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STRATEGIC BRANDING AS A DRIVER OF LONG-TERM EQUITY

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Abstract. In conditions of global market saturation and product parity, firms increasingly rely on intangible assets to sustain competitive advantage. This study is motivated by the hypothesis that systematic branding transforms a registered trademark into a strategic asset capable of generating measurable financial and relational value. The purpose of the research is to conceptualize branding as an integrated managerial process and to examine its impact on market performance and enterprise value. The study applies qualitative synthesis of classical and contemporary brand equity theories, combined with analysis of empirical observations from regional and global markets. The findings demonstrate that consistent brand investment reduces price elasticity, strengthens consumer psychological commitment, and enables firms to achieve sustainable price premiums. The research confirms that branding functions not merely as a communication activity, but as a capital investment embedded in corporate strategy. The novelty of the study lies in clarifying the causal mechanisms underlying trademark-to-brand transformation and in substantiating branding as a long-term value creation instrument with practical implications for strategic marketing and corporate governance.

Keywords: *brand equity, intangible assets, long-term value, marketing, price premium, sustainable advantage, trademark, value creation.*

Rezumat. În condiții de saturație a pieței globale și paritate a produselor, firmele se bazează din ce în ce mai mult pe active necorporale pentru a-și menține avantajul competitiv. Acest studiu este motivat de ipoteza că brandingul sistematic transformă o marcă înregistrată într-un activ strategic capabil să genereze valoare financiară și relațională măsurabilă. Scopul cercetării este de a conceptualiza brandingul ca un proces managerial integrat și de a examina impactul acestuia asupra performanței pieței și valorii întreprinderii. Studiul aplică sinteza calitativă a teoriilor clasice și contemporane ale capitalului de marcă, combinată cu analiza observațiilor empirice de pe piețele regionale și globale. Rezultatele demonstrează că investițiile constante în brand reduc elasticitatea prețului, consolidează angajamentul psihologic al consumatorilor și permite firmelor să obțină prime de preț sustenabile. Cercetarea confirmă faptul că brandingul nu funcționează doar ca o activitate de comunicare, ci ca o investiție de capital încorporată în strategia corporativă. Noutatea studiului constă în clarificarea mecanismelor cauzale care stau la baza transformării de la marcă înregistrată la marcă și în fundamentarea brandingului ca instrument de creare a valorii pe termen lung, cu implicații practice pentru marketingul strategic și guvernanta corporativă.

Cuvinte cheie: *capital de marcă, active necorporale, valoare pe termen lung, marketing, primă de preț, avantaj sustenabil, marcă înregistrată, creare de valoare.*

1. Introduction

In the contemporary environment of global competition and accelerating market saturation, sustainable competitive advantage increasingly depends on intangible assets rather than solely on functional product characteristics. Branding has evolved from a communicative instrument into a strategic mechanism of value creation and long-term differentiation.

The theoretical foundations of brand management were established in classical marketing literature. Aaker conceptualized brand equity as a measurable intangible asset determining firm value, he introduced the concept of brand equity as a key intangible asset, emphasizing consumer awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, and associations [1]. However, Kapferer's framework provides limited operational guidance for integrating branding into long-term corporate strategy. He introduced the brand identity prism, emphasizing internal coherence and symbolic consistency. This model presents the brand as a multidimensional identity system requiring alignment between appearance, personality, culture, consumer relationships, reflection, and self-image [2]. Keller developed the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, linking brand strength to accumulated consumer knowledge and associations [3]. Kotler and Keller positioned branding within strategic marketing management and corporate value creation [4].

Although these approaches differ conceptually – economic resource perspective [1], identity system perspective [2], psychological construct perspective [3] – they converge in recognizing branding as a determinant of sustainable competitive advantage.

Iglesias, Ind, and Alfaro introduced [5] a co-creation model, where consumers actively participate in building brand meaning. Recent studies have extended branding theory into digital and co-creation contexts. Iglesias et al. highlighted stakeholder co-creation of brand meaning, while Gensler et al. demonstrated the transformation of brand perception in social media environments [6]. Sustainability-oriented branding research further emphasizes ethical and ecological dimensions of brand trust [7]. However, despite this expansion, the strategic integration of branding into corporate planning processes remains insufficiently systematized. For this reason, the author (as CEO of *Promarketing Agency* (PMA) and university lecturer of *Technical University of Moldova* (UTM)/ *Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova* (ASEM)) conducted a series of branding studies at both regional and international levels within the framework of strategic marketing during 2023–2026. The objective of this study is to conceptualize strategic branding and identify the factors that determine brand strength and failure. The research also seeks to identify the mechanisms that enable the accumulation of brand equity and allow firms to command price premiums for branded offerings [8]. Based on his practical experience and numerous conducted studies, the author began to incline toward the conclusion that brands are developed over time rather than emerging spontaneously.

This divergence reveals a key theoretical gap: whether strong brands primarily emerge from cumulative market interactions or from deliberate strategic design. Despite these advances, the strategic integration of branding into corporate planning remains insufficiently explored. Building upon the evolutionary perspective of market offerings – product → registered trademark → marketed trademark → brand – this study addresses this gap by

conceptualizing branding as a deliberate managerial process that transforms legally registered trademarks into market-recognized, strategically managed brands capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage.

Accordingly, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

Sustainable brand equity is primarily the result of deliberate strategic brand management embedded in corporate strategic branding and marketing planning rather than spontaneous market evolution.

The object of the research is strategic brand management within strategic marketing planning. The subject concerns the mechanisms and instruments through which trademarks are transformed into brands capable of generating long-term competitive advantage.

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the role of branding in small and emerging economies, particularly in the context of digital transformation. At the same time, the growing importance of digital capabilities has been confirmed by recent research, which shows that firms in emerging markets must develop digital competencies to remain competitive in increasingly platform-driven environment. These findings are complemented by studies on nation and place branding, which underline that small economies face structural challenges but can enhance their global positioning through strategic branding and innovation-oriented communication [9].

Overall, contemporary research confirms that the intersection of branding, digital transformation, and emerging market dynamics represents a rapidly evolving field, reinforcing the relevance and timeliness of the present study.

The purpose of the study is to conceptualize trademark-to-brand transformation as a systematic managerial process and to clarify its role in enterprise value creation. To achieve this objective, the research:

- (1) examines the evolution of branding theory;
- (2) analyzes classical and contemporary approaches;
- (3) evaluates the relationship between strategic planning and brand equity formation;
- (4) develops an integrative framework of strategic brand management.

By addressing this theoretical gap, the paper contributes to marketing science by clarifying the causal logic of brand formation and reinforcing branding as a core strategic capability of modern firms. Contemporary researchers emphasize that a brand is formed at the intersection of three components:

- visual identity;
- value-based content;
- communication with the target audience.

At the same time, the role of the brand extends far beyond marketing: it becomes a tool for managing reputation, corporate culture, and even investment attractiveness. The sustainability of a brand is ensured only under conditions of comprehensive strategic brand management – from brand architecture to the development of long-term relationships with consumers.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodological framework of this research is grounded in strategic marketing theory and contemporary brand management research. The study is based on a long-term research program (2003–2026) focused on strategic branding and trademark-to-brand transformation.

Research Design

The research applies a qualitative multi-method design integrating:

- comparative theoretical analysis;
- content analysis of academic publications (1996–2025);
- cross-case comparative analysis of international and national brands;
- interpretive conceptual synthesis.
- marketing researches in Romania, Moldova and Ukraine (2003-2026).

The empirical base includes secondary data from corporate reports, international brand rankings (e.g., Interbrand, Brand Finance), and market databases. Additionally, observational data were collected from branding practices in European, Ukrainian, and Moldovan markets (2013–2026), with particular attention to post-pandemic and Russian-Ukrainian war strategic repositioning.

Sampling and Case Selection

Case selection followed purposive sampling principles. International brands were selected based on consistent presence in global brand valuation rankings, while Moldovan brands were selected based on market leadership and long-term experience, export activity, and strategic brand development initiatives. This allowed comparative evaluation of branding maturity across developed and emerging markets.

Variables and Analytical Procedures

The study operationalized three principal variables:

1. **Brand strength** – measured through qualitative indicators: brand awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, differentiation, symbolic associations.
2. **Consumer perception stability** – assessed via reputation metrics, public positioning consistency, and stakeholder engagement patterns.
3. **Market competitiveness** – evaluated through market share dynamics, price premium capacity, and strategic positioning sustainability.

Although the research is primarily qualitative, descriptive statistical indicators (frequency patterns, comparative ranking positions, capitalization dynamics) were applied where applicable. Data were systematized and processed using Microsoft Excel (Microsoft 365, version 2024) for comparative structuring and trend identification. No advanced econometric modeling was employed due to the conceptual nature of the study. For the visualization and clear presentation of research results, specialized software such as CorelDRAW (ver. 11-16) was used.

The central hypothesis tested is:

H1: Sustainable brand equity is primarily the result of deliberate strategic brand management embedded in corporate planning rather than spontaneous market evolution.

International and Moldovan Context

The comparative dimension of the research highlights that globally recognized brands systematically integrate branding into corporate governance structures, innovation strategies, and long-term investment planning. In contrast, many companies in emerging markets, including Moldova, continue to prioritize short-term sales performance over strategic brand capitalization.

The analysis of Moldovan brand development demonstrates a gradual shift from product-oriented competition toward value-based positioning. However, limited long-term brand investment and insufficient integration of branding into corporate strategy often constrain international scalability.

Strategic Implications

The findings reinforce the proposition that firms striving to create brands rather than merely sell products or services accumulate intangible capital, reduce price sensitivity, enhance stakeholder loyalty, and increase enterprise valuation. In contrast, companies focused exclusively on transactional sales remain vulnerable to price competition and market volatility.

Methodological Limitations

Limitations include the lack of large budgets at PMA and its clients, as well as constraints arising from the pandemic period (2019-2022) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2014–2026), which limited the possibility of conducting large-scale contemporary quantitative surveys and econometric modeling. Additionally, the study relied on secondary data sources. Nevertheless, the integrative methodological design ensures conceptual rigor and reproducibility, providing sufficient transparency regarding data sources, selection criteria, and analytical logic for replication in other markets.

3. Results and Discussion

People have long satisfied their needs and necessities through various commodities and goods. A commodity can be defined as any market offering capable of fulfilling a need or desire. Such offerings may take different forms, including tangible products, services, experiences, events, persons, geographical locations, property, organizations, information, and ideas.

Nowadays there is no doubt in the fact that a trademark is one of the company's most valuable assets. However, creation and "nurturance" of an effective trademark takes a lot of time and effort. The word "brand" originates from Scandinavian "brandr", which means "burn, fire." So was called the mark the cattle owners used to mark their animals. The use of branding can be traced back to the times of Ancient Egypt, when craftsmen placed their marks on the bricks they produced in order to identify the creator of each brick. There is also documentary evidence of trademarks appearing on Greek and Roman lamps as well as on Chinese porcelain. Trademarks were used in India as early as 1300 BC. Branding became widely practiced during the Middle Ages, when guild craftsmen marked their goods with distinctive signs. This became necessary as the population grew and more than one blacksmith, mason, shoemaker, or carpenter began to operate within the same territory. In some old European cities, such as Salzburg and Rothenburg, tourists can still see authentic iron "trademarks" that once marked the workshops where the holders of these marks worked. In 1266, English legislation officially required bakers to mark every loaf of bread with their own sign so that the weight of each loaf corresponded to the declared standard. In early American history, brands were often used not only to identify livestock (such as cows and sheep) but also to indicate the particular quality of goods produced by a specific farm or ranch [10].

In practice, the concepts of "registered trademark," "marketed trademark," and "brand" are often used interchangeably. Therefore, clear differentiation between these terms is required, it is necessary to clearly differentiate and define the terms "trademark" and "brand." According to the World Intellectual Property Organization, trademark is a distinctive sign which identifies certain goods or services as those produced or provided by a specific person or enterprise. It allows the customer to easily and fast decide in favor of tried-and-true products, provided by reputable entrepreneurs [8].

David Aaker – the leading world expert in effective brands' building – gives an illustrative comparison: "Each brand is like a separate football player, while design and

advertising are like trainings destined for improvement of shape and effectiveness of such player. Brand architecture – senior coach, who has to put players on their places and make a winning team out of them, not just a star collection [1].” The most important component of brand architecture creation is company’s brand portfolio structuring. This task consists of the selection of architectural option, selection of company’s brand grouping principle and decision on possible depth and width of spin-off. Aaker identifies three main groups of benefits derived from purchasing a brand:

- functional benefits;
- emotional benefits;
- self-expressive benefits, or symbolic benefits.

Functional benefits represent the type of value directly related to the functional aspects and tangible properties of the products of a particular brand. However, functional value has certain limitations: it can be relatively easy to imitate, especially if it is not protected by a unique secret or a specific unique selling proposition (USP).

Emotional benefits refer to the positive emotions that consumers experience during the use and consumption of a brand’s products. Emotional benefits increase the perceived value of owning and consuming a particular product.

Self-expressive benefits (or symbolic benefits) represent the type of brand value that enables individuals to communicate information about themselves and express their identity through the purchase and consumption of products associated with a particular brand [1].

As branding theory developed, numerous interpretations of the term “brand” also emerged.

The understanding of a brand provided by the American Marketing Association, which in many works is considered a basic definition, states: “A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these elements, intended to identify the goods and services of a particular seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors [8].” In *Principles of Marketing*, Philip Kotler provides a similar definition: “A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors [11].” It should be noted that in most translations of Kotler’s classical works, the terms *brand* and *trademark* are often presented as synonyms. In one of his later works [12], however, Philip Kotler interprets the term *brand* somewhat differently: “A brand is any name, term, trademark, symbol, or design that carries certain meaning and associations.”

Good brand management doesn’t come out of the blue, but rather is a result of accurate planning and correctly chosen development path. There are lots of examples of little-known or weak brands becoming strong and successful ones, and vice versa, of well-known and reputable brands falling, vanishing or going into deep crisis (e.g. *Polaroid*, *Kodak*, *Xerox*, etc.) Major, old-established brands become symbols, designating not only corporations, but even entire cultures. *Coca-Cola* has not only the most recognizable logo in the world, but the logo itself became the symbol of western lifestyle.

Scientific and methodological basis for substantiation of the thesis that “brands are born to become brands, not raised”, besides practical observations and experiments, are the works of renowned managers, businessmen and economic science authorities in the domains of marketing and management, data gathered during field and office studies. As scientific novelty of the hypothesis can mostly be deemed author’s attempt to formulate the overall concept of “strategic brand management.” It is made by means of direct comparison of

content of such hypotheses with the virtually observed state of things and of establishment of identical relation (or its absence) between facts stated in the hypothesis and facts proved by the results of observations and experiments.

The empirical validation of the proposed hypothesis was conducted through a longitudinal qualitative and comparative analysis of brand development strategies across established international corporations and emerging market entities during the period 2003–2026. The methodological framework combined structural analysis of brand architecture, comparative case evaluation, and synthesis of secondary market data.

The research yielded the following key findings:

1. Strategic intentionality precedes brand strength.

Brands that were conceptualized with clearly defined identity architecture, positioning logic, and long-term strategic alignment demonstrated significantly higher sustainability indicators (market retention, equity growth, customer loyalty) compared to brands that emerged through fragmented or reactive marketing decisions.

2. Brand architecture determines scalability potential.

Companies implementing structured portfolio systems – as conceptualized in the architectural framework of David Aaker – exhibited more stable expansion trajectories and lower reputational volatility. The empirical review confirms that architectural coherence reduces internal cannibalization and strengthens cumulative brand capital.

3. Uncontrolled brand emergence correlates with instability.

Case comparisons reveal that brands developed without predefined strategic identity frequently faced erosion of differentiation and long-term value destruction. Historical examples such as *Polaroid* and *Kodak* illustrate the strategic consequences of delayed adaptation and insufficient brand repositioning.

4. Brand equity formation is a function of systemic management rather than spontaneous growth.

The findings support the argument that strong brands are not accidental outcomes of market forces but the result of deliberate strategic governance. The hypothesis that “brands are born to become brands” should therefore be interpreted as strategic intentionality embedded at the moment of conceptualization rather than spontaneous brand formation.

5. Expansion of branding into geo-cultural territories confirms theoretical scalability.

The emergence of territorial branding practices demonstrates that branding logic extends beyond products and services into macro-economic systems, including cities and countries. This development reinforces the universality of strategic brand management principles.

The results refine and extend classical brand management theory. While the definition of trademark provided by the World Intellectual Property Organization focuses on legal distinctiveness, the present study demonstrates that a brand constitutes a higher-order strategic construct characterized by systemic identity fixation within mass consciousness and long-term capital accumulation.

In contrast to traditional life-cycle interpretations that assume gradual brand strengthening through market exposure alone, the findings indicate that structural coherence at the initial stage significantly determines long-term viability. This does not contradict the brand equity model of David Aaker; rather, it complements it by emphasizing the primacy of architectural intentionality prior to equity accumulation.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that organizations should avoid reactive brand formation and instead embed strategic architecture at inception. Early-stage identity design, portfolio alignment, and governance protocols reduce long-term restructuring costs and enhance cumulative equity growth.

At the policy level, the scalability of branding principles into territorial development supports the application of strategic brand management in regional and national competitiveness strategies.

The theoretical implication lies in formalizing **strategic brand management** as an integrative framework combining identity architecture, portfolio structuring, and long-term governance mechanisms. The research advances the conceptual distinction between:

- a product;
- a registered trademark (legal sign);
- a marketed trademark (promoted trademark);
- a brand (successful marketed trademark, market-validated strategic construct) and its strategic brand capital (long-term intangible asset).

Here are the main distinctions.

A **product (commodity)** is any good, service, or item that can be produced by anyone, including individual persons or households. For example, it may be homemade wine from a barrel. Such a product is not legally protected and rarely has any graphic identity, design, or advertising slogan attached to it.

When we decide to elevate the status of such a product and submit its name and graphic style for legal registration – that is, when we formally register it (for example, with “*Agenția de Stat pentru Proprietatea Intelectuală*” (AGEPI)) – it becomes a (registered) **trademark**. A trademark enjoys legal protection, and no one can unlawfully counterfeit or imitate our products without consequences. On supermarket shelves, approximately 99% of products are registered trademarks. For instance, in frozen food sections there are dumplings from various manufacturers, or numerous bottles of wine displayed in supermarket aisles. Many of them do not particularly stand out; they merely possess legal registration and protection against imitation.

If we begin to actively promote our trademark – organizing in-store displays, advertising it on television, promoting it on social media, and investing in marketing communications – the trademark gradually transforms into a (marketed, promoted) **trademark**, meaning a promoted and recognized mark. For example, sparkling wines produced by *Radacini Wines* may represent such a case.

Over time, and with sustained investment in promotion and customer relationships, a trademark may evolve into a fully developed **brand**. For instance, sparkling wines of *Purcari* or champagne from *Moët & Chandon* can confidently be described as brands. In simplified terms, a **brand** can be defined as a successful trademark. It represents the peak – the highest stage in the evolutionary trajectory that products undergo, from basic registration to broad recognition and the devoted loyalty of committed consumers.

A **product** (see Fig. 1) is the material, physical, tangible component of a future brand.

A (registered) **trademark** is a product that has obtained legal protection; it represents the first stage in the process of brand formation.

A (marketed) **trademark** is the differentiation of our trademark from similar trademarks of competitors.

A **brand** is a trade brand that accumulates brand equity; it is a trade brand that, over time, acquires sustainable competitive advantages and becomes successful.



Figure 1. Definition of concepts product, trademark, brand and evolution of product development.

Designed by the author.

Finally, the validation of the hypothesis must be understood within the epistemological limits of empirical social sciences. The confirmation of strategic hypotheses is inherently probabilistic and subject to continuous reinterpretation within evolving market dynamics. Nevertheless, the accumulated empirical patterns provide sufficient grounds to argue that sustainable brand strength is predominantly the outcome of deliberate strategic design rather than uncontrolled emergence.

A **brand** is not merely a visual symbol or a product name, but a complex system of associations, emotions, and trust that is formed in consumers' minds over an extended period of time. The strength of a brand is determined not only by product quality, but also by the stability and consistency of the perception it generates. It is precisely this perception that creates brand value – enabling the justification of premium pricing, enhancing customer loyalty, and securing competitive advantages in saturated markets.

The development of a strong brand requires systematic management of its identity, positioning, and communication strategy. This process includes the consistent application of corporate visual identity, a well-designed brand architecture, continuous quality assurance, and alignment between brand promises and the actual consumption experience.

Who earns the most in business, and on what? The one who knows more than others, about what others know less. One of the key tasks of business and marketing is to know more about your own brand, your competitors, the external environment, and everything that can influence the increase or decrease of sales, as well as the strengthening or weakening of your brand. **Marketing research** (MR) in branding is the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data about brands that is necessary for making marketing decisions within our brand architecture. But where did this discipline come from? How has it developed? Why is it important for a marketing professional? The author has conducted from early 2000s to 2026 dozens of marketing studies in the areas of marketing, branding and surveys as part of PMA's business activities, including focus groups, practical case analyses, and university lectures "Marketing Research" and "Sales Techniques" at UTM and "Branding and Sales Consumer's Psychology" and "Marketing-management" at ASEM and the many other study of consumer behavior and psychology in relation to brands [13].

The importance of applying MR in the field of branding in conditions of high competition and a rapidly changing external environment lies in the following:

Reducing brand portfolio risks. Research allows decisions to be based on real data rather than intuition or assumptions. This reduces the likelihood of mistakes when launching new brands, entering new markets, or adjusting pricing policies in brand management.

Increasing brand competitiveness. A deep understanding of the competitive environment and consumer behavior among brand fans helps the company differentiate itself from competitors, create unique brands, and strengthen its market position.

Optimizing marketing expenditures for effective branding. Analyzing the effectiveness of brand promotion and advertising channels enables rational allocation of the marketing budget, investing in tools that genuinely deliver results.

Improving interaction with brand customers. Based on research, a company can adapt its products, services, and brand communications to consumer expectations, thereby increasing the loyalty and satisfaction of both existing brand fans and potential customers.

In the Republic of Moldova, there is currently no objective government-level assessment of the popularity of specific brands or market valuation of local brands. Such evaluations and studies are carried out only by private agencies or commissioned by individual companies. For three consecutive years (2010–2012), the Ukrainian agency MPP Consulting compiled [8] a ranking of the 50 most valuable Moldovan brands (usually, in the post-Soviet space, a TOP-100 is created, but due to the limited number of Moldovan brands and their relatively low value, a TOP-50 was compiled in this case). The ranking includes only brands created in Moldova or specifically for Moldovan goods and services. In 2012, the total value of the trademarks included in the study was \$172.9 million, with market values ranging from \$0.44 million to \$35 million.

The top ten brands accounted for approximately 70% of the total value of the TOP-50. The authors clarify that the brand value reflects **only the trademark itself (the name)**, excluding production facilities, company infrastructure, patents, inventions, or other tangible or intellectual assets. It is necessary to take into account national characteristics and the mentality of the local population when choosing certain brands. The “noise” from a large number of brands (as in developed countries) has not yet reached Moldova – the market is still in a nascent state, and many companies are either unfamiliar with branding or understand it merely as advertising (see Tables 1-2).

Table 1

Top 10 Moldovan brands in 2012 (with evolution from 2010–2012, by MPP Consulting MR) [8]

Place in 2012	Brand	Brand's cost in 2012, \$ mln.	Brand's cost in 2011, \$ mln.	Brand's cost in 2010, \$ mln.
1	Cricova	35	17	4.4
2	Purcari	21	17	4.4
3	Bucuria	13	11.2	9
4	Chisinau	11.5	10.4	8.5
5	Aroma	8.2	7.3	7
6	Moldcell	7.4	6.3	4.5
7	Victoriabank	6.9	5.5	5.2
8	MAIB	5.1	4.7	3.2
9	Kvint	4.9	4.4	3.25
10	Bostavan	4.7	4.6	4

The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 indicate a significant concentration of brand value within a limited number of leading brands, suggesting an asymmetric structure of brand equity distribution. Such a pattern is characteristic of emerging markets, where branding processes are still evolving and market leadership is often determined by early positioning and accumulated recognition. In contrast, developed markets typically exhibit a more balanced distribution of brand value across a wider range of companies, reflecting a higher level of branding maturity and competitive intensity.

Table 2

Top 50 Moldovan brands in 2012 (by MPP Consulting MR) [8]

Place	Brand	Brand's cost, \$ mln
1	Cricova	35
2	Purcari	21
3	Bucuria	13
4	Chisinau	11.5
5	Aroma	8.2
6	Moldcell	7.4
7	Victoriabank	6.9
8	MAIB	5.1
9	Kvint	4.9
10	Bostavan	4.7
11	Buket Moldavii	4.5
12	Green Hills	4.1
13	Moldtelecom	3.7
14	Domnita	3.1
15	Unite	2.9
16	Nº1	2.3
17	Acorex	2.2
18	Spicul de Aur	1.9
19	Zorile	1.8
20	Maximum	1.75
21	Dionis Club	1.7
22	Moldindconbank	1.65
23	Moldasig	1.5
24	Lapmol	1.42
25	Vinurile Comrat	1.3
26	Gura Cainarului	1.22
27	Carmez	1.15
28	Tomai	1.1
29	Starnet	0.98
30	Bomba	0.97
31	Natur Bravo	0.96
32	BEM	0.93
33	Vitanta	0.92
34	Linella	0.91

Continuation of Table 2

Place	Brand	Brand's cost, \$ mln
35	Milestii Mici	0.9
36	Bunatete	0.87
37	Alina Electronic	0.83
38	Bemol	0.82
39	Zernoff	0.79
40	Aqua UniQa	0.77
41	Naturalis	0.68
42	Chateau Varteley	0.64
43	Dionysos Mereni	0.58
44	Argint	0.55
45	Bojo Vin	0.51
46	Floare	0.49
47	Roua Moldovei	0.47
48	Nefis	0.46
49	Incomlac	0.45
50	Alianta Vin	0.44

In 2016, PMA conducted a marketing research study on brands [8] – not only in Chişinău (although, due to significant depopulation, the capital of Moldova remains the most representative area in terms of the presence of the largest number of brands and the extent of their advertising). In this first field study, Moldova was conditionally divided into five regions: center, north, east, south, and west. In each region, the largest or most business-active city was selected, along with one smaller town, urban-type settlement, or village.

For reference, the regions and selected locations were as follows (see Fig. 2):

- **Center** – Chişinău municipality, village of Pânăşeşti
- **North** – Bălţi municipality, Briceni city
- **East** – Tiraspol municipality, Pervomaisc settlement
- **South** – Cahul city, Congaz village
- **West** – Ungheni city, Bălăneşti village



Figure 2. Selected locations for large-scale MR.

Designed by author.

In total, more than 3,500 people were surveyed. The survey was conducted in person on the streets of settlements by Promarketing Agency between May and September 2016. Respondents were asked the question (in one of the languages they understood – Romanian, Russian, or Gagauz):

"Please name the most well-known Moldovan, local brands in your opinion. Which ones do you know best, and use?"

Since not all consumers knew exactly which brands were Moldovan and which were foreign, all answers were taken into account. Thus, this survey reflects which brands, in general, are most recognized by the population in Moldova. Respondents could mention both locally produced brands and brands under foreign ownership. This first field study included costs for transportation, office supplies, meals, employee salaries, and opportunity costs. The overall brand recognition and awareness ranking was calculated using the following system: the first brand mentioned by a respondent received 10 points, the second – 7 points, the third – 5 points, the fourth – 3 points, the fifth – 2 points, and the sixth and subsequent brands – 1 point each. Some respondents mentioned only one brand, others several, and some very knowledgeable participants named more than 10 brands. On average, each of the 3,553 respondents listed 3–5 brands.

The research showed that among the most popular and well-known brands, food products (including also ecological products in daily priorities [14]) and beverages dominate, which again confirms that the population of the Republic spends the largest part of their family budget on sustenance. It is encouraging that among the brands, there are increasingly more young and promising ones gaining strength each year. Unlike in various paid rankings, our study revealed that people are interested in the situation in the country – hence the appearance of two media channels as well-known brands. It is also pleasing to see a university included in this ranking, as people are increasingly paying attention to education.

It is noteworthy that some brands were recognized by consumers across all regions of the republic, while others were known only in their own region or territorial unit. The final report was made representative by combining all responses into a single table (see Table 3).

Interestingly, not all respondents were aware of the bankruptcy of *Banca de Economii* or for other reasons – and although this brand scored more than 30 points, we did not include it in the final ranking.

Thanks to the inclusion of Moldovan citizens from all regions, including the eastern regions of the republic (so-called Transnistria), the survey included brands that are unknown or little known on the right bank of the Dniester (for example, *Sheriff*).

Table 3

Top 40 Moldovan brands in 2016 (by PMA MR) [8]							
Place in 2016 by points	Trademark/ Brand	Place in 2016 by points	Trademark/ Brand	Place in 2016 by points	Trademark/ Brand	Place in 2016 by points	Trademark/ Brand
1	Bucuria	11	Moldcell	21	Tucano Coffee	31	Vinuri de Comrat
2	Cricova	12	Incomlac	22	METRO	32	Carmez
3	Gura Căinarului	13	Orange	23	Zorile	33	Publika TV
4	Andy's Pizza	14	Starnet	24	Perfect	34	Rogob

Continuation of Table 3

5	Franzeluța	15	Rompetrol	25	Chișinău (bere)	35	Unimarket
6	Naturalis	16	Călărași	26	Букет Молдавии	36	Doina
7	MAIB	17	Aqua UniQa	27	Avicola Floreni	37	Jurnal TV
8	Linella	18	Kvint	28	Gas Natural fenosa	38	Maximum
9	VIS	19	OM	29	999.md	39	ASEM
10	Purcari	20	Unite	30	Sheriff	40	La Plăcinte

The results presented in Table 3 highlight that brand awareness in Moldova is primarily driven by high-frequency consumer interaction, with food products, retail chains, and telecommunications services dominating the rankings. This structure reflects the consumption-oriented nature of brand perception in emerging markets. In contrast to developed economies, where brand recognition is more evenly distributed across diverse sectors, including technology and services, the Moldovan market demonstrates a stronger dependence on everyday consumption patterns. At the same time, the inclusion of media channels and educational institutions suggests a gradual diversification of brand perception and the early formation of a more complex branding environment.

In parallel with the survey on awareness of local trademarks among the population of Moldova, PMA conducted another type of research – we studied local brands using a focus group approach, this time among more informed consumers. Their presence in Chișinău implies familiarity with local brands, as most brands present in Moldova are concentrated in the capital.

The focus group study involved 100 participants (randomly selected individuals aged 18 to 60, with an equal split between men and women), all of whom live, work, or study in Chișinău – representing the active part of the city's population. The study was conducted in August 2016 in Chișinău over five working days, in groups of 20 people at the PMA office. All participants were either students, employed, or combining both activities. The research was divided into two parts: first, an examination of the most well-known brands in each of the proposed product categories; and second, an analysis of young/promising brands. Participants were asked to name at least five of the most famous, best, or most trusted brands they know in each of the product categories presented for the study [8].

PMA agents also asked participants to indicate their level of awareness, describe, and evaluate several local brands according to specific characteristics. These brands were classified into one of the following groups:

- Young brand;
- Promising brand;
- Actively and successfully rebranded older brand;
- Revolutionary, innovative brand.

The following brands were proposed for evaluation, as they fit the above criteria: *Andy's Pizza*, *Aqua Uniqa*, *ASEM*, *Bombonici*, *Cool Radio*, *Darwin*, *Farmacia Familiei*, *Jurnal TV*,

Linella, MAIB, Medpark, Moldcell, Promarketing, Publika TV, Simpals, Starnet, Tucano Coffee, Unimedia, X-Style, Zorile.

Participants were asked to briefly describe each brand and rate them on a **5-point scale** according to the following categories (see Fig. 3):

- Awareness
- Brand visual identity
- Brand trust
- Willingness to use the brand
- Modernity
- Brief description

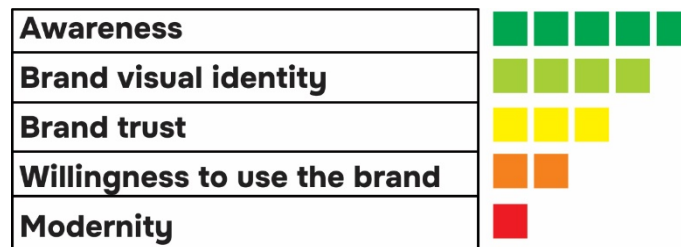


Figure 3. Criteria for evaluating young brands in the focus group.

Designed by the author.

Brief conclusions from this focus group: Chişinău consumers are quite savvy and well-informed about national brands and the brands present in the capital. Most of their evaluations and recommendations are fairly objective. It should be noted that a brand, if it does not itself shape tastes and trends, must orient itself toward consumer preferences and trends. In the second part of the study, all respondents noted the potential of the brands under review, indicating that each brand has a path for growth and that not all available marketing tools have yet been fully utilized to improve the current position. It is encouraging that consumers are responsive and willing to engage quickly even with relatively unfamiliar brands (e.g., *Promarketing* or *X-Style*), and based on only a superficial analysis of the brand's visual identity, products, and services, they can quickly develop trust and immediately characterize it as a promising brand worthy of their confidence. Some items overlap with well-known brands from the above-mentioned lists in the first part of the study – either from the Ukrainian agency's Top-50 or from the PMA agency's Top-40 list. Chişinău consumers are more aware of brands outside the “food and beverage” category, which dominates the national-level research conducted across Moldova's regions by PMA. Local consumers are more informed through media channels – via the internet, TV channels, and word of mouth – which is why they easily recognize certain brands, such as TV and internet portals, or even “Chişinău minibuses” or the “trolleybus fleet,” perceiving them as full-fledged “brands” due to their daily interactions with them. Their “savviness” is also evident in the fact that, for example, after the well-known scandal involving the “theft of billions” from a series of Moldovan banks that later went bankrupt (*Banca de Economii* – the former largest state bank, *Banca Socială, Unibank*) and the subsequent investigations, they are aware of *Kroll* as the most famous “local” auditing company (even though it is international and has no local office here). The Chişinău consumer is the most informed in the country, requiring marketers to work “harder and more subtly” to capture their desires and influence their thinking.

This indicates that, with a properly structured marketing strategy, long-term and strategic brand planning, it is possible to gain the trust of nearly any consumer, even the

most discerning ones. This once again confirms that if you create a high-quality product with a clear brand purpose and understandable communications, customers will adopt it relatively quickly as “their brand.”

Next, PMA conducted a fourth field study [8] using surveys and interviews with selected local experts, top managers, marketing and sales specialists, branding professionals, and business owners – specifically those whose brands we considered to have successful management experience. The goal was to discuss with them their perspectives on promoting their own or third-party brands in the local market, as well as their views on the overall market situation in the long term – from the day Moldova gained independence up to the present.

The value of this type of research lies in obtaining insider information firsthand, providing 100% practical insights into the execution of marketing tasks in a real-world setting. The core questions were largely consistent across interviews, differing only when specific circumstances required it. The main common questions discussed were:

- Do managers strictly follow marketing promotion rules, or do they rely more on their intuition?
- What is the local specificity of brand promotion? Does it conflict with international practices, or does it offer unique advantages or local character?
- Is it possible to create a strong brand with limited financial resources?
- What is necessary to maintain a brand’s strength over the long term?
- Are brands “born” or “raised”?

The expert evaluation method allows researchers to uncover many interesting aspects and nuances of local marketing and branding that cannot be captured through other types of brand research. Interviewed experts:

- Ruslan Cojocar, CEO & Founder, *Tucano Coffee*.
- Dmitry Voloshin, owner of *Simpals Studio* and brands *999.md*, *play.md*, *drive.md*, *sporter.md*, *forum.md*, etc., organizer of the first *Chişinău International Marathon*.
- Pavel Zingan, marketing and sales specialist, owner of several brands, with experience in promoting third-party brands.
- Radu Albot, top Moldovan tennis player (85th in singles and 68th in doubles in the 2016 world ranking).
- Irina Strajescu, Marketing Director at *Moldcell* (2012–2015), Communications and Events Director at *Moldcell* since 2015.
- Gennady Tanurkov, founder and director of the *Fedorov Eye Microsurgery Center* in Chişinău.
- Victor Guzun, former Moldovan ambassador to Estonia, promoted Moldova as a brand in the Baltic countries, Europe, and specifically Estonia.
- Vadim Gore, marketing and sales specialist at *Visapina-Impex* (brand *Visapina*).
- Alena Sorokina, marketing and brand specialist, currently working in Ukraine as Marketing Communications at *IT-Cluster Odessa*; Brand Keeper at *TEDx Odessa*.
- Victoria Condrat, Director of *Trimbos Moldova*, National Manager of the project “*Mental Health System Reform in Moldova*.”

Brief Conclusions from the Expert Brand Evaluation: most top managers primarily rely on intuition, especially during the early stages of promoting their brands in the 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, they recognize and agree that for even more successful brand promotion, it is necessary to adhere to professional marketing standards, strategies, and

planning. Nearly all emphasize that a successful brand must first and foremost be a quality product with a clearly defined goal and mission, and with understandable communication toward customers. The brand must also keep pace with the times, monitor market trends, competitors' actions, and customer behavior.

Moldova is not yet a well-known or fully developed brand on the international stage, which leaves room for development. National specificity and consumer culture strongly influence how brands should be sold and promoted, and this must be taken into account. Strategic marketing planning for brands should necessarily incorporate innovative marketing-mix tools and actively use them when traditional methods have been exhausted.

Are brands “born” or “raised”? Opinions are divided, but the majority believe that brands are raised. There is considerable potential in Moldova for creating and supporting strong brands, which requires applying a competent marketing approach and attracting the necessary financial resources. Some managers believe that a good brand can even be created with a modest financial budget.

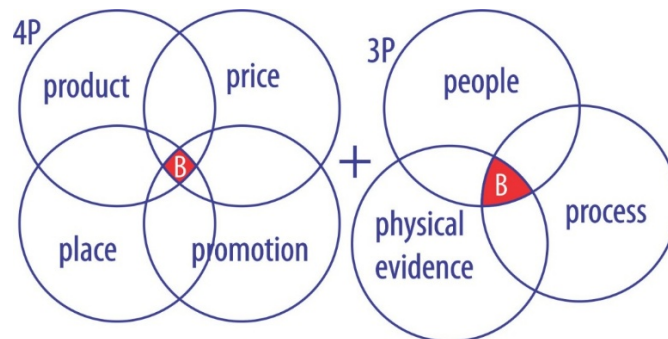


Figure 4. Marketing tools – 7P Mix.

Designed by the author.

Possessing up-to-date information, conducting continuous marketing intelligence, and implementing professional and pragmatic marketing research in branding make it possible to create, develop, and sustain strong brands – the key to success in any strategic marketing. Also, if you consistently monitor the marketing mix (7Ps) tools [15] and research all its components (see Fig. 4), conducting marketing research in the field of branding specifically across these areas, you will always stay one step ahead of your competitors. Guerrilla marketing, observations, implementations, protecting your research data from competitors, and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) – all of these practices enable the Marketing Department of any company to achieve strong results and **increase the brand equity** of its brands.

Creating and maintaining brands, as well as increasing brand equity, brings the following advantages:

1. **Higher price levels** – demand for branded products is characterized by lower price elasticity.
2. **Greater sales volume** – brands can operate “at scale” and at relatively lower costs per unit.
3. **Cost reduction** – the cost per unit of a branded product is significantly lower than that of its non-branded competitor.
4. **Economies of scale** – high consumer demand for brands allows companies to reduce capital expenditures and dictate terms to distributors.

The main task of a marketing specialist is to create a bright, memorable brand that lasts for many years. Your brand must stand out among the unnoticed ones. To achieve this,

we need a strong name (naming), high-quality support with texts, advertising slogans, and taglines (copywriting), a professional logo and well-executed design, memorable print and video advertising (your videos should be showcased at events like the “Night of the Ad Eaters” and the “Cannes Lions”), pragmatic digital marketing, and brand personalization through SMM and online channels. A full set of ATL/BTL activities, PR, the mandatory presence of a brand book/corporate code of conduct with strict adherence, and periodic guerrilla and “viral” marketing methods are also essential.

All of this together will guarantee the success of your brand. You cannot cut corners on naming, logos, slogans, design, or advertising, nor delegate these tasks to incompetent company staff or agencies if you want to build a true brand, not just a name.

As per the diagram No. 1 the author proposes **to create brands and use strategic brand management on a long-term basis!**

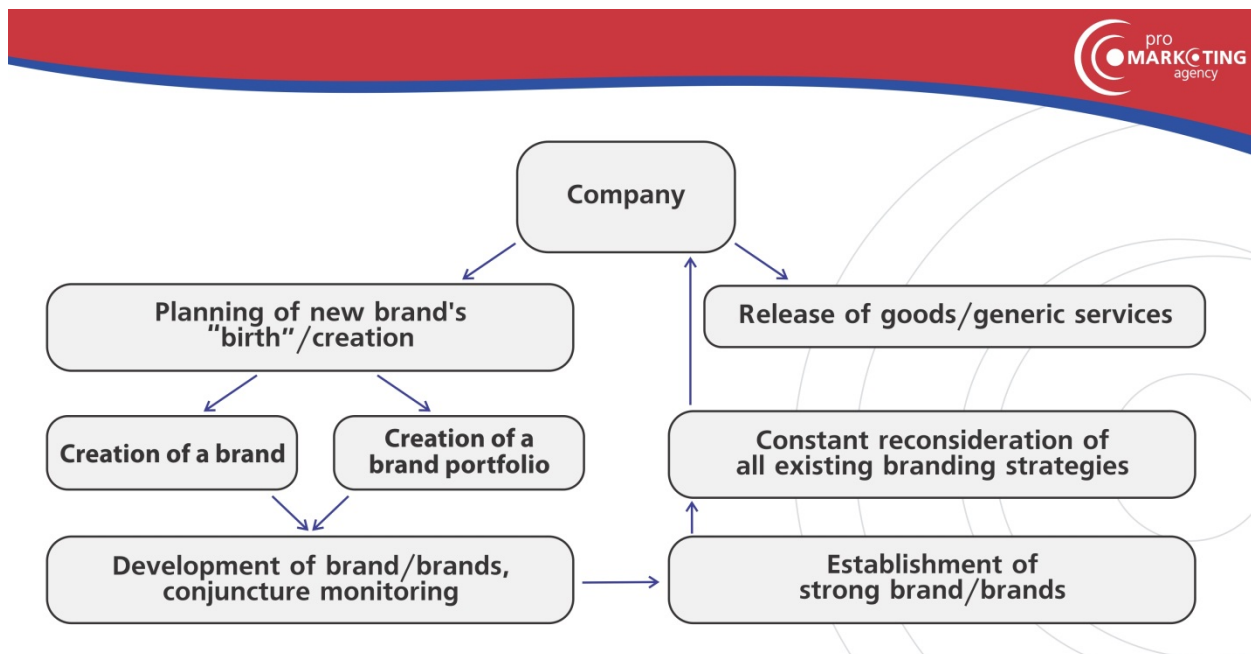


Diagram 1. Generalized diagram of strategic brand management.

Designed by the author.

Strategic brand management shall be performed in such a way, so that your brand becomes a “star”, which not only shines, but also brings joy and satisfaction, and, what’s more important – profit, to you and your clients. The strongest one wins. The one who will be capable of building the entire brand management strategy in his own team.

In our case it will take time to prove the validity of the hypothesis that the brands are born as brands, that a brand cannot “grow” out of nothing, or by uncontrolled chance. It is much harder to verify the validity of general empirical hypotheses, let alone theoretical ones, especially those underlying scientific theories, being their axioms. Such verification can only be indirect, by means of drawing conclusions from general hypotheses, establishment of identity or difference in the content of the latter with the state of things being observed, and, finally by means of assumption of the subject of scientific cognition as a decision about sufficient number of verified consequences from the general hypothesis for making a judgment about its validity or invalidity (in a particular case, falsity). The process of taking a decision by scientific community about validity of scientific hypotheses often takes a lot of time, and at that it is never final. Certain hypotheses and truths are relative, dialectical, mobile categories in the real dynamics of scientific knowledge.

Brand equity is not always directly reflected in accounting records or financial statements. However, if we decide to sell our business, the premium we expect to receive from the sale of our brand (see Fig. 5) often represents precisely this accumulated brand equity. Brand equity embodies all the investments made over many years and even decades in product development, quality enhancement, advertising, innovation, and the cultivation of trustworthy and ethical relationships with customers.

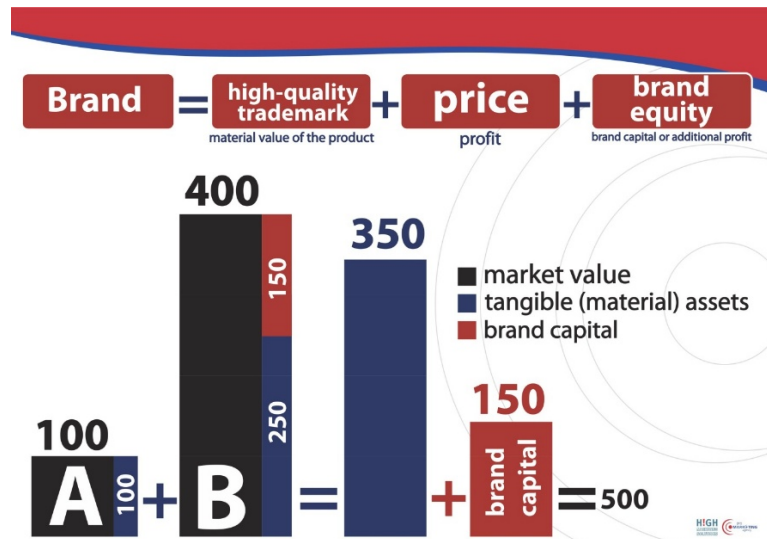


Figure 5. Structure of Market Value: Tangible Assets and Brand Equity Components.
Designed by the author.

As illustrated in Fig. 5, suppose we acquire *Company A* – for example, an ordinary rural cannery that has never been advertised and has never produced branded juices or canned goods (its products may have been used merely as raw materials for other branded manufacturers) – for 100 million. We then merge it with a second acquired company, say, a well-known producer of juices, carbonated and soft drinks under *Brand B*. Over many years, *Brand B* has accumulated recognition and brand equity. Consequently, the second company is sold to us at a significantly higher price: in addition to its tangible assets – land, equipment, technology, and active workforce – valued at 250 million, it includes an additional 150 million attributable to brand equity. Thus, within our newly formed brand portfolio valued at 500 million, we possess tangible assets worth 350 million and additional brand equity amounting to 150 million.

Recently there came up a lot of new things in marketing economic theory, in particular – geo-cultural territory branding – as a method of development of entire territories (regions, cities, even countries), although some 35 years ago no one even made hypotheses about the possibility for the whole country or a city to become a brand.

In the 1950s, David Ogilvy proposed the use of the concept of “brand image [16].” In the 1980s, major entrepreneurs noticed that brands were being sold and bought for enormous sums of money. The difference between a brand’s valuation for accounting purposes and the price a buyer is willing to pay for the brand increasingly came to be recognized as the “value of the brand.” The brand ceased to be an abstraction and became a tangible asset with real value for its owners. This rethinking of the brand’s significance led to the traditional term “brand image” increasingly being replaced by the financial equivalent “brand equity.”

The evolutionary trajectory of development in marketing and branding theory is understood as the progression of a product from a simple mark to a fully established brand.

Over time, any brand accumulates **brand equity** (brand capital) – the added value that transforms it into a high-quality and attractive offering in the eyes of devoted customers who gradually become loyal, repeatedly purchasing the brand again and again.

The value of brands has been assessed annually for decades by leading and reputable firms such as *Interbrand*, *Millward Brown*, *Forbes*, and *Brand Finance*. In 2013, *Interbrand* estimated the value of seven brands at over \$40 billion each (*Apple*, *Google*, *Coca-Cola*, *IBM*, *Microsoft*, *GE*, and *McDonald's*). By 2025, the value of the *Apple* brand alone exceeds \$400 billion. While brand owners generally do not disclose the proportion of a brand's value relative to the total value of the associated business, *Interbrand* data from 2013 indicate that for brands such as *GE*, *Allianz*, *Accenture*, *Caterpillar*, *Hyundai*, and *Chevrolet*, this proportion ranges between 10% and 25%. For brands like *Google*, *Nike*, and *Disney*, it ranges from 40% to 50%, and for *Jack Daniel's*, *Coca-Cola*, and *Burberry*, it exceeds 60% [17].

In recent years (see Table 4), the world's most valuable brands have been predominantly high-tech companies with substantial brand equity. Whereas several decades ago these rankings were largely dominated by Japanese, European, and American firms, an increasing number of Korean, Chinese, and other Asian companies have now entered the top tier. In such leading brands, the proportion of brand equity can constitute 50% to 90% of the total brand and business value, while tangible assets typically account for only 10% to 50%.

Table 4

Top 100 World brands in 2025 (by Interbrand) [17]

Place	Brand	Cost, bn \$	Change to 2024, %
1	Apple	470.9	-4
2	Microsoft	388.5	+10
3	Amazon	319.9	+7
4	Google	317.1	+9
5	Samsung	90.5	-10
6	Toyota	74.2	+2
7	Coca-Cola	60.1	-2
8	Instagram	57.3	+27
9	McDonald's	53	+0.1
10	Mercedes-Benz	50.1	-15

The fundamental task of any marketing specialist is to continuously increase brand equity. It provides a “safety cushion” that allows companies to offer discounts while maintaining high price positioning, to sell products at premium prices, and ultimately, if the business is sold, to secure a higher valuation due to substantial brand equity.

It is worth noting that in the world's most valuable and high-technology companies – those that have adopted strategic marketing and branding – brand equity can account for 50% and even up to 90% of total market capitalization.

In the specific context of the Republic of Moldova, strategic branding is currently undergoing a transition from a tactical communication tool to a core business asset. Recent market dynamics suggest that local enterprises are increasingly moving beyond simple trademark registration toward complex brand identity systems. This shift is particularly evident in the wine and food sectors, where Moldovan brands are beginning to align their value propositions with international quality standards and emotional positioning, effectively bridging the gap between regional traditions and global consumer expectations.

Author's perspective on the justification for using branding in strategic marketing planning: as understood by the author of this thesis, a **brand** – is a name of a sale object and a symbol attached to it (firm, goods, service, idea, personality, etc.), the peculiarities of which are widespread notability and stable fixation in mass consciousness. Thus, a **brand is virtually a successful trademark**. Only strong brand can generate profit on a long-term horizon; it, without relatively large investments, increases brand capital, makes a customer more loyal and less flexible in terms of price towards brand's offer.

The creation and long-term maintenance of a brand enable the accumulation of brand capital and allow branded products to be sold in greater volumes and at higher prices, with lower price sensitivity among loyal customers.

4. Conclusions

Brands are used in marketing and management to achieve their specific objectives. In marketing, brands are primarily necessary to enhance influence on consumer behavior, increasing consumer demand both in the short term and over the long term. For management, brands mainly serve as a tool for improving key economic and financial performance indicators of the firm.

This study develops **strategic brand management** as an integrated and independent framework within marketing and strategic management. While branding, brand management, and corporate strategy are often examined as related but distinct constructs, this research argues that strategic brand management should be regarded as a systemic governance framework that aligns brand identity architecture, long-term market positioning, and corporate development trajectories. The findings demonstrate that branding cannot be reduced to tactical promotional activity; rather, it constitutes a core strategic mechanism that shapes sustainable competitive advantage.

The principal theoretical contribution of this research lies in formalizing the distinction between product, registered trademark, marketed trademark, and brand as successive evolutionary stages of value creation, culminating in the accumulation of brand equity as a strategic intangible asset. Within this framework, a brand is conceptualized not merely as a legally protected sign or communication tool, but as a stable cognitive and emotional construct embedded in collective perception. This perspective extends conventional trademark-centered definitions and reinforces the understanding of a brand as a long-term, value-generating system.

From a strategic management standpoint, the study shows that brand governance increasingly functions as the nucleus around which corporate strategies are structured. In contemporary economic conditions, where firms emphasize capitalization growth and long-term market valuation, the brand serves as a central coordinating mechanism linking corporate identity, stakeholder trust, and financial sustainability. Effective strategic brand management requires coherence between declared brand promises and actual consumer experiences, systematic control over brand architecture, and alignment with overarching corporate objectives.

The broader significance of these findings extends beyond individual firm competitiveness. The principles of branding are scalable to territorial and macroeconomic contexts, suggesting that strategic brand management may serve as a developmental instrument not only for corporations but also for regions and national economies seeking

sustainable positioning in global markets. In this sense, branding emerges as both an economic and socio-cultural phenomenon influencing long-term structural competitiveness.

The study is subject to several limitations. It relies predominantly on qualitative comparative analysis and conceptual synthesis, which, while suitable for theory development, limits the potential for statistical generalization. Although the empirical observations are longitudinal, they remain interpretative and do not incorporate econometric modeling of brand equity dynamics. Furthermore, the framework has not been quantitatively validated across diverse industries or emerging digital ecosystems, where brand formation mechanisms may differ substantially.

These limitations create avenues for further research. Future studies could focus on the development of quantitative indicators for measuring strategic intentionality in brand creation, econometric modeling of long-term brand capital accumulation, and cross-sector validation of the proposed framework. Additional investigation into digital platform environments and AI-mediated consumer interactions may refine understanding of strategic brand management in technologically accelerated markets. Comparative cross-country analyses could also clarify how institutional environments influence the evolution from trademark to fully developed brand.

In conclusion, the research supports the proposition that sustainable **brand strength** is not an accidental by-product of market presence but the result of deliberate, structured, and strategically coordinated governance. Strategic brand management thus represents not only a marketing function but also a central pillar of long-term corporate development and value creation. While every brand is designated by a trademark, **not every trademark constitutes a brand**. Legal registration alone does not create objective prerequisites for enhancing competitiveness; sustainable advantage arises only through long-term, intensive brand development, which strengthens the firm's value system and ensures durability in competitive markets.

A comparative analysis between Moldovan and international branding practices reveals that while global leaders focus on systemic brand governance and long-term equity accumulation, many regional players still face challenges related to short-term orientation. However, the study confirms that successful Moldovan brands—much like their international counterparts—achieve sustainable price premiums when they transition from being “marketed trademarks” to “strategic constructs” with high consumer trust. Integrating international strategic planning models into the local business environment remains a critical factor for enhancing the global competitiveness of Moldovan intangible assets.

Key conclusions:

1. Business practice and the analysis of theoretical research in the fields of marketing, trademarks, and brands demonstrate that the concept of **strategic branding** is relatively new and still developing.
2. A truly strong brand is essentially a successful trademark.
3. Brands, like products, have their own life cycle.
4. A brand possesses a unique property: its price includes **brand equity**. All expenditures on brand promotion should therefore be considered investments in its brand equity. Strategic marketing planning in branding is carried out with the aim of achieving market dominance. Companies can not only follow existing market demand but also shape this demand through brands.

5. A vivid and memorable slogan, effective design, and advertising help create a recognizable and positive brand image.
6. Most national Moldovan brands originate from the Soviet period; however, new and young brands are increasingly entering the top rankings.
7. The picture of the most popular and widely recognized brands often differs significantly from rankings and lists created on a commissioned basis.
8. Brands always function as leading trademarks in competitive market rivalry.
9. There is an outflow of professional labor abroad, including specialists in marketing and branding.
10. A dynamic era of brands is emerging. Brands are penetrating virtually all spheres of life.
11. In Moldova, the **top-40 most recognized brands** mainly consist of brands associated with food consumption.
12. Consumers in **Chişinău** are fairly well informed about national brands.
13. A successful brand is, first and foremost, a high-quality product with a clearly defined goal and mission.
14. Moldova is not yet a widely recognized and fully developed brand on the international stage, but there are prospects for its development. National specificity and the culture of consumption strongly influence how brands should be marketed and promoted.
15. Some managers believe that a strong brand can be created even with limited financial resources. Are brands made or raised? There is no unequivocal answer. They are both made and born. A brand can be created from scratch, nurtured, and developed through continuous investment. It is also possible to transform an inconspicuous trademark into a strong and recognizable brand. With a slight clarification, the conclusion is as follows: a brand can indeed be created from the ground up, and if investments are made wisely and consistently, the growth of brand equity over time will ensure the formation of a successful and strong brand.

Main recommendations:

1. Based on the conducted research, it can be concluded that strategic planning with regard to brands should always be carried out with a long-term perspective. Companies should apply the principles of branding in their daily activities.
2. Before starting a business, it is necessary to choose one of two paths: either to produce unbranded generic products or to develop, create, and consistently support a brand or a portfolio of brands. When creating a new brand or implementing rebranding, it is important to structure the entire communication system both inside and outside the company so that relationships with customers are built strictly on fair and ethical principles.
3. To create a strong brand, managers must first develop a high-quality product with a clear and understandable brand purpose and mission for consumers. It is necessary to invest in brand development and thereby increase its brand equity – something that will make the brand less sensitive to price elasticity among loyal customers and allow the product to be sold at a higher price than competing alternatives.
4. Demand can be actively influenced and shaped through the offering of a unique brand by using the full range of marketing mix instruments (7P).
5. To attract attention to a brand, it is necessary to evoke emotions among consumers. Communication strategies should be designed in such a way that customers do not remain indifferent to the brand. The development of a brand book, corporate fonts and colors, corporate ethics, slogans, and a simple, clear, memorable, and original visual identity should

be entrusted to professionals (either in-house specialists or external agencies), rather than handled in an amateur manner.

6. To assess the real popularity and recognition of a brand, companies should conduct exploratory activities and their own marketing research rather than relying solely on paid contests, rankings, and brand lists.

7. All marketing strategies – short-term, medium-term, and long-term – must be interconnected and continuously reviewed and updated.

8. To build a successful brand in the long term, it is necessary to establish a strong brand identity and develop solid partnership relationships with consumers. The idea of a unified brand should be shared by everyone – not only customers but also the company's employees.

9. Building a strong brand requires sincerity and honesty in relationships. Deceiving customers, partners, or even competitors should be avoided, as this leads only to minor short-term victories. Honest partnership relations are the foundation of a strong brand–customer relationship.

10. For a brand to be strong, it is necessary to offer customers a unique value proposition – an original value that enables consumers to choose the brand without constantly comparing it with competitors.

11. If a brand does not shape tastes and trends or generate demand through its offerings, it must orient itself toward consumer preferences and trends, forming its offerings in accordance with market demand.

12. When marketing policy and brand marketing planning are properly structured, it becomes possible to quickly gain the trust of almost any consumer, even highly demanding ones.

13. Strategic marketing planning should incorporate innovative marketing mix instruments and actively apply them when the potential of the classical tools ($7P = 4P + 3P$) has been exhausted.

14. The key components of a brand – product quality, price, and brand image (brand equity)– should be used to influence the brand itself, as well as consumer perception and the degree of customer loyalty.

15. It is always necessary to act quickly and decisively. A strong and successful brand can be built even with relatively modest financial resources, but it requires the efforts of the entire organization. In Moldova, there is significant potential for the creation and development of strong brands; achieving this requires the application of a competent marketing approach and the mobilization of the necessary human and financial resources.

From a strategic perspective, **producing branded products is significantly more advantageous than offering no-name or generic goods**. Brands enable firms to differentiate themselves in saturated markets, reduce customer price sensitivity, and maintain more stable demand through loyalty formation. Unlike generic products, which compete primarily on price and are easily substitutable, brands generate emotional attachment, trust, and perceived quality – factors that drive long-term profitability and resilience under competitive pressure.

Brand is a successful trademark. Brands are not inherently strong at the outset; they acquire strength over time through effective, comprehensive, and forward-looking marketing management. A strong brand provides multiple advantages to both the company and its customers compared to depersonalized goods and services. Over time, a strong brand allows for the accumulation of brand equity – an intangible asset that attracts clients and enhances the firm's market value.

Research Data Availability Statement: The study is based on both secondary and primary data. Secondary data were obtained from publicly available analytical reports, scientific publications, and brand rankings (MPP Consulting, Interbrand, Brand Finance etc.) cited in the reference list. Primary data were collected by the author through independent marketing research (PMA, University researches etc.) conducted during the study. The datasets used and analyzed in the current research are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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Contribution of Authors:

Igor Belostecinic: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Lilia Chiriac: Validation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest

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