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**OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION  
OF OWN FASHION BRAND OF BULGARIAN SMALL  
AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES**

**AUTHOR'S ABSTRACT**

of a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree PhD  
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## CONTENTS OF THE AUTHOR'S ABSTRACT

<b>I. General characteristics of the dissertation.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Relevance of the topic .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Object and subject of the study .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. Research thesis .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Purpose of the dissertation .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>5. Research objectives and methodology .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>6. Scope of the study.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>7. Structure of the study .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>II. Main content of the dissertation .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chapter One. THEORETICAL BASIS AND KEY ASPECTS OF THE INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chapter Two. BRAND INTERNATIONALIZATION IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter Three. DEVELOPMENT OF BRAND STRATEGY FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>III. Directions for future research on the topic of the dissertation .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>IV. Reference to the scientific and scientific-applied contributions in the dissertation .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>V. List of the doctoral candidate's publications.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>VI. Report of compliance with the national requirements under the Regulations for the Implementation of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>VII. Declaration of originality of the dissertation.....</b>	<b>36</b>

## **I. General characteristics of the dissertation**

### ***1. Relevance of the topic***

The relevance of the topic "Opportunities for internationalization of own fashion brand of Bulgarian small and medium-sized enterprises" is determined by the growing socio-economic importance of the fashion industry. Today it is a key segment of the creative economy, as well as a specific source of economic growth based on human creativity, ideas, knowledge, technologies and intellectual property. The fashion industry is a developing concept, encompassing knowledge-based activities, on which creative and creativity-presupposing industries are built.

The dissertation provides an integral understanding of the internationalization of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the fashion industry, by bringing together theoretical frameworks, sectoral characteristics, and empirical research into a single analytical framework.

The models and concepts developed in the first chapter show that internationalization is a complex, gradual and multidimensional process, determined both by the resource potential of the enterprise and by the market, institutional and cultural conditions in the international environment.

Chapter Two demonstrates that the fashion industry functions as an interdisciplinary and globally connected system, in which the brand acquires central importance as a bearer of economic, cultural and symbolic value, and digitalization, hypercompetition and technological innovation set new standards for success.

Pause Jeans brand analysis confirms in the third chapter that Bulgarian SMEs can develop sustainable brand strategies and proceed to internationalization when they combine strategic orientation, modernized internal processes, digital infrastructure, human capital and participation in cluster forms of cooperation.

In its entirety, the study proves that internationalization is not the result of a single decision, but of a consistent, scientifically based and strategically managed transformation of the enterprise.

## ***2. Object and subject of the study***

**Object of the study:** The object of the dissertation work are SMEs in the fashion industry that are developing their own brand and have the potential for internationalization.

**Subject of the study:** The subject of the study is the complex of strategies, factors and mechanisms for building, developing and internationalizing the Bulgarian SMEs' own fashion brand.

## ***3. Research thesis***

The thesis of this study is that the successful internationalization of Bulgarian SMEs' own brand depends on building a long-term strategy that combines the company's creative potential with effective management and marketing practices, consistent with international standards and the local characteristics of the target markets.

Long-term success is determined by strategic thinking, leadership skills, creative talent of designers, operational efficiency and attentive attitude to customers. The ability to adapt the product to consumer values, identify strategic trends and build sustainable competitive advantages is of critical importance.

## ***4. Purpose of the dissertation***

The aim of the dissertation is to develop a methodology for building a brand strategy and assessing the effectiveness of SME in the fashion industry.

## ***5. Research objectives and methodology***

To achieve the set goal, the following **scientific tasks have been formulated:**

1. To systematize and analyze the main theoretical approaches to the internationalization of SME, by deriving the conceptual frameworks in the context of the development of one's own fashion brand.

2. To examine the specific characteristics of the fashion industry in the context of the global competitive environment, including economic dynamics, the role of digitalization, and the peculiarities of consumer behavior.

3. To identify the entry, positioning and communication strategies of fashion brands in international markets, analyzing their advantages, limitations and applicability for SMEs.

4. To assess the status and effectiveness of Bulgarian fashion SMEs, through analyses, research of specific practices and development of potential development scenarios.

5. To develop a methodological framework for building and managing a brand strategy for SME, including brand personification, determining strategic priorities and approaches to increasing brand value.

6. To formulate initiatives and practical recommendations to support the internationalization of Bulgarian fashion enterprises, including a model for inclusion and participation in clusters, network structures and other forms of collective competitiveness.

**The research methodology** is based on a combined application of classical and modern scientific methods. Historical-theoretical analysis and systematic research were used to trace the evolution of concepts; comparative and functional analysis to compare models; critical analysis to identify risks, barriers, structural deficiencies and sustainable competitive advantages; statistical and empirical methods to study dependencies; the "Case study" method, built on a specific Bulgarian SME from the fashion industry.

## ***6. Scope of the study***

**Restrictive conditions** have been set to determine the scope and validity of the dissertation, as follows:

The methods used, including theoretical synthesis, SWOT analysis, scenario modeling and brand value assessment, have a conceptual, strategic, rather than a strict economic and statistical representative focus, and are based primarily on available public data.

The geographical scope is limited to the conditions of the Bulgarian market and the international activity of domestic SMEs, without examining in detail the specific features of individual foreign markets.

The analysis and empirical observations are focused on Bulgarian SMEs in the fashion industry, which develop their own brand without claiming applicability to large companies or TNCs.

The dissertation does not develop specific financial, logistical or technological optimizations in depth, and the presentation focuses on the strategic aspects of brand development and internationalization.

## ***7. Structure of the study***

The dissertation is 228 pages long, of which 203 are main text, with 13 figures and 24 tables. Structurally, it includes an introduction, an exposition in three chapters, a conclusion, 1 appendix and a list of 225 literary sources and information resources used, with existing addresses to their content on the Internet, current as of November 2025. A declaration of originality and authenticity is attached.

### ***Content of the dissertation:***

INTRODUCTION

## CHAPTER I. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND KEY ASPECTS OF THE INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES

### *1. Theoretical Framework of SME Internationalization*

#### 1.1. Core Theories of Internationalization

#### 1.2. Theories of Firm Behavior and Market Imperfections

#### 1.3. Contemporary Managerial and Entrepreneurial Approaches to SME Internationalization

### *2. The SME Internationalization Process: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Challenges*

#### 2.1. Pathways and Scope of SME Internationalization

#### 2.2. Challenges, Risks, and Threats in the SME Internationalization Process

#### 2.3. Models of SME Internationalization

### *3. The Impact of the Environment on SME Internationalization*

#### 3.1. Institutional Environment and Its Impact on SMEs

#### 3.2. Financial Infrastructure and Access to Resources

#### 3.3. Cultural and Linguistic Differences in Entering Foreign Markets

#### Summary and Conclusions of Chapter One

## CHAPTER II. BRAND INTERNATIONALIZATION IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

### *1. The Global Fashion Industry and Its Interdisciplinary Nature*

#### 1.1. Historical Development of Fashion and Its Economic and Political Significance

#### 1.2. Economic Importance and Global Dynamics of the Fashion Industry

#### 1.3. E-commerce and Technological Transformation of the Fashion Industry

### *2. Strategic Concepts for Internationalization and Global Positioning of the Fashion Brand*

2.1. Strategies for Brand Entry into International Markets

2.2. Multinational Brand Strategy

2.3. Marketing Strategies for Attracting International Audiences

*3. Analyzing Brand Competitiveness in the Global Market*

3.1. The Global Competitive Environment of Fashion Brands

3.2. Competitive Interactions Between TNCs and SMEs in the Fashion

Industry

3.3. Brand Value Assessment and Management

Summary and Conclusions of Chapter Two

## CHAPTER III. DEVELOPMENT OF A BRAND STRATEGY FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

*1. Developing a Brand Strategy for SME in the Fashion Industry*

1.1. Approaches to SME Brand Strategy Development

1.2. SME Brand Strategy Through the Concept of Brand Personification

1.3. Factors and Specific Characteristics Influencing the Internationalization of Proprietary Fashion Brands in Bulgarian SMEs

*2. Bulgarian SME in the Fashion Industry: Status, Performance, and Development Scenarios*

2.1. SWOT Analysis of Bulgarian SMEs in the Fashion Industry

2.2. Status and Performance of a Bulgarian Fashion Brand: The Case of Pause Jeans Brand

2.3. Development Scenarios for SME

*3. Initiatives and Recommendations for Enhancing the Internationalization of Bulgarian Fashion Brands*

3.1. Establishment and Participation of Bulgarian SMEs in Fashion Clusters

3.2. Models for SME Integration and Operation within Fashion Clusters

### 3.3. Recommendations for Improving the Performance of Domestic Enterprises in the Fashion Industry

Summary and Conclusions of Chapter Three

CONCLUSION

Appendix No. 1

Index of Tables and Figures

Bibliography

Declaration of Originality and Authenticity

## **II. Main content of the dissertation**

### **Chapter One. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND KEY ASPECTS OF THE INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES**

Chapter one is dedicated to building the overall conceptual framework of SME internationalization. It traces the theoretical foundations, process dimensions and the impact of the external environment, which together outline the complex logic of international development. Historical and contemporary theories, from the classical models of Smith, Ricardo and Heckscher - Ohlin to behavioral and entrepreneurial approaches, including Uppsala, OLI and network concepts, provide a multi-layered explanation of the causes and mechanisms of international expansion.

The process of internationalization is analyzed as a sequence of strategic paths (export, contractual and investment forms, inclusion in value chains), risk dynamics, accumulation of experience, and reaction to barriers and limitations, which are particularly pronounced in SMEs.

The detailed exposition in the first chapter follows a sequence, unfolded in three paragraphs as follows:

*In the first paragraph "Theoretical Framework of SME Internationalization"* the study aims to comprehensively understand the conceptual foundations of SME internationalization. It traces how classical economic theories of comparative and factor advantages are gradually being built upon by firm-oriented explanations of market imperfections and by contemporary management and entrepreneurial models.

The study is aimed at systematizing the main theoretical directions that explain the reasons and mechanisms of the internationalization of SMEs, considering their historical development and conceptual logic. In this context, the emphasis is on the classical theories of international trade, which laid the foundation for the understanding of international specialization. It was found that the models of Smith, Ricardo and Heckscher-Ohlin derive internationalization as a consequence of national advantages: efficiency, structure of production factors and comparative specialization. Although formulated at the macro level, these concepts are gradually interpreted at the firm level, which allows to develop a view of their role in the behavior of SMEs when entering foreign markets.

The study focuses on the next theoretical layer - models of market imperfections, which transfer the analysis from the national to the firm level. The finding is that the theories of Hymer, Coase, Rugman and Vernon emphasize the crucial role of firm assets, specific resources, risk management and strategic behavior. They explain internationalization as a rational choice based on monopolistic advantages, internalization of transactions and product life cycles, thus revealing the economic logic behind a firm's decision to cross the borders of its domestic market. The inclusion of oligopolistic reaction theory complements this direction by proving that competitive pressure and imitation behavior are significant incentives for international expansion.

It was found that Dunning 's eclectic paradigm (OLI) integrates resource and behavioral explanations, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding investment decisions. At the same time, the Uppsala model, the network approach and the theory of international entrepreneurship add key management aspects such as learning, knowledge accumulation, relationship building and entrepreneurial initiatives. It was concluded that it is these modern theories that most accurately describe the reality of SME: resource constraints, high adaptability, dependence on knowledge and networks, and a dominant role of the entrepreneur. Thus, the conclusion is reached that internationalization is a multi-layered process, explainable by mutually complementary classical, firm and behavioral models.

In conclusion, the conclusion is that the theoretical framework of internationalization is multi-layered and integrative, and the modern analysis of SMEs requires a synthesis between economic, behavioral and managerial concepts, mutually complementary in revealing the real logic of international development.

*In the second section “The SME Internationalization Process: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Challenges”* the study aims to cover SME internationalization as a multidimensional process in which the paths to enter foreign markets, structural and behavioral challenges intersect. The variety of theoretical models explaining corporate international development is presented. It is considered how exports, e-commerce, contractual and investment forms, as well as inclusion in global value chains, shape a flexible palette of opportunities through which SMEs can initiate and gradually expand their international presence.

This process is complicated by a number of barriers, such as lack of resources, limited information, high risk, institutional difficulties and market uncertainty. These particularly affect innovative enterprises.

Internationalization is realized in the interaction between the company's internal capabilities, the degree of technological readiness, network connections and the perception of market opportunities.

The study also aims to interpret the different models of internationalization that offer an explanation for how SMEs can enter international markets under conditions of limited resources and high market uncertainty. It examines how globalization opens up vast opportunities for growth, but at the same time raises significant risks related to political instability, supply chain disruptions, cultural differences and economic turbulence.

It is found that it is these risks that make the choice of an internationalization model a critical decision, requiring a careful analysis of the opportunities, constraints and resource readiness of the enterprise. SMEs, which by definition have limited financial and information resources, are forced to use models that reduce risk, but at the same time allow access to international markets and the accumulation of experience.

The analysis focuses on the main models presented in the author's study, tracing both classical and contemporary interpretations of internationalization. The study shows that the Uppsala model remains fundamental, as it describes the stages of international development, from exports through sales representatives to the creation of production units. It was found that the key mechanism here is the accumulation of experience and the reduction of psychological and market uncertainty. The modernized version, the so-called "wait and see", complements the Uppsala logic through imitative behavior, a practical strategy for SMEs that do not have the capacity for large-scale research and are guided by the behavior of other companies.

Porter's model, where internationalization depends on industrial structure and competitive forces, as well as behavioral models that emphasize the role of managers' personal motives, cultural factors, accumulated experience and investment attitudes, is also examined. It has been proven that the different models

provide complementary perspectives on the complex process of international development.

It follows that the internationalization of SMEs is the result of the interaction between structural factors, company resources and individual motivations, and the most appropriate model is the one that allows flexible adaptation to the specifics of the enterprise and the market.

It can be summarized that digitalization and cross-border e-commerce expand the space of possible models by providing a low-risk alternative for international entry, especially for virtual and innovative SMEs.

The network approach has been found to complement this opportunity by building trust, partnerships, knowledge exchange and access to resources, which is particularly important for firms with limited capacity.

In conclusion, the view is defended that successful internationalization of SMEs requires a combination of classical and contemporary models, with the choice of a specific strategy being subject to key factors such as experience, industrial structure, investor risk appetite, and the company's ability to build and manage international networks.

*In the third paragraph "The Impact of the Environment on SME Internationalization"* the study aims to reveal the complex way in which the institutional, financial and cultural environment determine the real limits and opportunities for the internationalization of SMEs. It is traced how each of these three elements participates in shaping the strategic decisions of companies.

It has been found that the quality of the institutional framework, legislation, administrative procedures, legal predictability and effectiveness of institutions, has a direct impact on the undertaking and sustainability of international activity, especially for enterprises with limited resources.

It analyzes the financial infrastructure, which is both an engine and a barrier to international development. Access to capital, the availability of financial instruments, and a predictable financial environment are critical prerequisites for

expansion. On the other hand, corruption and institutional weakness create additional costs and risks.

It is emphasized that cultural and linguistic differences add another layer of complexity. International business requires not just language knowledge, but intercultural competence to ensure effective communication, avoid conflicts and build trust.

It follows that the internationalization of SMEs is possible only when the company manages to simultaneously manage the institutional framework, financial accessibility and cultural specificities of the target markets. The interaction between these three factors determines not only the chances of entering international markets, but also the sustainability of the presence in them.

*In summary of Chapter One*, we can say that the external environment, institutional, financial and cultural, is a critical factor that determines the opportunities, constraints and degree of sustainability of international activity, with the quality of regulations, access to capital and intercultural competence shaping the real strategic boundaries of internationalization.

The main conclusion is that the internationalization of SMEs is a complex, nonlinear and contextually dependent process that cannot be understood through a single theory, but requires the integration of economic, behavioral and environmental models, the interaction of which sets the logical foundation for the practical aspects discussed in the following chapters.

## **Chapter Two. BRAND INTERNATIONALIZATION IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY**

Chapter Two reveals the fashion industry as an interdisciplinary, highly dynamic and globally structured ecosystem. In it, the brand is the main economic, cultural and communication asset, determining the opportunities for internationalization.

The study finds that the fashion sector combines creative value, technological innovation and market logic, making the brand a central mechanism for competitiveness. In this context, international positioning strategies combine a trinity of integrated choices. Through appropriate brand architecture, a balance between global and multinational strategy and precisely constructed marketing practices, this trinity is key to how SMEs can enter and remain in foreign markets.

It is further elaborated that the success of these strategies depends on the firm's ability to interpret the global environment, including intensified competition, technological pressure, the structural dominance of transnational corporations (TNCs), and participation in global value chains.

The detailed exposition in the second chapter follows a sequence, unfolded in three paragraphs as follows:

*In the first paragraph "The Global Fashion Industry and Its Interdisciplinary Nature"* the study characterizes the understanding of the fashion industry as a complex, interdisciplinary, and highly dynamic system in which cultural meanings, economic processes, and technological innovations jointly shape the conditions for its development and global competitiveness.

It has been established that fashion functions simultaneously as a cultural phenomenon, an economic sector, and a communication mechanism, in which the brand plays the role of a key bearer of value and identity.

The analysis shows that the industry makes a significant contribution to the global economy, highlighting its growing role in creating employment, added value and international trade, while global market processes, geopolitical changes and consumer habits shape new territories of growth and competition.

Digitalization and e-commerce are fundamentally transforming business models, enabling rapid international positioning, personalized user experience, and technological innovations in design and manufacturing.

The modern fashion industry is simultaneously global and local, traditional and technological, creative and economic. It is emphasized that understanding

these interrelationships is the foundation on which the strategic analysis of the internationalization of fashion SMEs rests in the following parts of the study.

*In the second paragraph "Strategic Concepts for Internationalization and Global Positioning of the Fashion Brand"* the study deepens the understanding of the international positioning of the fashion brand as a complex strategic process in which the architecture of the brand, the choice between global, multinational and transnational approaches and the use of modern marketing tools are intertwined into a single system for building international competitiveness.

It has been found that the paths to entering new markets, from gradual evolution to the sharp expansion of "born global" companies, depend on resource availability, management vision, and the degree of symbolic and economic influence of the brand.

The analysis focuses on the choices between standardization and adaptation, demonstrating that multinational strategies are successful in conditions of high cultural and regulatory fragmentation, while global strategies exploit the power of a universal message and economies of scale. At the same time, the transnational model offers an interaction between the two extremes, combining corporate identity and local regional conditioning.

It is summarized that successful international positioning of the brand requires targeted marketing efforts: building a brand story, maintaining visual consistency, an active promotional policy, and effective use of new media and fashion bloggers as mediators of authenticity and trust.

The conclusion is that the internationalization of a fashion brand is not a linear, but a strategically differentiated transformation that depends on the company's ability to combine creative, cultural and market logic into a unified, sustainable and adaptive global strategy.

*In the third paragraph "Analyzing Brand Competitiveness in the Global Market"* the study brings together an understanding of the global competitive environment, structural differences between TNCs and SMEs, and methods for

assessing brand value to reveal the complex logic by which fashion brands build and maintain competitiveness on the global stage.

It has been found that oversupply, overcompetition, accelerated production cycles, and growing technological pressure are transforming the fashion industry into a highly digitized, globally connected ecosystem in which only the most adaptable brands manage to maintain market influence.

The analysis is focused on the structural dominance of TNCs, which set the standards through vertical integration, automation, and global logistics systems, while SMEs seek competitive space through quality, authenticity, local identity, and niche positioning.

The two groups operate in the same global economic system, but with diametrically opposed resource capabilities and organizational models. TNCs dominate global fashion through strong integration, centralized solutions, vast production networks, and the ability to standardize products worldwide. The examples of Inditex, H&M, Mango, Topshop, Boohoo, and others show a model in which rapid collection updates, the implementation of digital technologies, and efficient logistics management form a massive competitive advantage. SMEs, on the contrary, rely on local niches, sustainable practices, close customer contact, and creativity, but encounter limitations in implementing complex information systems and digital technologies, which slows down their international expansion.

Despite structural differences and resource imbalances, SMEs maintain competitiveness through quality, local identity and strong adaptability.

It is concluded that the observed production and organizational models of TNCs set the standards of the global fashion industry, and understanding their logic is critical for SMEs that participate in the same competitive system, albeit with different functions. We found that the example of Zara and the business model of Inditex are illustrations of high vertical integration, control over the value chain, rapid response to trends and global expansion achieved by managing design, production, logistics and sales from a single center. At the same time,

SMEs position themselves as sub-suppliers, niche manufacturers or partners in flexible regional chains, using their local expertise and resilience.

The competitive environment between TNCs and SMEs is not bipolar, but interactive: TNCs set the pace and global standards, and SMEs, through innovation, local advantages and high specialization, open up spaces for development and participation in the global fashion ecosystem.

The research is also aimed at revealing how the brand functions as a strategic and financial asset, the creation, maintenance and evaluation of which require targeted management based on an understanding of consumer needs, market conditions and the long-term role of brand value.

The process begins during product development, when the manufacturer defines the target customer profile and creates an integrated team of brand managers, designers and technologists. Brand management is viewed as a continuous cycle, from creating a brand identity to selling and promoting, in which the focus on the customer is crucial for positioning in a competitive environment. The growing role of the brand as an intangible asset makes it an important basis for relationships with investors, creditors and partners, and the accurate assessment of its value is used in acquisitions, licensing, expanding product lines and forming marketing budgets.

The analysis focuses on the three main approaches to brand valuation: cost, comparative and income, which structure the financial profile of the brand and reveal the relationship between financial performance, market perceptions and strategic management. It was found that the cost approach reveals a limited perspective, as it does not reflect the real market perception and can devalue strong brands with low cost of construction. The comparative approach measures the price premium and market analogues, but is dependent on the quality of the comparative base and the specific characteristics of the industry.

The revenue approach is proven to be the most relevant for the fashion industry because it takes into account the future economic benefits generated by

the brand, including an assessment of risks, loyalty and sustainability of consumer attitudes. The brand must be managed in a way that maintains high emotional value, a price premium and the possibility of expansion through products that bring additional income.

It is concluded that the private methodologies Interbrand and V-RATIO represent the most comprehensive and applicable tools for assessing the value of a fashion brand, as they link financial indicators with marketing factors and consumer perception. It was found that the Interbrand methodology measures the brand through economic profit, the role of the brand and its strength, transforming these components into a net present value. V-RATIO was considered a method particularly suitable for the fashion industry because it takes into account the price premium, the volume premium and the sustainability of the brand as a long-term asset. This approach separates the effect of the brand from other factors and shows to what extent sales depend on brand perception, rather than on short-term marketing incentives.

It is summarized that through both models an integrated assessment and management system is achieved, which allows to identify vulnerabilities, to plan investments in strengthening the brand and to predict its future value as part of the intellectual capital of the company. Thus, the brand is understood not simply as a marketing tool, but as a strategic financial unit that determines the competitiveness of the fashion enterprise in the long term.

*In summary of Chapter Two*, we can say that in this environment, the assessment and management of brand value through integrated models combining financial, market and emotional dimensions is the core of international competitiveness.

The main conclusion is that the internationalization of a fashion brand is a complex process in which creative identity, strategic adaptability, and analytical brand management intertwine, creating the foundation for a sustainable global presence.

### **Chapter Three. DEVELOPMENT OF A BRAND STRATEGY FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY**

Chapter three presents a comprehensive strategic model for building, managing and internationalizing Bulgarian SMEs' brands. It is implemented through the integration of internal organizational approaches, analysis of the actual company situation, and external support and development mechanisms.

An effective brand strategy begins with a clearly defined vision, resources, and competencies, complemented by methods such as brand personification, which allow for the construction of a distinctive identity and a strong emotional connection with consumers.

Pause Jeans brand analysis shows that the sustainable development of a fashion brand requires coherence between production, distribution, marketing, financial stability and digital transformation, as well as strategic choices between different growth scenarios.

At the external level, clusters, inclusion models and institutional forms of support provide an ecosystem that facilitates access to innovation, international markets and partnerships.

The detailed exposition in the third chapter follows a sequence, unfolded in three paragraphs as follows:

*In the first paragraph “Developing a Brand Strategy for SMEs in the Fashion Industry”* the study outlines brand strategy as a key mechanism for the internationalization of Bulgarian SMEs. It is achieved through the integration of organizational approaches, the psychological dimensions of the brand, and the specific factors determining their competitiveness.

It has been established that effective brand strategy begins with internal structural clarity, including choosing between an internal team and/or

outsourcing, formulating a vision, financially securing priorities, and building competencies for strategic adaptation to a dynamic market environment.

The analysis is deployed through the concept of personification, which allows SMEs to give human characteristics to their brand, build an emotional connection with consumers, and achieve differentiation in a highly competitive environment.

In the above context, the use of factor models and classification techniques assists in identifying sustainable brand attributes and their correspondence with consumer preferences.

It is summarized that the internationalization of Bulgarian fashion SMEs depends on their ability to combine strategic planning, psychological modeling of brand identity and realistic assessment of production, digital and human potential, which makes brand strategy the basis of their global visibility and sustainable development.

*In the second paragraph "Bulgarian SMEs in the Fashion Industry: Status, Performance, and Development Scenarios"* the study combines the SWOT analysis of Bulgarian SMEs, the empirical review of the Pause Jeans brand and strategic development scenarios to outline the overall picture of competitiveness and internationalization potential in the fashion industry.

It was found that Bulgarian enterprises possess significant strengths, such as flexibility, creative capacity, low production costs and long-term experience in export-oriented production. At the same time, limitations are observed due to deficits in capital, digital maturity, international recognition and marketing competencies.

A questionnaire was designed to systematically collect the information necessary to build a full-fledged company profile and to analyze the internationalization potential of the company BOGARA Ltd., owner of the Pause Jeans brand.

The initial questions describe the company's experience and maturity, allowing for an examination of the extent to which the acquired competencies support the entry into foreign markets. The profile elements characterize the product portfolio, production scale and brand orientation, thus seeking information on the company's ability to operate with sustainable brands in international conditions.

The brand structure module examines the way parallel brands are positioned and managed, using rating scales to describe their roles, market positions and strategic direction. The questions on international presence clarify the current level of internationalization, while those on sales channels seek information on the mechanisms through which the company reaches foreign customers.

The motivation section introduces the strategic reasons for international expansion and describes the expected benefits, which is key to understanding the managerial logic. The market block explores the perceived target markets and the factors for their evaluation, thus describing how the company analyzes the external environment. The barrier questions identify the main constraints that may hinder growth, and the strategy section reveals the preferred entry models, reflecting managerial priorities.

The product and resource readiness section seeks information on the company's capacity to support international operations, describing the technological, production, marketing and financial base. Finally, the digital infrastructure block examines the level of technological integration, which in modern conditions is decisive for the competitiveness of SME in global markets.

In this form, the questionnaire serves as a structured tool for collecting empirical data that allows describing the real processes, strategies, resources and constraints of the company. This is how it supports the logic of the Case Study method for Pause Jeans brand of BOGARA Ltd., providing a rich basis for subsequent analytical and comparative analysis.

In the research conducted of the Pause Jeans brand of BOGARA Ltd. describes the general characteristics of the enterprise, examining how the company builds its brand identity, positions itself in the fashion sector and structures its production and commercial model. The history and development of the Pause Jeans brand is traced, to clarify how the company has grown from a small trading SME, to one with a recognizable brand with a sustainable market logic and integrated management processes. The way in which production, design and distribution are combined into one system, allowing for rapid response to trends and sustainable quality, is examined.

An important part of the analysis examines the brand portfolio and positioning, focusing on the target audience, communication approaches, and strategic partnerships that shape the image of Pause Jeans brand. Information is sought on the differentiation between the core brand and the company's secondary brand, Negative Wear, in order to present the logic of product diversification and market scope expansion. In parallel, the business model is described by analyzing how the company combines physical retail stores, online sales, and flexible production to achieve operational efficiency and competitiveness.

The market and channel analysis examines how the company reaches customers, including through national retail outlets and a multilingual online store that facilitates international product availability. It describes how delivery practices, digital service, and online positioning reveal trends toward internationalization, albeit at an early stage. Information is sought about international presence, its limitations, and opportunities for expansion.

The digital infrastructure section describes the degree of technological integration, examining the CRM, marketing, logistics and financial systems used. The analysis gathered information on the extent to which digitalization supports or hinders internationalization. It is indicated that although the company has an active online environment, internal software solutions are not sufficiently developed, which indicates a need for technological upgrading.

The financial section describes the stability and efficiency of the company, examining liquidity, profitability, asset structure and revenue and expense dynamics. Information was collected on the company's ability to finance growth and international initiatives, finding that the Pause Jeans brand has a strong financial base and low risk.

Through analytical tools (SWOT, SLOT, SLOTS, V-RATIO) the strategic profile of the company is described, examining internal strengths and weaknesses, external opportunities and threats, as well as the structural value of the brands. Information is collected on the factors that shape competitive advantage and those that limit growth, such as personnel dependencies, partial digitalization and limited international expertise.

The section on issues and challenges examines the main barriers to internationalization, including local market constraints, unfair competition, production capacities, and lack of international partnerships. It describes how external factors such as dynamic fashion trends and intense global competition affect strategic sustainability.

At the end of the case study, strategic conclusions and recommendations describe key directions for development, indicating the need for increased digitalization, a more active presence in international online platforms, optimization of the product portfolio and development of partnerships. Information is sought to analyze how the company can turn its strong brand equity into even stronger international competitiveness.

Pause Jeans brand analysis shows a model of gradual upgrading: transition from production with a common firm origin to its own brand, integration of design, logistics and marketing, as well as building a wide distribution network, which demonstrates real prerequisites for international positioning with good structural coordination.

Development scenarios reveal that a sustainable path forward requires a combination of organizational stability, strategic planning, technological modernization, and the ability to systematically monitor market processes.

The conclusion is that the internationalization of Bulgarian fashion SMEs is possible when enterprises combine their resource base with a clear brand orientation, digital transformation and strategic partnerships that allow them to turn their production advantages into sustainable international brand capital.

*In the third paragraph "Initiatives and Recommendations for Enhancing the Internationalization of Bulgarian Fashion Brands"* the study tracks clusters, inclusion models and strategic recommendations as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that shape the overall framework for the development and internationalization of Bulgarian SMEs in the fashion industry.

A focus on deploying the model for including SME in a fashion cluster as a strategic framework that combines organizational affiliation, access to resources and targeted development mechanisms has been specified. It has been established that the affiliation itself is not a one-time act, but a structured sequence of actions: application, integration into a professional network, participation in training, sharing resources and entering into common initiatives. The initial model, presented as a scheme of cooperative growth, has been examined: an SME joins an ecosystem of manufacturers, designers, marketing specialists and logistics companies, which allows it to use common technological bases, optimize its costs and accelerate the implementation of innovations.

The early stage of inclusion builds the foundation for long-term participation, providing SME with the key tools for a conscious entry into the international competitive environment.

The analysis is deployed on the model for post-inclusion activities. It is done through a second, more detailed framework that describes how an SME establishes itself as an active participant in the cluster. This stage includes preparation and analysis of internationalization opportunities, assessment of

production capacity, certification requirements and market specifics. It is traced how the cluster helps enterprises to build international partnerships, enter into joint production processes, improve the supply chain and reduce costs through shared resources. This structure complements the initial model, expanding its scope from local cooperation to international positioning.

It is summarized that it is the two-component nature of the model, inclusion and subsequent operational integration, that guarantees the sustainability of SME in their long-term cluster activity.

It follows that the model for the inclusion and functioning of SME in a fashion cluster not only expands production and trade opportunities, but also builds a stable framework for risk management, sustainable development and international visibility.

The cluster provides expertise in logistics solutions, marketing, distribution and digital presence, while motivating participants to develop innovations, environmental practices and adaptive business models. By participating in international exhibitions, B2B forums, joint marketing campaigns and digital initiatives, SMEs build much broader market contacts that would be difficult or costly to achieve on their own.

The two-stage model, inclusion and subsequent validation, creates conditions for long-term competitiveness by reducing barriers to internationalization, facilitating entry into global value chains and turning the cluster into a strategic tool for unleashing the brand potential of Bulgarian SMEs.

The study is also aimed at systematizing multi-level recommendations that aim to assist Bulgarian SMEs in the transition to sustainable, innovative and competitive business models, in line with global trends and the socio-economic requirements of the modern fashion industry. The main starting point is the need to move from the dominant fast-paced model fashion towards the principles of the circular economy, design for durability, waste reduction, recycling and transparency. This approach reflects not only the environmental but also the social

responsibility of enterprises: fair pay, safe working conditions, support for local communities and ethical production practices. It is summarized that sustainability is becoming a central strategic element that determines the future competitiveness of Bulgarian fashion SMEs.

The recommendations related to state policies, international experience and SMEs support instruments that shape the external environment for the development of the sector are analyzed. We found that the European programs COSME, Horizon 2020, WORTH, the initiatives to combat counterfeiting and the protection of intellectual property provide SMEs with access to financing, expertise and innovation resources. In parallel, examples from Italy, the UK, China and Colombia show that state support through exhibitions, subsidies, tax incentives, technological modernization and export policy is a critical element for accelerating growth. It is observed that international competitiveness requires not only brand protection and the fight against counterfeit goods, but also investments in professional education, fashion ethics and informed consumers. The integration of global good practices into national policy is key to creating a sustainable framework for SMEs development.

It is concluded that the long-term effectiveness of Bulgarian fashion enterprises depends on three strategic directions, digitalization and innovation, professional management and human capital, which must be developed simultaneously and in a coordinated manner. We have established that the implementation of forecasting software, business process automation, digital supply chain management and participation in cooperation chains create the basis for technological renewal and optimization. Professional management through a sustainable business model, monitoring through KPI, strategic forecasting and active monitoring of trends strengthens organizational sustainability. At the center of everything is human resources: motivated employees, competent design, communications, management and production teams, as well as an international professional community that shape the brand portfolio.

Combining social, environmental and economic responsibility with technological and organizational transformation is the path to increasing the competitiveness, export potential and sustainable development of domestic fashion SMEs.

### ***Conclusion***

The dissertation confirms the thesis that the successful internationalization of the Bulgarian SMEs own brand in the fashion industry depends on the development of a long-term strategy that integrates the creative potential of the enterprise with consistent management and marketing solutions, tailored to both global trends and the local characteristics of the target markets.

The theoretical and methodological foundations of internationalization are the foundation on which the process of internationalization is analyzed in the context of the contemporary economic environment. The object of the study, Bulgarian SMEs in the fashion industry with internationalization potential, and the subject, the strategies for their international development, were placed in a clear conceptual framework that revealed the multifactorial and structured stage-by-stage nature of international expansion.

The aim of the dissertation was achieved through a systematic analysis of the fashion industry, its interdisciplinary structure and global dynamics, as well as through the study of good practices and strategies for international positioning of fashion brands. Analyzing successful models of internationalization and identifying the factors that influence the competitiveness of fashion enterprises, reveals generalizations regarding the management of brand value and the adaptation to technological and cultural transformations as critical for the sustainable international presence of SMEs.

In accordance with the subject and scientific objectives of the study, a methodology was developed to assess the effectiveness of corporate strategies and formulate specific recommendations for increasing the competitiveness of

Bulgarian fashion SMEs. Through SWOT analysis, assessment of real practices and creation of development scenarios, opportunities for improvement were outlined. Through the analysis of cluster models and cooperation initiatives, ways to overcome structural constraints were indicated.

The achieved results unequivocally show that the internationalization of Bulgarian fashion SMEs can be successful when based on a targeted strategy, an analytical approach and participation in an environment that stimulates collective and individual competitiveness.

All of the above generalizations are also expressed in several main conclusions - a general synthesis of the ideas in this dissertation, namely:

1. The internationalization of SMEs is a multi-layered process, shaped by the interaction between internal company resources, external market conditions and strategic management choices; no single model independently explains the process, but all of them together outline a comprehensive logic.

2. The fashion industry has its own, highly interdisciplinary specificity, in which aesthetic, cultural, economic and technological factors mutually determine the opportunities for brand development and require high adaptability from SME.

3. The successful international strategy of fashion brands requires consistent identity building, including positioning, personification, visual style, communication channels, and adaptation to the specifics of international audiences.

4. The global competitive environment is dominated by oversupply, technological standards and strong concentration of market power, which places SMEs in a structurally disadvantaged position and requires clear mechanisms for differentiation and brand value management.

5. The competitiveness of Bulgarian fashion SMEs depends on their internal organization and their ability to make informed strategic decisions based on environmental analysis, identification of strengths and weaknesses, and formulation of realistic development scenarios.

6. Clusters, cooperation and network structures are an effective tool for increasing international competitiveness, as they reduce the individual constraints of SMEs and provide them with access to markets, resources, partners and shared knowledge.

In conclusion, it can be confirmed that the internationalization of Bulgarian fashion SMEs is the natural extension of their creative potential and entrepreneurial spirit. Despite the challenges of the global environment, technological pressure and competition from established global brands and TNCs, Bulgarian SMEs possess intellectual, cultural, economic and organizational resources that can be transformed into a real competitive advantage on the international market, through an optimal and effective brand strategy.

The strength of the Bulgarian fashion brand should not be measured primarily in market shares and financial profitability, but above all in its ability to combine identity, innovation and sustainability in the global multi-cultural ecosystem.

### **III. Directions for future research on the topic of the dissertation**

Based on the restrictive parameters set in the dissertation, several promising directions for future research can be outlined that would expand both the empirical depth and applied value of the topic.

Due to the limited geographical scope, a further stage in the development of the topic allows for a detailed comparative study of individual foreign markets that Bulgarian fashion SMEs have potential to enter. This may include an analysis of cultural characteristics, consumer preferences, price levels, competitive dynamics, regulatory barriers and logistical requirements in individual countries or regions.

The focus on Bulgarian brand-oriented SMEs suggests a need for expansion through sectoral and company comparisons, both between different fashion SMEs and between SMEs and large companies or TNCs. Such studies would allow analyzing the extent to which the derived strategic models are valid in different organizational contexts and at different scales of resources.

More in-depth financial, logistical and technological analyses allow for the discovery of a field for future research aimed at operational optimizations, implementation of CRM/ERP/SCM systems, supply chain analysis, and production automation.

In view of the rapid digitalization of the fashion sector, an important direction is the study of the influence of social networks, influencer marketing, and online consumer journeys.

Last but not least, future research could focus on environmental impact, the role of certification, and other areas in attracting international customers.

#### **IV. Reference to the scientific and scientific-applied contributions in the dissertation**

With the analyses made, the research conducted on good practices and the main tasks solved, the goal of the dissertation has been fully achieved. The theoretical research carried out, the approbation and analysis of the achieved results provide grounds for the formulation of the following contributions of the dissertation:

##### ***I. Scientific, theoretical and conceptual contributions***

An integrated conceptual framework for the internationalization of SME in the fashion industry is derived, with an interpretation of brand strategy as the main mechanism for this. The concept of brand personification to the context of Bulgarian fashion SMEs is adapted and expanded.

##### ***II. Systemic and methodological contributions***

A comprehensive analytical framework has been created to assess the competitiveness of fashion SMEs with a scenario model for strategic development in the fashion industry and a two-stage model for the inclusion and functioning of SME in a fashion cluster has been formulated.

##### ***III. Scientific-applied contributions***

A strategic planning model has been built, oriented towards Bulgarian conditions and the realities of the fashion industry, and practically applicable recommendations have been formulated to increase efficiency and internationalization.

## V. List of the doctoral candidate's publications

### Articles:

**Lazarova, A. I.** (2024). Brand Internationalization - Strategies and Challenges. *Global and Regional Dimensions of International Economic Relations*, Issue 1, 2024, pp. 206–219. Electronic journal. DOI: 10.58861/tae.grdier.2024.20. Available at: <https://miojournal.uni-svishtov.bg/title.asp?title=3036>

**Lazarova, A. I.** (2025). Marketing strategies in the fashion industry to attract an international audience. *Global and regional dimensions of international economic relations*, issue 2, 2025, pp. 170–179. Electronic journal. DOI: 10.58861/tae.grdier.2025.13. Available at: <https://miojournal.uni-svishtov.bg/title.asp?title=3125>

### Conference paper:

**Lazarova, A. I.** (2023). Strategic opportunities for internationalization of small and medium-sized enterprises. *In Global Economy and Business: Collection of reports from a round table dedicated to 30 years of the Department of International Economics and Business* (pp. 119-126). Svishtov: Tsenov Academic Publishing House, 2023. ISBN (print) 978-954-23-2421-8; ISBN (online) 978-954-23-2422-5. DLib Virtual Library of the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics - Svishtov. Available at: <https://dlib.uni-svishtov.bg/handle/10610/4868>

**VI. Report of compliance with the national requirements under the Regulations for the Implementation of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria**

National requirement in number of points: 30

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Number of articles indexed in NACID: 2 x 10 points

Number of conference papers indexed in NACID: 1 x 10 points

Points credited to the author through articles and scientific papers: 30,00

## VII. Declaration of originality of the dissertation

The dissertation, in a volume of 227 pages, under the title: "*Opportunities for internationalization of own fashion brand of Bulgarian small and medium-sized enterprises*" is authentic and represents the author's own scientific production. It uses author's ideas, texts and visualization through graphics, diagrams, tables and formulas, and complies with all requirements of the Copyright and Related Rights Act duly observed through proper citation and referencing of the intellectual contributions of other authors, as well as of data, including:

1. The results achieved in the dissertation and the contributions made are original and have not been borrowed from research and publications in which the author has no participation.
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3. Scientific results that have been obtained, described and/or published by other authors are duly and in detail cited in the bibliography.

Declarant: .....

**(PhD Candidate Aneta Lazarova)**