

# Dilemmas of Branding for Start-ups

## The Opportunities and Challenges in the Digital Era

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**Abstract** – Most of the start-ups have challenges in building up their corporate brand as they have no resources, such as money and internal structure, nor do they have customers or even a consistent idea how the end-product should look like. Having a strong brand enables start-ups to increase their visibility and ensure a certain level of quality which ultimately increases their chance of success. Nonetheless branding, as a growing field, focuses mainly on well-established firms who are already successful as opposed to start-ups whose business model involves lots of risks and their success is still uncertain. Digitalization provides immersive opportunities for the start-ups to engage and communicate with their potential customers and stakeholders. The tremendous success of the new wave of start-ups, such as Facebook, Uber, Airbnb, and Coursera, which are now revolutionary brands, testifies the critical impact of digitalization on start-up brand building. This paper reviews the opportunities and challenges which start-ups face in building up their brands in the digital era and suggests a conceptual model with three notions including emotion, innovation, and co-creation to address these dilemmas. Later, Coursera is reviewed as one of the most successful education-focused technology start-ups in order to illustrate the application of the model. This paper highlights the vital role of branding for start-ups in the digital era and the findings contribute to the literature by articulating a three stages modular and incremental approach to build a start-up's brand from scratch.

**Keywords**–Start-up; Branding; Digitalization; Digital disruption; Emotion; Innovation; Co-creation

### I. INTRODUCTION

The new wave of start-ups fueled by information technology has flourished throughout the world, where leading companies emerge unexpectedly and cause what is state-of-the-art today to become outdated tomorrow [1]. We see start-ups like Uber valued at \$68B [2] and Airbnb valued at \$31B [2] in digital technologies, which are transforming the business environment, igniting major changes in the way we buy, sell, consume, communicate and even work and ultimately standing among the most valuable and beloved brands. The trend is also strong in other places of the world wherein those developing economies, start-ups are addressing local problems through creative technologies and solutions [3].

Meanwhile, it is important to note that, in today's world, everybody including customers increasingly face more choices with less time to make them and that is where a strong brand plays a major role to simplify decision making, reduce risk, and set expectations [4]. Customers are surrounded by

alternatives in every step of the way and the companies need to stand up, get customers' attention, and deliver the message they want them to hear [5].

Reputation and brand are considered as pivotal engines for growth and financial asset for any organization which fosters business development [6]. Though there is an increased attention towards branding and also the term start-up and disruptive innovation are widespread, however, the intersection of these fields is still not thoroughly explored especially in the digital era. In other words, there are few papers on the branding of start-ups and the main focus remained on large and successful companies and recently on medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) [7]. The major reason perhaps is that most academics and practitioners take a holistic and result-oriented approach and prefer to study the brand of the companies who are successful as opposed to those whose business model involves lots of risks. However, branding plays a vital role during the start-up growth phases, when the company is seeking to make the first impressions, building the reputation in the public, attracting investors and ultimately securing the long-term loyalty of the customers.

In fact, for a start-up, "visibility creates Opportunities", the faster it gets visible the closer the possibility of a business success is [8]. Moreover, the digital era has provided start-ups with tremendous opportunities to communicate and engage with their potential customers and stakeholders but substantial risks at the same time. Young ventures have specific branding needs due to their lack of resources [9], lack of internal structures and processes [7], and fundamental need to build a reputation [10] in order to find customers and investors.

This paper, therefore, aims to explore the corporate branding of start-ups by reviewing the extant literature in order to identify the opportunities and challenges these new ventures face in building up their brand in the digital context. It further suggests a conceptual model with three notions including emotion, innovation, and co-creation which are built upon each other. The paper is structured in six sections where Section 2 reviews literature and works related to start-up branding and identifies gaps. Section 3 is dedicated to the impact of digitalization. In Section 4 the notions that correspond to start-up branding and implications of digitalization on each are reviewed. In Section 5, the findings to be discussed and a conceptual model is suggested to deal with the corporate branding of start-ups. In Section 6, Coursera is reviewed as one of the most successful education-focused technology start-ups in order to illustrate the

application of the model. The conclusion summarizes the findings, discusses limitations and suggests further domain for research.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term “start-up” is widespread and has grown in recent years especially in line with the great success of San Francisco new ventures. Yet, the term is not limited to Silicon Valley and Seattle, since start-ups and incubators have been popping up in other places including Barcelona, Shanghai, Sydney, and Bangalore who now rank among the world’s top twenty start-up ecosystems, according to the Start-up Genome Project [1]. In many new industries, the most successful firms tend to be start-ups rather than established firms [11]. For example in IT field, it was newly established companies, such as Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Google and more recently, Facebook, Twitter, Uber, and Airbnb who came up with outstanding ideas and solutions which mattered to our daily life. Start-ups have always been a symbol of change by devising a new way of doing things in a more efficient and cost-effective way. They crystalize ambitious team who are ready to take big risks and change the industries and classic business models with their creativity and innovation. We can observe that in just a few years, start-up companies like Facebook, Uber, and Airbnb have disrupted and changed the rules of business and stood among the top most valuable brands. These companies have become the new principal points of power and created influential social and financial impacts on how we live, think, work, and interact with each other—even how we feel and sense [3]. In fact, disruption is one of the most popular terms in management today and it is associated in part with the notion of “disruptive technology” outlined by Clayton Christensen [12]. Digital disruption can be defined as the change that occurs when new digital technologies and business models affect the value proposition of existing goods and services. These technologies often enter at the bottom of the market which is ignored by established companies and then start-ups grow and beat the old systems from that point.[12]. Jonikas [13] states that most start-ups even high-end innovation-based businesses face fearsome competition and must compete with the old ways of solving or simply ignoring the problem. He further insists on the important role of branding and argues that a solid brand can transform a business from an unknown start-up into a successful competitor and niche, or even market leader.

Tai [14] argues that all great brands over the last 100 years were born out of the creation of a new category. He further insists that the creation of a new category or a next-generation product is usually what makes the big brands successful in the first place and this ultimately enables them to cement their position as the leader of that category. Rode and Vallaster [7] argue that start-ups provide a specific context to research corporate branding, especially in its early stage, as the internal structure and process do not yet exist. It could be tempting for start-ups to skip branding in the rush to get a new product to the market [15]. Some research and interviews show that many entrepreneurs do not consider branding important at the early stage and see it as later stage

luxury, a nice-to-have thing as against a must-have [16]. The major reason perhaps is that most entrepreneurs are as short on cash as they are on time and they don’t think they can afford to spend either to attend to brand-building [15]. Others consider it a difficult and long process which does not create actionable results. Some people even mistake online presence on a few social media or even personal branding and PR program as a sufficient measure. Talbott [17] analyzes common reasons for the failure of a start-up in the article "Four Trends That Can Kill Your Start-up". Ruzzier and Ruzzier [18] summarizes these trends by highlighting the first one to be an incorrect or overly narrow understanding of brands, which is usually associated only with a nice, good-looking logo and some other design elements. Second, is the perception that customers buy your features instead of your brand (meaning how the product makes them feel). This is particularly common in engineering and tech start-ups. The third trend is related to the issue of brand differentiation, which most start-ups tend to seek through the most likable and trendy visual identity elements, while the fourth most common mistake concerns creativity and founder's perception, that creativity could be acquired on the market by hiring designers.

One of the recent streams in branding which has strong implication in start-ups is brand co-creation. Co-creation, which is developing as a new paradigm in the management literature, allows companies and stakeholders and customers to create value through interaction. It was first defined by Kambil [19] and further developed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy [20] where it is argued that the supplier needs to engage all stakeholders and create value with them rather than creating value for them. Schultz [21] defines brand co-creation as a process in which the company involves stakeholders to become part of designing, creating and innovating the brand. France, Merrilees and Miller [22] develop the customer brand co-creation model which discusses the influence of brand engagement, self-congruity, and involvement as antecedents to brand co-creation and identifies the moderating effect of brand interactivity and brand communities. The model actualizes the impact of brand co-creation upon the brand value and brand knowledge after all.

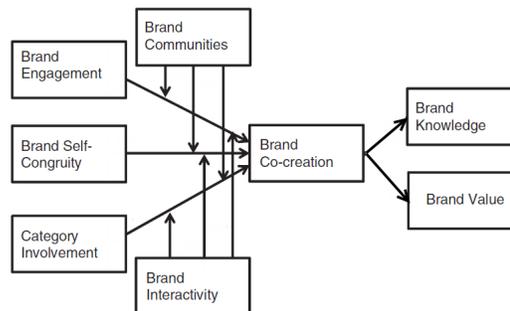


Figure 1. The customer brand co-creation model [22]

This is a solid framework for understanding the factors influencing customers to co-create and the impacts of customer co-creation on the brand. Though, it highlights the complexity of co-creation in contrast to traditional practices

of marketing planning, yet, it ignores to take the other stakeholders into account within co-creation process. Also, the focus of this paper is not on start-ups. Another model which is developed by Juntunen [23] identifies internal and external corporate brand elements in B2B start-ups and argues that brand co-creation is a process that begins with the stakeholders inventing the corporate name before the company is established, and continues at the start-up phase by developing the new corporate name, updating the logo and communications material, and developing the product and business.

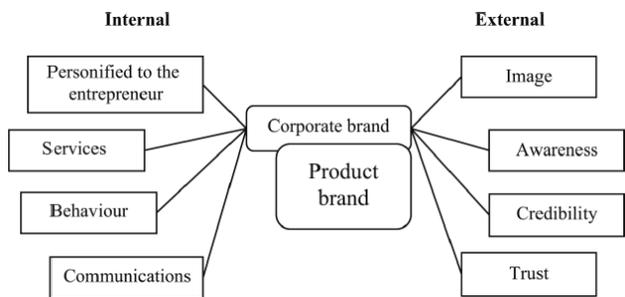


Figure 2. Corporate brand elements in B2B start-ups [23]

She addresses branding from superficial aspects and a visual viewpoint by concentrating on changes to corporate name and logo. Both internal and external elements of branding are identified with a focus on brand co-creation. Yet, less attention is given to exploring the ways to develop a great product and service which is at the core of the brand building.

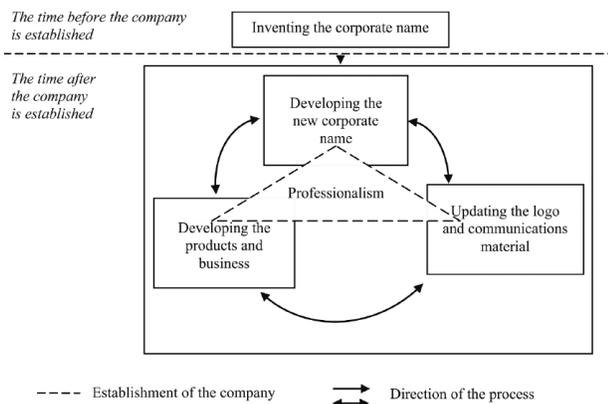


Figure 3. Corporate brand co-creation process [23]

Bresciani and Eppler [24] argue that branding is vital for the survival of start-ups, given their lack of resources and fundamental need to find and maintain clients. They propose a three phases development framework and key guidelines for start-up branding. First, the entrepreneur should define the brand strategy aligned to the strategy of the new organization before inception. Second, the brand strategy should be enacted through an appropriate brand design (name, logo, colors, and visual elements) in line with the brand mission and philosophy and finally, brand building activities should be developed carefully which entail using the power of the internet and also creating measurement tools

[24]. This would enable start-ups to improve the branding strategy, in a continuous and iterative process [24].

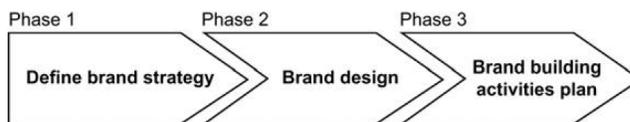


Figure 4. Brand creation sequences [24]

Each of the above-mentioned studies offers an important contribution to start-up branding and brand co-creation. We can also observe the importance of value co-creation from the early stage as well as creation sequences or development phases. Yet, emotion and innovation are two important notions which must be taken into consideration and their role in development phases to be identified. Meanwhile, none of the studies specifically reveal the role of the internet and digital marketplaces. With rapid growth and popularity of the internet, all companies including start-ups are forced to have a digital presence to connect with stakeholders in order to communicate and interact with them. Moreover, the platform is also an emerging business model that leverages digital technology to connect people, organizations, and resources in an interactive ecosystem in which amazing amounts of value can be created and exchanged [25]. Through these platforms and networks, companies like Google, Uber, and Airbnb are changing the structure of major industries and transforming businesses.

### III. THE IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION

The marketing communications environment, as Keller [4] argues, has changed dramatically in recent years, resulting in new challenges for marketers to build and manage their brand and reputation in the digital age. Digitalization which is defined as the mass adoption of Internet-connected digital technologies and applications by consumers, enterprises, and governments is a global phenomenon that touches every industry and nearly every consumer in the world [26].

The new technologies including machine learning, mobile, big data and social media, which are facilitated and promoted by internet connectivity, are driving companies beyond the boundaries of the local and traditional ways of doing business. We can observe that the world of marketing is shifting from mass market to customer networks in which the core behaviour of customers is focused on access, connect, engage, customize and collaborate [27]. Kotler [5] describes how marketing has evolved from product-driven marketing (1.0) to customer-centric marketing (2.0) to human-centric marketing (3.0) and now value-driven marketing (4.0) which leads to the convergence between digital marketing and traditional marketing and ultimately changes consumer's landscape to reach more customers. Today, social networks grow the power of connected consumers and put endless amount of information to share with each other and respectively interact with brands. Brands have less control over what is said about them in the digital era as online users are more autonomous than ever and have quick and easy access to other users, which heavily influence their opinions [28]. The successful start-ups in digital-born

business have played the major role in digital disruption by suggesting new business models, new revenue streams, and new sources of competitive advantage not only possible, but in ways that are cheaper, faster, and more customer-centric than ever before [29][31]. For example, while many business executives seek solutions to digitally automate their existing operations, we observe start-ups like Uber and Airbnb find nontechnology improvement opportunities, simplify and standardize them and finally digitally automate the same [28].

Branding is as much about products and services as about everything that exists between the company and its stakeholders. Businesses throughout the world are interested to board digital transformation journey by engaging in e-commerce because they see digitalization an essential ingredient for growing their businesses, improving customer experience and upgrading their business models. Yet, senior business executives admit they are not sure how to do it, as Gartner found when it surveyed CEOs [30]. The reason perhaps is that digitalization is an emerging concept and there are few well-tried and known frameworks to guide companies through the digital transformation process. The author presumes "the five domains of digital transformation" described by Rogers [31] builds a good foundation to explain how digitalization is reshaping five key domains of strategy including customers, competition, data, innovation, and value. These domains are important ingredients of start-up branding. Table I. sets out strategic themes and key concepts as businesses move from the analogue to the digital age.

TABLE I. THE FIVE DOMAINS OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS [31]

DOMAIN	STRATEGIC THEMES
Customers	Harness Customer Networks
Competition	Build Platforms, not just products
Data	Turn data into assets
Innovation	Innovate by rapid experimentation
Value	Adapt value proposition

The first and most important domain is customers since digital technologies transform the whole customer experience. For example today a start-up can easily use social media and mobile apps for exploring customer's requirements, building communities of potential customers, using analytics to know them better and ultimately offering personalized sales and services. Further, the new technologies facilitated the power of the platform and today's most valuable companies like Facebook, Uber, and Airbnb are increasingly successful in building and managing platforms which are digitized, open, and participative that create commercially connected ecosystems of producers and consumers. Moreover, the possibility of direct interaction with customers offered via digital technologies, such as social media and mobile applications provide tremendous data and information about customers. The data can be analysed through data mining and machine learning techniques to know the customers' characteristics, buying patterns,

spending, and other information. Digitalization and innovation facilitate the process and offer massive opportunities for visitors and potential customers through crowdsourcing and receiving feedbacks via social media and platforms. These are invaluable for designing new products and services and improving the existing one as Parker [25] argues innovation is no longer the province of in-house experts and research and development labs. Lastly, digital technologies enable start-ups to build, enhance, extend or reshape the customer value proposition with digital contents, insight, and engagement i.e. to offer better, cheaper, faster and personalized products and services. The digital transformation also underlies the success of many of today's biggest, fastest-growing, and most powerfully disruptive companies, from Google, Amazon, and Facebook to recent successful start-ups, such as Uber, Airbnb, and Pinterest.

#### IV. NOTIONS THAT CORRESPOND TO START-UP BRANDING

Talbott [17] indicates that it is not possible to differentiate in a crowded marketplace without a distinct brand. He further refers to a quotation from Rob Frankel who puts it best when he says, "Branding is about getting your prospects to perceive you as the only solution to their problem." The clear and consistent association with the defined category as Tai [14] argues is critical, especially when the brand is young and unknown to the world. There are a number of papers on SMEs in marketing literature but a few of it reflects on branding [32]. Rode and Vallaster [7] argue that literature on branding and corporate communication is rich, and studies about new ventures and entrepreneurship are also numerous, however, the intersection of these two fields is still an under-explored area. Abimbola [33] conducts one of the earliest explicit studies on SME branding and explores the role of branding as a competitive strategy. He further suggests SMEs, having fewer resources, require greater focus and effectiveness, and run specified and targeted campaigns. Though SMEs and start-ups look similar as they are small in revenue and staffing and built by entrepreneurs, they pursue different objectives and have a dissimilar business model, function and funding arrangement. An SME is a stable and structured business which focuses on the delivery of value to its already-known customers. Therefore, there is a base and foundation to build up a brand on top. A start-up, on the other hand, is a new, unstable, and unstructured business which is uncertain about its value proposition or even target customers and uses innovation to create new value.

Related research on SMEs is not applicable to start-ups, because they mainly focus on ongoing brand management [32], while start-ups face specific challenges, such as lack of resources and consistent idea how the end product should look like as well as the absence of reputation and customers.

So, a start-up goes through experimenting and testing its business model and lacks a base and build upon foundation especially in the early stage. Therefore, branding for a start-up would be more challenging since the business model and value proposition for potential customers are yet to be developed.

TABLE II. SMEs VS START-UPS DEVELOPED BY THE AUTHOR

SMEs	Start-Ups
Stable and Structured	Unstable, Risky
Final Products	Products are being developed
Delivery of Value	Create Value via Innovation
Known Customers	Seeking Customers

In this section, the major notions that correspond to start-up branding and implications of digitalization on each will be identified and reviewed.

A. Emotionally focused branding

Smith [34] says that branding is the creation of an idea, then communicating it in such a way that the market thinks and feels what you want them to know about you and your products. Talbott [17] argues that people often buy purely based on how a product makes them feel. However, we must remember that at the heart of a great brand is a great product or service [4], though, branding goes beyond features of the product and focuses on feelings of the consumers for the brand. The below matrix shows that the most beloved companies have both a fundamentally sound product and an emotionally connected brand [35].

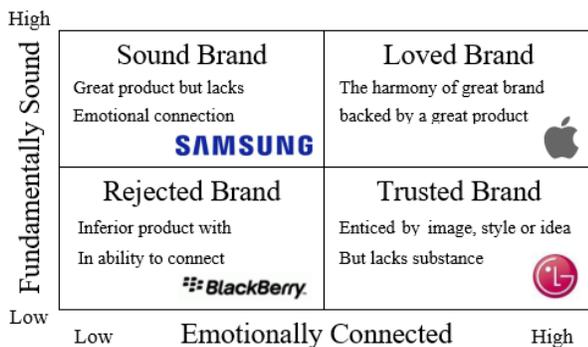


Figure 5. The matrix of Brand by Beloved Brands Inc [35]

Wasserman [36] argues that new ventures are usually labours of love for entrepreneurs, and they become emotionally attached to them using similar parenting language without even noticing. Therefore, start-ups need to sustain the high energy and determination to push the idea through the marketplace and that requires a powerful vision as argued by Maital and Seshadri [37] which excites the emotions, not just the power of reason [38].

The emotions and feelings can, therefore, play two roles in the branding of start-up. First, emotions and burning desire usually motivate an entrepreneur to initiate a solution and start a business and then he or she tries to create more authentic moments of customer engagement for example by story-telling and touching specific points which resonate with customer’s requirements.

Li [39] argues that an entrepreneur’s hope of creating a successful new venture significantly increases the

attractiveness and perceived success likelihood of the new venture. Forgas [40] indicates that emotions influence individuals’ judgment more strongly when the situation is ambiguous, information is limited, and decision making is intuitive rather than analytical. This is the case during the start-up process as decisions are made using emotions or rules of thumb, rather than systematic thinking during this stage. Kaplan [41] considers a passion or a cause as the common denominator among the innovators who organized around it and make things happen. Likewise, today we can see successful start-ups, such as Uber and Airbnb are built on a passion and clear point of view of their founders and then they fulfilled their promises on specific benefits, quality, and value by using credible, trustworthy, transparent media to communicate stories and information. All these ultimately cause the customers of these companies fall in love with brands, trust them, and believe in their superiority and feel emotionally connected. For example, the founders of Uber had trouble hailing a cab on a snowy Paris evening in 2008 and that is how they devised the idea of the tap a button, get a ride. Today, Uber connects people who need a reliable ride with people looking to earn money driving their car in 633 cities throughout the world with \$6.5B annual revenue [42]. The Airbnb story is perhaps one of the most inspiring stories of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the founders moved from New York with no job and had trouble paying their rent. They were looking for a way to earn some extra money and that is why they bought a few airbeds and set up a site called “Air Bed and Breakfast.” to offer visitors a place to sleep and breakfast next day. Today, Airbnb has over 4 million lodging listings in 65,000 cities and 191 countries with \$2.6B annual revenue [42].

The founder of Pinterest was inspired by the movie “Pirates of Silicon Valley,” about Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, and got a job at Google in customer support because he was more excited than the previous applicant about the internet. He further quit his job and started Pinterest, a photo-collecting, sharing, and publishing site that allows users to “Pin” pictures they like and upload their own recommendations to their “pinboards”. As of September 2017, the company has over 200 million monthly active users. All these success stories are full of persistence, determination and most of all fear and uncertainty but the founders seemed to crystallize this quote from Friedrich Nietzsche “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”

B. Brand-driven innovation

The emotions and feelings are probably a good start to initiate a solution, devise an idea and get people together and connect them, especially at the early stage. Yet, after formation of a start-up, it seems that everybody is trying to speak the same emotional language today which fed up the customers. Margaret Thatcher says [43] “If you just set out to be liked, you would be prepared to compromise on anything at any time and you would achieve nothing.” Joachimsthaler [44] suggests that trying to focus on emotions and being liked, cause a company to fall for everything and achieve nothing at the end. That is where creativity, invention, and

innovation comes in. Having fewer resources are pushing start-ups to think differently and innovatively in order to solve problems, and get things done Yet, people normally equate innovation with creativity or invention. However, innovation is different from invention and creativity. Sloane [45] has defined these terms as follows: creativity is the capability or act of conceiving something original or unusual, the invention is the creation of something that has never been made before and is recognized as the product of some unique insights, while innovation is the implementation of something new. Payne [46] says that branding rarely gets a mention in the literature on innovation generally and co-creation especially. This was perhaps due to misconceptions about the terminology in the 1<sup>st</sup> decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet, brand-driven innovation, introduced by Abbing [47] helps companies grow in a way that fits their vision and values, and delivers a real and lasting value to their customers. In this light, the brand needs innovation to fulfill its promise, and innovation needs branding to define the relationship between the organization and its customers. The design thinking is the glue that creates the synergy between branding and innovation. For example, Nintendo's Wii or Apple's iPod re-defined what a video game means and how we listen to music [48] respectively. More recently, Uber and Airbnb utilized the power of digital disruption by crafting a unique perspective and massive brand awareness for their customers. Uber became a pioneer in the sharing economy and is the world's largest taxi company owns no vehicle. In the same token, Airbnb is the world's largest accommodation provider, owns no property. Both these companies are innovative companies who are redefining the rules and principles of taxi and hotel industry respectively. Uber and Airbnb have built and changed entirely new industry sectors by connecting the consumers and suppliers via technology. This requires a very strong brand supported by huge fans. Abbing [47] explores branding theory and argues that the brand both creates a frame for innovation and evolves as a result of innovation by consumers and other stakeholders. This is closely related to brand co-creation theme in start-ups in which innovation with brand strategy are intertwined whilst providing inspiration and guidance to engage all stakeholders in the process of creativity.

C. Brand co-creation

Steiner [49] investigates the corporate identity of young ventures and finds five factors that affect early corporate identity: vision, aesthetics, play, charisma, and trust. In fact, the purpose of various statements, such as mission, vision, and values (which are called brand ideologies) is to connect stakeholders including employees and customers to a longer-term, purposeful yet abstract ideal model which brand hopes to achieve. Ind and Fuller [50] argue that a brand ideology creates a framework which guides the organization toward developing relevant products and services that are different from others. They further indicate that brands are fluid entities that are shaped by the interaction between employees, customers, and other stakeholders. The brands evolve because of the experiences and resulting expectations of people as they buy, use, adapt, discuss, interact with the

brand and the absorption of those experienced by employees who in turn can use that knowledge to re-structure and re-present the brand [50]. This is, in fact, the co-creation of a brand which involves customer's active involvement and interaction with their supplier in every aspect, from product design to final product [24], [20]. It is particularly important for start-ups since they are pushed to listen to the stakeholders from early days and take their feedback and criticism seriously. Co-creation is now substantially facilitated by digitalization and has become a business norm. As manifested in Uber and Airbnb business model, co-creation blends business expertise and digital technology and ultimately creates a new value proposition together with partners and customers to shape a different future. Facebook is the most noticeable example in which the customers create all of the content and thus create the reason to engage as well as the value of the platform. Co-creation demands a mechanism and a platform to engage customers and inspire them to add their own content, opinions, code or connections.

V. MODEL DEVELOPMENT AND DISCUSSION

Joachimsthaler [44] suggests the building of brand substance in which companies must try to improve people's life by solving something, enabling people, delivering value, fitting into their lives and giving people time back.

These ingredients resonate with the ideology of most successful start-ups like Uber and Airbnb who have tried to improve people's life by addressing most of the above. In the line of three notions discussed in former section and considering the brand substance, the below conceptual model is suggested. The model is called EIC (Emotion, Innovation, Co-Creation) which provide a roadmap for start-up as how to build up their brands in the digital era.



Figure 6. The EIC model for start-up branding in the digital era

We can see that there is a transition from start-up formation to validation and escalation by integrating three important notions including emotions and feelings which inspire a start-up to form, a brand-driven innovation which embraces creativity and invention to innovate something new and put into practice which can contribute into people's life. Ultimately, brand co-creation leverages the power of customers, stakeholders and their network in order to constitute a platform of a partnership between a start-up and its stakeholders. This is anchored by common goals, driven by a common vision to co-create values in order to meet the challenges of the new era. The blue line in the model shows the growth curve of a start-up and indicates the relationship between time on horizontal scale and growth or success on the vertical scale. Building on the matrix of the brand [35], the third dimension of co-creation is added to suggest 3 by 3

matrix of start-up branding. The most successful start-ups are emotionally connected, extremely innovative and highly co-creative and this is embodied in the shaded cubic.

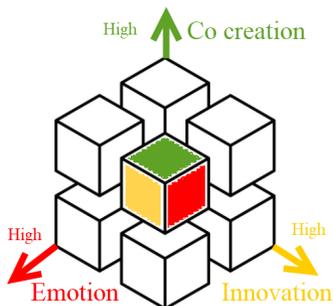


Figure 7. Three dimension matrix of start-up branding notions

The EIC model resonates with the Golden Circle developed by Simone Sinek in which he has been inspiring and challenging executives since his TED talk [51]. In his books [52] [53], he examines the emotional aspect of what makes employees and customers buy into a company.

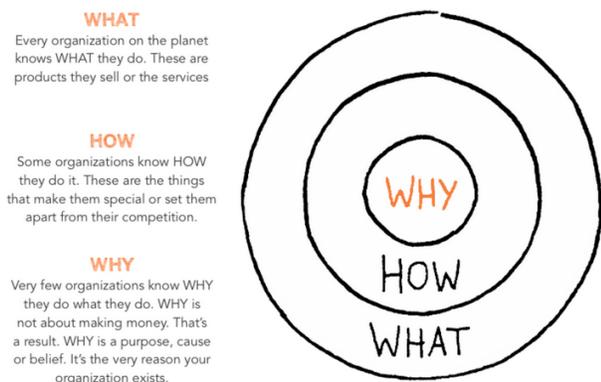


Figure 8. The Golden Circle [52]

Sinek [52] argues that when we’re selling from the inside out, the WHY is the reason we might start and buy which correspondences with emotions. The HOWs are “differentiating value proposition” or “unique selling proposition,” which will be manifested in innovation as it is the implementation of something new. Finally, WHATs serve as the tangible proof of former stages to create value and become valuable as suggested by Thiel and Masters [54] which resonates with co-creating of products and service in EIC model

Today, we see Apple as one of the most successful companies in the world and it cannot be considered as a start-up anymore. Nonetheless, we can capture and share insights and best practices from the tremendous success of iPhone as a new and unknown product which was introduced by Steve Jobs on January 9, 2007. In fact, a very solid marketing strategy which controls over the consumer experience including the omnipresent advertising campaigns, the price positioning as a maker of premium goods, and the lingering nimbus of Steve Jobs’s personal charisma all contributed to a

perception that Apple offers products so good as to constitute a category of their own [52]. Moreover, the marketing success and brand strategy of iPhone can be simulated through the suggested model in the digital era. A burning desire and inspiration of the founder brought all the features of internet communication into one small and lightweight handheld concept. He then leveraged innovation to design a device which had a massive impact on worldwide communication and transformed people lives. Apple further utilized the power of co-creation by providing apple store platform in which the consumers could work with company-provided resources to produce their own value offering applications. The ongoing participation of active consumers in the production of new applications and exchanging value made the software even more important than hardware and created a huge source of income from marketing and selling apps and in-app advertisements both for Apple and its partners.

## VI. CASE STUDY – COURSERA

Online learning has made huge changes in contemporary education and provided new opportunities for everyone who wants to learn something. Accelerated by the rapid and dramatic growth of the Internet, Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) emerged in 2012 when several well-financed providers, associated with top universities, including Coursera, Udacity, and edX were introduced. MOOCs penetrate the corporate environments and empower employee competencies and innovation [55] and provide an affordable and flexible way to learn new skills deliver quality educational experiences at scale,

Coursera which is one of the most successful MOOCs was founded in 2012 by two Stanford Computer Science professors who wanted to share their knowledge and skills with the world [56]. Today, Coursera has become as the world’s leading and well-known brand in learning and education whose courses sought after by individuals and employers around the world because of evidence of mastery and verified certificates of completion. Coursera has built a platform where anyone, anywhere can learn and earn credentials from the world’s top universities and education providers. With over 25 million registered users who have access to 2,000 courses by 149 partner universities, Coursera offers Specializations – collections of courses that build skills in a specific subject – as well as degrees and a workforce development product for businesses and government organizations [56].

Here, we briefly review Coursera case study and examine how it resonates with the conceptual model suggested in this paper.

### A. Emotion

In the formation stage, we can observe that passion of the two founders is a bold contributor and a valid predictor of business creation as well as an outcome of their behavior. Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng were inspired by the experiences offering their courses online in fall 2011 at Stanford [56]. Specifically, Andrew, in 2011, led the development of Stanford's Massive Open Online Course

platform and taught an online machine learning class that was offered to over 100,000 students - the initiative that led to the co-founding of Coursera [56] and offering the same there as one of the first courses. The founders' desire and passion to design, deliver and assure the high quality and integrity of their own courses embodied the reason and cause around which people showed up in Coursera as employees and developers. This also resonates with a research, in which it is argued that recruitment and a human capital building is vital to the survival and growth of new ventures [57]. The sense of purpose to help anyone to learn from top universities was so strong that attracted many students and courted the attention of other universities. Princeton, Stanford, the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania were the first universities to offer content on the platform afterward [56]. Innovation and Co-creation mindsets are other important ingredients for successful brand building that were cultivated from early days since Coursera was perhaps the first MOOCs which started to provide universal access to the world's best education through partnering with top universities and organizations to offer courses online. These universities primarily expect branding and reputation benefits from participation [58]. Also, Coursera creates value through the design and engineering of the technological platform to facilitate access of students, which contains sophisticated search and recommender systems [59].

### B. Innovation

Green [60] argues that MOOCs foster innovation by enabling both people with no formal education and those with a degree from a higher education institution to embrace the opportunities as these courses are provided for free or at low prices. Coursera like many other successful MOOCs, such as EDX and Udacity provides a platform upon registration which forms a diverse community of practice in which participants can share ideas and get deeply involved in the subject via a rich variety of synchronous and asynchronous online activities. Students at Coursera become engaged with the course, watching videos, communicating with peers, and accomplishing assignments. As of 2014, statistics show that only about 5 percent of students who enroll in MOOCs receive certificates of completion—a data point that has led many to conclude that online teaching is ineffective [25]. Nonetheless, Coursera has harnessed innovation and developed a community around its Courses by engaging learners and developing tools to facilitate their social interaction among each other [61] up to a level that some specializations in IT and programming can earn students a job in par with degree Carnegie Mellon and Caltech. Meanwhile, at Coursera, college credit is a “premium service” students pay extra for. This is the manifestation of brand-driven innovation in which Coursera delivers real and lasting values to the students and fulfills its promise to help anyone to learn and earn credentials from the world's top universities.

### C. Co-creation

Co-creation practically happened in escalation stage when different stakeholders including individuals,

organizations, and universities are brought together in order to produce a mutually valued output i.e. best education which benefits everybody. The platform, accessible upon registration allows learners to participate in thousands of courses offered and explore hundreds of contributions by other students, which often leads to further inspiration for their own and others assignment and even carrier experience. Freemium model, which is built on an expectation of converting a portion of free students to paying customers, increases the number of students and acts as a signal for content quality, thus increasing the legitimacy of Coursera's offering [59]. As the number of students grows, University partners have the benefit of predictive algorithms and data mining tools to identify their target students and evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of their courses. All these are invaluable sources both for Coursera and university partners to design and introduce new courses as well as improving and enhancing the existing ones. Registering more free students increases the chance for payment and consequently increases the level of captured value (revenues, profit), thus raising the value creation capacity and ultimately reinforcing the societal value proposition [59]. Though every free student incurs costs to Coursera, each individual equally increases the societal value co-creation for Coursera, university partner and students themselves.

We can observe the integration of emotion, innovation and co-creation in Coursera as it envisions the future of online learning and challenges stakeholders including students and university partners to stretch and grow which ultimately excites (emotion), empowers (innovation) and benefits (co-creation) everybody.

## VII. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Start-up branding cannot be addressed in a holistic approach since a new venture follows a growth curve where it goes through experimenting and testing its business model and lacks a base and build upon foundation especially in the early stage. The purpose of this paper was to provide a conceptual framework that helps to understand the vital role of branding in the digital era for survival and growth of start-ups. This has been met by articulating a three stages modular and incremental approach for building a start-up's brand from scratch.

First, founders must have a strong sense of purpose, cause or belief to solve a market need or take advantage of an existing market opportunity and cultivate innovation and co-creation mindset. Second, they need to innovate things that make them special and differentiate them from their competition. Third, they must seek to jointly create and develop value as the tangible manifestation of first two stages.

The paper is conceptual in nature and therefore future research is suggested to focus on validating and expanding the model through a qualitative research approach. Also identifying branding imperatives and developing quantitative metrics under each notion will be beneficial to measure the impact of a start-up brand in each growth stage.

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