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

**Justinas Kisieliauskas[1], Justas Šiburkis[2], Paulius Bakanauskas[3]**

**Abstract.** This research explores the nexus of audio branding and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), a substantial sector representing 90% of global businesses yet one that remains largely underrepresented in the context of audio branding. The primary research question is as follows: what are the possibilities of audio branding for small and medium-sized businesses, and how should such enterprises use it? The objective of this research is twofold: firstly, to highlight the potential of audio branding for SMEs; and secondly, to develop a comprehensive guidance model tailored to assist these enterprises in implementing effective audio branding strategies. The research approach is multi-faceted, encompassing a theoretical analysis of audio branding concepts, empirical research into current practices, and the creation of a practical, SME-specific guidance model. The study employs a range of methodologies, including the analysis and synthesis of scientific literature, a comparative analysis of diverse concepts and approaches, qualitative case studies, and in-depth interviews with experts in the field of sonic branding. The research employs these methodologies with the objective of filling the existing gap between the field of audio branding and its application within SMEs. The objective is to provide SMEs with a valuable tool to leverage the benefits of audio branding, thus contributing to a more inclusive and diverse sonic branding landscape. The research findings indicate that the restricted deployment of audio branding among SMEs is predominantly attributable to resource limitations, scepticism and difficulties in quantifying the return on investment (ROI). To address these issues, the research proposes a comprehensive four-step audio branding guide. This unique guidance model is designed to help SMEs effectively integrate audio branding into their marketing and branding strategies, taking into account their specific contexts and challenges. By following this guidance model, SMEs can overcome the barriers to adopting audio branding and unlock its potential to enhance brand identity and customer engagement in a cost-effective and impactful way.

**Keywords:** audio brand, sonic brand, audio branding.

**JEL Classification:** M31

## 1. Introduction

**Relevance of the topicality.** Nobel laureate Herbert A. Symon states that the abundance of information creates a poverty of attention, indicating that people now live in an attention economy where attention is considered a currency (Berkeley Economic Review, 2019). Today, the average person is exposed to between 4,000 and 10,000 different advertisements, promotions, commercials and other brand messages per day, but only about 100 are consciously captured. With more than half of the world consuming ever-shorter content online, the collective human capacity to sustain attention is diminishing (Lorenz et al., 2019). This is where marketers face a problem: how to attract and sustain consumer attention to the brand.

Especially today, the answer often lies in sensory marketing, specifically audio branding. Generation Z and Millennials make up more than half of the world's population, and 56% agree that sound is an escape from too much visual stimulation in their daily lives (Kesten, 2020). According to an advertising industry report, there are 2.5 million active podcasts, and the importance of sound in the market is exploding, with podcast use increasing by 80% between

[1] Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania *(corresponding author)*
E-mail: justinas.kisieliauskas@vdu.lt
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4332-2192
[2] Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania
E-mail: justas.siburkis@vdu.lt
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1441-8355
[3] CEO of Instakademija MB, Lithuania
E-mail: paulius@instakademija.lt
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5899-0876

2019 and 2020 (Claritas, 2020). In addition, 75% of media agencies now have digital audio advertising and podcast advertising as a regular part of their buying (IAB Australia, 2023). Finally, of the 250 million people in the US, 90 million own smart audio devices and 50% use them daily for voice-controlled navigation, online shopping and audio content (Kinsella, 2022).

Audio branding is a relatively nascent field that has been in existence for approximately two decades. However, there is now a discernible increase in demand for audio as a medium. In fact, more than 20% of Generation Z and Millennials are more likely to purchase products from a brand with a sound identity than from one that lacks such a feature (DLMDD, 2021). Brands that utilise sound in a manner that is consistent with their brand identity are 96% more recognisable by the consumer, in comparison to those that employ an inappropriate or absent use of sound (North, 2008). Brands that demonstrate a consistent application of sonic logos have an 88% higher recall rate than those that exhibit a minimal or non-existent utilisation of sonic logos within the market (Veritonic, 2022).

It is noticeable that, despite the wealth of scientific articles proving the effectiveness of audio branding, only large companies are increasingly using it, while the same cannot be said for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In one of the most recent industry reports on audio branding, 250 brands were analysed and not one of them could be considered a small or medium-sized business brand (Amp Sound Branding, 2022). None of the top 100 audio logos recently analysed by leading audio researchers are owned by SMEs (Veritonics, 2022). Most of the available case studies of successful audio brands also relate to large companies (Made Music, 2022, AMP, 2023, Sonic Minds, 2023), and in the latest report on the sonic branding industry, out of 136 brands measured and analysed over two years, not one appears to be owned by an SME (SoundOut, 2023).

Considering that SMEs represent 99% of EU businesses, which account for more than half of EU GDP (European Commission, 2022), and 90% of global businesses (The World Bank, 2022), it is not clear why no research has been conducted in this direction, why the audio branding industry doesn't try to reach the SME consumer, and why SMEs don't use audio branding despite its obvious effectiveness. The branding literature suggests that it may be that SMEs are severely constrained by limited resources and consequently have less brand focus (Inskip, 2004; Krake, 2005; Ojasalo, Nätti and Olkkonen, 2008). The adoption of management practices by SMEs has historically served to legitimise such practices (European Commission, 2017). Consequently, if audio branding were to become mainstream, it would be essential to reach SMEs in order to facilitate this process. Lastly, in an increasingly auditory world, where digital audio has been identified as the fastest-growing advertising format in 2022, with global ad spend expected to reach 8 billion dollars by 2025 (PWC, 2022), SMEs are without guidance as to how they might utilise audio branding in their limited resource case. Further research is necessary. Thus, the **research problem** of this article is as follows: What are the possibilities of using audio branding for small and medium-sized businesses and how should such enterprises use it?

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

The **purpose of the** study is to analyse the concept of audio branding and to conduct a study that will assess and highlight the possibilities of audio branding for small and medium-sized businesses.

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

*Objectives:*
1. To analyse the theoretical aspects of audio branding and the use of audio branding opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses.
2. To formulate a methodology for empirical research on the use of audio branding opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses.
3. To conduct a field analysis of the use of audio branding opportunities in the case of small and medium-sized businesses.
4. Based on the theoretical analysis and field research, present the possibilities of audio branding in relation to the model of orientation of small and medium-sized businesses.

*Research methods:*
1. Scientific literature analysis and synthesis.
2. Comparative analysis of concepts and approaches.
3. Qualitative case study.
4. In-depth interviews.
5. Expert interviews.

## 2. Literature Review

Audio branding is a marketing practice that is still in its infancy. It has been described by many terms: acoustic branding, sound branding, sonic branding, branded sound, elevator music, pied piper music, background music, music branding, etc. (Gustafsson, 2015). In this article, the terms "audio branding" or

"sonic branding" will be used to refer to the same concept, as for more than a decade, the scientific literature and the audio branding market itself have been revolving around this terminology.

Audio (sonic) branding is currently regarded as a relatively nascent but rapidly evolving field within the realm of official marketing and brand management. From the standpoint of the leading service providers and researchers in the audio industry, the definition of audio branding is the expression of a brand through sound or, in other words, an auditory brand expression. In other words, it is analogous to the visual expression of a brand, affording it a second – auditory – dimension (Brand Master Academy, 2022). This definition is further elucidated by the "Marketing Tutor" association, which posits that audio branding is the utilisation of sound to reinforce a brand's identity and a strategy for augmenting brand recognition, memorability, emotional resonance, and communication (2018). From a holistic perspective, audio branding is how a brand uses music and sound across all touchpoints between products and services in a customer journey (Massive Music, 2020). From a scientific standpoint, sonic branding is the use of music and sound to create a consistent and distinctive audio identity for a brand (Gustafsson, 2015). It can be used to convey brand values and personality, while creating an emotional connection with consumers and differentiating the brand from its competitors (Vidal-Mestre et al., 2022).

The audio identity can be considered as an audio brand and is expressed through the brand elements shown in Figure 1, which was compiled based on the model first proposed by Nufer G. and Gerd H. (2019).

Nufer G. and Gerd H. (2019) then proceeded to reinforce their findings with a detailed analysis of the existing literature on audio branding, as presented in this paper (for example, Kilian, 2009; Sound Strategy, 2022; Sonic Minds, 2022). It can be stated that the audio identity is known and documented to consist of such unique audio brand elements, yet it is not limited to them. Each audio brand element can be uniquely tailored specifically to the context of the brand's touchpoints; thus, it is not entirely possible to place every sound into a brand element category (Kilian, 2009). In addition to the elements discussed above, tracks are separately composed or enriched pieces of music derived from the brand song and audio logo. There can be many different tracks as they are usually tailored to, but not limited to, visual advertising campaigns (Kilian, 2009, Sound Strategy, 2022). A soundscape is a piece of music tailored to the physical environment and is an audio branding element that focuses on the environment rather than the brand message. In most cases, soundscapes are also derived from the core brand song (brand theme or audio logo, i.e., audio "DNA"). Finally, background music is often, but not necessarily, the audio branding element that is the least distant from the core theme of the brand's audio identity, as its role is to fill space in commercials (Nufer and Gerd, 2019).

In summary, the concept of audio branding refers to the holistic use of sound across all brand touch points in the customer journey to increase brand recall, recognition, emotional response and connection with the customer. The concept is based on creating an audio identity in addition to the existing visual brand identity through unique brand elements such as an audio logo, brand song and sound library, thereby increasing brand equity. Since the conscious practice and research origins of such a discipline began in early 2003, there has been a lack of scientific basis in many cases, but many articles are being published by audio branding service providers,
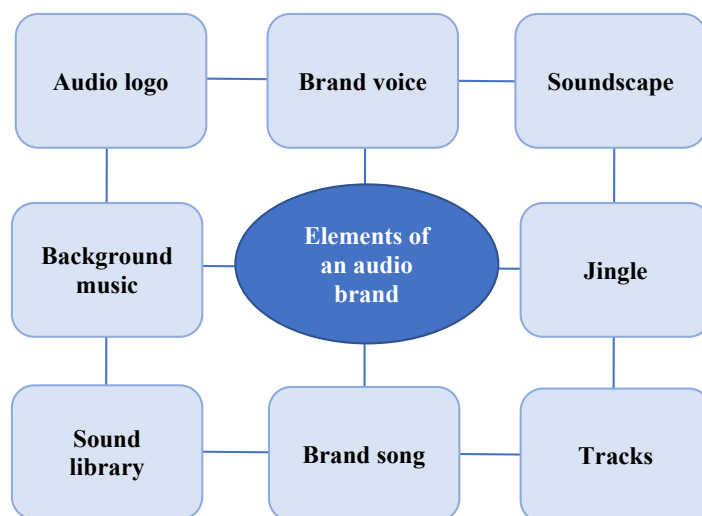


**Figure 1. Elements of audio brand**

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

indicating that the concept is widely used in the current marketplace.

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

For example, Graakjaer N. and Jantzen C. (2009) work on corporate sounds provided critical insights into sonic branding through interviews with sound agency representatives. These discussions highlighted both the challenges and opportunities associated with sonic branding, as well as the reluctance of large companies to adopt it. Today, the focus is shifting to SMEs, a sign of the growth of the field. In a study of successful branding in SMEs, Krake F. B. (2005) gathered valuable information from business owners through interviews. These stakeholders typically assume a guiding and decision-making role with respect to brand management in SMEs, offering a distinctive perspective on the application of sonic branding within these smaller entities. Their observations indicate that the adoption of branding practices by SMEs is contingent upon the presence of effective resource management and a willingness to assume risk. Krake's F. B. study underscores the significance of a company-wide passion for the brand, which is nurtured by an active entrepreneurial role. This passion not only fosters a robust internal culture but also translates into a discernible external brand recognition, without any additional cost.

A recent study by Dreßler M. and Paunovic I. (2022), which provided an in-depth examination of brand innovation in SMEs in the wine industry, found that SMEs are pragmatic, product-oriented and often fearful of change, but with the right approach are willing to do so because they are aware that they operate in an uncertain environment. A paradoxical way of thinking, to be sure, but a defining moment in how important it is for SMEs to feel secure when making decisions such as using sonic branding. The innovation seems to be carefully communicated for them to consider. Gustafsson C. (2019) highlighted the value of a qualitative approach to research in sonic branding. The researcher argued that sonic branding is closely related to the fields of cultural branding and consumer culture theory, and suggested that SME brand owners are an important focus for research in this area. The researcher did the most to unify the audio branding literature under the term sonic branding, and continues to do so, critiquing the current dispersed nature of the field and suggesting that further

research is needed in the direction of SMEs, as well as in the analysis of audio branding as a platform for consumers to co-create meaning themselves, much like TikTok or Spotify or a CD player in a car.

Alison C. Wong's (2018) semi-structured interviews with European sound agencies provided a comprehensive insight into the current state of the industry. From these interviews, several themes emerged, including the necessity for the broader branding industry to acknowledge and validate sonic branding as a distinct and specialized discipline. The objective of the research was to gain insight into the beliefs of audio branding practitioners regarding the potential influence of sound branding on consumer perceptions and behaviours. Alison C. Wong's 11 expert interviews with audio branding practitioners revealed a central theme: the necessity to demonstrate the value of sound branding in order to establish it as a recognised and respected discipline within the general field of branding. Another central theme was the finding that sound can indeed increase willingness to pay or shift attention, and create a solid emotional connection between consumer and brand.

In examining analogous studies on SMEs, Ojasalo J. et al. (2008) and Cardinali S. et al. (2019) employed an exploratory case study methodology, incorporating content analysis and in-depth interviews, to investigate the potential and challenges facing SMEs in the domain of branding. Whilst the problem and objective is different to the research of this paper, these were the closest and most related findings to the findings of this research, where it could be concluded that there are similarities in the reluctance of SMEs to embrace branding and audio branding. Much like branding a few decades ago, audio branding seems to be going through a similar phase where SMEs either do not see the value of adopting such a discipline, have budget and resource constraints, lack education or brand focus.

Cardinali S., Travaglini M., and Giovannetti M. (2019) conducted an exploratory case study on increasing brand orientation in SMEs through licensing. Their approach combined in-depth interviews and content analysis, providing another relevant perspective to consider when investigating the potential use of sonic branding in SMEs. As revealed in a study by Horan G., O'Dwyer M. and Tiernan S. (2011), the case SMEs reflected the influence of budget constraints, procrastination, desire for success and owner/manager influence on change on their branding activities. Such findings highlight the complexity of branding in service SMEs and the intricate factors that influence it. For the effective implementation of sonic branding in SMEs, recognising these variables can provide key insights and guide strategic branding decisions.

Nevertheless, research indicates that SMEs acknowledge the significance of brand-building and engage in experimentation with marketing techniques,

frequently developing more pragmatic and tailored branding practices than large corporations. Recent studies have underscored the increasing necessity of branding-oriented advertising, even for short-term gain-focused SMEs, with digital audio advertisements representing the fastest-growing medium. The ascendance of audio-centric platforms such as TikTok reinforces the growing significance of audio branding for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to connect with audiences, particularly Generation Z. The primary findings pertain to the pragmatic and product-oriented nature of SMEs, as well as their reticence to embrace novel approaches, such as sonic branding. Insights highlight the vital role of entrepreneurial passion in brand recognition and the need for sonic branding to prove its worth within the wider industry. The complexity of SME branding is underlined by factors such as budget constraints and the role of the owner. Understanding these elements is key to successful sonic branding strategies. This work highlights the untapped potential and need for further research into sonic branding within SMEs.

## 3. Research Methodology

The research topic focuses on the use of audio branding in SMEs and addresses the question What are the possibilities of audio branding for SMEs and how should they implement it? The aim is to identify, evaluate and highlight these opportunities in order to create a guidance model for SMEs.

Research objectives:
– To conduct high-quality expert interviews with audio branding professionals.
– To undertake a case study of cost-effective audio branding solutions for SMEs.
– To perform qualitative in-depth interviews with SME representatives.
– To compare the results with similar studies and lead a discussion.

Scientific approach:

An exploratory scientific approach is chosen due to the unexplored nature of the research direction. The study uses interpretive/constructivist qualitative research methodology, which understands reality as socially constructed and focuses on understanding experiences and discovering factors using qualitative methods such as interviews and case studies.

Based on such a scientific approach, the step-by-step **logic of the research** is presented next. In order to formulate the model for the use of audio branding for SMEs, a sufficient answer to the problem question is required, henceforth both steps one and two are used to develop a comprehensive understanding of how SMEs should use audio branding and what the possibilities of use are in general.

Methods:
– Expert interviews. Eight expert interviews were conducted with audio branding professionals from Europe. The questions were based on the existing literature and the research objective, and explored topics such as defining audio branding, bridging the gap between SMEs and the audio branding industry, and exploring audio branding opportunities for SMEs. An expert interview method was used, drawing inspiration from previous research (Priyono, Moin, and Putri, 2020, Wong, 2018). The sample size was selected using a purposive criterion approach (selecting a meaningful sample that fits the parameters of the project's research questions and objectives). Respondents were randomly assigned letters to maintain anonymity. Based on the literature on expert interviews, a sample of 5-10 experts is sufficient for saturation (Döringer, 2020; Bogner & Menz, 2009; Chernatony and Riley, 1998). Eight semi-structured Zoom interviews were conducted and recorded between March and April 2023, each lasting 40-60 minutes. Interview questions, inspired by similar studies (Wong, 2018; Graakjaer & Jantzen, 2009; Priyono et al., 2020), were formulated based on the research objective. Three themes emerged from the questionnaire: defining audio branding, audio elements and the audio branding/advertising industry; bridging the gap between SMEs and the audio branding discipline; and audio branding opportunities for SMEs.
– Case study. A qualitative instrumental case study approach was employed to explore the possibilities of audio branding in SMEs. Data from expert interviews, documents, reports, and online material were analysed to identify audio branding tools that could be used cost-efficiently in SMEs. The qualitative case study method enables a complex phenomenon to be explored through the identification of different factors interacting with each other (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This method was therefore deemed appropriate for the purposes of this paper. An instrumental case study approach was chosen because it is used to achieve something other than understanding a particular situation. It provides insight into an issue or helps to refine a theory (Baxter and Jack, 2010). The tools that were analysed by showing their purpose and possibilities for audio branding in the case of SMEs were "Brand Music Navigator, Kepfererer's brand identity prism, Every Noise at Once, stock music licensing websites ("Epidemic Sound", "Artlist" and "Premium beat") and AI-powered voice manipulation engines such as "Aflorhithmic".
– In-depth interviews with SMEs. In-depth interviews were conducted with SMEs, including both those with prior experience in audio branding and those without. Purposeful sampling and the use of structured questionnaires enabled the gathering of insights

into their perspectives and experiences. Given the objective of amassing as much information as possible, the primary criterion for determining the sample size was redundancy (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The questionnaires were structured with open-ended questions, inspired by previous research (Travaglini & Giovannetti, 2019; Priyono, Moin, & Putri, 2020; Wong, 2019), with the objective of addressing the research object, aim, and problem. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, targeting companies with fewer than 250 employees and a marketing department, to ensure relevance to the research question. Two questionnaires were used to interview 6 Central European SMEs from each group and for each questionnaire. In the case of SMEs that had purchased/used audio branding, the following topics were covered: reasons for using audio branding; challenges and experiences of using audio branding; future use and opinions on audio branding. In the case of SMEs that have not used audio branding, these themes are: familiarity with audio branding; perceived need for audio branding; reasons for not using or considering audio branding.

## 4. Research Results

The impetus for this study was the identification of a knowledge gap concerning the reasons behind the relatively limited utilisation of audio branding by SMEs in comparison to their larger counterparts. This gap was discerned through an analysis of data from industry reports and the observation of a paucity of research dedicated to this subject matter. Subsequent to the conduct of interviews with experts and SMEs, two principal issues emerged.

First, audio agencies, the primary drivers of the audio branding industry, tend to prefer engaging with large businesses. Such businesses possess greater financial resources, more established brand identities and a wider array of other resources, which collectively render them appealing partners for audio agencies. For example, in an interview, one of the largest and most prominent European audio agencies discussed the case of MasterCard. The respondent indicated that, despite the imperfections of the audio brand created for MasterCard, the campaign's sheer scale had a profound impact on the industry, inspiring other major brands to adopt audio branding. The campaign was made possible by the sheer resources devoted to MasterCard's audio rebranding, which in turn inspired other financial and other industries to follow MasterCard's lead. It all rippled out as an evolution of the audio branding industry, which, according to both practical and theoretical analysis, is where audio agencies ultimately want to be.

Second, SMEs are often left behind when it comes to audio branding. SMEs typically have limited resources and operate in competitive markets. Both the theoretical analysis and the interviews suggested that audio branding is a hard sell for SMEs, not necessarily because of their limited resources, but because they don't see the value in it. In other words, while limited resources are a factor, the bigger issue is that SMEs find it difficult to invest in something new and unproven, such as audio branding. The theoretical analysis indicated that, historically, SMEs were generally reluctant to adopt branding strategies. It appears that audio branding is now encountering a similar degree of scepticism. Audio branding is a marketing and brand management strategy that requires a long-term investment, produces results that are not immediately visible, and is a relatively new and less studied field with significantly fewer successful examples. Additionally, it is difficult to measure the return on investment (ROI) in audio branding. These factors contribute to the reluctance of SMEs to adopt it, which in turn leads to a lack of interest from audio agencies, who are leading the advancement of the field.

The field analysis also revealed that the growing demand for audio branding prevails in the increasingly digitalised world. This ties in with the points raised in the theoretical analysis, where more and more audio advertising media are emerging, more and more audio touch points for the brand and other marketing communication channels are appearing. Compared to similar research, it seems that audio branding practitioners are no longer aiming to prove its value to large companies, and the use of audio branding by SMEs has become a more common topic of discussion. The results of the expert interviews show that there is an emerging trend of SMEs showing an increasing interest in audio branding due to digitalisation, social media and the importance of audio in marketing campaigns. Furthermore, the SME interviews show a positive attitude towards audio branding, they are likely to use it if they can see the value of it. In particular, the SMEs that have already bought/used audio branding agree that such a brand management strategy will now remain in their respective communication strategy in the future, which means that SMEs that have bought audio branding intend to continue using it as well as expand to more audio assets, arguing that audio branding is the future of a holistic and cohesive brand experience.

In light of the identified necessity for audio branding in the context of SMEs, this research further addresses the following question: what are the potential applications of audio branding for SMEs and how should such enterprises utilise it? One immediate and straightforward answer is the collaboration with audio agencies, as they possess the unique skill set needed for music in branding that most brand owners lack. However, the research indicated that many of these agencies do not design their services with

SMEs in mind. This is particularly the case with established agencies, while smaller ones face a different challenge – they struggle to convey the value of audio branding due to a general lack of awareness about this practice among SMEs.

It is important to highlight that this exploratory research was primarily focused on Central Europe, with surveys conducted among SMEs and audio agencies in a range of countries. Given the qualitative nature of this study, it is not feasible to make sweeping generalisations. Instead, this study aims to elucidate the issues at hand without making sweeping statements. However, one point that seems universally true is that the possibilities of the use of audio branding are the same for SMEs and larger enterprises alike. These can be divided into two categories: possibilities of use once it is implemented and possibilities of use during the creation and implementation process. Both field and theoretical analysis revealed that once implemented, audio branding can increase brand equity, emotional connection with consumers, brand loyalty and trust, purchase behaviour and enhance brand image and experience. The creation and implementation process appears to be consistent across SMEs and larger companies. The agencies surveyed generally followed the audio branding creation model proposed by Jackson and Fulberg (2003). While the specific approaches and methodologies employed may vary, the fundamental stages remain consistent. These include the creation of a brand brief, the engagement in creative learning through the utilisation of audits and mood boards, the establishment of a distinctive sonic identity, and the implementation of this identity across all brand touchpoints. Continuous feedback and research are integrated into the process to ensure the sonic identity remains relevant and impactful.

Given the particularity, complexity and specificity required to create audio branding, both theory and field analysis suggest that SMEs should work with audio agencies for this task. However, given the resource constraints of SMEs and the lack of perceived value of such an investment – especially given the difficulty of measuring its impact – there is a need for a more cost-effective, practical approach. Despite the growing demand for audio advertising solutions, both theory and field analysis show that SMEs tend to be pragmatic and focus on products or individual campaigns when it comes to marketing solutions. This highlights the necessity to enhance awareness that branding marketing solutions, including audio branding, can facilitate short-term gains while supporting long-term marketing strategies. The findings collectively indicate an increasing requirement for a solution that can stimulate interest among SMEs, enhance their comprehension and perception of audio branding as valuable, and facilitate the implementation of this practice in a more feasible and cost-effective manner. The theoretical analysis of branding in the context of SMEs indicates that SMEs are more likely to adopt branding solutions when they can execute them in-house, thereby reducing the intimidation factor associated with large investments. Subsequently, a comparable hands-on methodology to audio branding could enable SMEs to comprehend its value by directly experiencing its impact when they attempt to outsource at least a portion of it themselves. Upon observing outcomes and acquiring hands-on experience, SMEs may then be more inclined to pursue further audio branding solutions, potentially through engagement with audio agencies.

Although there is consensus among experts that SMEs are capable of establishing an audio brand independently, the existence of audio agencies is justified by the necessity for professional expertise. Consequently, it is recommended that SMEs either employ an in-house audio creative expert or collaborate with audio agencies. However, if SMEs elect to pursue audio branding independently, it is essential that they undertake an internal audit of their existing sonic brand and translate their brand values into a musical language. The research for this paper sought to identify aspects of audio branding that SMEs could manage independently. Interviews with experts and SMEs who had previously engaged in audio branding – as well as those who had not – revealed that SMEs often start by licensing songs or sounds for use in their marketing strategies or campaigns. This suggests that SMEs tend to outsource their sound needs and raises the question of whether they could do this more efficiently through audio branding. Because audio branding involves the deliberate use of sound across all brand touchpoints, SMEs often overlook this and apply sound based on their understanding. However, by using the tools identified through the field analysis case study and expert interviews, SMEs could potentially achieve better results with their audio branding efforts, even with limited resources. In addition, they would be taking the first steps necessary for future collaboration with audio branding agencies, such as identifying their brand sounds through a brand sound audit, establishing their brand identity and a design language that represents their brand values. Carrying out this audit and identification process not only enables SMEs to make more informed decisions and improve their understanding of the sound of their brand, but also facilitates future work with audio branding agencies.

Notably, previous work by Alison C. Wong (2019) and Graakjaer N. & Jantzen C. (2009) focused on understanding the impact of audio branding and explored the need to prove its value, particularly for SMEs. Contrary to previous trends, this study reveals

a shift in perspective: experts now acknowledge the value of sound branding for larger companies, while emphasising the need to prove it for SMEs.

Further comparisons with studies by Ojasalo J. et al. (2008) and Cardinali S. et al. serve to reinforce the reluctance among SMEs to adopt audio branding, thereby echoing the historical challenges faced by traditional branding. Furthermore, research by Gustafsson C. (2015) and Vidal-Mestre M. et al. (2022) has identified a discrepancy between the perspectives of researchers and practitioners in the domain of audio branding. However, this study represents a significant departure from this trend, as practitioners now emphasise the integration of audio branding with digital platforms such as TikTok, particularly in addressing the needs of SMEs.

What sets this research apart is its groundbreaking approach. Unlike previous studies, this research doesn't just validate the legitimacy of audio branding; it moves the field forward. Until now, the academic literature has treated audio branding as a means of gaining attention and legitimacy. Large companies have embraced it, eradicating doubts about its authenticity. As a result, the focus is now shifting to SMEs, making this study a pioneer in exploring this uncharted territory.

The evaluation of the field analysis shows that the results are robust enough to formulate a practical guidance model for SMEs in audio branding. The model aims to bridge the knowledge gap between SMEs and audio agencies, helping both parties to optimise their audio branding strategies.

## 5. Audio Branding Guidance Model

The objective of this section is to establish a model for the **guidance of small and medium-sized businesses** in the effective utilisation of audio branding as a marketing and brand management tool. Additionally, the introduction of this solution is intended to bridge the existing research and practical gap between the audio branding field and SMEs. Furthermore, this section will provide a detailed account of the actionable measures and strategies for the implementation of the guidance model.

The theoretical and field analyses conducted in this paper have led to the formulation of an audio branding guidance model for small and medium-sized businesses. This model is presented as a four-stage pyramid (see Figure 2), reflecting both the potential applications of audio branding in the context of SMEs and the recommended process for their implementation.

As has been established, audio branding is the process of creating and utilising an audio identity across all relevant touchpoints within brand communication channels and the customer journey.

Therefore, the use of audio branding in general revolves around having an audio identity that is aligned with the pre-existing brand identity. This is achieved through the use of unique auditory brand elements, including an audio logo, brand voice, soundtracks, brand song, and so forth. In light of the aforementioned problem question, the utilisation of the audio branding guidance model for SMEs is divided into the following stages:

1. **The audio identity foundation (no cost)** is the first stage of audio branding for SMEs, which outlines the basic principles on which audio agencies create further audio identities. These principles are not costly, but are the most important aspects of any audio identity for both large and SME brands, and are therefore conveniently outsourced if SMEs want to do audio branding themselves.

2. The second and final stage within the threshold of what part of audio branding can be approached by SMEs in a DIY manner ("Do it Yourself") is **cost-effective audio identity**. This indicates concrete audio elements which can be a cost-effective solution for the use of audio branding for SMEs. Notably, the results yielded are limited but effective if used in accordance with the first stage of the guidance model.

3. The **core of audio identity** represents the initial stage of the audio agency threshold, which is to say that it constitutes a component of the audio branding or audio identity creation process that can only be accomplished in collaboration with audio agencies or in-house audio branding specialists. In essence, this third stage of the audio branding guidance model for SMEs indicates the principal audio elements that SMEs should aspire to utilise in collaboration with audio agencies once they have completed the first two stages of the guidance model.

4. **Holistic audio identity** represents the final stage of the guidance model, as well as the audio agency threshold. It signifies the most crucial, costly, and impactful audio elements for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Having established and explained the model of the SME audio branding guide, the possibilities for use are obvious, but it is also important to elaborate on the application part of the guide, i.e., how SMEs should use these possibilities in a practical sense:

1. In terms of the audio identity foundation (no cost), the initial stage of the model comprises brand identity analysis, a brand sound audit, the development of a sound design language, and the creation of a mood board. These elements represent the fundamental principles upon which every audio identity is created and utilised by any brand or business. As previously stated, this stage is of the utmost importance and is the most challenging for experts to implement, particularly for SMEs that are new to the concept of audio branding. A brand
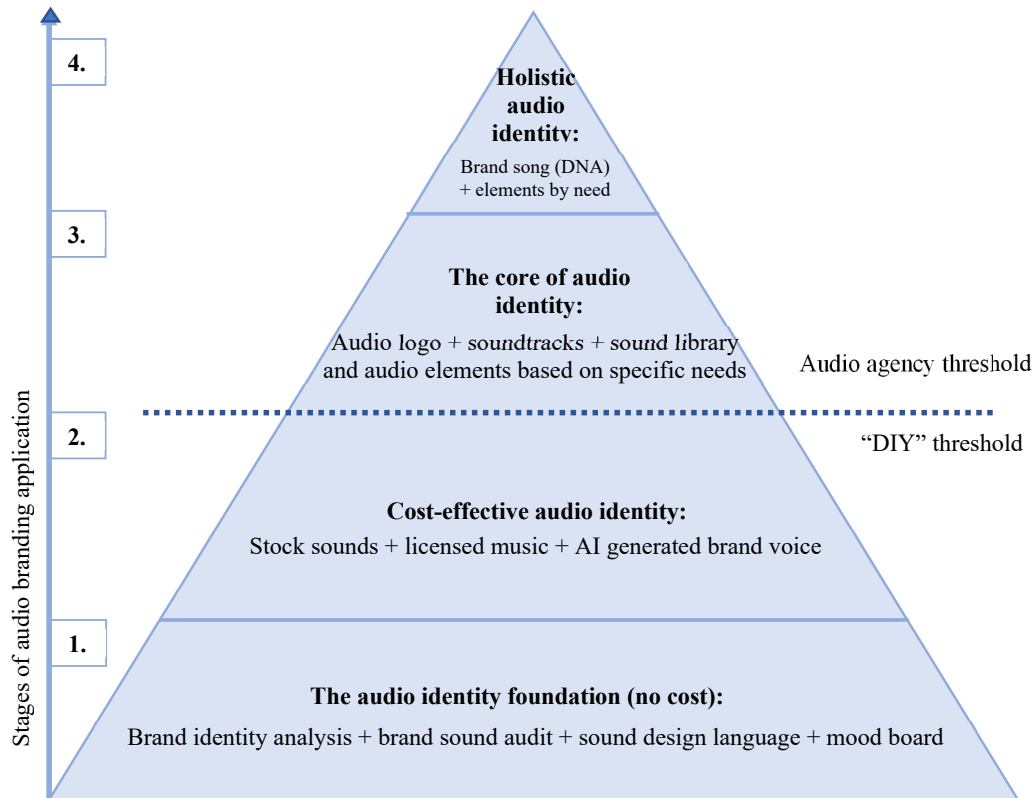
**Figure 2. The use of audio branding guidance model in the case of SMEs**

identity analysis reveals that SMEs must initially comprehend the brand attributes that fall under the umbrella of the brand identity definition. Such factors could include the brand's personality traits (e.g., innovative, trustworthy, adventurous), its core values (e.g., quality, customer service, sustainability), its mission, vision, target demographic, and its overall positioning within the market. A field analysis of this paper identified the Brand Identity Prism, first proposed by Kapferer (2004), as the most suitable tool for this process. Subsequently, SMEs should undertake a brand sound audit. This entails identifying the brand's historical and current audio usage across all pertinent brand and marketing communication channels. Additionally, it involves analysing the sonic landscape of competitors to guarantee a distinctive and unique audio identity. This involves translating the brand's values and personality into sonic elements using a specific language. For example, a youthful, energetic brand might align with upbeat, fast-paced music, while a luxury brand might resonate with orchestral music. Mapping these brand attributes to potential sound attributes requires an understanding of the emotional responses and associations that different sounds can evoke. For example, a brand that values innovation might align with electronic or synth-based music, which often represents modernity and technological advancement. A brand with a focus on tradition and heritage may find affinity with classical music or folk instruments. The "Brand Music Navigator" tool has been developed with this process in mind, and it is available free of charge to SMEs. Lastly, the creation of a mood board representing the desired auditory identity of the brand constitutes the final component of this guidance model. SMEs are advised to utilise the "Every Noise at Once" tool to develop a sonic mood board, as this process entails the selection of existing music tracks, sound effects, or voiceovers that exemplify the brand's identity. The "Every Noise at Once" tool is specifically designed for this purpose, offering a convenient and effective approach to the task.

2. In the future, the **cost-effective audio identity** stage of the guidance model will refer to which parts of a tangible audio identity can be executed by SMEs without the assistance of an audio agency. These parts will be broken down into three elements: a sound library, a soundtrack, and a brand voice. A review of the literature revealed that in many cases of SMEs, collaboration with audio agencies through the use of stock sounds or licensed stock music can result in outcomes that are both effective and cost-effective. In addition, the brand voice has been identified as one of the most important audio assets for SMEs to use in their audio branding strategies, as the brand voice, much like the audio logo, can be used across many brand communication channels. Artificial intelligence-based tools such as "Aflorithmic AI" can be a cost-

effective solution for SMEs to outsource brand voice themselves, and in terms of specific sounds or music tracks, tools such as "Artlist", "Epidemic Sound" and "Permium Beat" were identified as the most productive choices for SMEs. It is important to note, however, that the use of these second-stage proposed tools for SMEs may prove to be limiting in the long term. The alignment of audio assets with current brand identity attributes and their flexibility are fundamental aspects of an effective audio identity. The use of stock music and sounds can limit the flexibility of SMEs in the future, whereas sounds produced by audio agencies are more easily adapted to their needs. Therefore, if these tools are used in accordance with the first stage of the audio branding guidance model, effective results can be achieved for SMEs.

3. To elaborate on the **core audio identity** stage of the guidance model, it must be emphasised that the most important audio assets or audio elements of a brand cannot be outsourced by SMEs, and this is where collaboration with audio agencies comes in. The audio logo has been identified as the most effective starting point for SMEs to use in their branding strategies, as its use is multi-faceted. The audio logo is suitable for virtually any brand channel and in most cases acts as a guide for building the rest of an audio identity around it, so it should be the main asset SMEs use when they approach audio agencies. In essence, an audio logo, bespoke soundtracks, a brand-specific sound library and brand voice represent the fundamental elements of a robust audio identity. However, the specific elements to be employed by SMEs are contingent upon their distinctive and particular requirements.

4. In conclusion, with regard to the **holistic audio identity** stage of the guidance model, it should be noted that audio branding is never truly complete. Consequently, the final stage of audio branding for SMEs is defined as "holistic," encompassing a multitude of audio elements that are consistently utilised across a diverse range of brand communication channels, including those that are pertinent to various touchpoints within the customer journey and beyond. In a sense, having a brand song signals that an SME is at the final stage of using audio branding, as a brand song often encapsulates the essence (the "DNA") of an audio identity, i.e., a melody or combination of sounds that is recognisable to the consumer and can be heard in the brand song and associated with the brand in the consumer's mind. A brand song can have many different versions/ tracks, it can have an audio logo, it can be used as background music for advertisements or as ambience music for physical spaces. What makes a holistic audio identity is the adaptability and flexibility, as well as the consistent use of audio elements by SMEs,

and as brand campaigns and the brand itself change over time, so does the audio identity, hence audio branding is a never-ending process.

In summary, the model, based on theoretical and field analysis, unfolds as a four-step pyramid representing the process of audio branding in the context of SMEs. By following this guidance model, SMEs can both learn what audio branding is and what it takes to use it, and start using it themselves. While the model outlines all the ways in which audio branding can be used in the case of SMEs, the actual use of the model is likely to vary from case to case because of the very nature of audio branding – it is case-specific, adaptable, flexible and unique. The guidance model also provides the tools necessary for SMEs to take the first steps towards audio branding in a practical sense.

## 6. Conclusions

This study highlights the uncharted territory of audio branding in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Several key points emerge from the study:

– Audio branding essence. The concept of audio branding involves the creation of a coherent audio identity for brands at different stages of customer interaction. Despite its proven impact on brand identity, trust, loyalty, and emotional connections, there is a dearth of literature on its application to SMEs. SMEs face unique challenges, including limited resources and hesitancy to adopt unproven strategies.

– Challenges and opportunities. The field analysis revealed a twofold problem: audio agencies tend to focus on large businesses, leaving SMEs in the background. At the same time, SMEs are reluctant due to limited resources and scepticism, which prevents them from fully exploiting the potential of audio branding. However, growing digitalisation has sparked interest from SMEs, indicating a changing landscape.

– Solution. The study proposes an adapted four-step model of an audio branding guide for SMEs. This model offers a systematic approach, starting with brand identity analysis and audio audit, leading to cost-effective implementation of an audio identity. Collaboration with audio agencies is emphasised to ensure that audio elements are aligned with brand needs, promoting a holistic, adaptive approach.

– Novelty and significance. This study pioneers a focused study of SME-focused audio branding, bridging the gap between agencies and SMEs. The recommendation model is an invaluable tool that addresses the unique needs of SMEs. It also points to significant opportunities for mutual growth for both sectors.

– Further research directions. While this study is a first step, future research could further explore this issue. Quantitative methodologies, such as surveys in specific markets or regions, can provide a better understanding of SMEs' audio branding needs. Longitudinal studies can evaluate the impact of the model on SMEs and improve it. In addition, local market analysis can improve understanding of regional differences.

– Limitations. A qualitative research approach, despite its necessity, imposes certain limitations. Research biases and the diversity of the research subjects make it difficult to draw generalisable conclusions. The Central European focus of the study also limits the breadth of the findings, which requires further research in different markets.

This research provides a vital link between SMEs and the transformative potential of audio branding. While a significant step has been taken, the journey is ongoing. The comprehensive guidance provided serves as a guiding light for SMEs, illuminating the path towards brand resonance and customer connections in the realm of audio branding.

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