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International Brand Strategy Development and Local Implementation: An Exploratory Multiple-Case Study in the Perishable FMCG Industry

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Abstract: This thesis aims to contribute to the limited body of research investigating international brand strategy development and implementation. Through a qualitative empirical multiple-case study design we explore the research questions: How are international FMCG brands' strategies developed and implemented by global and local brand managers? How do brand management capabilities relate to international brand strategy development and implementation? Drawing on 18 interviews with brand managers and a marketing excellence representative across four FMCG brands, we deploy thematic analysis and derive one process model depicting global and local brand manager interaction in the brand strategy development and implementation. The empirics further revealed the central role of international brand management capabilities within this process. We develop a framework for *International Brand Management Capabilities,* comprising *international brand strategy development capabilities*, and *local brand management implementation capabilities*. These reveal different dynamic aspects, indicating a capability convergence in relation to previous theory.

Keywords: International Brand Management, International Brand Strategy Development, International Brand Strategy Implementation, Global Brand Managers, Local Brand Managers, Brand Management Capabilities, International Brand Management Capabilities

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1. Introduction

This chapter aims to motivate the relevance of this exploratory research investigating the phenomenon of brand strategy development and implementation across four international fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) brands. The introduction begins with providing background to strategic brand management, followed by the identified research gaps, and concludes with the aim and research questions.

1.1 Background and Motivation

Brands are widely recognized as one of the most valuable strategic assets to firms, with brand management being acknowledged as essential for sustaining long-term profits for companies (Doyle, 2001; Keller, 2008). Previous research posits that effective brand management, together with other marketing components, contributes to positional advantages (Morgan, 2011). These in turn yield both improved market performance in the form of higher sales volumes and market share, and financial performance in the form of improved margins and profitability (Morgan, 2011). As globalized markets of today become increasingly dynamic due to more volatile competitive conditions and rapidly shifting consumer preferences, strategic brand management and its related challenges have gained heightened managerial attention. This growing importance is reflected in recent contributions to both the strategic brand management literature and the broader marketing domain (Keller, 2025; Pfajfar, Mitręga & Shoham, 2024). The identified upswing in consumer preferences for genuine and credible brands that resonate with their perceptions, values and cultural contexts (Keller, 2025), has further heightened the challenge for international brands, i.e., brands present in multiple geographical markets (Van Gelder, 2004), in balancing authentic local resonance and maintaining consistent global brand identities (Matanda & Ewing, 2012).

Strategic brand management involves the development and implementation of marketing programs and activities to successfully build, measure, and manage brand equity (Keller, 2008). Although prior research has largely focused on consumer-oriented aspects, for instance, through examining how various consumer perceptions influence brand outcomes (Özsomer et al., 2012), the literature increasingly recognizes the dual nature of brand management. From a marketing perspective, brand management is focused on managing the consumer responses and emotions (Keller, 1993) whereas from a strategic business perspective, brand management seeks to align the brand with its core fundamentals with the objectives of the business and the market opportunities (Kapferer, 2012). This duality reinforces that effective enactment of brand strategies requires coherent development at the strategic level and an equally effective execution at the consumer-facing level, highlighting the close interconnectedness between strategy development and implementation for realizing positive brand outcomes (Morgan et al., 2025; Hultman & Oghazi, 2024). Firms often solidify the management of their brand(s) in the role of a brand manager (BM) (Cui et al., 2014). For international brands this role is often divided between global and local brand managers to meet differing market demands (Cui et al., 2014; Aaker & Joachimstaler, 1999).

1.2 Research Problem

Despite the centrality of branding to firms' competitive advantage, academic understanding of how brand strategies are developed and implemented in international settings remains limited (Neuvonen, 2016; Morgan, 2018). Existing branding literature has traditionally emphasized consumer perceptions of brand strategy while offering comparatively little insight into the managerial processes behind international brand strategy formulation and execution (Morgan, 2025; Tawse & Tabesh, 2021). As a result, the strategic brand management field lacks a comprehensive understanding of how brand strategy development and implementation unfold inside international organizations (Neuvonen, 2016).

Furthermore, research on brand management capabilities, i.e., the "systems and processes used to develop, grow, maintain, and leverage a firm's brand assets" (Morgan et al., 2009, p. 286) and how these relate to brand management, remains one of the most under researched capabilities within the marketing domain (Morgan, 2018; Neuvonen, 2016; Pfajfar, Mitręga & Shoham, 2024). This becomes even more salient in international contexts as most existing insights stem from domestic studies.

Consequently, these gaps leave open the question of how global and local actors collaborate, adapt, and implement brand strategies across markets (Matanda & Ewing, 2012; Morgan, 2018). The few studies that have examined these processes in international contexts (e.g., Matanda & Ewing, 2012) emphasize the crucial role of individual brand managers and the capabilities they bring to the organizations. However, how the brand management capabilities relate to the process of international brand strategy development and implementation remains notably under researched (Morgan, 2018; Matanda & Ewing, 2012; Pfajfar, Mitręga & Shoham, 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, researchers want to understand how brand strategies are developed and implemented, and which managerial capabilities drive these processes in international contexts where evidence is limited. From a managerial perspective, practitioners want to know which practices and capabilities to develop to enable brand managers to effectively execute brand strategies across international markets. Consequently, investigating how international brands develop and implement brand strategies represents a relevant and timely research area. This is particularly relevant in the perishable fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry, where high competition and fast market dynamics heighten the need for effective coordination and execution of brand strategies.

1.3 Aim and Research Questions

Attributed to the highlighted gaps in the literature, and the motivated relevance for both brand management researchers and practitioners, this study seeks to investigate the following two research questions:

- *How are international FMCG brands' strategies developed and implemented by global and local brand managers?*
- *How do brand management capabilities relate to international brand strategy development and implementation?*

The first research question addresses the identified gap in the brand management domain by examining the processes and interactions through which brand strategy emerges and is enacted in an international context. The second question explores the role of capabilities in shaping and enabling these processes and thereby addresses the limited research on brand management capabilities in international contexts. Thus, this research targets scholars in the strategic brand management and broader international marketing domain through exploration of an understudied phenomenon.

Furthermore, a persistent academic-practitioner gap in branding, evidenced by brand managers' limited engagement with academics and their perception that scholarly research offers little practical relevance (Alpert et al., 2022), highlights the need for research that captures brand managers lived experiences to inform more applicable brand strategy insights. Consequently, the research questions are investigated through a qualitative, primarily inductive, multiple case-study design wherein semi-structured interviews with 17 brand managers and one marketing excellence representative from four brands within the same perishable FMCG firm lay the foundation for the empirical analysis. The findings are supported by an interview with a marketing excellence representative, responsible for capability development across all four brands.

2. Literature Review

This chapter aims to contextualize the studied phenomenon by providing a synthesis of related research in the brand management and international marketing domains. Attributed to the gap in research on strategic brand management in international contexts, we also draw from the closely related international marketing domain to explain nuances in strategy development and implementation in international settings. Consequently, we start by investigating brand strategy development and implementation, associated challenges, followed by the role of the brand manager (BM) and brand management capabilities in managing international brands.

2.1 Brand Strategy Development and Implementation

Keller (2008) posits that strategic brand management involves the development and implementation of marketing programs and activities to successfully build, measure, and manage brand equity. He defines the brand management process as involving four steps: 1) identifying and establishing brand positioning, 2) planning and implementing marketing programs, 3) measuring and interpreting brand performance, and 4) growing and sustaining brand equity. Broader marketing strategy research emphasizes how formulating the strategy primarily concerns the '*what*', whereas implementation generally concerns the *'how'* (Morgan et al., 2025). Given Keller's (2008) conceptualization of strategic brand management, it becomes evident that effective outcomes hinge not only on the quality of brand strategy formulation, but also on its implementation, showcasing that they are interrelated. This interconnectedness has also been found in one of few brand-strategy specific studies (Huber, 2011).

Concerning the *'what'*, one of the key parts of strategy formulation is performing situational analysis, which includes diagnosing both internal and external environments to understand strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities (Mitchell, 2009). Within brand management the strategy development concerns setting the direction and the positioning of the brand to build long-term brand equity (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). The latter referring to the positive marketing effects which arise because of elements uniquely linked to the brand, such as a brand name (Keller, 1993). When such equity is strong and positive, the brand becomes a valuable intangible resource that helps firms build and defend market share, enhance the impact of communications spending, and facilitate new product launches (e.g., Aaker, 1991).

Concerning the *'how'*, brand strategy implementation refers to the "communication, interpretation, adoption, and enactment of a brand strategy or brand strategy initiative" (Noble & Mokwa, 1999 as cited in Huber 2011 pp. 46). Research on brand strategy implementation processes involve organizational-level processes, such as structures and systems to support information flows and coordination of activities (Bonoma, 1985; Miller et al., 2004), interpersonal-level processes, such as cross-functional collaboration and strategic alignment (Kennedy et al., 2003; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Noble, 1999), and individual-level processes, such as motivation and commitment to the strategy (Noble & Mokwa, 1999; Wieseke et al., 2008).

Given that strategy development and implementation are interconnected, this translates into continuous adjustments and iterations as new insights and constraints emerge in the internal or external environment (Morgan et al., 2025; Hultman & Oghazi, 2024). Sometimes aligning the formulated strategy with the implementation plan might not be possible, resulting complete changes to the marketing decisions and the subsequent implementation (Morgan et al., 2025). Despite previous research outlining how strategy development and implementation relate to each other on a top-level, implementation on a deeper level remains a "black box" (Tawse & Tabesh, 2021). As such, there is an incomplete understanding of the latter of the two interrelated components, failing to capture the full picture (Morgan, 2025).

2.1.1 Determining International Brand Strategies

International brands face challenges when present in diverse national contexts, each market with their own consumer expectations grounded in "unwritten rules" that govern perceptions and decisions about a brand's strategy and implementation (Van Gelder, 2004). As the multimarket exposure has the brand facing differences in cross-national consumer preferences (Liu et al., 2021), and increased exposure to both global and local competition (Porter, 1986), one key strategic choice is determining the international brand strategy (Van Gelder, 2004). This entails deciding whether the brand should opt for a more *standardized* brand strategy characterized by a unified brand position, image and product portfolio across markets, or a more *localized* brand strategy which accounts for more diverse nuances in local markets (Kapferer, 2005; Van Gelder, 2004).

The strategic brand management domain presents the strengths of one strategic approach as corresponding to the weaknesses of the other, creating a challenge for the BM. Standardized brand strategies have been praised with their ability to achieve economies of scale (Levitt, 1983), global cemented brand positions (Okazaki et al., 2007; Terpstra & Sarathy, 2000), and enhanced coordination of international activities (Douglas & Craig, 1986). In contrast, localized brand strategies have been shown to achieve deeper customer penetration (Katsikes et al., 2006), enhanced motivation among local BMs (Craig & Douglas, 1996), and improved foreign market understanding (Douglas & Wind, 1987). Other scholars stress how the superior strategy when pursuing international brand performance is context-dependent on macro- and micro-environmental contingency factors (Hultman & Oghazi, 2024; Hultman et al., 2009; Jain, 1989). They argue how effective international brand management requires assessing how key brand-related factors, such as brand perception, differ from one country to another (Van Gelder, 2004).

2.1.2 Challenges in Implementing Brand Strategies

Brand-specific implementation challenges remain under-researched, mirroring the broader scarcity of work on marketing implementation in international contexts. Huber (2011) being one of few studies on brand strategy implementation specifically, highlights brand-specific consequences of weak implementation, such as reduced brand recognition and weaker brand preferences, illustrating the difficulty of ensuring that customers perceive the brand as strategy intended. Seeing to how international brands are present across multiple geographical markets, this entails an inherent increase in exposure to shifts in the global and local market(s) (Van Gelder, 2004).

Marketing scholars highlight inherent trade-offs in the implementation of different marketing strategies (Morgan et al., 2025). These include balancing competing objectives, such as aligning strategic intent with novelty to make the activity distinctive and responding to new situations when unexpected shifts in market conditions or consumer preferences reveal gaps in the original strategy (Morgan et al., 2025). Here environmental turbulence increases the organization's need to acquire, distribute, and interpret information to modify behavior in response to changing conditions, elevating the demands placed on implementation efforts (Menon et al., 1999). Challenges can also arise when a strategy is fully translated and executed successfully due to discrepancies between expected and actual market reception (Morgan et al., 2025).

In addition, a tension arises when balancing immediate commercial objectives with the longer-term strategic intent (Mizik, 2010; Feng, et al., 2015). The implementation process is often shaped by pressures to deliver short-term performance even though much strategic work requires continuity and a forward-looking commitment (Mizik, 2010). Consequently, short-term actions may at times be taken at the expense of longer-term consequences, creating an intertemporal challenge that can influence strategic decision-making (Marginson & McAuley, 2008). These short-term pressures can be especially difficult to navigate in multimarket settings, where upholding one long-term strategic direction across varied local contexts amplifies the demands on BMs (Van Gelder, 2004).

2.2 Role of the Brand Manager

Scholars widely recognize the critical role of individual managers and human capital in the strategic process (Teece et al., 1997; Mintzberg et al., 2004; Shrader & Siegel, 2007; Porter, 2008). Building on this discourse, Cui et al. (2014) argue that BMs constitute a rare and valuable resource to the firm. Their research shows that while the BM can be replaced, the intangible capital, tacit knowledge and skills they embody cannot be easily substituted. In terms of their functional role, Low and Fullerton (1994, pp. 173) describe BMs as "central coordinators of all marketing activities for their brand […] responsible for developing and implementing the marketing plan". To fulfil this responsibility and realize brand level business plans, BMs must coordinate and synthesise inputs from different functions, spanning production, supply chain management, sales, advertising and promotions (Aaker 2008; Van Gelder, 2004).

In the case of international brands, the brand management role is often divided between global BMs and local BMs based in different local markets (Aaker & Joachimstaler, 1999). The matter of managerial responsibilities between global and local teams is one of the central decisions for international brands, i.e., deciding who should have custody of the international brand, who should be responsible for their strategic positioning in the local market, and who ought to dictate use of brand elements in more tactical settings (Douglas et al., 2001). The specific role descriptions differ between firms but in general terms the global BM is usually responsible for combining global strategies, keeping local markets satisfied (e.g., Dimofte et al., 2008; Holt et al., 2004), and ensuring all local markets adhere to the same 'look and feel' of the brand (Aaker & Jochmisthaler, 1999). Local BMs in turn, are usually responsible for implementing their part of the strategy, continuously monitor its development, and intervening if necessary (Craig &

Douglas, 2000). However, the discovered research-practitioner gap indicates a need for research further investigating BMs specific roles and responsibilities, as previous research has failed to properly capture relevant nuances for practitioners (Alpert et al., 2022).

2.2.1 Challenges in Cross-market Intra and Inter-unit Interactions

Scholars have long stressed the problematic discrepancy between the individual BM's responsibilities and authority (Panigyraki & Veloutsou, 1999; Low & Fullerton, 1994). In an international context, this tension is further highlighted when a strategic issue identified in a local market is not considered a priority by decision-makers in the global team (Doole & Lowe, 2008). This in turn is closely related to the phenomenon of centralized and decentralized decision-making structures. In practice, brands seeking success in international markets may require balancing both centralized and decentralized elements to allow for both local adaptation and global expertise sharing (Wickman, 2008).

As a result of the multimarket exposure, the amount of intra- and inter-unit interactions intensifies in an international context. A core challenge thereby entails managing various internal and external perspectives and navigating the power dynamics within and outside of the firm (Morgan et al., 2025; Smith, 2017). These power dynamics are heightened in multinational settings as they tend to entail even more intricate hierarchical structures and complex organizational political processes (Geppert et al., 2016). The local BM needs to coordinate with internal actors in the local organization, stakeholders in the global organization, as well as external parties such as media agencies and distributors, creating an additional layer of complexity for information and resource flows, and stakeholder management (Cui et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Huber (2011) notes that brand strategies can vary in complexity, where more complex strategies pose greater challenges during implementation as they are more difficult for organizational members to understand and enact. Weak cross-functional enactment limits alignment across units (Chimhanzi & Morgan, 2005), and inconsistent communication and information flows obstruct the dissemination of strategy-relevant knowledge and the development of shared interpretations (Noble, 1999). As the number of hand-offs between individuals and teams in implementing the strategy increases, the risk of gaps between intended strategy and tactical activities also increases (Morgan et al., 2025). These emerge from inconsistent understandings or misinterpretation of requirements in the strategy implementation process, lack of resources, short-termism, and stakeholder pushback (Morgan et al., 2025).

2.3 Brand Management Capabilities

Research on the role of brand management capabilities, i.e., the "systems and processes used to develop, grow, maintain, and leverage a firm's brand assets" (Morgan et al., 2009, p. 286) is limited (Morgan, 2018). This is despite scholars recognizing their importance for realizing brand strategies, brand level business plans, and positional advantages (Aaker, 2008; Morgan et al., 2009, 2018; Tan & Sousa, 2015). Existing studies posit that brand management capabilities represent just one subset of broader marketing capabilities (Morgan et al., 2011; 2018). More research has been conducted on the four dimensions belonging to marketing capabilities, namely, specialized marketing capabilities, cross-functional marketing capabilities (where brand management capabilities are part), architectural marketing capabilities, and dynamic marketing capabilities (Morgan et al., 2018). Given their central role in shaping firms' ability to translate strategy into effective market-facing actions (Morgan, 2011; 2018), a deeper understanding of how these capabilities relate to brand management capabilities is essential for explaining the mechanisms underpinning brand strategy development and implementation.

Brand management capabilities combine specialized marketing capabilities which refer to lower-order, functionally focused, marketing processes used to develop and execute marketing-mix activities (Morgan et al., 2012; Vorhies & Morgan 2005) including pricing, product management, market research, and brand-specific communications capabilities (Aaker 1991, 2008; Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2000). Brand management capabilities stand on the foundation of synthesizing cross-functional inputs, such as innovation pipelines from research & development, product quality data from production, as well as sales volume and pricing from accounting (Aaker, 2008). Consequently, brand management capabilities are part of cross-functional marketing capabilities and serve as a central integrative function within broader marketing capabilities. The domain classifies cross-functional marketing capabilities as more complex and higher-order as they integrate various lower-order specialized marketing capabilities (Morgan, 2018).

Morgan (2018; 2012) further classify architectural marketing capabilities, such as marketing strategy planning and implementation capabilities, as dealing with higher-order processes and routines. Huber (2011) applies this to a brand strategy implementation context, arguing that its brand implementation effectiveness and its positive effect on brand performance, depends on implementation-related brand strategy formulation capabilities. These architectural capabilities allow for the orchestration and coordination of both resource inputs and specialized marketing capabilities. At the highest classification level, dynamic marketing capabilities include market learning, resource reconfiguration, and capability enhancement on both individual (Morgan, 2012; 2018), and organizational (Huber, 2011) levels. These are deemed crucial for sustaining competitive advantages in complex and rapidly changing markets as they enable firms to continuously upgrade their lower-order marketing capabilities (March 1991; Danneels, 2002; Morgan, 2012).

2.3.1 International Brand Management Capabilities

When applying brand management capabilities to international contexts, research becomes even more limited to the point where it is stressed as one of the least studied marketing capabilities (Morgan, 2018). In international marketing literature, firm-level marketing capabilities are generally defined as in domestic contexts, but with an emphasis on using a firm's resources and processes to understand and satisfy *foreign* customers' needs more effectively than competitors (e.g., Lages et. al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2018). However, certain aspects of marketing capabilities have been highlighted as unique to international contexts, one being global brand management (Matanda & Ewing, 2012).

Matanda & Ewing (2012) is one of few studies investigating brand management capabilities specifically in international contexts. Through investigating global brand strategy implementation in regional contexts, they introduce the notion that global brand management has dynamic elements, enabling firms to reconfigure knowledge-based resources and adapt branding processes across global markets through learning, innovation, and knowledge transfers. However, the study by Matanda & Ewing (2012) does not extend its conceptualization to the underlying dimensions of dynamic capabilities, i.e., Teece's (2007) sense-seize-transform triad, and thereby falls short in explaining the mechanisms through which such capabilities are exercised. Teece (2007) explains how through dynamic capabilities, managers can *sense,* i.e., recognize and interpret threats and opportunities in the external environment, *seize,* i.e., act on uncovered information through resource deployments, and *transform,* i.e., continuously adjust and adapt assets, routines and capabilities to sustain competitive advantages.

3. Method

This chapter explains how the research was conducted. It starts by elaborating on methodological fit and research design, data collection method including sampling and interview procedure, data coding and analysis, before concluding with a quality assessment of the research and our ethical considerations.

3.1 Methodological Fit & Research Design

We adopt a qualitative approach as the research questions are exploratory and address a notably under-researched area. Our choice aligns with Yin's (2003) and Saunders et al.'s (2023) view where partly unexplored and ambiguous phenomena are best examined qualitatively. Edmondson and McManus (2007) emphasize how research strategy should match the developmental state of theory. The literature review identifies a clear gap, and nascent state of theory regarding brand strategy development and implementation, and the role of brand management capabilities in international contexts (Morgan, 2012, 2018, 2025; Neuvonen, 2016). In addition, the persistent academic-practitioner gap in branding (Alpert et al., 2022) further motivates the need for research that captures brand managers lived experiences and informs more applicable brand strategy insights.

Since little is known about the real-world practices, decision logics, and contextual influences affecting the phenomenon, an in-depth exploration uncovering the underlying processes is particularly important. To achieve in-depth exploration, we utilized semi-structured interviews, which allow additional reflections through follow-up questions and clarifications. Focus groups were also considered as they could have allowed for exploration, yet deemed less suitable due to risks of groupthink, dominant voices, and the loss of individual perspectives (MacDougall & Baum, 1997). Given our focus on understanding a complex phenomenon, qualitative design is additionally justified as quantitative measures risk not providing the depth needed to capture context-dependent processes (Bell et al., 2022). Quantitative designs may also overlook elements unknown to the researchers, as they reflect the researcher's perspective, whereas qualitative methods foreground participants' viewpoints (Bell et al., 2022).

We adopt a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, viewing reality as socially constructed through individuals' actions and meanings. Accordingly, knowledge is generated by examining how social actors interpret and shape the world and the processes through which events unfold (Bell et al., 2022). Consequently, we believe knowledge is best gained by understanding how people interpret their own experiences, rather than by measuring an objective reality. As such, the study takes a primarily inductive approach, where the collected empirical data, rather than existing theory, guides the research (Bell et al., 2022). We do acknowledge that our initial theoretical understanding did to a certain degree influence the general direction of the research, leaning toward the abductive sphere. However, the empirical findings refined both research questions and constitute the foundation of the thematic analysis, adhering to an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Our research employs an embedded, qualitative, multiple-case study design aligned with our how-oriented research scope. In an embedded case design, each case is examined at more than one analytical level, allowing exploration of both case-level processes and within-case variations (Yin, 2003). In this study, four selected brands under the same firm serve as the primary units of analysis, allowing comparison of brand strategy development and implementation across cases. Within each brand, the *individual* global and local brand managers (BMs) act as embedded units of analysis, capturing multiple perspectives on how brand strategies are enacted in practice. As such, we acknowledge the problematization of drawing brand-level conclusions based on individual-level interviews (Rousseau, 1985). However, we aim to mitigate this by conducting multiple interviews with expert individuals within each case brand. Using four cases offers a balance between depth and analytical breadth yet still adheres to the research's limited time frame.

3.2 Data Collection Method

3.2.1 Case Selection

The four case brands were purposively selected based on two criteria: 1) local marketing presence in at least three countries, and 2) operation within the perishable FMCG sector. All brands belong to the same firm, providing a consistent organizational context that allows the study to focus on within- and across-brand variations in strategy development and implementation. The perishable FMCG context, characterized by short shelf life, rapid turnover, and high competition (EBSCO, n.d.), underscores the importance of effective brand strategies and further motivates the study.

3.2.2 Data Sampling

To gather relevant data for analyzing the unit of analysis, this research utilizes *purposive* and *snowball sampling* methods, the former characterized by pre-defined selection criteria dictating the selection of interviewees (Bell et al., 2022) and the latter concerns building a participant pool by drawing on referrals from individuals who exhibit the characteristic of research interest found in the target population (Crouse & Lowe, 2018). Interviewees were selected based on three criteria: 1) a current brand management role at the global or local level, 2) employment within one of the four case brands, and 3) at least three months of tenure to ensure sufficient knowledge of the firm's marketing processes. This approach prioritized individuals who could provide rich, relevant, and multifaceted insights into brand strategy development and implementation.

Through personal connections, initial meetings with three key organizational contacts confirmed the study's relevance and feasibility after which snowball sampling, guided by the predefined selection criteria, was used to identify additional participants. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews (view table 1) were conducted with one marketing excellence representative, six global BMs, and eleven local BMs from the four case brands. Through snowball sampling, we conducted an additional follow-up interview with a marketing excellence representative working with capability development of all four case brands to expand on revealed empirical findings concerning capability development. Combined, this data sampling strategy ensured a high-quality sample of informed interviewees. Worth noting is that the larger brands had multiple global BMs to accommodate large volume of local market operations, explaining why we interviewed two global BMs from cases C and D. Interviews continued until possible interviewees or theoretical saturation was reached, ensuring that data collection captured the full range of perspectives and recurring themes relevant to the research questions.

3.2.3 Interview Procedure

Prior to interviewing, interviewees were informed that in accordance with GDPR, organizational, brand, and personal identifiers would be anonymized. They also received an outline of key themes and questions via email in advance to enhance response quality by reducing potential interview anxiety and allowing for more thoughtful responses (Haukås & Tishakov, 2024). Semi-structured interviews were chosen to balance consistency across participants with flexibility to explore the complex, context-dependent phenomena under investigation (Bell et al., 2022). An interview protocol (Appendix 2) ensured coherence, comparability, and coverage of topics relevant to the research questions (Bell et al., 2022). Questions were open-ended, neutral, allowing the participants to lead the direction of the interview. The guide was reviewed by our supervisor and adjusted based on feedback. Following semi-structured praxis and exploratory research principles, the protocol was adapted in real time to incorporate emerging themes (Eisenhardt, 1989). This setup allowed us to probe answers, request clarifications, and explore reasoning in depth, generating nuanced insights (Saunders et al., 2023).

All 18 interviews were conducted over a one-month period in English via Microsoft Teams, allowing participation from the many managers based abroad while ensuring linguistic consistency and clearer comparability. One risk and shortcoming with conducting qualitative research is that the quality of the data collected will depend on the researcher(s)' knowledge and skills in collecting data (Lim, 2025). To ensure consistent quality, both interviewers were present during all interviews. One led the interview while the other recorded and took notes to capture details for follow-up questions.

The interviews began with a brief introduction to build rapport and make participants comfortable (Bell et al., 2022), followed by a reminder of the research topic and anonymization of participants' name, case brand, and organization. Consent for recording and transcription was obtained at the start of each interview. The interviews lasted 45–60 minutes. Microsoft Teams' transcription tool was used to streamline transcription, and interviewees were offered the opportunity to review transcripts for accuracy. In addition, the recording was used for cross-checking any unclarities in the transcripts.

Table 1: List of Interviewees

Interviewee	Role	Location	Years at firm	Date of interview	Length of interview
Brand A-1	Global BM	Denmark	6 yrs	16 October 2025	45 min
Brand A-2	Local BM	Sweden	4 yrs	20 October 2025	46 min
Brand A-3	Local BM	Denmark	2,5 yrs	17 October 2025	47 min
Brand A-4	Local BM	China	1,5 yr	24 October 2025	45 min
Brand B-1	Global BM	Denmark	4 yrs	24 October 2025	50 min
Brand B-2	Local BM	UK	10 yrs	20 October 2025	52 min
Brand B-3	Local BM	Sweden	2 yrs	17 October 2025	60 min
Brand B-4	Local BM	Netherlands	6 yrs	17 October 2025	45 min
Brand C-1	Global BM	Denmark	6 yrs	15 October 2025	45 min
Brand C-2	Global BM	Denmark	9 yrs	30 October 2025	55 min
Brand C-3	Local BM	Sweden	5 yrs	22 October 2025	46 min
Brand C-4	Local BM	UK	5 yrs	24 October 2025	60 min
Brand D-1	Global BM	UK	10 yrs	15 October 2025	45 min
Brand D-2	Local BM	Sweden	5 yrs	21 October 2025	45 min
Brand D-3	Local BM	Finland	7 yrs	29 October 2025	50 min
Brand D-4	Local BM	Denmark	13 yrs	31 October 2025	58 min
Brand D-5	Global BM	Denmark	0.25 yrs	7 November 2025	60 min
Mkt Excellence Rep.	Marketing Excellence Rep.	N/A	10 yrs	14 November 2025	60 min

3.3 Data Coding & Analysis

The interviews generated a total of 351 pages of transcribed raw data and 14,5 hours of recorded material. The data collection and coding were conducted in parallel in the sense that we immediately reviewed the transcripts and summarized main takeaways upon having conducted an interview in a reflective notebook, later serving an additional quality assurance-layer for coding. We adhered to qualitative case study research praxis in managing the empirical data, where upon transcription, we began coding the interview (Mills et al., 2020). Throughout the process, themes emerged naturally from participants' responses rather than being imposed by pre-existing categories, ensuring alignment with the study's inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, in line with Braun & Clarke (2006) we do acknowledge that data is not coded in an epistemological vacuum, meaning that coding cannot be entirely detached from our existing knowledge and interpretive lenses.

To limit the risk of researcher bias where our beliefs and values risk coloring interpretation, one shortcoming of conducting qualitative research (Lim, 2025), we coded two case brands each. We applied thematic analysis and cross-checked the interpretation of the data in the end so as to not miss important information. During the initial stage of data interpretation, we read each interview transcript multiple times and subjected to *open coding*. In line with academic guidelines for open, axial and selective coding (Mills et al., 2020), we analyzed each of the 18 transcripts at the most granular level, highlighting words, phrases and examples subsequently grouped into concepts. Once these concepts had been identified, we applied *axial coding* to organize the derived concepts into overarching categories and subcategories. Lastly, we conducted *selective coding* to further refine and develop the identified categories.

The concepts from the individual transcripts were then aggregated into a within-case analysis, where we compared concepts from different interviews belonging to the same case and concluded the main themes for each case. For example, distinctions between global and local BMs' roles arose naturally from the data, reflecting patterns in how participants described their responsibilities and interactions. The theme *Interplay Between Global & Local BMs* is therefore one example of an aggregated theme comprised of 1) the primary role of a global BM as the strategy developer, 2) the primary role of a local BM as the strategy implementor. When themes were created or refined, we assessed their relevance by considering whether they helped answer our research questions.

Following the within-case coding, we conducted a cross-case analysis, comparing the main themes from each case, highlighting similarities and differences. The main themes and their corresponding cross-case nuances identified were: 1) Key Brand Choices, 2) Interplay Between Global and Local BMs, 3) Cross-border Knowledge-sharing and Capability Development (figure 1). These themes constitute the empirical foundation presented in chapter four, and the subsequent analysis presented in chapter five. Attributed to the nature of the research questions, the analysis focuses on explanation-building to incorporate the exploratory dimension. (Mills et al., 2010). Through analyzing the empirical findings, we derived two models for answering the study's research questions: one process model depicting international brand strategy development and implementation through the functions of global and local BMs, and a framework for *International Brand Management Capabilities.*

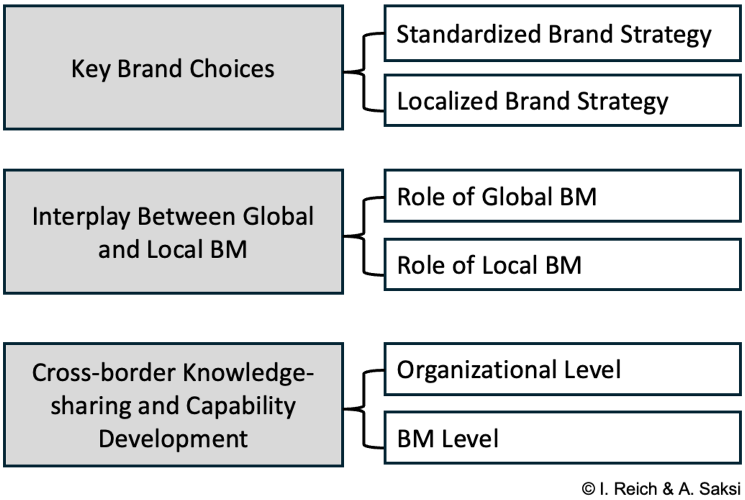

Figure 1: Identified Themes and Sub-themes

3.4 Quality of the Study

In contrast to quantitative research, scholars argue that the concepts of reliability and validity are less applicable in qualitative studies due to the constructivist and interpretivist view of reality. However, as quality evaluation remains important, Lincoln and Guba (1985; 1994) propose four alternative criteria for evaluating trustworthiness in qualitative research, which are applied to this study. They propose that trustworthiness comprises the research's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

We adhered to recognized standards of good research practice to enhance the credibility of the research. This was achieved through consulting our supervisor and work of previous scholars on conducting qualitative research, and by using respondent validation (Bell et al., 2019) wherein we allowed the interviewees to notify of any inaccuracies in the transcripts. Furthermore, a multiple-case study was preferred over a single-case design as it offers greater analytical depth, enables comparisons across cases, and strengthens the credibility of the findings by capturing the complexity of the phenomena from several cases (Yin, 2003). While we actively sought to have a high level of credibility, we are aware that one shortcoming with conducting qualitative research is that the findings are not generalizable due to a small, context dependent sample for data collection (Lim, 2025). Thus, findings of qualitative research may only be credible within the specific context where it is conducted, which limits transferability. To help the reader and future researchers to judge whether the findings of this work may be transferrable to other contexts, we have provided a detailed account of the research setting and data selection process in line with Geertz's (1973) notion of thick description.

Throughout the research process, we maintained detailed documentation of the research design, data collection, and analysis to provide a transparent record that allows for future replication or theoretical elaboration. As such, we sought to enhance dependability (Bell et al., 2022). Finally, while objectivity can never fully be accomplished in qualitative research, we took several measures to enhance confirmability. To avoid confirmation bias throughout the initial coding process, we independently coded two case brands each yet consulting each other, when necessary, before thoroughly discussing all four cases together. Furthermore, we used direct participant quotations to ground interpretations in the data and maintained regular communication with our supervisor with 10+ years of qualitative research experience, adding an additional layer of accountability throughout the research process.

3.4.1 Ethical Considerations

All interviewees participated voluntarily in the study, and the participants could, at any point, refrain from answering a particular question if they wished to do so. No incentives were provided beyond access to the study's results. The main ethical consideration throughout the study was to ensure anonymity of the organization and the interviewees. Consequently, an interviewee from brand X was denoted Global/Local Brand X-1, Global/Local Brand X-2 etc. All interviewees were briefed on the conditions of participating in the study, as described in section 3.2. Throughout the working process, only we, the researchers, had access to the empirical material. Lastly, in line with GDPR, the interview transcriptions were stored in SSE's OneDrive. After the project was completed, all materials except for the final work were deleted.

4. Empirical Findings

Three main themes with respective sub-themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews and subsequent thematic analysis. The themes correspond to the outline of this chapter: 1) Brand Strategy Choice, 2) Interplay Between Global and Local Brand Managers, and 3) Cross-border Knowledge-Sharing & Capability Development. This chapter presents each theme in order, drawing from the collective case findings of the four brands and their individual nuances as summarized in Appendix 2 and 3 respectively.

4.1 Brand Strategy Choice

The interviews underscored how brand management is a complex and highly consequential task, integrating brand strategy development, local strategic implementation, and ongoing adjustments. Brand managers (BMs) across the four brands emphasized its central importance to brand success in each market. The global BM for Brand A described brand strategy as a strategic tool for achieving business objectives, whether sales growth or profitability. In a similar vein, the global BM for Case D (Brand D-1) underscored the strategic essence of brand management, asserting that brand strategy "is about making choices, saying what you know is going to win and how you can win with it." Both global and local BMs concurred how brand strategy entails long-term portfolio decisions, the identification of growth opportunities, and the formulation of positioning strategies designed to enhance brand equity. This process was emphasized as encompassing multiple critical dimensions, including communication, innovation pipelines, and commercialization.

Given that all case brands operate across multiple geographical markets, a recurring challenge involves balancing global brand coherence with local relevance. Interviewees emphasized the necessity of evaluating the competitive landscape, as well as the maturity of both the product category and the brand within each local market, when shaping or adjusting brand strategies. Market and brand maturity levels vary across countries; a brand may be a well-established leader in one market while remaining a small, fast-growing challenger in another. Consequently, a critical strategic consideration for international brands concerns the degree of standardization versus localization, that is, determining the extent of local strategy adaptation in individual markets. This complexity was acknowledged across all cases, although each addressed it through differing degrees of local brand adaptation.

4.1.1 Standardized Brand Strategy

While there was broad agreement that international brands must maintain a certain degree of coherence in brand strategy across markets, the extent to which this was accounted for in the strategy differed, manifesting in different degrees of local market adaptation and consequent local decision-making power. Brands B and Brand C appeared to have a more standardized strategy with strict global brand directions for positioning, targeting, messaging, and core product portfolio to ensure strong global coherence and international brand recognition. This was also shown to entail lower involvement in the long-term brand development process and a lower degree of freedom to opt out from the yearly brand plans set by the global BM (i.e., resulting in the BM's having to adopt the global brand strategy with minimal modification). The standardized brand strategy and centralized decision-making were associated with advantages in international brand recognition, streamlined decision-making, improved economies of scale, and operational efficiencies through, for example, replication of marketing assets across markets. However, several local BMs stressed that when global focuses on scaling, the needs of smaller markets are sometimes overlooked, which ultimately risks generating poor sales performance in local markets.

> "I think the advantage [of a standardized strategy] is that we do all the heavy lifting by ensuring that it's solid and consistent with our long-term thinking. It's not a short-term approach. The benefit is that we ensure that the brand will survive. [...] The brand will look the same across countries because that's important. If you want to build a brand, it has to look the same. It has to feel the same. It has to have the same tone. You can't have different tonalities because the current brand manager thinks differently. So the global BM assures that the brand will always look the same." – Global Brand B-2

4.1.2 Localized Brand Strategy

On the other hand, Brand A and Brand D appeared to have a more locally adapted brand strategy, where the local markets are granted a higher level of flexibility to move within the frames of the fundamental brand frame. Examples range from increased adaptation of local messaging based on the brand's local heritage and market position, to pivoting the target audience and positioning. Common to the brands with a higher degree of localization was also the higher degree of local decision-making freedom. This entailed higher involvement in the long-term strategy development process as well as higher flexibility to opt out from the yearly brand plans presented by global, adjusting them to better fit the local market needs.

The local BM in China (Brand A-4) stressed that without local adaptation and decision-making authority, the launch of Brand A would probably not have been successful in the Chinese market as the consumer behaviors and preferences significantly differs. Findings from Brand D also stressed the need for local BM decision-making freedom to adjust certain aspects of the brand strategy to accommodate cultural differences and consumer preferences. Conversely, too much decision-making freedom in the local markets was communicated as risking diluting the coherence of the international brand, where local strategic pivots might affect the overall brand image. The global BMs from Brand A and Brand D also highlighted the challenge with determining how much to involve locals in their strategy development work.

> "One fact which affects our different position and different local strategies in different markets, is our brand maturity and brand heritage. For example, in Sweden where we have high brand awareness and local legacy, versus Germany where we have shorter history, we have a completely different approach. Also, in home markets where we are the local brand and category leader versus in other markets where we might be a challenger, that also affects how we can use our brand and our position compared to competitors. It requires us to evaluate what a locally credible position and communication looks like for us in each different market [...] The executions in different markets will be very different from each other because they are very locally driven. We have identified that we want to ensure that our brand feels local in all these markets." – Global Brand D-1

4.2 Interplay Between Global and Local Brand Managers

There was a strong consensus that BMs, at both local and global levels, function as key connectors across a wide range of functions and actors. This role entails the collection and synthesis of both quantitative and qualitative information from various business functions, including marketing, communication, product development, supply chain, and sales. In addition to these information exchanges, the BMs emphasized the importance of their own professional experience and intuition when navigating brand-related decisions. They further highlighted the complexity of managing cross-functional collaboration both within and beyond the organization, rendering stakeholder management a central component of the BM role. While BMs interact with numerous internal and external stakeholders, the closest collaboration was reported to be with their respective global or local counterparts. This relationship was facilitated through structured bi-weekly check-ins, monthly performance reviews, and annual brand plan presentations, supplemented by ad-hoc daily communication. Such internal coordination was considered essential to ensure alignment between global strategic directives and local implementation.

> "I would say brand managers in general are the ones who have the overview, being the glue or the connector across multiple functions. I mean sales of course, but also innovation, even supply chain. I think brand managers in this organization have a lot of different elements to their role and so their capability of connecting all those dots internally is very crucial. Their capability of understanding that there are local market dynamics and how to change things, that's important as well. But as a global brand manager, you also need to have a strategic overview of making the right choices and prioritizing the right markets. So, I would say that brand managers on both levels are very influential in how we deliver against each of our business objectives." – Global Brand A-1

4.2.1 Global Brand Manager

The global BM is primarily responsible for developing both the long-term international brand strategy (3–5 years), which sets the overall direction for the brand, as well as the annual brand plans. The development of the long-term strategy entails key strategic decisions concerning, for example, targeting, positioning, guidelines for tonality in communication, brand look and feel, and product portfolio management. The latter also includes assessing current product portfolio, and new product development potential. The annual brand planning process, in turn, involves revisiting and refining the long-term brand strategy before presenting it to the local markets at the yearly brand strategy kick-offs. As one BM (Brand A-4) phrased it, "the global brand manager is the key guardian of the brand house, responsible for how the brand grows across the globe. Dealing with the territories they must keep and future pipeline to help the markets grow the brand in terms of the reachable consumers and the potential volumes". Strategic prioritization and balancing long-term and short-term considerations across multiple markets with different maturity levels and growth potential is therefore central to the position.

> "I'm directly responsible for the global scaled positions to deliver the advertising assets, the innovation pipeline and products, the packaging and the strategy both for those parts, but also the strategy for the total brand. […] I think the trick with a global local set-up is that local always see themselves as unique and different. Your job globally is to see what's the same and to decide if a critical piece of information from country X is absolutely essential, and whether doing that for X is going to affect country Y. Because when you're trying to make it work cross countries, you're trying to make it work cross culture." – Global Brand D-1

All global BMs acknowledged the need for a good understanding of consumer behaviors, preferences, and perception of the brand across markets when developing the long-term brand strategy. Therefore, they stressed the importance of maintaining a close collaboration with their local counterparts to ensure smooth strategy implementation. As one global BM (Brand D-1) puts it: “if the local market doesn’t win, no one wins because I don’t have a global business”. Global BMs have a responsibility to seek out local market information and select key markets for conducting concept tests, for example for new product development or advertising campaigns. In developing the strategy, the global BM collaborates with several stakeholders such as internal and external agencies, the global innovation team, and supply chain to understand what is possible in terms of for example new product development and campaign launch. As such, stakeholder coordination and alignment with other functions in the organization, and across geographical markets was highlighted as a key responsibility area.

In addition, the interviewees highlighted the challenge of determining which elements of long-term strategic decision-making should be centralized (i.e., managed globally) versus decentralized (i.e., delegated to local markets). Product development and production were identified as areas in which the global BM needs to retain greater decision-making authority, due to their oversight across all markets and comprehensive perspective on aggregate demand. While local markets occasionally request larger scale requests such as market-specific flavors or innovations, the global BM evaluates their feasibility, broader business case, and potential for scalability across other markets.

Once the annual brand plans are established, global BMs must determine the degree of freedom to grant local markets in adapting these globally derived plans. Notable differences emerged in the level of local decision-making authority between the more standardized case brands (Brand B and Brand C) and the more localized brands (Brand A and Brand D). Consequently, the extent of a local BM’s decision-making authority determines whether they are required to opt in to the global brand plans or are permitted to opt out. Furthermore, global BMs remain responsible for supporting local BMs during the subsequent implementation of their strategies, acting both as challengers and as providers of global resources (e.g., advertising materials).

4.2.2 Local Brand Manager

The role of the local BM was emphasized by all interviewees as the primary brand strategy implementor in their local market, acting as an intermediary between global directive and local feasibility. One local BM (Brand D-3) puts it as “from a local perspective, my responsibility is to look at the package that I get from the global team and translate that into my local needs. I am responsible for implementing the international brand strategy in my local market”. The implementation includes executing the globally instigated yearly strategic brand plans in the local market through budget allocations, establishing local partnerships, campaign activations, securing in-store listings via key account managers to ultimately generate sales, among other objectives. As such, one cornerstone of the local role is collaborating with and aligning various external and internal, both local and global stakeholders. The BMs highlighted a significant prioritization challenge, as they need to juggle multiple priorities and responsibility areas, ranging from long-term brand equity governance to commercial and short-term tactics and activations. This was attributed to the multi-stakeholder dependency on both global and local levels, where key collaborators in the local market (e.g., sales) are pushing for short-term tactics to achieve yearly sales targets, whilst the global BM prioritizes the long-term strategic, brand-equity infused direction.

All local BMs underscored the importance of being on the ground for detecting local nuances not detectable from abroad or on a global level. To ensure continuous consumer relevance, the utilization of multiple consumer insight sources, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, was highlighted as central to any brand decision. While data-driven decision making is the foundation of any local update (e.g., sales data, consumer insight reports or focus groups), sometimes this was indicated to not be sufficient. One local BM (Brand C-3) explained it as “I say there is also a little bit of a gut feel and experience like, is the brand known? [...] How many products do I encounter on the streets? Do I see it as garbage on the street? So there's like indicators and a feeling that we don't really measure”.

> “The local relevance part is tricky to understand. So if you think about Finland and Sweden, they are as markets very close to each other and you could think that they are pretty similar, but then when it comes to like little nuances these might not be detectable. For example, our global brand director talks about Finnish quirkiness and that's well said. So that's where we need to have the trust that the local team understands these little nuances which make or break whether we [Brand D] feel locally relevant […] That's something that we do really on a daily basis, to make the global team understand why this would or would not work in Finland, for instance.” – Local Brand D-3

The local BMs corroborated that the brands differed in degree of local BM influence in both the long-term strategy development as well as their say in adjusting the yearly presented brand plans. Brand A and D were allowed higher freedom in adjusting components of the brand plan based on their local market understanding (e.g., positioning and campaigns) before presenting back to global, negotiating and securing global sign-off. While there was generally a high degree of freedom, altering elements highly dependent on scale such as new product development suitable for the local market, was shown more complex due to the impact on scale.

In contrast, the brands with higher degree of brand standardization across markets stressed the problem in being included too late in the long-term strategy development process, as the strategies sometimes fails to account for local conditions (ranging from legal feasibility to inauthentic communication). Other local BMs also raised the need for global to trust the local markets more by giving the local BMs higher decision-making power to adjust strategy once set. In ensuring sufficient acknowledgement of local market feasibility and nuances, several local BMs also stressed their own responsibility to inform global of their local market preferences in advance, to avoid global developing strategies and marketing materials inapplicable in the local market.

> "I feel like often when the global teams set brand strategies, or even if it's a strategy for a product launch or comms campaign, markets are consulted too late, because it's quite clear that the role of the global team is to do the overall strategy. I think they don't want to consult local markets too much because they don't want too many cooks and to have too many opinions at an early stage. But the problem is that they often wait until they're quite far down the road and then share it with us." – Local Brand C-4

4.3 Cross-border Knowledge Sharing & Capability Development

To manage an international brand, the BMs on both global and local levels highlighted the importance of staying up to date with the category, consumer trends, industry expertise, and new ways of working. A local BM (Brand A-3) phrased it as: "it's a need and a must for you as a brand manager, right? You need to sort of follow what's happening." This is echoed by a global BM (Brand B-2) stressing that: "things change very fast in FMCG, in marketing in general, so you need to adapt. You need to learn new things and constantly, just evolve. I think we are recognizing that as a company which is great, and something you appreciate as a brand manager". The interviews revealed different aspects of ensuring continuous learning and development on both organizational and individual levels.

4.3.1 Organizational Level

The organization (i.e., the firm to which all four case brands belong), was highlighted across all interviews as a central facilitator of knowledge sharing. One key advantage of being part of a large organization is that local markets can leverage its "organizational muscles" by accessing global resources, such as opportunities for campaign testing or product development. The organization also collaborates with external agencies to conduct both quantitative and qualitative studies on trends, as well as consumer behavior and attitudes, which serve as important informational inputs. Clear organizational structures where BMs are encouraged to present insights from their respective markets, such as success stories or identified pitfalls. The global BMs emphasized how one of the key benefits of operating across multiple geographical markets lies in the rich learning potential, as initiatives can be tested in selected markets and subsequently replicated, adapted, or fully reconfigured in others.

> “Studying product launches in particular is a great way of gaining knowledge. If it didn't work in this market or to this region of markets, then there must be an insight or a reason why it didn't and most likely it's actually transferable across other regions as well on a high-level basis.” - Global Brand A-1

Furthermore, the organization was shown to play a significant role in facilitating upskilling. A specific marketing transformation initiative, highlighted across all interviews, sought to enhance the impact of the organization’s marketing community by challenging the mindsets and ways of working. This initiative is driven by a central marketing excellence unit, which disseminates best practices, formalizes learning routines, and systematically upskills the marketing organization across all markets. Through training programs, standardized frameworks, and cross-market knowledge transfer, the organization actively builds brand management capabilities. The sessions are mandatory and slightly tailored to both global and local BMs, while the key contents remain similar, to ensure that global and local BMs “speak the same language.”

The specific marketing transformation initiative was born out of the CEO’s belief that there was an opportunity for raising the floor and the ceiling of the organization’s marketing departments that would ultimately drive business impact via faster growth of the organization’s brands. It was identified that BMs tended to prioritize tactics over long-term strategy, risked losing sight of evolving demand, and struggled to engage younger consumers in a rapidly changing market. To address this, the initiative aimed to strengthen brand managers’ consumer-centric capabilities and ensure long-term relevance.

However, the empirical data revealed several factors that complicate capability development. The Marketing Excellence Representative emphasized how the BM role has become overly broad and fragmented, characterizing BMs as the “Swiss army knife” of the organization: “It’s like they [brand managers] have got every single functional skill, what happened? We need to get back to them just being about demand creation. If it’s not about demand creation, it should be someone else’s job.” Despite learning being communicated as a strategic priority, there appears to be a lack of managerial follow-through in practice. Therefore, it seems to be a say-do gap where leadership has not consistently provided BMs with sufficient time or space to reflect on and act upon new knowledge gained through transformation initiatives.

> “The senior leadership hasn’t been thoughtful enough. If we want to push this in, we need to take things out. So what are we taking out? [...] that's a big problem. And we need to face into that. And of course nobody wants to face into that because then you're starting to get into some, you know, it starts to get becoming a bit of an issue” - Marketing Excellence Rep.

4.3.2 Brand Manager Level

While the organization offers plenty of opportunities to learn, the interviews revealed that the ultimate responsibility to make use of those and staying up to date rests with the BMs themselves. One BM (Brand B-3) shared this in the form of a personal mantra of "being the captain of your own ship”. Across all cases, BMs agreed that most of their learning occurred naturally in their role through cross-functional and cross-market interactions with both internal and external stakeholders, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative inputs. However, other knowledge-sources such as reports, personal networks, and general societal discourse (e.g., social media trends) were also noted. When determining which new insights to act upon or which capabilities to develop further, the interviewees emphasized the importance of combining experience and intuition with data-driven evidence.

> “Last week the organization had someone telling us some more about influencer campaigns. So this has really helped me look at the whole media landscape and the whole comms perspective from a different lens. So that's one of the ways we are learning. We are now spending like 5% of our budget on influencers, but I think we should aim for at least 20%. So it definitely helped me in shaping my plans going forward.”
> – Local Brand B-4

Sharing insights across markets not only facilitates learning but also helps strengthen relationships among brand managers and fosters a sense of community. As one global BM (Brand D-4) puts it “sometimes, you know, you’re asking them to share things that are not that great [...], so we really try to encourage an honest dialogue around it, so they [the brand manager] feel that we are in it together". Creating strong relationships as a driver of transparent communication was underscored across all interviews. Strong relationships build trust, which can make it easier to have a productive conversation regarding challenges, struggles, and potential experimentation, and as such enable a smoother negotiation process between the global and the local BM.

The interviews also revealed several challenges in capability development for BMs. One key tension arises when the organization provides inspiration and learning opportunities but does not offer clear guidance on next steps for the individual BM. Even when a BM feels motivated and understands what to do and why, the challenge of limited time remains. BMs consistently highlighted that their daily workload is already demanding, making it difficult to engage in additional learning or development activities beyond their routine responsibilities.

5. Analysis of Empirical Results

This section analyzes the empirical findings gathered from the interviews. In accordance with the inductive focus of this study, the analysis does not take a definite stance from one a particular theoretical framework, rather it primarily draws from the empirical findings to explore new dimensions to the phenomenon. However, some theoretical concepts explored in the literature review section contextualize the findings.

5.1 Toward a Process Model for International Brand Strategy Implementation

Brand management can be seen as a strategic tool to reach business objectives, with the brand manager (BM) being a central connector between different business functions and actors. Managing strategy development and implementation of international brands is highly interconnected, which requires close collaboration between global and local BMs. The global BM primarily contributes with strategic direction, brand coherence, and overarching resource priorities between markets, while the local BM primarily provides nuanced market intelligence, cultural insights, and operational feasibility assessments. Attributed to the differences in main responsibilities, the global and local BMs provide key input into the brand strategy development and implementation process at different stages. These stages are depicted by a three-phase process model in figure 2 showcasing what is done by the global BM (top), local BM (bottom), and what is done in their interaction (middle). The dotted line indicates steps in the process mainly observed in brands with a more localized brand strategy, whereas full lines showcase flows applicable to all case brands. Both global and local BM monitor market development, via for example consumer research and competitive analysis albeit on different levels and develop BM capabilities on an ongoing basis.

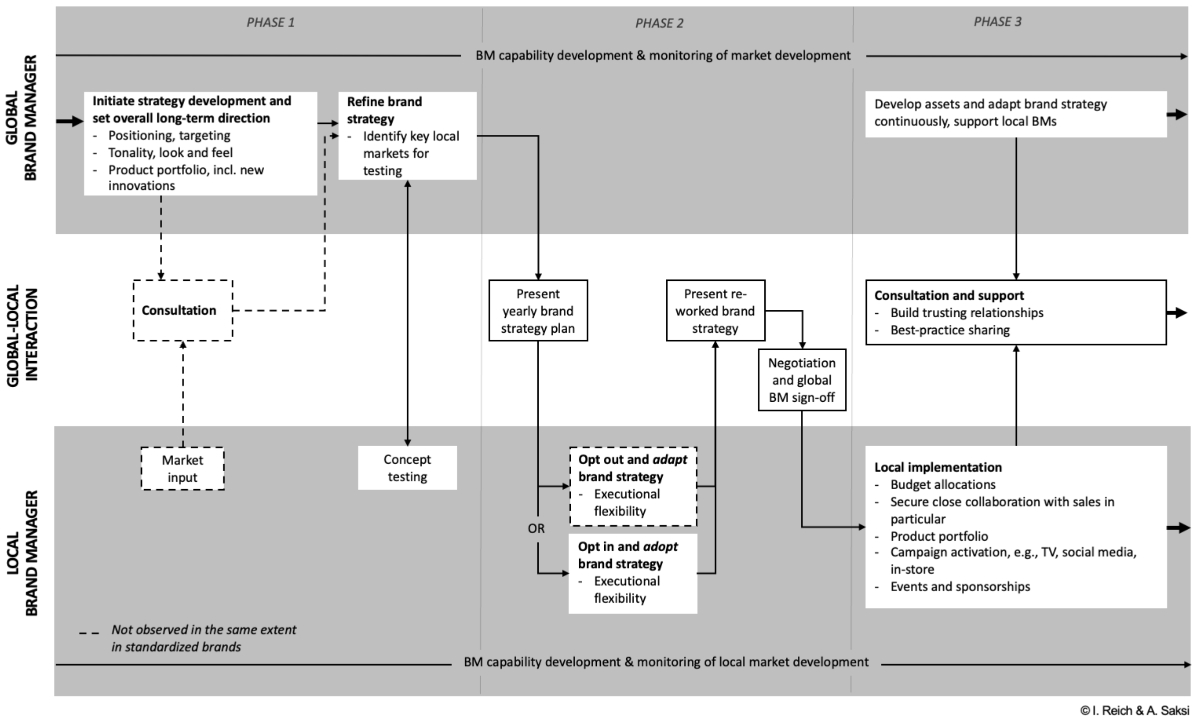

Figure 2: Global/Local brand manager collaboration in the brand strategy development and implementation process

5.1.1 Phase 1: Global BM as the Primary Strategy Developer

As the global BM is the primary strategy developer, they initiate the development of the long-term brand strategy process, including positioning and targeting, brand tonality, look and feel, portfolio management etc. However, the strategy formulation process is found to slightly differ depending on degree of brand strategy standardization. For brands with a more localized brand strategy (Brand A and Brand D), the local markets are consulted early on and asked to give input based on their local market understanding. These inputs are then taken into consideration and used for refining the brand strategy by the global BM. As for brands with a more standardized brand strategy (Brand B and Brand C), the local markets are not formally consulted in the early stage of the strategy process to make it less fragmented and because the need for adapting to local market conditions is not as large.

After the initial strategy is developed, key markets deemed to generate scale are identified for concept testing, usually based on size, maturity or growth potential of brand and category before finalizing the strategy. In collaboration with agencies or the global innovation team, concept tests are developed and subsequently performed in the key markets. When selecting key markets, the global BM needs to acknowledge the specific context of the chosen market(s) and how transferable the findings are to the other local markets due to constraints in resources. While focusing on the "big bets" which might generate the largest impact on the business, the results of the concept tests also need to be applicable in other markets, especially for brands with a more standardized strategy where the local BM has not been consulted to the same extent.

5.1.2 Phase 2: Negotiation Between Global and Local BMs

Following the first phase of strategy development, the global BM presents the yearly brand plans to all the local markets. Following the presentation, the local BMs internalize the strategy and reflect on what it means for their local markets. At this stage, localized brands are usually more informed, as they tend to have been included earlier in the strategy development process. Attributed to their higher decision-making power, they can also to some extent choose to opt out from the globally developed strategy, i.e., *adapt* certain core elements of the brand strategy such as positioning, targeting, and messages to better fit the local market needs. BMs of a more standardized brand have little choice but to opt in, i.e., *adopt* the core elements of the strategy.

Despite the local BMs of standardized brands having limited decision-making freedom to adjust core elements, the adoption still entails some flexibility (e.g., selecting products beyond the core product portfolio). However, given their limited involvement in the first phase, they tend to feel involved too late in the strategy formulation process, highlighting how certain local nuances in consumer preferences are being missed. Once the local BMs have re-worked, i.e., adapted or adopted, parts of the strategy, they present back to the global BMs and a negotiation process begins. Here, the need for global and local to use the same types of models and frameworks becomes apparent, as they must be able to "speak the same language" to have productive negotiations.

5.1.3 Phase 3: Local BM as the Primary Strategy Implementor

Once the negotiation process is signed off, the local BMs are responsible for implementing the brand strategy. Regardless of whether the local BM opts in or out of the brand plans, they have full decision-making authority of executional activities in their local markets. This means that regardless of position on the standardization-localization continuum, the implementation process looks similar for all the local BMs. It is the local BM who best detects local market nuances, thus acting as a translator between the globally initiated brand strategy and the local consumer. Their main task is to execute the developed brand strategy through budget allocations, establishing local partnerships, campaign activations, and in-store listings via key account managers to ultimately generate sales.

The sales organization is a fundamental collaborator to the local BM, through sales collaboration local BMs can ensure that they have a product portfolio, placement and recommended pricing that speaks to the target consumers. The main challenge for the local BM in the implementation phase is to align multiple internal and external parties, long-term brand equity directives from the global BM and short-term commercial objectives from stakeholders in the local market, to enable successful implementation of the strategy. Throughout the implementation process, the global BM acts as a sparring partner for the local BM. There is frequent interaction between the local and the global BM mixed with knowledge- and best practice-sharing among the local BMs in different markets. Sharing best practices provides inspiration to the other BMs enabling creativity in, for example, local campaign developments. The local BMs are also encouraged to share struggles to foster trusting relationships and transparent communication.

5.2 The Role of International Brand Management Capabilities

Having had the process model (figure 2) showcase the intertwined global and local components in international brand strategy development and implementation, it becomes necessary to shift attention to the underlying mechanisms that enable this process. Attributed to the highly interconnected brand strategy formulation and implementation components, largely driven by the global and local BMs respectively, the importance of the individual BM performing their job well becomes imperative in ensuring successful enactment of strategies across markets. In the case of the global BMs, this might entail prioritizing brand portfolio investments with the highest yield, whereas in the case of the local BMs, it might entail deriving high-impact activations. Given the fast-moving FMCG industry and constantly evolving marketing field, there is a need for “staying up to date” on shifts in trends to continuously ensure high performance. In doing so, the primary responsibility appears to lie with the BMs themselves where they act as individual action-takers. However, the organization also seems to assist in the capability development process.

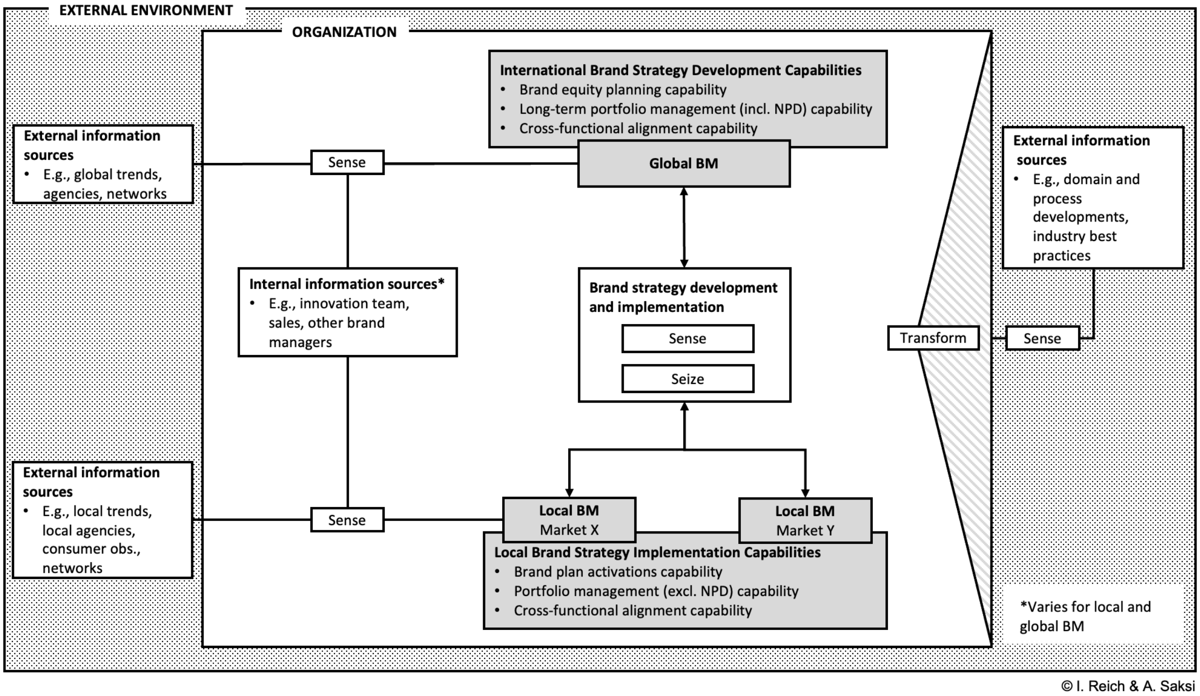

Figure 3: International Brand Management Capabilities

Figure 3 showcases how BMs, both global and local, monitor their external environment through absorbing external information sources, and *sensing* their relevance to their respective brand. The local BM, being closest to their local markets can monitor the external environment through for example, consumer observations, local agency knowledge-exchanges, and professional networks. The cross-functional exposure within the organization also allows the local BM to enrich their understanding of the local consumers, brand and products from internal information sources, such as the closely working sales teams, and local BMs from other markets. Simultaneously, the global BM is also *sensing* brand strategy opportunities and threats in the external and internal environments. This is achieved through external macro market monitoring and partnerships with different expert agencies, and internal collaboration with for example, innovation teams, local BMs in different markets, and in-house creative agencies for global guidelines and campaign developments. Whereas local sensing is grounded in deep contextual knowledge of the specific market, global sensing requires an ability to identify cross-market patterns, emerging category shifts that may transcend individual market boundaries, and macro-level dynamics that shape the brand's long-term trajectory.

As presented in process figure 2, the international brand strategy development and implementation is highly interconnected, underpinned by continuous collaboration between local and global BMs throughout the three phases, albeit to slightly different degrees depending on the brand strategy standardization. Figure 3 showcases that through the interaction between the global and local BM in the strategy development and implementation process, each BM's accumulated knowledge from external and internal brand monitoring, coupled with their experience and intuition, is shared and built upon. Seeing to the local BM's expert knowledge on their local market nuances, coupled with the global BM's exposure to other markets, a multifaceted learning loop is enabled. This learning loop is characterized by the exchange of global-specific and local-specific knowledge, best-practice sharing across markets, etc.

It is in the learning loop where the sensed nuances from all parties are transferred and added to the foundation for acting on, or *seizing*, opportunities and threats albeit at different scale and orientation for the global and local BM respectively. The high interconnectedness in the brand strategy development and implementation process, highlights the need for capabilities of both local and global BMs as their differing perspectives can be viewed as complementary for successful enactment of international brand strategies. For example, the global BM might contribute with the overarching long-term brand equity aspects and the local BM with nuanced consumer knowledge which together sharpen brand plans. This indicates that knowledge exchange can have synergistic effects on both the individuals' sensing and seizing abilities as well as their *international brand strategy development capabilities* or *local brand strategy implementation capabilities.* Together they form what we coin as *International Brand Management Capabilities.*

Given that the global BM has the primary responsibility for developing the international long-term brand strategy and yearly brand plans, they need to posit strong international brand strategy development capabilities. These encompass capabilities central to the role of a global BM, namely long-term brand equity planning, portfolio management (including strategic innovation pipeline processes), and cross-functional alignment (including cross-market). The local BMs instead need to posit strong local brand strategy implementation capabilities to implement the brand strategy in their local market. These capabilities encompass brand activations, portfolio management (excluding new product development as this lies at global level), and cross-functional alignment capabilities.

Consequently, international brand strategy development and local implementation appear to relate to the global and local BMs international brand strategy development capabilities, and local brand strategy implementation capabilities respectively. Both of which are arguably reinforced through the BMs' individual sensing abilities, and their knowledge-exchanging interactions. While individual BMs appear to play an important role in sensing and seizing opportunities, the data also suggests that capability development may not hinge solely on individual efforts. Learning is recognized as a key focus area in the firm housing the four case brands, serving as a catalysator for the BMs' upskilling. Figure 3 shows how the organization acts as an initiator and orchestrator of knowledge flows and organization-wide *transformation* initiatives. These capability-developing initiatives aim to help BMs build the right skillset to re-gain a closer connection to the consumer and ensure long-term relevance in the market. In other words, assist in strengthening the international brand strategy development capabilities and the local brand strategy implementation capabilities.

The organization senses external opportunities and threats, supports the individual BMs in seizing them, but primarily drives organization-wide transformations. The organization orchestrates the upgrading of international brand management capabilities by, for example, disseminating best practices, formalizing learning routines, and systematically upskilling the marketing organization across all markets. Through training programs, standardized frameworks, and cross-market knowledge transfers, the organization enables insights generated by global-local BM collaboration to feed into the organization-wide capability development. As such, the organization reconfigures resources, refines brand strategy processes, and thereby acts as a transformational force across the marketing organization.

However, transformational initiatives are not always straight forward, generating both micro and macro-level tensions. At the micro level, a tension emerges when the organization provides inspiration and learning opportunities but lacks providing clear next steps for the individual BM. Even when this is not applicable, limited time and overloaded roles risk restricting their ability to act on new knowledge. At the macro level, fragmented BM roles, and the leadership say-do gap deprioritize learning and challenge transformation initiatives to take root. This highlights a need for analyzing how these intertwined tensions collectively constrain the international brand management capability development.

6. Discussion

This chapter answers the research questions. We also specify the study's theoretical contribution and managerial implications. The segment ends with stating limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

6.1 Answer to Research Question 1

How are international FMCG brands' strategies developed and implemented by global and local brand managers?

Consistent with prior research (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999; Craig & Douglas, 2000; Holt et al., 2004; Dimofte et al., 2008) our findings indicate that global BMs primarily develop and coordinate brand strategy, while local BMs are responsible for its implementation within their respective markets. Existing research emphasizes the interdependent nature of these components (e.g., Morgan et al., 2025; Huber, 2011), a dynamic that is also reflected in our empirical data and demonstrates the necessity of close collaboration between global and local BMs in international brand strategy development and implementation. The case brands were positioned differently on the brand strategy standardization-localization continuum, generating different benefits and challenges (Levitt, 1993; Okazaki et al., 2006; Douglas & Craig, 1986; 1987; Katsikes et al., 2006) which affect the brand strategy development and implementation process.

Drawing on Matanda and Ewing's (2012) process model of global brand strategy implementation examining collaboration between global and regional BMs of a standardized brand, we develop a three-phase model grounded in our empirical findings which captures global-*local* interactions across brands positioned along the brand strategy *standardization-localization continuum.* In doing so, our model enriches Matanda and Ewing's (2012) single-brand process model, whilst also elaborating on the final implementation. In *Phase 1*, consistent with Matanda and Ewing (2012), the global BM leads the development of the long-term brand strategy. This includes setting the overall brand frame, including portfolio management, identification of growth opportunities, and the formulation of positioning strategies designed to enhance brand equity (Keller & Lehmann, 2006).

A key challenge for the global BM at this stage is to prioritize markets with the greatest potential for generating scale, while simultaneously ensuring that the strategy remains viable across other markets with differing consumer preferences (Liu et al., 2021; Van Gelder, 2004). In contrast to Matanda and Ewing's (2012) model, which depicts voluntary participation of regional BMs, our empirical findings show that local BMs of localized brands are more involved in this phase compared to local BMs of more standardized brands. This difference in early involvement risks giving rise to tensions later in the process if the local BMs perceive the strategy as notably misaligned with local market conditions with little decision-making flexibility to change the strategy.

In *Phase 2*, the global BM presents the yearly brand plans to the local BMs for them to assess local market suitability, similar to Matanda and Ewing's (2012) dissemination step. Our process model deepens the analysis by showcasing how the degree of standardization determines the decision-making freedom of the local BM. While local BMs of localized strategies can opt out and adapt the strategy, local BMs of standardized brands need to opt in to a greater degree. Scholars have long stressed the problematic discrepancy between the individual BM's responsibilities and authority (Panigyraki & Veloutsou, 1999; Low & Fullerton, 1994), a challenge underscored in the role of the local BM. Furthermore, a tension between short-term commercial pressures and long-term strategy (Mizik, 2010; Morgan et al., 2015) emerges when local and global BMs negotiate the final strategy. This gives rise to an ongoing tension in how the BMs interpret and prioritize relevant micro- and macro-environmental factors (Hultman & Oghazi, 2024; Hultman et al., 2009; Jain, 1989).

In *Phase 3*, local BMs lead strategy implementation by translating brand plans into local market actions. Morgan et al. (2025) argue that inadequate market understanding can lead to unanticipated reactions during implementation. While local BMs demonstrated strong sensitivity to local nuances, problems emerged when global BMs proceeded with decisions that did not sufficiently consider local market nuances. For example, local BMs reported that they were not surprised when sales declined following the implementation of strategic elements they had previously opposed, which aligns with Huber's (2011) proposition that weak or misaligned implementation can undermine brand recognition by local consumers. This further underscores the importance of stakeholder management and navigating the power dynamics in brand strategy development and implementation (Morgan et al., 2025; Smith, 2017; Cui et al., 2017).

6.2 Answer to Research Question 2

How do brand management capabilities relate to international brand strategy development and implementation?

In an international context, the interconnectedness of strategy development and implementation (Morgan, 2025; Smith, 2019) places effective collaboration between global and local BMs, and their individual capability to execute, at the core of successful strategy enactment. In line with previous research, our framework highlights the centrality of the individual manager's capabilities in the brand management process (Teece et al., 1997; Mintzberg et al., 2005; Shrader & Siegel, 2007; Porter, 2008; Cui et al., 2014). Seeing to the highly cross-functional nature of brand management (Aaker, 2008), the empirics underscored the ability of global and local BMs to synthesize various cross-functional both external and internal inputs to *sense* new opportunities and threats in the market. In this process, the individual BMs previous experience and intuition were underscored, further reinforcing Cui et al.'s (2014) view that BMs possess intangible capital and tacit knowledge not easily replicated. Figure 3 showcases how through the interaction between the global and local BMs in the strategy development and implementation process, each manager's accumulated knowledge from external and internal brand monitoring, is shared and synergistically built upon. This finding aligns with Matanda and Ewing's (2012) conclusion that capability development emerges through the interaction between global and regional BMs.

In line with the findings of Matanda and Ewing (2012) who present dynamic elements in global brand management through market learning, resource reconfiguration, and capability enhancement between global and regional BMs, our framework underscores the dynamic dimensions in international brand strategy development and implementation. The local BMs in-depth on-the-ground market understanding, coupled with the global BMs overarching long-term strategic brand equity perspective, enables a multifaceted learning loop with synergistic effects on the individual BMs' sensing and seizing abilities, as well as their individual brand management capabilities. In addition, the organization was highlighted in driving capability development by acting as the initiator and orchestrator of knowledge flows, ensuring that process-improvements and upskilling extend beyond individual BMs' efforts. To ensure long-term relevance in the market, the organization senses external opportunities and threats, supports the individual BMs in seizing them, and drives large-scale brand *transformations.* As such, our findings support Teece's (2007) notion that dynamic elements can be present on both organizational and individual levels. Together they reinforce the continuous adjustment and adaptation of assets, brand management routines and capabilities in pursuit of sustained competitive advantage.

Our framework presents the interconnectedness between *global brand strategy development capabilities* and *local brand strategy implementation capabilities*, as enacted through global and local BMs respectively. Global BMs primarily require capabilities in long-term brand equity planning, portfolio and innovation pipeline management, cross-functional alignment, and cross-market coordination, whereas local BMs rely on capabilities related to brand activation, portfolio management, and cross-functional alignment. Although the roles differ in focus, their capabilities partially overlap and mutually influence one another through continuous global-local interaction.

Prior research typically positions brand management as a mid-level, cross-functional capability responsible for translating architectural marketing strategy into brand-level plans by integrating specialized marketing capabilities and functional inputs (Morgan, 2011; 2018). Higher-order processes such as strategy development, resource reconfiguration, and capability enhancement are theoretically treated as distinct architectural or dynamic capabilities (Morgan, 2018). This theoretical separation becomes problematic in modern international FMCG environments, where BMs, with the support of the organization, routinely participate in strategic tasks associated with higher-order capabilities.

The theoretical separation does not only become problematic in relation to higher-order capabilities as *international brand management capabilities* span different layers of the capability classification hierarchy. For example, *international brand strategy development capabilities* include higher-order long-term brand equity planning capabilities, as well as mid-level cross-functional alignment capabilities. *International brand strategy development capabilities* in turn include both mid-level cross-functional alignment capabilities, as well as lower-order brand activations capabilities. While existing theory primarily posits brand management capabilities as a mid-level integrative capability, the evidence from this study supports the findings from Matanda and Ewing (2012) wherein dynamic dimensions are present in international brand management capabilities, in line with the highest-order dynamic capabilities. Consequently, the empirical evidence suggests a blurring of boundaries, a capability convergence not properly investigated in previous marketing research.

6.3 Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the strategic brand management- and the broader international marketing domain through two primary revelations. First, it addresses the limited understanding of how firms develop and implement brand strategies in international contexts (Morgan, 2025; Neuvonen, 2016). We deepen prior work of one of the few studies investigating international brand strategy development and implementation by using a multiple-case design to examine international brands' global strategy development and local strategic implementation, as opposed to regional (Matanda & Ewing, 2012). In doing so, we reinforce the notion of a highly interconnected brand strategy development and implementation process (Huber, 2011). By providing a detailed process model (figure 2) of international brand strategy development and implementation, the study directly furthers the understanding of international brand management nuances and elaborates on the implementation phase in relation to prior studies (e.g., Matanda & Ewing, 2012). It examines how global and local BMs collaborate, negotiate, and adapt strategies across markets, showing how local involvement and decision-making can differ depending on the degree of brand strategy standardization and localization. Consequently, our research makes a rare contribution to the theoretical domain by empirically revealing how global and local BMs across four FMCG brands collaboratively formulate, adapt, and implement international brand strategies.

Second, this study deepens the understanding of brand management capabilities by addressing the notable lack of empirical research on how these support brand strategy development and implementation in international contexts (Morgan, 2018; Neuvonen, 2016). The findings show how *international brand strategy development capabilities*, central to the global BM, and *local brand strategy implementation capabilities*, central to the local BM, jointly shape *international brand management capabilities*. Through close collaboration where global and local BMs share knowledge, synthesize cross-functional inputs, and engage in ongoing sensing and seizing activities, these capabilities continuously overlap, reinforce, and enhance one another. Furthermore, in line with Matanda and Ewing (2012), our findings support how international brand management capabilities encompass dynamic dimensions such as market learning, resource reconfiguration, and capability enhancement on both individual and organizational levels. In contrast to prior research positioning brand management capabilities as a mid-level capability (Morgan,, 2018), our research therefore demonstrates how international brand management capabilities span higher-order strategic planning, mid-level integrative alignment, and lower-order activation capabilities in addition to the highest-order dynamic elements. By uncovering the multi-level nature of these capabilities and revealing previously unexplored patterns of capability convergence in international brand management, this study makes a contribution to one of the most under-researched strings of marketing capability research and offers fertile ground for future inquiry.

6.4 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study offer several managerial implications for firms managing international brands in the perishable FMCG industry. Managers should recognize that international brand strategy development and implementation is not a linear or isolated process, but a highly interconnected one requiring continuous collaboration between global and local BMs (figure 2). The process model developed in this study highlights the value of early and ongoing local involvement in the strategy development stage, as local BMs' in-dept local market knowledge coupled with global BMs' overviewing long-term brand equity perspective can help ensure that international strategies are executable across diverse market contexts. Accordingly, efforts to maintain regular, structured communication may help ensure that insights, decisions, and actions are aligned across markets.

Furthermore, the findings of this study (figure 3) suggest that BMs' brand management capabilities are central in international brand strategy development and implementation. Consequently, managers could consider assisting BMs in their capability development, providing both micro-level support for individual learning and macro-level structures for larger-scale process and capability transformations. By helping BMs in synthesizing and acting on internal and external information sources, they can become better equipped to tackle the challenges of the fast-moving market environment present in the perishable FMCG industry and marketing domain. Lastly, managers might want to consider ways to overcome brand capability development tensions by, for example, allocating more time for reflection and skill development, and clarifying roles to allow the BM to focus on demand-creating activities. By reducing work overload, BMs can sustain capability development alongside daily operational demands.

7. Conclusion

By conducting our study, we have contributed to theory development on international brand strategy formulation and implementation, and the role of brand management capabilities within this process. This study advances the understanding of how global and local BMs collaboratively develop and implement brand strategies across markets. By introducing a process model of global-local interaction, revealing different nuances depending on degree of strategy standardization, it extends prior research and highlights the interconnected nature of strategy development and implementation. Moreover, the study advances brand management capability understanding by conceptualizing *international brand management capabilities* as a multi-level construct spanning specialized, cross-functional, architectural, and dynamic marketing capabilities. We elaborate on the dynamic aspects of international brand management in relation to prior research (e.g., Matanda & Ewing, 2012). In doing so, we offer new insights into an under-researched area (Morgan, 2018; Neuvonen, 2016) and provide a foundation for future research.

7.1 Limitations

As with all empirical research, this study is subject to several limitations. First, there are limitations related to the chosen methodological approach and research design. The use of a qualitative research design to address the research questions limits the transferability of the findings, given the small and highly context-dependent sample (Lim, 2025; Bell et al., 2022). Moreover, due to the time-constrained nature of this study, the interviews with the BMs were conducted as one-off engagements. This restricted the opportunity to follow up with more targeted questions after initial analysis and emergence of preliminary findings.

Second, there are limitations specific to the scope of the study. The sample of interviewees does not fully represent all BMs working on the respective case brands. Consequently, brand-specific nuances may have differed had all BMs been included. Lastly, the study primarily captures the perspectives of BMs, supplemented only by the view of the Marketing Excellence Representative. This focus may introduce a degree of bias in emphasizing the importance of brand management relative to other organizational functions.

7.2 Future Research

In addition to research exploring the limitations of this study, several interesting research strings remain. While we contribute to reducing an important research gap in strategic brand management and the broader international marketing domain, many aspects of international brand strategy development and implementation remain underexplored. Future research could carry out a purposively contrasting, in-depth exploration of brands positioned at opposite ends of the standardization-localization spectrum. This would be valuable for uncovering more intricate nuances in local involvement, decision-making latitude, and capability deployment. Such comparative case studies could further refine the process model presented in this thesis and help identify conditions under which specific strategy development and implementation approaches are most effective. Furthermore, future research could build on our findings by investigating how global-local collaboration unfolds in other organizational and industry contexts beyond the perishable FMCG sector.

Moreover, the discovered international brand management capabilities call for future research deepening the understanding of their pillars and importance to international brand strategy development and implementation. In addition, the strategic brand management and marketing domain could benefit from further research investigating the highlighted multi-level nature of international brand management capabilities. Lastly, quantitative research investigating how international brand management affects outcomes such as brand performance could also assist in providing broader empirical validation and theoretical understanding of international brand management.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

1. Introduction

Introduction of researchers, master program and data privacy, confirm consent for recording and transcribing interview. *Start recording*

2. Protocol Questions

Background questions:

Can you introduce yourself, your role and how long you have worked within this role and firm?

Theme 1. Brand Strategy Development & Implementation in an International Context

1.1 Can you describe Brand X brand strategy?

1.2 How often do you update the brand strategy, if you do?

1.3 How do you implement the developed brand strategy?

Theme 2. Global/Local Information Flows

2.1 In your role as [global/local] Brand Manager, what are your main responsibilities?

2.2. How does the coordination process between local/global BM look?

Theme 3. Upskilling

3.1 How do you ensure that you as a brand manager are continuously up to date in your role, if you do?

Ending question:

Is there anything you would like to elaborate on before we close this interview?

[**Adjustments for Marketing Excellence Rep:** How do you work with brand management capability development? What do you perceive as the biggest benefits? Biggest challenges?]

Appendix 2: Empirical Data

1. Brand Strategy Choice

Brand Strategy Pillars

“For brand strategy, if you take it in the literary level, I think it will include the brand positioning. Brand positioning will include assessing our target audience. So who is our target audience? Where to find them and how to approach them? I think these are the three elements for brand strategy, for deriving a successful way of reaching the business goals.” – Local Brand A-4

So there is a few parts of brand strategy right, there is the long-term brand strategy which you usually do about every three years, five years depending on how the brand is doing. And then there's the short-term brand strategy that we do every year. So every year we revisit that brand strategy. We adjust, we recalibrate, and then we change things that we think is not working. So it's a bit more tactical than on our actual long-term strategy. So it depends on the parts that you are and where is the brand performing, right?” – Local Brand B-2

“It's very much about figuring out how do you become relevant with the target audience, really understanding where they are and how they interact with brands today. So the brand strategy for [Brand A] is really to rejuvenate the brand and make it relevant for the denser target audience, Gen-Z, to also be relevant in the years to come” – Global Brand A-1

Business relevance

“I always describe it as business and brand together, right. So you need to deliver the business P&L and if your brand is successful and healthy, more from an equity point of view, then your business is only going to get a better P&L. That's how I always think about marketing responsibility-wise.” – Global Brand D-1

“I would categorize brand strategy and management as a way to get to a certain objective. So as an example a decline in sales, we want to reverse that, we want to grow the brand, and brand strategy is one of the pillars and ways we can get there. It always comes back to the commercial objectives from a growth point of view, from a numbers point of view. So whether that's sales, whether that's profitability.” – Global Brand A-1

1.1 Standardized Brand Strategy

“I have a pipeline that's super big and I can pick and choose from that for what's best for my market. But I don't want to come up with new stuff because I don't think that that's the purpose of this brand. If you come to another one of our brands, I think it's much more local. I don't think the one size fits all, but I think when it comes to this brand [Brand C], I think there is much more one size fits all. – Local Brand C-3

“I think the advantage [of delivering a standardized strategy] is that we [the global team] do all the heavy lifting, because we are ensuring that it's solid, consistent in long-term thinking. It's not a short-term approach. So that is the benefit, so at least we can ensure that the brand will survive. [...]. That the brand will look the same across countries because that's important. If you want to build a brand, it has to look the same. It has to feel the same. It has to have the same tone. You can't have different tonalities because the current brand manager thinks differently.” – Global Brand B-1

Tensions

“[…] I really think that the markets and the people working in the markets, developing the strategies and campaigns should have more mandate and that the global organization should have more trust because now it becomes a lot of like politics. In the end, it's a lot about that and this level of complexity where we are now is out of line I think, and it doesn't do any good. So less complexity and more trust and mandate to the markets”. – Local Brand C-3

"So we don't get resources to get new products. So that's a challenge, right? You still want to have a strong base but you also know that sometimes you need to bring in newness. That's just something that resonates with consumers. So that is a challenge because we don't have a setup in the organization where we could just do something locally. […] And because there are big global focuses, that means that our local branch doesn't get any focus, and that's a challenge. – Local Brand B-3

1.2 Localized Brand Strategy

"Something we also discussed a lot was how flexible our guidelines [for brand D] should be and how we prefer coherence in brand strategy versus local adaptability. And we have identified that our ambition for the future is to be more culturally relevant as a brand and to be part of the local cultural discussions. So therefore it is very crucial for us to give the local brand manager flexibility because we believe that if we are too globally governed, we can't be reliable in some local context because we need to be adaptable for the local culture, local conversations, local market situation, to make our brand credible in the local market. Maybe to build on that then, the low global governance in that sense, is that for example, we provide a toolkit and key brand assets which all our markets should use. So, for example, that we have the same logo, the same fonts, the same visuality, the same art direction, and so on. So the brand stays cohesive across the markets, and you can recognize it's the same brand. But then our expression and position and take on different forms that can vary across the markets. – Global Brand D-5

"We have quite the freedom to decide our local strategy, our local brand positioning here in China. I think on global's side, they also understand China market is very different context from global side. I would say that giving the freedom to the local marketing team is very important, especially for a new brand because you have to test and learn, you have to build up your brand strategy based on the context you are selling your products and promoting your brand. […] If we didn't have the freedom and we had to execute what the global brand manager told us to do, I would say you wouldn't have brand C succeed in China. Because as I mentioned, the target audience is very, very different here in China than from the global side." – Local Brand A-4

"If the local market doesn't win no one wins since I don't have a global business." – Global Brand D-1

Tensions

"If you try to please everyone you please no one, and that is the problem of having global brands with different brand maturities." – Global Brand D-5

"It's a complex balance that we struggle with daily, how much to involve local markets. Because you don't want too many cooks in one kitchen, but at the same time, you need local inputs because without local there is no global" – Global Brand D-1

2. Interplay Between Local & Global BMs

Role of BM

"So I guess part of the role of a brand manager is not just delivering the comms, it's delivering the core business sales, which comms, you know, so often we talk about comms and we talk about innovation, but they probably only drive about 10% of the brand sales. The rest of it comes from the core, which is our everyday products. which are just kind of supported more organically rather than specific hero campaigns. And through that, then working with the commercial team, that's really where we deliver a lot of the brand performance year on year." – Local Brand B-2

"It's not just about trusting the gut feeling, there's of course a lot of analysis behind this decision. But still, It's difficult to not to trust your intuition and gut feeling when you work with brands and marketing and communications. [...] So it's also often the people who know what is the best action for the brand, because of course the data don't know the ambition and the target which the brand owner and decision maker knows." – Global Brand D-5

Collaboration

"I think before any project, it's really important for the global team to identify who the key stakeholders are. By the nature of it, working multi-market, multidisciplinary, there can be a lot of voices, which can be helpful because it provides lots of insights, but it often can be a bottleneck or a kind of barrier to actually making decisions and having clarity. [...] It's also important for people to feel involved, but also to ensure you have clarity of roles and responsibilities." – Local Brand B-2

"It's very important to keep close contact with the global brand manager and to update and share progress, insights and learnings from our local activities. The reason why it's important is because we can also leverage. The global size resource to give us, you know, more assets that can take into local perspective a little bit and yeah, so we can share the assets, resources and also gain their support on our potential new products because in global they are also not only for branding, but also for NPD, right, for the portfolio pipeline. So it's very important." – Local Brand A-4

Tensions

"So we don't get resources to get new products. So that's a challenge, right? You still want to have a strong base but you also know that sometimes you need to bring in newness. That's just something that resonates with consumers. So that is a challenge because we don't have a setup in the organization where we could just do something locally. We need to get through the full process and we need to ensure what we call the minimum order quantity of how many tons minimum they need to sell to actually bring it to market and you require people resources to taste the product. What should the new taste be and all of those things. And because there are big global focuses, that means that our local branch doesn't get any focus, and that's a challenge. – Local Brand A-2

"So is everything always aligned? No. Do they always communicate in good time? No. Could they do better? Yes. So I think that's how it is. Sometimes they don't realize what they're starting, but I think a lot of time they get it from above where they sit. So of course you know everything drills down at it and the work is with us in the markets, right. So no, that could be better. They could be better at communicating and informing us on changes. For example with the change of the of the brand manual, because we're on an ongoing basis developing campaigns both global and sometimes it's just not in the right time that we get it. So with that new stuff, new design guidelines and stuff like that, a lot of time it comes in the last minute, which is difficult for us."– Local Brand A-3

2.1 Role of Global BM

"And that's a bit of the beauty and the challenge of working with a global brand, there are a lot of stakeholders that you need to manage, big or small, you need all of them to be in rough alignment with what you're doing. […] But specifically, as globally responsible it becomes much more complicated because you have more markets, more stakeholders, etcetera." – Global Brand A-1

"So in the brand I work on, [brand strategy] would both be about portfolio choices and also then about levers. So portfolio choices are about saying these parts of the brand are going to grow harder and these parts of the brand are maybe going to decline or stay static. And how can we make sure that the overall health of the brand being the equity, improves as a consequence of strategically prioritizing the portfolio? So an example of that might be that those growing areas of your portfolio are where you want the future of the equity to go and that you're enhancing your equity as you grow those things. But you're equally at the same time enhancing your P&L, so top line and bottom line. The levers then is more about some portfolios are more susceptible to grow. If you innovate in them with product or packaging, others are much more susceptible to growth." – Global Brand A-1

"So the global brand managers responsibility is to basically set the strategic direction for the brand and then to ensure performance. To make sure that everything's progressing and then to basically provide support globally where they have resource to us if we need to". – Local Brand B-3

"That is an important part of my role to have the conversations with local brand managers and ensure that the brand guidelines and toolkits and playbooks and so on are useful. It's my responsibility to include them, to make their work easier, and more structured or again provide new inspiration or new tools and to even create better local active activations and strategies and so on. So it is very important to motivate them and to have a good collaboration that's they know in which areas I can help them and when they can reach out to me."– Global Brand D-1

"In terms of centralized decision-making, you might want to get scale out of it, but you've got to decide what type of scale you want. Scale can be many things, maybe you want the product to be the same in two countries, and maybe you can do that, but the advertising can't be the same. Or maybe the product can be the same, but the language clusters can't be all in English. So the amount of which you want to scale can have a direct influence on whether the local adaptation works or not, but ultimately the most important thing to scale is your production. It's like thinking about where you make the most money back from scaling something; that's always the way. So portfolio centralization and production centralization of your brand can sometimes be even more important than you know, the marketing assets" – Global Brand D-1

2.2 Role of Local BM

"I think we're more like executional when it comes to operational things. But it doesn't mean that we don't feed into strategies. I think it's kind of local's responsibility to make sure that any strategy that's made globally like is actually practical and like can be implemented and work." – Local Brand B-3

"It's a gut feel. It might be insight driven. What I would say is particularly in some media channels, it's much more important to understand the local nuances when it comes to language, to humor, to product use, and particularly in our social channels such as Instagram and Facebook." – Local Brand B-2

"So we have everything regarding you know, the brand positioning and that's the same for global and local. And then we also have a communication platform and tagline developed on a global level. So we go down to, well we have like a tagline, we have the communication platform, but when it comes to the local implementation, the key is to find the relevance in the market. So to find the consumer tension in that area in the local context and then to develop communication campaigns from that, so really being relevant for the Swedish consumers. That is very much my role to take to take the brand position globally and then find the Swedish context." – Local Brand D-2

"I think you can't get a proper sense of local nuances unless you're in the market and you know the culture. That would be my worries if I ever considered a brand manager role in another market, that even if I lived there for a few years and I listened and did research, you can never really understand the national culture and the perception of things and the history on that deep enough level to get the strategy right." – Local Brand C-4

"But for local market brand managers, I would say it [brand management] is more complex. You have to drive the brand to grow sustainably, but how to achieve that in terms of commercial level is very complex. So there are a lot of executions in terms of channels, in terms of pricing, in terms of you know, customer expansion and trade marketing which global brand managers don't have". – Local Brand A-4

Stakeholder management

"So I think it's really about figuring out who you can work together with that knows more than what you know yourself and make each other stronger. So I know something about my brand, about my target audience, but I don't know enough about the media. I need to use tools to get in contact with my target audience […] so I need external input and I need wiser people than myself to give that input. But I need to be the one to sort of ensure that everybody that I work with is informed about the direction we're going in. And I need to sort of take it all in and back to stakeholder management, right? I need to control internally and locally inform people about what's happening, and I need to ensure that the global team is also informed about what I do and the insights that I get. […] But I also need the sales team and the key account managers. Getting the sales force and sales team excited and hyped about this is for me the most important thing because I can't succeed without them and the other way around." – Local Brand A-3

"Brand A is a globally owned brand. So in the sense they, the global team owns it and we are more on the executional side. […] But we are also responsible for the actual results, so it needs to be a collaboration. It's really a careful balance of making our voice heard. Budget wise we are dependent on the global advertising or creatives, so that's why we need to get our voice heard in in advance so that we just don't put something on air, which we know is not going to work. So that's why we really invest in getting the global or local market understanding through." – Local Brand D-3

"The most important people, at least in my eyes for collaboration, would be sales because I think if you can't get listings and distribution and get your products on shelf, then you basically have no brand [...] So category managers and sales, I think they're like, you know my bread and butter."– Local Brand B-3

3. Cross-border Knowledge-sharing & Capability Development

“We meet every month, all of us and it’s a very formal session based on collaboration and transparency where we share learnings from different campaigns and different processes. So that's all brand managers can also be inspired and informed of the others work and what's cooking in different markets. This is something everyone has found extremely beneficial and interesting, and inspiring. And on top of that, my manager is like a sort of brand director, she's also hosting a forum for her peers, which are then head of all of brands in different markets. They are meeting every three months.” – Global Brand D-5

“We can kind of mirror the strategy or what we do to a great extent, because it's all within the Nordic region. So the consumer behavior, the insights are very transferable. But if you look at a market like let's say, China, just as an example, they are of course very different geographically, but also consumer behavior point of view.” – Global Brand A-1

3.1 Organizational Level

Cross-functional & cross-market upskilling

“The organization is definitely helping and there's a lot of fantastic resources on how to upskill yourself with the webinars and the organization is very structured in that way and it's really important. So I think there's a really strong official upskilling and courses and this part but then also this kind of just understanding and having the pulse on where the world is and how it works and trying to kind of understand people even though you don't work or live like that yourself. So I think that's a dual part to it.” – Local Brand D-3

“It's about making sure that people build the same relationship they have with global with each other, and they do. They do it quite normally because they experience the same issue. So they will always be able to learn from each other.” – Global Brand C-1

“I think there's clearly an interest in like upskilling and educating brand managers on, you know, their portfolios. Because I think at the end of the day, you want to be the most knowledgeable person.” – Local Brand B-3

“I think we definitely get the big muscles of a global company, so things like the brand platform and innovation experiments, which we've never had as a small market. We wouldn't have the resources simply and then we still have, for instance, the local creative freedom. So we definitely get benefits.” – Local Brand D-3

Marketing transformation initiative

“Yes, I see [company] has quite a unique organization when it comes to learning activities and possibilities. [Company] is really an organization that wants the employees to have the latest information and has a strong focus in personal development of the employees when it comes to marketing, we, for example, have this whole marketing transformation organization which is focusing on marketing excellence and creating the best tools and skills for all marketeers across all. So they are for example, hosting a lot of different learning sessions, courses, seminars, events and so on. They are also providing us various templates, and so on. So this organization also ensures that we, as marketeers, can focus on doing our work and giving input to the development of the brands. And they are like providing the structure and framework. How should we work? In also in a very up to date way. So I think I see that's probably the strongest emphasis on ensuring our learning and developments.” – Global Brand A-1

“A lot of what we're trying to do here [with transformation initiatives] is to drive brand equity. I mean ultimately it all comes down to how relatively meaningful, different and salient is your brand, the more brand power you have the more likely it is that you're going to grow your market share so a part of being able to do that is to be able to kind of crystallize a long-term kind of brand positioning brand strategy.” – Marketing Excellence Rep.

Tensions

“But if you don't have the organizational set up with you, if the politic gets in the way, then it really does just stall. You end up in a world where you just lost all momentum. I initially thought when I started in the role, a barrier to transformation is going to be the down to the quality and the inspiration of what you're offering.” – Marketing Excellence Rep.

3.2 BM Level

“So definitely [the company] as an organization is very encouraging of you to take personal responsibility, like it's a personal development plan for a reason. So definitely the ethos behind the business is that you take ownership, but also as a line manager, if you have responsibility, that's also partially your responsibility to make sure your reports feel supported enough. There's a lot of opportunities out there, but as an individual, you need to engage in those and seek them out. Nobody will come to you and say, we've signed you up for this training. it's much more a case of you taking the ownership to go and see those opportunities and make the most of them.” – Local Brand B-2

“We try to understand work from other markets like we've worked with the Swedish team on gaming because that's a really big thing for us here. So we take work that the Swedish team has done, for instance in gaming, because that's even though there are market differences, that part is actually quite global. So we try to take these types of influences and apply them here in Finland.” – Local Brand D-3

“I would say it is [individual responsibility] probably to be honest, but they're doing a lot of the proactive work. I think it's probably my responsibility to make sure that I am upskilled. But in terms of presenting the different opportunities and options I have available. I definitely feel like the organization is taking initiative both locally and globally. I've definitely noticed a lot of activity in the last few months where I've been invited to lots of these meetings and trainings and things like that. So I think the business is definitely taking the initiative there. – Local Brand B-3

Tensions

“So it's quite nice when the company can fund those resources and initiatives. The main problem I would say is that you still have to feed it on your day to day calendar.” – Global Brand B-1

“I do have to admit that it is quite busy. It's a quite busy job because it entails so much that it's hard to try to do like the whole learning on top of it.” – Local Brand B-4

Appendix 3: Case Findings Overview

Table 2: Case Findings; Main Themes & Differences (latter in italics)

Brand/Themes & Subthemes	**Brand A**	**Brand B**	**Brand C**	**Brand D**
1. Brand Strategy Choice	Brand strategy as tool to reach business objectives	Brand strategy as tool to reach business objectives	Brand strategy as tool to reach business objectives	Brand strategy as tool to reach business objectives
1.1 Standardized Brand Strategy	-	*Semi standardized brand strategy*	*Semi standardized brand strategy*	-
1.2 Localized Brand Strategy	*Largely localized brand strategy*	-	-	*Semi localized brand strategy*
2. Interplay Between Global & Local BMs	High interconnectedness between brand strategy development and implementation and close collaboration between the global and the local BMs			
2.1 Role of Global BM	Primary strategy developer, overview across markets, long-term perspective			
2.2 Role of Local BM	Primary strategy implementor, *high local decision-making authority in strategy dev.*	Primary strategy implementor, *semi-low local decision-making authority in strategy dev.*	Primary strategy implementor, *low local decision-making authority in strategy dev.*	Primary strategy implementor, *semi-high local decision-making authority in strategy dev.*
3. Cross-border Knowledge-sharing & Capability Development	Global resources, best practice sharing and re-application of learnings across markets			
3.1 Organization level	Setting up structures for information and knowledge-sharing, drives large-scale transformation initiatives. Challenges include say/do gap in managerial priorities			
3.2 BM level	Individual responsibility to network, assess market transferability, and act on new knowledge. Challenges include individual non-priority, lack of time & insufficient understanding			

Appendix 4: AI Usage Statement

In writing this thesis, Generative AI was used to a limited extent, following consultation with our supervisor. Prior to inputting any material into AI tools, we ensured that all data was anonymized and that no organization-specific information was included. Specifically, ChatGPT Model 5.1 by OpenAI (paid version) and Microsoft 365 Copilot via SSE were employed to assist with tasks such as shortening paragraphs without omitting key messages, revising sentences or paragraphs to use a more active voice, summarizing content, and providing feedback on figures or the coherence of sections. All AI-generated material was carefully reviewed and manually refined, as we recognize that generative AI can produce inaccuracies. Throughout the thesis, AI served as a sparring partner and a tool to enhance clarity and coherence. All content presented in this thesis remains the original work of the authors.