Linnæus University
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Bachelor Thesis

The Impact of Generation-Z on International Branding Strategy: An Analysis of Startup Fashion Brands

What are the possible challenges and advantages faced by startup fashion brands in adapting to the Gen-Z effect in their international branding strategies?

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Abstract

This study explores the profound impact of Generation Z (Gen Z) on the international branding strategies employed by small fashion brand startups. As digital natives born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, Gen Z represents a dynamic force that challenges traditional marketing approaches. By delving into their distinct characteristics and preferences, this research aims to shed light on the ways in which Gen Z's unique mindset and behaviours shape the branding landscape.

Drawing upon a qualitative research approach, this study employs in-depth one-on-one semi-structured interviews with small fashion brand owners. Thematic analysis is utilized to uncover patterns and themes, offering valuable insights into the strategies employed by small fashion brands to engage this influential consumer segment.

Findings reveal insights and showcase that Gen Z's inclination towards authenticity, social responsibility, and individuality necessitates tailored branding strategies. Small fashion brand startups are compelled to harness the power of social media and immersive experiences to captivate Gen Z's attention.

By comprehending the impact of Gen Z on international branding strategies, small fashion brand startups can adapt and thrive in an increasingly competitive market. The implications of this research concern the fashion industry, offering valuable insights for marketers and entrepreneurs seeking to engage with Gen Z within the fashion sector.

Key words

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1 Introduction

In the introductory section, the authors will present the background information regarding the variables which contribute to the competitiveness of the fashion industry. The combination of the complicated Generation Z consumer habits, the larger corporations in the industry, and the emergence of small fashion brand startups with limited resources, raise the question of how these startups create their international branding strategies to stay competitive.

1.1 Background

When conducting research on any scientific domain in today's world, it is inevitable to account for and mention the immense impact of globalization and digitalization right from the start. Globalization is defined as the interconnection between states, societies, and organizations. The very effect of globalization, as stated by Acs and Preston, is: "creating new relationships and changes in structures, causing events in one part of the world to affect society elsewhere" (Acs and Preston, 1997). Digitalization, on the other hand, which is one of the facilitators of globalization, is the restructuring of individual, organizational, and societal aspects towards integrating digital technologies and automating their processes (Legner et al., 2017). The processes of globalization and digitalization have deeply impacted all aspects of society, but especially consumer habits, and, consequently, the conduct of business across all industries.

The fashion industry has undergone a significant transformation in the past two decades and it has become one of the largest and most competitive sectors in B2C eCommerce (Statista, 2023). This growth has attracted numerous new entrants aiming to capitalize on the high consumer demand (Fashion United, 2022). In this paper, these new ventures are referred to as small fashion brand startups (SFBSs). A startup is "*a small business that has just been created*", and that usually comes with several implications (Start-up, n.d.). Unlike multinational enterprises (MNEs) and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) who possess greater resources allowing them to adapt to market changes, SFBSs face challenges in achieving growth and competitive success. In the fashion industry, startups have a 53% failure rate (Brain, 2017). Bresciani and Eppler (2010) emphasize the significance of branding strategies for startup success, highlighting the importance of understanding the

target consumer. This paper focuses on consumer habits within the Generation Z cohort, which holds significant influence in the fashion market with an estimated spending power of $360B (Pollard, 2021). Generation Z refers to individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s (Berkup, 2014) (Kaihatu, 2020). Researching this customer segment's behaviors reveals complexities arising from their exposure to rapid globalization, digitization, and the internet from an early age, distinguishing them from previous generations (Özkan, 2017). SFBSs targeting Generation Z, face the challenge of creating effective international branding strategies while navigating the unique complexities associated with being a startup in this digital-native generation.

1.2 Problem

Globalization presents a dual challenge for SFBSs. On one hand, they face competition from larger players with greater resources. On the other hand, they have the opportunity to creatively engage their target consumers without the constraints of geographical location or a large marketing budget. According to Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan (2016), smaller and younger local companies have a chance to compete against larger global companies. However, this chance is not guaranteed unless strategic measures are implemented. Bresciani and Eppler (2010) emphasize that the success of startups relies on strategic decisions, particularly in branding. Branding encompasses both tangible and intangible elements that create awareness and differentiation in the eyes of consumers. In the fashion industry, branding is often viewed as a creative process, neglecting the significance of research-based branding decisions and strategies (Murphy, 1987). Many startup brands fall into this trap due to various reasons.

One of the most important considerations to be made is that small startups experience even more intricate barriers than those of MNEs, and SMEs. Both MNEs and SMEs have an established brand identity and more financial resources, allowing them to concentrate completely on brand management. Startups, on the other hand, must build their brand from the bottom up, as well as design proper branding strategies, all while dealing with a lack of knowledge, funding, clients, reputation, and customer acceptance (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010) (Jawahar and McLaughlin, 2001). The success of SFBSs will highly depend on their ability to navigate the immense lack of resources, their ability to understand their target consumers, and their competence in appropriate positioning and branding that answers to those consumers' demands (Wheeler, 2012). The consumer segment studied in this paper is

Generation Z, otherwise known as centennials. This is characterized as "*the generation unlike anything that came before it*" and they are not merely another generation segment; but one of the most evolved and complex consumer segments to have ever existed (Koulopoulos and Keldsen, 2014). The influence of globalization and digitalization on the new generation, known as Generation Z, has shaped them into digitally savvy online shoppers (Özkan, 2017) (Zirena-Bejarano, Zirena, and De La Gala-Velásquez, 2023) (Kaihatu, 2020). This phenomenon presents complexities that marketers and businesses, particularly in the fashion industry, must understand when targeting this consumer segment. These complexities include factors such as community-driven behavior, identity-driven preferences, and social and environmental awareness, which must be considered in the international branding strategies of SFBSs for long-term competitiveness and success. Failing to comprehend the impact of Generation Z on SFBSs' international branding strategies, along with the challenges of establishing a new brand, poses a significant issue that requires attention.

1.3 Research Gap

A big body of research exists on the topic of how demographic segments and different market dynamics can impact big multinational corporations and smaller businesses in their international business operations, both internally and externally. In recent years, there has been an emerging number of papers studying Gen Z's attitude and consumer habits, consumer behavior toward fast fashion, and luxury fashion brands, as well as what the fashion industry's reaction to the Gen Z consumption trends has been (Özkan, 2017; Vajkai Kovács & Zsóka, 2020; McCormick & Ram, 2022; Wang, 2021). However, the implications that the Gen Z phenomenon has on start-up fashion businesses and fashion startups that operate internationally have not been notably studied, especially regarding their international branding operations.

The research in this domain, especially in the context of SFBSs is limited and does not offer a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities, and challenges faced by these SFBSs. For the case of this study, which is focused on the international branding strategy of SFBSs, it is found that a lot has changed in terms of how Gen Z view and perceive brands compared to other generations. Understanding such drastic changes to the concept of branding for SFBSs and how it influences their international branding strategy needs further research and exploration. While the theoretical framework on international branding strategy applies to all firms, regardless of organizational life cycle, it is important to consider the special variables

that apply to start-up firms, which aren't that widely studied. Strategic practices between established MNEs, SMEs, and startups, or new ventures, are undeniably different, therefore special emphasis must be placed on the startup variables (Feldman, Özcan, and Reichstein, 2021). To specify, MNEs, and SMEs have more financial resources, and established brands with set international branding strategies, which they strategically apply across markets and throughout their operations, allowing them to focus solely on brand management. Startups, however, deal with a plethora of intricacies such as lack of capital, knowledge, and reputation, while having to build their brands from the bottom up (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010) (Jawahar and McLaughlin, 2001). This lack of resources and knowledge, as well as the fact that branding is usually viewed as a merely artistic addition in the fashion industry, raises the question of how these fashion startups apply international branding strategies, if at all (Murphy. 1987). This is the research gap that this paper aims to contribute to. This will be done by analyzing the combination of the unique variables that startup intricacies and the generational reasoning of Generation Z have brought to international branding strategies of startup fashion companies.

1.4 Research Question

Based on the background information and problem discussion, the authors of this paper will explore the following topic and research question:

"The Impact of Generation-Z on International Branding Strategy: An Analysis of Startup Fashion Brands.

- What are the possible challenges and advantages faced by startup fashion brands in adapting to the Gen-Z effect in their international business strategies?"

1.5 Purpose

The paper aims to take a closer look at the smaller startup players within the fashion industry, and how the constantly evolving and intricate consumer behavior scene led by Generation Z, is affecting the international branding strategies of those fashion brand startups. The paper will explore how the fashion startups employ international branding strategies when targeting Generation Z consumers. The paper will also explore both negative and positive implications that fashion start-ups encounter, and the extent to which they are driven by the Generation Z phenomenon. This topic is of extreme relevance and significance since smaller companies

and businesses face further implications compared to the larger fashion industry players. Small businesses are more prone to experience difficulty adapting to the ever-changing market needs due to a lack of knowledge of international business variables, as well as due to shortages of financial resources compared to big corporations. These variables can further hinder the ability of smaller brands to pursue the necessary initiatives to operate successfully in this ever-changing and dynamic marketplace driven by the new Generation Z (Wiklund and Shepherd, 2003). The combination of these intricacies, and the lack of research on this very topic, is why the authors of this paper are eager to explore this topic through the already existing literature, as well as through obtaining primary information from SFBSs themselves.

1.6 Delimitations

The study's main focus is how the combination of intricacies that come with being a startup venture, as well as how the Generation Z phenomenon impacts the international branding strategy of SFBSs. The topic requires analysis of both operational business variables and consumer behavior. The sample size of the study involved four SFBSs and presented them as case studies. Due to this fact, the sample size is fairly limited in size, and it only captures the topic domain from the business side, leaving the consumers' side and their perception partly unexplored, with most of the consumer data being obtained through secondary sources.

2 Literature Review

The literature review section of this thesis will present and further illustrate the relevant theories of the different aspects examined within the topic domain. This will include concepts and theories regarding three main areas which are the focus of the study. These are namely: branding and international branding strategy, generations and cohorts, fashion startups, and the fashion industry, all of which will be presented to give the reader a full and clear understanding of the information necessary to better understand the topic of this study.

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2.1 Branding and International Branding Strategy

2.1.1 Branding

The concept of branding has been developing extensively over the past years. There already exists a large body of research and literature on branding in general. However, the authors will review the literature on branding strategy with a specific focus on international branding strategy. To start off with what David A. Aaker defines as a brand: *"A brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors."* (Aaker, 1991). This concept has become an essential part of businesses to differentiate themselves and have a competing chance in an increasingly connected and globalized world. In branding strategy terms, for a brand to be successful it must include four main blocks. These are: an attractive customer value proposition, a value-based branding strategy, attractive market economics, and a brand that is integrated into the overall business process (Doyle, 2001). (See **Appendix A** - Determinants of the successful brand) (Doyle, 2001, p.256).

These are some of the major aspects leading to a successful brand that companies need to embrace when building their branding strategy. An insight to consider, is that strong branding in itself is not enough to create shareholder value, and that value creation will depend on the economics of the market in which these brands operate in and the strategies used by managers in that given market (Doyle, 2001). Moreover, the concept of the brand was further developed beyond signs, names, logos, packaging, and symbols, into a combination of these factors and leading to the concept of the brand experience. This brand experience is conceptualized as a mix of feelings, cognitions, behavioral reactions, and sensations that are

provoked and stimulated by the brand's identity or a key part of the brand such as its design, packaging, communications, and environment (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2009). Viewing the brand as an experience can reshape consumers' perception of the brand and pull them closer to the brand by experiencing it, which in turn represents a deeper interaction with the core concept of the brand, allowing consumers to better understand the brand itself. This brand experience represents the brand personality, which directly and indirectly influences consumer satisfaction primarily by the associations consumers link to those brands (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello, 2009). Consequently, branding is not limited to product offerings (Kotler et al., 2016, p. 227). As Bart Crosby explained: "*Brand is a living thing. It must be nurtured, attended to, and disciplined to survive and grow*" (Wheeler, 2012). Branding concerns both tangible and intangible aspects and values of a brand. It is designed to create awareness of a product, place, or organization, which meaningfully relates to the consumers and helps differentiate that brand from others in the eyes of the consumer.

2.1.2 International Branding Strategy

As the world became more globalized, businesses consequently expanded their business operations and brand message across international borders to market and sell to international consumers. This has called for businesses to develop an international branding strategy to compete beyond their national market. International branding sheds light on the issue of whether businesses should treat the world as one marketplace or adapt their branding to local markets instead (de Chernatony, Halliburton, and Bernath, 1995). Moreover, Leslie de Chernatony, Chris Halliburton, and Ratna Bernath, all strongly argue that when it comes to the international branding planning and decision-making process, and in regard to the dilemma of whether to adapt or standardize, there are two key aspects to consider: first, the brand core in terms of personality, value, and identity, and second, the brand execution (de Chernatony, Halliburton and Bernath, 1995). They further explain that the recommended course of action is to standardize and stay consistent with the brand's core identity, personality, and messaging, but to adapt its execution in different markets (de Chernatony, Halliburton, and Bernath, 1995). Steenkamp and de Jong also found that this local adaptation proved to be a successful approach in international branding strategy, where they concluded that the success of an international branding strategy was highly dependent on the brand's positioning in the local market. They also found that brands that highly positioned themselves as global or universal tended to be less successful than brands that placed adequate focus on adapting their branding strategy to suit the local market (Steenkamp and de Jong, 2010).

Jan-Benedict Steenkamp, defines the global brand in principle as a brand that has the same positioning around the world but with a varying marketing mix (Jan-Benedict Steenkamp, 2017). It is important to establish a global identity for the brand when it markets internationally, as it develops a competitive and distinctive edge. According to Douglas, Craig, and Nijssen, "*When the firm targets a global market segment with relatively homogeneous needs and interests worldwide, global brands provide an effective means of establishing a distinctive global identity.*" (Douglas, Craig, and Nijssen, 2001). Furthermore, crafting an international branding strategy is more than just answering the question of whether to standardize, adapt, or mix both. It requires a thorough strategic planning process. Sicco Van Gelder, discusses the strategic planning process for a global brand in what he calls the "*strategic planning cycle*". The cycle includes six stages that are important to be understood and developed to have a strategically viable branding strategy. These stages include the following as presented in the model below: brand strategy, brand expression, marketing, brand perception, brand recognition, and consumer behavior (see **Appendix B** - The strategic planning cycle) (Sicco Van Gelder, 2003).

2.1.3   International Branding Strategy Aspects

Literature concerning what international branding refers to, as well as what positions branding and international branding take within the marketing and international marketing domains, does not offer clear findings. Efforts to do that are yet to be made (Whitelock and Fastoso, 2007). However, Whitelock and Fastoso, conducted thorough research on the literature on the international branding domain and its definitions. They found that definitions vary from narrow definitions that focus on international branding in regard to the brand naming decisions only, to broader definitions referring to the whole process of developing the brand internationally (Whitelock and Fastoso, 2007). They further present their developed definition of international branding as follows: "*International branding is a field within international marketing concerned with the challenges that companies face when their brands cross national borders. These challenges relate to the essence of the brand in terms of brand name, brand visual (e.g. logo, colors) and sound elements (e.g. jingles, music), and brand personality.*" (Whitelock and Fastoso, 2007). Using this definition as a guide, the challenges facing companies when taking their brands across national borders can relate to three main aspects as discussed by Douglas, Craig, and Nijssen, where they explained that the international branding strategy of a firm is affected by three different aspects. These are firm-

based characteristics, product-market characteristics, and underlying market dynamics (Douglas, Craig, and Nijssen, 2001). Firm-based characteristics are the organizational structure, the international expansion strategy, or the entry mode. The product lines of a firm are also part of the firm-based drivers. Product-market drivers that affect the overall branding makeup are factors such as the characteristics of the target market, the cultural embeddedness of the product, and the competitive market structure. Finally, market dynamics include things such as political and economic integration and market infrastructure, which also affect the way firms employ branding strategies (Douglas, Craig, and Nijssen, 2001).

2.1.4 Factors Affecting International Branding Strategy

Crafting an international branding strategy can be influenced by a various number of factors that can be defined and undefined. However, the existing literature identifies a number of key factors influencing the international branding strategy at its core. From a higher perspective, these are the three previously mentioned aspects, including firm-based characteristics, product-market characteristics, and underlying market dynamics. From a closer perspective, a number of key factors influencing the international branding strategy are presented below:

Cross-Cultural Differences

When considering Hofstede's national culture model, it differentiates cultures through five-dimensional scales including power distance, masculinity/femininity, individualism/collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance. These are aspects reflecting the values of people of different cultures, and these differences are represented in consumers of different cultures which may eventually affect their brand perception, understanding, and overall experience of the brand's international strategy (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2010).

Brand Image

According to Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Pervan, *"Brand images are created by benefit claims that are made about a brand, usually through marketing communication. Benefits are either attributes (e.g., low in fat), subjective considerations (e.g., healthy), or emotions (e.g. look great), that are associated with a brand."* (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Pervan, 2018, p.246). This is a highly influencing factor on the international branding strategy, especially in the case of fashion brands. Lee, Leung, and Zhang explain that in the fashion industry, brand competition highly depends on their differentiation ability which is achieved by creating a value-added and desirable brand image (Lee, Leung, and Zhang, 2000). They further discuss

that brands may exhaust competing with low prices, making it more important to shift the focus to building a desirable brand image (Lee, Leung, and Zhang, 2000).

Market Characteristics

Markets are different in terms of their characteristics, and each market has its unique features, including size, language, legal and regulatory requirements, and even distribution channels (Kwon and Konopa, 1993). For instance, on average, socio-political governance and market heterogeneity have shown the greatest impact on brand sales (Bahadir, Bharadwaj, and Srivastava, 2015). Having a deeper understanding of the different market characteristics improves brand performance. According to Roth, managers who deepen and broaden the information they use in making global brand strategy decisions will enhance brand performance (Roth, 1995).

Global Competition

Today's globalized marketplace is highly competitive across industries, and the fashion industry is no different. Advanced countries are facing this increased competitiveness from both emerging and less developed countries which are utilizing the available modern technology, as well as their own low labor costs to establish a competitive edge in markets that are no longer unrestrained by tariffs (Doole and Lowe, 2008). With lower prices not being adequate to compete, brand differentiation becomes a key strategy. For instance, fashion brands can leverage sustainability and corporate special responsibility (CSR) as strategic differentiation tools for competing in the fashion industry, and this link between CSR and competitive advantage is especially strong in terms of the competitive environment (Battaglia et al., 2014).

Consumers

Branding is created to meet customer preferences and self-identity (Cătălin and Andreea, 2014). This is the very role of branding communication strategies, which must be congruent with the demands of the consumer markets they serve (Kerin and Peterson, 2013, p.21). This approach to branding necessitates the impact that the unique consumer qualities of the target market have on international branding. One way to effectively determine the impact of target consumer characteristics on branding is to look at the phenomenon through the generational branding perspective. Buying behavior is directly influenced by the consumers' generational cohort. This means that the way in which consumers affect branding is through their

generational cohort characteristics shaping their consumer behavior, which branding strategies must be catered around (Chaney, Touzani, and Slimane, 2017). It is therefore important to consider generational cohort theory. Given that the subject of this research article is Generation Z consumers, the following analysis will reveal information regarding that segment.

2.2 Generations and Cohorts

When speaking about generations, the term refers to people within a particular society or family that share the same age or are born and exist at about the same time (Generation, n.d.). Similarly, the term cohort pertains to a group of people sharing a characteristic, especially age (Cohort, n.d.). Each generation encounters homogeneous political, social, and economic events, as well as technological advancements during their early developmental stages of life (Thach, Riewe, and Camillo, 2020)(Duh and Struwig, 2015). Alwin and McCammon (2003) emphasize the great effect of the events individuals experience *at the time they are growing up* and during the present (Alwin and McCammon, 2003). These external events which individuals have experienced together completely shape their views, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, and values, which are usually extremely different between the generational cohorts (Duh and Struwig, 2015). There is an important distinction between a generation and a generational cohort since generations are usually determined by 20-25 years in length, while generational cohorts vary in length since their grouping is based on the particular external social events that seem to define it (Shewe et al, 2000 cited in Eastman and Liu, 2012).

2.2.1 Generational Cohort's Relevance in Marketing

It is already established that generational cohorts are responsible for shaping one's views and beliefs. This spans across all aspects of life, including one's consumer behavior characteristics (Chen, 2010). The generational cohort theory is a particularly relevant and useful tool when it comes to analyzing and understanding consumer behavior and crafting successful marketing strategies, and it aids in proper market segmentation and targeting (Mannheim, 1952; Bolin, 2017; Inglehart, 1997; Pendergast, 2010; Strauss and Howe, 1991, cited in Thach, Riewe and Camillo, 2020). Market segmentation and targeting through generational cohorts is one of the most efficient ways to perform such strategies, even better so than considering other demographic variables (Eastman and Liu, 2012b). Generational cohort theory takes into account the experiences, beliefs, and values that cohort groups share.

Values, which are very closely tied to an individual's identity, are one of the main influences on an individual's consumer decision-making styles, which in turn affect their purchasing decisions (Unal and Ercis, 2006, cited in Yilmaz, Gungordu and Yumusak, 2016). It is integral for companies to cater their product offerings in a meaningful manner depending on all life stages specific to each generation's values (Chillakuri, 2020, cited in Djafarova and Foots, 2022). When employing the generational cohort theory, however, it is important for marketers to avoid generational myopia, which refers to applying marketing strategies that are based on one's own generational behaviors, to all other generational groups (Smith and Clurman; cited in Williams et al., 2010).

2.2.2 Generational Cohort Theory Limitations

This theory, however, comes with its own set of limitations, which must be recognized. Firstly, researchers have not decided on the dates and years that divide each cohort (Thach, Riewe, and Camillo, 2020). Stereotyping groups of people, and especially a whole generation is not always accurate. Despite the generational cohorts experiencing homogeneous historical events, those events do not impact all individuals in the same manner (Stanton, 2017). This differentiation can be seen within generational cohorts between different countries, regions, and even national subcultures (Thach, Riewe, and Camillo, 2020).

2.2.3 Generational Cohort Groups

The main cohort analysis will be done on Generation Z, however, it is of great significance to briefly identify the characteristics of the Millennials or Generation Y cohort, in order for the vast differences between them and Gen Z to be more distinctive. This approach aims to better highlight the importance of studying the implications of Gen Z specifically.

2.2.3.1 Generation Y

Generation Y is otherwise known as Millennials, Why Generation, and Next Generation. They were born between 1977-1994, raised in a world of technology, the Internet, Google, and cell phones. Technology did have a significant impact on their development, and this has made them technologically savvy (Bilgihan, 2016). Millennials are independent, emotionally expressive individuals, who live for today, and are not cautious about spending their money (Eisner, 2005; Novak, et al., 2006; cited in Williams et al., 2010). They tend to spend more on apparel, and their purchase choices are often guided by their peer group. As consumers, they tend to be materialistic and do not have any eco or waste appeals when choosing a brand

(Loroz, 2006). This generation is often compared to Generation Z. The existing literature, as well as marketers, often do not separate the two. Even though these two generations both grew up with or were born into the interconnected world of the internet, they are vastly different, and it is especially important for marketers to separate them (Thangavel, Pathak, and Chandra, 2021). The distinction between Generation Z and Millennials that many papers and marketers fail to understand, has been described in the book "*The Gen Z Effect: The Six Forces Shaping the Future of Business*". In short, Millennials are described as "beta testers for the true digital natives of Generation Z" (Koulopoulos and Keldsen, 2014).

2.2.3.2 Generation Z

Despite all consumer cohorts having their own peculiarities and needing different targeting tactics, Generation Z is the one segment that needs particular attention from marketers (Baykal, 2020). Gen Z consists of individuals who were born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s (Berkup, 2014). This is the largest generational group, making up around 40% of the total population, surpassing their predecessors' population numbers, as well as their buying power by six times (Derbani, Adawiyah, and Wulandari, 2022) (Dabija, Bejan, and Dinu, 2019 cited in Djafarova and Foots, 2022). There is a plethora of intricacies when studying this consumer segment's behaviors, which can be attributed to the fact that they grew up being influenced by rapid globalization, digitalization, and the Internet, more so than any other generation (Özkan, 2017). This generation has not seen life before the internet. This is why they are also known as the i-Generation, technology generation, online generation, and Facebook Generation (Dolot, 2018, cited in Wijaya, Darmawati, and Kuncoro, 2020). Moreover, they were brought up in a world of economic volatility and experienced a world of unemployment (Seemiller and Grace, 2015). These are disruptive events that this cohort had to deal with during their formative years (Sladek and Grabinger, n.d.). These combined factors have given them distinct characteristics as consumers, which will be analyzed by category below.

2.3 Consumer Characteristics of Generation Z

2.3.1 Ethical Position

Gen Z, being exposed to global issues and realities from an early age, has developed a heightened awareness due to their access to information and media coverage (Witt and Baird, 2018, cited in Djafarova and Foots, 2022). They have witnessed the materialization of events

and their impact on real people in real time, distinguishing them from previous generations (Williams, 2015, cited in Djafarova and Foots, 2022). Gen Zers are characterized as thoughtful and compassionate, surpassing Millennials in these traits (Seemiller and Grace, 2015). These values are reflected in their consumer standards, emphasizing environmental consciousness, diversity, and inclusion. Ethical brands that positively contribute to the environment and society are preferred by this consumer cohort (GWI, n.d.; Klopotan et al., 2020; Djafarova and Foots, 2022). Approximately 70% of Gen Z is willing to pay a 15% premium for sustainable alternatives, surpassing the willingness of previous generations (Fromm, 2018). This aligns with marketing literature, which emphasizes the increasing consciousness of consumers in considering the local and global consequences of their purchasing decisions (Kotler et al., 2016, p. 425).

2.3.2 Self-identity and Personalisation of Offerings

Gen Z, characterized by thoughtfulness, open-mindedness, and responsibility, seeks brands that align with their personal values and represent their sense of self (Wang, 2021; Seemiller and Grace, 2015). They expect brands to understand them on an individual level and value personalized experiences (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2017). Marketers must prioritize personalization in their strategies to meet the expectations of Gen Z, tailoring marketing efforts to individual consumer profiles (Alan et al., 2021). However, personalization can be challenging due to the fluid and nonconformist nature of Gen Z's self-identity, as they resist labels and stereotypes, constantly evolving and exploring (Francis and Hoefel, n.d.; GWI, 2022; Sladek and Grabinger, n.d., p. 8). This lack of defined identity contributes to their low brand loyalty, as they constantly seek out new and trendy brands (Williams and Hodges, 2022; IBM Institute for Business Value, 2017). Understanding the impact of self-identity is crucial in attracting Gen Z consumers and influencing their purchase intentions (Lau et al., 2022).

2.3.3 Media Consumption

Gen Z predominantly engages with social media platforms like Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, while traditional forms of media such as television, print publications, and radio are less popular among them (Senanu, Anning-Dorson, and Tackie, 2023; Petrock, 2021). Social media serves as a significant source of brand information for around 80% of Gen Z, particularly through short-form video content (Wessel, 2022). Compared to Millennials, Gen Z shows a stronger preference for online shopping (Thangavel, Pathak, and Chandra, 2021).

Consequently, brands have shifted their focus online, leading to an abundance of advertisements in both physical and digital environments (Senanu, Anning-Dorson, and Tackie, 2023). Gen Z, being exposed to over 10,000 daily marketing messages, have become skilled market researchers (Fromm, 2019; Thangavel, Pathak, and Chandra, 2021). They navigate seamlessly between the real and digital worlds, considering them as complementary rather than distinct (Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Chomątowska, 2014, p. 407 cited in Dolot, 2018). Convenience and speed are paramount to Gen Z, and they readily purchase products through apps, websites, or physical stores as long as the process is straightforward (Francis and Hoefel, n.d.). Around 68% of Gen Z consumers exhibit an equal preference for purchasing across various channels (Trifecta Research, 2015). Moreover, they expect constant and on-demand access to information (Schneider, 2015). With their marketing savviness, Gen Z is less receptive to traditional advertisements, seeking relatable, authentic, and engaging content instead (Labi, 2008, cited in Williams et al., 2010; Southgate, 2017).

2.3.4 Importance of Authenticity

Brands employing all the correct branding messages according to the above parameters, will not necessarily earn this generation's brand loyalty, however (Thangavel, Pathak, and Chandra, 2021). Due to the combination of unique variables that shaped Gen Z, this consumer generation displays very low brand loyalty and brand trust (Nguyen et al., 2022). Research has shown, however, that brands authentically addressing the social and environmental issues concerning the Gen Z consumer are more likely to achieve differentiation (Nguyen et al., 2022). The aforementioned facts, along with a vast body of research, prove the notion that brands are expected to be vocal when it comes to matters of sustainability if they want to be successful in this segment. The importance of sustainability and social responsibility has led to increased pressure on businesses to incorporate Corporate Social Responsibility and sustainability into their marketing strategies, giving rise to "green marketing" (Dabija, Bejan, and Dinu, 2019; Kotler et al., 2016). Green marketing allows brands to differentiate themselves, but it requires authentic alignment with causes throughout a company's operations and offerings (Kotler et al., 2016, p. 422). Companies must acts carefully and avoid merely profiting without genuine contribution, as this can have negative consequences (Szabo and Webster, 2020).

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2.4 Generation Z and the Fashion Industry

The aforementioned consumer characteristics of Gen Z, combined with their big purchasing power and influence, make it clear why Generation Z should be a great priority for marketers to consider when developing branding strategies in order to successfully target this cohort, especially within the fashion industry, where this generation is the leading consumer segment of (Williams and Hodges, 2022). Various market research reports suggest that this generational cohort spends more than half of their income mainly on fashion apparel, like clothing and shoes (Cheung et al, 2017 cited in Williams and Hodges, 2022) (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2017). Furthermore, Gen Z has a significant influence on family spending when it comes to fashion products as well, making this segment even more critical within the fashion industry (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2017). Despite their ethical proposition, one of the largest customer segments that consume fast fashion is younger individuals, especially Generation Z (Gupta and Gentry, 2018, cited in Williams and Hodges, 2022). Generation's Z affinity to fast fashion purchases can be explained through the fact that fashion is a means for individuals to express and affirm themselves, as well as their constant need for new and innovative products, which are aspects of Gen Z characteristics covered previously on this review (Steele, 2005; Godart 2012, cited in Čiarnienė and Vienažindienė, 2014).

2.4.1 Fashion Industry

According to Ciarniene and Vienazindiene (2014), the fashion industry involves the design, manufacturing, distribution, marketing, retailing, advertising, and promotion of all types of apparel, from haute couture designer collections and designer fashion to everyday clothing (Čiarnienė and Vienažindienė, 2014). Bowen and Ozuem similarly describe the fashion industry as an industry that includes the production, and selling of clothing, shoes, accessories, and other textile products (Bowen and Ozuem, 2019). Through fashion, cultural norms are expressed, as well as the identity of the people using fashion as a form of self-expression (Solomon et al., 2006 cited in Dalziel and De Klerk, 2021). The way fashion is produced, designed, and consumed today has massively shifted due to globalization and digitalization, making the market more demanding than ever before (Geczy and Karaminas, 2019).

2.4.2 Fast Fashion

The fashion apparel industry has undergone a shift towards fast fashion, characterized by low-cost, fast-response mass production of trendy, low-quality garments (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010; Joy et al., 2012). This shift is driven by consumer demands for a wide variety of new styles at affordable prices in short timeframes (Bruce and Daly, 2006 cited in Pauluzzo and Mason, 2021). To meet consumer demands, fashion retailers and suppliers have adopted the fast fashion business model, aiming for shorter production times (Čiarnienė and Vienažindienė, 2014) (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010). In this context, fast fashion primarily encompasses apparel falling under the categories of basic commodity products, fashion basics, and better fashions (Abernathy, 1999, cited in Doeringer and Crean, 2006). The fashion pyramid illustrates these categories, with customization and price increases from the bottom up (see **Appendix C** - The fashion pyramid) (Doeringer and Crean, 2006, p.4).

2.5 Emergence of SFBSs

The fashion market, particularly in eCommerce, is one of the largest B2C segments due to increasing demand and low entry barriers (Statista, 2023; Taplin, 2014; Fashion United, 2022). While international business activities were traditionally dominated by MNEs, the landscape has shifted with the rise of SMEs and even smaller players known as "new individual brands" or SFBSs in the context of this paper (Acs and Preston, 1997). Defining a startup can be challenging due to various interpretations, but it is generally characterized as a newly established organization with a small size and limited workforce (Mazzarol, 2015) (Gruber, 2004).

2.5.1 Startup Intricacies

Due to both globalization and technological advancements, the dominant theme of SFBSs can be regarded as born globals (Knight, Koed Madsen, and Servais, 2004). According to Oviatt and McDougalls, born globals, or what they refer to as international new ventures, are a "business that from inception, seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and the sales of outputs in multiple countries" (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994, p.49).These born globals, or small fashion startups, can be characterized as young, often start on a small scale, and are limited in terms of financial, physical, and human resources (Knight, Madsen & Servais, 2004). To better understand the startup intricacies, it is critical to touch base on organizational life cycle theory as analyzed by Jawahar and McLaughlin (2001),

which states that organizations go through four different stages: start-up, emerging growth, maturity, and revival. The organizational life cycle theory proves the fact that SFBSs are presented with both opportunities and challenges even more intricate than MNEs (Gurel and Sari, 2015). The distinction is of extreme importance since organizations encounter different barriers and opportunities depending on which life cycle stage, they are in. In regard to fashion firms in startup stages, meeting capital requirements is one of their main negative implications on market entry (Jawahar and McLaughlin, 2001). Resource scarcity in regard to capital and knowledge, is also mentioned as a distinct limitation startups encounter by Gruber (2004).

3 Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, the authors will summarize the most critical aspects of the literature review relating to the characteristics of the Generation Z consumer, the specific aspects of International Branding strategy, and the startup intricacies (challenges and advantages) which emerged from the theory and use those to create a conceptual framework which will guide the empirical research process of this paper.

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3.1 The Relationship between Branding and Consumers

A multitude of studies has researched and analyzed how brands and branding affect, influence, and manage consumer behavior (Chovanová, Korshunov, and Babčanová, 2015) (Zykun et al., 2020). This study, however, looks at the branding and consumer behavior relationship from the opposite spectrum: branding is developed to fit consumer preferences and self-identity (Cătălin and Andreea, 2014). This is the traditional view of branding communication strategies, which must be consistent with the needs of the markets they serve (Kerin and Peterson, 2013 p.21). This view on branding requires a focus on the specific consumer characteristics of the target market, and the development of strategies according to those characteristics. Considering the focus of this research paper being the Generation Z consumer, who has a plethora of intricate, new, and extremely unique characteristics according to multiple sources, the authors will consider those for the research (Baykal, 2020) (Koulopoulos and Keldsen, 2014). To make the theory clear to the reader, it is important to summarize the unique Gen Z characteristics and list them clearly and concisely.

3.2 Gen Z Consumer

According to the literature review and theory on Generation Z's cohort characteristics gathered through the Literature Review part of this paper, this generational cohort has a plethora of intricate characteristics, which shape their media consumption habits, as well as their fashion consumption habits. The relevant review of Generation Z has been rather extensive, which is why it is useful to depict the generation's characteristics in a clear manner through the following figure.
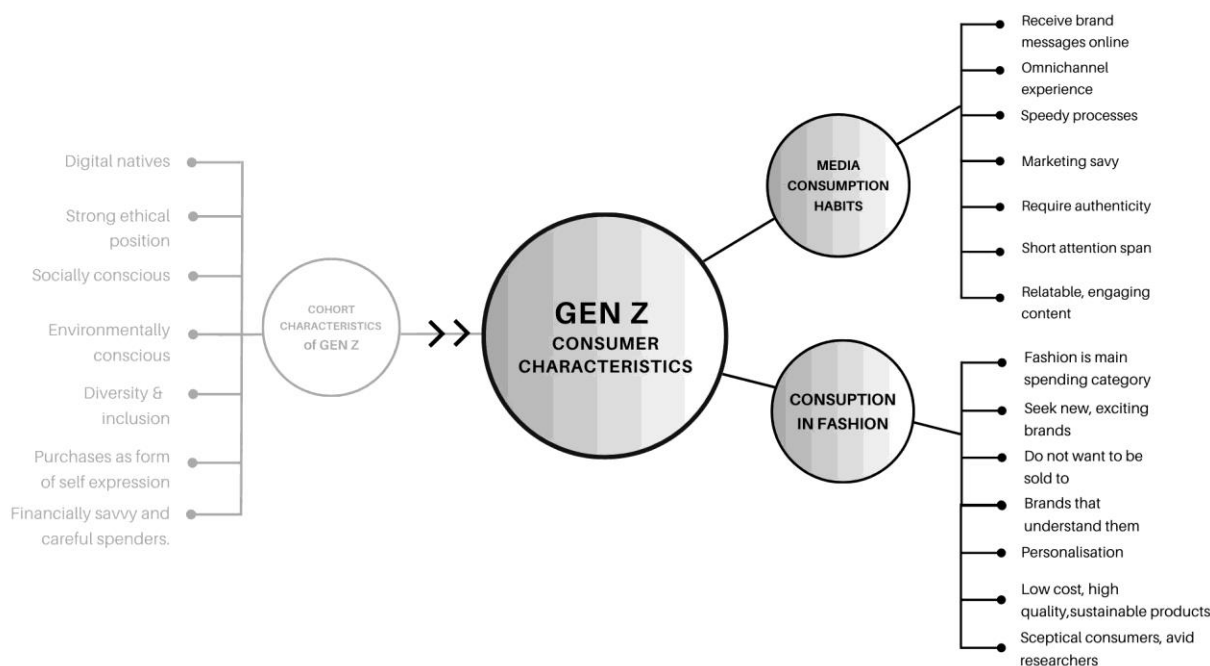
Figure 4. Generation Z's Consumer Characteristics.

The figure depicts how the Gen Z *Generational Cohort Characteristics* shape *their Media Consumption Habits*, and *Consumption Habits in Fashion*, which are highly relevant in the context of this paper. While this relationship and the aforementioned Gen Z characteristics will not be tested through empirical research, as the consumer theory aspect is not the research objective of this paper, it is still important to summarize the literature's findings on Gen Z in an understandable manner. The depicted lists of Generation Z characteristics will be shortly presented as "Generation Z Consumer Characteristics" in the conceptual map of this paper (to be presented below). This is done purely for design purposes, as to not make the conceptual map below extremely complicated and hard to understand.

3.3 International Branding

After establishing the specific Gen Z consumer characteristics which are considered in this research paper, it is important to clearly define what international branding entails, and what are the aspects of international branding strategies that respond to the Gen Z characteristics. While the literature on international branding strategy is divided in terms of its definition and aspects, most papers encompass international branding in the following manner: International branding is a field within international marketing, which includes decisions on a brand name, brand visual (e.g. logo, colors), sound elements (e.g. jingles, music), and brand personality

(Whitelock and Fastoso, 2007). In terms of international branding strategy, brands operating internationally are concerned with the advertising of the brand, brand-related research and development, distribution channel selection, personal selling, and overall market research (Jan-Benedict Steenkamp, 2018, p.4). Considering the target consumer, Gen Z, Witt, and Baird proposed that brands reaching Gen Z, must know how to get on the same wavelength as their target audience if they want to be successful (Witt and Baird, 2018). Because the definitions of international branding strategies are diverse, for the data collection method to be clear, the authors will focus on the following aspects of the international branding of SFBSs, and how those SFBSs deal with them when targeting the Gen Z consumer. The authors want to test if there are common patterns between fashion startups regarding the following international branding strategy aspects.

- **Brand identity and Personality**

- **Positioning**

- **Research and Development (product design, speed, quality, innovation)**

- **Supplier Choice**

- **Pricing**

- **Marketing Communication**

3.4 SFBSs' Intricacies

3.4.1 Challenges

While branding strategies are integral to all companies' success, it is even more crucial for newly established startup ventures (Bresciani, and Eppler, 2010). Newly established startups face issues even more intricate than SMEs or MNEs. SMEs have an established brand identity and financial resources and can focus solely on brand management. Startups, on the other hand, have to create their brand from the ground up, along with developing appropriate branding strategies, while also dealing with the absence of knowledge, capital, time, clients, and reputation (Bresciani, and Eppler, 2010). Considering these variables, in combination with the aforementioned complex Generation Z characteristics, the authors assume that

SFBSs are presented with even more challenges, which will be explored through the empirical research.

3.4.2 Advantages

As previously analyzed, Gen Z is constantly looking for new, innovative brands that align with their values of sustainability and social responsibility. Since Gen Z is more likely than other generations to identify with the brands they purchase from, it can safely be assumed that their purchase decisions are driven by their need to express their views through such purchase decisions. They can do this by either embracing or boycotting brands based on the ideology they represent (Paharia, Avery, and Keinan, 2014). This behavior is even more prominent when consumers decide on purchasing between a larger, or smaller brand. Especially in the case of Gen Z, surveys have proven that they are more likely to "vote with their wallets". This goes further in line with literature that suggests that consumers tend to avoid larger corporations and support small brands as a means of a politicized, rebellious act (Paharia, Avery, and Keinan, 2014). Furthermore, when considering the new digitalized era, and the online habits of the Gen Z consumer, who is an avid user of social media and extremely keen on online shopping, fashion startups can leverage these opportunities, and internationalize almost immediately after their inception, something that was not possible previously (Zhou et al., 2009). Such new ventures have also been observed to possess a "positional advantage of newness" and can build an international network and quickly obtain resources for a minimal cost and with greater flexibility than larger corporations (Zhou et al., 2009). Furthermore, since the Gen Z consumer largely prefers shopping online, there is no need for a brick and mortar to be created, cutting down on the startup costs even more significantly.

3.5 The Conceptual Map

The combination of these variables (*Generation Z Consumer Characteristics, International Branding Strategy Aspects, and Startup Intricacies*) and their relationship can be visualized in the following figure:
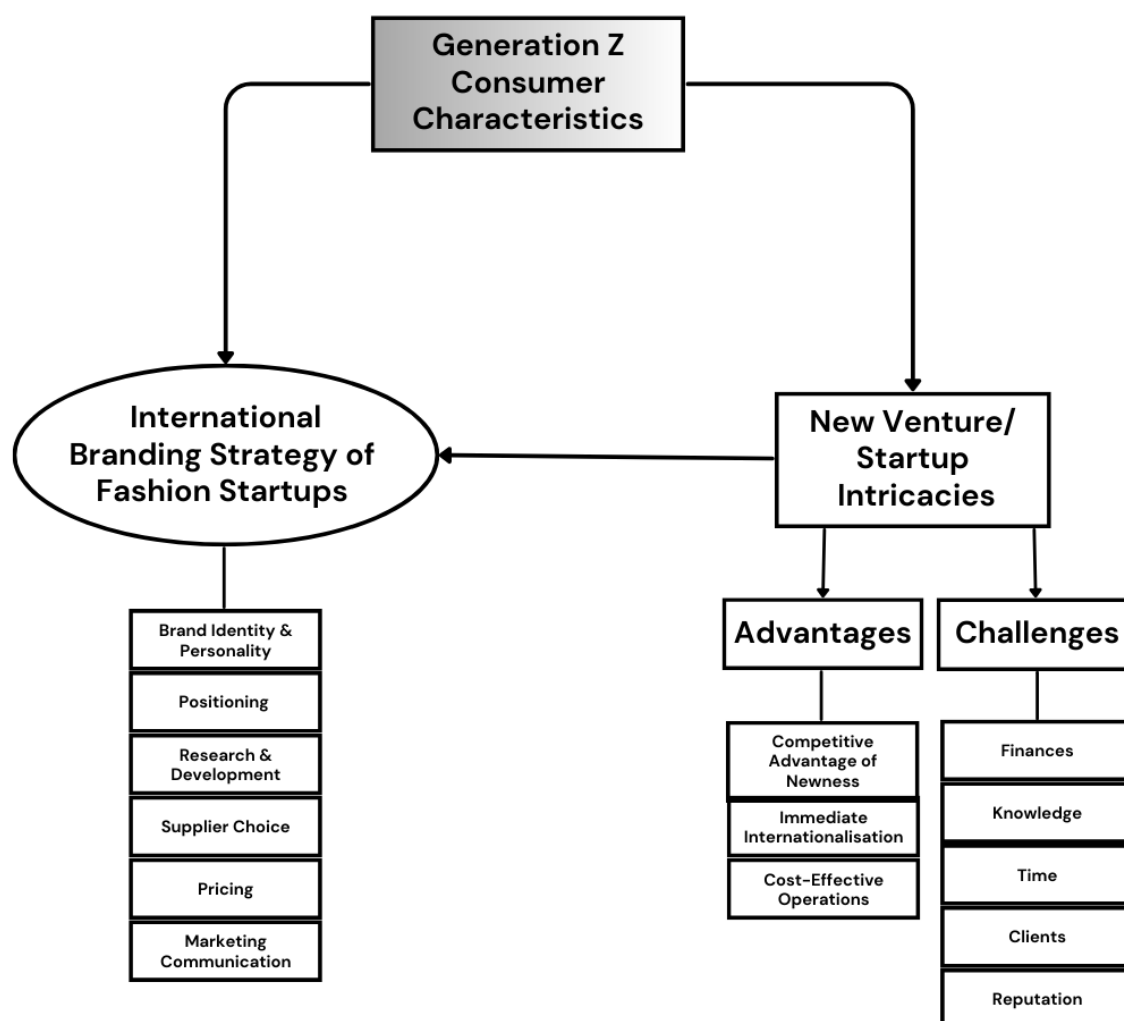
Figure 5: Conceptual map depicting the influence of Generation Z Consumer Characteristics on the experienced intricacies of startups, and their combined impact on the international branding strategies of those fashion startups.

4 Methodology

This chapter will present the methodological aspects of this research paper. The specific research approach and strategies applied for this research will be thoroughly explained, as well as the research design, type of data, method, operationalisation, sampling, data analysis, and quality of research. The ethical considerations will be presented as well.

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4.1 Research Approach

Research that is designed and focused on answering a question, must approach the question with a proper method that can best fulfil the research's objective of answering that question. Given the nature of this thesis, which investigates a relationship between research and theory, a deductive approach proves to be the most common and reasonable direction for answering a research question of this nature (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). The question of this thesis primarily investigates the impactful relationship between Gen Z and their effect on the international branding strategy of SFBSs. The domains of Gen Z, international branding strategy, and SFBSs, have been the research topics of many previous studies which provides the authors of this paper with a lot of rich data and relevant theories to work with in developing and testing the produced assumptions. The theories and concepts previously discussed in the literature review act as a guide for the authors to test the assumptions against. Having this richness in theory, data further supports the choice of using a deductive approach for this thesis. Moreover, considering that this research is more focused on testing theory rather than building theory, a deductive approach is deemed as the suitable research approach (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019).

4.2 Research Strategy

This research paper employs a qualitative research strategy for gathering the data needed to answer the research question. Although qualitative research is usually associated with an inductive approach to developing theory where the researchers start with data and build a theory upon it, qualitative research can also be well suited with a deductive research approach, primarily when the research is optimized for testing theory rather than building theory, and when gaining a deep understanding of the researched phenomena is required (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Moreover, in trying to understand the impact of Gen

Z on the international branding strategy of SFBSs, as well as the challenges and opportunities as a result of the newness of startup ventures, the authors require flexibility and depth in acquiring their data and better understanding the phenomena. Hence, a qualitative approach is selected to be more suitable to use for this research since its data-gathering techniques, unlike quantitative methods, allow for more flexibility and the researchers are able to adjust the direction of the research as they see fit (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). This approach provides an opportunity to better understand the subject in more depth and beyond numerical values.

4.3 Research Design

The research design refers to the research plan. As Dulock explained: "*Research design is a blueprint or plan specifically created to answer the research question and to control variance.*" where the choice of the research design depends on the purpose and objective of the research (Dulock, 1993). Generally speaking, there are five major types of research designs; experimental, longitudinal, case study design, and competitive design (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). Considering the purpose of this study, which is to ultimately gain a deeper understanding and comprehension of the impact of Gen Z on SFBSs international branding strategy, the authors find it most suitable to use a case study research design as it is a qualitative-related research design. The reasoning behind this choice is influenced by three factors: the nature of the research question which investigates a real-life phenomenon, the qualitative research strategy, and the characteristics of a case study research design that appeals as a suitable fit for this research. According to Yin, it may be best to use a case study approach when three conditions are present: (1) the study seeks to answer questions of the "why" and "how" nature, (2) you have little to no control in altering the behavior of the study participants, (3) your study seeks to research a contemporary phenomenon as opposed to a historical one (Yin, 2018). These characteristics, further the argument of why a multiple case study approach was selected, where the authors seek to explore the differences within and between cases and the objective is namely to replicate findings across the selected cases (Yin, 2018). This approach appeals to be a reasonable direction to better understand and gain deeper insights on the contemporary phenomena being studied and doing so without manipulating the behavioral events of the study.

4.4 Type of Data

The type of data collected by researchers usually falls into two main data types: primary and secondary (Hox and Boeije, 2005). Considering the qualitative nature of this paper, the authors used a primary data collection method using semi-structured interviews. Interviews are the most common data collection method in qualitative research (Jamshed, 2014). Moreover, the authors find that research of this nature requires deep and high-quality focused data that is closely tied with the context of the research. Furthermore, this paper uses a qualitative case study design which is typically associated and aligned with conducting semi-structured interviews (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Moreover, the nature of semi-structured interviews provides a powerful tool to acquire rich data from the interviewees. Considering that the interviews are semi-structured implies their flexibility in moving the direction of the dialogue and asking open-ended questions which allow participants to answer freely and better express themselves, their views, values, and personal beliefs on the matter being studied (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). This ultimately provides the authors with deeper insights into the situation and allows for gathering rich primary data that is best fit to answer the research question.

4.5 Research Method

The research method is usually established as a consequence of logical reasoning based on the content and design of the paper. For this research, the authors chose the method of interviews, since it is the best method for gaining deeper insights into the particular hypotheses tested (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 41). The interviews will be one-to-one, semi-structured, and non-standardized interviews that will be conducted either face-to-face, via telephone, video conferencing, or any median convenient for the respondents (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019). Semi-structured interviews are used in both deductive and inductive approaches and can help with gaining insights to better understand the relationships between variables, which is the case for this paper (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p. 443).

4.6 Operationalisation

The operationalization (see **Appendix D**) was based on the theoretical and conceptual framework, and it was created after the interview questions were decided (see **Appendix E**).

The interview guide was built to be able to extract relevant information in the data collection process, which would answer all components of the research questions. The interview questions were created in a way that would encourage participants to conversate and reflect deeply on their experiences. The language used was simple, and the order of the questions was determined to facilitate a natural conversational flow. These factors were considered in order to facilitate the data collection by ensuring a smooth, straight-forward process for the participants. The interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner, which allows for further clarification through follow-up questions in possible data gaps.

4.7 Sampling

In qualitative research, it is the research question that determines the sampling strategy and methods (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). Purposive sampling is usually the standard for most qualitative research (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, p. 391). Taking this research paper's goals into account, the authors employ a non-probability sampling technique. A priori purposive sample is the chosen method since the criteria for this research have been determined and identified from the beginning of the research process (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). In purposive sampling, participants are selected based on specific characteristics that are directly related to the research topic and question (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019). This is done to gain in-depth insights from a small number of cases, where the research questions can be explored to gain more insights (Saunders et al., 2019). In the case of this paper's topic, several four startup non-luxury fashion brand owners will be interviewed to gain insights about their branding strategies when targeting Gen-Z consumers, and the possible added implications that their startup or new venture status may add to their operations. The most important criteria the authors determined the cases must fulfill are the following:

- The startup brands of the interviewed owners must be new ventures with a maximum operation period of 3 years since their establishment.

- They must have an employee number of 1-5.

- They must be operating within the fashion eCommerce industry internationally. Having a brick-and-mortar store will not be considered.

- The sampling will not be home-market, or brand-owner demographic-specific (gender, age, or ethnicity, etc.). This can be described as a maximum variation sampling, as the authors aim to have variation in their data collection, which is considered a strength, especially in smaller sample sizes (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 321).

4.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is nothing short of a challenging and complex process for researchers (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012). As qualitative research, the authors are faced with this challenge and are presented with several data analysis methods that include different approaches to choose from. These according to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill can include thematic analysis and template analysis, grounded theory, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and visual analysis. (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019). The authors find thematic analysis to best fit the qualitative research of this study. This method is commonly and successfully used in analyzing qualitative data and is referred to as a foundational method in qualitative analysis (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019, p.651). The collected data were case studies based on interviews, where the authors' objective was to test assumptions and existing theory by coding the data and identifying similarities across the cases, to then relate them to theory. This is further described in the literature of thematic analysis of a deductive approach; "*In a deductive approach, the themes you wish to examine would be linked to existing theory*" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p.652). Thus, having data in the form of recorded case studies as well as a deductive approach to the study, a thematic analysis appeals as the best fit for the author's objective.

4.9 Quality of Research

To best meet quality standards for this study, the authors discuss the quality criteria of the research in terms of the three key aspects for evaluating the research quality in business research. These are reliability, replicability, and validity (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019).

4.9.1 Reliability

Although this is typically a concern in quantitative research, it is in the sense of whether the results of the study are repeatable or not (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). In this sense, the authors argue that it is repeatable if the same procedures that were taken in this study are

followed. Although the authors have selected four cases, these cases came and represented different brands of virtually different cultures and backgrounds, targeted different markets, and yet they showed a great level of similarities. As such, the authors find it reasonable to find the same results if the study was repeated and hence ensure reliability.

4.9.2 Replicability

This concept is related to the previous one of reliability, which concerns whether other researchers can replicate the findings of the study (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). For other researchers to be able to replicate the results, it is only possible if the procedures of this research are followed in great detail (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). As such, the authors believe that other researchers who replicate the same steps in detail, such as the sampling and operationalization, can expect to find similar results, as the research shows, to a clear extent, that empirical findings presented great similarities in terms of results. For instance, taking SFBSs who are not digitally based, could produce varying results, but SFBSs that are digitally based, are believed to showcase similar findings most likely to those of this study.

4.9.3 Validity

This can be considered the most important criterion for the research quality, and it is about the integrity of findings and conclusions that are produced from a given research (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Validity as a concept in business research includes various sides, including measurement validity, internal validity, external validity, and ecological validity, all of which are closely linked to quantitative research (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). In qualitative research such as this study, the findings represent the interviewee's personal beliefs, experiences, and reality. Having asked and confirmed with the interviewees their understanding of the questions, their answers are believed to present their reality in the research context as closely as possible. This is further confirmed as their answers were similar to a great extent, illustrating their understanding of the questions and the noted similar theme of their answers, establishing the validity of the findings. Although some qualitative researchers believe that the term validity does not apply to qualitative studies, they expressed the need for some measurement in that regard (Golafshani, 2003). As such, through the triangulation of the findings of which is considered the notion of validity measures in qualitative research, where both literature and the empirical findings of the different cases

representing different sources of data, have formed themes and categories to capture the data, increasing the validity and trustworthiness in that sense (Golafshani, 2003).

4.10 Ethical Considerations

To ensure integrity and maintain a positive reputation when facing issues that may come as a result of collecting and processing the data of this research, ethical considerations and awareness must be taken into consideration by the researchers (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). To make sure the research meets the ethical standards, the authors adhered to four key principles: informed consent, avoidance of harm, protection of privacy and confidentiality, and preventing deception (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019).

4.10.1 Informed Consent

The consent is regarded in the sense of whether the participants were given enough information about the research and the context of the interview, to make an informed decision of participation (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). In that sense, the semi-structured interviews were done with complete voluntary participation by the interviewees, where they were informed about the scope of the study, the objective of collecting their data, how long will their data be processed, and in which context, the recording of the interview, their rights to withdraw their participation at any time during the interview or after the time scope of the study, their rights of anonymity and sharing only the information they themselves wish to share. After presenting them with those facts, participants confirmed their understanding of the context and gave their consent and agreement to participate and have their participation recorded by the researchers as well as the researcher's ability to reach out after the study for further information if required.

4.10.2 Avoidance of Harm

Although this can be challenging, cases in qualitative research can easily be presented in a way where the participants cannot be identified or harmed (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Despite this study's participants not having concerns with sharing the information publicly, the authors, other than using first names only, have made sure to replace brand names with SFBS 1-4 to present the cases in a way that can prevent any potential harm to the participants.

4.10.3 Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

Privacy is linked to consent where participants are aware of what information they will be sharing and acknowledge their privacy is not violated as such (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). The authors made sure this is the case, where participants voluntarily, consciously, and openly revealed the information presented in this study, with full understanding of the context.

4.10.4 Preventing Deception

Deception occurs when the researchers misrepresent their research to the participants untruthfully and something that is not and thereby deceiving them into participation (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). As discussed in the informed consent section, the authors presented the study and its details to the participants exactly as it is and confirmed the participants' understanding of the presented information.

4.11 Author Contributions

This research was conducted by two students. Through open communication, and thorough planning, the division of the tasks was completely equal and both authors contributed equally to all parts and aspects of this paper. The authors collaborated in a close manner throughout the whole research process, and both authors assume full responsibility for this thesis research.

5 Empirical Results

In the empirical findings section, the authors will present the collected primary data derived from the conducted interviews. These data will be presented in the form of cases, where each case's data are themed and placed into three main categories that are discussed in the conceptual framework section.

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Interview Cases

- **SFBS 1**: Face-to-face interview, 11 May 2023, lasting 27:52 minutes.

- **SFBS 2**: Zoom interview, 13 May 2023, lasting 27:38 minutes.

- **SFBS 3**: Zoom interview, 17 May 2023, lasting 46:10 minutes.

- **SFBS 4**: Zoom interview, 17 May 2023, lasting 43:12 minutes.

5.1 SFBS 1

5.1.1 Background

Presenting the first small fashion brand case is Patricia, a 25-year-old entrepreneur who established her fashion business in 2021. Based in Helsinki, Finland, Patricia is the sole proprietor of an e-commerce brand offering casual apparel, including t-shirts, hoodies, and tops. Her unique graphic designs are printed onto the clothing, and she also creates hand-knitted accessories with her own logo tags. The idea for her business came about serendipitously when Patricia's friends admired her drawings on a white t-shirt, leading to unexpected demand and the birth of her brand. Patricia's exploration of ways to scale her business idea coincided with an Instagram ad she came across, promoting an easy website creation service with a two-week free trial. Taking advantage of this opportunity, she quickly created a branded website, finding the process accessible and user-friendly. Initially, Patricia operated on an on-demand basis, minimizing risk by avoiding large initial investments in inventory.

5.1.2 Consumers

The brand targets both male and female consumers, primarily in their early twenties to late thirties, with a smaller number of outliers. While appealing to middle-income individuals,

Patricia aims to cater to a broader demographic. The brand's consumers value down-to-earth lifestyles and individualism, aligning with the brand's core values: "*Their values are kind of down to earth, they agree with the brand values, one of them being listening to yourself and living the kind of life that suits you rather than going with social norms*". Quality, craftsmanship, and sustainability are prioritized by the consumers, although there is a discrepancy between their willingness to pay more for sustainability and their tendency to prioritize price, as revealed through a survey conducted by Patricia. The consumers also appreciate the personal involvement of the brand owner in all aspects of the business. To meet customer expectations and capitalize on her social network, Patricia transformed her brand from being "faceless" to a personal brand. The owner revealed that this decision was further made due to the fact that a big part of her customer base, especially in the initial stages, was her immediate and extensive social network.

5.1.3 International Branding Strategy

5.1.3.1 Brand Identity and Personality

According to the owner, branding strategies involve consistent use of colors, typography, tone of voice, logo, and product design, all of which are communicated through the brand's online presence. The products themselves reflect a down-to-earth and casual vibe in terms of drawings, illustrations, colors, tones, cuts, and fits. *"Originality*", "*authenticity*", and "*unique customer experience*" were also emphasized as the main aspects of the branding and marketing communication strategies. "*I'm trying to be original and authentic... people at least our generation really appreciate more business designers that are unique*" stated Patricia. She referred to her brand as being "*partly a personal brand as well and the values and life sell that I'm promoting*".

5.1.3.2 Market Positioning

The automation which was facilitated by Patricia's savvy combinatory use of the aforementioned services, allowed her to scale her business up internationally. The brand has reached markets such as Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Germany, Spain, the USA, Italy, Australia, and Mexico. The operations are now mainly focused on the home market, however, due to factors analyzed below.

5.1.3.3   Research and Development

For her upcoming collection, Patricia reveals that she is the one designing the garments, sourcing the materials, finding the manufacturers, testing the quality of the garments, operating the website, and packaging and shipping her products from her own warehouse. Her decision to progress and operate everything individually, without the on-demand service, was decided on the basis and visible signs of the growth her brand was experiencing. This independence, however, has paradoxically created a constraint in the brand's international operations since the costs are now much higher throughout the whole supply chain. This, along with the time needed to conduct the appropriate research and product development, led Patricia to make the forced decision to temporarily shift her focus mainly toward the brand's home market, Finland. "*I'm still full-time studying, so I don't have time to allocate [...] to visit different factories*", said the brand owner.

5.1.3.4   Supplier choice

After being able to scale up, Patricia decided that she wants to move from an on-demand production to the production of garments from the initial stages, including sourcing the raw materials, which include 100% cotton, and polyester, with the owner aiming to obtain through recycled sources. Patricia revealed that this decision was made for the ability to further personalize her products, as well as for sustainability purposes, which align with her consumer's identified preferences. However, the owner revealed that her supply chain is not yet in order, and that something needs to be further streamlined. "*Now I produce part of my collection in South Africa which means that after they sold out, I cannot make the same again, or at least I would need to go to a very far extend to create it again*" revealed the owner.

5.1.3.5   Pricing

According to the owner, the pricing strategy was developed considering consumer needs and sustainability standards. Initially operating on a print-on-demand basis, the owner considered future costs of using sustainable materials and transitioning to "*from scratch*" production. To maintain consistency and avoid alienating the audience, the brand was positioned as middle-priced due to sustainability, quality, and personalization aspirations, allowing for education and adaptation to potential pricing fluctuations. To align her pricing with consumer preferences, the owner created a survey, through which she obtained her customer's insights in relation to pricing: "*I've done a survey about my pricing which showed me some results*",

stated the owner. Through the survey, it was revealed that customers were willing to pay less than the set price of €40 for a t-shirt, yet more than the set €70 price for a hoodie. The pricing strategy was adjusted based on specific customer demands and initial expectations.

5.1.3.6 Marketing Communication

When discussing her marketing strategies as a startup fashion brand owner, Patricia emphasized the importance of brand recognition through the depiction of the brand's values and personality through personalized communication and interaction with the customers. To achieve this, the brand's main marketing channels are the social media platforms of Instagram, and TikTok, however, most of the brand's sales and recognition are achieved largely through word-of-mouth: "*The next step is actually more strategic marketing, now we're only focusing mainly on word-of-mouth and social media*", said the entrepreneur. The business owner is currently focusing more on "*brand building*" but plans to invest more in strategic marketing through "*campaigns, collaborations, and online marketing*", stated Patricia.

5.1.4 Startup Intricacies

5.1.4.1 Challenges

As a one-person business, Patricia revealed that she faces several challenges, mainly "*money and time constraints*". The most distinct one mentioned throughout the interview was the financial constraint, with the brand owner having to rely on her own resources, such as student loans to fund all operations of her brand. Furthermore, she expressed the severe time constraints she faces as a full-time student, which severely impacts her ability to streamline her manufacturing processes and find the appropriate sustainable fabric suppliers and manufacturers for her garments. Finally, the low volume of orders that is a natural result of operating on a startup level, results in even higher prices when it comes to Patricia's orders to her suppliers, as well as higher prices in the shipping deals. These intricacies that occurred through being a small startup, have severely impacted the internationalization of the brand, which must temporarily be constrained by its national borders to sustain its operations.

5.1.4.2 Advantages

However, the owner revealed certain advantages that come with operating as a one-person startup brand, which are namely the "*agility*" and "*flexibility*" when it comes to decision making, as well as the relative ease of starting up a fashion brand, which is made possible by

online automated services like website creation, and on-demand apparel printing and distribution*." If I want to change something, I can do it quite quickly. I can be quite flexible in my operations, my customer service, my deliveries, my customization, and whatnot.*", expressed the entrepreneur.

5.2 SFBS 2

5.2.1 Background

The 24 years old Talha, is the sole founder of the small street fashion brand SFBS 2. Back in 2021, the brand was founded in Gothenburg-Sweden to offer a set of uniquely designed street fashion products that included hoodies, sweatshirts, and light jackets. The brand is completely owned by Talha; however, he occasionally hires up to 50 freelancers at different stages of developing his brand and those included designers, marketers, influencers, etc. Moreover, at the start of launching his brand, Talha was not clear on who his target consumer was, but through trial and error, the brand was set to target both males and females at the age range of 18y-30y. As Talha described it, his market was primarily identified through Instagram as people who are interested in baggy (big-sized) and trendy streetwear fashion, which is exactly what his products are. For his brand, Talha designed the products himself and started off using print-on-demand, where he prints and ships the products only after the orders are placed. It is his goal to offer exclusive customized designs instead of reselling basic, existing designs. The brand was developed with a combination of Talha's passion for fashion and streetwear, and his entrepreneurial drive to start his own business and expand beyond Sweden to target the US market.

5.2.2 Consumers

As previously mentioned, Talha's target consumers for his SFBS 2 were not identified right from the start. According to Talha, it took a process of trial and error to filter out everyone and focus only on street fashion enthusiasts between the ages of 18y and 30y, including both males and females. The way Talha identified his target market and particularly what kind of streetwear designs to make for them was intensely based on his Instagram research, where he examined the Instagram profiles of what he believed is his ideal consumer. Additionally, his target consumers of the ages of 18y-30 included both Gen Z and Millennials, however, he focuses primarily on Gen Z. When asked about the advantages of marketing to Gen Z, Talha describes them as having characteristics of constant digital presence on various social media

apps, and as being impulsive buyers who make quick and impulsive purchasing decisions. Their use of social media makes it easier than ever to purchase something quickly with a few taps: "*also like Instagram shopping and Apple, they have made it easier, and like, you click, like add the card, go.*".

5.2.3 International Branding Strategy

5.2.3.1 Brand Identity and Personality

The branding and international branding strategy of SFBS 2, was primarily developed based on the target consumers' needs and preferences. First, the owner took notes of what kind of products the target consumers like and designed that. In terms of branding identity and personality, SFBS 2 was an entirely streetwear brand; "*I was more into like street fashion, [...], like baggy pants, baggy hoodies like that.*". The brand focused on having a trendy personality featuring a relaxed and colorful as well as an artistic streetwear image. High quality and exclusive street fashion at an affordable price. Other than the brand being a streetwear-only brand, Talha focused on three factors as the pillars of his brand's positioning: sustainable high-quality products, exclusive designs, and affordable prices. This is reflected in the other aspects of his branding strategy such as his pricing, supplier selection process, and unique street fashion designs. As the owner Talha identifies himself as one of his target markets, in terms of interest in streetwear, he wanted the brand to be a representation of that identity through its customized and strongly colored street fashion products. Moreover, CSR was a part of the brand positioning by offering sustainable products only.

5.2.3.2 Market Positioning

The entrepreneur targets two primary markets: Sweden and the United States. Despite the US's psychic distance from Sweden, Talha explains that his brand experienced a higher interest from the US market. His digital presence allowed customers to place an order directly through the brand's Instagram account or website and products will be shipped directly to the customers' address. The brand solely operates online.

5.2.3.3 Research and Development

When it comes to R&D, SFBS 2 products were designed by Talha himself, giving the brand a unique and exclusive set of product designs that can only be found through his brand, representing his goal of constant innovativeness in product design. Furthermore, according to Talha, SFBS 2 products are of high quality compared to other players in the industry. Talha

compares his product to those of the fast fashion Swedish brand H&M, and explains how his products are of better quality and sustain a longer use, where quality is not affected by color damage inflicted by washing machines as H&M products are; "*My quality was way better than H&M*". This quality standard he speaks of, is possible by his strategic supplier choice which is discussed next.

5.2.3.4   Supplier Choice

According to Talha, finding the right supplier for his brand was one of the biggest challenges he faced when he wanted to launch his brand. Finding a reliable supplier that can deliver to his standards and meet his needs, was not an easy task for Talha and one that took its time. He further explained that it took him four months to find the right supplier, because there were a tremendous number of options available, and his selection induced purchasing samples and testing the quality of materials, how sustainable they are, and their comfort level, where he eventually found the right supplier.

5.2.3.5   Pricing

The pricing of SFB2 was set to be competitive and affordable compared to other players in the streetwear market. For instance, the owner examined similar products in H&M, such as hoodies, and found that they were priced around 250 SEK (Swedish Krona) and decided to price his hoodies at a similar price range of 240-450 SEK, with the argument that his brand offered better quality products for the same price range H&M offered. The owner did nothing further except, calculate his costs, set the price according to competition, and keep whatever profits were left; "*I cannot apply lower and lower. So, I said like 250, Keep my profit margin and that's all* ".

5.2.3.6   Marketing Communication

The marketing communication of SFBS 2 is completely digital and utilizes digital means only. The organic marketing communication includes email marketing and content marketing on Instagram and TikTok, and YouTube, in the form of short videos or reels which tend to have a viral effect and generate more organic exposure compared to other types of posts. However, the brand also posts pictures and stories (pieces of content that expire after 24 hours of posting) regularly on its social media channels; "*I created the attention on Instagram marketing*". As for paid market communication, the brand uses a mix of Facebook ads, SEO (search engine optimization), fashion magazine ads, and micro-influencers

marketing. Talha explains that influencer marketing is his most successful marketing strategy of all since it is more affordable than placing ads in fashion magazines and brought his brand better results. As he expains: *"Influencer marketing, according to me, number one is influencer marketing"*. His influencer marketing strategy includes finding small street fashion wear influencers from both Sweden and the US, with a follower count ranging between 5000 to 10000, and emailing them to negotiate a deal which includes either shipping them a free or a largely discounted product in exchange of a shoutout, or to pay them an agreed-upon sum, to promote his products to their audiences. Furthermore, he also emphasized the use of storytelling in his marketing communication, giving meaning to the brand's journey and connecting with the consumers. In his own words he explains *"You know like storytelling, like people; I don't know why, but people love that, [...], You have to tell everything, but everything should be true"*.

5.2.4   Startup Intricacies

5.2.4.1   Challenges

As an SFBS, Talha explains that there are several challenges he faces when building his brand. First was the competition: *"challenges…all the competition. Like all the small brands, they were huge competition"*. He talks about the saturation of the fashion industry and the existence of many other small fashion brands where you must constantly promote and market your brand, which leads to another challenge: the small marketing budget. Having a small budget to start with, limits the types of marketing he can afford to further expand and build his brand. Another challenge he mentioned was finding and picking a good reliable supplier from all the available options around the world. Another challenge for him is to identify his target market and to not try to target everyone; *"if they target everyone, it does not work. I did that. And then I learned from that mistake. And I target only the people, which were more into street fashion"*.

5.2.4.2   Advantages

In terms of the advantage of SFBS 2, it can be summed in three words: flexibility, uniqueness, and proximity. Talha has freedom and flexibility in designing his products, and being able to change, and introduce new designs in a highly flexible and speedy manner. Being an SFBS also allowed his brand to be unique in its own way, via the brand's exclusive products, and individual story. This is reflected by Talah's passion, giving the brand a unique personality. Last was the proximity to customers; having a smaller customer base allowed his

brand to establish a stronger connection with the customers and cater better to their needs. He occasionally puts together customer's focus groups that include streetwear influencers he worked with, and up to 10 customers and asks them on ways he can improve his products, which helped improve his overall branding and products to meet his market's needs : "*I tried focus groups, like I like accumulated those influences who took my product and some customers, […], so they sent me the colors and more various design […].*".

5.3 SFBS 3

5.3.1 Background

In June of 2022, in Warsaw- Poland, SFBS 3 was founded by the 35 year old Monika and her close friend. The two have no employees other than themselves and they run everything. They knew how to sew clothes and always had the idea of starting their own brand and designing their own pieces of clothing but kept postponing it as they were both employed full-time without much time to build a brand. However, during the summer of 2022 the brand was finally launched. For SFBS 3, the target market was females between the ages of 18y-35 who are located both in Poland and the United Kingdom. Monika and her close friend both got sewing machines and started to design high-quality and comfortable clothes that are not offered by larger brands. Their products include dresses, tops, skirts, hoodies, and shirts. As Monika discusses, the extra motivation to start the brand was when one of her work colleagues was impressed by a top she was wearing, which she herself designed, and that friend ended up ordering one for herself. Monika found this interest can be shared among many other women like her and her network, and decided to take the brand idea more seriously; "*We wanted to make hand made products, like we use sewing machines and more flexibility in designs, […] that are not available in big brands and that are both comfortable and have great quality, so we decided to test our idea with the business*".

5.3.2 Consumers

Since the brand only offers female products, the target consumers of SFBS 3 are females only. They are high school students, university students, and women in their 30s, but they are all women who want high-quality products combined with high "*comfortness*", which is the type of products SFBS 3 offers. Being one of her own target consumer group, Monika describes her target consumer as follows: "*I would say other women like me who wanted something more unique and comfortable to wear at the same time*". In simple terms, Monika

and her friend would design something, share it, a request comes, and they design the product to best fit the customer's preferences. Moreover, the brand initially started in Poland, but later expanded to target Poles who are based in the UK. Monika further describes the Gen Z characteristics representing a large part of her target consumers as ones who favor social media and influencer marketing over traditional means of marketing; "*Gen Z is raised with it as the norm. They are raised with iPhones and iPads*". She believes this target consumer segment is more environmentally and socially aware, and they value transparency and authenticity over perfection.

5.3.3 International Branding Strategy

5.3.3.1 Brand Identity and Personality

At the starting stages, the branding strategy of SFBS 3 was built on referrals; "*it, was mainly built on referrals from family, friends, then friends of friends, and so on. So, it was kind of word of mouth that built our brand*". The focus was to make high-quality products that got customers to talk about them, making the branding strategy built on a completely customer-centric approach. Furthermore, they try to stay competitive in a market full of larger players by relying on being unique and different; "*We're not trying to compete with them. That would be silly in fact. We're just trying to be different*". The brand identity and personality of SFBS 3 is based on high-quality comfort; "*our main message was quality over quantity, and I think this message can be understood universally, and everyone can understand it*". The entire brand and its products are inspired by the idea of designing the piece that fits you best. The brand is designing customized products and adjusts sizes to fit the customer's request to the best ability; "*I usually design something, and I get requests on DMS to customize the size, and so on, to fit the customer's preferences.*" The brand's identity is focused on offering customers something that was made specifically for them, to spark both uniqueness and comfort.

5.3.3.2 Market Positioning

SFBS3 started in Poland initially and with no actual plans to expand further. However, as the brand was built on word of mouth, some orders came from Poles based in the UK, which opened the opportunity to expand and ship products to the Polish market there; "*…it was not planned but we got some orders from the UK, and we started to target the polish people over there since there was a large number of Poles who live in the UK, and we thought that it would be an opportunity to target them as well*". However, in terms of branding strategy,

their strategy was not changed when they expanded to the UK, and instead continued with word of mouth with no consideration to the new market as they considered the Poles in the UK, no different from those in Poland. The entry mode was in a similar fashion to the other cases, as the brand was only digitally present with direct exports, where customers abroad can send their requests digitally, especially through TikTok and Instagram, and their orders can then be designed and shipped to them directly.

5.3.3.3 Research and Development

Innovation, quality, and design are all strong pillars of the brand's concept. As Monika puts it: "*I was like if I cannot find what I want, I will just make it myself.*" Creativity and attention to quality were qualities both Monika and her friend exhibited where they did not find a need to hire any designers. However, the brand faces challenges in terms of delivery speed, especially to customers in the UK, largely due to the time it takes to create the order and to ship it to the customer's doorsteps.

5.3.3.4 Supplier Choice

When asked about their supplier selection criteria for SFBS 3, Monika mentioned quality as the first thing they are looking for when selecting a supplier; "*we think about quality first because it is very important for us*". In this quality control process, they make sure to order samples and test the quality first-hand before making any selection decisions. However, once the quality box is ticked, the second thing they consider is sustainability, as they always favour a sustainable supplier over one that is not, because as sustainability is also important for them, they look for suppliers who can fit those standards to work with and establish a good business relationship. Lastly, they are more interested in smaller suppliers than larger ones and look for those in particular. In their experience they found that smaller suppliers offer a more unique set of designs and materials that they could not find with larger brands, which enabled them to be more exclusive; "*they usually have more unique designs and materials and not everyone can have them because they are limited*".

5.3.3.5 Pricing

In terms of pricing their products, they focus on a quality-price ratio approach, by trying to set a reasonable price compared to the level of quality they offer. This was a process of calculating their costs and adding a markup on that for their work and quality product and charged a bit more than typical brands in their market, as their products are more uniquely

made and customized compared to other brands: "*For example, a dress would cost on average between 300 to 600 polish zloty (~ 750 SEK-1500 SEK) depending on design and material*".

5.3.3.6   Marketing Communication

As previously mentioned, SFBS 3 is heavily reliant on word-of-mouth marketing, and the majority of their sales come from customer referrals. However, the brand uses a couple of other marketing communication means to sell its products. For instance, their most dominant platform is TikTok where they rely on posting short form videos of their different dresses and designs in use, to go viral, spark interest, and generate interactions and sales. They also leverage some sort of influencer marketing, where one of their networks has a large following and gave them a video shoutout in Tik Tok which generated a boost in attraction and sales: "*One of them liked my products, they gave a good word about it and that also brought in some boost in sales and made the brand create more trust*". Another strategy they use is going live in platforms where they are digitally present, such as on TikTok, and featuring the products, demonstrating different uses and fits, and eventually sparking interests and sales from going live and having such an interactive setting; "*sometimes we did live streaming to answer questions and showcase the products live and build better relationships and sell the featured products that way*". The entrepreneur argues that positive word of mouth is their most successful strategy as they focused extensively on customer satisfaction and making customers happy which led to bringing them the most sales. When asked how they measure their success, Monika explains: "*Oh, that would have been mostly sales and positive feedback. If we are getting requests and interest, then we know that we are doing something right*".

5.3.4   Startup Intricacies

5.3.4.1   Challenges

For SFBS 3, Monika and her friend faced a number of challenges when trying to build their brand as a fresh startup. The first challenge, which does not come as a surprise, is the fierce competition. The competition is tough inside Poland and outside Poland as there is a large number of fashion brands on the internet. This was especially tough when they are targeting the UK-based Poles, as many Poles already established fashion brands there and are closer to the UK market than SFBS 3 is; "*It is very hard not only outside Poland but even inside*". Another challenge for SFBS 3 is meeting customers' expectations in terms of speed of

delivery as their products take some time from making to shipping them to customers. More challenges include learning how to design, facing the fear of failure and actually deciding to start. Lastly, what they found challenging is attracting more customers, since they lack social media marketing skills; "*Another challenge is attracting more customers because at the beginning we really did not know what we are doing with social media, and we were testing, and it took some time*".

5.3.4.2 Advantages

The first advantage Monika mentions for SFBS 3 is proximity or being close to customers. She explained that as a small brand, you are closer to your customers and can better meet their needs, leading to a strong customer relationship, which she explained that larger brands lack because of their huge customer base; "*For example, if a customer calls us and asks for a dress to be longer or shorter, we don't have a problem with that. Try this with H&M. Good luck*". Another advantage is the ability to offer more customization as a small brand compared to bigger ones. Because you have a smaller customer base, it's easier to design many variations that fit customer preferences and that way you can be more unique in comparison to larger brands.

5.4 SFBS 4

5.4.1 Background

The final interview was conducted with Ebba, a 25-year-old entrepreneur and co-founder of a sustainable apparel brand established in 2021 in Berlin, Germany. The idea for the brand originated six years prior, driven by the popularity of oversized fits and Ebba's difficulty in finding desired fits. However, the actual implementation was delayed until 2020 due to Ebba's strong desire to make the garments sustainable. The founders decided to order t-shirts made from hemp fibres from an Indian supplier, but the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant delays, resulting in the official launch of the business in 2021. After operating for nearly a year, the brand experienced a plateau in its operations due to complications related to the use of sustainable hemp fabric. While acknowledging the environmental benefits of hemp, the owner expressed that the fashion industry is not yet prepared for this material, citing its association with cannabis. As a result of both operational and personal challenges, the owners have temporarily paused the expansion of the brand and are currently evaluating their next steps. Despite the pause, the brand continues to operate, and the forthcoming case

analysis will provide insights into their international branding strategies, consumer characteristics, and the complexities they encounter as a startup.

5.4.2 Consumers

The brand primarily targets millennials, and as per the owner's statements specifically *"...those who are conscious or semi-conscious about sustainability"*. When asked to elaborate further on the specific age demographic of her *"millennial"* consumers, she referred to *"...people born between 1986 to 2000, [...], it can also include up to 2010"*. The majority of the purchasing customers, however, are admittedly between the range of 18 to 35. The brand seeks consumers who value sustainable fashion and have an interest in accessing products that are truly eco-friendly. When targeting the consumer segments, the brand's most important factors considered are *"authenticity and transparency"*. It is important to note, that when the owner elaborated on the brand's consumers, she revealed that her immediate network is one of the main consumer segments. Specifically, she stated that *"I have friends and family in Sweden, so there will be customers in Sweden. We have friends living in Mexico, so there will be customers living there"*.

5.4.3 International Branding Strategy

5.4.3.1 Brand Identity and Personality

According to Ebba's statements, the overall goal of the brand since its inception has been to make sustainable fashion accessible to a wide range of consumers. During the interview, she explicitly describes that *"sustainability doesn't have to be boring, [...], not about these boring colors, these boring sizes"*. Ebba describes that she and her co-founder *"want it to be a hip, cool, streetwear, an underground brand that still hits the main market"* when referring to the brand's characteristics. The brand aims to promote a *"laid-back life"*. When asked about the international branding strategies of the brand, the owner admittedly said that the brand does not have an established international branding strategy. *"I don't know if that's a startup thing, or if that's how we did it, because we're a bit immature, to be honest"* the owner expressed. The owner further reflected that this might be the factor why *"the brand never took off properly"*. The owner stated that *"I definitely started the brand out of my own values, rather than the customers"*.

5.4.3.2 Market Positioning

In terms of markets, the startup fashion brand is based in Germany and has reached the international markets of Sweden, Australia, and Mexico, mainly through its e-commerce activities. However, the brand has engaged in physical selling through "*pop-up*" opportunities in Germany, and Sweden. The opportunity for the small startup to reach the aforementioned international market was facilitated mainly through the social network of the brand owners, as the interviewee revealed. Successfully targeting these international markets, however, does not come without challenges: "*Lead times are definitely long, [...] like us selling a package from Germany to Australia.*" said the startup owner. Furthermore, the entrepreneur also expressed that "*it's hard to have a proper connection to the customers*", and she hopes that in the future the brand will be able to present itself physically in those markets through pop-up events since this interaction feels more genuine to her.

5.4.3.3 Research and Development

The research and development process of the brand has been a long process, which the owners are still admittedly finding difficult to navigate. Throughout the whole interview, the owner repeatedly mentioned the challenges of being a sustainable brand. In terms of the research and development process of the sustainable startup brand, the owner emphasized the importance of extensive research, establishing contacts, and engaging with relevant stakeholders. "*For almost a year, I researched and ordered different samples of hemp t-shirts*", revealed the owner. Initially, when the brand first launched the product development was fulfilled by two freelancers, and for the next collections, the startup brand owners even collaborated with their friends for the product development process. For their last collection, the owner stated that they tried to collaborate with another individual, but "*it became a bit chaotic, [...], she was really unreliable*". This reveals how turbulent the R&D process has been throughout the brand's operations.

5.4.3.4 Supplier Choice

The brand has gone through a lengthy two-year process in order to find a supplier that fulfils the brand's expectations of high-quality sustainable hemp fabrics. Suppliers of the brand are chosen primarily based on their ability or expertise in working with the brand's main raw material, which is hemp fibres. This is also one of the reasons that finding an appropriate supplier took so long since "*not many suppliers have this material*". Furthermore, the startup owner considered the supplier's location, opting for suppliers that are "*located as close to*

Europe as possible", as well as the pricing, trying to find which are "*the cheapest ones*". As the owner reveals, the final supplier choice that fulfilled all of the brand's standards is based in Portugal. "*At the end of it, I think we were also lucky*", stated Ebba, suggesting that the successful supplier choice was ultimately achieved coincidentally, and not because of well-calculated decisions made by the owners.

5.4.3.5   Pricing

The brand intentionally keeps its pricing levels on affordable levels so as to make sustainable fashion accessible to a wide array of consumers. The owner stated that "*from the beginning, we randomly priced, which is before we launched because we wanted to have a certain price*", but they quickly realized that "*everything was more expensive than we calculated in the beginning*". So, while the initial price of a graphic t-shirt made from hemp was initially decided to range from €29-35, in the end, the price was set at €50 in order to cover all the production costs. This has left the brand with a profit margin of around €5 euros per t-shirt sold.

5.4.3.6   Marketing Communication

When asked about the marketing communication strategies the brand employs, the owner expressed that this is actually "*a really hard part of the strategy, [...], and it's also one of the most important things I also realize*". The main marketing communication channels the brand utilizes are the social media platforms Instagram and Facebook. Instagram is the main tool the brand uses to present its product offerings, core values, and brand image, and Facebook was utilized as well, mainly through Facebook ads at the beginning of the launch. However, the owner stated that the ad strategy was not successful. "*I think we got a couple of sales from that, but it wasn't too much*", Ebba revealed. The brand owner also admitted that both she and her partner "are not really social media people". This is why the brand relies mainly on word-of-mouth to spread brand awareness. "*I just always hope somehow that word of mouth will just pay off*" the owner revealed. Social media marketing has not been a fruitful endeavor for the startup brand, and most of the sales are not achieved through marketing, but through the pop-up store events the brand has engaged in. "*To be fair, that's how we got 90% of our sales*", stated the owner, referring to word-of-mouth, "*...and other ones were more or less from pop-ups*".

5.4.4 Startup Intricacies

5.4.4.1 Challenges

The case of this startup brand revealed there are many intricacies involved when operating in the fashion industry, especially if there are high sustainability standards the brand is trying to adhere to. When asked to mention the challenges that the brand has encountered, the entrepreneur directly quoted: "*Finances. Number one, for sure*". Finances were the brand's main limiting factor when it comes to launching a new collection, and marketing. Immediately after, the owner mentioned the lack of skill set she and her co-founder have and stated "*I think if me and my partner had different skill sets [...], that complemented each other more. Maybe that could also have been different.*" Another perceived disadvantage the startup owner revealed was the fact that "*our target customer at the end of the day doesn't have any money*". "*[...] they would not want to buy a t-shirt for 50 euros, [...], especially the people that are semi-conscious*" stated the entrepreneur of the sustainable fashion brand.

5.4.4.2 Advantages

Despite the plethora of challenges that can arise while operating a small fashion brand, Ebba stated that "*Otherwise, to be fair, starting a company is not too hard*". The owner reflected that her startup operation had many advantages, especially "*because we were our target customers in a way, so we knew how we wanted to think and how to target them*". Furthermore, the freedom to experiment with products, processes, and strategies and be more individualistic. Even in a market dominated by larger players, the startup owner says that the *"uniqueness"* they possess as a new brand is their competitive advantage. "*This gave us confidence [...], we're just going to do our thing, and no one can take what we are, because we are so unique*", stated the owner. The agility and lack of external pressure were also mentioned by the entrepreneur, which are advantageous elements of startups as opposed to larger corporations.

6 Analysis and Discussion

This chapter will present the analysis of the empirical findings presented in the previous chapter and will connect them to the literature review and further relevant references. The authors will discuss the similarities and differences they identified between the theory and the empirical results and present them in a detailed manner.

6.1 International Branding Strategy

When examining the empirical findings, regarding the SFBSs' branding and international branding activities, several similarities are clearly identified. These are their internationalization process, brand values and personality, marketing communication channels, and target consumers. These findings can be linked to theory in the way they are described by the brand owners. Firstly, the empirical findings suggest that these SFBSs have internationalized rapidly from inception and were reaching international customers right from the starting stages of establishing their brands, or shortly after. This finding relates to the theory of the born globals, where according to Oviatt and McDougalls, born globals or what they refer to as international new ventures are a "*business that from inception, seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and the sales of outputs in multiple countries*" (Oviatt & McDougall, 1994, p.49). This was the case for all the interviewed brands, where they clearly illustrated that their internationalization was implied as they were fully digitally present and can be easily reached by international customers. This is further confirmed by theory where it is argued that due to factors such as globalization and technological advancements, the dominant theme of SFBSs is regarded as born globals (Knight, Koed Madsen, and Servais, 2004). This can also be understood as the "positional advantage of newness" of startups, which facilitates more seamless internationalization with a minimal cost and significantly more flexibility when compared to larger corporations (Zhou et al., 2009).

6.1.1 Brand Identity and Personality

In the empirical findings, it is noted that all the SFBSs had similar core values, which are namely, quality, uniqueness, authenticity, and sustainability. All brand owners expressed these qualities as core pillars of their brands, which they themselves valued as they

considered themselves part of their target consumers. SFBS 1: *"I'm trying to be original and authentic*", SFBS 2; "*You have to tell everything, but everything should be true.*", and similar comments were made by SFBS 3, and SFBS 4. More comments can be found in the empirical findings that further describe the brands' focus on being authentic, of high quality, unique and sustainable. SFBS 4 expresses its brand personality and messaging as follows; "*sustainability doesn't have to be boring* ". These were all factors that appealed to Gen Z where it is stated in the theory, according to Nguyen et al, that brands who authentically address the social and environmental aspects concerning the Gen Z consumer, are more likely to achieve differentiation (Nguyen et al., 2022). They also value authentic and relatable content (Labi, 2008, cited in Williams et al., 2010) (Southgate, 2017). These consumers are also increasingly demanding new styles that are unique and exclusive (Čiarnienė and Vienažindienė, 2014). However, the empirical findings differ from the theory in what they consider quality products. The presented cases all have strongly argued about their high-quality products. SFBS2; "*my quality was way better than H&M.*". Furthermore, they all expressed their reasoning on why they have high-quality products, yet the theory describes fast fashion products as trendy and low-quality clothing garments (Joy et al., 2012). Moreover, the empirical findings further illustrate how the Gen Z consumer was an impacting factor in pushing the brands to consider and incorporate CSR and sustainability in their brand values, as they all expressed that it has become more important, especially for today's consumers. Although they have incorporated this to different extents, with some brands incorporating it more than other brands, they all did regardless. The theory confirms this through stating that Gen Z consumers express the need to buy from ethical brands that positively affect both the environment and society (GWI, n.d.; Klopotan et al., 2020).

The impact of Generation Z characteristics on international brand identity and personality was confirmed through empirical data. Three out of the four entrepreneurs analyzed in the study were members of Generation Z themselves, which naturally facilitated their ability to target this consumer segment. The entrepreneurs acknowledged that they were their target customers and were able to align their brand identity and values accordingly. One founder described her brand as a "passion project" for promoting strong sustainability values, while another emphasized the personal nature of her brand and the values she promotes. These insights shifted the focus from the impact of Gen Z consumers to that of Gen Z entrepreneurs. The empirical findings indicate that Gen Z entrepreneurs start and develop their brands based on their core values, including self-expression, innovation, uniqueness in fashion,

sustainability, and personalization. This aligns with research suggesting that Gen Z individuals are driven by personal factors such as self-actualization and dissatisfaction with existing conditions when it comes to venturing into entrepreneurship. They seek to establish their own authentic identity and are inclined to take action before strategizing (Hamdi et al., 2022).

6.1.2 Market Positioning

The empirical findings suggest that the entry modes for these SFBSs were all via e-commerce and direct exports, except SFBS 4 which also did e-commerce, and physical pop-up meetings, which was not successful for the brand. This adequately shows a theme of using entry modes requiring the least risk, resources, and costs. The theory suggests the same where it discusses that the limited resources of SFBSs or the international new ventures, force them to select entry modes that are with relatively low resource commitment in order to overcome the lack of resources as well as to minimize the risk associated with foreign markets (Ripollés, Blesa and Monferrer, 2012). Furthermore, when expanding, and in terms of factors affecting the international braiding strategy, the theory according to de Mooij and Hofstede speaks of cross-cultural differences affecting the overall experience of the international branding, however, the cases in the empirical findings did not face such challenges strategy (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2010). Instead, their international branding strategy was not adapted or adjusted to fit the foreign markets they entered, and it remained consistent with the same branding activities used in their home country market. This latter finding is more related to the theory suggestions of Douglas, Craig, and Nijssen, who explained that for brands that have homogenous customer segments around the world, it is important to develop a global brand identity that is consistent across markets to be a distinctive brand (Douglas, Craig, and Nijssen, 2001).

This consistency can also be related to generational cohort theory, which states how different cohorts have distinct and homogeneous characteristics due to the similar experiences they grew up with (Thach, Riewe, and Camillo, 2020). The direct impact of Generation Z on the decision of the startup brands to develop consistent branding messaging across all markets, however, cannot clearly be determined via the context of this paper. The empirical findings showed that all the brands viewed their consumers as ones who share homogeneous characteristics and would not misunderstand the brand's universal messaging and positioning;

Take for instance the comment of SFBS 3: "*Our main message was quality over quantity, and I think this message can be understood universally*".

Moreover, in terms of factors affecting the international branding strategy, the empirical findings confirm the theory where both sides suggest global competition's impact on the SFBSs. Advanced countries are facing global competition from both emerging and less developed countries utilizing technology, low labor costs, and reduced tariffs (Doole and Lowe, 2008). This is also discussed by Taplin and presented by the Global industry fashion statistics where they discuss that the low entry barriers of the fashion industry and continuously increasing demand for variety-rich fashion products, which has caused an emergence of thousands of new individual brands thus increasing the impact global competition (Taplin, 2014) (Fashion United, 2022). This shift is observed in the fashion industry due to today's consumers' requirement for brands to meet their strict standards of speedy production of new styles (Čiarnienė and Vienažindienė, 2014). However, research has not proven the extent to which this phenomenon is driven by Generation Z characteristics. Despite the theoretical findings of the paper proving that Generation Z has values that require constantly new products and speedy buying processes, the collected data was not sufficient to make the statement that Gen Z is one of the drivers of such a phenomenon (Özkan, 2017; Wood, 2013) (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2017).

6.1.3 Research and Development

As reflected in the brands' positioning and personality, design, quality, and innovation were all incorporated into the essence of making the products. All cases argued their focus on designing something new that is not available in larger brands. As the owner of SFBS 3 expressed it best: "*If I cannot find what I want, I will just make it myself.*". The owners were all the designers themselves and translated their vision into physical products. However, this was at the cost of establishing a solid and viable branding strategy. The focus was on design, quality, and uniqueness, but little focus was put into investing resources and developing a viable branding strategy. This is further confirmed by the theory that according to Murphy, this phenomenon is especially prominent within the fashion industry, where branding is mainly viewed as a strictly artistic and creative addition (Murphy, 1987). Moreover, in terms of speed, the cases expressed different experiences where some faced difficulty in speedy delivery such as SFBS 3, due to the customization nature of the products. But other brands such as SFBS 4, expressed that speed and shipping were similar across their markets. This

however posed challenges in meeting customers' expectations of speed where it is also stated in theory that one of Gen Z's main concerns are convenience and speed (Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Chomątowska, 2014, p. 407 cited in Dolot, 2018).

6.1.4 Supplier Choice

The empirical findings demonstrated that supplier choice was not a random process, but a strategic and thoughtful one. All brands expressed supplier selection criteria which included three dominant factors: quality, sustainability, and accessibility, in the sense of how easy it is to access the suppliers in terms of distance and delivery. Other less-mentioned factors were also price and size where the cheapest and smaller options would be favored, given they meet the quality and sustainability standards of those brands. Concerning theory, these brands were choosing the suppliers that helped them best meet their consumers' demands, whereas according to Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, in fast fashion, fashion retailers and suppliers had to match and fit to achieve shorter production times and meet their consumers' demands (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010).

6.1.5 Pricing

The price range of all the examined brands was between 250 SEK and 1500 SEK. It was challenging to sell at these prices, and according to theory, consumers want new high-quality products at low prices (Bruce and Daly, 2006 cited in Pauluzzo and Mason, 2021). However, when taking a closer look at their pricing strategies, they all depended on their initial costs and positioning. In terms of costs, it was suppliers, marketing budget, product type, and materials. As for positioning, the pricing depended on whether the brand was positioned more as sustainable or as high quality. Brands such as SFBS 1, and SFBS 4, focusing on sustainability experienced higher costs and thus higher prices and both lower sales and profits; because their target consumers do not typically afford such prices which ranged between 460 SEK on the lower end and 800 SEK on the higher end. SFBS 2 was no different, in trying to appeal as both sustainable, high quality, and affordable, the brand was priced based on H&M price level at a lower price range of 250 SEK to 450 SEK, which barely made any profits at such a price level. This was not profitable for SFBS 2, primarily because smaller brands do not have economies of scale as compared to larger brands such as H&M. However, for SFBS 3, pricing was the highest, due to the level of customization involved in making the products which are expressed in theory in the fashion pyramid model, where the more customization the higher the product's price (Doeringer and Crean, 2006, p.4).

6.1.6   Marketing Communication

A dominant theme was presented by the empirical findings, as all brands relied on their digital presence in their marketing communications activities. Although to different levels of commitment to different apps, in totality, they all relied on social media apps including Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube, accompanied by a website. This is strongly related to the born global theory and to Gen Z's characteristics as consumers. According to theory, Gen Z are known as the Internet generation, online generation, technology generation, and real digital natives (Dolot, 2018, cited in Wijaya, Darmawati, and Kuncoro, 2020). Other than the low resources needed to use digital marketing communication channels, these brands were all aware that this is where their target consumer is present. As SFBS 3 expressed: *"Ask yourself where customers are and go be present there. For example, many of our potential customers are on TikTok, so we post there".* The other brands expressed the same conscious reasoning which relates to theory in trying to appeal to what is referred to as Gen Z frequency, where brands are aligned with where Gen Z are hanging and are using massaging that appeals to those consumers, such as quality, uniqueness, and sustainability. Witt and Barid explained that brands that are successful at reaching gen z are brands that are on the same wavelength as their target market (Witt and Baird, 2018). The brands specifically used short format videos that tend to have a viral effect, and their most successful strategies included influencer marketing and word of mouth. Apart from the success of word of mouth due to their social network, it can be argued that those two forms of marketing communication were the most effective due to their authenticity and credibility factors. A referral from a friend is more believable than a social media ad, and a paid influencer who is a normal everyday person is more believable and trusted by the audience compared to a faceless corporation. Theory confirms this where; "*the majority of marketing executives (61%) say that WOM is the most effective form of marketing*" (Chen and Yuan, 2020). Furthermore, firms that use influencer marketing enhance brand marketing effectiveness and gain the influencers' audience trust. (Leung, Gu and Palmatier, 2022).

6.2 Startup Intricacies

6.2.1   Challenges

6.2.1.1   Finances and Costs

When it comes to the intricacies that the brands experience due to being at the startup level, there are both identified challenges, but also advantages these ventures can encounter due to

their newness and small size. These challenges and opportunities are even more intricate than MNEs (Gurel and Sari, 2015). Firstly, it is important to address the challenges, since those are universal factors that have been proven to cause venture failure across all industries. The challenges that startups are known to encounter are the limited financial, physical, and human resources that come with being a new, small business (Knight, Madsen & Servais, 2004). When looking at the relevant literature, however, the most emphasized and discussed barrier, which has the most severe implications for startup ventures, is the capital requirements that come with the establishment, and the inability of small businesses to meet those requirements (Jawahar and McLaughlin, 2001). This is a theme that was consistently and clearly observed throughout the gathered data from the SFBS cases.

Financial constraints and cost-related issues were consistently mentioned by the startup fashion brands during the interviews, indicating their significance as barriers to their operations. The topic of finances arose early in the interviews, with one brand, SFBS 1, facing high shipping costs that restricted its internationalization efforts. Limited financial resources also influenced the choice of suppliers, with SFBS 4 emphasizing the need to find the cheapest options. Expensive production costs hindered SFBS 1's ability to transition to "from scratch production." SFBS 2 highlighted budget constraints when initially developing their influencer marketing strategy. When asked about the biggest challenges faced, three out of four brands mentioned finances as a significant obstacle. The phrase "you need money to make money" succinctly captures the consensus, as expressed by the founder of SFBS 1. The only time when finances were not brought up as a barrier was in the case of SFBS 3. However, this fashion startup is the only brand that has been selling hand-made sewed clothing designed and created by the two brand owners, which could play a role. The consensus, however, is that finances are the main challenge, which can be summarized by the phrase "*you need money to make money*", as explained by the founder of SFBS 1.

6.2.1.2 Knowledge Capital

Despite low financial resources, research suggests that startups must deal with more difficulties as well. Resource scarcity is the reality for most startups, not just when it comes to financial capital, but regarding knowledge too (Gruber, 2004). New entrepreneurial ventures are known for having low knowledge capital. This lack of knowledge concerns all aspects of operations (Wise, 2013). The lack of knowledge in entrepreneurial new ventures concerns aspects such as financial literacy, business knowledge, institutional knowledge,

international market knowledge, target market knowledge, and procedural knowledge regarding processes, techniques, and tools used to operate successfully (Wise, 2013) (Park et al., 2015). Entrepreneurs having knowledge capital and acquiring different components of knowledge are integral to new venture success, as they have been shown to reduce the costs of internationalization and benefit the internationalization speed (Park et al., 2015). On the other hand, lacking knowledge capital regarding international business processes is detrimental, but it is the case for most ventures of young entrepreneurs, who are found to have a small survival rate due to this (Wise, 2013).

Lack of knowledge, particularly in marketing, was frequently mentioned in the studied SFBS cases. SFBS 3 explicitly admitted to their lack of understanding of social media marketing. Similarly, SFBS 4 acknowledged their struggle with marketing and confessed to not being social media savvy. The absence of a well-defined branding strategy was attributed to the newness and "immaturity" of the venture (Park et al., 2015). SFBS 2 discussed the initial uncertainty about their target market, which required trial and error to identify successfully. Notably, one brand initially described its target audience as Millennials but later revealed it encompassed both Generation Z and Millennials. This underscores the significance of an entrepreneur's knowledge and competence in relation to venture performance (Gümüsay & Bohné, 2018).

Research indicates that combining different areas of knowledge between two parties can enhance a venture's internationalization process (Cao et al., 2009; cited in Park et al., 2015). By leveraging their respective expertise, these parties can bridge knowledge gaps and complement each other's skills. SFBS 4 provides an example of this, as the startup co-founder reflects on the importance of having complementary skill sets between herself and her business partner: "*Maybe that could also have been different*". The entrepreneur's reflection is empirically proven to be accurate since according to Loane et al. (2007), a study of ventures with more than one founder found them to have better success rates due to the combined market knowledge of multiple founders (Park et al., 2015). The empirical findings are aligned with the theory of the impact of knowledge capital on new venture success. Like the founder of SFBS 1 expressed: "*As time goes on, I feel more confident, I know my demand, I know my customers, I know a little bit more of what works and what doesn't work, and I can see the results for it*".

6.2.1.3   Time Constraint

Another common phenomenon that emerged through the gathered data of this research has been the time constraint which inhibits the entrepreneurs' operations. SFBS 1, being both the founder and sole proprietor of the fashion startup, expressed how being an entrepreneur, and full-time student, makes it difficult to find time to allocate to the necessary research for product development. This has had an active impact on the internationalization of the brand, with the owner having had to temporarily operate within its home market. The case of SFBS 3, also revealed an experience with time being a barrier. The interviewed co-founder revealed how both she and her co-founder "*don't quite have the time to do anything because we are both employed full-time*". Furthermore, the entrepreneur revealed how in order to be able to launch their brand, the two owners had to take a summer break from their jobs in order to have time to allocate starting their business. When revealing the challenges experienced by the owner of SFBS 4, the owner mentioned "time, of course" within the perceived difficulties that come with being a startup: "*It takes time to research, to make contacts*", revealed the owner. Time constraint is a phenomenon also mentioned in the research. For entrepreneurial startups, time constraints are a barrier on multiple levels (Auschra et al., 2019) (Shaw & Darroch, 2004).

6.2.1.4   Competition

The fashion industry presents complexities beyond what has been discussed, including new standards for mass production, low-cost high-quality garments, and speedy delivery (Taplin, 2014). The competition in the fashion industry is intense, particularly for new startups. SFBS 2's founder encountered significant competition from other small e-commerce startups: "*All the small brands, they were huge competition*" revealed the owner. SFBS 3, also described the competition as fierce within the online fashion market, especially because of the emergence of other small fashion brands. Surprisingly, the empirical findings suggest that entrepreneurs mainly consider other startups as competition. "*Larger brands are for masses, fashion companies are for those who value uniqueness*", said SFBS 3, when asked how the brand manages to stay competitive in an industry dominated by MNEs. SFBS 1 gave a similar insight by revealing that "*People still go to H&M, but they don't really want to get that dress everyone's wearing if they can get something unique*", suggesting that the small business owner does not consider larger companies as competition. However, when asked about possible pressures she has felt due to consumer standards or demands, the owner revealed that the pressure is created by other small fashion brands. The entrepreneur

explained that these small brands are trying to be "*as original, or as weird as they can be, [...], they create a need for you to belong*". The owner proceeded to compare her brand, which has "*soft and down-to-earth values*", and admitted to having contemplated whether she should also shift her branding to match that of the other fashion startups. This is an unexpected result that was revealed after the data analysis was conducted.

6.2.1.5   Limited Production Capabilities

A consistent theme that emerged through the empirical data, which was not a direct consideration in the theoretical framework of this paper, was the limited production capabilities, and the possible production difficulties that fashion startups encounter. The limited capabilities of startup production, however, are a natural implication due to the combination of the aforementioned intricacies of new venture experience. The data revealed that the startups' production capabilities are one of the main challenges the fashion startups have dealt with in one way or another. The case of SFBS 1, as mentioned through the previous intricacies, revealed that the time and research needed for product development have severely impacted the internationalization of the brand. Furthermore, the brand revealed that part of the production of the upcoming collection, which is taking place in a different continent to the brand's home market, will be limited and the owner will not be able to replicate the garments once they are sold out. The interview with SFBS 3, also revealed the limited production capabilities being a challenge. "*We don't have a large warehouse stuffed with our products; we are sewing them in so-called real-time when we get an order*". While this phenomenon can be partly attributed to the aforementioned capital and time constraints, this is also a strategy used by startups in order to ensure survival. Startups who seek to sustain their chances of survival, tend to keep production capabilities at a lower level (Archibald et al., 2015).

6.2.1.6   Generation Z Effects

During the analysis of the empirical data, the authors aimed to identify the distinct challenges that Generation Z and their consumer characteristics might pose for startups. However, no such challenges emerged from the interviews. Even when specifically asked about pressures related to targeting their consumer segments, the startup brand owners primarily discussed challenges such as finances, time, knowledge, competition, and production. While it could be argued that some challenges, like industry competitiveness, are influenced by Generation Z demands, this research did not provide conclusive evidence. Moreover, the startups in this study target both Generation Z and Millennials, making it difficult to isolate distinct

challenges associated with Generation Z. Additionally, the startups do not use data metrics to analyze the specific behaviors of each generational segment, which could reveal Generation Z-driven challenges. The startups primarily rely on sales and positive feedback as metrics for measuring success. Therefore, contrary to the researchers' expectations, the startup fashion brands did not reveal any direct challenges resulting from targeting the Generation Z segment.

6.2.2 Advantages

6.2.2.1 Technology

Startups, especially those categorized as born globals, benefit from facilitators such as globalization and technological advancements (Knight, Koed Madsen, and Servais, 2004). The startup cases in this study reflect this advantage, as they were able to expand internationally almost automatically, without strategic planning. SFBS 4, for example, refers to their brand as "a European brand" with customers from various locations. SFBS 1 attributes their immediate internationalization to an integrated e-commerce platform that automates order fulfilment, printing, packaging, and shipping. SFBS 2 targeted customers in both their home country and the US through e-commerce and influencer marketing. SFBS 3 also experienced natural international expansion without specific plans. Interestingly, the branding strategies across different markets remained relatively homogeneous, suggesting similarities in consumer preferences. The combination of globalization, digitalization, and technological advancements facilitates international operations even for startups, as evident in all the SFBS cases.

6.2.2.2 Agility and Flexibility

According to the theory, agility, the ability to adapt and respond to market changes, is a crucial characteristic for entrepreneurs (Pramono et al., 2021). Startups benefit from agility as it helps them manage resource scarcity (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020). The importance of agility and flexibility in business operations was consistently emphasized by the fashion startups in this research when discussing their perceived advantages and competitive edge. Although the researchers did not initially consider agility as an advantage, the data analysis revealed its consistent presence. SFBS 1 explicitly mentioned agility as an advantage, highlighting the ability to quickly make changes to the business model and operations based on circumstances. SFBS 4 echoed this notion, stating that startups have more freedom to explore different strategies. The concept of agility was indirectly implied in all interviews, as the

entrepreneurs discussed their continuous testing and adaptation of strategies based on consumer demands, personal aspirations, and other factors.

6.2.2.3 Cost-Effective Marketing

The empirical findings indicated that all fashion startups incorporated digital marketing, particularly through social media platforms, into their marketing strategies. This aligns with the broader trend of startups opting for digital marketing due to factors such as expected effort and financial resources (Teixeira et al., 2018). The insights from the four interviewed fashion startups supported these findings. SFBS 3 highlighted the cost-effectiveness of social media marketing compared to traditional advertising, emphasizing how it enables easy access to the Generation Z consumer segment. SFBS 2 also affirmed the tech-savviness of Gen Z and their responsiveness to short-form video content on social media, which the owner found to be highly effective. All fashion startups heavily relied on social media presence for brand recognition. These empirical findings align with research suggesting that Generation Z and Millennials are active social media users who prefer engaging short-form video content over traditional advertising methods (Senanu, Anning-Dorson, and Tackie, 2023) (Petrock, 2021). This advantage of targeting the Generation Z consumer segment eliminates the need for expensive traditional promotion strategies, as highlighted by the owners' insights.

6.2.2.4 Competitive Advantage

Throughout the data collection and analysis, the newness of the startups was perceived by the entrepreneurs as their main competitive advantage. All startups emphasized how their *"newness"* and *"uniqueness"* as small brands have allowed them to gain brand recognition within the young consumer segments they are targeting. SFBS 1 has taken note of the *"preference for small brands"* that expresses the Generation Z segment, stating that it is easier to achieve establishment as a small brand. SFBS 4, as well as SFBS 3, stated that their product offerings being *"limited"* and *"unique"* is their competitive advantage, especially over bigger corporations: *"We are not trying to compete with them, we are just trying to be different"*, stated SFSB 3. These findings reinstate the notion that Generation Z tends to prefer new and innovative brands, and they even avoid large corporations in order to support smaller brands (Paharia, Avery, and Keinan, 2014). These findings appear consistent through all the conducted interviews with the small fashion startups, making this the second distinct advantage that can be directly related to targeting the younger consumer segments.

7 Conclusion

This final chapter will address the relevant research topic and answer the research question. Following the answers, an updated conceptual map based on the empirical findings will be presented, and implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research will be presented.

7.1 Answering the Research Questions

The purpose of this paper was to explore how the international branding strategy of SFBSs is affected by the new Generation Z, and in what ways the intricacies of being a new venture or startup, affect the ability of the startups to create their branding strategies. In order to explore these variables, the authors formulated the research title (RT), which encompasses the scope of the study and includes all relevant elements of the research: *The Impact of Generation-Z on International Branding Strategy: An Analysis of Startup Fashion Brands.* To explore the topic in more depth, the sub-question (SQ) was developed: *What are the possible challenges and advantages faced by startup fashion brands in adapting to the Gen-Z effect in their international branding strategies?*

(RT) The main title aims to explore the possible implications that the Generation Z segment has on the international branding strategies of startup fashion brands. More specifically, through the research title, the study explored what are the aspects of the international branding of startup firms that are affected by this young consumer segment's characteristics. Through the study, the participating startup fashion brands displayed similar strategies in their international branding, which were shown to be a response to Generation Z consumer characteristics. Since the term of international branding is extremely broad, and encompasses a plethora of aspects, the authors studied the following aspects of branding: Market Positioning, Brand Identity and Personality, Research and Development, Supplier Choice, Pricing, and Marketing Communication.

The analysis of all four SFBS cases revealed homogeneous results. Firstly, all brands demonstrated a highly rapid internationalization process right from their inception, or during the beginning stages of their operations. SFBSs were shown to easily access foreign customers and build a global market presence thanks to their internet presence. In terms of entry modes, the entry strategies reflect startup brands' limited resources and are consistent

with the theory that says international new enterprises choose low-resource commitment entry forms. Furthermore, the empirical data show that SFBSs retain homogeneous branding operations across all markets, rather than responding to the distinctive peculiarities of foreign markets. This consistency aligns with the theory's proposal that firms targeting homogeneous client segments around the world build a global brand identity. This finding is also related to the fact that Generation Z, possesses homogeneous characteristics as consumers. The impact of Generation Z on SFBSs is also evident through the brands' identity and personality. The brands emphasized core values, such as quality, uniqueness, authenticity, and sustainability, which align with the ideals of Gen Z customers. SFBSs view their target consumers to be homogeneous, allowing them to establish consistent branding messaging across all markets. Furthermore, the findings showed that three out of four entrepreneurs were members of Generation Z themselves, which brought light to the Gen Z entrepreneur phenomenon. The findings revealed that the entrepreneurs' values and experiences influenced the establishment and development of their brands. Gen Z entrepreneurs promote the alignment of their brand's identity with their own values. While the case of Gen Z entrepreneurship was not the focus of this study, these findings further proved that Gen Z individuals are driven by factors such as self-actualization and dissatisfaction with existing conditions, leading them to constantly seek new experiences and brands and want to identify themselves with those brands. The entrepreneurs of this study who fall into the Generation Z cohort expressed the fact that their ventures were an extension of their own authentic identities and values.

Furthermore, in their research and development operations, SFBSs emphasize design, quality, and innovation, to offer innovative and unique items that are not readily available from larger brands. This aligns with the theory of Generation Z mentioned in this paper, who are individuals constantly seeking unique offerings. For SFBSs, supplier selection is a strategic decision that takes into account criteria such as quality, sustainability, accessibility, pricing, and size. The pricing strategies of SFBSs are determined by the start-up costs and brand positioning, with the brands having difficulty selling their products at higher price points due to their target consumers' budget limits. Digital marketing communication platforms are also critical components of SFBSs' international branding initiatives. These companies rely significantly on social media platforms, as well as their websites. This correlates with Generation Z's digital native nature and enables SFBSs to efficiently contact their target consumers. Because of their authenticity and credibility, short-form videos, influencer

marketing, and word-of-mouth methods are particularly effective in reaching Gen Z customers, which all brands employ.

(SQ) The sub-question of the paper aims to give light on the added intricacies that startup brands face due to their small size and newness within the fashion industry. Research on the topic of startups has revealed that new ventures are shown to face barriers more intricate than those of MNEs, and SMEs. The multifaceted barriers that startup brands face have not been widely studied, especially when it comes to their international branding strategies while targeting Generation Z within the extremely competitive fashion industry. The small body of research on startups also suggested that these new ventures have certain advantages over MNEs and SMEs. The purpose of the sub-question was therefore to examine the challenges and advantages faced by startup fashion brands, and the possible effect of the Generation Z intricacies on each of those aspects. The empirical findings of this research confirmed the part of the theory that stated that startups experience challenges such as limited knowledge, capital, time, clients, and reputation.

The findings, however, offered even more depth concerning the added intricacies of startups within the fashion industry. The first was the competition small fashion brands face due to other fashion brands. While the initial expectation according to theory, was that small startups struggle when navigating the market due to the competition of the larger players, the SFBSs of this paper revealed that they do not consider MNEs or SMEs as competition. Their biggest source of competition has been the emergence of other SFBSs. Another theme the empirical findings revealed about startup challenges in the fashion industry, was the brands' limited production capabilities, which is a big drawback within the fashion industry. This limitation could be the result of the aforementioned challenges of capital, knowledge, and time; however, this relationship was not studied through the context of this research. When it comes to evaluating the extent to which Generation Z contributed to the challenges mentioned above of the SFBSs, the findings did not suggest such a phenomenon. This reveals that the SFBSs' challenges were driven by their newness and the standard limitations that come with that, and by the environment of the fashion industry.

Moreover, the empirical findings of the SFBSs confirmed the theory of advantages such firms experience due to their newness. Technology was presented as a facilitator and agility, and flexibility consistently emerged as advantages of operating on a startup level. The findings also revealed certain advantages that the SFBSs experienced in direct relation to Generation

Z being their target market. The first was their ability to employ cost-effective digital marketing strategies. The theory suggested that Generation Z responds better to organic, authentic, engaging content rather than more traditional forms of advertisement, which also tend to be more costly. This was entirely confirmed by the participants. Furthermore, the SFBSs revealed that their newness is their main competitive advantage when targeting Generation Z, especially in relation to larger firms. This further confirmed the theory that Generation Z, constantly seek new product offerings, and prefer purchasing from smaller brands.

In conclusion, Generation Z has an impact on all aforementioned aspects of the international branding strategy of startup fashion firms, not only from the consumer perspective, but also from the Generation Z entrepreneur's perspective. All SFBSs have shown fast internationalization and are relying on digital channels to reach international markets. They demonstrate core values that are meaningful to Generation Z consumers and align their brand identity and personality accordingly. The impact of Gen Z entrepreneurs on brand values, authenticity, and innovation is also evident, further confirming the theory in regard to Generation Z's characteristics covered in this paper. Regarding the intricacies the small fashion brands experience, the disadvantages are mainly driven by the universal theory of limited resources related to new ventures, the entrepreneur's knowledge, and the competitiveness of the fashion industry due to the emergence of small brands. Generation Z did not have any considerable negative implications on the startups causing challenges. Quite the contrary, the findings suggested that the SFBSs targeting Generation Z, considered the consumer segment to be beneficial, especially in their startup phase, with specific advantages related to targeting this generation segment. These relationships will be illustrated below, with the revised conceptual map according to the empirical findings.
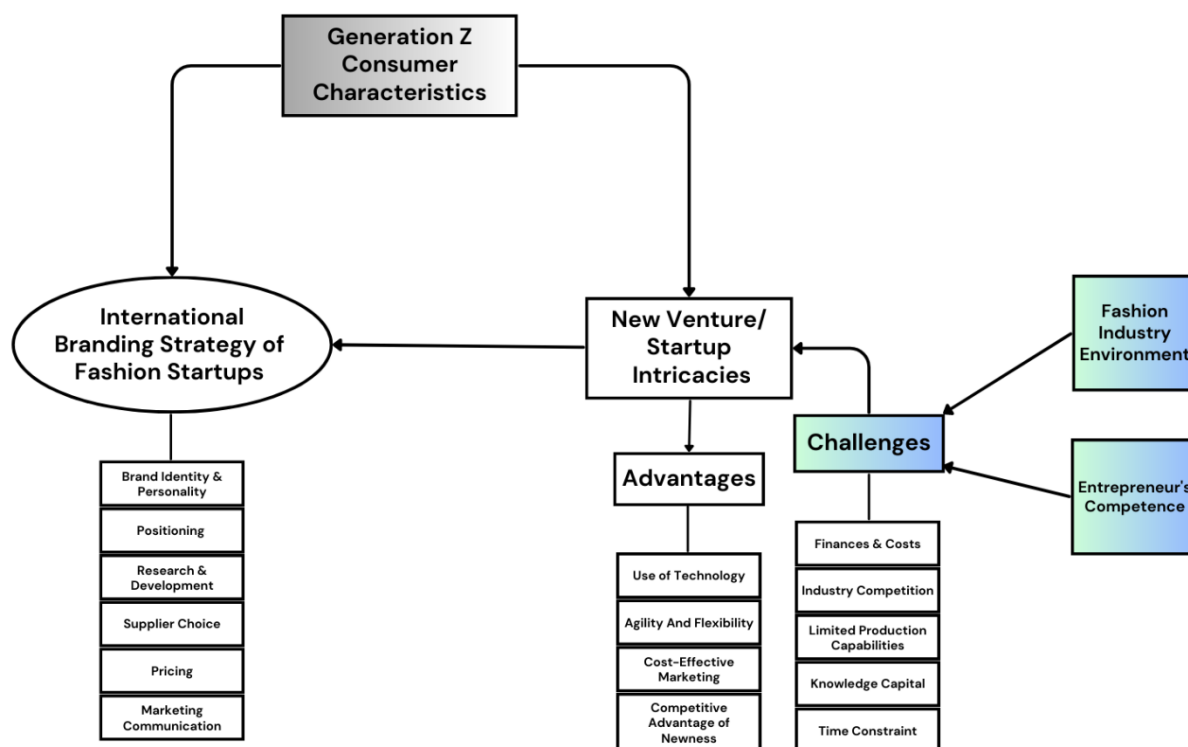
Figure 6: Updated Conceptual Map.

7.2 Implications

In practice, the study's findings have significant implications for startup fashion firms looking to adjust their international branding strategy to effectively reach Generation Z consumers. The study suggests that startup fashion firms may take advantage of their newness, agility, and flexibility. These businesses can benefit from low-cost digital marketing methods that appeal to Generation Z's desire for authentic and engaging content. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the importance of connecting brand values, authenticity, and innovation with Generation Z customers' tastes and expectations. Startups can leverage their capacity to provide unique and innovative solutions that meet the ever-changing needs of Generation Z.

7.3 Limitations

While conducting the research, several limitations were observed, which should be addressed. To begin, the study was limited to startup fashion brands, and the findings may not apply to other industries or types of startups. Furthermore, the study's sample size was limited to four cases, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The study also did not consider variables like the exogenous market conditions of the startups, and their effect on the brands. The entrepreneurs' business competence and general and educational background were also

not considered. Furthermore, Generation Z insights were retrieved from secondary sources, which is another limitation. Finally, because the startup owners targeted both Millennials and Generation Z consumers, the study was not able to address the extent to which specific consumer characteristics were related to Millennials or Generation Z based on the information provided by the owners.

7.4 Suggestions for Future Research

To improve the external validity of the findings, future research should increase the sample size and cover a larger number of startups, while also considering the personal background and competence of the entrepreneurs, which play a big role in startup operations. Furthermore, while this study focused largely on the viewpoints of startup fashion firms, future research might investigate the perspectives of other stakeholders such as investors, industry experts, and Gen Z consumers. Future research should investigate the long-term viability and scalability of startup fashion firms' international branding strategies in connection to Generation Z to increase understanding in this field. This would entail investigating how these firms can remain competitive and modify their strategies as Generation Z consumers mature and their preferences shift. It would also be interesting to investigate the role of technology in supporting the internationalization and branding efforts of startup fashion firms aimed toward Generation Z. Understanding the interactions between technology, branding tactics, and Generation Z consumer behaviour can help companies navigate the changing landscape of the fashion sector.

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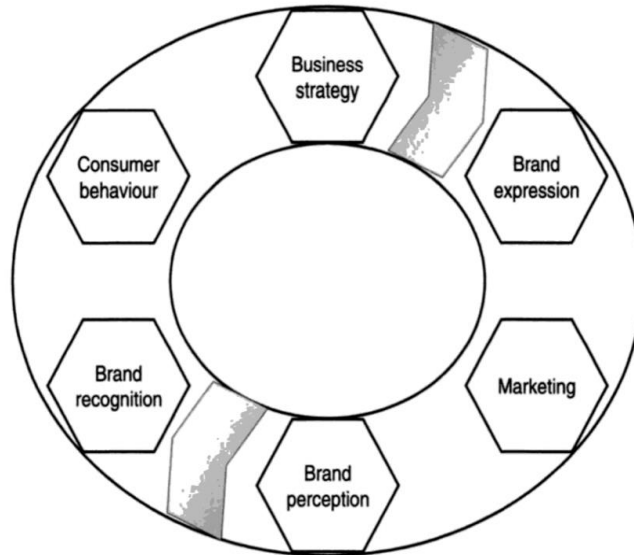
Appendices

Appendix A – Figure 1: Determinants of the successful brand (Doyle, 2001, p.256)
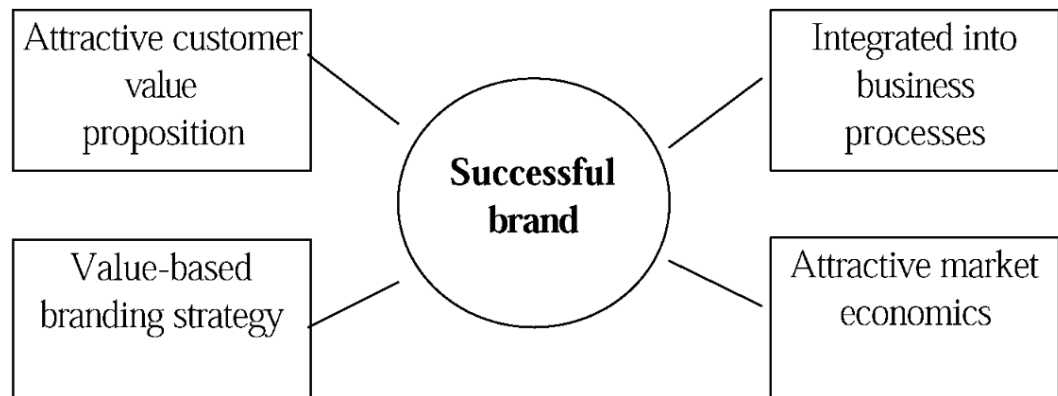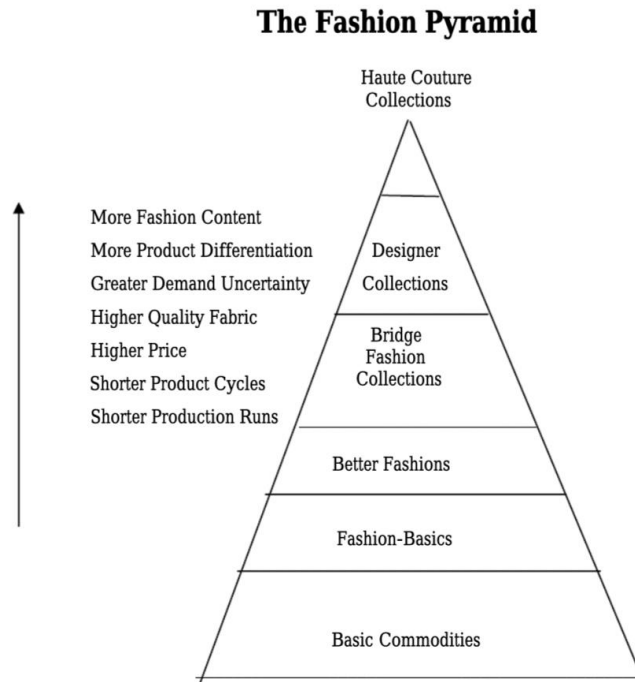
Appendix B – Figure 2: The Strategic Planning Cycle

(Sicco Van Gelder, 2003, p.2)

Appendix C – Figure 3: The Fashion Pyramid (Doeringer and Crean, 2006, p.4)

The Fashion Pyramid

Haute Couture
Collections

More Fashion Content
More Product Differentiation
Greater Demand Uncertainty
Higher Quality Fabric
Higher Price
Shorter Product Cycles
Shorter Production Runs

Designer
Collections

Bridge
Fashion
Collections

Better Fashions

Fashion-Basics

Basic Commodities

Appendix D – Table 1: Operationalization Table

Concepts	Interview Questions	Reasoning
Background Information	1-4	The SFBSs were given information about their rights as participants as per the Ethical Considerations Requirements. They were then asked questions in regard to their size, inception, establishment, market, products, industry in order to validate the case's relevance to this study.
International Branding Strategies	5-13	The participating brands were questioned on how they approach different aspects of their international branding strategies, including entry mode, pricing, marketing, metrics and statistics, CSR, and more operational aspects.
Startup Challenges	14-16	The participants were asked to reflect on their experienced challenges as startup brands in the context of the fashion industry.
Startup Advantages	17-19	The participants were asked to reflect on their experienced advantages as startup brands in the context of the fashion industry.
Target Consumer Insights	20-21	The participants were asked to elaborate on further details and experiences of targeting their consumers.
Other	-	The interviewers asked further questions in order to deepen their understanding and gain further relevant data from the SFBSs.

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Appendix E - Interview Questions

General Information and Startup Characteristics

1. Can you give us information on your brand? What are you selling? What is your brand size in terms of employees, and when did you establish your brand?

2. Can you tell us about your experiences in the fashion industry and how you got started with your brand?

3. How would you describe your target market and what are their values and preferences?

4. What international markets are you currently targeting, and how have you adapted your branding strategy to these markets?

International Branding Strategies

5. What are the biggest challenges you face in expanding your brand into international markets?

6. How important do you think it is to cater to consumers when developing your international branding strategies?

7. In your opinion, what are the most important factors to consider when trying to appeal to your consumers through your branding strategy?

8. Can you tell me about any successful branding strategies you have implemented for your consumers?

9. How do you measure the success of your branding strategy, and what metrics do you use?

10. How do you approach pricing your products?

11. Based on what criteria do you use your suppliers? Sustainability? Low Price? Quick fulfillment? Quality? All of the above? If not, then what?

12. What types of marketing communications do you use?

13. How important is corporate social responsibility (CSR) to your brand?/ In what ways do you incorporate CSR into your international branding strategies?

Startup Challenges

14. What are some of the biggest challenges you face as a small startup fashion brand?

15. Can you tell me about a time when you overcame a challenge related to your international branding strategy?

16. How do you stay competitive in a market dominated by larger brands?

Startup Advantages

17. What advantages do you think small startup fashion brands have over larger SMEs and MNEs when targeting consumers?

18. Can you give an example of a success that was made possible by being a small startup brand?

19. In your opinion, what do you think larger SMEs and MNEs could learn from small startup fashion brands when it comes to targeting young consumers?

Target Consumer Insights

20. What are some of the advantages of marketing to Gen-Z consumers?

21. What advice would you give to other small startup fashion brands looking to market to young consumers?