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Entrepreneurial bricolage in the branding efforts of international new ventures

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how B2B international new ventures (INVs) develop their brands through bricolage-driven improvisational practices and how these practices influence brand coherence as the ventures progress through different phases of development. Drawing on entrepreneurial bricolage and entrepreneurial branding research, the study employs a comparative, interview-based multiple case design involving eight Finnish B2B INVs. The dataset comprises 19 semi-structured interviews and firm-generated materials, analysed through an iterative and abductive coding process. The findings reveal two practices, namely identity patchworking and improvisational signalling, which show how bricolage shapes branding in resource-constrained internationalisation contexts. These practices are most visible in the transition from early to growth phases and they produce distinctive branding outcomes. Yet coherence drift is most likely when these practices accumulate without stable reference points or strategic anchoring as the venture evolves. This demonstrates that bricolage exerts a double-edged influence on B2B INV branding by fostering brand development under constraint while also producing accumulated improvisations that can erode coherence. This study contributes to B2B marketing and entrepreneurial branding research by developing a retrospective reconstruction of an inferred branding trajectory model and advancing propositions that explain how bricolage influences branding in INVs.

1. Introduction

Although a B2B international new venture (INV) may offer competitive pricing, a broad product selection, a distinctive value proposition, and efficient customer service, such advantages are unlikely to translate into market success without brand visibility. Without recognition, even the most compelling offerings may go unnoticed. Prior research highlights the critical role of branding in reducing customer uncertainty, enhancing satisfaction and trust, and fostering legitimacy in international markets (Efrat & Asseraf, 2019). In today's hypercompetitive and resource-constrained global environment, B2B INVs face mounting pressure to establish credible and differentiated brand identities from the earliest stages of internationalisation. Unlike established multinational corporations, these firms often face the liabilities of smallness, such as limited financial capital, relational assets, institutional support, and marketing infrastructure, that typically underpin strategic branding. Nevertheless, many B2B INVs manage to craft compelling brand narratives and gain legitimacy in foreign markets despite these constraints (Hirvonen, Laukkanen, & Reijonen, 2013; Sapienza, Autio, & Zahra, 2006; Zahra, 2005). This paradox invites a deeper investigation into the mechanisms that enable such firms to build and sustain brand identity under constraint.

Entrepreneurial branding, a concept that integrates entrepreneurial orientation with brand-building practices, offers a promising lens for understanding how new ventures construct brand meaning in uncertain and dynamic environments (Abimbola, 2001; Eggers, Eggers, & Kraus, 2016; Gabrielsson, 2005; Hallbäck & Gabrielsson, 2013; Kusi, Gabrielsson, & Kontkanen, 2021). Peters, Pfurtscheller, Wong, and Kraus (2010) describe entrepreneurial branding as a specialised form of corporate branding tailored to the unique characteristics of entrepreneurial firms, particularly small, innovation- or growth-oriented ventures such as INVs (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). It emphasises founder-driven storytelling, authenticity, and improvisation, which are especially salient in early-stage, resource-constrained contexts.

However, entrepreneurial branding alone does not fully account for how INVs enact their branding activities in practice, thereby necessitating an additional lens such as bricolage that captures improvisational and resource-leveraging behaviours (Baker & Nelson, 2005). This

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perspective suggests that entrepreneurial managers in INVs may engage in bricolage as a resource-orchestration mechanism to construct brand identity under constraint. Entrepreneurial bricolage, originally grounded in Lévi-Strauss's (1967) notion of bricolage and formalised in entrepreneurship research by Baker and Nelson (2005), refers to creatively "making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities" (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 333). Although entrepreneurial bricolage has been widely examined in venture creation and innovation, its implications for branding, particularly in B2B international contexts, remain underexplored. Emerging branding research nevertheless shows that bricolage-like practices can enhance brand authenticity, support grassroots storytelling, and leverage unpaid media, a process Suomi and Aro (2025) describe as 'media bricolage'. These insights reinforce the relevance of entrepreneurial bricolage for understanding how INVs construct brand identity under resource constraints.

Moreover, dominant branding frameworks such as Aaker's (1991) brand equity model, Keller's (1993) customer-based brand equity pyramid, and Kapferer's (2008) brand identity prism primarily focus on deliberate, structured brand-building processes and therefore offer limited guidance on how firms improvise brand identity under conditions of resource constraint and uncertainty (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2001). Rather than assuming stable resources or fully planned branding, these frameworks simply say little about how resource-constrained B2B INVs improvise brand elements as they navigate uncertain and rapidly evolving international markets. Despite growing recognition that resource-constrained firms rely on improvisational and resource-recombining practices, existing research has not sufficiently explored how entrepreneurial bricolage shapes branding in such contexts. Empirical work directly linking entrepreneurial bricolage to branding remains sparse, and the few existing studies (e.g., Suomi & Aro, 2025) focus primarily on tourism SMEs rather than B2B INVs or the evolution of bricolage across venture phases.

B2B INVs operate under markedly different branding and market conditions than tourism SMEs. Whereas tourism firms typically engage in consumer-facing, experience-driven branding aimed at broad audiences (Hankinson, 2004; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011), B2B INVs rely on relationship-based, credibility-intensive branding targeted at a small number of professional buyers (Beverland, Napoli, & Yakimova, 2007; Michell, King, & Reast, 2001). Their branding processes are therefore more embedded in technical signalling, trust building, and network legitimacy rather than experiential value creation (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004). Moreover, INVs face acute resource constraints and liabilities of foreignness, making bricolage and improvisation more central to their brand-building activities (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Kiss, Danis, & Cavusgil, 2012; Senyard et al., 2014). Consequently, focusing solely on tourism SMEs limits our understanding of how firms operating under severe constraints construct and develop their brands.

To advance understanding of branding under constraint, this study examines how resource-constrained B2B INVs use entrepreneurial bricolage in their branding activities and how entrepreneurs interpret the consequences of these practices for brand coherence and for signalling credibility, legitimacy, and authenticity in international markets. We identify novel bricolage behaviours that entrepreneurs use to craft brand identity and show how these behaviours influence perceptions of credibility, coherence, and legitimacy as ventures grow. By linking the enactment of bricolage to its branding consequences, we conceptualise bricolage as a double-edged process: while it enables early brand development through creative improvisation, it can also create challenges for maintaining brand coherence as firms grow and internationalize. Accordingly, we ask: How do B2B INVs engage in entrepreneurial branding through bricolage-driven improvisational practices, and how do these practices influence brand coherence across different phases of venture development?

By addressing this question, the study contributes to entrepreneurial branding and B2B marketing research (Eggers et al., 2016; Gabrielsson, 2005; Sheth & Sinha, 2015; Suomi & Aro, 2025), by explaining how resource-constrained firms build brands under uncertainty and why bricolage can simultaneously support and undermine brand coherence. It also responds to calls for more contextualized examinations of bricolage (Stenholm & Renko, 2016) and extends understanding of branding in industrial markets where credibility, consistency, and relational legitimacy are paramount.

2. Literature review

The following section reviews prior work on entrepreneurial bricolage and entrepreneurial branding to establish the conceptual foundations of our analysis.

2.1. B2B branding and industrial market distinctiveness

Branding in B2B markets differs fundamentally from consumer contexts because of the structural, relational, and risk-intensive nature of industrial exchange. Unlike consumer markets, where brands often serve symbolic and emotional functions, B2B brands primarily operate as signals of competence, credibility, reliability, and strategic consistency in high-involvement purchasing situations (Beverland, 2005; He, Huang, & Wu, 2018; Mudambi, 2002; Zhou, Ding, Feng, & Ke, 2021). Organizational buyers typically face significant financial, operational, and reputational risks, making brand credibility an important mechanism for reducing uncertainty and facilitating decision-making.

Recent research further demonstrates that B2B brand evaluations are shaped by complex organizational buying processes involving multiple stakeholders. Sarasvuo, Liljander, and Haahtela (2023) show that organizational buyers assess brand extension attractiveness not only in terms of functional fit but also through perceptions of legitimacy and the brand's ability to reduce uncertainty in service exchanges. Their findings highlight the multi-actor nature of B2B purchasing, where different members of the buying centre evaluate distinct dimensions of brand value and collectively construct judgments regarding brand suitability. Consequently, maintaining coherent and credible brand signals across organizational touchpoints becomes particularly important. This challenge may be especially pronounced for INVs, whose resource constraints often necessitate improvisational branding activities that can inadvertently generate inconsistencies across customer interactions.

The increasing digitalization of industrial markets has further elevated the importance of brand signalling through online channels. Digital touchpoints, particularly corporate websites, have become central platforms through which firms communicate expertise, market positioning, and organizational credibility. Mogaji, Restuccia, Lee, and Nguyen (2023) demonstrate that successful B2B service firms use website-based cues to project competence and strategic differentiation while simultaneously balancing pressures for consistency and responsiveness. Their findings suggest that B2B brand meaning emerges not only from deliberate positioning efforts but also from managers' ongoing adaptations to changing environmental conditions. This perspective is highly relevant to INVs, whose branding practices frequently rely on bricolage and resource improvisation. While such practices may enhance agility and responsiveness during international growth, they may also create fragmented brand messages that undermine perceptions of professionalism and strategic clarity.

Beyond influencing initial evaluations, B2B brand positioning also plays a critical role in shaping long-term relationship outcomes. Casidy and Lie (2023) demonstrate that sustainable B2B brand positioning strengthens relationship quality by enhancing trust, commitment, and perceived value among organizational buyers. Their findings suggest that industrial customers evaluate brands not solely on functional performance but also on the consistency and authenticity of the firm's market positioning over time. This relational perspective reinforces the importance of maintaining coherent brand signals throughout the customer journey. For INVs, whose branding often evolves through resource-constrained experimentation and adaptation, the accumulation of inconsistent signals may weaken the trust and reliability that underpin successful B2B relationships. Consequently, understanding how entrepreneurial firms balance the flexibility afforded by bricolage with the need for brand coherence represents an important challenge in the international B2B branding literature.

2.2. Entrepreneurial branding in B2B INVs

Research on INVs suggests that these firms evolve in phases (Coviello, 2006; Gabrielsson, Kirpalani, Dimitratos, Solberg, & Zucchella, 2008; Park & Bae, 2004; Rialp-Criado et al., 2010). For instance, Gabrielsson et al. (2008) identified three phases of development: 1) introductory, 2) growth and resource accumulation, and 3) break-out or maturity.

Branding activities evolve as INVs progress through different phases of their development, with varying levels of strategic emphasis and resource allocation. While later phases often involve more formalised marketing capabilities and deliberate brand-building processes, early-stage firms face a markedly different set of conditions (Gabrielsson, 2005; Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2009). In the introductory phase, firms concentrate primarily on developing and commercialising their initial products or services, drawing heavily on founders, creative individuals, and network relationships as their central resources (Coviello, 2006; Coviello & Munro, 1997; Gabrielsson et al., 2008; Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2009; Gupta & Chin, 1993). At this point, branding is typically not a strategic priority. Particularly in B2B contexts, firms tend to invest minimally in formal branding, focusing instead on technological refinement, customer acquisition, and establishing early market footholds (Gabrielsson, 2005).

However, this very absence of formal branding investment makes the introductory phase especially relevant for examining entrepreneurial bricolage. Resource scarcity, limited marketing capabilities, and the absence of established routines compel founders to improvise identity cues, legitimacy signals, and early market narratives using whatever symbolic, relational, and material resources are immediately available. Branding in this phase therefore emerges not through planned strategy but through improvised, bricolage-driven practices embedded in founder actions and network interactions. These improvised practices shape the nascent brand identity and influence how the firm initially constructs legitimacy in its markets. Consequently, although branding evolves across the INV's life cycle, the introductory phase offers a rich theoretical context for studying how entrepreneurial bricolage operates as a mechanism in the formation of early brand meaning.

The growth phase is marked by rapid expansion through continuous learning from partners and networks in foreign markets. These partnerships provide access to valuable information and resources, aiding in the development of marketing strategies for improved foreign market performance (Falahat, Knight, & Alon, 2018; Jie, Harms, Groen, & Jones, 2021). A key challenge in this phase is achieving sustainable growth while managing increased complexity, financial constraints, and operational scalability (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2003). Successful firms focus on developing capabilities in marketing, sales, and distribution to maintain competitive advantage. They adopt structured branding strategies and gain brand awareness, with B2B firms beginning to employ multiple branding approaches (Gabrielsson, 2005; Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2009).

The growth phase is also theoretically important because rapid international expansion introduces new forms of resource constraints and coordination challenges that cannot be solved through early-stage improvisation alone (Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2003). As firms scale across multiple markets, they face increasing demands for standardization, quality control, and cross-border integration. These pressures often require firms to adapt or transform their entrepreneurial bricolage practices rather than abandon them. In many cases, entrepreneurial bricolage becomes a selective, capability-like mechanism that helps firms creatively reconfigure emerging resources, integrate diverse partner knowledge, and respond to heterogeneous market conditions (Senyard et al., 2014; Baker & Nelson, 2005). Studying entrepreneurial bricolage in the growth stage therefore reveals how firms balance improvisation with formalisation, how they manage resource stretch during scaling, and how creative recombination supports the development of branding capabilities.

2.3. Entrepreneurial bricolage and its relationship to improvisation

While bricolage can occur in many organizational settings, our focus is on entrepreneurial bricolage that is, bricolage enacted in the context of opportunity pursuit, early internationalisation, and venture-level resource constraints (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Fisher, 2012). Entrepreneurial bricolage reflects a 'making-do' logic under constraint, whereby entrepreneurs use resources at hand, recombine them for new purposes, and take action despite limitations (Baker & Nelson, 2005). We extend this conceptualization by defining entrepreneurial bricolage as the creative recombination and deployment of resources that are available to, controlled by, or directly accessible within the firm's existing resource environment to address a problem or pursue an opportunity. Improvisation, in contrast, refers to real-time action with minimal planning, relying on spontaneous problem-solving and intuitive judgement (Baker, Miner, & Eesley, 2003; Moorman & Miner, 1998). Improvisational behaviour is most evident in the 'making-do' dimension of bricolage, yet it also underpins the creative recombination of resources and the decision to rely on what is immediately available (Baker et al., 2003). Thus, improvisation can be understood as a behavioural mode through which entrepreneurial bricolage is enacted, particularly in fast-moving and resource-constrained contexts such as B2B INVs.

2.4. Linking entrepreneurial bricolage and entrepreneurial branding

Although entrepreneurial branding and bricolage have developed as largely separate research streams, they share important conceptual foundations. Entrepreneurial branding scholarship emphasises how new ventures such as B2B INVs construct coherent identities and credible market positions (e.g., Beverland et al., 2007; Gabrielsson, 2005; Odoom, Narteh, & Boateng, 2017), while entrepreneurial bricolage research explains how entrepreneurs act under resource constraints by creatively recombining what is at hand (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Senyard et al., 2014). In early stages of B2B INVs, these processes are deeply intertwined: brand identities are not built through fully planned strategies but through improvised actions, ad-hoc decisions, and opportunistic resource use (Centeno, Hart, & Dinnie, 2013; Gabrielsson, 2005; Kusi et al., 2021; Yin Wong & Merrilees, 2007). Entrepreneurial bricolage therefore shapes branding in consequential ways, influencing which identity elements are created, how consistent they become, and what signals they send to stakeholders. Yet despite this overlap, existing studies rarely examine how improvised resource use affects brand formation or how tensions between improvisation and consistency unfold in practice. Integrating these literatures enables a more nuanced understanding of how entrepreneurial brand identities emerge and sometimes drift as B2B INVs navigate severe resource constraints, where early bricolage can support brand development but accumulated improvisation may gradually undermine coherence.

3. Methodology

Having established the theoretical foundations of entrepreneurial bricolage in branding, we now turn to the methodological approach used to examine these dynamics empirically. The study adopts a comparative, interview-based multiple-case design and is explorative in nature. This approach is well suited to addressing 'how' questions and uncovering the occurrence and meaning of phenomena in emerging contexts (Yin, 2018). This approach facilitates theory building and proposition generation (Birkinshaw, Brannen, & Tung, 2011; Chandra & Shang, 2019; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Pratt, 2009; Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2011), aligning with our aim of developing conceptual insights into how INVs engage in branding under constraint through entrepreneurial bricolage. While each firm is treated as a case, the depth of evidence varies across firms. The analysis draws on one or two interviews per firm. In addition to the interview data, we collected publicly available material from firms' websites, official social media accounts, blogs, and other relevant company documents. These materials were used to provide contextual information about the firms, their international activities, and the branding environments in which the interview accounts were situated. They also enabled us to verify factual information and compare interview accounts with publicly visible organizational communications where relevant. However, these materials were not formally coded as part of the qualitative coding procedure and did not constitute an independent dataset from which theoretical categories were generated. Thus, triangulation occurred through the use of multiple sources during data collection and interpretation, rather than through the integration of multiple datasets within the coding process.

The research design is cross-sectional with retrospective elements, combining participants' recollections of prior events with evidence concerning the firms' organizational and branding contexts at the time of the study. Accordingly, the study does not directly observe branding development over time. Rather, temporal patterns were reconstructed retrospectively from participants' accounts of how their branding practices and resource use changed across different periods of firm development. The temporal relationships presented in the analysis should therefore be understood as analytically inferred trajectories rather than directly observed longitudinal processes. In the following section, we outline the key elements of our study's methodology.

3.1. Case selection

The cases were identified through an initial search in a company database known as Startup 100 in Finland (https://startup100.net/). Finland offers an interesting setting for investigating early internationalisation, being a small, open economy with a tradition of early international market entry, and with many SMEs operating internationally (Knight & Liesch, 2016; Luostarinen, 1994). To ensure alignment with our research objectives, the selection process followed a structured, multi-step filtering procedure. From the original pool of approximately 400 firms listed over a 12-month period, we applied broad screening criteria to identify companies that (1) operated in B2B markets, (2) exhibited international market activity, and (3) demonstrated clear evidence of branding efforts. This narrowed the pool to 42 firms.

Regarding the criterion of international market activity, we followed purposeful sampling principles (Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki, 2011; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018) and developed specific criteria for case selection. First, firms had to enter foreign markets within their first three years of operation through export or other entry modes and achieve an internationalisation rate of 25% or more (Knight & Cavusgil, 2004; Knight & Liesch, 2016; Oviatt & McDougall, 1994). To allow for a richer examination of early internationalisation processes, we also included firms that had not yet generated international sales but had secured formal sales agreements pending country-specific certifications and approvals. These firms were not treated as exceptions; rather, the internationalisation criterion was applied in a manner consistent with the realities of early-stage INVs, where market commitments often precede revenue generation. Such agreements signal genuine international market engagement and are widely recognised as legitimate indicators of early internationalisation (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994; Cavusgil & Knight, 2015; Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2011).

Second, firms had to be in either the introductory or growth phase, enabling us to compare branding activities across different stages of INV development. The phase classification was informed by the INV lifecycle literature (Gabrielsson, 2005; Gabrielsson & Gabrielsson, 2009) and based on a combination of international market activity, organizational development, branding practices, and resource configurations. Firms were classified as being in the introductory phase when they had recently launched or commercialised their products or services, were in the early stages of foreign market engagement, relied heavily on founders and network relationships, and exhibited limited organizational formalisation. Consistent with prior research, branding activities in these firms tended to be informal, founder-driven, and secondary to product development, customer acquisition, and market entry efforts. Firms were classified as being in the growth phase when they had established customer relationships in foreign markets, generated recurring international sales, and developed more formalised organizational structures and business processes. These firms demonstrated increasing investment in marketing and sales capabilities, greater organizational specialisation, and more deliberate branding activities aimed at supporting international expansion. Classification decisions were based on interview data, company documents, websites, and other digital artefacts.

Although the sampled firms were founded between 2010 and 2024, all satisfied established INV criteria by internationalising within the first three years of operation and maintaining a strong international orientation. Consistent with the INV literature, classification was therefore based on the timing and nature of internationalisation rather than firm age at the time of data collection. We nevertheless applied an upper age limit of 15 years to reduce validity concerns associated with retrospective recall while retaining firms capable of reflecting on their early internationalisation experiences.

Importantly, the branding improvisations and bricolage activities analysed in this study relate to the firms' formative internationalisation period rather than their mature stages of development. Interview questions and supplementary data collection focused specifically on early market entry, initial international expansion, identity formation, and legitimacy-building activities undertaken under conditions of resource scarcity and uncertainty. Consequently, the observed bricolage is entrepreneurial in both intent and consequence, reflecting the adaptive branding practices through which INVs navigated their early internationalisation journeys. Next, we conducted a more focused screening using publicly available information, including company websites, press releases, and online blogs, to assess branding strategies and international orientation in greater depth. Firms lacking sufficient branding visibility or operating primarily in domestic markets were excluded, leaving 15 candidates.

Finally, we contacted founders at the shortlisted firms via email and LinkedIn to invite their participation. Eight firms agreed and met the final inclusion criteria: active engagement in international markets, ongoing branding efforts, and willingness to provide in-depth insights through interviews. Rather than relying on numerical thresholds, the sample size reflects the logic of comparative, mechanism-oriented inquiry. Contemporary qualitative methodology emphasises the alignment between the research question and the comparative logic of the design rather than adherence to fixed case counts (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Small, 2009). The eight firms provide sufficient heterogeneity to observe meaningful variation in how the focal process unfolds across different organizational contexts. This variation is analytically valuable because it enables the identification, refinement, and boundary specification of the proposed mechanism. To minimise recall bias and ensure comparability across cases, all selected firms came from the Finnish high-tech B2B sector. This empirical setting allowed us to examine how key theoretical constructs influence firm behaviour under conditions of minimal country- and sector-level variation. We consider the B2B sector particularly relevant due to its unique branding challenges compared to B2C contexts, such as cultivating long-term relationships, differentiating from competitors, and enhancing value perception (Chang, Wang, & Arnett, 2018; Gabrielsson, 2005). For confidentiality purposes, the firms were anonymised as Earth, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Pluto, Venus, Neptune, and Uranus. Table 1 provides an overview of the case firms.

3.2. Data collection

To enhance the credibility of our findings and achieve triangulation, we employed different forms of data collection (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Yin, 2018). These included two rounds of semi-structured face-to-face interviews, firms' webpages, social media platforms, blogs, and internal company documents. The first round took place across 2023, 2024, and 2025, during which the initial set of interviews was conducted. The second round was completed in 2026 to capture follow-up insights and developments within the firms. All interviews were conducted by a single researcher, ensuring consistency in questioning, probing, and interaction across cases. The two rounds of interviews were conducted to enrich our retrospective understanding of temporal and processual aspects of entrepreneurial branding in the participating firms. The first round captured broadly on entrepreneurs' experiences of international branding, resource constraints, improvisational practices, brand identity development, and market signalling. Questions were intentionally open-ended to enable participants to describe their experiences in their own terms and to avoid imposing predetermined theoretical categories. This round generated initial insights into how entrepreneurs adapted branding activities under conditions of uncertainty and resource scarcity. The second-round interview guide introduced additional questions concerning temporal variations in branding adaptation, the maintenance of brand continuity, changes in branding direction, and the contextual conditions influencing branding improvisation. Prior to the interviews, we carefully designed and piloted the interview guide to check for inconsistencies, thereby ensuring the study's dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the interviews, we followed the guide to ensure consistency in questioning while allowing flexibility to probe for emerging themes, insights, and nuances. We also used firm-generated materials, such as websites, blogs, and internal documents, to verify information during the interviews, helping to minimise bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1981) (See Online Appendix 1 for the overview of empirical materials). This strategy further reduced recall bias (Huber & Power, 1985; Miller, Cardinal, & Glick, 1997) by grounding our analysis of entrepreneurial branding and bricolage in concrete, documented evidence, rather than relying solely on memory. The interview guide focused on the firm's background and international activities, the evolution of branding from early to later stages, resource constraints affecting branding, and how ventures used, acquired, or repurposed internal and external resources to support branding under conditions of improvisation and bricolage (See Online Appendix 2). The empirical evidence is based primarily on entrepreneurs' and managers' accounts of their branding practices and interpretations of their consequences. The study does not include direct data from customers, buyers, partners, investors, or other external stakeholders. Accordingly, statements concerning credibility, legitimacy, authenticity, or stakeholder responses are interpreted as participants' perceptions, expectations, or intended signalling outcomes rather than as direct evidence of how external stakeholders actually evaluated the firms or their brands. Table 2 provides an overview of the data collection process.

3.3. Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics' guidelines for responsible conduct of research, the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and relevant Finnish legislation concerning the processing of personal data. Given the nature of the study and its minimal risk to participants, ethical approval was not required under Finnish institutional frameworks.[1] Participants were fully informed about the purpose, methods, and voluntary nature of the study. Further oral informed consent was obtained prior to their participation. Data were collected, handled, and stored in accordance with applicable data protection regulations to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

3.4. Data analyses

Only the interview transcripts were subjected to formal qualitative coding. The analysis involved iterative coding and comparison of interview accounts to identify patterns in how entrepreneurs described resource constraints, the use and recombination of available resources, branding actions, and their perceived consequences. Supplementary digital and documentary materials were not included in this coding procedure and were therefore not used to generate first-order codes, higher-order categories, or theoretical propositions. The data analyses apply an embedded case study design containing two sub-units of analysis, namely the firm and the entrepreneur (Kusi et al., 2021; Yin, 2018). This allowed us to understand how branding activities were influenced by the entrepreneur and by the firm. Each venture is treated as a case because it represents a bounded, theoretically meaningful instance of improvised branding under resource constraints. Following established qualitative case study logic, the designation of a case is based on the analytical purpose and unit of analysis rather than the number of interviews conducted (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

We transcribed our audio-recorded interviews verbatim into Microsoft Word format. Prior to analyzing the interview scripts (i.e., textual data), we provided a summary report to each interviewee to check the accuracy of the information. In line with recent calls in international business research for deeper theorizing through inductive and process-oriented inquiry (Eisenhardt, 2020; Magnani & Gioia, 2023; Welch, Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, Piekkari, & Plakoyiannaki, 2022; Welch & Piekkari, 2017), the analysis followed an iterative and abductive process involving continuous movement between the empirical material and emerging theoretical interpretations (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Although the study sought to develop theory through close engagement with participants' accounts, it did not begin from a theory-free position. Instead, the analysis followed an abductive logic that combined openness to empirically emerging patterns with ongoing engagement with relevant theoretical ideas.

Preliminary coding of the first-round interviews revealed recurring patterns in participants' accounts. These included periods in which branding activities became particularly intense and improvised, difficulties in maintaining coherence while adapting branding activities, and instances in which branding practices gradually moved away from their original direction. These observations informed further theoretical reflection and shaped the second round of interviews. More focused probing questions were introduced to examine these emerging phenomena in greater depth and to refine developing explanations.

These questions were not intended to validate predefined constructs. Rather, they supported continued exploration of emerging patterns and facilitated a more detailed examination of participants' experiences. The concepts later labelled *episodic spikes* and *coherence drift* were not incorporated into the original interview protocol. Instead, they emerged through analysis of the first-round interviews and were subsequently

[1] See Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK), "Ethical review in human sciences," available at: [https://tenk.fi/en/advice-and-materials/guidelines-ethical-review-human-sciences] (https://tenk.fi/en/advice-and-materials/guidelines-ethical-review-human-sciences)

Table 1
Background of the B2B INV Case Firms.

Firm	Founded	Industry / Offering	Founders	Employees	International Markets	Foreign Sales within 3 Years	Development Phase
Mercury	2015	Fire systems supervision and commissioning	1	2	Thailand, Curaçao, Jordan, Indonesia, Zambia, Ethiopia, Togo, Mozambique, Cameroon	95%	Growth
Venus	2016	Brand licensing management	2	12	USA, Nordic Region, Canada	70%	Growth
Mars	2012	Energy competencies and lean principles consulting	1	4	Japan, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Czech Republic, Norway	33%	Growth
Earth	2014	Industrial equipment cleaning	2	18	Thailand, Japan, Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Sweden, USA	25%	Growth
Jupiter	2015	Industrial lighting systems	2	4	Norway, Denmark, UK, Canada, USA	35%	Growth
Pluto	2024	Plant-protein production technology	1	5	Partnerships in Europe, North America, Asia, and Africa	Pre-commercial international partnerships	Introductory
Neptune	2010	Sales and marketing consulting	3	248	Europe, Asia, North America	75%	Growth
Uranus	2024	Recycled down feather supplier	1	2	Estonia, Sweden	25%	Introductory

Note: All firms entered foreign markets within three years of founding and met the study's internationalisation criteria. Firms were classified into introductory and growth phases based on international market activity, customer development, organizational formalisation, and branding development rather than chronological age.

Table 2
Data Collection Process.

Firm	Round 1 Interviews	Round 2 Interviews	Total Interviewees	Total Interview Time	Secondary Data Sources
Mercury	1 interview	1 interview	2	2 h 24 m	Website, social media
Venus	2 interviews	1 interview	3	3 h 02 m	Website, social media
Mars	1 interview	1 interview	2	2 h 05 m	Website, blog, social media
Earth	2 interviews	1 interview	3	2 h 30 m	Website, social media
Jupiter	2 interviews	1 interview	3	2 h 03 m	Website, social media
Pluto	1 interview	1 interview	2	2 h 05 m	Website, social media
Neptune	1 interview	1 interview	2	2 h 20 m	Website, social media
Uranus	1 interview	1 interview	2	2 h 15 m	Website, social media

elaborated through additional empirical inquiry and theoretical interpretation.

Consistent with prior case-based studies of internationalising firms (e.g., Freeman, Hutchings, & Chetty, 2012), the analysis employed open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All coding was conducted by a single researcher, ensuring consistency in the application of codes, interpretation of meanings, and progression from first-order descriptive codes to higher-order analytical categories (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Gioia et al., 2013). Analytical rigor was supported through iterative comparison of codes (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), memo writing (Saldaña, 2021), and continual refinement of the emerging data structure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Significant sentences and phrases were initially assigned descriptive open codes, which were subsequently grouped into axial categories and integrated into higher-order themes through selective coding.

Given the conceptual proximity of entrepreneurial bricolage to practices such as networking, resource acquisition, and resource orchestration, explicit criteria were used to distinguish bricolage from related activities. An activity was classified as bricolage when participants described: (1) a resource constraint or emerging opportunity; (2) reliance on resources already available or readily accessible; and (3) the creative recombination, redeployment, or repurposing of those resources to achieve a new objective. Activities that primarily involved acquiring external resources, accessing institutional support, or drawing on network relationships were not treated as bricolage unless participants described how available resources were subsequently adapted, recombined, or repurposed for a novel use.

To trace the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial bricolage shaped branding practices, analysis began with open coding of resource constraints, available resources, resource deployment, improvised responses, branding practices, and perceived challenges. Rather than imposing predefined relationships on the data, the coding process remained attentive to how participants described and connected these experiences. Categories were developed through continuous comparison within and across cases and were progressively refined through engagement with relevant theoretical literature.

Several broad sensitizing areas informed the interview guide, including branding coherence, inconsistency, and temporal variation in improvisation. However, their specific manifestations, relationships, and theoretical significance were not predetermined. Repeated within- and cross-case comparison revealed a recurring pattern in which individually beneficial bricolage-based branding actions accumulated over time without sufficient integration, contributing to growing inconsistencies in brand identity. Through iterative engagement with both the empirical material and theoretical explanations, this pattern was developed into the higher-order concept of *coherence drift*. Similarly, while the possibility of temporally concentrated episodes of improvisation was anticipated as an area of inquiry, the conditions under which such episodes intensified and their consequences for branding practices and coherence were identified and refined during analysis.

Through this process, activities involving the creative use and transformation of available resources in branding became increasingly salient and were grouped into broader conceptual categories. The analytical categories of *identity patchworking and improvisational signalling,* together with the higher-order concept of *coherence drift*, were developed through repeated comparison across cases and engagement with relevant theory. The same process was used to refine additional themes, including the developmental phases of INVs and the boundary conditions shaping entrepreneurial bricolage in branding. Throughout the analysis, emerging interpretations were continually checked against the empirical material, allowing the final conceptualization to evolve through ongoing interaction between participants' accounts, cross-case patterns, and theoretical explanation (See Online Appendix 3 for the data structure).

4. Results

With the methodological approach established, we now turn to the empirical findings that emerged from our analysis. The findings draw on participants' retrospective accounts to reconstruct how bricolage-based branding practices differed across periods associated with the firms' development. The analysis identifies recurring patterns in how entrepreneurs described using available resources to address branding challenges during introductory and growth-related periods. These patterns should be interpreted as retrospectively reconstructed trajectories rather than directly observed developmental sequences.

4.1. Development phases of the case firms

Our findings indicate that the case firms are situated at different points in their development. Uranus and Pluto are in the introductory phase. Uranus, with a lean team of two employees, has completed lab-scale pilots and is preparing for commercial rollout, supported by over €150 K in seed funding. As the entrepreneur noted, the firm is building brand awareness through partnerships such as Joutsen and VTT, refining its technology, and exploring new channels and international opportunities. Similarly, Pluto remains in an early stage, focused on validating its technology, attracting partners and investors, and preparing for scale.

In contrast, Mars, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Neptune, and Jupiter have entered the growth phase, marked by international expansion and strategic development. Mars has moved from early foreign trade toward competence development and long-term positioning. Earth demonstrates sustained momentum through sales growth and expanded global delivery. Venus has scaled rapidly, gaining international recognition and visibility. Mercury shows a broad operational presence across regions, though with some capacity constraints. Neptune illustrates structured scaling through strategic partnerships, strengthening its position in the European market. Finally, Jupiter adopted a calculated route to global expansion, entering European markets via a distribution alliance and identifying high-potential regions outside its home base.

Overall, these cases reflect varied but deliberate growth trajectories shaped by internationalisation, partnership formation, and capacity building, which are key characteristics of this phase of development.

4.2. Entrepreneurial bricolage-driven improvisational practices and branding

Importantly, not every resource accessed through external relationships was treated as an instance of bricolage. The cases also revealed networking, institutional support, and access to external expertise. These activities expanded the firms' resource base but were analytically distinguished from bricolage unless the evidence demonstrated the creative recombination or repurposing of available resources in addressing a branding problem.

4.2.1. Identity Patchworking

Identity patchworking refers to the bricolage-driven process through which entrepreneurial firms mobilise resources at hand, repurpose internal capabilities, and assemble brand elements from what is immediately accessible under conditions of constraint. While this approach can generate early branding momentum, it often produces fragmented and loosely connected identity cues, particularly when adaptations occur without an overarching brand frame. Across the cases, patchworking differed in structure and sophistication, reflecting variation in the types of resources entrepreneurs could creatively recombine and the extent to which these efforts were later complemented by more formalised practices.

In the introductory phase, Neptune's patchworking remained largely internally bounded. With limited branding expertise and financial resources, the entrepreneur relied on basic in-house capabilities to design a simple logo and iteratively refine it using low-cost tools. As the founder explained, *"We began by designing a simple logo… When the initial feedback wasn't encouraging, we responded by making small adjustments…"*. These repeated adaptations illustrate a pragmatic make-do logic in which branding elements were continuously reworked using whatever tools and skills were immediately available. While this experimentation helped the firm gradually improve its market presentation, it also generated a succession of loosely connected identity cues, making it difficult to project a consistent image and increasing the risk of coherence drift.

Earth exhibited the most intensive form of patchworking during its early development. Lacking branding expertise, the founders repeatedly redesigned their website by experimenting with colours, imagery, and typography using readily available digital tools. As one founder noted, *"We frequently changed the colours, background photos and font styles… it felt productive… but we weren't moving forward"*. These efforts reflect bricolage rather than deliberate outsourcing, as the firm relied on internal trial-and-error rather than acquiring new external resources. However, the continual reworking of visual elements produced inconsistent brand signals over time. During the growth phase, particularly when entering the U.S. market, Earth also drew on an MIT internship programme to access additional expertise and support for its branding activities. Rather than classifying access to the programme itself as bricolage, we interpret the institutional connection as an external resource that expanded the firm's available resource base. Bricolage occurred only to the extent that Earth subsequently recombined or repurposed the knowledge, skills, or outputs made available through this connection with its existing branding resources to address specific branding challenges. Thus, the institutional programme provided a resource context for bricolage rather than constituting bricolage in itself.

Venus relied on socially embedded bricolage by repurposing existing personal ties as branding resources. A trusted colleague informally designed the firm's early logo and website, and during international expansion, Venus also drew on insights and assistance available through its existing customer relationships when adapting elements of its branding for foreign markets. As the entrepreneur explained, *"Some of our customers helped us with translations because we didn't have the resources to hire anyone"*. Access to customer assistance alone was not classified as bricolage. Instead, the activity was treated as bricolage only where the firm creatively repurposed knowledge and resources already available through these relationships to address new localization and branding challenges. Where customers merely provided translation or external assistance, these activities were treated as network-enabled resource access rather than instances of bricolage. Importantly, these contributions enhanced the contextual relevance and linguistic credibility of the firm's communications, enabling Venus to project a more authentic and culturally appropriate brand image despite limited resources.

Mercury combined internal resource redeployment with bricolage-consistent use of accessible external guidance. In the early phase, employees with basic design skills were reassigned to branding tasks, illustrating internal bricolage. During expansion into China, the firm drew on support from Merinova's China office. This did not involve acquiring new resources but rather creatively leveraging an existing organizational relationship to navigate branding and legal requirements. This hybrid approach reflects a more structured and strategically augmented form of patchworking while remaining grounded in the bricolage logic of repurposing what is already available.

Similarly, Pluto, Jupiter, Mars, and Uranus addressed financial constraints by creatively repurposing existing digital assets, particularly social media platforms, and by mobilising employees' personal networks as branding resources. Rather than investing in paid advertising, these firms encouraged user-generated content and relied on organic reach to build visibility. As Jupiter's entrepreneur noted, *"We didn't have the money, but we acted smartly… we used employees' private social media* *channels…"*. Pluto likewise emphasised the value of stakeholder-generated content: *"We focused on maximizing user-generated content and leveraging organic reach to strengthen our brand presence…"*. Participants perceived these practices to represent digital bricolage, as the firms transformed existing social relationships and freely available digital tools into branding assets, generating social proof and enhancing perceived credibility in foreign markets.

Comparatively, Earth and Mercury demonstrate more structured and externally informed forms of patchworking in later stages, where accessible institutional or knowledge-based support helped stabilise identity development. In contrast, Neptune, Venus, Pluto, and Jupiter relied more heavily on internally driven or socially embedded bricolage, which tended to remain more ad hoc and episodic. Overall, while patchworking across all firms reflects entrepreneurial resourcefulness, its effectiveness increases when bricolage is progressively complemented by accessible expertise and more formalised practices during expansion.

4.2.2. Improvisational signalling across the firms

Improvisational signalling refers to the rapid, low-cost branding actions through which entrepreneurial firms communicate identity, legitimacy, and contextual fit using the resources immediately at hand. Under conditions of constraint, such improvisation enables firms to appear responsive and engaged, yet its effects vary depending on how bounded, selective, and strategically anchored these actions are. In early stages, improvisation often substitutes for formal strategy, whereas in later stages it may either stabilise into more deliberate signalling or continue to generate ambiguity, shaping how entrepreneurs perceived or manage stakeholders' interpretation of brand cues.

In the introductory phase, Neptune relied heavily on improvised brand elements, such as a simple logo, a basic mission statement, and continuous visual adjustments, to signal an emerging identity. These actions were driven by a make-do logic, using whatever tools and skills were readily available. As the entrepreneur reflected, *"We began with a simple logo… we fell into a cycle of tinkering… without real progression"*. While these improvised signals conveyed entrepreneurial authenticity, their reactive and uncoordinated nature limited strategic coherence. As Neptune moved into the growth phase, signalling became more deliberate as the firm drew on the established reputation of its subsidiary to enhance credibility in new markets, illustrating a shift from reactive improvisation toward more intentional identity construction.

Earth demonstrated the most intensive form of improvisational signalling in its early development. Frequent website redesigns were used to project dynamism and responsiveness, despite the absence of a stable brand direction. As the entrepreneur noted, *"We were frequently changing the colours… it felt productive… but we weren't moving forward"*. These improvised signals relied on readily available digital tools rather than external resource acquisition, aligning with bricolage. During expansion, improvisation became partially structured through the incorporation of outputs from MIT interns, an accessible, low-cost institutional tie. This allowed Earth to project greater professionalism while maintaining cost efficiency. However, the high frequency of changes risked generating noise rather than clarity, illustrating how improvisational signalling can contribute to coherence drift when not anchored in a broader brand frame.

Venus adopted a more selective and contextually grounded approach across both phases. In early development, improvisation was modest and embedded in existing social resources. During expansion, the firm used bilingual customer input and incremental localisation adjustments as targeted signals of cultural fit. As the entrepreneur explained, *"We gathered feedback from bilingual customers… adjusted our brand communication… and added a language option…"*. These actions represent bounded improvisation: they repurposed accessible customer insights to enhance contextual relevance without destabilising the overall identity. The entrepreneur described Venus's improvised signals as intended to communicate credibility and cultural alignment while maintaining coherence in the firm's branding. However, because the study does not include direct stakeholder evidence, these findings reflect entrepreneurs' interpretations of the likely signalling implications of these practices rather than verified changes in stakeholder perceptions.

Uranus relied extensively on improvised, platform-based signalling during its early stage, particularly through LinkedIn. As the entrepreneur noted, *"LinkedIn became our launchpad… we used it to share progress… and connect directly with stakeholders"*. This bricolage-consistent use of freely available digital tools enabled rapid visibility but also revealed the limitations of algorithm-driven exposure, where signals lacking immediate traction quickly lost visibility. As the entrepreneur explained, *"We saw that it was not enough, as most posts that did not trigger fast engagement were quickly buried"*. As the firm moved toward growth, supported by pre-seed funding, this reliance highlighted the need to transition from platform-contingent improvisation to more controlled and strategically coherent communication mechanisms.

Across the cases, Neptune, Earth, and Uranus demonstrate more intensive and continuous forms of improvisational signalling, particularly in early stages where improvisation often substitutes for strategic clarity. Even during growth, their signalling remains relatively volatile, reflecting ongoing identity formation and the absence of a stable brand anchor. By contrast, Venus employs improvisation more selectively and purposefully across both phases, grounding signals in customer feedback and contextual adaptation. This results in more stable and credibility-enhancing signalling, suggesting that the effectiveness of improvisation increases when it is bounded, contextually informed, and progressively integrated with emerging strategic intent.

4.2.3. Coherence drift across the firms

Coherence drift refers to the gradual misalignment that occurs when repeated improvisation accumulates without strategic integration. Coherence drift was most evident in Neptune, Earth, and Uranus. In these firms, repeated branding adjustments accumulated without a stable strategic anchor, producing incremental misalignment rather than coherent progression. Neptune explicitly recognised this pattern. Continuous minor modifications to brand elements created what the entrepreneur described as a "cycle of tinkering" without strategic advancement. Although the entrepreneur used the language of tinkering, coherence drift is analytically distinct from the "tinkering trap": the tinkering trap refers to the behavioural cycle of excessive iteration, whereas coherence drift captures the *branding consequences* of accumulated, uncoordinated adjustments. As the entrepreneur reflected, *"We began with a simple logo and a clear mission… we responded by making small adjustments… we fell into a cycle of tinkering… without real progression"*. This recognition prompted a shift toward more structured branding during the growth phase, including the adoption of professional design elements (e.g., a sans-serif typeface from the Finnish type foundry Schick Toikka).

Neptune also relied on existing relationships with organizations such as Slush and the University of Vaasa as part of its broader resource environment. As the entrepreneur noted, *"Based on feedback from colleagues and partners, we rebranded ourselves using a sans-serif typeface from Finnish type foundry Schick Toikka, defined a coherent brand strategy, and strategically leveraged our partnerships with Slush and the University of Vaasa to enhance brand credibility and visibility"*. However, the existence of these partnerships or access to their reputational benefits was not, in itself, classified as bricolage. Such relationships constituted externally accessible network resources. They were considered part of bricolage only when the empirical evidence demonstrated that Neptune creatively combined or redeployed resources available through these relationships with its own existing resources to address a specific branding challenge.

Earth exhibited a similar pattern of early-stage coherence drift. Frequent website changes created an illusion of progress but ultimately generated negative user feedback, revealing the limitations of uncoordinated experimentation. Although these adjustments did not constitute a full "tinkering trap," they nonetheless accumulated into branding inconsistencies, illustrating how coherence drift can emerge even without excessive iteration. This prompted the firm to participate in the BID4E project, which provided accessible guidance and supported the development of a more coherent brand strategy. As the entrepreneur explained, *"After receiving negative feedback… we participated in… BID4E… to build our brand identity. It was a turning point"*. Further reflection revealed that the firm's use of Google Ads, social media, and magazine advertising communicated fragmented messages that were not aligned with its intended positioning. In response, Earth reduced dispersed promotional activities and prioritised partnerships with companies and service providers whose values and market positioning were perceived as more compatible with its desired identity. These relationships provided more consistent signals through which the firm sought to communicate legitimacy, and helped reinforce a coherent brand narrative across communication channels.

Uranus demonstrated another form of coherence drift through its heavy reliance on platform-contingent signalling. The firm used social media to communicate funding progress, articulate its mission to transform plant-protein production, and engage with stakeholders such as food manufacturers, investors, and sustainability-oriented actors. However, this approach proved unstable, as visibility depended heavily on platform dynamics. As the entrepreneur noted, *"Most of our posts that did not trigger fast engagement were quickly buried"*. Over time, the need to improvise content to fit the norms and algorithms of different platforms created inconsistencies in how the brand was presented. On Twitter, the firm relied on short, reactive updates designed to maintain visibility, whereas on LinkedIn it communicated longer, mission-driven narratives targeted at investors and industry partners. While each adaptation was individually rational, their cumulative effect was the production of divergent brand cues across communication channels. These platform-specific adjustments accumulated during the introductory phase, gradually fragmenting the firm's brand narrative and pulling it away from a coherent identity. Importantly, this pattern reflects coherence drift rather than a tinkering trap: the firm was not excessively iterating on branding elements but was reactively adapting to platform constraints, which nonetheless generated incremental misalignment over time.

In contrast, the remaining firms exhibited limited evidence of coherence drift because their improvisational branding activities remained anchored to relatively stable reference points. Venus maintained alignment by grounding branding decisions in customer feedback and local cultural expectations, allowing the firm to adapt its communications while preserving a consistent core identity. As a result, branding adjustments reinforced rather than fragmented stakeholder perceptions. Mercury similarly avoided substantial drift because its bricolage activities were supported by strong social capital and accessible institutional relationships, which provided external validation and strategic guidance during international expansion. These resources helped ensure that branding adaptations remained consistent with the firm's broader positioning despite changing market requirements. Jupiter and Pluto also maintained coherence by adopting a more focused approach to social-media-based branding. Rather than continuously altering brand narratives across platforms, they relied on user-generated content and organic reach to reinforce existing brand meanings. Because these signals originated from customers and stakeholder communities, the entrepreneurs interpreted these signals as supporting the credibility and legitimacy of the emerging brand. These interpretations reflected entrepreneurs' views of how such signals could influence external audiences rather than direct evidence of how customers or other stakeholders actually perceived the brands.

Collectively, these cases suggest that coherence drift is most likely when improvisation occurs without stable reference points or strategic anchoring, as seen in Neptune, Earth, and Uranus. In contrast, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter, and Pluto demonstrate that bricolage does not inherently lead to drift when improvisation is guided by external feedback, accessible expertise, or an emerging strategic intent.

4.2.4. Episodic spikes in improvised branding

Retrospective accounts across the cases further suggest periods in which entrepreneurs described a marked increase or decrease in their reliance on improvised branding actions. We refer to these inferred fluctuations as episodic spikes. Rather than representing directly observed temporal episodes, episodic spikes constitute an analytical interpretation of recurring variations reconstructed from participants' accounts of changing branding activities and resource constraints. These spikes are not mechanisms in themselves but intensifiers that amplify or dampen identity patchworking, improvisational signalling, and coherence drift. In the cases, episodic spikes were triggered by acute events such as early stage identity shocks, unexpected opportunities, or rapid expansion. During these brief, high pressure intervals, entrepreneurs were compelled to rely either more heavily, or in some instances more sparingly, on bricolage in branding, thereby altering the observable intensity of the underlying mechanisms.

In the early phases of Earth, a pronounced upward spike in visibility followed the firm's victory in an elevator pitch competition at SLUSH in 2015. As the entrepreneur recalled, *"After winning the award, we suddenly saw a surge of people visiting our sites… and, motivated by this, we began posting whatever we could produce quickly: raw testimonials, unpolished videos, founder messages recorded on the spot. It was pure improvisation"*. The spike heightened improvisational signalling, making improvised content unusually visible to stakeholders and accelerating early identity patchworking as new cues were assembled rapidly.

In Mercury, similar upward spikes occurred in both the introductory and growth phases. In the introductory phase, a sudden expression of interest from a major fire systems distributor forced the team into rapid improvisation: *"We had to look like a real company overnight… we just threw together a landing page, a logo variation, and a pitch deck in two days"*. Later, during expansion into Curaçao, the entrepreneur described how the abrupt shift in context intensified bricolage: *"When we went to Curaçao, everything spiked… It was chaos, but we had no choice"*. This spike accelerated identity patchworking as improvised elements were assembled in days rather than months, amplified improvisational signalling as raw cues became more visible to local stakeholders, and increased coherence drift because the compressed timeframe made integration into the existing brand logic difficult. Mercury thus illustrates how upward spikes magnify the branding consequences of bricolage under acute pressure.

A similar but more controlled upward spike emerged when another firm expanded its foreign operations. As the entrepreneur explained, *"When we expanded abroad, everything sped up at once. We improvised messages, rushed out testimonials, and reused whatever visuals we had… our identity started to feel scattered"*. Here, bricolage intensified as the team made do with available materials, producing a rapid layering of new identity cues. The spike heightened improvisational signalling and increased coherence drift by temporarily pulling the brand away from its strategic anchor. Although less chaotic than Mercury, this case shows that opportunity driven spikes intensify the branding effects of bricolage.

In contrast, Uranus experienced a downward spike triggered by a sudden increase in resources. As the entrepreneur explained, *"After raising €1.8 million in pre seed funding… bricolage dropped. We finally had resources to plan instead of improvise"*. This resource shock dampened bricolage, thereby weakening the three mechanisms: identity patchworking slowed, improvisational signalling diminished, and coherence drift decreased as decisions became more strategically integrated. Uranus demonstrates that spikes can also reduce the intensity of bricolage's branding effects when resource constraints are lifted.

In sum, episodic spikes do not introduce new mechanisms but temporarily intensify or weaken the three core ones. Across the cases, upward spikes amplified the branding effects of bricolage under heightened pressure, while downward spikes dampened them as resources became more available.

4.2.5. Cross-firm variation and boundary conditions

Across the cases, bricolage in branding varied because each industrial environment created its own limits and possibilities. Firms improvised for broadly similar reasons such as scarce resources, the need to remain credible during uncertainty, and the pressure to differentiate when normal communication routines broke down. Yet the degree and style of improvisation differed depending on regulatory pressure, how visible or tangible the product or service was, and how dependent the firm was on long-term client relationships.

In highly regulated and safety-critical sectors such as fire protection and plant maintenance and commissioning, as well as industrial equipment cleaning, bricolage was tightly constrained by compliance requirements and expectations of reliability. As Earth's entrepreneur explained, "*We can't improvise too much because of safety regulations, so our branding bricolage had to stay within strict limits. We relied on low-cost but technically grounded materials and sometimes even reused old technical drawings as marketing material*". Within these contexts, firms could not experiment freely with tone or messaging. Instead, improvisation took more controlled and bounded forms, such as repurposing technical materials, adapting safety updates for remote communication, and personalizing interactions with plant managers to reinforce trust.

By contrast, firms operating in less regulated or more consumer-facing industries, such as consulting and brand licensing (i.e. Neptune, Mars, Venus), had greater latitude for creative improvisation. Their branding efforts often involved community-oriented content, informal storytelling, and more emotionally expressive communication. As Venus' entrepreneur explained, "*We constantly updated our slides and proposals to look credible to clients, and we adapted partner brand assets on the fly during negotiations. We were improvising all the time just to keep our branding consistent and trustworthy*".

Another pattern emerged among firms operating in design-intensive and sustainability-oriented industries (e.g., Jupiter and Uranus), which faced fewer regulatory constraints and competed in markets where aesthetic cues and narrative-driven communication played a central role. Here, bricolage in branding was more expressive and creative. Jupiter's entrepreneur described producing improvised visuals: "*We made our own product photos and visuals because hiring a designer was too expensive*". Uranus' entrepreneur also highlighted: "*We built the brand story around sustainability using whatever data we had*". These firms used bricolage to differentiate themselves, often turning prototypes or recycled materials into brand assets. The boundary conditions in these industries therefore amplified bricolage, making it a central part of their branding strategy.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that bricolage in branding is most feasible and effective in industries that permit narrative flexibility, aesthetic experimentation, and relational signalling, and least feasible in contexts where credibility hinges on stability, compliance, and technical precision. The industrial context thus operates as a boundary condition, shaping not only the extent to which firms can engage in bricolage, but also the forms of bricolage that are considered possible and legitimate. Building on this insight, we propose an exploratory cross industry typology of bricolage (see Table 3), illustrating that bricolage in branding is not a uniform behaviour but a context shaped pattern.

Table 3
Cross-industry typology of bricolage.

Industry	Firm	Dominant bricolage pattern	Explanation
Highly regulated and safety-critical sectors (e.g. fire systems supervision and commissioning, and industrial equipment cleaning)	Mercury Earth	Legitimacy-constrained bricolage	Safety and compliance limit improvisation; branding focuses on credibility and documentation
Design-intensive (e.g. industrial lighting design and marketing)	Jupiter	Aesthetic-narrative bricolage	Improvisation with photos, prototypes, and design stories
Sustainability-oriented industries (e.g. recycled down feathers for textile brands, and plant protein production)	Uranus Pluto	Aesthetic-narrative bricolage	Sustainability narratives and simplification of complex technology using improved visuals
Less regulated or more consumer-facing industries (e.g. consulting, and brand licensing management)	Neptune, Mars, Venus	Relational-signalling bricolage	Credibility is built through interactions; firms improvise slides, cases, and proposals to appear competent

5. Discussion and proposition development

The findings show that entrepreneurial bricolage has a double-edged influence on B2B INV branding. Under conditions of resource scarcity and uncertainty, bricolage enables entrepreneurs to develop and communicate a brand by mobilising whatever symbolic, visual, relational, and material resources are immediately available. However, the findings further reveal that repeated reliance on such improvisation can generate a cumulative problem that we conceptualise as **coherence drift**. Coherence drift refers to a gradual process through which accumulated improvised brand expressions become increasingly difficult to align with subsequent strategic refinements, causing the emerging brand identity to move away from a coherent developmental trajectory. Thus, the central contribution of the study is not simply that resource-constrained entrepreneurs improvise their branding, but that repeated improvisation can have cumulative consequences for how brand coherence develops over time.

The findings suggest that coherence drift develops through two interconnected forms of bricolage-driven improvisational practice: **identity patchworking** and **improvisational signalling**. These practices should not be understood as independent theoretical outcomes. Rather, they represent complementary ways in which entrepreneurs generate, assemble, and communicate improvised brand expressions, thereby contributing to the accumulation of elements that may subsequently become difficult to reconcile. Identity patchworking captures how entrepreneurs assemble provisional brand elements from disparate resources available to them, whereas improvisational signalling captures how these elements and other available cues are deployed to communicate credibility, legitimacy, and relevance to external audiences. Together, these practices explain how entrepreneurial bricolage, while enabling brand emergence, can gradually create the conditions for coherence drift.

5.1. From bricolage-driven improvisation to coherence drift

During the early development of the case firms, entrepreneurs often lacked a clearly articulated brand identity or guiding brand logic. Faced with resource constraints and uncertainty, they relied on available resources to create workable brand expressions. Through identity patchworking, entrepreneurs combined symbolic, visual, and material elements that were immediately accessible, producing distinctive brand expressions without extensive formal planning. This practice enabled firms to establish an initial market presence and differentiate themselves under constrained conditions. Consistent with prior research suggesting that early-stage branding is frequently emergent rather than deliberately designed (Centeno et al., 2013; Yin Wong & Merrilees, 2007), bricolage therefore supported the initial development of the B2B INV brand.

However, the same process also created the basis for later difficulties. Because identity elements were assembled in response to immediate circumstances rather than consistently guided by an overarching brand logic, disparate expressions accumulated across time. What initially represented a practical response to resource scarcity could subsequently become difficult to integrate as the venture evolved. The issue, therefore, was not that individual acts of improvisation necessarily produced incoherence. Rather, coherence drift emerged cumulatively as successive improvised elements were retained, adapted, or layered onto the developing brand without always being reconciled with one another or with later strategic refinements.

Improvisational signalling formed a complementary part of this process. Entrepreneurs used available branding cues, including logo variations, website modifications, customer testimonials, employee-generated content, and the reputational capital of partners or subsidiaries, to communicate credibility and relevance despite limited branding resources. Such actions enabled firms to respond quickly to stakeholder expectations and establish legitimacy when more formal signalling strategies were unavailable. Yet, as with identity patchworking, the consequences of improvisational signalling extended beyond individual acts. Improvised cues introduced across different channels, markets, and stakeholder interactions could accumulate and produce expressions that were not always aligned with subsequent efforts to formalise or refine the brand.

Taken together, identity patchworking and improvisational signalling explain how coherence drift develops. They enable entrepreneurs to respond flexibly to immediate opportunities and constraints, but their repeated use also generates a growing stock of improvised brand expressions. As the venture develops, entrepreneurs increasingly seek to introduce greater strategic clarity and coordination. At this point, tensions can emerge between earlier expressions that were produced opportunistically and later attempts to establish a more deliberate brand direction. Coherence drift therefore represents a process of **cumulative misalignment**, rather than a single instance of inconsistency or an inevitable consequence of bricolage.

This distinction is important. Bricolage is initially enabling because it allows entrepreneurs to act despite resource constraints. Its constraining effects arise when the accumulation of responses that were individually useful in their original circumstances becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile with the evolving brand. In this sense, coherence drift captures the temporal tension between flexibility and consistency in entrepreneurial branding: the very improvisations that facilitate early brand emergence can, when accumulated without sufficient integration, complicate subsequent efforts to establish a coherent identity. Consistent with prior research suggesting that bricolage may become counterproductive when repeatedly relied upon without adequate strategic anchoring (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Steffens, Baker, Davidsson, & Senyard, 2023), our findings suggest that the consequences of bricolage in branding should be understood not only in terms of immediate resource mobilisation but also in terms of its cumulative effects on brand development. Accordingly, we propose:

Proposition 1. As bricolage-driven improvisational brand expressions accumulate through identity patchworking and improvisational signalling, tensions between earlier improvised expressions and subsequent strategic refinements increase, thereby heightening coherence drift.

5.2. The temporal dynamics of coherence drift

The findings further suggest that coherence drift does not necessarily develop through a smooth or continuous process. Rather, entrepreneurs described periods in which bricolage-driven improvisation became particularly intense, especially during early identity formation, unexpected opportunities, and rapid growth. During these periods, entrepreneurs faced heightened demands to act quickly, often with limited time for deliberation or coordination. Consequently, improvised brand expressions could be generated and introduced more rapidly across the organisation's developing branding activities.

These episodic periods are best understood as part of the temporal dynamics through which coherence drift develops rather than as a separate theoretical construct. Under acute pressure, entrepreneurs may intensify their reliance on identity patchworking and improvisational signalling because immediate responses take precedence over systematic integration. This can accelerate the accumulation of improvised elements and make tensions between existing and newly introduced expressions more likely. Conversely, when immediate pressures subside, entrepreneurs may have greater opportunity to review, prioritise, and coordinate existing brand elements.

The findings therefore challenge a view of entrepreneurial branding as following a smooth progression from improvisation to formalisation, echoing prior work that portrays venture development as iterative rather than linear (e.g., Beverland et al., 2007; Hultman & Shaw, 2003; Ojasalo, Nätti, & Olkkonen, 2008). Instead, the movement between improvisation and strategic coordination is recurrent and uneven. Even as firms develop more deliberate branding practices, new opportunities, rapid growth, or periods of heightened pressure may reactivate bricolage-driven responses. Coherence drift should therefore be understood as a dynamic possibility that can intensify at particular moments in the venture's development rather than as a linear stage that necessarily precedes a stable branding outcome.

This temporal perspective deepens the central argument by explaining why coherence drift may become particularly pronounced during periods when the pace of entrepreneurial action exceeds the firm's capacity to integrate emerging brand expressions. The issue is not simply whether entrepreneurs improvise, but whether the intensity and accumulation of improvisation outpace processes of reconciliation and coordination.

5.3. Contextual sensitivity in the development of coherence drift

The findings also indicate that the consequences of bricolage-driven improvisation for coherence are contextually sensitive. Across the cases, improvised branding expressions appeared to be more consequential in settings where stakeholders expected stability, consistency, compliance, or technical precision. In such contexts, inconsistencies among brand cues were less easily accommodated and could become more visible or problematic. By contrast, in contexts allowing greater narrative flexibility, aesthetic experimentation, or relational adaptation, certain forms of improvisation appeared to be more readily accepted.

Rather than advancing a cross-industry typology, this finding points to a broader contextual condition shaping the development of coherence drift: the degree to which a firm's environment tolerates improvisation and variation in brand expression. Where entrepreneurs' perspectives of stakeholder expectations leave limited room for inconsistency, accumulated improvised expressions may more readily become a source of coherence drift. Where greater flexibility is accepted, the same forms of improvisation may remain compatible with the emerging brand identity for longer or be more easily accommodated.

This contextual sensitivity does not alter the central process identified in the study. Instead, it helps explain why the consequences of accumulated improvisation may vary across settings. Coherence drift is therefore shaped not only by what entrepreneurs do but also by the extent to which their branding environment permits variation before it is interpreted as inconsistency, unreliability, or a departure from an expected identity.

5.4. Stabilising coherence: Reconciliation and integration

Importantly, the findings indicate that coherence drift is not necessarily irreversible. As inconsistencies become more visible, entrepreneurs may draw on stabilising inputs that help them recognise, prioritise, and reconcile accumulated brand elements. These inputs included external feedback, network expertise, and minimal strategic intent. Their importance lies not in eliminating improvisation but in providing interpretive guidance that enables entrepreneurs to decide which improvised elements should be retained, modified, or abandoned.

External feedback can make previously unnoticed inconsistencies visible by revealing how different audiences interpret accumulated brand expressions. Network expertise can provide knowledge and perspective that entrepreneurs may lack internally, helping them evaluate which elements remain meaningful as the venture develops. Even minimal strategic intent can provide a reference point against which disparate expressions can be assessed and integrated. Together, these inputs support processes of reconciliation and integration through which entrepreneurs attempt to restore or strengthen coherence.

This finding further reinforces the processual nature of coherence drift. The development of coherence is not simply a movement from an initially incoherent entrepreneurial brand toward a fully stable and planned identity. Instead, entrepreneurs may repeatedly move between periods of improvisation, accumulation, recognition of misalignment, and attempts at integration. Bricolage can therefore remain valuable throughout the development of the venture, but its long-term branding consequences depend partly on the firm's capacity to periodically reconcile the improvised expressions that accumulate through entrepreneurial action.

5.5. *A retrospectively reconstructed trajectory of entrepreneurial bricolage and brand coherence*

Taken together, the findings enable the development of a model that retrospectively reconstructs an inferred trajectory linking entrepreneurial bricolage-driven improvisation to changes in brand coherence. This trajectory was not directly observed as firms developed over time. Rather, it was analytically reconstructed from cross-sectional interviews in which participants reflected on their branding experiences and described how their practices, challenges, and responses had evolved. Accordingly, the model does not claim that all B2B INVs follow a uniform or empirically verified sequence. Instead, it represents an inferred pattern of relationships and developments recurring across participants' retrospective accounts.

The reconstructed trajectory suggests that entrepreneurial bricolage may initially enable brand development under conditions of resource constraint and uncertainty. Participants retrospectively described relying on available symbolic, visual, relational, and material resources when developing and communicating their brands. These accounts pointed to two interconnected forms of bricolage-driven improvisation: identity patchworking and improvisational signalling. Identity patchworking involved assembling provisional brand elements from disparate resources, while improvisational signalling involved deploying available cues to communicate credibility, legitimacy, and relevance to external audiences. These practices enabled entrepreneurs to act despite limited resources and, in participants' accounts, contributed to the emergence of distinctive early brand expressions.

The retrospective accounts further suggest that, as improvised expressions accumulated across different activities, channels, markets, and stakeholder interactions, some entrepreneurs subsequently encountered difficulties in aligning these expressions with an evolving brand direction. The inferred trajectory therefore identifies a potential movement from the enabling use of bricolage-driven improvisation toward increasing tensions among accumulated brand expressions. We conceptualise the resulting pattern as coherence drift: a condition in which improvised brand expressions become increasingly difficult to reconcile with one another and with emerging strategic refinements. Importantly, coherence drift should not be interpreted as an inevitable or universal stage following early brand emergence. Rather, it represents a possible cumulative consequence inferred from participants' retrospective descriptions of how earlier improvisations and later branding developments became difficult to align.

Participants' accounts also suggest that coherence drift may be more pronounced during particular periods in which demands for immediate action intensify. These retrospectively identified episodes included early identity formation, unexpected opportunities, and rapid growth. During such periods, participants described heightened reliance on available resources and immediate responses, potentially increasing the accumulation and visibility of improvised brand expressions. In the reconstructed trajectory, these episodes therefore represent conditions that may intensify the relationships associated with coherence drift rather than empirically observed stages or universally recurring temporal spikes.

The inferred trajectory also incorporates variation in the contexts within which these relationships occurred. Participants' accounts suggest that the consequences of improvised brand expressions for coherence depended partly on stakeholder expectations regarding stability, consistency, flexibility, and precision. In contexts with limited tolerance for variation, accumulated improvised expressions appeared more likely to create problematic inconsistencies. In contexts where greater flexibility or adaptation was accepted, similar expressions appeared more readily accommodated. These contextual patterns are incorporated as conditions shaping the reconstructed trajectory rather than as a definitive cross-industry typology.

Finally, retrospective accounts indicated that entrepreneurs could draw on external feedback, network expertise, and strategic intent when attempting to recognise and reconcile inconsistencies among accumulated brand expressions. In the inferred trajectory, these stabilising inputs represent possible corrective responses that may support reconciliation and integration. They should not, however, be interpreted as a universal final stage occurring after coherence drift. Rather, participants retrospectively described such inputs as helping them make sense of and coordinate evolving brand expressions, potentially strengthening coherence whenever inconsistencies became salient.

Fig. 1 summarises this retrospectively reconstructed and analytically inferred trajectory. It is not intended to represent a directly observed process, a verified causal sequence, or a universal developmental pathway. Instead, the trajectory synthesises recurring patterns in participants' retrospective accounts: bricolage-driven improvisation was associated with identity patchworking and improvisational signalling; the accumulation of improvised brand expressions could create tensions with an evolving brand direction; these tensions could contribute to coherence drift; and feedback, expertise, and strategic intent could support efforts to reconcile and integrate disparate elements. The intensity and consequences of these relationships could vary across episodes of heightened pressure and across contexts with different tolerances for improvisation.

Thus, the model should be interpreted as a theoretical reconstruction of a plausible developmental trajectory inferred from retrospective accounts, rather than evidence that firms were directly observed moving from emergence, through coherence drift, to stabilisation. Individual firms may experience these relationships differently, revisit earlier forms of improvisation, engage in stabilising efforts alongside continued improvisation, or encounter coherence drift without following the precise ordering represented in the figure. The value of the model therefore lies in theorizing how the consequences of entrepreneurial bricolage may accumulate and become consequential for brand coherence over time, while remaining appropriately cautious about temporal ordering given the cross-sectional and retrospective design.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that entrepreneurial bricolage exerts a double-edged influence on B2B INV branding, fostering brand development under constraint while also producing accumulated improvisations that can erode coherence. Faced with limited financial capital and a lack of specialised branding expertise, entrepreneurs are compelled to adopt cost-efficient and improvised branding strategies. Such constraints make conventional, resource-intensive brand-building approaches unfeasible, pushing entrepreneurs to improvise by making do with what is at hand and creatively recombining existing assets. Rather than viewing scarcity solely as a limitation, our findings position it as a catalyst for branding improvisation and strategic creativity. This contributes to and reinforces the growing body of literature on entrepreneurial bricolage, highlighting its relevance as a viable response to

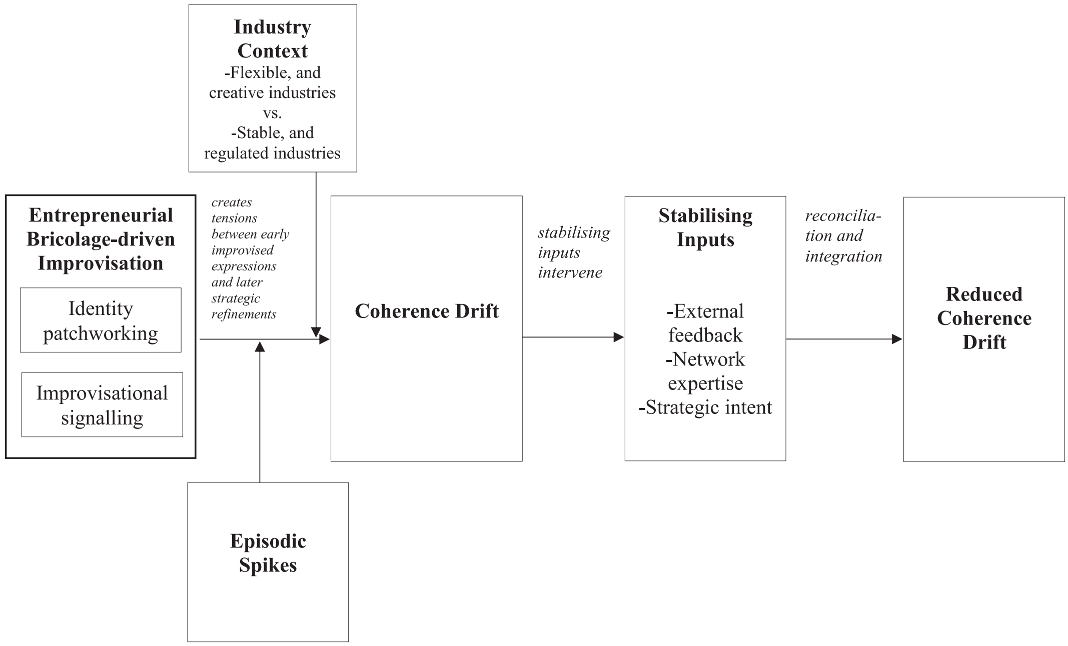

Fig. 1. Retrospectively reconstructed and analytically inferred trajectory of entrepreneurial bricolage-driven improvisation and brand coherence. Note: The trajectory is analytically reconstructed from cross-sectional interviews and participants' retrospective accounts. It does not represent a directly observed process, verified causal sequence, or universal developmental pathway. Rather, it summarises recurring patterns and relationships inferred from participants' descriptions of how bricolage-driven improvisation, accumulated brand expressions, coherence drift, and efforts at reconciliation/integration were associated in their branding experiences.

resource constraints in branding. Our study makes both theoretical and practical contributions to advance research on entrepreneurial bricolage and entrepreneurial branding. The following subsections address these contributions in greater detail.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the growing yet underexplored field of entrepreneurial branding and B2B marketing (Abimbola, 2001; Eggers et al., 2016; Gabrielsson, 2005; Sheth & Sinha, 2015; Suomi & Aro, 2025) by offering a complementary perspective to conventional branding frameworks. It positions entrepreneurial bricolage as a form of resourcefulness under constraint and as a nuanced lens for understanding how branding activities emerge in INVs. From this perspective, branding does not stem from resource abundance but from the creative and strategic use of scarce resources, as entrepreneurs make do by leveraging what is available and recombining existing assets to achieve visibility and legitimacy. In doing so, entrepreneurial bricolage functions as an enabling mechanism for early brand development in resource-constrained INVs, while the accumulation of uncoordinated improvisation can over time undermine the coherence that B2B branding requires. This reframes scarcity not as a limitation but as a strategic enabler, aligning with entrepreneurial marketing research that emphasises adaptability, proactiveness, and opportunity seeking under constraint (Breit & Volkmann, 2024). Accordingly, the study extends the limited body of work on entrepreneurial bricolage in B2B marketing, complementing prior studies on its use by small firms (Li & Wang, 2022; Suomi & Aro, 2025) and multinational corporations (Yang, 2018).

Our findings also complement recent work on the boundary conditions of entrepreneurial bricolage. While Steffens et al. (2023) show that repeated bricolage may generate an accumulation of compromises that ultimately constrain venture competitiveness, our study demonstrates a similar dynamic in the branding domain. Specifically, we show how repeated improvisational branding practices can gradually produce coherence drift through mechanisms such as identity patchworking and improvisational signalling, whereby adaptive branding responses accumulate and weaken brand coherence over time. This positions coherence drift as a distinct branding-related consequence of bricolage and clarifies how improvisation can create long-term misalignment even when it is initially beneficial. Thus, our findings extend the emerging view of bricolage as a double-edged process whose benefits may diminish when improvisation is repeatedly enacted without a stable strategic anchor.

A further theoretical contribution of this study lies in clarifying the relationship between coherence drift and the tinkering trap. Prior work conceptualises the tinkering trap as a behavioural cycle in which entrepreneurs engage in excessive, reactive iteration without strategic direction (Steffens et al., 2023). Our findings extend this understanding by showing that coherence drift represents a distinct, branding-specific outcome of accumulated improvisational adjustments. The two phenomena are related but not equivalent. The tinkering trap can accelerate coherence drift by increasing the volume and frequency of uncoordinated changes, yet coherence drift may also arise in firms that are not trapped in continuous tinkering. For example, platform-specific communication norms, distributed decision making, or incremental adjustments made across markets can gradually produce misalignment even in the absence of persistent tinkering behaviour. This distinction positions coherence drift as a novel outcome of entrepreneurial bricolage in B2B INVs and advances theoretical understanding of how improvisational practices shape brand coherence.

Furthermore, this study responds to calls for more contextualized examinations of bricolage (Stenholm & Renko, 2016) and extends understanding of branding in industrial markets where credibility, consistency, and relational legitimacy are paramount. In doing so, the study contributes to a more contextualized understanding of bricolage behaviours within branding-specific domains, thereby reinforcing the growing body of literature on entrepreneurial bricolage. These insights carry important implications for both theory and practice, suggesting that branding under constraint is not merely reactive but can be strategically leveraged to build legitimacy and visibility in international markets.

Building on these theoretical contributions, the following section examines the practical implications for entrepreneurs managing brand development and coherence in resource-constrained international markets.

6.2. Practical contribution

The findings provide actionable implications for B2B INV entrepreneurs, managers, and stakeholders seeking to build and sustain brands in foreign markets despite resource constraints across developmental phases. Specifically, the findings indicate that entrepreneurial bricolage can give rise to brand coherence drift, particularly when early branding efforts lack strategic anchoring, as entrepreneurs continuously adapt and recombine brand elements without an overarching frame. However, this drift is not inevitable. It is mitigated when entrepreneurs incorporate external feedback, draw on network-based expertise, or engage in deliberate strategic intent, which introduce stabilising reference points that help align and consolidate emerging brand elements over time. In the light of this, entrepreneurs and managers should build structured touchpoints for external feedback, especially from foreign customers, distributors, and partners, to ensure that improvised brand elements resonate across markets rather than diverge unpredictably. They should also leverage network-based expertise, such as advisors, industry peers, or international intermediaries, to introduce informed reference points that help evaluate whether emerging brand signals remain coherent and credible.

Additionally, while B2B INVs may initially rely on entrepreneurial bricolage-driven branding, we recommend transitioning toward more deliberate and cohesive strategies as they grow and internationalize, to prevent early improvisational practices from generating fragmented or inconsistent brand signals. Rather than depending solely on improvisation or reactive fixes, firms should cultivate a learning-oriented culture that treats branding as an evolving strategic capability. This includes fostering continuous improvement through experimentation and feedback and maintaining openness to new ideas and market signals.

Finally, managers can use bricolage to develop and adapt branding signals when resources are constrained. However, because improvised actions may accumulate inconsistently, managers should periodically evaluate whether individual branding actions remain aligned with the identity and credibility they seek to communicate to external audiences.

6.3. Limitations and further research

Having outlined the study's contributions, we conclude by reflecting on its limitations and opportunities for future research. First, it is based on a limited number of B2B INVs in Finland, a small and open economy. While this context improved comparability and provided rich insights into branding through the lens of entrepreneurial bricolage, it may limit the generalizability of the findings. Consequently, generalising the findings to B2B INVs in larger economies requires further empirical inquiry. As Welter and Smallbone (2011) observed, 'entrepreneurial behaviour needs to be interpreted in the context in which it occurs' (p. 107). Thus, our findings may not be fully applicable to other sectors, such as B2C firms, which may have different resource access and customer targeting strategies (Crick, 2009). We therefore recommend further research in diverse cultural settings, particularly larger and emerging economies, and extending the study to sectors such as B2C. The findings remain broadly applicable to any firm operating in resource-constrained environments, particularly other INVs, early internationalising firms, SMEs, and born-digital firms seeking to scale internationally using entrepreneurial branding and bricolage strategies.

Second, the cross-sectional multiple-case study design used here supports theory-building and generalisation (Chandra & Shang, 2019; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Pratt, 2009). However, as an exploratory study, the derived propositions would benefit from being reconstituted as testable hypotheses using quantitative data in future research. We therefore encourage longitudinal quantitative studies to explore the time-based dynamics of entrepreneurial branding and bricolage. Moreover, the cross-sectional design captures snapshots at a single point in time, which may not fully reflect the dynamic and evolving nature of these processes. The study also relies on retrospective accounts from entrepreneurs, which may be subject to bias. Thus, longitudinal or experimental studies are recommended to complement and build on these findings.

Third, this study focused on entrepreneurial bricolage as an alternative approach to branding in resource-constrained environments among INVs. Future studies should consider other theoretical frameworks, such as ingenuity, effectuation, and bootstrapping (Hamel & Prahalad, 1993; Lampel, Honig, & Drori, 2014; Sarasvathy, 2001). These frameworks also address resource constraints in entrepreneurial contexts. Both effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001) and bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005) begin with the resources at hand, but bricolage can be applied to achieve both effectuation and causation (Baker et al., 2003). Scholars (e.g. Scazziota, Serra, Sarkar, & Guerrazzi, 2023) argue that analyzing effectuation and bricolage together could provide a more comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurial action over time. Accordingly, we call for future research to examine these approaches in tandem to investigate branding in INVs longitudinally.

Fourth, although participants provided retrospective accounts of changes in branding practices, the cross-sectional design does not permit direct observation of temporal development or definitive causal sequencing. The trajectories presented in this study should therefore be interpreted as retrospective reconstructions of patterns across participants' accounts rather than as longitudinal evidence of a universal developmental process. Future longitudinal research could examine how bricolage-based branding practices and coherence drift unfold over time through repeated observation of firms and their branding activities.

A further limitation concerns the source of evidence regarding branding outcomes. The study draws primarily on entrepreneurs' and managers' accounts and therefore captures how they interpreted and anticipated the implications of their branding practices. It does not provide direct evidence of how customers, buyers, partners, investors, or other stakeholders perceived the firms' credibility, legitimacy, or authenticity. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives and examining how externally perceived brand evaluations correspond with entrepreneurs' intended branding signals.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Emmanuel Kusi Appiah: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2026.09.004.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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