

**UNIVERSITY OF VAASA  
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**BRAND BUILDING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA IN B2B BORN  
GLOBAL COMPANIES**

Case study Leadfeeder and Vainu.io

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Master's Thesis in  
Strategic Business Development

**VAASA 2019**



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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this master's thesis is to uncover the ways how born global companies, operating in the B2B sector, can implement successful brand building in social media when expanding to a new international market, since rapid internationalization is an important characteristic for the born global companies. The link between utilizing social media in brand building and the internationalization of born globals is a relevant topic for this research, because even though one of the most important marketing themes in the research world has been a brand and its benefits for a company, too little effort has been invested in the brand building actions in the B2B field. In addition, the utilization of social media in branding with deliverable results has remained to be problematic among many B2B companies.

This research includes a qualitative case study with two B2B born global companies; Leadfeeder and Vainu.io, who both have successfully entered several international markets early after their founding. In this study, the used data collection method is semi-structured interviews and the analysis of the empirical material has been carried out using a theory-based content analysis.

Based on the theoretical framework and the empirical results, the role of social media in B2B brand building is found to be diverse but decisive, since it can effectively support the internationalization of born globals. The results in this study are not intended to be generalized, but to be used as guidelines when building a brand with social media in the B2B field, taking into account the characteristics of the born global companies.

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**KEYWORDS:** born global, internationalization, B2B, brand building, social media



## 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the reader to the study by discussing the background, the existing research gap, and the objectives and the delimitations of this study. In addition, the key concepts of this research are explained. This chapter ends by presenting the structure of the study.

### 1.1. Motivation for the study and the research gap

Over the decades, traditional companies have internationalized by selling first their products in home markets for several years, and after getting many years of operations experience, they have sequentially started to look for internationalization opportunities from new countries. However, a new phenomenon in the field of internationalization of business organizations has evolved, which is called born global. The concept is relatively new, since the term was introduced during the beginning of 1990's. There is no universal definition for the concept, but there are many characteristics with born globals that distinguish them from traditional companies (Luostarinen & Gabrielsson 2006). According to (Oviatt & McDougall, pp. 49) a born global is a small or medium sized company that *“from inception, seeks to derive competitive advantage from the use of different resources and the sale of outputs in various countries”* without having a long-term domestic period. Generally, born globals can be distinguished from other businesses especially with their rapid internationalization characteristic. In addition, born globals are typically high growth and technology oriented business organizations i.e. startups that after a few years from founding enter to a several international markets, and have a global mindset since beginning (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson 2004; Luostarinen & Gabrielsson 2006). It is argued that in the future, born globals are a growing phenomenon in the B2B internationalization field (Rialp, Rialp & Knight 2005), which makes this phenomenon meaningful and important to study. Also, it is interesting how born globals can be successful in doing business globally, since they typically operate with limited human, physical and financial resources (Knight & Cavusgil 2004). It has been noted, that born globals have to utilize their capabilities in a unique way in order to internationalize rapidly (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson 2004). Therefore,

this research focuses on studying how born global companies could seek for rapid expansion to a new international market with the help of brand building in social media.

One of the most important and popular marketing themes in the research world has been the brand and its value for the company (Keller 2009). The domination of brand building research has occurred from the business-to-consumer (B2C) environment, whereas the research of branding in the business-to-business (B2B) environment has been lagging behind, even though the importance of branding in the B2B sector can be considered as equally relevant. Significant benefits can occur from building a strong and global brand, such as a brand with a positive equity, long-term customer relationships and brand loyalty (Kuhn, Alpert and Pope 2008). In addition, it is studied that a strong brand image raises the confidence and the satisfaction of corporate customers' purchasing decisions (Leek & Christodoulides 2011). The purchasing decisions have a long-term impact on the economic value of the B2B companies which therefore makes the brand building context a particularly important topic to study. Even though the benefits of B2B branding are obvious, too little effort is generally invested in brand building in the B2B field. This can be due to the research gap within the subject area, to which this thesis intends to contribute.

Social media is a popular and modern tool for implementing branding, because it has changed customers' way to communicate (Cawsey & Rowley 2016). Social media is an innovative tool for brands and companies, and it challenges the companies to step outside the box when it comes to executing online marketing or branding (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch 2017). Companies in the B2B field are commonly recognized to be only at the beginning of the utilization of social media, especially in branding (Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou & Valvi, 2015) which makes it a relevant topic to study. In addition, small but growing business organizations in the B2B field have commonly struggled with creating a social media presence that drives their desired audience and turns them as a loyal brand advocate (Brennan & Croft 2012). Therefore, the connection between brand building and social media studied in a born global context is a relevant and interesting topic for this research. Based on the previously published literature and the empirical research, the aim is to understand how born global companies can implement brand building with social media when entering a new international market, since rapid internationalization is a typical characteristic of born global companies. The research objective is interesting since it has not received attention within the existing research yet.

## 1.2. Theoretical contribution and research problem

The purpose of this master's thesis is to study brand building with social media in born global companies. In addition, the aim is to highlight the importance of branding in the B2B field and especially in born global companies in order to ease the process of internationalization. The main focus of this research is to understand the research phenomenon through analyzing the existing research and the empirical material. The purpose is not to create universal generalizations, but to understand the connection between the main topics of the research by forming a practical framework and guidelines for building a brand with social media.

This research includes a qualitative case study with two B2B born global companies; Leadfeeder and Vainu.io. Both of the companies use actively social media in their branding operations, and both of them have successfully internationalized to several countries early after founding, which makes the companies relevant and interesting to include to this study. In the empirical research, the essence is not the quantity of a material but the quality and the conceptualization coverage. Based on the previously published literature and the empirical material, the aim of this research is to answer to the following question:

- *“How can born global companies utilize social media in their brand building when expanding to a new international market?”*

Also, to support the main research question, additional research questions have been created to facilitate the connection between the key topics of the research. The additional research questions are:

- *“What are the key characteristics of born globals and how do they internationalize?”*
- *“What does B2B branding consist of, and what is brand equity?”*
- *“What is the role of social media in B2B branding and how to utilize it in brand building?”*

### 1.3. Definitions of key the concepts

**Born globals** are growth oriented business organizations that within a few years from being founded enter to multiple international markets with high technology products and entrepreneurial capabilities and have a global mindset from day one.

**Business-to-business (B2B)** refers to companies, who are selling products and services to other companies (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012).

**B2B branding** is defined as branding practices which ultimate purpose is the same as for business-to consumer (B2C) brands; to make the products, services or whole business known and at the same time separate from competitors (Beverland, Lindgreen & Napoli 2007).

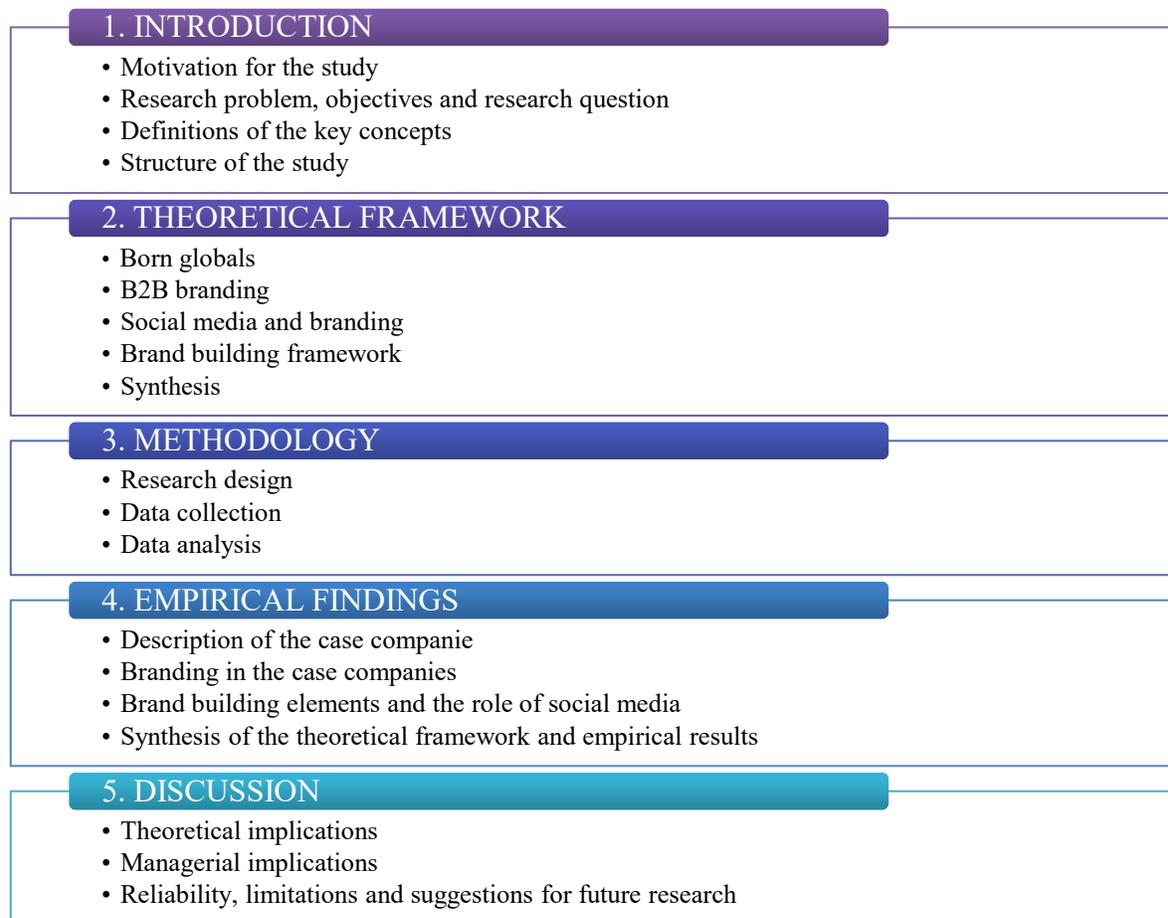
**Brand building** refers in this thesis to the development of a brand through different elements. The brand building elements are brand awareness, relevant brand differentiation, brand accessibility, communication value of a brand and emotional connection to a brand.

**Brand equity** is a company's intangible and added value to products or services which describes a brand's value. The value is determined by customer perception of the brand and experiences with the brand. (Aaker 1991).

**Social media** means a group of different internet applications and networks based on ideology and technology, which enables the creation of sharing information and content (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). In this thesis, social media is defined as a tool for branding, which enables companies to communicate directly to their audience with the use of different social media channels and networks.

## 1.4. Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists five parts which are visualized in figure 2. (1) Introduction part presents the aim of the thesis, research problem, research questions, the motivations for the study and the structure of the study. (2) Literature review lays the theoretical base for born globals, B2B branding, the role of social media in branding and brand building. In the end of the second chapter a synthesis of the theoretical framework is presented and visualized. (3) Methodology presents the research design as well as the methods of the data collection and how the data will be analysed. Also, introduction to the case study is presented. (4) Empirical findings show the results of the case study. Also a summary is presented which includes a practical framework for the research problem. Lastly, (5) conclusions are made from the results of the theoretical framework and the empirical findings. Also, reliability and limitations of the study, and future research suggestions are discussed in the end of the thesis.



**Figure 1.** Structure of the thesis

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, a literature review is composed about the main themes and concepts of the research. Firstly, the phenomenon and characteristics and internationalization of born globals are defined. Secondly, the concept of B2B branding and its different areas are explained. Thirdly, the role of social media in B2B branding is discussed. Fourthly, a practical model of brand building is presented. This chapter ends to a synthesis about the main themes of the research where a connection between the themes is shown.

### 2.1. Born global phenomenon

This chapter will present an overview of the born global phenomenon. Firstly, different definitions of a born global company are explained. Secondly, the main characteristics of a born global company are provided and thirdly the rapid internationalization process of the company is presented with a growth stage model.

#### 2.1.1. Definition

Researchers have studied over the ages extensively the traditional forms of internationalization e.g. the Uppsala Internationalization model. The most common view of internationalization is that companies begin to operate first in the domestic markets and after many years of experience, they sequentially expand to foreign markets. (Johanson & Vahine 1977.) In recent years, researchers, who are active in the field of internationalizations processes of firms, have begun to explore one of the newest concept of internationalization which is called as *born global*. This phenomenon can be considered as relatively new because it has not been studied to extent to which traditional internationalization have been studied. The concept of born global refers to companies, who at their early stage of life seeks to fast internationalization differently than traditional companies (Moen 2001). According to Knight & Cavusgil (1996), born globals are defined as companies that within a few years since being founded enters to several international markets. Also having a global mindset from day one is an important aspect of born globals (Knight & Cavusgil 1996). The born global concept focuses on the time aspect, because it requires the internationalization soon after establishment (Saarenketo 2002: 158). Over the time, there has been different labels to

describe the born global phenomenon, e.g. Early Internationalizers, High-technology start-ups (Moen 2001) and Global Start-ups (Oviatt & McDougall 1994) however, the term born global remains to be the most common denomination (Wictor 2012), and it is the one used in this thesis. In order to understand the born global concept, different definitions are provided in table 1.

Author	Definition
Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson (2008)	Companies having products which have a high global market potential.
Luostarinen & Gabrielsson (2006)	Companies that since inception pursue a vision of becoming global player, and due to this, they rapidly globalise their business without having earlier long-term domestic or internationalization period.
Knight & Cavusgil (2004)	Companies that early on seek rapid international business operations from the application of knowledge-based resources to the sale of outputs in multiple countries.
Saarenketo (2002)	Small or medium sized companies who internationalise soon after being established.
McAuley (1999)	Companies who experience generally unplanned fast internationalization.
Madsen & Servais (1997)	Companies who start to become international or global right after founding or very shortly thereafter.
Knight & Cavusgil (1996)	Companies with technology orientation, that operate in international markets from the earliest day of its founding.
Oviatt & McDougall (1994)	Companies that since inception seek to derive compelling competitive advantage from the use of different outputs in foreign countries.

**Table 1.** Main authors and definitions of the born global concept

As seen from the table 1, different scholars offer different suggestions to describe the phenomenon of a born global company. However, it is clear from the table 1, that there are repeating factors between the different definitions, which helps to explain the born global concept. Also, some of the presented definitions are generally more recognised than the others. The early contributors of the born global concept and the authors of the most popular definitions were Oviatt and McDougall (1994), who describe born globals as business organisations that seek to gain valuable competitive advantage from the use of different resources in international markets, whereas Madsen and Servais (1997) describe born globals as companies that adopt an international or even global approach right after establishment. Both of the early authors distinguish born globals based on their main purpose on rapid internationalization from early stage of founding.

A more detailed definition of the phenomenon is given by Knight and Cavusgil (1996), who state that born global companies are those who reaches a 25 % share of foreign sales after starting to export activities within three years after their founding. In contrast, Luostarinen and Gabrielsson (2006) defines born global as companies that achieve 50% sales outside its domestic markets. Zahra (2005) have not specified the sales percentage attribute of born globals, but referred them to be six years old or younger companies who are moving to international or global markets since early on. Knight & Cavusgil (2004, pp. 649) identified born globals as companies *“less than 20 years old that internationalized on average within three years of founding and generate at least 25 percent of total sales from abroad.”* However, according to Wong and Merrilees (2007, pp. 317) born globals are companies *“with over 30% of sales from overseas markets and the establishment of firm and interval of internationalization of firm’s activities within three years are regarded as born global”*. Rennie (1993) describe that born-global companies are those that internationalize within two years of founding, whereas McDougall et al. (1994) describes within eight years. Indeed, the time concept between the point of the first international sale and the point of the company’s founding as well as the foreign sales percentage of the total sales are common criterions to use when studying if a company can be described as born global or not. The phenomenon of born global can be seen as an area of controversy due to the time span used differs from two to eight years, which makes the phenomenon inconsistent and heterogeneous. In addition to the time aspect and the amount of foreign sales, other attributes which can be used to investigate a company’s qualification to be born global one are studied by Gabrielsson et al. (2008) who use four conditions as a criterion to qualify firms as born globals; small or

medium sized company with global vision and unique products or services with a global demand. Also independent and entrepreneurial mindset and operationally exhibited accelerated internationalization are typical conditions for born globals. All such conditions help to differ the born global concept from a traditional company. In spite of given different variations of the born global definitions the different scholars describe born globals as companies who internationalize their operations directly or within a few years after being founded.

To summarize, born globals differ from traditional companies because they seek for expanding their product or service operations to international or global markets shortly after being founded in domestic country (Oviatt & McDougall 1994; Knight & Cavusgil 1996). Since born globals are newly founded startups, they typically face constraints in physical and financial resources which they pursue to overcome with innovative mindset, the development of a global product, the use of networking, and the skills including entrepreneurial capabilities and managers' previous experience. Even though, born globals may face the lack of resources they do not let it constrain their strategic alternatives since they aim for fast growth and internationalization (Gabrielsson & Kirpalani 2008; Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson 2008). All of the different born global characteristics are flexible and consistent to define the born global phenomenon since they fit to various proposed definitions. For the purpose of this paper, it is useful to understand the different definitions of born globals, since there are many well-established definitions (see e.g. Oviatt & McDougall; Knight & Cavusgil 1996; Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson 2008). However, it is also important to distinguish born globals from traditional companies, and in this study, the difference between a born global company and traditional one is that a born global company is a growth oriented business organization that shortly after being founded enters international or even global markets with high technology products or services and it uses its entrepreneurial capabilities and global mindset from day one. Born global definition focuses especially to the creation of new business organizations that are international by design and purpose and not by emergence.

### 2.1.2. Characteristics of born global

As seen above, there is not only one definition for the born global phenomenon. All of the different definitions tries to explain the same phenomenon, but it can be seen that different scholars emphasize differently the various characteristics of the concept. According to

Knight & Cavusgil (2004, pp. 124) born globals are defined as “*business organizations that, from or near their founding, seek superior international business performance from the application of knowledge-based resources to the sale of outputs in multiple countries*”. It can be noted, that the born global companies start-off their international operations much faster than traditional companies, since they first establish their own domestic market to gain financial resources and then internationalize. The main reason for seeking the fast internationalization is the unique products or services of born globals which are having an international demand (Luostarinen & Gabrielsson 2006). It is noted that the born globals are international minded from the birth, and in addition, born globals are unarguably most commonly found in high-tech and software industries (see e.g. Preece, Miles & Baetz 1999; Bell, 1995; Falay, Salimäki, Ainamo & Gabrielsson, 2007; Gabrielsson, Kirpalani, Dimitratos, Solberg & Zuchella 2008). In addition, Saarenketo’s (2002, pp. 1063) research explains that born globals usually exists in high technology sectors, and they tend to be more technology advanced than traditional companies. The born global companies are generally small or medium sized and technology-oriented strat-ups, adopting a global vision of the market already in the early stages with the aim of accelerating international growth (Luostarinen & Gabrielsson 2006; Cannone & Ughetto 2013, Chwolka & Raith 2012). Moreover, born globals possess a unique innovative culture, which gives more attempts to acquire knowledge during the internationalization. In addition, born globals holds an unique innovative culture that facilitates the learning curve of international operations (Knight & Cavusgil 2004).

Knight & Cavusgil (2004) added that the born globals tend to seek entrepreneurial capabilities, and they are usually managed by entrepreneurial and innovative people who sees the marketplace filled with possibilities in technology (Knight & Cavusgil 1996). The early and rapid internationalization of born globals can be referred to the concept of international entrepreneurship. International entrepreneurship refers to a mindset which is creatively discovering different business opportunities that are found outside the domestic markets in pursuit of high returns and competitive advantages (McDougall & Oviatt 2005). In addition, Ardichvili, Cardozo and Ray (2003, pp. 113) emphasize “*the entrepreneurial character of the born globals: ‘the entrepreneurial alertness to the information and sensitivity to market needs and the access to information and prior knowledge that triggers recognition of the value of new information’*”. In the research, it is argued that entrepreneurs who have social networks with the people from the same industry have more chances in seeking the

opportunities in abroad. Coviello (2006) notes in the research the importance of network dynamics in international operations and discuss that network ties facilitates the born globals internationalization, because networks set entry to essential resources for born globals as they typically have constraints in physical-, financial- and human resources (Knight, Madsen & Servais 2004). The networks can provide for born globals for example market and financial support, key contacts information, marketing, logistics and distribution referrals, which can ease the learning-curve the whole process of internationalization (Coviello 2006). In addition, Sepulveda and Gabrielsson (2013) discuss that born global companies operate more typically in business-to-business sector than in business-to-consumer sector, and that they take advantage of network dynamics to reduce the lack of financial and human resources. It is clear that networks play an important role for born globals, especially in their early phase of business operations, however the importance may decrease in the later phases due to the fast growth and knowledge gain. Networks can cause strategic benefits for born globals, such as synergies in the internationalization, market positioning due to experience, and leadership knowledge from people in the same technology industry (Sepulveda et al. 2013).

Rialp et al. (2005) states that it is important for born globals to have good entrepreneurial skills within their management team. Early on, born global companies owns a vision for the target international markets, and therefore they develop their products, the organization structure and the whole business system on global basis. Also, born globals use different innovative marketing tactics and branding strategies on the global markets which helps them to internationalize early after existence and to seek for the international mission (Luostarinen et al. 2006). Sepulveda et al. (2013) discuss that for born global companies it is typical to have a strong entrepreneurial and start-up orientation in concepts of proactiveness, innovativeness and risk taking. In addition, Freeman, Edwards, and Schroder (2006, pp. 36) defines the entrepreneurial orientation of born globals through three elements: *Innovativeness: “company’s capacity to generate new ideas, products, and services for foreign markets and its determination to develop creative solutions to challenges it faces”*. *Proactiveness: “company’s proclivity to take initiatives, anticipate and pursue new opportunities, and participate in foreign markets, and it involves actively pursuing market opportunities rather than simply reacting to moves by competitors”*. *Risk taking: “proclivity of a firm to undertake risky ventures in foreign markets.* (see Kjellstrand & Ouf 2017, pp 18; Freeman et al. 2006, pp. 36.)

It is clear that there are many distinctive characteristics of born global companies, but the most common one can be seen to be their high activity in international markets. On the contrary, traditional companies prefer to develop domestic market first and gain several years of operations experience before gradually or systematically expanding to international markets. Born global companies can be seen to be typically young, and their products or services are most commonly seen in technology business. The high-technology products or services helps them to go global early on and bring value to target customers, which enables them to generate competitive advantage in international markets. Typically, traditional companies who internationalize possesses locally developed products which are not as unique or specialized as born globals. Born globals are typically high-technology oriented companies within their industry or product category, and they are founded to derive business opportunities based on the development of new products or services which are more advanced designed or higher quality than competitors' offerings. In addition, born globals do not operate in commodity markets (Knight & Cavusgil 2004), where traditional companies commonly operate. Also, born globals tend to be small scale companies who typically have less physical-, financial- and human resources as compared to traditional companies who seek to internationalize. In addition, born globals can be seen to be highly dependent on their entrepreneurial capabilities of their owners who vision to make the company a global leader. The managers of born global companies do not see the domestic market as important as they see the foreign markets due to the vision of innovatively start to compete in international markets early on. The leaders of born globals possess a strong international outlook and an entrepreneurial mindset. In the B2B sector, born global companies usually compete with hi-tech products or services that include unique characteristics and global demand which enables them to internationalize. Business relationships and networking are important factors in the success of B2B born globals, since they seek to derive significant competitive advantage in multiple countries. The main characteristics and key dimensions of born globals are summarized in table 2.

Key dimensions	Born global characteristics
Internationalization approach	From inception, proactive and rapid internationalization
Vision	High growth, competitiveness and high activity in global markets from or near the founding
Commitment	Visionary and dedicated entrepreneurs as founders
Industry	High-tech industry
Size	Small or medium size
Resources	Scarcity in physical, financial and human resources
Market advantage	Entrepreneurial capabilities, technology competence, flexibility to adapt

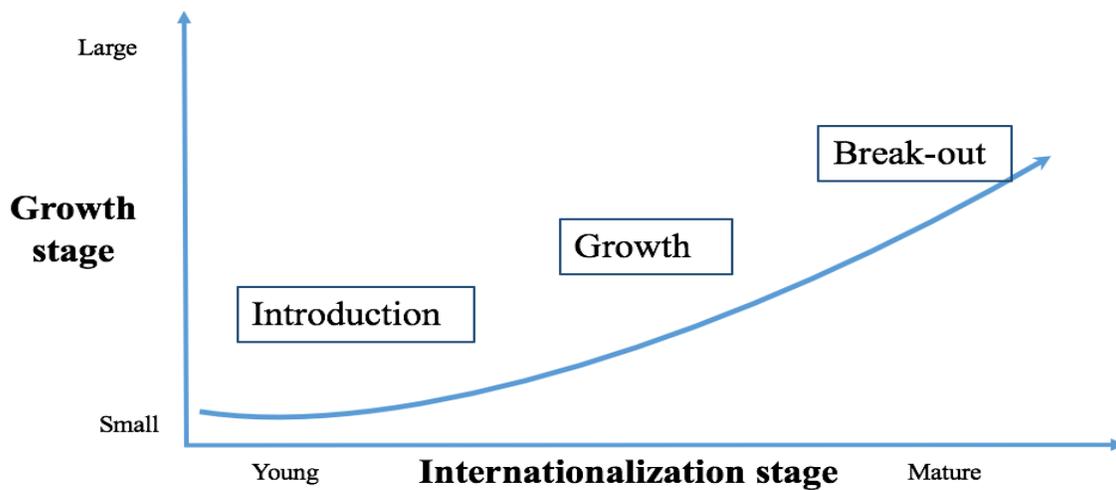
**Table 2.** Main born global characteristics

### 2.1.3. Internationalization of born globals

It is noted in the internationalization literature that when traditional companies internationalize, they develop their domestic market first, and after when they have enough experience and penetration in their home country, after many years, they may start to seek the foreign markets. It is common for traditional firms to expand to close psychic distance countries and the process of going global require number of years and a lot of resources. Psychic distance is determined by geographic and cultural distance between the home and foreign country (Hashai & Almor 2002). In contrast to traditional companies, as already mentioned above in this research, one of the main character of born globals is the rapid internationalization in contrast to traditional companies who tend to seek the domestic growth first. Also the expansions by psychic distance countries is not that important for born globals (Hashai & Almor 2002).

Since the born globals seek for fast international expansion, they need to create faster and different internationalization strategies if compared to traditional company's

internationalization strategies. Gabrielsson et al. (2008) introduces three main growth stages of born global companies, which are in another words described in terms of *phases*; the first phase of born global company development process is introductory or initial launch phase. The second stage includes growth and resource accumulation phase, whereas the third phase is the break-out phase. The three phases of different growth stages of born global firms are given in figure 2.



Introduction	Growth	Break-out
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existence and survival</li> <li>• Limited resources</li> <li>• Focus on marketing and positioning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• R&amp;D</li> <li>• Marketing expansion</li> <li>• Sales → returns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maturity</li> <li>• High returns</li> <li>• Experience in marketing</li> <li>• Expansion</li> </ul>

**Figure 2.** Internationalization of born globals (adapted from Gabrielsson et al. 2008; Churchill & Lewis 1983).

In the figure 1, the graph curve demonstrates the internationalization process of born global companies, which consist three different stages. First stage in the internationalization is the *introduction stage*, which is defined as an existence and survival phase. This is because the

born global companies usually originate from small scale companies with limitations in human and financial resources. Therefore, the reason behind their development to existence is the unique vision of international products or services, on the basis of which they develop specialize technology. In order to succeed with the rapid internationalization plan, born global companies need to develop and grow, and they may need help from different network synergies in order to expand into international markets. As born globals have limited capabilities to market the product on international scale, they also select, build and use different marketing channels and also takes advantage of networks to establish relationship with customers (Gabrielsson et al 2008).

The second stage of the internationalization of born globals is called as the *growth stage*. Since born global companies tend to have unique technology products or services which are difficult to copy and remake, it gives to the companies a possibility to gain a good market positioning in the international markets. In this stage, the success depends a lot on about the products and services offered in the market, and on the ability of the company to place them as competitive as possible. In this stage, a born global firm can earn revenues on their product or service due to large growing amount of sales due to their newness and added value to customers. Challenge in this stage is the importance of focusing to research and development of the existing products or services, because the competition always increases with the growth. In this growth stage of internationalization, networking and effective marketing practices are crucial for success in the international markets. (Gabrielsson et al. 2008.)

In the last internationalization stage of born globals, which is defined as a *break out stage*, it is important to continue the internationalization strategies developed in the second stage. In the break-out stage, the born globals are quite mature due to achieved international experience, and during this stage the companies usually develop their technological knowledge and good marketing skills, in order to achieve high revenues and mature market share. When the break-out phase is completed with high return on investments and great amount of sales in the foreign market with their innovative and high-tech products, the companies follow with new expansion strategies into other foreign markets (Gabrielsson et al 2008).

The main difference between traditional companies' and born globals internationalization is the pace of the growth stages, since the traditional companies usually in the beginning of their existence start the operations in their domestic markets for a good amount of time. After

when they have penetration in their business operations in their home country, they begin to plan to internationalize to foreign countries. In a contrast, born globals do not seek any penetration in their domestic market, because they seek for rapid internationalization right after their founding (Rialp et al. 2005). In order to seek the rapid internationalization, it is a mandatory to skip some stages of traditional internationalization.

To conclude, a born global firm is referred to “*a business organization which from early of inception seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of sale outputs in multiple countries*” (Oviatt & McDougall 1994, pp. 49). In this study, more precisely the born global company is defined as a growth oriented business organization that early on from being founded enter to multiple international markets and have a global mindset from day one, because this definition is flexible and consistent to define the phenomenon. What makes born globals unique is their strategy of achieving the competitive advantage during their different growth phases by using entrepreneurial capabilities including proactiveness, risk-taking and innovativeness. Also for a born global it is typical to develop hi-technology, unique and global demanded products, and possess high quality in their operations and rapid internationalization in global markets. All of these characteristics differentiate and define born globals from traditional companies. In this study, it is important to understand the different growth stages of born globals internationalization process, but the focus in this research is in the early phase of internationalization.

## **2.2. B2B branding**

In this chapter, different aspects and areas connected to the concept of B2B branding are explained. First of all, the background and meaning of B2B branding is defined, and also the importance of branding in the B2B sector is discussed in this chapter. After that, different areas related to the concept of B2B branding are defined one by one. At the end, the concept of brand equity is explained, since it can be applied to the benefits of B2B branding.

### **2.2.1. Background and meaning**

Branding has never been more popular than it is today. The popularity of branding has affected to the variety of branding related studies, publications, and various theories relating to the creation of a brand building frameworks. Researchers have over the years seek to find

the best practices for creating and building a brand (Jarrar 2015). Most of the branding related studies are associated with consumer brands (B2C), but nowadays, the business-to-business sector (B2B) has also gained more attention in the branding literature. The ultimate purpose of B2B branding is the same as for B2C brands; to make the products, services or whole business known and at the same time separate from competitors (Beverland et al. 2007). Brand is the company's guarantee of quality, origin and efficiency. Therefore, by increasing the experienced product or service value of the customer, while reducing the uncertainty associated with purchasing and risk, the companies can gain competitive advantages with branding (Beverland et al. 2007; Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides 2011).

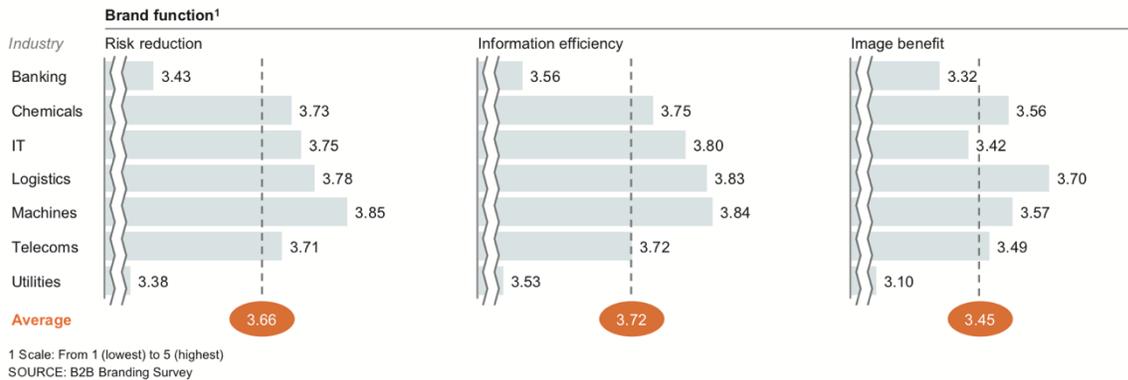
The brand of a company can be defined with different elements, such as a name, sign, term, symbol, design, or combination of things designed to identify a particular company and its products and also to distinguish it from competitors. Often, the brand is defined through the mentioned elements above in the B2C business, but when speaking about the brand in the B2B sector, it is defined much more holistically than e.g. a symbol of the company. In the B2B sector, the brand's definition extends further; it starts with a company's strategy and it's integrates its visions and goals, products and services, people and the company culture. The brand is based on brand identity, from which the brand image and other branding related elements derive. (Mindrut, Manolica & Roman 2015.) Later on, the different areas and elements related to branding are discussed more.

A strong brand benefits companies in numerous ways. Effective branding can increase the amount of positive impact on customer loyalty, market share, collaboration opportunities, marketing communications effectiveness, and customers' perceptions of the quality of products or services. In addition, a well-known brand provides protection against competitors' actions, and in case of market crisis, it can ease the challenging situations (Keller 2009). For the B2B companies, a strong brand identity in the and brand image are related to also boost employee motivation and attract new employees, which is highly important in today's competitive employee markets. The brand can therefore be seen as of the most important strategic asset and a sustainable source of competitive advantage for not only to B2C companies but especially to the B2B companies (Buil, Catalán & Martínez 2016).

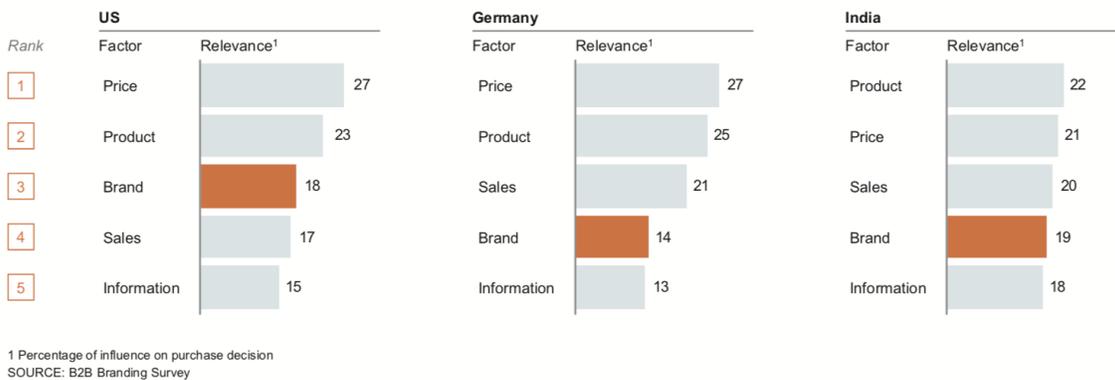
In addition, by means of B2B branding, the aim is to build a close and interactive relationship between the brand and the customer which is based on trust and the desired image of the

brand. Also, in the B2B branding, the aim is to influence to the customer's purchase decision and keep the customer loyal, whereby the customer recommends the company to move forward. Branding is part of a company's marketing communication aimed at enhancing brand awareness. In addition, the aim is to influence customers by creating positive images of the brand. The use of brand communication is similar to that used in marketing communications in general. However, the of branding is not to achieve direct sales, even though it is also possible through successful brand communication (McKinsey 2013). McKinsey (2013) demonstrates how brands matter in different B2B fields all over the world in figure 3.

**Brands add tangible value**



**Brands act as purchasing factors**



**Figure 3.** Why branding matters in the B2B field (business branding - McKinsey 2013)

### 2.2.2. Brand communication

In order to implement branding, the companies need an effective way to execute brand communication that supports the company's business objectives (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012). With brand communication, it is possible to build a close and interactive relationship between the brand and the customer which is based on trust and the desired image of the brand. The aim of brand communication operations is to build the desired brand images and influence to the customer's decision to purchase. Branding strategies are usually part of a company's overall marketing strategies, but the focus in branding is more in raising brand awareness and creating the brand images than in the traditional marketing operations. In addition, the aim in branding is to influence customers by creating positive images and trust of the brand with communication. The primary goal of branding is not to achieve direct sales, even though it is made possible by successful brand communications actions (Schultze 2013). Brand communication planning is based on clearly defined communication goals. In other words, the company needs to consider what kind of brand image and reactions they are hoping from the target audience. Often, marketing communication managers hope to obtain a strong brand image and brand positioning, however, the desired outcome can only be the result of a long process, so the marketer must understand the stage at which the target audience is at the moment and in what direction they must be guided (Kotler & Armstrong 2014: 257-258).

With brand communication, the company can also aim for the development of a company's employer image and promoting the recruitment of new employees (Chhabra & Sharma 2014). In some areas, such as in the IT sector, the competition for the best employees is intense, and companies have to invest in to attractiveness other than pay. It is important to get the employees' attention, for example, by building an image of an excellent job with attractive projects and a good corporate culture. With brand communication, a strong employer identity covering the company's values, practices, and measures for attracting, motivating and retaining existing and potential new employees can give the company a competitive edge in recruiting (Chhabra & Sharma 2014).

To conclude, brand communication actions must be carefully planned and implemented in order to create a strong brand image. Most important is to understand the target group, for example, if developing an employer image with branding, the company needs to understand what does the potential employees value and what kind of message would they be interested in, and which channels can best reach them. If the brand image is not properly communicated to the right audience, the time and money invested in the communication does not produce the desired results (Chhabra & Sharma 2014).

### 2.2.3. Brand identity

Brand identity can be said to be a set of features and dimensions that define the brand's mindset, behavior, and habit to exist. Brand identity defines the purpose and meaning of the brand, and also the direction where the brand desires to grow in the future (Buil et al. 2016). The unity of a brand identity is determined by beliefs and meanings, such as culture, vision, personality, positioning, and relationships, which the company has followed. Also, different components such as logo, marketing materials, communications, products and services and emotional reactions are created through brand identity. The different components of brand identity can be described as a vehicle that is moving towards the destination, which is the desired brand image. (Mindrut et al 2015.) Brand identity is the overall concept of the brand defined by the company, and it's clear definition is the basis for every branding communication strategies and projects (Madhavaram et al. 2005). Muhonen, Hirvonen and Laukkanen (2017) share the company's brand identity into three areas: values, vision and positioning. The brand values are the basis for brand separation from other brands. The brand values should be based on the values of the organization that define what the company represents. The brand's values therefore intensify what the brand represents. The brand's values in the B2B business can be, for example, the quality of product or service and the innovativeness (Muhonen et al. 2017). In addition, brand identity should include the company's future direction, in another words, companies should aim for a clear brand vision, because the brand's vision reflects the brand's future goals. Positioning is important for the brand identity because with different features of the brand is it more simple to distinguish the company from competitors (Muhonen et al. 2017).

According to Rashid and Ghose (2015) the corporate culture and brand identity have a significant connection. The corporate culture is defined as the company's general philosophy,

a set of the companies values and beliefs that shape people's thinking and behavior (Hankinson & Hankinson 1999). The values in the corporate culture guide the interaction of the company's employees with customers (Chernatony & Cottam 2008). Therefore, corporate culture is an essential part of brand building because the employee behavior reflects the brand and influences customers' views on the brand. Without a suitable corporate culture, the employees are unlikely to behave according to the brand's values. The ability to keep the employees in the company is also linked to the brand's success as the quality of work is more consistent when the same employees stay in the company for long periods of time. (Chernatony & Cottam 2008). According to the results of Rashid and Ghose (2015) study, the brand identity should be the basis for creating a corporate culture. Often, corporate culture is fostered to the companies, for example, by recruiting people of their own personality. Building a corporate culture is a long process that is in constant interaction with the concept of brand identity, they shape each other and develop together (Rashid & Ghose 2015).

#### 2.2.4. Brand awareness

Brand awareness refers to the ability of a consumer to recognize and recall a brand in different situations, and therefore it is important to get the brand name into attention of the potential customers (Heding et al. 2009). It is essential for the companies that the brand name comes to people's mind in the right context. Brand awareness is related to the intensity of the "memory" of customers, enabling them to recognize the brand in different situations. Keller (1993) shares brand awareness in two parts: brand recognition and brand recall. *Brand recognition* refers to the customers' ability to remember the previous contact with the brand when they meet the brand again, whereas *brand recall* refers to the ability of customers to remember the brand when a brand-related product category is given as a clue (Keller 1993). Brand awareness plays a major role in the customer's decision process and it is important that customers remember the brand when thinking about the product or service category associated with it. Brand awareness is also relevant to customer decision making in the sense that it affects the formation and strength of certain brand image. To create a brand image, it is imperative that the customer is left with a memo of the brand. (Keller 1993.) By expanding the brand awareness, the companies aims to apply good brand and corporate image, and strive to create the most positive image and attitude towards the brand (Heding et al. 2009; Davis et al. 2009). Generally speaking, brand marketing refers to external communication decisions designed to demonstrate the quality of the product or service. Brand marketing is a way for

B2B companies to influence the audience's attitudes towards organizations, products, services or ideas (Govender, Makasi, Rukweza 2014). Commonly, buyer's brand awareness for a particular product or service is often more useful in the early stages of a decision-making process whereby the seller and the buyer are not yet experienced in dealing with each other (Leek & Christodoulides 2012).

#### 2.2.5. Brand image

A strong brand image has already for a long time seen as a very important concept in the marketing research. Brand image refers to consumers' and customers' views and preferences of a brand, which are reflected from the customer's previous experiences. Strong, favorable, and unique brand images are important in order to separate from competitors. The brand image is therefore the consumer's perception of a brand that is affected by marketing communications in many ways. (Keller 2009.) According to Ataman and Ülengin (2003), the brand image is the most important answer to how does the consumers and organizations find themselves and choose each other from other competing brands. B2C and B2B brand communication is expected to differ in general, because in B2B brand marketing, the marketing decisions are commonly related only on the various features and facts of products or services (Bendixen, Bukasa & Abratt 2004). It is also commonly believed that B2B purchasing decisions are based only on rational decisions and therefore brands would not be that relevant in the B2B sector (Keller 2009). However, further studies in B2B branding literature have shown that price, different attributes and the physical product factors are not just the only factors influencing to B2B purchasing decisions. Rational and systematic purchasing decisions have also been influenced by many intangible factors such as the overall reputation of the company, which is one of the main attributes in branding. (Bendixen et al. 2004 ; Keller2009).

The brand image has a strong connection with brand equity, which consists the customers' reactions to the brand (Keller 2009). In addition, Keller (1993) notes that especially brand images have a major impact on those brand-specific reactions. The brand image consists of, among other things, these brand-name images. Keller (1993) shares the brand image in three areas: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. *Attributes* are the characteristics of a company's product or service in the customer's mind. In other words, the characteristics describe what the customer thinks about the product or service and what kind of things are associated with

buying and using it. The attributes associated with a the product or service may be related to the customer's own experience with the brand, or implicitly from other sources such as marketing communications. The different attributes of the brand can also include personality features that characterize different brands, such as youthful or colorful, in the customer's mind (Keller 1993). Benefits in the brand image context are the personal benefits that a customer associates with a product or service. Benefits can be for example experience or symbolic benefits such as status or others approvals. Attitudes, in turn, determine the customer's overall impression of the brand. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) argues that attitudes are consisting the customer's perception of the brand's characteristics. In other words, the customers believe that the brand has certain features and then they estimate what they like of the brand on the basis of the features (Keller 2009).

Several studies have shown the importance of brand marketing for the B2B companies (Michaelidou et al. 2011; Glynn & Woodside 2009). The brand image is formed on the basis of the information and experience of the customers. The ultimate purpose of B2B branding is to create a positive brand image of the company to the potential customers in order to simplify the decision-making process (Keller 2009). Different brand marketing operations enables the B2B companies to stand out from their competitors and improve the quality of their brand image on the market. In the B2B-business, strong brands are related to higher price because their products or services are perceived to be high quality and often superior when compared to their competitors (Michaelidou et al. 2011; Glynn & Woodside 2009; Keller 2009). In addition, successful B2B branding and brand management offers sustainable competitive advantage for companies (Beverland et al. 2007).

#### 2.2.6. Brand equity

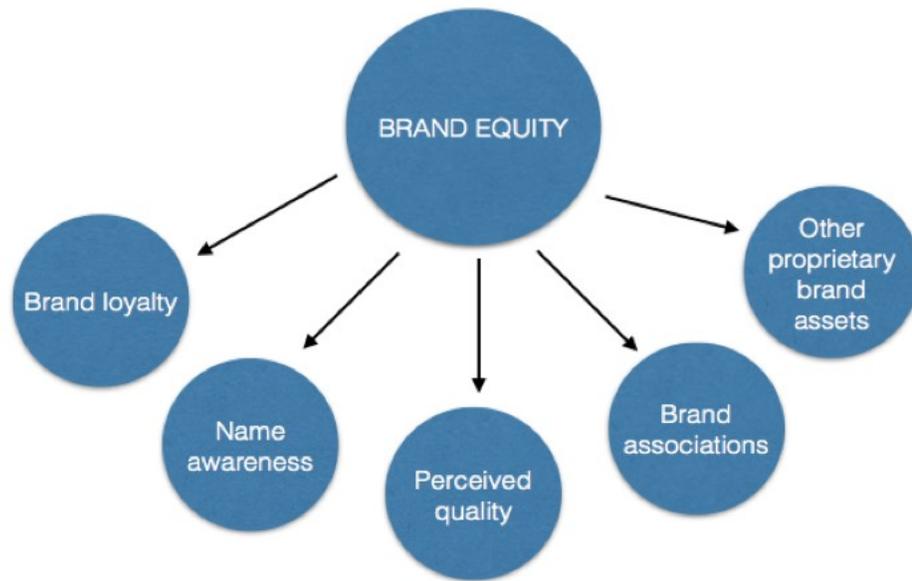
The purpose of the brand is not just to distinguish it between different products or services, but to generate interaction with the customer. Brand equity does not just mean the brand's financial benefit to the company, it also includes the intangible benefits of the brand (Bivainienė & Šliburytė 2008). The concept of *brand equity* has been constantly discussed in various brand marketing studies but there has not been found any consistent definition to determine or measure the B2B brand's equity (Govender et al. 2014). Most of the brand equity studies have focused on consumer marketing (B2C), but little has been done in B2B marketing (Leek & Christodoulides 2012). However, different researchers define brand

equity in a slightly different way, but they mostly agree that brand equity is the result of the marketing impact associated with the brand. The companies can notice brand equity impact in different ways; for example, by customers' opinions of the brand, customer behavior in relation to the brand, pricing, market value and profitability (Bivainienė & Šliburytė 2008).

Brand equity is defined as the value that a brand brings to its branded entity, and that entity's product or services. If a brand is strong, it has so-called high-brand equity. The brand equity level can be measured as a brand's ability to gain customers' enthusiasm and loyalty. If a company's brand has a positive brand equity, customers respond more favorably to their products and services than to their competitors. High brand equity offers the company a possibility for gaining sustainable competitive advantage and the foundation for creating strong customer relationships. (Kotler & Armstrong 2014.) In the brand equity related literature, a variety of reference frameworks have proposed to include brand identity, brand awareness and brand image as sub-domains for creating brand equity. Aaker (1991) shows that brand awareness is one of the main factors influencing to the existence of high brand equity. However, Keller (1993), for instance, argues that brand equity consists of how brand knowledge affects to customer reactions to different marketing projects. Brand knowledge is divided by Keller (1993) to brand image and brand awareness. From a theoretical point of view, it is a mandatory to identify the most important elements in the brand equity concept to understand its relation to brand marketing operations (Govender et al. 2014). In principle, the aim of a branding is to get high brand equity to its products or services (Heding et al. 2009). Brand equity includes *a brand value* concept, which is one of the intangible assets in the company's balances sheet. It is really important to be able to determine the value of a brand in the modern world (Heding et al. 2009), but it is also seen as a difficult concept to determine. The subjective perception of brand equity is strategically valuable because it refers to customers' expectations about the brand. Customers are those who experience the brand and their expectations regarding to the brand equity can be defined as follows: the consumer perceives the brand equity of a product or service as a value that has a particular brand name. (Heding et al. 2009.)

As it can be noted, B2B branding is built on the strategy as product branding. Therefore, Aaker's (1991) definition of the concept of brand equity can be linked to B2B branding and its benefits. (Kuhn et al. 2008) According to Aaker (1996, pp 8), brand equity is defined "*as a set of assets linked to a brand's name and symbol, whereas the management of brand equity*

*is the creation and improvement of these assets” (Aaker 1996, pp 8). The brand equity concept includes different components that can develop in many different ways value to the brand, whereas the overall brand equity creates value for the company and its customers. The different characteristics of brand equity can be seen below in figure 4.*



**Figure 4.** Brand equity (Aaker 1991:17)

Next, some of the components which are relevant to B2B branding, will be discussed more in detail. The components which can be linked as the benefits of B2B branding are brand loyalty, name awareness, and brand associations. Brand loyalty can be seen as a very important aspect for the company especially financially, since customers who are brand loyal means predictable future sales. In addition, it is noted to be more beneficial for companies to keep the existing customers happy instead of acquiring new customers. A way to consolidate the brand loyalty is to reinforce the customer loyalty of current customers (Aaker 1996). An example to improve the current customer relationships is by bringing value to the customer for example by producing content marketing, in another words, to provide useful information to current customers. Brand loyalty is important for customers, because it provides assurance to the new potential customers, especially with expensive or risky purchases (Aaker 1991), as it is usually in the B2B buying situation. Name awareness, in another words, brand awareness, refers to the fact how present the brand name is in the customer’s mind. The first

step of the buying process is to think which brands to consider, and therefore the awareness of a brand is crucial in buying behaviour. In order for the company to be a part of the buying process consideration set, it has to be known (Aaker 1996; Aaker 1991). Many studies explain, that name or brand awareness can be reflected to be the key benefit of branding (see e.g. Rose & Pulizzi 2011; Holliman & Rowley 2014; Regalix 2015). In the B2B field, companies can increase the overall awareness of their brand, by producing useful content to the audience. All attributes connected to a brand are seen as an elemental base for a brand name. Brand associations are relevant when seeking for brand positioning or differentiation and they are also linked to buying decisions, creating positive attitudes or feelings, and brand loyalty of the customers (Aaker 1991). By conducting content in branding, it can be linked to better brand associations. After noticing the importance of content producing in the B2B branding, the next chapter presents and discussed a useful tool for creating and sharing the content; social media.

### **2.3. Role of social media in B2B branding**

This chapter focuses on explaining the role of social media and its importance to B2B branding. First, the concept of social media is discussed, as well as it's background and meaning to branding is briefly presented. Next, the impact of social media to B2B branding is studied. Finally, the most popular social media channels in the B2B field are presented.

#### **2.3.1. Background and meaning**

Social media and its importance to branding has been studied in the B2C marketing an enormous amount over the past few years (see e.g. Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas 2015; De Vries, Gensler & Leeflang 2012; Ashley & Tuten & Solomon 2014). However, there can be seen a gap in the research of how to use social media in the B2B branding context (Michaelidou et al. 2015). However, social media as a tool for branding both in the B2C and B2B context can be seen as a direct way to communicate to the company's customers with the help of different social media networks, channels and platforms. Social media channels have created entirely new ways to interact with customers. Various social media channels

have acquired millions of people who have incorporated them into their daily lives (Boyd & Ellison 2007). Social media utilization consists of different social media technologies, platforms and software's to "*create, communicate, deliver and exchange offerings that have value for an organization's stakeholders*" (Tuten & Solomon 2014, pp. 21).

Social media has become as one of the most important tool for marketers in recent years and has taken on its place as one of the most important area in business development and branding. Social media and Web 2.0 have shaped organizations ways of communicating between different stakeholders and also how individuals and communities communicate within organizations (Gillin & Schwartzman 2011, 101; Kärkkäinen, Jussila & Aramo-Immonen 2014; Kietzmann Hermkens, McCarthy & Silverstre 2011). Social media refers to internet-based applications based on Web 2.0's ideology and technology, enabling users to create and exchange content. Social media allows sharing and creating user-generated content through different platforms (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, Shapiro 2012; Kärkkäinen et al., 2014). User generated content is media content of various formats that is publicly available (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Social media is defined as a variety of platforms in which everyone with access to the internet can create social interaction. One of the key reasons for the success and popularity of social media is that it is easily accessible to everyone and everyone can easily connect to one another in a digital environment (Thomas & Barlow 2011).

Kärkkäinen et al. (2014) integrate social media into the term Web 2.0, which is described as technologies that facilitate the audience to communicate, create valuable content, and share it in different communities or social media channels i.e. platforms. Social media is connected to the concept of Web 2.0 because it is identified as a group of technology methods or applications that are built on Web 2.0's ideology. In the recent years, there have also been a growing amount of studies about social media and Web 3.0 (Berners-Lee et, Hendler & Lassila 2001). According to Garrigos-Simon, Alcamí & Riberta (2012) Web 3.0 highlights the machine learning in technology, putting photos, sounds and feelings into a new interactive concept where the traditional passive content is no longer effective. In another words, this can be referred to a concept of artificial intelligence (AI) which is called as machine intelligence. Web 3.0 enables companies to focus on smarter social media choices which can lead to better customer relationships and organization management reflected from information through data collection (Garrigos-Simon, et al., 2012). Interactive marketing

tools, such as social media, are based on the audience's active role, whereas in traditional marketing the audience is passive (Wade 2009). Nowadays, there are hundreds of social media platforms and they are changing the marketing field enormously (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden 2011).

Social media offers an effective way for companies to implement marketing and brand communication operations. Brand communication offers a way for companies to build a close and interactive relationship between the brand and the customer, whereas social media offers a tool for brand communication to build customer relationship through interaction which encourages trust and the desired image of the brand. According to Hutchings (2012), social media has an ability to significantly influence to the brand awareness and brand image creation in the different stages of buying processes. Common social media applications in the B2B sector are sharing content on a business blog, building relationships with bloggers, influencing people and community administrators, and sharing content in different social media channels (Schulze 2013). According to Marx (2013), still the biggest challenge for many B2B companies is that social media is mainly seen as an "addition" to the company's marketing strategy when it really can bring significant benefits to the company when used strategically (Habibi, Hamilton, Valos & Callaghan 2015). Companies can choose from a variety of different social media channels to implement the brand communication strategies, ranging from different social media platforms such as collaborative productions, microblogs or forums (Kärkkäinen et al. 2011). Social media includes different social networking platforms, and the choice of companies to choose from the wide range of channels depends on the targeted audience, because choosing the right platforms is critical in delivering the desired messages about the company and its brand.

Fotis (2015) and Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) explains, that there are different types of social media categories which are presented in table 3 below. The different categories are: *social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, wikis, content community sites, consumer review sites, Internet forums and location based social media*. Although all of these different social media categories can be utilized in B2B marketing, some categories suite better to specific company targets than others depending a lot of the type of business and markets the company operates with (see Honkaniemi 2017; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).

Category	Content	Platform
Social networking	Networking, sharing company information	LinkedIn, Facebook, Google+
Blogs	Communicating ideas and sharing latest industry news	Blogspot, WordPress, external company blogs on website, Tumblr
Microblogs	Share content quickly	Twitter, Pinterest
Wikis	Managing information, externally and internally	Wikipedia, company's website
Content community sites	Sharing media content	Youtube, Instagram, Flickr, Snapchat, Periscope, Vimeo, SlideShare
Internet forums	Asking and answering questions	Reddit, Flyertalk, Quora, Yahoo! Answers
Location based social media	Sharing geographical locations	Foursquare, Google my business, Instagram locations, Facebook places

**Table 3.** Different social media platforms (adapted from Honkaniemi 2017; Fotis, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

### 2.3.2. Impact of social media to B2B branding

Over the last decade, the digitalization, in another words, digital change has affected to organizations marketing operations, and especially brand building methods, since the traditional offline methods have changed to online (Lacka & Chong 2015). It is clear, that all the different social media platforms are changing they ways of branding and marketing (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010) As already noted above this study, several recent studies have explained that the use of social media in B2B marketing and branding is still lagging behind the consumer side. However, according to Brennan and Croft (2013), the role of social media will become increasingly important for the companies operating in the B2B sector in the near future. Brennan and Croft (2013) asserts that the use of social media will gain competitive

advantage in large quantities to companies who understands the potential of social media and it's power as a tool in marketing and branding operations.

A change in the consumption of different platforms that has caused a significant impact on customers and companies in recent years, is the way of social media affects to people's and businesses' daily lives (Veloutsou & Guzman 2017). When utilized effectively, social media offers a lot of benefits for companies marketing and branding actions, but it also comes with challenges since social media moves the increasing power of brands reputation from companies to the social media users (Kohli et al. 2015). Typically, consumers are referred as customers of B2C companies, but the power effect has an impact on B2B companies' customers as well, because their customers also are on social media. Social media has changed the power of marketing operations which is based on spreading a certain brand image or brand message from the company to its customers, because before social media platforms, the company had most of the power over the brand image and its reputation (Kohli et al. 2015; LeeFlang et al. 2014). Companies still have a power in positioning their brands in social media from inception, but they have less control afterwards since in social media, there is a way to create direct communication where all individuals have the possibility to see the outcome and the message (Kohli et al. 2015). Also, in social media, the customers can have the full control of a brand's positive or negative reputation (LeeFlang et al. 2014). In addition, Fournier and Avery (2010) noticed, that many customer's feel that brands have robbed the social media by using it in an unpleasant way. According to Fournier and Avenry (2010), it is important for companies to understand that social media is primarily created for people. In another words, the ultimate goal in the social media usage is to find the golden recipe between people and branding and make the content authentic. It is noted, that if people (potential customers) feel that the companies have too much of a commercial impact in their social media marketing operations, they feel negative emotions. The more branding has shifted to social media, the more people thinks that brands are not always completely welcome (Fournier & Avery 2010).

However, on the positive side, social media has been shown to open up new opportunities for businesses in the B2C and B2B sector, for example by improving their communication, interaction, learning and collaboration which can bring significant brand value and competitive advantage for organizations (Sashi 2012). The popularity of social media changes the way of brand communication by offering new opportunities for brand

management. Brand communication in social media offers constantly updated information to customers which is accessible for everyone while creating brand awareness. With social media platforms, it is possible to maintain a direct and real-time discussion, which makes the relationship between the customer and the company more personal and therefore promotes the development of the brand value (Gao & Feng 2016.) In the B2B branding, the most important social media goals are related usually to brand image building and raising brand awareness which can lead to gaining brand equity (Cawsey & Rowley 2016).

As already noted, the use of social media and its channels as a part of different marketing methods has been studied mainly in the consumer marketing research (B2C) (Huotari et al. 2015; Michaelidou et al. 2015). In recent years, researchers and marketers have argued that B2B companies can equally exploit the power of different social media platforms for their marketing and branding operations. B2B companies have noticed the potential of social media in brand marketing much later than B2C companies (Michaelidou et al., 2011). Social media utilization in branding operations offers a very valuable tools for comprehensive brand building and raising the brand awareness in the target markets locally and internationally. Especially, companies, who are operating in the field of technological innovations. e.g. born globals, are able to provide clarified messages of their new products or services easily and understandably, and therefore creating more value for the customers. Also, with social media, it is easy for the customers to find reliable information about company's products or services. (Brennan & Croft 2012.)

The emergence and rapid growth of technological changes have led to a growing academic discussion about the usage of social media in the B2B marketing sector. Studies have shown, that social media has gained a lot of attention and therefore many researchers, experts and marketers are studying to show the need for social media to be a part of brand building, sales development, customer service improvement, and product development (Michaelidou et al 2016, Sashi 2012). Empirical studies in the B2B sector have emphasized that the organization can benefit greatly from the use of social media. Social media makes it possible to engage deep customers connection with the brand than any other media. Social media, especially social networks, have been used primarily as a marketing tool, due to the potential of the viral element of the communication (Colliander and Dahlen (2011). Despite the fact that the B2B marketing literature generally recognizes the potential of social media, it often fails to gain concrete benefits and, in particular, to measure them correctly (Michaelidou et al., 2011).

Therefore, this study focuses on studying the benefits of social media as a tool of branding in the B2B sector, because the social media can be seen as valuable to the B2B business as well as to B2C, even though its utilization has been slower than on the consumer side.

By taking advantage of social media, companies can recognize new business opportunities, new products or services, deepen customer relationships, and strengthen collaboration not only internally, but also between other companies and partners (Kärkkäinen et al. 2014; Michaelidou et al 2016; Sashi 2012). In social media, the current and potential customers of the company can interact with each other, and often the information obtained through social media transforms their perceptions and images into different products, services and businesses (Fisher 2009). Also, social media serves possibilities to create a trust and reach a large audience in digital platforms with a cost-effective way (see e.g. Habibi et al. 2014; Leeflang et al. 2014; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010) due to its accessibility to everyone. It is important for companies to choose the right social media channels and platforms for their target customers groups. By choosing the right social media channels depending on the targeted customer segments, branding will be effective (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

### 2.3.3. Social media channels in the B2B sector

As already discussed, social media offers an effective way for companies to implement to implement brand communication. The largest and most used social media channels in the B2B sector are noted to be according to Gillin and Schwartzman (2011) as well as Brennan and Croft (2012) LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. In addition, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are the major B2B social media marketing channels that can be used to perform and improve brand building, generating leads, and developing customer service and satisfaction. It has been studied that LinkedIn is the most powerful social media channel in the B2B business (Kontsevaia & Berger 2017), whereas, Twitter is noted to be the best to share information on a fast pace (Cripps, Mejtoft & Singh 2016), and Facebook being the largest channel for influencing people at the same time or when wanting to taking part in conversations (Barnard, Bothma & Cant 2017).

LinkedIn	Twitter	Facebook
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The world's largest business-oriented social network</li> <li>• +500 million members</li> <li>• Platform for professional networking and brand building, job seeking</li> <li>• Corporate pages and analytics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most popular microblogging platform</li> <li>• +310 million monthly active users</li> <li>• Hashtags, tags</li> <li>• Company and personal accounts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leader of social network sites</li> <li>• +1 billion users</li> <li>• Personal and professional updates</li> <li>• Company pages, analytics and advertising</li> </ul>

**Table 4.** Differences in LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook (adapted from Honkaniemi 2017).

As of 2017, there are over 500 million members on *LinkedIn* (LinkedIn 2017), which makes it the largest professional social network site, and the number of users continues to rise each year. LinkedIn is a platform for users to network with each other professionally. Also on a company perspective LinkedIn offers a corporate page creation where the company can post updates for example organisational changes, product launches, news from the industry, links to valuable and educational articles from the industry and so on. LinkedIn also offers analytics about the posts, and offers buying adverts, which can be used to gain e.g. brand awareness. This presents the huge opportunity of using the platform for marketing operations and indicates the potential of its impact to business. (Kontsevaia & Berger 2017; LinkedIn 2017).

With more than 300 million monthly active users, *Twitter* is the largest microblog in the western world and its users only rises globally, especially in the business sector. Twitter allows its users to create different attributes of short content such as short texts, images and video links (Kaplan & Haenlein 2011). Twitter is one of the top B2B social networking platforms, because it offers a fast way to create content and spread a message or pictures to millions of people around the world. Twitter also offers a way to promote their messages, which enables companies to drive people to their website, promote lead generation and sales and the overall awareness of the company. (Cripps, Mejtoft & Singh 2016.) By being a

frequent user of Twitter, the greater is the chance of raising the brand's visibility and awareness in social media (Kaplan & Haenlein 2011).

*Facebook* has been since its inception the largest social network site in the world, and it has nowadays almost 2 billion users (Facebook 2018). Within the past few years, Facebook has improved their user experience and currently the platform provides opportunities for marketers to promote their businesses. As on LinkedIn, on Facebook, users and companies can post messages and updates, download and share pictures, create and attend business or private occasions and, join groups and buy adverts. For companies Facebook advertising can be effective, because the channel offers the most active users per month than in any other social media channel (Greenwood, Perrin, Duggan 2016).

## **2.4. Brand building framework**

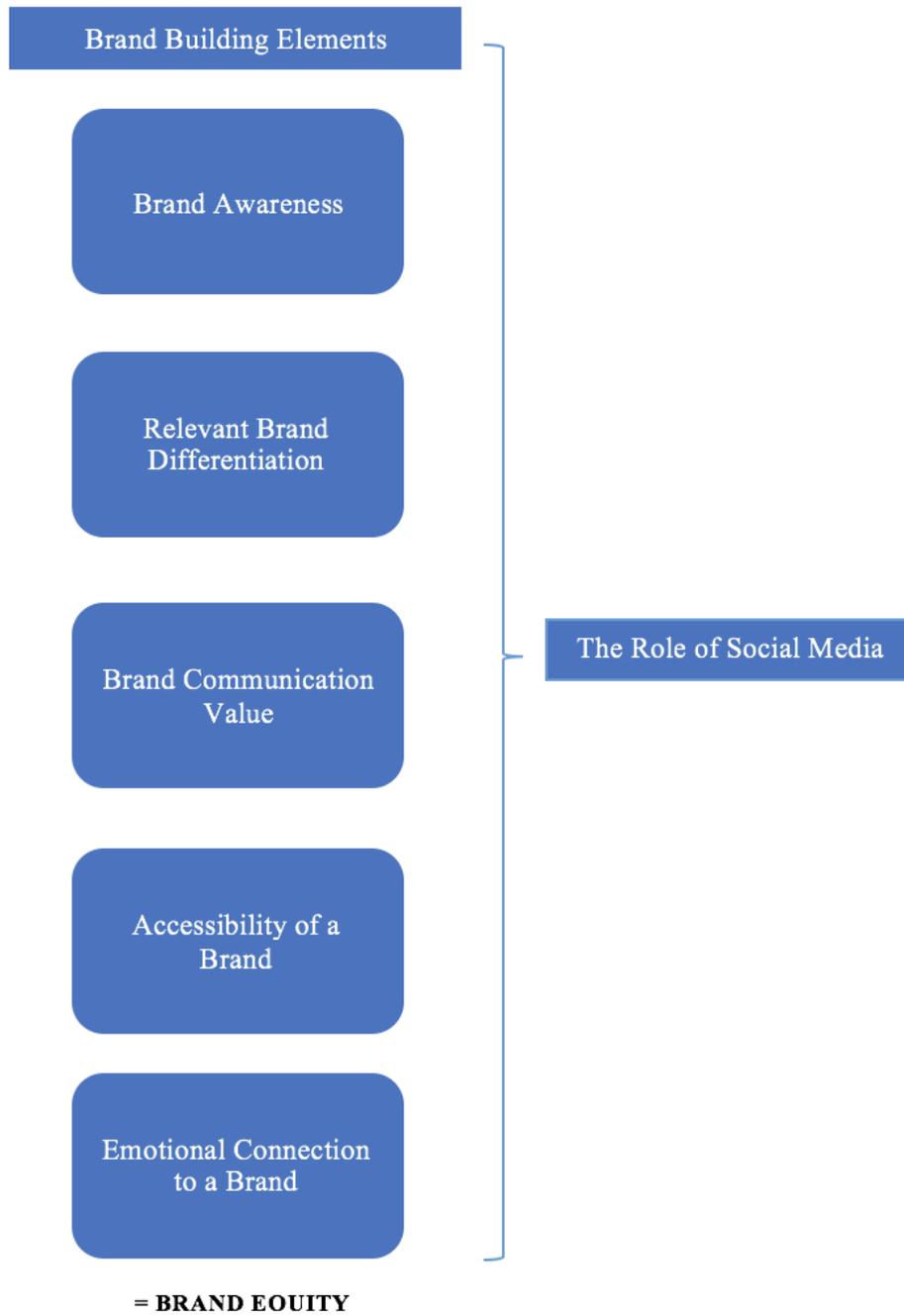
After going through the main themes of this thesis (*born globals, B2B branding and social media*), this chapter presents a framework for brand building through the elements adapted from a model called *brand insistence model*.

### 2.4.1. Brand building elements

In order for born global companies to seek for fast internationalization, they should invest in their brand building. The scope of different brand building methods is large, but in this study, a practical framework of brand building is presented through the elements of a model called *brand insistence model*, originally developed by VanAuken (1999-2016). The brand insistence model is a proprietary brand equity building system, which aim is to create exceptional brand loyalty, in another words, brand insistence, for a particular brand. This can be considered as a high level of brand loyalty in which a customer has stopped comparing the brand to other competitors. The brand insistence model has originally made to create brand equity for B2C companies, but the model can be adapted to B2B companies as well.

In this thesis, the objective is not to study how to achieve the brand insistence itself, but the elements behind the model gives a perfect brand building framework for this thesis. Some of the elements are adapted from the brand insistence model to fit to the B2B context. The brand building framework consists of five elements which can help born global companies to exploit brand building and to create brand equity.

As already noted, social media offers an effective tool for implementing branding, because it leaves space for discussions and idea exchanging which leads the users to contribute to the brand, which in turn can ease the process of internationalization. Therefore, all of the brand building elements are discussed in a social media context, since it is noted to be a great tool for brand communication (Godey, Manthiou, Pederzoli, Rokka, Aiello, Donvito & Singh 2016). The five elements for brand building, which are adapted from the brand insistence model, are brand awareness, relevant brand differentiation, brand communication value, accessibility of a brand and emotional brand connection. All of the elements are presented in figure 5 and explained more in detail below, in order to understand the importance of each element for brand building and creating brand equity.



**Figure 5.** Brand building elements and social media (adapted from VanAuken 2016).

- *Brand awareness*

As already noted earlier in this study, building a brand begins with raising the overall awareness of a company and its brand (Aaker 1996). Brand awareness is important factor in order to seek for high brand equity (Keller 2008; VanAuken 2016). In addition, raising brand awareness is usually the main targets of branding (Kapferer 2012:188). Brand awareness can be defined as to the extent to which customers are able to recall or recognize a brand which is central to purchasing decision-making (Turban et al. 2008). It is noted that open-ended questions measuring first recall and other recall top-of-mind brand awareness within specific categories is the most forecasting measure of the awareness. (VanAuken 2016). Raising a brand awareness is important for companies especially who are in their early stage of life or when launching new products or services (Kapferer 2012:189). In the B2B business, by raising brand awareness, the company can for example affect to the number of generated leads. Also, it can affect to the customer's decisions when differentiating companies for another and to encourage new purchases which leads to an increase in market share and incremental sales.

Raising brand awareness is usually one of the main target for businesses which are branding/marketing proactively through social media (Turban et al. 2008). Nowadays, when branding through different social media channels is in an exceptional growth, it is crucial to understand that the customers pay more attention to the marketing communications of familiar brands than those that are unfamiliar (Heding et al., 2007). In order to achieve competitive advantage, it is important to strive to the widest possible brand awareness in the target markets, locally and internationally especially after a company's inception (Heding et al., 2007). Raising awareness to the brand is effective when the company understand the needs and expectations of the potential customers to which the brand communication is sought (Mudambi 2002).

When creating brand awareness in social media, the born global companies need to develop communication strategies that increase the company's overall brand instead of concentrating on a variety of product brands, because it has been more beneficial to companies with limited resources (Bendixen et al. 2004), e.g. born globals. There are plenty of practical ways to raise brand awareness, but the most common in today's digitalized world is to do it with content creation in social media. In a research report published by Social Fresh (2016), the results

showed that the number one goal in the use of social media in B2B sector is to grow the brand awareness. Therefore, raising the brand awareness in social media can be seen relevant especially for born global companies.

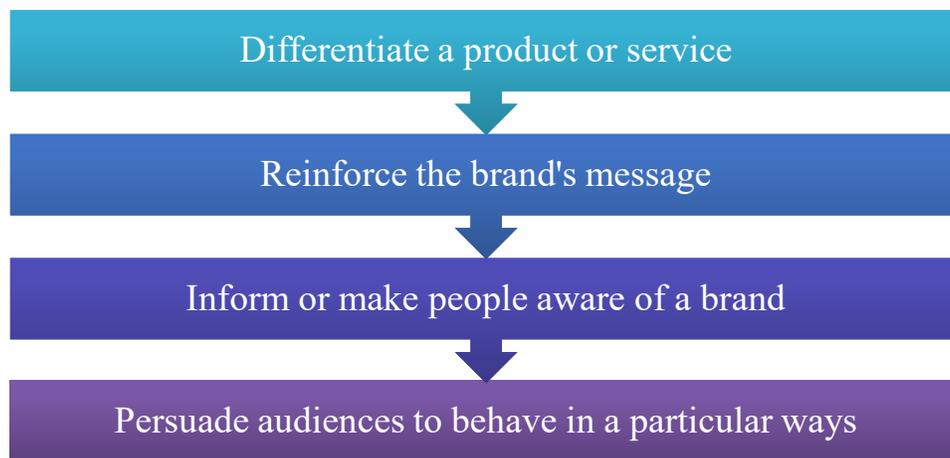
- *Relevant differentiation*

One of the cornerstones in brand building is brand differentiation (or simply differentiation) (VanAuken 2016). According to Kuhn, Alpert and Pope (2008), brand differentiation is defined as a process of distinguishing a brand from others and to make it more attractive to a particular target audience by differentiating it from competitors' brands. Aaker (2011) points out, that brand differentiation refers to a concept of brand positioning, which is fundamental for the brand in order to become relevant and afterwards preferred by the customer. According to Aaker (2011), there are two ways to compete in relevant brand differentiation; by *brand relevance* or by *brand preference*. Brand relevance is an indicator of a brand's long term success. Brand relevance occurs if the customer considers the brand when selecting a particular product or service category and comparing it to selected brands. The brand relevance can be enhanced by creating new product or service categories or subcategories and defending them, and also by managing the brand visibility. The objective in brand differentiation is to make competitors uninteresting. On the contrary, brand preference involves actions, to make a brand even more attractive or reliable to its current customers or to new potential customers. *Brand preference* occurs when the customer selects the brand from consideration group of products or services, or when the usage experience is positive. In order to become brand preferred, the brand should fulfil the brand promises, differentiate, and also create brand loyalty. (Aaker 2011.)

Relevant differentiation is an important indicator of profitability and market share. (Aaker 2011.) In today's competitive environment, companies can differentiate themselves in social media with engaging communication through different social media channels. Marketers can use different tactics in communication to help differentiate their brand against competing brands. A marketing communication model called DRIP, designed by Fill (2002) was introduced with the purpose to aid to brand differentiation. The DRIP model offers a practical way of modelling advertising messages when setting broad communication goals. The DRIP

framework includes four step approach, and it can be embedded within social media communications strategy to paint a picture of differentiating the brand from the competitors and to envisage how the brand could be positioned or re-positioned.

There are four different elements in the DRIP model; differentiate, reinforce, inform and persuade. The DRIP framework can be useful especially for born global companies, because commonly they operate in a competitive market where there is important to separate with clever communication in social media from competing brands.



**Figure 6.** DRIP framework (adapted from Fill 2002)

As an example of how to use the DRIP model, Smart Insights (2013) presented the way of how Nokia applied the model into their marketing communication campaigns to promote their new Lumia smartphone in social media:

- **Differentiate:** Lumia was differentiated from competitors with a communication of their zoomable Carl Zeiss camera lens, with 8.7 mega pixels auto focus and digital zoom.
- **Reinforce:** To reinforce the communication about the brand message, Nokia partnered with Carl Zeiss for its camera lens campaigns. Carl Zeiss explained the camera's features and promised 'blur-free photos every time'.

- **Inform:** To inform people about the brand, Nokia communicated and encouraged social conversations with their customers by giving away phones on two week trials. Those who blogged or tweeted about were also invited to take up a trial with the phone.
- **Persuade:** The challenge for Nokia was persuasion and for consumers it was switching phones. Nokia started a Twitter campaign @Nokia\_Connects and hashtag #SwitchToLumia to engage and demonstrate the number of people switching the phones.

- *Brand communication value*

The brand value for customers consists of different benefits such as the benefit of the product or service, the price, and the quality of which the brand delivers (VanAuken 2016). However, especially in the B2B business, it is important to take into account that companies can deliver value for the audience by innovative and effective brand communication, which nowadays can be done efficiently in social media. In the B2B business, it is studied that the customers' decision-making process is limited by perceived benefits and the experienced value of the brand (Töytäri, Rajala & Alejandro 2015). Therefore, it is important to understand what kind of benefits the companies can deliver with communication in social media in order to create value for the audience.

From a customer's point of view, if a company want's to stand out and deliver value by communication in comparison to competitors, it needs be proactive in social media. The ability of the customers to evaluate the communication value of a company has never been so easy, because the branding actions in social media are available to everyone (Töytäri, Alejandro, Rajala (2015). Interaction with customers can build strong and emotional bonds with a brand, and therefore increase the perceived value of communication (Cawsey & Rowley 2016).

According to Gao and Feng (2016), B2B companies face significant brand erosion in their efforts to take part in the on-to-one conversations available through social media. Gao and Feng (2016) point out, that only eight percent of people trust what companies say about themselves in social media, and less than 20 percent of people believe companies take their

customers seriously. Therefore, people who actively engage customers in social media through communication are twice as likely to believe companies are interested about them.

In addition, in order to increase the perceived customer's value by communication, authenticity in the customer engagement is important. For example, by communicating about the company's culture matters more now than ever because the customers want authenticity (Töytäri et al. 2015). Companies should find ways to show their shared values and beliefs of the organization and employees within their brand communication. Showing the organizational culture can have a strong influence on the entire audience.

- *Accessibility of a brand*

Due to different customer needs and preferences and high competition across the world, building a strong global brand can be a difficult task companies especially in B2B sector (Hollis 2008: 45). Accessibility of a brand in the B2C markets refer to the location of the brand (VanAuken 2016), but in this study, the accessibility of a brands refers to the availability and accessibility of different social media channels and the produced content in the social media.

Digitalization has removed the barriers of limited internet experience, and therefore started the discussion of the importance of accessibility. All people and businesses are surrounded by internet access and using mobile devices, i.e. smartphones and tablets with ease, which has affected to the popularity of social media utilization in branding operations in the B2B sector. Therefore, in terms of creating brand accessibility and measuring it, the easiest way is to go where the customers are; social media. Accessibility in B2B branding practices matters through the content's availability and convenience to the targeted audience (Hollis 2008: 81). Therefore, the accessibility of a brand comes into play in the internet, when a customer has to decide between a preferred brand that is less accessible online, and another brand that is more accessible. Social media is an effective tool for branding, since it makes the content accessible, and it allows sharing and creating user-generated content through different platforms which are publicly available. Social media is defined as a variety of platforms in which everyone with access to the internet can create social interaction. One of the key reasons for the success and popularity of social media is that it is easily accessible to everyone and everyone can easily connect to one another in different social networking sites

and platforms e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter (Thomas & Barlow 2011). However, it has been a growing trend in the B2B sector to make the company's online content less accessible for example, by inserting the content under a contact form. This creates leads for companies, but it makes the brand less accessible to everyone.

- *Emotional Connection*

Usually, two most common associations with brand are the name and the logo of a company (Keller 2009). However, those attributes only present the brand, but do not define it in any way. Many academic disciplines have demonstrated that even though it is commonly considered that in the business-to-business world, the decisions are made with rational thinking, in reality, the decisions are still largely driven by emotions (VanAuken 2016). Brand communication works as a tool for the companies to get the customers to feel certain emotions and to create brand images about their product, service, or organization. However, before any emotional connection, the customers must be aware of the company's brand, (Neumeier 2003), which requires different marketing and branding actions for instance in social media. After being aware of the brand, people can feel a certain way about it, because people are found to be emotional beings (Neumeier 2003).

Emotions are the driving force of a brand loyalty and therefore an important aspect of company's brand building. The concept of emotional branding identifies how a brand connects people with different emotions. Emotional branding is used within marketing communication, and it refers to brand building practices, which appeal directly to a customer's emotional states or needs (Gobé 2003).

There are different benefits in emotional branding in the B2B sector. For example, brand can help a company to manage risks by creating reputation and a brand image of a trusted company. If there would occur a company crisis, a company with emotional connection has a better chance to manage it on the market than a company without a trusted brand and loyal customers. In addition, emotional connection to a brand provides growth and increases profits. Especially in the B2B business, emotional connection to a company's brand helps to create and preserve a long-term relationship with customers on an emotional level. (Kelly

2012.) Emotional branding can be done, for example in social media, with a combination of different characteristics in the communicated messages (Kelly 2012):

- *Clear single-minded promise:* A company focuses on delivering a message of one trusted feature of their brand, which explains what customers should expect from it.
- *Meaning to people:* Delivering a message where brand meets customers' emotional as well as rational needs.
- *Uniqueness in market:* In a competitive environment, delivering a brand message which helps to differentiate a product or service or the whole company from competitors.
- *Consistency:* A brand is consistent when the messages are delivering their promises and do not disappoint people.

In order to create an emotional connection to the brand, it is important for a company to know what they want to be and why. Every company should know the answer to the question what images they want to give and what reputation they want to have in the markets (Kelly 2012). Emotional branding can be seen as an important factor for born global companies, because when seeing it as an asset to invest in, it can help the company to reach growth after inception. There are many innovative ways to achieve emotional connection to a brand in the B2B sector, for example, by offering from advertising to the quality of front line customer contact and one-to-one conversations.

Even though the main objective with the brand building framework was not to explore necessarily how to achieve the brand insistence itself, it can be useful to understand the logic behind the model to brand insistence. Therefore, the process for brand insistence through the elements works as a following way; by creating brand awareness and overall relevance it leads the customer to a consideration set where the purchasing process begins. By creating brand differentiation and value for the brand, it can lead the brand being preferred in the customer's eyes. When the brand is accessible for the customer it can lead to brand's product or service purchase. After purchase, an emotional connection to the brand creates brand loyalty and advocacy, which leads to trust between the company and the customer.

(VanAuken 2016.) All these elements are important in order to build a brand and brand equity.

## **2.5. Summary of the theoretical framework**

The most common view of internationalization is when a company operates first in the domestic markets, and after many years of experience, they sequentially start to look for foreign markets (Johanson & Vahine 1977). However, in recent years, a new growing phenomenon in the field of internationalization has evolved, and it is called born global. This concept can be considered as relatively new because it has not been studied to the extent to which common traditional internationalization processes have been studied. The concept of born global refers to companies, who at their early stage of life seeks to fast internationalization differently than traditional companies (Moen 2001). A born global firm is referred to a small or medium size business organization which early on from founding seeks to obtain significant competitive advantage from the use of sale outputs in multiple countries (Oviatt & McDougall 1994). In this study, a born global is defined as a growth oriented business organization that within a few years from being founded expands to several international markets and have a global and innovative mindset from day one, because this definition is flexible and consistent to define the phenomenon. What makes born globals unique is their strategy of achieving competitive advantage globally since beginning of the company by using entrepreneurial capabilities including proactiveness, risk-taking and innovativeness. Also for a born global it is typical to develop hi-tech, unique and global demanded products, and possess quality focus and rapid internationalization process in global markets. All of these characteristics differentiate and define born globals from traditional companies.

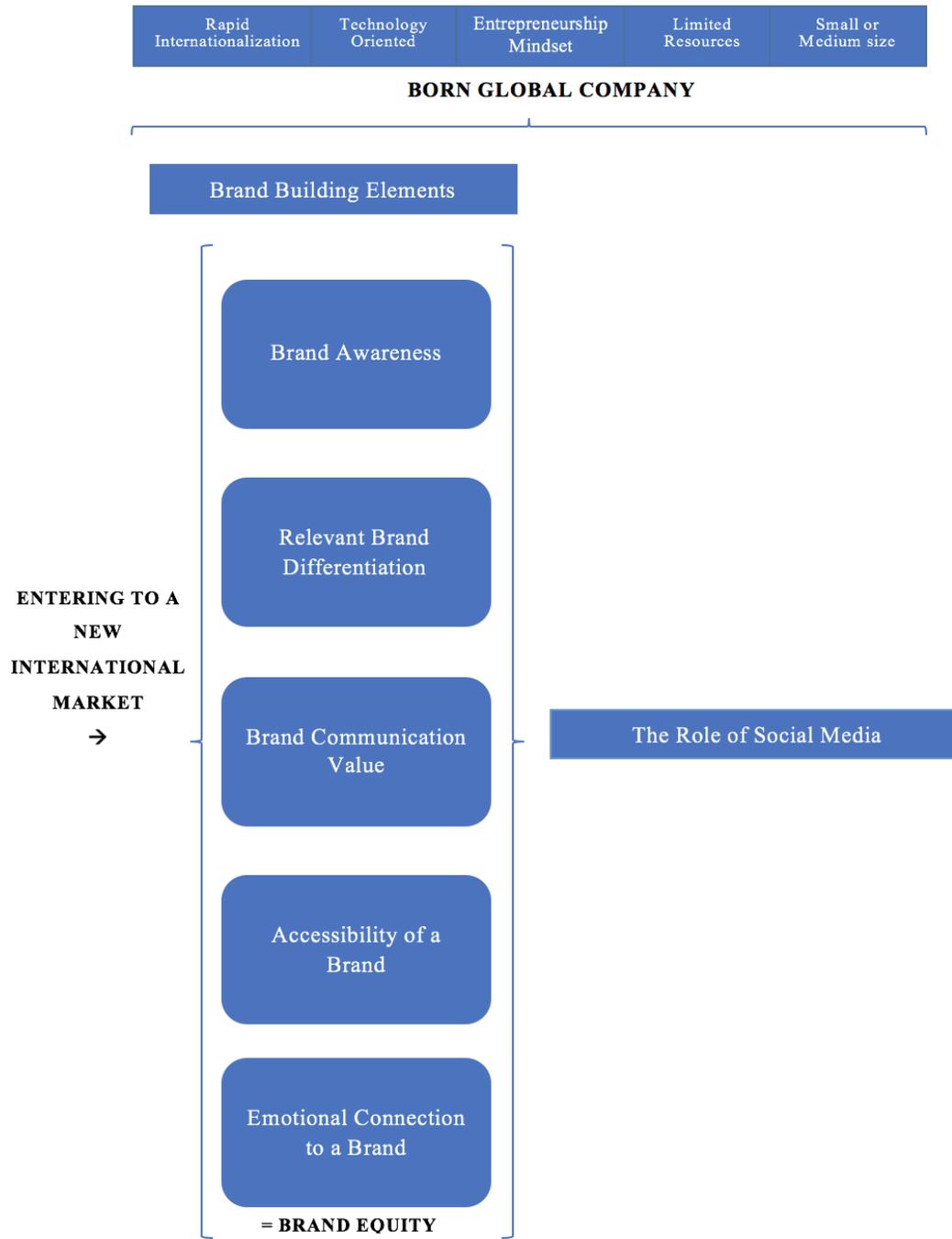
Over the years, most of the branding related research in marketing literature have been associated with business-to-consumer brands, but nowadays, the business-to-business brands have also started to gain attention. The ultimate purpose of B2B branding is the same as for B2C brands; to make the products, services or whole business known and at the same time separate from competitors (Beverland et al. 2007). Brand is the company's guarantee of quality, origin and efficiency. Therefore, by increasing the experienced brand value of the

customer, while reducing the uncertainty associated with purchasing and risk, B2B companies can gain multiple benefits and competitive advantage by branding (Beverland et al. 2007; Michaelidou et al. 2011 & Pinar et al. 2011). Building a brand is an important part of any company's internationalization (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson 2003), but especially for born globals, it can be decisive. Different traditional branding strategies have shifted from offline marketing such as traditional leaflets advertising or media advertising to more and more online on various social media channels, since it has been noticed as an effective tool for branding (Rowley 2004). Simmons (2007) explained that the development of technology has added a more complex and dynamic element for the implementation of branding operations especially in the B2B sector. Technological changes set new possibilities, but also challenges for born globals brand building strategies. In order to compete globally, born global companies need to be where their target audiences are; in social media. They need to develop trust and loyal based relationship between the brand and the customers, learn about their perceived audience, create value and a unique positioning concept by different brand communication and content creation actions in social media (Simmons 2007).

Since the born globals seek for rapid internationalization, they especially have a need for effective brand building actions internationally (Gabrielsson 2005). Even though commonly the resources of born globals are limited (Knight & Liesch 2016), the companies can efficiently build their brand in social media with low-cost. For companies, social media gives an opportunity to create a trust (Leeflang et al., 2014) and reach a large crowd (Habibi et al. 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010) with different brand communication and content creation strategies. Before the growing possibilities with online branding, according to Aaker (2003) the traditional brand building process has been a long-term project which takes time and money to build a good brand. Since social media has evolved the brand building opportunities, it is easier than ever for companies to connect with customers through different social media channels and networks (Habibi et al. 2016). Due to the lack of resources, the born globals need to adopt and adapt to online branding possibilities when targeting to international markets (Veloutsou & Guzman 2017). Business social network sites, such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter are important for B2B companies, because they can raise their company's brand awareness and create brand differentiation (Freeman et al 2006). Knight & Liesch (2016) asserts that building relationships and networking in social media is critical in the internationalization of born global companies, because they help to overcome the scarcity of the resources. Commonly, born global companies are quick to use advanced

online marketing systems through high amount of technology skills and knowledge (Luostarinen & Gabrielsson 2006). The brand awareness building is important for born globals, because by building their brand through different social media channels, companies with scarce resources can appear as a bigger brand than they are (Knight & Liesch 2016). Different social media channels are globally accessible through internet which creates the opportunity to communicate key brand messages and values of the company to a large audience of potential new customers (Rowley 2004). Social media offers for born globals to quickly and easily to reach more than two-thirds of all internet users, and it provides multiple opportunities for brand differentiation building (Godey et al. 2016). For born globals, the brand building strategies need to be flexible and able to change over time due to the dynamic characteristic of the company (Gabrielsson 2005).

In the end of the theoretical part, a practical example of brand building was presented. The framework seeks for creating brand equity and overall brand loyalty. The brand building framework consists of five elements which are discussed in a social media context, since it is found to be a great tool for executing branding in the B2B sector. To summarize the theoretical framework of this thesis, a synthesis of the main themes is presented in figure 7.



**Figure 7.** Summary of the theoretical framework

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, the research methodology of the study is presented. First, the methodological choices and the reasoning of these choices for the research are examined. Second, a closer look is taken to following topics; case study research strategy, data collection and data analysis of the current study are discussed. In addition, reliability and validity of the study are also briefly discussed in this chapter.

#### **3.1. Research methodology**

The aim of this research is to study brand building with social media in born global companies. In addition, the aim is to highlight the importance of branding in the B2B field and especially in born global companies since they seek for rapid internationalization. The main focus of this research is to understand the research phenomenon through analyzing the existing research and the empirical material. The purpose is not to create universal generalizations, but to understand the connection between the main topics of the research by forming a practical framework and guidelines for building a brand with social media. These research objectives are approached through qualitative research method. The qualitative research allows to generate data with semi-structured interviews, which is often used when the subject is timid or when trying to understand unknown things (Metsämuuronen 2005). A semi-structured interview is a valuable research method, when the interviewer does not know what the interviewee will answer or when the answer is based on the interviewee's own experience (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000). In addition, semi-structured interview is also commonly used when there is a need to deepen knowledge about certain subjects (Hirsjärvi et al. 2000). The advantage of this interview method is that it takes into account the interviewee and during the interview, information can be collected from different situations. Also, the order in which the interview topics are interviewed can be changed, which gives a better opportunity to make different interpretations. In addition, the benefit of a semi-structured interview method for example compared to a questionnaire is that the researcher can be sure of from who the desired information has been obtained (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2008.)

Qualitative method for this research is chosen in order to understand the subject of the study comprehensively by analyzing the interviewees answers. Also, the qualitative research method is chosen to get in-depth knowledge from the case companies' brand building practices in social media using a semi-structured interviews. Through the semi-structured interviews and the interview analysis, this study aims to conquer the research objectives. However, this study is not an operational development study, even though it may contain some features of developing the case companies branding practices. The main focus of this research is to understand the research phenomenon through the theoretical framework and the empirical material, because the time-consuming challenges removes the possibility to further develop the operations of the case companies.

This study follows a case study research strategy. According to Robson (2002: 178) a case study is defined as a research strategy which includes an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using different sources of evidence. In another words, case study is especially appropriate for studying business phenomena's such as organizational and managerial processes (Yin 2003: 13), and therefore case study research strategy is chosen for this research. By choosing a case study method, there is ability to answer 'how', 'why', and 'what' type of questions. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2007: 146).

This research includes a case study with two companies; Leadfeeder and Vainu.io. The companies selected for this study were chosen on the basis of the following criterions. First, they both, of course, are born global startup companies that operate in a global field. Both of the companies are relevant to represent the born global phenomenon because they are high growth oriented business organizations that within a few years from being founded have successfully entered to several international markets and both of them have owned a high technology product and a global mindset from day one. Also, both of the companies operate in the software industry, which bring coherency and meaning to the analysis. Also, both of the companies utilize different social media channels to a large extent, which makes them relevant and interesting companies to study and identify areas and issues related to the brand building with social media related matters.

### 3.2. Empirical data collection

There are several data collection techniques that can be used in a qualitative research. In this study, semi-structured interviews are used as the data collection method. The use of semi-structured interviews as a method for collecting data is justified in this study, as the phenomenon to be studied is multifaceted and the researcher's prerequisites are limited. Also, it enables the interviewee to give details about the phenomenon and processes and it also enables to collect in-depth data in short amount of time. Usually, interviewees are more willing to give verbal answers to interviewers rather than filling a questionnaire (Saunders et al. 2009: 324). Moreover, semi-structured data collection method is suitable for this study, because a fit for complex and open ended questions were needed. Also, the method was suitable for the variability in the order and logic of the questioning. The flexible nature of the semi-structured method went into the favour of both interviewer and interviewee.

The selection of interviewees was based on elite sampling i.e. the persons who is the best for to get information about the phenomenon (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 86). From both of the case companies, one person with the best knowledge was chosen for the interview. The interviewees were chosen due to their experience in their field, and their comprehensive knowledge about the subject. The sample size in the data collection is not very large, but with carefully conducted in-depth interviews, this research has received relevant amount of in-depth information. According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2000), there are no clear rules what comes to the parameters of the empirical study sample size in the qualitative research. Also, it is stated, that the size of the data set is only important aspect in quantitative researches (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009). The size of the data set draws less importance in qualitative research. In addition, a case study research does not seek to create universal generalizations but to understand the research phenomenon's and its themes. In the qualitative research, the essence is not the quantity of material but the quality and the conceptualization coverage.

The structure of the interview (*Appendix 1*) was built on the basis of the theoretical framework. Also, the structure of the interview was based on the selected themes within the brand building and social media context of born global companies. The interview questions followed the thematic key themes of the study instead of detailed questions. In this study, both of the interviews were recorded with phone, and after that transcribed to support the

data analysis. The length of the interviews was 60 minutes in average. The participants were informed beforehand about the themes and questions of the interview.

Name	Title	Job background	Company	Date and length of the interview
<b>Jaakko Paalanen</b>	Chief Revenue Officer	Sales, marketing, entrepreneurship, SaaS and software business		10.10.2018 00:68
<b>Mikko Honkanen</b>	Co-founder	Sales, marketing, entrepreneurship, SaaS and software business		25.10.2018 00:57

**Table 5.** Interview details

### 3.3. Data analysis

The data analysis is an important phase of any research study. This research follows the qualitative data analysis technique which includes non-numerical data in data collection and analysis practices. Yin (2003: 109) notes that it is the “*examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing or otherwise recombining qualitative evidence to address the initial propositions of a study*”. In addition, Saunders et al. (2009: 490) states that there are no standardized practices for analysing qualitative case study data because of its diverse nature.

According to Hyde (2000: 3) qualitative case study methodology rationalizes the phenomenon under the study in detail to give deep insight about the collection of data and context of it. In qualitative data analysis researcher draws conclusion by own interpretation (Cozby 2007). The aim of the qualitative analysis is to create clarity and produce new

perspectives to the research topic. With the analysis, the data is intensified and thus the contained information value is increased by structuring fragmented content into a clear and meaningful entity (Eskola & Suoranta 2008: 137). In this research, the analysis was based on the themes relevant to the research topic. In the theory-based analysis, the theory built with the literature review is used to assist the data analysis, but the analysis is not directly based solely on the theoretical framework. The analysing requires interaction between the theory and the empirical findings, which is seen on the interplay between them. In this study the theoretical framework serves as guidance to analyse the collected data. The responses of the interviewees have been directly cited to enable the reader to understand the analysis and the content.

## 4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter presents the empirical findings following the main topics of the research. This chapter starts by briefly presenting the chosen companies. After that, findings from the interview questions are gone through. First, findings related to questions about the case companies overall branding are discussed. Second, findings related to questions about brand building elements and social media are presented. The analysis of the empirical material consists of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. In the end, a synthesis of the theoretical framework and empirical results is given.

### 4.1. Case companies

This research includes a case study with two companies; *Leadfeeder and Vainu.io*. Both of the case companies have started operating globally early after inception, which makes them relevant to represent the born global phenomenon. Also, both of the companies utilizes actively different social media channels, which brings togetherness in studying how born global companies can utilize social media in their brand building operations.

#### 4.1.1. Description of the case companies

The first case company, *Leadfeeder*, is a Finnish software startup set up in 2012, but the actual product launch was in 2014. The company's head office is located in Helsinki, but since inception, the company has expanded to international markets. Nowadays, the company has customers in over 30 different countries, from which their biggest markets are in the United States and Europe. Leadfeeder employs currently 45 people, but the company intends to multiply its results and raise the number of the employees every year. The purpose behind the company's product is to make other B2B companies sales and marketing operations more intelligent through web analytics. (Leadfeeder 2018.) For the interview, *Jaakko Paalanen* was selected from the company due to his broad experience in sales and marketing. Paalanen described the company's operations in brief:

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“Leadfeeder is a software company, which has developed a web intelligence sales and marketing tool for small and medium sized companies operating in the B2B sector. The tool is especially developed for performance-driven teams to discover new prospects and monitor existing customers. Leadfeeder is resolving the ongoing problem, which is that companies in the B2B sector invests commonly a lot in driving visitors to their websites, but they do not have a way to turn them into sales leads. With our Leadfeeder tool, the companies can track the website visitors and therefore increase the sales lead generation. After the product launch in 2014, we started our operations straight from the international markets which has turnout to be a successful choice. Overall, the company's tool has been on the market for over 4 years now.” – Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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The second case company, *Vainu.io*, is also a software company based in Finland. The company has developed a SaaS-platform for sales intelligence, prospecting and account insights with a database of over 100 million companies which is enriched with open data. Since establishment, Vainu.io has been a fast-growing startup, which currently employs over 200 people. The company has started their operations from Finland, but early after establishment, they started to expand to international markets. Currently, the company has offices in Finland, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, the United States, and Denmark. (Vainu.io 2018). From the company, *Mikko Honkanen* was selected to be interviewed due to him being one of the founders of the company. Honkanen briefly presented the company as following;

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“The company was established in 2014, and the product was launched in August 2014. Simply put, Vainu.io is a company database platform which helps other B2B companies in sales prospecting. The developed platform benefits companies in many ways, for example, in time saving by bringing

all the information needed into one place. In addition, the platform targets the sales efforts to relevant prospects which in turn leads to better hit rate in sales. By using the platform, the average sales cycle will be shorter, which in turn helps companies to execute even more sales. To summarize, Vainu is a tool that helps companies to find actionable account insights, identify timely leads and determine the most valuable sales prospects to their business. ” – Honkanen, Vainu.io

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## 4.2. B2B branding

After the introduction of the case companies, the interview continued with a question for the interviewees to generally describe the meaning of a brand for their companies. Also, a question was presented relating to what kind of brand images the companies want to represent. The chosen questions were asked to support the theoretical definitions about the meaning of B2B branding.

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“Even though we do not have any exact strategy for our branding practices, the meaning of a brand for our company can be said to be about creating certain brand images which are connected to questions such as; What does our existing and new potential customers think of us when they see us for example online? What are their thoughts and what do they say about us to someone else? The brand images we want to create and represent are connected to trust and quality aspects. We want to create brand images of having not only the best product in the market, but also being a trustworthy company as a whole. “- Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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The aim of branding is to build a close and interactive relationship between the brand and the customer which is based on trust and the desired brand images of the company. For a long time, creating a wanted brand image has been seen as a very important concept for companies. Brand image refers to customers' views and preferences of a brand, which are reflected from the customer's previous and current experiences. Strong, favorable, and unique brand image is extremely valuable in differing from competitors. The brand image can be affected the most by different brand building strategies. (Keller 2009.)

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“We have not precisely defined the meaning of a brand for our company, but of course, we think a lot about what kind of brand related images we want to represent. In the beginning of our company, the brand was mainly built around the developed product (the platform). The brand images we wanted to represent were connected to being as a “modern sales power house”. However, within the past year, the brand related images we want to create have been evolving a lot. We have focused on branding ourselves with technology-related discussions and releases about our artificial intelligence knowledge, which hopefully has hopefully made our whole organization more technologically advanced. In addition, what comes to our branding operations, they differ locally through the people working in different countries. Some of our employees use actively social media, which makes the brand also differ through the people's own voices and thoughts” – Honkanen, Vainu.io

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It is clear that both of the case companies link the meaning of a brand to the building of desired brand images. Therefore, it can be noted, that branding is an important part of the case companies' marketing communication aimed at enhancing brand awareness and creating brand images. Branding locally through people was highlighted to be as an important factor in the B2B branding context, if the company is operating globally. However, neither of the companies did not have made any precise definition or strategy for their branding, which

supports the fact that in the B2B field, the importance of brand building is still lagging behind.

#### 4.2.1. Objectives in branding

After analyzing the meaning of a brand for the case companies, the interview continued with a question relating to the objectives of the case companies branding practices.

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“What comes to the branding objectives, we haven’t defined any precise goals for our branding, but of course they go hand-in-hand with the overall marketing strategies. I would say that the objectives with branding is for us to build the certain images about our offering, and make people aware of our functional solution. Also, it is important to differ from the competitors since the competition in the software business can be said to be high.” – Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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The common objectives in B2B branding are connected to build the desired brand images influence to the customer's purchase decision, and keep the customer loyal, whereby the customer recommends the company to others. The primary goal of branding is not to achieve direct sales, even though it is possible through successful brand communication (Buil, et al. 2016).

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“As in every startup, I think that there is two important objectives with marketing and branding; to get long-term customer relationships and to attract new potential employees as the company grows. In our company, we focus on creating positive and modern brand images about us as an employer, so that we attract new potential employees. Our company’s branding objectives are also related to brand ourselves as a company who does sales in a modern and effective way.” – Honkanen, Vainu.io

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Building a brand is an important part of internationalization (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson 2004). Therefore, the interview continued with a question that do the companies seek or have they sought for faster internationalization with branding.

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“At the moment, for example, if we are recruiting a new employee for sales tasks in Germany, at first, the main focus is in the sales and transferring all the sales material and other needed information to the local language. Later on, we can focus more to the marketing and branding side. For example, In Germany, we have tried to pay attention to relevant matters in our communication messages. The GDPR has been a widely discussed topic within the past year especially in Germany, and therefore we have tried to show by brand communication how compliant our product is in that matter. Therefore, it can be said that we consider branding as a relevant matter when expanding our operations to a new country” –Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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Leadfeeder has successfully expanded to international markets, and they see branding as a relevant matter in internationalization processes, even though their first focus is in the sales operations. The company highlighted that they have to start everything from the beginning when entering to a new market, and therefore the sales activities are the first priority. However, later on, the company seems to think about different branding methods to capture the attention of the new market.

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“As I already mentioned, I think that the brand needs to be built on locally, especially in our product category. When we are expanding to a new market, we try to take into account different branding actions that could make the internationalization process more fast and easy. For example, we are seeking to expand next year to the United Kingdom. Therefore, we have already started to brand ourselves in UK by releasing free trials to our products and other interesting content. These kind of branding actions

makes it easier for us to produce leads beforehand from the new market, which in turn facilitates the whole internationalization process. Therefore, we obviously consider faster internationalization as one of the goals for branding.” – Honkanen, Vainu.io

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Clearly, Vainu.io can be seen to utilize different branding practices to raise their brand awareness and lead generation when seeking to expand to a new market. They also highlight the importance of building the brand locally and focusing on branding actions beforehand the internationalization. The company considers fast entering to new markets as one of the goals of branding.

#### 4.2.2. Branding in social media

After analysing the meaning of branding and its objectives, a question was presented relating to how does the companies implement branding in social media.

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“Besides paid advertising, how we do branding in social media is through content sharing in different social media channels. The most popular ones we use are LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. In LinkedIn, we have focused on producing professional content, whereas on Facebook, the content is more “humanly”. On Facebook, we show our employees, and share content connected to employer branding. Also, we encourage our employees to brand themselves by taking a part to discussions in different social media groups connected to our business field. “ – Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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Leadfeeder utilizes paid advertising in different social media channels as a tool for branding, because the results are easy to analyse through analytics tools. In addition, Leadfeeder is

utilizing their technology expertise in the produced content in different social media channels for branding. Also, they highlight the importance of employer branding in social media by showing their employees and encouraging them to be active in the social network groups.

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“What comes to social media branding, active content sharing is important for us, but I think it is important to have something interesting to say there. With our platform, we can collect data from many different and interesting topics. Then, we visualize the collected data into a content which we can share through marketing automation tools in different social media channels. What we think as a best way to implement branding is sharing interesting content through our employees in social media. We have almost 200 employees, from which some of us can be seen as very active influencers in different social media channels. They implement branding by not only by sharing content connected to our company, but also by branding themselves through conversations with audience. Nowadays, the importance of social selling in different networks is growing, so we take the social selling as a branding opportunity for not only to our company but also for our people.” – Honkanen, Vainu.io

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Vainu.io highlights the importance of active social media utilization within their branding practices. They exploit their developed platform by producing interesting content, and then they visualize the interesting data and share it in different social media channels. In addition, they underline the importance of their employees in social media branding, since social selling and influencing in different social networks is growing in the B2B markets.

#### 4.2.3. Social media channels in branding

Next, in terms of branding, the main social media channels that the case companies utilize are discussed.

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“We utilize a lot of different social media channels in our marketing campaigns, but in the branding context, I think that LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter are the most important channels for us to reach the right target groups by sharing an interesting and useful content. LinkedIn and Facebook are the channels where we try to create the brand images we want to represent. We also use actively Instagram and Facebook to show our day-to-day life at work, which we have found to be effective for employer branding.” - Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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For branding, we use common social media channels in the B2B sector such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The popularity of certain social media channels differs in different countries, which we try to take into account. Besides the common social media channels, we also utilize some professional review sites for branding. For example, Quora.com is a question-and-answer platform where questions are asked and answered by own names. Getting your voice and name heard in those kind of social network sites is a smart way to build the brand and grab attention for the company and also to yourself.” - Honkanen, Vainu.io

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As noted in the theoretical part, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn can be seen as the major social media channels for B2B branding. Those channels can be used for performing and improving brand building, generating leads, and developing customer service and satisfaction. Both of the case companies utilize these channels actively in their brand building operations. However, other platforms, such as Instagram is noted to be useful for employer branding, whereas Quora.com were mentioned to useful channel for professional branding.

#### 4.2.4. Branding with social media in internationalization

The next questions in the interview were connected to the role of social media in brand building when expanding to a new international market. Also, it is discussed how the branding practices has differed in different levels of the internationalization process.

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“I think it is important for every growing business to take advantage of different social media channels and social networks sites when building the brand. For example, with content marketing in social media, we run leads (people and companies) to our websites which helps the international process in every stage. Lead generation is very important aspect especially in the beginning of expansion and therefore branding is too, because it can boost our company’s overall awareness which in turn generates leads. However, I think that, at this moment when the resources are still scarce, we are focusing our resources little more to internal branding than external one. As the company grows, I think it leads us to think about more about how we could expand our external branding operations too” – Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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As already noted in the theoretical part, it is a common for born global companies to face resource scarcity especially after the inception. However, in branding context, the resource scarcity can be overcome by utilizing the low cost social media channels and the social networks dynamics. Therefore, Leadfeeder also highlights the importance of social media as a tool for branding and raising their overall awareness of the company. They highlighted that branding is especially important in the beginning of the internationalization process, since it can boost the overall awareness and lead generation.

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“We have seen social media as a useful tool for branding when expanding to new international markets. A good example of this is connected to for example employer branding. We try to show people on social media how it is like to work in our company, which can lead us new potential employees. For the international process, we have not done any specific plan or strategy about how we implement our branding in the different phases. However, when we are in the start of the expansion, raising the overall awareness of the company is the most important aspect. Also, to get attention to our developed solution is important in the beginning. After the expansion, it is more important to focus on delivering messages and information about the ways how we solve the companies’ problems more precisely.” - Honkanen, Vainu.io

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Vainu.io seeks to gain benefits from branding with social media when they enter to new international markets. For example, they utilize different channels for employer branding to attract new potential employees to work for them to the new country where they are expanding. Even though they don’t have any specific brand building strategy for their internationalization process, they highlight the importance of branding and raising the awareness in social media especially in the beginning of the expansion.

### **4.3. Brand building elements**

The last, and the most important questions in the interview were related to the elements of the brand building framework. The brand building elements are discussed in a social media context, in order to understand and find practical examples for brand building with social media within born global companies when they are entering to a new international markets.

#### 4.3.1. Brand awareness

In the interview, the first question relating to the brand building elements was how does the companies raise their brand awareness in social media.

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“The main thing for raising the awareness of our brand in social media is simply systematic content creation through different channels which makes people to visit our website and therefore it creates leads and raises the awareness of our company. We do our content only in English, which gives us a global characteristic, but we have discussed the importance of branding also differently in different countries, since you can’t necessarily assume that same content would raise awareness for our company for example in Europe and in the United States, because the overall technology transition is much advanced in the United States. We use mainly LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook for professional content sharing and brand awareness building, but we also utilize Instagram and Facebook for employer branding.” – Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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In order to raise brand awareness, Leadfeeder highlights the importance of systematic content creation in different social media channels. They focus on raising the overall awareness of the company by sharing essential and interesting professional content in their biggest social media channels; Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook, whereas a lot of content about everyday life in Leadfeeder” is shared for example on Instagram and Facebook, which brings authenticity to the channels. The company highlights the importance in raising the brand awareness that some content may be relevant in some countries whereas in others it may not.

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“The best way for us to raise our brand awareness in social media is by creating and sharing content locally through not only people who are working for us, but also through local well-known social media influencers in the B2B field. As an example from this, we have done sales blog series in Sweden, for which we interviewed a Swedish sales professional influencer, who brought a lot of attention to our blog which therefore raised the awareness of our company. We have tried to find “powerful” social media influencers from different countries, because we have seen it as a beneficial way to raise the awareness. Also another example for raising awareness with content is to get interviewed for magazines, because it can be shared online easily, and they usually are a great way to get attention.”

– Honkanen, Vainu.io

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Vainu.io also highlights the importance of raising brand awareness through creating content and sharing it in different social media channels with the help of automated marketing platforms. However, what the company has noted to be the most successful way to share the content is locally through the company’s employees and also other well-known influencers in the B2B field. This can be seen as a great way to implement branding because influencing in social media has noted to be more successful through people than through the company. Vainu.io has created separate social media channels for example on Instagram for different countries, which can be seen to be a great way to ease for example their process of local recruiting. Overall, the company utilizes different influencers for raising their brand awareness, but they also utilize more traditional methods such as interviews for magazines. Since nowadays magazines offer articles also online, it is an easy way to share the interviews in social media and grab attention for the company through them.

#### 4.3.2. Relevant brand differentiation

Next question relating to the brand building elements, was how does the companies implement brand differentiation in social media.

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“What comes to the brand differentiation, we try to differentiate ourselves in many different ways. One simple example of differentiation has been that we have chosen a turquoise colour for our brand. The colour is representing us everywhere we are, and with the colour we have tried to create an easy way to recognize and remember our company. Also another example of our brand differentiation in social media is that we are very transparent with our people-oriented communication. We tell to our customers about ourselves and the differences what our product includes and offers. We try to create messages which shows our expertise in the field. Also we try to show by brand communication that Leadfeeder offers trust and quality, which is supported by our customer success team.” – Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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As a simple example of brand differentiation in social media, Leadfeeder has chosen a turquoise colour for their company, which they use also when creating branding content in social media order to make it easy for the audience to recognize and connect the company into that colour. This can be seen as a smart and easy way to differentiate the company from others. Leadfeeder also seeks brand differentiation with transparent communication in different social media channels. In their brand communication, they inform their customers about the qualities which makes them different from other companies competing in the same business segment in order to create differentiation.

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“There are many ways, how we seek to differ our brand in social media. One thing is connected to the tone of our communicated messages. We want our content to be delivered in a “casually professional” way. As I have already mentioned, we seek to differ from our competitors by sharing content through our employees and not only through the company. Another thing connected to the tone of our branding is that especially within the

startup scene, it is common in social media to speak a lot about typical startup related subjects, for example funding. For us, it has not been important to be seen as a “startup”. Therefore, we have branded ourselves more as a fast-growing business organization than a startup by which we try to differ. In addition, in order to differ in social media, we have focused on communicating about our advanced technology product and shared information related to that which can be as a way to implement brand differentiation. We want to be extremely transparent with our developed platform and share the results what companies can reach through our own examples of utilizing the product”- Honkanen, Vainu.io

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Vainu.io emphasized the importance of creating messages with a certain tone in social media in order to create brand differentiation. The company seeks for creating professional tone for the brand communication with the technology related content, but the messages are mixed with casual tone in order to make the content reader friendly. As already highlighted, the company utilizes a lot of their employees in their brand communication, in order to differ through people from other companies in different social media platforms. In addition, since the startup scene is growing, the company focuses on branding themselves with other related matters than those typically connected to a startup company, which makes them different from others.

#### 4.3.3. Accessibility of a brand

Third element discussed in the brand building framework is the accessibility of a brand. In this study, the accessibility refers to the content’s and communication’s availability and accessibility in social media. The questions relating to these aspects were; How do you take into account the overall accessibility and availability of your brand communication practices in the social media; are you there where your customers are, and is the brand related content and material accessible to everyone?

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“We see our brand communication in social media accessible to everyone who speaks English, since the main language of our company is English. This can limit the accessibility of our content in social media to some part of the audience in countries that do not speak English, but overall it is only a small issue. The marketing content, e.g. blogs, articles, videos that we produce to our social media channels is mainly available to everyone, and I think that we have a lot more material available when compared to some other companies in the same business area. However, some of our special contents, for example e-books, are behind a contact forum. In my opinion, this does not affect negatively to the accessibility of our content, since the produced material is really beneficial to the customers. Our objective is to be very open and accessible in everything that we do in the social media. “- Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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The trend in the B2B sector’s social media marketing has been already a long time to put some content behind a contact form, because it has been noticed to be a successful way to generate leads and to measure the effectiveness of different marketing or branding operations. However, it is not the most pleasant way for the customers, since everybody thinks it is a little bit “annoying”. In the near future, I think that the contact forum trend will change to all content being completely open and accessible to everyone, but before it happens, we just need to find a creative way how to turn the visitors into a sales opportunity. At this point we have some of our key content hide behind the contact forum, but a lot of created content is also available to everyone in the social media. I think that overall our brand communication actions in social media channels reaches a good amount of existing and new potential customers, but it is also important to

understand that there is a lot of people who doesn't use social media. For example, there are a lot of accounts in LinkedIn, but the number of active people is relatively small. Therefore, I think that if you are only branding and reaching customers through social media, it is not enough. Also nowadays, there has been discussion about content war in social media, which refers to a phenomenon in which too much content is being offered. Therefore, in order to be above competitors, it is important to focus on finding new effective ways for branding inside and outside the social media. "- Honkanen, Vainu.io

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Both of the companies seem to agree the fact that social media makes the overall branding actions very accessible and it also works as a great tool to reach big crowds with low-cost. However, both of the companies also utilizes contact forms to hide some of their special contents e.g. e-book, podcasts and webinars, because it has been an effective way to generate leads and measure the effectiveness of different marketing actions. In terms of brand communication and content accessibility, hiding the content makes the branding actions less accessible and available. However, Honkanen noted that the trend may change in near future to content being totally open to everyone, which sets opportunities but also challenges to the measurement of brand building activities. Paalanen noted that when there is special content behind the contact form, it is commonly seen as a normal thing between the audience. Since both of the companies are using their social media channels actively, they have an opportunity to reach a lot of new potential customers and create awareness. However, it needs to be taken into account that even though there are lot of accounts in social media, the number of people being active there is much less. Vainu.io has noted that the amount of published content in social media has grown significantly over the recent years, which has led to a phenomenon called content war. This forces companies to rethink about their branding and marketing actions in order to keep up above the competitors.

#### 4.3.4. Brand communication value

Next question in the interview was relating to the brand communication value in the brand building context. A question relating to this topic was how does company deliver value to existing and new potential customers with brand communication in social media.

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“I would say that we deliver value in our communication to customers through for example by sharing different customer reviews of our product in social media. By sharing the reviews, it creates transparency and therefore it provides for other new potential customers to see the quality and reliability of our product which in a contrary can add the lead generation for us. Also in addition, we share different comparisons from us and other companies, which also communicates about our product value. Also, we communicate about our customer support system, which adds a lot of value for our brand. Overall, we deliver value by being transparent with our communication in social media.” –Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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Leadfeeder stresses the importance of openness and transparency in the brand communication in order to create brand value for the audience in social media. They share for example a lot of customer feedbacks and reviews which realizes the promised values. Also, they utilize different technology competence related reviews in their brand related content in social media which speaks about the value of the product for the customers. The company also highlights their support system which is available to everyone in social media.

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How we communicate about value through our brand communication is that we produce messages which tells that our product helps people to do their job better. Also, we deliver brand value by communicating information which benefits people in social media. As an example of this, we developed Sales Academy, where people can learn to do sales more effectively. We promoted the sales academy concept in social media channels and communicated about how people can learn there. It was open

to everyone, which obviously adds the perceived value for people. We want that our brand messages to speak about our “helping nature” which delivers value to people. “- Honkanen, Vainu.io

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Vainu.io delivers brand value in social media by communicating about their corporate culture to help people to do sales in a modern way. They have also created different online learning programs which they promote in their social media channels, which delivers value for existing and new potential customers since they are available to anyone. Vainu.io stresses the importance of showing their company’s helpful nature in their brand communication, because it displays brand value to people.

#### 4.3.5. Emotional connection to a brand

The last question in the interview was that does the company seek to create different kind of emotions with their brand communication, and do they feel important to create an emotional connection to the brand.

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“We try to create positive emotions to people from our company through our employees influencing in the social media. I think it is a smart way to create emotional connections through people to the company. For us, it is important to represent emotions such as trust and expertise. We try to connect these matters to our brand communication as much as possible. Next year, we will focus on producing more video content to our social media channels, because it has been noticed to be an authentic and effective way to communicate to people especially in the B2B field.” – Paalanen, Leadfeeder

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Leadfeeder highlights the importance of representing trust and expertise through their brand communication activities in social media. They believe that people create emotional

connections better than companies, and therefore they utilize their employees within their brand building practices. In the future, the company will focus on producing more especially video content in social media, because it is noted to be a great way for creating emotional connections to the corporate brand, because in videos people's authenticity comes to light.

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“The emotions that we want to represent in our brand related communication in social media are connected to our product being “the sales manager’s best friend”. We want to communicate emotions which represents us being on the customer’s side. In our company’s logo, there can be seen a dog’s face. Dogs are commonly connected to emotions such as being likeable and loyal. These emotions are also what we want to represent. What comes to creating emotions when communicating about technology, we want to make the complex subjects approachable and simple to people. In addition, a long-term customer relationships are important for us, and in order to create them, we need be trusted, and that is definitely an important matter in our brand communication.” – Honkanen, Vainu.io

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What comes to emotional branding, Vainu.io emphasizes the importance of communicating brand related messages that makes the audience feel that Vainu can be their best friend in work. This can be seen as a powerful way to engage customers with emotions, and it definitely works as a creator of emotional connection to the brand. Vainu.io also stresses that it is mandatory to seek with brand communication to create emotional connections to the company, especially emotions connected to trust, because those emotions can bring them long-term relationships, which are essential especially small and medium sized business organizations that seek for growth.

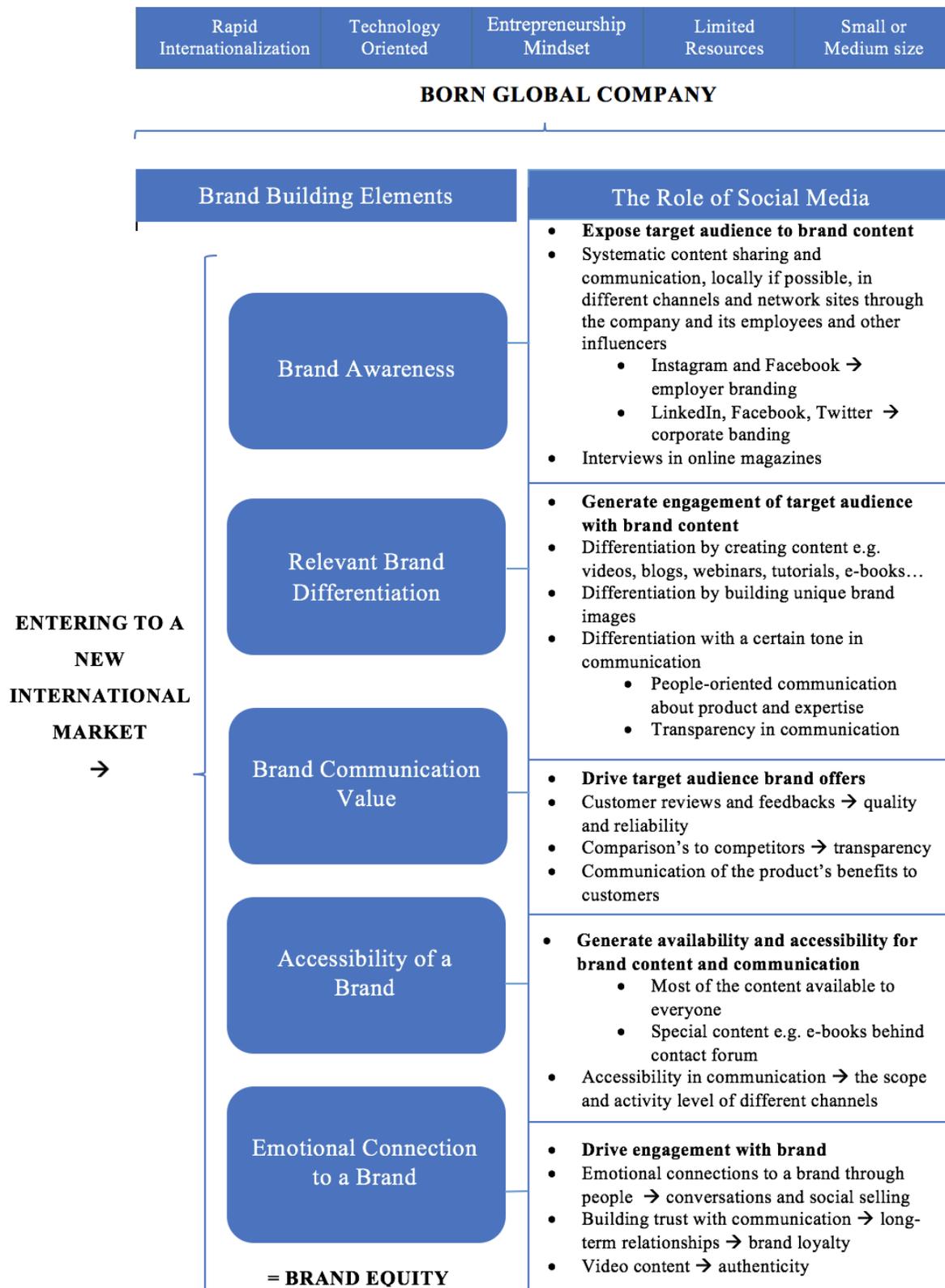
#### **4.4. Synthesis of the theoretical framework and empirical results**

Born globals are best defined as business organizations who seeks for rapid internationalization. The companies have different characteristics which differs them from a traditional company, for instance they own a global vision since inception due to their products being commonly high-technology oriented and their founders having an entrepreneurial mindset. In addition, born globals are usually small or medium size high growth oriented companies whose resources are scarce especially early after founding. However, with innovativeness, the born global companies can overcome the lack of recourses in different operations.

In order for born globals to seek for fast internationalization, they need to see brand building with social media as an important matter, because it is noted to ease the internationalization process in many ways. Over the years, branding in the B2B sector has lagged behind the B2C sector, even though it can be seen as equally important for both of the fields. In the B2B field, social media is found to be a great tool for implementing branding through brand related content creation and communication and networking in different channels. There are many strategies for building a brand, but the brand building framework used in this study includes different elements, which are explored with a qualitative case study in two born global companies. All of the brand building elements are discussed in a social media utilization context, in order to understand the essential connection between brand building and social media in the B2B sector. The aim behind the case study is to explore and understand practical branding practices in social media channels which serves guidelines for born globals to build a brand when seeking to enter a new international market. The case study was implemented with semi-structured interviews with the case company representatives. Direct responses of the interviewees have been cited in this study to provide the reader to understand the analysis correctly.

Based on the theoretical framework and the empirical results, the role of social media in B2B brand building is found to be diverse but decisive, since it can effectively support the internationalization of born globals. However, even though both of the companies

executes different branding practices in social media, and even though both of the case companies noted that branding can be seen as an important aspect to every growing business, especially when entering to a new international market, the empirical results of this study supports that B2B branding is still lacking behind the B2C sector, since neither of the case companies had not defined their branding strategies or objectives precisely. The brand building framework and its elements presented in this thesis can be seen to work as a practical and helpful framework for born globals especially when entering a new international market. Also, the role of social media in branding is highlighted as important, because it offers an efficient place to implement brand communication and content creation. Therefore, the empirical results of this study mainly supports the literature review and its main topics. The results of this study are not intended to be generalized, but they can be used as guidelines for brand building in social media in the B2B sector, taking into account the special features of the born global companies. Synthesis of the theoretical framework and the empirical results are summarized in the figure 3. The figure includes all the main themes described in the theoretical framework and the new findings obtained from the empirical analysis.



**Figure 8.** Synthesis of the theoretical framework and the empirical results

## 5. DISCUSSION

This chapter presents answers to the research questions and addresses the theoretical and managerial conclusions of the thesis. Finally, the evaluation of the reliability and the limitations of the study are presented, as well as suggestions for future research.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The aim of this thesis was to understand how born global companies can utilize social media in brand building when expanding to a new international market, since rapid internationalization is a typical characteristic of the born global companies. The aim was also to form a practical framework from previously published literature and empirical material, which would include guidelines for building a brand in social media. The objectives of the research were sought by analyzing the earlier literature about the born global phenomenon, and by analyzing the different sub-areas related to B2B branding and social media. The objectives of the research were also sought by analyzing the role of social media in branding through a brand building framework with a case study of two born global companies. In addition, the issues raised in the theoretical part were attempted to be supplemented and illustrated with practical examples from the empirical results.

The aim of the first theoretical sub-question was to understand what the key characteristics of born globals are and how they internationalize. The answer to this additional research question was found from the earlier literature, where born globals were defined as business organizations “*that, from inception, seek to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and the sale of outputs in multiple countries*” (Oviatt & McDougall 1994, pp. 49). Overall, born global companies own a global vision since inception due to their products being usually high-technology oriented and their founders having an entrepreneurial mindset. Also, born globals tend to be small or medium size B2B growth oriented business organizations, whose resources are scarce especially after the inception. It is be noted that born global companies have different characteristics which differs them from a traditional company, but the most common one is their rapid internationalization. Since the companies seek for fast global expansion, they skip some stages in their internationalization process which traditional firms usually prefer to follow.

The second sub-question was related to understanding what kind of areas B2B branding consists of. In addition, the concept of brand equity was studied. To these questions the answers were found from previous literature, which was supplemented with the empirical results. Based on the earlier literature, B2B branding consists of different areas connected to branding practices and communication whose ultimate purpose is the same as for consumer branding; to make the products, services or whole business known and at the same time separate them from the competitors (Beverland et al. 2007). The concept of brand equity can be applied to the benefits of B2B branding, which is supported by the theoretical research and the empirical results. Brand equity is referred to as the value of the brand which is determined by consumer perception of the brand and the experiences with the brand. Brand equity includes the components that create value to a brand in different ways for both to the company and the customer. Overall, brand equity is noted to be a set of assets linked to the brand, whereas brand building refers to the creation and improvement of these assets.

The third sub-question was related to the role of social media in B2B branding and also to how social media can be utilized in a B2B brand building context. To this question an answer was found through the theoretical literature and the brand building framework, which was enriched by the empirical findings. The role of social media in B2B branding was found to be especially important and essential in today's globalized and digitalized business area due to its innovative, low-cost and easily accessible characteristics. Social media challenges the customers' traditional ways to communicate which has made it a popular and modern tool for implementing branding (see e.g. Felix et al. 2017; Cawsey & Rowley 2016). From the empirical findings, the role of social media in B2B branding is also noted as important, because it offers an efficient and unique place for brand communication and content sharing, which sets the basis for B2B brand building in social media.

The main research question in this study was to understand how born global companies can build their brand in social media when seeking to expand to a new international market. This question was answered through the brand building framework, whose elements were analyzed with the case study findings, which are summarized and discussed next.

From the empirical findings, it was noted that a successful brand building begins with raising the overall *brand awareness* of a company in social media, and it can be seen as a one of the

main objectives of B2B branding. In the brand awareness element of the brand building framework, it is noted from the empirical findings that the role of social media is an important tool for exposing the target audience to the brand related content and communication. In the empirical analysis, systematic content sharing and communication in different social media channels, especially between the company's employees, was found as essential when seeking to raise the brand awareness. Also the importance of local brand building in social media was highlighted in order to raise the brand awareness internationally. In addition, social media influencers and for example interviews in online magazines were found to work as a great way to boost the audience's attention in social media. Social media channels such as Instagram and Facebook were noted to fit best for employer branding and raising the awareness of new potential employees, whereas LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter were noted to fit best for the overall company branding and attracting new customers in the B2B field.

One of the cornerstones of brand building was found to be brand differentiation, which is defined as a process of distinguishing a brand from the others and to make it more attractive to a particular target audience by differentiating it from the competitors. In the empirical findings, the role of social media was highlighted to be important in generating engagement from the target audiences with different content related matters as well as in brand image building. Also, people-oriented communication about products and other important content in social media was found to be relevant in the brand differentiation context. In addition, it was found that differentiation in social media can be increased for example by creating a certain tone within the messages, because it can make the company easily recognized. Also, within the brand differentiation context in social media, it was found that the companies should aim to differ as a whole for example with company culture related matters.

In the third brand building element, *brand communication value*, the role of social media was found to be especially important in driving the different brand offers to the target audience. The empirical findings highlighted the role of social media in building value to the audience by brand related content and communication. It is noted, that from a customer's point of view, if a company want's to stand out and deliver value by communication in comparison to its competitors, it needs be proactive and innovative in social media, since it is easy for the customers to evaluate the communication value of the company, because the branding actions are mainly available to everyone in social media. Interaction with customers can build

strong and emotional bonds with a brand, and therefore increase the perceived value of brand related communication. According to the empirical results, the brand communication value can be increased in social media by sharing different customer reviews and feedbacks because they build trust by transparency, and show the quality and reliability of a company. Also, it is noted that comparisons to competitors create transparency to the brand communication which can add the perceived brand communication value of the existing and the new potential customers. Also, the communication of a company's culture was found to be important, because it adds authenticity to the channels, which in turn, can add the perceived brand value of the audience. In addition, helpful nature in the content and conversations was found to be important within the brand communication.

The role of social media in *the availability and accessibility of a brand* element, refers to the content and communication availability of the company, and their accessibility on the social media channels. The empirical findings highlighted the importance of the accessibility of branding practices and the content's convenience to the targeted audience. From the empirical results, it was found that the scope and activity level of different social media channels and networks are important within the brand communication accessibility context. In the B2B field, the trend within the content's availability was found to be that some content are less available due to them being hidden behind a contact form in social media. However, it was also noted, that the trend will probably change more to everything being available to everyone in the near future, which is important to take into account. Overall, the role of social media was found to be important in brand building, since it makes the content mainly accessible, and it allows sharing and creating user-generated content and brand communication through different platforms which are publicly available.

The last element in the brand building framework, *the emotional connection to a brand* was found to be an important element especially when driving engagement to a corporate brand. The empirical results highlighted emotional branding as an important matter when seeking to create positive and trust based brand images for the audience in social media. Emotions are the driving force of brand loyalty and therefore an important aspect of any company's brand building practices. In the empirical findings, it was noted that emotional connection to a brand is most impactful through people and their brand communication, which appeal directly to a customer's emotional states or needs. Video content in social media was noted to be a great way to create emotional connections to a company's overall brand. Even though

it is commonly considered that in B2B field the decisions are made mainly with rational thinking, in reality, the decisions are still largely driven by emotions. Therefore, creating emotional connections by branding is important in order to seek for long-term relationships with customers.

Based on the empirical results, the role of social media can be said to be multifaceted and even decisive in all different areas of B2B brand building. In addition, based on previous theoretical research and the empirical analysis, social media is found to be an essential and important tool for the internationalization of born globals, since branding practices in social media can ease and fasten the whole international expansion process. To summarize, the empirical findings in this study mainly support the previous research in the theoretical framework. However, new findings and discrepancies were also found in the empirical results of the case study compared to the previous literature. In recent studies, the connection between brand building and social media has hardly been studied within the B2B field, or especially in born global companies, so this research contributed to create new information within those research areas.

## **5.2. Managerial implications**

Since the role of social media in brand building is found to be diverse but decisive especially in the B2B field, and when expanding to an international markets, the findings of this research probably bring interest to B2B growth oriented companies and business decision-makers who are seeking for rapid internationalization. Based on the results of this research, it can be said that the overall importance of brand building still needs to be more highlighted within the B2B environment. Based on the previous theoretical research, B2B business organizations commonly lack the understanding of the impactful value of a strong brand, because corporate customers are thought to make decisions on rational basis. However, based on the result results in this research, B2B companies can be recommended to invest more in brand building because corporate customers are noted to be influenced mainly by the same reasons as consumer customers; emotions.

This study also produces interesting results especially for companies who can be characterized as born globals. Based on the research findings, born global companies can easily and innovatively use social media as a tool for implementing branding by communication and content sharing in different social media channels. What comes to creating positive brand images in social media, the brand communication and content should be people-oriented, authentic and accessible. Born global companies can benefit from this research if they utilize the created brand building framework, because it offers guidelines to effective branding in social media, especially when entering a new international market. Also, born global companies should note from this research that they should invest more in brand building practices in social media, even if the resources are scarce, because branding is noted to facilitate the whole international expansion process. Based on the research findings, the use of social media in B2B brand building can also be recommended especially when a company seeks to raise brand awareness, or create brand image and a unified brand identity. In addition, it is noted that others than those in the management or the head of a marketing should be considered as an equally important resource for implementing brand communication in different social media channels. Also, the company's employees and different social media influencers within the B2B field are noted to be a powerful resource in social media for B2B branding. The strong link between the brand and the social media should also be taken into account, for example, when recruiting new employees.

The results of this study suggest that brand communication should be systematically and consistently designed to achieve the high brand awareness, brand differentiation, brand value, brand loyalty and the desired brand images in social media. This research encourages B2B companies to focus more on brand building and its interactivity, and on delivering high-quality content which attracts and raises the attention of the target audiences. Also, taking into account the different characteristics of different countries and business industries is important within the brand building. B2B companies and their branding operations should take into account all of the elements presented in the brand building framework, and they should design and implement brand communication and content creation in social media within them in order to seek for effective brand building.

### **5.3. Reliability, limitations and suggestions for future research**

Often, a reliability of a study is discussed using concepts such as reliability and validity. However, in the case of a qualitative research, the use of these concepts has generated criticism because they were originally created to evaluate the reliability of a quantitative research. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009: 136.) According to Eskola and Suoranta (2008: 211-212), the reliability of qualitative research can be better evaluated through the concepts of credibility, portability, certainty and the strength of a study.

The concept of credibility assesses whether the conceptualization made by the researcher and the interpretation of the material corresponds to the perceptions that are being studied (Eskola & Suoranta 2008: 211). In this study, credibility was sought to be strengthened by sufficient amount of interplay between the theoretical framework and the empirical results. In addition, the researcher informed the interviewee about the main topics of the research, in order to minimize possible errors and improve the overall quality of the case study. The reliability of the study is enhanced by the use of company names, the use of interviewees' names and titles, and the comments from the interviewees. However, the study could have included data collection from many other sources in order to increase the construct validity and reliability of the research.

The portability of a study is defined as how much the research results can be transferred to another context. In a qualitative study, portability is acceptable under certain conditions, although generalizations are not usually possible due to the multifaceted nature of the reality. (Eskola & Suoranta 2008: 211-212.) Therefore, the aim of this research was not to create generalizations, but the outcomes of the research provide guidelines for brand building with social media in other contexts as long as the B2B sector and the born globals environment are taken into account. In this study, portability is limited, due to the focus on only two case companies and a relatively small number of interviewees, but the limitations are reduced by the in-depth viewpoints obtained from the expert interviewees. Portability is also limited by the special features of the B2B field, born global companies and the software industry, which needs to be taken into account when using the results in another context.

The certainty of this research is improved by the exact report of the implementation of the research and the use of several different method (Hirsijärvi et al. 2009: 232-233). Qualitative research methods were utilized in this study and the research design of this thesis was presented in order to improve the certainty of the study. Lastly, the strength of the study refers to the extent to which the results of the research are confirmed by earlier studies of the same phenomenon (Eskola & Suoranta 2008: 212). This result of this research mainly support previous literature, but also some discrepancies and new information was found.

In this study, the research objectives were studied through two case companies and two semi-structured interviews. Although the reliability and validity of this study were strived to be as relevant as possible, it still has some limitations. As the B2B brand building with social media in born global companies is a very under-researched topic academically, there can be speculation involved during the study. Also, the selection of the interviewees sets another limitation to this study, since it is possible that by choosing other interviewees, would have led to very different results and conclusions. For the further studies, it might be useful to look at the research phenomenon with a larger number of interviews and case companies in order to increase the amount of reliability and validity of the research. The generalization of the study could also be improved by, for example, incorporating quantitative methods such as questionnaires for the investigation of the phenomenon. The research phenomenon could also be researched through other than born global companies operating in the software business sector. In addition, the research results produced interesting information mainly to the interests of companies operating in the B2B sector and especially to born global companies, which could be changed in the future studies by exploring the brand building with social media for the interests of other business organizations than in the software field.

Some interesting topics for further research that occurred during this study are for example the link between brand building and social selling of employees in social media. This could be an interesting research topic in the future within the born global companies. Also, the results of this study highlighted the importance of creating a local brand identity within the corporate culture, which could provide interesting perspectives for the new studies. Also, within the empirical results, the phenomenon of content war was presented, which could be seen as a valuable aspect to study within the context of brand building in social media, since it could provide important perspectives for the research of branding in social media.

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## APPENDICES - Appendix 1. Interview questions

YRITYKSEN TOIMINTA	BRÄNDI	BRÄNDIVIESTINNÄN TAVOITTEET	BRÄNDIVIESTINNÄN TOTEUTUSKEINOT SOSIAALISESSA MEDIASSA	TUTKIMUKSEN NÄKÖKULMAT SOSIAALISEN MEDIAN BRÄNDIVIESTINNÄSSÄ
Kuvaile yrityksen toimintaa lyhyesti?	Mitä brändi tarkoittaa teidän yritykselle? (Yritys-/ tuote brändi)	Mitkä ovat teidän brändiviestinnän tavoitteet?	Miten toteutate brändiviestintää sosiaalisessa mediassa? (markkinointivietintä & sisältö)	Millä tavalla toteutate brändiviestintää sosiaalisessa mediassa <b>bränditietoisuuden levittämisen ja laajentamisen kannalta?</b>
Kauanko olette olleet markkinoilla?	Mitä brändiin liittyviä mielikuvia haluatte itsestänne antaa?	Tavoitteletteko brändiviestinnän avulla helpompaa kansainvälistymistä?	Mitkä ovat teidän mielestä sosiaalisen median tärkeimmät työkalut/sivustot brändiviestinnän kannalta?	Millä tavalla pyritte brändiviestinnällä <b>erottautumaan</b> sosiaalisessa mediassa?
Milloin lähditte kansainvälistymään?			Oletteko kokeneet brändiviestinnän hyödyntämisen sosiaalisessa mediassa kansainvälisille markkinoille laajennettaessa hyödylliseksi?	Miten sosiaalisessa mediassa otetaan huomioon <b>brändiviestinnän saavutettavuus / laajuus?</b> (Oletteko siellä, missä asiakkaat ovat?)
Kuinka monessa maassa toimitte?			Eroaako brändiviestinnän toteutus, kun lähditte laajentamaan kansainvälisille markkinoille, tai kun olette kansainvälisillä markkinoilla?	Millä tavalla brändiviestintä tuottaa <b>arvoa</b> teidän asiakkaille/ kohderyhmille / sidosryhmille sosiaalisessa mediassa?
				Pyritäänkö teidän sosiaalisen median brändiviestinnässä <b>tunnetilojen luontiin</b> (mm. pidettävyys, luottamus)? Jos kyllä, niin millä tavoilla/keinoilla? Jos ei, niin miksi?

