

Louvain School of Management  
and Vytautas Magnus University

# THE USE OF AUDIO BRANDING IN THE CASE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED BUSINESSES

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## SUMMARY

In the age of the attention economy, the struggle to capture consumer attention amidst information overload is a pressing concern. As digital platforms inundate users with visual stimuli, audio branding emerges as a compelling marketing strategy. A wealth of data underscores its effectiveness, with Generation Z and Millennials in particular showing a strong preference for brands with distinct sound identities. Despite the rise in the use of audio in advertising, there is a conspicuous absence of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in the field of audio branding. Given the predominance of SMEs in global economies, the lack of research into their potential for exploiting audio branding presents a significant gap in the current understanding. Constraints of resources and brand focus may inhibit SMEs' adoption of this approach, yet understanding and addressing these limitations could propel audio branding into mainstream marketing practices. Against this backdrop, this thesis poses the research problem: what are the use of audio branding possibilities for small and medium-sized businesses and how should such enterprises use it? The aim is: to analyse the concept of audio branding and perform research evaluating and highlighting audio branding possibilities concerning small and medium-sized businesses. The object is: the possibilities of the use of audio branding in small and medium-sized businesses. To provide a comprehensive understanding of how SMEs can effectively utilise audio branding, a multi-method approach will be employed, combining scientific literature analysis, comparative analysis, qualitative case studies, and expert interviews. The intended outcome is a practical model guiding SMEs to effectively use audio branding, thereby bridging the prevailing research and application gap in this field.

This paper is a solutions-oriented final master thesis.

**Keywords:** audio branding, sonic branding, SME branding, small and medium-sized business, possibilities of use, the audio branding model.

**Justas Šiburkis.** GARSINĖS ŽENKLODAROS PANAUDOJIMO GALIMYBĖS MAŽŲ IR VIDUTINIŲ VERSLŲ ATVEJU: Marketingo ir tarptautinės komercijos magistro baigiamasis darbas / Justinas Kisieliauskas / Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Ekonomikos ir vadybos fakultetas, Magistrantūros studijos. – Kaunas, 2023. – 90 p.

## SANTRAUKA

Šiuolaikinėje ekonomikoje, informacijos perteklius sukuria dėmesio trūkumą, todėl vis labiau aktualėja jutiminio marketingo sprendimai, pavyzdžiui, garsinė ženklo daras. Šis mokslinis darbas nagrinėja garsinio prekinio ženklo ir mažųjų bei vidutinių įmonių (MVĮ) sąveiką. MVĮ užima 90% visų pasaulio verslų, tačiau yra neproporcingai mažai atstovaujamas vartotojų segmentas garsinės ženklo daros srityje. Probleminis tyrimo klausimas tampa: "Kokios yra garsinės ženklo daros panaudojimo galimybės mažų ir vidutinių verslų atveju bei kaip MVĮ turėtų jomis naudotis?". Tyrimo objektas yra garsinės ženklo daros panaudojimo galimybės MVĮ atžvilgiu. Tyrimo tikslas yra atskleisti garsinės ženklo daros panaudojimo galimybes MVĮ atveju ir pateikti išsamų panaudojimo modelį, padėsiantį šioms įmonėms įgyvendinti efektyvias garsinio prekės ženklo valdymo strategijas. Tyrimo metodika apima garsinės ženklo daros koncepcijų teorinę analizę, empirinį tyrimą ir praktinio, MVĮ orientuoto modelio kūrimą. Panaudotos metodologijos apima mokslinės literatūros analizę ir sintezę, koncepcijų ir metodų lyginamąją analizę, kokybinius atvejų tyrimus, giluminius ir ekspertų interviu. Šiuo darbu siekiama užpildyti esamą tyrimų ir naudojimo spragą tarp garsinės ženklo daros ir MVĮ, suteikiant vertingą marketingo/prekės ženklo valdymo įrankį MVĮ, leidžiantį pasinaudoti garsinės ženklo daros pranašumais.

Tai yra projektinis magistro baigiamasis darbas.

**Raktažodžiai:** garsinis prekinis ženklas, garsinė ženklo daras, MVĮ, mažos ir vidutinės įmonės, garsinės ženklo daros galimybės, jutiminis marketingas, prekės ženklo valdymas.

# INTRODUCTION

**Relevance of the topicality.** Nobel prize laureate Herbert A. Symon states that the abundance of information creates a poverty of attention, indicating that we are currently living in the times of attention economy where attention is considered a currency (Berkeley Economic Review, 2019). Nowadays, an average person is exposed to 4000 to 10000 different advertisements, promotions, commercials, and other brand messages in a day, but only around 100 can be consciously captured (Red Crow Marketing, 2015). When more than half of the world consumes ever so shortening content online, the collective human ability to retain attention is declining (Lorenz, Bjarke, Hövel, and Lehmann, 2019), and here marketers face a problem: how to draw and retain consumer attention to the brand.

Especially today, the answer can often be found in sensory marketing, specifically in audio branding. Generation Z and Millennials make up more than half of the world's population, and 56% agree that sound is an escape from too much visual stimulation in their daily lives (Kesten, 2020). An advertising industry report shows that there are 2.5 million active podcasts and the importance of sound in the market is exploding as the use of podcasts from 2019 to 2020 increased by 80% (Claritas, 2020). Additionally, 75% of media agencies now have digital audio advertising and podcast ads as a regular part of their buying (IAB Australia, 2023). Lastly, out of the 250 million US population, 90 million own smart audio equipment, and 50% use it daily for voice control navigation, online purchasing, and audio content (Kinsella, 2022).

While audio branding is only an emerging field that has been around for two decades, the growing demand for audio as a medium is now evident, more than 20% of generation Z and millennials are more likely to buy products from a brand with a sound identity than from one without (DLMMDD, 2021). Brands that use sound which is aligned with their brand identity are 96% more recognizable by the consumer, compared to the ones who use it wrongly or do not use it at all (North, 2008). Brands that consistently use sonic logos have 88% higher recall compared to the ones that rarely or never use sonic logos in the market (Veritonic, 2022).

A noticeable tendency is that with the abundance of scientific articles proving the effectiveness of audio branding, indeed, only large-scale businesses are increasingly adopting it while the same cannot be said about small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). There were 250 brands analysed in one of the latest audio branding industry reports, and none of them can be considered small or medium-sized business-owned brands (Amp Sound Branding, 2022). None of the latest 100 best audio logos analysed by the leading audio researchers are owned by small or medium-sized companies (Veritonic, 2022). Most of the available case studies on successful audio brands are also

related to large-scale businesses (Made Music, 2022, AMP, 2023, Sonic Minds, 2023), and in the most recent sonic branding industry report, out of 136 brands measured and analysed over the course of two years, none of them seem to be owned by an SME (SoundOut, 2023).

Considering that SMEs represent 99% of EU businesses, which accounts for more than half of EU GDP (European Commission, 2022), and 90% of global businesses (The World Bank, 2022), it is not obvious as to why no research has been conducted in such direction, neither why audio branding industry does not try to reach the SME consumer, nor why won't SMEs use audio branding despite its evident efficacy. Branding literature suggests that it might be the case that SMEs are heavily constrained by limited resources and have less brand focus consequently (Inskip, 2004; Krake, 2005; Ojasalo, Nätti and Olkkonen, 2008). SME adoption of management practices has historically legitimized such practices (European Commission, 2017), and if audio branding were to become mainstream, reaching SMEs is essential for that matter. Lastly, in increasingly audial world, where digital audio medium has been identified as the fastest-growing advertising format in 2022, expected to reach 8 billion dollars of global ad spend by 2025 (PWC, 2022), SMEs are left without guidance as to how utilize audio branding in their limited resources case, and further research is necessary. Therefore, **the research problem** of this paper is: what are the use of audio branding possibilities for small and medium-sized businesses and how should such enterprises use it?

**The object** is: the possibilities of the use of audio branding in small and medium-sized businesses.

**The aim** is: to analyse the concept of audio branding and perform research evaluating and highlighting audio branding possibilities concerning small and medium-sized businesses.

Through theoretical analysis of the concept of audio branding and its application to small and medium-sized businesses and empirical research on the current use of audio branding, this thesis will provide a comprehensive understanding of how small and medium-sized businesses can effectively utilize audio branding in their marketing strategies. The result of this thesis is a guidance model for small and medium-sized businesses to effectively use audio branding as a marketing tool as well as by introducing such solution – decrease the prevailing research and use gap between audio branding field and the SMEs.

**Objectives:**

1. Analyse the theoretical aspects of audio branding, and the use of audio branding possibilities concerning small and medium-sized businesses.
2. Formulate the use of audio branding possibilities for small and medium-sized businesses empirical research methodology.
3. Conduct field analysis of the use of audio branding possibilities in the case of small and medium-sized businesses.

4. Based on theoretical analysis and field analysis results, present the audio branding possibilities concerning small and medium-sized businesses' guidance model.

The **logic** of the paper is **structured** into three main parts.

**The first part**, “theoretical analysis of the use of audio branding possibilities for SMEs”, covers the thesis topic-related concepts like brand, branding, and audio branding as well as how they overlap with SMEs context. A degree of the paper problem solved by other researchers and available topic-related literature is formed alongside an overview of potential methodology to be used in the research part of the paper. The first part is a comprehensive theoretical analysis of the problem question and a synthesis of information that serves as a guideline for further research.

**The second part** of the paper is called “field analysis of the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs”, and covers the research problem substantiation, research object, objectives, and methodology presentation as well as it covers the results of research methods employed: expert interviews, qualitative case study, and in-depth interviews. It also covers similar research overview, comparison, and novelty discussion.

**The third part** is called “the guidance model of the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs”, and it covers, firstly, the critical analysis and discussion of the results of field analysis in the context of the research object. Out of this analysis emerges the formulation and justification of solutions to the problem areas identified. Lastly, it covers the presentation of the final guidance model and its concrete explanation as well as rationale. In addition to guidance model adaptation, practical benefits and further direction of the future research is discussed.

**Research methods:**

- 1) Scientific literature analysis and synthesis
- 2) Comparative analysis of concepts and approaches
- 3) Qualitative case study
- 4) In-depth interviews
- 5) Expert interviews

**Information sources:** scientific publications, industry reports, books of scientific nature, online scientific articles, online documents, statistical data, cases, experts, websites, and SME respondents.

# **I. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF AUDIO BRANDING IN CASE OF SMEs**

Based on the recent scientific literature covering topics such as brand and branding concepts, unique brand elements, and the concept of audio branding, the first part of this paper aims to conduct a thorough examination of the current theoretical understanding of the research problem. Additionally, this section will examine the theoretical aspects of the possibilities of using audio branding for small and medium-sized businesses, including an overview on the use of sound in marketing and branding. Through this analysis, the goal is to identify the prevailing views in the scientific literature regarding the concept of audio branding and its potential uses for small and medium-sized businesses, evaluate the degree of theoretical research on the topic as well as compare and evaluate theoretical research methods and solutions proposed in the literature.

## **1.1 Theoretical aspects of audio branding**

To investigate and fully uncover the research problem, theoretical analysis begins with an overview of what audio branding is, what it consists of, and what other marketing concepts it overrides. Going forward, the definitions and concepts related to audio branding as well as the audio branding practice itself are being analysed through the following subsections.

### **1.1.1 The concept of brand and branding**

Audio branding is directly related to the term "brand" and "branding", henceforth, before analysing the use of audio branding possibilities concerning small and medium-sized businesses, it's important to reveal what these terms mean from a scientific literature standpoint.

The brand is a complex phenomenon and has been widely discussed in the academic world. Although brand experts themselves cannot seem to reach a common and consistent agreement on the term, perhaps because of its ever-changing paradigm – one of the scientific positions states that brands are everywhere, and they touch almost all aspects of our lives: economic, social, cultural, sports, and religious as well as they should be analysed based on macroeconomics, microeconomics, sociology, anthropology, history, semiotics, philosophy, and other sciences (Kapferer, 2004). Despite this position, it is observed that the concept of "brand" is consistently associated with, and analysed through marketing practice (Clifton and Simmons, 2009). Marketing is a discipline that encompasses all the actions that a company takes to attract customers and maintain relationships with them. In

other words, marketing aims to increase a company's profitability by aligning the company's products and services with customer needs (Baker, 2007).

Such an association is made because the use of the term "brand" in a marketing confine has a long historical context. To review it briefly, the term "brand" comes from the ancient Scandinavians' "brandr," which means "to burn," and later entered the English language. In the past, people would burn a symbol on their animals to mark ownership, and as trade developed, buyers would use these symbols as a means of distinguishing one farmer's animals from another. A brand of a farmer with a particularly good reputation for animal quality would be highly sought-after, while the brands of farmers with poorer reputations would be avoided. This established the usefulness of a brand as a guide for product selection, an essence that remains unchanged to this day (Clifton and Simmons, 2009). Later, after the industrial revolution, in the late 1880s, with the advent of mass trade and the emergence of large retailers such as Coca-Cola, the term "brand" was used as a logo, i.e. a distinctive visual feature of a retailer's products. However, after the end of World War II and the beginning of the internet era, retailers began to realize that a "brand" is more than just a logo, i.e., a combination of name, letters, numbers, colours, slogans, signatures, shapes, or certain fonts, that can leave a lasting impression and, when used consciously in sales or communication context, increase the relationship with the consumer and reputation (Loyd, 2019).

To compare history with the present, according to Wood (2000), a brand is a business and marketing concept that helps people identify a certain company, product, or individual. Wood argues that brands are intangible, they help shape people's perceptions of companies, their products, or individuals. Companies use various visual means to help create a brand identity and gain a competitive advantage in the market. On the other hand, Ogilvy describes the term as the sum of non-material attributes of a product. This statement is supported by Neumeier, who states that a brand is the overall consumer perception of a product, service, experience, or organization (Morgan, 2020). "A brand is not just a product or a company's logo. It's a much broader concept that only exists in a person's mind, it's all the associations that arise in a person's mind when they hear a certain word, see a certain sign or colour," says the Association of Personal Branding (Marketing Hub, 2020).

Evaluating the thoughts expressed by the authors, a general understanding of the term brand can be formed, but to form a more concrete definition, further analysis of a scientific publication about the concept of "brand" (Mauryja and Mishara, 2012) and the use of the 12-part categorization system proposed by Chernatony and Riley (1998) is carried out. The 12-part categorization system helps to understand the concept of this term from both the company and the consumer perspectives, by listing definitions separately for each category:

1. **Brand as a logo** – name, term, design, symbol, or combination- intended to identify and differentiate the seller or group of sellers' goods or services from competitors.

2. **Brand as a legal measure** (Trademark) – a statement or evidence of legal ownership, for example, a certain type of goods is the legally registered property of this brand.
3. **Brand as a company** – when the brand is used to describe the identity of the company/corporation. This definition is less commonly used and more describes the internal corporate culture, i.e., how employees, staff, suppliers, and shareholders perceive the brand.
4. **Brand as an abbreviation** – a quick sum of all psychological connections in the minds of consumers, i.e., the recognition of a brand by the speed of recall when talking about a certain product or service.
5. **Brand as risk reduction** – consumer trust that their expectations will be met. In other words, when buying a product or service, consumers perceive risk, and understanding the dimensions of perceived risk allows marketing specialists to present their brands in such a way that they earn greater consumer trust and reduce purchase pain.
6. **Brand as identity** – a consequence of what culture (values), personality (character), self-projection (how the brand sees itself from a consumer standpoint), physiological (visual attributes), reflection (consumers' perspective), and relationship (associations) does a brand embody. The brand identity separates it from competitors, brings it closer to the consumer, and helps communicate more clearly with all interested parties.
7. **Brand image** – the result of all branding actions, i.e., how the consumer sees and perceives the brand identity.
8. **Brand as a value system** – a crossroads between the values of the consumer and the company. Consumers find value in the brand's history, heritage, personal experience with it, and how it reflects what they believe in. Consumers choose a brand according to 5 value categories: functional values, social values, emotional values, novelty, and conditional values.
9. **Brand as a personality** – a set of human attributes that are assigned to a brand. This is a qualitative added value that a brand acquires without functional advantages. Essentially, a brand's personality is something that the consumer can establish a connection with.
10. **Brand as a relationship** – the interaction of the consumer and the brand as a behaviour. This is an extension of personality, if a brand can be personalized, consumers can also have a relationship with it. Successful brands are characterized by a strong relationship between the product or service and the consumer.
11. **Brand as added value** – non-functional benefit. The difference between a product and a brand is defined as added value that the consumer perceives by associating with the brand, and this can be psychological, emotional, economic, or social aspects.

## **12. Brand as a developing subject** – the description of the brand as a concept and term growth.

This is an attempt to show the instability of the term and the path from visual product branding to personality and later – identity, company, values, etc. (Mauryja and Mishara, 2012).

In summary, the 12 categorical definitions show that some of them describe the concept of a brand from the consumer's perspective, i.e., as a risk reducer, as a personality, as an abbreviation, as relationships, as an image in the consumer's mind, and as a developing subject. Other definitions reveal the concept through the perspective of the company and corporation, i.e., as a logo, legal measure, and identity. It can be said that most of them interweave with each other and, in certain cases, contradict each other. It only goes to show the complexity of the term and why there is disagreement in the scientific literature about a unified and universal approach to defining it.

Considering the viewpoints from various authors, scientific publications, and a system of 12 categorical definitions, it's evident that despite the extensive exploration of the 'brand' concept in scientific literature, its complex nature lacks unanimous consensus. This paper's "brand" definition, derived from such literature, pertains to a business and marketing tool aiding consumers in identifying a specific company, product, or service. It's a legal property for companies, serving as a valuable intangible asset and a customer attraction/retention tool. Consumers view it as a relationship providing benefits and quality assurance. Collectively, it reflects a company's self-perception and consumers' perception of it. Continually evolving, a brand helps achieve business objectives, differentiates products, and elevates perceived value.

Going forward, as per marketing scholar Professor Kotler, it refers to the augmentation of a product or service via a brand's power. A product satisfies a market need, encompassing physical goods, services, experiences, among other things (Kotler and Keller, 2015a). A brand forms an idea or image in consumers' minds, combining functional and emotional associations. For instance, a "Nike - Just do it" ad would inspire a consumer to purchase quality, confidence-inspiring footwear (The Branding Journal, 2022). This blend of physical and emotional elements generates the brand's power, an effect of branding.

Branding, as stated by The Branding Journal Association (2022), involves creating meaning for an entity via forming a product brand image in consumers' minds. It forms structures facilitating consumers' information processing about products and services, hence creating value. Branding is thus the creation of a brand via strategic intent, use of brand associations, and crafting socially important brand stories (Kotler, Keller, 2015b).

The paper has already established that branding is the process of empowering a product or a service with brand attributes and through such process, value is created. Kotler and Keller continue this statement by saying that this process is manifested in relation to all the touch points of contact between the customer and the brand (2015b). What the authors are referring to is famously called

“customer experience” which is defined as “a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer’s cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial, and social responses to a firm’s offerings during the customer’s entire purchase journey” (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). The purchase journey, more famously known as the customer journey, is defined as the total time a customer spends interacting with a firm’s offerings across the total amount of touch points where the customer is deciding whether to purchase or not as well as where his decisions can be influenced by the firm (2016). There are four types of touchpoints:

1. **Brand-owned** – customer interactions that are designed and managed by the firm and under the firm's control. They include brand-owned media such as advertising, websites, and loyalty programs and any brand-controlled elements of the marketing mix such as product attributes, packaging, service, price, convenience, and sales force.
2. **Partner-owned** – customer interactions that are jointly designed, managed, or controlled by the firm and one or more of its partners. These partners can include marketing agencies, multichannel distribution partners, multivendor loyalty program partners, and communication channel partners.
3. **Customer-owned** – customer actions that are part of the overall customer experience but that the firm, its partners, or others do not influence or control. These touch points are most critical and prevalent post-purchase when individual consumption and usage take centre stage.
4. **Social/external** – customer interactions that are influenced by external factors such as peers, other customers, third-party information sources, and the environment. These touchpoints can substantially affect the customer experience and can be comparable or even larger than advertising effects, for example, “YouTube” reviews or information shared through social media channels (2016).

All the touchpoints fall under three phases within a customer journey. The first phase, called prepurchase, includes all interactions a customer has with a brand, category, and environment before making a purchase. This phase includes behaviors such as recognizing a need, searching for options, and considering options. The second phase is called purchase and covers all interactions between the customer and the brand during the actual purchase event. This phase is characterized by behaviours such as choice, ordering, and payment. The final phase of the customer journey is post-purchase, which covers customer interactions with the brand and its environment after the actual purchase. This phase includes behaviours such as usage and consumption, post-purchase engagement, and service requests (2016). To conclude Kotler and Keller’s (2015) idea of defining branding, these types of touch points between brand information and the customer journey are strategically created by companies or individuals and are called branding strategies. There are many branding strategies known and used within the marketing field like product branding, personal branding, corporate

branding, service branding, co-branding, etc. (Giles, 2020), but this paper is focused specifically on audio branding, uncovered within the next subsection of the paper.

In summary, the concepts of branding and brand are complementary and complexly interrelated, but if a brand is an emotional as well as a functional representation of a product or service in the customer's mind, then branding is the process of creating that representation, henceforth, the definition of branding is empowering a product or a service with brand attributes across all the touch points within the customer journey.

### **1.1.3 The concept of audio branding**

Audio branding is a marketing practice still in its infancy. Many labels describe it: acoustic branding, sonic branding, sound branding, branded sound, elevator music, pipe music, background music, music branding, etc (Gustafsson, 2015). Going forward, in this paper, either audio branding or sonic branding terms are being used to describe the same concept, because, for more than a decade, the scientific literature as well as the audio branding market itself has been revolving around this terminology specifically.

The research tradition of the use of sound to influence customer behavior started in the early 1990s with an article on the effects of music tempo in restaurants (Milliman, 1982) and the meaning of jingles in advertising (Scott, 1990). In the following years, research shifted to a more holistic approach and focused on the role of music in creating physical comfort in retail settings and the impact of sound and music on consumer perception of time (Bitner, 1992). It is not until Jackson at the time wrote the foundational book of audio branding, and introduced a concept where the use of music and sound was observed from a brand management/marketing perspective (Jackson, 2003). According to Jackson, the use of sound was under-realized in terms of using it to its full potential, and proposed viewing the use of sound as a discipline of strategic brand management, where a brand's audio identity is being created and used across the touchpoints in the customer journey. Although Jackson's discovery was intriguing, the use of sound as a discipline still lacked more research. In 2005, after Lindstrom released the book "Brand Sense" on the concept of sensory marketing, corporations realized the importance of audio medium (2005) and the complexity of the use of sound, which made brand owners and corporations turn to sound recording agencies for advice. Following previous Jackson's research and the need for clarity within the field, Brodsky (2011) created a research method that assessed how consumers perceive various attributes of brands and their products through the music utilized in advertising. In line with Brodsky's findings, Herzog et al. (Herzog, M., Jochen, Lepa, S. and Schoenrock, A, 2020) created a catalog of categories and descriptors that

encapsulate all facets of brand identity that can be conveyed through music, bridging the gap between industry professionals in the realm of musical branding and evaluating their efficacy.

Today audio (sonic) branding is considered young but increasingly more official marketing/brand management discipline. From the leading audio industry service and research standpoint, the definition of audio branding is the expression of a brand through sound or an auditory brand expression. In other words, it is parallel to the visual expression of a brand, giving it a second – auditory – dimension (Brand Master Academy, 2022). Such a definition is complemented by the "Marketing Tutor" association, stating that audio branding is the use of sound to strengthen a brand's identity and a strategy for enhancing brand recognition, memorability, emotions, and communication (2018). From a holistic standpoint, audio branding is how a brand uses music and sound in all touch points between products and services in a customer journey (Massive Music, 2020). From the scientific literature standpoint, sonic branding is the use of music and sound to create a brand's consistent and distinctive audio identity (Gustafsson, 2015). It can be used to convey brand values and personality while creating an emotional connection with consumers and differentiating the brand from its competitors (Mestre, Sánchez, Garrido, Carvallo, and Carnicer, 2022).

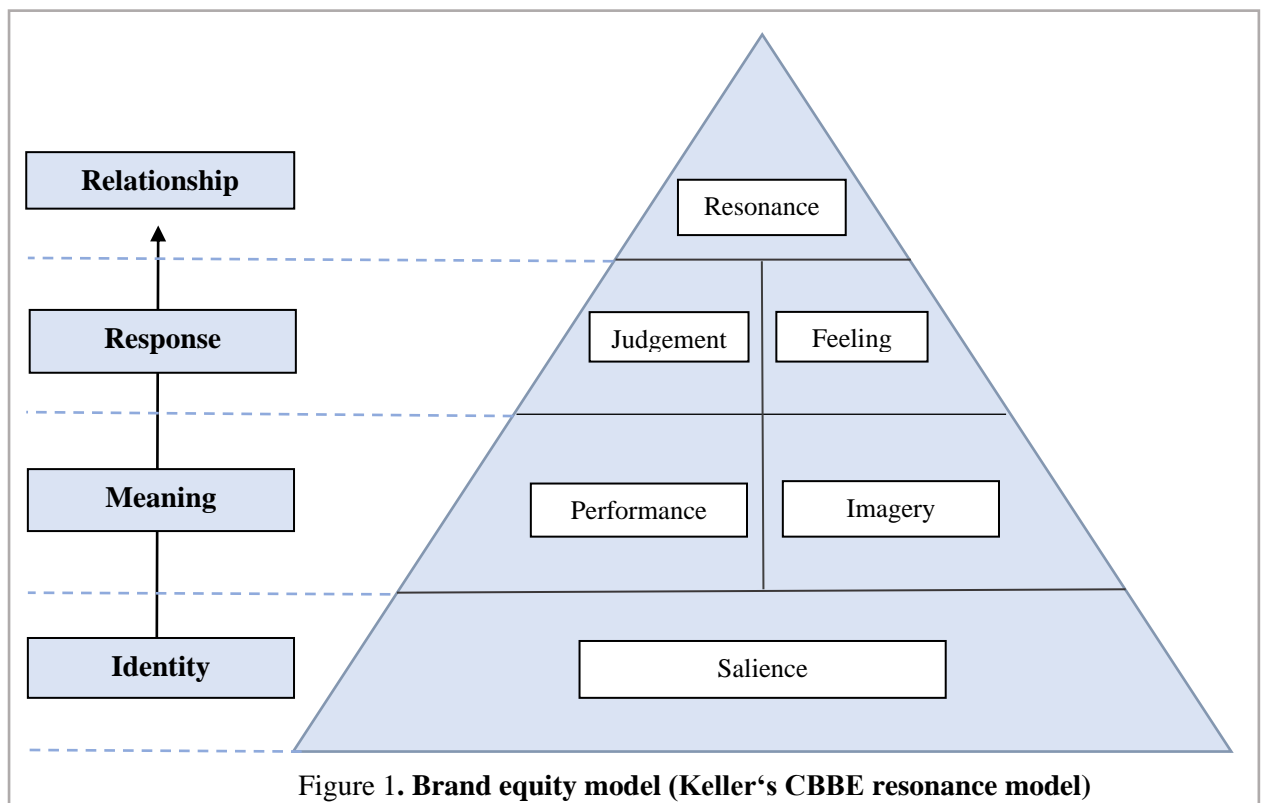
To understand what exactly an audio identity is and how it plays a key role in sonic branding, an overview of brand elements, brand identity, and brand equity concepts is needed. Not to be confused with the brand image (consumers' perception of the brand), brand identity is the collection of visual (tangible) and intangible brand elements that help the brand stand out and become recognizable (Nandan, 2005). Brand elements are memorable, likable, meaningful, transferable, adaptable, and oftentimes protective features of a brand's identity that play a key role in brand communication (Keller, Kotler, 2015b). The most important brand elements are:

1. **Brand name** – a carefully thought-out marketing measure aimed at increasing product awareness and customer loyalty. It encompasses the essence of the company in word combination and is often legally protected property.
2. **Brand logo** – the most memorable visual asset of the brand. The font, size, colour, emblem, and logo illustration must embody the brand's meaning and create a memorable impression for the consumer. A brand logo is also often legally protected property.
3. **Graphics and visual elements** – a combination of colour theme, typography, design, imagery, shape, size, and font elements that are specific to the brand and are used consistently in brand communication while in alignment with the brand name and logo. Together with the brand name and logo, this set of tangible visual brand elements is often seen as the most important asset of the brand when creating a memorable, likable, trustable, and meaningful identity.
4. **Tone and voice** – these are the intangible brand elements conveyed through every medium of interaction with the customer. The tone and voice of the brand can only be felt, and it represents

the brand's mood as well as emotions (trustable, gentle, reassuring, comic, or encouraging tone and voice).

- 5. Mission, vision, and purpose** – represent a company's core values, beliefs, and aspirations. They help create identity, build credibility, and communicate values to stakeholders (2015).

Brand identity is the core and the most important aspect of brand equity – the measure of the value of the brand, i.e., the value that a company receives from recognition of its name (Wood, 2000). In other words, brand equity refers to the additional value that consumers associate with products and services due to their brand, and this value is reflected in consumer behaviour, attitudes, and actions towards the brand, as well in market price, share, and profitability of the brand (Kotler, Keller, 2015). Keller's CBBE resonance model (figure 1), also known as the Brand Equity model, outlines how a strong brand can create value for a company by creating positive associations and emotional connections in the minds of consumers. “Meaning” refers to the brand's connotations, associations, and perceptions in the minds of consumers. “Response” refers to the consumer's behaviour and emotions towards the brand, such as brand loyalty and advocacy. “Relationships” refer to the consumer's attachment and bonding with the brand, which includes trust, respect, and other emotions, but none of the above-mentioned associations and connections are possible without brand identity (Keller, 2003). Henceforth, when authors discuss creating an audio identity, it means creating a second (audio) dimension to the present identity of the brand and in doing so – strengthening the total brand equity.



Source: Keller (2003).

According to the leading audio branding service providers and researchers (Sanders, 2022, Changeart, 2019, MassiveMusic, 2019, Boisson, 2022), audio branding process follows three steps:

- 1. Conceptualization** – defining the current brand values, positioning, target audience, and messaging. This process involves conducting market research to understand the competitive landscape and opportunities for differentiation as well as researching how the customer sees the brand. Based on the identified current brand image and identity – conducting ideation of possible audio identity direction.
- 2. Production** – creating a sound palette, which involves selecting the sounds and instrumentation that will be used to create the audio identity. Creating a sound library and audio logo, creating musical pieces, and revising every element to make sure it is aligned with previously conceptualized brand identity.
- 3. Implementation** – integrating the audio identity into every medium of the brand-to-customer interaction. Ensuring that the audio identity is used consistently across all touch points and applications. Ongoing refinement and evolution of the audio identity to keep it fresh and relevant. Overall, this step embodies a long-term audio branding strategy and its maintenance.

Audio identity production is made from unique brand elements like:

- 1. Audio logo** – a short musical note sequence, which is a part of the brand’s audio identity, used over a long period of time (Sheinin, Scott, and Labrecque, 2022). The Audio logo is the most researched audio identity element and has been proven to increase brand recognition, recall, emotional connection, and willingness to pay (Mas, Rodero, Barreda-Angeles, and Bolls, 2020). In most cases, it is the starting point of an audio identity, created as a short and memorable combination of 3-5 notes – it often becomes the brand’s audio DNA – a short, transferable, melodic asset of an audio identity (Sonic Minds, 2022).
- 2. Brand song** – based on identified audio DNA, it is a custom-created musical piece, which can be transferred amongst many different genres or variables of the same piece. Ultimately, the brand song is a memorable piece of music that can have many different versions and be applied across different customer touchpoints like an advertisement or physical space (Digitalist, 2017).
- 3. Sound library** – all brand’s audio identity-specific sounds used in every possible touchpoint across every possible customer journey medium.
- 4. Brand voice** – refers to a human-spoken language as well as its tone and character that the brand transits through every touch point in the customer journey.
- 5. Jingle** – a short and easily remembered audio message encapsulating the brand name, slogan, and sometimes audio logo while used mostly in advertisements (Sonic Minds, 2022).

Audio identity can be considered as an audio brand and is expressed through brand elements presented in figure 2 which has been assembled based on the model first proposed by Nufer and

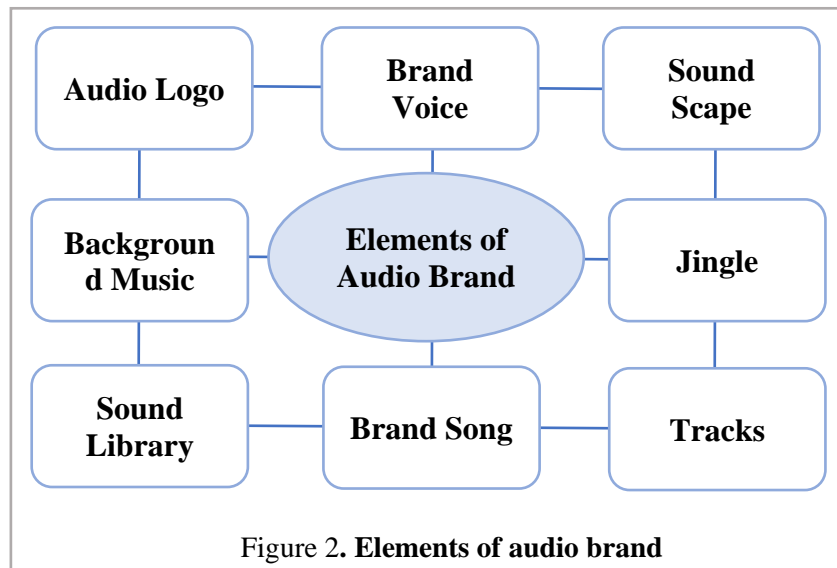


Figure 2. Elements of audio brand

Source: Nufer and Gerd (2019), Kilian (2009), and Sound Strategy (2022).

Nufer and Gerd (2019) then reinforced with other audio branding practitioner literature analyses presented in this paper (for example, Kilian, 2009, Sound Strategy, 2022, Sonic Minds, 2022). It is to say that the audio identity is known and documented to consist of such unique audio brand elements but at the same time is not limited to them. Each audio brand element can be uniquely tailored specifically to the context of the brand's touchpoints and so it is not entirely possible to place every sound into a brand element category (Kilian, 2009). In addition to the elements discussed previously, tracks are separately composed or enriched pieces of music that are derived from the brand song and audio logo. There can be many different tracks as they are tailored mostly to visual advertisement campaigns but are not limited to them (Kilian, 2009, Sound Strategy, 2022). Soundscape is a musical piece tailored to the physical environment and is an audio branding element that focuses on the environment rather than the brand's message. In most cases, soundscapes also are derived from the core brand song (brand theme or audio logo i.e., audio "DNA"). Lastly, background music can often but does not have to be the least detached audio brand element from the core theme of the brand's audio identity, since its role is to fill up space for commercials (Nufer and Gerd, 2019).

To summarise, the audio branding concept refers to a holistic use of sound across all the brand touch points within its customer journey that increases brand recall, recognition, emotional response, and connection with the customer. The concept is based on creating an audio identity in addition to existing visual brand identity through unique brand elements like an audio logo, brand song, and sound library, and in doing so increasing brand equity. Since the conscious practice and research origin of such discipline began in early 2003, in many cases, a lack of scientific basis can be

seen, yet many audio branding service-providing articles are being published, indicating that the concept is widely used in the current market.

## **1.2 Theoretical analysis of the use of audio branding**

Going forward, through the upcoming three subsections, the wide audio branding concept is narrowed down into the case of what are the possibilities of its use for SMEs, elaborating on the use of audio branding in general, as well as similar research analysis is being conducted.

### **1.2.1 Benefits and drawbacks of the use of audio branding**

Besides a few online articles by practitioners and theorists, little to no scientific research has been conducted on the use of audio branding for small or medium-sized business enterprises specifically, henceforth this short literature review seeks to shed light on the current audio branding use possibilities in general and then see how it might correlate to SMEs.

Fundamentally – the use of audio branding is a field still lacking in research and development even though pioneering researchers began analysing the concept as a discipline two decades ago (Jackson, 2003, Fulberg, 2003). An interesting phenomenon can be seen where the only two systematic consumer-oriented literature reviews currently existing in the field (Gustafsson, 2015, Vidal-Mestre, et al. 2022) are still trying to unite the researchers under either audio branding or sonic branding labels, indicating that the common unity and terminology are yet to be set. Meanwhile, sound studios in the market itself have been practicing audio branding, responding to ever-increasing demand, and conducting market and field research themselves (Graakjaer and Jantzen, 2009). Even though the audio branding discipline has a scarcity of research, managers and brand owners realize the importance of sound (Graakjer and Jantzen, 2009), especially seen in large-scale business owners' cases like „MasterCard“, which have been implementing audio rebranding strategies on a global scale for the past three years (Stewart, 2020).

It seems that such a phenomenon happens because of the clear consumer need to switch from overstimulation in visual content to an audio medium (Kesten, 2020). Early on, sound agencies were the first ones to notice the demand, and the first ones to act on it, which is why the foundational literature that started the audio branding discipline is based on the audio agencies' and audio branding practitioners' own experiences rather than empirical research (for example, Jackson, 2003, Fulberg, 2003, Lindstrom, 2005, Treasure, 2007, Graakjer and Jantzen, 2009, Kilian, 2009, Lusensky, 2010). The early practitioners argue that audio branding is a mindful, intentional, strategic, and conscious

use of music and sound across touch points in the customer journey, which seems to be the driving argument of research that does exist now. The primary source of such an approach stems from a vast amount of research on the use of music and sound in retail, restaurant, or any other physical environment. It has been proven that the use of sound and music as well as the genre and tempo of music in a physical environment can affect the customer shopping experience (Oakes and North, 2008), brand loyalty (Fulberg, 2003), and purchase decision making (Wong, 2018).

As the effect of music on mood, emotions, and behaviors from the psychological standpoint has been proven (Arjmand, Hohagen, Paton, and Rickard, 2017) and widely accepted by the marketing and management fields, a lot of emphasis is placed on researching the sound and music in search of its effect to the brand and consumer as the means to justify the legitimacy of audio branding discipline. The most tangible point of research becomes the audio logo (otherwise known as the sonic logo). A study found that the use of an audio logo can increase brand recall by 88% (Veritonic, 2022). Another study suggests that audio logos have a positive influence on willingness to pay (Krishnan, Kellaris, and Aurand, 2012). Other two researches were conducted to investigate how the use of audio logos builds resonance, emotional connection, and brand recognition and found that if consistently used across customer touchpoints and advertising campaigns – an increase in brand association to relevant industry or brand as well as overall positive brand likeability, recall, and emotional connection with the consumer can be seen (Wazir and Wazir, 2018, Scott and Labrecque, 2022). The focus placed on how music and sound affect brands and consumers as well as the implementation of it across touchpoints is the defining attribute of the strategic brand management approach to sonic branding, where brand image, identity, purchase intent, and mnemonics are the key drivers (Jackson, 2003, Treasure, 2007).

In contrast to the strategic brand management approach, which seems to be the driving approach of this paper too, it's important to mention the opposing approaches, for sonic branding is a field scattered, conflicted, and enriched at the same time by its subfields presented in table 1 (Gustafsson, 2019). The table indicates a place of music and sound researched by the subfield (loci), and the qualities considered most important within the subfields. Interestingly, sonic branding is being researched by every field differently with only one uniting idea that the discipline itself is vastly underrealized, which is why uniting research direction is needed. Sound studies focus on the technology and sound waves part and concern technicians and music producers, while the brand management field, as mentioned, is researching sonic branding largely based on practical ideas with a focus on how music can impact purchase intent and brand identity. Consumer behavior field research is also focused on how music affects consumers, largely cantered around mnemonics (for example how an audio logo triggers a memory of the brand) but qualitatively oriented fields like music sociology research sonic branding from a cultural perspective with an emphasis on embodying

music (sound affecting bodily reactions like a change of pace and heartbeat), and consumer culture theory (CCT) research focusing on nostalgia (yearning of another time) (2019).

Table 1

**The loci of music primarily considered in the research carried out in the corresponding fields, and the qualities in music that are considered to have the most impact within the fields represented respectively**

<b>Field:</b>	<b>Locus of Music:</b>	<b>Quality of Music:</b>
Sound studies	Music player (personal or other)	The sound waves, sound quality
CCT (qualitative methods)	Brand, store, commercials, personal music player (or other), art	Enabling nostalgia
Music sociology	Being heard by a person	Enabling embodiment
Strategic brand management	Brand, store, commercial	Positive vehicle for brand image/identity, influencing purchase intent
Consumer Behaviours	Brand, store, commercial	Enabling mnemonics, purchase intent

Source: Gustafsson (2019)

Gustafsson argues that the practical sonic branding field placing focus on touchpoints in the effort of reaching consumers and influencing them is to be changed and replaced with a focus on the use of platforms as points of future research and practice (2019). The platform is a metaphor much like “touch points” is, only that it can serve as a shared space for brands and consumers, where music and brand can take on mutually beneficial meanings. Such an argument is being put forward because of the consumer culture theory field findings that muzak (the use of music in physical spaces as a touchpoint) is intrusive and largely unwanted by the consumer (Bradshaw and Holbrook, 2008). Additionally, from the consumer culture theory standpoint, nostalgia is a feeling largely controlled by the consumer’s private use of music through platforms like “Spotify”, “YouTube”, their car, or private music player devices. It is where the consumer can experience feelings, moods, and wanted nostalgic moments at his own pace and unseen by the brands which means nostalgic moments in music are privatized by technology (Gustafsson, 2019). CCT emphasizes that consumers should be considered as co-creators of brand meaning, much like in the case of “Oreo” consumers create culture through the experience of eating cookies in their unique ways, and so sonic branding be treated similarly (Hoult, 2004). Lastly, a recent breakthrough in sound research has uncovered that consumers experience sound as co-creators of it – through imagination, meaning that imagination is considered a sense, much like hearing, smelling, or touching, and it is guided by experiencing impressions. (Grimshaw and Garner, 2015). The research opens doors to the sonic branding subfield unifying idea of taking loci and qualities of music presented in table 1 and using them as a tool for framing or guiding impressions of the consumer.

The main point of Gustafsson's pursuit of unifying the research efforts of sonic branding is that the field currently is too focused on researching how music and sound affect the consumer rather than on the branding part, and the latter should be the priority, "welcoming a qualitative approach to the consumers as the ones who use the music technology and the ones who organize themselves, their imagination, and their social lives with music through the available platforms (...) it means welcoming a sonic branding approach that is more culturally embedded, and still strategic, in its design" (2019, 373).

To summarise, the literature review on audio branding and related sound research subfields reveals how conflicted yet underrealized and in need of unity in terms of research focus and terminology this field is. In terms of the possibilities of the use of audio branding for SMEs, the brand management subfield with practitioners' literature regarding the touchpoints concept seems to be the leading subfield and the most useful in the present-day context (Jackson, 2003, Treasure, 2007, Lusensky, 2010). Enough research on how music and sound affect the consumer has been conducted to conclude that the use of audio branding can increase brand loyalty, purchase intent, brand recall, perceived brand identity, and brand image. On a contrary, the touch points concept can serve as an intrusive use of sound creating an opposite effect, as well as it is not apparent how the consumer culture prefers to interact with the sonic brand nor does the field pay attention to this aspect yet. With a recent discovery on how consumer imagination plays a role in the creation and meaning of music, it seems likely that the audio branding field will experience drastic changes relatively soon, which might involve radical changes in research direction and terminology.

### **1.2.2 The problematic and the use of audio branding possibilities for SMEs**

Finally, in this subsection, a theoretical overview of audio branding use for the case of small and medium-sized business enterprises is conducted.

In the most practical sense, the use of audio branding possibilities can be divided into two categories, one concerning how to use the audio branding in a practical sense, i.e., how to conduct it and apply it as a strategic brand management practice. The second category concerns the outcome, i.e., what are the possibilities of the use of audio branding when it is being implemented and conducted by the brand owners. In terms of the practical use of audio branding, Jackson and Fulberg (2004) were the first authors within the field to create a sonic branding model which is still seen in practice by sound agencies and researchers (for example, Gustafsson, 2019, Sanders, 2022, MassiveMusic, 2019, Boisson, 2022). Figure 3, in a four-stage sequence, explains both the strategic and the creative side of how sonic branding can be used by large-scale businesses and SMEs alike. Even though Gustafsson (2015) criticized the audio branding field's lack of scientific research, Graakjaer

(2009) argues that while practitioners may lack formal research focus, their practical knowledge is a pivotal part of what he refers to as "professional artistry" or "expertise", which is why Jackson's and Fulberg's model is so prominent and in various forms used in the sonic branding market today.

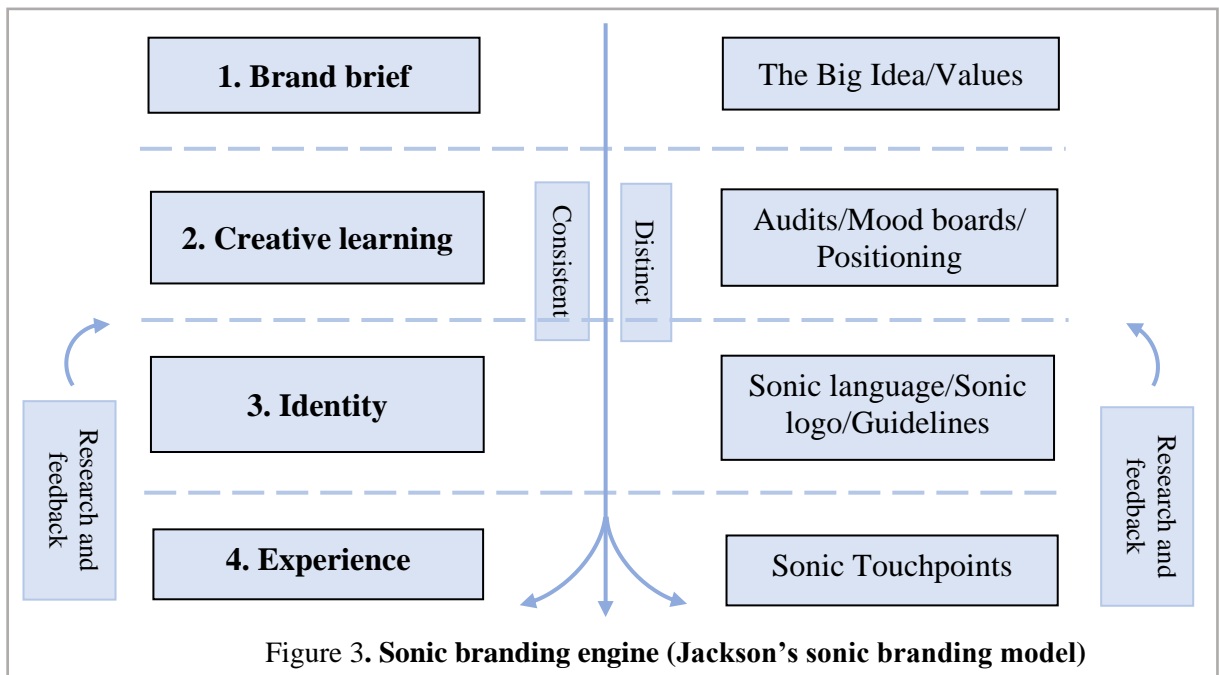


Figure 3. **Sonic branding engine (Jackson's sonic branding model)**

Source: Jackson (2004).

1. **Brand brief** – this is the first stage, indicating the creation of the crucial reference document that outlines the key objectives, requirements, and constraints of a sonic branding project. A well-crafted brief serves as a blueprint for the creative process and helps ensure that the result aligns with the brand's core values and beliefs. It typically involves the brand owners imparting their knowledge of the central belief or the big idea of the brand, the current brand identity as well as the organization's value set. To create an effective brief, it's important to involve representatives from different departments within the organization and to canvass as many opinions as possible (Jackson and Fulberg, 2004)
2. **Creative learning** – entails two types of audits: historical and competitive. The historical audit delves into the brand's pre-existing sonic touchpoints to reveal its innate sonic approach, underlining the concept that every business already possesses an audio brand, whether they realize it or not (Lusensky, 2010). Meanwhile, the competitive audit examines competitor soundscapes to safeguard our sonic branding's distinctiveness. Furthermore, mood boards, comprising various music pieces that resonate with the brand's central belief, provide an abundant source of inspiration while discouraging decision-makers from focusing on a single piece. This phase also necessitates a thorough understanding of the brand's market positioning through targeted research, effectively exploring how it can be articulated through sound.

3. **Identity** – involves creating a distinct and memorable sonic language. While visual branding can rely on a fixed set of colors, fonts, shapes, and layouts that define a brand's language, sonic branding requires identifying and assembling sounds that can move through time to express a brand's identity. Another element is the brand score (otherwise known as the brand song), which might never be used externally, but captures the identity (DNA) of the brand and then is used to create a sonic logo. To ensure consistency across all brand touchpoints, guidelines are established for the use of the sonic elements. These guidelines provide instructions on when and where to use the sonic logo and other sonic elements as well as how to adapt them to different contexts and platforms. Any other sonic branding element is created after the brand score and audio logo, whether it is a jingle, brand voice, etc.
4. **Experience** – involves implementing the sonic identity across all brand-relevant touchpoints to ensure consistency and flexibility. The first three stages of the model provide a palette of sounds that effectively communicate the brand and create distinctiveness and memorability, the fourth stage is about the consistent use of that pallet in advertisements, physical spaces, internet, product, offices, TV, radio, and other touchpoints. Consistent research and feedback from stakeholders on the use of the sonic identity are conducted for the second and third stages of the sonic branding model to ensure relevancy (Jackson and Fulberg, 2004).

As discussed in the literature review, the practical use of sonic branding has an outcome of increased brand memorability and recognition (Veritonic, 2022), increased purchase behaviour (Wong, 2018), stronger brand identity, and increased overall brand equity as well as stronger emotional connection with the consumer (Scott and Labrecque, 2022). The problematic aspect of these possibilities of use of sonic branding is the fact that music is complicated and generally hard to understand, measure, or implement, which means that any brand in need of sonic branding is dependent on sound agencies, henceforth small and medium-sized businesses potentially cannot utilize the use of sonic branding model themselves as we know it (Gustafsson, 2015).

SME are defined as business enterprises below 50 employees when it comes to small businesses and below 250 employees when it comes to medium-sized business enterprises (European Commission, 2022). SMEs often face budget constraints, limited resources, and generally are more product-oriented because of the need to remain competitive within their markets (Berthon, Ewing, and Napoli, 2008). Often these circumstances make it challenging for them to implement effective branding strategies in general, let alone audio branding. Small and medium-sized enterprises are commonly recognized as operating in an uncertain environment and facing resource constraints in comparison to larger firms (2008). Although there are successful SMEs with a branding orientation, research indicates that most small firms are focused on their products and do not prioritize brand awareness as a marketing goal or allocate a budget toward branding efforts (Inskip, 2004; Krake,

2005; Ojasalo, Nätti and Olkkonen, 2008). This could explain why most of the research and available online literature on sonic branding tends to focus on larger businesses, leaving SMEs with little to no guidance on how to develop a sonic branding strategy. On the flipside, research shows that small and medium-sized businesses recognize the importance of brand building and if the business grows – tend to experiment with various marketing techniques to determine which ones generate favourable outcomes. Consequently, branding practices in SMEs tend to be more pragmatic, practical, and tailored to the specific needs of the business at any given time, unlike those in large corporations. Because of the pragmatic SME nature, their capacity to adopt and continue using branding increases when SMEs get to outsource branding themselves to the extent that they can. Doing branding hands on allows SMEs to get a more intimate understanding of the value of the practice and increases their further willingness to consider using it (Ojasalo, et al., 2008).

Most recent research analysed 18 thousand commercials over the course of four years and concluded that 98% of all advertisements that were oriented towards building a brand rather than just a short-term advertisement, also delivered significantly above average short-term sales lift (SoundOut, 2023), i.e., in today's world branding oriented advertising is a necessity even for short term gain-oriented SMEs. Additionally, the same report states that brands are struggling to reach Gen Z, this is because Gen Z are not present in many places that brands are promoting themselves. To reach Gen Z brands need to target platforms like TikTok (2023), which are heavily audio oriented, much like Gustafsson (2019) discussed in the prior chapter of this paper. Lastly, digital audio advertisement has been announced as the fastest growing advertising medium of the year 2022 (PWC, 2022). Utilizing audio branding efforts for SMEs has never been as prevalent before as it is today.

To summarise, theoretical models such as the one proposed by Jackson and Fulberg, explain the strategic and creative aspects of sonic branding, which involves a brand brief, creative learning, identity creation, and implementing experience. Despite criticisms, such models contribute significantly to the industry's "professional artistry." While audio branding has beneficial outcomes such as increased brand recognition and emotional consumer connection, SMEs often face challenges due to budget constraints and product-oriented approaches, limiting their ability to implement effective branding strategies. Yet, research shows SMEs recognize the importance of brand-building and experiment with marketing techniques, often crafting more pragmatic and tailored branding practices than large corporations. Recent studies have emphasized the growing necessity of branding-oriented advertising even for short-term gain-focused SMEs, with digital audio advertisement as the fastest-growing medium. The rise of audio-oriented platforms like TikTok further underscores the increasing importance of audio branding for SMEs to reach audiences like Gen Z.

### **1.2.3 The use of audio branding in the case of SMEs similar research result analysis**

In any research endeavour, it is essential to review similar results discovered by other researchers in the field. This is because the foundation of knowledge in the subject area and can provide insights and guidance for future research much like this paper. Having completed the literature review it is apparent that the problem analysed in this paper is quite novel, henceforth this result analysis focuses on research that were at least closely related to either sonic branding or branding with SME orientation concepts.

Graakjaer and Jantzen's (2009) work on corporate sounds, for instance, revealed critical insights into sonic branding through interviews with sound agency representatives. These discussions highlighted both the challenges and possibilities associated with sonic branding and its reluctance to be adopted by large scale businesses. In the present day the topic shifts towards SMEs, which is a sign of growth for this field. In a study of successful brand management in SMEs, Krake (2005) collected valuable information from company owners through interviews. These stakeholders typically guide and make decisions about brand management in SMEs, offering a unique perspective on the application of sonic branding within these smaller entities, mainly highlighting that branding practices are adopted by SMEs when there is a right resource management and willingness to risk. Krake's study is the importance of a company-wide passion for the brand, ignited by an active entrepreneurial role. This passion not only fosters a strong internal culture but also translates into noticeable brand recognition externally, at no additional cost.

A recent study by Dreßler and Paunovic (2022) provided an in-depth examination of brand innovation in the wine industry SMEs revealed that SMEs are pragmatic, product oriented, and oftentimes afraid of change, but with the right approach are willing to do so because of self-awareness that they do operate in uncertain environments. Certainly, a paradoxical way of thinking but a defining moment as to how important it is for SMEs to feel safe when deciding like using sonic branding. The innovation seems to be communicated carefully for them to consider it. Gustafsson (2019) emphasized the value of a qualitative approach to research in sonic branding. The researcher argued that sonic branding is closely tied to cultural branding and consumer culture theory fields, suggesting that SME brand owners represent a critical focus for research in this area. This researcher contributed to uniting audio branding literature under a term sonic branding the most and continues to do so by criticising current scattered nature of the field, suggesting that further research in SMEs direction as well as in audio branding analysis as a platform for consumers to co-create meaning themselves is needed, much like TikTok, or Spotify, or a cd player in a car is.

Wong's (2019) semi-structured interviews with European sound agencies offered an in-depth understanding of the industry's current state. From these interviews, several themes emerged,

including the need for the broader branding industry to recognize and validate sonic branding as an expert discipline. The research aim was to understand audio branding practitioners' beliefs about how sound branding can influence consumers' perceptions and behaviours. Wong's 11 expert interviews with audio branding practitioners revealed a central theme: the need to 'prove' the value of sound branding to establish it as an expert discipline within the general branding industry. Another central theme was the finding that sound indeed can increase willingness to pay or shift attention, create a solid emotional connection between consumer and a brand.

Considering similar research regarding SMEs, Ojasalo, et al. (2008) and Cardinali, et al. were the researchers using an exploratory nature case study approach to content analysis and in-depth interviews, researching SME possibilities and challenges within the field of branding. While the problem and aim differ from the research of this paper, these were the closest, most relating results to the results of this research, where a conclusion could be made that there are similarities in SME reluctance of branding and audio branding adoption. Much like branding few decades ago, audio branding seems to be going through a similar phase of SMEs either not realising the value of adopting such discipline, have budget and resource constraints, lack of education or brand focus.

Cardinali, Travaglini, and Giovannetti (2019) conducted an exploratory case study on increasing brand orientation in SMEs through licensing. Their approach combined in-depth interviews and content analysis, offering another relevant perspective to consider when examining the potential use of sonic branding in SMEs. As revealed by a study by Horan, O'Dwyer, and Tiernan (2011), the case SMEs reflected the influence of budgetary constraints, procrastination, the aspiration for success, and the owner/manager's effect on change on their branding activities. Such findings underscore the complexity of branding within service SMEs and the intricate factors affecting it. For the efficient implementation of sonic branding in SMEs, acknowledging these variables can provide essential insights and guide strategic branding decisions.

In summary, neither of the similar results give concrete answers to the problem of this paper nor do this research follow the same direction like this paper, which only shines light on the novelty of this research, but some valuable insights were uncovered regardless. Main findings revolve around SMEs being pragmatic and product-oriented, they can be hesitant about change, such as adopting sonic branding. Insights highlight the vital role of entrepreneurial passion for brand recognition and the necessity for sonic branding to prove its worth within the broader industry. The complexity of SME branding is underscored by factors like budget constraints and the owner's role. Understanding these elements is key for successful sonic branding strategies. This work indicates the untapped potential and the need for further exploration in sonic branding within SMEs.

### **1.3 Summary of the theoretical analysis of the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs**

The use of audio branding is an emerging area of research, particularly when it comes to small and medium-sized business enterprises (SMEs). To shed light on the problem question of this paper, a theoretical analysis was conducted, covering the definition of audio branding, the history and evolution of audio branding, the importance, the elements, and the challenges of audio branding alongside brand and branding concepts. Additionally, the analysis included a brief review of the existing literature on the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs.

All in all, audio branding plays a crucial role in enhancing the brand image, identity, trust, and recognition. Generally, the use of audio branding can be categorized in two aspects: one referring to the practical use i.e., implementing the sonic branding model, (Jackson and Fulberg, 2004) and the other referring to the outcome of such practical use being increased brand equity, emotional connection with the consumer, and increased purchase behaviour. However, SMEs face unique challenges when it comes to audio branding, such as limited budgets, lack of brand prioritization, or lack of awareness about sonic branding in general. On one hand, scientific literature states that the use of audio branding is universal for any business enterprise, but the problematic side is that it is not apparent how to use it with constraints in the case of SMEs. The existing literature on audio branding use in the case of SMEs is scarce, possibly because audio branding is an emerging discipline, and practitioners are targeting large-scale business enterprises because they are more likely to have the budget for new opportunities. The researchers of the audio branding field encourage a qualitative approach to further studies of sonic branding because most of the research is focused on the effects of sound and music rather than the branding part of sonic branding. Research methods such as case studies and in-depth or expert interviews are encouraged to gain insights into the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs.

In summary, audio branding is an important aspect of brand management, and its potential benefits for SMEs cannot be overlooked. However, more research is needed to fully understand the best practices for audio branding in the context of SMEs, therefore, the degree of theoretical research on the problem is severely limited. It is not obvious how small and medium-sized business enterprises should use audio branding when operating in uncertain circumstances, neither is it apparent as to why such a topic has not been explored yet, given the fact that SMEs make up such a large proportion of the market (European Commission, 2022). Henceforth further research based on exploratory scientific nature is in order.

## II. FIELD ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF AUDIO BRANDING IN THE CASE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED BUSINESSES

Theoretical analysis revealed that the degree to which the problem of this paper is solved from a scientific literature standpoint is insufficient, henceforth it is important to conduct further research. In this second part of the paper. To develop a guidance model for the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs, exploratory qualitative research is formed, substantiated, and carried out. Therefore, for the sake of forming a valid methodology, it is important to **analyse similar research methodologies** employed by the scientists discussed in the previous part of this paper.

Prior studies such as Cardinali, Travaglini, and Giovannetti (2019), and Priyono, Moin, and Putri (2020) employed a multi-case qualitative research methodology, case study analysis, and in-depth interviews. This methodology was deemed particularly useful due to its broad-based approach, offering insights particularly regarding the qualitative aspects of the SMEs, where in-depth interview methodology seems to be of great effectiveness. These studies, along with works by Krake (2005) and Dreßler and Paunovic (2020), share a common methodological thread - the use of grounded theory or cross-case analysis, where this approach ensured the validity of their findings and provided a robust framework for understanding the complexities of branding within SMEs (Priyono, Moin, & Putri, 2020). Regarding the utilization of expert interviews, the study conducted by Graakjaer and Jantzen (2009) is noteworthy. They conducted expert interviews with audio branding agencies, a method that significantly influenced the current research's interview questionnaire. While their study only involved a small number of interviews, the approach demonstrated the value of acquiring in-depth knowledge from industry experts. Wong (2018) expanded upon this approach by conducting 11 interviews with audio branding and sound agencies, offering a broader perspective of the industry's state. The value of semi-structured interviews and exploratory case studies is also demonstrated in Wong's (2019) and Cardinali, Travaglini, and Giovannetti's (2019) work. Thus, a qualitative multi-case study, incorporating in-depth, semi-structured interviews, appears beneficial for sonic branding research within SMEs.

In light of the insights provided by these methodologies, the choice of a multi-case qualitative study, incorporating in-depth and semi-structured, expert interviews, appears beneficial for the present research. This methodology allows for open-ended questions and follow-up responses, fostering a deeper understanding of SMEs and sonic branding agencies' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to sonic branding. Nevertheless, the unique context and goals of each study should dictate the choice of methodology. The exploration of further qualitative methods, including observational studies, may also be beneficial for the research of this field.

## **2.1 Application value, relevance, and substantiation of the research**

This research subsection aims to demonstrate the practical and theoretical significance of analysing audio branding, a complex discipline within sensory marketing and brand management.

Audio branding has been proven effective and increasingly relevant in today's market (Oakes and North, 2008, Wong, 2018, Fulberg, 2003, Veritonic, 2022, Arjmand et al., 2017, PWC, 2022), with the rise of podcasting (Claritas, 2020), audio-controlled technology, and audio-first platforms (Kinsella, 2022) creating more touchpoints for consumer interaction. Although audio branding is not yet mainstream, demand for quality audio is rising (IAB Australia, 2023). However, audio branding tends to focus on large-scale businesses, with little emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Amp Sound Branding, 2022, Veritonic, 2022, Made Music, 2022). This is problematic because SMEs make up 99% of EU businesses, accounting for over half of EU GDP (European Commission, 2022), and 90% of global businesses (The World Bank, 2022). The lack of research on audio branding for SMEs potentially hinders the discipline's growth and legitimacy, as SME adoption of management practices has historically legitimized such practices (European Commission, 2017).

The absence of scientific literature addressing audio branding in SMEs leaves them without guidance on utilizing audio branding within their limited resources. Additionally, amidst the audial revolution, with the digital audio medium forecasted to claim \$8 billion in global ad expenditure by 2025 (PWC, 2022), SMEs are confronted with a pressing need for audio branding. Proven to boost short-term sales (SoundOut, 2023), brand-centric advertising is no longer a luxury, but a necessity, particularly for Gen Z-engaging platforms like TikTok (2023). With digital audio being the fastest-growing advertising medium in 2022 (PWC, 2022), 56% of Gen Z and Millennials using sound as a visual escape (Kesten, 2020), and a significant rise in podcast usage (Claritas, 2020), the urgency and need for SMEs to integrate audio branding into their strategy is clear.

This research directly impacts SMEs, audio branding agencies, and the audio branding field itself by providing the first practical guidance for SMEs on audio branding and offering insights into their perception of the practice. It also contributes a theoretical framework for future research in the audio branding discipline, addressing the current lack of research on SMEs and audio branding.

## **2.2 Methodology**

Going forward, in this subsection, the research object, aim, logic, and objectives are set and characterized. Additionally, a brief substantiation of the research object is presented alongside an

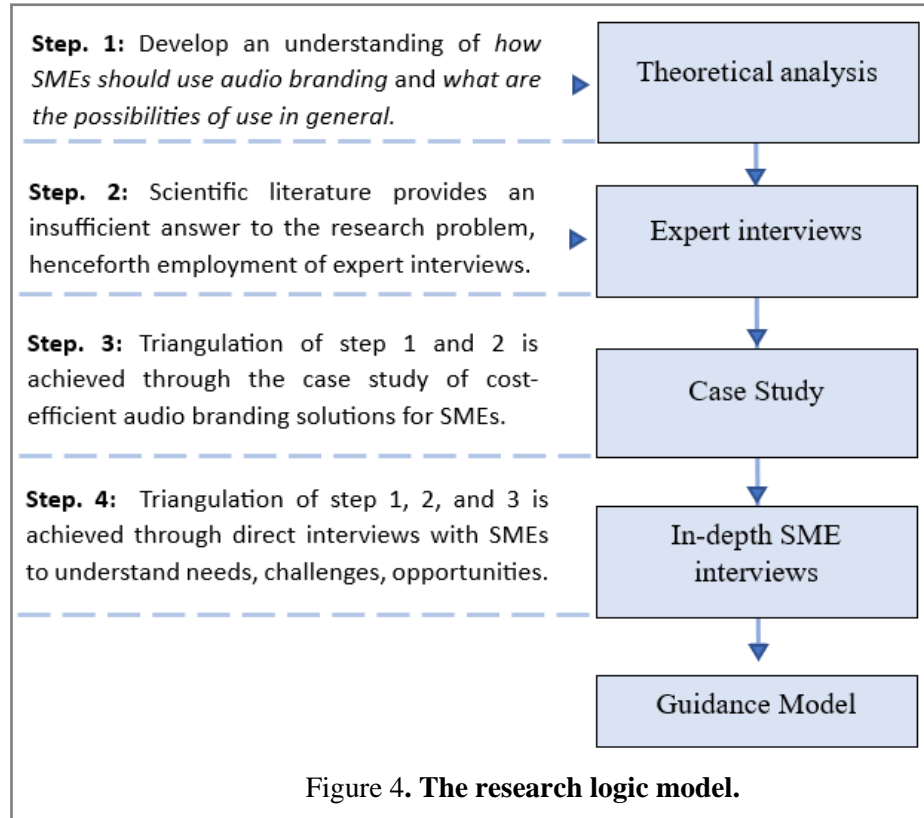
introduction of the methods used to collect, interpret, analyse, and present research data. **The object** of the research is possibilities of the use of audio branding in the case of small and medium-sized businesses. Stemming from the **problem question** of the paper: what are the audio branding possibilities for small and medium businesses and how should such enterprises use it? **The aim** of the research is to further identify, evaluate and highlight audio branding possibilities concerning small and medium-sized businesses to then enable a possibility of then formulating the use of audio branding guidance model for small and medium-sized businesses.

To reach the aim of the research, such **objectives** were raised:

1. Formulate the research methods.
2. Conduct qualitative expert interviews with audio branding field professionals.
3. Conduct case study of cost-effective audio branding solutions for SMEs.
4. Conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with SME representatives.
5. Compare findings to similar research and lead a discussion.

**Research methods:** Because a research direction of this paper has not been explored before, an exploratory nature of the scientific approach has been selected. “Social science exploration is a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life (...) researchers explore when they have little or no scientific knowledge about the group, process, activity, or situation they want to examine but have reason to believe it contains elements worth discovering” (Stebbins, 2001, p.3). “Exploration” here is used to indicate the development of theory from data, while interpretive/constructivist qualitative research methodology is chosen as a tool for how the actual collection of data is accomplished. The “interpretive/constructivist” is research epistemology, indicating a type of research that assumes that reality is socially constructed, i.e., there is no single, observable reality but rather multiple realities and/or interpretations of a single event (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). “Researchers do not “find” knowledge; they construct it, and that is why constructivism is often used interchangeably with interpretivism” (2016, p.9). In contrast to a positivist epistemology where hypotheses are raised and tested, interpretive qualitative research is interested in understanding the experience, discovering factors, using interviews, case studies, grounded theory, and observation methods, and so building theories by confronting the information within the field (Tracy, 2020). Lastly, qualitative research itself is defined as “an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (Van Maanen, 1979, p.520).

Engrained in such a scientific approach, the step-by-step **logic of the research** is presented in figure 4. To form the use of audio branding model for SMEs, a sufficient answer to the problem question is needed, henceforth, both step one and two (see figure 4) are employed to develop a comprehensive understanding of how SMEs should use audio branding, and what are the possibilities of use in general.



From theoretical analysis, it is apparent that the degree to which scientific literature can answer the problem question is insufficient, therefore an expert interview method is employed as a step two of the research logic. During the scientific literature analysis, it has been established that currently audio branding field is being led by practitioners and sound agencies alike, meaning that interviewing such field experts will most likely yield valid and up-to-date results needed. Having done step 1 and 2, a sufficient answer to the problem question has been reached, which then is triangulated by step 3 and 4. Case study analysis is carried as a third step in efforts to find cost-efficient audio branding solutions for SMEs, and in-depth interviews with SMEs themselves are conducted to quire complete view of the use of audio branding challenges and opportunities in the case of SMEs, i.e., how, both SMEs who have used audio branding before and the ones who have not, see audio branding and what are the needs, possibilities and opportunities for using it.

### 2.2.1 Explanation and argument of field expert interview method

The very first research method aims to gain an in-depth, comprehensive understanding on the problem of the research as to what are the use of audio branding possibilities for SMEs, and how should such enterprises use it.

Expert interview method is a qualitative research technique used to gather in-depth, expert insights on a specific topic or area of interest, where understanding complex phenomena or specialized knowledge is essential for developing a thorough and well-informed analysis (Döringer, 2020). An expert is considered a person within a field of expertise which is being analysed, who can offer reliable information regarding the topic analysed (Bogner, and Menz, 2009). As discussed before, since the scientific literature analysis cannot answer the research problem question to a sufficient degree due to the lack of research within such direction, a decision of employing expert interview method has been made, taking inspiration from previous research (Priyono, Moin, and Putri, 2020, Wong, 2018). The sample size has been selected using purposeful criterion approach (choosing a meaningful sample that fits the parameters of the project’s research questions and goals) (Tracy, 2020). In the case of this paper, an expert is a successful audio branding practitioner, representing an audio agency from Europe. In addition to audio agencies, a single expert has been interviewed that is not a European audio agency. Such decision has been made because this expert represents audio measurement and analytics agency, which is currently a monopoly, and while is in England/USA, works in all regions. A total of 20 emails were sent to both the most established and less established European audio branding agencies, and the final sample size turned out to consist of the 8 respective respondents presented in table 2, out of which 4 respondents are the dominating leaders of European audio branding industry, 2 are successful but underdeveloped audio agencies, and one as a monopoly of audio measurement and analytics.

Table 2

**Expert interview respondents**

Interviewee	Country	Title	Company
“SM”	Denmark	CEO	Audio branding
“MM”	Netherlands	Director of partnerships	Audio branding / sound production
“WB”	Germany	Creative director	Audio branding / motion design
“SH”	Belgium	Sonic branding director	Sound production
“RG”	Belgium	CEO	Audio branding / sound production
“PW”	Lithuania	Co-founder	Sound production
“VC”	England	General manager	Audio measurement and research
“AA”	Netherlands	Brand client manager	Audio branding

Source: Expert interview questionnaire (see annex 2).

Respondents were assigned random letters to maintain anonymity. Based on expert interview literature, a sample of 5-10 experts suffices for saturation (Döringer, 2020; Bogner & Menz, 2009; Chernatony and Riley, 1998). Eight semi-structured Zoom interviews were conducted and recorded between March and April 2023, lasting 40-60 minutes each. The recordings were transcribed using "Whisper AI" and analyzed using grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2014) via memos and axial analysis to identify emerging themes. Inductive analysis started with transcript reviews, noting initial thoughts, and grouping similarities in separate memos. Once data was reduced, selective coding of core categories occurred, and emerging themes were analyzed until saturation. Themes were then compared to the analyzed literature to gain insight. Interview questions, inspired by similar studies (Wong, 2019; Graakjaer & Jantzen, 2009; Priyono et al., 2020), were formed based on research aim. Due to the semi-structured nature, the questionnaire varied, but core questions (annex 2) remained consistent. Limitations include expert opinion biases and interviewer biases, countered by acknowledging them during data collection and analysis.

### **2.2.2 Explanation and argument of the case study method**

The second method aims to triangulate the expert interview findings in terms of the cost-efficient audio branding solutions for SMEs. After expert interview method, a sufficient research problem answer exists, and case study method is employed to not only validate the findings, but also extend by identifying audio branding tools SMEs could use themselves or in a cost-effective manner.

Qualitative case study method enables a complex phenomenon to be explored through the identification of different factors interacting with each other (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). and it makes a great fit in the case of this paper. An instrumental case study approach was selected, as it is used to accomplish something other than understanding a particular situation. It provides insight into an issue or helps to refine a theory (Baxter and Jack, 2010). Data collection is explicitly focused on further exploring the use of audio branding possibilities in the unique context of SMEs and is done so by analysing both primary and secondary data like previously discussed expert interviews, documents, reports, and previous research discussed in the theoretical part of this paper as well as online material like websites and audio branding tools available online. Henceforth, cases are selected based on the expert interview findings.

The findings were inductively generalised into emerging theme “audio branding tools for cost efficient use in SME context” and presented in continuous triangulation to prior conducted expert interview results. The main limitation of this case study method is difficulty of generalizing findings from one case study to other settings as well as the risk of bias. The limitations are countered by triangulating with prior research and taking biases into account as much as possible.

### **2.2.3 Explanation and argument of in-depth interview with SME representatives method**

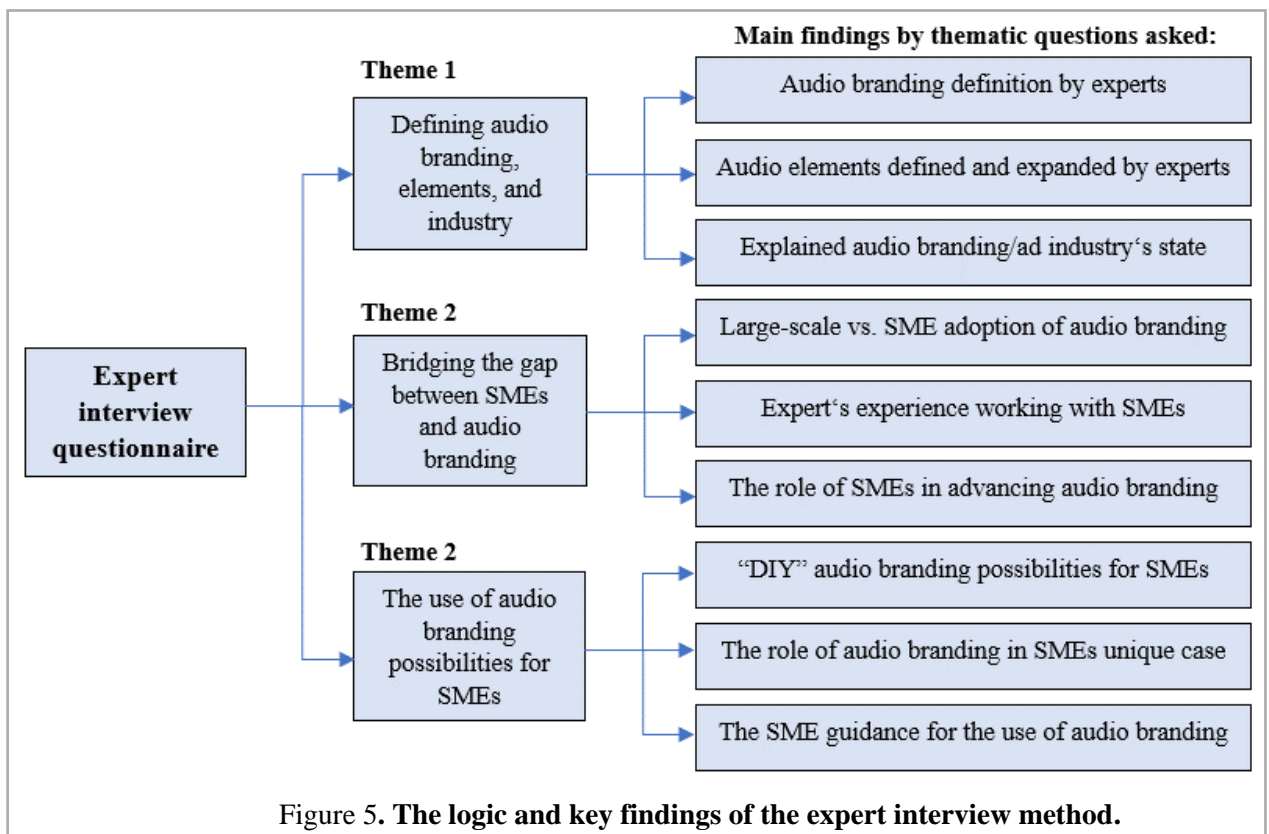
The final method aims to further triangulate the findings of prior methods employed by going directly to SMEs and further a complete view of the use of audio branding challenges and opportunities in the case of SMEs, i.e., how, both SMEs who have used audio branding before and the ones who have not, see audio branding and what are the needs, possibilities, and opportunities for using it.

In addition to prior research methods, an in-depth interview with SMEs were conducted, six of which have used audio branding and six that have not. A structured interview approach was employed, where a structured in-depth interview methodology is a qualitative research approach that involves conducting one-on-one interviews with participants, using a pre-determined set of questions to explore their perspectives, experiences, and insights on a specific topic (Tracy, 2020, Stebbins, 2001). Due to difficulties in securing in-person interviews, two qualitative questionnaires were used to gather data, created using “Google Forms” to gather data from SMEs with and without prior experience in audio branding. The selection of participants followed a purposeful sampling technique, targeting companies with fewer than 250 employees and a marketing department, ensuring relevance to the research question. For SMEs with audio branding experience, contacts were obtained through interviewed experts and client lists of audio branding companies. In purposeful sampling, the sample size is guided by the need for information. Because the aim is to gather as much information as possible, the main criterion for determining the sample size is redundancy (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The questionnaires, inspired by previous research (Travaglini & Giovannetti, 2019; Priyono, Moin, & Putri, 2020; Wong, 2019), were structured with open-ended questions to address the research object, aim, and problem. Interviews were conducted from March to April, and the list of interviewees is presented in the table 1 of the annex 11. Data analysis utilized grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), employing memos and axial analysis to identify emerging themes. Inductive analysis began with transcript reviews, noting initial thoughts, and grouping similarities in separate memos. After data reduction, selective coding of core categories was conducted, and emerging themes were analyzed until saturation. Themes were then compared to the analyzed literature to gain insight. The exploratory nature of this research aimed to understand SME experiences with audio branding, identifying key reasons for adoption or rejection, and exploring core challenges and possibilities.

The main limitation of this method as well as this part of the research itself is that the point of redundancy in sampling was not quite reached as well as conducting data gathering from questionnaire, even with open-ended interview-like questions is limiting possible depth of results. As this research is grounded in an exploratory nature, the sample size and results suffice to reach needed insights and conclusions, it is only to say that it could still be taken further.

## 2.3 Results of experts' interview

This section provides the main findings of the expert interview method and elaborates on the process of how is achieved (see figure 5). As discussed before, this method aims to gain an in-depth, comprehensive understanding on the problem of the research as to what are the use of audio branding possibilities for SMEs, and how should such enterprises use it. This is achieved through a qualitative, semi-structured questionnaire (see annex 2), which was employed in live conversations with experts (sound agencies from all around central Europe). Three themes emerged: defining audio branding, audio elements, and audio branding/advertising industry (Theme 1), bridging the gap between the SMEs, and the audio branding discipline (Theme 2), and audio branding possibilities for SMEs (Theme 3). Through these themes, the object as well as the problem of the research were explored, and the results of this method help to further developing the use of audio branding guidance model for SMEs.



Source: expert interview questionnaire (see annex 2).

The 8 expert interviews were carried out between March and April 2023, lasting 40-60 minutes each. Due to the lack of prior research with such direction, questions asked were based on branding for SMEs literature and the unique research aim of this paper. Through the following three subsections, the main findings are uncovered in a thematic order presented in the figure 5.

### 2.3.1 Theme 1: Defining audio branding, audio elements, and audio advertising industry

First questions were asked with intention to build on concepts and theories discovered in the first part of the paper, and to create a reliable audio branding guidance model for SMEs - explore what is and out what exactly audio branding consists of as well as how its industry is currently perceived by the experts. Theme 1 emerged from the following expert answers to three questions, the first being **“What is audio branding and out of what does it consist of (what audio elements)?”** The analysis of expert interviews on the topic of audio branding and its constituent elements reveals a consensus that audio branding involves a holistic approach to the use of sound and music across all touchpoints of a brand's customer journey.

**MM:** *“A holistic approach to a brand’s use of music and sound across all relevant touchpoints. A sonic brand is developed from three key pillars 1. Function, 2. Aesthetics, 3. Concept. If these three are taken into account there should be no limit in what you will be developing in terms of assets. Flexibility and adaptability is key in developing strong sonic brand equity. The start is often a brand DNA track, a logo, a suite of UI sounds and the start of a music library. But again, every client will have different strategies and thus different needs.”*

Virtually all experts emphasize the importance of understanding the brand's personality and values and incorporating a range of the most important audio elements: audio logo, brand track(song), brand voice (voiceover), UI/UX sounds, and music library, among other elements that can vary based on their needs like in-store music, on-hold music, advertising music etc. The goal is to enhance brand recognition, customer loyalty, and customer experience, while also differentiating the brand and building brand equity over time. Flexibility and adaptability are essential in the development of a strong sonic brand identity, with consistency across various touchpoints being a crucial factor. Successful examples of audio branding, such as Mastercard, demonstrate the importance of an intentional, comprehensive approach to creating a distinct and memorable sonic identity that resonates with the target audience and aligns with the brand's core values.

The second question **“What is your experience working in the audio advertising/sonic branding industry (what are the tendencies you are noticing)?”** reveals that the industry is growing but remains niche still. Experts observe a rising interest in audio branding and an increasing demand for high-quality audio across various brand touchpoints. The younger generation's exposure to digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and podcasts has contributed to the growing importance of sound in the advertising industry. The automotive sector, for instance, has seen significant growth in audio branding, with renowned composers like Hans Zimmer creating sound designs for brands like BMW. However, SMEs often struggle with understanding the value of audio branding and are hesitant to invest in it due to budget constraints and concerns about ROI. Despite this, there is a

noticeable shift towards brand managers and marketing managers taking ownership of audio branding, leading to greater investment in audio identities that go beyond just sound logos. Overall, experts observe that audio advertising industry is evolving, with brands gradually realizing the importance of a cohesive audio identity in complementing their visual branding.

The third question *“According to IAB Australia audio advertising industry report (2023), 75% of media agencies now have audio advertising as a regular part of their buying, with audio advertising industry quickly rising, do you think sonic branding will become mainstream discipline (or is it mainstream already)?”* revealed that while sonic branding is growing in importance, it has not yet become a mainstream discipline. The shift in media landscape, the rise of audio advertising, podcasts, and the incorporation of sound in various brand touchpoints have contributed to the increased interest in sonic branding. Larger brands are starting to implement rules for their audio branding, similar to their visual branding. However, there remains a gap between marketing and branding departments, with the latter focusing on recognition and systems while the former prioritizes performance and stories. Additionally, smaller businesses may find it difficult to invest in sonic branding due to the costs involved and the perceived complexity of the process. Experts suggest that if SMEs embrace sonic branding, it may become more mainstream, as their limited resources often inspire greater creativity. Overall, sonic branding is growing in significance, but it has yet to reach mainstream status, as it still faces challenges such as budget constraints and the need for greater integration with visual branding.

### **2.3.2 Theme 2: Bridging the gap between the SMEs, and audio branding discipline**

The following answers to questions presented arrange the second theme which tackles how audio branding experts see SMEs relation to audio branding, what’s their experience working with them, and what does it take to bridge the gap between SMEs and the use of audio branding.

The analysis of the expert answers to the first question *“Is it true, that audio branding practice is becoming increasingly more popular/used amongst large-scale businesses/brands rather than SMEs; (If yes) Why is audio branding practice being less considered/adopted by SMEs; (If no) what specific tendencies do you see in terms of SMEs adopting audio branding?”*, reveals a unifying consensus that audio branding is more popular/used among large-scale businesses than SMEs, though there are some indications of growing interest from smaller companies. MM attributes this popularity/use gap to three main factors: global clients' search for consistency, larger budgets, and have more extensive media spends compared to SMEs.

**MM:** *Yes. Because of three reasons (...) if you compare that to SMEs, they might do a few posts, but probably no TV campaigns, no radio campaigns. So, for them, it's the people that see their*

*content. It's only a small amount. And I think the recognizability is less important yet. They want to make sure that the communication from the content/the message comes across and they're less busy with making sure they have brand equity. Less brand focus."*

Experts' opinions suggest that audio branding is more popular among large-scale businesses due to factors like global brand consistency, larger budgets, and more extensive media spends, while SMEs face challenges such as limited budgets, lack of understanding of audio branding's value, and hesitation to invest in new, unexplored areas. However, there is an emerging trend of SMEs showing increasing interest in adopting audio branding, driven by digitalization, the rise of social media, and a growing recognition of the importance of a distinctive sonic identity. Many of the experts observe that SMEs are virtually becoming aware of the importance of sound and in increasingly of audio branding.

The second question ***"How many SME clients does (company name) get to work with and what is the general experience?"*** revealed that largest agencies like MM, VC, and AA don't work with SMEs much or at all, SM, SH, and WB focus on large scale brands but still have quite a few SME clients, and tend to accept SME offers in general, while experts like PW and RG are exclusively working mostly with SMEs with a few large-scale brand client exceptions. SM, SH, and WB agree in a consensus, that their experience working with SMEs is defined as easier work rather than with large-scale brands. There seems to be a clear division between the experts in their experience with SMEs, where, generally, agencies that work only with SMEs are experiencing more clients who don't know about the discipline and so state that there is a lack of education, while agencies who have large-scale clients and SMEs only as an addition – don't experience as much struggle in that case. Overall, in experts' opinion, while SMEs can create and audio brand easier than large brands, it is still the case that they are reluctant to do so either because of the lack of education.

**SM:** *"Right now SMEs look at audio branding websites and say "this is not for us, we are not there yet", but I disagree, SMEs should also start because it takes time to grow an audio brand and the sooner they start, no matter how small, the better for themselves. We still have more large-scale brands, but we are hoping to close the gap between SMEs and serve more of them in the future"*.

**WB:** *"SMEs are more hands on, and their decision-making process is very clear as well as creating an audio brand for them is an easier process because of their scale. SMEs are pragmatic and yet digitalization of the world forces them to seek of quality audio, so our experience is that they come to us for that more and more often."* **PW:** *"We mostly work with SMEs, our experience is that it is hard to convince the ones who don't know what audio branding about its value is, on the other hand the ones who do know what it is don't need as much convincing, but, generally, our experience is that there is still a great need for education about the discipline."*

When asked the third question *“is it important for the (company name) to reach SMEs, and what role does reaching SMEs play in advancing audio branding discipline?”*, the expert opinions on the importance of reaching SMEs for the advancement of the audio branding discipline vary significantly. MM acknowledges the importance but often declines SME offers due to budget limitations and the holistic approach required for effective audio branding. SM and WB view SME adoption as essential for the discipline's mainstream success, with SM specifically emphasizing the need for early adoption. SH and RG both operating primarily with SMEs, recognize the value of advancing audio branding among SMEs but note the current reluctance of both parties to close the gap. PW, also focused on SMEs, shares a similar view. AA believes that SME adoption is important but not necessary for mainstream success, as large brands can lead the way. Overall, in theory, closing the gap between audio branding and SMEs is important, but at the moment because of previously mentioned limited resources, and lack of value recognition within SMEs and vice-versa for large brands, not much is being done in that regard.

### **2.3.3 Theme 3: Audio branding possibilities for SMEs**

That being said, discoveries that emerged within theme 3, where, given the context of SMEs audio branding possibilities are being identified through the following questions, first being *“is it possible for SMEs to create an audio brand themselves, without audio agencies, and if so, what would be the means to do so?”*, revealed that virtually every expert agrees that it is indeed possible, but also highlight that sonic agencies exist for a reason.

Unlike visual branding, music fills time, and is experienced as time passes rather than a single moment, which means it is more complicated to manage sound rather than a visual and that requires specific music expertise that most companies don't have. Audio branding requires a methodological approach to sound creation, research on existing brand identity, values, and how it is perceived by a target audience as well as specific tools for translating these values into musical form.

**MM:** *“It is possible to create audio branding yourself, for that you need tools to create music and understanding about branding as well as about how your company's brand looks like. A lot of competitors to branding agencies are people with marketing/branding knowledge who create music in their basements, so a good idea might be to hire one person in-house like that.”* **SM:** *“Technically you can if you have in-house resources, and people do use stock music, of course, but having a brush does not make you a painter. You need audio agency because they know what they are doing.”* **SH:** *“well it's not impossible to do it yourself i think um you might end up with some problems if you don't really structure it in a in a clear methodology”* **PW:** *“Of course it is, some people use stock music for their advertising, and it often is more than enough, but the thing with audio*

*branding is that you want it to be distinctive and flexible, and for that reason just one asset might not be enough, even more so if it is not a unique to the brand type of asset.”*

Out of the views of the experts it is apparent, that creating an audio brand yourself means creating audio elements for further use within marketing and brand communication channels, and while it is possible to buy licenses to stock sounds and music tracks – it limits the brand to those sounds only. The other way around it is to create unique and adaptable audio elements but that requires expertise, which is why experts can't offer anything else but a recommendation of getting an in-house audio creative person with necessary skills or collaborate with audio agencies.

In terms of the second question *“since one of the main concerns of SMEs is limited resources, how do you see the role of sonic branding in the overall branding strategy of small and medium-sized businesses?”*, the experts recognize that SMEs face resource constraints but still emphasize the importance of sonic branding in their overall branding strategy. MM suggests that SMEs can achieve recognizability and emotion by using a consistent stock track across their communications, despite budget limitations. SM encourages SMEs to analyze their existing sound and channel usage, asserting that smaller budgets and teams can make the process simpler and less costly. WB emphasizes the role of consistent, quality audio in marketing communications, which can evolve into a holistic audio identity over time. SH posits that SMEs can allocate budget space for a unique sound logo, given their access to the same online channels as large-scale companies. RG argues that SMEs must incorporate quality sound in their marketing as soon as possible and maintain consistency over time to reap long-term benefits. PW highlight the need for SMEs to treat sonic branding as another layer of their branding strategy, focusing on consistency across campaigns rather than approaching each campaign as a one-off. AA suggests that sonic branding can help SMEs with limited resources stand out, particularly in radio advertising, and reach wider audiences to increase turnover. Lastly, VC acknowledges the challenges small and medium-sized businesses face in allocating their marketing budget and balancing short-term and long-term goals. They emphasize the effectiveness of sonic branding but recognize that SMEs may prioritize other marketing areas over sonic branding due to financial constraints.

**SM:** *“They should take time to research their whole brand channels and figure out where and how do they already sound. Every brand already has an audio brand, if only SMEs would realise that, not doing audio branding instantly would not make sense. Also, small brands don't have big teams, huge productions or a lot of channels like large brands, so it's even more simple for them, and less costly to do audio branding.”*. **WB:** *“the role of audio branding within SME strategy should be at least quality audio that is consistent with time and that could latter on develop into a full, holistic audio identity of their brand.”*. **RG:** *“If an SME is doing marketing in today's world – they must employ quality sound one way or another, so audio branding has never been as relevant as it is today.*

*In my opinion, SMEs should employ It as soon as possible and stick to it, don't change it for the sake of changing it, if your customers start getting attached to the brand sound early on – it will make them a fortune in the future, it's like the visual branding but with sound, it's the sound era.”*

Overall, in a mutual consensus, experts agree that employing audio branding even in a limited marketing environment is a must for SMEs, more so, it is easier for them to do so, because there is a less resources, less scale, less brand channels, and more tailored marketing campaigns. It is important to acquire at least most tangible, most adaptable audio elements like audio logo, brand song, or single musical tracks to use consistently which later can be developed into the holistic sound of their brand. Much like visual branding, audio branding used consistently throughout early developments of an SME brand will result in increased customer loyalty, emotional connection to the brand, buying behaviour and brand equity in the long term, which is why experts agree that there should not be an excuse even with limited budgets, and the reason for SMEs hesitating is the lack of value recognition, hence the fear of investment.

The last question of the theme ***“if we were to make audio branding approachable for the unique case of SMEs, how would that look like in terms of a step-by-step model, what would be the base/starting level (the most affordable that can yield results) and what would be end level?”***, revealed the most realistic SME approach to audio branding. Experts suggests that SMEs should focus on a single message, achieving wide reach by consistently using a track that fits the brand across all content as well as starting with stock music for affordability and eventually progressing to a curated music selection through an audio branding agency. Additionally, conduct an audit to identify the brand's existing sound and the most needed audio assets, establishing a language for the brand's desired audio identity then start with the most impactful channel of brand communication and investing in professional sound work. They encourage SMEs to measure the impact of these changes on brand performance and work with a sound agency to create an audio logo first and then gradually expanding the scope of audio assets for a holistic audio identity that can be adapted to various marketing campaigns and seasonal communications.

**AA:** *“Audio branding is never completed, so end level would be a holistic sound with all brand elements, produced custom, then it is continuous work and collaboration. But the start is translating your brand values into sonic values, audit how you sound already, your colour palette in music a.k.a. musical language of your brand.”* **SM:** *“Audit, insights, then first asset and maybe in a year or two develop other assets. Another point of starting should be establishing language for their desired audio identity. So, you need to have a language established within your company so you can communicate in sound. Right now, we can say this is green, this is white because you and I have a mutual understanding that this is white, and this is green. But in terms of sound, is this blue, is this modern, is this funky? What is funky? What is modern jazz?”*

In summary, the expert interview method revealed these main findings (see table 3).

Table 3

**Summary of the expert interview method results analysis:**

<b>Theme 1:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experts emphasize the importance of understanding the brand's personality and values and incorporating various audio elements such as audio logos, brand tracks, brand voice, UI/UX sounds, and music libraries.</li> <li>• Audio elements must be tailored uniquely by individual SME case.</li> <li>• The audio advertising industry is growing, driven by the rise of digital platforms and the increasing importance of sound in advertising.</li> <li>• SMEs struggle with understanding the value of audio branding due to budget constraints and concerns about return on investment.</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 2:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio branding is more popular among large-scale businesses compared to SMEs.</li> <li>• SMEs have limited budgets, lack understanding of audio branding's value, contributing to their reluctance to adopt it, but there is an increasing SME interest for adopting audio branding, driven by digitalization and the rise of social media.</li> <li>• Experts tend to focus on large scale businesses because it helps advance their business as well as the audio branding field in general but agree that reaching SMEs is important.</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 3:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experts agree that it is possible for SMEs to create an audio brand themselves, but highlight that it requires a methodological approach, research on brand identity and values, and specific tools for translating values into musical form.</li> <li>• Experts recommend hiring an in-house audio creative person or collaborating with audio agencies for SMEs to create a distinctive and adaptable audio brand.</li> <li>• Despite resource constraints, experts emphasize the importance of sonic branding in SMEs' overall branding strategy and propose first guiding steps like brand audit.</li> </ul>

By synthesizing these expert opinions, a guidance model for SMEs can be formed that emphasizes the importance of starting small, focusing on the most impactful audio assets, and gradually working towards a comprehensive audio branding strategy that is both affordable and effective.

**2.4 Results of Case study analysis**

In light to the question of what the possibilities of the use of audio branding in the unique case of SMEs are, where the most defining moment of the case appears to be limited budget, lack of value recognition, and general education/understanding, the expert interviews point to SMEs not being aware of how they sound and/or how does their brand operate in general. Both questions are key to audio branding and serve as a starting point for SMEs. Knowing what a business brand identity is, what does it stand for, what are its values and characteristics – is the first step of audio branding, ironically, because only then can these values be translated into musical language, which is another challenge in of itself. The following chapter presents results of an instrumental case study analysis conducted to identify what are the tools SMEs could utilize in a cost-efficient – high result manner when taking first steps of employing audio branding.

Brodsky (2011) developed a functional method to apply music in branding called design language-generated music, which echoes to the points made by experts: although the end-result of audio identity for a brand must be a collaboration with audio agencies, it is possible to create an audio brand yourself, but translating current brand values, imagery, characteristics into musical language is the very first step within that process. In the table presented within annex 3, is an example of Brodsky's research on two automotive brands "Chevrolet" and "Cadillac" employing design-language to identify their brand identities (see annex 3). Design language is a strategic tool used in product and brand development that utilizes think and feel words and phrases to transcribe brand attributes into a more visualising language and/or metaphors. It helps maintain consistency and harmony across multidisciplinary teams in any product or brand development stage (Brodsky, 2011).

The resulting correlation between expert points and Brodsky's research also echoes through Jackson's and Fulberg's audio branding model (2003) analyzed in the theoretical part of the paper, where the mood-boarding process is carried out when audio agencies try to translate the values of the brand into musical terms and later sounds. The content analyzed from Jackson and Fulberg's model, Brodsky's research, and expert interviews point to the process of either corporations themselves or audio agencies finding a musical-fit representation for the brand identity, and design language helps with that exactly. Experts argue that this information precisely what is missing from most SMEs they get to work with, and it is precisely the starting point for audio branding that can indeed be done without audio agencies. Along the line of prior mentioned arguments is an audio branding development tool that SMEs, audio agencies, advertisers, and creatives can utilize to acquire the brand music relative design language needed, and it's called "Brand Music Navigator" (see annex 4). This tool directly helps anyone willing to translate brand identity into musical language using design language linguistics, semantics, and integrated musical samples. Researchers who developed this tool also reference Brodsky's research and connected to Brodsky's findings to then employ a multi-method approach to understand the role of music in advertising and produce this tool as a product (Radio Center, 2016). The pictures within annex 4 explains how to utilize "Brand music navigator":

- 1) There are "think" and "feel" design language-based words representing brand's identity.
- 2) Which can then be selected based on words describing brand identity the most, for example "trustworthy".
- 3) A selected option leads to further design language describing now selected word in more design language detail.
- 4) Music parameters follow as another option elaborating on selected word in musical language, detailing what exact sounds or musical representations define the selected word.
- 5) A comprehensive explanation of the relationship between the selected word, design language, and music is presented through real-time musical examples as a choice of reference.

This seemingly simple tool solves a complex problem for any SME trying to identify how does their brand identity converts into musical language, and through the use of "Brand music

navigator”, SMEs can acquire the necessary design language which can then be used to help them speed up the creative process when working with audio agencies or help them select audio assets based on more tangible understanding of music and their design language-based brand identity representations. In addition to voiced expert concerns in the previous part of the research, another one of them were that SMEs lack brand focus or oftentimes don’t know what their brand stands for, what is their brand identity, let alone how does it sound like, and it is important to mention that the “Brand Music Navigator” tool won’t work for SMEs who have not yet established the brand identity itself. Experts state that often SMEs have a brand but can’t define its identity, and for that exactly Kapferer’s brand identity prism is an effective tool (2004). While it is not exactly a tool and rather a theoretical framework, it is being used as one by large brands mentioned in Brodsky’s research “Cadillac” and “Chevrolet”, which can then be translated into design language through refining brand identity’s vocabulary into musical terms with tools like “Brand Music Navigator”.

This prism (2004) comprises six interrelated dimensions that work synergistically to create a cohesive brand image (see annex 5), which are further divided into sender-oriented (physique, personality, and culture) and receiver-oriented (relationship, reflection, and self-image) components. Physique, the first sender-oriented dimension, pertains to the tangible attributes of a brand, including its logo, colour scheme, and packaging design. These elements form the basis of brand recognition and create an immediate visual impact on consumers. The second dimension, personality, refers to the human-like characteristics assigned to a brand, which shape its distinct voice, tone, and communication style. Culture, the third sender-oriented facet, encapsulates the values, beliefs, and norms underlying a brand, thereby influencing its long-term vision and positioning within the market. Turning to the receiver-oriented dimensions, the relationship aspect encompasses the connections a brand fosters with its consumers, primarily through customer service, loyalty programs, and tailored marketing efforts. Reflection, the fifth dimension, refers to the target audience's demographic and psychographic profile, which a brand mirrors to create resonance and foster identification. Lastly, self-image represents the idealized self-perception consumers may attain by engaging with a brand, which strengthens their loyalty and sense of attachment. If a brand identity is established and design language employed possibly with the help of “Brand Music Navigator”, then another tool for SMEs to utilize in audio branding that can be done without audio agencies might be “Every noise at once” (see annex 6). This interactive tool allows users to explore and navigate an extensive map of diverse musical genres and styles, providing SMEs with a comprehensive overview of the auditory landscape they may want to incorporate into their branding strategy. By utilizing "Every Noise at Once" SMEs can identify specific genres and subgenres that align with their brand's identity and design language. This tool enables SMEs to narrow down their audio branding options to a more focused selection, which can be instrumental in conveying their brand's unique message, values, and personality. By

presenting a broad spectrum of musical styles, "Every Noise at Once" encourages SMEs to think beyond conventional audio branding choices and explore innovative and distinctive soundscapes. In essence, "Every Noise at Once" complements the audio branding process by providing SMEs with a rich and diverse auditory palette, allowing them to make informed decisions that align with their brand's identity. Besides these free tools SMEs might utilize, other cost-efficient decisions for employing audio branding are stock music licensing websites as well as brand voice generation websites like "Aflorhithmic". Brand voice or voice over audio to use in advertisements or other brand communication channels is another unique brand audio element that experts think SMEs should employ as the starting points of their audio brand. "Aflorhithmic" (see annex 7) is an artificial intelligence (AI) powered voice manipulation engine that generates voice for the script provided. Although it is not a free tool, it is a cost-efficient solution for SMEs who are looking to get a brand voice over but don't want to hire a voice actor for an extended period of time. A downfall of this tool is the lack of humanity, if a brand is looking for a specifically distinct human voice to associate their brand identity with – "Aflorhithmic" might not be able to provide such intricate results. Lastly, experts suggest that a single track used consistently across communication channels suffices for many SMEs, and stock music licensing applications like "Epidemic Sound", "Artlist", and "Premium beat" (see annex 8) can be the solution. However, using stock music may limit overall brand identity and long-term use of a brand's audio identity.

In summary, the key findings of the instrumental case study analysis are reflected in table 4.

Table 4

<b>Tool</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Applicability for SMEs</b>
"Brand Music Navigator"	Translates brand values into musical language	Requires an established brand identity
Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism	Defines a cohesive brand image	Useful for SMEs lacking an established brand identity
"Every Noise at Once"	Explores various musical genres and styles	Helps SMEs make informed, brand-aligned musical decisions
Stock music licensing websites	Provides cost-effective audio assets	Good for SMEs with limited budgets
AI-powered voice manipulation engines (e.g., "Aflorhithmic")	Provides cost-effective voice assets	Good for SMEs with limited budgets

These case study findings act as a triangulation of prior expert interview findings, and in terms of cost-effective tools - help forge a more comprehensive guidance for how SMEs should utilize audio branding in their unique case.

## 2.5 Results of in-depth interview

Having completed expert interviews and case study, in-depth interview method is employed to achieve a complete view of the problem question by going directly to SMEs who have bought/used audio branding before and the ones who have not and identifying challenges as well as opportunities of the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs. Using two questionnaires, 6 central European SMEs of each respective group are interviewed and for each questionnaire three themes emerged (see the logic and main findings of the interview in figure 6). In respect to the exploratory nature of this research, the reasons for using audio branding in the case of SMEs who have bought it before, and vice-versa, are explored through this method.

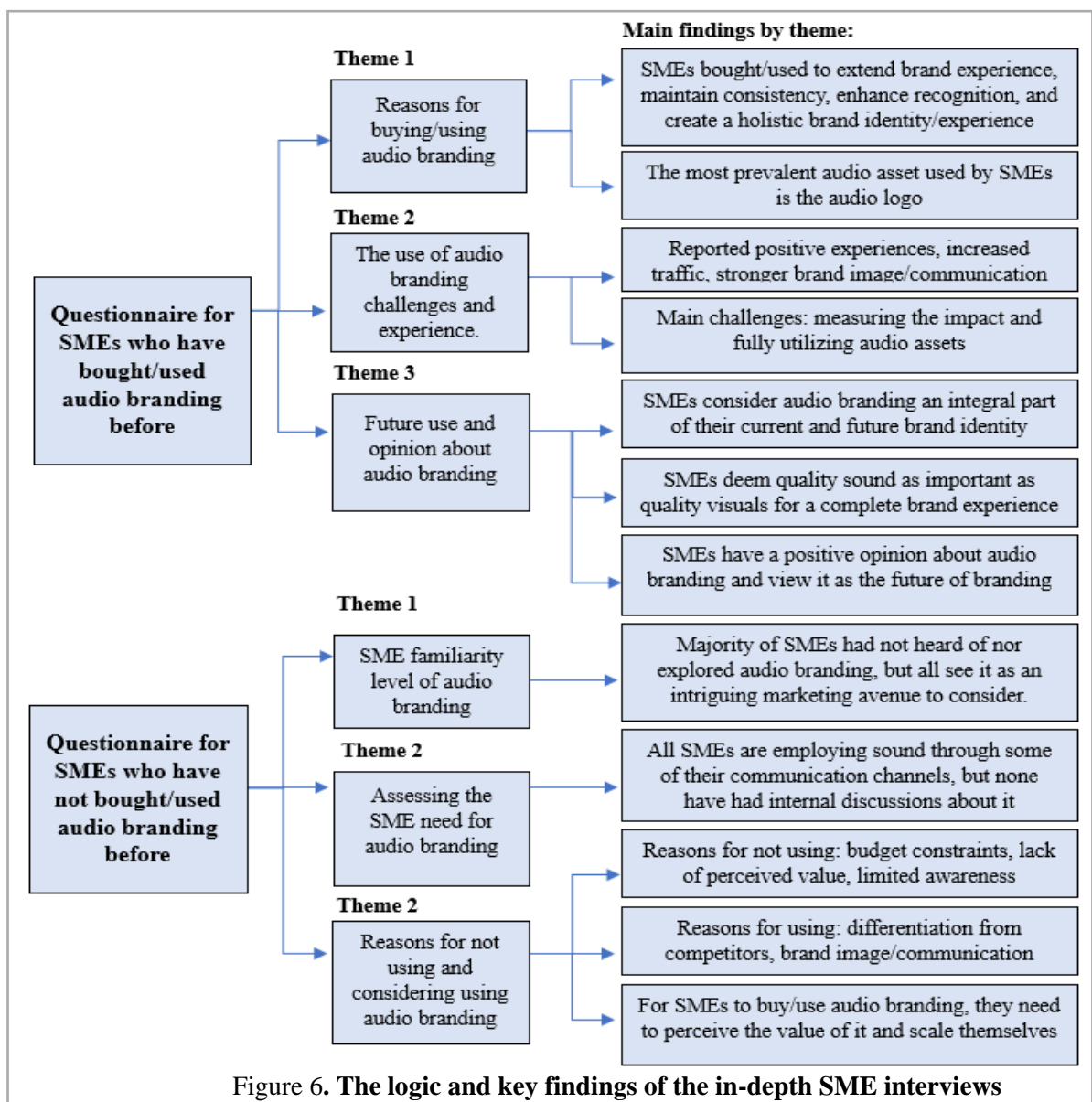


Figure 6. The logic and key findings of the in-depth SME interviews

Source: SME in-depth interview questionnaire (annex 9 and 10).

In the following subchapters, the results of in-depth interviews are being presented.

### 2.5.1 Interviews of SMEs who have bought/used audio branding before

Out of the questions presented in annex 10, three key themes have emerged from the answers of the interviewee SMEs who have already bought/used audio branding before: **1)** Reasons for buying/using audio branding; **2)** The use of audio branding challenges and experience; **3)** Future use and opinion about audio branding.

In terms of **theme 1**, the most prevalent audio asset utilized by SME was the audio logo as the element was mentioned by all respondents and was employed in various contexts, such as showreels, website home reels, events, sales presentations, online videos, social media (including Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube), radio commercials, and apps. In addition to audio logos, other audio assets mentioned by the SMEs included supporting sounds for apps (such as milestone, notification, bell sounds), soundtracks, advertising music, and a brand song in only one case of the SME. Several key motivations for buying/using audio branding emerged: **SK**: *“We wanted to extend our brand experience”*; **DD**: *“To keep consistency in our new communication campaigns”*; **HB**: *“Because we are very active on social media we needed a recognizable sound, that’s the main reason”*; **MS**: *“To enrich our app experience and help with brand recognition and marketing”*; **TZ**: *“most of the communication channels we use require sound one way or another, so we believe that playing an audio logo in every channel like that is the same like showing a visual logo on every channel that has visuals - it is equally as important”*; **RW**: *“We wanted to have a holistic brand, and in today’s environment that means audio branding included to visual branding”*.

In a consensus, all the SMEs agree to continue buying/using audio branding in the future, moreover, when asked what specific audio assets they are thinking about, answers showing continuous journey towards holistic brand identity emerge: **TZ**: *“We would like to develop our audio logo into a custom brand song or a few tracks in the future so that our whole brand communication across all touchpoints is coherent”*; **RW**: *“Since we have a brand song or the main theme song of the brand as well as the audio logo - we will need to create different versions of the song”*.

In terms of interviewee experience in using audio branding (**theme 2**, questions 4, 5, 6 in the annex 10), SMEs emphasized the role of audio branding in completing their overall branding efforts, making their brand communication more consistent and holistic, particularly important when creating videos, reels, or event openings. Some respondents mentioned that incorporating audio branding helped them create a stronger community around their brand by touching all senses and making their brand experience more immersive, others reported positive experiences and outcomes like increased website traffic and a stronger brand image. However, most of the SMEs acknowledge that it is hard to measure the impact of audio branding on their businesses objectively as well as few mention that they have not yet fully utilized the sound assets they received, but plan to do so in the future. Overall,

SMEs generally had positive experiences with audio branding, finding it beneficial for their overall brand communication, experience, and consistency. Although the direct impact of audio branding can be challenging to measure, SMEs noted some positive outcomes and expressed an interest in further exploring the potential of audio branding in their marketing efforts. All agree in a consensus that audio branding as they know it is not possible without guidance of audio agency. While most of the SMEs already were employing stock music prior to collaboration with audio agencies, they agree that translating brand identity into sound is not a process they could do themselves. A common challenge between SMEs is translating brand values into sound: **MS:** *“It was difficult to remove personal opinion and relate the sound back to our brand ideals. We overcame this by marking each sound or melody with scores against keywords that best fit our brand identity.”* **RW:** *“Translating brand values and current brand identity into music. Of course, audio branding agency helped us with their workshops but that required us to know precisely what is our brand identity as it is now, so even though we had the whole brand book and all that, we had to go through it again just to make sure do we really want to build on these values with sound”.* **SK:** *“Putting a sound on your brand as part of your DNA is not easy to figure out how your brand exactly sounds. The process was guided well by the sonic agency though”.*

Finally, **theme 3**, which emerged from questions 7, 10, 11, and 12 (see annex 10) revealed that all the interviewed SMEs share a common trait of being brand focused, which is why in a consensus they agree that quality sound is of importance just as much as quality visuals are important in their respective brands. **SK:** *“Like a human being, a brand hears, feels, sees, smells..... sonic branding is a part of the whole brand . We take an holistic view on branding”.*

Half of SMEs sought out audio agencies for audio branding while other half were approach by them, and realized the importance of branding after they were informed what it is. Virtually every interviewed SME has a positive opinion about audio branding but when asked about their genuine opinion, two themes emerged where one half of SMEs believe audio branding to be the future of every brand while others state that it is still the case that visuals seem to overpower the sound. **RW:** *“Audio branding is the future of every brand that wants to become seen, heard, experienced, felt, and understood on an emotional level. Music speaks to people more effectively than any other form of media, there are studies made on that, if any brand in increasingly digital environment will want to be seen and all those things then audio branding is key.”* **MS:** *“I believe it to be a highly important feature of our brand. However, in a social and mobile world where 80% of content is consumed without sound and captioned I think it less obviously important. It is the modern brand conundrum where visual elements have a higher perceived value but audio branding makes the experience whole.* **HB:** *“It's a good investment if you want to build a brand that people love.”*

Overall, the analysis results indicate that SMEs who have adopted audio branding have experienced positive outcomes and see it as an essential aspect of their overall brand identity. While there are challenges in measuring the direct impact and translating brand values into sound, SMEs express a strong interest in continuing to explore the potential of audio branding in their marketing efforts.

## 2.5.2 Interviews of SMEs who have not bought/used audio branding

In this subchapter, the main findings from interviews with SMEs who have not yet adopted audio branding are being presented. Through the analysis of their responses to the questions listed in Annex 9, three key themes that emerged: **1)** SME familiarity level of audio branding; **2)** Assessing the SME need for audio branding; **3)** Reasons for not using and considering using audio branding.

In terms of **theme 1**, which has emerged from questions 1, 1.1, 1.2, it is the case that only two SMEs out of 6 had some level of familiarity with the concept of audio branding although neither of them used/bought it before: **JP:** *“Audio branding, as far as we have known - is a company's marketing in the area of sound. Yet we have minor experience with it - only used a well-known song as something that reflects our brand's image and qualities in tik toks, Instagram reels and product launch events”*; **BR:** *“I've only heard of audio branding as a term. In the start-up world where we have experience, we don't see brands focus on audio branding, but it might be a very interesting marketing feel to look at and incorporate”*.

After a brief definition of audio branding, SMEs were asked a different set of questions (2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 from the annex 9) out of which theme 2 emerged. Besides the real estate SME, every respondent had identified at least some marketing and communication channels where their businesses employ sound already, most prominent ones being social media channels and online advertisements. Neither of the respondents had internal discussions within their companies regarding how their respective companies and/or brands should sound like, on the other hand, and to the point raised by experts in the previous research, in many cases SMEs had internal discussions regarding how their marketing campaigns should sound like, which echoes the point of SMEs being more pragmatic and single direction oriented: **BG:** *“We never had a discussion specifically towards how the brand sounds like, but we did discuss the online and social media advertisement sounds as in what music track to use”*; **AC:** *“While we never discussed the audio branding thing or specifically how our brand should sound like, we did have an internal conversation regarding our content marketing we do both for b2b and b2c clients. In fact, the discussion was about which licensed music should we get ourselves”*; **JP:** *“We did only for product launch events, social media content, and online advertising music, like which songs to play, especially on tiktok as well”*; **BR:** *“We never had*

*discussions on audio branding even during our brand building meetings, it's not a widely known/adopted thing in the SME world, I feel like”.*

SMEs that have not used audio branding before primarily communicate with their target audience using online platforms. The frequency of communication varies among respondents, ranging from once a week to daily interactions, and it is evident that SMEs rely on digital channels for their brand communication and engage with their target audience regularly. In terms of yearly financials allocated towards brand communication and marketing endeavours, the range within SMEs interviewed varies from 3 to 50 thousand euros per year. When asked whether branding is considered a priority – a positive answer emerged in a consensus amongst every respondent, which then ties the analysis results to the findings of the theme 3 (emerged from questions 7-12). When asked to comment on their opinion about the use of audio branding for SMEs, the responses reveal varying opinions, where a general recognition of its potential as a valuable branding tool for both B2C and B2B companies prevails, but opinions diverge on its relevance, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness for SMEs. Majority of respondents agree on audio branding being a creative and effective way to enhance brand identity, even for small businesses. They acknowledge that it is an underutilized concept and believe that it should be explored alongside visual branding from the start while others mention that the process is complex and requires specialized skills. Concerns regarding the appropriateness of audio branding for specific target audiences and contexts are also evident. For example, one respondent notes that in their B2B context, LinkedIn users typically consume content without sound, which limits the impact of audio branding. Another respondent mentions they are using sound in their marketing, but without a strategic approach to creating an audio brand identity.

Financial considerations play a role in the respondents' opinions about audio branding, since SMEs have limited budgets allocated to marketing, they are unsure if they can afford additional audio services when the perceived cost of implementing audio branding could be a barrier. It can be seen in the answers when asked whether hypothetically respondents would consider employing audio branding in the future. Three of respondents answered negatively and when asked of the reasons, the answers related to budget constraints, and lack of value recognition. When asked what needs to happen for them to reconsider, such answers emerged: **MC**: *“We need to grow first. Otherwise, we would need to see how it looks like in terms of price vs effectiveness when used in our marketing campaigns, would be interesting to see how it works in practice”*; **AC**: *“while it does sound interesting, I don't see how we would invest into it right now, most of our budget is visual branding, maybe it's more for the large companies or for those in b2c only”*; **RG**: *“I would like to see how audio logo for example would work in our context, right now it is hard to see the need for extra investments like audio which looks like a secondary thing”*.

On a contrary, the other half of respondents that were interested in using audio branding in the future, stated such reasons: **BG**: *“It would be interesting to explore a possibility of using custom made music in a brand-like way, more consistently with how we look like. We are already working with a sound agency to produce custom music for advertisements, but we tend not to think of it as an audio branding part, rather it's just a musical piece to help tell a story of a new product, so it's an interesting point of view I think we haven't really considered before.”*; **BR**: *“Make consumers feel that our brand is more premium, serious. Most importantly, make potential customers remember our brand better.”*; **JP**: *“It would be something original that would separate us from our competitors, as it is not something we casually see in SMEs, or other businesses that are competitors in our niche”*.

Lastly, it seems that all SME respondents expect audio branding to increase sales, brand recognition, and customer engagement, some respondents also acknowledged the difficulty in measuring the direct impact of audio branding on these metrics. The overall expectation is that audio branding would complement their existing brand identity and lead to positive outcomes of the prior mentioned points. None of the interviewees know how to implement audio branding and virtually everyone agrees that sonic agencies exist exactly for that reason. When asked about which audio assets are of most interest in their cases, all respondents mentioned audio logo and three of them did custom tracks for advertisements.

Overall, the analysis highlights a general lack of awareness and understanding of audio branding among SMEs. While some SMEs recognize its potential benefits and express interest in its adoption, others are hesitant due to budget limitations and perceived lack of value. This suggests that there is room for further education and awareness-building around audio branding for SMEs, as well as potential opportunities for sonic agencies to develop cost-effective solutions tailored to the needs of this market segment.

## **2.6 Similar research comparison and evaluation of field analysis results**

The third and final part of this paper presents a critical analysis and evaluation of field analysis results while, in contrast, this chapter is dedicated to the novelty of the work, result comparison to similar research and just a brief, summarizing evaluation of field analysis results.

In light to audio branding use for SMEs research direction never been explored prior, the closest research to the topicality and problem of this research paper were carried out by Wong (2019) as well as Graakjaer and Jantzen (2009). Both research had expert interviews with sonic agencies and audio branding practitioners in pursuit of deepening the knowledge of this field. While analysing completely different problems, Wong aimed to understand audio branding practitioners' beliefs about

how sound branding can influence consumers' perceptions and behaviours, and 11 expert interviews with audio branding practitioners revealed the need to 'prove' the value of sound branding in order to establish it as an expert discipline within the general branding industry, in contrast, this paper research shows that this need has shifted. Experts now agree that large scale businesses recognize the value of audio branding, and practitioners only need to prove its value for SMEs. Additionally, Ojasalo, et al. (2008) and Cardinali, et al. used an exploratory nature research approach to inspect SME possibilities and challenges within the field of branding. While the problem and aim differ from the research of this paper, conclusion could be made that there are similarities in SME reluctance of branding and audio branding adoption. Much like branding few decades ago, audio branding seems to be going through a similar phase of SMEs either not realising the value of adopting such discipline, have budget and resource constraints, lack of education or brand focus.

During the research on audio branding field as a whole, Gustafsson (2015) and Vidal-Mestre, et al. (2022) pointed out the division across researchers and practitioners within the audio branding field. Namely because of the lack of unity in research focus and prevailing need to prove audio brandings effectiveness, researchers focused on how music impacts the consumer while practitioners focused on scaling the industry up to large scale business enterprises, resulting in the lack of focus on branding part of the sonic branding. In contrast, this exploratory research shows that the field has advanced past the division point, where more and more emphasis from practitioners is placed on utilizing audio branding alongside the audio platforms like TikTok, and digital ad space in general, as mentioned by Gustafsson (2019). The need of addressing SMEs and not just large-scale businesses persists amongst practitioners, and with more research like this paper, the gap presented by Gustafsson and Vidal-Mestre will continue to further close.

Considering short evaluation of the field analysis results, it is apparent that the results are sufficient to form a guidance model for SMEs to use audio branding. The underlying notions of such model would be to serve both SMEs and audio agencies (practitioners) with bridging, firstly, the knowledge gap as to what needs to happen for SMEs to work with audio agencies, and how can SMEs themselves prepare their audio brands themselves. The novelty of this paper's research lies precisely in the fact that it is hard to find similar research prior conducted, i.e., until today, the use of audio branding in scientific literature was explored as the means to validate the legitimacy, and attract market and further research attention to the discipline itself (Gustaffson, 2019, Graakjaer, and Jantzen, 2009), but when large scale business enterprises recognized it, the same lack of legitimacy does not apply to audio branding anymore, henceforth, in the words of the audio agencies themselves, attracting SME attention becomes more and more prevalent. And so, this research direction serves as the first exploration of the problem, encouraging the advancement of audio branding and laying foundation for further, more in-depth exploration of the topic.

### **III. THE GUIDANCE MODEL OF THE USE OF AUDIO BRANDING IN THE CASE OF SMEs**

The final and paramount part of this paper will scrutinize and integrate insights from both theoretical studies and field analyses conducted throughout this research. As the title suggests, this section will pivot around the critical need for an effective guidance model for audio branding tailored to the case of small and medium-sized enterprises. This part aims to present solutions and recommendations in response to the issues identified in the context of the research object, considering the challenges and opportunities specific to SMEs in their journey towards employing audio branding.

This section begins with a critical analysis and discussion of the results of field analysis, which will then aid in identifying problematic areas and opportunities within the audio branding sphere in the context of SMEs. By juxtaposing these findings with the theoretical framework explored earlier, a foundation for the formulation of the solution is being constructed. Going forward, the second subsection will introduce the proposed solution: the use of audio branding guidance model designed to navigate the possibilities of audio branding for the case of SMEs. The model's formulation will hinge on the results obtained during the research, thus ensuring it directly addresses the identified problem areas. A thorough justification for the proposed solution, solidifying the relevance and utility in the chosen research context is presented as well. Subsequently, a detailed, comprehensive plan for the model's implementation in "Applicability and Further Research Discussion." will be presented. This will include a description of specific actions and measures designed to facilitate the successful execution of the proposed solutions. This discussion will additionally explore the potential adaptability of the model to other organizations and the reality and practical benefits of its implementation.

Lastly, a venture into possible directions for further development of the work in addressing the problem at hand is mapped out. This part of the thesis, therefore, aspires not only to shed light on the issues in the existing audio branding practices of SMEs but also to propose a practical, targeted, and theoretically grounded guidance model that can address these issues head-on.

#### **3.1 Critical analysis and discussion of the results of field analysis**

The aim, therefore, of this subsection is to critically reflect on the field analysis results as well as to compare them with the theoretical analysis insights in order to identify problem areas associated with the research object as well as formulate solutions to overcome them.

The starting point of this study was a gap in understanding why SMEs aren't using audio branding as much as larger businesses are. This gap was noticed by analysing the information from industry reports and observing the lack of research focused on this topic. After conducting interviews with experts and SMEs, two main issues became apparent.

First, audio agencies, the main drivers of the audio branding industry, prefer working with large businesses. These businesses have more financial resources, well-established brand identities, and a wide array of other resources that make them appealing partners for audio agencies. For instance, in an interview, one of the largest leading European audio agencies highlighted the case of MasterCard. Respondent mentioned that even though the audio brand created for MasterCard wasn't perfect, the sheer scale of the campaign had a massive impact on the industry, inspiring other large brands to adopt audio branding. The campaign was possible because of the sheer resources allocated to an audio rebranding of MasterCard, which as a return inspired other financial as well as other industries to follow the pace MasterCard set. It all rippled as an advancement of audio branding industry which according to the field as well as theoretical analysis, audio agencies are ultimately aiming for.

Second, SMEs often find themselves in the backseat when it comes to audio branding. SMEs typically have limited resources and operate in competitive markets. Both the theoretical analysis and interviews indicated that audio branding is a hard sell for SMEs, not necessarily because of their resource limitations, but because they can't see its value. In other words, while limited resources are a factor, the bigger issue is that SMEs find it hard to invest in something new and unproven, like audio branding. The theoretical analysis suggested that SMEs were once sceptical about adopting branding strategies in general. It seems that audio branding is now facing the same kind of scepticism. It's a marketing/brand management strategy that requires long-term investment, the results aren't immediately visible, and it's a relatively new and less studied field with significantly fewer successful examples. Additionally, it's difficult to measure the return on investment (ROI) in audio branding. These factors make SMEs hesitant to try it, and as a result – less of an interest for audio agencies who are leading the advancement of the field.

The field analysis also revealed that the growing demand for audio branding prevails in the increasingly digitalized world. This ties to the points raised in theoretical analysis, where more and more audio advertising mediums arise, more and more audio touchpoints for the brand, and other marketing communication channels appear. In comparison to similar research, it seems that audio branding practitioners no longer aim to prove its value for large-scale businesses and SME use of audio branding topic of discussion became more prevalent. Expert interview findings show that there is an emerging trend of SMEs showing increasing interest in audio branding due to digitalization, social media, and the importance of audio in marketing campaigns. More so, SME interviews show

positive opinion towards audio branding, they are likely to use it if they can see the value of it. Specifically, the SMEs who have already bought/used audio branding agree that such brand management strategy will now stay in their respective communication strategy in the future, meaning that SMEs who have bought audio branding, intend to continue using it as well as expand to more audio assets, arguing that audio branding is the future of a holistic and cohesive brand experience.

Given the identified need for audio branding in the context of SMEs, this research further tackles the question: what are the use of audio branding possibilities for SMEs and how should such enterprises use it? One immediate and straightforward answer is the collaboration with audio agencies, as they possess the unique skill set needed for music in branding that most brand owners lack. However, our research indicated that many of these agencies do not design their services with SMEs in mind. This could apply more to established agencies, while smaller ones face a different challenge—they struggle to convey the value of audio branding due to a general lack of awareness about this practice among SMEs.

It's crucial to note that this exploratory research focused primarily on Central Europe, surveying SMEs and audio agencies across various countries. Given the qualitative nature of this study, it's difficult to make broad generalizations. Instead, this study aims to illuminate the issues at hand without making blanket statements. However, one point that seems universally true is that the possibilities of the use of audio branding are the same for SMEs and larger enterprises alike. These can be divided into two categories: possibilities of use once it's implemented, and during the creation and implementation process. Both field and theoretical analyses revealed that once implemented, audio branding can increase brand equity, emotional connection with consumers, brand loyalty and trust, purchasing behaviour, and enhance the brand image and experience. As for the creation and implementation process, it appears to be consistent across SMEs and larger businesses. The agencies analysed generally followed the audio branding creation model proposed by Jackson and Fulberg (2004). Although their individual approaches and methodologies may vary, the core stages remain the same: creating a brand brief, engaging in creative learning through audits and mood boards, establishing a distinct sonic identity, and implementing it across all brand touchpoints. Continuous feedback and research are integrated to ensure the sonic identity remains relevant and impactful.

Given the particularity, complexity, and specificity required in audio branding creation, both theoretical and field analyses suggest SMEs collaborate with audio agencies for this task. However, considering SMEs' resource constraints and lack of perceived value in such an investment—especially given the difficulty in measuring its impact—there's a call for a more cost-effective, practical approach. Despite the rising demand for audio advertising solutions, both theoretical and field analyses reveal that SMEs are typically pragmatic, focusing on products or single campaigns when it comes to marketing solutions. This underlines the need to increase awareness that branding

marketing solutions, including audio branding, can, indeed, provide short-term gains while supporting long-term marketing strategies. The overall findings point towards a growing need for a solution that can pique SMEs' interest, enhance their understanding and perception of audio branding as valuable, and make this practice more feasible and cost-effective. The theoretical analysis on the branding in the context of SMEs suggests that SMEs are more likely to adopt branding solutions when they can execute them in-house, reducing the intimidation factor of large investments. Following it, a similar hands-on approach to audio branding could allow SMEs to grasp its value by directly (hands-on) experiencing its effects when they try to outsource at least some part of it themselves. Upon seeing some results and gaining hands-on experience, SMEs might then be more inclined to seek further audio branding solutions, perhaps by engaging audio agencies.

While the experts agree that SMEs can create an audio brand independently, they underscore the existence of audio agencies for a reason: professional expertise. Considering this, they recommend that SMEs either hire an in-house audio creative expert or collaborate with audio agencies. If SMEs decide to tackle audio branding independently however, their first steps should include conducting internal audits of their existing sonic brand and translating their brand values into a musical language. That being said, the research of this paper did strive to identify aspects of audio branding that SMEs could handle independently. Interviews with experts and SMEs who have previously engaged with audio branding—as well as those who have not—revealed that SMEs often start by purchasing licenses for songs or sounds for use in their marketing strategies or campaigns. This suggests that SMEs tend to outsource their sound needs and brings into question whether they could do so more efficiently within the context of audio branding. Since audio branding involves a deliberate use of sound across all brand touchpoints, SMEs often overlook this and apply sound based on their understanding. However, if they were to use the tools identified through the field analysis case study and expert interviews, SMEs could potentially achieve better results with their audio branding efforts, even with limited resources. Moreover, they would be taking the initial steps necessary for future collaboration with audio branding agencies, such as identifying their brand sounds through a brand sound audit, pinpointing their brand identity, and design language that represents their brand values. Conducting this audit and identification process not only enables SMEs to make more informed decisions and enhances their understanding of their brand's sound, but it also facilitates future work with audio branding agencies.

The need for an audio branding model tailored to SMEs becomes clear based on the issues discussed in this section. The problems identified by the field and theoretical analyses underline the absence of guidance for SMEs in the current audio advertising landscape, where the use of audio in the advertising landscape becomes increasingly prevalent. Consequently, the next section of this study will develop a concrete plan of action and the use of the audio branding guidance model.

## 3.2 Audio branding guidance model

Going forward, this section aims to formulate the **guidance model for small and medium-sized businesses** to effectively use audio branding as a marketing/brand management tool as well as by introducing such solution – decrease the prevailing research and practical gap between audio branding field and SMEs. Furthermore, this section focuses on detailing the practically applicable actions and measures for the use of the guidance model.

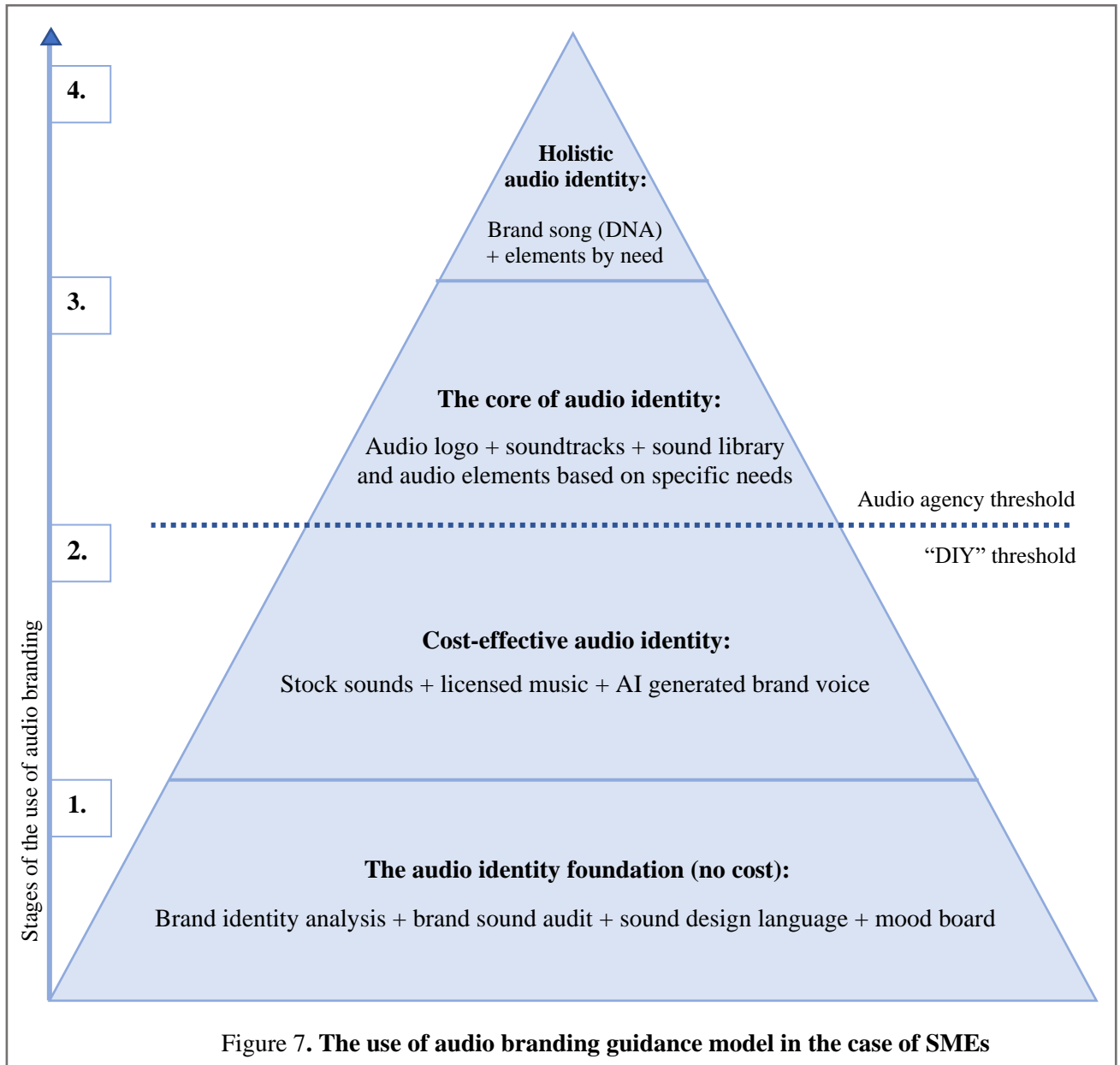
Based on theoretical and field analyses carried out in this paper, the use of audio branding guidance model for small and medium-sized businesses is being formulated as a four-stage pyramid (see figure 7), reflecting both the possibilities of the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs as well as the process of how SMEs should use them.

As it has been established, audio branding is the process of creating and using the audio identity across all relevant touchpoints within brand communication channels and customer journey, therefore, the use of audio branding in general revolves around having an audio identity for the pre-existing brand identity, where the former is made of unique audial brand elements like audio logo, brand voice, soundtracks, brand song, etc. (see figure 2, from theoretical analysis). Henceforth, based on the problem question of this paper, the division of the use of audio branding guidance model for SMEs is made of the following stages:

- 1. The audio identity foundation (no cost)** – the first stage of the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs, which reflects the founding principles on which further audio identity is being created by audio agencies. These principles require no cost to achieve yet are the most important aspects of any audio identity amongst large and SME brands alike, therefore, convenient to outsource for SMEs if they were to approach audio branding independently.
- 2. Cost-effective audio identity** – the second and final stage within the threshold of what part of audio branding can SMEs approach in a DIY manner (do it yourself), indicating concrete audio elements which, indeed, can be a cost-effective solution of the use of audio branding for SMEs which also yields (notably limited but if used in accordance with the first stage of the guidance model – effective) results.
- 3. The core of audio identity** – marks the beginning of the audio agency threshold, i.e., part of the audio branding or audio identity creation that can only be achieved in collaboration with audio agencies or in-house audio branding specialist. In its essence, this third stage of the use of audio branding guidance model for SMEs indicate main

audio elements which SMEs should aspire to use in collaboration with audio agencies once they are through with first two stages of the guidance model.

- 4. Holistic audio identity** – the final stage of the guidance model as well as the audio agency threshold, indicates the most important, expensive, and effective audio elements to use for SMEs.



After the formation and explanation of the use of audio branding guidance model for SMEs, the possibilities of use are apparent, but, in addition, it is important to further elaborate on the guidance part, i.e., how should SMEs use these possibilities in a practical sense:

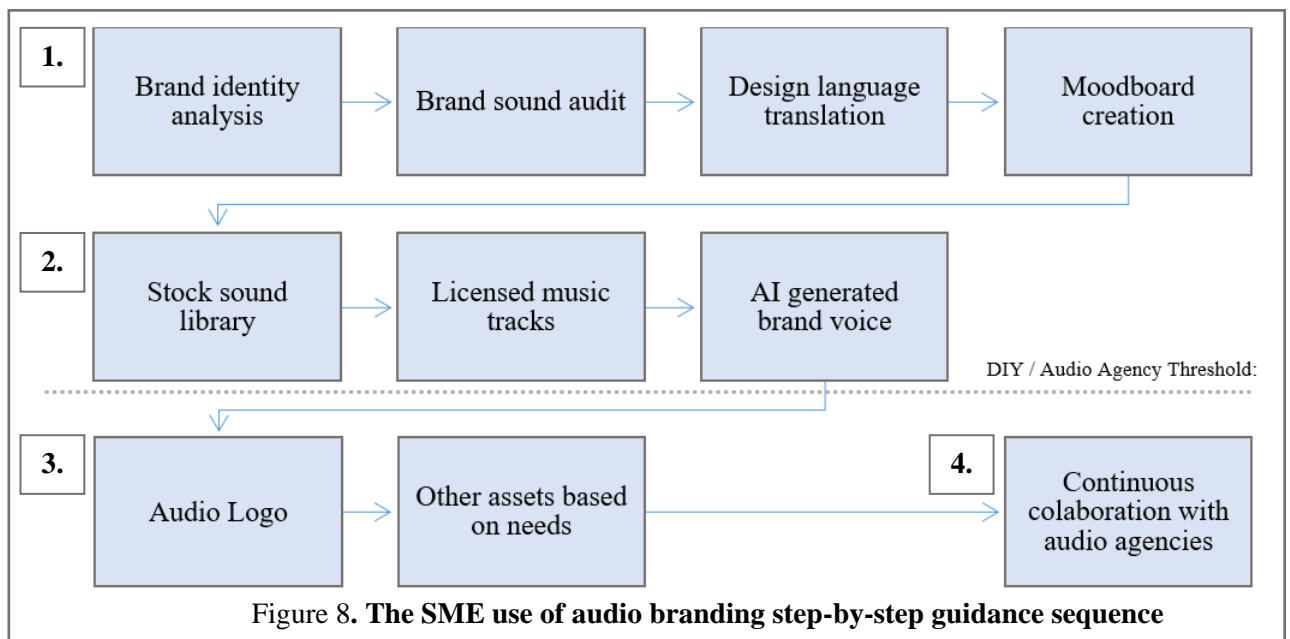
- 1.** In terms of **the audio identity foundation (no cost)**, the first stage of the model breaks down into brand identity analysis, brand sound audit, sound design language, and the mood board processes, them being the core principles upon which every audio identity is created and used by any

brand or business. As mentioned previously, this stage is the most important and most stressed by the experts to employ as the starting level of SMEs adopting audio branding. Brand identity analysis indicates the fact that SMEs must begin by understanding the brand's attributes that fall under the brand identity definition. These could include its personality traits (e.g., innovative, trustworthy, adventurous), its core values (e.g., quality, customer service, sustainability), its mission, vision, target demographic, and its overall positioning within the market. Field analysis of this paper identified the tool most suitable for this process – Brand Identity Prism first proposed by Kapferer (2004) (see annex 5). Then SMEs should conduct brand sound audit, i.e., identify brand's historical as well as current audio use across all relevant brand and marketing communication channels and analyze the sonic landscape of the competitors to ensure a distinct and unique audio identity. Afterwards, the brand's sound design language must be formulated, this involves translating the brand's values and personality into sonic elements in terms of the specific language. For instance, a youthful, energetic brand might align with upbeat, fast-paced music, while a luxury brand may resonate with orchestral music. Mapping these brand attributes to potential sonic attributes involves understanding the emotional responses and associations that different sounds can evoke. For example, a brand that values innovation might align with electronic or synth-based music which often represents modernity and technological advancement. A brand focused on tradition and heritage might align with classical music or folk instruments. The “Brand Music Navigator” tool (see annex 4) is designed specifically for this process, and SMEs can utilize it without no costs. Lastly, creating a mood board of how the brand should sound refers to the final component within this stage of the guidance model. SMEs should create a sonic mood board with the help of the “Every Noise at Once” tool (see annex 6) because the process refers to a selection of existing music tracks, sound effects, or voiceovers that represent the brand's identity, and “Every Noise at Once” is designed conveniently for that.

2. Going forward, **the cost-effective audio identity** stage of the guidance model refers to what part of a tangible audio identity can SMEs execute without the help of an audio agency, and it breaks down into sound library, soundtrack, and brand voice as unique brand audio elements. Field analysis revealed that in many SME cases outsourcing collaboration with audio agencies by employing stock sounds or licensed stock music can yield relatively effective and cost-effective results. In addition, brand voice has been identified as one of the most important audio assets for SMEs to employ in their audio branding strategies, since brand voice, much like an audio logo, can be used across many brand communication channels. Artificial intelligence-based tools like “Aflorithmic AI” (see annex 7) can be a cost-effective solution for SMEs to outsource brand voice themselves, and in terms of specific sounds or music tracks, tools like "Artlist", "Epidemic Sound", and "Permium Beat" (see annex 8) have been identified as the most prolific choice for SMEs. However, it must be stressed that using these second stage proposed tools for SMEs can be limiting

in the long term. Some of the core aspects of an effective audio identity are the alignment of audio assets with current brand identity attributes and their flexibility. Using stock music and sounds can bind SMEs to the sound that won't be as easy to change or adapt in the future compared with sounds produced custom by audio agencies, specifically tailored to their needs. Taking that into consideration, if these tools are used by the first stage of the audio branding guidance model, effective results can indeed be reached in the case of SMEs.

This elaboration is visualized as the step-by-step SME guidance sequence (see Figure 8) in order to emphasize each aspect within the original SME audio branding guidance model.



**3. Elaborating on the core audio identity** stage of the guidance model, it must be stressed that the most important audio assets or audio elements of a brand cannot be outsourced by SMEs, and here the collaboration with audio agencies commences. Audio logo has been identified as the most effective starting point for SMEs to use in their branding strategies since its use is multilayered. The audio logo fits virtually any brand channel and, in most cases, serves as a guide to further build the rest of an audio identity based on it, henceforth, should be the primary asset SMEs use once they approach audio agencies. Generally, audio logo, custom soundtracks, brand specific sound library, and brand voice make up the core of a strong audio identity, but which elements are to be employed firstly by SMEs is a question of their unique and specific needs.

**4. Finally, in terms of the holistic audio identity** stage of the guidance model, it must be said that audio branding is never quite finished, henceforth the final stage of the use of audio branding for SMEs refers to the term “holistic” as to a variety of audio elements used consistently in the variety of brand communication channels across as relevant touchpoints within the customer journey and beyond. In a sense, having a brand song signals that an SME is at the final stage of the use of audio

branding, since brand song often encapsulates the essence (the “DNA”) of an audio identity, i.e., a recognizable by the consumer melody or a combination of sounds that can be heard in the brand song and associated with the brand in the mind of the consumer. Brand songs can have many different versions/tracks of them, can have an audio logo in it, and can be used as background music for ads, or ambiance music for physical spaces. What makes a holistic audio identity is the adaptability and flexibility as well as consistent use of the audio elements by SMEs, and as brand campaigns and the brand itself shift over time, so does the audio identity, henceforth, audio branding is a never-ending process.

To summarize, the model, grounded on theoretical and field analyses, unfolds as a four-stage pyramid, representing the process of audio branding in the context of SMEs. By following this guidance model, SMEs can both learn about what is as well as what it takes to employ audio branding and start using it themselves. While the model does lay out all the use of audio branding possibilities for the case of SMEs, the actual use of the model will likely vary from case to case, as it is the nature of audio branding – case specific, adaptable, flexible, and unique. The guidance model also provides the tools necessary for SMEs to take the first audio branding steps in a practical sense.

### **3.3 Applicability of the model and further research discussion**

The final subsection of this paper aims to lead a discussion that demonstrates the reality and usefulness of the guidance model as well as it aims to provide an overview of further development of the use of audio branding possibilities in the case of small and medium-sized businesses topic of research.

In its essence, the use of the audio branding guidance model is tailored specifically for the case of SMEs, but it also has value for audio branding practitioners and agencies alike. The exploratory nature of the research conducted within this paper illuminated the prevailing problem of today’s state of the audio branding field – the use gap between audio agencies as the leading practitioners of the field and brands owned by SMEs. Since the practice of audio branding is so heavily dependent on audio agencies, the use gap appears when established ones willingly choose to not work with SMEs while the less established ones struggle to convey the value of audio branding for SMEs. Understandably so, audio agencies are oriented towards the most effective growth of the field, and it is found in reaching for large-scale brands, but the landscape of both audio branding and audio advertising is shifting, the demand for audio solutions in brand management and marketing practices of SMEs are increasing, and reaching for this group becomes more and more prevalent. Therefore, this guidance model serves audio agencies as the personification of the SME group as potential clients in terms of their needs, pain points, and expectations. Both established and less so

audio agencies might look at this proposed solution as the vital information encapsulating the idea of how they should approach such clients or information that should raise further internal questions of what the opportunity is and what is there to gain from reaching SMEs. This paper already identified how increasingly a field of practice legitimizes after SMEs (representing 99% European and 90% global businesses) start widely adopting it.

But the core discussion of the usefulness of the guidance model, indeed, should revolve around small and medium-sized businesses, since this paper provides this group with most of the uncovered value. It is important to mention that the use of the audio branding guidance model lacks measures SMEs could utilize to monitor this process, and it is the case because generally, it is hard to measure the impact of audio branding. Much like branding – audio branding is a long-term investment where the main result is the brand image in the minds of the consumers. Increased brand loyalty, trust, emotional connection between the brand and the consumer as well as increased buying behaviour can be seen in the long run but how much of the ROI should be attributed to audio branding is hard to concretize. Regardless, the effects of the use of audio branding are clear amongst SMEs who have used it before, and theoretical analysis supports this as well. In terms of the reality of the applicability of the use of the audio branding guidance model in the case of SMEs, virtually any enterprise that did not use audio branding before can find the use for it precisely because it encapsulates the essence of what makes audio branding, i.e., audio elements, tools and process for their creation and implementation, information on audio agency versus “DIY” threshold, making it suitable for introducing corporations into the concept and its execution. The model allows SMEs to engage in audio branding in a cost-effective manner as well as do it with a hands-on approach if they decide to engage individually. Field analysis revealed that if SMEs had done the first stage of the guidance model, it would drastically help with further audio identity creation both in “DIY” and collaboration case. Because audio branding goes hand in hand with branding and pre-existing brand identity, the guidance model would help SMEs re-evaluate their current brand representation.

The usefulness of this guidance model lies in the fact that SMEs could start using audio branding instantly by approaching the first stage of the model and continuing to other stages at their own pace accordingly. It can now be said with certainty, that SMEs should first focus on the “audio identity formation” as the process identified through the guidance model because when the understanding of where and how the brand emits sound is achieved amongst every SME employee, it can only bring value for the present brand identity as well as brand communication in general, even if a decision to not employ audio branding would have been taken. Some of the benefits include deepened understanding of brand values, identity, attributes, and how they are being communicated through sound. One of the most interesting discoveries of this paper was the fact that being an SME brand in fact helps with employing audio branding more than it would in the case of a large-scale

brand. In an SME brand, there are not too many communication channels to consider as well as the chain of command within a small business is shorter, more employees and management can participate in the decision-making and creation process when it comes to creating an audio identity, and that results in better common understanding as well as a sense of corporate brand identity (which reflects amongst internal employee circle).

Therefore, SMEs face virtually no threats when making the first steps towards audio branding, on the contrary, they can only gain and so are encouraged to do at least the first part of the audio branding guidance model. One potential challenge for that, although not a major one, might only be the knowledge gap, i.e., learning about the sound audit, mood board, design language, and brand identity attribute translation to design language. When considering the second stage of the guidance model, a clear threat can be identified of misusing “DIY” audio assets if they are not implemented by the first stage, and that generally is a mistake that many brands make. In addition to the same argument, misused audio assets misrepresent the brand and can result in an opposite effect to what benefits the use of audio branding typically brings. On the contrary, if AI-generated brand voice, stock sound library, or licensed music tracks are used in accordance with the steps analyzed in the first stage of the guidance model – it can be an opportunity for SMEs to achieve a cost-effective audio identity and employ audio branding while saving the budget. Moving forward, audio assets created in a “DIY” manner won’t serve SMEs for a long period of time, because audio identity has to be flexible and transposable from one communication channel to another/from one campaign to another. Here is where SMEs need to work with audio agencies and create a long-lasting, flexible, and transposable audio identity through assets like audio logos or custom-made tracks. The only threat SMEs face when collaborating with audio agencies in the case of the third and fourth stages of the guidance model is budget used on audio assets that do not match the brand and that can also be countered by making sure the first stage of audio branding guidance model was employed prior.

Lastly, the third by this research impacted party is the research field of audio branding scientific literature. It has now been uncovered that the direction this paper took in terms of research topic, object, and the problem is scarce because of the pace at which the audio branding field is evolving, from prior researchers like Wong (2019), Gustafsson, (2019), and Graakjaer and Jantzen (2009) observing audio branding practitioners trying to prove the value of audio branding for large-scale business enterprises, to now large-scale enterprises adopting audio branding, and the demand for audio solutions in brand management/marketing fields rising in the case of SMEs. Therefore, this paper employed an exploratory approach to illuminate the problematic and by being the first scientific paper to research such direction – laid out the opportunities for further research. Since the research was carried out with the use of qualitative data only, it is hard to generalize the current findings, henceforth further research could include quantitative methodology to test specific regions or markets

of SME use of audio branding. For example, in addition to expert interviews, SME in-depth interviews, and case studies, a quantitative questionnaire could be used in a single market of a single country within Europe to precisely identify current SME use of audio branding, their needs, expectations, opinions, and compare it with local findings of expert interviews to assess what possibilities and solutions might concretely fit that market. Such research direction could, therefore, could be applied to any chosen market or country, and yield valuable insights as to how should local SMEs use audio branding, and how should local audio agencies approach SMEs to bridge the prevailing audio branding use gap.

To summarize, the applicability of an audio branding guidance model is tailored to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), outlining its value for SMEs and the potential advantages for audio branding agencies. The model, by bridging the existing use gap between audio agencies and SMEs, presents a viable pathway for agencies to expand their client base and service offerings. This expansion is facilitated by the model's encapsulation of SME needs, pain points, and expectations, providing vital information that can guide agencies in their approach to this largely untapped market segment. While measuring the direct impact of audio branding is challenging, the resultant benefits such as increased brand loyalty, trust, and consumer buying behaviour are well-documented, suggesting a rewarding proposition for both SMEs and audio agencies. SMEs are equipped to engage in audio branding in a cost-effective, hands-on manner, progressing at their own pace. The paper additionally enriches the academic literature in the field of audio branding, shedding light on potential avenues for further research, including quantitative studies on SME audio branding usage across diverse markets and regions.

## CONCLUSIONS

This section aims to reflect on the main generalizations of the theoretical part of the paper, main results of the field analysis, main decisions for identified solution, novelty, limitations, and possible further research direction. Overall, this section illuminated the degree to which the aim and objectives of the paper has been achieved, therefore, in conclusion:

1. The concept of audio branding refers to the process of creating a holistic audio identity for the pre-existing brand identity, and its consistent use across all relevant brand touchpoints in the customer journey. While the creation of audio identity process is similar in any business case, and the use of audio branding results in increased brand identity, trust, loyalty, buying behaviour, and consumers emotional connection with the brand, the scientific literature degree to which the use of audio branding possibilities in the case of SMEs are laid out is significantly insufficient. SMEs operate in unique context of limited resources, competitive environment, and reluctance to experiment with new strategies if they can't perceive their value. Currently, the need for audio solutions in the case of SMEs are rising, yet guidance for SMEs to effectively use audio branding is little to none.
2. The research methodology adopted an exploratory approach, employing interpretive/constructivist qualitative methods to delve into the application of audio branding in small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). Expert interviews, case studies, and in-depth discussions with SME representatives were key techniques employed, offering varied perspectives. The research highlighted that practitioners and sound agencies significantly influence the audio branding field. It also identified a gap in literature concerning SME audio branding, underlining the need for further exploration. The triangulation of diverse data sources ensured an encompassing understanding of the challenges and opportunities for SMEs in implementing audio branding, successfully meeting the research objective.
3. The field analysis highlights two main problem areas regarding the use of audio branding in SMEs. First, audio agencies, which spearhead the audio branding industry, exhibit a preference for large-scale businesses due to their significant resources and well-established brand identities. This marginalizes SMEs, hindering their access to audio branding expertise. Second, SMEs are hesitant to adopt audio branding, a decision influenced by a combination of resource constraints, scepticism towards a new and relatively unproven marketing approach, and difficulty in understanding the value and

ROI of audio branding. The interest of SMEs in audio branding is rising due to increased digitalization, but challenges persist due to a lack of tailored services for SMEs and awareness about audio branding. The field analysis further provides the possibilities of use of audio branding in no cost, cost-effective, and “DIY” manner, emphasizing that it is possible to use audio branding independently but stressing the importance of collaboration with audio agencies inevitably and in the long run. Additionally, field analysis revealed the stages upon which the guidance model ought to be formulated as well as the current state of SMEs themselves, it being open and generally positive towards the possibilities of using audio branding.

4. The solution part of the paper proposes a comprehensive four-stage audio branding guidance model, specifically designed to assist small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in effectively incorporating audio branding into their marketing strategies. This model, backed by theoretical and field analyses, provides SMEs a methodical roadmap to develop a distinct audio identity without incurring substantial costs initially. It guides them from the foundation stage—encompassing brand identity analysis and sound audit—through to a cost-effective audio identity implementation using available assets. Further, it illustrates the importance of collaboration with audio agencies for the development of core audio elements tailored to the brand's unique needs. Finally, it emphasizes the continuous and adaptive nature of audio branding, suggesting a holistic approach that evolves with the brand itself. This model, thus, serves as a valuable tool for SMEs seeking to leverage audio branding, offering practical and adaptable strategies for unique brand requirements.
5. The novelty of this paper lies in value brought to SMEs, audio branding practitioners, and scientific research literature of the audio branding field. A comprehensive four-stage audio branding guidance model targeted specifically at small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), addresses the unique needs, pain points, and expectations of SMEs, and equips them with a cost-effective, hands-on approach to audio branding. This model also offers value to audio branding agencies by illustrating potential avenues for client expansion and service diversification. Additionally, this work is the highlight of the prevailing use gap between audio agencies and SMEs in the field of audio branding. This thesis uncovers this critical issue and presents it as a significant opportunity for both SMEs and audio branding agencies, demonstrating how the guidance model could serve as a bridge to connect the two parties, leading to the mutual growth of both sectors.
6. This paper, bounded in an exploratory approach, now stands as a first stand-alone SME-oriented research within the audio branding field, illuminating the lacking guidance on

audio branding in the case of SMEs and offering a preliminary solution. This paper, therefore, is an invitation to continue exploring the topic as well as the problem question in a different approach. Future research could incorporate quantitative methodologies alongside the qualitative research approach used in this study, this could involve surveys or questionnaires targeted at SMEs within specific markets or regions, allowing for a more concrete understanding of the current SME use of audio branding, their specific needs, and expectations. Another potential avenue for research is to examine the impact of the audio branding guidance model on SMEs who have implemented it. This could involve longitudinal studies tracking SMEs' brand development, consumer loyalty, and buying behaviour over a certain period after the model's implementation. These findings could be used to refine the model further and make it more effective in the future. Lastly, the framework of research proposed in this study could serve as a local market analysis of the current state of the use of audio branding in the case of SMEs to then identify the solutions effectively locally.

7. The main limitation of this paper is the qualitative exploratory approach. While employing exploratory research was deemed sufficient due to the prevailing lack of prior exploration of any kind in the case of audio branding possibilities for SMEs, this bounds the research to be scattered rather than condensed, i.e., three different qualitative methods were carried out within the confines of the central European region, moreover, objects of research varied from tools, SMEs to experts and concepts. While this approach makes an effective exploration, it is hard to make solidified generalizations and there is a higher risk for researcher biases. The research region being central Europe can be considered as a limitation as well, adding to the point of research results appearing scattered rather than condensed locally for example.

In summary, the degree to which the research problem question “what are the use of audio branding possibilities for small and medium-sized businesses and how should such enterprises use it” has been answered is deemed sufficient since the aim of the research has been achieved by providing comprehensive guidance for SMEs to utilize audio branding as a marketing/brand management tool.

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# ANNEXES

## Glossary

**Audio branding** – the marketing/brand management discipline, where the conscious use of sound/audio elements across all the touchpoints within brand communication channels (for example: background Ad music, audio logo, sounds of your product, and any other sound that your customer encounters in your brand's customer journey) is employed to increase brand recognition, brand equity, brand identity, customer loyalty, trust, and buying behaviour. (Jackson, 2003, Treasure, 2007, Lusensky, 2010).

**Audio identity** – a second (sonic) dimension to the present identity of the brand, which strengthens the total brand equity (Jackson and Fulberg, 2004).

**Audio logo** – a short musical note sequence, which is a part of the brand's audio identity, used over a long period of time (Sheinin, Scott, and Labrecque, 2022).

**Brand** – emotional as well as a functional representation of a product or a service in the consumer's mind.

**Brand elements** – various attributes and assets that can be recognized and identified as a brand, and thus differentiate the product from typical products in the market (Kladou, Kavaratzis, Rigopoulou, and Salonika, 2017).

**Brand equity** – the ultimate point of marketing decisions regarding the monetary return that a trademark brings to a company or individual, and overall – value added to a product or service beyond its functional benefits, based on consumer perceptions of the brand.

**Brand song** – a memorable musical piece that captures the essence of audio identity. It can have many different versions and be applied across different customer touchpoints like an advertisement or physical space.

**Brand voice** – refers to a human-spoken language that the brand transits through every touch point in the customer journey (Sonic Minds, 2022).

**Branding** – empowering a product or a service with brand attributes across all the touch points within the customer journey.

**Customer journey** – the total time a customer spends interacting with a firm's offerings across the total amount of touch points where the customer is deciding whether to purchase or not as well as where his decisions can be influenced by the firm (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016, p. 71).

**Design language** - a strategic tool used in product and brand development that utilizes think and feel words and phrases to transcribe brand attributes into a more visualising language and/or

metaphors. It helps maintain consistency and harmony across multidisciplinary teams in any product or brand development stage (Brodsky, 2011).

**Mnemonics** – sounds that trigger memory reactions (Gustafsson, 2015).

**Sensory marketing** – marketing that engages the consumers' senses and affects their perception, judgment and behaviour (Krishna, 2012).

**SME** – business enterprises below 50 employees when it comes to small business and below 250 employees when it comes to medium-sized business enterprises (European Commission, 2022).

**Sound audit** – the process of assessing the brand's use of sound across all relevant touch points within its customer journey, taking into consideration every marketing/brand communication or other relevant communication channels employed by the brand.

**Sound mood board** – a visual representation of audial elements relative to the brand identity and so brand's audio identity at the same time. It is a concept of creating a selection of sounds or music in accordance with previously established vocabulary that represents brand values, attributes, and other aspects that can then be translated into sound (Jackson and Fulberg, 2004).

**Touchpoints** – a time and place where the consumer interacts with a brand (Kotler and Keller, 2015).



**Unique brand elements** – various, less common attributes and assets that can be recognized and identified as a brand and thus distinguish the product from typical products in its market. These unique elements can be visual, auditory, or even olfactory, and can help create a more memorable and recognizable brand identity.

## **Expert interview questionnaire**

- 1.** What is audio branding and out of what does it consist of (what audio elements)?
- 2.** What is your experience working in the audio advertising/sonic branding industry (what are the tendencies you are noticing)?
- 3.** According to IAB Australia audio advertising industry report (2023), 75% of media agencies now have audio advertising as a regular part of their buying, with audio advertising industry quickly rising, do you think sonic branding will become mainstream discipline (or is it mainstream already)?
- 4.** Do (company name) think it's true, that currently, audio branding practice is becoming increasingly popular/used more so amongst large-scale businesses/brands rather than SMEs; (If yes) Why is audio branding practice being less considered/adopted by SMEs; (If no) what specific tendencies do you see in terms of SMEs adopting audio branding?
- 5.** SMEs are defined as companies with less than 250 employees. Proportionately, how many SME clients does (company name) get to work with and what is the general experience?
- 6.** Is it important for the (company name) to reach SMEs, and what role does reaching SMEs play in advancing audio branding discipline?
- 7.** Since one of the main concerns of SMEs is limited resources, how do you see the role of sonic branding in the overall branding strategy of small and medium-sized businesses?
- 8.** Is it possible for SMEs to create an audio brand themselves, without audio agencies, and if so, what would be the means to do so?
- 9.** If we were to make audio branding approachable for the unique case of SMEs, how would that look like in terms of a step-by-step model, what would be the base/starting level (the most affordable that can yield results) and what would be end level?

## Design language-generated music

Table 1

Brand	CADILLAC 	4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4	CHEVROLET 
I. Brand metaphor	Perfect Diamond	4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4	Man
II. Aesthetic message	1. Dramatic Presence And Performance 2. Derivative Of Nothing	4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4	1. Damn Good Looking 2. Doesn't Try, Just Is... Great
III. Descriptors	1. Monolithic Momentum 2. Psylent Eminence 3. Mystifying Exclusivity 4. Captivating Vibrancy 5. Focused Extravagance	4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4	1. Casual Cool 2. Universal Appeal 3. Passionate Flair 4. Robust Assurance
IV. Philosophy and impression	1. Dramatic 2. Impressive 3. Derivative Of Nothing 4. Unknown 5. Ground Breaking 6. Daring, Pioneer Of Style 7. Awe Inspiring, At Every Level 8. Mysterious 9. Intriguing 10. Impactful 11. Attitude 12. Extravagant 13. Opulent 14. Art And Science	4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4	1. One Strong Theme 2. Straight Forward 3. Confident 4. Bold 5. Strong 6. Tough 7. Robust 8. Passionate Flair
V. Surface, form, and details	1. Not To Be Tied Down, Always Breakthrough 2. Powerful 3. Taut 4. Directional 5. Diamond Like Fascination 6. Focused Extravagance 7. Calculated, Strategically Placed 8. Precise 9. Intricate 10. Technology Showpiece	4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4	1. Powerfully Simple 2. Solid 3. Pure 4. Passionate Flair 5. Clean, Well Executed 6. Linear

Source: Brodsky (2011).

“Brand Music Navigator” tool

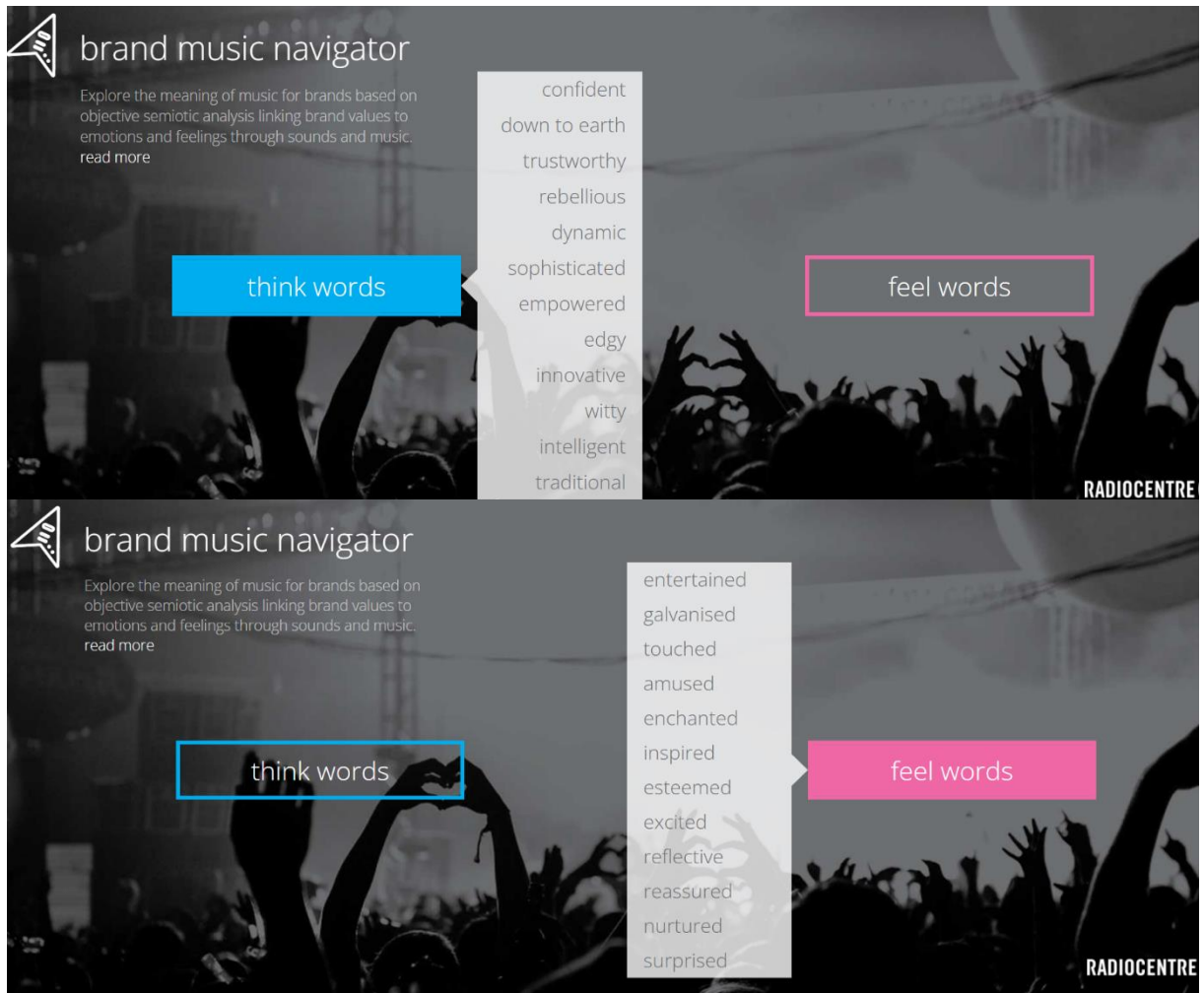


Figure 1. The first step of the case study guidance for “Brand Navigator” tool.

Source: Radio Center (2016).

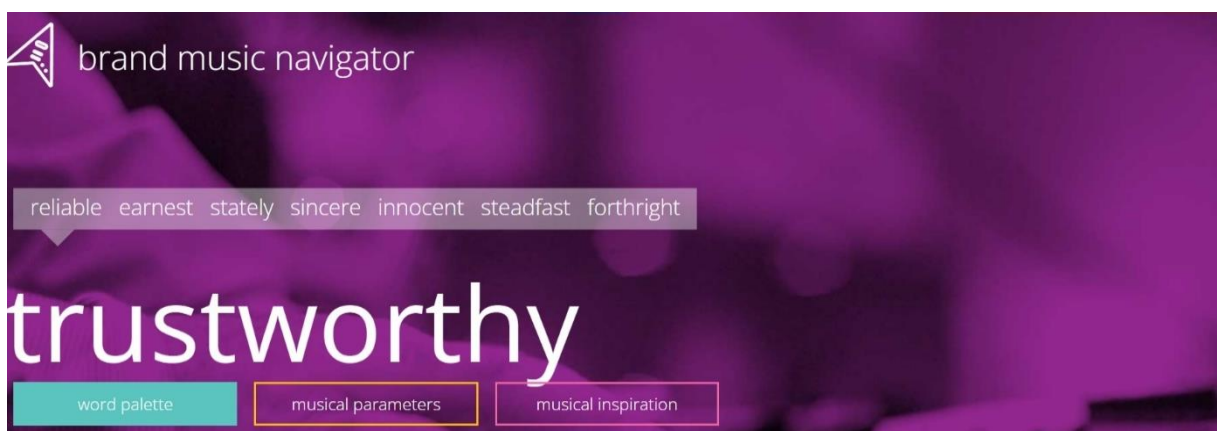


Figure 2. The second step of the case study guidance for “Brand Navigator” tool.

Source: Radio Center (2016).

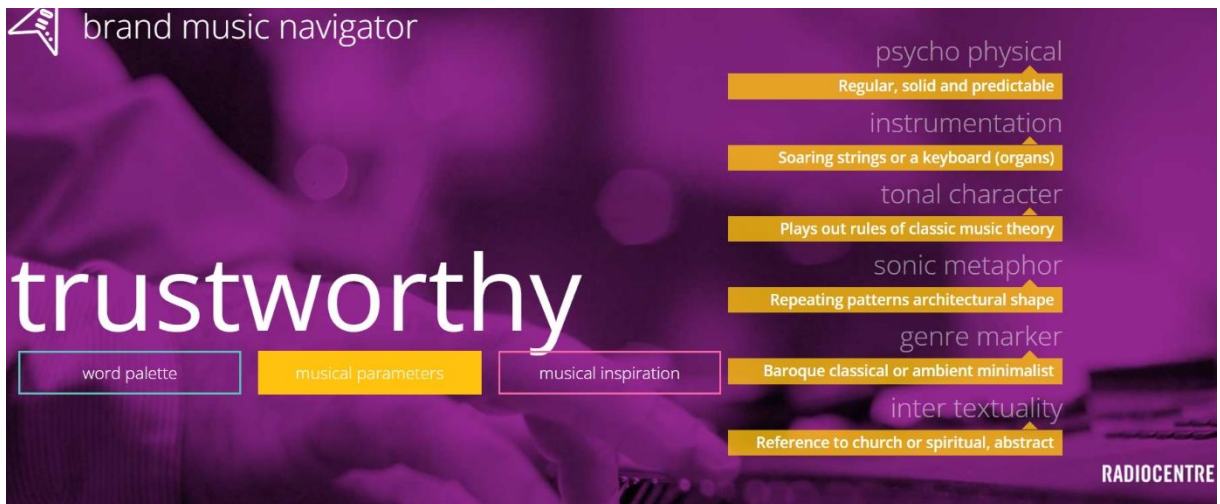


Figure 3. The third step of the case study guidance for “Brand Navigator” tool.

Source: Radio Center (2016).

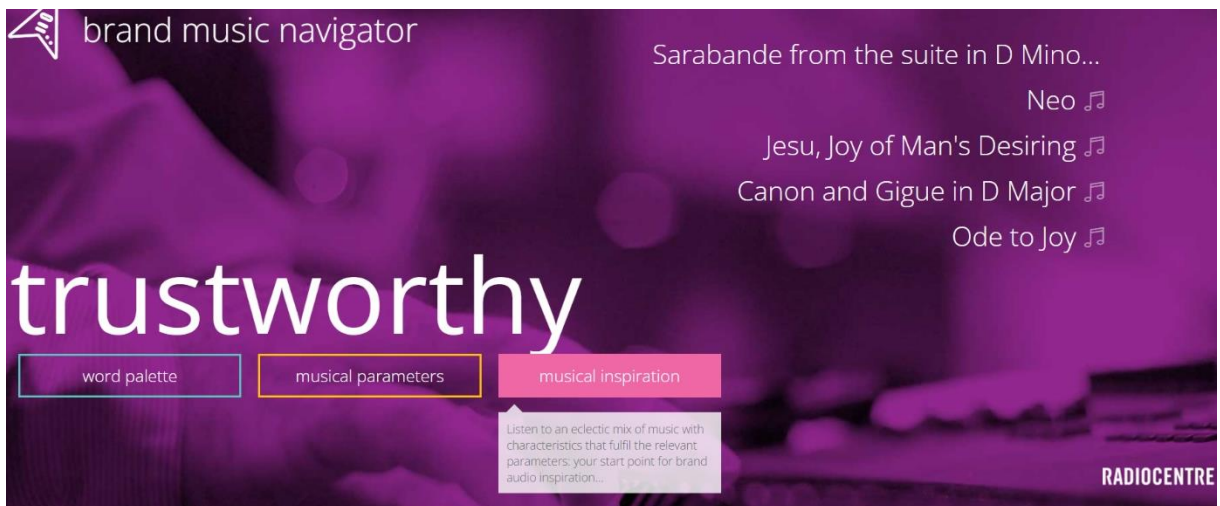


Figure 4. The fourth step of the case study guidance for “Brand Navigator” tool.

Source: Radio Center (2016).

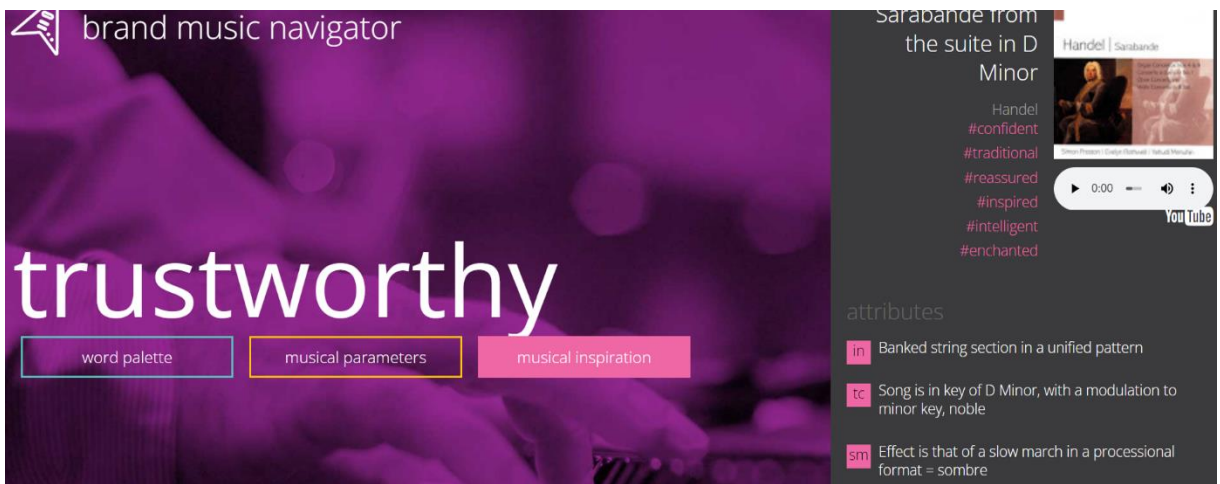


Figure 5. The fifth step of the case study guidance for “Brand Navigator” tool.

Source: Radio Center (2016).

## Brand identity prism

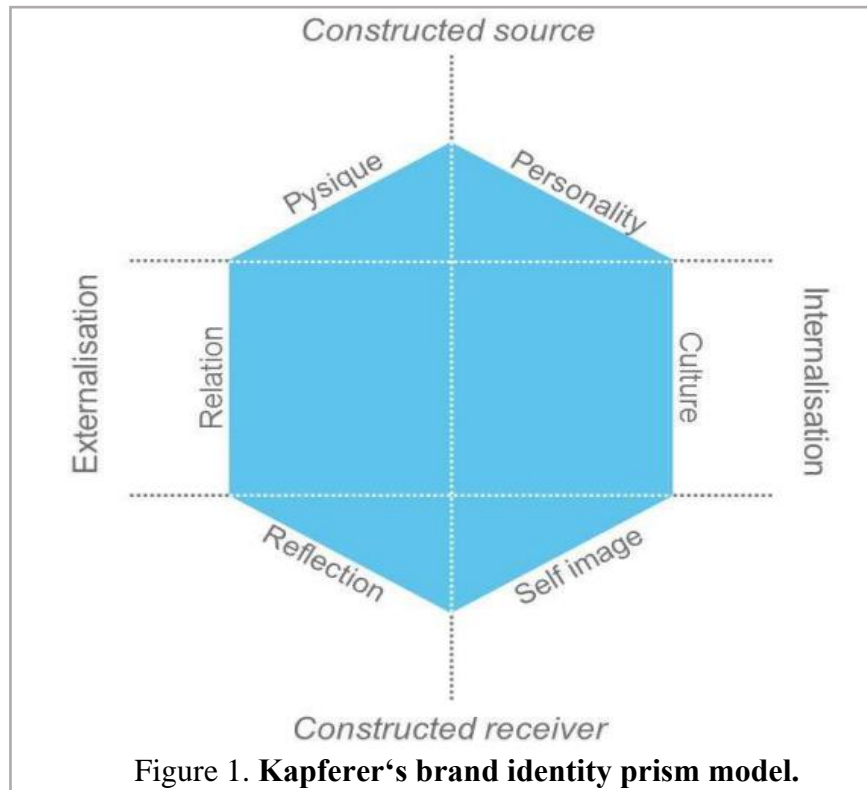


Figure 1. **Kapferer's brand identity prism model.**

Source: Kapferer (2004).

# “Every noise at once“ tool

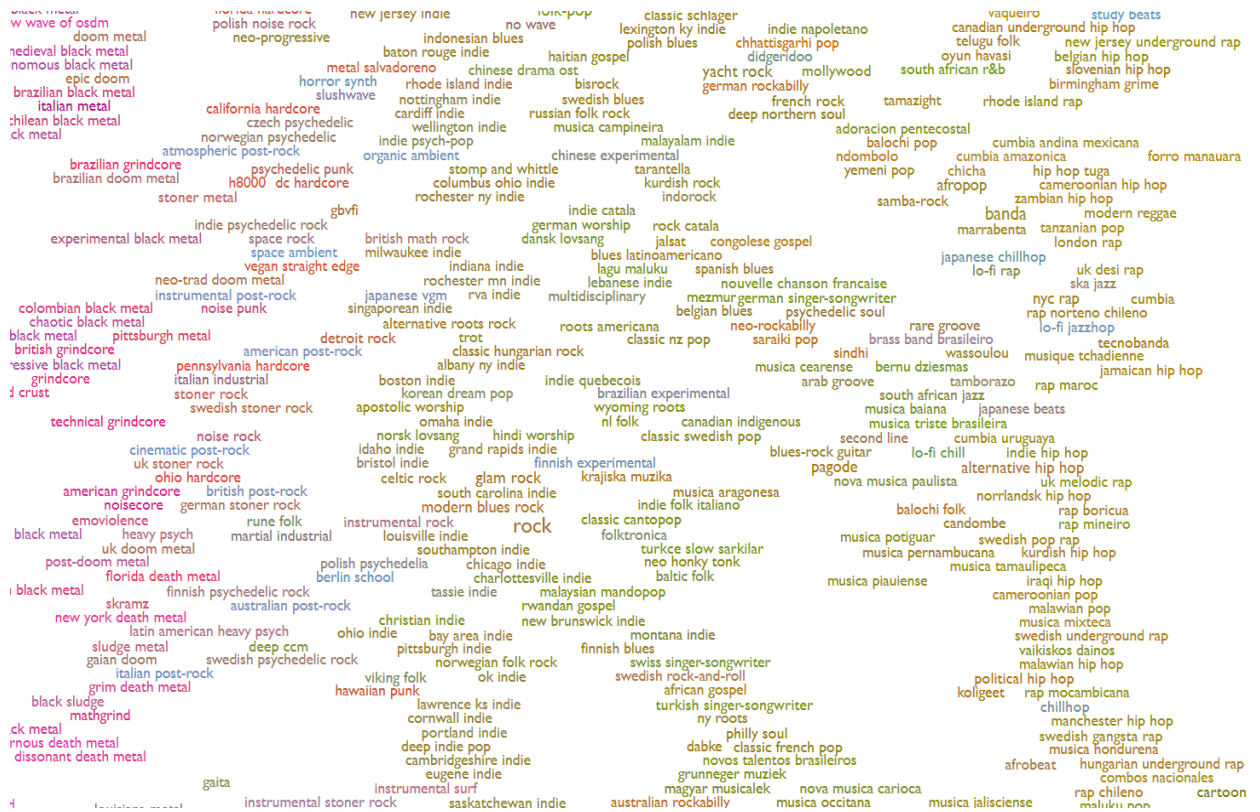


Figure 1. Every noise at once tool for creating a brand sound mood board.

Source: Every Noise at Once (2022).

## “Aflorithmic AI“ tool

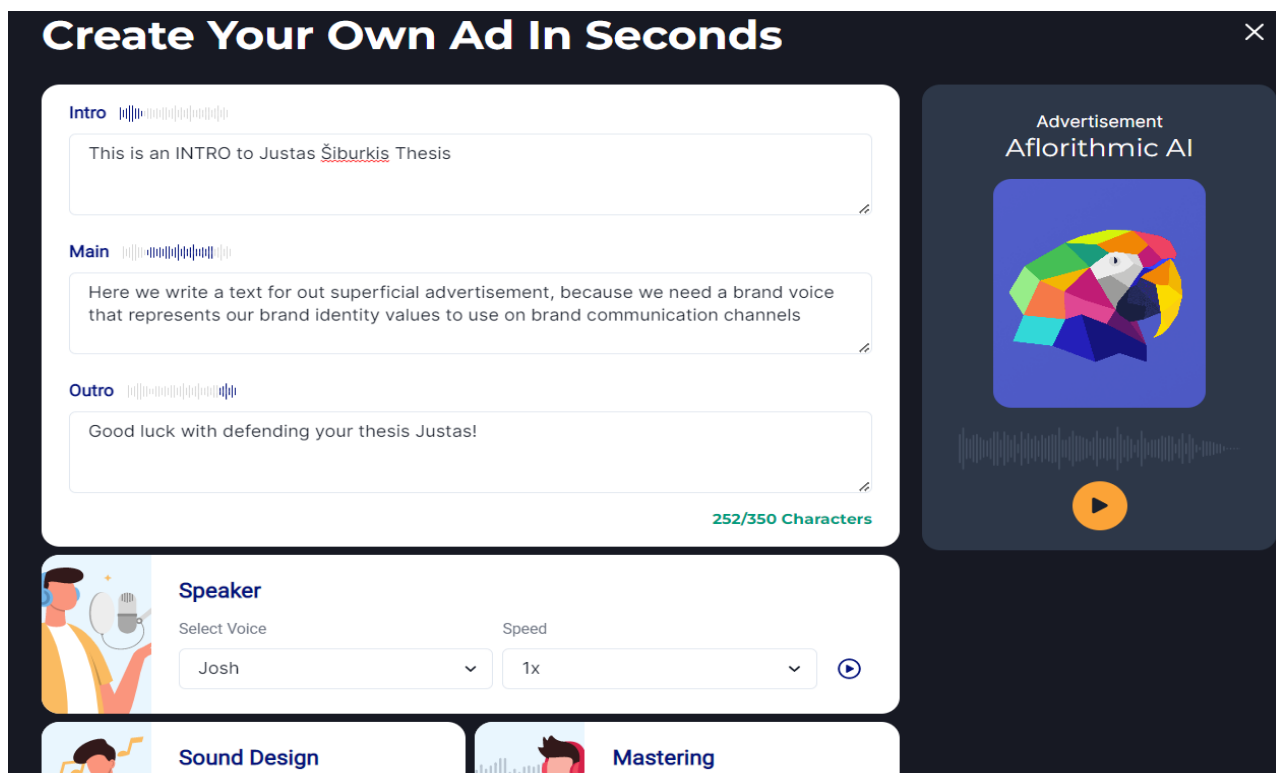


Figure 1. Aflorithmic AI tool for creating brand voice audio element for an audio identity.

Source: Aflorithmic (2023).

## Stock music licensing websites

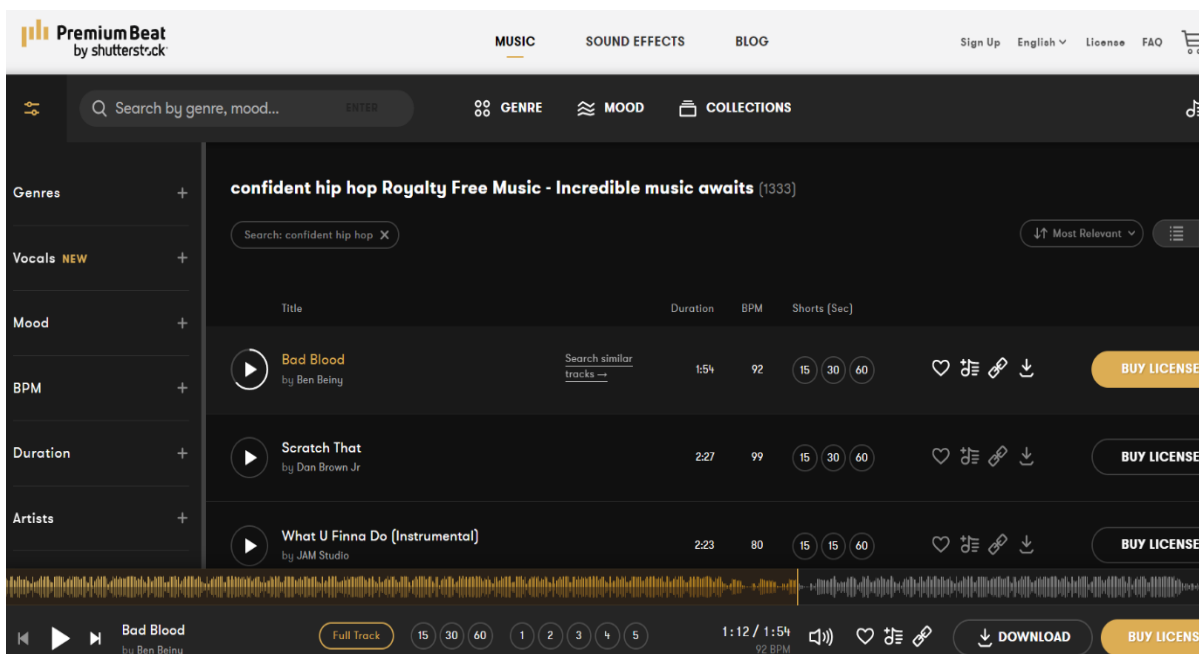


Figure 1. Stock sounds and music licensing online platform.

Source: Premium Beat (2023).

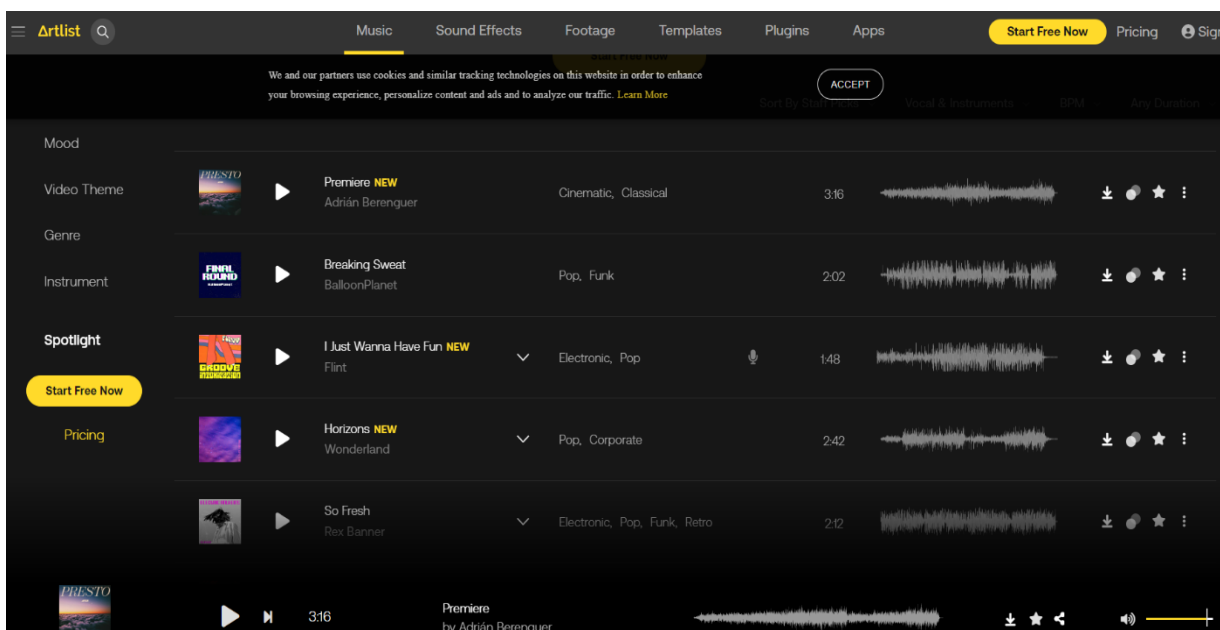


Figure 2. Licensed music and soundtracks online platform.

Source: Artlist (2023).

Figure 3. **Stock music online platform.**

Source: Epidemic Sound (2023).

## Qualitative questionnaire for SMEs who have not bought/used audio branding before

Link to the questionnaire: (<https://forms.gle/4ahpJobK3zg9aLbQ8>)

Conducted: 29/03/2023 – 29/04/2023

1. Are you familiar with what is "Audio (sonic) Branding"?
  - 1.1 (If yes) Can you tell me about what is your previous experience, and current knowledge of audio branding?
  - 1.2 If your respective brand/company has already bought/used at least some part of audio branding before - please fill out this questionnaire instead (link), if not – please continue.

**DEFINITION: Audio Branding - a holistic approach to a brand's use of music and sound across all relevant touchpoints within a brand's customer journey. Audio Branding aims to create an audio identity in addition to the visual identity your brand already has. Through the use of audio assets/unique brand elements like: Audio Logo, Brand Song, Tracks, Background/Advertising/In-Store music, Product/Website/App sounds - audio branding increases brand recognition, brand equity, brand identity, customer loyalty, trust, and buying behaviour.**

2. It is often the case that every brand already employs sound, even if unaware of it; How many, and which of your respective brand communication channels do you think are employing sound already?
3. Most, if not all brands have had internal discussions regarding their visual representation; Have you had an internal discussion within your respective company regarding how your brand sounds or should sound like? (If Yes): What were the key takeaways of the discussion? (If No): What do you think are the reasons why this discussion never came up?
4. How often does your respective company communicate with it's target audience, and what are the main communication channels?
5. Is brand development considered a priority or of importance for your respective company?
6. What approximate yearly financial budget does your respective company allocate towards brand communication/management/marketing endeavours?

7. What is your opinion about Audio Branding?
8. Hypothetically, would your respective company/brand find audio branding a useful tool to consider employing in future brand communication/marketing campaigns?
  - 8.1 (If no) Please name the key reasons why not.
  - 8.2 Hypothetically, what needs to happen for your respective brand/company to consider employing audio branding?
9. Please name the key aspects how you think audio branding could prove useful in the case of your respective company/brand.
10. If you were to employ audio branding, what would be the main expectations in terms of results/metrics?
11. Are you aware of how to create an audio brand for your respective brand/company?
12. What would be the primary audio asset you would find useful employing within your brand first?
13. Finally, "SMEs" are defined as business enterprises bellow 250 employees, can your business be defined as an "SME"?
14. (Information strictly for the researcher only) Please write the name of your brand/company.

## **Qualitative questionnaire for SMEs who have bought/used audio branding before**

Link to the questionnaire: (<https://forms.gle/EyCt5VczPghg1ZSi7>)

Conducted: 01/03/2023 – 30/04/2023

1. If you have received this questionnaire, that means your company has bought and/or used at least some part of audio branding before. Could you elaborate on what exact audio assets/elements has your company used, and in what exact context (for example: audio logo - used in commercials, or advertising soundtrack - used in such and such campaigns)?
2. What were the reasons for buying/using these audio assets in your company's case?
3. How did you go about selecting the audio assets/elements for your branding?
4. What challenges did you face in implementing your specific audio branding case, and how did you overcome them?
5. What can you tell me about your experience using audio branding in the case of your respective business in general?
6. Why exactly is it that quality sound is an important aspect for your company/brand?
7. Is your respective company/brand considering buying/using audio branding in the future?
- 7.1 (f no) In your case, what are the main reasons for not buying/using audio assets (audio branding) in the future
8. What audio assets is your company/brand considering buying/using in the future, and why?
9. Is brand development considered a priority in the case of your company/brand, and, in your case, how does audio branding play a role in it?
10. What approximate yearly financial budget does your respective company provide for brand communication/management/marketing endeavours?
11. As a representative of your company/brand, what is your genuine opinion about Audio Branding at the moment?
12. Finally, "SMEs" are defined as business enterprises bellow 250 employees, can your business be defined as an "SME"?
13. (Information strictly for the researcher only) Please write the name of your brand/company.

## In-depth interview SME respondents

Table 1

<b>SMEs who have bought/used audio branding before:</b>				
<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Company</b>	<b>Employees</b>
“MS”	Belgium	Head of UI/UX	Health and wellness app / Start-up	14
“HB”	Belgium	Founder	Real estate agency	11
“DD”	Lithuania	Head of marketing	Ice cream manufacturing	62
“TZ”	Belgium	Marketing director	Printing services / e-commerce	28
“SK”	Belgium	Marketing director	Advertising services	40
“RW”	Netherlands	Brand manager	Retail apparel	129
<b>SMEs who have not bought/used audio branding before:</b>				
“BR”	Lithuania	Business development manager	Home heating / start-up	6
“RG”	Lithuania	Founder	Real estate	20
“AC”	Finland	Head of marketing	IT distribution / security	19
“JP”	Lithuania	Founder	Clothing / e-commerce	5
“BG”	Belgium	Brand manager	Fashion accessories / e-commerce	63
“MC”	Lithuania	Marketing director	Personal care product manufacturing	19

Source: SME in-depth interview questionnaire (annexes 9 and 10).