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An exploratory study of the phenomenon blands
By: James Brattström, Hugo Röken and Hanna Welander

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Abstract

Purpose: A new phenomenon has emerged in the world of branding which has not yet been researched in an academic setting. Brands that look the same, feel the same, offer similar business models towards consumers but still somehow feel modern and unique at a first glance. The purpose of this exploratory paper is to define and analyze the phenomenon of blands.

Methodology: A literature review was conducted to find tangents to blands from other branding concepts. The dimensions of brand personality by Aaker (1997) and Kapferer's (2012) brand positioning diamond are used as tools to explore and define blands. A qualitative exploratory study with three focus groups was conducted to examine consumers' perceptions on blands.

Findings: Through the empirical findings a framework for blands was formed based on brand positioning and brand personality. This paper finds that blands are perceived as having the personality trait excitement, i.e. up-to-date, spirited and imaginative. A blands positioning can be interpreted as following: prioritizing a basic benefit, competing against traditional well-known brands within the product category and targeting young and trendy people by providing outstanding design. Findings also show that blands do not present reasons-to-believe that support their brand promises, instead they rely on design.

Original/Value: This paper is the first to explore and define blands in an academic setting, adding to previous literature about brand copying like research on me-too brands.

Keywords: Blands, Brand personality, Positioning, Me-too brand

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

Copying other brands has been a strategy deployed by companies to gain from innovators and pioneers within their fields for decades. The success of a new and unique product feature is usually followed by multiple brands copying these certain features (Gordon et al. 1991). To enter the market companies can adopt a me-too brand strategy, where a successful pioneer within a market attracts brand imitators who build their brand accordingly (Sinapuelas & Robinson, 2009).

The definition of a me-too brand is not completely distinct but has been defined by Sinapuelas & Robinson as a brand that "introduce their version of a previously introduced novel feature" (2009, p.184). Meaning that existing brands adjust their features to features already expressed by a pioneer within the category. Carpenter and Nakamoto (1989) states a similar definition, claiming that it is a brand that reacts to the competition by following the prototypical brand in the category.

Recently, a brand copying phenomenon has emerged with an omnipresence in multiple categories. In a Bloomberg article, Schott (2020) discusses this phenomenon that he calls "blands". Blands are brands that claim to be groundbreaking in purpose, offer a disruptive product and superiority when it comes to delivery. Simultaneously these blands appear to be molded in a homogenous shape, applying a specific tone of voice, utilizing the same business model and generally having the same appearance. Schott (2020) also believes that blands follow a certain blueprint which appears to be applicable in product multiple categories.

According to the blueprint, blands present themselves as non-corporate underdogs that disrupt the market by cutting out the middleman in order to lower prices, without

compromising with quality. Blands also offer one or very few products that are one click away, often sold on a subscription model. They have values that lean to a liberal ideology, showing no judgement towards sex, gender, age, race, ethnicity or faith. Additionally, they tend to position themselves as affordable luxury and to be the only option for consumers. Furthermore, blands emphasize its necessity in order to appeal to consumers who dislike marketing. In order to appeal to that crowd, they also use a certain aesthetic, using a simple & neutral graphic design with plain and pastel heavy palette (Schott, 2020). Although Schott's (2020) blueprint is very detailed regarding the brand phenomenon, it was written in Bloomberg, a non-academic magazine. This paper therefore aims to explore the phenomenon of blands in an academic environment.

When looking closer at the possible dichotomy of blands, questions arise regarding how consumers perceive them since this has yet to be explored. In order to define blands this paper investigates the phenomenon through dimensions of brand personality and positioning models. The paper uses a qualitative approach with focus groups in order to find out how blands are perceived, in this case Quip, Estrid and Hedvig. The aim of this paper is to provide managerial insights of a phenomenon yet to be described in an academic setting.

Literature Review

Brand personality

Marketers have known for a long time that consumers perceive and think about symbols from brands, not just products (Levy, 1959). Possessions act as contributions to and reflection of consumers identities and in mature markets non-product-features impact purchase

decisions greatly (Belk, 1988; Azulay & Kapferer 2003). Brand personality can be defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, pp 347). The last 20-years of academic research in brand personality has stemmed from the knowledge presented by Aaker in 1997 (Kapferer, 2008). In this article Aaker (1997) combines previous knowledge of brand personality with research on human personality structure. Earlier studies on the topic show that brand personality drives differentiation and consumer preferences within the product category (Aaker, 1997).

Brand personality is created as a result of direct, or indirect, contacts consumers have with brands. These contacts encompass consumers witnessing product attributes such as logotypes or design but also brand users, employees or CEOs of the brands. In addition to personality traits, other characteristics created in the minds of consumers as a result of contact with the brand are age, gender and class (Aaker, 1997).

Aakers (1997) examination of brand personality was based on a collection of free-associations consumers had with several brands. The associations were then rated based on their descriptive value and the highest rated ones were used by consumers to describe a diverse set of brands. The study resulted in selecting the five most robust personality dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The dimensions contain a set of items that describe the traits that correlate the highest with each personality dimension. Sincerity consists of the traits domestic, honest, genuine and cheerful. Excitement consists of daring, spirited, imaginative and up-to-date. Competence consists of reliable, responsible, dependable and efficient. Sophistication consists of glamorous, pretentious, charming, romantic. Ruggedness consists of tough, strong, outdoorsy and rugged. Aaker (1997) attests

that these dimensions and traits can be used generally across all brands due to the large number of brands studied.

Brand identity

Balmer, Grayser & Stephen (2002) argue that the corporate identity is built upon multiple identities that coincide within one organisation. Similarly, Kapferer (2008) asserts that brand identity is built on several aspects.

Kapferer (2008) describes brand identity as "being your true self, driven by a personal goal that is both different from others' and resistant to change". The sender, or organization, behind the brand is largely responsible for the brand identity resulting in it being an important managerial tool for organizations today. Brand identity monitors brand expressions, durability and provides frameworks that enable brand coherence (Kapferer, 2008).

Brand positioning

Positioning is regarded as being one of the key elements in marketing, strategy and branding. Additionally, positioning is a way to show both internal and external stakeholders should view the brands position (Urde & Koch, 2014). Hooley et al., (2001, p.503) emphasizes the importance of positioning: "Positioning forms the core of modern marketing theory and practice."

Further, brand positioning is described by Kapferer (2008, p.175) as "emphasising the distinctive characteristics that make it different from its competitors and appealing to the public". Brand positioning is developed from the brand identity where facets of the identity are used in a specific scenario with a defined market, point of time and competitors. Although the identity stays the same, global brands can vary in their positioning worldwide (Kapferer, 2008). Kapferer's (2008) analytical process

behind defining the brand positioning is established through examining four questions.

For what benefit? Referring to the consumer benefits and brand promise (Kapferer, 2012). A brand for whom? Referring to the brand's target aspect. The target can be defined through a profile of psychological, sociological factors. This aims to explain the nature of a potential consumer. Why? Referring to elements that support the brand's claimed benefit. This is also known as the reason-to-believe in the brand. A brand against whom? Referring to the main competitors. Comparing against whom the brand is competing against requires first indicating the competitive set the brand should be associated with and then identify the essential differences to competitors within the competitive set. The field of competition should be made after assessing the strategic value of the field. An assessment of the size, speed of growth and profitability of the field is important while looking at competition (Kapferer, 2008). These four questions can display positioning as a diamond presented in Figure 1.
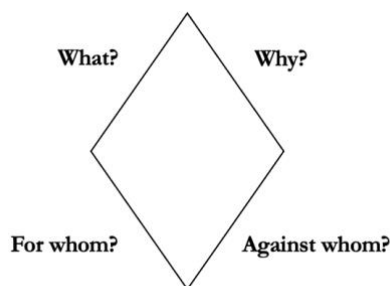

Figure 1.

Kapferer (2008) also adds that positioning helps consumers in their decision-making process. He claims that consumers compare products, but with brands they make an active choice. Therefore, positioning can create real or perceived advantages through taking possession of purchasing rationale. Perceived advantages can be satisfaction from participating in the symbolic world of the brands. Because of this, positioning

becomes a benchmark for consumer satisfaction after the position is advertised. In other words, positioning sets the external expectations for the brand (Kapferer, 2008).

Me-too brands

Product differentiation can distinguish brands from competitors by strategies that change things about the product that are more relevant and meaningful for competitors (Carpenter, Gregory and Nakamoto, 1989). A company that enters the market following a pioneer can do so as an imitator (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Schnaars (1994, cited in Kotler & Keller, 2016) adds that imitators can be successful in the marketplace if they offer lower prices than the pioneer, improved products or if they are able to set themselves apart with marketing. Me-too branding is a form of imitation where companies copy bigger brands' products and mark, resulting in similar attributes (Kapferer, 2008). Similarly, Sinapuelas and Robinson (2012) define a me-too brand as a brand that copies a previously introduced feature.

Methodology

Research strategy

The aim of this research paper is to investigate a phenomenon not described in an academic setting before. Consequently, this method takes form as an exploratory study. An exploratory study is defined as "a valuable means of finding out 'what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007, p.133). When exploring blands, it is necessary to seek new insights, ask questions and assess the phenomena, therefore an exploratory study is the approach for this paper's method.

According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2007), there are three options when

conducting research that takes an exploratory approach: a search of the literature, interviewing experts in the subject or conducting focus group interviews. A search of the literature was made, relevant business research on blands is however limited. One of the primary advantages of exploratory research is the ability to be flexible and adaptive to change when results of new data occur. This is especially favorable for this paper since the purpose is to investigate a concept and the outcome is very dependent on the collected data.

Data collection

When collecting data for exploratory research, conducting focus groups is one option, as stated before. Focus groups are preferable when examining a specific theme in depth. Focus groups of six to twelve consumers are then typically constructed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This paper used three different focus groups with six respondents in each. One of the main strengths of focus groups is the insights you receive from the interaction between the participants, such discussions can bring light to not only what they think but why they believe so (Morgan, 2019). To capture what lies behind consumer thinking is crucial when exploring the phenomena blands, their perceptions need to be fully elaborated and understood. The choice of focus groups provides this paper with such information.

In the assembled groups, non-standardized interviews were used. Semi structured interviews are often referred to as qualitative research interviews (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007), which is the interview structure this paper deployed. The moderator of the focus groups had a set of themes and questions that were brought up during the focus groups. The order of questions was subject to change depending on the flow and stage of the conversations. Additional questions also gave a possibility

to capture the respondents' thoughts and opinions. This structure allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions which is key for this paper's purpose, as it is important to fully understand the consumers perception of blands.

Since the paper aims to explore the phenomenon, capturing the consumer's perception of blands was crucial. One of the simplest ways of measuring brand personality is to solicit open-end responses. A direct and simple question for exploring blands personality is by asking our focus groups ``If the brand were to come alive as a person, what would it be like?" (Keller, 2006, cited by Anselmsson 2021). This creates discussions among the respondents, which is sought after in focus groups and desirable when examining consumers' perception of blands. Such questions were asked to get an understanding if blands emit any certain brand personality traits.

Case study selection

Case studies are empirical descriptions of particular instances of a phenomenon and are often descriptions of recent events (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). In this paper, theory was developed inductively from cases in the sense that the case selection was used to recognize patterns within and across the brands. When selecting cases, you should consider the cases that can bring light and logic to the researched topic (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

This paper chose three different companies to act as study objects. All firms are argued to complete the criterions when selecting case objects, since the selected brands will provide data which can help the study to get an understanding of the phenomenon blands. The brands in this case study all possess the characteristics of blands according to Schott (2020), simple products, offers subscription, colorful design, short snappy name with little

meaning, few products offered and heavy online presence. These were the constructed criterions when searching for brands that can highlight the phenomenon blands and could then be used as case studies. From here on, these brands will be referred to as blands. The three cases that all contained the traits of a bland are:

- *Quip* - A company that offers subscriptions on toothbrushes, toothpaste and refillable floss (Quip, 2021a).
- *Hedvig* - An insurance company that offers "Insurance for how we live today" (Hedvig, 2021a).
- *Estrid* - A company that offers "A new way of shaving" with subscriptions on shaving-kits for women (Estrid, 2021a).

As focus groups were assembled, the moderator started the interview with a presentation (see appendix 2) whereupon the participants were shown one of these brands. Pictures of the brands website and the brands social media presence on Instagram was presented to give the group a feeling of the brand. The presentation was followed with the research questions (see appendix 1). Different focus groups (focus group A, B and C) got different brands (Quip, Hedvig and Estrid) to start the interview with, to avoid any brand getting more focus in all three focus groups. The same procedure, showing a new brand and asking the same questions was made with the remaining two brands.

Focus group:	A	B	C
Order the brand were presented:	Quip	Hedvig	Estrid
	Hedvig	Quip	Quip
	Estrid	Estrid	Hedvig

Table 1. Overview of focus groups and order of brands presented.

Data analysis

Once the data was collected from three different focus groups, the transcription and coding process was started. The semi structured interviews were recorded and transcribed since it allows more thorough examination of what people say (Bryman & Bell, 2011), which is a necessity when an analysis is made from the data recorded. In the process of transcription unnecessary filler words were deleted to make the material easy to understand in a textual format. Coding the collected data meant dividing it into themes. A code schedule was designed depending on the question asked to identify keywords, similarities and differences in the respondents' answers which could later be used for the research analysis.

Research ethics

All participants in this exploratory study were offered anonymity to eliminate the risk of the respondents receiving any harm from contributing to this research, this is an important aspect of research ethics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Providing anonymity is also a path to establishing trust towards the group and giving the participants the possibility to express their point of view on blands without any hesitations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). A social comforting environment was sought for to ensure that no respondent was limited to express themself. All three focus groups were therefore performed in the respondents preferred language Swedish, to generate an optimal setting for the participants.

Research quality

To create a high research quality in this exploratory paper, the researchers took concepts such as Reliability, Validity and generalization into account. Reliability refers to what extent this collected data will produce consistent findings if other researchers would do similar observations

(Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). Since this study is exploratory and seeks the perceptions of blands from a consumer's point of view, answers and conclusions might differ. Perceptions and opinions change from person to person, perception about a single brand can also change over time. The phenomenon blands is a concept within branding, the development, growth and usage rate of brands becoming blands might be a trend and can take different directions. As the phenomenon changes the observations in this study are made to explore the phenomenon in its current stage, which makes reliability difficult to secure. The semi structured interviews were recorded and transcribed, this argues for the transparency of the collected data, creating a certain level of reliability.

Validity refers to "whether the findings are really what they appear to be about" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007, p.150). Validity can be hard to secure in small studies like these. However, participants were given anonymity and the option of choosing their preferred language, this argues for the validity of this research since it enhances true expressions.

When conducting research, it is desirable for the results to be able to be applied to other individuals than those participating in the study, this means having a representative sample (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It is difficult to generalize qualitative studies that seek to explain a phenomenon. In the exploratory stages of research, non-random sampling is the most practical sampling, even if generalization might lack in this type of sampling method (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). Limited resources affected the choice of sampling method.

Empirical Results and Analysis

Case companies background

Quip - Quip is a New York based company that was founded 2014 by two men with a background in product design. Quips brand promise is: "Align with dental advice and put what's best for your teeth before all else, never stop improving our products, reduce our environmental impact and strive to be available 24/7 and your one-stop-shop for oral health" (Quip, 2021b). To this date they have 175 employees and offer healthcare bundles, electronic toothbrushes with Bluetooth connection to an app, flosses and gum (Quip, 2021c).

Hedvig - Hedvig is a Swedish online insurance company started in 2017 with the brand mission "Setting new standards for an industry that's been standing still for decades" (Hedvig, 2021b). The company offers insurance to rentals, homeowners, students, houses and villas. Hedvig is currently the fastest growing insurance company in Scandinavia with over 70 000 users and 130 employees (Hedvig, 2021c). In 2020 they launched in Norway and grew with 200% and the following year they launched in Denmark (Hedvig, 2021d).

Estrid - The idea of Estrid started when the founders realized that 1 in 3 women use men's razors instead of women razors. The company was founded in 2019 and is today one of Sweden's fastest scaling start-ups with 65 employees (Estrid, 2021b). Estrid provides subscription plans with affordable razors for women online. Their brand mission is "Hair removal should be optional. Great hair removal shouldn't. That's why we've created Estrid." (Estrid, 2021).

Brand positioning - For what?

"For what" responds to the brand promise and consumer benefits (Kapferer, 2012). According to the focus groups, the benefits of each brand does not differ greatly from its competition when it comes to the actual performance of the product or the service itself. The examined brands provide the

essential benefit that is associated with its category (e.g. Quip provides good oral health). The unique benefits are connected to the appearance, trendy style and the subscription model. Here however Hedvig is an exception, who the participants believed to be providing a unique benefit with an app-based service with a faster response rate than its competitors.

Respondent 4 (Group C): "Have you ever seen such a good-looking toothbrush? I have never seen anything like it. That everything has the same color."

Respondent 3 (Group B): "It's focused on looking good, it is looking good, really nice-looking products."

The brand promise of Estrid, "A new way of shaving", raised questions among the respondents. When the brand promise is presented, the participants showed skepticism when it comes to actual performance.

Respondent 4 (Group A): "But I almost get slightly provoked. They say, 'A new way of shaving', honestly there are not that many ways to shave."

Respondent 5 (Group A): "I don't really get it either. I think that maybe this relates to their feminist image. Then they say, 'A new way of shaving'. Maybe emphasizing that it shouldn't be too difficult for women to handle their shaving. Maybe it is only me who has interpreted it that way. I don't know what they really mean."

Overall, according to the focus groups, the promise and benefit relate more to appearance rather than performance. In some cases, the brand promise is seen as somewhat hollow, in relation to what the actual product can do. A theme found in the data is that the brands promote themselves as making something new. In reality, people in the focus groups did not understand what was new, except for the modern and stylish design of a rather basic product. One comment that highlighted the view of the consumer benefit is this:

Respondent 3 (Group A): "I don't know. Normally it feels like you create the product first and then promote it as well as you can. But in this case, it feels like they just have found a good way to reach out, the only thing they need to do is to put something that they want to sell in that box…"

Brand positioning - Why?

Although no explicit questions regarding the elements, or reasons, that support the claimed benefits of the brand were asked, the respondents commented on this through overriding comments regarding their perception of the blands compared to their competitors.

Respondent 4 (Group A): "...it does not feel like they [Estrid] put any emphasis on how good their razors are. Other things are focused on instead."

Respondent 2 (Group A): "… commercials usually contain that they are recommended by the Swedish Dental Association. Maybe these [Quip] have that too but it does not feel like it is in focus."

Respondent 5 (Group C): "It feels like there is a focus on looking good while others focus on the amount of brush movement." (Referring to Quip)

The comments showcase the lack of communication around the reason-to-believe in the examined blands. In Group C the respondents mentioned that the lack of reason-to-believe might affect their perception of Quip. However, for Estrids razors, and in the other focus groups, no such effect was detected. No group commented on Hedvig's brand promise neither in relation to competitors nor willingness to buy.

Brand positioning - Against whom?

Analysis of the perceived competitors of the brand was made by asking the focus groups how the blands differ from other brands in the category. Kapferer (2008) mentions the competitive set the brand should be associated with as the first basis for examining competitors. Respondents were clear about their belief of what fields the blands presented were active in, Estrid in shavers, Quip in toothbrushes and Hedvig in insurance. Consequently, it can be assumed that the respondents believe the blands to be active within this respective competitive set. Respondents mentioned competing brands within these sets, Gilette Venus was mentioned as Estrid's competitor, Colgate as Quip's and Folksam as Hedvig's.

After assessing the competitive set, the essential differences can be explored (Kapferer, 2008). Several respondents mentioned that the blands appeared to have a different personality than the competitive brands.

Respondent 3 (Group A): "It feels like Folksam and the big established companies want to give an impression of trust and seriousness and like they know what they are doing. I guess Hedvig does that too, but they have that little mischievous youthfulness."

Respondent 2 (Group B): "As opposed to Colgate, which feels sterile, it feels like these [Quip] try to create a personality for something that is usually quite boring."

As brand personality appears to be an important differentiator, mentioned by many respondents in several questions, the personality aspect of the brand will be analyzed further under "Brand personality of blands" below. Another vital differentiator for the examined blands with products (Quip and Estrid) was the subscription service of the products which differentiated the blands from competitors.

Respondents also mentioned the fact that the product or service itself did not differ greatly from competitors for all the blands. However, the design of the products was mentioned by a majority of respondents as looking nice or at least appearing as something the brand focused on heavily.

Respondent 1 (Group C): "I think it [Estrid] differs only slightly. More that it is a subscription service."

Respondent 6 (Group A): "It feels like any electric toothbrush. Just that this one look better" (referring to Quip).

Brand positioning - For whom?

As stated in the Literature Review, "For Whom?" refers to the brand's target aspect. It aims to explain the nature of a potential consumer, based on psychological and sociological factors. To gain knowledge about who the blands would appeal to, or are for, respondents were asked to answer who the respective brand is for. The answers regarding all three brands unified the potential customer as being a rather young and trendy person, approximately between 20-30 years old, who cares about how others perceive them. Similarities between the target groups were also mentioned in Group A when exposed to the Quip brand (the first brand that group A was exposed to).

Respondent 4 (Group A): "Maybe the potential consumer is someone who has a little bit of extra money. It also reminds me of this: I think all ladies here know about this company called Estrid that everybody gets ads from. It is like nice razors. They have this as a service-model. It feels like it's pretty similar marketing and that they are targeting the same person."

Even before witnessing the other blands of the case study, respondent 4 in group A thought that the blands would appeal to the same kind of people. Another belief held by

the respondents was that the blands would appeal to a person with certain values. This became apparent especially when discussing Estrid.

Respondent 6 (Group A): "It feels like they are ticking certain boxes. Being politically correct, ethically, environmentally friendly, stylish and the nice colors. I think that is very appealing for many people. It feels like a good product in that sense. You can buy it just because you think it's eco-friendly enough instead of single use razors… or if you want something more stylish. I think in that sense that they reach a pretty wide audience."

Overall, the respondents believed that the target groups for the blands more or less overlapped. Besides the above stated similarities another theme is the lifestyle focus of the blands. The respondents thought that the blands would appeal to people within a certain lifestyle segment. When exposed to the Quip brand one respondent emphasizes this.

Respondent 3 (Group C): "Partially I believe that it's for those who like good looking toothbrushes, but also that they are promoting a certain lifestyle. So maybe someone that is insecure..."

Brand personality of blands

Aaker (1997) describes five distinguishing dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. By exploring the phenomenon blands with Aaker's five-dimension model this paper aims to identify if there are any common personality traits in Quip, Hedvig and Estrid and in that sense get an understanding of the concept blands.

When asked about who the brand would be if it were to come alive as a person, the personality trait of being trendy and hip was identified as a trait that seemed to be common for all three cases.

Respondent 1 (Group A): "...a conscious, trendy person" (Referring to Hedvig).

Respondent 2 (Group B): "It felt like all three companies try to be a little hip."

Respondent 5 (Group A): "...young, hip and I also think that this person lives in Stockholm" (Referring to Estrid).

Additionally, most of the focus groups commented that the blands presented themselves as youthful and playful.

Respondent 1 (Group A): "Feels like all three are doing things in a new way."

Respondent 4 (Group A): "Makes it a little nicer and a little more youthful and makes it look new."

However not everyone agreed with the previously mentioned perceptions of a youthful and hip person.

Respondent 2 (Group A): "...would be a 45-year-old person that imagines what students want" (referring to a quote from Hedvigs Instagram post "Go get in trouble").

Respondent 1 (Group C): "It [Qiup] is anxious and wants to be trendy. More surface."

Although there were some discrepancies among the focus group responses, the descriptions of the blands' personality largely matched the personality trait excitement. Aaker (1997) defines excitement as daring, spirited, imaginative and up-to-date. From the statements collected from the three different focus groups a common denominator was the word "hip" and "trendy" which can be connected to being up-to-date. An analysis can therefore be made as blands being perceived as new, trendy and hip, thus possessing *excitement* as brand personality.

Other personality descriptions of blands were identifiable from the respondents' statements that could not be found among Aakers (1997) dimensions. These descriptions were as follows:

Respondent 2 (Group A): "It [Hedvig] feels very selling and deceiving."

Respondent 5 (Group A): "If the product [Estrid] is a person, I do not necessarily think that it is a good person just because it should be so ethical, environmentally friendly and feminist. It feels more like a person saying that it is those things to have a certain image. Because it knows what to say, what goes home. It does not feel so real."

The comment from respondent 5 in group A is a quite negatively charged personality description that no brand would desire to have. Another comment on Estrid that aligns with undesirable brand perceptions:

Respondent 3 (Group C): "A girl you can talk to during the lunch break but no one I would like to be friends with."

Being deceiving, selling, portraying yourself like someone you are not and a person that you would not like to have as a friend summarizes these statements. These are personality traits that can be interpreted as falsehood, which, for natural reasons, is not advantageous for a brand to possess. But to draw any more conclusions from this you would have to examine why the consumers feel this way in depth. However, from these comments it could be argued that blands do not hold the personality trait competence, which refers to being reliable (Aaker, 1997). Sincerity, defined as being domestic, honest, genuine and cheerful by Aaker (1997) is also a trait that blands might lack. The two personality traits ruggedness and sophistication were not identified in the collected material, which

indicates that these traits are not to be found in the personality of blands.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to define and analyze the concept of blands. To enable this exploration, this paper used a combination of the brand positioning diamond and dimensions of brand personality and applied it to three blands. This resulted in "The Bland Framework" (Figure 2) that defines blands within a consumer perspective.

The main findings show that the bland concept is applicable in multiple existing markets. Meaning that the same concept of branding can be deployed in different product categories.

The findings also highlight the importance of brand personality for a bland. The common personality trait for blands is excitement, meaning a personality that is spirited, imaginative and up-to-date. Excitement acts as the foundation of the bland, influencing every facet of positioning creating a strong impact on consumers.

The blands position is defined by four elements. The foundation of the bland is the prioritization of the basic product benefit within a chosen field. The second element that creates the bland position is the competition against traditional well-known players within the bland's product field. Compared to competitors, consumers highlight the "nice" design and appearance of blands, which seemed to be the most important factor for consumer liking. This cannot be placed in any factor of Kapferer's positioning diamond resulting in this study's addition of the question "How?" to explain and highlight the design aspect. A factor that barely was present in the study is the positioning "Why?". Therefore, this question was removed from the positioning
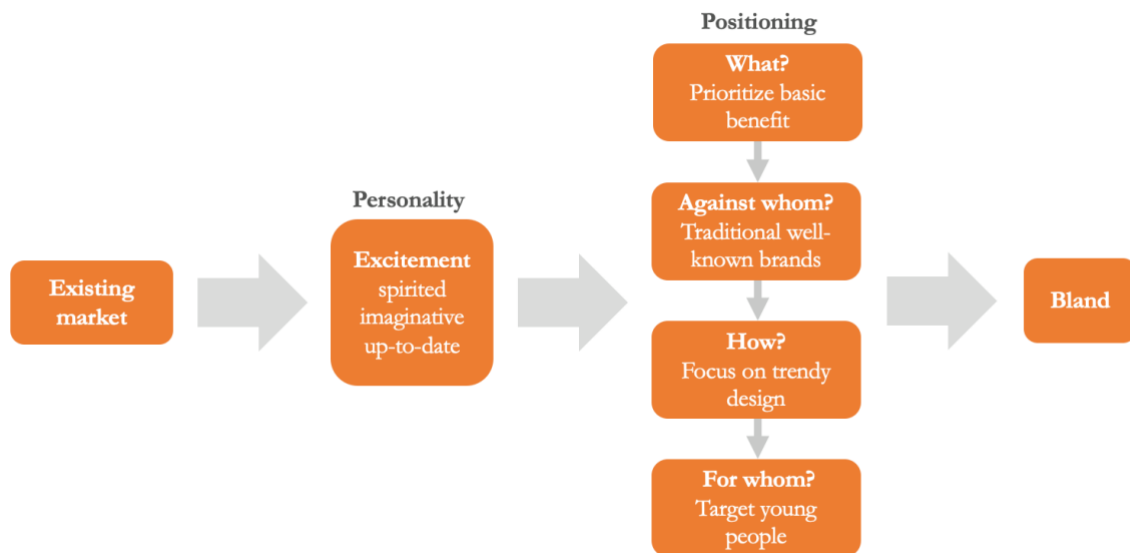
Figure 2.

of blands. Lasty, blands seem to be targeting young people.

Blands can be seen as a complementary concept to me-too products and branding. Me-too brands copy a pioneer's products within the same product category Whereas blands have copied a branding concept that is applicable in multiple markets, and on different products or services. Similar to a me-too product however is the fact that blands do not tend to innovate their product. Instead, they go into established markets and create a product that serves the consumer benefit, and does only that, but with new branding. This can create similarities to a pioneer in the field resulting in the sense of copying.

Managerial implications and Discussion

The findings of this research paper have created a framework that defines blands. By being based on the study of three successful blands the framework can act as a point of reference for managers who want to create a bland or have a product that might be suitable for bland branding in accordance with the framework. The previous literature on the topic is scarce and mostly focused on blands from a critical point of view. By contributing to the literature with a consumer perspective this paper can be utilized by brands who aim to apply bland tactics and want to have knowledge on consumer responses and perceptions.

This paper has also demonstrated the gap between me-too branding research and the extent to which copying is used by blands. Since brand imitation is a topic of high interest this paper adds to the literature on this topic with a new perspective, possible to be utilized by managers.

The main understanding about a bland's personality was concluded in a personality based on excitement. However, a sense of falsehood also appeared among the respondents. This might be a risk since blands tend to lack reasons-to-believe and instead focus on appearance. The fact that the blands claim to possess certain values regarding feminism, the environment and ethics in general might also create this sense of falsehood since these raised questions among respondents whether the blands actually comply with what they claim. What creates these negative

perceptions towards blands is not certain, but it might be the lack of information, the brand designs and the communications style in combination.

Additional topic of discussion is the reversed way of marketing. Rather than coming up with an innovative product and then deploying it to the market, the perception among consumers is that a marketing toolbox comes first (being the blanding process) where any product can then be put into it. This also relates to the feeling that some consumers had that blands feel new and exciting, when in reality they might not really be that groundbreaking. After a product has been put in the toolbox, the product becomes a bland, which seems to appeal to many. This appears to be a strength but also a weakness of the bland concept. If a bland gets exposed, consumer perception might change to a negative.

Limitations and further research

This paper creates a steppingstone to further research on the phenomenon of Blands and its implications on how brands are built. Future research could be made on

a larger sample size to increase generalizability.

More research in the subject could also study the lack of reason-to-believe and the effects of falsehood and how these topics affect brands and blands in particular.

In terms of limitations of the paper, the scarce basis that forms the empirical foundation is a major one. The fact that only three brands were studied by using three focus groups makes the findings more of indications of findings. In order to increase reliability and generalizability the sample should be bigger in further research. To combine it with a quantitative approach could also give clearer insight whether these brands are successful or not, answering a research question that this paper does not address.

Furthermore, the subject of blands is encouraged to conduct further research on to get a deeper investigation on the concept. Future research on blands could take the approach through an internal investigation, i.e including the companies' point of view. Another interesting topic is the success rate of blands, are blands more profitable than other brand in the field?

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Appendices

Appendix 1:

Interview guide - Blands

What does this company sell?

Have you consumed this brand?

If not, who is the person that typically look for these brands?

What are your perceptions of this brand?

If the brand were to come alive as a person, what would it be like?

Where would it live? If it went to a party, who would it talk to and what would it talk about?

How is this company different from others in the same product category?

Would you consider buying these products from this company?

We went through three brands, do you have anything more to add about these three?

Appendix 2: