

# Founders and their brands: how founder identity matters in small firm branding

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Branding is essential for business survival and growth, particularly for small firms in their early development. However, small firms approach branding differently than large organisations. This study aims to delve into the evolution of small firm brands over time, emphasising the role of founders' personal identities on shaping their firms' brands. It also explores how these firm brands develop through ongoing interactions with stakeholders.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Over eight years, empirical material was collected through a longitudinal multi-case study of small firms and their brands, using in-depth interviews over time with founders as the primary data source. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the empirical data.

**Findings** – This research reveals the intertwined relationship between founders' identity work and small firm branding. The authors emphasise how founders use their personal identities to shape their small firm brands, influencing recognition, differentiation and value creation. As firm brands evolve over time, they often deviate from founders' identities due to stakeholder pressure from within and outside the organisations.

**Originality/value** – This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by focusing on the branding processes within small firms, which have been largely overlooked in favour of larger organisations. By exploring the transformative journey of small firm brands from inception through development and ownership changes, this research elucidates the intricate entanglement of founder identity and brand. It highlights the distinctive challenges faced by small firms, offering new insights into their branding dynamics.

**Keywords** Corporate branding, Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial identity, Founder identity, Identity work, Longitudinal study, Role of founders, Small firm branding, Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), Start-ups

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Branding stands as a cornerstone for all businesses, driving their survival and growth in the competitive business landscape (Berthon *et al.*, 2008). Particularly for small firms branding holds heightened significance (Maldonado-Guzman *et al.*, 2018), especially during their initial development (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010). However, despite its critical role, research indicates that small firms often overlook branding compared to their larger counterparts (Inskip, 2004; Krake, 2005; Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008). This discrepancy highlights a distinct divergence in the practical approach to branding between small firms and established companies.



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Small firms are characterised by their limited size, often with a small number of employees and low revenue. During their start-up and initial operational years, these businesses often exhibit a dynamic and evolving nature as they rapidly strive to adapt to the market. Their primary focus is on building a customer base, refining products or services and ensuring financial stability. Compared to larger firms, small firms often operate with a more flexible business structure, with concepts, values and philosophies primarily held in the founder's mind (Rode and Vallaster, 2005). Founders of small firms often have a narrow interpretation of firm branding, concentrating mainly on elements such as brand name, logo and advertising (Inskip, 2004; Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008). In some cases, founders may not even recognise the existence of their firm's brand, considering branding to be solely for large established companies (Krake, 2005; Merrilees, 2007; Bresciani and Eppler, 2010). Moreover, limited financial resources, human capital and time pose significant barriers to developing a robust brand orientation in small firms (Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008; Juntunen, 2012), further exacerbating the challenges they face in effective brand management (Krake, 2005).

While extensive literature delves into the branding dynamics of larger organisations, we know much less about the branding processes within small firms (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2008; Odoom *et al.*, 2017). This gap is regrettable given the substantial role small firms play in various economies, prompting governments to implement supportive policies such as the Small Business Act for Europe (European Commission, 2008). Presently, the prevailing branding literature predominantly concentrates on large, well-established companies, often overlooking the specific needs and challenges of small firms (Bresciani and Eppler, 2010; Maldonado-Guzman *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore how small firm brands evolve over time. Specifically, we investigate how founders use their personal identities to shape their firms' brands and how these firm brands develop through ongoing interactions with stakeholders. This aim is guided by two research questions:

RQ1. How do founders engage with branding in small firms?

RQ2. How do small firm brands change over time?

We explore this by delving into the journey of two small firms, closely tracking their development from the initial exploratory steps of founders to the establishment of a more mature firm brand. Our investigation takes a unique perspective, as we conducted a longitudinal study following these firms and their market dynamics over the span of eight years (from 2010 to 2018). This extensive timeframe allowed us to capture the nuanced evolution and adaptation strategies they used while navigating the market. Notably, both firms underwent a change of ownership during the eight years we observed them, adding an intriguing dimension to our research.

The research findings delve into branding dynamics in small firms, uncovering the intertwined relationship between founders' identity work and branding, highlighting their inseparability. We emphasise how founders use personal identities to shape their firms' brands, influencing the brand's recognition, differentiation and value creation. In addition, we explore the negotiation of belonging as firm brands evolve, revealing the influence of external and internal stakeholders on the founder's sense of belonging to the brand and the resulting divergence from the founder's original identity.

This paper advances our understanding of branding in small firms by emphasising the pivotal role of founder identity from the inception of the firm brand through its development and to founder exit. It challenges traditional branding literature, which predominantly focuses on large established companies, by shedding light on the complexities of stakeholders' belonging to a small firm's brand, the entanglement of founder identity with the firm brand, and the succession

challenges it entails. Departing from conventional marketing paradigms tailored for large corporations (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2008), our article introduces the concept of “small firm branding” emphasising the distinctive approaches small businesses use in corporate branding. This term underscores the proactive efforts made by small firms in shaping their brands, encompassing aspects such as recognition, differentiation and brand values (Hatch and Schultz, 2001, 2003; Kay, 2006; Miller, 2014), which evolve over time as the firm matures.

We seek to illuminate the journey of small firm brands by leveraging insights from entrepreneurship literature, particularly the entrepreneurial identity (EI) literature. The field of EI is broad and evolving; with discussions ranging from identity as a static property to a dynamic process (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). Our study aligns with the process perspective, viewing identity as a “dynamic and fluid process of emergence” occurring in interaction with a context (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021, p. 1566). While this literature primarily revolves around the identity of entrepreneurs and their interaction with the entrepreneurial process, our research contributes by concentrating on the evolution of firm brands. Specifically, we explore how the founder’s identity interacts with and influences the firm’s brand over time, focusing on the development and transformation of the firm brand itself. Here, we deliberately use the term “founder” instead of “entrepreneur”. The term “founder” specifically refers to the individual or group initiating and establishing the firm. This choice aligns with the process view of entrepreneurship, emphasising the role of both agency and structure in the entrepreneurial process (Steyaert, 2007; Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017). This highlights how various actors, not just the original founder, can influence and drive the business forward.

Practical implications from the study are that for successful branding in small firms, it is crucial to understand and manage the pivotal role of founder identities. It is important to address founder identity during ownership transitions, and a gradual transition is suggested to maintain brand integrity and stakeholder loyalty.

In the following Section 2, we establish our theoretical framework. Thereafter, in Section 3, we outline our methodology and in Section 4, we provide a detailed account of two illustrative cases demonstrating how founders’ identities engage with branding and how small firm brands change due to stakeholder pressure. Our findings in Section 5 elucidate key themes identified in our study, notably the concept of belonging to a brand. We then discuss our findings and contributions in depth in Section 6. Finally, in Section 7, we present our conclusions and underscore the implications of our work on advancing the understanding of small firm branding dynamics.

## 2. Conceptual framework

This conceptual framework integrates three essential areas of literature: corporate branding, entrepreneurship and founder identity. By incorporating insights from corporate branding, we gain valuable understanding of the unique characteristics of branding at the firm level. Corporate branding involves creating a distinct identity for the business that connects with its intended audience (Ozdemir *et al.*, 2020), encompassing values, mission, culture and overall personality (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012). It enables the firm to achieve a unified focus and effectively communicate consistent messages to stakeholders (Ozdemir *et al.*, 2020).

Drawing upon entrepreneurship literature, we acknowledge the pivotal role of branding in the creation and development of firms. Leveraging insights from entrepreneurship literature, especially through the lens of process-oriented perspectives within EI research, offers valuable perspectives into the dynamics of brand evolution and its interconnectedness with the entrepreneurial journey.

Furthermore, our framework incorporates literature on founder identity, acknowledging its significant role within the branding process. By examining the role of founder identity, we gain deeper insights into how it shapes the branding efforts of small firms. Through the

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interplay of these interconnected dimensions, we aim to provide a holistic understanding of small firm branding, encompassing aspects of identity and belonging.

### *2.1 Corporate branding: stakeholder developing belonging to the brand*

The brand of a firm, commonly known as the corporate brand, holds immense significance as it plays a vital role in establishing recognition, differentiation and value, which are recognised as three central functions of branding in the literature (Kay, 2006). Recognition entails ensuring that customers and other stakeholders are aware of the brand and can associate it with the firm (Keller *et al.*, 2008). Differentiation, on the contrary, involves stakeholders perceiving distinct qualities and characteristics in the brand compared to its competitors (Keller *et al.*, 2008). It is worth noting that a firm's historical references, including its founders, can enhance the recognition of the firm's uniqueness (Miller, 2014). Finally, an essential function of a brand is to add value for customers and stakeholders. Miller (2014) explains the process of stakeholders engaging with the brand as a process of developing a sense of belonging to core values within the brand. Yoganathan *et al.* (2018) describes core values as a small set of deeply rooted principles underlying the defining characteristics of a brand. Similarly, Urde (2003) argued that core values represent the "overarching concepts that summarise the identity of the corporate brand" and serve as "guiding lights" in the brand building process (p. 1017). Thus, it is crucial for the core values embedded in a corporate brand to resonate with the values perceived and appreciated by stakeholders over time and vice versa (cf. Urde, 2009). Adding value to a corporate brand is thus an ongoing process where managers define core values, and these values are interpreted and redefined by various stakeholders (Miller, 2014).

The process of branding a firm involves multiple stakeholders who develop a sense of *belonging* to the brand. Many scholars have emphasised that the firm itself does not solely control the corporate brand (cf. Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach, 2016). Rather, it develops through dynamic relationships with various stakeholders (Ozdemir *et al.*, 2020) through their perceptions of the brand and their participatory actions (Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach, 2016). These interactions foster a sense of belonging to the brand, shaping it over time (Miller, 2014). Hatch and Schultz's seminal work (2001, 2003) suggests that a corporate brand is shaped through the interplay between management and its vision, employees and their organisational culture and stakeholders and their perceptions of the firm's image – reflecting the overall impression of the firm held by the outside world. Consequently, corporate branding is best understood as a social process involving multiple stakeholders (Iglesias *et al.*, 2017), including executive management, organisational members and external actors (Hatch and Schultz, 2001, 2003; Mingione, 2015) unfolding over time (Miller, 2014). Notably, in the context of small firms, Juntunen (2012) highlighted the active involvement of stakeholders, with particular significance placed on the contributions of employees. Thus, the branding process encompasses a variety of participants and has been described as a co-creative endeavour involving several actors embedded in a context (Welter, 2011; Astner and Gaddefors, 2021; Astner, 2022). Accordingly, we perceive the development of corporate brands as an interactive process, occurring within a context where stakeholders develop belonging to a firm brand over time. It is within this realm of branding that our focus and interest reside – exploring the intricacies of the branding process and the developmental trajectory of brands.

### *2.2 Entrepreneurship: the development of firms and firm brands*

Entrepreneurship has been conceptualised as both a series of static stages (Greiner, 1972) and as a dynamic process (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017; Steyaert, 2007). Instead of adhering to static linear stage models, which have been critiqued for their assumptions of linearity and

predictability (Steyaert, 2007), we adopt the entrepreneurial process perspective (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2017) to capture brand development. This perspective highlights the unfolding of processes through interactions with the surrounding context and its various stakeholders, emphasising the social and dynamic aspects of entrepreneurial activities (Welter, 2011; Welter and Baker, 2021). Our approach emphasises the interconnectedness between founders, other stakeholders, firm brands and the broader context, highlighting the significant changes these firms undergo as they strive to establish themselves in the market.

Within the branding process of small firms, the role of the founder holds particular significance. Through their interactions with stakeholders such as customers, employees and partners, the founder plays a pivotal role in shaping how the brand is perceived and received by these stakeholders (Rindova *et al.*, 2007). This underscores that branding is an integral part of the entrepreneurial process (Gaddefors, 2005), evolving through dynamic interactions with the context (Welter, 2011). It highlights the significance of the founder's actions, decisions and interactions in shaping the firm's brand, while also emphasising the influential role of other actors in the firm's surroundings in developing and evolving the brand.

To study the founder's interaction with a firm's brand over time, Bird (2014) emphasised three central aspects tracing their path from the inception of a new venture to eventual exit: venture creation, development and exit. "Exit" in this context, does not imply firm closure, although it can include this, but rather encompasses founder succession, where the founder may transition out of operational roles while the firm continues under new leadership (DeTienne and Wennberg, 2016). In this article, we follow firm brands and their founders on this journey as a firm is created, developed and the founder eventually exits the business. This broader view of firm brands over time allows us to explore the entrepreneurial process as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon shaped by both internal decisions and external forces, rather than being constrained by pre-determined stages.

The impact of succession on a firm and its brand has been subject of long-standing inquiry, yet the literature remains inconclusive (Haveman and Khaire, 2004). While some scholars advocate for founder replacement to address potential stagnation or decline in firm performance (Boeker and Karichalil, 2002), others find no supporting evidence for this claim (Willard *et al.*, 1992). In fact, certain studies even emphasise the crucial role of founder commitment for survival, considering founder exit as a significant challenge for both the firm and its brand (Cardon *et al.*, 2005). In this article, by exploring how small firm brands evolve, we will delve into the micro-processes involved in founder succession to better understand and address this inconclusiveness.

### 2.3 *Founder identity and the development of belonging to a corporate brand*

In the social process of developing a firm and its corporate brand, the founder plays a crucial role. Scholars like Wasserman (2003) emphasised the strong attachment between founders and their firms, with Cardon *et al.* (2005) highlighting the significance of emotions and identity connections between them. Krake (2005, p. 232) vividly portrayed this connection by stating: "As entrepreneur, you are the brand". Notably, founders often act as the public face of the firm, contributing to its legitimacy (Rindova *et al.*, 2007).

To better understand how small firm brands evolve over time, we delve into the concept of *individual identity* and explore how branding interacts with a founder's identity development. Researchers suggest that organisations originate from and reflect the founders' deeply held ideologies (Haveman and Khaire, 2004). Thus, we believe that using the concept of identity can offer insights into how small firm brands evolve and the influence of founders on this evolution. The identity of founders and its interaction with the development of businesses and their brands has been discussed extensively within the field of EI. This field is

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broad and evolving; with discussions ranging from viewing identity as a static property to understanding it as a dynamic process (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). In this article, we adopt a process perspective on identity, which sees it as a “dynamic and fluid process of emergence” occurring through interactions with the context (Radu-Lefebvre *et al.*, 2021). Individual identity, encompassing a person’s values and beliefs, shapes the concept of self (Gregori *et al.*, 2021). It is a dynamic construct that evolves within a social context, influenced by one’s own experiences and the actions of others (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). This ongoing process of identity construction and reconstruction is commonly referred to as identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008; Brown, 2015; 2021).

In the context of branding, the interplay between individual self-identities and external social identities becomes particularly relevant. Self-identity refers to individuals’ perceptions of themselves, while social identities are cultural or institutional notions of who individuals are (Watson 2008). This interconnectedness between self-identity and social identities influences an individual’s sense of *belonging* and provides a framework within which they navigate social contexts and affiliations (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). Moreover, the influence of discourses and social identities on self-identity is not merely one-directional; an individual’s self-identity can actively influence and shape social identities and discourses (Watson, 2008). Consequently, a founder’s identity can profoundly influence the vision, culture and image of a firm, thereby shaping the corporate brand perceived by stakeholders (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006). We contend that these interactions are nurtured as founders develop a sense of belonging to the firm’s brand. This sense of belonging, where founders feel intrinsically connected to their brand, fosters a deeper commitment to the firm’s mission and values, aligning personal and corporate identities. Understanding the dynamics of identity work and its impact on branding enables firms to align their brand effectively with their desired values and resonate with their target audience. By cultivating a strong sense of belonging among founders and stakeholders, firms can create more cohesive and authentic brand narratives that enhance loyalty and engagement.

The literature extensively explores brands associated with individuals, covering concepts such as human brands (Eagar and Dann, 2016), person brands (Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019), persona-fied brands (Dion and Arnould, 2016) and artist brands (Eagar *et al.*, 2022). These concepts collectively illuminate how individual identities can be developed and marketed as brands, highlighting the intertwining of people and their brands. They underscore the importance of personal attributes, storytelling and emotional connections in the branding process. Building on this foundation, this article focuses on small business brands. Unlike personal brands that place an individual at the forefront, our emphasis is on how small firm brands become intertwined with the founder’s identity. We highlight the development of these brands, emphasising the dynamic interaction between founders and other stakeholders over time. We explore how founders leverage their personal identities to shape and influence their firms’ brands, while also acknowledging the crucial role of other stakeholders in this process.

Our analysis delves into how the founder's identity intertwines with the corporate brand and investigates the challenges and transformations required for a brand to evolve and, at times, detach from its founder as the business expands. This shift from a focus on individual identity management to the collective process of small business brand development allows us to provide a nuanced contribution to the intricate relationship between people and brands.

### 3. Methodology

To explore our topic, i.e. how small firm brands evolve over time, we used a qualitative approach through a longitudinal multi-case study (Stake, 2006). Qualitative case studies enable in-depth exploration of complex phenomena, offering insights into how they unfold,

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and how people construct meaning (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Given our focus on understanding small firm branding in detail over time, a qualitative approach was appropriate. The longitudinal design allowed us to follow founders and their firms from an early start-up phase through their development process.

### 3.1 *Selecting and collecting the empirical material*

Our empirical study focuses on the meal-kit market in Sweden as a suitable context for conducting a multi-case study. This market involves firms that offer pre-planned meal kits containing dinner solutions (food and recipes) for a specific number of days, typically delivered to households through subscription services.

The selection of this market was driven by two key factors. Firstly, it is a consumer market centred on food where the significance of branding has been emphasised. In contemporary Western society, food consumption and meal choices have evolved beyond mere sustenance to become a means of self-expression and value representation. For instance, individuals often use their food choices to convey cultural affiliations, personal preferences, health-consciousness, environmental concerns and social status. Brands within this market play a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions, preferences and choices, offering products that resonate with consumers on a deeper level.

Secondly, the nascent nature of the market provided a unique opportunity to follow the development of multiple start-ups and their brands from early stages to maturity. Studying firms within the same market allowed us to gain insights into the contextual influences on their development, as they were part of each other's contexts. In our study, we followed ten firms over an eight-year period from 2010 to 2018. To gather material, the main author of this paper conducted three rounds of interviews with the founders, followed their firms online and in the media and reviewed documents like policy and commercial materials. The initial interviews were loosely structured with broad questions such as "tell me about your firm" and "what's going on right now", allowing founders to highlight important aspects of their firms, firm brands and lives. Follow-up interviews tracked changes over time and explored emerging themes more deeply (Bryman, 2001). All interviews were recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. Most took place at the respondents' premises, supplemented by field notes on settings, observations and informal interactions with employees. To complement the case descriptions, we continuously monitored the market to identify events and changes. This involved regularly creating market overviews by searching online registers of meal-kit providers (such as *matkasse.se*, *hittamatkasse.nu*, *jamformatkasse.nu* and *matkassetopplistan.se*), examining their websites and reviewing marketing materials and media reports from sources like *Dagens Industri*, *Expressen* and *BreakIT*. Table 1 provides an overview of the collected material.

For illustrative purposes, we focus on two of the firms, Peaceful Dinner and Home Grown (all names of firms, founders and owners are fictional to protect privacy). These firms were selected based on two criteria. Firstly, they provided an opportunity to track the founders' journey from the initial start-up phase to their exit, as both founders transferred ownership of their firms. This allowed for an in-depth examination of how the brand interacted with the founder throughout the stages of creation, development and exit. Secondly, these cases yielded a wealth of valuable and relevant material that effectively exemplified the key findings derived from our extensive data set. This rich material shed significant light on the intricate processes involved in branding. Furthermore, our selected cases allowed us to capture the observed variations in the larger multi-case study. For instance, some firms like Peaceful Dinner, successfully transitioned to new owners and continue to thrive in the market. In contrast, other firms, such as Home Grown, experienced closure shortly after the ownership transfer.

**Table 1.** Overview of the collected material

Time	Type of material
2010 autumn	Meetings (unstructured interviews) with two of the firms
2010 autumn	Online search to create an overview of meal-kit firms in Sweden
2010 autumn	Market analysis of the meal-kit market – gaining insights into the market and situation in Sweden, competition, marketing strategies, pricing strategies, incomes and expenses
2011 spring	Online search to update the overview of meal-kit firms in Sweden
2011 spring	Selecting firms and establishing contacts, reading up on the selected firms on their websites and news reports in the media
2011 summer	Interviews with nine of the firms
2012 autumn	Interviews with eight of the firms
2014 autumn	Online search to update the overview of meal-kit firms in Sweden
2015 winter	Online search to update the overview of meal-kit firms in Sweden
2017 summer	Searching the internet, magazines and other media to follow up on the meal-kit market in Sweden including the firms in my selected business cases
2018 spring	Searching the internet, magazines and other media to follow up on the meal-kit market in Sweden including the firms in my selected business cases
2018 summer	Interviews with seven of the firms
2018 summer	Online search to update the overview of meal-kit firms in Sweden

**Source:** Authors' own work

### 3.2 *Analysing the material and reporting the findings*

Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), our analysis unfolded simultaneously with the collection of empirical material gathered over the course of eight years (from 2010 to 2018). This extended timeframe underscores the longitudinal nature of our research project and highlights the depth and breadth of our data collection efforts. This dynamic interplay can be characterised as an iterative process integrating both empirical material and theoretical insights (Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011). In grounded theory, the iterative process of data collection and analysis is not only prevalent but also foundational to the methodology. This iterative approach allows researchers to continuously refine their understanding of the phenomena under investigation, ensuring that findings organically emerge from the data rather than being influenced by preconceived theories or assumptions. The longitudinal aspect of our research project is particularly well suited to the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory allows for a deep and thorough exploration of phenomena over time, as it embraces flexibility and responsiveness to the evolving nature of the data. By continuously revisiting and reanalysing the data in light of new insights and emerging patterns, grounded research enables researchers to capture the complexity and dynamics of longitudinal studies effectively.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the empirical data, allowing themes to emerge from the material (Ozuem *et al.*, 2022). To create themes, we used a process coding technique based on what was occurring (Saldaña, 2013). Process coding was appropriate because we were interested in the processes of change (Saldaña, 2013), i.e. how brands were created and developed. As Willig (2008, p. 164) suggests, processes are also embedded in psychological concepts such as identity, because identity is something that “people do rather than something people have”. The coding gave structure and depth to the analytical process, as it meant revisiting the empirical material (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019).



The coded material was sorted and categorised into themes, with our research questions in mind and with recursive input from the literature (Ozuem *et al.*, 2022). During this process, we strived to remain sensitive to the empirical material and its context as well as to our roles as researchers (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019). Table 2 below provides examples of the analytical process of transferring quotes and observed occurrences that are more descriptive into first order codes and more aggregated second order codes, as suggested by Saldaña (2013). Finally, the second order codes were grouped into themes, which became linked to the stakeholders’ development of belonging to the brand. An overview of codes and themes created from the empirical material can be found in Figure 1 in the Findings section. The dashed area in this figure shows the coding used as an example for the more detailed explanation in Table 1.

**4. Case contexts**

The emergence of the meal-kit market traces back to 2007, and our empirical collection began in 2010, during the market’s early stages. At this time, there were around 20 active firms within the market landscape. Over eight years, we closely observed ten of these firms. In this article, we focus on two cases, Peaceful Dinner and Home Grown, as representative examples to illustrate our findings from the broader data set. These cases provide context for our theoretical discussions, offering a nuanced understanding of branding dynamics in the meal-kit market.

*4.1 The story of Peaceful Dinner*

Peaceful Dinner, founded in October 2007 in Stockholm, Sweden, was started by Petra to address the challenge of planning and managing family dinners. Petra envisioned a service that offered healthy recipes, sustainable products and convenient grocery delivery. The brand

**Table 2.** Examples of the transferring of quotes and occurrences into codes and themes

Quotes/occurrences	First order codes	Second order codes	Themes
“I run Peaceful Dinner because I want to change the world. I’m fighting for high food quality and for food products without additives. I’m not leaving until every plate is free from unnecessary e-numbers and food scams”. (Petra at Peaceful Dinner)	Founder using personal values to create the firm brand	Founder used for adding value	Founder belonging to the brand
“You have to fight for the brand all the time, and it was mostly I who had to make all these choices. Should I choose Fair trade or organic, should I choose pork or not, how much beef, how do we get good chicken. There are hundreds of millions of things to consider all the time. These choices, my stance, are the most important for the brand”. (Helena at Home Grown)	Founder making choices for the brand based on personal values		
Petra discontinuous cooperation with Disney as it is not aligned with what she wants peaceful dinner to stand for. Petra declines customers’ request for a children’s meal kit	Founder protecting the core values of the brand		
“The advice I got from [Helena] was to stick to their concept and not make any changes, rather do as they did before so that customers do not drop out. So I have done so, only changed the recipes a bit, so they become a little more child-friendly”. (Harriet at Home Grown)	New owner protecting the core values of the brand		

**Source:** Authors' own work

emerged based on Petra's food values, which included homemade and nutritious meals for families, using minimally processed ingredients without additives and prioritising environmental and animal welfare. These principles guided the firm's selection of recipes and food products and overall values. She named the firm Peaceful Dinner to reflect the concept of peaceful dinners with homemade food and the assurance of sustainability.

Initially, Petra hired two part-time students to expedite the firm's launch, and her husband later joined as a partner, resulting in a four-person team. Petra served as the leader, having created the firm's food philosophy and acting as the face of the business, engaging with potential customers, suppliers and carriers.

As the firm developed, the brand faced pressure from several stakeholders – customers, suppliers, sellers and internal members. The management team, inexperienced in handling such pressure, made mistakes but learned from them. One regrettable mistake was a collaboration with Disney, which Petra realised did not align with the brand's values. Reflecting on it, Petra explained:

It felt wrong for our brand. I do not know why we went for it, because it sounded like [pause] well, we got a very attractive offer. It would be free DVD movies with the meal kits, or something like that, and then we'd do some kind of Tinkerbell-cupcakes [...] it was not [Peaceful Dinner's] style.

As Peaceful Dinner grew, Petra's CEO role became increasingly time-consuming. Despite challenges to the firm's brand, she and the management team gained confidence in managing it. Petra explains, "In everything we do we think like that, if this is consistent with our brand". They prioritised brand consistency in all decisions and carefully selected like-minded partners. For instance, when customers requested a "children's meal kit", the team debated, but ultimately declined, remaining true to their (i.e. Petra's) food philosophy of children eating the same meals as adults, even if competitors pursued alternative strategies.

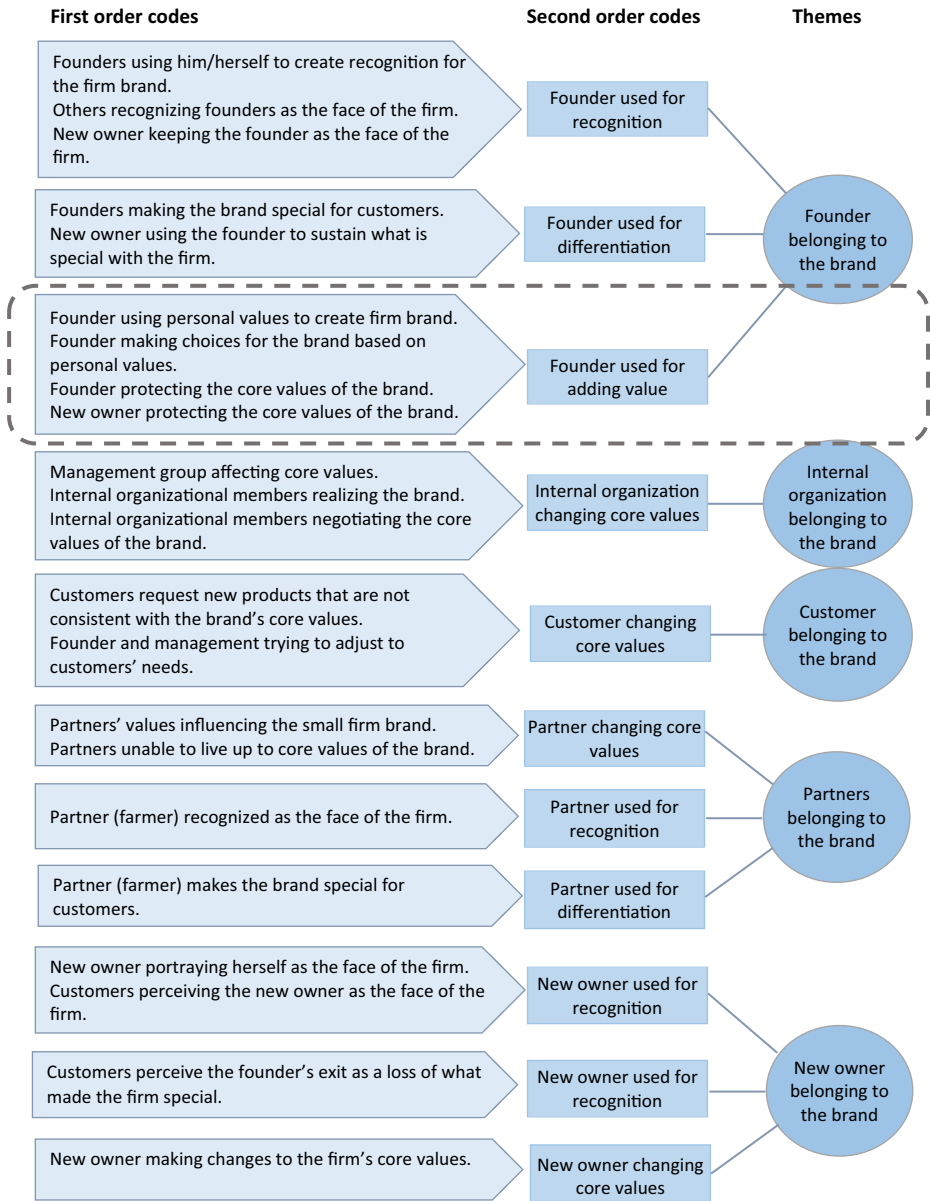
In 2012, a year later, Petra resigned as CEO but remained a main owner. That year, the pressure grew for a children's meal kit, leading Petra to eventually yield, whereas Peaceful Dinner began offering such a meal kit to customers. Petra explained this saying, "We have to make an attractive meal kit; otherwise we won't sell". The firm was by then well established in various regions of Sweden and had initiated expansion into other European countries through satellite operations.

In the following years, 2012–2016, Petra's work foremost concerned the firm's representation. She served as a social media influencer, running "Petra's blog", participating in conferences, delivering lectures and talks and being interviewed. Despite no longer being part of the management team, Petra remained the face of the firm. On the firm's home page, her image and a quote emphasised her mission stating,

I run Peaceful Dinner because I want to change the world. I am fighting for high food quality and for food products without additives. I'm not leaving until every plate is free from unnecessary e-numbers and food scams.

This image and quote were prominently featured on the firm's homepage and tagged on every sub-page. Moreover, the story of how Petra founded Peaceful Dinner was narrated through pictures and text on nearly every sub-page.

In early 2017, Peaceful Dinner was sold. The new owner kept the brand name, Peaceful Dinner, and worked to retain Peaceful Dinner's core values and food philosophy. Petra's quote remained on the front page for the first year, but gradually, it transitioned from the forefront to become part of the firm's history. By the end of our data collection period, Peaceful Dinner's vision remained aligned with Petra's initial values, focusing on promoting home-cooked meals with real ingredients and considering health, nature and climate. Under the new ownership, Peaceful Dinner continued to thrive in the Swedish market, maintaining its brand presence.



**Note:** The dashed area shows the coding exemplified in Table 1

**Source:** Author's own work

**Figure 1.** Overview of codes and themes created from the empirical material

#### 4.2 *The story of Home Grown*

Home Grown was started in September 2009 and operated from a local community near a medium-sized city in Sweden. It was founded by Helena and Homer, a married couple who owned a small bakery. The firm and brand were rooted in their shared values of food, environment, animal health and social commitment. These values shaped the firm's vision and market positioning. Helena and Homer advocated for local, organic food production and supported small-scale farmers. They also actively engaged in their community, arranging work for people who had been left out of the labour market, organising community events and taking care of children through social services. Social values were as significant to them as those related to food and the environment.

They used their bakery organisation to launch the new business, involving four individuals, including Helena and Homer. Helena created recipes and selected ingredients, whereas Homer handled meal-kit deliveries and customer interactions. The couple managed relationships with local farmers and suppliers, with a neighbouring farmer becoming their primary supplier. They also collaborated with a local artist to create a distinctive brand mark featuring a caricature of Helena and Homer. This brand mark was incorporated into business materials and prominently displayed on a large sticker affixed to the delivery truck. Homer believed that Helena and he, being known in the local community, were an important reason Home Grown differed from other meal-kit firms.

The firm's growth fostered a symbiotic relationship with the neighbouring farmer, who tailored their crops to meet Home Grown's ingredient needs. This connection was emphasised in customer communication, including regular "farm news" updates in the weekly newsletter. Customers were invited to farm events and activities, reinforcing the visibility of Helena, Homer and the farmer as the faces of the firm.

As the firm developed, Helena recognised the impact of her decisions on Home Grown's brand. She faced numerous choices, such as fair trade or organic, pork or no pork and sourcing quality ingredients. These decisions were crucial for maintaining the brand's integrity. Helena says, "There are hundreds of millions of things to consider all the time. These choices, my stance, are the most important for the brand". The founders also brought in outside help, which challenged the current brand. One example is when they enlisted a carrier company to deliver the meal kits. To align with their social values, they chose an organisation that supported employment for people with disabilities. However, this decision led to conflicts with other brand values, as the service to customers was not satisfactory. Homer explains: "You can't make too heavy demands on those drivers". One of the implications from this was that they had to adjust meal-kit variants to simplify the work for drivers. Another example of a challenge arose when a friend suggested professionalising the brand, replacing the founders' caricature in the brand mark. Despite appreciating the help, Helena and Homer felt the new approach was impersonal and did not resonate. Homer explained, "It did not feel good at all [...] when I come and go with this car, people look at the caricature on the side and recognise me there". Thus, they kept their caricature as they believed it had effectively connected with customers and carried a sense of identity.

As the meal-kit business grew, Helena and Homer realised it was consuming too much of their time and affecting their bakery as well as their other social commitments. Considering Homer's retirement age, they decided to hand over Home Grown to someone who could further expand the business. Helena explains: "I think the idea with [Home Grown] is so great that I really want it to live on". They sought a new owner who shared their core values and eventually found Harriet, a woman in their local network associated with the farmer's market and a café selling local food. Harriet seemed like the perfect fit based on Home Grown's values.

When Home Grown's brand transitioned to the new owner, the connection to the founders abruptly ceased from the customers' viewpoint. The brand logo featuring caricatures of Helena and Homer was replaced on the car and other marketing materials. Furthermore, the transfer of ownership marked a shift in interaction levels with the farmer; although the farmer's products remained the basis of the meal kit, his presence in the newsletter was no longer as prominent as before. Consequently, neither the founders nor the farmer was prominently featured as the face of the company. Despite efforts by the new owner, Harriet, to maintain Home Grown's core values and customer loyalty, replicating day-to-day operational decisions proved challenging. Helena, one of the original founders, expressed concern about Harriet's choices not aligning with Home Grown's core values, citing discounted canned mushrooms included in the meal kits as an example. As a result, compromises were made that diverged from the founders' initial values, influencing ingredient selection and recipes.

Under new ownership, Home Grown experienced a major loss of regular customers and eventually had to resign from the market. Helena reflected on this saying:

I felt like it was me and [Homer] who were the brand. All our first and oldest customers saw us as an assurance for it to be good and as we had imagined it from the beginning. I think we had customers who simply stayed with us to support us.

The founders were perceived by customers as an integral part of Home Grown's brand.

## 5. Findings

This section is dedicated to elucidating the identified themes derived from our study, which revolve around the founder and other stakeholders' development of *belonging* to the brand. These themes are then correlated with the intrinsic functions within a brand, including providing recognition, differentiation and added value for stakeholders. The theoretical underpinnings of these themes are thoroughly detailed in [Figure 1](#), illustrating the systematic coding and linkage of our empirical data to the relevant theoretical themes.

### 5.1 *Funders belonging to the firm brand*

From our study, it became evident that founders' identities played an active role in shaping the branding and development of their small firms, becoming deeply intertwined with the firm brands. We understand this process as the development of belonging to the brand. For instance, in the case of Peaceful Dinner and Home Grown, founders not only established their firms but also shaped the firm brands based on personal values. Peaceful Dinner, for example, represented Petra's dedication to homemade, healthy, sustainable and additive-free food. Similarly, Home Grown reflected Helena and Homer's personal values, including their social commitment and promotion of local organic farmers. Both Petra and Helena attest to how their firms' brands evolved from their own values, with everyday decisions and trade-offs shaping its trajectory. Managing diverse desires to shape the brand's content and meaning became a learning process for the founders, requiring constant decision-making and adjustments. This integration of founder identity into the firm brands was found to serve essential functions similar to those of corporate brands, such as providing recognition, differentiation and added value ([Hatch and Schultz, 2001, 2003](#); [Kay, 2006](#); [Miller, 2014](#)). While these fundamental brand functions are well documented in the literature, our examination of small firms offers a novel perspective. We demonstrate how these functions – recognition, differentiation and brand values – are intricately woven from the founders' identities, underscoring the originality of our findings.

Concerning *recognition*, we observed that founders were using their identities in the branding process by connecting themselves to their firms. This was evident in both our illustrative cases. In Peaceful Dinner, the founder began as an unknown figure, but through her dedicated outreach efforts, she emerged as the recognisable face of the brand. Her identity and influence grew alongside the development of the firm, ultimately becoming closely intertwined with the Peaceful Dinner brand by the time of the firm's sale in 2017. Similarly, in the case of Home Grown, the founders' local recognition carried the firm brand. The painted caricature of the founders on their car enhanced recognition and fostered personal connection. Over time, the founders identified themselves as representative of the brand, aligning with Krake's (2005) concept of the founder being the brand.

Regarding *differentiation*, we found that leveraging a founder's identity in brand building facilitated a distinctiveness from competitors. Individual identities, being inherently unique (Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001), shape distinctive beliefs, values and actions (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Gregori *et al.*, 2021), thereby influencing the firm brands. This presents a valuable opportunity for brand differentiation, exemplified by founders like Helena and Homer in Home Grown, and Petra's emergence as a renowned food influencer with Peaceful Dinner. As founders become deeply embedded in the firm's history, their contributions foster a sense of distinctiveness (cf. Miller, 2014). The literature describes how individual identities can be developed and marketed as brands (cf. Eagar and Dann, 2016; Fournier and Eckhardt, 2019; Eagar *et al.*, 2022), yet we contribute by illustrating how this entanglement is relevant for small firms that are not primarily created to market a person or where the focus has been on highlighting and promoting this personal connection.

Finally, in terms of *added value*, we observed how a founder's identity enriches a brand by imbuing it with their personal values. For instance, Petra added value to Peaceful Dinner by aligning the firm's vision with her own beliefs and values regarding food and management. Similarly, Helena and Homer added value to Home Grown through their environmental and social commitments within the local community. The founders' identities created and supported the values carried by the firms' brands. This was evident in the myriad small decisions made in the day-to-day operations of the firms – such as the selection of products, recipes and portion sizes. Each of these micro-decisions reflected the founders' personalities and values.

### 5.2 Other stakeholders belonging to the firm brand

Findings indicate that as the firms developed and stakeholders engaged in the firms' operations, the brands' core values underwent changes. Initially established by the founders, these values were subject to negotiation with various internal and external stakeholders, including customers, partners and new owners. For instance, at Peaceful Dinner, pressure from customers to introduce a children's meal kit, combined with competitors' advancements and new management's compliance with customer requests, led to a deviation from the core brand values. Petra's departure from the management team marked a significant shift in the brand's values, straying from the founder's identity. Similarly at Home Grown, pressure from the new owner to make trade-offs between financial incentives and the brand resulted in changes that deviated from the founder's identity. This is in line with current literature, explaining that firms develop in interaction with context (Welter, 2011) through the aspirations of its multiple stakeholders (cf. Ozdemir *et al.*, 2020; Iglesias *et al.*, 2017; Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach, 2016; Hatch and Schultz, 2001, 2003). This social process occurs over time and can be explained as a process of stakeholders engaging in belonging to the brand (Miller, 2014; Urde, 2003, 2009). The novelty of our findings lies in how these continuous changes in the small firm brands can be understood as an increasing divergence from the founders' identities.

In our cases, the bonds between the firm brands and the founders appear to be resilient. A founder's role as the public face of a firm appears to strengthen this connection. In the cases of Peaceful Dinner and Home Grown, the founders are virtually synonymous with their brands. Even after Petra's departure from Peaceful Dinner and the transfer of ownership, she continued to serve as the front figure, preserving the connection to her identity within the brand. Thus, Petra became what Miller (2014) referred to as a historical reference, playing a crucial role for the brand's uniqueness. The founders of Home Grown had a different exit experience, as the bond with the new owner was abruptly broken. Despite the new owner's efforts to maintain the brand's values, customer loyalty declined. The exit of the founders resulted in the loss of an essential foundation for brand recognition and differentiation. Home Grown's brand had strong recognition as Helena and Homer's creation, which differentiated it from competitors. For instance, Homer explained it as Helena and himself being the brand. However, the new owner introduced minor changes to recipes and products that did not fully align with the values that the founders' had built into the brand. One year after the ownership change, Home Grown closed down. While the exact cause cannot be determined, the significant loss of customers following the change of ownership emphasises the importance of the founders' identities to the firm's brand.

## 6. Discussion

In this section, we engage in a comprehensive discussion of our research findings and their implications for understanding small firm branding dynamics.

### 6.1 *Interplay of founders' identities in small firm branding*

The close relationship between identity work and branding in small firms is a topic of great interest. Our findings illuminate the integral role of founders' identities in branding, suggesting the inseparability of identity and brand. Founders engage in identity work that directly interacts with the branding process, impacting recognition, differentiation and value creation – key functions highlighted in branding literature (Hatch and Schultz, 2001, 2003; Kay, 2006; Miller, 2014).

This understanding aligns with literature on individual identity, which posits it as a dynamic construct evolving within a social context (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). The continuous process of identity work (Sveningsson and Alvensson, 2003; Watson, 2008; Brown, 2015, 2021), is evident in the actions of founders as they develop belonging to the brand. The founder's identity and the brand are so deeply entwined, especially at the inception of the firm, that they are nearly inseparable. This suggests that the processes of identity work and corporate branding occur in a state of co-construction, mutually influencing each other.

While prior literature has criticised founders for neglecting branding efforts (e.g. Merrilees, 2007; Berthon *et al.*, 2008) our research illuminates the inherent embedding of branding within founders' actions and commitments. By recognising how identity work and branding interact, our study not only enriches our understanding of small firm branding but also emphasises the integration of founders' identity work within this process. Thus, our research promotes a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to studying branding in small businesses. We highlight the intricate dynamics where founders' identities actively shape branding for small businesses, contributing to advancing theoretical frameworks that capture the complex relationship between identity work and corporate branding in the context of small firms.

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### 6.2 *The evolution of small firm branding: negotiating belonging*

Our research delves into the evolution of small firm brands by exploring the process of various stakeholders developing belonging to core values within a brand (Urde, 2003, 2009; Miller, 2014; Yoganathan *et al.*, 2018). Initially aligned with their founders, these brands embody their core values and identities. However, as time progresses and more actors become involved, these values undergo transformation. We propose this transformation as a process of multiple stakeholder negotiating belonging to the brand, leading the brand to diverge from its founder's original identity. This divergence not only changes the brand's character but also influences the founder's ongoing identity work.

By revealing the micro-processes through which firm brands transform in their interactions with both external and internal stakeholders, our research highlights how these interactions lead the brands to deviate from the founders' identities and shape the brand's trajectory. As more actors become involved in the small firm branding process and contribute to the development of belonging to the brand, they also influence the founder's identity work. Thus, our research sheds light on the reciprocal nature of these processes, emphasising the importance of understanding how they interact and shape each other over time.

### 6.3 *Unveiling the complex dynamics of belonging in small firm branding*

In small firm branding, the negotiation of belonging within a brand emerges as a multifaceted process involving numerous actors. Our contribution lies in outlining the complexity of this process, challenging previous conceptualisations that predominantly focus on the actor-brand relationship. While existing literature often portrays belonging as the development of a relationship between an actor and a brand, our study sheds light on the active involvement of various stakeholders in shaping this sense of belonging for the actor. For instance, let us consider the scenarios from our cases where a founder sells their firm, and a new owner assumes control. Even after the founder exits, the new owner might opt to highlight the founder's legacy within the brand, like in Peaceful Dinner, thereby perpetuating the founder's identity and preserving its influence on brand recognition, differentiation and core values. These dynamics pose challenges for a founder to disentangle their identity from a brand post-sale, resembling a process where a new owner borrows or even hijacks a founder's identity.

Our contribution lies in providing empirical illustrations of the micro-processes involved in negotiating belonging within a brand. We demonstrate how not only the specific actor but also various other stakeholders actively contribute to shaping the actor's sense of belonging. Thus, an actor's sense of belonging is a co-constructed and dynamic process. Consequently, we propose that the embedding and exit of founder identity within or from a brand may contribute to the inconclusive findings in the literature regarding whether founder's presence leads to stagnation (Boeker and Karichalil, 2002) or increased chances of survival (Cardon *et al.*, 2005) for firms.

To sum up, through our study, we delve into the dynamics of belonging within small firm branding, revealing the deep embeddedness of a founder's identity into a brand and the complexities of detangling this identity during founder succession. By exploring these intricate relationships, we enhance our understanding of the interplay between branding and the negotiation of belonging in small firms. Our findings provide empirical insights into the challenges of founder succession and its implications for brand continuity, enriching theoretical frameworks and offering insights for practitioners navigating succession processes.



## 7. Conclusion and implications

Our aim was to explore how small firm brands evolve over time. Our study reveals the intricate interplay between founders' identity work and branding in small firms. We demonstrate how founders use their personal identities to shape a brand, underscoring the inseparable nature between identity work and corporate branding.

Furthermore, our investigation into the evolution of small firm brands sheds light on the process of stakeholders negotiating belonging to the brands core values. We illustrate how brands diverge from their founders' original identities as more actors become involved, leading to conflicts and shaping the brand's trajectory. This divergence not only changes the brand's character but also influences the founder's ongoing identity work.

Finally, our contribution unveils the complex dynamics of belonging in small firm branding, challenging conventional conceptualisations by recognising the involvement of multiple actors in negotiating belonging for a founder. We illustrate how stakeholders such as new owners, customers and internal actors play active roles in shaping the founder's sense of belonging to the brand. We propose that the embedding and exit of founder identity within or from a brand may contribute to the inconclusive findings in existing literature, particularly regarding the impact of founder presence on firm outcomes.

By acknowledging the interplay between founders' identity work and branding, and how various stakeholders engage in belonging to a brand, our research enriches our understanding of branding processes in small firms and advocates for a more nuanced approach to studying small firm branding including studying this over time.

This also has implications for practice. Small start-ups often face criticism for neglecting branding due to resource constraints and limited understanding of its importance and management. However, the insights from this study demonstrate that in small firms, founder identities play a significant role in fulfilling brand functions, rendering conventional brand management approaches less needed. Small firms inherently engage in branding as they interact with their context. Hence, advising small firms on brand building requires a unique approach that acknowledges the pivotal role of founder identities and the opportunities and challenges they bring throughout the branding process, from creation, through development to founder succession. As stakeholders develop a sense of belonging to the brand, the brand naturally evolves to acquire distinct characteristics. Vigilance is crucial during ownership changes when the founder's identity strongly associates with the brand. A gradual transition and careful consideration of customer and stakeholder attitudes before and during the founder's exit can help manage this process effectively.

Future research could delve deeper into the literature surrounding human brands, person brands, persona-fied brands and artist brands. These concepts illuminate how individual identities are developed and marketed as brands, particularly in contexts where the founder's identity becomes intertwined with the corporate brand over time. Exploring these dynamics further could offer valuable insights into the entanglement of individuals, businesses and their brands in small firms. This exploration could shed light on how founders navigate the evolving role of their personal identity within the brand narrative, and how this influences brand development.

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#### **Further reading**

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