POSS
PERIODICALS OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Periodicals of Social Sciences
ISSN 2790-8720, eISSN 2790-873
Volume 6, Issue 1, June 2026

Brand Building in Service-Based Startups: A Case Study Approach Using Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism

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Received: February 13, 2026 ***Accepted: June 20, 2026*** ***Online: June 30, 2026***

Abstract

In this study, the authors examine the relationship between brand identity (BID) and brand image (BIM) in service sector startups and emphasize that any inconsistencies between the constructs can affect the brand-building efforts and the success of the services. The researchers used the Brand Identity Prism of Kapferer as their framework and interviewed both the startup owners and customers using semi-structured interviews, then analysed the findings using within and cross case analysis, contrasting planned brand identity with perceived brand identity. The results show significant differences in brand personality, physique and self-image, and this indicates that the brands of start-ups are not always perceived as intended. The relationship dimension and the communication dimension, however, showed a higher congruence with each other, underscoring the importance of communication in developing a unique and recognisable brand. In conclusion, the study helps in understanding branding in startups from service sector, as it illustrates that congruence between brand identity and brand image is crucial to build a strong and consistent brand.

Keywords: Brand Prism, Qualitative, Startups

1. Introduction

Establishing a strong brand has become one of the most important priorities for organizations aiming to have a long-term competitive advantage. But branding is not a simple, one-time operation, it is a process that takes place over time in which organizations set, shape, and communicate their values, personality and promises to their stakeholders (Aaker & Moorman, 2023).

As de Chernatony (2003) noted, the process of creating a brand is basically the process of creating a clear brand identity and ensuring that the brand image perceived by consumers is consistent with the brand identity. A brand is more than just a company name or logo, it is about all the transactions, including the product and services, store environment, packaging, communications and experience consumers have with the organization (Wheeler & Meyerson, 2024). Together these all influence the perception of the brand held by the consumers. For example, Disney has managed to develop a unique brand identity focused on imagination and fantasy, which is always reinforced in their movies, parks, products and services with customers (Aaker, 1996).

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A successful branding campaign can be crucial for their success, as it helps them stand out from the competition, build trust, and create a loyal customer base (Barrenechea Fernández, 2025). Ross and Harradine (2011) believe that branding and business performance go hand in hand and that consistency between the expected and the perceived image in the mind of the consumer is essential. Inconsistencies are the result when an organization's identity is not aligned with that of customers, which can diminish brand equity, customer loyalty, and brand love. On the other hand, a clear purpose and uniformity through all points of customer contact can help build consumer trust and preference (Darvidou, 2024). In startup businesses, the importance of branding is further accentuated. There is no single definition of a Startup, but according to Steve Blank (2013, p. 67) it is "a temporary organization designed to search for a repeatable and scalable business model".

Startups have to contend with limited resources and at the same time try to carve out a space for themselves in the market, find customers, and stay ahead of the competition. Startups, as pointed out by Bresciani and Eppler (2010), tend to be short of the financial and human resources to establish a solid market position and competitive advantage. This means the failure rate is still high, as around 24% of startups fail within their first two years and almost 63% fail before 6 years in business. Likewise, Shepherd and Zacharakis (2003) point out that there are significantly higher risks associated with entrepreneurship ventures than with established businesses. Previous studies have heavily focused on entrepreneurship and the success of the venture, but few studies have focused on the importance of branding in the initial development of a venture (Merrilees, 2007).

Previous research mainly examines financial, operational, or technological issues, but strategic branding issues are relatively under-researched. One of the key points that is frequently overlooked, and highly important, is the difference between the startup's brand identity and the brand image its customers have. This may lead to poor brand building, lack of consistency, and damage to customer relations, thus impacting the venture's overall success.

Brand identity is the vision that the organization has created for the brand internally. It is the distinguishing value, personality and images that Aaker (1997) says are the key that can be used in all branding activities to distinguish the brand from others competitors (Darvidou, 2024).

However, brand image is the consumers' perception and interpretation of the brand that is shaped by continuous interactions and experiences (Tahir et al., 2024 and Zhang & Y., 2014). It's an interesting point that while they're two different ideas, they're also interdependent for successful branding. Brand identity and brand image are closely aligned, increasing brand credibility and customer relationships; when they are not aligned, it may cause confusion and decrease the effectiveness of the brand (Harjunpää, 2024). In the case of startups, congruence between brand identity and brand image is more vital because startups are creating their brand identity while developing their market recognition.

This misalignment at the early phase can hinder startups in developing their business life cycle and may not enable them to scale their businesses from start-ups to big and sustainable brands (Fadillah, 2025). Successful brand building, as evidenced in some of the world's most recognized brands, like Nike and Disney, can be built over time, with internal alignment, strategic consistency and continual efforts, and not just a lightning speed of growth. In this context, the current study aims to explore the process of creating the brand image within start-up companies by analyzing the relationship between BID and BIM. Specifically, whether startups have an identity mismatch between what they tell their customers about themselves and what their customers think of them, and whether this gap is a source of understanding of the problems of branding in the early phases of the development of an organization.

This study is to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of brand building process in start-up setting by analyzing the congruence between startup founder's brand image and customer's perceived brand image. In particular, it examines if congruence exists between the organization's intended brand and the perception of the customers, and it is believed that this congruence is necessary in establishing a strong and sustainable brand. Thus, the study aims to explore if there is a difference between startup's brand identity and brand image. For this

objective, the study was guided by the following research question: Does the brand image perceived by the customer correspond with the brand image projected by the startup?

2. Literature Review

To comply with the proposed objectives and assess the congruence between identity and image internal knowledge of a company, it is essential to know both concepts and the factors that affect them.

The term *brand* originates from the ancient Scandinavian word *brandr*, which literally means "to burn." The Anglo-Saxons adopted this term to describe the act of marking objects or animals through burning (Keller, 2025). Historically, branding referred to the physical act of imprinting symbols on livestock to denote ownership and prevent theft. This practice not only allowed cattle breeders to identify their animals but also helped distinguish the quality of livestock among breeders. Those whose herds were known for superior quality gained wider recognition and commercial advantage, as their marks became associated with trust and value in trade (Room, 1998).

The expansion of brands beyond a specific product first started to happen in the 19th century mainly due to the influence of industrial revolution. With the growth of production and mass trading, more producers began to use trademark in order to protect their goods from imitators. Many famous brands that were established during this period - Coca-Cola, Quaker, Heinz - still exist today. Unexpectedly, the major reason for branding during that period was creation of trademarks that differentiated products, goods or services at that time was its function and this continues defining its role in modern market (Aaker, 2024; Keller, 2024).

2.1 Scholars' Perspectives of Brand

Scholars have, over the years, been trying to unravel the mystery of what a brand really is. The brand does not only represent the name nor logo it is essentially the ideas, values and promises that are conveyed by any organization/ company in this world. When people look at a brand they can tell what quality of products or services they can expect from it (Sung,et al., 2023). That's what makes one brand different from another. However, a brand is not only about images or catchy slogans; it is the living, breathing identity of an organization. It tells you who the company is, what it wants to be, and how it hopes others see it. Every action, every message and every tiny detail collect to make up the full picture/identity of that brand (Elliott, 2015).

2.2 Brand Identity: Theoretical Foundations and Dimensions

Brand identity provides a company with purpose and direction. It affects business decisions, investment strategies and the overall brand messaging. Those logos and symbols? They are just a small selection. At the root of it all is the brand's identity informing its strategy and storytelling (Muhonen et al., 2017). Organizational identity is not just a label which is fixed in place, it is a collection of deep-rooted and powerful concepts that are shared by all within the organization. These are the concepts that shape an organisation's image. They come alive in the stories that organizations tell, the way that they attempt to present their best foot forward to others (Ruão, 2001). Nonetheless, despite the significant role it plays in branding and organizational research, humans continue to debate the definition of identity.

2.3 Corporate Identity as the Foundation of Brand Building

Corporate identity according to Danciu (2016) is a factor that segregates organizations despite the fact that they may be offering similar products. The concept of corporate identity asserts itself through many things, it goes beyond just a logo or name, this is how a company displays what makes it unique as well as creating a good reputation that will lead to customer and employee loyalty. However, contemporary views on identity are much complex than this. They comprise not only internal organizational matters but also social, cultural as well as psychological traits of the individuals the company serves. Audiences do bring their personal aspirations, anticipations as well as ideas and these greatly help in articulating what an organization's identity really means (Clegg et al., 2007).

John and Mather (2001) state that brand identity is more than another marketing term and is the unique sensory, symbolic and organizational characteristics which represent a brand. It acts as the strategy that helps an organization to tell people inside and outside who it is and what it is about. A strong brand identity helps companies communicate their values, vision and personality in a consistent manner and helps to develop a shared understanding between employees and customers. In order to reach this consistency, it is important that the members of the organization understand, adopt and disseminate the defined image, so that the image of an organization is expressed in a self-presentation that matches its perception of itself.

Likewise, Nandan (2005, p. 125) states that "People feel that there is alignment when brand messages are clear and consistent." This illustrates the significance of brand consistency in brand communication from the point of view that the consistency of the intended brand image with the stakeholders' perception enhances the credibility and trust of the brand. If the identity provided by the organisation is similar to the image customers see, then there is less incongruity between what the organisation aspires to be and what customers experience in the marketplace, leading to better brand relationships and a more consistent brand experience.

2.4 Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism: A Framework for Brand Identity Development

Sender vs. Receiver: Here, the brand acts in two ways. On one side, it shows itself as a person think, physical traits and personality. On the other, it stands as a user archetype, shaped by how people see themselves and reflect on the brand.

Externalization vs. Internalization: This angle splits the brand's social, visible side its look, how it connects with others, and the way it's reflected apart from what's inside. That's where you find its core: personality, culture, and self-image. Put together, these dimensions give you a full picture of how brands keep their identity steady, both inside the company and out in the world.

2.5 Kapferer brand Identity Dimensions

Kapferer describes six dimensions that make up the identity of a brand, which are physique, personality, relationship, culture, reflection, and self-image. The physical dimension is the tangible and objective characteristics of a brand the elements that come to the mind of consumers whenever the brand is brought up. Kapferer said this was the pillar on which the brand is being constructed. He also opines that no brand can literally engage itself without bringing forth their material advantages in a unique manner, the issue is to make and maintain that distinction.

The personality aspect shows the subjective aspect of the brand. It comes forth when the consumers place human qualities on the brand, which is usually influenced by the style of communication, tone of voice, colour schemes and visual identity aspects. When properly executed, such cues provide the brand with a familiar face that the viewers can connect to personally (Kapferer, 2009)..

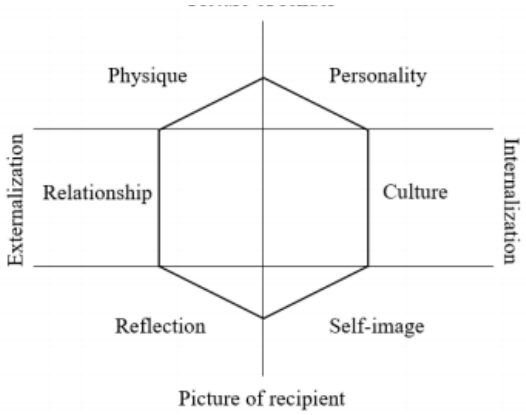
Relationship dimension is the way a brand engages with customers; the way two people would interact in a back-and-forth manner. It is in how the brand behaves, the tone of the way it behaves, and the manner in which it offers its services. This is not merely essential in the case of service brands, but it is all. This is because of the manner in which they relate with the customers and this determines their success (Kapferer, 2009).

The culture aspect entails the principles and values that influence the behavior of a brand. It works as a binding element between the brand and the organization itself and may be a potent differentiator. In other instances, this congruence between brand and culture goes as far as contributing to the development of cult brands which engage their audiences with a strong sense of emotional attachment (Kapferer, 2009)..

The aspect of reflection relates to the way that a brand is understood by the consumers. Kapferer underlines the fact that the brand should not create its image only according to the identity of the target audience, but the qualities that this audience likes and wants to possess. The reflection, then, shows the way consumers want to be perceived when they identify themselves with the brand. (Kapferer, 2009).

Lastly, the self-image dimension is an internal perception of consumers- how they are perceiving themselves relative to the brand. Kapferer describes this as one of the most crucial dimensions in brand building since being aware of what really drives the consumers will make a brand stronger emotionally. As an example, the customers of Lacoste brand tend to view themselves as the participants of elite sport clubs, although they may not be active participants of sports. This image depicts how the aspiration self-image of consumers must be taken into consideration in building the brand identity (Kapferer, 2009).

Figure 1: Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism



Source: Adapted from Kapferer (2008. p. 183)

2.6 Brand Image: Conceptualization and Consumer Perspective

The term *image* originates from the English word meaning “picture.” In the context of branding, brand image refers to the collective external perception held by consumers and society toward a brand. It encompasses the full range of ideas, opinions, associations, and emotions that individuals connect with a particular brand or branded product. While brand image reflects how a brand is perceived from the outside, brand identity represents how the organization perceives itself internally (Cretu & Brodie, 2007).

The studies on the concept of brand image are many, but researchers vary about its key factors, as noted by Nandan (2005). Aaker (1991) sees brand image as a collection of associations that are

considered to be connected with the brand, while Park and MacInnis (1986) believe that brand image is formed due to the company's actions and the interpretation of the actions made by the customers. Other studies, for example, Sääksjärvi and Samiee (2011), stress that the concept of brand image relies on the consumers' perception of the attitude, character and credibility of the brand. Although all these views are different, Nandan (2005) believes that in the end, brand image is built around the perception of the brand and associations of the consumers. Moreover, a well-defined picture can aid in positioning a brand effectively, thereby helping to match perceptions with its intended market position.
When a brand's identity aligns closely with the expectations and needs of its target audience, it positively reinforces the brand image and strengthens its position in the market (Janonis & Virvilaitė, 2007).

3. Methodology

Qualitative research seeks to gather data aimed at understanding the attitudes, motivations, and behaviors of a specific group. Rather than relying on numbers, it explores subjective dimensions how people perceive and interpret their experiences. Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes measurement and statistical testing, qualitative inquiry focuses on meaning-making from the perspective of participants (Asmawi & Alam, 2024). In addition, qualitative research can help generate hypotheses that may later be tested through quantitative methods (Asmawi & Alam, 2024).

3.1 Research Approach

The current study will utilize the case study methodology, which is one of the most popular qualitative methods and can be applied to study real life phenomena in natural settings. It is also suitable in situations where the events under study are controlled by the researchers to a small or no extent (Yin, 2018; Rule and John, 2024). The case study research provides an opportunity to see the complicated problems through the lenses of holistic and in-depth analysis, focusing not on experimental manipulation, but on contextual examination and analysis (Simeonova and Fitzgerald, 2023).
Merriam and Tisdell (2016) express the view that case studies allow researchers to understand the richness of lived experiences and concentrate on meaning and interpretation instead of measurement. This view has been reiterated by more recent researchers, who refer to the case study research as a reflective and flexible research design giving subtle understanding of the present-day social and organizational reality (Bunkar et al., 2024; Pokharel et al., 2024).

3.2 Study Design

In this case study, the researcher first worked with the founders of the startups in order to settle on the objectives of the study: to determine whether the corporate identity envisaged by the startups aligns (or does not align) with the brand image held by the internal and external stakeholders. Upon mapping out the topic, a thorough literature review was done to establish the pertinent concepts as well as the nature of data to be collected in each organization.
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the startup owners in order to gather data. The content of these interviews was to determine how they see the company and how they project their identity to the outside and inside and how they feel their brand is being viewed by customers. Due to these interviews, two questionnaires were created the first one aimed at the start up founders and the second one focused on their customers.

3.3 Sample Size and Saturation

In this research, there are three startups used as cases. Despite the small sample size, it has deep and detailed information, which assists in answering the research questions in detail. Smaller sample sizes are already typical and acceptable in qualitative research, where the research might aim to achieve the stage of data saturation, which essentially means that no new themes or information will be obtained with more data added (Daher, 2023; Rahimi and Khatooni, 2024).
Moreover, this choice concurs with the methodological advice in qualitative case study research, in which researchers frequently sacrifice breadth and depth, developing the deep and detailed detail of a few cases over the wide and shallow general coverage of a mass of them. This method will enable the researcher to investigate the contextual, behavioural and perceptual complexity of each case in detail thus providing more theoretical and practical results on the phenomenon under study.

3.4 Data Collection

Gathering the appropriate and adequate information is an important activity in any research work. The use of primary data sources in this case study was the sole source of data and this allowed the researcher to have direct access to the exact information needed to conduct an analysis and reduce chances of bias due to secondary interpretation or irrelevant information. In order to collect this data, semi-structured interviews were held with the owners of this start-up and with their customers.
The approach provides the level of flexibility to examine the experiences of the participants in a profound way and at the same time direct the discussion to the main themes of the study. The semi-structured interviews are particularly useful in case studies research since they allow exploring perceptions, behaviors, and motivations in their natural environment (Naz, Gulab, and Aslam, 2022; Barriball and While, cited in a recent qualitative case study, 2024). The ethical aspect was also put into consideration during the data collection process, and the interviewees were respected and understood (Chand, 2025).

4. Method of Analysis

The most desirable approach to data analysis of qualitative nature is to base on the theoretical suggestion. The most popular cross case synthesis, based on Runeson et al. (2012), is the one that is applied when carrying out many cases. It is also proposed that cross-case synthesis should be applied in situations where the cases under analysis and conducting the data analysis should be done sequentially (Cruzes et al., 2014).
In this research, the cross-case analysis has been used after within-case analysis. This has been done so as to fulfill every goal of this paper. The gap that may exist has been examined with the within-case analysis. In addition, the cross-case analysis has been applied in tracing similarities and distinctions in the responses to the cases through pattern matching. The cross-case analysis has made conclusions that have subsequently been applied in generalizing and investigating key factors that influence them.

4.1 Data Validation and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, several methods were employed. The components of validity applied within this research are outlined below, together with the context in which each was used.See Fig 2

Figure 2:Reliability and Validity

Test	Definition	The method used in this study
Construct Validity	Establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied	Incorporating several data sources: (a) Transcription and recordings of in-depth interviews;
Internal Validity	Establishing causal relationship as distinguished from spurious relationships"	a) Identifying categories through the process of constant comparison data within a case of a companies b) Identifying common patterns by comparing codes, categories, their relationships across the ten companies"
External Validity	Establishing the domain to which a study's findings can be generalized"	Comparing the results with business model constructs given in literature 2002-2017 (Sismondo, 2010)
Realiability	Demonstrating that a study can be repeated with the same results"	Explaining the entire process in detail (Chapter 3) to develop confidence in the reader about the results, however, it is possible in a constructivist or interpretive paradigm that another researcher may come up with a unique set of conclusions because of the difference in his or her positionality (Andrade, 2009; Qin, 2016)

4.2 Empirical Data

To achieve the aim and objectives of this study, one member of the management team and two to three customers from each startup were interviewed. Respondents were assigned codes to preserve anonymity. The first letter denotes the case (Alpha, Bravo, or Charlie), the second denotes the respondent's role (Management or Customer), and, where applicable, a number distinguishes between customers within a given case. For example, the first customer of Case Alpha is coded AC1 (Alpha Customer 1), as shown in Fig 3.

Figure 3: Overview of Respondents

Code	Case	Management/Customer
AM	Alpha	Management
AC1	Alpha	Customer
AC2	Alpha	Customer
BM	Bravo	Management
BC1	Bravo	Customer
BC2	Bravo	Customer
BC3	Bravo	Customer
CM	Charlie	Management
CC1	Charlie	Customer
CC2	Charlie	Customer
CC3	Charlie	Customer

Questions based on Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism were developed to identify the brand identity of each case individually, addressing the dimensions of culture, physique, personality, self-image, reflection, and relationships. Additional questions were developed based on Keller's components

of brand image attitudes, benefits, and attributes as well as on communication, loyalty, and trust, which were identified in the literature review as key components of the branding process.

4.3 Case 1: Alpha

Alpha is an agricultural startup that supplies farming materials to farmers. The company comprises three partners and two employees responsible for coordination, and operates primarily on a business-to-consumer (B2C) basis, with limited business-to-business (B2B) activity.

4.3.1 Management

The management respondent interviewed for Alpha was the company's founder and chief executive officer. When asked what branding meant to the organization, respondent AM described it as “a way to highlight everything that a company has to offer and a way for customers to identify the vision of the company.” Respondent AM further explained that Alpha's branding efforts to date had centred on the creation of a logotype for use across media platforms.

4.3.2 Brand Identity

To describe Alpha's brand, a series of questions were posed to Respondent AM about the company's vision, culture, physique, personality, and relationships. In the area of vision, the respondent clearly had a vision about bringing farmers and markets together. Employees were reported as being open, friendly and contributing equally; and the company's culture was reported to be one that “thrived on each other's ideas.”

When asked to describe Alpha as if it were a person, respondent AM hesitated before responding, ultimately characterizing the imagined figure as “very rough and tough,” comparable to a Ford Mustang. The respondent further described this figure's characteristics as “very simple, soothing,” with a muscular physique.

Respondent AM highlighting the relationship between the company and its customers to that of a girlfriend, emphasizing the company's constant availability to farmers. The respondent distinguished Alpha from competitors on the basis of its specific focus on the farming community.

4.3.3 Brand Image

Questions were asked of the management respondent regarding the company's values, its work on building customer confidence, its benefits compared to its competitors and the perception it hoped that customers would have of the company. In relation to values, respondent AM, after some thought, came up with “our team, our drive to change, adaptable, honest.” As for trust, AM said that the founder and CEO is constantly available to support their customers, making them feel closer. The respondent also added his hope to be received by the customers “with open arms” which would see Alpha become a major service provider for farmers.

4.3.4 Customers

There were two customers involved in the study, both in the farming business.

Brand Identity

Both AC1 and AC2 characterized the company as young, honest and ambitious when asked to describe the company as a person, AC1 also characterizing the company as “up and coming”. In terms of body type, AC2 couldn't comment; AC1 said the figure he imagined had a normal,

unremarkable body.
Regarding the company and its customers, AC1 described the relationship as good, and said that if it declines, it would put their patronage at risk. Both AC1 and AC2 identified themselves as loyal to the group and AC1 added that the relationship between the group and them was very friendly.

Brand Image

AC2 noted that Alpha's values focus on building trust with customers and developing new ideas, and that honesty is one of the values they hold. AC1 agreed that Alpha's values are well aligned with his/her own and that one of the core values is being honest. The company has a point of view, different from that of the customer, but it's still easy to get in touch with Alpha to voice your own opinion," AC2 added. Absolute trust was reported by both respondents and they said that the owner's attitude was the reason that they continued to visit Alpha as opposed to other companies: AC2 specifically mentioned that Alpha's size made it more responsive and treat customers as family, whereas AC1 mentioned that Alpha's size makes it more aware of its reputation and brand.

4.4 Case 2: Bravo

Bravo is a new company that sells kitchenware and equipment to street vendors and micro businesses. The company is still run by its founder who is the only staff member. The company was established in 2014 and is still in a nascent stage, but has recently started venturing into unpaid consultancy services.

4.4.1 Management

Bravo's management respondent was the company's founder and its only employee. The person who was asked to define branding said that it is positioning, positioning of the product in customers' minds. Respondent BM stated that Bravo did not have a formal marketing budget and does not actively pursue marketing activity, but has engaged in some limited marketing efforts, and all activity directed towards customers was considered to be marketing activity.

4.4.2 Brand Identity

As far as vision, respondent BM explained that they had no vision in the beginning, but they've since evolved to a desire to become a "one-stop" shop for emerging startups and larger restaurants. The company's culture was friendly and flexible, the personality was selfless (showing philanthropic attributes) and the physique as tall and managed. Close and clear relationship with customers, with customers valued highly.

4.4.3 Brand Image

BM's response stated "Commitment, Trust, and Integrity" as key values of the company, and said that "Customer Trust is built on Honesty and Transparency". As for what they would like to think of Bravo in terms of desired customer perception, BM said he would like them to feel confident and professional. The company's competitive advantage was said to be that it could sell the products and services at much lower prices as compared to wholesalers.

4.4.4 Customers

Bravo's customer respondents are all in the restaurant & street-kitchen sector and are repeat loyal customers.

4.4.5 Brand Identity

Opinions about Bravo as a person were quite different: BC1 said he was youthful and innovative; BC2 said he was ambitious, kind, helpful and accommodating; and BC3 said he was flexible, responsive, and humble. As far as the physique is concerned, people did not have an easy time answering the question. While BC3 refused to comment, BC1 said that the physique was brave and innovative, and BC2 said that it was a new, fresh consultant with good ideas and the ability to make them happen.
A very good relationship with Bravo was perceived by all respondents. BC1 perceived that the relationship was not just a professional one, but one that goes beyond that and into the personal, while BC2 saw it as one of mutual dependence where both parties are invested in the success of Bravo's business.
When it comes to a preference for Bravo over competition, most of the respondents replied because there was little alternative, and that the company and the owners were friendly and they were able to interact personally with them.

4.5 Case 3: Charlie

Charlie is a health and fitness self-employed consultant, who offers services in the gym, health-related activities and fitness consultancy. The company was established in 2016 and currently has over 50 employees and many customers. Charlie's turnkey model is B2C, as it offers customers direct access to consultancy services.

4.5.1 Management

Charlie's management respondent was the owner of the firm. For the startup, the key focus has been operating efficiently and that was seen as a natural part of the process of developing the brand (as stated by the founder), branding was defined by respondent CM as how the organisation is perceived.

4.5.2 Brand Identity

Respondent CM described a vision that focused on expanding the business and market share in the health and fitness industry and made the company a place that customers could turn to for expert advice. The company's culture was described as being open and friendly, with a focus on openness to innovation and new ideas. The company's personality was characterized as “energetic, not giving up and strong,” while its physique was described as strong and dark-haired, brunette like a boxer in the ring not willing to give up. The environment regarding the employees' relationship with the customers was described as "good" and "open access for questions and clarification.

4.5.3 Brand Image

Respondent CM indicated that customer satisfaction was a key value, and that customers should feel they are getting what they paid for. Responsiveness, defined as appreciation and listening to customers' needs and desires, was another core value found, and this included the willingness to go the extra mile based on the organization’s relevant knowledge. These values, plus a dedication

to quality service, were said to be ways to gain customer confidence, as was effective communication.
The organisation aims to become a top health and fitness center, based on quality. Respondent CM claimed that Charlie differentiates itself from the competition because they are “young, we are hip”, which gives them an alternative perspective and openness to new ideas, which he went on to say he felt was the advantage of new startups over their competitors.

4.5.4 Customers

Charlie's customer respondents were all loyal to the company, but CC1 qualified this by adding that they would not be loyal unless they continued to have a good relationship with the company.

4.5.5 Brand Identity

People were not very clear when asked to tell about Charlie as a person. CC1 could not respond, due to limited interaction with the company; CC2 responded that the figure was "rough, strong, and professional"; and finally, CC3 responded briefly to the question with “enthusiastic.” The traits of the figure were similarly hard for the respondents to describe, with only CC3 providing a description, “stable.” 100% of the people who responded described their relationship with Charlie as good.

4.5.6 Brand Image

When asked about Charlie's value, there was a split opinion: CC1 identified his honesty and responsibility; CC2 noted that his value was communication skills that have proven to be successful; and CC3 noted that his values were enthusiasm and professionalism. Despite this, the themes of all the respondents were aligned with their own CC1 (Honesty), CC2 (Honesty) and CC3 (Enthusiasm). 100% of respondents also indicated that they trusted the company.
When asked why they selected Charlie over competition, the answers were varied: CC1 and CC2 both said that he was honest, and CC2 also said he was competitive in price and competent in the area. CC3 said he was enthusiastic and creative**.**

4.6 Analysis

Both within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted in order to identify internal factors relevant to each individual case, as well as similarities and differences across the three cases.

4.6.1 Within-Case Analysis

Within case analysis aims to generate insight into the relationship between brand identity and brand image within each individual case and to establish whether there is a difference between the two constructs. From the literature review it is evident that these two concepts should ideally go hand in hand (Nandan, 2005). Questions were asked looking at the brand identity as well as the brand image and the underlying components of both types of brands. For brand identity these elements align with Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism, without the dimension of culture, as the cases studied are an early stage of corporate development, which could lead to a misleading or unfeasible interpretation of this dimension by the respondents. The reflection element was analyzed by comparing the company's declared values with the values that are deemed important by the company's customers.
The three components of brand image, namely “attitudes”, “benefits” and “attributes” were analyzed. Whilst brand identity and brand image are two separate elements, there are similarities

between them for example, attributes can be communicated in brand personality terms, as conceptualized by Boyle (2003). If there is a correlation between management and customer answer to these questions, then there is no gap between brand identity and brand image. As described by Aaker (2004), brand image is the total of the subjective associations that the customer has with a brand, which are measured in this analysis using the three elements of the brand image: attributes, attitudes and benefits.

4.6.2 Analysis of Alpha

The first stage of the Alpha analysis addresses the correlation between management's and customers' perceptions of the company's brand identity. The responses given by both parties, summarized in the previous section, are presented comparatively in Table 1.

To determine whether Alpha's brand identity is internally coherent, each of the five components was analyzed individually, enabling conclusions regarding the overall alignment of its brand identity. The same procedure was subsequently applied to brand image across its three constituent components.

Physique

Respondent AM described the imagined figure representing Alpha as conditioned for optimal performance strong and fit, akin to a Ford Mustang. Alpha's customers, AC1 and AC2, similarly described the figure as robust and strong. This convergence suggests that management and customers hold a broadly consistent view of the company's physique.

Personality

Responses regarding personality were similarly convergent in tone, both parties characterizing Alpha positively. Respondent AM described the company's personality as strong and outward-engaging, while customers characterized it as youthful and ambitious.

Relationship

Management's and customers' perceptions of the relationship were closely aligned. Respondent AM likened the customer relationship to that of family, emphasizing responsiveness, while both customer respondents similarly described the relationship as close and accommodating, indicating alignment on this dimension.

Self-Image

Different questions were posed to management and customers regarding self-image: management were asked how they wished to be perceived, while customers were asked what signals they perceived from the company. Respondent AM expressed a desire to be perceived with openness in recognition of the company's quality service. Customers, in turn, reported perceiving signals of dedication and seriousness. Although both sets of responses were positive in direction, they did not directly correspond.

Reflection

Both management and customers were asked whether the company's values reflected those of its customers. Respondent AM believed the company's values were well reflected in those of its

customers, a view shared by the customer respondents themselves, indicating clear alignment on this component of brand identity.

4.6.3 Brand Image Comparison of Alpha

Attitudes

Customers expressed a positive attitude toward Alpha, describing the company as honest, dedicated, and responsive.

Benefits

Responses regarding Alpha's benefits relative to competitors were closely aligned between management and customers, both identifying the company's diversified business activities as a key benefit.

Attributes

As attributes may be considered analogous to personality, the corresponding analysis is presented above under Personality.

Conclusions of Alpha

Comparison of Tables 1 and 2 reveals both similarities and differences between management's and customers' perceptions of the brand. Personality and physique exhibit some divergence, whereas relationship and reflection demonstrate closer alignment.

4.6.4 Analysis of Bravo

Bravo was analyzed using the same approach applied to Alpha; the comparison between management's and customers' perceptions of Bravo's brand identity is presented in Table 3.

Physique

Respondent BM described Bravo's physique as well-behaved and down-to-earth. Customers instead described the figure as young, fresh, innovative, and consultant-like, with strong ideas. Although a gap exists between these characterizations, they point in a broadly similar direction—terms such as “well-trained” and “fresh” may be regarded as compatible, depending on individual interpretation of a consultant's appearance. The responses may therefore be considered proximate, if not identical.

Personality

Respondent BM characterized Bravo's personality as hardworking, simple, and concise, while customers described it as humble, flexible, fast-responding, youthful, innovative, helpful, and accommodating. As with physique, these characterizations align in general direction, though no precise correspondence exists in the specific terms used.

Relationship

Respondent BM described the customer relationship as clear and close, with customers treated as a high priority. Customers similarly characterized the relationship as very good, spanning both professional and personal dimensions—consistent with management's emphasis on prioritizing customers and maintaining closeness.

Self-Image

Responses regarding self-image diverged: respondent BM expressed a desire for Bravo to be perceived as a large, leading name, whereas customers instead reported perceiving signals of commitment. As with the preceding components, these responses point in a broadly similar direction without constituting a precise match.

Reflection

Respondent BM indicated that Bravo's values were believed to reflect fairly well on those of its customers, a view corroborated by the customer respondents, indicating clear alignment and no discernible gap in this component.

4.6.5 Brand Image Comparison of Bravo

Attitudes

Customer attitudes toward Bravo were uniformly positive, with respondents expressing appreciation for the company's kindness and helpfulness indicating a generally favorable disposition toward the brand.

Benefits

Respondent BM identified Bravo's accommodating and fair dealings as its principal benefit relative to competitors. Customers instead cited personal interaction, kindness, and good communication as benefits; notably, one customer was uncertain whether direct competitors even existed.

Attributes

Management characterized Bravo's attributes as hardworking, dedicated, and professional, while customers described the company as ambitious, with aspirations to achieve significant success and establish itself as a leading name in the market.

Conclusion of Bravo

Comparison of management's and customers' perceptions of Bravo's brand identity and brand image reveals a slight misalignment. While components such as physique, self-image, and personality were broadly similar in direction, they did not demonstrate full congruence. Relationship and reflection, by contrast, showed close correspondence, suggesting that the close relationship and effective communication reported by customers may account for the comparatively narrow gap observed in this case; all customer respondents characterized the relationship positively and expressed appreciation for it.

4.6.6 Analysis of Charlie

Charlie was analyzed using the same components applied to Alpha and Bravo.

Physique

Respondent CM described the imagined figure representing Charlie as a strong, dark-haired individual dressed in a suit. When customers were asked the same question, two were unable to respond due to limited interaction with the company; the sole response offered characterized the figure as stable. This divergence indicates a misalignment between management's and customers' perceptions.

Personality

Management described the figure's personality as helpful and reassuring, while customers offered non-identical but similarly positive characterizations, describing the figure as enthusiastic, committed, kind, and professional.

Relationship

Respondent CM characterized the customer relationship as good, noting that customers are welcome to ask questions and request clarification. Customer respondents concurred, characterizing the relationship as good indicating alignment on this dimension.

Self-Image

Self-image emerged as a further point of divergence: management expressed a desire for the company to be perceived as a leading, quality-focused fitness center, with respondent CM additionally citing time efficiency, whereas customers instead identified flexibility, responsibility, and seriousness as the signals they perceived.

Reflection

All customer respondents considered their values closely aligned with, and well reflected by, the company a perception corroborated by respondent CM, who likewise believed the company's values were fairly well reflected in those of its customers.

4.6.7 Brand Image Comparison of Charlie

Attitudes

Customers did not articulate explicit attitudes toward Charlie; however, all respondents noted and appreciated the company's positive and helpful disposition.

Benefits

Responses regarding Charlie's benefits relative to competitors diverged between management and customers: management cited the company's youthfulness and novelty, whereas customers instead cited competence a clear point of difference, particularly given management's emphasis on novelty as against customers' emphasis on competency.

Attributes

Management characterized Charlie's attributes as enthusiastic and committed, whereas customers instead described the company as helpful.

4.6.8 Conclusions of Charlie

Comparison of management's and customers' perceptions across the examined components of brand identity and brand image reveals an overall divergence, with benefits and physique showing particularly clear misalignment. Although certain components corresponded between management and customers, mismatched components were more numerous overall.
One customer identified potential scope for improving communication between the company and its customers; this modest communication gap may partly account for the comparatively larger misalignment observed in Charlie relative to Bravo. Respondents also emphasized the importance of a strong relationship, with one noting that continued loyalty to Charlie was contingent upon the maintenance of this relationship an observation consistent with findings from the Bravo case, in which customers similarly emphasized the value of a close relationship and its associated benefits.

4.6.9 Cross Case Analysis among startups

The process of cross-case analysis revealed some similarities and differences in the congruency of the brand identity and brand image of the three startup ventures. The overall results suggest that certain aspects of the brand identity were interpreted in a similar way by the customers on every occasion while others varied in degree of interpretation. The degree of alignment was very high among the six dimensions, with the highest being the relationship dimension in all three cases. This indicates that the management's relationship with customers and the target customer profile were perceived by the customers throughout. Physique and personality were most different, however, between the cases.
The dimensions were less consistently interpreted by customers, and in two of the three cases there was either a partial or complete misalignment. There were also differences in the cases found in the comparison. Charlie showed the highest overall alignment with none of the dimensions being not aligned. These were more variable for Alpha and Bravo, with some dimensions being only fairly aligned or not aligned, pointing to some variation between the intended identity of the management and the customer's perceptions.

5. Findings, Recommendations & Conclusions

5.1 Findings

Three principal conclusions emerge from the analysis. First, a gap exists between brand identity and brand image across all three cases examined in this study. Second, this gap is generally larger in the case of Charlie than in Alpha or Bravo. Third, the findings inferred confirm the claims of Nandan (2005) and Kapferer (2008) regarding the relationship between communication, trust, and loyalty.
This study demonstrates that effective communication can foster trust and loyalty toward a company. A further factor contributing to Bravo's comparatively stronger performance relative to Alpha and Charlie was the quality of its customer relationships. Accordingly, communication and relationship management should be regarded as key components of branding efforts among

startups, given their influence on both brand identity and brand image a conclusion consistent with the existing literature reviewed in this study.
In summary, the study's two sub-objectives have been achieved. Regarding the first examining whether a gap exists between brand identity and brand image among startups such a gap has been identified and confirmed. Regarding the second identifying the key factors influencing brand identity and brand image among startups this study identifies relationship and communication as the principal factors. As noted in the introduction, Merrilees (2007) characterizes the intersection of branding and small business as something of an oxymoron; the findings of this study suggest that this intersection should instead be regarded as a promising area for further research.

5.2 Recommendations

From the findings, it can be concluded that start-ups should have a systematic approach to the management of their brand identity and brand image during their development. It is recommended that organisations periodically review customer perceptions of the brand to understand how far the brand's actual image differs from its intended one, before inconsistencies have the potential to damage brand equity. Startups should also develop comprehensive communication strategies which will ensure that there is a consistent brand message when communicating through both online and offline channels. Also, founders should be proactive in sharing organisational values with their employees as there is a higher chance of alignment with external brand consistency. Branding efforts should be continued not only to establish unique logos, but also to provide consistent customer experiences that will help reinforce the desired brand personality and organizational values. Through the ability to match the internal brand identity with the customer's external perception, startups can boost their competitive edge, build customer confidence and loyalty and ensure greater long-term sustainability in increasingly competitive markets.

5.3 Limitations

Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. The methodological choices made may not represent the optimal approach: non-probability sampling was employed to identify respondents, and, as argued by Saunders et al. (2009), this technique may reduce the representativeness of the sample relative to the broader population. Self-selection and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants; these techniques may not have been ideal, and their use may have influenced both the credibility of the study and the potential for participant bias for instance, customers recruited through snowball sampling may have been more reserved in their responses. The interview questions posed to management and customer participants may additionally have been misunderstood or suboptimally phrased. Although this is a multi-case study, it remains a small-scale, qualitative investigation; further research is required before broader generalizations can be drawn.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research design. As noted above, its findings do not support broad generalization. Future research should employ a sampling technique better suited to generalization, and a larger-scale quantitative study is recommended to establish the broader extent of the misalignment identified here.
This study represents an initial step in identifying a potential problem, building on the premise established in the introduction that misalignment between brand identity and brand image exists among large, established companies. This study demonstrates that such misalignment also characterizes small startups. Future research is encouraged to undertake comparative analysis of brand identity brand image congruence and brand-building processes between established firms

and startups, in order to clarify the differences between the two and identify the steps startups should take to build brand identity. A further avenue for future research would be to incorporate the perspective of employees, who represent an important source of insight in the brand-building process given their direct contact with customers; incorporating employees' perceptions of their brand and company may contribute to the cultivation of a more positive brand identity.

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