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Exploring authenticity in diversity branding: A case study of Weight Watchers' "For Every Body" rebranding campaign

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Abstract

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The landscape of strategic communication has undergone significant transformations in recent years, driven by progressive societal trends and changing consumer expectations. One increasingly prominent trend is a greater emphasis on diversity in brand communication strategies. A challenge lies in incorporating diversity into branding strategies while authentically appealing to myriad stakeholder groups. Organizations must navigate a minefield of stakeholder expectations and cultural sensitivity while maintaining a convincing appearance of authenticity. This thesis aimed to develop nuanced insights into the intersection of diversity branding, authenticity, and myriad stakeholder groups in the branding context by conducting a case study on the Weight Watchers rebranding campaign of 2018. Through a thematic narrative analysis of the campaign’s press releases, TV commercials, and quarterly earnings calls, the study gleaned insights into WW’s conveyance of authenticity, how it attempted to overcome diverse stakeholder needs, and how WW’s approach to incorporating diversity in its brand reflects the interplay between authenticity, organizational objectives, and the power of social influence. The analysis found strong similarities between WW’s approach to conveying authenticity and Walter R. Fisher’s conceptualization of how humans make decisions in the narrative paradigm—indicating narrative is an effective tool for strategic communication, and its timelessness is a testament to how impactful it can be. Finally, the analysis grounds the insights in a discussion of the implications of narrative’s potency regarding authenticity, organizational objectives, and the power of social influence.

Keywords: rebranding, narrative theory, narrative paradigm, investor communication, thematic narrative analysis, Weight Watchers, strategic communication, brand communication, stakeholders, rebranding

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1. Introduction

The landscape of strategic communication has undergone significant transformations in recent years, driven by progressive societal trends and changing consumer expectations. One increasingly prominent trend is a greater emphasis on diversity in brand communication strategies. Consumers favor brands that reflect their values and beliefs (Holt, 2004), and with a more significant percentage of the population prioritizing progressive ideals than ever before in the United States (Devitt, 2021), Europe (Ulea, 2023), and South America (The Economist, 2023), organizations are unavoidably compelled to integrate diversity messaging into their communication efforts. Rebranding campaigns, in particular, provide brands with a unique opportunity to adapt to a changing ecosystem (Goi & Goi, 2011) and reposition themselves to be more aligned with diversity principles.

Branding has emerged as a means of involving an organization in social discourse. This transition reflects the role brands play in cultural perceptions and social norms (Holt, 2004). Accordingly, brands are leveraging their platforms to communicate a renewed commitment to diversity and engage with their stakeholders. In this context, the following thesis explores the interplay between diversity and branding, focusing on the strategies behind advancing diversity initiatives within the space.

1.1 Problem Statement

Integrating diversity principles into branding presents a complex challenge for organizations. Diversity initiatives aim to lift underrepresented groups in society or the workforce and embrace differences by showcasing them positively (McKinsey & Company, 2022). According to research by McKinsey & Company (2022), *diversity* refers to a variety of perspectives and backgrounds being represented, including factors like race, age, size, disability, and gender. When an organization combines these principles and infuses them into its branding, it adds a new dimension to its messaging and improves a brand's global image (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

In recent years, diversity within branding strategies has become noticeably prominent. As societal attitudes evolve, brands must adapt their strategies to align with the prevailing beliefs and remain authentic and relatable to their target audiences. Byrd (2018) referred to diversity as a branding strategy (known as *diversity branding*) and one employed as a competitive advantage.

However, organizations face obstacles in maintaining authenticity through diversity branding. Consumers want to know that they are engaging with organizations and communication practitioners who share their values, and authenticity is confirmed by those who walk the talk and openly demonstrate the ideals they espouse (Wilson, 2016). Losing authenticity spells doom for a brand, so it is critical to earn and maintain it.

Earning and maintaining authenticity becomes complicated when organizations must also balance multiple stakeholder groups' diverse interests and expectations. These groups, such as consumers, employees, investors, and advocacy bodies, may have antithetical perspectives regarding diversity—between and within the groups—posing more problems for a brand trying to remain appealing, authentic, and progressive.

In sum, the problem lies in incorporating diversity into branding strategies while authentically appealing to myriad stakeholder groups. Organizations must navigate a minefield of stakeholder expectations and cultural sensitivity while maintaining a convincing appearance of authenticity. This feat requires a comprehensive understanding of communication strategies and their effectiveness.

This practical problem reveals a space in strategic communication for new knowledge that contributes to scientific understanding and improves practice. Looking at the underlying strategies and mechanisms employed in a unique case of diversity branding—such as a rebranding campaign—opens the door for more profound insight.

There is a gap in research that synthesizes branding, authenticity, stakeholder interests, and current diversity developments. A thesis examining the underlying strategies and mechanisms employed in branding in this context would undoubtedly contribute new knowledge to strategic communication research and practice.

Symbolism, themes, and overall narrative strategies in branding are critical variables in communicating authenticity and appealing to stakeholders (Holt, 2004). Narrative techniques, such as crafting a brand narrative and incorporating narrative elements into communication initiatives, offer a way to address multiple concerns arising in the age of diversity branding. Narratives are not only an effective tool for organizations but also a lens through which to look at this new age of branding.

One notable organization that took strides toward more inclusive and diverse branding was Weight Watchers, which rebranded to WW in 2018. This legacy weight management company was established in the 1960s (Weight Watchers, 2019a), but as societal perspectives concerning weight and health evolved to be more body-positive and

inclusive, WW was criticized for promoting antiquated beauty standards and perpetuating diet culture.

WW launched a rebranding campaign, repositioning itself more aligned with 2018's broader values. The campaign, "For Every Body," rolled out a new logo, slogan, and brand name. It sought to communicate a holistic concept of well-being separate from weight loss. The rebranding campaign is an exciting and relevant case following this thesis's problem, and it opens the door to exploring narrative being used in branding, specifically in the topical context of diversity.

1.2 Research Aim and Questions

Through a case analysis of the WW rebranding campaign, this thesis aims to develop nuanced insights into the intersection of diversity branding, authenticity, and myriad stakeholder groups. By examining a specific case of an organization incorporating diversity principles into its brand through a rebranding campaign, this study can generate new knowledge to inform future strategic communication practices and research—even beyond the branding context.

To achieve this aim, I seek to answer three research questions:

RQ1: How did WW convey authenticity in its rebranding campaign?

RQ2: How did WW attempt to overcome diverse stakeholder needs?

RQ3: How does WW's approach to incorporating diversity in its brand reflect the interplay between authenticity, organizational objectives, and the power of social influence?

The first research question is grounded in the importance of conveying authenticity, especially in the context of diversity. The second research question recognizes the classic strategic communication challenge of adapting to stakeholders.

The third research question explores the broader implications of the strategic branding process. Brands operate within societal ecosystems where their actions have consequences (Holt & Cameron, 2010), so as they change their communication to resonate with particular stakeholder groups, they shape individual realities and contribute to broader cultural changes.

2. Literature Review

The increasing emphasis on diversity in branding and strategic communication reflects a growing need for communicating authentically and with consideration of stakeholder diversity—in both its needs and composition. Understanding a narrative’s place in the branding process is especially important in the context of diversity. This literature review presents key facets of the thesis problem and aim to set the foundation for the ensuing research.

2.1 Branding

A brand, to many researchers, is intangible and symbolic. Kapferer (2012) and Gardner and Levy (1955) saw a brand as more than a label. Specifically, to all three, it is a symbol. Gardner and Levy (1955) approached the brand from a social and psychological perspective, saying that a brand is a product symbol and encapsulates the notions people hold about that product. A brand also holds associations; it makes consumers think about other things, positive and negative, and these associations have been built up during the brand’s time as a public figure (Gardner & Levy, 1955). According to Gardner and Levy (1955), people's psychological perception of brands causes them to choose products for more than their utility.

Kapferer (2012) took the concept multiple steps further, adding that a brand is an intangible and conditional asset, can command love, signifies trust, and provides financial value. Kapferer is one of many who held these beliefs. Beise-Zee’s (2022) case study affirmed that brands are powerful enough to have an emotional appeal. Collange and Bonache’s (2015) study agreed that brands bond with stakeholders. With academic material confirming the significance brands have to people, it is only natural to conclude that changing the brand is not only a delicate, complex process but also presents a strategic challenge with inevitable consequences.

Collange and Bonache’s (2015) previously mentioned study establishes, along with an agreement by Muzellec and Lambkin’s (2006) descriptive case studies, that rebranding can mean creating a new symbol, design, and brand name. However, Goi and Goi’s (2011) review of reasons for rebranding advanced the definition, conceptualizing it as also changing intangible elements—such as positioning, feelings, and image—in a way that changes the organization’s self-identity.

Goi and Goi (2011) include an exhaustive list of reasons for rebranding in their research, citing (1) fear of being outdated, (2) a fast-changing environment, (3) globalization, and (4) “a change in direction, focus, attitude or strategy” (p. 448). Beise-Zee (2022) found that another reason is image repositioning. Meanwhile, Makasi et al. (2014) posited, based on a case study on rebranding and consumer perceptions, that an organization may choose to rebrand to distance itself from the past, counter competition, and “reestablish and reenergize the market position while at the same time embed a new vision, mission and values” (p. 2586). A brand’s motivation to establish new, contemporary values is a common thread among the previously referenced articles, in addition to Makasi et al. (2014). Their research revealed that successful rebrandings alter consumers’ perceptions (Makasi et al., 2014), and companies choose to rebrand to align with culture, add new values, and reinvigorate the brand.

Existing literature presents conflicting findings regarding the consequences that rebranding yields. Makasi et al.’s (2014) research concluded that a change such as rebranding increases the organization’s performance. The authors actually describe rebranding as *crucial* (Makasi et al., 2014). Marques et al. (2020) had more ambivalent results from their private label brand study, determining that consumers still associate a brand with its past image. Nevertheless, attitudes are still optimistic about the shift overall.

Meanwhile, Zhao et al. (2018) looked at the effect of rebranding on stock performance and noticed an increase in stock prices after rebranding announcements, but 41.3% of the rebranding announcements in the sample yielded negative responses. Kalaitzandonakes et al.’s (2022) research discovered a 32% decrease in the likelihood of consumer purchasing after a brand image and name change, regardless of the reasoning provided. Furthermore, Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) argue that rebranding poses a significant reputational risk, and even changing the brand name can erase years of built-up brand equity.

2.1.a Diversity Branding

As brands follow social trends, the transition toward incorporating diversity in communication initiatives reflects a broader shift in societal beliefs. To pivot not only grounds brands in more contemporary values but also preserves broader goodwill. Dessart and Cova’s (2021) research indicated that stakeholders will reject a brand based on how they see it interacting with societal issues. Hegner et al. (2017) found that ideological incompatibility can cause consumers to *hate* a brand.

Integrating progressive messaging into branding has emerged as a critical strategy for organizations seeking to connect with various stakeholder groups. Diversity has several dimensions. Asmar et al. (2023) claim that diversity includes dimensions of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and linguistic abilities, while Burgess et al. (2023) add disability and body size. Jonsen et al. (2021), Confetto et al. (2023), and Kele and Cassel (2023) all found that gender was the most common diversity dimension promoted in employer branding, followed by race and, occasionally, age and disability. Using diversity in branding, according to Himberg (2014), is financially wise because it expands an organization's stakeholder market. Asmar et al. (2023) came to the same conclusion, going so far as to label it a selling point. As Himberg (2014) reasons, by incorporating a diverse array of individuals in stakeholder-facing communication initiatives, "there is someone for everyone to identify with and desire" (p. 296).

Kele and Cassel's (2023) study on marketing and diversity in law firms found that diversity is a competitive advantage because more value is created when employees share demographics with stakeholders. Oliver et al. (2015) assert that diversity in branding makes consumers feel good and engage positively with a brand and promotes a more inclusive, equitable, and unified society. Thus, incorporating diversity is not only beneficial for an organization but also for a larger culture.

Scholars have explored the phenomenon of organizations strategically leveraging diversity to engage with stakeholders, involve themselves in cultural dialogue, and shape their brand identities. Asmar et al. (2023) offered a case analysis on Netflix and how the streaming giant emphasizes diversity in its press releases to assert cultural power. The researchers first determined that Netflix considered diversity to mean including anyone who is not a white, non-disabled man. Then, Asmar et al. (2023) found that diversity was used as a "technology of power," allowing Netflix to "control the narrative on the very difference it seeks to express" (p. 36). Furthermore, the researchers gleaned insight into the inherent power balance and conflict of interest that diversity branding brings. Because the strategy is economically motivated, attempting to combine diversity with corporate interests inevitably means an organization will promote diverse cultures—but only the most marketable (Asmar et al., 2023). The study reaffirms a critical aspect of discussions around diversity branding: organizations capitalize on the marginalized communities they claim to honor.

Moreover, scholars have examined the strategic use of diversity in branding across other industries and contexts. Kohnen (2015) and Aslinger (2009) both studied diversity used in brand management in cable and network television, and their findings echoed that of

Asmar et al. (2023). In addition, both authors revealed the phenomenon of branded diversity, where organizations capitalize on controversies surrounding diversity dimensions such as race and sexuality as a means to contemporize, promote, and shape their brand (Kohnen, 2015; Aslinger, 2009).

Byrd (2018) offered another critical perspective, highlighting the dangers of incorporating diversity into branding and its potential to conceal an organization's negative behaviors, compromising authenticity and legitimacy. Furthermore, using phrases in branding such as "valuing diversity, celebrating diversity, [and] embracing diversity" (Byrd, 2018, p. 301) potentially dismisses real bias in the workforce and creates more harm than help. Ahmed (2007) reinforces Byrd's warnings, pointing out that organizations can disguise the active mechanics of systematic inequalities by allegedly embracing differences. Byrd's (2018) research acknowledges the value of diversity in branding, emphasizing its valuable potential in improving workplace attitudes and brand image while cautioning against its inherent risks. Her work argues that diversity branding conceals harmful behaviors that disadvantage, rather than empower, marginalized communities (Byrd, 2018).

2.1.b Authenticity in Diversity Branding

Authenticity is crucial in determining how brands are received by stakeholder groups, especially when incorporating diversity into branding. The previous sections touched on the risks of diversity branding and conveyed that an organization that can authentically integrate diversity into its brand can build a stronger connection with its stakeholder groups, enhance loyalty, and differentiate itself from the competition. After all, Collange and Bonache (2015) saw that a stakeholder's trust in an organization diminished any negative feelings and attitudes toward a rebranding.

Several organizations and industries have been used in research on diversity branding, and their insights also contribute to authenticity considerations. Burgess et al.'s (2023) conceptual paper on brand approaches to diversity analyzed various brands incorporating diversity to determine best practices. The authors found that early adoption of deep-level diversity integration was a high predictor of success because a sudden and late shift signals inauthenticity (Burgess et al., 2023).

Lessons from Burgess et al. (2023) are that authenticity is built through an organization practicing what they preach from the start. Fenty, a makeup brand, successfully communicated diversity because its first product release had a more extended shade range than nearly any other beauty company. Instantly, inclusion was part of its brand. The

organizations with diversity branding “wins,” according to Burgess et al. (2023), implemented initiatives early on that supported a wholesome and trustworthy brand image, and the researchers juxtaposed these success stories with similar organizations that received backlash for incorporating diversity and inclusion into their brand. For example, Aerie and Victoria’s Secret are brands specializing in women’s lingerie and apparel. Diversity is prominent in Aerie’s communication, and from the brand’s inception, it pledged to reject all retouching of campaign and catalog photos, opting to feature role models instead of fashion models (Aerie, 2014). Victoria’s Secret (VS) was founded in 1977 (Violante, 2021) yet announced diversity incorporation in its brand mere years ago (Burgess et al., 2023). It received backlash because it was a sudden shift after decades of reinforcing narrow beauty standards. While Aerie’s marketing mix features multiple dimensions of diversity, VS still addresses diversity at a race level, ignoring other dimensions such as age, body type, disability, and gender identity (Burgess et al., 2023).

Dessart and Standaert (2023) examined authenticity in the context of sustainability—an example of another progressive societal value—and its messaging in communication and branding. They recognized storytelling as a strategic branding practice that can introduce and reinforce authenticity. The authors’ investigation found that stakeholders “must be able to easily verify that the brand is acting on its promise and have a very clear and transparent view of its practices” (Dessart & Standaert, 2023, p. 381) if a brand wants to be seen authentically. Purposely applying narrative elements increases a brand’s authenticity and believability when introducing progressive, sustainable messaging, and narrative elements are critical in helping stakeholders understand the new brand promises and how the brand is enacting them (Dessart & Standaert, 2023).

2.1.c Narratives in Branding

Fog et al. (2010) describe narrative as a tool that is, at its core, more persuasive than other communication strategies. These include direct arguments and presenting facts (Fisher, 1984). According to Denning (2006), it is essential in branding, and Cayla and Arnould (2008) declared brands to be *intrinsically* narrative. Twitchell’s (2004) reflection paper suggested that a brand is a story bound to an organization’s offering. Like Twitchell, Holt (2004) also found that consumers engage with a brand’s offering to experience this story. This engagement makes incorporating narrative a fundamental priority in branding (Denning, 2006).

Narrative with branding is a familiar union in communication research. Studies have examined narratives being employed by government agencies (Anderson, 2019), PSAs (Ko et al., 2023), celebrities (Eng & Jarvis, 2020), online stores (Karampournioti & Wiedmann, 2019), fake news (Mills & Robson, 2020), and food companies (Pfannes et al., 2021). The overwhelming collective understanding is that incorporating narratives into communication is more effective, engaging, and rewarding than not including them.

This is because narratives have significant power, particularly in a communication context. Empirical research by Aicha and Bouzaabia (2023) learned that narrative messaging increases advertising efficacy across cultures. Furthermore, Kemp et al.'s (2019) mixed-methods study on business owners and online consumers found that incorporating stories into communication materials improved the consumers' personal and emotional connection with the brand. This personal connection unlocked by stories is necessary for consumer engagement, and this engagement increases revenue and business reputation, according to the authors (Kemp et al., 2019). Choosing a narrative approach as opposed to standard persuasive methods also yields overall better attitudes from the stakeholder (Lundqvist et al., 2013), improves message retention (Allagui & Breslow, 2016), guides opinions (Abolafia, 2004), and fosters long-term interest in the brand (Steele, 2019).

Narrative has this power because of the relationship and connection it creates with an organization's stakeholders—one empirical example of which was found in Kemp et al.'s (2019) work. While narratives can reach anyone (Fisher, 1984), they are not all received similarly. In a branding context, research found that narratives must be crafted with different cultures and perspectives in mind (Aicha & Bouzaabia, 2023).

2.2 Addressing Diverse Stakeholders

Best branding practices require reaching across stakeholder groups. According to research by Olteanu (2020), a brand should engage with individuals and entities to the extent that it builds a relationship and emotional connection. Falkheimer and Heide (2018) call these parties stakeholders. Much research has conceptualized stakeholders, both in identifying and addressing them.

According to Freeman (2010), stakeholders are interested in a brand and its company's actions because its behaviors impact them and vice versa. Stakeholders actively participate in branding, and stakeholder groups include consumers, investors, journalists, and the government (Diers-Lawson, 2019). Consumers use their resources to interact with companies by consuming a good or service, and deciding whether to commit their time,

effort, and finances is a mental and social process (Jisana, 2014). Consumers do not just financially interact with a brand and its offerings—they also invest socially, psychologically, and emotionally.

Strategic communication and marketing literature lessons indicate that appealing to stakeholders is insufficient. According to Tench (2013), a brand should engage in dialogue and foster a relationship with them. After all, matching personalities and entertaining consumers increases brand confidence, trust, and loyalty (Aaker, 1992). Rebranding case studies show that building trust with employees and shareholders retains brand equity. Muzellec and Lambkin's (2006) study of 166 rebranded companies saw that an informal connection between an organization's employees and consumers was a determining factor in how both stakeholder groups perceived the rebranding.

A mix of stakeholders, including consumers and employees, possess a particular interest in a company's branding efforts (Diers-Lawson, 2019)—making the challenge not only reaching them but also communicating with them effectively enough that the brand appeals to their unique interests while maintaining a sense of brand cohesion across communication activities. According to Falkheimer and Heide's (2018) review and demonstrated in Muzellec and Lambkin's (2006) multi-organization study, the boundaries between stakeholder groups are increasingly blurred with the rise of technology and advanced communication. Stakeholder groups are now exposed to the organization's communication with other stakeholders, some of which have different values and motivations than others. Falkheimer and Heide (2018) use an example of a journalist who reads an internal magazine and reports its contents to external stakeholders. The authors posture this example as a jumping-off point to insist on sending out cohesive, non-conflicting messages while acknowledging that the groups can have competing interests.

Research on communicating with multiple stakeholder groups is limited in scope. Despite at least 14 stakeholder groups (Diers-Lawson, 2019), ranging from suppliers to media and sponsors to regulators, rebranding research primarily concerns consumer and employee interests. Gotsi and Andriopoulos (2007), in particular, found evidence of a phenomenon they name stakeholder myopia. In their case, a company was so focused on appealing and communicating a rebranding to its investors that it neglected to consider other stakeholders' viewpoints. Work by Kaikati (2003) is an outlier in this research desert, and he discusses Accenture's communication to consumers, employees, shareholders, the stock market, and journalists in the context of their rebranding campaign. A pillar of the rebranding's success is Accenture's commitment to engaging with multiple stakeholder

groups throughout the rebranding campaign (Kaikati, 2003). The organization meaningfully interacted with myriad stakeholder groups, and its outreach was tailored to each group's interests and priorities. For example, there was a global advertising campaign to reach consumers, but journalists received attractive and interactive packages as incentives to write about the organization's new identity. Accenture involved and rewarded employee suggestions, offered them a new vacation policy, and sent over 40,000 packages to clients around the world with a personalized message. It incentivized management partners to get on board with the rebrand by restructuring and decreasing salaries to free up cash. It offered more valuable stock options instead, guaranteed by the incoming IPO. Accenture's novel stock ownership structure allowed financial stakeholders to gain a new type of value. Had Accenture's rebrand not committed to a multi-stakeholder approach, it would not have been the commercial and fiscal success it became (Kaikati, 2003).

2.3 Synthesis

Consumers have an emotional and psychological connection to a brand (Kapferer, 2012), and rebranding can interrupt and even damage that connection. One key motivation behind rebranding is aligning with culture to reenergize the organization's position in the marketplace and reach new audiences (Makasi et al., 2014). Research finds that using diversity in branding is a wise approach; Himberg (2014) pointed out that diversity makes people feel good, piques their interest, and widens an organization's stakeholder market. Diversity branding can benefit organizations and their stakeholders. For organizations, it appeals to new audiences and improves their image, and for stakeholders, it can be refreshing to see a brand as a reflection of themselves (Himberg, 2014). However, diversity branding is also a means to assert cultural power. Brands define diversity through demonstrations, as seen in Asmar et al.'s (2023) case study on Netflix's representation of diversity in its public relations. Because diversity branding is economically motivated, an organization inevitably spotlights the *marketable* diversity dimensions (Asmar et al., 2023). Notably, the research found gender to be one of the most common diversity dimensions displayed in branding (Jonsen et al., 2021), followed by race.

Diversity branding also conceals negative behaviors under the guise of embracing differences. It dismisses bias considerations by implying bias does not exist because the organization respects all differences (Byrd, 2018). In using diversity as a tool of strategic communication, organizations not only capitalize on the populations they claim to honor (Asmar et al., 2023), but they potentially shape cultural perceptions of diversity itself.

In the pursuit of relevance, an organization will choose to display the diversity dimensions it deems most culturally in touch. Suppose a brand conducts a rebranding, utilizing diversity to refresh its image. In that case, the organization chooses the most marketable dimensions to show and those that will help it overcome the innate vulnerability that a rebranding creates. Rebranding interrupts the connection between the stakeholder and the brand, but it can be mitigated by meeting them where they are and authentically appealing to their ideology.

It is important for stakeholders to trust brands because trust diminishes stakeholders' negative feelings toward rebranding (Collange & Bonache, 2015). Authenticity builds this trust and allows a brand to connect with and enhance loyalty with stakeholder groups. Research from Dessart and Standaert (2023) revealed that applying narrative elements increases a brand's authenticity, specifically when introducing new ideological messaging. A synthesis of this literature review reveals a research gap.

Plenty of research indicates that narrative is the most effective communication strategy (see Fog et al., 2010), and there are many studies on narrative being used in branding and communication, with primarily managerially-oriented aims and results. Narrative is helpful as a tool, but based on the literature reviewed, it is rarely used as a theoretical lens to analyze a brand case. Brands are intrinsically narrative (Cayla & Arnould, 2008), yet literature examining branding and rebranding through a narrative lens is limited. Moreover, despite reaching more stakeholder groups being a well-established organizational priority, research is also limited in the types of stakeholders studied and stakeholder groups across diverse industries, contexts, and aims.

The research gap leaves room for exploring these areas. Case studies are common in brand communication literature, but there is room for a case study that takes a narrative approach toward an intrinsically narrative subject. A study on brand activity through a narrative lens would yield insights different from typical methodologies in this literature review, such as observational and mixed-methods case studies. In a branding case study set in a new context, a theoretical approach that would contribute the most new information is narrative theory. It would reveal insights into the strategic branding process that would not be found through other qualitative and mixed-methods approaches.

3. Theoretical Framework

Narrative theory has cemented itself as a critical framework for understanding human communication, culture, and thought. It is a complex paradigm founded in literature, sociology, psychology, and communication studies. This chapter explores narrative theory's foundations, examining its historical evolution, major epistemological turning points, and key concepts.

3.1 Foundations of Narrative Theory

Narrative theory is less a static, clearly defined theory than a collection of perspectives on narrative human communication, each building on the last to explain how stories and the telling of them shape the world around us.

Narrative theory's roots can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he analyzed the elements of a successful tragedy (Aristotle, 335 BCE/1902). He divides poetry into genres, which all imitate life but clearly differ in meter, characters, plot, and presentation (Aristotle, 335 BCE/1902). Aristotle (335 BCE/1902) also introduces the concept of imitation, suggesting that narratives imitate life and use language and plot to elicit emotions such as pity and fear.

As narrative solidified itself as a field of study in the 20th century, structuralist and post-structuralist theorists built upon existing narrative theoretic principles—such as semiotics and linguistics—by studying narratives' underlying structures (Puckett, 2016). These scholars, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Julia Kristeva, Gérard Genette, and Roland Barthes, were heavily influenced by Saussure's linguistics (Puckett, 2016). Narratology, a branch of structuralism, studies storytelling mechanics, such as time, place, perspective, and voice (Puckett, 2016). Post-structural theorist Roland Barthes's work, *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives* (translated by Lionel Duisit), challenged the existing structuralist assumptions of what is and is not a narrative, the role of the audience, and fixed meanings (Barthes & Duisit, 1975). He established narrative as omnipresent, having no form, being an infinite variety, and transcending culture, history, and geography (Barthes & Duisit, 1975). Barthes also established examples of where narrative can be found.

Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history,

tragedy, drame [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings (in Santa Ursula by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation [sic]. (Barthes & Duisit, 1975, p. 237)

Later on, other scholars would build upon Barthes's varieties of narrative in research and name them *narrative texts*. Today, narrative texts can also be visuals in corporate reporting (Rämö, 2011), political speeches (Fisher, 1987), and TV commercials (Bonnin & Alfonso, 2019).

While structuralist and post-structuralist theorists debated the mechanics of the narrative, starting in the 1960s, psychological, psychiatric, and cognitive approaches to narrative were becoming integral to understanding the human experience (Meretoja, 2023). These theorists, including William Labov, Paul Ricoeur, and Jerome Bruner, looked beyond narrative as a text and incorporated it into life itself. Labov (1972) understood narrative as a method to evaluate and recount the past; Ricoeur (1984) insisted that narrative enables humans to experience the passage of time; and Bruner (1987) conceptualized life as a narrative itself. Ricoeur (1984) and Bruner (1987) were among the first to assert that people use narratives to make sense of the world.

3.2 Narrative Paradigm

Fisher's (1987) conceptualization of narrative theory stands out, particularly against the structuralists. In his seminal book *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, Fisher (1987) observed that structuralism and structuralism-adjacent schools of thought have a traditionally formal relationship with narrative. He proposed a new way of looking at narrative that aligns more with rhetoric as a "mode of social influence" (Fisher, 1987, p. 90), making his perspective compatible with a thesis grounded in strategic communication. He saw narrative as taking a more active and influential role than the other theorists, whose interpretations saw narrative and narration as mere elements in rhetorical discourse (Fisher, 1987).

Moreover, Fisher's (1987) narrative theory—which he called the *narrative paradigm*—holds that all human communication is *meaningful*, never simply descriptive, and this meaning is determined by culture, history, and even linguistic conventions. *Narration* is the symbolic sequential actions, such as discourse and efforts, that have meaning for the individual (Fisher, 1987). Fisher (1987) considered his narrative paradigm a theory of human communication and the foundation of rhetoric itself. The term paradigm is used to formalize his conceptualization as a structure and philosophy and a lens through which to understand

human communication. The narrative paradigm's purpose is to provide a means to interpret human communication to determine how much a moment of discourse contributes to the world, how it contributes, and how reliable and desirable the contribution is (Fisher, 1987). Fisher's (1987) paradigm recognizes the nuances of life, such as elements of culture that are fluid or permanent, those that are reasoned with or cherished, and the value of everyone's personal experiences.

The narrative paradigm argues that communication does not need to be argumentative; it can simply *be*, and it is the synthesis of traditional rhetoric and literature (Fisher, 1987). It asserts that communication is historical, situational, and composed of stories that compete with other individuals' stories—a competition motivated by reasoning, rationale, and morality (Fisher, 1987). For Fisher (1987), narrative, no matter the context or method, is embedded within society and is a universal aspect of human nature that transcends time and culture. It forms the fabric of reality.

The paradigm rests on five premises: (1) storytelling is intrinsic to humans, (2) humans make decisions based on *good reasons*, which are elements in rhetorical communication that justify adopting an outlook or action bound to the idea of what is “good,” (3) history, personal past, and culture determine the creation and practice of *good reasons*, (4) rationality is humans' ability to recognize and evaluate narratives through determining the stories' truthfulness and alignment with the human's own lived experience and fundamental beliefs, and (5) “the world as we know it is a set of stories” that humans choose among in order to live life (Fisher, 1987, p. 65).

To Fisher (1987), humans are *homo narrans*, story-telling beings who turn life into stories to make sense of the world and establish shared intellectual and spiritual communities. Seeing reality as a collection of stories enables people to understand their own lives and others' actions (Fisher, 1987). Narrative paradigm's premises reinforce this notion by bringing in reasoning and rationale, other essential aspects of life. It insists that the interpretation of the world is not all that narrative offers; rather, it enables good judgment and practical wisdom.

Fisher's (1987) fourth premise is especially relevant in strategic communication. Organizations desire particular decisions by their stakeholders, and per the author, these stakeholders make decisions based on *good reasons*, which are based on what they perceive to be good. This decision is dependent on how stakeholders (1) consider a message's facts to be facts; (2) determine if facts have been excluded, warped, or misrepresented; (3) pursue reasoning through informal logic and morality and weigh possible effects of adhering to the

message; (4) evaluate the message's completeness in the extent to which an individual's own experience validates it or that of people they respect; and (5) ask whether the crux of the message ultimately reflects the optimal standard for human behavior (Fisher, 1987).

In other words, people communicate and make sense of the world through a narrative lens and evaluate statements through this lens. Then, to make decisions, they have a logic of reasons that question the components of a message. The individual compares that narrative with what they know, weighing a message's veracity, accuracy of representation, morality, consistency, and humanity. Fisher's (1987) logic of reasons is, essentially, the measure of *authenticity*.

3.3 Central Narrative Techniques and Strategies

Narrative techniques and strategies are elements that authors use as tools to construct meaningful and, most importantly, engaging stories (Forster, 1927) for various purposes, including brand communication. When these elements cooperate, they create compelling narratives.

The fundamental aspect of a narrative is its plot. As said in the previous section, people are storytelling beings and innately use narrative to make sense of the world (Fisher, 1987). According to Forster's (1927) seminal work, a plot is rooted in a story, which is literature's origins. It appeals to humans' primitive natures. A plot and a story are an arrangement of narrative events over a time period; however, a plot emphasizes the *causality* of its events (Forster, 1927). Causality connects narrative elements and offers a sense of logic and coherence to the events in a story, giving the audience the tools to understand how one event led to another based on their intelligence and memory (Forster, 1927).

A critical element of plot and narrative are symbols. According to Monnet (2011), a symbol is a "concrete reality (a building, a statue, a coin, etc.) that communicates something intangible (an idea, a value, a feeling)" (para. 1) but their factual existence is "relatively independent from the meaning that is attributed to them" (para. 2). In other words, symbols are a piece of reality that communicates an abstract meaning to a group of individuals. This meaning is independent of the piece's factual existence (Monnet, 2011). These symbols are interpreted by the audience in the context in which the narrative is set (Monnet, 2011). Holt and Cameron (2004) connected symbolism to narratives in branding, referring to symbols as cultural codes instead. Holt and Cameron (2004) argued that narrative is also found in branding through myths expressed through cultural codes. Like symbols, which contribute to a group's identity, cultural codes—defined by Kruglov and Kruglov (2022)—are visual or

textual elements that people associate with a meaning, independent of the element's factual existence, are formed from a person's background and identity, and are interpreted in the context of culture. Thus, in the branding context, symbols are not unique to individuals and have been sourced from and historically embedded in the culture itself (Holt & Cameron, 2004).

Forster (1927) has a pertinent perspective on characters, another narrative element. To Forster (1927), "There is an affinity between [an author] and his subject matter which is absent in many other forms of art" (p. 44). The character's existence speaks volumes about the author and their perspective of the world. Forster delineates two types of characters: flat and round. Flat characters are shallow, defined by a single quality, and can be encapsulated in one sentence (Forster, 1927). They are easily recognizable—visually and emotionally—and are the most useful to an author because (1) they are so simple that they never need to be remembered or re-introduced and (2) for this reason, they serve as excellent vehicles for an author's message (Forster, 1927). They are often referred to as *types* and *caricatures*. Meanwhile, round characters are multi-dimensional, undergo character development, struggle, and change, and can surprise readers (Forster, 1927). Round characters create depth in a story and are easy for readers to empathize with because their complexity mirrors readers' own, but are not as easily memorized as flat characters.

Setting is a crucial narrative element because it is the story's context (Bal, 1997). According to Bal (1997), a setting grounds a story in space and time. The setting is not passive; it actively contributes to the development of the narrative, interacting with the characters and plot (Bal, 1997). It includes the historical period, the cultural zeitgeist, and the geographic location (Bal, 1997). It influences the characters' behaviors, affects the story's mood, and conveys themes (Bal, 1997).

Meanwhile, a theme is a strategy that alludes to the underlying messages in a plot or story conveyed by literary tools such as characters, setting, plotlines, and symbols (Abrams, 1999). In fact, people have an impulse to find a relationship between elements to create themes, and the narrator is but an assistant (Fisher, 1987). Themes, sometimes referred to as motifs, can be both implicit and straightforward and are principles which, according to Abrams (1999), "an imaginative work is designed to involve and make persuasive to the reader" (p. 230). Literary critic Northrop Frye (1957) believed themes relate to the *point* of a story and he uses various examples in literature across cultures and periods to show the value of themes. He found that themes reach an audience because of their inherent

universality—they transcend the narrative details and maintain longevity and relatability because people relate to the core message (Frye, 1957).

4. Methodology

Brands are rooted in narrative (Cayla & Arnould, 2008), and narrative has such power over stakeholders that it influences their cognition, perception, and behavior (Delgado-Ballester, 2021). The literature review transitioned to presenting a theoretical framework compatible with the research problem, aim, question, and literature review: narrative theory. The principles of these elements led to my selection of a qualitative methodology.

In subsection 1.1, I mentioned the WW rebranding as an example of a major brand significantly incorporating diversity principles into its messaging through rebranding. What WW did—a complete overhaul of a legacy brand in favor of incorporating diversity values that, arguably, were at odds with the foundation of the organization—was the first of its kind, and case studies concern what is unique about a phenomenon and examine it in its completeness (Thomas & Myers, 2017). Additionally, the case study meets the analytical nature of my research, and this is supported by Thomas and Myers (2017), who point out that a case study concerns *how* something occurred and aims to glean *insights* from the analysis.

In this analytical pursuit, I do not seek to take the knowledge from this research nor propose that this is (1) the only way to examine this case and (2) my interpretation is the “best.” It is an interesting case I intend to interpret to gain insight and contribute knowledge in a particular context. While the information can be used to offer guidance, there is no grand revelation or ultimate truth at the end of this study.

My thesis favors a research paradigm that accepts my interpretation as a valid means of inquiry: interpretivism. Interpretivism is linked with qualitative research and claims that an objective experience does not exist (Merriam, 2009). This perspective applies to individual researchers’ analyses—each researcher’s analysis is subjective because they cannot experience an objective reality. According to Merriam (2009), “researchers do not “find” knowledge, they construct it” (p. 9). Essentially, my analysis is unique to me and is used to construct the knowledge I contribute. According to Merriam (2009), a single event—or, in this thesis’s case, a campaign—can have multiple interpretations. As a researcher, I provide just one of them.

4.1 Qualitative Narrative Analysis

A core aspect of a case study in the interpretivism paradigm is that a researcher does not arrive at a final result. It is never “done.” Qualitative research methods are particularly well-suited to explore narratives in the branding context, as narrative itself is interpretive (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015), and my research questions call for an interpretation of materials. Qualitative narrative analysis (QNA), grounded in the interpretivism paradigm (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015), would enable a deeper interpretation of WW’s communication and uncover the underlying themes and other narrative elements hidden in the research materials. It echoes Fisher’s (1987) conceptualization of narrative theory. By integrating narrative theory with QNA, I can find elements and themes that reveal narrative techniques’ role in adapting to diverse stakeholder needs and communicating authenticity within diversity branding.

4.1.a Understanding Qualitative Narrative Analysis

Approaching this analysis from a narrative perspective adds depth to the problem at hand and best answers the research questions. It also makes a greater contribution due to the gap it uniquely fills. Much branding research is results-driven and managerial, primarily intended to contribute to practice. By pursuing this research strategy, I can garner *insights* more than *results*, and my research questions prioritize the former.

According to Riessman (2008), QNA “refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (p. 11) and typically involves investigations into particular cases, such as WW’s rebranding. These cases can include organizations, individuals, and countries, and the analytic methods are applied to materials called narrative texts—as explained in Chapter Three. Because this case happened in the past and I am examining archival texts’ content, one might argue that a content analysis would answer the questions, too. To the contrary, QNA focuses on themes, subtlety, “sequences of action” (Riessman, 2008, p. 11), and the entire story (Webster & Mertova, 2007). I aim to discern the themes and meanings within the narrative texts of the campaign, so I focus on the nuances of interactions between plot, characters, settings, and additional narrative elements (Riessman, 2008). Further, content analysis coding practices are more structured than QNA, and according to Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994), “narrative analysis is rather loosely formulated, almost intuitive, using terms defined by the analyst” (p. 465). Combining Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994), Riessman (2008), and Webster and

Mertova's (2007) interpretation of QNA in practice, it is clear that analyzing content does not require a content analysis.

My research questions call for examining the content of the narrative texts. Their structure, intent, and audience interpretation are irrelevant to the study. Therefore, the research aim and questions lend themselves best to a thematic narrative analysis (TNA), a concentration of QNA that focuses on the content of the research materials. This conclusion is bolstered by Riessman (2008), who remarked, "In thematic narrative analysis, emphasis is on "the told"—the events and cognitions to which language refers (the content of speech)" (p. 58).

4.2 Research Design

The research method was chosen based on the research problem, aim, and questions, and it guided the research design. The most notable quality of TNA is its sole attention to content (Riessman, 2008). Accordingly, I began by asking myself what materials would both be accessible and meet the needs of the thesis. It required materials that I could be certain had reached a range of stakeholder groups because this was a factor in my problem statement and is included in the research questions.

I looked at all accessible communication materials from WW during the campaign and what particular stakeholder group they were (1) exposed to and (2) meant to reach. The outgoing communication I had access to during the WW rebranding campaign was social media, TV ads, press releases, and investor calls. WW's press releases are distributed via Cision, a public relations service that sends press releases to prepared lists of news media members (Cision, n.d.). WW prepares the lists, intentionally deciding whom the press releases reach. Therefore, press releases are a kind of campaign communication activity unique to a stakeholder group, particularly journalists on Cision. News media is a narrative text type (Barthes & Duisit, 1975), meaning the press releases would be compatible with analyzing the thesis theoretically and methodologically.

Next, I identified another narrative text in the campaign that is unique to a significant stakeholder group: commercials (Bonnin & Alfonso, 2019), which appeal most to consumers, although this does not dismiss the notion that there could be a crossover between stakeholder groups. Customary to advertising practices, commercials are pushed toward specific demographics of the consumer audience that WW selects (Ward, 2024). Since these forms of advertisement are not only strategically placed in front of a particular audience, their content is also strategically curated with the target consumer demographic in mind.

Commercials are also a highly effective form of media. CivicScience, an online polling company that surveys consumers, found that TV ads are the top advertising format that American adults pay the most attention to, at 25 percent (Feger, 2023). In comparison, social media ads follow far behind at 14 percent (Feger, 2023).

The final form of communication unique to a stakeholder group during the WW rebranding campaign was the earnings calls with investors. During the year, there are four quarterly calls that WW—and all publicly traded companies—host with their investors. In these calls, the WW CEO and CFO discussed the rebranding and company progress with WW’s financial stakeholders. Due to their exclusive nature, the earnings calls were, at that time, only attended by WW’s investors and financial analysts. To this day, the transcripts of the calls are not publicly accessible.

Finding relevant insight within each of these communication initiatives (press releases, commercials, and investor transcripts), with the understanding that all are sent to unique stakeholder groups, serves to answer the research questions.

4.2.a Research Material Selection and Collection

The rebranding campaign ran from September 24, 2018, through March 28, 2019. Since the research questions concern communication during this timeframe, I required that all narrative texts be within that timeframe.

WW released five press releases throughout the rebranding campaign. I retrieved these from the Cision website and downloaded them as PDFs. To ensure their authenticity, I cross-referenced the text with copies of press releases on the WW newsroom marked the same day as Cision’s posts.

WW released five commercials during the campaign. I found these through internet searches and ultimately sourced them from WW’s official YouTube channel and iSpot.tv, an ad catalog that, in addition to preserving commercials, can be hired by companies to measure their performance. Each ad was screen recorded, dated, and saved as a video file in case WW or iSpot.tv deleted the videos.

WW hosted two quarterly earnings calls with investors. On November 1, 2018, the company discussed Q3 performance and rebranding; on February 26, 2019, they discussed Q4 performance and rebranding. These transcripts were downloaded from Bloomberg Terminal in the form of PDFs. This software system provides clients working in the financial fields unlimited access to analytics and all communication done by publicly traded companies. The transcripts were each 25 and 26 pages, although my analysis of them was

restricted to the initial presentations by the CEO and CFO before questions opened up. The initial presentations are what WW has the most control over and can write ahead of time.

4.2.b Material Analysis Process

While there is no perfect way to conduct a TNA (Smith & Sparkes, 2008), I abided by the approaches suggested in the narrative analysis literature—primarily Braun and Clarke’s (2006) instructions. The authors recommended six research phases; the following list accounts for how I followed their guidance (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1. I first **familiarized myself** with the narrative texts—including press releases, commercials, and transcripts—by reading, re-reading, watching, and re-watching the materials. I jotted down notes and observations to identify central concepts and highlighted clips, passages, and phrases that stuck out.
2. I inductively **generated codes** based on the initial exposure to the media, using NVivo to analyze text materials such as transcripts and press releases. Commercials’ codes were organized using Microsoft Word and Excel. These were comprised of observations and common threads I thought were interesting and not strictly delineated. The codes were gathered systematically across all research materials, and I collected pieces of the materials that were relevant to the codes.
3. I **searched for themes**, which involved organizing the codes into potential themes and gathering all possible extracts of the narrative texts that could fit into the themes. The initial coding process—phases one through three—is where I most employed the specifics of the theoretical framework. In contrast, understanding narrative theory’s principles was most useful in the following three stages. I used my knowledge of narrative elements and strategies, such as characters, setting, and plot, to identify commonalities forming the codes.
4. I **reviewed the themes** by revisiting extracts I had organized into every theme separate from their codes and determined whether they appeared to form a consistent pattern. When I saw them form a pattern, I looked at the themes in the context of the entire set of materials—do they make sense in the context of the set? Is it reflective of the meanings in the set, or is my interpretation manipulating the information to make it valid? Once I determined the themes that made sense in the context of the set, I moved on to code any additional pieces of the narrative texts that had been missed in the second or third phase.

5. I then **defined and named the themes**. Completing the first four phases was a prerequisite for this phase because it calls for concentrating the theme into specifics.
6. Finally, I **produced an academic report**. The report comprises the analysis and discussion chapters in this thesis's context. This report is the most crucial phase in the analysis because of the crystalization it requires. Here, I provide a “concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). To support my analysis, I include vivid examples and evidence of my identified themes but present and explain them in a readable and uncomplicated way. There should be no doubt that the extract I am providing is to demonstrate the theme. Furthermore, the extracts should be grounded in an analysis that is more than a description of what I identified. This final phase of my TNA requires me to *argue* that this report meets the research questions.

4.3 Quality Considerations

4.3.a Validity

Validity and reliability are found in the meaningfulness of the analysis, the transparency of methodological decision-making, and the authenticity and credibility of materials (Webster & Mertova, 2007). These needed to be authentic and genuine, coming from the source wherever possible. The press releases were downloaded directly from Cision to achieve these qualifications, where WW is listed as the original author. I captured WW’s commercials from their official YouTube account and the iSpot.tv archive. The latter platform is credible and committed to maintaining accuracy in its record-keeping. iSpot.tv has over 50 unique companies for which it has measured ads, including Google, Amazon, and Burger King.

Finally, the earnings call transcripts were retrieved from Bloomberg Terminal, which I gained access to through a contact working in the stock market. Members pay \$30,000 annually (NeuGroup, 2022) for a subscription to ensure access to the highest quality data possible. I watched my contact, in person, download the PDFs from Bloomberg Terminal and send the same PDFs to me—cementing their genuineness and trustworthiness. The transcripts are created during the earnings call, and while there is no guarantee that every word said was taken down, the transcripts meet the Bloomberg Terminal standard of accuracy.

4.3.b Reflexivity

Narrative analysis is highly interpretive and intuitive (Freeman, 2015; Riessman, 1993), and I acknowledge that my own experiences and beliefs could affect my choices and interpretations. Being a member of American society, I also grew up witnessing WW's communication initiatives. My familiarity with the brand could prove valuable, as I know the campaign's context. However, it introduces the risk of unintentional bias because subconscious assumptions could weigh down my interpretation. To circumvent these risks, I committed to having an open mind to all possible conclusions throughout the analysis, and my reasoning was transparently and logically presented.

5. Case Study

In this chapter, I introduce WW and the broader context and describe the rebranding campaign as a case.

5.1 Broader Context

Media sources have extensively covered the increasing prevalence of diversity considerations in various aspects of society, including its influence on branding and organizational strategic communication. Diversity branding has gained prominence rapidly in recent years, especially following the societal reckoning sparked by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020. To begin with, Google searches for “diversity and inclusion” rose around the globe by 100 percent in June 2020, at the height of the BLM protests (Google Trends, n.d.). In 2021, diversity policies reached The White House, with President Joe Biden signing an executive order to strengthen diversity and accessibility in the federal workforce (The White House, 2021). Nine European companies increased the diversity of their workforce by implementing gender diversity quotas (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020). After implementing diversity quotas, the share of women on boards of directors in organizations based in France, Norway, Sweden, and Italy grew to 45 percent (Smith, 2018). According to research by McKinsey & Company (2022), in 2021, more than 80 percent of retailers claimed that diversity has become more important over the last two to five years—marking the beginning of inclusion initiatives between 2016 and 2019.

By 2022, nearly 90% of the USA’s most prominent companies had a Chief Diversity Officer, according to Bloomberg (Green et al., 2022). According to the LA Times, McDonald’s Corp., Microsoft Corp., and Boeing Co. are among some companies that introduced diversity hiring quotas (Green, 2021). Racist branding allegations led to many organizations not only changing their logo but going so far as to overhaul their name, as the newfound attention spotlighted many organizations’ reliance on racial and ethnic stereotypes and slurs. For instance, the breakfast syrup brand Aunt Jemima changed its name to Pearl Milling Company because of the original name’s roots in racism and minstrelsy (Alcorn, 2021).

Additionally, brands have deliberately tried diversifying their spokespeople and models in campaigns. Dove has made diversity part of its brand with its iconic “Real Beauty Pledge” never to use models, only real women (Dove, 2023). Target’s inclusive advertising

showcases models of many races, genders, and disabilities (Forbes Communications Council, 2022). Other brands have made inclusivity part of their offering. Apple celebrates diversity through customizable emojis, Memojis, and stickers (Forbes Communications Council, 2022), and apparel company Good American uses size diversity in their advertising and carries a wide range of sizes and fits (Florio, 2022).

Literature has found that the most common display of diversity and inclusion involves race and age (Kele & Cassel, 2023). However, another dimension is significantly less present in corporate and pop culture: size diversity. Throughout the 2010s, the social climate changed as more diverse body sizes became included in pop culture—from Ashley Graham to Lizzo, plus-sized bodies became more mainstream, and so did the body positivity value system. As Asmar et al. (2023) noted, organizations tend to feature the most marketable forms of diversity, and in the late 2010s, body positivity was popularizing quickly.

Analysts in 2016 gave quantitative support reflecting the swift downfall of diet culture among consumers (Chen, 2016). A 2016 NPR article cited a market research firm Mintel report, illustrating a steep decline in diet product purchases (Chen, 2016). The same Mintel analyst reinforced the correlation between consumer anti-diet values and the struggling diet industry in 2016, saying, “Consumers are not dieting in the traditional sense anymore – being on programs or buying foods specific to programs [...] [a]nd there's greater societal acceptance of different body sizes” (Chen, 2016, para. 4).

5.2 Introducing WW

Weight Watchers, renamed WW after its 2018 rebranding, is a weight loss company headquartered in the United States yet has an international presence with physical locations and merchandise across the globe. For over 60 years, it built its reputation on being the only weight loss company that allowed members to (1) lose weight while eating foods they like, (2) keep the weight off, and (3) attend support groups and coaching that created an encouraging community for members in similar positions (WeightWatchers, 2019a). In theory, WW teaches members appropriate portion sizes and calorie regulation through coaching, recipe suggestions, and portion size guidance (WeightWatchers, n.d.a). The program aims to make a weight loss journey more approachable and longer-lasting for the directionless (WeightWatchers, n.d.b).

WW was founded in September of 1961 as Weight Watchers Inc. by Jean Nidetch, who was on her weight loss journey and had been unsuccessful at keeping off the weight she

had lost from various programs (Weight Watchers, 2019a). She launched Weight Watchers Inc. in 1962, with the first official meeting having over 400 attendees (Weight Watchers, 2019a). As time passed, the company continued to expand and improve its successful formula; not only did WW write cookbooks and recruit celebrity spokespeople, but it also released products such as frozen foods (Weight Watchers, 2019b).

5.3 The Rebranding Case

On September 24th, 2018, WW posted a press release on Cision, a public relations platform, announcing their rebranding, name change, and a new campaign, “For Every Body,” which would launch in the United States on December 26, 2018 (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018b) and last until March 28, 2019. WW jointly posted on its Instagram account with the same name announcement but in different writing, and its website was overhauled on the same day. This launch officially declared Weight Watchers’ rebranding to WW, establishing a new name and, at the same time, new messaging, a new purpose, a new color scheme, and more. Despite having announced to staff in February of that year an intent to shift to health and wellness (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018a) to the public, it was an abrupt and shocking shift for the brand. Weight Watchers, now WW, went from being the most prevalent weight loss program in the United States, known for its messaging promising to help in weight loss, to suddenly minimizing weight loss rhetoric. On September 24th, 2018, its new messaging focused on holistic health and wellness (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018b). During the next six months, ending on March 28th, 2019, WW released four more press releases and five commercials as part of their rebranding campaign. Throughout the campaign, WW also hosted two quarterly earnings calls (on November 11th, 2018, and February 26th, 2019) between its CEO, CFO, and investors, communicating the rebranding campaign and WW’s fiscal progress to its financial stakeholders.

6. Analysis

This thesis aimed to develop nuanced insights into the intersection of diversity branding, authenticity, and myriad stakeholder groups by answering three research questions.

RQ1: How did WW convey authenticity in its rebranding campaign?

RQ2: How did WW attempt to overcome diverse stakeholder needs?

RQ3: How does WW's approach to incorporating diversity in its brand reflect the interplay between authenticity, organizational objectives, and the power of social influence?

Per my interpretation of Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for conducting a TNA, the following analysis crystallizes the story the materials tell regarding the research questions—particularly RQ1 and RQ2. RQ3 lends itself to the discussion portion, which grounds the analysis and explores the study's implications. This chapter offers insights into the strategic communication employed by WW to incorporate diversity into its new brand while authentically appealing to multiple stakeholder groups.

The TNA sought to uncover themes, which Abrams (1999) defines as underlying messages in a plot or story conveyed by literary tools. The three themes I identified are true to Frye's (1957) perspective in that they have an inherent universality because people can relate to the core of their message. This analysis is organized by the three major themes, supported by frequent examples from the research materials in the form of text, screenshots, and quotes.

6.1 We Are an Inclusive Champion of Health

The texts revealed WW's tendency to position itself as a champion of inclusivity in the health space. WW opens its arms toward all people and opportunities in the name of being the world's partner in wellness. In its first announcement through a press release, WW begins by communicating its intent.

[Weight Watchers] today announced that the company will become WW, honoring its legacy while broadening the role it plays in helping everyone live healthier lives. A new tagline, "Wellness that Works.™" will be used globally to reflect the company's heritage and overall approach to health and wellbeing of inspiring powerful habits rooted in science. (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018a, para. 1)

The excerpt above introduces WW's new portrayal as an inclusive champion of health on a mission to *partner* with the world. The CEO is quoted saying as much and announcing the extent of the identity shift.

We are becoming the world's partner in wellness. No matter what your goal is – to lose weight, eat healthier, move more, develop a positive mind-set, or all of the above – we will deliver science-based solutions that fit into people's lives. This is just the beginning of our journey to become the world's partner in wellness, and I am inspired by the potential for our impact. (...) The move to WW includes an entirely new brand identity – from logo and color palette to font and photography style – which will come to life across all brand touchpoints and member experiences leading with an all new WW app experience. (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018a, para. 2)

As seen above, WW often describes itself with character traits such as “world’s partner,” “helping everyone,” and “well-being.” This pattern is reflected throughout all narrative texts, not only in verbiage, but also in constantly revolving its writing about general sentiments about health. In other press releases, WW repeats in excess that it is the *world’s partner* in wellness and is proud of its ability to increase access to wellness worldwide (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018c; 2018d). Together, these items form a character representing the ideal image of diversity, inclusion, and equity. The organization reiterates this claim in a later press release in the context of the CEO being named one of the most influential people in health care:

Here at WW, we are wholly committed to our purpose of helping everyone build healthy habits for life, and we'll continue to harness the power of our WW community and mission to make a real impact on the accessibility of wellness across the globe. (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018c, para. 2)

This quote is evidence that WW strategically positions itself as a champion of inclusivity *and* accessibility. However, this can only be done by implying that the current health landscape is exclusive and inaccessible. The logic follows that if wellness was accessible, WW would not need to advocate for accessibility. By setting the brand's backdrop as unfavorable to the average person, regardless of their health status, the organization can present itself as a transformative agent challenging the status quo.

WW's business decisions reinforced this characterization through partnerships with global clothing and skincare companies, retail stores, fitness apps, group meetings to help “people to find other members like them,” and new WW app features for those who have different goals from weight loss (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018a, para. 8).

By reiterating broader messaging, introducing business partner diversification, and conveying a sense of universal appeal, WW can resonate with readers who believe the organization is exclusive or reserved for weight management. This approach was likely a refreshing change for the reporters who were reading WW's press releases and were presented with the legacy company's new identity. WW appeals to the reporter's worldview and demonstrates the organization's follow-through by describing its intentions and impending actions—however, there is little attempt to specifically cater to reporters' interests or motivations. For instance, beyond the label change, there is little indication that WW's *communication* would be evolving along with the brand. All of its inclusivity did not extend beyond the consumer, despite reporters being responsible for disseminating the new information.

The press releases exhibit this section's theme, *We Are an Inclusive Champion of Health*, primarily through WW's characterization, but establish the setting as the status quo the organization wants to disrupt. The commercials' audio-visual elements both confirm and elaborate on this observation. For instance, Oprah says the following quote in the fifth campaign commercial:

...for everybody who wants the freedom to eat what they love (...) for everybody who wants to go out and not miss out... (WW, 2019c, 00:06)

The above example reiterates WW's inclusivity themes by saying it is for *everybody*, but most importantly, referring to inherently relatable activities. Having the freedom to eat, go out, and not miss out is relatable to someone from every walk of life—regardless of age, gender, race, and body type. The brand is also able to relate inclusivity visually, as exemplified in the following freeze-frame:

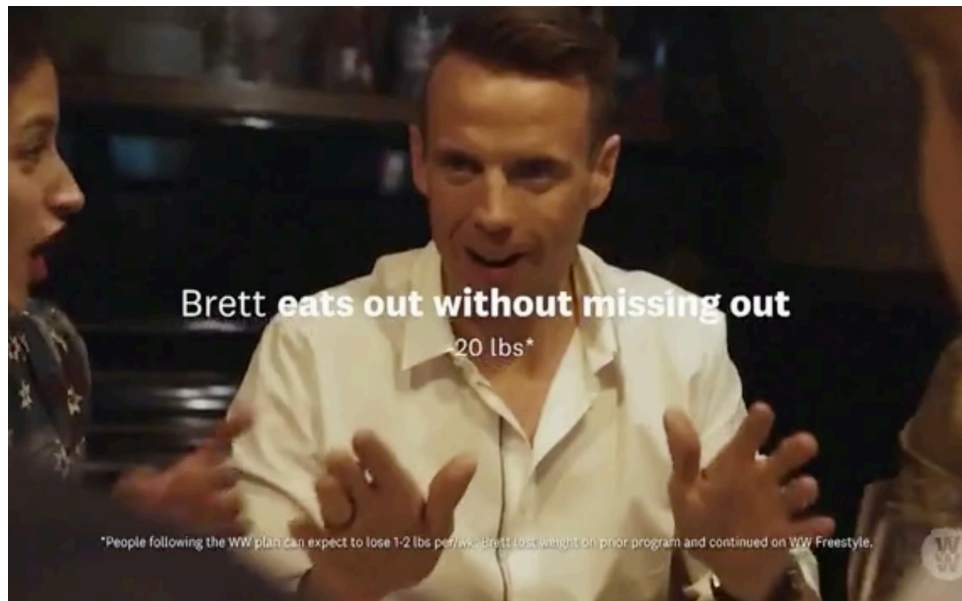


Figure 1. Screenshot of WW commercial: Brett (WW, 2019a)

The text on screen repeats the voiceover, although the imagery speaks for itself. Not only is Brett a man—a strategic departure from WW’s reputation of exclusively targeting women—but he is depicted as part of a community in a food context. All of the attention is on him, and he is confident. WW’s commercials are rich with symbols of inclusion and community, achieved *after* its unique program, firmly proclaiming WW as a catalyst for change against traditional approaches to health. What follows is a wide shot of Brett’s scene:



Figure 2. Screenshot of WW commercial: Brett and friends (WW, 2019a)

Brett and his friends of various ages and ethnicities are at a modern-looking restaurant, enjoying each other's company. The table of friends symbolizes the communion someone on a "regular diet" would miss out on. The commercials' actors—real WW members—are symbols unto themselves, as are their relationships with each other. There is Brett, who is presented as an average healthy guy. Melanie, on the other hand, is plus-sized and a symbol of the freedom WW provides.

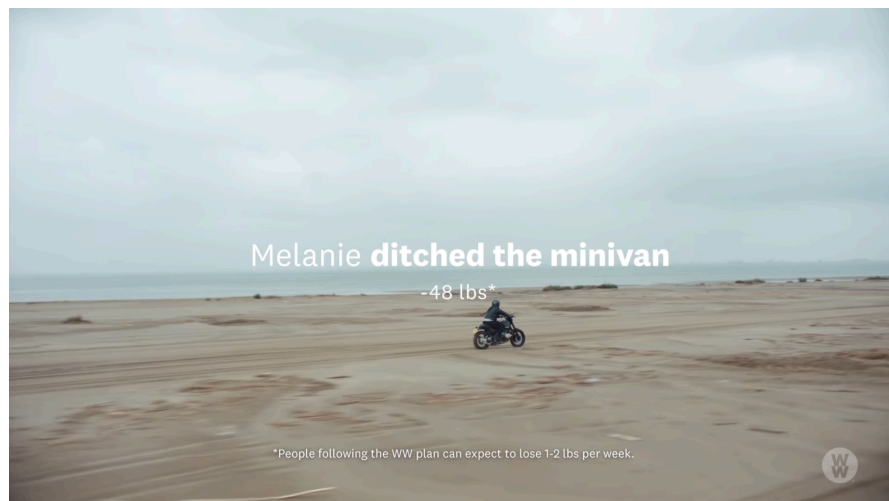


Figure 3. Screenshot of WW commercial (WW, 2019b)

As pictured above, she is on a motorcycle and, after a brief camera shot of her laughing face, zooms off as the commercial nears its close. In this case, Melanie *and* the motorcycle are symbols. Text on screen also implies that Melanie is not only a mother but a *cool* mother—adding another dimension to the diverse cast of 18 members these commercials feature.

The commercials capture scenes alluding to signs of a high quality of life, while almost always including on-screen the amount of weight the member had lost. From WW's point of view, overweight or unhealthy people would, effectively, not engage in riding motorcycles, jumping on trampolines with children, meditating, getting married, singing on stage, and playing a musical instrument. WW members are *living* now because of WW, and if not for WW, the members would not have these enriching lives. Alma, for example, is seen going out on a date after losing weight.



Figure 4. Screenshot of WW commercial: Alma on a date (WW, 2019c)



Figure 5. Screenshot of WW commercial: Alma's date (WW, 2019c)

She is happy, and the man who is taking her out is impressed with her appearance. WW is painting a dream world using the WW members, and as the inclusive champion of health, the brand is uniquely equipped to bring the consumer there. This couple contributes to a diverse cast featuring a wide range of identities, spanning age, race, gender, occupation, hobby, and body size. Whether it is an energetic Black woman jogging down a residential street, an attractive Blonde woman eating Mexican food with friends, a middle-aged man playing drums in his garage, or a plus-sized Black man being fitted for a tuxedo, WW is not telling the viewer the brand is for everyone—it is *showing* them. The members not only serve as a vehicle for the consumer to project themselves onto, but they also serve as the world in which WW operates.

Despite starring in the commercials, WW members are not characters. WW does not give them qualities beyond their image, name, number of weight lost, and brief achievement; the brand does not have an affinity with them (per Forster's (1927) definition), nor can an analysis identify whether they are flat or round characters. This theme finds that the commercials' stars are the *setting*. Like Bal's (1997) description of setting, WW's members

ground the story in the current cultural context and contribute to developing the narrative. The WW commercial would be nothing without them, and their movement subconsciously transitions the scenes. However, they are not included to give their earnest experience of WW or engage meaningfully with consumers. If they were, their stories would not be captured in fast cutscenes, nor would their triumph be summarized in less than six words. The members serve as the supporting scenery for WW's story of being the champion of inclusivity.

The brand invites the *consumer* to experience existing in the diverse wellness utopia that the commercials present, welcoming and relatable to people of all diversity dimensions. The commercials' conclusions underscore the message:

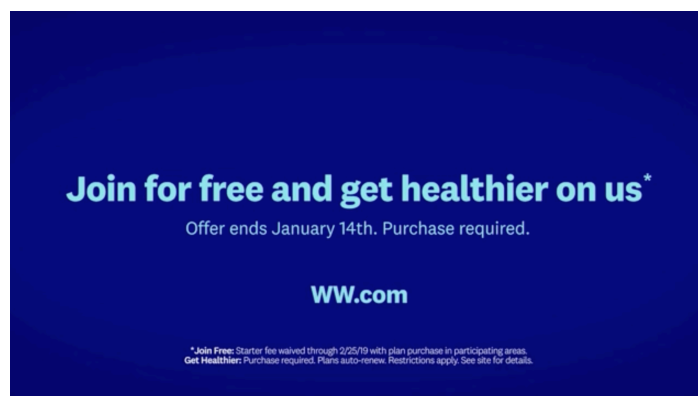


Figure 6. Screenshot of WW commercial: Call to action 1 (WW, 2019a)

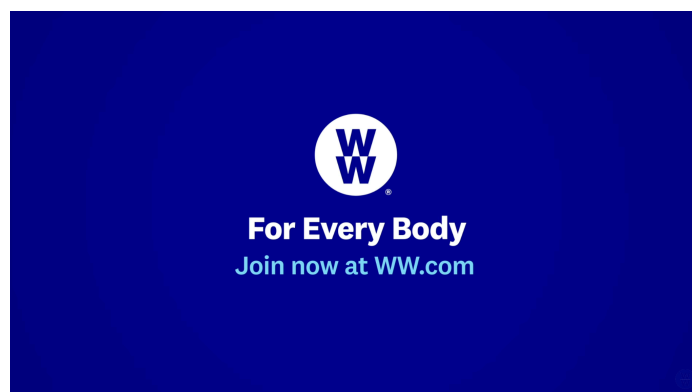


Figure 7. Screenshot of WW commercial: Campaign name (WW, 2018a)

According to the above examples, the program is instantly accessible because it is free to start. WW attempts to convey authenticity by showing, rather than claiming, diversity in a

way that relates to the consumer's own life and reflects the composition of society in the consumer's reality.

WW understandably took a different approach to authentically conveying inclusivity to its financial stakeholders in the transcripts. Regardless of potential stakeholder crossover, an investor listening or participating in an earnings call is motivated by maximizing profits from their investment (Ricciardi & Rice, 2014). Investors are famously risk- and loss-averse, and rebranding affects stock prices, shareholder value, and overall market perception (Ricciardi & Rice, 2014). WW's organizational priority in these earnings calls was to ease investors' concerns, but it still needed to communicate the rebranding, performance, and future plans.

Nevertheless, *We Are an Inclusive Champion of Health* echoed throughout the transcripts. Given the success rate of narrative in communication, I was not surprised to find a plethora of literary tools present in the transcripts. Particularly, WW utilized storytelling within these texts to introduce, explain, and defend organizational choices. In the following example, CEO Mindy Grossman narrates WW's rebranding process during the November 1, 2018, quarterly earnings call.

As a reminder, the WW mark has been associated with the Weight Watchers brand for years and before launch, we tested the combination of the WW mark and the tagline with consumers across four countries. We talked to both current and former members and many other individuals who are not part of the WW family. People have always associated our brands as real results and that remains a valuable part of our brand and legacy. ... We are leading the future and reflecting what people want in a wellness partner today, [a] holistic partner that inspires them... (p. 5)

In this passage, Grossman supports the inclusivity theme by narrating a plot. She explains WW's place in the current cultural context and WW's due diligence leading up to the change of label, before describing WW's vision: "reflecting what people want in a wellness partner today, [a] holistic partner that inspires them" (p. 5). Investors on the other end of this call are now prepared to understand not only WW's ambitious goals but also that WW is prepared to achieve them. By beginning the plot with a nod to WW's legacy, Grossman assures her financial stakeholders that WW understands the gravity of rebranding and immediately works to ease their concerns by explaining how the organization prepared itself. Notably, she does not say WW conducted market research. She says, "...we talked to both current and former members and many other individuals who are not part of the WW family" (p. 5) expressing WW's proactive approach to including a diverse array of perspectives. Her

language, including words such as *family*, reminds the audience of WW's community. In sharing ambitious WW's vision of being a wellness partner to all, Grossman conveys confidence and inspiration.

In an excerpt from the February 26, 2019 call, Grossman uses storytelling to reinforce the theme while easing investors' concerns about poor performance:

...our winter advertising did not drive consumers, particularly our former members to action in the way we hoped. To improve performance, we quickly conducted research, identified key areas to optimize including reinforcing WW as the new Weight Watchers. We also adjusted and had new creative in-market within weeks. These actions improved the trend, but we have more to do to ensure our marketing leads to action among both our core audiences and new. (p. 4)

This passage has a clear story arc linked by causality. WW was disappointed by winter performance, and as a result, conducted research, identified key areas to optimize, and adjusted creative output. Those actions improved performance. According to the text, WW was able to overcome this obstacle of not welcoming enough members through due diligence and will continue to help new audiences achieve wellness. Grossman attempts to convey authenticity by narrating stories to investors in which WW is transparent, knowledgeable, and extremely proactive. By telling the story of WW being an inclusive champion of health first, WW controls a narrative that might otherwise be unfavorable in the investors' minds. Essentially, WW thinks for the financial stakeholder. The transcript excerpts demonstrate how a narrative structure is applied to communication with financial stakeholders in a rebranding context while maintaining consistent messaging.

6.2 Transformed Through Expertise

The narrative texts indicated WW's use of literary techniques to position itself as transformed through the expertise of people with authority and legitimacy. WW is guided by experts, and its authenticity stems from supporting its transformation through scientific evidence, innovation, and leveraging expert voices. In particular, WW makes great use of its leadership, partnerships, and legacy to build a character that is reliable and trustworthy, regardless of individual stakeholder interests. The approach is immediately signaled as WW positions the CEO as a "visionary leader who is redefining wellness" (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018c, para. 1). As stated by the CEO, Mindy Grossman:

"We are committed to always being the best weight management program on the planet, but now we're putting our decades of knowledge and expertise in behavioral science to work for an even greater mission," (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018a, para. 2)

The quotes above leverage Grossman's position to the reader, but Grossman frequently refers to WW's legacy in its longevity and efficacy, making this part of WW's character. Furthermore, Grossman's commitment to a greater mission than weight management is a crucial aspect of this first theme. Because she is quoted throughout the press releases throughout the campaign, she embodies the role of a transformative figure who withstands the test of time, and thus, so does WW. WW's characterization is, essentially, an amalgamation of the people and partnerships it is grounded in.

By portraying Grossman as her own character with a clear vision of the future, firm in the present, and proud of the past, the narrative spotlights WW's impressive leadership, transferring legitimacy to the company's decision-making. Adding to the character-driven narrative is the following excerpt, attributing the quote to WW Chief Scientific Officer, Gary Foster, Ph.D.:

"Our years of behavior change experience have revealed the importance of consistent inspiration in building healthy habits, and there is power and significance in small, everyday behaviors on long-term change. In fact, results from a WellnessWins pilot program showed increased engagement and satisfaction among members." (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018b, para. 3)

As seen above, and throughout the materials, WW has a tendency to refer to its years of experience, research, and reputation. Foster's character contributes educated authority in behavioral science, with the responsibility of providing expert counsel to WW and acting as a legitimate source for the reporters reading the press release. His inclusion is central to this theme because it demonstrates the brand's reliance on scientific expertise to advise its program offerings. It is not a coincidence that his quote in the press release cites positive scientific results rather than formulaic talking points. Not only does his expertise provide a sense of legitimacy around WW's wellness strategies, but he also echoes Grossman's sentiments—further strengthening the ethos of WW leadership. In the press release, this particular excerpt from Foster introduces a host of new features to WW's new app-based rewards program. The organization's tech offerings also bring a sense of legitimacy because of the heuristical association between technology, innovation, and science. To the reporters reading these press releases in 2018, WW's innovative movements would not have been possible without expert input.

Throughout the press releases, WW consistently anchors itself in the legitimacy of its leadership, assets, and partnerships—such as partnerships with a slew of for-profit and nonprofit organizations, multi-industry companies, online programs, and famous

spokespeople, such as Oprah. This anchoring extends to its technology, especially in regard to WW's innovative application. In one press release, Grossman describes WW as a "technology experience company" that wants to enhance its "digital experience in ways that are meaningful to people's lives" (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018b, para. 2). These excerpts are evidence of WW's character being defined by its associations with authority or prestige, such as the habitual quotation of leadership, the plethora of business partnerships, and the tendency to describe itself as anything other than a diet, weight, or health company. By introducing this pervasive character trait, WW can resonate with readers who may be skeptical of WW's efficacy or genuineness. Having scientific and authoritative backing helps reporters judge WW's transformation as more authentic because the organization immediately shows that it has a long history of success, important people and organizations are talking about and partnering with it, and it is rooted in reality by way of scientific research and innovation, and the citation of behavioral science lends a sense of thoroughness to WW's efforts.

The press releases exhibit this section's theme, *Transformed Through Expertise*, primarily through WW's characterization made up of experts, innovation, and legacy. The reader should be on board with the rebranding, because they should believe in WW's associations. The commercials' audio-visual elements both confirm and elaborate on this observation. For instance, WW leverages its celebrity partner with a fun shot of Oprah riding a bike. In the commercials' context, she is mixed in with other WW members with a shift in weight or wellness as a catalyst for a better life. She is depicted in Figure 8. Meanwhile, another celebrity named Kate Hudson is also mixed into member success stories in the commercials. Her feature is captured in Figure 9.



Figure 8. Screenshot of WW commercial: Oprah Winfrey (WW, 2019a)



Figure 9. Screenshot of WW commercial: Kate Hudson (WW, 2019a)

The figures above depict celebrities doing relatable activities that the consumer may like to do as well but feel hesitant to try. Perhaps, as well, they are physically unable to because of their size or health. By featuring celebrities doing healthy activities, WW creates symbolic representations of the brand's new vision with a sense of legitimacy. Moreover, the imagery WW uses of celebrities in settings that represent health, adventure, success, family, and happiness contributes to the overall holistic, aspirational tone of the campaign.

Oprah embodies her own story of overcoming obstacles and being a self-made billionaire, symbolizing empowerment, and Kate is known for her healthy lifestyle and activewear brand, conveying a balance between physical health and overall wellness. Both are seen as experts, not necessarily of science, but experts of *life*. Unlike the other WW members in the previous section, Oprah and Kate are characters for this theme but only because (1) their individual stories are already public knowledge and (2) they support WW as a character. By including Oprah and Kate in its characterization, WW utilizes the celebrities' existing reputation and star power to diversify the catalog of experts and evidence it is supported by. WW implicitly establishes itself as a celebrity to celebrities, because without WW Kate would not be keeping up with her sons and Oprah would not be on a bike ride. This narrative strategy heightens its own prestige.

Elsewhere in the commercials, *Transformed Through Expertise* is still present but it is based on WW's scientific strengths and technological innovation. In Figure 10, WW illustrates this theme with text onscreen and, laid over it, Oprah's voice reiterating the same words.



Figure 10. Screenshot of WW commercial: Scientific call to action (WW, 2019c)

Figure 10, expanded for detail, highlights the theme by touting a powerful word, “proven,” and in small print citing the research behind the claim. Although it is taken off screen too fast to read without pausing the video, WW is including its scientific research in its communication offerings. Characterizing itself as being backed by scientists gives credibility to its other, non-science claims. These choices establish WW’s role as the premier wellness company whose claims can actually be believed. Everything WW said has a reason to be included, so the logic follows that this rebranding must have happened for a reason. The incorporation of expertise in WW’s character and motivation has developed a causality to its actions, leading to the makings of a plot.

Figure 11 contributes to WW’s characterization, but introduces another plot compatible with the theme rooted in causality.

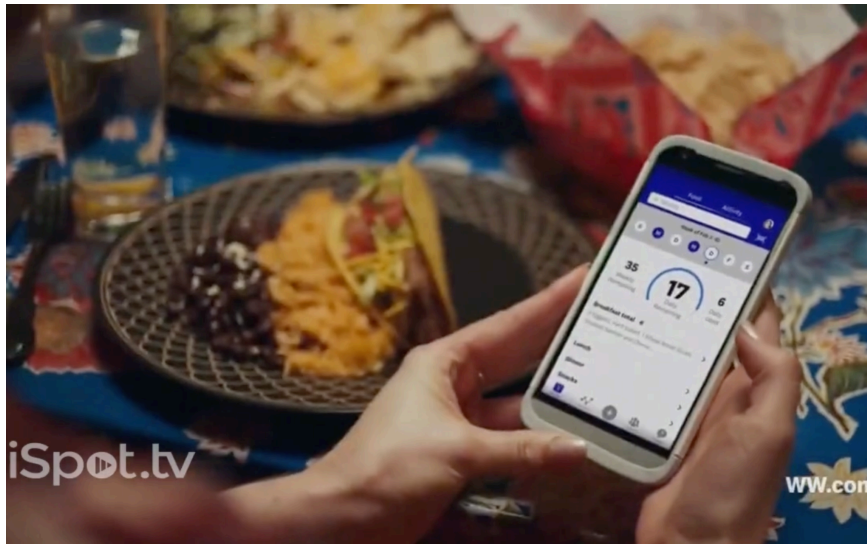


Figure 11. Screenshot of WW commercial: WW app at dinner (WW, 2019c)

In the picture above, Katie is depicted with friends at a taco restaurant. She has lost 11 lbs. She is also logging her meal in WW's new app. This example shows multiple narrative elements, the first being symbolism through imagery. WW's innovative app appears next to a strategically placed plate of food, which might look appetizing to some consumers. Naturally, given that humans are natural storytellers who seek connections (Fisher, 1987), the two would be subconsciously linked. If consumers use this app, they can have delicious food. If they use this app, they can have delicious food *and* lose weight. And, taking the rest of the scene into context, if consumers use this app, they can have delicious food, lose weight, go out with friends, and be happy. The plate symbolizes freedom and enjoyment while the application shows how uniquely WW can make that possible. Figure 11 also sets a plot in motion because the above interpretation captures causality. This new era of WW is possible through technology, and the consumer's new era is possible through WW. By highlighting how the potential WW's new brand promises is actually within reach because of its commitment to science and innovation, the organization promises consumers that they can find the new brand authentic because WW shows not only evidence that it works, but also how it works.

While the last section established WW as an inclusive champion of health, this section shows how WW was transformed through expert voices through its science-backed claims, partnerships, and innovation. The press releases convey this narrative theme through characterization, but the commercials impart the message through characterization and plots of causality. WW's approach to conveying authenticity and appealing to financial

stakeholders was, like the last theme, heavily communicated through storytelling. The organization's priorities in these earnings calls were to appeal to investors' priorities, which are heavily performance-based (Ricciardi & Rice, 2014). Therefore, WW utilized storytelling within the transcripts to energize investors, justify decision-making, and ease concerns. The uniqueness of the strategy is immediately evident in that investors are immediately privy to information that reporters and consumers are typically not. The first excerpt, said by CEO Mindy Grossman in the Q3 earnings call, presents exciting news to listeners:

I'm extremely pleased that we announced today our first new data point on the weight loss results our North American members are seeing on WW Freestyle since the launch of the program. ... And after six months members who track their weight lost 10% more weight than on last year's program where we had a 15% more weight loss claim. So, on top of that, these results are impressive and we have started featuring them in our marketing just this week reinforcing one of the reasons people come to WW, because it works. (2018, p. 4)

In this passage, Grossman supports the theme by narrating a plot and using scientific data to present good news. She explains the context: the new program has already launched, but they were still awaiting data on its efficacy. The data has come in, reporting statistics indicating WW's newest program launched along the rebranding is successful. Based on the quantified success of the program, WW changed its marketing. Hearing this causality, investors on the other end of this call now understand why WW changed its marketing, and that it was backed by science. Grossman announced the favorable findings before its incorporation into the brand's communication, framing the transformation as a positive without triggering investors' risk aversion. Through a trend of incorporating impressive scientific findings, Grossman reminds the audience of WW's legitimacy and invites them to make the causal connection on their own. Namely, if the brand is making educated business decisions, brand decisions are educated as well. Furthermore, the legitimacy behind the research is reinforced when it is presented by the CEO.

In an excerpt from the Q4 call, Grossman uses storytelling to reinforce the theme while assuring investors that they are taking an evidence-based approach to overcoming the disappointments the last quarter brought:

With our expanded team and talent in data science and analytics, member loyalty and content, we're in a strong position to better meet people where they are and make a WW experience that much more compelling. We're also leveraging artificial intelligence to make tracking in the app even easier. (2019, p. 9)

The above passage establishes WW's strength in its educated, experienced team and that this team is key in progressing toward the future. Not only does Grossman acknowledge the

expertise her team has, and how it will be what saves the brand, but she also explains the first step they will take: meeting people where they are. Moreso, she introduces the concept of using artificial intelligence as another means of supporting the continuing WW rebranding journey.

The expansion of the WW team of experts reflects a focus on the experts as drivers of WW's continuing transformation. By incorporating their expertise, WW is able to tackle organizational challenges more effectively and implies that they are an investment in themselves. WW's mention of AI integration is another example of its innovative, science-backed approach. This technological advancement shows that despite setbacks, WW is still committed to being an industry leader in more ways than weight management.

Unlike the commercials and press releases, celebrity and other brand partnerships are used as good news, but not specifically for an attempt at legitimacy to the investors. In this excerpt below, Grossman (2019) talks about two celebrity spokespeople:

And in the U.S. just a few weeks ago, DJ Khaled shared his 43 pound weight loss on the program. His weight loss goalpost is the most liked WW Instagram post in the last year. Kevin Smith also shared his more than 50 pound weight loss on WW in December. And in February, as part of American Heart Month, together with Kevin we launched a social campaign to drive awareness, engagement and visibility. (p. 5)

As shown in this example, celebrities are more describers of the overall WW experience that the brand brings to members and WW brand news. Grossman describes these associations, not to get legitimacy from the investors, but instead to narrate to investors that this is how WW conveys legitimacy to members and potential members. The causality in these stories is clear. If DJ Khaled's Instagram post was the most liked in the last year, that must mean it reached and appealed to the most members; Kevin Smith lost weight, so they collaborated with him on a campaign geared toward gaining more members—not investors. Unlike members, celebrities and brand partnerships are not taken as seriously by investors, which is evidenced in the kinds of stories Grossman tells them during the earnings calls.

In the investor-facing materials, the theme *Transformed Through Expertise* refers to WW's depiction of its science, legacy, experts, and technological innovation as drivers of organizational change and the key to continuing success. Appearing authentic is a challenging task in the face of any stakeholder group, but WW used strategic storytelling to present good and bad news to investors in a way that they would believe what Grossman said, follow her logical arguments and explanations, and match WW's definition of expertise and legitimacy with their own through selecting the most relevant expert voices.

6.3 On a Journey to Help The World

The narrative texts revealed a theme of WW positioning itself as a champion on a journey to help the world. This journey is not linear, but there is no antagonist or conflict that WW confronts. The organization was challenged by poor reception to its rebranding campaign, which was relayed only in the transcripts, but it was a problem of its own creation.

According to the texts, WW is on a journey to bring holistic health and wellness to communities around the world, and it is uniquely equipped to do so. In its first press release, Oprah Winfrey begins by extending her support to WW's altruistic mission:

"As Weight Watchers becomes WW, I believe we will continue to inspire people not only to eat well, but to move more, connect with others and continue to experience the joys of a healthy life." (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018a, para. 3)

The excerpt above immediately narrates WW's work in progress. Oprah establishes the evolution of the brand while outlining WW's commitment to continuing to improve people's lives. She presents a clear plot: WW is on a journey of a rebranding campaign that will end with making the world a better place and giving people access to leading healthier lives. The example narrates WW's journey, but it also highlights a recurring causality within this theme: health is the key to a life full of happiness, and because WW is uniquely positioned to offer that, WW is the key to a life full of happiness. Positioning WW as a mission-driven organization shifts the rebranding perception from being financially motivated to an altruistic pursuit that would lead to the betterment of society.

Apart from framing the rebranding as a benevolent journey, WW also works to convince the reader that health is a universal good. Health being positive is a pretty universally shared opinion, but it is interesting that WW goes to significant lengths to remind its audience that health is joyful and something to be *won*. In the following example, WW explains a new program that offers incentives for members to log healthy behaviors:

Members will earn "Wins" for tracking meals, activity and weight, as well as for attending WW Wellness Workshops. Wins can be redeemed for a range of products, services and experiences designed to inspire members on their wellness journeys... (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2018b, para. 1)

In the above example, the press release presents a story establishing that members will be given the tools to track healthy choices, and these choices will be rewarded with a range of prizes that will inspire them to continue their journey toward wellness. The causal relationship is clear between participating in healthy behaviors and winning rewards, implying that health is a goal everyone should have because it is the key to a better life.

Moreso, it establishes that WW is importantly doing the *right thing*. WW needs to convince the reader that it is disrupting the status quo through its rebranding, so it is over-emphasizing the positive attributes of health. This excerpt shows how narrative can be used to reframe discussions around something people take for granted. WW makes itself seem to be on a journey to being the world's only partner in health while convincing people that health is something elusive that requires hard work. However, WW is the best way to find it.

In the following example, Grossman supports the theme by focusing the narrative around the benevolence of WW's mission:

"We are committed to not only being the world's partner in weight management, we're also going to be the world's partner in wellness, helping people, all people, lead healthier lives." (Weight Watchers International, Inc., 2019b, para. 6)

The excerpt presents several narrative elements. WW is cemented as the protagonist on its way to being the world's partner in wellness so that it can help people. She reinforces the protagonist's mission, which is to be the world's partner in everything health, presenting a "flat" character with a singular motivation (see subsection 3.3). The statement's mention of helping people lead healthier lives also establishes WW's context in a world where many people of all walks of life are not only not leading healthy lives, but they need help to do it. By setting itself in this seemingly bleak world with a benevolent mission, WW can position itself as the solution.

The core audience of WW's press releases is reporters, and WW has an approach to convincing them of authenticity that is unique from the other themes. While the other themes had an emphasis on demonstrating follow-through of ideas and strategic relatability, WW's primary goal through its narrative elements in the press releases was to convince the reporters that what it was doing was good for people. This may have appealed to the reporter's sense of public duty, but it also communicated a core value that transcends stakeholder interests: the concept of a human good. By using narrative to paint WW's new identity as a mission-driven organization, WW was also able to convey a unique aspect of authenticity that was not found in the other themes.

The press releases exhibit this theme primarily through storytelling; alternatively, the commercials also convey authenticity to consumers with this theme, but with audio-visual elements such as symbols, imagery, characterization, music, and implicit narratives.

Implicit narratives in the commercials lead consumers to come to the conclusion that WW is on a journey to help the world. WW first establishes that the outcome of the program

is a human good, which immediately spins its work in a positive light. The first example shows Kendra:

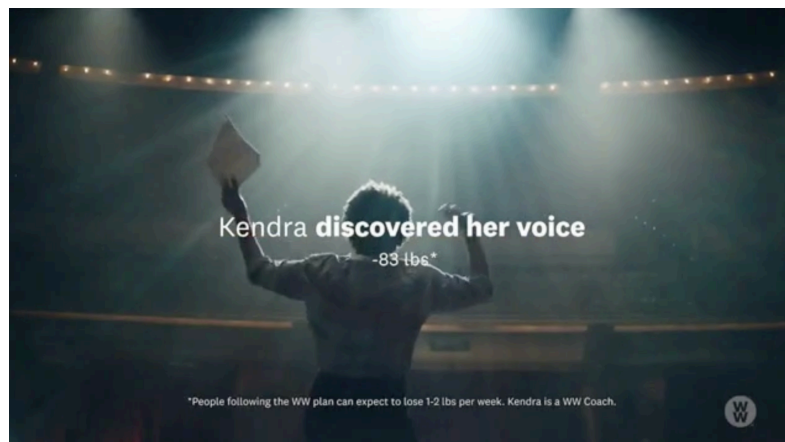


Figure 12. Screenshot of WW commercial: Kendra on stage (WW, 2018a)

Kendra is seen on stage singing. This image conveys the literal narrative that Kendra always had a voice but only discovered it after finding success through WW. However, her voice is a metaphor for her confidence. Gaining confidence is a relatable human good that the commercial displays. Viewers who are witness to this narrative subconsciously make the causal connection between WW, Kendra, Kendra's confidence, and their own life story. If the consumer joins WW, they will find confidence too—and that is a good thing. Figure 13 also tells a story around a core value and sense of universal human good.

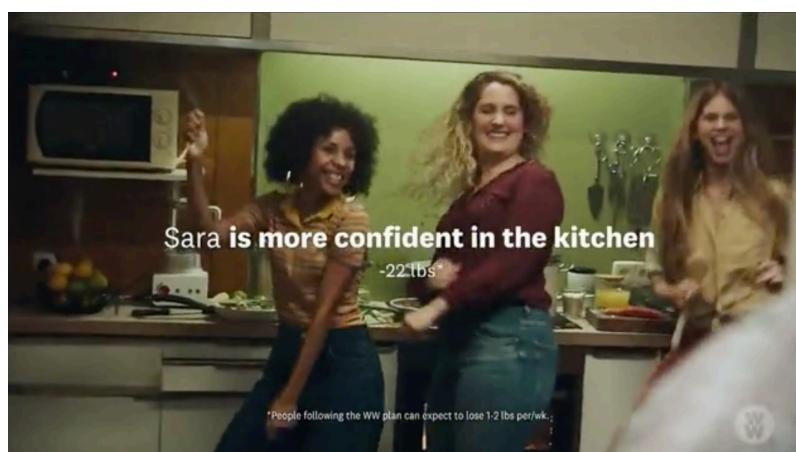


Figure 13. Screenshot of WW commercial: Sara with friends (WW, 2019a)

This image captures Sara dancing with her friends in a kitchen, and the viewer is told that she is more confident in the kitchen. WW establishes another plot by depicting her success: Joining WW and losing weight made Sara more confident around food. The visuals imply, however, that she gained *more* than confidence around food. Sara is also more relaxed in the kitchen, and she is having fun with friends. The implication is that before WW, she was not relaxed or having fun with friends. WW is positioned as facilitating an improved quality of life for a person, inviting the consumers to find their insecurities in the “before” of Sara, Kendra, and other commercial personalities.

This theme revealed that WW uses the depiction of WW’s benevolent work to convey authenticity to the consumer, and this first required showing WW makes people’s lives better. By showing that Kendra and Sara’s lives improved after becoming healthy, WW also told the consumer that being healthy is a good thing. Figure 14 again demonstrates the causality WW creates between health and happiness without explicitly mentioning the program itself.

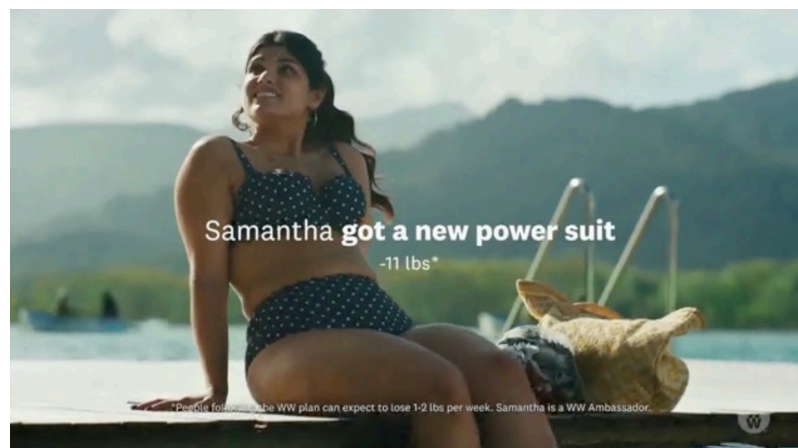


Figure 14. Screenshot of WW commercial: Samantha’s power (WW, 2018b)

The picture shows Samantha sitting on a dock wearing a bikini. Although the text says she has a new power suit, the narrative the image communicates is that by getting healthy through WW she felt empowered enough to buy and wear a new swimsuit. WW’s “goodness” is also illustrated through visual symbolism in this picture, such as the sun and smiles. The commercials also display images of common human life goals, such as marriage, family, youth, and living confidently. In addition, all the commercials are accompanied by an upbeat, empowering song named “Worship” by Lizzo, inviting consumers to identify with someone in the commercial and believe they are empowered to achieve their goals through WW’s program.

It became clear that WW's organizational *journey* was not something it sought to share with the consumer explicitly. Instead, the theme was reflected in how it illustrated what WW can do for the consumer. The commercials did not show every personality stepping on a scale and showing their weight loss—they showed the improvement in their quality of life. Suddenly, WW is not a weight management company. Instead, it is an empowering organization that can help every person realize their wellness goals and, as a result, live their truth. While the press releases emphasized the continuous journey WW was taking to improve in order to serve the world, consumers were shown how WW helped make the world a better place for people on their own journeys. Then, consumers were more likely to consider the authenticity of the rebrand, despite it being a significant shift.

WW took a modestly different approach to authentically conveying WW's journey to help the world to its financial stakeholders in the transcripts. Regardless of potential stakeholder crossover—a reporter can gain access to these transcripts if they also have connections—an investor listening in on this call is hardly motivated by an altruistic mission to change the world. Instead, WW uses storytelling to position helping the world as a business strategy to reach as wide of an audience as possible. WW's unique advantages and new brand are means to reach more people, capture their attention, and fully integrate into members' lives in more ways than before. In the following example, Grossman narrates WW's mission in the Q3 earnings call:

We are purposely building out a diverse portfolio of engaged WW ambassadors from all areas of culture, who are enthusiastic about sharing their wellness journeys and inspiring others. When we work with the right ambassadors, those whose journey is authentic and they are committed to making themselves and the world healthier, it makes a real impact. (2018, p. 12)

In the excerpt, Grossman is telling a story about WW's current process, in which it is on a journey like its members and ambassadors. WW is engaging folks from all walks of life, and when they do this WW sees results. The notion of journeys is pervasive across the press releases and transcripts, but in this particular context, Grossman indicates WW is still a work in progress. However, WW is a successful and smart work in progress. She suggests that by aligning with enthusiastic WW ambassadors from all areas of culture, who are in particular *authentic*, WW can have a real impact. Grossman frames this dynamic as a universally beneficial relationship where despite everyone being on their own journeys, ambassadors, members, and the company can all work toward and benefit from making the world a healthier place.

Ultimately, Grossman's narrative is about positioning WW's altruistic aspirations as a strategic business practice. This narrative strategy demonstrates to financial stakeholders that WW's commitment to making the world a healthier place is not just a moral obligation, but an effective business model that causally leads to more member engagement, positive reception, and loyalty. In the following example from the Q4 earnings call, Grossman again highlights WW's benevolent commitment to community empowerment:

As we spoke about in November, as we optimize our Studio network, we are actively pursuing strategic partnerships where we have a shared passion to empower families and communities to live healthier lives. ...the shift to WW reflects the realization that we can and should leverage our expertise in science-based behavior to play a bigger role in people's lives. As consumers become more focused on improving their overall health and wellness, we're uniquely positioned to help them build healthy habits in addition to managing their weight. (Grossman, 2019, p. 6)

In this excerpt, Grossman reiterates WW's continuous journey to improvement and reaching new audiences. She begins by acknowledging WW's ongoing evolution, in this case optimizing their Studio network and pursuing strategic partnerships after realizing that it would be the right thing to do to leverage WW's expertise to drive positive social change. This decision is beneficial to consumers because of WW's unique competencies. In fact, Grossman discloses that the rebranding reflects the realization of WW's potential to impact people's lives beyond weight loss, offering a new justification and explanation for the brand shift. The causality in this plotline is implied: when WW helps the world, WW reaches more people, and business performance improves.

The narrative frames WW as a mission-driven organization, prioritizing partnerships and business decisions—such as rebranding—that allow it to reach new audiences of people who are focused on improving their overall health. The following excerpt outlines a related project with Oprah underway at the time:

Today, we are excited to announce that Oprah and WW are working on an initiative to galvanize and bring communities together through a series of digital and live events and experience to accelerate WW's impact and reach new and diverse audience. ... I'm thrilled that Amy Weinblum, Oprah's long-term Chief of Staff has joined WW as Chief Business Development Officer and will be leading the team to bring this initiative to life. (Grossman, 2019, p. 10)

This passage offers a clear plot reflecting another journey WW is on, yet again intending to have more impact and reach a new and diverse audience, but also incorporate a seasoned business executive. By repeatedly emphasizing its mission to impactfully reach new

audiences through strategic business endeavors, WW assures its financial stakeholders that the benevolent journey will be rewarding for them.

Grossman's storytelling creates a causal relationship between altruism and investor interests and utilizes their interests to convey authenticity. She convinces investors what is good for the world is especially good for them, and she is a voice of authority, tells the strategic narratives seen in the excerpts, and consistently grounds WW's motives in response to real world concerns. WW simultaneously has the world's best interests at heart and authentically prioritizes increasing shareholder value, which is made possible by creating a causal relationship between the two.

7. Discussion

My aim was to develop nuanced insights into the intersection of diversity branding, authenticity, and myriad stakeholder groups by uncovering themes in the narrative texts of WW's rebranding campaign materials. First, how did WW convey authenticity in its rebranding campaign? Second, how did WW attempt to overcome diverse stakeholder needs? The analysis indicated that WW conveyed authenticity to all three stakeholder groups, but took different approaches for each group—indicating that there was an attempt to not only accommodate different stakeholder needs but also different stakeholder measurements of authenticity. The following chapter will summarize the answers to the first two research questions, and answer the third research question through a reflective discussion on what the analysis signals about the interplay between authenticity, organizational objectives, and the power of social influence.

7.1 Authenticity and Stakeholder Diversity: A Summary

I organized the analysis chapter into three primary narrative themes. While that chapter describes the narrative texts in depth, each explaining how WW was able to convey authenticity to each stakeholder group, the narrative texts told a story themselves. Altogether, the WW rebranding campaign told the world: *We are an inclusive champion of health, transformed through expertise, on a journey to help the world.*

WW interwove the three themes together across its campaign materials to craft a cohesive story of a benevolent prestige brand, guided by expert voices, on a mission to bring health to everyone. The TNA found that WW conveyed the rebranding's authenticity differently to each stakeholder group. Reporters were shown its authenticity through characterization of inclusivity and community, expert voices at the helm of WW's evolution, and narratives of WW's journey as a mission-driven organization. WW appealed to consumers' measurements of authenticity through world-building using the commercials' personalities, celebrities, and technology as faces of expertise, and strong narratives about the change of life that the WW program offers. Investors were reached through storytelling about community and inclusivity, experts as the drivers of WW's transformation, and altruism as a business strategy.

Uncovering the themes strongly reminded me of my connection between authenticity in strategic communication and Fisher's (1987) interpretation of narrative theory: wherein

stakeholders make decisions based on good reasons. To Fisher (1987), this concept of *good reasons* is strikingly similar to what literature defines as stakeholders' concepts of authenticity.

My findings of how WW conveyed the rebranding's authenticity to all stakeholder groups is strikingly compatible with Fisher's (1987) good reasons, and this contributes to his perspective on how pervasive narrative is in how humans make sense of reality. The first metric in how stakeholders make decisions based on the narrative paradigm is whether the stakeholder can consider facts to be facts. WW leveraged expertise and legitimacy to all stakeholder groups, albeit through different narrative strategies. Second, stakeholders determine if facts are accurately represented; WW strategically positioned reliable figureheads that each stakeholder group could trust as the speakers. Consumers trust diverse people like them, reporters trust experts and leadership, and investors trust the CEO. Third, stakeholders pursue reasoning through informal logic and morality. All stakeholder groups were appealed to through causal relationships within bespoke narratives, encouraging the stakeholders to come to their own conclusions and follow logic. Fourth, stakeholders evaluate a message's completeness to the extent it reflects their own experience or someone's experience who they respect. All of WW's stakeholder groups had their own interests reflected to them through the narrative materials, in particular through WW's utilization of the universal desire for human good. WW also incorporates the respect element by featuring a range of experts—in science, business, and life. Fifth, stakeholders consider whether the crux of the message reflects the optimal standard for human behavior (Fisher, 1987). The third theme of the analysis demonstrates how WW showed itself on a journey to help the world achieve health and happiness—two optimal standards for human behavior.

Matching WW's rebranding campaign thematic narratives with Fisher's (1987) "good reasons" shows that it used narrative as an effective tool to influence and persuade stakeholders by tapping into their subconscious motivations, which is how it overcame stakeholder differences. Seeing Fisher's (1987) idea materialize in a 2018-2019 rebranding campaign validates his paradigm's timelessness, especially his claim that people are inherently narrative and are guided by the stories they find meaningful, credible, relatable, and trustworthy—stories that they envision themselves in.

This insight suggests that impactful strategic communication should reach beyond information and argument, and instead connect with stakeholders in a way that touches their core values, beliefs, and motivations.

7.2 Implications

This section intends to discuss how WW's approach to incorporating diversity in its brand reflects the interplay between authenticity, organizational objectives, and the power of social influence.

In rebranding to WW, Weight Watchers navigated this interplay by aligning its authenticity with the deeper motivations and interests of its stakeholder groups. The organization's narrative texts revealed strategic communication that sought to foster a genuine connection with the individual stakeholder groups by meeting them where they were.

However, it is important to note that WW did not seek a middle point with the consumer, reporter, or investor. In fact, it all but told them what their own priorities were. WW's narrative conveyance of authenticity and connection with multiple stakeholder groups was not an image of progressive social values or altruism; rather, WW defined what those should be. Byrd (2018) and Asmar et al. (2023) discussed how organizations, particularly those with considerable social influence, have the ability to mold narratives and strategies in ways that have ricochet effects beyond their immediate organizational objectives. These legacy brands, such as Netflix and WW carry a considerable amount of power because their social capital is so significant that they can introduce, define, and challenge ideologies (Holt, 2004). As brands continue to become integrated into society, these conversations are even more important.

WW's rebranding is another example that embodies Byrd's (2018) and Asmar et al.'s (2023) concerns. WW not only utilized narrative to appeal to each stakeholder's desire for authenticity, but also implicitly guided their perceptions of health, wellness, and what happiness means. While Asmar et al. (2023) learned that Netflix defined what it deemed "diversity" to be, in this rebranding campaign WW defined its perception of diversity and *health*. WW emphasized the spirit of inclusivity of all people around the world to its investors and reporters, but to the general public via commercials, it took a different approach. The brand conveyed diversity through multiple dimensions: race, age, size, occupation, and location, to name a few. However, in reality, WW minimized its diverse set of member success stories to the setting its commercials take place in. As reviewed in section 6.1, WW's own membership base was not included in WW's campaign materials to tell their stories, instead they were included to be a backdrop. To WW, diversity was something to use and watch, not celebrate and honor. The organization used its social capital to not only show

the consumer what the ideal diverse world would look like but also what health looks like, in ways that aligned with WW's own brand identity and organizational objectives.

Following reflections from Asmar et al.'s (2023) analysis of Netflix, WW also presents critical concerns. A powerful company such as WW follows its organizational objectives and, therefore, leans so heavily into (1) defining what health is, (2) that wellness is what matters, and (3) that health should be something to be achieved, won, or rewarded has significant implications for individuals and broader social considerations toward health.

The notion that healthy behaviors should be won, rewarded, or incentivized through a points system or material rewards fits not only into a capitalist framework, where wellness is its own commodity but fosters a toxic state of mind around the intrinsic value of health. When a large organization like WW promotes a view of health that ties one's wellness to their self-worth or achievements, health becomes a moral obligation. People who appear healthy are seen as winners, and those who appear unhealthy, or consider themselves unhealthy, are viewed as lacking discipline. Through the objectives of the rebranding campaign, WW has the power to create a stigmatization of those who are not able to achieve the picture of health that WW itself is creating.

In summary, WW's diversity rebranding campaign opens an interesting dialogue about how organizations utilize the power of social influence to convey authenticity and achieve organizational objectives. This particular case provides insight into how a large organization's rebranding campaign can shape public health narratives that potentially affect perceptions of the worth of diversity and health as an achievement instead of a condition.

8. Conclusion

The analysis and discussion chapters answered the research questions with which I began this thesis. My thematic narrative analysis found three themes within WW's rebranding campaign that served to convey authenticity and accommodate various stakeholder interests and they interwove to form their own story: *Weight Watchers is an inclusive champion of health that has been transformed through expertise on a journey to help the world.*

8.1 Suggestions for Further Research

This thesis explored the case of a legacy company incorporating diversity into a rebranding strategy while having the challenge of authentically appealing to myriad stakeholder groups, and insights were achieved through a thematic narrative analysis through the lens of narrative theory. Future research into the intersection of authenticity, diversity, and diverse stakeholder groups in the branding context could explore alternative methods, theories, and contexts. There is considerably more room in the social science for more research in diversity branding and narratives, for both internal and external communication, and qualitative interviews would provide this insight. For instance, how does a non-marginalized communication practitioner *feel* about strategically constructing narratives for marginalized groups? How does that influence their output and the stories they tell? Would they create different stories about the same brand to marginalized versus non-marginalized groups? Is it ethical?

If the aim is generalizable findings, other qualitative and quantitative methods are worth pursuing. A mixed-methods study that includes quantitative data from stakeholders and qualitative data from brand practitioners could paint a complete picture of the intricate rebranding process. Second, a different theoretical lens, such as stakeholder theory, would enable deeper insight into the brand-stakeholder relationship in a novel context.

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