Assembling the Start-up Brand: A Process Framework for Understanding Strategic Communication Challenges

Vidhi Chaudhri, Jason Pridmore & Carola Mauck

Published online: 29 Mar 2022.

Submit your article to this journal ⊠

Article views: 274

View related articles ⊠

View Crossmark data ⊠

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Assembling the Start-up Brand: A Process Framework for Understanding Strategic Communication Challenges

Vidhi Chaudhri [iD][a], Jason Pridmore [iD][a], and Carola Mauck[b]

[a]Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC), Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands; [b]Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The proliferation of start-ups and their contribution to the global economy is well-documented as is their high failure rate, a paradox attributable in large part to the inadequate attention start-ups ascribe to establishing a strong brand. Premised on the idea that brand-building is an active process of meaning-making and an assemblage of layers of professional and material activities, our study offers an empirically grounded approach to start-up branding. Based on an inductive analysis of interviews with co-founders of 15 start-up and scale-up brands, we propose a process framework of start-up branding that highlights the strategic communication processes by which entrepreneurs bring their products to market. Through this contribution, we make clear that entrepreneurial brand building is not a one-size-fits all process and that there is no linear pathway. While the framework is not predictive of success, it is indicative of a new formulation of how strategic communication can be used to understand and evaluate brand processes within entrepreneurial organizations.

Introduction

With global venture capital investments nearing $300 billion in 2019 and a total value creation of nearly $3 trillion in 2020 (Global Startup Ecosystem Report [GSER], 2020), the global start-up economy is considered at par with the GDP of a G7 economy (GSER, 2020). In recognition of the economic and societal potential of start-ups, the European Commission launched an initiative in 2016 to "improve the economic and regulatory framework for start-ups and scaleups" (Bormans et al., 2020, p. 2) where start-ups are characterized as businesses younger than 10 years, possessing an innovative product, service, and/or business model, with the ambition to scale up in terms of employees, turnover, or the markets in which they operate (*p. 4).

Despite the impressive growth and aside from well-known 'unicorns,' numerous start-ups emerge and fail each year, putting the start-up failure rate at 90% (van Dijk et al., 2015). Growth-stage start-ups may still encounter serious challenges due to premature scaling (Cerdeira & Kotashev, 2021). The numerous challenges for start-up survival are attributable to the liability of newness (Witt & Rode, 2005) and absence of a long and stable operation history (Moroni et al., 2015). Additionally, the inadequate attention start-ups ascribe to establishing their brand by prioritizing financial and operational concerns is identified as a critical obstacle (e.g., Berthon et al., 2008; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). It is this challenge that our paper seeks to address, countering the suggestion that branding in small businesses is a "reductive concept" (Spence & Essoussi, 2010) or an "oxymoron" (Merrilees, 2007).

CONTACT Vidhi Chaudhri ✉ chaudhri@eshcc.eur.nl 📧 Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (Eshcc), Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Although the importance of branding is well-understood in academic research, with few exceptions, this research focuses on larger organizations (see Berthon et al., 2008; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). Research about branding processes and challenges in start-ups – that are characterized by fewer financial resources (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007), undeveloped (initial) reputation (Men et al., 2017; Petkova, 2012), flexible internal structures (Rode & Vallaster, 2005), and operate in dynamic markets – is as of yet nascent albeit on the rise. Mueller et al. (2012) further note that entrepreneurial behavior is "a process of emergence" (p. 996) which suggests that entrepreneurs are less likely to engage in routine activities, work at a faster albeit fragmented pace, and pursue different types of business opportunities from managers at more established organizations. For these reasons, it is argued that start-ups are distinct organizational types that merit their own space in scholarship (Centeno et al., 2013).

Premised on the idea that "brands are not born but made" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 11), it becomes important to understand the communication processes by which entrepreneurs bring their products to market, and the varied roles of strategic communication in the process. Cornelissen et al. (2012) critique the assumption of one-way sender-oriented (aka conduit) models of communication that dominate much theorizing around corporate branding, identity, and reputation, and advocate a larger role for constitutive approaches that view these phenomena not as a given but "as processes and products of meaning construction" (*p. 1099). Brands, then, are "constituted in and through joint communication between an organization and individual stakeholders" (*p. 1099).

Our research treats the start-up brand and the branding process itself as a heterogenous assemblage of multiple layers of professional and material activities (Lury, 2009). These can be seen as intricately connected to the materialities of brand representations in objects emblazoned with logos to branded Instagram feeds and as the outcome of diverse professional activities from marketing to product design (ibid). However, the specific role of communication within this assemblage remains implicit or, at best, focused solely on the communication and leadership skills of founders/entrepreneurs (e.g., Wiesenberg et al., 2020) and/or communication formats, channels, and flow (Mueller et al., 2012) in most research.

We embrace the call to go beyond individual factors, one-way transmission models (Cornelissen et al., 2012) and discrete activities or skills toward a broader and more integrated perspective that accounts for strategic communication across "the start-up ecosystem" (Wiesenberg et al., 2020, p. 51). As such, the questions we ask are: *In light of the challenges ascribed to start-ups, how do they navigate the heterogenous elements that make up the brand-building process? What is the role of strategic communication in this process?* In this context, we see strategic communication as "all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity [. . .] the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals" (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 493; see also Hallahan et al., 2007). For start-ups, strategic communication is a fundamental aspect of what they are about, even if branding may happen as an afterthought.

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with the (co-)founders of 15 European start-up and scale-up brands across different business sectors. Based on an inductive analysis of interviewee perspectives, we identify a process framework of start-up branding that reflects the communication challenges and developments faced and managed by entrepreneurs. This framework draws on the field experiences of start-ups in different stages of growth and highlights the (differential) patterns in how these organizations understand and practice strategic communication across what we label the 4 C dimensions: *Craft, Cultivate, Curate*, and *(re)Calibrate*. Through this framework, we make clear that entrepreneurial brand building is not a one-size-fits all process and that there is no linear pathway in relation to the heterogenous elements of branding. However, there are common patterns across the dimensions we define even if the way in which the dimensions are prioritized and enacted differs.

We begin with an overview of the small but growing body of research addressing start-up and entrepreneurial brand building much of which focuses on small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Following this, a second key strand of the literature unpacks the role of strategic communication in start-up branding. With few exceptions, existing literature rarely situates communication

(perspectives) as core to the process of brand building. We then note how the framework for understanding start-up branding within strategic communication highlights the ongoing 'making' of these brands, assemblages of multiple components that are brought together through the efforts of people within the organization. As such, we highlight that communication within our defined dimensions are central to how start-up brands are constructed – whether done well or not.

Start-ups and the branding imperative

Start-ups are characterized by a range of challenges that set them apart from already established organizations including high levels of uncertainty and risk (Sommer et al., 2009), differences in management style and operations as well as resource constraints, both in terms of time and money (Berthon et al., 2008). Key among these challenges is the liability of newness in which "emerging organizations face complex challenges limiting their viability, including managing relationships among strangers, assembling resources quickly, and coping with difficult environments" (Yang & Aldrich, 2017, p. 36). The limitations on viability additionally include the liability of smallness or size (Aldrich & Auster, 1986), excessive reliance on the founder as personification of the start-up brand (Rode & Vallaster, 2005), and the lack of an established identity and/or reputation (Petkova, 2012).

To understand branding practices within start-ups, it is important to understand that "start-ups are not smaller versions of large companies. They do not unfold in accordance with master plans" (Blank, 2013). More often than not, the constraints surrounding start-up entrepreneurs cause them to have a "survival mentality" (Berthon et al., 2008, p. 28) that translates to a primary focus on operational and financial issues instead of developing a clear brand identity (e.g., Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007). The case for branding is equally emphatic. Spence and Essoussi (2010) highlight the tangible benefits start-ups can accrue in terms of competitive advantage and favorable customer perceptions, loyalty, and active engagement with the organization. Abimbola and Vallaster (2007) note that strong brands can induce "feeling of familiarity and trust, reduce risk, and serve as the basis for dialogue and engagement" (*p. 342).

Arguably, an early focus on branding is pivotal to building organizational reputation (e.g., Petkova, 2012; Petkova et al., 2008) and securing legitimacy (van Werven et al., 2015). In a competitive environment marked by information asymmetries, stakeholders construct firm reputation from a variety of sources including the firm itself, the media, or other mediated sources (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). However, the absence of a proven track record, prior information about the business and the liability of newness makes it challenging for stakeholders to assess and form judgments about the reputation and legitimacy of starts-ups ("If your employees van Werven et al., 2015).

Overall, there is an increasing consensus that branding should be incorporated in strategic planning from the very start. It is equally clear that "in terms of the branding *process*, a different approach appears necessary to the standard branding model used for large organisations" (Inskip, 2004, p. 365, italics original). The challenge is that the majority of these models derive insights from large organizations (e.g., Invernizzi & Romenti, 2015), SME experience (e.g., Ojasalo et al., 2008) or are based on a small sample of start-ups (e.g., Juntunen et al., 2010), limiting their usability.

Strategic communication and the assemblage of start-up brands

Research focused on start-up branding is informed by diverse disciplinary lenses which may explain the varied perspectives on the role of communication within this domain (Wiesenberg et al., 2020). Using entrepreneurial behavior as their point of departure, Mueller et al. (2012) found that start-up entrepreneurs in both early and growth stages spend a majority of their working time communicating with others. Although the authors claim that "communication is an underlying element" in entrepreneur's behavior (*p. 1013), it remains limited to a tactical approach focused on format (asynchronous

vs synchronous), channels, and/or directionality (internal or external) of communication. The communicative character of activities such as networking, relationship building, or information exchange remains only implicit (Mueller et al., 2012).

The need to develop more sophisticated and communication-centred understanding of corporate branding is clear in the call by Cornelissen et al. (2012). They note that classic models of corporate branding tend to be linear, "assume one-way communication processes from the organization to its stakeholders with images being projected and installed into the stakeholders' minds" (*p. 1097). Instead, viewing the brand "as processes and products of meaning construction" constituted in and through communication (*pp. 1109–1100) interrogates the treatment of brand identity as a "fixed representation that is revealed to stakeholders via effective communication (*p. 1097). Rather, the brand is fluid and continuously evolving through the interaction of multiple actors in differing social contexts. The understanding of start-ups and their branding processes stands to benefit from such a performative and constitutive perspective on communication (Cornelissen et al., 2012).

This perspective has to take into account the transformed landscape in which stakeholders are not passive receivers but "active participants in brand interaction and co-creation of brand meaning" (von Wallpach et al., 2017, p. 443). Changes in the communication landscape present new opportunities and challenges to the ways in which brands are (co-)constructed. As such, start-ups cannot "unilaterally define and control brand meaning" (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013, p. 1513). These challenges are exacerbated for born-digital brands where "online interaction with brand communities form the basis on which corporate brand identity is negotiated" (Mingione & Abratt, 2020, p. 986).

Indeed, building and maintaining "mutually beneficial relationships" with strategic publics and customers is increasingly critical (Men et al., 2017, p. 90). Pakura and Rudeloff (2020) study of German start-ups reveals the varied importance of (social-mediated) PR across growth stages leading them to conclude that relative to competitors, start-ups that planned for long-term PR were more likely to achieve success in reputation and brand building. However, unlike large organizations that have an established public relations (PR) function, start-ups usually do not have specific guidelines or precedents and therefore need to creatively engage in communication and branding activities.

Our study focuses on developing a broader and more integrated perspective following the scope outlined by Zerfass et al. (2018) to examine the purposeful use of communication in branding but sees this as part of a larger assemblage of activities and materialities. The examination of how branding and communication intersect hinges on an approach that sees brands as assemblages. It "emphasizes that the brand's materiality and meanings are co-constituted through ongoing, ever changing collective, and distributed practices" (Price & Coulter, 2019, p. 549; also Lury, 2009; Onyas & Ryan, 2015). An assemblage perspective is especially appropriate for our goal to understand the processes of start-up branding as it helps us to "conceptualize the complex and contested constructions of brands among diverse parties" and "offers a framework to consider the multiple expressive and material components that make up the complex and non-linear systems that constitute brands" (Rokka & Canniford, 2016, p. 1791). Given the high-paced and high-turnover world of start-ups, capturing this complexity of branding was critical to understanding the responses of our interviewees.

A brand-as-assemblage perspective draws out more than just the desired narrative of brand making by those engaged in this process. It instead highlights the various factors that contribute to the overall branding process. Parmentier and Fischer (2015) argue that brands cannot be understood without seeing them as "comprising both the narratives that marketers harness and the myriad components with important material capacities that make up the product itself" (*p. 1248). Such an approach also requires a recognition of how consumers themselves contribute "to stabilizing and at other times to destabilizing the assemblage" (ibid) and draws in both interactive and material elements that allows for more multilevel perspectives (Preece et al., 2019).

For this study, the communication processes articulated by our interviewees represent both a discrete context of analysis and one that is continually interactive and connected to material practices and imbued meanings of the brand and their consumers. The interconnections between this *assemblage* focus and a *strategic communication* lens allows for a broader and more comprehensive understanding/dynamic perspective grounded in the lived experience of start-ups across growth phases.

Method

Guided by our research question – How do start-ups do they navigate the heterogenous elements that make up the brand-building process, and what is the role of strategic communication in this process – we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample (Creswell, 2005) of start-ups in different stages of growth (Churchill & Lewis, 1983) and representing a variety of business sectors and business models (e.g., B2B and B2C; See Table 1). A purposive sample was deemed appropriate given our interest in examining entrepreneurs' perceptions and practices of strategic communication in brand building. Utilizing a combination of snowballing where each interviewee was asked to recommend at least two other individuals who meet the inclusion criteria, one of the researchers conducted 15 interviews with start-ups from different industries. Interviewees were (co-)founders and took the lead in different functional capacities, as CEO or COO.

Our sample includes an equal distribution of startup and scaleups (7 each) with one start-up consultant. As noted in the opening paragraph, scale-up refers to a development stage whereby a start-up aims to "grow the number of employees and/or turnover and/or markets in which they operate (Bormans et al., 2020, p. 4). Both B2B and B2C start-ups in different stages of maturity are represented which allows us to offer insights into convergent and divergent approaches. All of our interviewees were male, consistent with the findings of the European Start-up Monitor (Bormans et al., 2020) that over 90% of start-ups are founded by all all-male teams. Aside from one Belgian and one German start-up, the majority were Dutch and based in the main start-up hubs of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Delft.

Interviews were conducted using a combination of skype/phone and face-to-face meetings between March and April 2019 and ranged between 45 to 70 minutes. Except for one German language interview, all interviews were conducted in English by one of the researchers fluent in both languages. After signing informed consent forms, interviewees commenced with a description of the venture's origin, rationale, and challenges or opportunities in the start-up period. Participants also reflected on their motivations, approaches, and practices of brand-building efforts at different points in the start-up lifecycle as well as

Table 1 .Participant profile.

Participant	Stage (self-described)	Established	Type	Business sector
P1	Start-up	2009	B2C	An application to simplify communication for people on the spectrum of autism
P2	Start-up	2019	B2C	Online platform to match students and driving instructors
P3	Scale-up	2014	B2C	Bike rental, repair and maintenance service
P4	Scale-up	2012	B2C	Sustainable jewelry and watches manufacturer
P5	Scale-up	2015	B2C	Mobility sector
P6	Scale-up	2011	B2C	Coffee house chain
P7	Scale-up	1996 (first Brasserie opened in 2015)	B2C	Café and brasserie chain (being rebranded at the time of interview)
P8	Start-up	2018	B2B	Noise cancelling technology
P9	Start-up	2015	B2B	Sustainable shipping
P10	Start-up	2017	B2B	Online review monitoring platform for the food industry
P11	Start-up	2018	B2B	Improving indoor air quality
P12	Scale-up	2017	B2B	Reusable energy systems
P13	Scale-up	2018	B2B	Start-up event platform
P14	Start-up	2018	B2B	Healthy ice cream
P15	N/A	–	–	Start-up Specialist/ consultant for financial technology (former Start-up co-founder)

the perceived importance, relevance, and role(s) of communication in the branding process. In addition to asking clarification questions, participants were encouraged to provide specific examples or instances in support of their response and to discuss additional topics deemed relevant to their experience. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim, yielding a total of 300+ pages of data.

Following Tracy (2013), we follow an iterative process alternately between "emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories [...] in which the researcher visits and revisits the data, connects them to emerging insights, and progressively refines his/ her focus and understandings" (*p. 200). The full set of transcripts was read and re-read by two researchers with the goal of understanding and explicating the role of strategic communication in the brand building experience. It was important for us to elucidate the lived experiences of participants and highlight stories and accounts in their own words. As a first step, we engaged in primary-cycle coding which involves reading and re-reading the data and structuring them by descriptive first-level codes (Tracy, 2013, p. 200) followed by a second-cycle coding that entailed identifying patterns or groupings of codes within the data using Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence ("same thread of meaning"), repetition ("repetition of key words, phrases, or sentences"), and forcefulness ("vocal qualities that served to stress or subordinate words and phrases"; pp. 275–276). Interviews were conducted by one of the researchers. To ensure data validity, two researchers analyzed the data and cross-checked findings with each other to ensure that interpretations were representative of interviewee experiences. In each subsequent interview, we also shared our interpretations from previous interviews and allowed participants to build on these understandings which confirmed our confidence in the findings. A working schema developed from initial transcripts was further refined and modified on the basis of subsequent transcripts. The findings are presented using a process framework that emerged during the analysis of interview data. Four process dimensions were identified: *Craft, Cultivate, Curate*, and *(re)Calibrate*.

Results

Our results confirm that although there is no linear or uniform pathway from one to another organization, there are some shared patterns across the different stages of growth, stemming largely from similar challenges. Articulated in our 4 Cs framework, the patterns attest to an active, negotiated, and relational effort at brand-building among start-ups and scale-ups. Viewed from a communication lens, the results of our study contribute to an expanded notion of strategic communication and a more holistic approach to branding in entrepreneurial ventures. We contend, therefore, that start-ups are, knowingly or unknowingly, engaged in brand-building from the outset. We unpack our 4 C dimensions in the following sections.

Craft

At the crux of any new venture is an idea or a concept that morphs into a tangible product or service offering. Crafting a viable offering from a concept is, arguably, an assemblage of material and symbolic elements. The dimension *Craft* highlights purposeful efforts to infuse meaning in the idea/concept or the product/service offering to carve out a differentiated identity that forms the basis of the start-up story explained thus: "Whatever you do, you have to make clear to the world that it's your thing so that even if it's copied, that people will think, ah, that's theirs" (P9).

Interviewees narrated the story of their start-up in great detail, emphasizing the emergent and even serendipitous start to their venture from casual conversations with friends, a personal experience, or aspiration to start a company, all of which went on to define the brand mission. Crafting a mission for the brand was mentioned as an early activity in conjunction with the name and logo design, and for the majority of our participants, firm mission was about helping individuals, business, and/or society to fulfil an unresolved need or to improve current systems. Aligning with socially accepted "regulative, normative or cognitive norms and expectations" (Deephouse & Carter, 2005, p. 332) may lend start-ups the much-needed legitimacy or, colloquially, the license to operate. In doing so, however, start-ups confront the "uniqueness paradox" in storytelling (Martin et al., 1983) by drawing on similar scripts to

demonstrate their uniqueness. For instance, P1 highlighted the very personal brand mission, "The CEO, because he's actually autistic and he's on a crusade [. . .] to get as many people on the spectrum as possible so that we solve the problem for them." Another defined their mission in terms of giving less visible start-ups a platform, "not like cool start-ups that everybody wants but the ones that nobody wants or that in the beginning just have an idea, don't know anything about branding or scaling. How about we facilitate those start-ups here?" (P13).

For these and other participants, crafting a unique proposition for their brand was integral to the branding process. Others too focused on crafting an experience for the end-user, an element that becomes integral to the "entrepreneurial story" (P6). In turn, this story forms the basis of the branding exercise and spills over to all forms of communication and, despite the dynamism, "the story of who we are and what we're made from keeps [sic] the same" (P14).

Part of crafting a strong brand is the process of developing a name and logo that encapsulates the story of the brand. These are indeed the first material/tangible but also symbolic expressions within the assemblage of making a brand identity. Far from being a straightforward process, naming the venture is a combination of inside-outside thinking considering both the audience's ease of recall and staying true to oneself, symbolic associations (e.g., the country of origin), and feedback, among others. Two start-ups, in particular, emphasized how their Dutch heritage lent them a high degree of credibility and reliability: "the Dutch know all about cycling," noted P3, implying that their bike start-up had a solid basis. Additionally, young ventures reported having to address pragmatic considerations of domain name availability, trademarks options, amongst others in the process of finalizing a name.

The crafting of a logo design went through similar deliberation processes to ensure that it was meaningful and memorable. For a minority, the pressure to pitch the idea to investors meant taking quick action to pick a "placeholder logo with some images" (P8) and, if necessary, revisit it later. Others made a course correction when they realized that the original logo was too complex: "we had struggles drawing it ourselves and if he [the customer] is not able to draw the logo – that's bad" (P12) hence they made the decision to use a version of the name as their logo. Premised on the idea that everything communicates, another received advice to consider a signature brand color (for packaging) and chose purple, "everybody knows that [our brand] is the purple one and the blue is [competition]" (P14).

Such introspective moments and an eye towards the target audience propelled our interviewees to consider their decisions toward brand-building even when they said they lacked the resources. The rebranding of the café and brasserie chain in our sample was another such learning moment, several years after their existence, and they did not hesitate to pivot: Initially positioned as an Italian coffee brand, the brand realized during its rebranding that its Belgian origins were not just more authentic ("our coffee comes from Antwerp. Why on earth are we saying that our coffee is Italian?" said P7) but also made business sense. Except retaining the name as a measure of continuity, the rebranding exercise allowed the chain to craft its new brand DNA.

These developments highlight that (strategic or emergent) efforts at *crafting* a distinctive brand identity, brand story, and experience involves managing the interplay of material and symbolic considerations. These are seen to support the start-up for the long term and make them recognizable to potential stakeholders including investors. Crucially, these efforts do not exclude the substantive focus on product quality and, where relevant, sales (P15).

Cultivate

A unifying thread across our sample pertains to the fundamental understanding that the entrepreneurial brand is only as good as (the communication with) the team, aptly encapsulated in this quote using a very material focused metaphor:

> Building a start-up is like building a bike. You're not doing it alone. So you started with the frame and then the wheels come and the brakes and the gear to switch up . . . because if you cannot communicate properly, it will steer right into a wall and that's going to hurt. (P11)

We refer to this dimension as *Cultivate* for its focus on developing and nurturing relationships in which employees are empowered and engaged to contribute to the brand, to live the brand values both within and outside the organization as "fans" and "ambassadors": "If your employees are happy, they will carry the brand to theoutside. If not, they won't speak well about your brand and, well,that becomes a problem" (P4).

Consistent with previous research, the role and vision of the founder permeated all aspects of the organization's culture and ways of doing things and leading by example. However, our participants were very mindful that founder roles (should) evolve as the start-up grows and that excessive reliance on the founder was not only risky but potentially dangerous if the founders split or left. Certainly, all founders reported a strategic and central role for themselves but spoke about the need to share responsibility for decision-making among the team. A commonly invoked phrase referred to "not working *in* your company but working *on* your company" as the firm grew, translated thus "you try to find people which are more specialized in the things that are important for your company instead of trying to do everything yourself" (P5). A focus on effectively cultivating the talent and experience of specific team members was seen as serving a more effective branding process.

All participants agreed on the importance of building a strong team that believed in the venture. "Passion" (for the business) and "authenticity" were by far the most prominent and frequently mentioned characteristics/values that entrepreneurs sought among new hires be it "an affinity with food" (P10) or "renewable energy and sustainability" (P12). In fact, if there was a choice between technical competence and belief in the company, many entrepreneurs leaned toward the latter scenario: "I would like to get people who really believe in what we're doing. Believe in a sense that they need to understand the technology but also see where we're going so that they also come up with ideas" (P8). Another was more stringent about new hires, describing the recruitment process as "Hell Week" where everyone except those "absolutely obsessed with the core values" (P13) would be filtered out. Since the employee base was typically very small, a good fit with the aforementioned values and the business itself was considered crucial. However, all participants expected to grow their teams in the short to medium term.

Ongoing communication was cited as integral to developing a culture that participants variously described in terms of "safe," "creative," "enthusiastic," "happy," "honest," "respect[ful]," and "open." Some reported loosely developing "onboarding documents" (P10) to describe the way things are done at [the firm] and/or as a "way of translating our mission statement to behavior" (P9). Everyone concurred though that engaged employees were "more committed, involved, and motivated" (P4). Hence, "small, team, stand-up meetings" (P10), "bi-weekly reportings, daily communication via Whatsapp, and internal newsletter every six weeks" (P6), "stock options, competitions, Christmas party, and brand trainings" (P7) etcetera, were all geared toward creating an engaging workplace. Even though some acknowledged that it would be easier and less time-consuming to tell the team what to do, it would undermine an "open atmosphere for sharing ideas" (P9), and by, extension, cultivating a particular ethos that was essential for the brand making process.

The connections forged with and among the team served to align people, values, culture, and communication in a way that allowed the organization to work toward accomplishing strategic goals (see Volk & Zerfass, 2018). The start-up consultant cautioned, however, that "sharing the same values doesn't mean you think in the same way; if you hire people that think the same way as you, your company will go bankrupt. You can't have a football team if everyone is a keeper" (P15). Finding the balance between a core team that believes in the brand and ensuring some degree of freedom and autonomy to allow people to contribute to the brand was important to everyone we interviewed.

True to the entrepreneurial spirit, allowing employees to take "calculated risks" was deemed to be empowering (P5) and trusting people to do right by the firm was associated with cultivating responsibility and ownership: "So like we have meetings here that a lot of

confidential things are told so [we have] complete trust in everybody in the team" (P11). Trust was not unconditional, though, and as long as people were working toward results, it was no problem:

> There are no hours, it's the deadline. If you want to spend 80 hours working on it, be my guest. So you have to be autonomous in your own community so what I like is a team that is very independent but functions as a whole. (P12)

Curate

Central to what we classify as *Curate* is the active process by which entrepreneurs communicate and socialize their product/concept in an effort to favorably and consistently position themselves among stakeholders. This may be done using a combination of specific forms of mediated and non-mediated touch points as well as strategic and emergent approaches. Notably, this process was mentioned not as secondary to or separate from concept development but as an integral part of it.

Given the age of the majority of our participants, digital and social media were mentioned as an integral part of the communication mix for "getting the name out," (P5) "creating awareness and buzz" (P2), and "being recognized" (P6). Particularly, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were frequently mentioned; for B2B start-ups, LinkedIn was cited as the number one communication platform for which carefully chosen content was regularly posted. Social media management was typically undertaken by an (student) intern or a team member, or the (co)founders themselves (if they had a relevant background). Some reported hiring a brand or marketing specialist to professionalize the activities as the venture grew, propelled by the acquisition of funding.

An assemblage of communication mechanisms was mentioned by participants as decisive to connecting with decision-makers, experts and (prospective) clients, generating business leads, and networking. Underpinning the choice and multitude of communication channels available to start-ups is a purposeful understanding about the importance of favorably positioning the brand across stakeholder groups. Harnessing the power of traditional mass media was mentioned as desirable but not always achievable because of high costs and so a focus on accessible and available tools at hand was described as critical. A similar perspective was foregrounded with respect to public relations, perceived primarily as a source of publicity and promotion. The assertion that "we still have the start-up mindset if we can get it for free, then we don't spend . . . " (P13) was echoed by other participants who went on to explain the unintended positive outcomes of the (free) visibility which would otherwise be beyond the reach of young firms. For one, free visibility was a marker of creativity within constraints, "I think those would be the indicators that with a small budget you can still do a lot and get attention" (P14).

This line of reasoning aligns with Yang and Aldrich (2017) that young ventures may indeed benefit from "free advertising" and by building "close connections with stable organizations" (*p. 49). They further note that "acceptances by well-established institutions may be particularly influential for new organizations because they signal new organizations' credibility, legitimacy, and competence" to other stakeholders (*p. 49). To this end, partnerships and client/user testimonials serve as an important strategic resource to curate the start-up brand, as it allows "other people to do the talking" (P13). Another advocated his preference for organic word-of-mouth communication with creative product endorsement:

> When a student is getting driving lessons during high school, I want to give him a [branded] water bottle. Someone will ask 'hey, what's that bottle about?' And he'll say, 'it's from my driving instructor.' Or when he is refers the name, he'll get a Tony Chocolonely bar and when someone asks, he'll say 'it's from my driving test.' (P2)

Several recounted moments of success without conscious effort or a strategic intent. Though there is often an approach of trial and error and optimally using "whatever we have available we want to broadcast at that moment", these are often then curated specifically for public content. A participant recounted the time that they "gave a presentation and won a prize as most promising start-up" which

resulted in a prominent interview and, at another conference, a spontaneous photographed interaction with the Dutch king (P9). Though these moments were not planned, they were leveraged as opportunities to strategically create social media posts reaching "thousands and thousands of people" (P9).

Of course, the curation process has its limitations. In some cases, business models prevented them from "doing sales" and relied more on networking for recognition-building. Others qualified the assumption that more visibility was better, noting that creating focused awareness among specific groups or in specific contexts was more meaningful and cost-efficient as opposed to "publicity in cities where we were not available" (P7). As should be clear, a careful curation of opportunities and locations is crucial to making this happen.

(re)Calibrate

The last dimension in our process framework reflects the role of stakeholders as a source of inspiration, input, and feedback. We refer to this dimension as (re)*Calibrate* to illuminate the iterative and cyclical processes by which start-ups' customer-focused orientation plays a key role in strategy formulation or refinement: "the brand is not only what you in your small room decided it to be . . . it naturally develops at every touchpoint" (P4).

Several reported using customer feedback as a sounding board to validate their concept and to sharpen or enhance the value proposition of their offering:

> In the beginning, it was more based on intuition and we were just saying, how do we want to be for our customers? We thought it's only that you want to use the bike to go from A to B. We asked people what they wanted to pay for. Some customers said, 'well, I [want to] know when something breaks down you will be there to fix it.' This really changed our perspective from we are 'bike hire company' to we are a 'service company.' And this is still part of our DNA. (P3)

Indeed, seeking and adjusting the concept to feedback ensured that the (emerging) brand connected with the (potential) customer, was memorable, easily recalled, and elicited positive associations. It was precisely this exercise that allowed the energy systems start-up understand that their early inspiration to be "sleek and fancy like Apple" did not resonate with their end-customers. After field-testing their idea, the start-up made adjustments to the brand tagline and logo colors, avoiding "the overused green" (P12) with the intention of significantly improving customers' material recollection and experiences with the brand. Although well-intentioned, Volk and Zerfass (2018) caution that such efforts to secure stakeholder alignment may be overly positive and naïve; hence organizations have to manage the fine line between being adaptive and rigid (*p. 437).

What was less clear in the (re)calibration of the brand was whose feedback was most valued. Interviewees indicated that they received (un)solicited input from several sources which varied from a variety of "people outside the company" (P2) including neighbors, "experts" and "people within the start-up eco landscape" (P5), friends, family and the extended professional network of business partners and advisors ("many brains instead of one brain"; P7). With family and friends, some cautioned about the possibility of bias ("mom test . . . if you ask your mom about anything, she would say it's great," opined P8) and advised to seek "honest feedback" instead. Feedback from early hires/team members also contributed business ideas that were incorporated by the firm. As a case in point, six months after their official launch, the food chain in our sample introduced an expanded menu including high-tea and brunch inspired by an employee and a retail partner who said "'Hey, high-tea is picking up in popularity. Why don't you do something with high-tea?'" (P6). For another, the value proposition of vegan fruit and vegetable ice bars was the result of a tip from "a guy from Israel [who] said in the summer you sell a lot more [ice cream] sticks than pints so that's why we started to focus on the sticks" (P14).

Over time, customer input may shift to decisions about where and how to communicate, how to tailor communication for different customer groups, and less about the core values of the brand. Customer segmentation and market analysis forms the basis of how entrepreneurs tailor their

messages to highlight value proposition in terms of (customer) value, understanding the "pain points of the customer" (P10). Hence, a lot of thought had to be given to forging favorable associations in brand communication even when the physical product was the same:

> . . . people who mainly try [our scooters] for sustainability reasons, activating them with a different message significantly increases the conversion rate. People working as bankers are more attracted to the message that we are the fastest way to get around town so they still have time to do the gym and work and go to a date for example. (P5)

This type of (re)calibration of offerings and message to fit with public consumption potential represents a key moment in which our interviewees expressed their struggles with effective communication and branding.

Discussion and implications

In line with the special issue call, our research aimed to contribute a communication lens on how entrepreneurs describe the start-up branding experience. The 4 C dimensions emerging from our research demonstrate the role and relevance of strategic communication in the start-up brand-building process. Through this, we show how entrepreneurial practices are communicatively enacted and embrace the call to abandon a functional and linear branding approach centred on visual design in favor of an innovative communication approach (Cornelissen et al., 2012; Van Ruler, 2018; Wiesenberg et al., 2020). Below we delineate the implications of our research.

Wiesenberg et al., 2020). Below we delineate the implications of our research.

Despite the exponential growth in branding research in the past decade, few studies have advanced a communication-centred explanation of brand-building among starts-ups. Using an assemblage approach, our dimensional 4 C framework offers an empirically grounded communication perspective on entrepreneurial branding efforts. We identify the dimensions of *Craft, Cultivate, Curate* and *(re) Calibrate* to illustrate how branding is a dynamic and heterogenous process that entails a process of meaning and material construction, an approach that aligns well with entrepreneurial constraints outlined in extant research and early on in this paper. Overall, entrepreneurs in our study demonstrated an appreciation for an early start to brand-building and found creative ways to leverage material constraints (e.g., budgets, time, human resource) and to remain relevant in a volatile business environment. Especially as young organizations may be resource strapped, or precisely because they are resource strapped and in start-up mindset, they are more mindful of how they use their material and financial resources.

For each dimension, we illustrate how entrepreneurs negotiate between resource limitations and actively enact attendant practices and the considerations that shape their decisions. In this sense, strategic communication plays in pivotal role in how entrepreneurs create organizational strategy. This effort resonates with the assertion that communication not only supports already formulated strategy but, in continuous and reflective way, helps to "build, define, present, realize, and rebuild strategy" (Van Ruler, 2018, p. 378). Such an effort aligns well with the need for a broader perspective, taking into account "the start-up ecosystem as well as the start-ups themselves, the way they build up their concept (emergence of strategy), and how they try to gain capital (be it by turnover and therefore clients and/or investors)" (Wiesenberg et al., 2020, p. 51). Our approach is also well-positioned within the 'strategy-as-practice' turn that focuses on the everyday activities of organizing that are involved in the "emergence of organizational strategies, conscious or not" (Vaara & Whittington, 2012, p. 287; Winkler & Etter, 2018).

Our study both lends support to existing research and departs from it in important ways. From a branding activity standpoint, our study confirms what Juntunen et al. (2010) and others have outlined, for instance, the importance of developing an idea, finalizing a name, defining core values, employee engagement and involvement, consistent brand communication, etcetera. However, the linearity across stages or "eras" (e.g., Juntunen, 2012) and the assumption that these activities are

executed in a strategically planned and consistent manner is not something our study echoes. In view of the challenges confronting start-ups, our research confirms the need to look at start-up branding as a dynamic, continual, and negotiated process that involves the simultaneous interplay of actors (e.g., founders and stakeholders) and is both strategic and emergent.

First, we find that any of the 4Cs may serve as a point of entry and/or may occur concurrently or act as areas of crucial reflexive brand focus. Because start-ups confront multiple challenges, they often do not have the luxury of compartmentalizing tasks and must simultaneously work on multiple fronts (aka the 4Cs). Our explicit goal was not to compare branding processes across business models; however, our results indicate that depending on their model (B2B/B2C), a start-up may prioritize specific dimensions, e.g., *Curate* and *(re)Calibrate* before investing in building a team; alternately, a start-up with initial funding may focus more heavily on issues related to our dimensions of *Craft* and *Cultivate*. Instead of viewing these dimensions as predictive or prescriptive of success, we contend that they are better understood in terms of ways of framing the communication processes that constitute the act of "doing" or assembling a brand and how the branding process unfolds in practice (Vasquez et al., 2013).

Second, we find that in *Crafting* their problem statement and/or brand mission, start-ups actively engage in legitimacy building by framing their concept as a solution for a (societal or business) need. As previously noted, new ventures confront legitimacy challenges owing to their liability of newness leaving the examination of their legitimacy-gaining mechanisms open for inquiry. With Ricard (2017), we see that start-ups would benefit from an understanding of the multidimensional nature of legitimacy and contend that framing their brand mission in societal terms is a legitimacy-seeking effort that start-ups in our sample engaged in early on. Arguably, a changing communication landscape with active stakeholders and heightened expectations from brands to transcend functional benefits have shifted attention to the importance of a social purpose (Vilá & Bhardwaj, 2017; also Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Contrary to established, large organizations, our dimension focused approach may help identify points at which start-ups can make use of the edge they have to situate societal relevance and impact as core to their business model from the start (see Golob et al., 2020).

Third, our study also confirms the important role of stakeholders, especially consumers and employees, in co-creating the start-up brand across different sub-processes and stages (Juntunen, 2012; Men et al., 2017) as yet another layer or resource in the overall brand assemblage. Thus, the brand is best seen as a "communicative outcome of negotiation interactions" (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 144), a shift in which brand managers view themselves not as rigid "brand custodians" but as "conductors" who facilitate the adaptation of the brand to stakeholder needs while staying true to their DNA (Iglesias & Ind, 2020, p. 712). For start-ups, the openness to *re(Calibrate)* in accordance with stakeholder feedback affords a mechanism for concept/product validation and leeway to incorporate future iterations; however, it is noteworthy that the emphasis on brand co-creation is a delicate balancing act that can dissipate into loss of brand control (e.g., Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). Therefore, entrepreneurs need to be cognizant that managing this "fragile yet flexible" assemblage is key to brand survival (Preece et al., 2019, p. 345).

In particular, the relationship with employees (*Cultivate*) is reminiscent of the challenges that even large organizations confront in terms of finding the balance between being autonomous and living the entrepreneurial brand (values). As such, a focus on employee understandings of the brand within these start-ups is needed alongside efforts to transform this knowledge into brand-aligned behavior and meaningful customer encounters (Men et al., 2021; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). This process requires further study as well, as how employees of new ventures experience the identity tensions that an ambassadorship role evokes and how they negotiate the expectations of employee advocacy has been largely based on the experiences within large corporations – for instance, "employee branding" (Cervellon & Lirio,) and "employee ambassadorship" (van Zoonen et al., 2018).

From a practitioner perspective, instead of seeing start-up branding as an oxymoron, our research suggests that entrepreneurs can assess and assign priority to the strategic communication processes most appropriate for them. The same is true for how start-ups strategically *Curate* their brand,

a process that does not have to follow after the concept or product is fully developed nor does this have to entail communication efforts that are wide-ranging across all media. Rather, depending on business peculiarities, focused and direct efforts at communication with key audiences may be more strategic and cost-effective for some while a wider scope of visibility may be beneficial for others. These perspectives affirm the claim of Petkova et al. (2008) that through symbolic and material activities, new ventures may build a generalized reputation while others may invest in accumulating 'local' reputation by engaging in communication activities with a small and focused group of stakeholders.

Limitations, future directions, and conclusion

Our study naturally has limitations. First, our sample comprises exclusively male (co-)founders, which, while being consistent with the demographic findings of the European Start-up Monitor (Bormans et al., 2020), could be critiqued for being skewed. More effort could have been made to actively seek female entrepreneurs and examine if gender plays a decisive role in conceptualizing and executing branding processes. Second, our sample size could be considered small and confined only to the (co-)founders. Employees and other stakeholders were not interviewed. Although our approach was justifiable given the research question and the differences in start-up maturity whereby several of the participating start-ups only had a small core founding team, future research would benefit from including additional stakeholders. Finally, although a qualitative approach allowed us to foreground participant perspectives and lived experiences, interviews were conducted at a single point in time and participant perspectives were constructed retrospectively. For pragmatic reasons, an observational approach to see the entrepreneurs 'in action' was not possible. Future research can benefit from a larger sample of participants and a wider range of methodologies to examine the transferability of our findings to start-ups in different cultural and business contexts. The exploratory 4C dimensions can be subject to a more extensive quantitative process to tease out which of these are prioritized in different industry contexts, and what could be possible facilitators, barriers, as well as meaningful indicators of success for each of these dimensions.

ORCID

Vidhi Chaudhri ⬦ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1553-9370
Jason Pridmore ⬦ http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9159-8623

References

Abimbola, T., & Vallaster, C. (2007). Brand, organizational identity and reputation in SMEs: An overview. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, *10*(4), 341–348. https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750710819685

Aldrich, H. E., & Auster, E. R. (1986). Even dwarfs started small: Liabilities of age and size and their strategic implications. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, *8*, 165–198. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228221131_Even_Dwarfs_Started_Small_Liabilities_of_Age_and_Size_and_Their_Strategic .

Berthon, P., Ewing, M. T., & Napoli, J. (2008). Brand management in small to medium-sized enterprises. *Journal of Small Business Management*, *46*(1), 27–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-627X.2007.00229.x

Blank, S. (2013, May). Why the lean start-up changes everything. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2013/05/why-the-lean-start-up-changes-everything%20

Bormans, J., Privitera, M., Bogen, E., & Cooney, T. (2020) *European startup monitor 2019/2020*. http://www.europeanstartupmonitor2019.eu/EuropeanStartupMonitor2019_2020_21_02_2020-1.pdf

Bresciani, S., & Eppler, M. J. (2010). Brand new ventures? Insights on start-up's branding practices. *The Journal of Product and Brand Management*, *19*(5), 356–366. https://doi.org/10.1108/10610421011068595

Centeno, E., Hart, S., & Dinnie, K. (2013). The five phases of SME brand-building. *Journal of Brand Management*, *20*(6), 445–457. https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2012.49

Cerdeira, N., & Kotashev, K. (2021, March 25). *Startup failure rate: Ultimate report + infographic*. Failory. https://www.failory.com/blog/startup-failure-rate#toc-failure-rates-of-scale-ups-

Cervellon, M. C. & Lirio, P. (2017)., When employees don't 'like' their employers on social media. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 58(2), 62-70. https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/when-employees-dontlike-their-employers-on-social-media/

Churchill, N. C., & Lewis, V. L. (1983). The five stages of small business growth. *Harvard Business Review*, *61*(3), 30–39. https://hbr.org/1983/05/the-five-stages-of-small-businessgrowth

Cornelissen, J., Christensen, L. J., & Kinuthia, K. (2012). Corporate brand and identity: Developing a stronger theory and a call for shifting the debate. *European Journal of Marketing*, *46*(7/8), 1093–1102. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561211230214

Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Pearson Education, Inc.

Deephouse, D. L., & Carter, S. M. (2005). An examination of differences between organizational legitimacy and organizational reputation. *Journal of Management Studies*, *42*(2), 329–360. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00499.x

Fombrun, C. J., & Shanley, M. (1990). What's in a name? Reputation-building and corporate strategy. *Academy of Management Journal*, *33*(2), 233–258.is DOIhttps://doi.org/10.2307/256324

Global Startup Ecosystem Report (2020). *Startup Genome*. https://startupgenome.com/article/state-of-the-global-startup-economy

Golob, U., Davies, M. A. P., Kernstock, J., & Powell, S. M. (2020). Trending topics plus future challenges and opportunities in brand management. *Journal of Brand Management*, *27*(2), 123–129. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-019-00184-4

Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., Van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *1*(1), 3–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/15531180701285244

Iglesias, O., & Ind, N. (2020). Towards a theory of conscientious corporate brand co-creation: The next key challenge in brand management. *Journal of Brand Management*, *27*(6), 710–720. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-020-00205-7

Inskip, I. (2004). Corporate branding for small to medium-sized businesses—A missed opportunity or an indulgence? *Journal of Brand Management*, *11*(5), 358–365. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540181

Invernizzi, E., & Romenti, S. (2015). Adopting an entrepreneurial perspective in the study of strategic communication. In D. Holtzhausen & A. Zerfass (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of strategic communication* (*pp. 214228). 214228). Routledge.

Juntunen, M. (2012). Co-creating corporate brands in start-ups. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, *30*(2), 230–249. https://doi.org/10.1108/02634501211211993

Juntunen, M., Saraniemi, S., Halttu, M., & Tähtinen, J. (2010). Corporate brand building in different stages of small business growth. *Journal of Brand Management*, *18*(2), 115–133. https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2010.34

Kapferer, J. N. (2012). *The new strategic brand management: Advanced insights and strategic thinking* (5th ed.). Kogan Page Ltd.

Lury, C. (2009). Brand as assemblage. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, *2*(1–2), 67–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350903064022

Martin, J., Feldman, M. S., Hatch, M. J., & Sitkin, S. B. (1983). The uniqueness paradox in organizational stories. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *28*(3), 438–453. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392251

Men, R. L., Chen, Z. F., & Ji, Y. G. (2021). Cultivating relationships with startup employees: The role of entrepreneurs' leadership communication. *Management Communication Quarterly*[OnlineFirst], 089331892110179. https://doi.org/10.1177/08933189211017918

Men, L. R., Ji, Y. G., & Chen, Z. F. (2017). Dialogues with entrepreneurs in China: How start-up companies cultivate relationships with strategic publics. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *29*(2–3), 90–113. https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2017.1329736

Merrilees, B. (2007). A theory of brand-led SME new venture development. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, *10*(4), 403–415. https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750710819739

Mingione, M., & Abratt, R. (2020). Building a corporate brand in the digital age: Imperatives for transforming born-digital startups into successful corporate brands. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *36*(11–12), 981–1008. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2020.1750453

Moroni, I., Arruda, A., & Araujo, K. (2015). The design and technological innovation: How to understand the growth of startup companies in competitive business environment. *Procedia Manufacturing*, *3*, 2199–2204. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.promfg.2015.07.361

Mueller, S., Volery, T., & von Siemens, B. (2012). What do entrepreneurs actually do? An observational study of entrepreneurs' everyday behavior in the start-up and growth stages. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *36*(5), 995–1017. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2012.00538.x

Ojasalo, J., Nätti, S., & Olkkonen, R. (2008). Brand building in software SMEs: An empirical study. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *17*(2), 92–107. https://doi.org/10.1108/10610420810864702

Onyas, W. I., & Ryan, A. (2015). Exploring the brand's world-as-assemblage: The brand as a market shaping device. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *31*(1–2), 141–166. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2014.977333

Owen, W. F. (1984). Relational themes in interpersonal communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *70*(3), 274–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383697

Pakura, S., & Rudeloff, C. (2020). How entrepreneurs build brands and reputation with social media PR: Empirical insights from start-ups in Germany. *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship* [Online First], 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/08276331.2020.1728490

Parmentier, M., & Fischer, E. (2015). Things fall apart: The dynamics of brand audience dissipation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *41*(5), 1228–1251. https://doi.org/10.1086/678907

Petkova, A. P. (2012). From the ground up: Building young firms' reputations. In M. L. Barnett & T. G. Pollock (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of corporate reputation* (*pp. 383401). 383401). Oxford University Press.

Petkova, A. P., Rindova, V. P., & Gupta, A. K. (2008). How new can ventures build reputation? An exploratory study. *Corporate Reputation Review*, *11*(4), 320–334. https://doi.org/10.1057/crr.2008.27

Preece, C., Kerrigan, F., & O'Reilly, D. (2019). License to assemble: Theorizing brand longevity. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *46*(2), 330–350. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucy076

Price, L. L., & Coulter, R. A. (2019). Crossing bridges: Assembling culture into brands and brands into consumers' global local cultural lives. *Journal for Consumer Psychology*, *29*(3), 547–554. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1121

Ricard, A. 2017 New ventures in search for legitimacy? An analysis of startupers social representations of legitimacy. [Conference proceeding]. http://entrepreneuriat.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Ricard.pdf

Rode, V., & Vallaster, C. (2005). Corporate branding for start-ups: The crucial role of entrepreneurs. *Corporate Reputation Review*, *8*(2), 121–135. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1540244

Rokka, J., & Canniford, R. (2016). Heterotopian selfies: How social media destabilizes brand assemblages. *European Journal of Marketing*, *50*(9/10), 1789–1813. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-08-2015-0517

Sommer, S. C., Loch, C. H., & Dong, J. (2009). Managing complexity and unforeseeable uncertainty in startup companies: An empirical study. *Organization Science*, *20*(1), 118–133. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1080.0369

Spence, M., & Essoussi, L. H. (2010). SME brand building and management: An exploratory study. *European Journal of Marketing*, *44*(7/8), 1037–1054. https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561011047517

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods – Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Vaara, E., & Whittington, R. (2012). Strategy-as-practice: Taking social practices seriously. *The Academy of Management Annals*, *6*(1), 285–336. https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2012.672039

Vallaster, C. & de Chernatony, L. (2006).European Journal of Marketing, 40(7/8), 761-784. DOI:10.1108/03090560610669982

Internal brand building and structuration: The role of leadership

Vallaster, C., & von Wallpach, S. (2013). An online discursive inquiry into the social dynamics of multi-stakeholder brand meaning co-creation. *Journal of Business Research*, *66*(9), 1505–1515. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2012.09.012

van Dijk, M., Kruit, J. D., Mogendorff, G., & Scheper, W. (2015). *Scale-up: The experience game*. Deloitte. https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/nl/Documents/deloitte-analytics/deloitte-nl-data-analytics-onderzoeksrapport-scale-up-the-experience-game.pdf

Van Ruler, B. (2018). Communication theory: An underrated pillar on which strategic communication rests. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *12*(4), 367–381. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1452240

van Werven, R., Bouwmeester, O., & Cornelissen, J. P. (2015). The power of arguments: How entrepreneurs convince stakeholders of the legitimate distinctiveness of their ventures. *Journal of Business Venturing*, *30*(4), 616–631. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2014.08.001

van Zoonen, W., Bartels, J., van Prooijen, A., & Schouten, A. P., and M.C, Cervellon

Vasquez, C., Sergi, V., & Cordelier, B. (2013). From being branded to doing branding: Studying representation practices from a communication-centered approach. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *29*(2), 135–146. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2013.02.002

Vilá, O. R., & Bhardwaj, S. (2017). Competing on social purpose. *Harvard Business Review*, *95*(5), 94–101 https://hbr.org/2017/09/competing-on-socialpurpose#:~:text=Competing%20on%20social%20purpose%20requires,diligent%20pursuit%20of%20brand%20goals

Volk, S. C., & Zerfass, A. (2018). Alignment: Explicating a key concept in strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *12*(4), 433–451. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1452742

von Wallpach, S., Hemetsberger, A., & Espersen, P. (2017). Performing identities: Processes of brand and stakeholder identity co-construction. *Journal of Business Research*, *70*, 443–452. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.06.021

Wiesenberg, M., Godulla, A., Tengler, K., Noelle, I.-M., Kloss, J., Klein, N., & Eeckhout, D. (2020). Key challenges in strategic start-up communication: A systematic literature review and an explorative study. *Journal of Communication Management*, *24*(1), 49–64. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-10-2019-0129

Winkler, P., & Etter, M. (2018). Strategic communication and emergence: A dual narrative framework. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *12*(4), 382–398. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1452241

Witt, P., & Rode, V. (2005). Corporate brand building in startups. *Journal of Enterprising Culture*, *13*(3), 273–294. https://doi.org/10.1142/S0218495805000173

Yang, T., & Aldrich, H. E. (2017). "The liability of newness" revisited: Theoretical restatement and empirical testing in emergent organizations. *Social Science Research*, *63*, 36–53. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.09.006

Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *12*(4), 487–505. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485