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Master's thesis

BRANDING IN START-UPS: CHALLENGES AND WAYS TO OVERCOME

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ABSTRACT

This study examines branding and brand building in start-up context. It recognizes challenges in branding common to start-ups, and proposes tools and actions to overcome them. The study is executed as a qualitative research, by examining a case company called Noblecat. Data is collected through semi-structured interviews, and analysed through the abductive approach, whilst exploiting existing literature to support the findings of primary data. The research indicates that challenges common to start-ups are related to the scarce resources in many terms. To overcome these challenges, it is suggested that a start-up should aim to assimilate branding as a part of the daily operations, create strategies, concentrate on the corporate brand, and seek for outsourcing branding activities, if possible. A framework is proposed to support the branding process of a start-up, which aims to operate as a guide for a start-up in the beginning of branding.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä tutkimus keskittyy brändäykseen ja brändin rakentamiseen start-up kontekstissa. Tutkimuksessa tunnistetaan start-up brändäyksen yleisiä haasteita, ja ehdotetaan toimintoja ja työkaluja niiden ylittämiseksi. Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena, jossa keskityttiin tarkastelemaan case-yritystä nimeltä Noblecat. Dataa kerättiin puolistrukturoitujen haastattelujen avulla. Analysointi tapahtui abduktiivisen päättelymenetelmän avulla, ja olemassa olevaa kirjallisuutta käytettiin tukemaan tutkimuksen löydöksiä. Tutkimus osoittaa, että resurssien puute vaikuttavat olevan yleinen haaste start-upeille, ja vähäiset resurssit vaikuttavat täten moniin osa-alueisiin. Tutkimuksen löydöksien perusteella ehdotetaan, että haasteiden ylitsepääsemiseksi start-upin tulisi sulauttaa brändäys osaksi päivittäisiä toimintoja, luoda strategioita, keskittyä yrityksen brändiin, ja pyrkiä ulkoistamaan brändäysaktiviteetteja resurssien puitteissa. Tutkimuksessa kehitettiin viitekehys, jota start-up voisi hyödyntää työkaluna brändäystä aloittaessaan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter of the master's thesis provides an overview of the following study, by offering sections on background of the study, research questions, preliminary literature review, theoretical framework, definitions and delimitations, research methodology and structure of the study.

1.1 Background

The purpose of this master's thesis is to investigate brand building of start-ups in their early stages. The empirical focus of the study is narrowed down to particularities of a case company and the field they operate in, as the research is conducted as a case study. As branding is considered as a crucial activity for any successful company, it is also essential for a start-up or a new venture to begin the brand building process already when founding the company. However, as it can be said that these start-ups differ from large, established companies by being new to the market and lacking resources, which makes them disadvantaged in terms of the liabilities of newness and smallness (Aldrich and Auster, 1986). These adverse conditions have a significant impact on the practise of branding in start-ups. As Bresciani and Eppler (2010) suggest, the traditional branding strategies of large companies can not be compared to those of new ventures, and hence there is a need for further study of branding of start-ups.

This thesis hence aims to contribute to the research of the start-up branding and brand building through case approach. The study is performed from the point of view of a real-life case company, called Noblecat Oy (further in the text referred only as Noblecat). Noblecat is a Finnish start-up, founded in August 2018. It operates in the field of electronical learning, currently producing e-learning material for the vehicle and transportation sector of Finnish vocational schools. While currently employing less than five employees, the company is aiming for rapid expansion. More details of the company is offered in chapter 3.1.

Notwithstanding the future direction of Noblecat is yet somewhat unclear and to be discovered, the company needs to figure its branding strategy in a manner that allows them to develop with a wide range of options. This current study would thus aid them in this branding process, by contributing with theoretical knowledge on the matter, as well as developing a theoretical framework. By doing so, the research would also contribute to previous literature on branding of start-ups.

This thesis firstly provides an introduction, followed by a literature review and research design. After this, the results of the study are provided and discussed in light of existing literature, and finally and conclusions section finalizes the study.

1.2 Research Questions

As this study aims to research the topic of start-up branding, it is important to formulate research questions that are fit to serve this purpose. In addition, formulation of research questions aid in the limitation of the scope of the study; as the topic is very wide and could be researched through various points of views, one must choose a focus in order to be able to conduct the research within the limits of this thesis. Hence, three research questions are formulated and introduced in the following:

Q1: What are the challenges a start-up faces in their branding?

This research question aims to identify the challenges that start-ups are trying to overcome in their branding.

Q2:What kind of help and information is available to facilitate start-up branding?

This research question continues from the results of the previous research question; based on the needs of a start-up, this study aims to recognize the important, useful and applicable information. knowledge, and tools that a start-up can deploy once they begin to build their brand. These would represent the external resources that are available for start-ups.

Q3: What are the steps a start-up should take in brand building?

This research question aims to formulate a framework or a guideline, that a company (and Noblecat) could follow in when building the brand for the start-up. Hence it would describe the internally deployed practises The knowledge gained through the previous two questions (Q1 and Q2) shall be exploited in this question and used to build this theoretical framework.

These research questions will be refined during the thesis process, so that they can be answered within the limits of this thesis. In addition, the formulation and the study of the research questions is done through the point of view of Noblecat, as this company is an important factor and inspiration for the thesis and its results. As this thesis is conducted through a case study approach, it can be seen from the research questions as well that they aim to produce rather qualitative than quantitative data.

1.3 Literature Review

This section takes a preliminary look on literature already existing on the matter of branding start-ups. An in-depth literature review is provided in chapter 2, where the articles discussed in this part shall be discussed further and more literature will also be considered. The literature chosen here is based on the point of view of the research questions, and it aims to explore what is already known of the phenomenon of branding start-ups. Firstly, discussion on why start-up branding should be considered is provided, and secondly, the concentration will be on what kind of frameworks and tools the previous literature suggests for the process.

As Bresciani and Eppler (2010) emphasise in their case study researching the branding activities by Swiss start-ups, the starting point and practices differ vastly for start-ups and large companies in terms of branding. Whereas much research has been conducted on branding tools and activities of multinational companies (further: MNEs), less is known about combining branding and start-ups (ibid.). However, as the point of view differs so much according to size and newness of the company, it is substantive and crucial to study the branding practises of start-ups well (ibid.).

Bresciani and Eppler (2010) list three aspects on why start-up branding is different from more traditionally considered branding perspectives of MNEs; start-ups are in the very early stage of their life cycle, which means that they don't have yet reputation or internal structures, they must gain customers to survive, and their resources are often very limited. They also argue that these issues lead to the fact that entrepreneurs may first overlook the importance of branding, as they find other aspects more important in the early stages, and only later discover it is crucial to start to consider the brand from the very beginning. These also describe the liabilities of newness and smallness of new ventures (Aldrich and Auster, 1986). However, these aspects also reflect why start-ups require special aid and have particular needs in terms of branding, as branding can also act as a tool to overcome the three issues. Thus, one can state that studying the branding aspects of start-ups in substantial, and the results of this thesis are hence of interest.

Continuing with the same theme of understanding the phenomenon of start-up branding, an article by Inskip (2004) may be discussed. Although the context of the study was in small and medium-sized enterprises (further referred as SME), start-ups inevitably belong to this category of firms. Despite the discussion on SMEs is often more concentrated in on-going management, start-ups are rather in the beginning of processes (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010), the findings remain relevant to start-up branding. Inskip suggests that branding differs for SMEs (including start-ups), especially in B2B sector, as these companies usually overlook the importance of branding and perceive it as an extra activity, which one can perform if only has the possibility to do so.

The article discusses especially corporate branding, which is referred to as a professional, in-depth perspective for branding, that is operated through structures and management. Through the research, it was found that the researched companies considered branding in more superficial practices, such as designing a name and a logo, whereas they would benefit more from taking a perspective of corporate branding. This finding is somewhat in line with Bresciani and Eppler (2010), where they found that branding is a crucial activity to take, but it is often overlooked through e.g. lack of resources.

As previous literature also finds that the topic under discussion is relevant, it is also interesting to have a look on what the earlier studies state of branding practises and tools for start-ups, as they are of interest when considering the research questions. Bresciani and Eppler (2010) found interesting insights on this aspect as well. They discussed that it is important to firstly recognize the importance of branding, after which it can be continued to create the brand. Lastly, actions are taken to build the brand, which means that a start-up can, for example, advertise themselves and exploit online presence. The article hence offers some general ideas of the practises, but they are not described in a very throughout manner, and thus this thesis might contribute in offering more details on the activities.

Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) also talk about branding activities, although through SME perspective, but it can still be considered to be relevant for start-ups as well, as discussed earlier. In their approach, the creation of brand identity and management of brand equity are considered as crucial steps for SME branding, and it is recognized that the company should concentrate their further activities around these two aspects. Again, it is emphasized that branding is critical for success, and it should not be overlooked by SMEs, even though resources might be limited. This further implies that there is indeed a need for more establishing and creating more specific and easily accessible guidelines for branding in start-ups, as this would aid the companies when there are not many resources to be exploited.

As has been discussed briefly, the previous literature not only recognizes that there is little research conducted on the field of start-up branding, but also that there is a need for further research on topic. In addition, it is emphasized, that the area is indeed important, because branding is a highly important practice for start-ups and SMEs as well, even though previous literature, and perhaps perceptions as well, have mostly recognize branding from the perspective of large enterprises and multinational companies. Therefore, it can be stated that the topic of this thesis is also very relevant and the results might contribute to previous studies by both increasing knowledge and understanding of start-up branding, as well as providing practical tools and frameworks that a start-up could deploy as they start building their brand. More literature is also discussed in chapter 2., which provides an in-depth literature review.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

To guide the following research of this thesis, a theoretical framework is proposed, which can be seen in Figure 1. Analytical model for start-up branding. Previous literature is used to develop the framework, and it combines three concepts that are seen important in the brand building process. The framework consists of three notions that constitute start-up branding; challenges, external resources and internal practises. This framework can be utilized to analyse branding in start-ups, as it presents issues to be considered, and hence the following study exploits it in its research.
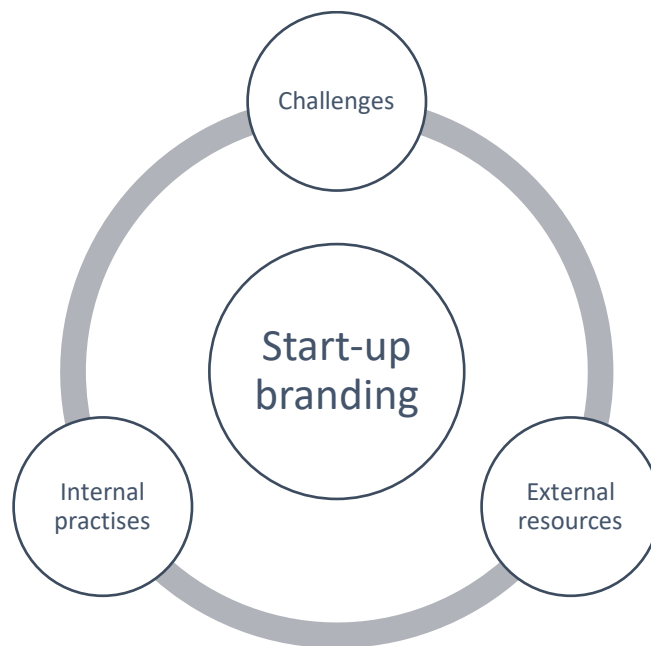
Figure 1. Analytical model for start-up branding

1.5 Definitions and Delimitations

This part of the thesis first aims to define some of the key concepts discussed in this study. These key concepts are chosen to be defined, as they are significant to be understood in order to be able to read this thesis with full comprehension. After providing the definitions, some delimitations are offered, which outline the topics and area for study, as it is not possible to research everything connected to the field in hand within the scope of this thesis.

1.5.1 Definitions

The following section presents and defines the key concepts used in this thesis. It is notable, that some definitions are based on literature, and thus have references, but some are created based on the author's own vision and earlier knowledge of the concepts.

Start-up

A start-up is a newly established company, that is run by an entrepreneur or entrepreneurs, and usually does not yet employ much staff. This kind of company usually aims for fast growth and large profits, even though the resources might be very scarce in the beginning. Start-ups do not yet have established structures in their functions, which affects e.g. their marketing and branding, as was briefly discussed in earlier section of preliminary literature review.

Small- and medium-sized enterprise/SME

OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) defines small- and medium-sized enterprise as follows: "Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are non-subsidiary, independent firms which employ fewer than a given number of employees. This number varies across countries. The most frequent upper limit designating an SME is 250 employees, as in the European Union." (www.stats.oecs.org)

Large Organizations (LOs)

In this thesis, large organizations are referred as companies that are well-established in the markets, employ a vast number of people (in EU: more than 250), and are financially stable with high cash flows.

Brand

Brand is unique set of e.g. name, logo and appearance, that make the product differentiate from those of competitors, and bring special value to customers (Keller, 2013).

Branding

Keller (2013) describes branding as follows: "Branding has been around for centuries as a means to distinguish the goods of one producer from those of another" (p.2). Hence it could

be said that branding is the term that covers the aims of e.g. brand building, managements, and strategizing for a product, service or a company.

Corporate branding

Corporate branding describes the branding of the company itself, instead of its products only. It's distinct from a product brand, as it is much wider in terms associations (Keller, 2013).

Brand equity

Brand equity creates value to a product, so that when a brand is connected to a certain product, it is more valuable for the consumers, than it would be without the brand (Keller, 2009). Hence, brand knowledge increases perceived quality and brand loyalty (French and Smith, 2013)

Brand management

Brand management describes the management of brand equity, based on branding strategies. It aims to build high level of brand equity. (Keller, 2013)

Brand strategy

A brand strategy is a strategy developed carefully for the means of building or managing a brand (Keller, 2013). A brand strategy aims to "maximize profits and long-term brand equity and track the progress along the way" (ibid., p. 40).

Liability of newness

Liability of newness states that businesses are at the highest risk of dissolution in the point of when they are established. The risk diminishes as the company ages (Aldrich and Auster, 1986).

Liability of smallness

According to Aldrich and Auster (1986), small business are exposed to the liability of smallness, which means that they are more volatile due to their small size. They also state, that "The combination of smallness and newness means a very high early dissolution rate" (p. 173).

1.5.1 Delimitations

Delimitations are important to be provided, as they inform what remains outside the scope of the study, and hence for what kind of purposes the results gained from the research are applicable. Firstly, theoretical delimitations are outlined, continued by some practical and contextual delimitations.

In terms of theoretical delimitations, this thesis does not cover every aspect of branding and brand management, as that would be simply impossible in terms of time and capabilities. Instead, it concentrates on concepts that are connected to the brand creation and building, as those are of interest for this study that focuses on start-up branding. Some of the identified theories are brand creation and brand equity, because those are interesting aspects to research when studying the beginning of branding for start-ups.

As this thesis is conducted as a case study, the width of the study is rather narrow and concentrates only in the point of view of a single company. Therefore, the results of this study are not generalizable as such, but they do offer interesting insights for start-up branding, and imply about the state of the topic and how it might represent for other companies and fields as well. In addition, as the target company for the case study operates in Finnish e-learning markets, the research conducted also only focuses on this field of business. Hence, even though the results might be applicable for other fields as well, it cannot be said that they operate as a description of such areas too. As so, it can be stated that since being a case study, this thesis rather aims to reach a comprehension of start-up branding in depth from the point of view of the case company, rather than trying to understand and describe the phenomenon as such in a generalizable form.

To conclude on the delimitations, it can be said that this thesis offers a look on the brand building issues for a start-up that operates in the Finnish e-learning market. Hence, it does not offer results that apply for any start-up in any field of business, but it may provide important knowledge of the challenges and methods of start-up branding that a company might face in their process. In addition, as it is not possible to deal with all theories and theoretical concepts connected to the issue of start-up branding within the scope of this thesis, some particular ones described above have been chosen to be discussed.

1.6 Research Methodology

The research is conducted as a case study, and therefore it applies the qualitative research method. The case under research is the start-up branding issues of Noblecat, which is further examined through the research questions. Therefore, the research deploys rather qualitative than quantitative methods, as the goal is to understand what kind of challenges a start-up faces in their brand building efforts and what kind of aid and tools could help them. To deepen the information and data collected from the case, previous literature is also used. Literature is also applied to find tools and practices that may serve a guideline to help the case company overcome their branding challenges.

Interviews are mainly used as the source for primary data, and they are conducted for the entrepreneurs and owners of Noblecat. The questions used in the interviews are open-ended and the interviews are semi-structured, as this leaves room for free conversation and provides possibilities for the interviewees to express their own ideas. The source for secondary data is literature.

1.7 Structure of the Study

Firstly, the study focuses on previous literature, to understand what is already known form the topic of start-up branding. This is presented in the following chapter 2. After this, the questions for the semi-constructed interviews are developed, based on the research questions, and the interviews are implemented. Followed by analysing the interviews, previous literature is also researched further, as a source for secondary data that might provide more knowledge and understanding on the themes that are risen in the interviews. Based on this data collected, findings are drawn, which aim to provide answers for the research questions. In addition, based on the findings of the study, some management suggestions for the case company, Noblecat, are provided.

2. BRANDING IN THE START-UP CONTEXT

This chapter of the thesis presents a literature review. It aims to research and find out what is already known of the topic of start-up branding in extant literature. However, in order to understand start-up branding, first it is important to understand more general concept of branding itself. After the introduction to the concept of branding in general, the focus of the literature review specifies to start-up branding in particular, and outlines the differences to the branding of large organizations.

After gaining a comprehension on these issues, the literature review concentrates on the directions outlined by the research questions. Therefore, the discussion focuses on brand creation and brand building theories, as they aid in understanding the initial steps a company must take when building their brand. Furthermore, literature on start-up branding and branding tools are to be explored to see the possibilities a company can exploit to enhance their brand building activities. These issues also cover the challenges a start-up may face, as well as how they might measure their brand. Finally, a conclusion is provided.

2.1 Introduction to Branding and the Theory of Brand Equity

To provide a clear understanding on the topic under research, it is crucial to take a deeper view on the theory of branding itself. Branding is a widely researched area of marketing, and the views and theories vary from the point of view of research. However, common to most literature, is the acknowledgment of the importance of branding for the success of a product or a company. In the further discussion, a definition of a brand is provided, followed by providing an introduction to the theory of brand equity.

American Marketing Association (AMA) defines the term brand as such: "A brand is a name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." (marketing-dictionary.org). Often brand is viewed as a product or product line, but nevertheless the company can and should be branded as

well (Inskip, 2004). Brands consist of different visible elements, such as name and logos, but with those elements more deeper meanings are aimed to built for the minds of customers. All in all, brands are used to be differentiated from competitors, and a strong brand also operates as a shield against competitors (Keller, 2013).

The theory of brand equity could be viewed as one of the most important, if not the most important even, theory on branding (e.g. Keller, 2009; French & Smith, 2013). Hence it is discussed rather in depth in this part of the literature review, as it describes well what branding is and provides a clear approach to it. Brand equity could be viewed from three different perspectives, which all describe the same idea but through slightly different approaches. Firstly, brand equity is viewed as brand performance, and secondly, it can be seen as the shareholder value of the brand (French & Smith, 2013). The third perspective of consumer based brand equity 'conceptualises brand equity from a cognitive psychology perspective' (ibid., p. 1357), where brand knowledge increases perceived quality and brand loyalty.

Keller views brand equity as a rising view for branding (2009). In addition, he emphasises the significance of branding for companies for "-the intangible value that brands bring to organizations" (p. 140). The theory of brand equity states that a brand creates value to the product, so that when a brand is connected to a certain product, it is perceived as more valuable by the customers, than another similar product without the brand (ibid.). It is also suggested, that brand equity is built through marketing efforts over time, and thus marketing can be, and should be, harnessed for the benefit of creating brand equity (ibid.)

As described, a high brand equity enhances the value of the product. Keller specifies the benefits of brand equity to be "improved perceptions of product performance; greater customer loyalty; less vulnerability to competitive marketing actions and marketing crises; larger margins; more elastic customer response to price decreases and inelastic customer response to price decreases; greater trade or intermediary cooperation and support; increased marketing communication effectiveness; and finally, additional licensing and brand extension opportunities" (2009, p. 140). When considering the context of this study that concentrates of start-ups, it could be suggested that aiming to

build a high brand equity from the very beginning of the company, and making it an integral part of its marketing strategy, would help a start-up to survive and establish grounds for becoming successful and create competitive advantages. A high brand equity might also protect a start-up from the competitors' efforts, which would be beneficial as start-ups often compete with innovative products in blue oceans.

Spence and Hamzaoui Essousi (2010) also discuss brand equity and its importance in marketing strategies. They name the sources of brand equity to be consumer awareness and enhancing associations. In addition, they state that creating brand equity begins by developing "a brand identity through unique set of associations that a firm aspires to create or maintain" (p. 1039). Brand identity should be created through a visionary look on what is wanted to be achieved with the product or with the company. Therefore, it could be said that a starting point for creating any brand, as well as branding strategy, is to consider what kind of perceptions the company would like to have on itself and its products in its customers' minds.

An important aspect in brand equity theory is measuring the value of the brand, which in other words means measuring the brand equity. French and Smith (2013) researched this topic from the point of view of consumer based brand equity. They found that brand equity could be researched through measuring the strength of brand associations. The measurement should be done not only by the number of associations, but also their structure and linkages to each other. From these results, they draw the conclusion that increasing the brand association strength has a positive effect on brand equity, which is in line with Spence and Hamzaoui Essousi (2010) that was previously mentioned. To enhance brand association strength, French and Smith (2013) suggest "upgrading the status of important tertiary and/or second-order associations; increasing the number of associations; forging links between unconnected, but potentially valuable associations and strengthening already existing links" (p. 1364).

The research by Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) intriguing from the point of view of this thesis, as it implies that brand associations, in addition to brand equity itself, are important to be considered when start-ups formulate their brand and branding strategy. It also provides a rather complex, yet interesting, model for the measurement of brand equity, and provides knowledge that brand equity can be measured with more sophisticated ways, than for example shareholder value. Measurement of brand equity in start-ups would also be an intriguing topic for further research, even though it is not likely possible within the scope of this thesis.

As a conclusion, it could be stated that there is a consensus within literature that brand equity is a conceptual backbone of branding. Keller (2013) even implies that branding aims to building brand equity. Hence, it is important from the point of view of this thesis to study more literature in terms of how brand equity is seen in start-ups. This knowledge could thus be exploited for the empirical part of this thesis. Furthermore, literature about building brands and brand equity should be explored more in depth, as this would aid in finding replies for the research questions, as well as in recognizing what remains uncharted on the focal the topic. Therefore, the following chapters of this literature review contemplate in these matters. In addition, it addresses facets of corporate and entrepreneurial branding, which could reveal yet another promising point of view on start-up branding.

2.2 Start-Up Branding and Its Differences from Traditional Branding

In the light of insofar presented discussion on branding in general, whereas the theory of brand equity has been recognized as significant concept, it is interesting to study what previous literature offers about branding in start-ups. Hence, this part discusses how start-up branding differs from the more often researched contexts, such as branding in multinational enterprises (further referred as MNEs). In addition, this part of the literature review reflects upon previous studies about branding in start-ups, and especially how brand equity is seen in the respective context. An important note is also that since there seems to be a lack of literature on start-up branding, the scope of literature is widened to literature that discusses branding in small- and medium-sized enterprises (further referred

as SMEs) as well, as they share many similar qualities and are thus of interest for this study.

In their article Bresciani and Eppler (2010) recognize that not much research has been conducted about branding in the start-up context, even though both concepts, branding and start-ups, or new ventures, have been well studied as such. In addition, according to them, the research on branding in MNEs differ from the research in start-ups, as the former focuses on ongoing brand management, whereas the latter examines a situation where brand management and branding is yet to be established, or it is in the beginning of the process.

Nevertheless, Bresciani and Eppler (2010) suggest that this combination indeed requires more research for at least two reasons; for one, branding is a crucial activity for company's success and it hence aids the company if it is considered from the very beginning. Secondly, the ways that start-ups and MNEs approach branding and compose branding strategies differ vastly. In Figure 2. are listed the aspects with which start-up branding offers a unique and differing setting, and they shall be discussed in detail in the following.

Figure 2. Unique setting of start-up branding (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010, p. 356

As can be seen from the figure, the challenges in branding for start-ups are connected to the fact that they are in the very beginning of setting up the company. Hence, they don't yet have established identity and reputation, that would help their customers to recognize them. This is also interesting from the point of view of brand equity discussed in the previous chapter of 2.1., where e.g. French and Smith (2013) highlight the importance of brand associations as a source for brand equity; if a company does not yet have reputation and identity, their customers cannot have associations on their brand either, and thus the company must consider what kind of associations they wish to create to their customers' minds.

In addition, the lack of internal structures can be a challenge in terms of brand management (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010). As there is not yet, for example, clear roles for who manages branding and marketing activities, which might lead to a situation where no one in the company is tendering the respective tasks. Interestingly, however, Bresciani and Eppler (2010) recognized in their study, that entrepreneurs often later understand the importance of brand management from the very beginning, since "clear brand vision is a sound investment for them, because the costs of subsequent changes to their corporate identity can be very high." (p. 356)

According to Bresciani and Eppler (2010), branding is a vital activity for start-ups in terms of customer acquisition as well, as eventually a company can only survive if it manages to gain a customer base. Again, through establishing reputation and identity, one can also increase customers' awareness of the company, which likely enhances customer acquisition. This way could also help in the process of creating positive brand associations and subsequently brand equity as well (French and Smith, 2013). However, the situation might seem somewhat paradoxical for start-ups; they should have customers in order to have brand associations in the given customers' minds, but on the other hand, they need branding activities to even gain customers. This highlights the situation that start-ups face: they must begin to build their brand from the very start.

Yet another characteristic feature for a start-up is the lack of resources in terms of capital, knowhow and time (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010), which are linked to the liability of smallness (Aldrich and Auster, 1986). On one hand, this means that a start-up might struggle in dividing financial resources for branding activities. In addition, there might not be enough knowhow within the start-up to conduct branding activities, and due to financial limitations, they cannot be outsourced either. On the other hand, according to Bresciani and Eppler (2010), as a branding strategy is not seen vital when starting a business, the resources might be concentrated on other activities than branding in the beginning. This might lead to a situation where branding is completely neglected due to lack of resources. However, as explained by the two previous aspects, branding is a crucial activity for the survival of the company, such neglect might lead to poor results.

As it has now been discussed, branding is important for start-ups, and it also differs from MNE branding by these three aspects. MNEs already have established structures and reputation, established customer base and often a sound situation in terms of resources (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010). Therefore, MNEs usually have a different approach to enhancing brand equity as well, and much of the previous literature concentrates on situations where the previously mentioned three aspect are in a different state than within a start-up. Hence, the following shall take a look on brand equity management in start-up and SME context.

Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) recognize similar unique aspects to start-up and SME prerequisites to branding as Bresciani and Eppler (2010). Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) further discuss, that in order to create brand equity, a company must create a brand identity through achieving a unique set of brand associations. However, they suggest that in this process, SMEs differ for MNEs, as they should use the entrepreneur and his/her values and personality when creating the brand identity. They hence propose, that a SME benefits from visionary brand management, that exploits the entrepreneur's vision of who the company desires to be and become.

Furthermore, Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) propose, that for nurturing brand equity in SMEs, the companies should concentrate in building a number of incremental innovations. These are suggested to support differentiation aspects. In addition, Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) suggest, that "In SMEs, an integrated and focused communication strategy is essential in supporting brand equity." (p. 1050). This again highlights the importance of considering branding and a brand strategy early on when establishing the company. However, as this study was conducted on a SME context, it differs slightly from that of a start-up, as a SME is more established and ongoing in its management processes. Therefore, it seems that brand equity in start-ups is not much studied earlier.

As discussed, branding and brand management vary depending on the context; start-ups and MNEs have rather different premises. In addition, it is quite clear that previous research seems to be scarce in terms of combining start-ups and branding, and for example brand equity in the context of start-ups is little studied. This implies a research gap, that this thesis might be able to somewhat address. In addition, as Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) suggested in their research on SMEs, the entrepreneur's personality and vision might have a large impact on the brand image, and this is thus interesting to be discussed from the point of view of start-ups as well. Therefore, the following chapter of this literature review also addresses this view, as well as the concept of corporate branding.

2.3 Corporate and Entrepreneurial Branding in Start-Ups

This part of the literature review discusses branding in start-ups from two different but connected perspectives: corporate and entrepreneurial branding. Both are interesting in the context of start-ups, but whereas corporate branding views branding from the perspective branding the company itself (e.g. Abratt and Kleyn, 2012), entrepreneurial branding emphasises the role of the entrepreneur in the corporate branding process (e.g. Eggers et al., 2016).

Corporate branding as a term describes the brand a company builds for itself, in addition to the branding its products (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012). Corporate brand has large impacts for the company and its customers, as it can for example affect not only the company's strategy, but also the way the customers view the company (Schroeder, J. E., 2017). In fact, Abratt and Kleyn (2012) describe corporate brand as a strategic resource, as it can perform as a competitive advantage for the company. Hence, accordingly, company should aim to build a brand for itself as well. Therefore, corporate branding is an important phenomenon from the perspective of start-up branding, as gaining competitive advantage enhances a company's performance (Davcik and Sharma, 2016), which is crucial for the succession of a start-up.

In their article, Abratt and Kleyn (2012) recognize the interlinkages between corporate identity, corporate brand and corporate reputation. According to them, "The corporate brand comprises two aspects: corporate expressions and stakeholder images of the organization's identity" (p. 1050). They also suggest, that when a corporate maintains its brand promise, it also strengthens its reputation. Furthermore, a good reputation helps the company in e.g. survival, profitability, customer satisfaction and retention, as well as aids in keeping a competitive advantage (ibid.)

Therefore, it could be said that a company should aim for building a positive reputation. Abratt and Kleyn (2012) also found, that "corporate identity and corporate branding are key drivers of an organization's reputation management" (p. 1059). It could so be stated that the importance of corporate branding for start-ups as well is self-evident. In addition, Souiden et al. (2006) found that different dimensions of corporate branding affect consumers' evaluations on its products, and hence it might be beneficial for start-ups from this perspective as well, as the products of start-ups are new and thus not yet known for the customers.

Inskip (2004) discusses corporate branding from an interesting point of view in terms of this thesis, by researching the importance if corporate branding to SMEs in B2B markets. Notably, the case company to be researched in this thesis also operates in B2B markets, and SME approaches can also be applied to it, to some extent. Inskip (2004) claims that corporate brands are not very deeply considered in B2B markets, especially when looking at SMEs. However, in her study she found that corporate branding is just as crucial for SMEs, as it is for larger companies. She also suggests, that corporate branding is especially important when operating in a B2B sector, because "differentiation via product or service superiority alone is increasingly hard" (p. 365) there. In addition, the research suggests that such companies might benefit in seeking consultation in corporate branding issues outside the company, as the resources inside the company in terms of know-how can be scarce.

Rode and Vallaster (2005) researched the effect of corporate branding in start-ups. They suggest, that start-ups are a special area for studying corporate branding, as they lack internal structures and processes. The claim that establishing a corporate brand is vital for a start-up to survive, and it should be done in a rather short time. Rode and Vallaster views that a corporate brand consists of corporate identity and corporate image. Furthermore, corporate identity is said to consist of corporate culture, design, behaviour and communication (ibid.). These are communicated through multiple ways to the stakeholders, which builds corporate image (ibid.).

Based on their research, Rode and Vallaster (2005) claim that the entrepreneur in a start-up has a crucial role in the early stages of the company, when building and communicating corporate identity and corporate image, and thus the corporate brand. They suggest that start-up entrepreneurs should develop their corporate identity in line with the corporate culture, as well as constantly communicate the corporate identity to the stakeholders and employees. Based in their research, they suggest some steps for start-up entrepreneurs to follow, which are presented in Figure 3. below:

Agreement on business concept

Business concept, values and philosophy should be developed and agreed before founding the businee

Sustainable corporate design

Visual elements should be designed and aligned carefully with the business concept, values and philosophy.

Constant information flow

Information flow to employees at all times to keeps them aligned with company's values. Structures should be developed when the company grows.

Careful employee selection

Standartized selection process of emplyees should be developed to ensure emplyees fit to company's culture.

Figure 3. Steps for entrepreneurs in creating corporate brand (Rode and Vallaster, 2005, pp. 132-133)

When recalling the previous chapter of this literature review, it was discussed that Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) suggested the visionary role of the entrepreneur to be of importance in brand building and creation, which is in line with these finding of Rode and Vallaster (2005). Hence, the phenomenon of entrepreneurial branding could be relevant in terms of this literature review too, as the role of entrepreneur seems to be essential for the brand.

Egglers et al. (2016) base their research partly on the results on Rode and Vallaster (2005). They claim, that in the beginning of the company, the brand of a product is usually the same as the brand of the corporate, as there usually is only one product. In their research, Egglers et al. (2016) suggest that customers meet lots of uncertainty when switching from the products of well-known, established companies, to the products of start-ups, and this process can be eased by successful corporate and entrepreneurial branding. Therefore, they draw the conclusion that start-ups should pay attention on making their customers to perceive them as an established company, as well as present effectively the management team, as it makes it more likely that the customers choose their products.

To conclude, the previous literature presents that corporate branding is a theory that is of interest for start-ups as well, and can have positive influence in terms of the survival of the company. Furthermore, the role of the entrepreneur and the management team also enhances the brand of the company, and thus the entrepreneur should be a visionary, who strategically aims to transfer their values and visions to the brand of the company. Interestingly, Reijonen et al. (2015) also found that an entrepreneurial orientation within the company can also have a positive effect on the corporate brand, which means that the management team should be innovative, proactive and risk-taking. These descriptions likely match to start-up entrepreneurs as well, so an interesting research direction could also be in how entrepreneurial orientation could enhance entrepreneurial branding. All in all, based on previous literature, it seems that even though corporate and entrepreneurial branding are important for start-ups as well, there is not much research conducted on this field, and hence this thesis might participate in the process of filling this gap.

2.4 Brand Building

Since the discussion has now much concentrated on defining branding and what it consists of, as well as presenting some approaches to branding, it is also important for this thesis to see and understand what previous literature states about brand creation and building. These are of interest in terms of the research questions, and hence the processes and mechanisms should be discussed too. The further focuses on defining brand creation and brand building and presenting what are the steps taken in these processes generally, and especially in terms of start-ups.

Keller (2013) views branding as a concept that aims to build brand equity. He names establishing a positive brand image and creating brand awareness as sources for creating brand equity. This is quite consistent with the findings of other research discussed in section 2.1. Furthermore, Keller (2009) presents the brand resonance pyramid as model for building strong brands. The parts that build the pyramid are brand salience (the level of awareness), performance, imaginary, judgements, feelings, and, finally, brand resonance of the top of the pyramid. Keller emphasises that a brand must achieve the top

of the pyramid to achieve strong brand equity. The pyramid can be found from Figure 4. The objectives aimed to achieve in each step are also listed in the blocks.

Resonance
• *Objective:* intense, loyal activity

Judgements & Feelings
• *Objective:* positive, accessible reactions

Performance & Imagenary
• *Objective:* points-of-parity and -difference

Salience
• *Objective:* deep, broad brand awareness
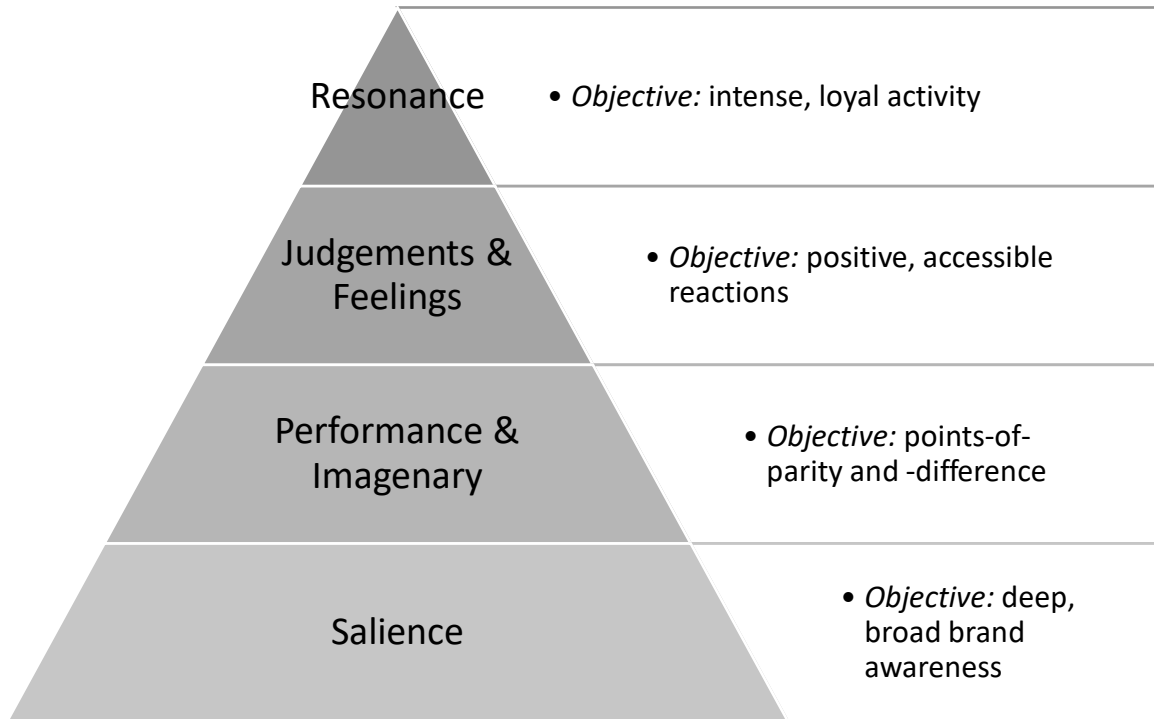
Figure 4. Brand resonance pyramid (Keller, 2009, p. 144)

Keller (2009) provides definitions for the six steps of the pyramid as follows: "Brand salience is how easily and often customers think of the brand under various purchase or consumption situations. Brand performance is how well the product or service meets customers' functional needs. Brand imagery describes the extrinsic properties of the product or service, including the ways in which the brand attempts to meet customers' psychological or social needs. Brand judgments focus on customers' own personal opinions and evaluations. Brand feelings are customers' emotional responses and reactions with respect to the brand. Brand resonance refers to the nature of the relationship customers have with the brand and the extent to which they feel they're 'in sync' with the brand." (pp. 143-144). As can be seen from the definitions, the brand resonance pyramid a provides clear and comprehensive model to brand building, which could also provide useful when considering the research questions of this thesis.

Ghodeswar (2008) also proposed a model for brand building, with a slightly different approach. The framework is called PCDL Model, and it provides different stages that a company should go through in its brand building efforts, whereas Keller's (2009) brand resonance pyramid focuses perhaps more on concepts. The PCDL Model of Ghodeswar (2008) consists of four steps, of which it's named after; positioning the brand, communicating the brand message, delivering brand performance, and leveraging the brand equity. The steps can be seen in Figure 5. below.

Positioning the brand		Communicating the brand message		Delivering the brand performance		Leveraging the brand equity
•Features, tangible and intangible attributes •Product functions •Benefits •Operational	→	•Advertising campaigns •Themes and celebrities •Events and shows •Consumer	→	•Product and service performance •Customer care, satisfaction, and delight	→	•Line and brand extensions •Ingredient and co-branding •Brand alliances •Social integration

Figure 5. The PCDL Model (Ghodeswar, 2008, p. 6)

It is suggested, that through positioning, the perception of the brand in customers' minds can be affected. The desired positioning can then further be communicated to the customers. In addition, it is crucial to track the performance of the brands, as well as leverage the created brand equity, through e.g. linking the brand to other entities. By following the model, it is suggested that strong brands can be build. The PCDL Model could also be useful in terms of the research of this thesis, as it provides a rather concrete steps, that a company can apply and consider in its branding strategy.

The two previously discussed models to brand building, the brand resonance model of Keller (2009) and PCDL Model of Ghodeswar (2008), concentrate on brand building on a product perspective, and from the point of view of ongoing brand management of MNEs. Thus, they could be said to be more generic models on brand building. However, as has been discussed previously, start-up branding has specific aspects in terms of branding and thus brand building. In addition, corporate brand is especially important for them. Hence it is interesting to see what literature offers on the topic of brand building in start-ups and SMEs especially.

Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) suggest that in SME context, brand building is a continuation of the visionary of the entrepreneur. In fact, they suggest that the brand associations are sourced from the founder's values, and the associations again are used to build core brand identity. In addition, they propose that "functional and/or symbolic brand associations contribute to build strong brand images" (p. 1049). They also found, that can country-of-origin image can enhance the brand. These findings are certainly interesting, when considering the strategies start-ups need to consider when building their brands. Especially from the perspective of previously discussed entrepreneurial branding, this finding by Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) highlights the importance of considering the entrepreneur's visions in brand building efforts.

In their article, Centeno et al. (2012) focused on two key brand elements, which were brand identity and brand differentiation. Similarly to the findings of other literature, they as well found that the entrepreneur and their personality and vision plays a large role in the brand, especially when considering brand identity. They suggest, that brand building in SMEs perform five phases, which consist of starting stage and development stage. The phases are shown in Figure 6. below.
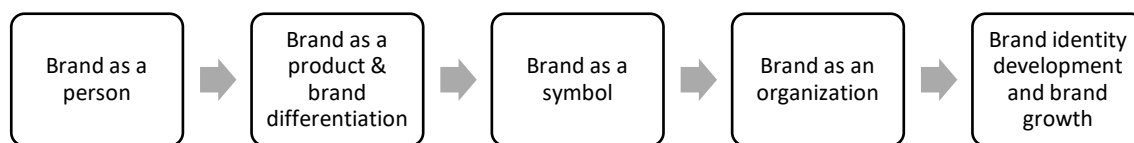
| Brand as a person | → | Brand as a product & brand differentiation | → | Brand as a symbol | → | Brand as an organization | → | Brand identity development and brand growth |

Figure 6. The five phases of SME brand building (Centeno et al., 2012, p.448)

Centeno et al. (2012) describe the phases so, that the beginning is derived from the entrepreneur. Thus, in the first stage, the entrepreneur is the key to branding, and after development and processing, the brand can also be developed to be a part of a product. The third stage, brand as a symbol, describes the process where the brand is taken further and evolved in terms of appearances, such as e.g. name and logo. The final stage describes how the organizational values of the company and the entrepreneur are transferred to the brand.

This model is very interesting for this thesis, as it takes a perspective of an SME in brand building. and hence it might be very useful when replying the research questions. In addition, as Centeno et al. (2012) suggest, the results of their study indicate that a lack of financial resources is not a barrier for brand building and management, if the issues can be overcome with creativity. Furthermore, the results again highlight the importance of the entrepreneur in SME branding. However, as the focus of the study was in SMEs, rather than in start-ups, some limitations on applicability exist, and hence it might be interesting to see how the start-up context differs in terms of brand building, in which this thesis might be able to participate.

To conclude this chapter, there are some models that are suggested for brand building. Perhaps the most acknowledged, and also most applicable for this study, is the brand resonance model by Keller (2009). However, the PCDL model by Ghodeswar (2008) might also be of use. In addition, the start-up context in brand buildingmust be also considered, as there is very little on this aspect yet.

2.5 Branding Activities and Tools for Start-Ups

As this literature review has now discussed what branding is and how brands are build, in addition to different perspectives to branding, it is now of interest to see what kind of branding activities and tools for start-ups the previous literature has to offer. As has been concluded many times already, the literature on start-up branding and SME branding is rather scarce, and therefore this section consists of different pieces and suggestions made by some authors who have briefly discussed the topic.

Bresciani and Eppler (2010) found some specific and practical guideline for start-ups to follow in their branding practises. They suggest, that start-up entrepreneurs should anticipate that the company will grow in the future, and hence plan their activities accordingly. Hence, they should consider this in e.g. their logo design. In addition, they suggest that start-up entrepreneurs should be creative in their brand building activities, which in practice means, for example, participating in different events and using different promoting channels in new ways. Furthermore, they guide the entrepreneurs to exploit the power of internet. Finally, the measurement of results is also emphasised, as it should not be overlooked in start-ups either.

Krake (2005) also found some interesting insights on brand management in SMEs, and based on those, he suggested some points to consider. Similair to many other authors, he guides the entrepreneurs to acknowledge the importance of their personality and values in brand management and exploit them. In addition, he suggests to provide daily attention to brand management, as well as to name the responsibility to a certain person. He also suggests, that if the name of the brand is more known than the name of the company, it would be worth to consider, whether to change the company's name. In addition, he advices to exploit the elasticity of marketing budget, rather than taking it as a constraint. Many authors seem to acknowledge the power of internet in branding efforts. Keller (2009), for example, found that integrating interactive marketing communication in brand building is very effective in terms of brand resonance. Inskip (2004) also highlights this aspect, and guides entrepreneurs to seek for online possibilities for increasing brand equity.

A less practical, but yet emphasized aspect, is that entrepreneurs should consider brand management as a strategic process that results in a competitive advantage. For example, Kotler and Pfoertsch (2007) state that brand management is crucial in B2B markets, where it is more commonly overlooked. This was also found by Horan et al. (2011), who also stated that in SMEs, entrepreneurs can bring their personality into brand management.

As can be seen, the literature is very scarce on the subject of branding activities for start-ups, especially when it comes practical advice. This is perhaps the largest research gap, where this thesis could participate in and aim to fill with the findings. However, as this topic is very much of interest in terms of the research questions, the literature found is above is very insightful.

2.6 Conclusion

As a conclusion to this literature review, an integrative summary of the previous five sections is presented briefly, whereas respective findings are pieced together. In addition, some blanks and research gaps are identified, to see what needs to be studied further.

The discussion begun with the topic of branding in general. It was found that in literature, the theory of brand equity is considered as a very important one, and that branding activities should aim to increase brand equity. Furthermore, the differences between branding in MNEs and start-ups were presented, which provided a view that the start-ups indeed provide a special and unique context for branding. After this, the ideas of corporate branding and entrepreneurial branding were discussed, as they were found to be interesting ones for start-ups. Lastly, the brand building process and branding activities for start-ups were addressed.

This literature review found, that the research of start-up branding is quite limited at the moment. Therefore, this thesis has a chance to participate in adding knowledge on the phenomenon. Especially, it can take part in researching how brand building models and theories apply in the start-up context, and providing practical guidelines. In addition, it

can also participate to increase understanding on corporate and entrepreneurial branding in start-ups, and their consideration in brand building processes. All in all, as the previous literature is so scarce, the thesis likely is able to increase knowledge in many aspects in terms of start-up branding.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This part of the thesis discusses the planned design of the following research, as well as the methods applied in it. To begin, a detailed description of the case studied in the research is provided, including also background on the case company. After this, the data collection and analysis methods are presented. Lastly, discussion on the reliability and validity of the study is provided.

3.1 Case Description

The focus of this thesis is on researching start-up branding according to the earlier presented research questions. The research is conducted as a case study, and the case under inspection is the branding issues of a target company called Noblecat Oy (further refereed as Noblecat). Noblecat was already briefly introduced in chapter 1.1, but this section provides more in-depth details, as well as describes why it is an interesting case company to be studied in the terms of start-up branding.

Noblecat was founded in August 2018, as a limited liability company as business entity. Its founders are three family members, who aim to grow the company to become a successful player in the e-learning markets of Finland. The CEO Joona Ehrnrooth tells, that: "The future of company is rather open, but the aim is to become so successful that one can become more of an owner, less of an employee". The CEO also acts as a source for further information of the company presented here. Currently, the company employs one person in full-time, and two persons as part-time, and it has also chosen to outsource some activities when needed.

The main product of Noblecat is currently e-learning materials and an e-learning platform for the vehicle and transportation sector of Finnish vocational schools. However, in the future they aim to evolve the platform so that the platform would solely become the main product, and content production would be decreased. This is considered as a reasonable strategy, as the production of materials is too depended on the know-how of certain

employees. In addition, the company seeks to develop innovative ways for learning in electronical form, and hence they have invested in e.g. 3D equipment for the development of new kind materials.

Noblecat acts in business-to-business (B2B) markets, which means that they sell their products to other businesses, who then deliver them to the end users. The CEO defines the company as a KIBS (knowledge-intensive business services), because they are selling expertise as a service, which is characteristic for KIBS (Miles et al., 1995). Currently, their main customer is a company who outsources the material from Noblecat, and then sells them forward to schools. However, in the future, Noblecat aims to remove these kinds of middlemen, and sell their products directly to schools. In addition, they possibly seek to cooperate with publishers or suchlike actors, who could produce contents for the platform in the form of e.g. outsourcing. Figure 7. demonstrates this customer process.
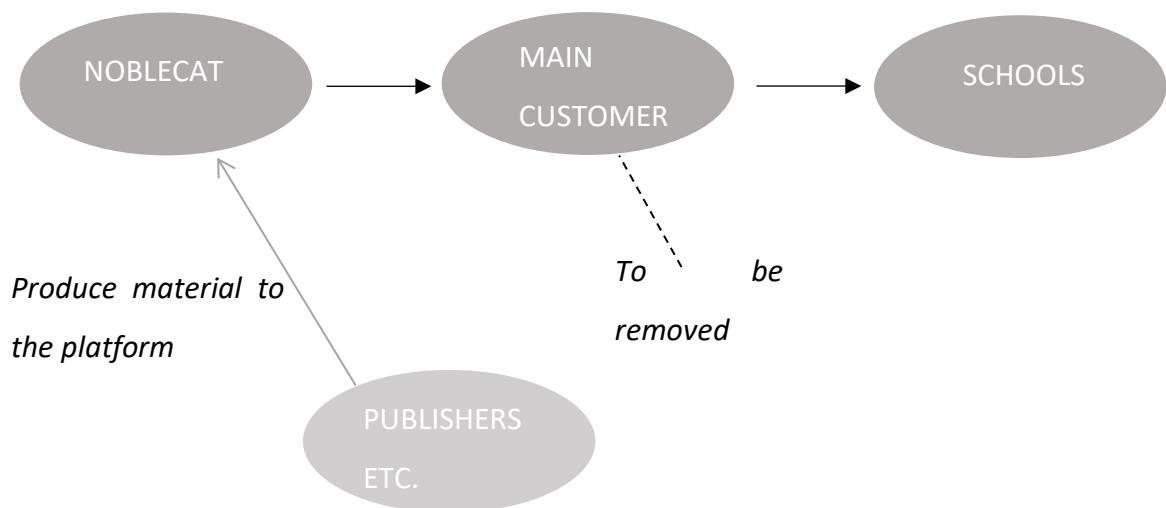

Figure 7. Noblecat's customer process

As has been discussed, Noblecat is young company with high ambitions. However, at the moment they are mostly concentrating on developing their products and selling them to their main customer. Hence, for the continuity of the company, it is crucial for them to gain a larger customer base, as the CEO now acknowledges that they are too dependent on their current customer presently. However, in order to gain new customers, the company would need to become more known in the markets, as it would be too much of a work for them to reach customers. Therefore, especially considering the limited resources, it would be best if the customers found the company instead. The CEO thus feels, that building a brand would be very beneficial for them. In addition, focusing on brand issues would also aid in developing marketing strategies.

In the previous chapter 2., there was discussion on why start-ups face unique situations in terms of branding (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). The presented factors were the lack of established identity, reputation and internal structures; the cruciality of customer acquisition; and scarce resources. These conditions apply well to Noblecat as well, as discussed below. These also prove, based on previous literature, why Noblecat is a suitable target company, when researching start-up branding.

As Noblecat is a new player in the e-learning markets, it is not yet known and even recognized by other actors. Therefore, the possible customers cannot recognize them either, nor have a perception of what kind of a company it is. The internal structures are not established either, and there is somewhat a confusion on the roles and responsibilities of the employees within the company. In addition, as mentioned, it is crucial for Noblecat to gain customers, if it wishes to ensure its future. One significant factor is also the lack of resources. Finance is scarce, as well as know-how, since the company is very small at the moment, so the employees cannot have knowledge in every aspect that would be important for the company. In addition, Noblecat doesn't have much time, if it wishes to establish itself in the markets, because time requires finances that are not available.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

The research is conducted as qualitative study, that explores how the phenomenon of start-up branding occurs in a certain case. The primary data collected and interpreted is qualitative. The following chapter shall explain the data collection and analysis methods in detail.

The source for primary data are semi-structured interviews, that are conducted with the CEO of Noblecat, Joona Ehrnrooth. Some questions are prepared to guide the interviews, but room for free discussion is also left. Such interviews allow to the researcher to "understand the reasons for the decisions that your research participants have taken, or to understand the reasons for their attitudes and opinions" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 394) . In addition, the benefit of semi-structured interviews is that it might reveal something through discussion that was not previously concerned by the researcher (ibid.). Hence, such interview approach is determined to be suitable for the purposes of this study. The basis for the interviews are the research questions, as they are wished to be answered through the interviews, and current literature is also used to ensure discussion on important themes. The number of interviews is planned to be 3-5, and the primary interviewee is the CEO, whilst the two other members of the company are also interviewed if needed and possible. The interviews are audio-recorded.

By following this research plan and going through the interview process, the number of interviews conducted with the CEO was eventually 3, with an addition of 2 briefer discussions as well. The three interviews lasted approximately for 20-35 minutes, while the two shorter ones took 5-10 minutes. In addition, one interview was conducted with another member of the company, Kari Ehrnrooth (later addressed as 'Founder'), who is one of the founders of the company too. This interview lasted for 20 minutes. The themes of the interviews concentrated around the research questions, and during the process more specifying questions were created to address the issues which remained unclear from the previous interviews.

In terms of data collection and analysis methods, literature is also used as a source to confirm the findings of the primary data. As the interviews provide knowledge on the phenomenon, literature is utilized as a tool to fill the possible blanks. In addition, as the interviews raise questions, literature can be used to answer them, and based on this process, new interviews can be conducted, to gain new knowledge. This iterative process can be repeated several times, in order to gain cumulatively enhanced understanding of the focal phenomena until the point of saturation is achieved and research questions have got appropriate answers.

The analysis of primary data begins as soon as it is collected, which helps in further literature search. The research questions guide the analysis. Based on analysing the interviews, more literature can be found and applied. Once important themes and points are recognized, frameworks are developed and juxtaposed against empirical case, thus providing answers to the formulated research questions. The unit of analysis is the case company, Noblecat. The method applied to analyse the data and draw findings is the abductive approach, where logic and knowledge of the phenomena is used to reason observations (Aliseda, 2006).

3.3 Reliability and Validity

This case study takes some steps to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. As the study is qualitative and conducted with a single company, the methods may differ from the ones used with quantitative data, but nevertheless reliability and validity are carefully considered. The following discusses these issues.

Reliability is aimed to ensure with the primary data through in-depth interviews. While conducting the interviews, the phenomena expressed in them is discussed within various questions, so that it can be ensured that a correct understanding is received from the interviewee. In addition, in case of uncertainties and ambiguities in terms of the replies, new interviews are performed to ensure reliability. Reliability is also enhanced by combining the findings of primary data and literature, by seeing how the themes and findings presented in the literature matches to those found in primary data. If these

findings are coherent with those that have been presented earlier in literature, they are likely to be reliable. However, as Saunders et al. (2009) state, a problem for the reliability of semi-structured interviews is "whether alternative researchers would reveal similar information" (p. 397), and this issue must be kept in mind when concerning the results of this study.

In terms of validity, Saunders et al. (2009) suggest that "semi-structured and in-depth interviews can achieve a high level of validity/credibility – where conducted carefully using clarifying questions, probing meanings and by exploring responses from a variety of angles" (p. 400). Hence, to ensure and improve the validity of the data, special attention is given during the interviews to secure that the researcher fully understands the topic discussed by the interviewee, and aims to reach a comprehension of the topic in a wide scope.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter of the thesis concentrates on the findings of the research, as well as provides discussion on the matter. As discussed earlier, the research is conducted through interviews, and based on them, results are drawn to reply the research questions. After this, literature is revised from the literature review to test, support and fulfil these findings. The following chapter is hence divided into five sections, of which the first three focus on the research questions and the answers found to the based on the data. The fourth section discusses these results, and deploys literature to deepen them. Lastly, the fifth section provides managerial suggestions for the case company, which are derived based on the preceding parts of the chapter. However, for revision, the research questions are presented here:

Q1: What are the challenges a start-up faces in their branding?

Q2: What kind of help and information is available to facilitate start-up branding?

Q3: What are the steps a start-up should take in brand building?

4.1 The Challenges of Start-up Branding

This section focuses on providing findings for research question 1: *What are the challenges a start-up faces in their branding?* As discussed earlier, semi-constructed interviews were conducted to find how the case company sees the phenomenon of start-up branding, and the challenges connected to it. The interviews were conducted with the CEO of the company and with one of the founders (later addressed as 'Founder'). There were many themes that were highlighted during the interviews of both of the interviewees, which described the challenges the company is facing in their brand building. These points were also somewhat in line of the findings of previous literature discussed in chapter 2. The following shall discuss these challenges.

Newness

The CEO highlighted in many cases, that because they are starting from zero to build their company, it creates special conditions and challenges. Everything must be created from the beginning, which means that there are a vast amount of tasks and topics to consider. This goes from focusing on practical issues, such as who does what, to creating business plans and visioning the future directions. As the CEO concluded:

> *It takes a lot of time and effort, if we are willing to become successful and acquire customers. Especially because we didn't have anything but an idea of a business and a product when we started."*

The aspect of newness has also led to another challenge, which is being short of time. As the CEO said, in the beginning there were only a business idea, but nothing else developed, and hence the processes connected to starting a company and creating everything from a new have required a lot of time, which has resulted in having less time to allocate for different functions. Therefore, newness is connected to the next challenge to be discussed, which is the lack of time.

Lack of time

Time is an important resource for any company. However, new companies are often short of time, as there are many tasks to do, which should be completed as fast as possible to be able to get the business operating. In terms of the case company, lack of time has impacted negatively marketing and branding issues, which can be seen from the following quotations:

> *"We have been planning to sit down and talk about marketing and especially about the tools we want to apply. We should also discuss about how each of sees our company and who we aspire to be as a company, because at the moment everyone has their own vision inside their heads. We just haven't had the time to do this as we have so much going on all the time"* (CEO)

"I have decided that branding is not my case, and hence I've left the other two gentlemen in our company to handle with it. We have been talking about it ever since beginning our business, but we haven't had the time to do anything about it. All of my time goes with producing content to the product, as well as developing it, so I don't have the time to consider these kinds of issues. I also feel that it is not so important at this stage and size of our company" (Founder)

As the quotation from the CEO describes, lack of time is a challenge for the company. On one hand, the company must keep on pace in order to be successful, as it needs to develop and produce products for its clients. On the other hand, the three members of the company are busy with the tasks connected to the company, as well as in their personal life, since two of them have a full-time job in other companies, and one concentrates fully on producing content for the product. Hence, they lack the time when they could actually sit down and have meetings about other than practical issues. This is also one reason why the company doesn't have a marketing strategy, nor other strategies, at least in written forms. In addition, as the CEO implied, the members might not be in the same page regarding all issues, and currently each member might have a differing opinion and views of the company and its functions and future. The members of the company also have somewhat differing opinions on how important it is to allocate time for brand building efforts, as can be seen from the quote from the Founder, in which he stated that branding is not a top priority for their company at this point, whereas the CEO finds that branding is a significant activity for any business.

Lack of knowhow

The CEO recognized the lack of knowhow as their greatest challenge when considering branding:

I don't really know what a brand is, and where to start building a brand. Of course I have some idea of what branding is, but in order to e.g. create a branding strategy, I would have to study the topic quite a lot. I also believe, that the other two members have even less understanding about branding. I would like to have some roadmap etc. that would help me. since were starting from zero in this area.

It could be stated, that branding efforts would require rather much work and studying from the CEO to begin with. In addition, such studying takes a lot of time, which the CEO currently does not have.

In the interview with the Founder, the same theme of not having enough knowledge of branding was seen throughout the interview. For example, when discussing the challenges that the company has with branding, the Founder stated:

"To be honest, I can't really say what are our challenges, because even the term 'brand' is vague for me. If I were given, say, 20 minutes to come up with a brand for our company, I would be completely clueless of what to do."

It is likely, that as the concept itself is so unclear for the members of the company, reaching enough knowledge and knowhow would require a significant amount of time and effort.

Lack of finances

Connected to the lack of knowhow, the lack of finances is also an issue in terms of branding for the company. Regarding to the CEO, as they don't have the needed knowhow to build a branding strategy and brand, the best solution would be to outsource it a consultancy service. However, currently they can't afford this, and the CEO was not sure when would be a time when they would. Hence, they must handle branding themselves, instead of outsourcing it. In addition, branding might not be perceived as

important enough to allocate any additional finances in the upcoming future, at least by all of the members of the company. As the Founder said:

> *If we were given additional resources, I would not want to use it for branding. Instead, I think that when we will become more financially stable, one of the other members would take a leave from their current jobs and become fully employed with our company and begin to develop or platform on a daily basis.*

As this quotation implies, it might be challenging to assure all the members of the company about the importance of branding, so that finances could be allocated for its means. However, increasing knowledge on branding might be helpful for this aim; as the members of the company realize the significance of branding to the success of the company, they might become more yielding to allocate additional finances for branding activities.

Family firm aspects and lack of structures

The CEO also recognized some issues connected to the fact of the company is family owned. He stated, that it is a positive factor that the information flow is very free and ideation is easy, because the members are so close to each other. In addition, he found it positive that there are no strict structures. On the other hand, it was said that because they are so free with each other, they don't have clear structures in terms of responsibilities and hence the roles they have as family members might affect their work sometimes too much.

No strategies

The CEO's view is that a company this size does not need written strategies. According to him, it is important that everyone is on the same page of the company's future and what kind of brand the wish to have. However, he found that it would be too time-consuming to compose written strategies at this point. The Founder had a somewhat similar view,

while recognizing the importance of considering and developing strategies constantly, yet finding it rather indifferent to compose written strategies in such a small company.

The importance of selling the company

The CEO emphasized, that he finds it very important that they sell the company and its expertise, rather than only products, as the future of their products is still unclear but they have some idea of what kind of company they wish to be. He also found, that the role of one of the members could be highlighted in these efforts. Furthermore, this was seen as an aspect that would be useful when starting to build the brand. The Founder somewhat shared this view, as he stated that in his opinion, it would be too challenging and difficult to create a brand for their product, because the product is under constant development.

4.2 Help and Information for Start-up Branding

This part focuses on the findings the research provided for the second research question: *What kind of help and information is available to facilitate start-up branding?*. Hence, the findings present activities and tools that are externally available for the company, which are of use in start-up brand building.

Accessible information

In regards of the second research question, there were many issues discussed during the interviews. As the CEO highlighted, he, or any of the founding members, do not have previous knowledge on marketing or branding issues, only a basic understanding, or grasp, on the concepts. He also speculated that this kind of situation is common for many start-ups, as there are few people working on the company, and they usually have knowhow concerning the products, not so much on the business functions. He also said that:

I believe that a common factor in successful start-ups is a multi-skilled team, in which someone knows about marketing and branding, and brings those aspects to the company. I don't think that start-ups can success if they are only technologically driven and only try to sell the technology, without giving any consideration on branding.

Therefore, it could be said that start-ups might benefit from having material about branding that are easily accessible, or people who have knowledge on branding and can share and teach it to others in the company, as well as highlight the importance of the matter. This should hence be considered when hiring new employees.

Simple models and frameworks

The CEO expressed that it would be useful to have a road mad or a framework that is simple and contains information that helps the company to start the branding process. An important aspect is also that such a framework would be especially created or modified for the needs of start-ups. As the literature review showed, there is little research conducted on start-up branding, and the CEO also mentioned during the interviews, that he had not found specific literature of start-up branding, at least in a simple form that would have served his needs. The Founder had a similar view with the CEO; according to him, it would be useful to have information that is easy to understand and does not require previous knowledge on branding. Hence, it could be said that a simple framework or a branding model for start-ups could be useful. In addition, it would need to be easily accessible, so that beginning the branding processes would be easy.

Consultancy

In addition, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, scarce resources in terms of finances are also challenge, especially when connected to the lack of knowhow, as this limits out the possibility of consultancy. One way to overcome this issue could be applying for different funding that could be the used for marketing efforts, for example in the form of consultancy. In Finland, there are many entities who grant funding for start-

ups, and those could be exploited for the benefit of marketing and branding issues. The CEO also implied, that if they would be granted such a funding, he would heavily consider using it for marketing. However, a challenge might be ensuring the others in the company that marketing, and especially branding, are important enough to use extra allowance on, as the Founder expressed his scepticism of such budgeting policies.

4.3 Steps and practices in Start-up Branding

In terms of the third research question, *What are the steps a start-up should take in brand building?"*, some issues were discussed during the interviews as well. Again, the CEO and Founder expressed that their knowledge of branding is not that wide, they wish that they create a simple branding strategy to begin with and apply tools that are appropriate to that strategy. Hence, the findings should be matching to those.

Strategies

One theme risen in the interviews was the lack of strategies. However, creating written strategies is often considered as a very important factor for businesses. Hence, it could be so, that composing strategies might help in gaining a clearer vision on what the company wishes to achieve and how they could achieve it. This might also help in creating the brand itself and the branding strategy, as the vision could be deployed for further processes.

Brand elements

The CEO also implied, that his understanding of branding consists mostly on factors such as name, logo and appearance, i.e. the brand elements. Considering brand elements would therefore be an easy point to start with, and also an important aspect in branding. However, as Bresciani and Eppler (2010) stated, a company should anticipate growth in the future and consider this when determining the brand elements, and therefore it would be useful to have a strategy composed at this point, so that the elements would be aligned to the strategy.

Corporate branding

One point discussed in the interviews was the role of the company and selling it, instead of solely the product. This is also a factor that the CEO mentioned that could assist in their branding efforts, because when building the branding strategy and the brand, the aspect of the company could already be considered. In addition, he mentioned that the entrepreneurs could be deployed in the branding efforts. Therefore, creating a branding strategy for the corporate brand could be a relevant step for the company. In addition, entrepreneurial branding could be useful, so that the vision and the enthusiasm of the entrepreneurs could be envisioned in the corporate brand as well.

These prescinding sections have presented the results the that were drawn from the interviews. They have provided some clear points as answers. However, to fulfil and deepen these findings, as well as to test them, it is also relevant to discuss the findings of present literature in the light of this research. Therefore, the following part continues with discussion, which reflects the literature review, as well as combines different theories and findings of literature, based on the results of this study.

4.4 Discussion

This part discusses the previously drawn responses to the research questions, from the point of view of how literature can fulfil these findings. The information of chapter 2. shall thus be connected to the research questions and the findings of primary research.

In terms of the first research question, the primary research showed many results that are similar to the findings of current literature. It was found, that the case company struggles with the challenges of newness, lack of time, finances, knowhow, and strategies, as well as some aspects resulted by being a family firm and having no established structures. These are in line with the findings of Bresciani and Eppler (2010), who list newness and scarce resources as characteristics for start-ups. These also describe the liabilities of newness and smallness of new ventures (Aldrich and Auster, 1986). In addition, it was also found that it is challenging to create a brand for the product/products of the company,

as they are under constant development. Therefore, considering the corporate brand would be a useful solution.

Merrilees (2007) presents an interesting theory for SME new ventures, in which he suggests many propositions that could help to overcome these challenges. In his theory of brand-led new venture development, Merrilees emphasises the importance of brand, as he proposes that "brand is a central or pivotal catalyst for all aspects of the pre-launch activity" (2007, p. 409). Adapting such a view might be useful for all members of start-ups, as it would highlight significance of branding and concretize it during the process.

Merrilees (2007) makes eight propositions, which are related to the activities of start-up branding. Firstly, he suggests that corporate branding brings more advantages to a new venture, as a corporate brand is not as narrow as a product brand, and on the other hand, product brands can be used to supplement the corporate brand. This is also linked to the findings of the first research question, where it was found that it is challenging to create brands for the products, as they are under constant development, and hence concentrating on corporate brand would be recommendable. Related to this, Merrilees emphasises the role and responsibility of the founder in the corporate brand.

It is also suggested in the brand-led new venture development theory that branding can be used as a focusing tool (Merrilees, 2007). It can hence be applied to control innovation and creativity, by addressing the core values of the brand during the innovation process. Likewise, "branding could be seen as a filter to the opportunity recognition process" (p. 407), so that opportunities can be reduced and assessed by the means of how well they are suited to the brand. The same idea also applies to the business model: by focusing on the brand perspective, it can be better considered what kind of a firm the company wishes to be in the future, and thus the business model can be developed towards this direction. This kind of consideration of branding as a focusing tool could also be a solution for the lack of resources and knowhow, which were found challenges in start-up branding; there is no need for a very deep knowledge of branding, but instead it is important to keep the brand as a focus in every function.

Merrilees (2007) also proposes, that branding "increases access to new venture capital" (p. 408), helps in customer acquisition process, and enhances the accessibility of suppliers to the company. These issues are often challenges for start-ups, as they are connected to the liabilities of smallness and newness (Aldrich and Auster, 1986). Therefore, based on the brand-led new venture development theory, branding can be seen as a tool to overcome many challenges that are faced by start-ups too.

In terms of the second research question *"What kind of help and information would a start-up need in their branding process?",* the primary research implied that start-ups might benefit from creating strategies and approaching branding from a simple point of view, and exploiting from those who already have knowledge on branding. In addition, again, corporate branding should be considered. The literature offers more specific tools for these aims.

When regarding the issue of creating strategies, Abimbola (2001) suggests that a branding strategy can aim an SME in creating a competitive advantage. The author states that "Branding strategy is a policy for creating and nurturing sustainable competitive advantage - By building upon inherent tacit knowledge, product, service and process within a firm, brand may serve as a platform for innovative practices for enhancing a firms market based assets such as reputation, and enhance and command trust from non-customers.." (p. 100). This strengthens the idea that a branding strategy is highly important for a company, and should not be overlooked. The steps that Abimbola (2001) suggest for creating a branding strategy are discussed later in this section.

One useful concept as a branding tool could be Keller's (2009) brand resonance pyramid, which was presented in Figure 4. in chapter 2.4. Although the concept is created from the point of view of MNEs, it could be applied for start-ups as well, as a simple framework to help create a branding strategy. It could be exploited so, that the management could consider how to achieve the presented objectives through the branding strategy; how to create a deep and broad awareness (salience), how to create points-of-parity and -difference, hot to create positive and how accessible reactions, and how to achieve intense, loyal activity with the customers.

Another useful tool could be the steps to create corporate brand, that Rode and Vallaster (2005) presented in their study, which can be found in Figure 3. in chapter 2.3. In their model, they suggest that entrepreneur(s) should agree on the business concept and create sustainable corporate design. This point would also help in creating the brand elements, which is also an important step for start-ups. They also suggest that is important to keep the information flow constant. This should be easy in a start-up, as it usually employs few people in the early stages, and as was expressed in the interviews as well, keeping in touch is usually easy, so this should be applicable from the point of view of branding as well. It is also suggested, that when new employees are hired, it should be considered that they share the vision of the company. From the point of view of start-ups this might especially important, as growth might be happening in near future.

An interesting view presented in literature, which might also be useful as an external source in branding process, is co-creation. In his book, Steenkamp (2017) suggests that co-creation might aid in brand building. By involving the customers in innovation and development processes, a company can increase their own knowledge, as well as strengthen the brand in the eyes of the consumers (ibid.). This might also be useful for a start-up which suffers from the liability of smallness, resulting in scarce resources; the customers could be used as a resource for knowledge for the development of products, or even in terms of branding, while involving them in the process, the awareness of the brand is increased. This could thus be very effective in terms of saving resources.

In terms of the third research question, "*What are the steps a start-up should take in brand building?"* the previous literature also offers some useful frameworks. As e.g. Keller (2009) creating brand equity should be the aim of brand building, start-ups should also consider how they could achieve this. For example, Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi (2010) suggest that brand equity is created through brand associations, which lead to brand image and hence create brand equity. Hence start-ups should also consider these aspects when creating their branding strategies.

Centeno et a. (2012) also presented some steps that SMEs should consider in their brand building, which can be seen in Figure 6. in chapter 2.4. According to them, the process starts from considering the entrepreneur to be the same as the brand, and through different steps it leads to creating brand identity and brand growth. The model could also be applicable to start-ups, especially when considering the importance of corporate branding, which was also mentioned during the interviews.

In his study, Abimbola (2001) proposed five notions, which an SME (in which category the case company also belongs to) should consider in their branding strategy. The author suggests for a company to consider carefully the corporate brand, as well as design a marketing programme with creativity. In addition, he encourages to "create a well-integrated set of brand elements that enhance both awareness and brand image" (p. 104) and create campaigns directed for carefully chosen audience. Lastly, it suggested to "leverage as many secondary associations as possible." (p. 104), which in other words implies that a company should aim to make linkages of their brand to those of other companies. By considering these steps, the company can strengthen their branding strategy.

In addition, Bresciani and Eppler (2010) suggested in their study that star-ups should be creative in their brand building activities and exploit bravely different channels to promote the brand. This could also be useful, when considering the idea that was risen in the interviews, that knowhow is lacking in terms of marketing and branding knowledge, and this might also be the case for many other many other start-ups as well. Hence, creative methods could be exploited to patch this deficiency. It could also help to find achievable channels for promotion, when considering the lack of finances and limited marketing budget, which was also discussed during the interviews.

Based on the previously discussed findings, this research could also propose a model for start-up brand building, which is presented in Figure 8. Branding model for start-ups.. It is based on the models discussed above (Keller, 2009; Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010; Centeneo et al., 2012; Bresciani and Eppler, 2010, Merilees; 2007, Abimbola, 2001), as well as the issues found in the interviews. It considers the importance of corporate branding and thus could provide as a model that a start-up could follow in its brand building aims. The model aims the help a start-up to overcome the challenges by suggesting steps that are simple to follow as a process.

To discuss the six steps presented in Figure 8. Branding model for start-ups, each step shall be addressed in the following. To begin, the first three steps are introduced, as they aim to build the basis for the brand. This is continued by focusing on the following three steps, which present activities related to the branding process. The model suggests, that the starting point for a start-up is agreeing on its vision and business concept (Rode and Vallaster, 2005), as these serve as the basis for the brand. In the second step, it is suggested that strategies should be created and the company should also seek for competitive advantages, as these guide the development of the branding strategy, in which the company chooses the methods and activities it wishes to apply for its branding aims, as well as the factors that differentiate their brand from those of competitors (Abimbola, 2001). The third step in the model proposes that a start-up should pay attention to the design of the brand and the corporate, because growth is expected, and hence developing designs already in the beginning, which are suitable for later stages and a bigger of scale, saves resources. At this point, the corporate brand should also be considered, even to the point of choosing whether to solely focus on the corporate brand instead of product brands. (Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010; Centeneo et al., 2012; Bresciani and Eppler, 2010, Merilees; 2007, Abimbola, 2001).

The fourth step is connected to the pervious one, as it suggests to concentrate on the brand equity, in which brand elements and associations are the building blocks. Hence brand associations and image should be considered as well, and they should also be taken into account in the brand design (Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010; Keller, 2009). The fifth step concentrates on internal and external communication; whereas the employees

should communicate effectively within the company about the brand and the actions and tasks related to it, the brand itself should also be communicated coherently to the customers, so that all of the employees present the brand in a similar way (Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010). The last step proposes, that a start-up should be creative in its branding activities (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010; Abimbola, 2001). As resources are scarce especially in terms of knowhow and finances, creative branding activities can patch these deficiencies.

Agree on the vision and business concept	Create strategies and find competetive advantages	Create sustainable brand and corporate design
• Decide who you are and what you wish to be	• Apply these in branding strategy	• Seek for help if needed, possibly extra financing too

Consider the associations for your brand, and what kind of image it has	Communicate effectively inside the company and to the customers	Be creative in branding activities
•Aims to build brand equity	•Be coherent about the brand	•Exploit internet and social media

Figure 8. Branding model for start-ups

To conclude this section, it could be said that the start-up context creates a unique and challenging setting for branding, which is created especially by the liabilities of newness and smallness. Hence, start-ups are faced with the lack of resources, which decreases their accessibility to branding. However, these special conditions can be overcome by a systematic approach, in which branding is considered as a process that builds up on itself, as well as acknowledging the significance of branding to the success of the company. It is also substantial to focus on branding already from the point of establishing the

company, as controversary to considering it as a separate activity, which is done somewhere in a point when the business is already running. In addition, it is important to create strategies and ensure that all members of the start-up are aware of them and share an agreement on the matters. Corporate branding is also a useful concept for start-ups, even to the extent of rather choosing to focus on the corporate brand, instead of product brand(s). In addition, creativity can be used to aid to patch the deficiencies in resources. As a result of this research, a framework was proposed (Figure 8.), which presents a systematic process for start-up branding and emphasizes that brand building actually begins at the same time as the creation of the start-up.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter of the thesis provides discussion and draws conclusions on the issues discussed in the earlier sections. Firstly, the theoretical contributions of this thesis and the research related to it are discussed. Secondly, the practical implication that it offers are given. Lastly, the focus shall be on the limitations related to this study, and some directions for future research will be outlined as well.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis has provided a few theoretical contributions in the area of start-up branding. For one, it has collected together literature from different fields of branding, which are related to the topic of start-up branding. It has also research start-up branding issues from the point of view a start-up and hence deepened understanding of the phenomenon. In addition, it has investigated how the theories presented in previous literature are seen from the point of view of start-up, as well as suggested how they can be applied to it. Furthermore, it has provided a model for start-up branding, which covers the important steps that a start-up should take in branding, based on primary and secondary data. In the following, these theoretical contributions are discussed in depth.

In the chapter 2. previous literature was researched and discussed in terms of what is already known of branding and brand building, as well as corporate branding and start-up branding. The factors that bring special conditions to the branding of start-ups were also presented. As was found, the literature is rather scarce in terms of combining start-ups and branding, as most of the literature around branding seems to focus on on-going brand management of MNEs. Hence, this thesis contributed in bringing the literature together, as well as seeing how other issues related to the field could be related and applied.

This thesis studied a case company called Noblecat, which is a Finnish start-up. The interviews conducted with the CEO demonstrated the challenges and special conditions in branding that the start-up is facing. In addition, they provided an understanding of the phenomenon from the point of view of the case company. Even though these results are not generalizable as such, since they focus on one company only, they might still indicate what other start-ups are facing in similar situations.

The research has also demonstrated that the findings of previous literature can be seen within the case company as well, and thus strengthened the theories presented earlier. For example, during the interviews the CEO expressed same kind of challenges in branding that the previous literature had also suggested. It was also seen, that the special conditions of the start-up context were applicable for the case company as well.

This thesis also presented a model that a start-up could apply in its branding aims. The model is based on the needs that were expressed by the CEO of the case company during the interviews, and the suggestions made in it are drawn from the literature, as well as the issues discussed during the interviews. Thus the model is based on theory, while it is planned for the practical use. The model might well be applicable for the use of other start-ups as well.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this thesis have some practical implications for the start-ups facing branding challenges, which are discussed in this section. To begin with, managerial suggestions to the case company shall be provided, which are specifically modified for the needs of Noblecat. After this, practical implications for start-ups in general are discussed. However, it must be kept in mind, that the findings of the study are not generalizable as such, since the research was conducted as a case study and focused on the perspective of one company solely. Despite this, some general practical implications can still be drawn and they focus on the model for start-up branding proposed by this thesis, which is presented in Figure 8.

5.2.1 Managerial Suggestions for Case Company

This section provides suggestions for the management of the case company. It hence provides ideas and development directions, which Noblecat could consider when they start their branding process and develop the bran strategy. These suggestions are based on the findings discussed in the previous section, and they could also be useful for other start-ups with similar issues as well. Firstly, each suggestion is discussed, after which a conclusion is provided.

As was discussed during the interviews, and as the secondary research also confirms, start-ups seem to struggle with the lack of knowhow, time and finances in their branding aims. In addition, as there are no established structures within the company yet, and especially as the case company is a family firm, information flow, communication and the division of responsibilities are sometimes problematic. Based on these, as well as the branding model introduced in the previous chapter, the following managerial suggestions are given:

Create a basic understanding of branding for each management member

As was mentioned several times, none of the management members have knowhow in terms of branding and marketing issues. Hence, it would be quite useful to familiarize each one with some branding theories and concepts, such a e.g. brand equity, brand building, corporate branding and special conditions of start-up branding. By doing so, the importance of branding might become clearer and it would be easier to include branding as a part of everyday business functions. In addition, it would be easier to look for more information on branding issues, as basic theories are well in hand. To do so, the literature review of this thesis could be used, as the information needed would be easily in hand in a same place, and no extra time would be needed for literature collection.

Make your vision clear

It would be wise to sit down and discuss in-depth what the company wishes to be, what its vision is, and what is the direction for the future. All of the management team should be in a same page with these issues. This could then be applied for branding issues, as the management team should discuss how they want this vision to be seen with the brand. Communicating such issues would be quite crucial, so that everyone implements the same idea of the company, when carrying out business with the customers, as well as developing the company's products.

Create a branding strategy and aim for brand equity

As branding has not been given much attention to yet, an important move would be to create a branding strategy. The previous suggestions would help in brand strategy formulation, as the management would have a better insight for branding, and the future direction of the company would be clearer. Writing down the strategy would also be a good idea, so that recalling it would be easier. In the strategy, issues such as the aims and goals for branding, brand building steps, as well as financing, could be covered. In addition, it should be covered what kind of associations are wished to be linked to the brand, and what kind of image the brand should have. These aim in building brand equity, and the brand resonance pyramid model by Keller (2009) could also be applied in this process. Strategy formulation is recommended for other business areas as well. Especially a marketing strategy would be supportive for the branding strategy.

Create a structure that supports daily branding

It is also suggested, that once a branding strategy is formulated, it should be considered how branding issues can be addressed in everyday business functions. For example, someone could be assigned to be responsible for making daily check-ups in terms of branding issues. Communication is also a key element, which enhances creating a structure that supports branding. In addition, measurement and performance should be considered.

Search for financing via grants for start-ups

There are many grants and entities that offer tuitions and subsidies for new businesses and start-ups. While such financing aids may already be applied by the company, new ones could also be searched for the specific means of branding. As the finances are scarce, which limits the possibility of looking for consultancy in branding issues, to cover the lack of knowhow, subsidies could be used to ease this situation. This would also be efficient in terms of time, as consulting would save time for the management team, as in addition to creation and implementation, time would also be saved from looking for additional information.

Create a sustainable brand appearance and brand elements

Creating a brand appearance is perhaps the most visible part of branding, and it is also an aspect that is covered in early stages of the company. Brand appearance consists of the aesthetics of the product or company. This design should be done keeping in mind, that the company is expected to grow, and so that the same appearance is applicable and suitable in larger scale too. It should thus match with the vision of the company. The same applies for the brand elements, which consist of e.g. name and logo. By creating a sustainable brand appearance and elements, many resources can be saved, as they don't have to be redesigned in a later stage. It also enhances customer retention, as the brand becomes known and recognizable via its appearance and elements, so when they are kept the same, customers can find the brand again more easily.

Get creative with branding activities

Like Bresciani and Eppler (2010) suggest, entrepreneurs in start-ups should be creative with their branding activities, as it can patch the lack of finances and knowhow. Therefore, it is also suggested that Noblecat should find and exploit branding possibilities with creativity. This could mean, for example, exploiting internet and social media opportunities, as well finding new channels that are cost effective, such as participating for student fairs. On the other hand, these kind of activities require time as a resource, but

when incorporating them to the daily business functions, as suggested earlier, less time might be required.

Acknowledge the importance of corporate branding and the entrepreneur

It is also recommended to consider the brand of the start-up, keeping in mind again that growth is expected. As the entrepreneur also acknowledged during the interviews, it's important to sell the company as well, not only the products. The role of the entrepreneurs should be considered in this issue: how can the vision and excitement of the entrepreneur(s) be exploited so that it becomes visible in the corporate brand too. While keeping in mind that the branding activities rather aim to brand the company, not the products, it is also easier to grow a more sustainable brand, as the products of the start-up are likely to be changed and modified in time, but the vision and goals of the company will likely remain the same.

To conclude, it is suggested that the case company should give attention to branding issues and make sure that everyone in the management team understand the importance of branding, e.g. in terms of customer acquisition and retention. There are some challenges that bring special conditions to branding building and branding activities, such as lack of time, finances and knowhow, but they can be overcome. In addition, creating a structure to the company that brings branding as a daily function, and ensuring strong and clear communication, branding issues are enhanced. As the start-up is currently small, the CEO could take a leading role in terms of branding and familiarizing the others with the issues. This way, it would be ensured that things do indeed get done.

5.2.2 Practical Implications for Start-Ups

This section provides some practical implications drawn from the study, which can be applied for managerial use of start-ups. They concentrate on the model for start-up branding, which was presented in Figure 8., and discuss the ways that the model can be applied for practical use.

It is important to be clear on the business model, and especially on the vision of the company, as they must be considered so that the brand can be built sustainably from the start. The vision of the entrepreneur is of special importance, as this can be exploited in the corporate brand through entrepreneurial branding. Based on these, a branding strategy can be build.

A start-up should keep in mind that growth is expected, and this should also be considered in branding. The brand elements should be designed so that they are suitable in later stages and larger scale as well. It would also be wise to consider what kind of brand associations and brand image the start-up wishes its customer to perceive, since these factors contribute in aiming for high brand equity.

Establishing structures to enhance communication of the brand, and as well as brand management, was also found to be useful. Communication should be constant and coherent. As branding gets absorbed as a part of daily business functions, it becomes easier within the company. It may also be communicated more effectively to the customers.

As the resources are usually scarce for start-ups in many terms, creativity can be used to patch these deficiencies. Hence, start-ups should be creative with their branding activities, and exploit every possibility that might e.g. save financial resources. For example, internet could be used as a communication channel in many ways. In addition, for example different events such as fairs can be very useful as a branding activity.

In addition to the model, one implication found is the scarce resources and how to mend these deficiencies. For example, to overcome the lack of finances, different grants could be applied. In addition, if, or rather when, a start-up faces a lack of knowhow in terms of branding and brand building, aid could be found from outside the company, in the form of e.g. consultancy.

As can be seen, this thesis offers a view on practical implications for start-ups facing challenges in branding issues. However, it should be kept in mind that the research was conducted specifically from the perspective of the case company, and thus there are most likely other recommendations and factors that should be considered in start-up branding as well, than only those presented in this thesis. In addition, the findings presented here should be verified in further studies. The following section shall discuss these aspects more deeply.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has some limitations, which should be considered when investigating the results. The following shall present these limitations. Concerning the limitations, some suggestions can be made for future research, which could overcome these restraints, as well as take the research of the topic further. These issues are discussed in the following.

This thesis has focused on studying the concept of start-up branding through a case study and qualitative data. Due to the nature of qualitative study, the results are not as generalizable as would be gained through quantitative research (Saunders et al., 2009). This flagrantly limits the interpretation of the findings and managerial recommendations in other companies or in a general level, as the phenomenon describes the perspective of a certain company. Hence, it would be suggested that the start-up brand building process, and challenges met in it would be research in further studies. For example, a multiple case study combining several start-ups might be suitable, or a survey for a representative sample of start-ups, which would produce quantitative data.

In addition, the features of the case company should be kept in mind as a limiting factor. The case company operates in Finnish e-learning markets, and hence similar results might not be found in other countries or in other fields of business. The sector is B2B, so the findings might differ in B2C sector. In addition, the start-up is technologically driven, which brings another restraint when concerning how generalizable the findings are. Therefore, it is suggested that future research could test if it gains similar results by studying start-ups which operate in different contexts as the case company.

It is also suggested, that for the benefit of practical matters, activities supporting start-up branding should be investigate more deeply, than was possible with the scope of this study. Such research could be conducted through e.g. a survey which aims to study what are the activities successful start-ups take, in terms of building brand elements, choosing marketing channels, and communicating with the customers, and such. A measurement for succession could be high brand equity.

Another interesting direction for future research could be branding in start-ups which fall to the category of KIBS (knowledge-intensive business services) (Miles et al, 1995). The CEO of the case company described the start-up as a KIBS, and this perspective might be an interesting one in start-up branding. Such connection was not possible within the scope of this thesis, but it would certainly make an interesting contribution to future research.

As a conclusion, it can be stated that based in the findings of current literature and this thesis, start-up branding is an area that has attracted little research at the moment. A reason for this might be that the connection of start-ups and branding is quite new. In addition, due to the special features of start-ups, which are the liabilities of newness and smallness (Aldrich and Auster, 1986), start-ups might be a difficult topic for research. On one hand, they are in the very beginning of their life cycle, and hence they are only starting their brand building process; and on the hand, they are very limited in terms of resources to allocate for branding. Nevertheless, start-up branding is an interesting concept that should be researched in the future from different angles and contexts, in order to reach a full understanding and theoretical base for the matter.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Questions used to guide semi-constructed interviews

To guide the semi-structured interviews, and keep the focus on the topic, some interview questions were developed prior the interviews. During the interviews, more specifying questions were asked as well, and requested for examples. The questions are presented below, and they are categorized according to the research question they are connected to:

Part 1: Background

-Could you describe your company and its mission?

-Could you describe your company's vision?

-How have you organized tasks within your company?

-How do you see your company to develop in the near future?

-What kind of aims do you have for your company?

-Could you tell about your products?

-How do you wish to develop your products in the future?

-Could you describe your competitors?

-What do you think your competitive advantages are?

Part 2: Challenges in brand building

-What do you think are the challenges in terms of branding in your company? Could you provide some examples?

-What are your challenges in general?

-How have you tried to solve your challenges (branding/in general)?

-How do you usually communicate in your company?

-Do you think your company's communication supports the development of the company, its brand, and its products? How?

-How do you perceive the importance of marketing?

-What are the issues that you would like to be helped with, in terms of marketing and branding?

Part 3: Resources and information

-What kind of information would you like to have of branding?

- Do you think branding and developing a brand strategy is important? Why?

-Have you sought for literature about branding? If so, what kind of and from where?

-Have you sought for information from other sources than literature? Where?

-Do you find that it's important to allocate financial resources to branding? Please justify your opinion.

-From where would you seek for help in branding?

-What are the sources of help you would like to utilize?

-What kind of sources of information have been helpful? What else might be helpful?

Part 4: Steps and practices

-Have you considered what kind of brand you would like your company to have?

-Have you taken any actions to develop a brand yet? If so, what kind of?

-How do you see that you could start to concentrate on branding issues?

-How do you find that you could educate you company's staff about branding?

-Where do you see your situation to be currently in terms of branding (beginning, middle…)? Where would you like to end up?

-Do you perceive that branding could become part of your daily activities?