects Keller's model's "brand meaning" block (2001). Brand performance is exemplified as employees deliver on the brand's promise through customer interactions. Employee-led interactions also shape brand imagery, where the brand becomes associated with personal values like fairness, joy, and community (Keller, 2001).

4.1.2 Social Media and Visual Consistency

Social media is a critical tool for developing and maintaining a strong brand today. Regardless of the type of brand, if it has no social media presence, it is, in essence, throwing away one of the most inexpensive and accessible ways of developing and maintaining brand identity. Social media can be leveraged to attend to all the blocks, building and maintaining an SME brand with relatively small financial input (compared to traditional for example TV commercials) and offering a chance to reach a broad audience of potential customers. AGT has used social media from the beginning, shifting its communications from Facebook to Instagram and TikTok to be present in the channels most relevant to the newer customer generations. Social media is especially appropriate for AGT, as illustrated by one of the interviewees:

"...social media enables us to communicate the amazing experiences..." (E1)

Employees highlighted the importance of brand consistency across different platforms and customer touchpoints. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, play a central role in how Abi Goes Tallinn communicates its brand values to its target audience. These platforms allow AGT to share engaging content that reflects the brand's youthful, energetic, and inclusive identity. Employees highlighted the importance of maintaining a consistent tone and visual style on these channels to effectively reinforce the brand's message and connect with its audience.

"They (the posts on Instagram) must have certain elements in them, which tie them to our brand. Like logo or other graphic elements, which make it easier to recognise that this is a post made by AGT." (E3)

This visual consistency extends beyond mere aesthetics. It serves as a subtle form of brand reinforcement, where familiar colours, fonts, and formats act as visual cues for followers and potential customers, strengthening brand recall and engagement. One employee (E2) pointed out that creating

a brand guideline to support this consistency across platforms is something they are looking into. Social media enhances Keller's brand salience (identity) by helping to keep the brand relevant and present in the digital feeds of current and potential future customers. At the same time, consistent and visually aligned content supports brand imagery, enabling customers to associate the brand with specific values and experiences through visual signals (Keller, 2001).

4.1.3 Brand Actions

In addition to traditional marketing, an SME can employ "brand actions" to communicate its values and identity. They don't have to be extensive giveaways or sales campaigns, which could potentially impose financial strain on the SME, but little ways of giving back to the community of customers. Programs like the "AGT Stipendi" (Scholarship) initiative serve as tangible demonstrations of the AGT's commitment to fairness and inclusivity.

"We just created the AGT Stipendi, which offers students who might not have the same opportunities monetary wise, an opportunity to attend AGT for free." (E1)

These initiatives not only build trust and loyalty among existing customers but also enhance the brand's reputation in the broader market. It is challenging, but possible, to obtain such effects within the resource-constrained operations of SME. More than anything, it's about the weight the SME puts on their brand and developing and maintaining it among all other ongoing business operations. Brand actions directly influence brand feelings, evoking emotions such as warmth, admiration, and trust (Keller, 2001). At the same time, they shape brand judgments by signalling fairness and integrity, encouraging customers to see the brand as socially responsible and credible.

This chapter explored how SMEs develop and maintain a strong brand identity despite operating with limited resources. The findings from the employee interview data highlight three key themes that enable brand-building in resource-constrained environments: a clear set of core values, alignment between employee and brand identity through internal branding, and active use of cost-effective communication tools such as social media. In AGT's case, fairness, memorable experiences, and reliability form the foundation of its brand identity. These values were shaped by the founders and have continued to evolve through employee input and ongoing practices. Altogether, the findings show that building and maintaining a strong SME brand is not primarily a function of budget but of

creativity, internal employee alignment, and authenticity. AGT demonstrates that SMEs can develop and maintain meaningful brand identities through consistent actions, even without extensive resources.

4.2 The Role of Employees and Customers in Shaping and Communicating an SMEs Brand

4.2.1 Employees as Brand Ambassadors

AGT communicates its brand values through direct and indirect channels, emphasising social media and personal interactions during the event.

AGT's employees also underscore the organisation's sense of community and camaraderie. This perception shapes the brand's internal culture and external image, contributing to a warm, approachable identity that resonates with both employees and customers. The familiar atmosphere also enhances internal branding efforts, as employees are motivated to embody the brand's values and goals in their work.

"I'd say that people (the employees) see AGT as kind of a one big family. (E3)

This sense of community fosters a unified brand experience, both internally and externally. Employees internalise the brand values and pass them on through service, social media, and internal interaction. Through internal motivation and alignment, employees contribute to Keller's block of brand resonance — creating loyalty and active engagement — and help deliver brand performance by ensuring consistent service quality and brand experience.

4.2.2 Customers and Content Creation

On the other hand, customers play a slightly different yet equally important role in shaping and communicating AGT's brand. In SMEs like AGT, where the resources are limited, customer experiences, perceptions, and advocacy become key drivers of brand visibility and reputation. One of the most significant ways customers shape the SME's brand is through brand associations and meaning. The experiences of customers influence how the brand is perceived by others, affecting its credibility and attractiveness. Positive experiences lead to brand loyalty, whereas negative experiences can quickly damage an SME's reputation. Customers also contribute to branding by

creating and sharing content on social media. In AGT's case, these serve as authentic endorsements that influence current as well as potential customers:

"...and on social media I saw the photos and videos...and thought I really wanted to go there (to AGT)." (C2)

This is especially powerful because customers share content voluntarily and often emotionally—smiling group photos, vlogs, or tagging AGT in social media posts—reinforcing a sense of community and inclusion. The brand starts to live not only in the official posts by the brand itself but also in the spontaneous expressions of the attendees. In addition, peer content boosts brand salience (Keller, 2001), making the brand visible to new potential customers. It also influences brand judgments, as the experiences shared by customers serve as informal reviews that shape how others, especially potential future customers, perceive brand credibility and quality (Keller, 2001).

4.2.3 Emotional Engagement and Community

Customer-driven word-of-mouth marketing is an efficient way of promoting an SME's brand. It is also a crucial component of AGT's branding. According to C3, one of the reasons for attending was hearing positive experiences from older students at her school. This shows how brand perception spreads online and offline through "real-life" conversations. Employees emphasised the significant role satisfied customers play in spreading the brand's message through personal recommendations and social media shares. This organic promotion is particularly effective in reinforcing the brand's authenticity and credibility, further amplifying its reach and impact:

"One thing is this word-of-mouth; people tell others how cool of a thing this (AGT) is, and then people want to come." (E3)

This peer-driven brand communication is essential for SMEs, amplifying branding efforts while requiring no direct financial investments. These emotional touchpoints also build brand feelings (Keller, 2001), such as fun, joy, and community, deepening the brand resonance, where customers become loyal advocates and emotionally invested in the brand.

In summary, both employees and customers are central to shaping and communicating an SME's brand, especially in the resource-constrained environments in which SMEs mainly operate.

Employees influence brand identity through their attitudes, behaviours, and emotional connection to the company, often putting a face and a voice for the brand in the eyes and ears of the customer. Therefore, it is crucial the employees feel linked with the brand they represent or, better yet, are passionate about it (Krake, 2005). Customers on the other hand extend the brand's visibility through word-of-mouth and organic, user-generated social media content. In the case of AGT, this dynamic interplay creates a feedback loop where internal enthusiasm fuels customer experiences, and customer engagement further reinforces the brand's credibility and reach. Together, these two groups help signal the brand's identity, continuously shaping how it is perceived and experienced.

4.3 Summary: Role of Branding in SME Operations

The findings of this study suggest SME branding assumes multiple roles and is closely tied to daily operations. Rather than functioning as a standalone marketing function, branding at AGT is embedded into everyday practices, internal culture, and customer experience. The brand is not merely communicated through campaigns or slogans but constructed and maintained through consistent actions, decisions, and interactions.

Brand identity is built and maintained through a consistent set of values, employee-brand alignment and cost-effective tools like the social media. These findings reflect how an SME can build a distinctive and consistent brand even with limited resources. Branding becomes an interactive process—both intentional and emergent—carried out and developed by - employees and customers alike. The collected data illustrates that in SME contexts, a brand is not defined by scale but consistency, values and resonance. Employees embody the brand through aligned behaviour and enthusiasm, while customers contribute through advocacy and shared experiences. These insights form the basis for the following discussion, which reflects on the broader implications of the findings in relation to existing literature and SME branding theory.

5 Discussion

5.1 Main Findings

The purpose of the study was to explore the role of branding in SME operations, using Abi Goes Tallinn as a contextual example. The research focused specifically on how SMEs develop and maintain a brand identity with limited resources and how employees and customers shape and communicate the brand. This study adds to the literature by offering an empirical look at branding as an evolving process in an SME context, where both strategic efforts and spontaneous interactions shape brand identity. Using Keller's (2001) Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model as a thematic framework, the findings suggest that branding in SMEs is deeply embedded in everyday practices, interactions, and values—rather than existing as a separate or formalised function. As established earlier in this study, branding is often perceived to play a critical role in the operations of SMEs, serving as a key differentiator in competitive markets (Horan et al., 2011). However, according to Aaker (1992), it must be acknowledged that not all SMEs utilise their brand in their operations; some merely see it as distant jargon that has little to do with their day-to-day business. A great example of leveraging the brand in an SME context is the case of Abi Goes Tallinn (AGT).

First, employees of AGT perceive their brand as a critical pillar supporting the event's — and, as an extension the company's — success. Employees emphasised that the brand is not merely a supplementary aspect of the product but an integral part of the overall experience that distinguishes AGT from its competitors in the market. This perspective aligns with the understanding that strong branding adds value by shaping customer perceptions and fostering loyalty among the customer base (Keller, 2001). Second, AGT's brand has evolved alongside the product, reflecting intentional branding efforts as well as organic development. The employees pointed out that some brand elements—like the logo and colour schemes—have been carefully crafted through a deliberate rebranding initiative. AGT's brand identity is rooted in three core values: fairness, experience, and reliability. These values have also been developed through a combination of intentional branding efforts—such as the re-branding initiative—and organic development, shaped by employee contributions and customer feedback. This dynamic progress further highlights the unstructured yet adaptive nature of SME branding, responding to external influences while maintaining a consistent core identity arising from the owner and the employees. The alignment of employee values with the brand reinforces a sense of authenticity and strengthens internal branding efforts, further

strengthening a sense of an authentic and customer-centric brand. This is also reflected across Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity model (2001): structured brand elements like the logo and colour palette contribute to brand salience and performance, while spontaneous, employee- and customer-driven elements enrich brand imagery and feelings. Together, these build resonance by creating a sense of belonging and trust.

Another finding of significance is that the communication of AGT's brand values relies heavily on digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which are used to convey the brand's youthful and inclusive identity. These platforms allow for interactive, real-time engagement with customers, enabling AGT to strengthen brand awareness and maintain relevance in the competitive landscape. The findings suggest that for SMEs, leveraging cost-effective digital marketing strategies can be just as impactful as traditional advertising, if not more so. In addition, customer-driven word-of-mouth marketing plays a significant role in amplifying AGT's reach and reinforcing its credibility among the consumer base. The broad spectrum of user-generated content serves as an authentic endorsement that enhances brand credibility and attracts the attention of potential new customers.

From the customer side, branding was perceived less in terms of strategy and process and more through experience and emotion. Customers repeatedly emphasised how word-of-mouth, social media content, and the overall energy of the event shaped their perception of AGT. This reinforces the idea that customer-centric branding develops largely through lived experiences—not just marketing materials. Customer-generated content on Instagram and TikTok, as well as offline conversations among high schoolers, actively contribute to how the brand is perceived and communicated further. This organic spread of the brand through shared experiences and conversations is a key pathway to the top of Keller's pyramid: brand resonance. When customers willingly advocate for a brand through user-generated content and peer-to-peer storytelling, they move from passive consumers to active brand ambassadors (Keller, 2001).

When comparing employee and customer perspectives, both groups align in a way that they see branding as something felt and lived rather than managed and controlled. For employees, branding is about values and internal cohesion. For customers, it's about the emotions and expectations tied to the event. They differ slightly in awareness: employees are more conscious of branding as a strategic

tool that should be developed, while customers experience it more intuitively through touchpoints like social media and the atmosphere during the event itself. This combination of shared experiences and conversations is a key pathway to brand resonance in Keller's framework.

Another key takeaway is the recognition (by employees) that AGT currently lacks formal tools to measure the effectiveness of its branding efforts. While there is an understanding of the crucial role of branding, no systematic metrics are in place to track brand equity, customer perceptions, or long-term engagement. Developing methods to quantify brand performance could provide valuable insights for refining AGT's branding strategies in the future. Measuring deliberate branding would help AGT understand whether its visuals, tone of voice, and planned campaigns resonate with the customer base. On the other hand, analysing organic branding—such as how employees interpret the brand or how customers describe it in their own words—can help AGT stay aligned with its audience, which practically renews annually. This balanced approach would enable AGT to refine its branding strategies without losing the authenticity and playfulness that have made it successful. In this context, Keller's model could serve as a useful tool not only for building brand equity but also for assessing it. Measuring salience, performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, and resonance as separate but interlinked components could help SMEs better understand where their brand is strong and where it needs refinement.

In conclusion, for SMEs working with limited resources, branding often becomes embedded in the customer experience and company culture rather than being treated as a separate marketing function. At AGT, branding is not only a matter of logos or visual identity but also something expressed through employee attitudes, customer interactions, and the shared experiences created around the event. This makes branding an ongoing process—partly intentional, partly unplanned—which is shaped and sustained by both employees as well as customers. The findings show that a successful brand in an SME context is less about scale and more about consistency, values, and emotional connection. Employees bring the brand to life through enthusiasm and internal alignment, while customers amplify it through word-of-mouth and social media. However, much of it risks remaining intangible without formal tools to measure branding. SMEs must consider this when deciding which direction to go with their brand and how much resources to pour into their branding efforts. Measuring both deliberate and organic elements of the brand identity would help companies like AGT understand the true impact of their brand and refine it accordingly to achieve optimal results.

The study also underscores branding as a strategic asset for SMEs rather than an isolated marketing function. Initiatives like the “AGT Stipendi” program further exemplify AGT’s commitment to inclusivity and fairness, serving as natural extensions of the brand’s values. The program also exemplifies how branding efforts can extend beyond traditional promotional activities to reinforce brand values. These kinds of emotional responses and social initiatives contribute to both brand feelings and brand judgments in Keller’s pyramid, as they elicit admiration, respect, and a sense of community while reinforcing perceptions of fairness and reliability. The findings indicate that when branding is embedded into business operations and customer interactions of an SME, it becomes a powerful driver of trust, reputation and long-term brand equity. For SMEs like AGT, branding is built through authentic customer interactions, active employee engagement and relevant digital communication rather than large-scale marketing initiatives. This study concludes that effective branding in SMEs requires a balanced combination of strategic planning and organic development, allowing the brand to evolve naturally while remaining aligned with its fundamental values.

5.2 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study offer several actionable insights for SMEs to strengthen their branding efforts. First, SMEs should develop structured processes to evaluate branding performance. Many SMEs, including AGT, lack tools for measuring the effectiveness of their branding strategies. Developing clear metrics, such as customer loyalty scores or social media engagement rates, could provide valuable insights and guide the decision-making further down the line. Without such measures, branding efforts remain intuitive rather than strategic. Second, internal branding plays a critical role in SME brand consistency. While employees usually align well with the company’s values, implementing brand training programs could ensure consistency in representing the brand across all types of customer interactions, from support emails to social media posts. This would also address the possible variability in how employees interpret and embody the brand. Third, leveraging value-driven initiatives can help SMEs differentiate themselves in competitive markets. Programs, like the “AGT Stipendi” in AGT’s case, can amplify the company’s commitment to its core values, such as fairness and inclusivity. These brand actions serve as powerful tools for reinforcing customer trust and further strengthening the brand's likability.

Keller’s Customer-Based Brand Equity model offers a practical roadmap for SMEs aiming to build sustainable brands with limited resources. By anchoring strong values and service quality

(performance), fostering emotional connections (feelings), ensuring consistent visibility and recognisability (salience), and cultivating loyal customer relationships (resonance), companies can build a brand upon which they can stand when developing their business. When these components are actively supported through internal employee alignment and external engagement, branding evolves from a side activity into a strategic and cultural foundation for the entire company. Recognising this can help SMEs make smarter, more intentional decisions about how to enhance their brand, even when operating with limited resources.

Finally, a consistent social media presence is vital for any SME, particularly for businesses that rely on word-of-mouth and community engagement. Optimising social media strategies to maintain consistent messaging and engagement will be crucial for sustaining a brand's reach and relevance. AGT effectively uses Instagram and TikTok to communicate its brand identity, demonstrating how SMEs can achieve broad visibility with targeted, engaging content rather than high-budget marketing campaigns. By prioritising brand measurement, internal alignment, authentic initiatives and social media engagement, SMEs can strengthen their market position and ensure sustainable brand growth. AGT's case highlights how strategic yet cost-effective branding efforts can drive long-term success in an SME context.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study provides valuable insights into SME branding strategies, but several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research is based on a single case study, representing a relatively isolated and niche market. This limits the applicability of the results to other SMEs operating in different markets and industries. While AGT is a strong example, SME branding challenges and strategies may vary across sectors, making it beneficial for future research to explore multiple case studies to identify common patterns and industry-specific differences. Secondly, the sample size in this study is relatively small, consisting of three employees and three customer interviews. While the qualitative approach allows for in-depth exploration, a more extensive and diverse participant pool could offer broader perspectives and enhance the generalizability of the findings. Future research could broaden the scope by including additional employees and customers or other stakeholders, such as business partners, to capture varied perspectives on branding in SMEs. Thirdly, as the researcher is also professionally involved with AGT, complete detachment from the case company was not possible. While this insider position provided valuable contextual understanding, it also posed a risk of bias.

To mitigate this, efforts were made to approach the data as objectively as possible, including systematic coding of interviews and the inclusion of both employee and customer perspectives.

Finally, future studies could investigate how SMEs balance structured branding efforts with organic brand development. Many SMEs, like AGT, experience “a dual branding process”, where some elements evolve intentionally while others emerge from the day-to-day business activities, such as customer interactions. Research could focus on the potential trade-offs between creativity and consistency in SME branding, offering insights into how SMEs can scale their branding without losing their unique identity. Moreover, exploring the impact of customer-driven word-of-mouth marketing on branding could yield valuable insights for SMEs. Given the increasing reliance on social media and peer recommendations, studying how SMEs can strategically harness user-generated content, influencer partnerships, and customer advocacy would provide practical value for many companies and entrepreneurs. Similarly, developing tools to measure branding success, such as customer loyalty metrics or brand sentiment analysis, could provide valuable implications for similar businesses. By addressing these gaps, future research can deepen the understanding of SME branding, helping small businesses develop cost-effective and sustainable branding strategies that foster long-term success.

References

- Aaker, D. A. (1992), "The Value of Brand Equity", *Journal of Business Strategy*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 27-32.
- Astner, H. and Gaddefors, J. (2024) "Founders and Their Brands: How Founder Identity Matters in Small Firm Branding." *Qualitative Market Research*.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Bresciani, S. & Eppler, M. J. (2010) Brand new ventures? Insights on start-ups' branding practices. *The Journal of Product & Brand Management*. [Online] 19 (5), 356–366.
- Deborah Roedder, J. (2016). "Customer-Based Strategic Brand Management: Past Progress and Future Challenges." *AMS Review* 6.1–2: 17–22. Web.
- Eggers, F. et al. (2013) The impact of brand authenticity on brand trust and SME growth: A CEO perspective. *Journal of World Business: JWB*. [Online] 48 (3), 340–348.
- EIF (2024). "The European Small Business Finance Outlook 2024". EIF Research and Market Analysis. Working Paper 2024/101.
- Eriksson, P. & Kovalainen, A. (2008) *Qualitative methods in business research*. Los Angeles, [Calif]; SAGE.
- Galletta, A. (2013) *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: from research design to analysis and publication*. 1st ed. [Online]. New York: New York University Press.
- Horan, G. et al. (2011) Exploring management perspectives of branding in service SMEs. *The Journal of Services Marketing*. [Online] 25 (2), 114–121.
- Juntunen, M. (2024). Conceptualising SME brand co-creation. *International Journal of Management Reviews: IJMR*. [Online]
- Keller, K.L. (1993) Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity. *Journal of Marketing*, 57, 1-22.
- Keller, K.L. (2001) *Building Customer-Based Brand Equity: A Blueprint for Creating Strong Brands*. Marketing Science Institute. Report Summary.
- Krishnan, B. C. & Hartline, M. D. (2001) Brand equity: is it more important in services? *The Journal of Services Marketing*. [Online] 15 (5), 328–342.
- Lassar, W., Mittal, B. and Sharma, A. (1995) "Measuring Customer-Based Brand Equity." *The Journal of Consumer Marketing* 12.4. 11–19. Web.
- Miles, S. J. & Mangold, G. (2004) A Conceptualization of the Employee Branding Process. *Journal of Relationship Marketing (Binghamton, N.Y.)*. [Online] 3 (2–3), 65–87.

- Muhonen, T. et al. (2017) SME brand identity: its components, and performance effects. *The Journal of Product & Brand Management*. [Online] 26 (1), 52–67.
- Punjaisri, K. et al. (2009) Internal branding: an enabler of employees' brand-supporting behaviours. *Journal of Service Management*. [Online] 20 (2), 209–226.
- Suomi, K. & Aro, K. (2025) Bricolage and Entrepreneurial Branding in Finnish Tourism Business SMEs. *Corporate Reputation Review*. [Online]
- Vipunen – Opetushallinnon tilastopalvelu (2023) *Opiskelijat ja ylioppilastutkinnon suorittaneet*. Available from: <https://vipunen.fi/fi-fi/lukio/Sivut/Opiskelijat-ja-ylioppilastutkinnon-suorittaneet.aspx> [Accessed on 9 January 2025]
- Yin Wong, H. & Merrilees, B. (2005) A brand orientation typology for SMEs: a case research approach. *The Journal of Product & Brand Management*. [Online] 14 (3), 155–162.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questions for employees of AGT

1. How did AGT start?
 - a. Motives for entrepreneurship?
 - b. Sources of inspiration?
2. Was the brand a part of the development process?
3. What kind of values does AGT represent?
 - a. How does AGT communicate these values to its customers?
4. In what ways has AGT developed throughout the years? Has the brand developed?
5. Has there been any great successes in the history of AGT? What about failures?
6. How is your vision visible in the brand? How about the vision of other employees?
7. How do the employees of AGT perceive the brand?
8. How do you think AGT's customers perceive the brand?
9. Why do the customers choose AGT over its competitors?
10. How is AGT different from the other players in the same market and why?
 - a. How does that affect the brand's value?
 - b. Has the competition changed through the years?
11. AGT's customers attend the event only once. How do you maintain or transfer brand loyalty when the customers change every year?
12. How do the customers take part in the development of the brand and how does it affect the value of the brand?
13. How do you measure the success and value of AGT's brand?
14. How do you see the future of AGT?

Appendix 2: Interview questions for customers of AGT

1. When and how did you hear of AGT for the first time?
2. What made you choose AGT over Abiristeilyt?
3. What kind of expectations did you have of the event prior to attending it? Did the event meet your expectations?

4. How would you describe the Abi Goes Tallinn event to your friends?
5. Did you feel like you were part of a community during the event?
 - a. If not, what was missing?
 - b. If yes, where did that feeling come from?
6. What kind of values do you think AGT stands for?
7. All in all, how satisfied were you of the event overall?
8. Did you have any problems or disappointments during the event? If yes, how were they handled?
9. What was the best memory or experience of the AGT event and why?
10. Would you recommend AGT to others? Why/why not?
11. How do you think AGT could enhance the event in the future?

Appendix 3: The codebook for analysing the interviews

Code	Description	Research question
Yellow	Role of branding	<i>What is the role of branding in SME operations?</i>
Teal	Brand identity and resources	<i>How do SMEs develop and maintain a strong brand identity with limited resources?</i>
Green	Internal and external stakeholders	<i>What role do employees and customers play in shaping and communicating an SME's brand?</i>
Bolded	Interesting points	-

Appendix 4: Declaration of the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

In accordance with the University of Turku's guidelines on the use of artificial intelligence (AI), I hereby declare the following regarding the use of AI during the process of writing this thesis.

Artificial intelligence was used as a supportive tool and for language refinement throughout the writing process. The tools used, their purposes, and steps taken to ensure the integrity of the text are outlined below:

1. Grammarly (Grammarly Inc., accessed in March and April 2025).

I used Grammarly to check and improve grammar, spelling, and sentence structure. I manually reviewed all suggestions and then proofread the content carefully to ensure that my text remained accurate and consistent.

2. ChatGPT (OpenAI, accessed between September 2024 and April 2025)

I utilized ChatGPT for brainstorming and idea generation in the early stages of the thesis process. I used it particularly for understanding key theoretical concepts such as Keller's CBBE model (see example prompt 1). and for helping me with the practical problems of research (see example prompt 2). I assessed all outputs generated by the AI manually and used none of them as such in the thesis.

No AI tools were used to generate or analyse research data, interpret findings, or write any sections of the thesis. No personal or confidential data was analysed by any AI. I confirm that I have used AI tools with appropriate caution, disclosed their use transparently in this Declaration, and take full responsibility for the content, originality, and accuracy of this thesis.

Examples of prompts:

1. ChatGPT, OpenAI, September 13, 2024. Prompt: *"What is a Brand Association in Kellers model?"*
2. ChatGPT, OpenAI, September 19, 2024. Prompt: *"What are some pros and cons of conducting the customer interviews face to face vs. online in Zoom or some other remote video call?"*