

# A COMPARISON OF THE CONCEPTS OF MC AND BRAND EQUITY IN ASSESSING COMPANIES' APPROACH TO BRAND DEVELOPMENT AND AN EVALUATION OF THEIR COMBINED USE FOR BRAND DEVELOPMENT OF START-UP COMPANIES

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**Abstract:** The following article discusses the newly proposed concept of magical chain and its application to the strategic development of small brands. The concept is compared with Keller's brand equity model CBBE. Subsequently, the magical chain concept is validated on selected chocolate brands. The results suggest a possible application of the magical chain concept for the brand strategy development of both large international brands and small start-up brands.

**Keywords:** Brand equity, CBBE model, magical chain, start-up.

## 1 Introduction

The Czech and European business environment is experiencing a trend of a growing number of startups and new companies that are developing rapidly and contributing significantly to the Czech and European economy (Tomanka, 2024). One of the areas that these companies are involved in is the area of brand management, which plays a much larger role today than it did a few years ago. This is due to the increasing competition, the development of social networks where all information about the product and its substitutes can be found (Jones, 2024), and the growing innovation that supports the development of the brand and its value (Steffl & Emes, 2023).

These reasons and the need for rapid company development lead start-up companies to consider brand strategy at an early stage, practically at the stage of company strategy development, because company and brand strategy must be in harmony with each other (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). The objectives of brand management in the early stages of brand development focus mainly on developing brand awareness, creating credibility (Wijayasinha, 2023).

For these emerging companies, the selection of appropriate brand management tools is important. These tools should be simple, resource-light (both time and financial) (Wijayasinha, 2023). In their development, start-up brands try to take advantage of associations that are already embedded in the customer's mind in a certain way and evoke certain attitudes (Petkova et al., 2008). One source of these associations is the country associated with the brand (Keller, 2020). A start-up brand has the opportunity to link its perception to the desired country of origin by aligning its own image and the country image (Oduro et al., 2023).

Pilot research in the area of branding of small companies and startups in the context of the Customer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model indicated that the concept would be too complex for companies and would be useful during their development rather than at the beginning of branding. Which proves Bresciani & Eppler's (2010) assertion that not all brand strategy models and practices used by multinational companies are suitable for startups. The CBBE model is based on customer response to brand marketing campaigns (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020), which is a major barrier to use for a small company that does not have a large enough customer base. Related to this is the problem of absent or low brand awareness and brand associations (Petkova et al., 2008), which according to Keller, are essential resources for creating brand equity. At the same time, the concept of CBBE is resource intensive both in terms of time and money (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020).

For these reasons, the magical chain concept was tested, which, although developed in the area of large companies, is easier to grasp in the environment of small and start-up companies. The question is whether the use of such a basic, simple concept can replace the concept of brand equity. Another possibility is that the magical chain could serve as a complement to the concept of brand equity or even as a tool to better understand equity in a small company environment.

## 2 Literature review

One of the areas that startups need to address at their inception is brand strategy, which should be based on the overall strategy of the company (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). There are several reasons why startups should ideally address brand strategy before entering the market (Petkova et al., 2008). These are building consistent brand awareness (Awad & Abdel Fatah, 2015) among both customers and potential employees, establishing positioning and communication with investors which is important to gain funding for the startup development. It is important to focus on communication with investors before going to market because it is necessary to create the desired brand image that is presented to investors and other stakeholders (Wiesenberg et al., 2020). Not only the content is important for building brand awareness, but also the intensity of the content is important because customers nowadays have a lot of information about brands due to the influence of royal media (Awad & Abdel Fatah, 2015).

In the beginning, it is important to choose tools for brand building that will achieve the desired result but will not be a burden on the limited budget of the startup. This is one reason why not all models and approaches used by large multinational companies and brands are suitable for startups (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010).

### 2.1 Magical chain

Magical chain is an approach that identifies the interdependence of factors in the development of a company's brand and strategy. These factors were identified by examining perception, image and country of origin. The basic view includes the standard company-brand-product linkage. (Svobodová & Zich, 2020; Veselá & Zich, 2013; Mráček et al., 2012) When considering customer perception of value built on four levels, i.e. functional, financial, social and individual value (Ciomea et al., 2011), it appears that these factors need to be expanded (Svobodová & Zich, 2020; Veselá & Zich, 2013; Mráček et al., 2012) Magical chain thus defines six links that need to be evaluated for the desired brand and strategy development:

- Country of origin - represents a factor that is, in principle, completely outside the scope of the company (Oduro et al., 2023). Factor of country of origin can be understood as some location typically country of production origin or specific location of product or company. Positive attributes linked with specific location can potentially related to product, company or brand (Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2019). Possible problems with "bad location" are usually based on bad reputation of country, misunderstanding of some aspect of country or bad association (Pušić et al., 2024).
- Company - this is a factor entering the magical chain from the perspective of the traditional hierarchical perception of strategy. A fundamental link can also be found in theories concerning strategic brand development, where different brand hierarchies are defined (Kapferer, 2008; Carolino Sousa Santos Junior, 2018) Company aspect is critical when brand name is not the same as company name because many people do not see the difference. Brand portfolio can help to develop various business strategies in

one company. "Bad company" can generate negative impact on good brand and vice versa (Brexendorf & Keller, 2017).

- Brand - theories dealing with brand development can be seen as an essential tool for developing and assessing companies' competitive behaviour (Porto et al., 2024). Their use can link in a very fundamental way the concepts of business strategy (Hitt et al. 2016), competitive strategy (Porter, 2004) and the issue of customer perceived value (Jensolin Abitha Kumari J. & Gotmare, 2022). Although brand is the central part of magical chain, it does not specifically define any brand framework as the best one. Brand is considered the possible way how to develop marketing or communication of the company (Kotler & Keller, 2013).
- Product - the product aspect plays a crucial role both in terms of product category and, above all, with regard to the perceived functional value of the product (Ciornea et al., 2011). The importance of this element often leads to the incorrect assumption that strategic brand development is only linked to product attributes. The product within the magical chain provides a clear understanding of positioning, customer needs, customer value, possible competitors and helps to understand unique selling proposition and brand promise.
- Substitute - in line with the so-called success-ability concept, this aspect defines from the customer's point of view the breadth of products that satisfy a given need, which for the company in real terms also means the extent of competition to be considered in strategic development (Zich, 2012). The definition of substitute is another key part for positioning (principle With whom? Against whom?), understanding of customer, understanding of customer values and needs (Kotler & Keller, 2013).
- Place - this article offers several perspectives. In its narrowest definition, this part can be understood as a point of sale, or a type of store. In a broader context, it is a comprehensive view of the manner and nature of selling, or in the broadest view, it may include the definition of market segments and target market (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Thus, in this part we talk about, for example, distribution channels, store organization, in-store placement, store design, store location, E-shop concept etc (Floor, 2006).

Although it can be assumed that the importance of these factors and their linkages is of general validity, it is clear that certain industries and products naturally have more significant potential for their exploitation, or their specificities need to be taken into account as follows: (Svobodová & Zich, 2020; Veselá & Zich, 2013; Mráček et al., 2012)

- The article country is generally replaced by the term the roots. This is linked to the specifics of different business areas. Although country of origin represents potentially the strongest base of the of magical chain, there might by some other roots like specific production aspect, product features or principles which can be similarly strong.
- In particular cases, it is possible to define specific links for different links of the chain. These relate, for example, to the brand architecture (company - brand), the stereotypical association of a quality product and the country of origin (country - product), brands based on the shopping experience (brand - store), etc.
- When evaluating the magical chain, it is necessary to clearly work with the range according to the customer's perception. This is defined from maximum positive perception - "bright side", to maximum negative perception - "dark side" The range of "bright and dark side" helps to understand both the scope of the market and the perception from the customer's point of view. At the same time, it is possible to identify weaknesses in one's own chain and eliminate them by 'replacing' the link. A typical approach here may be the entry of Chinese car companies into the European market, which they do

through purchased, often defunct brands, which are of European origin.

- It is not always necessary to build on all links in the chain and it is necessary to define which links are the strongest. At the same time, the target market must be taken into account, as customer perceptions often differ fundamentally. In other words, while in one country a particular reason is an advantage, in another it will be a weakness. The magical chain can thus be adjusted appropriately for each target market.

## 2.2 Brand equity

In the field of brand equity, there is no consensus on its definition among individual authors. One of the first authors to define brand equity was Farquhar (1989), who defined brand equity as the value that a brand adds to a product and is measured by the incremental revenue derived from the association of the brand with the product. Another definition was provided by Aaker (1991) who defined brand equity as the set of assets and liabilities associated with a brand that the product brings to the company or customer. Keller & Swaminathan (2020) defined brand equity as the difference between a brand's marketing activities and customer response. A similar view of brand equity is also encountered in Raggio and Leone (2007) who define brand equity as the strength of customer attitudes and decision-making processes towards a brand. The comparison of brand equity theories was addressed by Davcik et al. (2015) in their article, who compared them in 2 dimensions, which were customer focus vs. company focus and marketing vs. financial approach.

Just as there is no consensus on the definition of brand equity, there is also no consensus on how to create brand equity, what its sources are or how to measure it. For this reason, the literature also offers several basic conceptualizations of brand equity, which are divided into theoretical ones developed from research and applied ones developed by the remaining brand equity companies (Leone et al., 2006).

The main theoretical models are Aaker's brand equity model and Keller's CBBE model. According to Aaker's model, brand equity consists of the components brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, brand loyalty, proprietary assets. In the author's original model, all 5 components contribute to brand equity simultaneously (Aaker, 1991). This concept has been modified by Yoo et al. (2001), who argue that brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations are the source of brand loyalty, which in turn contributes to brand equity.

Keller's CBBE model is based on a step-by-step process of creating brand equity, where the goal of several consecutive steps is to achieve brand resonance. The steps are represented as a pyramid called the brand resonance model. Keller's approach could be described as sequential because it is not possible to advance to the next level in the creation of brand equity unless the previous level is met (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020).

The basic level of brand equity is salience, which aims to create a brand identity and achieve the desired breadth and depth of awareness. At the same time, the hierarchy of products and brands within the portfolio offered is decided at this stage. The second level of brand equity defines brand meaning through imagery and performance. Performance is defined as how the consumer's needs are met by the brand's product and imagery is based on the customer's perception of the brand and its rather intangible added values. The third level of brand equity building is brand response, which consist of judgments about the brand and feelings evoked by the brand. Judgments are formed on the basis of the quality, credibility, consideration and super-priority of the brand. Brand feelings are emotions in the mind of the consumer. The final step and goal of creating brand equity is to achieve brand resonance, which is a state where the consumer has formed a psychological relationship with the brand and lives in harmony with the brand (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020).

The common feature of all the definitions is that it is a complex set of several aspects and approaches of brand management. The reason for choosing Keller's model for comparison with the magical chain concept is the presence of all elements of magical chain in the CBBE model (see Figure 1). Furthermore, it was also chosen for its gradual introduction and creation, which is a more suitable concept for start-up companies (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020).

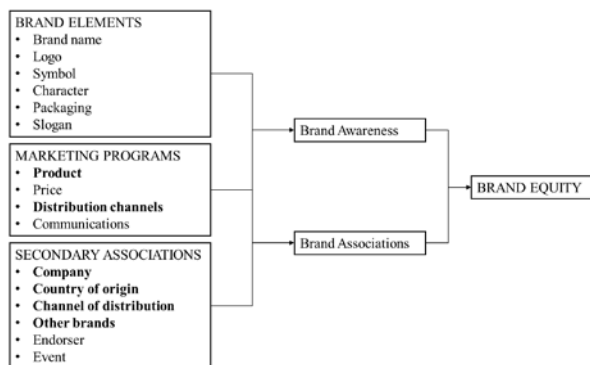


Figure 1: Sources of brand equity, based on (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020).

The Figure 1 shows the sources of brand awareness and brand associations that make up brand equity according to CBBE theory. These are the areas of brand elements, marketing programs and secondary associations. Apart from the brand element, which can be considered as the overarching element of the whole diagram, all elements of the magical chain are present in the sources of brand equity. Product occurs as part of marketing programmes where it is a means of satisfying customer needs. Distribution channels occur in the sources both in marketing programs in the context of how the product is transported to the customer and in secondary associations as a way to influence brand image (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Company and country of origin are also part of indirect associations with the brand, influencing it through their own associations. The last element of magical chain appears in brand equity sources in the association of other brands, which can refer to both competing brands and brands with which the brand is associated (e.g., co-branding) (Keller, 2020).

**2.3. Comparison matrix of magical chain and CBBE**

The magical chain CBBE comparison table defines the deeper context in which the various elements of the magical chain appear in different parts of the CBBE model. The first column defines the elements of the magical chain, the second column contains the connection of the magical chain elements to the CBBE model, whose structure is described by the remaining 3 columns.

Table 1: Comparison matrix of magical chain and CBBE

Magical chain	Connection	Parts of CBBE model	Stage of brand development	Source of brand equity
COUNTRY	Countries create secondary associations that influence brand image	Resonance	Relationship	Brand awareness: Brand recognition  Brand recall  Brand image (associations) Strength associations  Uniqueness of associations
	What happens in a country affects both the country perception and the brand perception			
	Associations are formed on the basis of a stereotypical country perception			
	For the creation of brand equity it is important to reckon with specific behaviours and experiences in different countries			
	Different country perception on foreign and domestic markets (influence of patriotism)	Feelings	Response	
	Different brand perceptions and brand associations in different countries due to different cultures and languages			
	Brand strategy suitable for one country may not be suitable for another country			
	The country may also influence the brand historically (e.g. the product was previously produced there)			
COMPANY	Today it is difficult to link a brand to one country (linking a brand to a country through strategy, manufacturing the product and having the company headquartered in other countries)	Judgments		
	Company is one of the secondary brand associations			
	The first step in building brand equity is the definition of a corporate view of the brand equity and strategy of a given brand	Judgments		
	Branding strategy should reflect corporate interests			
	The brand borrows some of the company's values, relationships and common product characteristics from the company			
	The brand is an important determinant of the strength of associations towards society			
	Provided that the company is developed, it offers the brand a large number of advantages for its development			
	To maximize brand equity, it is necessary to choose an appropriate brand architecture that achieves high brand awareness and creates a brand image for each brand			
	Maximum brand equity is achieved if all brands in the portfolio maximise their brand equity and do not reduce the brand equity of other brands			
	Brand architecture allows to communicate the differences between brands and thus improve their brand image			
A larger number of brands (brand portfolio) allows the company to implement different branding strategies				

	If the name of the brand and the company are the same, then here is more influence of the company and brand equity			
	It is not always profitable to create a link between a company and a brand (often multinational companies own a large number of brands)			
	The company perception also depends on the industry in which it operates			
<b>BRAND</b>	A prerequisite for brand equity is the differences between brands as perceived by the customer	Imagery	Meaning	
	The brand is an important factor in the purchase decision, especially for products whose parameters cannot be assessed before purchase			
	Brand may borrow associations from other entities			
	The brand gives the product associations that help differentiate it from competitors			
	Different associations are evoked by the brand of a product, company, store			
	Marketing programs are often the biggest source of brand equity			
<b>PRODUCT</b>	Product attributes are one of the sources of brand recall	Performance		
	The product is one way to differentiate the brand from the competition			
	Product attributes should give the customer a certain advantage			
	Product features should evoke certain associations in the customer's mind			
	Ensuring brand association is the first step in future brand resonance and brand equity			
	Customer perception changes over time			
	Some of the most important attitudes towards a brand are formed by perceived quality, customer value and satisfaction with the product			
	Perceived quality is often at the heart of brand equity			
	Every product of a given brand should meet its brand promise			
<b>SUBSTITUTE</b>	Competition should not be defined narrowly to competitors with whom the brand shares certain attributes, but also to competitors with whom it shares associations in the mind of the customer	Salience	Identity	
	Unique associations that differentiate from competitors are one of the sources of brand equity			
	One source of competitive advantage is the physical attributes and design of the product			
<b>PLACE</b>	Brand associations are formed based on distribution channels, store location, sales method, ease of purchase			
	Distribution channels have an indirect influence on brand equity by creating their own image through store environment, assortment, pricing policy, accompanying services			
	From the customer's point of view, the distribution channel is also perceived as a source of information, experience and entertainment			
	Retail often forms the most intense contact between the customer and the brand and thus has great power to influence brand equity			
	The customer transfers the image of the store to the image of the brands sold in the store			
	Associations with the store vary according to the type of store			
	A great source of brand equity are own stores or a combination of sales methods (e-shop + brick-and-mortar store)			
	For corporate stores, the brand has control over their image and, as a result, the brand image			

As can be seen from the table 1, all parts of the magical chain concept have links to CBBE theory:

- In the area of country, both approaches agree that brand perception is influenced by the country with which either the brand itself, the company's headquarters or the place where the products are manufactured are associated. At the same time, Keller also argues that it is not easy today to identify a single country of origin in a brand-product-company context. Furthermore, there is a consensus that country can influence a brand both negatively and positively and that a company has little ability to influence brand perception. The CBBE model extends the domain of

country perception to brand perception to include the destination of the brand in which it operates, where it argues that brand perception may be different in different countries due to different culture and language.

- The area of the magical chain most frequently mentioned in the context of the CBBE model is the company, which confirms the close link between the company-brand and their strategies. The congruence between the two approaches is in the interaction of company image on corporate image and vice versa, both in a positive and negative direction. However, this interaction is expected to be stronger in a situation where the brand and company names coincide, as the customer will form associations

with both the company and the brand at the same time. At the same time, the CBBE model also confirms the close interdependence of company and brand strategies, where the brand strategy should be based on the company strategy, as the brand borrows some of its values and associations from the company. Consistency also occurs in the brand portfolio, where different brand hierarchy strategies allow for the creation of different brand strategies and different degrees of brand-company linkage. The CBBE model extends this view by relating the contribution of individual brands to the brand equity of the portfolio. The CBBE model further extends the influence of the company on the brand to include the indirect influence of the industry in which it operates, where it assumes that the industry itself creates a certain perception of the company which is further transferred to the brand.

- The magical chain concept and the CBBE model coincide on brand as a way of communicating the company and creating marketing. The CBBE model looks at the brand as a factor that gives the product associations that differentiate it from competitors and influences the customer's purchase decision. The magical chain concept looks at the brand more in terms of its place in the corporate hierarchy and the competitive behaviour of companies. A common brand parameter of both concepts is the emphasis on differentiating oneself from competitors, which contributes to the creation of brand and company value.
- Both the magical chain concept and CBBE see the product as an element of positioning and one of the ways to differentiate themselves from the competition. Similarly, the product is seen as an element that gives the customer a certain advantage over customer needs.
- Both the MC concept and the CBBE model understand the substitute view as a way of defining competition, which in their view should include all brands satisfying the same need based on customer values and needs, or in the words of the CBBE model, brands with which they share associations. In order for a brand to generate brand equity, brand associations should be uniquely different from competitors.
- The last area of place is understood by both concepts in relation to distribution channels and point of sale. The magical chain concept also looks at place in terms of the possibility of defining a target market, whereas the CBBE model examines the influence of the image of the distribution channel on brand image and equity. Furthermore, it views the store as the place of most intense brand-customer contact, which is also seen as a source of information and thus has a great opportunity to influence brand equity.

Although there are minor differences between the different concepts, there is agreement in the main areas, so we can test the use of the magical chain concept as a simpler alternative to the CBBE model.

### 3 Methodology

The aim of the research part is to test the application of the magical chain concept on a selected sample of chocolate brands. Chocolate was chosen because the magical chain concept was developed on this sector.

The research sample consists of 3 chocolate brands, 2 of which were the result of focus groups used to define and validate the concept. These brands are Lindt representing the bright side of the magical chain and Milka representing the dark side of the magical chain. Both of these brands have been on the market for more than 100 years and form certain associations in the mind of the consumer. To test the suitability of the magical chain concept for small start-up brands, these 2 brands were complemented by a small start-up brand from the Czech Republic, Čokoládovna Janek.

The research was conducted using a desk research method combined with observation of the manifestation of brand

elements at the point of sale. Data collection was conducted between November 2023 and May 2024, as the period before Christmas and Easter and Valentine's Day is the main period for chocolate sales and marketing drips of chocolate brands.

The main source of data for desk research was the websites of Lindt and Milka brands in both Czech and English versions, the Czech version of the Janek website. In addition, the social networks of all the brands were used. At the same time, the research was also extended to other websites on the Internet remaining with the brands under study. These were to a large extent interviews provided by the individual brands, product reviews and marketing campaigns. Observations were conducted 4 times during the data collection period, namely in late November, early February, early March and May. The main part of the Christmas marketing programmes took place at the end of November, with campaigns targeting Valentine's Day shopping at the beginning of February and Easter campaigns at the beginning of March. May was chosen as a month when brand communications are not tied to an event. The observation was carried out in Tesco Uherské Hradiště supermarkets, Albert Staré Město, Lindt store in Vaňkovka shopping gallery, Janek store in Uherský Brod.

## 4 Results of the desk research and observation

### 4.1 Lindt

The first brand analysed was Lindt as a representative of the bright side magical chain. In the country area, Lindt is strongly associated with Switzerland which is one of the countries traditionally associated with chocolate (Huszno, 2023). Lindt is associated with Switzerland both by its history, brand and partly by its production (*The Lindt & Sprüngli factory - A history on the Lake of Zurich*, c2024). Even though it is a global brand, it still maintains a link to its Swiss roots and values, which mainly include quality production, attention to detail and precision (*The Difference Between Swiss Made And Made In Switzerland: A Guide To Quality And Craftsmanship*, 2023). All these values are applied across the brand strategy. In the brand communication, the connection with Switzerland is very much part of the logo itself, which includes a direct reference to the country (*Vítejte ve světě čokolády Lindt*, c2024). Another manifestation is their slogan "developed by Swiss chocolate masters" (*Poznejte naše mistry čokolády*, c2024), which refers to the country both directly and indirectly through the quality of production.

Further communication of the country of origin is in the context of where the product was manufactured, where the exact address of the factory is given on each one. One of these factories is located in Kilchberg, Switzerland, which is also the company's headquarters and historically one of the first production sites (*Lindt & Sprüngli offices*, c2024). At the same time, products made in this factory bear the label 'Swiss made', which is a protected label for products made at least 50% in Switzerland and is a mark of prestige referring to high quality and craftsmanship (*The Difference Between Swiss Made And Made In Switzerland: A Guide To Quality And Craftsmanship*, 2023). This label can create a feeling of expectation of a higher quality product. Other factories are located in Aachen in Germany, Induno Olona in Italy, Oloron-Sainte-Marie in France, as well as in Austria and the US (*Lindt & Sprüngli offices*, c2024).

Overall, the link between the country of Switzerland and the brand's strategy and other activities is very strong and consistent. The link with Switzerland is present throughout the brand's lifetime (*The Lindt & Sprüngli factory - A history on the Lake of Zurich*, c2024), which adds to the consistency of its perception. Combining the Swiss chocolate tradition with the high quality of Swiss products gives the Lindt brand an expectation of high quality in its products.

The last link to the country of origin is from the source region of the main cocoa raw material, which is Ghana, Ecuador, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, the Dominican Republic, and

Peru (*Lindt - Premium chocolate, Exceptional taste*, c2024). The Swiss values of high quality are also reflected in the sourcing and use of the finest raw materials. In line with the Swiss approach to sustainability and ecology, the Lindt brand sources cocoa beans only from farmers participating in the Lindt and Sprüngli Farming Program, which helps them to create dignified growing and living conditions (*The Lindt & Sprüngli Farming Program*, c2024).

In the company area, the close association of the Lindt brand with its parent company Lindt & Sprüngli can be seen, where they share part of their name, which can lead to brand associations being transferred to perceptions of the whole company. There are also other brands under Lindt & Sprüngli, which are Ghiraldelli, Russel Stover, Whitman's, Caffarel, Hofbauer and Küfferle (*The Lindt & Sprüngli Brands*, c2024), but they do not share part of their name with the company. However, the use of the same name can also mean that the brand and the company are more easily confused in the mind of the consumer.

Lindt's product portfolio consists exclusively of chocolate products (*Obchod*, c2024). The main significant and most popular product are Lindor truffles with different fillings (*The LINDOR Truffle - One of our Best Kept Secrets*, c2024). In addition, there are table chocolates of various types and flavours and the EXCELLENCE range of table chocolates with high cocoa content (up to 100%) and flavours. NUXOR luxury chocolates and Creation table chocolates (*Obchod*, c2024) round off the permanent product range. Another part of the product portfolio is adapted to the time of year, with a Christmas collection of pralines and a golden Teddy bear on sale before Christmas. Before Easter, a traditional golden bunny with a red ribbon and jingle bells is offered, the golden wrapper of which is protected in Germany because customers associate the golden wrapper with the Lindt bunny (*Čokoládový zajiček Lindt si doskáká pro výhru. Firma vyhrála spor o obal*, 2021). Seasonal chocolate flavours complete the portfolio of seasonal products (*Letní čokolády*, c2024).

In terms of the competition of the products offered, observations in Albert and Tesco stores revealed that Lindt is the only brand selling high percentage chocolates with a cocoa content above 85%. It can therefore be argued that there is no competitor for the EXCELLENCE range of chocolates in terms of sales in supermarket chains.

Lindt's products are sold in supermarkets, both brick-and-mortar stores and e-shops, specialty chocolate stores in its own network of brick-and-mortar stores (*Store locations*, c2024), where the full breadth of the range is available, including high quality chocolates with high cocoa content that are not usually available in supermarkets.

#### 4.2 Milka

The second analysed brand was Milka, which was identified by focus group participants as the dark side magical chain of the chocolate market. Milka is traditionally associated with the Alpine countries (Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, France, Liechtenstein, Slovenia). The idea for Milka chocolate originated in Switzerland, but the first bar was made in Germany by a Swiss chocolatier (York, 2022). The name Milka was created by combining the 2 German words Milch + Kakao, referring to the German-Swiss origin (*Historie čokolády Milka*, c2024). In the context of Milka, it would therefore be more appropriate to consider only Austria, Germany and Switzerland as Alpine countries.

Milka works strongly in its brand strategy with the motif of Alpine milk and the Alps. This motif is most evident in the brand communication, with the phrase '100% Alpine milk' appearing in both marketing campaigns and the visual style of product packaging (*Milka - nezaměnitelně lahodná chuť*, c2024). On these, milk is represented by a white milk jug and the words '100% Alpine milk'. The visual style of most product packaging

also includes the Alpine motif with a grazing cow. The combination of the Alps, the milk jug and the grazing cow is intended to give the customer the impression that the milk used is of high quality, healthier and comes only from the area. The brand also uses the phrase 'Alpine milk' to describe the ingredients of most of its products (*Produkty*, c2024). Although it is still a motif used in most of Milka's communications, in earlier years the link to Alpine nature was stronger. This is evidenced by the advertising campaigns that took place in the Alps in earlier years ('Milka - old ad from 2002 / Werbung / Commercial (c. 2002) @ Staré Reklamy', 2012; 'Milka - Werbung / old ad / old TV commercial (1994) @ Staré Reklamy', 2011).

The connection between Milka and Switzerland can be found in the area of communication of quality chocolate and quality milk and in the area of environmental support *The Difference Between Swiss Made And Made In Switzerland: A Guide To Quality And Craftsmanship*, 2023) in the form of a partnership with the Hohe Tauern National Park, where they support the development of biodiversity (*Lila liebt Grün - unsere Partnerschaft mit dem Nationalpark Hohe Tauern*, c2024).

Unlike Lindt, Milka does not mention the country of production of its product, which may be due to the ownership of the multinational company Mondelez. Milka products are manufactured in plants in Bludenz, Austria, Lörrach, Germany, which is the original Milka manufacturing plant (*Germany & Austria*, c2024), Bratislava, Slovakia, Opava, Czech Republic and Székesfehérvár, Hungary (*Czechia & Slovakia & Hungary*, c2024). This expansion of production outside the Alpine countries demonstrates the influence of the brand owner, the multinational Mondelez. The countries of origin of the other main cocoa raw materials are Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Indonesia, Dominican Republic, India and Brazil (*MORE SUSTAINABLE INGREDIENTS*, c2024).

Although the Milka brand is now considered international, it still retains its links to the original Alpine countries. The Milka brand is owned by the multinational company Mondelez (formerly Kraft foods) (*Our Brands*, c2024), which has given the Milka brand its international significance.

The Milka brand works with other Mondelez brands as part of a co-branding strategy to find and build new customer segments. One of the strongest alliances is with the Oreo brand, which crosses across most of the product portfolio and sometimes shares joint marketing campaigns. Other brands that are part of Milka's co-branding are Daim, Tuc, Philadelphia, Tassimo, Crispello (*Produkty*, c2024).

Milka's product portfolio includes both chocolate products and products where chocolate is just a flavour or a complementary ingredient. All of Milka's chocolate production is concentrated on milk or white chocolate, which are products containing milk (*Produkty*, c2024). The production of dark chocolate would not fit in with Milka's concept of emphasising the use of Alpine milk. This demonstrates the link and consistency between the product portfolio, brand strategy and country. If the brand also offered milk-free chocolate products, then it would lose its main brand aspect - 100% Alpine milk and the Alpine theme in its communication.

The typical product is therefore milk chocolate in various sizes and flavours. In addition, heart-shaped and four-leaf clover pralines are often promoted before special events such as Valentine's Day as a gifting option (*Produkty*, c2024). A minor exception in the portfolio of milk and white chocolates is the Darkmilk range, which is a combination of milk and dark chocolate, or in other words milk chocolate with a higher cocoa content (*Dark Milk*, c2024).

The second group of products are sweets containing Milka chocolate as one of the ingredients. This includes biscuits, cookies, chocolate and nut spreads and cocoa powder. Although

they are not chocolates, all Milka products use the Alpine motif and combine it with 100% Alpine milk (*Produkty*, c2024).

Milka products can be bought mainly supermarkets and their online stores. Another point of sale is specialist chocolate shops. The targeting of these point of sale indicates a mass production distribution strategy to sell as many products as possible.

### 4.3 Janek

The Janek chocolate brand is a small brand founded in 2015 with the aim of building a purely Czech chocolate factory (*Příběh JANKA z Uherského Brodu*, 2023). This may also be the reason why brands do not associate themselves in their identity with countries typical for chocolate such as Belgium, Switzerland. The connection of the name Janek is both with Czech culture, where Janek is a colloquial version of Jan one of the most common names (*Jan má svátek 24. 6.*, c2000-2024), and with the place of production and birth of the brand, Uherský Brod. Black Janek is a figure from legend and his statue is located on the tower of the town hall (*Pověsti*, c2003-2024). The combination of name and origin thus created a connection that is partly used in the communication of the brand "Janek from Uherský Brod". The risk of this link is that consumers who are familiar with the legend are more likely to associate it with the legend than with the Janek chocolate factory brand. The link with the Czech history of production and traditional crafts (*České tradice: Řemesla*) is in the use of the motif of honest Czech production.

In the visual communication of the brand, the name Janek is directly part of the logo and the presented name. However, what can be seen as an element of incongruity between the typically Czech name and the reference to Czech culture with the aim of becoming a Czech honest and domestic chocolate factory is the presence of the English word "chocolate" as part of the logo (*Čokoládovna JANEK*, c2024).

From the production point of view, the entire chocolate production process takes place in one place in the production plant in Uherský Brod, which is in line with the built image of the Czech brand. At the same time, this image is supported by the maximum use of local and seasonal ingredients. The countries of origin of the basic raw material for cocoa are, for example, the Dominican Republic, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea and Peru (Hurábová, c2024). In the case of the bean-to-bar product, there is a direct indication of the origin of the cocoa beans, as these chocolates are always made from points from one country only (*Co je to Bean to bar čokoláda?*, c2024).

The owner of the chocolate factory Janek is the company Kakaovník (*Kontakty*, c2024). The use of a different brand name and the company removes the developing brand association with the company, which it could use to develop itself. On the other hand, the company name only appears on product packaging in association with the manufacturer's name.

In the area of corporate cooperation, it cooperates closely with the coffee roastery Coffeespot, which currently has the same owner as Kakaovník (*Exkurze do pražírny: Výroba kávy a čokolády mají ledacos společného*, 2023), and with the Lihovar Žufánek (*JANEK hostem Lucie Výborné: Děláme jen to, co nám doopravdy chutná*, 2021).

The products offered by the Janek brand consist mainly of handmade pralines of various types, which are the most popular product (Hurábová, c2024), and table chocolates of various types, cocoa content, flavours and fillings (*Čokoládovna e-shop*, c2024). Another edition of chocolates are bean-to-bar chocolates with cocoa content up to 100%, which are made from cocoa beans from a well-defined geographical area (*Co je to Bean to bar čokoláda?*, c2024). Untypical are their tables of chocolates with fruit or nuts on the reverse side. The range of products can be supplemented by chocolate specialities such as chocolate lollies, chocolate creams, onion chutney or chocolate-covered nuts, and by cocoa products such as cocoa beans, cocoa butter, chocolate drinks and other products. Like other brands, Janek

has seasonal products, which include Easter and Christmas figurines, pralines and Valentine's Day editions of pralines, and seasonal chocolate flavours. In terms of the portfolio here, we can say that most of the products are associated with chocolate in the mind of the customer. Nevertheless, there are some products that break the consistency. One such product is onion chutney, which, although it contains chocolate, is not generally associated with chocolate (*Čokoládovna e-shop*, c2024).

A large number of products carry the brand name in their label, which reinforces the brand's association with the product type. An example of a label is 'Jankův nugát' (*Čokoládovna e-shop*, c2024). All the products are packaged very simply to show off their quality and workmanship. They have a simple label with the Janek's logo and the ingredients. In the area of products, they strive to combine traditional Czech and international ingredients (*JANEK hostem Lucie Výborné: Děláme jen to, co nám doopravdy chutná*, 2021).

In terms of substitute and competition, the brand claims to be the only chocolate factory in the country producing handmade chocolate along with the breadth of the range offered (Hurábová, c2024).

Janek products can only be purchased in a limited number of stores offering their limited range. The main points of sale are a shop in Uherský Brod at the place of production, own brick-and-mortar shops in Prague and a branded e-shop. It is also possible to buy the products in Coffeespot store, in selected cafés across the Czech Republic, and in selected small (often local) stores in the Czech Republic and at chocolate festivals (Hurábová, c2024; *Kde ochutnat JANKA*, c2024). In terms of distribution, Janek opts for a strategy of fewer small outlets that focus on selling local quality products

## 5 Discussion

Table 2: Example of magical chain

Country	Switzerland	Alpine countries	The Czech Republic
Company	Lindt & Sprüngli AG	Mondeléz international	Kakaovník s.r.o.
Brand	Lindt	Milka	Čokoládovna JANEK
Product	Typical product: chocolate truffles	Typical product: milk chocolate bars of different flavours	Typical product: chocolate pralines
Substitute	The only brand selling high cocoa content chocolates in supermarket chains	Co-branding	
Place	Supermarkets + own stores	Supermarkets	Own stores + stores of local products

The table 2 above summarises the results of the observations and desk research and demonstrates how the different elements of the magical chain concept occur in brand communication. The product area was conceived in terms of a typical product as presented by the brand itself. The substitute article shows in a table the brand from the perspective of its competitors, where its biggest advantage is, or what part of its offer it is the only one to offer.

It is clear from the Table 2 that the big international brands put emphasis on the country part of the magical chain link, with both Milka and Lindt referring to the country of origin of the brand. At the same time, these brands sell large volumes through

supermarket distribution. In the area of distribution, a link can also be found between increasing product quality and the preference for own stores, which is confirmed by the results of the focus groups carried out in setting up the magical chain, which showed that supermarkets are not associated in the mind of the customer with the place of sale of quality chocolate.

The results prove the assumption that different brands focus on different parts of the magical chain in their brand strategy, with Milka and Lindt focusing on the country part of the chain, whereas Janek focuses on the product communication part of the chain with exceptional quality and handcrafted products (Hurábová, c2024). This finding also supports the assumption that the missing link in the chain can be suppressed or outsourced in communication (e.g. the example of Milka and its association with other brands to create different associations).

## 6 Conclusion

The issue of the development of startups is currently very topical, as there is both an increase in their number and an increase in their share in GDP (Tomanka, 2024). One of the important parts of creating a startup strategy is branding, which is important to focus on from the beginning when creating a strategy (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010) as it helps to create brand awareness (Awad & Abdel Fatah, 2015) of the new business, differentiate from competitors from the beginning, ensure consistency in communication, which helps in brand recognition, building trust in the brand, which is important for building a customer base as well as convincing investors (Wijayasinha, 2023; Wiesenberg et al., 2020).

Brand equity is a holistic approach that offers a wide range of brand development areas to achieve maximum connection in the form of brand resonance (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). For this reason, it is complicated for startups and early-stage brands to take advantage of it. The proposed magical chain concept can serve as a tool for initial brand setup and development.

A comparison of the magical chain concept and the CBBE model on both a theoretical and research level showed that they overlap in many areas and work with the same basic ideas. For startups, this offers the opportunity to work with the magical chain concept in the beginning of brand development to create a foundation for the subsequent application of brand equity theory and the CBBE model.

The simplicity of the concept was proven by the fact that secondary sources of data from publicly available sources such as websites and social networks were sufficient to build the brand's magical chain. In this way, any brand can create a profile of itself as well as any competitor, creating a market spread from the bright side to the dark side.

## 7 Research limitation

The main limitation of the research is the sample of brands on which the magical chain concept was tested. Therefore, to further research and validate the concept, it is recommended to expand the sample to other brands and sectors outside the chocolate market and food industry. Another limitation is the use of mainly secondary data sources in the form of websites and social networks. Therefore, it is recommended to validate the research by collecting primary data, for example by interviewing customers of the industry or through a questionnaire survey. The last limitation is the implementation time, which was 7 months. A longer time period is recommended for further research, during which time the market evolves.

More in-depth research on the brands of startups and start-ups is planned for late 2024 and during 2025.

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