



Branding Strategies of Born Globals

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Abstract. Born global companies have now been studied for a decade. However, little has been written specifically about the challenges facing born globals in their branding endeavours. This research examines the branding strategies of 30 Finnish small and medium-sized born globals. The experience, qualities and global orientation of the founder and the top management team are found important for the success of the born globals in their branding achievements. A key argument is that business-to-business and business-to-consumer born globals differ as to their branding strategies and approaches. The analysis reveals a major imperative; branding strategies are dynamic and depend on the globalisation degree.

Keywords: born globals, marketing strategies, branding strategies, degree of marketing standardisation, number of brands, brand building approach

Introduction

Born global companies, which often globalise their business rapidly, thereby contradicting the mainstream pattern of internationalisation (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977; Luostarinen, 1979), have recently aroused interest among researchers in many countries (see Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004). In this research, born globals are defined as those that from their inception pursue a vision of becoming global and that often globalise their business rapidly without an earlier long-term domestic or internationalisation period (Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004; see also Oviatt and McDougall, 1994).

Although the international and global marketing literature has contributed much to our understanding of the marketing strategies of large global firms (see e.g. Buzzell, 1968; Keegan, 1969; Levitt, 1983; Jain, 1989; Yip, 1992), little has been written specifically on born globals' marketing strategies (see e.g. Knight, 1997) and few of these studies are related to the challenges facing born globals in their branding endeavours (see McDougall et al., 1994b; Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2002; Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2003a).

Finnish born globals are facing a tremendous challenge given their origin, resource constraints, and vision/mission. As they originate in a small and open economy (SMOPEC), are new business ventures, and aim to conquer the global market rapidly, it is difficult to imagine anything more difficult. Given these circumstances, branding is among the most difficult managerial challenges. (see e.g., Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004) It has usually taken decades for truly global companies to gain global brand

recognition. Given the limited attention received in research and the high managerial importance, it seems justifiable to study the branding strategies of born globals.

Hence, this study addresses the following research problem: what are the branding strategies of born globals given their origin, resource constraints, and vision? To address this problem, the objectives set for this study are as follows: (1) What are the specific characteristics of born globals originating from SMOPEC countries?, (2) What are the realistically feasible branding strategy alternatives given these circumstances?, (3) What are the factors influencing the Born Global's choice of branding strategy?, and (4) What are the branding strategies selected by leading Finnish born globals?

The study approach is of a descriptive-analytical nature. It first reviews the existing literature and then advances toward development of a theoretical framework. Propositions are developed and then examined by applying the multiple case study methods in investigating the branding strategies of 30 Finnish small and medium-sized born globals. Finally, the theoretical contribution is pinpointed, the managerial implications are drawn, and future research suggestions are depicted.

Literature review

Characteristics of born globals

Born globals can be defined in many ways. These definitions vary from very strict to relatively loose, depending on the school of thought. Some of the earlier studies have used revenues and export percentage achievements within two years of their establishment as measurement criteria (Knight and Cavusgil, 1996). Others have emphasised the elements of an international venture, which "seeks to derive significant competitive advantage from the use of resources and the sales of outputs in multiple countries" (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994). Generally speaking, born globals have been associated with small size, entrepreneurship and few employees, limited resources and experience in international business, and small domestic markets and global niche products intended for global markets (Gabrielsson and Al-Obaidi, 2004).

The latest global business research has insisted on a strict interpretation of the concept 'global' and also taken up the strategic perspectives, whereby born globals (1) start international operations even before or simultaneously with domestic ones, (2) base their visions and missions mainly on global markets and customers from the inception, (3) plan their products, structures, systems and finances on a global basis, (4) plan to become global market leaders as part of their vision, (5) use different product, operation and market strategies than firms have traditionally done, (6) follow different global marketing strategies, and (7) grow exceptionally fast on global markets. (Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004).

Limited financial and managerial resources combined with a rapid globalisation strategy reduce the realistically available branding strategies in many ways: (1) the branding strategy should be cost effective, (2) the branding strategy should allow rapid impact on the global market, and (3) the brand building should be simple and require

limited managerial skills. At first, achievement of all of these requirements seems almost impossible.

Branding strategy dimensions

Branding strategies have been examined extensively in the marketing literature. Research has determined that branding plays a strategic role by strengthening relationships and creating value for partners (Aaker, 1994), branding of services has been recognised to be equally important as for industrial goods (Berry, 2000), and research has now progressed to measuring such brand equity (Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 1997). Brand leverage through brand extension has been investigated with respect to consumer evaluation, and implications for the firm's overall branding strategy have been provided (Aaker and Keller, 1990). Research has also examined the benefits of brand alliances (Bucklin and Sengupta, 1993), co-branding (Blackett and Boad, 1999) and umbrella branding (Erdem, 1998), and tackled the electronic shopping and e-branding incentives (Alba et al., 1997). However, the research conducted on branding in the international business field is more limited. Kelz and Block (1993 p. 11) contend that "independently, globalization and branding have been given due attention, but the interrelation between the two has not." The notable exception has been the advanced literature around the standardisation issue with regard to branding; over four decades, it has evolved from a pros and cons debate (Buzzel, 1968) to concerns about performance issues and implications (Zou and Cavusgil, 2002; Holt et al., 2004).

Although, branding research in the marketing literature has seldom focused on international or global aspects, the research may be useful because the object of analysis has often been an international or global company. Building on both marketing and international business research streams, three important dimensions of branding strategy are next covered.

Brand-building approach. The studies examining branding strategies of born globals are limited and somewhat contradictory. Luostarinen and Gabrielsson (2004) proposed that born globals deviate from conventional companies because of the high pressure to develop their own global brand from inception. In contrast, when examining the born globals' potential to differentiate their marketing, Knight (1997) argues that born globals usually lack the resources that are required for intensive marketing and brand building. They instead differentiate via product innovation.

The global brand-planning process could be considered in two sequential stages (de Chernatony et al., 1995): The first entails a decision about the core essence of the brand. This necessitates identifying the basis under which the brand will be differentiated in such a way that customers perceive the unique, relevant and added value that the company is able to sustain. Having conceived a clear positioning relating to a unique cluster of added values, the second stage can then be addressed. This concern planning and implementing execution of the brand's benefits internationally, and includes a decision regarding the standardisation degree across countries. The literature seems

to agree that development of global brands is usually a long-term endeavour, which leads to increased brand equity when successfully managed (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1994; Kapferer, 1997). Targeted global brand awareness and image are built consistently on the basis of the brand identity set by the company as the target for its brand.

Since various researchers tend to use the concepts in slightly different ways it is important to define what is meant by brand name, awareness, image, and identity. Legally, a brand name simply distinguishes a company's product and certifies its origin, but hereby we refer to its "ability to gain an exclusive, positive and prominent meaning in the mind of a large number of consumers" (Kapferer, 1997 p. 25). This strength can be measured by brand awareness "as reflected by consumers' ability to identify the brand" (Keller, 1993 p. 3). "Brand awareness affects consumer decision making by influencing the formation and strength of brand associations in the brand image" (Keller, 1993 p. 3). Brand image again consists of "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993 p. 3).

Kapferer (1997) has suggested three pathways to globalisation: (1) duplicating progressively the success factors of the local strategy and brand originally planned for the local markets, (2) launching the brand from scratch in several countries at the same time, (3) unifying the local brands inherited by acquisitions and mergers during the growth of the firm. The two earlier approaches relate closely to the two approaches suggested by advertising standardisation research (Peebles et al., 1977), but which can be extended to branding: prototype standardisation and pattern standardisation. In prototype standardisation, a brand that has been successful in one market (often domestic) would be employed in multiple markets, whereas in the pattern approach, the brand would initially be designed for multi-market use and needs. These are two viable alternative approaches for born globals in the early globalisation phase, whereas the third alternative of unifying local brands may become important in a later development phase.

An essential part of brand building is the implementation of the external and internal marketing communication in regards to the brand identity (Aaker and Joachimshaler, 2000 pp. 7–13). An important marketing communication decision is whether the 'push' or 'pull' strategy is applied. In the pull approach, the Born Global advertises and uses sales promotion to create pull for the brand among end customers. In contrast, in the push approach personal selling, direct marketing, and public relations are used to push the products at each stage of the value delivery process and marketing channel. (see e.g. Aaker et al., 1992; Webster, 2000)

Type and number of brands used. Relatively little attention has been paid to the question of brand structure and architecture in international marketing literature (Douglas et al., 2001). Brand structure refers to a firm's set of brands across countries and businesses, whereas brand architecture refers to the formal process by which management makes explicit how brand names will be applied at each level in the organisation. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2001) have suggested that there are basically two alternatives for global branding: a house of brands or then a branded house. In a house of brands, an independent set of product brands is used, each maximising the impact on market.

This multiple branding approach helps the company target different market segments, spread risk, and meet the consumers' needs for variety (Chen and Paliwoda, 2002). In contrast, in the branded house alternative, a single master brand is used to span a set of offerings. In addition, descriptive sub brands may be used to offer some flexibility for market requirements (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2001). The companies often use as the master brand the corporate name or then a successful product brand is lifted to become an umbrella for the whole product offering. Moreover, Douglas et al. (2001) have suggested that in addition to the corporate-dominated and product dominated branding also a kind of "mixed" or "hybrid" branding strategy may be identified, in which corporate brands are used to endorse product-level brands.

The born globals and conventional companies, however, probably differ, not only as to the number of brands used, but also to the extent of usage of in-house versus co-operative brand arrangements. Born globals have been proposed to utilise co-branding more extensively than traditional companies (Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2003a). Co-branding is a form of co-operation between two or more brands with significant customer recognitions, in which all the brand names of the participants are retained (Blackett and Boad, 1999 p. 7). For example, value may be created by building awareness of their brands through exposure to their partner's customer base, or by providing an ingredient for the partner's product or brand (see also Desai and Keller, 2002). Two specific types warrant attention: ingredient co-branding in which one becomes a branded ingredient in another brand (Arnott, 1994), and then composite co-branding, in which two brands are bundled (Leuthesser et al., 2003). In connection with marketing channel arrangements, an additional type of co-operative arrangement warrants attention; this is private labelling, in which the producer's product is sold under the retail channel or other marketing channel member's brand. This type of co-operative channel branding efforts should be distinguished from the imitation by retailers of well-recognised branded products without the manufacturer's permission (see e.g. Kapferer, 1995). In the business-to-business sector, the private label arrangement may take the form of OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturing) branding, in which the manufacturer produces the products based on specifications provided by the channel that is by the brand owner, or then ODM (Original Design Manufacturing) branding in which the manufacturer also designs the product based on the guidelines provided by the channel member.

Some recent research has suggested that born globals may be increasingly leveraging the resources of multinational corporations by using their channels and marketing efforts in their global expansion (Coviello and Munro, 1997; Gabrielsson and Kirpalani, 2004). This would indicate that co-branding may be a viable alternative for born globals in the future, if they succeed in agreeing with the MNCs on such arrangements and if they are able to develop an interdependent relationship in which none of the parties becomes overly dependent on the other. Finally, when small firms rely on large firms or channels they may lose control of brands due to a decrease in their brand visibility and recognition in end-customer markets. This may have further implications for the value appropriations of their stakeholders, such as investors and partners.

Degree of standardisation. The debate concerning whether to standardise or to adapt marketing strategies has gone on for a long time and does not seem to be close to any conclusive theory or practice. The earlier work goes back to the 1960s, when Levitt (1983) argued that emerging global markets are providing opportunities to market standardised products across the globe, ignoring regional or national differences, and Buzzell (1968) opened the debate around the benefits and obstacles of standardising the international marketing strategies. Most of the articles that have appeared since 1960 have been of a purely theoretical nature and empirical evidence, including the branding element, is rare except for a few works, mainly on MNCs operating in Europe (Sorenson and Wiechmann, 1975; Boddeyn et al., 1986) or less developed countries (Still and Hill, 1984; Chhabra, 1996). The study results have been somewhat mixed. Although, quite many researchers report that MNCs show increasing interest in using standardised branding (Yip, 1997), others claim an opposite trend (Boddeyn et al., 1986). The proponents of the adapted approach to global marketing argue that as customer and institutional characteristics differ significantly by area, some geographic adjustment is needed to be able to compete successfully (Simmonds, 1985). While reviewing these results it must be kept in mind that the behaviour of the born global firm most probably differs significantly from that of MNCs due to differences in size and resources.

One can conclude that it is more relevant to speak about the degree of standardisation on a continuum (Quelch and Hoff, 1986). For instance, from fully standardised brands whose positioning, personality, look and feel are uniform across the countries (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 1999) to fully adapted brands which position themselves as the true defenders of the local culture (Kapferer, 2001). An important distinction should be made between the standardisation of the brand and other elements of the marketing programme, and then the standardisation of the managerial processes (Walters, 1986). The conclusion in many of the studies is that it is far easier to standardise the brand planning process and best practices sharing system than the content of the brand (Jain, 1989; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 1999; Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2003b).

Although in terms of the brand standardisation of born globals, empirical evidence is scarce, it has nevertheless been proposed that born globals apply highly standardised product and marketing strategies from the very beginning (Gabrielsson and Gabrielson, 2003a p. 135).

The marketing and international business literature has provided us with three dimensions for branding strategy, which are examined further in the empirical section. See Figure 1.

Framework

Earlier research has identified several factors influencing the Born Global strategies (e.g. Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; Madsen and Servais, 1997; Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2003a; Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004) and also factors influencing branding strategies (e.g. Chung, 2002; Zou and Cavusgil, 2002) have been covered to a great

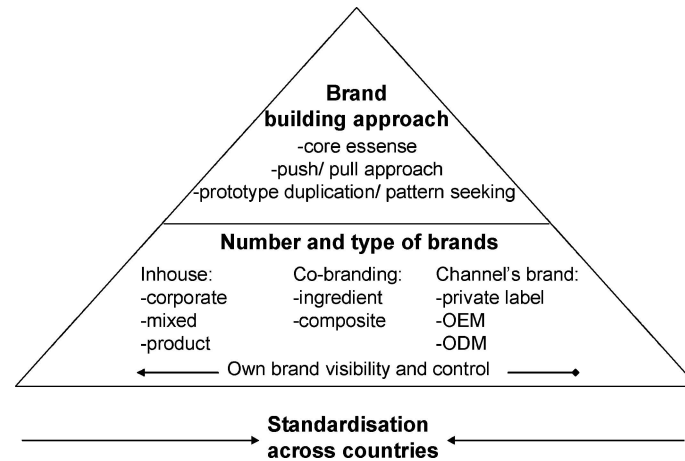


Figure 1. Dimension of branding strategies of born globals.

extent. These guide us to development of an integrated theoretical framework for the branding strategies of born globals. See Figure 2. These explanatory variables can be grouped under the following headings: (1) firm characteristics and global expansion, (2) product-market and environmental factors, and (3) marketing channel structure and network relations.

Firm characteristics and global expansions

Earlier in this study, some of the general characteristics were described that have been associated with born globals, such as small size, limited resources, and global vision. In addition, international entrepreneurship studies (McDougall et al., 1994a) have pointed out that the history of the founder, such as past experience, ambition level and motivation, has an important influence on the behaviour of born globals (Madsen and Servais, 1997). In particular, the decision maker's global orientation explains why some companies are born globals and some remain local (Moen, 2002). Also, the calibre of its researchers may have a favourable influence on both the product innovations and on the company's technological reputation, which allows it to brand the product successfully (Zahra et al., 2003).

Furthermore, born globals seem to differ as to the degree of their internationalisation or globalisation in definitions used for research (e.g. Madsen and Servais, 1997), but also in their actual stage-wise globalisation development (Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2002). Hence, it is justified to include the geographical market expansion criteria and just accept that some of them have reached an international stage (majority of sales derived from the home continent) and others have achieved a global status (majority of sales derived external to the home continent). This can be expected to be an important variable influencing the branding strategy (Douglas et al., 2001).

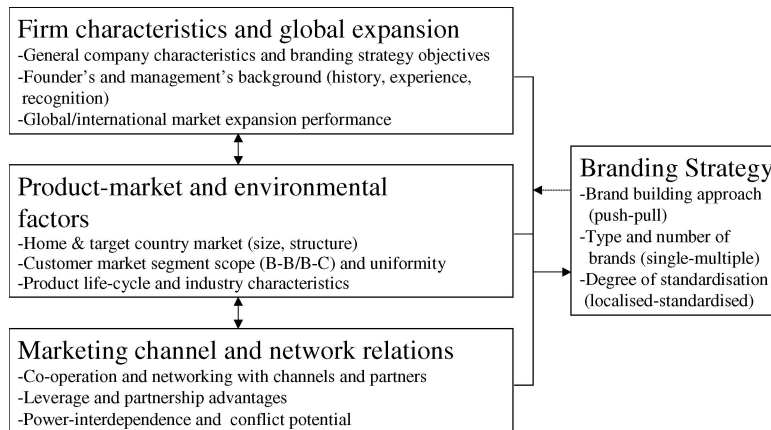


Figure 2. Theoretical framework for branding strategies of born globals.

Product-market and environmental factors

An important decision by the Born Global entrepreneur is to determine the product-markets where it will operate. Earlier research has recognised that the push and pull forces faced by the entrepreneur in their home country influence their globalisation process and global marketing strategies (Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004). Also, the marketing standardisation literature has found that in addition to firm factors, target country factors and product factors are also important in deciding on branding strategy (Chung, 2002).

In addition, McDougall et al. (1994b) address the born globals' branding strategies by arguing that the broadness of the competitive strategy's scope measured by range of products, broadness of markets, number of market segments, number of customers, and number of distribution channels are decisive when new ventures decide on the emphasis in brand identification and name recognition and on the resources to be allocated to them. Earlier born globals research has suggested that an important criterion is whether the product is based on low- or high-tech (Madsen and Servais, 1997). In contrast, it has been found that born globals in Finland exist in five different product groups: high-tech, high-design, high-service, high-know-how and high-systems (Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004). Also, the branding strategies of born globals targeting end-consumers seem to differ from those selling to business customers (Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2002). In the propositions development section this examination will be limited to this end-customer division. However, empirical studies are also needed to investigate the influence of the above product-groups classification on branding strategy selections.

The standardisation literature shows that besides firm level factors, various environmental variables at the country and industry level also influence the level of brand

standardisation. Among the country variables, notable elements were political and regulatory elements, level of economic development, similarity of culture, and existence of similar market segments. (Waheeduzzaman and Dube, 2002; Zou and Cavusgil, 2002) A leading argument in much of this literature is that standardisation should not exceed the level where not even minimum national requirements are acknowledged. Hence, it is always a balance between home-market and target-markets requirements and their business potential. Besides many of the above-mentioned aspects, the product life cycle stage and level of competition have been used in earlier studies as variables (Chung, 2002). For instance, the spreading of the innovation to broader user groups usually requires more emphasis on branding as the newness of technology is not enough to convince the consumers that are more conservative. Besides, increased competition along the lifecycle may call for higher investments into branding to secure the global position.

Marketing channel structure and network relations

The born globals literature emphasises the importance of co-operating and networking with supply chain members to avoid the scarcity of their own resources and provide market knowledge (see e.g. Coviello and Munro, 1997; Sharma and Blomstermo, 2003). Oviatt and McDougall (1994, p. 55) conclude that “a major feature that distinguishes new ventures from established organizations is the minimal use of internalisation and the greater use of alternative transaction governance structures.” Consequently, companies form mutually beneficial relationships with their suppliers, buyers, other companies, trade associations, universities, and research centres (Zahra et al., 2003). Also, Luostarinen and Gabrielsson (2004) state that “born globals deviate from the holistic operation mainstream pattern (Luostarinen, 1994) by proceeding in the reverse order or by moving exceptionally fast/ simultaneously through the inward-outward-co-operation process.”

Born globals more often than traditional companies rely on supplementary competences sourced from other firms. In their distribution channels, they more often rely on close relationships and network partners (Madsen and Servais, 1997). These business relationships provide born globals with an opportunity to learn the necessary skills, “which enables them to enter new country markets in which they can develop new relationships, which give them a platform for entering other country markets” (Johanson and Vahlne, 2003).

Hence, born globals often form alliances with large distribution channels to benefit from their ready-built sales channels, reputation, and brands. In addition, they cooperate with large MNCs, which use born globals’ products in their systems (Gabrielsson and Kirpalani, 2004). This can be beneficial for born globals in the entry phase, but can become problematic if they become overwhelmingly inter-dependent on these large channels. Price negotiations and sales channel conflicts can become a burden. Gabrielsson and Gabrielson (2003a) suggest that born globals should therefore especially increase their marketing co-operation with horizontal partners. For

instance, they mention that in the ICT field, born globals can use telecom manufacturers' or operators' brands or logos when marketing a product or application that has successfully completed their testing process. Further, born globals can leverage the content-providers' brands and marketing resources, for instance, by co-branding with large well-established companies from the music or movie industry.

Development of propositions

Based on the above literature and framework, propositions can be built to explain the branding strategies selected by born globals, keeping in mind that the special requirements they should fulfil were cost effectiveness, rapidity, and simplicity.

Born globals of SMOPECs are faced with a tremendous entrepreneurial challenge: how to globalise their businesses when they originate in small countries, have limited financial and managerial resources, and are forced to proceed rapidly (Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004). They argue that building a global brand is a necessity for successful global expansion and propose that born globals deviate from conventional companies because of the high pressure they face from inception to develop their own global brand. This combined with the observation that the history and quality of the founder and key management (McDougall et al., 1994a; Madsen and Servais, 1997; Zahra et al., 2003) are crucial for the outcome of the branding efforts of the Born Global led to the postulation of the following proposition number one:

PR1: Born globals with more experienced, motivated and recognised founders and key personnel will be more likely to achieve global brand recognition than those without such qualities.

In line with the emphasis of Luostarinen and Gabrielsson (2004) on the importance of a global brand, it has also been proposed that born globals standardise their branding strategies from inception across countries (Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2003a). However, earlier research has recognised the importance of the product market in which born globals are operating (McDougall et al., 1994b; Madsen and Servais, 1997; Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004) and preliminary empirical findings (Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2002) have indicated that the customer type, whether industrial or consumer, influences the branding strategies of born globals. McDougall et al. (1994b) have proposed that higher branding emphasis is required to enhance the ability of new ventures to market in broader market segments. They argue that born globals in the business-to-consumer (B-C) field usually have to reach a much broader market than the business-to-business (B-B) born globals. Hence, it could be argued that development of a global brand from inception is more important for B-C born globals than for B-B born globals. This would require that the B-C born globals develop a global brand for multi-market purpose right from the beginning following the pattern standardisation approach, whereas B-B born globals could experiment with prototypes in the early

globalisation phase if they so decide. However, due to limited resources, B-C born globals face huge challenges in developing their own brands. This can be empirically examined by the following proposition:

PR2: Born globals (B-B/B-C) are likely from inception to select a global brand that is standardised across countries.

Now as the importance and challenges related to development of a global brand of their own has become evident, let us consider what implications cost effectiveness, rapidity, and simplicity have on the number of brands used. The aggressive growth targets of born globals may suggest that they should use all possible channels and respective branding strategies to gain market share. The resource limitations of born globals most probably restrict the use of the 'house of brands' strategy (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2001) if they develop the multiple brands themselves. However, born globals can overcome resource limitations by co-operating with large channels or other networks (see e.g. Coviello and Munro, 1997). According to Madsen and Servais (1997), born globals should seek hybrid arrangements. Born globals could act as original equipment manufacturers (OEM) of well known brand owners or private label channels. This option would be particularly suitable for B-B companies, but could also offer B-C companies an opportunity to leverage the marketing resources and brand recognition of their partners. Although this offers the born globals leverage and partnership advantages, it can easily lead to a situation where they become overly dependent on their partners. Therefore, born globals should not rely solely on single branding strategies, such as OEM, private labeling, co-branding or their own brand development. Instead, they are expected to rely on multiple branding, by using several of the above options. Based on the above we postulate:

PR3: Born globals (B-B/B-C) are likely to use multiple branding strategies to grow rapidly and overcome dependence on large partners.

Furthermore, Knight (1997) has proposed that born globals mainly emphasize personal selling since (1) they often sell specialized products to dispersed global market niches that may be hard to target with advertising, (2) lack the resources needed to engage in large scale advertising, and (3) sell to industrial markets. This would indicate that B-B companies favour push-based marketing communication over pull-based. In contrast, B-C companies can be expected to create demand through the pull approach, because otherwise, channel members usually do not often sell these 'new to the world' products. However, they probably need to be innovative in finding new low-cost techniques such as the Internet, editorial publicity, and the technological reputation of their engineers and designers (see e.g. Joachimsthaler and Aaker, 1997; Zahra et al., 2003). The following can therefore be proposed about the brand-building strategies of born globals:

PR 4: Business-to-business born globals rely on push whereas business-to-consumer born globals on both the push and the pull approach.

Empirical data gathering and measurements

Data gathering

The present research analysis is based on longitudinal field research on the born globals' branding strategies during the globalization process. Multiple-case study research was selected as the methodological approach for Finnish small and medium-sized born globals. The case study method permits a more thorough understanding of the behaviour of the born globals examined than survey or other more deductive research methods. The case method's strength is the likelihood of it resulting in theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989 p. 17) and the method is especially applicable in answering "how" and "why" questions. The case study approach is also valuable when the particular business situation represents a distinctive or revelatory opportunity to analyse a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation (Yin, 1989 pp. 46-48).

The data gathering and analysis process were based upon many of the suggestions made by Eisenhardt (1989, p. 533). The validity of the data was enhanced by having several people analyse the results and reliability through careful data collection, and having key informants review the draft case reports. Data were collected in a large project where several different respondents from 30 case companies were personally interviewed. These 30 case companies were chosen because they represent the major leading Born Global companies operating in Finland in 2002. In this report, summary information is presented on all of the companies. They consisted of firms that belong to five business areas. Out of the 30 cases, 6 were high-tech, 4 high-design, 8 high-services, 8 high-know-how, and 4 high-systems firms (for definitions see Luostarinen, 1979; Gabrielsson et al., 2004). The number of employees was varying from less than 10 persons to over 400 depending on the size of the case companies, and was in average 85 persons.

The study used the born globals data bank and commensurate definitions developed at the Helsinki School of Economics (cf. Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004). These definitions imply that achievement of international status requires that the company's foreign sales outside the domestic market (Finland in this case) need to exceed 50% of total sales. In contrast, the global phase is achieved when sales outside the domestic continent of Europe exceed 50% of the total. An additional requirement was that foreign sales are derived from several countries, and also attention was paid to the fact that no single country dominated while others had only a nominal role.

The interviews were made in 2001 and 2002. The interview data were complemented with archival material such as newspaper articles, press releases and other company material. Updates were also completed with the interviewed persons by telephone or e-mail. The research interviews and analysis focused on how the companies grow globally and how branding strategies were used during this development.

Measurement of international or global expansion

Earlier studies have recommended that attention should be paid to the differences among born globals as to vision, international/global market expansion and age (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004). Hence, the analysis began by selecting those companies that were relatively young (from 1 to 15 years), had since their establishment formulated a global mission/vision, and whose domestic stage had been short (1–24 months) or non-existing. A total of 30 case companies was found. These companies were then divided on the basis of their global expansion into three groups: (i) International phase begun. Those which, despite their international/global vision, have been unable to raise their international sales above 50% of total sales. (ii) International phase achieved. This group of cases consists of those companies that have succeeded in raising their international sales above 50% of total sales. (iii) Global phase achieved. This group of companies have successfully globalised their business to the extent that they derive over 50% of their sales outside the domestic continent of Europe (global sales). The 30 Finnish small and medium sized case companies examined were distributed so that 7 were in phase I, 14 in phase II and 9 in Phase III. (See Table 1 below)

Results*Examining the context*

The 30 Finnish case companies were all leading small and medium-sized born globals in their own field. They sold various high-tech products, for instance, electronic components and devices, medical instruments, and know-how products like software, games and other applications. Also, services were included such as IT-consulting, digital services and information services. Further, design products were represented, for instance, innovative interior design products, design garments, innovative utensils and gift items. Even complete systems related to production and quality control were sold, as well security-related systems.

Branding strategies. It was of considerable interest to identify the branding strategies adopted by the 30 leading Finnish small and medium-sized born globals in their global expansion endeavour. In order to achieve this, the companies were first asked whether they had a branding strategy in the first place, and then secondly, whether they had achieved brand awareness in their potential clientele (see Table 1 below). The branding strategies of the case companies were then examined more thoroughly through the usage of case methodology techniques.

It was found out that the majority of the Finnish born globals studied (19/30 cases) had a clear branding strategy in place, which is generally unusual for companies of that age and size. It was also noticed that the brand architecture was usually simple when in-house brands were considered; a corporate brand was used, but product sub-brands

Table 1. Branding Strategies of 30 Finnish SME Born Globals.

Global expansion		Number	International Business (IB) experience	Branding strategies
Phase I	International phase begun	7 cases	–Few companies had prior IB experience (3 cases out of 7)	–Few had a clear branding strategy that had resulted in significant brand awareness (3 out of 7 cases) –B-C companies have single global brands, whereas B-B companies generally did not.
Phase II	International phase achieved	14 cases	–Strong prior IB experience (10 cases out of 14) –Co-operation with global companies (2 out of 14 cases) –Designers with strong international recognition (3 cases that lacked IB-experience)	–Many had set a branding strategy and also brand awareness was considered significant (9 out of 14 cases) –Multiple branding strategies common for B-B companies (corporate brand and co-operative arrangements such as OEM and private label) –Single branding strategy common for B-C companies (corporate brand) or co-branding
Phase III	Global phase achieved	9 cases	–Strong IB experience prior to establishment (7 out of 9 cases) –IB talents recruitments and co-operation with global companies (2 cases out of 9)	–Almost all cases had a branding strategy with significant brand awareness (7 out of 9 cases) –Single branding approach common. –B-B used corporate global branding, which was standardised across the globe –B-C either used corporate branding or co-branding, which was standardised across the globe

were not used extensively (with 2 exceptions). The explanation given was that for a small or medium-sized globalizing Finnish company it is not possible due to resource limitations to develop multiple in-house brands for either product or geographical markets. When a product brand has been better known to the clientele than the corporate brand, some of the Finnish born globals have made the former product brand their corporate brand and in that way reduced the number of brands. The companies with

multiple branding strategies used a combination of their own and a private label or the OEM channel's brand. They reported that growth and market share were the reasons for this selection. The case companies usually strived for globally standardised brand essence and image in the target markets. The major deviations were due to use of a local channel's brands, as mentioned above. As to the degree of global branding, the number of brands and the use of push/pull marketing in their brand building, three major variables in the framework were found to have a major impact: the phase of global expansion, the product-market, and the channel arrangement. These results are reported in subsequent sub chapters.

Firm characteristics and global expansion. The role of branding strategies was found to increase during global expansion. See Table 1. There were few companies in Phase I (international expansion begun) that had determined a branding strategy and successfully implemented it. These include Single Source, which sells web-based project data management tools; Animal Design Factory, a utensil and interior product manufacturer; and Jippii Group, a multi-service telecom and Internet operator. In contrast, the companies that had achieved international status (phase II) were already widely using various branding strategies and had achieved international and global awareness in their major clientele. This was the case with APLAC Solutions, which provide electronic design software; Iobox, a wireless portal for entertainment and information services; Vacon, which produces electronic frequency converters; and Biohit, which produces pipettes and other laboratory equipment and diagnostics for hospitals. Moreover, almost all of the global companies (phase III) were found to be involved with successful branding strategies. These were for instance, MadOnion.com, a special software developer; IMA Engineering, which produces quality control systems; and SSH- Communication Technologies and Stonesoft, both providers of IT security software and solutions.

The history of the founders of the born globals and their key personnel is critical for their success. The born globals that have achieved either the international phase (II) or the global phase (III) have in most cases had founders and key management that have had prior international business experience. As expected, this was less common for born globals that had not yet reached an international phase. If their international business skills were limited they recruited talented international business professionals. Also, some of the case companies developing and selling software products had received considerable help through leveraging the resources of existing global companies such as Nokia. In design companies, which often have been established by innovative and far-sighted designers, the brand image was largely built through successful participation in design competitions and international fairs. Many of the design companies made their breakthrough at the Milan or other famous design fairs. A manager from one of the design firms explained us a good example: "when we had been on the Frankfurt design fair we got immediately orders from 30 countries and the business exploded at once to global scale." Moreover, in some cases immense editorial publicity has resulted followed

by such fairs from non-commercial articles written in praise of the new product and its design.

Product-market and other environmental factors. As described earlier the companies examined represented many fields. A common feature of all of these case companies was that the product was either unique or highly specialised. Further, the product market of the case companies was new and developing rapidly and the customer segment was often narrow and highly uniform across countries. In every case, the Finnish home market was seen as insufficient and therefore global market expansion was essential to sustain growth.

The Finnish SMEs examined consisted of three types of born globals based on their target customer group: (1) business-to-business born globals, which often targeted large business customers such as large industrial, service or governmental organizations, often of a multinational nature and ranging from banking to telecommunication equipment manufacturers and operators, and further including universities, research institutes, and defence forces; (2) business-to-consumer born globals, which targeted private customers, which often had global needs related to housing, leisure, or other desires; (3) born globals targeting both business and consumer markets, with interior products, mobile telecom services or various software applications, which had broad appeal in both groups of customers. The empirical data included 19 business-to-business, 7 business-to-consumer and 4 business-to-business & consumer born globals.

The role of branding strategy was particularly important for companies that target consumers. They had followed pattern matching standardisation from the very beginning by developing a global brand essence while keeping a global customer segment in mind. This was typical of many of the born globals selling digital services such as games, which had a clear view of their end-customer segment. Also, the branding strategy was global right from the beginning for many of the design companies, like Golla, which provided utensils and gift items, or Woodnotes, an interior design product manufacturer. For instance, one design firm reported that over 1000 articles had been written in magazines around the world during the two years following a breakthrough on a design fair. However, in their case the major reason for the instant global brand image was the global nature of their selected media; internet or then global editorial publicity resulted from a successful trade exhibition, such as the Milan fair. Naturally, if the company was active in both the business-to-business and business-to-consumer segment, branding was considered to be of the utmost importance. This was the case with design companies producing interior design products for both home and office usage. A similar case was MadOnion, which developed software that could be downloaded through the Internet by both business customers and consumers.

As expected, the innovative usage of inexpensive and effective pull-branding approaches were particularly important for business-to-consumer (B-C) companies, which cannot solely rely on the push through their existing channels. Specialised magazines, editorial publicity, Internet and online advertisements, industry fairs and

competitions were used effectively. The importance of using both push and pull marketing approaches was explained by an interviewed manager of a business-to-consumer firm as follows: “Internet is an important promotion channel. However, billboards and print advertising are important to get consumers visit our net pages. In addition, we go to trade fairs to present our products and to answer questions about our products and to get new customers who create a positive word of mouth effect.”

Alternatively, many of these B-C companies also leveraged the resources of other global companies in financing their brand building. They were frequently leveraging the brand image and awareness of global film studios or magazines through private label or co-operative branding arrangements. In contrast, born globals targeting the business-to-business sector could rely more strongly on the push side. Many of the business-to-business firms leveraged the resources of the global partners such as Nokia and Siemens to piggy-back their products into global markets.

Marketing channel structure and other network relations. The branding strategy was heavily influenced by the nature of the channel. Basically four alternatives existed: (1) small local channels (2) large multinational channels, (3) the Internet, or (4) co-operation networks between brand owner, service provider and sales channel.

The business-to-business companies often selected alternative (1) or/and (2). Those companies that had begun the international phase (group I in Table 1) often had settled with small local channels such as VARs, and thus no branding approach was particularly emphasised. Those that had achieved the international phase (group II in Table 1) were often involved in co-operation with large MNCs or acted as Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) for brand owners such as Nokia, ABB, Siemens or large private label channels such as 3M and Johnson & Johnson, which often added their brand on to the final product. Such OEM branding or private labelling strategy, was also often combined with early attempts to introduce a brand of their own to decrease dependence on channel partners. That is why multiple branding strategies were particularly common. Hence, this often resulted in variation in the brands visible to end-customers across countries based on the channel arrangement. According to interviewees, such multiple branding strategies were effective in reaching a wide range of segments, but involved a risk of channel conflicts and were thus seen mainly as an intermediate phase on the way to developing a strong global brand of their own. The logic behind a multiple branding strategy was explained by a manager of a business-to-business firm as follows: “Our products are industrial products. This is a kind of sub-marine strategy, in which we come with several brands to the markets. In most cases the customer knows who the producer is since the buyers are engineers—and so we rise to the surface with our own brand.”

The business-to-consumer born globals often selected channel option (3) or (4), depending on the product and available partners in the value network. A typical partner was a well-recognised magazine or film company whose brand was used when the Born Global's service was distributed through the telecom operators' channels or the Internet. The arrangement was mostly co-operative so that the Born Global brand and

the branding partners brands were both visible. Typically, the products or services sold through this kind of co-operative arrangements and the Internet were standardised or had only minor modifications worldwide.

Testing the propositions

Based on the evidence presented in Table 1 and the discussion of firm characteristics and global expansion, it became evident that the *first proposition has received support* from the empirical data examined. Indeed as stated in PR 1: *born globals with more experienced, motivated and recognised founders and key personnel will be more likely to achieve global brand recognition than those that lack such qualities*. In most cases, the prior international business experience of the founders was obvious and seemed to correlate with global expansion and brand recognition. Often the founders were ex-directors of either international companies or had earlier experience from previous attempts to establish new ventures. It was shown that even those founders that lacked these qualities had either been or would soon become talented and well-recognised designers, or were able to recruit suitable managers with international business skills, or alternatively leveraged other global companies' resources to achieve recognition.

Turning to an examination of *proposition two*, it can be concluded that it *received only partial support*. It was stated in PR2 that *born globals (B-B/B-C) are likely from inception to select a global brand that is standardised across countries*. In the examination of the influence of the product-market and environmental factors on branding strategy it became evident that business-to-consumer born globals are more likely to select a standardised global brand from inception (pattern standardisation) across countries than business-to-business born globals, which rely on more localised, often non-branded strategies. Most of the successful B-C born globals had a clear global brand and the managers interviewed stated that they had developed significant brand awareness. This was not the case in all of the B-B born globals. In fact, many of them lacked a clear global branding strategy or then as earlier described used brands of their own and their channel partners selectively across countries. Hence, proposition two was found valid only for B-C companies.

Equally, it became evident in the examination of the influence of the firm characteristics and marketing channels on branding strategies that *proposition three receives only partial support*. It was stated in PR 3: *born globals (B-B/B-C) are likely to use multiple branding strategies to grow rapidly and overcome dependence on large partners*. Based on the data for Finnish SME born globals the proposition is only valid as to business-to business born globals, which frequently used combinations of their own and OEM and private label arrangements, particularly in the international phase (see Table 1: phase II). For instance, Dekati, a producer of environmental measurement instruments, sells under both the Dekati and OEM brands to gain market share. Also, Vacon and Biohit, which were discussed earlier, use a similar multiple branding approach. Business-to-consumer born globals relied on their own brand development

or used co-branding. An example of the former is Woodnotes, which markets carpets made out of paper yarn globally. They rely on their own brand. As for co-branding, Housemark and Open Mobile, in the mobile service development business, co-operate with publishers of global sport magazines, movies and books. It can be concluded that business-to-business born globals are more likely to use multiple (OEM, private label, and own) branding strategies than those targeting consumers, which often developed a single in-house brand or co-branded their offering with a global partner. Hence, proposition three was found valid only for B-B companies.

Finally, the empirical evidence presented in section on product-market and other environmental factors supported the proposition that *business-to-business born globals rely on push whereas business-to-consumer born globals rely on both the push and the pull approach* as indicated in *proposition 4, which was thus supported*. When selling new and highly innovative products the business-to-consumer born globals explained that it was important for them to be involved in the end-consumer demand generation activity, since no single channel member would be willing to do that alone for an unknown company from Finland. The empirical data also included born globals that targeted both of these customer segments and it was found that their behaviour was directed by the needs of the consumer business requirements in the sense that global branding was seen as extremely important and required both push and pull marketing. It was further noted that a wide range of low-cost brand building approaches was used, including editorial publicity, the Internet, and piggy-back marketing.

Having examined all of the propositions, we can conclude that although two of them were supported and two received partial support (either from B-B or B-C cases), they only partly captured the dynamism related to global expansion. This will be discussed further.

Discussion of the results

In relation to type of strategy, degree of standardisation and number of brands, the branding strategies seem to depend on the stage of global expansion (see Table 1). There was less emphasis on branding for companies that had just begun their internationalisation (phase I), whereas companies that were already international (phase II) usually had an active branding strategy. Business-to-consumer companies mainly used brands of their own or co-branding strategies. In contrast, business-to-business companies often experimented with a portfolio of multiple brands. Therefore, the branding strategies of B-B companies differed somewhat from country to country based on the arrangements in place. Born globals that had achieved the global phase (phase III) relied on single branding strategies. It was necessary for them to provide a globally consistent brand image. Based on the preliminary results of the Finnish born global case companies that had achieved a global phase it became evident that business-to-consumer companies had been planning their global brands for multiple markets right from the beginning (pattern seeking standardisation), whereas B-B companies had developed their brands more slowly along with global expansion (prototype duplication standardisation). This

result is, however, of a preliminary nature and will require further verification. What became evident, however, was that the *importance of global branding and standardisation across countries increases as globalisation of born globals proceeds.*

Conclusions

Ten years after Rennie (1993) brought the born globals phenomena into the daylight, research is still far from any final conclusion on many aspects as to their behaviour. The reasons for the existence and increased number of born globals have been explained thoroughly (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994; Knight and Cavusgil, 1996; Luostarinen and Gabrielsson, 2004). However, the broader research framework that many researchers (e.g. Madsen and Servais, 1997) have called for is still in its initial stages. This research contributes by increasing knowledge related to the branding strategies of born globals. Although branding strategies have been covered in the international business literature to a great extent (Sorenson and Wiechmann, 1975; Walters, 1986; Boddewyn et al., 1986; Ozsomer et al., 1991; Whitelock and Pimblett, 1997; Waheeduzzaman and Dube, 2002; Zou and Cavusgil, 2002), the branding strategies of born globals have remained almost untouched (see Gabrielsson and Gabrielsson, 2003a).

An empirical investigation of 30 Finnish Born Global small and medium-sized companies confirm some of the earlier study assumptions that experience, motivation and global orientation are crucial qualities for the success of Born Global branding efforts (cf. McDougall et al., 1994a; Madsen and Servais, 1997; Moen, 2002; Zahra et al., 2003). More importantly, the theoretical assumption developed within this study that business-to-business and business-to-consumer born globals differ as to their branding strategies and brand-building approaches received support. For born globals targeting consumers, a globally standardised brand is crucial. This brand could be their own or co-branded if resources are tight. Typically, companies could leverage the brand image and awareness of a global film studio or a globally recognised magazine. In contrast, born globals targeting business customers often utilise multiple brands, ranging from OEM, private label and brands of their own, depending on the segment and market in question. Thus, their products are offered to end-customers around the world in a less standardised manner. Management of such multiple branding strategies was described by the business-to-business born globals as challenging due to a high dependence on their large channels and to the potential for conflict. Also, business-to-consumer born globals reported that achievement of necessary recognition for their brand was sometimes the result of tough negotiations with their large co-branding partners. Moreover, there was support for the idea that business-to-business born globals rely more on push based marketing (see also Knight, 1997) and business-to-consumer born globals also need to create demand pull by use of innovative and often new low-cost marketing techniques (see also Joachimsthaler and Aaker, 1997; Zahra et al., 2003).

It was also determined that the born globals should be divided into international beginners, already international, and global companies. This realization would seem to explain some of the mixed results of the early Born Global studies that used a variety

of measures and significantly increased the quality of the results of this study. For instance, the proposition made by Luostarinen and Gabrielsson (2004) according to which born globals are under considerable pressure to develop their own brand from inception could be extended upon. It became evident that this is particularly important from inception for business-to-consumer companies. The importance of one's own brand was, however, also found to increase for business-to-business companies and standardisation of the brand across countries to become more important as the global expansion of born globals proceeded.

This study is seen to include numerous managerially and theoretically important results. First as to managerial implications, this research explains which Born Global firms can be expected to emphasise global branding and what qualities are required of the firm's founder and managers for success. Second, the reader is also told when to use the single or multiple branding approaches, and third, to what extent standardisation of branding strategies across countries should be applied. Finally, the framework, propositions and empirical evidence also imply that branding strategies need to be changed over time. The theoretical contribution stems from the scarcity of Born Global studies focusing on branding. Hence, it should be regarded as an achievement that this study is the first to develop a theoretical framework and propositions that explain the branding strategies of born globals. Support was found for two propositions, and another two were valid for either business-to-business or business-to-consumer companies. The second theoretical contribution is believed to stem from the finding that born globals should be examined in a dynamic way in which global expansion is treated as an explanatory factor that influences branding strategies. It is suggested that future research should examine in more depth the question of whether the global brand has been developed for multiple market purpose right from the beginning or during global expansion. This could have wider implications for research also examining other business functions.

Naturally, these very preliminary research findings should be subjected to more thorough empirical testing. Such verification is being planned first for Finnish born globals. The results are then to be replicated in other SMOPEC countries as well. Only then can robust implications be drawn on these preliminary study results. In addition, more dynamic and longitudinal research is required. At some point research also needs to tackle the question of what born globals become when they reach adulthood.

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