ICONIC ENTREPRENEURIAL BRANDS

A multiple-case study on cultural branding in entrepreneurial ventures

Master’s Thesis

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Till Mommo
Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this explorative qualitative research is to, first, provide an updated assessment of Holt & Cameron’s (2010) cultural branding framework in an entrepreneurial context. Second, to examine how entrepreneurial ventures can successfully use cultural branding principles to create iconic brands. Third, to investigate whether introducing concepts from cultural entrepreneurship into the cultural branding framework can generate any opportunities for future interdisciplinary research.

**Theoretical framework:** This study reviews existing literature on cultural branding, entrepreneurial branding, and cultural entrepreneurship, focusing especially on the theoretical frameworks developed by Douglas Holt (2002; 2004; 2010) and Lounsbury and Glynn (2001; 2019).

**Methodology:** This research takes a critical realist, social constructionist perspective for a qualitative and abductive multiple-case study research design to study four American, iconic entrepreneurial consumer brands established after 2010, which are Warby Parker, Away, White Claw and Glossier.

**Findings:** It was possible to apply the cultural branding framework in an entrepreneurial context, but questions for future research remain. Social media was an important factor that allowed the cultural innovations of these brands to take place. The addition of theoretical elements from cultural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial branding aided the case analysis. For example, the findings show that founder networks are an essential factor to get a new business off the ground. Networks were important also in getting funding, but in this area the findings also confirmed that entrepreneurial narratives play a key role. Additionally, the findings indicate that founders featured themselves more prominently in public narratives to legitimize their business when faced with resource constraints.

**Theoretical contributions:** The findings provide evidence to suggest that cultural branding can beneficially be enriched by contributions from cultural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial branding literature. This study contributes a first attempt at building a bridge between these two fields, which also constitutes a fruitful area for future research. The concept of optimal distinctiveness provides one such avenue, as well as the use of cultural narratives in fundraising.

**Managerial implications:** Having a connection with subcultures to come up with the winning cultural expression was a required first step for the start-up brands. This could be delayed with a sufficient marketing budget, but for a brand to become iconic it could not be delayed indefinitely. The move online of subcultures to become crowdcultures may have made this easier. The right contacts are essential for starting businesses, and it pays to build a strong and diverse network.

**Keywords:** branding, cultural branding, iconic brands, entrepreneurial branding, start-ups, cultural entrepreneurship, Warby Parker, Away, White Claw, Glossier
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The branding landscape of today is vastly different from how it was imagined over sixty ago, when early researchers in consumer-centric marketing set out to create models explaining how brands can win over consumers by creating products with the right set of benefits. Early actors like Reeves (1961) and Ries and Trout (1969) established a branding paradigm that built on the assumption that brands succeed when they “own” the most important functional benefits of a given category in the minds of consumers (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Successful managers were those who managed to identify and target consumers’ cognitive gap, i.e. the most valued functional benefits that consumers did not already perceive belonged to a certain brand. Later, prominent works by academics such as Kotler (1991), Aaker (1996), and Keller (1998) introduced a focus on the emotional or intangible attributes that consumers associate with a brand, product, or category (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Still, the core cognitive assumption of the branding paradigm remained: brands succeed when they occupy the cognitive space of key benefits in consumer minds.

For several decades, this traditional branding paradigm and its mindshare approach to marketing has dominated both research in the field and managerial practices. Branding strategies which follow the principles of the mindshare marketing model have remained favorable among managers and continue to inform organizations’ branding activities to the present day, likely because it allows for easy rationalization of the branding task (Holt, 2004). However, due to rapidly changing conditions in the external environment within the last twenty years, such traditional approaches to branding are becoming increasingly outdated. Advances in information, communications, and digital technologies, including the introduction of social media, have dramatically altered the ways in which consumers behave, consume, and interact with brands (Quinton, 2012). Such significant technological and cultural changes have given rise to new phenomena, which in turn have sparked new streams of branding research that aims to explain these phenomena by focusing on the context within which the consumption of brands occur (Heding et al., 2016). Once such novel theoretical framework is cultural branding theory, which shifts the traditional branding paradigm away from the transaction between the brand and a consumer to a macro-perspective on brands. Pioneered by academic Douglas Holt, cultural branding offered a new approach to branding.
wherein the source of brand meaning lies not in the cognitive perceptions or associations of individual consumers, but rather is derived from the culture which a brand is embedded within (Holt, 2004). Cultural branding offered a profoundly new perspective on how brands worked. A brand that delivers innovative cultural expressions could become powerful symbols, much like celebrities, and become iconic brands because they are “collectively valued in society as a widely shared symbol of a particular ideology for a segment of the population” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.189).

Additionally, a growing interest in entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial activities in recent years has had a large impact on how individuals and organizations approach various business pursuits, e.g. opportunity recognition, innovation, and decision-making for resource allocation, product development, etc. (Carlsson et al., 2013). This brings about an entirely new array of implications for the traditional branding models, as entrepreneurial ventures constitute a unique host of considerations, opportunities, and challenges that differentiate them from the big business perspective that has informed traditional branding literature (Abimbola, 2001). Despite this, little research has been dedicated to examining branding in an entrepreneurial context (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Marrilees, 2007; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Otubanjo, 2018).

Another interdisciplinary field of entrepreneurship studies which is still in its infancy is entrepreneurial research from a cultural perspective. While the intersection between cultural processes and entrepreneurship has received less attention than other dimensions of entrepreneurship, this niche has been initiated and developed in part by Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) into the field of “cultural entrepreneurship”. Despite its name, and the similar period of theory development, there are no overt connections between Holt’s cultural branding framework and Lounsbury and Glynn’s cultural entrepreneurship theory. There are no acknowledgements of Holt in Lounsbury and Glynn’s works, not even in their latest contribution (2019) that aims to provide an overview of cultural entrepreneurship scholarship and contains concepts such as narratives and storytelling which are concepts usually associated with branding theory. Furthermore, there are no references to wider cultural entrepreneurship literature in Holt’s latest book Cultural Strategy, despite Holt arguing that cultural branding is a viable strategy for start-up businesses wanting to achieve growth in highly competitive markets (Holt &
Cameron, 2010). This apparent absence of bridges between these two areas of literature has motivated this thesis, and the aim of this study, in contributing to the building of such bridges.

1.2 Problem definition and research purpose

Holt’s cultural branding theory (Holt & Cameron, 2010) represents an important alternative to conventional branding models, yet the existing framework presents a number of critical limitations. This stems from a lack of focus on the aspects that distinguish cultural branding efforts of new ventures vs. established ones, as well as a lack of case studies that assess the application of the cultural branding framework on entrepreneurial brands that are established in the social media age, including the advantages and disadvantages that such businesses may face. This highlights an important gap in the field of cultural branding research which, if filled, would strengthen and facilitate the development of this new branding paradigm. Furthermore, the limited research on branding and brand management in entrepreneurial companies in general, and especially the minimal research on entrepreneurial brands established in the social media age from a cultural branding perspective, further justifies the relevancy of this study.

As such, this thesis has multiple research objectives.

The first purpose of this study is to expand upon Holt’s cultural branding theory by providing an updated assessment of the framework in an entrepreneurial context.

The second purpose is to examine how entrepreneurial ventures can successfully use cultural branding principles to create iconic brands.

The third, and final, purpose is to investigate whether introducing concepts from cultural entrepreneurship into the cultural branding framework can generate any opportunities for future interdisciplinary research.

1.2.1 Research questions

Following the objectives of this study, the following research question has been developed:

How can entrepreneurial ventures founded in the social media age successfully apply the cultural branding principles proposed by Douglas Holt?
Furthermore, the following sub-research questions will support in fulfilling the research objectives:

- How does the rise of social media influence entrepreneurial ventures’ ability to employ cultural branding strategies?
- How can cultural branding strategies be applied by entrepreneurial ventures in order to get support from other stakeholders besides consumers?
- How can an integration of cultural entrepreneurship concepts into the cultural branding framework generate future interdisciplinary opportunities?
- What challenges do new entrepreneurial ventures face in applying cultural branding strategies?

1.3 Delimitations

This thesis limits the concept of cultural branding to the cultural branding framework developed by Holt (2002; 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010). As such, the study excludes all references to other interpretations of “cultural” branding such as country-of-origin branding. Additionally, this study limits the field of entrepreneurship theory to dimensions that concern cultural processes and branding, i.e., cultural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial branding.

For this study, four recently established entrepreneurial consumer brands will be studied to explore the phenomena of cultural branding in entrepreneurial ventures. The number of cases chosen was limited to four to allow for an in-depth analysis of the brands with respect to time constraints and space limitations. Furthermore, it will allow the study to achieve a deeper level of understanding of each brand as individual, and isolated, cases before being compared through a cross-case analysis.

The study and case analyses are built upon information and evidence that is available online, as well as interviews in the form of podcasts or YouTube video excerpts from TV interviews. Primary data could not be collected due to the decision to use American brands as cases instead of local Danish brands. The focus of this study is limited to the first five years of operation for each of the cases.
2. Theoretical framework

The area of interest for this thesis lies in the intersection between cultural branding and entrepreneurial processes. While the literature on entrepreneurship is extensive and diverse, the focus of previous studies tends to lie on the economic and psychological aspects of entrepreneurship (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). On the other hand, cultural branding literature is limited in the sense that it builds primarily upon the works of one sole contributor, Douglas Holt. Douglas Holt has focused on developing a general framework of cultural innovation, and he has applied this mostly on the branding stories of well-established companies, to help them with re-brands and cultural re-inventions (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

Following the aim of this thesis to initiate bridge building between cultural branding and cultural entrepreneurship, this chapter will begin with an overview of cultural branding theory. Then, a literature review on entrepreneurial branding will highlight common dimensions of branding among start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures to illustrate the entrepreneurial context which this study is embedded within. Lastly, relevant dimensions of entrepreneurship literature that facilitate a link to cultural branding processes will be introduced. Specifically, the research stream of cultural entrepreneurship involves several complementary ideas which this chapter intends to highlight.

2.1 Cultural branding

Douglas Holt (2002) first articulated his logic of using cultural expressions in brand management through a series of journal articles starting with “Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding”. Following these, Holt has developed his theory of cultural branding in the books *How Brands Become Icons* (2004) and *Cultural Strategy* (Holt & Cameron, 2010). The foundation for Holt’s cultural research came out of the general stream of theory called consumer culture theory, which is a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meaning (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). While other scholars have used Holt’s theory in their work, with some taking a critical approach by focusing on ideological issues related to branding and consumer culture (Heding et al., 2016), Holt’s works arguably still represents the main stream of literature.
Holt’s cultural branding theory challenges the conventional model of market innovation as exemplified in *Blue Ocean Strategy* (Kim & Mauborgne, 2004), whereby market participants only need to “build a better mousetrap” to attract customers (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.1). Holt is also highly critical of more traditional marketing paradigms, such as those promoted by Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991) (Heding et al., 2016), that he refers to as the *mindshare model*, which aims to embed “associations between brand and valued benefits in consumers’ minds” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.10). The mindshare model requires consistent and unchanging marketing messaging, which does not allow for changes in culture altering the resonance of such messaging. Instead, Holt suggests that companies should find and champion an ideology from the culture that resonates strongly with their customers (Holt & Cameron, 2010). His argument is that it is through the myths that surround a product that customers get impelled to buy it, rather than the benefits of the product itself. As such, the cultural branding approach represents an alternative to traditional branding perspectives by focusing on stories told in the wider culture, rather than understanding the direct connections between marketer and consumer.

### 2.1.1 Cultural consumption

Holt’s theory focuses on the management of brands and encourages managers to see their brands as *cultural artifacts*, and “as a cultural platform – just like a Hollywood film or a new social movement – to respond to these desires with effective myths” (Holt, 2004, p.215). This focus on brands as carriers of cultural meaning makes McCracken’s (1986) concept of cultural consumption an important supporting theory for the cultural branding framework.

In McCracken’s (1986) theory of *cultural consumption*, culture and consumption operate as a system, wherein goods are able to carry and communicate cultural meaning in addition to their utilitarian properties (Heding et al., 2016). Their meaning is transferred “from the culturally constituted world into consumer goods and through the consumption of goods integrated into the lives of consumers” (Heding et al., 2016, p.225). Cultural meaning is transferred by the advertising and fashion system by them picking up on up fragments of meaning and bestowing them on products through advertising and media (Heding et al., 2016). Particularly relevant to cultural branding is the idea that a consumer can create their own meaning through their consumption choices. McCracken’s theory implies that there is a marketplace for meanings as much as there is one consisting of utilitarian economic goods. This is the
foundation for cultural branding’s assumption that brands can win out in the marketplace of ideas with better ideologies (Holt & Cameron, 2010).

2.1.2 Defining iconicity

The concept of iconic brands is central to cultural branding. In Holt’s later works, iconicity is implied as the desired end-goal of a (cultural) brand strategy (Holt & Cameron, 2010). However, in How Brands Become Icons, Holt’s definition of an iconic brand is stated in relation to the way that such a brand can be used by consumers as an important expression of their own identity: “iconic brand: an identity brand that approaches the identity value of a cultural icon” (Holt, 2004, p.11). These constituent parts are also defined by Holt:

- “identity brand: a brand whose value to consumers (and, thus, its brand equity) derives primarily from identity value” (Holt, 2004, p.11)
- “identity value: the aspect of a brand’s value that derives from the brand’s contributions to self-expression” (Holt, 2004, p.11)
- “cultural icon: a person or thing regarded as a symbol, especially of a culture or movement; a person, institution, etc., considered worthy of admiration or respect” (Holt, 2004, p.11)

Later, in Cultural Strategy, Douglas Holt simplifies his definition of iconic brands to be more macro-based and less fragmented into micro-parts. Iconic brands are those that “deliver innovative cultural expressions [to] become powerful cultural symbols” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.189). The field of cultural branding analyzes the interactions between macro-level culture and brands, rather than between marketer and consumer (Heding et al., 2020, p.220). The concept of iconicity is closely related to the idea of cultural resonance, which is also mentioned in the cultural entrepreneurship literature (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). Iconic brands achieve resonance by connecting with consumers by representing a cultural idea.

To facilitate the realization of the thesis’ objectives, this study introduces an abridged definition of iconic brands that aims to synthesize the older and newer definitions as stated by Holt (2002; Holt & Cameron, 2010). Hence, in this thesis, an iconic brand is defined as:
a brand that successfully embodies a cultural ideology which has strong resonance among consumers by addressing their collective anxieties or desires in response to cultural contradictions in contemporary society.

2.1.3 Cultural branding framework

In *How Brands Become Icons* (2004), Holt develops the core aspects of cultural branding theory. In particular, he identified four aspects of how the communications of iconic brands differ from other brands (Heding et al., 2020):

1) They target a cultural contradiction: “Cultural branding works when the brand’s stories connect powerfully with particular contradictions in American society” (Holt 2004, p.224), and can perform a powerful myth to resolve those tensions.

2) They act as cultural activists: The efforts taken by iconic brands are radical and active, with an aim to influence culture.

3) They create original expressive culture as an artist: Iconic brands have created new and unique visual expressions.

4) They develop an authentic populist voice: A brand has to be perceived as credible in their expressions of a cultural ideology. Brands borrow from subcultures, where new non-commercial culture is being created and must show a deep understanding of them.

Furthermore, Holt highlights how companies have to reinvent their cultural myths as society changes, in order to remain relevant. This insight is what led to the more managerially focused *Cultural Strategy* (2010) which aims to provide guidance on how companies can go about finding relevant myths and also communicating them. In *Cultural Strategy*, Holt and Cameron present a six-stage strategic framework, which represents a managerially implementable interpretation of the cultural branding theory from *How Brands Become Icons* (2004). The six stages are the following:

1) Map the category’s cultural orthodoxy

   a. This stage seeks to get an overview of the conventional cultural expression, consisting of ideology, myth and cultural codes, of the category. This is through research of the communication of competitors, and the point is to identify the stories and tendencies that they convey.
b. Ideology: “what the product stands for” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.8)
c. Identity myth: “a simple story that resolves cultural contradictions” (Holt, 2004, p.11)

2) Identify the social disruption that can dislodge the orthodoxy.
   a. This concept is related to Holt’s theoretical analysis of cultural and social contradictions (Holt, 2004)

3) Unearth the ideological opportunity.
   a. This stage requires identifying collective desires and anxieties

4) Cull appropriate source material.
   a. This source material comes from subcultures, social movements and media myths.
   b. Holt defines subcultures (which include social movements) as “groups or places that cohere around an ideology that is antithetic to the category’s cultural orthodoxy” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.187). Holt goes on to explain that “subcultures provide great credibility as foundations for brand expressions because they ‘prove’ that the ideology actually exists in the world as a viable world view that has value for its participants” (Holt, 2020, p.187).

5) Apply cultural tactics. Holt and Cameron presented a list of cultural tactics in Cultural Strategy (2010), which they developed through the case studies featured in the book. These involve:
   a. Provoking ideological flashpoints: When a company identifies social issues that the company’s target audience are passionate about, and then designs communication to highlight the company’s alternative counterpoint to the issue (Holt & Cameron, 2010).
   b. Mythologizing the company: “Rather than rely on participants of the subculture to express the brand’s ideology, the company itself becomes the stage for the branding” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.62)
   c. Resuscitating reactionary ideology: When brands use a pre-existing historic ideology as a counterpoint to the current orthodoxy. Also known as a reactionary cultural strategy (Holt & Cameron, 2010).
   d. Cultural capital trickle-down: Making cultural capital, that was previously inaccessible for people outside a select few, highly accessible for the masses (Holt & Cameron, 2010)
e. Crossing the cultural chasm: When brands with a strong social purpose transform their social-change ideology into a cultural expression that appeals to the mass-market consumer, thus expanding their consumer base (Holt & Cameron, 2010)

f. Cultural jiujitsu: When a challenger brand uses the popularity of the market incumbent against it (Holt & Cameron, 2010)

6) Craft the cultural strategy:

a. “Cultural strategies are detailed documents that specify nuanced direction in terms of ideology, myth and cultural codes. In cultural innovation, details matter” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.199)

### 2.1.4 Cultural branding and social media

In recent years, Douglas Holt (2016; 2020) has slightly updated the main theory by adapting it to the introduction of widespread social media, in two articles published in the Harvard Business Review. For instance, Holt updates the concept of subcultures for social media with the new concept of *crowdcultures*. He defines these as “digital crowds [which] … serve as very effective and prolific innovators of culture” (Holt, 2016, para.3). Holt subdivides crowdcultures in two: “subcultures, which incubate new ideologies and practices, and art worlds, which break ground in entertainment” (Holt, 2016, para.10). This does not exclude the possibility of both physical subcultures and digital crowdcultures simultaneously existing to provide compelling myths, but Holt’s argument is that subcultures have predominantly moved online.

According to Holt (2016), “digital technologies have not only created potent new social networks but also dramatically altered how culture works” (para.3). In this way, he suggests that social media has influenced not only how culture influences people, but the culture itself. In the new social media paradigm, there is a lack of success for branded products and sponsorships as branded content do not appeal to, or engage, consumers to the degree that companies could previously rely on. Holt posits that the introduction of social media argues in favor of the importance of cultural branding, and subsequently presents an updated version of the framework to incorporate crowdculture:

1) Map the cultural orthodoxy
2) Locate the cultural opportunity
3) Target the crowdculture
4) Diffuse the new ideology

5) Innovate continually, using cultural flashpoints
   (Holt, 2016)

In Holt’s 2020 article, he states that “for incumbents to innovate, they’ll need to adopt a second mantra: “think like a cultural entrepreneur” (final para.). This indicates a potential link to cultural entrepreneurship while highlighting the lack of focus on entrepreneurship within cultural branding. Holt’s statement is directed to incumbents aiming to counteract culturally entrepreneurial entrants into their domain by being cultural entrepreneurs themselves. As such, the application of cultural branding on start-ups or smaller entrepreneurial ventures remains limited.

Holt dedicates considerable space in Cultural Strategy (2010) to explaining why larger companies struggle to both come up with and implement cultural branding strategies. Larger companies develop brand bureaucracies, which “stifle innovation” due to “sciency marketing” and “command-and-control management” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.293-94). The opposite, an “informal organization structure that is antithetic to the brand bureaucracy” is given the term cultural studio (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.312). Holt and Cameron’s research is focused on larger companies with the aim of getting them to become more culturally innovative by acting more like cultural studios.

It would also be logical to assume that if brand bureaucracies are a consequence of company size, then new ventures would have less of a brand bureaucracy. Holt touches upon this briefly: “for smaller companies and start-ups that lack a formal MBA-driven marketing function, cultural studios can form organically “above ground”, as participants iterate to the best organizational structure to pursue their innovation goals” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.336). The opposite, an “underground” cultural studio, occasionally occurs in larger businesses when a “well-placed manager is able to create enough autonomy within the organization [to get unorthodox moves through]” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.336). However, these chances tend to occur in reaction to crisis, and are thus usually short-lived. This argument implies that cultural innovation might be easier to maintain through cultural studios in newly started brands. This is an idea that Holt and Cameron mention several times in the book. For instance, they mention how “managers bemoaned that, despite their huge advantages in resources and market power, tiny start-ups
continually beat them to the innovation punch” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.x). However, since their theory is about a general theory of market innovation, they do not expand much on how the cultural branding principles might apply differently to smaller brands for whom innovation might be less encumbered by brand bureaucracies.

Entrepreneurial references are not completely lacking from cultural branding. Holt calls several of his studied case companies, e.g. Vitaminwater, Patagonia, ESPN and Snapple, “entrepreneurial start-ups” (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p.284). However, this is arguably a loose application of the term, as when the book was published in 2010, only Vitaminwater had the best claim of being considered a start-up at the time, having been established in 2000. The others, Patagonia (1973), ESPN (1979) and Snapple (1972) have less of a claim to being considered start-ups, due to their founding dates. Furthermore, Holt’s focus in these cases was on the re-invention they went through several years after launch, and hence, cultural branding research still seem to lack development in the context of early entrepreneurship, as well as the study of recently established brands.

2.2 Entrepreneurial branding

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) make up over 95% of businesses worldwide which explains the growing interest in entrepreneurship research over the past two decades (Spence & Essoussi, 2010; Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007). While streams of entrepreneurship literature have emerged that explore entrepreneurial marketing processes, there is still little research which combines entrepreneurship and branding (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). Considering that entrepreneurial companies face unique challenges related to limited access to resources and smaller budgets, some entrepreneurial branding scholars argue that the lack of small business perspectives in traditional branding literature is an issue (Abimbola & Vallster, 2007; Krake, 2005). This section will provide an overview of the small, but growing, literature on branding and brand management in entrepreneurial ventures, and present three key topics that are prevalent in entrepreneurial branding literature and relevant to the topic and purpose of this thesis.

Perhaps most noteworthy is that start-ups and entrepreneurial ventures tend to neglect branding in favor of a strong focus on product and price. Traditionally, marketing strategies in these types of businesses have been characterized by a high sales-orientation, and thus branding and brand management tend to
receive little or no attention (Krake, 2005). Early recommendations from studies on entrepreneurial branding centered around keeping the branding efforts small by focusing on establishing one or two key associations for their brands (Keller, 1998; Abimbola, 2001). Furthermore, corporate brand identity tends to emerge over time through the daily proceedings and the company’s products, rather than being something which is consciously and strategically developed (Juntunen et al., 2010). Overall, studies show that there is a lack of understanding among founders and managers of entrepreneurial companies of the advantages and opportunities that a strong brand can bring, but also, what it takes to build a strong brand (Krake, 2005). This highlights that despite the growing research on entrepreneurial branding, there remains a disconnect between the academic world and the managerial world.

The first theme is the role of brands and branding in entrepreneurial ventures. Arguably, branding is of key importance to all businesses as research has proven time and time again the multitude of benefits that a strong brand provides (Abimbola, 2001; Merrilees, 2007; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). Most interestingly for entrepreneurial companies, in some studies on start-ups, researchers have highlighted that brands represent a key resource that has an even larger impact on a company’s competitiveness in the market than their size (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007). This supports the argument that branding is of key importance also for smaller, entrepreneurial ventures. For instance, brands hold symbolic meaning that facilitate and contribute to consumers’ identity projects. Abimbola and Vallaster (2007) argue that in today’s fragmented society, the identity values that a brand offers become even more important as an incentive that influences consumers’ purchase decisions. This indicates that new entrepreneurial ventures should focus on creating brands that represent and share the same values as their target consumers. Furthermore, studies suggest that branding facilitates the innovation process in entrepreneurial ventures. Merrilees (2007) argues that branding provides a focus to the innovative and creative processes that occur in the activities of new entrepreneurial ventures. In other words, branding principles can act as a filter that enables new businesses to faster identify opportunities in the market. In summary, branding can be considered a crucial activity to ensure the survival and success of a new entrepreneurial venture (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010), which supports the aim of this thesis in exploring cultural branding in an entrepreneurial context.
The second theme is related to the *importance of networks* in smaller and entrepreneurial organizations. Due to constrictions related to limited resources and smaller budgets, entrepreneurial brands must rely on networks in many aspects of their operations (Abimbola, 2001). For instance, entrepreneurial companies cannot afford spectacular and costly brand launches, and instead often have to rely on networks and word-of-mouth to achieve brand awareness (Abimbola, 2001). Furthermore, start-ups should leverage the favorable associations of more established brands, e.g. through partnerships or collaborations, to circumvent their resource limitations and strengthen their brand (Krake, 2005). This likely also helps with achieving brand awareness.

Studies in entrepreneurial branding have also shown that brands contribute to entrepreneurial companies’ ability to effectively link their internal and external environment (Abimbola, 2001). Multiple studies find that entrepreneurial businesses that engage in branding from the start gained easier access to new venture capital, had increased access to suppliers in both early and later stages of the business, and had a higher customer acquisition speed in the early-growth stage (Merrilees, 2007). Additionally, according to Krake (2005), the entity of the brand in smaller and medium-sized companies are much closer integrated with the founder than in larger companies. This suggests that founders in entrepreneurial ventures have a bigger influence over the brand identity and branding strategies, but also that founders that engage in branding can leverage this in interactions with various stakeholders.

The third and last theme emerged through the literature review on entrepreneurial branding is the *role of the founder*. There is a clear consensus within the literature that the founder has a central role in the branding process in entrepreneurial companies (Merrilees, 2007). Krake’s (2005) extensive review on entrepreneurial branding models shows that the founder tends to have a key role in the frameworks. This could be due to the smaller size that characterizes these types of organizations, which means that the founder tends to have a unifying role for the company and possess larger influence on the organizational culture (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007). Furthermore, some scholars argue that the founders personify the brands and thus play a direct role in representing and communicating the brand to the external environment (Krake, 2005), e.g. to investors, suppliers, consumers, and other stakeholders. Other researchers go even further and claim that entrepreneurial brands are a direct continuation of the founder’s opinions, values, and personal mission. This implies that brands are not created to fill a space
in the market or fulfil supposed unmet consumer needs that have been identified by market research (Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Rather, it is the founder’s own personality and characteristics that become the source for developing a brand’s identity and core values (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007). Either way, the literature agrees that the founder has an important role in the creation, development, and success of a brand.

Despite these findings, the literature review on entrepreneurial branding indicates that the founder’s influential position, and the opportunities emerging from that, are rarely utilized among start-ups and entrepreneurial SMEs trying to build a strong brand (Krake, 2005). This insight provides a bridge over to the section on cultural entrepreneurship theory, which explores how founder narratives and storytelling contribute to the growth and development of entrepreneurial businesses.

2.3 Cultural entrepreneurship

Cultural entrepreneurship is a field that is mostly associated with Lounsbury & Glynn, who with their (2001) paper “Cultural entrepreneurship: stories, legitimacy, and the acquisition of resources”, set a direction and main themes for this sub-field. According to Lounsbury & Glynn (2001), cultural entrepreneurship is “the process of storytelling that mediates between extant stocks of entrepreneurial resources and subsequent capital acquisition and wealth creation” (p.545). The field was surveyed and assessed in their 2019 Element (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019).

Before Lounsbury & Glynn’s (2001) cultural stream, there was another stream that focused on entrepreneurial processes in the culture sector. This stream viewed culture as a sector, containing “organizational forms, governance structures, and cultural products, ranging from museums, symphonies, and operas” (Gehman & Soublière, 2017, p.64). Lounsbury and Glynn represent an alternative approach to cultural entrepreneurship that developed in parallel but with little overlap. Driven by a lack of cultural explanations in how entrepreneurs were able to succeed, they used the “toolbox” conceptualization of culture (Swidler, 1986, as cited in Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019) to develop a framework (see Figure 1) for how “a set of available symbols, meanings, and explanations [in the culture] … could be appropriated by entrepreneurs to narrate, rationalize, and make convincing the potential of their new venture” (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019, p.57). Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) explain that examples
of entrepreneurial stocks of resource capital include “technological capital, financial capital, intellectual capital, human capital, social capital” (p.548), while entrepreneurial stocks of institutional capital include “industry legitimacy, industry norms and rules, industry infrastructure” (p.548).

![Figure 1: Theoretical Model of Cultural Entrepreneurship (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019)](image)

Cultural entrepreneurship sees entrepreneurs as agents who use cultural resource stocks to create stories. It is the degree of resonance of such narratives that have the power to give a newly founded organization identity and legitimacy in the interactions with the external world (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). Thus, there are two main phases in cultural entrepreneurship: 1) Identity formation, and 2) Cultural resonance of identity stories.

*Identity formation* is the stage in which entrepreneurs use the cultural and other resources at their disposal to formulate a distinct entrepreneurial narrative (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). In their formulation, entrepreneurial stories must have “narrative fidelity, claim a distinct identity, and relate this identity within broader socio-cultural understandings” (Gehman & Soublière, 2017, p.64). Furthermore, the second stage follows the narrative formation and aims to explain the “effectiveness of that narrative in
appealing to resource providers who can endow the new venture with legitimacy, needed assets, and ultimately, wealth” (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019, p.23). These narratives are used by founders of entrepreneurial ventures to appeal to external stakeholders, to get funding and achieve cultural resonance required to sell their products.

Entrepreneurs need to decide on the optimal level of distinctiveness by managing the tension between “legitimacy pressures to appear similar … or [to appeal to] those audiences who value differentiation from [similar businesses]” (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019, p.30). This tension has encouraged research on optimal distinctiveness (e.g., Deephouse, 1999; Durand & Calori, 2006; Navis & Glynn, 2011). An important area where distinctiveness meets its limits is in how entrepreneurs pitch new ideas to investors, suggesting that investors need to be able to understand new business ventures for them to receive necessary funding (Navis & Glynn, 2011).

The literature suggests that legitimacy happens first, and differentiation second. For example, Navis and Glynn (2011) studied the emergence of satellite radio and found that entrepreneurs early-on focused on establishing legitimacy, and afterwards focused on differentiating their firms within the market (Gehman & Soublière, 2017). Cultural entrepreneurship separates the processes of legitimacy and differentiation into processes that happen at different times, whereas cultural branding does not have this temporal element separating legitimization and differentiation.

2.4 Linkages between cultural branding and cultural entrepreneurship

In addition to Lounsbury & Glynn’s (2001) stream of cultural entrepreneurship, there has been a new stream emerging about how cultural framings evolve over time – what Gehman and Soublière (2017) call cultural entrepreneurship 3.0. Stream 1.0 was cultural entrepreneurship in the culture industries (“making culture”), stream 2.0 was Lounsbury & Glynn’s interpretation (“deploying culture”), whereas stream 3.0 is described as “cultural making” (Gehman & Soublière, 2017, p.62). While stream 2.0 does not preclude the possibility, stream 3.0 emphasizes that cultural entrepreneurship narratives are not a one-time accomplishment, but is a constant process (Gehman and Soublière, 2017). Entrepreneurial narratives can and should be updated over time, which corresponds well to Holt’s model of cultural innovation also requiring constant adjustment (Holt & Cameron, 2010).
The literature review on cultural entrepreneurship suggests that there has been less focus on how exactly entrepreneurs choose which stories to tell to achieve cultural resonance. The focus seems to be on appealing to stakeholders more than developing a framework for how the narratives can also achieve cultural resonance. Cultural entrepreneurship does not focus on *how* cultural resonance is achieved, but cultural branding does. Cultural branding does not include organizational factors such as the entrepreneur’s role in narrative formation and how narratives are used to legitimize new ventures vis-à-vis external stakeholders, including investors, but cultural entrepreneurship does. Together, the conducted literature reviews suggest that the areas that are neglected by cultural entrepreneurship are integral parts of cultural branding, and vice-versa.
3. Methodology

In this chapter, the thesis’ philosophical stance and methodological choices are outlined and discussed. This includes the research philosophy, research approach and design, case selection and data collection methods, and the choice of analysis methods. The chapter concludes with reflections on the study’s quality of research.

3.1 Research philosophy

Underpinning all research is the set of assumptions and beliefs which researchers hold about the nature of reality and the development of knowledge. Together, they form the research philosophy which justifies the methodological choices, research strategy, data collection techniques and analysis procedures of a study (Saunders et al., 2015). Saunders et al. (2015) identifies five major scientific philosophies that are distinguished by their different ontological and epistemological positions. The two concepts are closely linked, as ontology refers to the researcher’s stance on the nature and existence of the objects or phenomenon they are studying, while epistemology relates to the researcher’s assumptions regarding knowledge: what constitutes as valid knowledge and how knowledge is developed or acquired (Moon & Backman, 2014). Consequently, a high degree of consistency between the set of assumptions is key in order to design a coherent research study. In the following section, we will establish the research philosophy of this thesis and argue for how it relates to the purpose of this thesis and the research questions.

The aim of this thesis is to seek an understanding of how new entrepreneurial ventures can apply cultural branding principles to create iconic brands and illustrate how elements of entrepreneurship theory can enrich cultural branding theory. To address this purpose, this thesis adheres to the philosophy of critical realism. Critical realism is positioned in the middle of the ontological spectrum, and represents an interface between naïve realism, which posits the existence of one true reality, and relativism, which claims that there are as many realities as there are human beings, since each individual’s reality is the result of their own unique mental constructs, and thus no objective truths (Moon & Backman, 2014). Critical realist ontology makes a distinction between the real world and the observable, empirical world,
and thus favors a structured and layered ontology that distinguishes between three layers of reality: the Empirical, the Actual, and the Real (see Figure 2) (Saunders et al., 2015).

Saunders et al. (2015) explains that critical realists assume the existence of an external reality which exists independent of human perceptions and experiences. However, this core of reality, the Real, is hidden and thus, we are unable to directly observe or study it. Instead, the world that humans observe and experience, the Empirical, are in fact manifestations of the Real and not the true phenomena itself. Therefore, in order to understand the unobservable real world, researchers need to draw upon their observations of phenomena and events to make assumptions about the underlying reality that may have caused those events, through abductive reasoning. Consequently, a critical realist ontology is well-suited for the methodological choice of case study research, as case studies aim to understand complex social phenomena through empirical analysis (Yin, 2014).

![Figure 2: Critical realist stratified ontology (Saunders et al., 2015)](image)

Research that adopts a critical realist philosophy aims to gain an understanding of the bigger picture by examining its smaller parts (Saunders et al., 2015). This aligns with Holt’s own cultural branding research, where micro-level data is acquired through methods such as the decoding of advertisements (ads), phenomenological interviews, and case studies, and interpreted through macro-level analysis (Heding et al., 2016). Holt (2002) explains, “to study how consumer culture operates, I examine the phenomena that it structures, people’s everyday consumption practices. In methodological terms, I will
use microlevel data – people’s stories about their consumption – to investigate macrolevel constructs.” (p.73).

Furthermore, research philosophies are differentiated depending on where their epistemological assumptions lie on the objectivism–subjectivism continuum (Saunders et al., 2015). According to Reed (2005, as cited in Saunders et al., 2015), critical realists embrace epistemological relativism that follows the theoretical perspective of social constructionism, which assumes that knowledge is dependent on its historical and cultural context, and that facts are not independent truths but social constructs which are created through social interactions in which people create shared meanings and realities (Saunders et al., 2015). However, Crotty (1998) highlights an important distinction between constructionist epistemology and subjectivist epistemology, which is that the constructionist epistemological assumption (that knowledge or meaning is socially constructed) does not mean that reality is pluralistic. Consequently, a critical realist ontology is not at odds with a social constructionist epistemology. This thesis adopts the epistemological assumptions of social constructionism as our purpose is not to uncover exact objective knowledge, but rather to better understand the construction of brand iconicity as a culturally and socially situated phenomena. Hence, this purpose will be achieved through interpreting empirical data through the theories and frameworks provided by cultural branding, entrepreneurial branding, and cultural entrepreneurship.

3.2 Research approach and design

The purpose of this research is to better understand how cultural branding principles can facilitate new entrepreneurial ventures’ development to become iconic brands, assess the applicability of Holt’s cultural branding framework in an entrepreneurial context and identify potential challenges, and illustrate the interdisciplinary possibilities that arise from integrating elements of cultural entrepreneurship theory with cultural branding theory. In other words, the goal is to both understand the phenomenon and expand upon existing theory, which renders the objectives of this research as both explanatory and descriptive. To address the research objectives of this study, we have chosen a qualitative and abductive case study approach as our research design.
In general, the goal of qualitative research is sensemaking, to develop knowledge about a phenomenon by studying how individuals within a certain context experience and make sense of the phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Qualitative studies strive to describe, understand, analyze, and interpret the individuals' beliefs and behavior, and how the social contexts within which they exist are understood by the individual and shapes their perceptions and practices (Fossey et al., 2002). As such, qualitative research favors an explorative approach that involves open-ended and iterative methods (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). The aims and methods associated with qualitative research align with our purpose, which is why we decided on a qualitative approach for our study.

An abductive approach describes a research process where the researcher collects data to investigate a phenomenon, identify themes, and explain patterns, to either develop new theory or enrich existing theory (Saunders et al., 2015). However, abductive studies start by establishing a theoretical foundation which guides the initial data collection. As the information is gathered and new observations are made and the empirical area of application is developed, the researcher subsequently adjusts, develops, or redefines the theoretical framework (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). Accordingly, abductive research is an iterative process as the researcher moves back and forth between data collection and theoretical constructs to interpret and create meaning (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Given the nature of the research objectives, we believe that an abductive research approach is the most suitable choice for our thesis. Specifically, we aim to use Holt and Cameron’s (2010) cultural branding framework to identify initial themes that will guide the collection and analysis of data. However, due to the underexplored nature of cultural branding in an entrepreneurial context, we expect new questions to arise as the study progresses that will require us to revisit entrepreneurship theories that we believe will aid us in conducting the analysis and interpret the results. Hence, using an abductive approach will allow us to meet the purpose of our thesis which, in short, is to develop and enrich cultural branding theory with entrepreneurship theory.

### 3.2.1 Multiple-case study

We have chosen multiple-case study as our research design. Yin (2014) argues that case study research is the most appropriate method when the main research questions pertain to questions of “how” and “why”, and if the researcher believes that to understand a phenomenon it will require an understanding of important contextual conditions relevant to that case. When considering the many historic factors and
processes involved with a brands’ rise to icon status, it is nearly impossible – and, following Yin’s logic, undesirable – to separate the companies from their respective environments, which supports our choice of case study as the research design.

Using a multiple-case study design, compared to using a single case study, has the advantage of enabling the researcher to compare and contrast the findings from each case (Bryman & Bell, 2011). According to Bryman and Bell (2011), this is a practice which has become increasingly common within business and management research as the comparative element allows for greater theoretical reflections on the case findings. This is because using multiple cases provides an opportunity of achieving analytical generalization of the study’s results. Yin (2014) explains that when a case study is designed based on relevant theoretical premises, following an abductive approach, the subsequent findings will either corroborate, modify, reject, or advance the original theory, or illuminate entirely new theoretical concepts. Accordingly, the implications extend to situations beyond the original case study which promotes an analytical generalization that occurs on a higher conceptual level than the specific cases, thus allowing the researcher to expand and generalize theories (Yin, 2014). Hence, studies using a multiple-case design can be considered more scientifically robust.

Following this line of reasoning, we aim to apply the cultural branding theory in multiple contexts through a multiple-case study, while keeping the general cultural environment the same for all cases. Representing different markets, each case consists of the historical and cultural experience that each brand underwent in their journey to become iconic. This will allow us to gain a broader perspective on cultural branding in an entrepreneurial context.

3.3 Case selection

Due to the nature of its research, most qualitative studies employ purposive sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Purposive sampling involves choosing the objects of study, whether it is organizations, documents, people, cases, etc. in direct accordance with the research questions (Bryman, 2012). The idea is that the research questions give an indication of what objects are important for the analysis and thus should be selected as the focus of the research. For this study, the purpose is to examine cultural branding in an entrepreneurial context and the main research question thus inquires how new entrepreneurial
brands can successfully apply cultural branding principles to reach iconic status. Therefore, we have chosen four consumer brands that were founded recently, in the social media age, as our cases. We picked brands that had become iconic according to the definition outlined in 2.1.2, thus we could assume that the chosen brands would demonstrate cultural branding principles at least to a degree, which was required for the purpose of our thesis. Yet, we limited our area of focus to the brand’s founding and first five years of operation, to get at the processes that were most pertinent during their establishment and early-growth phase.

Yin (2014) argues that researchers who strive to conduct a multiple-case study should approach the case selection as if they were conducting multiple individual experiments. Yin refers to this line of reasoning as following a replication design. By following a replication design, the objective of the case selection is to choose cases that either predict similar results or predict contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons (Yin, 2014). The underlying logic is that the predictions are based upon theory, and thus each case is selected because it reflects an area of theoretical interest. For this study, the theoretical assumption is that cultural branding principles can be applied regardless of the brand’s product offering, which is why we have chosen cases that each represent a different product market. Furthermore, we have included one brand in our selection, White Claw, whose founder had previous entrepreneurial experience from launching brands. We believe that including White Claw will allow us to better test the elements of entrepreneurial theory that we believe, based on the literature review, will enrich the cultural branding framework. If the findings of the multiple-case study identify patterns that occur across the multiple cases, the combined strength of the findings provide substantial support for the subsequent conclusions and theoretical contribution of the study (Yin, 2014). In practice, a replication approach entails that each individual case analysis constitutes a “whole” study which is individually conducted, before the findings of each individual study is compared at the end to draw cross-case conclusions that provide the foundation for modification or elaboration of the theory (Yin, 2014).

To ensure that the selected cases fit the purpose of the study, we followed the principles outlined by Stake’s 2006 book on multiple case study analysis when deciding on our cases. Firstly, Stake (2006) argues that the ideal number of cases for a multiple-case study is between four and six cases. We chose four cases to ensure enough data to conduct a productive cross-case analysis, as well as due to time and
space constraints. Furthermore, Stake highlights three key criteria to consider when choosing the cases to ensure a thorough understanding of the phenomena which the researchers wish to study. The three factors are:

- Is the case relevant to the phenomenon?
- Do the cases provide diversity across contexts?
- Do the cases provide good opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts?

(Stake, 2006)

First, we wish to examine how new entrepreneurial ventures can successfully apply cultural branding principles, and how the rise of social media affects this process. Therefore, we chose consumer brands Warby Parker, Away, Glossier, and White Claw as our cases, since they were each established after 2010, in the social media age. Furthermore, all brands have a strong digital presence: Warby Parker, Away, and Glossier started as direct-to-consumer (DTC), e-commerce brands. As such, they were considered particularly relevant to explore the social media element of the research objective. White Claw is the exception, as it did not start out as an e-commerce brand. However, we knew that the brand had a strong online presence and thus we felt that including White Claw as a case could provide a different perspective on the role of social media in cultural branding. This line of reasoning relates to Stake’s (2006) second criteria.

Second, we wanted the cases to provide diversity across contexts by representing different product categories and price points. Warby Parker is an eyewear brand, Away sells travel luggage, Glossier is a beauty brand that sells skincare and makeup products, and White Claw sells hard seltzers. To allow for comparison across product categories, we did not select brands that sold very expensive, high-involvement products such as cars. The heterogeneity of the chosen brands mean that they exist in different contexts, i.e. product markets that are characterized by different key attributes, while still being part of the same overarching national culture – 2010s American society. Additionally, we chose to include White Claw as it forms a counter-point to our other cases regarding founder backgrounds. We believe that White Claw will be instructive in demonstrating the differences between cultural branding principles for new brands launched by completely new firms (Warby Parker, Away, and Glossier) and new brands launched by established ones (White Claw). Consequently, this ensures that the cases have
enough similarity to allow for a fruitful cross-case comparison, while being distinct enough to provide the study with different perspectives that help illustrate the studied phenomena. Together, the cases will contribute to answering the research questions in a convincing manner.

Third, Stake highlights that the chosen cases should facilitate insight into the area of study. We believe that the four cases meet this criterion since we suspected the cases to have embodied cultural branding principles, based on the initial research into the brands during the selection process. Early indications suggested that each of the brands had strong cultural resonance, based on the level of excitement that they were being talked about online, as well as having a pervasive presence in American culture.

3.4 Data collection
We followed Yin’s (2014) recommendations for data collection to achieve data saturation and ensure validity and reliability of the gathered evidence. According to Yin, researchers should strive to use multiple sources of evidence. When a case study is based on several different sources of information, the study’s findings and the conclusions which the researcher makes become more convincing and accurate (Yin, 2014). Accordingly, multiple sources of evidence strengthen the validity of the study as the different sources promote the likelihood that the research accurately explained the phenomenon. As such, it was our intention to use a varied set of evidence, encompassing third-party article written by interested observers, as well as first-party articles, blog posts, webpages, and podcast interviews written by, or featuring, the founders and/or senior marketing executives of the case brands. Other sources of information used included the brands’ own websites, the social media channel(s) of the brands, newspaper articles and magazine articles, online advertising databases and campaign archives.

The data collection was conducted based on the thesis’ purpose and on the initial themes we wanted to explore based on the theoretical framework, e.g. resource acquisition. Furthermore, the data was collected primarily from secondary sources. Secondary data is commonly used in case study research to investigate a phenomenon, and within cultural branding research, researchers are recommended to customize their data collection depending on the research project (Saunders et al., 2015; Heding et al., 2016). For instance, Holt’s case studies on Starbucks and Vitaminwater relied solely on secondary materials available in the public domain, while other of his cases involved a combination of analyzing the brand’s past advertising campaigns and interviews with brand executives (Holt & Cameron, 2010).
Due to the limitations our study faced in terms of time and accessibility to the brands in question, we opted for using secondary data as our source of analysis. However, we believe that the breadth of data in terms of different sources and types of data, including raw data such as interview transcripts and access to campaign archives, have allowed us to accurately illustrate the studied phenomena and answer the research questions. Furthermore, by using multiple sources we gained access to different perspectives on the same matter. For instance, we were able to compare the founder’s first-hand account on certain branding-related aspects through podcast interviews, with the brand’s official story on their website, with an independent article written by another observer.

To ensure high-quality and robust secondary data, we limited the use of newspapers and websites to trustworthy sources. In situations where the aim was to collect evidence that provided a consumer perspective, e.g. individual consumers’ opinions on the case brand’s products or communication, we also used sources such as blog posts. However, since the data collected from those sources was used only to illustrate how the case brands’ cultural ideology was received by consumers, we do not believe that it affected the validity of the thesis. Additionally, we relied to the furthest possible extent on interviews with the founders in podcasts and magazines to get direct insight into the branding strategies and considerations employed by the cases. For instance, the podcast “How I Built This” hosted by the American public-service radio station NPR, provided long, in-depth interviews with the founders of Warby Parker, Away, and Glossier covering major relevant aspects of how they successfully built their brands. Lastly, all secondary data was critically evaluated based on two criteria developed to ensure high validity and reliability: the data’s relevance to the research questions and objectives, and how well suited the data is for the intended analysis by evaluating the data’s measurement validity and potential bias (Saunders et al., 2015). Sources or data that did not meet these criteria were omitted from the study. In cases of doubt, we compared the data against evidence collected from other sources to ensure that the information was as accurate and reliable as possible.

3.5 Data analysis

As established in the theory chapter, cultural branding draws upon elements of consumer culture theory and cultural consumption. Central to cultural studies is the ability to deconstruct surface-level meanings to understand and interpret the production and circulation of cultural meaning (Heding et al., 2016). This
requires a certain approach to data analysis that involves a variety of methods inspired by several interpretive research traditions. What unites all analysis methods, however, is that micro-level data is interpreted through macro-level analysis. In this way, evidence from individual cases can be elevated to illustrate shared cultural constructs (Heding et al., 2016). In this study, we use two methods of analysis: content analysis and semiotics.

3.5.1 Qualitative and ethnographic content analysis

Qualitative content analysis involves finding and interpreting the underlying themes in the collected data. In contrast with quantitative analysis methods, qualitative content analysis takes a more implicit approach to establishing themes in the data. Usually, identified themes or categories are illustrated through excerpts and quotations from the collected data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This aligns with inductive coding methods such as grounded-theory, where the data analysis process takes a ground-up approach whereby codes and themes are derived from the data with no preceding theoretical framework (Saunders et al., 2015).

In an attempt to structure the qualitative content analysis process, Altheide (1996) introduced “ethnographic content analysis” as an alternative approach for analyzing qualitative data. Distinctive of ethnographic content analysis is that it takes a more abductive approach to the analysis process, in that the researcher iteratively revises the categories and themes that either were established before the analysis began, or emerged during the analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Considering that the themes that we wish to explore through our analysis were in part derived from the theoretical framework, we have chosen ethnographic content analysis as our method of data analysis.

Altheide (1996) explains that ethnographic content analysis

“follows a recursive and reflexive movement between concept development [and] sampling-data, collection [and] data, coding [and] data, and analysis [and] interpretation. The aim is to be systematic and analytic but not rigid. Categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge during the study, including an orientation to constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances.” (p.16; emphasis in original)
As such, ethnographic content analysis allows the researcher to move back and forth between conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and interpretation in an iterative process (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In relation to our study, we began the data analysis based on the categories or themes derived from our theoretical framework, which in turn was informed by our research questions. As we simultaneously gathered and analyzed the empirical evidence, new questions arose in relation to the cases which were not sufficiently addressed by the initial themes related to cultural branding. For instance, themes relating to entrepreneurial branding theory were incorporated into the analytic framework, e.g. networks and founder narratives. Then, we used these new emerging themes as we continued to analyze the cases. This summarizes the analytical strategy that we employed in the analysis chapter. To facilitate our understanding and interpretation of content in the analysis, we have employed the analysis technique of semiotics.

### 3.5.2 Semiotics

Semiotics is an analysis technique that involves studying and interpreting the meanings of signs and symbols in communication. The premise of semiotics is that signs and symbols constitute a system of codes that convey hidden meaning (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As such, the focus of semiotic analysis is on understanding how individuals interpret and create meaning from the signs they encounter in everyday life. However, the meanings of signs are constantly anchored within a cultural context. Hackley (2003) explains that “the meaning of signs is arbitrary. In principle, anything could stand for anything else. It is the cultural context that frames the interpretation of signs and imbues particular signs with localized meanings” (p.162). As such, how an individual interprets and draws meaning from a sign – whether it’s an image, an ad, a slogan, or logo – will depend on his or her personal and cultural background (Heding et al., 2016).

By employing semiotic analysis in our case study, we aim to uncover the hidden cultural myths, meaning and codes imbued in the commercial messages communicated by our case brands. Due to the subjective nature of semiotics, we as researchers acknowledge that our own backgrounds, enculturation, and preunderstandings shape how we deconstruct and interpret the content in our analysis. Yet, by discussing and comparing our interpretations of the semiotic signs that we study, we believe that we are able to
achieve a more varied understanding that will benefit our study, the findings and the conclusions that we make.

3.6 Limitations and reflections on quality of research

For a researcher to be able to establish credible and scientifically robust findings, it is important that he or she considers the aptness of the research design in answering the research questions, before conducting the study (Saunders et al., 2015). According to Bryman & Bell (2011), reliability, replicability, and validity are three main criteria which are most used by researchers to evaluate and make judgements about the quality of their study. Bryman and Bell explain that the first criterion, reliability, evaluates whether the research results of a study can easily be repeated. Closely associated with this is the second criterion, replicability, which examines if the study can be replicated (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In other words, whether the researcher has been transparent and detailed in disclosing the research procedures. Lastly, validity addresses the integrity of the conclusions that a study generates (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As such, many scholars consider validity to be the most important criterion in establishing the research quality (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015; Bryman & Bell, 2011).

However, Saunders et al. (2015) argue that the researcher’s ontological stance will ultimately affect in how the researcher applies such criteria to assess the quality of research. A positivist researcher will use strict measurements of reliability, validity, and replicability to ensure that their study produces objective and generalizable results (Saunders et al., 2015). On the other hand, interpretivist or relativist researchers commonly seek to adapt these criteria to fit their qualitative research approach (Saunders et al., 2015). In this thesis, we embrace a social constructionist epistemological stance. This means that we believe that there are no objective facts but rather, facts are social constructs that are agreed upon by people who create shared meanings through social interaction (Saunders et al., 2015). The purpose of our research is to gain a thorough understanding of the phenomena within the context that we are studying, i.e. the application of cultural branding in an entrepreneurial context. Therefore, as suggested by Saunders et al. (2015), we will need to adapt the concepts of reliability, validity, and replicability to evaluate the quality of our research. In practice, this means that we will use alternative criteria that have been developed with the nature of qualitative research in mind to enrich our reflection. These alternative criteria, developed
by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are credibility, transferability, and dependability, and are meant to parallel the concepts of internal validity, external validity and reliability, respectively (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

In qualitative studies, the credibility-criterion is used to ensure that the research findings accurately represent the socially constructed cultural meanings that the analysis intended to deconstruct, interpret, and understand (Saunders et al., 2015). In other words, credibility measures to what extent a study’s findings are correct and accurate. In our study, we have gathered a large and varied amount of empirical data which ensures that our findings aim for high levels of credibility (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). According to Heide and Simonsson (2014), case studies that account for a wide variety of perspectives are better able to provide an accurate representation of the studied phenomenon and thus, the quality of the case study is higher. In our multiple-case study, we have used a diverse set of sources of evidence, including the first-hand accounts from the cases’ founders and/or brand executives through podcasts and interviews, information on company webpages and owned social media channels, newspaper articles, ads and campaigns sourced from online archives, and direct consumer perspectives through blog posts. Hence, we have been able to gain thorough insight into different perspectives on the brands’ approach regarding cultural branding principles, communication methods, crafting of narratives, and strategies for resource acquisition, etc.

The second criterion, transferability, relates to the external validity or generalizability of a qualitative study. Since qualitative case studies focus on achieving depth rather than breadth, their findings tend to highlight the contextual uniqueness and significance of the phenomenon that is studied (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As such, it is of less interest whether the findings are useful in an entirely different context, like in quantitative studies. Instead, qualitative researchers are advised to produce thick descriptions, which are in-depth accounts of the details of a culture (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The large and diverse set of data collected for our study helps us to accurately describe and explain the cultural context of our chosen cases. However, due to limitations of allowed pages and time-constraints, we were not able to explore in-depth all the themes that were encountered during the data collection and analysis. If we had opted for a single case study instead, rather than multiple-case study, we may have been able to get even closer to the phenomenon that we aimed to study.
Furthermore, we opted to study American brands that today have reached iconic status, though we restricted our focus of study to their initial years of operations. We made this choice as we wanted to study brands that we could assume would demonstrate cultural branding principles to at least a degree, as this was a requirement for the objective of our thesis. We had otherwise surveyed potential iconic European brands to include in our case studies, but we found that there were few brands that have achieved icon status in the consumer goods space recently, and exceptionally few that could be called pan-European icons that satisfied our requirements. We chose iconic brands that had been established recently, i.e. within the last 15 years, to examine entrepreneurial brands in the most modern context possible. By delimiting our study to the first five years of their operation, we wanted to explore if cultural branding played a role from the start when the brands were still in their entrepreneurial early-growth stage, or if a cultural branding approach was introduced at a later stage. The advantage of our choice is that we minimized the risk of choosing cases where no cultural branding strategies had been used, and we had access to a larger and wider amount of data due to the brands having an international presence in addition to their native America. Although, as the chosen brands did eventually become icons in their respective industries, we perhaps found fewer signs of early struggles than is normal for start-ups, which is an important consideration when answering the sub-research question regarding what challenges those new entrepreneurial businesses face when applying cultural branding strategies.

If we had instead opted to select a smaller entrepreneurial Danish case company, we would have been able to get closer to the brand and the phenomenon that we wanted to explore. Our chances of getting direct contact with the founder or other key figures within the brand’s organization would have been higher. If we had chosen a single case study of a Danish company, we could have used in-depth interviews as our research method, which would have allowed us to get an even deeper understanding of how the studied brand used cultural branding principles to achieve cultural resonance in a Danish entrepreneurial context. This would potentially increase the dependability of our study.

However, we believe that the benefits that our study gets from including a cross-case analysis between the four case studies outweighs the limitations that a multiple-case study represents. Since one of our aims was to contribute to building a bridge between cultural branding and cultural entrepreneurship, we believe that the cross-case analysis of the multiple-case study is key to meeting this objective.
Furthermore, we argue that we despite the limitations have managed to build highly detailed descriptions of the context within which the case brands exist, including arguments to support our observations and analysis. Hence, we argue that our study achieves a high level of transferability. Furthermore, the transferability is higher in studies where the researcher has provided an in-depth and transparent description of the process, including research objective and context, research questions, research design and methods, findings and analysis (Saunders et al., 2015), which is included in our thesis.

Lastly, the dependability-criterion mirrors reliability and is thus concerned with the trustworthiness of the study, including the likelihood that the findings remain stable over time (Bryman, 2012). Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2012) argue that the qualitative researcher can achieve dependability through adopting an “auditing” approach. This involves keeping complete and detailed records of all phases of the research process at hand, e.g. problem formulation, case selection criteria, data analysis methods, transcripts and notes (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In this way, researchers can check and confirm to how well they have followed proper research procedures, which impacts to what degree they are able to justify theoretical inferences based on the study’s findings (Bryman & Bell, 211). Thus, to achieve high dependability, we recorded our research process in depth, e.g. notes from meetings with our supervisor, transcripts from founder interviews, and list of themes used in case analysis.

Lastly, the findings of this study need to be carefully considered in the light of the constraints brought by our choice of research approach, i.e. using a qualitative multiple-case study instead of quantitative methods. As a result, we cannot based on our findings make generalizable claims regarding cultural branding that holds true for all entrepreneurial ventures. However, as explained earlier, this is not purpose of our thesis. Rather, our objective with this study is to achieve analytical generalization to make theoretical inferences based on the findings. Yin (2014) argues that a well-designed multiple-case study which is based on relevant theoretical premises and includes a cross-comparison section can generate findings that exist on a higher conceptual level than the individual cases. Based on this argument and our reflections as outlined in this section 3.7, we argue that our findings can fulfil the study’s purpose and answer the research questions in a thorough and credible manner.
4. Analysis

4.1 Warby Parker

4.1.1 Introducing Warby Parker

Warby Parker is a DTC eyewear brand that was founded in 2010 by friends Neil Blumenthal, Dave Gilboa, Andy Hunt, and Jeff Raider. The founders got the idea for the brand while they were students at Wharton Business School, after one of them had lost his glasses on a trip before the semester started (Warby Parker, n.d.). At the time, prescription glasses cost several hundreds of dollars, so the cost of replacing them was high which led the founders to start questioning why glasses were so expensive despite being technologically simple. Blumenthal had experience from the eyewear industry from his time working at the non-profit foundation VisionSpring, which produced and distributed low-cost eyeglasses to poor people in developing countries (Bahrenburg, 2010), and this provided the founders with two key insights. First, the reason why glasses were so expensive was because the industry was controlled by Luxottica who, with an 80% market share, had established an oligopoly that allowed them to charge a markup equivalent of 20 times the manufacturing cost (Inc., 2011). Second, the founders could drastically reduce prices by selling their glasses online, thus cutting out cost-inflating middlemen (Bahrenburg, 2010).

The result became Warby Parker, a vertically-integrated e-commerce brand that designed and produced their glasses and sold them on their own website with the same price for all styles – $95 (Shontell, 2017; Zax, 2012). To reduce consumers’ perceived risk, Warby Parker implemented a Home Try-On program where customers got to choose five frames that are sent to them to try on at home for a five-day period,
free of charge (Shontell, 2017). In addition, Warby Parker was founded with a social mission and use a “buy one, give one” business model where they donate one pair of eyeglasses for every pair sold to visually impaired people in poor countries, through partnerships with non-profits (Bahrenburg, 2010).

After being featured in leading fashion magazines Vogue and GQ in connection with their launch, Warby Parker sold out of their most popular frames – meeting their first year’s sales target in three weeks, were forced to temporarily suspend their Home Try-On program less than 48 hours after launching due to the high demand, and amassed a waitlist of 20,000 customers that took the brand nine months to work through (Grant, 2016; Mehra & Schultz, 2014).

Since their launch, Warby Parker has continued to grow and cemented themselves as an iconic brand. In 2011, the brand’s sales grew 500% (Zax, 2012). In the same year, the brand’s Facebook fanbase increased from 6600 fans to 51,083 and they were the fastest-growing Instagram account with a growth rate of 268% (Fuller, 2011). In 2013, Warby Parker opened their first flagship store in New York City’s SoHo district, next to Apple and Ralph Lauren (Knowledge at Wharton, 2013). In mid-2014, the brand had sold over one million pairs of glasses and donated the same number through VisionSpring (Stone, 2014). In 2015, Warby Parker was named the world’s most innovative company by Fast Company (Grant, 2016). In 2017, the eyewear brand hit unicorn status as they reached a valuation of over $1 billion (Raz, 2016). In 2020, Warby Parker had raised $245 million in funding and was valued at $3 billion (Crook, 2020). Lastly, in 2021, the company went public on the New York Stock Exchange (Tepper, 2022).

4.1.2 Warby Parker: Cultural Branding Analysis

*Eyewear’s cultural orthodoxy: The glamorous life of the wealthy and famous*

Prior to the launch of Warby Parker, the eyewear market was controlled by industry giant Luxottica. Luxottica both owned popular retailers such as LensCrafters and Sears Optical, and the licenses to major fashion brands such as Chanel and Prada (Grant, 2016). Designer eyewear brands had their different brand personalities and values that they wanted to communicate: Ray-Ban was free-spirited and embodied American rebelliousness (Seckler, 2007), Oakley was masculine and rugged (Porter, 2008), Tom Ford and Dolce & Gabbana was glamorous and sexy (Mower, 2007; Dunbar, 2010), and the likes of Burberry, Chanel, and Louis Vuitton signaled chic, elegance, and sophistication (20/20 Magazine,
However, their brand communication was largely following the same conventional cultural expression: the myth of celebrity glamour.

Following the economic upswing during the 90s, the early 2000s was a time marked by decadent fashion, a booming entertainment industry, and a peaking obsession with celebrity culture. The average American no longer turned to models for style inspiration, instead celebrities and TV shows such as Sex and the City became the fashion trendsetters (The Fashion Folks, 2017). During this era of celebrity glamour and worship, fashion and eyewear brands started enlisting actors, musicians, and reality stars to feature in their ads and promote their products to a larger degree than ever before (Vemuri & Madhav, 2004). Celebrity endorsements allowed eyewear brands to claim the positive associations that consumers had with the celebrities and leverage the celebrity’s fame and influence to boost brand awareness and increase consumers’ likelihood of purchase (Olenski, 2016). Consumers, who aspired to be like their favorite celebrities, would buy the glasses in hopes of getting a share of the glamour and success into their lives while signaling a degree of status and wealth to those around them.

Eyewear brand Foster Grant had been running the campaign “Who’s Behind those Foster Grants?” since the mid-60s, which always starred a celebrity – film stars, athletes, and supermodels – wearing a pair of sunglasses obscuring their face, and a caption or speaker reading a version of “Isn’t that [celebrity name] behind those Foster Grant glasses?” (Diaz, 2014). Many of their ads had a humorous undertone and often referenced sexual innuendos. In 2009, Hollywood actress Raquel Welch became the new spokesperson for Foster Grant and featured in a campaign for their sunglasses and reading glasses. In one of the videos, Welch is seen exiting a limo and being greeted by a starstruck public who compete to lend her their Foster Grant sunglasses as Welch appears to have forgotten her own (John’s Art Direction, 2021a). In another, two waiters at a restaurant spots Welch at a table reading a menu and asks, “Isn’t that Raquel Welch behind those Foster Grant sunglasses?”, before one of them approaches her and asks her if she’s seeing anything she likes, whereupon Welch looks up from the menu, pushes her reading glasses down, looks the young male waiter up and down and responds “I certainly do” in a seductive voice (John’s Art Direction, 2021b).
Print campaigns in magazines were another common marketing approach used by brands to promote their glasses (see Appendix A). Likewise, these heavily featured celebrities, but also models – some of which had become celebrities in their own right during the 90s, e.g. Naomi Campbell, who featured in Dolce & Gabbana’s eyewear campaign in 2011 (Joanna Elizabeth, 2011). Tom Ford’s 2010 spring eyewear campaign starred actor Nicholas Hoult together with a nude model in a series of glamorous and highly seductive photos (Dunbar, 2010). The brands that did not use big names in their campaigns used models who represented another version of the glamour myth by having beautiful and professionally stylized models posing in glamorous settings.

**Social Disruption: The financial crisis and rise of the sophisticated intellectual**

In early 2010, Americans were still feeling the effects of the big bank collapse that led to the worst financial recession since the Second World War. Before the financial crisis started to unfold in 2007, celebrity worship remained at its height and along came the desire to emulate celebrity fashion and lifestyle, which sparked a trend of flashy branding with big designer logos on bags, hats, scarves, and belts (The Fashion Folks, 2017). Clothing items or accessories with designer logos were status symbols that consumers purchased to signal wealth and social status, and brought them closer to their favorite celebrities. During the first half of the decade, aspirational consumption was big, and it was not limited to apparel.

Americans hold a shared cultural belief that affluent people live in big houses, drive luxury cars, and wear designer clothes and accessories (Lowe, 2010). During the 2000s, cheap gas prices and low loan requirements made giant SUVs and even larger houses, later dubbed McMansions, the symbol of the prosperous middle-class (Weissmann, 2013). However, when the investment banks Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns collapsed and triggered the domino effect that would burst the housing bubble and take down the American economy, that put an abrupt end to the indulgent consumption that characterized the first half of the decade (Mull, 2019a).

Two years after the financial crisis, in early 2010, the US economy was slowly starting to recover. Employment rates were going up together with the average wage, while layoff rates were going down. Still, the shaky economy continued to dominate the news with unemployment rates, the Federal Reserve
and sovereign debt amid the top headlines (Aaron et al., 2010). The financial hardship had caused a strong cultural anxiety among Americans, whose outlook on life remained gloomy as predictions of the economic development remained uncertain (Harris, 2011).

Meanwhile, the modest positive development in employee’s economic outlook had fueled a small rebound in consumption (Aaron et al., 2010). However, the collective anxieties brought on by the tough financial times had altered Americans’ consumption habits, who were now searching for inexpensive escapism (Banerjee, 2009). Movie theatre attendance went up, as did the sales of romance, science fiction, and fantasy books (Rich, 2009). A shared cultural longing for the certainties of the past had awoken among Americans, and this was reflected in the media. Television shows set in the 1950s and 1960s, e.g. Mad Men, became instant hits as it provided viewers with a nostalgic refuge to the Golden Age of the US economy, when jobs were plenty and the American dream was thriving – or at least that was how it was being remembered (Harris, 2011).

The retro revival was not limited to television but also sparked several retro-inspired trends. Vintage cocktails became popular, as did facial hair, and fashion borrowed heavily from elements of neo-Beat and 50’s nostalgia (Grief, 2010; Harris, 2011). Around this time, US society saw the rise of the contemporary hipster subculture. Hipsters were concerned with the pursuit of individuality and the undiscovered cool. At its core, being hipster meant having access to knowledge about exclusive things before everyone else (Grief, 2010). They value counter-culture, independent thinking, intelligence, creativity, and tongue-in-cheek banter (Weeks, 2011). And, despite participating in mass-consumerism, the hipster views themselves as rebel consumers and thus, seek out products that distinguish them from the common consumer. Therefore, for the hipster, the ultimate status symbol is not a shiny designer logo, but rather possessing superior knowledge (Grief, 2010). Being in-the-know about what is cool – before it is cool – becomes a means of social dominance and status.

Hipster culture fueled the return of glasses as a fashion statement; a trend that had been emerging over the past couple years and been heavily reported by the media. Retro influences were prominent also in the eyewear category, with people opting for a vintage look for their eyeglasses (Ives, 2010). In 2009, The Guardian published an article titled “The return of face furniture” stating that “glasses are back –
and the key look is nerdy but sexy” (Chilvers, 2009, para.0). In a relatively short time, glasses had been rising in status from necessary sight aid to becoming a fashion statement (Chilvers, 2010). People were swapping between multiple pairs of glasses depending on the occasion or outfit, and media even reported about people with perfect vision wearing frames without prescription to get the look of sophistication that glasses give (Chilvers, 2009). Media declared that glasses had become a “symbol of grownup sophistication” (Cochrane, 2012) and theorized that glasses had become a means to signal a new type of status, one linked to intellect rather than wealth (Chilvers, 2009).

**Warby Parker’s cultural strategy: Innovation, source material and cultural tactics**

Warby Parker used this ideological opportunity that had occurred by creating an eyewear brand that addressed both dimensions of the consumers’ collective anxieties: a longing for the past and the evolved notion of social status. Warby Parker achieved this through their frames’ retro-inspired design (see Appendix A) and by setting a lower price point, which made the status markers that had been imbued into the glasses – intellect, sophistication, and class – more accessible to consumers who were experiencing limited buying power after the financial crisis. This was Warby Parker’s cultural innovation that enabled their rise to iconic status.

Taking cultural codes employed by the elite to display sophistication and high social status and making it easily accessible to people outside of that selective social circle is a cultural tactic that Holt refers to as cultural capital trickle-down (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Warby Parker’s offering consisted of affordable glasses that were imbued with an accessible form of cultural sophistication, intellect and taste that was sourced from codes of Ivy League institutions, British upper-class society, and literature icons. The brand’s promise was sharp-looking glasses with preppy-sounding names that gave nods to Ivy League culture, for an affordable price and with the added bonus of supporting a social cause (Bahrenburg, 2010; Knowledge at Wharton, 2013). This was very different from Warby Parker’s competitors, who despite having adapted their eyewear and communication to match the ongoing retro-trend, still used celebrities and Hollywood-glamorous models in their advertising to signal the status-value of their product (Mower, 2007; Barnett, 2009; Joanna Elizabeth, 2010; Lam, 2010).
Source material: Literature icons, high culture and upper-class society

Warby Parker positioned themselves as a sophisticated brand by infusing their brand and its products with cultural codes borrowed from 20th century classic literature and literature icons. From the beginning, Warby Parker has taken advantage of the natural connection between eyewear and reading (Greenfield, 2014). Starting with the name, Warby Parker, which was created by combining the names of two Jack Kerouac characters. Gilboa explains:

“We kept going back to different authors and artists we felt represented the brand ideals and one person we found ourselves talking about a lot was Jack Kerouac and the whole beat generation, what they were trying to do in terms of standing up, going against the grain, and being independent thinkers. Coincidentally, the New York Public Library had an exposé on Jack Kerouac’s private diaries and that’s where we found all these unpublished characters with funky names like Warby Pepper and Zag Parker. We decided to combine the two and make it our own.” (Standard Culture, 2012, para.10).

Similarly, the names of Warby Parker’s eyeglasses, e.g. Huxley, Percey, and Winston, creates associations with British literary figures or private school students (Bahrenburg, 2010).

References to cultural expressions borrowed from Ivy League culture and the British upper class is plentiful in Warby Parker’s communication during their first years. However, the brand made sure to never take themselves too seriously, adding a quirky or whimsical twist to their ads. Their first TV ad, “Eyeballs Looking for Glasses”, features two men on unicycles, dressed in suits and with eyeballs for a head, with an older British narrator who begins the ad with asking, “looking for a new pair of glasses, are we?” with a posh accent (Warby Parker, 2012a). The ad is sprinkled with retro references, from T-Fords, and women dressed in 60s mod-fashion, to Churchill with an English bulldog on a leash (see Appendix A). The commercial ends with the pair of human eyeballs sharing a “good-looking pair of glasses”, standing in a library and each holding a glass of whiskey, while the British narrator says: “Visit Warby Parker.com – don’t delay!” (Warby Parker, 2012a, 00:26), using an exaggerated and old-timey expression. By keeping the tone of their communication playful, Warby Parker ensures that they do not alienate American consumers by staying in line with the playful expressions borrowed from hipster culture.
Their second TV spot, “The Literary Life Well-Lived”, is a fast-paced ad that features a bunch of young intellectuals in various vintage-inspired settings to the sound of the English 60s rock band The Kinks. The ad shows scenes from private clubs, black tie parties, pre-war apartments and informal boxing matches and poker games that draw associations to the carefree and lavish life of the young and well-educated upper class (see Appendix A) (Warby Parker, 2013). This campaign is less playful compared to Warby Parker’s previous communication, and instead portrays Warby Parker as a cool and rebellious, but still intellectual brand. It appeals to consumers who wish to be seen as cultured and smart, but also consider themselves to be independent, free-thinkers and a bit of a rebel – like the hipsters. The ad reaffirms the ideal that glasses are not only a sign of sophistication and intellect but can also be sexy.

During the first years when the brand had limited funds to spend on advertising, Warby Parker used different creative approaches to increase brand awareness. Every time the brand released a new line of eyewear, the brand published a short film-inspired video to their YouTube channel to promote the collection. In 2012, Warby Parker released a YouTube video titled “Le Chat Cambrioleur (The Cat Burglar)” to promote their new “Auteur” collection. Auteur is French for “author” and according to Warby Parker, the collection “channels the ebullience and aesthetic of French New Wave Cinema” (Warby Parker, 2012b). The video is also inspired by French new wave cinema and is shot in black-and-white, featuring a French couple in 60s style hair, clothing, and glasses, who are talking in French without any subtitles. In this way, Warby Parker instills each collection with associations of different works of literature, music, history, art, and film.

Regardless of medium, Warby Parker has since the beginning consistently cemented the connection between their eyewear and high culture, whether it is literature, music, or art. Their retail stores are designed taking inspiration of classic libraries with their glasses displayed on backlit display shelves alongside books, with old-school rolling library ladders (see Appendix A) (Knowledge at Wharton, 2013). Many stores offer on-site eye exams in offices furnished with mid-century furniture, and the staff wears uniforms designed after French worker jackets with WP monogrammed on the chest (Sebra, 2013). Furthermore, Warby Parker partners with independent publishers and showcases their books in their stores, so customers can purchase both the glasses and the books. The location for Warby Parker’s flagship store was carefully chosen, founder Blumenthal shares: “we chose Soho because it has an art
and literary history. Our store is near where many of the ‘Beat’ writers used to eat and drink” (Knowledge at Wharton, 2013, para.29).

### 4.1.3 Applying Entrepreneurship Concepts

**Founder networks**

The founders’ ability to leverage their networks to find solutions, create opportunities, and help grow their business is apparent throughout Warby Parker’s history. Since the journey of creating the brand, started while the founders were studying at a prestigious business school belonging to an Ivy League university, they had access to a network of experts in all important areas of business (Mendler, 2022). In fact, the founders were taking an entrepreneurship class together and used Warby Parker for the class project which was to put create a business plan (Mehra & Schultz, 2014). According to Gilboa:

“We spent the next several weeks really researching every element of our idea, getting a bunch of great insight from professors, running a bunch of surveys, standing for hours in different optical shops and then that culminated in a forty-page business plan.” (Raz, 2016, 06:25)

One major insight that the founders received from one of their professors was pricing. Thanks to Blumenthal’s connections to cheap production factories, the founders realized that they could sell their glasses for $45 while keeping the same level of quality as the eyewear that their competitors were charging hundreds of dollars for (Mendler, 2022). However, the Head of Marketing department at Wharton advised against it:

“We remember going into our Head of Marketing department’s office at Wharton and we said, ‘we’re going to transform the optical industry, we’re going to charge $45 for a $500 pair of glasses’, and he kind of laughed at us and said, ‘No way, won’t work’. And we were like, ‘Wait, you didn’t even read our deck, every graph goes up into the right’, and he said, ‘I’m sorry guys, first of all, price is the biggest indicator of quality, and it’s just outside the realm of believability that you can sell a product for a tenth of its price’. (Raz, 2016, 09:38)

This advice led the founders to reevaluate their pricing strategy. After some additional research, they discovered that consumers’ likelihood to purchase increased up to prices around $100 at which point the likelihood ratio plateaued and then dropped in the higher price ranges (Grant, 2016). However, they also
found that consumers perceived $99 as an indicator of a discounted price and low quality, thus the founders settled $95 which they felt suited the aspirational brand that they were building (Raz, 2016).

Networks also played a vital role in making the business viable as the founders got access to manufacturers through founder Blumenthal’s personal connections. Blumenthal had spent the five years prior working for the non-profit VisionSpring, which produced low-cost glasses for people in developing countries (Bahrenburg, 2010). During this time, Blumenthal had traveled to the factories where the glasses were being made, and when the founders were searching for manufacturers to work with for Warby Parker, they used Blumenthal’s old connections: “We leveraged a lot of the relationship that I had, and we went over to visit the factories” (Raz, 2016, 14:32). Even though the founders may had been able to find other sources to manufacture their glasses, having already established relationships with the vendors likely helped the founders gain the trust and credibility that they needed to establish a business relationship with the manufacturer, considering that the founders were young and had limited resources and experience running a business.

Having access to the right networks also enabled Warby Parker to get features in Vogue and GQ, which gave them the publicity that caused them to sell out immediately after launch (Shontell, 2017). Founder Gilboa shares: “[We hired] a fashion publicist who was able to get us meetings with the right people at GQ and Vogue. So, we went in to pitch to them and got these great editorial features that we really wanted – and a stamp of approval.” (Mehra & Schultz, 2014, para.14). The founders also attribute one reason why two major premiere fashion magazines were at all interested in featuring an unknown company that at the time had not even launched to the fact that their idea of the Home Try-On program “was a completely novel idea that writers could write about” (Shontell, 2017, 08:22). However, the fact that the founders were able to get meetings with the magazines in the first place would not have been possible without the right connections. Warby Parker’s founders acknowledges the many ways that networks have played a key role in their success:

“We were really lucky to be exposed to our marketing professor that helped us think through pricing …, or [to have] our friends calling in favors on our behalf … [Another] thing was identifying the right PR person to help represent us” (Raz, 2016, 26:23, 17:03)
**Funding**

In Warby Parker’s case, getting funding was also closely linked to the use of networks. Initially, Warby Parker was funded by a combination of the founders’ contribution from their life savings, $30,000 each, and by grants they had received from Wharton Business School (Shontell, 2017). This money allowed them to design their first collection, produce an initial inventory of glasses, set up their website and hire a PR firm (Shontell, 2017). It took them 15 months after launching their business before they raised their first round of funding in 2011, getting $1.5 million in venture capital funding (Raz, 2016; Kunthara, 2021).

At the start, however, the founders were apprehensive of giving up equity and therefore looked for alternative ways of financing their business. In 2010, they first tried to get loans to help them fund their inventory, but with the financial crisis fresh in mind, the banks were cautious and unwilling to provide Warby Parker with a loan (Raz, 2016). Instead, the founders got a loan for $200,000 from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), a federal government agency that helps small entrepreneurial ventures to start and grow their businesses. But, the founders kept searching for other creative ways to fund their company, which involved leveraging their personal connections.

The founders stress the importance of networks in order to successfully fundraise:

“Build relationships ahead of having to ask for money and have all your ducks in a row, again, often ahead of asking for money. So, the process starts well before. … have you built relationships so that the first time you're meeting someone is not the time that you're asking them for money?” (Mendler, 2022, 27:33)

This mentality is likely why Warby Parker’s founders were successful when they approached their logistics partner to propose a collaboration to help both of their businesses grow. The founders told the third-party logistics partner that managed their inventory that Warby Parker was unable to purchase more inventory due to their lack of funds. The CEO of the logistics company told them that if Warby Parker’s founders could provide them with some PR consulting, then the logistics company would pay them a few hundred thousand dollars which Warby Parker could use to purchase more inventory (Raz, 2016).
As Warby Parker grew, the founders raised money from venture capital in multiple series of funding over the years (Kunthara, 2021). External funding helped the company expand in ways that had previously not been possible, among other things it allowed the brand to open its first store in New York in 2013 (McKinnon, 2022).

**Optimal distinctiveness**

Cultural branding theory argue that brands can achieve differentiation in the market through cultural innovation, which if successful enough will allow the brand to become iconic (Holt & Cameron, 2010). However, some cultural entrepreneurship authors argue that newer brands need to take an active approach in ensuring the legitimacy of the brand and be mindful to not invertedly alienate consumers by being too different (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). As such, there is a critical need for brands to achieve a balance between differentiation and legitimacy.

As outlined in section 4.1.2, Warby Parker differentiated themselves from competitors through their cultural innovation of selling eyewear with trendy, retro-inspired design, enriched with cultural codes of intellect and refinement, at an affordable price. They managed to achieve the lower price by using a business model of a vertically integrated e-commerce brand that sold their glasses directly to the consumer through their website (Shontell, 2017; Zax, 2012). However, this left Warby Parker with two key things they needed to legitimate in the eyes of consumers.

First, Warby Parker had to legitimize their brand as a designer brand that sold exclusive eyeglasses, despite their price point being several hundred dollars cheaper than their competitors. Section 4.1.2 illustrates in further detail how Warby Parker leverage the cultural codes and expression from classic literature, Ivy League culture and British upper-class lifestyle in their communication, ads, product names, and even in the creating the name of the brand – Warby Parker. This shows how cultural branding principles can aid in both differentiating a brand, as argued by Holt and Cameron (2010), and ensure that the brand and its messages are legitimate.

Second, Warby Parker needed to legitimize their e-commerce distribution strategy. At the time of their launch, there were few pure DTC brands in general, and consumers held an inherent scepticism towards
the idea of buying glasses online (Grant, 2016). It was critical for Warby Parker to convince consumers that their business was trustworthy and that their glasses were of equally high quality as the designer brands Warby Parker were competing against. Three factors worked in synergy to help Warby Parker achieve this. The first was the brand’s Home Try-On program, that targeted consumers’ doubts regarding not being able to assess the quality of the glasses in-store before buying them. Gilboa:

“We were trying to sell a product that normally cost several hundred dollars, and we were selling it for less than $100, so there was inherent scepticism about the quality. So, we [asked ourselves] how do we just get as many of our glasses on people’s faces as possible? And that’s when kind of this lightbulb went off for the Home Try-On program.” (Raz, 2018, 08:55)

The second was Warby Parker’s efforts in turning the act of buying glasses online into a social consumption process (Standard Culture, 2012). Inside the Home Try-On kit that the brand sent out to its customers, a note was included that encouraged the customer to ask friends and family for feedback on the five Warby Parker frames that they have ordered (Shontell, 2017). Furthermore, Warby Parker encouraged the consumer to bring the decision-making process online by sharing photos of themselves trying on the glasses on Facebook and tagging it with #WarbyHomeTryOn (G & Co, n.d.). This allowed Warby Parker’s customers to get the opinions of other Warby Parker fans, but was also a way for Warby Parker to achieve legitimacy through increasing their brand awareness. Lastly, the editorial features that Warby Parker received in Vogue and GQ Magazine acted as a stamp of approval that further legitimized the business (Mehra & Schultz, 2014). This indicates that social proof can also greatly contribute to a brand’s legitimation process.

Together, these examples illustrate how Warby Parker, through a combination of cultural branding principles and more traditional marketing approaches such as allowing the customer to sample their products before purchase, were able to achieve both differentiation and ensure legitimacy.

**Founder narratives**

Entrepreneurial branding literature highlights the central role of the founder in the branding process, especially in the early stages of business development when the corporate identity tends to be closely linked to the personality and values of the founders (Merrilees, 2007; Juntunen et al., 2010). Furthermore,
the founders’ public image can influence how consumers view a company (Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Since the beginning, the founders of Warby Parker have developed a founder narrative grounded in their background in charity and desire to “do good in the world” and solve real problems that consumers were facing (Mendler, 2022). Blumenthal shares:

“One of the reasons why we chose to … provide a pair of glasses for every pair that we sell, rather than … a percent of profits dedicated to that mission is because … if for some reason, we weren't in control of the company, that no future owner or executive would stop doing this because it would be detrimental to the brand. So, we wanted to tie into the brand and make that commitment. And that came from a sincere place. It came from what was going to motivate us every morning to wake up and not roll over and hit the snooze button and be excited to go to work.” (Mendler, 2022; 10:17)

In their corporate communication, Warby Parker often employs storytelling tactics that use a David vs. Goliath narrative, where Warby Parker is David and Goliath is the marked-up and monopolized eyewear industry controlled by Luxottica. On Warby Parker’s website, the brand shares the story of how the founders got the idea for Warby Parker. The story goes that one of the founders lost a $700 pair of glasses when he was traveling before starting business school, and as a full-time student he could not afford to replace them but had to spend the first semester without glasses “squinting and complaining” (Mendler, 2022). The founders started questioning why glasses were so expensive and concluded that there was a simple explanation: “the eyewear industry is dominated by a single company that has been able to keep prices artificially high while reaping huge profits from consumers who have no other options” (Warby Parker, 2020, para.6). By using this narrative, the founders help establish that Warby Parker is an authentic brand and legitimize the brand’s corporate social responsibility efforts as genuine.

Another possibility for why Warby Parker’s founders like to highlight their social mission in interviews and on their website is that it makes the company more attractive to other stakeholders, e.g. their employees, investors, and other business partners. This argument is supported by Blumenthal who shares that “one of the reasons why [Warby Parker] chose to provide a pair of glasses for every pair that we sell … is because we thought that if we tied it to the brand, we would attract great talent that cared about this” (Mendler, 2022, 10:17).
4.2 Away


4.2.1 Introducing Away

The oft-repeated origin story of Away goes that when Jen Rubio was in Zurich airport in early 2015, the zipper on her luggage broke. However, she did not realize immediately, and left a trail of clothes throughout the airport building (Raz, 2019). She had just quit from being Global Director of Innovation at All Saints in London and had been interviewing with multiple firms for VP of Marketing roles (Raz, 2019). Following the incident, all she wanted was to buy a replacement suitcase. A Facebook post she published asking for recommendations provided her with no brands that she got excited about, which set in motion events that would lead to her co-founding Away with her former colleague Steph Korey shortly thereafter. The pair met while working at Warby Parker as social media manager and Head of Supply chain, respectively (Lamare, 2020). With the help of friends and family, Rubio and Korey gathered $150,000 that they used to start Away (Lamare, 2020). A year after launch, in 2016, “Vogue called it ‘the perfect carry-on’, while others dubbed it ‘the little black dress of luggage’” (Lamare, 2020, para.1).

Two years later in 2018, Away had by some measures already become the largest company in luggage, with a higher share of revenue (16% of overall luggage revenue) than the biggest incumbent Samsonite (who had a share of 11%) (Alcántara, 2019). Furthermore, Rubio and Korey managed to raise $100 million in funding in 2019 at a $1,4-billion-dollar valuation, firmly cementing their strong market position (Clark, 2019). A sceptic might have wondered if their suitcases were so different from existing
market offerings, yet they achieved both cultural resonance and financial success remarkably quickly. In a market that was characterized by strong competition and mildly differentiated products, they managed to stand out based on a visual and emotional expression that drew attention from their consumer base. This is highly suggestive of cultural branding principles having been employed by the brand.

Right from the beginning, Away was not acting like a typical luggage company. In 2015, Away released their first collection of “the ultimate carry-on bar” which sold out within 2 weeks (Avakian, 2015; Gilliland, 2020). When the brand found out that they could not deliver suitcases in time for Christmas from their initial production run, they created a physical book (*The Places We Return to*) that their customers could receive, instead of pre-ordering the suitcase and having to wait until February for the physical product (Gilliland, 2020). The book contained a gift card inside that was redeemable for a carry-on suitcase.

Eventually Away would create *Here*, their standalone blog and print magazine that is released quarterly (Gilliland, 2020). The brand quickly achieved resonance among consumers, and evidently, it was very strong. Their market resonance also seems to have persisted to the present day. People were clamoring for something that Away was offering, which begs the question – What was Away doing differently?

4.2.2 Away: Cultural Branding Analysis

The founders of Away mention “storytelling”, “stories” and “brand” frequently in their public interviews on television and podcasts (Raz, 2019; Inc., 2018). They seemed very aware of the power of stories, which suggests an intuitive appreciation for cultural branding principles.

*Luggage’s cultural orthodoxy: Building-better-mousetraps*

Before Away, Rubio was convinced that buying luggage was an “awful” experience (Raz, 2019). She shared her perception of the buying experience in a podcast interview on NPR “How I built this”-series in 2019:

“How come buying luggage is so awful? You have to go into the basement of a department store, or in New York there’s all these crazy luggage stores in mid-town that are massive, and you go in and there’s a $500 bag next to a $50 bag and they look exactly the same. And then the luggage
salesman is whispering in your ear I can give you 30% off if you buy it right now. I was like, why is this so horrible?" (Raz, 2019, 28:00)

Based on their market research, it seemed that many others shared the perception of buying luggage as an unenjoyable experience.

The cultural orthodoxy of the wider luggage industry in the mid 2010’s was that luggage was just the functional case that allowed you to bring your belongings with you when you travelled. A kind of trusty sidekick, but not a fashion accessory. The luggage companies thought that customers would be satisfied by ever lighter, ever stronger cases that satisfied an imagined list of required features. The industry had fallen for the appeal of what Holt and Cameron (2010) call “building better mousetraps”.

The main incumbent and largest player in the international luggage market in 2015 was Samsonite, with a global market share of 17.3%; the next largest was LVMH with 5% (Quartz, 2016). Samsonite is however both a corporate and a product brand, hence said 17.3% includes some of their owned brands. The company owns the brand Samsonite as well as American Tourister, High Sierra, Hartmann, Lipault, Gregary, and Tumi (Samsonite, n.d.). Other brands in the market include Travelpro, Delsey, Briggs & Riley, and Paravel (Holland, 2023).

As Samsonite was the biggest player in 2015, their marketing communication is arguably the most important for understanding the cultural orthodoxy of the luggage industry. In the early 2000s, Samsonite was communicating the message that their luggage was light and durable. A magazine ad from 2000 shows a line of Samsonite luggage pieces in a line on top of a series of sand dunes, each one facing metal anvils. The tagline states: “Opposites Attract. The ultra-light, ultra durable Ultralite 4 series” (see Appendix B) (Samsonite, 2000). The very name of the luggage, “Ultralite 4”, makes the purpose of the communication quite clear – to highlight the physical qualities of lightness and sturdiness.

Even in ads from 2015, the same year that Away was founded, Samsonite were still emphasizing lightness and durability. One TV ad from 2015 demonstrates this. For durability, one scene shows a woman stepping on a suitcase and then shows how the bag regained its shape afterwards. The video is dynamic
and shows many otherwise glamorous scenes from international travel. However, the tagline is “travel lighter to go further”, with almost every sentence from the voice-over having a reference to lightness:

“How much does a sunset weigh?
How light is an emotion? The sudden feeling of freedom?
What’s the weight of a memory? Just instants... so light... yet so intense they stay on your mind forever.
The more memories you want to keep, the lighter you need to be.
Travel lighter to go further with Samsonite."
(Samsonite, 2015)

Other major luggage brands also adhered to the same cultural orthodoxy. For example, long-time incubator American Tourister has focused its brand communication on the association of its suitcases with durability for several decades. In 1971, American Tourister created a 30 second ad that featured a gorilla beating up a piece of luggage inside a zoo cage (American Tourister, 2014a). Ten years later, they followed this up with a similar ad where a gorilla grabs two suitcases from the airport bag drop counter, and successfully destroys the non-branded luggage while the American Tourister suitcase remains intact (American Tourister, 2014b). Both ads humorously show the perceived need for a durable suitcase when travelling and communicate how American Tourister had the required attributes. This theme of durability and functionality has continued to the current day but has become slightly more subtle. In 2011, an ad from a series titled “Survive the world” shows a tourist who gives up on traffic and rollerskates to the airport with his American Tourister bag rolling in tow. He skates through daring obstacles, in the air and even under a camel. The ad ends with the tagline onscreen: “the tough international luggage” (American Tourister, 2014c).

TravelPro has a similarly functional approach to their messaging. In an ad from 2015, they introduce the Platinum Magna 2, with the message “flawless performance” and with a closeup side-image of the headlights of a fine sports car (see Appendix B) (TravelPro, 2015). The narrator goes through a list of product benefits over a light jazz soundtrack, with each alluding to some aspect of the fine quality of the sports car behind. An ad from 2016 communicates the same message, showing various close-up scenes
of the suitcase’s wheels handling various tough situations from airport to home, with the bold text halfway through: “WELLMADE.” (Travelpro, 2016).

Lastly, the higher end luggage brands seem to have had a similar emphasis on the product in their campaigns, but their communication focused more on an aesthetic of luxury including stories of high quality craftsmanship. Examples of such brands are Delsey, Tumi, Rimowa, and Globe-Trotter. An example of the craftsmanship myth is the use of the founding myth in the marketing of Rimowa: supposedly a fire in their factory in Cologne caused all the materials they used to make luggage to burn up, except aluminum (which is Rimowa’s signature material) (Boulanger, 2018). As such, the cultural orthodoxy of the premium luggage segment also centered around durability, although from a more understated angle which emphasized the luxury of the materials to a larger degree than cheaper luggage brands.

**Social Disruption: Social media amplifies status anxiety**

Instagram was the platform that would allow the rise of Away. Instagram launched in October 2010 and managed to gain 1 million users in just 3 months (Big 3 Media, 2021). In June 2013, Instagram introduced videos and in December 2013, they introduced the direct messaging function (Big 3 Media, 2021). Therefore, Instagram was still very new by the time Away launched. Rubio explains that

> “our timing was perfect. It was this time in social media where travel was this status symbol. Everybody wanted to post about not just their trips. Not just the mountain they’re on, not just the beach they’re on, but how they got there. And people were taking photos at airports or even when they were packing. Steph and I realized we had to be a part of this” (Raz, 2019, 53:20).

While Instagram was increasingly a place to share and view travel photos, Americans who possessed a high enough salary to afford such travel had less time than ever to go off and travel themselves. Research done in the early 2000s showed that educated Americans had less leisure time than uneducated Americans, and that this gap had increased since the mid ‘60s (Ozimek, 2018). At the same time, status anxiety from spending time on Instagram seems to be a relatively inevitable consequence, due to the ease of comparing yourself with others on the platform (Jiang & Ngien, 2020). This fact added onto already high stress levels and anxiety in the American population (ADAA, n.d.). People now had an even easier
way to compare themselves to others – especially to those at the highest income levels who could genuinely afford both leisure time and luxury suitcases.

As illustrated in section 4.1.2, early 2000s American society had gone from idealizing wealth-flaunting lifestyles and idolizing celeb culture to a more minimal and sophisticated approach to showing refinement. The culture would value knowledge and “insider” signs of refinement over flashy signs of status, as embodied at one time by a rise of hipster culture. This cultural backdrop sets the scene for an American population that yearned for escapism and for more time and freedom to travel. But they did not want to do so in a way that was too flashy. This was combined with the social disruption of new possibilities to easily compare oneself to others through Instagram which had become widespread by the early 2010s. This created an ideological opportunity for Away, who saw an opening in the market for an affordable, minimalist suitcase that could give consumers a boost of status and bring them closer to an aspirational travel lifestyle.

Away’s Cultural Strategy: Innovation, source material and cultural tactics

Further clues as to what the cultural innovation of Away was can be found in what the founders themselves were seeking in a luggage brand before launching Away. After Rubio’s luggage breakdown in the airport in 2015, she thought that “there had to be a luggage brand out there. I wanted to go shopping, to buy the right thing” (Raz, 2019, 27:30). She adds that “the baby idea of making luggage that my friends would love was brewing in my head” (Raz, 2019, 29:40). What would such a brand look like and who would it speak to? In early 2015, Rubio was 27 and Korey was 26, meaning they wanted a brand that spoke to people like them, but they were finding none that they could identify with (Ellenberg, 2021; Zilber, 2020).

Rubio infused the Away brand with a new ideology that had been remarkably absent from luggage purchasing – a lifestyle of leisure travel. This lifestyle was one that could be experienced every time a customer left for the airport with their Away suitcase. By focusing on the person carrying the suitcase instead of the suitcase itself, Away enabled millennial consumers to identify with the brand in ways that the category’s cultural orthodoxy had not allowed for. Away introduced suitcases that looked and felt
luxurious but at an affordable price tag – the initial carry-on cost $225, whereas a similar bag from competitor Tumi sold for $525 (Lamare, 2020).

The founders Rubio and Korey seemed to have an intuitive understanding that their brand had to stand for more than just the luggage that they would sell. From the beginning, they were calling Away a “travel brand”, or even a “travel lifestyle brand” (Bloomberg, 2017, 2:53), not a luggage brand or a “provider of travel solutions” like Samsonite used to (LA Times, 1997, para.1). Their deliberate choice to make the focus on travel, not solely luggage, is also reflected in their chosen website url, which is www.awaytravel.com. As such, the Away founders designed for themselves and their friends in mind – millennial, urban professional, women – even though they quickly found out that the ideology resonated with a wider group of people: “I’ve seen every single type of demographic and person with an Away bag and it’s something that has resonated across a lot of different people” (Raz, 2018, 1:20).

Signs of this wider brand emphasis are evident in the few Away retail stores, where only a small amount of space was dedicated to the actual product (Bloomberg, 2017). Rubio explains how the retail stores are “a physical place that provides context around the brand that we’re building and the travel stories that we’re trying to tell... there are travel guidebooks, there are things that you might want to bring with you on your trips, and it's just supposed to be a really inspiring place to get you thinking about your next trip... and giving our community a place to gather... we went in there the other day and people in there were sitting in the café booking flights... we’ve created this space for people to really think about travel”. (Bloomberg, 2017, 0:20).

In addition, they created a podcast, magazine, blog, all to “give … more ways to tell [their] stories... to inspire people to travel better” (Bloomberg, 2017, 1:40).

It is curious that after they had performed extensive market and customer research, finding out what peoples’ pain points were when they travelled, they arrived at “not necessarily a list of features, but a list of stories that kept on coming up and that’s how we figured out all the things we needed for that perfect suitcase” (Rubio, as cited in Raz, 2019, 37:00). As such, both founders were reluctant to talk about features, even though they would share them if directly asked by the interviewer. Korey explains: “we made something super light, you can fit more inside than anything else, it’s the maximum size for a carry-
on, the carry-on charges your phone... so no more dead phone” (Cramer, 2018, 2:10). This appears like a feature list, but they are careful not to make it sound like one. Instead, they highlight how there was no brand as obsessed with travel as they were (Raz, 2018).

Perhaps the message they wanted to get across was that, while the list of physical attributes was good, it was not the main reason for buying luggage from Away. The reason why the list of features was better than any competitor at the time was because the founders had been willing to do the research, willing to find out every single pain point of travelling from consumers and themselves. One example they discovered was that “people would get to hotel rooms and steal laundry bags because they didn’t have their own” (Raz, 2019, 37:00), which is a small point, but the inclusion of such a bag in the Away suitcase reveals to a customer the attention to detail that Away was willing to put into it.

Attention to detail gave Away favorable features in online blogs in magazine. In August 2015, TechCrunch writes how Away was going to bring down the cost of this “luxury good”, by bringing a “high-end portfolio of luggage products to the masses” (Crook, 2015, para.3). In that article, the selling point was that Away was able to offer a higher quality product, including “the best German polycarbonate and high-end Japanese wheels”, “by selling directly to consumers without any part of the profits going to middlemen” (Crook, 2015, para.5). The attention to small details such as having the very highest quality wheels represents the level of detail that consumers might usually have considered reserved for luxury suitcases.

After Away had launched their first carry-on pre-order sale, in November 2015, they were featured in Vogue, Business Insider, the travel magazines Valet and Afar, as well as Vice’s travel publication called Amuse (Avakian, 2015; Valet, 2015; Purkrabek, 2015; Turner, 2015; Farra, 2016). For these first mentions of the Away brand, Rubio and Korey are referred to as “Warby parker execs”, which seems to have helped explain the approach that they would be employing in the luggage industry (Avakian, 2015). This moniker also helped to give them legitimacy as a new start-up – allowing them to borrow the legitimacy of the Warby Parker brand.
The travel ideology features in these early mentions. In Afar, they are introduced as two “travel aficionados”, and they elaborate on how “our travels are the heart of why we’re doing this”, before explaining the book *Places We Return to* would come in the pre-order (Purkrabek, 2015, para.1, 4). Already at that point, customers who were encountering Away for the first time could see that they were a company that focused on more than just the luggage. Curiously, in the Vogue article announcing the new Away suitcase, there is a glamour photo of a model with a Rimowa suitcase – as if to highlight that Away could offer a similar level of sophistication as even such a brand (Farra, 2016).

On Instagram, Away introduced their brand through a post on their feed from September 2015, which is a video consisting of quickly changing photos of travel destinations, behind an “AWAY” logo (Away, 2015a). They followed this on October 2015, with a picture of a piece of paper with the Away logo and a cut off “around the world” (Away, 2015b). The next post is of a travel list with the following city names: Oslo, Tokyo, Paris, Nashville, Maderas, Berlin (Away, 2015c). The names are scratched out in the original post, implying progress in a checklist in travelling the world. It is only on the 19th post, on November 9, that we get to see the first image of any suitcase, which is of their first carry-on; the post exclaims that “awaytravel.com is live” and that the carry-on could now be bought (Away, 2015d).

Away started crafting themselves as a travel lifestyle brand by increasingly sharing photos of travel destinations, to the extent that the brand’s feed started to resemble that of a travel influencer (see Appendix B) (Away, n.d.). Even if the Away suitcases were often prominently featured, they do not seem to be the main subject of the photos – the location, or the holder of the luggage was the focus of the posts (Away, n.d.). Even in another early post from January 2016, which shows a photography studio and a suitcase in the center, the suitcase has the handle raised up – as if to highlight that even in the studio, what is missing is the consumer to drag it away on holiday with them (Away, 2016a).

**Source material: Instagram travel influencers**

The source material consisted of the Instagram feeds of travel influencers, who were contributing to the creation of the myth of travel as a status symbol. During her time at Warby Parker, Rubio had been immersed in social media, and especially Instagram, and it is therefore likely that she was heavily inspired by the travel aesthetic that had become commonplace on Instagram during the early 2010s (Raz, 2019).
Travel photography was highly polished and exotic, and for many people travel inspiration became a big reason for why they used Instagram (Schmalbruch, 2015).

There was a wide variation of travel photography on Instagram with travellers could focus on going to cities or landscapes. There seem to have been at least two categories of travel influencer: professional photographers and online personalities. While there is some overlap in competencies and approach, the main difference appeared to be the degree to which the subject of the images was the influencer themselves or the travel scene. Away would use the visual cues of this genre in their own feed, to the degree that one might mistake Away’s feed for that of a travel influencer at first glance (see Appendix B). While the suitcases are usually prominent (thought become more subtly placed over time), the content which Away shared never felt like an ad. This was a different communication approach that set Away apart from other luggage brands in the market. Instead, Away’s Instagram posts gave the appearance of belonging to a travel influencer that happened to use Away suitcases (Away, n.d.a). As such, Away’s cultural innovation was to present their suitcases as an essential accessory to the travel lifestyle.

Cultural capital trickle-down seems to be the primary cultural branding tactic that Away used to communicate their ideology of leisure travel. The ideology of travel as something exclusive and glamorous meant that, outside of the affluent people who could regularly enjoy this leisure activity, there was a perception among American consumers that (especially international) travel was only attainable for a select few. In the founders’ market research, they discovered that their friends – who were mostly millenials – did not like the suitcases they used, expect for one female friend who had a suitcase that cost $4000 (Raz, 2019, 37:30).

There was a sophistication and status that travel influencers on Instagram had come to represent. Away leveraged this to become a sort of travel influencer themselves, and managed to imbue both their product and online presence with the same codes of sophistication and luxury that people were accustomed to seeing on travel influencer accounts – impossibly exotic locations, luxury hotels, but now with an ever-present Away suitcase. They made this lifestyle accessible to millennial consumers who could not afford either a $4000 suitcase or lacked sufficient leisure time to travel extensively. Away offered the cultural capital of travel influencing as an extension of their new “perfect carry-on” (Farra, 2016).
One way that Away ensured that their communication appeared authentic to the consumer was through emphasizing subtlety, and a feeling of being “in the know”. Away included small details that would normally only be present in a much more expensive bag, e.g. “a Makrolon polycarbonate exterior; water-resistant zippers; quiet 360-spinner wheels; a TSA-approved lock: top and side handles; an interior silk lining; a removable laundry bag; and a built-in … battery” (Farra, 2016, para.3). These small aspects of luxury that had previously been reserved for a cultural elite were now made accessible through Away’s myth. Away made their logos very subtle on their suitcases, leading to the design of the suitcases being their most recognizable aspect (see Appendix B) (Away, n.d.b). All this enabled Away to make travel sophistication much more accessible to the average consumer through cultural capital trickle-down.

4.2.3 Applying Entrepreneurship Concepts

**Founder networks**

In March 2015, a friend of Rubio’s in San Francisco had introduced her to Yuri Kim, a partner at venture capitalist (VC) fund Forerunner (Raz, 2019). Rubio scheduled a meeting with Kim, even though Away was mostly just an idea at that time. Kim wanted to stay in touch, so when Away set out to raise the seed round in the summer of 2015, they already had a foot in the door with a potential partner. Forerunner ended up co-leading their seed round and Yuri Kim ended up bringing in the other co-lead from Excel: Brian O’Malley. They raised $2.5 million in that fundraising round, and the early connection made with Yuri Kim was influential for securing funding from both of those VC firms (Raz, 2019). While having these two reputable investors on board certainly helped in legitimize Away in subsequent funding rounds and to business partners, it is hard to judge whether Away would have had a significantly more difficult experience with raising money if they had not been introduced to Yuri Kim. From Rubio’s interview with Guy Raz in 2019, she implied that they had gone through many investor conversations in addition to the ones with Yuri Kim and Brian O’Malley (Raz, 2019). She does not specify how those other conversations came about – whether they were from their personal network or not. Therefore, while their network was important to get those high-quality investors, it is unlikely that it was a requirement for Away to get investments at all.

In addition to the network that allowed the Away to raise money with relative ease, Rubio had contacts at influential publications, via a friend who was a freelancer for Vogue (Raz, 2019, 47:05) and Korey
had contacts at factories in China from her time at Warby Parker (Raz, 2019). Rubio’s network with magazine editors and publicists in the PR world enabled the press coverage that led to Away selling out of their first batch of 1200 suitcases in two weeks (Raz, 2019). One way of looking at Rubio’s PR network is that it acted as a substitute for hiring an expensive external PR agency to create those contacts for them, set up the meetings with editors, etc. While Away had raised significant money a few months before and could likely have afforded a PR agency, the PR network that Rubio had would have allowed for resources to be spent on other aspects of their marketing and product development.

Arguably, Korey’s network allowed for them to make the suitcases at all, by providing access to manufacturers in China at a low cost. In the same way as how Away could likely have hired an agency that had contacts in the PR world, they could also have tried to hire a consultant or agency specializing in contacts in Chinese production. It is likely however, that the personal connections would have shortened the process considerably and contributed to legitimizing Away as a serious business partner. Additionally, Korey’s insider knowledge regarding local Chinese business customs and procedures (Raz, 2019) likely helped in reducing obstacles spurred by (national) cultural differences and instead ensured that Away could efficiently make use of cheap Chinese manufacturing.

The founders combined network allowed Away to launch quickly. In fact, stories shared by the founders implies that if they had not had the background, and therefore the networks, that they did, Away may never have been founded. When Rubio got a job offer in New York after leaving Warby Parker, she wrote an email to Korey, saying that she rather wanted to start her own business and explaining why Korey fulfilled all the criteria to be a great co-founder (Raz, 2019). This seems to have been a turning point for Rubio wanting to become an entrepreneur, and if Korey had not satisfied her checklist (such as being able to get a suitcase produced via her contacts in China), Rubio may not have gone ahead with Away and might simply have taken the job offer. This illustrates how networks also can play a big part in giving the budding entrepreneur the courage and reassurance to take the leap and start their own business.
Funding

The Away founders did not explore other routes of financing than through VCs. Perhaps this was because Rubio and Korey were well versed with how to interact with VCs, and thus knew how to raise money from them from their exposure to investors while working at Warby Parker. This theory is strengthened by the fact that the fund Forerunner, who invested in Away for their initial seed round, had also invested in Warby Parker (Raz, 2019). While Rubio says that she had not interacted directly with Forerunner, she has also shared that she had heard about them and the other investors while working at Warby Parker (Raz, 2019).

In addition to the importance of network for raising their first external financing, the narrative that the founders had crafted was also important in making those conversations successful. For instance, the founders have shared that some investor conversations could be summarized accordingly: “you’re creating the Warby Parker for luggage, great, we’ll invest” (Raz, 2019, 47:30). However, other VCs struggled to see the innovation which indicates that the founders’ background at Warby Parker helped legitimize them. This was an organizational narrative, however, and had little to do with the brand’s cultural innovation. The investors who did invest, had been convinced by the two founders of the importance of brand-building (Raz, 2019), and this gave Rubio and Korey leeway to do things for the brand that did not make obvious economic sense – such as selling the physical book as the pre-order, as well as branching out into a blog, magazine and podcast. In this way, their organizational narrative made it possible for them to operate as freely as they wanted.

Optimal distinctiveness

The brand attained legitimacy quickly in November 2015, through the social proof of being mentioned in high profile publications such as Vogue (Farra, 2016). When the founders were mentioned in early PR, they were referred to as “Warby Parker execs”, which would have helped to legitimize the new venture by borrowing legitimacy from Warby Parker (Avakian, 2015). They could also afford to widely distribute their Instagram ads due to their VC funding (Crook, 2015). Though the strongest social proof came from the extensive user-generated content from customers proudly posting pictures with their Away suitcases, which was, according to Rubio how “most people found out about the brand” (Digiday, 2017, para.4).
This narrative that helped Away gain legitimacy and resources was based partly on their past experiences, but also contained the intentions for the brand that they wanted to build. Their narrative of being Warby Parker execs, as well as having the complementary skills to execute the idea, helped to legitimize the new venture. The investors who could see the similarities in what they wanted to do were thus easily convinced. However, when it came to brand building, it seems like the investors were taking a greater leap of faith. Rubio explains how she would talk at length about branding and how their brand would “really connect with people... people didn’t emotionally connect with Samsonite or Tumi or other brands” (Raz, 2019, 48:10). It is unclear whether investors understood the cultural innovation that Away was trying to introduce (aspirational lifestyle travel branding) or whether they relied on track record to estimate the likelihood of success.

Away’s main points of product differentiation consisted of an aesthetic yet minimalist design, high quality features usually seen in luxury luggage and a much lower price point for such features. The narrative used in early PR mentions makes it clear that they are offering luxury at a lower price point: “Priced at $225, it has all the qualities (and then some) of a $500 or $1,000 bag” (Farra, 2016). This differentiating narrative is quite similar to the cultural capital trickle-down method, but instead of an ideology of luxury, the narrative focuses on the actual product’s differentiation.

**Founder narratives**

A common narrative that founders and entrepreneurs like to use is the hero narrative (Campbell, 2008). Korey often frames herself as a reluctant hero, rather than a founder looking for an industry. Korey talks about how she did not expect or want to be an entrepreneur (Cramer, 2018), while Rubio admits in a separate interview without Korey present that Korey had in fact been looking to start a business, and that Rubio’s idea of a new luggage brand where they “could do what they did with Warby Parker” (Raz, 2019, 30:40) was exactly what Korey had been looking for while at business school (Raz, 2019).

Prior experiences of the founders made it clear that they could successfully found a company. Rubio describes how she and Korey came to the same conclusion that “what we did with Warby Parker we can do with luggage... the same things we were seeing with eyewear, we were seeing with luggage. Crazy markups in the industry, no brands that people really loved, a really awful shopping experience” (Raz,
2019, 30:40). It seems unlikely that they would have been able to create as successful a brand as Away if they had not had the experience with Warby Parker – that experience made it seem possible to them. They both repeat many times in public interviews that they did not see themselves as founders or entrepreneurs, which could imply that without the Warby Parker experience, they may not have had the confidence to go ahead with Away (Raz, 2019; Cramer, 2018; Raz, 2018; Inc., 2018).

A confluence of factors made them decide to go ahead with the idea together at that specific time. For example, they were both between jobs – Rubio was job searching and Korey was at Columbia Business School (Raz, 2019). If Rubio had said yes to the job offer she received, or not left her job at All Saints in the first place, or had Korey not been at business school, they would not have had the time to dedicate to the market research that made them gain the confidence that a gap in the market truly existed (Raz, 2019). This market research consisted of some 800 interviews over a few months and would have been much more difficult to conduct so quickly if they had been in full time employment (Raz, 2019).
4.3 White Claw

Various flavors of White Claw (Swanner, 2021). Still from Trevor Wallace’s 2019 video *drink’s white claw once* (Schultz, 2019)

4.3.1 Introducing White Claw

White Claw is a hard seltzer brand that was established in 2016 by Canadian serial entrepreneur Anthony von Mandl, who had previously launched a couple of successful beverage brands through his company Mark Anthony Group (Rogers, 2019). In the mid-2010s, hard seltzers was a new category in the alcoholic beverage market that had emerged in response to a trend among American consumers, who were moving away from beer and sugary low-alcoholic drinks (Dimitrakis, 2022). After a slow start, YouTube comedian Trevor Wallace released a video titled “*drinks White Claw once*” in 2019 that gained large spread and gave rise to the phenomenon “White Claw summer” which was heavily reported by the media (Stevens, 2019; Mull, 2019b). In 2022, six years after launch, White Claw had become the dominant brand in the hard seltzer category with a 45% market share of a $13.5 billion industry (Statista, 2023).

White Claw’s founder began working in a wine import and export business straight out of college in Vancouver, Canada. 10 years later, in 1981, von Mandl managed to buy his own winery in the Okanagan valley (Korstrom, 2014). Since he kept running out of money to support his winemaking, von Mandl established several businesses to fund it over the years. First, he made flavored ciders, then introduced and distributed Corona beer in Canada, then he created Mike’s Hard Lemonade that quickly became popular and finally he launched White Claw in 2016 (Korstrom, 2014). Therefore, White Claw is the culmination of many years of experience in the alcoholic beverage markets of Canada and the US for von Mandl. von Mandl was CEO of Mark Anthony Group for the launch of White Claw, and remains so
(Mark Anthony Group, 2022), and therefore it can be assumed that he has been an important influence on the development of the brand.

According to a 2023 review from Delish Magazine, the hard seltzer offerings of today are confusingly similar and generally unimpressive (Romero, 2022). Out of the 15 hard seltzers that the magazine reviewed, White Claw rating landed the brand in the middle, behind competitors Truly and High Noon. Nonetheless, White Claw remains by far the market leader (45%), with a market share of more than Truly (17.4%), High Noon (10.4%) and Bud Light Seltzer (10%) combined (Dimitrakis, 2022). If White Claw doesn’t have the best tasting product, but is the most sold product, and have become a cultural iconic that by large represents American summer, then this is strongly suggestive of cultural branding principles at work.

### 4.3.2 White Claw: Cultural Branding Analysis

*Hard seltzer’s cultural orthodoxy: A drink for women*

Beer, at least in the US, has traditionally been sold as a male drink. “Beer commercials … often still truck in mundane male fantasy: dudes sharing brews with their bros on game day, hanging out over the grill or golfing” says Emily Heil of the Washington Post (Heil, 2019, para.2). In contrast, wine and wine-related beverages have tended to be sold as female drinks in America (Heil, 2019). This gender stereotype extends to sweet alcoholic beverages. Before hard seltzer arrived, there were several low-proof malt-brewed alternatives to beer, e.g. Smirnoff Ice, and Budweiser’s Lime-a-rita, some of which had existed for decades (Gray & Goldfine, 2021). Mike’s Hard Lemonade had been targeted to men, but there still seemed to be a lingering issue of many considering it a feminine drink (Intoxicology, n.d.; Foodly, 2021) The issue that many of these companies found was that as these drinks were initially popular with women, marketing efforts shifted to target predominantly women, which caused the brands to struggle to later expand their market to include male audiences (Heil, 2019).

This orthodoxy in American culture of beer for men, and sweet, low-alcoholic drinks for women had been tested several times in various subcultures. One instance of a sweet alcoholic drink becoming successful outside of this gender paradigm was Four Loko, which had become “a staple at any and all house parties” in colleges around 2008 (Johnny D, 2018, para.1). Four Loko’s name was derived from
the original four main ingredients: alcohol, caffeine, guarana, and taurine (Phelan, 2011). It was a wild drink that used to contain 156mg of caffeine and be up to 12% alcohol per 23.5oz (700ml) can, before complaints and campus-bans caused the caffeine to be removed (Canning, 2010). It was a short-lived craze but suggested that there was a demand for beer alternatives amongst young people of both genders. The public impression of the drink as “blackout in a can” meant that the drink failed in gaining appeal outside its college niche (Kranc, 2020), or as Holt and Cameron (2010) would put it, failed to cross the cultural chasm. White Claw would later be referenced in Trevor Wallace’s video *drinks white claw once*, as “basically just a vegan Four Loko” (Wallace, 2019, 0:17), as well as “like a Four Loko who went to private school (Wallace, 2019, 0:20). Both phrases highlight that even though they might have elements of cultural similarity, White Claw would be considered healthier and more sophisticated.

Zima is usually considered the first iteration of hard seltzer. Zima was a clear, lightly carbonated and lemon-lime flavored malt beverage introduced in 1993 and “became very successful with young women in particular” (Flavorman, 2020, para.5). Their TV ads from 1994 prominently show women and seem to play along with the cultural orthodoxy that men are not as keen to drink Zima as compared to beer. In a particular ad from 1994, the setting is that two men go into a bar and ask for beer, yet it is a world in which beer does not exist. Everyone else is drinking Zima, and they get served one – they seem to sheepishly admit that it tastes quite good, but the message simply seems to be that men would only drink Zima in a world where beer literally did not exist (Zima, 1994). According to Gray and Goldfine (2021), Zima was “initially popular, selling 1.3 million barrels in 1994, but sales fell to … around 400,000 barrels within a few years” (para.9) before being discontinued in 2008. Why did Zima fail, even though their product closely resembled what would be re-introduced only a few years later with great success? According to Slate, Zima was “done in by its medicinal taste and girly-man rep”, which refers to its long-standing stereotype as “the very opposite of macho: a drink that fragile coeds swill while giving each other pedicures” (Koerner, 2008, para.2; para.1).

In 2013, the current iteration of the hard seltzer market emerged, with the launch of SpikedSeltzer. SpikedSeltzer was inspired by vodka sodas and created with the goal to “bridge the gap between beer, wine, and cocktails with a new kind of alcoholic beverage” (Whalebonemag, 2017, para.3). The brand quickly became popular and by 2015, the company managed to sell 250,000 cases in that year
(Flavorman, 2020). According to its founder Nick Shields, people liked SpikedSeltzer for a few different reasons:

“They liked the fact that you couldn’t really taste the 6% alcohol due to a natural fermentation process. They liked the low sugar and not-sweet flavor profile. They liked the gluten free, simple ingredients. And they really liked the bright packaging and our mermaid logo.” (Whalebonemag, 2017, para.7)

The initial customers were overwhelmingly female, as per the cultural orthodoxy. SpikedSeltzer’s customer base skewed 70-30% toward women, and especially health-conscious women who liked its low-calorie count (Nedelka, 2017).

Due to the brand’s success, it was acquired by Anheuser-Busch in 2016, and rebranded to Bon&Viv in 2019 (Gray & Goldfine, 2021). Apart from the name, the appearance of the can and logo remained. Nor did the focus on women change. In one of Bon&Viv’s first ads, they featured two mermaids (Bonnie and Vivian) pitching the idea of spiked seltzer to 4 animated sharks, a play on the TV show Shark Tank (AdAge, 2019). The literal mermaids are a reference to the mermaids on the can design and contributed to the perception that Bon&Viv was aimed at women more than men. Failing to reach mainstream appeal, Bon&Viv kept losing market share and eventually, White Claw and Truly launched in 2016 and overtook their market leader position, being dubbed the “Coca Cola and Pepsi of hard seltzer” (Creswell, 2021, para.9). In the following years, the number of hard seltzer brands rose from 10 at the start of 2018 to more than 100 in 2021, while the total market sales also went up from $400,000 in 2018 to a predicted $30 billion by 2025 (Gray & Goldfine, 2021). The market would completely change. What happened?

**Social Disruption: Health consciousness infiltrates colleges**

There seem to be three main social disruptions that would allow for the cultural success of White Claw in the hard seltzer category: health consciousness; gender-neutral norms, and online meme culture. The introduction of social media constitutes both a cultural disruption and a propagation mechanism of culture (Holt, 2016). The online connectivity of social media led to the rise of meme culture, as well as becoming an enabler of the spread of the first two cultural disruptions – health consciousness and gender neutrality norms.
As Holt describes in *Cultural Strategy*’s (2010) case on Vitaminwater (founded 2000), there had been a cultural movement over many decades demonizing certain ingredients used in soft drinks, as well as increasing scientific consensus on the connection between consumption of sugary drinks and obesity. As a result, younger Americans were becoming increasingly conscious of their health and ways to maintain it (Watson, 2015). In a 2015 survey, 80% of respondents stated that they were “committed to eating and maintaining a healthy lifestyle in an effort to prevent... serious health and medical issues” (Watson, 2015, para.8). In 2010, the Food and Drug Administration implemented a mandatory menu calorie count in all chain restaurants with 20 or more locations, which was part of a general trend towards more available nutritional information (Kovar, 2016).

The keto diet may have been the trend that popularized health amongst young men. This diet involves restricting carbohydrate intake (including sugar) drastically, with almost all nutrients coming from protein and fat sources (Mawer, 2020). The diet was one of the most popular diets during the late 2010s, adopted by everyone from “Silicon Valley trendsetters [to] famous actors” (Stein, 2018, para.1) and called the “hot diet trend of 2019” (Clay, 2019, para.1). The popularity of this diet across genders in colleges seems to have been an important precursor to the adoption of low-calorie drinks by men in that subculture, and perhaps the popularization of less extreme calorie-restriction. College students interviewed in early 2019 on why they were drinking hard seltzers, stated maintaining ketosis as an important factor:

“Regarding that bloated feeling, a number of the people I talked to (most of whom are in some state of ketosis) do seek out hard seltzer for its low-calorie virtues... ‘That’s the fun part of drinking White Claws: I can drink 10 of them and still be in ketosis but also still be very drunk,’ explains Liana, a 24-year-old data scientist in Seattle who picked up the taste for hard seltzer in college.” (Longo, 2019, para.7)

Health consciousness entered the drinks market several decades ago, with healthier versions of soft drinks, e.g. unflavored and flavored seltzer water. In particular, the seltzer-water brand LaCroix which had first risen to prominence in the 1990s became a cultural sensation in the mid 2010s (Bryan, 2018). LaCroix gained traction amongst hipsters and tech bros on the coasts (Sunderland, 2017), which explains why White Claw would later try to target the same demographic when they launched the alcoholic version
of seltzers. The wide cultural acceptance of non-alcoholic seltzers at this time may have paved the way for the cultural rise of hard seltzer in the years following. Curiously, the visual expression of the LaCroix can and Wallace’s Hawaiian shirt in the “*drinks white claw once*” video are strikingly similar (see Appendix C).

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 3: The evolution of the hard seltzer beverage (Authors’ own work)*

Hard seltzer can be seen as a similar evolution towards low-sugar, low-calorie, versions of lightly alcoholic drinks. Hard seltzer had started to become more popular in colleges, particularly at frat parties by early 2019 (Longo, 2019). This demographic was the early adopters of hard seltzers. Students seemed to apply the benefits of this category to day-drinking, as well as very long sessions of drinking that would previously have been done with beer: “you’re getting the same alcohol content [as the 12-pack of beer he used to bring with him], but you’re not getting that bloated feeling” (Longo, 2019, para.6).

The other main cultural disruption was the rise of gender-neutral norms, including those around drinking. Gender equality in all sectors and spheres of life had become the norm towards the end of the 20th century and through the 2010s (England et al. 2020). This trend towards gender equality has continued to the extent that distinctions between genders are increasingly blurred. This can be seen in the form of androgynous fashion that rose in the 1990s, with examples like rockstar Kurt Cobain wearing eyeliner and dresses during concerts (TomboyX, 2022). This trend of ever less distinction between gender identity continued in the 2000s and is a widespread phenomenon in fashion culture today (FashionCapital, 2022). Metrosexuality was another phenomenon of the 90s and 2000s that reflected blurred gender identity lines (Williams, 2018).
Gender-neutral norms were increasingly present in settings where alcohol is consumed, e.g. college campuses. Studies have shown that on average, men and women consume significantly more alcohol in mixed-gender settings than in single-sex settings (Thrul et al. 2017). Therefore, the college setting may be where one may find the greatest desire for an alcoholic beverage that has the fewest side-effects, since it is where some of the greatest amounts of drinking occurs.

The last cultural disruption required for White Claw was meme culture. Though memes have been used to communicate “as long as [we] have used any symbolic system” (Benveniste, 2022, para.3), this human tendency to share symbols and content has exploded because of social media. While the original concept of meme was concerned with the notion of a shareable idea, the word has come to represent a format of online content. One feature of memes is that “most of them can be read and understood within seconds”, according to Samir Mezrahi, deputy director of social media at BuzzFeed (Benveniste, 2022, para.10). What one may term “meme culture” now represents a kind of shared American culture. Modern memes allow for a shared cultural understanding: “When you crack open a White Claw now, it means taking a sip of meme culture, the internet, and hell, pop-culture itself.” (Binder, 2019, para.4).

**White Claw’s cultural strategy: Innovation, source material and cultural tactics**

Americans wanted to drink alcohol in a healthier way, in the mixed-gender social settings that had become the norm. It had become acceptable for men to drink flavored sparkling water. von Mandl saw an opportunity with a male-friendly beer-alternative and had already seen some success with this idea with Mike’s Hard Lemonade. Still, the challenge remained to transform the unattractive associations of hard seltzers into something that male consumers would accept.

White Claw was brought to the market with the intention of finally breaking through to male drinkers – a low-calorie, low-proof drink made with simple ingredients. In connection to White Claw’s launch in 2016, White Claw’s VP of Marketing Sanjiv Gajiwala explains how White Claw would be different:

> “Alcoholic beverages and healthy alternatives don’t always go hand-in-hand but White Claw fuses convenience, refreshment and subtle flavor to deliver a drink that’s considerably lighter than a cocktail or beer... Serving as a step away from high-sugar sodas and mixers, White Claw is a shift into a lighter, all natural, better-for-you alcoholic beverage – defining a whole new
category for those who want to enjoy life and have fun while maintaining a healthy lifestyle.” (Brewbound, 2016, para.3)

Responsible for White Claw’s name, narrative and visual elements (see Appendix C) was marketing agency Bulletproof:

“we created a brand narrative that centered around the legend of the White Claw wave: a triple-set, gnarly phenomenon that delivers the ultimate refreshment... the spiritual home of the brand being the beach, the ocean and a lifestyle without limits” (Bulletproof, n.d., para.2).

Bulletproof also came up with a tagline of “Made Pure”, to convey “the lightness and refreshment of Seltzer and to highlight its holistic properties” (Bulletproof, n.d., para.5). Bulletproof Executive creative director Tony Connor mentions how they used soft seltzers as inspiration for hard seltzers:

“when you think of seltzer, you think of clear, or the color of a vibrant white. So we brought in white, silver, and minimal color. When you get into the world of alcoholic beverages, when you see a lot of colors, you think sugar, calories, and heavy. That’s sort of the opposite of what you want when you’re thinking about seltzer” (Binder, 2019, para.6).

This design form would end up becoming iconic in its own right – spawning endless forms of fan-created merch. One example is the White Claw-inspired dog toy called “White Paw”, which is a chew toy in the shape of a black cherry can (Gift Spawt, n.d.). The flavor is “bark cherry” and the wave is replaced by a paw – “ain’t no laws when you’re drinking paws” (Gift Spawt, n.d., para.1).

White Claw was first teased on Instagram in June 2016, showing a big wave breaking right to left, with the caption: “Like a cool, refreshing mist from a mighty wave crashing to shore... #whiteclaw is coming soon” (White Claw, 2016a). After that, almost every single post would contain the cans front and center. Occasionally, there would be a beach background, e.g. a post from September 2016 where a can is held up in front of a shoreline (White Claw, 2016b). White Claw also posted cocktail recipes that included White Claw as the replacement for seltzer water, such one called the “mint thrill”, posted in March 2017 (White Claw, 2017a). To begin with, White Claw focused on promoting the functional benefits of the product but also some associations with summertime. The terms “gluten-free”, “only 100 calories”,

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“purest hard seltzer”, “nothing artificial” are included alongside most posts before 2019 (White Claw, n.d.a).

In early 2019, hard seltzers had hit college campuses, but there seemed to be a similar amount of interest in drinking competitor Truly as there was for drinking White Claw (Longo, 2019). Truly’s market communication centered around youthful summer drinking in mixed social settings. In a TV ad from July 2018, “This is Truly”, the drink is presented with the same attributes that White Claw was also communicating: “spiked sparkling water”, “simple”, “refreshing”, “5% alcohol”, “only 100 calories” (Truly, 2018). This voice-over happens while we see a scene of a group of young people on paddleboards in the sun. This seems like a very similar myth to the one that Wallace would later popularize on White Claw’s behalf.

The watershed moment for White Claw came in June 2019, when LA-based comedian Trevor Wallace posted the parody video “*drinks white claw once*” on his YouTube channel (Wallace, 2019). In the roughly 3-minute-long video, which as of 2023 has 6.7 million views, Wallace skillfully packages all the stereotypes around the frat-bro who drank White Claw and exaggerates it for comedic effect. For instance, the video starts with Wallace wearing a black t-shirt and after one sip of White Claw, his outfit is transformed into a colorful Hawaiian shirt as well as a red cap with the script “Weekend legend” (Wallace, 2019). By mid 2019, White Claw was ubiquitous on college campuses, thanks to a “wellness-driven branding campaign and viral stardom on Instagram” according to an article in Mel Magazine (Longo, 2019). The Wallace video manifested White Claw as part of the meme sub-culture, which allowed it to spread beyond the campuses through a vicarious experience of it online – first the video, and then via memes from meme accounts such as @whiteclawmeme (see Appendix C).

Wallace’s video not only popularized White Claw but managed to take the White Claw-drinking fat-bro subculture and make their cultural expression around White Claw mainstream. The parody created an image of reckless abandon and youthful summer drinking that many people would want to associate with. Wallace would be responsible for two particularly powerful memes that have contributed to popularizing White Claw:

1) “White Claw summer 2019” (Wallace 2019, 0:13)
2) “Ain’t no laws when you’re drinking claws” (Wallace 2019, 0:22)

An Atlantic article from August 27, declared the summer renamed from “hot girl summer” (a reference to Megan Thee Stallion’s hit single of the same name) to “White Claw summer” because of the ubiquity of the drink at that point (Mull, 2019b). The mainstream popularity of White Claw memes is further exemplified by a tweet from the Portland Police’s Twitter account, where they participated in the trend by jokingly reminding people that even though the phrase “ain’t no laws when you’re drinking claws” had become popular, laws still applied (see Appendix C) (Boss, 2019).

**Source material: Never-ending "Claw"-memes**

The source material for the new White Claw myth came from the Trevor Wallace video and the memes that it spawned. White Claw allowed the source material to proliferate and would both repost memes and post their own meme-format content on Twitter (White Claw, n.d.b). Few brands other than White Claw have seen an equally large number of meme pages created with the sole purpose of sharing memes about their brand. Several White Claw meme accounts on Instagram boast several thousand followers (see Appendix C). It is difficult to accurately represent the quantity and diversity of memes associated with White Claw, as they are present on all platforms and in all formats.

The White Claw brand originally communicated an ideology that centered around surfing and beach culture, but this was not the ideology that they became known for. It was the Wallace video that introduced the ideology that would help them go mainstream - drinking a healthier drink was cool and slightly rebellious, as represented by the college drinking culture and memes such as “ain’t no laws when you’re drinking claws”. The huge viral success of the brand seemed to have taken the management by surprise. White Claw’s senior Vice President of Marketing said in September 2019 that “White Claw has accelerated faster than anyone could have predicted” (Valinsky, 2019, para.2).

White Claw was not quick to understand the importance and value of what Wallace had done for the brand. In an interview with Anthony Padilla, Wallace explains how White Claw threatened to sue him when he put his coined phrase “ain’t no laws when you’re drinkin’ claws” on a t-shirt and sold it as merchandise alongside an altered White Claw logo (see Appendix C) (AnthonyPadilla, 2023). Wallace
managed to sell 7000 t-shirts in 24 hours after pictures of the shirt went viral. 24 hours later, the legal team from White Claw reached out to Wallace’s manager and got the merchandise taken down. Nonetheless, the memes that the Wallace video produced would be impossible to prevent spreading, even if White Claw would have wanted to.

Did White Claw just get lucky? Cultural branding can be employed effectively especially after an initial success. While Mark Anthony brands may not have been able to predict the success of White Claw on college campuses, since they had been marketing toward young professionals, they had still intentionally set up the brand to cater to both genders (Longo, 2019). Once they could see the traction happening throughout 2019, it was possible to amplify the existing trends even if they did not initially understand what was going on.

As most of the discussion around White Claw was happening on Instagram and Twitter in the form of user-generated content (e.g. selfies with white claws in hand) or memes that were often tagged with hashtags that White Claw could monitor. Hence, all the brand had to do was to actively participate in a way consistent with the myth that had been built up for White Claw by Wallace. White Claw’s marketing team continuously stoked the social media buzz set in motion by Trevor Wallace’s video, e.g. with posts highlighting their favorite memes on Twitter (ThoughtCatalyst, 2020). Therefore, the mythologization that happened with White Claw was not done as an active strategy by the company themselves but happened relatively naturally.

4.3.3 Applying Entrepreneurship Concepts

Founder networks
The founder, von Mandl, and his company Mark Anthony Group had plenty of experience and network within the beverage market in the US from their successful brand Mike’s Hard Lemonade (Maloney, 2019). This made launching the White Claw brand relatively easy, since they had relationships that allowed for rapid setup of distribution with retailers (Schultz, 2019). Without the backing of a company like Mark Anthony, it is likely that the brand would have had to prove itself in the market before being granted such distribution deals, which would have made it much harder to get in front of the college students that would end up producing the myth of carefree summer drinking.
This case is slightly different in that White Claw’s cultural expression that made it go viral did not come from the company itself but was sourced from the college subculture and its online expression. The network that enabled White Claw to enter the market and get on shelves, was a necessary first step before which the college subculture could get to know the brand.

Other stakeholders
An additional key factor which emerged during the data collection for White Claw was the influence of other stakeholders. The concept of stakeholders within cultural entrepreneurship is the study of how narratives can appeal to external stakeholders to help with the success of the business (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). One of the more important external stakeholders for White Claw is the Bulletproof brand agency that helped them develop the brand’s components. Perhaps the narrative that Mark Anthony Brands was an established company, and a serious client, would have helped to convince the agency to do a thorough and well-executed job. On the other hand, White Claw’s access to big spending through Mark Anthony Brands likely contributed in equal amounts to ensuring the brand agency delivered the highest quality work. Either way, White Claw outsourced many of the key business functions that contribute to the brand development, e.g. branding and PR, which smaller entrepreneurial brands likely do not have the resources to do. It is hard to say for sure whether this is an advantage or disadvantage for brands to involve external actors in developing such integral aspects of the brand.

Funding
Mark Anthony Brands did not require fundraising to launch White Claw, which makes it different from most other entrepreneurial brands, and is also a reason why White Claw was chosen as a case. White Claw was created as a new brand by von Mandl (via Mark Anthony Brands) who was an established player in the drinks market (Brewbound, 2016). Therefore, White Claw had backing from a successful serial entrepreneur, which meant external funding was not required to have the resources to create and market this new brand. This also meant that the entrepreneurial narrative that was required for the other cases was not as important in this case and can explain why von Mandl is not involved prominently in any corporate messaging.
**Optimal distinctiveness**

White Claw was a very similar product to other hard seltzers such as Truly, which for a while was equal to White Claw in popularity (Longo, 2019). Some opinions from students online in 2019 suggest that White Claw may have been considered a better tasting product than Truly (Longo, 2019). Additionally, the minimalist black and white design of the can (see Appendix C) was distinctive as compared to other hard seltzer brands who tended to have more colorful designs (Reuters, 2021). Cultural entrepreneurship’s understanding of entrepreneurial narratives focuses on the company itself (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019), and in the case of White Claw vs. Truly, there is little guidance to facilitate an understanding in how differentiated the two brands were in practice. Neither cultural branding theory (Holt & Cameron, 2010) provides a thorough explanation as to how White Claw could achieve differentiation as the brand’s cultural expression is not particularly differentiated either beyond its viral moment.

The drink became widely memed and referenced, as well as spread by word-of-mouth, which granted it legitimacy in the public eye as well as in the key “bro” demographic (Biron, 2019). Social proof came easily during the viral storm of “White Claw summer” in 2019, but before that the main legitimizing factor is likely to have been the mere presence of White Claw on retail shelves. Through visibility at physical retail stores, the brand would have been legitimized, and the wide availability at house parties when it started to become a drink of choice added to this (Longo, 2019).

The balance between the White Claw narrative legitimizing and differentiating seems to be more on the differentiating side, as the established Mark Anthony brands did not need much to legitimize themselves to retailers and distributors. However, vis-à-vis the customers, legitimization was more dire as hard seltzers was still a new category in 2016. This suggests that the requirements and success of legitimacy depends on who the receiver is of the entrepreneurial narrative. Perhaps entrepreneurs naturally have different narratives depending on their goals and audience, but such assessments are difficult to make without further research.
Founder narratives

In the few appearances and interviews available online, founder von Mandl speaks at length about his passion of winemaking, but is less outspoken about White Claw (Von Mandl, 2017; 2018; 2021). von Mandl’s passion is clearly wine and he mentions repeatedly in interviews how his business projects, such as Mike’s Hard Lemonade, were only started so that he could finance his wine projects (Von Mandl, 2017). A former business partner, Clark Simms called von Mandl’s “marketing savvy … near genius”, and a “master at spinning stories, creating brands and designing compelling products” (Korstrom, 2014). However, his efforts seem focused behind the scenes.

After being named the 2021 Distinguished Entrepreneur of the Year, von Mandl’s only reference to White Claw is by mentioning the “last four years of this amazing social phenomenon called White Claw hard seltzer” (Von Mandl, 2021, 3:37). His recorded videos do not have many views online, potentially due to his low profile and thus weak public association with White Claw. Furthermore, there do not seem to be any memes about the White Claw founder, though he could very easily have been a target, which further proves von Mandl’s low public profile.
4.4 Glossier

Emily Weiss (O’Conner, 2016). Glossier makeup (The Beauty Minimalist, 2020)

4.4.1 Introducing Glossier

Glossier is a DTC beauty brand that sells “back-to-basic” makeup and skincare products. It was founded in 2014 by beauty blogger Emily Weiss, who wanted to create a brand that made beauty products inspired by women’s real life beauty routines (Glossier, n.d.a.). The idea for Glossier was born out of Weiss’ blog, Into The Gloss, which she had started four years prior while working as an editorial assistant at Vogue (Branch, 2017).

The blog provided insider coverage on all things beauty (Strugatz, 2022). On Into The Gloss, Weiss shared the real beauty routines of celebrities and fashion insiders (Meltzer, 2019). She wanted the blog to be a platform for conversation, where people could share the product they love, get inspired by others and receive information about the best makeup and skincare products (Glossier, n.d.a). The most popular column on the blog was “Top Shelf”, an interview series where Weiss interviewed women from the beauty and fashion industry about their best beauty tip and techniques (Into The Gloss, n.d.). In 2010, Into The Gloss had amassed close to 10 million monthly page views (Jacobs, 2015).

After four years of running the blog, Weiss decided she wanted to create a brand that would represent the changing dynamic in the beauty industry which she had seen and participated in through her blog (Turk, 2020). The result was Glossier, a brand whose business approach centered around giving its
customers a voice. As founder Weiss puts it: “our mission of kind of giving voice through beauty, so really activating people to be able to say, to sit up a little taller and say, “This is what I know. This is what I think.” (Swisher, 2019, 24:34). The business model was a DTC, e-commerce brand that sold its products exclusively through Glossier’s website. Weiss wanted to be in complete control of Glossier’s relationship with its consumers, because she recognized that the brand’s intimate, two-way communication with its customers and followers was part of the brand’s value proposition (Danziger, 2018; Turk, 2020). After the launch of Glossier, Weiss kept Into The Gloss active, although she no longer was the main contributor. The blog became another communication channel where Glossier regularly asked readers and fans what products they wanted Glossier to make, and how they wanted the product to look, smell, and feel like (Turk, 2020).

Since its launch, Glossier has grown into a billion-dollar company and solidified their position as an iconic brand. In 2015, Glossier launched Boy Brow, a brow gel which quickly became a fan-favorite. Customers bought a year’s worth of inventory in five months and the product quickly generated a 10,000-person waitlist – three years later, Glossier reported to have sold the equivalent of one Boy Brow every 32 seconds (Turk, 2020; Rubin, 2022). In 2016, the brand’s customer base grew by 600% (Talbot, 2017). During 2018, the brand acquired a million new customers and surpassed $100 million in annual revenue, which was double their 2017 result (Hanbury, 2023). Glossier reached unicorn-status in 2019, at which time the company employed over 200 people with operations in seven countries (Goldfine, 2021). In 2020, the brand surpassed 3 million customers and had raised almost $200 million over five years (Turk, 2020; Crunchbase, n.d.). In 2021, the brand received a valuation of $1.8 billion (Mondalek & Strugatz, 2021). The same year, Glossier opened a permanent retail store in London (Coates, 2021).

Glossier’s success has been recognized time and time again. It has been named a top beauty brand by magazines Allure, Cosmopolitan, Vogue, Glamour, among others, received the award Digital Innovator of the Year in 2015 from Beauty Inc, recognized as one of the Most Innovative Companies of 2017 by Fast Company, and was featured in LinkedIn’s annual list of “Top Startups [of the year]” in 2018 (Danziger, 2018). Above all, the brand is known for its large and devoted fanbase. Glossier has repeatedly been dubbed a cult brand; with over 2.7 million Instagram followers, products that accumulated a combined 60,000 names on waitlists, and both customers and celebrities wearing merchandise
sweatshirts with the company’s name across the chest, Glossier instills a brand loyalty among its customers that is rare in the beauty industry (Glossier, n.d.b; Goldfine, 2021; O’Connor, 2016).

4.4.2 Glossier: Cultural Branding Analysis

*Beauty’s cultural orthodoxy: Top-down beauty autocracy*

In the years leading up to the launch of Glossier, the beauty industry was controlled by a few big, multinational beauty incumbents that owned several makeup and skincare brands. Pre-2014, e-commerce had been on the rise for a couple of years, but in the beauty industry, brands’ business models were still centered around securing favorable shelf-spaces in physical retail stores where the average beauty consumer shopped (Meltzer, 2019). When a smaller, boutique brands managed to break into the industry, it was quickly bought up by conglomerates such as L’Oréal and Estée Lauder (Goldfine, 2021). As a result, emerging niche brands often ended up losing their character in the process as they were incorporated into the brand architecture of these corporate giants. This meant that, even though the beauty industry was filled with makeup and skincare brands that communicated different brand personalities and targeted different segments, their mode and goal of communication followed the same conventional cultural ideology, i.e. a top-down approach that used homogenous-looking models and celebrities to tell consumers what products they should purchase to be beautiful.

The cultural orthodoxy of the beauty industry was built on a core assumption that brands know best (Vischer, 2019). Incumbent beauty brands were product-focused, developing makeup and skincare products first and then using big marketing budgets to push them into the market and convince consumers to buy them. For cosmetics, most of the ad messages emphasized perfection. Chanel’s campaigns featured beautiful models in glamorous settings, e.g. blonde women in bikinis lounging around the pool while wearing bright, sparkling lipstick (Chanel, 2013). Maybelline’s campaigns featured models with professionally styled hair and clothing and promoted makeup products that were more glamorous, better, or extreme than the last, with a voice-over that said catchphrases such as “Mission? The lushest, most glamorous lashes” or “Our smoothest, most sumptuous [lip] color ever – color this gorgeous, moisture this extreme should come with a warning” (AdForum 2013; 2014). Covergirl’s camping often featured celebrities in a studio setting, wearing heavy makeup, e.g. Drew Barrymore and Taylor Swift, promoting a variety of products that promised “flawless coverage”, and “lashes that look up to 80% longer” thanks
to the mascara’s new “elasta-nylon” formula (Jade, 2010; stevefullertv, 2010). As such, the beauty industry’s cultural orthodoxy often centered around a building-better-mousetraps strategy with each new product being somehow superior to the last.

Through TV ads and print campaigns, companies crafted a difficult-to-attain beauty myth that encouraged women to purchase the products to fit into the narrow definition of beauty that the ads promoted (Prokopets, n.d.). The celebrities and models featured in the campaigns were beautiful, thin, and predominately white, and the images heavily airbrushed which promoted a luxurious and glamorous ideal of beauty that was difficult to attain for the average woman (see Appendix D) (Kilikita, 2022). As such, the conventional cultural expression of the beauty industry left little room for individual expression or diversity.

**Social disruption: Rise of blog culture, social media, and online social movements**

As illustrated in section 4.1.2, early-2000s American society idealized decadent lifestyles and celebrity culture. After the recession, aspirational societal values shifted from decadence and wealth-flaunting to the opposite, and minimalism became the new way for people to signal refinement that ended up defining the 2010s (Goldfine, 2021). As it became less cool to look ostentatiously rich, consumers started turning away from companies whose communication centered around a “more is more” message (Jennings, 2020). The financial crisis had made people lose faith in institutions and big companies that represented Corporate America, and instead consumers were seeking out brands that were honest, authentic, personable, and warm (Brooke, 2018).

When institutional trust went down, consumers started placing even bigger trust in the opinions of other consumers. For both fashion and beauty, people started turning to their friends for inspiration rather than celebrities, and the interest in the concept of personal style grew (Turk, 2020). This contributed to the rise of modern blog culture which was fueled by the launch of new blog platforms, e.g. Medium and Wordpress, that made it easy for people to create their own blogs, but also find other blogs to read (Allen, 2005). As blogging became a mainstream phenomenon, it reshaped people’s notion of who can create, share, and influence knowledge and opinions (Mohler, 2005). It challenged the dominance of mainstream media and forced traditional newspaper and magazine editors to start taking bloggers seriously (Strugatz,
2022). Additionally, the introduction of the blogging medium dramatically changed the relationship between companies and consumers and contributed to a shift in the existing power dynamic in the beauty industry (Turk, 2020). It was this social disruption in America’s media landscape that allowed Weiss’ blog to grab hold of beauty consumers and turn Weiss into an early influencer with a loyal following years before she launched Glossier (Del Valle, 2019). Weiss has shared that these influences inspired her to start her blog, *Into The Gloss*:

“I wanted to start this new conversation around product that was more through the lens of personal style, rather than beauty coming from a product- or launch-driven perspective; really talking about the best of beauty as it relates to women's routines, women's opinions, as women's individual, unique beauty thumb prints.” (McCall, 2017, para.9).

Around the same time, modern social media such as Facebook and Instagram made it even easier for consumers to share their opinions and connect with other, like-minded people. But, the power of social media in connecting and engaging people was not limited to discussions about products and brands. The first half of the 2010s saw a rise of several social movements that occurred predominantly online, fueled by social media platforms whose lack of geographical barriers enabled public discourse and created a platform for activism, spreading awareness, and promoting change (Chittal, 2015). For instance, a number of hashtag-campaigns was started that protested sexist ads or raised awareness about feminist issues like violence towards women (e.g. #NotBuyingIt and #YesAllWomen).

Within the fashion and beauty community, consumers began speaking out against the narrow beauty ideals that were being promoted by brands. On Instagram, the body positivity movement had quickly gained supporters who leveraged their collective voice to challenge advertising campaigns that they believed promoted negative body images (Chittal, 2015). For instance, in 2014, Victoria’s Secret released a lingerie campaign with the tagline “perfect body”, which featured very thin and predominantly white models. After a storm of criticism on Instagram and Twitter, Victoria’s Secret ended up changing the slogan two months later to “a body for every body” (Ramsey, 2017). Similar issues were present in the beauty industry, where companies featured fair-skinned models in their ads; makeup brands sold foundations that had one or two dark shades for women of color compared to ten or twenty variations of lighter shades; and airbrushed and filtered product and campaign photos set unrealistic standards for
perfect skin (Dirshe, 2016; O’Neill, 2018). The last issue sparked a hashtag-movement of its own, #Skinpositivity, that advocated for bigger representation and acceptance of different skin types and conditions such as acne and vitiligo (Khatib, 2020). Despite this, few brands were making genuine efforts to change their communication to be more inclusive of different notions of beauty (Dirshe, 2016).

**Glossier’s cultural strategy: Innovation, source material and cultural tactics**

Through her blog, Weiss had noticed that an ideological opportunity had appeared in the beauty industry: there as a collective desire among consumers for a brand that was more authentic and inclusive – an alternative to the big conglomerates and the autocratic beauty ideals they pushed (Goldfine, 2021). Glossier was created to be that alternative. By positioning themselves as the antithesis of the beauty industry’s large incumbents, Glossier created minimalist makeup products inspired by consumers’ opinions, wants and existing routines that they had shared with the brand through *Into The Gloss*, and that represented a rejection of traditional rules and ideals regarding beauty (Rogers, 2018; Nicholson, 2019; Del Valle, 2019). This was Glossier’s cultural innovation, and it was powerful enough to get millions of makeup and skincare consumers to rally around the brand’s messages of empowerment, inclusivity, and self-love. As Weiss described it when she introduced Glossier to her blog readers in 2014: “Glossier is about living in – and embracing – the now, not the past, and not the future. It’s about fun and freedom and being OK with yourself today” (Weiss, 2014, para.9).

Glossier employed a cultural tactic which Holt and Cameron (2010) call “provoking ideological flashpoints”. It is a cultural branding principle where the brand identifies certain social issues that the target audience are passionate about and creates products or campaigns that address this issue, thus positioning the brand as the (better) alternative (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Glossier’s product offering was purposefully scaled back, offering a more minimalistic and natural look that was designed to enhance, rather than cover up, the consumer’s natural beauty. This “skin first, makeup second” philosophy that Glossier embodied appealed to consumers who were discontent with the big beauty brands’ messages that centered around using heavy makeup to conceal perceived imperfections and achieve a flawless, airbrushed look (Turk, 2020). By sourcing relevant material from the online social movements striving for a more diverse and inclusive beauty standard, Glossier aspired to become a brand that consumers would rally behind. As Weiss puts it, “at Glossier, the entire premise of what we’re doing is all about
democratizing beauty” (McCall, 2017, para.18). In an interview with Fashionista magazine, Weiss shared Glossier’s alternative ideology:

“An enormous part of social media is beauty. [Glossier is not] reinventing the wheel by saying that we want everyone to be their own expert, I just think we're the first beauty brand to actually embrace that as a thing to rally behind … There's not one voice of reason, or one expert, or a brand as an expert, or a brand-appointed spokesperson or makeup artist as an expert. In today's day and age with the digital landscape, what it’s done if nothing else, has given the power to the people to … elect their own brands and elect their own heroes.” (McCall, 2017, para.25).

This was a very different ideology to the hierarchical approach of the beauty industry, where companies create unattainable ideals that they sell to consumers through celebrity endorsements and ads featuring perfect models (Del Valle, 2019).

In contrast to traditional makeup brands that followed a “building-better-mousetraps” ideology by releasing new products that promised better results through buzzwords like “elasta-nylon formula” (stevefullertv, 2010), Glossier’s products were simple, and the brand’s total product range much smaller than industry standard. Other makeup brands usually offered dozens of different mascaras promising different benefits – volumizing, lengthening, different brush technologies, and different shades of black – Glossier offered just one, available only in black. According to Weiss, this was an intentional choice. She states that Glossier’s goal was to create timeless products that are easy to use and can become staples in women’s beauty routines (Turk, 2020). This reaffirms that Glossier’s cultural innovation lies in what the brand represents, and how they communicate it. In fact, Weiss has shared that she aspired to make Glossier into “the beauty version of Nike” (Talbot, 2017, para.11), a culturally relevant brand with products equally iconic as the brand itself. Weiss shares:

“What I want to have happen with Glossier, I hope that we transcend being a product company; I think product is maybe 50% of what we do. There's a whole other 50 that we offer people who are in the world of Glossier, and that's seeing the world through Glossier-colored glasses. It's an outlook. It's a certain perspective, not just product – there's far too many "just products" in the world. I hope that we become a symbol for being your own best expert and have your own opinion and narrative, and sharing that with others, sharing it with the world.” (Weiss, as cited in McCall, 2017).
Source material: Online beauty communities and inclusive beauty movements

A major part of Glossier’s cultural innovation was how they communicated with consumers, including providing their customers with a platform to share what products they wanted directly to the brand. Drawing upon source material from online beauty communities, Glossier adopted a conversational style of communicating on their website, Instagram, and product pages – in stark contrast to traditional beauty conglomerates’ top-down approach (Meltzer, 2019). For consumers who had grown skeptical of big corporations, brands that used a colloquial and friendly tone of voice seemed more like a peer than a business and contributed to creating a sense of shared values that consumers valued (Brooke, 2018). This helped Glossier appear more authentic and genuine than their competitors. Weiss shares how Glossier’s communication is focused on transparency and finding the right voice:

“We like to think that whenever we talk to [our customer] through captions on Instagram or through email or through copy on the site, that we’re writing text messages to a friend. [For Glossier,] staying true to that voice has created a lot of loyalty and trust with our customers.” (Loizos, 2017).

Furthermore, Glossier energized their strategy by adopting the beauty community’s mode of communication, Instagram, as their main communication channel (Johnson, 2019). 2014 was a time when few beauty brands had social media accounts and even fewer had a dedicated social media manager, and those who did used Instagram in the same way they used TV ads – as a one-way broadcast of product promotions (Prokopets, n.d.). Glossier was early in recognizing the power of social media marketing and used Instagram as a platform for the Glossier community; a social promotion channel; an online product research and development lab; and a potent source of user-generated content (Prokopets, n.d.). Weiss shares the philosophy behind Glossier’s approach: “At Glossier, we’ve really taken user feedback and asked them for things like what products to make, where to go in terms of pop-ups, or countries, and fundamentally, have been able to really change the relationship between brands and customers.” (Johnson, 2019, para.26).

To drive home their message, Glossier’s marketing strategy is centered around representing real beauty and embracing flaws and imperfections as something normal, by using regular people as models in their ads, and sharing user-generated content about their customers’ real experiences of Glossier products on
their Instagram (see Appendix D) (Waterson, 2020; Turk, 2020). In doing so, Glossier mimicked the expressions of the beauty social movements on Instagram that used non-filtered photos of bodies and skins to show a more diverse and inclusive representation of beauty. Furthermore, the brand posts “get ready with me”-videos on their YouTube channel, a style of video where women share their morning routine including skincare and makeup. The video series featured a variety of real women of different ages and ethnicities (see Appendix D) (Glossier, n.d.c).

New product launches are announced not through Glossier’s own Instagram, but through their followers’. Ahead of the official launch, Glossier sends product samples to their most loyal customers, Glossier Ambassadors, and let them break the news by sharing a photo of video of the new product on their Instagram accounts (Waterson, 2020). Weiss shares: “Our customers are our number-one mouthpieces and evangelists. They’re doing exactly what we hoped they would. They are interpreting Glossier” (Del Valle, 2019). As such, Glossier encourages their customers to be in charge of their own beauty narrative, including how they use Glossier’s products. This illustrates how Glossier’s cultural strategy is built around being a champion of real, unfiltered beauty and having the brand in that sense participate in the inclusive beauty movements and communities that the brand use as source material.

4.4.3 Applying Entrepreneurship Concepts

Founder networks

Weiss had no formal business training prior to launching Glossier (Berger, 2019). Instead, it was her connections from her previous jobs and blog that would prove vital for the success of Glossier. During her various positions at Teen Vogue, W Magazine, and Vogue, Weiss had built a large network of influential people in the fashion and beauty industry (Strugatz, 2022). It was through her job that she met big industry names and celebrities such as supermodel Karlie Kloss, whom she would later approach and ask to interview for her blog (Goldfine, 2021). Weiss shares: “The connections I made in my jobs and internships definitely helped me to get better access to people, or at least to have some credibility to be able to say, ‘Let me interview you.’” (Odell, 2013, para.14). The interviews, centered around the interviewees’ beauty routine and bathroom cabinets, contributed to the blog drawing a million monthly readers within a few years (Goldfine, 2021).
After about a year, *Into The Gloss* had gained a big enough readership for Weiss to quit her day job at Vogue to work full-time on running the blog (O’Connor, 2016). She asked a friend who worked in publishing to join her as the editorial director and started running the blog more like a business with employees and external partnerships (Hanbury, 2023). Weiss began working with household beauty brands through advertising and sponsorship deals (Turk, 2020). Weiss shares: “In working on *Into The Gloss* for the first year, I was exposed to all these beauty companies. So, I was working with Lancôme, I was working with Estée Lauder, I was working with Coty, I was working with every big conglomerate.” (Raz, 2018, 25:25). As such, Weiss was quickly expanding her personal network to also include beauty industry professionals.

When Weiss wanted to turn her blog into a beauty brand, she quickly realized she needed outside help to make Glossier reality. Weiss reached out to Henry Davis, an experienced VC who had worked with multiple fashion and e-commerce companies that Weiss had met while running the blog (Into The Gloss, 2015). After sharing her idea with Davis – to turn the community and platform she had built through her blog into a skincare and makeup brand that was not just a product but an experience, an identity and a trustworthy friend – Davis joined Glossier as President and COO (Fessler, 2018; Glossy, 2018). Since neither Weiss nor Davis had any experience in product development, Glossier hired their first employee. Weiss shares:

”My first hire was an incredible director of product development that had over a decade of experience over at MAC Cosmetics. That was my first hire, because I had never made a product, and I don’t know how it works, or vendors, or how long things take. I have no idea. I remember, she ended up getting a recommendation for a chemist from someone who she knew from the industry, who was based outside of LA … He became our chemist and he’s actually developed almost all of our skincare products until today” (Raz, 2018, 36:18)

This illustrates how not only the founder’s personal networks, but also the personal and professional relationships of early employees, can provide solutions and create opportunities that contribute to the growth of a business.

In Glossier’s case, Weiss’ network through her blog and readership was arguably even more important than her previous professional network. Many of Glossier’s early employees were fans of the blog, and
it was also the readers who would become Glossier’s first customers (Into The Gloss, 2015; Goldfine, 2021). Weeks before Glossier officially launched, Weiss had started teasing the brand on her blog and on what would become Glossier’s Instagram channel, sharing over one hundred images of logo mockups, product samples with covered labels, glowing and smiling faces, and inspirational quotes about self-love and positivity (see Appendix D) (Holmes, 2014). Only a handful of images showed actual Glossier products, as Weiss shares her purpose was about “establishing a certain mood and a certain kind of girl and a certain spirit” (Holmes, 2014, para.6). Much of the initial PR that Glossier received from the media was also centered around Weiss as the founder. For instance, in 2014, major fashion and beauty publication Elle reported that “Emily Weiss Launches Glossier” (Schott, 2014). As such it was through Into The Gloss that Weiss; got the idea for Glossier and for the brand’s first product (a cleanser – after asking her readers what product they were missing in their beauty routine); found her co-founder and first employees; grew the brand’s Instagram following with over 10,000 people before Glossier had posted a single product photo; and could introduce the official launch of Glossier to one million blog readers for free (Turk, 2020; Holmes, 2014; Goldfine, 2021).

**Funding**

To develop Glossier’s initial products and hire an executive team that could help her run the brand, Weiss needed to raise funding. According to Weiss, she had no idea how much money was required to hire a team, produce the makeup and skincare products, build the website and e-commerce platform (Johnson, 2019). She made a list of all the things she needed to do before she could launch her company, and settled for $1 million (Raz, 2018). However, Weiss struggled to find VCs who wanted to fund her idea. She shares:

“When I was first raising our seed round … I didn’t even know what a venture capital was. I knew I needed $1 million in order to pay for materials that would make beauty products and go produce beauty products. And it was a lot of cold outreach and getting people onboard. And 11 out of 12 people said no” (Swisher, 2019, 53:15)

After receiving 11 no’s, Weiss finally got a yes after pitching to the founder of Forerunner Ventures, Kristen Green, who agreed to give Weiss $2 million to create Glossier (Goldfine, 2021). Weiss believes that the reason why she initially struggled to raise funding for Glossier is because the VC firms she
approached were skeptical that consumers would buy beauty products online (Feroze, 2020). She also felt that VCs did not understand what she was trying to build with Glossier: “a brand that really hears [their consumers] and understands them” (Raz, 2018, 32:40). She shares:

“My COO and I, we would have our little goodiebags [of products] and bring them to different rooms full of guys and have them get the bag and say ‘oh, that’s so nice thank you I’m gonna give it to my wife and ask what she thinks’ … It’s hard to look at a female CEO who does not have a business school degree and say that ‘we’re gonna take the bet’.” (Raz, 2018, 34:09)

However, once Glossier launched, Weiss would find that getting access to funding was no longer an issue. A month after launch, Glossier raised an additional $8.4 million in venture capital funding (Goldfine, 2021), likely because the VCs now could see that selling makeup online was no issue as Glossier’s products instantly sold out. Between 2016 and 2018, Glossier held two more funding rounds where the brand raised a total of $76 million (Hanbury, 2023). In 2021, when Glossier closed their series E funding, the brand had raised an aggregated total of $266.4 million over six rounds (Crunchbase, n.d.).

**Optimal distinctiveness**

As shown in section 4.4.2, Glossier differentiated themselves to consumers mainly through what and how they communicated. Glossier’s product offering was simple: basic, easy-to-use and highly utilitarian products (Ellison, 2019). What grew the brand to iconic status was the values that Glossier represented and their democratized approach to engaging with their consumers through content and conversations on Instagram and Into The Goss. Normally, a brand that claims to champion real beauty and to empower women by providing beauty consumers with a voice in a hierarchical market – like Glossier did – would need to work hard to legitimize such claims to be seen as authentic. However, Glossier did not have to take any extreme measures to do so, likely since Glossier’s founder Weiss had already achieved a kind of influencer status with a loyal following and a large platform through her blog prior to launching Glossier. From the beginning, Into The Goss had focused on changing the topic of conversation in beauty away from the product to the person wearing the product, with posts speaking candidly about a range of topics that allowed Weiss to assert herself as an authority on beauty and develop a unique and trusted voice in the industry (Iglehart, 2020). In this way, Glossier seemed like a natural extension to what she
was already promoting on her blog and the personal brand she had built over the four years of running the blog.

Still, the way that Glossier communicated and the content they shared on their social media platform, particularly Instagram and YouTube, likely contributed to ensure the brand’s legitimacy. One thing that Glossier did that set them apart from competitors was that their content was not just self-promotional. Founder Weiss had shared her goal of democratizing beauty through Glossier (Del Valle, 2019), and the brand legitimized these claims by frequently showcasing products from other beauty brands alongside their own products in “get-ready-with-me” videos on YouTube and in Instagram posts of product displays (see Appendix D) (Glossier, n.d.b; Glossier, n.d.c). Weiss shares:

“What we’re interested most in is creating this really democratized conversation. What we do a lot of on our channel on Instagram is really celebrate people’s stories. We try to find people who use Boy Brow or [another] Glossier product, but what we really want to do is evangelize that person’s whole routine and all of her discoveries, whether that’s a L’Oréal product or a MAC product.” (Del Valle, 2019, para.8).

This philosophy employed by Glossier contributed to legitimizing the brand as authentic, as it supported a view that Glossier first and foremost cared about their customers and had the consumers’ best interests at heart (Loizos, 2017).

However, Glossier did need to work harder in order to legitimize their business model as a DTC, e-commerce brand. Many other DTC brands had emerged in the years before Glossier, e.g. Warby Parker, Away, and Harry’s (Goldfine, 2021), but the beauty industry was still built around a traditional retail model of brick-and-mortar stores and consumers visiting chains like Sephora to test and buy makeup (Turk, 2020). As such, despite Glossier already having accumulated a consumer base through Into The Gloss, there remained a uncertainty as to whether consumers would want to buy makeup and skincare products online. To address this concern, Glossier relied on social proof.

A major part of Glossier’s communications strategy relied on sharing user-generated content on their YouTube and Instagram pages. Glossier’s customers would take photos of themselves wearing the products, or record videos where they reviewed Glossier products (Raz, 2018), which provided Glossier
with content of their products being used on different skin tones and skin types that they could re-share to their followers. Furthermore, the user-generated content contributes to validating, authenticating and legitimizing Glossier’s products, posts, and brand values (Danziger, 2018).

However, another important aspect that facilitated that Glossier’s e-commerce model would work lay in the design of the products. Glossier’s products were minimalistic, which also made them more likely to fit a variety of consumers regardless of e.g. skin type. Weiss shares her view on how Glossier managed to get consumers to take the leap of faith and order their products online:

“Part of it is by having a product philosophy and an approach to content that facilitates that leap of faith. I mean that if we had a super high coverage foundation product, then that would require us to make 50 shades or something like that which would be almost impossible to sell online … What we can do is create a product like Boy Brow that is super intuitive, that’s super easy to use, that doesn’t deposit too much, that is sheer enough that it can span a wide range of eyebrow hair colors. Something that facilitates that participation.” (Raz, 2018, 43:05)

Through a combination of cultural branding principles, well-designed products, and ample social proof, Glossier was able to differentiate their brand in a highly saturated market while ensuring legitimacy. Furthermore, the case of Glossier also illustrates the key role that a brand’s founder can have in helping to legitimize a company.

*Founder narratives*

Weiss has spoken a lot about her desire to “democratize beauty” – taking power back from the big beauty incumbents and giving it back to the consumer. When she was running her blog, she noticed that the powerful women she interviewed seemed to carry a sense of shame regarding their beauty routines (Nicholson, 2019). Weiss shares:

“I realized how sheepish otherwise very confident women were about beauty. It’s indicative of some sort of societal conditioning and beliefs that admitting to liking beauty must mean you’re frivolous or not very bright or can’t be taken seriously.” (Nicholson, 2019, para.10)

Glossier was a solution to this, representing a freedom that stands for being yourself, being okay with wherever you are in life, being able to enjoy beauty without having to be perfect (Jacobs, 2015).
In interviews, Weiss rarely emphasizes the role of others in the creation of Glossier, despite e.g. President and COO Davis helped Weiss raise funding from the start. Instead, Weiss has created a narrative of herself as a “girlboss”, a self-made woman who succeeded despite the skepticism she faced from male VCs, and who refused to play by the beauty industry’s rules.

“L’Oreal has a male CEO, Estée Lauder has a male CEO, but the majority of beauty brands that those companies own are founded by women. Generally, the woman is the CEO for a while, and maybe once the company gets bought or sold, or enough time goes by, the female CEO ends up going away. I don’t have any plans to go away anytime soon.” (Weiss, as cited in Rubin, 2022, para.24)

At the same time, Weiss seems eager to acknowledge and empower other women. She often mentions how Glossier’s team consists of 70% women and highlighting the role of the Glossier team in ensuring the brand’s success (Johnson, 2019). Weiss shares: “What makes me really happy is watching people on our team and women really surprise themselves with what they're capable of. The goal for me professionally is to continue to create incredible entrepreneurs and push people's boundaries on themselves.” (Weiss, as cited in McCall, 2017, para.45).

It is likely that this is a deliberate choice. Weiss has also shared that she is really interested in the power of narrative and storytelling (Raz, 2018) and said that “women are so hungry to have more role models who have achieved what they want in their careers” (Weiss, as cited in Meltzer, 2019, para.26). As such, establishing a founder narrative that Weiss is a successful, empowered woman aligns well with Glossier’s target audience. This is important, since entrepreneurial branding research has shown that the public image of a company’s founder can influence how consumers view the brand (Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Weiss’ “female empowerment” narrative gives Glossier credibility and contributes to the brand’s messages of rejecting beauty ideals and daring to be yourself being seen as authentic. Furthermore, it protects Glossier against being accused of “femwashing”, which is when brands use feminist virtue signaling in their marketing to pretend to be interested in women’s issues to sell more products, like many other beauty brands have been considered doing (Dolden, 2021; Iqbal, 2015).
5. Cross-case analysis

After having introduced the four cases in the previous section, we will now turn to a comparison of them in which we will apply the cultural branding framework and discuss the extent to which the four entrepreneurial branding ventures can be explained in terms of cultural branding principles. We follow this with an assessment of how the cultural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial branding concepts that we brought in were helpful in explaining aspects that cultural branding lacked.

5.1 General similarities

Following a purposive sampling technique (Bryman & Bell, 2011), the cases were selected according to certain criteria based on the purpose of the thesis and the theoretical framework. For instance, all case brands are recently established entrepreneurial ventures, founded after 2010 in the United States (US). As such, the cases have a shared national cultural background which means that a degree of overlap in the cultural branding analysis was to be expected which was seen for the national-level cultural orthodoxies and social disruptions. Additionally, a general similarity between the cases is that three of the brands (Away, Warby Parker, and Glossier) can be considered digitally native brands that were started as online-exclusive businesses, using the internet and social media to reach initial consumers quickly and at low cost. White Claw is the exception as the brand instead employed a physical distribution retail strategy, partly due to its parent company Mark Anthony Group already being an established player in the market and partly due to the nature of the product being an alcoholic beverage, which brought implications of consumption habits and distribution challenges that are less suited to DTC delivery. Nonetheless, social media still had a large impact on White Claw’s increase of notoriety and popularity after its launch, which is why it was considered a relevant choice to investigate how new brands can become iconic in the age of social media.

5.2 Cultural orthodoxies and social disruption

When comparing the cultural orthodoxies of the cases, it is expected that different product categories will have different conventions of cultural expression. In Away’s case, the cultural orthodoxy of the luggage category was an orthodoxy of better mousetraps with competitors like Samsonite and American Tourister promoting more durable and lighter suitcases. For White Claw, the cultural orthodoxy was a
market with a strong gender divide where hard seltzer was being marketed predominantly to women. Still, there are some similarities across product categories. For both Warby Parker and Glossier, there existed a cultural orthodoxy of incumbent brands using celebrity endorsements and models in their advertising to communicate the glamour myth that was pushed by the media in the early 2000s, to appeal to the aspirational side of consumers in an age of celebrity worship. The conventional cultural expression of the eyewear category and beauty category included using perfectly styled, airbrushed images of conventionally attractive models in glamorous settings (see Appendices A & D). This is likely due to both product categories being closely associated with the fashion category through men’s and women’s lifestyle magazines.

Regarding the social disruptions that occurred prior to the launch of the case companies, one key similarity is the introduction of a new kind of social media platform in the 2010s with Facebook and Instagram. As seen in the individual case analyses, this had a major impact on the culture that affected all the brands and provided them with an avenue for their subsequent cultural innovations. Though Twitter was established in 2006, it seemed a less important part of our companies’ cultural strategies. For Away, the rise of Instagram created the travel influencer which popularized the idea of travel as an aspirational lifestyle. This allowed Away to express the same ideology by sharing similarly engaging content that people were expecting from travel influencers, which gave millennial consumers a compelling reason to follow the account. For White Claw, social media created a connected internet culture that centered around creating and sharing comedic memes that could spread across a large audience. This made the viral phenomenon of “White Claw summer 2019” possible, which ended up launching a “White Claw lifestyle” into the mainstream. For Warby Parker, social media meant a new platform for social consumerism that took place online rather than in traditional retail stores. By encouraging its customers to share pictures of themselves trying on frames on Facebook and asking their friends for feedback, Warby Parker increased their customer engagement and helped overcome consumer skepticism surrounding buying glasses online. Lastly, Glossier’s cultural innovation was facilitated by the rise of blog culture that legitimized regular bloggers as opinion leaders, and by social media that provided beauty-interested women with a platform where they could voice their opinions and connect with others who felt similarly, creating communities online which shifted the power of influence away
from big corporations to the consumers. As such, it becomes clear that the cultural innovation of the case companies would not have been possible without the introduction of social media.

5.3 Use of cultural branding methods

All case brands used cultural branding methods to some extent. For some brands, the cultural tactics were more integrated with the brand’s offering. Warby Parker and Away both used a tactic that Holt and Cameron (2010) refer to as cultural capital trickle-down. The brands offered products that were imbued with cultural codes that signaled high social status but made it more accessible to the average consumer through a lower price point which was integral to the brands’ success. Glossier’s cultural innovation utilized a “provoking ideological flash points” strategy by creating products that represented an alternative view on a social issue which their target consumer felt passionately about (Holt & Cameron, 2010), namely (the lack of) female empowerment, diversity and representation of real skin in the beauty industry. White Claw seemed to “cross the cultural chasm”, through a mythologization of the company, which took hard seltzer popularity from the college-bro to the mainstream. But, the analysis suggests that this achievement may have been driven as much by luck than by an intentional application of cultural branding strategies.

Having a list of different cultural branding tactics can be useful when analyzing a brand’s cultural strategies, as it helps in identifying the method(s) that the brands used and to facilitate the investigation into what led the brands to employ certain tactics. However, it brings the risk of limiting the depth of the analysis if the researcher only searches for evidence of certain cultural tactics and does not equally consider other aspects that could have a key impact in making the brand’s marketing strategy successful. This can be considered a shortcoming of Holt’s theoretical framework, as Holt primarily relies on empirical case studies both in the development of his theory and to illustrate how the theory works in practice (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Evidently, Holt’s case selection is not random, and it is unclear the extent to which the choice of cases influences the validity of the framework. Thus, it is less clear if the list of cultural branding methods presented by Holt and Cameron (2010) is meant to be an exhaustive list or simply a set of examples of the most prominent or commonly occurring strategies from his research. Nonetheless, this leads into the next element of comparison, which is how well Holt’s cultural branding framework could be applied when analyzing the cases.
5.4 Applicability of Holt’s cultural branding framework

The degree to which the cultural branding framework was adept at providing insight into how the brands managed to become iconic varied between the cases. At initial glance, it is easy to assume that the reason behind Warby Parker’s success is that their glasses were more affordable, which is what traditional marketing mindshare models would suggest (Holt & Cameron, 2010). However, it is only through applying Holt and Cameron’s (2010) cultural branding framework that it becomes possible to understand why consumers felt that Warby Parker provided the same degree of social capital and status as much more expensive and established designer eyewear brands. Furthermore, the cultural branding framework helped in illustrating how Away was able to effectively create cultural resonance by drawing upon the ideology of leisure travel. Much like Warby Parker, Away’s suitcases offered similar amounts of social capital as much more expensive luggage brands. Likewise, in the case of Glossier, cultural branding facilitated an understanding of how social media enables a crowd culture to form by connecting women who were passionate about beauty, but felt ignored by major makeup and beauty conglomerates, into an online community that ended up being Glossier’s target audience. In summary, the cultural branding framework was successful in explaining the strong resonance that these three case brands ignited among consumers that went beyond the utilitarian or price-related product attributes.

However, for White Claw, there were circumstances that created challenges as to how well Holt and Cameron’s (2010) framework could explain how White Claw reached iconic status. On one hand, cultural branding helps illustrate why White Claw managed to become culturally resonant, whilst prior successful hard seltzers brands like SpikedSeltzer failed to cross the cultural chasm and gain mainstream appeal. On the other hand, the cultural branding framework proved limited in facilitating the understanding of why it was specifically White Claw that conquered the hard seltzer market and not the competitor Truly. As shown in the analysis, White Claw and Truly enjoyed a similar degree of initial popularity amongst college students, the products themselves were nearly identical, and the brands communicated similar ideologies. Thus, it is difficult to establish with certainty why it was White Claw that became iconic, beyond the fact that White Claw enjoyed a viral moment which snowballed into a proliferation of associated memes. Hence, the analysis suggests that the cultural branding framework is most successfully applied to cases where a company is the only one introducing a particular ideology in their market.
5.5 Founder networks

Much like the shared disruption of social media, personal networks played determining roles for all the case brands. A similarity between Warby Parker and Away is that they already had sufficient connections that provided them with the prerequisites to start their companies. Warby Parker’s founders had insight into the glasses industry and connections to cheap manufacturers that were willing to work with them despite the founders being fresh out of business school with no proven business experience and very limited resources. Korey, one of Away’s founders, had previously worked at Warby Parker as head of Supply Chain, and through that had access to connections to factories in China. The other founder of Away, Rubio, had connections to PR agencies and online magazines that would provide the brand with their initial publicity that helped get the company off the ground. Without these connections, Warby Parker and Away may not have been able to launch their companies and gain awareness as quickly and efficiently as they did.

For White Claw and Glossier, the use of networks looked slightly different as the brands’ respective founders had a more extensive professional industry network. The founder of White Claw had launched multiple beverages before, which meant that White Claw could easily leverage the networks that had been formed through the activities of Mark Anthony brands (e.g. Mike’s Hard Lemonade) to get favorable distribution deals. Glossier’s founder lacked direct previous industry experience but had already built up a personal reputation through her blog. The blog, Into The Gloss, which had turned into a small business of itself through advertising and sponsorship deals, meant that Weiss had connections to a variety of industry professionals in the makeup and skincare industry as well as editors at prominent women’s lifestyle magazines. The blog also had a loyal following that allowed Glossier to create anticipation around the brand before it was even launched. To summarize, the multiple-case analysis indicates that founder networks represent a key factor in determining the success of a new entrepreneurial brand.

5.6 Funding

Comparing how and when the case companies got access to funding, there are some similarities but also differences, especially in the initial stages. Neither White Claw nor Warby Parker opted for external
funding to launch, but for different reasons. White Claw was launched by the already established Mark Anthony Group, which meant that there was no need to seek external financing. Warby Parker, on the other hand, were reluctant to reduce their equity shares, possibly because they were four founders and therefore already started with a smaller share each. Instead, in addition to the founder’s personal savings, Warby Parker was creative in sourcing their funding from alternative sources, including taking an SBA loan and acquiring money from their business partners in exchange for services. Warby Parker would eventually raise significant money through VC funds, but tried to delay it for as long as possible until the founders felt that the brand was ready for the next growth stage. In contrast, Glossier and Away both went the typical venture capital funding route from the beginning, and both raised significant sums of money before the market launch of their respective companies. As such, nothing in the multiple-case study suggests that the approach to funding is linked to the brands’ ability to successfully apply cultural branding.

5.7 Founder narratives
Finally, there were big differences in how prominently the case companies’ founder(s) were featured in the communication of their brands. White Claw’s founder, von Mandl, seems to have limited direct involvement in the brand’s external communication and barely discusses White Claw in the few public interviews post 2016. Instead, White Claw’s communication always comes directly from the brand itself and very much exists independently of its founder. In comparison, Glossier’s founder Weiss played a very big role in representing Glossier, as Weiss herself had built up a name for herself beforehand and in many ways personified the authentic, cool and empowered “girlboss” persona that Glossier stands for. She has been featured in Glossier’s YouTube channel and Instagram page and has been very open about her personal and Glossier’s founding story in interviews. Warby Parker and Away represents a middle-ground, as their respective founders have not had a very visible role in the market communication but instead played an important part of legitimizing Warby Parker and Away in the initial wave of PR and interviews, and to a certain extent by being in a similar demographic as their target customers. For instance, both Away’s founders and Warby Parker’s founders have spoken publicly about wanting to create a brand that solved issues that they had first-hand experience of. Hence, the analysis shows that the nature and degree of founder involvement differs between the cases, but was an important way to legitimize completely new brands.
6. Discussion

6.1 Cultural branding theory in an entrepreneurial new venture context
We found it possible to apply Holt and Cameron’s (2010) six-stage cultural branding framework to all the cases. Based on our analysis, we identified national cultural orthodoxies across the cases, as well as the cultural orthodoxies unique to each product category. It was possible to determine streams of social disruption that would allow the eventual success of each brand. Nonetheless, the most difficult aspect to identify was the precise cultural innovation that each brand had employed to become iconic, i.e. create a brand that embodied a strong enough cultural ideology which resonated with consumers and successfully addressed their collective cultural anxieties or desires (Holt & Cameron, 2010). It is worth mentioning that since we are studying brand cases that had already achieved iconic status, it was possible to presume the existence of a cultural innovation and that the cases had applied a cultural strategy to some degree. However, one purpose of the study is to investigate the applicability of cultural branding in an entrepreneurial context and thus the aim of the analysis was to investigate if the cases had used cultural branding principles from the beginning. The findings of the multiple-case analysis, which will be further developed below, indicate that it is possible for new entrepreneurial ventures to not only successfully apply cultural branding from the beginning, but also use cultural branding methods to help facilitate the growth of their businesses by tackling common constraints associated with new entrepreneurial brands, e.g. limited resources.

6.2 Finding the right cultural expression
We found cultural branding theory to be less suitable at explaining how the case brands came up with their cultural expressions. We expect this stage of the framework to be the most difficult to “manufacture” through research. From our cases, it was unclear for example how exactly Warby Parker determined to use the particular kind of fashion references that they incorporated. Perhaps the Ivy League environment of Wharton (the business school at the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania) inspired them to dig up older cultural references of American literary sophistication, coupled with the countercultural retro fashion revival happening in broader society. Away’s founders seemed to have an instinctive understanding of how to build a travel lifestyle brand that would resonate with millennials and beyond. Could they have manufactured their approach if they were not engrossed in Instagram travel-culture, had
conducted hundreds of interviews and were late-20s millennial professionals themselves? Glossier’s founder Weiss was similarly embedded in her industry’s cultural vanguard, but more directly. Indeed, via her blog, she had already been publicly expressing the cultural innovation that would later propel Glossier to iconic status.

To us it seemed like the brand founders had an instinctive understanding of what the cultural expression “should be” for their respective brands, and indeed these brands very quickly achieved resonance. It was the resonance of their narratives that would allow them both to sell out of their initial product supply and raise money to keep going. It seemed like it was important for their companies’ evolutions to achieve resonance immediately after launching, especially to convince themselves to continue.

The exception was White Claw, which was lucky to see the iconic source material present itself to them several years after launching. Since we included the case of White Claw as an example of an established company that created a new brand in the same cultural context, we find this difference instructive. As a company that had resources to launch a product based on a cultural innovation hunch held by the founder, they were able to operate in the market despite not achieving the same kind of immediate cultural resonance as Glossier, Warby Parker and Away. Neither the founder von Mandl, nor the other management at Mark Anthony Brands, had direct exposure to the college drinking subculture that would be the one to popularize the brand’s unisex beer-alternative ideology, instead they had a lucky break that allowed White Claw to achieve explosive cultural resonance three years after launch. Trevor Wallace, who did have direct access to that subculture, would parody the norms of the college and frat bro drinking subculture and expose it to the mainstream through his video, which White Claw could then mine for source material.

6.3 Locating the crowdculture
How did the founders find their crowdculture? Here we found bigger differences in the cases. The concept of crowdculture is one that Holt (2016) introduces only after social media had reached a sense of maturity. Therefore, the concept of crowdculture is of limited use for Warby Parker since they started their business in 2010, before Instagram had established itself in American culture. It seemed that Facebook was not the place for crowdcultures to form around the fashion ideologies that Warby Parker
sold, partly due to the lack of visual element that is inherent with Instagram. Glossier’s founder Weiss had already succeeded in attracting the crowdculture to her blog, which meant that the community was pre-made by the time the Glossier brand was created. Away’s crowdculture of aspiring young urban professionals who loved to travel was already on Instagram, which is the reason why this platform was for Away the main vehicle for achieving cultural resonance. By flooding Instagram with ads that spoke to their cultural innovation, they could directly target their crowdculture and gather them as followers of Away’s Instagram account.

Without direct access to the crowdculture, is it still possible to find it? This question may require further research. The analysis showed that White Claw found their crowdculture by accident but was able to do so because their product had sufficient market penetration for the crowdculture to find White Claw, not the other way around. White Claw had been marketing to young professionals, and it came as a surprise to them the extent to which college students had taken hold of White Claw as their drink of choice. Mark Anthony Brands may only have heard about that crowdculture through the Trevor Wallace video and subsequent meme storm. Consequently, the implication is that in the social media age a brand can still get in contact with the right crowdculture so long as it has enough market penetration and the right cultural ideology that can be taken hold of. But this approach assumes a higher risk than having direct access to and knowledge of the crowdculture at launch and achieving the cultural resonance right before expanding.

Lastly, we found that Holt’s cultural branding framework was less good at explaining contingent factors such as what happens when multiple similar cultural innovations come about at the same time. For example, cultural branding is limited in its ability to explain why White Claw succeeded over Truly, despite both dominating college campuses in 2018 and 2019, with only the viral Trevor Wallace video and the subsequent meme-storm being the apparent deciding factor. Therefore, a finding of the analysis is that Holt’s framework seems to work better when only one new competitor was employing a given cultural strategy in a market.
6.4 Lack of organizational perspectives in cultural branding

A limitation of cultural branding theory derives from its strength – a sole focus on the cultural ideology that a brand communicates and the strategies which the brand employs to communicate it (Holt & Cameron, 2010). The theoretical critique that cultural branding research tends to lack an organizational perspective was also borne out by the cases. For example, the organizational elements behind the brands, e.g. founder networks, proved vital for the success of all the case brands studied. The analysis showed that by adding elements from cultural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial branding, we could achieve a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of how the cases managed to create iconic brands. This will be elaborated in sections 6.5–6.8.

6.5 Incorporating a founder perspective

By incorporating cultural entrepreneurship theories, the multiple case analysis generated a range of new insights. One added perspective was the founder perspective in a cultural branding context. Many entrepreneurship theories tend to emphasize the role of the founder, highlighting how founders often have a larger and more direct influence when the entrepreneurial ventures are in the early-growth stage (Merrilees, 2007; Krake, 2005). In the analysis, it became evident that the role of the founder, while determining the degree to which cultural branding principles had been applied, is much more complex than Holt and Cameron’s (2010) cultural branding framework suggests. Not only were the founders involved in developing the cultural strategy and deciding the marketing approach, but in three of the cases the founders featured publicly to help legitimate the new ventures to external stakeholders such as consumers, the media and investors. This was apparent in the cases of Glossier, Away, and Warby Parker, but not for White Claw. We found limited evidence of White Claw’s founder, von Mandl, participating in legitimizing White Claw through interviews or public speeches. This variation could be explained by the different conditions that White Claw was founded under as compared to the other brands. Cultural entrepreneurship theory suggests that founders are more involved in the public legitimization of new ventures to circumvent resource constraints (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). Given that White Claw already had sufficient financial backing through the success of Mark Anthony Brand’s other products, this can explain why the founder did not have the same degree of involvement in helping to legitimate his venture compared to the other cases.
6.6 Founder networks

Another insight related to the founder perspective is the leveraging of networks. Through the analysis, it became clear that the personal and professional networks that the founders had upon starting their ventures were essential to the subsequent success of those brands. The cases illustrate how the founder’s ability to leverage connections within their respective industries allowed them to perform the necessary elementary company functions, e.g. establishing a supply chain and manufacture their products, and enlist the support of opinion leaders, media and PR-organizations to promote their brand. As a result, one finding of this study is that the pre-existence of strong and relevant networks within the brand’s industry strongly influence a new entrepreneurial venture’s ability to successfully perform a cultural branding strategy. So important was this factor for the viability of each of our new ventures, that we consider the existence of a personal network to be a sort of “hygiene factor”, without which cultural branding cannot be employed for lack of a viable business.

6.7 Resource acquisition

Another central theme of cultural entrepreneurship theory is resource acquisition (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). One purpose of this thesis is to examine how brands can apply cultural branding principles to gain support from other stakeholders besides consumers, e.g. to get access to external funding. In his research, Holt addresses that smaller companies’ ability to communicate their cultural innovation is dependent on their marketing budget, and thus brands with a limited budget need to be more creative when developing their marketing strategy and look for alternative ways of communicating their message, e.g. through guerrilla marketing (Holt & Cameron, 2010). However, Holt does not address how companies can craft narratives in order to raise money and increase their marketing budget. This limitation represents another justification for the aim of this thesis to provide a bridge between cultural branding theory and cultural entrepreneurship theory, and subsequently our choice of including funding as one of the focuses of the case analysis. One assumption that arose from the literature review is that, in addition to using cultural branding principles to become culturally resonant with consumers, new entrepreneurial ventures can use the narratives that are crafted as part of the cultural strategy to raise funding from external sources of capital, in a dynamic like the one discussed in the cultural entrepreneurship literature. Our analysis provided arguments that support this possible theory. For instance, Away’s cultural innovation of selling luggage embedded with cultural codes relating to the lifestyle of leisure travel seemed to have been a key
contributing factor in convincing early venture capital investors to invest in the business. Although, the findings from the analysis also point to the importance of the background of Away’s founders at Warby Parker, and the sense that they were going to replicate the successful Warby Parker approach in a new industry.

6.8 Building a bridge between cultural branding and cultural entrepreneurship

Optimal distinctiveness is a concept developed in cultural entrepreneurship literature (Lounsbury & Glyn, 2001, 2019) about managing the trade-off between differentiating a new venture from existing competitors, while also maintaining the business’ legitimacy. The findings from our case analysis indicate that cultural branding as an approach can be used to both differentiate and legitimize new ventures at the same time. For instance, Warby Parker managed to legitimize itself as a fashionable brand that could provide cultural capital by expressing cultural codes that indicate sophistication and intellect, despite offering this for a significantly lower price point than established designer eyewear brands. Similarly, Away legitimized their lower-price suitcases as fashionable versions of much more expensive suitcases such as those by Tumi. Both Warby Parker and Away sold an aspirational lifestyle for an affordable price that allowed for mass-adoption. As such, there is evidence that supports the finding that cultural branding does not only contribute to differentiating businesses, as Holt’s original theory suggests (Holt & Cameron, 2010), but also aids in the legitimization of ventures. However, it should be noted that none of the case companies relied solely on cultural branding principles in legitimizing their brands, but employed a variety of tactics, including free at-home trials and leveraging social proof in their marketing efforts.

Nonetheless, arguably the key strength of cultural branding theory is the ability that the approach provides for brands to differentiate themselves through cultural references and ideologies, as opposed to having to differentiate themselves based only on tangible product attributes. Originally, Holt presented the cultural branding approach as an alternative to the blue ocean strategy, which follows the traditional mindshare marketing approach (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Despite the findings outlined in the above paragraph, the results of the multiple case study also confirm Holt’s claim. In fact, all four cases provided evidence that the use of cultural branding principles was the main way in which they differentiated their brands. This was especially apparent in the cases of Glossier and White Claw, as their respective cultural
brand strategies enabled the brands to differentiate themselves in otherwise highly saturated and competitive markets with competitors offering products with very similar functional attributes at a similar price point. In short, the findings of the case analysis demonstrate that cultural branding theory can help new entrepreneurial ventures to both legitimize and differentiate their brands, but that cultural branding has a stronger impact on differentiating brands as all four case studies used additional non-branding related measures to help legitimize their brands in the eyes of consumers and other stakeholders.

In conclusion, the cases provide an insight into how the concept of optimal distinctiveness is applicable in a branding context, and indeed very similar to Holt’s concept of ideological differentiation that is baked into the theoretical underpinning of his cultural branding framework (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Together, this observation and the aforenoted findings that indicate that the cultural branding framework would benefit from broadening its perspective to include certain organizational elements, make a strong case for the high theoretical compatibility between cultural branding and cultural entrepreneurship. Among the several bridges that have been highlighted in this discussion, optimal distinctiveness most clearly demonstrates the connection between the two theories. Additionally, it is the bridge that we see as most relevant to continue to build between cultural branding and cultural entrepreneurship, though future research is needed to further explore and develop this connection. This point will be developed upon in chapter 8 “Recommendations for future research”.

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7. Conclusion and implications

7.1 Conclusion

The first purpose of the study was to expand upon Holt’s cultural branding theory by providing an updated assessment of the framework in an entrepreneurial context. The second purpose is to examine how entrepreneurial ventures can successfully use cultural branding principles to create iconic brands. The third purpose was to investigate whether introducing concepts from cultural entrepreneurship into the cultural branding framework could generate opportunities for future interdisciplinary research. The analysis and discussion in this thesis have provided sub-conclusions that together answer the research question posed for this study.

The first sub-conclusion addresses the influence of social media on the brand’s ability to employ cultural branding strategies. We found that the cultural innovation of the case companies would not have been possible without the introduction of social media. Each of the case companies had significant online presences where they built their brands and interacted with customers. While the focus of the analysis was on the symbols contained within the communication of the companies, more research could be done on how cultural branding theory may be combined with theories on social media marketing strategies, e.g. how virality interacts with new cultural ideologies.

The second sub-conclusion concerns how cultural branding strategies can help entrepreneurial ventures get support from other stakeholders besides consumers. Here, we found that cultural branding methods can help facilitate the growth of a new entrepreneurial venture by tackling common constraints associated with start-ups and new entrepreneurial brands, e.g. limited resources. The analysis showed how the case brands could successfully use the narratives that are crafted as part of their cultural strategies to convince early investors to provide them with funding. Raising funding could be achieved through a tactical use of both organizational-based entrepreneurial narratives, as well as narratives that conveyed the intended cultural expression to investors. Furthermore, we found that entrepreneurial brands can use cultural branding principles to attract employees.
The third sub-conclusion answers how integrating concepts from cultural entrepreneurship theory into the cultural branding framework can facilitate opportunities for future interdisciplinary research. We found that the concept of optimal distinctiveness (the balance between narratives that legitimize and differentiate) is the most fruitful connection between the two theories. The findings from our case analysis indicate that cultural branding as an approach can be used to both differentiate and legitimize new ventures without the same trade-off or temporal aspects as these concepts have been found to have in cultural entrepreneurship literature. Specific recommendations for future research are developed in chapter 8.

The fourth sub-conclusion addresses what challenges that entrepreneurial ventures face when trying to employ a cultural branding strategy. Here, we identified several challenges. First, it can be difficult for entrepreneurs to identify the ideological opportunity that is needed to craft the cultural innovation. We found that founders need to have almost an intuitive understanding of what the cultural expression “should be” before the company is founded. This is especially true for start-ups, as we also found that new entrepreneurial brands from established companies have more leeway in finding the right cultural expression as long as they have the funding to sustain their business during this process. Second, we found that unless the founder is already immersed in the crowdculture that his or her brand targets, it can be even more difficult to find the most powerful cultural expression. However, here we also found that social media can facilitate the process of localizing the right crowdculture as the brand can gain easier access to crowdculture, but also, that consumers can find and, in a sense, “claim” brands as their own. This, however, requires that the brand already has a not-trivial degree of brand awareness which is challenging for entrepreneurial ventures to achieve.

Ultimately, in answering our main research question on how entrepreneurial ventures founded in the social media age successfully can apply the cultural branding principles, we conclude that it is possible for founders to employ cultural branding principles to differentiate and legitimize their brands, get support from consumers as well as other stakeholders, and that social media can greatly facilitate this process. As such, entrepreneurial ventures do not have to reach a certain size or state of maturity, but can employ cultural branding principles from day one to achieve quick growth. But, there are necessary organizational factors that entrepreneurial brands need to consider in order to successfully apply cultural
branding principles. First, the pre-existence of strong and relevant networks within the brand’s industry is necessary for the successful execution of cultural branding. Second, the role of the founder has a powerful role in crafting the narratives that legitimize completely new entrepreneurial brands. We found that the presence of relevant founder networks was like a “hygiene” factor for enabling a brand to perform cultural branding principles. Therefore, entrepreneurs hoping to employ cultural branding principles to create an iconic brand should look to create a brand within an industry where they have a personal connection, and preferably also a professional network.

7.2 Theoretical contribution

We set out to apply Holt’s cultural branding framework as outlined in Cultural Strategy (2010) in an entrepreneurial context that reflected a modern cultural setting after the rise of social media, as well as identify how other research fields such as cultural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial branding may enrich and expand upon cultural branding theory.

First, this study contributes to confirming elements of cultural branding theory also in an entrepreneurial context. Social media was an important factor in all our cases, which supports that Holt was correct in needing to update the framework from Cultural Strategy (2010) by adding the concept of crowdcultures in 2016 (Holt, 2016). Our findings support his framing of social media as both a cultural disruption and a facilitator for cultural expressions.

Second, the findings of our study confirm that cultural branding principles can be successfully applied also by entrepreneurial ventures. Thus, our study contributes to the theoretical development of cultural branding theory by introducing an entrepreneurial context. To Holt’s suggestion that brand bureaucracies are a stifling factor in allowing cultural innovation, our findings support that an absence of bureaucracies supports cultural innovation as the we could with more certainty identify the cultural innovation of the start-up cases (Warby Parker, Glossier, and Away) compared to the case where an external brand agency was involved in developing the brand.

Third, our study represents evidence for the usefulness of adding additional elements to cultural branding, which is an additional contribution to the theory on cultural branding. We found value in the additional
concepts that were brought in from cultural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial branding, which were: founder networks, resource acquisition, and founder narratives. Additionally, the role of the founder in the cultural branding narrative should be highlighted in the cultural branding framework and seemed particularly important for newly established businesses without a track record.

Lastly, the main theoretical contribution of our study is our conclusion that there indeed a theoretical overlap between cultural branding and cultural entrepreneurship. The theoretical construct from cultural entrepreneurship of “optimal distinctiveness” serves as a useful framing for narratives within Holt’s cultural branding theory (Holt & Cameron, 2010) also, and therefore suggests that a greater focus on legitimization of new ventures and their differentiation through cultural narratives could be included in the cultural branding framework. Cultural entrepreneurship (CE) 3.0, as described by Gehman and Soublière (2017), may also shed light on the same phenomenon, since CE 3.0 aims to explore the ways that narratives are updated in a dyadic relationship with culture. This corresponds with Holt’s concept that a brand should always be updating its cultural expression in a response to cultural disruptions.

7.3 Managerial implications

One of the main implications of the findings is that managers who want to craft compelling cultural innovations for new brands need to be part of a subculture or online crowdculture, from which their innovative cultural expression is likely to come from. This is based on the observations from the analysis that the founders of the case companies that personally crafted a successful cultural innovation were embedded in the subculture from which their cultural innovation and some of the source material came from. The findings also imply that direct access to source material may be beneficial in multiple ways: to come up with the idea, and for the references to be authentic.

This implication gives rise to the question of how founders can get embedded in subcultures that are fertile ground for potent cultural expressions. With the rise of social media, it becomes easier to observe crowdcultures than it used to be when such communities were purely offline and may have had gatekeepers. This means that the observation of cultural trends has perhaps become more democratized. It allows for immersion in online cultures even just as observers, e.g. by following accounts on social
media platforms. Nonetheless, this still does not mean that would-be founders will necessarily make the correct understanding of what the innovative cultural expression should be.

A need for direct access can be circumvented if the subculture vocalizes the right cultural expression for the brand to notice. However, this requires that the brand already has achieved a fair degree of success through conventional marketing techniques to achieve enough brand awareness to be noticed by and connect with the right subculture, who can then claim the brand as their own. However, managers should not pursue this avenue as the luxury of being able to put marketing spend behind a product is no guarantee to success, as the brand still needs some degree of cultural resonance to at all appeal to valuable crowdcultures.

Additionally, it may not be possible for start-ups to follow such an approach, since without cultural resonance they may not be able to achieve sufficient traction to get funding to spend on marketing. Managers are recommended to create promising founder narratives, which can help their brand acquire resources, such as funding. There is inherently a financial risk in starting new business ventures from scratch, and to minimize the risk of pursuing a strategy that yields mediocre results, another recommendation to founders is to aim to have built up as much evidence of cultural resonance to motivate expanding their venture. One way that managers can achieve a secure cultural understanding is by establishing their business in the industries that they are already embedded in either as consumers or through previous professional experience.

Lastly, networks were also essential for the success of each of the case companies. Work experience in one industry created a network and contacts that often transcended industries. However, there seems to be much about networks that is down to chance. The implication is that it is hard for founders to determine the “usefulness” of any given connection, and therefore the last managerial recommendation is for future founders to be open and try to build an extensive network, as the value of connections and chance encounters may not become apparent until after several years.
8. Recommendations for future research

Our thesis presents several avenues for future research, related to questions that remain unanswered based on our methodological limitations, or to questions that arose through our findings from applying cultural branding theory in an entrepreneurial context and our aim to explore potential connections between cultural branding and select entrepreneurship theories.

First, our case studies consisted of only American brands established after 2010 that had become iconic. Future research could look at entrepreneurial brands in other cultural contexts, e.g. recently established Danish iconic brands. Our study looked only at consumer goods brands selling products for less than a few hundred dollars, but this could be extended to higher value goods, as well as digital-only brands.

Second, the case analysis raised some questions in regards to how cultural branding could be used in practice, as well as some types of cases that could be explored in future research. We found that the cultural branding framework needs further development in how managers can successfully identify the right cultural expression. In the case of White Claw, a connection between the brand and crowdculture came about from a viral video. This gives rise to question about whether a brand’s cultural innovation could be co-created. It also gives reason to believe that perhaps cultural branding theory could be combined with digital marketing strategies, such as theories on viral marketing. This provides two new avenues for future research.

For the process of crowdculture adoption, if the founders do not connect initially, how is contact formed, and how are relevant ideologies picked up on? The White Claw case suggests that there could be research done on the intersection of hijacking and cultural branding. The Trevor Wallace video was a parody, which suggests that it could also have gone in a negative direction. As such, we suggest that there is space for developing theory on co-creation of cultural ideologies with consumers, which might make successful cultural ideologies more likely.

This thesis provides an initial contribution in building a theoretical bridge between cultural branding and cultural entrepreneurship. Our findings show that this is an area with a lot of potential, but further
research is needed to explore all potential links for interdisciplinary research. For example, how cultural branding narratives can be used for resource acquisition and how optimal distinctiveness can serve as a bridge between the concepts of cultural branding narratives and cultural entrepreneurship narratives may both benefit from further inspection. Additionally, Cultural resonance was a term used in both literatures, and future research could compare their uses. In the forming of legitimacy narratives, it seemed that the intended audience mattered for how important legitimizing was. This could be further explored in the context of new brands from established companies. Lastly, the mapping of cultural entrepreneurship 3.0 onto cultural branding could likewise be fruitful for both fields.
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Appendix A. Warby Parker


Fall is coming! 🍂 These frames pair perfectly with the turning shades of the season. (👓: Kimball, Hemmings, Abner, Irving, and Nadia) [Tweet]. Twitter.

https://twitter.com/WarbyParker/status/1432372633291706368


Warby Parker | The Literary Life Well Lived, 0:30 TV Spot [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et-bd6yg9o4
Appendix B. Away


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Appendix C. White Claw


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Appendix D. Glossier

