

Brand Identity and Brand Image Congruence to Improve Branding Practices: A Multi-Case Study on Startups

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the link between Brand Identity (BID) and Brand Image (BIM) in startups operating in the service sector. The research aims to identify how incongruence between BID and BIM can lead to business failures, utilizing Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism to assess the alignment between these elements. This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing both within-case and cross-case analysis to comprehensively understand the phenomena. The within-case analysis focuses on the BID and BIM elements of individual cases. In contrast, the cross-case analysis compares the results from three different cases to examine the misalignment among the elements of BID and BIM. Data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires, capturing the perspectives of both owners and customers. The findings indicate a misalignment between BID and BIM, particularly in the aspects of brand personality, brand physique, and self-image. However, the study found that the relationship and communication elements were fairly aligned, suggesting that effective communication by the company can help create a distinctive brand image and make the brand stand out. The results of this study deepen the understanding of the branding process within startups in the service industry.

1 Introduction

This research investigates and tries to comprehend the way to build a brand. According to Parris and Guzman (2022), the depiction of a brand's identity is strongly tied to the image it projects, which takes several years to process. A brand is not just the name of the company and what it sells but everything that the company represents for its customers and society. It goes far beyond a logo and deals with decorating environments, labels, packaging, and everything linked to a company's image. For example, when we think of the Disney brand, we refer to a world of fantasies, which can be lived in its parks, movies or with its products. (Aaker, 1996).

Chan (2023) contends that branding and the company's success go side by side. Therefore, the author sheds light on the importance of the branding process, which includes coherence and alignment between BID and BIM. Suppose companies fail to successfully create alignment between BID and BIM. In that case, it will lead to company failure and loss of customer loyalty and emotional connectivity with the brand because brands with well-built positioning and values are much more likely to captivate consumers. As a result, this research explores the congruence between BID and BIM within the context of startups. Despite the absence of a universally acknowledged definition of startups in the literature, one frequently cited definition is that proposed by Steve Blank. As articulated by Blank (2013), a startup is "a temporary organization designed to search for a repeatable and scalable business model" (p. 67).

1.1 Problem Discussion

Sánchez-Robles (2023) highlights that new businesses and startups encounter distinct hurdles because they have limited financial and human capital. These resources are crucial for establishing themselves in the market and gaining a competitive edge. Therefore, approximately twenty-four per cent of startups fail within their initial two years, with a staggering 63 per cent failing within the first six years of operation. While determining a precise success rate remains elusive, it is widely accepted that startup failure rates exceed those of established firms (Aminova & Marchi, 2021, Davidson et al., 2019)). Despite this reality, entrepreneurs often encounter a dearth of guidance in traditional literature regarding branding startups (Merrilees, 2007). Besides resource limitation, the other contributing factor that leads to startup failure is the misalignment between BID and BIM.

Moreover, this concept has been widely debated, so the literature collects several definitions of brand identity. Manavis et al. (2023) suggest BID originates from the

company. It is how the brand sees itself, being responsible for differentiating its products and services through the aspects it offers.

The brand image concept has undergone major changes since it was introduced in the study of customer behavior in the 50s. Guliyev (2023) defines it as the customer's perception of the brand, which arises from interactions between the brand and its audiences. This image is the client's perception or reading of the brand's identity. That is, it is how it absorbs the brand elements projected by the company. Therefore, incoherence between BID and BIM will lead to the failure of startups in their early stages, and these startups don't enter into the maturity stage of lifecycle. To become a big brand name like NIKE or Disney, companies have to go through rigorous internal processes for the brand-building process.

1.2 Aim, Objectives and Research Questions

The fundamental goal of this research is to understand the brand-building process in a startup environment and verify the congruence between the company's vision (corporate identity) and its customer's perception (brand image). The objective of this study is to determine whether a gap exists between BID and BIM among startups.

The following research question has been formulated to achieve the study's objectives to understand the brand-building process in startups and examine the alignment between BID and BIM.:

Is there any misalignment between BID and BIM among startups?

2 Literature Review

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

2.1 Importance of Branding for Startups

Branding is important for start-up companies who wish to establish a foothold in market segments where they are likely to face stiff competition from established competitors. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism artfully describes how the distinct aspects of a brand can be synthesized and aligned to form an overarching brand identity that is strong and consistent. Their focus on the consistency and coherence of the brand messages is especially important for startups, as they require people to recognize and trust them from the beginning (Aghazadeh et al., 2023; Sharma & Sharma, 2023). More specifically, there has been an increased emphasis on branding and brand identity's role in evaluating customer loyalty and market positions.

Iglesias and Ind (2020) uphold how the development of a clear brand image is uniformly helpful in creating close connections best useful for start-up organizations interested in stable customer relations. For the same reason, Brexendorf et. al., (2017) state that brand identity consistency is crucial for developing brand equity and customer relations management, which supports the utility of the Kapferers model for startups.

Comparison with Kapferer's Brand Identify Prism reveals how startups can systematically deal with various aspects of a brand. Thus, startups can adapt to the lack of specific business values by stressing elements such as the visible image and emotional and cultural touch points, allowing them to construct a unique story to set them apart from rivals. Dessart et al. (2020) observed that this is crucial to managing brand ecosystems in the modern world and creating long-lasting brands appealing to the target market.

However, it is also imperative to highlight some of the criticisms that can be levelled against using the Brand Identity Prism, not least of which is its complexity. The framework requires extensive time and effort, though these are likely significant problems mainly in the early stage when startups have limited funds. Kapferer (2009) notes that the

existence of multiple dimensions of the prism means that understanding them may be complex. In contrast, it can be challenging for newcomers to the market to gain extensive expertise in a short period. Organizations face the risk of dealing with this complexity to the detriment of other more important tasks, which in a way, might slow growth and practical adaptability.

Additionally, the adaptability of the Brand Identity Prism in diverse and rapidly changing market environments has been questioned. Pilz Sonnby and Knutsson (2022) argue that the model assumes a level of market stability and homogeneity that might not exist in all contexts. Startups operating in different cultural or volatile markets may struggle to maintain consistency across all prism facets, leading to a diluted brand identity. This inconsistency can make it harder for startups to establish a strong and cohesive brand presence, highlighting a potential limitation of Kapferer's framework.

2.2 Origin of Brand

The term "brand" in the Anglo-Saxon context traces its etymological roots back to the ancient Scandinavian term "brandr," which originally referred to burning. The Saxons adopted this term, associating it with marking or burning objects. Historically, this practice involved marking heads and pieces of cattle to signify ownership and possession, facilitating the identification of material goods. This practice conferred an advantage upon cattle breeders, as it allowed them to distinguish their animals and establish their reputation based on the quality of their livestock. Consequently, breeders with well-known brands enjoyed increased recognition and demand in commercial transactions (Thakor, 1996). Over time, the term "brand" has become synonymous with the act or consequence of branding.

From the 19th century onward, especially with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, brands started to achieve widespread prominence. The shift towards mass

production and commercialization during this period played a significant role in popularizing branding practices. Many brands that emerged during this era, such as Coca-Cola, Quaker, and Heinz, still endure today. Notably, the primary function of brands, namely, the identification and differentiation of products, goods, or services, remains a fundamental aspect of branding even in contemporary times.

2.3 Branding: The Strategy for Building a Brand

Branding involves a series of activities dedicated solely to managing a brand, starting from its inception and continuing through its growth. It functions through various methods, including visual and verbal identity, sensory engagement, and shaping the brand's position on products or services. (Fu et al., 2024; Keller, 2023; Zéman & Bogdan, 2019 & Iyer & Paswan, 2018).

2.4 Scholarly Definitions of Brand

A brand is a symbol representing a company, embodying a set of concepts that signify the promises a company makes to its customers. It communicates what customers can expect from its products and services and distinguishes the company from its competitors. Closa et al., (2021) a brand goes far beyond creating a logo; the brand represents who you are, who you want to be and how people will perceive you. In short, brand is the whole set of actions that represent the company. (Gaski, 2020).

2.5 Brand Identity

Identity is like the foundation that forms a brand. It's what gives a brand its direction, purpose, and significance. This identity helps steer the business decisions and financial strategies, outlines the commercial and communication goals, and communicates a particular sense or concept through its symbols.

In this perspective, organizational identity is understood as the concentration of information that integrates the dominant, lasting and consensual meanings, instituted as narratives that project the organization's image in the most favourable direction (Ward et al., 2020). However, as will be seen below, this concept has been widely debated in the community, academically and professionally. Still, it is not, for that reason, consensual and hermetic.

2.6 The Concept of Corporate Identity

According to Guzman-Serratos et al. (2024), identity thus constitutes a means for organizations to assert their difference concerning others, with whom they relate in the market, seeking to affirm their reputation and loyalty of their customers and employees. The current definition of identity goes even further when considering that this is the mirror of social, cultural and psychological characteristics of the company's audiences, or their aspirations personal and social, rather than the internal interpretations (Erjansola & Lipponen, 2024).

The brand identity serves as a guardrail for communication in order to build up a clear brand image and reflect the self-image of a company. Kolosok et al., (2017) For this brand identity to be properly and consistently communicated to the outside world, it is essential that a company's customers also know, understand, and, above all, accept and support the brand identity. Basically, the more easily understandable and the more transparent the brand content is presented and communicated, the higher the alignment develops in the mind of the customer (Çil & Pangburn, 2017).

2.7 Brand Identity Prism by Kapferer

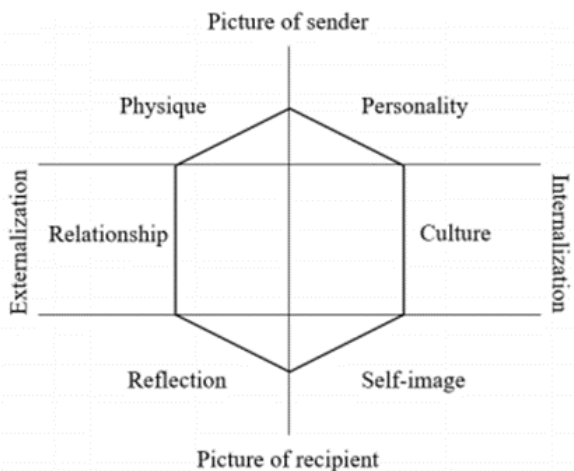
Kapferer developed the Brand Identity Prism, a detailed plan to explain all the different parts of brand identity. It helps people understand how brands are seen and built.

The prism discusses personality, culture, relationships, and how customers see the brand. This conceptual framework emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the signals emitted by the brand and the interpretations made by its audience, considering this interaction as an integrated process. Comprising six facets—physical (Phy), personality (Pers), culture, relationship (Rel), reflection (Ref), and self-image (SI)—the Kapferer Brand Identity Prism delineates two.

2.8 Elements of Brand Identity Prism

The brand identity prism has two dimensions: Sender-Receiver and Exteriorization-Interiorization dimensions. The Sender-Receiver dimension underscores the brand's capacity to be perceived as a distinct entity with tangible attributes (physical and personality facets) and embodying characteristics reflective of its target audience (reflection and self-image facets). The Exteriorization-Interiorization dimension discerns between the social dimensions of the brand that manifest externally (physical, relationship, and reflection facets) and those internalized within the brand itself (personality, culture, and self-image facets).

Figure 1 Brand Identity Prism



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

2.9 Brand Identity Facets

The physical (Phy) dimension encompasses the brand's objective, tangible characteristics that consumers remember when the brand is brought up. According to the author, this aspect should be considered the basic structure on which the brand should be built. Kapferer goes even further by stating that no brand attracts attention to itself if it does not appeal to its material benefits differently, and the problem may be to evoke that difference (Kapferer, 2009).

A brand's personality (Pers) encapsulates its distinctive characteristics and traits, akin to the personality traits of individuals. Through consistent and well-crafted brand communication strategies, brands can imbue themselves with human-like attributes, fostering a sense of familiarity and connection with consumers. This is often achieved through specific language styles, visual elements such as logos, fonts, and color palettes, and the overall tone conveyed in advertisements and marketing materials. By cultivating a strong and recognizable personality, brands can differentiate themselves in crowded markets, evoke emotions, and build lasting relationships with their target audience (Kapferer, 2009).

The relational (Rel) dimension of branding focuses on how a brand interacts and engages with its customers, covering every touchpoint throughout the customer journey. Particularly significant for service-oriented businesses, the quality of these interactions directly influences customer satisfaction and loyalty. By prioritizing customer engagement and delivering exceptional experiences, service brands can foster trust, loyalty, and advocacy among their customer base, ultimately driving long-term success and sustainability. (Kapferer, 2009). Brand culture refers to the collection of beliefs and standards that dictate a brand's behaviour. This aspect can set a brand apart, turning it into

what some may call a "cult" brand. Culture forms the direct connection between the brand and the organization it represents (Kapferer, 2009).

The reflection (Ref) refers to how consumers perceive brands in a particular way. The author stresses, however, that the brand should not necessarily seek to build its reflection according to the target audience it intends to reach, but according to the characteristics that this group appreciates. This aspect reveals how consumers desire to be perceived after engaging with the brand. (Kapferer, 2009).

The self-image (SI) is the internal mirror of consumers, reflecting what they feel about the brand. Kapferer considers this an essential aspect to consider when building a brand because understanding what motivates consumers adds more strength to the brand. Look at the following example to clarify this facet: Lacoste brand customers see themselves as belonging to sports clubs (associated with prestige), even if they do not practice any type of sport, so it is important to always emphasize this facet (Kapferer, 2009).

2.10 Brand Image

The term "image" in English refers to a visual representation, while in the context of branding, it denotes the overall perception that consumers and society hold about a brand. Brand image encompasses a broad spectrum of ideas, opinions, associations, and emotions linked to a brand or its products. It delineates the external viewpoint of a brand, contrasting with the concept of brand identity, which pertains to a company's self-perception. Various perspectives exist regarding the formation of brand image: Aaker (1991) posits it as a collection of associations, while Park and MacInnis (1986) suggest it arises from organizational activities and consumer perceptions of these actions, and Koh et al. (2022) propose that brand image is rooted in attitudes, character, and credibility. Nonetheless, Wijaya (2013) concludes that brand image is shaped by consumer perceptions

and their associations with the brand. Additionally, the alignment between brand identity and consumer preferences can positively impact brand image, facilitating successful brand positioning, as emphasized by Balmer & Podnar (2021).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

3.1.1 Research Approach

There are two widely used research approaches: qualitative and quantitative. The primary aim of the qualitative approach is to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject rather than to measure it (Bhangu et al., 2023; Tufa & Kant, 2023). This approach provides a detailed description of the situation related to the research problem and relies on a few respondents. In qualitative research, several variables are thoroughly investigated among a limited number of entities. Our research process employed a qualitative approach because it allows for a detailed examination that leads to a deeper understanding of the case. This research uses a qualitative approach to address the research question, which quantitative analysis cannot address. The results are not quantifiable in terms of "how many" or "how much," making an exploratory case study approach more suitable (Yadav, 2022; Silverman et al., 2021 & Allan, 2020).

3.1.2 Research Strategy

There are three major research strategies: experiments, surveys & case studies (Bhangu et al., 2023). Thomson (2020) also agreed with these three research strategies and describes that a case study approach is suitable for a research problem formulated to explore unidentified factors. A case study is an in-depth, narrow exploration of a single entity, such as an organization, a group of people, a campaign, or an event bound by time and place. (Sjoberg, 2020). This research employs a singular, intrinsic case study approach to thoroughly explore a distinct phenomenon: the brand identity and brand image of the

startups in the light of the Brand Identity (BID) prism. Although the research is limited in its ability to make broad generalizations, it has the potential to provide valuable insights into the alignment of brand identity facets from the lens of brand image customers carry.

3.2 Population and Sampling

3.2.1 *Sampling Method*

In this study, participants of interest have been sampled purposively. This sample selection approach permits the researcher to selectively target people with certain qualities, history, or information relevant and valuable to the goals of the research study. Purposive sampling, a type of targeted selection that identifies the population with the greatest likelihood of providing specific and detailed information relevant to the research questions, was deemed suitable for this study.

3.2.2 *Sample Size and Data Saturation*

The study includes three startups. Despite its small size, it offers enough information to address the research questions. As Patton (2002, p. 230) mentioned, qualitative research often delves deeply into relatively small samples, even single cases (n=1).

3.2.3 *Study Plan*

As a starting point for this case study, the author discussed the study needs with the startup owners and decided to explore the themes of identity and BIM together. This was followed by a review of the available bibliography and identifying the type of information to collect within the company. Thus, conducting a semi-structured interview with the startup owners was decided to learn the desired corporate identity, understand how it is being communicated to its internal and external audience, and determine what image has been achieved. Based on the information collected in the interview, two questionnaires were built: one destined for the startup owners and another for the customers of the startups.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

3.3.1 Data Collection

Gathering the right amount of relevant information is vital in research. According to Jones (2022), defining a "case study" relies on the features of the phenomenon studied and how data is collected and analyzed. In this case, primary information sources were used exclusively since they sought specific information for analysis. In this way, it was possible to eliminate the bias caused by the subjectivity or errors of others in the analysis of the information and exclude non-relevant information. Thus, semi-structured interview with the startup's owners and its customers was conducted to gain firsthand information (Interview guide attached).

3.3.2 Data Analysis Method

The preferred approach for analyzing qualitative data often involves relying on theoretical propositions. According to Kwekha-Rashid et al. (2023), the most commonly utilized strategy is cross-case synthesis when dealing with multiple cases. This method is recommended when conducting case studies and data analysis sequentially (Cruzes et al., 2015). In this study, a sequential approach has been adopted, comprising within-case analysis followed by cross-case analysis.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

3.4.1 Reliability

"Reliability pertains to the degree to which the methods employed for data collection or analysis produce consistent results" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 156). As outlined by the authors, achieving greater reliability involves ensuring that measures consistently yield similar outcomes across different instances, that different observers arrive at comparable observations, and that the process of deriving meaning from raw data is transparent.

Additionally, the authors identify four potential threats to reliability in a study: participant errors, participant biases, observer errors, and observer biases. According to Saunders and Bezzina (2015), time constraints for participants and observer biases pose significant threats to interview-based data collection. However, by ensuring voluntary participation and utilizing voice recordings to capture verbatim responses, the reliability of this study has been enhanced.

3.4.2 Validity

Validity comprises internal validity and external validity (Yin, 2009). In a case study research design, internal validity focuses on potential interference encountered during the study (Yin, 2009). Employing the analytical pattern-matching method is one way to address internal validity concerns (Ayres, 2003). Thus, pattern matching has been utilized in the cross-case analysis of this study to enhance internal validity. External validity pertains to the extent to which findings can be applied beyond the specific cases examined (Saunders et al., 2009). Critics argue that case studies often lack the breadth for generalization, particularly single case studies (Yin, 2009). However, this concern predominantly applies to single case studies, not multiple case studies. However, this study focuses on multiple case studies.

3.5 Respondents Profile

To achieve the objectives of this study, one member of the management team from each startup, along with two to three customers per startup, was interviewed. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure participant anonymity as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Respondents Profile

Pseudo Names	Case	Management (M)/Customer (C)
Anas	Alpha	M
Ali	Alpha	C

Atiq	Alpha	C
Bilal	Bravo	M
Bushra	Bravo	C
Bilawal	Bravo	C
Chishti	Charlie	M
Chaman	Charlie	C
Chaudhry	Charlie	C

Questions adapted from the brand identity prism were employed to analyze the brand identity of each specific case. These questions explored different aspects such as culture, physical characteristics, personality traits, self-perception, reflection, and internal relationships within the organization. Furthermore, inquiries inspired by Keller’s three components of brand image—attitudes (Att), benefits (Benef), and attributes (Attri)—were integrated. Lastly, additional questions regarding communication, loyalty, and trust were included, as these elements were recognized as crucial in the literature review.

3.5.1 Case 1: Alpha

Alpha is a farming startup that supplies agricultural materials to farmers. It consists of three partners and employs two staff members for coordination. While its main focus is on serving consumers (B2C), it also engages in limited business-to-business (B2B) activities.

3.5.1.1 Management.

Anas is the founder and CEO. When asked about what branding means to them, they explained that it's a way to showcase everything the company offers and helps customers understand its vision. They also mentioned that Company Alpha has focused on branding by creating and promoting its logo on different media platforms.

3.5.1.2 Brand Identity.

When talking to respondent Anas about Company Alpha's vision, culture, appearance, personality, and relationships, they shared valuable insights. They said the company's vision is about linking farmers with markets. They described the startup's culture as open and friendly, emphasizing employee teamwork and idea-sharing. When

asked to imagine Company Alpha as a person, respondent Anas compared it to a tough and rugged individual with simple and calming characteristics, akin to a Ford Mustang. They described this person as muscular. The respondent stressed the importance of the company's relationship with its customers, likening it to a supportive girlfriend who is always there for farmers. Additionally, they noted the uniqueness of their industry, highlighting that they are farmers while others are not.

3.5.1.3 Brand Image.

The Alpha founder was asked many questions about the company's values, how they gain customer trust, their advantages, and what image they want customers to have of them. When queried about the company's values, the respondent took some time to reflect before stating that the team, drive for change, adaptability, and honesty are paramount. Regarding efforts to earn customer trust, respondent Anas emphasized the founder and CEO's accessibility, highlighting their availability round-the-clock to assist and communicate with customers. They want customers to feel like they belong to and are close to them. When talking about how they want customers to see them, Anas said they want to be greeted warmly and known as a top provider of services for farmers.

3.5.1.4 Customers.

Two customers who use Alpha's farming services participated in this study.

3.5.1.5 Brand Identity.

When asked to describe Company Alpha as if it were a person, both participants described it as young and honest. They also mentioned that Alpha is ambitious, with Ali calling it "up and coming." When discussing the physical appearance of this imaginary person representing Alpha, Atiq chose not to respond, while Ali described them as having an average body type and unremarkable. Respondent Ali reported a positive relationship between Alpha and the respondents. Ali further explained that the relationship with the

company is very amicable and accommodating. Respondent Atiq expressed loyalty as a customer thus far.

3.5.1.6 Brand Image.

Atiq expressed that Alpha's values centre around fostering customer trust, generating innovative ideas, and upholding honesty as a core principle. Additionally, Ali remarked that these values resonate well with their values. However, Atiq acknowledged the possibility of differing perspectives between themselves and the company but emphasized the ease of communication with Alpha to present their viewpoint.

Both respondents affirmed their complete trust in Company Alpha. They attributed their loyalty to Alpha primarily to the considerate and responsive nature of the company's owner. Atiq highlighted Alpha's responsiveness and the familial relationship cultivated with customers as key advantages over competitors. In contrast, Ali emphasized the benefit of Alpha being a smaller company, allowing them to prioritize their brand and reputation, leading to heightened care and attention to customer needs.

3.5.2 Case 2: Bravo

The 2nd case, Bravo, is a startup that supplies kitchen appliances and equipment to small-scale or roadside eateries. At present, the company's founder is its sole employee. Despite being in a phase of expansion, Bravo remains struggling. Notably, the company recently ventured into consultancy services, albeit non-paid. Established in 2014, Bravo continues to navigate the challenges associated with its growth trajectory.

3.5.2.1 Management

Bravo's founder, the sole employee of the startup, explained branding as ensuring people remember the product well. They also said branding means making sure the product stands out in people's minds. Respondent Bilal asserted that Bravo operates without a designated marketing budget and does not actively engage in branding initiatives. Instead,

they highlighted the company's efforts toward customers and end-users as integral components of its marketing strategy.

3.5.2.2 *Brand Identity.*

When asked about the company's vision, respondent Bilal explained that Bravo initially operated without a clear vision but has since aimed to become a comprehensive solution provider for emerging startups and established restaurants. Bilal described the company's culture as friendly and flexible. Personifying Bravo, Bilal imagined a generous individual with philanthropic traits, portrayed as tall and well-presented. Furthermore, Bilal underscored the close and transparent bond between the company and its customers, emphasizing their focus on meeting customer needs.

3.5.2.3 *Brand Image.*

According to respondent Bilal, some core values of Bravo include commitment, trust, and integrity. Bilal elaborated that the company endeavours to cultivate customer trust through honesty and transparency, emphasizing honesty as a key factor in establishing and maintaining customer trust. Regarding how Bilal envisions customers perceiving Bravo, they aspire for the company to be regarded as confident and professional. Bilal identified a competitive advantage of Bravo over its competitors by offering goods and services at significantly lower prices than wholesalers.

3.5.2.4 *Customers.*

All who use Bravo's services in this study are from restaurants or street kitchens. Plus, everyone interviewed says they keep returning to Bravo and are loyal customers.

3.5.2.5 *Brand Identity.*

When asked to describe Bravo as if it were a person, Bushra said it's young and creative, while Bilawal said it's ambitious, kind, helpful, and flexible. Bilawal liked Bravo's physique to that of a young, fresh consultant with great ideas. When asked about the relationship with Bravo, all respondents reported a very positive connection. Bushra noted

that the relationship transcends mere professionalism and extends to a personal level. Bilawal described it as a mutual dependence where both parties desire Bravo's success. Respondents highlighted several reasons for choosing Bravo over competitors, citing limitations in competitors to Bravo. They emphasized benefits such as personal interaction, flexibility, and the friendliness of the company owner as key factors differentiating Bravo from its competitors.

3.5.2.6 Brand Image.

When discussing the perceived values of Bravo among customers, Bilawal views their values as innovation, honesty, modernity, and accommodation. Bushra agrees with the values of accommodation and adds flexibility. When asked if these values align with their own, all respondents claim they are either fully or fairly aligned. Additionally, all respondents unanimously express trust in Bravo. Regarding why respondents choose Bravo over competitors, the majority cite limitations in competitors compared to Bravo. They highlight benefits such as personal interaction, flexibility, and the adaptability of Bravo's product offerings as reasons for their choice.

3.5.3 Case 3: Charlie

The 3rd case, Charlie, is a consultant who works independently in the Health & Fitness field. This startup provides gym, health, and fitness services. Established in 2016, it has acquired numerous customers and employs over 50 staff members. Charlie operates in a business-to-consumer (B2C) model, where customers directly access their services and consultancy.

3.5.3.1 Management.

When discussing branding, Charlie's owner described how others perceive and experience their company. However, they admitted that their startup hasn't prioritized branding efforts. Their main focus is simply doing their work to the best of their ability. They believe that by excelling in their services, they naturally establish their brand.

3.5.3.2 *Brand Identity.*

The respondent highlights the company's vision to expand and establish a stronger health and fitness industry presence. Chishti emphasizes the aim to operate as a company where customers seek expertise and assistance. Regarding the company culture, Chishti describes it as leaning towards openness and friendliness, focusing on embracing innovation and new concepts. The respondent briefly characterizes the company's personality as energetic, resilient, and determined. When discussing the company's traits or appearance, Chishti compares it to a strong, brunette boxer in the ring, illustrating a tenacious and unwavering demeanor. Chishti asserts that the relationship between the company and its customers is positive, allowing for open communication and prompt responses to inquiries.

3.5.3.3 *Brand Image.*

Respondent Chishti highlights customer satisfaction as a fundamental value of the company, emphasizing the importance of ensuring customers feel they receive value for their investment. Additionally, Chishti highlights responsiveness as another core value, emphasizing its role in demonstrating appreciation and a willingness to listen to customer needs. Chishti suggests exceeding expectations to assist customers, leveraging the company's expertise to foster trust. The respondent emphasizes listening to customers and maintaining effective communication channels. Chishti wants Charlie to be perceived as a leading health and fitness centre, known for delivering quality service. They identify Charlie's freshness and youthful energy as distinguishing factors from competitors, believing these attributes offer a unique perspective and vitality. Furthermore, Chishti suggests that new startups like Charlie may possess a heightened openness and resilience due to their novelty and youthfulness.

3.5.3.4 *Customers.*

All the people who agreed to be part of this study are Charlie's customers. They all said they stick with Charlie and keep coming back. However, one of them, Chaman, mentioned that their loyalty depends on Charlie maintaining a good relationship with them.

3.5.3.5 *Brand Identity.*

Both respondents found it difficult to answer when asked to imagine Charlie as a real person. Chaman even said they couldn't answer due to limited interaction with the company. Chaudhry described Charlie as rough but strong and professional. Similarly, when asked about the characteristics of this imaginary person, all respondents struggled to answer.

3.5.3.6 *Brand Image.*

When questioned about the values they associate with Charlie, the responding customers (Chaman and Chaudhry) provided varied responses. Chaman identified honesty and responsibility, while Chaudhry suggested communication based on positive experiences. Despite these differences, respondents agreed that Charlie's values aligned well with theirs. Chaman and Chaudhry emphasized the importance of honesty in their work. Similarly, when asked about their trust in Charlie, both respondents expressed trust in the company.

Regarding the reasons for choosing Charlie over competitors, responses differed slightly. Chaman and Chaudhry cited honesty as the primary reason for hiring Charlie, and Chaudhry also mentioned competitive pricing and Charlie's competence.

4 Data Analysis

The analysis approach will encompass both within-case and cross-case analyses. This methodology aims to uncover internal factors specific to each case while also delineating similarities and distinctions across the three cases.

4.1 Within-Case Analysis

Analyzing each case individually helps us see if the brand identity matches how people see the brand in that situation. This helps us spot differences between how people think the brand is and how it is. As explained earlier, these two things must match up (Nandan, 2005). We'll look at different parts of BID and BIM and ask questions related to each one.

Brand identity examination will encompass Kapferer's brand identity prism, excluding the aspect of culture. Culture is omitted due to the early developmental stage of the involved cases, where capturing meaningful data on this aspect may be challenging. The reflection component will be assessed by exploring company values and their alignment with values significant to customers.

Brand image analysis will consider the components of attitudes, benefits, and attributes. While distinct, there are parallels between these components. Attributes, for instance, may manifest as personality traits, as suggested by Hassan et al. (2024). Any potential disparities between brand identity and brand image can be identified by scrutinizing the correlation between management and customer responses (Shufutinsky, 2020).

Saxena and Dhar (2021) defined brand image as the collective subjective associations customers hold toward a brand. This analysis will encapsulate these associations by examining attributes, attitudes, and benefits, collectively representing the essence of brand image.

4.1.1 Analysis of Alpha

The first step in analyzing Alpha is to look at how the management sees the company compared to how customers see it. The answers from both the management and customers are combined in Table 2.

Table 2: BID Comparison of Alpha

BID	Management	Customers
Phy	Muscular	Robust
Pers	Simple and strong	Strong
Rel	Close	Close
SI	Receive a warm welcome, recognized for excellent work	Very dedicated accommodative
Ref	Anas thinks that Alpha's values align well with the values of its customers.	Very well reflecting values

To determine the alignment of BID, each of its five components will undergo analysis. Through this process, conclusions can be drawn regarding the harmony of Alpha's brand identity. Similarly, a parallel examination of the BIM will focus on analyzing its three components.

4.1.1.1 *Physique.*

Respondent Anas thinks the ideal representation of Alpha should be strong and fit, like a Ford Mustang. On the other hand, Ali and Atiq customers believe it should also be robust. This suggests that both management and customers see the company similarly regarding its physical attributes.

4.1.1.2 *Personality.*

When describing Alpha's personality, both the management and the customers see it in a positive light. Respondent Anas thinks Alpha's personality is strong and engaging, while the customers see it as youthful and ambitious. So, both groups agree that Alpha has a positive personality.

4.1.1.3 *Relationship.*

Both sides seem to agree When discussing how the company interacts with its customers. Respondent Anas said the company treats its customers like family and quickly responds to their needs. And the customers of Company Alpha also feel the same—they see the company as close and accommodating. This means the company and its customers are on the same page regarding their relationship.

4.1.1.4 *Self-Image.*

The management and customers were asked how they viewed the company differently. The management was asked how they wanted the company to be perceived, while customers were asked about the messages they received from the company. Anas wants the company to be seen as providing quality service in a welcoming manner. However, customers feel that the company demonstrates dedication and seriousness. Although both answers are positive, they don't exactly match.

4.1.1.5 *Reflection.*

Both the management and customers were asked to see if the company's values match those of its customers. In the case of Alpha, both the management and customers agreed that the company's values were similar to those of the customers. This shows that both management and customers see things similarly regarding this part of the BID.

Now, an outline of the comparison is presented in Table 3 below for the examination of Alpha's Brand Image.

Table 3: BIM Comparison of Alpha

Brand Image	Management	Customers
Att	fair, honest	responsive, considerate
Benef	acting in more than one line of business	As it is small company that care about the brand and reputation
Attri	dedicated, strong, young	ambitious, strong

4.1.1.6 *Attitudes.*

Customers think highly of Alpha. They see Alpha Company as honest, committed, and quick to respond.

4.1.1.7 *Benefits.*

When questioned about Alpha's advantages over competitors, the management and customers gave similar answers. They both mentioned that Alpha's diverse business lines are a major benefit.

4.1.1.8 Attributes.

As mentioned earlier, attributes can be considered the same as personality traits. Therefore, analyzing attributes will be done in the same way as analyzing personality.

4.1.1.9 Conclusions of Alpha.

These two tables show similarities and differences between how the management and customers perceive the brand. These perceptions are all related to how they view the brand. Table 4 shows similar options for the personality and physique of the company. However, the connection is more robust regarding the relationship and reflection aspects.

4.1.2 Analysis of Bravo Case

Bravo will be looked at in the same way Alpha was. The table above, Table 5, shows how the management and customers view Bravo's brand identity.

Table 4: BID Comparison of Bravo

BID	Management	Customers
Phy	Simple, Helpful	Youthful, vibrant consultant with innovative ideas and supportive
Pers	Diligent, reliable, unique, succinct	Humble, flexible
Rel	Close customers are a high priority.	Close
SI	Mature professional	Committed, adaptive
Ref	Believes that the values of Chishti align well with the customers	Fairly concordant values

4.1.2.1 Physique.

Respondent Bilal says Bravo's appearance is calm and practical. Customers think the company's representative is young, creative, and smart, matching the management's opinion. Even though there are some differences in the descriptions, both sides agree on the general impression. Attributes like being well-prepared and looking sharp give off a vibe of freshness and professionalism, like a consultant. Overall, while not the same, the responses have similarities, showing that everyone similarly sees Bravo.

4.1.2.2 Personality.

Respondent Bilal describes Bravo's personality as hardworking, straightforward, and concise. Customers see them as humble, adaptable, quick to respond, young, creative,

helpful, and accommodating. Like with the physique, these are generally in agreement, even though there aren't exact matches in wording.

4.1.2.3 Relationship.

Respondent Bilal affirms a clear and close relationship between Bravo and its customers, emphasizing their high priority to the company. Customers echo this sentiment, describing the relationship as excellent, both professionally and personally. This alignment indicates agreement between management and customers, with the prioritization of customers and the depth of the relationship connecting both perspectives.

4.1.2.4 Self-Image.

The responses to the question about self-image differ between management and customers. Respondent Bilal wants Bravo to be seen as a prominent and leading name. However, customers feel Bravo is showing signals of commitment. Like before, the answers generally agree but not exactly the same.

4.1.2.5 Reflection.

Respondent Bilal and the customers think that Bravo's values match fairly well with those of its customers. This agreement shows that management and customers are on the same page in this aspect of brand identity, with no evident difference. Check Table 5 for a comparison of Bravo's brand image.

Table 5: BIM Comparison of Bravo

BIM	Management	Customers
Att	Kind, helpful	Flexible, adaptive, kind
Benef	Accommodative, fair in dealing	Hardworking, give valuable advice
Attri	Dedicated, hardworking, Trustworthy	Ambitious

4.1.2.6 Attitudes.

All of Bravo's customers had good thoughts about the company. They liked how Bravo was kind and helpful, showing they generally felt positive about the company.

4.1.2.7 *Benefits.*

In response to inquiries about the advantages of Bravo over its competitors, respondent Bilal mentioned that Bravo is accommodating and fair. However, customers highlighted benefits such as personal interaction, kindness, and good communication with Bravo compared to competitors. It's worth noting that one customer wasn't sure if there were any competitors at all.

4.1.2.8 *Attributes.*

According to the customer's perspective, the company's attributes, such as being hardworking and professional, reflect its ambition to become a leading name in the market.

4.1.2.9 *Conclusion of Bravo.*

We notice a slight mismatch when comparing how Bravo's management and customers see the company's brand identity and image. While some areas like physique, self-image, and personality are quite similar and mostly in agreement, they're not perfectly matched. Despite this, there's a close match in aspects like customer relationship and how values are reflected, although not entirely. This might be because of the strong communication and close relationship customers mention, which helps reduce the differences. All respondents talked about having a positive relationship with Bravo and appreciated their interactions with the company.

4.1.3 *Analysis of Charlie*

Just like Alpha and Bravo, Charlie will undergo analysis using the same components for both BID and BIM. The comparison of Charlie's brand identity is outlined in Table 6 below.

Table 6: BID Comparison of Charlie

Brand Identity	Management	Customer
Phy	Strong, brunette	Stable
Pers	Energetic	Enthusiastic
Rel	Good, open for questions and clarifications	Positive

SI	The leading service provider that prioritizes quality. Charlie's values are fairly well reflected in the values of its customers.	Professional, seriousness
Ref	All respondents assert that their values closely align with and are well mirrored by Charlie's values	All participants assert that their values closely align with and are well mirrored by Charlie's values.

4.1.3.1 *Physique.*

When questioned about the company's appearance, Chishti described them as a strong individual with brown hair and a suit. However, when customers were asked the same question, they didn't know Charlie well enough to respond.

4.1.3.2 *Personality.*

The Charlie's management said the imaginary person would be helpful and supportive. Customers didn't say the same thing but had positive thoughts, too. They said the person would be enthusiastic, committed, kind, and professional.

4.1.3.3 *Relationship.*

Chishti believes that the company has a good connection with its customers. They say customers are encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification. All the customers who responded agreed that the relationship with the company is good. So, there's an agreement on how they view the relationship.

4.1.3.4 *Self-Image.*

There's a disagreement between management and customers regarding the self-image of the company. Management says the company wants to be seen as a top fitness centre offering quality service. But Chishti thinks the company is seen as time-efficient. Customers, however, see flexibility, responsibility, and seriousness as signals from the company.

4.1.3.5 *Reflection.*

When customers were asked how much they felt their values matched those of the company, everyone said they were very similar and well reflected. Chishti also thinks

customers' values align well with the company's. Now let's look at Charlie's brand image. You can find a summary in Table 7 above.

Table 7: Brand Image Comparison of Charlie

Brand Image	Management	Customers
Att	Open, friendly	Positive, helpful
Benef	Young, hip, new	Competent
Attri	Enthusiastic, committed, kind and professional	Helpful, reassuring

4.1.3.6 Attitudes.

In the context of our study, there was an absence of explicit customer feedback concerning Charlie. Nevertheless, all respondents consistently noted and valued Charlie's positive and supportive behavior.

4.1.3.7 Benefits.

Their answers differed when Charlie's management and customers were asked about Charlie's advantages over competitors. Management said Charlie's benefits were being young, trendy, and new. However, customers saw competency as an advantage. This shows a clear difference, especially when management sees being new as a benefit while customers think competency is more important.

4.1.3.8 Attributes.

Again, the attributes can be seen as enthusiastic and committed while customers find it helpful.

4.1.3.9 Conclusions of Charlie.

There are some differences in how managers and customers see the brand. For example, they didn't agree on the benefits and appearance. While Bravo had some similarities, like in its physique, there were more differences overall. A Charlie customer mentioned that communication could be better, which might be why there's a bigger gap compared to Bravo. Customers said having a strong relationship is important, with one saying their loyalty to Charlie comes from that connection. Without it, they wouldn't feel

loyal. This is similar to what Bravo's customers said about the importance of a close relationship.

4.2 Cross-Case Analysis

Looking at all three cases together, Table 8 outlines both similarities and differences.

Table 8: Cross-Case Analysis of Brand Identity

BID Component	BID Alpha	BID Bravo	BID Charlie
Phy	Strong	Helpful	Strong
Pers	Young, hip, new	Hardworking	Openness
Rel	Enthusiastic, committed, kind and professional	Helpful, reassuring	Close
SI	Be greeted with open arms	Mature professional	Leading, quality service provider
Ref	Good reflected,	Fairly good reflected	Fairly good reflected

Along with Table 8, which shows the different parts of brand identity, Table 9 does the same thing but focuses on brand image instead.

Table 9: Cross-Case Analysis of Brand Image

BIM component	BIM Alpha	BIM Bravo	BIM Charlie
Att	Responsive, considerate	Helpful	Positive helpful
Benef	A small company that operates in multiple lines of business, prioritizing its brand and reputation.	Accommodative, fair in dealing. Hardworking, give valuable advice	Young, hip, new, competent
Attri	Dedicated, young, strong	Dedicated, Hardworking, Trustworthy	Enthusiastic, committed, kind and professional

Tables 10 and 11 evaluate how closely management and customer perspectives align. "Aligned" indicates agreement, "Fairly aligned" suggests partial overlap, and "Not aligned" signifies disagreement. Table 11 outlines brand identity components for reference.

Table 10: Summary of the Comparative Analysis of Brand Identity Across Case

Brand Identity Component	Aligned	Fairly aligned	Not Aligned
Phy	Alpha	Charlie, Bravo	
Pers	Alpha	Charlie	Bravo
Rel	Alpha, Bravo	Charlie	
SI	Bravo, Charlie		Alpha
Ref	Alpha, Bravo	Charlie	

Table 10 shows that two cases struggle with personality and self-image, but all cases are good at relationships and self-reflection. Charlie always stays aligned, unlike Alpha and Bravo. Table 11 compares different parts of the brand image.

Table 11: Summary of the Comparative Analysis of Brand Image Across Cases

BIM component	Aligned	Fairly Aligned	Not Aligned
Att		Bravo	Alpha Charlie
Benef	Alpha		Charlie Bravo
Attri		Alpha	Charlie Bravo

Looking at Tables 10 and 11, we see that Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie often appear in the "Not aligned" column, showing a big difference between what management thinks and what customers think. But Alpha seems to match up better overall. This makes us want to look deeper into what Nandan (2005) and Kapferer (2009) said about how communication affects trust and loyalty. For Bravo, where customers all think communication is great, there's a clear link to high levels of trust and loyalty. On the other hand, Charlie's customers also think communication is good, but there's room for improvement. Even so, customers still trust and stay loyal to Charlie, but they make it clear that keeping up good relationships and service quality is important for their loyalty, as shown in Table 12. This detailed look shows how communication, trust, and loyalty

connect with customers' feelings about a company. Keeping communication consistent and compelling is key to building lasting customer relationships.

Table 12: Significance of Communication

Questions	Alpha	Bravo	Charlie
What is the level of communication effectiveness do you perceive between yourself and the company (X)?	Ali- Good Atiq - Good	Bushra –Very good Bilawal – Very good	Chaman –Good Chaudhry –Good
Do you place your trust in (company x)	Ali- Good Atiq - Good	Bushra – Yes Bilawal – Yes	Chaman – Yes Chaudhry – Yes
Do you consider yourself a loyal customer of [company x]?	Ali- Somewhat Atiq - Good	Bushra – Yes Bilawal – Yes	Chaman – Yes Chaudhry – Yes

4.3 Discussion

Based on the analysis of collected data, three significant conclusions emerge. Firstly, a notable disparity exists between BID and BIM across the startup cases examined in this study. This disparity is evident in all three cases. Secondly, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that this gap is more pronounced in Charlie's case than in Alpha and Bravo's. Table 12 corroborates the assertions made by Nandan (2005) and Kapferer (2009) regarding the crucial link between communication and trust, as observed within the data.

This study shows that better communication can help build more trust and loyalty towards a company. It also points out that building relationships is key to why Bravo does better than Alpha and Charlie. So, it's clear that communication and relationships are really important for startups in branding, as they affect how people see the brand. These results match what other studies have found, as we discussed in the literature review.

In summary, this study achieves its smaller goals. First, it finds a difference between how startups and customers see themselves. Second, it shows important things that affect how startups are seen, like building relationships and communication. As Chan (2023) posited, the traditional view of branding in the context of small businesses as

paradoxical should be reconsidered. Instead, it represents an area ripe for further exploration and research opportunities.

4.4 Recommendations

Based on the analysis and conclusions, three key recommendations emerge for practitioners, drawing from existing literature and empirical findings. Firstly, fostering and nurturing close customer relationships is paramount. This study reveals that strong customer relationships enhance alignment between brand identity and image. Secondly, establishing and maintaining clear, efficient communication channels is crucial.

Empirical evidence underscores the importance of communication in bridging the gap between brand identity and image, with customers valuing clarity and effectiveness. Lastly, prioritizing customer-centric approaches and flexibility is essential. Startups with a strong focus on customer needs demonstrate better alignment. Implementing these recommendations can enhance brand identity-image alignment, fostering trust and customer loyalty, thereby maximizing the benefits associated with this alignment for practitioners.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Theoretical Contribution

The intersection of branding and startups has been a relatively underexplored area in the existing body of literature. While extensive research exists separately on branding strategies and startups' dynamics, there has been a noticeable gap in examining how these two domains intersect. This study aims to fill that void by delving into the branding efforts within the startup ecosystem by using Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism.

By undertaking this investigation, this study seeks to initiate a new avenue of research that could be immensely beneficial for entrepreneurs striving to establish

successful ventures. It is widely acknowledged in the literature, as highlighted by Bresciani and Eppler (2010) and reiterated in the literature review conducted here, that branding plays a pivotal role in the trajectory of startups.

This study begins a broader exploration into the symbiotic relationship between branding strategies and the startup landscape. Through such research endeavors, entrepreneurs may gain valuable insights and guidance to navigate the complexities of building a distinctive brand identity amidst the challenges of launching and scaling their ventures.

5.2 Managerial Implication

At a managerial level for owners of startups, ways to realign the brand identity and the brand image, if misaligned, can be identified using Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. In its earlier version, Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism had six facets: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image. It is vital for businesses, especially if you are a Startup that these align with the public perception.

The root of this misalignment in any of these dimensions could result in brand identity- brand image mismatch. For example, suppose a startup aspires to be seen by customers as an innovative and vibrant brand, but it actually is come across as an inconsistent or untrustworthy one. In that case, this misalignment can shut the brand's door to further growth and customer loyalty. Suppose startup founders assess and realign these elements systematically. In that case, they can create an integrated and persuasive brand story that connects with their target audience, which is critical to strengthening brand equity.

Consistency between this brand character and reputation creates trust and brand loyalty among customers, who feel more comfortable doing business with and acting as 'repeat customers' of companies that consistently meet their expectations. The importance,

of course, goes much further. Proper alignment results in more effective marketing, as consistent brand messaging proves to be more persuasive and compelling, fostering deep engagement and increased returns on marketing investments. Also, a well-aligned brand identity contributes to internal alignment, narrowing the gap between your values and the employees' end goal, boosting motivation and overall efficiency. Consistency in this area can have broader economic effects for Pakistan concerning improved brand consistency and customer loyalty.

5.3 Limitations

The study faces several limitations, primarily stemming from methodological decisions. Non-probability sampling, including self-selection and snowball techniques, raises concerns about sample representativeness and introduces potential biases. Respondents selected via snowballing may withhold information, affecting data quality. Moreover, the study's qualitative nature and small sample size limit generalizability. Improved sampling methods and clearer, well-articulated questions are necessary for future research to overcome these limitations and provide more robust findings for broader applicability in the field.

5.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Despite being explorative and descriptive, this qualitative study lacks generalizability due to its limited scope and sampling techniques. Future research should employ more suitable sampling methods for broader generalization, necessitating a larger, quantitative study. While this study identifies misalignment in brand identity and image among small startups, further investigation into comparative analysis between established firms and startups is recommended to understand brand-building processes. Exploring employee perspectives is also suggested, as they play a crucial role in brand building by

interacting directly with customers. Understanding their perceptions can contribute to fostering a positive brand identity. Overall, this study serves as an initial step in recognizing the issue of misalignment in brand identity across various company types, paving the way for more comprehensive research to address these complexities and provide actionable insights for brand development strategies.

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