

Cranfield University

AAKANKSHA BADWE

NAVIGATING THE TENSION BETWEEN IMMEDIATE MARKET VISIBILITY AND ENDURING BRAND VALUE IN EMERGING UK FOOD AND BEVERAGE START-UPS

Cranfield School of Management
MSc in Management

MSc Thesis
Academic Year: 2024-2025

Supervisor: Zimu Xu

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Abstract

This study examines how founders of emerging UK food and beverage ventures navigate the tension between achieving immediate market visibility and building enduring brand value under resource constraints. Accordingly, it asks: How do founders of emerging UK food and beverage start-ups navigate the tension between achieving immediate market visibility and building enduring brand value under resource constraints? The research contributes to literature on entrepreneurial branding and temporal strategy by exploring how temporal decision-making unfolds under scarcity.

Adopting an interpretivist design, the study draws on seventeen semi-structured interviews with founders and senior brand decision-makers from early-stage UK F&B start-ups. Data were analysed thematically and organised along an E1–E4 orientation continuum, representing increasing venture maturity and evolving decision logics. Trustworthiness was ensured through a transparent audit trail, reflexive journaling, verbatim evidence, and cross-case comparison.

Five themes emerged that explain how temporal choices are made in practice: temporal fluidity, dynamic switching across horizons; decision logics, pragmatic opportunism tempered by principle; evolution and maturity, institutionalising entrepreneurial branding; measurement and learning loops, lightweight yet cumulative sensemaking; and constraints and authenticity, resource limits as a credible source of meaning. The analysis shows a progression from reactive, channel-led visibility to purpose-anchored brand building in which short-term actions increasingly serve a coherent long-term narrative.

This study contributes theoretically by conceptualising temporal fluidity as a founder capability that coordinates short and long horizons under uncertainty, and by reframing constraint as an authenticity engine rather than merely a limitation. Practically, it offers staged recommendations for founders and ecosystem actors (accelerators and investors) on resourcing, measurement, and governance that align immediate traction with brand longevity. The study is situated within UK founder-led F&B ventures; future research could explore the transferability of the E1–E4 continuum across categories and geographies.

Acknowledgements

"We do not learn from experience… we learn from reflecting on experience." – John Dewey (1993)

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Finally, to my family and friends - thank you for your constant faith, support, and understanding through the long hours and self-doubt that accompany research. Your belief made perseverance possible and turned this academic pursuit into a deeply personal journey of learning and resilience.

Aakanksha Badwe
2025

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Navigating the Tension Between Immediate Market Visibility and Enduring Brand Value in Emerging UK Food and Beverage Start-Ups

Executive Summary

This thesis explores how founders of emerging UK food and beverage start-ups navigate the tension between achieving immediate market visibility and building enduring brand value under resource constraints. Early ventures must achieve rapid market traction while cultivating brand meaning capable of sustaining future growth, creating a persistent tension between immediate sales and coherent brand identity.

A qualitative interpretivist approach was adopted, involving seventeen semi-structured interviews with founders and senior brand decision-makers. Thematic analysis, supported by an E1–E4 orientation framework based on venture maturity and branding logic, enabled comparisons across different growth stages and strategic priorities.

Five interrelated themes emerged: temporal fluidity, decision logics, evolution and maturity, measurement and learning loops, and constraints and authenticity. Across all cases, branding was understood as a continuous, overlapping process. Tactical activities designed to generate awareness were also used to reinforce identity when aligned with purpose and values. Resource scarcity frequently strengthened authenticity by driving transparency, creativity, and personal engagement.

The study contributes to entrepreneurial branding scholarship by reframing temporal balance as continuity rather than trade-off and by demonstrating how authenticity can emerge as a strategic asset from operating within visible limits. Practically, it offers guidance for founders, investors, and accelerators seeking to combine agility with consistency in brand development. The findings emphasise that when everyday actions align with identity, even resource-constrained ventures can build credible and enduring brands.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Over the past decade, the United Kingdom's food and beverage (F&B) industry has experienced rapid entrepreneurial growth, particularly in premium and niche categories such as functional drinks, plant-based foods, and ethical snacking. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) now dominate the sector, representing more than 96 per cent of registered businesses and contributing approximately £30 billion to the national economy (Food and Drink Federation, 2024). This expansion has been driven by shifting consumer priorities toward authenticity, health, and social responsibility, which have redefined competition and brand perception in contemporary markets.

Within this evolving environment, branding has become a decisive source of differentiation. Established corporations can invest continuously in long-term brand-building programmes that strengthen the overall value of the brand in consumers' minds, whereas early-stage ventures often prioritise immediate visibility to sustain sales and attract investors. This contrast creates a managerial tension between tactical visibility efforts such as influencer collaborations, event sampling, and social-media campaigns, and the slower, cumulative process of building brand meaning through identity, design consistency, and community engagement. The dilemma is not merely operational but conceptual, reflecting how founders interpret the passage of time in their branding practice. Traditional brand frameworks present branding as a sequential investment process that gradually accumulates value (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), while entrepreneurial literature, notably effectuation theory, emphasises decision-making through iteration and flexibility under uncertainty (Sarasvathy, 2001). The intersection of these temporal perspectives remains under-explored, leaving a gap in understanding how entrepreneurs construct and manage brand meaning when strategic horizons overlap (Mintel, 2023; McKinsey & Company, 2022).

1.2 Industry and Sector Context

The UK's premium F&B landscape has been reshaped by the rise of direct-to-consumer (D2C) business models, the growing centrality of digital marketing, and post-pandemic shifts in consumption behaviour. These changes have accelerated consumers' preference

for convenience, transparency, and authentic brand engagement (Mintel, 2023; McKinsey & Company, 2022; Nobre & Ferreira, 2018). Social-media platforms have lowered entry barriers for brand launches and intensified competition for attention, particularly for SMEs operating with constrained resources (Nobre & Ferreira, 2018; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Dahlén & Rosengren, 2020). For many start-ups, success hinges less on product novelty than on perceived authenticity, transparency, and alignment with cultural narratives (Holt, 2002; Beverland, 2021). The digital environment has also accelerated brand cycles: visibility can be gained quickly yet erode without a coherent identity and consistent storytelling (Graham, Fennell & Mulhern, 2020; Becker, Wiegand & Reinartz, 2023; Keller, 2016).

Macroeconomic volatility further complicates this context. Rising ingredient costs, supply disruptions, and investor caution have constrained marketing budgets and pressured founders to adopt improvisational, low-cost promotional tactics. These realities force entrepreneurs to oscillate between short-term campaigns that sustain momentum and long-term initiatives that embed symbolic meaning and consumer trust. Understanding this balance is essential for both scholars and practitioners. From an academic standpoint, it enriches discussions on entrepreneurial marketing and time-based strategy. From a managerial standpoint, it provides insight into how small firms can build sustainable brands despite uncertainty and limited capital. (McKinsey & Company, 2022)

1.3 Research Problem and Management Problem

Brand-building scholarship has historically centred on large organisations capable of consistent communication and long-term investment (Kapferer, 1997; Keller, 2012). In contrast, start-ups experience branding as an adaptive process that evolves through experimentation and constraint (Merrilees et al., 2020). Existing models, such as Binet and Field's (2013) 60:40 rule balancing short-term activation with long-term brand investment, assume stable budgets and established data infrastructures, conditions rarely present in small ventures. Consequently, there is limited empirical understanding of how founders in resource-constrained environments negotiate the temporal trade-off between immediate visibility and enduring brand value.

This management problem was observed first-hand through the author's internship at Chapmans of London, a premium non-alcoholic beverage start-up in the UK. During the

placement, the founders faced constant pressure to generate short-term sales through promotional visibility while also aspiring to build a distinctive and enduring brand identity capable of attracting loyal consumers and investors. Limited financial and human resources intensified this trade-off, compelling the team to make continuous decisions about where to allocate time, attention, and capital. These experiences revealed a broader issue faced by many early-stage F&B ventures: the need to reconcile immediate commercial imperatives with the long-term process of brand development. The research therefore focuses on understanding how entrepreneurs interpret, prioritise, and integrate these competing demands within constrained business environments.

1.4 Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this research is to explore how founders of emerging UK food and beverage start-ups balance short-term brand-awareness tactics with long-term brand-building strategies under conditions of limited resources. To address this aim, the study investigates how founders conceptualise short-term and long-term branding within their operational realities, the managerial reasoning and contextual factors influencing decisions between visibility and equity-building activities, and how these approaches evolve as firms mature and gain market legitimacy.

The central research question guiding this thesis is: How do founders of emerging UK food and beverage start-ups navigate the tension between achieving immediate market visibility and building enduring brand value under resource constraints? The inquiry is qualitative and exploratory, seeking to generate contextual understanding rather than test predetermined hypotheses. It examines founders' narratives to reveal how temporal perspectives and resource limitations interact in shaping branding practice.

1.5 Scope and Relevance of the Study

The research focuses on independently founded UK-based food and beverage ventures employing fewer than 25 people and operating for less than eight years. Multinational subsidiaries and established consumer-goods companies are excluded because their branding processes differ in scale, governance, and capital intensity.

Academically, the study contributes to entrepreneurial and SME branding literature by integrating classical brand-equity theory with effectuation and temporal-strategy

perspectives (Sarasvathy, 2001; Merrilees et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2020; Iglesias et al., 2020). It also extends discussion on authenticity by viewing constraint not merely as a limitation but as a credible driver of meaning creation (Beverland, 2021; Iglesias and Ind, 2020). Practically, the findings aim to inform start-up founders, incubators, and investors seeking to understand how small brands can sustain both short-term performance and long-term resonance in volatile markets.

1.6 Thesis Structure

The thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the background and rationale. Chapter 2 reviews relevant branding and entrepreneurship literature to establish the conceptual gap. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative methodology. Chapter 4 presents the findings. Chapter 5 discusses theoretical and practical implications. Chapter 6 concludes with contributions and future research directions.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Branding has evolved from a communication tool into a strategic asset central to organisational identity, differentiation, and long-term competitiveness (Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 2012). Traditional brand theory regards brand building as a deliberate, structured process supported by significant resources and managerial control. However, recent scholarship increasingly recognises branding as an adaptive and iterative practice, particularly in entrepreneurial and small firm contexts (Merrilees, Miller, and Yakimova, 2020; Cocker and Cronin, 2023).

The purpose of this chapter is to critically evaluate the theoretical foundations and evolving perspectives that explain how firms balance short-term brand activation with long-term brand building. The review integrates classic frameworks with emerging literature to identify conceptual gaps and develop the foundation for this research. The discussion unfolds across five main areas: (1) brand-building theory and temporal perspectives, (2) short-term branding and activation, (3) long-term brand building and meaning creation, (4) branding in entrepreneurial and SME contexts, and (5) the conceptual synthesis and research gap underpinning this thesis.

2.2 Brand Building and Temporal Perspectives

Classical brand theory positions brand equity as a cumulative asset developed through consistent associations, awareness, and positive consumer experiences (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Kapferer's (2012) Brand Identity Prism reinforces this by suggesting that enduring brands integrate physical, personality, and cultural dimensions into a coherent identity system. Such traditional approaches assume brand stability, market predictability, and sustained investment, conditions rarely attainable in start-up environments.

More recent perspectives introduce the idea of temporal duality in branding, recognising that firms must manage multiple time horizons simultaneously. Rather than treating brand activation and brand building as sequential phases, contemporary models emphasise their coexistence and interdependence (Graham, Fennell, and Mulhern, 2020). Binet and Field's (2013) influential 60:40 framework argues that an effective marketing investment strategy allocates roughly 60 per cent of resources to long-term brand building and 40 per cent to short-term activation. Subsequent studies, however, note that these ratios are derived primarily from large corporate data sets and may not account for the volatility, cash constraints, and decision fluidity of smaller ventures (Nobre and Ferreira, 2018; Cocker and Cronin, 2023).

As a result, the temporal dynamics of branding in start-ups require a more nuanced understanding. Research now acknowledges that founders in emerging ventures collapse planning horizons, blending tactical and strategic initiatives to ensure both survival and brand coherence (Merrilees et al., 2020). Building on this temporal framing, the next section explores how short-term activation functions as both a commercial necessity and a brand-building mechanism.

2.3 Short-Term Branding and Market Activation

Short-term branding, often referred to as brand activation, focuses on generating immediate awareness, engagement, and sales. Common tactics include social-media campaigns, influencer collaborations, paid advertising, promotions, and experiential events (Binet and Field, 2013). These activities are typically evaluated through measurable outcomes such as impressions, conversions, or short-term revenue uplift.

Recent scholarship has revisited this topic to reflect the impact of digital platforms and the speed of consumer engagement. For instance, Campbell and Farrell (2020) argue that real-time analytics and micro-campaigns have made activation more agile and data-driven, allowing even small firms to optimise visibility within limited budgets. Similarly, Dahlen and Rosengren (2020) show that digital ecosystems enable faster brand response cycles, supporting survival in competitive markets.

In early-stage F&B ventures, such activities are essential for encouraging first-time purchase and building initial trust ('generating trial'). Event sampling, festival participation, and digital influencer partnerships help overcome consumer hesitation towards untested brands (Nobre and Ferreira, 2018). Yet scholars caution against the "promotion trap," where excessive short-term discounting undermines perceived quality and erodes long-term brand meaning (Sharp, 2010). Without narrative continuity or an embedded identity system, start-ups risk commodification and short-lived awareness (Keller and Lehmann, 2006).

Therefore, short-term activation must be framed not as a standalone exercise but as a component of a broader narrative that links immediate visibility to the gradual accumulation of brand value.

2.4 Long-Term Brand Building and Meaning Creation

Long-term brand building focuses on developing associations, emotional resonance, and symbolic meaning that sustain the brand beyond transient market cycles. Kapferer (2012) asserts that longevity depends on aligning internal identity with external perception through consistent storytelling and consumer experience. Aaker (2014) similarly highlights the strategic importance of brand meaning, identity coherence, and trust as sources of long-term differentiation.

Recent studies further expand this view to include brand purpose and authenticity as core elements of modern brand strategy. Vredenburg et al. (2020) demonstrate that consumers increasingly reward authentic, value-driven brands that exhibit coherence between words and actions. Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte, and Beverland (2022) show that authenticity acts as a strategic resource, particularly under uncertainty, enabling smaller firms to command loyalty even with limited marketing expenditure.

Iglesias and Ind (2020) introduce the concept of conscious brand co-creation, where meaning is collaboratively produced between the firm and its stakeholders. Founders, employees, and customers participate in this meaning-making process, fostering community-based brand identities. More recent work by Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz (2023) highlights that consistency in brand purpose strengthens stakeholder trust, while flexible adaptation sustains relevance in dynamic markets.

However, long-term brand building is resource intensive and its benefits often accrue slowly, making it challenging for start-ups operating under financial constraints. Keller (2016) and Gensler et al. (2021) argue that while equity grows cumulatively, the time lag between investment and return can strain entrepreneurial liquidity. Thus, emerging ventures must reconcile the tension between immediate commercial outcomes and the gradual process of brand meaning creation.

2.5 Branding in Entrepreneurial and SME Contexts

Entrepreneurial branding diverges from corporate branding because it relies on improvisation, experimentation, and founder-led meaning creation rather than formalised processes (Merrilees et al., 2020; Cocker and Cronin, 2023). Sarasvathy's (2001) effectuation theory provides a useful foundation, suggesting that entrepreneurs make decisions based on available resources and evolving contingencies rather than predictive planning.

The SME context is central to understanding this phenomenon. Unlike large corporations with established budgets, hierarchies, and systems, small ventures operate under resource scarcity and uncertainty. This constraint fosters flexibility and closer customer engagement, allowing rapid adaptation and authenticity (Krake, 2005; Wong and Merrilees, 2015). At the same time, such conditions expose start-ups to instability and inconsistent communication. Comparing SMEs to larger corporations helps highlight these unique dynamics: where corporations achieve brand coherence through scale and formal governance, SMEs rely on founder identity and relational marketing to achieve resonance (Berthon et al., 2008; Morrish and Deacon, 2019).

In the F&B sector, this personalisation often manifests through founder storytelling, ethical sourcing narratives, or community-focused engagement. Graham et al. (2020) and Cocker

and Cronin (2023) observe that start-ups gradually professionalise brand management as they mature, shifting from intuitive expression to structured governance once funding stabilises. Constraints therefore act not only as limitations but as creative catalysts, prompting authenticity and differentiation (Iglesias, Ind, and Schroeder, 2020).

Consequently, examining the SME context is critical because it provides insight into how scarcity-driven creativity shapes branding outcomes.

2.6 Balancing Short-Term and Long-Term Horizons

Integrating the preceding perspectives reveals a central paradox in start-up branding: the simultaneous need to generate immediate awareness while nurturing enduring brand meaning. Traditional marketing models portray these as sequential stages, but emerging research conceptualises them as overlapping and mutually reinforcing cycles (Graham et al., 2020; Becker et al., 2023).

Balmer and Burghausen (2019) note that even young firms can create a form of “heritage in the making,” where consistent storytelling during early campaigns contributes to a nascent brand legacy. Merrilees et al. (2020) argue that founders merge tactical visibility with identity formation through storytelling-led promotions that both sell and symbolise. Therefore, it becomes essential to understand not only how this balance operates conceptually but also the managerial reasoning behind it.

Given the limited empirical insight into how founders consciously manage this balance, especially in UK F&B ventures marked by fast-changing consumer trends and digital competition, this study seeks to bridge that gap. The next section consolidates these streams into a conceptual framework that positions temporal balance, effectuation, and authenticity as interrelated drivers of start-up branding.

2.7 Conceptual Framework and Gap

The literature reviewed indicates three interconnected foundations that guide this research: temporal duality in branding, effectual decision-making, and authenticity under constraint. Temporal duality recognises that effective branding requires concurrent management of short-term activation and long-term equity-building activities (Graham et al., 2020). Effectual decision-making highlights the iterative nature of entrepreneurial

choices, where founders rely on experimentation, feedback, and available means rather than pre-set plans (Sarasvathy, 2001; Merrilees et al., 2020). Authenticity under constraint underscores that resource limitations, when aligned with genuine values, enhance credibility and differentiation (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Napoli et al., 2022).

Together, these constructs reveal a clear research gap. Although prior studies acknowledge the coexistence of these dynamics, limited attention has been paid to how entrepreneurs integrate them into a coherent branding approach. Most existing literature treats temporal balance as a theoretical ideal, offering little understanding of how it unfolds within the lived managerial experience of small ventures.

The conceptual framework for this study therefore positions founder decision logic, shaped by available resources and contextual pressures, as the mechanism linking short-term activation and long-term brand-building outcomes. This model, illustrated in Figure 1, depicts resource constraints informing effectual reasoning, which in turn drives branding practices that influence visibility, authenticity, and growth trajectory.

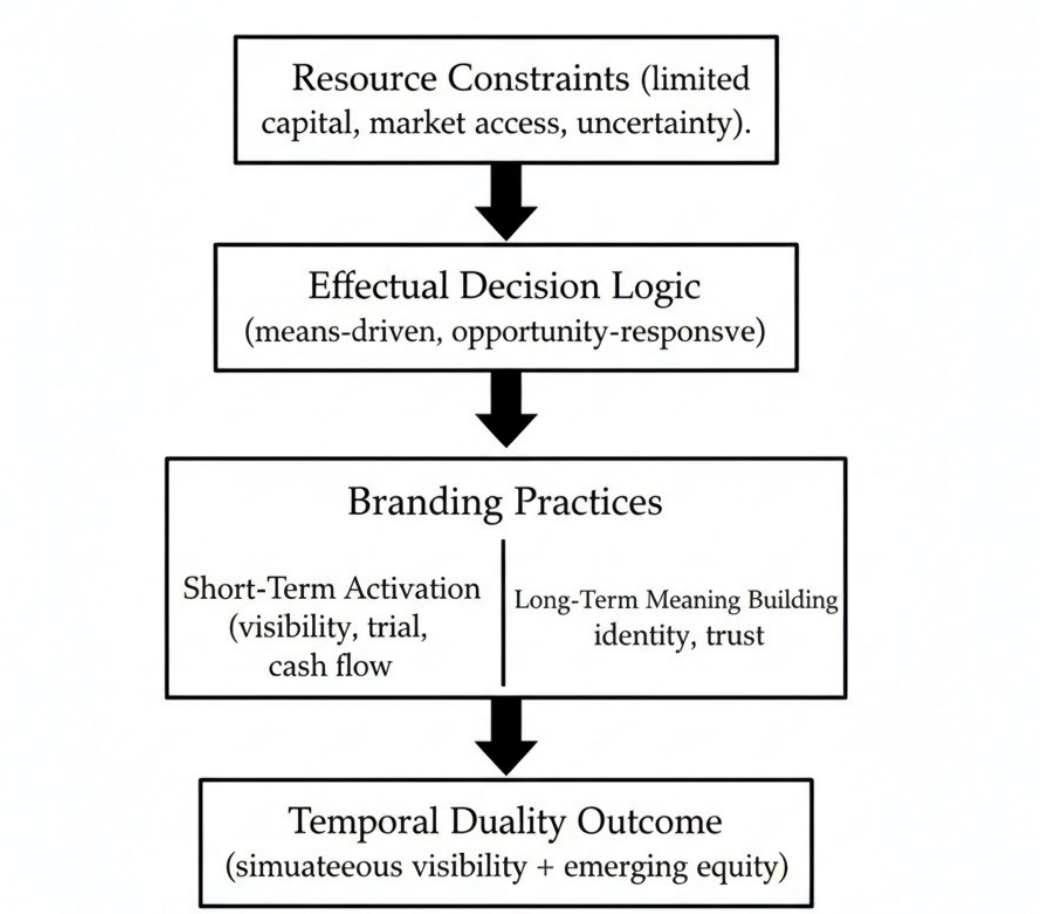


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Branding Under Constraint

This theoretical framing highlights temporal duality as a central branding challenge for emerging ventures and informs the development of this study's research design.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological design used to examine how founders navigate the tension between achieving immediate market visibility and building enduring brand value under resource constraints. It outlines the research philosophy and approach, explains the qualitative design and choice of methods, details sampling and data collection, and then describes the analysis, saturation, trustworthiness, and ethics procedures that underpin the study.

3.2 Research Philosophy and Approach

The study adopts an interpretivist epistemology and a constructivist ontology, recognising that brand meaning and managerial reasoning are socially constructed and best accessed through participant's accounts situated in their contexts (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019; Bryman, 2016). The intent is interpretive rather than law-seeking: to understand how founders make sense of competing branding priorities as they navigate uncertainty. An inductive logic guides the work so that theoretical insight is developed from patterns in participant's narratives rather than imposed a priori. This stance aligns with qualitative inquiry into contemporary management practice, where complex processes, multiple time horizons, and context specificity require depth of understanding (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013).

The interpretivist perspective also resonates conceptually with the *effectual reasoning* discussed in the literature review. Both emphasise how entrepreneurs construct meaning and make decisions through iterative learning, contextual adaptation, and engagement with available means rather than following predetermined causal plans. This philosophical coherence reinforces the suitability of qualitative inquiry for exploring the subjective reasoning behind branding decisions in early-stage ventures.

To ensure a coherent link between philosophy and method, the analysis strategy was selected to enable close engagement with language, decision rationales, and temporal framing as expressed by participants.

3.3 Research Design and Rationale

Semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit detailed, reflective accounts of branding decisions while retaining a consistent set of prompts across cases. This approach is well suited to exploring managerial sense-making because it combines a guiding protocol with the flexibility to probe for clarification and depth within each participant's lived context (Qu and Dumay, 2011; Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide was mapped to the research aim and questions, covering temporal framing of branding work, decision criteria and trade-offs, development through maturity, and approaches to measurement and learning. Questions were open-ended to invite explanation of reasoning and sequencing rather than short factual responses. Semi-structured interviewing already

assumes adaptability to the conversation; it was used here in that accepted sense, without claiming novelty (See Appendix A for the indicative interview guide).

3.4 Sampling, Participants, and Data Collection

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit information-rich cases from the UK F&B start-up landscape. Inclusion criteria required that firms be independently founded, fewer than eight years old, employ fewer than twenty-five people, offer branded consumer products in food or beverages, and be actively engaged in brand-related activity.

Seventeen interviews were conducted: twelve founders, three heads of marketing, one chief executive officer, and one executive director. Founders formed the core of the sample because the research focuses on founder understanding and decision logic; senior commercial leaders were included where they worked closely with founders on brand strategy in lean organisations. Participants were accessed through professional networks, sector events, and direct outreach to F&B communities, combining purposive and snowball techniques typical of qualitative research in entrepreneurial contexts.

Interviews took place between August and September 2025 via video call and, where feasible, in person at markets or trade fairs. Each conversation lasted approximately forty to forty-five minutes on average. Audio was recorded with consent, field notes captured contextual cues, and recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

In line with supervisory guidance, participants are described in aggregate and individually coded (P1–P17). Table 3.1 provides the demographic overview of the interviewees, showing variation in gender, age, business type, and firm maturity.

Table 3.0.1: Demographic Overview of Participants

Participant ID	Gender	Age (Approx)	Business Type	Years in Business
P1	Female	32	Non-alcoholic beverages (premium mixers)	2
P2	Male	28	Snacks (high-protein granola)	1
P3	Male	35	Indian street-food restaurant	3

P4	Male	30	Non-alcoholic RTD mocktails	2
P5	Male	33	Plant-based desserts	3
P6	Male	31	Non-alcoholic beverages (sparkling tea)	2
P7	Female	36	Ready-to-eat snacks	3
P8	Male	39	Ready-to-eat meals	4
P9	Male	34	Purpose-led café chain (Indian street food)	3
P10	Female	29	Condiments (artisan sauces)	2
P11	Male	37	Non-alcoholic beverages (kombucha)	4
P12	Female	38	Ready-to-eat meals	5
P13	Male	40	Plant-based meal kits	5
P14	Male	42	Condiments (premium chutneys)	6
P15	Male	34	Non-alcoholic beverages (cold brew)	4
P16	Male	43	Fine-dining Indian restaurant	5
P17	Female	39	Sustainable niche condiments and spreads	5

Source: Author's fieldwork (2025).

(A fuller participant overview, including interview mode and duration, is presented in Appendix B.)

The table illustrates the range of participants interviewed, reflecting diversity in gender, product category, and firm maturity, with business ages spanning one to six years. This heterogeneity offered comparative insight across different growth stages and market routes (A short sample transcript illustrating interview tone and depth is included in Appendix C).

3.5 Data Analysis and Coding Process

Thematic analysis provided a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying patterned meaning across the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process began with repeated reading of transcripts to achieve immersion and preliminary noting of concepts connected to temporal balance, decision rationales, and constraints. Initial codes were generated inductively at the semantic level, attending to language used to describe short-term activation and long-term brand building. Codes were compared and refined through constant attention to similarities and differences, after which they were collated into candidate categories that expressed relationships among concepts. Finally, categories were reviewed for coherence and distinctiveness and developed into themes that speak directly to the research questions (A snapshot of the code–category–theme structure is provided in Appendix E).

Manual coding was used deliberately to maintain proximity to the text and to enhance reflexive engagement with meanings as they emerged. This choice is well established as rigorous in qualitative research when accompanied by a transparent audit trail of decisions and iterative checking for consistency (Nowell, Norris, White and Moules, 2017). Memos recorded coding rationales and interpretive moves, and iterations of the codebook were retained to evidence how themes stabilised over time. The interpretive stance was sustained throughout to link participant narratives to the theoretical concerns of the study without forcing data into pre-existing templates (Cross-case representation of themes is summarised in Appendix F).

3.6 Saturation

Evidence of conceptual saturation appeared as recurring codes and no substantively new themes after approximately the fourteenth interview, with subsequent interviews reinforcing rather than extending the thematic structure (Guest, Namey and Chen, 2020). Variation in firm age, product category, and route to market provided breadth for testing the stability of themes while preserving analytic depth. The sample size was therefore sufficient for the interpretive aims of the research.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Credibility was supported through sustained engagement with the data, memoing during analysis, and periodic discussion of emerging interpretations with an academic supervisor

to challenge assumptions and strengthen argument coherence. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced by maintaining an audit trail of coding iterations and decision points. Following the trustworthiness criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability was supported through thick description of the research context and the inclusion of verbatim participant quotations, consistent with contemporary guidance for thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical approval was obtained through Cranfield University's procedures prior to data collection. Participants received an information sheet and consent form outlining the study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality protections, and the right to withdraw. All data were stored securely, and identifiers were removed during transcription. The researcher acknowledged prior industry exposure and used reflexive journaling to monitor potential bias (A consolidated reflexivity and trustworthiness statement is provided in Appendix G).

Chapter 4 – Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from seventeen semi-structured interviews with founders and senior managers of emerging UK F&B ventures. The aim was to explore how these entrepreneurs balance short-term brand awareness with the longer-term work of brand building within the limitations of small-scale operations. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework was used to identify patterns across their experiences.

Five themes were developed: Temporal Fluidity, Decision Logics, Evolution and Maturity, Measurement and Learning Loops, and Constraints and Authenticity. Each relates directly to the research sub-questions set out in Chapter 1.

Participants were grouped into four orientation types based on how they approached branding and organisational maturity. Table 4.1 outlines these categories and their defining characteristics.

Table 4.0.1. Participant Orientation Groups

Orientation Code	Description	No. of Participants	Typical Firm Age	Primary Route to Market	Branding Emphasis
E1 – Reactive Awareness Builders	Early-stage start-ups focused on immediate visibility and survival-driven marketing.	6	1–3 years	Pop-ups, markets, D2C	Rapid visibility and short-term activation.
E2 – Strategic Storytellers	Purpose-led brands combining emotional storytelling with tactical marketing.	5	3–4 years	D2C with selective retail	Narrative consistency and audience engagement.
E3 – Adaptive Scalables	Growth-stage ventures institutionalising brand systems while retaining flexibility.	4	3.5–6 years	Retail-first or hybrid	Structured identity with iterative learning.
E4 – Conscientious Minimalists	Small sustainable producers prioritising authenticity and restraint over scale.	2	2–5 years	D2C or local networks	Purpose-driven minimalism and ethical focus.

Source: Author's fieldwork (2025).

Although the five themes cut across all groups, their expression varied according to maturity and market positioning. (Derivation criteria and exemplars for the E1–E4 orientation groups are set out in Appendix D)

4.2 Theme 1: Temporal Fluidity

Across all interviews, founders described short-term and long-term branding as part of one ongoing process. The idea of separate time horizons rarely appeared in their accounts. For early ventures, daily marketing activity was both a sales driver and a narrative vehicle. One founder commented, *"Every event we do for quick sales also tells people what we stand for"* (P3).

Participants in Group E2 treated this overlap as deliberate brand practice. *"Even our discounts tell a story about value and care,"* said P9. They believed that repetition across time was essential for credibility. In E3, temporal fluidity appeared as planned alignment. *"We plan quarterly, but every promotion still has to link to our purpose,"* explained P13. For E4, fluidity took the form of selective silence. *"We would rather say a few meaningful things that people remember,"* noted P16.

These experiences suggest that brand time for start-ups is cyclical rather than sequential. Instead of alternating between building equity and chasing visibility, they merge both within everyday practice. As Keller (2016) observes, brand equity grows through the accumulation of consistent experiences, which is reflected in how these founders treat each marketing act as a contribution to long-term identity.

4.3 Theme 2: Decision Logics

The decisions that shaped branding activity often balanced immediate financial pressures with a desire for authenticity and coherence. For E1 participants, short-term viability guided most actions. *"We have to do what pays the bills, even if it's not perfect for the brand,"* said P2. Yet, even these early-stage founders expressed awareness of longer-term consequences. *"Discounts help us survive, but they can't define us,"* added P4.

Groups E2 and E3 showed more deliberate attempts to maintain proportional balance. Some applied informal ratios to ensure resources were divided between performance marketing and storytelling content. P7 noted, *"We keep a rough split in mind between*

quick-return activity and things that build our reputation." Others described decision-making as a test of values. *"When something looks profitable but feels wrong, we stop,"* said P12.

For the smallest and most ethically driven firms in E4, choice itself became a signal of brand principle. *"We could outsource and make more, but that's not who we are,"* stated P17. These accounts show that decisions about brand activity are not only financial calculations but also moral judgements. Resource scarcity sharpens the need for clarity and focus, forcing founders to define what the brand stands for and what it will never compromise.

4.4 Theme 3: Evolution and Maturity

Most participants described a gradual movement from improvisation to structure, as their businesses developed. In the beginning, branding was personal and improvised. P5 said, *"It was just me doing everything, guessing colours, fonts, captions, whatever felt right."* This intuitive phase allowed rapid experimentation and helped identify what resonated with customers.

As ventures grew, branding became more formal. P14 explained, *"Once we had retailers, we needed guidelines and consistency, not just ideas."* E3 participants, in particular, viewed this shift as essential for scaling. However, several founders expressed ambivalence. P16 reflected, *"Now that everything is planned, it's easier to manage but harder to feel spontaneous."*

E4 founders tended to resist over-professionalisation. *"We keep things simple because polish makes us look like everyone else,"* said P17. These reflections illustrate how maturity is not simply progress but an adjustment of balance between control and creativity. The findings echo Merrilees et al. (2020), who argue that entrepreneurial branding evolves through continuous adaptation rather than fixed stages.

4.5 Theme 4: Measurement and Learning Loops

Participants used measurement mainly to inform reflection rather than to monitor compliance with numerical targets. Early-stage firms focused on visible outcomes such as

event sales or web traffic. *"If orders go up after a tasting, that's good enough proof,"* explained P1.

E2 and E3 groups adopted broader approaches. They combined performance data with qualitative indicators such as repeat customers and social feedback. P9 noted, *"When people use our phrases in reviews, that's when we know the message works."* For others, engagement quality mattered more than quantity. *"We measure, but we don't get lost in the numbers,"* said P11.

E4 founders assessed brand health through relationships rather than metrics. *"If customers keep coming back and bring friends, that's our sign of success,"* said P17. This suggests that start-ups develop their own learning systems suited to their scale and maturity. Rather than applying corporate metrics, they rely on contextual, experience-based signals to guide adjustments. This practice aligns with McGrath's (2013) view of discovery-driven learning, where data are used to refine future actions rather than validate past assumptions.

4.6 Theme 5: Constraints and Authenticity

All participants identified constraint as a defining feature of their brand environment. Limited resources restricted their reach but also strengthened their credibility. P1 commented, *"We can't match big budgets, so we build trust by being personal."* For many, transparency became a natural marketing language. P10 explained, *"Customers like seeing behind the scenes. It feels real to them."*

E2 and E3 founders described constraint as creative stimulation. *"It forces us to think harder about ideas that mean something,"* said P8. Others saw limitation as a moral boundary. P17 reflected, *"We're small by choice. Growth without purpose isn't worth it."*

This perspective supports Napoli et al. (2022), who argue that authenticity arises from credible constraint rather than performance. For these entrepreneurs, scarcity was not a weakness but a signal of integrity. Their audiences perceived sincerity precisely because the founders operated visibly within limits. Constraint, therefore, was not just a context but a source of differentiation and trust.

4.7 Integrative Summary

Taken together, the five themes show that branding in emerging food and beverage ventures is a continuous and adaptive process. Founders operate across overlapping time horizons, where immediate marketing actions contribute to long-term brand meaning. Decision logics evolve from financial pragmatism toward principled selectivity as ventures mature.

Measurement and learning function as cycles of observation and response rather than formal systems of control. Most importantly, constraint underpins authenticity and identity, turning limitation into a source of meaning. Across the four orientation groups, the pattern remains consistent: growth changes the tools and systems but rarely alters the fundamental logic of coherence over time.

These findings reinforce the argument that brand development in small enterprises is cumulative, relational, and shaped by context. The evidence aligns with Graham et al. (2020), who note that brand growth in constrained environments depends less on sequencing activities and more on maintaining consistent meaning across time.

Chapter 5 – Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the research objectives and theoretical foundations established earlier. The discussion integrates the five core themes identified in the findings - Temporal Fluidity, Decision Logics, Evolution and Maturity, Measurement and Learning Loops, and Constraints and Authenticity - and connects them to the four orientation groups (E1–E4). In doing so, it explains how different entrepreneurial contexts shape branding balance and how these practices reflect and extend existing literature on entrepreneurial branding, temporal strategy, and authenticity.

5.2 Balancing Horizons Through Temporal Fluidity

The evidence shows that founders rarely separate brand activation and brand building into distinct phases. Instead, they operate within overlapping timeframes where each short-term action also contributes to longer-term meaning. This pattern reflects Graham et al. (2020)’s notion of “two-speed” branding but in a more organic and adaptive form.

Founders described their day-to-day marketing as both survival mechanism and storytelling vehicle. P3 noted that *"each pop-up not only sells but teaches people who we are."* Similarly, P1 explained that every promotional effort must "count twice," serving both immediate sales and cumulative identity. This demonstrates a pragmatic synthesis of time horizons rather than deliberate sequencing.

Within the orientation framework, E1 participants relied on instinctive integration of sales and narrative, while E2 and E3 employed planned coherence through messaging and tone. E4 founders showed temporal restraint, believing that limited communication reinforced distinctiveness. Across all cases, temporal balance emerged as continuity of purpose rather than division of effort, echoing Keller's (2016) idea that enduring brand equity results from consistent experiences built over time.

5.3 Decision Logics: Pragmatism and Principle

Branding decisions were grounded in both financial necessity and value coherence. For early-stage ventures in E1, actions were guided by immediate revenue generation. P2 observed that "if we don't see sales, we can't survive," but even these founders were conscious of the reputational impact of short-term choices.

E2 and E3 participants adopted flexible heuristics, maintaining approximate ratios between performance marketing and story-driven content. P7 commented that they "keep a rough split" to ensure long-term communication is not neglected. This adaptive reasoning supports Binet and Field's (2013) activation-equity model while showing how entrepreneurs translate it into simple, experiential rules.

At the other end of the spectrum, E4 founders viewed restraint as a deliberate signal of integrity. P17 said, "We could grow faster, but not if it means losing what defines us." Such value-centred logic aligns with Merrilees et al. (2020), who describe entrepreneurial branding as a negotiation between market opportunity and founder authenticity. Constraint, rather than limiting choice, heightened awareness of priorities and sharpened the distinction between opportunism and principle.

5.4 Evolution and Maturity: Institutionalising Entrepreneurial Branding

As ventures developed, branding moved from improvisation to formalisation. E1 participants described early experimentation - “guessing colours and captions” (P5) - as essential for discovering brand tone and audience connection. Over time, E3 firms adopted structured systems once external stakeholders, such as retailers, demanded consistency. P14 explained that “guidelines became a necessity once we had listings.”

This transition supports Krake’s (2005) description of intuitive branding evolving into managed identity. However, several founders felt that greater organisation risked reducing agility. P16 reflected that “branding feels less alive now.” E4 participants consciously resisted over-professionalisation, arguing that informality preserved authenticity.

These findings suggest that maturity in branding is not linear progress but an adaptive equilibrium between discipline and flexibility. Founders must embed creativity within structure, maintaining the personal tone that initially attracted customers while meeting the professional standards required for growth.

5.5 Measurement and Learning: Sensemaking as Strategy

Evaluation across ventures operated as reflective learning rather than performance auditing. E1 and E2 founders relied on observable outcomes such as repeat purchases or social engagement. P1 explained, “If people return after an event, we know it worked.”

E3 and E4 participants developed broader interpretive systems that combined numerical and narrative indicators. P9 commented that “when customers use our words in their reviews, the brand is landing.” This demonstrates the emergence of informal yet sophisticated learning loops that connect short-term response with long-term resonance.

Such practices echo McGrath’s (2013) concept of discovery-driven learning, where data function as a prompt for adaptation rather than as control mechanisms. In entrepreneurial branding, sensemaking replaces measurement precision. Carson et al. (2004) likewise observe that small firms rely on relational feedback rather than formal analytics, confirming that interpretation, not instrumentation, drives improvement.

5.6 Constraint and Authenticity: From Limitation to Leverage

Resource constraint consistently appeared as both context and catalyst. Founders portrayed scarcity not as weakness but as the foundation of authenticity. P1 remarked, “We can’t buy reach, so we earn it through real connections.” For many, transparency and small-scale production were central to credibility.

E2 and E3 participants framed constraint as a creative discipline that required ingenuity. P8 described it as “forcing us to think harder about what really matters.” E4 founders treated it as a moral stance. P17 explained, “We stay small by choice to stay true.”

This reframing of constraint as value aligns with Napoli et al. (2022), who argue that authenticity becomes a strategic resource under uncertainty. The findings further support Vredenburg et al. (2020) by showing that authentic branding arises when purpose and action coincide.

5.7 Integrating the E1–E4 Framework

The E1–E4 classification highlights how branding logic evolves while retaining coherence. E1 firms depend on immediacy and improvisation, E2 combine emotional storytelling with tactical execution, E3 institutionalise learning and systems, and E4 stabilise around ethical minimalism. Despite this diversity, every group treats branding as an ongoing negotiation between visibility and meaning.

This progression supports Graham et al. (2020)’s argument that brand growth depends on consistent meaning rather than proportional investment. Temporal balance is therefore not numerical but narrative.

Bringing these elements together, Figure 2 presents the empirically refined model developed through this study, illustrating how branding unfolds as a continuous process shaped by effectual reasoning under resource constraints. (For cross-group evidence supporting theme distribution, see Appendix F.)

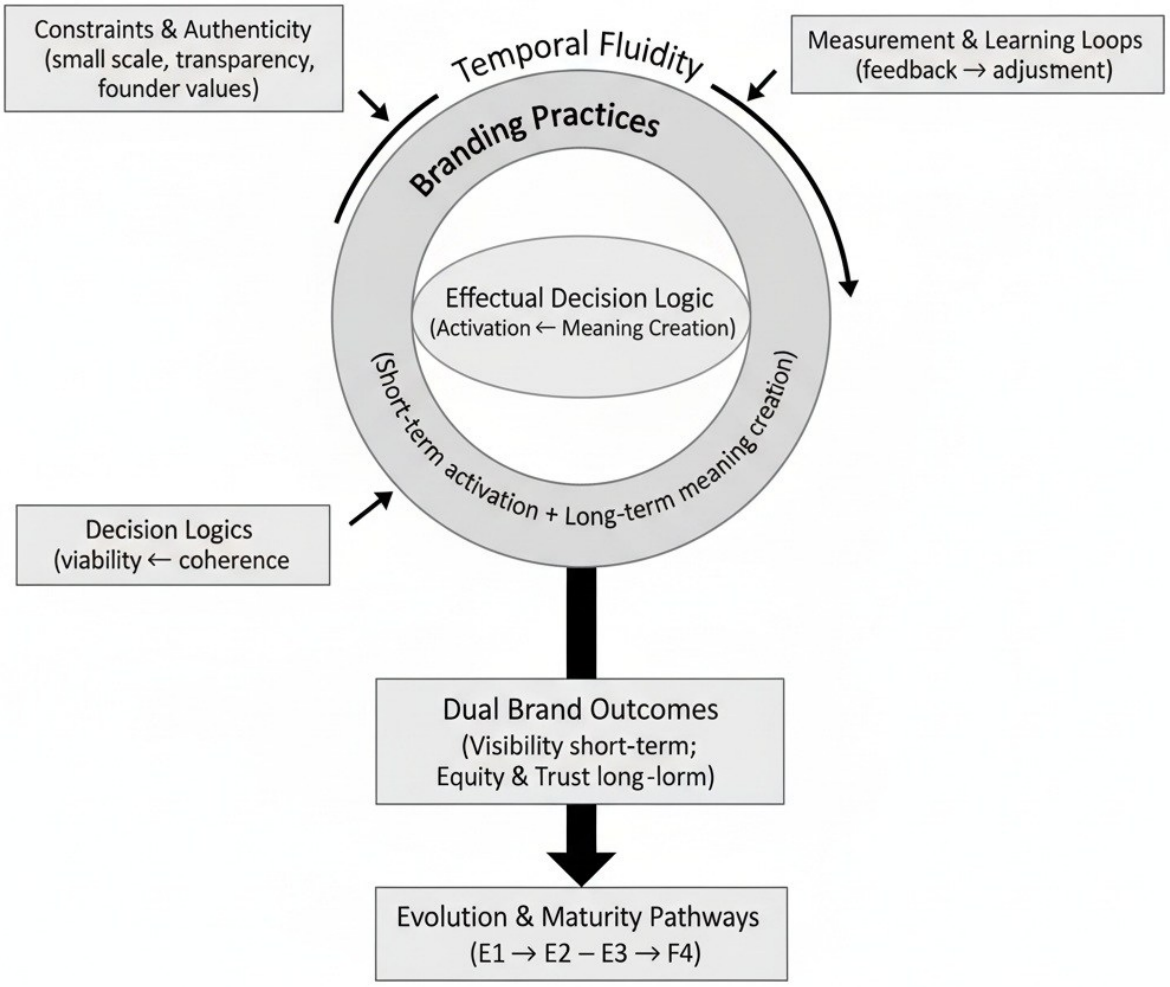


Figure 2: Empirically refined model of Branding Continuity in Resource - constrained Start-ups.

5.8 Recommendations

5.8.1 Recommendations for Founders

For founders of early-stage UK F&B ventures, sustainable growth requires balancing tactical agility with brand coherence. The findings indicate that founders must treat every short-term marketing activity as an extension of long-term meaning. Building on this, three actionable priorities are proposed.

5.8.1.1 Adopt a Minimum Viable Sustainability (MVS) approach.

Rather than pursuing costly certifications, founders should embed one or two visible

sustainability practices that fit their operational scale such as recyclable packaging, local sourcing, or transparent supplier communication and integrate them consistently into brand storytelling. This incremental model reflects Sarasvathy's (2001) effectual logic, emphasising action within current means while remaining open to adaptation. It also aligns with rising consumer expectations in the UK, where 60 per cent of buyers consider environmental credentials when selecting F&B products (Food and Drink Federation, 2024). By communicating modest yet authentic progress, ventures create credibility that compounds into long-term brand equity (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

5.8.1.2 Develop micro-data literacy before digital infrastructure.

Many start-ups adopt e-commerce tools such as Shopify or Klaviyo but underuse the insight potential of their existing data. Founders should institutionalise simple learning loops-monthly reviews of repeat purchases, customer comments, and social engagement-to build interpretive capability before investing in advanced analytics. This sequential capability building reflects the discovery-driven learning logic identified by McGrath (2013) and is consistent with the UK's Made Smarter SME digitalisation agenda. Over time, these low-cost feedback systems evolve into scalable data competence, connecting tactical experimentation with strategic brand management (Merrilees, Miller & Yakimova, 2020).

5.8.1.3 Form purpose-led collaborations.

Collaborative alliances among small producers enable shared access to manufacturing, logistics, and retail channels. Yet the evidence suggests that collaborations are most successful when grounded in shared brand purpose rather than cost alone. Partnerships with complementary ethical or cultural positioning strengthen authenticity while achieving economies of scale. Initiatives supported by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and regional food innovation clusters offer viable routes for joint packaging, cold-chain distribution, and promotional campaigns.

Taken together, these practices provide an effectual pathway for early-stage ventures: begin with credible sustainability signals, build internal learning capability, and grow through aligned cooperation. Each step is incremental, affordable, and consistent with the founder-led authenticity that defines the UK's entrepreneurial F&B sector.

5.8.2 Recommendations for Ecosystem Support

While founders bear the primary responsibility for brand coherence, the surrounding entrepreneurial ecosystem accelerators, investors, and support agencies plays a decisive role in enabling sustainable growth.

5.8.2.1 Integrate brand and capability mentoring within accelerator programmes.

Embedding modules on storytelling, authenticity, and digital community building would prepare founders to translate marketing actions into sustained equity (Merrilees et al., 2020). Such mentoring should reflect the temporal duality of branding identified in this research, ensuring that participants develop both immediate sales strategies and long-term brand architectures.

5.8.2.2 Facilitate collaborative infrastructures.

Government-backed bodies such as LEPs and Innovate UK could expand existing shared-use facilities-commercial kitchens, cold-chain logistics hubs, or digital fulfilment networks to lower operational barriers for start-ups under eight years old. This echoes the principles of the Made Smarter initiative by promoting digital and sustainable manufacturing collaboration at regional level. Public investment in cooperative infrastructure transforms fragmentation into collective competitiveness, directly addressing the constraint-driven authenticity dynamic observed across interview groups E1–E4.

5.8.2.3 Encourage accessible sustainability verification.

Simplified sustainability reporting templates, micro-grant schemes, or local partnerships with universities could help small ventures quantify impact without heavy consultancy costs. Providing low-threshold access to measurement tools ensures that early-stage brands can meet retailer ESG expectations while maintaining resource efficiency (Food and Drink Federation, 2024).

In summary, these recommendations transform the thesis findings into actionable guidance for practice. Collectively, they demonstrate how authentic growth can be achieved through coherence, learning, and collaboration despite financial and operational constraints. These insights bridge theory and practice by reframing short- and long-term branding not as opposing demands but as interdependent capabilities. The next chapter

concludes the thesis by synthesising the overall contributions, reflecting on the implications for theory and practice, and outlining potential directions for future research.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

This research investigated how founders of emerging UK food and beverage start-ups navigate the tension between achieving immediate market visibility and building enduring brand value under resource constraints. Seventeen semi-structured interviews with founders and senior managers provided insight into the lived experience of small-scale branding and the reasoning that guides it.

The research shows that this balance is rarely the result of formal planning. Instead, founders integrate immediate and enduring goals within a single stream of activity. Marketing actions designed to generate sales also serve to strengthen identity and meaning over time. This form of temporal fluidity supports Graham, Fennell and Mulhern's (2020) view of two-speed branding but extends it by demonstrating that, for small firms, simultaneity arises from necessity rather than design. Every interaction, however tactical, becomes part of a cumulative narrative that shapes long-term equity.

Decision-making among founders reflects a continual negotiation between pragmatism and principle. Early-stage businesses rely on activities that sustain cash flow, while more established ones apply informal heuristics to ensure that story-driven content receives consistent attention. Across all four orientation groups identified in this study - Reactive Awareness Builders, Strategic Storytellers, Adaptive Scalables and Conscientious Minimalists-founders sought coherence between purpose and performance. This confirms Merrilees, Miller and Yakimova's (2020) argument that entrepreneurial branding is not a sequence of discrete steps but a process of adaptive reasoning grounded in values as much as in analysis.

As ventures mature, branding evolves from improvisation towards structured management. Participants described an early stage dominated by experimentation and intuition, followed by gradual institutionalisation of design, tone and communication guidelines. While these systems enhance consistency, they may also restrict spontaneity, highlighting the tension between professionalism and creativity. Learning and evaluation

follow the same reflective pattern: instead of relying on formal analytics, founders draw on customer interactions, story recall and repeat purchases as indicators of brand health. This discovery-driven approach (McGrath, 2013) allows adaptation without losing authenticity.

A defining contribution of the study lies in how it reinterprets constraint. Limited resources were not viewed simply as a disadvantage but as an enabler of authenticity. Founders positioned scarcity as a marker of honesty and craft, using transparency and personal engagement to build trust. Authenticity therefore emerged not as a marketing device but as a structural outcome of small-scale practice, reinforcing the perspectives of Napoli, Dickinson-Delaporte and Beverland (2022) and Vredenburg et al. (2020).

The research is limited by its qualitative and contextual focus. Findings are based on a particular group of UK entrepreneurs and may not transfer directly to other sectors or regions. Self-reported data could also reflect retrospective interpretation. Future studies might extend this work through longitudinal research or comparative analysis including consumer perspectives.

Overall, the thesis contributes to understanding branding in resource-constrained environments by reframing short-term and long-term marketing as complementary dimensions of one continuous process. It shows that founders sustain growth through coherence of meaning, reflective learning and ethical clarity rather than through scale or expenditure.

The study adds to theory by linking temporal branding, effectual decision-making and authenticity into a unified perspective on entrepreneurial practice. For practitioners and policymakers, it demonstrates that strong brands can be built through consistency, transparency and purposeful adaptation. In essence, the success of these ventures lies not in separating the immediate from the enduring but in connecting them, turning everyday actions into lasting expressions of brand identity.

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Appendix

Appendix A – Interview Guide

Introduction

The following interview guide was developed in consultation with the thesis supervisor and was approved through the CURES ethics process after a formal review meeting. It was designed to explore how founders and senior decision-makers in the United Kingdom Food and Beverage (F&B) start-up sector balance short-term commercial objectives with long-term brand development.

The semi-structured format allowed participants to elaborate on their individual experiences while ensuring that key areas such as branding strategy, decision-making processes, constraints, and adaptation were consistently explored. Each interview lasted approximately 42 minutes and was conducted through a combination of in-person meetings, online calls, and email exchanges. All interviews were recorded with prior consent, anonymised, and transcribed manually for analysis.

Indicative Interview Questions

- A series of around thirty questions were asked during the interviews, adjusted slightly according to each participant's role and company context. A selection of representative questions is presented below to illustrate the structure and scope of inquiry.
- Can you describe your company's journey so far and your role within it?
- How do you define or interpret the concept of a brand in the context of your organisation?
- What does short-term brand awareness mean for your company, and how do you pursue it in practice?
- How do you conceptualise long-term brand building, and how is it balanced with immediate operational or sales objectives?
- Could you share an example of a decision where you had to prioritise short-term visibility over long-term brand consistency?
- What factors or considerations tend to influence such trade-offs, such as funding, customer feedback, or external pressures?

- How have your branding decisions evolved as your company has grown or become more established in the market?
- What are the main constraints that affect your brand-related decisions, for example finance, time, or limited expertise?
- In what ways do investors, collaborators, or external networks influence your brand-building activities?
- Looking ahead, how do you expect the balance between short-term tactics and long-term brand growth to develop within your company?

Follow-up questions were used to probe deeper into specific examples or clarify reasoning where appropriate. These included prompts such as:

- What made that particular decision feel appropriate at the time?
- How did that experience influence your understanding of the brand's long-term direction?
- Would you approach the same decision differently now, and if so, why?

Use of the Guide

This guide functioned as a flexible conversational framework rather than a fixed questionnaire. Its purpose was to elicit both strategic reasoning and practical experiences from founders and senior executives regarding how they manage competing short-term and long-term branding priorities under conditions of uncertainty and resource constraint. The approach ensured analytical comparability across participants while allowing rich and contextually grounded insights to emerge naturally.

Appendix B – Participant Overview Table

Introduction

The following table provides an overview of the participants included in this study. Seventeen individuals were interviewed, representing founders and senior decision-makers from start-up and early-growth stage Food and Beverage (F&B) companies operating in the United Kingdom.

The sample captured variation in business maturity, strategic orientation, and organisational scale. Participants comprised twelve founders, three marketing heads, one executive director, and one chief executive officer (CEO). To protect confidentiality, all

names and company identifiers have been anonymised, with only broad contextual descriptors retained to indicate diversity within the sample.

Interviews were conducted between May and July 2024, lasting between 20 minutes and 70 minutes. Two participants engaged in extended discussions exceeding one hour, while one initial interview was shorter due to the researcher's prior familiarity with the company context. All participants provided verbal consent, and recordings were subsequently transcribed and anonymised.

Table B.0.1. Overview of Participants

Participant ID	Role / Position	Company Age (Years)	Approximate Size (Employees)	Primary Product Category	Route to Market	Interview Mode	Duration (Minutes)
P01	Founder	1.5	3	Premium soft drinks	Direct-to-consumer	In person	20
P02	Founder	4	6	Health beverages	Retail and D2C	In person	64
P03	Marketing Head	3	8	Plant-based snacks	Retail	Zoom	38
P04	Founder	2	5	Craft mixers	D2C and hospitality	Zoom	41
P05	Founder	6	10	Natural juices	Retail	Phone	40
P06	Executive Director	5	12	Frozen meals	Retail	Zoom	43
P07	Founder	3	4	Artisan sauces	D2C	Zoom	44
P08	Founder	2.5	5	Non-alcoholic cocktails	Retail and D2C	Zoom	39

P09	Founder	7	15	Organic tea	Retail	Email exchange	-
P10	Marketing Head	5	9	Snack bars	Retail and vending	Zoom	46
P11	Founder	4	7	Functional drinks	D2C	Zoom	42
P12	Founder	1	2	Cold brew coffee	D2C	Phone	37
P13	Founder	6	14	Health shots	Retail and D2C	Zoom	70
P14	Marketing Head	3	9	Smoothies	Retail	Zoom	43
P15	CEO	8	18	Premium condiments	Retail and hospitality	In person	48
P16	Founder	2	5	Protein beverages	D2C	Zoom	40
P17	Founder	5	11	Kombucha	Retail and D2C	Zoom	49

Summary

The participant group reflected a balanced cross-section of the UK's emerging F&B ecosystem, encompassing both early-stage start-ups and more mature small enterprises. The diversity of roles and company types provided valuable variation in strategic perspectives, particularly regarding how brand-related decisions are influenced by company age, growth pressures, and available resources.

All interviews were transcribed manually to preserve nuance, and detailed notes were maintained for those conducted via email exchanges. This approach ensured the integrity of the qualitative dataset and enhanced analytical depth.

Appendix C – Sample Interview Transcript (Excerpt)

Introduction

The following excerpt illustrates the conversational depth and analytical focus typical of the interviews conducted for this study. It presents a short exchange with a founder of a United Kingdom Food and Beverage (F&B) start-up, discussing how they balance short-term sales imperatives with the long-term development of brand identity. The transcript has been anonymised to protect confidentiality.

Interviewer (I): How do you balance the immediate need to drive sales with the longer-term goal of building a strong and consistent brand?

Participant (P07 – Founder, Artisan Sauces Brand): That is the question we wrestle with every day. Early on, I would say we chased visibility wherever we could find it – pop-ups, discounts, collaborations – but it became exhausting. Now we try to separate effort from noise. We still do short-term pushes when cash flow demands it, but we make sure each one fits our larger story. For instance, if we run a seasonal promotion, the visuals and messaging must still reflect who we are as a brand.

I: Has that approach changed as your business has grown?

P07: Completely. In the beginning it was about staying alive; now it is about staying coherent. We have learnt that not every opportunity is worth taking if it pulls us away from our identity. It is slower, but it feels more sustainable.

Summary of the Excerpt

This short extract demonstrates the reflective tone and strategic reasoning that characterised the interviews. It captures a founder's lived experience of managing the tension between short-term commercial necessity and long-term brand integrity, which informed the study's analysis of decision-making and temporal balancing.

Appendix D – Derivation Matrix for Founder Orientation Groups (E1–E4)

Introduction

During thematic analysis, participants were grouped into four orientation categories (E1–E4) based on their responses to questions concerning branding priorities, decision-making patterns, and perceived trade-offs between short-term and long-term goals. The grouping was developed through iterative reading of interview transcripts, manual coding, and comparison of how founders described their approach to brand-building under resource constraints.

Each orientation reflects a distinct decision logic that shaped how participants navigated competing time horizons in brand development.

Table D.1. Founder Orientation Groups and Defining Characteristics

Group	Defining Decision Logic	Typical Business Stage	Core Characteristics	Example Participant IDs
E1 – Reactive Executors	Focused primarily on short-term sales and visibility; decisions driven by immediate cash flow and survival concerns.	Early launch (0–2 years)	High responsiveness to market noise; frequent tactical shifts; limited planning capacity; reliance on personal effort rather than structured brand vision.	P01, P04, P12
E2 – Adaptive Experimenters	Seek balance through trial and learning; alternate between tactical actions and reflective brand adjustments.	Emerging (2–4 years)	Emphasise experimentation, data from small tests, and learning from failures; brand identity gradually clarified through feedback loops.	P03, P07, P10, P16
E3 – Strategic Builders	Begin to institutionalise long-term brand thinking while maintaining short-term agility.	Growth (4–6 years)	Clear articulation of purpose and story; structured planning cycles; selective use of short-term promotions aligned with core brand narrative.	P05, P11, P13, P17

E4 – Vision-Led Anchors	Operate from a strong sense of purpose and brand legacy; long-term orientation dominates decision-making.	Established (6 + years)	Emphasise authenticity, heritage, and consistent brand equity; deploy short-term tactics only when reinforcing strategic positioning.	P02, P06, P09, P15

Derivation Process

The classification emerged inductively through comparative analysis of participant's narratives rather than pre-defined typologies. After initial coding, excerpts related to decision triggers, branding rationale, and temporal framing were extracted and re-read across cases.

Patterns of similarity and contrast were then identified according to:

- Temporal orientation – whether decisions were framed as immediate responses or long-term investments.
- Decision logic – whether choices were guided by intuition, reflection, or strategic intent.
- Resource framing – whether constraints were viewed as limitations or as drivers of innovation.

Participants exhibiting comparable patterns were grouped together, and cross-checking ensured that each case was placed according to dominant behaviour rather than isolated statements.
The resulting E1–E4 typology captured a developmental continuum from reactive survival to strategic brand stewardship.

Interpretive Note

These categories were not mutually exclusive; several participants exhibited transitional traits as their businesses matured. However, the typology provides a useful analytical lens

for interpreting how founders in the UK F&B start-up sector construct and operationalise the balance between short-term necessity and long-term brand vision.

Appendix E – Coding Framework Snapshot

Introduction

Manual thematic coding was carried out following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Each transcript was read several times, and initial descriptive labels were assigned to phrases or sentences that captured meaningful ideas related to branding practice and decision-making. Codes were then grouped into higher-order categories, refined through constant comparison, and consolidated into the five main themes reported in Chapter 4.

The table below summarises a representative segment of the coding framework, illustrating the progression from raw data to final themes. Only a sample is provided for clarity; the complete coding record is maintained in the researcher's archive.

Table E.1. Illustrative Coding Framework

Level 1 Initial Codes	Level 2 Categorised Codes	Level 3 Refined Theme	Illustrative Excerpt (Paraphrased or Anonymised)
"We post daily to keep in people's minds."; "Discounts help us survive quiet weeks."	Short-term visibility tactics	Theme 1 – Navigating Constraint	Founder described tactical promotions as necessary despite limited marketing budget.
"We learn by doing small trials."; "Feedback from one pop-up shapes the next product."	Iterative learning and experimentation	Theme 2 – Learning Through Iteration	Decisions adjusted after observing consumer reactions rather than relying on formal data.
"We want customers to recognise us for our values, not	Brand purpose and identity articulation	Theme 3 – Building	Participant emphasised storytelling as core to

offers."; "Our packaging tells our story."		Authentic Brand Narratives	long-term brand building.
"Investors push for quick results, but we think in milestones."; "Cash flow decides our pace."	Balancing external expectations and internal vision	Theme 4 – Decision Trade-Offs and Temporal Tension	Founder reflected on balancing stakeholder pressure with brand consistency.
"We now mentor smaller start-ups."; "Community events build loyalty."	Ecosystem engagement and knowledge sharing	Theme 5 – Ecosystem and Community Orientation	Participants saw collaboration as contributing to collective growth and credibility.

Analytical Reflection

This coding framework demonstrates how the analytic process moved from individual statements to conceptual abstraction. The iterative reading of transcripts enabled the identification of both convergent and divergent perspectives across founder orientation groups (E1–E4). Each theme was verified by returning to original transcripts to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participant's words and context.

Appendix F – Cross-Case Theme Matrix

Introduction

To enhance the robustness of thematic analysis, coded data were compared across the four founder orientation groups (E1–E4) identified during analysis. This cross-case mapping allowed examination of how recurring themes manifested differently depending on founders' strategic orientation, business maturity, and resource context.

The following matrix presents a summarised view of how each of the five final themes was represented across the orientation groups. The density of occurrence is indicated qualitatively using the symbols ✓ (present), ✓✓ (strongly evident), and ✓✓✓ (dominant). This visualisation demonstrates variation in emphasis rather than statistical measurement.

Table F.1. Cross-Case Representation of Themes by Founder Orientation Group

Theme	E1 Reactive Executors	E2 Adaptive Experimenters	E3 Strategic Builders	E4 Vision-Led Anchors
1. Navigating Constraint	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓
2. Learning Through Iteration	✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓
3. Building Authentic Brand Narratives	✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
4. Decision Trade-Offs and Temporal Tension	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
5. Ecosystem and Community Orientation	–	✓	✓✓	✓✓✓

Interpretive Summary

- E1 - Reactive Executors displayed heavy emphasis on constraint management and short-term tactics, with limited articulation of brand narrative. Their focus on survival limited ecosystem engagement.
- E2 - Adaptive Experimenters demonstrated active learning through iteration, adopting flexible short-term activities that informed evolving brand identity.
- E3 - Strategic Builders balanced authentic brand storytelling with structured decision-making, showing maturity in linking immediate visibility with consistent long-term positioning.
- E4 - Vision-Led Anchors prioritised authenticity and ecosystem collaboration, consistently aligning tactical actions with broader brand legacy and purpose.

This comparative analysis validated that the core themes were present across all participant groups, albeit with varying intensity. The progression from E1 to E4 reflects a developmental continuum from reactive to purpose-driven decision logics, reinforcing the conceptual model proposed in Chapter 5.

Appendix G – Reflexivity and Trustworthiness Statement

Introduction

Reflexivity and methodological transparency were integral to this study, which explored how founders and senior decision-makers in the United Kingdom Food and Beverage (F&B) start-up sector balance short-term commercial goals with long-term brand development. The research followed the principles of qualitative trustworthiness as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), addressing the four key criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher also engaged in continual self-reflection to manage potential biases arising from prior professional experience in the same industry.

Credibility

Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the sector, triangulation of perspectives, and careful verification of interpretations with primary data. The researcher had previously completed a professional internship in a premium non-alcoholic beverage start-up, which provided contextual understanding of founder challenges and brand-building dynamics. While this insider knowledge enhanced interpretive sensitivity, it also required deliberate reflexive distancing to avoid assumptions.

Credibility was further reinforced through: Use of verbatim quotations in the findings chapter to preserve participant voice, cross-checking of interpretations with the thesis supervisor during analytic development and iterative reading of transcripts to ensure that themes reflected participant meanings rather than researcher expectations.

Transferability

Transferability was supported by providing a thick description of the research context, including company sizes, product categories, and market channels. This allows readers to determine the extent to which findings may apply to other start-up or early-growth environments.

By situating the study within the broader United Kingdom F&B ecosystem, the thesis contributes contextually grounded insights that can inform similar entrepreneurial settings.

Dependability

Dependability was achieved through systematic documentation of data collection and analysis procedures. The study maintained consistent interview structure across participants while allowing natural adaptation to conversational flow. Manual coding was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach,

and a clear audit trail was retained, linking raw data excerpts to coded segments and final themes. Regular supervisory discussions served as peer debriefing to test coherence between data, codes, and emerging interpretations.

Confirmability

Confirmability was addressed through transparent data handling and continuous critical reflection.

All interviews were recorded with participant permission, transcribed, and anonymised immediately after completion. A separate reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process to record analytical decisions, moments of uncertainty, and emerging insights. These notes served as a check against personal bias, ensuring that interpretations were data-led and not influenced by prior professional experiences in marketing or brand development.

Researcher Reflexivity

As the researcher had professional exposure to the same industry, reflexivity was particularly important. Awareness of potential preconceptions was maintained by consciously separating internship experience from research interpretation. During analysis, the researcher asked whether an insight stemmed from the participant's account or from pre-existing industry knowledge. Where uncertainty arose, the data were revisited, and interpretations were adjusted or qualified. This ongoing reflexive practice enhanced analytic clarity and contributed to the authenticity of the findings.