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A Bland New Way To Imitate?

A Qualitative Study Exploring the Phenomenon of Blands Through
Consumers' Perceptions

by

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Abstract

Title: A Bland New Way To Imitate? A Qualitative Study Exploring the Phenomenon of Blands Through Consumers' Perceptions

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Thesis Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to explore the phenomenon of blands – A rise of brands that potentially adhere to a similar blueprint while claiming to be disruptive, unique and extraordinary. Moreover, this thesis aims to create an understanding of how consumers perceive blands as well as how value is created.

Methodology: The methodology takes a social constructivist standpoint with a multiple case study design where qualitative data is collected through focus group interviews. Three cases of blands were selected in Hedvig, Quip and Estrid.

Theoretical Perspective: Due to limited academic literature on the phenomenon of blands, a theoretical framework was created constituting a combination of grey literature as well as theories from brand imitation, customer-based brand equity and consumer value creation.

Empirical Material: Two focus groups were conducted with six participants in each. Participants were millennial consumers aged 25-30. The data was presented as four different themes which all represent similarities in perception about each case and also how they differ to their respective competition.

Conclusions: Blands are perceived as adhering to four different themes which unite them and create point-of-differences towards their in-category competition: *Innovativeness, Social Awareness, Anthropomorphization* and *Modern Display*. By creating these points-of-differences, blands are perceived to hold epistemic, functional and emotional values

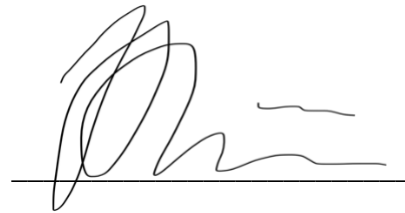
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1. Introduction

Because the phenomenon of blands is likely to be unheard of by most people also within the field of marketing, this first chapter will begin to introduce and briefly explain what blands are and from where the concept has emerged. Next, the background will distinguish the claims of blands in relation to the traditional view of brands before we problematize blands in comparison to so-called me-too brands. Lastly, the first chapter summarizes this discussion by stating the purpose as well as the questions that will guide the remainder of this study.

1.1 Introducing Blands

“A new way of shaving” – Estrid (2022a)

“Better oral health, made simple” – Quip (2022a)

“Setting new standards for an industry that have been standing still for decades” – Hedvig (2022a)

These are three examples of claims made by rather new brands out there. The razor shaving company Estrid, claims to have created a new way of shaving, even though the razor seems to be very similar to a conventional razor and the oral health brand Quip claims to have made the task of caring for your oral health into a simple procedure. Additionally, the insurance brand Hedvig, claims to offer the next generation of insurance. The three brands make rather contradicting claims given that they are offering relatively basic products or at least quite similar products to what is existing within their respective categories. Potentially contradicting claims made by brands is not really something new, but there is something else that these brands have in common. They are far from alone in their respective category and in recent years there has been a great increase of new brands who are seemingly adhering to a similar approach and more interestingly portray themselves in the same way as Estrid, Quip and Hedvig do.

Estrid, Quip and Hedvig are potentially part of the rise of brands that look the same, feel the same and offer similar business models towards consumers yet somehow feel and claim to be unique at a first sight, in other words; brands that potentially create generic brand associations while claiming to be unique. In grey literature such brands have been referred to as *Blands* (Schott, 2020; Beal, 2020). What distinguishes a bland from a traditional brand according to Schott (2020) is its duality – the claim of being disruptive in purpose, extraordinary in delivery and unique in product, while at the same time bowing to a generic formula in terms of tone of voice, design and business model. The formula partly consists of using a distinct, neutral & simple design with lots of pastels, also highlighting its necessity, being corporate under-dogs who cut out the middleman and by that, keep prices lower for the consumers without compromising with quality. They also have values which lean to a liberal ideology that reflect that they do not show any judgement toward demographic factors. Lastly, Schott (2020) claims that they offer one or very few products, often on subscription, and that blands position themselves as affordable luxury yet as being the only reliable option out there. What is also interesting with this phenomenon is that it has pushed other brands within these categories to also adhere to this blueprint. According to Schott (2020) Colgate launched their new brand *Hum by Colgate* as a response to Quip.

When we came across this topic and the more we investigated additional so-called blands, the more it became apparent how certain brands claim to be unique and disruptive brands while they in fact share many similarities with their competitors within the respective product category, but also across categories - thus questioning the differentiation and copy mechanisms of emerging brands.

1.2 Background

It all started with trademarking cattle a few thousand years back as a way to distinguish one's belongings from others. According to Mollerup (2002), marking one's product was, and still is, a way to guarantee the genuineness of the quality assured by the issuer, for the sake of differentiating one's brand from similar products on the market. The dawn of trademarks did however also create a new problem: copying or plagiarism. For example, already during the reign of the Romans, Fortis oil lamps were one of the first known victims of plagiarism as multiple imitation copies of the lamps have been found all over Europe (Mollerup, 2002). A more modern definition of a brand is offered by Kotler and Keller (2016, p. 322) as “a name,

term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors”. Similarly, Kapferer (2012) suggests that a brand is fundamentally a name with certain associated symbols that distinguishes itself to influence consumers’ purchase behavior over time. Though times have changed, copy strategies are still a viable strategy for brands to adopt in various ways to gain from the success of a pioneer (Van Horen & Pieters, 2017). In order to protect themselves and create barriers for imitators over time, brands attempt to build competitive advantages that last over time by offering products to a lower cost, differentiating themselves or with a combination of both (Porter, 2008). Essentially, how brands compete amongst one another builds on the concept of brand equity as a way to measure the value of a brand to different stakeholders.

In the early 1990’s, brand equity was conceptualized as a way to measure a brand’s value and was based on two main motivations (Keller, 1993). The first derived out of a strategic necessity to streamline communications expenses due to fiercer competition and higher costs of marketing activities, while the second stem from a financial need of estimating a brands value for the balance sheet and acquisition purposes. Brand equity describes the value of a brand, consisting of brand assets such as perceived quality, brand awareness, strong brand associations, brand loyalty but also trademarks and patents (Aaker 1991; Kotler & Keller, 2016). To enable the creation of brand equity towards consumers, Keller (1993) highlights that a brand needs to be easily recognized and have unique, strong and favorable brand associations. Despite that brand associations might be shared with some of the competitors, a brand still has to distinguish itself by a competitive advantage or a unique selling proposition (Keller, 1993). Kapferer (2012) additionally argues that strong brands can achieve volume and price premium of their product offering in relation to brands with low equity.

As a result of having various purposes, brand equity does not hold a unified definition. Kapferer (2012) identifies two main perspectives of brand equity where the first is customer-based and focuses solely on the relationship between the brand and its customers. The second is financial and instead seeks to measure a brand’s monetary value. Nonetheless, customer-based brand equity (CBBE) has been the widely recognized perspective by both scholars and practitioners of brand equity and has been elaborated on by multiple pioneers of the concept (e.g. Aaker, 1991; Keller 1993; Kapferer, 2012). However, Kapferer (2012) argues that these two approaches to brand equity rather should be understood as interrelated concepts as the

financial approach emphasizes customers' willingness to purchase a certain brand rather than one of a competitor despite the latter being cheaper. In turn, this price premium is created over time by marketing activities of the brand from which the customer creates a bond to the brand (Kapferer, 2012). CBBE enables managers to understand how a marketing program can improve the value of their brand and was first defined by Keller (1993, p. 2) as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand". In order to initiate this process, managers can do so in the stage of choosing some elements of the brand identity, including symbols, the logo, the brand name or in the supporting marketing program. Essentially CBBE argues that brand value is solely based on the perceptions of the customers.

The success of a brand relies on how well it can create a unique perceived quality for the consumer and also how the brand is able to convey this value through marketing communication tools (Kovanoviene, Romeika & Baumung, 2021). Creating value for the consumer is increasingly important in the competitive environment that brands operate in today and a way of actually creating equity is to engage customers in the value creation process (Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2014). Baker (2010) argues that it is important for brands to adopt a value-based approach to marketing and that the value creation process creates value propositions. In order to establish a value proposition and be able to communicate it so that it defines a service or product wanted by the consumers, brands can meet this perceived need and in the end create value for the consumer. To successfully do so, a brand must define value based on a correct understanding of the consumer needs and wants (Baker, 2010). According to the CBBE model by Kotler and Keller (2016) and consumer value creation theory by Kovanoviene, Romeika, Baumung (2021), creating unique associations and unique perceived quality in the minds of consumers is not only essential for building brand equity but also what builds the success of the entire organization. The phenomenon of brands however, raises questions of the need for brand's uniqueness – maybe it is enough to adhere to a blueprint which is perceived favorably by the consumers? Ultimately this questions the needs and wants of the consumer in relation to the brand.

1.3 Problem Formulation

Conventional theories in brand management like CBBE rests on the premise that firms' success is determined by the level of unique associations in the perceptions of the consumer

through which it will generate brand loyalty (e.g. Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 2012; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Essentially, brands that are perceived to offer the greatest value in relation to the customer's wants and needs are consequently rewarded with what Porter (2008) refers to as an above-average performance and potentially a sustainable advantage over competitors. Following this argumentation, brands that do not fulfill this mission - to offer the greatest value in relation to competition to consumers - would then become the opposite, namely below-average performers in their category (Porter, 2008).

However, drawing from the claims about so-called blands, a great number of brands are now emerging across industries claiming to be unique and groundbreaking in purpose while in fact they are being seemingly imitative as they follow an identicate formula of business model, look, feel and tone of voice (Schott, 2020). For example, Happy Fluffy Cloud claims to sell "the fluffiest duvet on earth" to enable the consumer to sleep "just like in cartoons and in rural alps villages" (Happy Fluffy Cloud, 2022). Furthermore, Happy Fully Cloud (2021) also states that they "reclaim the colorful bedding" as their product, instead of the traditionally white color, solely offer a pink duvet which matches their bright pink logo shaped like a cloud. Similarly, such claims are also being made in other product categories. The insurance brand Hedvig (2022a) claims to offer the "next generation of insurance services" within an industry that "has not seen development for decades" while the oral health company Quip (2022b) claims that their colorful and electric toothbrushes "prove that good design has a bigger impact on oral health than quick fix gimmicks". Estrid (2022a) proclaims that their razors are "the new way of shaving" and that the consumer should not need to pay more for who they are. What is perhaps the most interesting thing about blands, and Estrid in particular is that consumers also tend to appeal to them. For example, in 2021 Estrid received a valuation of 1 billion SEK following an increase of revenue from 8 million SEK to 117 million SEK in 2020 (Agazzi, 2021).

After all, not every brand can be considered the innovator nor pioneer in their respective category. Nevertheless, when a vast amount of brands across unrelated categories start copy each other, molding their brand in a certain concept, it exceeds what marketing literature have referred to as me-too branding (e.g. Sinapuelas & Robinson, 2009) or even imitation strategy (e.g. Van Horen & Pieters, 2017) in a general sense. In fact, imitation and copying of others in regard to brand management are relatively well researched concepts in the field today where a focus from scholars have been dedicated to understanding different kinds of

imitations both within and across categories (Van Horen & Pieters, 2017). Among these strategies, me-too branding stands out as one of the more utilized strategies by firms where a successful pioneer within a given category attracts brand imitators who copy certain features of the host (Sinapuelas & Robinson, 2009). However, blands are not just about copying a new feature from a pioneer within one's own industry, but rather it becomes a standardized blueprint that is being utilized across various category borders seemingly unrelated to one another. Considering the absence of literature on the topic, Brattström, Röken and Welander (2021) is pioneering in the academic setting on the phenomenon where they in a non-peer reviewed article suggest that there potentially is a connection between a me-too strategy and "blanding". The authors emphasize though that imitation strategies, and me-too branding in particular, does not fully align. The authors further argue that blands are applying a marketing strategy where copying takes place across product categories in a similar way, a phenomenon that conventional marketing literature and scholars of imitation strategies, to our knowledge, have not investigated. A more thorough exploration of blands and their proposed blueprint is needed to better understand the phenomenon in regard to the necessity for brands to obtain strong, unique and favorable associations and how these brands create value for consumers. It is also of importance to create an understanding of the phenomenon of blands beyond the brand positioning and brand personality models used by Brattström, Röken and Welander (2021).

1.4 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to continue the exploration and develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of blands from a consumer perspective. Moreover, we want to explore how blands are perceived by consumers in order to understand how they perceive value in this context. To fulfill this purpose, two research questions have been formulated to guide the remainder of this study:

RQ₁: How do consumers perceive blands?

RQ₂: How do consumers perceive value from blands?

Through the fulfilment of the research purpose, this thesis aims to contribute academically in the marketing and brand management fields by offering a holistic understanding of consumers perceptions of blands across categorical borders that scholars thus far has not explored. Furthermore, the thesis also aims to develop the current understanding of how

consumers perceive the value proposition of blands and how a potentially homogeneous marketing strategy is perceived by consumers. From a managerial point of view, this thesis seeks to assist professionals of both traditional and non-traditional brands to understand how blands can be perceived as appealing to consumers.

1.5 Delimitations

In order to make the thesis comprehensible and generate satisfactory contributions we argue that some delimitations are necessary. Firstly, the context for the thesis will be limited to only three cases of blands which all belong to unrelated product categories. This delimitation is considered to be necessary because too few cases would not enable exploration of similarities across categorical borders which essentially is one of the foundational elements of being as expressed by the blanding blueprint. On the contrary, too many cases would entail difficulties to cope with the amount of data necessary to fulfill the research purpose. Particularly in relation to the amount of resources available for this thesis as well as the complexity of the topic which has not been addressed in an academic setting of this magnitude before.

The second delimitation that we deem necessary is to research blands that are available on the Swedish market and therefore also perceptions held by Swedish consumers. Though the phenomenon of blands originates from a different market than the Swedish, brands that fit into the proposed blueprint can be identified in this context as well and has also been studied in one previous study of smaller magnitude with a somewhat different approach. In relation to this we also acknowledge that, because of our demographic backgrounds as Swedish master students and the complexity of the topic, we would have a difficult task of conducting a study on blands as well as consumers that we have no previous experience or knowledge about. Moreover, by delimit the study to Swedish consumers' perceptions we can to a greater extent assume a generally greater level of knowledge and awareness of the bland. Therefore, we argue that consumers' perceptions of blands on the Swedish market offer us a more realistic opportunity to provide meaningful insights and achieve more usable results.

Another delimitation that we consider necessary to fulfill the purpose of the study is in regards to demographic factors of the respondents. In this thesis we will solely focus on the perceptions by millennial consumers. This is because a cross-generational study was considered to be too complex and comprehensive for us to handle. Moreover, millennials are considered to be a customer segment that is relatively active on social media where blands

are claimed to be especially prominent. For the same reason we have also chosen to not dedicate attention to potential cultural differences which also is supported by the limitation to Swedish brands and Swedish consumers. Hence cross-cultural exploration was regarded as too overwhelming to handle for us under the circumstances. By complying to these delimitations we argue that we have a better chance of generating important contributions without compromising the fulfillment of the research purpose.

1.6 Disposition

In this first chapter we introduce the phenomenon of brands with some concrete examples and definitions before presenting a background to the conventional theories of brand management literature. A problematization then informs about the knowledge gap in the current literature which has resulted in a stated research purpose which will guide the remaining chapters and are organized as follows. The second chapter presents related theories and concepts to imitation strategies, brand equity and consumers' perception of value that frame the context for this research. The literature review is summarized in a theoretical framework that will serve as a platform for collecting the empirical data as well as the analysis of it. Next, the third chapter holds a discussion in regards to our methodological approach throughout this thesis with the aim to fulfill the research purpose and derives from our philosophical assumptions. Moreover, this chapter also discusses our research design as well as what data was used and how it was collected. A reflexive discussion in regards to the quality of the thesis will round up the third chapter.

Moving into the fourth chapter we present the empirical findings and use the theoretical framework to analyze the collected data which is presented in three pedagogical parts. In the first part we present the empirical findings in relation to brand awareness whereas the second part presents four prominent themes from consumers' perception of brands. The third part will then relate these themes to consumers' perceptions of value from brands which will conclude this chapter. Lastly, a fifth chapter presents the conclusion to our two research questions and is then wrapped up with a reflexive discussion in relation to the thesis' contributions, limitations as well as opportunities for future research.

2. Literature Review

The main focus of this chapter is on previous literature for the purpose of supporting the relevance of this study. The objective of this chapter is to elaborate on the phenomenon of blands and to discuss tangents from different fields of research. Since blands are just briefly mentioned academically in terms of a non-peer reviewed study, there is a necessity to explore additional theories in order to build an extensive and cohesive literature review. First of all, blands will be presented based on the few contexts in which the term so far has been covered by which is in grey literature (magazine articles and a non-peer-reviewed academic article). The second part aims to find connections between Me-too brands and blands. Furthermore the concept of Brand Equity and more specifically Brand Resonance Pyramid will constitute a part of the review to help analyze the phenomenon in order to categorize bland features and consumer perceptions of these. Lastly, literature on Consumer value creation is reviewed in order to lay a theoretical foundation for answering the second research question.

2.1 The Phenomenon of Blands

In grey literature, the phenomenon of blands was first mentioned by Brunfaut and Greenwood (2018) by describing it as concept where emerging brands from different categories started following a certain brand formula which includes the following elements: using a made-up-word name, using a sans-serif font, deploying a certain tone of voice, no usage of logos, using cheerful illustrations and adding vibrant colors. They further describe blands as teenagers; they dress the same, act the same and talk the same. In a company report by Revolt (2021) on the top 50 emerging direct-to-consumer product brands, showed a lot of commonalities between the brands. By examining brands from different categories between 2020 and 2021 it was shown that 40 % of these brands use some sort of sans serif font, 60 % state a social purpose but do nothing to give back to that cause, 70 % of them used one out of three color palettes and that 78 % had no logotype other than the brand name itself. This phenomenon is referred to as the blanding model; brands obeying to a similar blueprint.

Prior to the study by Revolt (2021) , Schott (2020) presented a more thorough definition of what a bland is (also in grey literature). The essence of a bland according to Schott is its duality by “claiming simultaneously to be unique in product, groundbreaking in purpose, and singular in delivery, while slavishly obeying an identikit formula of business model, look and

feel, and tone of voice”. It is important to emphasize that the characteristics of a bland (defined by Schott) are non-scientific in the sense that they have not been tested and are under influence by the opinions of the author. The characteristics of a bland (the blanding blueprint) are many according to Schott, some more clear than others. First of all is that blands are direct to consumers, they cut out the middleman and sell directly to the consumer, most of the time on a subscription based model. Blands are also referring to themselves as underdogs, trying to pose as non-corporate in order to position themselves against other big actors within the category. They also need a narrative, which entails origin stories as the one of Candid “Once upon a time, five of us started talking about teeth”. Schott also argues that they are humble and also affordable luxury. Blands also have values which entail to not have judgements towards demographic factors such as sex, race, gender, faith, age, ability or looks. The name itself comes from the fact that blands are bland, in other words; tasteless and mild. The reason for this according to Schott is to target people who are tired of marketing. This is done by using a simple name from for example a character (e.g. Estrid) and visually being very neutral. They tend to use plain pastel with a happy and upbeat tone of voice. Finally they portray themselves as being the only reliable option out there. According to practitioner Beal (2020), the reason for this increased resemblance of brands has to do with the fact that a lot of new brands use a similar brand book. Another possible reason for the increased resemblance is discussed in an article in *The Media Leader* where Carr (2022) argues that this is due to that culture itself is becoming more homogeneous as a result of the increased connectivity through the internet.

In an attempt to conceptualize this phenomenon academically, in a recent study on the phenomenon of blands, Brattström, Röken and Welander (2021) created a stepping stone for further research on the topic by examining three brands: Quip (oral health care), Hedvig (insurance) and Estrid (shaving/skin care). The paper concluded that blands can be seen as an extension of the me-too branding concept, where me-too brands copy features of a pioneer within their category, whereas blands adopt a certain branding concept that goes beyond category limits and is not restricted to certain features. The paper resulted in a framework of blands, consisting of taking a product to an existing market and adopting a brand personality trait of excitement. In regards to positioning, a bland prioritizes a basic benefit, focuses on trendy design, targets young people and positions themselves against traditional well-known brands within its competitive set, without providing reasons to believe their brand promise.

Being a non-peer reviewed study, the work of Brattström, Röken and Welander (2021) should be viewed in that light.

2.2 What are Imitator Brands?

Since the 1990's, scholars of various disciplines have increasingly been engaged in the discussion concerning how some brands aesthetically look identical to one another. Though it stems from trademarking and a legal perspective, Kapferer (1995) argued that certain brands imitate a market leader's aesthetic elements to cause confusion both in the courtroom, but also in the minds of the consumer. Brands that copy certain innovative features from a pioneering market leader within a given category to gain from its success are usually referred to as imitator brands (Kapferer, 1995; Shenkar, 2010; Van Horen & Pieters, 2017). Though multiple scholars have emphasized the potential success of imitator brands (e.g. Porter, 1985; Quintal & Phau, 2013; Qiao & Griffin, 2022), the pioneer is considered to retain certain competitive advantages for being the first mover into their market position (Kotler & Keller 2012). Furthermore, Porter (1985) emphasizes that both imitation as well as market position are dynamic activities for brands because once an imitation has occurred, the competitive landscape changes and sets the foundation for a repetitive process – hence where a pioneer introduces novel features and competitor(s) imitate those features as a result of how a satisfactory product offering is perceived in the given product category. Furthermore, whereas young markets are easier to enter for imitating brands, the more innovative a feature, the more time consuming and costly it is to the late entrant - thus affecting the imitators' market entry speed (Sinapuelas & Robinson, 2009). Since the 1990's across 22 consumer packaged goods subcategories, Sinapuelas and Robinson (2009) suggest that imitated features reach the market in 85 weeks on average.

However, because imitation can be done in a great number of ways – by copying various elements of other brands or through a combination of them – marketing literature often distinguishes several distinct types depending on what object is being copied, which industry it is adapted from, who is to be imitated (or performs the imitation), when as well as how it is done (Shenkar, 2010). For example, whereas Kapferer (1995) argues that imitation can take place on proprietary signs like names, logos and packaging, Shenkar (2010) suggests that a replica can be made of any existing product, service process or business model yet still be perceived as new or innovative in distant markets or industries. Consequently, for an

imitation strategy to be successful, the imitated brand does not necessarily have to be the best performing brand in its category but rather the copied element, regardless of type, must be adding value to the consumers perceptions of the imitator (Shenkar, 2010).

2.2.1 Private Labels and Me-Too Brands

Already in the 1990s, Kapferer (1995) suggested that distributors in almost every fast-moving consumer goods category had started creating their own branded products and in one fifth of the categories across the UK, they had come to hold a market share of over 50%. What started off as low quality products that mainly competed on price at the bottom of supermarket shelves, distributor's own brands (DOB) or private labels as they more commonly are academically known, have over the past decades grown into competing not only on price but on quality as well (Kumar & Steenkamp, 2007; Shenkar, 2010). Moreover, Kapferer (1995) argues that private labels often imitate the package design and brand name of the prototypical brand in order to achieve a spill-over effect through confusion and a perceptual connection to the associative attributes of the brand being imitated. Kumar and Steenkamp (2007) further emphasize that private labels today not solely compete in terms of price to achieve a volume premium but rather that they also have been enabled to achieve price premiums by being associated with prototypical brands of higher quality as well.

In relation to distributors and their private labels, imitation strategies are also utilized by manufacturers which in turn often is referred to as me-too brands (e.g. Van Horen & Pieters, 2017) or copycat brands (Kapferer, 1995), though both of these terms sometimes are used to describe brand imitation altogether (e.g. Shenkar, 2010). In fact, even earlier scholars like Sinapuelas and Robinson (2009) argue that almost all me-too brands are either line-extensions where they are introduced as new brands or as private labels. Reviewing various definitions of the me-too brands further suggest that these terms are used interchangeably with Carpenter and Nakamoto (1989) who claim that a me-too brand follows the prototypical brand in its category whereas Sinapuelas and Robinson (2009) define me-too branding as a brand that launches their own version of a feature previously introduced by another brand. More recent scholars like Kotler and Keller (2012) argue that a me-too strategy involves an imitator brand who copies certain features from the industry leader though it maintains certain elements that differentiate the brand, such as through packaging, advertising, pricing or location.

Based on the conducted review of literature on brands and imitation strategies, our understanding of brands' relationship to me-too brands and private labels is visualized in figure 1. The two boxes of brands emphasize that brands potentially could be seen as an extension to me-too brands (imitation across unrelated categories) or as its own distinct imitation strategy.

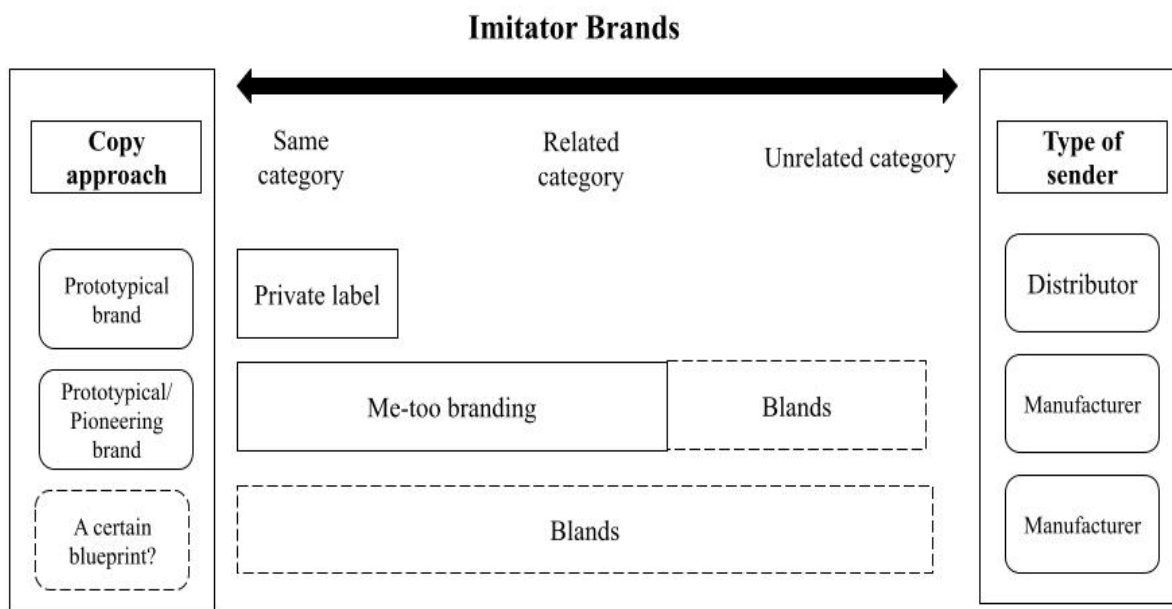


Figure 1: Explanatory model for how brands can be understood in relation to other imitation strategies. Own creation based on literature review.

2.3 Brand Equity

Before diving into the concept of Customer based brand equity we need to provide an understanding of what a traditional brand and brand equity is. It has been evident to marketers for a long time that consumers perceive and think about symbols from not only products, but also brands (Levy, 1959). Keller (2013), defines a brand as “a set of mental associations, held by the consumer, which adds to the perceived value of a product or service”. Later on, together with Kotler (Kotler & Keller, 2016), the definition used is “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors”. More extensively, Kotler and Keller (2016) refer to these features as brand

elements, including brand name, URLs, logos, symbols, characters, spokesperson, slogans, jingles, packages and signage which all are devices that can be trademarks and in turn differentiate and identify the brand. Similarly, Kapferer (2012) suggests that a brand is fundamentally a name with certain associated symbols that distinguishes itself to influence consumers' purchase behavior over time. Keller and Swaminathan (2019) also suggest that brands extend the definition of products because of its range of dimensions – from tangible to intangible elements – and can differentiate products that attempt to satisfy similar needs.

Established in order to identify what constitutes a strong brand, the concept of brand equity was born partly through the conceptualization by Keller (1993) but has since then also been conceptualized differently by other researchers (Aaker 1996; Erdem, T, Kapferer, J.N, Swait, J, & Chakravarti, D.,1999). The conceptualization by Keller (1993) is based on the consumer response of the brand, whereas Erdem et al. (1999) base the conceptualization on actual product attributes. Aaker (1996) on the other hand has a more similar approach to Keller. By using ten measurements divided into five categories, Aaker (1996) established a model for measuring brand equity. Loyalty, awareness, perceived quality, associations and market behavior make up the categories which are used as a basis for the conceptualization. Rather than taking a bottom-up approach with a four step process as Keller (1993), Aaker (1996) visualizes brand equity as a more fluid concept where all dimensions are interrelated without hierarchy in terms of influencing brand equity. As one of the key dimensions of measuring brand equity, perceived quality is measured in relation to alternative brands where the brand has high quality vs. average quality vs. inferior quality. It also has consistent quality vs inconsistent quality and is seen as the best versus one of the best.

2.3.1 Customer-Based Brand Equity and The Brand Resonance Pyramid

Since the focus of this thesis is to investigate consumer perceptions of brands, the most suitable model for brand equity in this paper is identified in the CBBE model (Keller, 1993). The fundamental idea with CBBE is that the strength of a brand is created based on how customers perceive, think and feel about the brand. Essentially it builds on the premise that the strength of a brand lies in the perception of the consumers. Due to the fact that brands

seem to be following a certain blueprint, the model is suitable since it takes into account customer responses of all facets of the brand.

CBBE is conceptualized in the brand resonance pyramid (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019) and identifies brand building as a four step model. The process takes a bottom-up approach of the model which is initiated by creating salience or awareness about the brand. Next, the meaning of the brand should be communicating both in terms of performance (how the product offering meets customer needs) as well as imagery (how the brand meets customers on a social and psychological level). Thirdly, Judgements and Feelings correspond to the responses from customers on the brand’s communication. Lastly, resonance is the last but also the most difficult step to reach as it entails a deep connection between the brand and the customer (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). The brand resonance pyramid is visualized in Figure 2 and will be further explained in the upcoming sections.

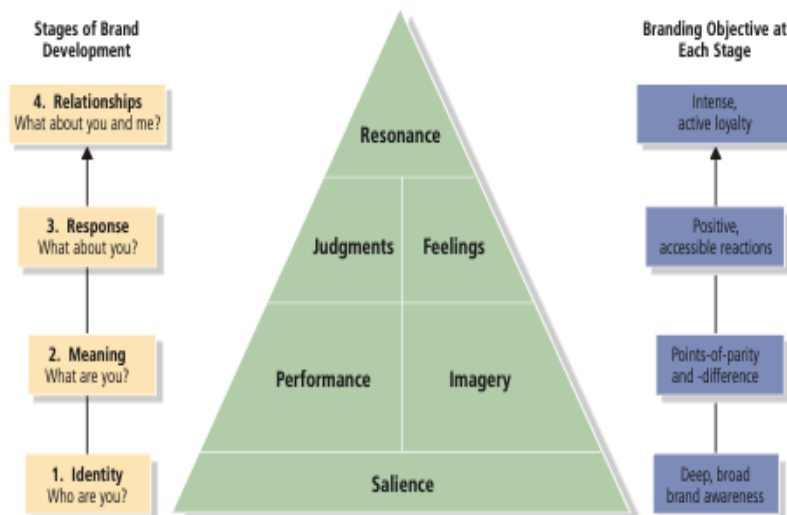


Figure 2: The brand resonance pyramid (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019, p. 78).

2.3.1.1 Brand Salience

The bottom of the pyramid reflects Brand Salience, which according to Keller & Swaminathan (2019, p 330) is “how often and how easily customers think of the brand under various purchase or consumption situations—the depth and breadth of brand awareness”. It has also been conceptualized as the probability that a customer will think about a brand someday (Sutherland, 1993). As suggested by Keller & Swaminathan (2019), brand salience is used interchangeably with brand awareness, more specifically top of mind awareness within a product category. It can also be used beyond category borders as proposed by

Romaniuk & Sharp (2003). In the stages of brand development it should answer the question of who you are as a brand and the objective with achieving it, is to obtain deep and broad brand awareness (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Keller & Swaminathan (2019) also argues that brand awareness is a tool that is used to help customers understand the product or service category in which the brand operates.

2.3.1.2 Performance

As previously mentioned, Keller and Swaminathan (2019) portrays the associations that consumers have to a brand into performance and imagery. Brand performance relates to the most important facet of associations of the consumer: designing and delivering a product (brand) which meets the needs or surpasses the needs of the consumer and is essential for successful marketing. The brand performance is underlined by five types of attributes and benefits. The first one is primary ingredients and supplementary features, referring to core elements of the product which the consumers often have beliefs about in terms of how well they operate. Complementing these features are the supplementary features which could be patented or just special for the product. The primary features are essential for the function of the product whereas the complementary allow some sort of customization or personalized use.

The second type of attributes according to Keller and Swaminathan (2019) are attributes related to product reliability, durability and serviceability. Reliability is the consistency in performance over time, durability is the expectancy of the economic life of the product and serviceability is how convenient it is to repair the product if such a need exists.

Keller and Swaminathan (2019) describes the third type of attributes as service effectiveness, efficiency and empathy where service effectiveness describes how well a brand satisfies the service needs of the consumer, service efficiency measures the responsiveness and speed of the service and empathy to what extent the service providers are seen as caring and trustworthy.

The fourth type of associations described by Keller & Swaminathan (2019) are style and design, which do not only hold an image purpose in terms of associations of size, shape, material and color, but also a functional purpose in regards to how well a product works. Performance can consequently depend on sensory attributes such as look and feel but also smell and sound. The last bracket of type of associations is particularly important, which is

price. It refers to how relatively expensive the brand is compared to competitors (in the mind of the consumer). The consumer often organizes product category knowledge based on the price and this is why it is extra important.

2.3.1.3 Imagery

Consumer identities are often reflected on and contributed to by brand possessions and it is evident that non-product-features that come with a brand have a great impact on the purchase intention of the consumer (Belk, 1988; Azoulay & Kapferer 2003). In the model by Keller & Swaminathan (2019), the imagery part of the bracket relates to the intangible assets of the brand. This bracket can be divided into three main themes; *user profiles, purchase and usage situation, personality and values, and history, heritage, and user experiences.*

1) *User profiles, purchase and usage situations*

First of all Keller & Swaminathan (2019) argues that what kind of person is associated with using a brand constitutes one type of brand imagery associations that consumers might have. These attributes are somewhat aspirational by being a mental image from the consumer about who is an idealized user. These associations of a typical idealized brand user are typically based on demographic and psychographic factors. The demographic factors could consist of gender, race, age or income. Another set of these associations are more related to the conditions in which the brand is acquired, consumed or worn. It can be about which channel is used when acquiring them or when they are being used.

2) *Brand Personality and Values*

Secondly, brand imagery according to Keller and Swaminathan (2019) also relates to brand personality, values and history. Two early research studies (Alt & Griggs, 1998; Batra, Lehman & Singh, 1993) first showed the connection between brands and human characteristics. However, Aaker's (1997) article made the brand personality theory prominent by approaching a way to measure it and defined it as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, pp 347). According to multiple scholars (Kapferer, 2008; Freling, Crosno & Henard, 2011; Avis, 2012) the last 20 years of research on brand personality stems from the methodology developed by Aaker in 1997. By combining research on human personality structure and previous findings on brand personality, Aaker (1997) shows that brand personality affects differentiation and consumer preferences within a certain category of products.

Aaker's (1997) dimensions of brand personality is divided into five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The personality traits connected to sincerity consist of 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) argues strongly for the generalizability of the model due to the fact that multiple brands from all kinds of different categories were studied.

Other non-product features that brands can create brand equity through, which is related to image, are their values which could be done by using brand activism (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020). According to Kotler and Sarkar (2017), Brand activism is achieved by taking a stance on social or political questions, as a marketing tactic for companies to further differentiate themselves from competition. Vredenburg et al. (2020) categorize brand activism into mainly two forms of activism: authentic and inauthentic activism. The former is when brand activism matches a brand's values and purpose with marketing messaging and practice. The latter, however, fails to connect the two and is then often referred to as woke-washing and could leave the consumer with negative associations towards the brand. According to Keller and Swaminathan (2019), value associations can also be influenced by the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives taken by a company. Such activities are broadly defined by Smith (2014, cited by Keller and Swaminathan, 2019) as “an organization's obligation to maximize its positive impact and minimize its negative impact on society”.

3) History, heritage and user experience

Lastly, brands may try to take on associations related to their history, heritage or user experience. This is often one of the so called points of differences that brands can have in relation to its competitors (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019).

2.3.1.4 Strong, Favorable and Unique Brand Associations

Combined, the building blocks imagery and performance constitute what Keller (1993) explains as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand”. Furthermore, this definition conclusively holds three concepts that Keller (1993) identifies as “the differential effect”, “brand knowledge” and “consumer

response to marketing” which can be used to explain the customer-based brand equity model. In order to discover the differential effect of a brand, it has to be compared to the consumer response of an unnamed or fictitiously named version of the product. What is especially essential when considering the differential effect of a brand is the strength, favourability and uniqueness of the associations, essentially creating a positive brand image and a familiar brand name. If the consumer has unique salient associations to the brand compared to their category, it should differ. On the contrary, if a brand is seen to be the same as the prototypical brand within the category, the differential effect should not be there. Keller (2009) continues to argue that unique brand associations are essential as points-of-difference that can provide a source of brand equity to push differential effect. According to Keller and Swaminathan (2019), points-of-difference are associations held by the consumer (related to the specific brand) that are unique, strong and favorable. Points of parity on the other hand, are associations that do not need to be unique to a specific brand, they are rather seen as mandatory to fulfill in regards to the specific category in which the brand operates in order for the brand to be credible. In terms of the brand resonance pyramid, the combined associations formed by performance and imagery turn into brand judgements and brand feelings which are the next steps in the pyramid.

2.3.1.5 Judgments and Feelings

Judgments

According to Keller & Swaminathan (2019), brand judgements are the opinions held by the customers about the brand and can be categorized into brand quality, brand credibility, brand consideration & brand superiority where the most important associations have to do with perceived quality, customer value and satisfaction. Secondly, brand credibility relates to the organization behind the brand and is about to what extent the brand is seen as trustworthy, likable and perceived as experts. Trustworthiness is based on how dependable and customer centric the brand, likability is on the other and is based on judgements of how fun and interesting a brand is whereas perceived expertise relates to judgements on innovativeness, competence and whether they are seen as market leader or not. Nguyen, Yu, Melewar and Chen (2015) suggests that brand innovation includes both marketing innovation and product or technology innovation.

The brand credibility aspect of CBBE is also present in Keller's (1993) brand equity conceptualization, where organizational associations consider the underlying organization that stands behind the brand, including its people, values and programs. Consideration has to do with if the brand is considered as a reliable option or not and brand superiority measures whether customers view the brand superior to others.

Feelings

Keller & Swaminathan (2019) describes Brand feelings as customers' reactions and responses to the brand and relates to the social currency of the brand. The most important types of brand feelings evoked in the customers are: warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval and self respect. The first three of these types of feelings can be summed up in a category of feelings which are immediate and experiential, whereas the latter three can be seen as enduring and private.

2.3.1.6 Resonance

The last step of the pyramid (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019) is brand resonance which relates to the level of consumer identification the consumer has to the brand, essentially what is the optimal relationship the consumer-brand relationship. It describes how well the consumer feels that they are in sync with the brand and is characterized by the level of intensity and activity of the bond. Furthermore, Keller and Swaminathan (2019), breaks down these two dimensions into behavior loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community and active engagement.

2.4 Consumer Value Creation

In order to explore how consumers perceive brands, it is essential to first discuss how consumers actually perceive value and more importantly why consumers make the choices they do in regards to brands and their proposed offers. These issues have captivated scholars of consumer behavior across many disciplines for a long time (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991) and Zeithaml (1988) was early to argue that, though the concept is highly subjective to the individual consumer, perceived value can be understood as an internal negotiation between what the consumer gets (quality) in relation to what is given (price) for a product or service. Given this subjectiveness, some consumers may perceive value as a measure of

utility or satisfaction from a given product, others argue that value is merely low price, whereas a third and fourth may perceive value as a tradeoff – the quality gained equals the price given – or as an uneven relationship between the components regardless of amount (Zeithaml, 1988). Apart from emphasizing that the price-quality relationship thus holds many variations for consumers, Zeithaml (1988) affirms its participatory role for the consumer’s choice behavior yet also suggests that other factors influence what constitutes the concept of perceived value. To more accurately predict, describe and explain why consumers buy what they buy and how they choose between products as well as brands, Sheth, Newman & Gross, (1991) propose a function of consumer’s choice behavior to consist of five independent consumption values: *functional, social, emotional, epistemic* and *conditional* (Figure 3). As a result of theoretical contributions from various disciplines, these values may independently or collectively – through various combinations and contributions – explain the decision in any given choice situation (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991).

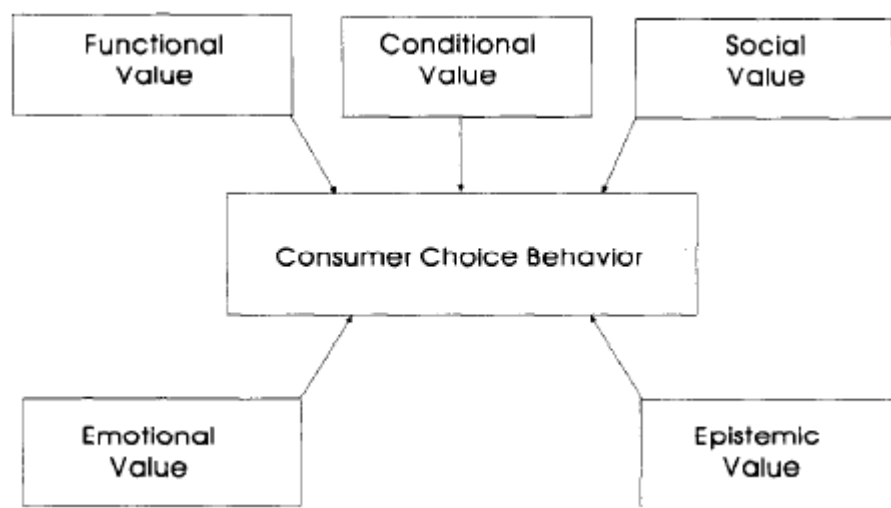


Figure 3: Five consumption values that affect consumer choice behavior (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991, p. 160).

The first, and the one closest related to the discussion of price and perceived quality by Zeithaml (1988) are the functional value which often is referred to as the main driver for consumer choice behavior. The functional dimension of value constitutes the functionality, utility or physical performance of a product or brand (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991) and corresponds to the consumer’s need at a fair price (Kovanoviene, Romeika & Baumung, 2021). In other words, for decisions where functionality is a prominent dimension, alternatives are chosen if they elevate salient utility for the consumers relative to competition.

Social value in comparison instead corresponds to the associations that consumer's perceive in relation to one or more social groups. These associations can be made through a positive or negative perception of value in regards to demographic, social, economic, cultural or ethnic stereotypes of the social group. Moreover, social value is often a driven factor of choice when it comes to highly visible products, for example in wearables like clothes (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991).

The third consumption value is emotional and relates to the perceived benefit of arousing feelings in consumers and is acquired when a specific feeling or affection is inflicted by an alternative (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991; Kovanoviene, Romeika & Baumung, 2021). Similar to the other consumption values, the emotional dimension may be perceived positively through for example excitement whereas negative associations may hold fear or even anger towards an alternative. Fourth, the epistemic value regards curiosity, novelty and knowledge as means for consumers to subjectively achieve a certain level of stimulation and hence to choose an alternative where value is perceived in experiencing something new or trying something else (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991). Kovanoviene, Romeika and Baumung (2021) suggest that brands that are perceived as innovative or meet the consumers needs of acquiring knowledge can thus achieve epistemic values. Lastly, conditional value constitutes the consumers' perceptions of utility in regards to how and under what circumstances an alternative is acquired. Sheth, Newman & Gross (1991) argue that such perceptions of value can be experienced in certain situations when physical or social contingencies enhance an alternatives' functional or social value. For example, there can be an enhanced social value in purchasing gifts for christmas whereas the functional value of an ambulance is conditional to an emergency.

Whereas these five values can be combined in various ways and are all desirable to maximize, Sheth, Newman & Gross (1991) argue that consumers find it both more practical and are more willing to accept less of one in order to obtain more of an alternative's salient values. Kovanoviene, Romeika & Baumung (2021) further argue that it is essential for the success of an organization that they are capable of creating a unique perceived value for the consumers and being able to communicate these values through marketing tools in a systematic approach.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

In order to make sense of blands as a research phenomenon and guide the thesis towards an understanding of how consumers perceive value from them, a theoretical framework has been developed to facilitate this purpose. For the remainder of this thesis, the theoretical framework will thus offer a platform for identifying and selecting our research context yet also assist in structuring the empirical findings as well as the analysis of the data. Though literature on the phenomenon of blands mainly originates from outside the academic domain and is based on rather few practitioners' observations and opinions in grey literature - the long yet informative definition of blands will serve as a stepping stone for this thesis by setting the context in which perceptions of blands will be explored.

Drawing from the collective distinctions that our literature review on blands in relation to imitator brands provide we acknowledge that blands, as shown in figure 1, potentially could be understood as an extension to me-too brands because they are created by a manufacturer (in contrast to distributors' private labels) and utilizes an imitation strategy across unrelated categories. Though imitator brands seem to be known by various names academically (e.g. Kapferer, 1995; Van Horen & Pieters, 2017) depending on the founders' business model and individual researchers rather than for the concepts' distinct definitions.

Because of the undefined relationship with imitator brands (e.g. Shenkar, 2010) in the general sense and me-too's (e.g. Sinapuelas & Robinson, 2009; Van Horen & Pieters, 2017) in particular, blands are consequently also difficult to accurately relate to the conventional theories of CBBE (e.g. Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 2012; Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). In contrast, CBBE is found to be rather concrete and explanatory because it derives from the customers' perception of the brand across essentially every part of its offer – tangible as well as intangible elements (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). Consequently, we argue that in order for this thesis to fulfill its purpose, a rather loose framework is adopted because it will allow the empirical data to not be restricted to a predetermined model that may or may not be suitable in the context of blands. Hence, by thinking of the brand resonance pyramid (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019) as more of a toolbox, consisting not only of fixed measurements but rather as topics for discussion, we argue that such a framework enables us to avoid constraints to solely test conventional concepts but rather offer the possibility of generating theory and better make sense of blands as a phenomenon. Because the purpose of this thesis

is to explore how consumers perceive brands, the analysis will be focused on the two middle sections of the pyramid which constitute consumers' perceptions of imagery, performance, judgements and feelings. By letting the empirical material speak for itself and guide the discussion with the assistance of existing theories to frame the context, we believe that the potential of the empirical findings can lead to more interesting and meaningful contributions to the marketing field. Lastly we want to see how these findings transcend into literature of consumer value creation based on the five dimensions of value: functional, social, emotional, epistemic and conditional (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991; Kovanoviene, Romeika & Baumung, 2021)

3. Methodology

In this third chapter we present the research methodology where we elaborate and motivate our methodological standpoints, approaches and choices throughout the thesis in order to best answer the research questions. We begin by discussing the philosophical standpoint and how that has affected the current thesis. The ontology and epistemology then leads to the presentation of the research strategy where we argue for the choices of utilizing a qualitative study as well as an abductive inference approach. Thereafter, the multiple case study design is elaborated on, followed by the process and choices related to collection and analysis of the qualitative data. The chapter is lastly wrapped up with a discussion of the quality of the thesis.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Consider the origin of trademarks from cattle and the oil lamp by Fortis that we mentioned in the introductory chapter of this thesis. Indeed, research in business and management have come a long way - a progress enabled by a heterogeneity of approaches and philosophical positions that constitutes the relationship between data and theory (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) argue that philosophers have for a long time discussed this relationship and emphasized the need for scholars to think about their standpoints as it can be harmful and preventive for the research if neglecting these issues. Moreover, considering one's philosophical view holds four main arguments to why it can affect research positively and potentially derive more satisfactory results. Firstly, Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) argue that only by reflecting on the philosophical issues and answering them can the researcher make a creative contribution to their field. In doing so, such a process enables the researcher to critically reflect upon their own role in the conducted research and more specifically how their values, motives and ideas may affect the research methods and the results. Secondly, an understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the research is crucial for selecting and creating a favorable research design that enables the researcher to collect the necessary evidence and interpret it so that the purpose can be fulfilled and answer the research question(s). Thirdly, a thorough understanding is also favorable due to the researchers ability to recognize the designs that will enable a successful research approach and which will not. Consequently, the limitations and opportunities with different designs can be identified and selected in-line with the purpose of the research to

achieve more satisfactory results. On the same note, the fourth and final opportunity with having knowledge of the philosophical issues is to assist the researcher in finding or creating designs that can be adapted when there are constraints to the research phenomenon or its knowledge structure. It may therefore also suggest designs that go beyond the researchers' past experiences (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

Throughout this thesis, we experienced a great number of challenges in identifying a suitable design to fulfill the research purpose. To start with, blands is a relatively untouched phenomenon in academic literature where it has only been explored on a minor scale - thus its definition and the accuracy of its claims are a result of rather few authors which had to be taken into account when conducting this research. Moreover, this absence in academic literature also poses a challenge in accurately identifying theories that are representative and connectable to the phenomenon under exploration. Hence, because of this constraint as a subject and in terms of its knowledge structure thus far, it became clear that a great focus was needed to be placed in the philosophical issues to be able to make sense of this phenomenon which also is the reason for our loose conceptual framework previously discussed. Therefore, we acknowledge the various opportunities associated with knowledge of the philosophical issues as presented by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), hence we intend to comply with these recommendations in order to fulfill the research purpose in a satisfactory manner and to pass a meaningful contribution to marketing literature.

In the following subsections we discuss our ontological as well as epistemological standpoint respectively so that a suitable strategy to answer our research questions can be identified and applied. By reflecting and understanding these assumptions we attempt to reach more satisfactory results and improve the quality of this thesis (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

3.1.1 Ontology

An ontological standpoint reflects the researchers' views about the nature of reality and influences whether social phenomena are assumed to exist dependently or independently from actors (Bryman, 2012; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). As researchers in social science and interest in the behavior of people, we must thus question whether social phenomena exist beyond our influence, if the phenomenon are socially produced through our interaction with it

or if its existence depends on the perspective from which it is observed (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

In the current study, the purpose is to form a deeper understanding of consumers' perceptions of blands - hence a relativist ontological standpoint is taken as we acknowledge the existence of multiple truths which is dependent on the perspective from which it is experienced and determined (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Furthermore, given the scarce literature on blands in academia we further believe a relativist ontology is of great relevance for this thesis' theoretical as well as practical implications.

3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge - the assumptions of what it is and how it is acquired (Bryman, 2012; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). In this study, we embrace a social constructivist epistemology that Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) links to a relativist ontology with the purpose of giving a bigger perspective of the behavior and life within groups and organizations. Moreover, a social constructivist standpoint dictates that reality is neither objective nor determined by external factors but rather subjectively constructed through interactions among people. By acknowledging people's individual experiences rather than their responses to stimuli, a social constructivist epistemology is applicable with this thesis as we attempt to understand how consumers' individually and collectively perceive blands and their value. Lastly, this thesis also places attention on how consumers communicate these perceptions through both verbal and non-verbal expressions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

3.2 Research Strategy

In the following subsections we relate our ontological as well as epistemological standpoints to the chosen approach for this thesis. We argue that a hermeneutic, qualitative and abductive approach is favorable in order to fulfill the research purpose.

3.2.1 Scientific Approach

Deriving from our ontological as well as epistemological discussion presented in the previous section is the scientific approach that should connect with our views of reality and knowledge. Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) emphasize that the various epistemological stances can be understood as a continuum - ranging from positivism to constructivism. In a similar

way, they argue that researchers also need to think of their relative engagement when attempting to answer the research questions which is visualized by the four quadrants (A-D) in Figure 4. On the one hand, the researcher should strive to be as independent or detached from the phenomenon as possible to avoid potential bias. On the other hand however, when studying complex social systems there is positive value in getting a closer relationship to the phenomenon in order to better understand the individuals and processes which is referred to as engaged research (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

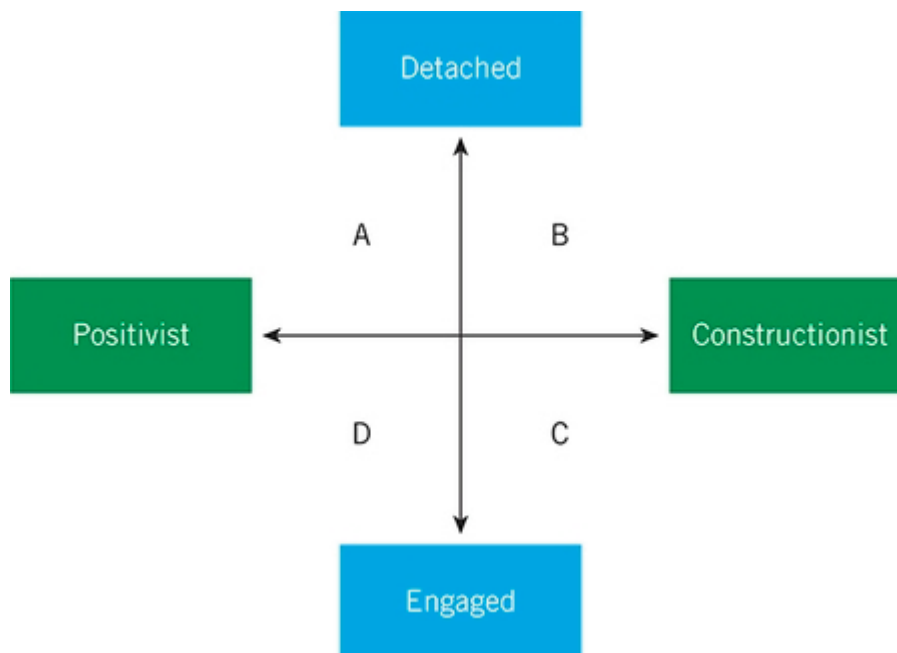


Figure 4: Visualization of the relationship between epistemology & scientific approach (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 90).

In chapter 2 we presented a rather loose theoretical framework because of the complexity of both previous knowledge and the phenomenon itself. Consequently, in terms of blands' complex knowledge structure, a more engaged scientific approach would be suitable as it would enable us as researchers to make more sense of the data that we encounter. On the contrary, we question how consumers perceive blands and their value from them which rather supports the objectives of a more detached scientific approach. Furthermore, Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) emphasize that a social constructivist stance consists of both constructionist as well as interpretivist assumptions. This means that multiple perspectives are necessary to gather consumer's diverse perceptions of the research phenomenon. Therefore, we argue that

in order to both increase the quality and contribution of this thesis, a scientific approach requires a combination of a detached as well as an engaged research design. Hence, in order to fulfill the research purpose of understanding blands from the (various) consumer perceptions yet at the same time bridge the gap between our own knowledge and the complexity of blands as a phenomenon in relation to previous literature, we argue that a hermeneutic scientific approach is the most suitable to utilize (Easterby-Smith et al. (2021).

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) a hermeneutic scientific approach enables researchers to interpret and understand consumers' perceptions in written as well as spoken (once recorded) textual material. Furthermore, given our developed framework with loose rather than connected theories to explore a relatively untouched phenomenon, we are able to collect and analyze consumer's perceptions of blands depending on the context in which individuals express it - verbally as well as through their body language. A hermeneutic scientific approach is favorable for this thesis because, though it is relatively more detached from the phenomenon, it also enables us to understand blands from multiple contexts which do not limit this thesis to solely test existing theories but also offer the potential of generating extensions to them.

3.2.2 Qualitative Research

As a result of the philosophical considerations throughout this thesis so far we consider qualitative data to be appropriate in order to answer the two research questions and thus to fulfill the purpose of this thesis. This is in-line with the recommendations by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) who also define qualitative data as a non-numerical form of information that is created in a process of interaction and interpretation with the research subjects. Qualitative research is also associated with an explorative nature and aims at gathering rich information through open-ended questions. To overcome the challenges and to bridge the gap between our complex phenomenon and staying as detached as possible, a multiple case study design has been applied to concretize the phenomenon both for ourselves as researchers to become more familiarized with blands. Moreover, by interpreting qualitative data conducted through focus group interviews the respondents are able to express their perceptions in a comprehensive and rich way. We believe that this design is favorable to our theoretical as well as practical contributions to the field (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

3.2.3 Abductive Approach

By offering a creative and flexible framework, the openness and complexity of qualitative data can be reduced to comprehensible measures which require a systematic and successive approach. In this way, researchers are able to explore and understand phenomena in ways that quantitative data cannot (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Because we base this thesis on primary qualitative data as well as existing theories to understand the perceptions of value in the context of blands, a purpose related to elements of both inductive and deductive reasoning, an abductive approach has been deemed suitable to utilize (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). In other words, we do not solely validate or falsify the relevance of the conventional theories constituted in the proposed theoretical framework for the research phenomenon, we also embrace the opportunities of the primary data to generate insights to these theories. Therefore, an abductive approach allowed for a more creative and flexible utilization of the theoretical framework (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

By not constraining this research to the limitations associated with deductive and inductive approaches respectively as proposed by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) we argue that the understanding of the phenomenon of blands as well as its value from millennial consumers' perceptions was enriched and thus favorably to fulfill this purpose.

3.3 Case Study Design

In this study the goal is to expand the understanding of the phenomenon of blands, especially to understand the consumer perceptions of blands. This paper adopts a case study design where collection of qualitative data derives from studying cases which in this context refers to different blands. Case study research means looking into one or a smaller number of objects, such as organizations, individuals or events and is especially beneficial when looking for in-depth knowledge from these objects (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). Bryman & Bell (2011) concludes that a case study design is not limited to studying a single case, the even increasingly more common design is to use a multiple-case study design which is sometimes categorized as a “comparative design” due to the purpose being to compare the cases that are included. Since the phenomenon of blands is argued to be a phenomenon which occurs across different categories, we argue that it is essential to select cases from different categories and thereby using a multiple case study design.

Even though many scholars argue that a multiple case study is heavily linked to taking a positivistic approach (Eisenhard, 1989; Yin 1984; Easterby-Smith et al, 2021), it is possible to use multiple cases within a constructionist stance (Easterby-Smith et al, 2021). This is also in-line with the need to bridge the gap between a detached and engaged methodology as previously discussed in section 3.2.1 (Scientific Approach). Additionally, Yin (2003) also argues that the case study design allows to collect data through six sources of evidence which are documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observations, physical artifacts. In this thesis we have thus opted to collect primary data through focus group interviews which will be further elaborated on in the following section.

3.4 Sampling Process

3.4.1 Selection of Cases

Given the aim to further explore the nature of blands from a consumer perspective, this study adopts a case study design by investigating three different blands from three unrelated categories. Due to the fact that the phenomenon of blands is argued to be taking place in multiple categories (Schott, 2020; Brunfaut & Greenwood, 2018; Brattström, Röken & Welander, 2021) we deem it necessary to use multiple cases and not limit ourselves to one case. The three cases that have been selected are; Hedvig (insurances), Quip (oral health products) and Estrid (razors) i.e. the same study objects as in the case study by Brattström, Röken & Welander (2021).

The selection of cases is based on the constructed theoretical framework which in turn constitutes the definition of blands according to the review of existing literature (e.g. Schott, 2020). Furthermore, these premises have also been adopted in previous studies (Brattström, Röken, Welander, 2021) and will thus enable the findings of this thesis to be relatable in order to continue the exploration of the phenomenon of blands. Hence, we chose the cases based on the fact that they have been studied in a similar context and that they follow these criteria: young and emerging DTC-brand, heavy online presence, short and snappy name, colorful design, and available in Sweden.

As a rationale for choosing cases, Flyvberg (2011) argues that there are two types of selection of cases; either random selection or information-oriented selection. Given the nature of this thesis, the latter was selected as information-oriented means that cases were chosen based on the expectations of their information content. This is also referred to as purpose sampling by

Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2019). Flyvberg (2011) also argues that this process can be done on the basis of the case being an extreme or deviant case. In regards to this emphasis we argue that we have chosen our cases based on deviance in relation to conventional brands since the understanding by Schott (2020) is that the concept of brands deviates from conventional branding. To give a further insight into the selected cases we provide a brief description of them respectively in the following section.

3.4.2 Short Presentation of Cases

As a result of our methodological assumptions and choices so far, the three selected cases are presented briefly here (a longer presentation will follow in chapter 4). The first one is Hedvig, an insurance brand, founded in 2017 which offers home insurances, accident insurances and car insurances through an app (Hedvig, 2022a). The second case, Quip, is an oral health brand which provides electric toothbrushes, toothpaste, floss, chewing gum and mouthwash on subscription (DTC) and was founded in 2014 (Quip, 2022). Lastly, Estrid, the razor brand provides razor blades on subscription which are used for the starter kit razor acquired in the beginning of the subscription (Estrid, 2022a).

3.4.3 Sampling Method

What all non-probability sampling designs have in common is that it is impossible to state the probability of any member of the population being in the sample (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) describes one way of non-probability sampling as purposive sampling, which means that the selection of participants is based on the specific research in mind to enable the researcher to answer the research question. The phenomenon of brands has been described as being direct to consumer brands that target a younger audience (Brattström, Röken & Welander 2021; Schott 2021). According to a study by ESW (2021), millennials are driving the rise of purchases of international DTC brands with about 52 % of 25-34 year olds having bought online directly from an international brand. According to Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2022), the term millennial is not consistent but can refer to people born between 1986-2005, but is widely assumed to stop at the new century, 2000, where Generation Z starts.

Therefore, in regards to the focus groups, the sampling design was of purposive character, meaning that we purposely chose consumers based on certain factors; millennials with a self-

proclaimed interest in brands. In order to get rich answers from the focus groups we believe that it is beneficial to limit the sample to consumers who see themselves as persons who have an interest in brands. The criterion for being a millennial was based on that the group is a major consumer of DTC brands (ESW, 2021), which is one of the elements of a brand according to Schott (2020). However, even though other generations such as Generation Z also drive the increasing purchase of DTC brands (ESW, 2021) we purposively left them out of the study since one of the brands is an insurance brand which we believe is something that millennials are more inclined to have dealt with due to their age. The focus group participants consisted of twelve people, six men and six women, who were born between 1997-1992.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	City	Field of work/study
Adam	Male	26	Stockholm	HR
Denise	Female	25	Luleå	Engineering student
Iris	Female	25	Malmö	Psychology student
James	Male	26	Uppsala	Medical student
Jenna	Female	30	Uppsala	Engineer
Julia	Female	26	Malmö	Medical student
Lucas	Male	26	Lund	Sales
Martin	Male	27	Stockholm	Engineering student
Maya	Female	27	Malmö	Human Geography student
Michael	Male	27	Stockholm	Lawyer
Philip	Male	28	Malmö	Career counselor
Sophie	Female	27	Stockholm	HR

Table 1: Demographics table for focus group respondents.

In order to get in contact with potential respondents for this thesis, we published a request on our personal Facebook profiles asking for individuals that were interested in brands and could

consider taking part in our research. No compensation was offered to the respondents because we wanted the sample to consist of individuals who had a true interest in brands and would consider sharing their perceptions without such incentive. The two Facebook posts generated fifteen responses in total among which twelve individuals were selected with the premise of having as diverse a sample as possible between men and women. The respondents included in this thesis are presented in table 1 below and were divided into two focus groups - three males and three females in each group. In total two focus group interviews were held and were considered to meet saturation because the two groups were as diversified as possible in regards to the criterias and delimitations of the thesis. Moreover, the two interviews rendered similar perceptions of the three cases and thus additional focus groups were considered unnecessary to fulfill the purpose of the thesis, all of Swedish nationality.

3.5 Data Collection

3.5.1 Focus Group Interviews As Primary Data

The data collection method of using a focus group means conducting a form of group interview where several participants together under the guidance of one or more moderators, in conjunction construct the meaning of a (usually) fairly tightly defined topic (Bryman & Bell, 2011) and is a good exploratory tool in qualitative research (Easterby-Smith et al, 2021). Bryman and Bell (2011) also argue that focus groups are suitable when examining a specific theme in depth, which is exactly what we want to do on the topic of brands. The reasoning behind conducting focus groups rather than one-to-one interviews as a way of sourcing consumer perceptions is to enable discussion among the respondents to collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it as suggested by Bryman and Bell (2011). Our reasoning also stems from the fact that brands can potentially be seen as a rather new phenomenon which could more easily be discussed within a group. The focus groups used in this study were so-called online focus groups (Bryman & Bell, 2011) and were conducted through Zoom. According to Stancaelli (2010) online focus groups are merely a variation of traditional focus groups and the commonalities among the two are greater than the differences. However, we acknowledge that body language in this setting can be argued to be somewhat more difficult to comprehend in relation to face-to-face interviews. To overcome this issue and because we are two authors of this thesis, one was appointed the moderator of the discussion throughout the interviews whereas the other had an observational

role in order to enable the comprehension of respondents body language. Therefore, we argue that zoom-interviews with this setup can be seen similarly as live focus group interviews.

Regarding the size of the groups, Morgan (1998 cited in Bryman & Bell, 2011) suggests that six people make up a typical focus group which we applied in this study. Furthermore, the author argues that a low number of participants is suitable when involvement is high, which was expected in this project due to the participants' self-proclaimed interest in brands. Bryman and Bell (2011) also emphasize that a larger number of participants per focus group can be more difficult to manage. Hence, we chose to conduct two focus groups with six people in each group which were both conducted on May 15th 2022 with a duration of approximately 75 minutes each. The way we conducted the focus groups was by doing a semi-structured interview guide which is done by having a list of questions on specific topics (Bryman & Bell, 2011). What the semi-structured interview method does according to Bryman and Bell (2011) is that it allows the interviewer to be flexible about the order of questions, but also to be able to ask questions that were not included in the interview guide that arises based on what is said by the interviewees. We believe that the flexibility of such a structure allowed the interviewees' perceptions of the presented cases to not be limited by the scope of predetermined questions but rather created a possibility to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon.

3.5.2 Focus Group Preparation and Execution

For the execution of the two focus group interviews, an interview guide was created in order for the two groups to follow the same structure and discussion topics (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This interview guide is attached as Appendix A. Due to the semi-structured approach however, sporadic follow-up questions occurred throughout the interviews respectively in order to clarify or develop the respondents' perceptions. This is in line with the recommendations by Bryman and Bell (2011). Additionally, the preparation for the interviews also involved creating a PowerPoint presentation of the three cases - Hedvig, Quip and Estrid - which then was shown to the respondents during the interview sessions and is attached as Appendix B. This PowerPoint was created and used in order for the participants to familiarize themselves with the different cases. The PowerPoint consisted of the same elements for each case: A short commercial video, home page of website, slogan, product/service pictures, four to five different Instagram posts from each case's own

Instagram. Each presentation of a case was followed by a discussion before moving on to the next one: repeating the process for the next case. After discussing all cases, the focus group ended with a general discussion of the cases altogether where questions about the participants' general impressions and thoughts were asked. It is important to note that the phenomenon of blands was not mentioned in order to avoid bias in terms of participants seeking commonalities among the cases.

Because the focus group interviews took place in an online setting, no written consent was considered to be necessary nor relevant to be distributed to the respondents. Instead the respondents were both informed about the premises for their contribution at the time of sign up for participation. Moreover, the respondents were also asked for verbal consent before the recording of the video was initiated. With this consent the respondents agreed to participate and that their identity would be officially confidential as well as solely used for this thesis.

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Choice of Data Analysis Method

In this thesis, primary data was gathered by using two semi-structured focus groups who were presented with the three different cases of blands. The phase following the conduction of the focus groups naturally became to analyze the non-standardized qualitative data, which often is both large in terms of volume and complex in nature (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). In order to make sense of the qualitative data there is a need to analyze it in a manner which is appropriate from our philosophical standpoint (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Hence, our data analysis method needed to be consistent to our philosophical standpoints of being relativists in our ontological standpoint with a social constructionist epistemological standpoint. In order to allow for flexibility, we adopted what Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), calls a thematic analysis method, which is not tied to a specific philosophical standpoint and can be conducted when having adopted a abductive research strategy. Thematic analysis is essentially a way to form themes out of your data and in line with our abductive approach our themes derive from both the data itself could also be linked to our theory. We attempted to find relevant themes that could help us interpret the phenomenon of blands through the consumer perceptions.

3.6.2 Sorting, Reducing & Arguing

Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) who emphasize the need for qualitative data to be sorted according to recurring themes or form in order for the data to be identified, highlighted, differentiated and listed - hence become more comprehensible to the researcher. In doing so, both ‘what’ the subjects are saying as well as ‘how’ they say it are identified which relates to our ontological and epistemological standpoint and research question. The ‘whats’ was first coded according to different types of facets (both tangible and intangible) of a brand according to the brand resonance-pyramid which helped to sort the perceptions according to features of the different cases to concretize what the perceptions were about. By sorting through these facets we got a clear picture of the perceptions of each case and then were able to sort ‘how’ respondents spoke about each case regarding each facet.

According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), presenting all the data available in a setting is not possible why they emphasize that it should be reduced to a manageable quantity. By resorting and reducing our initial coding, by finding tangents in the initial codes we could form four different themes where we interpreted similarities between the cases: *blands as innovators*, *blands as socially aware*, *blands as a modern display* and *blands as anthropomorphic*. This is what Rennstam & Wästerfors describes as categorical reduction.

The final step of the data analysis according to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) is to argue for the findings which is done by theorizing the collected data. To comply with the recommendations of arguing we have attempted to present arguments in as clear and coherent a way as possible and also related to the identified theory in the field.

3.7 Research Quality Criteria

Assessing qualitative research can be done in different ways (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In order to assess a qualitative constructionist research design, Locke (1993, cited in Easterby-Smith et al. 2021) suggests three criteria for evaluating validity; authenticity, plausibility and criticality. Silverman (2000, cited in Easterby-Smith 2021) criticizes these criteria for enabling “anecdotalism”, where the researcher is allowed to hand-pick the data to support their preconception of what the result might be. Hence, we chose to adopt an assessment scheme of Lincoln and Guba (1985) which partly consists of trustworthiness, which is divided into Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability.

3.7.1 Credibility

In regards to Credibility, which corresponds to the internal validity criterion in positivism, we first sought to create credibility through triangulation of data sources & researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which were made up out of two different focus groups. The fact that we were two people conducting both the establishment of an interview guide (topic guide), execution of the focus groups, and data treatment and analysis contributes to the credibility. The fact that we also applied a multiple case study design with cases from three different industries also increases the credibility in terms of triangulation between cases.

3.7.2 Transferability

According to Flyvbjerg (2011) case studies are usually criticized for not being generalizable, but argues that even though there would be no generalizability, case study knowledge may still be transferable. Since this paper is exploratory in terms theorizing of the phenomenon of blinds, we argue that the multiple case design shows that the phenomenon is transferable to other contexts than just within a single context which according to Easterby-Smith et al (2021); Lincoln and Guba (1985) is transferability in a constructionist stance. As Lincoln & Guba (1985) argue, we have tried to provide sufficient detail about the context: cases, participants and focus group execution in order for it to be transferable. In regards to generalizability of the thesis, we argue that this research will not be highly generalizable due to the fact that all respondents were Swedish. As shown by Kapferer & Valette-Florence (2022), the common preconception of the universal millennial is not correct, hence millennials from Sweden might not correspond to millennials from other parts of the world. The fact that we performed two focus groups also affects the generalizability in a negative way, by conducting more focus groups or increasing triangulation of methods or perspectives we could have achieved a higher generalizability. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that within interpretivism, it is up to those who want to apply the findings and interpretations of a study to determine the applicability into their context. That is why we also have tried to be as transparent as possible in describing the methodology of the conducted research.

3.7.3 Dependability

Dependability, which according to Bryman and Bell (2011) refers to reliability and seeks to answer if the findings can be replicated or not. Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) argue that

dependability (or reliability) within social constructionism is when others can reach similar observations. In order to achieve dependability we believe in being transparent about the research process, especially in regards to the data collection process which we have argued for and shown e.g. by providing an interview guide and clear description of how the focus groups were conducted. However, even though transparency is highly emphasized in this thesis, it is impossible to generate an exact replication of qualitative findings due to the subjective perceptions of the respondents.

3.7.4 Conformability

In the last criteria of trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985), argue that conformability is necessary to consider in order to avoid biased findings and results based on the researchers' motivations, interest and perspectives. Hence, we want to explicitly address the fact that one of the authors of this thesis is also one of the authors of the article by Brattström, Röken and Welander (2021). By being reflexive of our own affect as researchers we believe that we have attempted to not force findings in focus groups with leading questions. For example by not asking for similarities among the cases nor informing the respondents on the phenomenon of blands. Such opposing factors reduce the risk of bias and increase conformability.

However, the flexible approach of using an semi-structured interview does have effects on the responses of the respondents, since the questions will not be exactly the same or presented in the exact same manner. By trying to be neutral in our interactions as moderator and observer, by not providing disapproving nor approving responses within the focus groups, we believe this has increased conformability.

3.7.5 Source criticism

In this thesis, a relatively little known phenomenon is under study which inevitably have meant challenges in terms of their relevance and actuality. For this reason we consider it necessary to address and reflect upon the use of grey literature as part of this study. First of all, we have adopted an understanding of grey literature based on the definition provided by Schöpfel (2010) by which is known as scientific information, printed or electronically available, that is produced and published by other actors than commercial publishers. Moreover, we argue that the use of grey literature in this has been necessary for multiple reasons. For one, grey literature currently remains the only published articles available to the

best of our understanding apart from one pilot study by Brattström, Röken and Welander (2021) which in turn is based on grey media articles and have been included in this thesis. Secondly, a thorough and strategic review of past literature in both LUSEM Library and Google Scholars search engines have provided zero hits in regards to blands nor topics that have been found to accurately represent the phenomenon of blands as presented in grey literature. Hence, we believe that the use of grey literature for this thesis enables us to contextualize and research a particularly interesting topic. Having said this, we acknowledge that the included articles from grey literature are based on a few individuals' observation and argumentation why we have attempted to present these definitions and examples as objectively as possible to enable a better understanding for the readers of this thesis.

3.8 Reflexivity

Though qualitative research is suggested to hold difficulties in regards to being completely objective (Bryman & Bell, 2011), we have throughout this thesis aimed at adopting an reflexive approach as proposed by Alvesson (2003). While reflexivity itself can be used in various ways and does not belong to a single philosophical stance, Alvesson (2003) argues that reflexivity can be used to bridge the gap between epistemology and methods. As we have discussed earlier in this chapter, our philosophical assumptions possess traits of different stances why we consider an reflexive approach to be of particular importance for this thesis to address. Alvesson (2003) also emphasizes that reflexivity should be seen as a conscious and continuous attempt by researchers to shed light on multiple perspectives and angles of a subject rather than favoring a single and perhaps the most conventional one. By approaching a phenomenon with such openness the researcher is able to become more critical towards assumptions and meanings of data yet also enables an exploration of new vocabulary in regards to the subject (Alvesson, 2003).

Throughout the second chapter we have therefore attempted to present relevant theories with a critical mindset in relation to blands and aimed for a rich discussion of various perspectives. Furthermore, we argue that by analyzing multiple cases of blands through these theories we are able to explore the phenomenon in several contexts to enable a deeper understanding and fulfill the purpose of this thesis. By combining focus group interviews as a more engaged qualitative method to a case study design, we argue that our philosophical stance is well reflected in this thesis where the need for objective interpretations as well as engagement is

achieved. Reflexivity was also adhered to in regards to the conducted focus group interviews where respondents were given time to answer the questions in their own way where follow-up questions and clarification of expressions were addressed which Alvesson (2003) argues can enable new vocabulary and richer information to appear. Lastly, throughout the analysis we have also attempted to be objective and utilized the partnership with one another to avoid bias and subjective interpretations of the findings.

4. Empirical Findings & Analysis

In this section, the results and findings of the study will be presented. Before that, a short background information will be given on each case of the multiple case study. Followed by that is a section of different levels of relationship between the respondents and the brands. After that, the findings and analysis will show the characteristics of a brand and the consumer attitudes/perceptions to/of them shown in this study.

4.1 Case Backgrounds

4.1.1 Hedvig

The Swedish digital insurance brand originated back in 2017 and was created to build an insurance experience based on trust - rather than on endless questioning. By the year of 2018 they were listed as one of the hottest startups in Sweden by Wired and by 2020 they launched their operations in Norway and the following year, Hedvig also launched in Denmark. Hedvig is one of the fastest growing insurance companies in the Nordics and has now accumulated more than 100 000 customers. (Hedvig, 2022a)

Hedvig offers home insurance for homeowners and rentals, but also provides car insurances and accident insurances. Since the beginning of their launch they have been on a mission which according to themselves is to set a new standard for an industry that has been standing still for decades by providing an app-based insurance which allows the customers to get instant help and the possibility to make claims anytime. They aim to provide insurance for how we live today on a flat fee and all unclaimed money by the end of each fiscal year is donated to charity (Hedvig, 2022b).

4.1.2 Quip

Founded in New York in 2014, Quip is an oral health brand that provides electric toothbrushes, toothpaste, chewing gum, floss and mouthwash on a subscription based model direct to the consumer. The brand was created to “prove that good design has a bigger impact on oral health than quick fix gimmicks” and lets you customize your subscription based on what you want for your oral health and lets the consumer connect the toothbrush to an app to monitor the brushing (Quip, 2022b). The brand promise of Quip is to “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, 2022a). The cost of a toothbrush subscription has a starting fee of 60 USD (where one receives the actual toothbrush) which is followed by continuous cost of 5 USD for refill of brush heads and battery change every three months (Quip, 2022c).

4.1.3 Estring

The brand was created in 2019 on the idea that "Hair removal should be optional. Great hair removal shouldn't" and mainly provides razors. The razor can only be bought online from their website where the customer can subscribe to refills of razor heads which are provided monthly, every other month or every three months. They also provide different skin care products such as moisturizers and shower gels. Estring is keen on emphasizing that you should not have to pay more for razors based on your gender (Estring, 2022b). Estring ships their razors to 13 other European countries other than Sweden, e.g. Germany, the UK and Spain. As for the price of the product, the starter kit of a razor handle, a wall mount and two razors costs 95 SEK which is followed by an 129 SEK subscription-fee for receiving four new razor heads. How often the subscription will deliver razor heads is either every other month, every third month or every fourth month (Estring, 2022c).

4.2 Consumers' Awareness of Brands

Keller and Swaminathan (2019) suggest that brand awareness can be a tool for helping consumers understand what category the brand operates in and that increased brand awareness leads to more perceptions about the brand. Brand awareness is however not only related to beyond category borders as proposed by Romaniuk and Sharp (2003). In table 2 we present the respondents' respective awareness and experience of the three cases prior to being exposed to them during the focus group interviews. The table is coded by color where a red dot indicates that the respondent had no previous knowledge or experience about the brand. A yellow dot marks that the respondent had heard about the brand before in some way but could not recall or know what product category they belonged to. A green color signifies knowledge about the brand where the respondent knew what category it belonged to and finally a black dot disclosed that the consumer currently was or had previously been a customer to the brand.

	Was the brand known by the participant prior to the focus group?		
Pseudonym	Hedvig	Quip	Estrid
Adam	●	●	●
Denise	●	●	●
Iris	●	●	●
James	●	●	●
Jenna	●	●	●
Julia	●	●	●
Lucas	●	●	●
Martin	●	●	●
Maya	●	●	●
Michael	●	●	●
Philip	●	●	●
Sophie	●	●	●

Table 2: Respondents' awareness and experience of the cases prior to being introduced to them.

By relating this prior awareness to the general discussion about the brands respectively it was prominent that consumers had a tendency to hold more perceptions about Hedvig as well as Estrid who they knew about beforehand whereas Quip generated fewer distinct perceptions. Furthermore, the respondents tended to hold generally more positive associations towards the two more well known cases in relation to Quip. The respondents that had heard about Hedvig prior to the focus group had partly come across it on social media and podcasts but also through marketing campaigns at different student events during their time at University. As for Estrid it was mainly through friends and social media where several respondents said Instagram and Tik Tok to be the source. The one respondent that had previous knowledge about Quip had come across it through a podcast.

4.3 Themes - How do Consumers Perceive Blands?

By following the example of Wright, Frazer and Merrilees (2007) we have formed themes based on what emerged during the data collection process and that can be related to some of the different characteristics of a bland blueprint according to Schott (2020). These themes stem from performance and imagery associations which the consumers have about the blands. In accordance with the brand resonance pyramid, these associations form judgements and feelings of the bland, which will also be shown within each of the themes. Hence, the thematized perceptions of blands are formed based on commonalities between the cases and how they differ to their competitors according to consumers and can be explanatory towards how bland value is perceived by consumers.

4.3.1 Theme 1 - Blands as Innovators

What distinguishes a bland according to Schott (2020) is partly the claim of being disruptive in purpose, delivery and product while still being very similar to other brands in various aspects. Most closely related to being disruptive in regards to CBBE theory (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019) is the consumer judgements on brand credibility which partly relates to judgements on innovation, competence and market leadership. Obtaining judgments of being an innovative brand in the mind of the consumer is often done by creating innovative features. It is also proposed that brand innovation includes both marketing innovation and product or technology innovation (Nguyen, Yu, Melewar & Chen, 2015).

4.3.1.1 Skepticism to Claims

Skepticism arose when respondents were asked about what they thought of the following claims by the blands: Estrid (2022a) - "*A new way of shaving*", Quip (2022a) - "*Better oral health, made simple*" and Hedvig (2022a) - "*Setting new standards for an industry that have been standing still for decades*". Consumers were mainly questioning what it was that actually was new with these offers where a prominent skepticism arose for all three cases, especially harsh was a comment on Hedvig by Martin:

[...] My opinion is that it's somewhat of a turd rolled in glitter [...] I have a feeling that it's same-same but as I said, I have not looked into it more thoroughly. But to my understanding it seemed like the only new thing is their way of marketing. My general

opinion about it is that it is an insurance and that there are not so many new things that could be done about it.

Jenna also questioned what could be new about Hedvig in comparison to other insurance brands: [...] “What is it that you can do that is new about insurances? [...] I am skeptical about what is so new about it”.

Regarding Quip, and their claim of “better oral health, made simple” also caused reactions among the respondents, here exemplified by Iris’ response:

I almost got provoked. Regarding whether it would become better, then I would like to know in what way. Absolutely, you get a new brush for your head, but I don’t know. I don’t get why this product or toothpaste would make it better [...].

Skepticism was perceived by Iris also with regards to Estrid’s disruptive claims about providing a new way of shaving: “*This is so silly. I believe this is really silly*”. In line with Iris’ reaction, Lucas also quickly expressed his thoughts: “*This is not true!*” and Sophie was also questioning the claim: “*What is the new way?*”.

All these feelings associated with claims by the brands relate to anger which Kovanoviene, Romeika & Baumung, (2021) refers to the emotional dimension of consumption values which are seen as negative when anger is held against a brand.

4.3.1.2 A Convenient Offer

After discussing what Hedvig’s claim of setting new standards for an industry that have been standing still for ages, the respondents concluded that what might be new was the way of handling insurance errands through an app, however, that was questioned due to the fact that some argued that many insurance companies do in fact have mobile application services in their offer. It did, however, result in the perceived innovative feature of Hedvig was the quick responsiveness to insurance claims and that it was solely digital. These factors were concluded to be a convenient way of handling one’s insurance in contrast to their competitors, exemplified by Adam: “[...] *It (Hedvig) feels more convenient than IF or Länsförsäkringar*”.

As for Quip it was concluded what was potentially seen as “better” or “new” about the brand was the subscription model and not the actual toothbrush or toothpaste. What was perceived

as potentially improving oral health was the fact that customers would get new brush-heads for their toothbrush on a regular basis. Julia, who would consider buying Quip due to its convenience, expressed the following: “[...] *To change the brush head is something that I could easily postpone. It is good that you get a reminder and it would be nice to make this more efficient*”

In other words, consumers perceive that Quip's solution affects the habit of taking care of your oral health positively. No one of the respondents had heard about a subscription model for oral health products before. James addressed this by saying: “*The fact that it is a subscription model feels very new regarding toothbrushes*” and Michael thought this model felt “[...] *convenient and simple [...]*”.

What was perceived as being new with Estrid's razor solution was similar to Quip based on the fact that you would get them on a subscription model. The only actual customer of Estrid, Denise, also thought that they were quite similar to other razors in regards to product similarity but she thought that the handles of the razors felt heavier than others:

I would not say that they are that different. You still have to do the same movements. The actual razor blades don't differ that much compared to the ones you buy in store. With that in mind, I still believe that they are heavier than the plastic ones you buy in-store and that affects the actual experience.

Most respondents thought that the new appealing feature resided in the convenience of the subscription model and app-solution. The association of convenience can be seen as what Keller and Swaminathan (2019) refers to as points-of-difference, namely associations held by the consumer (related to the specific brand) that are unique, strong and favorable. Hence, they all show the same point-of-difference but within different categories. Even though convenience was a common perception, some also questioned the actual need for subscription of razors and toothbrushes, one of which was Iris:

Everything in our everyday life is being simplified. We are supposed to save time on so many things. Sometimes I wonder what all that time should go to. What will we do with the time saved by all subscription services? I feel a little bit skeptical if it really has simplified anything.

Denise also reflected upon the increased number of subscriptions one would get if one would use these brands : “[...]To what extent can you sign up for more subscriptions? How are you supposed to keep track of all subscriptions? It feels overbearing [...].”

4.3.1.3 Brand, Innovator or Both?

In summary, what was perceived as being disruptive or innovative about the brand did not lie within the primary features of the product of which the brand represents; at least not for Estrid & Quip. Even though the respondents felt that the claims of innovation partly hinted at being a new type of product, they perceived the way of acquiring it as the innovation in regards to its category, by adopting the DTC-subscription model. This way of bringing the product to the consumer, creates imagery associations of innovativeness which are related to the purchase situation (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). It can also be argued that the subscription solution also is seen as a part of the supplementary features of the brand, which at the same way creates this image. In regards to Hedvig it was somewhat inconclusive whether it was the primary feature which was new or not, which is partly explained by the brand purely offering a service rather than a physical product. Even though other insurance brands were perceived as also being digital, Hedvig was however perceived as being highly responsive and convenient. Being convenient and simple seems to be the common denominator of imagery association in regards to being innovative and act as a point-of-difference for each brand towards competitors within their category. Even if they are somewhat unsure of the innovative feature, as Shenkar (2010) suggests, copying a business model can be done yet still be perceived as new or innovative in distant markets or industries

By using either digital solution (Hedvig) or a digital/subscription solution to serve the consumer (Estrid & Quip) the brands create functional value. The perceived functional value (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991) primarily stems from the convenience of the subscription model applied by Estrid & Quip and the digital insurance solution by Hedvig. Whether consumers perceive this convenience as necessary or not differs amongst them. What also seems evident is that the consumers perceived the brands as trying to create a sense of novelty which would relate to the perceived epistemic value by the consumer. Even though skepticism was present, a lot of the respondents felt that the subscription model and digital solution offered something new and exciting compared to alternative brands in the respective categories.

As Iris puts it: *“In one way or another all make claims of being simple”*. However, making such claims of innovation or disruption on rather basic products, which are not instantly obvious to the consumer can lead to negative feelings and judgements towards the brand. It is also apparent that all three brand claims are noticed as a commonality between them, summarized by Lucas:

They are also disruptors within their industries, entering the market and rebuilding it from the ground. Or at least they talk about it alot, they want to be challengers in an old industry.

Similarly to Lucas, Michael perceives the brands as at least trying to reinvent their respective industry which are seen as boring:

They are quite similar in the sense that they take on traditionally boring industries such as the insurance industry or oral health industry, which are not that sexy. Then they try to rebrand it in a new way to reach out to consumers.

This theme indicates that the common innovative features of brands mainly stems from perception of them being convenient. In the following themes we will elaborate further on other commonalities in what unite the three cases and what sets them apart from their competitors.

4.3.2 Theme 2 - Brands as Socially Aware Actors

Schott (2020) argues in grey literature that brands have social values that reflect that they show no judgment towards any demographic factors. To take an active stance based on social issues related to these factors is often referred to as brand activism, which according to Kotler and Sarkar (2017) is a way for a brand to distinguish itself from competition and a way of creating imagery related associations to a brand, and ultimately creating brand equity. In the empirical findings there is a common perception that Hedvig, Quip and Estrid are all socially aware, or at least tries to be a force for good – Estrid and Quip by taking a stance on social issues and Hedvig by donating all their profits to charities.

A lot of the perceptions of especially Estrid was based on their social stance on a person's right to choose whether to shave or not and the attempt to take a stance on not only inclusion and diversity but also veganism. Regarding the other two, perceptions related to being socially aware, was mainly as a response to Quip's stance on diversity among dentists and

Hedvig's donation of all their profits to charity. In contrast to the other two, Hedvig's donation would not be seen as brand activism according to the definition by Kotler and Sarkar (2017) since they are not taking a stance on a specific social issue. However, it can be seen as a CSR effort which creates image related associations (Kotler & Swaminathan, 2019) to be a force for good. The opinions of the respondents varied but can be categorized into two different camps. One of which was skeptical whereas the other was more approving.

4.3.2.1 Skepticism towards authenticity in social awareness

The perceptions of the skeptical camp argued that both Quip and Estring capitalized on being “woke” only as a means of selling their product, which could be categorized as being perceived as inauthentic brand activism (Vredenburg et al. 2020). When being initially presented to Estring, Martin was quick to accuse Estring of pink-washing (which could be seen as form of woke-washing):

I have also heard about Estring and maybe I am a little biased, but to my understanding they are pink-washing. [...] They use their message in a way that doesn't do as much as they say. [...] They promote diversity and different ideals but the bottom line is that it is nothing new, it's only a new way of promoting themselves.

Regarding the pinkwashing accusation by Martin, this is also touched upon by Iris who first stated that Estring is “woke” in their communication. When Iris was asked to elaborate, Julia answered:

They are very good looking razors. But the fact that they are claiming that they are for both those who want to shave and those who don't, while still selling razors. You guys want us to buy razors. That annoys me!

When Iris gets a chance to elaborate on what she meant by woke she does so by citing Estring: “*It's okay to not shave as well*” - *They only say that to strengthen their own brand*” which indicates that she does not find the stance taken as being authentic brand activism. A similar perception of Estring's stance on social issues is shown by Lucas:

[...]Even though they seem to do good stuff, it still feels like they are trying to capitalize on being woke. It is very clear that they try to push for inclusion and that sort of stuff. It is still a company.

Overall, the negative perceptions could be summarized as accusations of woke-washing in regards to taking a stance on norms associated with body hair, and this seems to be mostly because the consumer finds it odd that they do so, while still being a razor brand whose sole purpose is to provide razors for shaving.

There was also confusion regarding what would be vegan about the razor and how Estrid was “cruelty free” showcased by Adams statement: “[...]I don't like this non-cruelty statement. I would like to know more about it”. Jenna questioned the vegan aspect as well by wondering: “How can it be vegan? Are not all razors vegan?”

However, it is not only Estrid that catches skepticism as a result of taking a stance on increasing diversity. Respondent Iris explains how she feels about Quip's stance in terms of increasing the diversity in terms of ethnicity of dentists:

I am bothered by their.. I think that it is super nice to try to raise awareness about the lack of diversity among dentists, where only a certain percentage are black women. But it feels like they are capitalizing on it, which bothers me as a way of trying to sell their product [...]

Overall, the skeptical comments on diversity stance, taken by Quip, could be summarized into a common understanding of perceiving Quip's stance as a very deliberate way of trying to appeal to consumers without really being authentic. Similarly, this applies to Estrid and even though these respondents felt the brand activism as inauthentic they still somewhat believed that this could be appealing for others when describing what they thought people would like about them. Overall these skeptical responses showcase a perceived negative emotional value.

4.3.2.2 Approval of Social Awareness

Other respondents were more positive about the brands stances on social issues which Vredenburg et al. (2020) would categorize as perceiving the brand activism in a more authentic way. This was shown when respondents argued that especially Estrid had a more feminist approach - compared to other competitors within their category (such as Gillette) by actually showing the hair that is being shaved off the body, in their communication. These perceptions seemed to relate to the fact that Estrid promotes that you can shave whenever or if ever you want. Sophie recalled a commercial from Gillette of where an already shaved leg

was shaved and contrasted it to Estrid by saying: “*Estrid is like this: Shave what you want and if you want, whereas “Gillette for women” signals that you shouldn't have hair on your legs*”. Similarly, James was really approving of their stance on body hair and that it goes against norms created by competitor brands; that people shouldn't have body hair:

Isn't it really good? It does not create these norms [...] of when even if you have very little hair on your leg, you should still shave it, in that case the product creates a norm. In this case it is more like you can do whatever you want with the razor. If you want to remove the hair, remove it. But you don't have to do it

Even though the more positive consumers (in regards to Estrids stance) conclude that they think that they are in a sense contributing to the norm of shaving since they are selling razors, they simultaneously feel like they are trying to change it to some extent, by trying to normalize body hair.

In regards to Quip's stance, no one really showed positive reactions but some were rather neutral, by just addressing the fact that they did take a stance. However some thought that Hedvigs CSR initiatives by donating all their profit to charity was impressive and unique as exemplified by Adam:

They donate their profits to charity [...] . It differs not only from other insurance companies but it also differs from almost all other companies. Companies are run on the basis of making a profit and provide a return for those who have invested. [...] That is what I perceive as cool, but also slightly odd, especially because there are not that many other companies that does that today

Even though the perceptions of the taken social stance or action for good, varies in terms of how present they are in each brand, there seems to be a common understanding that all brands are very socially aware as suggested by Schott (2020) and in some cases creates a positive emotional value (Kovanoviene, Romeika, G & Baumung , 2021; Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991) through their stance. However, when the authenticity is perceived to be lacking, the feelings of the consumers seem to be related to distrust and creates a resistance to the brand and in the end create what Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991) refers to as a negative emotional value. Hedvig was, however, not perceived as taking a similar stance as the others, probably

due to the fact that they do not address a specific social issue as Estrid and Quip. Either way they were still considered to make a distinguished effort to be a positive force for good. Overall imagery associations related to taking a stance or being a force for good seems to be a common feature for these three cases, in the minds of the consumers. Therefore, an epistemic value (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991) can also become prominent to some consumers who perceive the brands as innovative in relation to other brands within and across the given category. Being socially aware is also how the brands create a point-of-difference within their categories.

4.3.3 Theme 3 - Brands as a Modern Display

The third theme that emerged from the data collection was commonalities in perceptions regarding the brand elements such as brand name and logo (Kotler & Keller, 2016) of each case but also in regards to following a certain color scheme and design. Not only to each other but also how they differ from other brands within their respective category. Schott (2020) suggests that brands use a neutral and simple design with lots of pastels and also use a short and snappy name that do not necessarily relate to their business. Brunfaut & Greenwood (2020) further suggests that brands tend not to use a logo and rather just use the name. Features such as logo, name and color scheme is what according to Keller (1993, p.2) partly constitutes “what makes up the differential effect of brand knowledge and consumer response to the marketing of the brand”. According to Kotler & Keller (2016) brand elements consist of brand name, URLs, logos, symbols, characters, spokespersons, slogans, jingles, packages and signage are all devices that can be trademarked, which differentiate and identify the brand. Keller and Swaminathan (2019) also suggest that consumer associations of style and design (size, shape, material and color) relates to both imagery and performance associations to the brand.

The responses to the different logos were quite moderate and associations were made to ‘modern’ and ‘brash’ in regards to Quip. Hedvig’s logo however was perceived as being ‘bland’ and ‘simple’ but ‘pretty’ whereas no one made specific comments on Estrid’s logo rather than it was similar to the other cases. However, for some respondents that had not been exposed to the brand prior to the interview, the logos and names were associated to other categories than what they operate in. Jenna thought that Hedvig, for instance, was some new kind of mobile operator: “ [...] *when you showed the Hedvig logo I thought it was a new*

“Hallon” or some other mobile operator [...]” whereas Philip thought it was a clothing brand. Two respondents believed that Quip was an e-scooter brand, exemplified by Denise: *“I think it reminds a lot of Bolt and other such brands. So I thought it would be about something completely different from the beginning”*. As for Estrid, Adam also connected the brand to another category: *“ [...] At first I thought it was a clothing brand [...]”*.

To conclude the perceptions of the brand element of brand name and logo it appears to be hard for respondents with no previous brand awareness to connect the brand to its category. This lack of category connection, at least for Hedvig, makes the brand name stand out to other insurance brands, which according to the respondents often include the word “insurance” in their brand name. Either way, a concluding opinion about the logos was that they were bland, as Lucas puts it: *“ [...] The logos are very similar, and by that I mean that they are very bland, but on the surface they are a lot like each other. ”*

Connected to the perceptions of brand logo/name and the interface of the brand and the product itself, is also the tendency by respondents to highlight the way of using colors. Summarized as that they are all using pastels in some way or another. It was suggested that they follow a classic “start-up” color scheme: *“ [...] they use a color scheme where 80 % is of one color and 20 % is made up of another color. ”* In regards to how the respondents perceived the usage of colors most respondents thought that they were appealing.. Iris explains what she thinks about when she was faced by Estrid: *Nice looking colors, these pastels recurs from the other brands. Kind of the same font, and the usage of emojis [...]”*.

As for the design of the actual products, there seems to be an understanding that they were different in design compared to other brands within their respective category, and that they were all pretty minimalistic but colorful, both in regards to Quip Michael: *“It looks like a new way of designing toothbrushes”*. When James saw the Estrid razors it made him happy: *“It is colorful. It makes me happy when I see this picture compared to when I see a regular razor. This looks a lot more fun”*. Sophie also liked the appearance of the Estrid razors and suggested that they serve a decorative purpose for the bathroom: *“I think they are pretty. They are fun to have in the shower instead of those Gillettes, which are kind of boring.” [...]*

Overall the aesthetics of the brand elements of logo and brand name are together with the design being perceived as being quite similar among the three cases and even described as

bland but colorful. Compared to competitors within each category, the brands however seem to stand out in terms of these features and in other words creates points-of-difference (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). In terms of what value the elements create can relate to both what Sheth, Newman and Gross (1991) refers to as emotional value as a result of excitement.

4.3.4 Theme 4 - Brands as Anthropomorphic

Brunfaut and Greenwood (2018) argued that one of the prominent features of brands is the resemblance to teenagers in how they act, dress and communicate in a similar way. On this note, a prominent finding from the focus group discussions of the three cases highlights how consumers in these contexts tend to perceive brands appear youthful and more personal compared to other brands, essentially creating what Keller & Swaminathan (2019) refers to as points-of-difference towards their competitors. It is worth noting however, that the name of the current theme comes from a seemingly narrower branch in academic literature related to consumers' perceptions of both brands and their personality where they are acknowledged as actual human beings. Referred to as *anthropomorphized brands*, scholars like Puzakova, Kwak & Rocereto (2009) propose that brands can be perceived as actual human beings who are capable of having emotional states, a mind and soul, as well as a conscious behavior through which it can serve as an actor in a social aspect and form social connections.

4.3.4.1 Anthropomorphized Brands

In the context of brands, human characteristics permeate respondents' perceptions both across the three cases under study but also in relation to how prototypical brands and competitors are described. Especially in regards to the brands' names and logos which is summed up quite accurately by one of the respondents, Martin, who shared his opinion on Hedvig: *"It feels like talking with a person since it comes with a name and not like Länsförsäkringar or IF, that it really becomes a bit more personal."* By relating to two competing brands within the Swedish insurance industry, Martin perceived the name of the brand to reinforce the feeling of talking to an individual compared to his feelings towards the competitors. Interestingly, both James and Adam also relate Hedvig to competitors within the industry where James argues that Länsförsäkringar sounds really boring to him and that Hedvig in comparison sounds more fun to deal with. Adam similarly argue for Hedvig's distinct difference in approach:

Well I do not think they [Hedvig] are equal as much, how should I say, “red tapists” like for example Folksam, Länsförsäkringar or IF. When I had any of them one was required to submit all receipts when one had damage or something. It was a whole thing.

Both James and Adam hence perceive Hedvig to be more forgiving and convenient to deal with compared to more established insurance brands and seem to be liking this less approach in the event of an insurance claim. Sophie adds to this point: *“Take this commercial video for example where something really sad has happened in that something broke, but we [Hedvig] do it in a fun way instead.”* The communication of Hedvig in this case emphasizes what several of the respondents perceive as a more casual treatment within an industry they interpret to be generally traditional in the sense of being more serious and strict. Furthermore, Lucas agrees with Martin in that the three cases appear similar to him:

And that they have human names too, it is a psychological trick. They want to be a friend and that they share opinions with oneself is almost creepy, but maybe that is something many companies do?

Iris is united with this view when she also recognizes that Estrid and Hedvig both are common girl names and says in regards to Hedvig that: *“But I think that it is a nice name actually. I think the logo is pretty nice as well but I believe that it appeals to me. It sounds youthfully adult.”* Denise on the other hand phrase her perception of Hedvig a bit differently: *“I think I feel biased just because I have a second cousin who is named Hedvig. I think automatically on a small girl with curly hair who dances or something”*

Though many examples of the anthropomorphization are directed towards Hedvig in particular, many of the respondents especially relate these examples to Estrid’s case as well where reactions tend to refer to the human name of both brands. What is interesting is how consumers also express a commonality towards Quip as well despite not sharing this commonality between the two other cases. For example, Iris notes that Quip and Hedvig both look to have the same font in their logos and Lucas gets a different vibe between these two and describes Quip as more *“American”* and *“A bit more boastful than Hedvig, but also ambitious.”* Adam elaborates in a similar way with regards to Quip’s supportive

communication towards diversity: *“It also feels like Quip is not a Swedish brand because of the message itself. It feels cool and all three of them feel cool and aware.”*. So despite that Hedvig and Estrid in terms of name stands out from Quip, consumers still perceived a similarity between all three cases with a more personal approach and even appear in some aspects to be an individual rather than a brand.

4.3.4.2 The Bland Personality

Another interesting finding from the focus groups further indicates that respondents do not solely perceive and describe blands in a more humanized way, but they also argue for certain personality characteristics that they all seem to share. Julia, for example, elaborates on her perception of Hedvig as *“A young person who also enjoys life or does not fear taking risks. A risk-averse person who is quite young.”* Lucas agrees: *“everything you (Julia) said”* and adds that he perceives Hedvig as an ambitious person as well. These characteristics are also prominent in other’s description of the Hedvig bland where Iris identifies an attractive young woman with nice clothes and an eye for interior design. Lucas adds that she (Hedvig) is fun to be around whereas Michael also agrees with Iris with regards to nice clothes and suggests *“she”* sounds cool.

Two respondents however, share distinctly different descriptions of Hedvig, where Martin perceives a different vibe from Hedvig: *“I get the vibes of an entrepreneur. It feels very much of a start-up somehow like we saw there, that they should revolutionize and think. That is my view of the person.”*. Sophie on the other hand think that Hedvig sounds more like a *“nice dude”* and elaborates:

Well it feels like [...] partly because I think it feels a little unprofessional but also that it is a person who has tried [...] and that it feels very much like Gen Z. I see for example a lot of commercials on TikTok and Instagram. In other words a little bit more like someone who tries to reach out to this youth mass, young adults that is, and that it feels unserious but because it should be in a fun way.

When consumers are asked to describe Estrid on the other hand, they do so with a similar demographic but perceive the personality to be a bit different from Hedvig. For example, both Sohpie and Iris argue that they perceive Estrid as a young woman though *“she”* differs from Hedvig by having more opinions and a greater focus towards her look and style. Others

also agrees on this like Lucas for example who argues that Estrid is a woman with “*the right opinions and you know, everything*” whereas Sohpie perceives vibes of a feminist and HBTQ friendly person. Others agree, like Adam who perceives Estrid as a “Hipster” and is supported by Jenna. Interestingly, some of the respondents find it more difficult to personify Estrid in any other way than by referring to an Instagram and Tik Tok influencer because it feels “*very edited*”. Adam is more specific in his expression:

I think about that girl, what is her name? “1337Likes” who had an account on Instagram, this feels like her. [...]. She made some good points, was lovely and norm-breaking in many ways which might have questioned how things are. [...]. Still she enjoyed success and was a bit like that, cool and socialized at all cool and nice places. [...] I do not even know if she is an influencer anymore. She was another kind of influencer and did not do all these sponsored posts. Many appreciated her message and material without her getting commercialized.

In a similar matter, the respondents perceive Quip as having a somewhat similar demographic though with some differences with regards to personality. The general perception of Quip was similar to Estrid and Hedvig in that it was as a young adult. However, respondents instead argued for the bland to be a man exemplified by Maya: “*It might be a man in comparison to Hedvig, I don't really know why.*”. Iris agrees on the gender but is sharing her line of thought: “*Quip, it feels like equipment, like a gadget guy [...], a good job, but a desk job. Dress nice, casual but handsome.*”. Both Lucas and Martin further relate their perceptions of Quip to the personality of Hedvig as a person with a nice smile, ambitious and a start-up mentality. Other perceptions of Quip indicate that Quip is a man with many ideas but that they are not completely thought through.

Concluding the personality descriptions, all three cases fit within what Aaker (1997) describes as excitement; by being up to date, spirited, imaginative and somewhat daring. By being perceived to have a start-up mentality, taking risks and being very up to date both in regards to values and solutions. However, stemming from the other themes: the lack of trust and skepticism shown to both social awareness and innovativeness, shows that in some aspects fail to be perceived as what Aaker (1997) describes as sincerity (being honest and genuine).

4.3.4.3 The Idealized User

One of the more general perceptions that the respondents had amongst one another was with regard to the consumer segment that each brand was attempting to target. This finding can be related to what Keller and Swaminathan (2019) discuss within the imagery dimension of brand equity where idealized users are identified on demographic and psychographic factors.

Those consumers who previously have had an interaction with the brand argued that Hedvig seemed to target students because of the brand's presence on several social events in Uppsala, Sweden. Iris for example expressed the following about Hedvig:

Well I think students, and like younger, young adults. Above all because it is always available in an app. Then one must be able to handle it and that would be most people actually but that it is still aimed towards people who are used to getting a quick response like I think that today's youths do.

Other respondents like Lucas agreed on Hedvig's aim to reach the younger generation with the argument that these consumers to a greater extent probably appealed to the convenience and sought something new compared to other brands. Apart from solely applying to Hedvig, Lucas as well as the rest of the respondents seemed to hold this rather unified perception of who the targets were for the other two cases as well. Lucas expressed the similarities on Hedvig for the Quip brand:

I think it is very similar to Hedvig's target group and that it aims at people who are early adopters perhaps, maybe into technology. A bit wider though, everyone brushes their teeth.

Lucas further notes that Quip may be seen as appealing to consumers who value their social awareness and dislikes the perfectness of traditional commercials and concludes that such individuals would be young, woke and socially aware. Furthermore, both Iris and Michael perceive that a younger consumer are more inclined to favor the concept of purchasing Quip's products because of their subscription and DTC model where the former argue that it may be more expensive that way - thus young families may be inclined to like Quip because

of the convenience and relatively more expensive price to conventional ways. Michael on the other hand says:

But also the younger part of the population in that relationship. If you think about how one traditionally has bought toothbrushes and toothpaste compared to binding it to this new way, to have it as a subscription service. Then maybe a little bit younger who are more moldable individuals who can hop on an idea like this and make it to the new normal. [...]

This view also holds true for Estrid who consumers, like Iris, perceive to be targeting women in the range of 20-30 years old or even younger. Maya agrees and notes that despite Estrid's statement of being for everyone, it feels more aimed at women of that age group. Jenna adds that Estrid though can be seen to target both men and women yet agrees that they are around the same age as previously proposed. Adam further agrees on this perception but also refer to what he perceives as a battle that Estrid are dedicated towards:

Considering above all the thing they said about having the same pricing regardless of gender, because you (Denise) said before that it was more expensive to buy razors for women. So maybe that was the fight they (Estrid) took first.

The respondents argue thus that their perceptions of the blands are having a rather unified user type and appear to appeal to their own segment. Arguably these perceptions also include some arguments to why they believe these groups to appeal to blands. Whereas some respondents highlight a more functional value through convenience, others refer to the more socially aware dimension or even the perception of newness as a factor for appeal. Nevertheless the consumers indicate that various consumption values may be interpreted in the valuation of blands' offers (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991).

4.3.5 The Bland Blueprint

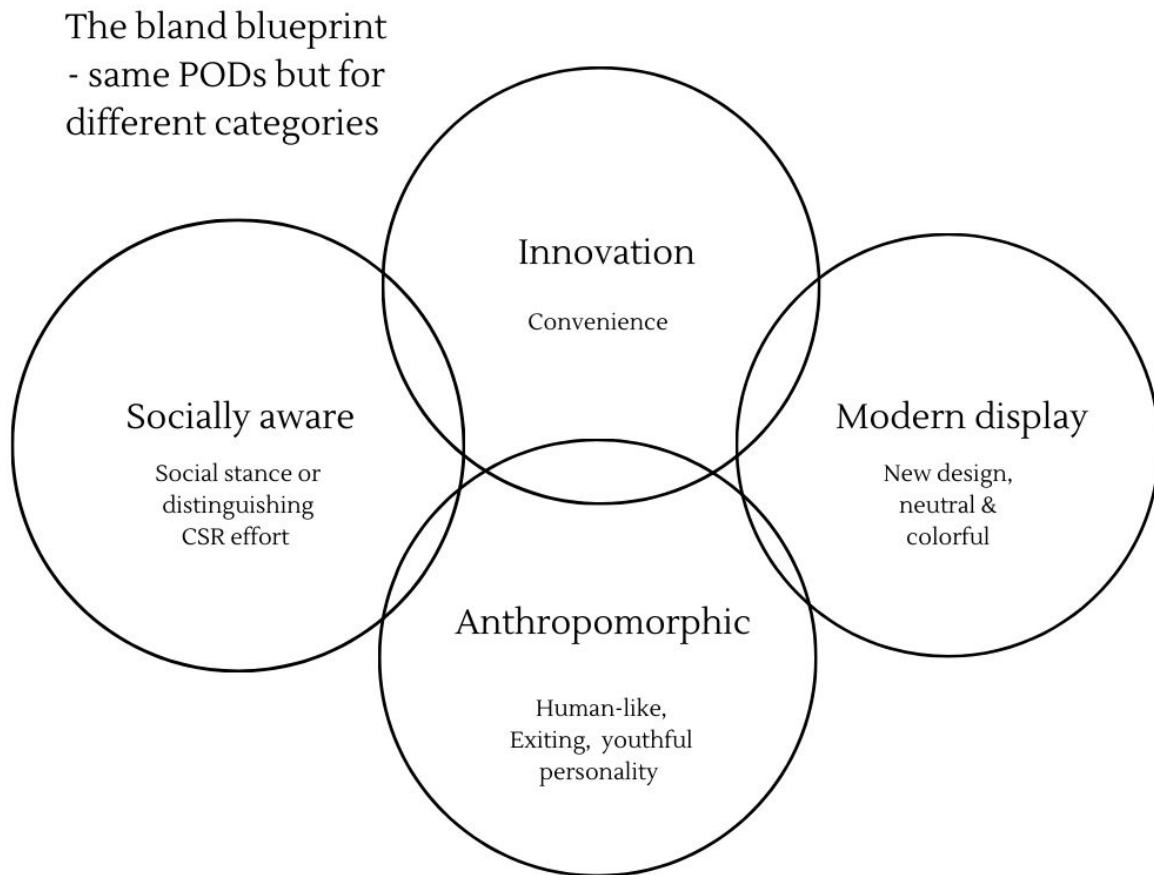


Figure 5: The bland blueprint deriving from the themes (own creation).

Stemming from the consumer perceptions of the cases, it appears as that blands create the same points-of-difference (PODs) but within different categories by adhering to the themes of the bland blueprint. This is essentially how consumers perceive blands differently in regards to their in-category competition. As shown by Figure 5, almost all themes are interrelated in one way or another. First, the innovation theme is related with the other elements because consumers perceive an in-category POD from each of them respectively. Secondly, blands as socially aware relates to the anthropomorphic theme because consumers perceive blands' social awareness as part of the human-like associations of the bland. Similarly, the third theme, bland as a modern display, relates to the anthropomorphic theme because the display reinforces the youthfulness of the bland.

However, the model does not tell whether the brands are seen favorably or not, rather just in what ways they are perceived differently to competitors. The conclusions from this framework will be further discussed in conclusions and analysis.

5. Discussion

In this fifth chapter a discussion will be provided in relation to the empirical findings that were presented and analyzed in the previous chapter. Moreover, the discussion will reflect how the empirical findings relate to the literature that was reviewed in chapter two and will serve as a foundation from which a conclusion will be drawn in the sixth and final chapter. First, a reflection of the consumers' awareness and familiarity in relation to their perceptions of the bland is presented followed by a discussion of how the bland is perceived. Lastly, the discussion will lead into what consumers value in a bland offering.

From the analysis of the empirical findings it was prominent that the three cases held an uneven amount of perceptions in the mind of the respondents. Whereas consumers expressed many opinions in regard to both Estrid and Hedvig, relatively few of the respondents had any familiarity of the Quip bland nor had they heard about it before except from one participant. Throughout the analysis it is therefore not surprising that relatively more examples were provided about the more well known cases. However, what then becomes interesting is that despite this difference of awareness and hence prior perceptions, the respondents reacted in a somewhat similar way towards Quip as to Estrid and Hedvig. Moreover, whereas some respondents reacted in a restrained way towards Quip in terms of liking and trust of the offer, a few still perceived the bland positively and would even consider buying it though more research was wanted before being able to conclusively state whether to do so. In accordance with Keller and Swaminathan (2019) and the salience block of the brand resonance pyramid, the brand awareness for each of the bland could explain why respondents had trouble identifying which product category the lesser known bland belonged to.

Based on the perceptions held by consumers, the four themes explain how bland in the same way, are perceived as different from competitors within their respective category. This is in-line with Shenkar (2010) who suggested that an imitation can occur across categories and still be perceived as innovative. Nguyen et al. (2015) also highlight that brand innovation can be utilized on other aspects of the brand than merely the product but communication and technology as well.

One of the most important findings of this study is the perceptions that consumers express in regard to bland's dualistic and disruptive claims. Whereas respondents expressed a mistrust,

and even anger in some cases, towards the innovative claims, respondents still acknowledged that there were elements of the three cases that could be interpreted as a category innovation. First of all, consumer perceptions showed that the innovative features of the blands partly reside in the direct-to-consumer approach through a subscription or digitalized solution. Both create associations of convenience which serve as a point-of-difference to the blands in relation to their respective in-category competitors.

Secondly, consumers perceive blands to be socially aware entities that distinctly differentiate them (point-of-differences) from how competitors appear within their industry. Whereas Quip and Estrid attempt to be a force for good in regards to ethnic and gender diversity respectively, Hedvig donates their profits to charity. The former two can be seen to utilize what Kotler and Sarkar (2017) refer to as brand activism which distinguishes the bland from competition and creates imagery related associations and equity. Hedvig however, is rather creating image associations through what Kotler and Swaminathan (2019) define as CSR activities. Consumers did also perceive these initiatives from the blands in two different ways where some expressed genuineness, approval and relevance whereas others rather perceived skepticism towards its authenticity and argued that it was woke- and pink washing. This is in line with Vredenburg et al. (2020) who argue that some brands may hold perceptions that are more positively linked with its purpose whereas a disconnection may result in negative associations. In fact, consumers' perceptions of such features to be innovative within the industry also indicate that consumers see an epistemic value in the blands' social awareness. This confirms Nguyen et al. (2015) claims that brand innovation is not restricted to product and technology but also done through communication, and in this case in communication of social awareness.

The third element in the bland blueprint identified as having an effect on the perception of innovativeness was how the blands obey to a modern display. From the analysis of the empirical findings it was further shown that consumers held many perceptions towards blands' seemingly simple and shared design of names, logos and color scheme throughout the proposed bland offer. These perceptions have previously been noted in the academic literature to constitute both performance and imagery related associations to build equity for a brand (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). It is noteworthy that consumers perceived these features to be very similar across the three cases – for example with regard to being a human name, logo written with the same font or by adopting similar color schemes – yet they

distinctly perceived them differently within their respective category. In terms of the color scheme, consumers perceived both the use of pastel colors applied by Estrid and Quip to play on the same modern associations utilized by Hedvig. It seems necessary to address that the latter one in this case study is the only brand to be a service provider (insurance) whereas the other two offer physical products in razor and toothbrushes/toothpaste. Hence, the perceptions related to the products themselves could for this reason be greater than for Hedvig. Nevertheless, the modernity and simplicity that was perceived between all three cases indicate that brands obey to a similar blueprint when it comes to color scheme throughout their offers respectively and that it also creates associations and judgements in the minds of the consumers. In accordance with Keller (1993) the brand as a modern display can be related to constitute part of its differential effect and may further be connected to the brand equity pyramid's performance section; through the consumer perceptions of look and feel for the brand, as well as the judgment section because of the perceived value and quality entailed by these features (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). According to the consumers' perceptions of brands as a modern display in a rather traditional category result in a distinct point-of-difference towards competitors where value is drawn from the excitement and willingness for new experiences. In turn, those consumers who held such emotions could be understood to portray an epistemic value towards the brand as defined by Sheth, Newman & Gross (1991).

The fourth finding of this thesis implies that consumers generally referred to brands in a more anthropomorphized manner where similarities across the imagery section of brand equity were prominent in the form of a distinct and common personality and idealized users across all three contexts (Keller & Swaminathan, 2019). The resemblance to teenagers as proposed by various grey literature authors (Brunfaut & Greenwood, 2018) was also present in consumers' perceptions of the brands where certain elements indicate a strong relevance in forming these associations. For example, whereas Hedvig and Estrid both were perceived as individuals because of their human name, Quip were also identified as an individual though with a slightly different demographic compared to the other two. Moreover, the findings indicate that brands' personalization in approach towards consumers is perceived as a way for brands to shift from a consumer-brand relationship into something with a more friendly nature. Furthermore, though the consumers hold a unified perception of brands as targeting young consumers similar to themselves, the findings implies that each of the brand successfully appear as separate individuals despite being emphasized to follow a somewhat fixed blueprint. Consequently, consumers do perceive a general excitement because of the

innovative way in which brands formulate and behave distinctly different from competitors within their category and can thus be related to how brands may be described as being exciting. Particularly relevant is the alignment in how Aaker (1997) similar to consumers perceive an up-to-date and daring mentality. In this way, brands can reinforce their epistemic and emotional values as means to form positive associations in the mind of the consumer (Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991).

Throughout the brand blueprint the empirical findings suggest that certain values could serve as differentiators whereas others hold a more supportive role for the sample in this study. Though social value does not appear to be as prominent or important for perceiving the brands positively for the respondents of this study, this thesis cannot conclusively disregard its importance for creating favorable associations. For example, a few respondents relates their initial interest towards Estrid to be based on their previous awareness known from their social connections. For these reasons, individuals who find each of the brands' respective socio-political stance to be relatively more important may therefore hold different perceptions in valuing the brand offer. A similar reflection can be noted with regards to the conditional value where certain respondents expressed a feeling not knowing whether they liked or disliked the brand and argued that more information was needed for them to decide. Therefore, it can be argued that conditional value may in the case of brands come to serve as a tipping point for these individuals where the social value as well as the seemingly important functionality of the offer can result in more positive, unique and favorable associations.

6. Conclusion

In this final chapter of the thesis, we start by restating our research purpose and reflect on the fulfillment of the conducted research through a presentation of the key conclusions. Furthermore, a discussion of the theoretical as well as practical implications will be held before the limitations are acknowledged. Lastly, this chapter will present opportunities for future research within the field of imitation strategies for brands and the phenomenon of blands in particular.

6.1 The Bland Blueprint

The purpose of this thesis was to explore and develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of blands and how they can be perceived from a consumer perspective. Moreover, the purpose was to understand how consumers create value from these perceptions in order to explore whether a homogeneous blueprint can be applied across unrelated categories successfully. Stemming from this purpose, two research questions were formulated in order to guide progress to fulfill this goal. The two questions are presented individually below where the first relates to how consumers perceive blands and enables us to fulfill the purpose of creating an understanding of what a bland is. The second question relates to the value perceived by consumers and complements the first to fulfill the research purpose with an in-depth understanding of how value is created from a consumer perspective.

RQ₁: How do consumers perceive blands?

First and foremost, the findings of our research shows that consumers perceive a lot of similarities between the three cases of blands and brands in different categories than their own. Simultaneously, the findings also show how consumers' perceptions differentiate blands from the competition within their respective category. Blands create the same points-of-difference but within different categories by adhering to the themes of the bland blueprint. First of all, by providing bold reinvention claims to attract consumer excitement, which is backed up by providing a direct-to-consumer approach to differentiate themselves from competition which creates a category-unique association of convenience. Secondly, they are all perceived as being socially aware compared to their competitors. Thirdly, they are all perceived as having a similar modern display, by the new and neutral design as well as usage

of certain color schemes. Lastly, they are perceived as more personal, in some cases even anthropomorphized (humanlike) compared to their competitors. Related to being more personal than competitors, they are also perceived as having the same brand personality of excitement due to their young, up-to-date and daring mentality.

The findings also conclude that blands can be perceived with more skepticism because of the relatively higher risk which in turn may partly be explained by a low brand awareness. Moreover, this skepticism can be partly drawn from the individual consumer's approval or rejection of the given social stance's authenticity from the bland and may thus result in both negative or positive associations, which also applies to the perceptions of the innovation claims. Overall the identified themes are perceived to collectively differentiate the bland from competition within their product category while simultaneously connecting them with other blands across categories – potentially showcasing signs of a standardized model for building blands.

RQ₂: How do consumers perceive value from blands?

The second question of this thesis refers to the various perceptions of value that consumers perceive from the blands' offers as identified by the four themes. The findings indicate that consumers across these themes hold a unified perception of favoring functional as well as epistemic values of the bland blueprint. Consumers perceive the functionality of the offers to be fundamental in order to result in positive associations where convenience and usefulness become vital arguments to fulfill. The epistemic values on the other hand serves as a distinguishing element for blands compared to their respective competitors where excitement and willingness to try something different is perceived though it also may inflict a higher risk when the brand awareness is low. A second finding is that emotional value is highly individual where certain consumers tend to perceive positive emotions of the bland concept where others perceive skepticism or even anger. In a similar fashion the social values throughout the bland offer indicate that despite not being a prominent element in the current sample could potentially be highly individualistic to certain social groups and may relate to the theme of social awareness. Lastly, this thesis concludes that conditional value may serve as a tipping point for consumers' liking or disliking in the bland offer through the enhancement of the social and functional aspects.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

Since the phenomenon of blands previously only has been mentioned in a non peer-reviewed academic article as well as grey literature, the findings of this thesis hold multiple contributions to the academic field of marketing and brand management.

Firstly, by exploring blands from a consumer perspective this thesis provides an in-depth understanding to how blands are perceived which could be seen as a first piece of the puzzle to conceptualize the phenomena academically. Particularly, this thesis extends the current understanding of me-too brands by providing prominent arguments for the need of a more holistic view of how imitation strategies can be executed across unrelated categories following a certain blueprint. Additionally, by drawing from conventional theories of brand equity, the second contribution extends the understanding of brand imitation and consumer behavior theory as this thesis also offers an exploration of their relevance towards the emerging context of blands.

Thirdly, whereas prior studies have emphasized the relative importance of functional value for the consumer's choice behavior, the findings from three unrelated cases suggest that epistemic and emotional values may potentially hold a greater impact towards how millennial consumers evaluate and choose various alternatives. The fourth implication of this thesis suggests that the bland blueprint can be understood as a carefully customized model that constitutes a strategy which entails creating points-of-difference through the same attributes but adopting it in different categories.

6.3 Practical Implications

Considering the claimed emergence of increasingly similar brands across a great variety of industries, this thesis holds some important implications and recommendations for managers and practitioners working with both new and established brands. First, the findings of this thesis emphasize the need for managerial consideration in regard to how specific customer segments may hold different consumption values where we recommend brands to not neglect the relevance of epistemic and emotional values to attract consumers through excitement and a sense of novelty regardless of categorical belonging.

Secondly, we propose that established and prototypical brands could benefit by adopting elements from the bland blueprint to increase perceptions of novelty where pre-established associations of functional values may diminish the perceived risk from young consumers. By understanding how value is perceived for blands, managers of multi-brand strategies may utilize this understanding to better defend against emerging rival brands.

Thirdly, as a result of the diverse response by the consumers to the different elements of the blands, we advise managers to be careful if or when adopting this formula. By adhering to this blueprint and attempting to create a sense of novelty throughout their offer, the bland comes under a lot of scrutiny. This is shown in regard to when the consumer perceives the social awareness as inauthentic and the novelty claims as being fake or deceiving. It is therefore essential to be able to back up the social awareness and novelty claims in order to be seen favorably.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

The first limitation of this study relates to the fact that the research is conducted within a contextual setting, namely by using millennial respondents from Sweden. Despite that this delimitation enabled a greater focus of contextualizing and making sense of blands as a new phenomenon, it can though be seen as a limitation of generalizability. If the research would have been conducted with different cases and respondents from other markets, the empirical data might have generated different results. Therefore, the generalizability of the thesis is subject to some scrutiny but nevertheless, we argue that this approach gave us the opportunity to receive a deep understanding of the phenomenon of blands in the chosen setting. We thus propose that future scholars may find it beneficial to explore this phenomenon further in different contexts to build an even more coherent picture of the emergence of blands.

On a similar note we acknowledge that the second limitation of this study is the number of respondents which in accordance with a social constructionist standpoint could have brought a bigger sample to collect further perspectives. Doing so would also have enabled a combination of data collection methods, such as one-to-one interviews or content analysis which could have strengthened the contributions of this thesis. However, due to the complexity of the phenomenon in this early stage we still argue that focus groups were a good way for consumers to express meaning surrounding the phenomenon both individually

and collectively. Future scholars should see this as an opportunity to expand the understanding of blands where differences of multiple generational cohorts or other demographic factors may prove meaningful for academia and practitioners alike.

The third acknowledged limitation of this thesis is the fact that only three cases were studied which also questions the generalizability of the findings in different contexts. Because of the explorative format of this thesis we argue that the relevance of blands are yet to fully be explored. Consequently, we welcome future scholars with greater relative resources and experience to expand the understanding of this topic through a wider cross-categorical comparison which we believe would be a valuable addition to our work in this thesis. Lastly, we believe that quantitative methods could be of particular interest to further test the connection between blands of various industries and markets.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Guide

Prior to beginning the interview, we asked the respondents for consent to record the interviews for transcription. This was followed by a clarification of anonymity and confidentiality in order to receive approval of using their responses in the thesis. After this conversation, this was communicated to the focus groups:

Hello!

We study at the Master's programme: International Marketing & Brand Management at Lund University and our names are ____ and _____ .

This is a focus group for our master's thesis about different brands and we want to make sure that you are aware that it is possible to leave the focus group at any point and that the participation is voluntary. We also want you to be aware that what you say can be used in our master's thesis.

After receiving approval, the interview started. Each brand was presented individually with a following discussion based on questions below. After discussing all three brands, a final question was asked.

Questions

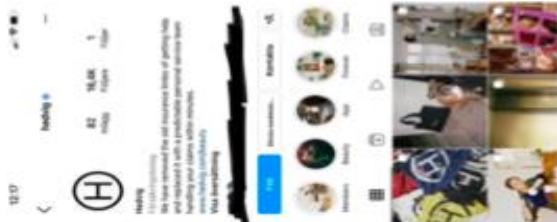
1. Have you used or bought this brand before? Or heard anything about this brand before? If so, tell us about it.
2. What do you think about the brand's logotype?
3. (What do you think of how the product is displayed/packaged?)
4. If you would purchase this product/service, do you think you would be satisfied with the quality (functionality in relation to price)
5. What are your thoughts on this brand?
6. (How do you think the product looks?)
7. Who is it for?
8. How does the brand make you feel?
9. What do you think about the brand message?
10. What product category is this brand related to?
11. Which competitor brands do you know about?
12. What do you think about this brand compared to competitor brands that you know of?
13. Would you consider buying products from this brand, why?, why not?

14. Why do you think people would buy products from this brand?
15. What do you think about people who would buy these products?
16. If the brand were to come alive as a person, what would it be like? How would you describe the person?

Final question after showing all three brands:

What are your overall thoughts about these brands?

Appendix B: PowerPoint Presentation of Blands



Commercial:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoBsQkSbIPM>

Hedvig®



Vi sätter en ny standard för en bransch som stått still i årtionden



quip

Better oral health, made simple

QUIP is the only toothbrush that's designed to be used with a toothpaste dispenser. It's the only toothbrush that's designed to be used with a toothpaste dispenser. It's the only toothbrush that's designed to be used with a toothpaste dispenser.

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Thin, lightweight, and incredibly smart

QUIP is the only toothbrush that's designed to be used with a toothpaste dispenser. It's the only toothbrush that's designed to be used with a toothpaste dispenser. It's the only toothbrush that's designed to be used with a toothpaste dispenser.

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Customize

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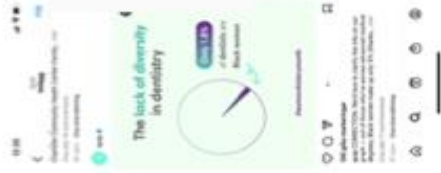
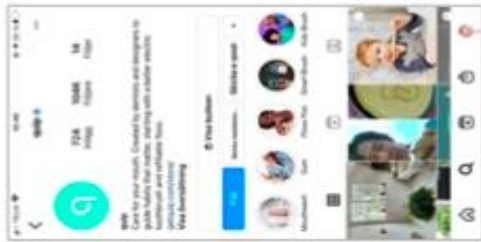
QUIP is the only toothbrush that's designed to be used with a toothpaste dispenser. It's the only toothbrush that's designed to be used with a toothpaste dispenser. It's the only toothbrush that's designed to be used with a toothpaste dispenser.

The design products that guide good habits (and exclude the gimmicks that don't), to simplify a healthy routine.

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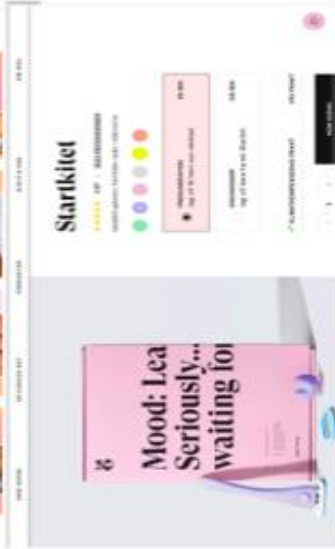
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Commercial:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ic uSalls3lg>

ESTRID



Commercial:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=m7XCdHPVUio&feature=emb_title