STRATEGIC BRAND MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL ADAPTATION IN MOLDOVA

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36004/nier.es.2026.2-04
JEL classification: G30, M10, M31, O34
UDC: 005.21:339.138(478)

Igor BELOSTECINIC

PhD in Economics, Department of Economic Theory and Marketing,
Faculty of Economic Engineering and Business, Technical University of Moldova

https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1422-9824
igor.belostecinic@tem.utm.md

Received 25 September 2026

Accepted for publication 30 October 2026

SUMMARY

This study examines strategic brand development and adaptation in Moldova from 2022 to 2026, focusing on the transition from trademark protection and promotional activities towards integrated brand management. Using a qualitative multiple-case approach, the research analyses five Moldovan brands—Château Purcari, MAIB, Cricova, StarNet and Tucano Coffee—across four dimensions: strategic brand management, digital transformation, adaptation to external economic changes and international market orientation. The analysis draws on corporate disclosures, publicly available business information and secondary market data.

The findings identify common strategic practices alongside significant sectoral differences. Digital customer experience and service development are particularly relevant in banking and telecommunications, whilst product differentiation, brand heritage and international market positioning play a greater role in winemaking and hospitality. The results suggest that effective brand development involves aligning organisational capabilities, customer relationships and market positioning with changing business conditions. The study contributes to the understanding of strategic brand management in small transition economies by highlighting the importance of context-specific approaches to brand development. Although the findings provide qualitative support for the role of integrated brand management, the direct effects of these practices on brand equity and organisational resilience require further empirical investigation.

Keywords: strategic brand management, brand equity, digital transformation, organisational resilience, transition economies

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive and uncertain business environment, the development of strong brands has become a key component of corporate strategy and long-term value creation. A brand is more than a name, symbol, or legally protected trademark. It represents a combination of consumer perceptions, accumulated trust, reputation, and associations that can influence purchasing decisions, customer loyalty, and competitive positioning. From an economic perspective, brand equity is an intangible asset that may contribute to a firm's market performance and its ability to maintain customer relationships under changing market conditions (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2020; Kapferer, 2016).

Understanding of brand management has evolved considerably over recent decades. Earlier approaches focused primarily on brand identity, differentiation, consumer awareness, and the development of favourable brand associations. More recent research views branding as a strategic and continuous process involving multiple organisational functions and interactions with consumers and other stakeholders. Veloutsou and Guzman (2017) highlight the evolution of brand management research towards a broader understanding of brands and their relationships with stakeholders. Similarly, Iglesias et al. (2013) and Sarasvuo et al. (2022) emphasise that companies do not create brand value exclusively; it develops through interactions among firms, consumers, and other market participants. These perspectives suggest that successful brand management requires not only effective communication but also alignment between corporate strategy, organisational practices, and customer experience.

Digital transformation has further changed the conditions under which brands are developed and maintained. Social media, e-commerce, mobile applications, and other digital communication channels have expanded opportunities for interaction between companies and consumers while reducing firms' control over brand-related information. Gensler et al. (2013) demonstrated social media's implications for brand management, while Zollo et al. (2020) examined the relationship between social media marketing, consumer experience, and brand equity. Research by Siano et al. (2022) also draws attention to customer engagement and the changing nature of brand value creation in digital environments. Thus, strategic brand management increasingly depends on integrating digital communication, service quality, customer experience, and organisational capabilities rather than on promotional activities alone.

These developments are particularly relevant for enterprises operating in small, open economies, where domestic market limitations and exposure to external economic developments create additional challenges for business competitiveness. Companies in such economies frequently face restricted financial and managerial resources, relatively small consumer markets, and dependence on external demand and supply chains. Under these conditions, the development of recognisable and trusted brands may provide opportunities for product differentiation, customer retention, and access to international markets. At the same time, translating a registered trademark into a commercially successful brand requires sustained managerial efforts and investment in product quality, distribution, communication, and customer relationships. The importance of integrating branding into strategic marketing planning has also been discussed in research focusing on the Moldova (Belostecinic, 2018, 2025; Belostecinic & Chiriac, 2026).

Moldova provides a relevant context for examining these relationships. During 2022–2026, Moldovan enterprises operated under the combined influence of post-pandemic digitalisation, regional geopolitical instability, inflationary pressures, supply-chain changes,

and the continued reorientation of economic relations towards the European Union. The implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which entered fully into force in 2016, and Moldova's acquisition of EU candidate status in 2022 created additional incentives for enterprises to strengthen their competitiveness and adapt to European market requirements (European Commission, 2026). For domestic companies, these developments have increased the importance of product differentiation, corporate reputation, digital accessibility, and the ability to maintain stable relationships with consumers and business partners.

Although international research has extensively examined brand equity, digital branding, and stakeholder engagement, the application of these concepts to enterprises operating in small transition economies warrants further investigation. Existing theoretical approaches offer important explanations of how brand value is created, but they do not fully account for the specific combination of limited domestic markets, institutional transformation, external economic dependence, and geopolitical uncertainty that characterises countries such as Moldova. In particular, further research is needed to understand how enterprises integrate traditional brand-building activities with digital transformation, organisational adaptation, and international market orientation to maintain and develop their brands amid changing economic conditions.

An additional issue concerns the distinction between trademark registration and the development of a strategically managed brand. Trademark registration provides legal protection, but it does not automatically confer consumer recognition, loyalty, or economic value. Similarly, promotional activities may increase market visibility without necessarily building sustainable brand equity. The transformation of a product or registered trademark into a strong brand therefore requires a combination of managerial decisions, organisational capabilities, market positioning, and long-term relationships with consumers. Understanding this process is particularly important for Moldovan enterprises seeking to strengthen their competitive positions in domestic and international markets.

The aim of this study is to examine the transformation of registered trademarks into strategically managed brands in Moldova and to identify the main factors associated with brand development and adaptation under changing economic conditions during 2022–2026. The research combines a conceptual analysis of the stages of brand development with a qualitative comparative examination of selected Moldovan enterprises operating in different economic sectors. Particular attention is given to digital transformation, organisational adaptation, responses to external disruptions, and international market orientation.

The study is guided by the following research proposition:

P1: In small transition economies exposed to external economic shocks, the development and maintenance of brand equity are associated with integrating strategic brand management, digital capabilities, organisational adaptation, and market-oriented decision-making, rather than with trademark registration or promotional activities alone.

By examining these relationships in the Moldovan context, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of strategic brand management in small transition economies and to identify managerial practices that may support brand development and competitiveness under conditions of economic uncertainty.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

BRAND EQUITY DEVELOPMENT AND VALUE CO-CREATION IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

The distinction between a trademark and a brand is fundamental to understanding the economic significance of strategic brand management. A trademark provides legal protection for a distinctive sign, whereas a brand encompasses the perceptions, associations, experiences and relationships that consumers and other stakeholders form in relation to a company's products or services. Legal registration may protect brand identity, but it does not automatically confer consumer recognition, loyalty or economic value. Brand equity develops through sustained interactions between organisations and their markets, supported by consistent product quality, communication, distribution and customer experience (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2020; Kapferer, 2016).

Traditional approaches to brand equity emphasise consumer awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and loyalty as important sources of competitive advantage. From this perspective, brand management involves building and maintaining a distinctive market position over time. However, contemporary research increasingly recognises that brand equity is not simply the accumulated outcome of marketing expenditure. It is influenced by the ability of organisations to adapt their strategies, capabilities and relationships to changing market conditions. The dynamic capabilities perspective is particularly relevant in this respect, as it draws attention to how firms develop and reconfigure resources in response to technological change, competitive pressures and external uncertainty (Bresciani & Oliveira, 2023).

An important development in branding theory concerns the shift from firm-controlled brand communication

to value co-creation. Rather than being determined exclusively by managerial decisions, brand meanings and associations are increasingly shaped through interactions among companies, consumers, employees and other stakeholders. Iglesias et al. (2013) emphasise the relational nature of brand value creation, while Sarasvuo et al. (2022), in their systematic review of 148 studies, conceptualise brand co-creation as an interactive process through which different participants influence a brand. This approach does not diminish the importance of strategic management; instead, it highlights the need for organisations to coordinate brand-related activities whilst recognising that brand perceptions cannot be fully controlled by the firm.

Digitalisation has substantially expanded both the opportunities and the challenges associated with this process. Social media platforms, online marketplaces, mobile applications and digital customer services have created additional points of contact between organisations and consumers. These interactions shape how brands are perceived, evaluated and discussed. Gensler et al. (2013) demonstrate that social media environments require organisations to reconsider traditional approaches to brand management, particularly because consumers actively produce and distribute brand-related content. Similarly, Siano et al. (2022) examine the transition from brand control towards collaborative approaches to brand development.

The implications of digital interaction extend beyond communication. Digital customer experiences increasingly hinge on the accessibility of information, the reliability of online transactions, the responsiveness of customer service and the consistency of interactions across channels. Research by Zollo et al. (2020) indicates that consumer benefits and experiences help explain the relationship between social media marketing and brand equity. Consequently, digital brand development should be understood as an organisational process that integrates marketing communication with service delivery, technological capabilities and customer relationship management.

Recent research has also raised questions about measuring brand equity in digital environments. France et al. (2025) argue that traditional indicators need to be complemented by measures that capture how consumers interact with and evaluate brands online. Their proposed approach emphasises indicators such as share of search, digital brand awareness and digital brand sentiment. These developments suggest that digital brand performance cannot be assessed solely by advertising expenditure, social media activity or website traffic. A more comprehensive assessment requires attention to the quality of consumer relationships and the consistency of the experience across digital and physical channels.

Another important dimension of contemporary brand management concerns corporate credibility and responsible business practices. Brand perceptions may be influenced by how closely corporate behaviour aligns with publicly communicated values. Research on sustainability-related communication shows that environmental and social messages can affect brand credibility and consumer attitudes, although their effectiveness depends on the perceived authenticity of corporate commitments (Parguel et al., 2011; Sander et al., 2021). From a strategic perspective, this reinforces the importance of aligning brand positioning with organisational behaviour, rather than treating corporate responsibility as an isolated promotional activity.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that sustainable brand equity is linked to the coordination of several interrelated elements: legal protection, market differentiation, organisational capabilities, stakeholder relationships, digital customer experience and corporate credibility. Their relative importance may vary across industries and institutional environments. This provides a conceptual basis for examining how enterprises develop and maintain their brands amid external uncertainty.

The development of brand equity is shaped not only by organisational decisions but also by the economic and institutional environment in which firms operate. This is particularly relevant for small transition economies, where enterprises must often combine limited internal resources with adaptation to evolving regulatory frameworks, international competition and external economic shocks. Compared with firms operating in larger domestic markets, enterprises in small economies may face tighter constraints on marketing investment, fewer opportunities for market segmentation and greater dependence on external customers and distribution networks.

In this context, strategic brand management can enhance competitiveness by supporting differentiation and strengthening relationships with consumers, business partners and international distributors. However, the effectiveness of branding depends on whether enterprises can translate their market positioning into consistently delivered value. A recognisable trademark or an intensive promotional campaign is insufficient if product quality, customer service, distribution and organisational practices do not meet the expectations associated with the brand. Strategic branding therefore requires integration into wider corporate planning and management processes (Belostecinic, 2018, 2025).

The relationship between brand equity and organisational resilience warrants particular attention. Organisational resilience broadly refers to the capacity to anticipate, respond to and recover from disruptions whilst maintaining essential functions and adapting to changing circumstances. In branding, resilience may be reflected in the ability to preserve customer confidence, maintain brand relevance and adjust market positioning during periods of uncertainty. Established brand associations and customer relationships may provide resources that support such adaptation. Nevertheless, brand equity alone cannot compensate for serious disruptions to production, distribution, financial stability or service quality.

The dynamic capabilities perspective offers a useful explanation of this relationship. Enterprises facing external shocks need to identify shifts in market conditions, adjust their resources and revise organisational practices. Strategic brand management may support these processes by providing a consistent market identity whilst allowing firms to adapt products, communication channels and customer relationships. In this sense, brand resilience should not be understood as the preservation of an unchanged brand image, but as the capacity to maintain brand relevance and credibility through appropriate strategic adaptation.

For enterprises operating in Central and Eastern Europe, international market integration adds another dimension to brand development. Access to foreign markets creates opportunities for growth but also exposes firms to diverse consumer expectations, competitive conditions and regulatory requirements. The ability to build recognisable brands beyond domestic markets may therefore depend on a combination of product competitiveness, market knowledge, distribution partnerships and organisational adaptation. International brand development should consequently be examined as part of a broader process of enterprise internationalisation rather than as an outcome of promotional investment alone.

These considerations are particularly relevant to Moldova. Its relatively small domestic market, dependence on external economic relations and ongoing institutional adaptation create conditions in which enterprises must continually reassess their competitive strategies. The implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with the European Union and the country's broader European integration process have heightened the importance of product standards, market differentiation and access to international distribution networks. At the same time, regional geopolitical instability and changes in supply chains have underscored the need for flexible management and reliable relationships with customers and business partners.

Previous research on strategic branding in Moldova has emphasised the importance of integrating brand development into long-term marketing planning (Belostecinic, 2018, 2025). Further the authors examine how strategic branding contributes to long-term enterprise value development (Belostecinic and Chiriac, 2026). Building on these perspectives, the present study considers how external pressures and digital transformation may influence the ways in which Moldovan enterprises develop, manage and adapt their brands.

Importantly, the relationship between strategic branding and resilience should not be assumed to be uniform across enterprises. The opportunities available to a banking institution, a wine producer, a telecommunications provider or a retail company differ considerably in terms of consumer relationships, regulatory requirements, distribution channels and exposure to external markets. These sectoral differences suggest that brand development strategies should be assessed within their organisational and market contexts.

The theoretical framework therefore identifies four interconnected dimensions relevant to analysing strategic brand development in Moldova: (1) organisational integration of brand management; (2) digital capabilities and customer relationships; (3) adaptation to external economic and institutional changes; and (4) international market orientation. These dimensions provide a basis for comparing selected enterprises qualitatively and for assessing how strategic brand management practices relate to brand development under conditions of economic uncertainty.

FROM TRADEMARK TO STRATEGIC BRAND: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The transformation of a trademark into a strategically managed brand marks an important stage in the development of a company's competitive position. Although the terms trademark and brand are often used interchangeably, they refer to different aspects of business activity. A trademark provides legal protection for a distinctive sign, whereas a brand encompasses the perceptions, associations and relationships developed through interactions between an enterprise and its customers (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2020; Kapferer, 2016).

Building on these theoretical approaches, the study proposes a four-stage conceptual framework that illustrates how a product may develop into a strategically managed brand (Figure 1):

- Product: A good or service offered in the market without a clearly differentiated brand identity.
- Registered trademark: A distinctive sign that has legal protection, providing identification and protection against unauthorised use, but not necessarily creating substantial market recognition.
- Marketed trademark: A legally protected trademark supported by promotional activities, distribution and communication aimed at increasing consumer awareness and market differentiation.
- Strategically managed brand: A brand supported by consistent market positioning, customer relationships and long-term managerial practices aimed at developing and maintaining brand equity.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Brand Development



Source: Developed by the author based on Aaker (1996), Keller (2020) and Kapferer (2016).

The framework highlights the distinction between legal protection, market visibility and the development of brand equity. These stages should not be regarded as a strictly linear or universal progression, as brand recognition may emerge before trademark registration, whilst promotional activities do not necessarily result in strong brand equity.

The central implication is that the economic value of a brand depends not merely on its legal status or promotional visibility, but on its integration into the enterprise's broader strategy and its ability to sustain meaningful relationships with customers. This conceptual distinction provides a basis for examining the strategic brand management practices of the selected Moldovan enterprises.

STRATEGIC BRAND DEVELOPMENT AND ADAPTATION IN MOLDOVA

The development of corporate brands in Moldova was shaped by several interconnected shifts in the business environment, including digitalisation, geopolitical instability, supply-chain disruptions and closer economic integration with the European Union. These developments created new challenges for enterprises but also prompted changes in market positioning, customer relationships and international business strategies.

The analysis identifies three areas where these changes are particularly relevant to strategic brand management: digital transformation and customer engagement, adaptation to external economic shocks, and international market development. Examples from selected Moldovan enterprises illustrate how branding practices have evolved in response to these conditions.

DATA AND METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN AND CASE SELECTION

This study employs a qualitative multiple-case study approach to examine strategic brand development and adaptation among Moldovan enterprises from 2022 to 2026. The analysis focuses on how companies across different sectors have responded to digital transformation, external economic disruptions and changing market conditions.

Five Moldovan brands were selected for comparative analysis: Château Purcari, MAIB, Cricova, StarNet and Tucano Coffee. These cases span different sectors, including winemaking, banking, telecommunications and hospitality, and illustrate diverse approaches to brand development. The selection enables an exploration of common strategic practices and sector-specific differences in the management of established brands.

The study is exploratory and does not aim to provide a statistically representative assessment of Moldovan enterprises.

The research draws primarily on secondary data, including corporate annual reports, financial statements, investor disclosures, company websites, and publicly available information on business strategies and market developments. Additional contextual information was obtained from national statistics, international market reports, and materials provided by Promarketing Agency (PMA). The analysis focuses on developments from 2022 to 2026, whilst earlier research is used to provide historical and theoretical context.

The comparative analysis is organised around four dimensions derived from the theoretical framework:

- Strategic brand management: the integration of branding into corporate strategy, market positioning and product or service development.
- Digital transformation: the adoption of digital communication channels, online services and customer engagement tools.
- Adaptation to external changes: organisational and marketing responses to economic uncertainty, geopolitical disruptions and shifting market conditions.
- International market orientation: export diversification, cross-border expansion and adaptation to foreign markets, where applicable.

The cases are examined through a qualitative comparison of documented strategic initiatives and reported business developments. Particular attention is given to similarities and differences across sectors and to how branding practices relate to broader organisational adaptation.

Information from different sources is compared where possible to assess the consistency of the reported developments. However, the availability and detail of company-level information vary across cases. The analysis therefore concentrates on identifiable strategic practices rather than attempting to quantify their causal effects on brand equity, profitability or organisational resilience.

The study is limited to five selected enterprises and relies predominantly on publicly available information and secondary sources. Although these cases provide insights into strategic brand management in Moldova, their experiences cannot be generalised to the entire business sector. Furthermore, the lack of standardised consumer-based brand equity measures and comparable longitudinal financial indicators limits the ability to assess the direct economic effects of individual branding strategies.

The findings should be interpreted as an exploratory comparison of strategic approaches rather than as a quantitative evaluation of brand performance. Nevertheless, the analysis provides a basis for identifying managerial practices and contextual factors relevant to brand development in small transition economies.

MAIN RESULTS

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

The expansion of digital technologies has substantially changed how Moldovan enterprises communicate with consumers and deliver their products and services. According to Kemp (2025), Moldova had approximately 2.42 million internet users at the beginning of 2025, representing 80.2% of the population, whilst the number of social media user identities reached 1.40 million. These figures indicate the growing importance of digital channels for business communication and customer interaction.

For enterprises, digitalisation has created opportunities to strengthen brand visibility, improve service accessibility and maintain ongoing relationships with customers. However, the significance of digital transformation extends beyond online advertising. Mobile applications, digital payments, loyalty programmes and integrated customer services increasingly form part of the overall brand experience. As a result, the consistency and quality of digital interactions have become key considerations in strategic brand management.

The development of MAIB provides an illustrative example of this transformation in Moldova's banking sector. According to the bank's 2025 annual report, its customer base reached approximately 1.2 million, whilst the number of maibank digital users increased to 938,000. The bank also reported a Net Promoter Score (NPS) of 61, an increase of eight points compared with the previous year (MAIB, 2025). These indicators suggest an expansion of digital customer engagement, alongside improvements in reported customer satisfaction and loyalty.

MAIB has also introduced artificial intelligence applications across several operational processes, including customer experience and product recommendations. The bank reported that an AI-supported product recommendation function increased recommendation relevance by 50%. Although these developments cannot be taken as direct measures of brand equity, they illustrate how digital capabilities may contribute to customer relationships and strengthen the consistency of service delivery.

Similar developments are evident in retail. For example, Linella has combined the expansion of its physical store network with digital customer engagement through a mobile application and integrated loyalty services (Linella, 2025). This approach illustrates how physical and digital channels can complement one another, making the customer experience more consistent across different purchasing environments.

These examples suggest that digital brand development in Moldova increasingly involves integrating communication, service delivery and customer relationship management. However, the extent to which digitalisation contributes to brand equity depends on the quality of implementation and consumers' actual experiences, rather than on the adoption of digital technologies alone.

BRAND ADAPTATION TO EXTERNAL ECONOMIC SHOCKS

The business environment in Moldova has been affected by several external disruptions since 2022, including the war in neighbouring Ukraine, inflationary pressures, higher operating costs and changes to logistics and supply chains. These developments have tested enterprises' ability to maintain operational continuity, customer confidence and market positioning.

From a strategic brand management perspective, adapting to external shocks involves more than protecting an established brand image. It requires enterprises to maintain the quality and reliability of their products and services whilst adjusting business operations and communications to changing circumstances. This interpretation aligns with the view that organisational capabilities and operational practices are important for sustaining relationships with consumers and other stakeholders (Kapferer, 2016).

The experience of Purcari illustrates the interplay between operational adaptation and corporate reputation. Following the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the company participated in humanitarian initiatives and supported displaced persons. These activities were part of its wider response to the regional crisis and aligned with its publicly communicated corporate responsibilities (Purcari Wineries PLC, 2025). Such initiatives may contribute to stakeholder perceptions of corporate credibility when supported by consistent organisational behaviour. Nevertheless, their direct influence on consumer loyalty, brand equity or financial performance cannot be established from corporate disclosures alone.

External disruptions have also heightened the importance of supply chain flexibility, market diversification and reliable service delivery. For export-oriented enterprises, the ability to maintain product availability and fulfil contractual obligations can be particularly important in preserving relationships with international distributors and customers.

The developments examined suggest that brand resilience is closely linked to broader organisational adaptation. A recognised brand may provide an advantage during periods of uncertainty, but maintaining its value also depends on operational stability, responsiveness to customers and the capacity to adjust business strategies.

EUROPEAN MARKET INTEGRATION AND INTERNATIONAL BRAND DEVELOPMENT

European economic integration has created both additional opportunities and competitive pressures for Moldovan enterprises. The implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), together with Moldova's acquisition of EU candidate status in 2022, has reinforced the importance of European markets for domestic producers and exporters.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (BNS, 2026), Moldova's exports of goods to EU countries reached USD 2.55 billion in 2025, accounting for 67.5% of total exports. This highlights the European market's significance for Moldova's external trade and provides an important economic context for examining the international development of domestic brands.

Access to European markets requires enterprises to compete not only on price but also on product quality, reliability, differentiation and compliance with applicable standards. For companies developing their own brands, these requirements incentivise stronger market positioning, improved packaging and product presentation, and the establishment of relationships with foreign distributors and consumers.

The wine industry offers a particularly relevant example. Château Purcari and Cricova have developed recognisable brands associated with product origin, quality and established winemaking traditions. Their international activities illustrate different approaches to combining brand heritage with adaptation to foreign markets. In this context, geographical diversification and participation in international distribution networks can contribute to wider brand visibility, although export growth alone does not constitute evidence of increasing brand equity.

International development also extends beyond manufacturing and exporting goods. Tucano Coffee's expansion through franchising illustrates a different approach to international brand development, based on replicating a distinctive service concept and customer experience across markets. This model depends on maintaining consistent brand positioning whilst adapting operational practices to local conditions.

Taken together, these examples indicate that international brand development among Moldovan enterprises is shaped by both market opportunities and organisational capabilities. The ability to expand beyond the domestic market depends on the interplay of product or service differentiation, market knowledge, distribution arrangements and consistent brand management.

COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF STRATEGIC BRAND MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

The comparative analysis of Château Purcari, MAIB, Cricova, StarNet and Tucano Coffee reveals both common features and sector-specific differences in strategic brand management. Although these enterprises operate in different markets, their experiences illustrate how brand development is linked to broader organisational decisions on customer relationships, service delivery, market positioning and business expansion.

The five cases were examined across four dimensions defined in the methodology: strategic brand management, digital transformation, adaptation to external changes, and international market orientation. Table 1 summarises the key practices identified from available corporate information and other secondary sources.

Table 1. Comparative Assessment of Strategic Brand Management Practices among Selected Moldovan Enterprises (2022–2026)

Brand	Strategic brand management	Digital transformation	Adaptation to external changes	International market orientation
Château Purcari	Premium positioning, development of brand identity and product portfolio	Digital marketing and improvements in operational information systems	Supply chain adaptation, market diversification and sustainability initiatives	Export-oriented strategy, with an emphasis on European markets
MAIB	Integration of customer experience and brand positioning into corporate transformation	Expansion of mobile banking, digital services and AI-supported customer solutions	Operational transformation and diversification of financial services	Primarily domestic market orientation, complemented by international payment services and solutions for customers abroad
Cricova	Brand positioning based on winemaking heritage, product quality and wine tourism	Digital communication and online promotion of products and tourism services	Product development, quality improvements and diversification of export destinations	Established presence in European markets and expansion of international distribution
StarNet	Positioning based on connectivity, technological solutions and service reliability	Development of internet, cloud and business-oriented digital services	Diversification of services in response to technological and business requirements	Predominantly domestic orientation; international expansion is not established by the available evidence
Tucano Coffee	Distinctive lifestyle positioning, standardised customer experience and franchise-based brand management	Online communication and digital customer engagement	Adaptation of service delivery and franchise operations to different markets	International expansion through franchising

Source: Author's synthesis based on corporate disclosures and publicly available information from the selected enterprises, 2022–2026.

The comparison suggests that strategic brand development among the selected enterprises is not based on a single model. Instead, companies combine different managerial practices according to the characteristics of their industries, customer relationships and market opportunities.

The integration of branding into broader organisational strategy emerges as a common feature across the cases. Brand development is associated not only with advertising and visual identity but also with decisions about products, service quality, distribution and customer experience. For Château Purcari and Cricova, this integration is particularly evident in the relationship between product quality, brand heritage and international market positioning. MAIB and StarNet place greater emphasis on the reliability, accessibility and development of services, whilst Tucano Coffee relies on a distinctive customer experience supported by a recognisable brand concept and franchise arrangements.

Digital transformation plays different roles across sectors. In banking and telecommunications, digital technologies constitute a central component of service

delivery and customer interaction. MAIB provides the clearest example of this relationship, with the expansion of its mobile banking ecosystem accompanied by measurable increases in digital customer engagement. For wine producers and hospitality businesses, digital technologies primarily complement existing products and services by supporting communication, distribution, customer interaction and brand visibility. The findings therefore suggest that digitalisation should not be treated as a uniform branding strategy; its significance depends on the business model and the nature of the customer experience.

Adaptation to external changes is closely linked to operational and market diversification. The wine producers examined have responded to shifting market conditions, in part, through export diversification and adjustments to product positioning. By contrast, MAIB and StarNet have focused more strongly on service development and technological capabilities. Tucano Coffee illustrates a different form of adaptation, replicating the brand concept across markets through franchising. These differences suggest that the capacity to maintain brand relevance under uncertainty depends on sector-specific organisational capabilities rather than promotional activities alone.

International market orientation varies across the selected enterprises. For Château Purcari and Cricova, international markets are a key component of business development and brand positioning. Tucano Coffee adopts an alternative model centred on the international transfer of a standardised service concept. By comparison, MAIB and StarNet remain more closely tied to the domestic market, although their activities are influenced by international technological developments, competition and changing customer expectations. This distinction is important because international expansion cannot be taken as a universal indicator of successful brand management.

The comparative analysis also reveals an important difference between brand development and the measurement of its economic value. Corporate initiatives such as expanding digital services, entering new markets or diversifying products provide evidence of strategic activity, but they do not, in themselves, establish an increase in brand equity. Such an assessment would require comparable indicators of consumer perceptions, loyalty, price premiums or financial brand value, which are not consistently available across the five cases.

The findings indicate that strategic brand management in Moldova is increasingly connected with organisational adaptation, digital capabilities and market positioning. However, the relative importance of these dimensions varies across sectors. The cases provide qualitative support for the research proposition that brand development requires more than legal trademark protection and promotional activity. They do not establish a causal relationship between the identified practices and measurable improvements in brand equity or organisational resilience.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that strategic brand management in Moldova is increasingly integrated into broader organisational practices, rather than being limited to trademark protection and promotional activities. This aligns with established approaches to brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2020; Kapferer, 2016) and highlights the importance of organisational capabilities and customer relationships in a small transition economy.

The analysis also supports contemporary perspectives on digital brand equity and value co-creation (Gensler et al., 2013; Zollo et al., 2020; France et al., 2025; Sarasvuo et al., 2022). However, the sectoral differences identified suggest that digitalisation contributes to brand development in different ways, depending on business models and the extent to which digital capabilities are integrated into service delivery and the customer experience.

A further implication concerns the relationship between strategic branding and organisational resilience. The adaptation practices observed among the selected enterprises are consistent with the dynamic capabilities perspective (Bresciani & Oliveira, 2023; Pfajfar et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the available evidence does not establish whether these practices directly improve brand equity or financial resilience. Their potential contribution should therefore be interpreted cautiously.

The Moldovan context highlights the importance of sector-specific strategies amid limited domestic market opportunities, external economic dependence and institutional change. International expansion is an important development strategy for some enterprises, but it is not a universal requirement for successful brand management. This suggests that branding strategies must align with organisational capabilities and market conditions rather than follow a standardised model.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined strategic brand development in Moldova from 2022 to 2026, focusing on how enterprises adapt their branding practices to digital transformation, economic uncertainty and shifting market conditions. The comparative analysis of five companies shows that brand development extends beyond trademark registration and promotional activities, requiring the integration of brand management into broader corporate strategy.

The findings highlight the importance of digital capabilities, customer relationships, organisational adaptability and market positioning in developing and maintaining brands. However, the relative significance of these factors varies across sectors. Whilst digital customer experience is particularly important in banking and telecommunications, product differentiation, brand heritage and international market orientation play a more prominent role in winemaking and hospitality.

The study contributes to understanding of strategic brand management in small transition economies by identifying how organisational capabilities and external market conditions shape different approaches to brand development. The findings provide qualitative support for the research proposition that effective brand management depends on coordinating strategic, digital and organisational practices rather than promotional activities alone.

From a practical perspective, Moldovan enterprises should approach branding as a long-term strategic investment, ensuring consistency between brand positioning, customer experience and business development. Although the identified practices may contribute to organisational resilience, their direct effects on brand equity and financial performance require further empirical investigation using consumer surveys and longitudinal data.

REFERENCES

Aaker, D. A. (1996). *Building strong brands*. The Free Press. https://books.google.com/books/about/Building_Strong_Brands.html?id=E_cOAQAAMAAJ

Belostecinic, I. (2018). *Branding in marketing's strategic planning* [Doctoral dissertation]. https://irek.ase.md/xmlui/handle/123456789/534 (In Russian)

Belostecinic, I. (2025). Scientific justification of the importance of branding in strategic marketing. *Social Economics*, *72*, 65-71. https://doi.org/10.26565/2524-2547-2025-72-05

Belostecinic, I., & Chiriac, L. (2026). Strategic branding as a driver of long-term equity. *Journal of Social Sciences*, *9*(1), 39-64. https://doi.org/10.52326/jss.utm.2026.9(1).03

Biroul Național de Statistică al Republicii Moldova. (2026). *Comerțul internațional cu mărfuri al Republicii Moldova în luna decembrie 2025 și în anul 2025*. BNS. https://statistica.gov.md/ro/comertul-international-cu-marfuri-al-republicii-moldova-in-luna-9539_62323.html

Bresciani, S., & Oliveira, M. (2023). Corporate brand equity in international emerging markets: A dynamic capabilities perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, *158*, 113670. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113670

European Commission. (2026). *EU trade relations with Moldova*. Directorate-General for Trade. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/moldova_en

France, S. L., Davcik, N. S., & Kazandjian, B. J. (2025). Digital brand equity: The concept, antecedents, measurement, and future development. *Journal of Business Research*, *192*, 115273. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115273

Gensler, S., Völckner, F., Liu-Thompkins, Y., & Wiertz, C. (2013). Managing brands in the social media environment. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *27*(4), 242-256. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2013.09.004

Iglesias, O., Ind, N., & Alfaro, M. (2013). The organic view of the brand: A brand value co-creation model. *Journal of Brand Management*, *26*(2), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2013.8

Kapferer, J.-N. (2016). *The new strategic brand management: Advanced insights and strategic thinking* (5th ed.). Kogan Page. https://scispace.com/pdf/the-new-strategic-brand-management-advanced-insights-and-24y870622x.pdf

Keller, K. L. (2020). *Strategic brand management: Building, measuring, and managing brand equity* (5th ed.). Pearson. https://www.pearson.com/nl/en_NL/higher-education/subject-catalogue/marketing/keller-strategic-brandmanagement-5e.html

Linella. (2025). *Extinderea rețelei de magazine și digitalizarea experienței de cumpărare*. Linella Retail. https://www.linella.md

Moldova Agroindbank (MAIB). (2025). *Maib Annual Report 2025: Investing in Moldova's future*. BC "MAIB" S.A. https://www.maib.md/en/noutati/raportul-anual-maib-2025-investitii-in-viitorul-moldovei

Parguel, B., Benoît-Moreau, F., & Larceneux, F. (2011). How sustainability ratings might deter 'greenwashing': A closer look at ethical corporate communication. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *102*, 15-28. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-0901-2

Pfajfar G, Mitręga M, Shoham A (2024). International dynamic marketing capabilities: developments and a research agenda. *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 41 no. 1 pp. 1–41. https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-10-2023-0283

Purcari Wineries PLC. (2025). *Annual report 2024: Sustaining growth and international brand equity*. Purcari Wineries Public Company Limited. https://purcariwineries.com

Sander, F., Föhl, U., Walter, N., & Demmer, V. (2021). Green or social? An analysis of environmental and social sustainability advertising and its impact on brand personality, credibility and attitude. *Journal of Brand Management*, *28*(4), 429-445. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-021-00236-8

Sarasvuo, S., Rindell, A., & Kovalchuk, M. (2022). Toward a conceptual understanding of co-creation in branding. *Journal of Business Research, 139*, 543-563. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.09.051

Siano, A., Vollero, A., & Bertolini, A. (2022). From brand control to brand co-creation: An integrated framework of brand paradigms and emerging brand perspectives. *Journal of Business Research, 152,* 372-386. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.08.001

Veloutsou, C., & Guzmán, F. (2017). The evolution of brand management thinking over the last 25 years as recorded in the Journal of Product and Brand Management. *Journal of Product & Brand Management, 26*(1), 2–12. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-01-2017-1398

Zollo, L., Filieri, R., Rialti, R., & Yoon, S. (2020). Unpacking the relationship between social media marketing and brand equity: The mediating role of consumers' benefits and experience. *Journal of Business Research, 117*, 256-267. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.05.001