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The Impact of Consumer Engagement on International Brand Building through Social Media

A Case Study of Finnish Internationalized SMEs

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UNIVERSITY OF VAASA**School Of Marketing and Communication****Author:** Larissa Nikkinen**Title of the thesis:** The Impact of Consumer Engagement on International Brand Building through Social Media: A Case Study of Finnish Internationalized SMEs**Degree:** Master of Science in Economics and Business Administration**Discipline:** Master's Degree Programme in International Business (MIB)**Supervisor:** Peter Gabrielsson**Year:** 2024 **Pages:** 115

ABSTRACT :

Digitalization has changed our everyday lives. Consumers are spending increasingly valuable time on various social media channels, which has altered how consumers and companies interact, making it more interactive. As social media platforms continue to evolve, they have become valuable tools for creating and maintaining customer relationships and for building successful and strong brands.

Consumer engagement on social media can benefit companies by allowing them to collaborate with their customers and create value together. It also gives companies valuable insights into their customers' needs. Besides, social media channels create new opportunities for companies in today's digital environment. To take advantage of these new digital developments, brands need to adopt a more dynamic way of thinking and acting to maintain a competitive edge and achieve success in the market. For this reason, social media channels provide an essential platform for brand building, enabling critical competitive advantages in international markets. Branding plays an important role in today's globalized world, where companies are beginning to expand into international markets more rapidly.

Strong and distinctive brands need better positions and visibility to attract consumers and succeed in the new competitive market. Co-creation of a brand has become even more important in international markets. Co-creation in brand development is one of the key factors in creating a strong international brand. This approach is helpful for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with limited resources, as co-creation with brand stakeholders reduces constraints and benefits companies in international markets. More importantly, co-creation helps SMEs build their brands in a way that appeals to and attracts consumers. In international brand orientation, the brand's country of origin (COO) has been studied to affect consumers' perceptions and purchase intentions.

This study explores how consumer engagement affects the international brand-building of Finnish SMEs through social media. The research is based on previous academic work that emphasizes the shift in brand-building processes from the company's control to the consumers' control, where consumers significantly influence today's brand-building processes. The international aspect of the research includes examining the impact of the company's country of origin on co-creating a Finnish brand with consumers on social media.

KEYWORDS: Consumer Engagement, Consumer Brand Engagement, Brand Building, Social Media, Co-creation, Country-Of-Origin, International Brand Orientation, Internationalization, SMEs.

VAASAN YLIOPISTO**Markkinoinnin ja viestinnän yksikkö**

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Tutkielman nimi:	Kuluttajien sitoutumisen vaikutus kansainvälisen brändin rakentamisessa sosiaalisen median välityksellä: tapaustutkimus suomalaisista kansainvälistyneistä pk-yrityksistä		
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TIIVISTELMÄ :

Digitalisaatio on muuttanut jokapäiväistä elämäämme. Kuluttajat viettävät yhä enemmän arvokasta aikaa sosiaalisen median eri kanavissa, mikä on muuttanut kuluttajien ja yritysten vuorovaikutustapoja vuorovaikutteisemmaksi. Samalla kun sosiaalisen median alustat kehittyvät jatkuvasti, niistä on tullut arvokkaita työkaluja asiakassuhteiden luomiseen ja ylläpitämiseen sekä menestyvien ja vahvojen brändien rakentamiseen.

Kuluttajien sitoutuminen sosiaalisessa mediassa voi hyödyttää yrityksiä, koska ne voivat tehdä yhteistyötä asiakkaidensa kanssa ja luoda arvoa yhdessä. Se myös antaa yrityksille arvokasta tietoa asiakkaidensa tarpeista. Lisäksi sosiaalisen median kanavat luovat uusia mahdollisuuksia yrityksille nykypäivän digitaalisessa ympäristössä. Voidakseen hyödyntää tätä uutta digitaalista kehitystä, brändien on omaksuttava dynaamisempi ajattelu- ja toimintatapa säilyttääkseen kilpailuetunsa ja saavuttaakseen menestystä markkinoilla. Tästä syystä sosiaalisen median kanavat tarjoavat olennaisen alustan brändin rakentamiselle, mikä mahdollistaa kriittisen kilpailuedun kansainvälisillä markkinoilla. Brändäyksellä on tärkeä rooli nykypäivän globalisoituneessa maailmassa, jossa yritykset alkavat laajentua entistä nopeammin kansainvälisille markkinoille.

Menestyäkseen uusilla kilpailluilla markkinoilla vahvat ja erottuvat brändit tarvitsevat parempia asemia ja näkyvyyttä erottuakseen joukosta ja houkutelakseen kuluttajia. Brändin yhteisluominen on noussut entistä tärkeämmäksi kansainvälisillä markkinoilla. Yhteisluominen brändin kehittämässä on yksi avaintekijöistä vahvan kansainvälisen brändin luomisessa. Tämä lähestymistapa on hyödyllinen pienille ja keskisuurille yrityksille (pk-yrityksille), joilla on rajalliset resurssit, koska luominen yhdessä brändin sidosryhmien kanssa vähentää rajoituksia ja hyödyttää yrityksiä kansainvälisillä markkinoilla. Vielä tärkeämpää on, että yhteisluominen auttaa pk-yrityksiä rakentamaan brändejään tavalla, joka vetoaa kuluttajiin ja houkuttelee heitä. Kansainvälisessä brändiorientaatioissa brändin alkuperämaan (COO) on tutkittu vaikuttavan kuluttajien käsityksiin ja ostoaikaisiin.

Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitetään, kuinka kuluttajien sitoutuminen vaikuttaa suomalaisten pk-yritysten kansainväliseen brändin rakentamiseen sosiaalisessa mediassa. Tutkimus perustuu aikaisempaan akateemiseen tutkimukseen, jossa korostetaan brändinrakennusprosessien siirtymistä yrityksen hallinnasta kuluttajien ohjaukseen, jossa kuluttajat vaikuttavat merkittävästi nykypäivän brändinrakennusprosesseihin. Tutkimuksen kansainvälisenä näkökulmana tarkastellaan yrityksen alkuperämaan vaikutusta suomalaisen brändin luomiseen yhdessä kuluttajien kanssa sosiaalisessa mediassa.

AVAINSANAT: Kuluttajien sitoutuminen, kuluttaja brändi sitoutuminen, brändin rakentaminen, sosiaalinen media, yhteisluonti, alkuperämaa, kansainvälinen brändiorientaatio, kansainvälistyminen, pk-yritys.

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List of abbreviations

SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise
B2C	Business- to- Consumer
B2B	Business-to-Business
CE	Consumer engagement
CBE	Consumer brand engagement
SM	Social Media
WOM	Word – of – Mouth
COO	Country-of-Origin

1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research, including its background, the existing research gap, objectives, and an explanation of key concepts.

1.1 Background

Digitalization has become an essential phenomenon in our everyday lives. Consumers spend more and more valuable time on different social media channels, which has changed the interactions between consumers and companies towards a more interactive direction (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015, p. 636). According to Search Engine Journal, in 2023, an average individual spent more than 2 hours daily on social media. From this, we can state that social media has become an important part of our daily lives, significantly impacting companies' consumer engagement and international brand co-creation. Besides this, social media has transformed the entire marketing landscape in a new direction where consumers have become active information generators (Heinonen, 2011, p. 356). This transformation affects companies' brand-building as the role of consumers has become one of the key factors in business success (Heinonen et al., 2019, p. 96).

As social media platforms constantly change, they have become valuable tools for creating and maintaining customer relationships and building successful, strong brands (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016, p. 755). Social media has changed the way brands interact with consumers, which at the same time has significantly changed the core of business branding strategies (Tuten, 2023, pp. 19-20). Social media also plays a key role in strengthening the bond between customers and brands, affecting consumer loyalty. This interaction between consumers and brands has influenced companies' marketing strategies, making social media an effective marketing and communication tool (Masa'deh et al., 2021, p. 1).

Social media influence has also changed the traditional one-way communication approach, where brand leadership drives the message within the organization. Towards a

direction where consumers communicate and interact with the brand and each other directly affects companies' success. (Bruhn et al., 2012; Tuten, 2023; Masa'deh et al., 2021). The two-way communication with consumers on social media has affected brand ownership, turning it into shared ownership, which is a vital part of brand entities today (Swaminathan et al., 2020, p. 24). However, this interaction is beneficial for building a company's brand, as it can create a positive word-of-mouth effect (WOM) and enables more effective use of target marketing on companies' social media platforms (Hershberger, 2013). Moreover, this approach has been supported recently by academic researchers who have urged companies to take a more customer-centric approach to today's brand building and focus more on humanizing brands and creating relationships with audiences (Burgess, 2020). This means brand value creation is changing towards co-creation with several stakeholders, which requires increasing interaction, cooperation, and dialogue between companies and consumers (Mingione & Abratt, 2020, p. 982).

Consumer engagement on social media can benefit companies, allowing them to collaborate with their customers and create value together. It also gives companies valuable insights into their customers' needs (Shashi, 2012, p. 254). Recent studies suggest that brand building is not limited to creating the brand identity and reputation but extends to the consumers' identity. By expressing identity, consumers actively support the brand and become more committed to the brand, leading to increased engagement and a stronger connection to the brand (Black & Veloutsou, 2017, p. 416).

According to Search Engine Journal (2023), there are currently 4.8 billion social media users around the world, which accounts for 59.9% of the global population and 92.7% of all internet users. The most used social media platforms in April 2023 ranked by global users were Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and WeChat. Whereas TikTok was the most popular in terms of the time spent by users.

In Finland, more than 70 percent of Finns use social media. According to the study, 56 percent of Finns consider social media an important part of their lives. Compared to

other countries such as the US, UK, Germany, and other Nordic countries, social media holds greater significance to the Finnish population. On average, one-third of Finns follow companies and brands on Facebook (Komulainen, 2023).

Social media channels create new opportunities for companies in today's digital environment. To take advantage of these new digital developments, brands need to adopt a more dynamic way of thinking and acting to maintain a competitive edge and achieve success in the competitive market (Mingione & Abratt, 2020, p. 982). For this reason, social media channels provide an essential platform for brand building, enabling critical competitive advantages in international markets.

Branding plays an important role in today's globalized world, where companies are beginning to expand into international markets more rapidly. To succeed in the new competitive market, strong and distinctive brands have better positions and visibility to stand out and attract consumers (Forbes, 2021). In this fast-paced and hyper-connected international market environment, companies can leverage social media channels to influence their consumers more effectively. In addition, social media offers a cost-effective and efficient tool to engage and connect with the target audience compared to traditional marketing (Mingione & Abratt, 2020, p. 982).

The co-creation of a brand has become even more important in international markets. According to research conducted by Kusi et al. (2022), co-creation in brand development is one of the key factors in creating a strong international brand. This approach is helpful for SMEs with limited resources as co-creation with brand stakeholders reduces constraints and benefits companies in international markets. More importantly, co-creation helps SMEs build their brands in the right direction that appeals to and attracts consumers (Kusi et al., 2022, p. 5).

This research focuses more closely on the research of Finnish SMEs that have internationalized their operations. SMEs are a significant part of the Finnish economy because

most Finnish companies are SMEs, and thus, they also employ almost a large part of the country's workforce. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), about 99.1% of all employer companies in Finland are SMEs, employing 57% of the workforce (OECD, 2022). For this reason, the impact of research on SMEs' consumer engagement on brand-building in social media cannot be ignored. Moreover, branding offers competitive means for SMEs in product differentiation and company growth (Odoom & Bedman, 2017, p. 68), which makes branding a vital part of the SME's business development. Especially today, when competition is more challenging than ever because consumers are exposed to new brands due to social media, the brand building becomes an integral part of the business (Forbes, 2021).

Moreover, brand building for SMEs differs significantly from that of traditionally built brands of larger companies. According to Odoom & Bedman's research (2017, pp. 77-78), the branding of SMEs is based on the principles of the owners and managers, mainly based on their entrepreneurial orientation, where brand planning is minimal and often done with limited resources. This is an important factor, especially when SMEs expand into international markets. In global markets, the marketing strategy of SMEs must be oriented towards an international brand orientation, which sets new operating strategies for the company's operations in order to succeed in international operations.

According to Kusi et al. (2022, p. 15), the international brand-oriented approach can increase profit growth in highly competitive and dynamic global markets. This requires an international brand marketing strategy from the company to achieve competitive advantage during internationalization and to develop the brand globally (Cheng et al., 2005, p. 504). To successfully build their brand in global markets, SMEs need to commit to an international presence and cultural adaptation of the brand (Wong & Merrilees, 2006, pp. 22-23). These areas can be influenced by taking into account the influence of the brand's country of origin (COO) in international brand orientation, which has been studied to affect consumers' perceptions and purchase intentions (Chen, 2021, p. 147; Moon & Oh, 2017, p. 224).

Therefore, more in-depth research combining these aspects of consumer engagement, international branding, and social media is important for SMEs. It brings important information about the co-creation of an SME's brand in social media channels in the international markets and the factors influencing it, which significantly impacts the creation of an SME's international marketing strategy. The international dimension is brought by the influence of the country of origin on the building of an SME's brand in social media channels because building an international brand in today's digitalized world requires the company to understand how an international consumer commits to a foreign brand and how international brand orientation is implemented in the social media channels of SMEs in such a way that it attracts international consumers to participate in the creation of the company's brand. Therefore, the effects of the country of origin bring an important international business perspective to the research.

1.2 Research gap

Many studies have been done on international branding and consumer engagement, as well as on social media, as digital relationships with consumers have become critical to companies' business processes and marketing strategies. They have quickly changed the operating environment of companies, moving towards a change where consumers have more influence on the company's brand than ever before (Kannan & Li, 2016, p. 33). Social media channels have established new, engaging ways for consumers to interact and impact companies' brand creation, moving brand control over firms to stakeholders' control (Swaminathan et al., 2020, p. 24). However, research combining consumer engagement impact through social media channels in international brand building from the perspective of an SME leaves a gap for research. From the standpoint of SMEs, research is important because they are a significant part of the Finnish business environment.

Moreover, examining the international brand-building process in SMEs helps us better understand the relationship between SME brands and consumers. Unlike larger companies, SMEs do not typically have an established brand-building model that can be applied

universally. Instead, branding in SMEs is often based on the owner's principles, particularly their entrepreneurial operations, with minimal brand planning and limited resources. As a result, the study of consumer engagement's impact on international brand building in SMEs can provide valuable insights for companies in building a successful international brand (Odoom & Bedman, 2017, pp. 77-78).

Furthermore, the research topic is topical because consumers play an undeniable role in brand building. With the increasing use of social media channels in our everyday lives, it is essential to study how consumer engagement impacts international brand building through the company's social media channels. Additionally, similar research has yet to be conducted from the perspective of Finnish internationalized SMEs.

1.3 Research problem and question

This research will explore how consumer engagement impacts Finnish internationalized SMEs' international brand-building through social media. The research builds upon previous academic work highlighting the shift in brand-building processes from the company's control to the consumers' control (Mingione & Abratt, 2020, p. 982), according to which consumers significantly influence today's brand-building processes. The international perspective of the research includes the company's country of origin effects, which will be captured by studying how the brand's country of origin affects the co-creating of a Finnish brand with consumers in social media.

Additionally, this thesis researches the impact of consumer engagement in social media on SMEs' international brand-building process and how SMEs utilize this for brand co-creation. Moreover, this research will deepen the understanding of the consumer's role in the international brand-building process of SMEs and how consumer engagement in social media has shaped the brand. The main research question for this study is:

1. How do Finnish internationalized SMEs co-create brands in social media with consumers in international markets?

Sub-questions of the research are:

1. How has consumer engagement impacted Finnish internationalized SME brand co-creation in international markets?
2. How do social media channels influence today's Finnish internationalized SME brand-building and increase willingness to commit to the brand in the international markets?
3. How does a brand's country-of-origin effect affect the consumer engagement and brand co-creation process of Finnish internationalized SMEs?

This research will benefit Finnish internationalized SMEs that use social media channels for brand building and SMEs who plan to expand their business into international markets. The results obtained from the research can be considered in SMEs' marketing strategies in the future. Moreover, this research will gather more information on how the company's country of origin affects the brand-building process and consumer engagement in SMEs' social media channels. This research also increases the understanding of the consumer's impact on brand value creation, which is claimed to be one of the critical factors in the success of companies (Heinonen et al., 2019, p. 96). Furthermore, the research will deepen the understanding of SMEs' brand-building as there is no established and universally applicable brand-building model in SME environments, as SME branding differs from branding in larger companies (Odoom & Bedman, 2017, p. 78).

This research adds dimension to previous studies emphasizing the importance of co-creating the brand with stakeholders (Black & Veloutsou, 2017, p. 416; Tormala & Gyrd-Jones, 2017, p. 83). The research explores how consumers have shifted the brand's value creation in a new direction and how much power the company has over it. These questions would also delve deeper into today's SMEs' social media marketing methods across different social media channels and how companies use these channels to create brand value in highly competitive international markets.

1.4 Research Focus

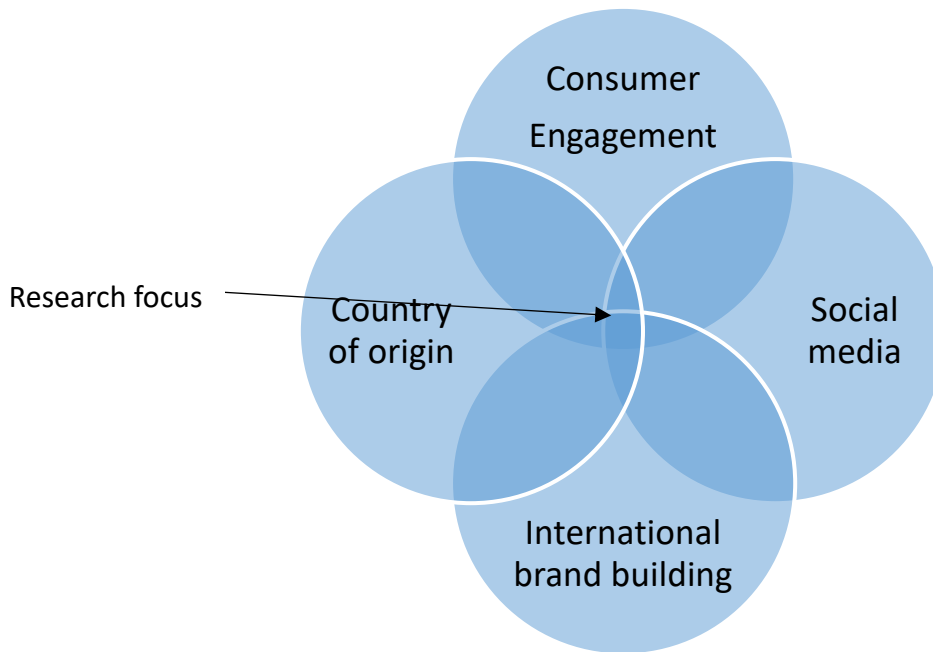


Figure 1. Research Focus

The main focus of this research is to understand how consumer engagement has impacted the brand-building of SMEs through social media, especially in an international marketing context. The country of origin plays a significant role in understanding how international brand orientation is implemented in building a global brand. Therefore, the literature used in this research focuses on four key areas: consumer engagement, international brand building, social media, and country of origin. Figure 1 illustrates how this research is positioned at the intersection of these four focus areas.

1.5 Definitions

Brand-Building

Building a brand is to create a meaningful relationship with the consumer. Especially in the brand-building process of an international company, the brand plays an important role, as strong brands have better opportunities to stand out and attract consumers

(Forbes, 2021). According to Cawsey & Rowley (2016, pp. 756-757), a strong brand reputation can give consumers confidence in the product's quality, leading to a stronger connection between the company and the consumer. Therefore, brand-building is a continuous interaction between the company and the consumer. For the company to succeed, it is crucial to recognize consumers' vital role in brand-building.

Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement (CE) through social media has changed branding in a new direction, which impacts the company's operations. Consumer engagement is defined by Vivek et al. (2012, p. 127) as "the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings and/ or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate." Pansari and Kumar define it as "the mechanics of a customer's value addition to the firm, either through direct or/and indirect contribution" (Pansari & Kumar, 2017, p. 295).

Consumer Brand Engagement

Hollebeek et al. (2014, p. 154) define consumer brand engagement (CBE) on social media as "a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interaction."

Co-Creation

Brand management has shifted towards a broader phenomenon where the brand is created among managers, employees, consumers, and other stakeholders (Black & Veloutsou, 2016, p. 416). In the theory of brand co-creation, consumers actively participate in creating brand experiences, which strongly impacts the success of modern brands (France et al., 2015, p. 849). The term co-creation describes the dialogue and interaction between the consumer and the company, which is based on a service-dominant logic where the company understands the processes that produce consumer value and learns to support consumers' co-creation activities. The central basis of the logic is that the customer is always the creator of value (Payne et al., 2009, p. 380).

Country of Origin Effects

Country of origin (COO) is defined by Jaffe and Nebenzhal (2006, p. 29) as “the country in which a consumer associates with a certain product or brand as being its source, regardless of where the product is produced.” The effects of COO are reflected in how consumers evaluate, perceive, or intend to purchase a product or brand based on the information from the country of origin (Herz & Diamantopoulous, 2013, p. 400). Research on COO effects suggests that products and brands can derive significant value from their country of origin (Moon & Oh, 2016, p. 224).

International Brand Orientation

Brand orientation is a business strategy focusing on creating, developing, and maintaining a strong brand identity through constant interaction with target customers. The aim is to attain a long-lasting competitive advantage through the brand (Urde, 1999, pp. 117-118). Kusi et al. (2022, p 2.) have further defined brand orientation in the context of international markets, stating that competitive advantage is sought in international markets. According to Wong and Merrilee's research in 2007 (p. 401), international brand orientation is one of the crucial aspects that companies should consider to achieve better international performance.

Internationalization

Internationalization refers to a company's strategy of expanding its activities beyond its country of origin (Roque et al., 2019, p. 2). According to Welch and Luostarinen (1988, p. 36), internationalization “is the process of increasing involvement in international operations.”

Social Media

Social media (SM) is described by Tuten (2020, p. 4) as a versatile online platform that enables communication, collaboration, and networking among interconnected individuals, communities, and organizations facilitated by technological advancements and mobility. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61), social media is defined as a group

of Internet-based applications that are constructed on the principles and technology behind Web 2.0. These applications allow users to create and share their own created content. Hershberger (2013) suggests that social media is an effective channel for building relationships and loyalty and enhancing the company's brand.

SMEs

According to the European Union (EU) definition of a Small and Medium-sized Enterprise (SMEs) are companies that employ less than 250 employees and generate no more than € 50 million in annual revenue or have an annual balance sheet total of no more than € 43 million are considered as SMEs (Carr, 2010).

2 Literature View

The literature review of this study is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on consumer engagement in brand building in international SMEs. This section includes the background and meaning of consumer engagement. This section also discusses consumer brand engagement (CBE) and the influence of social media, international brands, and country of origin on consumer engagement as a part of international marketing strategy. The second part discusses the creation of international brands together with consumers. This section deals with co-creating brand value and discusses building brand value in international SMEs, social media, and the brand's country of origin (COO). The literature review presents the central theories and concepts of the research from an international perspective and, at the same time, clarifies the main concepts of the research, supports the research question, and helps the readers to understand the connection between the main concepts. Various figures are presented to give a clearer overview of the theory.

2.1 Consumer engagement

Consumer engagement (CE) has become strategically important for companies as the digital business environment is constantly evolving, which has been affected by technology development, increased customer participation, and tightening global competition (Heinonen, 2018, p. 147). It is also one of the key drivers of a company's long-term success (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2019, p. 99). Implementing consumer engagement in the company's strategy is important because it enables a deeper, more meaningful, and longer-lasting connection between the company and the consumer. Moreover, consumer engagement strategically improves company performance, directly impacting sales growth (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 252). Strategic engagement also affects consumer interaction and participation (Kumar et al., 2010, p. 297). Consumer engagement is defined by Vivek et al. (2012, p. 127) as "the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate." Whereas Pansari and Kumar define it as "the

mechanics of a customer's value addition to the firm, either through direct or/and indirect contribution" (Pansari & Kumar, 2017, p. 295). Both definitions emphasize the importance of the meaningful bond between the consumer and the company for the company's actions. Moreover, it can be concluded that consumer contribution brings additional value to the company's operations. However, in today's dynamic and interactive business environment, more than satisfied and loyal customers are needed to keep a company competitive. To stand out and gain a competitive advantage, companies must develop a deeper bond with their customers that goes beyond satisfaction and loyalty and leads to emotional attachment and commitment (Pansari & Kumar, 2017, p. 294). According to Pansari's and Kumar's research, the bond between the company and the consumer has changed from a transactional level to engagement over the years. The engagement level is reached only when the consumer relationship has reached satisfaction and an emotional bond, as shown in Figure 2. (Pansari & Kumar 2017, pp. 294-295).

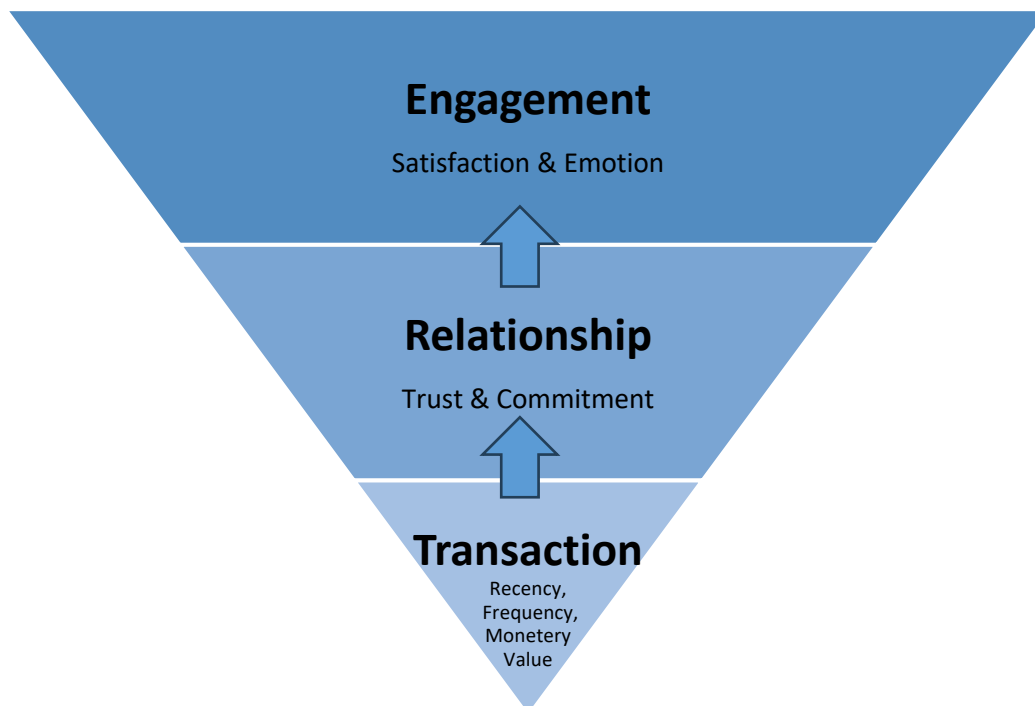


Figure 2. Consumers' relationships progress to the stage of engagement (Pansari & Kumar, 2017, p. 295).

Consumer activity should be recognized and considered in the company's strategy to strengthen engagement. These consumer activities include purchase events, brand interaction on social media channels, consumer feedback, and suggestions (Pansari & Kumar, 2017, p. 298). Technological advancements provide companies new and diverse opportunities to interact with consumers through various social media channels and applications. These engagement platforms allow the company new ways to influence consumer interactions and activities (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020, p. 713). In addition, as digital technology significantly increases consumer engagement, the company's social media channels become an important factor in the company's consumer engagement strategy.

2.1.1 Consumer brand engagement

Digitalization and social media have shifted consumers to the center of today's interactive business environment (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015, p. 633). As a result, consumer brand engagement (CBE) has become an emerging concept in creating a customer-centric environment (Hollebeek, 2011, pp. 569-570). It is considered one of the key drivers of competitive advantage in the market (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 524). According to Kumar and Pansari's research (2016, p. 502), implementing CBE is crucial for companies as it directly impacts their overall performance. Moreover, the research of France et al. (2016, p. 119) highlights that CBE has emerged as a highly influential concept in today's marketing environment.

Consumer brand engagement (CBE) is the psychological state of a consumer during interactive and co-creative experiences with the brand (Leckie et al., 2015, p. 558). Hollebeek et al. (2011, p. 565) define CBE as "the level of a consumer's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions.". Whereas Dwivedi (2015) defines it as a favorable consumer mindset related to a brand characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Dwivedi, 2015, p. 101).

Researchers Gambetti et al. (2012, p. 668) suggest that CBE is a multidimensional concept that creates a complete brand experience with consumers by combining attention, dialogue, interaction, emotion, sensory pleasure, and immediate activation. According to Dwivedi (2015, p. 107), CBE has significantly shaped customer relationships with brands and brought a significant competitive advantage to the company's operations (Kumar et al., 2010, p. 298).

Furthermore, consumer brand engagement (CBE) brings many positive effects on companies' operations, including increased sales, positive communication and recommendations, higher customer loyalty, and better company performance (Leckie et al., 2016, p. 560). This means that when consumers engage with a brand, they are not just passive receivers of information but active participants who bring their cognitive, emotional, and physical resources into the interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 149). Doing so creates shared value that benefits both the consumer and the brand. Therefore, CBE can be a powerful tool for building strong, long-lasting relationships between brands and consumers (Dwivedi, 2015, p. 102). According to Cheung et al. (2020), social media is one of the key factors in improving CBE. CBE can be enhanced by strengthening consumer interactions on companies' social media platforms. For this reason, social media plays an important role in building CBE. By focusing on consumer-brand interactions, companies can establish stronger connections with their consumers and enhance their overall brand engagement (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 525).

2.1.2 Consumer brand engagement in social media

Social media offers brands effective platforms and tools to build interaction and increase consumer engagement and brand awareness. Additionally, these platforms allow consumers to interact with brands and other consumers, giving valuable insights for the company and simultaneously impacting consumers' purchasing decisions (Kabadayi & Price, 2014, p. 203).

Social media refers to “online communication, collaboration, and cultivation among interconnected networks of people, communities, and organizations enhanced by technology and mobility” (Tuten, 2021, p. 5). It is also described as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media enables brands and consumers to connect and engage with each other in real-time and directly compared to more traditional marketing communication tools. Besides this, it provides a cost-effective platform for brand promotion, making it a relevant marketing tool, especially for small and medium-sized companies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 67).

Finland’s most popular social media platforms are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Pinterest (Meltwater, 2023). These platforms allow companies to build brand awareness that fosters strong consumer-brand relationships (Aljuhmani et al., 2021, p. 1722). This is especially important for SME brands to remain competitive and grow (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015, p. 633). However, to utilize social media as an engagement tool, a marketing strategy must be organized and implemented effectively, combining social and brand marketing tactics and aiming for consistent communication and consumer engagement (Tuten, 2020, p. 112). Social media marketing offers various useful tools for brand marketing that can strengthen the relationship between the consumer and the company. These tools include effective word-of-mouth communication, special offers that boost sales, consumer relationship management, and data collection (Tuten, 2020, p. 112).

Consumer brand engagement (CBE) on social media is defined by Hollebeek et al. (2014, p. 154) as “a consumer’s positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interaction.” Consumer brand commitment can be categorized into three dimensions: cognitive processing, affection, and activation. The cognitive processing dimension, also known as the cognitive CBE dimension, refers to the processing and development of a consumer's brand-related

thoughts during a consumer/brand interaction. The second dimension, affection, or the emotional CBE dimension, refers to the extent of positive brand-related emotions a consumer experiences during a consumer/brand interaction. Lastly, the activation dimension, or the behavioral CBE dimension, encompasses the energy, effort, and time a consumer devotes to a brand during a consumer/brand interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154).

Figure 3 shows the multidimensional relationship model of consumer brand engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014) and illustrates the consumer brand engagement phenomenon that comprises cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Involvement acts as a precursor to CBE, and consumers' self-brand connection and brand usage intent represent key consequences of CBE. From the figure, it can be interpreted that if companies aim to reach consumers' self-brand connection and brand usage intent that comprises consumer loyalty component, they must focus on activities and tactics that include the three areas of CBE: affection, activation, and cognitive processing (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 13).

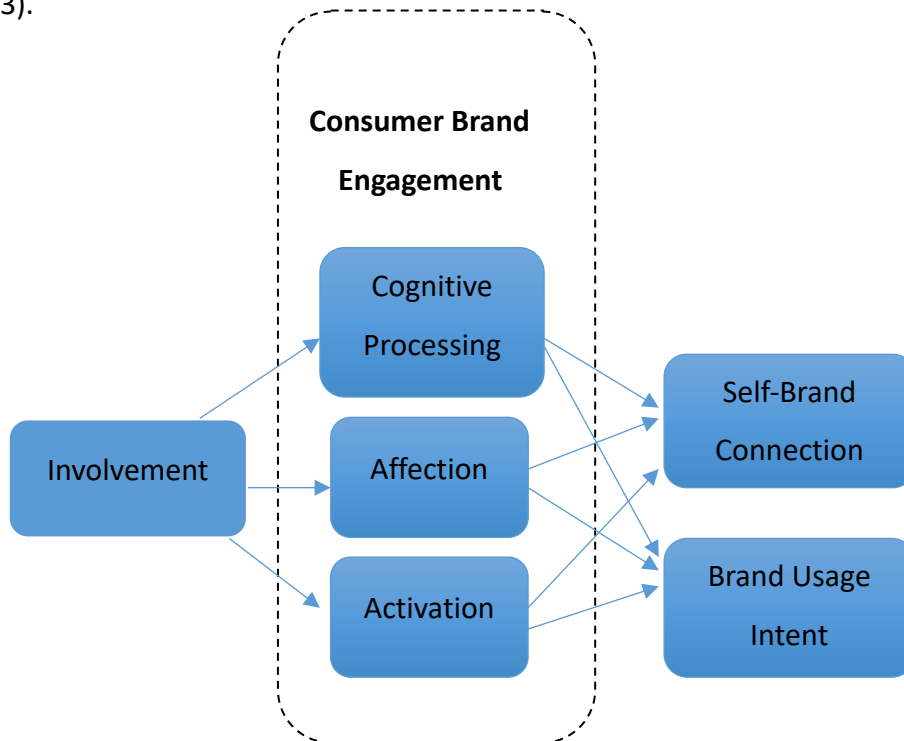


Figure 3. CBE relationship model (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 157).

Therefore, social media offers brands various ways to engage and interact with their customers. Consumers can engage with the brand by liking and commenting on social media posts and sending direct messages. With these functions, companies can efficiently respond to messages and interact closely with their consumers. Especially entertaining, current, and trendy content engages consumers and arouses brand engagement, strengthening the brand's equity (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 534). Social media channels also help companies understand their consumers better and receive important feedback that helps them develop their products and services. Moreover, consumers can easily find relevant information about the brand, which makes these platforms mutually beneficial for both the brands and consumers (Kabadayi & Price, 2014, p. 204). In the strategic aspect, brand interactivity is a powerful marketing strategy on social media that encourages consumers to create and share interactive brand content with others, which co-creates brand value on social media platforms and increases sales (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 534).

2.1.3 Consumer engagement in international markets and country of origin

The advancement of technology has led to higher competition across the global market and increased interaction with consumers worldwide. Therefore, companies must comprehend the behavioral patterns of their international consumer in order to maintain a strong engagement between consumers and the company (Gupta et al., 2018, p. 4).

In today's global and interconnected markets, the role of consumers has changed from passive receivers of products or services to active engagers interacting with brands, companies, and other stakeholders. This interaction significantly impacts the company's offering and value creation (Hollebeek et al., 2018, p. 330). For this reason, understanding consumers in international markets is emphasized even more, as it positively impacts customer lifetime value and company performance (Gupta et al., 2018, p. 4). Therefore, international companies need to emphasize consumer engagement in their international marketing strategy, as consumer engagement influences companies' success in global markets (Gupta et al., 2018, p. 13). Research has shown that the country of origin (COO)

plays a significant role in shaping consumers' perceptions and brand images when operating in the global market (Pappu et al., 2006, p. 967). This impact is known as the country-of-origin effect, which refers to a situation where the consumer's assessment changes due to the association between a product, service, or brand and a place (Andéhn et al., 2016, p. 225).

The country of origin creates a strong association with the brand, which affects the consumer's perception of the brand and how consumers see and evaluate the brand's products. Therefore, the brand's foreign name has a strategic effect on the consumer's view and evaluation of the products, as national and cultural stereotypes can bring country- and culture-related evaluations that affect the brand image and brand value (Leclerc et al., 1994 p. 263). Moreover, the country of origin affects consumers' purchase decisions, as associations related to countries determine consumers' probability of purchasing products (Magnusson et al., 2022, p. 916). Furthermore, international consumer engagement can benefit from brand associations with their country of origin, providing a competitive edge over competitors. The brand image and country of origin can influence consumer attitudes and behavior, creating powerful associations that help brands differentiate from competitors (Oduro et al., 2024, p. 109).

As companies expand their operations globally, it becomes increasingly important to maintain the "core essence of the brand" in international branding strategies. The brand's core essence refers to the brand's value, which consumers comprehend and appreciate (Pappu et al., 2006, p. 967). By considering diverse cultural and economic contexts, businesses can gain valuable insights from their international consumers and develop engagement strategies accordingly. This approach ensures that the brand resonates with consumers worldwide, contributing to the company's global success (Gupta et al., 2018, p. 4).

2.1.4 Consumer engagement marketing strategy

Over the years, the marketing environment has changed to one where the customer can influence more marketing functions than ever before, which changes the requirements for competitive success, where engagement has shifted an important part of the company's strategy (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 511). Consumer engagement marketing strategy is defined as "a firm's deliberate effort to motivate, empower, and measure a customer's voluntary contribution to the firm's marketing functions beyond the core economic transaction" (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 317). Consumer engagement marketing has several positive impacts that can benefit a company's performance. It can help the company achieve cost efficiency, customer-oriented product innovation, and better service quality. It also provides a more comprehensive understanding of the consumer and their satisfaction, which deepens their loyalty and improves the company's overall performance (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 313). Figure 4 presents the key constructs and relationships of consumer engagement marketing.

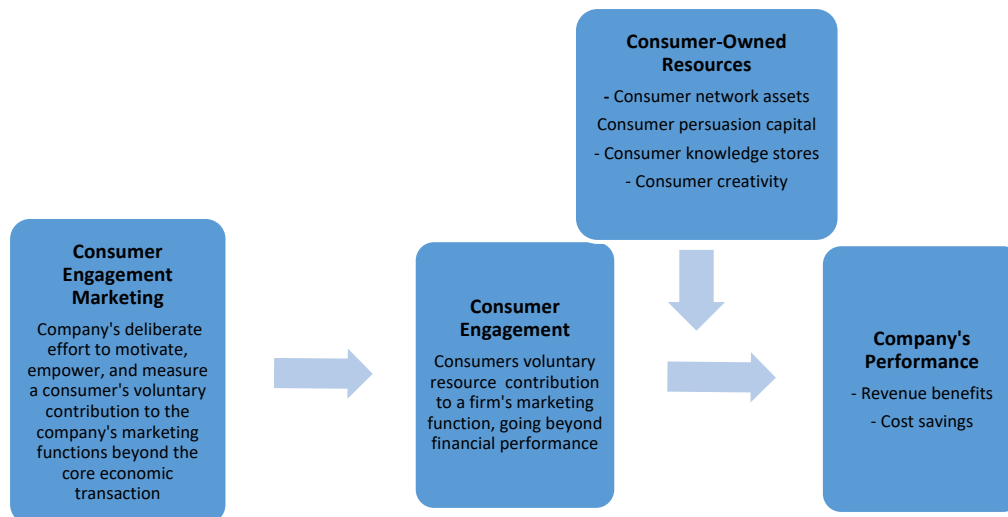


Figure. 4. Key constructs in consumer engagement marketing (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 314).

Therefore, social media platforms offer international SMEs an effective, consumer-engaging marketing strategy. Social media platforms provide essential engagement tools that help businesses establish customer relationships. Moreover, these platforms enable companies to communicate, converse, and engage with their target audience, fostering brand loyalty (Esalmi et al., 2022, p. 1). Consumer engagement marketing through social media aims to foster ongoing interaction between consumers and the brand, which can strengthen the consumer–brand relationship and increase their engagement with online content (Ashley & Tuten, 2015, p. 15). Moreover, social media provides a powerful marketing tool for building brands, engaging consumers, and developing unique customer relationships (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015, p. 636).

Social media marketing consists of four levels: the ability to connect, engage, coordinate, and collaborate in interaction with other stakeholders. SMEs can benefit from social media marketing by expanding their networks, engaging with consumers, improving customer engagement, and enhancing marketing outcomes (Drummond et al., 2020, p. 1250). Using social media in consumer engagement marketing is to connect with potential customers and assist them in their purchasing journey. This approach helps improve brand awareness, increase brand image and value, and encourage consumers to take action (Tuten, 2023, p. 25).

The first level, "connect," involves targeting and receiving specific messages to desired actors outside the company's networks. The connect function is strategically designed to expand networks, increase interaction with a broader audience, and reach potential customers. The goal is to personalize communication and develop interaction and engagement with the recipient (Drummond et al., 2020, p. 1250). These social media networks can increase the company's profitability and competitive advantage (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 316). The second level, "engage," refers to the ability to convey messages between current and future consumers. Engagement starts with a two-way conversation, where the interaction deepens into a deeper, more meaningful engagement (Drummond et al., 2020, p. 1250).

In addition, consumer feedback about the product can significantly influence consumers' binding purchase decisions, which makes consumer engagement an important asset in a company's social media engagement strategy (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 317). The third level, "coordinate," refers to the activities within the company and between stakeholders enabled by social media functions. Social media interaction on different platforms and functions can also be used to solve problems and as a resource to meet consumers' needs. The last fourth level, "collaborate," is creating and co-creating new activities and operating models between current and future consumers. Consumer relations have become more collaborative and engaged due to the influence of social media. Social media platforms can facilitate various forms of interaction, such as activities created in collaboration. In this way, a company can develop collaboration, innovation, and value creation with consumers using social media platforms (Drummond et al., 2020, p. 1251). Creative content generated by consumers can also inspire idea generation and offer insights into product innovations, which can help ensure the success of new products (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 317.) Furthermore, collaboration can facilitate the creation of new business networks, increasing the competitive advantage (Drummond et al., 2020, p. 1251).

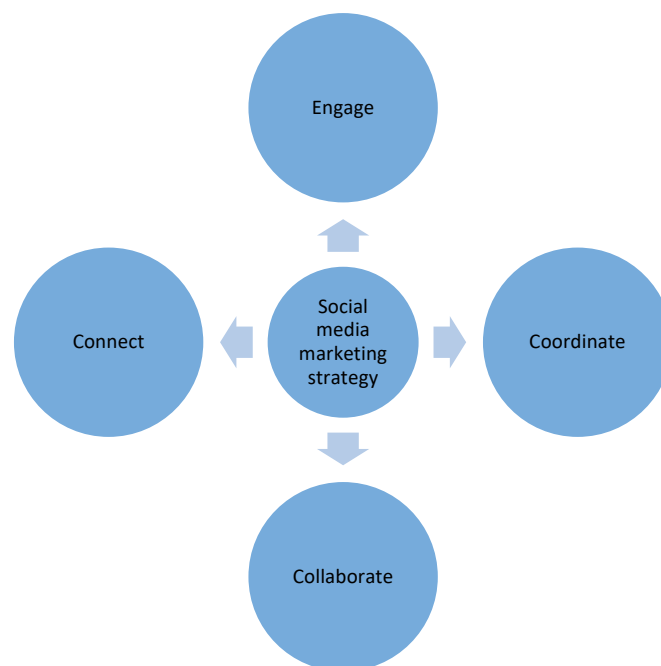


Figure 5. The four levels of social media engagement marketing.

2.2 Brand building as co-creation

Over time, the role of brands has changed from just a way to identify a company's products and services to a powerful tool in shaping customers' beliefs and actions. Brands now deliver functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits, becoming an important company asset and resource (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016, p. 93). As digitalization and the growing network economy evolve, it has become increasingly important for companies to interact and cooperate with others to enhance their efficiency and gain a competitive advantage in a highly competitive global environment. Especially for SMEs with limited resources, networks are important for branding and business growth as a brand orientation has a favorable market effect on business development (Mäläskä et al., 2011, p. 1144). Furthermore, consumers are no longer passive recipients of products but rather valuable sources of innovation who play a role in brand co-creation (Fueller, 2010, p. 98), influencing brand-building strategies.

Digitalization has transformed the way brand equity is perceived, and digital platforms have a central role in connecting and creating innovative experiences, as well as value, with consumers and other stakeholders (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016, pp. 93-94). This has also impacted consumers' role, which has transformed them into co-creators of the brand, and it has a significant impact on the brand's overall value. However, branding in SMEs differs from that in large companies. It relies on the principles of owners or managers, who are often entrepreneurial-oriented and have limited resources for brand planning (Odoom & Bedman, 2017, pp. 77-78). Moreover, branding is not considered a priority in SMEs, and its role is usually limited to the company's logo, product, service, or technology rather than being a strategic part of the overall branding of the company (Spense & Essoussi, 2010, p. 1038).

With the advancement of technology, branding has evolved from individual ownership to joint ownership. The easy availability of information and increased consumer engagement has allowed traditional brand owners, managers, and consumers to co-create

brand meanings and experiences. This co-creation process is essential for the international brand-building process as it helps shape the brand in a direction that interests consumers, which is critical for the brand's success as it strengthens the purchase decision (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 524). Furthermore, hyperconnectivity has made it possible for brands to expand beyond their geographical and social boundaries, which creates new opportunities for companies to expand the boundaries of the brand into new markets, which is especially beneficial for SMEs with smaller operating networks and resources. With the new operating environment, consumers and digital platforms participate in brand development, positively affecting brand value growth worldwide (Swaminathan et al., 2020, p. 24).

2.2.1 Brand value co-creation

The theory of brand co-creation emphasizes how consumers actively participate in creating brand experiences, leading to successful innovations and new business opportunities (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2019, pp. 585-586). The modern economy has brought new challenges to consumers and companies. The emerging market economy has brought consumers more choices than ever before. However, they are less satisfied, while companies have more strategic decisions than ever before, yet they produce less value. For this complex challenge, the company needs to modify the traditional approach to creating brand value and move towards a new approach where consumers become part of the brand creation process. This requires a new value-creation framework focusing on creating unique value with consumers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 4).

The movement towards co-creation represents a significant shift in the traditional value-creation process. In the past, companies had clear roles as producers, and consumers had clear roles as buyers. However, consumers are taking on a more active role, blurring the distinction between producers and consumers. As a result, consumers are becoming increasingly involved in defining and creating brand value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 5). This allows companies to create valuable experiences with consumers, which can lead to successful outcomes (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016, pp. 93-94).

This co-creation process is accelerated by technological advancements, especially social media platforms, which allow consumers to participate in the interaction between the brand and consumers (Vallaster & Von Wallpach, 2013, p. 1505). Consumers are an important source of competitive advantage because they generate financial benefits, protect from crises, and contribute to companies' survival. Therefore, building strong and positive relationships and involving consumers in the brand-creation process with their consumers can gain a competitive edge in the market, creating brand value (Viglia et al., 2018, p. 404).

Social media platforms enable consumers to interact with companies in a new interactive way, adding value to the deep bond between consumers and companies. As consumers' roles have changed, their part in various business activities has increased, including product design, development, marketing, and sales. Consumers' co-creation contribution affects the common desired outcome and offers multiple benefits to the company's operations (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 5).

Consumer involvement in co-creating value for a brand can offer various advantages to the company. These benefits include outcomes for both the company and the brand, such as brand experience, awareness, productivity, and efficiency (Kennedy & Guzman, 2016, p. 319). Furthermore, consumers can influence other consumers' perceptions, which increases consumer empowerment (Black & Veloutsou, 2017, p. 417). In addition, the role of consumers in co-creating a brand also impacts consumer loyalty. Therefore, companies need to pay close attention to customer feedback, consider their opinions, and ensure that the brand remains strong and trustworthy among consumers (Sarkar & Banerjee, 2019, p. 586).

The success of a company's value co-creation process depends on the quality of co-creation experiences, which in turn requires a unique infrastructure explicitly designed for co-creation. Companies need to create environments that facilitate versatile and inno-

vative co-creation. This involves developing a flexible network that allows people to create and personalize their experiences. This, in turn, builds unique experiences, increasing the brand's value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 6).

Figure 6 presents a framework for brand value creation, where the brand value is co-created with consumers. In the premise phase, the company determines to create brand value with consumers based on co-creation experiences. The implication phase of co-creating a brand value is based on various unique experiences, where customer-company interaction is the locus of value co-creation. In the manifestation phase, the focus is on the quality of co-creation between customers and the company. Therefore, the company should concentrate on developing innovative experiences and network infrastructure that enables the co-creation of the company's brand value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, pp. 4-6).

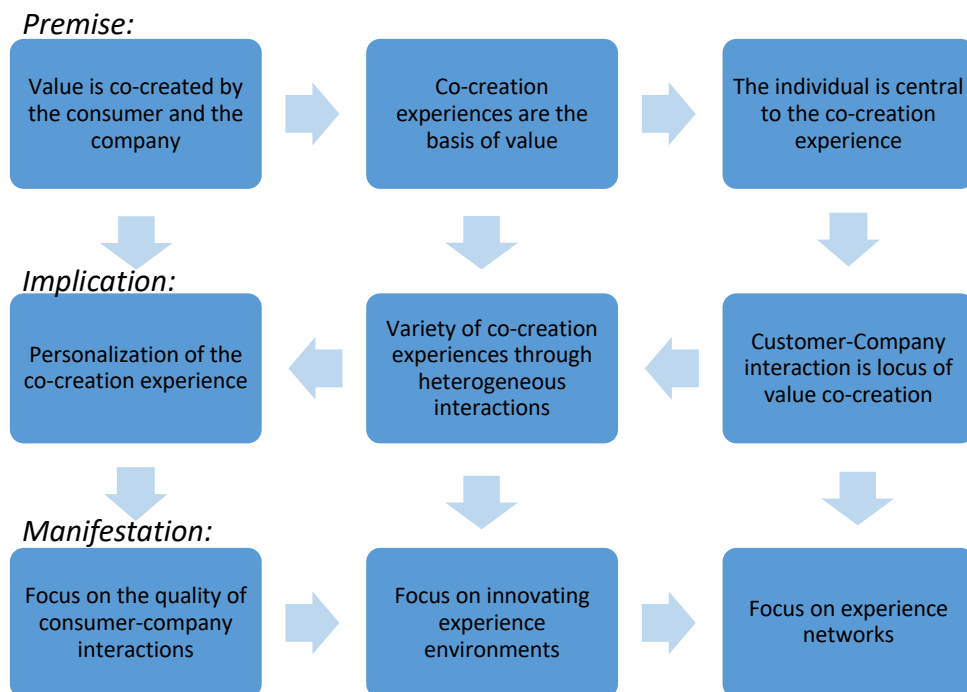


Figure 6. Framework for brand value co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 5).

2.2.2 Branding in international SMEs

Branding plays a significant role in international marketing, offering companies opportunities to compete and grow globally (Odoom & Bedman, 2017, p. 68). According to Urde (1994, p. 18), brand orientation in strategy formation emphasizes the importance of brands as central factors. In this approach, companies view the brand as an essential element in strategy forming, which can lead to increased profitability, competition, and growth. Furthermore, Wong and Merrilee's research (2007, p. 401) on international brand marketing states that brand orientation and repositioning are essential aspects of developing successful international marketing strategies and achieving higher international performance.

Brand orientation is a strategic decision that determines a company's competitive advantage. It has been found that a brand-oriented approach can have a positive impact on a company's performance (Ying Wong & Merrilees, 2005, p. 160). Developing brands from a global perspective brings opportunities to take advantage of economies of scale, reach new markets, and target multiple market segments (Wong & Merrilees, 2007, p. 386). In the international brand orientation, the "think globally, act locally" approach is advantageous for companies aiming for international markets. This approach requires adapting marketing strategies to match the unique characteristics of different external environments. This implies that a single approach cannot fit all markets. Therefore, the international marketing strategy must be adapted to fit the characteristics of different external environments to appeal to international consumers (Wong & Merrilees, 2007, p. 386).

Brand repositioning is an international branding strategy used to adjust a domestic brand's market position to meet the needs and preferences of its foreign consumers. This strategy helps distinguish foreign markets based on competition, consumer needs, and channel structures. A change in psychological aspects is required to achieve brand repositioning, which involves creating and positioning the brand in a way that appeals to the target consumers' minds (Wong & Merrilees, 2007, p. 387).

In SMEs, brand building heavily relies on the entrepreneur's vision and ability to create a brand identity. The brand identity summarizes what the brand represents and forms a relationship with consumers through repeated interaction (Kusi et al., 2021, p. 2). In SMEs, the brand's value is based on the associations and personality of the entrepreneur, as entrepreneurs play a key role in shaping and representing the brand's identity (Ojansalo et al., 2008, p. 95). This gives SMEs an edge in brand management compared to larger companies, as they can integrate different areas of the organization into the entire branding process, allowing for flexible and quick decision-making. The marketing and communication goals of SMEs are twofold. SMEs' marketing activities aim to create brand awareness and increase turnover simultaneously. This means that the importance of sales is emphasized in all aspects of branding (Ojasalo et al., 2008, p. 96).

Moreover, brand building and reputation are usually the entrepreneur's responsibility in SMEs because they create the organizational culture and brand identity, which inevitably develops around the founder's personality. This means that entrepreneurs have to be mindful of their brand image and reputation since it can significantly impact the success of their business (Spence & Essoussi, 2008, pp. 1039-1041).

In international brand marketing, SMEs have to change their marketing strategies to adapt to the global market. To build and manage influential brands, SMEs need to be more creative and focus on the strong associations created by their brand (Spence & Essoussi, 2008, p. 1041). Figure 7 presents the international brand marketing strategy developed by Wong and Merrilees (2007, p. 388). This figure shows how a company's environment consists of physical, social, cultural, and technological factors that impact the creation of an international marketing strategy. Cultural factors have a structural influence on behavioral factors like brand repositioning, brand orientation, marketing strategy, and marketing operations management. Whereas the operational factors affect the brand and financial performance (Wong & Merrilees, 2007, p. 387). The strategy adopted is based on the company's resources and capabilities, which can be leveraged to gain a competitive advantage. This approach, also known as the resource-

based perspective, which considers the company's physical and intangible resources that can be used to create a competitive edge. To succeed in the international market, a company needs to use its existing resources while simultaneously acquiring new ones. However, the value of a company's resources and capabilities in increasing its competitive advantage largely depends on how well it can adapt to the external environment (Wong & Merrilees, 2007, p. 387).



Figure 7. Model of international branding strategy (Merrilees & Wong, 2007, p. 388).

2.2.3 Brand co-creation in social media

Consumers have a significant impact on the success of brands in today's market environment, mainly because they can influence how other consumers perceive them on various social media platforms. Therefore, it is essential to take into account the role of social media in brand co-creation. Brand co-creation refers to the company's and its customers' joint efforts in creating brand value (Kamboj et al., 2018, p. 169). Social media platforms provide an avenue for interaction between the consumer and the company, during which the customer's brand experience creates the brand. This makes brand co-creation crucial in today's brand building, as it helps to build a strong relationship between the company and its customers. In addition, it enables the company to gain insights into customer preferences and needs, resulting in better products and services (France et al., 2015, p. 849).

Social media has opened up new channels for communication and interaction, providing opportunities for customer engagement and value co-creation (Kamboj et al., 2018, p. 169). Nowadays, most brands have social media accounts on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter (now known as X), TikTok, and Snapchat, enabling them to reach and engage with different customer segments directly in real time (Search Engine Journal, 2023). Brands that are not active on social media may be seen as out of touch with consumer engagement and branding, underscoring the importance of social media in today's branding environment (Hershberger, 2013).

According to research, social media is the most effective way to establish relationships with consumers (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 329). Brands should engage in two-way communication with their audience on social media to attract their attention and encourage them to participate in conversations. These social media channels provide consumers with more opportunities to have conversations with brands, which increases their sense of connection (Vallaster & Von Wallpach, 2013, p. 1507). By sharing brand-related information, these online platforms also enhance transparency, potentially attracting consumers who were previously uninterested in the brand.

Research shows that using content generated through automation in social media can reduce consumer interest by as much as 70%. Therefore, brands should concentrate on producing relevant content for their audience and involving them in the creation process. This approach will increase engagement and result in positive word-of-mouth for the brand. This makes social media a cost-effective and efficient channel for building relationships, fostering loyalty, and boosting engagement with the brand (Hersberger, 2013).

Consumer engagement in co-creating brands on social media platforms can greatly benefit companies. This engagement can provide companies with valuable insights into consumers' needs, wants, and preferences for the brand, which can help improve their products and services. Moreover, it allows companies to gain recognition and generate consumer interest in their products and/or services through the information consumers share on social media (Kamboj et al., 2018, pp. 171-172). Social media platforms like Facebook offer opportunities for brands to engage with their current and potential customers, thereby increasing their value. Engagement can take various forms, such as liking and commenting on the brands' social media pages. Facebook has become an essential platform for brand co-creation and marketing, as it allows for direct interaction with consumers and provides a discussion forum for them to get information and give feedback easily. Therefore, it is essential for companies to understand consumer behavior and develop products and services that meet their needs (Kabadayi & Price, 2014, pp. 203–204).

Social media offers several important benefits to companies in brand co-creation, but it also comes with risks. Negative comments or reviews on social media platforms can spread quickly and harm the company's reputation among other social media users. Therefore, the biggest challenge for companies using social media is to develop appropriate strategies that can handle negative communication situations effectively and prevent them from damaging the relationship between consumers and the company. Companies need to respond to such situations promptly and in a neutral manner so that the problem does not escalate and negatively impact the company's brand image and sales (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 332).

2.2.4 Country of origin in branding

International companies are always looking for ways to remain competitive in the market. One way to achieve this is by making their brands stand out and increasing their value. This can be affected by the company's country of origin (COO). The COO effect has a central part in international brand marketing, as it affects how consumers perceive the brand. The way consumers perceive the COO can have a positive or negative impact on the brand. If the COO is perceived positively, consumers are more likely to be willing to pay a higher price for the products, which in turn allows the company to charge a premium price (Götze & Brunner, 2019, p. 291). Moreover, consumers are increasingly concerned about brands' ecological responsibility and ethical aspects in today's global market (Creamedia, 2022). Therefore, companies need to integrate these dimensions into their international branding strategy, as the country of origin impacts the brand's image, which is a valuable asset for companies (Pecotich & Ward, 2007, p. 274).

According to Ahmed and d'Astous (1996, p. 93), research on the COO affects consumers' perceptions of brand image and value. Therefore, an international brand must maintain its unique identity to differentiate from competitors and influence consumer purchasing decisions (Ahmed & d'Astous, 1996, p. 112). The brand's COO can give the company a competitive advantage that is difficult for competitors to copy. However, the effects of COO on sales and product evaluation may vary depending on consumer trust in the brand. For example, sensitive consumers may prefer to choose products from familiar domestic companies, which may be influenced by brand familiarity, ecological reasons, and quality (Volles et al., 2016, p. 206). Moreover, the brand's country of origin has become increasingly important for companies today as they have started to invest more in corporate social responsibility and sustainable development to enhance their reputation and brand image (Cowan & Guzman, 2020, p. 683). Furthermore, with growing issues of climate change and overconsumption-related consumption aspects, consumers are becoming more interested in sustainability drivers, such as companies' social and environmental values (Iannuzzi, 2018, p. 17).

2.3 Theoretical framework

Figure 8 outlines the research framework for SME international brand building, which consists of three stages: premise, implications, and outcomes. The premise stage is based on four key areas: social media, consumer engagement, country of origin, and international brand. These four areas form the basis for the successful development of an international brand-building strategy and provide a strong foundation for building an international brand.

In the premise phase, social media platforms offer businesses an excellent opportunity to interact with consumers (Bruhn et al., 2012; Tuten, 2023; Masa'deh et al., 2021). Companies can gain valuable experience and develop activities that strengthen consumer-brand relationships by creating interactions. According to research (France et al., 2015, p. 849; Cheung et al., 2020, p. 524), building strong consumer-brand relationships is an essential part of growing a business. Therefore, it is important that companies prioritize building a strong international brand identity when expanding into international markets. This requires understanding the brand's country of origin, which can help give the company a competitive advantage and improve its brand image among foreign consumers (Pecotich & Ward, 2007, p. 274; Oduro et al., 2024, p. 109). Expanding into international markets can provide companies with new sources of income, valuable networking opportunities, and other benefits (Odoom & Bedman, 2017, p. 68).

After the premise phase, the implication phase focuses on co-creating the brand as the primary objective of building an international brand based on the four key concepts from the premise phase. During this phase, it is crucial for the company to cooperate with consumers in the brand co-creation process. Consumers play a significant role in the international brand-building process, and considering their role is essential for the company to achieve its desired goals (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 524; Sarkar & Banerjee, 2019, pp. 585-586).

The final stage of the framework involves achieving critical goals through co-creation. This phase is called the outcomes phase. The goals to be achieved include improving the brand's value, increasing consumer loyalty, enhancing global brand performance, raising awareness, and boosting sales growth. The strategy of brand co-creation involves an active collaboration between the company and consumers to co-create a brand that succeeds in international markets. This approach aims to make consumers an integral part of the brand development process and utilize their input to achieve the goals for the brand's success. (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016, pp. 93-94; Viglia et al., 2018, p. 404; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 5; Kennedy & Guzman, 2016, p. 319).

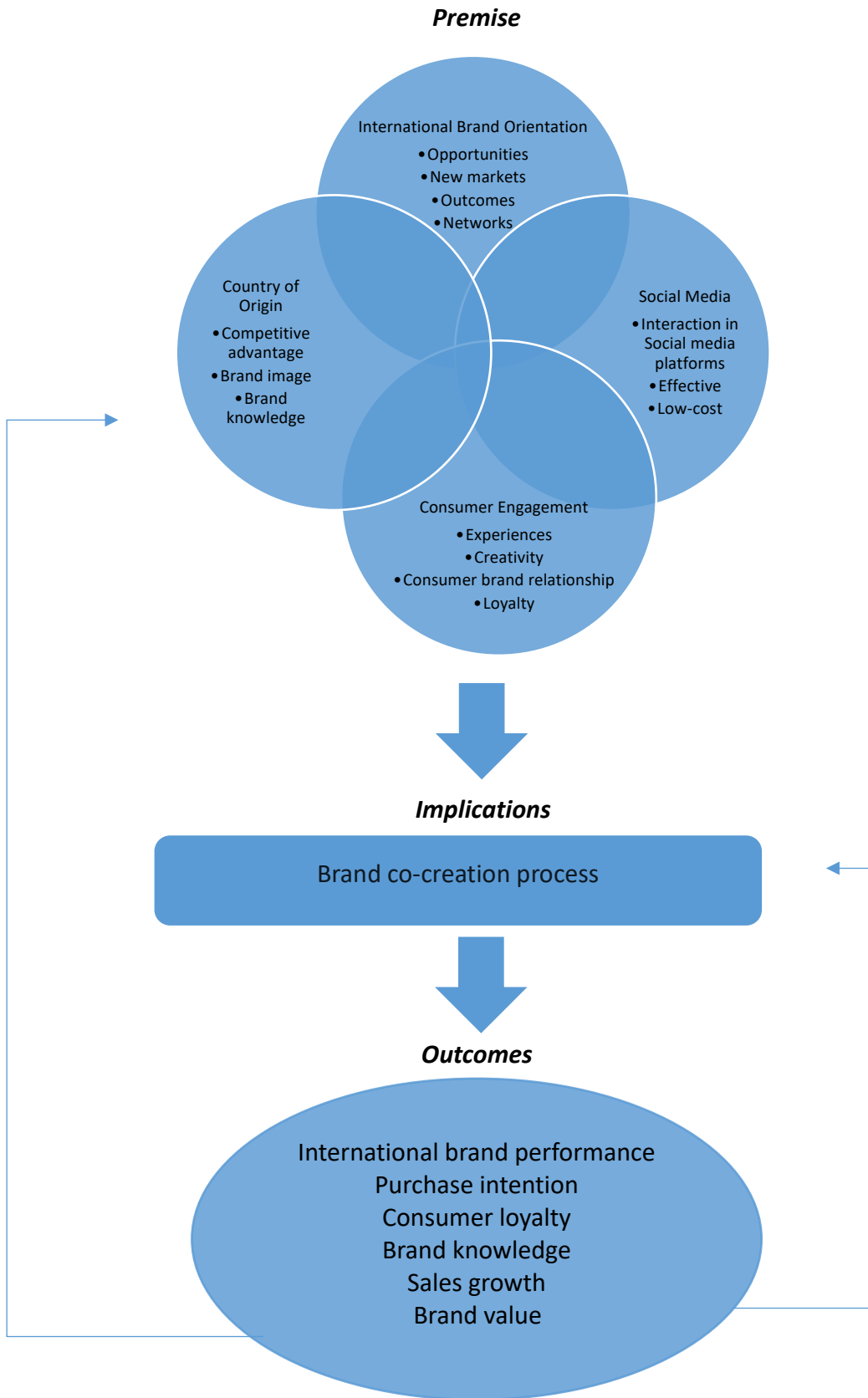


Figure 8. International brand-building framework.

3 Research methodology

This chapter is about the qualitative research methodology used in the study. It begins by introducing the research design and the methods that were implemented. Next, the data collection and analysis process will be discussed, followed by a presentation of the study's validity and reliability. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of four case companies.

3.1 Research design

A research design can be described as a "research onion," where each layer is closely related to the others. The onion's core represents the research design, and the other layers are built around it. The research onion consists of six layers: philosophy, research approach, methodology, strategy, time horizon and procedures and techniques (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 176-177).

The research philosophy presents the researcher's beliefs and assumptions about knowledge development (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 131). The research philosophy used in this study is interpretivism, which seeks to gain a profound and comprehensive understanding of social contexts and the world around us. This philosophy is based on people's perceptions of various phenomena that shape their meanings. By investigating the experiences and perspectives of individuals, this research methodology offers insights into organizational realities (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 150-151). This research aims to understand how consumer engagement impacts international brand-building through social media. Therefore, gathering individual opinions on the subject is crucial, as brand-building with consumers is based on the relationship between consumers and the company.

The research approach is often divided into two opposing approaches to reasoning: deductive and inductive. Deductive reasoning is when a conclusion is derived from premises based on a theory. In contrast, inductive reasoning involves a gap in the argument between the conclusion and the observed premises, where the conclusion is considered

to be supported by the observations made in the research (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 154). For this thesis, an inductive approach is used, as the aim is to generate knowledge about the impact of consumer engagement on international brand building through social media by using existing theories and conducting interviews. This approach allows the researcher to participate in the situations that are the subject of the study and analyze how people and groups define the meaning of the topic under study. The theories that emerge from the observed phenomena function as meaning-creating tools in the research process. This approach is often used in case studies (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008).

The research methodology provides the approach that directs the research. It can be categorized into qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. The research approach used in this thesis is qualitative research, which involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 181). A qualitative research method is an approach that enables researchers to examine people's experiences by using various research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, content analysis, visual methods, and life histories or biographies. This method allows researchers to understand better research participants' experiences and their interpretations of behavior, events, or objects. The primary objective of qualitative research is to comprehend or interpret phenomena based on the meanings people attribute to them (Hennik, 2020, p. 10).

In order to gain a better understanding of how Finnish SMEs co-create brands with consumers through social media in international markets, the qualitative research method has been chosen for this thesis. To comprehend this phenomenon, it is essential to research how case companies engage consumers on social media channels, which is the key to creating a strong international brand (Kumar & Pansari, 2016, p. 502; France et al., 2006, p. 119). The study will be conducted through semi-structured interviews that align with the research question and objectives of the study. SMEs are an important part of the Finnish business environment, and unlike larger companies, they do not typically have an established brand-building model that can be applied universally. Moreover,

branding in SMEs is often based on the owner's principles, which is why the qualitative research method supports this research angle.

The research purpose can be classified into five categories: exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, evaluative, or a combination of these (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 180). This thesis will conduct exploratory and explanatory studies. Exploratory research is used to discover and ask questions about what is happening. This type of research is helpful when there is not enough information about the phenomenon (Gray, 2021, p. 38). It aims to investigate the understanding of a question, problem, or phenomenon where the general question is "what" or "how." Exploratory research is flexible and adaptable to change throughout the research process until the researcher can build conclusions from the material and critically evaluate the research (Puusa et al., 2020). Whereas explanatory research investigates causal relationships between variables to understand a situation or problem and explain the connection between them (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 180).

This thesis explains the relationship between consumer engagement and social media in international brand-building. Therefore, it is an explanatory study as it examines the relationship between variables (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 181). By exploring the relationship between variables, the thesis aims to provide an explanation for the research question. The research methodology involves interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the topic, making the research exploratory. The research data is collected to understand the importance of consumer engagement in building an international brand and how Finnish-based SME's social media marketing engages consumers in co-creating the brand. Therefore, this thesis provides both exploratory and explanatory perspectives.

The *research strategy* refers to the chosen approach that ensures the research questions are answered and the research objectives are achieved while maintaining consistency in the research design. The most commonly used research strategies in business studies are experiment, survey, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, archival, case

study, and action research (Saunders, 2023, p. 191). A case study is an in-depth investigation of a specific case, organization, or individual used to analyze and understand the subject of the study (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 206). A case study involves collecting information from various sources, such as archives, surveys, interviews, visual methods, and participant observation. This information is then analyzed to draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the findings. This thesis is a case study, as it requires a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon that can only be derived from interviews with four case companies. However, some researchers do not consider the case study approach reliable, objective, or legitimate because it can be difficult to generalize the findings from a specific case, and the process can be time-consuming, leading to a large amount of documentation (Gray, 2021, pp. 286-288). According to Saunders et al. (2023, p. 208), case study structures can be categorized as single or multiple cases. In this study, four Finnish SME case companies were interviewed, making it a multiple-case study. Using multiple cases allows the researcher to combine and compare the findings from the case study companies, which provides strong support for the theoretical foundations on which these research findings are based. For this reason, case studies are likely to produce more evidence, although each case study approach has a different purpose (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 209).

The *time horizon* of the research can be either cross-sectional or longitudinal (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 212). Cross-sectional research involves a particular phenomenon at a particular time. On the other hand, longitudinal studies mean that the research takes a longer time, which allows the research to change and develop during that time (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 213). This research has a cross-sectional time horizon because it focuses on a specific phenomenon at a particular time. Furthermore, due to the time constraints of the master's project, this process must be completed within a specific time frame, making the cross-sectional time horizon an appropriate method for this research. Additionally, the study is a case study that is based on interviews conducted with case companies over a short time period.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The research material consists of primary and secondary data. This study's primary data is collected from case company interviews and observations. Primary data refers to information collected by a researcher specifically for a research project that answers the research question and meets the objectives (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 360), while secondary data refers to information collected by someone else (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 342). This data can be surveys, documents, or multiple sources. Using secondary data saves resources compared to collecting primary data, as it is already collected by someone else (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 345-358). However, there are disadvantages to using secondary data as the data is collected for different purposes, which may not align with the research question and objectives. Additionally, the data may have been collected years ago, making it less relevant than the primary data (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 360). Moreover, secondary data is influenced by the purpose for which it was collected, so it must be carefully analyzed before being used as a research source (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 362).

The secondary data used in this thesis is collected from case companies' social media channels and web pages, supporting the research question and objectives. To ensure the quality of primary and secondary data, trustworthy data sources from academic sources or reliable websites have been utilized. The interviews were held in Microsoft Teams. Before the interview, the research topic was thoroughly familiarized to ensure the best possible starting point for data collection and upcoming data analysis.

Interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 442). For my thesis, I have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews because it aligns with the research theme and has a more open approach. Semi-structured interviews enable the interviewer to delve deeper into the answers, which is important in comprehending respondents' significance to different phenomena (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 86). It also allows interviewees to elaborate and expand on their responses (Saunders et al., 2023, p. 315). The semi-structured interview questions are the same for

all the case companies. However, the interviewees can respond to them in their own words (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2022). The semi-structured interview is also known as a theme interview. This means that the interview is based on specific key themes selected in advance, and detailed questions are asked to find meaningful answers to the purpose of the research question, research objectives, and the research phenomena (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, p. 86). For this research, the themes include consumer engagement, social media, brand building as co-creation, and international aspects, such as the country of origin and international markets.

This case study consists of interviews with international fashion, design, and beauty companies. These companies use direct-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) strategies for marketing and sales. Three case companies are categorized as B2C, meaning they focus on consumers rather than other companies. One of the case companies has a business-to-business (B2B) approach, meaning it focuses on other companies. Even though this company has a B2B approach, it still emphasizes consumer engagement as part of its marketing operations.

The purpose of the study is to understand how consumer engagement on social media impacts the process of building an international brand. Therefore, the research focuses on consumer-oriented companies that use social media. In addition, the research concentrates on Finnish-based small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) that operate locally and internationally. SMEs are a significant part of the Finnish economy (OECD, 2022), which gives the study an important economic perspective. Besides, previous research has shown that brand-building in SMEs differs from that of larger companies, as the branding of SMEs is mainly based on the principles of their owners and managers. These principles are often influenced by their entrepreneurial orientation, which results in minimal brand planning and limited resources (Odoom & Bedman, 2017, pp. 78-79). This provides an interesting insight into the researched topic. Moreover, the case companies operate in similar industries, making the research more precise and the results more

comparable. This will provide a better understanding of how social media engagement affects international brand building in SMEs.

Social media was used to contact the case companies selected for the study. Three out of four were reached through social media, and one company was found through university contacts. However, it was challenging to find research companies, and this took a surprising amount of time. This was because not all Finnish companies have international operations or use social media, even though they are mostly SMEs. To make the research more reliable, the aim was to find as many companies operating in the same fields as possible, which made finding companies even more challenging and time-consuming.

The interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, which was also used to send out interview invitations. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams' transcription tool to ensure all information was received. Furthermore, notes were taken during the interview to document the most significant points. One hour was set aside for the interviews, but the first interview was too long, taking one hour and 15 minutes. After that, the questions were further specified and combined so that the hour reserved for the interview would be more sufficient for the other interviews. The research questions were sent in advance to the interview participants by e-mail, so they had a more accurate understanding of the research content and the questions to be asked.

Qualitative data analysis is the process of organizing qualitative information into meaningful categories based on a theoretical framework. This helps to systematically and accurately study and analyze the collected data. However, it is important to create coherent categories to provide a well-structured analytical framework (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 479-480). Qualitative data analysis involves selecting specific data units, such as words, transcript lines, sentences, paragraphs, or other textual data for analysis. This action consists of associating the data units to previously created categories. It may also

include creating tables or figures to help display the data. In recognizing relationships and developing categories, the researcher engages in the process of analyzing the data. The analysis continues with the search for key themes, patterns, or relationships in the rearranged data. This may lead to revising the categories and rearranging the data until the desired outcome is achieved (Saunders et al., 2023, pp. 480-482).

In this thesis, the data has been analyzed by identifying and sorting themes that are central to the research presented in Chapter 2.3 - the theoretical framework. Themes were identified from each interview transcript using color codes, which accelerated and facilitated the analysis and processing of the material. Additionally, the color codes have made it easier to identify different themes from the lengthy, over 20-page transcripts. Different tables have also been used in the analysis to provide a more precise overview to the reader. The analysis involved comparing the consumer engagement of case companies, social media marketing activities, international brand orientation, and brand co-creation between consumers and brands and utilizing the research theory to gain a comprehensive understanding of the consumer engagement of case companies in building an international brand. Finally, the study's results have been compiled into a conclusion that answers the research questions and objectives.

3.3 Trustworthiness of the study

The trustworthiness of research is evaluated by applying the criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which focuses on four main aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ensure research findings are *credible*, pro-longed engagement with the phenomena in the field over an extended period allows the researcher to understand the phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302). This process helps identify possible sources of distortion and ensures complete visibility of the situation. Some ways to achieve credibility are persistent observation and the technique of triangulation of data using various sources and methods, peer debriefing to maintain honesty, and developing and testing the emerging design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 304-305; Schwandt et al., 2007, pp. 18-19).

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a research study can be applied to other contexts and situations. However, it is impossible to transform these findings in this type of research, as the researcher can only present the findings obtained in a specific time and context. The researcher's responsibility is to provide the data that allows others to judge the transferability of the findings should they wish to use some or all of them elsewhere (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of data over a period and the conditions under which the study was conducted. The dependability can be demonstrated using techniques that ensure high-quality research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 316-317). Lastly, *confirmability* refers to the extent to which the findings can be confirmed or repeated. Objectivity is crucial in maintaining unbiased and accurate results throughout the research process (Connelly, 2016).

For this thesis, the research's credibility is based on a thoroughly researched theory that forms the body of the interview. Before the interview, the questions were sent to the interviewees in advance, allowing them time to become familiar with the topic and prepare their answers. The interview was recorded and saved using the Teams transcript function to ensure the accuracy of the information gathered for the study. Additionally, important observations were noted down during the interview.

The transformability of this study is influenced by the backgrounds and operations of the four international Finnish SMEs on which it is based. Therefore, it may only apply to certain companies. Moreover, there are variations between the companies as some are more focused on internationalization than others, while some are in the early stages of expanding their operations. Also, one of the case companies under analysis is a micro company, which sets it apart from the other companies. This difference in size may impact the cross-case analysis, as the company's operations may not be comparable to the other companies.

Additionally, the companies operate primarily in the B2C sector, while one operates in the B2B sector. This creates differences in the interpretation of the responses and perspectives, as the study only partially targets consumers and also applies to companies. Furthermore, the study is limited to the social media channels that the case companies use, so it cannot be generalized to all social media channels. Furthermore, in the analysis, direct quotes from the interviewees are utilized and presented to analyze the researched topic, allowing the study data to potentially be used for other studies while considering the specific time and context.

The study's dependability is ensured by conducting interviews at a specific time and using various aids for recording, such as the phone's recording function, Microsoft Teams' transcript function, and notes and observations. However, the research focuses on the company's current situation, which means that the results cannot be generalized because they are greatly influenced by the company's background information, such as its financial situation and size. Additionally, the interviewees may have varied interpretations of the interview questions, which could impact research outcomes and hinder cross-company analysis. Also, the researcher's interpretation of the answers can differ from the interviewees', which could affect the study's results.

Nevertheless, research findings are valuable for understanding how consumer engagement impacts SMEs' international brand-building on social media. The results can also benefit other SMEs planning to expand internationally or SMEs that are not currently active on social media or are still in the process of building an international brand. In addition to this, the research interview was conducted in the native language of the interviewed companies, i.e., Finnish, which may affect the English translations made by the researcher.

The study's confirmability can be partially established by examining the company's social media activities and the information gathered, supporting the study's findings. However, the research cannot be fully replicated as social media channels and related activities

are always active, making the research less reliable. Nonetheless, the data obtained from the support represents the current state of the company's operations. Therefore, the information gathered from the research should be viewed with the understanding that the brand is continuously evolving and influenced by social media impacts, trends, and the general economic situation on an international level. The case companies wished to remain anonymous, so they are listed in the study as Case Companies A, B, C, and D.

Table 1 below presents the empirical data collected from interviews to ensure clarity for the reader. The table includes the interviewee's title, interview date, interview duration, number of transcribed pages, implementation channel of the interview, and other relevant secondary data used in the study.

Table 1. Empirical data collection.

Company	Title of the interviewee	Date of the interview	Length of the interview	Transcribed pages	Channel	Secondary-data
Case Company A	Consumer engagement manager	10.4.2024	1h 15 min	64 pages	Microsoft Teams	Social media channels and web pages
Case Company B	Head of marketing and communications	16.4.2024	41 min	42 pages	Microsoft Teams	Social media channels and web pages
Case Company C	Ecommerce specialist, Owner	17.4.2024	21 min	22 pages	Microsoft Teams	Social media channels and web pages
Case Company D	Founder	18.4.2024	26 min	26 pages	Microsoft Teams	Social media channels and web pages

4 Findings

This chapter presents the research findings to address the research questions and objectives. The research is based on interviews conducted with four Finnish companies and utilizes secondary data to present the information comprehensively using various data sources, including the company's website and social media channels. The participants are company owners or employees closely involved in the company's customer engagement and social media marketing.

First, the analysis presents the findings of each case company based on the theoretical framework. Then, a cross-case analysis is conducted to identify similarities or differences between them. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of the findings presented in Table 2.

4.1 Case Company A

Company A is a jewelry manufacturing company from Helsinki, Finland. It designs, manufactures, and markets gold, silver, and bronze jewelry under its brand. The company is the largest in its field in Finland and one of the largest in the Nordic countries. Its turnover was 9,880,000 euros in 2023, and it employs 74 people. The company has a long history and was founded in the 1930s. It is owned by a cultural organization founded by women.

The company has been conducting international operations since the early 2000s. However, it has no physical stores outside of Finland. In 2019, the company's new CEO and strategy led to the shutdown of its international business based on the agent model, which was deemed unprofitable. Instead, the company focused on direct-to-consumer trade, particularly online sales, to achieve international growth. The company engages in small-scale international trade with central Europe, Sweden, and the United States. The company's largest market is currently Finland, and it has recently expanded into new

international markets. The company decided to focus on the Japanese market, particularly in Tokyo. They chose this area because Finnish culture is popular in Japan, and there is a lot of potential for Finnish products in the market. The Japanese market is currently the second largest market for the company. Additionally, there are expected to be new market openings in the near future.

The company has a small marketing team due to its SME background, meaning the interviewee has a diverse job description. The interviewee's position in the company is a consumer engagement manager, and she has been there for almost half a year. Her primary role involves managing the company's social media channels, strategically planning content creation, designing and producing newsletters, and managing marketing automation. Additionally, she is responsible for influencer marketing, supporting the PR person with marketing matters, events, image and content production, and copywriting.

4.1.1 Company's premise stage in international brand building

Consumer engagement

Consumer engagement is at the center of the company's strategy, as the interviewee stated: *"Without the engaged consumers, there will be no revenue, and the company has high expectations to grow internationally. This is why I was hired for the position of consumer engagement manager. The company needed more support for social media and customer path planning, content planning, and implementation that answers and serves our consumers. So, in short, consumers and their engagement are at the very core and an essential part of our strategy"*.

Consumer engagement is maintained with a thoughtfully planned continuous content strategy. The interviewee states, *"Everything is done with the finger on the pulse, and we strive to create and deliver relevant content. We have carefully selected key messages that we want to convey and aim to engage our customers with them."*

Consumer engagement has an impact on the brand strategy and its jewelry collections. According to the interviewee, the brand is currently in a transition and brand renewal phase, where consumer engagement is sought with modern jewelry sets and older collections. The interviewee stated, *“We want to renew the brand, but we do not want to forget anyone, and it can be seen in our jewelry collections as well.”*

Social media

The company’s most important social media channel is Instagram, where they post and create content at a specific frequency, at least five times per week. Due to the channel’s growth and functionality, the company wants to be active and post frequently. However, according to the interviewee, they cannot post as often as they would like as they lack resources.

The company has more followers on its Facebook channel, which was established earlier. However, according to the interviewee, the new target group cannot be reached on Facebook, which is why the main focus is on Instagram. Social media content is created to reinforce the consumer’s path. She states: *“The content is synchronized with our own online store and social media so that we can also bring traffic or even redirect from the store to the site and that the story continues there.”* Besides this, she states, *“The company collaborates with influencers and raises influencers, so we regularly do jewelry stylings like this, where we encourage our consumers to tag us in their pictures if they are wearing our jewelry, and the consumers are really active in this, then, of course, we also always try to comment and like these posts, that our image is very much with them, and we also like to bring this kind of content in our social media account.”*

The company also has a LinkedIn account for certain types of content, such as collaboration, charity, and recruitment. In addition to this, the company also has a Pinterest account, which is currently being updated. However, due to the small size of the marketing team and resources, they cannot implement all of their marketing ideas, which affects

the company's marketing activities and possible opportunities. For example, the company's TikTok channel is still in a very early stage of development because, according to the interviewee, the resources are insufficient for everything, and the company does not have a separate social media team.

International brand orientation

The company has social media channels where content is created in English and Finnish, serving international and domestic consumers. They also have a separate Japanese Instagram channel, which a Japanese marketing coordinator manages. The coordinator is responsible for translating all the content planned and created for the channel from the interviewee. In addition, the company has collaborated with Japanese fashion brands and influencers in Japan and has gained important visibility through magazine features.

Country of origin

Country of origin is a key point for the company, and it is also in the company's slogans: "jewelry from Finland" and "handmade in Finland." The interviewee states, *"The jewelry market is saturated, and there is an awful lot of supply, which affects the competition, which is why Finland and the Nordic countries are of great interest as their distinguishing factors, especially in Japan."* In addition to this, she says, *"The company is also profiled in Finland's responsibly produced jewelry industry. The company has solar and wind power at the factory, a water recycling system, and air conditioning technology, which collects all the silver crystals from the air and other materials that come off in the process. The company wants to be profiled on the theme of sustainable development, through which Finland is also known. It is particularly interesting in Japan because they are only in the beginning stages of responsibility issues."*

According to the interviewee, Finland's country of origin already engages in itself, which is why consumers are interested in the brand. She states, *"Finland has already profiled itself as the happiest country in the world for the seventh year in a row and, of course, by its Finnish nature, which is at the very core of the company's jewelry and collection*

strategy. Where the designers are inspired by Finnish nature. Charity, sustainable development, handicrafts, nature, all these things related to Finland are also related to our jewelry, and we really want to raise these”.

The company has a strong foundation for building an international brand, with all four elements of the premise phase covered in its background factors. However, due to its SME background, the company faces challenges in some of its operations, particularly regarding resources and marketing activity on social media platforms. The company is currently going through a brand renewal process, which is reflected in its new look, identification of a new target group, and expansion into the Japanese market. The company uses the country-of-origin effects in its branding, which gives the brand a unique and powerful competitive advantage that sets it apart and attracts new international customers. Overall, the company has a clear strategic direction and a strong emphasis on consumer engagement and social media to achieve its internationalization objectives.

4.1.2 International brand co-creation process

The company has a strong market and brand in Finland, but it is driven by a new target group. She states, *“The company has identified a new target group, especially in Finland, but also in the international market, which is an important target group in terms of international growth. Moreover, this target group now dominates everything we plan and do, and how we reach and get them in a way, not just for a one-time buyer but also to come back and live and breathe this wonderful brand and our brand story”.* From which it can be stated that the company is at the beginning stages of building an international brand. The interviewee states, *“We are at a transition phase that we are balancing with what we are. Because we are a Finnish brand with a very large fan base of a certain age, because of growth, it is absolutely necessary to internationalize and grow, so we have to somehow navigate between them.”*

Consumers and their engagement are at the center of the brand, strongly guiding its operations and playing a central role, especially in international growth. However, co-

creating an international brand is only the beginning; the interviewee states, *“At this point, we are still getting to know each other with those international customers, and before they actually adopt this brand.”*

The company has revamped the visual look, social media, and tone of voice and developed new cooperation patterns to reach new engaged consumers. She states, *“In our communication and in this consumer engagement, we need to engage new consumers, but we do not want to lose these older fans, and in a way, we want to offer everyone something that is quite challenging.”* The company engages consumers in co-creative experiences with the brand in many creative ways, such as the Independence Day reception with jewelry bingo, encouraging consumers to comment and find the company's jewelry from the Independence Day celebrations. According to the interviewee, these posts *“resonate strongly”* and receive over twenty thousand likes on social media.

The company also engages consumers by telling stories about old jewelry that is no longer in the collection. Besides this, it has created a service where consumers can sell and buy pre-loved jewelry; this, according to the interviewee, resonates strongly with the company's true fans, who are very excited about the stories behind the jewelry. In addition, the company wants to remind younger consumers who might consider the brand old-fashioned with a collaboration where the jewelry is styled with a new and fresh look.

Consumers engage with the brand in various ways, including participating in jewelry collection naming contests, purchasing special batches of jewelry that have not been in production for a while, and receiving personal communication. Besides, this communication is made personally and aims to provide a genuine response from a real person instead of an automated message. The brand values and considers consumer suggestions and feedback, implementing them when possible and aligning with the company's strategies.

The brand aims to rewrite its hundred-year-old history to the international market, focusing on its unique identity. This identity is strongly linked to the company's roots as a business founded and managed by women. The company is financing a training center project in Kenya that provides vocational training to young girls and women. Additionally, the company has collaborated with Roosanauha. She states, *"Even though we are being renewed visually and otherwise, that core is still our value base. We want to make jewelry responsibly, we want it to be handcrafted, we want it to still be made in Finland, and we use our jewelry to create social impact and charity projects."*

The core essence of the brand is an important element and basis also in the international market, she states: *"What is so wonderful is that we are really proud of our values, and they are, in a way, exactly the key factors that we want to have when we go to the international market. And if we want to stand out from the others with these things, I could see that the brand core essence will definitely be preserved."*

With the increasing influence of social media and the brand's efforts, consumers have become more involved in the co-creation of the brand. The company places consumers at the center of all its activities, guided by its strong values. It aims to maintain these values in the international market to stand out and preserve its core essence, guiding the company's international operations. However, the company has only just begun building an international brand, but they have already taken steps to invest in this process. For example, they have localized marketing efforts in Japan, and they are working on various cooperation projects with influencers and other companies to raise awareness and boost sales and brand value. All these efforts align with the company's general strategy to renew and grow internationally, which is, according to the interviewee, essential for the company's existence.

4.1.3 The outcomes through brand co-creation

The brand demonstrates strong consumer engagement in all its operations, from strategic planning to incorporating consumer feedback. According to the interviewee, the

brand has a highly engaged audience on social media, which is reflected in the high engagement rate. Consumers are engaged with relevant and current content, and a lot of effort is made to monitor analytics to understand which content resonates with the audience.

The brand actively promotes consumer-generated content on its social media channels, showcasing outfits styled by consumers using the brand's jewelry. The brand values its strong and loyal fan base, as evidenced by its efforts to engage new consumers while catering to older fans during its renewal phase. She states, *"We also have a customer base that is very loyal to the brand heritage, but also like that in these new collections heritage and this wonderful story of ours must always be included and at the brand's core."*

Even though consumers play an important role in brand building, the brand aims to preserve its core essence in international markets. This approach helps the company to distinguish itself and enhance brand value, especially in the international market. The Japanese market is the company's second-largest market, and the brand is focusing on localized marketing and collaborations with other companies, such as Marimekko, to boost sales growth and raise awareness. All strategies are carefully planned using analytics and segmentation research based on the brand's interest in supporting the consumer's journey. Moreover, the brand's country of origin offers a significant competitive advantage in the international market, which is a key factor in international marketing efforts to stand out from the competition and reach new engaged consumers. Furthermore, sustainable development is an important theme in brand strategy, especially in Japan, where the brand wants to profile itself as a sustainable operating jewelry manufacturer, as sustainable development is still in its early stages in the Japanese market, which raises much interest in the brand.

4.2 Case Company B

Case Company B is a Finnish-based wholesaler specializing in hair cosmetics and hair salon services, established in 1997. Its turnover last year was around 17 million euros. The case company is part of the domestic, family-owned, multidisciplinary Transmeri group, with a turnover of 250 million euros and approximately 600 employees. The company employs 48 experts at its headquarters in Kamppi, Helsinki, and its warehouse in Espoo. The company operates on a distribution model, and in addition to Finland, they have distributors in several export countries: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Baltic countries, Holland, USA, Czech Republic, Greece, Ukraine, Hungary, and Moldova. The company operates in the B2B sector.

The interviewee holds the company's Head of Marketing and Communications position. She is also a member of the executive team and is responsible for managing the brand, developing a customer experience, and overseeing processes related to customer relationship management. Her role includes shaping marketing and communications strategy, annual marketing planning, and budgeting. Her primary responsibility is to lead a team of eight people in the marketing and communications department.

4.2.1 Company's premise stage in international brand building

Consumer engagement

The company's business structure is designed to cater to professional hairdressers. She states, *"We train them, and we have a business model built in such a way that we produce services for hairdressers to be successful in their own business and be able to make a good customer experience for their customers, and in that sense, in a way, when we think of our customer very much in a customer-oriented way, that our number one customer is like a b-b customer. Then, of course, consumer engagement is so important that if consumers do not buy our products, it does not support the customer either."*

The brand's consumers are at the heart of its operation. She states, *“Our core message is that we want to help everyone to feel wonderful just as they are, and in this hairdresser industry, we especially want to help the consumer when they go to the hairdresser and to the hairdressing bench, and many times at that point you feel a bit crumpled and tired. But then that feeling when you get up from that hair salon bench. Usually, if the hairdresser is good, you feel a bit like you have been reborn, and you look at yourself in the mirror, and you are thinking, I look wonderful, and in a way, those are the key moments that we, as a brand try to influence.”*

The brand's core focus is on consumer engagement. She states, *“Even though we do not necessarily interact with that consumer at that very moment, with all that we do, we train the hairdresser to know how to consult customers. We train them to understand how to make each person just the kind of hair that suits that person and their personality and lifestyle, and all of this is right at the core of our brand.”* Besides this, it is important for the brand to also think about the product's packaging and its effect on the consumers. She states, *“When the consumer uses the product in their bathroom as part of their hair routine, we think how our packaging speaks to that customer at that moment.”*

Social media

The brand's social media supports consumer engagement. She states, *“We are building our brand on social media, and there, consumers and their engagement are specifically monitored and desired to build a brand so that the consumer engages, and that does not buy the product just once but creates reasons more than the product itself and the functionality of the product so that the consumer sticks to the brand.”*

Instagram is the company's most important social media channel. It has separate channels for both B2C and B2B target groups. In addition, the company has a Facebook channel. There is also a very active community of hairdressers in a closed group, which is important to the company.

In addition to this, the company has a growing TikTok channel. She states, *"For brand building and creating consumer demand, this channel is the number one channel for that at the moment."* The brand also has a YouTube channel with training videos and Pinterest channel, where consumers can find inspiration.

The brand posts 4-5 times per week on its social media channels and stories and shares daily consumer' content. She states, *"We consider it a very important marketing channel and a tool for community building, and then, of course, when we have internationalization as our goal, with this relatively limited marketing budget or with a really tight marketing budget, the channel is used to break internationally."*

The company supports consumer engagement in social media in many ways. She states, *"It starts with all the materials and the packaging itself. Even the product description tells what our social media accounts are. We bring out our social media on all marketing trips and similar events, and we make photography walls and other things in a way that aims to ensure that social media is also present in places that are not social media."*

The brand supports consumer participation in social media with user-generated content campaigns. However, their content has been perceived as not so functional, so the brand has had less of that type of content. She says, *"Well, we could have more campaigns like that, but we have probably experienced that somehow they start really badly or do not work. Also, it is hard to get people to produce really good commercial content."*

Consumer feedback and suggestions are taken into account in the company. She states, *"We are a small domestic company with a small team, so it is easy to get to the decision-maker's table. We collect and direct all such feedback to the product managers and development."*

The brand takes negative comments seriously. She says, *"If they are things that are developing and that can be done something about, equally as positive feedback, so we take*

them into account, and we have made changes to our packaging based on feedback. For example, one shampoo that is still on sale, so we are changing it to a tube because we have received feedback about it."

International brand orientation

Brand activities are closely connected to international markets. She states, *"We have this distributor model, meaning we have a company representing our brand in each country. We then cooperate with them in practice, and the distributor handles the marketing in that country. Our task here is to produce content that the distributor can use and then guide them to act according to our brand. In practice, we have our own B2C social media. Of course, this is done internationally or in English, so we also guide and support our distributors in creating their own social media in their native language. We produce ready-made content for them and meet them, so they know what is coming."*

The brand works closely with its distributors and monitors what they do. She states, *"So, we have a brand manual communicated to our distributors. Whenever we start a new distributor in a new country, we introduce them to our brand. Then we have our image banks and copies of the materials that our distributors use, and the more finished materials we make for them, the better the brand will remain the same in different markets. Of course, the contract defines certain things, and we also monitor what they do. It is important that the brand remains the same in a certain way. However, I also feel that cultural differences are significant in different countries, and then brands must adapt to different markets."*

Country of origin

The company has researched whether it should take a Finnish angle in the international markets. She states, *"Of course, Finnish-based angle separates us from the big international competitors, but according to the research, it has been noted to some extent that our Finnish-based background does not really mean anything in international markets."*

Maybe more like the Scandinavian angle and Nordicness arouse more interest, and people like the same cleanliness and the functionality and reliability of things and those values."

According to the interviewee, she does not believe that the country of origin affects consumers' engagement with the brand. She states, *"Frankly speaking, I do not think it affects; according to our research, people are interested in the fact that the product is suitable for their hair. Then they feel that you get value for your money and probably the responsibility of what country the product is from; that the product is Nordic, and it can be a plus compared to if it is Chinese, but I do not think that it affects the purchase decision or engagement very much."*

80% of brand followers are Finnish, but they use English on social media to help the brand to internationalize. She states, *"This is also a certain kind of obstacle to this engagement because surely if we made content in Finnish, the engagement would be better among Finnish consumers."*

The country of origin causes challenges in social media communication, which also impacts brand engagement and co-creation. She states, *"When we have to do it in a foreign language, of course, it affects the fact that we do not speak English natively here in Finland, which certainly affects it to some extent. In a way, in that communication. Plus, in our export market, only the USA is one where English is spoken as a mother tongue, and none of our export markets have English as the mother tongue, so yes, I believe that it does affect engagement and brand co-creation that our followers cannot do it there in their mother tongue. So, it is negative in that sense, but then, of course, we have the distributors in each exporting country, whose job is to produce that content in their native language."*

4.2.2 International brand co-creation process

Consumers play an important role in the brand-building process. She states, *"They play a massive role, as without consumers, there would be no brand and no business."* According to the interviewee, the goal of the co-creation process is to involve consumers in the brand's social media posts and generate engaging content that resonates with them and others.

Consumer engagement is sought through versatile content that is both interesting and useful. She states: *"Well, of course, we think about the content that is produced in general, that it is always content that is useful or entertaining in some way for consumers, and that we do not just tell it like that this is our product, and buy buy, but we offer the same added value with our contents. That is the starting point of everything, and we can see from the analytics that usually, such content is successful when you tell some tips or tricks that the consumer might not otherwise have known, and then such content works. Of course, then we have raffles and, well, in general, in its simplicity, suggesting that consumers participate by asking questions. "*

Consumers' opinions and ideas are taken into account in the development of the brand in many different ways; she states, *" We regularly ask on social media for ideas and advice on conducting surveys and consumer surveys. For example, qualitative research has been done where consumers have kept a diary about their hair salon habits and hair fixing habits. So, in a way searched what exactly is the hair fixing, and what does it mean for consumers. Then, when we create new products so many times, we do something like consumer research. When we ask about packaging conceptualization, consumer research has been used to ask opinions about the packaging, as well as in the conceptualization of advertising."* However, the interviewee states that consumers' ideas could be used even more because, nowadays, technology enables production.

When creating brand value, the brand actively interacts with its consumers. She says, *"Part of the B2B business is what kind of material is produced for the hair salon, such as*

banners, mirror stickers, as well as social media advertising, where consumers are directed to the online store where you can find our retailers and the hair salon search, and in a way, if I think about it, it is the value of our brand so it is mainly because our turnover comes from the B2B business and those hair salons, so we would not be such a big brand if consumers did not know us and that we make ourselves known to consumers and direct those consumers to those hair salons, which increases the value of our brand our B2B customers want to do business with our brand and not someone they do not know.”

4.2.3 The outcomes through brand co-creation

Consumers play a crucial role in brand creation and are supported in various ways. For example, they contribute to content creation on social media channels, adding value to the consumer experience. They also actively produce content to engage consumers and foster a connection with the brand. This benefits the brand by enhancing brand experience, awareness, productivity, and efficiency. The brand's SME background is reflected in the marketing budget, which is why internationality is sought through social media channels because of its cost-effectiveness. However, the SME background benefits decision-making because they can easily bring important feedback or suggestions to the decision-makers table and move forward in promoting things more nimbly than, for example, large companies.

The strong recognition of the brand in the hairdressing industry and the positive result communicate that the company's consumers and strong social media presence are at the center of the brand building. She states, *“We would not be such a big brand if consumers did not know us and that we make ourselves known to consumers and direct those consumers to those hair salons, which increases the value of our brand our B2B customers want to do business with our brand and not someone they do not know.”* However, due to language barriers, international brand-building challenges consumer engagement. Because the company only communicates in English, which makes it is less successful in creating and positioning the brand in a way that appeals to the target consumers' minds.

The brand wants to be profiled in the international market as a Nordic brand instead of a Finnish brand, as it is believed to bring more appeal to its consumers. The reason for this is the weak knowledge of Finland's recognition in the international market, which is why the Nordic brand is seeking to stand out in the market. However, the brand does not believe that the country of origin is important for brand engagement.

The impact of consumer engagement is evident in the brand's social media and marketing activities. Consumers play a crucial role in the brand's activities, and their engagement is important. However, as the brand transitions to an international level, it is still developing. The brand has Instagram channels in the target countries of its distribution channels, but, except for the USA and Ukrainian markets, they have not yet gained a large number of followers. Some channels are more active in creating content than others, which impacts brand awareness and the number of followers.

In addition, many of the videos shared on the social media platforms in the countries where the products are distributed are in English, which may not strongly appeal to foreign consumers. The brand distributes its videos to the distribution countries to maintain a consistent brand image and preserve its core essence. However, English content may not resonate as strongly with foreign consumers as content in their native language, posing challenges in creating an international brand. Additionally, the brand's SME background limits the available resources for international brand-building.

4.3 Case Company C

Case Company C is a family-owned retail store in the fashion and textile industry based in Finland. It was established in 1983 and is managed by the founding family's third generation. The company's turnover was 2023, around 2 million euros, and it employs 15 people. In its early days, the company focused on exports to foreign countries. It rapidly opened stores and sold products through large retailers such as Stockmann in Finland, NK department store in Sweden, and Steen & Strøm department store in Norway. At that

time, the company aimed to emphasize its central European identity rather than its Finnish roots, even adopting an Italian name. However, the company has shifted its focus to domestic markets. The company's owners and new designers aim to better establish themselves as a Nordic, responsible brand that manufactures its clothes locally. The company had reduced its stores to two when there were almost 20 at best. The company is now investing in the online store, which has also been renewed, including the logo and advertising images. The motive for brand reform is the desire to internationalize and to aim for a stronger market position.

While the company's primary market is Finland, it also operates an international online store that serves customers across the EU region. The interviewee holds the online store and marketing manager position and is also one of the company's owners.

4.3.1 The company's premise stage in international brand building

Consumer engagement

The fashion and clothing industry has become increasingly competitive, leading to significant changes in branding strategies. Consumer engagement plays a crucial role in the brand's operations, prompting the company to conduct various customer surveys to analyze consumer behavior. Additionally, the brand offers a loyalty program to benefit its customers while involving them in the brand's activities. With a forty-year history in the fashion and clothing industry, the brand has established a strong foundation of trust, reflecting its long-term commitment and passion for the industry. The brand actively engages consumers by utilizing loyalty programs, brand advertising, and social media marketing to engage consumers and activate them to make purchase decisions. She states, *"Without the customer, our company does not exist. In other words, we make those products directly for consumers."*

The company's engagement strategy identifies and considers consumer activity. The strategy reflects consumers' engagement in product range development, quality maintenance, partner cooperation, and distribution. She states, *"At the moment, this market*

economy is very changeable, so we need, for example, new pop-up concepts and platform partnerships for the online store, with which we can then keep the current customers happy, but also so that we can be reached like new ones."

Consumers are taken into account on many different levels so that the brand's functions meet the expectations and needs of consumers, which can be influenced and adapted to match the needs of consumers with digital technology. This also increases consumer interactions and activities. She states, *"We constantly conduct various inquiries about the development of the online store or how the consumer perceives it to work, customer experience, satisfaction, and surveys. The company also has a reward model, i.e., product reviews in the online store get customer points for their reviews. In addition, the company has an easy contact surface with the customer directly because of our brick-and-mortar stores and online store."*

However, the brand has undergone a significant change phase, during which it was rebuilt based on customer surveys and interviews. The brand's operations are strongly guided by consumer focus, which has shaped the brand's development. She states, *"We have just turned 40 years old, so basically, the first 30 years in the brand history have gone strong, like with the original brand customer, and now that we have started to re-brand. Based on this, the brand has done a lot of customer research, in-depth interviews, and brand research. In other words, it has shaped the brand's development."*

Social media

The brand's CBE is supported by social media platforms, which enhances consumer interactions and creates stronger connections with consumers and overall brand engagement. The most important platforms for the brand are Facebook and Instagram. These platforms have different target audiences. Pinterest is becoming increasingly important for reaching new customers, while LinkedIn is used primarily for business purposes. According to the interviewee, meta platforms (Instagram and Facebook) are currently the

most significant platforms for the company. The brand publishes content daily, although not necessarily on every channel, mainly on meta platforms, particularly Instagram.

Social media activity helps the brand interact and engage with its consumers, fostering brand engagement and strengthening brand equity. The number and type of social media posts depend on the platform and appropriate suitable content. She states, *“Algorithms affect the number of publications so that interest can be maintained. We update the Pinterest posts when we get new collections and launches. LinkedIn is more if we have a new store opening, a concept, or someone like this.”*

The social media content aims for versatile and engaging activities. The brand uses influencers, consumer feedback on products, and current happenings in its content. She states, *“These days, it is getting even more challenging as everyone is competing for the same eyes, but in principle, as we have experienced interesting and new activating content, such as various surveys or reactions, works well on Instagram and then also various contests and raffles where consumers can participate in and have a chance to win something.”*

The brand encourages consumers to share reviews of their products in connection with purchases and in posts where the brand asks the consumer to choose their favorite product. This activity is often seen in social media content, which helps strengthen the bond between the consumer and the brand.

Through social media platforms, the brand gathers consumer feedback to understand its customers better and obtain valuable input that aids in developing its offerings. She states, *“Consumers can send messages directly to customer service, which has been very positive. We always consider feedback in product development and actively collect data ourselves, such as for surveys and our Loyalty program.”* All feedback is carefully considered. She states, *“Surprisingly, consumers provide little negative feedback. We will answer all negative feedback as clearly and quickly as possible.”*

International brand orientation

The brand currently does not have a planned international market strategy and is mainly focused on the domestic market. However, according to the interviewee, an international strategy is currently under development. The company's Instagram content is mainly in English, indicating an effort to target both international and Finnish consumers. However, the content on the Facebook page is in Finnish. Both pages have approximately 10,000 followers. The company's website's content is available in Finnish and English. The company's LinkedIn pages are in English, but the posts are in Finnish. The brand has included "Finland" in its Instagram account name, indicating that it wants to emphasize its Finnish roots. However, "Finland" is not used on the brand's Facebook pages.

Country of origin

The brand's Italian name influences consumers' perceptions and evaluations of the brand and its products. The brand focuses on its Nordic identity in its marketing to gain a competitive advantage and stand out in the market. This emphasis on Nordicness is rooted in its Finnish origins. However, it may not effectively convey the brand's country of origin to consumers, leading them to perceive the brand as foreign. Despite this, the brand's name is easily adopted internationally, as it is international and easy to pronounce. She states, *"Our slogan, "True Nordic charm," has a Nordic perspective, and Nordicness is a bigger concept, and next to that is the quality of our products. So maybe the country of origin, Finland, is not in our focus when we start to create the international market strategy; that is why that slogan was chosen."*

Moreover, the company does not consider the brand's country of origin a competitive advantage or a sufficient element to engage the consumer. She states, *"Basically, in the domestic market, it is so easy to think when everyone has an image of their own country, but that alone is not enough, but then I do not have any experience with international markets."*

4.3.2 International brand co-creation process

Consumer orientation is emphasized in the brand's operations. She states, *“Brand work always interacts with the customer, and, in principle, customer orientation is always present in business development.”* The role of consumers in the co-creation of the brand has been partially taken into account, as consumer-oriented activities guide operations. However, professionals create and design the brand's products. In addition, the company produces content shared on social media. However, consumer feedback is considered in the product design, the clothes' colors, and the location of the pop-up stores. She states, *“Creativity does not come to mind directly, that is, the creativity aspect in our field, or at least for us, it comes from professional creators, i.e., designers, but then the customer has, for example, requests for new pop-up locations, the colors of the products or things like models, we have taken into account.”*

The brand's operations are strongly influenced by its background as an SME and its long history in the clothing industry, which has guided its direction for years. Additionally, the brand has prioritized responsibility in its operations. For instance, it recently introduced a clothing impact calculator to measure the carbon footprint of each product. Moreover, it has implemented a clothing repair and maintenance service, which was the winner of the Finnish Responsible Product competition in 2024. This demonstrates that responsibility is a central theme for the brand, which has also gained significance among consumers. The brand aims to drive consumer engagement and communicate its commitment to responsible practices in a highly competitive and constantly changing sector.

In creating the brand's value, the brand uses influencer marketing, which is an effective way to influence the consumer's purchase decision and gain visibility through social media platforms. She states, *“Brand value has been created through consumers with our brand ambassador program. In other words, various micro-influencers have been sought for it, and then through them, an effort has been made to create content that creates value for consumers and user experience thing and everything like that.”*

The brand's co-creation development is heavily influenced by its SME background and available resources, so not all ideas can be implemented. Moreover, the company's brand renewal has been the focus of operations, which is why some of the ideas have remained at the idea level. She states, *"We have also been talking about this Advisor Board, consisting of consumers. However, this brand renewal has focused more on customer feedback. In other words, we have only had this kind of idea-level thing. It is not something that can be implemented at the moment, and we have not started to implement that, so now we have just that brand ambassador program, for example, which is driving the focus a little bit at the moment."*

4.3.3 The outcomes through brand co-creation

Brand development and changes are closely linked to consumer engagement. The brand has conducted various surveys based on consumer opinions and feedback, which have influenced the brand's operations and development. The brand uses social media channels versatilely, creating active, engaging, and current content. It also constantly develops its operations by highlighting the functions of cooperation and responsibility, which creates brand recognition and aims for a deeper, more meaningful bond between the consumers. However, the role of consumers is relatively small as a co-creator of the brand, even though it functions at the center of the activity. For example, consumers do not participate in the content producer role, but social media influencers are used for that. However, the brand pays close attention to consumer feedback and considers the consumers' preferences regarding, for example, the colors and cuts of the products.

The brand is still in the early stages of its international operations. However, it aims for international expansion and has already taken steps in that direction. For instance, the content on some of its social media channels is in English, and it has developed an international online shopping platform that operates throughout the EU region.

The brand's active and engaging presence on social media, collaborations with other brands, and the launch of pop-up stores positively impact consumers' purchasing decisions. These interactions place consumers at the center, leading to increased consumer engagement, loyalty, brand awareness, sales growth, and overall brand value.

When building an international brand, social media channels are mainly used to reach local consumers, who form the brand's primary market. However, from a global perspective, the brand must customize its approach to engage the target country effectively and locally to reach international consumers' interests.

4.4 Case Company D

The company, D, is a Finnish micro-sized SME that operates in the fields of arts, entertainment, and recreation. It was founded in 2018 and employs one person. The company's turnover was 71,000 euros in 2023. The company sells worldwide, and 75 % of its designs are sold abroad, including in Europe, North and South America, Australia, and Asia, and 25 % from Finland. The interviewee is the CEO and founder of the company.

4.4.1 The company's premise stage in international brand building

Consumer engagement

The company's primary strategy in consumer engagement is to develop high-quality knitting instructions that captivate the customer and strengthen the brand. This approach is intended to motivate customers to buy the designer's instructions in the future as they are reliable and well-designed. Additionally, the company offers post-purchase support. The designer stresses the significance of providing support after the purchase, particularly if the consumer faces any issues with the knitting pattern.

Consumer engagement is present in the knitting hobby as it has a sense of community, which means that it is important to be present all the time, talk to people, and respond to everyone's comments, which she maintains with live knitting events. She states, "I

organize a live knitting broadcast where I encourage the group to knit for a specific pattern, and then I share feelings and experiences of my knitting. I usually do a live broadcast on Instagram once a week. I have one every other week in Finnish and one every other week in English. Besides this, whenever the customers post pictures on Instagram that they have knitted something with my instructions, I always share them in the stories." Sharing consumers' knitting on social media also enhances engagement, as followers see knitting made by others, making the content versatile and interesting.

All knitting instructions are test knitted. This means that some customers get to beta-test the product before it goes on sale. Moreover, the test knitters give possible comments about the instructions. For example, if errors have been found there, which will then be corrected. In addition, the test knitters generally tell whether the instructions are clear and easy to understand and whether the instructions need step-by-step pictures to be more understandable. Based on the feedback, the instructions will be edited to be error-free and easily understood when the product is ready to publish.

In addition, the brand collects feedback on Instagram to find out what design followers would like to see next. She began hosting weekly live broadcasts during the pandemic, which have become important events for consumers due to their interactive nature and the sense of community they provide. Furthermore, she states that knitwear design is generally personal branding. This means that the designer is present in the designs knitted in the posts and gives a face to her brand. It is an important factor for the consumers as they can feel they know the designer. She states, *"I have also wanted to build my brand on the basis that I am truly present as myself."*

Social media

The brand primarily uses Instagram and Ravelry, a community site and yarn and pattern database for knitters and crocheters, as its primary social media channels. These platforms are crucial for both sales and community building. Additionally, Instagram plays a significant role as an advertising channel for the brand. The brand also has a Facebook

page but has significantly fewer followers than on Instagram. The brand has more than 40,000 followers on Instagram, while on Facebook, there are 3,500 followers. Facebook's content is linked to Instagram, and posts are made several times. The posts are in English, indicating that the channels' content is mainly for international consumers. The brand posts daily on Instagram using scheduling programs to plan content; besides, more content is made actively on Instagram stories. Being active on social media is important for the brand; she says, *"It is extremely important to both be present all the time and to stay in people's minds."*

The brand encourages consumers to participate in its activities in different ways. For example, by encouraging followers to comment with questions, which at the same time promotes the brand's knitting patterns, she states, *"I will present what I have to knit with needles and work in progress, then I might ask what others are planning to knit today, or if I am promoting an older pattern, then I will just ask if you have knitted this already."* Besides, live knitting broadcasts enable interaction with the brand's consumers on social media. The brand also hosts knitting events, including design-along events on Instagram stories. During these events, the designer creates a new design and lets followers vote on the details of the design. She states, *"It has been really fun for the customers to feel like they have been involved in planning it."* In addition, the brand actively shares consumer posts about knitted designs by the brand in which they are tagged, which makes the content interesting for consumers and, at the same time, brings the brand closer to its consumers.

The brand does not have a separate feedback channel, and consumers express their opinions in their posts. She states, *"If there are any problems, even with an instruction, then they usually send me a direct message."* The brand takes an active approach to consumer feedback and suggestions. She states, *"If there is an error in the published instructions, someone might comment on it on social media. Then, I will immediately respond to it and correct the error from the instructions in the file so that it will always be correct in the future. In my opinion, it is really important to respond to all feedback"*

and always as quickly as possible." However, the brand has a clear vision for its operations, which is why not all consumer suggestions are implemented. She states, *"You cannot always go along with everything because it would not be my kind of thing."*

Negative comments are always answered in a personal way. She states, *"Generally, it is important always to go and answer, just in case someone criticizes, for example, that my sweater does not fit well. Then I commented that, okay, this model fits better for a person with a wide shoulder. However, what is really important is always to come and say sorry, that it is unfortunate that it did not fit well, and that I will try to consider such things in the future."*

International brand orientation

The brand has a strong international brand orientation; she states, *"Basically, I do everything for the international market, that I have separately the few things that I do for the domestic audience, but that basically everything is specifically aimed at the international market. If only for the reason that Finland is a market as an area, they are too small for planning, so that if you want to succeed"*.

The brand considers sales in international markets and translates the knitting instructions into the target country's language, thus supporting and strengthening its international position. She states, *"I always have all the knitting instructions in English, but then I have translated some of the most popular instructions into, for example, German. Since Germany is one, I think the biggest markets are probably the United States and Finland. And then Germany comes third. Moreover, for example, my first knitting book was also translated into German and then finally into Korean."*

Preserving the brand's core essence is crucial because it is centered around the designer's identity, and the knitting industry relies heavily on personal branding. She states, *"It is absolutely important to always and everywhere be exactly as I am; I do not want to go*

in such a way that I would present somewhere that I am something other than what I am, that I think it is really important specifically to offer consumers my authentic self."

Country of origin

The brand's country of origin affects the brand, and according to the interviewee, it could be brought out more. She says, *"Embroidery is such a Nordic thing. It is easier to start selling books when you tell consumers that you are from Finland, Sweden, or Norway, and they immediately think that it is the thing of that region, that it belongs to that style. For example, Finnish aesthetics are highly valued in Japan, so I have many customers from Asia, such as Japan, and the first knitting book sold a lot in South Korea. I feel that it also somehow matched the local aesthetics there, but yes, there is much importance there. Then I usually shoot all my knitwear, i.e., all my marketing photos, so most of them are shot outside, i.e., in the Finnish nature, so it can also be seen through that."*

However, the interviewee does not believe that the brand's country of origin affects consumers' engagement with the brand. The brand's country of origin has a greater influence on the brand's operations, in that sense that the designer also offers knitting instructions in Finnish and holds Finnish-language joint knitting sessions on Instagram, even though most of the sales come from abroad. She states, *"I feel that it is really important, even though the vast majority of the market, 75% of the instructions are sold abroad and approximately 25% to Finland, so even though the Finnish market share is small in itself, I feel that it is really important to offer those instructions in Finnish as well. For example, when I do those joint knitting broadcasts on Instagram, every other time, I always keep it in Finnish because it is really important to be present in the international market. I always write all the posts in English so that it is easy for people from everywhere to follow them and come to comment and interact. However, it feels like there are a lot of similar domestic customers who also need that communication in the Finnish language."*

The brand's country of origin does not affect its co-creation. Besides the fact that Finnish English language skills are very high, which involves international marketing, the Nordic countries are recognized for their knitting skills, giving the brand a competitive advantage. She states, *"You can do marketing in English here and not lose the domestic audience at the same time. Perhaps you could think that if the designer was from another country, some countries might not be easily approachable. However, in being Finnish, I have at least never felt that there would be any harm in this, but rather the advantage in that the Nordic countries are known for knitting and embroidery."*

4.4.2 International brand co-creation process

The active participation of consumers in brand activities is crucial for brand creation. Their involvement excites and motivates other consumers to try the designed model; according to the interviewee, *"Knitting, in general, as a hobby, is very communal, and knitters, especially, are herd animals; when you see one knitting something, then others join in, and it is important to get people to share the pictures on social media of the knitting they have done with my instructions because it inspires others to those instructions."*

The brand's operations are consumer-focused as the designer photographs all the knitted designs on herself, making it easier for consumers to understand how the design would look on different body types. In addition, the use of knitting patterns varies according to the consumers' country of origin, which is why sharing others' knitting products she designed on social media is particularly important. She states, *"Finns do not have that much of a problem, but American knitters, in particular, are such that they cannot imagine the knitting pattern in any colour other than the way it looks when it is in the instruction picture, so it is really important to get other customers to knit it in different size and different colours."*

Consumers participate in brand co-creation in different ways. She states, *"I have organized co-design events a couple of times so that consumers have been able to participate*

in the design of a knitting model from the very beginning, and sometimes I ask people for ideas. For example, for the name of new designs. Additionally, the brand involves consumers in discussions about future joint knitting events and offers courses organized by the designer. All activities engage the consumer as an integral part of the brand, which enhances brand engagement.

The brand considers consumers' influence in creating the brand's value by keeping operations customer-centric, where customer satisfaction is an important value. She states, *"I try to keep all customers as satisfied as possible because I make good instructions and offer friendly and good instructional support, and then they can ask if they do not understand the instructions. And then, of course, I always share all the customers' knitting posts in my Instagram stories; it encourages people to post those pictures of themselves."*

Besides, consumers' appreciation is really important to the brand and is supported by the brand's social media platforms; she states, *"I try to show as much as possible that I value customers. For example, at various knitting events, where there are many knitters, whenever I notice someone wearing a shirt knitted according to my instructions, I always try to say hello and compliment that you have knitted a pretty nice shirt"*.

4.4.3 The outcomes through brand co-creation

The co-creation of the brand is strong, and consumers are involved in the brand's operations in many different ways. Like knitting in joint broadcasts, participating in knitting design planning, and having an active presence on social media channels. Social media channels are important for the brand to reach international markets, and the brand actively publishes different content on its social media channels to maintain a strong presence in consumers' minds. The brand's operations are based on international operations, as most of its sales come from foreign markets. Despite this, the brand wants to keep its Finnish roots visible, for example, in design instructions and knitting in broadcasts that are made in Finnish and English. The brand's country of origin can be seen in the marketing images taken in Finnish nature and knitting patterns. The brand's authenticity,

Nordic knitting culture, and strong international presence help it to connect with consumers globally, giving it a competitive edge in the market. Besides this, knitting instructions are also made for customers in the most important countries regarding sales in their native language. This increases consumer engagement with the brand and its international position in the market.

The brand values consumer satisfaction, and all operations are focused on providing high-quality and easy-to-understand knitting patterns. The brand's operation is centered around the designer's identity, which is strongly reflected in the design models and marketing materials. The designer prefers to be featured in the pictures to enhance consumers' connection to the brand and their perception of how the designed models look on a person. Consumer posts are frequently shared on the brand's social media platforms to maintain followers' interest and inspire others to start knitting, which increases sales growth and purchase intention.

The brand has a very strong hold on consumer engagement. This is evident from its active social media presence and high sales volume in the international market. These two factors indicate that international consumers find it easy to engage with the brand, which is undoubtedly influenced by the content's authenticity and the designer's strong presence on social media channels.

4.5 Cross-case analysis

This chapter will explore the similarities and differences between the empirical findings and the existing academic literature on the case companies. The cross-case analysis will follow a theoretical framework, starting with the premise stage in international brand building, followed by the international brand co-creation process, and concluding with the outcomes through brand co-creation. The purpose of the cross-case analysis is to enhance the validity of the research.

4.5.1 Premise stage in international brand building

The premise stage for international brand-building consists of four key areas: social media, consumer engagement, country of origin, and the international brand. These areas provide the brand with an optimal premise stage to establish a strong foundation for an international brand and have a better opportunity for success in the international market. In this chapter, I will analyze the similarities and differences of the case companies at the premise stage.

Consumer engagement

Table 2. The consumer engagement in case companies

Companies	Consumer engagement strategy	Ways to maintain consumer engagement	Consumers opinions and ideas developing products/services	Consumer interaction influence on brand
Case company A	Consumers and their engagement are at the very core and an essential part of their strategy	Thoughtfully planned continuous content strategy	Various activities, name contest, special batches, Styling	Brand renewed visual look, tone of voice, new social media channels, cooperation, influencer marketing, sustainability
Case Company B	Customer oriented way of operating, with core message to help everyone to feel wonderful just as they are	Interesting and useful social media content adding value	Conducting surveys, changes in packaging	New social media channels, influencer marketing, packaging, consumers hair routines

Case Company C	Consumer driven approach, products are made customer-oriented way	New concepts, platform partnership, loyalty program	Conducting surveys, pop up store's locations, product colors and cuts	Rebrand, sustainability, online store, influencer marketing, co-operation
Case Company D	Develop high-quality, reliable, well-designed knitting instructions for consumers	Live knitting broadcast, social media content	Collects feedback, involves consumers in designing process	Personal branding, beta testing knitting instructions, involve consumers actively on producing content

The main focus of all companies' strategies was consumer engagement. Every company emphasizes the significance of consumers in the brand's operations. This is, according to recent studies, one of the key drivers of a company's long-term success and enables a deeper, more meaningful, and longer-lasting connection between the company and the consumer (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2019, p. 99; Brodie et al., 2011, p. 252). Company A mentioned that their operations are guided by the consumer and designed to meet the needs of this new target group, while companies B and C based their activities on consumer-based research, on which decisions have been made in the brand's operations. Company D, however, describes its operations as prioritizing the best possible experience for consumers, but the designer's preferences strongly influence the brand's operations. In general, the brand's value in SMEs is based on the associations and personality of the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs play a key role in shaping and representing the brand's identity (Ojansalo et al., 2008, p. 95), which is a noticeable factor in Company D's operations.

All companies use social media channels and content to keep consumers engaged. Company C has a loyalty program that benefits consumers who use the brand's products. Consumers share their feedback on products on company social media channel posts, which creates trust and interest in the brand among platform followers. Company D

hosts live knitting broadcasts, which have become popular among followers. Social media engagement platforms provide companies new ways to impact consumer interactions and activities (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020, p. 713).

All companies use various methods to engage consumers with their brands. This has numerous positive effects on company operations, including increased sales, positive communication and recommendations, higher customer loyalty, and improved company performance (Leckie et al., 2016, p. 560).

All companies take into account the positive and negative feedback they receive from consumers. Company A stated that it considers consumer feedback and implements it if it aligns with its strategy. Company B mentioned that it collects consumer feedback and uses it for product development. The SME background benefits the company, as they can make decisions quickly by listening to the consumer and proceeding to the decision-makers table. Company C stated they are actively conducting surveys on their channels, thereby considering consumer feedback. On the other hand, company D mentioned that she responds to all feedback quickly, but ultimately, the brand's direction supports the designer's preferences. Consumer feedback is considered in all companies, allowing companies to gain recognition and arouse consumer interest in their products and/or services through the information that consumers share on social media (Kamboj et al., 2018, pp. 171-172).

All companies aim to attract consumers' interest and encourage participatory activities that stimulate interest, such as raffles or competitions. Additionally, Company A posts consumers' styling of the brand's jewelry to highlight the brand in new, fresh ways, which aims to attract new consumers. Company D involves consumers in the design process, allowing them to feel like they are co-creating new knitting designs that aim to engage the consumers in the brand's activities. In addition, consumers have also influenced the rebranding efforts of companies A and C, as evidenced by their operations that target

new customer segments. Companies A, B, and C also utilize influencers in their marketing strategies to reach new consumers and boost brand recognition.

On the other hand, company D utilizes the knitwear made by its customers using the brand's knitting instructions. This effectively communicates to other followers on social media how the knitwear looks on the customers and what kind of knitting patterns the brand's designer designs. This makes the followers active and entices them to make purchases. This interactivity between the companies and consumers offers a powerful marketing strategy that encourages consumers to create and share interactive brand content, co-creating brand value on social media platforms and increasing sales (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 534).

Social media

Table 3. The use of social media in case companies

Companies	Followers	Activity	Channels	Content	Language
Case Company A	Instagram 35 000 Facebook 66 000	4-5 times per week	Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, TikTok, LinkedIn, Japanese Instagram	Re posting consumer gen- erated content in Instagram stories, collab- oration with other brands, uses influenc- ers, events	Instagram English Facebook English and Finnish Separate Instagram Japanese
Case Company B	Instagram 24 200 Facebook 28 000	4-5 times per week	Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, TikTok, LinkedIn, YouTube,	Re posting consumer gen- erated con- tent, uses in- fluencers, tips and tricks	Instagram English Facebook Finnish and English Distribution coun- tries Instagram and Facebook

			Distribution countries separate Instagram		channel in distribution country language and English
Case Company C	Instagram 10 000 Facebook 10 000	Daily	Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn	Reposting consumers feedback, collaborations, uses influencers, events	Instagram English, some Instagram stories in Finnish Facebook Finnish
Case Company D	Instagram 44 800 Facebook 3 500	Daily	Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Raverly	Reposting consumers content, joint events,	Instagram English, some posts in Finnish Facebook English, some content Finnish

All four case companies actively use social media channels for advertising and engaging with consumers, which helps build brand awareness and fosters strong consumer-brand relationships (Aljuhmani et al., 2021, p. 1722). Instagram was identified as the most important channel for reaching consumers and creating content for all companies. Additionally, all companies utilize Facebook as one of their social media channels. However, it was noted that the number of consumers engaged through Facebook was smaller, and the companies felt they were not reaching all the consumers they were aiming for through this platform.

The TikTok channel did not work as a primary social media channel for any brand; for those who did use it, it was only in the beginning stages. However, company B mentioned that it is currently the number one channel for brand building and creating consumer demand. All brands use Pinterest, but it does not work as the leading social media channel as its functions are more focused on supporting brand activities and development. Three companies, A, B, and C, use the LinkedIn channel to support their brand marketing

and companies' operations. However, LinkedIn's content primarily consists of publications from the business sector, such as news about collaborations and recruitment.

All brands are active on social media and publish at least four times a week to stay in consumers' minds and engage with them. This helps to increase brand engagement and strengthen the brand's equity (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 534). The primary language of communication for all brands on social media is English. Companies A, B, and C use Finnish in their Instagram stories and Facebook posts. Besides, company A has also localized its social media channels to better reach and engage consumers in the target country, the Japanese market. Company B distributor countries produce content for social media channels in their native language. This adapting marketing approach to fit various external environments attracts international consumers and enables them to engage with the brand (Wong & Merrilees, 2007, p. 386).

All brands recognize the importance of engaging with consumers on social media. They emphasize the need to promptly and personally respond to consumer comments. Additionally, all brands acknowledge the significance of addressing negative feedback and comments based on the specific situation. They all create their content for social media channels. Three brands mentioned using consumer-generated content on their social media platforms, while three brands stated that they use influencers on social media to generate consumer interest in their brand. This allows companies to gain recognition and generate consumer interest in their products and/or services through the information consumers share on social media (Kamboj et al., 2018, pp. 171-172).

International brand orientation

Table 4. International brand orientation

Company	Brand strategy in international market	Preserving brand's core essence
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Company A	Separate Japanese Instagram channel, content in English, collaborations, influencers, social media	Company's values, sustainability aspect
Company B	Distribution model, content in English, Image banks and materials, social media	Contracts with distributors, monitoring countries, guiding, and supporting
Company C	Not planned international market strategy, online store in EU region, content in English, social media	Couldn't answer question
Company D	Content in English, knitting instructions on country's native language, joint broadcasts in English, social media	Designer identity centered, Authenticity

All companies utilize social media platforms for international brand marketing, with most of the content being in English. Additionally, they target both international and domestic markets. However, Company A has a Japanese-speaking marketing coordinator who translates marketing materials into Japanese and manages the Japanese Instagram channel. Company B employs a distributor model, using the brand's existing materials for marketing in the target countries, with the distribution countries producing content in their respective languages. Company C's online store operates throughout the EU, with materials in English aimed at international customers. Company D generally creates all materials and content in English for international marketing and also provides knitting instructions in the target country's language for the most important sales countries.

The company's operations support international brand orientation, which supports the international customer. Understanding consumer behavioral patterns is crucial for maintaining strong engagement between consumers and the company (Gupta et al., 2018, p. 4).

Both Company A and Company D prioritize preserving their brands' core essence in international markets. Company A achieves this by maintaining the brand's strong foundation in values and operating sustainably, which enhances the overall brand operation. Similarly, it is important for Company D to preserve the designer's core essence and vision in her brand, guiding the brand's operations in the international market. Moreover, Company B aims to maintain the brand's core essence through agreements, guiding distributor countries, supporting their activities, and monitoring brand marketing. This supports the preservation of the brand's look and essence in the same way in its distribution countries. The brand's core essence is important to be maintained in international markets as the brand's core essence creates the brand's value, which is what consumers comprehend and appreciate (Pappu et al., 2006, p. 967).

Country of origin

Table 5. Country of origin effects of case companies

Company	Country of origin marketing strategy	Country of origin affect consumer engagement	Country of origin impact brand co-creation
Company A	Key point for the company, distinguishing factor, sustainability development, "Jewelry from	Nature, sustainable development, happiest country, jewelry collection and design, handcrafts	Still in the phase of getting to know each other's, Finland is profiled itself well, raises interest

	Finland” and “hand-made in Finland”-slogans		
Company B	Finnish-based angle separates, but based on research Finnish-based background does have impact in international markets, more Nordic perspective	Don’t believe it affects, it can be a plus but the more important is the product itself	Language barriers, obstacle to engagement
Company C	In social media brand uses Finland with the brand name, the brand is profiled as a Nordic brand, “Nordic charm”-slogan	Produces products locally, production control and logistics from Finland, designs, sustainability	Couldn’t answer question
Company D	It could be brought out more, embroidery is Nordic thing	Nature, designs, Finnish aesthetics attract	Doesn’t affect to co-creation, English skills are high in Finland, Finland is known for their knitting

The influence of the country of origin can be seen in different ways for all brands. Company A's country of origin has a significant impact on the brand. The brand uses the country of origin in the slogans "Jewelry from Finland" and "Handmade in Finland," which emphasizes the brand's country of origin. The company also wants to stand out in terms of its country of origin, so it has chosen Japan as its target country, where Finland

is arousing great interest. In addition, the brand utilizes themes connected to Finland in its brandings, such as nature, sustainable development, and charity, which can also be seen in the brand's jewelry collections. However, the brand mentions that they are just getting to know international consumers, which is why co-building the brand is only in the initial stages.

Company B wants to emphasize its brand as a Nordic identity, as its research suggests that the Finnish background is not very important to consumers. The company believes that the most crucial factor for consumer engagement is the product itself, and having a Nordic country of origin is seen as favorable compared to products from other countries, such as China. However, the company is aware that the country of origin presents challenges in terms of consumer engagement, as the communication is in English rather than the consumers' mother tongue, making it difficult for consumers to engage with the brand entirely.

Company C includes "Finland" in its brand's Instagram account name but does not heavily promote Finland in its marketing. Instead, it focuses on "True Nordic charm" in its slogan. The brand utilizes local designers and manages production control and logistics from its factories in Finland to emphasize its Finnish background and enhance consumer loyalty. In addition, the brand emphasizes the sustainable development related to Finland to stand out and arouse the interest of consumers, which is also a strong theme today that has gained attention among consumers (Iannuzzi, 2018, p. 17).

Company D recognizes that it could do more to highlight its country of origin, but the brand has strong Nordic roots, as Nordic countries are known for their expertise in embroidery and knitting. Finland is emphasized in the brand's operations, as marketing materials are photographed in Finnish nature. Additionally, Finnish aesthetics have generated interest in Asia, particularly Korea, and Japan, where the brand's books have sold well. Furthermore, Finland is easily approachable as a country, which is useful for inter-

national branding, as Finland is neutral and does not evoke negative feelings in consumers, as some other countries might. Additionally, Finland has a good level of English language proficiency, enabling it to reach international consumers and establish an international brand.

The country of origin has a significant impact on how consumers perceive and evaluate the products of companies A and D. For Company C, the foreign name of the brand plays a strategic role in shaping consumer views and perceptions, as national and cultural stereotypes can influence the brand's image and value (Leclerc et al., 1994, p. 263). Additionally, the country of origin affects consumers' purchasing decisions, as their associations with different countries can influence their choices, as seen in companies A and D (Magnusson et al., 2022, p. 916). Additionally, the country of origin is utilized in every brand to some extent. Company A considers it an important competitive advantage to stand out in the market, while companies B, C, and D are positioned as Nordic. Country of origin offers companies valuable aims to attract consumers and shape their attitudes and behaviors to establish distinct associations that set the brand apart from competitors (Oduro et al., 2024, p. 109).

4.5.2 International brand co-creation process

Table 6. International brand co-creation process

Company	Consumers role in brand building	Brand utilization consumers creativity, ideas, experiences	Consumer influence in creating brand value
Company A	Central role, guiding its operation	Visual look, tone of voice, social media channels, cooperation	Sharing content in social media channels, pre-loved service

		tion, considers suggestions and feedback, styling	
Company B	Important role in the brand-building process, social media,	Opinion and ideas taken into account, packaging conceptualization,	Interaction with consumers, brand materials,
Company C	Customer orientation is always present in business development	Consumers feedback are considered and taken into account, renewed brand	Interactions with the consumer, brand ambassador program
Company D	Important role as their involvement excites and motivates others	Involves consumers to co-design events, discussions, courses	Interaction with consumers, sharing consumers content in social media

All companies place great importance on the role of consumers in building their brand through social media. They consider consumer experiences and feedback when developing the brand. For instance, Company A has updated its brand's appearance to appeal to a new customer group, and Company C has also refreshed its brand to attract a new customer base. Company A shares consumer posts on social media about its products, creating interest among followers and giving its jewelry a fresh new look. Company B pays attention to consumer feedback and makes changes to its packaging based on consumer input. Company D involves consumers in brand development through joint events, allowing them to participate in design planning.

All companies prioritize creating brand value by sharing consumer content on social media. This benefits both the consumer and the company, allowing the company to achieve

many important benefits, such as increasing the brand experience, awareness, productivity, and efficiency. These advantages allow the brand to succeed in the competition (Kennedy & Guzman, 2016, p. 319). This can be seen in companies as continuous development in a way that serves consumers, for example, which combines the growth of brand value, such as Company A has implemented a new service for the resale of used jewelry, bringing added value to consumers and in addition to this, the brand shares publications made by consumers about the brand's jewelry on social media, which also aims to arouse the interest of followers and increase brand recognition. Company B emphasizes brand value with its marketing materials and active consumer interaction, which aims to influence the consumer's overall experience of the brand's products, which starts from the design of the packaging in a way that appeals to the consumer. Company C implements a brand ambassador program with micro-influencers, creating interesting content and value for consumers. The company also shares consumer feedback, which further increases the brand's value, arouses the interest of new customers, and increases the brand's reliability. Finally, Company D increases brand value by sharing consumer-generated content on social media, generating consumer interest and expanding the brand's following, which makes the content authentic, using content created by consumers, which at the same time arouses the interest of the followers and increases the purchase decision.

5 Discussion and conclusions

This section presents the study's results, which are discussed and explained. This chapter of the thesis gives the reader a conclusion of the entire research from its starting point to where it has led. The primary purpose of this chapter is to gather results from the case study and theory by reflecting them on the original objectives presented in the first chapter. This chapter also provides an answer to the research questions. At the end of this chapter, theoretical and managerial implications and possible future research areas are presented.

5.1 Summary of the findings

The study examined how consumer engagement impacts Finnish internationalized SMEs' international brand-building through social media. In the beginning, the main concepts of consumer engagement in brand-building in international SMEs were introduced by explaining the main features and theories related to these. The answers to the research questions are based on theory and interviews of the four case companies.

The main research question was, **“How do Finnish internationalized SMEs co-create brands in social media with consumers in international markets?”**

The research objectives were presented in order to understand the purpose of the research and answer the research question. *The first objective was to understand the impact of consumer engagement in social media on SMEs' international brand-building process.* All the case companies emphasized the significance of consumer engagement in their operations and on social media. They stressed that their operations are centered around meeting consumer needs. Company A mentioned, *“Without engaged consumers, there will be no revenue.”* Company B said, *“If consumers do not buy our products, it does not support the customer either.”* Company C highlighted, *“Without the consumer, our company does not exist.”* Company D noted, *“I try to make the instructions so good that*

people want to knit them and trust the designer.” The answers summarize that the consumer and their engagement with the brand are at the heart of all case companies’ operations. Because of the interactive nature of social media, brands can easily receive consumer feedback and suggestions. This feedback is important for building the brand and is reflected in every brand’s actions. Considering consumers’ feedback enables the brand to develop in a way that serves consumers’ needs and remains consumer-centric in its operations.

Social media platforms are crucial in capturing and maintaining the engagement between the brand and consumer, and every brand actively utilizes them. All brands produce interesting and engaging content on social media that provides value for consumers. Moreover, social media offers cost-effective platforms to reach international markets, which is an important factor, especially for SMEs whose resources are smaller compared to large companies. From this, it can be stated that the engagement of consumers in social media channels plays an important role in building an international brand; by utilizing social media, brands enable the pursuit of international markets and reach new consumers. However, there are differences between SMEs in how they involve their consumers in the brand’s activities on social media. These differences are influenced by the companies’ background and strategy for pursuing international markets.

The brands with the most followers on social media actively involve consumers in the brand’s activities. This creates a sense of consumer experience, fostering a strong connection to the brand. According to Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004, pp. 4-6), this is the locus of brand value co-creation, where the co-creation between customers and the company creates brand value.

The second objective was to deepen the understanding of the role of the consumer in the international brand-building process of SMEs. The theoretical part explains the concepts of consumer engagement and brand co-creation. This supports the understanding that the role of the consumer is evolving towards a brand creator, which is particularly

beneficial for SMEs. Engaged consumers enable the brand to succeed internationally (Kusi et al., 2022, p. 5; Odoom & Bedman, 2017, pp. 77-78). From the research, it can also be concluded that Company D's activities in social media effectively support international sales with the help of engaging content that involves consumers as part of the brand. One important point was also that of the case companies, company D had the most significant number of followers on Instagram, even though the company was the smallest of the companies, which is due to the importance of the authentic content produced by the company, where the content resonates strongly and engages the consumer.

The last objective was *to understand how consumer engagement in social media has shaped the brand*. The research reflected the behavior of the brands of the case companies, showing that the brands actively create content for social media to engage consumers as part of the brand. Social media content aims to be versatile and activate the consumer, making them a part of the brand. Therefore, it can be concluded that consumer engagement on social media has shaped the brand to be more interactive, focusing on the consumer (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 13).

Sub-questions of the research were:

How has consumer engagement impacted Finnish internationalized SME brand co-creation in international markets?

All companies focused on international brand orientation, as evidenced by their English-language content on social media platforms to engage international consumers. It was evident that translating content into the consumer's native language was crucial, particularly for company A in the Japanese market, as well as for content production in company B's distribution countries in their mother tongue and for company D's translation of knitting instructions and books into the native languages of their best-selling countries to reach and engage consumers.

How do social media channels influence today's Finnish internationalized SME brand-building and increase willingness to commit to the brand in the international markets?

According to the research results, Finnish SMEs are still in the early stages of creating international brands on social media. This is influenced by the factors that limit SMEs' activities and the companies' strong vision of their brands. Notably, authentic, engaging content resonates best with consumers and increases their willingness to engage with the brand.

How does a brand's country-of-origin effect affect the consumer engagement and brand co-creation process of Finnish internationalized SMEs?

The different case companies viewed the country of origin in various ways. It is a key factor in Company A's marketing, giving the brand a competitive advantage and distinctiveness in the market. In addition to this, the brand has also carefully selected its target market because Finland has a strong market position in Japan. Companies B, C, and D showed a strong Nordic approach, aiming to differentiate themselves from the competition and highlight the Nordic backgrounds of their brands. The study results suggest that brands strive to form a market profile based on their country or region of origin to gain competitive advantage and distinctiveness in the international market, which is reflected in the marketing of all case companies on social media.

5.2 Theoretical implications

The research was based on consumer engagement and the co-building of an international brand. Both theories included social media, the international market, and the country of origin to understand consumer engagement's impact on international brand building through social media. The study's findings highlighted the importance of consumer engagement in building an international brand (Cheung et al., 2020, p. 524) and the significance of social media channels (Kabadayi & Price, 2014, p. 203), particularly

for SMEs, whose background factors impose limitations on marketing activities. Additionally, the research supported the notion that SME branding is influenced by the principles of owners and managers, primarily driven by their entrepreneurial orientation, which heavily guides the brand's operations, often conducted with limited resources (Odoom & Bedman, 2017, pp. 77-78).

An important theoretical observation that emerged in the research was the significance of consumers in the co-creation of a brand, where the consumer has become a part of the brand (Fueller, 2010, p. 98; Black & Veloutsou, 2017, p. 416; Tormala & Gyrd-Jones, 2017, p. 83). This was evident in the findings, as each company involved the consumer in its operations and considered consumer feedback. Additionally, each company placed strategic importance on consumers, proving that consumers are at the core of SME operations (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 252).

Another important theoretical consideration was the influence of the country of origin, which was visible in each company in its own way. Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that companies want to be profiled either through the country of origin or the region in their marketing, which allows the company to stand out and gain a competitive advantage that is difficult to copy. The country of origin or region plays an important role in making consumers' purchase decisions and with associations related to the brand (Pecotich & Ward, 2007, p. 274; Ahmed & d'Astous, 1996, p. 93), which each brand brought out in its social media, slogans, and marketing images.

The research's theoretical framework reinforced the findings, indicating that establishing an international brand for an SME is greatly affected by the company's background factors, such as social media, international brand building, consumer engagement, and country of origin, which creates a strong base for building an international brand with consumers. Taking the consumers as a part of the brand co-creation enables the brand to succeed in the market (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016, pp. 93-94; Viglia et al., 2018, p. 404; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 5; Kennedy & Guzman, 2016, p. 319).

5.3 Managerial implications

This thesis has identified several important management implications. It highlights the importance of consumer engagement through social media in all case companies, especially SMEs looking to expand internationally through social media platforms. In addition, social media offers SMEs a cost-effective way to reach consumers and operate globally. Based on the findings, firstly, managers should focus on authentic content creation and consumer-oriented activities, where consumers are involved in different ways as part of the brand, which simultaneously binds consumers to the brand. Through these activities, brands provide consumers with a sense of experience that is crucial to the co-creation of brand value and depends on the quality of co-creation experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, pp. 4-6). This was reflected in company D's number of followers and its high share of international trade, which was 75%. Company D was the only company whose primary market was international, while the others focused primarily on the domestic market with a secondary focus on international markets.

Secondly, managers should consider the brand's country of origin in their marketing efforts as it gives the brand a competitive edge in its local market. The country of origin also communicates the brand's values, design, and development to consumers. This association with the brand's operations is important to highlight because it provides a unique and competitive advantage that is hard for competitors to imitate. However, research has shown that companies are often identified by region instead of the specific country of origin, such as focusing on the Nordic identity in a study. This emphasizes that brands are frequently linked with a particular country or region, especially for companies seeking a competitive advantage and distinctiveness in the market. Managers must consider international operations from the beginning as it allows them to differentiate themselves and gain a competitive edge that others cannot easily replicate (Volles et al., 2016, p. 206).

Finally, managers should consider sustainable development in their international operations. This can be a decisive way to stand out and gain a competitive advantage in the

global market, especially when sustainable development is still emerging compared to Finland. As concerns about climate change and excessive consumption grow, consumers are becoming more conscious of the principles of sustainable development, such as social and environmental values, which have profound effects on society as a whole (Iannuzzi, 2018, p. 17).

5.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The research has limitations because it focuses on selected Finnish internationalized SMEs, so the results cannot be generalized outside the studied SMEs. In addition, the research aims to deepen the understanding of the co-creation process of the SME brand and how consumers have influenced it. Therefore, the research focuses on the bond between companies and consumers and thus does not deal with other branding-related aspects. In addition, the research deals with the impact of consumer engagement on international brand building through social media channels, which is why it only covers the social media channels used by SMEs participating in the research and takes into account only the marketing channels that SMEs use to market the brand in the international market.

Using interviews to gather research material also presents limitations, as the responses are based on the interviewees' opinions and knowledge of the subject, which is why the research cannot be generalized. Additionally, the research interviews were conducted in Finnish, and translating the findings into English introduces limitations since the researcher made the translations based on her understanding. However, the research interviews are supported by the social media channels of the case companies and articles about the companies, which support the research's reliability and confirm the interview's veracity.

It would be interesting for future research to explore brand building by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in social media across different countries, including both smaller and larger ones. This would help compare and understand any country-specific

differences in brand-building activities. Furthermore, conducting future research from the consumer's perspective would be valuable in understanding their involvement in brand co-creation. It has been observed that consumers now have more control over brands, so it would be interesting to explore how they view current branding and their participation in brand activities and social media posts. This understanding could offer important insights for brands, helping them grasp the impact of consumer engagement on content created by brands on social media platforms. With this knowledge, brands could engage consumers in a way that helps develop the brand.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview Questions

Company's background information

1. What is the company's field of operation?
2. How large is the company?
3. In which countries the company operates beside Finland?
4. What is your position in the company?

Consumer engagement

5. How does consumer engagement appear in the company's strategy? And how does it guide the company's decisions and operations? Give an example.
6. What strategies does the brand use to maintain consumer interest and interaction on social media? Give an example.
7. How does the company consider consumers' opinions and ideas when developing new products/services? Give an example.
8. How has consumer interaction influenced the building of the company's brand? Give an example.

Social media

9. What are the main social media channels used by the company, and why?
10. How actively does the company publish and communicate on social media, and why?
11. How does the company encourage consumer interaction on social media channels? Give an example.
12. How does the company enable consumers to share their product experiences on social media? Give an example.
13. How does the company respond to consumer feedback or suggestions on social media? Give an example.

14. How does the company handle negative comments or feedback on social media? Give an example.

Brand building as co-creation

15. What role do consumers play in building a company's brand? Why?
16. How has the brand utilized consumers' creativity, ideas, or experiences in building the brand? Give an example.
17. How does the company consider consumer influence in creating brand value in its strategy? Give an example.
18. How does the company support brand co-creation with consumers? Give an example.

Country-of-origin-effects

19. How is the company's country of origin reflected in the brand's international marketing strategy? Give an example.
20. How does a brand's country of origin affect consumer engagement in international markets? Give an example.
21. How does the brand's country of origin impact the co-creation of the brand with consumers? Give an example.

International markets

22. How is consumer engagement considered in the brand's marketing strategy in the international market? Give an example.
23. How does the company preserve the brand's core essence in the international market? Give an example.